Resenting dickens

I. If there is one word that sums up the pervading atmosphere of Little Dorrit, it is claustrophobic. From the very first chapter, the reader is inducted into a world primarily made up of rigidly enclosed spaces; every level of the novel is in some way bound, restricted within literal or, more interestingly, metaphorical confining structures. This theme of imprisonment gives rise to, and is inextricable from, its emotional response, a feeling of victimization and resentment, an element that lends the novel a suggestively subversive uneasiness that extends beyond the bounds of the novel, to the very heart of Dickens' literary form. The powerful humanity of Little Dorrit lies in Dickens' masterful arrangement of his characters and the various ways in which they deal with imprisonment; the intriguing ambiguity lies in whether or not they ultimately transcend the walls that confine them, and indeed, whether this question is even relevant. II. The novel's central prison, the Marshalsea, and the Dorrits, the literal prisoners within, form the origins of the prison theme, from which the images of other, figurative prisons and their inhabitants draw their potency and pathos. Part of the idiosyncrasy of a Dickens novel is the way in which his characters, rather than standing on their own as focal points of interest, depend on other characters to lend them greater form and dimension; rather than endowing one character with a full personality, he creates clusters of strangely crippled, uni-faceted entities, de-composites of personality who usually provide more insight into the characters surrounding them than interest in and of themselves. In Little Dorrit, the characters of Amy, ' child of the Marshalsea', and Miss Wade, child of another kind of prison, together shed interesting light on the themes of imprisonment and resentment, and their respective narrative functions. Amy Dorrit, the diminutive title-character, has lived her entire life within the prison walls; she

is the only member of the Dorrit family who, when we first meet her, has never spent a night outside the gates. (The one exception to this, which comes in the chapter entitled ‘ Little Dorrit’s Party’, is the night she spends with her idiot-friend Maggie, literally just outside the gates, separated from her cell by the least possible distance.) The very title of the book comes to represent her having grown up under the blight of the ‘ shadow of the wall'(p. 243). Yet, in striking contrast to the rest of her family, she bears not the least sign of bitterness towards her lot. On the contrary, she devotes herself relentlessly to kindness and servitude to everyone around her; she painstakingly hides from her father anything she thinks might remind him of the separation between his world and the one beyond the gates, (efforts that are helped along by the bizarre position of ascendancy he occupies among the prisoners). Just as thanklessly, she helps her brother and sister in their outside-worldly ‘ ambitions’, arranging dancing lessons for her sister, finding job opportunities for her brother. We find an interesting counter-possibility to Amy’s demure and humble resignation in the enigmatic character of Miss Wade. Miss Wade has lived her life imprisoned by the seemingly more debilitating walls of resentment of her orphan status, (note the assonance between ‘ Wade’ and ‘ Ward’), and the absolute certainty that every kindness ever done her has been cruel condescension. Geoffrey Carter, in his essay on sexuality in the Victorian Era, aptly calls it a “… paranoia [that] everything that is done around [her] is designed to hurt [her].”(p. 144) The interesting comparison between Amy and Miss Wade lies precisely in this attitude towards the kindness of others. Contrasted against the venom with which Miss Wade condemns those who would help her, Amy is all acceptance. After the initial and momentary shame of being ‘ found out’ by

Arthur Clennam, she willingly, passively, and gratefully submits to his efforts to help her and her family. Indeed, her gratitude is so strong that it turns into erotic (or semi-erotic anyway) love. Miss Wade on the other hand, due to her bitterness towards all humanity, removes herself from society, particularly the society of men, suggesting that her bitterness has developed into an all-pervading misanthropy that precludes her from the possibility of love. Amy, her gratitude towards Arthur having developed into the tenderest love, eventually finds happiness and narrative rest in marrying him. Miss Wade, we are led to believe, cannot marry; after the relation of her life story, we cannot but assume that she will remain to the end of her days an acrimonious spinster, all chances of love choked by her disproportionate pride and eternal vengefulness. (In her essay entitled ‘ Miss Wade and George Silverman’, Carol A. Bock calls attention to the ‘ authority and conviction’ with which she relates her history, and the consequent lack of interest the reader has in ‘ her present state of mind’ ; there is a seeming finality in the way her story is isolated within its own chapter, almost as though she is now forever wedded to her own grievances. It has been suggested that Miss Wade’s bitterness and isolation stem from frustrated homosexuality , and, though this is a perfectly plausible and valid claim, it seems an unnecessary extrapolation, detracting from the potent image of her exile. Her didactic purpose in the narrative, (if indeed she serves one), is the fact that she is relegated to eternal isolation, something that, within the terms of Victorian literature, is achieved just as effectively through asexuality as it would be through homosexuality.) In Little Dorrit, as in Bleak House , Dickens suggests the possibility that gratitude gives rise to erotic love, and, therefore, narrative fulfillment, a suggestion that has profound

