University of Alberta

The Signifying Movement:
Characterization Through Theatrical Gesture
In the Novels of Charles Dickens

by

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A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

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Edmonton, Alberta

Fall 1997

University of Alberta

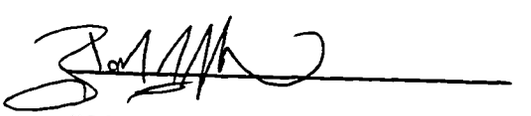
Library Release Form

Name of Author: Barb J. Green

Title of Thesis: The Signifying Movement: Characterization Through Theatrical Gesture in the Novels of Charles Dickens

Degree: Master of Arts

Year this Degree Granted: 1997



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October 2, 1997

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The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research for acceptance, a thesis entitled The Signifying Movement: Characterization Through Theatrical Gesture in the Novels of Charles Dickens submitted by Barb J. Green in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

Juliet McMaster

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September 25, 1997

DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to my mother. I am indebted to her for her invaluable help, encouragement, and ability to listen.

ABSTRACT

The dramatic nature of Dickens's writing is most evident in his abundant use of theatrical gesture as a method of external characterization. Gesture can be defined as the movement that signifies and theatrical gesture implies the employment of the signifying movement with the consciousness of an audience, whether that audience is comprised of other characters interacting with the gesturer or the readers comprehending the author's description of gesture. The great length of Dickens's works, the large number of characters therein, and the original method of serial publication over as much as nineteen months all dictated that the author create characters that remain memorable. Using his imagination to expand upon the stock, coded theatrical gestures of the Victorian stage, Dickens enables his readers to visualize his characters, particularly his minor figures and his villains, performing melodramatic, conscious and unconscious gestures and thereby making them more colourful and memorable.

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INTRODUCTION: THE MOVEMENT THAT SIGNIFIES

Every writer of fiction, though he may not adopt the dramatic form, writes in effect for the stage. --Charles Dickens (*Speeches* 262)

Dickens did indeed write for the stage--a stage upon which he and his characters were the principal entertainers; and his audience was comprised of the readers of his novels. The dramatic nature of Dickens's writing is most evident in his abundant employment of theatrical gesture as a method of characterization. If gesture is defined as the movement that signifies, then the term theatrical gesture implies the employment of the signifying movement with the consciousness of an audience. Dickens, more than most novelists before or since, had an intense awareness of his audience of readers due, largely, to the serial publication of his major novels. Publication by instalment also shaped Dickens's writing methods because his characters had to remain memorable to his audience over as much as a nineteen-month span of monthly, and in some cases, weekly numbers. Many of Dickens's characters, particularly his minor characters, are given a gestural signature which serves to individuate them, and differentiate them from the scores of other performers on the crowded stages of his novels. Dickens's mastery of the use of theatrical gesture not only enhances the performance aspects of his work, but also aids the reader's memory in his crowded, serially published novels.

As a life-long avid theatregoer, performer, director and stage manager, Dickens was very well versed in the techniques of evoking emotion and defining personality through stage gesticulation. Dickens's experiences in the theatre and the nature of theatrical gesture will form the basis of my discussion in the first chapter. The professional performers in Dickens's novels are the most obvious

sources of theatrical gesture and they will form the subject of Chapter 2. As theatrical gesture is most evident in *Nicholas Nickleby* with its troupe of professional perfomers, it will be the focus for most of the textual analysis in this thesis. However, every one of Dickens's novels is packed with colourful characters performing dramatic, and often melodramatic, flourishes.

Dickens's use of melodrama is not always appreciated by the modern reader. Serious melodrama often appears to us to be artificially emotional, although there are some notable exceptions. Melodramatic gesture is most successful when it is humorous, as in the parodying of melodrama, and when it is used by the professional performers. The melodramatic gestures in Dickens's fiction are the subject of the third chapter. Dickens employs gesture in multifarious ways. It not only rounds out dialogue, but also acts as a replacement for it. Conspirators use coded gestures to communicate their intentions to their fellows within the hearing of the uninitiated. Propriety accounts for so many gestures that Dickens's novels can be read as anthropological treatises on behaviour patterns now, sadly, all but lost. Also gone today are the many accoutrements necessary to style in Victorian times. Such accessories naturally enhance theatrical gesticulation. I discuss the various types of conscious gestures in Chapter 4. While Dickens is a master at describing conscious gestures such as those performed with speech and used in matters of etiquette, his descriptions of unconscious gestures are equally remarkable, and I examine these in the fifth chapter. In these cases, the signifying movement often connotes not a universally recognised semiotic system but individualised, idiolectic motions that give specific characters meaning beyond simple movement. Dickens's use of gestures which reveal the psyche, such as unconscious mannerisms and tics, demonstrates his ability to externalize the inner workings of his characters. Some of his most interesting gestures can be called failed false gestures. In these

situations, the characters' attempts to conceal their true natures and intentions with stock gestures are discovered by those adept at reading gesture. The dubious morality of many a villainous character is apparent in his gestures, which often belie his speech. Gesture can therefore be an indicator of morality as well as of other traits of personality.

In some cases, the repetition of a descriptive gestural phrase accretes so much meaning that a character not mentioned for chapters (or months in the case of serial publication) can be instantly recognized by just the mention of the signature gestural phrase. Other characters are noted for their lack of gesture, which is a testament to the variety and abundance of gestures in Dickens's novels generally. Stiff or rigid characters exhibit few gestures, but when they do gesticulate, their sometimes subtle, sometimes violent movements carry more semiotic weight. His study of the relationship between gesture and space is most noticeable on the vertical plane, when he employs lowering gestures as signs of submission and heightening gestures as their opposite. Often, the characters' gestures serve as the main clues as to what they are really feeling, while their words and other behaviour are mitigated by their milieu. While many of the very minor characters are given a single, defining and memorable gestural signature, some of the major characters have a whole range of gestural performance. However, an examination of Dickens's protagonists reveals that few of his heroes and heroines are blessed with much in the way of gestural range. With these main characters, Dickens could be said to have regressed to, or at least never have progressed from, the stereotypical gestures of the classic virgins of the melodrama and their tender young saviours. This does not come as much of a surprise when one considers that it is difficult to have much in the way of gestural

expression when the reader cannot even begin to picture many of Dickens's legless angels[1] and bodiless, faceless innocents. Conversely, Dickens's villains are gestural triumphs. While many of his evil characters are largely presented through melodramatic gestures, the author's imaginative and varied descriptions of the stock gesticulations enable them to rise above the merely stereotypical. Chapter 6 provides a series of character studies, focussing on the gestures of both minor and major characters.

In order to fully examine Dickens's presentation of theatrical gesture, I shall provide close readings of the depictions of several characters. In *Nicholas Nickleby*, the Crummles troupe of performers provides a wealth of professional gestures, both on stage and off. As Dickens is at his best when creating villainous characters, an examination of Quilp in *The Old Curiosity Shop*, Uriah Heep in *David Copperfield*, and Rigaud/Blandois in *Little Dorrit* will demonstrate not only his range and progression of characterization through gesture but also his ability to vary descriptions of gesture while still keeping characters intact in the reader's memory. In *Dombey and Son*, Edith Granger's gesticulations begin as subtle illuminations of her psyche amid the stiff formalities necessary to her position, then gradually progress to violent rending and breaking movements as her control falters. The reader learns to gauge Edith's emotional state largely from her gestures alone.

Many critics have faulted Dickens for employing external means to present the inner emotions and psychology of character, claiming that in doing so, he has limited the reader's ability to apprehend the souls of his characters, or worse, that he has merely created shallow, one-dimensional characters.[2] Some of this

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[1]George Orwell. "Charles Dickens" in *A Collection of Essays by George Orwell*, p. 109.

[2]The following are only a few examples of the many works which criticize

criticism can be accounted for as hindsight. Many of the literary trends since Dickens's time have focused almost entirely on the inner lives of characters, using such devices as stream of consciousness and internal monologue. However, Dickens did not write the kind of novels where the reader can become so caught up with the thoughts of the characters that he forgets the author and the brilliancy of his presentation. Dickens's works are theatrical and they date from a time when theatre audiences were more interested in the performances of the actors on the stage than the inner lives of the characters they portrayed or the plot machinations that motivated them[3]. For this style of writing, theatrical gesture is fundamental to the presentation of character in crowded, serially published novels.

Dickens's method of portraying characters through external presentation: Forster cites the French writer, M. Henri Taine: "'he seizes on one attitude, trick, expression, or grimace; sees nothing else, and keeps it always unchanged'" (II, 265). Forster also cites a review of Dickens criticism by George Henry Lewes: "'In vain critical reflection showed these figures to be merely masks; not characters, but personified characteristics; caricatures and distortions of human nature'" (II, 269). Garis cites George Eliot: "'he scarcely ever passes from the humorous or external to the emotional and tragic, without becoming transcendent in his unreality'" (54). More recently, Torster Pettersson argues that "By maintaining a predominantly external perspective the narrative of *Oliver Twist* goes against the grain of the novel's moral" (345).

[3]This will be discussed further in the following chapter with reference to Ivor Brown's description of the early Victorian theatre in *Dickens in his Time*.

CHAPTER 1: DICKENS AND THE THEATRE

In the definition of gesture as a method of characterization there are two main points of consideration: meaning and moment. Gesture is the movement that signifies, that has meaning, as opposed to simple movements that are included in the descriptive elements of writing as a furtherance of the plot . Some definition of the terms that I will be using is necessary here. In this examination of the gestures employed by Dickens to create characters, I will use the verbs 'gesture' and 'gesticulate' synonymously. The word 'action' is much closer to 'gesture' than is the word 'movement'. One definition of 'action' in *The Oxford English Dictionary* is: "Mode of acting. Of persons: Gesture, oratorical management of the body and features in harmony with the subject described; in *Sculpt*[ure] and *Painting*: Gesture or attitude expressive of the sentiment or passion depicted" (94). 'Actio' was used in eighteenth-century actors' manuals in reference to specific movements in stagecraft. Of course, this meaning of action is specifically linked to acting, or stage performance, as opposed to forms of physical motion in general, for example, running or working. Actio or action can therefore be likened to theatrical gesture as a more specific term than movement or physical motion. In order for a movement to be classified as a gesture, it must have significance in some context, whether it is a socially recognized gesture such as a bow or curtsey or a gesture idiosyncratically meaningful within the characterization of a personality.

Gesture is often considered to be more sincere or more valuable as a truth-telling agent than speech. This is where moment, the other point of consideration, comes into play. In his book, *Practical Illustrations of Rhetorical Gesture and Action*, Henry Siddons defines gesture as follows: "In all cases, the

veritable gesture is that which expresses the sentiment of the moment, and which exclusively predominates the mind of the orator" (211). Gesture's ability to precede thought accounts for its reputation as an indicator of true emotion; it can be spontaneous and therefore, not preconceived or controlled. Charles Le Brun, the eighteenth-century authority on the rendering of passion in painting, is cited by Dickens in *Little Dorrit* (695). The words in his discourse, *A Method to Learn to Design the Passions*, can as easily be applied to the creation of fictional characters as to those in painting: "Expression intimates the emotions of the Soul, and renders visible the effects of Passion" (12). While theatrical gesture is, by its very nature, a performed and therefore preconceived action, it can still be a better indicator of the veracity of character than can more modulated demonstrations such as speech, simply because the audience places more truth value in gesture. At the other end of the scale, some put more stock in the written word than the spoken word because more time can be taken to consider before writing. Thus, any method that is chosen to convey thoughts and emotions is received with consideration of the time involved in deliberation. Regarding theatrical gesture, the old saying that actions speak louder than words is reinforced.

In *Every Little Movement. A Book About Francois Delsarte*, Ted Shawn interprets Delsarte's theories regarding the importance of gesture over speech:

> Gesture is more than speech. It is not what we say that persuades, but the manner of saying it. . . . That which demands a volume is uttered by a single gesture. . . . Gesture is the direct agent of the heart. It is the fit manifestation of feeling. It is the revealer of thought and the commentator upon speech. . . . In a word, gesture is the spirit, of which speech is merely the letter. (25)

Delsarte's thoughts on gesture are of particular interest in the context of Dickens's works because the great actor W.C. Macready was both a pupil of

Delsarte's and a good friend of Dickens's. In fact, the most obviously theatrical of Dickens's novels, *Nicholas Nickleby*, is dedicated to Macready. The line of Delsarte's teachings can be drawn directly through Macready to Dickens. Arguably, Delsarte's views on gesture were anything but revolutionary: the legibility and reliability of the body, as opposed to speech, as a signifier of emotion was a tenet of western thought for hundreds of years before his time. In the above passage, Shawn states that "a volume is uttered by a single gesture." His choice of the word utter for a silent act recalls Bulwer's opinion that the hand, in gesturing, is " another tongue, which we may justly call the spokesman of the body" (15). The definitions of gesture and theatrical gesture as being guided by meaning and moment are completely applicable to Dickens's employment of them as a method of characterization. Of equal importance in the study of Dickens's works are the ways in which he employed gesture and what techniques he used in its presentation.

The author's depictions of gesture underline his skill as a master of words. There are many examples of Dickens repeating the same gesture thirty or forty times in the portrayal of one character but never using quite the same words to describe it. An example of this would be the depiction of Carker and his gleaming teeth in *Dombey and Son*, which I will discuss in more detail in my final chapter. However, in Dickens's presentation of gesture, more than words come into play in the reader's comprehension of the action. Context is as important as form. The mutability of meaning within gestural description can be accounted for by accretion. The reader brings previous experience of the particular gesture being described to the contemplation of its present incidence. The previous meanings of the same gesture, when performed by the same character, by other characters in the same novel, within Dickens's oeuvre and in the reader's outside experience all colour the reader's appreciation of the current gestural description as he

strives to make relational comparisons of the role of the gesticulator in this particular occurrence with those that have come before. While accretion plays a role in the discovery of meaning in gesture, the words that Dickens chooses to describe the gesture texture and qualify its reception. That Dickens was well aware of the necessity of describing the intensity of a gesture is made clear by the following passage from *Little Dorrit*, when Arthur Clennam first observes Henry Gowan:

> As Arthur came over the stile and down to the water's edge, the lounger glanced at him for a moment, and then resumed his occupation of idly tossing stones into the water with his foot. There was something in his way of spurning them out of their places with his heel, and getting them into the required position, that Clennam thought had an air of cruelty in it. Most of us have more or less frequently derived a similar impression, from a man's manner of doing some very little thing: plucking a flower, clearing away an obstacle, or even destroying an insentient object. (245)

In the above passage, Dickens employs Gowan's performance to prefigure his cruelty to Minnie Meagles after she becomes his wife. In one sense, Gowan's performance is for himself only, as he does not at first see Clennam. This suggests an intriguing line of questioning: if a character makes a gesture when he thinks that no one else is present, is it still a gesture? Undoubtedly, the answer is yes because of the larger audience of readers who are always present as observers and who were particularly present to Dickens's mind through their comments to him during the development of his serial publications. In this sense, all gestures are theatrical gestures in the works of Dickens. So, when Dickens describes James Carker in *Dombey and Son* by saying: "alone in his room he shows his teeth all day" (311), Carker is never really alone and thus, his performance is gestural. The subtleties of Dickens's characterization are apparent in the level of performative gesture in relation to the performer's

awareness of his audience. In the case of Carker, his rapaciousness is emphasized by the fact that his awareness of his solitude does not preclude the baring of his teeth and indeed can be read as a relaxation of his normally guarded manner. This instance of Carker showing his teeth is not the same as the obsequious smiles that he shows to Mr Dombey and others.

By far the largest performer in Dickens's novels is the author himself. In *The Dickens Theatre*, Robert Garis calls the kind of art that Dickens practises "theatrical art" (24). By this he means that kind of art where there is a consciousness on the part of the audience, and on the part of the artist, that the artist is practising his art. There is no illusion of suspension of disbelief; indeed, quite the opposite:

> Anyone who opens one of Dickens's novels . . . is prepared to enter a 'theatre' and find 'humorous' writing. . . . Humorous writing is expected to reveal itself openly as 'trying to be funny', and the reader will not be at all surprised to find the humorous writer openly trying for whatever other kinds of effect he might be interested in. (Garis 40)

Dickens's method of writing, by its very nature, consistently calls attention to his efforts. His excellence as a writer means that his works can easily withstand the close scrutiny of style that the theatrical method invites, but his theatrical art does leave his characterization open to the criticism that he creates only one-dimensional characters.[4] Garis continues:

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[4]In "Self-Articulating Characters in *David Copperfield*", Robert M. DeGraaff declares: "The problem is that Dickens's dramatic mode usually proscribes direct narrative analysis or personality or motivation" (215). DeGraaff goes on to state that Dickens's methods of getting around the proscription can also be flawed. Here, he is discussing the characterization of Dora Spenlow: "I think the critical objection to her as a fictional character is directly related to Dickens's technique of character self-articulation, and that critics who reject her would subscribe to some version of Professor Cockshut's critique of Edith Dombey--that her self-articulation is not credible because it would require 'exceptional qualities of detachment and self-analysis' which the character, as created, does not seem to

> Theatrical art is not an appropriate mode for dealing with the inner life. . . . The elements of serious dramatic art--the self-developing, continuous, and integrated illusion, the self-effacement of the artist, the disinterested, morally intelligent search for the centre of self of human beings--these elements are the harmonious manifestations of an attitude of mind and an attitude towards the world totally at variance with the procedures and attitudes of theatrical art. . . . In theatrical art the primary object of our attention is the artist himself, on the stage of his own theatre, performing his brilliant routines. The characters he 'creates' on this stage will come to us, and be consistently known to us, as the embodiments of his brilliant gift of *mimicry*. (53-54)

In order to demonstrate that Dickens's mimicry was not limited to the stock descriptions of such studies as those of Le Brun, Siddons, Bulwer or Delsarte, I supply a sampling of stereotypical descriptions to demonstrate Dickens's vast variations. In *Realizations*, Martin Meisel notes a few such descriptions from Rede's *The Guide to the Stage* of which the following will provide an indication:

> *Joy*, when sudden and violent, is expressed by clapping of hands and exulting looks, the eyes are opened wide, and on some occasions raised to heaven. . . .
> *Grief*, sudden and violent, expresses itself by beating the head or forehead, tearing the hair, and catching the breath, as if choking; also by screaming, weeping, stamping, lifting the eyes from time to time to heaven, and hurrying backwards and forwards. This is a passion which admits, like many others, of a great deal of Stage trick. . . .
> *Fear*, violent and sudden . . . draws back the elbows parallel with the sides, lifts up the open hand (the fingers together) to the height of the breast, so that the palms face the dreadful object, as shields opposed against it; one foot is drawn back behind the other, so that the body seems shrinking from danger, and putting itself in a posture for flight. . . . Fear is also displayed, frequently, by a sudden start, and in ladies, by a violent shriek, which produces fainting. . . .
>
> (Rede, cited in Meisel 6)

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possess: '[Dickens] is guilty here of a failing very common in novelists of strong convictions--he is making a character do the author's work for him by commenting (as if from above) upon her own personality'" (21).

It is interesting to note how much emphasis there is on the placement of the limbs. This is truly a coded language of gesture by which the Victorian theatre audience could read the emotions of the actors. Meisel goes on to state: "Rede's formulas undoubtedly continued in use through the century in parts of a vast and dispersed theatrical culture. But through excessive familiarity many of them lost potency and acceptability among the more sophisticated" (7). Dickens may certainly be counted as one of "the more sophisticated," as is evidenced by his criticism of the predictability of the actors at a theatre in the Rue Richelieu in Paris. In a letter to John Forster, Dickens complains that the actors rely, in conveying emotions, not on their imaginations, but entirely on stock theatrical gestures like those outlined above:

> There is a dreary classicality at that establishment calculated to freeze the marrow. . . . One tires of seeing a man, through any number of acts, remembering everything by patting his forehead with the flat of his hand, jerking out sentences by shaking himself, and piling them up in pyramids over his head with his right forefinger. (Forster II, 162)

The emphasis on gesture in the Victorian theatre appears remarkable when compared to the theatre performances of today. To some extent, practical considerations in the Victorian performance spaces can account for the importance of gesture. Meisel notes:

> In the theatre, despite its relative conservatism, enlarged auditoriums and a broader audience in the first third of the century made gesture and attitude a more important register of emotion than facial expression (the chief concern of the academic tradition stemming from Charles Le Brun) and even language. (5-6)

Other practical considerations for the primacy of gesture over speech and facial expression in the Victorian theatre, compared to the theatre of today, can be linked to poor lighting and sound. The low levels of light provided by gas lighting in the large, crowded theatres meant that the actors were simply less visible to

audiences and that large, dramatic gestures had to be employed in order to convey emotion. Subtlety would have been invisible to all but the front rows of spectators. The lack of sound equipment and acoustically designed spaces combined with noisy, raucous Victorian audiences to make the actors' inflections and intonations largely unheard. When speech must be projected at a great volume, the subtleties of emotion available to the voice are mostly lost. On the other hand, gesture, and particularly large, coded gesture, was visible from the back of the house and conveyed emotional messages loudly and clearly.

As I noted at the onset, Dickens recognized that "every writer of fiction, though he may not adopt the dramatic form, writes in effect for the stage" (*Speeches* 262). The fact that he was successful as a novelist writing theatrically can be seen in tributes such as that of Ivor Brown in *Dickens and his World*, where he writes: "The phrase 'as good as a play' was applicable to any of his books" (11). Dickens was not the only Victorian novelist to comment on the close connection between fiction and theatre:

> Ainsworth, introducing *Rookwood* (1834), observes: "The novelist is precisely in the position of the dramatist. He has, or should have, his stage, his machinery, his actors. His representation should address itself as vividly to the reader's mental retina, as the theatrical exhibition to the spectator. . . . The Romance constructed according to the rigid rules of art will, beyond doubt, eventually, if not immediately, find its way to the stage.--It is a drama, with descriptions to supply the place of scenery. (Meisel 66)

Many of Dickens's novels did find their way to the stage. In the case of his earlier works, such as *Oliver Twist* and *Nicholas Nickleby*, plays were produced even before all of the serial parts of the novels had been published.

Wilkie Collins was a close friend of Dickens's and the co-writer, with Dickens, of a play entitled *The Frozen Deep*. He shared Dickens's views on the close relationship of fiction to drama:

> 'Believing that the Novel and the Play are twin-sisters in the Family of Fiction; that the one is a drama narrated, as the other is a drama acted; and that all the strong and deep emotions which the Play-writer is privileged to excite, the Novel-writer is privileged to excite also, I have not thought it either politic or necessary, while adhering to realties, to adhere to common-place, everyday realities only.'
>
> ("Letter of Dedication," *Basil* xxxvii)

Evidently Collins also shared with Dickens an unfortunate reliance on melodramatic coincidence and serendipity. Dickens himself can be said to have defined the nature of theatrical presentation in his comments in defence of some French paintings at the Paris Exposition Universelle in 1855. He contrasts dramatic to theatrical paintings:

> Conceiving the difference . . . to be, that in the former case a story is strikingly told, without apparent consciousness of a spectator, and that in the latter case the groups are obtrusively conscious of a spectator, and are obviously dressed up, and doing (or not doing) certain things with an eye to the spectator, and not for the sake of the story. (cited in Meisel 81)

Dickens's analysis of the French paintings can be likened to the different forms of photography today. Dramatic presentation is similar to the snapshot taken when the subject is unaware of the camera, while theatrical presentation is like a posed photographic portrait. Dickens's definition of theatrical, as opposed to dramatic, presentation can be applied to his own works of fiction. While many of his passages are definitely dramatic, his awareness of his audience of readers makes his works predominantly theatrical. Classical theatrical gestures such as those described by Rede, illustrated by Siddons and seen by Dickens at the theatre in the Rue Richelieu were still much in use at the time of Dickens's writing, but his use of theatrical gestures in his novels was not limited by the practical considerations of the Victorian stage. Dickens could, and did, push far past the coded, stock gestures of the theatre. The variety of meaning provided by his modulations of particular, known theatrical gestures demonstrates his

ability to treat the description of gesture as an open and mutable art form, and not just a closed, coded semiotic system. For him, there is no such thing as only one meaning for a particular gesture. His ability to vary the stock theatrical gestures not only stems from his wide knowledge and experience of the theatre, but also from the medium in which he worked, where he could let his imagination expand his depiction of character through gesture.

