"It appeared on the whole, to Little Dorrit herself, that this same society in which they lived, greatly resembled a superior sort of Marshalsea:" dysfunctional society in the World of Little Dorrit.

Prisons, ineffective governmental agencies, social conventions that no longer function properly, organized religions which no longer satisfy the needs of their congregations, evil characters who prey upon good people; these are all manifestations of the dysfunctional society that Dickens portrays in the novel, *Little Dorrit*.

The novel opens in a prison located in Marseilles, with one of the archetypal villains, in the person of Monsieur Rigaud, railing against the society which has placed him, a "citizen of the world" in prison (Dickens 5). The scene next shifts to the quarantine area in Marseilles, where a group of European travelers have been placed, awaiting their release to return to England. The next scene shifts to England, where an invalid, Mrs. Clenham, sits in her wheeled chair, confined to a single room in a ramshackle house, where she sits in self-imprisoned exile. Next, the reader is shown the Marshalsea Debtor's Prison, where the Dorrit family live "locked up in narrow yards surrounded by high walls with spikes at the top" (Dickens 34). For those fortunate to escape the Marshalsea, the prospect of Bleeding Heart Yard is not much better, and for those who cannot afford a roof over their heads, they are condemned to the workhouse, a far more horrific place than the debtor's prison, "much worse fed and lodged and treated altogether than. . . malefactors" (Dickens 72).

The world of *Little Dorrit* is a prison world, where even the governmental agencies, which should assist the population, are instead the locus of cronyism, ineffectiveness and nepotism. The motto of that institution was "How Not To Do It," and its tentacles spread through every phase of government: "In short, all the business of the country went through the Circumlocution Office, except the business that never came out of it; and *its* name was Legion" (Dickens 53). That the Circumlocution Office was another form of imprisonment is made clear by Dickens on page 275: "The shady waiting rooms of the Circumlocution Office, where he [Arthur Clenham] passed a good deal of time in company with various troublesome Convicts who were under sentence to be broken alive on that wheel. . . ."

The Circumlocution Office was populated with a species of animal life known as the Barnacles, whose job it was to make sure that the principle of "How Not To Do It" was strictly adhered-to: "The Barnacles were a very high family, and a very large family. They were dispersed all over the public

offices, and held all sorts of public places" (Dickens 54). The primary job of this species was to propagate itself and stick to anything that might hold promise of remuneration or advancement:

> . . . there was to be a convocation of Barnacles on the occasion . . . sticking to that post was a Barnacle. . . Thus the Barnacles were all over the world, in every direction—despatch-boxing the compass . . . on which there was nothing (except mischief) to be done and anything to be pocketed, it was perfectly feasible to assemble a good many Barnacles." (Dickens 203)

True to their charter, the Barnacles effectively ignored the needs of the poor or needy in their quest for self-aggrandizement; their neglect of the condition of the poor folks assembled in Bleeding Heart Yard will serve to illustrate this point: "That high old family, the Barnacles, had long been too busy with their great principle to look into the matter; and indeed the matter had nothing to do with their watchfulness in outgeneralling all other high old families except the Stiltstalkings" (Dickens 70).

Life outside of prison was composed of a series of parlor games, known as "Society," which is portrayed by Dickens with a combination of disgust, satire, and loathing as he develops the characters who populate this squalid universe. Chief among the outward social luminaries are the Merdles (perhaps the name itself is a play on the French word for excrement, "merde"). Mrs. Merdle, described by Dickens as "the bosom," is an affected, transparent woman who claims to detest the social conventions of her time and professes a desire to return to a more simple lifestyle: "We know it is hollow and conventional and worldly and very shocking, but unless we are Savages in the Tropical seas (I should have been charmed to be one myself—most delightful life and perfect climate, I am told), we must consult it" (Dickens 122). Yet, she is not above flaunting her wealth and looking down upon the lower social classes, in the persons of Fanny and Amy Dorrit:

> I pointed out to your sister that plain state of the case; the impossibility of Society in which we moved recognizing the Society in which she moved—though charming, I have no doubt; the immense disadvantage at which she would consequently place the family she had so high an opinion of, upon which we would find ourselves compelled to look down with contempt, and from which (socially speaking) we should feel obliged to recoil with abhorrence. (Dickens 123)

The husband of “the bosom,” Mr. Merdle, was professed by all to be “the man of his time. The name of Merdle is the name of the age” (Dickens 246). Like Midas, everything Merdle touched was turned to gold, and investment turned to admiration, which quickly proceeded to adulation: “All the people knew (or thought they knew) that he had made himself immensely rich; and, for that reason alone, prostrated themselves before him, more degradedly and less excusably than the darkest savage creeps out of his hole in the ground to propitiate, in some log or reptile, the Deity of his benighted soul” (Dickens 282). This Merdle, ascending the social ladder like a comet, became affiliated with that other highly connected, one might say, tight family, the Barnacles, and was proposed for a peerage; such is the power of money, as portrayed by Dickens.

