

SUFFERING, SELF-CREATION AND SURVIVAL:
VICTIMIZED CHILDREN IN THE NOVELS OF CHARLES DICKENS

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...there lay, in an old egg box which the mother had begged from a shop, a little, feeble, wan, sick child. With his little wasted face, and his little hot worn hands folded over his breast, and his little bright attentive eyes, I can see him now, as I have seen him for several years looking steadily at us...as if there were no crowds of healthy and happy children playing on the grass a stone's throw of him...

There he lay looking at us, saying in his silence more pathetically than I have ever heard anything said by any orator in my life, "Will you please tell us what this means...?"

—Charles Dickens, 1858

INTRODUCTION

“A list of the killed, wounded or missing amongst Mr. Dickens’s novels would read like an Extraordinary Gazette. An interesting child runs as much risk there as any of the troops who stormed the Redan.” —James Fitzjames Stephen, 1855¹

Surviving childhood

Charles Dickens, like few novelists before or since, has become firmly associated with prominent and memorable child characters. His innovation, however, lies not so much in the use of children as protagonists but in his use of childlike perception to focus and organize the narrative. Protagonists such as the young David Copperfield and Pip of *Great Expectations* are convincing specimens of childhood: imaginative boys, with no great respect for the sacred or the self-important, but sensitive to the careless slights of the adult world. Young female protagonists tend far more to unrelenting sweetness and self-sacrifice: while they are universally loved by the other characters in their novels, they may be found insufferable by modern readers. But some nurturing daughters are also members of a third category: child characters who form part of Dickens’s throng of eccentrics: Paul Dombey, Smike, Jenny Wren, and Little Nell.

These children are often strange, precocious, and self-aware to the point of having an almost preternatural perception, assuming the responsibilities or cares of adulthood along with their adult mannerisms. They are unable to access an

¹ Quoted in Philip Collins’s *Dickens: The Critical Heritage*, p. 298. The epigraph on the preceding page is from a speech given by Dickens in order to fundraise for the Great Ormond Street Hospital for Children, quoted in John Forster’s *Life of Charles Dickens* (Life 467).

idealized, Edenic childhood of innocent play and fanciful dreams. Dickens placed an extremely high value on childhood in its “natural” state, often embodied in certain idealized characters like Florence Dombey. However, “natural” feelings are often thwarted:

It had been hard – how hard may none but Florence ever know! – to have the natural affection of a true and earnest nature turned to agony; and slight, or stern repulse, substituted for the tenderest protection and the dearest care. It had been hard to feel in her deep heart what she had felt, and never know the happiness of one touch of response. (DS 655)

“Natural” childhood finds no scope for survival in the rough streets of Dickens’s London. Experience figures too heavily in children’s lives: cruel forces of want, of hunger, of physical debility or weakness, of neglect. The city itself is uncaring to its smallest inhabitants, and almost all child characters—even those with a parent or two still living—are somehow orphaned.

Childhood, then, must be survived. All his child characters must work to outlive it, to become strong enough to combat the forces of a world at present far too vast and fragmented for them. If being young makes them weak, they grow up faster. If a parent abdicates responsibility, the child inherits it. At times the early onset of maturity is unendurable, and the child will die. As Fitzjames Stephen’s quotation from the opening of this chapter suggests, childhood is a battle that results in casualties. Dickens used the death of children, the slow build to the deathbed and its resolution, as major set pieces: conspicuous moments of sentimentality and catharsis, calculated to move the reader deeply.

But Dickens appears to have exercised more restraint in the use of these scenes in the novels following *Bleak House* (1853). Children continue to die, but

their status in the narrative dwindles. In *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859), for example, there is only a passing reference to the death of Lucie Manette's son; in *Our Mutual Friend* (1865), the little boy Mrs. Boffin hopes to adopt dies, but he has only been seen once before and is really too young to capture the reader's imagination. Curiously, *Our Mutual Friend* does feature a prominent child character who suffers agonizing pain—the dolls' dressmaker, Jenny Wren—who in early Dickens novels would have been a prime candidate for a sentimental death scene. While there are ways to compare Jenny to Little Nell, or Paul Dombey, or Smike, there is a large, glaring difference: Jenny survives.

This work examines what is necessary for survival in Dickens by means of the strategies employed by four child characters: Little Nell of *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1841); Paul Dombey of *Dombey and Son* (1848); Amy Dorrit of *Little Dorrit* (1857); and Jenny Wren of *Our Mutual Friend* (1865). In assessing Dickens's work through his treatment of the victimized child, I will attempt to articulate the continuities and evolutions of the resources given to these characters—resources placed within them by Dickens as inherent strengths, or bestowed upon them by mystical, quasi-divine authority.

The child in ideology

Though primitivist ideas reached their height of popularity in the eighteenth century, their influence still held some currency in the Victorian period. Primitivism speaks to the belief that man's greatest dignity, happiness, and moral state could be found in the "state of nature," prior to civilization and its

degrading effects. According to Angus Wilson, Dickens, who avoided conventional primitivist idealizations like the Noble Savage or the Golden Age, “fell victim to a large extent to the primitivism of childhood as a pre-Adamite Eden,” largely associated with the work of Rousseau, or with poems celebrating childhood by William Wordsworth (Wilson 214).² Children have long been associated with “savage” or animalistic traits; after the Noble Savage idea was discredited, the idea of the Child served as a politically inoffensive substitute.

The opposing strain of thought was progressivist and associated with Protestant evangelism, which held that the state of children was essentially parlous, badly necessitating religious and moral education.³ Dickens, who had a decidedly negative view of dull moral tracts for children, certainly did not subscribe. However, in his own appraisal of nineteenth-century England, he could not help but see that children were rarely able to live long in a state of Edenic happiness, but were forced into maturity by poverty or neglect. Malcolm Andrews argues that the unresolved tensions between childhood innocence and childhood experience, embodied in the primitivism-progressivism debate, linger in Dickens’s characterizations of children:

The controversy, particularly over facts vs fancy, was loud and long... Should the child be allowed to develop freely, nourished by romance and fairy tale, or should it be disciplined early to enable it to meet the demands of the real world in which it will have to function as a rational, mature adult? Since either view could quite reasonably be argued as being in the best interest of the child, it is not surprising that Dickens, like many of his

² The influence of poems such as “We Are Seven” may be seen in Dickens’s treatment of the death of Little Nell, where death leaves the child “unaltered” and a lingering presence to those she leaves behind. Dickens also used Wordsworth’s concept of maintaining childlike wonder within adult consciousness through valued characters such as Mr. Dick or Joe Gargery.

³ A tract by James Hannay aimed at parents counseled them to “take some time to speak a little to your children... about their miserable condition by nature. They are not too little to die, nor too little to go to hell” (qtd. in Adrian, 3).

contemporaries, was not consistently clear where, at any one time, the emphasis should fall. (Andrews 4)

Hence we have in Dickens's work the grown-up children and the child-adults who redefine maturity and immaturity, confusing boundaries and integrating positive attributes of both (responsibility with purity) within the figure of the child.

Social history of the nineteenth century child

“There have always been children. But there has not always been childhood,” Marshall Brown writes (Brown 204). Children came to hold considerable cultural currency in the Romantic period as symbols of innocence and naturalness. The child has been seen at different moments of history as merely a miniature adult or as belonging somehow to a different species:

The word “child” itself tended to shade off into the sense of a servant, slave, or primitive. But that usage gradually grew outmoded, as childhood increasingly came to be viewed as a state within rather than a condition of outside humanity... Wordsworthian childhood is not outgrown or left behind as we age. Romantic idealization dematerialized childhood, so that it was no longer a species but only an aura. (Brown 205)

This “aura” of childhood is present in Dickens through his creation of characters who maintain childlike simplicity and innocence into adulthood, such as *David Copperfield*'s Mr. Dick or *Great Expectations*' Joe Gargery. But in the shift to the subsequent Victorian era, social issues on the ground prompted a new change in the role of the child. As Laura Berry writes in *The Child, the State and the Victorian Novel* (1999):

Victorian writing tends to consider the child not merely as a symbol but as a subject, focusing in greater detail and at length on his or her interior state and physical well-being. Victorians tend to cast the child as victim rather than as a triumphant representation of the transcendent self. (Berry 16)

Berry finds causes for this shift from symbol to subject in nineteenth-century concerns about child rearing, child labor and social welfare that yielded tremendous amounts of reform writing. Social and literary writings were by no means completely distinct categories: even the “usually sober” London *Times* could “out-Dickens Dickens in its description of a world fiercely hostile to children” (Berry 3). The realm of the family was, in short, becoming an increasingly public domain, open to the interference of laws, of educational authority, and of social welfare. “Even before some of these institutions had any formal existence,” Berry argues, “their development was supported by the fact that *childhood* and *the child* had become unquestioned and unquestionably public categories” (Berry 2). Victimized children, as Dickens would consistently suggest in his fiction, were also, of necessity, objects of public concern. Diagnosing childhood’s wrongs in fiction simultaneously addressed the symptoms of Victorian society.