Dickens's life-long experience as an avid theatre-goer and as a participant in theatrical productions gave him an abundant education in the craft of stage gesticulation. In his introduction to *Nicholas Nickleby*, Michael Slater notes some of the details of Dickens's theatrical background:

> It began with those childhood visits to the Theatre Royal, Rochester, where he learned such 'wondrous secrets' as that the Witches in *Macbeth* 'bore an awful resemblance to the thanes and other proper inhabitants of Scotland', continued at school where he staged a toy theatre version of *The Miller and His Men* for his friends, and culminated in his subsidiary career as an energetic amateur actor-manager during the 1840s and 50s. (15)

It must be remembered that the theatre of Dickens's time was very different from the theatre of today. The play was indeed not 'the thing'; it was the player that was important, as Brown relates:

> It was dominated by the actors, who starred either in botched-up versions of Shakespeare's plays or in pieces by contemporary authors which have proved ephemeral and would now be ridiculed by the critics. Their stale plots with familiar situations were then taken without complaint as a matter of playhouse routine by the devotees of the drama. So long as their favourite players strolled and intoned with a formidable strength in the manner of Macready or flashed lightning with the fiery and dynamic genius of Edmund Kean they were amply satisfied. . . . It was the voice, the gesture, the mien, and the energy of the actor that filled the theatre. . . . The word 'ham', fashionable in our time for the denigration of uninhibited acting, was not known. If it had been, the audience would have cried out for a diet of 'ham' without stint. (*Dickens in His Time* 76)

The over-acting of the Crummles troupe in *Nicholas Nickleby* and Wopsle's misguided attempts at Shakespeare in *Great Expectations* are much more understandable, although just as humorous, when seen in the light of Brown's observations. However, it was not just the audiences' thirst for exhibitions of stage ego that determined the tenor of the Victorian theatre. One of Michael Slater's footnotes to *Nicholas Nickleby* states:

> Drury Lane and Covent Garden were the only two London theatres officially allowed to present straight plays (legitimate drama) owing to a monopoly granted by Charles II. During the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, however, a number of other theatres were able to infringe the patent theatre's monopoly by presenting 'burlettas', plays containing music, singing or dancing. Gradually this was attenuated to a few songs and finally a few chords on the piano were enough for a play to be classified as a burletta. The monopoly was at last abolished in 1843. (966)

Although this passage concerns theatre in London, that city was the centre of the theatrical world in nineteenth-century England and the place where Dickens saw most of his theatre, so it can therefore serve to explain, to a certain extent, the discontinuity of the Crummles's scenes and perhaps, the audiences' focus on performance in a theatrical world where the best dramas were literally forbidden in many theatres.

The primacy of the performer over the plot in early Victorian theatre also helps to account for its attraction to a person like the young Dickens, who had large personal ambitions and was famously energetic. Forster describes how the literary world came close to losing one of its best-loved authors before he had even written his first novel:

> He went to theatres almost every night for a long time; studied and practised himself in parts; was so much attracted by the 'At Homes' of the elder Mathews, that he resolved to make his first plunge in a similar direction; and finally wrote to make offer of himself to Covent Garden. 'I wrote to Bartley, who was

> stage-manager, and told him how young I was, and exactly what I thought I could do; and that I believed I had a strong perception of character and oddity, and a natural power of reproducing in my own person what I observed in others. . . . There must have been something in my letter that struck the authorities, for Bartley wrote to me almost immediately to say that they were busy getting up the *Hunchback* (so they were), but that they would communicate with me again, in a fortnight. Punctual to the time another letter came, with an appointment to do anything of Mathews's I pleased before him and Charles Kemble, on a certain day at the theatre. . . . I was laid up when the day came, with a terrible bad cold and an inflammation of the face. . . . I wrote to say so, and added that I would resume my application next season. I made a great splash in the gallery soon afterwards; the *Chronicle* opened to me; I had a distinction in the little world of the newspaper, which made one like it; began to write; didn't want money; had never thought of the stage but as a means of getting it; gradually left off turning my thoughts that way, and never resumed the idea. (I, 49-50)

It is clear from Dickens's writing that he never lost his natural power of reproducing in his own person, and writing down on paper, his strong perception of character. His great faith in his own abilities can often sound like egotism, but he is probably not exaggerating when he writes to Forster regarding his performances in Montreal in 1842: "I do not know if I have ever told you seriously, but I have often thought, that I should certainly have been as successful on the boards as I have been between them" (I, 373). Dickens's talents as an actor are now lost to us, but what he took from his experiences on the stage and as an audience member can be seen most vividly in his descriptions of stage gesture. The following passage could easily have been taken from one of his novels but is instead from a letter he wrote to Forster:

> You remember the dumb dodge of relating an escape from captivity? Clasping the left wrist with the right hand, and the right wrist with the left hand-alternately (to express chains)--and then going round and round the stage very fast, and coming hand over hand down an imaginary cord; at the end of which there is one stroke of the drum, and a kneeling to the chandelier? (I, 378)

Such an expert at the craft of stage gesticulation must have found it an agony to have to watch the poor, early attempts at dramatising his own novels. Indeed, Forster describes his behaviour as a member of the audience at an early production of *Oliver Twist*: "in the middle of the first scene he laid himself down upon the floor in a corner of the box and never rose from it until the drop-scene fell" (I, 100). It seems as if Dickens sometimes even tried to furnish the hacks who pirated his works for the stage with something in the way of stage directions. When he describes such characters as Ralph and Nicholas Nickleby pacing in their rooms, or when he depicts Biler in *Dombey and Son* listening to an argument as he "inclined his ear to each by turns" (403), the reader can almost see the actors on the stage. It must not be forgotten that while Dickens spent much of his energy in amateur theatricals, his greatest triumph upon the stage was in the public readings of his own works. His great success in his public readings testifies to the fact that he was not only a fine creator of theatrical art, but also a wildly energetic presenter of the more dramatic aspects of his own works--so much so that Forster, Edgar Johnson and Peter Ackroyd all attest to the fact that the readings were largely responsible for his relatively early death.

An examination of theatrical gesture as a means of depicting characters must take the meaning and the moment of the gesture into consideration. Form, by which I mean the words chosen to texture the presentation of the gesture, is as important as context. Theatrical, as opposed to dramatic gesture, implies the awareness of an audience, whether it be the reader or other characters within the narrative. Dickens's breadth of experience in the theatrical world allowed him to use the stock coded theatrical gestures as a starting place. His imagination enabled him to provide the reader with vivid and memorable gestures that move far beyond the constraints determined by tradition and by the physical limitations of Victorian performance spaces. Dickens's presentation of theatrical gesture as

a method of characterization relies on the development of movements that signify, that communicate. In Dickens's works, actions often speak louder than words.

CHAPTER 2: THE PROFESSIONAL PERFORMERS

Michael Slater's assessment of the Crummles acting troupe in his introduction to *Nicholas Nickleby* could just as easily be applied to Dickens and his friends: "They perform as much for sheer love of the thing as for money and are constantly getting up little stage dramas for their own sake" (19). While many of the performances that Dickens and his friends staged were intended to raise money for charity, their enjoyment of the process itself is evident in Dickens's letters and Forster's descriptions. The Crummleses' offstage performances are fittingly full of theatrical gesture. For Mr Lillyvick and Miss Petowker's wedding, Mr Crummles plays the part of the father of the bride. In addition to the costume for the part, Mr Crummles puts on the airs of a father "greatly overcome" and walks up the aisle "with an infirm and feeble gait" (402). He even has props for his role: "all parties present having signed the register (for which purpose, when it came to his turn, Mr Crummles carefully wiped and put on an immense pair of spectacles)" (402). Mr Folair, acting as Mr Lillyvick's second in the ceremony, follows him up the aisle, "imitating his walk and gestures, to the indescribable amusement of some theatrical friends in the gallery" (402). Mr Folair's theatrical playfulness is also evident when he and Mr Lenville visit Nicholas at his lodgings early one morning. While waiting for Nicholas to open his door, they have "a fencing bout with their walking-sticks on the very small landing-place, to the unspeakable discomposure of all the other lodgers downstairs" (374). When Nicholas leaves the Crummles company, he goes to Vincent Crummles's lodgings and says farewell. It therefore comes as a surprise when he again encounters Mr Crummles as he is preparing to board the coach for London with Smike (see Fig. 1):

> Nicholas was not a little astonished to find himself suddenly

Fig. 1: Vincent Crummles's theatrical farewell to Nicholas

> clutched in a close and violent embrace, which nearly took him off his legs; nor was his amazement at all lessened by hearing the voice of Mr Crummles exclaim 'It is he--my friend, my friend!'. . . . Mr Crummles, who could never lose any opportunity for professional display, had turned out for the express purpose of taking a public farewell of Nicholas; and to render it the more imposing, he was now, to that young gentleman's most profound annoyance, inflicting upon him a rapid succession of stage embraces, which, as everybody knows, are performed by the embracer's laying his or her chin on the shoulder of the object of affection, and looking over it. This Mr Crummles did with the highest style of melodrama, pouring forth at the same time all the most dismal forms of farewell he could think of, out of the stock pieces. (478)

Vincent Crummles is like a walking advertisement for the theatre. When the Crummleses are leaving for America, a fellow-actor takes the opportunity of the going-away party to make a speech, accompanied by the appropriate theatrical gestures:

> At length Mr Snittle Timberry rose in the most approved attitude, with one hand in the breast of his waistcoat and the other on the nearest snuff-box . . . ending a pretty long speech by extending his right hand on one side and his left on the other, and severally calling upon Mr and Mrs Crummles to grasp the same. (729)

It is remarkable how many of Dickens's male characters are described as resting one hand inside their waistcoats. For example, in the same novel, Mr Snevellicci "whipped the two forefingers of his right hand in between the two centre buttons, and sticking his other arm gracefully akimbo seemed to say, 'Now, here I am, my buck, and what have you got to say to me?'" (468). In fact, Siddons's illustrations for both pride and conceit show this Napoleonic trait. Of course, this gesture disappeared along with the predominance of waistcoats in men's fashions. It is fitting for Timberry to take this pose as he obviously glories in speech-making. The gesticulations here are typical of many of the actions Dickens describes in that there is a detailed description of the props involved in the gesture, namely

the waistcoat and the snuff box. Such details, while completely unnecessary to the plot, texture the presentation and add to its theatricality.

Considering that the members of the Crummles troupe make many interesting gestures when they are off the stage, it comes as no surprise that their paid performances are filled with theatrical gestures. Although each of the following examples of Mr Folair's stage gestures is provided with its own built-in interpretation, it is clear that his audience would have found his gestural language easy to comprehend. Here, Folair, in the role of the savage, is responding to the maiden, played by Miss Crummles, after she has performed six twirls:

> This seemed to make some impression upon the savage, for, after a little more ferocity and chasing of the maiden into corners, he began to relent, and stroked his face several times with his right thumb and four fingers, thereby intimating that he was struck with admiration of the maiden's beauty. Acting upon the impulse of this passion, he (the savage) began to hit himself severe thumps in the chest, and to exhibit other indications of being desperately in love. . . . (364)

Shortly thereafter, Folair "leant his left ear on his left hand, and nodded sideways, to intimate to all whom it might concern that she [the maiden] was asleep, and no shamming" (364). Nicholas has also become conversant in theatrical gesture, as is evidenced by his coaching of Smike (see Fig. 2):

> As soon as he began to acquire the words pretty freely, Nicholas showed him how he must come in with both hands spread out upon his stomach, and how he must occasionally rub it, in compliance with the established form by which people on the stage always denote that they want something to eat. (407)

These are just a few of the shorter examples of threatrical gesture as performed by the Crummles troupe, but they demonstrate the silent language which Dickens's professional performers employed to communicate with their audiences.

Fig. 2: Nicholas teaches Smike the theatrical gesture for hunger

Nicholas Nickleby is not the only one of Dickens's novels that features professional performers. In *The Old Curiosity Shop*, Nell and her Grandfather fall in with a crowd of roving performers, beginning with Codlin and Short. As they travel along to the races, they meet various other performers, including two stilts-walkers, whose gestures of greeting must be adapted to their stilted elevation:

> The young people being too high up for the ordinary salutations, saluted Short after their own fashion. The young gentleman twisted up his right stilt and patted him on the shoulder, and the young lady rattled her tambourine. (194)

Although their methods are necessarily unusual, their meaning remains clear. *Great Expectations* also includes a professional performer but, surprisingly, Wopsle is somewhat gesturally stunted. Much is made of Wopsle's voice when he is a clerk at the local church and when he examines the evening school children by reciting Mark Antony's oration over the body of Caesar and Collins's *Ode on the Passions*, but aside from his rendition of Revenge, where he throws "his blood-stained sword in thunder down" (74), he is remarkably gesture-free. When Pip goes to see him perform in London, Wopsle has hardly taken the theatre world by storm. As Pip relates, Wopsle has achieved a "questionable triumph" (395). Perhaps the poor quality of the performance that Pip witnesses can account for its lack of theatrical gesture. The description of the two pieces enacted concentrates mostly on the costumes, props and stage machinery. In the first piece, when the boatswain marries the "young person in bed furniture," there is a celebration on stage: "the whole population of Portsmouth (nine in number at the last Census) turning out on the beach, to rub their own hands and shake everybody else's" (396). As will be later discussed, hand-rubbing of all sorts and for all reasons is one of the most common gestures in Dickens's world. Further handshaking ensues when the boatswain addresses Mr Wopsle in his role as a great power direct from the Admiralty. The boatswain "solicited

permission to take him by the fin" and Mr Wopsle "conceding his fin with a gracious dignity, was immediately shoved into a dusty corner while everybody danced a hornpipe" (396). Perhaps Wopsle's ineptitude at gestural expression in the second piece can be accounted for in part by his preoccupation with Pip, and as is later revealed, with Compeyson. Of course, Wopsle's theatrical endeavour is but a very small element in a novel that does not, as does *Nicholas Nickleby*, give professional performers any detailed examination.

Mr Chadband of *Bleak House* is another professional performer. He is a minister but, as Dickens relates, "attached to no particular denomination" (315). He is most certainly a professional orator and his gestures command attention, as he "never speaks without first putting up his great hand, as delivering a token to his hearers that he is going to edify them" (317). His facial gestures are also remarkable, and quite unusual. He is described as "languidly folding up his chin into his fat smile" (317). This gesture is reminiscent of Rigaud's nose going down over his moustache in *Little Dorrit*. This fat smile is particularly fitting for such an oily, patronizing character as Chadband. His first such smile occurs when he condescends to hear poor Guster speak. Chadband's gesture of lifting up his hand prior to speechifying is repeated, with variations, many times, and rightly so for such a windbag. Chadband's trademark patronizing facial gesture is also repeated, but this time it is Jo, the crossing-sweeper, who is the victim of his condescension. Dickens varies the description slightly: "with his persecuted chin folding itself into its fat smile again" (325). It is interesting to note that Dickens has objectified the character by using "its fat smile" instead of his, thereby further distancing the reader from any sympathetic appreciation of this character, if that was needed.

At Chadband's next appearance, some hundred pages later on in the novel, Dickens repeats the same descriptive character markers in both style of

speech and gesture, with slight variations, as if to remind the reader of who this character is. The differentiation appears with reference to his hand. It has now become a "flabby paw" and a "bear's paw", which quite frightens Jo. However, Dickens has not changed the gestural description to the extent that the character is in any way unrecognizable. Chadband still "holds up his bear's paw, and says, 'My friends!' This is the signal for a general settlement of the audience" (412). The author incorporates gesture into speech, as well as announcing the speech that is to come. In this occurrence, both facial and hand gestures are employed:

> 'We have here among us, my friends,' says Chadband, 'a Gentile and a Heathen, a dweller in the tents of Tom-all-Alone's among us, my friends,' and Mr Chadband, untwisting the point with his dirty thumb-nail, bestows an oily smile on Mr Snagsby, signifying that he will throw him an argumentative back-fall presently if he be not already down, 'a brother and a boy. . . .'
>
> (414)

Such Dickensian details as the "dirty" thumb-nail and the "oily" smile emphasize Chadband's greasy character. Although this is a minor character in a very large, crowded novel, Dickens's choice and variation of descriptive phrasing serve to make him memorable.

Much of the humour in Dickens's character descriptions comes from his use of exaggeration. For example, it is unlikely that any of the itinerant preachers that Dickens satirizes in Chadband would be truly as oily and oozing as he describes him to be. The author has clearly sacrificed realism for the seduction of stylization. And yet, in "Exaggerated Character: A Study of The Works of Dickens and Hogarth," Harry Marten cites Dickens's own defense of his use of exaggeration: "'What is exaggeration to one class of minds and perceptions, is plain truth to another" (296). Marten continues: "He [Dickens] was careful to define for his public the point that what might be thought of as 'exaggeration' in his works was intended to heighten believability" (297). Some of what is today

considered to be overtly melodramatic in Dickens's works can be accounted for by the change of style between Victorian times and our own. The public exuberance portrayed in Dickens's novels was not merely fictional. There were then more public displays of what we would now term excessive emotion. One of Dickens's latest biographers, Peter Ackroyd, discusses how different the theatre-going audiences of the Victorian era were to the staid, passive audiences of today:

> But if actors and acting, theatres and theatrical props, become a dominant motif in Dickens's life and work, it is nevertheless hard now to recover that lost sense of reality which the nineteenth-century theatre represented. It is hard to hear the noises once again, the stamping on the floor, the clapping, the groaning, the cheering, the open weeping. It is hard to evoke the sight of the theatregoers waving their hats or handkerchiefs to signal their acclaim for a scene or for a play. (36)

When seen in the light of such open displays of exuberance, many of Dickens's characters' performances appear less exaggerated. Dickens's own audiences for his public readings were no less overtly enthusiastic than those of other performances:

> So it was that in the scenes of pathos the audience wept; at the death of Paul Dombey one man cried openly for a while and then 'covered his face with both hands and laid it down on the back of the seat before him, and really shook with emotion'. And then of course there was the comedy. Here is Dickens's description of another member of the audiences: '. . . whenever he felt Toots coming again he began to cry, as if it were too much for him.' (Ackroyd 835)

Considering this, Dickens's descriptions of public displays of exuberance appear less exaggerated, and just simply more Victorian. Here is his description of a crowd of businessmen at the meeting of the United Metropolitan Improved Hot Muffin and Crumpet Baking and Punctual Delivery Company in *Nicholas Nickleby*:

> The resolution was of course carried with loud acclamations, every man holding up both hands in favour of it, as he would in

> his enthusiasm have held up both legs also, if he could have conveniently accomplished it. (74)

The added bit about both legs is obviously an example of Dickensian comic hyperbole, but the rest remains true to what Ackroyd has described. Naturally, professional performers are prone to overt displays of affection, as was evidenced by Vincent Crummles' farewell to Nicholas. This is also demonstrated in *Nicholas Nickleby* on the wedding day:

> Miss Petowker went on to enumerate the dear friends of her youthful days one by one, and to call upon such of them as were present to come and embrace her. . . . These various remembrances being each accompanied with a series of hugs, occupied a long time, and they were obliged to drive to church very fast. (401)

Displays of Victorian exuberance are not limited to the theatrical crowd or to crowds of businessmen. In *Dombey and Son*, Mr Toots's spasmodic gestures invite comparison between him and the dog, Diogenes. Toots's behaviour is puppy-like when he first sees Florence after an absence:

> Poor Mr Toots's amazement and pleasure at the sight of her were such, that they could find vent in nothing but extravagance. He ran up to her, seized her hand, kissed it, dropped it, seized it again, fell upon one knee, shed tears, chuckled, and was quite regardless of the danger of being pinned by Diogenes. (798)

Toots is primarily a comic character and the presentation of his gestures, a combination of Dickensian exaggeration and Victorian exuberance, is appropriately humorous.

Many of the professional performers in Dickens's works have colourful gestures, both on stage and off. The Crummles love of the theatre is emphasized by the fact that they perform as many dramas for their own entertainment as they do for paying audiences. The gesture that precedes Chadband of *Bleak House*'s sermons demonstrates that the repeated use of a gesture enables the reader to recognize a character when he reappears even after long absences from the

narrative. Professional performers make their living by communicating with their audience members. Dickens's employment of theatrical gesture shows that these characters can express their emotions and their meaning as easily with actions, as with dialogue.

CHAPTER 3: MELODRAMATIC GESTURE

The variations in Dickens's presentations of melodrama and the reader's accompanying diverse responses to them underline the author's level of sophistication in this genre. Dickens provides not only straight melodrama, albeit with mixed success, but also comic send-ups and parodies of the form. His knowledge of the conventions of melodrama is evidenced by his ability to subvert its over-the-top qualities to produce humour. As I demonstrated in Chapter 2, the actions of the members of the Crummles troupe are often humorous when they are not consciously trying to be funny. Their attempts at tragedy are laughable because of their overtly melodramatic gestures.

Like the Crummleses, many characters in *Nicholas Nickleby* who are not professional actors perform melodramatically . Two of the most obvious actors are Mr and Mrs Wititterly. Their performance focuses on their pretending to be of a higher class than they really are, and their conception of the upper class is curiously reserved to the one notion of sensitivity. Mr Wititterly willingly abets his wife's histrionics: "'You are my love, you know you are; one breath-- 'said Mr W. blowing an imaginary feather away. 'Pho! you're gone'" (342). In response to the honour of a visit by Lord Verisopht, the Wititterlys give a command performance, complete with gestures to accompany their remarks:

> 'It is an honour, indeed!' said Mr Wititterly. 'Julia, my soul, you will suffer for this tomorrow.'
>
> 'Suffer!' cried Lord Verisopht.
>
> 'The reaction, my lord, the reaction,' said Mr Wititterly. 'This violent strain upon the nervous system over, my lord, what ensues? A sinking, a depression, a lowness, a lassitude, a debility. My lord, if Sir Tumley Snuffim was to see that delicate creature at this moment, he would not give a--a--*this* for her life.' In illustration of which remark, Mr Wititterly took a pinch of snuff from his box and jerked it into the air as an emblem of instability. (441)

In turn, Mrs Wititterly plays her role like a consummate actress: "She was reclining on a sofa in such a very unstudied attitude, that she might have been taken for an actress all ready for the first scene in a ballet, and only waiting for the drop curtain to go up" (340). It is fitting that Dickens should make her an actress in a ballet instead of in a play because her performance is largely based on movement rather than speech. She is an adept at conveying the listless air of decadence, "raising her glass with a languid hand" (437) and poses for her audience:

> By dint of lying on the same sofa for three years and a half, [she] had got up quite a little pantomime of graceful attitudes, and now threw herself into the most strking of the whole series, to astonish the visitors. (439)

Mrs Wititterly is as much an actress as Mrs Crummles and therefore, we expect her performance to have the air of melodrama.

The most noticeable example of the parody of melodrama occurs in the portrayal of Mr and Mrs Mantalini. Their performance highlights the best of melodrama, running from romance to tragedy. The brevity of description with which Dickens here burlesques his own presentation of characters like Madeline Bray, Mrs Nickelby, and even Florence Dombey enables it to succeed where his straight melodramatic descriptions often fail: "Poor Madame Mantalini wrung her hands for grief, and rung the bell for her husband; which done, she fell into a chair and a fainting fit simultaneously" (334). While the wringing of hands is a classic melodramatic gesture with which to signify grief and fainting signifies excessive emotion, Madame Mantalini's time-saving measures and the zeugmatic presentation thereof make it clear that her performance is one part sincere and three parts acting. Mr Mantalini, however, is all showman. His knowingly futile suicide attempts are genuinely humorous as are his flirtations with his wife while, at the same time, he preens himself in the mirror. The humour that Dickens

wrings from this couple is made possible by the brevity of the parody and by the fact that these characters are well aware of their audience, even if, sometimes, that audience is only made up of themselves and their own false pretensions.

Dickens often employs melodramatic gesture to disclose false pretensions and role-playing, particularly in the area of romance. The gestures performed by Arthur Gride are perceived, at first glance, as straight melodrama because he is, as Michael Slater notes, "the shrivelled old miser of a hundred melodramas" (Introduction, *Nicholas Nickleby* 18). His romantic gestures towards Madeline Bray are repellent, not only because of his age, but also because of his motivation. He is mainly marrying Madeline due to greed, but his gestures attest to the fact that the lecher in him is also anticipating the added bonus of a young, attractive bed-partner: "After an ineffectual clutch, [of Madeline's fingers] intended to detain and carry them to his lips, old Arthur gave his own fingers a mumbling kiss, and with many amorous distortions of visage went in pursuit of his friend" (717-18). More than one layer of interpretation is available here, which attests to Dickens's sophistication and subtlety in his employment of gesture. This description of Gride's gestures, with its tempering modifiers of "ineffectual", "mumbling" and "distortions", leads the reader to reexamine the character's motivation and sincerity. Gride can be seen as performing the role he believes is called for in this pre-marital situation. His ineffectiveness speaks to even his understanding of the sexual inappropriateness of his role, as do his "many amorous distortions of visage." Dickens's choice of the words, "amorous distortions", underlines the insincerity of Gride's performance. No one who is genuinely amorous would have to resort to distortions of visage. Gride's ineffectual attempts at courtship can be construed as indicators of his misguided belief that merely going through the motions of courtship will be enough to make Madeline his willing wife just as the monetary reasons for the marriage justify it to

his avaricious mind. And yet, his hesitant manner can be interpreted as a sign that even he does not genuinely believe that his courtship will achieve more than its monetary aim.

Mrs Nickleby receives much amorous attention from her neighbour, who not only woos her with produce, but also "kisses one hand, and lays the other upon his heart" (569). The gentleman neighbour's dementia colours our reception of his romantic gesticulations. Pyke and Pluck are making fun of Mrs Nickleby's airs when they perform gallant gestures towards her. Mr Pyke admires Miss La Creevy's portrait of Kate and "in the warmth of his enthusiasm kissed the picture a thousand times" (423) and Mr Pluck "pressed Mrs Nickleby's hand to his heart" (425). With these overblown gestures, we laugh, not at Pyke and Pluck so much as at Mrs Nickleby, for being taken in by them. Other characters fool themselves as much as they fool others with their gallant and coquettish gestures. The relationship between Major Bagstock and Mrs Skewton in *Dombey and Son* combines vanity, fantasy and a hearty dose of self-deception as these two old shells pretend to be what they probably never were even in their long, long ago youth. Major Bagstock "took the hand of the lady in the chair [Mrs Skewton] and pressed it to his lips. With no less gallantry, the Major folded both his gloves upon his heart, and bowed low to the other lady" (360). He plays the melodramatic lover to Mrs Skewton's flirtatious coquette: "The Major again pressed to his blue lips the tips of the fingers that were disposed on the ledge of the wheeled chair with careful carelessness, after the Cleopatra model" (364). Both of these are characters presented as performing roles that they have created for themselves. Their melodramatic gestures are part of a game that they play willingly. It is ironic that Edith's mother and Dombey's friend perform the courtship gestures while it is really Dombey who is courting Edith. Mrs Skewton chides Edith for not playing the game of flirtation, but it is Edith's non-participation

that sets her apart. Her stiffness and aloof manner are, ironically, just what attract the correspondingly rigid Dombey. In this sense, Dickens's employment of gesture serves to contrast modes of courtship. The overly demonstrative Bagstock and Skewton play at courtship as high melodrama while the largely gesture-free Dombey and Granger courtship is the one that achieves the engagement.

