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Writing Literary Criticism

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Just Do It: The Value of Being a Doer in Wilkie Collins's and Charles Dickens's *The Perils of Certain English Prisoners*

Abstract

In Wilkie Collins's and Charles Dickens's 1857 novella *The Perils of Certain English Prisoners and Their Treasure in Women, Children, Silver, and Jewels*, the inhabitants of Silver-Store are presented with a unique definition of worth and value. The text discusses many types of value: intellectual value, physical value, productive value, etc. The collaborating authors present a pattern of having the white-male characters' worth on the island of Silver-Store as action-based: that the doers of the society are seen as more valuable than those that are passive in the society. Gillian Ray-Barruel extrapolates on this unequal idea of social value in Victorian literature. By showing the struggle of inadequacy between the atypical or disabled human being and his or her productive potential. In her words, she describes the worth of an individual as measured "in terms of their productive capacity . . ." (90). This same tension is illustrated in *The Perils*; Dickens and Collins are producing a concept that the more a character does that is useful to the society, rather than simply being a busy character, the more social capital a character has in the society.

Essay

In Wilkie Collins's and Charles Dickens's 1857 novella *The Perils of Certain English Prisoners and Their Treasure in Women, Children, Silver, and Jewels*, the inhabitants of Silver-Store are presented with a unique definition of worth and value. The text discusses many types of

value: intellectual value, physical value, productive value, etc. The collaborating authors present a pattern of having the white-male characters' worth on the island of Silver-Store as action-based: that the doers of the society are seen as more valuable than those that are passive in the society. Gillian Ray-Barruel extrapolates on this unequal idea of social value in Victorian literature. By showing the struggle of inadequacy between the atypical or disabled human being and his or her productive potential. In her words, she describes the worth of an individual as measured "in terms of their productive capacity . . ." (90). This same tension is illustrated in *The Perils*; Dickens and Collins are producing a concept that the more a character does that is useful to the society, rather than simply being a busy character, the more social capital a character has in the society.

However, the idea that social value is based on the status of a doer is complicated with the details of the character being a female or a "racial other", the character's worth is not coordinated with anything they can do. Furthermore, it seems that the argument is complicated by the idea that an active leader could also be someone that is verbally active rather than physically active. These concepts dictate that active participants who are white males are signs of value and worth, while with women and "racially diverse" people, their value is based on other standards and cannot be correlated with their actions or lack of such. This idea demonstrates that Collins and Dickens are addressing the issue of value being unequally measured between people.

A character who illustrates value that is action-based is Gill, a lower rank soldier that proves his worth against the pirates in their time of peril and imprisonment, which makes Gill able to become a leader for the Silver-Store people. Gill begins the novel hating the world that is Silver-Store and what it represents. Peter Scheckner correctly describes the society that Gill sees in Scheckner's description of Victorian culture discussing the inequalities of class in the

Victorian culture. He calls it, “the profound inequality and exploitativeness (sic) of Victorian society” (236). This inequality and exploitativeness affect Gill directly because of his status as a lower classman. He is constantly working for the benefit of others in order to survive rather than to thrive and be socially valuable. Gill directly says, “I had had a hard life, and the life of the English on the Island seemed too easy and too gay, to please me” (Collins and Dickens 7). Gill values himself as less because his worth is then measured by the military standards, as he was a lower-rank soldier and was essentially being used for the benefit of the English government and the soldiers who rank higher than him.

Gill then begins to be measured through the Silver-Store value system of the value of work in the society. As Gill shows his diligence, especially when the pirates attack, he proves his usefulness and therefore improves his value in the society. Gill is the one who wakes Serjeant Drooce to warn him of the pirates, calls the townspeople to arms, and eventually leads the people out of captivity. He says, “I myself, and the sailor I have mentioned under the name of Short, led the march” (Collins and Dickens 54). This shows him leading the group through the jungle, and eventually to freedom. Gill becomes a part of the island leadership because his value as a doer in the society. By adapting to the characters’ plight in the jungle, Gill’s worth increases to the point that he becomes a high-value member of the inhabitants of Silver-Store, which leads to him becoming their leader in the jungle.

