

# Liminal Dickens



# Liminal Dickens:

## *Rites of Passage in His Work*

Edited by

Valerie Kennedy

and Katerina Kitsi-Mitakou

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Liminal Dickens: Rites of Passage in His Work

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To Dimitra in love and gratitude

(Katerina Kitsi-Mitakou)



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Illustration by Robert Cruikshank. *The Dandies' Ball; or, High Life in the City*. London: John Marshall, 1819.

## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

<i>AN</i>	<i>American Notes</i>
<i>BH</i>	<i>Bleak House</i>
<i>BR</i>	<i>Barnaby Rudge</i>
<i>CB</i>	<i>Christmas Books (The Battle of Life)</i>
<i>DC</i>	<i>David Copperfield</i>
<i>DS</i>	<i>Dombey and Son</i>
<i>ED</i>	<i>The Mystery of Edwin Drood</i>
<i>GE</i>	<i>Great Expectations</i>
<i>HT</i>	<i>Hard Times</i>
<i>LD</i>	<i>Little Dorrit</i>
<i>MC</i>	<i>Martin Chuzzlewit</i>
<i>NN</i>	<i>Nicholas Nickleby</i>
<i>OCS</i>	<i>The Old Curiosity Shop</i>
<i>OMF</i>	<i>Our Mutual Friend</i>
<i>OT</i>	<i>Oliver Twist</i>
<i>PP</i>	<i>The Pickwick Papers</i>
<i>TTC</i>	<i>A Tale of Two Cities</i>

## INTRODUCTION

# LIMINAL DICKENS: RITES OF PASSAGE IN HIS WORK

VALERIE KENNEDY  
KATERINA KITSI-MITAKOU

### **Liminality and Dickens**

This collection examines Dickens's fascination with liminal zones or rites of passage, like births, growing-up rituals, weddings, and deaths; it explores both the implications of the fusion and confusion of these states in his major works and journalism and the implications of liminality for Dickens's conceptions of community. The term, "liminal," which made its first appearance in the field of anthropology and was coined by anthropologist Arnold Van Gennep early in the twentieth century (*Rites of Passage*, 1909), referred initially to rites of passage during which the essential principles and ideals of a society are questioned and suspended, since they demarcate a period of abstinence from the established modes of social action. One of the most influential conceptualizations of liminality is to be found in Victor Turner's *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (originally published in 1969), where Turner defines liminality in terms of social interactions, seeing it as an anti-structural element which is related to transitional moments and which mitigates the classificatory procedures of many traditional societies, offering liberating "liminal areas of space and time" (vii) beyond the constructions and constrictions of conventional social boundaries. Although Turner has little to say about literature, his idea of liminality has been productively developed in literary criticism by a variety of writers, especially in cases of new or postcolonial literatures.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example the works by Alghamdi, Drewery, Faust, Gilsenan, Klapcsik, Viljoen, and Wangari in the Works Cited.

The concept of liminality is adopted here in its broader and more modern sense of “in-betweenness” as far as political and cultural states are concerned, while particular emphasis is given to the term’s allusions to the challenging of fixed boundaries and the potential of subversion of the limits of subjectivity. All the essays in this collection focus on how Dickens’s preoccupation with transitional phases reflects his own liminality and his varying positions regarding some main Victorian concerns, such as religion, social institutions, progress, and modes of writing. Although the very notion of a “liminal Dickens” may at first strike readers as an oxymoron, given Dickens’s central position in Victorian letters and cultural life, his recurrent and insistent blurring of boundaries, as all the writers in this collection argue, suggests that he takes on oscillating positions rather than settling for a clearly categorizable stance. We are not used to thinking of Dickens as a borderland writer. Yet, if Dickens’s status is now firmly fixed in the academic canon,<sup>2</sup> his characters are often strikingly dislocated, and as their personal experiences of rites of passage intertwine with political and cultural changes we are led to viewpoints that are often complex and/or ambivalent.

Dickens’s consistent confusion of life with death, for example, his perception of life as a middle space/stage of deprivation,<sup>3</sup> and his inability to perceive death as necessarily meaning a transition to another life, as the essays in the first part of the collection argue, make it evident that his perspective on the religious debates of his time was liminal. Dickens is usually seen as subscribing to the beliefs of the Broad Church version of Anglicanism and as endorsing the tolerant and liberal perspective of the New Testament, “the Religion of Humanity,” as Vincent Newey calls it (41), rather than the often punitive philosophy of the Old, as recent work

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<sup>2</sup> Dickens’s position in the academic canon of course was contested by some until at least 1948, the date of the first publication of F. R. Leavis’s *The Great Tradition*, although the Leavises changed their minds about Dickens in *Dickens the Novelist* (1970).

