THE UNIFYING FUNCTION OF HUMOUR AND COMEDY IN NICHOLAS NICKLEBY

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NICHOLAS NICKLEBY

By

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ABSTRACT

Nicholas Nickleby is not traditionally considered to be amongst Dickens' greatest works, however, it has never been extensively examined on its own terms and in its own context since it is usually fragmented within a larger argument. In order to appreciate fully the literary integrity and artistic vitality of Nicholas Nickleby, it is essential to recognize the purposeful integration of its internal dynamics of humour with its externally defined elements of Comedy. The examination of humour necessitates an internal analysis of the novel since humour expresses itself in such details of the work as themes, tone, style, language, narration and characterization. Comedy, on the other hand, can only be studied when the novel is approached as a whole because it is manifested in the traditional literary structure and conventions of the genre.

This dissertation recognizes humour and Comedy as serious literary devices which are an integral part of Dickens' ability to 'teach and delight' as he presents his tragi-comic world view. Humour can be basically defined as the enlightening and entertaining process by which a character or situation is simultaneously perceived from various alternative perspectives. Freud furthers this definition by asserting that true humour requires an atmosphere of negative 'affect' so that one is

struck by the juxtaposition of both emotion and point of view which causes the impact and import of the humour to be intensified. The cyclical nature of the genre of Comedy complements this humour because it explores alternative emotional states and perspectives as it moves the protagonist through various hardships and returns him to a state of prosperity and happiness. In conclusion, it is only when these essential elements of humour and Comedy are understood in Nicholas Nickleby that the novel can be given its rightful place among Dickens' greatest literary achievements.

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INTRODUCTION

Nicholas Nickleby (1838-1839) was written when Charles Dickens was only twenty-six years old and yet it is preceded by two successful novels, a publication of literary sketches, and accomplished career as a reporter. This novel has the curious history of being received favourably by the public but poorly by the critics. As a result, it has enjoyed considerable public interest but only a minimum of serious critical analysis. The novel has been such a popular classic that it has inspired several sequels, been repeatedly adapted to the stage, and been translated into many languages. Although popularity does not guarantee literary quality, when it is of this magnitude it indicates a level of artistic achievement that warrants exploration.

The first monthly part of Nicholas Nickleby was published in April 1838 and the publishers calculated that the sales would reach between forty and fifty thousand copies based on the "astonishing" circulation of Dickens' previous novel, Pickwick Papers (1836-1837).[1] This large volume of publication required Hablot Browne (Phiz) to etch the accompanying plates in duplicate. The novel's sales, however, were so large that the plates for all the following

parts were etched in triplicate and some even in quadruplicate.[2] The novel's popularity is also evinced by the lucrative trade in pirated works and memorabilia even before it was completed in October 1839.[3] Thackeray humbly bowed to the extraordinary success of Nicholas Nickleby with the following anecdote:

> All children ought to love (Dickens). I know one who, when she is happy, reads Nicholas Nickleby;...when she is in bed, reads Nicholas Nickleby; when she has nothing to do, reads Nicholas Nickleby; and when she has finished the book, reads Nicholas Nickleby over again. This candid young critic, at ten years of age, said, 'I like Mr. Dickens's books much better than your books, Papa'; and frequently expressed her desire that the latter author should write a book like one of Mr. Dickens's books. Who can?. . . .
>
> What a kind light of benevolence it is that plays round Crummles and the Phenomenon, and all those poor theatre people in that charming book! What a humour and what a good humour! I coincide with the youthful critic, whose opinion has just been mentioned, and own to a family admiration for Nicholas Nickleby.[4]

Although Thackeray's comment is hardly a critical assessment of the novel, it reflects the zeal and admiration with which it was received in the mid-nineteenth century.

Modern audiences have also attested to the popular appeal of Nicholas Nickleby. The 1980 stage production of the novel by the Royal Shakespeare Company was enthusiastically received and reasserts the novel's vitality, timelessness and artistic strength.[5] The great "enthusiasm"[6] with which this eight-and-one-half-hour, one-hundred-dollars-a-ticket "ambitious enterprise"[7] was met is

demonstrated by several facts: the outstanding accumulation of theatre awards;[8] the "ecstatic praise"[9] of the reviewers; and the spontaneous ovations of London and New York audiences. In London, Bernard Levin chided those critics who would not admit to being "swept away" by the play.[10] Susan Ravens agreed with Levin and observed that "something magical had taken place" on the stage.[11] New York reviewers were even more positive and enthusiastic. They termed it to be "one of the great theatrical experiences of our time";[12] a "Marvelous Melodrama"[13] and an "historic theatrical phenomenon".[14]

It is imperative to note that the favourable public and critical response to the dramatization was to the spirit of Dickens' novel and not merely to the extravaganza of the production itself. David Edgar, the play's adaptor, "gives us at least a glimpse of every plot development and character . . . in the original" and retains most of the dialogue as well as much of the narrative.[15] John Caird, a director, asserts that they "wanted to capture the moral purpose of the book".[16] As a result, the Royal Shakespeare Company's production explores the novel "faithfully and reveals that it is Dickens himself who is the first hero of the marathon".[17]

Traditionally, those critics who concede a level of artistic genius in the novel Nicholas Nickleby focus on its humour and argue that it is this quality that saves it from the realm of immature and unsophisticated literature. In "Nicholas Nickleby: The Victories of Humor", Margaret Ganz assesses the novel's humour as a serious literary

component. She claims, "Nothing in Nicholas Nickleby can vie with the power, vivacity, suggestiveness of its humor".[18] However, she, like other critics, extols humour at the expense of the novel's moral depth, dramatic energy and thematic unity. She asserts that Dickens' developing art:

> as yet lacked not only the capacity to construct a plot ably but to embody in a serious characterization the delusions, contradictions, dilemmas, and misguided aspirations which humor contends with so differently. His conception of the struggle between negative and positive impulses wanted some depth and insight when he conceived of it as the clash between good and evil. His heroes and villains are merely embodiments of moral absolutes, in the absence of attempts to encompass human ambiguities in the dynamic terms of tragedy.[19]

In this passage Ganz summarizes the criticisms typically laid against Nicholas Nickleby: weak plot; shallow characterization; and superficial melodramatic representation of moral values. She, like so many critics, concludes that if it were not for its humour, the novel would be but a faint shadow of Dickens' later masterpieces. It is revealing to note that Ganz criticizes Dickens for failing to 'attempt' to deal with human nature "in the dynamic terms of tragedy", when a structural and thematic analysis of the novel indicates that Dickens was 'attempting' to produce, and succeeded in creating, a Comedy.

The critical charges that are directed against Nicholas Nickleby are undermined by their very assortment and inconclusiveness. As frequently happens with a body of criticism, the various analyses of the novel negate and contradict each other so as to leave the reader enlightened by

some, but convinced by none. For example, one critic accuses the novel of "cheap melodrama",[20] while others insist that melodrama gives it a "logical moral and philosophical coherence".[21] Some assert that Nicholas Nickleby is among Dickens' greatest comic achievements,[22] while others write entire articles about his humour without ever mentioning the novel.[23] By some the novel is accused of being Dickens' "chief offender" in "talking like a book"[24] and of having little literary value,[25] while others specifically praise its dialogue,[26] and insist that it attains a high level of literary achievement.[27]

What has led to this pandemonium of critical responses to Nicholas Nickleby? There are several things: first, the diverse nature of modern criticism; second, the novel's honest, almost ingenuous, presentation which is not easily tolerated by esoteric modern literary taste; and finally, the numerous vantage points from which the novel has been examined. This last point is highly significant. Perhaps because of intellectual snobbery, the novel has never been extensively examined within its own context, rather it is always fragmented as part of a larger argument. However, when it is taken as the focal point of a study, many of the charges against it become either irrelevant or inconsequential. Nicholas Nickleby displays an intricate and significant interaction between its plot, themes, structure, language and style. All of these aspects of the novel complement each other in order to allow the reader to discover the social

and psychological issues at its root. This artistic unity has been largely overlooked since critics have tended to focus on one aspect of the novel at the expense of the whole. J. H. McNulty goes so far as to proclaim:

> Of Nicholas Nickleby it may be said, in spite of Euclid's partly contradictory axiom, that the parts are greater than the whole.[28]

McNulty 'may' say that the novel does not function as an artistic whole; however, he also 'may' have read Euclid with greater care than Nicholas Nickleby.

Melodrama is one of the aspects of the novel that is often focused upon in critical discussions. Consequently, it is frequently noted with disdain that it utilizes melodramatic plot contrivances and characterization. This criticism, however, becomes irrelevant when the roles of humour and Comedy in the work are truly understood. Humour governs the novel's language and themes and this is complemented by Dickens' utilization of a comic structure and its conventions. In order to be fully appreciated, the humour in the novel must be viewed in the sophisticated sense employed by Sigmund Freud and Northrop Frye. It is humour that allows Dickens to inject a sense of universal truth, and the horrors of the dark side of life, into the ostensibly melodramatic and superficial atmosphere of the novel. Through this pervasive presence of humour, the reader is both exposed to, and protected from, the universal truths embodied in the tragic aspects of life.

Humour in Nicholas Nickleby has not only the critically

accepted function of setting an entertaining tone, it also has the distinction of being the essential force behind its world view. In order to examine the powerful influence of humour in the novel, it is crucial to distinguish it from the broad and elusive definitions of comedy. In the paper "Humour", Freud makes the important distinction between amusement provoked by jokes and the comic, and the intellectual pleasure of a revelation that is generated by humour. Freud explains:

> Like jokes and the comic, humour has something liberating about it; but it also has something of the grandeur and elevation, which is lacking in the other two ways of obtaining pleasure from intellectual activity. The grandeur in it clearly lies in the triumph of narcissism, the victorious assertion of the ego's invulnerability. The ego refuses to be distressed by the provocations of reality, to let itself be compelled to suffer. It insists that it cannot be affected by the traumas of the external world; it shows, in fact, that such traumas are no more than occasions for it to gain pleasure.[29]

According to Freud, comedy is not as versatile as humour because it cannot function in an atmosphere of distressing 'affect'. Humour, on the other hand, is embellished by a distressing emotional environment that allows thought provoking insights to be generated. The ability of humour, especially black humour, to flourish within the dark side of life, enables grim realities to be tolerated so that a sustained intellectual examination can take place.

Humour, therefore, can be seen as a defence mechanism in both literature and life. Freud asserts:

> There is no doubt that the essence of humour is that it spares oneself the affects to which the situation would naturally give rise and dismisses the possibility of such expressions of emotion with a jest.[30]

This definition of humour suggests that those aspects of Dickens' work that are humorous are not the superficially comic parts, rather, they are those which direct the reader to the essence of the tragic issues. Freud's distinction between humour and comedy elucidates Dickens' ability to juxtapose an omnipresent awareness of the dark side of life with a tone that is light-hearted and amusing. Ganz maintains that humour merely relieves, not obscures, the grim realities presented in Nicholas Nickleby. She states:

> The triumphs vouchsafed by humor offer a respite from the encroachments of reality, not a permanent deliverance from them. Ars brevis, vita longa.[31]

Thus, the reader's perception of such tragic issues as child abuse at Dotheboys Hall, Ralph Nickleby's villainy and suicide, and the unscrupulous lechery of Sir Mulberry Hawk and Arthur Gride, are made tolerable, rather than ineffective, by Dickens' use of humour. A major factor, therefore, in the characteristic tragi-comic vision of Dickens' novels is his use of humour that presents grim realities to the reader without turning him away in unenlightened horror.

In Dickens and the Rhetoric of Laughter, James Kincaid relates the defensive capacity of humour, or laughter as he terms it, directly to Dickens. He notes that the emotional protection of humour is ambiguous since it also can make the reader vulnerable to tragic issues. Kincaid observes Dickens' balance between humour and the grotesque by which the reader's:

> laughter moves close to the desperate or the hysterical as the balance shifts to terror and that we may dismiss the threat with our laughter now, only to have it reappear a few pages later, all the stronger for coming on us in our presumed safety.[32]

The episode in which Nicholas is introduced to Dotheboys Hall displays the careful balance between the reader's antithetical emotional responses of amusement and horror. The "young noblemen" of the Hall are initially presented to their full potential of pathos and tragedy. The narrator describes them as a group of:

> Pale and haggard faces, lank and bony figures, children with the countenances of old men, deformities with irons upon their limbs, boys of stunted growth, and others whose long and meagre legs could hardly bear their stooping bodies, all crowded on the view together; there were the bleared eye, the hare-lip, the crooked foot, and every ugliness or distortion that told of unnatural aversion conceived by parents for their offspring, or of young lives which, from the earliest dawn of infancy, had been one horrible endurance of cruelty and neglect (151).

Immediately following this passage, the tone shifts to become self-consciously tragi-comic. The narrator takes a more objective perspective and observes that the scene;

> painful as it was, had its grotesque features, which, in a less interested observer than Nicholas, might have provoked a smile (152).

Adopting this "less interested" viewpoint, the narrator lightens the tone with humour so that the scene becomes "irresistibly ridiculous" (152). Mrs. Squeers is depicted:

> presiding over an immense basin of brimstone and treacle, of which delicious compound she administered a large instalment to each boy in succession, using for the purpose a common wooden spoon, which might have been originally manufactured for some gigantic top, and which widened every young gentleman's mouth considerably, being all obliged, under heavy corporal penalties, to take in the whole bowl at a gasp (152).

The chapter continues in this grimly jocular tone as it

recounts Mr. Squeers' "practical mode of teaching" in which the opportunistic pedagogue explains to a student:

> "a horse is a quadruped, and quadruped's Latin for beast, as everybody that's gone through the grammar knows, or else where's the use of having grammars at all? . . . [now] go and look after my horse, and rub him down well, or I'll rub you down"(155-156).

Mr. Squeers delegates all the domestic chores to his poor students under this transparent guise of 'education'.

The humorous presentation of Dotheboys Hall allows the reader to penetrate its environment with a sense of detachment and safety. Once inside, however, Dickens gives the reader another carefully measured dose of the actual misery in the school with the introduction of Smike. The "timid, broken-spirited creature" (161) concludes the chapter by relating to Nicholas the deep psychological hell of Dotheboys. Pathetically, Smike recounts the lonely death of one of his schoolmates and he asks Nicholas:

> "What faces will smile on me when I die! . . . Who will talk to me in those long nights? They cannot come from home; They would frighten me if they did, for I don't know what it is, and shouldn't know them. Pain and fear, pain and fear for me, alive or dead. No hope, no hope"(162).

This scene is made poignant by the sudden, almost cinematic, shift of focus to the hushed solitude of the two young men in the still evening hours of Dotheboys Hall. The moving tone is further enhanced by the natural intensity always given to the words that conclude a chapter. An additional subtle and insidious cause of the strong impact of Smike's misery is the preceding humorous tone used to describe

the Hall. As Kincaid explains, this is:

> one of /Dickens'/ more successful tactics /that/ involves just this sort of combined immunity-vulnerability which laughter creates and which makes us so open, even if just for an instant, to the deepest attacks.[33]

Thus, the somber chapter ending recalls the initial wretched description of the boys and embellishes it with the details of their daily life so innocuously presented through the narrator's humour.

Dickens was aware of the softening effect of humour, and he consciously employed it in order to publicize the evils of the Yorkshire schools. The success of his presentation is demonstrated by the demise of the schools after the publication of Nicholas Nickleby. In the "Nickleby Proclamation" of 1838, Dickens explains his mixture of humorous tone and lofty import in the novel:

> It will be our aim to amuse by producing a rapid succession of characters and incidents, and describing them as cheerfully and pleasantly as in us lies; that we have wandered into fresh fields and pastures new, to seek materials for the purpose; and that, in behalf of NICHOLAS NICKLEBY, we confidently hope to enlist both their heartiest merriment, and their kindest sympathies. [34]

The Yorkshire schools were the "fresh fields" that Dickens visited after hearing of their deplorable conditions. He hoped that through his novel he could provoke a public outcry that would close the schools and make society aware of its pervasive mistreatment of children.

The traditional comic structure of Nicholas Nickleby and its mythic, fairy tale, and melodramatic components complement Dickens' use of humour. Both comic structure

and melodrama work with the humour to create the illusion that the reader is at a safe psychological distance from the tragic realities that are addressed in the novel. In fact, it is the success of these buffers that has compelled critics to complain of the novel's lack of tragic depth and reality. This is not the case, however, since it is through these combined defenses against the distressing issues in the novel that Dickens is able to present such grim realities as Smike's life without turning the reader away unenlightened and in abhorrence.

The conventional comic structure of Nicholas Nickleby works with humour in order to present disturbing issues through its inherently positive atmosphere. In the Anatomy of Criticism, Northrop Frye outlines the comic structure:

> What normally happens is that a young man wants a young woman, that his desire is resisted by some opposition, usually parental, and that near the end of the play some twist in the plot enables the hero to have his will. In this simple pattern there are several complex elements. In the first place, the movement of comedy is actually a movement from one kind of society to another. At the beginning of the play the obstructing characters are in charge of the play's society, and the audience recognizes that they are usurpers. At the end of the play the device in the plot that brings hero and heroine together causes a new society to crystallize around the hero, and the moment when this crystallization occurs is the point of resolution in the action, the comic discovery, anagnorisis or cognitio.[35]

This is, of course, the basic 'innocence to experience' motif of so many myths and stories. It is repeated, with variations, from the trials of Perseus and Christ, to The Comedy of Errors, Rasselas, and Duddy Kravitz. Since this circular plot structure of Comedy is so firmly embedded

in the literary consciousness of the Western psyche, it brings with it the awareness of a just and happy outcome to the action. Even the unconscious recognition of this pattern is enough to give the reader the faith to persevere through the tragic aspects of a literary work. Thus, in Nicholas Nickleby, the structure makes the reader intuitively confident that ill fortune will change to good, and all will ultimately be well in the world of the novel.

This protective aspect of Comedy is closely akin to the assured ascendant movement of the protagonist and his society in melodrama. In melodrama, the evil villain is always overcome, the righteous hero is always victorious, and the threatened heroine is always rescued. The corresponding melodramatic figures in Nicholas Nickleby are Ralph Nickleby, Nicholas, and Kate. The stilted and sentimental language and gestures of these characters indicate to the reader that moral and structural conventions of melodrama are being adhered to in the novel. As a result, the reader is assured that the novel is operating within an emotionally safe set of dramatic rules. Kincaid recognizes the ability of sentimentality in both melodrama and Comedy to arrest the negative 'affect' of tragic issues. He explains:

> Sentimentality seems to stop short of tragic knowledge, short of grief, short of terror; it assumes that fundamentally everything is all right, or that it will be all right.[36]

Dickens' use of Comedy, melodrama and sentimentality, however, does not prevent him from communicating tragic knowledge

since he couples it with an incisive kind of humour that reveals even as it conceals, and which uses the grim realities of life and human nature as its core.

Ironically, it is Nicholas Nickleby's comic structure, humorous and sentimental tone, and use of melodrama, that critics have used in an attempt to discredit the literary integrity of the novel. It is through these very elements, however, that the social and psychological depth of the novel is revealed. These literary devices allow Dickens to explore the tragic realities of child abuse, poverty, greed, lechery, madness, suicide and death, while protecting the reader from the distressing 'affect' associated with these universal evils. If left unprotected, the recoiling reader would remain unenlightened by the dark realities ever present in Dickens' social conscience and which consequently form the thematic basis of much of his work. Thus, through the atmosphere and devices of humour and Comedy, Dickens is able to genuinely 'teach and delight' as he examines the tragi-comic elements of life, and thereby fulfills the essential elements of 'poesy'.

Harry Stone recognizes the vision that directs Dickens' creative imagination:

> Like most of the great Victorians of his generation, Dickens sought to move and shape his time. In accepting this role he also accepted that his immediate goals were to teach and delight, thus allying himself with the central tradition in Western literature.[37]

An investigation of Dickens' use of humour and Comedy in Nicholas Nickleby reveals his established position,

even in this early work, within Sir Philip Sidney's definition of artistic value. Sidney states that the true artist must:

> imitate to teach and delight; and to imitate borrow nothing of what is, hath been, or shall be; but range, not only reined with learned discretion, into divine consideration of what may be and should be . . . . [to] delight to move men to take that goodness in hand, which without delight they would fly as from a stranger; and teach to make them know that goodness whereunto they are moved: -- which being the noblest scope to which any learning was directed, yet want there no idle tongues to bark at them.[38]

In Nicholas Nickleby, it is primarily through a successful implementation of a sophisticated understanding of humour and a conventional comic structure that Dickens is able to fulfill Sidney's high standards of literary achievement.

PART I

CHAPTER I

THE PERSPECTIVE OF HUMOUR: ILLUSION AND REALITY

> To write of Dickens at all, is to presuppose his humour. . . . It was as a humorist that Dickens made his name; and in a retrospect of his life's activity one perceives that his most earnest purposes depended for their furtherance upon this genial power. . . . Humour is the soul of his work. Like the soul of man, it permeates a living fabric which, but for its creative breath, could never have existed.[1]

The truth of Gissing's claim is substantiated by the opening words of Dickens' obituary notice and Forster's Life. In these tributes, Dickens is named "the greatest humorist whom England ever produced."[2] The humour Dickens employs is "true humour" since it "always suggests a thought, always throws light on human nature."[3] Dickens' use of humour is renowned for its ability to enlighten and teach as well as to entertain and delight. The cultivation of humour as a serious literary technique by Dickens, echoes Dostoevsky's conviction that the "rousing of compassion is the secret of humour."[4]

Humour has many meanings and connotations which extend beyond Freud's definition of it as a defence mechanism. In "Laughter", Bergson notes that humour, comedy, and laughter elusively resist definition.[5] It is generally agreed, however, that comedy and humour are basically the result of the act of recognizing the disparity between

the reality and the illusion of a situation. Thus, a pun or parapraxis, such as a slip of the tongue, is amusing because the audience is made aware of the difference between what is said and what is meant. Although comedy and humour share the dynamic interplay of reality and illusion, according to Freud, humour exclusively has the ability to flourish in an atmosphere of negative 'affect'. Humour is able, therefore, to complement and coexist with Tragedy.

Dickens fully exploits humour's tragi-comic potential by refining and manipulating the illusion-reality motif so that it becomes an atmosphere or perspective rather than simply a formula. Certainly Dickens employs such traditional techniques as puns, farce, burlesque, comedy of manners and caricature; however, the real genius of his humour lies in his subtle application of it to the very themes, tone, and often tragic depth of his novels. For example, with the advent of nineteenth-century interest in psychology and the unexplained, a realization of this dichotomy between reality and illusion became a philosophic and literary issue. As a result, Dickens was nurtured in an age intrigued by the irrational and the unconscious. It was an age that had a growing awareness of the fragile border between illusion and reality in the human mind. This fascination manifested itself in such areas as mesmerism, spiritualism, somnambulism, dream research, hypnotism, and psychoanalysis.

