Three Comically-Absurd Female Characters in Dickens: Mrs. Nickleby, Flora Finching, and Mrs. Wilfer

Dr. Richard Andretta
Professor of English,
College of Languages and Translation,
Al Imam Muhammad bin Saud Islamic University,
Riyadh,
Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.
dickens3000@yahoo.com

An absurd character is a character that behaves in a fantastic or unusual manner and as such becomes comical. The word "absurd" has acquired a special meaning through the influence of the Theater of the Absurd and the playwrights of the absurd such as Beckett, Ionesco, Adamov, and Pinter, among others. The character in an absurd play is one that behaves in a funny, ridiculous, or mechanical way; is placed in a situation that makes no sense to him; or finds that his world has all of a sudden gone crazy and become totally incomprehensible to him. As a result, the character becomes motivated by a feeling of angst or anguish because he believes that the universe is devoid of meaning, purpose, or pattern and that man is alone in this universe. His absurd actions are, therefore, an expression of what the critics have called his "metaphysical anguish."[1] Moreover, in such a meaningless world, a character's actions and words are not subject to conventional morality, objective verification, or logical assessment.

The absurd characters in Dickens likewise behave in a senseless, apparently inexplicable or mechanical way. However, contrary to what has often been said about Dickens that his female characters are flat and lack depth, individuality, and the ability to surprise, the three characters under discussion are individualized by their very eccentricity and absurdity. We realize that their absurdity is the result of some personal frustration which arises from a mistaken belief that they have been unjustly deprived of a right or privilege that should have been theirs, such as wealth and social status (as in the case of Mrs. Wilfer); or of an erroneously conceived notion that they are exceptionally smart, intelligent, and wise but that these qualities have not received their due appreciation and recognition by the people around them (as in the case of Mrs. Nickleby); or of a feeling that what they have missed or lost through no fault of their own can never be retrieved or recovered (as in the case of Flora Finching.)

Dickens, thus, provides these absurd characters with a psychological motivation that goes a great way towards explaining the absurdity of their behavior and the illusions they harbor and continue to live by. This does not mean that in the absence of such frustrations they wouldn't behave in an absurd manner. They still would because absurdity comes naturally to them. However, the psychological motivation provided by Dickens serves to extenuate their mental aberrations and behavioral eccentricities.

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[1] Martin Esslin, *The Theater of the Absurd*(Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1970), 22-4.

Dickens shows how these characters impose their own twisted version of reality on life and the people around them in order to compensate for what they have lost, missed, or been deprived of. He makes it clear that in so doing, these characters cause problems, and a great deal of pain, embarrassment, or unhappiness to the people closest to them. As in real life, these characters either never come to a realization of what is wrong with them and of the pain, gloom, and unhappiness they cause with their behavior; or come to only a partial realization of their drawbacks and their outcomes so that they begin to change, though they still retain some of the traces of their initial condition. In the rare cases when they come to a full realization of what is wrong with them, they still cannot change: it is too late for them.

These characters thus impose their idiosyncratic vision of reality through certain fantasies which they have developed. They mediate these fantasies between themselves and the unpleasant realities of their lives. These fantasies have, however, the paradoxical result of giving these characters some temporary satisfaction but they also continue their suffering for they cannot provide a permanent solution to their problems.

It is the purpose of this study to discuss the various aspects and manifestations of absurdity of these three female characters and show that their absurdity goes beyond the simply funny or ridiculous. This study argues that these female characters' absurdity is their way of coping with their frustrations and unfulfilled lives.

Mrs. Nickleby has always felt that she "might have married better" (44)[2], and that her improvident husband, and not her ill-judged advice to him, is responsible for her poverty and misery. She therefore deplores her fate. There is, however, some indication in the novel that her husband was indeed gullible (p. 225).

