

# THE COMPLEXITY OF POVERTY. DICKENS'S RESPONSE TO THE POOR LAW FROM *OLIVER TWIST* TO *BLEAK HOUSE*.

## ABSTRACT

Pochi autori hanno saputo rappresentare la povertà con la compassione e la sensibilità di Dickens, sorprende dunque che rari siano gli studi pubblicati sul rapporto tra Dickens e i poveri del suo tempo. Il presente articolo indaga l'evoluzione del concetto di povertà nelle opere di Dickens dal giovanile *Oliver Twist* al più maturo *Bleak House*. In un momento in cui la riflessione sulla povertà era dominata dall'agenda della Poor Law Commission, il pensiero che emerge dagli scritti dickensiani vede un'evoluzione da una spontanea empatia di matrice religiosa a una visione più sofisticata della povertà. La stessa poetica dei romanzi dickensiani consente col tempo di penetrare sempre più profondamente la complessità della condizione del povero, in aperto contrasto con la semplicistica nozione vittoriana secondo cui i problemi che conducono all'indigenza possono essere ricondotti a due o tre categorie e risolti di conseguenza.

Few authors have been able to represent poverty with the intelligence and compassion shown by Dickens. And yet little scholarship has been devoted to the relationship between the Victorian novelist and the paupers of his times. This paper investigates the evolution of the idea of poverty in some of Dickens's works, from his early novel *Oliver Twist* to his more mature *Bleak House*. At a time when the understanding of poverty was dominated by the agenda of the Poor Law Commission, Dickens seems to move from a spontaneous and religious empathy with the poor, to a more sophisticated view of poverty, which he tackles in all its social and human complexity. Indeed Dickens's poetics allows him to offer a glimpse into the complexity of the poor's predicament, gainsaying the Victorian notion that indigent people could be sorted into two or three categories and managed accordingly.

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Complexity plays a major role in Dickens's poetics, and particularly in his later fiction;<sup>1</sup> this paper however does not deal with aesthetic complexity at large, but with one of the ethical commitments that the novelist pursues through a poetics of complexity: relieving poverty. Dickens's fictionalization of the poor responds to the simplistic view that Victorian social sciences and Victorian political propaganda had propounded since the inception of the debate around the revision of the Poor Law in the early 1830s. The enforcement of the Elizabethan Poor Law is a good example of a system that gained in complexity over the time. Eventually this complexity was deemed uncontrollable and far too expensive, and thus called for simplification. Consequently, the Parliament passed a «New Poor Law» in 1834. Dickens apparently reflected at length on the issue of poverty, and in his fictional works between *Oliver Twist* and

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<sup>1</sup> The issue of complexity with reference to *Bleak House* has been first and magisterially explored by J. Hillis Miller in the relevant chapter of his *Charles Dickens: the World of His Novels*, see in particular pages 163 and 194.

*Bleak House* elaborated ever more sophisticated views of the poor, which owe a debt to Carlyle's and are akin to Mayhew's.

In order to appreciate Dickens's insights with reference to the poor, we shall refer to the theory of complexity and systems, as is often applied to social sciences. According to this theory, a distinction must be drawn between the notions of structure and system. In the past, the two words were used interchangeably, but more recently the latter has been preferred to refer to sets made by independent components. Interestingly Raymond Williams's *Keywords* (1976) does not cover «system» but includes «structural». Williams traces the origin of the word to the Latin *struere* (to build) and follows the metaphoric shift that has taken place since the XVIII century bringing «structure» within the realm of sociology. The term still carries the connotation of the static construction, and above all the static, detached role of the builder in relation to the building. The main feature of a structure is its solidity; time does not play any important role in the definition of a structure, which may be damaged, destroyed or replaced, but hardly ever adapted without becoming something else. Besides, the maker or the head of the structure is not necessarily part of it. Thus, for instance, the Minister of Education is not necessarily a teacher or a student.

Unlike structures, a system is usually capable of self-organization, which obviously implies changes over the time. Bruce Clarke contends that a system is a structure to which the notion of time has been added: «A system can be any complex totality composed of interdependent elements», he writes, and soon adds that a «process emerges from the interdependent interactions of these elements».<sup>2</sup> System theory deals with both structures and processes. While the quality of a structure is solidity, the quality of a system is resilience. It may be asked of a system not only how it works, but also how it will change over the time either if left alone or in response to external stimuli. Another characteristic of a system is its complexity. This is determined by the number of components and the number of independent connections that such components may establish with one another. As Bruce Livingstone<sup>3</sup> points out, most scholars agree that the perception of complexity depends on the presence of an observer within the system observed. Given this somewhat subjective definition of complexity, one cannot speak of complexity tout-court, but of different degrees of complexity. A cell, for example, may be simple for the anatomist who studies tissues, but is very complex for the cytologist. Social systems are good examples of complexity in that they contain a huge number of independent components which are at leisure to establish relationships in unpredictable ways. Warren Weaver in a seminal essay first published in 1948 posited two forms of complexity: disorganized and organized complexity. By «organized», we should actually understand «self-organized». Phenomena of «disorganized complexity» within a system can be predicted using probability theory and statistical mechanics, while «organized complexity» is set up by phenomena that escape such approaches, and deals «simultaneously with a sizable number of factors which are in-

<sup>2</sup> CLARKE 2010, p. 14.

<sup>3</sup> LIVINGSTONE 2011.

terrelated into an organic whole»<sup>4</sup> (1991: 5). As an example of the former Weaver cites the movements of gas particles in a container, whereas among the many examples of the latter he mentions the behaviour of human groups.

Given this definition, I shall argue that Dickens discerns a higher degree of complexity in his understanding of the poor within the English Victorian society than most coeval politicians and reformers. However, his understanding of the Victorian poor and of the complexity of their plight was not fully formed as the novelist began his career, but changed over the time and was developed in the years between *Oliver Twist* (1838) and *Bleak House* (1853). Like most Victorian intellectuals, Dickens too, elaborated his views on poverty in response to the Poor Laws.

