

CHAPTER 3

Representing loss in narrative

The focus of this chapter is on some of the narrative techniques that Dickens uses when he deals with loss and death in *BH*. Language is faced with the problem of representing the range of losses which I have outlined in Chapter One, as well as physical death which involves ambiguous transitions from body to corpse and from this world to the next, and the state of death in life, with which I dealt in Chapter Two.

Representations of death and loss in literature are always tied to narrative and several critics have highlighted the problems that this presents for language. It is only by representing death and loss in words that they become accessible to the experience of the reader and yet, as Bronfen states, the problem is that 'the corpse marks a threshold... is always a body-double, so that whatever the survivors see is only a reference to some absent and more meaningful concept or image that is always already lost' (Bronfen 1992:84).

In dealing with death and burial, there is a difficulty of reconciling the secular and the scriptural in linguistic terms. The rite of lowering a body into the ground reinforces the thought of the end of life and the corruption of the body, and yet, in the Christian faith at least, the Burial Service in the Book of Common Prayers seeks to console the mourners with the hope of a future life

and an incorrupt body. When the hope of resurrection had become overshadowed by religious doubt and uncertainty, Wheeler suggests that the novelist faced the problem of finding a language to convey 'an idea of the transcendent in an increasingly scientific-materialistic world' (Wheeler 1990:xii).

Dickens faces this problem in his description of the death of Jo, where language comes to the boundary between death and what lies beyond, a boundary that is symbolised by the contrast between dark and light: "It's turned wery dark, sir. Is there any light a-comin?" (Chapter 47:649). In the following passage, the point of transition between life and death is indicated by the coming of the light, but Dickens stops short of exploring the implications of this 'light' and immediately returns to the solid ground of death as a rebuke to the living. We see here the power of Dickens's anger as he forcefully draws his readers' attention to the social irresponsibility that has contributed to Jo's death. In the context of my argument that loss is a key component of the novel, it is interesting to note that 'Heavenly compassion', with which he suggests men and women have been born, is yet another facet of life that has been lost.

The light is come upon the dark benighted way. Dead!
Dead, your Majesty. Dead my lords and gentlemen. Dead, Right
Reverends and Wrong Reverends of every order. Dead, men and
women, born with Heavenly compassion in your hearts. And dying
thus around us every day.
(Chapter 47:649)

Outside the world of fiction, death and loss are shattering and disorientating experiences which defy the use of language, but, inside fiction, death takes on the role and meaning which the novelist wishes to assign to it.

In *BH*, death and loss are depicted in carefully chosen terms. As

Kaplan points out:

As we try to understand Dickens's sentimentality, it is important that we understand...the moral significance of his treatment of death, his awareness of the potential gap between feelings and moral acts, his corresponding concern with "benevolence" as a means of closing the gap, and the irresolvable problems he confronted in his efforts to provide moral paradigms in his fiction to compensate for their absence in society.

(Kaplan 1987:8)

What Kaplan calls the 'moral significance' of Dickens's treatment of death is seen clearly in his descriptions of the death of Jo, with which I have dealt above, where Dickens purposefully attempts to arouse his readers' moral sentiments as the source of benevolent actions¹.

At a time when beliefs and perceptions were being challenged and so much was changing, the issue of truth was a real concern. A key question became: What is true and how are things to be interpreted? In *BH* characters are evaluated not against an objective, absolute standard but, rather against Dickens's own perceptions of the world, his own 'truth'.

Dickens's worldview becomes in some ways a transcendental signified at the novel's centre by which other "truths" can be evaluated. But the novelistic world, too, is a language – a system of signs intended to describe the chaotic mid-Victorian world, but able to do so only from the unavoidably and limited perspective of a single speaker.

(Cowles 1991:154)

When *BH* was originally published in *Household Words*, each instalment was set within the context of references to factual articles and editorial comment. Readers were confronted, simultaneously, by death and loss within the fictional world of the novel, substantiated by factual descriptions and editorial comment. Although each used different means of representation, there was a correspondence between the concerns raised in the novel and the concerns of the world in which Dickens lived.