Dickens as a child

Modern readers are blessed or burdened with a greater knowledge of Dickens’s personal motivations for writing certain characters into existence than was available to his immediate contemporaries. Dickens’s sister-in-law Mary Hogarth, whom he idealized, is now almost universally recognized as an influence or prototype for Little Nell: Mary’s death at sixteen may have decided, as much as anything, Nell’s eventual fate. Perhaps more crucially, John Forster’s *Life of Charles Dickens* (1872-4), published in its complete state four years after

Dickens's death, revealed what the novelist had kept secret even from his children. He was sent to work in Warren's boot-blackening factory when he was twelve, following his father's imprisonment for debt in the Marshalsea. His tenure there was not long, but it made an intense impression on him, eventually resulting in the semi-autobiographical *David Copperfield*, his "favourite child" (DC 870). Forster, in his *Life*, published Dickens's autobiographical fragment, which in part reads:

It is wonderful to me how I could have been so easily cast away at such an age. It is wonderful to me, that, even after my descent into the poor little drudge I had been since we came to London, no one had compassion enough on me – a child of singular abilities, quick, eager, delicate, and soon hurt, bodily or mentally – to suggest that something might have been spared, as certainly it might have been, to place me at any common school. Our friends, I take it, were tired out. No one made any sign. My father and mother were quite satisfied.... No words can express the secret agony of my soul as I sunk into this companionship [of the factory]; and felt my early hopes of growing up to be a learned and distinguished man, crushed in my breast. (Life 23)

This anguish regarding future prospects is found in the young David Copperfield and in Pip; female characters who work are generally more cheerful and resigned. Perhaps more significant to this work is the remaining bitterness palpable in the above passage that Dickens directed towards his parents. He never fully forgave his mother for not bringing him home from the factory immediately after his father's release. As for John Dickens himself, he is found directly in Dickens's two debtors, the charming Wilkins Micawber and the pathetic William Dorrit, but is indirectly embodied in other irresponsible fathers. Several critics argue that the

recurrence of the parent-child role reversal is directly attributable to this brief period in Dickens's life.⁴

Waves of response

Lionel Trilling wrote in his 1953 introduction to *Little Dorrit*, “With a body of work as large and enduring as that of Dickens, taste and opinion will never be done. They will shift and veer, as they have shifted and veered with the canon of Shakespeare, and each generation will have its special favourites and make its surprised discoveries” (Trilling v). What Dickens's contemporaries most enjoyed or praised is rarely what receives modern critical attention—in fact, it is often ridiculed. This is nowhere more clear than in the character of Little Nell, whose story the majority of contemporary readers found, by all accounts, immensely moving. The poet Thomas Hood, while acknowledging that Nell “speaks, thinks, and acts, in a style beyond her years,” argued that “poverty and misfortune are apt to make advances in worldly knowledge to the young at a most ruinous discount—a painful sacrifice of the very capital of childhood” (CH 97).⁵ As for her death, of which the citizens of Boston famously stood on the docks for news, William Macready wrote of it to Dickens:

I do not know how to write to you about the papers I read last night ... I have suffered so much in reading them I have a recurrence of painful sensations and depressing thought. ... You have crowned all that you have ever done in the power, the truth, the beauty and the deep moral of this exquisite picture. ... I have had thoughts and visions of angelic forms and pictures of the last sad truth of our being here, in constant succession

⁴ See, for example, Arthur Adrian's *Dickens and the Parent-Child Relationship* and Harry Stone's *Dickens and the Invisible World*.

⁵ Most of the quotes in this section are taken from Philip Collins's *Dickens: The Critical Heritage*, which I have abbreviated as “CH” and given page references accordingly.

through the night. — I cannot banish the images you have placed before us. (Letters 2.193)

Even Ruskin, who wrote in 1880 that “Nell...was simply killed for the market, as a butcher kills a lamb,” observed:

The pathos of [the death of young girls] is constantly used in poetry and novels; but the power of the fiction rests, I suppose, on the fact that most persons of an affectionate temper have lost their own May Queens or Little Nells in their time. For my own part of grief, I have known a Little Nell die... (CH 101)

In retrospect, Ruskin’s evaluation may be unintentionally predictive. In 1839— one year before *The Old Curiosity Shop* commenced publication—“almost half the funerals in London were conducted for children under the age of ten, carried off by sickness or malnutrition” (Ackroyd 320). The decreasing rates of child mortality that accompanied the march forward in time could have been partially responsible for the backlash against Little Nell. Oscar Wilde, a later Victorian, famously quipped, “One would have to have a heart of stone to read the death of Little Nell without laughing” (qtd. in Bowen, 13). In 1972 F.R. Leavis called Nell “a contrived unreality, the function of which is to facilitate in the reader a gross and virtuous self-indulgence” (Leavis 298). A more recent critic, John Bowen, summed up the now-prevailing attitude in a 2000 essay: “In many studies of Dickens, Nell is an early candidate for the critical chop, sacrificed on an early page to demonstrate the seriousness of the criticism that will follow” (Bowen 13).

But if we no longer appreciate characters like Nell or exercises in sentimentality such as her well-known death, books that were once poorly reviewed by Dickens’s contemporaries are now far more appreciated and studied—*Little Dorrit* and *Our Mutual Friend* being two notable examples.

Among earlier readers who detested *Little Dorrit* were G.K. Chesterton, who found it utterly devoid of the humor and joy of early Dickens novels such as *The Pickwick Papers*, and James Fitzjames Stephen, who had no patience with the social criticism, which likely hit too close to home. He remarked, “An Act of Parliament would fail to enforce the serious reading of [the novel]” (CH 356). There were, as Philip Collins notes, political reasons to dislike *Little Dorrit*, the home of Dickens’s most pointed critiques of government. But if one felt, like Fitzjames Stephen, that “Sam Weller, Dick Swiveller and Sairy Gamp are his successes and we thank him most heartily for them,” one was unlikely to care much for his later works (qtd. in Smith, 26).

Dickens had stepped outside the boundaries of the word “humorist” and had begun to assert himself as an artist and social critic. But Henry James wrote in his 1865 review of *Our Mutual Friend*, “Mr. Dickens is a great observer and a great humorist, but he is nothing of a philosopher” (CH 473). James’s review, which is especially dismissive of Jenny Wren, begins:

Our Mutual Friend is, to our perception, the poorest of Mr Dickens’s works. And it is poor with the poverty not of momentary embarrassment, but of permanent exhaustion. It is wanting in inspiration. For the last ten years it has seemed to us that Mr Dickens has been unmistakably forcing himself. *Bleak House* was forced; *Little Dorrit* was labored; the present work is dug out as with a spade and pickaxe. (CH 469)

Our Mutual Friend sold fairly well—there had been a reasonable space of time between its release and Dickens’s last, *Great Expectations*—and response was not always so hostile. But even the more positive reviews repeated the same invocation: Dickens, according to the *Annual Register*, “still possesses the qualities that enabled him to write the *Pickwick Papers*, the *Old Curiosity Shop*,

and *Martin Chuzzlewit*.” Dickens’s friend and biographer John Forster was among those who felt the novel lacked “the creative power which crowded his earlier pages” and would “never rank with his higher efforts.”⁶ *Our Mutual Friend* is one of the more studied novels now, as its “subtleties and profundities” that, according to Philip Collins, were originally not noticed are now the subject of much critical work (CH 453).

These general patterns subsist throughout the critical tradition, shaping research output and the preconceptions of those new to Dickens’s work. “Little Dorrit herself,” Collins notes, “never became a cult figure, as her similarly-named predecessor Little Nell had been,” but she now can be of more interest (CH 357). Jenny Wren’s survival can now intrigue us more than Little Nell’s death.

Literature review

Critical work on childhood in Dickens is abundant and diverse, but may be imagined in three categories, identified by Malcolm Andrews: the biographical, the social, and the metaphysical-historical. Andrews admits readily that these three approaches are not mutually exclusive. All rely in some measure on Dickens’s set of responses to the world around him, separating his worldview into filters for clarity’s sake.

The biographical approach, springing from the unique circumstances surrounding Dickens’s own experiences working at Warren’s blacking factory, is

⁶ There were, of course, exceptions to the rule. Contemporaries of Dickens’s such as E.S. Dallas and Henry Chorley hailed *Our Mutual Friend* as one of his best novels in their initial reviews. Fitzjames Stephen, though an avowed admirer of the earlier works, was as fervently annoyed by the portrayal of Little Nell’s death as any modern reader.

particularly common. While it is clear that Dickens drew heavily on his own experiences in the semi-autobiographical *David Copperfield* (1850), it is possible to perceive, as Arthur Adrian does in *Dickens and the Parent-Child Relationship* (1984), echoes of the author's own personal relationships throughout the entire range of work he produced:

Spurred by poignant memories of his own childhood, Dickens used his art to launch a crusade [for victimized children] that occupied him throughout his career... For the genesis of his lifelong interest in parent-child relations it is necessary to consider the formative years of his boyhood. (Adrian 14)

Dickens's "prodigal father" may be most clearly perceived in the extravagant verbosity of Mr. Micawber or the shabbily genteel and parasitical William Dorrit, but there are many other fathers who are propped up by their supposedly dependent offspring (Little Nell's grandfather, *Copperfield's* Mr. Wickfield, Jenny Wren's father Mr. Dolls). For the original of Little Nell, many point to Mary Hogarth, Dickens's saintly sister-in-law, whom he idealized after her premature death. As reiterations of the self-sacrificing, motherly daughter are perhaps the clearest constant in Dickens's writing, Mary has been identified as a possible influence for other Dickens characters as well, such as Florence Dombey.

