**“Shall I bite it?” – Sexuality and the Biting Male in Dickens**

When unctuous Seth Pecksniff makes his assault upon Mary Graham, it is with “a dash of the crocodile” (49; bk.2, ch. 4). Associated with excessive sexual desire, the parodic crocodile was one of a number of Dickensian metaphorical beasts used to signify the predatory lusty male. With a name that suggests an animal’s ineffectual rooting around for choice morsels, Pecksniff, despite his pretensions to refinement, is associated through this name with the “lower” animalistic senses of the nose and mouth and their connotations of primal appetites.[[1]](#endnote-1) Ian Watt, in his essay “Oral Dickens,” observes that Pecksniff is a “compulsively oral” character (168). Exploring this premise further, however, shows that Pecksniff’s drive to consume goes beyond swallowing young architects and their ideas, or the greedy devouring of Mrs. Todger’s dinners, to reveal an erotically charged construction. There is an ingenious irony in Pecksniff’s metonymic “familiar,” the crocodile, since despite his frequent crocodile tears, he is not as toothless as he first appears but is in fact cunningly and forcefully libidinous.[[2]](#endnote-2) Pecksniff, as a sly beast lurking beneath social waters, enters the Victorian imagination with all the negative traits of the deviant sexual glutton.

Tactile Pecksniff, forever seizing and pressing the hands of friends and relations, spies pretty Mary Graham alone in the garden and launches his offensive by first kissing his *own* hand as if in practice for what is to come.[[3]](#endnote-3) Once Mary is ensnared, he forcibly entwines her fingers with his in a barely disguised erotic imitation of “communion” — to paraphrase Pecksniff.[[4]](#endnote-4) Tracing “the course of one delicate blue vein with his fat thumb,” he slaps, then rubs Mary’s hand before holding up her little finger and asking, “shall I bite it?” (417; bk.12, ch. 30). That the encounter with Mary is meant to be read as sexual is implied through Dickens’s description of Pecksniff immediately after the encounter: not only is he said to be “hot, and pale” and “shrunk and reduced,” but even his hair is “limp” (417; bk.12, ch. 30).

In this essay, I examine the erotic energy of Dickensian mouths through the phenomenon of biting as an expression of primal male sexuality. I assess the role of biting in the early works, *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1844), *The Pickwick Papers* (1836-37), and *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1840-41), as a comic device for exploring predatory sexuality; I then consider how the biting impulse in *Dombey and Son* (1846-8) and *David Copperfield* (1849-50) becomes a darker metaphor, almost normalized, as a sign of masculine sexuality. It is a drive that threatens to destabilize the rise and progress of its middle-class perpetrators through its obsessive configuration.

Biting violently punctures boundaries between civility and animality and, in Dickens’s writing, often represents fetishized sexual behavior. It is a taboo that transgresses all social codes and conspicuously defies the elaborate language of nineteenth-century courtship. As a failure of restraint, it is also a means for Dickens to expose anxieties of middle-class male sexuality. Pecksniff is just one of his biting males, ranging from comically grotesque characters in earlier works, such as the “fat boy” in *Pickwick Papers*,and Quilp, to a less comical and more problematic form embodied in Jonathan Carker, and David Copperfield. In Victorian sexual poetics, lust and desire often congregate at the mouth with its fleshy lips, shining teeth, agile tongue and dark interior. Dickens, that most oral of writers, exploits the erotics of this orifice, its fluidity and its agency in bodily communion. Not only is the mouth a clearly visible erogenous zone but, in Dickens, the biting mouth has the power to destabilize corporeal, social, and psychological boundaries as it penetrates the body of another. With this act — or the threat of it — Dickens brings primal man into the middle-class home.

**Biting and the Dickensian Gentleman**

Through the poetics and semiotics of the mouth, Dickens, interrogates and deconstructs the edifice of the “gentleman,” exposing the predatory sexual male beneath. The Victorian model of the gentleman was not of course fixed but, as Herbert Sussman explains, “formations of Victorian manhood may be set along a continuum of degrees of self-regulation” (3). At the ideal end of the spectrum lay the hegemonic bourgeois ideal of a moderate and disciplined man and much further along, somewhere before the unconstrained hedonist, was the middle-class aspirant struggling to control his primal appetites. The self-discipline required to maintain a semblance of that ideal — an aspect that seems to fascinate Dickens — pivoted on the deflection of sexual need and could only be achieved by channeling that distinctly male energy into hard work, moral superiority, chastity, and family pursuits. Pecksniff, Pickwick, Carker and Copperfield appear to be striving to achieve such idealistic bourgeois restraint but, through the semiotics of Dickensian biting, a fundamentally aggressive libido is exposed. Hyperbolic dedication to family and/or business functions as a key structural irony in these novels which, when juxtaposed with the “uncivilized” pursuit of sexual fulfilment, highlights the fragility of the whole enterprise.

It is notable that the necessary displacement into hard work included “brain-work” — in other words, the work of the professional classes— thus locating problematic primal drives in the middle-class male psyche.[[5]](#endnote-5) Yoking sexual purity and hard work to the gentleman extended to the male writer who was not supposed to “intensify the Erotic but rather desexualize an eroticized desire” into the constructive activity of bourgeois man, “business, ambition and accumulation” (Sussman 37). Dickens, however, within this strange context of rampant urban capitalism and Evangelical piety, actively engages with the question of what it means to be a gentleman by undermining the concept through the semiotics of the mouth. By imagining pleasure in extreme forms of consumption — the masculine desire to bite into another’s body — he challenges “manly” progress with a visceral deviant act.

Male biting, therefore, has a constitutive function in shaping the boundaries of civilized masculinity by pointing out its contradictions. In Dickens, biting, as an analogue for sex, is a means for men to imprint their desire *into* the body. When Pecksniff holds Mary’s finger up for biting, he makes the female body not only pleasurable but material; biting breaks through the surface of the body, radically highlighting its three-dimensional aspect and drawing attention to flesh. It is in this way that Mary becomes momentarily embodied despite being more usually considered as the “absent center of almost every male’s sexual desire” (Turley Houston 78). “Subdue your appetites, my dears and you’ve conquered human nature,” declares Squeers to Nicholas Nickleby, but Dickens returns throughout his work to what happens when men not only succumb but revel in those appetites (58; bk.2, ch.5).

