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Recasting social criticism in 19th century fiction and modern fantasy fiction: Corrupt institutions as theme in *Bleak House* by Charles Dickens and *Going Postal* by Terry Pratchett

ABSTRACT

This paper explores how fantasy writer Terry Pratchett transforms social commentary in novels by subverting readers' expectations. This is done using a section from Bleak House (1853) by Charles Dickens, whose novels are considered prominent examples of social commentary. The section is used to consider the literary presentation of social commentary in novels as it manifests in the theme of corrupt governance. A section from Pratchett's Going Postal (2004) follows, illustrating how Pratchett expands on the presentation of social commentary, focusing on the same theme. The aim is to show that while readers generally expect a fantasy novel to contain an element of entertainment, Pratchett exceeds this expectation: he entertains readers with elements of fantasy while subtly injecting this realm with similarities of everyday life, causing readers to reflect on important concepts like corruption and its effect on contemporary society.

1. Introduction

Social commentary or criticism has been one of literature's many functions throughout history. From Plato to Swift to Dickens, authors have used various methods to incorporate commentary and criticism on contemporary social issues related to their respective time-periods (Seung, 1996:99). Whether or not this criticism is written with an eye on reform or simply to attract attention is debatable. Even more debatable is the level of impact it achieves

and whether it actually leads to reform. However, it can be argued that in the cases found here social criticism is a method for specifically educating its readers in different ways.

Bleak House showcases some of its author's most prominent and scathing social criticism of 19th century English society, making it ideal for this article. When discussing Dickens's social commentary, George Gissing states "against a political folly, or a social injustice, he would use every resource of his art, and see no reason to hesitate" (Gissing, 2007:53), and of *Bleak House* in particular G.K. Chesterton says "almost everything is calculated to assert and re-assert the savage morality of Dickens's protest against a particular social evil" (Chesterton, 2007: 153).

An element of this determination is echoed in Terry Pratchett's novels about Discworld, the fantasy world of his creation. Pratchett's friend and co-author, Neil Gaiman, explains to *The Guardian* that there is an anger powering the creation of the Discworld novels. He says Pratchett "will rage ... against so many things: stupidity, injustice, human foolishness and short-sightedness ... And, hand in hand with the anger, like an angel and a demon walking into the sunset, there is love: for human beings, in all our fallibility; for treasured objects; for stories; and ultimately and in all things, love for human dignity" (Gaiman, 2014).

Pratchett has gained significant praise in recent years for his ability to engage commentary on social issues in his novels, despite the fact that his novels do not focus on social commentary as main subject. This trend merits attention as it recasts social commentary by spreading its realms of influence beyond the genres Dickens used. While *Bleak House* and many of Dickens's other novels fall under various genres ranging from gothic fiction to detective fiction, fantasy is not a genre he ever fully explored. Pratchett's novels present the reader with a fantasy world which becomes a comic counterpart for the world we live in – the 'real world' – and through which he is able to criticise many aspects of this world with some degree of distance. Some critics see him as the "most single-minded writer since Dickens: stubbornly, resolutely concerned with examining and illuminating the gears and cogs of the human condition" (Coward, 1996). Journalists like Mark Thomas (quoted in Butler et al., 2004:viii) goes as far as saying that Pratchett is a Dickens of our time when it comes to the subject of social criticism.

While illuminating human behaviour – how people think, reason and consequently act – Pratchett's novels make people think about the human

condition and the influence this has in contemporary society. The Discworld novels reflect various stages of human development that can be related to key themes in human history: *Equal Rites* (1987) explores the issue of women in the workplace, the nature of religion is considered in *Small Gods* (1992), while *Feet of Clay* (1996) and *Jingo* (1997) both foreground racial discrimination as their central theme.

However, Pratchett's choice of genre seems to prevent him from receiving recognition as a social commentator and excludes his work from mainstream literary criticism and academic discourse. He admits this himself when he says that his Discworld novels have "spun on such concerns as the nature of belief, politics and even journalistic freedom. But put in one lousy dragon and they call you a fantasy writer" (Pratchett quoted in Weale, 2002).

Literary criticism of Pratchett's work is still rather scarce. Whether because of his status as fantasy writer or as popular contemporary author, most current sources on Pratchett come from dissertations. The most useful academic source on him is *Terry Pratchett: Guilty of Literature*, edited by Andrew M. Butler et al. (2004), which draws the most accurate correlation between Pratchett's novels and the contemporary English society for which they were written. Alongside this, Kristiansen's theory in *Subverting the Genre: Terry Pratchett's Discworld As a Critique of Heroic Fantasy* (2003) provides a good basis for discussing the relationship between the reader in the real world and the fantasy world Pratchett constructs, broadening his audience beyond the English shores. Kristiansen's central argument is that Pratchett subverts the genre conventions of fantasy by introducing comical and psychological elements into his fiction. In doing this, he creates a sub-genre which bridges the gap between the real world and his fantasy world. He calls this sub-genre "fantasy that is constantly being undercut by reality" – a theory also mentioned by Mark Edwards in *The Sunday Times* (Edwards, 1996:20). This sub-genre enables Pratchett to criticise the values of modern fantasy from the inside (Kristiansen, 2003:0.2.6).