Critics who utilize biographical interpretations, among them John Carey and Harry Stone, find in this authorial "obsession" the unmistakable influence of Dickens's powerful sense of having had the prerogatives of childhood—fancy, innocence and irresponsibility—taken from him; this sense of loss is occasionally even attributed to Dickens's supposed psychic damage.⁷

⁷ Specifically Adrian, who attributes Dickens's social criticism to the "never-to-be-forgotten unhappiness" of his early years (Adrian 29).

The second approach, the social, is embodied in works such as Laura C. Berry's *The Child, the State and the Victorian Novel* (1999). Berry locates Dickens within the tradition of the Victorian generation of novelists, all of whom brought their energies to bear on the social problems of their day, which included a growing emphasis on the importance of the family and the child. For example, Berry makes a convincing case for *Dombey and Son*'s deliberate invocation and defusing of the contemporary wet nursing debate carried on by C. H. F. Routh and William Acton. The social approach, shared by Philip Collins and George Levine, reinforces Nancy Armstrong's idea of literature as an active participant in, as well as a producer of, the debates of its society. Adrian argues that the repeated iterations of the reversed parent-child relationship are the presented "symptoms" of a society that has neglected its own paternal obligations to its citizens.

Malcolm Andrews's *Dickens and the Grown-Up Child* (1995) takes an avowedly rarer third route, the "metaphysical-historical."⁸ This approach is more philosophical, examining the relevance of a history of ideas both contemporary and inherited from previous generations—a tack taken by critics such as Lawrence Lerner in *Angels and Absences: Child Deaths in the Nineteenth Century* (1997) and David Lee Miller's *Dreams of the Burning Child* (2003). These would include Romantic notions of childhood, such as Wordsworth's valorization of innocence and Rousseau's of the "natural child." Andrews suggests that while Dickens rejects both outright primitivism (the cult of

⁸ The term "metaphysical-historical" was coined, in relation to Dickens, by Angus Wilson in his centenary essay in *Dickens 1970*.

childhood) or progressivism (evangelical efforts to improve the “naturally sinful” child), these systems of thought are combined, at times uneasily, in his approach to the characterization of child characters. While novels such as *Hard Times* (1854) endorse the free development of childish imagination and affections, others make it abundantly clear that many will be denied the whimsical childhood Harold Skimpole claims to embody, and children must be prepared to face the world’s demands responsibly.

This thesis aligns itself most closely with the metaphysical-historical, which allows one to trace larger concepts through their externalization into particular characters. I am especially indebted to the large number of critical responses to Dickens’s figuring of imagination as a vital and necessary tool for survival, linked inextricably with childhood. Garrett Stewart’s *Dickens and the Trials of Imagination* (1974), John Carey’s *The Violent Effigy: A Study of Dickens’ Imagination* (1973), and Robert Higbie’s *Dickens and Imagination* (1998) all make a case for the centrality of imagination in the text as a purposive aim of Dickens’s novels and as a means to sympathetic reception. These critics also affirm the desirability of receiving Dickens on his own terms as a chiefly imaginative writer, rather than exploiting the moments when fanciful depictions of characters jar against his alleged “realism,” as Robert Garis does in *The Dickens Theatre* (1965). Garis argues that Dickens is a theatrical writer whose characters cannot be “taken seriously” by his readership:

If the reader can be said to encounter human beings (and not merely patterns of words) in the mode of illusion we call fiction or drama, then it seems to me that his normal, habitual, almost mechanical expectation is

that he will encounter human beings whom he can take seriously, human beings with an inner life. (Garis 51)

Garis places significance on a complete and coherent sense of characters' inner life, using as his typical counterexample the novels of George Eliot. But as Terry Eagleton wrote in 2005, Dickens writes in "an urban kind of way":

His mode of characterization, as Raymond Williams astutely observes, belongs to the street as well, in the sense that the way he perceives men and women – vividly but externally, caught in a single posture or defined by one or two idiosyncratic figures – is the way we take in passing strangers on busy street corners. These figures are at once animated and enigmatic, expressive but hard to decipher. So if 'realist' means 'true to the situation,' these two-dimensional figures are actually more realist than fully rounded ones. (Eagleton 145)

To compare Dickens unfavorably to those of the more rural Eliot is, Eagleton suggests, missing the point: Dickens must, to depict the new strains of urban life, create a new, urban style of characterization.

John Carey's *The Violent Effigy: a Study of Dickens' Imagination* directly takes issue with Garis's devaluing of Dickens's work as being less than "serious." He argues that Dickens's greatness is primarily due to the great sweep and prodigality of his imagination: "We shall miss his real greatness if we persist in regarding him primarily as a social critic" (Carey 8). Oddly, Carey admires conventional child characters such as David Copperfield and Pip, but has few kind words for the "unreal" children, "pious little monsters, moribund and adult" (Carey 131), like Nell or Paul Dombey:

Being small but adult they are strictly dwarfs – antiseptic, expurgated dwarfs, purged of all the features which make child psychology offensive to the adult mind. We recall Dickens's affection for dwarfs like Little Dorrit, who has a child's body but is really a woman. As dwarfs, they have close affinities with the modern garden gnome... Like Dickens's plastic

children, the gnome is a cheery, middle-class version of an alien and menacing species of being. (Carey 137)

He sees them not as springing from the same prodigal imagination he admires, but as lifeless, idealized automatons designed to gratify an adult readership.

Garrett Stewart is a critic whose ideas closely match my own and to whom I will return repeatedly. In *Dickens and the Trials of Imagination* (1974), Stewart argues that in the darkening world of Dickens's creation, the imagination is vital, not only to Dickens's work but to characters' self-creation. It enables them to restyle the wretched or mundane into escapes and refuges and to avoid self-destructive urges. Sam Weller and Dick Swiveller are emblematic of this tradition, which Stewart then sees deteriorate into characters such as Harold Skimpole, for whom imagination is far more escapist than redemptive. But imaginative re-creation finds its culmination in Jenny Wren, who unites vision and device (device as both stratagem and as desire) to make order from the threads of her life.

The importance of money is pervasive throughout much of Dickens's writing and is the subject of critical work by, among others, Wilfred Dvorak and Seonju Lee. The later novels I examine—*Dombey and Son*, *Little Dorrit*, *Our Mutual Friend*—have strong thematic associates with money, cash and wealth. While money is not one of my primary categories, it must be noted that all the child characters I explore in this thesis are hyperaware of money—its presence, its absence, and crucially, how it is earned. Even little Paul at age five is startlingly insightful about money. His question (“Papa! what’s money?”) cannot be evaded, as Dombey attempts to do by saying: “Gold, and silver, and copper. Guineas,

shillings, half-pence.” Paul responds, “I don’t mean that, Papa. I mean, what’s money after all” (DS 110). Money, after all, is far more mysterious than the metal that represents it, and has an ambiguous moral status. Money is associated with dirt, nowhere more starkly than in the valuable dust-heaps of *Our Mutual Friend*. More than once, it deprives characters of their childhood. The avaricious gambling of Nell’s grandfather loses more than money: she loses her home and eventually her life. Money perpetuates Jenny Wren’s father’s drunkenness, as is made clear every time he requests “Threepenn'orth Rum.” The money-conscious Clennams of *Little Dorrit* deprive Arthur of his “[w]ill, purpose, hope” in his infancy:

‘I am the only child of parents who weighed, measured, and priced everything; for whom what could not be weighed, measured, and priced, had no existence. Strict people as the phrase is, professors of a stern religion, their very religion was a gloomy sacrifice of tastes and sympathies that were never their own, offered up as a part of a bargain for the security of their possessions. Austere faces, inexorable discipline, penance in this world and terror in the next—nothing graceful or gentle anywhere, and the void in my cowed heart everywhere—this was my childhood, if I may so misuse the word as to apply it to such a beginning of life.’ (LD 35)

But money is never expressly an evil force: its effects simply cannot be relied on. The money earned by the needles of Amy Dorrit and Jenny Wren keeps them from destitution and subordination; Mr. Dombey’s vast fortune cannot save his wife or his child from the grave.

