ARTICLES

Complutense Journal of **English Studies**
ISSN: 2386-3935

EDICIONES
COMPLUTENSE

https://dx.doi.org/10.5209/cjes.61471

Reading the Body in Dickens's *Bleak House* and *Our Mutual Friend*[1]

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Abstract. This article examines the ways in which the Victorian body and identity were being transformed in the mid-nineteenth century and identifies three distinctive ways the biological and normative boundaries of the body were violated as represented in Dickens's fiction: the grotesque body, the vulnerable body and the dead body. In this sense, Dickens's *Bleak House* (1851-53) and *Our Mutual Friend* (1864-65) present creative and challenging literary responses to the Victorian body abjected through deprivation, physical vulnerability and death. In the novels, the grotesque body challenges the abject via a tragicomic and hybrid representation of the body and of character. Regarding the vulnerable body, the study elaborates on a body "out-of-control", threatening the boundaries between the object and the subject, inside and outside, by holding a liminal state through ill-health, excessive labour, starvation and physical degradation. Finally, it is argued that there was an intimate and abject relationship between the living and the dead bodies in the capital, beside prevalent infant deaths, high mortality rates, diseased bodies and overflowing graveyards in the city.
Keywords: Victorian body, grotesque, Charles Dickens, vulnerability, identity.

[es] Leyendo el cuerpo en las obras de Dickens *Casa desolada* y *Nuestro común amigo*

Resumen. Este artículo examina en qué formas el cuerpo y la identidad victorianos se estaban transformando a mediados del siglo XIX, e identifica tres formas distintas en las que se violaron los límites biológicos y normativos del cuerpo tal como se representa en la ficción de Dickens: el cuerpo grotesco, el cuerpo vulnerable y el cadáver. En este sentido, *Casa desolada* (1851-53) y *Nuestro común amigo* (1864-65) presentan respuestas literarias creativas y desafiantes al cuerpo victoriano, humillado por la privación, la vulnerabilidad física y la muerte. En las novelas, el cuerpo grotesco desafía lo abyecto a través de una representación tragicómica e híbrida del cuerpo y del personaje. Con respecto al cuerpo vulnerable, el estudio elabora un cuerpo "fuera de control", que amenaza los límites entre el objeto y el sujeto, lo interior y lo exterior, al mantener un estado liminal debido a la mala salud, al exceso de trabajo, al hambre y a la degradación física. Finalmente, el estudio sostiene que había una relación íntima y abyecta entre los vivos y los cadáveres en la capital, además de muertes infantiles frecuentes, altas tasas de mortalidad, cuerpos enfermos y cementerios desbordados en la ciudad.
Palabras clave: cuerpo victoriano, grotesco, Charles Dickens, vulnerabilidad, identidad.

Contents. 1. Introduction. 2. The Grotesque Body. 3. The Vulnerable Body. 4. The Dead Body. 5. Conclusion.

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[1] This study is a revised section of my doctoral thesis "Urban Abjection in Fiction by Charles Dickens, George Gissing and Arthur Morrison" submitted to King's College London (UK) in 2015.

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How to cite this article: Harputlu Shah, Z. (2019) Reading the Body in Dickens's *Bleak House* and *Our Mutual Friend*, in *Complutense Journal of English Studies* 27, 259-292.

1. Introduction

In *The Body Reader*, Moore and Kosut (2010: 1) consider the body not only as "the medium or raw material" inhabiting the world, but also as an entity that carries diverse meanings. That is, studying and speaking of our bodies does not merely mean a subjective and individual act, but more significantly, it is also a political and cultural act that helps us make sense of the world we are dwelling in. The body is the entry point into our social relationships, emotional experiences, our subjective inner world and the biological aspect of the flesh. At the same time, as a site of contradictions, it carries a huge potential and limitations, symbolic and material meanings; and the flesh acts both in and out of our wills. Symbolically, the body stands for "any bounded system" and it is under threat of danger from both inside and outside (Douglas 1991). Hence, we are unable to possess our body completely and when it is out of control "it leaks, fails us and gives us away" (Moore and Kosut 2010: 2).

What happens to selfhood, then, when one's body is out of control? How does one handle a damaged, sick, vulnerable, or grotesque body? How do these bodies relate to society and morality? What is the significance of location and history in maintaining a healthy body and identity? In examining these questions, this paper attempts to explore the ways in which identities were being transformed in the Victorian period, as imagined through embodiment. This study identifies three distinctive ways the body was abjected through sufferings and the violation of its boundaries in the mid-Victorian period: the grotesque body, the vulnerable body and the dead body. In this regard, Dickens's fiction provides critical and creative representations of the ways the unity and coherence of the Victorian body and identity were threatened and damaged. Dickens was an author influenced by the repulsive and fascinating aspects of the bodies of the urban poor. In his novels, the readers could find a discourse of mass poverty, physical degradation and degeneration, dissolving the boundaries between the normal and the deviant, purity and impurity, child and adult, animal and human in the streets, in the river and slums throughout the city. In particular, *Bleak House* (1851-53, 1996) and *Our Mutual Friend* (1864-65, 1981) offered creative and challenging literary responses to the Victorian body abjected through deprivation, physical vulnerability and death.

As is clear, abjection is one of the key concepts used in this study for the consideration of the dynamic relationship between the body and identity in the period. The theory of abjection was developed by Julia Kristeva in *Powers of Horror* (1982), partly influenced by Georges Bataille's essay, as a complex psychological, philosophical and linguistic concept.[3] Abjection is fundamentally based on a psychoanalytic theory of the subject, grounded in separation of the body of the child from that of the mother to constitute itself as a subject. The abject is considered neither

[3] In "Abjection and Miserable Forms" (1934), Bataille describes abjection as "the inability to assure with sufficient force the imperative act of excluding abject things (which constitutes the foundations of collective existence" (1997: 8-15). He argues that the forces of sovereignty and their intrusive and exclusionary practices produced waste or outcast populations who were threatened from within, yet could not be assimilated or expelled since the system required this surplus to constitute its boundaries and legitimate its order and power.

a subject nor an object; yet it must be identified, rejected and expelled for a unified sense of self, which is not always possible as it cannot be eliminated from the body, social order or culture easily. Abjection has frequently been used to describe the condition of stigmatised or marginalised groups such as women, ethnic groups, minority religious groups, prostitutes, convicts and disabled people. Similarly, the urban poor in Victorian society were also cast out and stigmatised as "other" for their potential to defile and their threat to the security of the middle and upper classes. In this study, the abject embodiment of the urban poor refers to a state in which bodily boundaries abrade and the self has little control over the body and bodily fluids (Waskul and van der Riet 2002: 487). The body experiences "brutish suffering" in the form of "disorder, powerlessness, pain, torment and stigma" and not only biological but also normative boundaries are violated (2002: 487). In this sense, the order between the body and the self is threatened by the abject body, which is out of control and of coherence. The grotesque abject body endangers the order between the body and society, whilst the vulnerable and repulsive body threatens the order between the body, nature and morality. The dead body is a noteworthy example of a state in which the boundaries between the body and the self erode and dissolve, the subject turns into an object with the loss of identity or holds an ambiguous status between life and death.

