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# The Inverted World in *The Old Curiosity Shop*

Noriko Teramoto

Charles Dickens's *The Old Curiosity Shop* was published as a serial from 1840 to 1841. It became highly popular amongst its readers as soon as Dickens began publishing his serial long novel in *Master Humphrey's Clock*. It was published in England and also in the United States. Readers in both countries became absorbed in the story as it proceeded and approached its ending. In particular, readers in the latter country were completely crazy about Nell's movements. It is said that the crowd shouted, 'Is Little Nell dead?' unanimously at the port in New York when the ship with the newest issue of the magazine arrived there.<sup>1</sup> They were shocked at and grieved over Nell's death.

In spite of the applause and devotion for this story amongst readers, it was severely criticized by a number of theorists and writers of Dickens's time. Of course, there were also many critics in his time who praised the story and Dickens. According to Ford, Daniel O'Connell 'was so upset by the death scene that he burst into tears and threw the book out the window' (Ford 56). Fielding says, 'Lord Jeffrey, the old critic of the *Edinburgh Review*, declared there was "nothing so good as Nell since Cordelia"' (Fielding 64). However, as soon as the serial story ended, critics said the story was too sentimental and Dickens himself was too crazy for Nell. For example, Ford mentions, '[a]ccording to Oscar Wilde, one must have a heart of stone to read the death of Little Nell without laughing' (Ford 55).

Although some critics say that this story is just a 'fairy-tale',

it seems to me it is more than that. Dickens made the best use of the opportunity to describe his criticism to others, especially to the people at the top of the society in his era.

What attracts me most are the inversions in this text. There are many layers of them in this text from its beginning to the end. Some characters in the story have the world upside-down in their own minds, some people have reversed relationships and also, most interestingly, the world inside *The Old Curiosity Shop* itself is inverted. Dickens used these inversions intentionally. By looking at the inversions in this text closely, we can find Dickens's criticism and hope that he expressed in this story.

'Inversion' in this text is seen quite a lot of times. The most famous inversion may be the relationship between Nell and her grandfather, which I'll refer to later in this thesis. There are more inversions in this text. For example, Quilp's body itself can be considered to be one of them. His body is small but his head gigantic. They are not well balanced. As I'll mention later, there are a lot of other inverted things in this text. Dickens must apply these inversions as a symbol. In my opinion, he succeeds in grabbing readers' hearts and expressing his criticism of society with them.

Among the inversions Dickens sets, the most interesting person who needs to be looked at carefully is Tom Scott. The fact that we should pay attention to is that he often inverts his body by himself, by standing on his head. Critics have not paid much attention to him. They usually take notice of Nell, Old Trent and Quilp. Of course, they are worth being considered. However, their ignorance of Tom seems rather strange, considering many critics' attentions to the perverted relationship between Nell and Old Trent. Their perverted relationship must be also reconsidered in connection with Tom Scott. Usually the word 'pervert' contains a sexual implication, but in this thesis, I apply it to strengthen

'invert.' Therefore, 'perversion' in this thesis means a relationship stronger than 'inversion' such as the connection between Little Nell and Old Trent.

The reason why Tom Scott should be paid attention to in examining inversions in this text is, firstly, that his actions are outstanding. His favorite handstand itself shows the inversion. Secondly, his handstand is described in a symbolic way. The story even seems to start and end with his handstand. The facts I will refer to in the first chapter will certify his importance. There are many incidents and acts concerning him that are quite different to those of other people in this novel. Without paying attention to Tom Scott, we cannot understand this text properly.

### 1. Tom Scott (Quilp's Boy)

The person who symbolizes the inversion in this text most is Tom Scott, who is Quilp's boy. Critics have never argued for his symbolic importance in this novel. The importance of his standing upside down is summed up in the fact that he does not stand on both his legs when he is introduced to the reader for the first time and when he is mentioned for the last time: he stands on his head or tumbles. By examining his two representative acts, standing upside down and tumbling, this text will tell us how important his role is to convey what Dickens wanted to say.