<sup>3</sup> More recent critical works on Dickens have shown interest in his ambivalent positions, which they define either as an “in-between-ness” or a blurring of boundaries in his works. Zigarovich, for example, focuses on what she calls the “liminal spaces of death” (3), and she sees Dickens’s narrative representations of death as “symbols of a destabilized culture as they try to stabilize that which is ultimately unknowable [that is, death]” (5). Stewart, on the other hand, has examined the rhetoric of death scenes in Dickens as a dramatization of the “traversed interval between life and death” (57). *Bleak House* has been singled out for attention by Lougy (2002) and Beaumont (2012), while Wheeler (1990) has offered a suggestive reading of *Our Mutual Friend*, and all three offer significant perspectives on the burring of boundaries in the works they discuss.

by Gary L. Colledge, Linda M. Lewis, Newey, Robert Newsom, and Dennis Walder makes clear. Newsom argues that Dickens's ambivalence about religion can be seen in the opposition in his works between the "ghoulishness" or black humour frequently evoked in relation to sacred things and his interest in "the otherworldly" (46), a concept which several of the essays in this collection develop in new ways. Trevor Hope's analysis of *Little Dorrit* from a Derridean perspective, for instance, brings the neo-Platonic dimension of the novel to bear on the confusion of liminal states within it, while Dominic Rainsford suggests that Dickens's views about heaven and the afterlife are complex and shifting and may be profitably seen as a negative version of Wordsworthian "intimations" of immortality. Margaret J.-M. Sönmez's stylistic analysis of death euphemisms, moreover, suggests that Dickens has an ambivalent view of the conventional Christian view of death as inevitably followed by eventual resurrection and salvation, and Jeremy Tambling argues that birth and life are frequently intertwined in the lives of Dickens's heroes.

Charles Dickens's engagement with liminal moments or rites of passage like growing-up rituals or weddings—not such a widely discussed topic among critics as his deaths are—also manifests a complex perspective on his part. Catherine Waters' and Michael Hollington's essays focus on Dickens's ambivalent representations of such phases and make significant contributions to a relatively neglected area of Dickens's studies. There is surprisingly little recent in-depth critical discussion of Dickensian marriages specifically as opposed to analyses of the family or patriarchal structures, as in the work of Anny Sadrin or Catherine Waters.<sup>4</sup> Kelly Hager's work is an exception here; she sees the "failed marriage plot" (6) as central to Dickens and argues that his ambivalence about the institution is clear in the tension between the conventional plots of his novels which endorse it and the various subplots of divorce and desertion which undermine it. Hollington's essay in this volume in a sense develops Hager's diagnosis of "marital dis-ease" (7) in Dickens's novels and breaks new ground in demonstrating the role of minor characters in creating both positive and, more often, negative versions of the *rite de passage* of marriage, the wedding ceremony, where these minor characters often appear as death-tinged enforcers of the social hierarchy rather than enablers of a freer sort of *communitas*, the fundamental sense of connection that shapes all societies (Turner 97).

Likewise, Dickens's response to the Victorian "age of transition," what Sara Gilead calls "a liminal period in a history of spiritual, moral, and

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<sup>4</sup> In the recent volume, *Charles Dickens in Context*, edited by Ledger and Furneaux, there is no section on marriage and no "marriage" entry in the index.

intellectual as well as material progress (186), is anything but consistent. George Orwell's telling statement in 1939 that "even if Dickens was a bourgeois, he was certainly a subversive writer, a radical, one might truthfully say a rebel" (32), encapsulates centuries of Dickens criticism that fails to categorize him. More often than not, as the writers in Parts II & III show, Dickens is sceptical and ambivalent about progress, while at times he even sees it as presenting the risk of a dangerous regression. This becomes evident also in Dickens's often liminal mode of writing and his tendency to experiment with a variety of styles and genres, as the essays in Part IV make clear. Informed by Bakhtinian notions of the novel as a dialogic genre, recent criticism on Dickens, like Nicola Bradbury's "Dickens and the Form of the Novel," has been preoccupied with the many-voicedness of his novels or has even presented him as a writer who has shaped our concepts of the romantic, the Victorian, and the modern and prepared the ground for the postmodern, like Jay Clayton's "Dickens and the Genealogy of Postmodernism." David Parker, Valerie Kennedy and Maria Vara, in Part IV, add to the idea of a polyphonic Dickens by discussing ways in which he refashions old genres by expanding the range of the rhetoric of the realist novel, adopting and adapting the conventions of the Newgate novel, or challenging the basic assumptions of the detective novel, in ways which anticipate twentieth-century debates about the death of the author or the birth of the writerly text.