Another exceedingly prominent theme that accompanies many discussions of Dickens’s child characters is education. I touch on education chiefly in my analysis of Paul, who is dealt a deathblow by one educational model: the forced memorization of classical languages. Dickens was well known for his educational

criticism, particularly thanks to *Nicholas Nickleby*'s scathing portrayal of "Yorkshire schools" and their cruel treatment of young students. One of the novels in which Dickens offers a positive educational model is *Our Mutual Friend*, wherein Lizzie Hexam and Jenny Wren are taught to read by a patient tutor at Eugene Wrayburn's expense. Jenny, the younger pupil, is noticeably "sharp" at her lessons and eager to learn; reading is associated with her rooftop haven, suggesting that the pleasures of reading form a prominent part of her escapism. Education is also figured as a means to social mobility. Silas Wegg's status as a "literary man – *with* a wooden leg" gives him access to the wealthy Boffins (OMF 57). Learning makes Lizzie more marriageable, explicitly in the eyes of her brother and the schoolmaster Bradley Headstone, and eventually fulfills its promise in helping to "ready" Lizzie for her marriage to Eugene. Jenny, too, enjoys a heightened status when taken under the protection of the Harmons at the novel's close.

Alex Woloch's recent *The One vs. the Many: Minor Characters and the Space of the Protagonist in the Novel* (2003) develops a theoretical approach to character that relies on examining *character-spaces*, his designation for the "particular and charged encounter between an individual human personality and a determined space and position within the narrative as a whole" (Woloch 14). A novel's intersecting character-spaces form a *character-system* that unifies the novel into a complete structure. This method holds the inestimable benefit of reconciling two approaches that have been thought to be mutually exclusive,

despite each being dissatisfying when taken separately. To a certain extent, Woloch suggests, the student of the novel has had to choose between examining the referential and psychological aspects of character or examining the structural/functional aspects, the character-as-device (Woloch 17). Woloch's theory is particularly useful in tackling the realist novel:

This tension between the one and the many becomes particularly pressing in the realist novel, which has always been praised for two contradictory generic achievements: depth psychology and social expansiveness, depicting the interior life of a singular consciousness and casting a wide narrative gaze over a complex social universe. (Woloch 19)

Woloch's methodology makes it possible to consider a character's more impressionistic qualities through the structural lens of distribution: a character's physical space in the novel, how he or she enters or exits the narrative, how he or she loses or gains increased narrative attention, and his or her interrelated place within the rest of the character-system.

The application of this method to Dickens, and to Dickensian minor characters in particular, has particularly intriguing results due to their disproportionate receipt of attention and affective power. Both Jenny Wren and Paul Dombey should be dwarfed by the vast scope of the novels they exist within, but still manage to be not only memorable but also thematically central.

Building on this history of criticism, the following chapters will offer close readings that focus in particular on characters' circumstances and strategies of survival. Woloch's theory will be applied to questions of the distribution of narrative space, in order to avoid an approach that extracts certain characters wholly from their surroundings and attempts to examine them in isolation, or as

separate from their fictional and social context. Such moments in this thesis remain useful in preventing a reductive thematic reading of characters that ignores more complicated narratological details.

Allegory and realism

Those who feel the need to apologize for Dickens cast him as a “theatrical” writer, thus excusing his propensity to create unrealistic or flat characters. When characters lack inner life and appear to personify more abstract concepts or functions in the text, they can be read as allegorical figures. However, as Woloch argues, allegorical constructions of character are necessary in the realist novel, given the double project of representing a vast urban society as a whole and providing characters with psychological depth and inner life:

...the realist novel never ceases to make allegorical (or functional) use of subordinate characters, but it does ferociously problematize such allegory, by more clearly and insistently putting it in juxtaposition with reference. Allegorical characterization now comes at a price: the price of the human particularity it elides. In other words, the realist novel systematically reconfigures its own allegorical reduction of characters through a pervasive awareness of the distributional matrix. This awareness lies behind the “flatness” that E. M. Forster so insightfully conceptualizes: a flatness that would seem to go against the basic tenets of realism but, in fact, becomes essential to realism. (Woloch 20)

Realism as a genre is simultaneously aware of each character’s potential for both symbolic, allegorical meaning and psychologically complex reference, thus complicating classification. In Dickens, E. M. Forster argued, almost all the characters are flat and easily summarized, and yet they have a “wonderful feeling of human depth. Probably the immense vitality of Dickens causes his characters to vibrate a little, so that they borrow his life and appear to lead one of their own”

(Forster 71). While Dickens's characters generally lack some of the elements we attribute to "inner life" in the modern novel, they remain vital through their external "particularities" and distortions. This, as expressed earlier by Terry Eagleton, is part of his "urban style": "So if 'realist' means 'true to the situation, these two-dimensional figures are actually more realist than fully rounded ones'" (Eagleton 145). Realism, then, as defined by both Woloch and Eagleton, is not confined to George Eliot's "process and an unfolding" (Eliot 158). Realism allows and even demands Dickens's reliance on incomplete, externalized characters, drawn with the quick sharpness of an observer of the streets.

In this thesis, allegory surfaces sometimes in juxtaposition to realism, sometimes as a form of realism. Allegory-as-emblem manifests itself most prominently in the discussion of Little Nell, who, much like *Oliver Twist*, carries the burden of representing "the principle of Good," ever surrounded by evil and danger (OT 457). *The Old Curiosity Shop*, through references to *Pilgrim's Progress* and to Nell herself as "a kind of allegory," confirms an allegorical reading that Dickens pointedly does not "problematize" through external particularities (OCS 22). Nell is, in general, both physically unsubstantial and psychologically blank—less a child than The Child, the archetype of innocence. However, allegory remains present throughout Dickens's work: all his child characters must, like Nell, represent a principle of victimized innocence—the Child—in navigating the "fiercely hostile" world Dickens creates.

Fairy tales

Motifs borrowed from the literary fairy tale and the folk tradition are intensely present in Dickens's work, particularly in his rendering of child characters. According to Bruno Bettelheim, the fairy tale gives children the skills to "cope" with the "inner problems of human beings," thus linking the stories themselves to survival:

Just because his life is often bewildering to him, the child needs even more to be given the chance to understand himself in this complex world with which he must learn to cope. To be able to do so, the child must be helped to make some coherent sense out of the turmoil of his feelings. He needs ideas on how to bring his inner house into order, and on that basis be able to create order in his life. He needs... a moral education which subtly, and by implication only, conveys to him the advantages of moral behavior, not through abstract ethical concepts but through that which seems tangibly right and therefore meaningful to him. (Bettelheim 5)

This view of fairy tales—as vehicles for moral education—closely matches that held by Dickens himself.

Dickens loved fairy tales and invoked them repeatedly throughout his life and work. When his friend and former collaborator George Cruikshank rewrote and illustrated fairy tales such as "Hop-o'-my-thumb" to include elements of teetotalism, Dickens was frustrated enough to write a devastating essay ("Frauds on the Fairies," published 1853 in *Household Words*) decrying such distortion.

He wrote of fairy tales:

It would be hard to estimate the amount of gentleness and mercy that has made its way among us through these slight channels. Forbearance, courtesy, consideration for poor and aged, kind treatment of animals, love of nature, abhorrence of tyranny and brute force—many such good things have been first nourished in the child's heart by this powerful aid. It has greatly helped to keep us, in some sense, ever young, by preserving through our worldly ways one slender track not overgrown with weeds, where we may walk with children, sharing their delights. (Frauds 56-57)

In Dickens's "utilitarian age," fairy tales were the last bastion of pure fancy and the transcendence of youth. They contrasted sharply with the popular didactic, moralizing tales also aimed at children, which he excoriates in *Our Mutual*

Friend. Students at the ragged school Charley Hexam attends must read:

...the good child's book, the Adventures of Little Margery, who resided in the village cottage by the mill; severely reproved and morally squashed the miller, when she was five and he was fifty; divided her porridge with singing birds; denied herself a new nankeen bonnet, on the ground that the turnips did not wear nankeen bonnets, neither did the sheep who ate them; who plaited straw and delivered the dreariest orations to all comers, at all sorts of unseasonable times. (OMF 215)

To see the creeping influence of the loathed homily on the idealized stories of his youth, perpetrated by a man he respected as an artist and friend, was simply too much for Dickens. Harry Stone has argued that Cruikshank's manipulation challenged "some of Dickens's formative childhood experiences...crucial to his imagination. He was equally certain that the literature he read as a youth had prevented him from perishing" (Stone 3). Fairy stories were shorthand for Dickens's beliefs regarding the redemptive power of the imagination. As Bettelheim writes, "Dickens understood that the imagery of fairy tales helps children better than anything else in their most difficult and satisfying task: achieving a more mature consciousness" (Bettelheim 23).