It is clear that Dickens excels at employing melodrama for comedic purposes. However, his presentation of serious, straight-ahead melodrama is problematic. We can find humour in the actions of the members of the Crummles troupe when they attempt to perform tragic melodrama because we know they are acting. However, many of the characters in *Nicholas Nickleby* who are not professional performers gesticulate just as melodramatically and we do not find them funny. In *Picturing: Description and Illusion in the Nineteenth-Century*, Michael Irwin asks:

> Why should the reader not laugh at Sir Mulberry, or at Ralph Nickleby, as he does at Lenville or Crummles? In his other novels Dickens does not aggravate by satire the problems inherent in his use of melodramatic convention; but the problems remain, and sometimes obtrude. All of the great Victorian novelists modulate more or less uneasily into melodrama on occasion. Dickens makes the task harder for himself by his preoccupation with gesture. (55)

Gesture itself focuses our attention on the melodramatic moments in Dickens's works. This is not surprising in light of Harvey Peter Sucksmith's descriptions of melodrama as "theatrical" and "the striking of artificial or unrealistic postures" (76). The definition of melodrama in the *Random House College Dictionary* underscores the problem regarding the perception of melodrama by the modern reader: "a dramatic form in which exaggeration of effect and emotion is produced and plot or action is emphasized at the expense of characterization" (833). In

their discussions of melodrama, both Irwin and Sucksmith underscore the gestures of the characters, while the dictionary defines melodrama as being at the expense of characterization. The twentieth-century reader's preference for character-driven, realistic novels makes Dickens's melodramatic passages stand out awkwardly. Irwin states that the abundance of gestures everywhere in Dickens's works encourages us to visualize what we read, but that many of the melodramatic scenes are "starkly posed" and "strangely unvisualisable" (55). Irwin continues: "The problem for him was that in this area of description he moved between extreme realism and extreme stylisation" (55). Gestures that are comical when performed by professional actors in *Nicholas Nickleby* become simply unrealistic and untrue to the reader's vision of the character when performed by non-professionals in this novel and others. The only value that such over-the-top displays of emotion have is that, in their very extremity, they establish a range within which the more fairly modulated and nuanced dramas and gestures can be the better appreciated.

The actions described in Mr Lenville's suggested rewrite of Nicholas's play translation are such a microcosm of the melodramatic gestures performed by the non-actors in the novels that a short sampling will suffice:

> The distressed lady sinks into a chair, and buries her face in her pocket-handkerchief. . . . the faithful servant, rubbing his eyes with his arm. . . . the distressed lady, overpowered by old recollections, faints at the end of the dance. . . . (376)

The distressed lady could be any one of Dickens's female characters, but Mrs Nickleby comes immediately to mind. The faithful servant who rubs his eyes on his sleeve recalls Biler in *Dombey and Son* as well as Master Squeers in *Nicholas Nickleby*. So many of Dickens's heroines faint at the drop of a hat that any of them would work here. For example, Madeline Bray "staggered to a chair and swooned away" (603), and, in response to the amorous but awkward advances of

the gentleman in small-clothes after he has come down the chimney, Mrs Nickleby "wasted no words, but uttered an exclamation of horror and surprise, and immediately fainted away" (745). More women did faint in Victorian times than do today, but this can be partially accounted for by the tight bone stays of their undergarments which prohibited deep breaths. Nevertheless, the types of faints and swoons described above are melodramatic. Several of the serious characters in *Nicholas Nickleby* perform gestures easily as melodramatic as those that Lenville suggests. In the pages leading up to the duel between Sir Mulberry Hawk and Lord Frederick Verisopht, Hawk is restrained from attacking Verisopht after he has been struck. One of his acquaintances holds him back and suggests that he wait for vengeance on the following day:

> 'Tomorrow will be ample time,' said the friend.
> 'It will not be ample time!' cried Sir Mulberry, gnashing his teeth. 'Tonight--at once--here!' His passion was so great that he could not articulate, but stood clenching his fist, tearing his hair, and stamping upon the ground. (759)

Hawk's gestures clearly proclaim his murderous mood. The problem is that Hawk is such a stereotypically melodramatic character, that it is difficult for the reader to invest much interest in his rage. Such stereotypical characters perform predictably stereotypical gestures. We expect Hawk to gesture as he does and fulfilled expectations, while sometimes comforting, do not make for great characterization. John Browdie, on the other hand, with his amusing combination of country bumpkin and gallant hero, engages the reader's interest almost in spite of his first performance when, jealous of Nicholas's supposed attentions to Miss Price, he "exchanged with Nicholas at parting, that peculiarly expressive scowl with which the cut-and-thrust counts in melodramatic performances inform each other they will meet again" (178). It is almost as if Browdie is playing at being a character like Hawk; and that is the point. At Fanny Squeers's tea party, each of

the participants, with the possible exception of Nicholas, is playing a role that he or she feels is proper for the occasion. Their behaviour is thereby distanced from their true feelings and, as such, can be viewed as comedy by the reader; it is one step closer to the Crummleses. The difference lies in the perception that, unlike the Crummleses, Fanny and Tilda are not acting so much as pretending; they are like little girls playing at being great ladies having a grand tea party. In his Preface to *Joseph Andrews*, Henry Fielding argues: "The only source of the true ridiculous . . . is affectation" (28). The girls' behaviour, and especially their affected etiquette, is ridiculous and worthy of the reader's laughter. There is no such distinction between the gesture and the affected emotion in the destructive sputtering of Hawk or the pathetic swooning of Madeline Bray. When the reader must attempt to cope with such overblown emotion as realistic representation, the artificiality of the melodrama appears awkward. The meaning, the moment and the context are all there but the form has become foreign to the modern reader's taste.

Another example of how the reader's appreciation of melodramatic presentation has changed since Dickens's era concerns the sentimental portrayal of Florence Dombey. She is presented as a straight character and her performance, while melodramatic, has none of the air of knowing theatricality about it that Mrs Wititterly and even Mrs Skewton enjoy. Dickens portrays Florence as a lonely, love-starved little girl and her gestures convey this:

> When no one in the house was stirring, and the lights were all extinguished, she would softly leave her own room, and with noiseless feet descend the staircase, and approach her father's door. Against it, scarcely breathing, she would rest her face and head, and press her lips, in the yearning of her love. (320)

Dickens repeats this gesture, or ones similar to it, several times to underscore Florence's plight. Her sadness, complete with dishevelled hair and tears (327), is

overdone to the point that the reader tires of reading of poor, sad Florence. In this case, as in many others in Dickens's works, the sentiment is poured on too thickly and tastes too sickly-sweet for the modern reader to appreciate it.

As might be expected, strong emotions are often presented melodramatically. In *Dombey and Son*, Alice Marwood's despair is made more pathetic and Harriet Carker is made to seem more sympathetic when Alice's gestures literally draw Harriet to her: "the woman caught her arm, and drawing it before her own eyes, hid them against it, and wept" (564). As if that was not a clear enough signal about the correspondence between these two women, despite their obvious differences in experience, Dickens repeats the gesture: "Once more she caught her arm, and covered her eyes with it, and then was gone" (566). I am reminded of the imperilled heroines of the classic horror films of the 1950s and 60s, with their struck poses of terror, by the following description of Florence Dombey: "'No, no! Walter!' She shrieked, and put her hands up to her head, in an attitude of terror that transfixed him where he stood" (788). It is too bad that the cause of Florence's terror is not the Creature from the Black Lagoon or Frankenstein but only Walter's suggestion that she turn to her father for help. Both Miss Knag and Ralph Nickleby make a strange melodramatic gesture when they are upset. When she feels that she is being supplanted by Kate, Miss Knag throws a very theatrical fit, the description of which includes the following gesture: "suddenly becoming convulsive, and making an effort to tear her front off" (298). This is similar to a gesture that Edith Granger performs in *Dombey and Son*, when she "spurns her bosom" (515). Ralph is described in nearly the same terms: "keeping his face steadily the other way, tore at his shirt with the hand which he had thrust into his breast" (833). These gestures, while undoubtedly indicative of strong emotions, are, as Irwin says, strangely unvisualisable. It is as if Miss Knag's anger at Kate, Ralph's at

Nicholas and Edith's at her marital situation have all been turned inwards and, somewhat symbolically, they tear at their clothing as representations of themselves. Yet, again, at least in the cases of Ralph and Miss Knag, the reader does not feel any investment of emotion in these displays. Like Hawk, Ralph is too stereotypical a villain to engage the reader, as Michael Slater points out in his Introduction to *Nicholas Nickleby*:

> Ralph's real self, . . . is too much of a literary stereotype to grip the reader's interest strongly. . . . Dickens does give him some complexity of character but, essentially, his cunning devious plots, harsh demeanour and virulent malice are all drawn from the standard villain of the Elizabethan or Jacobean stage. (24)

Miss Knag's hysterical fit is so over-played an attempt to gain attention that it just seems silly.

Edith Granger is a character that the reader can become interested in, perhaps because of Dickens's greater skill at character development in his later novels. Her melodramatic scenes do not jar as awkwardly for the modern reader as do those in earlier works, no matter how starkly posed they are. Our emotional investment in Edith's character builds to the climax of her repudiation of Carker in Paris:

> He was coming gaily towards her, when, in an instant, she caught the knife up from the table, and started one pace back.
> 'Stand still!' she said, 'or I shall murder you!'
> The sudden change in her, the towering fury and intense abhorrence sparkling in her eyes and lighting up her brow, made him stop as if a fire had stopped him. . . .
> 'Stand still!' she said, 'come no nearer me, upon your life!'
> They both stood looking at each other. Rage and astonishment were in his face, but he controlled them, and said lightly,
> 'Come, come! Tush, we are alone, and out of everybody's sight and hearing. Do you think to frighten me with these tricks of virtue?'
> 'Do you think to frighten *me*,' she answered fiercely, 'from any purpose that I have, and any course I am resolved upon, by reminding me of the solitude of this place, and there being no help near?. . . If I feared you, should I be here, in the dead of

> night, telling you to your face what I am going to tell?'
> 'And what is that,' he said, 'you handsome shrew? . . .'
> 'I tell you nothing,' she returned, 'until you go back to that chair--except this, once again--Don't come near me! Not a step nearer. I tell you, if you do, as Heaven sees us, I shall murder you!'
> 'Do you mistake me for your husband?' he retorted, with a grin.
> Disdaining to reply, she stretched her arm out, pointing to the chair. (854)

Edith's gestures remain grand even in extreme circumstances. Some of Dickens's melodramatic scenes still appeal to the modern reader. In *Nicholas Nickleby*, the title character's triumph over Squeers is full of melodramatic action and speech. After Squeers has begun to beat Smike, Nicholas comes to his rescue:

> Nicholas Nickleby suddenly starting up, cried 'Stop!' in a voice that made the rafters ring.
> 'Who cried stop? said Squeers, turning savagely round.
> 'I,' said Nicholas, stepping forward. 'This must not go on.' (221-22)

Nicholas's majesty at this juncture is evidenced by his noble, and yet simple speech. Squeers defies our hero, and prepares to resume his abuse of Smike when Nicholas declares: "Wretch, . . . touch him at your peril! I will not stand by and see it done; my blood is up, and I have the strength of ten such men as you'" (222). Squeers again defies Nicholas, "brandishing his weapon" (222), and this is where the action really begins (see Fig. 3):

> He had scarcely spoken when Squeers, in a violent outbreak of wrath and with a cry like a howl of a wild beast, spat upon him, and struck him a blow across the face with his instrument of torture, which raised up a bar of livid flesh as it was inflicted. Smarting with the agony of the blow, and concentrating into that one moment all his feelings of rage, scorn, and indignation, Nicholas sprang upon him, wrested the weapon from his hand, and, pinning him by the throat, beat the ruffian till he roared for mercy. (222)

Perhaps the appeal of the melodrama in this scene, and in that from *Dombey and Son* above, has to do with the triumph of justice over injustice or virtue over villainy which, apparently, can never be presented too melodramatically. Another

Fig. 3: Nicholas's melodramatic thrashing of Squeers

instance of the appeal of melodrama for the modern reader also regards the presentation of a villain receiving his just deserts. When old Martin Chuzzlewit thrashes Pecksniff to the ground in front of their entire family, we cheer the melodrama of the gesture (882).

Ralph Nickleby's final gesture is extremely melodramatic and again, the melodramatic gesture succeeds because it depicts a villain after his plots and manipulations have failed. Good, as represented by the cheerful example of the Cheerybles, has triumphed over evil. Just before his suicide, he rants at the tolling bell, at his fate, at humanity, and:

> With a wild look around, in which frenzy, hatred, and despair, were horribly mingled, he shook his clenched hand at the sky above him, which was still dark and threatening . . . (906)

This gesture reminds me of Scarlett O'Hara in the movie, *Gone With the Wind*, who shakes a fistful of dirt towards heaven, vowing, "As God is my witness, I shall never be hungry again!" However, Scarlett's gesture promises hope and strength whereas Ralph's is a prelude to suicide. In the Dickensian oeuvre, one other character gestures skyward, namely Agnes in *David Copperfield*. At least, that is how David repeatedly pictures her in his mind's eye when her example encourages him to do right. In *Sexual Analysis of Dickens' Props*, Arthur Brown writes that Dickens told Forster that he visualized his young sister-in-law, Mary Hogarth, performing the same gesture. John Carey, in his book, *The Violent Effigy*, states that Agnes "is pointing upwards but towards the bedroom" (171). It is surprising that it is Carey, and not Arthur Brown, who makes the connection between sex and this gesture, considering that Brown finds sex everywhere in Dickens's works.

Dickens's employment of melodramatic gesture succeeds most when coupled with actors, professional or otherwise, and comedy, and usually fails

when performed by straight characters in fits of rage or in the sentimental depths of loneliness. Even in those instances where melodrama still works for the modern reader, the success of the scenes depends more on the denouement of the plot than on the character's gestures. This is completely fitting when one remembers the *Random House College Dictionary*'s definition of melodrama as "plot or action is emphasized at the expense of characterization." The presentation has more to do with physical movements such as beating and thrashing and with melodramatic speeches than it does with true gesture. The extent to which melodrama has now become a pejorative term dictates that Dickens's skilfull employment of melodramatic gesture is most effective when he utilizes the melodrama as burlesque or parody for comedic effect, and then it is not really straight melodrama at all.

CHAPTER 4: CONSCIOUS GESTURES

The gestures used by characters in Dickens's novels can be divided into two large groups: the conscious and the unconscious. When the characters are aware of their employment of gesture, they are trying to make their meaning known to their audience. This is most evident when gestures are either complementary to speech or are used as replacements for speech, when they are used to facilitate propriety, or when they are made with accessories. In his discussion of scene-painting in Victorian fiction, Irwin states:

> The reader who has been made to see the drawing-room of a great house will expect also to see the faces and movements of the characters who quarrel in that drawing-room. The novelist must interfuse dialogue and description, prompt ear and eye alternately, since he cannot do so simultaneously. Many a fictional scene owes its vitality largely to the skill with which the author has deployed a variety of brief hints or reminders; and it is a skill that has tended to elude critical inquiry. (4-5)

Dickens's "brief hints or reminders" paint the scene within which the dialogue occurs and are largely gestural. They serve to ground the reader in the scene and to break up the back-and-forth tennis match on the page, into which straight dialogue can degenerate. Irwin's simile is useful: "intermittent commentary relates to the component speeches as mortar relates to bricks: holding them apart as well as keeping them together" (48). Just as the mortar can be viewed sequentially as coming before the next brick, or after the previous one, or in the middle between the two bricks, so gesture is placed in anterior, posterior and medial positions to speech.

Ted Shawn discusses Delsarte's insistence on the anterior positioning of gesture and here recalls the quality of spontaneity of gesture in the moment as I discussed in Chapter 1: "Gesture is parallel to the impression received; it is

therefore always anterior to speech, which is but a reflected and subordinate expression" (25). Delsarte's Law of Sequence states:

> 'Let your attitude, gesture and face foretell what you would make felt.' The thought (emotion, feeling, idea) comes first, then the expression of the face and attitude of the body, and the gesture is a result of this cause--and only last does speech come. (Shawn 48)

Anterior gesture can be directly illustrative of what the character is going to say, as in this example, when the guard on the coach that Nicholas and Smike take to Yorkshire complains about the weather: "giving himself a plentiful shower of blows on the chest and shoulders, observed that it was uncommon cold" (112). The politicians of Dickens's time are not that different from those of today. True to form, Mr Gregsbury plays the political game when he stalls for time before replying to the aptly named Mr Pugstyles's question:

> Mr Gregsbury reflected, blew his nose, threw himself further back in his chair, came forward again, leaning his elbows on the table, made a triangle with his two thumbs and his two forefingers, and tapping his nose with the apex thereof, replied (smiling as he said it), 'I deny everything.' (*Nicholas Nickleby* 263)

When the gesture occurs in the middle of a speech, it is most often used for emphasis by the speaker. In *Dombey and Son*, as Mrs Chick compliments Miss Tox in front of Mr Dombey, she underlines each statement gesturally: "'And I do say, and will say, and must say,' pursued his sister, pressing the foot of the wine-glass on Miss Tox's hand, at each of the three clauses" (57). Carker also uses gesture to dramatize his speech to his brother: "'all the hypocrisy and meekness of this place--is not worth *that* to me' snapping his thumb and finger" (*Dombey and Son* 733). Mr Toots waxes melodramatic in demonstrating his love for Florence Dombey:

> 'But upon my word I--it's a hard thing, Captain Gills, not to be able to mention Miss Dombey. I really have got such a dreadful load here!'--Mr Toots pathetically touched his shirt-front with both

> hands--'that I feel night and day exactly as if somebody was sitting upon me.' (632-33)

This is similar to Mr Squeers's description of Smike: "'he was a little wanting here,' touching his forehead, 'nobody at home you know, if you knocked ever so often'" (522). The following gesture is interesting because, while it is Kate who is speaking, her mother performs the accompanying gestures: "Kate blushed as she mentioned her principal acquirements, and Mrs Nickleby checked them all off, one by one, on her fingers" (341). This is a favourite gesture of Mrs Nickleby's and she uses it again when she is making a list of her suitors: "beginning with her left thumb and checking off the names on her fingers" (619). In answering Florence Dombey's inquiry after Captain Cuttle, Rob pairs the verbal and the gestural: "'Him with a hook, Miss?' rejoined Rob, with an illustrative twist of his left hand" (402).

Gestures made after speech also serve to place emphasis on the character's words and feelings. Mr Lillyvick stresses his appreciation of the Crummleses' performance with an unusual choice of adjective, after which his gestures reveal his embarrassment:

> 'Agreeable!' cried the collector. 'I mean to say, sir, that it was delicious.'
>
> Mr Lillyvick bent forward to pronounce the last word with greater emphasis; and having done so, drew himself up, and frowned and nodded a great many times. (396)

Dickens himself comments on gesture in *Nicholas Nickleby*: "The expression of a man's face is commonly a help to his thoughts, or glossary on his speech" (77). Gestures that follow speech often perform the service of a glossary by illustrating with movement what has been spoken. The author also seems to view gestures that follow speech as eking out the speaker's words. In *The Old Curiosity Shop*, when Codlin is trying to convince Nell that he, and not his partner, is her true friend, he emphasizes his speech with action:

> 'Codlin's the friend, not Short. Short's very well as far as he goes, but the real friend is Codlin--not Short.'
>
> Eking out these professions with a number of benevolent and protecting looks and great fervour of manner, Thomas Codlin stole away on tiptoe, leaving the child in a state of extreme surprise. (207)

Just after this, Codlin very pointedly reminds Nell of his professed true friendship: "following close at her heels, and occasionally admonishing her ankles with the legs of the theatre in a very abrupt and painful manner" (209). The actress in Miss Ledrook of the Crummles troupe is apparent in the drama she wrings out of her minor speech regarding Miss Snevellicci's tearful disappearance into the bedroom after her father's toast:

> 'Hush! Don't take any notice of it,' said Miss Ledrook, peeping in from the bedroom. 'Say, when she comes back, that she exerts herself too much.'
>
> Miss Ledrook eked out this speech with so many mysterious nods and frowns before she shut the door again, that a profound silence came upon all the company. . . . (470)

Whether they occur before, during, or after the character's speech, gestures enable the reader to visualize the speaker and, to a certain extent, hear his words better for the emphasis that his gestures make.

Gesture can act as a substitute for speech without any loss of meaning. Indeed, in some cases the gesture is more eloquent than any words could be. In *The Old Curiosity Shop*, when Mrs Jinwin is telling the guests at the tea party how she would respond to her late husband if he had ever treated her the way that Quilp treats his wife, her actions make her sentiments perfectly clear:

> 'When my poor husband, her dear father, was alive, if he had ever ventur'd a cross word to *me*, I'd have--' the good old lady did not finish the sentence, but she twisted off the head of a shrimp with a vindictiveness which seemed to imply that the action was in some degree a substitute for words. (75)

In some instances, gesture completely supplants verbal communication. This is not surprising in light of what Bulwer has to say:

> And [gesture] being the only speech that is natural to man, it may well be called the tongue and general language of human nature which, without teaching, men in all regions of the habitable world do at the first sight most easily understand. (16)

The most obvious example suitable to Bulwer's comments concerns Cavalletto in *Little Dorrit*. Dickens manages rather cleverly to work around the language barrier by having Cavalletto speak French as well as Italian and thereby be able to communicate with both Rigaud and Clennam. Cavalletto also makes great use of his multi-purpose word, altro, and of Mrs Plornish, his sometime translator, for lack of a better word. However, he does employ gesture to communicate with Pancks about money: "threw out as many fingers of his right hand as there were shillings, and made a cut crosswise in the air for an odd sixpence" (352). He also communicates his understanding of Mrs Plornish's suspicions, voiced to Pancks, that he is on the watch for someone:

> Mr Baptist [Cavalletto] seemed to have a general understanding of what she said; or perhaps his quickness caught and applied her slight action of peeping. In any case he closed his eyes and tossed his head with the air of a man who had sufficient reasons for what he did, and said in his own tongue, it didn't matter. (353)

Here Dickens is presents true non-verbal communication when Cavalletto reads Mrs Plornish's gesture of peeping and gesticulates in response. In *Dombey and Son*, Alice Marwood is a master of the mute appeal. This has already been discussed in the previous chapter with reference to her melodramatic gestures towards Harriet Carker. Still in the same scene, when Harriet comments that she and Alice might be about the same age, but implies that Alice has lived through much more, Alice does not need words to convey her emotion:

> She opened her arms, as though the exhibition of her outward

> form would show the moral wretch she was; and letting them drop at her sides, hung down her head. (565)

Alice's actions are completely in accordance with Dickens's overall methods of characterization through external presentation. Alice's obsession with Carker as the man who has caused her woes is emphasized in Dickens's presentation of her gestures: "In the intentness with which she looked after him again, she made a hasty gesture with her hand, when the old woman began to reply, as if her view could be obstructed by mere sound" (725).

Coded gestures between conspirators also replace speech. In these cases the gestures are not only conscious, but indeed highly calculated and strategic. They must replace speech with movements that have meaning for the confederates but that the uninitiated will not comprehend. By far the most common coded gesture in Dickens's works is the wink, as when Mrs Squeers signals to her husband and he replies in kind:

> 'Ale, Squeery?' inquired the lady, winking and frowning to give him to understand that the question propounded was, whether Nicholas should have ale, and not whether he (Squeers) would take any.
> 'Certainly,' said Squeers, re-telegraphing in the same manner. 'A glassful.' (145)

One of the most notable winks in the novels is actually not intended to be a secret code at all but is an affront to the easily insulted Mr Lillyvick: "what did Mr Snevellicci do? He winked--winked, openly and undisguisedly; winked with his right eye--upon Henrietta Lillyvick!" (472). As if that was not enough, Snevellicci repeats the wink and "drinking to Mrs Lillyvick in dumb show, actually blew her a kiss!" (472). Snevellicci manages to completely upset Mr Lillyvick with his use of gesture. This is not at all surprising when one considers how many gestures are used as sexual advances.[5] Tom, the cheeky clerk at the General Agency Office,

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[5]For a discussion of this, see Desmond Morris, *Bodytalk: The Meaning of Human*

assumes an air of intimacy with Nicholas Nickleby that is not appreciated: "he winked towards Nicholas, with a degree of familiarity which he no doubt intended for a rather flattering compliment, but with which Nicholas was most ungratefully disgusted" (257). Tom continues this unwarranted behaviour with reference to Madeline Bray, again, much to Nicholas's disgust:

> 'I say, what a good-looking gal that was, wasn't she?'
> 'What girl, sir?' demanded Nicholas, sternly.
> 'Oh yes. I know--what gal, eh?' whispered Tom, shutting one eye, and cocking his chin in the air. (258)

Dick Swiveller is also quite a winker. He evidently enjoys the idea of being in a conspiracy with Fred Trent and makes more out of it than there really is, as is evidenced by his gestures: "he winked as if in preservation of some deep secret, and folding his arms and leaning back in his chair, looked up at the ceiling with profound gravity" (*The Old Curiosity Shop* 60). Swiveller also has occasion to wink when he jokes with Fred about not being able to pay his bill to a waiter (109). As can be seen by most of the above examples, winks, like any other gesture, can be misconstrued if taken out of context by the receiver of the signal. Even in the case of Dick Swiveller, his winking is more for his own benefit in confirming to himself his craftiness than it is for Fred.