and complex implications in a socially-minded nineteenth-century novel. In a form that derives closure from marriage , we cannot help but read some sort of intended judgment into the contrasted stories of these two women; in a novel populated only by deeply constricted characters, the fact that love and marriage can only take place in the absence of the struggle against confinement, indeed only upon a total resignation to confinement, seems, at the very least, contradictory to the agenda of a reformatory novel. The ambiguity of the novel's final statement is compounded by the fact that Amy, though the central character, remains somewhat ambiguous herself. (One of the difficulties of reading Dickens is that his characters, in their aforementioned flatness and monotony, are very reluctant to ' come to life'– they seem, oftentimes, to be imprisoned on the page.) The reader wonders whether she does not suffer from a neurosis as intense as Miss Wade's, one that manifests in her dependence on single-handedly bearing the weight of her family's misfortunes, and on thanklessly but nonetheless tirelessly serving and nursing them. (Dickens is a master of laying open the profoundly British ' mustn't grumble'-mentality, a resentment that manifests itself in a rigorous but latently hostile good-will.) When the family fortunes change, and the Dorrits quit the Marshalsea, Amy fades into an utterly despondent melancholy, only finding relief in a new mothering relationship with her uncle; her return to England is a return to her old life, with Arthur as a replacement for her father. Seen in this way, we are unsure what to make of her eventual marriage to her new ' patient', hesitant to see this final union as a triumph, a release, or even a change of life. (It is noteworthy that two of the final chapters are entitled " Closing In" and " Closed", confounding the readerly expectation that this novel, pervaded by bars and gates, will ' open

up’ at the end.) We have another ambiguous element in the discussion of resentment and its resolution in Tattycoram’s story. If Miss Wade is Amy’s double, we may see Tattycoram as a kind of parallel-universe version of Miss Wade, her return to the Meagles being an alternative to Miss Wade’s professed belief that if one is “… shut up in any place to pine and suffer…”, one should “… always hate that place and wish to burn it down, or raze it to the ground…”(p. 35). The ambiguity of Tattycoram’s story lies in Dickens’ non-commentary upon the Meagles’ treatment of their charity case, and the reader is not entirely sure that they are not hypocrites, masking supercilious condescension as charitable kindness. “ Count to five-and-twenty,” is a thinly veiled euphemism (“ Repress! Repress!”), and there is a vague trace of creepiness in the image of Tattycoram, in fits of rage, hypnotically counting to twenty-five on Mr. Meagles’ command(p. 314). Given the traditional Dickensian mode of closure–characters are either condemned or rewarded by the novel’s closing events–the reader doesn’t quite know what to make of Tattycoram’s return to her ‘ cell’ in the bosom of the Meagles family (just as we are hard put to see Amy’s marriage as a liberation). We have another interesting and (typical of Dickens) puzzling study of the ideas of repression and resentment in Arthur Clennam, who stands out as one of the stranger characters in Dickens’ imaginative population. (Despite Arthur’s shadowy presence and vague outlines, there is a palpable weight to his brooding consciousness; one feels at times throughout the novel, particularly in the passages that deal with Arthur’s unrequited love, that Dickens the often distant narrator, is noticeably close.) The repression of his ardent love for Pet Meagles manifests itself, straightforwardly enough, in hostility towards the nefarious Henry Gowan, her successful suitor. “… still Clennam thought, that

if he had not made that decided resolution to avoid falling in love with Pet, he would have taken a dislike to this Henry Gowan."(p. 203) In the chapter entitled ' Nobody's Disappearance', (note the extent of Arthur's repression– not only does the Arthur who is capable of love ' disappear', he never existed, was always ' nobody'), Arthur gives up all hope of ever finding love: "… he… finally resigned the dying hope that had flickered in nobody's heart, so much to its pain and trouble; and from that time he became in his own eyes, as to any similar hope or prospect, a very much older man who had done with that part of life."(p. 326). He is from now to the end of his days a bachelor, mourning the loss of his true love, and he has the reader's sympathy, especially since, far from allowing his forever-broken heart to turn bitter, he remains the kindly, self-effacing character we have known from the beginning. One would expect, then, that his ultimately marrying Amy, would bring some sense of suffering rewarded, a broken heart happily mended. This is decidedly not the case. Arthur does not fall in love with Amy, he rather succumbs to the centrifugal force of his life, of which she is ' the vanishing point': " He had traveled thousands of miles towards [her]; previous unquiet hopes and doubts had worked themselves out before [her]; [she] was the centre of the interest of his life; [she] was the termination of everything that was good and pleasant in it; beyond there was nothing but mere waste, and darkened sky."(p. 702) Only one-hundred pages before the end of the novel, Arthur asks himself if "… there was no suppressed something on his side that he had hushed as it arose? Had he ever whispered… that he must not think of such a thing as her loving him, that he must not take advantage of her gratitude…"(p. 700). This is the first the reader knows of such past feelings; either Dickens needed a way to tie up