The Elizabethan Poor Law divided the kingdom into parishes and decreed that every parish should look after its own poor, levying poor-rates when necessary. In the beginning, this was a simple enough arrangement, which relied on a feudal system where every man was connected to his landlord and everyone was known within the parish. However, the complexity of the system was bound to increase over the time due to societal changes. The enclosure process and industrialization moved masses of people across the country, severing the loyalty ties that bound the poor to their masters and their land, on which the Law was based. Migration created poorer and richer districts, where the poor-rates were by necessity different, and where overpopulation made it impossible for the parish clerks to know each applicant and to evaluate the legitimacy of their claims. Initially, lawmakers reacted to this situation endeavouring to contain internal migration through the infamous Settlement and Removal Act of 1662, which obliged the parish where one was born to grant him or her poor-relief if need arose even when one had settled in another parish in search for work. As a result, unemployed people found it even more difficult to look for a job outside their parish unless they were invited by a master. Indeed, if found outside their own parish without means of sustenance, the poor could be arrested for vagrancy. Many intellectuals raised their voices against the Act, most noticeably Adam Smith.<sup>5</sup> However as long as the social costs weighed only on the poor, despite the many outcries against the Removal Act, the Parliament did not take any action. The situation was to change at the turn of the XIX century.

During the Napoleonic Wars, the soaring costs of the conflict and a series of successive bad harvests created an unprecedented number of destitute people that lived on the verge of starvation. To cope with the situation, after the meagre harvest of 1795, a group of magistrates assembled in Speenhamland, a village in Berkshire, and agreed upon a system that granted outdoor relief to every needy person. For the first time, the recipients included the so-called labouring poor, i.e. people who had a job, but were nonetheless unable to make ends meet. The entity of relief was not the same for everyone, but varied greatly according to how much one earned and to the needs of

<sup>4</sup> WEAVER 1991, p. 5.

<sup>5</sup> HIMMELFARB 1985, p. 61.

his household. It was the most flexible relief system of the time and certainly the most complex since it tried to do justice to a variety of different cases. Unfortunately, it was also very costly and taxpayers soon begrudged the expense. Besides, it was believed that people would not exert themselves if they could count on a dole to top up their income for the asking. This situation led to one of the most momentous reform laws of the Nineteenth Century, the so-called Poor Law Reform Act of 1834. The historian David Englander calls the Reform Act «the single most important piece of social legislation ever enacted».<sup>6</sup> This single Act of Parliament defined the concept of pauper, poor, and poverty for the following generations and, more importantly for us, it set forth the terms for any future Victorian debate on the issue.

The 1834 Law passed following the recommendation of a Royal Committee appointed two years before. No actual pauper participated in the works. Indeed, it was an all-party commission, but the members were all from the middle class; there were clergymen, several country gentlemen – exponents of «practical economy» – and one leading economist, Nassau Senior, who wrote the preamble and the analytical portions of the Report, while the final conclusions and recommendations were written by his protégé, Edwin Chadwick, who was a fervent Benthamite.<sup>7</sup> Chadwick believed that the old Poor Law acted as a disincentive to work and industry, and thus in effect perpetuated the poverty that it purported to alleviate. The definition of poverty brought to the surface a typically Victorian paradox between the commitment to free trade and to Christianity.<sup>8</sup> The commission had to mediate between those who advocated an unconditioned repeal of the Poor Law according to the philosophy of Malthus, and those who would have extended outdoor relief even further. Benthamites found themselves on the middle ground as they advocated a centralized control and a simple efficient bureaucracy. In fact the commission never tried to translate Bentham's utopian ideas on poverty<sup>9</sup> into reality, but simply looked up to Bentham for a rational pattern of reasoning.

The Commission proceeded to an analysis of the problem and published a report that pointed out three evils: decentralization, discretion and voluntarism. There were too many parishes working without coordination. Each parish acted in diverse ways administering different kinds of relief according to different logics. Furthermore, there were no permanent and paid members of the establishments; those who did it on a voluntary basis were easily corruptible so that relief was awarded to non-eligible friends or clients. In the whole, the system was too expensive and it was believed that it created a class of people who were able to work, but chose not to – a phenomenon that went under the name of pauperism. As a remedy, the Royal Commission on the Poor

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<sup>6</sup> ENGLANDER 1998, p. 1.

<sup>7</sup> ENGLANDER 1998, p. 9.

<sup>8</sup> HIMMELFARB 1985, p. 23.

<sup>9</sup> Bentham had proposed a system whereby the poor were cared for by private companies in actual workhouses that would turn them into money by organizing their work. Children from the age of four would learn a job that they would do all their life without wasting 10 years of productivity by going to useless schools or simply being idle. (HIMMELFARB 1985).

Laws recommended to centralize poor relief in order to unify different policies; to offer relief on a strict eligibility base; to employ professionals for the administration. The Parliament agreed to all the suggestions of the Commission and, as a result, a Poor Law Board of three members appointed by the central government became responsible for the enforcement of the law throughout the country. Parishes remained, but smaller ones had to cohere into Unions, thus cutting the number of different institutions from 15,000 to 600. As for the eligibility, it was recommended that able-bodied people should not receive any outdoor relief. In the past, it had been customary for seasonal workers to supplement their income with a dole from the parish, and the eligibility of these applicants had always been decided upon by the parish clerks. However, as the Unions became much bigger, the claimants were mostly unknown to the authorities. To overcome this problem, the committee devised the infamous workhouse test, which characterizes the Victorian age and is reflected in many of Dickens's novels and prose pieces, most notably in *Oliver Twist* that was published in 1837, three years after the promulgation of the Poor Law Reform Act. The law positively prohibited outdoor relief for the able-bodied and discouraged it even for the sick, the old, and the unmarried mothers. The only available relief was to be dispensed within the workhouses. These were a mixture between a hospice for elderly people, a hospital, an asylum and a prison. Dickens describes a visit to a workhouse in an article published in «Household Words» in 1850 entitled *A Walk in the Workhouse* (25 May 1850). The writer is impressed by the number of old men and women who look «ugly», «ghastly», «weird», «all skeleton». He compares the workhouse with the Model Prison at Pentonville, that had been covered in the same paper (*Pet Prisoners*, appeared on 27 April 1850), concluding that prisoners are much better off than the wards in the workhouse. Indeed one of the chief aims of the Royal Commission was to contain the costs of paupers relief, also within the workhouse and thus

[l]ess eligibility was accomplished not only by making workhouse inmates labour, but by enforcing a strict regime of waking hours, limiting inmates to a monotonous diet, and forbidding small pleasures such as tobacco. The idea was to provide for basic material needs while nonetheless making a self-supporting life outside the workhouse preferable to the working poor.<sup>10</sup>

The workhouse test reflected the practical mentality and moral attitudes of the Victorian middle class: people were to be divided into needy and non-needy, which was an economical distinction. The needy were furthermore to be divided into deserving and non-deserving, which was mostly a moral distinction. The non-deserving had become needy through some faults of their own, as they were drinkers or gamblers, or simply did not save when they could. Only the deserving should be recipients of financial aids. The problem was to distinguish, and possibly segregate, the actual paupers (institutionally recipients of aids) from the so-called labouring poor, and the rest fell into place automatically.<sup>11</sup> The moral prejudice against the poor originated with

<sup>10</sup> BESLEY – COATE – GUINANNE 1993, p. 4.