Our collection will also refer to Dickens's liminality in relation to the idea of community or *communitas*. The term "*communitas*," which was first introduced by Turner and related to the concept of liminality, was defined by him as "an essential and generic human bond, without which there could be *no* society" (97); it is not to be identified, however, with normative classificatory, hierarchical types of social organization. This concept of *communitas* or community as in some sense an alternative to conventional social organization has been developed and rendered more complex in the work of more recent thinkers, like Jean-Luc Nancy, Maurice Blanchot, Giorgio Agamben, and Roberto Esposito,<sup>5</sup> but where Turner suggested that *communitas* was often transitory and liminal, they all seem to see the idea(l) of community as impossible, unrepresentable, or empty in various ways. Nancy suggests that one of the defining features of "the modern world" is "the testimony of the dissolution, the dislocation, or the conflagration of community" (1), along with the notion that community in its many varied manifestations is always already "lost, or broken" (9). Nancy rejects conventional definitions of community as implying "not

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<sup>5</sup> Blanchot, Agamben, and Esposito all acknowledge the influence of Nancy on the issue of *communitas*.

only intimate communication between its members, but also its organic communion with its own essence” (9). He suggests instead that it is

something for which we have no name or concept, something that issued at once from a much more extensive communication than that of a mere social bond . . . and from much more piercing and dispersed segmentation of this same bond, often involving much harsher effects (solitude, rejection, admonition, helplessness) than what we expect from a communitarian minimum in the social bond. (11)

This idea is echoed in Esposito when he says that “*communitas* is simultaneously both the most suitable, indeed the sole, dimension of the animal ‘man,’” and “also its most potentially disintegrating impetus” to undermine that dimension (8).

In the light of Nancy’s conceptualization of community, it might be argued that one distinctive feature of Dickens’s modernity is precisely his awareness of the vulnerability, instability, or fragility of community or *communitas*, as the analyses of the difficulties of survival in the world of Dickens’s novels by Zelma Catalan and Jeremy Tambling make clear. Although Dickens’s happy endings offer hope for the future attainment of *communitas* by both the individuals concerned and (more rarely) their society, his vision of it is never conventional or unproblematic. Amy Dorrit’s success in achieving a version of *communitas*, Hope and Katerina Kitsi-Mitakou propose, is made despite or through the confusion of the liminal states of birth and death: through Dickens’s paradoxical deployment of the opposition between darkness and light, concealment and discovery, as Hope argues; or through the reversal of accepted ideas about filth and cleanliness, as Kitsi-Mitakou’s essay suggests. Similarly, Victor Sage reveals the dangerous and violent regressions which threaten any concept of society as a community and any idea of progress in the world of *Our Mutual Friend* where marriage seems haunted or pre-empted by death.

Interestingly, both Nancy and Esposito draw a connection between death and community. For Nancy, community is “the *limit* of the human as well as the divine” (11, emphasis added), and “it is through death that the community reveals itself” (14). Esposito in turn links this connection specifically to “the modern period, let’s say at the end of the *res publica christiana*” and evokes “the Christian conception of community” (9), a conception about which the essays by Parker, Rainsford, and Sónmez suggest that Dickens had an ambivalent and liminal position. All agree that death and the otherworldly are of great importance for Dickens, although

while Parker's analyses emphasize the novels' evocation of the community of the Christian afterlife, those by Rainsford and Sönmez suggest a less canonical understanding of human and divine limits and possibilities.

Like Nancy and Esposito, and engaging specifically in a dialogue with Nancy's *The Inoperative Community*, Blanchot places even greater emphasis on the interconnection of death and the idea of community, connecting the impossible idea(l) of community to birth and death: "There could not be a community without the sharing of that first and last event which in everyone ceases to be just that (birth, death)" (9). He also quotes with approval Nancy's statements that "'The community does not create ties of a higher, immortal, or transmortal life, between subjects . . . it is constitutionally . . . linked to the death of those one calls, maybe mistakenly, its members'" (10) and that "'death is itself the true community of mortal beings, their impossible community'" (11). It is precisely Dickens's tentative experimentations related to this paradox—of the impossible connections between death and birth (or rebirth)—which are explored in the essays by Parker, Rainsford, and Sage. Moreover, while Sönmez reminds us of the inescapability of death for and in Dickens, Vara examines *Edwin Drood's* reversal of the detective novel as the "story of an absence," whereby the final absence of the author and the uncertainty about the death of the supposed murder victim lead, paradoxically, to the continuing life of author, victim, and novel.