**Patterns of Biting in the Early Novels: *The Pickwick Papers* and *The Old Curiosity Shop***

In Dickens, fetishized biting is presented as a deeply pleasurable instinct. Robert E. Polhemus, in *Comic Faith*, asserts that Dickens “had an abnormally strong oral fixation” and in analysing how this impacts on characterization he divides characters into “suckers,” the passive dependent types, and “biters,” the aggressive vigorous types (114). Discussing Pecksniff’s world, Polhemus rightly asserts that “mouths…are always busy in the oral universe of *Martin Chuzzlewit*” (113). James E. Marlow, in *Charles Dickens: The Uses of Time,* similarly contends that in the same novel, “biters bite to repletion” (87). What these comments recognize is Dickens’s affinity for the mouth as the hub of social, physical and psychosexual relations, where the oral overlaps with the corporeal both physically and linguistically.

The male Dickensian mouth is invested with a busy, bawdy Rabelaisian aspect in early works, yet this is often overlaid on a brutal subtext. Biters have an oral complexity; their comic exuberance belies a sadistic impulse to incorporate the other, although not always suggestive of a vampiric transformative coupling — that occurs later in his work with Jonathan Carker attempting to transmute Edith Dombey into a “French” mistress and with David Copperfield and Uriah Heep in their distinctly oral-sadistic relationship. The almost indiscriminate lust of early works aligns more closely with anthropophagy — cannibalism —through the conflation of food, bodies and illicit satisfaction. While Dickens professed abhorrence towards the idea of “survival cannibalism”, such as that rumored to have occurred on the Franklin expedition, he was paradoxically open to exploring cannibalism as a metaphor for sexual pleasure.[[6]](#endnote-6) From childhood, he was fascinated by the tale of *Little Red Riding Hood*, musing on “that dissembling Wolf” in his article *The Christmas Tree* (291). In a similar cast to the wolf, the figure of Blue Beard crops up in various forms throughout the novels: as a warning to inquisitive young women, as a teasing reference to secretive husbands, and as a sly reference to misunderstood husbands for example, when Sam Weller, in *The Pickwick Papers*, expresses a mordant sympathy for Blue Beard, remarking that he’s a “wictim of connubiality” (246; bk.7, ch. 20). Although critics, such as Michael Stone, have attributed Dickens’s obsession with cannibalism to the terrifying bedtime tales of his infancy, I argue that it is a more complex phenomenon.[[7]](#endnote-7) His fascination appears to emerge from the extreme sensory states that imaginary cannibalism offers, with the possibilities for encoding primal libido; biting into the human body provokes the “attraction of repulsion” response that Dickens associates with transgressive impulses, and recognizes the drive for material, bodily communion.

Between the wolf and the nobleman of many wives, lies a Dickensian middle-class cannibal with aspirations. Many nineteenth-century thinkers — not just anthropologists — considered the mouth an organ of sensuality and thus ranked it as a primitive organ, unlike the “civilized” organs of the eyes and ears. Yet biting is not presented as distinctive to the lower classes or to the primitive male but as a signifier of elemental sexuality lurking in the middle-class subject. The teleology of biting in Dickens’s work is its function in deciding which men are capable of assimilating or diverting their overflowing erotic energies, and thus able to remain within respectable society. Pecksniff, Quilp, Heep and Carker fail the test, as this paper will show.

During the late 1830s and early 40s — the period of *The Pickwick Papers* and *The Old Curiosity Shop* — sensationalist representations of cannibalism were a distinct trend in popular culture.[[8]](#endnote-8) Alongside gothic tales that provoked terror and disgust, there was also a fashion for of comedy-cannibalism, on the stage and in print, loaded with irreverent sexuality. It came to the fore partly through the rapid growth of the anatomy class and the rise of the barber-surgeon, reflecting and causing much anxiety about male appetite and the naked body, especially the naked female body.[[9]](#endnote-9) As the human body was increasingly observed, studied, and objectified through physiological work, the “hands-on” role of the medical student became a staple figure of popular culture. Dickens’s medical students, Bob Sawyer and Ben Allen in *The Pickwick Papers*,are fine examples; “Nothing like dissecting, to give one an appetite” declares Bob Sawyer to his friend Ben Allen (365; bk.11, ch.30). The two students discuss the dissection of human parts while gorging, nonchalantly, on legs and oysters — two foods well-known for their erotic connotations. Pickwick’s description of the students as “overflowing” with “animal spirits” is reinforced by Sam Weller’s observation that Mr. Allen “has got a barrel o’ oysters atween his knees, vich he’s a-openin’ like steam” (364; bk.11, ch.30). Weller’s idiosyncratic vernacular allows for cruder observations than can be permitted of Pickwick and signal to the knowing reader a surprising range of sexual allusions. Not only does Sam comment that the two students are smoking cigars — an oral-phallic trope for the predatory Dickensian male — but in specifying the position of the oysters, the association with female genitalia seems likely.[[10]](#endnote-10)

With an implied male audience for this distinctly homosocial novel, the semiotics of masculine appetites have been well noted. Auden’s witty essay “Dingley Dell and the Fleet” (1962) contends that Pickwick gradually falls from a state of naïve grace into a condition of sinful experience but, as later critics such as John Lucas point out, this is not an accidental phenomenon because Pickwick “deliberately chooses to enter the fallen world” (1). Good and evil are not discretely quarantined from each other in this novel, as Garrett Stewart claims, since the transit between the two states is made manifest through the mouth and appetites, where boundaries blur (89). Pickwick takes himself increasingly into the spheres of temptation, from prowling outside a boarding house for young ladies to the fleshly delights of Bath. Critics, including Kincaid and Turley Houston, no longer regard Pickwick as absolutely naïve but have tended to locate his sexual energy in exuberant infantilism — what Kincaid calls “full childhood sexuality” (237). Brian W. McCuskey rightly identifies the limitations in those arguments that locate Pickwick’s sexuality in infantile oral drives, as “Pickwickian regression begins to sound suspiciously like Pickwickian innocence, writ now from a psychoanalytic point of view” (246). Dickens, too, seems to warn against such innocent readings in the observation that Sam and Mary’s carpet-shaking “is not half as innocent a thing as it looks,” which could apply equally to Pickwick (493; bk.14, ch.39). Rather, the novel sets out to deconstruct middle class innocence through amplifying Pickwick’s naïvety as parody and through simultaneously opening up a sexualized dialogic inquiry between middle-class man and servant. By this process, fantasies of middle-class sexual relations are mediated in the mouths of the servant class and lower middle-class aspirants, such as the medical students. Pickwick’s habit of intruding into the frequent scenes of intimacy does not, as he claims, “remove any slight coloring of impropriety,” but rather highlights the eroticism by aligning him with those “biters” Sam Weller, the fat boy, and the medical students (606; bk.17, ch.48).

