CHAPTER 2

Loss of life

The tile of this chapter refers to two aspects of loss of life with which Dickens deals in the novel. There is the loss of physical life brought about by death, as in the case of Richard and Jo; and also the loss of life, in the sense of death in life, seen in characters such as Vholes and Tulkinghorn. Dickens uses and adapts the norms and conventions associated with dying and uses death in relation to individuals as a representation of the loss of life and health in the nation.

The Victorians seemed to have an almost obsessive interest in death. As Garrett Stewart remarks in his article 'The Secret Life of Death in Dickens', 'characters die more often, more slowly, and more vocally in Victorian fiction than ever before' (Stewart 1983:178)[1]. Stewart highlights the link between death and meaning, which is particularly valuable in the context of *BH*, where death scenes - for example the death of Jo - are constructed to challenge and rebuke.

Death scenes in the novel offer the reader the opportunity to look at death by proxy, the comfort of looking at the loss of a life that is not one's own, taking place in an unreal world where death is a safe, fictional construct over which the author has control. There can be no actual experience of the death of the other and the reader must remain always the spectator, seeing death only from the perspective of the living. Bronfen states:

> In the same way that death always recedes from the epistemological grasp of the living, the process of representation is such that the reference of signifiers to other signifiers is indefinite, that representations are always in some sense figural, speaking 'other', referring to a meaning that is located 'elsewhere'.
> (Bronfen 1992:85)

The novelist faced a dilemma in desiring to make death and decay visible to his readers. He had to ensure that his descriptions were suitable for family reading but this meant that there was the danger that readers would remain complacent spectators only, unaware of the full element of suffering and unwilling to do anything towards its alleviation. Possibly increasing their detachment and passivity, was the influence of lantern shows and new optical gadgets where the phenomena being viewed were known to be illusory and artificial.

While nineteenth-century fiction reflects a wide range of responses to the subject of death, it was viewed as an essential part of human experience. The high mortality rate, particularly amongst children, and the constant threat of disease meant that readers were likely to have had personal experiences of loss and grief. Altick writes:

> In the middle of the century, half of London, whose population had doubled since 1801, got its drinking water from a reach of the Thames into which more than two hundred sewers flowed. Epidemics of typhoid and cholera outbreaks of the latter killed 16,437 people in England and Wales in 1832, and some 16,000 in London alone in 1849 joined with diseases induced by malnutrition, exhaustion, and "vice" (a conveniently vague catchall term, with particularly strong connotations of alcoholism and illicit sex) to further increase the death rate, which in these conditions was several times the national average. One out of every two babies born in the towns died before the age of five. Life was as cheap at home as it was at work.
> (Altick 1977:45)

Most deaths took place at home and both adults and children would have been very familiar with the dying process and with the sight of corpses. Particularly for the upcoming middle class, funerals were often occasions of great display and cemeteries, laid out as parks, were sites of family outings (Curl 1993:212).

Death was also a favourite subject in Victorian fiction and the novelist could be reasonably sure that the death-bed scene as a literary convention, and the vocabulary associated with death and loss, were familiar to most of his readers. Death was seen as the Reaper, an unwelcome visitor, a destroying angel and also for many of the poor and ill, as a friend, a guide and a liberator from poverty and suffering. It is interesting that the image of death as a leveller underwent some revision during the nineteenth-century, with elaborate and ostentatious mourning customs being used as a way of reinforcing the distinction between classes (Wheeler 1990:26).

In the nineteenth century, patterns and norms associated with the death-bed were well established both in art and literature. Sanders draws attention to two seventeenth-century models which, he believes, had a significant influence on the ways in which death was presented in nineteenth-century fiction (Sanders 1982:21-32). The first of these is the death of Queen Katherine in Shakespeare's *Henry VIII*, a play which had great appeal to Victorian audiences and which was frequently performed during the 1850s. It reinforced the conventions of the death bed that were thought to be desirable

– repentance, forgiveness of one's enemies, readiness for death, a vision of the joys of heaven and significant last words. The second is Jeremy Taylor's *Holy Dying* which provided a guide to a 'good death'. Although first published in 1651, by the end of the nineteenth century it was reprinted at least forty-eight times, with five of those editions being published between 1840 and 1853. I would suggest that both of these models are evident in Dickens's portrayals of death in the novel. Richard's death is in keeping with death-bed conventions, while the deaths of Krook, which Dickens uses to draw attention to corruption within the country, and the sexually-tainted Lady Dedlock are the antitheses of 'good deaths', occurring without any of the correct niceties.

