Marshalsea Prison and the World of Change: A Study of Dicken's *Little Dorrit*

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Little Dorrit, first published in monthly parts from 1855 to 1857, shows the characteristic of Dickens's latter works in its "prevalent air of gloom."[1] Some regard it as "gloomier than *Bleak House,*"[2] which opens up with a forcible description of the fog-permeated city. *Little Dorrit* is even called "Dickens's darkest novel,"[3] partly because it chooses the Marshalsea as one of its central places of action. The issue of prison or imprisonment recurs in the author's previous novels in various ways and degrees, but it is the first, and the last, time that the issue is focused on throughout the whole work. While "imprisonment" in this novel is "a profound symbol of the universal condition of life,"[4] "the consciousness of living in the world of change," which Humphry House points out in relation to *Dombey and Son,*[5] is here again no less significant a matter.

The changing world in the 19th century, in fact, is another recurrent theme seen throughout the author's career. Sir Leicester Dedlock, one of the characters in *Bleak House,* calls the change, "the confusion into which the present age has fallen."[6] This baronet, who strongly resents his house-keeper's son, an ironmaster, going into Parliament, laments "the whole framework of society ... receiving tremendous cracks in consequence of people ... getting out of ... the first station in which they happen to find themselves."[7] While the chief concern of this

upper-class gentleman is centered around people's social positions, it seems quite intriguing to treat the issue of the changing world from a wider point of view.

This essay, therefore, will discuss *Little Dorrit* as a novel written "at a time when the traditional structures of home and society were undergoing unprecedented changes," that is, "the end of feudalism" and of patriarch (there appear in the novel the Father of the Marshalsea and even The Last of the Patriarchs).[8] Seeing that the "traditional structures," without doubt, regulated the actions and positions of people, as was manifest in Sir Leicester's comments, we will especially focus our attention on the roles or functions of people and, sometimes, of objects. First, we will pursue the instances of the reversal or exchange of positions in relation to both human and non-human entities, which occur frequently as the story proceeds. And then, the issue of unsuitable or unexpected roles will be treated as variations on the aforesaid theme. It will, in the end, develop into a discussion of the significant problem of discrepancy between surface and reality. By discussing these problems, we will try reconsidering the significance of the Marshalsea in *Little Dorrit* .

I

Little Dorrit is divided into two books, while *Hard Times* and *A Tale of Two Cities*, which were published severally before and after *Little Dorrit* consist of three books. The titles of the two books of *Little Dorrit*, "Poverty" and "Riches," primarily stand for the situation of the Dorrit family. In Book I, we are told that William Dorrit has been in the Marshalsea for such a long time as to acquire

the title of "the Father of the Marshalsea" after the death of the turnkey, the oldest inhabitant of the prison. At the end of the first book, however, this poor debtor inherits a great sum of money from his relative and becomes very wealthy.

As the central stage of the novel is set in the Marshalsea, it is natural that the author should dwell upon the issue of money.[9] In fact, the Dorrits are not the only people who experience drastic changes of financial situation. Mr. Merdle, for instance, is first introduced as being "immensely rich; a man of prodigious enterprise; a Midas without the ears," who has "turned all he touched to gold."[10] When the fate of the Dorrits takes the favorable turn, Fanny Dorrit, the eldest daughter of the family, marries Mr.Merdle's son-in-law, and Mr.Dorrit enjoys association with the famous rich man. He even has a chance to consult with him about his own monetary affairs and to ask for assistance. On the other hand, the incarnation of wealth, in the end, turns out to be nothing but "the greatest Forger and the greatest Thief," (p.777) and is driven into suicide.

The fall of this influencial man, of course, cannot be confined to a mere personal problem. Arthur Clennam, by investing in Mr. Merdle's enterprise, loses all the money and causes a great loss for his company, Doyce and Clennam. Pancks, who recommended the investment to his friend, also suffers a great loss, while he has "an inclination to get money." (p.202) Though Arthur tries to take responsibility for the folly by himself, his effort falls short; the man who once offered "his testimonial to the Father of the Marshalsea" (p.125) or made cash advances at the Father's request, and who also helped Amy's brother out of debt is, in turn, offered by Amy Dorrit

to use her money to repay *his* debt. The girl, for whom Arthur's room once appeared to be "a spacious one", "and grandly furnished," (p.208) has become far wealthier than he by now.