Beneath the cannibal humor in the novel, a deviant pattern is discernible where biting is thinly veiled through oral metaphors of taste. Bob Sawyer is encouraged to court Ben Allen’s sister Arabella but as Bob informs him, in the language of consumption, he has already been rejected; “It happens unfortunately, that that single blemish is a want of taste. She don’t like me’ (599; bk.17, ch.48). Allen rejects the very idea of female discrimination and instead metaphorically feeds his sister to his friend;

“I wish”, said Mr. Ben Allen, setting his teeth together, and speaking more like a savage warrior who fed upon raw wolf’s flesh which he carved with his fingers, than a peaceable young gentleman who ate minced veal with a knife and fork — “I wish I knew whether any rascal has been tampering with her” (599-600; bk.17, ch.48).

The “raw wolf’s flesh” is a striking image accentuated by the bathetic comparison of “minced veal,” and produces a conflation of Arabella, her “taste” and the pale flesh of the veal. Homosocial comedy-cannibalism serves to contain the oral eroticism suggested by these two biters who lust after and over-indulge in fleshly bodies.

Dickens is fascinated by the tensions between sexual consumption and restraint that converge at the mouth. In *The Pickwick Papers*, this fraught relationship is further explored through Joe, the fat boy, an embodiment of indulgent sensuality. On his first appearance, his unlimited carnivorous appetite is primarily comedic; whilst unpacking a picnic for Pickwick and his friends, he “leered horribly upon the food” and hung “fondly over a capon … bestowing an ardent gaze upon its plumpness” (48; bk.2, ch.4). But whilst James Kincaid asserts that “laughter in *The Pickwick Papers* rejects all that is predatory and possessive”, I argue that there is a deliberate darkening of the fat boy’s desire towards aggressive sexuality as he matures through the novel (Kincaid 23). “I wants to make your flesh creep,” roars the fat boy as he discloses his voyeuristic secrets to an old woman (93; bk.3, ch.8). His propensity for voyeurism foreshadows his deviance; often to be found spying on love scenes, he watches intensely “the progress of morsels from the dishes to the mouths of the company, with a kind of dark and gloomy joy” (344; bk.10, ch.28).[[11]](#endnote-11) His gloating gaze becomes “a semi-cannibalic leer,” when Dickens more clearly aligns biting into food with sexual penetration. The fat boy finally interrupts his meal to register a pretty girl and, sitting with a meat pie in front of him, he “ogles” the girl and plunges into the pie “up to the very ferules of the knife and fork” (682; bk.19, ch.54).

The consumption of the female body as meat is a recurrent metaphor linked with middle-class men as mass consumers. *The Swell’s Night Guide* (1849) is one of many guides for the young man-about-town seeking leisure and pleasure. Reprinted twenty times, this popular title — the “Young Man’s Best Companion” —describes itself as a “polishing school” for the uninitiated young man (13). Aimed at the middle classes and above, — the “perfumed sprig of nobility, slipped from its parent aristocratic tree,” — it declares that “Yes, the flesh market is here unsurpassed for its choice and delicate variety, from the tender lamb to the most ripened mutton” (14). Such language recalls the “cannibal scene” in *Martin Chuzzlewit* when the “strong-minded woman” announce that “If Mr. George Chuzzlewit has anything to say to *me…*I beg him to speak out, like a man, and; and not to look at me and my daughters as if he could eat us.” Mr. George responds, “If I was a cannibal…I think it would occur to me that a lady who has outlived three husbands and suffered so very little from their loss, must be most uncommonly tough” (55; bk.2, ch.4).

Published under a pseudonym, the *Swell’s Guide* exemplifies the currency of cannibalism within the culture of middle-class male pleasure. Many of the “establishments” were in areas frequented by Dickens and his friends. As the guide explains, in the Royal Saloon Piccadilly, “gentleman is here sure to meet with the gentleman, the scholar with the scholar” (15).

In *The Pickwick Papers* the servant class, who have dispensation to expend their sexual energy with relative freedom, offer an alternative reading of middle-class sexual libido. Pickwick shares a meal with the libidinous Tupman — whose name suggests an unexpected crudeness since “tup” is defined as “of the ram: To copulate with” in the Oxford English Dictionary.[[12]](#endnote-12) During the meal, Pickwick’s slow-motion consumption of a piece of meat is interrupted with news of Rachel’s elopement; he “had raised his fork to his lips, and was on the very point of opening his mouth for the reception of the piece of beef” (99; bk.4, ch.9). The association of the girl’s elopement and, thus, sexual awakening, with eating the piece of meat seems to intimate that Pickwick is a putative “biter”.

This scene is revised for the fat boy showing a servant’s broader scope in metaphors of flesh and penetration; when he fails to “ravish a kiss” from Mary, he eats “a pound or so of steak” instead (684; bk.19, ch.54). Similarly, Sam Weller’s gaze is drawn to a strangely cannibalistic print-seller’s image which depicts two “modern” cannibals salivating over a pair of skewered hearts (403; bk.12, ch.33). McCuskey argues that the representation in the novel of master-servant erotics “seems strangely evacuated of either sexual violence or oppression” but I argue that there are significant exceptions, most notably with the fat boy (253). While the tone might be comic and his demeanor often languid, he is also described as roaring, leering, grabbing and masticating, initially at food but increasingly in the presence of attractive females. Equally symbolic is the way in which the fat boy revises the limits of normative middle-class sexuality. The middle class male expended excess sexual energy by “slumming with the servants” thus avoiding endangering middle-class females, but the fat boy penetrates Pickwick’s flesh in an arresting class reversal, thus, testing the boundaries of male libido further.[[13]](#endnote-13) As McCuskey argues, the overlapping of homosocial and homoerotic bonds, which is a central element in the novel, is afforded by locating those bonds in a “socially sanctioned and institutional relation such as the family, or in this case, the master-servant relation” (263). In the fat boy’s urgent desire to communicate (and bond) with Pickwick, the exchange conflates penetrating flesh, whispering in ears, and biting:

“What the devil did you run sharp instruments into Mr. Pickwick’s legs for?” enquired Wardle, angrily.