Nicholas Nickleby is an early manifestation of Dickens' lifelong fascination with the notion of an underworld reality that is artfully obscured from everyday life by a variety of thin façades and intricate illusions. This sense of layers of reality, or levels of perception, does not expose a supernatural, mystical world in Nicholas Nickleby as it does in A Christmas Carol (1843), Bleak House (1853), or Edwin Drood (1870). Rather, this early novel's examination of the tenuousness of reality is directed toward a revelation of the multiplicity of ways in which illusions are generated and utilized by man and society. The novel, therefore, revolves around such themes as acting, portraiture, courting, comedy of manners, criminal deception, and personal delusions. These themes continually bring to the reader an awareness of the juxtaposition of illusion and reality in the novel. Humour, in its most profound sense, is the recognition of this juxtaposition and an understanding of the relationship between the two states within a given context.

The issue of 'reality' is a contentious one in Dickens' work in general, but it is particularly marked in Nicholas Nickleby which in places, has an allegorical atmosphere like a fairy tale. An understanding of Dickens' narrators, or personae, is essential to the comprehension of his artistic conception of reality and its place in his work. In "Fables of Knowing", Fredric Bogel observes that Dickens' narrators provide a "standard of awareness by which that of the characters may be measured."[6] The narrator

in Nicholas Nickleby clearly exemplifies this function. An understanding of his role in the novel reveals that the emphasis that many modern critics place on a sense of reality in Dickens is mistaken. Reality in Nicholas Nickleby is, as in Dickens' other works, a relative position on a continually shifting scale of awareness. The shifting from one 'reality' or 'world' to another, is engineered primarily by the narrator. This characteristic alteration of perspective leads George Santayana to note that Dickens' literary world is one that:

> is a perpetual caricature of itself . . . the mockery and the contradiction of what it is pretending to be.[7]

As a result, any attempt to determine a constant sense of reality in Nicholas Nickleby is futile, and contradicts the function of humour and its companion themes in the novel.

In order for Nicholas Nickleby to be investigated on its own terms, it must be viewed within its own context of reality. In the novel, a sense of actual reality is superseded by an internal philosophic, thematic, dramatic and psychological emphasis on contrasting perspectives of reality. Thus, a "willing suspension of disbelief" is essential in order to allow the characters and their actions to combine and produce their intended orchestration of literary conventions and innuendoes of meaning. By manipulating reality through humour and its related themes which demonstrate the interplay between illusion and reality in Nicholas Nickleby, Dickens is following Sidney's definition of 'poesy'. Sidney explains that the artist must:

> borrow nothing of what is, hath been, or shall be; but range, only reined with learned discretion, into divine consideration of what may be and should be.[8]

Thus, Dickens does not portray "what is", rather, he creates a caricature of life in order to demonstrate a moral vision of "what may and should be."

Humour is both an indicator and the effect of the repeated contrasts made in the novel between a character's, or situation's, overt affectation and the actual condition. It is an indicator because humour is invariably generated by the simultaneous perception of an artful illusion alongside of the natural reality that it strives to mask. Dickens heightens the humorous tension produced by the juxtaposition of illusion and reality by encouraging the reader to see the many ways in which reality is manipulated by the characters in the novel. For example, the Crummles Theatre Company represents several levels of reality, or equally, progressive layers of illusion. In the first place, as actors, they create the fictional 'reality' of the plays that they produce. Second, they embody the theatrical 'reality' of actors performing upon a stage. Third, the troupe inhabits the off-the-stage 'reality' wherein individuals project their ego-ideals toward society. Fourth, they exist in the objective 'reality' of their actual natural condition. This fourth level is usually revealed by the narrator who exposes the absurdity of their several layers of pretensions and affectations. Finally, the Crummles embody the consummate 'reality' of being creations of Dickens' imagination. This last level completes

a circular pattern that allows the Crummles to again be perceived in the fictional 'reality' of characters existing 'on stage' within a dramatic work of art. As Dickens moves from one to the other of these various perspectives of reality, the reader experiences a very sophisticated and powerful kind of humour which provokes both insight and amusement. Dickens' layers of illusion in Nicholas Nickleby encourage the reader to forfeit the sense of an ultimate reality for the illuminating experience of observing the dynamic interaction of the spectrum of worlds and realities that are created in the novel.

Dickens explores humour through the dichotomy of reality and illusion in the social, psychological and linguistic levels in Nicholas Nickleby. Unlike traditional humorists, he emphasizes the process of revelation in the reality-illusion motif, rather than relying simply on the element of trick or irony in the revelation. In this way, Dickens subjugates the superficially entertaining element of surprise for the more complex and subtle intricacies of the process of discovery. He delicately weaves and unravels illusions and pretences through a masterful understanding of the mind's ability to alter reality. As a result, reality and illusion interact with each other in Nicholas Nickleby by continually merging and reversing in order to give intellectual depth and emotional vitality to the novel.

The three major themes in Nicholas Nickleby which employ the illusion-reality motif of humour are: knowledge

of the world, comedy of manners, and the stage. All three reflect the human propensity to calculate speech and action very carefully, in order to create a desired illusion that can mask real intentions and motives. Each theme approaches the overall motif from a distinct perspective and through a separate group of characters. For example, Newman Noggs and Nicholas reveal the relationship between a character's understanding of the world and his position in it. The comedy of manners is demonstrated by the Kenwigses and Wititterlys, who provide a satire of social behaviour. The stage, which is the grand metaphor of the motif, is faithfully presented with true Thespian energy by the Crummles' Theatre Company. With some necessary and inevitable overlapping, all the characters in the novel are exposed as artful manipulators of reality and illusion in at least one of the three categories. These central themes complement and embellish each other to generate the predominant intellectual focus of the humour in the novel.

Art in Nicholas Nickleby, whether as acting or painting, is an illuminating mirror of life's panoply of social and private illusions which are in constant conflict with reality. Miss La Creevy is a master of the art of illusion in the novel. Through her talents as a portrait painter, Dickens examines the subtle ways in which illusion and reality can coexist in a manner that is both humorous and enlightening. Her miniature portraits are, in a sense, a metaphor for Dickens' conception of humour. The dichotomy between the actual sitter

and the idealized portrait she produces, is a concrete exemplification of the thought provoking polarity that Dickens explores in the novel. Similarly, it is as the reader simultaneously apprehends the reality and the illusion of a character, event, or word, that humour and insight are produced. Miss La Creevy's portraits mirror Dickens' technique of caricature that shifts the emphasis and tone of a character's reality, in order to create a desired illusion. Dickens, however, always provides an enlightening perspective by which his characters can be seen. Metaphorically, the actual 'sitter', usually given to the reader by the narrator, and the 'portrait', usually projected by the character himself through his language and actions, are always in close proximity in the novel.

Learning from her craft as a portrait painter, Miss La Creevy projects a stylized image of herself to the outside world. The narrator characteristically produces humour by providing an alternative perspective. He produces the paradoxical image of her as "a mincing young lady of fifty" (79). The narrator brings this description to life by asserting that her actual identity is a blend of a "young lady" and a woman of "fifty". It is the adjective "mincing" that brings the oxymoron to life and enables her to emerge as a credible and lively character.

Dickens initially presents Miss La Creevy as pure façade. Ralph Nickleby encounters her as "the voice" which is in possession of "a yellow head-dress" that "/bobs/ over

the bannisters" (78). She is further objectified by the description of her reception of Ralph. The narrator explains:

> The voice replied that the gentleman was to walk up; but he had walked up before it spoke, and stepping into the first floor was received by the wearer of the yellow head-dress, who had a gown to correspond, and was of much the same colour herself (79).

Miss La Creevy appears much like one of her portraits. She is miniature, artfully costumed, painted with stark colours, has limited detail and individuality, and produces a bright, clear impression. She comes to life gradually, however, as Dickens shows how her compassionate "good nature" wins over her "interests" (90) when Ralph informs her that her new tenants are penniless. She comes to life further as she makes a flustered response to Nicholas' farewell kiss (105). Finally, she emerges as a lively "mincing", blushing bride at the end of the novel. This progressive character development, or bringing her portrait to life, parallels the process of humour in which the reader comes to appreciate both the illusion and reality of a situation.

Miss La Creevy's miniature portraits are expert renditions of stereotypes in society. In her portraits, the dress and atmosphere clearly supersede any sense of individual identity. The narrator describes one of the paintings as containing "two portraits of naval dress coats with faces looking out of them" (78). The other portraits are equally stereotypical and lifeless, and the narrator's

emphasis on this makes their description humorous. The portraits include:

> one of a young gentleman in a very vermilion uniform, flourishing a sabre; and one of a literary character with a high forehead, a pen and ink, six books, and a curtain. There was moreover a touching representation of a young lady reading a manuscript in an unfathomable forest, and a charming whole length of a large-headed little boy, sitting on a stool with his legs foreshortened to the size of salt-spoons (78).

The words "very vermilion", "flourishing", "literary character", "touching", and "unfathomable" all indicate that Miss La Creevy's talent lies in the creation of traditional images or illusions, rather than her clients' actual appearance. She capitalizes on her understanding of vanity in human nature which demands to see itself as it desires to be seen and not as it is.

As an "unprotected female" (81), Miss La Creevy's financial survival depends as much upon her perceptiveness and imagination as a psychologist and an illusionist, as it does on her technical skill as an artist. For example, Nicholas discovers her waiting one morning, 'like' a true artist, "for the light to carry out an idea." (104) Her task, however, is less one of fine art than of artifice and craftsmanship since she

> had got up early to put a fancy nose into a miniature of an ugly little boy, destined for his grandmother in the county, who was expected to bequeath him property if he was like the family (104).

This passage is humorously revealing for several reasons. First, there are few things less artistically inspiring than

a little boy's nose. Second, the rendition of the nose is sought for the financial gain of the family rather than for realism or artistic taste. Finally, the grandmother's willingness to bequeath her fortune on the basis of appearance rather than on true character, is indicative of society's cultivation of illusion and deception.

Miss La Creevy's perception of society's desire for idealized images is illustrated further by her reaction to Kate's appearance. The painter, like the Wititterlys, Sir Mulberry Hawk, and Dickens himself, recognizes Kate as a paragon of Victorian femininity which is easily translated into the melodramatic heroine. As a result, Miss La Creevy knows that Kate would "make a sweet miniature" for her "street-door case."(104) In this way, the painter's prospective clients can see that Kate's portrait is an ideal type, like the officers and scholars, to which Miss La Creevy can mould her vain sitters. Ironically, Kate is dramatically stilted throughout the novel by her stereotypical character and appearance, and yet, within the world of the novel, she is the least deceptive, artificial and affected. This paradox is the result of Kate's open and honest personality and her ability to embody ideal values that transcend the caricatures and illusions that surround her. Thus, Miss La Creevy's portrait of Kate mirrors nature accurately and yet, at the same time, it is a supreme example of a stereotype. This apparent contradiction can be explained when Kate is seen as the 'antitype'[9] of melodramatic femininity. In this capacity, she is the ultimate mould for all the 'types' that

mimic her in Miss La Creevy's portraits and in real life.

Dickens sets Kate and Nicholas apart from the 'realities' of the other characters so that they appear genuine and unpretentious in a world full of imposters and counterfeits. In this way, they act as a foil to the various illusions of the other characters, and thereby extract humour and insight from their pretensions. They need not, therefore, be criticised for their melodramatic language, gestures, actions and values. As well as aiding the novel's production of humour, Kate and Nicholas' stock characterization satisfies the novel's comic conventions as well as the nineteenth century public's taste for theatricality in literature. In the Poetics, Aristotle insists that the personality of a character in Comedy must be universal. Frye defines this aspect of the comic character as the 'humour'. Aristotle insists "that Comedy, when it deserves the name of poetry, represents universal types or abstracts of human character."[10] Kate and Nicholas are certainly "abstracts of human character" who have clearly defined personalities and ideas. Ralph Nickleby is also an "abstract", however he represents the human evils of avarice, hatred, greed and selfishness. His character is concisely defined by the narrator:

> The only scriptural admonition that Ralph Nickleby heeded, in the letter, was 'know thyself.' He knew himself well, and choosing to imagine that all mankind were cast in the same mould, hated them; for, though no man hates himself, the coldest among us having too much self-love for that, yet, most men unconsciously judge the world from themselves, and it will be very generally found that those who sneer habitually at human nature, and affect to despise it, are among its worst and least pleasant samples (656-657).

Like most of Dickens' villains, Ralph is far more complex and memorable than his virtuous opponents.

In "Dickens and the Comedy of Humours", Frye describes the stylized world that Dickens creates in his novels as:

> not so much better or worse that the ordinary world of experience as a world in which good and evil appear as much stronger and less distinguished forces.[11]

Thus, the major characters who inhabit this world are proportionately vivid in their morality. Ganz notes that the language and actions of Kate, Nicholas and Ralph define them as stock melodramatic characters. She observes that their clichés and moral perspectives make them:

> often seem mere incarnations of good and evil, conceived in one dimension, invested with rigid standards, clear aims, and a vision unblurred by the contingencies that invariably perplex and modify human behaviour.[12]

There are, however, other levels of reality in Nicholas Nickleby which are inhabited by appropriately diverse, three dimensional characters.

This representation of separate worlds, or levels of experience in the novel, has confused many critics and has led to much condemnation of the detached melodramatic reality of the major characters. Stephen Marcus notes Nicholas' propensity to be removed from the reality of the other characters by 'acting' from the proscenium. He observes:

> In a novel peopled with characters who are engaged in creating their social identities, Nicholas, Kate, and Madeline are supposed to be exempt from such labor: they need only be what they have always been. As a consequence, the disparate fields of reality in the novel, one in which Nicholas exists, the other in which almost everyone else does, fail to define each other.[13]

Marcus identifies the paradoxical lifelessness of the one dimensional 'real' characters in the novel. He notes:

> Nicholas's reality is naturally meant to seem more 'real' than that of the other characters, but it does not. Indeed, it is he who seems 'staged', melodramatic and incredible.[14]

In a discussion of Dickens' attraction to the mode of humour which operates by literalizing idioms and conventions, John Carey observes that Dickens is often 'guilty' of using the techniques he mocks. Carey explains:

> If so much of Dickens' humour depends on his seeing through conventions, whether theatrical or artistic or verbal, we may well wonder how it is that he fails to see through his own.[15]

Carey would argue that in Nicholas Nickleby, Dickens humorously 'sees through' melodrama with the Crummles and Mantalinis while earnestly indulging in the convention with his major characters. Dickens,however, does not fail "to see through" his use of melodrama in the novel. Rather, he utilizes the melodramatic convention parallel with his mockery of it, in order to further demonstrate the dynamics of melodrama and its ability to complement the issues of acting and Comedy in the novel. Nicholas' 'genuine' embodiment of the melodramatic convention presented along with the parody of it by Mr. Mantalini and the Crummles, forms a humorous contrast in which they are each equally valid and absurd depending upon the 'reality' from which they are viewed.

Nicholas, Kate and Madeline are like the pale human actors who are incorporated into an animated Walt Disney movie. They act as a standard against which the colourful illusions and eccentricities of the other characters are

revealed. Ironically, they cannot be accepted as 'real', only as 'touchstones' of reality, since they lose the impression of life and individuality by being a representation of an identifiable norm for the reader.

The distinct worlds, or realities, therefore, in Nicholas Nickleby are essential to its literary integrity for several reasons. First, the melodramatic characters enhance the moral certainty of the comic structure while the addition of the more individual characters allows the novel to be an imaginative, interesting and creative work. Second, the presentation of separate worlds is consistent with the novel's thematic exploration of humour's alternative perspectives. Finally, the melodramatic element enables the reader to identify with the causes of the stereotypical characters, and to use their 'reality' as a 'touchstone' by which to understand, and participate in, the novel.

CHAPTER II

THE WAYS OF THE WORLD

In Nicholas Nickleby, Dickens presents society as a vast network of those who 'know the world'. All the characters in the novel have varying degrees of knowledge of the world and have diverse illusions about its realities and their roles within it. Ralph Nickleby, Mrs. Squeers, Mr. Bray, Mr. Gride, Sir Mulberry Hawk, Mr. Crowl, and the monk in the interpolated story, "The Five Sisters of York", all see the world with Machiavellian clarity and callousness. The other extreme of perception in the novel comes from a group of characters that includes those who live in a totally subjective and illusory world. The epitome of this group is the mad vegetable wooer. Through the delusions of his insanity, he completely subjugates the external world to his schizophrenic whims. Mrs. Nickleby, who often rivals the detached 'logic' of the "Gentleman in small clothes"(740), is the most memorable representative of the group. In addition to her, the other characters who belong to this category of subjective, or 'blind', characters are, Fanny Squeers, the heroically "abstracted"(294) Mortimer Knag and, to a lesser degree, the gullible Mrs. Mantalini. The deluded and egocentric projection of the self onto the outside world displayed

by these characters became one of Dickens' favourite character motifs. It emerges in such memorable characters as Miss Havisham, Mr. Dorrit and Mr. Dick.

The two groups of characters represented by Ralph Nickleby and the mad vegetable wooer respectively, illustrate two diametrically opposed perceptions of the world and definitions of reality. Their relative positions in relation to reality and illusion, however, are difficult to distinguish. Although the objective, clear sighted first group, who 'know the world', appear to be more in touch with reality than the imaginative, eccentric second group, they are actually equally deluded. Like the first and last points on a circle, their positions in relation to illusion and reality are not very different. This is demonstrated by the fact that both groups, either consciously or unconsciously, share the common impulse to manipulate their environment with illusions that allows them to construct a 'reality' that suits their needs. They are equally unresponsive to the moral reality that Dickens so masterfully defines in all his work. For example, the epitome of objective rationalism, the factual pedagogue, Thomas Gradgrind, is revealed to have as little understanding of moral reality as the mad vegetable wooer or Miss Havisham.

The characters in Nicholas Nickleby who do not belong to either group, fluctuate between the two extremes of perception. They illustrate that reality in the novel cannot be strictly defined by, or assigned to, representative characters, but that it is as relative, changeable, and

enigmatic in the world of the novel, as it is in 'real' life. The only reality that is indisputable in the novel is a moral one. It is equally attainable by those who know the world and those who are isolated from it. Moral reality is determined by the attitude through which the world is perceived. It is a selfless perception, coloured by the basic religious values of faith, hope, love and charity. This moral perspective is the ultimate reality for Dickens in all his work and he communicates this through his masterful illusions of fiction.

Reality in Nicholas Nickleby, therefore, is something very elusive. It does not coincide with an understanding of the ways of the world, nor does it exclude the many illusions and pretences that riddle human life. As a result, a rich atmosphere for humour is created since the novel continually thwarts the reader's attempts to establish a concrete sense of reality and a reliable perspective on the action. Whenever the reader begins to be comfortable with the 'reality' of certain characters, like the Crummles, the Kenwigses, or Ralph Nickleby, this reality is manipulated and undermined by a humorous shift of emphasis and perspective. This shift invariably amuses and enlightens the reader by enabling him to see the interplay between reality and illusion.

Ralph Nickleby's Machiavellian reality, for example, is shaken for both himself and the reader, by the nonmaterialistic values of love, charity and honour which are embodied in Kate. Similarly, the reality of Kate and Nicholas is

undermined by their very lack of life and credibility. The social reality of the Kenwigses and the Wititterlys is alternately respected and violated by Dickens' use of the comedy of manners. Ironically, the novel's least convincing 'reality' is the most enduring. This sense of reality is presented by Mrs. Nickleby's eccentric, selfish and myopic perception of the world. Despite her incredible monologues and delusions, she has the distinction of being the only character to maintain confidently that her family would ultimately find fortune, happiness and prosperity. The various realities in the novel, therefore, are merely perspectives from which the reader is encouraged to view the action therein. As a result, Nicholas Nickleby cannot be criticised for its lack of a coherent sense of reality since this sense has been forfeited in favour of the playful insights of humour which operate by shattering the conventional expectations of a situation. Consequently, several worlds are established in the novel only to be dynamically set against each other for the entertaining and enlightening purposes of genuine humour.

There are three basic 'worlds' in Nicholas Nickleby. There is the London world of Ralph Nickleby, the world of delusions represented by Mrs. Nickleby, and the porcelain, 'touchstone' world of Kate and Nicholas. Beyond these general boundaries, the novel quickly unravels into a multitude of exclusive worlds, each having its own hierarchy, regulations and illusions that allow it to function in myopic isolation. There are the separate worlds of the Squeers, the Crummles,

the Kenwigses, the Wititterlys, Sir Mulberry Hawk, the Mantalinis, and the ultimate microcosm of the bedridden hyacinth boy (601). Some critics feel that the novel is fragmented and episodic as a result of this panorama of exclusive worlds. Their presence, however, reflects the protagonist's search for his identity and an understanding of the ways of the world. In addition, they mirror the novel's serious-humorous attempt to elucidate the enigmatic assortment of realities that exist in the world beyond the novel.

Nicholas and Newman Noggs are the principal characters by whom the reader is shown the world of London with all of its evil associations. The chief representative of this world is Ralph Nickleby who, with dastardly determination, attempts to foil these good men at every opportunity. Noggs illustrates the inhumane oppression of Ralph and his sinister world although he is finally freed from it through his alliance with the virtuous Nicklebys.

After the fashion of a bildungsroman, Kate and Nicholas come to understand the ways of the world as the novel develops. Initially the innocence of the homeless, little family is very apparent. They are described as a

> simple family, born and bred in retirement, and wholly unacquainted with what is called the world--a conventional phrase which, being interpreted, signifieth all the rascals in it (87).

The separate trials of Kate and Nicholas lead them to a knowledge of the world and the power and place of illusion and deception in it. Both young people are at first naive

and gullible about the hypocrisy and pretence of the world. The comedy of manners provides the context for their education in social hazards, while the theatre gives Nicholas the additional apparatus in order to contend with the intricate techniques and motives of deception in the world.

Nicholas is a moderate blend of his ingenuous, kind father and his worldly calculating uncle. Ralph describes the initially innocent perception which Nicholas has of the ways of the world to Mr. Squeers. Aptly, Ralph defines Nicholas as one who is "wholly ignorant of the world, has no resources whatever, and wants something to do" (99). Nicholas, however, quickly begins to understand that there are techniques that can help one survive in a hostile world. Even before he leaves for Dotheboys Hall, the narrator notes Nicholas', largely undeveloped but intuitive, understanding:

> It was very little that Nicholas knew of the world, but he guessed enough about its ways to think, that if he gave Miss La Creevy one little kiss, perhaps she might not be the less kindly disposed towards those he was leaving behind. So he gave her three or four with a kind of jocose gallantry, and Miss La Creevy evinced no greater symptoms of displeasure then declaring, as she adjusted her yellow turban, that she had never heard of such a thing, and couldn't have believed it possible (105).

Nicholas' intuition is correct, and his gallant gesture reinforces Miss La Creevy's good-natured sympathy toward the bereaved family so that she assists the vulnerable Nickleby ladies in Nicholas' absence.