Expanding on this theory, I suggest that if Pratchett is capable of subverting the heroic fantasy genre and commenting on the conventions of fantasy, he is also capable of presenting an entertaining new way of commenting on other contemporary social issues through the lens of fantasy as this in turn strengthens the impact of his social commentary. By shifting the issue being commented on from the real world into a fantasy world, Pratchett is able to comment on social issues in an objective manner that

forces readers to contemplate the similarities between the fantasy world and the real world. Pratchett ultimately discusses the issue which is presented without merely pointing out the matter at hand.

Since both Dickens and Pratchett wrote for English audiences, it could be argued that this real world and society mentioned here is limited to English society. However, Pratchett's Discworld caters for much more than just this: his novels include numerous races and places that resemble countries like oriental Asia (*Interesting Times*, 1994), the Middle East (*Jingo*, 1997) and Australia (*The Last Continent*, 1998). Therefore it would be unfair to limit any discussion to just English society. The concept of the 'real world' here aims to include various aspects of contemporary modern culture, with the addition of filtering these aspects through more than one cultural group, making it applicable to more than just English society. The details of these aspects will be discussed along with the relevant novel passages.

This paper will first illustrate commentary on social issues by analysing a well-known extract from *Bleak House* by Dickens, focusing on how he narrates and deliberates governing structures that have become corrupted, specifically the justice system. The manner in which Dickens presents his social commentary will then be compared and contrasted to the way Pratchett comments on the corrupt governing structure of modern businessmen by considering an extract from *Going Postal* (2004).

2. *Bleak House*

Dickens's social commentary primarily critiques bureaucratic institutions or structures of power when their power is abused. This ranges from his attack on the poor laws in *Oliver Twist* (1838) to his portrayal of the conditions in Yorkshire schools in *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838), and his criticism of utilitarianism in *Hard Times* (1854). Many critics credit him as a social reformer for his relentless manner of dealing with injustice. Although he may not directly have reformed society, his novels drew attention to these matters and managed to create a "climate of opinion that facilitated in the creation of a less strife-ridden society" (Cunningham, 2008:159). Although he supported various reform movements, many – like the equalisation of the poor rates that would reform the new poor law – would only be achieved in 1894, after his death (Cunningham, 2008:165).

Schramm notes that *Bleak House* is "perhaps Dickens's most sustained engagement with the social inequities generated by systematic bad

governance and legal mismanagement” (Schramm, 2011:316). A central theme here is the law, a theme found in many of his novels and one he investigated thoroughly during his time as political journalist. As reporter for the *Morning Chronicle* and the *Mirror of Parliament*, Dickens dealt with everything from criminal law to some of the first reform bill debates, as well as civil law, where he gained most of his knowledge on contracts and wills (Schramm, 2008:279).

His experiences with the law also turned personal when he brought five actions in Chancery against the pirating of his work overseas and breach of copyright. However, he achieved little success in these cases and was outraged by the manner in which it was dealt with (Schramm, 2008:288). Dickens voiced his disgust with the state of England in an angry letter to John Forster, saying that “it is the system to know nothing of anything; and to believe that England, while doing nothing, is doing everything. There are Thousands of Asses now – and Asses in power: which is the worst of it – who will hold this faith – if one can dignify such idiocy by the name – until they have done for all of us” (Dickens, 2012:328).

Although it is unclear who these “asses in power” refers to, figures in powerful positions are often those who govern others. The definition of “governing structure” as mentioned in the title refers to a group of figures in powerful positions which influence figures in positions below them. Although never a spoken democrat, Dickens have been mentioned to say that he had “little or no faith in the people governing, but faith limitless in the people governed” (Gissing, 2007:144-145). What happens to these governed people when those who rule over them become corrupt is the concern he foregrounds in *Bleak House*; the former are almost always adversely affected when this happens.

An example of such a governing institution is the Court of Chancery in *Bleak House*, which reflects the state of English law at the time. The experiences Dickens accumulated in courtrooms caused him to be both “fascinated and repelled” (Markey, 2002:692) by the law, making it an interesting and productive theme for his novels. Schramm notes that Dickens’s novels feature many self-centred law practitioners that range from the diligent but self-serving proctors of the Court of Doctors’ Commons in *David Copperfield* (1850) to the attorney tainted by association with his criminal clients in *Great Expectations* (1860) (Schramm, 2011:312). The “asses in power” Dickens describes can be seen as a description of many of the

Chancery lawyers in *Bleak House* and their behaviour as they believe they are contributing to justice, while in fact they are doing nothing to help their clients (Dickens, 2012:328).