If Nancy and Esposito link community with death, Agamben and Esposito develop Nancy's explorations of community into what Vijay Devadas and Jane Mummery call "Community Without Community" (1), or "Community as an active idea", which "calls for the opening up of other possible and potential networks of relations, of living and being with others" (2) which are not based on identity. In Agamben's words, this is "an absolutely unrepresentable community" (24-25) in which human beings will "form a community without affirming an identity, that humans co-belong without any representable condition of belonging" (86-87). This idea might be seen as a more extreme version of Turner's proposal that *communitas* is often brought about by individuals who are liminal to society, low in status, or not easily classifiable in terms of social hierarchy (109-11). Hollington's analysis of successful wedding scenes in Dickens reveals that when the liminal phase of transition (in marriage for example) is successful, it is brought about by characters who are themselves liminal entities, existing on the margin of society, as Turner suggests (125).

In conclusion, the essays in this collection add further to the debate on liminal Dickens by offering a series of explorations of the confusion of various *rites de passage*. In doing so, they offer new perspectives on the



rites of passage or liminal stages of birth, growing-up rituals, weddings, and death in Dickens and on the way that these liminal stages affect concepts of community. They may either create community in unlikely situations or offer further evidence of the breakdown, instability, or vulnerability of community.

## The Essays

The three essays in Part I of the book, “Christian Births, Marriages, and Deaths Contested,” explore the complexity of Dickens’s religious stance, and the ways he both adheres to and questions Christian theology. Rainsford, in his “Posthumous and Prenatal Dickens,” connects moments of birth with intimations of death and throws light on a dimension of Charles Dickens’s thinking about time which has not as yet been fully explored, that is, his perception of life before or after death, as well as states of being and non-being (as suggested, for example, by non-existent characters, like Betsey Trotwood Copperfield in *David Copperfield*). The concern with such states and moments, according to Rainsford, can be seen to imply Dickens’s notion of a non-earthly heaven even if this is largely unknowable. Relating the development of this idea in Dickens’s fiction to the plots of the novels, Rainsford claims that very often in Dickens, life on earth is seen as “a middle space,” that is, a transitional or liminal moment or period. The recurrent attention to orphans and to the question of origins in Dickens’s plotting, for instance, attests to his enveloping uncertainty about the beginnings and endings of life. Rainsford explores various dimensions of the question of origins in Dickens through the 1853 essay, “Where We Stopped Growing,” using it as further evidence of Dickens’s vision of human life on earth as “a middle state . . . over as soon as it begins,” and focusing on Dickens’s interest in what is called in *David Copperfield* “that tremendous region” of existence before birth and after death, which has much in common with, but is also distinct from, the Christian afterlife. David Copperfield, Rogue Riderhood, and Paul Dombey are among the characters whom Rainsford sees as having or dramatizing Wordsworthian “intimations” of this “other world”: he argues that through them Dickens was asking himself what heaven might be like. However, Rainsford argues, unlike Wordsworth’s, Dickens’s ideas come from religious and psychological emptiness, so that the liminal state, that is, human life on earth as “in between” other forms of existence, is one of deprivation rather than plenitude.

Using a Derridean framework, Hope’s “*Little Dorrit*: A Grammarology of the Books of Birth, Death, and Marriage” argues that the novel’s

obvious Platonic and Christian comedic trajectory, that is, the movement from shadows and darkness to light and from imprisonment to freedom, is partially undermined by the presence in the text of ambiguities and paradoxes as well as reversals of this pattern, as the novel reinscribes but also subverts conventional oppositions of darkness and light, imprisonment and freedom, or life and death. Hope's argument suggests that the rites of passage, or liminal states of birth, marriage, and death, cannot be easily separated from each other, as the contiguity of the three church "Registers" which record the birth, marriage, and (future) death of Amy Dorrit underlines. Hope claims that the subversion of the comedic trajectory of the novel cannot be seen merely as a Foucauldian inversion of Platonic metaphysics; instead, he proposes that the many "scenes of writing" in *Little Dorrit* should be seen as producing and staging "a metaphysical crisis," since writing in the novel is a source of both truth and obfuscation, movement, but also stasis. Hope first traces selected scenes demonstrating the text's dramatization of the upward movement from places of enclosure, darkness, and imprisonment to liberation, light, and freedom, before examining key moments where the "scene of writing" compromises this positive vision of transcendence.