In order to understand the ways in which the body has been vulnerable to serious threats to its health, unity and coherence from inside and outside, it is also necessary to locate the body geopolitically through its position within specific social, geographical and political circumstances in history (Rich 1986: 212).[4] The Victorian period offers plentiful and remarkable examples of grotesque, filthy, vulnerable, and dismembered bodies in an urbanised society. It also provides a distinctive perspective on diverse contexts in which the body was understood and represented in an era in which reason, science and advancement were privileged over the body. Yet, the prevalence of serious public issues such as lack of sanitation, contagious diseases, poverty and institutional corruption jeopardised this scientific idealism and paved a way for physical, moral and social degradation and degeneration. Specifically, the widespread problem of the body's physical vulnerability to disease, dismemberment, hunger and death caused a major concern for the Victorians, who tried to preserve a healthy body and nation:

> Victorians did not have to look far for evidence that their hold on life and limb was tenuous. Their bodies were, in general, smaller than bodies are today; they were shorter, lighter, suffered more unalleviated pain, aged faster, and died sooner. Physical deformities were less easily "remedied" by operation or institutionalization and so were more commonly seen. Disease was a major risk and longevity a comparative rarity. Infant mortality was high, standards of health care often low. The number of possible ends a body could come to seemed to be multiplying. It could be murdered "most foully". It could be dismembered alive or dissected dead. It could be squashed into an overflowing graveyard, in as many pieces as would best fit, or dug up after burial and sold to anatomists. It could be watched by the multitudes as it writhed in operative pain. It could be hanged by the neck until

[4] Rich draws attention to the intersections of gender, sexuality, race, and politics in relation to "the geography closest in-the body" where she [a female] "exists" by focusing on the female body (1986: 212).

> dead before an exited crowd and then be dissected. It could be put on display, in flesh or wax. It could starve or sicken in numbers or conditions that were a direct product of Victorian society (Gavin 1994: 11).

By the last quarter of the century, in a post-Darwinian framework, the Victorians increasingly "harboured anxieties about poverty, about public health and national and imperial finesse, about decadent artists, 'new women' and 'homosexuals'" (Greenslade 2010: 2). The middle and upper classes also acquired a "displacement and transference of guilt, and of fear of the uncontrollable and baffling energies of material existence" by attacking the irrational and creating differentiations between "the normal and the abnormal, the healthy and morbid, the fit and the unfit, the civilised and the primitive" (2010: 7). In addition, the ruling classes used fear of degeneration as a strategy to "justify their hostility to the deviant, the diseased, and the subversive by considering the oppositional voices as either 'irrational' or 'sick'" (Gavin 1994: 2). Nonetheless, whilst earlier in the century (especially in 1840s and 1850s) the increasing problem of the moral and physical conditions of the urban poor was scrutinised by social explorers and journalists, by the early 1880s these concerns began to shift in the direction of a new pessimism regarding the insufficiency of sanitary reforms and chronic poverty, which was considered a threat to the nation.

In the Victorian city, therefore, not only biological but also normative boundaries of the body were violated and the abject penetrated the habitats of the poor in slums, alleys, streets and holes, where the body was more likely to become vulnerable and degraded. In this scope, in the first section of this study, it is argued that the grotesque body is part of the creative responses of Dickens challenging the abject via a tragicomic and hybrid representation of the body and of character. The second section on the vulnerable body elaborates on a body "out-of-control", threatening the boundaries between the object and the subject, inside and outside, by holding a liminal or ambiguous state through ill-health, excessive labour, starvation and physical degradation. One result of "being cast as abject" was the placing of the poor in "an intermediary position where they were defined in an arrested passage from subject to object", or "a borderline between frontiers that hinder[ed] clearly defined subject position" (Cross 2006: 33). Ultimately, the final section explores an intimate and abject relationship between the living and the dead bodies in the capital, beside prevalent infant deaths, high mortality rates, diseased bodies and overflowing graveyards in Victorian London.

2. The Grotesque Body

> The body is, in a sense, always foreign, always the other of the spirit, or mind privileged by the nineteenth century idealism.
>
> — John Shad, *Dickens Refigured* (1996)

The otherness of the body in Victorian society and culture would not inhibit its plurality and capacity to challenge the ways in which it was repressed or manipulated; instead, it opened up new possibilities. This section elaborates on Dickens's representations of the grotesque body, arguing that the author challenges the abject by reconstructing the body through specific histories, social and political conditions in

the mid nineteenth century. In Dickens's novels, not only the bodies of the poor, but also the bodies of children, infants, and females are exposed to arduous living conditions and difficulties. These works shed light on the misrepresented and neglected lives of the urban poor and other fragile bodies that gradually transformed into degenerated, grotesque or diseased bodies. They also demonstrate the creative responses of the author to the fragile body by resisting a breakdown in meaning caused by poverty and spatial exclusionary practices, which transform the social identity of the poor into "other", "object" and "outsider". The protagonists struggle to survive in a "world of the atrophied or perverted development in which people [have] been reified into more fetishised fragments of some putative fuller personality" (Clark 1996: 27). Their connection with urban history, tragicomic elements, animalism and criminality are closely connected with the spaces they inhabit, in other words the place of the abject, where boundaries begin to break down and alter the conditions of survival. Grotesque bodies pervaded the streets of London like "extraordinary specimens of human fungus", as Dickens pointed out in *Bleak House* (1996: 425*)*. Yet, their grotesqueness also addressed the strength, creativity and capacity of the bodies of the urban poor and the labouring classes, which became "double, fuzzy, heterogeneous, animal, metamorphised, altered, abject" through degradation, savagery and violence (Kristeva 1982: 207).