We can also see that Gill’s value as a leader diminishes when Captain Carton comes back on the scene. Carton, being Gill’s superior, orders him to a less active place. Carton orders, “My brave fellow, you have been Miss Maryon’s bodyguard all along, and you will remain so” (Collins and Dickens 103). Gill depicts the following, “I had the like post in Captain Carton’s boat. I had a special station of my own, behind Miss Maryon . . .” (Collins and Dickens 103).

This evidently strips Gill of his worth and leadership position by positioning him as a bodyguard whose only purpose is to stand next to the person of importance, thus making him a passive character and a non-doer, while Carton assumes the role of leader and active participant. This is also proven by Carton killing Christian George King in what Dickens describes as, “In a flash the Spanish gun was at his bright eye, and he fired . . . Shot through the heart” (106). This creates an inversion of leadership where Gill becomes a lowly protector of the island’s treasure, Miss Maryon, while Captain Carton becomes the leader and strongman of the group. By doing this, Dickens is demonstrating Gill’s descent from the value placed on him in Silver-Store to the value of a lowly, illiterate soldier once more, essentially saying that Gill’s value is fluctuating according to his usefulness as a doer in the moment. This shows that the society’s leadership and value of the character is based on activity and who can produce more as a doer and is in flux dependent on what they are doing to benefit the society.

Serjeant Drooce illustrates the flux of leadership when he transitions from a very prominent doer and leader to a liability within the story because of his inability to produce anything of value. Drooce begins as the epitome of masculinity and leadership. This characterization relates to Danahay’s analysis of men in Victorian culture and their roles as workers: “The compulsion to labor was thus made an integral part of normative masculinity” (7). Dickens uses this idea of work and action being a part of masculinity by incorporating it into his most masculine character, Drooce. Dickens describes him as “most tyrannical non-commissioned officer in His Majesty’s service” (6). This description as “tyrannical” shows Drooce as a hyper-masculine character who embodies power within leadership. Furthermore, this introduces his work ethic as Drooce is a “non-commissioned” officer. A non-commissioned officer is defined as an officer who worked his way up the ranks of the military rather than a commissioned officer

that gains their position automatically. This shows that Drooce is the most valuable character on Silver-Store at this point in the story because of his obvious value in productivity. His value as a doer is displayed further when the pirates come to fight them on Silver-Store. Dickens says, “Drooce was armed with a broadsword, too, and did such things with it, that there was a cry, in half-a-dozen languages, of ‘Kill that serjeant!’ as I knew, by the cry being raised in English, and taken up in other tongues” (37). Dickens is portraying Serjeant Drooce as having a reputation on the island for his actions and productivity as a character. He also leads the characters through the attack on Silver-Store, thus showing that he is valued for his active role in the community.

This all changes when Drooce no longer can be a doer in chapter two. Collins breaks Dickens’ manly man and causes him to go mad from the injuries he sustained in battle with the pirates, subsequently redacting all Drooce’s former and future glory by taking away his productive capability. He is destined to rely on Tom Packer for support for the rest of their captivity with the pirates. Gill sees Drooce less of a hero and more of a liability. Collins uses this when the Silver-Store men are trying to escape; he says, “I noticed that Mr. Macey had posted himself . . . close to Serjeant Drooce, and that Mr. Fisher seemed to . . . make himself agreeable with Mr Pordage. I was glad that the two gentlemen of the company . . . were already taking in hand the two unreasonable men” (83). This shows that Drooce’s inability to produce anything of worth makes him “unreasonable” and incapable of taking care of himself. His “compulsion to labor” is no longer a part of him, so he is a liability, illustrating that value is based on whether or not the character is able to work (Danahay 7).

In contrast to Serjeant Drooce, Tom Packer is a good example of a character who is of high class but seen of low value because he does not produce anything of value due to laziness. Tom starts out as a lazy soldier who could become an officer if he wanted to because he is

