Little Dorrit

by Allan Ronald

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The aim of this Bookmark is to consider some of the more important themes of the novel: prisons and imprisonment, in both physical and figurative terms; the role of women in the book, the only one of Dickens's novels to be named after a female character; and, probably most important, the way in which the author creates a picture of a society predicated upon pride, selfishness and greed.

1. 'In prison and in bonds'

_Little Dorrit_ was published in book form in 1857 but monthly serialisation had started in 1855; the action of the novel, however, takes place 'thirty years ago', quite specifically in 1825. This is important with regard to the way in which Dickens so often mined his own life experiences for his works of fiction: his father, John Dickens, spent three months in the Marshalsea debtors' prison, the setting for so much of this novel, in 1824 when the writer was only twelve years old. Much of the intensely powerful sense of stifling, soul-sapping enclosure within high, spike-topped walls is rooted in Dickens's own memories of this episode from his childhood.

The first section of the novel, 'Poverty', is focused upon the actual imprisonment in the Marshalsea, situated in Southwark, of William Dorrit, father of the eponymous heroine. She, too, lives in the prison in which she had been born, the 'Daughter of the Marshalsea' just as her parent is, as longest-serving resident, 'The Father of the Marshalsea.' These titles suggest the way in which the characters are in some way defined by their imprisonment and marked, only slightly on Little Dorrit's part, with the 'taint' of the jail. Towards the end of the book, bankrupted by his rash investments in the failed financial speculations of Mr Merdle, Arthur Clennam also ends up in the Marshalsea, refusing the more pleasant amenities of the King's Bench prison for a place which is associated in his mind and heart with Little Dorrit. By refusing all offers of escaping from his debts he accepts a 'punishment' which 'balances' the acts of his mother which had ruined the Dorrits: 'I admit that I was accessory to that man's captivity...I have paid the penalty'. In fact, thanks to the kindness of the keepers of the 'lock', Mr Chivery and his son, John, he finds himself in the room once occupied by William Dorrit. And, just as he and Pancks had worked for the release of Dorrit, now Little Dorrit rescues him from a life-threatening fever, despair, and his own imprisonment. That imprisonment is both physical and metaphorical for he is trapped by his own harsh upbringing and his deep sense of guilt about the undiscovered 'crime’ his family seems to have committed in the past.

The perpetrator of that 'crime' and the person who inflicted on him both a grim childhood and the 'mill' of business he was 'grinding' in for twenty years is his mother. This religious bigot with her Old Testament beliefs in revenge and punishment is also imprisoned, confined to her room, in a wheelchair, for over a decade, 'in prison and in bonds' as she puts it. She is also psychologically imprisoned in the bitterness of her beliefs and the awareness that Arthur is not her son but the child of a singing girl her husband had married before he met her. Chaining her to the chair is the knowledge that she punished Arthur’s mother by taking away her child and bringing him up in her own beliefs, an act which led to the madness and death of the girl. That her 'imprisonment’ in her room and chair is psychosomatic is shown dramatically at the end of the novel when, under threat of blackmail, she finds the power to stagger from her house in the City to the Marshalsea to reveal the truth to Arthur. The physical nature of this journey is not necessarily a long one and Jeremy Tambling has shown
from internal evidence in the text that her house is in present day Upper Thames Street, just across London Bridge from the Marshalsea.

Imprisonment is used figuratively in many ways in the novel. It opens in Marseilles where the stage Frenchman and melodrama villain, Rigaud/Blandois, is in a dungeon awaiting trial and sentence for the alleged murder of his wife, and where Arthur Clennam, returning from twenty years in China, finds himself in quarantine along with the Meagles family. When Blandois and Cavalletto are to be fed their jailer brings his three or four year old daughter down to the dungeon imaging that other daughter of a prison, Little Dorrit, with her face 'like an angel's in the prison', just as the 'Daughter of the Marshalsea' is an angel of love, devotion and self-sacrifice to her selfish father and to her siblings. In quarantine Mr Meagles jokingly refers to 'we jailbirds' and it is there that we first meet Miss Wade, presented by Dickens as someone trapped in her own bitterness and misandry.

Mirroring the prison imagery of the opening of the first book, the second book, 'Riches' opens with the Dorrit family, released from debt and immensely wealthy, travelling on a sort of mini-Grand Tour. Crossing the Alps into Italy they spend a night in the guest house of the monastery of the Great St Bernard, the cells of which, and its confinement by snow for much of the year, present us with another prison of sorts. Once in Italy the family moves into 'society' and Little Dorrit finds herself trapped by the regime of Mrs General hired to put a 'surface 'and 'varnish' [one thinks of the Veneerings in Our Mutual Friend] on the Dorrit children. 'Society' is also a yawning trap in every sense of the words:

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

John Carey in his book The Violent Effigy finds this unconvincing and bearing 'no relation to the state which, as we know from Mr Dorrit, real prisons reduce their inmates to.' While there is some truth here it seems to be the case that Dickens does succeed in cumulatively building a picture of a society which is truly imprisoning in a psychological sense. The Kafkaesque Circumlocution Office, for example, is a paperwork prison which inflicts real suffering on those, such as Daniel Doyce, who are caught in its serpentine rolls of red tape.