Tom Scott's standing on his head means that his peculiarity, that is his behavior toward Quilp is totally unique: he opposes Quilp, he is the only one who is allowed to do so, he has 'a strange kind of mutual liking' (49) for Quilp, and he sheds tears when he learns about Quilp's death, and so on. In fact, this strange relationship between them is described clearly in the text:

How born or bred, or how nourished upon blows and threats on one side, and retorts and defiances on the other, is not

to the purpose. Quilp would certainly suffer nobody to contradict him but the boy, and the boy would assuredly not have submitted to be so knocked about by anybody but Quilp, when he had the power to run away at any time he chose. (49)

It comes to our mind that his act, the handstand represents his way of behaving toward Quilp, which is inverted compared to others. Then, it can be said that since he has the inverted view inside, he likes Quilp and vice versa.

There is another interesting fact that makes Tom Scott stand out in this text. It is about his extraordinary success after Quilp's death:

Being cast upon the world by his master's death, he determined to go through it upon his head and hands, and accordingly began to tumble for his bread. . . . [A]nd afterwards tumbled with extraordinary success, and to overflowing audiences. (550)

The description of a person's success like this, especially that of people who are closely connected with Quilp, is quite rare in this text. All the people but Tom who obey, flatter and work for Quilp never succeed. For example, Sampson Brass's name '[is] erased and blotted out from the roll of attorneys.' (549) Considering this description, Tom's success seems to stand out as a curious fact.

Paying attention to Quilp and Scott's significance to each other is helpful in thinking about the change in Tom Scott's behavior, standing on his head to tumbling. When he appears in this novel, he is always with Quilp except after his death. It means that Tom is not able to show up without his master while Quilp is alive because they are described as an inseparable pair. Tom

Scott stands on his head and looks at Quilp in the inverted way, upwards. On the other hand, Quilp stands on his legs and looks at Tom in the normal way, downwards. They need to look and to be looked at in both ways, upwards and downwards. That makes them important for each other and an inseparable pair. Separated from Quilp after his death, Tom by himself needs to see the world in both ways, upwards and downwards. It makes him start tumbling. He can not do anything but tumble and see the world around him continuously in both ways. Thus, it can be said that his actions are dependent on whether he is with Quilp or not. That will give us the reason why Tom Scott does not leave Quilp and there is 'a strange kind of mutual liking' (49) between them.

Among Quilp's followers, only Tom likes to make the world upside down. Quilp's followers who stand on their legs as people usually never succeed, but Tom Scott who likes to stand on his hands succeeds. Dickens intended for this inversion to occur. Readers feel a sense of familiarity with Tom because of his actions like handstands, and regard him as a funny and humorous person and accept him. Accepted by many readers, Tom transmits Dickens's claims to readers without difficulties. Dickens entrusts Tom to convey his criticism to people around the world. Tom Scott may be described as Dickens's double who conveys his criticism.

Referring again to the quotation on Tom's success, Dickens and Tom have something in common. In this case, the words 'overflowing audiences' will certify this argument. A person who rarely speaks and stands upside down or tumbles is generally called 'a fool' and thought to be a person who attracts and draws people's attention. Considering his acts, the only word that describes Tom Scott properly is 'a fool.' His role as a fool is important in this sense as he is looked at by many people. Tom

Scott grabs people's (and readers') interest when he acts as a fool. When he stands on his head, he always cares for Quilp's eyes. When he tumbles at the end of the novel, he does so in order to show his act to the audience, so he cannot act without being concerned about reactions. Thus, he always cares for others' eyes when he stands upside down and tumbles. In regard to his constant concern for people around him, Tom Scott is like Dickens. Dickens was a writer who cared very much for his readers' reactions. While writing this story, he changed what he had originally planned to write constantly worrying about readers' reactions. According to many critics, he was originally going to write a short story about Nell. Readers expected it would be a new long novel when he published this story and 'the first number [sold] seventy thousand copies' (Fielding 61). However, when they learned it was not a long novel but just a short story, readers stopped buying and 'by the third number their decline was disastrous' (ibid 61-62). Then, Dickens changed his original plan to publish a long novel because readers wanted a continuous story. This shows his extreme care for the people around him, readers in this case. His thirst for public admiration is similar to that of Tom Scott. The next chapter will further explore the twin natures of Dickens and Scott.