Nicholas' employment at Dotheboys Hall dampens the eager idealism with which he sets out into the world. The criminal deception of Mr. Squeers, the shameless cruelty of

his wife, and the ludicrous romantic inventions of his daughter, give Nicholas a shocking and grotesque introduction to the ignoble ways of the world. The revulsion generated in Nicholas when he comprehends the physical and moral filth which pervades Dotheboys Hall precipitates his violent rebellion and escape. Shaken, but matured, by the experience, Nicholas is able to reembark on his journey with new found caution and wisdom. He is truly left to his own devices at this point and plans to become a sailor since he does not, as yet, have the knowledge which will enable him to survive in Ralph Nickleby's world. The occupation of a sailor can be seen as an unconscious attempt to flee the terrible world with which he has become acquainted even though it means abandoning his responsibility to his family. The knowledge that allows Nicholas to cope finally with his family's situation comes from his apprenticeship with the master manipulators of reality--the Crummles Theatre Company.

It is at the Crummles Theatre Company that Nicholas learns how to act in, and deal with, the world. As the Company nurtures his natural ability to write, he becomes acquainted with the power of invention, imagination, and staging, as devices through which to create a desired illusion. The Crummles foster Nicholas' skills as a writer and actor by providing him with an ideal environment in which to experiment with the rules and patterns which govern society and human behaviour. Nicholas soon becomes proficient in all aspects of the theatre and conquers its boundaries both on

and off the stage. As Nicholas outgrows this Thespian microcosm, he demonstrates his graduation from it emblematically by defeating his bold rival, Mr. Lenville on all fronts: talent, skill, appearance, popularity, combative wit, courage, and dignity. The narrator notes that Nicholas

> bore his triumph, as he had his success in the little world of the theatre, with the utmost moderation and good humour (459-460).

While Nicholas' encounter with the Squeers family gives him knowledge of the ways of the world, the Crummles Theatre Company provides him with the tools, skills and understanding to confidently answer its challenges as they are embodied in the villainous Ralph Nickleby.

Newman Noggs is a character through whom the reader learns much about the world and the devastating effect of its ways on those who are innocent and good. He emphasizes the Nicklebys' predicament by epitomizing the antagonism that exists between their hopeful idealism and the devious reality which they face. Through Newman's perceptions, actions, and the internal dynamics of his character, Dickens illustrates the dramatic tension of humour between reality and illusion, the actual and the artful, as it exists in the London world. In this way, Newman discloses the essence of humour in the novel, that is, to entertain and enlighten by illuminating the disparity between the perceptions of a single situation.

Newman Noggs is a striking example of a man who is trapped between his involvement in, and understanding of, the

world, and his moral inability to accept its ways. Like Wemmick in Great Expectations (1860-1861), Noggs lives by the strict mercantile laws of London by day, but then withdraws into the consoling atmosphere of the moral, idealistic, and private night world of his alter-ego. Wemmick copes with the irreconcilable tension created by his practical acceptance of the ways of the world by creating an alternate environment and personality of humanitarian values. He understands the incompatibility of these two disparate worlds, and the vulnerability of his private 'castle'. As a result, Wemmick keeps the two worlds separate, both physically and psychologically, by constructing a fortification around each.

Wemmick, however, is more fortunate than his earlier counterpart, Newman Noggs. Noggs is not able to separate his opposing worlds of understanding effectively and must, therefore, hold the antagonism within himself. This internal torment expresses itself through his characteristic knuckle-cracking, drinking, and various other eccentric activities. The Nickleby family provides him with a vent for his suppressed belief in humanity, love, and gentility. As he secretly takes up their cause, he gains strength from their goodness and youthful idealism, just as they gain guidance from his experience and understanding of the ways of the world. Thus, together they emerge triumphant from the spiritual 'wilderness' of Ralph Nickleby's tarnished world.

Initially, the Nickleby family views Noggs cautiously

since he appears to be a very eccentric man who is subject to fits. Noggs behaves strangely when he is with the Nicklebys because he is struggling with his empathetic understanding of their optimistic naiveté, and his realistic comprehension of the hopelessness of the battle in which they are unwittingly engaged with Ralph Nickleby and the world he represents. Thus, Noggs embodies the 'humorous' perspective of seeing both the Nicklebys' hopeful illusions and their hopeless reality. For example, when Nicholas, with his "sanguine imagination warming" (102), tells Noggs of his 'kind' uncle's assistance in finding him a job, Noggs painfully sees the dichotomy between what Nicholas thinks his uncle "was going to do for him" (102) and the villain's actual intention. As a result, Noggs expresses the disparity he perceives in Nicholas' situation through a variety of idiosyncratic gestures:

> after throwing himself into a variety of uncouth attitudes, /Noggs/ thrust his hands under the stool and cracked his finger-joints as if he were snapping all the bones in his hands.
>
> Newman Noggs made no reply, but went on shrugging his shoulders and cracking his finger-joints, smiling horribly all the time, and looking steadfast at nothing, out of the tops of his eyes, in a most ghastly manner (102).

As Noggs 'smiles horribly' his experience is akin to laughter, however his complete understanding of Nicholas' tragic misconceptions necessitates that the 'humour' express itself in a 'horrible', rather than an 'amused', smile.

Newman Noggs responds with a similar type of disturbed humour to the thankfulness Mrs. Nickleby and Kate

express at Ralph's 'generosity' in providing them with a place to live. In this scene, Noggs is genuinely amused by the disparity between the ladies' misconception of Ralph as a kind man, and the villain's actual temperament. Although Noggs is totally responsible for making the ladies' meagre lodgings comfortable:

> the notion of Ralph Nickleby having directed it to be done tickled his fancy so much, that he could not refrain from cracking all his ten fingers in succession (199-200).

Noggs' finger-cracking punctuates the novel like a leit-motif to signify his distressed perception of the difference between the reality and illusion of a given situation.

Two things allow Noggs to be keenly alert to the incongruity of the Nicklebys' illusions in the London world. First, he recognizes in them the vulnerability that led to his own decline at the hands of the heartless usurer, Ralph Nickleby. Second, he maintains within himself a precarious balance between the family's ideals and Ralph's Machiavellian realism. This incongruity is shown to be continually churning within him, and it manifests itself visually in his high strung, intense, finger-cracking, and eccentric manner. When Noggs takes leave of the ladies in their new accommodations, he displays vividly the incompatible elements in his double nature. Noggs leaves their new home,

> bowing to the young lady more like a gentleman than the miserable wretch he seemed, placed his hand upon his breast, and, pausing for a moment, with the air of a man who struggled to speak but is uncertain what to say, quitted the room (200).

In this scene Noggs acts like a gentleman, but appears to be a "wretch" and is, as a result, a confused and humorous spectacle that prompts the reader to see the dynamics beneath the surface of the situation.

Noggs' warning letter to Nicholas is the strongest evidence of his divided existence and his inherent dignity and honour. As the deluded Nicholas leaves for Dotheboys Hall, Noggs warns him:

> I know the world. Your father did not, or he would not have done me a kindness when there was no hope of return. You do not, or you would not be bound on such a journey.
>
> If you ever want a shelter in London, (don't be angry at this, I once thought I never should), they know were I live at the sign of the Crown, . . . You can come at night. Once nobody was ashamed--never mind that. It's all over.
>
> Excuse errors. I should forget how to wear a whole coat now. . . .
>
> P.S. If you should go near Barnard Castle. . . . Say you know me, and I am sure they will not charge you for it. You may say Mr Noggs there, for I was a gentleman then. I was indeed (147-148).

This highly revealing letter demonstrates the latent gentility and humanity which the Nickleby family reawakens in Noggs. As the novel progresses, Noggs and the Nicklebys are jointly able to restore their integrity and faith in human goodness. With the help of Nicholas, and the Cheerybles, by the end of the novel Noggs no longer "struggles" between the opposing impulses of nature and circumstance, and is restored to a position of respect, composure, and gentility. Similarly, it is only by coming to know the world with Noggs' help, that Nicholas is able to lead his family to a prosperous, moral, and happy life within it.

CHAPTER III

COMEDY OF MANNERS

Comedy of manners is a literary technique which Dickens employs to emphasize the humorous manipulation of reality and illusion in the social arena. This traditional form of comedy has been an effective means of producing humour since the Restoration Comedies, and continues in such popular modern forms of entertainment as the television situation comedy. It works on the same principle as humour by revealing a reality that is masked by an illusion. Comedy of manners has been so enduring and successful because society, by its very nature, is riddled with pretences, affectations and illusions through the rules of etiquette, protocol, and fashion. This is an ideal environment for the humorous exposure of the many ways in which reality can be altered by the human imagination.

In Nicholas Nickleby, the main victims of Dickens' incisive comedy of manners are the Kenwigses, the Wititterlys, Mrs. Nickleby, Miss Knag, and Fanny Squeers. All these characters, either artfully or ingenuously, display an inflated persona and an exaggerated social status. Through humour, one comes to a composite sense of a character's identity by appreciating the interplay between the pretences and the basic reality.

The Kenwigses are invariably presented facetiously, and in the realm of low comedy. Perceiving them as caricatures, rather than as realistic characters, the reader views them with an amused, elevated detachment. This fictional atmosphere enables the reader to examine objectively the human propensity to manipulate reality in order to deceive the self and others. The Kenwigses are considered the 'crème de la crème' of their Golden Square circle. With mocking enthusiasm, the narrator reports:

> Mrs Kenwigs . . . was quite a lady in her manners, and of a very genteel family, having an uncle who collected a water-rate; besides which distinction, the two eldest of her little girls went . . . to a dancing school . . . for . . . which reasons and many more, equally valid but too numerous to mention, Mrs Kenwigs was considered a very desirable person to know, and was the constant theme of all the gossips in the street, and even three or four doors round the corner at both ends (230).

The irony of this illustrious distinction given to the Kenwigses is that they are in reality, a family of very modest means and connections. Indeed, their plebeian domain is merely:

> a bygone, faded, tumbledown street, with two irregular rows of tall meagre houses, which seemed to have stared each other out of countenance years ago. . . . Their tops are battered, and broken, and blackened with smoke.
>
> . . . . . .
>
> To judge from the size of the houses, they have been at one time tenanted by persons of better condition than their present occupants (227-228).

To compound the Kenwigses' humble surroundings, the narrator objectively observes that they not only live in a decrepit district, and live on a decrepit street, but their house

> was perhaps a thought dirtier than any of its neighbours; which exhibited more bell-hangers, children, and porter pots, and caught in all its freshness the first gust of the thick black smoke . . . from a brewery hard by (228).

Thus the conventional humour of exposing the pretensions in the comedy of manners is augmented by the exceptional unworthiness of the Kenwigses. In this way, Dickens makes a farce of the comic genre itself to illustrate that the comedy of manners extends beyond class distinctions, and is a general phenomenon of human nature. The Kenwigses are, therefore, entitled to participate in the affectations and delusions of society with as much integrity and fervour as the Wititterlys, or Mrs. Leo Hunter in Pickwick Papers.

The humour produced by the Kenwigses is effective dramatically because their sense of gentility is self-imposed and tirelessly cultivated. For example, Mr. Kenwigs routinely makes a humble bow to the higher status of his wife, which he views by extension as a flattering reflection on himself. His "very genteel family" (230) also elevates itself through its prized kinship with a "great lion"(231) of society, Mr. Lillyvick the water-tax collector. This "great man--the rich relation--the unmarried uncle" (246) is in reality an insecure, gullible man who is made a fool of by the "bewitching" young actress, Miss Petowker. Before her romantic capture of Mr. Lillyvick, Miss Petowker is regarded as another major social acquisition of the Kenwigs family because of her profession and 'breeding'. The actress "of the Theatre Royal Drury Lane" (234) has the distinction of being

> the daughter of a theatrical fireman, who 'went on' in the pantomine, and had the greatest turn for the stage that was ever known (231).

As a result of Miss Petowker's acting heritage and proficiency,

she easily penetrates the Kenwigses' domain and is able to dupe their "great lion".

Newman Noggs is also included in the Kenwigses' social events. They feel that he is "a genteel person to ask, because he had been a gentleman once" (231). Characteristically, the Kenwigses value Noggs only for what he "was", and do not recognize the natural superiority that lies beneath his shabby appearance. They are oblivious to the irony that he inhabits the most decrepit lodgings in all of Golden Square. This "decayed gentleman" (234) lives on the top floor of the Kenwigses' house, where

> the garret landing-place displayed no costlier articles than two crippled pitchers, and some broken blacking-bottles (228).

Blacking-bottles are a recurrent image of despair in Dickens' work because of his traumatic childhood experience of working, like a common boy, in a blacking factory. Although Noggs lives amidst Dickens' strongest personal emblem of physical, psychological, and spiritual depravity, he is inherently superior to all the members of the paltry Kenwigs community. He is the only one who can see far enough beyond himself to help the Nickleby family. Noggs' position of moral superiority enables him to expose the humour and hypocrisy of the Kenwig 'dynasty' by contrasting their pretensions of gentility with his humbled, but genuine, refinement and humanity.

The Wititterlys, Kate's final employers, provide a further illuminating display of Dickens' adept use of the

comedy of manners. Being of a higher social station than the Kenwigses, the Wititterlys are more typical of the pattern and, therefore, less imaginatively conceived and memorable. Nonetheless, the Wititterlys are equally transparent in their affectations as the narrator reveals the limited substance beneath their grandiose airs. Since the Wititterlys are representative, they are like the other 'gentility' of Cadogan Place who do not:

> claim to be on precisely the same footing as the high folks of Belgrave Square and Grosvenor Place, but that they stand with reference to them rather in the light of those illegitimate children of the great who are content to boast of their connexions, although their connexions disavow them. Wearing as much as they can of the airs and semblances of loftiest rank, the people of Cadogan Place have the realities of middle station (339).

Dickens' language makes it clear that the interesting aspect of the Wititterlys is the enormous effort by which they maintain the precariously "doubtful ground" (339) between their lofty illusions and their actual position.

The Wititterlys focus all their aspirations on one figure so that the energy of their pretensions culminates in one facade of gentility. Mrs. Wititterly is the one who projects the paradigm of the family's genteel image of itself. Mr. Wititterly supports the family's image through his repeated references to his wife's reputation of having "a very excitable nature" and being "very delicate, very fragile; a hothouse plant, an exotic" (341). He takes great care to impress this upon Kate and her mother by assuring his wife, in their presence:

> you are no ordinary person; that there is a constant friction perpetually going on between your mind and your body; and that you must be soothed and tended (343).

In effect, the Wititterlys admit to the active cultivation in their lives of the humorous disparity between mind and body, seeming and being, art and nature, and illusion and reality.

The Wititterlys merely mimic the ways of the upper class by 'affecting fashion' (339) without ever 'effecting' any action of consequence in the outside world. They must surround themselves with various props in order to keep their airs afloat. For example, they hire an appropriate number of 'imposters' to cast their on going social production. They employ, therefore, a man who appears to be a footman, but whose worthiness is as specious as the powder on his head (339).

The Wititterlys' page is their most noteworthy creation. They impressively and appropriately call him Alphonse, while he undeniably "carried plain Bill in his face and figure" (340). The little page's attire is as inauthentic as his countenance. He was:

> so little that his body would not hold, in ordinary array, the number of small buttons which are indispensible to a page's costume, and they were consequently obliged to be stuck on four abreast (339).

Thus, the inordinate page embodies the Wititterlys' enthusiastic, but unconvincing, efforts to emulate the upper class. Like Alphonse, they are ornamented with the airs and props which only accent their inappropriateness.

Mrs. Wititterly's efforts to seem grand blatantly expose her incapability to sustain her extensive illusions.

Her poise and airs, like Alphonse's buttons, are so overdone and theatrical that they reveal, rather than conceal, her low social rank. The incongruity between her illusion and her reality is evident as she "[gives] audience" (339) to Kate and Mrs. Nickleby. Like the leading actress in a performance of the whole household, she 'plays' directly to them, as she does later to Lord Frederick Verisopht and Sir Mulberry Hawk. In Mrs. Wititterly, the Nickleby ladies encounter the very image of gentility, as they view her

> reclining on a sofa in such a very unstudied attitude, that she might have been taken for an actress all ready for the first scene in a ballet, and only waiting for the drop curtain to go up (340).

Dickens effectively reveals the hypocrisy of Mrs.Wititterly through his diction. The words "reclining", "very", "attitude", and "ballet", all contradict the initial description of her as "unstudied" thereby making it clear that she is the very actress with whom she is being compared.

It is characteristic that the Wititterlys employ Kate primarily for her "appearance" and "highly respectable reference for everything" (341), rather than for any of her more discreet virtues. Like Miss La Creevy, the Wititterlys recognize a certain stereotype of female gentility, modesty, and breeding in Kate's demeanour. The same quiet authenticity that makes her a desirable addition to the Wititterlys' cast, by contrast, exposes the fraud and humour of their pretensions. In all the Wititterly episodes, Kate, like Noggs in the Kenwigses' community, performs the dramatic function of providing this undercutting perspective to their pretences.

Unlike Kate, Mrs. Nickleby is taken in by the Wititterlys' display of a high social station. She gullibly notes to Kate as they leave, "They are very distinguished people, evidently. . . . What a superior person Mrs Wititterly is!" (343) Relative to Mrs. Nickleby, perhaps Mrs. Wititterly is "superior" however, she cannot even be compared to Kate who is on an entirely different moral and fictional plane. As a result, Kate responds to her mother's enthusiasm with the doubting reply, "Do you really think so, mama?" (343)

Mrs. Nickleby's favourable impression of the Wititterlys is indicative of her inherently poor judgment of character and reality. She sees no affectation or incongruity in the Wititterlys because she inhabits a world of much deeper illusions, that of actual delusions. Like Dickens' other victims of the comedy of manners, Mrs. Nickleby inhabits a well protected, egocentric world. Unlike the other "hothouse" worlds, however, Mrs. Nickleby's universe has the opaque and resilient walls that are supported by her myopic perception of life. For Mrs. Nickleby, the laws of reality are not merely stretched playfully, as at the Crummles Theatre Company; or skillfully manipulated, as by the social climbers; or artfully adjusted, as by the portrait painter; rather they are totally subject to the whim of her obtuse and eccentric misconceptions. Mrs. Nickleby, therefore, is an exaggerated example of the mentality which generates the comedy of manners. Externally, her favourite 'realities' are those illusions of respectability and affluence which are enacted by such people as

the Wititterlys. Internally, her 'realities' are her delusions of self-worth, social station, and ironically, acuteness of perception. Her inability to deal with any aspect of life in an objective manner makes her wander from such vital priorities as her childrens' safety, to bizarre allusions to the past or trivial present fixations.

Although Mrs. Nickleby's function in Nicholas Nickleby reaches far beyond her participation in the comedy of manners, she is involved in one of Dickens' most energetic displays of the genre. She unwittingly spars with Miss Knag in a duel of airs, illusions and affectations. Miss Knag is a much more clear-sighted woman than Mrs. Nickleby and thus calculates her speech and actions to produce the desired aims of her vanity and ambition. In a significant scene Mrs. Nickleby routinely alludes to her affluent past, which provokes the vain and patronizing Miss Knag to outdo her young employee's mother. As a result, the airs of the two women reach an absurd level of upstaging which is accentuated by the obliviousness of Mrs. Nickleby on the one hand, and the desperate intensity of Miss Knag, on the other. The narrator relates the spectacle of the two ladies:

> Miss Knag fell into many more recollections, no less interesting than true, the full tide of which Mrs Nickleby in vain attempting to stem, at length sailed smoothly down, by adding an undercurrent of her own recollections; and so both ladies went on talking together in perfect contentment; the only difference between them being, whereas Miss Knag addressed herself to Kate, and talked very loud, Mrs. Nickleby kept on in one unbroken monotonous flow, perfectly satisfied to be talking, and caring very little whether anybody listened or not (291).

This humorous interchange, in which very little is exchanged, reveals a key element in the comedy of manners. In it any dialogue or action of substance is completely obscured by an egocentric production of static. Since the two ladies have lost all sense of objectivity, the narrator presents them as they actually appear, that is, as an inane pair who spew words "no less interesting than true". They talk only to satisfy a vain need to feel important and respected. Dialogue at this point becomes entirely noncommunicative and inwardly directed. The physical placement of Kate between the two ladies is significant. As a 'touchstone', Kate is objective, wholesome and perceptive, and by standing between the two egocentric and foolish ladies she accentuates their puppet-like caricatures and heightens the humour and import of their behaviour.

Fanny Squeers is yet another character whose social politics are exposed through the comedy of manners. If Miss La Creevy were to portray the antithesis of Kate, she would perhaps arrive at a figure much like Fanny Squeers. Fanny is the epitome of physical, spiritual, emotional, sociological, and intellectual depravity. Her hellish environment colours unfavourably any comparison between her and the other characters in the novel. For example, although Smike is poorly endowed physically, mentally, and emotionally, he is far more noble, honest, and admirable than is Fanny. It is her denial of her faults and inferiority that makes her an unwittingly humorous character. She is an intuitive actor, a

true hypocrite in the comedy of manners, and most of all, a transparently deluded, selfish and pathetic young woman.

Fanny's bleak enviromnent coupled with the disparity between her self-image and her appearance, enables her to demonstrate the total spectrum of humour through the comedy of manners. Although humour's requirement of negative 'affect' is somewhat evinced in all the other worlds of the novel, it is nowhere as pronounced as at Dotheboys Hall which acts as a tragic backdrop to the entire novel. The humorous presentation of Fanny at once utilizes, relieves, and accentuates the tragic aspects of her environment. Her presence allows the reader to smile occasionally within the sinister walls of Dotheboys Hall and consequently, to be more deeply touched by its horror.

Although Fanny is one of the least mannered and sophisticated characters in Nicholas Nickleby, she is equally compelled to disguise her condition and motives with artful pretensions and, as a result, appears as almost a farce of the comedy of manners. For example, the image of her ogling at Nicholas' legs (166), with her hair conspicuously arranged in order to obscure her paternally inherited squinting eye, is at once humorous and pathetic. The contrast between the way in which she desires Nicholas to see her, and what he actually sees, constitutes the foundation of the situation's humour. As with the Crummles, and even his own mother, Nicholas sees through her airs and, like the reader, is amused by them. For example, when he is approached by Fanny, whose pen needs mending, Nicholas is shown

> pointing to the pen, and smiling, in spite of himself, at the affected embarrassment of the schoolmaster's daughter (167).

Nicholas, as a 'touchstone', is able to recognize her 'act' and to smile at it even though he is too naive to see the romantic motive behind the action.

Fanny has the imaginative capacity to delude herself by fabricating illusions in order to deny her despicable condition. For example, she displays the ability to skillfully protect herself from the humiliating reality when she is caught in the contradiction between her boastful reports of her romance with Nicholas, and his obvious indifference. As a result, when Fanny recoils from Nicholas' devastating rejection of her:

> there was one thing clear in the midst of her mortification, and that was that she hated and detested Nicholas with all the narrowness of mind and littleness of purpose worthy a descendant of the house of Squeers. And there was one comfort too; and that was, that every hour in every day she could wound his pride and goad him. . . . With these two reflections uppermost in her mind, Miss Squeers made the best of the matter to her friend by observing, that Mr Nickleby was such an odd creature . . . that she feared she should be obliged to give him up (209).