Touching the finger to the side of the nose is another coded gesture between conspirators and was apparently a much more common, and therefore legible signal in the Victorian era than it is today. The most popular example of this gesture that has survived to the present day can be found in "A Visit from St. Nicholas", also known as "The Night Before Christmas," by Clement Clarke Moore, where Santa Claus is described as "laying his finger aside his nose, and giving a nod, up the chimney he rose" (no pagination, third page from last). As

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Gestures.

Juliet McMaster has discussed in *Dickens the Designer* (53), Dickens varies his presentation of this gesture for comic affect. As is illustrated by George Cruikshank in *Oliver Twist* (383), Fagin employs this gesture to begin a confidential conversation with Noah Claypole (see Fig. 4):

> 'Why, one need be sharp in this town, my dear,' replied the Jew, sinking his voice to a confidential whisper; 'and that's the truth.'
> Fagin followed up this remark by striking the side of his nose with his right forefinger,--a gesture which Noah attempted to imitate, though not with complete success, in consequence of his own nose not being large enough for the purpose. However, Mr Fagin seemed to interpret the endeavour as expressing a perfect coincidence with his opinion, and put about the liquor which Barney re-appeared with, in a very friendly manner. (382)

In *David Copperfield*, Miss Mowcher also has difficulty performing this gesture, but this time it is the length of the arm, not the length of the nose, which poses the problem (386). Like Dick Swiveller, Miss Mowcher delights in a good conspiracy and makes the most of it. In this same scene with Steerforth and David, she touches her nose three more times and also winks several times. Tom Gradgrind Junior of *Hard Times* also makes the finger-touching-nose gesture when he is drunkenly ingratiating himself with James Harthouse: "Tom took his cigar our of his mouth, to shut up his eye (which had grown rather unmanageable) with the greater expression, and to tap his nose several times with his finger" (168-69). The finger-on-the-nose signal can also be used as a comic method of deflating the pretensions of one character by another. When Mrs Nickelby is at the height of her hauteur, the footman of Sir Mulberry Hawk's coach makes a similar gesture:

> It was quite exhilarating to hear the clash and bustle with which he banged the door and jumped up behind after Mrs Nickleby was safely in; and as that good lady was perfectly unconscious that he applied the gold-headed end of his long stick to his nose, and so telegraphed most disrespectfully to the coachman over her very head, she sat in a state of much stiffness and

Fig. 4: The coded gestures of Fagin and Noah

> dignity, not a little proud of her position. (426-27)

This act of unseen impudence between servants is similar to a scene in *Dombey and Son* where one of the hired servants gesticulates at Mr Dombey and Mrs Skewton's expense: "one of the very tall young men on hire, whose organ of veneration was imperfectly developed, thrusting his tongue into his cheek, for the entertainment of the other very tall young man on hire, as the couple turned into the dining room" (508). Mrs Nickleby is yet again the victim of the finger to nose gesture when her gentleman neighbour uses it as a signal of courtship:

> 'Go away, sir!'
> 'Quite away?' said the gentleman, with a languishing look, 'Oh! quite away?'
> 'Yes,' returned Mrs Nickleby, 'certainly. You have no business here. This is private property, sir; you ought to know that.'
> 'I do know,' said the old gentleman, laying his finger on his nose with an air of familiarity quite reprehensible, 'that this is a sacred and enchanted spot, where the most divine charms' --here he kissed his hand and bowed again--'waft mellifluousness over the neighbours' gardens, and force the fruit and vegetables into premature existence.' (621-22)

As her son is embarrassed by Tom's knowing wink, so Mrs Nickleby resents the intimacy implied by her neighbour's conspiratorial gesture.

When the finger is pressed against the lips instead of the nose, a slightly different meaning is conveyed. While the finger against the nose implies that the co-conspirators have a secret agreement, as might be expected, the finger against the lips signals that the receiver of the gesture should keep quiet. When Mrs Nickleby is trying to control her son's temper in front of Ralph, she "made no other reply than entreating Nicholas with a gesture to keep silent" (82). When Kate Nickleby comes upon Newman Noggs by surprise, he begs her silence with a similar, although more detailed, gesture:

> The surprise with which Kate, as she closed the room-door, beheld Newman Noggs standing bolt upright in a little niche in the wall like some scarecrow or Guy Fawkes laid up in winter

> quarters, almost occasioned her to call aloud. But, Newman laying his finger upon his lips, she had the presence of mind to refrain. (450)

In *The Old Curiosity Shop*, the Grandfather makes this sign to Nell (172) as does Mrs Jinwin to the other women at the tea party when they are surprised by Quilp (78). Another method of exhorting silence is somewhat more direct. Gride claps his hand over Ralph's mouth (*Nicholas Nickleby* 837) as does Cuttle in *Dombey and Son*: "before Rob could stammer a word in answer, Captain Cuttle turned out, all in a heap, and covered the boy's mouth with his hand" (430). A more secretive gesture takes place between Mrs Brown and Mr Dombey when he is eavesdropping on her conversation with Rob the Grinder:

> The old woman, still holding him [Rob] as before, took this opportunity of raising the forefinger of her right hand, in the air, as a stealthy signal to the concealed observer to give particular attention to what was about to follow. (830)

Mrs Brown repeats this curious signal, somewhat like Mr Chadband of *Bleak House* telegraphing the importance of what he is about to say. Mrs Brown's gesture is also similar to one used by Cavalletto in *Little Dorrit* to convey secrecy: "imparting great stealthiness to his flurried back-handed shake of his right forefinger" (634). When Nicholas is being interviewed for his job at the Cheeryble brothers establishment, Tim Linkinwater signifies his approval with a gesture suitable to his position:

> The brothers looked on with smiling faces, but Tim Linkinwater smiled not, nor moved for some minutes. At length he drew a long slow breath, and still maintaining his position on the tilted stool, glanced at brother Charles, secretly pointing with the feather of his pen towards Nicholas, and nodded his head in a grave and resolute manner, plainly signifying 'He'll do.' (556)

Highly specific details such as the fact that it is Cavalletto's right forefinger, as opposed to his left, with which he gestures, and that it is specifically the feather of his pen with which Tim signals lend credence to the idea that Dickens really did

visualize his characters in action before writing them down. It also goes a long way in aiding the reader to picture the gestures. Whether it is a nod, a wink, or a finger to the nose or lip, each of the above coded gestures is consciously employed by the character to convey a message beyond the hearing of others present. In this way, Dickens utilizes gesture as a secret, visualisable replacement for speech between two characters to the exclusion of uninitiated.

The conscious employment of gesture is also used in matters of courtesy. Gestures of propriety are socially accepted, socially recognizable and universally useful deliberate motions of courtesy and social accommodation. Often in courtesy gestures, one character demonstrates his recognition of the class of another. The criticism of gestures of class consciousness appears to be dangerous ground for some writers in that their discussions often demonstrate their own prejudices about class. For example, Jerome Hamilton Buckley's praise of Dickens contains its own class bias:

> He [Dickens] had found his power in dramatizing the foibles and the vitality of the little men with a sharp animation of gesture that often suggested the canvases of Brueghel and sometimes the more acid caricatures of Daumier. (29)

This quotation is drawn from Buckley's *The Victorian Temper*, which was published in 1964, thirty years before the politically correct 1990's, and perhaps that is why the phrase, "the little men" jars so discordantly now. Henry Siddons's *Practical Illustrations of Rhetorical Gesture and Action* was published in 1822, an even further cry from the egalitarian precepts of today. His argument that lowering gestures of submission and respect hold "place with all people, with all nations, without distinction of their ranks, their estates, or their conditions" and are therefore "truly *natural* and *essential*" (7) seems to miss the point of these gestures altogether. Gestures of submission and respect are all about distinction in rank. Not only does the current thinking about class colour our perception of

such critics' remarks, it also makes it more difficult for us to appreciate some of the more subtle gestural class markers that Dickens employs. Irwin makes this point well:

> In terms of class and social convention Dickens's novels are so remote from our experience that we are liable to misread his finer detail, to overlook or misconstrue carefully recorded snubs, blunders, unorthodoxies. The danger is particularly marked in relation to etiquette--the whole troublesome business of when to sit and when to stand in company, of how to dispose of one's hat or one's hands when addressing a social superior. The performance of gestures of this kind can convey a great variety of meanings. . . . The modern student can too easily dismiss Joe Gargery's deportment before Miss Havisham as merely imbecilic, or fail to see the full offensiveness of Sir Mulberry Hawk's drawing of Kate Nickleby's 'arm through his up to the elbow' within a few minutes of meeting her. An active sense of what was or wasn't 'done' in Victorian England is a great help towards a full appreciation of Dickens. (57-58)

The most common gestures of etiquette are the bow, the curtsey and the lifting of the hat. I will examine these in some detail in order to demonstrate that, while they are obviously conscious gestures on the part of the character, they often carry more semiotic weight than is first assumed by the modern reader.

In his examination of the teachings of Delsarte, Shawn details the intricacies of class consciousness in gestures of etiquette. Like Siddons before him, Delsarte examined the bow as a sign of respect. Shawn states: "lowering the body in any way has been a mark or symbol of submission" (50). He goes on to discuss how many different levels of interpretation are available from such a simple gesture:

> The bow is the most complicated and expressive gesture of the human body . . . the social status of the person bowing (as well as the person being bowed to) can be determined by the richness or poverty of the parts used. The peasant bow is a simple downward jerk, or bob of the head, or dip of the knee. The bow is affected not only by the order or kind of motion used (succession, reversed succession, parallelism, opposition), by

> the temoo of the bow, the amount of space covered (the size of the bow), but by its direction in space: an oblique bow, when one bows not directly facing the person honored, indicates some hidden meaning--it may be suspicion, a secret between the two persons involved, dislike, and many other 'elliptical' things. (52)

Irwin cites Erving Goffman regarding the lifting of the hat, which is a similar sign of respect. This passage conveys the complexities within seemingly simple, almost automatic gestures:

> Here a beautiful practice might be cited, now much in abeyance: the hat-lifting rule. When, according to traditional, official etiquette, a gentleman was thanked by a strange lady for his holding the door open, or offering her a seat in a public conveyance, or picking up a dropped parcel and proffering it to her, or saving her from a runaway horse, he bowed slightly and raised his hat, all the while specifically not returning her gaze. That motion allowed him to imply that the act was but a single expression of the worthiness of the recipient's self based upon her gender attributes, that he acknowledges the obligation of orienting himself to such qualities and to the passing predicaments of their possessor, and that the exchange has been brought to a close. (Goffman cited in Irwin 46)

While Goffman is obviously writing in a very long hand to describe a very short action, what remains interesting is the detail of interpretation available in such a gesture which is, on the surface, barely noticeable. Dickens has many such gestures, some of which are straightforward instances of propriety and some which have hidden levels of respect or in a few examples, a noted lack of the same.

As is the case with many of his other gestures and, indeed, with his other methods of characterization in general, Dickens demonstrates a great range of presentation in his depiction of bows, curtsies and other gestures pertaining to etiquette. Many of the minor characters in his novels bow and in some cases, such as that of Mr Perch in *Dombey and Son*, this is simply a graphic representation of their social station in the presence of their superiors. In this case the superior is Mr Carker:

> Mr Perch the messenger knocked softly at the door, and coming in on tiptoe, bending his body at every step as if it were the delight of his life to bow, laid some papers on the table.
>
> 'Would you please to be engaged, Sir?' asked Mr Perch, rubbing his hands, and deferentially putting his head on one side, like a man who felt he had no business to hold it up in such a presence, and would keep it as much out of the way as possible. (376)

Mr Perch is servility incarnate. Rob the Grinder also displays his fearful submission to Carker with bows:

> Rob expressed in a number of short bows his lively understanding of this caution, and was bowing himself back to the door, greatly relieved by the prospect of getting on the outside of it, when his patron stopped him. (678)

In *Nicholas Nickleby*, Dickens demonstrates his powers of exaggeration in the portrayal of Sir Matthew Pupker, a minor politician who graces the meeting of the United Metropolitan Improved Hot Muffin and Crumpet Baking and Punctual Delivery Company: "Sir Matthew Pupker especially, who had a little round head with a flaxen wig on the top of it, fell into such a paroxysm of bows, that the wig threatened to be jerked off every instant" (70-71). In this case the energetic nature of the bowing in not attributable to class consciousness so much as it is to the equivalent of political glad handing. Sometimes a submissive gesture can simply be a sign of respect, as it is for the representative of the Cheeryble brothers' porters and warehousemen:

> The sturdiest and jolliest subordinate elbowed himself a little in advance of his fellows, and exhibiting a very hot and flushed countenance, pulled a single lock of grey hair in the middle of his forehead as a respectful salute to the company, and delivered himself as follows--rubbing the palms of his hands very hard on a blue cotton handkerchief as he did so. (563)

Conversely, the protagonists of the novels sometimes exhibit their noble qualities by employing courtesy gestures to their subordinates. In *Little Dorrit*, Clennam is

as unfailingly courteous to Mrs Plornish and Maggy as he would be to Mrs Merdle: "'It ain't many that comes into a poor place, that deems it worth their while to move their hats,' said Mrs Plornish. 'But people think more of it than people think'" (178). When Nicholas Nickleby first meets Squeers, whose is appearance is described in anything but glowing terms, he is very polite, as befits a young gentleman: "Nicholas did *not* see that anybody was breakfasting except Mr Squeers; but he bowed with all becoming reverence, and looked as cheerful as he could" (106). Gestures of propriety can also indicate something less than reverential etiquette, as when Miss Knag is condescending to Kate Nickleby: "with that sort of half sigh, which, accompanied by two or three slight nods of the head, is pity's small change in general society" (288). Here, although the lowering of the head is like a small bow, its meaning is quite the opposite, as Dickens makes clear. It is typical of Quilp in *The Old Curiosity Shop* that he turns a simple parting gesture into something more diabolical: "he bowed and leered" (69).

As everyone knows, curtsies are the females' equivalent to the bow and Dickens demonstrates an equal range in their depiction. In *Dombey and Son*, the author underlines Miss Tox's sycophancy with an amusing simile: "Miss Tox, in the midst of her spreading gauzes, went down altogether like an opera-glass shutting-up; she curtseyed so low" (110). The author utilizes zeugma to depict Polly Toodle's fear and respect of Mr Dombey: "Such a hard-looking gentleman, that she involuntarily dropped her eyes and her curtsey at the same time" (82). In *Nicholas Nickleby*, Fanny Squeers and her friend Miss Price quarrel at the end of their tea party with Nicholas and John Browdie. Their spat includes Fanny "making a face" (177) and Miss Price responding: "'You are monstrous polite, ma'am,' said Miss Price. 'I shall not come to you to take lessons in the art, ma'am,' retorted Miss Squeers" (177). Their fight continues, with both

combatants agreeing upon "the danger of associating with low persons" (177) and their parting words and gestures also concern propriety: "'I scorn your words, Minx,' said Miss Squeers. 'You pay me a great compliment when you say so,' answered the miller's daughter, curtseying very low" (177-78). When the two young ladies quarrel again much later in the novel, it is Fanny who uses the sarcastic curtsey repeatedly (637-38). As is evidenced by the above examples, a courtesy gesture can be a sign of sincerity or quite its opposite. In any event, the characters are consciously making their feelings known through movements that signify.

As I previously stated, with reference to Goffman, the lifting of the hat is also a gesture of courtesy. As Mrs Nickleby's memories are not to be trusted, the exuberance displayed by Hawk and Verisopht in the following quotation is fittingly exaggerated:

> With similar recollections Mrs Nickleby beguiled the tediousness of the way, until they reached the omnibus, which the extreme politeness of her new friends would not allow them to leave until it actually started, when they took their hats, as Mrs Nickleby solemnly assured her hearers on many subsequent occasions, 'completely off,' and kissed their straw-coloured kid gloves till they were no longer visible. (417)

Hats can also be used in gesturing to convey feelings that have nothing to do with courtesy. When Florence asks a rough labourer for directions to Dombey and Son's, he expresses, in gesture, his astonishment that a young girl would want that information: "The man looked at her yet more curiously, and rubbed the back of his head so hard in his wonderment that he knocked his own hat off" (133). In *Nicholas Nickleby*, Newman Noggs makes many gestures with his hat. When expressing his hatred for Ralph to Miss La Creevy, Newman curses and gesticulates: "'Damn him!' cried Newman, dashing his cherished hat on the floor" (485). His aggravation at his employer for keeping him from his dinner is also

expressed with his hat: "The recital of his wrongs, however, seemed to have the effect of making Newman Noggs desperate; for he flattened his old hat upon his head" (703). After he eavesdrops on Ralph and Gride plotting against Madeline Bray, his anger is again expressed with what may be called hat gesturing: "'Gride and Nickleby! Good pair for a curricle--oh roguery! roguery! roguery!' With these reflections, and a very hard knock on the crown of his unfortunate hat at each repetition of the last word. . . ." (713).

Hats are only one of the many accessories to fashion that are used as props when characters gesture. Appropriately, considering her name, Susan Nipper is repeatedly described as biting her bonnet strings in *Dombey and Son* as she listens quietly and approvingly to Florence and Walter's conversation (336-37). Her response is measured completely by her gestures. Handkerchiefs form a part of many gestures. Obviously, they were much more prevalent than they now are and thus, like so many of the gestures depicted by Dickens, those performed with handkerchiefs seem somewhat foreign to the modern reader. Irwin points out that: "Mr Peggotty would never have covered the face of the fallen Em'ly with a Kleenex" (38). A parallel can be drawn between the gentleman in small clothes' keeper in *Nicholas Nickleby* and Captain Cuttle in *Dombey and Son* in that they both gesture with handkerchiefs and hats. The keeper performs a great many gestures over the garden wall when discussing his charge with Mrs Nickleby and Kate:

> 'Ah!' rejoined the man, taking his handkerchief out of his hat and wiping his face, 'he always will, you know. Nothing will prevent his making love.' . . . looking into his hat, throwing his handkerchief in at one dab, and putting it on again. . . . shaking his head so emphatically that he was obliged to frown to keep his hat on. . . . touching his hat sulkily. . . . (627-28)

These gestures are very similar to those repeatedly used by Ned Cuttle:

> The Captain was greatly relieved by this reply, and expressed

> his satisfaction by taking off his hard glazed hat, and dabbing his head all over with his handkerchief, rolled up like a ball, observing several times, with infinite complacency, and with a beaming countenance, that he know'd it. (763-64)

Fanny Squeers is described as "tying tight knots in her pocket-handkerchief and clenching her teeth" when she is bewailing Nicholas's inability to fall immediately in love with her (204). Dickens must have had Fielding's thoughts on comedy in his Preface to *Joseph Andrews* in mind when he created the character of Fanny Squeers. Her gestures betray her vanity, both about her station in life and about her beauty. Fielding states that vanity is one of the two causes of affectation worthy of ridicule, the other being hypocrisy (28). Fielding could easily be describing Dickens's characterization of Fanny when he states:

> Natural imperfections [are not] the objects of derision: but when ugliness aims at the applause of beauty or lameness endeavours to display agility; it is then that these unfortunate circumstances, which at first moved our compassion, tend only to raise our mirth. (29)

In *Great Expectations*, Mr Jaggers is known, not only for throwing his finger at people[6] and creaking his boots, but also for making splendid and terrifying use of his handkerchief:

> He always carried (I have not yet mentioned it, I think) a pocket-handkerchief of rich silk and of imposing proportions, which was of great value to him in his profession. I have seen him so terrify a client or a witness by ceremoniously unfolding this pocket-handkerchief as if he were immediately going to blow his nose, and then pausing, as if he knew he should not have time to do it before such client or witness committed himself, that the self-committal has followed directly, quite as a matter of course. (262)

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[6]Mr. Bucket, the detective in *Bleak House*, also uses his forefinger in interrogation: "Mr Bucket and his fat forefinger are much in consultation together under existing circumstances. . . . he shakes it before a guilty man, and it charms him to his destruction" (768). Norman Page (*Bleak House*, footnote #2, Chapter 22) and Butt and Tillotson (*Dickens at Work*, 196-197) both note that Bucket was patterned after Inspector Field of the London Metropolitan Police Force.

Who ever thought that gesturing with a handkerchief could achieve such results? It is highly unlikely that a Kleenex, if substituted, could provoke such an action.

Gesturing with accessories demonstrates a high level of conscious gestural sophistication on the part of the character and, of course, on the part of the author describing that character. As man is sometimes defined as a tool-using mammal, so these are tool-using gestures. Dickens's genius in the description of gesture with props is evidenced by his ability to infuse common actions with uncommon depths of meaning. For example, in two incidences in *Nicholas Nickleby*, the common toothpick is employed to convey an air of decadent nonchalance on the part of the gesturer. When Nicholas confronts Hawk and Verisopht after he overhears them gossiping about his sister in disrespectful terms, their controlled, insensitive behaviour drives him mad. Nicholas announces his identity, and his relation to Kate, by presenting his card to Hawk. This is Hawk's response:

> A momentary expression of astonishment, not unmixed with some confusion, appeared in the face of Sir Mulberry as he read the name; but he subdued it in an instant, and tossing the card to Lord Verisopht, who sat opposite, drew a toothpick from a glass before him, and very leisurely applied it to his mouth. (495)

Is this action a further cover-up for the astonishment he has just subdued from his facial expression, or is it a class-conscious gesture indicating that he believes that his station permits the ill usage of those below him in class, such as Kate and Nicholas, and that he really feels no concern about them or his behaviour towards them? The answer to this question is left to the reader, but Nicholas's response can be construed as taking it as a further insult: "'Your name and address?' said Nicholas, turning paler as his passion kindled" (495). The next incidence also concerns an attempt to gesturally rebuff Nicholas with the same tiny wooden weapon and the same duality of meaning can be drawn from the gesture. When

Nicholas confronts the literary gentleman at the Crummleses' going away party, he accuses him of literary piracy, a controversy very close to Dickens's heart. Nicholas compares Shakespeare's brilliant adaptation and enlargement of classical tales to the hacks' butchery of unfinished popular novels, but the literary gentleman chooses to misconstrue his meaning and hides behind his toothpick:

> 'I was about to say,' rejoined Nicholas, 'that Shakespeare derived some of his plots from old tales and legends in general circulation; but it seems to me, that some of the gentlemen of your craft at the present day, have shot very far beyond him--'
> 'You're quite right, sir,' interrupted the literary gentleman, leaning back in his chair and exercising his toothpick. 'Human intellect, sir, has progressed since his time--is progressing--will progress--' (727)

Again, the toothpick gesture can be interpreted as demonstrating an insulting degree of indifference or as a subtle defensive, stalling measure.

Many of Dickens's characters gesture with their canes, often using them as blunted substitutes for swords. Proud of the impression he assumes that his speech has made upon Nell's grandfather, Dick Swiveller "poked his friend with his cane and whispered his conviction that he had administered 'a clincher'" (65). While strolling with Mr Dombey, Major Bagstock performs martially with his cane:

> 'Edith Skewton, Sir,' returned the Major, stopping short again, and punching a mark in the ground with his cane, to represent her, 'married (at eighteen) Granger of Ours;' whom the Major indicated by another punch. 'Granger, Sir,' said the Major, tapping the last ideal portrait, and rolling his head emphatically, 'was Colonel of Ours; a de-vilish handsome fellow, Sir, of forty-one. He died, Sir, in the second year of his marriage.' The Major ran the representative of the deceased Granger through and through the body with his walking-stick, and went on again, carrying his stick over his shoulder. (365)

The female equivalent to this gesture is performed by the newly married Sophronia Lammle in *Our Mutual Friend*. Upon the discovery that she has made the mistake of marrying a poor man for his money, she "has prodded little spirting

[sic] holes in the damp sand before her with her parasol, and the gentleman has trailed his stick after him. . . . like a drooping tail" (168). As their conversation of dismayed discovery continues, Dickens's remarks on the trail they leave behind them places the reader in the curious position of the hunter, discerning their passage by the marks they have left in the sand. In *Dombey and Son*, Mrs Chick draws "lines on the carpet with the ivory end of her parasol" (490). Curiously, several of Dickens's male characters are described as sucking on the heads of their canes or walking-sticks. Lord Verisopht, in *Nicholas Nickleby*, Jonas Chuzzlewit in *Martin Chuzzlewit*, and Dick Swiveller in *The Old Curiosity Shop* all have this habit, but the most colourful description of cane-sucking concerns George Sampson in *Our Mutual Friend*: "He put the round head of his cane in his mouth, like a stopper, when he sat down. As if he felt himself full to the throat with affronting sentiments" (155). The lack of these fashion accessories today has really left us bereft of great gesture-making tools. Some characters adapt what props they do have to the situation. In *Nicholas Nickleby*, Mr Lillyvick employs his umbrella in a manner similar to those of characters above: "giving a collector's double knock on the ground with the umbrella" (396) and: "patting himself benignantly on the side of the head with his umbrella" (397).