Sex and death are both activities defined largely in terms of anatomy and body function, where, as Barecca puts it, 'either the heart races or it stops altogether' (Barecca 1990:2). The Victorian novelist wishing to portray either activity was governed by strict codes of propriety, and the need for exaggerated delicacy meant that both accounts had to be camouflaged by symbol, metaphor or cliché. I would like to highlight three examples of this technique. In the first, when George speaks to Esther about Gridley, he translates the man's approaching death into military terms: the 'last march' and 'the roll of the muffled drums' (Chapter 24:347).

Second, Dickens's use of the extended metaphor of the cart to depict Jo's laboured breathing and slowing heart rate, translates distressing physical activity into the acceptable image of a journey towards death. 'That cart of his is heavier to draw, and draws with a hollower sound...the cart seems to be breaking down...the cart had very nearly given up...the cart is shaken all to pieces, and the rugged road is very near to its end' (Chapter 47:649). The

illiterate boy, who has spent his life sweeping the crossing and has repeatedly been told to 'move on', out of sight of society, now draws breath with the same physical effort of drawing a cart, and imagines death as the last, uphill phase of a life of 'moving on'. The metaphor is particularly apt in the context of Jo's life. Earlier in this chapter, I pointed out that Dickens uses Jo's death as a rebuke to his readers and, therefore, the metaphor of the cart is not left to speak for itself. In this case, it becomes a camouflaging or revealing device.

The third and final example is Richard's death which is carefully staged in terms of acceptable death-bed conventions: 'a smile irradiated his face...he slowly laid his face down upon her bosom, drew his arms close round her neck, and with one parting sob began the world' (Chapter 65:871). All unpleasant sights and sounds have been removed, leaving only an idealised picture, guaranteed not to offend or transgress the boundaries of propriety. The paradoxical use of the word 'began' again draws attention to the confusion between death as an exit or an entry, as discussed in Chapter Two, and mitigates the sense of the finality of loss. The chapter in which Richard's death is described is entitled 'Beginning the World', which reinforces the ambiguity between death as an ending or death as a beginning. Language faces the difficulty of representing both absence and presence, death and life.

In addition to the examples of the ways in which death was camouflaged by symbol, metaphor or cliché that have been mentioned above, Dickens's chapter titles in *BH* indicate, often ambiguously, certain aspects of death that

he wishes to highlight. Garrett Stewart has examined these chapter titles and writes: 'Like the contained symbolism of Dickens's death scenes...the bracketing titles may also operate as exploratory pivots between worlds, between discrete spheres of reference' (Stewart 1978:82). The multidirectional and polyvalent titles reinforce the ways in which death appears in the novel. Gridley dies, for example, in 'An Appeal Case', which signifies both the appeal which he has lost in the earthly Court of Chancery and the other-worldly Appellate Court into which death ushers him.

The chapter in which Krook's death is described is entitled 'The Appointed Time', representing both the time at which Krook is expected to hand over Nemo's papers and the time of his death. Ironically, he dies on his birthday and, in creating the link between birth and death as two events over which Krook has no control, Dickens seems to suggest that there has been very little life of value in the space between. In 'Closing In', the chapter on Tulkinghorn's death, the title refers both to his imminent denunciation of Lady Dedlock and to the fact that his death is closing in on him. As Stewart comments, 'Time will be up for her when he closes in, and for Tulkinghorn himself when eternity descends upon him from the other direction' (Stewart 1987:95). The anti-teleological impulse of the novel and its treatment of death as transitional, what Wheeler calls a 'process in and through time', makes the notion of 'closing in' qua closure highly ironic (Wheeler 1994:5).

In Chapter Two I dealt with Lady Dedlock, Tulkinghorn and Vholes as characters in the novel who inhabit what Carey calls the 'hinterland between life and non-life' (Carey 1973:90). Dickens creates this impression of death-in-life by associating each of these characters with aspects of lifelessness. Lady Dedlock is described as 'bored to death' (Chapter 2:9); Tulkinghorn is described as a human tomb; and Vholes has a 'lifeless manner' (Chapter 37:533).

