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THE EVOLUTION OF THE CONCEPTION OF THE VILLAIN  
IN DICKENNS' S NOVELS

The polarization hero-villain has its long tradition in literature. In the theatre it took an abstract form in mediæval allegory; it reached its peak in the Elizabethan and Jacobean drama. In the mediæval romance the hero was opposed to the monster or wicked giant, the oppressed heroine - to the witch. This pattern was transferred with many modifications to the 18th century novel, e.g. Clarissa and Lovelace, Pamela - Mrs. Jewkes and M. Colbrand<sup>1</sup>.

Dickens, by virtue of his temperament and his artistic imagination, was naturally attracted to these sharp contrasts in character which are at the basis of any dramatic conflict. His villains have been recognised both by critics and readers as his most vigorous creations. But it is not merely a question of creative vigour and dramatic contrast: Dickens's conception of the villain is subordinated to his preoccupation with the problem of evil. The theme of evil barely sketched in „Pickwick Papers“ develops in an interesting way in „Oliver Twist“ and runs through all his work undergoing an evolution with the growth of Dickens's moral and artistic consciousness. In his early period Dickens

<sup>1</sup> The definition of the villain puts stress on his role in the plot of the novel:

COD: A person guilty or capable of great wickedness, scoundrel; character in a play whose evil actions or motives are important in the plot.

J.A. C u d d e n, A Dictionary of Literary Terms, London 1977: „The bad man in the story, and in an important and special sense the evil machinator or plotter in a play [...]“

While stressing his role in drama the author adds that Elizabethan dramatists explored and exploited the possibilities of the evil antagonist as something like an incarnate devil thus achieving an increased realism.

presents brute force and crime as evil embodied in characters of repugnant physical appearance; in his later period he creates a modern cynic, a nihilist of perfect manners who moves in the drawing rooms and is more destructive than Fagin and Sikes.

"Pickwick Papers" is a unique creation and it stands, in a way, apart, with its optimistic belief in the solution of problems and difficulties in which the characters are entangled<sup>2</sup>. But already in this very first novel there are more villains than one: besides Jingle and Stiggins there are the lawyers. Walter Allen is right to say that Jingle and Stiggins are such powerful comic creations that we forget about the evil which is in them. Jingle is easily exposed, he is a fraud, a fortune hunter, a derailed man, but at the end he reforms and is even capable of admitting his dishonesty and of feeling grateful to Pickwick who helps him to make a fresh start. The lawyers - on the contrary - do not reform. The representatives of law and order are essentially wicked, impervious to any moral argument. Therefore the reader shares with the characters in the novel a feeling of helplessness when confronted with their malpractices and effrontery. There is, of course, the traditional happy ending with the four couples married, Mr. Pickwick benignantly patronising, Jingle reformed, an atmosphere of gaiety and general satisfaction, yet there remains an irritating memory of Dodson and Fogg, though the author pretends to dismiss them as morally defeated by Mr. Pickwick's invincible honesty.

In "Oliver Twist", Sikes represents brute force, while Fagin is more perverse since he is the ring leader and depraver of children. Fagin, who never raises his voice and usually addresses his companions as "my dear", is shown as a diabolical figure from popular tradition. In the famous scene, when Oliver watches him on waking-toasting bread, with a fork in his hand over the flames on the hearth, he is grotesque and sinister. We are in the world of crime and darkness in every sense of the word: moral darkness which results from misery and ignorance, symbolized by the physical darkness of the slum area. It has been stressed that Fagin is shown usually in the night, often with animal associations - a reptile moving in mud. Dickens's attempt at psychological penetra-

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. among others W. A l l e n, *The Comedy of Dickens*, [in:] *Dickens 1970*, London 1970.

tion in the final chapters in which he presents the thoughts or rather stupefaction of the Jew during the trial, and Sikes's state of obsession during his escape and final pursuit after the murder of Nancy, has been discussed in an illuminating way by Philip Collins in "Dickens and Crime"<sup>3</sup>.

In "Nicholas Nickleby" the leading villain, Ralph Nickleby, is surrounded by a group of minor characters all of whom are his tools. They are from different social classes. Besides Ralph who deserves a closer study, the other figures are simplified, they could in fact be summed up in one word, apart from moral dissolution which is common to all the aristocratic group, e.g. Mulberry Hawk - arrogance, Lord Verisopht (the telling names speak from themselves) - degeneracy, Arthur Gride - lust. Squeers is a character from low comedy which is obvious in the external appearance of the schoolmaster - and it is evident that the young novelist was not very subtle in his choice of what was to be supposed comic detail:

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 shape resembling the fanlight of 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<sup>4</sup>.

Squeers is another embodiment of brute force after Sikes, and if he is not a professional killer he is a potential murderer anyway; his main characteristic feature is his sadistic behaviour towards the boys, in particular to his victim Smike.

Ralph Nickleby deserves more attention. He is the first of Dickens's negative characters whose object is power and whose dominating feature is greed. Power through money - this is one of the main motifs of the Victorian novel in general and of Dickens in particular. Ralph the usurer holds his aristocratic clients in his power, as later Mr. Tulkinghorn - a much more subtly drawn character - will hold them through the knowledge of their secrets.