In "Death in Other Words: Dickens's Novels and the Euphemism Boom," Sönmez is also concerned with Dickens's ambivalent view of transcendence. Her essay analyses death euphemisms in four of Dickens's novels in the context of two main areas of investigation. Firstly, it asks whether the Victorian surge in the use of death euphemisms (that theorists have posited) really existed, whether Dickens's novels support the dates proposed for the start of this fashion, and whether the four novels record a growth in the frequency of these euphemisms across time. Secondly, it tries to elucidate the possible sources and early adopters of this language behaviour, by asking if users and types of euphemisms are associated in the novels with certain types of religion, profession, class, or behaviour. For the purpose of monitoring change in time, Sönmez examines death euphemisms in Dickens's earliest and latest novels and two novels from the intervening decades, that is, in *The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club* (1837), *Bleak House* (1853), *Great Expectations* (1861), and *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* (1870). She notes that these four novels provide evidence that conflicts with claims that linguistic tactics implying a taboo-like anxiety about death or a denial of it started to increase dramatically in the 1830s or 40s and became common in the late nineteenth century. Sönmez argues that while an increase in the frequency of death euphemisms in the first three of the novels could be seen as supporting these claims, the more dramatic decrease displayed in the last of them

must force us to see these changes in frequency as being related to the artistry of the writer rather than as direct responses to speech habits in the world outside the novels. She notes that *Edwin Drood* goes against another death-related trend, too, in showing an “attraction of repulsion” to death in its near-obsession with images of graves and crypts and its references to the dust or “ashes” of dead bodies, at exactly the time when “the dying of death” (the hiding of death events and the silencing of references to death) was becoming evident in Victorian England. In fact, in Sönmez’s view, for Dickens as novelist and satirist, death was the one immovable truth and the only certainty in life, against which all human behaviour was assessed. Death euphemisms in his work, however, do not necessarily suggest the religious belief that death is simply a transition to another life, a form of sleep, or a peaceful, happy entrance into heaven, and so they partially conflict with a positive view of the liminal stage of death.

In Part II, “Growing Up and Marrying Unconventionally,” Waters and Hollington examine threshold moments like growing-up rituals and marriages, highlighting respectively the ambiguity of Dickens’s representation of growing up, and the absence of conventional marriages and families in his work. In “Dickens, ‘First Things,’ and the Rites of Growing Up,” Waters bases her discussion on the article by Charles Dickens and George Augustus Sala, “First Fruits,” and Dickens’s articles “Where We Stopped Growing” and “New Year’s Day” and analyses three different types of rituals or rites of passage associated with childhood, adolescence, and New Year’s Day. Waters uses Victor Turner’s concept of liminality as a state of transition or “in-betweenness,” and, unlike the other authors in this collection who often suggest the confusion or failure of liminal states and rituals of transition and the fragility of community, she takes examples of successful transitions from childhood (as exemplified in the first pair of trousers, the first picture book, the first play), adolescence (the first dissipation, the first time one is treated as a man), and New Year’s Day (a variety of fictional and autobiographically-based moments). However, defining a “liminal” condition as any “betwixt or between” situation or object, Waters shows that in the rituals of transition which she analyses, even if the transitions are successful, there is still a blurring of the lines between the child’s recollected perceptions and the adult’s remembered emotions, although the latter do not undermine or fundamentally qualify the former, as they do in Charles Lamb. Like Rainsford, Waters evokes the importance in and for Dickens of retaining a connection to the world and feelings and sensations of childhood, which suggests finally that Dickens’s representations of growing up retain a certain ambivalence, since he believes in the value of childhood’s

imagination and fancy as well as of the adult's more mature reflections.

Hollington's "'Ji': Minor Characters at Dickens's Weddings" focuses on the role of minor characters in the *rite de passage* represented by weddings in Dickens. Starting with W. H. Auden's "Musée des Beaux Arts," and using and modifying Woloch's approach to minor characters in *The One versus the Many*, Hollington takes Greimas's concepts of the *adjuvants* and *opposants*, as well as Jakobson's distinction between the metonymical and the metaphorical, to offer a reading of the significance of the role of such secondary characters as pew-openers, like Mrs. Miff in *Dombey and Son* for example, who appear at Dickensian weddings, especially when these ceremonies are represented as unsuccessful *rites de passage*. Like Rainsford and Tambling, Hollington contends that there is a confusion of weddings with other rituals of transition, such as those of death, especially in *Dombey and Son*, where the Dombey wedding is connected to the deaths of Paul Dombey and his mother. This confusion of normally differentiated liminal states—of birth and death or marriage and death—undermines the ritual of transition as the passage into a happier state in the case of weddings or the state of life and existence in the case of birth. Dickens's "queer weddings" and the absence of traditional families at successful wedding ceremonies indicate his challenge to conventional ideas of such ceremonies. Hollington adds a more general historical dimension to these failed transitions by evoking the changes in the situation of pew-openers in the 1830s and 1840s, and the connection between the renting of pews and social class. He shows, furthermore, that Dickens's novels, with their emphasis on minor characters in the theatrical representations of wedding scenes, at times offer an alternative to the capitalist ethic of competition, although at other times these same characters seem to be on the side of capitalism and class hierarchies. This inclusion of significantly socially marginal characters, according to Hollington, demonstrates a tendency in Dickens towards a democratic narrowing of gaps.