The financial situation of the two is inverted so completely that Arthur has to be confined in the prison, and after the family has been set free, he has to stay in the room where the Dorrits used to be. This has been foreshadowed by the fact that Arthur gets "accidentally locked in on the first night of his appearance" (p.301) and has to spend a night in the prison, while Amy once gets "shut out" (p.219) from the place and waits outside until morning, as the gates are closed at night.

This reversal of their positions is not limited to their financial affairs. Between the two, there has been "ties of innocent reliance on one hand, and affectionate protection on the other" (p.231). Arthur, in other words, feels comfortable about "patronising" (p.185) this little lady. When William Dorrit is still in the prison, Arthur tries hard "to ameliorate his unhappy condition," (p.153) and to "be serviceable to the poor child." (p.185) After the rise of the family, however, Arthur does not need to take the trouble to visit the Circumlocution Office for their sake. Amy, on the contrary, takes care of and works for the ruined Arthur in his sickroom in the Marshalsea. Moreover, the relationship between the two is concerned with some love problems, and many other characters are involved in the matter. The interchange of positions or roles takes place here again in variety of ways, sometimes directly and sometimes indirectly.

What we first see in relation to love is that Arthur Clennam is attracted by Minnie Meagles, who is about half his age. As he is a retiring man, he decides, on his first visit to the Meagles', that he

will "*not* allow himself to fall in love with Pet." (p.239) It is suggested, nevertheless, that he suffers to witness the hightened color in the face and fluttered manner Pet (or Minnie) shows before Henry Gowan. Arthur tries to be generous and unprejudiced about this young artist and troubles himself to support this young couple. He, for one thing, corrects the misconception of Henry's mother, who believes that the whole Meagles family wants to secure her son. On the part of Mr. Meagles, the poor father is not at all happy about the somehow amaturish painter of his daughter's choice. Arthur Clennam, this time, has to play the role of a confidante, and is asked by Minnie herself to reconcile her father to Henry Gowan.

It is interesting to notice that just after Arthur realizes his defeat by the appearance of the young painter, another man has to shed tears for an unrequited love; John Chivery, son of the turnkey at the Marshalsea, is spurned by Amy Dorrit. John is a character, "absurd enough upon the surface," but "highly respectable at bottom." (p.798) This comical young man, with his own lips, has to inform Arthur of the fact that Amy has been in love with this senior man. As Arthur has never tried to understand Little Dorrit's feeling, though he has dimly fancied that there might be "some one in the hopeless unattainable distance," (p.309) he seems to Young John to be feigning ignorance, and hurts the spurned lover all the more.

Amy Dorrit, who troubles John's mind, also experiences the pain of one-sided love. The man she loves, Arthur, treats her as "his dear child," "dwelling upon the difference in their respective ages." (p.798) She is tormented to hear Arthur's one-time betrothed Flora give a detailed account of their past when Amy visits her as an employed seamstress. Moreover, Arthur even confides to her that he fancied he

loved some one she does not know. He is far from seeing "the dagger in his hand, and the cruel wounds it struck in the faithful bleeding breast of his Little Dorrit." (p.433) The cruel man, at the same time, askes her if she has an interest in some one, to which she cannot but answer in the negative. When the Dorrits become free and go on a travel abroad, Amy is charged by Arthur to hand a letter to Minnie and to inform him if the lady is doing well. "His child," of course, discharges the task faithfully.

So far, we have seen how the characters' positions change in relation to the issue of love, too: they distress and are distressed; they wound and get wounded. Similar complicated change of positions and roles can be found also in some other respects.

