

If we look at Longfellow's reaction to the death of Fanny in July 1861, we see just this kind of reaction. He remained in self-imposed isolation throughout the second half of 1861, attending only to his children, emerging slowly back into public life over the next three years (Hilen 208, 257–59). The poem, then, offers the advice of experience. But, in typical Longfellow fashion, he does not offer us a complete solution to the problem, only a means of coping with the problem. Projecting our griefs into the natural world will not banish grief, but it does help us to live with it.

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#### Dickens's A TALE OF TWO CITIES

In *A Tale of Two Cities*, Charles Dickens's detailed narrative accounts of personal habits and patterns of behavior are the essential elements that define his characters' individual human natures. Athena Vrettos's critical examination in "Defining Habits: Dickens and the Psychology of Repetition" contends that "Theories of habit conceptualized the mind as a closed system, driven to repetitive, automatic behaviors in order to conserve energy for more difficult or novel tasks" (400). I am interested in the social implications of these patterns of behavior as they relate to the contradictory ethical and moral positions of Sydney Carton and Charles Darnay. I argue that Charles Darnay represents the novel's ethical contradictions, whereas Sydney Carton embodies stability.

Sydney Carton, I suggest, is depicted as a man of habit and Vrettos's "automatic behaviors." For example, we first see him depicted as a habitual drinker in conjunction with fellow barrister Charles Stryver: "What the two drank together, between Hilary Term and Michaelmas, might have floated a king's ship. Stryver *never* had a case in hand, anywhere, but Carton was there [ . . . ] they prolonged their *usual* orgies late into the night" (90; emphasis added). This brief description clearly identifies Carton's pattern of repetitive behaviors, emphasizing his typical drinking habits and employing the signifiers "never" and "usual" to reinforce his professional capacity and frequency of

the meetings with Stryver. The narrator vigilantly reports Carton's daily routine, and we discover that he is "rumoured to be seen at broad day, going home stealthily to his lodgings, like a dissipated cat" (90). The suggested pattern that Sydney Carton regularly works for Stryver, drinks heavily, and is seen habitually walking the streets in the early morning hours is our initial and seemingly accurate assessment of Carton's character. Although negatively portrayed as a creature of habit, nevertheless, readers have established Carton's mental temperament as a closed system, engaged in repetitive acts.

In a broader sense, we realize that Carton is on the fringe of his profession and society. For example, Stryver taunts him with "old seesaw Sydney," a name coined from their schooldays together at Shrewsbury. Simon Petch further illuminates his pattern of behavior: "Uncompetitive as Carton is by nature, his work for Stryver is a continuation of the habit formed in his school-days, the habit of doing exercises for other boys, rather than his own" (31). Interestingly, we never discover his compensation for these acts to Stryver or the other boys, whether it is for monetary gain or otherwise. In Carton's universe of potentially endless repetition, his individual routines reinforce social routines shaping the personal habits of his body and mind (Vrettos 403). This exact repetitive behavior of doing "exercises" for others is the impetus driving the plot to its conclusion by enabling him to conserve his energy for the final task he performs for Charles Darnay at the guillotine.

Charles Darnay's pattern of abandonment and social irresponsibility is presented poignantly during his visit to the Chateau when he formally renounces the Evremonde name. However, he simultaneously makes the self-serving, heroic proclamation, "If it ever becomes mine, it shall be put into some hands better qualified to free it slowly [...] so that the miserable people who cannot leave it and who have been long wrung to the last point past endurance, may, in another generation, suffer less" (130). This lofty ambition to save the French people whom his family has perpetually wronged becomes second in line to the unfulfilled promise of the same merit that he made to his mother. Here, we begin to distinguish Darnay's repetitive behavior as abandonment of social responsibilities and broken vows to loved ones. Lawrence Frank comments, "In his renunciation Darnay reveals a tendency to self-deception. He wants to obliterate the past, to elude the responsibility he has acknowledged as his alone" (130). The blueprint for Darnay's repetition of deception is so ingrained in his nature that Dickens's text echoes the perverseness: "'Yes,' repeated the Marquis. 'A Doctor with a daughter. Yes. So commences the new philosophy!'" (131). This nefarious affirmation alludes to Darnay repeating an even greater multigenerational pattern that is also mentioned by Frank: "Darnay is fulfilling his destiny, repeating a version of that act to which Doctor Manette became an unwilling witness" (130). Darnay perpetuates the same selfish desire by concealing his true identity and taking Lucie Manette as his

wife. Doctor Manette has again become an “unwilling witness” to this version of events initiated by the Evremonde family.