Bronfen suggests that Dickens's death-bed scenes have both a social and religious purpose. On the one hand, the heart which sheds tears for the dead may more easily feel compassion for the living and, on the other, sentiment may help to counter religious doubt (Bronfen 1992:89). In a letter to the novelist Emily Jolly, Dickens stresses the power of fiction to 'bring tears from many eyes, which can only have their spring in affectionately and gently touched hearts' (Storey 1993:677). It is significant that at a time when many were questioning their religious faith, and were turning away from traditional belief, religious duty was being replaced by philanthropy and benevolence, the acts of a good heart.

The tension between this world and the next and an exploration of faith and doubt, seem to be a feature of all Victorian writing on death. In Bowler's

painting *The Doubt: "Can These Dry Bones Live?"*, there is a tension between the grave below the ground, indicating that life has ended in death and burial, and the tombstone with its inscribed hope of a future life. At a time when the certainty of a future life was being questioned, it is significant that Dickens dwells on new beginnings and the hope of a better future life in his deathbed scenes[2]. Wheeler draws attention to two aspects of Dickens's attitude towards religion which are applicable to his treatment of death in *BH.* His point that 'for Dickens the Christian hope of heaven is associated mainly with peace and with rest' is exemplified in his description of Richard's death as a new beginning, and his statement that Dickens placed emphasis in his novels 'upon finding Christ in other people, and upon the "redemptive" role of a few enlightened individuals in society…' is well demonstrated in Woodcourt's role in Jo's death (Wheeler 1994:221).

Just as loss on a personal level serves to reflect social decay, as I explored in Chapter One, so, many passages in Dickens's novels associate death with the city. In *Dombey and Son*, Harriet Carker watches people trudging towards London:

> Day after day, such travellers crept past, but always, as she thought, in one direction – always towards the town… they passed on to the monster, roaring in the distance, and were lost.
> (Chapter 33.)

I would argue that 'lost' here means not only lost to sight but also implies a loss of identity and the very likely loss of life through unemployment, poverty and neglect. Carlyle writes of thirty thousand unemployable needlewomen who have 'oozed in upon London from the universal Stygian quagmire of

British industrial life' (Butler 1990:33). This is the mud of the opening chapter of *BH,* the substance which Jo makes an endlessly futile attempt to clear. The association of death with the city is echoed in the following passage from *BH*:

> It is a fine steaming night to turn the slaughter-houses, the unwholesome trades, the sewerage, bad water, and burial grounds to account, and give the Registrar of Deaths some extra business. (Chapter 32:444)

In keeping with the emphasis on science and mathematics, the Victorians were keenly interested in statistics. In the passage above, deaths due to the poor sanitary conditions, highlighted in the novel as sources of contagion and disease, were carefully recorded by the 'Registrar of Deaths'. As Altick points out, 'everything in life that could be quantified, from birth to death inclusive, was quantified' (Altick 1977:245), and if one examines nineteenth-century records, much of the information is presented in tables and columns of figures. One of the effects was an increased sense of depersonalisation, an issue which Dickens explores in detail in *Hard Times,* where Sissy Jupe has become 'Girl Number Twenty'. In *BH* Hawdon obliterates his identity by taking the name 'Nemo', meaning 'no one'.

Dickens portrays London as densely populated and yet made up of an impersonal crowd of individuals struggling to survive, having lost all sense of community. At a time of official assertions of widespread progress, in *BH* Dickens chooses to juxtapose a picture of the dome of St Paul's and the figure of the poor, homeless Jo:

> And there he sits, munching and gnawing, and looking up at the great Cross on the summit of St. Paul's Cathedral, glittering above a red and violet-tinted cloud of smoke. From the boy's face one might suppose that sacred emblem to be, in his eyes, the crowning confusion of the great, confused city; so golden, so high up, so far out of his reach. There he sits… the crowd flowing by him in two streams – everything moving on to some purpose and to one end.
> (Chapter 19:271)