Fairy tales will be a recurring theme in this work, as they are in the lives of the characters I have selected. They manifest themselves in the actual shape of characters' lives through familiar tropes of seclusion and confinement, or in details, such as Jenny Wren's choice of folkloric names for herself and her friend Riah, or the story Amy Dorrit makes up to tell Maggy that unwittingly reveals the

desire she keeps hidden. All these invocations reinforce what, to Dickens, is ideal and intrinsic in childhood, kept somehow pure in the face of sullied experience. Even in the midst of the city, characters keep a pastoral image in front of them and seek out refuge in tales of simple life.

Vision and device

The terms “vision” and “device” are ones I have borrowed with gratitude from Garrett Stewart, who uses them when writing of Jenny Wren:

One of the most profoundly moving characters ever brought forth from those inspired Dickensian marriages of gift and craft, Jenny Wren can be seen in her own creative making to act out such a union of vision and device... The artistic marvel of Jenny’s conception is itself a large part of the significance toward which her whole being tends. She is not only created by, she comes in fact to symbolize, the Dickensian fancy at its most spacious and versatile. (Stewart 199)

In other words, Jenny is not merely the product of Dickens’s combined authorial craftsmanship and artistic vision: she also symbolizes and enacts the very “fancy” that makes her existence in the pages of *Our Mutual Friend* possible. What this thesis hopes to express is a clearer concept of how vision and device might function as available aspects of and strategies for other characters in Dickens.

“Device” here suggests not literary device but a character’s ability and will to make, to do, to work—it is the impulse that underlies industriousness. The *Oxford English Dictionary* also defines device as the “action of devising, contriving, or planning; the faculty of devising, inventive faculty; invention, ingenuity.” The physical making of things, such as the sewing of a dress, is augmented by the presence of creative power and skilled contrivance that extends

beyond literal work. Device is an attribute heavily associated with Dickens's female characters, who in order to work or plan must, of necessity, contrive: they become cunning managers of circumstances and often assume a role of authority within their households. In this, device in every sense remains vital: labor provides a basis for domestic authority through both financial autonomy and moral power.

“Vision,” in its simplest sense, refers to imaginative or creative ability such as that which, as Stewart suggests, Dickens must use to create characters as vivid and fanciful as Jenny Wren. Jenny herself is only one of many Dickensian characters who have access to imaginative capacity both through her work—designing and sewing dolls' dresses—and through her verbal dexterity. But “vision” also, for Stewart, encompasses the more intense experience of mystical sight, which the *OED* defines as “an appearance of a prophetic or mystical character, or having the nature of a revelation, supernaturally presented to the mind either in sleep or in an abnormal state.” This kind of transcendent, quasi-divine experience is also available to Jenny through the remembrance of the visions she has had of “bright slanting rows” of children who ease her pain, of flowers that bloom in her dark neighborhood (OMF 238). Her visions are certainly distinguished by her potency but, as I explore, she is not the only Dickensian character to access solace—either found within or bestowed extrinsically—from vision. All will use some combination of personal resources and preternatural aid in order to navigate and survive that most dangerous period in their lives: childhood.

CHAPTER ONE: CHILD DEATH, ALLEGORY AND SENTIMENTALITY

In his earlier work, Dickens earned his reputation for making child death central to his novels in prominent deathbed scenes. These set pieces of novels such as *The Old Curiosity Shop* and *Dombey and Son* are notable for the elaborate control Dickens attempts to maintain over the emotional responses of his readers—successfully, in the case of most of his contemporaries. Modern readers have tended to react unfavorably to the sentimentality that accompanies death in Dickens or, more generally, to the necessity of slaughtering children on the page. In this chapter I explore my larger themes of imagination and allegory, as well as the work such alleged “sentimentality” does within the text, through Little Nell and Paul Dombey. Why write the deaths of children into works notable for their exuberance and comedy? The answer, I suggest, comes back to Dickens’s awareness of a “world fiercely hostile to children,” where innocence has a perilously short life expectancy (Berry 3).

In pursuing the evolution of child suffering in Dickens’s novels, Nell is an ideal starting place: she is emblematic of the sweet, innocent children Dickens delighted in putting in harm’s way in his earlier novels. In their suffering or, in Nell’s case, death, they illustrate the savage danger of the society they live in. Nell is associated often with Paul Dombey, the fellow recipient of a sentimentalized death. But Paul, unlike Nell, does not lead a sentimental life: he

is a strange boy, whose wild fancies and brooding demeanor give him added interest as a complex, almost grotesque character. While both of them are focusing points for the projected expectations and fantasies of others, Paul alone has his own, contradictory interior self. In his oddity and his access to compensatory vision, he hints at the eventual culmination of Dickens's evolutionary portrayals of victimized children.

Allegorical and exemplary: Little Nell

Though Nell Trent is thirteen, she appears young for her years; she is often referred to as simply “the child.” She is a strange, insubstantial figure to Master Humphrey, the initial narrator of *The Old Curiosity Shop*, whom Nell approaches when she loses her way home. More than once he refers to her as a “little creature”:

She put her hand in mine as confidingly as if she had known me from her cradle, and we trudged away together; the little creature accommodating her pace to mine, and rather seeming to lead and take care of me than I to be protecting her. I observed that every now and then she stole a curious look at my face, as if to make quite sure that I was not deceiving her, and that these glances (very sharp and keen they were too) seemed to increase her confidence at every repetition.

For my part, my curiosity and interest were at least equal to the child's, for child she certainly was, although I thought it probably from what I could make out, that her very small and delicate frame imparted a peculiar youthfulness to her appearance. Though more scantily attired than she might have been she was dressed with perfect neatness, and betrayed no marks of poverty or neglect.

‘Who has sent you so far by yourself?’ said I.

‘Someone who is very kind to me, sir.’ (OCS 11-2)

Already Dickens gives his readers the essence of Nell: her “confiding” sweetness; her comfort with strangers, on whom she must rely throughout her journey; the

keen perception and ability to lead and protect that enables her to care for her grandfather. The “marks of poverty or neglect” Master Humphrey fails to find are still to come, just as the alleged “kindness” of Nell’s grandfather to his innocent charge is yet to be interrogated.

Nell is destroyed, ironically, by her grandfather’s obsession with her future prosperity. His helplessness and “second childhood” are the impetus for Nell’s strange, assumed maturity as she becomes his only caretaker. But it is she who inspires him, indirectly, to resort to compulsive gambling, in order that she may not “be left to the rough mercies of the world” after his death (OCS 83). It is he who unintentionally ruins them and hastens Nell’s early death. Nell’s death, then, is a far more personal tragedy than prior child deaths in Dickens. *Oliver Twist*’s Dick or *Nicholas Nickleby*’s childlike Smike are explicitly the victims of impersonal, institutionalized social forces. Nell, like Paul Dombey of *Dombey and Son*, is crushed by the misguided love of a parent figure who loves her and only her.

Social forces are also at work throughout Nell’s suffering. Mr. Trent’s gambling addiction, repeatedly a threat to any tranquility Nell might find, is not only a private character flaw, but a social ill. The cold, damp streets of the unnamed northern city that start the gradual decline in Nell’s health are not simply allegorical. The pitiless indifference she encounters from the populace and the squalor that surrounds her are real and impersonal: “They [Nell and her grandfather] were but an atom, here, in a mountain heap of misery, the very sight of which increased their hopelessness and suffering” (OCS 332).

Nell's decline also operates on a narrative level. Edward FitzGerald once extracted a simplified, coherent children's version of Nell's story, which he termed the "Nelly-ad," but this is not what *The Old Curiosity Shop* is.¹ In substantial portions of the novel, Nell does not appear, yielding to the explosive energy and humor of the London chapters of Kit Nubbles and Dick Swiveller. Kit and Dick are originally involved in the Nell plot—Kit as a loyal but spurned servant of the Trents, Dick as a hapless member of Quilp's conspiracy to marry him to Nell—but both characters gain narrative space as they become involved in emerging plot threads that have little to do with Nell. Nell, in moving further away physically from London, cuts ties with other characters and allows them to move freely and usurp greater narrative attention.

Nell's physical and emotional energy gradually diminishes from the beginning of the novel, when she laughs at Kit, to its end, when, passively and uneventfully, she slips out of the life that so disillusioned her. This is mirrored in the narrative's gradual decentering of focus from its heroine. The novel may begin with Nell, lost in the streets, but it ends by fondly gazing at the happy marriages Kit and Dick make. In their lives, Nell becomes merely a story for children, a paean to goodness—in fact, a fully allegorical figure, rather than the semi-allegorical child she was in life.

¹ See the *Letters of Edward Fitzgerald*, 22 August 1844: "I have made a short abstract of Little Nelly's wanderings . . . leaving out the Swivellers, etc. For children do not understand how merriment should intrude in a serious matter. This might make a nice child's book, cutting out Boz's sham pathos, as well as the real fun; and it forms a kind of Nelly-ad, or Homeric narration of the child's wandering fortunes till she reaches at last a haven more desirable than any in stony Ithaca."