1. Mrs. Nickleby (in the novel *Nicholas Nickleby,* 1838-9)

Following her husband's death, Mrs. Nickleby finds herself in straitened financial circumstances. She has therefore to leave the countryside in which she has lived all her life and come to London to seek the assistance of her brother-in-law Ralph Nickleby. She is poor and has to cope with a new environment and meet a different set of people. Hence her self-indulgence in fantasies and absurd reminiscences. As Jill Muller has written: "Detached from rural traditions and extended families, even those with no apparent social or financial motivation for pretense are engaged in self-creation" (XX111)[3]. If we add to this her ignorance, weak head, inclination to vanity, and easy accessibility to flattery to compensate for her feeling of deprivation and destitution, we will be able to understand the psychological reasons behind her garrulity, digressions, absurd anecdotes, and refusal to accept logical explanations.

Nineteenth-century society with its pervasive materialism and acquisitiveness fostered greed and selfishness. As Raymond Williams has written: "It is the way in which social institutions, particular social purposes, reshape not only the physical but the moral world."[4] This

[2] *Nicholas Nickleby.* All textual references are to the Barnes and Noble Classics edition (New York: Barnes and Noble, 2005).

[3] Introduction to the Barnes and Noble edition of *Nicholas Nickleby*.

[4] *The English Novel from Dickens to Lawrence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), 46.

new morality based on possessions and a large income causes Mrs. Nickleby to feel bitter about her own poverty and induces her to indulge in her fantasies about wealth and she shows that she is endowed with a poetic imagination (p.133).

In defining Extroversion and Introversion as traits of the personality, the psychologists Floyd H. Allport and Gordon W. Allport have written:

The extroverted person is one whose mental images, thoughts, and problems find ready expression in overt behavior. Mental conflicts trouble him but little, and he appears to have nothing to repress or to avoid. The introvert, on the other hand, dwells largely in a realm of imagination, creating inwardly a more desirable ideal world rather than adjusting himself outwardly to the real one. He is not always a misfit, however, for given sufficient ability, his internal or covert reactions may be the vision of the poet or artist. (5)[5]

One of the major sources of the absurdity in Mrs. Nickleby's personality is her alternation between extroversion and introversion. She is unable to find a mooring for her feelings, thoughts, and inclinations. Thus, while we find her prattling on apparently insignificant topics or giving illogical explanations, we realize that this prattling is the outcome of her having conjured up an internal and ideal world which is the "vision of the poet or artist."

Dickens pokes fun at Mrs. Nickleby who is supposed to stand for his own mother whom he harshly criticizes for her vanity and selfishness and takes revenge on her because, as is well known, she insisted on his continuing to work in the blacking factory instead of going back to school even after his father's affairs had improved.[6] However, in spite of being portrayed as ridiculous, Mrs. Nickleby is the most interesting character in the novel. She is, to quote Jill Muller again, "The imaginative heart of the novel, the antidote to both artifice and ruthless practicality, and the hilariously fertile source of inexhaustible comic life" (xxxi). Although she is never seriously involved in the major conflicts in the novel, her hilariously funny anecdotes and her unexpected and bizarre responses to her environment have the effect of validating the comic resolution of the novel and imparting to its action and the dashing exploits of Nicholas an aura of the quixotic which rescues the novel from being too solemnly serious or sentimental.

The anecdotes she is so fond of telling are replete with such irrelevant or trivial details as to destroy the effect she intended to convey. She herself strays from her original purpose in telling the anecdote and loses herself in the maze of details she spins out. Nevertheless, she unwittingly conveys an impression or reveals an impulse that is not part of her anecdote's original intention. Thus, in the anecdote about the horse, for example, she sidetracks the purpose of her narration through the unnecessary details with which she concludes it. However, the account she gives of the horse which dropped dead "and that your poor papa said he hadn't had

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[5] Allport, Floyd H., and Gordon W. Allport. "Personality Traits: Their Classification and Measurement III. *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology 16* (1921): 6-40. *Classics in the History of Psychology.* March 2000 http://psychclassics.yorku.ca/Allport/Traits/

[6] See, for example, Edmund Wilson, *The Wound and the Bow* (Athens, Ohio: Oxford University Press, 1947), 7-8.

any corn for a fortnight, (134) indicates that she had felt sorry for the horse and implies a criticism of the owner or driver for having neglected to feed the poor animal. Such feelings serve to humanize Mrs. Nickleby. She is not a mere doll, or a robot that utters all kinds of funny nonsense when a button is pressed, but a human being who can be deeply moved by the account of a horse being starved to death, so much so that she still remembers the incident. Thus, in spite of her creator, Mrs. Nickleby shows and will continue to show qualities that he never thought she had or intended her to have.