All the characters in the comedy of manners, like Fanny, always manage to make "the best of the matter" by repudiating reality and constructing protective illusions. After Fanny is proven fraudulent in her claims and expectations regarding Nicholas, she excludes the humiliating reality from her mind and reconstructs her self-esteem with an energetic defiance of reality.

Fanny's letter to Ralph Nickleby which informs him

of Nicholas' insurrection and denounces his character, is a humorous documentation of her transparent façade of respectability. Her lowness is evident in her poor spelling, grammar and ideas. She writes:

> Sir,
> My pa requests me to write to you. The doctors considering it doubtful whether he will ever recuvver the use of his legs which prevents his holding a pen.
> We are in a state of mind beyond everything, and my pa is one mask of brooses both blue and green likewise two forms are steepled in his Goar.
> . . . . . .
> I am screaming out loud all the time I write and so is my brother which takes off my attention rather, and I hope will excuse mistakes (242-243).

Fanny's attempt to sound self-righteous and proper fails humorously despite her use of semi-appropriate letter form and vocabulary. Margaret Ganz, in "Nicholas Nickleby and the Victories of Humor", notes that Fanny's letter:

> perhaps best illustrates Dickens' tendency in Nicholas Nickleby to exploit the humorous potential of an idea, veiling or even forgetting didactic intentions.[1]

Fanny's "vindictive resourcefulness" so imaginatively rearranges reality that her "moral indignation" in the letter "is bound to seem bankrupt."[2] It does, however, achieve a serious "didactic intention" by giving the reader a glimpse of how pitiable and low she, and her family, really are. Pathetically, the Squeerses feel genuinely abused by Nicholas' assault since they do not comprehend the moral values by which it was precipitated.

This dilemma between punishment and understanding complicates the humour in Fanny's letter. Although it superficially displays the affectations of the comedy of manners,

it reveals a more tragic kind of blindness. Mr. Squeers and his daughter are "larger emblems of human fallibility" than Mrs. Squeers and Wackford who "seem accidental manifestations of evil".[3] Ganz explains that Mr. Squeers is:

> a vulnerable grotesque rather than a figure of evil, like Bob Sawyer and Jingle at once forger and victim of his own mental life rather than the manipulator of the destinies of others.[4]

Thus, the reader feels compassion for Fanny and her father because they are so humanly blind in their delusions and self-deception. As stock evil characters, the punishment of the other two Squeerses can be accepted without reservation. This is demonstrated by the illustration entitled, "the breaking up at Dotheboys Hall" in which acts of revenge are carried out only on Mrs. Squeers and Wackford. To have included Fanny and Mr. Squeers would have complicated the reader's sense of moral justice and tarnished the virtuousness of the emancipators.

The humour produced by Fanny and her maid Phib, can only be appreciated in the light of the more conventional episodes of comedy of manners in the novel. These episodes are, in turn, embellished by an understanding of the Crummles' acting, both on and off the stage. Phib, as her name suggests, alters the truth with lies, and calculates her actions in order to manipulate her mistress. The "artful Phib" (202) consoles Fanny after she loses her pride and heart to Nicholas. Phib understands exactly what Fanny wants, and needs, to hear in order to facilitate the alteration of facts that is required to twist the romantic humiliation into a success and

thereby restore her mistress' self-esteem. The "artful", "hungry servant" (201), however, is motivated by the self-interested desire to keep Fanny in good spirits, rather than by compassion or fondness. In order to achieve her aim, Phib

> Having a half perception of what had occurred in the course of the evening, . . . proceeded on the indirect tack (201).

Phib insightfully begins by soothing Fanny with flattery and bold comments on Tilda's shabbiness. Cleverly, Phib opines to Fanny:

> "if she was only to take copy by a friend--oh! if she only knew how wrong she was, and would but set herself right by you, what a nice young woman she might be in time"(202).

This 'fibbing' actress consciously sets the stage for Fanny to play the self-righteous, injured and superior role in the dispute with Tilda. Phib, like Puck in Shakespeare's Comedy A Midsummer Night's Dream, alters the painful reality of the previous evening and creates a wishful illusion which Fanny accepts easily in order to preserve her pride and to deny her shameful behaviour.

Dickens gives a depth of character to both Fanny and Phib by examining the motivation behind their affectations. They are both sympathetically understood by the reader when one remembers their deplorable moral and physical surroundings. Fanny, like most of the characters in the comedy of manners, engages in self-delusions and social airs because she is not content with herself or with her position in life. Phib acts out of an even deeper sense of necessity, that is, hunger. It is imperative to her survival that she appease her mistress

with 'fibs' rather than to anger her with the truth. Nicholas, on the other hand, demonstrates the suicidal result of failing to succumb to Dotheboys' ways by maintaining his morally realistic and honourable impulses and acting upon them.

The majority of characters in the novel create illusions, like Phib, out of basic physical, psychological and social necessity. Ralph, for example, affects pleasantness to Lord Verisopht to satisfy his greedy nature. Similarly, Noggs diverts his hatred for Ralph into eccentric behaviour and pantomimes, out of economic necessity. Mrs. Nickleby creates the illusions of self-importance, beauty and prosperity out of psychological necessity. The Kenwigses and the Wititterlys maintain a strict code of conduct out of social necessity. Finally, Miss La Creevy paints illusions of vanity out of financial necessity. The Crummles Theatre Company complements these various explorations into personal cultivations of illusions that help a character to cope with his world and its specific demands. The Crummles mirror, amplify and analyze the human propensity to manipulate the environment. Through the Crummles, as actors on and off the stage, Dickens explores the human imagination which straddles the fine line between illusion and reality. He does this through the illuminating perspective of humour.

CHAPTER IV

THE THEATRE

Dickens' affinity for the theatre was apparent from his boyhood. It remained a powerful influence in his works and readings throughout his life. Even at the young age of fourteen, Dickens is reputed to have been an avid story maker, teller and actor. One of his fellow dayboys at Mr. Jones' school recalls that Dickens:

> took to writing small tales, and we had a sort of of club for lending and circulating them. Dickens was also very strong in using a sort of lingo, which made us quite unintelligible to bystanders. We were very strong, too, in theatricals. We mounted small theatres, and got up very gorgeous scenery to illustrate the Miller and his men and Cherry and Fair Star. . . . Dickens was always a leader at these plays.[1]

Another "School-fellow and Friend" recalls that Dickens'

> well-known liking for theatricals was also early developed. . . . At the age of about 14 Dickens took parts at the small play-house in Catherine Street . . . which was much frequented by amateurs.[2]

Dickens' perceptive childhood fascination with the theatre is also captured in his recollections,

> that the witches in Macbeth bore an awful resemblance to the thanes and other proper inhabitants of Scotland, and that the good King Duncan couldn't rest in his grave, but was constantly coming out of it, and calling himself somebody else.[3]

Even as a mature novelist, Dickens retained this childlike literalizing vision. His natural ability to perceive the

actor's precarious suspension between illusion and reality, constitutes a major factor in his masterful use of humour.

As a young man of twenty-three, Dickens planned to become a professional actor. In a letter to Bartly, the stage manager for Mathews at the Lyceum, Dickens described himself as having "a strong perception of character and oddity, and a natural power of reproducing."[4] Fortuitously, however, he became ill and could not attend the ensuing major audition and, as a result, was available to accept the propitious offer to have his writing published along with Seymour's popular engravings. This employment quickly evolved into Pickwick Papers and provided Dickens with a lifelong direction for his creative energy. Even in his last months of ill health, Dickens was driven by his theatrical instincts. It was during his last years that he performed most of his energetic and captivating readings. At these readings, Thomas Carlyle noted that Dickens:

> acts better than any Macready in the world; a whole tragic, comic, heroic theatre visible, performing under one hat, and keeping us laughing -- in a sorry way, some of us thought -- the whole night.[5]

Although these readings were very profitable, many feel that the compulsive strain under which Dickens put himself during this time was self-destructive and led ultimately to his emotional and physical decline and death in 1870.

Dickens' natural theatrical sensibility encouraged him to apply his intuitive understanding of acting and the stage to his literary works. He saw that the stage was a metaphor for life and recognized that acting had an integral role in

human nature. This theatrical perception colours his works in a multitude of characteristic ways, from characters who have the capacity to visually define and animate themselves with language and gesture, to the grippingly vivid and cinematic scene descriptions.[6] Not only does he use the tone and techniques of the theatre, Dickens uses the very dynamics of the artistic interaction between illusion and reality which gives the stage its intellectual appeal and dramatic intensity. The theatre was a creative wellspring for Dickens throughout his life because he maintained creative contact with it in several ways. First, he wrote several plays at various stages in his career.[7] Second, he traditionally organized a Christmas production with his family and friends. Third, he was an avid patron and critic of the theatre. Finally, he had a life long friendship with the great actor William Macready, who proof read much of his work and with whom Dickens exchanged many ideas.

Dickens' most memorable characters come to life as he exposes their hidden selves beneath the 'act' of their personae. This protected identity lies below a façade which is projected by the performance of the ideal self. Through his understanding of psychology, Dickens conveys that an individual can be seen as a subtle blend of a vulnerable, protected ego, and the calculated, outward ego ideal. When Dickens reveals this often tragic dichotomy between illusion and reality in human nature, he is essentially working within the intellectual and emotional framework of humour.

It is the presence of the Crummles Theatre Company in Nicholas Nickleby that allows the mechanics of illusion and reality to be explored on both the personal and social levels. Their presence encourages the reader to extrapolate the knowledge of acting gained through them to the other characters and events in the novel. As a result, while the Crummles educate Nicholas to be an actor and playwright, they show the reader the ways of art and illusion in human life. The reader is encouraged, not only to extend the Crummles episodes to the novel's related themes of reality and illusion, but also to the artistic experience of fiction and characterization in the novel itself. Dickens like Shakespeare, in such plays as Hamlet and A Midsummer Night's Dream, understands the value of the 'play within a play' as a metaphor which complements the themes of seeming and being, art and nature, and illusion and reality.[8]

Nicholas Nickleby, more than any other Dickens' novel, employs actors and the stage as a conscious complementation of the total work.[9] It is not surprising, therefore, that he dedicates this novel to the actor, his close friend, William Macready. The Crummles are essential to the novel's structure and theme because their episodes are overtly theatrical. Similarly, the novel is theatrical in its general structure and in minute details of language, organization, gesture and narrative voice. As a result, more than any other Dickens' novel, it is not so much like reading a play, as being at a play. This accounts for its unique success as

a modern stage production marathon.

Mr. and Mrs. Crummles are natural actors for whom truly 'all the world's a stage'. This is evident from the way in which they present themselves in Portsmouth's main street:

> Mrs Crummles trod the pavement as if she were going to immediate execution with an animating consciousness of innocence and that heroic fortitude which virtue alone inspires. Mr Crummles, on the other hand, assumed the look and gait of a hardened despot; but they both attracted some notice from many of the passers-by, and when they heard a whisper of 'Mr and Mrs Crummles!' or saw a little boy run back to stare them in the face, the severe expression of their countenances relaxed, for they felt it was popularity (371-372).

Dickens emphasizes the Crummles' propensity to act 'off the stage' with the words "animating", "as if" and "assumed". In addition, the exaggerated descriptions of their having "heroic fortitude" and being a "hardened despot" respectively, enhance the fancifulness of their public image. The initial humour of the scene comes from the absurdity, and thus, transparency, of their "assumed" public façades. It is intensified, however, by the Crummles' inability to see that they are not perceived by others as they are by themselves.

At the wedding of Henrietta Petowker and Mr. Lillyvick, Dickens again presents the Crummles displaying their inclination to use the world as their stage. Mr. Crummles indulges in his part as the Father of the Bride. He walks up the aisle "with an infirm and feeble gait" while he "carefully wiped and put on an immense pair of spectacles" (402). Mr. Crummles artfully follows his "original conception" of the part, and is "made up" with the props to create the 'spectacle' of his "immense" mask:

> a theatrical wig, of a style and pattern commonly known as a brown George, and moreover assuming a snuff-coloured suit, of the previous century, with grey silk stockings, and buckles to his shoes. The better to support his assumed character he had determined to be greatly overcome, and, consequently, when they entered the church, the sobs of the affectionate parent were so heart-rending that the pew-opener suggested the propriety of his retiring to the vestry (402).

Mr. Crummles, of course, declines the invitation to 'exit' since he naturally maximizes the intensity and duration of any role he plays.

In this nuptial performance, Mrs. Crummles takes the part of the Mother of the Bride. She enters the scene "in a stern and gloomy majesty, which attracted the admiration of all beholders" (402). Appropriately, she joins the spectacular procession up the aisle by "advancing with that stage walk, which consists of a stride and stop alternately" (402). All the other members of the Company were similarly costumed, rehearsed and staged for the dramatic event. As a result, the wedding is a grand theatrical event in which the actual ceremony "was very quickly disposed of" (402).

The only outsiders at the wedding performance are Nicholas and Mr. Lillyvick. They present two very different perspectives on the action. Nicholas, as a 'touchstone', is a perceptive observer who views the production with amused, objective understanding. Mr. Lillyvick, on the other hand, is a bewildered and trapped participant in the action. He is duped by the actors and becomes their foil. In this capacity, he demonstrates that even a "great lion" can be a powerless prey if he is oblivious to the essential role

of acting, pretence and deception in the 'world'. By comparison, Nicholas is elevated in the reader's estimation and deemed ready to enter the London 'world' and to compete with Ralph on the villain's own devious terms.

Mr. Lillyvick's encounter with the Crummles enhances an understanding of his position in the Kenwigs family. He is also a victim of the Kenwigses' performances, which are usually scenes of patriarchal affection and devotion. Although he appears to control the family completely with his position and temperament, he is actually intimidated and manipulated by their performances. He explains to Nicholas, "quite trembling as he spoke", that his marriage is a clandestine affair because:

> "If my niece and the children had known a word about it before I came away, they'd have gone into fits at my feet, and never have come out of 'em till I took an oath not to marry anybody -- or they'd have got out a commission of lunacy, or some dreadful thing"(398).

The Kenwigses, however, are upstaged in their captivation of Mr. Lillyvick by the charming Miss Petowker. He is once again the victim of a masquerade when he is duped by the whole Company into providing an elaborate wedding breakfast. Mr. Lillyvick seems half-conscious of his vulnerability on several occasions. He exhibits this when he explains to Nicholas that he desires to keep the marriage a secret from the family. Nicholas observes his vacillating insecurity as he notices:

> through the whole of this interview a most extraordinary compound of precipitation, hesitation, confidence and doubt; fondness, misgiving, meanness, and self-importance (399).

Later, at the wedding breakfast, Mr. Lillyvick again manifests signs of defensive insecurity. Mr. Folair initiates this by good-humouredly drawing a parallel between tying the wedding knot and hanging oneself. Mr. Lillyvick 'doth protest too much' by accusing the "unfortunate" Mr. Folair of aiming "a blow at the whole framework of society" (403). Throughout the novel, Mr. Lillyvick fails to understand the artful "framework of society" which is a delicate intertwining of illusions.

Miss Snevellicci presents a further example of the ability of the actors to transfer their theatrical knowledge and skill into life beyond the curtain. When Nicholas calls on her to help promote her 'bespeak', it becomes evident to both him and the reader, that she has carefully staged his wait in order to produce a favourable impression. She arranges her apartment with casual precision so that Nichclas has a view of everything from her stockings to her most prized reviews. Amid these evidences of a versatile and talented actress, Nicholas' attention is artfully encouraged to view:

> the open scrap-book, displayed in the midst of some theatrical duodecimos that were strewn upon the table, and pasted into which scrap-book were various critical notices of Miss Snevellicci's acting, extracted from different provincial journals, together with one poetic address in her honour (382-383).

Miss Snevellicci delays her entry just long enough for Nicholas to absorb the selected glowing reviews of her acting career which she has left out on display. Feigning embarrassment, she scolds him:

> "Oh you cruel creature, to read such things as those. I'm almost ashamed to look you in the face afterwards, positively I am. . . . I wouldn't have had you see it for the world" (384).

Nicholas defends his trespass in such a way as to indicate that he sees through her performance but that he is willing to play along. Amused, he responds, "I thought you had kindly left it here, on purpose for me to read," while the narrator adds, "And really it did seem possible" (384).

The Infant Phenomenon opportunely enters at this delicate and embarrassing trial to Miss Snevellicci's modesty. Like a good actress, the Phenomenon

> had discreetly remained in the bedroom up to this moment, and now presented herself with much grace and lightness (384).

Nicholas' good nature, sense of humour and perceptiveness, enables him to accept Miss Snevellicci and the other actors, both as they are and as they appear to be. Through his exposure to their many affectations, he is able to come to an understanding of human nature and the ways of the world.

Smike, like Nicholas, also profits from his encounter with the Crummles. It helps to build his character in both the individual and social sense. Smike experiences respect, popularity and a sense of self worth for the first time in his life. Upon meeting Smike, Crummles views him with a favourable "professional eye":

> "without a pad upon his body, and hardly a touch of paint upon his face, he'd make such an actor for the starved business as was never seen in this country. Only let him be tolerably well up on the Apothecary in Romeo and Juliet with the slightest possible dab of red on the tip of his nose, and he'd be certain of three rounds the moment he put his head out of the

> practicable door in the front grooves of O. P. . . . I never saw a young fellow so regularly cut out for that line since I've been in the profession"(356-357).

Similarly, Mrs. Crummles singles Smike out as a rare theatrical find by stating "he is admirable. . . . An acquisition, indeed" (363). This warm reception of Smike provides him with a sense of purpose, self respect and security, qualities long overdue in the development of his character. For the reader, Smike's newly found fame lifts him from a position of pathetic and painful deformity, to one of sympathetic eccentricity and fondness. Dickens uses the Crummles episodes in order to salvage Smike from his former tragic associations and thus, makes his character more tolerable and versatile for the reader. This is a necessary dramatic transformation in order to allow Smike to develop and to function in the novel beyond his limited scope at Dotheboy's Hall where he is exclusively a personification of its inhumanity and horror.

The Crummles provide Nicholas with an additional tool with which to help him understand the complexities of the world. They appoint him as the Company's writer. Nicholas' apprenticeship as a playwright augments his acting experience by teaching him how, not only to embody, but actually to develop and orchestrate illusions. Although the play he 'writes' is merely a melodramatic translation, it necessitates a keen understanding of human nature, interpersonal relations and basic dramatic structure. Melodrama is essentially a highly stylized synthesis of the struggles, defeats and victories of human life. Nicholas' ability to adapt the melodrama to the individual

personalities and preferences of the actors illustrates that his understanding of reality and illusion goes far beyond that of the other actors.

The experience of being in the Company and 'writing' the play, also develops Nicholas' understanding of human nature and the ways of the world in a very practical way. Mr. Lenville and Mr. Folair, like most of the members of the Company, demand that Nicholas alter the play to fit their personal specifications. Nicholas quickly realizes that he must subjugate his idealistic and sophisticated esthetic sense to the egocentric demands of the Company's members. He comes to respect the power of illusions in social politics and learns how to employ it to his advantage. Although still honest and honourable, Nicholas comes to know that acting is a type of deception that must be respected and mastered in order to survive in the 'world'.

Mr. Lenville provides Nicholas with the additional challenge of bold social confrontation. The jealous Mr. Lenville sends Nicholas a "cartel of defiance" requesting that he come to the theatre at his convenience "for the purpose of having his nose pulled in the presence of the company" (454). Nicholas deals with the challenge far more successfully, intelligently and gracefully, than he had dealt with Squeers at Dotheboys. With confidence and humour he publicly conquers Mr. Lenville and emerges the gallant hero of the Company. This encounter prepares Nicholas for the ensuing, far more serious social confrontations with Sir Mulberry Hawk, and finally, Ralph Nickleby himself.

Although Nicholas can be seen as developing through progressive stages as he comes to understand the relationship between reality and illusion within society and himself, it is an emblematic rather than realistic movement. The acquired knowledge of acting, melodrama, and human nature does not allow Nicholas to be seen as a convincing 'artist'. The apprenticeship he goes through merely satisfies the structural requirement of Comedy which is that the protagonist move from a state of innocence to experience. He does not have the depth of character and inspiration of a fully developed imaginative and spontaneous artistic character. Although Dickens praises the natural qualities of an artist, he is only able to approach a positive representation of them in such characters as Sissy Jupe and David Copperfield. The fact that Nicholas enters the business world at the end of the novel emphasizes that the most important outcome of his experience as an actor and writer is not the artistic, but the social and psychological understanding of the role of illusion and reality in the ways of the world.

PART II

THE LANGUAGE OF HUMOUR

The discussion of humour in Nicholas Nickleby necessitates both an internal analysis of themes, language, characterization and style, and the external examination of the traditional patterns of Comedy and melodrama. Our discussion of the novel began with an investigation of its logos, or prevailing 'idea', of illusion and reality. This logos is expressed through the multifarious applications of humour in the novel which extend from its themes of the ways of the world, comedy of manners, and the theatre, to its very language, tone, style and narration. The internal literary mechanics of Nicholas Nickleby work with its themes and overall structure of Comedy to complement them with the intricacies of language, character and style. Kincaid observes:

> the use of our laughter is an extremely powerful instrument of rhetoric, persuasive and incisive in its accuracy, and applicable to us in its contribution to the total vision contained in Dickens's novels.[1]

Laughter, in its varying degrees as a reaction to humour, is therefore induced by Dickens for its own sake as well as for its effect on the overall tone and meaning of the work.

Language is a major factor in Dickens' creation of the laughter and enlightenment which is generated by his humour.

Language contributes to the humour in Nicholas Nickleby with its incisive puns, oxymorons and inappropriate words, as well as its idiolect and dialogue, characterization and descriptive detail. Intrinsic to Dickens' style is his characteristic alteration of expected word choice and sentence construction. It is the unexpected element in his use of language that produces the basic humour of surprise and revelation. An examination of humour in Dickens' language extends to a linguistic investigation of all aspects of the novel, from chapter titles to narration and dialogue. A detailed discussion of the element of humour in Dickens' language is fascinating, but voluminous, therefore, narration and idiolect are specifically focused upon in this context since they are indicative of Dickens' general linguistic style.

The narrator in Nicholas Nickleby is unobtrusive, ironic, perceptive and witty. His language communicates a humorous objective perspective through his use of deflating literalism. While he leads the reader through the novel, he 'teaches and delights' by means of his language and perspective, and thereby keeps within the objectives of both humour and 'poetry'. His humorous language includes irony, sarcasm, hyperbole, understatement, superlatives and inappropriate words.