<sup>11</sup> HIMMELFARB 1985.

Adam Smith and was upheld by intellectuals like Malthus and Bentham; they contended that the poor had always existed and will always exist, however the principles of economy are governed by an invisible hand so that those who work industriously, plan their families, and save money are not likely to ever need poor relief schemes. The Commission synthesized this concept in the following words:

Wherever inquiries have been made as to the previous condition of the able-bodied individuals who live in such numbers on the town parishes, it has been found that the pauperism of the greatest number has originated in indolence, improvidence, or vice, and might have been averted by ordinary care and industry.<sup>12</sup>

Since the life of labouring poor was only a tiny bit above the survival line,<sup>13</sup> there was little margin for the workhouses to make it physically harder; consequently the rules of the houses aimed at deterring applicants by enforcing psychological hardships, like separating men from wives and children from their parents, and prohibiting what little amusement the lower classes used to resort to, including chatting over meals.

When we consider the story of the Poor Law in terms of system theory and complexity, it is clear that the Elizabethan Poor Law had once been a simple arrangement that relied on a societal structure that was deemed immutable. Elizabeth as a law-giver considered her subjects as a structure apart from herself and the upper classes, and did not foresee any changes in the future. When such changes as enclosures, famines and higher mobility came about, the relief structure began to absorb them turning into an organized system. As such, it was characterized by complexity and disorder, and could no longer be regulated by a central authority. The highest degree of complexity was reached under the Speenhamland scheme, which brought about its collapse. The Speenhamland system fostered self-organization encouraging every parish to calculate the cost of living for individuals according to the cost of bread and the size of their families. As a response, the Poor Law Commission worked towards a simplification both theoretical and practical. Their goal was to restore the maximum possible order and bring the system back to a state of structure by reducing the number of components, their interactions, and their agencies. The Act did not in fact reduce the number of paupers, nor of people who cared for them, but it reduced the number of classes of paupers and caregivers. Besides, the law established an external board to preside upon its implementation. Ideally, the number of possible interactions between the parties concerned was reduced to a minimum.

The Speenhamland system had tried to cater to the needs of different paupers according to their different predicaments; it counted upon a very fine network of institutions, using subsidized work and outdoor relief beside indoor relief. The new

<sup>12</sup> ROYAL COMMISSION 1834, p. 264.

<sup>13</sup> Intellectuals like Hume believed that the poor work more and live better when the wages are low. Higher wages would only conduce the poor to either debauchery or working less, which is detrimental to the trade balance. Adam Smith, on the contrary advocated higher wages, saying that where wages are higher the workers are better fed and more prone to being productive. (HIMMELFARB 1985, p. 52).

law, on the contrary, simplified the approach and typified poor people by means of a few binary distinctions, and recommended one solution for all, namely the workhouse. Those who were starving would be happy to find food and shelter in spite of the hardships, and those who were culpable for their plight would be well served by the same. Subsequently, a number of workhouses popped up throughout the country, filling the countryside with their massive architectures. Inside and around them thrived a new class of professionals of poor relief, amply satirized in *Oliver Twist*.

Taking social classes and destitution for granted, the debate about poverty since Adam Smith and throughout the Victorian age never addressed the issue of how to reduce structural poverty, and only very seldom it addressed the issue of what it entailed for the masses of England to be poor, apart from earning less than a given figure or, more importantly, applying for relief.<sup>14</sup> The only measure that would be able to reduce poverty was punishing the poor in the workhouses for their want of industry or their dissipation. The government did very little even to mitigate the appalling fame of the workhouses, which was supposed to be a deterrent for all the labouring poor to become a burden on the society, or even to ensure that professional caregivers respected any standard. In 1849 Dickens wrote four articles on the «*Examiner*» at the time of the so-called Tooting disaster, when one hundred and fifty children at a child-farm run by Bartholomew Drouet died of cholera.<sup>15</sup> Dickens collects figures and details proving that

[t]he children were overcrowded, undernourished, and thinly clad; the buildings were poor, and the whole place was surrounded by open sewers. It was insufficiently staffed for such an emergency, and the doctor in charge was only twenty-five; he was inexperienced, had been there two months, and he was paid for his full time service just fifty pounds a year.<sup>16</sup>

Dickens's indignation reaches its peak when the manager of the establishment is exculpated by the court, which could not prove that the children would not contract cholera and die if they had not been in the care of Mr Douet.

Simplification did not mean equality throughout the kingdom. Englander points out that the recommendations of the Royal Commission were tailored on poverty in the countryside, but failed to address the inequalities of trade cycles in the industrial towns, where vast numbers of workers found themselves suddenly unemployed. Besides, the Commission assumed a family model made of two parents, which was already obsolete in the working classes at the beginning of the nineteenth century.

Policy makers like Senior and Chadwick assumed that the stable two-parent family, dependent upon the male breadwinner, was the norm. Raising the earnings of husbands and fathers was the means to maintain women and children above subsistence, and this the application of a deterrent Poor Law was sure to secure. This rather abstract view of poverty ill-accorded with industrial realities and bore little relationship to the situation of large numbers of de-

<sup>14</sup> SMITH 1980, p. 40.

<sup>15</sup> BRICE 1968.

<sup>16</sup> Ivi, p. 230.

serted or abandoned women who struggled to sustain themselves and their dependents on starvation wages.<sup>17</sup>

Senior and Chadwick's views appealed to the middle class not only because they promised to save money, they also promised a certain degree of order both theoretical and practical in dealing with the paupers, and absolved the middle class from the moral duty of caring for the less fortunate. The Poor Law Commission considered the paupers as a closed, well-defined group within the society, and devised a structure whereby they could be dealt with. In fact, they did not see the middle class as part of the same system to which the paupers belonged, nor would they consider their own society as a system, but rather as a set of adjacent structures.

