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THE LABYRINTH OF INCARCERATION IN LITTLE DORRIT

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The Labyrinth of Incarceration in *Little Dorrit*

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Abstract

This essay explores Dickens's treatment of prisons in *Little Dorrit*. Dickens had a deep interest in incarceration and *Little Dorrit*, teeming with various kinds of prisons, is a novel in which he seeks to shine a light on these dark and secretive places. The writer especially focuses, in particular, on prisons of the imagination in which people willingly confine themselves. For the characters portrayed in the novel, the real world is definitely not an easy place to live in and in order to escape from their harsh reality, they create fictions that serve their purposes. Although these kinds of prison initially appear comfortable, they soon begin to reveal serious implications. In his exploration of both the positive and negative sides of the characters' various confinements, Dickens succeeds in uncovering their potentially fatal nature.

It could be said that Charles Dickens was obsessed with prisons. Dickens's connection with the penal system can be traced to his youth, when his father was incarcerated in Marshalsea, a debtors' prison, for failing to pay his debts. His family was also forced to live in the prison, supported only by the wages young Charles earned through his humble labour in a shoe factory. It is well known that this experience was a complete nightmare for the writer and he was traumatised for the rest of his life. To Dickens, who later became a staunch critic of the inhumanity and cruelty of prisons and even campaigned for the improved treatment of inmates, a prison represented a source of hardship, a place more menacing than any other.

Nonetheless, one is left with the impression that Dickens's deep interest in prisons is not merely rooted in distaste. Indeed, prisons can also be considered mysterious spaces, full of paradoxes because as Victor Brombert claimed, 'Prison haunts our civilization. Object of fear, it is also a subject of poetic reverie. The prison wish does exist. The image of immurement is essentially ambivalent in the Western tradition'⁽¹⁾. This facility for the detention of criminals possessed a charm that had sparked some of the West's greatest minds from the 18th to the 19th centuries; as demon-

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strated by the works of Romantic poets and Gothic writers, it was not uncommon to find writers showing a yearning for prison. Starting with *Sketches by Boz*, Dickens himself was immersed in the theme of incarceration quite thoroughly, which means that he, beguiled by the wicked charm of prison, shared the passion of his peers.

I

Little Dorrit can be regarded as an embodiment of Dickens's unique perspective on prison. Here, the prison is not simply a stage on which the story unfolds or the mere location where the central characters reside but an all-encompassing theme that connects all the sub-plots together in an orderly manner. As critics repeatedly cite the phrase 'All the world's a prison'⁽²⁾, this novel is painted as a treasure trove of examples of different forms of incarceration, including the prisons of Marseille, Marshalsea and even Mrs. Clennam's house, with each character being a prisoner in one way or another.

Dickens's insights into a kind of inner prison within each human being is probably the most intriguing element. In addition to considering those incarcerated in actual physical prisons, the author devoted much of his attention to the portrayal of characters imprisoned behind their own intentional and invisible walls. By focusing on these figurative prisons, Dickens confronted the complex workings of the human mind. As Edmund Wilson suggested, '[M]urk of Little Dorrit permeates the souls of the people, and we see more of their souls than in *Bleak House*'. '[T]here is a great deal more psychological interest than in Dickens's previous books. Here we must enter into the central question of the psychology of Dickens's characters'⁽³⁾.

William Dorrit, one of the main characters in the novel, is trapped deep within a mental prison. Incarcerated at Marshalsea at a young age, William is initially hopeful of a quick release, until frustration eventually engulfs him as decades pass and freedom is never realized. As the only prisoner who cannot leave Marshalsea, he finally loses all his resolve to reclaim freedom by repaying his debts and forfeits his responsibility as a father and breadwinner. For such a man always clinging to his pride during his incarceration, the only way to survive is to capitalize on his status as the longest-serving inmate, or the 'Father of the Marshalsea', in the prison society's imaginary hierarchy in which he is revered by the other inmates as a merciful and compassionate person. This plan is surprisingly effective as it shields William from the bleak reality of being a loser with a miserable life and provides him with stability of mind. From then onwards, he becomes increasingly dependent on the comfort offered by his own fantasy. Indeed, he deliberately chooses a life inside a prison of fiction.