Part III, "Births and Deaths: Challenging Progress," concentrates on Dickens's scepticism and/or ambivalence about aspects of the progressiveness of Victorian society related to social reform and the conflict between conventional moral codes and such theories as evolution. Tambling's "The Workhouse World of *Oliver Twist*: Mother, Orphan, Foundling" links the problematic *rite de passage* of birth to the changes in the legal system in relation to the registration of births in the 1830s and 1840s. He begins by evoking the opening chapters of *Oliver Twist*, *Dombey and Son*, and *David Copperfield* and outlines the increasing interest Dickens has in seeing how birth and death are interrelated. Like Hollington and Kennedy, Tambling

suggests that liminal states or rituals of transition—here those of birth and death—may be fused or confused. For *Oliver Twist*, *Paul Dombey* and *David Copperfield*, and perhaps for Pip in *Great Expectations*, Tambling contends, the transition from non-existence to existence is complicated and uncertain, partly because birth seems inevitably mixed with death and partly because fathers are excluded from the scene or event of birth. Moreover, Tambling links these unsatisfactory, unclear, or confused liminal states of birth and death with political and cultural changes, which can also be seen as liminal stages for Victorian culture more generally. Specifically, in *Oliver Twist*, Tambling links the rites of passage represented by the hero's birth, Agnes Fleming's death, and the marriage which did not take place between Agnes and Oliver's father, to the 1837 Registration Act (which required the registration of births, marriages, and deaths) as well as to the 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act. Both Acts were symptoms of the new disciplinary regime of the 1830s, which included the reform of the workhouse system and the continued work of the Foundling Hospital. Tambling's essay thus suggests that the social narratives of Dickens's novels, and his interest in children who are abandoned or at risk, ascribe the unsatisfactory or incomplete rituals of birth and marriage largely to social institutions or elements of infrastructure like the workhouse, the law, or the prison.

In "Dodging Nell: Dickens and Resilience," Catalan examines the larger social implications of liminality through the idea of "resilience" in relation to some of Dickens's important but in some cases also secondary characters. She begins by defining "resilience" and then locates Dickens's model of resilience in relation to two mid-Victorian works, Samuel Smiles's 1860 *Self Help* and Alexander Bain's 1865 *The Emotions and the Will*. She detects in Dickens's novels a tension between conventional ideas of progress and morality and a more socially liminal idea of resilience. Catalan argues that the novels are characterized by both the Victorian doctrine of self-development based on the strict ethical and moral code underlying the notion of progress and alternative patterns of behaviour deviating from this established set of abilities and attitudes. The author relates resilience in Dickens's characters to this Victorian narrative of progress, which is based on qualities like "stoical endurance" and on the idea of resolution and duty (as in the cases of Amy Dorrit and Little Nell); but Catalan also sees resilience as embodied in unorthodox alternative patterns of behaviour. These alternative patterns can be seen in eccentric but resilient characters like the Artful Dodger in *Oliver Twist* or the Micawbers in *David Copperfield*. Strikingly, like those minor characters at Dickensian weddings identified by Hollington as creators of positive

versions of *communitas* or indicators of successful rituals of transition, the characters whom Catalan discusses in her second (unconventional) category are also socially marginal, lower-class, or not easy to categorize socially, and they also help foster odd but successful versions of *communitas*.

Kitsi-Mitakou's "'A Little Life among the Multitude of Lesser Deaths': Productive Life Cycles in Little Dorrit" examines Dickens's liminal position in relation to governmental policies of the recycling of waste as well as of the problems of sanitation and disease. The first law of thermodynamics inspired the idea that the nation, like nature, could move in never-ending cycles of growth and decay and be a self-sufficient mechanism when there was the least possible government intervention. Dickens's *Little Dorrit*, Kitsi-Mitakou argues, draws the line between closed systems with an obstinate adherence to rubbish/money (reflected in the novel's capitalist titan, Mr. Merdle and his ghastly death) and open systems which imply a productive reappropriation of dirt and dust. It is Amy Dorrit's insightful literal and metaphorical investment in dirt, liminal spaces (the Marshalsea prison), and liminal characters (Maggie, "Dirty Dick," Old Nandy) that provides an individualistic example of how happiness might be achieved and reform carried out. Like Lord Palmerstone, Little Dorrit knows well that dirt is nothing but "matter out of place," and she exerts herself in productive recycling (metaphorically turning death into life); unlike Victorian politicians, however, in her productive employment of dirt she is first concerned with the poor, the needy, and the dirty. The story of Amy, Kitsi-Mitakou concludes, suggests Dickens's wavering position as far as the non-interference policy of the state is concerned. While in his journalism Dickens proclaimed the importance of efficient state assistance in fighting disease and death, his fictional solution to the problem of sanitation in *Little Dorrit* relies on individual initiative and reflects in part both Lord Palmerston's views on the productive appropriation of dirt as well as the Spencerian principle of non-interference.

