
In ‘The Genealogy of Monsters’, John Bowen discusses Martin Chuzzlewit’s ‘Dickenstruction’ of Western metaphysics, its representation of the role of capital and cities in modern life, its treatment of rhetorical language, and ‘the nature of moral behaviour’ in the world of the novel.

In his introduction, Bowen establishes that Martin Chuzzlewit (henceforth MC) is a novel full of paradoxes, full of confusion about identity, and where the plot depends not on the revelation of past events, as in previous Dickens novels, but rather on the unravelling of new, unpredictable, present events. This last feature is one of the ways in which MC presages later novels, novels usually thought of as ‘modernist’ works. Bowen returns to Dickens’s pre-empting of modernism later in the chapter.

Part I of Bowen's chapter focusses on chapter one of MC. Many previous readers had strongly disliked or even dismissed the first chapter, but Bowen argues that it establishes a world of paradox and confusion, where the idea of interpretation itself is rendered absurd, that characterises the rest of the novel. While the novel claims to be about lineage, ‘history’, in chapter one, is presented as ‘a matter of absurd interpretation and bad puns’.

If our relation to the past is troubled in MC, so is our relation to ‘the city’. In Part II, Bowen begins by observing that MC was written just a year before Baudelaire began publishing his essays on the Paris salons. MC has real similarities with Baudelaire’s essays, similarities ‘which lie in their shared sense of a break in tradition, “of the discontinuity of times and... a feeling… of vertigo in the face of the passing moment” and of the important place of the city in these changes’. In Baudelaire’s essays and Dickens’s novel, the city is a space where identity is a performance. The performance of identity is connected to the novel’s exploration of capitalism and money, as Pecksniff exemplifies ‘the essentially fictional and performative conventions upon which capitalist activity rests’.

MC is a pun-heavy novel, and it puns most extensively on terms of financial exchange, like ‘credit’ and ‘capital’. In Part III Bowen points to many imaginative and funny examples of Dickens’s financial puns, tying Dickens’s punning to the novel’s wider representation of language and rhetoric. Proverbs, allegory, irony and litotes are all, in their different ways, responses to a world where hyperbole threatens to inflate language so much that it all becomes meaningless. In MC, the U.S. exemplifies that threat of inflation: America is, in the novel, ‘a great machine for the production of rhetoric.’

Part IV is concerned with how MC depicts ‘the nature of moral behaviour in the world.’ The novel, Bowen argues, ‘presents modern ethical life as deeply disturbed and disturbing.’ In considering the nature of ‘ethical life’, Bowen begins by interrogating the meaning of the ‘self’. Selfhood in MC, he argues, is profoundly ‘uncanny’: selves are doubled, or defined only in relation to what they are not. Bowen gives many examples of the novel’s doubled, split, uncanny selves. The novel also calls into question the boundary between human and non-human: if humans are distinguished from animals because we have ethics, for example, what do we make of a human like Pecksniff, who is purely selfish? Bowen contextualises these moral questions with reference to the moral philosophy of Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832), who argued that all people are essentially selfish.

Bowen ends the chapter with a reflection on Gamp, who, being most characteristic of the ‘multiple associations... free semiosis [and]... wild jaculations’ that have so frustrated those readers who wish in vain for a more rigid plot, is the great ‘deconstructionist of the novel, an affirmative force. Allegedly a servant, she is the mistress of the book.’