Bleak House tells the story of the Jarndyce vs Jarndyce family dispute which centres on multiple family wills surfacing at various instances throughout the novel and subsequently driving the plot. As these multiple wills engage different characters and the legitimacy of each needs to be determined, it becomes a legal affair that ends in court, at which point the reader encounters the Court of Chancery. Dickens invokes the English legal system of the time and portrays a fictionalised version of the real Court of Chancery, a court famous in the nineteenth century as a “ruinously expensive and slow court” (Lobban, 2004:389). Chancery became the focus of many law reformers throughout the nineteenth century. Thomas Pemberton even attacked the Clerk’s Offices in a speech in 1840 after exposing the high sums they received for “effectively sinecure work” (Lobban, 2004:569-570).

In *Bleak House* the Court of Chancery is an institution which enforces governance, created to oversee justice for the people of London. However, as greed has seeped into its walls, it has been rendered ineffective, making it an example of a corrupt governing structure. It no longer effectively serves the people it was created for, and seems to rather serve itself through financial gain. The Jarndyce vs Jarndyce court case in the novel has been running for years without much progress and has been consuming thousands of pounds in the process. Within the context of the Jarndyce case, Dickens’s focus falls on the Court of Chancery lawyers and the consequences of their legal mismanagement. The abuse of power is a central concern in *Bleak House* and his portrayal of greedy lawyers becomes a demonstration of some of the “asses in power” and their capabilities.

To explore Dickens’s criticism of Chancery as a corrupt institution, his narrative treatment of one of the Chancery lawyers emphasises that he sees the lawyers as one of the causative symptoms of an unjust legal system. One of the most descriptive sketches of the lawyers appears in chapter thirty-nine. Named “Attorney and Client”, the chapter centres on a meeting between Richard Cartstone and his legal adviser, Mr Vholes, following a fruitless session in court. This after Cartstone takes an interest in the Jarndyce case, hoping to gain some wealth from it. He takes on Mr Vholes as his adviser, and Vholes assures him that they will make progress in the case.

The beginning of the chapter comments on English law and what it ultimately means for its lawyers. One of the opening paragraphs states that “The one great principle of English law is to make business for itself ... Let [the lawyers] but once clearly perceive that its grand principle is to make business for itself, and surely they will cease to grumble” (Dickens, 1999:542). Here an ironising theory is presented on the unified practice of the law with the aim of profit instead of the well-being of its clients (Welsh, 2000:108). This principle is practised by most of the novel’s lawyers since the clients they take on do not receive justice, but lose their fortunes to legal fees instead. The two most striking lawyers in the novel are the Dedlocks’s solicitor, Mr Tulkinghorn, and Richard Cartstone’s legal adviser, Mr Vholes.

Mr Tulkinghorn is a very prominent figure in *Bleak House* and specialises in collecting the secrets of his clients which is then harnessed as blackmail. He turns on Lady Dedlock and is killed after one of his informants turn vengeful against his unfeeling nature. Markey argues that from a legal perspective Mr Tulkinghorn is a successful lawyer in that he makes money, but is a failure from an ethical and moral perspective for the way he bribes and blackmails his clients and abuses his power as lawyer (Markey, 2002:691). This manifests in the manner of the other lawyers as well. When the question is asked whether anything good can come from the Jarndyce case, Conversation Kenge – another Chancery lawyer involved in the case – casually admits that “this is a great country, a very great country. Its system of equity is a very great system, a very great system” (Dickens, 1999:837).

Kenge does not give any indication that anything good can come from the court case other than the benefits it holds for the lawyers. This supposedly “very great system” is responsible for the state of many of the novel’s characters, and Welsh argues the system offers a sense of false hope for justice and fortune that is partly responsible for Richard Cartstone’s failure in finding an earnest vocation (Welsh, 2000:108). Cartstone and many other characters examined in the novel become embroiled in a lawsuit that ends up in Chancery where it is either not resolved or resolved without success. Richard Cartstone’s attorney, Mr Vholes, is portrayed as one of the most accurate and caricatured examples of the selfish lawyer in comparison to the other lawyers. A caricature in this sense is a character of which specific features (moral or physical) have been selectively amplified, resulting in a personality dominated by these features and simplifying the

character's identity and personality, subsequently flattening the character (Andrews, 2008:99).

In chapter thirty-nine Vholes is described as a “respectable man” and a list is given of the characteristics that make him respectable. However, these characteristics reveal him to be very one-dimensional: the narrator states that Vholes “never takes any pleasure, which is another mark of respectability. He is reserved and serious, which is another mark of respectability. His digestion is impaired, which is highly respectable. And he is making hay of the grass which is flesh, for his three daughters” (Dickens, 1999:542). In fact, the repetition asserting Vholes as respectable serves to reveal exactly the opposite; rather, this description suggests some Victorian virtues, such as the notion of the dominant male breadwinner.

Walker indicates that during the industrial revolution male breadwinners were seen as the norm, even in poorer households like mining communities: In public at least the image of the male breadwinners supporting family units in which the sole economic responsibility of the senior female was to reproduce labour was prevalent by the second half of the nineteenth century ...” (Walker, 1997:331). Parr also asserts that even as the family demographics and income arrangements started changing with urbanisation, “[workers] held adamantly to the notion that only men should be breadwinners” (Parr, 1990:198).

