

Narratives of Disability in *A Christmas Carol* and *Little Dorrit*

Andrew Bramwell

Abstract: *The nineteenth century was a period when the ‘afflicted’ or ‘defective’ body was a common sight on the streets of Victorian Britain. Disabled characters pervaded popular fiction and were often used as metaphors for social comment around notions of welfare, morality, and health. Writers such as Charles Dickens introduced the characters of Tiny Tim in *A Christmas Carol* and Mrs Clennam in *Little Dorrit* to provoke an emotional response but also as a commentary on contemporary values and attitudes. At first glance, these characters appear to promote a narrative of sentimentality and melodrama, but this narrative is far more complex on closer reading. *A Christmas Carol* and *Little Dorrit* display not only scathing indictments of societal judgements concerned with class, gender, and power but also surprising hints of individual agency. I will reveal how both Tiny Tim and Mrs Clennam exhibit resistance to contemporary attitudes and roles foisted upon them, asserting their rights and taking control of their individual situations.*

As Schillace notes about nineteenth-century writers. ‘Authors of narrative fiction – particularly Charles Dickens...portray disabled characters as ‘purified’.¹ There is an element of truth in this statement as in the example of Tiny Tim in *A Christmas Carol* or Jenny Wren in *Our Mutual Friend*. Dickens, in particular, used disability as a means of eliciting an emotional response on the part of his readers, but the emphasis on innocence, melodrama and sentimentality was not a universal narrative and was certainly not the case with Mrs Clennam in *Little Dorrit*, whose psychosomatic paralysis was used as a metaphor for corruption and exploitation. Dickens representations of people with disabilities were complex. They served different purposes in what they represented and how these characters and their actions served as plot devices to drive the storyline. I would argue that

¹ Brandy Schillace, “Curing ‘Moral Disability’: Brain Trauma and Self Control in Victorian Science and Fiction”, *Cult Med Psychiatry*, 37 (2013), 587-600.

behind the caricatures, Dickens hinted at the struggle, in different ways, for individual agency and offered glimpses of unexpected rebellion.

The character of Tiny Tim in Charles Dickens 1843 story *A Christmas Carol* has often been taken as representative of Victorian attitudes to disability. Both the text and contemporary illustrations were designed to produce emotional excess on the reader's part, to promote a sense of poignancy and disturbance in the 'afflicted' or 'defective' nature of the character on whom so much love and concern are expended. There are many images of Tiny Tim in the various additions of *A Christmas Carol*, but it is interesting to note the similarities between them. Most of the illustrations show Tiny Tim dressed for winter with a long thick winter coat, completely masking his legs as if his disability was somehow unsuitable for the public to see. There is invariably a thick scarf and woollen cap, often placed at a jaunty angle to hint at individuality. In terms of physical features, Tiny Tim's face is shown as pale, wide-eyed, innocent, and frail; sometimes, there is a faint smile, sometimes an expression bordering on a frown, but unworldly, as if dissociated from his surroundings. Occasionally, these depictions have a feminine quality accompanied by suggestions that Tiny Tim is only a few steps from the grave. Finally, without exception, whether being carried like a lamb on Bob Cratchit's shoulder or seated on a chair in the corner of the room, there is always a crutch placed prominently within the frame, emphasising the fact that there is a young boy afflicted, damaged in some way but significantly not to the extent that his disability is unsightly. If his legs are visible at all, they resemble the limbs of a puppet rather than a human being; there is much of the toy or ventriloquist's dummy about his representation. When Tiny Tim does find his voice within the text, it is equally toylike, weak, scratchy, sentimental, cloying. This is the physical context of the illustrations, obviously designed to supplement the text and appeal to readers and create an image of innocent vulnerability.

Mills make the point that.

At that time, any physical or mental impairment was seen as a burden – something that should be hidden or a signal of retribution. Victorians defined disability as something that prevented you from participating in the new industrialised society, or more importantly as something that prevented you from working and contributing to society.²



Figure 1. Tiny Tim by Harold Copping. Dickens, M.A. *Dicken's Dream Children* (London: Raphael Tuck, 1900). Photographic reproduction of line drawing scanned by P. Allington.

² Selena Mills, 'Dickens: Bah, humbug! Tiny Tim', *The Spectator*, 16 December 2017.

