

**Dickens, Disgust and the Mother:
The 'Autobiographical' Novels**

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ABSTRACT

This thesis offers new pathways into the novels of Charles Dickens which contain extended first-person narratives (*David Copperfield*, *Bleak House* and *Great Expectations*) with reference to the only piece of autobiographical writing that Dickens is known to have produced. This manuscript which covers the early years of Dickens's life has not survived and is something of a mystery. As John Bowen notes: "We do not know for certain when it was written, how long it was, or how much of Dickens's life it treated."¹ Nevertheless, it would appear that it was written around 1847 and regardless of its length and scope, it clearly expresses Dickens's anguish at having been put to work as a child in Warren's Blacking warehouse after his father was arrested for debt and taken to the Marshalsea Prison. Originally intended to form part of an autobiography, the piece (now known as the autobiographical fragment) was instead put to use in a transmuted form in Dickens's novel *David Copperfield* and much later after Dickens's death, was incorporated in John Forster's *The Life of Charles Dickens*.

Dating from the publication of Edmund Wilson's seminal article "Dickens: The Two Scrooges"² in 1941, critics have turned to the autobiographical fragment to produce a range of psycho-biographical trauma thesis readings of Dickens's fiction but in more recent years some critics have actively questioned this line of approach and have sought instead to produce other less trauma focused readings of Dickens's work. Whilst appreciating the reasons

¹ John Bowen, "A Garland for *The Old Curiosity Shop*," *Dickens Studies Annual* 37 (2006): 5.

² Edmund Wilson, "Dickens: The Two Scrooges," *The Wound and the Bow: Seven Studies in Literature* (1941; London: Methuen, 1961) 1-93.

behind such a critical shift, I cannot help but share Lawrence J Clipper's view (albeit expressed in 1981) that "the exegesis of Dickens's works from this biographical perspective has not gone far enough."³ Indeed, what could arguably be described as one of the most important aspects of the autobiographical fragment - the rhetoric of implicit disgust which underlies the depiction of Dickens's mother, Elizabeth Dickens - has largely been overlooked. Accordingly, this thesis will seek to tease out this aspect of the autobiographical fragment and will suggest that the rhetoric of implicit disgust which underpins the portrait of Elizabeth Dickens is actually replicated in the portraits of the protagonists' mothers within Dickens's 'autobiographical' novels. The rhetorical link between the portraits is interrogated through close textual analysis which draws upon the aetiology of disgust. Whilst a range of writers within different fields have sought to understand the affect of disgust, this study will show that Mary Douglas's anthropological understanding of pollution and Julia Kristeva's psychoanalytic concept of abjection provide the most profitable exegetic tools to explore the anti-maternal rhetoric within Dickens's 'autobiographical' novels.

³ Lawrence J. Clipper, "The Blacking Warehouse Again: Another View," *Dickens Studies Newsletter* 12 (1981): 77.

STATEMENT OF CANDIDATE

I certify that the work in this thesis entitled “Dickens, Disgust and the Mother: The ‘Autobiographical’ Novels” has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of the requirements for a degree to any other university or institution other than Macquarie University.

I also certify that the thesis is an original piece of research and it has been written by me. Any help and assistance that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself have been appropriately acknowledged.

In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

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“But he⁴ had – as most men who
grow up to be great and good are
generally found to have had – an
excellent mother.”⁵

Charles Dickens

A Child's History of England

⁴ Alfred the Great.

⁵ Charles Dickens, *A Child's History of England* in *Holiday Romance and Other Writings for Children*, ed. Gillian Avery (London: J. M. Dent, 1995) 22.