the novel, or Arthur is inventing his love for Amy, culling it, perhaps, from a dread of loneliness, and a gratitude towards her for loving him. The dynamic of their union is a strange one. Arthur refuses her in her plea to let her pay his debts and free him from the Marshalsea; the shame of accepting help from her would be too great. After her fortunes have changed, (again), their engagement becomes understood. It is interesting to note that the initiation of the engagement is all Amy's; Arthur says not a word in this scene–it is his turn to be all passive acceptance. Only after Arthur is freed–Doyce makes a timely reappearance to take care of his debt–can the marriage take place, a marriage about which the reader notes two things: first, that the marriage makes obsolete Arthur's, and indeed the novel's, appellation for Amy; second, that the marriage is marked by a decided lack of the redemptive glory or triumphant liberation we have come to expect, or at least hope for, by the end of this claustrophobic novel; the reader is left with the image of Amy and Arthur, lost in " the roaring streets" among " the noisy and the eager, and the arrogant and the froward and the vain," making " their usual uproar."(p. 787)III. What is the reader to do, then, with these ambiguities? How are we to reconcile the two novels that seem to struggle within Little Dorrit for eminence? On the one hand we have a novel that "… teaches us in the manner of Piers Plowman and Pilgrim's Progress the necessity of transcending individual personal will…"(p. 114). Dickens biographer Fred Kaplan suggests the following for a scheme of the novel: "… wealth becomes a prison, the Marshalsea becomes a place where freedom, gained only through self-discovery, is possible, and the world of experience provides the context in which honesty, moral rectitude, and hard work determine self-worth."(p. 343) As tempting as it is to leave the analysis in this well-

delineated state, it does not account for Dickens’s endlessly fascinating, (often frustrating), ambiguities of tone and plot. Despite the novel’s narrative condemnation of Miss Wade, and its exoneration of Amy, the reader remains somewhat unsure as to whether or not to fall in behind these judgments. (This is due in part to the strange pathos of Miss Wade’s story, and in part to the noticeable lack of suggestion of transcendence in the final passage of the novel.) Lionel Trilling wrote that “ it is part of the complexity of this novel which deals so bitterly with society that those of its characters who share its social bitterness are by that very fact condemned.”(p. 40) Elaborating on this point, Brian Rosenberg succinctly sums up the novel’s problematic duality thus: “ The ubiquitous image of the prison, the exhaustive portrait of the Circumlocution Office, and the saga of Mr. Merdle–among many other things–combine to form a scathing attack on the values and practices of mid-Victorian society, with particular emphasis placed on society’s tendency to deny freedom, thwart initiative, and corrupt even the best intentions. Yet this angry novel appears at times to internalize and endorse the assumptions of the culture it denounces.”(p. 39) The term ‘ angry novel’ is particularly apt; in the confusion and ambiguity of Little Dorrit, and the final ‘ endorsement’ of the ‘ cultural assumptions it denounces’, we cannot help but feel a certain hostility aimed at us. I would suggest that this hostility originates in Dickens’ struggle for artistic freedom (that strange ideal that becomes so hard to define as to become almost meaningless) within the confines of Victorian culture and the dictates of serial publication. There is plenty of evidence that Dickens sorely felt the restrictions of working within these constraints. In a letter to Wilkie Collins, he wrote: “ If the hero of an English book is always uninteresting–too good–not natural, etc… what a shining impostor you,” (the

English critic), “ must think yourself and what an ass you must think me, when you suppose that by putting a brazen face upon it you can blot out of my knowledge the fact that this same unnatural young gentleman (if to be decent is to be necessarily unnatural)… must be presented to you in that unnatural aspect by reason of your morality, and is not to have, I will not say any of the indecencies you like, but not even any of the experiences, trials, perplexities, and confusions inseparable from the making and unmaking of all men!”(p. 355) Dickens also found the “ limited elbowroom of weekly serial publication” to be “ absolutely crushing.”(p. 307) The first numbers of Little Dorrit, which was published in twenty monthly installments, received mixed reviews, the main complaint being that “… he should stick to comedy and domestic drama.”(p. 340) And though it sold better than anything he had written up to that time, “… the public appreciation tended to be less for the satire than the sentiment.”(p. 340) It is one way to account for the duality of the novel to say that, as he continued to write installments, Dickens internalized this criticism, and felt forced to re-route his original novel, adapting it to the demands of his market, toning down his social criticism to make it more palatable to a public hungry for ‘ sentiment’ and conventional narrative. In limiting his ambitions, Dickens ended up obscuring the didacticism of the novel, and the reader certainly feels the heat of his resentment at working under such constraint. Indeed, these constraints are directly reflected in his creation of characters. The characters in Little Dorrit, as in many of his novels, are not characters who evolve or transform; Dickens conceived of them as fundamentally imprisoned, within themselves, and within the confines of narrative predictability. This goes a long way in explaining the problems of much of Dickens’ work, in explaining why we

have a novel that is, on one level, a story of the triumph of the good at heart, and on another, a somewhat disturbing and cynical portrait of stunted lives and dead ends. The novel is so shrouded in ambiguities that ultimately, it is neither of the above; as readers trying to find meaning, we are imprisoned within Dickens’ compromised art. Surely we cannot help but feel a little resentful.