As I have mentioned, inversions cover Tom Scott totally and contain the importance to be carefully looked at. His inversion, standing upside down symbolizes all the inversions in this text that I will refer to later in this thesis.

## 2. Quilp

The second interesting person who should be looked into carefully is Quilp. Komatsubara claims that Quilp is Dickens's double in the way he directs himself. According to him, 'Dickens has an extraordinary passion for performances and direction. And in

this sense, Quilp is greatly given Dickens's characteristics' (Komatsubara 109).<sup>2</sup> My interpretation of their 'directing' themselves is that they calculate people's reactions before they act. That is, whenever they act, they do it in order to be regarded as people around them expect. Considering this point, the necessity of looking into Quilp closely is strengthened because a person who is described as Dickens's double must be given a special mission to convey the writer's opinion.

Here, it is necessary to refer to Tom Scott again. As I mentioned in the previous chapter, he is like Dickens in regard to his constant concern for people around him. The same thing can be said concerning Quilp. As Komatsubara argues, Quilp is always worrying about people's reactions. As I mentioned in the previous chapter, Tom Scott and Quilp are an inseparable pair and both mind others. Therefore, it can be said that both of them are endowed with many of Dickens's characteristics. Although Komatsubara applies the expression 'Dickens's double' only to Quilp, the expression can be applied to Tom Scott also. In other words, they are both Dickens's other selves in respect of directing themselves. In this sense, the reasons why Tom Scott only is allowed to be with Quilp and Tom Scott and Quilp have 'a strange kind of mutual liking' (49) each other will be clear. It's because Tom and Quilp, are derived from the same origin, Dickens. This fact certifies the argument that Tom and Quilp are described as an inseparable pair in the last chapter. Quilp has a lot of inversions and this makes it important to look into him carefully.

His way of eating seems dreadful to us:

[H]e ate hard eggs, shell and all, devoured gigantic prawns with the heads and tails on, chewed tobacco and water-cresses at the same time and with extraordinary greediness, drank boiling tea without winking, bit

his fork and spoon will they bent again, and in short performed so many horrifying and uncommon acts that the women [Mrs Quilp and Mrs Jiniwin] were nearly frightened out of their wits, and began to doubt if he were really a human creature. (47)

As I read this quotation, I have doubt whether he is really a human or not. Dickens often describes him as 'a dwarf', which is not an ordinary human being, to emphasize his uncommonness. Also, he often uses 'doglike' to describe him. For example, his smile is 'the old doglike' (46) one and has 'a horribly grotesque and distorted face with the tongue lolling out' (47). The person, whom people imagine with those characteristics, is terribly fearful. He does not seem to be a human being but a beast. If he is not a human but a beast, it means that a beast is a leader of human beings and controls them in this story. Usually, humans keep and regulate animals. Therefore, if he is a beast, it means that the world around him is inverted by Dickens. The world in *The Old Curiosity Shop* is under Quilp's control, the beast's regulation. It clearly shows the reversible world.

It makes me associate the inversion concerning Quilp with some pictures in *The Reversible World: Symbolic Inversion in Art and Society*.<sup>3</sup> There are some pictures that show reversed relationships between animals and human beings such as fish on land and in trees, a horse driving a man, an ass washing its master's head, and a parrot teaching a caged man to talk. These examples tell us that the 'inverted world' is not only available to refer to the relation like a visible inversion of an object, such as a building built upside down and a person standing on one's head, but also to the vertical relationships, such as the connection between King and his servants or a driver, a chaise and its horse. The vertical relationship like the latter connection is clear in our mind. In some of the pictures about the inverted

relationships in the book, animals lead and control human beings: a sheep shearing its shepherd, a donkey driving its laden master, and an ox driving men at plough. Since Quilp is not a human but a beast, it can be said that the association between Quilp and people around him is turned upside down. Here we can see another symbolic inversion. This perverted vertical relationship dominates this story from its start to the end as one of the layers of inversion.

