

Dickens's Use of the First Person Narrative Technique
in "Hunted Down"

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The main concern of this article is to shed light on Dickens's technique of the first person narrative used in his short story "Hunted Down". It also aims at showing Dickens's indebtedness, as far as this matter is concerned, to other writers particularly Wilkie Collins. This will be carried out through a careful reading to the text of "Hunted Down" and some critical essays written by Dickens's biographers and critics.

It is stated that Dickens's "Hunted Down" is written in the manner of Wilkie Collins. The motivation is decidedly Pecuniary. Its subject has been taken from the life of a notorious criminal and its principal claim to notice is the price paid for it (Forster,344). In fact Dickens's biographers

have paid little attention to "Hunted Down, aside from the large sum paid for it and the probable connection between the antagonist of the story and such real life models as the prisoners Thomas Waine Wright.

Another notorious criminal who may have sat for the villainous of the story, Shington, according to Philip Collins(138) is Palmer of Rugeley a wholesale murderer of Persons (in Allingham, 1).

John Forster (334) indicated that Dickens was offered £1000 for the short story by the New York Ledger, which ran it in three installments(20 and 27 august and 3 september, 1859). A year later Dickens reprinted it in All the Year Round. According to Willoughby Matchett, the prisoner was also the original for Rigaud Blandois in Little Dorrit for "each rascal was rain of his hands, and took Pains to disply them to advantage"(335). But Julous Slinkton is Dickens's most direct presentation.....of Wainewright at the age of forty"(ibid.,336). Malcolm Morley (179), on the other hand, believed that Dickens had met Wainewright just before his

arrest and trial not for the poisoning of 21 Yearold Helen Abercromby one of his wife's stepsisters, but on charges of forgery made eleven years before. Philip Collins noticed that Dickens saw Wainwright in Newgate on 27 June, 1837. Born in 1794, Wainwright would have been 43 when stood trial at the old Bailey on 5 July, 1837.while Slinkton avoided human justice in the manner of Jonas Chuzzlewitt, the real-life prisoner upon whom he seems to have been principally modeled cheated the gallows. Transported to Hobart Town, Wainwright died in hospital of his opium addiction in 1852. Apparently, the characters of Meltham was derived from a secretary who had fallen in love with the murdered girl in the Wainwright case (in Allingham, 1).

Dickens had also been fascinated by the strange and sensation case of Dr. William Palmer, and especially by the psychology of the killer. Dr. Palmer was a respectable professional man and scientist who murdered his own family for the life-insurance money. Dickens published an article on the trial of Dr. Palmer in Household Words on 14 June, 1856.

in the essay it is Palmer demeanor throughout the trial that fascinates Dickens who notes the fact of the prisoner's "complete self possession, of his constant coolness, of his profound composure, of his perfect equanimity (ibid.,2). Peter Ackroyd, in his biography of Dickens, remarks that "curiously, this is also a description which Dickens liked to give of himself(768).

Andrew Lang has described "Hunted Down" as "this improbable little anecdote"(in Allingham,2), and Ackroyd has dismissed it as "not in itself a particularly memorable piece of fiction, except perhaps for its demonstration of Dickens's general fascination with the idea of murder and his particular interest in the case of Thomas Wainwright(865). However, it is neither its improbability nor its caricature of the infamous poisoner but rather its unreliable, even devious, narrator of "Hunted Down" transcends the usual limitations of the narrative stance in actively misleading and mystifying his reader(Allingham, 2). While the reader's natural tendency

in dealing with first-person narrative is "to grant our speaker the full credibility possible"(Riggane). In this respect Allingham believes that Dickens challenges his readers to construct meaning out of apparent inmeaning and to usurp the role of the narrator(2). In this Dickens is imitating Collins's testamentary narrative in The Moonstone(ibid). As with Collins's novels in "Hunted Down" the reader finds as William Riggan suggests that "that which goes unsaid is frequently seen to be as significant as that which is said"(182).

The title points to the story chief movement, the inexorable hunting down of a heartless predator.(Allingham 2). Indeed , Dickens characterized the as "devoted to the destruction of a man, revenge built up on love "(Forester 367). As we have seen, the unraveling of the mystery is closely associated with the stripping away of disguises. We learn that Slinkton's dying victim Beckwith is, in fact, Melthem; that Slinkton is a killer prepared to cheat human justice by using his poison on himself. The narrator

throughout the story has been less than honest with both Slinkton and his auditor (Allingham 2). The narrator tells the story of one who has "retired and live at ease" (Hunted Down I). the

narrator's tale flies in the face of expectation not only because it is not the prosaic and business like anecdote one expects from a crusty capitalist but also because one does not normally associate adventure (Romance) with a senior man of commerce (Allingham 2).

Allingham alludes that the narrator is ingenuous, asserting on the one hand that he has been taken in by the appearances of friends and acquaintances, and on the other hand that his first impression of those people, founded on face and manner alone, was invariably true (2). The narrator seems to be counseling cool detachment rather than passionate engagement when he remarks that judgment based on physiognomy alone can be subverted by close acquaintance (ibid). "My mistake was in suffering them to come nearer to me and explain themselves away" (2).

Alienaed from feeling, affection, and sympathy aswell as from direct contact with strangers by his offices" thick plate glass"(4) the life Assurance Manager maintains a physical isolation inconsistent with the implications of "Romance" with which the story opened.