Although Mr Vholes would then be found respectable by Victorian standards, the imagery surrounding him reveals the irony inherent to this description. Throughout the novel, Vholes is linked to images of death and haunting animal comparisons. While one could argue that Vholes never takes any pleasure because he works hard, critics like Crompton argue that Vholes is *incapable* of enjoying life (Crompton, 1958:300). The narrator argues that Vholes is respectable because he is reserved and serious, but a closer look at other imagery surrounding him suggests a much more sinister picture.

Vholes is likened to a predator, staring at his client as if “making a lingering meal of him with his eyes”, “looking at his prey and charming it” and later drafts his bill book, as a “fox, or bear, make up his account of chickens or stray travellers” (Dickens, 1999:545, 530, 549). As reserved and serious as Vholes is, his apparent preying on his clients is anything but respectable. Most criticism discussing Vholes describe him as a parasite as he rolls up the fees for his clients, without providing any useful service in return. The novel's protagonist, Esther Summerson, sees Vholes as a dark and

unwholesome creature. Describing him as “cold-blooded” and always “gloved and buttoned-up” he seems to her a “bird of ill-omen” (Dickens, 1999:609). She becomes concerned for Cartstone’s well-being and exposes Vholes through the haunting image: “So slow, so eager, so bloodless and gaunt, I felt as if Richard were wasting away beneath the eyes of this adviser and there were something of the vampire in him” (Dickens, 1999:813).

Ballinger compares Vholes with other gothic vampires, finding him to be “disturbingly real”, and equates his professional appetite with that of a vampire’s thirst for blood (Ballinger, 2008:36, 42). He “mak[es] hay of the grass which is flesh, for his three daughters”, and although gathering wealth for one’s children is a noble cause, the metaphor of flesh as hay adds a dark suggestion that Vholes in fact preys upon the flesh of his clients to feed his daughters (Dickens, 1999:542). When the suit ends as unresolved as it was at the beginning of the novel, Cartstone is left deep in debt. In the closing image of the court case, Vholes leaves the courthouse and gives “one gasp as if he had swallowed the last morsel of his client” (Dickens, 1999:860). Vholes is therefore not content by the fact that he has ruined Cartstone, but his appetite is only satisfied when he hears that the entire estate has been consumed (Ballinger, 2008:42). Cartstone dies shortly after this realisation and it becomes apparent that Vholes had indeed swallowed all of him. Through this caricature Dickens zooms in on the ability of the lawyers to acquire wealth without helping their clients, asserting that they cause the tediousness in the Court of Chancery to assure their wealth. Lawyers like Vholes become haunting images of parasites tediously preying upon their clients for money and ultimately leaving them desolate.

In the passage under discussion, Conversation Kenge mentions Vholes’ relation to the social system. Kenge states that the social system cannot afford to lose men like Vholes (Dickens, 1999:543). He describes Vholes as “diligent, persevering, acute in business” (Dickens, 1999:543) and argues that a reform in the legal system would be the death of such figures – the reason for this not only that they would run out of business, but that they would not be able to continue doing business in their corrupt way. Kenge admits to this corruption by saying the current practice causes delay and great expense, but he is not ready to admit the level of vexation it causes (Dickens, 1999:543).

Kenge concludes with the extreme image that cannibalism would sooner be defended for the welfare of man-eaters than reform of their ways

be considered. In this image Vholes is symbolised as a minor cannibal chief and Kenge states “make man-eating unlawful, and you starve the Vholeses” (Dickens, 1999:543). Here Vholes is given the same status as a chief would receive in a tribe of cannibals, characterising him as a primal figure of the legal system, feeding upon its corrupt ways.

The reader may be amused by Dickens’s comic description of the court members floundering in the technicalities surrounding the lawsuits, but it is the representation of the Chancery lawyers as the selfish and greedy masterminds behind the suits that give the novel its satiric tone. Dickens’s criticism of the corrupt English legal system is realised through the representation of these characters, and he ultimately makes his point clear by proclaiming the Court of Chancery the “most pestilent of hoary sinners” (Dickens, 1999:6).

3. *Going Postal*

Now that we have explored one way that social commentary enters the novel through Dickens’s means of characterisation, we can consider how Pratchett approaches a similar theme in his Discworld series. The Discworld series concerns various tales from the Discworld, a fantasy world in the shape of a disc, resting on the backs of four elephants that stand on top of a great sea turtle swimming through space. Already we see a great deal of imagination at work. Pratchett admits that a great deal of this fictional and societal space is based on human culture, human mythology, human history and accordingly human cultural mythology at large (Pratchett, 2000:160).

