

# The Theme of Frustration in Dickens's *Little Dorrit*

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## Introduction

*Little Dorrit* is one of Dickens's most controversial novels. When it first came out, critics tended to treat it as a disappointment, and since then critics as different as G. K. Chesterton and George Orwell have disapproved of it (to very different degrees) in terms suggesting that most readers would share their dissatisfaction.<sup>(1)</sup> On the other hand, the generally unimpressed critic Swinburne (466) felt that the novel had some great scenes—he compared one of them with the greatest scenes of Shakespeare. More recently, *Little Dorrit* was singled out for special praise in Edgar Johnson's influential biography of Dickens.<sup>(2)</sup> And more recently still, F. R. Leavis, in the book implicitly contradicting his earlier dismissal of Dickens, concluded that *Little Dorrit* was Dickens's greatest novel (362).

It seems so obvious that *Little Dorrit* is a great novel (however it ranks in Dickens's complete oeuvre) that something other than its artistic merit may account for its many detractors. As my previous footnote has already laid the groundwork for suggesting, I believe this extraneous element to be its theme, which is rather dark. Normally, critics do not censure a writer for expressing pessimism, but Dickens is a special case. This requires a brief explanation, which is reserved for

a footnote.<sup>(3)</sup> The relevant point for this paper is that the theme of frustration is very insistent, and it troubled many of the critics of Dickens's day.

In this paper I would like to discuss how the novel treats this theme on both the national and personal levels. I wish to show how the frustration felt in the conduct of the Circumlocution Office—the novel's directly political satire—is echoed and concretized by the frustration felt in the private life of a special character, Mr. Meagles. Accordingly, the paper is divided into two parts, the first treating the Circumlocution Office, and the second treating the marriage of Minnie Meagles (Mr. Meagles' beloved daughter) to Henry Gowan and the frustrating consequences of this marriage.

### **The Circumlocution Office**

The keynote of the Circumlocution Office is the frustration felt by anyone who tries to use it. Dickens deals directly with the Office, and then with the attempts of two admirable men to get past its bureaucracy. Dickens employs the poetic and almost surrealistic manner that he began using to treat the Chancery courts in *Bleak House*—and that he will later use in the Veneering chapters of *Our Mutual Friend*. Here is the opening sally:

The Circumlocution Office was (as everybody knows without being told) the most important Department under Government. No public business of any kind could possibly be done at any time, without the acquiescence of the Circumlocution Office.... If another Gunpowder Plot had been discovered half an hour before the lighting of the match, nobody would have been justified in saving

the parliament until there had been half a score of board, half a bushel of minutes, several sacks of official memoranda, and a family vault full of ungrammatical correspondence, on the part of the Circumlocution Office.... Whatever was required to be done, the Circumlocution Office was beforehand with all the public departments in the art of perceiving—HOW NOT TO DO IT. (104)

As this passage suggests, the Circumlocution Office is the enemy of its authorized function. It is represented in parliament as the means of getting a thing done as efficiently as possible, yet it thwarts the honest effort to get anything done. It is dedicated to “the art of perceiving—HOW NOT TO DO IT.” This secret mission is absurd but not really perverse because there is a secret agenda impelling it. The true motive behind the Office is self-interest. It has evolved into a huge public white elephant to promote the interests of the ancient Barnacle family, whose most recent patriarch is one Lord Decimus Tite Barnacle,<sup>(4)</sup> a man of no special talent, who dispenses positions in the Office to a small army of relatives. Many of the beneficiaries of this system have neither competence nor the proper attitude for the job. And some, like Barnacle’s son and the ironically named Edmund Sparkler (stepson of the great swindler Merdle and Fanny Dorrit’s eventual husband), are virtual imbeciles.

