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**“What an Absurd Fellow You Are, Eugene!”: A Kierkegaardian Reading of *Our Mutual Friend***

Charles Dickens’s final completed work, *Our Mutual Friend*, has been the subject of a great deal of criticism in the century-and-a-half since its publication. Of this criticism, much of it has been of the psychological variety, and rightfully so; one need not look farther than Dickens’s use of John Harmon’s doppelgänger, John Rokesmith, to see that the novel is among the most psychological of his works. As a result, readers have been treated to everything from aforementioned Freudian readings of the John Harmon-John Rokesmith dynamic to esoteric comments on Dickens’s views of phrenology. What makes this dedication to psychobabble problematic, however, is that it is hardly difficult for a critic to make Freudian claims about the mind; as the critic Naomi Goodwin says in her essay “A Philosophical Approach to Literary Criticism,” it is easy to “take a really artistic play...stamp it Freudian, and acclaim it good” (Goodwin, 14). Indeed, past critics of *Our Mutual Friend* have focused too closely on problems of the mind while ignoring something much more important: problems of the soul. Surely the eccentricities and troubles of some of Dickens’s most memorable characters are caused by problems that are metaphysical, rather than mental. This notion is evident perhaps most obviously in the characters Mortimer and Eugene, who suffer from the existential despair that is discussed in the works of Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard.

It should probably come as no surprise that no critic has, before now, taken a Kierkegaardian approach to *Our Mutual Friend*. For one, the philosopher is rather obscure, due in part because of heavy censorship of his works by governments of all persuasions until recently; indeed, he was almost entirely ignored by his peers, who viewed him as a dangerous

religious fanatic (Bretall xviii). Further, many critics and readers alike would scoff at the idea simply because there appears to be virtually no chance that Dickens ever met Kierkegaard, or even read his work, despite being contemporaries<sup>1</sup>. This, however, is hardly any excuse, as Kierkegaard's theories of absurdity apply to Eugene and Mortimer regardless of whether or not Charles Dickens could have possibly known about them, and, even if he did not, the attitudes of some of his characters are uncannily similar to the philosopher's ideas.

Before one may begin to understand the impact of absurdity on the characters of *Our Mutual Friend*, one must, of course, begin to understand the preliminary beliefs of Kierkegaard's philosophy. Absurdism is based around the concept of the “absurd,” which is the conflict between the fact that the universe lacks a universal, inherent meaning, and the human tendency to search for one in spite of this. Kierkegaard's view of our own universe is one of indifference towards man -- not antagonism, as some philosophies hold -- and it is this indifference toward man that causes the conflict, because it is human nature to struggle to find meaning in the absence of any. Further, this struggle can cause immense fear and despair in the one undergoing it, and these feelings can lead to inaction, or, perhaps even worse, a disregard for one's true personality as one attempts to ignore the pressure of the absurd. This notion links the philosophy to a more common definition of the word “absurd” which, regardless, holds true in this instance: when faced with the absurd, one might take foolish or ignorant actions; in other words, they do things that are absurd.

The pressure that the absurd holds on the characters Eugene and Mortimer in *Our Mutual Friend* is evident even at the beginning of the book; it becomes more evident as the text goes on that these two characters have felt the overbearing weight of the absurd for quite some time. For example, one might consider the scene where Mortimer and Eugene, both lawyers, are traveling to meet the “gaffer,” Jesse Hexam. While walking toward his house together, Mortimer and Eugene smoke cigars while lamenting about their careers. “I have been, Eugene,” says Mortimer, “upon...the High Court of Chancery, and attorneys at

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1 Despite having written between 1841 and 1856, Kierkegaard's work was not translated into English until the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. He was, therefore, almost entirely unknown outside of Denmark, though he was well-known throughout his own country and regarded as a great writer stylistically, despite his radical content (Roberts 63). However, it is possible that Dickens had at least heard of Kierkegaard through Hans Christian Andersen, as one of Kierkegaard's first writings was a negative review of *Only a Fiddler* (McDonald). Andersen, then, might have had some unkind things to tell Dickens about Kierkegaard, but this, of course, is highly speculative.

Common Law, five years, and...I have had no scrap of business but this romantic business.” Eugene replies by saying that has “been 'called' seven years, and have had no business at all, and never shall have any. And if I had, I shouldn't know how to do it.” Mortimer admits that he is no better off, and both men finally admit together that they hate their professions (Dickens 29).

While this might not seem absurd at first, it is the context of this conversation that makes it so. We later learn that, even though both men hate their careers, neither of them have done much of anything to change them. This is made apparent when both men admit that they were forced into the profession and had no choice but to take it up, neither of them saying much that would indicate they have made any attempt to change. Instead, they only affirm each other's hate of the law profession through their conversation. This is also apparently not the first time the two have had this conversation, either; neither of the men ever address their comrade's statements directly, instead using the other man's comments as a springboard into his own complaints. Consider, for example, when Mortimer complains about his office, asks Eugene to light his cigar, and thanks him; Eugene replies to this thanks by beginning a new complaint about having energy (Dickens 29). The reader can infer through the manner in which this conversation is held that this is not a new topic of conversation for either of them, and that they are simply complaining for lack of anything else to do.