“He wouldn’t look at me,” replied the boy. “I wanted to speak to him.”

“What did you want to say?” demanded Wardle, shaking him.

“Stop,” said Mr. Pickwick; “allow me. What did you wish to communicate to me, my poor boy?”

“I want to whisper to you,” replied the fat boy.

“You want to bite his ear off, I suppose,” said Wardle (688; bk.20, ch. 54.)

The intimacy the boy desires — the wish to touch and whisper to Pickwick — is quickly dispelled by Dickens, as Wardle has him “taken down stairs,” relocated to a safe distance from the middle-class dining room. At that moment, the heterosexual plot is reasserted with Mr. Winkle, the “captive lover,” emerging from the bedroom to greet the astonished diners (688). Biting and penetrating male flesh surfaces here in a different sort of tone than we usually encounter with the creeping rapacious fat boy. He is weeping and the comedy is muted, until Winkle appears.

In the early works, the depiction of biting into flesh as figurative cannibalism relies strongly on caricature as a means to moderate the allusion but this is complicated in the characterization of Quilp. Often considered the quintessential caricatured cannibal, much of critical commentary focuses on his supernatural goblin origins from myth and legend. Reading Quilp’s oral disposition, however, reveals a more complex psychosexual characterization and a radical presentation of the pleasures of biting. On the surface, his biting habits may appear to be an overwrought Dickensian gesture but, compared to Nell’s dreamscapes, Quilp’s biting sexuality — and biting tongue — provide a riveting tactility in the material world.

Through the threat of biting, Dickens presents animality in the marital bedroom but not as a problematic dynamic. Quilp’s primal sexuality is not only unregulated and all-consuming, but he also symbolizes a pleasure in pain that continuously disrupts middle-class social order. Hablôt Knight Browne’s illustrations for *The Old Curiosity Shop* foreground these disruptive primal instincts, depicting Quilp leering out of a tavern window next to a sign advertising “Acco[mmodation for] Man [&] Beast; the only visibly complete words being “man” and “beast.” Dickens deliberately places Quilp at the intersection of both creatures; he is human, but with beastly appetites. Emphasizing his crudeness in the illustration, Quilp’s mouth is stretched wide to better display his stumpy, broken teeth as a grotesque signifier of the sexually open. Yet, at the same time, Dickens was explicit in his intention to make Quilp one of the “grotesque and wild, but *not impossible* companions” [my italics] and, thus, to complicate Quilp’s persona, he presents him as an “attractive” husband.[[14]](#endnote-14)

“Good-looking” Mrs. Quilp is said to have allied herself to her husband in “one of those strange infatuations” but Dickens relates Quilp’s wider appeal to the middle-class women of the neighborhood (34; bk.8, ch.4). They agree “by a little understanding amongst themselves” to visit Mrs. Quilp’s “bower” just at a time when Quilp himself might be expected to appear (33; bk.8, ch.4). They have come for titillation and fittingly the talk is of marital relations, with its reference to Mrs. Quilp conducting herself “in that manner” and with “no respect for herself” (36; bk.8, ch.4). In response to the talk of Quilp’s marital “dominion,” however, Mrs. Quilp, smiling and blushing, offers the pointed riposte: “if I was to die tomorrow, Quilp could marry anybody he pleased — now that he could, I know!” (36; bk.8, ch.4). Emphasizing Quilp’s sexual credentials she underscores his “allure” when she declares that “the best-looking woman here couldn’t refuse him if I was dead, and she was free, and he chose to make love to her” (37; bk.8, ch.4). Behind the women’s feigned indignation at such an allegation, their sexual desire is discernible – they would “*like* to see him dare … *like* to see the faintest approach to such a thing” [my italics] (36; bk.8, ch.4). Quilp is a sexually attractive catch.

As the women talk of the need to tame the “symptoms of the tiger” — masculine sexual behavior in the early stages of marriage with its connotations of animality and fangs — Quilp makes an entrance (38; bk.8, ch.4). Dickens raises the sexual tension higher, as he draws attention to the erotics of communal eating with Quilp’s reassurance that it is “not anything unwholesome,” thereby implying the very opposite. Quilp’s appetite is orgiastic; he hints “with a grin” at the idea of sexual communion with each of the women present through having “a score of mothers-in-law at the same time— and what a blessing that would be” (40; bk.8, ch.4). Dickens shows how these hints should be understood when Mrs. Jinwin giggles at the idea and reminds him that he is already wedded (40; bk.8, ch.4). Quilp’s carnivorous appetite is purposely conflated with married sexual desire when, looking at his “delicious” wife, he is described as “smacking his lips as if this were no figure of speech, and she were actually a sweetmeat” (41; bk.8, ch.4). Alone with his wife in a makeshift bedroom, Quilp remarks “if you ever listen to these beldames again, I’ll bite you,” yet this is tolerated with no shriek from his wife and no exclamation mark in the text, serving to diminish the threat (42; bk.9, ch.5). Reinforcing this reading, Knight Brown’s illustration presents Mrs. Quilp lifting her skirt to reveal rather a lot of ankle, as if she is in some way complicit.