Not every Barnacle relation is incompetent. Arthur Clennam eventually happens upon—and remains on cordial terms with—one obviously intelligent member of the family, but this young gentleman is cynically clear about the unofficial ends of the Office and the means to those ends: the Office must remain the enemy of real human initiative, since any evolving meritocracy would challenge the claims of the Barnacle

family, which has a good thing and intends to keep it. Most of the Barnacles are far too elitist to even ponder the question of the common good. Thus we learn that Lord Decimus himself keeps very short hours at the “workplace” and feels rather put out that he must exert himself at all:

What with the patrician requirements of Barnacle Junior, the three young ladies, Mrs. Tite Barnacle née Stiltstalking, and himself, Mr. Tite Barnacle found the intervals between quarter day and quarter day rather longer than he could have desired; a circumstance which he always attributed to the country’s parsimony. (107)

This introduction to the Barnacle family is the novel’s overture to Clennam’s first dealings with the Circumlocution Office. He wants to trace William Dorrit’s debt to its origin, on the reasonable chance that he will be able to pay the debt himself and free Dorrit from his life in prison. (This is done for Amy Dorrit’s sake, not the father’s. Clennam wants to get Amy out of this prison, but knows she is too faithful to her father to leave while he remains incarcerated.) Clennam starts with the assumption that the Barnacle to contact in the Office is Lord Decimus Tite Barnacle himself, since he alone was personally associated with Dorrit’s old claim. After his fifth failure to procure an appointment, he tries the son, Barnacle Junior, who treats him like a complete novelty:

“Oh, I say. Look here! My father’s not in the way, and won’t be in the way to-day,” said Barnacle Junior. “Is this anything that I can do?”....

“You are very good,” said Arthur Clennam. “I wish however to

see Mr. Barnacle.”

“But I say. Look here! You haven’t got any appointment, you know,” said Barnacle Junior....

“No,” said Arthur Clennam. “That is what I wish to have.” (108)

We are later confirmed in the impression that Barnacle Junior is dimwitted, here given by his recourse to “I say. Look here!” Because he is so dull, the son can innocently convey the amazement of a Barnacle who has never questioned his own position and prerogatives. He has no wish to offend, but can only be scandalized by the presumption of Clennam’s desire to “know” anything.<sup>(5)</sup> It is bad manners in a member of the “Public” to expect the family bureaucracy to help him, especially when the Circumlocution Office is officially in charge of the matter at hand. The public has a debt to the Office, not the other way around. Nevertheless, Barnacle Junior kindly invites Clennam to visit his father at home, on the promise that his problem is not “about – Tonnage – or that sort of thing” (108) – in other words, as long as it doesn’t pertain to the patriarch’s real duties. Clennam assures him that it is not and hurries off to the Barnacle’s house. But the meeting turns out rather badly. Clennam is never given a straight answer to any question. The most striking nuance in the interview is Barnacle’s dash-highlighted pause before the despised word “Public,” suggesting his sense of effrontery at being forced to deal with the public, even in the person of an obvious gentleman like Clennam:

“The Department is accessible to the – Public,” Mr. Barnacle was always checked a little by that word of impertinent signification, “if the – Public approaches it according to the official forms;

if the—Public does not approach it according to the official forms, the—Public has itself to blame.”

Mr. Barnacle made him a severe bow, as a wounded man of family, a wounded man of place, and a wounded man of a gentlemanly residence, all rolled into one.... (112)

Clennam then goes back to Barnacle Junior, but is sent to the Secretarial Department, in the person of a Mr. Wobbler. When Clennam finds him, Wobbler is telling another gentleman a story about a “Dog,”—perhaps a hunter’s story since, “one of [the gentlemen] was polishing a gun-barrel on his pocket-handkerchief”(114). The other is “spreading marmalade on bread with a paper-knife”(114)—a brilliant image of the abuse of public time, property, and office. Clennam is entirely ignored until the end of the dog story and is then referred to another bureaucrat, “Mr. Clive”—more accurately, he is shuffled off to Clive in a rude and cavalier fashion:

“Can’t inform you,” observed Mr. Wobbler, apparently to his lunch. “Never heard of it. Nothing at all to do with it. Better try Mr. Clive, second door on the left in the next passage.”

“Perhaps he will give me the same answer.”

“Very likely. Don’t know anything about it,” said Wobbler.” (115)

Clennam is slow to accept the message that members of the public have no right to expect these legatees of the system to put themselves out in any way. He is deferred three more times and finally ends up talking to the intelligent Barnacle referred to above, who is frank with him:

“Oh! you had better not bother yourself about it, I think.”