There is a yawning gap between the physical presence of the Church in Jo's world, as symbolised by 'the dome of St Paul's', and the complete absence of its effect in his life, to the extent that he knows nothing of the Lord's Prayer during his lifetime and has to be taught it on his deathbed. Sen, in an article in which he focuses on the ways in which novelists, including Dickens, organise social space, states that in the 1850s 'massive street clearance tended to push the poor to the realm of the "residuum" or "the sunken Sixth", morally and even biologically demarcated from those capable of participating in the processes of progress' (Sen 2000: 4). Despite society's efforts to move Jo out of sight, Dickens locates him firmly within the city itself, as a reminder to his upper and middle class readers of the poverty and ignorance which they preferred to ignore.

In some cases, as de Pennington, for example, suggests, poverty was a cause of perplexity:

> Was it because of personal misfortune, because of social circumstances beyond an individual's control, or, the direct result of a person's character, their laziness and indolence? Were the poor, therefore, 'deserving' or 'undeserving'? Who was responsible for those who became so poor that they could not maintain themselves and how should these paupers be cared for?
> (de Pennington 2001:2)

Even where there is a sympathetic attitude, as seen in Esther Summerson's and Ada Clare's visit to the brickmakers' cottage, Esther identifies the barrier that exists between the two groups:

> We both felt painfully sensible that between us and these people there was an iron barrier, which could not be removed by our new friend. By whom, or how, it could be removed, we did not know; but we knew that. (Chapter 8:108)

It is the death of the brickmakers' baby that provides some way of bridging the barrier. Here, loss assumes a positive function in creating a means of displaying compassion and fellow-feeling.

In *BH*, one of the key ways in which Dickens challenges the middle and upper class inclination to ignore the poor in their midst is by highlighting the loss of boundaries and the interconnectedness of all things. Although the possible loss of boundaries was seen by his readers as a threat to class security, Dickens suggests the positive value of forcing readers to take notice of those, like Jo, whom they would prefer to move out of sight.

The bringing together of many different plots and a collection of seemingly disparate characters and the impression that interconnection is inescapable, is a key theme of the novel. Joseph Childers, in his study of Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton*, makes the interesting point that the novel attempts 'to discern the unsaid and construe the silences that exist within and between communities' (Childers 1995:385). I would argue that Dickens's use

of two narrators in *BH* can be seen as a similar attempt to bridge this gulf. The third-person narrator asks:

> What connexion can there be between the place in Lincolnshire, the house in town, the Mercury in powder, and the whereabout of Jo the outlaw with the broom, who had that distant ray of light upon him when he swept the churchyard-step? What connexion can there have been between many people in the innumerable histories of this world, who, from opposite sides of great gulfs, have, nevertheless, been very curiously brought together!
> (Chapter 16:219)

Dickens's answer in *BH* is that, although many chose to delude themselves that their lives and concerns remained completely insulated, everyone is connected to and dependent upon others, regardless of class or geographical location. The most significant links in the novel are those that are least desirable   greed, corruption, disease and death.

In this corrupt and parasitic society, people do not only live with one another, they live on one another (Daleski 1970:164). There is a loss of concern and a reluctance to offer help. Skimpole and Smallweed are the most obvious predators but there are also the Dedlock relations, the philanthropic acquaintances of John Jarndyce who are willing 'to do anything with anybody else's money' (Chapter 8:99), and Mrs Pardiggle who preys on the poor with her 'rapacious benevolence' (Chapter 8:100). There is also the fat, resplendent Mr Turveydrop who lives off his hard-working son, doing nothing more than serving as a 'Model of Deportment'.

Just as parasitic relationships provide a connection between people, the image of insidious contagion, which spreads throughout all levels of society, highlights a further sense of interconnectedness. Lack of proper drainage and proper sanitation were common throughout the city, from Buckingham Palace, where one of the men working on the sewerage problem complained that he had never been in 'such a set of stinks', to the dilapidated slum, Tom-All-Alone's, with its overflowing gutters and open sewers (Sanders 1982:8). It would appear that, where sewerage was concerned, class made very little difference.