Thus, William Dorrit shuts himself in a prison of his mind, within the Marshalsea prison. This nest-like multi-layering in William's story is an echo of Chapter 40 of *The Pickwick Papers* in which Sam Weller spots a bird cage in Fleet Prison, where his master is detained, and remarks 'Veels within veels, a prison in a prison. Ain't it sir?'⁽⁴⁾

Other characters in *Little Dorrit* are also embroiled within their own individual fictions. For instance, Rigaud, arrested for his wife's murder, pleads innocence and insists that his wife committed suicide; Merdle, a 'giant of the finance world with immense fortune' is renowned because of a glorious legend; Mrs. General, wears the disguise of a top etiquette instructor; and Miss Wade has summarized the first half of her life in a diary titled 'The History of a Self-Tormentor'.

Despite great differences in content, a common thread connects these fictions. To be specific, they are all mechanisms by which the characters conceal inconvenient truths about themselves. The act of creating a fiction is similar to the glamorization of one's self-image such that the more appealing attributes are accentuated while the less favourable ones are suppressed. 'Mrs General's way of getting rid of it was to put it out of sight, and make believe that there was no such thing. This was another of her ways of forming a mind—to cram all articles of difficulty into cupboards, lock them up, and say they had no existence.'⁽³⁷⁷⁾ Indeed, putting on a front for oneself and others while ignoring everything undesirable is the way of life in *Little Dorrit*, and this is perhaps best reflected in Mrs. Merdle's statement, 'Seeming would be quite enough: I ask no more'⁽³⁷⁷⁾.

This dependency on fiction is not only found among selfish and vain characters but also, albeit in a milder form, among the good and self-sacrificing ones. For example, Arthur is trying to end his hopeless infatuation through the fictional tale of an imaginary personality (named Nobody), and Amy Dorrit con-

vinces herself that her father is kind and caring, saying ‘It would be a new distress to him even to know that I earn a little money... He is so anxious about us, you see, feeling helplessly shut up there. Such a good, good father!’(82) However, in actuality, she is painfully aware that her father has low morals, living on his daughter’s money without returning her affection. The fairy tale of a queen and a little girl that Amy tells her friend Maggy is nothing more than a device for her to bury her unrequited love for Arthur.

These attempts at beautifying reality may seem comical and foolish when considered objectively, but the underlying problem cannot be simply laughed off. In many cases, rather than something to be celebrated, truth is considered a restriction or a threat; therefore, the pillars of conventional morality, in which truth represents good and falsehood represents evil, are extremely fragile within the parameters of this novel. For the inhabitants of the world in *Little Dorrit*, self-deception is often indispensable for survival. This is perhaps best illustrated in the scene where Merdle, whose bankruptcy strips him of the reputable image of a self-made man (also a fiction of a kind) and reveals his identity as a fraudster, attempts to commit suicide while naked in a bath.

The description of a scorching sun in Marseille at the very beginning of the novel can also be interpreted as a metaphor for the harshness of the truth.

Blinds, shutters, curtains, awnings, were all closed and drawn to keep out the stare. Grant it but a chink or keyhole, and it shot in like a white-hot arrow. The churches were the freest from it. To come out of the twilight of pillars and arches—dreamily dotted with winking lamps, dreamily peopled with ugly old shadows piously dozing, spitting, and begging—was to plunge into a fiery river, and swim for life to the nearest strip of shade.(2)

The desperation shown by the people of Marseille as they run for shade to block out the sun is not very different from the psychological state of the fiction-creating characters.

