

Alcoholic Masculinity; Analyzing the Relationship between Gender Identity and Intoxication in Charles Dickens

Farrah Abdel- Latif

Fourth Year Paper

Citation Style: MLA

“What makes a man, more precisely, what makes a gentleman, are by no means the innate and interior qualities (such as honesty, integrity, and moral strength) ... What matters are external and acquired status symbols, commodified forms of social respectability, which also function as symbols of a successfully acquired gender position” (Rainer Emig 71).

Two major social components dominate the life of the Victorian man: wealth and marriage. In the chapter called “Low on Assurance: The Troubled Masculinity of Victorian Comedy,” in *Performing Masculinity*, Rainer Emig argues that in the Victorian Era “men and the masculinity that is supposed to shape them are also subjected to the great ideologies that rule the nineteenth century: class and wealth. Men have price-tags on the marriage market, [and] rise or fall according to their changing market value” (60). In other words, men achieve successful social status primarily if they are wealthy and secondarily if they are married. In a sense, wealth and marriage go hand in hand – a man’s chances of marrying in the Victorian Age are multiplied if he is worth enough money. Furthermore, Emig argues that Victorian men occupy a dynamic which is described as a “triangular relationship that connects competing masculinities through a desired third element. This is frequently a woman, but can also be status, wealth, and so on” (73). This means that Victorian men were often in competition with one another in the race for such things as women and wealth; items that added to their social status and their perceived success within their own gender roles. In Charles Dickens’ “The Lawyer and the Ghost,” “The Ghosts of the Mail,” and “Baron Koeldwethout’s Apparition,” the ghost figure represents a source of competition for each protagonist. This competitive ghostly interaction suggests to the reader that the cause of the competition is deeply rooted in the anxiety each protagonist feels in relation to gender expectations. Interestingly, it is each protagonist’s drunkenness that on one hand helps to repress his social anxiety and is on the other hand the catalyst for enabling each man’s ghostly vision, which allows them, in one way or another, to come to terms with their distress.

Thus, alcohol has a dual function; it represses gender anxiety to the protagonists and it expresses gender anxiety to the protagonists. The supernatural encounter, brought on by

drinking, is the source of competition that exposes the kind of anxiety each protagonist suffers. Each case of gender dysphoria can be re-articulated through Freudian terms, an analysis of masculinity in the Victorian Era, and an understanding of the history of drink in this age. For instance, the lawyer indulges in intoxication to keep his feelings of inadequacy over wealth repressed. His ghost vision offers him an outlet to compete in claiming his possessions, and in turn relieves some of the anxiety felt over unsuccessful wealth attainment. Similarly, the uncle drinks to repress his anxiety over his masculinity and lack of marriage status. His supernatural encounter allows him to compete for a lady; he promises to marry her and again, his gender dysphoria is allayed. Lastly, the Baron drinks to repress feelings of anxiety over marriage *and* wealth. His ghostly vision engages him in competitive bantering that ultimately abates his distress.

The connection between gender dysphoria and intoxication can be comprehended under the analysis of Sigmund Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents*. Freud states that "we are threatened with suffering from three directions: from our own body, which is doomed to decay and dissolution and which cannot even do without pain and anxiety as warning signals; from the external world, which may rage against us with overwhelming merciless forces of destruction; and finally from our relations to other men" (26). This latter aspect illustrates how social competition can bring the individual such pain and anxiety to the point where "he cannot tolerate the amount of frustration which society imposes on him in the service of its cultural ideals" (39). If Victorian men felt pressure to attain wealth, status and partake in the social ritual of marriage then it can be assumed that anxiety would distress those men who were unable to succeed in fulfilling male gender roles. Freud tells us that "this 'cultural frustration' dominates the large field of social relationships between human beings. ... it is the cause of the hostility against which all civilizations have to struggle" (52). This relates back to the triangular relationship whose driving force is competition between men and a variable third force. All three short stories exemplify these competitions and power struggles through the protagonists' ghostly encounters (which, as a rule, ensue drinking).