Until the 1850s cholera and typhoid were grouped under the general heading of 'fever', an umbrella term applied to many illnesses. The loss of health frequently led to the loss of life. Cholera was a very real threat during the years that Dickens was writing *BH,* with two thousand dying of the disease in September 1849 and twenty thousand during 1853-4. In 1850 statistics showed that in the poorer areas cholera mortality averaged 98 in 10,000, more than double the number in richer areas. It was regarded with particular fear by both rich and poor and in some cases victims were buried within ten minutes of expiring (Morley 1971:34).

The prominent disease-theory of the time, miasma theory, argued that diseases like cholera were caused and spread by the gases emanating from diseased and dead bodies and this belief contributed to a blurring of the boundaries between shallow graves in overcrowded graveyards and the air

above them[3]. The bars and locks on the graveyard in *BH* cannot prevent contamination, and when Lady Dedlock goes there to see where Hawdon is buried, Dickens writes that she stands in the archway 'with its deadly stains contaminating her dress' (Chapter 16:225). He confronts his readers with the impression that the corpses have become a soluble deposit smeared on the railings, able to stain Lady Dedlock's dress (Carey 1973:123). He creates the sense that the living, the diseased and the dead all occupy a closed space, that disease and death cannot not be contained, and that they create an unwelcome link between people, however high or low on the social scale. However undesirable this link was perceived to be by the middle and upper classes, Dickens suggests that it cannot be denied and constantly draws attention to it.

In addition to the dangers associated with bad drainage, inadequate sanitation and overcrowded graveyards, tainted female sexuality, with its loss of the Victorian ideal of sexual purity, carries its own threat of contamination. Lady Dedlock embodies the possibility of the sexually-tainted woman invading the realm of the aristocracy and threatening the preserves of respectability.[4] In the nineteenth century female infidelity was often seen as a congenital disorder which could be passed from mother to daughter, similar to the spread of a disease like cholera.

I would like to turn now to some of the deaths that are portrayed in *BH* and explore the ways in which Dickens uses and adapts the norms and

conventions associated with dying as well as the way he uses death as a representation of the loss of life and health in the nation. I have selected the deaths of Richard, Gridley, Jo, Nemo and Krook, as I feel each highlights a particular facet of Dickens's style in the novel.

The first two chapters of the novel set the tone for the deaths that will follow, presenting the reader with two worlds, London and Chesney Wold, both characterised by lifelessness and decay. It is within the first of these, London and the world of Chancery, Tom-all-Alone's and Cooks Court, that all the deaths occur. Two, Richard and Gridley, die from the direct effects of the lawsuit of Jarndyce and Jarndyce: two, Jo and Nemo, die from poverty and neglect; and the last, Krook, dies from 'spontaneous combustion'.

At a time when society was faced with many unsettling changes, it is ironic that the deaths of Richard and Gridley are caused by a system that refuses to change. Dickens describes the law as a 'monstrous maze', which exists only 'to make business for itself' (Chapter 39:548). Chancery applicants like Richard and Gridley are drawn into this maze and lose themselves, resulting ultimately in the loss of hope and a mental anguish that is portrayed as leading to physical death. Just before his death, Gridley describes himself as a 'wreck', 'worn out' and 'broken down' (Chapter 24:352), and Woodcourt describes Richard as haggard and dejected, with sunken eyes, dry lips and bitten finger-nails (Chapter 51:692,695).

Richard's death-bed scene incorporates many of the conventions that I have already mentioned – asking Jarndyce's forgiveness, the presence of a comforter, the vision of beginning again in a different world, the last words to Ada and Esther, the parting kiss and the final, beautiful corpse. This illustrates Dickens's view, outlined in a letter written in 1840 to R S Horrell, concerning what he considered the proper way in which a death-bed scene should be constructed. The letter included the advice to 'make him dying attended, as it were, by an angel of his own creation… to inspire him with gentle visions… to let him gently pass away, whispering of it and seeking the hand to clasp in his…' (House 1969:155). This passage emphasises again that Richard's deathbed is not a realistic portrayal of death, but a novelistic construct which Dickens uses to further his theme of the pervading destruction and loss associated with Chancery.

Stewart quotes E M Forster and Edward Said in the context of the link between birth and death, beginnings and endings. Forster writes that birth and death are 'strange because they are at the same time experiences and not experiences. We only know of them by report…. Our final experience, like our first, is conjectural', while Said suggests 'that initiations are themselves against the threat both of ends and of the anterior void, and that any theory of origination must therefore be intimate with a myth of death' (Stewart 1978:99). As I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, the reader has no actual experience of death and must remain always a spectator.