In his study on Pratchett’s Discworld novels, Andreas Kristiansen argues that Pratchett subverts the fantasy genre – more specifically heroic fantasy – by adding aspects of realism in his novels (Kristiansen, 2003:3.1.1). By definition most fantasy worlds represent an imagined reality radically different in nature and functionality from our ordinary experience (Abrams & Harpham, 2009:323). Yet Pratchett’s world, as strange and comical as it may seem, functions on logic. Pratchett asserts that it is solidly logical because it shines a light on the grey areas of fantasy that are commonly not questioned or overlooked. In an interview with *Writers Write*, he explains that “a lot of the humour, and possibly a lot of the power in the Discworld series, come from thinking logically about those things which we don’t normally think logically about, that we just accept” (White, 2000). As an example he explains how horror movies accept foreign concepts such as

werewolves and vampires without much consideration. For his novels he took to thinking about what a werewolf in modern society would be like and what the politics of werewolves would be (White, 2000). This led to the creation of the werewolf character, Angua, which features in many of his novels. The same alertness is used when aspects of reality enter fantasy.

In contrast to various fantasy worlds which move completely away from ordinary experience, the Discworld is seen as a comic counterpart for the world we live in. It gives Pratchett a “comic distance from reality” (Butler, 2004:69) in order to criticise the world of the everyday. Elements of reality are to be found everywhere in the Discworld, with its leading city, Ankh-Morpork, considered a fictional version of London which continuously changes while remaining in a quasi-medieval state.

Pratchett describes Ankh-Morpork as a “renaissance city with elements of early Victorian England” (Hills, 2004:218) and in an interview with Natasha Mitchell he agrees that the city is a “hip, upbeat Dickensian London... with additional things...” (Pratchett, 2011). Like London, Ankh-Morpork has suffered several fires, and it had to be rebuilt numerous times – to the point that it is mainly built on itself (Pratchett, 1993:221). Through the city flows the river Ankh, which is akin to the Thames, although the Ankh is so polluted it is rumoured that one could walk on it (Pratchett 1987:74). Like Victorian London, the city contains dame schools and governesses (as found in *Reaperman*, 1991) and by the time *Going Postal* appears, Ankh-Morpork has developed an elaborate mail delivery system which closely resembles the rapid mail system of the nineteenth century. Pratchett admits in an interview with Sky1 that the old Victorian mail system was seen as new and bright technology, and that this had been the inspiration for *Going Postal* (Pratchett, 2010).

Ankh-Morpork even has slums that come close to the descriptions found in Dickensian London. While Dickens’s London is described with metaphors of fog, mud, dirt and pestilence, Ankh-Morpork’s slum areas are described as a “relief map of sinfulness, wickedness and all-round immorality” (Pratchett, 1991:47). The one main aspect that sets the city apart from Dickens’ London is its inhabitants. Ankh-Morpork houses creatures from all corners of the fantasy genre, from dwarves to trolls to wizards and even golems, which appear as mechanically animated creatures made of clay. Dickens describes the lawyers of Chancery with vampire metaphors; in the

Discworld reside an actual vampire lawyer by the name of Mr Morecombe and a zombie lawyer named Mr Slant.

Ankh-Morpork's unique inhabitants deal with the same issues that ordinary civilians experience and deal with in the real world. From keeping up with differences in music trends (*Soul Music*, 1994) to the dangers of disputes between countries and the effects thereof on civilians (*Jingo*, 1997). When these themes, both serious and comic, are encountered in the Discworld, they gain a comic significance, but still provide accurate commentary on these issues that closely relate to events of our world. However, this also means that Ankh-Morpork has its own brand of corrupt institutions. In *Going Postal* businessmen looking to modernise the city are exposed as one such structure. Like the Court of Chancery, these businessmen offer to help their clients and govern the main form of communication in the city, but without actually aiding anyone but themselves. Consequently another element of reality is introduced into the fantasy world.

Kristiansen focuses on these elements of reality and argues that its incorporation into the novels allows the novels to transcend the genre of fantasy:

Pratchett's work can be perceived as transcending the traditional division between literary fiction and fantasy, as the novels can be placed in both categories; he slips back and forth between engaging story and meta-fiction, placing the readers inside a fantasy narrative before suddenly moving them outside through satire and parody, making them laugh at the conventions they a minute earlier were immersed in (Kristiansen, 2003:3.1.4).

In one example in *Thief of Time* (2001) Kristiansen explores the comments of one of Pratchett's famous characters, Nanny Ogg, on swine herding as a symbol of the impoverished or humble origins from which a king can come (Kristiansen, 2003:3.2.5). Heroes and kings rising from ordinary or poor backgrounds is a common trend in fantasy fiction. In Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* (1954) – the first novel Pratchett admittedly parodied – one of the main characters is first perceived to be an ordinary ranger until it is revealed that he is heir to the throne of Gondor. This approach gains a more dramatic effect in *Going Postal* as the protagonist, Moist von Lipwig, is made postmaster of the post office despite the fact that he had been a criminal. The postal workers are very serious about their profession, though,

and like a hero in a fantasy novel, Von Lipwig is forced to undergo a series of challenges to be accepted as their new leader.