The initial description of Mr. Squeers exemplifies the narrator's calculated, humorous language:

> Mr Squeers's appearance was not prepossessing. He had but one eye, and the popular prejudice runs in favour of two. The eye he had was unquestionably useful, but decidedly not ornamental, being of a greenish grey, and in a shape resembling the fanlight on a street door. The blank side of his face was much wrinkled and puckered up, which gave him a very sinister appearance, especially when he smiled, at which times his expression bordered closely on the villainous (90).

The narrator begins his description with the gross understatement "not prepossessing", which does not prepare the reader for Squeers' actual deformed and "sinister appearance". The fact that the Yorkshire schoolmaster "had but one eye" is delicately phrased and is followed by the absurdly inappropriate judgement that "popular prejudice runs in favour of two." The alliteration of "popular prejudice" contributes to the narrator's jocular and slightly facetious tone. The tactful description of the eye as "useful" but not, to put it mildly, "ornamental", is shattered by the unexpected contrast between it and the "fanlight on a street door." This comparison illustrates the linguistic observation John Carey makes in The Violent Effigy:

> It's not only that he is wonderfully resourceful at finding the inappropriate word--the device upon which irony depends--but his comic similies are highly graphic (the porridge looking like pincushin stuffing, for instance), as well as funny.[2]

The crowning touch of Squeers' description is, not so much the eventual admission that he has "a very sinister appearance", but that his ugliness is, paradoxically, most apparent when he smiles.

The narrator's use of language in order to startle is not arbitrary or merely for the effect of surprise, rather his unlikely words and constructions show the reader the, often ironic, reality of a character or situation. Thus, it is strangely appropriate that when Squeers smiles "his expression bordered on the villainous", because his smile is an unnatural façade that is hypocritically calculated to deceive and harm.

It is therefore, the most deformed, "sinister" and "villainous" pose this man can strike.

In describing Mr. Squeers, the narrator displays his characteristic tone of objective literalism. Throughout the novel, the narrative tone forces the reader to view the characters and events from this humorous and enlightening perspective. Thus, the narrator is a major factor in the novel's humour as a result of his continual exposure of the interplay between illusion and reality. His innovative language and viewpoint prompts Carey to observe:

> The deflating literal treatment of dramatic art is carried on extensively in Nicholas Nickleby, of course, in the episodes with Mr. Vincent Crummles and his travelling players. Here the innocent child viewer /who is the usual source of this kind of humour/ has been removed, and it is Dickens as narrator who takes a literal look at the play.[3]

As an example, Carey notes the scene in which the Crummles set a

> gorgeous banquet, ready spread for the third act, consisting of two pasteboard vases, one plate of biscuits, a black bottle, and in short, everything was on a scale of utmost splendour and preparation (377).

The disparity between the narrator's literal perception of the props, and the audience's 'willing suspension of disbelief' creates humour by providing the reader with a simultaneous understanding of the scene from two opposing perspectives. Thus, the reality of the banquet is purely relative, and it is this kind of versatile ambiguity of reality throughout the novel that makes Nicholas Nickleby such a rich environment for humour.

John Carey also notes that the narrator's literal

language "allows Dickens to see through ceremony and regalia"[4] as well as to "extract comedy from idioms and titles by taking them at face value."[5] One effective and sustained use of literalism by a narrator occurs in Little Dorrit with the identification of Pancks with a steam-tug. In addition, Dickens' chapter headings often have this capacity to show through, and yet still respect, an illusion. For example, chapter eight of Nicholas Nickleby is entitled, "Of the Internal Economy of Dotheboys Hall". This title is humorous primarily because it so ironically understates the actual management of the school. A more accurate title might be "Of the Eternal Misery of Dotheboys Hell". Dickens' title, however, reflects the deepest truth and reality of the Squeerses' establishment for several reasons. First, the Squeerses consider the internal management of the Hall to be strictly a matter of economics, rather than of education or compassion. Second, "Internal Economy" is just the sort of facetious euphemism with which Squeers sells his school and eases his conscience (while he actually sells his conscience and eases his sales). Finally, the detached and aloof tone of the title, emphasized by the narrator's ability to interject humour and meaning through his distinctly literal perspective, reflects the shameful lack of interest Dickens found in the contemporary public's attitude toward the inhumane Yorkshire schools.

The narrator often describes the characters in such an unexpected way that the mere inappropriateness of his language humorously enhances the depth of the characterization.

For example, the narrator casually refers to the unscrupulous and sadistic Mrs. Squeers as Mr. Squeers' "amiable consort" (149). The phrase implies an unwarranted measure of civilized behaviour by its French linguistic roots and its courtly associations. "Amiable" is a grossly inappropriate adjective by which to describe Mrs. Squeers since she is one of the most detestable characters in the novel. She, unlike Mr. Squeers and Ralph Nickleby, is totally unconscionable in her wickedness. She embodies no hypocrisy or pretence of goodness out of shame or principles. For example, Mr. Squeers implicitly acknowledges his evil intent when he hides the spoon in an attempt to conceal from Nicholas the fact that they feed the boys brimstone and treacle. When exposed, however, Squeers sheepishly explains, "We purify the boys' bloods now and then" (149). Mrs. Squeers, on the other hand, violently rejects this hypocrisy. Callously she reprimands Squeers and informs Nicholas:

> "Purify fiddlesticks' ends. . . . Don't think young man, that we go to the expense of flower of brimstone and molasses just to purify them. . . . Let [Nicholas] understand at once that we don't want any foolery about the boys. They have the brimstone and treacle, partly because if they hadn't something or other in the way of medicine they'd be always ailing and giving a world of trouble, and partly because it spoils their appetites and comes cheaper than breakfast and dinner"(149).

This is not the reasoning of an "amiable" woman. Similarly, "consort" is incongruous with Mrs. Squeers' actual character, since it means to "accord, agree, harmonize" as well as to be a "partner" or "companion".[6] Thus, through the inappropriateness of the narrator's phrase, the grotesque and discordant

nature of Mrs. Squeers is allowed to develop beyond words into a vivid image of evil in the reader's imagination.

The narrator also heightens the sense of character through his naive understatements. He notes, for instance, that Miss Petowker was "really showing great capability for the stage" (400) at her wedding. This generous phrasing is followed by the observation that she "fainted with great decorum" when she saw her "youthful bridegroom" (401). The narrator's language facetiously exposes a string of illusions. First, although Miss Petowker 'acts' as if her bridegroom is a "youthful" prince, he is in reality a dumpy old tax collector. Second, one who faints with "decorum" is simply pretending to be overcome, while one who faints with "great decorum" is indulging in histrionics. Finally, the observation that Miss Petowker was, not only "showing" "capability", but "<u>really</u> showing <u>great</u> capability" (401, my emphasis) for the stage, implies that she is actually an indulgent, transparent 'ham'. Thus, the narrator at once maintains her illusion by presenting the image that she wishes to project, and undermines it by showing its absurdity.

The narrator similarly exposes the inflated posture of Mr. Lillyvick. Throughout the novel he is reverently referred to as "the collector" by the other characters. However, when the narrator employs the title he overuses it and thereby makes a mockery of him and those characters who revere him. In describing Mr. Kenwigs' respect for his father-in-law, the narrator notes that he speaks "with becoming submission to

the collector of water rates" (245). Syntactically, "collector of water rates" is much more impressive than simply "the collector", or even "the water rate collector" and thus, the narrator at once mimics and mocks those who respect Mr. Lillyvick's title. Mr. Lillyvick is also defined by the narrator's sarcastic reference to the mousy little man as a "great lion" (231). This metaphor is augmented by the description of Mr. Lillyvick watching Nicholas give the little Kenwigses a French lesson. He displays his intellectual ignorance and egocentric pompousness by informing Nicholas that he thinks very little of the French language because their word for 'water' is "Lo". As a result, as Nicholas teaches, Mr. Lillyvick regards

> the group with frowning and attentive eyes, lying in wait for something upon which he could open a fresh discussion on the language (274).

The phrase "lying in wait" is the narrator's humorous literal application of the earlier reference to the collector as a "great lion". Thus, the narrator emphasizes the absurdity, and comedy of manners , of the aptly named Mr. Lillyvick's social elevation by showing that he is in reality a "Lo" creature in the social hierarchy.

The humour, and therefore depth, which the narrator interjects into the novel through his language and perspective is subtle and unobtrusive. As a result, the narrator is often not consciously appreciated in Dickens' works since he is absorbed into the overall tone and language of the fiction. For example, the narrator describes the ill-mannered, ill-bred

Squeers offspring as:

> the young lady and gentleman [who were] occupied in the adjustment of some youthful differences by means of a pugilistic contest across the table, which, on the approach of their honoured parent subsided into a noiseless exchange of kicks beneath it (162-163).

Although the humour in this passage is apparent, its complexity is subtle. The reader immediately perceives the actual heathen behaviour of the children through his prior knowledge of them as virtually the hounds of hell. The narrator merely couches his description of them in civilized euphemisms which are effortlessly interpreted by the reader. When examined more closely, however, the narrator's language is acutely humorous , and therefore, not only amusing, but enlightening and complex as well. First, the delicacy of the syntax is in direct opposition to the reality of the situation. Second, this juxtaposition of physical reality and linguistic illusion is enhanced by the fact that Nicholas, who is the novel's 'touchstone' and paradigm of moral behaviour, is observing the conflict. Finally, the term "pugilistic contest" implies a measure of order, direction and purpose to the children's activity, while it is in reality , merely the result of their random destructive and malicious impulses.

In addition to the narrator's language, the language of the characters themselves does much to define their personalities. Forster is one of the many critics who recognizes Dickens' ability to let his characters emerge through their language. In his Life of Charles Dickens, Forster notes:

> There never was any one who had less need to talk about his characters, because never were characters so surely revealed by themselves.[7]

Although the narrator in Nicholas Nickleby plays an important role in characterization, he does not bring them to life. Rather, he primarily supports, frames, and acts as a foil through which the characters come to their full animated potential. For example, it is Mr. Lillyvick who perceives himself as a "great lion", and it is he who conveys it through his language and actions. The narrator merely mirrors the character's projection in a way that reveals its irony and absurdity. Language allows a character to define his personality by revealing the sort of persona he presents to the world. Also communicated, however, is the fragility of this persona and the hidden dimension of the ego from which it is created. Stephen Marcus explains:

> the characters of Nicholas Nickleby become themselves by impersonating the imaginary creatures they wish to be. But Dickens received this truth ironically, and what he gives is a kind of double image: that of the character regarding himself, and that of the disinterested, informing intelligence of Dickens himself, regarding his characters as they enact a vision of their ideal selves, ascend the ladder of society with the assistance of their own particular daimon, ambition.[8]

Through this "double image", Dickens often reveals the motive, or psychological reason, that compels his characters to develop their distinctive personae.

In Little Dorrit, Mr. Dorrit illustrates the tragi-comic complexity of Dickens' conception of identity. More than any other Dickens character, Mr. Dorrit is genuinely split between the public and private halves of his "double image". Publicly, he displays the behaviour of a wealthy gentleman, but privately he is indisputably a penniless debtor.

Neither identity can be termed either 'real' or 'unreal' since he is in the irreconcilable position of being a physical inhabitant of the Marshalsea, while mentally being an inhabitant of the aristocratic world. The extreme tension that results from the antagonism between these diametrically opposed identities is pathological, and inevitably results in Mr. Dorrit's mental breakdown and death. The moving scene in which the conflict within Mr. Dorrit comes to a head is dramatically expressed through his language. As his "castle in the air" is finally dissipated, along with his spirit, Mr. Dorrit makes this very "unexpected After-dinner Speech" to an aristocratic gathering:

> "Ladies and gentlemen, the duty--ha--devolves upon me of--hum--welcoming you to the Marshalsea! Welcome to the Marshalsea! The space is--ha--limited--limited --the parade might be wider; but you will find it apparently grow larger after a time--a time, ladies and gentlemen--and the air is, all things considered, very good. It blows over the--ha--Surrey hills. Blows over the Surrey hills. This is the Snuggery. Hum. Supported by a small subscription of the--ha--Collegiate body. . . . Those who are habituated to the--ha--Marshalsea, are pleased to call me its Father. I am accustomed to be complimented by strangers as the--ha--Father of the Marshalsea. Certainly, if years of residence may establish a claim to so--ha--honourable a title, I may accept the--hum--conferred distinction. My child, ladies and gentlemen. My daughter. Born here!"[9]

There is an obvious disparity between the degrading content of the speech and its noble diction, style and tone. This tension goes beyond the humour that results from the clash between the illusion and reality of a situation in the comedy of manners. Mr. Dorrit displays the penetrating 'humour' of a schizophrenic identity torn between two irreconcilable impulses.

In most of Dickens' characters, the interaction within

the double self does not fester into the intolerable and extreme tension displayed by Mr. Dorrit. Rather, Dickens usually expresses the delicate balance within the double self by illustrating the vital components of reality and illusion that wax and wane to create a dynamic image of the complete self. When Dickens draws a character without the hint of a façade, such as Nicholas, Kate or Madeline, the character appears one-dimensional and to lack depth, interest and vitality. Carey noted that these are usually the 'good' characters in Dickens. He explains:

> Just as the heroes and heroines wear no clothes and have no bodies, so they do not really speak.[10]

These flat characters, however, often serve a very important function by providing a 'touchstone' of moral reality for the reader. The other characters, on the other hand, like Newman Noggs within whom Dickens reveals a double self, are exposed on many psychological levels, for various dramatic purposes, and through various literary techniques. Thus, the characteristic, and often enigmatic "double image" of Dickens' characters is not so much a theme as a predominant perspective and source of humour in his work.

Idiolect is one of Dickens' fundamental linguistic tools by which he frees his characters from narrative description. Such characters as Mrs. Gamp, Sam Weller, Mr. Pancks, Mr. Dorrit, Flora Finching, Mr. Micawber and Jo Gargery, all come to life through the distinctive speech patterns and vocabulary of their idiolect. Carey notes that in all of Dickens' works, the characteristic:

> ear and memory for idiolect displayed take the mind back to early phases of Dickens' life. At school, already struck by idiom's pliancy, he had invented a private language, so that he and his friends might be taken for foreigners.[11]

Collins records the recollections of several schoolfellows who attest to Dickens' early interest in language which led him to later use it as a defining tool of character. Owen P. Thomas recalls that Dickens

> invented what we termed a 'lingo', produced by the addition of a few letters of the same sound to every word; and that it was our ambition, walking and talking thus along the street, to be considered foreigners.[12]

In Nicholas Nickleby, some of Dickens' finest examples of idiolect are displayed in Mrs. Nickleby, Mr. Mantalini, and Mrs. Squeers. Although the novel was written relatively early in Dickens' career, his skillful use of idiolect by no means makes its debut here. It had already been demonstrated in four previous plays and such characters as Fagan in Oliver Twist (1837) and Pickwick Paper's Jingle. This early mastery of idiolect is not surprising when it is remembered that Dickens' first literary efforts were plays, his first occupation was as a reporter of dialogue and speeches, and his first love was of the theatre.

Mrs. Squeers is a clear example of a character who is made vital and memorable through her idiolect. As a minor character, her very few lines of dialogue must be distinctive and simple in order for her to be effectively remembered throughout the novel. Like Magwitch in Great Expectations, and Bucket in Bleak House (1852-1853), Mrs. Squeers can be

identified and can come to life after being absent for many installments. When she captures the fugitive Smike, she displays her characteristic language and mentality:

> "A nasty, ungrateful, pig-headed, brutish, obstinate, sneaking dog," exclaimed Mrs Squeers, taking Smike's head under her arm, and administering a cuff at every epithet(220).

This combination of language and gesture displays Dickens' highly theatrical transmission of character. Her speech matches her personality and actions. It brings with it a sense of being strong, curt, abusive, and single-minded.

Upon meeting Nicholas, Mrs. Squeers decides that he is a "knuckleboy" and that she hates him. When Mr. Squeers inquires as to why his "lady wife" (162) has formed this opinion of Nicholas, she explains: "Because he's a proud, haughty, consequential, turned-up-nosed peacock" (163). Dickens cultivates her jerky speech pattern and seems to derive an obvious pleasure from its creation. This is evident from the narrator's indulgence in a humorous and lengthy discussion of Mrs. Squeers' character analysis of Nicholas. He explains:

> Mrs Squeers when excited was accustomed to use strong language, and moreover to make use of a plurality of epithets, some of which were of a figurative kind, as the word peacock, and furthermore the illusion to Nicholas's nose, which was not intended to be taken in its literal sense, but rather to bear a latitude of construction according to the fancy of the hearers. Neither were they meant to bear reference to each other, so much as to the object in whom they were bestowed, as will be seen in the present case: a peacock with a turned-up-nose being a novelty in ornithology, and a thing not commonly seen (163-164).

This passage, like so many others, is clearly written in a mood of delighted self-indulgence in language which was likely

encouraged and nurtured by Dickens' lengthy instalment quotas. It is as if Dickens wrote Mrs. Squeers' excited epithets, was amused by them, and spun a web of humour around them. It is the objective literal perspective of the narrator, once again, that extracts humour from the characters.

The idiolect in Nicholas Nickleby is among Dickens' best. It is incisive, vital, fresh, and dynamic as it lifts the characters off the page and into the reader's imagination. In"Nicholas Nickleby: The Victories of Humor", Margaret Ganz places Mr. Mantalini's comic capacity through language, second only to that of Mrs. Nickleby. Of Mr. Mantalini she observes:

> Like Jingle, he is largely defined by his speech, concocted mainly to deceive and flatter, yet so enchantingly bizarre that it endows him with the special reality that is humor's paradoxical gift. . . . He does share with Sam Weller the special power of inspired observation that can forge the startling images--grotesque but apposite--in which humor enshrines incongruity and contradiction.[13]

Mr. Mantalini's idiolect is constructed around his use of variations of "dem", ranging from "demd", to "demmit", "demnition", and "demnebly". In addition to his inexhaustible use of "dem", Mantalini appears to speak veryquickly, as well as fancifully and dramatically. All these factors contribute to his memorable presence and linguistic individuality. In Ralph's office, Mr. Mantalini theatrically persuades his wife not to reduce his 'allowance' with his sycophantic phrases, and his claim that he "for her sake will become a demd, damp, moist, unpleasant body" (513). Although the alliteration and syntax undermine Mr. Mantalini's sincerity, his wife is characteristically

softened by his flattery and suicide threats and he gets his way.

Mr. Mantalini's language is so idiosyncratic that, at the end of the novel, Kate is able to identify him merely from his speech. Although in "reduced circumstances" (921), he has not changed: he is still 'kept' by a woman whom he angers, he still controls the woman with his flattery, charm and wit, and finally, he still uses the same speech pattern, images and vocabulary. As a result, Kate is "convinced" that it is his voice she overhears in this interchange:

> "You nasty, idle, vicious, good-for-nothing brute," cried the woman. . . . "why don't you turn the mangle?"
>
> "So I am, my life and soul!" replied a man's voice. "I am always turning, I am a perpetually turning, like a demd old horse in a demnition mill. My life is one demd horrid grind!" (920).

Mr. Mantalini, like a circus clown, is absurd, transparent, repetitive, and yet is also at times innovative and surprising. This enables him to bring comic relief to the novel, and especially to Kate's trials when she is on her own in London.

Mr. Mantalini is highly theatrical in everything he does. In this way he complements the theme of acting that runs throughout the novel. Stephen Marcus, in From Pickwick to Dombey, notes that:

> Mantalini is his role; his act is his reality--as is true of almost all the characters in the novel. He has made himself out of his own conception of what he ought to be.[14]

This image is a highly melodramatic one and, as a result, he engages his wife in some of the most melodramatic scenes in the novel. Before the two begin a 'performance' they always

ensure that they have an audience, and Mr. Mantalini always "well considere[s] his part" (336) before he begins. Thus, Mr. Mantalini's speech is not only a fine example of idiolect, it is also representative of the theatrical language, gesture, and themes that are tailored for one man's survival in the world.

Mrs. Nickleby, with her dramatic monologues, is one of Dickens' greatest creations of idiolect. As a consequence, she is Nicholas Nickleby's most remembered and discussed character. G.L. Brook compares her with Mrs. Bates in Jane Austen's Emma. He observes:

> Miss Bates, Mrs. Nickleby and Flora Finching all use long sentences made up of a large number of clauses, each of them mentioning unimportant detail or qualifying unimportant statements. The sentences acquire added complications from her failure to ensure that the adjectival clauses occur reasonably near to the nouns which they qualify.[15]

It is Mrs. Nickleby's distinctive speech pattern and perspective on life that makes her proof of G.K. Chesterton's assertion:

> this should be firmly grasped, that the units of Dickens, the primary elements, are not the stories, but the characters who affect the stories--or, more often still, the characters who do not affect the stories.[16]

Although Chesterton's statement can be argued in such later novels as Bleak House and Great Expectations, it is certainly true of Nicholas Nickleby. Although Mrs. Nickleby is by no means an irrelevant character to the plot, her dramatic function and linguistic presence in the novel far exceeds her role in the development in the story line. Through her distinctive monologues, Mrs. Nickleby contributes much to the

tone and themes of the novel. She illustrates how crucial language is to the determination of character in Dickens. Without her distinctive linguistic style to bring her egocentric and idiosyncratic perceptions to life, Mrs. Nickleby's effect in the novel would be minimal. As it is, she is a major instigator of humour and ideas through her propensity to introduce an alternative, often ludicrous but always enlightening, point of view into a situation.

Mrs. Nickleby's monologue reveals both her dramatic function as a source of comic relief and her childlike, self-centred and irrational thought processes which are questionable qualities for a good mother. A monologue, by its very nature is self directed, just as Mrs. Nickleby by her very nature, is self-directed. It is appropriate then, that a monologue is usually indulged in by " one that loves to hear himself talk; or talks very much about very little."[17] Dickens, thus uses Mrs. Nickleby and her monologue to demonstrate his skill and playfulness with language. In fact, Mrs. Nickleby does not merely use the monologue, rather she and the monologue are virtually metaphors of one another, since they mirror and define the characteristics of each other.

Mrs. Nickleby delivers her monologues at precisely the moments when she should be helping or consoling her children. Although her monologues are often optimistic and well meaning, they display her innocent lack of consideration for the needs and hardships of others. For example, she launches into an unrealistically optimistic monologue in order to detail the

future fortunes of the family, while being unaware that Kate is "jaded and dispirited with the occurrences of the day" (284) and that Nicholas is miserable at Dotheboys Hall. She tells Kate:

> "what a delightful thing it would be for Madame Mantalini to take you into partnership--such a likely thing too, you know! Why your poor dear papa's cousin's sister-in-law--a Miss Browndock--was taken into partnership by a lady that kept a school at Hammersmith, and made her fortune in no time at all; I forget, by the bye, whether that Miss Browndock was the same lady that got the ten thousand pounds prize in the lottery, but I think she was; indeed, now I come to think of it, I am sure she was. "Mantalini and Nickleby", how well it would sound!--and if Nicholas has any good fortune, you might have Doctor Nickleby, the headmaster of Westminster School, living in the same street" (284).

Although this optimism seems absurd at the beginning of the novel, it must be remembered that her optimistic premonitions are ultimately realized in a figurative sense.