This feeling of routine and boredom is one that is shown through the character's actions on several occasions early in the novel. One may recall, for instance, the party at the Veneerings, during which the guests discuss the “man from Somewhere,” whom Lady Tippins is going on about. While most of the guests are excited to meet him, Mortimer is quick to point out that they will “execrate Lady Tippins in your secret hearts when you find, as you inevitably will, find the man from Somewhere a bore” (Dickens, 23). This scene gives the reader insight to the dull, negative lives that Mortimer and the rest of the party-goers seem to find themselves in.

However, while Mortimer surely seems to be a victim of the absurd, his issues seemingly pale in comparison to Eugene's. While Mortimer is realistic and serious in his

responses to the absurd, Eugene faces it in a much more comical, if not somewhat unhealthy, way: he makes up personas for himself, and leads strangers to believe them. For example, he has no qualms with telling Mr. Inspector that he is a lime trader – “my father having been a shipper of lime before me, and my grandfather before him” – a lie which Mr. Inspector seems to believe (Dickens 162). It is also a rare occurrence when we see Eugene do much of anything that is even remotely productive; more often, he is seen following Mortimer around during investigations and making up stories about his own life for fun.

This tendency to dwell on negative aspects of life and to ignore the reality of it is common among those who are experiencing the absurd. When faced with it, one experiences an overwhelming feeling of despair, which, according to Kierkegaard, is a “sickness” that is “a more dreadful danger” than death (Kierkegaard 342). This is described in detail in his essay “The Sickness Unto Death,” written under the pseudonym “Anti-Climacus.” Despair occurs when one has the wrong conception of himself, which is brought about as a reaction to the absurd. According to the Dane, this despair is worse than death because the man in despair *wishes* for death, but even that would not bring relief; in the words of the philosopher, “the torment of despair is precisely this: not to be able to die” (Anti-Climacus 342). He later solves this seemingly paradoxical idea by showing how the victim of despair continues to despair on into the afterlife, therefore being unable to truly die and rest in peace:

This is the situation in despair. And however thoroughly it eludes the attention of the despairer, and however thoroughly the despairer may succeed...in losing himself entirely, and losing himself in such a way that is not noticed in the least – eternity nevertheless will make it manifest that his situation was despair, and it will so nail him to himself that the torment nevertheless remains that he cannot get rid of himself, and it becomes manifest that he was deluded in thinking he succeeded. And thus it is eternity must act, because to have a self, to be a self, is the greatest concession made to man, but at the same time it is eternity's demand upon him. (Anti-Climacus 344).

The idea of despair was so essential to Kierkegaard's philosophy that he described

several distinct levels of it, each one increasing in its severity. The first level is that which the philosopher calls “the despair which is unconscious that it is despair.” In other words, this despair occurs when the subject does not realize that he is in despair; instead, he is too blinded by superficial aspects of life to realize that he is facing the absurd. Kierkegaard states that this is the most common form of despair, and affects everyone at some point in time (Anti-Climacus 345).

The second level of despair (and the first conscious level of the sickness) is what Kierkegaard calls “despair not to want or will to be oneself” (Anti-Climacus 349). This disregard for the true self is further divided into three subdivisions of despair: willing to not be oneself, not willing to be a self at all, and, finally, to will to be a new self. Kierkegaard categorizes each of these smaller levels of despair as “despair of the earthly” (Anti-Climacus 351).

In *Our Mutual Friend*, it seems that Eugene and Mortimer, at least at first, suffer primarily from this earthly despair. However, both men appear to be faced with different sublevels. Mortimer, for instance, is quick to state that his life seems to be missing something, and is thus absurd: “show me a good opportunity,” he says, “show me something really worth being energetic about, and I’ll show you energy” (Dickens 30). It is clear that he is aware of this missing piece of life, and that he is looking for something to devote his time to. We are also given insight to the fact that Mortimer is nearly always feeling run down, when the narrator tells us that his “weariness was chronic” (Dickens 93). However, in this instance, Mortimer refuses to show his true tiredness, and, in fact, he often puts on an air of calm no matter who he is around. This is right in line with Kierkegaard's conception of the first sublevel of this despair, as he says that a common reaction to it is stoicism (Anti-Climacus 366). Through these instances, it becomes evident that Mortimer desires to get away or to be someone else with a different profession and purpose, which is indicative of Kierkegaard's second level of despair.

While Eugene initially suffers from this very same level of despair, he is faced with a different sublevel of it; namely, the will to not be a self at all. As mentioned above, Eugene seems to be unhappy with life in general, as is evidenced by his complaints about society,

and we see that he apparently wishes to be someone else, as he lies about his life. However, while he shows tendencies of this third sublevel of despair, it seems that he wishes to not have to deal with the monotony of life at all, even if he lived as another self. This despair is shown to be manifested fully when Eugene talks to Mortimer about the “sameness” of life while discussing their boat trip:

I have thought of that also...but it would be a defined and limited monotony. It would not extend beyond two people. Now, it's a question with me, Mortimer, whether a monotony defined with that precision and limited to that extent, might not be more endurable than the unlimited monotony of one's fellow-creatures. (Dickens 148).