2. 'I prefer to go my own way in my own manner'

Writing in Dickens and Women of the middle period novels, including Little Dorrit, Michael Slater sees the author apparently preoccupied with women as the insulted and injured of mid-Victorian England yet voicing no general condemnation of prevailing patriarchal beliefs and attitudes; rather he seems to see the social and sexual trials of his heroines as a sort of tragic nurture which serves to bring them to their full 'womanly' (or spiritually superior) potential.

Little Dorrit is 'little' only in a physical sense ['probably of not less than two and twenty she might have been passed in the street for little more than half that age']; morally she is one of the most mature figures in the novel. Amy Dorrit, to use her highly suitable given name ('beloved'), suffers insult and injury, largely at the hands of her self-centred father and her equally uncaring and selfish siblings, Fanny and Tip. At the start of the book she seems, however, to have already reached a good degree of spiritual superiority. It is she, after all, who supports the family by her work as a seamstress, a trade that was notorious in Victorian times for the harshness of the work and the poverty of its pay [one thinks of Hood’s 1843 poem, The Song of the Shirt]; it is she who has found job after job for the feckless and idle Tip, who arranged dancing lessons for Fanny, allowing her to find employment in a small, downmarket theatre; and it is she who starves herself when employed by Mrs Clennam so that she can take back to her father the victuals provided for her lunch. She is an echo of Miss Fairy in Dickens's 1855 article Gaslight Fairies who labours in pantomimes to keep her
father and dissolute brother. Under the other name she is known by, ‘Little Mother’, she is also the sole ‘carer’ for Maggy, the young woman left with a mental age of ten after an attack of brain fever. Her ‘tragic nurture’ in the novel derives from her, as she imagines, unrequited love for Arthur Clennam and the heartless condescension and selfishness of her family [with the exception, to be noticed later here, of her uncle Frederick]. The most striking example of their heedlessness comes at the end of Book the First when, puffed up with their new-found affluence, they leave the Marshalsea in their new finery and a carriage and completely forget that they have left Amy behind them.

The other women in the novel present different aspects of how Dickens tended to see women. ‘Pet’ Meagles, living up to the ‘pet-name’ imposed by her doting parents, is described as having ‘an air of timidity and dependence which was the best weakness in the world, and gave her the only crowning charm a girl so pretty and pleasant could have been without.’ Keats comes to mind here: ‘God! She is like a milk-white lamb that bleats/ For man’s protection.’ Sadly, the man who gets Pet is Gowan, another self-seeking flaneur, who marries her for her parents’ money. Alongside this ‘angel in the house’ there are more ‘comic’ representations of women: the grotesque monster Mr F’s Aunt is a deranged conduit for vicious aggression towards men, Clennam in particular, while her daughter-in-law and carer, or minder, Flora Finching, is an altogether more complex and subtly drawn figure. Based on Dickens’s experience of meeting in middle age his childhood sweetheart Maria Beadnell, she is seen at first glance as garrulous and prolix, a fatter and older version of her girlish self whose dress and manner still have much of the girlish about them. She is more than a figure of fun, however, displaying a love and concern for her legacy, Mr F’s Aunt, and for Amy Dorrit who brings out ‘her own natural kind-hearted manner.’ She displays on many occasions a ‘natural tenderness...in which there was no incoherence’, a tenderness learned from her own trials and sufferings dating from the ending of her relationship with Arthur Clennam by his mother and her father: she too is a victim. The fun she produces is provided in her often brilliantly witty observations on her own past sufferings: ‘ere we had yet fully detected the housemaid in selling the feathers out of the spare bed gout flying upwards soared with Mr F to another sphere.’

The most interesting woman in the novel is Miss Wade, someone who has not been nurtured by her trials into womanliness or spiritual superiority. Although she, or Dickens, presents her (self) as a ‘self-tormentor’, someone who has always seen gestures of affection and thoughtfulness as patronising or exploiting her, she is in many ways the only independent woman in the book. She begins her autobiographical fragment by saying ‘I have the misfortune of not being a fool’ and as Michael Slater says ‘she is given a mind, even if a diseased one.’ As such she is an object of fear to Dickens, a ‘self-contained and self-reliant’ woman who, like Joan of Arc in his Child’s History of England, is condemned for her refusal ‘to become a good man’s wife’. She is, indeed, placed further beyond the approved ‘womanly’ norm by the strong suggestion of her lesbianism.