In Kristiansen's example Nanny Ogg explains that the city of Ankh-Morpork now has guilds that train people and establish trades and businesses for pig farming. She claims that "there's many well set-up men and women who started life that way. There's no shame in it" (Pratchett, 2001:35). Here we notice aspects of the real world intruding into the fantasy setting. Pratchett comments on the modern notion of establishing trades instead of remaining in poor job positions. This is done through what is essentially a metaphor for menial labour designed to keep a future king humble. Nanny Ogg also points out that – since destinies do not unfold according to schedule – a king cannot simply wait for his destiny to save him from such a job.

This realistic thinking illustrates how Pratchett stretches his commentary beyond the realm of fantasy and is capable of criticising aspects of the fantasy genre (Kristiansen, 2003:3.2.5). In *Going Postal* Pratchett takes this concept further by using the fantasy setting to criticise aspects of the modern world. Moist von Lipwig entertains the postal workers by completing the challenges he is given, but does not see his job as honourable. He realises that he is now in a government position and reflects that "governments took money off people. That's what they were for" (Pratchett, 2004:118). While the other postal workers come to see him as a hero, he continues to see himself as nothing more than a clever schemer working for the government, with the exception that his skills are used for a good cause. He even admits that "they want a saint, not someone like me" upon which his companion answers "perhaps a saint is not what they need" (Pratchett, 2004:182). The ultimate challenge Von Lipwig faces is the post office's rival, the Clacks Company, which turns out to consist of sheer corruption, rendering its management structure truly corrupt. While the government Von Lipwig thinks about does take money off people, they still offer some service in return while the Clacks Company offers nothing in return.

The Clacks Company marks another stage of Ankh-Morpork evolution in which it faces a transition between old technology, represented by the post office and the new technology of the Clacks towers, which is depicted as a medieval form of internet. The Clacks consist of several semaphore towers through which coded messages are sent from one tower to another across the city and beyond. Although the new technology is very beneficial

to the people of Ankh-Morpork, it is run by a panel of corrupt directors who abuse the system to generate as much capital for themselves as possible.

These directors seek to create a consumer culture – not unlike that in our own contemporary society – in Ankh-Morpork by eliminating all competition, making the citizens of Ankh-Morpork dependent on the Clacks. Featherstone explains how companies and intellectuals of this contemporary society are able to establish a monopoly by defining legitimate taste within a cultural realm to create a consumer lifestyle (Featherstone, 2007:87). When addressing the directors of the Clacks Company, the city’s notorious patrician, Lord Vetinari, exposes the company’s scheme. He notes that when it comes to the service they offer “the only choice [their] customers have is between [them] or nothing” (Pratchett, 2004:98). Not only do the directors offer the citizens very little choice, but they exploit them to receive the most profit they can. In this sense these directors are very much like the lawyers of Chancery Court in the way they operate: they offer a service that should better the lives of the Ankh-Morpork citizens, but the prices to use the service are grossly inflated, while the machinery is worn out due to lack of maintenance, resulting in various breakdowns and delays in service.

Some of the characters in *Going Postal* are even very similar to characters found in *Bleak House*. The Clacks Company lawyer, Mr Slant, is the most prominent example. Slant is the city’s most renowned and most expensive lawyer (Pratchett, 2004:90-91). He is also a zombie, but it is mentioned that the “change in his habits between life and death had not been marked” (Pratchett, 2004:91). The nature of these habits is not explained, but the reader gets a sense that these habits include his affinity for gaining wealth and the ability to be devoid of emotion. A strong correlation can be traced between Mr Slant and Mr Vholes in *Bleak House*. While Mr Vholes is compared to a vampire, Mr Slant is physically an eerie creature, typical of the fantasy genre. Both lawyers share the need to make as much money as possible while offering little or no service.

It is mentioned that Slant has expensive hiring fees and advises only big clients like the Clacks Company. He is present when the Clacks Company is doing good business, but once it begins to deteriorate and the cracks begin to show, Slant disappears. At one of the directors’ meetings late in the novel, Slant’s absence is noted, and one of the directors confirms that “he’s never there when it all goes bad” (Pratchett, 2004:360). Just as Vholes seems to

have no intention of helping Cartstone with his lawsuit, Slant disappears as soon as the company's prosperity is over.

The lawyers share the ability to appear emotionally absent. The first time the reader is introduced to Vholes, the protagonist notes that "there was nothing so remarkable in him as a lifeless manner" (Dickens, 1999:528). Since Slant is technically an animated form of a lifeless being, he displays this same lifeless manner quite literally. However, this lifelessness seems to give him an edge in his line of work. Vetinari reflects that "if he was not already a zombie it would be necessary to have him turned into one" (Pratchett, 2004:102). Here we already see a similarity between how characters related to corrupt structures are perceived by other characters.

Just as Dickens presents the Chancery lawyers as the main cause of the Chancery court's corruption, so Pratchett portrays the directors of the Clacks Company as the main cause of corrupt businesses and asserts that justice must prevail over them. The Clacks Company becomes a metaphor for modern businesses and while the staff and the clients of the company suffer, the directors in charge increase their wealth. Many references are made to the Clacks Company's previous owner, John Dearheart, who made a profitable business out of it. It is revealed on an indirect level and later a direct level that the directors and new owners of the company stole the company from Dearheart and had him killed. This issue is first raised by Vetinari when he describes a hypothetical situation in which this occurs which makes many of the directors uneasy. They admit to nothing, however, until one of the directors, Crispin Horsefry, admits under the influence of alcohol that "we bought the Grand Trunk wi' its own money!" (Pratchett, 2004:141). The character that is ultimately responsible for the corruption of the Clacks Company is its chairman, Reacher Gilt.