A similar negligence of the needs of her children is shown by Mrs. Nickleby when she disregards Miss La Creevy's warning that Kate's occupation as a milliner may be unhealthy. Mrs. Nickleby eliminates the disturbing news with narrow minded language and logic:

> "that's not a general rule, . . . for I remember as well as if it was only yesterday, employing [a milliner] . . . to make me a scarlet cloak at the time when scarlet cloaks were fashionable, and she had a very red face--a very red face indeed" (195).

When Miss La Creevy reasonably suggests that "perhaps she drank", Mrs. Nickleby sees no connection and returns:

> "I don't know how that may have been, . . . but I know that she had a very red face so your argument goes for nothing" (195).

The narrator accounts for Mrs. Nickleby's optimism and simplicity.

He explains, "a project had but to be new, and it came home to her mind brightly varnished and gilded as a glittering toy" (195). The words "gilded" and "varnished" are appropriate to Mrs. Nickleby's mentality. Whatever she is given, be it an idea or a problem, she removes it from reality and lacquers it with her single-minded delusions and presents it in its new form through her monologues.

Mrs. Nickleby's 'innocent' optimism and ingenuous perceptions once again border on the criminal and harmful, when she cheerfully places Kate in the compromising position of attending Ralph Nickleby's dinner party and meeting Sir Mulberry Hawk. Mrs. Nickleby merely reassures the wisely reluctant Kate with a monologue about rich uncles slipping money into their niece's reticules. As a result, she sends Kate primped and unsuspecting into Ralph's villainous trap.

Mrs. Nickleby's language, therefore, like that of Mrs. Squeers and Mr. Mantalini, communicates her perspective on life, her view of herself, and brings her to life for the reader. The language of these characters conveys much more than the mere meaning of the words they use, since they each have a distinct way of phrasing their thoughts which reveals much about their complete character. Mrs. Nickleby's monologue is a supreme example of Dickens' mastery of idiolect. It is through her language that she comes to occupy such a vital position in the world of the novel, and establish herself as an unforgettable identity in the reader's imagination.

PART III

THE TRADITION OF COMEDY: STRUGGLE AND TRIUMPH

The artistic success of Nicholas Nickleby stems from its ability to communicate its social and psychological moral vision. The novel appeals to the reader's emotions, imagination, and intellect, through a closely interdependent system of themes, literary techniques, and structure, so that the logos becomes a numinous experience that is comprehended by the reader rather than didactically conveyed and apprehended. The theatrical atmosphere of the novel forces the novel's dynamics into the reader's imagination where he participates in it without consciously being aware of the mechanics of the fiction.

In order to appreciate fully the literary integrity and artistic vitality of Nicholas Nickleby, it is essential to recognize the purposeful integration of its internal dynamics of humour with its externally defined elements of Comedy. The examination of humour necessitates an internal analysis of the novel since humour is found in such separate details of the work as language, themes, style, tone and characterization. Comedy, on the other hand, can only be studied when the novel is approached as a whole, because it is manifested in a traditional literary structure with its conventions.

Northrop Frye's definition of New Comedy places Nicholas Nickleby within the archetypal seasonal pattern of a conflict which results in a descent to a place where knowledge is gained, which then precipitates an ascent to a new and rejuvenated level of personal and social understanding. The dynamic interplay between reality and illusion in humour can be seen as a microcosm of the moral confrontation of the congenial and obstructing societies in Comedy. As will be shown, the conflicting societies in Comedy reflect the process of humour by representing the alternative perceptions of the world through the simultaneous presentation of different levels of moral and social reality.

Up to this point, the concentration on humour has shaped an investigation of such distinctive features in Nicholas Nickleby as logos, themes, narration, characterization, language, and idiolect. These distinctive aspects come directly from Dickens' personal experience and imagination, and are used to flavour the literary traditions that give the novel its general shape.

These traditions connect the novel with a network of artistic heritage and provide it with a recognizable framework and conventions. For example, structurally, the novel follows the Comic convention; stylistically and dramatically it follows melodrama; thematically it borrows from allegory and fairy tale; and romance brings to it imaginative freedom and emotional intensity. It is difficult to discuss the novel's alignment with any one of these traditions without addressing

the others since they are intertwined and mutually dependent. Although a work can be a Comedy without utilizing the other traditions, a work can hardly have the attributes of the others without being a Comedy. Thus, Dickens elects to 'paint' his Comedy with literary modes that are easily integrated with, and are meaningful to, Comedy's pattern and logos.

CHAPTER I

THE COMIC CONVENTION

The definition of Nicholas Nickleby as a Comedy is essential in order to clear it of charges such as: exhibiting a sketchy plot, unrealistic events, episodic chapters, as well as stock melodramatic characters presented side by side with distinctive caricatures of other figures. The ease with which the Comic convention absorbs these often criticized elements of the novel, raises the question of the appropriateness of the literary standards by which it has been examined. It appears that the twentieth-century literary infatuation with Tragedy and existentialism has led some critics to analyze the work from the standpoint of contemporary literary preference rather than by its actual literary aims and content. In Charles Dickens: The Last of the Great Men, Chesterton notes the difficulty that modern readers have in adjusting to the Dickensian imaginative context. Chesterton maintains:

> Few modern people understand Dickens. . . . few understand the faiths and fables of mankind. The matter can only be roughly stated in one way. Dickens did not make a literature; he made a mythology.[1]

The definition of Nicholas Nickleby as a Comedy is essential to an understanding of its artistic unity, meaning, and construction. In "An Essay on Comedy", George Meredith makes an important conceptual distinction between

Comedy and Tragedy which clearly places the novel in the Aristotelian tradition of Comedy. Meredith concludes that, unlike Comedy, Tragedy:

> is a 'closed' form of art, with a single, fixed, and contained meaning. . . . Tragedy demands a law of necessity or destiny, and a finality that can be gained only by stressing a logic of 'plot' or 'unified action' with a beginning, middle, and end. . . . . If tragedy requires plot first of all, comedy is rooted so firmly in 'character' its plot seems derivative, auxiliary, perhaps incidental. Unlike tragedy, comedy does not have to guard itself by any logic of inevitability, or academic rules. Comedy makes artistic all the unlikely possibilities that tragic probability must reject.[2]

Comedy, therefore, makes "artistic" and meaningful all the coincidences that occur in Nicholas Nickleby and which have disturbed some readers. Thus, the sense of fortune and poetic justice inherent in Comedy, not only allows, but encourages, such unlikely coincidences as Nicholas's happening upon Sir Mulberry Hawk's lecherous remarks about his sister; his timely encounter with the Cheerybles; the lovers' finding their loves reciprocated; Smike being Ralph's son; and even the coincidental emergence of Mr. Mantalini in Yorkshire at the end of the novel.

Cornford explains that the "primacy of Character in Comedy necessitates that:

> the most unexpected incidents are the most amusing. Fortune was the acknowledged divinity of the New Comedy; and accident has always been allowed a large place in the comic plot.[3]

Not only does fortune play a role in the structure of Nicholas Nickleby, it is an integral part of its logos and themes. Fortune is traditionally assimilated easily into Comedy because

the circular ascendant movement of Comedy necessitates a correspondingly positive movement of the wheel of fortune to bring about its joyful finale. That this is a conscious association of theme and structure by Dickens is evinced by the novel's title page and opening chapter.

The title page of Nicholas Nickleby depicts Fortune at her wheel, administering the disparate fates of Nicholas and his alter ego, Smike. The opening chapter also reinforces fortune's thematic presence in the novel. This brief, witty chapter focuses on two of the novel's major themes, fortune and marriage. The narrator describes Mr. Godfrey Nickleby's entrance upon "life matrimonial". After the marriage, the couple

> looked wistfully out into the world, relying in no inconsiderable degree upon chance for the improvement of their means. (59)

Their 'reliance' is rewarded by a highly unexpected and fortunate inheritance from old Mr. Ralph Nickleby's fortune. The parallels in themes, names, attitudes and events in this opening chapter with those of the rest of the novel are many, and make an enlightening examination: however, they are too various to be discussed in this context. It is sufficient to note that the introductory chapter gives a capsulized sense of the ideas dealt with in the entire novel. It also gives the impression that the distilled plot of the entire novel could be given with equal conciseness and in a few pages. The fact, however, that the history takes more than eight hundred pages indicates that it is not the plot, but

the ideas, that are important to the novel. The novel's comedic emphasis on logos, a circular structure, themes of fortune, and the acquisition of knowledge, are revealed in its full title which reads, The Life and Adventures of Nicholas Nickleby, containing a Faithful Account of the Fortunes, Misfortunes, Uprisings, Downfallings, and Complete Career of the Nickleby Family.

Nicholas Nickleby is therefore, consistent with Cornford's distinction between the tragic mythos and the comic logos. He explains that in Comedy the plots are not restricted to myths as in Tragedy, but are "freely invented":

> The proper term for the comic plot is not mythos, but logos. The term seems to mean the 'theme', or 'idea', of the piece. There is no suggestion of a closely spun web of incidents running all through. Whereas the Euripidean prologue will foretell the whole general course of the action to the end, the prologue in Aristophanes only states the main idea.[4]

Thus the comic 'prologue' to Nicholas Nickleby, the opening chapter, sets up the main 'ideas' explored in the novel.

The comic convention, in addition to preparing the reader for a work governed by its themes, characters and meaning, rather than by its plot, suggests that the action will be controlled by fortune rather than destiny. Cornford discusses this distinction by explaining that Tragedy:

> bent on revealing the working of human destiny, keeps to the fundamental conception of the old ritual plot. The stories it borrows from heroic legend are such as illustrate this conception; the characters are created to fit the 'experience' they must undergo. Comedy, on the other hand, has no concern with the course of destiny. The substructure of the old plot is kept, just as a matter of indifference, and, when its serious element is toned down and its happy conclusion emphasised, it serves well enough. Comedy is bent on character, and fastens on those stock masks which Tragedy was bound to discard.[5]

Although Nicholas Nickleby is the most classic case, this definition allows all of Dickens' works to be considered Comedies to some degree. Many Dickensian literary trademarks are closely aligned with the comic tradition, for example, his animated characterization, unstressed plot construction and logic, and reworking of dominant themes and images. These characteristics, along with an overall circular structure following the pattern of innocence to experience which culminates in a basically happy finale, are all at once Dickensian and comedic.

In The Narrative Art of Charles Dickens, Harry Sucksmith emphasizes that it is Dickens' pagan moral vision that demands a comic structure in his work, since Comedy brings with it the willingness to concede the poetic justice of fortune's coincidences and ironies. Sucksmith explains:

> It should not be inferred that Dickens' moral vision is, in general, a wholly Christian or even consistent one. On the contrary, it has decided pagan, if not primitive, elements. The precise form, of the punishments meted out in Dickens's catastrophes, with its apt irony, does not express a rational kind of justice but the ancient law of talion.[6]

While discussing Dickens' use of irony and coincidence, Sucksmith notes that Dickens' characters are repeatedly "warned and ignore the warning".[7] As a result of disregarding the warning, the character invariably receives an ironic, but appropriate, act of poetic justice. The coincidences by which the ironic 'twist' of events come about, arouses a sense of both "surprise and inevitability" in the reader, according to Sucksmith.[8] The reader is surprised

because the justice is ironic and contrived in an unexpected manner. On the other hand, the moral vision of Comedy makes the justice inevitable. For example, Ralph Nickleby's suicide is both a "surprise" to the reader, and yet somehow "inevitable". It is a morally satisfying irony that Ralph, who denies that he has a heart, should kill himself when it finally breaks. It is also inevitable, however, that Ralph be punished for his heartless life and be excluded from the new society. Sucksmith notes that Dickens investigates the ways in which characters define their fate by their actions. He explains:

> The vision which this ironic structure helps to realize is moral in the classical or religious sense. It does not investigate conduct as such but presents the relationship between conduct and fate.[9]

Thus the emphasis in Dickens is on character and the psychological and philosophical ramifications of the interplay between his actions and the moral order within which the actions are made.[10] The 'logic of plot' and 'unity of action' which Tragedy demands are irrelevant within the moral vision of Comedy, and therefore are not standards by which Nicholas Nickleby should be judged.

CHAPTER II

THE COMIC STRUCTURE

Comedy brings with it a traditional structure that Northrop Frye applies directly to Dickens. He explains:

> The structure that Dickens uses for his novels is the New Comic structure, which has come down to us from Plautus and Terence through Ben Jonson, an author we know Dickens admired, and Molière. The main action is the collision of the two societies which we may call for convenience the obstructing and the congenial society. The congenial society is usually centered on the love of the hero and heroine, the obstructing society on the characters, often parental, who try to thwart this love. For most of the action the thwarting characters are in the ascendant, but toward the end a twist in the plot reverses the situation and the congenial society dominates the happy ending.[1]

Many other scholars have identified this allegoric pattern within the structure of Dickens' work in general, and in Nicholas Nickleby in particular. Fredric Bogel in "Fables of Knowing", and Michael Kotzin in Dickens and the Fairy Tale, see the novel as one of the many works which draws from a cultural reservoir of mythic material and patterns. In concise, universal terms, G.K. Chesterton summarizes the 'romantic' tradition in which Nicholas Nickleby has its roots:

> In every romance there must be the three characters: there must be the Princess, who is a thing to be loved; there must be the Dragon, who is a thing to be fought; and there must be St. George, who is a thing that both loves and fights.[2]

This comic pattern has become a dominant motif in Western literature.

It can be traced through the history of Western thought from the Greeks, through the Bible, to modern times.

The circular pattern of the 'struggle and triumph' in Nicholas Nickleby can be compared with that of the great archetypal comic heroes such as Perseus, Christ, and St. George. Nicholas is merely one of the thousands of 'faces' that the hero displays in literary history.[3] Like his archetypal antecedents, Nicholas overcomes an obstructing evil force that poses a threat to himself and his society. The personification of this evil is Ralph Nickleby, just as it is the Gorgon, Medusa, for Perseus; Death, or Satan, for Christ; and the Dragon for St. George. Nicholas also shares with these mythical heroes, the reward of marriage and social power. This new personal and social status symbolizes the emergence of a new, rejuvenated social order that has been purged of its former evil. Madeline Bray is Nicholas' bride-reward with whom he, along with Frank Cheeryble and Kate, establishes the core of a strong new congenial society. This 'brave new world' is formed after the pattern of Perseus and Andromeda, Christ and the Church, and St. George with his Princess.

Thus, Nicholas is the 'hero' in Nicholas Nickleby, although he is a pale reflection of his high mimetic mythic fathers. His congenial society consists of Smike, Newman Noggs, Mr. and Mrs. Linkinwater, Mr. and Mrs. Browdie, Frank and his Cheeryble uncles and, of course, the Princesses, Kate and Madeline. These characters are recognized as morally superior to the others in the novel and they are accordingly

rewarded with marriage and money.[4] Ralph takes the role of the Dragon and dominates the obstructing society which includes the Squeerses, Sir Mulberry Hawk, Mr. Bray, Mr. Gride, Mr. Snawley and Mr. Crowl.[5] Their graphically sinister, animal, if not Dragon-like, names are well suited to the evils of selfishness, lechery, and avarice of the world they represent. When the obstructing society is finally defeated, these evil characters are appropriately punished with such things as physical beatings, mental anguish, suicide, death and poverty. This fact provides a sense of underlying moral order and retributive justice in the novel. All the other characters, such as the Kenwigses, Wititterlys, Mantalinis, and Crummles, are essential to the meaning of the novel even though they do not embody the stereotypical values of either morally stylized and melodramatic society. The morality of these characters is either neutral or irrelevant. Within the comic structure, their main function is to lend dramatic support, thematic accent, and artistic detail, to the struggle between the opposing societies. In this way they help to individualize the novel and give it an identity separate from the many others in the tradition of Comedy and melodrama.

According to the theory of comic construction, the primary opponent to the hero's wishes is a father figure who dwells in an established, obstructing, adult society. Frye defines the villain as:

> a rival with less youth and more money . . . [whose] claim to possess the girl must be shown up as somehow fraudulent.[6]

This is, of course, the Oedipal pattern in which the son is thwarted by the powerful father in his desire to possess the mother. The details of the psychological conflict fit Nicholas' situation perfectly. As a father figure, Ralph has "less youth and more money" than Nicholas, and he is even the closest male relation that the young man has alive. In addition, the Oedipal pattern is established further by Ralph's "claim" on both the women in Nicholas' life. Ralph forces Kate to compromise her safety and honour by exposing her to Sir Mulberry Hawk and working within the clothing industry. Of the latter, Richard Altick explains:

> By the mere deed of enrolling Kate in the dressmaking trade. . . . Dickens was able to arouse in his readers a concern which he did not need to make explicit .[7]

Madeline is similarly endangered by Ralph through his arrangement to have her 'sacrificed' to the detestable, stingy, old, Mr. Gride. It is Ralph's financial power over the Brays that enables him to force the helpless maid to marry his 'double' and, thereby, unwittingly thwart Nicholas from attaining his Princess.

This interpretation of the battle between good and evil exhibited in Nicholas Nickleby as the conflict between age and youth, is also the traditional emphasis of the fairy tale. The novel can, therefore, be seen as following the psychoanalytic characteristics of the fairy tale pattern, which work in conjunction with its Oedipal and comic associations. The novel asserts the basic fairy tale premise that the child is right and good, and the adult world is wrong and evil. As a result, the child wishes to eliminate the adult figures and to

establish his world in their place. This desire, however, is fraught with guilt and fear, and is therefore modified by the fantasy in which the child 'saves' the parent from a figure on to which the negative parental associations have been transferred. As a result, the impotent parent is tokenly included in the new society which the child so virtuously establishes and rules. It is this ritual pattern around which Freud builds his psychoanalytic theory that the son must 'kill-save' the 'father' in order to achieve maturity.

It is not surprising that the fairy tale motif is a major inspiration for Dickens' work and that it leads him to adopt the structure and conventions of Comedy. As a child, he loved fairy tales and he retained this admiration throughout his life. In addition, he fought to have them included in the school curriculum because he recognized their value in nurturing morals and the imagination. To support this view he wrote the article "Frauds on the Fairies" in 1853 which argued that fairy tales should be left in their original form. Dickens even wrote a fairy tale in 1868 entitled, "The Magic Fishbone" and became acquainted with Hans Christian Andersen.

Dickens and Shakespeare are among the greatest writers who use Comedy as a means of expressing their ideas. They both make use of the dramatic tendency of the comic structure which includes as many characters as possible in the finale and which celebrates the new society with its emblematic marriages. This ending theatrically reaches out to the reader by expanding the illusion of the literary experience

and the moral rejuvenation to the world beyond the novel. In order to signify a new beginning, Comedy demands that all characters be accounted for, and be given an appropriate position in the new society. The credibility of the 'twists' and coincidences which bring about the resolution is irrelevant, because the novel demands only that the reality of the moral vision be upheld with poetic justice.

In the comic convention, the blocking characters are more often reconciled or converted, rather than simply repudiated or exiled, that is 'saved' rather than 'killed'. In Nicholas Nickleby, however, Ralph and the other obstructing characters are irreconcilable with the new society and must, therefore, be removed before it can be established. Some, like Squeers and Gride, are too stereotypically evil to be redeemed, or too shallow in their characterization to warrant the moral change. Ralph's death eliminates the problem of his reconciliation, even if he were capable of it. In addition, the fact that he commits suicide prevents Nicholas from being tainted with punishing him, which would obscure his moral purity. The suicide also fits well into the novel's comic pattern because:

> comedy often includes a scapegoat ritual of expulsion which gets rid of some irreconcilable character.[8]

Ralph, as the personification of the evil values of the obstructing society, like the Dragon, must be slain before the comic structure can be fulfilled and a healthy new society can emerge.

In Nicholas Nickleby, the comic convention establishes the novel's basic dramatic and moral pattern. It is the hero's moral superiority, rather than realism of action

or 'logic of plot', that is developed and emphasized throughout the novel. For example, the 'twists' that allow Nicholas to rise above his oppressors are his fortunate encounter with the Cheerybles, the miraculous rescue of Madeline, and the morally essential suicide of Ralph. If the reader accepts Dickens' moral vision, and the traditions and ideals through which he elects to express it, then these coincidences cannot be criticised as artificial manipulations that are destructive to the artistic unity of the whole. They must be accepted as the artistic expressions of a morally ordered and just universe. The comic structure and conventions in Nicholas Nickleby permit the reader to indulge in the literary illusion of a world that is governed by a moral code even though this ideal is not reflected in the world beyond the novel. As Sidney proclaims, the true Poet brings to his creation "nothing of what is, hath been, or shall be. . . . [but only] what may be and should be."[9] Thus, through the imaginative illusions of a society constituted of individuals governed by the ideals of love, faith, hope, charity, work and responsibility, Dickens strives to instill these qualities in his readers, and thereby make his idealistic illusions a human reality.

PART IV

MRS. NICKLEBY: A UNIFYING FACTOR

An examination of Mrs. Nickleby and her role in the novel brings an understanding of the ways in which the intricate dynamics of humour work in conjunction with the novel's comic structure and conventions. This makes Nicholas Nickleby an artistically satisfying synthesis of literary experience. Mrs. Nickleby is the character who seems to be the most out of step with all the 'realities' in the novel, and therefore it is ironic that she should be the one through whom the reader can appreciate the unity and meaning of the novel. As previously discussed, she displays the most developed idiolect in the novel, and is the character who brings herself most thoroughly to life through her projected 'idea' of herself. In this way, she also embodies the novel's theme of acting since she performs her role so convincingly that her act becomes her reality. Thus, she embodies the humorous dichotomy of illusion and reality with in a single character.

Mrs. Nickleby elicits a variety of responses from the reader because of her highly idiosyncratic ideas, language and behaviour. Although she is an amusing, well meaning optimist, she is also a boring, selfish burden to those around her. Throughout the novel she vacillates between these two positions

and acts as a refreshing foil to its action and sentiments. Mrs. Nickleby's absurdly irrelevant monologues are a major source of humour and counterpoint in Nicholas Nickleby. Her bizarre observations are a welcome punctuation to the often melodramatic, sentimental and disturbing actions in which the other characters are engaged. Through her distinctive use of language and fantastic 'logic', Mrs. Nickleby reveals herself to be a rambling, irrational, ingenuous, and blindly optimistic woman. Although these characteristics are quaint and humorous at times, they carry with them the more serious implication that she is a slow-witted, self-centred woman who repeatedly jeopardizes the safety of her family by being oblivious to the dangers and realities of the world. This more sinister interpretation of her character allows her to be categorized along with the many incapable and irresponsible parents presented by Dickens, such as Mrs. Copperfield, Mrs. Jellyby, Mr. Dorrit, and Mr. Gradgrind. This theme of the naive harmfulness of parents toward their children is generated by Dickens' social observations and personal experience. Mrs. Dickens, like Mrs. Nickleby, attempted to save her family financially with a poorly thought-out scheme and she seemed similarly unconscious of her childrens' various hardships.[1]

Despite Mrs. Nickleby's naiveté and simple mindedness, she is by no means 'criminal' in her innocent negligence. The peculiar reflections and ideas presented in her monologues are harmless and amusing for the most part. Her faults are forgivable and endearing because they are indulged in innocently

rather than consciously pursued and exploited, as are the villainies of Ralph Nickleby and Mrs. Squeers. Mrs. Nickleby is in the paradoxical position of, on the one hand, being consistently out of step with the 'reality' presented at any given time in the novel, and yet, on the other hand, being the character who consistently brings about a sense of realism. She does this through her expression of the common qualities of human nature which tend to blind an individual to the actual facts of a situation. These very human characteristics are pride, vanity, self-centredness, and self-deception. Her lengthy ramblings allow Dickens to have a free hand with language and characterization in order to dazzle, baffle, tantalize, amuse and enlighten. Mrs. Nickleby is a prime example of Dickens' ability to let a character ingeniously reveal himself to the audience, and at the same time act as a mirror that reveals the audience to itself. Dickens creates her as a striking embodiment of her profound observation of the universal self-deception of human nature:

> "we never see ourselves--never do and never did--
> and I suppose we never shall"(909).