Before an analysis of the grotesque art and body in Dickens's fiction, two prominent works which provide useful frameworks for reading the grotesque in literature shall be introduced: Wolfgang Kayser's *The Grotesque Art and Literature* (1963) and Mikhail Bakhtin's *Rabelais and his World* (1968). These works focus on the grotesque as an "essentially mixed or hybrid form, like tragicomedy, its elements, in themselves heterogeneous combining in unstable, conflicting, paradoxical relationships" (Hollington 1984: 1). These hybrid forms constitute human forms, animal forms, the natural, the supernatural, the comic, the monstrous and misshapen, all of which were frequently used by Dickens, too. The term "grotesque" derives from the Italian word *grotta* (cave), referring to "the underground paintings excavated beneath the baths of Titus in the 1480s", and it was first recorded to have been used to describe ceilings "with such fantastic forms, colours, and arrangements as are now called grotesques" (1984: 2). Furthermore, the term has often been associated with remote antiquities and a historical perspective in history.[5] Whilst Kayser's interpretation of the grotesque largely describes "an attempt to invoke and subdue the demonic aspects of the world", Bakhtin's approach diminishes the demonic aspect altogether and constructs a more ancient but benign tradition that treats the evil "as a function of the Christian beliefs in medieval Europe" (1984: 3). Bakhtin adds that the grotesque body is a celebration of the cycle of life; it is a comic figure of profound ambivalence and its positive meaning is linked to birth and renewal while its negative meaning is associated with death and decay. That is, the grotesque is more likely to disclose the capacity of the hybrid body to transform its surroundings with its creative and destructive, material and symbolic power emerging in altered conditions of the everyday. Bakhtin's consideration of Dickens's work as a tradition of "grotesque realism" which "manifest[s] a renewed vitality" and aims "inventive

[5] Thomas Wright, an English writer of the theory of grotesque, had also found his examples in his *History of Caricature and Grotesque* (1865) in ancient Egypt. He argued that the grotesque was essentially "social in character" and both caricature and burlesque were "intended to be heard and seen publicly" (Hollington 1984: 4).

freedom", in comparison with classic realism, helps us uncover this creative power that challenges abject poverty and self-destruction (1984: 6). This approach epitomises the fundamental principle of grotesque realism: degradation and the lowering of all that is abstract, spiritual, noble and ideal to the material level.

The concept of "the uncanny" is also useful in the examination of the grotesque body in Dickens's novels. Freud's *das Unheimlich* refers to it as "in reality nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression" (Freud 1955: 14). What Freud calls "the return of the repressed" is renamed as "maternal abjection" by Kristeva, and they are both a permanent counterpart to consciousness, "a longing to fall back into the maternal 'chora' as well as a deep anxiety about the possibility of losing one's subjectivity" (McAfee 2004: 49). For Kristeva, nevertheless, abjection is "essentially different from uncanniness, more violent, too" because it is "a failure to recognize its kin; nothing is familiar, not even a shadow of a memory" (1982: 5). The representation of the uncanny and the grotesque in literature are not identical in the way that they are managed or controlled. In literary texts, form and content may be used as a defence mechanism against infantile fear, impulses or fantasies. In Dickens's fiction, for instance, the disturbing aspects of grotesque bodies are modified and partially normalised through comedy and caricatural expressions (Steig 1970: 314). Terrifying characters or events that would normally evoke a strong sense of anxiety or fear (as repressed material recalled) are reduced to a level that is more acceptable to the consciousness through the use of "an energetic comic demonism" as a narrative technique (1970: 314). In this way, the uncanny is modified through artistic invention, comic expression or caricature in the narrative.

Whilst Dickens's early comedy suggests a more "joyful and triumphant hilarity" that stemmed from the Romanticism of the eighteenth century, his later works provide a serious consideration and use of the grotesque as a means of conveying moral and social messages (Hollington 1984: 6). In his early works, Dickens's relation to the grotesque tradition is more clearly understood in terms of his capacity to "fuse heterogeneous elements of popular tradition-fairy tale, chapbook romance, [and] popular gothic- into an integrated representation of the industrial society he was faced with" (1984: 6-7). In Dickens's approach, his interest in popular theatre, visual satire and popular sources like German romanticism and Gothic fiction played a significant role in his early works, such as *Pantomime of Life* (1984: 8-10). There the readers find a portrayal of memorable tragi-comic grotesques: while the grotesque characters seldom "contribute to thematic unity or to effective social criticism; they [exist] as curiosities peopling the odd turns of picturesque plots" (Dunn 1969: 147). Some of these characters include Quilp in *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1841, 2000), Ned Dennis in *Barnaby Rudge* (1841), and Sairey Gamp in *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1843-44). Also, grotesque characters surround little Nell's world during her long journey with her grandfather across England in *The Old Curiosity Shop*.

Another particular achievement of Dickens in his characterisation of the grotesque bodies was the normalisation and humanisation of the uncanny or the demonic, and the "objectif[i]cation of] the abstract" (Dunn 1969: 148). In Dickens's later works such as *Bleak House* and *Our Mutual Friend*, the readers find a more thematic and complicated approach to the grotesque with the body of an immature child, a living "dead" man, or a collector of animal and human body parts; however, their presence in the novels seems to be almost too familiar to be strange or demonic in

the chaos of the everyday. Injustices, inequalities, degeneration and sheer ignorance take form in the shape of seemingly never-ending cases in the Royal Court of Chancery; the river Thames carries dead bodies in a foggy city where objects cannot be distinguished from people and it is an abject space that engulfs all into a bottomless pit. In a chapter titled "Nobody's Fault" in *Little Dorrit* (1855-57, 1987), "nobody" refers an abstract or symbolic subject responsible for all the ills and vices of society. In a different way, Dickens uses animal analogies to convey moral messages and creates grotesque effects by using resemblances between human faces and animal heads in his novels. In Dickens's (1837-39, 1994) for instance, "Fagin is lynx-eyed, Mrs Sowerberry of a vixenish countenance, and monks like vampires in appearance" (qtd in Hollington 1984: 15). The earlier and later works of Dickens therefore represent the grotesque as "double-edged" since they simultaneously evoke anxiety by expressing childhood fears, fantasies and impulses in the chaos of the everyday and create a defence against the uncanny through comedy and caricatural expression (Steig 1970: 258). This defence, however, is only partially successful and it is unstable because the settings of the novels are abject spaces, and the grotesque bodies still allow some anxiety to remain in the text.