Here, Eugene is not stating that he wishes to be a new self, but, rather, that human contact has become monotonous to the point of becoming pointless; to quote Kierkegaard, “it strikes him as ridiculous to want to be another; he maintains the relationship to his self – to that extent reflection has identified him with the self” (Anti-Climacus 355). It is through statements like this that Eugene reveals his disappointment with his life, and his penchant for blaming it on the society he has been born into. However, in the words of Lizzie Hexam, “it cannot have been Society that disturbed you;” indeed, it is not this society, but crippling existential despair.

Next is the penultimate level of conscious despair, which Kierkegaard simply calls “despair over the eternal.” At this point, the despairer realizes that he is faced with the absurd. Rather than embracing God, as Kierkegaard recommends, however, he wallows in his despair and misfortune (Kierkegaard 355). It is important to note, though, that absurdism does not require devotion to the Judeo-Christian God; it simply states that, to rise above absurdity, one must become a champion of some cause. This is also referred to as becoming a Knight of Faith, which will be described in greater detail later.

Eugene appears to reach this level of conscious despair while he is on his deathbed talking to Lizzie. Rather than devoting himself to a cause and accepting the absurd, which Kierkegaard states is “the only thing that could save him” (de Silentio 126), Eugene seems content to flounder in his own despair. He laments that Lizzie has “thrown that [her heart]

away,” and when she insists that she had not thrown it away, but, instead, had given it to Eugene, he cries “The very same thing, my dear Lizzie!” (Dickens 734). Further, just as Kierkegaard states that the ultimate struggle of the despairer is to wish for death (Anti-Climacus 341), so Eugene struggles with this wish: “I have been thinking whether or not it is the best thing I can do, to die.” Finally, at the end of Chapter XI of Book Four, he laments about his “wasted youth,” and shouts that he “ought to die, my dear!” (Dickens 735).

Finally, the despairer comes to terms with his despair. This final level is what Kierkegaard calls “demonic despair,” or “despair to be oneself;” while it does not assume that the sufferer has stopped reveling in his own despair (Kierkegaard states that this is natural when faced with the absurd), it is distinctly marked by the subject surrendering to a higher power. However, what makes this despair demonic is that the sufferer realizes he is in despair, and is crying out for help from a higher power, yet no aid ever arrives. However, this calling out is futile, because “even if at this point God in Heaven and all His angels were to offer him help out of it – no, now he doesn't want it, now it is too late, he once would have given everything to be rid of this torment but was made to wait” (Kierkegaard, 369).

Eugene's despair does not reach this final point; Kierkegaard states that this despair is “seldom seen in the world,” and that it is most often seen in classical Greek poetry (Anti-Climacus 370). Instead, we see a marked change in Eugene after his confrontation with the absurd: he goes on to marry Lizzie, and, as the narrator states, “she should see how his wife had changed him!” (Dickens 789). Instead of succumbing to his despair and dying, as he wished to do (but, as Kierkegaard paradoxically states, he cannot), he has finally settled down and married, even when it was arguably absurd to do so. After all, Eugene readily admits at one point to Mortimer that he really has no idea why he is smitten with Lizzie, as she is below his class. The fact that he marries her anyway, despite the effects this has on their social status, makes this his leap of faith.

According to Kierkegaard, one can only overcome his despair when he aligns himself with a cause that is one of total faith; indeed, to the rational person, this Knight of Faith is acting irrationally, because he is committing himself fully to a cause that is not readily apparent to anyone else. Indeed, Kierkegaard states that one must act entirely on faith,

because “the only thing that can save him is the absurd,” and, to face the absurd, he must take the leap of faith (de Silentio, 126). Eugene's marriage to Lizzie is what allows him to throw off the shackles of his despair and face the absurd. In marrying Lizzie, Eugene is not only marrying below his status, but he is also running the risk of ruining Lizzie's reputation. However, they marry out of love, despite these risks and in spite of the stigma they may face from others; indeed, as the Dane states, “when someone is to leap he must certainly do it alone” (Clamachus 241). Eugene certainly does act alone in marrying Lizzie, and, in doing so, faces the absurdity of his life and ultimately becomes the Kierkegaardian ideal, rising to the ranks of Abraham and Mary, the only two people whom Kierkegaard claimed were true knights of faith (de Silentio 131).

While Charles Dickens surely never knew Søren Kierkegaard personally, the similarities between the existential crises of the characters of *Our Mutual Friend* and those of Kierkegaard's pseudonymous writers are, to say the least, uncanny. Though existential criticism of a text has, in the past, been underused, it is of great use to us as readers; as Goodwin mentions, it is through a philosophical approach to literary texts that we are able to understand what we value (Goodwin 19). Indeed, by applying an absurdist approach to *Our Mutual Friend*, we are given an example of what Kierkegaard would say is the greatest value of all: the leap of faith. Through the actions of Mortimer Lightwood and Eugene Wrayburn, we are treated to the fall and subsequent rise of men faced with the absurd, which, as Kierkegaard states, is a problem that plagues all of humanity; perhaps we would be wise to follow Eugene's example.

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