<sup>3</sup> Ph. Collins, Dickens and Crime, London 1965.

<sup>4</sup> Ch. Dickens, Nicholas Nickleby, Harmondsworth 1978, p. 90. All further quotations are from this edition.

Ralph is dominated by greed and hatred. Dickens tries to analyze Ralph's motives several times at critical moments. There are situations in which the voice of conscience seems to be awakening in him, and although he suppresses it and goes to his own destruction, the very shadow of the inner struggle makes him more human and convincing. It shows Dickens's attempt to give his character some complexity - in which he succeeds. Thus there is the moment when Ralph puts Kate into the coach and he is struck by her likeness to his brother which reminds him of his youth, and he feels troubled<sup>5</sup>. There is also the scene when he argues with himself that he is not doing her any harm because her own mother would have sold her to one of his aristocratic clients. It is followed by a moment of psychological inconsistency after the above mentioned scene when Kate leaves him:

It is one of those problems of human nature, which may be noted down but not solved; although Ralph felt no remorse at that moment for conduct towards the innocent, true - hearted girl; although his libertine clients had done precisely what he had expected, precisely what he most wished, and precisely what would tend most to his advantage, still he hated them for doing it, from the very bottom of his soul.

"Ugh!" said Ralph scowling round, and shaking his clenched hand as the faces of the two profligates rose before his mind; "you shall pay for this. Oh! you shall pay for this!" (451)

All his behaviour towards Kate is well calculated. He does not know, when he introduces her for the first time to his clients, how Kate will behave, and he does not want to discourage them or to compromise himself before Kate. Therefore his attitude is ambiguous, so that Kate, in her innocence, does not realize his intentions and it takes time before she rebels. Ralph degenerates in his villainy - his moral defeat and death become inevitable in the course of the action. While Sikes and Fagin are capable of feelings only of the lowest kind, Ralph has moments in which the human being in him awakens in spite of his corruption; he feels despair from which there is no escape when he learns the truth about his son, he feels among the damned in his sleepless nights, haunted by "the heavy shadow" of something he cannot define and thus he rises in stature as a figure of evil who

<sup>5</sup> Cf. B. Hardy, *The Complexity of Dickens*, [in:] Dickens 1970.



destroys himself, melodramatic and yet impressive as the Jacobean villains are impressive in their way<sup>6</sup>.

In "The Old Curiosity Shop", Quilp is a creature of darkness like Fagin<sup>7</sup>, a physical and moral monster, his deformity corresponding to his moral repulsiveness. The narrator particularly stresses the dirt in his appearance, he has dirty hands and clothes, he lives in a rat-infested place. Dickens's interest in the pathological, evident in this character, has been pointed out by different critics (Gabriel Pearson, Pamela Hansford-Jones) in their analysis of Quilp's relationship with his wife and Nell.

In "Martin Chuzzlewit" the two "arch-villains" - Jonas Chuzzlewit and Pecksniff, mark a step forward in Dickens's vision. Jonas Chuzzlewit is a development of the figure of a miser whose greed for money drives him to murder. If Ralph Nickleby causes the suffering and death of his son through lack of interest and neglect, Jonas is an intentional murderer of his father. Like Ralph Nickleby he is cunning and his main motives are greed and hatred, but while Ralph is cold and calculating Jonas is brutal, especially towards his wife; he is in fact brute force combined with cunning and greed. Again Dickens's study of Jonas's criminal mind is an achievement in psychological insight<sup>8</sup>. The last stage of Jonas's life during his journey with Montague Tigg before he murders his partner, is an interesting analysis of an obsessed mind, tense with purpose, which is to kill his enemy, and haunted by the fear of death. The last sequence of his pursuit by the police is a study of guilt and fear.

Pecksniff is Dickens's perfect presentation of a hypocrite. This conception must have been in his mind ever since the creation of Dodson and Fogg, but in Pecksniff he achieves his masterpiece. Walter Allen calls him a moral monster<sup>9</sup> and so he is, all the more so in that he is far more civilized than all the other villains who preceded him. He is no longer a brutish figure. He is an

<sup>6</sup> Cf. M. Slater in the Introduction to the above edition of "Nicholas Nickleby", p. 24.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. J. Holloway, Dickens and the Symbol, [in:] Dickens 1970,...

<sup>8</sup> See Collins, Dickens and Crime, pp. 276-79.

<sup>9</sup> The Comedy of Dickens, [in:] Dickens 1970,...

architect, he is the father of two daughters whom he pretends to bring up according to the highest moral principles. By modern standards he belongs to the professional intelligentsia, as an architect he might be expected to have a sense of beauty and with it a more subtle moral awareness. It takes a long time to unmask him and when he is unmasked he remains undefeated, firm in his falsity, unyielding.