Besides the influence of Gothic fiction and German Romanticism on the idealisation of the imagination in everyday life (making the familiar world strange), Dickens found "the terror…of the soul" in "the great industrial cities of Victorian England" (Hollington 1984: 18-25). London was one of those paradoxical sites that embodied a mixture of sensations such as attraction and repulsion for Dickens, who was well aware of its crimes, horrors, monstrosities and delights: "A very important intersection of Dickens's work is London, where the romantic, the fantastic or the gothic comes into collision with the real world of the city to produce the paradoxically mixed and contradictory art of the grotesque" (1984: 24). The grotesque maintains its existence on the border of narrative and real life. Similarly, Dickens describes the city with its "living monstrosities, in all their fantastic and thrilling reality" in his novels (1984: 25). In the Victorian city, filth, darkness, fog, mist and dirt were useful symbolic and material elements associating the city with corruption, crime and degeneration: "Its [the city's] teasing, vaporous insubstantiality, seemingly combining matter and spirit, or mediating between them, was also to be a fertile source of grotesque modes of suggesting sublimity" (1984: 65).

The city inhabits grotesque bodies and queer object collectors as described by Dickens in *Bleak House* and *Our Mutual Friend.* Mr Krook's shop, which is located in Chancery, and Mr Venus's shop are filled with second-hand objects, animal and human body parts, and waste materials. In these shops, "everything seem[s] to be bought and nothing to be sold" (Dickens 1996: 67). In *Bleak House,* Mr Krook's shop, for instance, is full of various picturesque objects such as "dirty bottles, blacking bottles, medicine bottles, ginger-beer and soda-water bottles, pickle bottles…second-hand bags… heaps of old crackled parchment scrolls and discoloured and dog's-eared law-papers…that yonder bones in a corner, piled together and picked very clean, were the bones of clients, to make the picture complete" (1996: 67-68). In the novel, an eccentric man, Mr Krook is called "the Lord Chancellor" for he "can't part with anything [he] once lay hold of" or "alter anything, nor has any sweeping, nor scouring, nor cleaning, nor repairing going on about" him; yet he does not mind (1996: 70). Mr Krook is interested in rust, must and cobwebs as well as human hair. When he sees Ada, he cannot help complimenting her on her

hair: “They—Hi! Here’s lovely hair! I have got three sacks of ladies’ hair below, but none so beautiful and fine as this. What colour, and what texture!” (1996: 69). Even the story of Mr Krook keeping a cat is odd: “I deal in cat-skins among other general matters, and hers was offered to me. It’s a very fine skin, as you may see, but I didn’t have it stripped off! that warn’t like Chancery practice though, says you!” (1996: 70). The grotesque description of Mr Krook’s character and shop does not make his death less interesting and horrific, for he dies of spontaneous combustion. His eccentricity and rejoice in his job and his relations with his cat and human hair provoke a grotesque effect with queer objects piled in his shop in the Chancery. The value of these objects seems to have been elevated and sublimated in their collector’s hands.

Similarly, in *Our Mutual Friend* Mr Venus’s shop promises all kinds queer and grotesque materials including human body parts, and his eccentric visitors like Mr Wegg. He is a preserver of birds and other animals, as well as an articulator of human bones. Mr Wegg finds Mr Venus’s shop, filled with indistinguishable objects displayed on its window, in a narrow and dirty street. The objects that fill the shop remind the reader of Mr Krook’s shop:

> A Wice. Tools. Bones, warious. Skulls, warious. Preserved Indian baby. African ditto. Bottled preparations, warious. Everything within reach of your hand, in good preservation. The mouldy ones a-top. What’s in those hampers over them again, I don’t quite remember. Say, human warious. Cats. Articulated English baby. Dogs. Ducks. Glass eyes, warious. Mummied bird. Dried cuticle, warious. Oh, dear me! That’s the general panoramic view. (Dickens 1981: 81)

This panoramic view is completed with the strange look of Mr Venus, which does not fit into any categories: his “face looking up is a sallow face with weak eyes, surmounted by a tangle of reddish-dusty hair [and] eyes are like the over-tried eyes of an engraver, but he is not that; his expression and stoop are like those of a shoemaker, but he is not that” (1981: 78). Just like the queer objects he keeps in his shop, he is unidentifiable and undistinguishable among them, thus holding an ambiguous status between an object and a living being. On another occasion, Mr Boffin looks through the windows of Mr Venus’s shop and sees figures including:

> the French gentleman, though he had no eyes, was not at all behind-hand, but appeared, as the flame rose and fell, to open and shut his no eyes, with the regularity of the glass-eyed dogs and ducks and birds. The big-headed babies were equally obliging in lending their grotesque aid to the general effect. (1981: 576)

Interestingly, Mr Venus recognises Mr Wegg only for his missing body part, his “hospital amputation” as described in the novel (1981: 78). Their conversation on the aesthetics of human body parts such as wooden legs reveals how grotesque they both are:

> [Mr Venus] “With ribs (I grant you) always. But not else. When I prepare a miscellaneous one, I know beforehand that I can’t keep to nature, and be miscellaneous with ribs, because every man has his own ribs, and no other man’s will go with them; but elseways I can be miscellaneous. I have just sent home a