Mrs. Nickleby clings to her naïve optimism which rejects corroborated facts in favor of absurd speculations and ignores logical possibilities in favor of preposterous or far-fetched explanations (141). She seems to be constantly recreating the world around her by establishing incongruous relations among heterogeneous elements of experience, and, as a result, she offers a fragmented picture of her environment or her society, a picture which unconsciously reflects the fragmentation occurring in Victorian society as a result of the excessive and selfish pursuit of gain and personal aggrandizement and the ever-widening gap between social classes (p. 141).

In addition to having a poetic imagination which intuits relationships among disparate things, she can also spin a good yarn (267-8). When she reads an advertisement in a newspaper that a married lady needs a genteel young person as companion, she immediately conjures up a glorious future for Kate, a future not unlike the story of Jane Eyre and Mr. Rochester (p. 272). Mrs. Nickleby's fantasies cannot therefore be subjected to moral judgment. They inhabit a world of the absurdly comical and are outside the sphere of what is logical, moral, or objectively verifiable. Her fantasies follow their own inner logic which is amoral and not accountable to reason because it stems from the subconscious and is therefore structured according to the way the subconscious is structured: seemingly chaotic, unpredictable, and startling. As Mark Ford has written: "But characters like Mrs. Nickleby, or Mrs. Gamp in *Martin Chuzzlewit*, or Flora Finching in *Little Dorrit* body forth in their free flowing monologues a kind of syntax of the subconscious as striking as that of Joyce's Molly Bloom" (xviii)[7].

Another way by which Mrs. Nickleby is made to expose her absurdity is through anti-climax or bathos which has a hilarious effect: Ralph Nickleby's villainy is made more monstrous, according to Mrs. Nickleby, because her eighteen pence went into his pocket (pp. 413-4). Subjecting Ralph Nickleby to Mrs. Nickleby's comic absurdity takes away from his menacing stature and reduces the possibilities of his being able to cause real harm to Nicholas and Kate. No villain who has been the target of Mrs. Nickleby's comic incongruities can really be dangerous.

Her vanity leads her to the absurd logic that she has to prove to Nicholas that their next-door neighbor is neither an idiot nor a dotard but a sensible gentleman who was driven to behave in an awkward manner under the influence of her mature charms. She therefore determines to vindicate the "abused gentleman" (513) by dressing herself in a way calculated to attract him and justify his infatuation with her. In other words, she wants to prove to her son that the gentleman in question was justified in the passion he feels for her and that she is capable of arousing such passion. She then disregards all the weird and demented actions of her neighbor and explains

[7] Introduction to the Penguin Classics edition of *Nicholas Nickleby* (London: Penguin Books, 1999.)

them away as manifestations of his arduous passion for her: "They [the madman's proposals] must be gratifying and agreeable to one's feelings" (522).

As usual, her imagination never fails her and she weaves a fantastic yarn about him to the effect that his keepers are plotting against him to gain possession of his property and that he is not really mad but, like Hamlet, is feigning madness: "There's a great deal too much method in his madness." (525) Thus she recreates reality by imposing upon it a subjectively absurd interpretation that satisfies her own vanity. Moreover, the analogy she forges between Hamlet's situation and that of her crazy neighbor has the effect of reversing the relationship between life and fiction. Hamlet's story is indeed similar to the story she invents about the crazy neighbor but not to the real facts about him. Hamlet feigns madness in order to deceive and be able to watch his uncle who has killed his father and usurped his kingdom; likewise, the keepers of the fictitious story she has invented are plotting to usurp her neighbor's property. Hamlet's story acquires the status of reality because this is what really happened in *Hamlet*, whereas the story she fabricates about the crazy neighbor which is supposed to be a realistic and true story but is not so remains in the realm of fiction. Thus, Mrs. Nickleby fictionalizes reality and factualizes fiction.