Biting is a complex metaphor in Quilp: he bites his nails and the air, taunts a chained-up dog to bite *him*, and assures a parent “I don’t eat babies; I don’t like ‘em” (165; bk.18, ch. 21). He compounds his threat to bite his wife, by promising to set his watchdogs to bite her and, in a scuffle with Dick Swiveller whom he mistakes for his wife, he “bit and hammered away” until he was dislodged. (380; bk.33, ch.5, and 106; bk.14, ch.13). In Dickensian poetics, however, this repetitive biting and oral lust, while not entirely normalizing the grotesque, create a sense that they are tolerated. Quilp is undoubtedly an impish comical character and biting symbolizes his bestial propensities, but he is the extreme version of a self-made man whose biting represents a fetish for colonization and accumulation. His greed for property supplements his fetish for colonizing the female body, from Sally Brass to Little Nell. Women seem to recognize this code, even Nell, subconsciously, as she gazes on Quilp lying asleep in her bed, transfixed for a few moments by his wide-open growling mouth (102; bk.13, ch.12). Within this configuration, Dickens creates a space to present fecund male sexuality in Quilp, whom he calls “the lord of creation” when he “blazes away all night” with Mrs Quilp (42; bk.8, ch.4). The phrase, from Robert Burns’s poem *The Twa Dogs*, may well allude to the lines that a person might not be so wretched as supposed and for Mrs Quilp at least:

They're sae accustom'd wi' the sight,   
The view o't gies them little fright.[[15]](#endnote-15)

What can be Quilp’s attraction, Dickens wants us to ask. Perversely, Quilp is after all the only father in the novel, albeit his paternity of the Marchioness is not explicitly acknowledged in the published version of the text. His fertile sexuality is a castrating power, signified early in the novel by his devouring of “the tails of gigantic prawns” (45; bk.8, ch.5). Those who cannot bite, like the chained dog he taunts, are simply impotent. A biting power seems to engender an impotent awe in others which, while not exactly condoned, becomes almost acceptable.

Jeremy Tambling rightly argues that Quilp is “de-centred, not in control of his own drama” and “we do not need character analyses of him, as though he were reducible to realist explanation” (66-67). In this way, the oral-phallic power located in Quilp is not exclusive to him but is a phenomenon that circulates amongst other males in the novel as an expression of excess libido. Kit’s awkwardly grotesque gyrations have more than a little resonance with Quilp, but it is in the iteration of his “uncommonly wide mouth” — which he opens and contorts frequently in Nell’s presence, — together with his “extraordinary leer” and habit of gorging on “immense mouthfuls” that edge him into the category of male biters, despite his lack of savagery (13-14; bk.4, ch.1). Locating oral excesses in a range of male characters — some of whom are admittedly “schooled” by Quilp, diminishes class differences and lends them a more commonplace impression in the novel.

As Dick Swiveller’s characterization develops, his biting instinct materializes; taking hold of the underage and under-sized Marchioness, Swiveller eats her in metaphorical alternate bites:

Mr. Swiveller, holding the slice of toast or cup of tea in his left hand, and taking a bite or drink as the case might be, constantly kept, in his right hand, one palm of the Marchioness tight locked; and to shake, or even to kiss this imprisoned hand, he would stop every now and then, in the very act of swallowing, with perfect seriousness of intention, and the utmost gravity (489; bk.11, ch.66).

Quilp’s urge to bite for pleasure, then, is a shared perversion. Interestingly, Dickens identifies Dick Swiveller’s neighborhood as “Drury Lane,” not just famous for its theater venues but as a slum area notorious for lower-class prostitution and under-age girls. He lives above a tobacconist’s shop but many of these enterprises were fronts for brothels. Mr. Swiveller, “the bachelor” is quite possibly situated here to suggest a man familiar with transactional sexual relationships. Homosocial connections based on voracious and shared consumption of the female body are central to the novel; Nell is offered to Dick by her brother Fred — when she will be “almost” sixteen — and offered again to Dick, by Quilp (62; bk.10, ch.7). Even Mr. Brass who “seemed to have changed sexes with his sister” understands well the connection between biting and male pleasure (499; bk.41, ch.66). Forced to drink Quilp’s fiery rum in a queer communion, he describes the experience as “very biting! and yet it’s like being tickled — there’s a pleasure in it too, sir” (464; bk.39, ch.62).

**Normalizing Biting in the Middle-Class Male**

Dickens’s notion of the biting human male is a radical departure from the more usual anthropocentric narratives of nineteenth-century discourse. From the cannibal trope in the early work, he develops the biting male into a less bestial and non-comic form. Although the biting male is often rendered through animal metaphors, in Dickens, human biting or threatening to bite another comes to be positioned as a human trait as much as an animal one. In this new dynamic, biting becomes a symbol of complex sexual communication not just coercion, evident in the characterization of both Carker and David Copperfield. More than a transgressive act, it places the mouth at the axis of interpersonal relationships.

The literary mouth, as an erotogenic junction between the interior and the exterior body, draws attention to the meeting point and communion of bodies. Dickensian poetics reflect this relationship, producing patterns of male sexuality in the oral nature and idiom of the protagonists. Such relations coexist with his frequently direct expression of conservative values, thus, the resulting tensions reveal an agitated ambivalence in the narration. Sexuality in Dickens’s novels has often been read as stereotypically restrictive and confused, but the semiotics and poetics of the mouth contradict this reading. As Barickman, Macdonald and Stark point out,

In a curious way, the suppression of genital sexuality from the notice of the respectable Victorian reading public caused both writers and readers to be preternaturally sensitive to the nuances of sexual expression in every area of social and personal life (4).

Since where, how and what people eat is highly regulated and culturally determined, biting is a both cultural and sexual force in the novels. Recalling Polhemus’s taxonomy of biters and suckers, John Berger’s “The Eaters and the Eaten,” analyses how the bourgeois subject “approaches” and complicates his object of desire; “On the bourgeois table, everything that can be is kept untouched and separate … the meal is a series of discrete, untouched gifts” (63). The “eaten” becomes invested with notions of a special reward and has an extrinsic value abstracted beyond its intrinsic capacity to satisfy the appetite. In this way, when later Dickensian male characters bite into another body it represents more than simple libidinal urge. Within this semiotic system, the teeth present a complex synecdochal function superbly executed in Carker, the business manager in *Dombey and Son*:

Mr. Carker was a gentleman thirty-eight or forty years old, of a florid complexion, and with two unbroken rows of glistening teeth, whose regularity and whiteness were quite distressing. It was impossible to escape the observation of them, for he showed them whenever he spoke; and bore so wide a smile upon his countenance (a smile, however, very rarely, indeed, extending beyond his mouth), that there was something in it like the snarl of a cat. (183; bk.4, ch.13)