> Beauty—a perfect Beauty—to a school of art. One leg Belgian, one leg English, and the pickings of eight other people in it. Talk of not being qualified to be miscellaneous! By rights you ought to be, Mr Wegg." Silas looks as hard at his one leg as he can in the dim light, and after a pause sulkily opines "that it must be the fault of the other people. Or how do you mean to say it comes about?" he demands impatiently. "I don't know how it comes about. Stand up a minute. Hold the light." Mr Venus takes from a corner by his chair, the bones of a leg and foot, beautifully pure, and put together with exquisite neatness. These he compares with Mr Wegg's leg; that gentleman looking on, as if he were being measured for a riding-boot. "No, I don't know how it is, but so it is. You have got a twist in that bone, to the best of my belief. I never saw the likes of you." Mr Wegg having looked distrustfully at his own limb, and suspiciously at the pattern with which it has been compared, makes the point: "I'll bet a pound that ain't an English one!" "An easy wager, when we run so much into foreign! No, it belongs to that French gentleman."… "Oh!" says Mr Wegg, with a sort of sense of being introduced; "I dare say you were all right enough in your own country, but I hope no objections will be taken to my saying that the Frenchman was never yet born as I should wish to match." (1981: 79-80)

Mr Venus humbly accepts the fact that everyone's body parts are unique, and therefore, a perfect match is not possible. Yet, he conceives them as works of art and tries his best to find the best match for Mr Wegg's missing leg and foot. The grotesqueness of this scene is the perfect normalisation of matching the body parts of different people; it is also ironic as Mr Wegg is not willing to use a Frenchman's bones for he considers himself superior as an English gentleman. The contrast between their indifferent approaches to use of the bones of the dead and their serious consideration of nationality create a grotesque atmosphere and comical effect. The physical appearance of Mr Wegg is worthy of attention as he is described as "a petrified specimen qualifying for a position among the curiosities in Mr Venus's shop", and he is "so wooden, wooden a man" that he seems to take "his wooden leg naturally and might be expected if his development received no untimely check to be set up with a pair of wooden legs in about six months" (Dunn 1969: 151). Mr Wegg is an outsider, yet he does not seem to accept that. Mr Venus, on the other hand, considers his profession as an obstacle for his marriage with Pleasant Riderhood, and Dickens narrates this character as "a relatively normal individual living in grotesque surroundings" (1969: 153). Dickens, therefore, could effectively use the contrast between settings and characters and control his sense of grotesque to evoke humour through Mr Krook and Mr Venus (1969: 151).

3. The Vulnerable Body

The meaning of the term "vulnerability" varies across the literature of many disciplines, such as philosophy, sociology, feminism, politics and psychoanalysis. In studies of feminism, it is argued that bodily vulnerability is "discursively deeply feminized" (Vaittinen 2015: 1). The Cartesian body/mind dualism also associates the mind with "masculine forms of autonomous, rational, and public life; whereas the body is linked with femininity, irrationality, and the private life" (2015: 5-6). Moreo-

ver, women's corporeal vulnerability includes physical and sexual violence to a significant degree. Yet, as Judith Butlers suggests in *Vulnerability in Resistance* (2016) on the political potential of bodily vulnerability, physical exposure to violence establishes "the conditions of the very possibility of resistance" through "new forms of embodied political interventions and modes of alliance" (1-7). Dissimilarly, for cancer patients, bodily vulnerability is linked with illness as the out-of-control body loses its capacity to maintain coherence and unity, which threatens the boundaries of selfhood and subjectivity. In everyday life, the bodies of the old are vulnerable to aging, bodily decay and death, whilst the infant body is in extreme need of protection. In psychoanalysis, the abject body is defined as "the ambiguous, the in-between, what defies boundaries, a composite resistant to unity", which distorts the subject's identity (Lechte 1990: 160).

Corporeal vulnerability took extreme forms and degrees in Victorian society. Whilst the bodies of the poor were exposed to contagious diseases, hard labour, starvation or death, their dead bodies were vulnerable to body snatchers, the business of death and illegal dissection for medical purposes. The fragility and vulnerability of the bodies of children, infants, females and the old was represented by Dickens in order to draw attention to the degrading effects of poverty, neglect, toil and hunger among the lower classes. The bodily vulnerability was highly feminised in Victorian lıterature and culture, too. Dickens's female characters experience bodily vulnerability in one of two ways: they are either confined in the house through domesticity as the "angel in the house", or they are defined as rebellious or fallen women who are expelled from the safe realm of society. Esther and Lady Deadlock in *Bleak House,* for instance, represent these two types of females. Moreover, the prevalence of premature death among infants, child labour, orphan-hood and homelessness in Dickens's fiction indicates an urgent call for immediate action against child vulnerability. Most of these children are neglected, exploited or abused, and they are deprived of education due to their social status. Pip and Estella in *Great Expectations* (1861), Amy in *Little Dorrit* (1855-57), Oliver in *Oliver Twist* (1837-39), David in *David Copperfield* (1850) and Sissy Jup in *Hard Times* (1854) exemplify the abundance of child characters in need of care, guidance and protection.

One of these vulnerable children destined to move on is young Jo in *Bleak House*. The street sweeper Jo "is not a genuine foreign-grown savage- he is the ordinary home-made article" living in London (Plotkin 1997: 724). He is dirty, "very muddy, very hoarse, very ragged", untrained and without any knowledge of his own name: "Don't know that everybody has two names. Never heerd of sich a think. Don't know that Jo is short for a longer name" (Dickens 1996: 176-77). He is homeless, uneducated and does not know anything about the world around him: "Can't exactly say what'll be done to him after he's dead if he tells a lie to the gentlemen here, but believes it'll be something wery bad to punish him" (1996: 177). With his filthy body and loneliness in his home country, he is homeless and "strangely unhomely, even *unheimlich*" (Plotkin 1997: 17). In fact, as In fact, as Wilkie-Stibbs argues, "the child's body, whether it is regarded as the 'subject-to-be', or as 'being a subject', is inexorably in the polymorphic mode" (2006: 319). As such, it is already positioned in the borderland between a "pre-socialised condition and the developed ego; therefore, it is already codified in these respects as abject" (2006: 319). In addition, Dickens invites the reader to look at the world through Jo's eyes, who strolls in the city without any acknowledgement of his position in Victorian society:

> It must be a strange state to be like Jo! To shuffle through the streets, unfamiliar with the shapes, and in utter darkness as to the meaning, of *those mysterious symbols*, so abundant over the shops, and at the corners of streets, and on the doors, and in the windows! To see people read, and to see people write, and to see the postmen deliver letters, *and not to have the least idea of all that language*—to be, to every scrap of it, stone blind and dumb! It must be very puzzling to see the good company going to the churches on Sundays, with their books in their hands, and to think (for perhaps Jo does think at odd times) what does it all mean, and if it means anything to anybody, how comes it that it means nothing to me? (1996: 257)