In "The Lawyer and the Ghost," the story begins with the protagonist, the lawyer, "drinking the first of two gallons of whiskey he had ordered on credit, wondering whether it would ever be paid for, and if in how many years' time, when his eyes encountered the doors of the wooden press" (1). These lines imply that the lawyer is poor. Despite his poverty, he is a man

who is clearly willing to take alcohol on credit on the pretense of being able to pay his debt. He *wonders* if he will ever pay it back and then, perhaps to justify to himself, he pretends that he might in some years' time. But with the lawyer's own lack of surprise at his actions, we can imagine that this is not his first (or his last) time ordering unpayable booze. Coincidentally, according to Brian Harrison's *Drink and the Victorians: the temperance question in England, 1815-1872*, during the Victorian Era "drink-sellers were more willing than other tradesmen to extend credit to distressed customers" (43). Furthermore Harrison states, "alcohol can relieve psychological as well as physiological strain. ... It also calmed fears of social disapproval. ... Drink moderated the harshness of social isolation" (42). Freud agrees when he claims that "the crudest, but also the most effective among these methods of influence is the chemical one – intoxication ... directly [causes] us pleasurable sensations; and [it] also so [alters] the conditions governing our sensibility that we become incapable of receiving unpleasurable impulses" (27). Furthermore, he adds that "the service rendered by intoxicating media in the struggle for happiness and in keeping misery at a distance is so highly prized as a benefit that individuals and peoples alike have given them an established place in the economics of their libido. We owe to such media not merely the immediate yield of pleasure, but also a greatly desired degree of independence from the external world" (28). Drinking can alleviate our pain; drinking allows us to escape the pressures of society.

This suggests that the lawyer may possibly be drinking to numb the pain of being poor. The text exemplifies just how poor he is; the lawyer we are told takes "an old, damp, rotten set of chambers, in one of the most ancient Inns, that had been shut up and empty for years and years before" (1). We are told that his new lodging is scant and poor but that this does not matter to the lawyer because "he [is] poor, and the rooms [are] cheap, and that would have been quite a sufficient reason for him, if they had been ten times worse than they really were" (1). Interestingly, the text implicitly tells us that the lawyer is in fact concerned with appearances and the condition of his living space. The text illustrates that the lawyer "had moved in all his furniture – it wasn't quite a truck-full – and had sprinkled it about the room, so as to make the four chairs look as much like a dozen as possible" (1). It is important to note that the title indicates that our protagonist is a lawyer; and yet, he is poor. We can therefore speculate that due to life's circumstances, the lawyer has taken a turn for the worse and has ended jobless and penniless. This is perhaps why the lawyer chooses to drink because intoxication helps not only to

pleasure, but to keep unpleasurable feelings at bay. This means that with drinking, the lawyer is able to, in a sense, repress his social anxiety of being a man who was once a lawyer and is now a penniless drunk who lives in uncomfortable conditions.

In fact, the lawyer's thoughts of his drinking debt are what precede his sudden awareness of the wooden press which ultimately brings him to his supernatural encounter. When the lawyer contestingly sneers at the press and says "I'd have a fire out of you in less than no time," (1) suddenly the lawyer sees "a pale and emaciated figure in soiled and worn apparel, standing erect in the press. The figure was tall and thin, and the countenance expressive of care and anxiety" (1). The ghost at once argues with the lawyer and declares that:

"in this room...my worldly ruin was worked, and I and my children beggared. In this press, the papers in a long, long suit, which accumulated for years, were deposited. In this room, when I had died of grief, and long-deferred hope, two wily harpies divided the wealth for which I had contested during a wretched existence, and of which, at last, not one farthing was left for my unhappy descendants. I terrified them from the spot, and since that day have prowled by night – the only period at which I can re-visit the earth – about the scenes of my long-protracted misery. This apartment is mine: leave it to me!" (2)