The title of the chapter in which Richard dies, ‘Beginning the World’, suggests something of a confusion between an exit and an entry, between death and life, highlighting again the two paradoxical views of death – death as a terminus or end point, and death as a new beginning.

The deaths of Richard and Jo illustrate the interconnectedness of people and situations within the novel. Both are born and bred in Chancery, Richard as a ward and Jo an inhabitant of Tom-all-Alone’s. But, while Richard is a victim of the Court and his own personality, Jo is more a victim of poverty, neglect and the loss of humanity on the part of his fellow city dwellers. When Dickens describes Jo’s death-bed scene, the reader is at first lulled into a vague sense of sympathy by the symbolic picture of a cart which becomes increasingly difficult to draw but, unexpectedly, the narrator’s blunt ‘Dead!’ goes beyond a factual exclamation of Jo’s fate to an accusation aimed at agencies of state and church as well as middle and upper class readers (Chapter 47:649). As Garrett Stewart puts it: ‘In Jo’s bodily death, even as the contemporary audience merely reads of it, is the autopsy of their own humanity’, challenging Dickens’s readers to think why such things were allowed to happen (Stewart 1983:198). I would suggest that Dickens is also challenging his readers to explore the reasons for this loss of humanity.

Dickens’s treatment of the death of children has been censured by critics such as James Fitzjames Stephen and Ruskin who complained that, instead of presenting an accurate picture of death and its associated feelings

of loss, grief and pain for the bereaved, Dickens translates it into a commodity aimed at pleasing his readers and boosting his sales, making it into what Stephen calls ‘a savoury dainty’ (Jay 1979:163). John Carey also asserts that Dickens ‘manufactured children to gratify the ideals of the adult reader’ (Carey 1973:131). While these criticisms might be partly valid, I would suggest that in the case of Jo’s death, this is presented in keeping with Victorian notions of sentiment and is particularly constructed to rebuke and challenge his readers.

It is only in death that Jo and Lady Dedlock, representatives of the opposite poles of society, are linked. When he describes their first meeting, Dickens is at pains to stress that Jo is ‘loathsome to her’ and that as she hands the money to him, she avoids all contact with him, ‘shuddering as their hands approach’ (Chapter 16:225). In death, both are drawn back to the burial ground which forms part of their first meeting, to be united with Hawdon, the friend of one and lover of the other.

As mentioned in Chapter 1(21), Dickens often visited the Morgue in Paris, something that may seem strange to us today and yet was considered a perfectly acceptable site for an outing until it was closed to the public in the early 1900s. In an essay in the *Uncommercial Traveller*, entitled ‘Some Recollections of Mortality,’ he writes of the experience of ‘looking at something that could not return a look’ (Carey 1973:82). This experience is reflected in his representation of Hawdon, or Nemo, who loses his identity completely and exists in the novel only in memory, in traces of his handwriting and as a

corpse. In an explanation of the ontological challenge of the corpse, Maurice Blanchot states:

> What we call the mortal remains evades the usual categories: something is there before us that is neither the living person himself nor any sort of reality, neither the same as the one who was alive nor another, nor another thing.
> (Pearsall 1999:381)

Like Cornelia Pearsall, I would question Blanchot's statement that the corpse is not 'any sort of reality' because one is presented with inescapable physical remains, but the value of his view is that it emphasises the fact that, when one looks at a dead body, one is confronted with an individual who has become something else. What this is, is difficult to define as one is unable to choose between two oppositional states. Meaning arises from the 'space': what Bronfen calls 'the interstice between the dead body and the image' (Bronfen 1992:xii).

It is ironic that Nemo, who has lost all connection with his fellow man in life and enters the novel as a corpse, in death finds a place among the living and is accepted as 'our dear brother'. This brotherhood between the living and the dead is stressed by the fact that Nemo will play the role of 'avenging ghost' (Chapter 11:151), uniting himself to those who rejected him in life, a connection stressed by Dickens in his choice of chapter title 'Our Dear Brother'.