The fact that Quilp, an animal or even a beast, stands at the top of the hierarchic society in this text is one of the most symbolic inversions in this story. He sometimes threatens Tom Scott and Kit with 'a thick stick' (54) in his hand. This picture makes me think once more of the drawings in *The Reversible World*. There are a few illustrations that show a donkey with a whip in its hand driving a chaise which some young ladies are leading. These two pictures seem to be the same in this sense that an animal threatens people with a kind of weapon in their hands and drives them. These people are all terribly afraid of the beasts and can not help obeying them. The image those two have in common certifies the inverted world in this text.

Then, we have some doubt if there are clear pictures that illustrate Quilp's body upside down in the text. There is a description which shows his body completely upside down in front of Kit's mother:

[H]e derived in the course of the journey much cheerfulness of spirit, inasmuch as her solitary condition enabled him to terrify her with many extraordinary annoyances; such as hanging over the side of the coach at the risk of his life, and staring in with his great goggle eyes, which seemed in hers the more horrible from his face being upside down; . . . getting nimbly down . . . and thrusting his head in at the window with a dismal squint. (367)

Here he makes his body upside down just like Tom Scott. Considering his big head and small body, the body seems to suit the law of gravitation for the first time when he turned his body upside down. However, when he makes his body follow the terrestrial gravitation, the figure looks strange and even grotesque enough to make a person want to run away. A different law, or even a totally opposite law, seems to work upon Quilp. In other words, he has an original inverted law of gravitation inside.

As I've said, there are many inversions concerning only Quilp. Referring again to Komatsubara, Dickens invented Quilp as his double and directed him. It leads us to think that he uses Quilp as a tool to convey what he himself wanted to say: the person who stands at the top of the society himself has inversion inside and the society around him is inverted by him. It does not mean that the inverted world is inverted again and becomes in order but that the two inversions make double layers, so the inversion is strengthened. That is, the person who has the inversion inside at the top of the inverted world is doubly inverted. Since Quilp is inverted by nature and he is at the top of the inverted hierarchic world inside *The Old Curiosity Shop*, his inverted nature is stronger than that of other people in the text.

### 3. Nell and Old Trent

As I have discussed before, the most famous perverted relationship in *The Old Curiosity Shop* is the one between Little Nell and Old Trent. As many critics have pointed out, the relations between the two are totally perverted. Old Trent, who should care and protect Nell, is not reliable enough, so Nell must look after herself and even her grandfather instead. This perversion is regarded as one of the layers covering in this text.

Their perverted relationship as an unreliable grandfather and a young guide is described directly in the morning when he and

Nell decide to start off being beggars:

They got the door open without noise, and passing into the street, stood still.

'Which way?' said the child.

The old man looked irresolutely and helplessly, first at her, then to the right and left, then at her again, and shook his head. It was plain that she was thenceforth his guide and leader. The child felt it, but had no doubts or misgiving, and putting her hand in his, led him gently away. (103)

It is Old Trent who decides to steal away on that morning. However, when the time he needs to decide where to go comes, he can not do anything but shake his head. This perversion has the effect of drawing readers' attention. However, this relationship is not presented for the first time in the morning they steal away. Old Trent himself notices this at the very beginning of this story. When he talks with the narrator of this story in the first chapter, he says, 'It is true that in many respects I am the child, and she the grown person' (18). This statement is the first hint for readers to understand the inverted world in this story.

The responsibility to make decisions and lead others to the proper way is usually given to adults instead of children. Considering this, Nell plays the role of an adult. As for Old Trent, he appears childish when he makes sure if she has no more money with her in the next morning after he has robbed her. He says, 'But is there no more, Nell?' and 'no more anywhere? Was it all taken — every farthing of it — was there nothing left?' (237). He looks like a child who wants more money even though he has been given some already.