“Not bother myself about it?”

“No! I recommend you not bother yourself about it.”

This was such a new point of view that Arthur Clennam found himself at a loss to receive it.

“You can if you like. I can give you plenty of forms to fill up. Lots of'em here. You can have a dozen if you like. But you'll never go on with it,” said number four.

“Would it be hopeless work? Excuse me, but I am a stranger in England.”

“I don't say it would be hopeless,” returned number four, with a frank smile. “I don't express an opinion about that; I only express an opinion about you. I don't think you'd go on with it. However, of course, you can do as you like. I suppose there was a failure in the performance of a contract, or something of that kind, was there?”(116)

Our impression that this Barnacle (“number four”) is a decent person is later confirmed when Clennam himself ends up in debtor's prison, and the young man visits him with some kind and unselfish advice.<sup>(6)</sup> Nevertheless, the overwhelming sense in this study of the Office's workings is one of frustration. Clennam has been personally abused to a greater or lesser degree by everyone except the intelligent Barnacle, and, more importantly, he is completely thwarted in his attempt to get Dorrit—and hence Amy—out of the Marshalsea Prison.

The frustration he feels is underscored and magnified by a chance meeting with Mr. Meagles in which the latter introduces him to Daniel Doyce. Doyce is an inventor—in fact, it later becomes clear, a man of

genius. But he has been unable to secure any patents from the British government because the road to such patents is blocked by the Circumlocution Office. Meagles' rhetoric is a charming example of his common sense and kindness. He is the natural enemy of the absurdity and selfishness represented by the Circumlocution Office. Meagles begins by inviting Clennam to guess what heinous crime has made Doyce "a public offender":

"What has he been guilty of? Murder, manslaughter, arson, forgery, swindling, housebreaking, highway robbery, larceny, conspiracy, fraud? Which should you say, now?"(119)

Clennam naturally supposes "not one of them," whereupon Meagles gets to the point:

"You are right....But he has been ingenious and he has been trying to turn his ingenuity to his country's service. That makes him a public offender directly, sir."(119)

Meagles goes on to explain that twelve years earlier Doyce perfected an invention "of great importance to his country and his fellow creatures" at great cost to himself, but then made the mistake of turning to the Government for cooperation:

"The moment he addresses himself to the Government, he becomes a public offender! Sir...he ceases to be an innocent citizen, and becomes a culprit. He is treated from that instant as a man who has done some infernal action. He is to be shirked, put off,

browbeaten, sneered at, handled over by this highly-connected young or old gentleman, to that highly-connected young or old gentleman, and dodged back again; he is a man with no rights in his own time, or his own property; a mere outlaw, whom it is justifiable to get rid of anyhow; a man to be worn out by all possible means.”  
(119)

This description of the workings of the Circumlocution Office is humorous but accurate. It is verified by Doyce himself, a soft-spoken man who admits to having aged from his experience. Later, when he and Clennam form a partnership, Doyce cautions Arthur not to prematurely age himself in the same way by pursuing the fight for their invention. His ultimate solution is to take the invention to an unnamed country on the Continent, where his treatment is more fitting: he is embraced, honored, and compensated. Significantly, the money that Doyce earns from the less bureaucratic country allows him to solve Clennam’s and Amy’s problems at the same time: Clennam becomes solvent again, is relieved of his guilt for supposedly dragging Doyce down with him, and can marry Amy. This final consummation has been Amy’s fondest wish ever since she met him.<sup>(7)</sup>

In this way, Dickens makes the point that the Circumlocution Office is grossly inefficient because it is run on a principle of snobbish self-interest. He says as much in his opening satirical essay. Then he supports it by taking us through Clennam’s frustrating encounter with the Office. This scene provides the loving detail that Dickens is most famous for, including such nuances as Mr. Wobbler fobbing off Clennam while he chats about hunting and spreads marmalade on bread with a paper-knife. And then Dickens gives us the most relevant case:

that of Doyce, the genius, who is patience personified but takes his invention to the Continent to escape the opposition of the Circumlocution Office.