This dual structure of the novel—encompassing Nell’s country journey and Kit and Dick’s city exploits—enables Nell’s grandfather to be rendered a dangerous innocent and displaces the source of evil on to Daniel Quilp, the malicious dwarf who turns Nell and Mr. Trent out of their old curiosity shop. In terms of the plot, Quilp is almost a laughable villain; he attempts to do more evil than he actually does in his plan to marry Nell to Dick Swiveller. He achieves far more in his vendetta against Kit, who comes perilously close to being transported. In Nell’s psychology, however, Quilp figures as the principle nightmare in a nightmarish life, the evil sprite that is in perpetual pursuit of her and her grandfather. This recasting of the antagonist’s role is part of what critics identify as the allegory of the Nell story: Dickens’s carefully drawn antithesis between light and dark, passivity and activity, death and life through their extremes, Nell and Quilp.

John Bowen observes almost sadly in 2001 that few “care . . . about or for Little Nell” (Bowen 13) and quotes F.R. Leavis: “To suggest taking Little Nell seriously would be absurd: there’s nothing there. She doesn’t derive from any perception of the real; she’s a contrived unreality, the function of which is to facilitate in the reader a gross and virtuous self-indulgence” (Leavis 298). Bowen, who notes that all fictional characters are contrived unrealities, goes on to argue that Nell is purposefully unreal; that she was created, in Dickens’s words, “a kind of allegory,” static, neither alive nor dead, interior nor exterior.

Nell was not described explicitly as an allegory in the first publication; Dickens added the word as a response to Thomas Hood’s 1840 review of the early

chapters of the novel. Hood described the initial image of Nell, sleeping in her “bower” surrounded by curiosities grotesque and artificial, as “an Allegory of the peace and innocence of Childhood in the midst of Violence, Superstition and all the hateful or hurtful Passions of the world” (CH 96). Dickens, writing a preface to the 1848 edition, affirmed the intentional design of this imagery:

I will merely observe, therefore, that in writing the book, I had it always in my fancy to surround the lonely figure of the child with grotesque and wild, but not impossible companions, and to gather about her innocent face and pure intentions, associates as strange and uncongenial as the grim objects that are about her bed when her history is first foreshadowed. (OCS 8)

In an allegorical reading, Nell is “the child,” the archetypal child: unreal, as Leavis suggests, in the absence of particularities or flaws. David Copperfield falls asleep in church, and Pip tells lies to his sister about Miss Havisham’s four immense dogs, but Nell does nothing of the kind. She barely even requires food. By representing childhood itself as seen through the adult lens and emphasizing the saintlier aspects of youth, Nell’s characterization is far too generalized to be compelling. This is the case even at the time of her death, where as Barbara Hardy notes, “There is nothing concrete or individual: those details which are mentioned, like the winter berries and green leaves placed on Nell’s ‘couch’ in response to her request to have something ‘near’ her ‘that has loved the light’, are not made specific, but left general and unvisualized” (Hardy 66). In this, her closest Dickensian counterpart, as Bowen notes, is Oliver Twist, who also carried the burden of representing “the principle of Good surviving through every adverse circumstance” (OT 457). Meanwhile, as Dickens suggests, the characters who surround Nell are deliberately “grotesque and wild, but not impossible”—they

function both as allegorical dangers and plausible, referential characters of a realist author.

Assessments of *The Old Curiosity Shop* often turn on whether Nell's death is the inevitable end of the novel or whether Dickens had a change of heart regarding her fate. Oliver did not have to die at the conclusion of his novel—though a surrogate does, the equally sweet and put-upon Dick. On the other hand, the task of imagining what sort of man Oliver Twist might have grown up to be in the aftermath of his adventures is far too difficult to undertake. Oliver Twist's alternate title, "The Parish Boy's Progress," situates little Oliver squarely in the world of allegory through Dickens's allusion to John Bunyan's moral classic, *The Pilgrim's Progress*. Oliver achieves his "Celestial City"—a return to the loving bosom of his middle-class family—and the curtain falls. The allegorical atmosphere of the pilgrim is also very present in *The Old Curiosity Shop*: Nell is intimately familiar with Bunyan's work and says to her grandfather, "I feel as if we were both Christian, and laid down on this grass all the cares and troubles we brought with us; never to take them up again" (OCS 123). In *Oliver Twist*, the narrator engages in his usual work of tying up loose ends; we are assured that Rose Maylie will marry her devoted Henry, that Charlie Bates will become a reformed character, and that the Bumbles, in a rather predictable reversal, will end up inmates of the workhouse wherein they "once lorded it over others" (OT 452). But of Oliver, there is no word, except that he received a comfortable 3000 pounds from his late father's will and was adopted by Mr. Brownlow. Reference is made to the "joyous little faces" crowding around Rose's knee (OT 453), but

how to picture *Oliver Twist* as a father, or a man of business? Dickens, it strikes us, is quite right not to speculate on his future. An unreal child cannot grow into a convincing adult.

In Nell's case, there is the problem of her inevitable physical maturity. Dickens has already retarded Nell's physical development, and as her grandfather says, Nell "would be a woman, soon" (OCS 412). But how could Nell, as "an allegory of the peace and innocence of childhood," outgrow or transcend her nature and become a commonplace adult? Norman Page, in his introduction to the novel, writes:

If we ponder alternative endings, it soon becomes clear that they would be radically inconsistent with the tone and tendency of the Nell story from the outset. A Nell, for instance, that married Kit Nubbles, bore him a large, rosy-cheeked family and lived happily ever after, would betray the ideal the child Nell represents. (Page xviii)

Page draws attention in this statement to the paucity of available endings for a female protagonist: "No potential suitor is ever groomed to ask for her hand in the final number," he notes, as if even the absence of such a suitor can be read as foreshadowing for Nell's eventual death (Page xix).

But Page also notes Nell's fundamental unsuitability for the marriage plot. After all, Kit, who possesses such a strong devotion for Nell that it provokes intense jealousy in his eventual bride, Barbara, never thinks of Nell as a potential wife: "I have been used, you see...to talk and think of her, almost as if she was an angel" (OCS 521). Part of what places Quilp in the realm of truly threatening evil is his ability to imagine little angelic Nell as "Mrs Quilp the second, when Mrs Quilp the first is dead . . . to be my wife, my little cherry-cheeked, red-lipped

wife.” However, Nell’s desexualized nature appears to protect her: “The child looked frightened, but seemed not to understand him” (OCS 53). Puberty itself is a threat to Nell’s Edenic innocence; or, as Robert Polhemus argues, “It seems crucial that Nell die a virgin, unpolluted by sexuality, but her sexual vulnerability and peril are very much a part of her story and destiny.”² In other words, the burden of allegorical purity is what elevates her and destroys her within the narrative.

Nell’s characterization or lack thereof pushes her towards the climactic death, both the parallel and the antithesis of the marriage plot. Marriage is reserved for the Marchioness, whom Robert Higbie calls “a kind of parody of and antidote to the story of Little Nell.” Both are “girl victim[s]” of thirteen, small for their age, who suffer, often of starvation (Higbie 172). Both are curiously bereft of identity: Nell, by her onerous responsibility to represent the ideal child, and the Marchioness by her initial namelessness—she is always simply “the small servant” until Chapter 57. Both Nell and the Marchioness are also, in Schor’s words, “use[d] literally as an object” (Schor 37). Nell becomes a living waxwork in Mrs. Jarley’s traveling show; the unforgiving Sally Brass uses the Marchioness as a battering ram or a projectile missile. But the latter is rescued, or in a sense created by Dick Swiveller’s decision to name her first the Marchioness, and later Sophronia Sphinx. According to Garrett Stewart, Dick, “by naming her almost brings her into being. For . . . to name is to nominate for a reality of one’s own choosing” (Stewart 105). Her new identity carries with it suggestions of glamour,

² From Robert Polhemus’s “Comic and Erotic Faith Meet Faith in the Child: Charles Dickens’s *The Old Curiosity Shop*,” quoted in Lerner’s *Angels and Absences* (112).

power and class-mobility, and introduces her to her first recreational activity, cribbage:

‘Now,’ said Mr Swiveller, putting two sixpences into a saucer . . . when the cards had been cut and dealt, ‘those are the stakes. If you win, you get ‘em all. If I win, I get ‘em. To make it seem more real and pleasant, I shall call you the Marchioness, do you hear?’

The small servant nodded.

‘Then, Marchioness,’ said Mr Swiveller, ‘fire away!’