Thus, in spite of Mrs. Nickleby's exasperating qualities which Dickens magnifies and keeps repeating throughout the novel in order to poke fun at her, and, through her, take revenge vicariously on his mother, Mrs. Nickleby emerges as a woman who can triumph over ridicule and transcend the blemishes of garrulity, illogicality, vanity and digression through following her own system of logic and by showing that she has an artist's gift of creating poetry from her environment, and weaving yarns from the facts she culls from newspapers. She thus recreates herself in her own terms.

2. Flora Finching (in the novel *Little Dorrit*, 1855-7)

Flora Finching is one of the most memorable and amusing characters in the novel. Although she has "grown to be very broad … and short of breath … Flora whom he [Arthur Clennam] had left a lily, had become a peony. … Flora, who had seemed enchanting in all she said and thought, was diffuse and silly" (125)[8]. She is well past the prime of her life, but she still believes she can be attractive to her ex-sweetheart, Arthur Clennam, who has returned from China after an absence of twenty years. She indulges in girlish behavior and all kinds of absurdity in order to maintain the fantasy that she can revive their romance in spite of the fact that she is aware that the past is irretrievable. When they were very young, Flora and Clennam were very much in love with each other. Clennam's mother, a very gloomy, austere, and heartless woman, however, destroyed their romance by separating them from each other (p.225).

During Clennam's absence, however, Flora married a Mr. Finching who died of the gout a few years later. After his death, Flora moved in with her father, the hypocritical and greedy Christopher Casby. He never shows any pity for any defaulting tenant who may be unable to pay his rent. He is unlike his daughter who is generous, compassionate, and tender-hearted. Flora is naturally unhappy to be constrained to live with such a father: "I returned to Papa's roof and lived secluded if not happy during some years (238); "here's Papa who is always tiresome and

[8] *Little Dorrit*. All textual references are to the World's Classics edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982).

putting in his nose everywhere where he is not wanted" (129). In spite of the company of the eccentric Mr. F's aunt, she feels lonely and desolate. Her world is limited and therefore dreary. She finds consolation in brandy and sherry and incessant babbling. She also reads romantic poetry, mythology, and works of romance and intrigue such as Dumas' *The Man in the Iron Mask* (237) and Otway's *Venice Preserved* (448)—all of which find their way in her endless flow of words.

Flora's garrulity and her inability to control her logorrhea is a reflection of her inability to control the events of her life: being separated from Clennam; her husband dying of the gout; and her having to live in with her obnoxious father. As she drifts along in life, her words and sentences gush forth undirected and uncontrolled by commas, periods, or even common sense.

Dickens, however, feels compassion for her. He demonstrates that her garrulity does have coherence and can, at times, even reveal shrewdness and creativity (p. 238). He also shows that Flora achieves individuality through her very abuse of the rules of punctuation and syntax and that she harnesses language into naming various objects and experiences and a multitude of feelings and impressions simultaneously:

Oh good gracious me I hope you never kept yourself a bachelor so long on my account! Tittered Flora; but of course you never did why should you, pray don't answer, I don't know where I'm running to, oh do tell me something about the Chinese ladies whether their eyes are really so long and narrow always putting me in mind of mother-of-pearl fish at cards and do they really wear tails down their backs and plaited too or is it only the men, and when they pull their hair so very tight off their foreheads don't they hurt themselves, and why do they stick little bells all over their bridges and temples and hats and things or don't they eally do it! (126-7)