### **Mr. Meagles**

Mr. Meagles is in many ways a traditional Dickens character. Like Pickwick, the Cheeryble brothers, the reformed Scrooge, and, in Dickens's last completed novel, *Boffin*, Meagles fits the Father Christmas (or Santa Claus) mold. He is roundly avuncular, altruistic, and independently wealthy.

Meagles is capable of various kinds of error,<sup>(8)</sup> but never of mean-spiritedness. Furthermore, he makes a perfect foil to the characters and institutional bureaucrats causing the frustration: he is truly self-made (no blustering *Bounderby*<sup>(9)</sup>), without pretensions or malice.

Mr. Meagles has various connections to the main plots of the novel. He introduces Arthur Clennam to Daniel Doyce, and towards the end of the novel he travels to the Continent and informs Doyce of Clennam's troubles, thus bringing on, in rapid succession, the happy end of Arthur's financial embarrassments and his wedding to Amy Dorrit. He is also the father of Minny Meagles, who becomes Amy's best friend during their mutually dreadful Italian exile. It is also a fact that early in the story, Clennam has all but made up his mind to propose to Minny and is only deterred from doing so by the recognition (at the Meagles dinner table) that Minny is already devoted to Henry Gowan.

Nevertheless, Mr. Meagles has no essential relationship to either Clennam's story or Amy's; in them he is more of an arbitrary device. His special place in the novel is as an example of the frustrations endemic to a society that supports a Circumlocution Office. By the time

we come to grasp Mr. Meagles' personal problems, we already understand the nature of that Office. It is dedicated to the frustrating triumph of birth and privilege over genuine merit in the ways noted above. Meagles provides us with a moving example of the same frustration, brought about by exactly this blight: the preference of birth over real merit. In Meagles' case, the problem involves his daughter, Minny.

It would be easy to dismiss Minny as a spoiled child, since Meagles does pamper her—he calls her “Pet” and can deny her nothing. But nowhere in the novel does she behave like a spoiled child. She is uniformly kind to Meagles' other charge, the jealous Tattycoram.<sup>(10)</sup> She is aware of Clennam's disappointment in learning about her relationship with Henry Gowan, and her final conversation with Arthur is a *tour de force* on Dickens's part in the representation of tact and sweetness. It is quite convincing and should be referred to readers who accept the cliché that Dickens's beautiful women are mannequins.<sup>(11)</sup> Most compellingly, Minny endures the slights of Society in the persons of her unworthy husband and his snobbish and calculating mother.

Because Minny Meagles is likable, Dickens can use her marriage to Henry Gowan as a concrete source of frustration. The problem is that Gowan and his mother belong to Society. Significantly, they are cousins of the Barnacles, and Henry was even offered a position in the Circumlocution Office. It was not, of course, principle that moved him to reject the offer, but an extraordinary dose of vanity and spite. He has enough extra bile for his relatives, and being a black sheep is an amusing way of thumbing his nose at them.

This is where Minny comes in. To do him justice, Gowan does have some tender feelings for Minny, but he is as aware as his mother of the advantages of marrying the daughter of a rich and doting father. Like

a Jane Austen cad, Gowan is basically a drone and relies on his wife's income. But Gowan's form of shiftlessness is more infuriating. He gives new meaning to the concept of having it both ways. Not only does he mortify his wife by sponging off his father-in-law through her—he promotes the myth that it is *he* who is conferring the favor: he is bestowing the great gift of class on a girl born outside Society. Nor does the myth stop there. He conspires with his mother to hint to everyone they know that the Meagles as a family connived to bring about the marriage.

The exact opposite is true. Minny married for love, and her doting father acquiesced but tacitly opposed the match. That was why he had taken Minny on the European tour where they met Arthur Clennam for the first time. After that meeting, Meagles hoped his daughter would transfer her affections to Arthur. This is clear from our first glimpse of Gowan at the Meagles house, which is given from Clennam's resigned point of view. The Gowans, on the other hand, have always had mercenary motives, and Dickens makes enough omniscient comments on these (in the ironic style of an outside observer with a strong opinion) to leave no room for argument.