Ironically, the ghost illustrates the same poverty in which the lawyer himself portrays. He is emaciated and wearing ragged clothes. He describes that in his living life he and his family were beggars. Even more ironic is the fact that a part of what brought him to ruin is a legal suit which accumulated for years – a part of his demise was brought upon him by the legal system – and yet the lawyer himself, a representative of the legal system, is left beggared as well. In this sense the ghost represents everything that has brought poverty into the lawyer's life and yet what strikes most is that the ghost is presenting himself as competition for the lawyer. Two men whose lives have been ruined by lack of wealth, a primary indicator of social status and successful gender role fulfillment, are now in competition over the one last material possession that gives them any claim to personal value – the lodging. The lawyer wittingly convinces the ghost to abandon the room by arguing that "it does appear to me somewhat inconsistent, that when you have an opportunity of visiting the fairest sports of the earth ... you should always return exactly to the very places where you have been most miserable" (2). In this sense, the lawyer, although unable to achieve the social symbol of wealth and drinks to numb the anxiety of this lack, he is able, through his supernatural encounter, to compete with another man (although dead) and

successfully advise away his opponent to maintain ownership of his possessions – even if they are not fit for a gentleman.

Similarly, the uncle in “The Ghosts of the Mail” is portrayed as an unstoppable drunk. His nephew describes him as “one of the merriest, pleasantest, cleverest fellows, that ever lived” (1) and that “if any two of his numerous virtues predominated over the many that adorned his character, [he] should say they were his mixed punch and his after-supper song” (1). Clearly, the uncle is a jovial fellow who loves to drink and be merry. Unlike the lawyer, who is portrayed drinking in solemn thought, the uncle is portrayed as a happy drunk. This is supported by the notion that “besides moderating gloom, drink [enhances] festivity” (Harrison 44). So why is the lawyer left in sombre contemplation while the uncle parties with reckless abandon, seemingly unstifled by life’s worries? The uncle may not seem as if he is drinking to repress gender anxiety. This does not mean that he is not; it still holds true that “fear of society, fear of strangers, fear even of life itself [can] foster drinking ... It [brings] relief from ... the mingled fear, worry, anxiety and foreboding felt by people in all societies where the smallest setback means disaster” (Harrison 43). So then what is the uncle unconsciously repressing with drink? We cannot assume that it is wealth for we are told that he is employed as a debt collector and is able to spend ample leisure time travelling and meeting with friends (2).

Perhaps Harrison’s argument that “intoxicants were far more than mere thirst-quenchers. ... they were thought to impart physical stamina. ... By drinking deeply one asserted one’s virility” (40) can clarify what exactly the uncle is repressing. This statement reveals that in the Victorian Era drinking was, for men, a way to establish their manliness, their toughness, their vigorousness. This relates to the uncle because first of all, he is attracted to men of his same drinking character. We are told that “the very first night [him and Tom] met, [the] uncle took a fancy for Tom, and Tom took a fancy for [the] uncle. They made a bet of a new hat before they had known each other half an hour, who should brew the best quart of punch and drink it the quickest” (1). This shows that the uncle likes to surround himself with like men who use drinking as a means of establishing their masculinity. Ironically, we are told that “in personal appearance, [the] uncle was a trifle shorter than the middle size; he was a thought stouter too, than the ordinary run of people, and perhaps his face might be a shade redder” (1). This depicts the uncle as a plain-looking man, with a less than masculine build. He is short, plump and his face is red from over-drinking. His own belief in drinking to establish masculine fervour is

confirmed when his nephew claims that “[he has] heard him say that he could see the Dundee people out, any day, and walk home afterwards without staggering (2). We are told that the Dundee people are avid drinkers and that the uncle feels proud of himself for being able to out-drink even the staunchest of drinkers. Also, the nephew relates to us that:

“I don’t quite recollect how many tumblers of whiskey-toddy each man drank after supper; but this I know, that about one o’clock in the morning, the bailie’s grown-up son became insensible while attempting the first verse of ... and he having been, for half an hour before, the only other man visible above the mahogany, it occurred to my uncle that it was almost time to think about going, especially as drinking had set in at seven o’clock, in order that he might get home at a decent hour ... my uncle voted himself into the chair, mixed another glass, rose to propose his own health, addressed ... and drank the toast with great enthusiasm. Still nobody woke ... took a little drop more ... sallied forth into the street” (3).