Flora also ignores the conventions attaching to time and place travelling from past to present to past in one breath and utterance. She flouts the outside world in favor of a personal fantasy that acknowledges no bounds or barriers but pursues a course which is both creative and self-creative and enables her to cope with what Eric Bentley calls "the daily, hourly, inescapable difficulty of being" (306).[9] She manages to cheer herself up in her loneliness and to put up with an insensitive and senseless father by refusing to take her predicament seriously and minimizing her own importance.[10] She even finds joy and escape in her flights of loquacity, and in forging similes, metaphors, and other tropes by which she romanticizes her life and renders an unpleasant person or event ridiculous. Thus Clennam's mother whom she dislikes because she put an end to her romance with her son "sits glowering at me like Fate in a go-cart" (237); and Flintwinch, Mrs. Clennam's assistant, is "a rusty screw in gaiters" (532). She can even make fun of herself; thus, when Clennam went to China, she became "the statue bride of the late Mr. F" (238). Her disjointed utterances seem like a stream of consciousness by which she tries to combine various fragments of her experience and life.

[9] Ch.9 on 'comedy,' *The Life of the Drama*(New York: Atheneum, 1964), 306.

[10] See Elder Olson, *The Theory of Comedy*(Bloomington, IN, 1968), quoted in *Comedy, Developments in Criticism*, ed. By D.J. Palmer (London: Macmillan, 1984), 151.

In spite of her absurdity and indulgence in fantasies, Flora is not unaware of her deficiencies: "I know I am not what you expected, I know that very well (p.128; and also pages 349 and 520). In his essay titled "Laughter" Henry Bergson has written:"(124) Here, too, it is really a kind of automatism that makes us laugh—an automatism … closely akin to absent-mindedness. To realize this more fully, it need only be noted that a comic character is generally comic in proportion to his ignorance of himself. The comic person is unconscious." [11]The self-knowledge she achieves and her acceptance of her own absurdity enable her to see through her fantasies, perceive her own absurdity, and break free from her merely comic "automatism." In this also she is different from Dickens's other absurd characters who are, until the end, identified with their absurdity, such as Mrs. Micawber, Mrs. Wilfer, and even Mrs. Nickleby.

Just as her abuse of language endows her with freedom and individuality, her kindness to Little Dorrit enhances her stature as a human being. In her treatment of the poor girl, she shows she is generous, kind-hearted, and devoid of snobbery. Even when she realizes she has lost Arthur Clennam to her and that they are going to get married, she harbors no grudge and is selfless enough to wish them happiness (p. 682).

In this passage (If Fancy's fair dreams &ff.) Flora shows she realizes she is absurd or comical: comical not in the sense of just being funny, but in the sense of being ridiculous and therefore causing people to laugh at her. She also knows that she cannot do anything to change. At this juncture, Flora the absurd character, moves into the realm of the tragic. One of most disturbing moments in a person's life is when he realizes he is absurd. At this point comedy and tragedy come very close to each other, only a very thin line separating between them. It is one of Dickens's greatest achievements that he has created a character that belongs to both the realm of tragedy and that of comedy. Flora is comical because she makes people laugh at her endless garrulity, incoherent and disconnected sentences, and, above all, her acting as if she is still an attractive and desirable young girl, although she is neither young, attractive, nor desirable. She is tragic because she is aware of all this about herself but cannot change. She cannot change her eating or drinking habits and lose weight nor can she stop being verbose and incoherent. There is no way out for her and losing Clennam for the second and last time takes away any incentive she may have felt or would feel to change herself. She has to continue to be ridiculous and unattractive while being aware of the impression she makes on other people.

3. Mrs. Wilfer (in the novel *Our Mutual Friend*, 1864-5)

Unlike Mrs. Nickleby or even Flora Finching, Mrs. Wilfer is a very minor character in *Our Mutual Friend*. However, she is so absurd and comical that it is impossible to forget her and one wonders how Dickens could have conceived such a phenomenally eccentric character.

Mrs. Wilfer is also different from either Mrs. Nickleby or Flora Finching in that she has no redeeming qualities that would counterbalance her absurdity. She is neither imaginative nor creative like Mrs. Nickleby nor sympathetic and devoid of snobbishness like Flora. She continues to be comically absurd throughout the novel. However, although she is a flat character that never changes or develops, she constantly surprises us with various manifestations of her eccentric behavior and expressions and the reader is always eager to know what her next reaction or comment will be.