The imagery of a prison of fiction in which a meagre enclosure is likened to a positive place that ensures and protects (to a certain extent) the inmates’ freedom is again evoked when the Marseille prison doctor uses the seemingly self-contradictory expression stating, ‘It’s freedom, sir, it’s freedom!... Elsewhere, people are restless, worried, hurried about, anxious respecting one thing, anxious respecting another. Nothing of the kind here, sir. We have done all that—we have done the worst of it; we have got to the bottom, we can’t fall, and what have we found? Peace. That’s the word for it. Peace.’(53) Thus, leaving reality behind and hiding in such invented spaces offers so much comfort that many of the characters in the novel lose themselves in the labyrinth of such fictions.

II

Are the fictional prisons in *Little Dorrit* the perfect paradise longed for by the prisoners? Unfortunately, the answer is no. One must not forget that underneath the peaceful appearance, the interior of a prison is often torn by the interlocking of two opposing vectors, one moving outwards from within (the yearning of a suppressed heart for liberation) and another moving inwards from the without (the concealment of the true self behind a psychological wall).

The truth within each character is often projected onto some other character, object, or scenery to remind readers of his or her inner struggle. This visualization technique was much loved by Dickens and he used it quite generously in *Little Dorrit*. For instance, Maggy, the friend who is looked after by Amy due to a mental disability that diminishes her intelligence level to that of a child’s, always innocently exposes feelings that Amy desperately tries to hide. Also, Mrs Merdle has her thoughts shadowed by her parrot. Whenever Mrs Merdle begins weaving a conspicuously tall tale, the parrot shrieks in a piercing voice with such impeccable timing that it appears to be a whimsical retort. The fact that the parrot is not confined to its cage is also symbolic of its representation of Mrs Merdle’s true intentions outside the realm of her fictional world.

However, the most striking elements in the novel are perhaps the brothers William and Frederick. While one is strong, the other is weak; while one is talkative, the other is silent. This constantly contrasting, yet complementary relationship between the two brothers can be read as a set-up whereby one can monitor the changes in William’s mental state through Frederick’s role as a barometer. Frederick must

be designed as an outlet for all those emotions, that is, the feelings of inferiority, guilt and affection toward Amy that his older brother tries to deny. Indeed, one is less aware of Frederick's existence when William is thriving as his fictional self, the 'Father of the Marshalsea'. It is only when William's mental guard is weakened and his true self begins to emerge that Frederick once again reclaims his prominence.

Many characters in *Little Dorrit* always treat the inner voice that speaks the truth as a threat or target for annihilation: Mrs Merdle's cry 'Bird! Do be quiet!' (329) and William's show of contempt toward his younger brother for playing up his own vibrancy are two indications of such lingering caution. In most cases, these fictional walls are not quite as invincible as the characters want them to be, thus making them vulnerable to a sudden burst of the suppressed truth. (No matter how hard one tries to cover up one's true thoughts, there is always a moment at which one must face oneself through all the lies.) This explains why the characters react in such a frantic manner while seeking to build a stronger wall around themselves when their fictions are violated and the delicate balance of their paradise is destroyed.

Yet being confined deep in a prison does not eliminate the possibility of meeting something even more sinister. Through the portrayal of Mrs Clennam, Dickens warns readers that the excessive suppression of the inner self can, in the worst case scenario, lead to death. Because Mrs Clennam has lived in seclusion in a desolate house for many years due to her physical disability, she has also been confined to a multi-layered prison like William Dorrit. As soon as she learns that her husband had a relationship with another woman before their marriage, she becomes so humiliated, enraged and jealous that it drives her to build a fiction based on strict Calvinist doctrine. In doing so, she is able to justify her act of revenge upon another woman's child even when the price is high. Thus, when she says, '[I]f it is any compensation to me for my long confinement to this room, that while I am shut up from all pleasant change, I am also shut up from the knowledge of some things that I may prefer to avoid knowing...' (156), sitting motionless in her wheelchair with a stony face and cold grey eyes, it is actually a telling sign that her heart has been slowly withering away inside that fiction.