3. ‘The death’s head apparition of the family gentility’

While Little Dorrit may not be exactly as George Bernard Shaw described it, ‘a more subversive book than Das Kapital’, its major concern is with the crippling effects of the selfishness, pride and greed of mid-Victorian society. As Dickens put it in another context his aim was ‘to shame the cruel and the canting.’ Writing to Forster about the novel he declared that ‘society, the Circumlocution Office and Mr Gowan are, of course, three parts of one idea and design.’ All three are closely linked in the novel. The Circumlocution Office is described as ‘a politico-diplomatic hocus pocus piece of machinery for the assistance of the nobs in keeping off the snobs’, and it has a tentacle, so to speak, in every pie. Its principal operatives, the Tite Barnacles, have links to the speculative financial world of Mr Merdle, the faded but arrogant gentility of Mrs Gowan [whose husband, another bureaucrat, ‘died at his post with his drawn salary in his hand’], to mother and father Meagles through their son-in-law Henry Gowan, and, through their sometime ‘town-agent’ Casby, to the oppressed
proletarians of Bleeding Heart Yard. At the evening events where they congregate we find them gaining the sycophantic attentions of the professional classes of Victorian society, presented only by the titles of their fields of work: Bar, Medicine, and Bishop. At the same time the Tite Barnacles are busy linking their network to the rising star of the financial world, Mr Merdle, a man whose name suggests Dickens’s attitude to what is today being called ‘casino capitalism’. Merdle is depicted as an uncomfortable figure, uncertain of his standing in the world to which his wealth has provided access: he sits in abstracted silence at his lavish dinner, ‘fitting a table spoon up his sleeve’, an unconscious gesture suggestive of the theft and deceit at the base of his fortune and his business. The picture he presents at the end of the novel as he heads off to cut his throat in a public baths is a powerful summary of his twisted and tormented being. Seen through the tears of vexation of his daughter-in-law, Fanny Dorrit, he appears ‘to leap, and waltz, and gyrate, as if he were possessed by several Devils.’

Others leap and gyrate in their social-climbing contortions. The Meagles, supposedly ‘practical people’, patronise the truly practical man, Daniel Doyce and are filled with sycophantic regard for the Tite Barnacles into whose circle, at a distance, they are marrying their daughter: when Clarence Barnacle, a monocle-sporting buffoon, ‘sat on Mrs Meagles’ right hand, Mr Meagles looked as gratified as if the whole family were there.’ The Meagles also patronise the maid they acquired from the Foundling Hospital for Pet. Named by the institution Harriet Beadle, she is shorn of one reminder of her origins, the name of the parish officer, and given an even more demeaning one, Tattycoram; here is a perpetual reminder of her ragged and orphaned and illegitimate origins, a completely thoughtless and uncaring act on the part of the Meagles. There is a world of difference between this carelessly spiteful renaming and the splendid names Dick Swiveller, in The Old Curiosity Shop, confers on the anonymous slavey bullied by Sally Brass, the Marchioness and Sophronia Sphynx.

In their turn the Meagles are superciliously treated by Mrs Gowan, a friend of the equally proud and selfish Mrs Merdle. So, too, are the Dorrits, in their hapless quest for ‘varnish’ and ‘surface’ condescended to by Mrs General. William Dorrit has one dread constantly on his mind, the revelation of the decades he spent in a debtor’s prison and hopes that he can efface the effects of poverty of upbringing in his children by exposing them to Italian art, ‘society’ and the social veneer applied by Mrs General. When Amy Dorrit does not respond to this ‘varnishing’ as he would wish, he and her siblings turn blame and condemnation upon her. Above all he invokes ‘the death’s head apparition of the family gentility’ as a social hallmark setting them above their time in the Marshalsea. This sense of what it is to be a ‘gentleman’ lies behind his ignorance of how his daughters earn a living; they keep it from him to avoid his distress. Another character constantly invoking his standing as a ‘gentleman’ is the swaggering murderer and blackmailer Blandois. One of the main acts of genuine gentility in the novel is displayed by Arthur Clennam when he enters the home of the poor plasterer, Plornish, in Bleeding Heart Yard: he removes his hat as he comes in, an act noticed and commented upon with gratitude by Mrs Plornish. Another incident of a similar nature is seen when Clennam is incarcerated in the Marshalsea and is treated kindly by the jailers, Chivery and his son, John. Dickens observes a ‘native delicacy in Mr Chivery—true politeness; though his exterior had very much of a turnkey about it and not the least of a gentleman.’ Indeed, here their name seems to play upon ‘chivalry’.

According to Michael Slater, ‘self-interest was, as Dickens saw it, the age’s besetting sin. Unconcern for others manifested itself in individuals, in social grouping, and in religious denominations.’ It is rampant in this novel, in too many individuals, in ‘society’ and in the harsh bigotry of Mrs Clennam’s creed. Worst of all the incidences of selfishness and pride is the shabby treatment meted out to the self-sacrificing Amy Dorrit by her father, Tip and Fanny. The rebuke delivered to them for this behaviour comes from her uncle, Frederick Dorrit, a man who has eked out a living playing the clarinet in the theatre where Fanny dances, a man derided by the schoolboys of his area as ‘Dirty Dick’, a man viewed with despairing condescension by his brother. As with Our Mutual Friend, where the insignificant and shabby-genteel Twemlow delivers judgement on the social pride of ‘society’, so too here
it is given to the least-regarded of individuals to voice moral condemnation. Driven to anger by the treatment of the devoted Amy he breaks out fiercely: ‘I protest against pride, I protest against ingratitude.’ Those words are, perhaps, a summation of one of the great important themes of this remarkable novel.

**Further Reading**

Michael Slater, *Dickens and Women* (1983)