[11] "*An Essay on Comedy" by George Meredith and "Laughter" by Henry Bergson,* ed. Wylie Sypher (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), 71.

Mr. Reginald Wilfer, her husband, nicknamed the cherub because of his "chubby, smooth, innocent appearance" (p. 49) and meekness of character is made the constant victim of Mrs. Wilfer's snobbishness and pretentiousness. He is blamed for having aspired to marry such a superior woman as Mrs. Wilfer. She, on her part, firmly believes she has married beneath her station and deserts and has no other choice but to be resigned to her sad fate. She therefore assumes a stance of heroic endurance and self-sacrificing forgiveness (p. 497).

The cherub is naturally intimidated by her looks and feels he is in the presence of some supernatural evil power: "This was to illuminate the family with her remarkable powers as a physiognomist; powers that terrified R.W. whenever let loose, as being always fraught with gloom and evil which no inferior prescience was aware of" (135). Under the influence of her cobra-like looks, he feels weak and helples.

She exercises a similar intimidating influence on George Sampson. Lavinia. His scared reaction to her looks constitutes one of the greatest sources of comedy in the novel. The way she looks at him makes him, like the cherub, feel guilty, and the poor young man wonders what he could have done to arouse so much hostility on her part. He is not aware that this is her way of asserting her position and making all those around her feel guilty towards her as if they had failed to acknowledge her greatness and the sacrifice she made and is still making every day by being married to a man like Reginald Wilfer (p. 504).

It is reasonable to conclude that Mrs. Wilfer does not look up to her husband and that she feels bitter and disappointed. In spite of his many good qualities, Mr. Wilfer is not physically impressive, has a weak personality, is intellectually limited, and is very poor: "Even Mrs. Wilfer relaxed under the influence of her married daughter [Bella] and seemed in a majestic manner to imply remotely that if R.W. had been a more deserving object, she too might have condescended to come down from her pedestal for his beguilement" (744).

In order to deal with her frustrations, Mrs. Wilfer assumes a majestic stance and a funnily condescending attitude of exalted stateliness: "Gloomy majesty on the part of Mrs. Wilfer" (347); 'Who is it?' said Mrs. Wilfer, in her Act-of-Parliament manner. 'Enter' (55); This arrangement Mrs. Wilfer sanctioned with a stately inclination of her head and wave of her gloves, as who would say, 'Your demerits shall be overlooked, and you shall be mercifully gratified, poor people.'" (133)

Another comical indication of her absurdity is her constantly wearing a handkerchief around her head, tied under her chin, and a pair of gloves which she keeps on even within doors. The head-gear in conjunction with the gloves she considers "as at once a kind of armour against misfortune (invariably assuming it when in low spirits or difficulties) and as a species of full dress" (50). Mrs. Wilfer is thus portrayed as a knight-at-arms who is ready at all times to do battle against his enemies: she is a female Don Quixote doing battles against windmills or other imaginary foes.

She also plays the part of a tragedy queen who, like Lady Macbeth, is dealing with an unpleasant situation and has therefore to wash her hands: "Mrs. Wilfer, washing her hands of the Boffins, went to bed after the manner of Lady Macbeth" (675). Lady Macbeth in the sleep-walking scene was washing her hands of Duncan's blood which, though non-existent but only imagined, was once real and actually stained her murderous hands; whereas Mrs. Wilfer who has assumed the majesty of Lady Macbeth washes her hands off the Boffins whom she dislikes

because she is jealous of them and resents their prosperity. The analogy with Lady Macbeth, the tragic queen of Scotland, further underscores Mrs. Wilfer's absurd pretensions. As Arnold Kettle has noted: "Mrs. Wilfer is every bit as snobbish as Lady Tippins [an aristocratic lady who belongs to the Veneerings' circle[12] , but the joke is, of course, that her snobbery has no real social basis: she is a tragedy-queen out of a tenth-rate repertory company."[13]

Although Mrs. Wilfer enjoys her fantasies, she is also keenly aware of her poverty, her low social status as a result of her poverty and her husband's physical and mental deficiencies. She is thus strongly aware of her lack or her missing out on something important, that her "Jouissance" [enjoyment] of her fantasies is also accompanied with a feeling of pain.