Dickens presents the Gowans' abuse of the Meagles family in gradually more aggravating stages. He shows Henry Gowan to be unpleasant and supercilious from the beginning. Daniel Doyce confides to Clennam—who has already been put off by Gowan's tendency to belittle every person and thing he mentions<sup>(12)</sup>—that Gowan considers himself an artist but is hardly devoted enough to deserve the appellation:

“An artist, I infer from what he says?”

“A sort of a one,” said Daniel Doyce, in a surly tone.

“What sort of a one?” asked Clennam, with a smile.

“Why, he has sauntered into the Arts at a leisurely Pall-Mall pace,” said Doyce, “and I doubt if they care to be taken quite so coolly.”(206)

Leavis comments perceptively that the real artist is Doyce (364), which is certainly true. Though being an “inventor” associates him with industry, Doyce is truly creative and dedicated, while Gowan admits to being in the artistic game only for the money—and he soon fails on that level as well. Gowan’s conversation is always held together with a nerve-wracking string of references to his family background. He unflinchingly hints at making a great sacrifice in marrying a daughter of the unconnected Meagles. Shortly before the wedding he taunts Clennam with his own cavalier attitude toward the union that Clennam himself longs in vain for:

“You see, Clennam,” he happened to comment..., “I am a disappointed man. That, you know already.”

“Upon my word,” said Clennam, a little embarrassed, “I scarcely know how.”

“Why... I belong to a clan, or a clique, or a family, or a connection, or whatever you like to call it, that might have provided for me in any one of fifty ways, and that took it into its head not to do it at all. So here I am, a poor devil of an artist.”(401)

He goes on to officially acknowledge that his wife-to-be is “beautiful and charming” and his future father in law is “a capital fellow”(401), but this is exactly the kind of language he uses to dismiss all his

associates.<sup>(13)</sup> Ominously, he admits to feeling no inspiration at all to “pass the bottle of smoke, according to the rule”(402)—in other words, to pull his weight and devote himself to his chosen vocation. The inference, which Clennam feels ashamed of himself for drawing, is that Gowan is going to make a shabby husband for someone of Minny’s qualities. There is the additional hint that Gowan will rely heavily on his father-in-law for support; and this turns out to be accurate—though for “heavily” we might fairly substitute “completely.”

We first see the married Gowans in Italy. Minny and Amy have heard favorably of each other from Arthur Clennam, and they become natural friends, being—with the notable but decrepit exception of Amy’s uncle—the only really decent people in sight. As an example of how Gowan asserts his authority over his wife, in Venice he keeps bringing home a Frenchman using the alias Blandois (a.k.a. Rigaud) who frightens Minnie and is extremely insinuating with her. (Rigaud later poisons Gowan’s dog, though Henry ignores Minnie’s certain intuition of this.) Actually, as the reader has known from Chapter One of the novel, Rigaud murdered his own young wife (whom he married for money), and Minny has reason to fear him. Gowan knows nothing of this, but takes him up for several perverse reasons, the “first,” Dickens tells us, being that “he opposed the separate wish he observed in his wife, because her father had paid his debts, and it was desirable to take an early opportunity of asserting his independence”(489). Thus, at a stroke, Dickens establishes that Gowan will maintain a policy of both borrowing from Mr. Meagles and aggravating Minnie—the latter in spiteful proportion to the former.

Almost as unnerving as Gowan’s not-so-subtle abuse of his wife is the complicity of his mother, who has been the main herald of the myth that

a great sacrifice was made in marrying outside Society. This finally culminates in a visit Mrs. Gowan pays to the Meagles for the purpose of breaking off all connection with them—secure in the knowledge that this will in no way deter the doting father from supporting Minnie (and hence the feckless Henry). An irony running through this painful scene is the contrast between Society’s judgment of the manners of Mr. Meagles and Mrs. Gowan and the reality: Mr. Meagles, the self-made commoner, is too much of a gentleman to really speak his mind; while Mrs. Gowan, the aristocratic dowager, simply pours on the insults, and she is a very fluent liar into the bargain. Reading this scene, it is easy to guess why *Little Dorrit* was relatively unpopular (for a Dickens novel) with the privileged classes of the mid-Victorian Era. Mrs. Gowan finally states the myth explicitly, in the form of a cool insult that is also a conscious lie:

“It’s as much as to state, you begin,” [this is one of Mrs. Gowan’s sentence-sucking interruptions]. If you please, I will finish the sentence. It is as much as to state...that from the first to the last I always objected to this match of yours, and at a very late period yielded a most unwilling consent to it.”(523)

The simple truth is that Mrs. Gowan rejoiced in getting Henry out of her hair, since she was loathe to support him on her own government-bestowed widow’s pension, and Henry was too difficult with the Barnacle relations to be offered a second government sinecure without some effort on her part. Mrs. Gowan harps maliciously on herself and Mr. Meagles having “such extremely different antecedents”(525), but Dickens is explicit about her motives for breaking with the Meagles family:

Thenceforth the Dowager, with a light and careless humour, often recounted to her particular acquaintance how, after a hard trial, she had found it impossible to know those people who belonged to Henry's wife, and who had made that desperate set to catch him. Whether she had come to the conclusion beforehand, to get rid of them would give her favorite pretence a better air, might save some occasional inconvenience, and could risk no loss (the pretty creature [i.e., Minnie] being fast married and her father devoted to her), was best known to herself. This history has its opinion on that point too, and decidedly in the affirmative. (525)

There is exhilarating humor in Dickens's way of disclosing an observer's private inference about Mrs. Gowan's motives, when, of course, he is writing with the full authority of her creator.

As mentioned in an earlier footnote, Henry Gowan also breaks with the elder Meagles, and his motives and calculations are basically the same as his mother's :

This arrangement involved the contingent advantage, which perhaps Henry Gowan had not foreseen, that both Mr. and Mrs. Meagles were more liberal than before to their daughter, when their communication was only with her and her young child: and that his high spirit found itself better provided with money, without being under the degrading necessity of knowing whence it came. (806)

Of course, the clause "which perhaps Henry Gowan had not foreseen" is satirical. The swelling reaction to such impositions on a kind man

like Mr. Meagles and his very likable daughter is frustration, since this is one of the problems that the novel never solves. The same snobbery, laziness, and dishonesty—the same conspiracy of the “well-born” that supports the Circumlocution Office in its war on Daniel Doyce and real performance—supports the Gowans and their war on the personal initiative, honesty, and love of the Meagles family.

We see how implicitly Mrs. Gowan’s myth is accepted when it is repeated by Amy Dorrit’s older sister, Fanny. (Amy, we can be sure, doesn’t believe it.) Like their now-dead father, Fanny owes everything—including her social position—to Amy. Yet the Dorrit family has always lived by a conspiracy of ingratitude that is even more frustrating than the Gowans’ ; so it is altogether fitting that Fanny would believe the Gowans’ version of reality. It is consistent, in this light, that our last view of the Dorrit sisters is of Amy giving “a mother’s care, in the fulness of time, to Fanny’s neglected children no less than to her own, and to leave that lady going into society *forever and a day*”(826 ; italics mine). Though Amy and Clennam do find happiness with each other, the myths, laziness, and snobbery of Society run on into the future.

In conclusion, frustration is an insistent mood in *Little Dorrit* and becomes a major theme. The root causes of the frustration are selfishness and snobbery, logical enemies of true quality. They undermine the workings of government, as things bog down in the Circumlocution Office. They also darken the private lives of truly decent people like Mr. Meagles and his daughter Minnie.

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1 Chesterton, the enemy of “realism,” “determinism,” and “evolutionism,”(in a word, the Catholic) writes: “*Little Dorrit* stands in Dickens’s life chiefly as a signal of how far he went down the road of realism, of sadness, and of what is called modernity”(178). But if we leave out Chesterton’s unfortunate comments on “evolutionists,” his attitude is quite non-sectarian. It was a common critical view. Note, for example, this comment of Ward: “Doubtless much in this part of the story—the whole episode, for instance, of the honest turnkey—is in the author’s best manner. But admirable as it is, this new picture of prison-life and prison-sentiment has an undercurrent of bitterness, indeed, almost of contemptuousness, *foreign to the best part of Dickens’s genius*”(370 ; italics mine). The full meaning of this judgment is soon explained: “There is in general little in the characters of this fiction to compensate for the sense of oppression from which, as he follows the slow course of its far from striking plot, the reader finds it difficult to free himself”(370).