On the other hand, Fielder notes that Tiny Tim as represented by Dickens became a symbol of compassion indicative of the attitude that ‘the plight of the disabled can always be alleviated by philanthropy’.³ The idea of charity, particularly to the ‘deserving’ was an important feature of Christian values embedded in Victorian society. In some ways, charitable donations could be a salve to the conscience in an era of vast disparities of wealth, a simple, clearly understood act in a time when the rate of social, economic, and technological change must have seemed overwhelming. But also, a genuine desire to help the less fortunate. The image of a disabled and vulnerable Tiny Tim, struggling through the machinations of an uncaring and cruel world, connected with these values perfectly. Yet even here, there were complications. While there was a widely held view that disabled children were innocent victims worthy of support, as they grew older, perceptions changed. Individuals were more inclined to look for the appearance of features of their inner depravity, an inevitable consequence of physical imperfection. This narrative of innocence and depravity, worthy and unworthy, was prevalent in all aspects of life, including disability. The very term ‘disabled’ was used to denote individuals who had suffered an accident, rendering them incapacitated and unable to work with all the moral judgements that entailed. Henry Mayhew, in his *London Life and London Poor* (1861-63), used this terminology in this sense; in other descriptions, he used ‘crippled’, ‘afflicted’, ‘maimed’ and ‘deformed.’ Mayhew reflects contemporary attitudes by distinguishing between the ‘honest’ and ‘dishonest’ poor. There were a considerable number of beggars on the streets of London who ‘exhibited’ their ‘deformities’ as a means of providing income. Mayhew considered many of these people imposters and reacted with his description of the ‘crippled street seller of nutmeg graters.’ I now give an example of one of the classes driven to the streets by utter inability to labour. I have already spoken of the sterling independence of some of these men possessing the strongest claims to our sympathy and charity and yet preferring to sell rather than beg.⁴ Dickens was aware of this dual narrative and the possibility of physical impairment leading to corruption. This made the possibility of Tiny Tim dying, thus avoiding the stigma of

³ Leslie Fielder, ‘Pity and Fear: Images of the Disabled in Literature and the Popular Arts’, *Salmagundi* 57 (Summer 1982), 57-68 (p. 680).

⁴ Henry Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor, Vol.1* (London: Charles Griffin and Company, 1868) p. 330.

being workless and a burden on society less shocking to Victorian minds. He exploited the friction between the two ideas by instigating a discourse of sentimentality on the one hand in *A Christmas Carol* and the terrifying, iron-willed, wheelchair-bound depiction of Mrs Clennam in *Little Dorrit* on the other. But even this analysis is a simplification; the reality was far more nuanced.

While the illustrations emphasised visual impact to lead the reader to the text, the text complimented this visualisation by creating layers of meaning that both enhanced and subverted the illustrations, as noted by Julia Miele Rodas.

While Dickens is often criticised for his sentimental and objectifying representations of people (or characters) with disabilities, seeming to render disabled figures as villains, or as objects of fun, his relationship with disabled identity and his representations of disabled bodies (and minds) appear to be more complex than some would believe.⁵

It is undoubtedly the case that Dickens tended to utilise the extreme examples of physical disabilities in his fiction to drive the narrative forward. In *A Christmas Carol*, Tiny Tim is used as a vehicle to show Scrooge the meaning of empathy and, for the most part, adheres to the conventions of sentimentality. But a close reading of the text offers a subtle departure from the narrative of the helpless cripple to suggest that Tiny Tim has the potential to determine his agency with his ‘active little crutch.’ There are times when he has boisterous fun with his siblings, and it is also interesting to note that when Bob Cratchit implores the family to raise a toast to Mr Scrooge, it wasn’t just Mrs Cratchit who objected with ‘I’ll drink his health for your sake and the Day’s ‘not for his. Long-life to him!’ but also as Dicken’s notes, ‘Tiny Tim drank it last of all, but he didn’t care twopence for it’.⁶ This observation reveals that for all his disablement, Tiny Tim was aware

⁵ Julia Rodas, ‘Tiny Tim, Blind Bertha and the Resistance of Miss Mowcher: Charles Dickens and the Uses of Disability’, *Dickens Studies Annual*, 34 (2004), p. 51.

⁶ Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol, 1843* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981) p. 98.

of the pain caused by Scrooge but also able, in his small way to offer resistance, to be capable of independent thought. He also exhibits a high degree of self-awareness. Clare Walker describes the Christmas morning visit to church as an exercise in self-imagery that Tiny Tim was pleased to be creating a 'sympathetic spectacle'.⁷ This indicates an element of control. She also points out that Dickens's use of a sentimental narrative to appeal to readers was viewed differently at the time and was seen more in an ennobling sympathy. It is equally true that Tiny Tim's personal narrative is deliberately withheld. Stoddard Holmes states;

We don't know enough about Tim to ascertain whether his disability results from poor nutrition, a factory injury or some other material cause. We know- and only need to know, as engaged readers of this story, that Scrooge's Malthusian, emotionally closed stance toward poverty is the cause and that as soon as Scrooge regains the ability to melt and weep in response to his own and others' lives, Tim will not die an early death.⁸

This manipulation of disability to spark an emotional response in others, often as a mechanism of individual redemption, was a popular motif in Victorian literature.