Mr Snawley also adapts what he happens to have in his hand to make a gesture. Dickens's use of low comedy in his depiction of Snawley is readily apparent in his hypocritically pious gesticulation of congratulation to Squeers on his capture of Smike: "'It's clear that there has been a Providence in it, sir,' said Mr Snawley, casting down his eyes with an air of humility, and elevating his fork with a bit of lobster on the top of it towards the ceiling" (585). Paper, in the form of letters, plays a part in many gestures in *Nicholas Nickleby*. After Nicholas has read Mr Lenville's invitation for him to come and have his nose pulled, he pairs words with gestures that make it all too clear what he thinks: "'And how dare you

bring it here, sir?' asked Nicholas, tearing it into very little pieces, and jerking it in a shower towards the messenger" (455). Ralph Nickleby performs this same tearing gesture twice; once to a letter from Nicholas (525) and once to a note from Gride (772). When Nicholas uses Newman Noggs as the carrier of a letter in which he renounces all ties to Ralph, Noggs's pride and satisfaction at being the bearer of such a denunciation is evidenced by his gestures:

> Newman was not three minutes' walk from Golden Square, but in the course of that three minutes he took the letter out of his hat and put it in again twenty times at least. First the front, then the back, then the sides, then the superscription, then the seal, were objects of Newman's admiration. Then he held it at arm's length as if to take in the whole at one delicious survey, and then he rubbed his hands in perfect ecstasy with his commission. (506)

Ralph's reaction to this letter is also depicted gesturally: "Ralph Nickleby read this letter twice, and frowning heavily, fell into a fit of musing; the paper fluttered from his hand and dropped upon the floor, but he clasped his fingers, as if he held it still" (507).

In *Dombey and Son*, Dickens uses props extensively in drawing the character of Mrs Skewton. She has a great many accoutrements and she employs them all to carry on her act as the flirtatious coquette. She even plays at peekaboo with her hand-screen: "cruelly holding up the hand-screen so as to shut the Major out. . . . glancing at the Major, round the screen" (368). If there was ever a case of age counterfeiting youth, this is it. Mrs Skewton also makes much of her fan. A few examples will suffice to show her method:

> Cleopatra made as if she would brain the flatterer with her fan. . . . giving one hand to the Major, and tapping his knuckles with her fan, which she held in the other. . . . bringing her fan to bear upon the Major's nose . . . [the Major] would have imprinted a kiss on her exceedingly red lips, but for her interposing the fan with a very winning and juvenile dexterity. (446-48)

Mrs Skewton also manages to flirt with her handkerchief and her parasol and even makes a prop of her wheeled chair. Dickens has here presented a master at the game of sexual play still at the top of her game, despite the fact that when her maid peels back the layers at night, nothing much is left of this "young lady" except a palsied old crone. Perhaps she needs all these accoutrements to prop up her act.

Conscious gestures are inherently meaningful. Their signification is readily apparent considering that they can be used as both complements to, and replacements for speech. Dickens's employment of gesture to further conspiracies is at once plentiful and imaginative. His characters' strategic signals heighten the theatrical nature of his scenes in some cases and enhance the comedy in others. While some of the gestures that his characters make for propriety's sake may now appear unusual, his ability to imbue such simple gesticulations with more than one meaning attests to his subtlety and sophistication in characterization. Gestures of etiquette speak to a level of class consciousness far beyond what we experience today. His utilization of the accessories necessary to fashion and other props highlights the reality of each scene for the reader. Gestures with props accentuate the character's physicality in that the accessories are more than just accoutrements, they are extensions of the character's body and, as such, are employed by the characters to create meaningful movement. Conscious gestures enable the reader to visualise Dickens's characters as they interact. The various levels of sophistication presented in conscious gestures, from the simple accompaniment to speech, to secret codes, to the use of props as gesture-making tools attest to Dickens's skill as a creator of personality through external representation.

CHAPTER 5: UNCONSCIOUS GESTURES

It is easy for the reader to comprehend immediately the gestures that Dickens's characters perform consciously, but gestures made unconsciously often require more careful examination. Those characters who perform unconcious gestures are by definition unaware of an audience and therefore their gestures do not fit neatly under my category of theatrical gesture. Nevertheless, they are signifying movements, the presentation of these gestures is theatrical, and the author was well aware of his audience of readers. Although such gestures are not as universally recognized as the consciously performed ones, their meaning is more important to the furthering of characterization. An unconscious gesture can paint a fuller portrait of a character than can a conscious one. These gestures can be divided into groups based on what they reveal about the gesturers. In his article, "Emotion and Gesture in *Nicholas Nickleby*," Angus Easson discusses a "hierarchy of gesture" with "those usually least controllable (e.g. blushing, tears) being valued more highly as manifestations of true emotion than those that may be involuntary yet which can be manipulated (e.g. lowering of eyelids, movement of lips)" (141). Those unconscious gestures which are perceived as having a higher degree of value as markers of true emotion occur most often as a direct result of the interaction between characters. Some unconscious gestures enlighten the reader about what is going on in the character's mind at that moment and usually invite fairly straightforward interpretation. Other unconscious gesticulations permit a deeper discernment of the character's psyche as a whole. A few characters are described as having nervous tics or mannerisms that serve as guides as to when the character is under stress or in the grip of some insatiable appetite. Some unconscious gestures are idiosyncratic to a particular person and serve to create

an idiolectic portrait of that character. Although idiolect usually refers to idiosyncratic, individualized language, I will be using the term to refer specifically to gesture. In order for unconscious gestures to obtain meaning, they must be interpreted by an observer and thus, the interpreters of unconscious gestures are often of as much significance as the gesturers. There are occasions when characters consciously, although unsuccessfully, perform gestures as a method of hiding their true thoughts and feelings. Dickens's depiction of these failed false gestures permits the discerning reader to uncover what the character is trying to hide. Other characters who are adept at gesticular legibility can also discover the character's deceptions. In these cases, conscious gestures are betrayed by unconscious ones. Finally, while few gestures have only a single meaning in Dickens's oeuvre, there are some actions that usually serve as moral signposts. Such gestures, like all unconscious gestures, can be seen as brilliantly etched close-ups that when read together have a cumulative, pointillist impact in the presentation of character.

Peg Sliderskew of *Nicholas Nickleby* and Mrs Brown of *Dombey and Son* are two of a kind. Both old crones are likened to witches and both have similar, unappealing, unconscious gestures. When Gride is telling Peg about his plans for married life with Madeline Bray, her gestures chart her emotions:

> Mrs Sliderskew appeared to approve highly of this ingenious scheme, and expressed her satisfaction by various rackings and twitchings of her head and body, which by no means enhanced her charms. These she prolonged until she had hobbled to the door, when she exchanged them for a sour malignant look, and twisting her under-jaw from side to side, muttered heavy curses upon the future Mrs Gride, as she crept slowly down the stairs, and paused for breath at nearly every one.
>
> 'She's half a witch, I think,' said Arthur Gride, when he found himself again alone. (767-68)

Squeers's story of how Gride fares on his wedding day provokes unknowing, ungainly gestures of joy from Peg:

> Mrs Sliderskew was in an ecstasy of delight, rolling her head about, drawing up her skinny shoulders, and wrinkling her cadaverous face into so many and such complicated forms of ugliness, as awakened the unbounded astonishment and disgust even of Mr Squeers. (851)

As with Peg, the jaws form part of the description of Mrs Brown's gestures. When she is begging to be paid to tell Edith's fortune, Mrs Brown is portrayed in gruesome terms: "munching with her jaws, as if the Death's Head beneath her yellow skin were impatient to get out" (459). After this, she makes the same offer to Carker and he agrees to have his fortune told. The description of her gestural response makes reference to the First Witch in *Macbeth*:

> Munching like that sailor's wife of yore, who had chestnuts in her lap, and scowling like the witch who asked for some in vain, the old woman picked the shilling up, and going backwards, like a crab, or like a heap of crabs: for her alternately expanding and contracting hands might have represented two of that species, and her creeping face, some half-a-dozen more: crouched on the veinous root of an old tree, pulled out a short black pipe from within the crown of her bonnet, lighted it with a match, and smoked in silence, looking fixedly at her questioner. (460)

Shortly thereafter, Dickens repeats, with alliteration, the description of her unconscious facial gesture: "The old woman, who had not removed her pipe, and was munching and mumbling while she smoked, as if in conversation with an invisible familiar, pointed with her finger in the direction he was going, and laughed" (460). It is almost as if the munching or twisting of the jaws in these two old crones is a visible sign that the wheels are turning inside their heads. Mrs Brown is later portrayed in a more sympathetic light than Peg ever is. When she first sees her daughter, returned after having been transported to Australia, the old lady's gestures are more pitiful than joyous:

> 'It's my gal! It's my Alice! It's my handsome daughter, living and come back!' screamed the old woman, rocking herself to and fro upon the breast that coldly suffered her embrace. . . . she screamed again, dropping on the floor before her, clasping her knees, laying her head against them, and still rocking herself to and fro with every frantic demonstration of which her vitality was able . . . still holding her knees . . . beating her hands together to a kind of weary tune, and rolling herself from side to side, continued moaning and wailing to herself. (568-69)

These self-soothing rocking motions are similar to those performed by some agitated mental patients and are indicative of the profound emotional affect that Alice's arrival has on her lonely mother. In *Oliver Twist*, Dickens displays Nancy's great remorse for kidnapping Oliver with similar gestures: "She rocked herself to and fro; caught her throat; and, uttering a gurgling sound, gasped for breath" (197).

In *The Old Curiosity Shop*, Sampson Brass's unconscious gestures connote nothing more than the reaction to a rude awakening. Nevertheless, they are a sample of Dickens's mastery of the description of unknowing gestures and can certainly strike a chord with most readers: "Mr Brass, after writhing about in a great many strange attitudes, and often twisting his face and eyes into an expression like that which is usually produced by eating gooseberries very early in the season, was by this time awake also" (153). Dickens's wit is readily apparent in humorous descriptions like that of Mr Brass. The author's skillful presentation invites the reader not only to chuckle at the description but also to relate to the character's experience more closely by painting an expression we can all recognize. Susan Nipper of *Dombey and Son* also makes unconscious gestures that are entertaining, but hers reveal more of her inner thoughts. Her abrupt gestures display her resolution and steadfast loyalty to her mistress. Here, she is making up her mind to speak to Mr Dombey about Florence:

> But the Nipper, so far from being cast down, was singularly

> brisk and bold, and all her energies appeared to be braced up for some great feat. This was noticeable even in her dress, which was much more tight and trim than usual; and in occasional twitches of her head as she went about the house, which were mightily expressive of determination. (702)

As she prepares to enter Mr Dombey's room, she displays further signs of bracing up her courage: "With a twitch--not of her head merely, this time, but of her whole self--the Nipper went on tiptoe to Mr Dombey's door. . . . Susan encouraged herself with a final twitch, and went in" (702). Once inside, Nipper's defiance of her master on behalf of Florence is emphasized by her movements: "here the black-eyed shook her head, and slightly stamped her foot" (703). Her repeated foot stamping and head shaking perform the function of visual punctuation to her repeated, resolute phrase: "'I say to some and all--I do!'" (703). Dickens's depiction of Susan Nipper is unusually replete with gestures throughout the novel. This can be accounted for by the fact that she is a servant and cannot always speak freely and yet plays a substantial role in Florence's life. She plays Sam Weller to Miss Dombey's Pickwick, but, unlike the loquacious Sam, the Nipper enacts most of her emotions with gesture. Gestures multiply with repression. Newman Noggs also acts as a servant to a major character and is even more gesturally prolific than Susan Nipper. While most of Noggs's gestures fall under the division of gestures indicative of ongoing personality traits, some of his actions are simply unconscious displays of passing emotions. When the meeting that Newman has arranged between Nicholas and a young lady is disturbed, a great commotion ensues and Newman reacts with a strange and comical gesture:

> Newman hurried to and fro, thrusting his hands into all his pockets successively, and drawing out the linings of every one in the excess of his irresolution. It was but a moment, but the confusion crowded into that one moment no imagination can exaggerate. (613-14)

This reminds me of the circus clowns who run around the ring performing the same gesture when their miniature car catches on fire.

It is fitting that at least three of Dickens's villains should perform similar unconscious gestures. In one of Nicholas and Ralph Nickleby's verbal sparring matches, Ralph congratulates himself for having made a particularly stinging remark about his nephew: "when Ralph noted his pale face and quivering lip, he hugged himself to mark how well he had chosen the taunts best calculated to strike deep into a young and ardent spirit" (326). When Carker serendipitously learns from Captain Cuttle of Walter Gay's love for Florence Dombey, he is depicted as making a similar self-congratulatory gesture: "bending down at the knees, for a moment, in an odd manner, as if he were falling together to hug the whole of himself at once" (307). Uriah Heep also applauds his own conniving by hugging himself but, as are all of this character's gestures, his hug is uniquely and sickeningly Heep-like:

> Raising his great hands until they touched his chin, he rubbed them softly, and softly chuckled; looking as like a malevolent baboon, I thought, as anything human could look.
> 'You see,' he said, still hugging himself in that unpleasant way, and shaking his head at me, 'you're quite a dangerous rival, Master Copperfield. You always was, you know.' (637)

When Heep has finished telling David Copperfield how well he thinks being "umble" has paid off, he again physically congratulates himself: "His account of himself was so far attended with an agreeable result, that it led to his withdrawing his hand in order that he might have another hug of himself under the chin" (639). There is something very pathetic about the fact that Dickens's villains must hug themselves in celebration of their dastardly deeds, as no one else would ever congratulate them on their acts or, moreover, hug them at all. It is certainly not difficult to picture Pecksniff performing the same unconscious gesture in *Martin Chuzzlewit*.

Another gesture is predominantly, but not exclusively, employed by Dickens's villains. Nail and finger-biting gestures are unconscious indicators of strong emotions and often of self-hatred, as the violent emotion and frustration that the character feels is turned inward. Ralph Nickleby is described as "gnawing his fingers" when he visits Squeers after he has been arrested (882). Ralph is realizing that he has been "beaten at every point" (882) and, therefore, his finger gnawing is the gestural equivalent to the melodramatic villain's utterance of "curses!" Two other villainous characters, Lord George Gordon of *Barnaby Rudge* and Quilp of *The Old Curiosity Shop* are also nail biters. Lord George Gordon is repeatedly described as biting his nails--and quite voraciously too. The mental instability that makes him Gashford's pawn is emphasized by this gesture. He is described as "biting his nails as though he would pare them to the quick" (339), and "biting his nails most horribly" (344). When Quilp discovers how quickly Nell's grandfather is spending the money he has lent him, his pondering takes gestural form: "he bit the nails of all his ten fingers with extreme voracity" (92). The characterization of Quilp is such that this gesture is completely fitting to one who eats boiled eggs shells and all, and drinks boiling-hot liquids. While we understand from his nail biting that he is puzzled and concerned about his money, this gesture really only serves to display another facet of his bizarre and impish personality. Pancks of *Little Dorrit* also bites his nails, "cropping such scanty pasturage of nails as he could find" (201), which is just one of the many curious habits of the tugboat. Finally, Ned Cuttle of *Dombey and Son* is also a nail biter of sorts. The melodramatic nature of this gesture has travelled full circle from the seriousness of Ralph's finger gnawing to the point where the Captain's performance of much the same gesture is comical:

Instead of putting on his coat and waistcoat with anything like the

Fig. 5: Captain Cuttle bites his "nails"

> impetuosity that could alone have kept pace with Walter's mood, he declined to invest himself with those garments at all at present; and informed Walter that on such a serious matter, he must be allowed to 'bite his nails a bit.'
>
> 'It's an old habit of mine, Wal'r,' said the Captain, 'any time these fifty year. When you see Ned Cuttle bite his nails, Wal'r, then you may know that Ned Cuttle's aground.'
>
> Thereupon the Captain put his iron hook between his teeth. . . . (283)

By having this character comment on the gesture as he performs it, and by describing him as biting his hook rather than his nails, Dickens further endears Captain Cuttle to the reader. Indeed, Phiz chose this gesture for his illustration, "Profound Cogitation of Captain Cuttle" (284) (see Fig. 5). The dilemma that puts Ned Cuttle aground is a serious one, worthy of sober consideration; namely, how to inform Sol that his son is departing. However, Dickens successfully employs humour in the characterization of Captain Cuttle to lighten the mood.

There are other gestures in addition to nail and finger biting that serve as indicators of nervousness. When Ralph Nickleby is striving to persuade Squeers to steal Gride's papers from Peg Sliderskew, the schoolmaster displays many gestures that reveal his concern about the project:

> These arguments at length concluded, Mr Squeers crossed his legs and uncrossed them, and scratched his head, and rubbed his eye, and examined the palms of his hands, and bit his nails, and after exhibiting other signs of restlessness and indecision, asked 'whether one hundred pounds was the highest that Mr Nickleby could go.' (844)

Dickens's skillful repetition of the word "and" here accentuates the impression of the narrator's cataloguing of Squeers's gesticulations, and its emphasis can even lead to the interpretation that Squeers could be employing body language as a bargaining device in order to get Ralph to raise his offer. Although Gride is as unlikeable a character as Squeers, his nervous gestures just before he is due to

marry Madeline Bray do not invite the interpretation of manipulation and are genuinely unconscious:

> Gride . . . sat huddled together in a corner, fumbling nervously with the buttons of his coat, and exhibiting a face of which every skulking and base expression was sharpened and aggravated to the utmost by his anxiety and trepidation. (810)

Solomon Gills of *Dombey and Son* also makes an anxious gesture by toying with his buttons: "passing his hand nervously down the whole row of bright buttons on his coat, and then up again, as if they were beads and he were telling them twice over" (300-01). This gesture is occasioned when Walter and Captain Cuttle alarm Solomon by telling him of Walter's plans to go to sea. All of Solomon's and Walter's problems have a financial basis, as is presented eloquently by Solomon's gestures earlier in the novel:

> 'You've got *some* money, haven't you?' whispered the Captain.
> 'Yes, yes--oh yes--I've got some,' returned old Sol, first putting his hands into his empty pockets, and then squeezing his Welsh wig between them, as if he thought he might wring some gold out of it. (184)

Gills's grave financial concerns are demonstrated by his unconscious gestures to such an extent that his actions contradict his words and the reader, and Captain Cuttle, can perceive the intensity of Sol's worries. The unconscious gestures are better indicators of the truth than are the character's words.

Money occasions a number of gestures, both conscious and unconscious, but for convenience I shall group them here together. When Ralph Nickleby strives to get the better of Mr Mantalini in a disagreement over money, his seemingly unconscious gesture, like those of Squeers above, is actually manipulative. He has what Mantalini wants and he employs gesture like a subliminal message:

> Ralph pushed some papers from him as he spoke, and carelessly rattled his cash-box, as though by mere accident.

> The sound was too much for Mr Mantalini. He closed the bargain directly it reached his ears, and Ralph told the money out upon the table. (509)

Mantalini's desire for cash is demonstrated not only by his immediate reaction to Ralph's seductive cash-box-rattling but also by his own gestures. He is described as "dropping on his knees, and pouncing with kitten-like playfulness upon a stray sovereign" (509). As with Solomon Gills's wig-wringing gesture, Mantalini's playful gesticulations with coins uncover a deeper level of need, in his case perhaps mixed with greed, than is apparent at first glance. While listening to his wife complain to Ralph about their financial troubles, Mantalini attempts to make light of the situation by behaving like a repentant child:

> Mr Mantalini groaned once more from behind his wife's bonnet, and fitting a sovereign into one of his eyes, winked with the other at Ralph. Having achieved this performance with great dexterity, he whipped the coin into his pocket, and groaned again with increased penitence. (512)

It comes as no surprise that such a hypocrite as Squeers has more manipulative gestures with money when he is negotiating with Ralph. Pretending to have more money than he does, he begs a small sum from Ralph for Wackford Junior to buy a pastry: "'You haven't got such a thing as twopence, Mr Nickleby, have you?' said Squeers, rattling a bunch of keys in his coat pocket, and muttering something about its being all silver" (521). It is surprising that Mr Dick of *David Copperfield* should make a gesture similar to that of Ralph's and Squeers's above but, of course, Mr Dick's is innocent of guile. Betsey Trotwood demonstrates her wisdom by not allowing Mr Dick to spend any money on his own and it does not take long for David to deduce that Mr Dick "was only allowed to rattle his money, and not to spend it" (307). When David's aunt is considering professions for David, Mr Dick proposes that of a Brazier, which, necessarily, is immediately vetoed by Betsey and Mr Dick "ever afterwards confined himself to

looking watchfully at her for suggestions, and rattling his money" (331). If it is a truism that money is power, then Mr Dick's cash rattling is a small unconscious gesture that recaptures some of his own self-esteem. In *Nicholas Nickleby*, Dickens takes special notice of the two men who work at the gambling tent at the race course at Hampton. As I stated at the beginning of this chapter, the observer can be just as important as the gesturer in the examination of unconscious gestures. The gambling croupier and the manager are two such observers. They make their money by paying attention to the gestures of others and by keeping poker-faced themselves. Although the author devotes a very detailed description to these men, a sample will suffice to demonstrate his point regarding their subtle gestures and their keen perception of the gestures of their customers:

> Amid all the buzzing noise of the games and the perpetual passing in and out of people, he [the proprietor] seemed perfectly calm and abstracted, without the smallest particle of excitement in his composition. . . . Sometimes, but very rarely, he nodded to some passing face. . . . The next instant he subsided into his old state. . . . People turned round and looked at him; he made no gesture, caught nobody's eye,--let them pass away, and others come on and be succeeded by others, and took no notice. . . . But there was not a face that passed in or out this man failed to see, not a gesture at any one of the three tables that was lost upon him, not a word spoken by the bankers but reached his ear, not a winner or loser he could not have marked; and he was the proprietor of the place.
> (750-51)

Dickens contrasts the still watchfulness of the proprietor with his employee who runs the rouge-et-noir table. This second man is continually in skillful motion as he keeps up the constant patter of a carnival barker, and yet one phrase betrays his complete and careful observation of the gamblers:

> 'I lost one hundred and thirty-seven pound yesterday, gentlemen, at one roll of the ball: I did indeed!--how do you do, sir,' (recognizing some knowing gentleman without any halt or change of voice, and giving a wink so slight that it seems an accident) 'will you take a

glass of sherry, sir--here wai-ter, bring a clean glass. . . . ' (752)

This rudimentary casino has none of today's hidden cameras and patrolling security personnel, yet Dickens's description makes it clear that nothing will get by the observation of these two professionals. They would be sure to spot the unconscious, nervous gestures of a desperate Solomon Gills, the transparent pretences of Mantalini, or the gestural manipulations of Ralph and Squeers. Money serves as the nexus for conscious and unconscious gestures.

One class of gestures is presented as being completely involuntary in Dickens's oeuvre. The changing colour of the flesh is repeatedly used as an indicator of sincere emotion in the novels and thus would attain the highest level in Easson's hierarchy of gesture. Siddons cites Descartes regarding blushing: "the soul always preserves some power over the muscles, she has none over the blood. says Descartes; and this is the reason why sudden redness and paleness are always independent of our will" (23). Many of Dickens's female characters blush. In *Hard Times*, Sissy Jupe's blushing colour and naturalness are contrasted to Bitzer's complete lack of colour and his willingness to be indoctrinated into Gradgrind's religion of facts. When Sissy cannot provide Gradgrind with the proper definition of a horse, despite the fact that her father works at Sleary's Horse-riding, Bitzer gives the correct answer. As the sun shines upon both of them, it highlights Sissy and deprives Bitzer of what little natural colour he has: "His skin was so unwholesomely deficient in the natural tinge, that he looked as though, if he were cut, he would bleed white" (50). In contrast, Sissy's natural colour becomes darker due to her embarrassment at her failure:

> 'Now girl number twenty,' said Mr Gradgrind. 'You know what a horse is.'
>
> She curtseyed again, and would have blushed deeper, if she could have blushed deeper than she had blushed all this time.
>
> (50)

While blushing is a wholly unconscious gesture, it is nevertheless a gesture because it is a signifying movement, in this case, signifying mortified embarrassment.