Orwell’s judgment is harder to classify. The real point he makes is that Dickens would not have been Dickens—he would have been less than the genius he was—if he hadn’t been willing to overreach: “What people always demand of a popular novelist is that he shall write the same book over and over again, forgetting that a man who would write the same book twice could not even write it once. Any other writer who is not utterly lifeless moves upon a kind of parabola, and the downward curve is implied in the upper one”(56). This is both fair-minded and finely expressed. Nevertheless, the implication is that *Little Dorrit* is on the “downward curve.”

2 For example, see the paragraphs in Johnson’s biography treating the novel’s publication: “The great structure that he finally evolved integrated his criticism into a whole of remarkable intellectual and artistic power”(427).

3 If there is one axiom in practical criticism, it is that a writer may be faulted for his treatment of a theme, but not for his choice of themes. This is the basis for Vladimir Nabokov’s defense of his novel *Lolita*. Nabokov had chosen the theme of pedophilia, which he considered to be his right as long as he treated it honestly and artistically, regardless of how disgusting such a theme might have been to the public of the ’50’s and ’60’s. In the case of *Little Dorrit*, the problem is not that Dickens chose an intrinsically distasteful theme, but that he treated any unhappy theme *for the entire length of the novel*. Traditional critics of Dickens have

always tended to identify his genius with his optimism: evil is always present in Dickens's fiction, but (according to their view) in his best work – in the novels that accurately reflect his sunny nature – evil is there to be put down. Conversely, such critics regard Dickens's more disciplined explorations of dark themes as violations of his happy nature. Owing to its very consistency, *Little Dorrit* is the outstanding example of this kind of novel. The one implicit theme that runs through *Little Dorrit* is that of frustration.

- 4 H. P. Sucksmith (ix) points out that Tite Barnacle is based on Lord Palmerston, Prime Minister from the year 1850. Dickens had previously compared Palmerston to Julius Caesar; hence the Latin title.
- 5 Later, at the Meagles' house for dinner, Barnacle Junior recognizes Clennam. He is alarmed and warns his cousin Henry Gowan that Clennam is "a most ferocious Radical, you know"(207). Gowan is amused by this description of someone so harmless and asks him what Clennam wanted. "Egod, sir," is the reply, "He said he wanted to know, you know! Pervaded our department, and pitched into me.... Pervaded our department – without an appointment – and said he wanted to know!"(207). This obsession with the word "know" – as if there were something scandalous about a word that can't be avoided when dealing with a bureaucracy – is only possible because Barnacle Junior is a simpleton. Dickens is quite poetic in the way he has Barnacle Junior make the thematic point by awkward repetitions – here, the word "know" and above, "I say. Look here!"
- 6 It is also the Marshalsea, which is the worst of the debtors' prisons. Like so many members of the public, Clennam was swindled by Merdle, but uniquely, Clennam took responsibility for the money this would cost his creditors, and was imprisoned. The intelligent Barnacle visits him in prison and informs him of the practical and self-interested line to adopt in order to free himself. Though feeling the man's kindness, Clennam is too crushed by shame to take his advice. Ultimately, Arthur is saved – spiritually by Amy Dorrit's ministrations and financially by his partner Daniel Doyce's return to England. Doyce knows Clennam to be a basically sound accountant and insists on maintaining their partnership.
- 7 We know that Amy has a special feeling for Clennam, but he is about twenty years older. It becomes clear that Amy's feeling is love when Arthur's old flame – the muddled and overblown but excellent Flora – gets carried away in one of her

uncanny stream-of-consciousness speeches, and actually implies that she and Arthur are still lovers. Subsequently, Amy tells her retarded friend Maggy “The Story of the Princess,” which is the story of a “tiny woman” visited by the Princess who kept constant watch over “the shadow of Some one who had gone far away out of reach, never, never to come back” which she “was proud of it with all her heart, as a great, great treasure”(294). She confided to the Princess that when she died the shadow would “sink quietly into her grave, and would never be found”(294). When the Princess discovered that the tiny woman had died, this was exactly what had happened: the treasured shadow was gone. This is about despairing love, and there can be no doubt that the tiny woman represents Amy, who is extremely undersized, though normally proportioned.