The Marchioness, holding her cards very tight in both hands, considered which to play, and Mr Swiveller, assuming the gay and fashionable air which such society required, took another pull at the tankard, and waited for her lead. (OCS 432)

The Marchioness does take the lead. Neatly effecting a gender-role reversal, she eventually saves the fever-struck Dick Swiveller and the nearly-transported Kit Nubbles from their respective fates, displaying much cunning throughout. She bests Nell, who cannot save her grandfather, or ultimately even herself—in comparisons between the two characters, most readers are drawn consistently to the Marchioness’s comic potential, tinged with pathos but never dominated by it. William Thackeray claimed he “never read the Nelly part . . . more than once; whereas I have Dick Swiveller and the Marchioness nearly by heart” (CH 91). In a stage adaptation of *The Old Curiosity Shop* performed in 1884, Lotta Crabtree performed dual roles: Little Nell and the Marchioness. The *New York Times* reported, “The adaptation . . . gives greater scope to the delineation of the Marchioness than to that of Nell. The audience soon caught the spirit of Lotta’s eccentric humor as the Marchioness, but was little impressed by her efforts of pathos as Nell.”³ These responses illustrate what the public has found enduringly popular in Dickens: eccentrics over angels. The Marchioness has her own share

³ *New York Times*, January 13, 1884, from a column entitled “Table Talk in London.” The performance in question opened January 12, 1884 at the Opera Comique in London.

of the imaginative capacity Dick Swiveller is known for; she steeps oranges peels in cold water and pretends it is wine: “If you make believe very much, it’s quite nice” (OCS 482). But the responses also speak to the pleasing quality of the Marchioness’s arc: rags to riches, ending with the typical marriage to the reformed and grateful Swiveller who first “created” her. Stewart writes, “It is the Marchioness, the child of his fancy, who nurses him back to health, and we are thereby presented, in a highly indirect but moving way, an image of fancy as salvation” (Stewart 105).

In this context, Nell’s own storyline might not affirm the inevitability of her death, but rather suggests that Nell’s only possible alternate ending would have echoed *Oliver Twist*: an unfinished sketch of a child and an old man living together in a futureless, pastoral tranquility—the tranquility of allegory and stasis.

I would argue that Nell’s death, though never strictly unlikely, does not transition into an inevitability until approximately halfway into the novel. In writing about the supposed inevitability of Nell’s death, critics cite clues that dot the narrative—her encounter with the dying little scholar, for example, or the image of her sleeping form that is echoed, both verbally and visually in Cattermole’s illustrations, in her deathbed scene, the bookends of the novel.⁴ Catherine Robson writes, “Nell is ready for the grave from the first pages of the novel – we lose track how many tombstones she sits on, and how many sextons she chats up along the way” (Robson 120). But these tombstones and sextons are only encountered after Nell leaves London; they are not found on the “first pages.” Nell is far more robust to begin with than Paul Dombey, her closest

⁴ See Steven Marcus’s discussion of Nell in *Dickens: From Pickwick to Dombey*.

Dickensian analogue; her health remains good until her grandfather's relapse into gambling forces her to flee with him from the kindness of Mrs. Jarley. It is only with her increasing weakness of body that Nell begins to succumb to the longing for rest and the death wish that will pursue her relentlessly into the grave.

Evidence garnered from the biographical record supports this reading. Dickens may or may not have intended for Nell to die in his initial conception (it was not until *Dombey* that he began to carefully plan his plots): in fact, John Forster claims that Dickens killed Nell on his suggestion:

He [Dickens] had not thought of killing her when, about half-way through, I asked him to consider whether it did not necessarily belong even to his own conception, after taking so mere a child through such a tragedy of sorrow, to lift her also out of the commonplace of ordinary happy endings, so that the gentle pure little figure and form should never change to the fancy. (Life 94)

Forster makes a key observation: Nell is not fit for “ordinary happy endings” and is somehow too pure to “change”—implicitly, to enter puberty—even in the imagined future beyond the end of the novel. If that were the case, Dickens certainly would have had the skill to recall earlier symbolic elements, such as the schoolmaster and his dead student or the tableau of the sleeping, “beset” Nell to more strongly foreshadow the child's demise. But regardless of authorial intention, Nell, who once had “light and sunny dreams,” would not have cheerfully surrendered to death had she not been driven onto the road with none to guide her (OCS 22). The danger of childhood, allegorized in her journey, was not survivable.

Nell succumbs slowly to her unnamed disease (Page notes that Nell's “slight figure” and “too bright eye” indicate consumption), showing few signs of

recovery even after she comes to her village haven. She is finally safe in a “quiet, happy place,” but, as she continues, it can only be “a place to live and learn to die in!” (OCS 390). And she does begin an education of sorts in death: chatting with the sexton, sitting for hours in the church, and planting flowers at the graves of dead children. She has also been reunited and realigned with Mr. Marton, the schoolmaster whose young pupil she saw die. In Nell, “your little scholar lives again,” she insists; the curious claim becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy (OCS 410). We last see Nell alive staring into a grave-like well, much as Hamlet stared into the eye-sockets of Yorick, as she contemplates the spring that will come again without her. Her resignation is complete, if not unexpected: Nell has, throughout the novel, sought refuge in deep sleep from her self-destructive fantasies of Quilp. She now does the same, anticipating “the sleep that knows no waking” (OCS 325).

Still, Nell’s resignation is somewhat problematic: the narrative dwelling on the positive aspects of dying young is too insistent. This insistence finds its clearest expression in Marton’s final exhortation to Nell:

‘There is nothing,’ cried her friend, ‘no, nothing innocent or good, that dies, and is forgotten. Let us hold to that faith, or none. An infant, a prattling child, dying in its cradle, will live again in the better thoughts of those who loved it, and will play its part, through them, in the redeeming actions of the world, though its body be burnt to ashes or drowned in the deepest sea. There is not an angel added to the Host of Heaven but does its blessed work on earth in those that loved it here. Forgotten! oh, if the good deeds of human creatures could be traced to their source, how beautiful would even death appear; for how much charity, mercy, and purified affection, would be seen to have their growth in dusty graves!’

‘Yes,’ said the child, ‘it is the truth; I know it is . . . Dear, dear, good friend, if you knew the comfort you have given me!’ (OCS 410)

Nell, equated throughout *The Old Curiosity Shop* with childhood in its purest form, even to an infantilizing degree, is not present in the world or in the novel to do or create—the hallmarks of device—but rather to inspire. Nell is the point where others focus their imagination and desires: she facilitates vision, but if she has her own creative impulses, they are hidden from us.

After the subsequent death of her grandfather, Nell is remembered and mythologized by Kit, who tells his children “that story of good Miss Nell who died”:

This, Kit would do; and when they cried to hear it, wishing it longer too, he would teach them how she had gone to Heaven, as all good people did; and how, if they were good, like her, they might hope to be there too, one day, and to see and know her as he had done when he was quite a boy. Then, he would relate to them how needy he used to be, and how she had taught him what he was otherwise too poor to learn... (OCS 556)

We do not receive the text of Kit’s tale (or sermon), though it appears to focus on Nell’s goodness and its eventual reward—that is, what can be extracted from Nell’s story of a morally improving nature for the benefit of young Nubblesees. Nell’s legendary goodness does not wholly spring from the one concrete example Kit gives, her teaching him to read: it is one sign of her charity and benevolence. Her journey, though allegorical like that of the *Pilgrim’s Progress*, was not the achievement: it yielding nothing but suffering. Rather, Nell’s achievement is the *quality* of her suffering, her final acceptance of a good death, and her certitude in the life to come.

And yet, as a proffered set of ideals to the reader, these ring hollow.

Laurence Lerner, in his 1997 study of child death, *Angels and Absences*, writes:

In the first place, childhood is a beginning: the child has left nothingness behind and with every moment will become more alive; it embodies energy and vitality, and nothing is more remote from the idea of childhood than death. But in the second case, where the child exists on the margin, it embodies frailty and is always liable to be snatched back into the darkness from which it has barely emerged. (Lerner xi)

Nell seems to exist entirely in the second “case” identified by Lerner; Nell is never possessed of energy or vitality, and even her life is dominated by the “darkness” that threatens to overwhelm her. But the readership values vitality. Our sympathies are with Kit, who thinks it no sin to spend his holiday at the theatre or eating lobster. We are more apt to remember the eager conviviality of Dick Swiveller, who can always imagine gin-and-water is really ‘rosy wine’ and is determined to lose none of the “poetry of existence” (DS 421). Nell never seems to eat, but the “small servant” who becomes Dick’s Marchioness is always hungry: hungry for food, for orange peels in cold water, for knowledge gained at keyholes, and eventually for learning and love. Quilp is the extreme iteration of this energetic, life-hungry theme, and despite his wickedness, his appearances in the narrative remain a guilty pleasure for the reader and, one senses, for his creator. “We are never more impatient with Nell,” Garrett Stewart writes, “than when we stop to think that, with luck, we will have Quilp back in the next chapter” (Stewart 99).

Nell’s death wish seems, after all, less than inspiring, even though Cattermole drew her with a smile on her face at Dickens’s behest. In fact, Dickens points out that she does not seem dead at all: “She seemed a creature fresh from the hand of God, and waiting for the breath of life; not one who had lived and suffered death” (OCS 538). As Lerner asks, “Is this a description of a

dead body or a refusal to describe it?” (Lerner 96). She is sleeping, or “unaltered,” or an angel who has slowly transitioned from the corporeal to the spiritual before the reader’s eyes. She “faded like the light upon a summer’s evening” (OCS 541). But to better understand Nell’s sentimental death, I will compare her to another strange child with a sentimental death, but not a sentimental life: Paul Dombey.