In "Evolutionary Murder: Death by Water and the Struggle for Existence in Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend*," Sage is also concerned with the intrusion of the world of the dead into the world of the living. The first section, entitled "Triangular Fictions," elucidates the "dead man conceit" of the title of *Our Mutual Friend* where a third party (dead, fictional, or "real"—in fictional terms—and thus transitional) acts as a means of linking two other characters, sometimes eventually bringing them together in marriage, and sometimes leading them to death or almost to death, thus creating a liminal register in the novel. Similarly, in the second section of

the essay, the Gothic elements of the novel show the Gothic dyad of Self and Other becoming triadic in the various versions of the “ghostly resurrection” which the novel offers. The most notable examples can be traced in the multiplicity of Gothic interrelations between Eugene Wrayburn, Mortimer Lightwood, Bradley Headstone, and Rogue Riderhood, which end with the deaths of two of the four and the almost-death of a third, meaning that once again the world of the dead intersects with the world of the living. Finally, in the third section, these triangular fictions and Gothic leitmotifs are seen as the outworks of what Sage interprets as the novel’s denial of the Victorian rhetoric of progress or Providential design: this denial is seen in the novel’s allusions to Darwin’s theory of evolution and the idea of “the survival of the fittest” and other allusions to Natural Science and Natural History. *Our Mutual Friend*, Sage concludes, is Dickens’s last bleak attack on Victorian progress since the novel reveals both uncertainty about social progress and the fear of regression to an earlier stage of human evolution. The novel suggests that life is nothing but a movement downwards and backwards: you must die, Dickens implies, to reverse descent. Like Catalan’s essay, Sage’s analysis reveals Dickens’s scepticism in his final completed novel about conventional Victorian ideas of progress, and his tendency to see the boundary between life and death as porous.

The essays in Part IV of the book, “Unorthodox Lives and Deaths: Battling with Genre,” show Dickens adopting a liminal position in relation to the conventions of realism and of certain sub-genres of the novel. They focus on how Dickens mixes the rhetoric of comedy, melodrama, and some of the key texts of Christian belief with realistic representation in some of his most important deathbed scenes, or how he borrows from and redefines the genres of the Newgate novel and detective fiction, often blurring the boundaries between life and death. Parker’s “Dickens’s Deathbeds” examines the development of Dickens’s portrayals of deathbed scenes from *Oliver Twist* to *Our Mutual Friend*. Although Dickens integrates a basic Christian theology into his deathbed scenes, Parker argues, he does not rely exclusively on conventional religious experience. When describing the deaths of estimable characters, Dickens disregards the conventions of realistic nineteenth-century fiction and his readers’ expectations about the way death might be portrayed and draws upon sources alien to realism, such as melodrama, sensation fiction, and, above all, upon the traditional Christian beliefs to be found in the rhetoric of Jeremy Taylor’s *Holy Dying* (1650-51) or John Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress* (1684). Consequently, Dickens’s deathbed scenes may be seen as a *bricolage* of various types of discourse. These scenes, according to

Parker, show an increasing mastery of technique and a corresponding increase in subtlety, as assertive religious doctrine is blended with comedy, powerful imagery and leitmotifs which echo throughout the text, keen-eyed observation of characteristic behaviour, and narratorial intrusion that stands apart from what is being described. In Dickens's deathbed scenes, moreover, the implicit and/or explicit allusions to the Christian afterlife or to some form of life beyond birth and death bring together these two liminal states: death in this world means life and rebirth in another, thus mingling the "immediate" and the "transcendental," according to Parker.