In *Dombey and Son*, Edith repeatedly turns pale and blushes. Her gestures are so few and so subtle that the colour of her skin becomes a verifiable barometer of her emotions. As Edith's anger becomes more intense while Mr Dombey berates her for what he perceives to be her insolence and extravagance, her colour changes, marking her heightening emotion and waning self-control:

> She bent her eyes upon him steadily, and set her trembling lips. He saw her bosom throb, and saw her face flush and turn white. . . .
> Still the fixed look, the trembling lips, the throbbing breast, the face now crimson and now white. . . . She changed suddenly. Her face and bosom glowed as if the red light of an angry sunset had been flung upon them. (651-52)

Edith is such a cool marble statue at most times that when Dickens does describe her blushing, it has a remarkably strong effect. There is a way that Edith can change the colour of her skin consciously. When she loses control and hurts herself in her frustration, the injured skin turns red on three occasions. On the night before her wedding, Edith fights with her mother regarding Florence and then returns to her room for a night of restless pacing and agitation. The author's description of her is memorable: "her dark hair shaken down, her dark eyes flashing with a raging light, her broad white bosom red with the cruel grasp of the relentless hand with which she spurned it from her" (515). At the end of the argument between Edith and Mr Dombey that I cited above, she again resorts to self-mutilation:

> She had changed her attitude before he arrived at these words and now sat--still looking at him fixedly--turning a bracelet round and round upon her arm; not winding it about with a light, womanly touch, but pressing and dragging it over the smooth skin, until the white limb showed a bar of red. (653)

After Carker has kissed her hand, and she is once again alone in her room, she strikes the tainted hand on the marble chimney-shelf, "so that, at one blow, it was bruised, and bled, and held it from her near the shining fire, as if she could have thrust it in and burned it" (692). The author's detail that the chimney shelf is made of marble accentuates the intensity of the blow, because Edith is repeatedly described as being a marble statue herself. Here, the intimation of marble striking marble recalls the jarring and breaking movements repeatedly described when Edith loses her rigid self-control. Remarkably, Edith is not the only one of Dickens's female characters to be described as a statue, Louisa Gradgrind of *Hard Times* and Mrs Clennam of *Little Dorrit* also have this quality. Edith's self-hatred arising from allowing herself to be sold like a chattel into a loveless marriage is expressed by her turning her feelings of self-contempt into violent actions against her own body. The dramatic change in Edith from still marble whiteness to angry red always signifies extreme emotion and the loss of her tight self-discipline. Blushing, like all unconscious gestures, acts as a window into the inner self of the character and, for Dickens, is indeed a very effective method of external characterization.

Some characters have odd, unusual repetitive gestures that serve to individualize them. I will call this class of unconscious gestures gestural idiolect. Gesture forms a part of body language, and idiolect usually refers to language, so gestural idiolect can be defined as the individual, idiosyncratic language of movements that signify. Newman Noggs, with his distinguishing nervous tics, is one of the foremost examples of a character depicted through gestural idiolect. Newman can be said to fit into a class of characters whose gestures depict them neither as evil nor good. These characters often fulfill the role of helping the protagonist from his or her position as underling to a villain, or at least to a character in power who has influence over the hero. As underlings or assistants,

these figures are often granted many gestures as substitutions for speech. As I said before, gestures multiply with repression. Pancks, the tugboat in *Little Dorrit*, Wemmick in *Great Expectations*, and Riah in *Our Mutual Friend* are all members of this class. These helper characters are at first gesturally illegible so that it is difficult for the reader to determine where their loyalties, if any, lie. Easson states that these are characters who "present a business face at odds with [their] own personality, that reality only gradually or subsequently being revealed" (141). In introducing Newman, Dickens immediately indicates the impossibility of determining his character from his external appearance: "the countenance of Newman Noggs, in his ordinary moods, was a problem which no stretch of ingenuity could solve" (77). It is important to note that Dickens makes the proviso about Newman's inscrutability applying only to his normal moods, as it is in agitation and in action that this character's true nature shines forth. The following is one of the first descriptions of Newman Noggs:

> Noggs gave a peculiar grunt as was his custom at the end of all disputes with his master, to imply that he (Noggs) triumphed, and (as he rarely spoke to anybody unless somebody spoke to him) fell into a grim silence, and rubbed his hands slowly over each other, cracking the joints of his fingers, and squeezing them into all possible distortions. The incessant performance of this routine on every occasion, and the communication of a fixed and rigid look to his unaffected eye, so as to make it uniform with the other, and to render it impossible for anybody to determine where or at what he was looking, were two among the numerous peculiarities of Mr Noggs, which struck an inexperienced observer at first sight. (67-68)

There are several items worthy of examination in this passage. Some of the words that Dickens has chosen here are telling, namely: "peculiar" (twice), which is completely appropriate to Noggs, "distortions", which is applicable to his visage at all times, and "incessant", which prefigures the abundance of repetition of this gesture throughout the novel. It is interesting to note that Dickens states that

Noggs "rarely spoke". Like Susan Nipper, he is an underling who resorts to manifold gesturing to vent his feelings. It is also appropriate that Dickens mentions that these are the impressions of an "inexperienced observer" because as the reader grows accustomed to Noggs's peculiarities and learns of his actions, he becomes a character very different from the one the reader first assumed him to be. There is a hint at where his loyalties lie in the fact that he has many disputes with Ralph Nickleby and obviously has no love for him, but he is also depicted as a drinker and has strange habits, and both of these facts increase the difficulty of pigeonholing him immediately. The illegibility of Noggs's gestures can be seen as a signal to the reader to suspend immediate judgement on this character based solely on his position as underling to Ralph. As I remarked above, Noggs's knuckle-cracking is incessant but, like most repeated gestures in his novels, Dickens manages to vary its description by employing hyperbole and humour: "after throwing himself into a variety of uncouth attitudes, [he] thrust his hands under the stool and cracked his finger-joints as if he were snapping all the bones in his hands" (102) and "[he] went on shrugging his shoulders and cracking his finger-joints, smiling horribly all the time, and looking steadfastly at nothing, out of the tops of his eyes, in a most ghastly manner" (102). The author even succeeds in providing the reader with an aural, as well as a graphic depiction of the gesture:

> Newman appeared to derive great entertainment from this repartee, and to the great discomposure of Arthur Gride's nerves produced a series of sharp cracks from his finger-joints, resembling the noise of a distant discharge of small artillery. (770)

It is only after the reader comprehends Noggs's true nature through his loyal services to Nicholas that the nervous tics can gain a deeper meaning. Noggs is a genuinely good character with an unfortunate past and a completely untenable

present, as is demonstrated by both his drinking habits and his odd, habitual, unconscious gestures. He is under great pressure from having to work for such a dastardly villain as Ralph, and his incessant knuckle-cracking is an unconscious means to alleviate some of that pressure.

Newman Noggs is not the only character with unusual mannerisms. Jacques Three of *A Tale of Two Cities* has a disgusting habit: "with his agitated hand always gliding over the network of fine nerves about his mouth and nose" (199) and "his fingers ever wandering over and over those fine nerves, with a strikingly greedy air, as if he hungered for something--that was neither food nor drink" (199-200). It turns out that Jacques Three's hunger is for the blood of the aristocracy and he becomes, along with Madame Defarge, exemplary of the madness of the French Revolution. Jacques Three's gestures are very similar to those discussed by Robert E. Lougy in "Repressive and Expressive Forms: The Bodies of Comedy and Desire in *Martin Chuzzlewit*", in that they are "extraordinary or unusual gestures and movements through which the repressed can find articulation" (40). Dickens employs a similar gesture, although with a different effect, to detail Mr Dorrit's increasing acceptance of his role as the Father of the Marshalsea. His characterization through gesture begins with the introduction of this character:

> He was a shy, retiring man; well-looking, though in an effeminate style; with a mild voice, curling hair, and irresolute hands--rings upon the fingers in those days--which nervously wandered to his trembling lip a hundred times in the first half-hour of his acquaintance with the jail. (98)

This description of the irresolute hands on the trembling lips is repeated four times in the first three pages after the above introduction and then slowly dissipates as Mr Dorrit sinks into his role as the Father of the Marshalsea. In *A Tale of Two Cities*, Doctor Manette discusses his own psychological problems

with the objectivity of a scientist. Manette even speaks in the third person to describe his own ailment:

> He once yearned so frightfully for that occupation [shoe-making], and it was so welcome when it came; no doubt it relieved his pain so much, by substituting the perplexity of the fingers for the perplexity of the brain, and by substituting, as he became more practised, the ingenuity of the hands, for the ingenuity of the mental torture, that he has never been able to bear the thought of putting it quite out of his reach. (234)

The nervous tics of Newman Noggs, Jacques Three and Mr Dorrit all can be described as substituting the perplexity of the fingers for the perplexity of the brain.[7] These unconscious gestures enable the reader to comprehend the troubled psyches of such characters while still following Dickens's method of showing the inner man by his outward actions.

In some cases, an unusual, repetitive, unconscious gesture merely serves to mark a character in the reader's memory and does not provide much data towards the reader's goal of comprehending the inner man. Idiolects are very useful when it comes to making minor characters memorable in such crowded, serially published novels. In *Dombey and Son*, Mr Toodle's role really goes no further than his being Polly's husband and Rob's father. His only real plot function is to demonstrate, yet again, the unbending nature of Mr Dombey's pride. This is competently managed by his first meeting with Mr Dombey, where his nervousness is a class marker, and by his meeting with Dombey at the train station, which serves to embarrass Dombey and demonstrate his snobbery. On both occasions, Mr Toodle displays gestures of discomfort in the presence of a social superior. At their first meeting, Mr Toodle is described as making a hand-to-mouth gesture similar to that of Jacques Three and Mr Dorrit but again, with a

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[7] I am indebted to Juliet McMaster for this idea from her discussion of expression and gesture in *Dickens The Designer* (58).

different meaning: "the husband did nothing but chuckle and grin, and continually draw his right hand across his mouth, moistening the palm" (69). This gesture is repeated shortly thereafter and then, much later in the novel, after Miss Tox has told the Toodles of her intention to teach their youngsters: "Mr Toodle, who had a great respect for learning, jerked his head approvingly at his wife, and moistened his hands with dawning satisfaction" (625). This is simply colourful idiosyncratic behaviour. When Toodle approaches Dombey and Bagstock at the train station, his gestures again take precedence: "turning his oilskin cap round and round" (351). The plot function of this character is fulfilled by Dickens's description of Dombey's reaction to him. After Mr Toodle expresses his gratitude for Rob's education, "Mr Dombey looked at him, in return for his tone of interest, as if a man like that would make his very eyesight dirty" (351). In this scene, as in so very many in Dickens's works, it is not what is being said that is important so much as what gestures are made and what intonations of speech can be implied from the accompanying gestures, which is why a close reading is vital to these narratives. Dickens skillfully repeats Toodle's hat gesture, but this time from Dombey's point of view: "his attention was arrested by something in connexion with the cap still going slowly round and round in the man's hand" (352). The discomfort of a character in the presence of those whose social station is above his is often demonstrated by unconscious, awkward hat-gesturing: for example, Joe Gargery's hat problems in the presence of Pip and Herbert in London. At the beginning of *The Old Curiosity Shop*, Kit Nubbles also plays with his hat before his social superiors:

> He stopped short at the door on seeing a stranger [the narrator], twirled in his hand a perfectly round old hat without any vestige of a brim, and resting himself now on one leg and now on the other and changing them constantly, stood in the doorway. (49)

Kit has another unusual habit at the commencement of the story:

> The lad had a remarkable manner of standing sideways as he spoke, and thrusting his head forward over his shoulder, as if he could not get at his voice without that accompanying action. (50)

Surprisingly, Lady Dedlock of *Bleak House* (310) shares this habit of speaking over the shoulder with Kit but, in her case, this connotes decadence and hauteur. Kit Nubbles's idiosyncratic gestures fall aside as his role changes and he becomes associated with the Garlands. Squeers also displays a gestural idiolect. Throughout *Nicholas Nickleby*, he is repeatedly described as sitting and placing his hands on his knees and rubbing his knees with his hands. Perhaps this is the child-beater's unknowing signal of self-restraint, as it often occurs in public. Unconscious gestures are often used to draw attention to a character, whether as simple memory-aiding devices or as signifiers at a deeper level of meaning.

Dickens is sharply observant of one combination of conscious and unconscious gestures that I call failed false gestures. Here, the character consciously performs a gesture in order to cover up some emotion that nevertheless shows through. At Ralph Nickleby's party, Colonel Chowser is embarrassed when a joke he makes regarding Sir Mulberry Hawk's victimization of Lord Verisopht falls flat. None of his listeners laughs, indeed, all of them turn to stare at him critically. Under the weight of his ensuing mortification, Chowser, "to hide his confusion, was reduced to the necessity of holding his port before his right eye and affecting to scrutinize its colour with the most lively interest" (310). Chowser's gesture is a failed attempt to hide his social discomfort, but his transparent cover-up backfires, because it only reveals and accentuates his embarrassment for all at the table to see. Dickens's skilled observance of human body language is evidenced by such gestures in that they ring true for the reader. We have all performed similar transparent subterfuges in attempts to redirect our witness's gaze away from us after some embarrassing mishap. When Mantalini

comes upon Mr Scaley presenting Madame Mantalini with a writ of execution, he hides his discomfort at being the cause of the problem with the pretence of nonchalance:

> Such was the posture of affairs when Mr Mantalini hurried in, and as that distinguished specimen had had a pretty extensive intercourse with Mr Scaley's fraternity in his bachelor days, and was, besides, very far from being taken by surprise on the present agitating occasion, he merely shrugged his shoulders, thrust his hands down to the bottom of his pockets, elevated his eyebrows, whistled a bar or two, swore and oath or two, and, sitting astride a chair, put the best face upon the matter with great composure and decency. (334)

Mantalini's attempt at composure is so overplayed, as is emphasized by Dickens's recital of so many actions at once, that his conscious gestures betray his true discomposure.

In some instances, the author guides the reader's assessment of a character in a particular scene so that the character's conscious gestures are betrayed, not by his own unconscious gestures, but by the author's comments on them. During his visit to Mr Dombey and Bagstock at their seaside hotel, Carker's manipulative villainy is readily apparent in the double meanings that he makes of his fawning speeches to his dupes. As if that were not enough, Dickens emphasizes his subtle machinations by interpreting his gestures for us:

> 'By Gad, Sir!' said the Major, staring, 'you are a contrast to Dombey, who plays at nothing.'
>
> 'Oh! *He!*' returned the Manager. '*He* has never had occasion to acquire such little arts. To men like me, they are sometimes useful. As at present, Major Bagstock, when they enable me to take a hand with you.'
>
> It might be only the false mouth, so smooth and wide; and yet there seemed to lurk beneath the humility and subserviency of this short speech, a something like a snarl; and, for a moment, one might have thought that the white teeth were prone to bite the hand they fawned upon. But the Major thought nothing about it; and Mr Dombey lay meditating with his eyes half shut, during the whole of the play. . . . (456)

Carker certainly intends to "take a hand" with Bagstock, and particularly Dombey, and the snarl beneath his obsequious smile proves it. Carker's proper assessment of the situation is also proven by the private joke he makes to himself with the word "play" and Dickens underlines this by repeating the word at the end of the passage. Dombey, in the position of power in this relationship, obviously has no need to play at anything, whereas Carker's crafty manipulations play both Dombey and Bagstock for the fools that they are. His double meaning foreshadows his intentions of ultimately betraying Dombey in the "game" of love. Here, Dombey's eyes are literally "half shut" whereas later, when Carker surprises him by absconding with his wife, his eyes are metaphorically closed to what is happening around him.

The character who best exemplifies Dickens's employment of failed false gestures is Ralph Nickleby. Angus Easson's cogent examination of the characterization of Ralph speaks to this issue:

> Ralph Nickleby has suppressed affection, love, tenderness, charity, yet his face and other gestures frequently reveal a deep core of emotion, suppressed and distorted yet there still, so that Ralph reveals against his will his riven character, at war with itself. The emotional 'tics' are true expressions, they obtrude through his mask though he is not thereby validated in the sense of any credit or approval being given him. (143)

When Ralph walks in to find that Sir Mulberry Hawk's flirtation has seriously upset Kate, his anger at Hawk and loving concern for his niece almost cause him to spoil his relationship with Hawk. Here, his "riven character" is evidenced by the conjunction of his conscious and unconscious gestures:

> 'Your way lies there, sir,' said Ralph, in a suppressed voice, that some devil might have owned with pride.
> 'What do you mean by that?' demanded his friend, fiercely.
> The swollen veins stood out like sinews on Ralph's wrinkled forehead, and the nerves about his mouth worked as though some unendurable torture wrung them; but he smiled disdainfully, and again pointed to the door. (313)

Ralph the villain's uneasiness with his feelings of love and care for Kate is underlined by Dickens's comments that her innocence and victimization make him feel "awkward and nervous" (315), and he is "seriously alarmed by the violence of her emotions" (316). He is "quelled by her eye, and actually trembling beneath her touch" (316). Such involuntary gestures contradict his own belief that he is "proof against all appeals of blood and kindred" and "steeled against every tale of sorrow and distress" (316). Ralph's false gestures fail again near the end of the novel when the Cheerybles are about to confront him with the fact that he is Smike's father. Brooker is hiding in the recess of the bay window, and Ralph senses that someone is there, thinking it to be Nicholas. Ralph's nervousness about the hidden person and his agitation about what he is to be confronted with are made evident by his focus on the window:

> 'Who's that yonder?' he said.
> 'One who has conveyed to us within these two hours the intelligence which caused our sending to you,' replied brother Charles. 'Let him be, sir, let him be for the present.'
> 'More riddles!' said Ralph, faintly. 'Well, sir?'
> In turning his face towards the brothers he was obliged to avert it from the window, but before either of them could speak, he had looked round again. It was evident that he was rendered restless and uncomfortable by the presence of the unseen person, for he repeated this action several times, and at length, as if in a nervous state which rendered him positively unable to turn away from the place, sat so as to have it opposite him, and muttered as an excuse that he could not bear the light. (885)

Ralph's muttered excuse about not being able to bear the light is as easily seen through as Chowser's embarrassed attempt to scrutinize his glass of port. Both are attempts to cover up their true emotions, which are blatantly demonstrated by their unconscious gestures. These unconscious gesticulations, like the nervous tics of Newman Noggs or the wig-wringing of Solomon Gills, speak volumes about the characters and enable the author to present the inner workings of individuals through their outward movements.

As I have demonstrated above, the same unconscious gesture can have a variety of meanings in different contexts and when performed by different characters. In *Picturing: Description and Illusion in the Nineteenth-Century Novel*, Michael Irwin discusses this mutability of signification:

> The fact is that *no* gesture has absolute value for Dickens. Pickwick, Tom Pinch and the Cheeryble brothers are all given to rubbing their hands. One might reasonably deduce that for their creator this gesture seemed indicative of kindliness and innocent zest. But two other persistent hand-rubbers are Quilp, who is zestful but evil, and Uriah Heep, who is evil and insidious. Plainly, . . . it is not the action itself but the manner of it that is revealing. In these instances the manner no doubt has something to do with the quality of the hands being rubbed. Uriah Heep's are clammy, requiring stealthy drying on his pocket handkerchief, while Quilp's are so filthy that his hand-rubbing generates little pellets of dirt. The habit is coloured by the character concerned as much as the character is coloured by the habit. (58)

Irwin lists just a few of the many, many characters in Dickens's works who are described as rubbing their hands. Indeed, hand-rubbing can almost be said to be a national pastime in Dickens's novels. Bulwer defines hand-rubbing as follows:

> Gestus XII: Lucri apprehensionem plaudo [I applaud the taking of money]: To rub the palms of the hands together, with a kind of applause. Much after the manner as some are wont to do who take pains to heat their hands, is an itching note of *greedy haste*, many times used by such who *applaud some pleasing thought of deceit* that they have in their heads. (41)

Bulwer's definition is applicable to many of the characters of dubious morality who rub their hands, but it is not appropriate to such descriptions as these regarding Charles Cheeryble: "rubbing his hands as if he were washing them" (533), and "rubbed his hands with infinite delight" (536). Here, the applause is for the happiness of circumstance and it serves to further the characterization of Cheeryble as a jolly old man. The association of greed with hand-rubbing is also not applicable to little Paul Dombey's characteristic gesture: "But Paul got his hand free [from his father] as soon as he could; and rubb[ed] it gently to and fro

on the elbow of his chair, as if his wit were in the palm, and he were sharpening it" (152). This instance could be construed as Paul's rubbing his father's influence off, as much as it could mean that this is simply a sick child warming his hand, as it does on other occasions (154,254). The rubbing of the hands as if cleaning them, as is seen in the gestures of Charles Cheeryble and Paul Dombey, is taken one step further by Mrs Squeers, when she "called up a little boy with a curly head, and wiped her hands upon it" (154). This gesture underlines Mrs Squeers's total disregard for her charges as anything more than the means to an end, whether her goal is financial gain or simply the substitute for a towel. It is typical of Carker, the manager of *Dombey and Son*, that his hand-rubbing is stealthy and somewhat feline: "Mr Carker bent his head very slowly, and very softly rubbed his hands, as if he were afraid by any action to disturb the current of Mr Dombey's confidence" (682). Quilp is the character who performs the most notable variation of hand-rubbing in these novels: "rubbing his hands so hard that he seemed to be engaged in manufacturing, of the dirt with which they were encrusted, little charges for popguns" (78). It is interesting to note the obvious but unusual association for Dickens between hands and armaments. He also compares Newman Noggs's knuckle-cracking to the discharge of small artillery. Newman himself resorts to rubbing, although not his hands, when he listens to Smike's narrative of his rescue:

> It was odd enough to see the change that came over Newman as Smike proceeded. At first he stood rubbing his lips with the back of his hand, as a preparatory ceremony towards composing himself for a draught, then, at the mention of Squeers, he took the mug under his arm, and opening his eyes very wide, looked on in the utmost astonishment. When Smike came to the assault upon himself in the hackney-coach, he hastily deposited the mug upon the table, and limped up and down the room in a state of the greatest excitement, stopping himself with a jerk every now and then as if to listen more attentively. When John Browdie came to be spoken of, he dropped by slow and

> gradual degrees into a chair, and rubbing his hands upon his knees--quicker and quicker as the story reached its climax--burst at last into a laugh. (598)

Newman's unconscious gestures detail his idiosyncratic reaction to Smike's words. He has a gesture to match each stage of the story. In this way, Dickens cleverly contrives to present the narration of Smike's rescue without having to repeat the story in its entirety.

Newman's unconscious gestures are typical of most of the involuntary gesticulations portrayed by Dickens in that they illustrate one character reacting to another and therefore serve to comment on the other character (in this case, Smike); but they also speak volumes about the gesturer himself. Whether the unconscious gesture is an immediate reaction to the actions of another, or a repeated signifier of the ongoing emotions of a character, unconscious gestures perform the function of non-verbal manifestations of personality. Unusual mannerisms or tics serve to guide the reader's perception of character and point to hidden stresses and histories. The author's mastery of the art of characterization through external representation is evident in his ability to employ unconscious, often repetitive and yet varied, gestures as a means to illuminate the psyche.

CHAPTER 6: MINOR AND MAJOR CHARACTERS

Dickens's technique of characterization through gesture is applied, rather unequally, to both the minor and the major figures in his novels. Very minor characters who only make brief appearances in his novels are often given remarkable gestures for the sake of pure oddity or entertainment. These sorts of characters contribute to the scenery of the novel, to its milieu, and the vividness and specificity of the description of their gestures attests to Dickens's attention to detail in his crowded novels. The definition through gesture of other characters who can still be classed as minor, but who are more integral to the plot and who make more appearances in the novels, is somewhat different. In these cases, gesture serves to flesh out the character and is intrinsic to his nature. The presentation of these gestures ranges from subtle detailing to glaring melodrama. The heroes and heroines are gesturally stunted, while his villains and many of his more minor characters are given an abundance of colourful and memorable gestures. Many critics have complained that Dickens's morally good characters suffer from near anonymity as well as homogeneity, whereas each of his villains is unique and completely detailed. His good characters are difficult for the reader to visualize and this lack of indelible characterization makes them seem all alike. Even when Dickens strives to particularize a good character through unusual gesture, he does not succeed completely, as in the case of Lucie Manette in *A Tale of Two Cities*. On the other hand, not all of the author's morally bad characters are triumphs of gestural characterization either. James Carker of *Dombey and Son* is a good example of an evil character whose characterization through gesture fails. The gestural characterization of three of Dickens's villains can be considered a complete success. The author's techniques in providing the reader with the means to visualize Rigaud, Quilp and Heep merit a closer

examination which will demonstrate Dickens's ability to use his imagination to create villains who move far beyond the confined predictability of their sources in the theatre and in literature.

Dickens's consummate talent for characterzation is apparent in his depiction of even the most minor characters in his novels. Old Martin Chuzzlewit secretly contracts the services of a lawyer to hire Tom Pinch as his librarian. Mr Fips, Solicitor of Austin Friars, is the man who presents Tom with his mysterious new position. Fips is a very minor character, but our interest is focussed on him almost by proxy in that he represents his anonymous employer. The description of Fips and his surroundings is full of typically Dickensian touches. For example, when Tom and John Westlock first visit Mr Fips, his office is described in sparing yet vivid detail:

> They walked in. And a mighty yellow-jaundiced little office Mr Fips had of it: with a great, black, sprawling splash upon the floor in one corner, as if some clerk had cut his throat there, years ago, and had let out ink instead of blood. (684)

Fips's gestures are equally memorable:

> They occupied two chairs, and Mr Fips took the office stool, from the stuffing whereof he drew forth a piece of horsehair of immense length, which he put into his mouth with a great appearance of appetite. (684)

This ingenious little piece of characterization is not necessary to the novel as a whole; it is not even necessary to this small scene concerning two characters who are adjuncts to the protagonist. However, this gesture and others like it, which would not have been lavished by other novelists on such throw-away characters, lies at the heart of what makes Dickens a great artist. If the devil is in the details, Dickens provides his readers with a lot of devilishly enjoyable entertainment, purely for the sake of interest and oddity.

