

Mothers & Sons in Dickens's *Barnaby Rudge*

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Barnaby and Mrs. Rudge

· She was about forty—perhaps two or three years older—with a cheerful aspect, and a face that had once been pretty. It bore traces · of affliction and care, but they were of an old date, and Time had smoothed them. Any one who had bestowed but a casual glance on Barnaby might have known that this was his mother, from the strong resemblance between them; but where in his face there was wildness and vacancy, in hers there was the patient composure of long effort and quiet resignation.

One thing about this face was very strange and startling. You could not look upon it in its most cheerful mood without feeling that it had some extraordinary capacity of expressing terror. It was not on the surface. It was in no one feature that it lingered. You could not take the eyes or mouth, or lines upon the cheek, and say, if this or that were otherwise, it would not be so. Yet there it always lurked—something for ever dimly seen, but ever there, and never absent for a moment. It was the faintest, palest shadow of some look, to which an instant of intense and most unutterable horror only could have given birth; but indistinct and feeble as it was, it did suggest what that look must have been, and fixed it in the mind as if it had had existence in a dream.

More faintly imaged, and wanting force and purpose, as it were, because of his darkened intellect, there was this same stamp upon · the son. Seen in a picture, it must have had some legend with it, and would have haunted those who looked upon the canvas. They who knew the Maypole story, and could remember what the widow was, before her husband's and his master's murder, understood it well. They recollected how the change had come, and could call to mind that when her son was born, upon the very day the deed was known, he bore upon his wrist what seemed a smear of blood but half washed out. (49-50)



The Ridges in hiding

· "To labour in peace, and devote her labour and her life to her poor son, was all the widow sought. If happiness can be said at any time to be the lot of one on whom a secret sorrow preys, she was happy now. Tranquillity, resignation, and her strong love of him who needed it so much, formed the small circle of her quiet joys; and while that remained unbroken, she was contented.

For Barnaby himself, the time which had flown by, had passed him like the wind. The daily suns of years had shed no brighter gleam of reason on his mind; no dawn had broken on his long, dark night. He would sit sometimes—often for days together on a low seat by the fire or by the cottage door, busy at work (for he had learnt the art his mother plied), and listening, God help him, to the tales she would repeat, as a lure to keep him in her sight. He had no recollection of these little narratives; the tale of yesterday was new to him upon the morrow; but he liked them at the moment; and when the humour held him, would remain patiently within doors, hearing her stories like a little child, and working cheerfully from sunrise until it was too dark to see." (271)

“the autobiographical fragment” (1840s)

...[T]he offer was accepted very willingly by my father and mother, and on a Monday morning I went down to the blacking warehouse to begin my business life.

It is wonderful to me how I could have been so easily cast away at such an age. It is wonderful to me, that, even after my descent into the poor little drudge I had been since we came to London, no one had compassion enough on me -- a child of singular abilities, quick, eager, delicate, and soon hurt, bodily or mentally -- to suggest that something might have been spared, as certainly it might have been, to place me at any common school. Our friends, I take it, were tired out. No one made any sign. *My father and mother were quite satisfied....*

No words can express the secret agony of my soul as I sunk into this companionship [that of the blacking factory]; and felt my early hopes of growing up to be a learned and distinguished man, crushed in my breast. The deep remembrance of the sense I had of being utterly neglected and hopeless; of the shame I felt in my position; of the misery it was to my young heart to believe that, day to day, what I had learned, and thought, and delighted in, and raised my fancy and my emulation up by, was passing away from me, never to be brought back any more; cannot be written. My whole nature was so penetrated with the grief and humiliation of such considerations, that even now, famous and caressed and happy, I often forget in my dreams that I have a dear wife and children; even that I am a man; and wander desolately back to that time of my life....

I was so young and childish, and so little qualified -- how could I be otherwise? -- to undertake the whole charge of my existence, that, in going to Hungerford-stairs of a morning, I could not resist [spending money on food]....

I know I do not exaggerate, unconsciously and unintentionally, the scantiness of my resources and the difficulties of my life. I know that if a shilling or so were given me by any one, I spent it in a dinner or a tea. I know that I worked, from morning to night, with common men and boys, a shabby child. I know that I tried, but ineffectually, not to anticipate my money, and to make it last the week through.... I know that I have lounged about the streets, insufficiently and unsatisfactorily fed. I know that, but for the mercy of God, *I might easily have been, for any care that was taken of me, a little robber or a little vagabond.... But I kept my own counsel, and I did my work.* I knew from the first, that if I could not do my work as well as any of the rest, I could not hold myself above slight and contempt....

From that hour until this at which I write, no word of that part of my childhood which I have now gladly brought to a close, has passed my lips to any human being. I have no idea how long it lasted; whether for a year, or much more, or less. *From that hour, until this, my father and my mother have been stricken dumb upon it. I have never heard the least allusion to it, however far off and remote, from either of them.* I have never, until I now impart it to this paper, in any burst of confidence, with any one, my own wife not excepted, raised the curtain I then dropped, thank God....