In „Dombey and Son” there are women villainesses - Good Mrs. Brown, the old prostitute, with her daughter Alice, and Mrs. Skewton who sells her daughter Edith for marriage with Dombey. But these are minor figures, the central evil character is Carker. His external appearance suggests conformity and conventionality, his inner character is presented through animal associations - the image of a savage cat, which is evoked by Carker's unnatural grin, suggesting rapacity and treachery. The famous description of his smile which was rather like "the snarl of a cat", with his white, glistening regular teeth, contains a hint of characteristic features of Carker as an individual; the details of his clothes - the stiff cravat, the tight suit, buttoned up, are characteristic of a number of Dickens's characters representing the System (Dombey, Uriah Heep, Tite Barnacle, Vholes), suggesting conformity and rigidity of principles, narrowmindedness. The cat image suggesting treachery and the will to destroy appears in two particular cases - in association with Carker and later with Vholes, but the images differ as much as the characters do. Mr. Carker is shown basking in the sun, like a cat, clean, well-groomed, yet he has something that unexpectedly connects him with the monster Quilp in the detail of his long well-kept hands and fingers:

Something too deep for a partner, and much too deep for an adversary, Mr. Carker the Manager, sat in the rays of the sun that came down slanting on him through the skylight, playing his game alone.

And although it is not among the instincts wild or domestic of the cat tribe to play at cards, feline from sole to crown was Mr. Carker the Manager, as he basked in the strip of summer light and warmth that shone upon his table and the ground as if they were a crooked dial-plate, and himself the only figure on it. With hair and whiskers deficient in colour at all times, but feebler than common in the rich sunshine, and more like the coat of a sandy tortoise-shell cat; with long nails, nicely paired and

sharpened, with an unnatural antipathy to any speck of dirt which made him pause sometimes and watch the falling motes of dust and rub them off his smooth white hand or gloosy linen: Mr. Carker the Manager, sly of manner, sharp of tooth, soft of foot, watchful of eye, oily of tongue, cruel of heart, nice of habit, sat with a dainty steadfastness and patience at his work, as if he were waiting at a mouse's hole<sup>10</sup>.

Dickens's evil characters are seldom shown in the sunlight, they are, as was mentioned several times above, figures of darkness, therefore Mr. Carker's image is of a peculiar kind. His feline nature is suggested all the more strongly: basking in the sun is an act of repose, cats delight in it, but for Carker it is also a moment of quiet calculation before he chooses the right moment to attack and destroy his enemy. Carker's aspiration to power is one of the leading motifs in Dickens's conception of the villain. Power through the management of their principals' affairs and the knowledge of their weaknesses is the aim of Carker and Uriah Heep.

The two villains of „David Copperfield“, Mr. Murdstone and Uriah Heep, continue the two types of characters: the brutal violent man and the hypocrite. But each of them is different from his predecessor. Mr. Murdstone is a sadist, sexually an attractive man, a tyrant not only in relation to his naive wife, but also to his disreputable companions. In the external presentation of his character Dickens suggests brutality by the dog image, but a new motif is introduced which will be developed later in „Bleak House“: Murdstone, like Vholes, enslaves his victims with his gaze, like a snake. David's agony during his lessons is watched by the Murdstones and their influence upon him is "like the fascination of two snakes on a wretched young bird"<sup>11</sup>. David describes Murdstone in passages in which the vision of the child and of the adult overlap. He sees Murdstone's power over his mother right in the moment before the first clash between the child and the man takes place:

He drew her to him, whispered in her ear, and kissed her, I knew as well, when I saw my mother's head lean down upon his

<sup>10</sup> Ch. Dickens, *Dombey and Son*, London 1946, p. 278.

<sup>11</sup> Ch. Dickens, *David Copperfield*, London 1967, p. 52. All further quotations are from this edition.

shoulder, and her arm touch his neck - I knew as well that he could mould her pliant nature into any form he chose, as I know, now, that he did. (43)

Murdstone is not just a brute oppressor of children, he is a supreme egoist who cannot tolerate sharing his wife's affection with David, the more so as he feels the child's instinctive hostility towards him. He is supported in his behaviour by his sister, and the motif of the man brought up to be a tyrant by women in the family was introduced already in "Dombey and Son".

With the Murdstones Dickens introduces the theme of perverted religious ideas. What the Murdstones practise and try to impose on David is the rigid Calvinistic unforgiving spirit, a distortion, in fact, of Christian teaching. As in the story of Arthur Clennam, Sunday for David is a day of torment. Like Mrs. Clennam the Murdstones make "tremendous visages" on Sunday, they dress in black; the church service is "a condemned service", the angels are destroying powers. Religion for David, as later for Arthur, is connected with the vision of hell and damnation. Thus the characters of tyrants and sadists bring oppression to their environment in the physical, moral, and psychological sense.

In "Bleak House" the main figure of evil is Wholes, the representative of legal authority which is the target of satire in the novel. Wholes appears with animal associations that were used for Carker, Uriah Heep and Murdstone: he is a serpent with a fascinating gaze who charms his victims, a black buttoned up figure like Heep, in clothes so close-fitting that he seems to "skin his hands" when he takes off his gloves, or "scalp his head" when he takes off his hat; he is several times juxtaposed with the image of a cat watching the mouse hole, he carries connotations of death. Like Pecksniff he is a father and seems to be a most respectable professional. The emphasis on his respectability is put in different ironic intonations and different narrative modes including parody, particularly in the chapter "Attorney and Client". His physical ugliness is emphasised by the naturalistic details of an unhealthy complexion and pimples on his face.

