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Little Dorrit is, above all, a novel about prisons. In addition to the literal Marshalsea prison that is home for the Dorrit family in the first half of the novel, we are taken to the Circumlocution Office, a bureaucratic imprisonment of any sort of innovation, and the Clennam house, which Mrs. Clennam never leaves. Dickens is equally interested in psychological prisons; characters are imprisoned by their emotional attachment to the past or their desire for material and social gain. These are not literal prisons but prisons of desire. But the most subtle and interesting imprisonment in the novel is neither literal nor psychological but embodied. Through the character of Frederick Dorrit, uncle of the title character, Dickens demonstrates that chronic illness is, fundamentally, a prison.

Frederick is introduced early in the novel, through Arthur Clennam's perspective, when Arthur visits him in his lodgings just outside the Marshalsea prison:

Turning himself as slowly as he turned in his mind whatever he heard or said, he led the way up the narrow stairs.... The old man mumbling to himself, after some consideration, that Fanny had run away, went to the next room to fetch her back.... The uncle, without appearing to come to any conclusion, shuffled in again, sat down in his chair, and began warming his hands at the fire; not that it was cold, or that he had any waking idea whether it was or not.... When he by-and-by discovered what he was doing, [he] left off, reached over to the chimney-piece, and took his clarionet case down.... He discovered, in due time, that it was not the little paper of snuff (which was also on the chimney-piece), put it back again, took down the snuff instead, and solaced himself with a pinch. He was as feeble, spare, and slow in his pinches as in

everything else, but a certain little trickling of enjoyment of them played in the poor worn nerves about the corners of his eyes and mouth.

Based on Dickens' description, it seems highly likely that Frederick Dorrit suffers from Parkinson's disease, characterized by tremor, slow movements, soft speech, and shuffling gait. James Parkinson had described the "shaking palsy" in 1817, about thirty years before the publication of *Little Dorrit*. Whether or not Dickens had read Parkinson's essay, he has produced here a superb observational description of an individual with parkinsonism. Indeed, Frederick Dorrit demonstrates classic signs of parkinsonism, from the slow turning in the doorway to the shuffling gait to the weakness of his pinches of snuff.



Figure 1: Frederick and William Dorrit. Illustration by Phiz, 1856



Figure 2: Person with Parkinson's disease. Illustration by William Gowers, MD, 1886

Parkinson's disease has four major symptoms: tremor, rigidity, akinesia (or lack of movement), and postural instability. The very mnemonic for these characteristics, T-R-A-P, emphasizes that those with Parkinson's disease are trapped by their illness. All these contribute to an increasing physical immobility. As a degenerative condition, Parkinson's disease leads to increasing physical incapacitation; Frederick Dorrit appears to spend all his time in the confines of his house, much as his brother spends all his time in the Marshalsea prison next door. Another, often overlooked, aspect of Parkinson's disease is dementia, which affects nearly all patients within two decades of the diagnosis. Frederick displays an inability to distinguish objects when he mistakes his clarinet case for his snuffbox. In both physical and cognitive ways, then, Frederick Dorrit is imprisoned by his illness.

Arthur Frank, in his seminal text *The Wounded Storyteller*, outlines three major forms of illness narratives: the restitution narrative, the chaos narrative, and the quest narrative. However Frederick's story, like that of many people with Parkinson's, lies outside these three forms. He does not experience a restitution to complete physical health. Indeed, the novel refuses to presuppose that he was *ever* in good physical health. Similarly, his narrative is fundamentally not one of chaos. He plays a central role in the Clennam-Dorrit mystery that lies at the heart of the novel. Frederick

is the key link in the highly logical, if somewhat improbable, chain that leads from Arthur Clennam to Amy Dorrit. Lastly, even the quest narrative, that archetypal story form, does not fit Frederick's story. Frederick's illness does not serve as an emotional or spiritual journey. Instead, he remains a static character throughout the novel, and he is always defined in relation to his nieces and brother. Frederick's family encapsulates him, in every sense of the word. His mental and physical limitations seem to prevent him from escaping their prisons and journeying anywhere at all, in a metaphorical sense.

In a literal sense, Frederick does accompany his brother's family to Italy, but he does so in a curiously inevitable way. There is no discussion, no understanding that Frederick might stay in England if he chooses; rather he is carried along by the new Dorrit fortune to Rome. In this, Frederick, is a mere echo, a shadow, of his brother William. In the early part of the novel, the brothers lead distinct, if intertwined lives. Yet as the novel progresses, the characters of Frederick and William Dorrit bleed into each other. When the two brothers converse, Frederick repeatedly defers to William's opinion. William's speech begins to imitate Frederick's in its hesitations and stammers. After he leaves the Marshalsea, William Dorrit begins to experience a rapid decline in his own health, and the brothers die within pages of each other, implying that Frederick literally cannot live without William. Frederick is killed not only by his physical illness but also by his dependence on his brother. To bring the matter full circle, the inheritance that was to have gone to Frederick's daughter ultimately goes to William's. Even legally, then, the brothers are interchangeable. In subsuming Frederick and William Dorrit into a single entity, Dickens forces us to reconsider the seemingly distinct division between the society of the healthy and the society of the incurably ill.

In the end, Frederick Dorrit is not an individual actor but merely a part of his stronger counterparts; he fundamentally lacks agency. Perhaps this is why he, unlike many of the other characters in the novel, cannot escape his prison. Yet by creating the character of Frederick Dorrit, Dickens has created a new form of illness narrative, long before the concept was common parlance.

A version of this essay previously appeared in The Intima: A Journal of Narrative Medicine. Phiz' original illustration of Frederick Dorrit was scanned into the Victorian Web by Philip V. Allingham. Additional information on illness narratives as a genre and a construct can be found in the works of Arthur Frank, Susan Sontag, and Kathlyn Conway.

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Figure 2: Illustration by William Gowers, MD, 1886. Retrieved from Wikimedia Commons.

