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psychiatry
in 19th-century
literature

Post-trauma symptoms in Dickens' *Our Mutual Friend*: better Abel than Cain

Alistair Stewart

The long shadow cast by traumatic experiences on many people who live through them has been well described. Some attention has been paid more recently to the ways in which people who commit violent assaults can be affected psychologically as a consequence of their own actions. However, it requires an imaginative leap to enter the mind of the perpetrator of violence who has not yet been detected, or otherwise made themselves available for interview. Charles Dickens does this, in a forceful and convincing way, in a chapter towards the end of his novel *Our Mutual Friend*, written in the 1860s.

Bradley Headstone, a conscientious and humourless schoolteacher with a 'slowly labouring expression', discovers that Lizzie Hexham, the young woman on whom he has set his heart, has affections for a frivolous and selfish upper-class waster, Eugene Wrayburn. Driven by hatred for this man, Headstone follows him late one night along the banks of the Thames, clubs him over the head and throws him in the river.

He does not know for certain that he has killed his victim. His crime undiscovered, he feels no guilt or regret. He does not thereby escape the anguish of the compulsion to return.

First, he fears discovery:

'there are fifty doors by which discovery may enter. With infinite pains and cunning, he double locks and bars forty-nine of them, and cannot see the fiftieth standing wide open.'

Second, the doubts in his mind tie him fast to the recollection of his deeds:

'now, too, was he cursed with a state of mind more wearing and more wearisome than remorse. He had no remorse; but the evil doer who can hold that avenger at bay, cannot escape the slower torture of incessantly doing the evil deed again and doing it more efficiently . . . The state of that wretch who continually finds the weak spots in his own crime, and strives to strengthen them when it is unchangeable, is a state that aggravates the offence by doing the deed a thousand times instead of once; but it is a state, too, that tauntingly visits the offence upon a sullen unrepentant nature with its heaviest punishment every time.'

In detail this means:

'supposing his head had been held down under water for a while. Supposing the first blow had been truer. Supposing he had been shot. Supposing he had been strangled. Suppose this way, that way, the other way. Suppose anything but getting unchained from the one idea, for that was inexorably impossible.'

On returning to his classroom duties, Headstone finds no respite.

'He was doing it again and improving on the manner, at prayers, in his mental arithmetic, all through his questioning, all through the day.'

Research has shown that many young men convicted of violent offences are affected by intrusive memories and ruminations. Of course, the same research shows that many offenders are not troubled in that way. Or perhaps they simply do not want to discuss the matter at the relevant time.

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