In Carker, male biting is elevated out of the ranks of servants and lower-middle class men to feature in the figure of the gentleman, too. A ravenous, apparently successful consumer, Carker’s teeth glisten and vibrate with their own erotic energy (330; bk.7, ch.22). His gentlemanly status is cleverly distorted and undermined in the “regularity and whiteness” of his teeth; to Victorians, who suffered terrible dental problems and often worse dentures, perfect teeth suggested fakery, vanity and unnatural concerns with the body. Given the usual state of middle-aged Victorian teeth, it is likely that Carker’s are meant to be perceived as false. More significant still is the phrase “it was impossible to escape the observation of them;” Carker’s teeth function here as the lure for his prey, a sort of physiognomic trap. The lure is critical to the phenomenon of sexual fetish, since the fetish works by attracting the gaze and provoking curiosity. In Laura Mulvey’s ground-breaking essays on fetishism she explains that the fetish “does not want its forms to be overlooked but to be gloried in” (xiv). Carker’s teeth are indeed “gloried in” as they bristle and dazzle.

Carker’s bite exists as a perpetual threat rather than a fully realized act, but it is the suspension of his bite, embodied in the display of his teeth, that creates sexual tension. This is most effective in his pursuit of Edith; his white teeth “glisten” as he “approaches Edith, more as if he meant to bite her, than to taste the sweets that linger on her lips” (469, bk.10, ch.31). That his teeth glisten draws attention not just to their beacon-like effect but to their vigor. Like Uriah Heep, Carker presents an almost genderless, fluid and predatory sexuality. Prefigured by Mrs. Pipchin’s “old black cat, who generally lay coiled upon the center foot of the fender, purring egotistically,” Carker basks at Dombey’s side (113; bk.3, ch.3). He has “the snarl of a cat,” is “desperately cat-like” and “feline from sole to crown” with a voice like a “purr” (249; bk.6, ch.17 and 330; bk.7, ch.22). Assigning female gender to cats, irrespective of their actual gender, was common to nineteenth-century discourse on the feline animal and implied a promiscuous and vicious sexuality.[[16]](#endnote-16) Thus, Carker’s latent cat-like bite, symbolized by his prominent teeth, is directed promiscuously at both men and women. Similarly, his malign smile is forced and artificial, locating it with an animalistic baring of teeth to denote aggression.

Carker’s teeth are a vector of sexuality, having both magnitude in their ordered brilliance and a sense of direction when he bestows his smile on someone. This semiotic comes to characterize his vampiric relationship with Dombey, whom he attempts to bleed dry. When luring Dombey into a false sense of security Dickens writes that Carker “continued with a smile, softly laying his velvet hand, as a cat might have laid its sheathed claws, on Mr. Dombey’s arm” (633; bk.14, ch.42). In an incident when Dombey falls from his horse, Carker, “with the flush and hurry of this action red upon him…bent over his prostrate chief with every tooth disclosed” (635; bk.14, ch.42). He takes great pleasure at the prospect of anyone, man or woman, being penetrated by tooth or claw. In this case, he is excited by Dombey’s injury from the horse’s iron-shod feet. Dickens draws attention to Carker’s flushed animation, when he writes that, as Carker sets off to report Dombey’s accident, he rides “as if he hunted men and women” (636; bk.14, ch.42).[[17]](#endnote-17) The horse, and horse-riding especially, was a sign of sexual dominance in Victorian iconography and it is worth noting that it is Dombey who falls from his horse, whilst Carker is “quick of eye, steady of hand and a good horseman” (635).

For Carker, whose teeth signify the power to penetrate, the puncturing of the skin’s boundary is a much sought-after pleasure. We see this when Mr. Toots, attacked by Florence’s dog, Diogenes, falls down with the dog’s teeth gripping his leg, Carker watches transfixed. Dickens points out that Carker makes no attempt to assist but, instead, sits at a distance in trance-like observation of poor bitten Mr. Toots. Carker is stimulated by what he witnesses. When he eventually rides over to Toots, significantly remaining mounted, it is Dickens’s description of Carker’s smile as “propitiatory” that is especially compelling. In seeming to empathize with dog, Carker transposes Diogenes’ teeth with his own, ‘“If the dog’s teeth have entered the leg, Sir—' began Carker, with a display of his own” (336; bk.7, ch.22). Mr. Toots blushes at Carker’s teeth and attentions and hands him his calling card, only wishing that he could signify to Carker that “he liked [the bite] very much” (336). Queer biting enters Dickens’s work here, which he returns to in *David Copperfield*.

Dombey, too, is uncannily lured by Carker. Although he is not usually emotionally attuned, he cannot help responding to Carker’s grotesque oral charisma; during a business meeting, Dombey senses that with Carker there “seemed to lurk a stronger latent sense of power than usual” (183; bk.4, ch.13). Dickens describes this power as having great reach through Carker’s network of spies and contacts, which Carker appears to control through a flash of his teeth. His ability to read the landscape and assess danger is animalistic in its instinctiveness. In his natural habitat, the office, this translates to a voracious consumption of words; he reads multiple languages at great speed and has a singular acuity, “if there had been anything in the offices of Dombey and Son that he could *not* read, there would have been a card wanting in the pack” (316; bk7, ch.22). This uncanny ability, a sort of hyper-vigilance, is extra-human, emphasizing his sensual scope and reach. It presents Carker’s oral and linguistic mastery as a complement to his feline cunning. That Carker even thinks with his teeth, establishes their potent synecdochal agency. His teeth do not just mediate, they scout: “That passage, which was in a postscript, attracted his …teeth, once more” (319; bk7, ch.2).

Carker self-consciously presents himself to the world as an artful and effortless arrangement with his unreal teeth as the showpiece. Dickens highlights the irony in pointed descriptions of Carker’s effortful attention to appearance, comparing it to sly, feline vanity:

In whose sly look and watchful manner; in whose false mouth, stretched but not laughing; in whose spotless cravat and very whiskers; even in whose silent passing of his soft hand over his white linen and his smooth face; there was something desperately cat-like (251; bk.6, ch.17).