Mrs. Wilfer always suspects that her husband and her daughters, especially Bella, are enjoying themselves behind her back and thus deprive her of her rightful share of the good time they have together. Commenting on Lacan's concept of "Jouissance" and the fear of missing out on it, B. Fink has written: " We think that there must be something better, we say that there must be something better, we *believe* that there must be something better,"[14] and thus we turn nothing into something. Therefore, Mrs. Wilfer's fantasies are not only a source of pleasure and enjoyment to her, but they are also a source of pain and suffering. As Sean Homer has written, paraphrasing Lacan's concept of "Jouissance": "Furthermore, in assuming that it [i.e. Jouissance or" enjoyment"] is there and that we are lacking it, we generally attribute it to the Other. The Other is believed to experience a level of enjoyment beyond our own experience."[15]

The pain and suffering Mrs. Wilfer undoubtedly feels because of her indulging in her obsessive fantasies humanize her. Absurd as she is, she is capable of experiencing feelings that take her back into the realm of the disappointing *real* and enable her to cope with her deprivations, as Sean Homer has also written, paraphrasing Lacan: "Fantasy is one of the ways through which we reconcile ourselves to our dissatisfaction with our Jouissance and the impossibility of the real. Through fantasy we construct our social reality as an answer to the intractability of the real."[16]

Mrs. Wilfer is keenly aware of her poverty but is determined to assert her independence and self-esteem at all costs. Accordingly, she constantly assumes a pompous attitude of stateliness and uncompromising superiority. Unfortunately, she often strikes this attitude vis-à-vis individuals who are, like the Boffins, genuinely amiable and modest. In spite of becoming rich, the Boffins are completely devoid of snobbishness, arrogance, or condescension. Mrs. Wilfer, however, is both envious of their sudden good luck and suspicious of their intentions and

[12] Donald Hawes, *Who's Who in Dickens*(New York: Routledge, 2002), 239.

[13] Arnold Kettle, "Dickens and Class," *Hard Times, Great Expectations, and Our Mutual Friend: A Casebook*, ed. Norman Page(London: The Macmillan Press, 1979), 161.

[14] B. Fink. "Knowledge and Jouissance," in S. Barnard and B. Fink (eds), *Reading Seminar XX: Lacan's Major Work on Love, Knowledge, and Feminine Sexuality.* New York: SUNY Press, p. 35.

[15] *Jacques Lacan,* p.90.

[16] *Jacques Lacan, p.90*

therefore resists every effort on their part to gain her friendship. She continues to fight against the windmills until the end making her behavior and tone of voice the more absurd.

Being a snob herself, she shudders at the idea of people whom she considers her equal or even inferior on the social ladder patronizing her or acting in a condescending manner towards her (p. 132). So, to allow the Boffins to patronize any of her children would be like submitting to slavery and humiliation (p. 675).

When she is invited to dinner by Bella and her husband, she is incapable of relaxing. Her youngest daughter, Lavinia, keeps asking her to "loll" (878) and then makes a witty comment on her mother's stiffness and stateliness: "But why one should go out to dine with one's own daughter or sister as if one's under-petticoat was a backboard, I do not understand" (878). Mrs. Wilfer regards every servant who goes near her "as her sworn enemy, expressly intending to offer her affronts with the dishes and to pour forth outrages on her moral feelings from the decanters" (881). Her greatest fear is to be patronized or be looked upon as an inferior or a poor relative. She is aware of the importance her society sets on money and riches and how this society looks on her and her family. Her hatred and contempt for individuals who, she thinks, belong to higher classer goes undiminished. As T.A. Jackson has written: "Class-contrast and class antagonism, class hatred and class-contempt are woven into the innermost text of *Our Mutual Friend*"[17] She will not give in no matter what but will keep her defenses on the ready and her suspicions alert at all times: "She sat erect at the table, on the right-hand of her son-in-law, as half suspecting poison in the viands and as bearing up with native force of character against other deadly ambushes" (881)