Dickens's Mother, Elizabeth Dickens

- Elizabeth Dickens was "a dear, good mother and a fine woman" according to Charles Dickens

· "Who would not rather see a poor idiot happy in the sunlight, than a wise man pining in a darkened jail!" (*Barnaby Rudge* 208)



Literary Allusions and Allegiances

- Later in life, Dickens recollected that it was his mother who taught him to read English and Latin.
- His friend and biographer John Forster wrote that his mother inspired "his first desire for knowledge and his earliest passion for reading."
- He would sit sometimes—often for days together on a low seat by the fire or by the cottage door, busy at work (for he had learnt the art his mother plied), and listening, God help him, to **the tales she would repeat**, as a lure to keep him in her sight. He had no recollection of these **little narratives**; the tale of yesterday was new to him upon the morrow; but he liked them at the moment; and when the humour held him, would remain patiently within doors, **hearing her stories like a little child**, and working cheerfully from sunrise until it was too dark to see." (271, from earlier slide)



Criminality in family history

➤ “he bore upon his wrist what seemed a smear of blood but half washed out. “ (*Barnaby Rudge* 50)

➤ **LADY MACBETH**

Out, damned spot! out, I say!--One: two: why, then, 'tis time to do't.--Hell is murky!--Fie, my lord, fie! a soldier, and afeard? What need we fear who knows it, when none can call our power to account?--Yet who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him. (5.1)



Barnaby as Romantic Child

- ▶ Their pleasures on these excursions were simple enough...Barnaby's enjoyments were, to walk, and run, and leap, till he was tired; then to lie down in the long grass, or by the growing corn, or in the shade of some tall tree, looking upward at the light clouds as they floated over the blue surface of the sky, and listening to the lark as she poured out her brilliant song...There were birds to watch; fish; ants; worms; hares or rabbits, as they darted across the distant pathway in the wood and so were gone: millions of living things to have an interest in, and lie in wait for, and clap hands and shout in memory of, when they had disappeared. In default of these, or when they wearied, there was the merry sunlight to hunt out, as it crept in aslant through leaves and boughs of trees, and hid far down—deep, deep, in hollow places—like a silver pool, where nodding branches seemed to bathe and sport; sweet scents of summer air breathing over fields of beans or clover; the perfume of wet leaves or moss; the life of waving trees, and shadows always changing. **When these or any of them tired, or in excess of pleasing tempted him to shut his eyes, there was slumber in the midst of all these soft delights, with the gentle wind murmuring like music in his ears, and everything around melting into one delicious dream.** (Barnaby Rudge 372)

▶ CALIBAN

Be not afeard; the isle is full of noises,
Sounds and sweet airs, that give delight and hurt not.
Sometimes a thousand twangling instruments
Will hum about mine ears, and sometime voices
That, if I then had waked after long sleep,
Will make me sleep again: and then, in dreaming,
The clouds methought would open and show riches
Ready to drop upon me that, when I waked,
I cried to dream again.

Romanticized view of the world versus reality

- ▶ · 'A brave evening, mother! If we had, chinking in our pockets, but a few specks of that gold which is piled up yonder in the sky, we should be rich for life.'

'We are better as we are,' returned the widow with a quiet smile. 'Let us be contented, and we do not want and need not care to have it, though it lay shining at our feet.' (*Barnaby Rudge* 373)

▶ **ROMEO**

He jests at scars that never felt a wound.
JULIET appears above at a window

But, soft! what light through yonder window breaks?
It is the east, and Juliet is the sun.
Arise, fair sun, and kill the envious moon,
Who is already sick and pale with grief,

All that glitters is not gold

- ▶ 'You do not know,' said his mother, rising from her seat and laying her hand upon his shoulder, 'what men have done to win it, and how they have found, too late, that it glitters brightest at a distance, and turns quite dim and dull when handled.'

'Ay, ay; so you say; so you think,' he answered, still looking eagerly in the same direction. 'For all that, mother, I should like to try.'

'Do you not see,' she said, 'how red it is? Nothing bears so many stains of blood, as gold. Avoid it. None have such cause to hate its name as we have. Do not so much as think of it, dear love. It has brought such misery and suffering on your head and mine as few have known, and God grant few may have to undergo. I would rather we were dead and laid down in our graves, than you should ever come to love it.'

- ▶ *All that glisters is not gold—
Often have you heard that told.
Many a man his life hath sold
But my outside to behold.
Gilded tombs do worms enfold.
Had you been as wise as bold,
Young in limbs, in judgment old,
Your answer had not been inscrolled
Fare you well. Your suit is cold—
Cold, indeed, and labor lost. (Merchant of Venice 2.7)*

Discussion

- Why do you think Dickens name the novel *Barnaby Rudge: A Tale of the Riots of Eighty*?
- Why does Dickens choose Barnaby as the character through which to personalize the historico-political narrative of the novel?
- Does geographical location—the country vs. the city—play a role in Barnaby's characterization in the novel?



Dickens's 1850s Attitudes & Scandal

- In "the violated letter," Dickens accused Catherine of having a "mental disorder"
- Catherine Dickens's family fought back:
 - Her "aunt Helen Thomson claimed that Dickens had tried to get the doctor who attended Catherine to sanction the accusation of mental illness, but that the latter "sternly refused, saying he considered Mrs. Dickens perfectly sound in mind"."
- Letter newly discovered by John Bowen, in which Catherine's neighbor and friend writes of Dickens:
 - "he discovered at last that she had outgrown his liking. She had borne ten children and had lost many of her good looks, was growing old, in fact. He even tried to shut her up in a lunatic asylum, poor thing! But bad as the law is in regard to proof of insanity he could not quite wrest it to his purpose."