The philosophy behind the Poor Law Reform Act had its divulgers, the most important one in the person of Harriet Martineau (1802–1876), who turned economics into didactic fiction. Defying the scepticism of her friends at the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge, who advised her to write pamphlets instead, between 1830 and 1832 she authored a set of novelettes under the general title of *Illustrations of Political Economy*. The collections were enormously successful, selling an average of 10,000 copies for each book. They were translated into Dutch, German, Spanish, French and Russian. At the height of her fame, Martineau received visitors every day, among them many prominent politicians who wanted to have their own views popularized in her fictions.<sup>18</sup> In the general preface to the *Illustrations*, the author declares that she does not write to amuse, but to «convince her readers of the economic principles of Adam Smith, David Ricardo, and Thomas Malthus, which, if generally understood, would gradually remove all the obstructions, and remedy the distresses and equalize the lot of the population».<sup>19</sup> Her characters are actually embodiments of ideas, but her settings are varied; the interest of the tales does not reside in the realism of the characters, but in the liberal doctrine that they ingeniously expound. If her means are different, and her ideas opposite to those of the industrial novels later written by Dickens and Gaskell, she still pursues the same aim to promote social peace by illustrating the state of things. There is very little action in her stories, which resemble Platonic dialogues that rely on the art of maieutics to bring forward philosophical truths. Here is an extract from a chapter called *Tea Talk* in the third volume of the series of *Cousin Marshall*.

«... that there should be able-bodied indigent, that is, capable persons who cannot support themselves, is a disgrace to every society, and ought to be so regarded as such as to make us very careful how we confound the poor and the indigent».

«I assure you madam», said Wilkes, «it grieves me very much to see honest working men, or sober servants out of place, come here and to be mixed up with rogues and vagabonds».

«But they are all indigent alike», observed Mr Nugent, «or your honest labourers would not have to come here».

<sup>17</sup> ENGLANDER 1998, p. 13.

<sup>18</sup> HOBDAV 2015, p. 9.

<sup>19</sup> COURTEMANCHE 2006, p. 386.



«All indigent certainly, sir; but not all alike. We have had cottagers here for a time, after losing cows or pigs by accident [...] this sort of indigence is very different from that which springs out of vice».<sup>20</sup>

Charles Dickens was certainly not a Tory, but he hardly sided with the liberals either. As Michael Sanders<sup>21</sup> points out, Dickens had the passion of a radical whenever he criticized the ruling power and the inconsistencies of the system, but he was sceptical that the lower classes would ever be able to rule successfully, as he intimates in *Tale of Two Cities* or in *Barnaby Rudge*. As early as in *Oliver Twist*, Dickens attacked the workhouse system, satirizing the work of the «deep philosophical men» who invented it. Thus, summing up the work of the above-described Commission, and implicitly responding to Martineau, the novelist wrote:

The members of this board were very sage, deep, *philosophical men*; and when they came to turn their attention to the workhouse, they found out at once, what ordinary folks would never have discovered – the poor people liked it! It was a regular place of public entertainment for the poorer classes; a tavern where there was nothing to pay; a public breakfast, dinner, tea, and supper all the year round; a brick and mortar Elysium, where it was all play and no work. «Oho!» said the board, looking very knowing; «we are the fellows to set this to rights; we'll stop it all, in no time». So, they established the rule, that all poor people should have the alternative (for they would compel nobody, not they), of being starved by a gradual process in the house, or by a quick one out of it.<sup>22</sup>

While satire was common also to other pamphlets writers, such as Carlyle, Dickens stands out for the way he could show that behind ideas, principles and statistics there are actual human beings.<sup>23</sup> Thus, Dickens relied on empathy or pity, as in the scene of poor Dick, whom *Oliver Twist* meets in a moving farewell on his way to London at the close of chapter seven.

«How pale you are!»  
 «I heard the doctor tell them I was dying», replied the child with a faint smile. «I am very glad to see you, dear; but don't stop, don't stop!»  
 «Yes, yes, I will, to say good-b'ye to you», replied Oliver. «I shall see you again, Dick. I know I shall! You will be well and happy!»  
 «I hope so», replied the child. «After I am dead, but not before. I know the doctor must be right, Oliver, because I dream so much of Heaven, and Angels, and kind faces that I never see when I am awake. Kiss me», said the child, climbing up the low gate, and flinging his little arms round Oliver's neck. «Good-b'ye, dear! God bless you!»<sup>24</sup>

Likewise Dickens rejects the pretence to distinguish between deserving and undeserving poor: as starving Oliver, begs for some food on his way to London,

<sup>20</sup> MARTINEAU 1834, p. 30.

<sup>21</sup> SANDERS 2011, p. 236.

<sup>22</sup> DICKENS 1999, p. 10, ch. 2, our emphasis.

<sup>23</sup> SMITH 1980, p. 45.

<sup>24</sup> Ivi, p. 54; ch. 7.

he waited at the bottom of a steep hill till a stage-coach came up, and then begged of the outside passengers; but there were very few who took any notice of him: and even those told him to wait till they got to the top of the hill, and then let them see how far he could run for a halfpenny. Poor Oliver tried to keep up with the coach a little way, but was unable to do it, by reason of his fatigue and sore feet. When the outsides saw this, they put their halfpence back into their pockets again, declaring that he was an idle young dog, and didn't deserve anything; and the coach rattled away and left only a cloud of dust behind.<sup>25</sup>

This does not imply that all poor are victims and good at heart; Dickens draws a sharp line between Noah Claypole, Artful Dodger, and Oliver, but the moral shortcomings of Claypole, Fagin, Dodger, are not a cause for their poverty, in fact they seem to be better off than deserving Oliver or Dick.