literate, made evident by the quote, “Tom Packer, a wild unsteady young fellow, but the son of a respectable shipwright . . . and a good scholar who had been well brought up” (Collins and Dickens 18). This is important because literacy is seen as a characteristic of leadership in the military, as implied by Gill when he says, “I was recommended for promotion . . . but, my total want of all learning stood in my way . . .” (Collins and Dickens 109). This “want of all learning” is not a problem for Tom, Tom is not motivated to become an officer because he was “wild” and “unsteady” in his desires, thus not having the “compulsion to labor”. Danahay says, “Education, as an essential part of the civilizing process, is here represented as reinforcing work as integral to masculine health” (8). While Tom has the essential part of education, he is not being reinforced to work because of his wild desires. Since Tom does not want to have the productive capability, he is not seen as worthy to be an officer and because of that, has no worth within the island society, as portrayed when he is essentially demoted as a bad soldier by Captain Drooce in battle when he says, “If you are not man enough to strike for a fellow soldier because he wants help . . . I’ll go into the other world and look for a better man” (Collins and Dickens 38). However, this changes in the second chapter when Tom Packer has control of Serjeant Drooce. Collins states the reason for this, saying, “Tom Packer, who had saved his life, had a power of controlling him, which none of the rest of us possessed . . . he was always to keep near Drooce (50). Through having this power over Drooce and enacting it in order to keep Drooce as less of a liability, this power gives him more of a capacity to be of use to the society. Furthermore, he opens a hospital, “Tom Packer . . . kept hospital aboard the old raft . . .” (Collins and Dickens 104). Through being active in a manner productive to the society, he is directly helping the people the colonizers of Silver-Store, and therefore, his worth increases in the society.

In comparison to Tom Parker, Commissioner Pordage is an example of a character that is active, but produces very little in terms of worth to the society. Therefore, Pordage has very little worth in Silver-Store and cannot be defined as a doer. Martin A. Danahay comments on this in his examination of work and its peculiarly synonymous relationship with masculinity. He says, “this opposition between the gentleman who does not resort to manual labor and the representation of labor via images of the working classes points to one of the schisms in Victorian middle-class masculinity” (5). In a typical Victorian culture, this nonnecessity for manual labor to thrive in his life would have made Pordage a “gentleman” and an example of a leader in the community. Pordage would represent how Silver-Store is the opposite of this culture, as he is not reliant on manual labor, but he is considered of low worth on the island. While Pordage should be a leader within the society, it can be seen that he is not respected and valued in the community, and therefore, while he has high class, is seen as having lower value. This is shown in Dickens’s first chapter, where Commissioner Pordage is “punishing” the soldiers for not writing a document about saving the *Christopher Columbus* when it is about to sink. Afterward Dickens portrays the following, “When he had given that order, he walked off in his coat, and all our names were taken . . . which only got done with after all, by being lost” (16). After this encounter, Gill further depicts Pordage as insane and inactive when it comes to the pirates by saying, “He had taken to always polishing one particular button . . . and to always calling for stationery. I suppose that man called for pens, ink, and paper, tape, and scaling-wax, upwards of one thousand times in four-and-twenty hours” (Collins and Dickens 93). Pordage’s insistence on office supplies in the middle of the jungle represents his desire to be active, but also his inability to recognize an actually productive way to be active. This demonstrates Pordage’s inability to act or be an active character loses respectability in his society and position in

Government. Pordage's inactivity when encountered with the pirates and captivity lowers his worth significantly as he slowly goes mad from the sun and the pressure of the pirates. Pordage is the self-proclaimed leader of the island, is constantly spouting out orders which soon are generally ignored.

Similarly to Pordage's orders being ignored, women on the island of Silver-Store often have knowledge and productive capacity that is ignored and does not predicate their worth. This disregard of their ability to produce complicates the idea of worth being based on productive capacity because on the island of Silver-Store, women are valued for their beauty and composure rather than their knowledge. This could be attributed to labor being an "integral part of normative masculinity" (Danahay 7). The character where this gendered idea is illustrated best is Miss Maryon. This does relate to Miss Maryon, because whether she is the domestic housewife or the divine feminine, she is valued in the society. Miss Maryon is presented by Dickens as the "light and spirit of the Island" (8), she is characterized as the angel of Silver-Store but becomes the divine feminine as soon as the pirates arrive. This portrayal contrasts the more concrete spheres of knowledge ranging from war and strategy to domesticity. Maryon's multifaceted nature shows she is valuable without needing to be constantly doing something. To illustrate this, Miss Maryon simply welcomes them into her home and leads them around, causing Gill to remark, "she showed us (being as affable as beautiful), how the different families lived in their separate houses..." (Collins and Dickens 9). Gill also mentions that "her composure gave great weight to what she said, and I believed it" (Collins and Dickens 11). It appears that Dickens is saying that Gill deems Miss Maryon as valuable simply because she is beautiful and nice to him without her actually needing to do anything, thus proving that Miss Maryon's value is not predicated on her actions as previously depicted for the white males on the island.