The reversal of the superior and the inferior, the powerful and the helpless takes place, for example, between those who are introduced at the very beginning of the novel. One of the two prisoners in Marsailles, "proud" Rigaud, declares that he "can't submit" and that he "must govern." (p.49) The other, John Cavalletto, calls the sinister man "'my master'" (p.173) even when they happen to meet again outside the prison, and obeys his orders. Afraid of the rascal, however, this Italian runs away from "his master" during the night. Although John is haunted by the fear of seeing the man again, he is asked by Arthur, his benefactor, to find Rigaud; here a man who wants to escape must act as a pursuer. These two prisoners are not really a master and a servant, but we find there are some other servants who revolt against their masters.

One of the servants, Tattycoram was brought home from the Foundling Hospital by the Meagles and serves as a little maid of Minnie. Although she is very thankful for the family, she sometimes

loses her temper to think that she has to look after the girl a few years older than herself. The poor orphan, one day, entirely loses her control and bursts out. With the help of an incarnation of a rebellious soul, Miss. Wade, the girl refuses to go back to the family saying that she has "thrown them off." (p.724) Another servant, Mr. Pancks works as a collector of rent on behalf of his "proprietor," (p.322) Mr. Casby. The collector first performs his duty faithfully and squeezes the poor tenants as is ordered by his master. Just like the little maid Tattycoram, however, he finally becomes impatient of his proprietor, as he has "taken all the drudgery and all the dirt of the business as his share" while Mr. Casby has "taken all the profits ... as *his* share." (p.865) Mr. Pancks discloses the true nature of Casby's benevolence before the public, snips off the locks of his master and flees to hide himself.

The master-servant relationship can be said to exist between a man and a wife, too. Mr. Flintwinch, for example, is called "Affery's liege lord." (p.226) His shuffling footsteps alone can cause his wife "to retreat to the other end of the room." (p.76) In order to help Arthur, however, this frightened woman bravely cries out: "If that's turning against you, yes, I turn against both of you two clever ones." (p.835) As the "two clever ones" are her husband and her employer Mrs. Clennam, Affery's declaration is a rebellion both as a wife and a servant. Curiously enough, this alteration of an oppressed to an exalted is accompanied by a radical reversal of totally different nature; what Affery has believed to be her dream turns out to be reality. Because of the ignorance of her husband's secret deeds, the old servant understands that the mysterious scenes she has witnessed appeared in her sleep. On the contrary, with the change of her attitude

and position, what has been confined in the background as unreal is brought forth and attains to the place of fact.

People can be oppressed not only by their superiors but by institution. Daniel Doyce, a smith and engineer, has been treated as "a public offender" by the Circumlocution Office, despite the fact that he turned his ingenuity whole-heartedly for his country's service. He has been ignored by the Government for so long a time that he finally gives up his success in his own country and goes abroad. The inventor is recognized his ability there and retaliates, though indirectly, the injustice inflicted upon him by the Government. Incidentally, when the ingenious man has decided to abandon his old design, his partner Arthur takes over the task and resumes "the long and hopeless labour of striving to make way with the Circumlocution Office." (p.571) This faithful companion, in turn, becomes a frustrated man; moreover, he is found in debtor's prison, when Daniel returns a successful man from abroad.

II

While people's stations and roles can shift from one to another, there are those who occupy unsuitable positions from the beginning, or whose behaviour is unbecoming to their stations. Before discussing this matter, however, we might briefly glance how the unexpected roles are alotted not only to human beings. Inanimate objects are described, for example, as if they had lives:

> Everything in Marseilles, and about Marseilles, had stared at the fervid sky, and been stared at in return, until a staring habit had become universal there. Strangers were stared out

> of countenance by staring white houses, staring white walls, staring white streets, staring tracts of arid road, staring hills from which verdure was burnt away.... Everything that lived or grew, was oppressed by the glare. (pp.39-40)

This passage forcibly expresses the extreme heat in August, but, at the same time, it suggests the inverted relationship between living creatures and lifeless objects. This kind of inversion is not the phenomenon particular to this foreign city. In London, similarly, there are "houses frowning... on the streets," (p.68) and a "picture... with the eyes intently looking at his son." (p.95)