Dickens' artistic genius, however, allows us to "see ourselves" reflected with vitality in such complex characters as Mrs. Nickleby. In this way he provokes amused, but genuine, consideration of the human capacity to manipulate illusion and reality.

Mrs. Nickleby, regardless of her faults as a person and shortcomings as a mother, plays an important role within the dramatic and thematic structure of the novel. For example,

in "Mrs. Nickleby's Monologue: The Dichotomy of Pessimism and Optimism", Leslie Thompson notes of her optimistic perspective:

> close inspection reveals that rather than being the mere ramblings of a visionary old lady these dreams are an integral part of the structure of the novel.[2]

According to Thompson, Mrs. Nickleby's "eternal optimism" has the important function of voicing the "Victorian dream" of the 1830's and 1840's. He sees the understanding of her character to be essential to the recognition of the psychological and sociological tension that is at the heart of the novel and of Dickens' mind. Thompson suggests:

> A study of Mrs. Nickleby's monologue . . . underscores the divided nature of Dickens' mind at this time when he was divided between youthful enthusiasm and hope and more mature insights which were later to lead him to a more trenchant dissection of society.[3]

Thus, Mrs. Nickleby's optimism juxtaposes the tragic aspects of the novel by her blind refusal to acknowledge them. Although her optimism often appears grotesque and unfounded, this ironic fact must be remembered: "it is ultimately consummated by the benevolence of the Cheeryble Brothers."[4]

Thompson sees Mrs. Nickleby as the embodiment of the "optimistic vision" with which Dickens contrasts the unpleasant "realities of Victorian England".[5] As a result, Nicholas Nickleby contains a working out of the opposing impulses of optimism and pessimism, youth and age, illusion and reality, and good and evil. This examination of the interplay between opposing impulses is carried out in a manner which foreshadows Dickens' progressively more complex and bleak world view. Thompson, therefore, places the novel:

> between the buoyant optimism of Pickwick Papers and the bitter pessimism of Our Mutual Friend. . . . Nicholas Nickleby, then, poignantly reveals Dickens' vacillation between hope and pessimism at its most critical juncture.[6]

The fact that Dickens couches the novel's optimistic idealism in such characters as Mrs. Nickleby and the Cheerybles indicates that, even in this early work, he realized that it was merely a fictional ideal and not a realistic expectation.

Mrs. Nickleby's function in the novel, however, is much more complex than to be merely an embodiment of the work's optimism as Thompson suggests. Her monologues and character always present a point of view that is contrary to the action of the other characters. In this capacity, she frequently introduces a refreshing note of humorous, enlightening subjectivity and selfishness, that draws the action and dialogue of the novel away from its necessary, but often stifling, degree of sentimentality and melodrama. For example, the atmosphere of fairy tale happiness at the end of the novel is refreshingly punctuated by Mrs. Nickleby's petty, but natural, remarks on the marriage of Miss La Creevy to Tim Linkinwater. She expresses her disapproval to Kate:

> "I think that he is the weakest and most foolish man I ever knew. But it's her age I speak of. That he should have offered himself to a woman who must be--ah, half as old again as I am, and that she should have dared to accept him! It don't signify, Kate;--I'm disgusted with her" (918).

Although this childish jealousy is unbecoming of a mature woman, it is very much in character with Mrs. Nickleby's shallow and selfish perception of the world. This testiness offers a welcome contrast to the unbelievable charity of the

Cheeryble Brothers and the fairy tale lovers.[8] Michael Slater notes:

> Whilst we are amused by Mrs. Nickleby's discomfiture, however, we are none the less surely grateful to her for introducing this very human jarring note to the saccharine finalé stage-managed by the Brothers Cheeryble.[9]

This "human jarring note" accompanies Mrs. Nickleby throughout the novel like a leit-motif and, ironically, adds a sense of reality to the potentially unrealistic atmosphere.

Mrs. Nickleby repeatedly checks Nicholas' melodramatic speeches and actions. In this way she humorously stalls the movement of the action and heightens the sense of spontaneity and common human experience. It is paradoxical that Mrs. Nickleby should produce this sense of human realism, when her "pretty tolerable share of penetration and acuteness" (426) of perception of reality and the ways of the world, are outdone in bizarreness only by the mad vegetable wooer. After Nicholas heroically challenges Sir Mulberry Hawk for his abuse of "little Kate Nickleby" (492) he is sentimentally reunited with his sister and melodramatically informs his mother:

> "the time for talking is gone by. There is but one step to take, and that is to cast /Ralph Nickleby/ off with the scorn and indignation he deserves, Your honour and good name demand that after the discovery of his vile proceeding, you should not be beholden to him one hour, even for the shelter of these bare walls"(504).

Mrs. Nickleby arrests the momentum of this melodramatic episode by the fact that she is unable to even apprehend either the moral or practical implications of Nicholas' heroic speech.

The narrator explains that Mrs. Nickleby:

> was not the sort of person to be told anything in a hurry, or rather to comprehend anything of particular delicacy or importance on a short notice (504).

As a result of her slow nature, she both literally and figuratively 'jars' the movement and atmosphere of the other characters. With characteristic self-centredness, then, Mrs. Nickleby responds to Nicholas' plea by thinking only of the eighteen-pence that she spent to have the ceiling white-washed, the shilling she lost in the straw, and various and sundry items which she imagines to have left behind.

Nicholas' heroic activities are again deflated by Mrs. Nickleby when he valiantly defends Smike against Mr. Squeers, Ralph Nickleby, and Mr. Snawley's "parental instinct" (681). She undermines Nicholas' position with her chilling, matter-of-fact response to the dilemma:

> "Nicholas ought to be the best judge, and I hope he is. Of course, it's a hard thing to have to keep other people's children, though young Mr. Snawley is certainly as useful and willing as it's possible for anybody to be; but, if it could be settled in friendly manner--if old Mr. Snawley, for instance, would settle to pay something certain for his board and lodgings, and some fair arrangement was come to, so that we undertook to have fish twice a-week, and a pudding twice, or a dumpling, or something of that sort, I do think that it might be very satisfactory and pleasant for all parties" (685).

Although Mrs. Nickleby's rambling solution to the issue of Smike's home is amusing, it is also disturbing. She is being very "reasonable' in considering the expense of raising "other people's children", but shows a lack of the charity and understanding which her two children so honourably display. She

assumes that Smike is "young Mr. Snawley" and that "old Mr. Snawley" is his father and, thereby blindly and insensitively jeopardizes the safety of the pathetic and loyal young man.

In addition to checking the novel's inclination toward insipid displays of sentimentality and melodrama, Mrs. Nickleby also tempers the tragic realities with which it deals. It is partly her overwhelming monologues that distract the reader from such tragic issues in the novel as: Smike's life and the inhumanity of the Yorkshire schools; the Nicklebys' fatherless, homeless, and penniless condition; Kate and Madeline's defencelessness against lecherous men; and finally, Ralph Nickleby's loveless life and suicide. Thompson concludes:

> Mrs. Nickleby's monologue, then forms an undercurrent of hope that occasionally punctuates the grim realities of the novel and presages its final happy consummation.[9]

For example, Mrs. Nickleby tempers the empathetic sorrow and embarrassment that the reader feels for Smike throughout the novel. With amusing irony, she blindly reveals that Smike pines in his room with a broken heart everytime Frank Cheeyble comes to visit. She does not realize that Smike and Frank are both in love with Kate, and that Kate is in love with Frank. It is very significant that it is she who exposes much of the evidence which informs the reader of Smike's tragic position in this love triangle. Her lack of understanding of the situation, along with her nature, distances the reader from this disturbing and poignant information.

Mrs. Nickleby also helps to soften the pathetic reality

of Smike's death. This sad episode harkens back to the cruel reality of Dotheboys Hall and reinforces the harsh realization that everyone cannot be rescued from despair and placed in an harmonious and prosperous environment. Mrs. Nickleby's eulogy to Smike draws the emphasis away from this tragic and disturbing reflection which would have been reinforced by the sentimentality of the other characters. Mrs. Nickleby sobs "bitterly" and in her "peculiar fashion of considering herself foremost" (892), she laments:

> "I have lost the best, the most zealous, and most attentive creature that has ever been a companion to me in my life--putting you, my dear Nicholas, and Kate, and your poor papa, and that well-behaved nurse who ran away with the linen and the twelve small forks, out of the question of course. . . . I can't bear it, I cannot really. Ah! This is a great trial to me. . . . Of course you /Nicholas/ were, and are very much cut up by this; I am sure it's only necessary to look at you to see how changed you are, to see that; but nobody knows what my feelings are--nobody can--it's quite impossible!" (891-892)

The length, theatricality,hypocrisy and self-centred focus of this monologue is refreshingly amusing to the reader, while still conveying the tragic sorrow of Smike's death.

Throughout the novel, Mrs. Nickleby's presence ensures an entertaining, discordant and often irrelevant, objectifying note. By nature, she refuses to conform harmoniously to the predominant atmosphere at any given time in the novel. She refuses to participate totally in the joyful sentimentality at the end of the novel, just as she refuses to be anything but blindly optimistic during the earlier hardships. Her monologues, although they might appear lengthy, boring, and

irrelevant, are actually an integral part of the novel. The characters, like the reader, feel alternately amused, bored, contemptuous and impatient with her and her language. She never fails, however, to precipitate a re-evaluation of the perspective from which reality is being viewed at a given point in the novel.

The fact that Mrs. Nickleby can stall the action and confuse and bore her audience, is a tribute to Dickens' successful and ingenious characterization of her. She, like an effective discord in music, prevents a smooth, unrealistic flow of action and movement of thought in the novel, which would become uninteresting and meaningless if prolonged without her interruptions. It is for this reason that Mrs. Nickleby does not perceive and project the same world as do the other characters. There is, however, a brief and significant episode in which she has an 'understanding' with an "absurd old idiot" (570). Mrs. Nickleby's characteristic discordant movement in the novel makes it difficult to categorize her as either a sweet loving and generous mother, or as a wickedly egocentric person.[10] She is not, however, merely a dithering, simple and harmless old woman. There are many very real human flaws in her character that allow her to be representative of the many innocent evils of which 'harmless' and unthinking people are guilty.

Mrs. Nickleby is by nature and habit guilty of pride, vanity and self-centredness. It is evident that she was doted upon by her family and that her children learned to humour her

early in life. Although her childlike character appears amusing and harmless, Dickens is careful to point out that this lack of responsibility and mature judgement can have devastating results in the 'real' world. The economic plight of the Nickleby family, and the resultant death of Mr. Nickleby, are a direct result of her irresponsible nagging to 'speculate' in order to increase their dwindling income. She is motivated by impulsiveness and greed in this venture so that she responds carelessly to Mr. Nickleby's very reasonable concern about the risk simply with the word "fiddle" (63).

Mrs. Nickleby fails ignobly to acknowledge her part in the family's misfortunes. She stands by self-pityingly as Ralph tells her that her husband was a .

> "thoughtless, inconsiderate man . . . and nobody, I am sure, can have better reason to feel that, than you"(85).

In response to this untrue and slanderous statement, the "rather weak withall" Mrs. Nickleby:

> fell first to deploring her hard fate, and then to remarking, with many sobs, that to be sure she had been a slave to poor Nicholas, and had often told him she might have married better (as indeed she had, very often), and that she never knew in his lifetime how the money went, but that if he had confided in her they might all have been better off that day . . . Mrs Nickleby concluded by lamenting that the dear departed had never deigned to profit by her advice, save on one occasion: which was a strictly veracious statement, inasmuch as he had only acted upon it once, and had ruined himself in consequence (85).

The fact that Mr. Nickleby is being unjustly represented by both his wife and his brother, is evident from the description of him earlier in the novel. He is favourably described in

contrast with Ralph, as having "a timid and retiring disposition" and being one who "gleaned from" long accounts of his father's suffering and poverty "nothing but forewarnings to shun the great world and attach himself to the quiet routine of a country life" (61). The injustice which Mrs. Nickleby does to her husband's memory throughout the novel is also exposed during Kate's long speech in defence of her failure to remember her mother's "spice-box" and other items which Mrs. Nickleby frets at losing to poverty. Kate explains to her mother in "great agitation":

> "I know no difference between this home and that in which we were all so happy for so many years, except that the kindest and gentlest heart that ever ached on earth has passed in peace to heaven"(652).

This emotional outburst brings on one of Mrs. Nickleby's few moments of speechlessness and remorse. In testimony of her injustices to the memory of her husband, she:

> began to have a glimmering that she had been rather thoughtless now and then, and was conscious of something like self-reproach as she embraced her daughter, and yielded to the emotions which such a conversation naturally awakened (653).

This touching scene reveals the unconsciousness and ingenuousness of Mrs. Nickleby's selfishness, and illustrates the natural and innocent ease with which so many people render themselves blameless at the expense of others. Mrs. Nickleby's reflection serves the dramatic function of shifting the focus away from Kate's highly charged sentimentality. Although Mrs. Nickleby's "something like self-reproach" is sincere, it is also characteristically amusing and refreshing. The understated language

and qualifications such as "glimmering", "rather thoughtless" and "now and then" reveal that Mrs. Nickleby is still clinging tenaciously to her illusions. She is not willing to concede any more guilt than necessary and even in her speechlessness, she dominates the scene by yielding to her emotions.

Mrs. Nickleby again displays a serious and ignoble lack of loyalty to her family when she hesitates to believe in the innocence and honour of her son in the face of Mr. Squeers' charges against him. Kate contrasts her mother's scepticism by stating from the beginning:

> "I never will believe it . . . never! It is some base conspiracy, which carries its own falsehood with it. . . . It is impossible, . . . and a thief, too! Mama, how can you sit and hear such statements?"(321)

Mrs. Nickleby, however, makes no reply "thereby most ingeniously leaving her hearers to suppose that she did believe it" (322). Her feeble exclamation, "Oh dear, dear! . . . That things should have come to such a pass as this!" (324) further incriminates her in her lack of natural honourable faith in her son. Nicholas, shocked at her lack of support, demands to know "who speaks in a tone, as if I had done wrong, and brought disgrace on them?" (324) Kate similarly reproaches her mother by exclaiming:

> "Why do you say 'if Nicholas has done what they say he has,' mama? . . . /You/ know he has not"(326).

Mrs. Nickleby reinforces her position by merely replying, "I don't know." Mrs. Nickleby's lack of loyalty to her son is emphasized by Nicholas' realization of it later in the novel as he:

> stood beneath the windows of his mother's house. It was dull and bare to see, but it had light and life for him; for there was at least one heart within its old walls to which insult or dishonour would bring the same blood rushing that flowed in his own veins (345).

This passage pointedly excludes Mrs. Nickleby as a supportive influence in Nicholas' life, although he never directly condemns her.

This lack of trust in her son's character is unbecoming in a mother and contradicts the pattern of her usual indiscriminating optimism. Mrs. Nickleby's refusal to be optimistic about the charges against Nicholas is conspicuous because she usually responds to crises with blind, trusting optimism. In this case however, when it would be appropriate and honourable for her to be hopeful, she hesitates. Here again Mrs. Nickleby displays her ability to add a discordant, refreshing, and amusing "jarring" note through her language and outlook, by refusing to conform to the sentiments and movement of the novel.

Mrs. Nickleby's experience with the mad vegetable wooer is another major episode in which she introduces a bizarre and humorous change in atmosphere to the proceedings of the novel. The rosy world created by the Brothers Cheeryble is punctuated by Mrs. Nickleby's little drama of love with the "gentleman in small-clothes" (740). This episode serves as an alternate perspective to the conventional courtships which are developing simultaneously. Egocentrically, she exhibits little awareness of the romances between the other characters, and shows little interest in Nicholas' good fortune and favour in the eyes of

the kind Cheerybles. She is so engrossed in her own little world that she, like a child, senses the reality of their good fortune as little as she realized the reality of their earlier poverty. Her main concern at this point in the novel, is her new 'suitor' whom she describes to her son in a long, humorous conversation which adds a refreshing vitality to the smooth and cheery atmosphere of the other characters. At the end of this amusing scene in which Mrs. Nickleby reveals to Nicholas that she is being wooed, the narrator defends Mrs. Nickleby's childlike self-indulgent consideration of the "absurd old idiot":

> To do Mrs. Nickleby justice, her attachment to her children would have prevented her seriously contemplating a second marriage, even if she could have so far conquered her recollections of her late husband as to have any strong inclinations that way. But, although there was no evil and little real selfishness in Mrs. Nickleby's heart, she had a weak head and a vain one; and there was something so flattering in being sought (and vainly sought) in marriage at this time of day, that she could not dismiss the passion of the unknown gentleman quite so summarily or lightly as Nicholas appeared to deem becoming (570).

The narrator's carefully chosen language leaves it up to the reader to determine how much light hearted irony and sarcasm should be read into this 'defence'.

The termination of Mrs. Nickleby's relationship with the vegetable wooer disrupts the calm progression of a cosy and sentimental scene, thereby, once again acting as a reflective balance to the fairy tale courtships of the group of characters who get married at the end of the novel. The quaint new home of the Nicklebys is filled with a harmonious group of friends and lovers when the tranquil atmosphere is

dispelled by the absurd arrival of the "absurd old idiot" down the chimney. This intrusion provides Mrs. Nickleby with a humorous opportunity to display the naive and childlike engineering of her egocentric pride and vanity. When the mad gentleman suddenly switches his amorous allegiance to the unsuspecting Miss La Creevy, Mrs. Nickleby quickly reasons that her refusal of him must have driven him to madness. She explains to Kate:

> "that gentleman has lost his senses, and I am the unhappy cause. . . . You saw what he was the other day; you see what he is now. I told your brother, weeks and weeks ago. . . . He would scarcely hear me. If the matter had only been properly taken up at first, as I wished it to be--. But you are both of you so like your poor papa. However, I have my consolation, and that should be enough for me!"(745-746)

Mrs. Nickleby uses her sharp 'Pickwickian sense' to protect her pride and vanity from this potentially shattering rejection. Like Fanny, she makes "the best of the matter" (209) by imaginatively altering the reality of the situation. This monologue also illustrates the ironically superior position in which she views herself in relation to the rest of the family. In addition, it displays her humorous ability to twist the reality of a situation to fit her delusions in such a way that ensures she has her "consolation".

The fragility of Mrs. Nickleby's ego is revealed by the fact that she is never able to forgive Miss La Creevy totally for her innocent part in the fickle vegetable wooer's change of heart. Mrs. Nickleby refers to Miss La Creevy patronizingly as a "poor unfortunate little old maid" (746) and

repeats this tone of petty condescension when she hears of the marriage of Miss La Creevy to Tim Linkinwater. Her fragile ego sees this marriage as adding 'insult' to the 'injury' of the vegetable wooer's rejection, and prompts her to be permanently deluded about the kind portrait painter. Mrs. Nickleby expresses her thinly-veiled jealousy to Kate (918) and the narrator notes her inability to overcome the inadvertent blow to her vanity by Miss La Creevy:

> It was a very long time before /Mrs Nickleby/. . . could be induced to receive Mrs. Linkinwater into favour, and it is even doubtful whether she ever thoroughly forgave her (932).

It is significant that these are the last words in the novel connected with Mrs. Nickleby. They imply that within the harmonious group of new friends and spouses, Mrs. Nickleby continues to live in her own vain little world, and to hold her petty grudges and contrary opinions.

Mrs. Nickleby's unrelenting discordant perspective at the end of the novel is highly significant to its concluding impression and import. By failing to harmonize with the other characters' expressions of joy and brotherhood, she is like the seed of dissension in the Garden of Eden. Although she is by no means evil, her discordant presence warns that the fateful seeds of human nature's selfishness, greed and delusions are merely suppressed, rather than eliminated, in the new 'Cheeryble' society of Nicholas, Madeline, Kate and Frank.

In the modern stage play, the Royal Shakespeare Company

ingeniously captured this sense of uncertainty in its closing image. On the stage, Nicholas is isolated between the joyful nuptial festival on the one side, and an impoverished boy on the other. This staging illustrates the Royal Shakespeare Company's recognition of the tenuousness of the 'happy ending' in Nicholas Nickleby. The image, which contains diametrically opposed emotions, is effective visually and is appreciated by modern audience's taste for thought provoking qualification and complexity of emotion. Although they are not so directly expressed in the novel, the diverse emotions generated at the conclusion of the stage play are substantiated in Dickens' themes and structure. Most critics, however, fail to see the uncertainty of the perfection in the novel's new society, and have consequently discredited the ending as trivial, predictable and sentimental. The complexity of the novel's closing impression, however, is signalled to the reader in several ways, such as Smike's death and the persistent memory of the tragic issues that are at its root.

Mrs. Nickleby also plays a major role in making the reader question the finale's superficially idyllic atmosphere. It is her function, after all, to provide an opposing perspective to the action and sentiments of the other characters. As previously discussed, she adds a discordent note to the closing chapters by being jealous of Miss La Creevy, and voicing her disapproval to the marriage. In addition, her very presence in the new 'congenial society' foreshadows its imperfection and vulnerability to human nature, since an

individual of her nature is inconsistent with its ideals. Through her language and perspective, she has revealed herself to be a materialistic, self-serving, slow-witted, deluded, disloyal and even crazed old woman. Therefore, her presence, coupled with the novel's tragic issues and Dickens' emphasis on the circular movement of Fortune and Comedy, implicitly generates the impression of a tenuous victory at the end of Nicholas Nickleby. This sense of uncertainty amidst joyful celebration recalls Shakespeare's incisive glimpses into the human condition at the end of so many of his plays, by suggesting that there are seeds of corruption within the 'brave new worlds' he establishes.