This scene of abundant drinking is the precursor to the uncle’s supernatural encounter.

All these details relate to us so far that the uncle is a man who relies on drink to empower his masculine performance of strength, vigour and energy. This leaves us to wonder why the uncle feels such a need to prove his masculinity. We are told that “although he was a bachelor, he had held some ladies in his arms ... he had rather a habit of kissing barmaids ... in one or two instances, he had been seen by credible witnesses, to hug a landlady in a very perceptible manner” (15). Yet, although the nephew boosts his uncle as a lady’s man, he is unmarried, and his female encounters are littered amongst barmaids and landladies. According to Freud, “sexual love – has given us our most intense experience of an overwhelming sensation of pleasure and has thus furnished us with a pattern for our search for happiness” (33) and that “happiness in life is predominately sought in the enjoyment of beauty ... the beauty of human forms and gestures ... The enjoyment of beauty has a peculiar, mildly intoxicating quality of feeling” (33). From this we can conclude that the lack of love and beauty is not just a lack of happiness; in our case, the lack of a wife not only inhibits the consistency of sexual love from the uncle, as well as disables him from being able to daily enjoy the beauty of the woman form. It is also a lack of social marker in the successful integration of male gender expectations. This shows how his repressed anxiety over unsuccessful completion of gender expectations causes him to drink and consequently use drink to make up for his lack in masculinity.

The uncle’s supernatural encounter allows him to reconcile these gender anxieties by

fulfilling for him the wish-fantasy of marriage and in turn, attainment of gender expectations. Freud states that the wish-fantasy is when “one can try to re-create the world, to build up in its stead another world in which its most unbearable features are eliminated and replaced by other that are in conformity with one’s own wishes” (31). This ideology defines the uncle’s supernatural encounter. When he awakes from his doze he sees that “the whole of this deserted and quiet spot had become a scene of most extraordinary life and animation ... it was perfectly clear that every mail there, was to be off directly” (6). In fact, he himself gets into a mail coach. As he does, a beautiful woman accompanied by two men embarks as well; “in this one glimpse of the beautiful face, [the] uncle saw that the young lady cast an imploring look upon him, and that she appeared terrified and distressed” (8). The uncle instantly makes up his mind to help her. Incidentally, the two men engage in a small altercation with the uncle and the uncle threatens them by saying “I don’t want to have any death, with or without lightening, in a lady’s presence, and we have had quite blood and thundering enough for one journey; so if you please, we’ll sit in our places like quiet insides” (9). Right away the two men present themselves as competitors against the uncle for the beautiful woman. When it came time to save the woman, although “he had never had a sword in his hand before ... here he was, cutting and slashing with two experienced swordsman, thrusting, and guarding, and poling, and slicing, and acquiring himself in the most manful and dexterous manner possible” (13). For a moment the uncle is performing brave masculinity, he appears to be defeating the men. As encouragement, the woman, by removing her hood, “[discloses] a countenance of such dazzling beauty, that [the uncle] would have fought against fifty men, to wine one smile from it and die” (13); yet as she does this, one of the men falls in fierce jealousy and “turning his weapon against her beautiful bosom pointed a thrust at her heart, which caused [the] uncle to utter a cry of apprehension that made the building ring” (13-14). This shows that in the moment where the uncle’s masculinity and bravery are needed most, he at once falls into a panic and screams (like a girl?) What is even more curious is that, in this moment of great danger, “the lady [steps] lightly aside, and snatching the young man’s sword from his hand ... [drives] him to the wall, and running it through him, and the panelling, up to the very hilt, [pins] him there, hard and fast” (14). This show of bravery and stamina is what provides “a splendid example [for the uncle]. [The] uncle, with a loud shout of triumph, and a strength that was irresistible, made his adversary retreat in the same direction, and plunging the old rapier ... nailed him beside his friend” (14). Clearly, it is the woman’s efforts