But there were other ways in which Dickens could utilise images of disability. These images populate Dickens theme of disability runs throughout Charles Dicken's *Little Dorrit* (1857). Here the narrative diverges from sentimentality into much darker territory. Instead, individual disablement is seen as a disease and used to represent the threat to London posed by corruption and social disorder in the same way that in *A Christmas Carol*, Scrooge exemplified the disease of unfeeling capitalism (and Tiny Tim the redemptive cure).

⁷ Clare Walker, *Plotting Disability in the Nineteenth Century Novel* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019), p. 25.

⁸ Martha Stoddard Holmes, *Fictions of Affliction: Physical Disability in Victorian Culture*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009), p. 2.

The language of disability is sprinkled throughout the narrative in numerous ways, the teacher ‘Mr Cripples’, the ‘crippled wardrobe’ but most disturbingly through the character of Mrs Clennam. Due to an ambiguous ‘rheumatic affection’ and ‘nervous disorder’, she has not left the house for twelve years. The house itself ‘appears to lean on half a dozen gigantic crutches.’ Instead, she resides on a couch or in a wheelchair, ‘living and dying like a statue’. Disability is seen as toxic, poisoning the character of Mrs Clennam and those around her. This novel parades a slideshow of neurotics and psychological misfits unsuited to the pressures of mid-Victorian life but unable to control reality or escape.

The irony of Mrs Clennam position is that her predicament is entirely without physiological basis; it is a psychosomatic illness of self-imposed and resentful immobility. *Little Dorrit* is a novel of imprisonment, both literal and psychological. This is most starkly illustrated in the characters of Mr Dorrit and Mrs Clennam.

As the novel begins, Mr Dorrit is incarcerated in a debtor’s prison. ‘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 trouble out’.⁹ He adapted to his position, the walls and bars providing security and a refuge from the pressures of life outside. This reverses the meaning of constraint. Such was his adaptation that he became known as ‘The Father of Marshalsea’ so much that ‘he grew to be proud of his title. If any imposter had arisen to claim it, he would have shed tears in resentment of the attempt to deprive him of his rights’.¹⁰ Dickens superimposes a layer of mental illness onto Mr Dorrit in the same way as Mrs Clennam’s psychosomatic conjuring of paralysis provides an element of ‘safety’ in a world of insecurity created by industrialisation, urbanisation, and technological change. Here both mental and physical disability becomes something of an emotional crutch. Mr Dorrit is eventually defeated by the world. Still, significantly Mrs Clennam

⁹ Martha Stoddard Holmes, *Fictions of Affliction: Physical Disability in Victorian Culture*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009), p. 2.

¹⁰ Charles Dickens, *Little Dorrit, 1847* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981), p.103.

takes control of her environment by self-imposed physical afflictions from where, in her own house, at least she can reign supreme, thus turning what might be construed as a moral weakness into a statement of personal autonomy. Like Bob Cratchit and Tiny Tim, she is a victim, although being an adult of questionable morals is not intended to create a sympathetic response from the readers.

In Mrs Clennam's case, there are accusations of manipulation from the outset with parallels to Mayhew's distinction between the deserving and undeserving afflicted, but with the twist of gender bias. As Wood notes:

Dickens takes an altogether more censorious view of the female invalid and suggestively portrays states of health or infirmity in terms of the individuals' willingness to subscribe to the cultural prescriptions of womanhood and the extent of resistance to them.¹¹

Mrs Clennam's cold will, a self-enforced reclusive, wheel chain bound life, spits resentment and bitterness, a model of feminine deportment guaranteed to strike fear and distaste in the mind of the readers. At first glance, there are minimal insights into the psychological gymnastics of Mrs Clennam's inner self. That the illness is psychosomatic constructs a framework of transgression, either moral or sexual, to the characters actions. The reader is left to glean whatever intuitions they can through the interpretation of these actions. Mrs Clennam's home is a prison. Wood further develops this theme:

She embodies, in her immobility, the extreme end of this 'close confinement'. Her house is made a place of correction and quarantine, where in her role as a moral

¹¹ Dickens, p.210.

agent, she seeks to eliminate the taunt of Arthur's illegitimate birth into the world beyond the house walls.¹²

This is the fear of social stricture taken to extremes, yet it also illustrates the sense of being crushed or overwhelmed. An internalisation of repression so punishing that Mrs Clennam commits a kind of suicide of the soul. She distorts the Victorian ideal of the home as a sanctuary, subverting submission and endurance into an arena of inhospitality and defiance.