Among the houses in the City, there is one especially noteworthy ——Mrs. Clennam's residence. The old house which, "M[m]any years ago, ... had it in its mind to slide down sideways" is now "leaning on some half-dozen gigantic crouches." (p.71) This old house, of course, is expected to be a home for the Clennams. Arthur, however, finds no attraction in "the blank and dreary" house, (p.96) and prefers staying in a coffee-house to remaining with his mother, although he has lately returned from abroad after fifteen years' absence. His mother, on the other hand, has kept "shut up" (p.74) in one of the rooms and has made it the place of confinement. The only compensation for her long confinement within the narrow limits is that she is "shut up from the knowledge of some things that" she "may prefer to avoid knowing." (p.226) Needless to say, it is too negative a relief compared with what she has sacrificed, and is far from the comfort and joy "home" is expected to offer.

Contrary to the Clennams, for whom their house is not at all like home, the Dorrits have found their home in the Marshalsea. The youngest child Amy, born in the prison, has particularly "become so

used to the prison," and declares that "it is home" and that her "place is there." (p.308) Her father, a debtor, also has found refuge in the place:

> Crushed at first by his imprisonment, he had soon found a dull relief in it. He was under lock and key; but the lock and key that kept him in, kept numbers of his troubles out. (p.103)

As the Marshalsea is a special prison where the prisoners can bring their families to live with them, its nature as "home" is emphasized all the more.

Moreover, the most important department under Government is also one of the institutions which play some unexpected roles. For "W[w]hatever was required to be done, the Circumlocution Office was beforehand with all the pubic departments in the art of perceiving —HOW NOT TO DO IT." (p.145) It is just like the Chancery in *Bleak House*, another notorious institution, which victimises the suitors by its prolonged procedure. The Office is not exactly "public," either, because "a very high family," the Barnacles, are "dispersed all over the public offices," and hold "all sorts of public places." (p.148) They are a noteworthy example of those who are incongruous to the places they occupy, when the Office is expected to perform its duty.

The issue of the Barnacles and their behaviour leads us to return to the relationship between people and their unsuitable roles. We find another rather comic example in the Chief Butler at the Merdles'. "That great man" thinks that as "nations are made to be taxed, so families are made to be butlered." (p.671) There seems to be a reversal of master-servant relationship in this house, and the servant conducts himself as if he were superior to his employer. Even

celebrated Mr. Merdle is "E[e]xtinguished by this great creature" once he returns from the outside, and cannot but retire to his own room.

Yet another more conspicuous instance of the issue of unbecoming positions is represented in the Dorrits. A member of the family Amy Dorrit, as is shown in the title of the novel, is called "Little Dorrit." As it is, she is a woman "of not less than two-and-twenty":

> her diminutive figure, small features, and slight spare dress, gave her the appearance of being much younger than she was ... Not that her face was very youthful, for in truth there was more consideration and care in it than naturally belonged to her utmost years. (p.93)

Little Dorrit is a curious "composite figure of the grown-up child,"[11] both physically and mentally, for "W[w]orldly wise in hard and poor necessities," she is "innocent in all things else." (p.118)

The singularity of the girl is directly connected with the role she has played in the family. Her mother dies when she is only eight, and since then, "the protection" that her eyes have shown towards her father becomes "embodied in action." (p.111) It is the beginning of the "reversal of the places of parent and child."[12] Not only is the relationship with her father inverted, but she somehow takes care of her brother and sister, becoming "the head of the fallen family" (p.112) though she is the youngest of all. Little Dorrit, in addition, is called "little mother" by mentally retarded Maggie, who is also senior to her.

Amy's father, while totally dependent on his youngest daughter, behaves towards the collegians "with a kind of bowed-down beneficience" and talks to them "paternally" as the Father of the Marshalsea (pp.105-6). His "patronage" and "magnanimous protec-

tion" seem to reach their heights on the occasion of Old Nandy's visit; the Father remarks, in a "relishing manner," on the "infirmities and failings" of the old pensioner, who is now in a workhouse but is actually a little younger than the Father (pp.423-4). The same kind of "patronage" is shown before Frederick Dorrit, Willam's brother. The two brothers act as if their positions were inverted: "Frederick the free, was so humbled, bowed, withered, and faded; William the bond, was so courtly, condescending,and benevolently conscious of a position." (p.264) The patronising and superior manner assumed by Mr. Dorrit is closely related to the issue of pretence, that is, surface and reality.