Side by side with Wholes a new type of villain appears in "Bleak House" to be developed in an original way in the other two "novels of the System" - "Hard Times" and "Little Dorrit" - the

character of the cynic and nihilist whose appearance is attractive and who seems highly civilized. The first of them is Harold Skimpole. He is presented as a charming man in the first impressions recorded by Esther, naive and inexperienced:

He was a little bright creature with a rather large head; but a delicate face, and a sweet voice, and there was a perfect charm in him. All he said was so free from effort and spontaneous, and was said with such a captivating gaiety that it was fascinating to hear him talk<sup>12</sup>.

(55)

Later she discovers his irresponsibility, lack of scruples and dishonesty, but she is very cautious, like all good women in Dickens, not to pronounce a severe judgement. It is Inspector Bucket with his knowledge of human perversity who sees through Skimpole's mask of a "child who knows nothing about money". But it is Skimpole himself who reveals his cynical views. He is not a hypocrite, he simply refuses to accept any norms of behaviour except those which suit his convenience. Thus he is capable of betraying a friend or giving up a man to the police for a bribe. He does not even pretend to put on a mask, he is free in the existential sense, as later Kurtz will be free, though it may seem that they are worlds apart. The concept of good and evil is meaningless for him: "I am not warped by prejudices as an Italian baby by its bandages. I am as free as the air" (728). He denies blandly the use of moral principles in the presence of his friends, but his playful manner makes Boythorn and Jarndyce treat him as "a child who blew bubbles and broke them all day long". The horror of Skimpole's cynicism is a fact that neither Jarndyce nor Boythorn have the courage to face. In one of the conversations Boythorn asks:

Is there such a thing as principle, Mr. Harold Skimpole? To which Harold Skimpole would reply, "... Upon my life I have not the least idea! I don't know what it is you call by that name, or where it is, or who possesses it. If you possess it, and find it comfortable, I am quite delighted and congratulate you heartily. But I know nothing about it, I assure you; for I am a mere child, and I lay no claim to it, and I don't want it!" (227)

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<sup>12</sup> Ch. Dickens, *Bleak House*, New York 1977. All further quotations are from this edition.



The immorality of Skimpole is not only an individual case - it is closely related to the immorality of the system which protects and needs individuals like him. With his subtle intelligence he sees the working of the mechanism of power and he can make use of it for his own purpose. Skimpole, however, transcends the framework of a social or political system - he is a new incarnation of evil which operates within or independantly of a system.

Skimpole is passive, with his indolence he does not engage in any social activity; he is a corrupt individual who condones and lives by corruption. In the novel which follows chronologically, Dickens's conception of the modern villain takes a new development. James Harthouse in "Hard Times" is a social parasite like Skimpole and an anticipation of the fin-de-siècle nihilist. But in contrast to Skimpole he engages for a short time in government activity thus becoming destructive not only as a private individual, but as a representative of authority. "Hard Times" is a novel about a philosophical system carried to the extreme with disastrous consequences. The doctrine preached by Gradgrind is supported either by fanatics like himself, a man with a theoretical mind, or by people who do not care for any ideology like James Harthouse. The fanatics are forced by life to face facts. Gradgrind preaches his doctrine while ignoring the essential biological and psychological facts about his own children. When finally brought to accept them he must acknowledge total disaster in the life of his family. The cynics in Parliament, entrust a fact-finding mission to a man who is absolutely incompetent and who does not care for any values, therefore he is a convenient tool for them in their party policy:

The Gradgrind party wanted assistance in cutting the throats of the Graces. They went about recruiting; and where could they enlist recruits more hopefully, than among the fine gentlemen who, having found out everything to be worth nothing were equally ready for anything?<sup>13</sup>

James's brother, a Member of Parliament, a fine gentleman of a good family and better appearance, "with a happy turn of humour",

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<sup>13</sup> Ch. Dickens, *Hard Times*, Harmondsworth 1971, p. 157. All further quotations are from this edition.

persuades his colleagues that they should send his brother to Coketown:

"If you want to bring in, for any place, a handsome dog who can make you a devilish good speech, look after my brother Jem, for he's your man". After a few dashes in the public meeting way, Mr. Gradgrind and a council of political sages approved of Jem, and it was resolved to send him to Coketown to become known there and in the neighbourhood. (158)

In "Hard Times" society has reached a stage in which moral values have no meaning any more. People are useful or useless according to whether they serve the interests of the ruling powers in the country. They are judged by their skill in adapting themselves to the situation and they are valued according to the external symptoms of success. Thus corruption which starts at the top reaches the young generation. Tom Gradgrind, brought up on the principles of the "religion of Facts", appreciates the facts of material well-being. This is skilfully suggested by Dickens's use of the synecdoche. While the villains of the earlier novels were presented through animal imagery, James Harthouse is referred to as "whiskers" and "waistcoat". This is how Tom Gradgrind sees him. The whiskers and waistcoat are the epitome of elegance to him and a model to imitate. But the image which Tom sees has another dimension for the reader: James Harthouse anticipates the vision of the "hollow-men" of the century to come.

