

A Crocodile Overcome: Idleness, Busyness, and Mischief in *David Copperfield*

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<http://www.nines.org/exhibits/view/a-crocodile-overcome>

Sentence Outline

- I. *Thesis*: Dickens plays on Watts's metaphor (replaces the hard-working "busy bee" of Watts's poem with a predatory crocodile) to affirm the importance of hard work, but also to show that hard work can make as much trouble as idleness.
- II. Dickens plays on Watts's metaphor to affirm the importance of hard work.
 - A. Dickens reinforces the model of the busy bee through the negative example of idle parasites.
 1. Jack Maldon
 2. Traddles's sister-in-law, "the Beauty" ("queen bee")
 - B. Dickens also reinforces Watts's moral with positive examples, specifically busy bees whose labor leads to domestic happiness.
 1. Tom Traddles and his wife Sophy ("laboring bees")
- III. He also inverts Watts's moral, observing that hard work can be devoted to evil as well as to good.
 - A. Mrs. Markleham works hard.
 1. Mrs. Markleham is a fiscal parasite, like her relative Jack Maldon, but she is not idle — instead she works hard at draining someone else's resources.
 2. She is as busy as a bee, but at the expense of her son-in-law, Doctor Strong.
 - B. Mrs. Markleham's hard work is devoted to evil.
 1. Mrs. Markleham's pursuit of her own pleasure is positively vampiric in the way it makes those around her miserable.
 2. Mrs. Markleham's vampiric nature nearly destroys her daughter's life.
 3. Aunt Betsey declares Mrs. Markleham to be a crocodile.
 4. In calling Mrs. Markleham a crocodile, Aunt Betsey expresses Mrs. Markleham's hunger for money and pleasure and the necessity of her daughter's self-defense.
- IV. Why would Dickens connect Mrs. Markleham to Watts's poem, only to transform her from a bee into a crocodile? The answer goes beyond the stated moral of "Against Idleness and Mischief" to the stated purpose of all of Watts's Divine Songs.
 - A. For Watts, the parent or teacher is the busy bee, and the child is meant to trust and emulate these authority figures.
 - B. For Dickens, virtue is not necessarily passed from a trustworthy adult to a trusting child.
 - C. For Dickens, kindness does not always instill virtue, as it does for Watts; it can enable vice.
 - D. Where Watts asks children to trust and imitate adult authority figures, Dickens emphasizes that not all adults deserve that trust.
 - E. *Conclusion*: While affirming the virtue of hard work that Watts extols, Dickens undercuts the paradigm for which the poem was created.