BH was written at a time when there were significant changes in the way in which the world was being perceived and I believe that one can see the influence of these changes on narrative technique. Dickens had always been interested in science and was a keen reader of Lyell's papers on geology. In *BH*, written seven years before the publication of *On The Origin of Species*, and in *Our Mutual Friend*, published seven years after, there is evidence of metaphors which draw on biology and geology. For example, the opening chapter of *Bleak House* contains images of primeval mud and a prehistoric creature, rather than the more traditional, Biblical images of the origins of life; and social structures are seen as predetermined and unlikely to change. I would suggest that perhaps the choice of images also reflects a loss of the concept of death as a spiritual phenomenon which had been more widely held during a time of strong, unchallenged faith.

At the same time, Dickens distrusted the optimism of the evolutionary perfecting of the world and he saw little correspondence between biological evolution and any progress towards moral growth. As I have mentioned,

Dickens deliberately sought to appeal to his readers' moral sentiments in the hope of motivating them to benevolent action. The novel reflects his firm commitment to the power of the human spirit and the power of the social gospel.

The double narrative technique in *BH* provides Dickens with the opportunity to explore issues viewed from two different perspectives. He retains the elements of traditional storytelling in the chapters allotted to Esther, while the impersonal narrator speaks in the present, is more neutral and, to some degree, more objective. It is interesting that, at a time when there were new discoveries and developments in photography, the style of the third-person narrative often functions as a roving camera, sweeping over a scene and then 'zooming in' on detail.

The juxtaposition of these two narratives, one centred in the historic present and the other in the retrospective past, creates an initial sense of two worlds orbiting around different centres and yet, as the worlds connect and converge, we are forced to revise this initial conception and to acknowledge the inescapable oneness of the two spheres. The narrative method and the form of the novel reinforce a key theme, that social classes and groups – whether in the private or public worlds – are interconnected and interdependent.

Criticism of the technique of dual narration has been varied. Reviewers in both the 1853 edition of *Bentley's Monthly Magazine* and the *American Eclectic*

Magazine wrote favourably, but it might be worth bearing in mind that they both identified the first-person narrator directly with Dickens, and the American reviewer saw Esther as 'Dickens disguised in sisterly form' (Collins 1990:25). Collins points out that in Dickens's description of Mr Turveydrop the disguise is flimsy and his own perceptions and wit, out of character with Esther's, shape the scene, and Johnson comments 'that Dickens himself wrests from Esther Summerson the pen he placed in her hands' (Johnson 1986:767). For example, her account of Mrs Pardiggle's visit to the brickmakers, and her description of Vholes are characterised by a degree of perception and wit that seems incongruous with other aspects of her character. Her comparison between Krook's shop and the Court of Chancery would require an experience of the law which Esther could not be expected to possess.

In the preface to *BH*, Dickens wrote that he had 'purposely dwelt upon the romantic side of familiar things' and it would seem that he wanted to be seen as a master of the techniques of both realism and romance, the two aspects of his style of narration in the novel. He sought, as a realist, to comment on social and political injustices and, as a romantic, to incorporate the imaginative and the fantastic. The ways in which death is depicted in the novel are evidence of both techniques. His description of the death of Jo, although this incorporates imaginative elements through the use of the cart metaphor, is predominantly realistic and is intended to challenge and rebuke, while the death of Krook is in keeping with his desire to incorporate elements of the fantastic².

I agree with Alexander Welsh when he states that 'it was against death in the earthly city, and death in the nineteenth-century city, that Dickens was fending' (Welsh1971:212). However, I find that, in the context of Dickens's treatment of death in *BH*, I cannot agree with his comment that 'his [Dickens's] main strategy... was to domesticate death and wrest it from the city and take it in by the fireside' (Welsh 1971: 212). In line with his purpose of drawing attention to social ills and individual and national irresponsibility, death is set within a city of 'slaughter-houses, ...sewerage, bad water and burial grounds' (Chapter 32.444). For Gridley, Nemo, Lady Dedlock and Jo there is no evidence of the 'fireside'. One might argue that Richard's death is somewhat domesticated, in that it is accompanied by some of the more conventional death-bed images, but one is conscious of the city and the Court of Chancery just outside the door.

Notes

¹ As Kaplan points out, 'To Dickens and his contemporaries, strong emotional response to death seemed more desirable than the all-too-common callousness... (Kaplan 1987:49).

² As I mentioned in the Introduction, a reader today is divorced from the original context of the novel and would probably have greater difficulty in identifying with Dickens's stated goal of combining techniques of realism and romance.