Dicken's description exemplifies the atmosphere in the room:

The varying light of fire and candle in Mrs Clennam's room made the greatest change that ever broke the dead monotony of that spot. In her two narrow windows, the fire shone sullenly all day, and sullenly all night. On rare occasions it flashed up passionately, as she did; but for the most part it was suppressed, like her and preyed upon itself evenly and slowly.¹³

There are echoes of Miss Havisham in *Great Expectations*; time is not seen as in disturbance but in stasis. While it is a choice to be immobile, this reveals some of Mayhew's views on the exhibition of disfigurement as morally reprehensible, except in this instance, there was no actual physical deformity but a disfigured state of mind.

The degree of Mrs Clennam's self-awareness, the extent to which her psychosomatic illness is controlled, the ingress of mental illness into her decision to retreat to immobility and create a dark theatre of the hearth is open to question. Tavela has examined psychosomatic illness as a device:

Rather than domestic work, maternal work, or professional work, the psychosomatic heroine demonstrates that the most important work a woman does is as herself; she

¹² Jane Wood, *Passion and Pathology in Victorian Fiction* (Oxford: University Press: Oxford, 2001), p. 16.

¹³ Wood, p. 22.

must find a way to manage her mind-body relations to present the necessary image that allows her to navigate the world.¹⁴

Arguably, Mrs Clennam is not a heroine in the traditional sense. Still, the choice of immobility allows the exercise of control in a world where such control for a woman was difficult to achieve. Disability, real or genuine, is a form of personal agency, a rebellion against the pressure of life in the mid-nineteenth century.

Wood links Mrs Clennam's predicament back to Dicken's views on the female invalid and suggests her reaction is almost an expectation:

Mrs Clennam is a reflection of the ways in which invalid narratives work with and against the ideological framework in which they are constructed. Each is informed by Mid-Victorian medical representations of female psychosomatic illness as a function of social, moral, or sexual-political transgression.¹⁵

The emphasis is on transgression and the widely held view in medical circles that the emotions and irrationality dominate the feminine mind in contrast to the domination of the intellect in men. This example serves to illustrate the blurring of boundaries between disability and calculation. In this case, psychosomatic illness is used as a narrative device, as a tool of characterisation, and acknowledges that this was the only power a woman had over her body. Immobility, in this case, sees physical atrophy as a symptom of frantic and disturbing psychological activity. Mrs Clennam, seated in her wheelchair, exists at the tipping point of extreme self-control and self-destruction. This image exemplifies her precarious situation and millions of others on the edge of poverty, including Tiny Tim and Bob Cratchit.

¹⁴ Dickens, *Little Dorrit*, p.220.

¹⁵ Clare Wood, *Passion and Pathology in Victorian Fiction*, p. 16.

Representations of disability in the fiction of Charles Dickens utilised narratives of sentimentality and melodrama and widespread cultural notions of the 'deserving' and 'undeserving.' But such narratives were far more complex than would appear at first glance. Depictions were undoubtedly influenced by issues of class and gender but also hinted at the possibility of individual agency, the faintest precursor of the emergence of the authentic voice of the disabled.

Bibliography

Primary Sources

Dickens, Charles, *A Christmas Carol, 1843* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971)

Dickens, Charles, *Little Dorrit, 1847* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981).

Mayhew, Henry, *London Labour and the London Poor, Vol.1* (London: Charles Griffin and Company, 1868)

Secondary Sources

Fieldler, Leslie, 'Pity and Fear: Images of the Disabled in Literature and the Popular Arts', *Salmagundi* 57 (Summer 1982) 57-68

Mills, S. 'Dickens: Bah, humbug! Tiny Tim', *The Spectator*, 16 December 2017

Rodas, Julia, 'Tiny Tim, Blind Bertha and the Resistance of Miss Mowcher: Charles Dickens and the Uses of Disability', *Dickens Studies Annual*, 34 (2004)

Schillace, Brandy, "'Curing 'Moral Disability': Brain Trauma and Self Control in Victorian Science and Fiction', *Cult Med Psychiatry*, 37 (2013), 587-600

Stoddard Holmes, M. *Fictions of Affliction: Physical Disability in Victorian Culture* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009)

Tavela, Sara, "'What a Poor, Passive, Machine" - The Psychosomatic Heroine from Richardson to Austen', (unpublished doctoral thesis, Duquene University, 2015)

Walker, Clare, *Plotting Disability in the Nineteenth-Century Novel* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019)

Wood, Jane, *Passion and Pathology in Victorian Fiction* (Oxford: University Press, 2001)