Ⅲ

The discrepancy between surface and reality is frequently mentioned in relation to the Dorrits, most evidently in the form of "family fictions." First of all, as for the burden laid on the youngest member of the family, the Father is not the only person that tries to disregard it: "the family fiction" that Amy is "a plain domestic little creature"is "the family assertion of itself against her services. Not to make too much of them." (pp.279-80) "The family fiction," moreover, is not limited to this respect. What the family is most concerned about, without doubt, is "the miserably ragged old fiction of the family gentility." (p.257)

As the Father of the Marshalsea, Mr. Dorrit has come to take an extreme pride in the title, and tries to perform what he believes is becoming to that title. This, for one thing, brings about the "wonderful air of benignity and patronage" (p.122) we have witnessed. The

old man wants to regard himself not as a parasistic, incompetent debtor in prison, but as a man of high position. When the Father receives money from those who come to the prison, he likes to call it "Testimonial" (p.123) offered to him, although it is himself who actually presses people for the money. Besides, "the family gentility" is assured by the Chiveries, that is, the turnkey of the prison, his wife and son; the son, who loves Amy, regards the Dorrits "with reverence" and the parents support the son's union with the girl of "family." (pp.256-7)

While making much of "his forlorn gentility," (p.113) Mr. Dorrit has to feign ignorance of his daughters' earning bread. Even Amy herself takes part in "preserving the genteel fiction" and pretends not to be working outside. Mr. Dorrit never gives intimation "that he was privy to the fact that they did something for a livelihood" (p.470) before he is informed that he will be finally set free. His "gentility" is exaggerated in much more villainous prisoner Rigaud, who declares, "A gentleman I am! And a gentleman I'll live, and a gentleman I'll die! It's my intent to be a gentleman." (p.47) The representation of this figure as one of the "people ... who have no good in them" (p.169) suggests the grossness of the "gentility" of his parallel, William Dorrit.

The habit of pretence goes on, or is even intensified after Mr. Dorrit goes out of prison. He continues to make every effort to behave as a member "in an exalted position." (p.516) His tendency to keep up appearances, however, is now focused on obliterating his past, the days he spent in the prison. Amy, though she has co-operated in supporting "the family fiction," feels sorry to find in him "the well-known shadow of the Marshalsea wall," "the old sad shadow" in

"a new shape." (p.530) Her brother and sister, however, adapt themselves to the new surroundings easily. Here, in additon, the incarnation of the family disposition, Mrs. General, is introduced as a companion to the daughters. Her "province to varnish" and "assistance in, the formation of a surface" (pp.503 & 530) support and increase the peculiar tendency in Mr. Dorrit. Mrs. General's refusal to be employed in the capacity of a governess is one of the clear proofs of her particularity about her position, for governess was not regarded, at that time, as a job suitable for a "lady." This "gentility" in the widow corresponds with that of the Dorrits.

The Dorrits come to be united with the high society because Fanny marries Edmund Sparkler, whose mother is now wife of Mr. Merdle, a millionair. Mrs. Merdle is another instance of those who are "not in a natural state," because, as she says, "Society suppresses... and dominates" them (p.286). She is described as, "not young and fresh from the hand of Nature, but... from the hand of her maid." (p.285) When her friend Mrs. Gowan laments the matrimony between her son and Minnie Meagles, "nursing the pretence" that it is a most unfortunate business (p.440), this lady of Society quickly perceives "the exact nature of the fiction to be nursed", and puts "her required contribution of gloss upon it." (p.444) There is yet another person who enjoys acting in a play; Flora, who used to be Arthur's fiancée, behaves "with a caricature of her girlish manner," and rattles away her nonsense "in the drama under representation," while she is no longer young or like a lily (p.192). Her father, a merciless squeezer, too, is a man of fiction, whose "smooth face" "seemed[s] to be delivering sentiments of rare wisdom and virtue" and whose "physiognomical expression seemed[s] to teem with benignity."