According to Forester, the narrative voice probably reflects the fact that Dickens was himself forty seven when he wtore this story and the year before had broken off his marriage for an affair with the young actress Elen Teman (213). That Slinkton appropriates youth and break off his connection with a female relative to secure his own comfort must have rendered him a figure with a female whom Dickens unconsciously identified himself. According to Johnson "the figure of Slinkton is haunted by Dickens's troubled consciousness, of ambiguities within himself"(1071). As yet, the narrator has held himself a loof from the reader, not committing his name until his dialogue with his clerk, Mr.Adam.

Riggan believes that the "seductive and perilous

nature of the reader's sustained intimacy with the narrator is precisely Dickens's subtext in "Hunted Down"(34). Since a first-person narrative carries with it an inherent quality of realism and conviction based on a claim substantial veracity (ibid).18) in the reader's consciousness. The reader tends to lose his objectivity as he becomes more intimate and familiar with the first-person narrative just as Collins in The Moonstone emphasizes the limitations inherent in the first-person narrator's perception, interpretations and memories(ibid.20). So in "Hunted Down", Dickens explores the unreliability of a superficially trustworthy persona (ibid.). Dickens advises the reader to discard "conventional (3) thinking in evaluating human nature:

"Dishonesty will stare honesty out of countenance, any day of the week, if there is any thing to be got by it"(3). A gentleman remarkably well-spoken and possessing insinuating manners and the prepossessing appearance of a clergyman nevertheless may be a ruthless savage underneath (Allingham 3).

Slinkton's keen interest in the insurance profession's loss of "poor Mr. Meltham"(6). Seem odd when one considers that Slinkton insists that he knows the young agent by reputation alone. Slinkton knows that Sampson must be in a position to offer him information about his late niece's fiancé, even though the narrator does not confide in the reader that he does indeed have a prior relationship with Melatham. Surely Slinkton's enquiry is founded on some suspicion that Meltham's withdrawal from society may somehow threaten his scheme to use the insurance money too procure the respectable status of a church of England rector(Allingham 3). The narrator's reporting this conversation appears to be a mere digression. It signals Slinkton's awareness that in the social jungle he is a predator about to be hunted down. But Sampson lulls Slinkton's suspicion of Meltham as he deludes his auditor. The conversation, in fact, makes sense only after one has heard the whole story. At that point the reader becomes reasonably sure that Slinkton's mentioning Meltham to Sampson was not

mere coincidence but calculated spying(ibid.). Only after Meltham's true identity is revealed do the narrator's mentioning an early morning visitors entertained at "his bedside"(10), the five-minute conversation with the elderly invalid on the beach, the narrator peculiar interrogation of Miss Niner shortly afterward "the figure of an active young man"(14) who helps her up the Scarborough Cliffs and the "defensive weapons"(15), he secretly clutches in his pocket as the fourth part closes make any sense.

Although Meltham remains a shadowy figure for most of the story, "Hunted Down" implicitly concerns the hunter as well as the hunted. Dickens "never outgrew his fondness for the amateur detectives who can, of course, enjoy the fictional advantage of being emotionally involved with the victim of the villain"(Collins, 241 in Allingham,). However whereas his mystery-writer Wilkie Collins often chooses to put the reader in a detective shoes, as in The Woman in White and No Name (ibid). Dickens here chooses to keep his

reader further in the dark; in "Hunted Down", "the mystery lies in the telling rather than in the events told(ibid).

The chief concern of Dickens in "Hunted Down" seems to be the playing of what is colloquially called mind games within the text as well as with the reader. Dickens has his narrator tantalize the reader with unexplained details so that the reader feels a suspense generated not so much by the plot itself as by the vagaries of the narrative (ibid).

"Hunted Down" concludes with a twist reminiscent of the short stories of Wilkie Collins. In fact, for all Dickens's handling of the first person narrator Slinkton fails to fascinate as Collins's villains do. Dickens's villain remains very much a stereotype. Whereas his oft described hair-parting renders Slinkton a caricature, Collins's villains impress by their intelligence, cunning, sophistication and quirky individuality (ibid.,4).

At the time that Dickens wrote "Hunted Down", he was well acquainted with the early fictions of Wilkie Collins. The two writers had first met in March 1851 and since April,

1852, Dickens had published "A Terribly Strange Bed" in Household Words; he had appreciated the younger writer's style and plotting. Then he published Collins's A Rogue's Life (March 1856) and The Dead Secret (January 1857) in Household Words (ibid.).

It has been stated that Collins created strong resourceful heroines who were assailed as being masculine in temperament (Lynn 87). Slinkton in "Hunted Down" is interpreted a somewhat effeminate villain in the manner of Collins's villains. Similarly Slinkton has a tendency to place his own comfort and convenience about humane consideration for the weak and defenseless. Slinkton is a reminiscent of Court Fosco in Collins's The Woman in White, and Godfrey Ablewhite in The Moonstone. In its structure, "Hunted Down" reveals the same careful, complex back-plotting and attention to details that are the characteristics of Collins's style. Thus, as has been mentioned, Dickens indebtedness to Wilkie Collins is evident (Allingham 4). However, "Hunted Down" is considered to be

"distinctive in being an interesting experiment in undermining the confidence that readers habitually place in the authoritative voice of the first-person narrator who is also a participant in the action of the story (ibid.).

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