Additionally, Darnay’s noted behavior of idleness is recurring in his professional life and the idyllic refuge he has taken in England. He fills the position of a tutor teaching his native language as a “sort of tolerated smuggler who drove a contraband trade in European languages, instead of conveying Greek and Latin through the Custom-house” (135). Darnay’s motivation to aspire and achieve anything more than the mediocre remains completely absent. We see that he is disrespectful of the time passed in his peaceful, English residence—“the events of this week annihilated the immature plans of last week, and the events of the week following made all new again [ . . . ] he had watched the times for a time of action, and that they had shifted and struggled until the time had gone by” (251). Darnay is destined to repeat a pattern of idle behavior and create a futile existence because “life in England has hardened into an imprisoning conception of himself [ . . . ]. He has become yet another victim of a paralyzing habit” (Frank 141). Unlike Darnay, Carton’s patterns of activity are constantly defining him as a force of habit instead of a “victim of paralyzing habit.”

Davis and Womack note that these characters and their distinct behaviors serve as more than “mere vessels of transport for the essential elements of genuine behavior” (299). Dickens’s use of repetitive behavioral patterns substantially diminishes the reader’s ability to assess the characters’ prevailing social implications. Are we critical of Carton’s character because he is portrayed as a chronic drinker and a man on the fringe of society while finding compassion for Darnay, the privileged French aristocrat? Davis and Womack aptly identify this condition: “The effectiveness of Dickens’s characters as human representations lies in their peculiar *lack* of ethical certainty, in their capacity for mimicking the elusive qualities that often define human nature” (299). Carton’s repetition of automatic behaviors leads him to sacrifice his life and brings to light the stability and constancy of his character initially occluded by his socially inappropriate or “elusive qualities.” In the same vein, Darnay’s recurring behavior of idleness and escapism produces the work that Carton, by habit, must complete for him. Carton’s final exercise reinforces Darnay’s pattern of avoidance and falseness to himself and others, leaving the reader with a concrete “lack of ethical certainty” about Darnay’s true character.

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## Wilde's THE REMARKABLE ROCKET

Scholars have generally read Oscar Wilde's fairy tale "The Remarkable Rocket" as a commentary on egotism, with its portrayal of a self-important fireworks rocket. But what has not yet been understood is that this fairy tale consciously references Wilde's aestheticism in its ongoing conflict with utilitarianism, and that the character of the Rocket is a conscious forerunner of the aesthete Gilbert of "The Critic as Artist." Rather than portraying an egotist, the Rocket represents Wilde's own parody of the aesthete in society.

"The Remarkable Rocket," published in *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* (1888), shows a fairy-tale hero who appears to be a mere egotist.<sup>1</sup> Julia Prewitt Brown, for instance, sees the story as a "tale of narcissistic self-destruction" (108). But a close reading reveals Wilde's intentions. When the Rocket is interrupted, for instance, he exclaims, "I hate rudeness [...] for I am extremely sensitive. No one in the whole world is so sensitive as I am" (*Complete Works* 312). It cannot be accidental that the Rocket is proud to call himself "sensitive," for sensitivity to sensation, color, and art is precisely what an aesthete cultivates in himself; aesthetes were regarded as "sensitive" and "artistic," recognizable code words. A selfish sensitivity is, however, self-absorption at the cost of another's feelings. Another firework explains in a whisper that a sensitive person is one who "because he has corns himself, always treads on other people's toes" (*Complete Works* 312). Isobel Murray calls "The Remarkable Rocket" "a full-scale study of that vanity which distorts any notion of reality. The Rocket is indefatigable in his determination to see the world as he wishes to" (12). Murray does not take this insight further, however, to discover that the person who sees the world "as it is not" is, indeed, the Wildean aesthete.

When the Rocket states, "I have imagination, for I never think of things as they really are; I always think of them as being quite different" (313), it becomes clear that Wilde sees the Rocket as a stand-in for the image of the Apostle of Beauty. The Rocket's comment is a knowing response to Matthew Arnold's influential statement in "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time" (1864) that the aim of criticism is "to see the object as in itself it really is." This directly foreshadows the critical argument Wilde later published in his essay "The

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