Thus far the genius of Dickens has only given a fictional form to the arguments of the radicals and the evangelical societies that opposed the workhouse system claiming that it was devised only to punish the poor and lacked humanity in the management of the institutions themselves. The agenda behind the project was to give visibility to poverty, while the workhouse system had tried to render it invisible. Even early chartists believed that poverty could be alleviated if only it had been brought to the attention of the Parliament.<sup>26</sup> Dickens had contributed to this project with such pieces as *Gin Shops* or *Pawnbroker's Shop*, both included in *Sketches by Boz*. However in *Oliver Twist*, Dickens widens his scope by targeting the ethics of Utilitarianism, as the choice of the ironic adjective «philosophical» in the above quotation indicates. The novelist genuinely believed that this system was unethical and un-Christian. In fact, at the time when Dickens wrote *Oliver Twist*, he was more interested in the moral problem than in the politics of social classes. In his novels, virtuous and vicious characters are to be found across social classes. Apparently, Dickens's indignation at the injustice of the Poor Law develops out of his ability to imagine the predicament of the poor and sympathize with them – something that only longer fiction allows him to do. Although he finds in Carlyle (to whom he will dedicate *Hard Times*) a philosophical rationale for his critic, Dickens's thought is never systematic. His uneasiness with the workhouse system originally stems out of his power of imagination. It is because he can imagine the complexity of individual predicaments that Dickens cringes at the philosophy behind the Commission's work.

Dickens launches his major attack to Utilitarianism in *Hard Times*, but even before that, it is interesting to see how Dickens further develops his thoughts on poverty in *Christmas Carol*. Here the novelist shows the predicament of a poor family, the Cratchitts, and the stance of the upper middle class, Scrooge. Ebenezer Scrooge may well be a pathological miser, but his political views are straightforward Tory. When asked for a contribution for the poor, he argues like a character from Martineau's:

«Many thousands are in want of common necessities; hundreds of thousands are in want of common comforts, sir».

«Are there no prisons?» asked Scrooge.

<sup>25</sup> Ivi, p. 55, ch. 8.

<sup>26</sup> SMITH 1980, pp. 284-285.

«Plenty of prisons», said the gentleman, laying down the pen again.  
 «And the Union workhouses?» demanded Scrooge. «Are they still in operation?»  
 «They are. Still», returned the gentleman, «I wish I could say they were not».  
 «The Treadmill and the Poor Law are in full vigour, then?» said Scrooge.  
 «Both very busy, sir».  
 «Oh! I was afraid, from what you said at first, that something had occurred to stop them in their useful course», said Scrooge. «I'm very glad to hear it».<sup>27</sup>

Two points in this passage are worth highlighting: when the notion of poor is brought to Scrooge's attention, his first thought is of prison. This is coherent with Malthus's and Bentham's idea that most poor are undeserving and probably criminals at heart. Secondly Scrooge thinks of the workhouses, that were in fact very similar institutions, and treadmills, which were coercive devices similar to hamster wheels, which obliged captives to ascend a kind of infinite stair. All of Scrooge's questions are in fact taken from a paragraph in Carlyle's *Chartism* published in 1840, three years before *Christmas Carol*. Talking about the millions of poor, Carlyle proactively asked: «Are these millions taught? Are these millions guided?» To these questions he offered the answer of the aristocracy:

This Aristocracy, astonishment in every feature, answers: Yes, surely the people are guided! Do we not pass what Acts of Parliament are needful; as many as thirty-nine for the shooting of the partridges alone? Are there not tread-mills, gibbets; even hospitals, poor-rates, New Poor-Law?<sup>28</sup>

This analogy proves that Scrooge's is not the callous reply of a deranged miser, but rather the standard answer of a Tory aristocrat to what Carlyle liked to call «the question of England». We could say, turning the perspective on its head, that those who had devised and supported the New Poor Law were actually misers at heart, who disguised their avarice under the veil of philosophy.

*A Christmas Carol* offers yet another interesting philosophical insight about poverty, possibly inspired by Carlyle, which is a step forward in Dickens's speculation. When the Ghost of Christmas Present is just about to depart, he introduces Scrooge to the Children of Man, Want and Ignorance. They are a girl and a boy, both rather repulsive:

«Spirit! are they yours?» Scrooge could say no more.  
 «They are Man's», said the Spirit, looking down upon them. «And they cling to me, appealing from their fathers. This boy is Ignorance. This girl is Want. Beware them both, and all of their degree, but most of all beware this boy, for on his brow I see that written which is Doom, unless the writing be erased. Deny it!» cried the Spirit, stretching out its hand towards the city. «Slander those who tell it ye! Admit it for your factious purposes, and make it worse. And bide the end!»  
 «Have they no refuge or resource?» cried Scrooge.  
 «Are there no prisons?» said the Spirit, turning on him for the last time with his own words.  
 «Are there no workhouses?»<sup>29</sup>

<sup>27</sup> DICKENS 1985, *Christmas Carol* pp. 50–51; stave 1.

<sup>28</sup> CARLYLE 1840, p. 50.

<sup>29</sup> DICKENS 1985, *Christmas Carol*, p. 109; stave 3.

Again it is worth noting that these two children are not, as Malthus would put it, children of the improvident poor, but children of Man, which means of humanity as a whole, or at least of the English society. John Leech in the woodcut illustration that accompanied the first edition of the *Carol*, depicted the two children and the Ghost against the backdrop of a workhouse. Dickens refuses to see the poor's and the middle class's groups as separate *structures*, but thinks of them as a unified *system*. Albeit only by way of allegory, the author problematizes the notion of poor that was sanctioned by the Poor Law: poverty is not only a matter of feeding people and warn them to be cautious about how they spend their money. Feeding them will not save them (and the society in general) from the political and social dangers of ignorance and from the moral degradation of want. The children are characterized as a boy and a girl because, according to an established Victorian distinction, men act in the world while women act at home. Thus masculine ignorance may lead to riots (as Carlyle warned in his *Chartism*) and feminine want to moral degradation. Having no dignity to lose and no knowledge to go by, these children are doomed to repeat the pattern that brought them into the world. The allegory closes the third stave without any further comment. From a narrative standpoint this is a strange sequence, rather eccentric compared to the graphic, Hogarthian and realistic scenes introduced by the Ghost. Dickens decided to wind up the spirit of the Christmas present with this dreadful apparition that, in fact, points to the future.<sup>30</sup> Nor is this the only time that Dickens resorted to this notion: in a speech delivered at the Birmingham Polytechnic Institution on February, 28<sup>th</sup> 1844,<sup>31</sup> he evoked the image of Ignorance, a devil that if soon released from his leaden casque will reward those who save him, but if left to roll under the waves for too long a time, will eventually destroy them. The metaphor is borrowed from the *Arabian Nights*, but the meaning remains the same: if the middle classes do not take care of the cultural poverty of the masses, they will regret it sooner or later.