Thus Mrs. Wilfer's fantastic behavior and appearance serve to destabilize the harmony that seems to be attained through the marriage of Bella Wilfer with John Rokesmith, and Lizzie Hexam with Eugene Wrayburn. Mrs. Wilfer cannot be included in the happy solution. She continues to suspect everyone and will not give up her fantasies or her animosities. Dickens seems to imply that in spite of the happy ending, there are still elements in Victorian society that defy solution, resolution, and integration and will continue to be the unyielding "other." As Rosemary Jackson has remarked: "Fantasy is not to do with inventing another non-human world. … It has to do with inverting elements of this world, recombining its constitutive features in new relations to produce something strange, unfamiliar and apparently 'new', absolutely 'other' and different."[18] Mrs. Wilfer's fantasies invert and recombine elements of her world in order to produce a new and "other" reality that satisfies her snobbishness and appeases her frustrations and allows her to maintain her defiant attitude.

Although Mrs. Nickleby, Flora Finching, and Mrs. Wilfer are absurd characters, they enjoy their own eccentricity. Mrs. Nickleby, who never realizes how absurd she is, exalts in her poetic flights and her unwarranted claims to have predicted future events; Flora Finching who, in spite of the fact that she comes to realize how absurd she is, enjoys her own garrulity and stunning her hearers with her flow of incongruous sentences and words; and Mrs. Wilfer, who

[17] T.A. Jackson, *Charles Dickens: The Progress of a Radical* (New York: International Publishers, 1971), 161.

[18] Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (New York: Methuen, 1981), 8.

takes herself very seriously, enjoys acting the victim, intimidating her husband and George Sampson, casting an atmosphere of gloom around her, and assuming a stately and majestic air. This is perhaps why these characters never change. Changing would mean foregoing the pleasure they derive from the fantasies they have created around themselves.

To change would also imply that the society in which these three women live has changed, but we know that if Mrs. Nickleby's society has produced the philanthropic Cheerybles, it has also produced ruthless capitalists like Ralph Nickleby and vultures like Arthur Gride, and will continue to do so since in this society the pursuit of money continues to override every other consideration. In Flora Finching's case, although the Merdles have collapsed, another Mr. Merdle will appear and the Barnacles will continue to run things because it is in the nature of this society to produce people like the Merdles and the Barnacles. The same can be said in the case of Mrs. Wilfer: the Veneerings and Podsnaps are gone but others will take their place for, as J.Hillis Miller has noted "Dickens shows people turned into objects by money. Instead of being a unique and therefore infinitely valuable individual, each person becomes his monetary worth, an object interchangeable with others."[19] If the society that causes the individuals to adopt certain fantasies in order to be able to survive the ugliness and frustrations of their lives does not change, then it would be absurd to expect the individuals to change, just as in The Theater of the Absurd the characters do not change because the universe itself continues to be the same: devoid of meaning, purpose, and design, or, simply, uncaring.

In conclusion, I venture to add that Dickens has created what I may be allowed to call "weird realism" or "the realism of the absurd." The oxymoron points to a kind of realism that portrays weird, eccentric, or absurd characters realistically. Dickens' absurd characters seem to inhabit a world of their own, which, however, is not unconnected to our everyday world and our humdrum existence. Although his eccentric characters behave strangely and come up with bizarre ideas and observations, they are not completely alien to or different from us. They embody an aspect of life which, though it has deviated from the normal, the habitual, or the rational, still belongs to the real because it is motivated by recognizable drives and even familiar aberrations. Real life includes both the normal and the irrational and Dickens' gallery of absurd or eccentric characters has enabled us to witness or experience those aspects of our subconscious which we have kept hidden or suppressed because we are afraid to confront them or too embarrassed to reveal them. By bringing them to the surface and portraying them in the form and actions of such absurd characters, Dickens allows us to contemplate the irrational in us with an amused smile and learn to accept our foibles and our fallibility and forgive ourselves and others.

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[19] J.Hillis Miller, Afterword to the Signet Classics edition of *Our Mutual Friend*, 904.

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