In addition to the matter concerning money, Nell has to deal with matters concerning her childish grandfather. His complaint is this:

'Why did you bring me here?' returned the old man fiercely.  
'I cannot bear these close eternal streets. We came from a quiet part. Why did you force me to leave it?' (ibid)

Here we remember who decided to steal away for the first time — Old Trent. He complains to her in spite of the fact running out of the house was his suggestion. As Matsumura has pointed out, Old Trent is one of those parents who are not able to accept his child's good will as it is.<sup>4</sup>

Taking a look at Old Trent's actions after Nell's death, we can see one of her inversions. He cannot accept her death or believe she is not with him:

And thenceforth, every day, and all day long, he waited at her grave for her. How many pictures of new journeys over pleasant country, of resting-places under the free broad sky, of rambles in the fields and woods, and paths not often trod — how many tones of that one well-remembered voice — how many glimpses of the form, the flattering dress, the hair that waved so gaily in the wind — how many visions of what had been, and what he hoped was yet to be — rose up before him, in the old, dull, silent church! (546)

It means that Nell is still his hope to live even after she is dead. Saying 'She will come to-morrow!' (ibid), waiting for her to come is his only purpose to live, which is totally impossible. This confusion and unreasonable hope by him describes one of the inversions concerning Little Nell's nature. The person who cannot do anything any more, Nell, is still given the role of guiding a person. Nell is described as if she were alive when she is dead. The nature of her is inverted.

As I have shown above, there are many perversions about Nell and Old Trent. Many critics have argued this perversion is just

the same as the relationship between Dickens and his father, which may be true. However, the connection between Nell and her grandfather has more meaning than just the revelation of his experiences. These are Dickens's devices to make readers feel uneasy as they proceed reading this story. The uneasiness makes them read on and on, as Dickens expected them to do.

#### 4. Others

More inversions can be seen in the text. First, paying attention to Kit will be necessary. What makes him stand out more is the connection with Quilp. The relation between the two is quite strange in this text. Quilp is unable to bear the sight of Kit and always wants to cheat him. Quilp does not like others (except for Tom Scott) yet usually he is not attached to them, for when he threatens them, they are too afraid to oppose him and he easily controls them. However, Kit (and Tom also) is not a timid person, which irritates Quilp. He insists on deceiving Kit throughout the story. Because he is the only person to whom Quilp is attached, the relationship between the two stands out. The way he is delighted when Kit is placed in jail is considered to be crazy. He is 'certainly entertaining himself with vocal exercise' that is 'rather a kind of chant than a song' (461). Every time he reached the end of the chant, he bursts into 'a shriek of laughter' (462) and begins chanting again. The way he shows his violence against a huge figure which he regards as Kit can also be said to be full of insanity. This again shows Quilp's peculiarity, which I mentioned before. Also, it certifies Kit's uniqueness and importance.

The next inversion is about Mr Sampson Brass and Miss Sally Brass. Referring again to the book *The Reversible World*, it shows some examples about the perversion between a male and a female: a hen sitting on a cock, women causing war, and a

husband spinning and a wife being armed.<sup>5</sup> These perverted hierarchies can be applied to Mr and Miss Brass. The difference between the two is clearly described in their appearances. Despite the fact that Mr Brass is the owner of his company, his face or figure is not described. On the contrary, his sister Sally attracts readers' attention. There are concrete descriptions of her complexion which is 'rather a dirty-sallow'; her voice which is 'deep and rich in quality, and, once heard, not easily forgotten'; her usual dress which is 'a green gown, in colour not unlike the curtain of the office window' and has 'a peculiarly large and massive button' (251); and her way of working which is 'like a steam engine' (257). Dickens's paying attention to Sally is incomparable with Sammy. It gives us a specific image of Sally and makes Sally superior to Sammy.

Their inverted power relationship is clearly described when they are first introduced to readers. When Miss Brass says, 'The business wouldn't go on very long, I expect, without me', and 'Don't you be a fool and provoke me, Sammy, but mind what you're doing, and do it' (253), Mr Brass cannot do anything but obey her. In fact, he is 'at heart in great fear of his sister' (*ibid*). Dick's word may conclude their connection: 'Bless you, he'd never do anything without her' (434). They seem to know their vertical status towards each other and accept it. It means they accept the inversion without any doubt. In other words, the inversion naturally functions in this text.

When we take a look at Marchioness, we can find some inversions as well. She does not have a name, and the reader does not discover her origin or her age. She is apparently of low social standing. However, the name Dick, who feels much sympathy for her and becomes friends with her by playing cards, gives to her is 'Marchioness', which is usually for a person who is higher in society.<sup>6</sup> In other words, the meaning her name

delivers is opposite to her situation.