In "Life and/or Death: Lineage versus Environment in *Oliver Twist*" Kennedy links *Oliver Twist* to the Newgate novel, notably to *Paul Clifford*, and she offers a comparison of the two versions of identity to be found in Dickens's novel: a Platonic-type view of character as innate, not influenced by experience or environment, versus an environmental model which suggests that character is primarily moulded by these factors. In *Oliver Twist*, Kennedy argues, Dickens exploits the deterministic model which presupposes that character is influenced by environment, as in the Newgate novel, in order to criticize the deleterious effects of institutions like the workhouse, charity schools, etc. As Oliver's final triumph attests, however, the model that finally dominates, Kennedy concludes, is the one which presupposes that character traits are innate, a product of heredity and inheritance, unchanged by the environment. Like Hollington, Rainsford, and Tambling, Kennedy examines the confusion of states of birth/life and death in Dickens, arguing that Oliver may be said never to truly be born or to grow up as an independent character. From his birth, which is barely differentiated from death at the beginning of the novel, his life is scripted in two different ways, both of which seem to lead to death rather than to full existence: either he is destined to be hanged as a criminal and a thief, like the heroes of Newgate novels like *Paul Clifford*, or he is destined to be identified as the true son of two dead parents, a clone of their virtue. In neither case does he truly live. For much of the novel, Oliver remains on the margins of society, falls between the interstices of different social groups and classes, and at times exists on society's lowest rungs, in the workhouse or the criminal underworld. Even when Oliver finally escapes this liminal state he finds himself in the death-like stasis or "heaven" of the Brownlow-Maylie rural idyll at the end of the novel.

While Kennedy argues that Oliver's life seems like death, Vara suggests in "The Story of an Absence: The Writerly Mystery of *Edwin Drood*," that the disappearance of a fictional character or the death of the author sometimes seems, paradoxically, to intimate continued life. Her



essay uses Roland Barthes's distinction in *S/Z* between "readerly" and "writerly" texts to propose an original reading of *Edwin Drood* as a "writerly" work that transgresses the boundaries of classical detective fiction. Vara situates *Edwin Drood* in the context of the historical development of the detective novel from the nineteenth century onwards, and she takes her title from Tzvetan Todorov's contention that in a classic detective novel the story of the crime is "the story of an absence" necessary to initiate the story of the investigation and its movement towards resolution. She goes on to argue, however, that, because of Dickens's death and Edwin Drood's absence, the novel eludes these terms. Seeing *Edwin Drood* as an "anti-detective novel," Vara claims that both the conventions of reading classic detective fiction and the transition between life and death (the probable death of Drood and the certain death of Dickens) are put under erasure, since Drood may have been intended to be either dead or alive at the end of the novel, and since Dickens lives again through his works and specifically through the many attempts which have been made to finish the novel which he left unfinished. If Kennedy argues that *Oliver Twist* may be said to never be truly born, because like a Newgate novel hero he seems to be destined to be hanged, or because, alternatively, he seems fated to be identified as the rather lifeless true son of two dead parents, Vara maintains that Edwin Drood may be said never to truly die, as he is endlessly reborn in the numerous rewritings of the novel. As an unfinished, anti-detective crime story, *Edwin Drood* is in that sense a writerly text that generates ever more stories and that exists as a liminal text in relation to classic detective fiction and the death-of-the-author debate.

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**PART I:**

**CHRISTIAN BIRTHS, MARRIAGES,  
AND DEATHS CONTESTED**

# CHAPTER ONE

## POSTHUMOUS AND PRENATAL DICKENS

### DOMINIC RAINSFORD

This paper takes its starting point from the end of the first chapter of *David Copperfield*—the chapter that culminates in David’s birth. Before that, the small household at Blunderstone has unexpectedly been invaded by the abrasive Aunt Betsey, who has never been there before, never seen David’s mother, but has a very specific expectation concerning the imminent addition to the family:

“And *she*. How is *she*?” said my aunt, sharply.

Mr. Chillip laid his head a little more on one side, and looked at my aunt like an amiable bird.

“The baby,” said my aunt. “How is she?”

“Ma’am,” returned Mr. Chillip, “I apprehended you had known. It’s a boy.”

My aunt said never a word, but took her bonnet by the strings, in the manner of a sling, aimed a blow at Mr. Chillip’s head with it, put it on bent, walked out, and never came back. She vanished like a discontented fairy; or like one of those supernatural beings, whom it was popularly supposed I was entitled to see; and never came back any more.

No. I lay in my basket, and my mother lay in her bed; but Betsey Trotwood Copperfield was for ever in the land of dreams and shadows, the tremendous region whence I had so lately travelled; and the light upon the window of our room shone out upon the earthly bourne of all such travellers, and the mound above the ashes and the dust that once was he, without whom I had never been. (*DC* 11)

There is only one more reference to this imaginary female child in the novel, in Chapter 15, “I make another Beginning,” where Aunt Betsey has warmed to David to such a degree that he hopes that he may come to “take equal rank in her affections with my sister Betsey Trotwood” (*DC* 185). Here we see Dickens playing with the idea that both aunt and nephew still regard this “sister” as somehow a reality. But it is more than a joke.