Gilt is a professional conman without a conscience. He manipulates the other directors and gets the most out of the company. Like the Chancery lawyers, Gilt understands and interprets the law. Professionally he does not break the law, but commits a host of other transgressions, among which lying, stealing money and killing business rivals. Lord Vetinari accurately describes how the directors successfully seized the Clacks Company from its inventors by buying shares to the point that they owned it without actually paying its former owners. He concludes by saying "some run and some hide and some try to fight, which is foolish in the extreme, because it turns out that everything is legal, it really is. ... And yet actual illegality, it would appear, has

not taken place. Business is business” (Pratchett, 2004:97). Moist von Lipwig knows how Gilt works and notes that “...people like Gilt don’t bother with the law. They never break it; they just use people who do. And you’ll never find anything written down, anywhere” (Pratchett, 2004:328).

Although Gilt cannot be seen as a mere caricature, he is portrayed as having a single focus. Through Gilt’s use of language Pratchett expands his satirical commentary by referring to the tendency of modern businesses to disguise their shortcomings by using elevated language to avoid losing face. In her study on Pratchett, Moody notes that Pratchett “creates chaos from the discourse of managerial double-talk” (Moody, 2004:166) and explains how language gained political power in the 1980s to diffuse criticism of employment relations, including the failure to meet safety standards. Pratchett’s technique of satirically exposing this managerial talk is a humorous technique which comments on cultural changes in our world (Moody, 2004:168).

In *Going Postal* Pratchett incorporates political aspects by presenting an absurd view on business sense and policies of modern time (Moody, 2004:158). Pratchett exposes the absurdity of the Clacks Company’s excuses for bad service in the passage below, in which Reacher Gilt speaks to the local newspaper about the problems the Clacks Company is experiencing. Von Lipwig comments on the article as he reads it. A conman himself, he almost looks up to Gilt’s achievements, but he finds himself opposed to the wicked ways of the Clacks Company.

Now, like an apprentice staring at the work of a master, [Von Lipwig] read Reacher Gilt’s words on the still-damp newspaper.

It was garbage, but it had been cooked by an expert. Oh, yes. You had to admire the way perfectly innocent words were mugged, ravished, stripped of all true meaning and decency and then sent to walk the gutter for Reacher Gilt, although ‘synergistically’ had probably been a whore from the start. The Grand Trunk’s problems were clearly the result of some mysterious spasm in the universe and had nothing to do with greed, arrogance and wilful stupidity. Oh, the Grand Trunk management had made mistakes – oops, ‘well-intentioned judgements which, with the benefit of hindsight, might regrettably have been, in some respects, in error’ – but these had mostly occurred, it appeared, while correcting ‘fundamental systemic errors’ committed by the previous management. No one was sorry for anything because no living

creature had done anything wrong; bad things had happened by spontaneous generation in some weird, chilly, geometrical otherworld, and 'were to be regretted' (Pratchett, 2004:372-373).

Bear in mind that this jargonised rant takes place in the context of a fantasy novel. Kristiansen notes that most fantasy fiction contains grandiose and pompous language usage to give weight and atmosphere to surroundings and battles (Kristiansen, 2003:4.0.1). Pratchett, however, manipulates language carefully to bring awareness to the topic being discussed. Through Gilt's words Pratchett detaches readers from the fantasy realm to shift attention to the similarities between the Clacks Company's inadequacy and the inadequacy of many real world organisations. In both situations, when an organisation or company is confronted about suspicious behaviour, the issue is often waved away in ambiguous and jargonised answers, through which the matter is evaded instead of addressing it.

Therefore it is especially significant that Von Lipwig sees the language employed as nothing other than manipulative jargon. The metaphor comparing words to innocent beings which have been corrupted by Gilt places a sharp satiric twist on Gilt's words and on Von Lipwig's opinion of them. Gilt's ranting is disputed and ridiculed, and in the same breath the reader realises that Von Lipwig has taken a scornful stand against the language and possibly the viewpoint he once would have shared with a fellow conman. Von Lipwig reveals what Gilt's words are actually saying: that a long line of complicated words simply means that mistakes have been made.

The most significant statement Von Lipwig reflects upon is that "bad things had happened by spontaneous generation in some weird, chilly, geometrical otherworld". It is ironic that a character in a fantasy setting tries to imagine a different world where the things Gilt mentions are possible. Just like a fantasy world is based on an imagined reality radically different from ours, so we find Von Lipwig imagining a reality different from his own. This world which Von Lipwig describes resembles one which the Court of Chancery lawyers seem to thrive in – a world illustrated by the stubbornness with which Conversation Kenge asserts in *Bleak House* that no reform of the law is possible. This world is also cold as the emotionless environment in which Mr Vholes operates.