Its moveables were ugly old chairs with worn-out seats, and ugly old chairs without any seats; a thread-bare patternless carpet, a maimed table, a crippled wardrobe, a lean set of fire-irons like the skeleton of a set deceased, a washing stand that looked as if it had stood for ages . . . (31)

This description of the attic can also be interpreted as a journey into the depth of Mrs Clennam's heart, where the remnants of the human emotions she has sacrificed to keep that fiction alive still linger. Such is the irony of fiction, which may initially appear liberating but is ultimately a shackle on life and could only lead to greater tragedy.

III

In any case, one conclusion that Dickens has reached regarding incarceration is that, once lured by its charm, one cannot escape from the escapism in prisons until it transforms your life into a recurring nightmare.

In his *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*, Thomas De Quincey, while he was in delirium, refers to yet another vision of a prison, the famous *Prisons* series by Italian print artist Piranesi.

Creeping along the sides of the walls, you perceived a staircase; and upon it, groping his way upwards, was Piranesi himself: follow the stairs a little further, and you perceive it come to a sudden abrupt termination, without any balustrade, and allowing no step onwards to him who had reached the extremity, except into the depths below. Whatever is to become of poor Piranesi, you suppose, at least, that his labours must in some way terminate here. But raise your eyes, and behold a second flight of stairs still higher: on which again Piranesi is perceived, but this time a standing on the very brink of the abyss. Again elevate your eye, and still more aerial flight of stairs is behold: and again is poor Piranesi busy on his aspiring labour: and so on, until the unfinished stairs and Piranesi both are lost in the upper gloom of the hall. (5)

According to this passage, De Quincey saw a seemingly possessed Piranesi ascending flights of stairs that materialise one after another in a prison (or gothic hall). Readers are introduced to the inside of an enclosed building without windows or doors that connect to the outside, although one is still left with

the illusion that this space expands infinitely. The staircase, used to emphasise the vertical expanse of that space, always ends in an abyss of darkness; therefore, no matter how high Piranesi climbs, he never finds a way out. This is the paradox of a finite infinity, a confinement without boundary.

Looking at William Dorrit, we soon realize the uncanny similarity between this space and the mental prisons created by Dickens's characters. In the latter part of the novel, William is suddenly freed from Marshalsea, owing to an inheritance, and finally becomes a member of the upper class where he no longer requires the protection of his fictional prison. However, although this is exactly how he had envisioned his life, it does not bring him the expected joy. Just as he had camouflaged himself with vainglorious fictions while in Marshalsea, William must now try to erase his past at Marshalsea with new fictions, when confronted with members of the high society. Because it is an endless trap of prisons, even his grand tour of Europe with his entourage appears to be the never-ending upward climb (both geographically and socially) of the possessed Piranesi. William cannot elude the dark shadow of Marshalsea, so much so that the majestic beauty of the Alps escapes him altogether, leaving only desolate and cursed Gothic scenery before his eyes. This feeling of entrapment is best captured in Chapter 19 of Volume 2, when William, now with a diminished mind, mistakes the high society dignitaries for inmates and gives the same speech he did as the 'Father of the Marshalsea'. Here, Dickens stresses that as long as a prison is still present within one's mind there is no hope of deliverance from confinement, no matter how far you run.

This is similar for the majority of the characters in the novel. In the end, we notice that death is perhaps the only way out from such mental prisons. This sentiment is particularly strong in the novel's latter part, in which Dickens's dark worldview permeates the pages with a sense of resignation.

NOTES

References to Charles Dickens's *Little Dorrit* are to The World Classics edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982). Page numbers for quotations are given in parentheses.

1. Victor Brombert, *The Romantic Prison* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), p. 3.
2. John Carey, *The Violent Effigy* (London: Faber and Faber, 1979), p. 114.
3. Edmund Wilson, *The Wound and the Bow* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1997), p. 46, 51.
4. Charles Dickens, *The Pickwick Papers* (The Oxford Illustrated Dickens, 1979), p. 571.
5. Thomas De Quincey, *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 70.