When Krook dies, both life and bodily remains cease to exist. It is as if Krook is transformed into the putrid liquids and gases that characterise the

novel, without the benefit of any of the required niceties of the socially correct death-bed scene. Ironically, in keeping with prescribed burial procedures, a full-sized coffin is used, although presumably there would have been very little to put into it. Again, there is a sense of confusion between the absence of mortal remains and the presence of the coffin.

In the first chapter of the novel, Dickens in his description of the closing of the courtroom, refers to the 'battery of blue bags…loaded with heavy charges' which he wishes could 'be burnt away in a great funeral pyre' (Chapter 1:7). In the destruction of Krook, by a process fuelled by internal decay and corruption, we have the fulfilment, in a physical body, of Dickens's wish that the legal body of the country would also be consumed by fire. Krook's death becomes a metaphor for the spontaneous combustion that, with wishful thinking, could take place within a corrupt body politic.

Barreca writes of the 'satisfaction' that a Victorian death scene could be expected to provide, 'either the satisfaction of our righteous indignation or the satisfaction of other-worldly recompense for an otherwise destitute and unthinkable existence' (Barreca 1990:2). I suggest that the deaths of Krook and Jo are good illustrations of this point, with the first providing readers with a target of censure and the second providing the reassurance of a deserved reward.

Essential to an understanding of Dickens's treatment of loss and death is a distinction between 'sentiment' as the term was used and accepted during the nineteenth century, and the modern, pejorative view of 'sentimentality'. Fred Kaplan, in a study of sentimentality in Victorian literature, makes the 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. I would add to this that we cannot fully understand Dickens's belief in moral sentiments and what Kaplan refers to as 'his efforts to provide moral paradigms in his fiction to compensate for their absence in society' (Kaplan 1987:17), apart from an understanding of his assumptions regarding human nature.

At a time when religious devotion was being replaced by social concern and a heightened sense of responsibility, Dickens 'was recognized as a major prophet of sympathetic feeling and benevolent action' (Houghton 1957:274). He was more concerned with good deeds within a social realm, the activities of John Jarndyce and Allan Woodcourt, than with an understanding of doctrine and a commitment to formal religion. He firmly believed that human beings are innately good and that the expression of spontaneous, natural moral sentiments is not only desirable, but also provides evidence of sincerity and concern. In the *Edinburgh Review* he was praised for 'his comprehensive spirit of humanity' and the 'tendency of his writings… to make us practically benevolent – to excite our sympathy in behalf of the aggrieved and suffering in all classes; and especially in those who are most

removed from observation' (Houghton 1957:274). Sanders stresses the need to grasp the tradition within which Dickens is working and to bear in mind that 'the novelist varies both the nature and the occupants of his death-beds, but if we look more closely at his developing art, it should become evident that he moderates and shapes them to serve precise fictional, thematic, and indeed emotional purposes' (Sanders 1982:31). For example, the deaths of Jo, Krook and Lady Dedlock are all shaped for different purposes. Jo's death is intended to challenge social indifference while Krook's death parallels the corruption within the country. The life and death of Lady Dedlock draw attention to the link between the loss of control in socially unsanctioned sexual behaviour and the loss of life. As Barreca points out, 'in Victorian fiction, the mortality rate for immorality is exceedingly high' (Barreca 1990:3).

In Victorian prose and poetry there was often a link between sex and death, a point highlighted by critics in both the fields of literary criticism and Victorian studies. For example, Bronfen, in a study exploring representations of the dead feminine body, indicates that in the nineteenth century love and death were both seen as disruptive forces, threats to the Victorian obsession with control (Bronfen 1992:76). Many Victorians believed that sexual activity equalled a shortened lifespan, with each male orgasm seen as depleting physical strength and bringing death closer. This is a further example of the dual nature of loss as, in this case, the sexual act contains a life-giving force and, it was believed, a move towards death. During most of the Victorian period, sex and birth were largely unmentionable in polite society and gave

rise to uneasiness, embarrassment and a plethora of euphemisms and veiled references. In *BH* children simply appear as evidence of sexual activity, and Ada alludes to her pregnancy only obliquely, even in her conversation with Esther.