Mrs. Nickleby, then, is a unifying factor in Nicholas Nickleby by participating actively in both the details and perspective of humour in the novel and, in addition, by acting as a foil to its comic structure and conventions. She brings humorous detail to the novel through her fantastic monologues and ideas. Mrs. Nickleby also contributes much to the novel's logos and themes which explore humour's interplay between reality and illusion. She accomplishes this by consistently providing a "jarring" perspective to the actions and ideas in the novel. Although her delusions are not shared by the reader, she upholds the novel's assertion that reality and illusion are relative qualities, and differ only on the basis of perspective. In this capacity, she is a living study for the reader to examine the motives and devices by which human nature blinds itself from objectivity

and reason in order to establish an emotionally and psychologically satisfying 'world' and 'reality'. Finally, Mrs. Nickleby acts as a foil to the structure and conventions of Comedy which give an order and direction to humour's internal details and themes in Nicholas Nickleby. As a provider of alternative perspectives and "jarring" notes, she defies the elements of Comedy in the novel. For example, she resists the various comic conventions such as, the hero's honour, the recognition and denouncement of the villains, a participation in the finale's weddings, and the integration into the selfless atmosphere of love and charity of the new society.

Mrs. Nickleby, therefore, can be seen as a unifying factor in Nicholas Nickleby. She continually brings to light the mechanics of the juxtaposition of illusion and reality in human perception which are reflected by the novel's internal dynamics of humour and external structure of Comedy. As a result, by both contrast and example, she accents the novel's central issues and contributes to its imaginative flavour, depth and complexity. In this way, although Mrs. Nickleby has very little to do with the plot of Nicholas Nickleby, Dickens' imaginative creation of her character and idiolect makes her an indispensable caricature of the novel's prevailing ideas and import.

CONCLUSION

HYACINTHS IN BLACKING-BOTTLES: A UNIFYING EMBLEM

Like dissecting a joke or an illusion, explaining the ways in which the literary mechanics of a novel combine to produce a successful, artistic whole, tends to defuse its magic and meaning. It is only when the novel is approached again as an esthetic whole that the understanding gained through its analysis can provide a total appreciation of the work. In Nicholas Nickleby, the humorous perspective with its emphasis on the process by which illusion and reality are simultaneously comprehended, is complemented by the structure and conventions of Comedy. This complementation can only be realized fully when the novel is reapproached as a cohesive, fictional whole. When the novel is viewed in its entirety, Tim Linkinwater's image of hyacinths in blacking-bottles can be seen as an emblem for its complete literary experience, from its mechanics to its logos. The critical perspective which demands that a work be placed back in its own context and viewed once again as a synthesis of artistic activity is as true of the novel as it is of its emblem.

Esthetically, there is something magical, mythical and universal about the image of a hyacinth in a blacking-bottle which can be appreciated on an intuitive level. The mechanics

of this vivid Dickensian image however, like the novel as a whole, are profound in both their simplicity and implications. The image is presented by Tim Linkinwater as he attempts to explain to Nicholas the beauty and inspiration that he finds in the city. As Nicholas greets Tim one morning, Tim playfully challenges:

> "talk of the country, indeed! What do you of this now for a day--a London day--eh?"
> "Its a little clearer out of town," said Nicholas.
> "Clearer!" echoed Tim Linkinwater. You should see it from my bed-room window."
> "You should see it from mine," replied Nicholas, with a smile.
> "Pooh! pooh!" said Tim Linkinwater, "don't tell me Country!" (600).

In the very lengthy exchange which follows, that has nothing to do with the mythos of the novel, Tim enumerates the many natural wonders that he perceives within the city. In doing so, he aligns himself with the novel's emphasis on alternative perspectives, and thus with the theme of shifting the conventional conception of the reality of a situation. After a long preamble, Tim reveals the natural phenomenon which he considers to be the most wonderful:

> "There were hyacinths there this last spring, blossoming in--but you'll laugh at that, of course."
> "At what?"
> "At their blossoming in old blacking-bottles," said Tim.
> "Not I, indeed," returned Nicholas.
> Tim looked wistfully at him for a moment, as if he were encouraged by the tone of this reply to be more communicative on the subject (601).

The dramatic hesitation and repetition of the components of the image in this dialogue, and the history of it which follows, all work together to heighten the reader's interest in the image and to fix it in the reader's imagination. Tim, after stressing the importance of having a serious and sensitive listener, continues his explanation of the touching phenomenon of hyacinths in blacking-bottles:

> "They belong to a sickly bed-ridden hump-backed boy, and seem to be the only pleasures, Mr. Nickleby, of his sad existence.
>
> . . . . . .
>
> "Are there any country flowers that could interest me like these, do you think? Or do you suppose that the withering of a hundred kinds of the choicest flowers that blow, called by the hardest Latin names that were ever invented, would give me one fraction of the pain that I shall feel when these old jugs and bottles are swept away as lumber? Country!" cried Tim, with a contemptuous emphasis; "don't you know that I couldn't have such a court under my bed-room window anywhere but in London?" (601-602)

Once again Dickens emphasizes that the value and character of an object, person, or event, is the result of the way in which it is perceived, rather than of any inherent, fixed quality. In a process similar to humour, Tim brings about a fresh understanding of nature, beauty and value, through his shift in perspective on the country and the city. Tim, with determined earnestness, shatters the illusion that beauty is in its most pure and desirable state in the pastoral setting of the country. He reminds both Nicholas and the reader, that beauty is empty if it is meaningless, and that it cannot have meaning without its sublime dialectical counterpart, ugliness.

The three-page scene in which Tim introduces the image

of the hyacinth in the blacking-bottle illustrates that Dickens' inclination to wander from the plot line is not mere verbosity and is not superfluous to his prevailing ideas in Nicholas Nickleby. First of all, the image carries with it profound personal and collective mythological associations. In the Greek and Roman mythologies, hyacinths, and other similar spring flowers, bring with them the association of the seasonal rituals of death and rebirth which connect the natural and spiritual worlds. This pattern has been incorporated into the Western literary tradition as the mythic structure of Comedy. Comedy emphasizes the cycles of the joy of spring and the rebirth of life and society after the sterility of winter which was precipitated by the death of the 'corn god' in the fall. The blacking-bottles, on the other hand, are significant for their position in Dickens' personal mythology. As a result of the traumatic period in which he worked like a common boy, in a blacking factory, Dickens came to associate the bottles with a deep sense of mental and physical despair, and uses them as an image of this throughout his work.[1]

The culmination of these two ideas in the image of a hyacinth in a blacking-bottle, produces a powerful metaphor for Dickens' literary intentions in Nicholas Nickleby. Even without Dickens' personal associations, the blacking-bottle is an appropriate object in which to couch the mythically joyful hyacinth. Its colour and lack of value make it analogous to the cold, death-like, sterile winter earth from which the hyacinth emerges triumphantly each spring. When Dickens'

bleak psychological associations are added to the image, it becomes all the more poignant and meaningful. The personal aspect specifies the social and emotional implications that the 'blackness' from which the positive image emerges can have. In addition, the knowledge that it is a sadly crippled boy who is responsible for the flowers, intensifies the image by specifying further the nature of the 'black' inception of the plants. The reader knows that the boy, unlike the flower, will never spring forth into beauty and happiness from his 'black' containment. Nevertheless, Tim Linkinwater appreciates that the boy has created a tiny living symbol of beauty and joy from within his bleak environment and pitiful condition. The crucial position of the sick boy, both literally and figuratively, behind the image, similarly demonstrates Dickens' repeated attempts to illustrate that beauty, love and value can be found and cultivated on the dark side of life if the perceiver is compassionate, receptive and resourceful.

By deepening the bleak and tragic dimension of Tim's story, Dickens also heightens the magic, meaning and beauty of the hyacinth and its connotations. As the narrator observes on the opening page of the novel:

> A painter, who has gazed too long upon some glaring colour, refreshes his dazzled sight by looking upon a darker and more sombre tint (59).

Dickens, therefore, begins the novel by reminding the reader of the assertion that, like the sublime and the beautiful, any opposite cannot be truly comprehended without its counterpart.

This is an appropriate opening remark to a novel that deals extensively with humour as the juxtaposition of the illusion and reality of a situation. When the axiom that opens the novel is applied to the image of the hyacinth in the blacking-bottle, the joy, optimism and youth embodied in the flower, as in the novel's comedic structure, is intended to be all the more vibrant and meaningful as a result of the tragic aspects of life which are exposed in the novel.

The hyacinth is not only an emblem for the structure and conventions of Comedy used in Nicholas Nickleby, it is also a reflection of the complex depth of the novel's use of humour. This humour, which 'teaches and delights', can only truly be called by that name when it operates in an atmosphere of negative 'affect' according to Freud. Thus, the negative 'affect' in the novel is the tragic issues at its root, just as the blacking-bottle is for its emblem. Humour, then, like the novel, is not merely the flower, with its bright colour and sweet smell. That would be sentimentality at its worst. Rather, humour is the simultaneous perception of the dichotomy that exists between the beautiful, joyful object and its black roots, or alternately, between illusion and reality, seeming and being, art and nature, optimism and pessimism, or between good fortune and bad. Like the process of humour, fortune continually rotates and shifts its perspective and yield. This shifting thematically complements the novel's comic structure, the movement of the seasons, and the life-cycle of the hyacinth.

As well as mirroring the novel's themes and structure, the image of the hyacinth in the blacking-bottle can be seen as an emblem for Nicholas Nickleby by reflecting the overall impression it leaves with the reader. At the end of the novel, the reader is left with three simultaneous and enduring impressions which are contained within its emblem of the hyacinth in the blacking-bottle. First, the closing scene of the novel leaves the reader with the celebration of a magical, festive, flowering forth of life, hope and goodness, which is represented by the hyacinth's bloom. Second, there is a lingering sense of the novel's colourful use of humour, melodrama, and romance, which are reflected by the hyacinth's lingering cloying aroma, vibrant colour and too perfect shape, all of which make it, like the novel, appear larger than life. It is this second aspect of the novel which has been criticised as artificial and manipulated however, like the hyacinth, within the context of the whole work it can be seen as a deliberate part of Dickens' plan and purpose in the construction and logos of the novel. Third and finally, the novel compels the reader toward the unforgettable realization that the lively, flower-like aspects of Nicholas Nickleby are indelibly and inevitably anchored in the 'blacking-bottle' of grim realities that are at its root and which underlie Dickens' tragi-comic world view.

NOTES

INTRODUCTION

[1]Michael Slater, "The Composition and Monthly Publication of Nicholas Nickleby", in Nicholas Nickleby by Charles Dickens (1838-1839; rpt. Menston: Scolar Press, 1973), p. 1.

[2]Thomas Hatter and A. Cleaver, Bibliography of the Periodical Works of Charles Dickens (London: Chapman and Hall, 1933), p. 132.

[3]In "The Composition and Monthly Publication", Michael Slater notes several plagiarisms of Nicholas Nickleby that were marketed even before Dickens had completed the original. The novel's popularity is demonstrated by the 1839 Staffordshire pottery reproductions of its characters, an illustrated publication of the "Heads from Nicholas Nickleby" purported to have been done by Miss La Creevy, as well as pirated plays and works by men such as Sterling and William Moncrieff.

[4]Quoted by A.E. Brookes Cross in "Some By-ways in Nicholas Nickleby", Dickensian , 1939, p. 9.

[5]The production played at the Aldwych Theatre in London for ten weeks beginning in June 1980, and returned for eight weeks the following November. It then travelled to the Plymouth Theatre in New York for fourteen weeks beginning in October, 1981.

[6]Frank Giles, "Why the Dickens Must Nickleby Die?" London Sunday Times, July 1980, p. 15.

[7]Ned Chaillet, "Nicholas Nickleby" London Times, June 23, 1980, p. 9.

[8]"Eight-Hour Dickens Stage Show Takes Six Stage Awards" London Times, December 8, 1980, p. 48. At the Society of West End Theatre Awards Nicholas Nickleby won awards for the year's best play, director, designer, actor and supporting actress.

[9]Bernard Levin, "The Truth About Dickens in Nine Joyous Hours". London Times, July 8, 1980, p. 14.

[10]ibid.

[11]Susan Ravens, "The Return of Nicholas Nickleby", London Sunday Times Magazine, November 9, 1980, p. 72.

[12]Clive Barns, "Nicholas Nickleby Arrives--A Splendid Theatrical Event", New York Post, October 5, 1981, p. 58.

[13]Edwin Wilson, "Nickleby: Marvelous Melodrama at $100 a Seat", The Wall Street Journal, October 9, 1981, p. 27.

[14]Richard Corliss, "A Dickens of a Show", Time, October 5, 1981, pp. 64-67

[15]ibid.

[16]Ravens, "The Return of Nicholas Nickleby", p. 72.

[17]Giles, "Why the Dickens", p. 43.

[18]Margaret Ganz, "Nicholas Nickleby: The Victories of Humor", Mosaic, 9 iv, 1976, p. 148.

[19]ibid., p. 148.

[20]Hillis Miller, Charles Dickens: The World of His Novels (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1965), p. 90. Miller contends that "the central action in Nicholas Nickleby is the elaborate performance of a cheap melodrama, complete with sneering villains, insulted virginity, and a courageous young hero who appears in the nick of time".

[21]Michael Booth, English Melodrama, p. 14. Quoted by Valerie Purton in "Dickens and 'Cheap Melodrama'", Etudes Anglais, 28 (1975), p. 26; Fredric V. Bogel, "Fables of Knowing: Melodrama and Related Forms", Genre II, Spring 1978, p. 86. Bogel sees Dickens' "serious melodrama" as one of the legitimate literary forms of the "moral fable" like allegory, satire or prophecy. The various plot and character criticisms laid against Nicholas Nickleby are inconsequential to Bogel's argument because he uses Frye's definition of a "moral fable" as being a story in which "internal characters are subordinated to an argument".

[22]Ganz, "The Victories of Humor", pp. 131-148.

[23]Walter E. Allen, "The Comedy of Dickens", Dickens 1979 (ed., M. Slater, London: Chapman and Hall, 1970); Frederic Bush, "Dickens: The Smile on the Face of Death", Mosaic 9 iv, 1976. pp. 149-156.

[24]G. L. Brook, The Language of Charles Dickens (London: Andre Deutsch, 1970), p. 138.

[25]George Gissing, Charles Dickens: A Critical Study (London: The Gresham Publishing Co., 1904),

[26]John Forster, The Life of Charles Dickens (London: Cecil Palmer, 1928). Forster maintains that Nicholas Nickleby "established beyond dispute [Dickens'] mastery of dialogue, or that power of making characters real existences, not by describing them but by letting them describe themselves" (722).

[27]William Thackeray, quoted above.

[28]J.H. McNulty, "In Spite of Euclid", Dickensian 1939, p. 165.

[29]Sigmund Freud, "Humor" in The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, trans. James Strachey (Toronto: Clark, Irwin and Co., 1975), Vol. 21, 162.

[30]ibid.

[31]Ganz, "The Victories of Humor", p. 139.

[32]James Kincaid, Dickens and the Rhetoric of Laughter (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), p. 15. Kincaid defines "Rhetoric of Laughter" as "the use of laughter to persuade. In Dickens, our laughter affects very strongly our notion of what the novel is, and the vision of that novel is partly defined by the nature, quantity, and control of our response" (vii). In addition, he stresses that "the notion that . . . humour is somehow detached from major concerns or that it functions mainly as a holiday or relief and the notion that it is genial, soft, or humanitarian seem ... . demonstrably false" (4-5).

[33]Kincaid, Rhetoric of Laughter, p. 16.

[34]Slater, "Composition and Monthly Publication", p.20.

[35]Northrop Frye, Anatomy of Criticism (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1957), p. 163.

[36]John Kucich, Excess and Restraint in the Novels of Charles Dickens (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1981), p. 53.

[37]Harry Stone, "Dickens and the Uses of Literature", Dickensian 73, p. 139.

[38]Sir Philip Sidney, The Defense of Poetry (Boston: Ginn, 1890), p. 10.

PART I

CHAPTER I

[1] Gissing, Dickens, pp. 197-198.

[2] Forster, Life, p. 1.

[3] Gissing, Dickens, p.202.

[4] George Ford, Dickens and His Readers (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1955), p.140.

[5] Wylie Sypher, ed., Comedy (New York: Doubleday, 1956), p. 61.

[6] Bogel, "Fables", p. 85.

[7] Quoted by Ganz, "The Victories of Humor", p. 133.

[8] Sidney, Defense, p. 10.

[9] The OED defines "antitype" as "responding as an impression to the die", "stamp, type", "stem. . . . That which is shadowed forth or represented by the 'type' or symbol."

[10] Quoted by Francis Cornford, The Origin of Attic Comedy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1934), p.203.

[11] Northrop Frye, "Dickens and the Comedy of Humors" in Pearce, Experience in the Novel (New York Columbia University Press, 1968),p. 237.

[12] Ganz, "The Victories of Humor", p. 137.

[13] Stephen Marcus, Dickens: From Pickwick to Dombey (London: Chatto and Windus, 1965), p. 121.

[14] ibid.,p. 121.

[15] John Carey, The Violent Effigy (London: Faber and Faber, 1973), p.60.

CHAPTER III

[1]Ganz, "The Victories of Humor", p. 140.

[2]ibid.

[3]ibid., p. 140.

[4]ibid., p. 140.

CHAPTER IV

[1]Philip Collins, Dickens: Interviews and Recollections (London: Macmillian, 1981), vol. I, p. 6.

[2]ibid., p. 8

[3]Gissing, Dickens, p. 10

[4]Edgar Johnson, Charles Dickens: His Tragedy and Triumph (Markham: Penguin Books Canada, 1977), p. 51.

[5]Collins, Interviews and Recollections, p. 63.

[6]For example, the scene in Great Expectations in which Pip and Magwitch are described in the graveyard is very cinematic.

[7]Vision Press, Complete Plays and Selected Poems of Charles Dickens (London: Vision Press, 1970). This collection includes Dickens' six extant plays which were produced between 1836 and 1867.

[8]In Great Expectations, when Pip watches Mr. Wopsle play Hamlet, the reader is made to reflect, among other things, if Pip is "playing his part" as a gentleman as poorly.

[9]In Hard Times (1854), Sissy Jupe's circus can be seen in much the same way in that it is intrinsic to the meaning of the novel like the Crummles Theatre Company in Nicholas Nickleby. The circus, however functions more as a metaphor for creativity, spontaneity of emotion and imagination which oppose Mr. Gradgrind's 'facts', than as simply displaying the mechanics of illusion and reality.

PART II

[1]Kincaid, Rhetoric of Laughter, p. 19.

[2]Carey, The Violent Effigy, p. 72.

[3]ibid., p. 55.

[4]ibid., p. 56.

[5]ibid., p. 59.

[6]OED.

[7]Forster, Life, p. 121.

[8]Marcus, From Pickwick to Dombey, p. 105.

[9]Charles Dickens, Little Dorrit (Markham: Penguin Books Canada, 1967), p. 709.

[10]Carey, The Violent Effigy, p. 65.

[11]ibid., p. 64.

[12]Collins, Interviews and Recollections, p. 5.

[13]Ganz, "The Victories of Humor", p. 142.

[14]Marcus, From Pickwick to Dombey, p. 104.

[15]Brook, The Language of Dickens, pp. 162-163.

[16]G. K. Chesterton, Dickens: The Last of the Great Men (New York: Press of the Readers Club, 1942), p. 61.

[17]OED.

PART III

CHAPTER I

[1]Chesterton, The Last of the Great Men, p. 61.

[2]Sypher, Comedy, pp. 218-220.

[3]Cornford, The Origin... of Attic Comedy, p. 197.

[4]ibid., p. 199.

[5]ibid., p. 211.

[6]Sucksmith, The Narrative Art of Charles Dickens (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), p. 247.

[7]ibid.

[8]ibid,

[9]ibid., p. 244.

[10]This interest, especially when applied to the human criminal mind, is one of the many similarities between Dickens and Dostoevsky.

CHAPTER II

[1]Frye, "Dickens and the Comedy of Humors", p. 54.

[2]G. K. Chesterton, Appreciations and Criticisms (London: Dent, 1911), pp. 27-28.

[3]Joseph Campbell, The Hero with a Thousand Faces (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1973).

[4]Although Smike does not live long enough to participate in the new congenial society, he is 'rewarded' with a loving family and a peaceful death. These are two things that he feared he would never attain or experience.

[5]Mr. Crowl, who lives beside Newman Noggs, is described as "the very epitome of selfishness" (229).

[6]Frye, Anatomy of Criticism, p. 162.

[7]Richard Altick, "Victorian Readers and the Sense of the Present", Midway, Spring 1970. Quoted in the Dickensian, 1971, p. 165.

[8]Frye, Anatomy of Criticism, p. 165.

[9]Sidney, Defense, p. 10.

PART IV

[1]Johnson, Tragedy and Triumph, p. 30. During the Dickenses' financial hardships, Mrs. Dickens "was struck by an inspiration. The time had arrived, she announced, for her to exert herself; she 'must do something.' She would start a school and they would all grow rich!"

[2]Leslie Thompson, "Mrs. Nickleby's Monologue", Studies in the Novel, vol. I, Summer, 1969, 222.

[3]ibid., p. 223.

[4]ibid., p. 224.

[5]ibid., p. 223.

[6]ibid., p. 228.

[7]Although the Cheerlyble Brothers appear unbelievable in their goodness, they closely resmble the Grant brothers from whom they were drawn. See Rev. William Hume, The Story of the "Cheeryble" Grants (Manchester: Sherratt and Hughs, 1906).

[8]Michael Slater, "Appreciating Mrs. Nickleby", Dickensian 72, p. 138.

[9]Thompson, "Mrs. Nickleby's Monologue", p. 224.

[10]M. Pender,"In Defence of Mrs. Nickleby", Dickensian 1933, pp. 209-216. Pender presents an unconvincing argument that Mrs. Nickleby is a "good mother and not in the least selfish" (209). Also note the disagreement expressed to her view in the letters to the editor of the following publication (329).

CONCLUSION

[1]Johnson, Tragedy and Triumph, p. 40. Johnson notes that a large part of the trauma associated with the blacking factory was that Mrs. Dickens preferred to have Charles stay at the factory rather than go to school once they could afford it. He quotes Dickens: "I never shall forget, I never can forget, that my mother was warm for my being sent back." Although Dickens was only at the factory four months, "In his secret agony, the hours and weeks prolonged themselves into an eternity" (41). Johnson believes:

> No emphasis can overstate the depth and intensity with which these experiences ate into his childish soul.
> . . . . . .
> But it was more than a mere unavailing ache in the heart, however poignant, and however prolonged into manhood, that gives the Marshalsea and Warren's Blacking their significance in Dickens's life. They were formative. Somewhere deep inside, he made the decision that never again was he going to be so victimized. (41)

Johnson, therefore, sees this experience in Dickens' life contributing greatly to the 'tragedy' of his otherwise 'triumphant' life.

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--------. Little Dorrit. Markham: Penguin Books Canada, 1980

--------. Nicholas Nickleby. Markham: Penguin Books Canada, 1980.

--------. Pickwick Papers. Markham: Penguin Books Canada, 1981.

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