Harthouse, like Skimpole, is not a hypocrite, as far as his ideas are concerned. In his conversation with Louisa he reveals himself as a cynic without any inhibitions; cynicism is very much like the good manners of the great world set against provincial naiveté:

You have made up your mind, said Louisa ... "to show the nation the way out of all its difficulties". "Mrs. Bounderby", he returned laughing, "upon my honour, no. I will make no such pretence to you. I have seen a little here and there, up and down; I have found it all to be very worthless, as everybody has, and as some confess they have. ... I have not so much as the slightest predilection left. I assure you I attach not the least importance to any opinions. The result of the varieties of boredom I have undergone, is a conviction ... that any set of ideas will do just as much good as any other set, and just as much harm as any other set". (162)

It is natural that the consequence of this attitude is an egoistic pursuit of pleasure which is evident in James's desire to seduce Louisa. In the section of the novel which deals with James's strategy as he lays siege to win Louisa's love, James is stylized as a tempter. But this new avatar of the devil in Dickens's novel is quite different from the previous ones - it is original and modern. We have seen the devil represented by Fagin, Quilp, Uriah Heep and Vholes. The former two were grimacing horrifying monsters, the latter - more civilized but repulsive. James Harthouse is attractive, well-mannered, and bored to death. In each of the previous cases the evil character was a menace to society; in the case of Harthouse his destructive power operates in a far more subtle and perverse way. In chapter 8, Book the Second, Reaping, the narrator makes this direct comment:

When the devil goeth about like a roaring lion, he goeth about in a shape by which few but savages and hunters are attracted. But, when he is trimmed, smoothed and varnished, according to the mode: when he is aweary of vice, and aweary of virtue, used up as to brimstone, and used up as to bliss; then whether he take to the serving out of red tape, or to the kindling of red fire, he is the very Devil. (207)

Perhaps in no other commentary has Dickens shown more emphatically that the destructive power of evil lies in moral indifference - laissez-faire in a broad sense as a "moral" principle carried to the extreme and leading to a total negation of values.

Another feature of James Harthouse is his contempt for man. He despises the workers and the manufacturer alike, he despises Tom who admires him, and has no scruples to use the naive boy as a tool in his carefully calculated game to seduce Louisa. In his thoughts he refers to Tom as "whelp". The irony which consists in Tom's ignorance of James's attitude to him and the mutual relationship between the man and the boy is perfectly handled by the narrator - stage director of the social and moral drama.

Harthouse, defeated by Louisa and Sissy, dwindles from his diabolical part to that of a deplorable human mediocrity, unable to understand that his withdrawal is the only sensible and honest action he committed in his life. His departure to Egypt is an escape from the place of his defeat; at the same time it is an escape from himself - he fails to grasp the moral meaning of what had happened, he only feels silly.

It is worth while to mention another villain in "Hard Times"

- Bitzer, who is a perfect product of the system of Facts. He is a puppet but a different one from the "bags and maces" or "silk gowns" in "Bleak House", who are only masks and monsters; or rather he is a further development of that concept. Externally he is a feeble echo of Uriah Heep; his "bloodlessness" is a physical detail strongly emphasized throughout the novel as a symbol of his moral vacuity. He has no life of his own, he is a bundle of slogans, but he has been taught to use them and he does so by turning them against those who taught him, against anyone who stands in the way to his career. His dehumanization is complete in the sense that human feelings have been killed in him by the very system of education.

In "Little Dorrit" there are several negative characters which require a closer analysis. In the first place there is a villain in the old tradition, Rigaud-Blandois, a blackmailer and murderer whose crime has never been proved. There is a group of characters apparently very different from the "villain tradition", the Barnacles whose most important representative is the Engaging young Barnacle, and there is Henry Gowan, an aristocratic dilettante, a spurious artist, as James might have called him, one of the most interesting creations in Dickens's conception of evil.

Rigaud-Blandois seems to be in the tradition of the villain from crude melodrama, too grotesque to be sinister, as e.g. Fagin is sinister. Dickens seems to enjoy this crudity and grotesqueness, and then on a closer analysis we see that Rigaud is a more complex creation than it seems at first sight. He is another incarnation of the devil, and while the dominant feature of Hart-house was boredom and indifference, the characteristic feature of this figure is its ambiguity. Rigaud affects the manners of a gentleman and he forces his way into good society. His insolence is taken for swagger by some people while others unmistakably assess him from the start. Thus Little Dorrit and Pet shrink from him, while Gowan in his perversity accepts him as a companion. He is a tawdry and vulgar figure, a modern globe-trotter, a cosmopolitan everywhere at home and capable of using every situation to his advantage. His ambiguity is well emphasized in the chapter "Let Loose" when the landlady of "The Break of Day" is watching him and cannot make up her mind whether he is handsome or ugly. The ugliness of evil which peers unexpectedly from behind