In 1848 Want and Ignorance undergo another transformation and become the «Child with no name» in another Christmas Book, *The Haunted Man*. Here the binomial is no longer represented by a twin pair, as it appears even more dramatic when conflated into one single character. The boy is described in these words:

A bundle of tatters, held together by a hand, in size and form almost an infant's, but in its greedy, desperate little clutch, a bad old man's. A face rounded and smoothed by some half-dozen years, but pinched and twisted by the experiences of a life. Bright eyes, but not youthful. Naked feet, beautiful in their childish delicacy, – ugly in the blood and dirt that cracked upon them. A baby savage, a young monster, a child who had never been a child, a creature who might live to take the outward form of man, but who, within, would live and perish a mere beast.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Dickens decided to keep Ignorance and Want in his earlier public readings of the *Carol*, and only cancelled them at a later stage (SLATER 1971, p. 356).

<sup>31</sup> DICKENS 1844, p. 96.

<sup>32</sup> DICKENS 1985, *The Haunted Man* p. 272; ch. 1.

The child with no name makes his ghastly appearance at the end of the first chapter (another resemblance to Want and Ignorance who appeared at the close of the third stave). Initially it is not even clear whether he is real or just another vision. The reaction of the bewildered chemist is similar to Scrooge's, and to the one of Carlyle's aristocracy: he flinches and wonders at what has come in front of him. Then he asks standard middle-class questions that make no sense to the boy, who has no answer to offer:

«What is your name?»  
 «Got none».  
 «Where do you live?»  
 «Live! What's that?»<sup>33</sup>

Like Want and Ignorance, the «Child with no name» does not play any important role in advancing the plot, still he interacts with the protagonist and appears now and again as a counterpoint to some of the events. This allows the reader to sound his tragic want of education, affection, emotions, beside nutrition. Indeed, the «Child with no name» is «naturally» deprived of memories and emotions, just like Redlaw after the ghost's spell. The only emotions felt by the boy are fear and greed. The likeness between the boy and Redlaw himself becomes clear when the scientist is surprised at his own stupefaction in three particular moments, namely visiting a churchyard, looking at the beauty of the moon, and listening to music. «At each of these three times, he saw with horror that, in spite of the vast intellectual distance between them, and their being unlike each other in all physical respects, the expression on the boy's face was the expression on his own».<sup>34</sup> Whitewashing his memory, Redlaw has lost what made him human, it follows that the boy, who feels exactly like Redlaw, has never been fully human.

The boy surfaces again, slightly older, in *Bleak House*. This time Dickens endows him with a name, albeit a very short one: Jo. He is the street sweeper who lives in Tom-All-Alone's, as ragged and repellent as his two predecessors, but much less allegoric, and actually more like a character from Mayhew's *London Poor*. As customary, the last instalment of *Bleak House* featured a woodcut that would serve as opening page for those readers that would have the instalments bound. Several characters from the novel appear in the vignette, but Jo has pride of place. This is hardly surprising, since *Bleak House* is the one novel that describes the Victorian society as a complex system. Between Jo and Queen Victoria there are no more than two or three degrees of separation through Tulkinghorn or Sir Leicester. Thanks to the structure of the novel, Dickens is able to merge his idealized poor, like Oliver or Bob Cratchitt, with his philosophical allegories of poverty, Want and Ignorance, and the «Child with no name». The glue that keeps them together is a mixture of realism and imaginative power. Dickens utilizes real people as models for his poor characters, and his power of imagination to make them interact with the middle-class. Even Esther and Woodcourt recoil at first seeing

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.* p. 274; ch. 1.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.* p. 310; ch. 2.

Jo, but they overcome their repulsion once they get beyond the grubby appearance of the boy and see his good heart and deep misery.<sup>35</sup>

In *Bleak House* Dickens, much like Mayhew, stages a gallery of poor characters describing the peculiarities of each; Jo in a way epitomizes all their characteristics, even remaining a realistic character. Indeed the novelist was almost certainly inspired by a real sweeper boy of fourteen, whose interrogation on the part of an alderman had been reported in «The Examiner» in 1850. The testimony given by Jo in the novel recalls that of the boy almost verbatim. Some scholars believe that the author of the piece on «The Examiner» was Dickens himself.<sup>36</sup> Jo is first introduced to the readers at the death of Nemo, *alias* Captain Hawdon, as a reliable but un-relied witness. The coroner examines him:

Oh! Here's the boy, gentlemen!

Here he is, very muddy, very hoarse, very ragged. Now, boy! But stop a minute. Caution. This boy must be put through a few preliminary paces.

Name, Jo. Nothing else that he knows on. Don't know that everybody has two names. Never heard of sich a think. Don't know that Jo is short for a longer name. Thinks it long enough for *him*. *He* don't find no fault with it. Spell it? No. *He* can't spell it. No father, no mother, no friends. Never been to school. What's home? Knows a broom's a broom, and knows it's wicked to tell a lie. Don't recollect who told him about the broom or about the lie, but knows both. Can't exactly say what'll be done to him arter he's dead if he tells a lie to the gentlemen here, but believes it'll be something wery bad to punish him, and serve him right – and so he'll tell the truth.<sup>37</sup>

The coroner, like Scrooge and the chemist before him, refuses to take notice of the very existence of the boy. If he does not have a name and does not share at least a bit of common knowledge, he cannot count as a witness, and cannot be produced before the magistrate. Indeed his very appearance would offend and somehow defile the court.

I have been trying to suggest that the twin-siblings Ignorance and Want and their successive avatars challenge the simplistic way by which the Victorian middle-class appraised poverty. Dickens suggests that poverty entails malnutrition, lack of cleanliness, ignorance, stupidity, loss of dignity and morality. Not only is it a shame for a modern society, poverty also poses a social threat to public security, public health and political stability. In *Bleak House*, it is Jo who spreads smallpox even among the upper classes. Smallpox is central to the poetics of the novel because it connects different characters and different social classes. Besides it is a realistic instance, which serves as symbol for the corruption of the society, which begins in the indifference of the middle-class for the poor and spreads like an infection.<sup>38</sup>

Jo appears *passim* in different narrative capacities as witness, sweeper, informant, and eventually the novel dedicates a whole chapter to him, *Jo's Will*, where he dies

<sup>35</sup> On this point see FASICK 1996.

<sup>36</sup> FIELDING – BRICE 1968.

<sup>37</sup> DICKENS 1977, p. 134; ch. 11.