As referred to earlier in this chapter, tainted female sexuality, as embodied in Lady Dedlock, was often seen as a congenital disorder which could be passed from mother to daughter. Virginia Blain argues that, even at the conclusion of her story, Esther remains sexually repressed and without desire in an asexual marriage (Blain 1990:139-56). I would counter this argument by suggesting that, in the final chapter of the novel, Esther is presented as having overcome her tainted sexual inheritance and finally able to express her feelings. She refers to her husband as 'my love, my pride' and speaks openly of thinking 'that it was impossible that you *could* have loved me any better…' (Chapter 67:880).

The title of this chapter, <u>Loss of life</u>, refers to both the loss of physical life and also to a death-like existence. Stewart makes the significant comment that 'in no other novel by Dickens, quite possibly in no other work in English of the nineteenth century, is the moribund so severely, so severally, exposed as a *modus vivendi*' (Stewart 1978:109). The main focus of the chapter thus far has been on Dickens's representation of the loss of physical life, but there is a group of characters in the novel that, although not literally dead, could be described as living lives which, according to Stewart are 'so empty that they

are merely extended rehearsals for death' (Stewart 1978:108). I would like, in closing this chapter, to focus on three of these figures; Lady Dedlock, Tulkinghorn and Vholes.

Lady Dedlock is textually manufactured as dead long before she actually dies. The reader is not party to a death-bed scene or an actual moment of death and is presented only with an *ex post facto* corpse. When Esther finds her 'cold and dead' (Chapter 59:812), her physical death is portrayed simply as another stage in a life of self-imposed deadness. In Chapter Two when the reader is first introduced to her within the context of Chesney Wold, she is described as 'bored to death' and fallen into 'the freezing mood'. At the sight of Nemo's handwriting her shock is 'like the faintness of death' (Chapter 2:9,10,14).

It is as though the reader is only permitted to see her from a distance, as a phantom-like figure flitting from place to place. In Jobling's 'Galaxy Gallery of British Beauty' she is 'on a terrace, with a pedestal upon the terrace, and a vase upon the pedestal, and her shawl upon the vase, and a prodigious piece of fur upon the shawl, and her arm on the prodigious piece of fur, and a bracelet on her arm' (Chapter 32:448). The disembodied and metonymic arm sustains the impression of a shadowy, unreal figure, inhabiting what Carey calls the 'hinterland between life and non-life' (Carey 1973:90).

Tulkinghorn is described as a human tomb, the repository of buried secrets. At the beginning of Chapter Forty-eight we are told that 'Mr Tulkinghorn says nothing; looks nothing' and by the end of the chapter the process is complete and he has become nothing. Killed by a bullet through the heart, he is reduced to an empty shell, little different from what he had been in life. The question 'What power of cannon might it take to shake that rusty old man out of his immovable composure?' (Chapter 48:664) is equally applicable to the living or the dead Tulkinghorn. To complete the picture, his funeral is attended by only four human mourners and a whole array of empty carriages.

The last of these death-like characters is Vholes, a man with a void at his centre. Esther describes him as 'dressed in black, black-gloved, and buttoned to the chin, there was nothing so remarkable in him as a lifeless manner' (Chapter 3:533). She also envisions him as a 'the Vampire' (Chapter 60.820), linking him to the undead who inhabit a shadowy, inhuman world. The third-person narrator echoes Esther's impression as he describes Vholes's office in London as a 'dingy hatchment', looking onto a 'dead wall' with a 'stale and close' atmosphere (Chapter 39:545). His appearance, his office and his voice all suggest death, his own lifelessness and the death of his client/prey. Storey makes the point that Vholes has 'deliberately drained the life out of himself, so as to appear, as he lies in waiting, to be no challenge to anyone' (Storey 1987:51). Vholes, like Lady Dedlock and Tulkinghorn, is

presented as death-like from the outset. For all three characters physical death is the mere intensification of a death-like existence.

Pearsall identifies two concurrent narratives which characterise a Victorian approach to death and loss. On the one hand there is an 'anxious repulsion of the dead' motivated by the fear of contagion and, on the other, there is a 'profound attachment to remains' (Pearsall 1999:389). Having dealt with the first approach, I would like to explore briefly how the dead were commemorated, both in society and in the novel. The disruption, pain and sorrow that death and loss pose are mitigated to some degree by representation. I am using the word 'represent' to suggest the idea of making present again, standing in for or recuperating. The 're' suggests that absence is staged as a form of re-presence in a form that differs from the original, although the illusion might be created that something lost has been regained. Representation must therefore always remain imperfect and incomplete.