Not to be outdone by the rich and famous, Fanny Dorrit, she of the Marshalsea, was herself adept in the posturings of Society. Considering herself to be superior in every way to her colleagues, or “collegians,” in the Marshalsea, Fanny expressed her attitude toward Society to her sister Amy, as follows: “If I am ever a little provoking, I am sure you’ll consider what a thing it is to occupy my position and feel a consciousness of being superior to it” (Dickens 120). Once released from the stifling confines of the Marshalsea where her societal luster was dimmed, Fanny thrust herself into Society with a will: “As to Miss Fanny, she had become the victim of an insatiate mania for what she called ‘going into society’” (Dickens 244).

It might seem odd that a person, raised in the confines of a notorious debtor’s prison, should develop an attitude of superiority towards other members of society. Fanny’s sense of entitlement was a learned response; a response perfected by her father, William Dorrit. That illustrious gentleman, known as the “Father of the Marshalsea,” had over long years, become convinced that his largely honorific title, a title earned due to his longevity in the prison, conveyed a sense of importance and respect which he cultivated. Mr. Dorrit, in observing the niceties of life in the Marshalsea, had come to expect to be given small “tributes” as a mark of respect that he believed, was owed to him as the benefactor of the prison and its inhabitants. Failure to provide a sufficient monetary emolument met with Mr. Dorrit’s displeasure, and past favors earned no merit with him on this sensitive topic, as Arthur Clenham learned: “Mr. Clenham did not increase with favor with the Father of the Marshalsea in the ratio of his increasing visits.

His obtuseness on the great Testimonial question was not calculated to awaken admiration in the paternal breast, but had rather a tendency to give offense in this sensitive quarter" (Dickens 129).

So great was Mr. Dorrit's sense of entitlement, that he referred to his behavior as a manifestation of "spirit": "At the same time, I preserve in doing this, if I may—ha—if I may use the expression—Spirit, Becoming Spirit" (Dickens 189). His tendency to take offense at perceived slights to his person became more pronounced after an inheritance freed him from the constraints of the debtor's prison, and launched him into society. Travelling with his family in Italy, Mr. Dorrit arranged to rent a villa, where he and his family would spend time in order to become more "polished." Upon his arrival at the villa, Mr. Dorrit was upset to learn that his accommodations were not ready, and complained to the agent of the villa on page 233: "You have treated this family with disrespect; you have been insolent to this family."

It was at this villa that Mr. Dorrit became acquainted with Mrs. Merdle, an acquaintance that would result in the marriage of Edmund Sparkler, Mrs. Merdle's son by a prior marriage, to Fanny Dorrit. The marriage resulted in an alliance that combined the Merdles, Dorrits and Barnacles, so that prison life and social life became nearly indistinguishable, as Little Dorrit mused to herself one day:

> It appeared on the whole, to Little Dorrit herself, that this same society in which they lived, greatly resembled a superior sort of Marshalsea. Numbers of people seemed to come abroad, pretty much as people had come into the prison; through debt, through idleness, relationship, curiosity, and general unfitness for getting on at home. They were brought into these foreign towns in the custody of couriers and local followers, just as the debtors had been brought into the prison. They prowled about the churches and picture-galleries, much in the old, dreary, prison-yard manner. They were usually going away again to-morrow or next week, and rarely knew their own minds, and seldom did what they said they would do, or went where they said they would go; in all this again, very like the prison debtors. They paid high for poor accommodations, and disparaged a place while they pretended to like it, which was exactly the Marshalsea custom. (Dickens 259 – 260)

No mention of the disdain in which Dickens holds social conventions would be complete without acknowledging one of his great comic creations, Mrs. General, keeper of the proprieties by way of

"prunes, prisms, poultry, and potatoes." That estimable personage was retained to impart a "surface" on Amy and Fanny Dorrit by means of applying a "varnish" to their exterior. Mrs. General was one of those personages whose ideas of propriety were bound by their limited intellectual achievements, as attested on page 229: "She had a little circular set of mental grooves or rails on which she started little trains of other people's opinions, which never overtook one another, and never got anywhere." She, like the Barnacles, was never concerned with the realities of life which might interfere with her limited scope of understanding. Her advice to Amy Dorrit could have come from Lord Decimus Tite Barnacle himself:

> Nothing disagreeable should ever be looked at. Apart from such a habit standing in the way of that graceful equanimity of surface which is so expressive of good breeding, it hardly seems compatible with refinement of mind. A truly refined mind will seem to be ignorant of the existence of anything that is not perfectly proper, placid, and pleasant. (Dickens 242)

That Mrs. General's ideas of imparting a "surface" were somewhat hollow, is reflected in Amy Dorrit's ruminations on page 256: "Prunes and Prism, in a thousand combinations, having been wearily in the ascendant all day—everything having been surface and varnish and show without substance—Little Dorrit looked as if she had hoped that Mrs. General was safely tucked up in bed for some hours."