<sup>38</sup> BUTT 1955; SCHWARZBACH 1983; GURNEY 1990.

comforted by Allan Woodcourt who, finding Jo beyond medical help, for the first time teaches him the words of «Our Father». Jo, one might say, is the quintessence of poverty, and thus a most complex character. The New Poor Law would call him a labouring poor, unfit for public relief because, after all, although he is undernourished, he makes some money sweeping and lives on it.<sup>39</sup> In fact, his poverty affects him and the whole society in other ways, which are not acknowledged by the Poor Law. He is spiritually poor: he does not even know his prayers and has no idea of religion, or his place in the world. He is emotionally poor: he has no friends and cannot recall any kind word ever spoken to him except once or twice by Nemo, who was to him a perfect stranger; he has no affections, no attachment to anyone; the only emotion he knows is fear. He is culturally poor: completely unschooled and illiterate, he lacks any culture both in the broad and narrow sense of the word. His health is poor: he lives in Tom-All-Alone's, which is a dirty, infectious place, and besides he is undernourished. Clearly, the legal dichotomies of labouring-poor vs pauper, or deserving vs non-deserving are as inadequate to capture his plight as the Poor Law is unable to address his predicament. Jo's poverties are evident to all and yet overlooked. He is poverty itself, and for this reason, he deserves a central role in *Bleak House*. However, Dickens does not renounce a more analytical view in the novel, and he also depicts different kinds of poverty in isolation.

We have already hinted at some similarities between Dickens's and Mayhew's works. Mayhew's main opus, *London Labourers and London Poors* was published in 1851, one year before Dickens began the serialization of *Bleak House*. The work consisted originally of three volumes, to which a fourth was added in the 1861 edition. Mayhew was a combination of journalist, modern ethnographer,<sup>40</sup> and statistician<sup>41</sup> who presented the Victorian middle class with a compelling description and an accurate analysis of the variety of poor people who lived and traded in the streets of London, mostly unrecognized by official statistics. Some of Mayhew's sketches capture one single informant, others deal with a particular trade in more general terms. The framework that sustains the whole work is taxonomic; Mayhew did not start with individuals, but with a classification of types, knowing that classification would appeal to Victorian readers. Thus, London street folks are considered according to six categories (street sellers, street buyers, street finders, street performers, street artisans, street labourers) which are further subdivided until he comes down to every actual trade. Besides, Mayhew often draws comparisons between similar categories or contrasts them. Some of these professions rose and disappeared in his own lifetime, being dependent on the development of the city. According to the general introduction, the main purpose of this huge work, for which Mayhew had employed a whole team

<sup>39</sup> In the Eighteenth century, labour and poor were virtually synonymous terms (Himmelfarb 1985: 27-29). The New Poor Law redefined the concept of poor excluding the idea that those who have a job may be poor nonetheless. In this they were following the recommendations of Edmund Burke, who had strongly opposed the very notion of labouring poor, arguing that those who have a wage can only be poor for lack of industry or parsimony.

<sup>40</sup> GREEN 2002.

<sup>41</sup> CHAMPKIN 2007.

of recruiters and fact-checkers, was to bring about a reform of what he considered a national disgrace.

Although Mayhew outlived Dickens by over 20 years, the two of them were born in the same year and, as Mary Shannon<sup>42</sup> has recently demonstrated, their offices were only a few yards apart, near the Strand. There is no record of any collaboration between the two, and scholars have argued whether Mayhew influenced Dickens or vice versa.<sup>43</sup> The issue is beside the point of the present discussion; Dickens may have used some of Mayhew's characters as models for his own, but the kind of resemblance that concerns us here is in the systematic approach to the poor of both *London Poor* and *Bleak House*. While Mayhew's tapestry depicts the poor according to their different types and trades, Dickens evokes the plight of poor people according to the kind of poverty that prevails with them. In this respect, the approach of the novelist is similar to that of the journalist-ethnographer and much more analytical than that of the politicians. Indeed, both Mayhew and Dickens seem to have written to counter the simplification of the notion of poverty that the Poor Law Commission had forced upon the public debate.

Thus the novelist describes the effects of emotional, financial, educational, cultural, and health poverty in the Victorian social system. Not that these are to be found in separation, Jo, as we pointed out, suffers from all of them, but often one of these kinds prevails over the others.

The first is emotional poverty. As I have just recalled, only two men have shown some sympathy to Jo in his brief and forlorn existence, Woodcourt and Nemo. The former is not poor, but Nemo is, although he does not fit into either the definition of pauper, since he is not recipient of any dole, nor into the definition of labouring poor, since he is a copyist. Nevertheless, like Cratchit, he is worse off than many labourers.<sup>44</sup> His economical predicament is coterminous with his emotional poverty, as he points it out when he first meets Jo:

While the coroner buttons his great-coat, Mr. Tulkinghorn and he give private audience to the rejected witness in a corner.

That graceless creature only knows that the dead man (whom he recognized just now by his yellow face and black hair) was sometimes hooted and pursued about the streets. That one cold winter night when he, the boy, was shivering in a doorway near his crossing, the man turned to look at him, and came back, and having questioned him and found that he had not a friend in the world, said, «Neither have I. Not one!» and gave him the price of a supper and a night's lodging. [...] That when the man had no money, he would say in passing, «I am as poor as you to-day, Jo», but that when he had any, he had always [...] been glad to give him some.<sup>45</sup>

Incidentally it should be noticed that Tulkinghorn, who may well be called heartless, but certainly not naive, cross-examines Jo in order to investigate on Nemo, and his

<sup>42</sup> SHANNON 2016.

<sup>43</sup> SUCKSMITH 1969; DUNN 1970; HIMMELFARB 1985.

<sup>44</sup> HIMMELFARB 1985, p. 463.

<sup>45</sup> DICKENS 1977, p. 135; ch. 11.



suspensions find confirmation right in the latter's emotional poverty, a plight of which he must have had a thorough professional knowledge.

Charley is an example of cultural poverty, or, better, educational poverty, since she shows a solid culture of industriousness and sense of duty towards her family. Left an orphan with her younger siblings, Charley, who is barely thirteen, works as a washerwoman in order to scrape together some food for herself and her siblings. When Jarndyce decides to help them, he sends the boy to school and hires Charley as a maid for Esther, who will endeavour to teach Charley to read and write. Nor does Dickens ever idealize Charley; she is a good hard-working girl, but she is not a good student. «Writing was a trying business to Charley, who seemed to have no natural power over a pen»,<sup>46</sup> Esther comments. Eventually Charley marries a miller, which, obviously, will not make her rich nor middle-class, but a labouring artisan with a proper education and dignity.