In Dickens’s oral economy of desire, Carker’s display of teeth is exceptional because Victorian conventional etiquette required a firmly closed mouth. Michael Sonstroem writing on Victorian art argues that “depicting a subject with teeth showing is so rare, we may assume that any display of teeth holds meaning” (352). The same premise is true of Victorian novels, where the open mouth often encodes an impulsive sensualist character, usually a female. In Knight Brown’s illustration, “Mr. Carker introduces himself to Florence and the Skettles family,” he is baring his teeth at Florence. But in the ironically titled, “Mr. Carker in his hour of triumph,” when Edith has destroyed Carker’s proposal, laying his “sensual rest” and “voluptuous retirement” to rest, he covers his mouth with his hand in defeat. From sophisticated, civilized gent, one of the last images depicts him like a mad dog: “the foam was on his lips” (807; bk.17, ch. 54). Unable to manage his appetites, Carker is a Dickensian gentleman felled by his primal appetite.

Dickens turns to the figure of the vicious dog again, in *David Copperfield*. In this novel, however, he releases biting from its satirical origins to express a more mature form of masculine sexuality. Once David’s stepfather Mr. Murdstone installs himself into the home, David is increasingly denied that oral gratification embodied in his mother. In an erotic triangulation, that resonates with René Girard’s theory of mimetic desire, Clara Copperfield — now Clara Murdstone — becomes marginalized while Murdstone and David are drawn together in the battle for her attention. David senses that he is being usurped by his rival, yet subconsciously he draws closer to him. Finding himself gazing on Murdstone’s hirsute masculinity “with a sort of awe,” he declares it “made me think him, in spite of my misgivings, a very handsome man” (34; bk.1, ch.2). A psychic intimacy develops between these two males, with an analogue in the sterile exchange of vampirism as the rivals attempt to consume and control the other. Murdstone threatens David with drawing blood, promising to “conquer that fellow; and if it were to cost him all the blood he had, I should do it.” Yet, it is David who is the first to penetrate flesh (57; bk.2, ch.4). James B. Twitchell argues that there is a “distinct level of homosexuality carried in the [vampire] myth that is often reflected in literary treatment” and describes the male bite as “sex without mention” (134). It is this drawing of blood that presents a new, expression of male sexuality for Dickens. Its liquidity reflects anxieties of an infectious, spreading sexuality, a sort of circulating errant libido that characterizes David’s relationships with Steerforth, Heep, and Dora.

The cataclysmic bite into Murdstone’s flesh marks a loss of innocence for David and his transmutation from the “sort of boy I used to be, before I bit Mr. Murdstone” (81; bk.2, ch.5). Having taken too much of Murdstone’s flesh and undermined bourgeois values of control and restraint, David is sent away to school embodied in his own fetish when he is made to wear the sign “He Bites” upon his back. Reduced to a pronoun, David fears he will be subsumed by the metaphor, “I positively began to have a dread of myself, as a kind of wild boy who did bite” (79; bk.2, ch.5). This biting impulse engenders a sort of panic in David as he recalls the bite with horror, but also its hot, feverish wickedness (69; bk.2, ch.4).

While the narrative works hard to normalize David’s biting as a sympathetic passion, it is one that must be contained for successful entrance to the ranks of gentility. This conflict, driven by his oral personality, infiltrates David’s narrative of the constant challenge to shape himself. His romance with Dora is a good example. Not just having “dined off Dora, entirely,” he is also compelled to bite the key to his carpet bag in an effort to suppress his libido — the key has long been a phallic symbol to the corresponding female lock (399; bk.9, ch.26). During his secret engagement to Dora, Dickens positions David against Jip, the snapping lapdog, where they battle for the female in another triangulated, biting relationship. By complicating the relationship with a dog, it provides a space for Dickens to present the pain-pleasure principle; after Jip bites into David’s floral gift to Dora, David wishes that he were the “bitten” gift, if only to attract Dora’s compassion/passion, “if Jip had laid hold of me. I wished he had!” (488; bk.11, ch.33). Not yet able to control the biting impulse, David’s marriage into the upper ranks is, therefore, delayed.

Where he struggles most to suppress his desires, is in his relationship with Uriah Heep whose grotesque features culminate in his expansive “post-office” mouth. Aged only fifteen, at their first meeting Uriah makes a stunning impression, acting as a lure to David’s fetish and reeling him in through his tactility and orality. David acknowledges “immediately feeling myself attracted towards Uriah Heep, who had a sort of fascination for me” (243; bk.7, 16). Engulfed in his mouth fetish, David imagines himself as “a tender young tooth” confronted by Heep the dentist (265; bk.6, ch.17). Heep’s open sexuality is symbolized by his gaping mouth, which David frequently observes closely, noting at one point that “I never saw his mouth so wide, or the creases in his cheeks so deep…all the time writhing modestly” (264; bk.6, ch.17). Although neither David nor Heep bite one another, they are well-matched vampiric enemies attempting to subdue the other through acts of violent incorporation, notably when David dreams of “running him through” with “a red-hot poker” (389; bk.9, ch.25). Heep’s vampiric guise is imagined just as sadistically by David as the “corkscrew” to his “tender young cork” (265; bk.6, ch.17). The repeated image of David as both “tender” and “young” signals his vulnerability to penetration by Heep, but this is complicated by the idiom of swallowing and orality that pervades many of David’s relationships. Dickens represents Heep as a consuming threat to David’s linguistic orality — the source of his rise to middle-class success — since he looms over David like “a great vulture gorging himself on every syllable that I said to Agnes” (392; bk.9, ch. 26). As their fortunes diverge, however David begins to disassociate from his own vampire metonymy, while Heep’s is foregrounded. Mrs Heep describes her son’s appearance as “a wasting and a wearing of him” and David observes that Heep is like a great bat “hanging over the whole house” (577-78; bk.13, ch.39).