a handsome mask is perfectly suggested here. The title of the chapter "Let Loose" brings to mind immediately an association with "the devil let loose" and Rigaud is obviously stylized here as Cain and devil in turn; at the same time he appears also as a human wreck, a miserable creature in need of assistance. He brings associations with certain criminal characters from the contemporary French novel, viz. from "Les Misérables" and "Père Goriot"; he is of the race of Thénardier, though Thénardier is never stylized as the devil by Victor Hugo, and of Vautrin. It is Vautrin who makes a violent attack on the bourgeois society which produces criminals and then passes sentences of death upon them. In both cases, in the novel of Balzac and in Dickens, the villains proclaim an unscrupulous fight against an unscrupulous society. There are several interesting scenes in which Dickens shows Rigaud to the reader as an incarnation of evil. Among them his first visit to Mrs. Clennam's must be mentioned. He is shown here as a devil from a puppet show while he is watching the house at night, with his shining eyes, surrounded by black cats whose eyes are similar to his. It is grotesque, no doubt, we may expect a Sabbath of witches to follow. But the same scene takes on a new dimension from the perspective of the whole novel. Rigaud appears here as a messenger of Fate who brings destruction to Mrs. Clennam unaware of her doom. The irony of the situation consists in the fact that it is a doom which Mrs. Clennam has brought upon her own head. All her life long she wanted to decide the Fate of other people, destroying them by her decisions, now Fate turns against her in the figure of an abject blackmailer. Another scene takes place at the inn in the Alps. Rigaud remains alone at night and comes closer to the fire, he is reluctant to go to bed: "One would think the night would be long enough, in this freezing silence and solitude, if one went to bed two hours since"<sup>14</sup>. Dickens does not overemphasize this detail, but the suggestion of the solitude and freezing space with which the devil is associated is quite transparent. Rigaud is shown in the room by the fire "with a monstrous shadow imitating him on the wall and ceiling" (433). At some moment he is also associated with a reptile: this is how Little Dorrit and Pat feel his presence.

<sup>14</sup> Ch. Dickens, Little Dorrit, Oxford 1979, p. 434. All further quotations are from this edition.



There are, however, other villains in "Little Dorrit" whose appearance is attractive, or inoffensive, or seems to command respect. A striking example of misleading appearances is Casby, the Patriarch. His appearance is to a great extent symbolic and this symbolism is set off by contrast with Pancks. The Patriarch with his silver locks is revered by the naive who judge by external features, while Pancks, blackhaired, untidy and dirty suggests obviously the "dirty business" he is doing for the Patriarch, who in turn is the agent for Sir Tite Barnacle, one of the powerful representatives of the Government, i.e. System. This relationship together with the theme of extortion of money from slum dwellers will later be taken up by Shaw in "Widower's Houses", and it is Shaw, as we remember, who called "Little Dorrit" a more revolutionary work than "Das Kapital". Dickens's Patriarch is a kind of Samson à rebours who loses power when his locks are shorn; Pancks turns into a kind of fairy godmother who brings fortune to the Dorrits. In Shaw's play Sartorius is never unmasked and Lickcheese will make his career by a fraudulent business deal into which he will draw Sartorius as well as his aristocratic estate owner. Although Shaw's vision is sharper and more realistic, there are other villains in Dickens's novel who testify to the sharpness of his vision, too. Dickens has no illusions about the corruption of the society. That corruption starts from the top, and goes down to the lower social strata. At the top are the powerful Barnacles who operate the System. The Barnacles as a destructive force have been discussed by different critics<sup>15</sup>. I will confine myself to three of them who repeatedly appear in the novel: Mr. Tite Barnacle, Barnacle junior, and the most important of them, "the sprightly young Barnacle", or Ferdinand. Two of them can be summed up easily and they are classical flat characters: Mr. Tite Barnacle represents the "insolence of office". His self-importance and pride are a weapon in his dealing with the individuals who dare to apply to him. He annihilates the weaker or humiliates the stronger ones. Barnacle junior is in fact a farcical figure. His mannerisms of speech, his continual obsessive fussing with his eye-glass are comic and absurd, they are emphasized to provoke laughter, but

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<sup>15</sup> Cf. C. P. Snow, John Wain and others, in Poland - Irena Dobrzycka.

there is another side to his farcical performance: this imbecile is an important figure in the government administration and it is in the power of Tite Barnacle or of Barnacle junior to block any creative effort or any appeal for justice.

The third of them, Ferdinand, is a development of the cynical character. The engaging young Barnacle, "a vivacious, well-looking, well-dressed, agreeable young fellow" (110) seems to be poles apart from the traditional villain. Politeness and good humour are the features of his behaviour, he never seduces other men's wives, like Harthouse, he is never associated with any dark symbolic images. On the contrary he goes to the opera, rides a horse, attends parties which occasionally turn into "great patriotic conferences". But with all his social advantages young Barnacle is a new and modern incarnation of evil - he is one of the main supporters and leaders of the System which destroys the individual and ruins the country. Among his two predecessors Skimpole was indolent and lazy, a parasite who supported the System by his immorality; Harthouse did not care for ideology and he willingly profited from the advantages offered to him as an opportunity to get out of his boredom. Ferdinand Barnacle is well aware that the System is corrupt and with a smile he challenges anybody to reform it. He knows the means to block any attempt at a reform and, the most intelligent of them all, he knows how the system operates. James Harthouse did not care, Skimpole had a good idea of its mechanism, but he was interested only in those issues which referred to him directly, i.e. money. Ferdinand, as a private Secretary to the Head of the Circumlocation Office wants power, and he knows how to eliminate potential rivals. In one of the key passages, in the first scene when Arthur meets him, the narrator comments:

... This touch and go young Barnacle had "got up" the Department in a private secretaryship, that he might be ready for any bit of fat that came to hand; and he fully understood the Department to be a politico-diplomatico hocus pocus piece of machinery, for the assistance of the nebs to keep out the snags. This dashing young Barnacle, in a word, was likely to become a statesman, and to make a figure. (111)

In one of the significant conversations with Arthur, in which he cynically reveals his views, Ferdinand expresses the

social and moral deterioration of the rulers who operate the System based on inertia, which is an antithesis to what is just or creative:

"Our place is the most inoffensive place possible. You'll say we are a Humbug. I won't say we are not; but all that sort of thing is intended to be, and must be. Don't you see?"