Unable to find solace from the dysfunction of the world-view of the novel, it might be natural to expect that the characters would turn to organized religion for comfort. Unfortunately, the only religion to be found in the novel is that of the warped, Old Testament vindictiveness exhibited by Mrs. Clenham. Mrs. Clenham's idea of religion was formed around the principles of retribution, wrath and hatred:

> She then put on the spectacles and read certain passages aloud from a book—sternly, fiercely, wrathfully—praying that her enemies (she made them by her tone and manner expressly hers) might be put to the edge of the sword, consumed by fire, smitten by plagues and leprosy, that their bones might be ground to dust, and that they might be utterly exterminated. (Dickens 18)

Her implacable nature, combined with her self-righteousness, reduced her life to one of retribution and self-imprisonment; which the following quotation, uttered to Mr. Blandois, illustrates:

> If I forgot that this scene, the Earth, is expressly meant to be a scene of gloom, and hardship, and dark trial, for the creatures who are made out of its dust, I might have some tenderness for its vanities. But I have no such tenderness. If I did not know that we are, every one, the subject (most justly the subject) of a wrath that must be satisfied, and against which mere actions are nothing, I might repine at the difference between me, imprisoned here, and the people who pass that gateway yonder. (Dickens 182)

Mrs. Clenham's bitterness and vindictiveness have led her to set up an idol, rather than worship God. The idol is made in her own image, for she, like many of the characters in the novel, has mistaken the order of creation: "Yet, gone those more than forty years, and come this Nemesis now looking her in the face, she still abided by her old impiety—still reversed the order of Creation, and breathed her own breath into a clay image of her Creator" (Dickens 394). For the Barnacles, the Merdles, Mrs. Clenham, Mrs. General, Fanny and William Dorrit, and others like them, religion offers no refuge from the society they have created.

As if the dysfunction in the novel could extend no further, Dickens adds one final touch of depravity in the form of the evil characters who prey upon the unfortunate characters inhabiting the poorer portions of the city. As Little Dorrit passes through Covent Garden, Dickens apostrophizes those members of society who have neglected the poor, leading to: ". . . desolate ideas of Covent Garden, as having all those arches in it, where the miserable children in rags among whom she had just now passed, like young rats, slunk and hid, fed on offal, huddled together for warmth, and were hunted about (look to the rats young and old, all ye Barnacles, for before God they are eating away our foundation, and will bring the roofs on our heads!). . . "(Dickens 84).

Two characters stand apart from the other evil personages in the novel; two characters who display sociopathic tendencies which mark them as the final piece to the puzzle of social decay in *Little Dorrit*. The first, a woman, displays her antisocial tendencies early in the novel, when she informs Mr. Meagles while quarantined in Marseilles: "If I had been shut up in any place to pine and suffer, I should always hate that place and wish to burn it down, or raze it to the ground. I know no more" (Dickens 12). She is meant to be a counterpoint to Little Dorrit, who, despite being locked away in Marshalsea some

twenty years, has grown to venerate the prison as a result of the associations of family she developed there. Miss Wade, she of the "unhappy temper" invents insults where none are intended, and cherishes the slights she feels as she relates to Arthur Clenham: "Let him [Blandois] look round him and judge for himself what general intelligence was likely to reach the ears of a woman who had been shut up there while it was rife, devouring her own heart" (Dickens 334).

Miss Wade's character, which devours her own heart, is formed as a result of her early upbringing as an orphan. Her conversation with Mr. Meagles concerning Tattycoram on page 169, sheds some light on her early childhood: "What your broken plaything is as to birth, I am. She has no name, I have no name. Her wrong is my wrong. I have nothing more to say to you." The kindness exhibited by her guardians is interpreted as condescension by Miss Wade, and she turns all good acts performed on her behalf into a personal affront, resulting in her rejection of love and her anti-social behavior. On page 336, she explains herself to Arthur Clenham, and provides an insight into her character in the process: "For this reason [her rejection of Mr. Gowan's love] I have for some time inclined to tell you what my life has been—not to propitiate your opinion, for I set no value on it; but that you may comprehend, when you think of your dear friend and his dear wife, what I mean by hating."