Jo cannot read any of these symbols and is even unfamiliar with written language; therefore, he is always a little confused and feels inferior. Dickens's portrayal of Jo's everyday life turns into an existential question of identity in the midst of crowds in the city, where he is continuously forced to move without any particular reason and has no place to return. Jo holds an ambiguous or abject status between being a human and animal, and his ambiguous position complicates his presence as a "home-made savage" and a vulnerable body in the streets of the metropolis:

> *To be hustled, and jostled, and moved on*; and really to feel that it would appear to be perfectly true that I have no business here, or there, or anywhere; and yet to be perplexed by the consideration that I am here somehow, too, and everybody overlooked me until I became the creature that I am! It must be a strange state, not merely to be told that I am scarcely human (as in the case of my offering myself for a witness), but to feel it of my own knowledge all my life! To see the horses, dogs, and cattle go by me and to know that in ignorance I belong to them and not to the superior beings in my shape, whose delicacy I offend*!* Jo's ideas of a criminal trial, or a judge, or a bishop, or a government, or that inestimable jewel to him (if he only knew it) the Constitution, should be strange! *His whole material and immaterial life is wonderfully strange; his death, the strangest thing of all.* (1996: 257-58) [Emphasis added]

This passage describes the mobility of Jo in the streets and his perception of himself and his position amongst the members of other social classes. Although it is narrated in the first person, it is completed with the views of the omniscient narrator, who finds Jo's life and eventual death "strange". His neglected life and existence is strange, but sometimes even too familiar for the Victorians as he wanders in the streets often unnoticed. Jo is surprised by the fact that despite being overlooked he still has a place in this world. Yet his being "hustled, and jostled, and moved on" in the streets refers to the interruption of continuity of his movement and his outsider status, since he is considered neither as a human nor an animal. The law and customs means nothing to him for he does not see himself as belonging to the human race. David Plotkin suggests that he is an outsider in an imperial context and he does not hold a national identity for not having been educated and cultivated by English society (1997: 19).

Then again, although Jo's position endangers the notion of a healthy and respectable society within the margins of the city, he can neither be deported as a foreigner nor embraced as a "home-made" child in his country. He blurs the ideological distinction between (home) nation and the (outside) world, as well as a human or an

animal. Even his confusion regarding his identity abjects his status in his own world and his death creates a similar dilemma as "the strangest of all." In the same way, he does not have a solid ground inhabiting him and has to keep moving on, just like the crowds in the city:

> Jo moves on, through the long vacation, down to Blackfriars Bridge …From the boy's face one might suppose that sacred emblem to be, in his eyes, the crowning confusion of the great, confused city—so golden, so high up, so far out of his reach. There he sits, the sun going down, the river running fast, the crowd flowing by him in two streams—everything moving on to some purpose and to one end—until he is stirred up and told to "move on" too. (Dickens 1996: 314-15)

The river and running water symbolise the everyday and purposeful life of the city dwellers, whilst Jo's movement does not suggest any meaning and he does not have any objectives or hopes for his future. His only feeling is the multiplying sense of confusion and amazement in the great city, in which he feels lost. He is one of many confused and mesmerised young children, like Amy in *Little Dorrit* (1855-57) getting lost in or observing the vast and overcrowded city. Their tiny bodies dissolve into the flow of everyday life and they find it horrifying to get lost in the crowds, since they are afraid of never getting back to their familiar world (home) again. Their fear is also an indication of their identities being threatened by the unstable nature of the city and of the vulnerability of their bodies in spaces that they cannot make sense of yet. However, both Jo and Amy lack a sense of belonging to a place, which further complicates their position among the different social classes and the chaos of the city. They hold an abject status among the innumerable and illegible signs and symbols in the city, and they cannot make sense of anything as they are in practice neither adults nor children. Jo sees himself as an animal rather than a human, whilst Amy behaves like a mother to her father and carries the responsibilities of an adult by looking after her family in the Marshalsea prison. Her unhappiness with her new life after her father is released confirms her confusion regarding her roles as a child, a woman and mother, and takes a completely different direction with her marriage to Arthur Clennam at the end of the novel. Jo and Amy, therefore, represent an incomplete body and identity vulnerable to the effects of poverty and abjection in the chaos of the city.

4. The Dead Body

> The corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life.
>
> — Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror* (1982)

> They dies everywhere…they dies in their lodgings…and they dies in down Tom-All-Alone's heaps. They dies more than they lives, according to what I see.
>
> — Charles Dickens, *Bleak House* (1996)

This section examines Dickens's novels as a form of confrontation with the reality of death and loss of identity, and therefore abjection, through representations of dead

bodies, the necropolis, disease and accident. In Kristeva's *Powers of Horror*, the corpse is described as a fundamental defilement as it means a body without a soul and a waste object, purified through burials in most cultures. The body is objectified and discarded out of boundaries that separate the living and the dead, with the discontinuity of any life signs such as extracting bodily fluids to stay on the border of the living: "It is something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object. Imaginary uncanniness and real threat, it beckons to us and ends up engulfing us" (Kristeva 1982: 3-4). Deprivation of the world means the annihilation of all borders between inside and outside and defines the abject body and the self through death, without any boundaries. The corpse is regarded as the abjection of waste in biblical texts as it represents the indispensable contamination and the eternal separation of the body from the world. Therefore, it needs to be removed from the living world immediately to avoid pollution, as principles laid down in religious texts also refer to the burial of the bodies. In this sense, the burial is a purification method to cleanse the world of matter that does not belong to it. Abjection, then, can be regarded as "the other facet of religious, moral and ideological codes" that sooth the fears and anxieties of individuals and societies in order to purify and repress the abject (1982: 209). In "Abject Embodiment of Cancer Patients," Waskul and van der Riet identify two types of "bad death" linked with abjection: "It is a death within an abject body in which the self must reconcile some measure of dignity despite diseased and grotesque embodiment, or second, it is a death within abject enselfment…in which the body remains attached to an individual who no longer is a self. Either 'ultimate bad death' portends horrifying implications for personhood" (2002: 509). That is, death refers to either the abjection of the body with a conscious self, trying to hold on to their unity, or the abjection of selfhood with an estranged body.

