

CONCLUSION

In this dissertation, the concept of loss is understood to mean both the absence of that which once existed, as well as the lack of something which one might have expected. Examples of the first instance are the loss of life, or the regression from a functional state to one of disorder, as seen in buildings such as Tom-all-Alone's. The second aspect, the loss of the ideal or expected, is exemplified by society's avoidance of responsibility for its outcasts like Jo and Nemo, or Esther's loveless childhood.

In Chapter One, I have highlighted several of the far-ranging losses with which Dickens deals in the novel to create the cumulative impression of individuals, buildings and a nation all existing in a state of chaos and decay. As Donovan points out, 'his [Dickens's] principal technique is the multiplication of incidences' (Watt 1971:106). He presents his readers both with a panoramic view of the national situation, and a close scrutiny of the ways in which national problems, and the evasion of national responsibility, affect individuals.

By bringing together a collection of apparently different plots and seemingly disparate characters, Dickens creates the impression of inescapable interconnection, a key theme of the novel. The use of two narratives, one centred in the historic present and the other in the retrospective past, while initially creating a sense of two separate worlds,

reinforces the inescapable oneness of the two spheres as they connect and converge.

The loss of responsibility, in both the national realm and the narrower family sphere, is a key concern in the novel. Dickens's main criticism of the Great Exhibition was that, while it showcased national achievements, it detracted from areas such as poverty and unemployment. It is significant that he chooses to locate the homeless Jo firmly within the centre of the city, as a reminder to his readers of the poverty and ignorance which they preferred to overlook. Herbert's concept of 'obstructed vision' (Herbert 1984:127) is seen both in society's failure to see and acknowledge the world of poverty and despair in its midst, and in characters ranging from Mrs Jellyby and Mrs Pardiggle to Lady Dedlock and even Esther herself. Linked to 'obstructed vision', and reinforced by advances in photography, is the fact that the eye could be tricked and that seeing does not always produce an accurate representation of events, as exemplified in Jo's encounter with Inspector Bucket.

Dickens's treatment of loss is not consistently negative. In the case of Esther's progression from narrated 'I' to narrating 'I', the loss of her physical beauty is seen as a positive opportunity to develop her own identity apart from her resemblance to her mother, to discard the role of Dame Durden and to create a legitimate version of herself.

In my second chapter, I have concentrated on the loss of physical life and the state of death-in-life, the two areas to which the chapter title, 'Loss of Life' refer. While death was a favourite subject in Victorian fiction (Stewart 1983:178), and offers the reader a chance to look at death by proxy, it creates two particular problems for narrative. The first of these is the difficulty of representing in words the ambiguous transitions from body to corpse and from this world to the next. The second is that neither author nor reader can experience the death of another, and both are limited by the perspective of the living. Bronfen refers to the corpse as marking a threshold (Bronfen 1992: 4), highlighting the difficulty of representing absence in narrative. As I have suggested, Dickens's treatment of loss is complex, particularly when he deals with the subject of death, which can be seen as both an exit and an entry, a loss and a gain.

None of Dickens's novels was written as a treatise on loss or death. Instead, these are aspects used for a particular novelistic purpose, to evoke a desired response. Sanders, in commenting on Dickens's death-bed scenes, points out that '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 1983:31). Dickens believed in the affective power of fiction (Storey 1993:677) and, as Bronfen suggests, the death-bed scenes in particular have a social and religious purpose (Bronfen 1992:89). The deaths associated with the Court of Chancery provide Dickens with an opportunity to comment on the judicial and

political failings within the country, a subject which he was at great pains to stress throughout the novel. With regard to the religious purpose of the death-bed scenes, it is significant that, at a time when many were questioning traditional beliefs, Dickens focuses on benevolent action, rather than religious devotion or duty, as evidence of sincerity and concern.

This dissertation has concerned itself with Dickens's representation of loss within one particular novel, *BH*. Areas of further research could include an exploration of the subject of loss within a wider framework of other works by Dickens, as well as a comparison between Dickens's treatment of the subject and that of authors such as Thomas Hardy in *Jude the Obscure* or George Eliot in *Felix Holt*. Another subject of interest would be a comparison between Dickens's treatment of his subject within the framework of the nineteenth century, and the treatment of death and loss in the present day.