Miss Wade's hatred extended even to her closest friends, as she related the account of her life to Arthur Clenham. During her stay at her "grandmother's" house, she developed a fondness for one of the children living in the house. Over time, Miss Wade convinced herself that her friend was plotting against her for the affections of the other residents in the household, and related to Mr. Clenham that: ". . . I would hold her in my arms till morning: loving her as much as ever, and often feeling as if, rather than suffer so, I could so hold her in my arms and plunge to the bottom of a river—where I would still hold her after we were both dead" (Dickens 338).

That Miss Wade should form an alliance with another evil person, one identified several times with the devil, is not surprising. A known murderer, blackmailer, and scoundrel, Blandois is Dickens's idea of evil incarnate. From his introduction to the reader in the prison in Marseilles to his involvement in uncovering the mystery of Mrs. Clenham's secret, Blandois is unfailingly presented as all that is evil in

society, despite his sometimes genteel appearance. Mr. Gowan, the dilettante painter and isolated scion of the Barnacle family tree, sees though Blandois' exterior to the essence of the man within:

> There he stands, you see. A bravo waiting for his prey, a distinguished noble waiting to save his country, the common enemy waiting to do somebody a bad turn, an angelic messenger waiting to do somebody a good turn—whatever you think he most looks like! . . . 'Or say, Cattivo Soggetto Mio,' returned Gowan, touching the painted face with his brush in the part where the real face had moved, 'a murderer after the fact. Show that white hand of yours, Blandois. Put it outside the cloak. Keep it still. . . . 'He was formerly in some scuffle with another murderer, or with a victim, you observe. . . .' (Dickens 250)

Blandois commits his crimes as a form of retribution for his treatment at the hands of society, a treatment he resolves to avenge early in the novel: "Such are the humiliations that society has inflicted upon me, possessing the qualities I have mentioned, and which you know me to possess. But society shall pay for it" (Dickens 67). Blandois, like Mrs. Clenham, keeps a scrupulous ledger of the insults he receives, and calculates the cost of those insults with the precision of a merchant: "I sell anything that commands a price. How do your lawyers live, your politicians, your intriguers, your men of the Exchange? How do you live? How do you come here? Have you sold no friend? Lady of mine! I rather think yes!" (Dickens 381).

His actions are calculated to do the most harm to the society which he despises, a fitting circumstance where the prisoner takes retribution on the various forms prison that populate the novel: "Society sells itself and sells me: and I sell society" (Dickens 381). When he falls, as all proud persons must in the novel, he takes down the house of Clenham (literally) along with its partners, Mr. Flintwich and Mrs. Clenham. In the end, the Merdles are destroyed, the Barnacles embarrassed, the inheritance of Mr. Dorrit is squandered, Blandois killed, Mrs. Clenham the victim of a stroke which makes her an invalid (this time imposed externally as opposed to internally), bankers ruined, the general populace involved in the fall of Merdle's empire. The entire social structure comes crashing down like the house of Clenham, itself built upon deceit and treachery.

Is there a saving grace in the novel, an antidote to the contagion that sweeps through the town and destroys everything in its wake, like the Merdle-disease that wracked the inhabitants of Bleeding Heart Yard? Unfortunately, no such antidote exists on a universal scale. Dickens, in his despair, is unable to develop a program which would cure the ills he paints in the dysfunctional view of the world of *Little Dorrit*. Instead, he offers provisional hope that the good characters in the novel can somehow eke out a living amid the squalor and hopelessness that pervades London. It is only this provisional, personal form of salvation that Dickens can offer. The blight of the city, the indifference of governmental institutions, the hypocrisy of social conventions, the useless hope that panders to the populace with organized religion, the evil of characters like Blandois and Miss Wade cannot be white-washed away. At best, the good characters can only hope to lead a life such as Arthur and Amy Clenham, who:

> Went down into a modest life of usefulness and happiness. Went down to give a mother's care, in the fullness of time, to Fanny's neglected children no less than to their own, and to leave that lady going into Society for ever and a day. Went down to give a tender nurse and friend to Tip for some few years, who was never vexed by the great exactions he made of her in return for the riches he might have given her if he had ever had them, and who lovingly closed his eyes upon the Marshalsea and all its blighted fruits. They went quietly down into the roaring streets, inseparable and blessed; and as they passed along in sunshine and shade, the noisy and the eager, and the arrogant and the froward and the vain, fretted and chafed, and made their usual uproar. (Dickens 420)

Is there no more? Is there no salvation, no cure to the dysfunction that permeates the novel? Can Dickens develop no antidote to the disease of life in London? In this, his most mature novel, he admits that such an universal cure is beyond him. Perhaps, like Arthur and Amy, the best that can be hoped for is to walk quietly in the sunshine and the shade while the world roars along, indifferent to the lives of individual men and women.

Works Cited

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