that prove to be the actions of the so-called alpha-male for she takes charge of the situation and acts on instinct and impulse, whereas the uncle's first reaction is to freeze and shriek. Only in the lady's light can he follow by example and defeat the other man. Yet curiously, the lady calls the uncle her "dear, kind brave preserver" (15). Although we know he has not, in this supernatural encounter, actually accomplished a brave show of masculinity, the wish-fantasy, his "attempt to procure a certainty of happiness and a protection against suffering through a delusional remoulding of reality" (Freud 32) is successful because he is still recognized by the lady as her saviour.

In addition, his wish-fantasy relieves his repressed anxiety towards marriage for the lady at once asks the uncle "will you never love any one but me – never marry any one beside?" (16) The uncle, in reply, "[swears] a great oath that he never would marry anybody else" (16). In fact, we are told that "he remained staunch to the great oath he had sworn to the beautiful young lady, refusing several eligible landladies on her account, and dying a bachelor at last" (17). This demonstrates how "despite their inferior status in patriarchal ideology, women – as the object of competition – play an important part in the constant challenges and tests to which men are subjected" (Emig 73). For the uncle, drinking helped keep his gender anxieties repressed but drinking also became the catalyst for bringing him to his supernatural encounter. In a sense, drinking is what then exposes his anxieties about women and marriage to himself to then relieve him of the stress they were presiding over him. After the supernatural encounter, he lives his life as if betrothed to the beautiful lady, and this helps him to escape any anxiety felt over being unable to secure a wife and participate in male gender roles.

So far we have seen the lawyer afflicted with gender anxiety with regards to wealth, and we have seen the uncle afflicted with gender anxiety with regards to marriage. Both men have supernatural experiences which offer them a source of competition to in a way regain some control over their anxieties by enabling them to achieve, through competition, some symbol of achieved gender role status. So what happens when a man is both afflicted with anxieties about marriage *and* about wealth? In "Baron Koeldwethout's Apparition," the Baron is one such man.

The Baron's drinking problem relates directly to Freud's pleasure principle. Freud says that intoxicants "are responsible, in certain circumstances, for the useless waste of a large quota of energy which might have been employed for the improvement of the human lot" (28) and that the pleasure principle "regards reality as the sole enemy and as the source of all suffering, with

which it is impossible to live, so that one must break off all relations with it if one is to be in any way happy” (31). The Baron is guilty of both these theories; he and his men waste mass amounts of energy in drunken stupor. Contrastingly, when the Baron marries and enters “reality,” he, like the pleasure principle, regards it as suffering to the point where dying is the only solution to escape reality.

Since the Baron is dominated by the pleasure principle, he needs constant excitement to keep him satisfied. For instance, the Baron and his men “drank Rhine wine every night till they fell under the table, and then had the bottles on the floor, and called for pipes. Never were such jolly, roystering, rollicking, merry-making blades, as the jovial crew of Grogzwig” (2). Conversely, one day “the baron grew weary, and wanted excitement. He took to quarrelling with his gentlemen, and tried kicking two or three of them every day after dinner. This was a pleasant change at first; but it became monotonous after a week or so, and the baron felt quite out of sorts, and cast about, in despair, for some new amusement” (2). Again, this shows how the Baron’s character is based on the pleasure principle. As soon as his regular enjoyment ceases to amuse him, he looks for new entertainment. He decides new suitable entertainment would be finding a wife. After he marries, though, we are told that:

“the Baroness Von Koeldwethout somehow or other acquired great control over the Barn Von Koeldwethout, and that, little by little, and bit by bit, and day by day, and year by year, the baron got the worst of some disputed question, or was slyly unhorsed from some old hobby; and that by the time he was a fat hearty fellow of forty-either or thereabouts, he had no feasting, no revelry, no hunting train, and no hunting – nothing in short that he liked, or used to have; and that, although he was as fierce as a lion, and as bold as brass, he was decidedly snubbed and put down, buy his own lady” (5).