In the Victorian period, there were many "visible reminders of death and its possible causes" and when the graveyards literally began to overflow in the city, dead bodies became a serious threat to the living ones (Cross 2006: 21-22). The disposal of dead bodies posed a problem and alternative burial methods were suggested in *Household Worlds* (1.1855) such as "embalming, cremation, extramural burial"; it was argued that "in no age, and in no country have the dead been disposed of so prejudicially to the living as in Great Britain" (qtd in Cross 2006: 22). Dead bodies were, in fact, as vulnerable as the living, since some were dissected to contribute to scientific research or dismembered to make space for other dead bodies.[6] The overcrowding of burial grounds and the duality between living anatomy and dead body drew the attention of Dickens, who points out the role of science in people's increasing awareness of death in *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838-39): "[Science] has explained how grave-water soaks into adjoining wells, and has shocked and disgusted people by showing them that they are drinking their dead neighbours. It has taught parties resident in large cities that the very air they live in reeks with human remains, which steam up from graves; and which, of course, they are continually breathing" (1990: 302). However, there was another aspect of dead bodies, which created "an attrac-

[6] The Registrar-General on "Life" in London reported mortality statistics: "On an average, a thousand persons die in London weekly, and are, as a rule, buried under the ground on which they fall" (*Household Worlds*, 1 [1850]: 330-333). This didn't mean that they wouldn't be taken out of their coffins and be dismembered in order to space after a few weeks (Cross 2006: 24).

tion of repulsion" for Dickens, who frequently visited the Paris Morgue: "Whenever I'm in Paris, I'm dragged by invisible force into the Morgue. I never want to go there, but am always pulled there…with its ghastly beds, and the swollen saturated clothes hanging up, and the water dripping, dripping all day long, upon that other swollen saturated something in the corner, like a heap of crushed over-ripe figs" (qtd in Kaplan 1988: 215).

Dickens's attraction for repulsion towards both the city and dead bodies was found in his later novels such as *Bleak House* and *Our Mutual Friend*. Although Dickens's London portrayed a gothic and blurred vision of the city in *Bleak House*, the presence and proximity of dead bodies in its centre of the city gave it a more grotesque and uncanny quality. *Bleak House* is one of the most death-haunted novels in British literature. In Tom-all-Alone's, for example, the buried bodies are closer to the ground and the burial place contaminates neighbourhood, but street-sweepers like Jo and the many rats are as loathsome and dangerous as the body itself to the visitor (the disguised Lady Dedlock):

> "There!" says Jo, pointing. "Over yinder. Arnong them piles of bones, and close to that there kitchin winder! They put him wery nigh the top. They was obliged to stamp upon it to git it in. I could unkiver it for you with my broom if the gate was open. That's why they locks it, I s'pose," giving it a shake. "It's always locked. Look at the rat!" cries Jo, excited. "Hi! Look! There he goes! Ho! Into the ground!" The servant shrinks into a corner, into a corner of that hideous archway, with its deadly stains contaminating her dress; and putting out her two hands and passionately telling him to keep away from her, for he is loathsome to her, so remains for some moments. Jo stands staring and is still staring when she recovers herself. "Is this place of abomination consecrated ground?" "I don't know nothink of consequential ground," says Jo, still staring. (Dickens 1996: 262)

Firstly, the burial ground in Tom-all-Alone's addresses an anxiety of contamination of life by death, with the close proximity of dead bodies to that of the living, creating disorder and horror of mortality. The iron gate in the court is materially and symbolically the only thing separating the dead from the living, and the body of the deceased is on the very top of other bodies. Secondly, it addresses a depiction of national failure; as Dickens states, it is "a shameful testimony to future ages, how civilisation and barbarism walked this boastful island together" (qtd in Plotkin 1997: 21). This situation is considered threatening because "it calls into question the 'ground' upon which English identity was based" as a clear boundary between the English and outsiders was assumed in an imperial context (1997: 21). Thirdly, the visitors' attitude towards Jo and the rats discloses how they threaten the boundaries between the clean and the polluted, the attractive and the repulsive between social classes. This attitude is comparable to the perspectives of the middle and upper classes towards the working class and the unemployed poor, who were considered contaminating and dangerous for not sharing the same moral values and habits of cleanliness. The poor were also more involved in violence and criminal offences that threatened the order of society. Hence, not only the dead bodies but also the living bodies could become a source of horror and defilement in Victorian society.

One of the most common fatalities in Victorian London was infant deaths in poverty-stricken areas as a result of hunger, contamination and contagious diseases. In

addition, factory accidents and tough labour conditions had long affected the health and life span of children after the Industrial Revolution. Dickens highlighted infant vulnerability frequently in his novels and displayed the close connection between filth and the unhealthy conditions babies were born into. In *Bleak House*, for instance, Dickens describes the rage and awareness of parents affected by their aggravating and hopeless conditions:

> "Then make it easy for her!" growled the man upon the floor. "I wants it done, and over…Is my daughter a-washin? Yes, she is a-Washin. Look at the water. Smell it! That's wot we drinks. How do you like it, and what do you think of gin instead! An't my place dirty? Yes, it is dirty—it's nat'rally dirty, and it's nat'rally onwholesome; and we've had five dirty and unwholesome children, as is all dead infants, and so much the better for them, and for us besides." (1996: 132)

All of their "dirty and unwholesome children" die before they could even grow up and their parents believe their death is better than living in this condition. Their awareness of the situation and submission actually help them accept the reality of death and the loss of their babies for they would not be able to provide a healthy environment. This situation is further illustrated in a conversation between Mr Snagsby, Mr Bucket and Jenny, who lives in a small room "offensive to every sense":

> "You seem as fond of it as if you were the mother yourself," says Mr Bucket. "I was the mother of one like it, master, and it died." "Ah, Jenny, Jenny!" says the other woman to her. "Better so. Much better to think of dead than alive, Jenny! Much better!" "Why, you an't such an unnatural woman, I hope," returns Bucket sternly, "as to wish your own child dead?" "God knows you are right, master," she returns. "I am not. I'd stand between it and death with my own life if I could, as true as any pretty lady"…"Well, well," says Mr Bucket, "you train him respectable, and he'll be a comfort to you, and look after you in your old age, you know." "I mean to try hard," she answers, wiping her eyes. "But I have been a-thinking, being over-tired to-night and not well with the ague, of all the many things that'll come in his way. My master will be against it, and he'll be beat, and see me beat, and made to fear his home, and perhaps to stray wild. If I work for him ever so much, and ever so hard, there's no one to help me; and if he should be turned bad "spite of all I could do, and the time should come when I should sit by him in his sleep, made hard and changed, an't it likely I should think of him as he lies in my lap now and wish he had died as Jenny's child died!" (1996: 360-61)

Jenny is aware of the fact that the child raised in this environment will probably not be able to acquire good habits and will "be turned bad" no matter how hard she tries. She distrusts the possibility of bringing up a respectable child with good moral and social values.