Natalie McKnight says “Amy’s freakish smallness can be partially explained by her refusal of food, another trait that emphasizes her femininity”(118). She doesn’t exactly refuse food; she accepts it, then hides it and takes it home to her selfish father in the Marshalsea, who pretends not to have any idea of its being a sacrifice—or even that Amy works when she leaves the prison each day. Martin Meisel points out that this detail reminds one of “the horror of the scene in Ugolino’s tower,” which is Dante’s image of a child offering himself up as food to a starving parent(306).

In any case, in this light it is equally clear that the “Some one” is Arthur. When Maggy asks if the Some one “was a man, then?” Amy says “timidly” that it was (294). Being retarded, Maggy can be trusted not to read things into the story, but Amy is timid in spite of this because of her strong feeling.

- 8 Meagles is systematically insensitive—Irrving Howe says “insufferable”(xvii)—to his ward Tattycoram; he also has a split personality. On the one hand, he inveighs accurately and eloquently against the Circumlocution Office; on the other, when his daughter marries Henry Gowan, he is not simply impressed with the Barnacles who come to the wedding but knows their lineage in indecent detail. The aristocracy is a hobby of his, and he gives them entirely too much credit.
- 9 Mr. Bounderby is the rugged individualist in Dickens’s shortest and most socially preoccupied novel *Hard Times*. He is an example of the inconsistencies in the policy of *laissez-faire*. Unlike Meagles, Bounderby courts the myth of the rugged individualist. He is always bragging about his rise from the gutter, which, in his stories, was ruled by cruel, unloving parents. When his real parents turn up, they are meek and conventional, and it is clear that Bounderby’s depiction of them was

not only mythical but ungrateful. Still, Dickens did not consider truly self-made men to be a priori philistines. He was a bitter enemy of the exploitation of the poor, but on the whole his entrepreneurs are more admirable than his aristocrats.

10 This is also a pet name, given by Meagles to the orphan girl he took under his wing; but it is much less affectionate. It is a symbol—deliberate on Dickens's part—of Meagles' blundering kindness with Tattycoram. Moreover, in this case there is a certain poetic justice to Meagles' tribulations. Tattycoram rebels and falls under the malign influence of her new guardian Miss Wade, who gloats over Tattycoram like the Devil over a lost soul. In the end, though, after Mr. Meagles suffers for his lack of tact with Tattycoram, she returns to him and tearfully acknowledges his kind intentions. Though to a measured extent Meagles brought about his own problems with Tattycoram, his sin (pace Howe) was venial: it was against tact and never against generosity or warm-heartedness. Who can blame Meagles for loving his own daughter more than an unrelated ward? But it is tactless to constantly dote on Minny in Tattycoram's presence.

11 This last interview between Arthur and Minny is very long, but Minny's final comment, referring to their relationship and his totally unspoken love for her, is a worthy sample: "Dear Mr. Clennam, in my happiness...I cannot bear to leave a cloud between us. If you have anything to forgive me (not anything that I have wilfully done, but any trouble I may have caused you without meaning it, or having it in my power to help it), forgive me to-night out of your noble heart!" (336). This, is not sentimentality but decent sentiment. Minny is vague in reference because Clennam has never wooed her. Yet she knows his feelings and does them justice by apologizing for her (rather tragic) preference for Henry Gowan in a way that will leave Arthur with his self-respect and give him a more explicit sense of how much she likes and respects him.

12 Leavis terms Gowan a nihilist (364). Since Gowan does have a strong interest in himself, this may not be an accurate description. Furthermore, he implicitly values his family connections, or he wouldn't talk about them so much. There can be no doubt, though, about Gowan's outward disdain for everything around him.

13 In fact, when Henry finally breaks off all contact with his father-in-law, he refers to him in much the same language: "...he mentioned to Mr. Meagles that personally they did not appear to him to get on together, and that he thought it would

be a good thing if...they agreed that they were the best fellows in the world, but were best apart"(806).

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