"I don't", said Arthur.

"You don't regard it from the right point of view. It is the point of view that is the essential thing. Regard our place from this point of view that we only ask you to leave us alone, and we are as capital a Department as you'll find anywhere".

"Is your place there to be left alone?" asked Clennam.

"You exactly hit it", - returned Ferdinand, "It is there with the express intention that everything shall be left alone. That is what it means. That is what it's for. No doubt there's a certain form to be kept up there; it's for something, but it's only a form. Why, good Heaven, we are nothing but forms! Think what a lot of forms you have gone through ... It's like a limited game of cricket. A field of outsiders are always going in to bowl at the Public Service, and we block the balls". (716-717)

The climax of young Barnacle's speech comes in the moment when he expresses his admiration for Merdle. It is the ultimate revelation of his personal moral nihilism and also the expression of the degeneration of a society which admired a forger and was skilfully manipulated by him. The motif of contempt for man as an individual, stressed in Harthouse's attitude to Tom Gradgrind, recurs here again with its social implications:

"He must have been an exceedingly clever fellow", said Ferdinand Barnacle.

... "A consummate rascal of course", ... "but remarkably clever! One cannot help admiring the fellow. Must have been such a master of humbug. Knew people so well - got over them so completely - did so much with them!"

This intensification of qualities which arouse the admiration for what is perverse and destructive ("must have been such a master of humbug. Knew people so well - got over them so completely - did so much with them!") reveals the extent of corruption in Barnacle the ruler and in the society which supports the System by its veneration of money.

Ferdinand Barnacle with all his excellent manners is much more dangerous and destructive than all the preceding "villains", the consequences of his attitude and activity having a nationwide range. It is with this character that Dickens achieved the final

artistic expression of the struggle for power motif, which runs through several novels, as has been indicated above in his presentation of individual characters. Harthouse's boredom and indifference has changed in the character of Ferdinand into an active conscious support of "humbug". Because he considers Clennam a far more intelligent man than many of his co-workers in the Circumlocution Office, and because he considers him harmless, he lays his cards open to him:

"Believe me, Mr. Clennam", said the sprightly young Barnacle in his pleasantest manner, "our place is not a wicked Giant to be charged at full tilt; but only a windmill showing you as it grinds immense quantities of chaff, which way the country wind blows".

And later:

"We must have humbug, we all like humbug, we couldn't get on without humbug. A little humbug and a groove, and everything goes on admirably, if you leave us alone". (718)

Thus Ferdinand Barnacle is himself: the type of a modern opportunist and career-maker, a cynical operator of the System which is based on the perversion of values. He cannot be unmasked - or his unmasking means the collapse of the System.

One more negative character appears in "Little Dorrit" - Henry Gowan. He is another diletante, like Skimpole, one of Dickens's most interesting "villains". The evil which is in him manifests itself in the denigration of values evident in his speech and in his manner. He brings disaster to the people with whom he becomes involved: he wins Minny and makes her unhappy, he exploits financially his father-in-law and then breaks relations with him, he humiliates his noble rival, Arthur, he had seduced Miss Wade and broken her life. Gowan is a more complex character than Ferdinand. He is not easy to decipher for people who come into contact with him until he brings ruin to their lives. Arthur who intuitively sees him as a perverse character struggles with himself unwilling to judge him too severely. Consequently Gowan is shown to the reader from different points of view: Arthur's, Little Dorrit's, the main narrator's and Miss Wade's. Gowan's handsome appearance and aristocratic descent are stressed, but his total lack of moral values, his perversity are gradually revealed to the reader

while the characters surrounding Gowan are not able to grasp the whole extent of his wickedness. The ambiguity of his speech and behaviour, his cynicism are suggested by the apparently entertaining tone of narration. While Gowan's speech may seem benevolent to the naive, the narrator wants the reader to assess him as he deserves and makes an explicit ironic statement:

The process by which this unvarying result was attained, whatever the premises, might have been stated by Mr. Henry Gowan thus: "I claim to be always book-keeping, with a peculiar nicety. in every man's case, and posting up a careful account of Good and Evil with him. I do this so conscientiously that I am happy to tell you I find the most worthless of men to be the dearest old fellow too; and am in a condition to make the gratifying report that there is much less difference than you are inclined to suppose between an honest man and a scoundrel". The effect of this cheering discovery happened to be, that while he seemed to be scrupulously finding good in most men, he did in reality lower it where it was, and set it up where it was not; but that was its only disagreeable or dangerous feature. (200)

Gowan is associated with the Death image and in this way Dickens shows him as an incarnation of evil very close to the theological concept, which is the absence of good, the negation of being, i.e. non-being. This assessment is made very skillfully in Miss Wade's diary. Instead of a direct commentary by the omniscient narrator-moralist, we have a passionate condemnation pronounced by one of his victims:

He was like the dressed-up Death in the Dutch series; whatever figure he took upon his arm, whether it was youth or age, beauty or ugliness, whether he danced with it, sang with it, played with it or prayed with it, he made it ghastly. (650)

The image may evoke some remote associations with the allegorical Dance of Death; it shows Gowan as a destroying force, an incarnation of evil which operates independently of the System in power.