The semiotics of Heep’s vampiric mouth strip out the human and Dickens eventually relocates him from society to prison. David, however, is permitted to break out of his self-perpetuating libidinous cycle by his marriage to Agnes, as though in deferred obedience. In *Eating Their Words*, Kristen Guest writes that “among mainstream Victorian writers, none exemplified the two-fold fear of being consumed and the fear of consuming another like Charles Dickens” (111). Such fear is contiguous with a fear of sexuality but through the poetics of the mouth Dickens negotiates the expression of male sexuality with increasing confidence and maturity. In *David Copperfield*, avoiding much of the comic layering in the dynamics of male sexuality, the configuration of Murdstone as “a great dog — deep mouthed and black-haired” endows the semi-autobiographical David with a profoundly anxious sexuality. Murdstone’s mouth and his potential bite, symbolized by the dog which “sprung out to get at me,” characterizes a lurking libido which continually threatens to quash David’s progress to gentility (55; bk.1, ch.3). Even when married to Dora, his sexuality still figures as primal and “biting,” but what is interesting about this is his self-conscious acknowledgement of his need to overcome predatory desire. As the spider to Dora’s fly, he admits that rather than changing Dora, he must try to change himself or, “I must degenerate into the spider again, and be for ever lying in wait” (703; bk.16, ch.48). Only when he has mastered his own primal urges, assisted by marriage to the asexual Agnes, is David presented as a “successful” gentleman. Unlike Pecksniff, David echoes Cymon, the lecher in *The Decameron*, who is refined and rescued through love.[[18]](#endnote-18) This configuration suggests a literary evolution from the indiscriminate lust of early works into directed desire, structured by intentionality and pointing to the erotic worth of the object of desire rather than basic greed.

Through oral fixation and biting, Dickens presents a pattern of masculine sexuality that reflects a gradually maturing exploration and perspective. Collapsing the boundaries between cannibal and middle-class male and, later, between vampire and gentleman, allows for Dickensian poetics to touch on private fantasies and admit covert unconventional desires. The violence implicit in biting is not avoided by Dickens but presented, in certain eroticized relationships, as part of a natural sexual intimacy, what Sam Weller reiterates as “natur.” Biting as an expression of sexual desire does not have its own teleology, however, and is either neutralized by Dickens through companionate marriage, or the biting subject, himself, is neutralized through a violent death or incarceration. Nonetheless, it is an important Dickensian gesture symptomatic of a desire that resists repression. By paying close attention to the semiotics of biting, it is possible to uncover a vigorous desiring male in Dickens. It is a form that transfers abstract desire and longing to the sphere of the body through an intimate violent act and one that Dickens seems to normalize as a stage in the maturing male. Whilst not exactly advocating a sensory revolution, Dickens recognized the social and corporeal primacy of taste and touch and their place in stimulating the development of the self. From the Bakhtinian carnivalesque of Quilp to David Copperfield’s complex sexuality, the male bite represents Dickens’s developing exploration of psychosexuality and the centrality of the mouth to Dickensian sexual relations.

1. See David Howes. *Sensual Relations: Engaging the Senses in Culture and Social Theory*. U of Michigan P, 2006, for a detailed discussion of the nineteenth-century sensual economy. Many nineteenth-century thinkers ranked the senses into a hierarchy, placing sight at the pinnacle, as the “civilized sense” associated with art and literacy, and taste at the bottom associated with eating, drinking and sexuality. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Pecksniff is also presented as a boa constrictor, but the crocodile has an overdetermined value in Victorian culture, reflecting Pecksniff’s lecherous nature. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Dickens compares Pecksniff to Cymon, the lecherous, brutish fool in Bocaccio’s *The Decameron*. V.1., Oxford UP, 1993, pp. 317-328, who comes upon a beautiful woman in a wood and despite her protestations, refuses to leave her alone. Cymon however becomes refined through love, whereas Pecksniff is incapable of self-improvement. Philip V. Allingham contends that Dickens probably encountered Cymon through Dryden’s "Cymon and Iphigenia" in his *Fables, Ancient and Modern* (1700), rather than directly through Bocaccio’s work. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Dickens. *Martin Chuzzlewit*. 413-4; bk.12, ch.30. On creeping up behind her, he asks if she is “communing with Nature.” [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. See for example, Ford Maddox Brown’s lines accompanying his painting “Work”: “Work! which beads the brow and tans the flesh of lusty manhood” echoes the sentiment in artform. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. In “Lost Arctic Voyages [III].” *Household Words*. vol. X (23 December 1854): 433-437, Dickens refused to believe that cannibalism could have occurred and strongly defended the reputation of Franklin’s men. Dickens was fascinated by the concept of the “attraction of repulsion,” writing that “the attraction of repulsion [is] as much a law of our moral nature, as gravitation is in the structure of the visible world,” in “Letters on Social Questions: Capital Punishments,” Daily News, 28 February 1846, p. 6. From the British Library, Shelfmark:1846-1912 LON LD10 NPL. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Dickens’s childhood terrors of cannibalism are related in “Nurse’s Tales.” *The Uncommercial Traveller* (1859) and explored in detail in Stone’s *The Night Side of Dickens.*  [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. See H. L. Malchow’s *Gothic Images of Race in Nineteenth-Century Britain*. Stanford UP, 1996, for a detailed analysis of medical science and cannibal jokes. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. In 1832, for example, an article in *The Lancet* included a complaint that, “It is disgusting to talk of anatomy as a science, whilst it is cultivated by means which would disgrace a nation of cannibals.” Quoted in Malchow, *Gothic Images of Race*, p. 110. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. The cigar, in Dickens’s work, is associated with potent masculinity especially in the characters Rigaud, Steerforth, Bentley Drummle, James Harthouse, Eugene Wrayburn and Henry Gowan who all smoke cigars and often indulge in the habit in a suggestive or aggressive, if not sadistic, manner. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. James Kincaid. *Annoying the Victorians*. Routledge, 1995. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/207495?rskey=TMWFSL&result=2#eid> Accessed 3 October 2019. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. McCuskey uses this phrase when analysing the relocation of libidinal energy, p. 253. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. From Dickens’s “Preface to the Cheap (1848), Library (1858), and Charles Dickens (1867) Editions.” *The Old Curiosity Shop*. (1841). Oxford UP, 2008, p. 6. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Robert Burns. *The Twa Dogs: A Tale.* 1785. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. See Sarah Amato and Harriet Ritvo on the feline as a symbol of female sexuality. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. See Elsie B. Michie “Horses and Sexual/ Social Dominance.” *Victorian Animal Dreams: Representations of Animals in Victorian Literature and Culture*.Eds. Deborah Denenholz Morse and Martin A. Danahay. Ashgate, 2007, for a compelling essay on the association of new money with sexual dominance in Victorian fiction.

    See note 3 above.

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18. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)