As the lawyers of Chancery are guilty of tediousness, Von Lipwig accuses Gilt of racing forward in his alleged insults. The newspaper also mentions Gilt using the phrase “Our mission” which can also be seen as a reference to the real world of business. Although general fiction may often include fictionalised companies with a mission and a vision, it is rare in the fantasy genre. However here the phrase is not fully explained and seems to be another instance in which Gilt hides behind words with little or no meaning. Gilt’s statements are as empty as the hopes that are given to the clients of the Chancery lawyers. The difference is that Von Lipwig sees through the façade. He knows that the company is “for everything, except anything” and that everything that is said is to save face.

Here again we see the similarities between the Clacks Company and Conversation Kenge. When law reform is mentioned in *Bleak House*, the question is posed whether the current practices cause vexation. Although the entire novel illustrates the vexation that their practices cause, Kenge simply responds that “I am not prepared to say that. They have never given me any vexation; quite the contrary” (Dickens, 1999:543). Not only does he give this answer to save face in the light of the accusation towards the current practice of lawyers, but he admits that since the practice benefits him, quite the opposite is true for him.

The final statement by Gilt which should be noted is his joke about the post office as an institution that is only fit to deliver the Clacks Company bills. Von Lipwig notes the hasty reference at the end of the newspaper article:

Reacher Gilt loved the Post Office and blessed its little cotton socks. He was very grateful for its assistance during this difficult period and looked forward to future co-operation, although of course the Post Office, in the real modern world, would never be able to compete on anything other than a very local level. Mind you, someone has to deliver the bills, ho ho ... (Pratchett, 2004:373).

This reveals Gilt’s level of greed. Unlike the Chancery lawyers, who silently make notes in their bill book, Gilt is not ashamed to proclaim his scheme to make money. While the Clacks Company is continuously criticised for their expensive rates, Gilt does not seem to care or even make an effort to ease the tension that arises from this. When Gilt’s other business associates later panic and fear exposure, Gilt merely reflects, “embezzlement, theft, breach of trust, misappropriation of funds ... people can be so harsh”

(Pratchett, 2004:363). This makes Gilt's character as sinister as the Chancery lawyers with the addition of overt self-entitlement.

The entire concept of a fully functional modern business in the fantasy setting of the Discworld is rather new in comparison to the content of Pratchett's previous novels. For this reason its appearance in *Going Postal* adds weight to Pratchett's commentary. The fact that everything takes place in this fantasy universe serves to objectify the situation and to make it ultimately absurd and satiric. While readers find Von Lipwig's reaction comical, they can relate to his anger. Just like the citizens of Ankh-Morpork are forced to pay expensive fees without receiving the speedy services they were promised, ordinary citizens in the real world also fall prey to the greed of large corporations making false promises and taking their money without delivering on the promises.

Pratchett's ending to the novel portrays how his social commentary differs from that of Dickens. While *Bleak House* is very effective at exposing the corruption in the Court of Chancery, the victims of the system are given no relief from this corruption. Like Cartstone, none of the characters who gets involved with Chancery achieves success and their fates are misery, madness and death. In contrast to this, *Going Postal* achieves a happy ending for the victims of the Clacks Company: the directors are removed and humiliated and the once closed post office thrives. This triumph of justice and truth is an element often found in fantasy literature and seen as the result of a predictable storyline in fantasy fiction (Kristiansen, 2003:2.1.1). Pratchett uses his happy ending to show that the novel still relates a story in a fantasy world, while also providing a possible solution to the problem at hand. The Clacks Company is not closed down, but returned to the founding family, with an indication that it can flourish if managed properly.

4. Conclusion

It is therefore possible to see Pratchett as much more than just a fantasy writer. The literary criticism currently available on his oeuvre proclaims his ability to comment on problems of real-world experiences through his fantasy novels. Famous social commentators such as Charles Dickens expose social problems like corrupt governing systems by caricaturing the source of its problems and making it possible for readers to be entertained as well as be educated by these caricatures. Pratchett takes this to the next level by placing the entire problem in a fantasy universe where anything is

possible. Readers are entertained by the genre and the comedy in the novel.

When an important issue such as corruption is discussed, the reader is temporarily displaced from the fantasy world to realise that what happens in the fantasy world is also applicable to the real world. A possible solution is then presented in typical fantasy fashion which returns the reader to the story where happy endings are still possible. Just as Dickens educated the Victorians about social problems, so Pratchett educates contemporary society about social issues that require attention. He does this through satire and comedy. Whether or not we choose to see Pratchett as a popular author of fantasy novels or as a Dickens of our time, as many journalists have called him, there is no denying his significance in our era. Dickens created a platform where opinions could be raised, readers educated and change considered. In Pratchett's case it is difficult not to agree with Edward James that "readers of Pratchett, in all their millions, have, whether they realise it or not, been given some serious lessons in politics, civics and ethics" (James, 2004:216).

NOTES

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