Summing up - the conception of the villain in Dickens's novels undergoes an evolution with the growing experience of the writer, an artist and a moralist involved in the social life of his country. In his early novels the villain is a murderer or a crook, a usurer or a hypocrite greedy for power. He operates within a limited area of life. He is finally unmasked, punished



by law or commits suicide. In the novels of the fifties the villain is not exposed. Dickens has reached full knowledge of the mechanism of power: in the three novels of "the world of System" society is manipulated by unscrupulous individuals who are "at the top" - legal officials, parliamentary figures, government dignitaries, "magnates" of different areas of public life. There is no longer any question of "unmasking"; top dignitaries cooperate with legal officials, i.e. the well-masked "villains" are protected by law, while the legal system serves the government. This is best illustrated in the "gossamer" manoeuvres of Ferdinand Barnacle and Bar - the private secretary of Lord Decimus and the future Attorney General.

There are no more animal associations in the presentation of the cynics, on the contrary, they are all socially charming people. Still Harthouse is presented by the narrator as the Devil and Gowan as a Death figure; this is, however, their inner image, to the society in which they move they are elegance and charm itself. But Skimpole is associated with the child image and Ferdinand Barnacle, the incarnation of cynicism and corruption, is associated with entertainment. The narrator speaks about him in a prose which has a light, easy, almost dancing rhythm, his behaviour at the Merdles' is like an operatic performance of the soloist, surrounded by a chorus, his partner being Bar, and he hurries to the opera after "the great Patriotic Conference". Barnacle, the most intelligent of all, is the ultimate development of the motif of the drive for power. He has achieved power over the whole society and the corruption of the individual is a measure of the corruption of the society which supports the System.

Thus the conception of the villain has passed through a profound evolution and it is deeply connected with Dickens's growing awareness of the multiple faces of evil. His satirical vision of contemporary bourgeois society invites a comparison with Balzac's Human Comedy. But his poetic genius goes beyond the concrete facts characteristic of his time: both in theme and art Dickens looks forward to the future, anticipating the social and moral drama of the present age.

It is in the novels of the 50s that Dickens's conception of the villain achieved its culmination. The villains of the later

novels are interesting psychopathological studies like Bradley Headstone, violent types like Orlick or symbolic characters like Madame Defarge. All of them require a separate and closer analysis.

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### EWOLUCJA POSTACI NEGATYWNEJ W POWIEŚCIACH DICKENSA

Postać negatywna - „czarny charakter”, the villain - jest w centrum problematyki zła, przewijającej się przez całą twórczość Karola Dickensa. Koncepcja tej postaci przechodzi ewolucję, która osiąga kulminację w powieściach lat 50-tych: „Bleak House”, „Hard Times”, „Little Dorrit”. We wczesnej fazie twórczości the villain rysuje się dość prosto: jest to złoczyńca, morderca (Fagin, Sikes); lichwiarz i krętacz (Ralph Nickleby, Quilp); sadysta (Squeers, Murdstone). Ale stopniowo postać przewrotna staje się bardziej złożona i zakłamaną (Pecksniff, Jonas Chuzzlewit, Uriah Heep). We wczesnych powieściach zło zostaje zdemaskowane, the villain oddany w ręce sprawiedliwości, ale już w średnim okresie twórczości postać przewrotna, choć zdemaskowana, pozostaje niepokonana i dalej działa, lub może działać w społeczeństwie (Murdstone, Pecksniff, Heep). W powieściach lat 50-tych K. Dickens wprowadza typ cynika, który reprezentuje wyższe klasy społeczne i sfery rządowe i jest przez społeczeństwo popierany (Skimpole, Hart-house, Ferdynand Barnacle). Metaforyka stosowana przez Dickensa znakomicie odzwierciedla ewolucję postaci negatywnej. We wczesnej fazie brzydota zewnętrzna odpowiada brzydocie wewnętrznej. Liczne są obrazy gadów i drapieżnych zwierząt symbolizujących przewrotne charaktery (Fagin, Carker, Wholes). W powieściach lat 50-tych trzech cynicy występują jako wytworni i czarujący ludzie, bywalcy salonów. Żadna z tych postaci nie będzie zdemaskowana, ponieważ każda reprezentuje niezwyciężony system i opiera się na współdziałaniu z najwyższymi sferami i instytucjami życia publicznego. W miarę pogłębiającego się doświadczenia Dickens daje niesłychanie ostrą satyrę na współczesne społeczeństwo angielskie, humor ustępuje ironii, centralnym zagadnieniem staje się zło społeczne i moralne. Problemy, które pisarz porusza, łączą go z twórcą „Komedii ludzkiej”, jego postaci przewrotne osiągają wartość uniwersalną, a problematyka zła wiąże go z twórczością powieściopisarzy przełomu XIX i XX w.: Henry Jamesa, Josepha Conrada i Grahama Greene'a.