(p.188)

Thus many characters and objects in the novel reveal, in one way or another, split between their interior and exterior. The split can range from the discord between what the entities are originally supposed to be and how they actually function to the disparity between their true colors and the masks they put on. What are hidden, however, will be disclosed in variety of ways, suggesting that those entities are endowed with double-nature. The most violent revelation in the novel may be the case of Mrs. Clennam, who has suppressed her passion and the secret of the past by imprisoning herself in her old house. After disclosing the secret, she bursts outside for the first time after years of confinement. When she returns, her house has literally collapsed, as if to deny her the surface she has feigned. She never recovers from the shock, and the retirement from the world, which used to be her choice, is now pressed upon her: "the rigid silence she had so long held was evermore enforced upon her, and ... she lived and died a statue." (p.863)

As we have seen so far, *Little Dorrit* is filled with the sense of instability in the roles and positions of both human and non-human entities. The possibility of reversal threatens the "traditional structures," denying the unity and order; the disclosure of hidden side suggests the duality people and objects can possess. These may be called the instances of the "disturbing ambivalence" in the novel at the age of "polarization between the need for change and the comfort of habit."[13] The matters treated in this respect vary from financial affairs, parent-child relationship, master-servant relations, to social positions. To return to the Marshalsea as the central place of action,

we find it a most appropriate choice, for it is not only a symbol of "imprisonment," together with Circumlocution Office, Mrs. Clennam's house or Society, but is the totality of all the issues mentioned above. The prison is, in addition, inseparable from the notion of inside and outside, internal and external, which was also dwelt upon in the preceding part of this essay.

We must remember, lastly, that the Marshalsea was no longer used as a debtors' prison when this novel was published: the place, which was a curious mixture of prison and home, and which had given serious trauma to young Dickens by imprisoning his father, had lost its function in 1842. Even the imprisonment for debt was abolished in 1869. In the preface to the 1857 edition, the author, who revisited the place only after finishing this novel, gives the impression of the experience:

> ... whosoever goes into Marshalsea Place ... will find his feet on the very paving-stones of the extinct Marshalsea jail; will see its narrow yard to the right and to the left, very little altered if at all, except that the walls were lowered when the place got free; will look upon the rooms in which the debtors lived; and will stand among the crowding ghosts of many miserable years. (p.36)

It seems to suggest that the Marshalsea can stand for the ambivalence of change and past habit in this regard, too. The place itself was, as it were, one of the witnesses of the time in transition.

Notes

1. George Gissing, *Charles Dickens: A Critical Study*, cited in Alan Shelston(ed.), *Dickens:* Dombey and Son *and* Little Dorrit, *A*

Casebook, (Hampshire: Macmillan Publishers Ltd., 1985), p.130.

2. Edmund Wilson, "Dickens: The Two Scrooges" in *The Wound and the Bow* (1947; rpt. New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), p.46.
3. J. Hillis Miller, *Charles Dickens: The World of his Novels* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1958), p.227.
4. Miller, p.228.
5. Humphry House, *The Dickens World* (1941; rpt. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), p.137.
6. Charles Dickens, *Bleak House,* ed. Norman Page. (1971; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin books Ltd., 1986), p.449.
7. Dickens, *Bleak House,* p.453.
8. Anny Sadrin, *Parentage and Inheritance in the Novels of Dickens* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp.25-6.
9. Humphry House points out, "Money is a main theme of nearly every book that Dickens wrote," in *The Dickens World,* p.58.
10. Charles Dickens, *Little Dorrit,* ed. John Holloway. (1967; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1984), p.292. Further references to this work appear in the text.
11. Malcolm Andrews, *Dickens and The Grown-up Child,* (London: Macmillan Press Ltd., 1994), p.86.
12. Andrews, p.85.
13. Sadrin, p.11.