A further example of women not held to the same standards as men and value is unequal is proven in Isabella Tott. She represents a character that does not do much in the text but be present, and yet has social value for being entertaining. For instance, Gill constantly observes her as being present in Dickens's two chapters, but she does not accomplish much in the first chapter. Her defining characteristics by Dickens, as observed by Gill, consist of, ". . . a kind of neat little woman . . . I never saw a woman so like a toy in my life" (11). Further, she is given the nickname of Belltott, not because of anything she does, only because she seems like "a toy" to the men of the island. She is given value as "a toy" because of her composure and beauty, not because of her actions. It is also interesting to point out that Belltott does not speak through the entire book. Gill remarks on this by saying, "Mrs Belltott surprised me by trembling and saying nothing" (Collins and Dickens 26). This is proof that Belltott's value as "a toy" does not come from anything she says either, she just is seen as valuable. Her value as a woman can be seen when she is at the ball, in which Gill observes, "Mrs Belltott had more partners than she could dance with: though she danced all night, too" (Collins and Dickens 17-18). Through this scene, Belltott is presented as a frivolous female character that is used as entertainment for the men of the island, even though her actions do not suggest such. It would be understandable if Belltott had presented herself in such a manner, but Belltott does not even speak in such a way, or at all. Therefore, Belltott has value as entertainment for the men of the British Colonizers, even though she does not necessarily do anything. This shows that women are held to different standards of value on the island, which leads to the notion that value is unequal.

The act of doing being of social worth to the Silver-Store society does not apply to all people as "racial others" are not being included in the mix, making the status of doer exclusive to white males. This is most prominently illustrated by the Sambos, being shown mostly by

Christian George King, and the Indians. All these characters are constantly working for those to whom they are subservient. In Christian George King's case, he has to work for both the English and the pirates, as he is "loyal" to both. However, he is still treated as inferior without any hope to progress. This displays his worth is not predicated on his amount of activity or his label of being a doer. This level of treatment can also be attributed to the rest of the Sambos as Dickens says, "And as for the Sambos, the Pirate Captain knew them better than the English had known them at Silver-Store, and would have nothing to do with them in any matter of importance" (70). This judgment of Sambos and the trustworthiness as being a racial concept even though the Sambos are contributing a large part of productivity to the society. It is also interesting to point out what Alex Tickell says in his essay about the connections between *Perils* and the Indian Mutiny of 1857. He says, "[Dickens] is able to condemn savagery while also hinting that nineteenth-century civilized manners may not have developed, morally, very far beyond their savage origins" (458). These "civilized manners" are evident in both the British colonizers and the pirates, as witnessed in Don Pedro's mistrust of the Sambos. It appears that Dickens is saying the Sambos were still seen as inferior to the pirates as well as they were with the English, even though the Sambos were working for them diligently.

This inequality of "racial others" visible with the treatment of the Sambos can also be seen with the Indians, thus confirming that social value placed on doers does not apply to "racial others". The Indians are being exploited by the pirates, thus being treated as subordinate even though they are producing work beneficial to the society in which they live. The pirates are living among the Indians, the Indians are cooking them food, and also the moment when the food was not tasting right to the pirates, Don Pedro threatened the Indians, "Those Indian beasts have burnt the Tortillas,' he said, 'and their dirty hides shall suffer for it tomorrow morning" (Collins

and Dickens 84). Through Don Pedro's malevolent actions, he proves that even though the Indians are letting the pirates stay with them and they are cooking their food, no matter what they do, their worth is not predicated on their actions. This confirms that the concept of value being placed on the doers does not apply to the "racial others".

The productive capability illustrated directly illustrates the value of the white male characters, whether high or low, in *Silver-Store*. These ideas affect the text because it shows the resulting standards of each character being predicated on what they do, if they are a white male, or how it does not affect those that are female. It is also affected by Dickens's general opinion of the "inferiority of non-white peoples" (Moore 53). The complications of the original value of doers affects the overall view of *Silver-Store*, as this is evidence of an unequal value standing in their community. By doing so, it appears that Collins and Dickens are addressing the issue of value being unequal between all people, whether racially diverse or not of the male sex.

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