These inversions I argued in this chapter are described as layers that cover the whole story. They emphasize the importance of them in this text. At the same time, they strengthen my arguments in the last three chapters.

## Conclusion

As I have argued throughout this thesis, there are many inversions in *The Old Curiosity Shop*. They cover the whole story forming many layers and that certifies their importance. Dickens uses inversions as a tool to make readers continue reading. For example, he uses Tom Scott's standing upside down in order to make readers feel a sense of familiarity, Quilp's unbalanced body to make them feel uneasiness, the perversion between Nell and Old Trent to make them worry about their future, and the others to strengthen the inverted world inside the story. Thus, every one of them has a different role to grudge his readers' minds.

Of course, these inversions are also described in order to criticize people who were at the top of society in Dickens's era. Inversions concerning Quilp and Mr and Miss Brass are the symbolic ones. They represent Dickens's opinions that people at the top of the society have an obligation to improve society, but they do nothing. He illustrates inabilities and the wickedness of them clearly by those descriptions. Furthermore, he criticizes them by describing Quilp's failures and Mr and Miss Brass's loss of their positions. Also, the perversion between Nell and Old Trent shows Dickens's criticism. His advocacy is that a parent is unable to protect his child and, what is worse, he leads the child to misery. This criticism includes his disapproval of his father. Dickens worked at a factory in his childhood for a few weeks because of his father's inability to control his money spending habits. He was so shocked by this experience and it made him

have think that his father was responsible for caring for his family but was unable to do so.<sup>7</sup> The perverted relationship between Nell and his grandfather conveys his denial of the adults and hope for the children in society.

Among those inversions in *The Old Curiosity Shop*, the most important and symbolic one is Tom Scott's standing on his head and tumbling. His inversion and his extraordinary success are described in a symbolic way. In my point of view, he symbolizes the people at the bottom of the hierarchy in the society of Dickens's time. His standing upside down is a very hard act to do. It symbolizes poor people who are forced to live with terrible surroundings. Tom Scott does not say many words and it means that people can not speak their feelings freely in the society of Dickens's time. They were oppressed and treated very severely. Although they wanted to run away, they did not have any choice but to obey people in the upper class. Dickens himself was one of them who was unable to do anything but obey the law and was at the mercy of his father and people in the upper class. He knew what oppressed people would think and wanted to brighten them up. The direct description that Tom Scott is the only person who succeeds at last is illustrated as the most striking fact to cheer them up. Thus, Dickens uses many inversions in *The Old Curiosity Shop* to express his criticism and hope at the same time.

## NOTES

1. For example, Komatsubara mentions this. I explained about this argument in my words consulting his opinion.
2. Komatsubara describes his affection toward Quilp in his book. He states 'he is fed up with Nell but he never feels bored with Quilp.' He also says, 'among all the characters in *The Old Curiosity Shop*, the most energetic person is Quilp' (Komatsubara 121).

3. There are many pictures that show inverted relationships in *The Reversible World*. There are drawings concerning the vertical relationships not only about human beings and beasts, but also the one between beasts. See pp. 44-47 for more detailed information.
4. Matsumura discusses the parent figure in *Victoria-chou no Bungaku to Kaiga* [Literature and Art in Victorian Period]. On stating the figure, he pays attention to *Dombey and Son*. He describes a typical father in Dickens's novels as 'a self-centered and irresponsible father who has no ability to accept any goodwill, zeal and sincerity from his son' (Matsumura 13).
5. See pp. 44-47 in *The Reversible World*.
6. Dick Swiveller gives the servant her name when they start a card game. After teaching her the rules, he says, 'To make it seem more real and pleasant, I shall call you the Marchioness, do you hear?' and she nods (432). Thus, the servant-girl who had no name was given her name. In the end of this novel, she gets another legal name, Sophronia, but Dick keeps calling her the Marchioness 'from first to last' (553).
7. It is said that his father visited Dickens and bothered him for some money many times after he had been recognized by the public as a great writer. Many critics argue that the model of Old Trent is no doubt Dickens's father, John Dickens.

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