Jerry Cruncher, the alarmingly spiky-haired messenger for Tellson's Bank in *A Tale of Two Cities*, is another character with an odd gesture. In this case, the character's repeated gesture serves to hint at his secret profession. Jerry's son first comments on his unusual trait:

> 'Al-ways rusty! His fingers is al-ways rusty!' muttered young Jerry. 'Where does my father get all that iron rust from? He don't get no iron rust here!' (89)

Cruncher senior is next described as "sucking the rust off his fingers in his absorption" while he is watching Charles Darnay's court case. A few pages later, but still at the scene of the trial, the author employs this gesture to underline the passage of time: "Mr Cruncher had by this time taken quite a lunch of rust off his fingers, in his following of the evidence" (104). Cruncher's gesturing piques the reader's interest but it is not until Chapter 14 that we learn that his rusty hands are due to his nocturnal profession of "fishing" for corpses as a resurrection man. Jerry's experiences in this ghastly market of bodies pave the way for his contribution to the plot, when he confirms that Roger Cly is not dead and buried as is at first assumed. In this way, Dickens deftly interweaves a gesture into the development of his plot and also provides the reader with an entertaining character with an unusual appearance (the obstreperously spiky hair), a fascinating, albeit gruesome profession, and an odd gesture.

A Tale of Two Cities is not the only novel where Dickens employs the gestures of a relatively minor character to further the plot. In *Great Expectations*, there are two gestural incidents upon which the progression of the plot depends. As Ian Ousby writes in "Language and Gesture in *Great Expectations*":

> The evidence of Magwitch's continued interest in Pip lies in signs. The convict whom Magwitch later sends to the village with the shilling wrapped in 'two fat sweltering one-pound notes' . . . establishes the significance of his mission purely by gestures and not at all by words. (790)

Here are the gestures that inform Pip of Magwitch's continuing presence in his life:

> It was not a verbal remark, but a proceeding in dumb show, and was pointedly addressed to me. He stirred his rum-and-water pointedly at me, and he tasted his rum-and-water pointedly at me. And he stirred it and he tasted it: not with a spoon that was brought to him, but *with a file*.
>
> He did this so that nobody but I saw the file; and when he had done it he wiped the file and put it in a breast-pocket. I knew it to be Joe's file, and I knew that he knew my convict, the moment I saw the instrument. I sat gazing at him, spell-bound. But he now reclined on his settle, taking very little notice of me, and talking principally about turnips. (106)

The plot also hinges on gesture when Pip notices that Molly, Jaggers' maid, has features and gestures of remarkable similarity to those of Estella, and then begins to realize that their relationship is familial:

> The action of her [Molly's] fingers was like the action of knitting. She stood looking at her master, not understanding whether she was free to go, or whether he had more to say to her and would call her back if she did go. Her look was very intent. Surely, I had seen exactly such eyes and such hands, on a memorable occasion very lately. (403)

Pip's realization that Molly is Estella's mother, later confirmed by Wemmick, and that Magwitch is Estella's father, helps him to understand how past events have come to influence his life. Gestures not only advance the action in the novels but are colourful and memorable as well. Dickens could just as easily have handled the progression of his plots with less vivid characters and more mundane gestures, but his talent lies in presenting the reader with completely enjoyable characters, even the minor ones. He is flexing the muscles of his imagination, and we all benefit from such dispensable but completely enjoyable minutiae.

Many of Dickens's minor characters have gestures that serve to enhance their personalities. In *Dombey and Son*, Harriet Carker's gentleman, Mr Morfin, is one such character. He is a musician and his gestures are in keeping, not only

with the delicacy of his situation as helper to his love interest, but also with his hobby. Here is the author's description of him when he is waiting for Harriet to come home:

> After knocking once at the door, and obtaining no response, this gentleman sat down on a bench in the little porch to wait. A certain skilful action of his fingers as he hummed some bars, and beat time on the seat beside him, seemed to denote the musician; and the extraordinary satisfaction he derived from humming something very slow and long, which had no recognisable tune, seemed to denote that he was a scientific one. (557)

As Mr Morfin professes his desire to help Harriet and John Carker, he is repeatedly described as "drumming thoughtfully on the table" (559). When he confesses to Harriet that, in his position at Dombey and Son, he has witnessed the villainy of James Carker and the innocence of his brother John, he is again described as ""drumming with one hand on the table" (841). He performs the same gesture when he informs Harriet that Dombey's business is ruined (913). In this way, Dickens combines Morfin's nervous gestures with his love of music to endear this character to the reader and to Harriet. In *Our Mutual Friend*, Dickens coins a term to describe the Victorian bourgeoisie's ability to make a troublesome issue disappear by simply avoiding talking or thinking about it. Podsnappery is not only the name of this head-in-the-sand approach to problematic issues, it is also the title of Chapter 11 of the first Book of *Our Mutual Friend*. This term, based on Mr Podsnap's attitude towards life, is accompanied by a signifying movement:

> Thus happily acquainted with his own merit and importance, Mr Podsnap settled that whatever he put behind him he put out of existence. There was a dignified conclusiveness--not to add a grand convenience--in this way of getting rid of disagreeables which had done much towards establishing Mr Podsnap in his lofty place in Mr Podsnap's satisfaction. 'I don't want to know about it; I don't choose to discuss it; I don't admit it!' Mr Podsnap had even acquired a peculiar flourish of his right arm in often

> clearing the world of its most difficult problems, by sweeping them behind him (and consequently sheer away) with those words and a flushed face. For they affronted him. (174)

Podsnap's words and his gesture stand for the type of self-satisfied pig-headedness that Dickens was fighting against with all of the social protest in his novels.

Dickens's artistry is demonstrated by his being able to combine physical description, dialogue, and gesture to form a complete portrait of a character. A good example of this can be seen in Jane Murdstone of *David Copperfield*. In "Dickens's Language of Gesture: Creating Character," Bert Hornback discusses the metaphysical nature of gesture:

> The language of gesture discovers a character's essential identity by representing dramatically the cause or source of that identity: gesture thus becomes what one *is*, not just what one *does*. (102)

Jane Murdstone's metallic nature, as is evidenced by her appearance and by what she thinks and says, is also embodied by her gesture and her props. When she is upset by what she perceives are David's mother's accusations against her, she "made a jail-delivery of her pocket-handkerchief, and held it before her eyes" (100). Miss Murdstone must make a "jail-delivery" of her handkerchief because it is kept in "a very jail of a bag which hung upon her arm by a heavy chain, and shut up like a bite" (97). It is also notable that when Miss Murdstone applies the handkerchief, she merely holds it "before her eyes" instead of using it normally. When David again encounters Miss Murdstone, in her position as companion and chaperone to Dora Spenlow, she "gave me her chilly finger-nails, and sat severely rigid" (611). After she has betrayed David's love for Dora to Mr Spenlow, Miss Murdstone returns the damning love note to her steel purse: "here she ceased, and snapping her reticule again, and shutting her mouth, looked as if she might be broken, but could never be bent" (613). Dickens repeatedly states that when Miss Murdstone opens her purse, she opens her mouth and when she

closes her purse, she closes her mouth. In this way, he equates the character with her reticule and furthers her characterzation as a hard, cold, metallic woman adorned with rivets and steel fetters. The physical detail with which Dickens describes Miss Murdstone combines with her flinty name and her cold, stiff gestures to complete the portrait of her as a person whose severe self-discipline has steeled her into iron rigidity. Hornback continues:

> What has happened is that the gesture is no longer just a gesture. Jane Murdstone has become her gesture, metaphysically. She began, through David's comparing her to her rivets and chains, as a 'metallic lady'; a metal-modified lady. Now she *is* metal, with her 'finger*nails*' and that iron whisper of a voice. (103-04)

Miss Murdstone has become the iron lady--the woman of steel.

Dickens's ability to reinforce a character's nature by the employment of gesture in such a variety of ways testifies to his close observance of his fellow man. His gestural range varies from remarkably subtle details to violent melodramatic renderings of extreme emotion. Two examples will suffice to demonstrate this. When Captain Cuttle is praising the immense value of Bunsby's opinions despite, or perhaps because, of all the head injuries he has sustained in his maritime career, the great sailor's response is the epitome of minimalism:

> The stolid commander appeared, by a very slight vibration in his elbows, to express some satisfaction in this encomium; but if his face had been as distant as his gaze was, it could hardly have enlightened the beholders less in reference to anything that was passing in his thoughts. (411)

Cuttle's esteem for Bunsby's opinions, despite Bunsby's obvious mental quirks, is similar to Betsey Trotwood's praise of Mr Dick's simple suggestions in *David Copperfield*. The portrayal of Bradley Headstone in *Our Mutual Friend* is anything but minimalist. When Lizzie Hexam finally tells him that there is no chance that

they shall ever be wed, his nervous fidgeting with the stones in the graveyard wall turns violent:

> 'Are you quite decided, and is there no chance of any change in my favour?'
> 'I am quite decided, Mr Headstone, and I am bound to answer I am certain there is none.'
> 'Then,' said he, suddenly changing his tone and turning to her, and bringing his clenched hand down upon the stone with a force that laid the knuckles raw and bleeding; 'then I hope that I may never kill him!' (456)

This instance of self-inflicted, violent injury is similar to the actions of Edith Granger, and like Edith, Headstone exerts enormous self-control to regain his rigid demeanour. Just after what has been described above, the frightened Lizzie tries to flee, only to be restrained by Bradley. When she threatens to call for help, his response, with its attendant facial gestures, charts his emotions:

> 'It is I who should call for help,' he said; 'you don't know yet how much I need it.'
> The working of his face as she shrank from it, glancing round for her brother and uncertain what to do, might have extorted a cry from her in another instant; but all at once he sternly stopped it and fixed it, as if Death itself had done so. (456)

Headstone's gestures performed against the backdrop of the tombstones, or headstones, of the graveyard are certainly as melodramatic as anything done by Sir Mulberry Hawk or Ralph Nickleby. The sudden fixity of his face foreshadows his untimely end. These gestures, performed by relatively minor characters, demonstrate the author's diversity of description, as well as his attention to detail.

A number of the main characters in Dickens's works suffer from vagueness. The scarcity and inexactness of the physical and gestural descriptions commit these characters to near anonymity. Dickens's failure to provide his readers with enough information for them to apply their imaginations to visualize his central characters is particularly noticeable in his earlier works,

such as *The Old Curiosity Shop*. Garis, continuing his central metaphor of the novel as stage, comments on this point:

> The action in the early novels is performed by the least interesting members of Dickens's theatrical company, performers so uninteresting that it sometimes seems only the contractual commitments of the management that keeps them on the stage. Actors on the payroll must earn their money, and it is a convention that a full evening in the theatre must include a story. (87)

Dickens's evil-doers are such magnificently unique characters, painted with such specific and vivid detailing, that other characters pale by comparison, despite their prominent positions in the plots of the novels. It seems that in the Dickens universe, goodness is singular while there are multifarious ways to be evil just as good health is a single concept whereas there are innumerable illnesses. Carey appears to find fault with Dickens's characterization of both the villains and the heroes:

> It remains true that Dickens' hypocrites, though magnificently solid, have no insides, in that for all the opulence of voice and gesture and physical deformity with which their exteriors are fabricated, they are not allowed to have serious emotions. Real feeling is the perquisite of the solemn, nebulous characters at the centre of the novels. (66)

Nebulous is a perfect choice of words to describe Dickens's many of main characters. Irwin states:

> Dickens has encouraged us to expect particularised description. Where he fails to supply it he leaves a hole or a smudge in the reader's imaginative response to his novel. . . . The more physical information the reader is given, the more he expects. If Esther's face is 'very much changed' by her illness, what did it look like before? If Uriah Heep's hair is red, what colour is Agnes's? (39-40)

In her examination of *The Old Curiosity Shop* in *Dickens the Designer*, Juliet McMaster calls Nell "a kind of offprint of her mother and grandmother" (113) and thus points up the sameness of the good characters. Similar criticisms can be

levelled at the Garlands and the Nubbles in the same novel and the Maylies and the Meagleses of *Oliver Twist* and *Little Dorrit*, respectively. Even in the illustrations, the Nubbleses bear more than just a family resemblance to each other; it is as if Phiz devised one face for the whole family and then just altered its size and expression to fit each member (see Fig. 6). McMaster draws from the world of art to compare Nell and Quilp:

> Nell with her associates - perfect, unblemished, changeless and repetitive - is like the peaceful Greek in his triglyph; and Quilp, the dismounted nightmare, the gargoyle descended from his niche, has the restless rugged energy and vital individualism of the Gothic. (119)

Perfection is absolute but blank whereas imperfection is multifariously intriguing.

That being said, a few examples from *Nicholas Nickleby* will be enough to demonstrate the gestural tepidness of the protagonists. Kate Nickleby is one of Dickens's typical shrinking violet heroines. She is pretty, shy, timid and, like so many of Dickens's young women, little. Although she is not named little Kate, she fits in perfectly with Little Nell, Little Em'ly and Little Dorrit. She is described as being little almost as many times as is Ruth Pinch. The most common words used to describe her gestures are: shrinking, trembling, clinging, clasping, and fainting. Here are two of Kate's gestures that typify her characterization: "bending over him [Ralph], and timidly placing her little hand in his" (449) and "tracing some pattern upon the ground with her little foot" (896). Both Kate and her brother Nicholas have a propensity to bite their lips. Nicholas is repeatedly described as biting his lip in the excess of his passion for justice. In fact, most of Nicholas's gestures spring from this cause. When he is not biting his lip, he is pacing or throwing a paternalistic, protective arm around Smike. His speechlessness while experiencing extreme emotion is similar to that of Hawk. Upon the surprise appearance of Ralph, Squeers and Snawley for the purpose of taking away

Fig. 6: The Nubbleses at home

Smike, Nicholas's ire is immediately awakened: "Nicholas bit his lip and shook his head in a threatening manner, but appeared for the moment unable to articulate a syllable" (676). If it were not for his magnificently melodramatic thrashing of Squeers at Dotheboy's Hall, one would think that Nicholas was somewhat of an effeminate wimp. Indeed, Ralph insultingly describes him as follows: "he still keeps her [Kate] by him as you see, and clings to her apron-strings like a cowardly boy to his mother" (815). Michael Slater writes of Nicholas: "His language is as literary as Ralph's but less interesting because in melodrama it is the devil who generally has all the best tunes" (25). In this case, the devil has all the best gestures as well.

Dickens does have some very interesting female characters, notably Edith Granger of *Dombey and Son*, Sairey Gamp of *Martin Chuzzlewit*, and Betsey Trotwood of *David Copperfield*. However, his attempts at enlivening the characterization of his heroines are not very successful. This can be seen in the problematic presentation of Florence Dombey, as I discussed in Chapter 3, and in the unusual, regrettable portrayal of Lucie Manette in *A Tale of Two Cities*. Dickens often gives his characters feature-specific gestures, most commonly focussing on the eyebrows, shoulders and hands. In the case of Lucie Manette, his attempt to make her express all of her emotions through her forehead can be described as misguided at best. When we are first introduced to Lucie, it is through the eyes of Mr Lorry:

> As his eyes rested on a short, slight, pretty figure, a quantity of golden hair, a pair of blue eyes that met his own with an inquiring look, and a forehead with a singular capacity (remembering how young and smooth it was), of lifting and knitting itself into an expression that was not quite one of perplexity, or wonder, or alarm, or merely of a bright fixed attention, though it included all the four expressions--as his eyes rested on these things, a sudden vivid likeness passed before him, of a child whom he had held in his arms. . . . (52)

Lucie has all the markings of a typical Dickensian heroine. She is short, slight, pretty and childlike. She also has this exceptionally expressive forehead--although just what it expresses is undetermined. Irwin addresses this problem:

> This is an imaginable and potentially significant characteristic, and Dickens proceeds to allude to it at least half a dozen times in the course of his narrative. But somehow the details fail to 'take'. This is partly because Dickens is uncertain about the expression: uncertain as to whether it is occasional or habitual, uncertain as to what it conveys. It must go beyond the four possibilities he first mentions, because it is later called Lucie's 'old look of earnestness'. (27)

Just after our introduction to Lucie, the amazing forehead performs again: "The young forehead lifted itself into that singular expression--but it was pretty and characteristic, besides being singular--and she raised her hand" (53). In the next few pages, as Lorry tells Lucie the tragic news about her father, the forehead is visited twice: "Between the eyebrows and just over the little feminine nose, the line of which was as delicate and fine as it was possible to be, the expression deepened itself" (54) and "the curiously roughened forehead was very intent upon him" (55). When she learns the full story of her father's imprisonment, "the expression in the forehead, which had so particularly attracted his notice, and which was now immoveable, had deepened into one of pain and horror" (57) and on the next page: "that last expression looking as if it were carved or branded into her forehead" (58). This spectacular forehead, capable of so many unspecified expressions, has now both hardened and deepened of course, always remembering "how young and smooth it was" (52). Lucie's performing forehead makes many more appearances in the novel but undoubtedly its most impressive feat occurs in Darnay's first court appearance when it persuades a chorus of foreheads to mimic it:

> Any strongly marked expression of face on the part of a chief actor in a scene of great interest to whom many eyes are directed,

> will be unconsciously imitated by the spectators. Her forehead was painfully anxious and intent as she gave this evidence, and, in the pauses when she stopped for the Judge to write it down, watched its effect upon the Counsel for and against. Among the lookers-on there was the same expression in all quarters of the court; insomuch, that a great majority of the foreheads there, might have been mirrors reflecting the witness, when the Judge looked up from his notes to glare at that tremendous heresy about George Washington. (102)

While this passage does attest to Dickens's great powers of observation as a student of gesture, Lucie's forehead gestures are given considerably too much emphasis. It will be clear from the tenor of my thesis as a whole that I greatly admire Dickens's art but here, he is utterly routed by his inability to perceive his heroines as anything other than little, timid blank slates upon which the stronger characters write.

Dickens's failures in characterization are limited to his heroines with one main exception--James Carker of *Dombey and Son*. In this instance, there is again the repeated focus on one feature, which fails, but this time the author groups the featured gesture with a repeated metaphor. Carker is described, ad nauseam, (110 times at least, according to my count) as having very white, very visible teeth. He is also repeatedly described as being like a cat. Irwin addresses this issue also: "yet despite this carefulness of technique the face remains oddly difficult to see. Dickens strains too hard, gives us too little too often. Carker becomes nothing *but* a smile" (27). Carey is succinct in his appraisal: "*Dombey* comes near to being a novel with a set of dentures as its villain" (96). Although Dickens does invent entertaining new ways to describe Carker's teeth at nearly every repetition, Carey is correct. The characterization through dental gesture fails, both because it becomes too prevalent and because its attendant trope, the feline comparison, does not mesh with it. Irwin's discussion of Dickens's failure here is cogent:

> The point being made against Carker is too obvious. Either he must look less sinister and predatory than Dickens is constantly implying, or the people around him are hopelessly obtuse. The cat metaphor does little to help the case. A cat's teeth are visible *only* when it snarls, and that snarl looks nothing like a smile. (87)

The characterization of Carker is asking for too great a degree of suspension of disbelief.

The failure of the characterization of Carker is the exception to the rule when it comes to Dickens's portrayal of his villains. The character of Rigaud in *Little Dorrit* incorporates many of the classic characteristics of the standard villain of the melodrama. It is interesting that Dickens should create a villain like Rigaud for one of his later novels, in that such a stereotypically melodramatic villain would, at first glance, seem to have fitted better in one of the earlier novels, most notably *Nicholas Nickleby*. However, the themes of imprisonment, duty and self-sacrifice in *Little Dorrit* do not require a prominent villain. For example, although Rigaud's attempts at blackmail do force the codicil to Gilbert Clennam's will to surface and thereby indirectly affect Amy Dorrit, she has very little direct contact with him. Rigaud's purpose in the plot of this novel is more related to presenting an ominous threat to several of the more minor characters. This serves to weave several of the plot threads together. In this role, the threat of Rigaud's villainy, and his interest for the reader, lies in where he will pop up next and what shape his diabolical schemes will take. The melodramatic elements in this character's makeup enable him to be easily recognized, despite his aliases, secrets and international mobility. We recognize Rigaud/Blandois/Lagnier by the features and props that mark him as a villain (see Fig. 7). The introduction to this character includes most of the features upon which the reader will rely to recognize him in his later appearances in the narrative and combine physical detail with gesture:

> He jerked his great cloak more heavily upon him by an impatient

Fig. 7: Rigaud, the standard villain of the melodrama

> movement of one shoulder. . . . his eyes, too close together, . . . were sharp rather than bright – pointed weapons with little surface to betray them. They had no depth or change; they glittered, and they opened and shut. . . . He had a hook nose, handsome after its kind, but too high between the eyes by probably just as much as his eyes were too near to one another. For the rest, he was large and tall in frame, had thin lips, where his thick moustache showed them at all, and a quantity of dry hair, of no definable colour, in its shaggy state, but shot with red. The hand with which he held the grating (seamed all over the back with ugly scratches newly healed), was unusually small and plump; would have been unusually white but for the prison grime. (41)

With the exception of his slouch hat, which is mentioned soon after, here are all of the elements by which we are alerted to the reappearances of this character throughout the novel but the one signal gesture is still to come:

> When Monsieur Rigaud laughed, a change took place in his face, that was more remarkable than prepossessing. His moustache went up under his nose, and his nose came down over his moustache, in a very sinister and cruel manner. (44)

This gesture is repeated in connection with this character at every appearance he makes and is often the single, telling phrase by which we realize that the villain is again on the stage. The theatricality of this creation is underlined by the author soon after he is introduced:

> His theatrical air, as he stood with one arm on his hip within the folds of his cloak, together with his manner of disregarding his companion and addressing the opposite wall instead, seemed to intimate that he was rehearsing for the President. . . . (48)

Although Rigaud also has certain phrases and even a song by which he can be recognized, it is most often his gestures and his swaggering air that alert the reader to his presence.

Dickens's sources for such a diabolical character clearly come from the theatre, but other influences have been cited as contributing elements. The deciding factors in citing sources for Rigaud are his moustache and, surprisingly,

his fingers. In describing another of his nastier creations, Dickens refers to the association of a certain type of moustache with the devil. Here is part of his initial description of Montague Tigg in *Martin Chuzzlewit*:

> But he wore a moustache--a shaggy moustache too; nothing in the meek and merciful way, but quite in the fierce and scornful style: the regular Satanic sort of thing--and he wore, besides, a vast quantity of unbrushed hair. (97)

In "The Melodramatic Villain in *Little Dorrit*," Harvey Peter Sucksmith cites such men as Thomas Griffiths Wainewright, "the English poisoner" with the "large, heavy moustaches" and Pierre Francois Lacenaire, "the infamous French assassin" as Dickens's models for Rigaud (76). Sucksmith asks:

> With the example of such a man as Lacenaire before us, can we censure Rigaud as an unreal or improbable creation? Melodramatic Rigaud certainly is, yet, by referring to Rigaud's 'theatrical air' in the first chapter of the novel, Dickens deliberately draws the reader's attention to the melodramatic posturing of his villain and such posturing, objectively observed, need not, in the light of what we now appreciate about Dickens's time, appear unreal or improbable. (78)

Sucksmith makes a comparison of the description of Lacenaire's hand in an article in *All The Year Round* and Dickens's description of Rigaud's hand, making the disclaimer that although Rigaud's hand is plump and Lacenaire's lean, the descriptions have a marked similarity. Here is the description of Lacenaire's hand:

> M. Victor Cochinat . . . was shown the hand of Lacenaire 'preserved by a chemical process.' It is the most repulsive hand that ever was seen. The fingers, lean and thoroughly *canailles*, flattened and broad at their extremities, like the heads of deadly serpents, betray a crawling cruelty of disposition. (80-81)

Here is the description of Rigaud's fingers:

> There had been something dreadful in the noiseless skill of his cold, white hands, with the fingers lithely twisting about and twining one over another like serpents. Clennam could not prevent himself from shuddering inwardly, as if he had been

looking on at a nest of those creatures. (817-18)

In both these cases, the eyes through which we see the fingers know that they belong to evil men and that no doubt colours their perception of them. Also, in the case of Cochinat observing Lacenaire's hand, the "chemical process" can hardly have increased the attractiveness of the severed object. Dickens mentions Rigaud's hands and fingers repeatedly throughout the narrative. Most often, the villain is described as snapping his fingers contemptuously, as in this instance, after Cavalletto has informed Arthur of how he and Pancks managed to capture Rigaud and bring him to Arthur in the Marshalsea Prison:

> At the close of this recital, Arthur turned his eyes upon the impudent and wicked face. As it met his, the nose came down over the moustache and the moustache went up under the nose. When nose and moustache had settled into their places again, Monsieur Rigaud loudly snapped his fingers half-a-dozen times; bending forward to jerk the snaps at Arthur, as if they were palpable missiles which he jerked into his face. (813)

Again, Dickens associates hand gestures with armaments. Rigaud often attempts to use his hands, combined with his swagger, to elevate himself to a higher social level: "he kept his small smooth hand in constant requisition, as if it were a witness to his gentility that had often done him good service before" (48). After he has explained the circumstances resulting in his sharing a cell with Cavalletto, namely the murder of his wife, he makes a significant hand gesture: "he stepped aside to the ledge where the vine leaves yet lay strewn about, collected two or three, and stood wiping his hands upon them, with his back to the light" (50). This gesture reminds me of Lady Macbeth and her "damned spot" and Pilate washing his hands after sentencing Christ.