The permanent effect of loss was mitigated by commemorating the dead both through elaborate mourning rituals and through the construction of funerary monuments. Both processes aimed at 'the transformation of what was a living person and then an inanimate but destabilised decaying corpse into a permanent and stable inanimate representation' (Bronfen 1992:78). Dickens loathed the extravagance of elaborate mourning rituals, believing that they were a false expression of grief. The two funerals that he deals with in the novel, those of Nemo and Tulkinghorn, are both used as opportunities to

criticise the loss of sincerity, where outward show and rhetoric replace any true sorrow or grief. In the case of Tulkinghorn particularly, Dickens highlights the ironic separation between the elaborate ritual associated with his funeral and any sense of genuine commemoration.

The nineteenth century was known for its elaborate tombstone sculptures and large, impressive cemetery monuments. The tomb serves as a representative sign of loss and a means of preserving the deceased in the memory of the living and making a presence of absence. Victorian cemeteries, often set in landscaped parklands, were also seen as an escape from the ugliness and spiritual emptiness of the city. In *BH* the only reference to a funerary monument is the 'mausoleum in the park' where Lady Dedlock lies amongst 'dead-and-gone Dedlocks' and where Sir Leicester occasionally pauses before the door and raises his hat (Chapter 66:872). It is ironic that the large and elaborate monument preserves her memory for one person only. Her friends would rather not be reminded of her and wonder that 'the ashes of the Dedlocks, entombed in the mausoleum, never rose against the profanation of her company' (Chapter 66:872).

Monuments and their epitaphs also became the site of objection and criticism, with Victorian prudery even extending into the realm of commemorative monuments in churches and churchyards. Classical Greek figures of scantily-veiled females, naked men and cherubs, which were ironically used extensively in paintings of the period, were dubbed 'outrages'

(sic) in an article in the *Quarterly Review* when associated with the serious subject of death and dignified funerary monuments (Morley 1971:55). It would appear that even representations of loss could give rise to heated debate.

This chapter has focused on Dickens's representation of the two aspects of loss of life suggested by the title, Loss of life. First, there is death as the loss of physical life, a favourite subject in Victorian fiction but one which presented the novelist with the difficulty of finding a suitable ways of expression. For Dickens, death and the fear of contagion are means of highlighting the loss of boundaries between classes and of challenging his readers to recognise the social ills which were in danger of being overshadowed by the Great Exhibition. Death and decay also become metaphors for the state of the country, and the death of Krook, for example, finds a parallel in the internal decay and corruption of the Court of Chancery.

Second, the title also suggests death in life, epitomised by Lady Dedlock, Vholes and Tulkinghorn, manufactured as dead long before they actually die. Finally, there is the issue of commemoration, highlighting the fact that, while death and contagion were seen as a threat, there was also a strong desire to preserve the deceased in the memory of the living.

Notes

[1] In writing about the narrative treatment of the death scene, Stewart focuses particularly on scenes of drowning but his claim that 'death is the fueling beauty of Dickensian storytelling' and that 'death in the novel becomes a miniaturized parable of the life of a novel as a whole' are applicable to my argument (Stewart 1983: 177,178). Of particular significance is his comment that 'fictional dying, however, like fiction as a whole, is bent on meaning, and so in novelised deaths the *rightness* is all' (Stewart 1983:179).

[2] Wheeler, in comparing Tennyson's *In Memoriam* and Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend* makes the point that 'both writers sympathized with Anglican Broad Church opinion on most of the major doctrinal issues of the day and grounded their writing on the subject of death and the future life… on the authority of the heart and a liberal interpretation of scripture (Wheeler 1994:222).

[3] In her article *Writing the Victorian City: Discourses of Risk, Connection, and Inevitability*, Tina Young Choi gives a detailed description of the miasma theory of disease which was prevalent until the 1880s, when the cholera bacillus was isolated.

[4] Deborah Nord makes the telling point that '… if in Dickens, as elsewhere, chaste womanhood is threatened by womanhood already defiled, it is also the case that only another woman can absolve, reclaim and expiate the sins of one who has fallen' (Nord 1995:85).