This passage relates how the Baroness forbade every pleasure to the Baron; a man who lived based on the pleasure principle and even married on the pleasure principle, assuming that a wife would bring him happiness. Through this, we can understand the Baron’s anxiety towards marriage in relation to his own masculinity – his wife, although allowing him to achieve successful symbol of marriage status, takes away from him everything that made his life merry and leaves him in dreadful despair of the reality of wife, in-laws, and children. The anxiety does not stop here; it relates directly to his anxiety over wealth. We are informed that:

“when he could bear it no longer lost his appetite and spirits, and sat himself gloomily and dejectedly down. ... Times changed. He got into debt. The Grogzwig coffers ran low, though the Swillenhausen family had looked upon them as inexhaustible; and just when the baroness was on the point of making a thirteenth addition to the family pedigree, Von Koeldwethout discovered that he had no means of replenishing them” (6).

Because of all the pressure and anxiety incurred from marriage and money problems, the Baron decides to commit suicide. This is understandable when we are told that the Victorian Era’s “central contradiction is the replacement of the traditional idea of honor with money and the attendant subscription of men to an ideology of commodification, consumption, and excess” (Emig 63).

True to his alcoholic nature, the Baron “[tosses] off a goodly measure of wine ... [and] [throws] himself back in his chair” (7) before attempting to stab himself to death; once again, there is an intake of alcohol before the supernatural phenomenon occurs. The Baron at once perceives the ghostly vision which calls itself “the Genius of Despair and Suicide” (8). One of the first things the Baron asks him is “do you drink?” (8), in which the Genius of Despair and Suicide replies “nine times out of ten, and then very hard” (8). The Baron then wonders “never in moderation?” (9) The ghost replies and says “never ... that breeds cheerfulness” (9). This is significant because the text is making an explicit comment on indulgent drinking and is claiming that perhaps moderation is the key to all happiness. This competitive bantering between the ghost and the Baron is what ultimately leads the Baron, in a sense, to confront his anxieties – he “opened his eyes wide, and looked as if quite new light had come upon him for the first time” (9). The appearance of the ghost himself affirms to the Baron that although his life is “a dreary one certainly, ... [the Baron doesn’t] think [the ghost’s] much better, for [he has] not the appearance of being particularly comfortable” (10). He determines to “brood over miseries no longer, but put a good face on the matter, and try the fresh air and the bears again; and if that don’t do, [he’ll] talk to the baroness soundly, and cut the Von Swillenhausens [his in-laws] dead” (10).

In each story, drinking is the impetus of the supernatural encounter. In each story, drinking helps to keep at bay, to in a way repress, the anxiety caused by male gender expectations, such as wealth and marriage. Consequently, each supernatural encounter unveils to the protagonist, through competition, his repressed gender dysphoria. In these texts, since

drinking seems to invite the supernatural vision, then in a sense, drinking also enables the confrontation with gender anxiety. Thus, drinking's purpose is twofold; it represses gender dysphoria *and* it exposes gender dysphoria to its victim. In these texts, although drinking is scrutinized, it is not condemned. Perhaps this is because in the Victorian Era "drunkenness and self-improvement did not then necessarily conflict" (Harrison 40). Therefore, it is no wonder when Dickens writes:

"my advice to all men is, that if ever they become hipped and melancholy from similar causes ... they look at both sides of the question, applying a magnifying-glass to the best one; and if they still feel tempted to retire without leave, that they smoke a large pipe and drink a full bottle first" ("Baron Koeldwethout's Apparition" 11).

Works Cited

Dickens, Charles. "Baron Koeldwethout's Apparition."

Dickens, Charles. "The Lawyer and the Ghost."

Dickens, Charles. "The Ghosts of the Mail."

Emig, Rainer and Antony Rowland. *Performing Masculinity*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010. Web.

Freud, Sigmund. *Civilization and its Discontents*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1989. Print.

Harrison, Brian Howard. *Drink and the Victorians: the temperance question in England, 1815-1872*. Staffordshire: Keele University Press, 1994. Web.