There are three occasions when we are presented with a view of Rigaud through the eyes of other characters. In Venice, Little Dorrit and Pet Gowan are drawn closer together by their fear of Blandois. This is a good example of

Dickens's ability to draw subtle shades of meaning despite his method of external characterization:

> To both of them, Blandois behaved in exactly the same manner; and to both of them his manner had uniformly something in it, which they knew to be different from his bearing towards others. The difference was too minute in its expression to be perceived by others, but they knew it to be there. A mere trick of his evil eyes, a mere turn of his smooth white hand, a mere hair's breadth of addition to the fall of his nose and the rise of the moustache in the most frequent movement of his face, conveyed to both of them, equally, a swagger personal to themselves. It was as if he had said, 'I have a secret power in this quarter. I know what I know.' (563)

We also see Rigaud through Arthur's eyes when he first spies him with Tattycoram and, most tellingly, through Cavalletto's view. Here, Cavalletto again uses gesture as a substitute for language:

> With his rapid native action, his hands made the outline of a high hook nose, pushed his eyes near together, dishevelled his hair, puffed out his upper lip to represent a thick moustache, and threw the heavy end of an ideal cloak over his shoulder. While doing this with a swiftness incredible to one who has not watched an Italian peasant, he indicated a very remarkable and sinister smile. The whole change passed over him like a flash of light, and he stood in the same instant, pale and astonished, before his patron. (739)

Cavalletto's skill at mimicking the salient features of Rigaud's physical and gestural appearance allows Clennam to recognize him instantly, without a word being said. Dickens also uses Rigaud's tell-tale moustache and nose gesture to provide the reader with instant recognition when the villain appears in a new locale. After he has been acquitted, he limps to the Break of Day inn and overhears the patrons and the hostess discuss his case. We are not entirely sure of who this 'new' character is until, in interacting with the hostess, he smiles his identifying smile (169). When he frightens Affery by appearing unannounced on Mrs Clennam's doorstep, he again gives his trademark sinister smirk, and we

know that he has reached London (393). When the newly rich Dorrits stop at the convent of the Great Saint Bernard in the Swiss Alps, they meet another party of travellers, but it is not until the end of the chapter that we know for certain that Rigaud has surfaced yet again. As he signs his name to the travellers' book, he smiles his characteristic smile (499) and we know that Pet Gowan's miseries are about to increase. In these cases, we are alerted to the villain's presence solely by his repeated gesture. When one considers that the original method of serial publication would have drawn out the reading of this novel over a period of nineteen months, the significance of this method of recognition acquires even more weight. The readers would have recalled Rigaud/Blandois/Lagnier, not by his name(s), but by his gestures.

Although the nose coming down over the moustache is Rigaud's most important gesture, he does gesticulate in other notable ways. On two widely separated occasions, his physical movements embody his sinister plans, as he controls Flintwinch: "clapping him on both shoulders, and rolling him backwards and forwards" (410). He makes exactly the same strange embracing gesture towards Flintwinch later on (601) (see Fig. 8). Rigaud shares some characteristics with Quilp and Heep. Like Quilp in his drinking scene with Dick Swiveller, Rigaud attempts to get Flintwinch drunk in order to pry information out of him: "As often as Blandois clinked glasses (which was at every replenishment), Mr Flintwinch stolidly did his part of the clinking" (412). Like Heep, Rigaud has a notably silent laugh. Carey states: "A dumb laugh is an effigy's laugh. Despite Weller and Noggs, it usually strikes Dickens as sinister or imbecile" (99). While he is making friends with Flintwinch, he affects conviviality and laughs "a diabolically silent laugh" (409). Finally, the foreshadowing of Rigaud's death also takes gestural form: "in the hour of his triumph, his moustache went up and his nose came down, as he ogled the great beam over

Fig. 8: Rigaud's strange embrace of Flintwinch

his head with particular satisfaction" (855). Somewhat like the House of Usher, the Clennam house collapses under the weight of the sins committed therein and, of course, termites. As all great villains of the melodrama should, Rigaud dies at the moment of his greatest triumph.

Like Rigaud, Quilp escapes the punishment of men only to be destroyed by nature. However, Quilp is by no means a typical villain of the melodrama. That is not to say that Dickens did not rely upon traditional sources in literature and the theatre when creating this character. In his introduction to *The Old Curiosity Shop*, Malcolm Andrews discusses the "pure relish Quilp takes in his villainous role" (21) and names Quilp's predecessors:

> It is here that the echoes of Shakespeare's master villains, Iago and the deformed Richard III, resound most strongly. Two decades before *The Old Curiosity Shop* was written, Edmund Kean had terrified and magnetized his audiences with his full-blooded portrayal of these characters: and the tradition of playing these villains as monstrous intruders from the infernal regions, cackling with delight and rubbing their hands at the torments they inflict, remained strong in the theatre for more than a century. (21)

In "Putting Quilp to Rest," Robert S. McLean states that Quilp's character is "derived from three principal demonic sources: the evil dwarf, the devil and the comic devil of the English stage, characters who have an ancient ancestry in folklore and literature" (30). Branwen Pratt has a completely different opinion. In his article, "Sympathy for the Devil: A Dissenting View of Quilp," he states that "Dickens created the dwarf in his own emotional image, and drowned his personal guilts in his surrogate's watery grave" (129). Pratt goes on to describe Quilp's salient characteristics: "Quilp's appetites are as undiscriminating as they are unbridled. Nell displays the virtues of repression; he speaks for the joys of polymorphous perversity" (130). I will let McLean have the last word on the issue of sources because I agree with the common sense in his approach:

> Whatever the source of Quilp's comicality, Dickens' addition of a comic dimension to his evil character was a masterstroke. We can enjoy Quilp, as we enjoy Richard III, as a major artistic creation, without being perturbed about his lack of reality or his inadequate representation of evil. (32)

This discussion of sources for the character of Quilp includes many of his salient characteristics. He revels in the chaos he creates, his is comical, and he has an insatiable appetite for "polymorphous perversity." Quilp is, above all else, an impish goblin-dwarf, and his gestures substantiate his physical characterization. As we have seen in my discussion of proprietal gestures such as bowing and curtseying in Chapter 4, "lowering the body in any way has been a mark or symbol of submission" (Shawn 50). Quilp, being the imp that he is, subverts the vertical gestural plane. He also refutes another of Delsarte's Laws, namely the Law of Altitude: "Positive assertion rises, negative assertion falls, in general, the constructive, positive, good, true, beautiful, moves upward, forward, outward--the destructive, negative, ugly, false, moves downward, inward and backward" (Shawn 48). Even though he is a dwarf and is therefore physically lower than others in elevation, he is repeatedly described as making movements and gestures that elevate him and allow him to look down upon other characters. As I cited above in my discussion of Dickens's nebulous good characters, Juliet McMaster compares Quilp to a gargoyle:

> The suggestion of the gargoyle is carried out in his physical behaviour: he likes to perch, and squat, and hang upside down, in unexpected places and postures. . . . He is a grotesque gargoyle in all respects except in being endlessly and tirelessly mobile. (106)

When Quilp is eavesdropping on Nell and her grandfather, he quietly ascends to an unusual position (see Fig. 9):

> Standing, however, being a tiresome attitude to a gentleman already fatigued with walking, and the dwarf being one of that kind of persons who usually make themselves at home, he soon

Fig. 9: Quilp looks down from on high

> cast his eyes upon a chair into which he skipped with uncommon agility, and perching himself on the back with his feet upon the seat, was thus enabled to look on and listen with greater comfort to himself, besides gratifying at the same time that taste for doing something fantastic and monkey-like, which on all occasions had strong possession of him. Here, then, he sat, one leg cocked carelessly over the other, his chin resting on the palm of his hand, his head turned a little on one side, and his ugly features twisted into a complacent grimace. (124)

When Nell and her grandfather are making their escape, she must return to fetch the key to the door. She enters her own room to find the villain, fast asleep on her own bed:

> Here she stood for a few moments quite transfixed with terror at the sight of Mr Quilp, who was hanging so far out of bed that he almost seemed to be standing on his head, and who, either from the uneasiness of this posture or in one of his agreeable habits, was gasping and growling with his mouth wide open, and the whites (or rather the dirty yellows) of his eyes distinctly visible. (150)

When Mrs Nubbles is returning by coach to London after her trip with the single gentleman, she is terrified by Quilp surprising her from above:

> It was some gratification to Mr Quilp to find, as he took his place upon the roof, that Kit's mother was alone inside; from which circumstance he derived in the course of the journey much cheerfulness of spirit, inasmuch as her solitary condition enabled him to terrify her with many extraordinary annoyances; such as hanging over the side of the coach at the risk of his life, and staring in with his great goggle eyes, which seemed in hers the more horrible from his face being upside down. . . . (454)

Tom Scott is Quilp's familiar, but he is more than that. Not only does he act as Quilp's companion and servant, he also mimics his behaviour--including his subversion of the vertical gestural plane. Tom has a "natural taste for tumbling" (72) and is repeatedly described as standing on his head. He even moves around while in this upside-down position. The following passage not only

demonstrates Tom's ability to perform while inverted but also gives an indication of the love/hate relationship between him and his master:

> 'Now,' said Quilp, passing into the wooden counting-house, 'you mind the wharf. Stand upon your head again, and I'll cut one of your feet off.'
>
> The boy made no answer, but directly Quilp shut himself in, stood on his head before the door, then walked on his hands to the back and stood on his head there, and then to the opposite side and repeated the performance. (88)

Just after this, Tom is described as "dancing on his head at intervals on the extreme verge of the wharf" (95). He is not only an acrobat, he is also a daredevil. Lewis Horne calls Tom "a younger Quilp" (500) and cites the following example to substantiate his claim: "[Tom] sat crouching over the fire after the manner of a toad, and from time to time, when his master's back was turned, imitated his grimaces with a fearful exactness" (613). Although Tom is unquestionably a strange individual, his mimicking of Quilp's gestures underlines a significant aspect of Quilp's character: he is, in his own uniquely devilish way, attractive to those who are closest to him. Tom emulates him and Mrs Quilp is obviously sexually attracted to him. What is it about this despicable goblin that is so enticing? For the reader, anyway, his attraction lies in his impish delight at his own mischievous machinations. Quilp enjoys every minute of his life and ironically this positive attitude, despite its negative results, is attractive.

Many of Quilp's gestures express his glee at simply being Quilpish. His joy at teasing his wife takes gestural form: "advancing with a sort of skip, which, what with the crookedness of his legs, the ugliness of his face, and the mockery of his manner, was perfectly goblin-like" (81). Often, his gleeful gestures are violent, but unlike the violent gestures of Edith or Bradley Headstone, Quilp's violence is always directed outward: "biting the air in the fulness of his malice" (154) and "chopping the ground with his knife in an ecstacy" (161). Quilp will take

delight wherever he can find it, as on the occasion when he maliciously teases the chained dog (see Fig. 10):

> The dog tore and strained at his chain with starting eyes and furious bark, but there the dwarf lay, snapping his fingers with gestures of defiance and contempt. When he had sufficiently recovered from his delight, he rose, and with his arms a-kimbo, achieved a kind of demon-dance round the kennel, just without the limits of the chain, driving the dog quite wild. (228)

Even without the provided illustration, the reader can clearly visualize this scene. What is not so easily comprehended, at least for those who interact with him, is Quilp's smile. When we are first introduced to Quilp, he is placed in juxtaposition with Nell, as he is thematically throughout the narrative. Beside personified innocence, his devilish nature is more striking. Here follows the depiction of his illegible grimace:

> But what added most to the grotesque expression of his face, was a ghastly smile, which, appearing to be the mere result of habit and to have no connexion with any mirthful or complacent feeling, constantly revealed the few discoloured fangs that were yet scattered in his mouth, and gave him the aspect of a panting dog. (65)

His grimace is later described as a "cheerful smile, but which in any other man would have been a ghastly grin of pain" (92). Quilp's cheerful smile is difficult for the other characters to understand simply because it is unnatural; but that is what makes Quilp unique: he comes, not from nature, but from hell. With his bizarre appetites and his effervescent enjoyment of his own evil ways, he is the ultimate non-conformist and, as such, he is incomprehensible to the duty-bound self-sacrificers who oppose him. Quilp's brand of villainy is not that of a pathological criminal such as Rigaud, or a sycophantic deceiver such as Heep. His menace lies primarily in his physicality and in his delight at leaving his impish black mark on everything he touches. Dickens's employment of gesture as a method of characterization is particularly suited to such a physically repulsive yet attractive

Fig. 10: Quilp's devilish glee

goblin. The gesticulations provided enable us to see Quilp, to squirm and to enjoy it.

Uriah Heep also takes pleasure in his villainy, but as is fitting to such an artful deceiver, the expression of Heep's pleasure is much more secretive than is Quilp's. Hornback compares Heep to other villains:

> Unlike Fagin in *Oliver Twist* or Daniel Quilp in *The Old Curiosity Shop*--in their different ways his two most important predecessors--Uriah is always and uncompromisingly evil, and always seriously so. He is not just a caricature, or a 'humour' character, or even just a villain. He is an essentially evil person. (104)

Heep's seriousness is what sets him apart from Quilp. While he may take pleasure in his deceitfully humble persona, his intent is unrelievedly serious. Heep shares the gesture of the silent laugh with Rigaud:

> Uriah stopped short, put his hands between his great knobs of knees, and doubled himself up with laughter. With perfectly silent laughter. Not a sound escaped from him. I was so repelled by his odious behaviour, particularly by this concluding instance, that I turned away without any ceremony; and left him doubled up in the middle of the garden, like a scarecrow in want of support. (675)

Dickens's use of the two short statements to describe Heep's silent mirth not only underlines the abnormalcy of the behaviour, but also intimates a sense of the first-person narrator's wonderment at such a strange spectacle. That is what is so repulsive about Heep; his utter strangeness. Unlike Quilp, whose uniqueness can be accounted for as being devilish, Heep is simply spectacularly, weirdly repulsive. Although it is unlikely that anyone has ever met a person with all of the combined idiosyncrasies of Heep, it is a testament to Dickens's skill that Heep is a completely believable character. Part of the reason that Heep works so convincingly as an imaginary construct lies in the fact that the author provides us with plenty of physical, gestural detail by which to visualize this character. Irwin goes so far as to praise the gestural characterization of Heep above all others:

"no other character in Dickens reveals himself so consistently and eloquently through his gestures" (64). Consistency is the key to the presentation of Uriah Heep. Although Dickens varies his gestures, each action contributes to the overall design so that, unlike Carker, we always see the entire body, and not just a single feature. Irwin continues: "He is a sort of visual pun. His physique and movements represent his evil in almost literal terms. . . . The metaphorical merges into the actual" (66). This is reminiscent of Hornback's examination of Jane Murdstone; like Jane, Uriah becomes his gestures. They are not just what he does, but what he is. Uriah is also unique among Dickens's villains in that he does not spring from an obvious literary or theatrical source. However, in *Creating Characters with Charles Dickens*, Doris Alexander does argue that Hans Christian Andersen is the original for Uriah Heep (78-86). Alexander quotes Elizabeth Rigby's description of Andersen's gestures upon the occasion of being introduced to Dickens: "'wriggling and bending like a lizard with a lantern-jawed, cadaverous visage'" (78). If Heep is patterned after Andersen, it certainly is not a very complimentary likeness. However, in his biography of Dickens, Ackroyd mentions the fact that Andersen was a house guest at Gad's Hill who overstayed his welcome. After he finally left, Dickens created a card for his room which read, "'Hans Andersen slept in this room for five weeks--which seemed to the family AGES!'" (782). Nevertheless, it seems unlikely that such a combination of oddities could have existed outside the imagination of Dickens.

It must be remembered that the presentation of Heep is filtered through the first person narration of David Copperfield. Irwin suggests that "David exaggerates Heep's unpleasantness as a means of justifying a wildly disproportionate dislike" (66). However, David's perception of Heep contributes to our understanding of both the villain and the protagonist and is therefore useful. Unlike Heep, David makes no secret of his feelings in this relationship.

For example: "Uriah writhed with such obtrusive satisfaction and self-abasement, that I could gladly have pitched him over the banisters" (433). Uriah is like the proverbial car wreck in that David is both drawn to him and troubled by this attraction at the same time: "I was attracted to him in very repulsion, and could not help wandering in and out every half-hour or so, and taking another look at him" (443-44). At the resolution of the Strong's troubles, Uriah's disrespectful remarks enrage David and the intimation is that he finally acts on what he has wanted to do for a long time: "The whole of his lank cheek was invitingly before me, and I struck it with my open hand with that force that my fingers tingled as if I had burnt them" (685-86). The elements in Heep's character that so repulse David are made abundantly clear with gesture. One gesture predominates in every description of Heep. He writhes. Heep's writhing is his method of ingratiating himself with his social superiors and, as such, it can be taken as a uniquely Heep-like way of lowering the body in submission, as in a bow. Heep's writhing also indicates a squirmy enthusiasm, which in a less undulating character would probably be indicated by jerks and twitches, such as those made by Susan Nipper or Newman Noggs. Here is the first description of Heep's characteristic gesture:

> He had a way of writhing when he wanted to express enthusiasm, which was very ugly; and which diverted my attention from the compliment he had paid my relation, to the snaky twistings of his throat and body. (292)

This unusual gesture is exaggerated shortly after the passage above: "he writhed himself quite off his stool in the excitement of his feelings, and, being off, began to make arrangements for going home" (292). In several instances, Dickens varies the body parts incorporated in the writhe, as in this case: "Uriah, with his long hands slowly twining over one another, made a ghastly writhe from the waist upwards, to express his concurrence in this estimation of me" (316).

Here, Heep's hands are similar to the serpentine fingers of Rigaud. Heep's writhing is so grotesque and occurs with such regularity, that it comes as no surprise that an outspoken woman like Betsey Trotwood reprimands him for it:

> He jerked himself about, after this compliment, in such an intolerable manner, that my aunt, who had sat looking straight at him, lost all patience.
> 'Deuce take that man!' said my aunt, sternly, 'what's he about? Don't be galvanic, sir!'
> 'I ask your pardon, Miss Trotwood,' returned Uriah; 'I'm aware you're nervous.'
> 'Go along with you, sir!' said my aunt, anything but appeased. 'Don't presume to say so! I am nothing of the sort. If you're an eel, sir, conduct yourself like one. If you're a man, control your limbs, sir! Good God!' said my aunt, with great indignation, 'I am not going to be serpentined and corkscrewed out of my senses!' (579-80)

Obviously, it is not only David who is repulsed by Heep's idiosyncratic, fawning gestures.

As may be expected, such an unusual character has many unusual gestures, but all of them are repulsive in some way. When we first see Uriah, he is holding Betsey's pony and "breathing into the pony's nostrils, and immediately covering them with his hand, as if he were putting some spell upon him" (275). By my definition, all gestures must be signifying movements, but this simply signifies creepiness. Heep's gestures often serve as accompaniments to his speech, as in this case where he compares Wickfield to an unripe pear that is not yet ready for plucking, which in his idiom means controlling. Heep goes on to say that he can wait for the pear to ripen, and then "he made motions with his mouth as if the pear were ripe already, and he were smacking his lips over it" (645). Uriah often makes a gesture with his hand, as if he is shaving his lanky cheek. In this instance, David catches a glimpse of Heep's misanthropy when he is discussing his dislike for Jack Maldon: "He left off scraping his chin, and sucked in his cheeks until they seemed to meet inside; keeping his sidelong glance upon

me all the while" (674). Again, Heep's gestures are so alien that they require special attention in order to ferret out their underlying meaning. Uriah has another gesture that serves to demonstrate his enthusiasm--his nose twinkles:

> I observed that his nostrils, which were thin and pointed, with sharp dints in them, had a singular and most uncomfortable way of expanding and contracting themselves--that they seemed to twinkle instead of his eyes, which hardly ever twinkled at all.
> (291)

Nasal gesture is relatively rare but, in *A Tale of Two Cities*, the Marquis also expresses himself by the marks in his nose (151), as does Mr Lammle in *Our Mutual Friend* (171). When Heep is fantasizing out loud about having Wickfield under his thumb, his threat seems so real to David that his accompanying gesture is exaggerated: "'Un--der--his thumb,' said Uriah, very slowly, as he stretched out his cruel-looking hand above my table, and pressed his own thumb upon it, until it shook, and shook the room" (439). Heep's gravity about his ambitions is frightening in its gestural intensity.

Some gestures are presented as being more felt than seen. This is certainly the case when it comes to Uriah's handshakes. David's first handshake with Uriah is indicative of all of those that follow: "But oh, what a clammy hand his was! as ghostly to the touch as to the sight! I rubbed mine afterwards, to warm it, *and to rub his off*" (281). And no wonder, when one remembers that David imagines that Uriah's forefinger leaves a track like a snail on the page when he uses it to read (290). Dickens again varies his descriptions of Uriah's handshakes, but every instance has the common denominator of clamminess (see Fig. 11). The following are merely a sampling of David's responses to shaking hands with Heep: "his hand felt like a fish, in the dark" (293); "his damp cold hand felt so like a frog in mine, that I was tempted to drop it and run away" (437) and "all this time he was squeezing my hand with his damp fishy fingers"

Fig. 11: David shakes Uriah's clammy hand

(638). Dickens's comparisons of Heep to fish, frogs, snakes and eels emphasizes his undulating, writhing false sycophancy. Heep's gestures combine with his physical features to present a unique character who is the epitome of smarmy unctuosity.

I have demonstrated that, while Dickens lavishes gestural description on his villains and on many of his more minor characters, he has difficulty doing the same for his heroes and heroines. However, what must be abundantly clear by now is that Dickens's novels are overflowing with gesture of all types. Even with those characters where his attempts at characterization through gesture fail, it is not primarily from a lack of gesture but from too narrow a focus on feature-specific gestures, as is the case with both Lucie Manette and James Carker. Dickens's ability to modify the tone and temper of repeated gestures enables him to keep his descriptions vivid and colourful. In some cases, notably that of Rigaud, gesture becomes the most significant method of recognizing a character throughout the drawn-out serial publication of such large, crowded, novels. Many of Dickens's characters can be considered gestural triumphs, but his villains attain the highest level of gestural legibility and presence. When compared to Rigaud's melodramatic swaggering and sinister grin, Quilp's gleeful capering, and Heep's writhing "umbleness," all other characters are upstaged.

CONCLUSION

Dickens uses theatrical gesture as one of the major building blocks in the creation of character. In employing gesture as a means of external characterization, Dickens has been criticized for creating only shallow, one-dimensional characters. However, this study has shown that while the gestures are on the surface, the meaning and emotions that they convey can plumb the depths of the psyche. This is most particularly noticeable in the case of unconscious gestures, such as those performed by Newman Noggs or even Uriah Heep, but many other gestures also serve to bare the souls of Dickens's characters. Although they are not always fully appreciated by the modern reader, melodramatic gestures do clearly communicate strong emotions. Odd or unusual gestures interest the reader in a character and invite him to draw conclusions regarding the character's thoughts and emotions. In defense of criticisms levelled against his portrayal of Mr Pickwick, the author has this to say about the charge that Pickwick changed during the course of the narrative:

> I do not think that this change will appear forced or unnatural to my readers, if they will reflect that in real life the peculiarities and oddities of a man who has anything whimsical about him, generally impress us first, and that it is not until we are better acquainted with him that we usually begin to look below these superficial traits, and to know the better part of him.
>
> (Preface to the Cheap Edition of *The Pickwick Papers* 45)

The genius of Dickens lies in the fact that he was able to present both the peculiarities and oddities that are seen at first glance *and* those things that impress us after longer acquaintance, through gesture. For example, the habitual, repetitive gestures of many of the characters not only serve to recall them to our recollection after an absence, but also remind us of the basic nature of the character, and this is not something that can be comprehended at the first

glance. Forster states that "no man could better adjust the outward and visible oddities in a delineation to its inner and unchangeable veracities" (II, 117). Dickens employs gestures the way a photographer uses a zoom lens--he uses outward manifestations to investigate the "inner and unchangeable veracities." Irwin makes a similar comparison: "A precisely recorded gesture can produce an effect similar to that of adjusting a pair of binoculars to make the general outlines of a distant view sharpen into detailed definition" (48). Dickens's gestures are definitely detailed. His vast knowledge of the theatre and of theatrical gesture enabled him to take the coded, stock gestures from the Victorian stage and expand upon them with his vivid imagination. Irwin states: "He records gesture with a stylistic vividness that seems a spontaneous reflex of his acuteness of observation" (49). The colourful and unusual details in many of the author's gestures bring minor characters to life and elucidate the motivations of major characters.

Above all, Dickens's use of theatrical gesture enables the reader to see and to remember what he sees. Whether the gestures described act as accompaniments to speech or as signposts of morality, they enable us to visualize the interaction between the characters. Dickens's ability to make us picture his characters for ourselves is particularly useful in such large, crowded novels. When one considers that the original method of serial publication would have drawn out the reading process by as much as nineteen months, aids to the reader's memory become imperative. The characters' gestures perform the same function as the tag lines in Homeric epithets: they preserve each character's salient features in the reader's recollection. Nabokov's comment reflects this perfectly: "Every character has his attribute, a kind of colored shadow that appears whenever the person appears" (68). Even simple, straightforward gestures such as those involving etiquette or props serve to aid the reader to

develop a mental picture of the action and thereby more easily recall the character at later appearances. While Dickens is more successful in employing this method to portray his minor characters and especially his villains, even his colourless heroes and heroines are given more definition through their signifying movements. In *The Return of the Native*, Thomas Hardy writes: "In respect of character a face may make certain admissions by its outline; but it fully confesses only in its changes" (48). The physical description of a character is expected by the reader and lavishly provided by this author but movement is what provides meaning.

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