Summary of


In ‘Coincidence as Realist Technique’, Adam Grener argues that the many ‘coincidences’ in Martin Chuzzlewit, while they initially seem antithetical to ‘realism’, are in fact an important part of Dickens’s ‘realist representation’. Because coincidences are unrealistic, previous critics had tended to think that Dickens’s coincidences jarred with his attempt to write realistic fiction. However, Grener uses a more complex definition of ‘realism’ than these previous critics had used. For Grener, ‘realism’ is not simply an attempt to directly copy the world, but an attempt to examine issues in a particular historical period. ‘Selfishness’ was one such issue in Dickens’s contemporary culture, and ‘coincidence’, Grener argues, is a way of exploring how selfishness works, and undermining the assumptions of a selfish mentality. Selfishness is predicated on the belief that we, as individuals, are isolated from other people. Apparent coincidences, when we bump into one another by chance occurrence, reveal that we are not in fact isolated, but interconnected. Coincidences help Dickens represent the interconnectedness of urban life.

Coincidence is not a contrived way of forcing connections where they would never really exist, then, but a deliberate way of revealing connections where we would not normally notice them. In this way, coincidence propels ‘the moral movement of the novel’, which is to ‘overcome the myopia of selfishness by altering the way that characters see their relation to others’. Coincidences reveal that we are not as alienated in society as selfishness would have us think. Indeed, Mark Tapley’s ‘ultimate fate as the proprietor of the Jolly Tapley embodies the novel’s vision of unalienated social space’ because the Jolly Tapley ‘posits a social space that promotes interconnectedness rather than self-interest’.

Grener ends his essay with the observation that ‘understanding the role of coincidence in Martin Chuzzlewit helps us link two strands of Dickens’s development as a novelist.’ Before Martin Chuzzlewit, Grener writes, coincidence was, for Dickens, mostly just a way of creating narrative structure, one that threatened. Construed as a mere ‘plot device’, coincidence threatened, through its improbability, to impinge upon the ‘realist’ aims of Dickens's novels. By the time of Martin Chuzzlewit, though, Dickens was entering the second of his ‘strands’ of ‘development’, as he ‘began to understand that such plot devices [as coincidence] could be utilized in the service of the novel’s realist aims.’ Coincidence also plays a role in the reformist aspect of Dickens’s writing. This is because coincidence not only shows ‘how specific social conditions generate particular types of behaviour’ but, by revealing interpersonal connections where we would not normally expect to find them, demands that we challenge the selfishness generated by those social conditions.