By contrast – a device favoured by Mayhew too – the predicament of Charley is further highlighted through the shadows of Mr Krook. He is not so financially poor as Charley or Jo, but he shares illiteracy with them. However, unlike Charley, he is not in the least willing to learn because he is obviously culturally poor. He has no culture but the culture of accumulation, which he has acritically and unconsciously absorbed from the legal neighbourhood. Here Dickens appears less determined in rejecting the notion of undeserving poor. It may not be applicable to economic relief, but it is viable in terms of ethics, and seems applicable also to educational poverty; while Charley is deserving of educational assistance, Krook is not, and his endeavours with writing are met with scorn even on Esther's part.

If Dickens by now accepts the idea that there are deserving and undeserving among the poor, still he does not appreciate the simplistic implementation of the Poor Law; the brick-makers are a case in point. The Poor Law does not make distinction between the unworthiness of the head of the family and the rest of it, on the false and middle-class assumption that the suffering of a man's family is a just punishment for his laziness or debauchery, or that the hardships suffered by wife and children are a stimulus for a man to relinquish debauchery and work harder. Thus the brick-makers posit an interesting case: certainly the father of the house is an unworthy, violent man, who could, but does not, provide for his family, for which apparently he does not care. Still Dickens sympathises with the wife and the children who must bear the double brunt of poverty and of a violent father/husband. The situation is summed up by the man himself, who enjoys scandalizing Mrs Pardiggle with his blunt truthfulness.

«I'll save you the trouble. Is my daughter a-washin? Yes, she *is* a-washin. Look at the water. Smell it! That's wot we drinks. How do you like it, and what do you think of gin instead! An't my place dirty? Yes, it is dirty – it's nat' rally dirty, and it's nat' rally onwholesome; and we've had five dirty and onwholesome children, as is all dead infants, and so much the better for them, and for us besides. Have I read the little book wot you left? No, I an't read the little book wot you left. There an't nobody here as knows how to read it; and if there wos, it wouldn't be suitable to me. It's a book fit for a babby, and I'm not a babby. If you was to leave

<sup>46</sup> Ivi, p. 378; ch. 31.

me a doll, I shouldn't nuss it. How have I been conducting of myself? Why, I've been drunk for three days; and I'da been drunk four if I'da had the money. Don't I never mean for to go to church? No, I don't never mean for to go to church. I shouldn't be expected there, if I did; the beadle's too gen-teel for me. And how did my wife get that black eye? Why, I give it her; and if she says I didn't, she's a lie!».<sup>47</sup>

The situation is definitely very complicated: the man is certainly an unworthy husband and an unworthy father given to drinking. He does not care for his family and beats his wife so, according to the law, his family is not eligible for any aid; however because of the dire straits in which they live, his baby dies and his battered wife starves: surely they cannot be held accountable for the man's behaviour, but the Law has no answer for this. The degrees of poverty of the brick-maker's family are slightly varied: the husband is poor in education, culture, and emotional life, and preserves only a little dignity, shown in resisting Mrs Pardiggle; his wife is as poor in all these features, except dignity and emotions, which make her a better person and, in the eyes of Esther, a worthy recipient of her help, which is both financial and psychological.

We have just discussed different types of poverty for the sake of literary analysis, however these types are hardly found only in isolation, and certainly an analytical description does not do justice to Dickens's perceptivity. Indeed Dickens's similarity to Mayhew ends in the recognition that there exist different kinds of poverty, since Dickens, unlike Mayhew, also glimpses into the relation between the society of the have-nots and that of the middle class.

The depth of Dickens's understanding of the poor in England brings about a change in his narrative strategy. In *Bleak House* Dickens no longer attempts to describe the innermost self and thoughts of the poor as he had done in *Oliver Twist* somewhat at the expense of plausibility. Nor does he purport to describe the relationships that must exist within the lower classes. In that earlier novel the author could endow characters like Oliver, Dick, Fagin, Dodger, Nancy with a distinctive voice, which eventually made their thoughts similar to those of middle-class people, despite the uncouth manners and unrefined language. Likewise, the novelist made up the relationship between Fagin and his gang. In *Bleak House* Dickens seems to know better than to ascribe middle class sensibility, reasoning, aspirations and relationships to the very poor. While the complexity described by both Mayhew and the early Dickens initially was after all disorganized,<sup>48</sup> as he glimpses into the lower world, Dickens seems to realize that it possesses an autonomous organization which eludes the understanding of his own class and possibly even his own descriptive powers. In the words of John Burnett,

Behind the great public institutions and images of the Victorian age the working classes inhabited an inner, secret life which perpetuated traditional values and patterns of behaviour, essentially of rural origin, into the new urban industrial society.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>47</sup> Ivi, p. 99; ch. 8.

<sup>48</sup> WEAVER 1948.

<sup>49</sup> BURNETT 1974, p. XIX.

According to Smith's notion of the Two Nations,<sup>50</sup> the middle-class man knew very little of the lives of the poor and of their social organization; the surprised reaction of Scrooge in front of Ignorance and Want is echoed by Redlaw, by Mr Snagsby as he first enters Tom-All-Alone's, and by so many others. Dickens hints at this complexity, but he does not really describe its organization. For instance, we catch only a tiny echo of the dynamics of the servants at Chesney Wold, or we do not know how the brick-makers from Albany ended up in Tom-All-Alone's, nor how Jo caught small-pox, or why he went to Albany. Charley's family procedures and the procedures of their neighbourhood are only seen through Esther's eyes and through the account of Mrs Blinder, the neighbour. We know what Charley says to Esther, but we have no idea of what she speaks about when she is with the other servants of the house. Still Dickens illustrates the effects of such a submerged relationship without questioning the underlying causes. The novelist only hints at its workings through the famous «connexion» between all members of the society. In fact he resorts to symbolism like pox contagion from Tom-All-Alone's to the daughter of Lady Dedlock, or spontaneous combustion to hint at these invisible relationships. This is a sign that Dickens's reflection upon the condition of England would actually take a new direction in the following novels; it becomes a reflection upon the plight of humanity in general, rather than that of any single class.

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<sup>50</sup> SMITH 1980.

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