The fragmented identity and body has successfully been illustrated in *Our Mutual Friend,* in a striking and intriguing way, as it exemplifies facing one's own death and the abjection of self, through a fake death in the plot. As Nicholas Royle notes, the novel "invites us into the dark, into other scenes of reading, leading us along strange waterways, into the desiccation of headstones and crypts, the silence of the tomb. To enter the world of *Our Mutual Friend* is to enter the world of the dead, living on"

(qtd in Shad 1996: 40). The novel passionately describes a society that is engulfed by injustice, corruption, death and barbarism. One of the most striking examples is the fragile border between the living and the dead, or "the notion of living, playing dead", experienced by Harmon/Hadsford (Rokesmith). This character's life oscillates between being dead and being alive as he turns into an unnameable self, like a ghost haunting the present and manipulating reality. The suspension of the character himself on a blurry boundary between life and death maintains his ambiguous status and invites him into an abject condition that he can avoid neither in the past nor in the present. The river Thames is the site where "so many dead bodies" have been found, and when the body of Mr John Harmon is discovered by Jesse Hexam, it is "in an advanced state of decay, and much injured; [and] the said Mr John Harmon had come by his death under highly suspicious circumstances" (Dickens 1981: 31). Harmon's narration of his own death describes a unique experience of being a dead man, although he has "no clue to the scene of his death: "It is a sensation not experienced by many mortals", he says, "to feel that I no more hold a place among the living than these dead do, and even to know that I lie buried somewhere else, as they lie buried here. Nothing uses me to it. A spirit that was once a man could hardly feel stranger or lonelier, going unrecognized among mankind, than I feel" (1981: 366). Being a dead man, unrecognized and buried somewhere in a graveyard he does not even know, generates an uncanny feeling even if it is fake. He tells the story of the night when his friend was mistaken for him and murdered; and when he sees a figure like himself "lying dressed in [his] clothes on a bed" he is traumatised and forgets who he is for a short while. He experiences that abject moment, in which he could actually not distinguish his "self" from the victim's body:

> I cannot possibly express it to myself without using the word I. But it was not I. There was no such thing as I, within my knowledge. It was only after a downward slide through something like a tube, and then a great noise and a sparkling and crackling as of fires, that the consciousness came upon me, "This is John Harmon drowning! John Harmon, struggle for your life. John Harmon, call on Heaven and save yourself!" I think I cried it out aloud in a great agony, and then a heavy horrid unintelligible something vanished, and it was I who was struggling there alone in the water. (1981: 369-70)

Afterwards, he examines newspapers regarding his death and finds news about a body found at Whitehall: "Found dead and mutilated in the river under circumstances of strong suspicion, described my dress, described the papers in my pockets, and stated where I was lying for recognition" (1981: 371). He hurries there "with a horror of death" and finds out that Radfoot has been murdered for the money for which he was planning to murder Harmon. The announcement of his death, on the other hand, has another uncanny effect on him, as "it seemed as if the whole country were determined to have me dead. The Inquest declared me dead, the Government proclaimed me dead; …but it was borne into my ears that I was dead" (1981: 371). This is the starting point in which his identity as John Harmon disappears; although he is still alive his body cannot confirm his identity any more. He becomes an object with an ambiguous objective status and is resurrected with a new identity: "So John Harmon died, and Julius Handford disappeared, and John Rokesmith was born" (1981: 372). This moment relates to a differentiation between the acknowledgement of death and

its meaning from a traumatic experience of witnessing your own death. The fact that there is a real corpse which people think belongs to Harmon exemplifies an image of abjection since, as Dino Felluga notes, it "literalises the breakdown of the distinction between subject and object that is crucial for the establishment of identity and for our entrance into the symbolic order" (2015: 3). By looking at a corpse, particularly the corpse of a friend, a family member or of ourselves, as this example suggests, we confront "our own eventual death made palpably real" (2015: 3).

5. Conclusion

Considering the representation of the Victorian body in Dickens's fiction, this study evaluates three crucial aspects of the abject body: grotesqueness, vulnerability and death. In Dickens's *Bleak House* and *Our Mutual Friend*, the grotesque representations of the urban poor represent a creative effort to challenge abjection (or the uncanny) with an emphasis on their animalistic, tragicomic and hybrid qualities. Whilst this approach accentuates the differences between the normal and the deviant, it also arouses sympathy for and interest in the bodies of the lower classes. Mr Krook and Mr Venus's shops and their grotesque objects create an uncanny effect, but such scenes are balanced with Dickens's comical approach and sense of humour. The anxiety that missing body parts (such as Mr Wegg's leg) might cause is partly reduced with a dialogue between Mr Wegg and Mr Venus. Dickens's narrative technique and word choice modify the pure uncanny and generate a tragi-comic grotesque effect on the reader. The prevalence of the Victorians' corporeal vulnerability and its representation in fiction also discloses an out-of-control body and indicates the fragility of normative boundaries and the unity of the body. In particular, female, infant and child vulnerability among the lower classes draws the reader's attention to the problems of urban poverty and shows how the bodies of the deprived were cast out and excluded by the middle and upper classes. The final section examines the possible meanings of "corpse" and "death" among the Victorians and suggests that the dead body symbolises the fragile boundary between life and death, as well as loss of identity due to the breakdown of distinction between an object and subject. Dead bodies also experienced physical vulnerability due to the lack of sufficient graveyards and trading of dead bodies for medical purposes. The Victorians' intimate relationship with death and dead bodies, therefore, indicates an abject experience that it was impossible to expel it from their lives.

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