Strange and contained: Paul Dombey

Paul Dombey, like Nell, is a pretty child, “naturally delicate,” who displays a troublesome inability to thrive after the abrupt dismissal of his wet nurse (DS 107). Precociously aware that he does not have the strength of his older sister Florence, Paul cannot play for long without becoming tired. Gradually, he acquires an aura of strangeness, which reads as an adoption of adult mannerisms—firegazing, for example—as a replacement for typical childhood pursuits.

Even more than Nell, Paul is somehow “other,” not quite normal. While Nell is described as being both enchanting and enchanted, Dickens evokes the image of a changeling in *Dombey and Son*:

...he had a strange, old-fashioned, thoughtful way, at other times, of sitting brooding in his miniature arm-chair, when he looked (and talked) like one of those terrible little Beings in the Fairy tales, who, at a hundred and fifty or two hundred years of age, fantastically represent the children for whom they have been substituted. (DS 109)

Such imagery, describing Paul as an “old man or a young goblin,” does not invite us to actually suspect Paul of having supernatural powers in his possession (DS

112). The text invites us to laugh at them when Paul's nurse Wickam makes the claim that little Paul has supernatural powers over the deaths of others, with the future looking particularly ominous for Mrs. Pipchin. But these descriptions are not without effect: by depicting the small, frail Paul as a "grotesque," at least until his pathos-imbued death scene, the narrative makes space for Florence as the sentimentalized child heroine.

Before Paul is sent to Brighton for the sea-air, his strangeness is deliberately qualified. He is not entirely a creature from another world:

His temper gave abundant promise of being imperious in after-life; and he had as hopeful an apprehension of his own importance, and the rightful subservience of all other things and persons to it, as heart could desire. He was childish and sportive enough at times... (DS 109)

Paul's imperious and self-important attitude operates on two levels. First, it confirms his possession of traits that are both typically childish (bossiness, self-centeredness). But they are also "Dombeyish." After all, if Paul takes after his father, a mental conception of the world's revolving around him—and, by extension, around the timeless firm—will be requisite. Mr. Dombey believes that the "earth was made for Dombey and Son to trade in, and the sun and moon were made to give them light... Stars and planets circled in their orbits, to preserve inviolate a system of which they were the centre" (DS 12).

He is also "childish and sportive enough at times," which again sets Paul's temperament in the realm of conventional childlike behavior, despite the statement's marked qualification. Paul's "childish" behavior is associated with Florence's presence, or with imaginative play: "playing with Florence, or driving Miss Tox in single harness." Even during these occasions, he can "lapse" into his

other attitude, his “strange, old-fashioned, thoughtful way, at other times, of sitting brooding in his miniature arm-chair” (DS 109). But it is far more common for him to “lapse” when he is in the company of Mr. Dombey—a situation which, by the very nature of their relationship, necessarily excludes Florence:

They were the strangest pair at such a time that ever firelight shone upon. Mr Dombey so erect and solemn, gazing at the blaze; his little image, with an old, old face, peering into the red perspective with the fixed and rapt attention of a sage. Mr Dombey entertaining complicated worldly schemes and plans; the little image entertaining Heaven knows what wild fancies, half-formed thoughts, and wandering speculations. Mr Dombey stiff with starch and arrogance; the little image by inheritance, and in unconscious imitation. The two so very much alike, and yet so monstrously contrasted. (DS 109-10)

Paul’s strangeness is rooted in his weakness, the moments when it is impossible for him to join Florence in healthy play. Instead he “unconsciously” imitates his father, but the emulation is somehow “monstrous” when beheld in one so young. Dombey and Paul both firegaze, but Paul does not contemplate, as his father does, the worldly glories of Dombey and Son. His specific thoughts are closed to us, but Dickens hints at “wild fancies” and “wandering speculations.” Paul’s childlike imagination persists in Dombey’s presence but is stifled, giving forth darker images that cause him to brood.

Paul’s strangeness causes him to sit uneasily within the evolution of Dickens’s child characters that I posit. Malcolm Andrews writes, “There is a grotesque quality about Paul that the narrator underlines at several points. This makes him different from, say, Little Nell, with whom he is often compared: *we* may think Nell somewhat grotesque, but her creator certainly does not” (Andrews 112). Grotesques typically cannot inspire the levels of sentimentality and feeling

afforded to idealized characters. The reader enjoys Paul not because he is sentimental, but because of his abrupt pronouncements and preternatural broodings. In this, the reader is alone: to Dombey, Paul is a symbol; Florence does not appreciate Paul for his oddities, but rather fixates on the pity she feels for his weakness. But if Paul is to experience the sentimentalized child death Dickens planned for him from the beginning, his characterization must evolve within the few chapters afforded him: he must transition from grotesque to affectionate child.

As Paul begins to manifest his “changeling” nature, it becomes clear that he is not, despite his Aunt Louisa’s claims, “a perfect Dombey”: “If your dear boy’s soul is too much for his body, Paul, you should remember whose fault that is – who he takes after, I mean – and make the best of it. He’s as like his Papa as he can be. People have noticed it in the streets” (DS 115). Louisa unintentionally hints at a theme that dogs Paul’s steps as he approaches his death: confinement. Paul’s strange old-fashionedness and “wild fancies” contrast with and overpower his small, weak frame; he is also hemmed in by the constraining plans of his father. Nell’s more expansive world leaves her without shelter, but Paul suffers from too much shelter. He improves on the beaches of Brighton, free from the claustrophobic intensity of his home and his father. Being once again confined in Blimber’s educational “hothouse” is too much for Paul: he is crushed, unresisting, by adult expectations and by stringent modes of education.

It is Florence who has the greatest normalizing influence on Paul. By simply appearing in a room, she causes a remarkable change in her brother:

The child immediately started up with sudden readiness and animation, and raised towards his father in bidding him good-night, a countenance so much brighter, so much younger, and so much more child-like altogether, that Mr Dombey, while he felt greatly reassured by the change, was quite amazed at it. (DS 113)

Paul's strangeness manifests most strongly in the presence of his father, but it does not connect him to his father: it only bewilders and worries Dombey, insofar as he can be worried. Bending his will and all his aspirations on Paul's weak frame is probably a contributing cause of Paul's oddity, but it is not in any sense a desirable effect, or one that inspires confidence in Paul's future enthusiasm for his chosen destiny. His weariness at the prospect is palpable:

'And you'll try and learn a great deal here, and be a clever man,' said Mr Dombey; 'won't you?'

'I'll try,' returned the child, wearily.

'And you'll soon be grown up now!' said Mr Dombey.

'Oh! very soon!' replied the child. Once more the old, old look passed rapidly across his features like a strange light. (DS 170)

Dickens makes it clear that Paul's biggest danger is his father. Despite Dombey's obvious devotion to his heir, his presence and expectations bring on Paul's "old look," both through "unconscious imitation" and the imperative, always present even when unspoken, that Paul is being groomed for a destiny that does not involve childish fancy. Dombey and Son deals "in hides, but never in hearts. They left that fancy ware to boys and girls, and boarding-schools and books" (DS 12). The "strange light" that passes over Paul's face when confronted with such massive expectations hints at Paul's growing prophetic awareness that try as he might, he will not grow up at all.

As two sensitive and sentimental children, Paul and Nell have in common the part they play in relation to a parental figure—in Paul's case, Mr. Dombey.

Paul is the living symbol of Dombey's dynastic hopes that "the house will once again... be not only in name but in fact Dombey and Son" (DS 11). Little Paul represents the coming of the "anno Dombei," a hazy but glistening future where Dombey and Paul will be utterly self-sufficient and contained, as he reveals when discussing the choice of godparents for Paul:

'Paul and myself will be able, when the time comes, to hold our own – the house, in other words, will be able to hold its own, and maintain its own, and hand down its own of itself, and without any such commonplace aids... So that Paul's infancy and childhood pass away well, and I see him becoming qualified without waste of time for the career on which he is destined to enter, I am satisfied... Until then, I am enough for him, perhaps, and all in all. I have no wish that people should step in between us.' (DS 61)

Dombey's fantasy is of the semi-mystical fusion of himself and Paul into Dombey and Son, free of intrusions from the valueless Florence or the lower-class Toodles (who must, to Dombey's shame, supply Paul's wet nurse Polly). David Lee Miller writes, "Mistaking himself for God, Dombey endures the full consequences of his error, sacrificing his only begotten son to the symbolic identity they share in 'the Firm'" (Miller 148). Dombey's fantasy is shattered in due course by his own impatience. Blind to the true state of his son's health, he insists on sending him to Dr. Blimber's mental hothouse to prepare him all the more quickly for the days of their collaboration and union. He actually speeds little Paul to his death.

As we have seen previously with Nell, the death of the child is intensely personal, stemming not from impersonal neglect but from intense overattentiveness. But again, social forces are not absent: Dickens makes it clear that the privileged children of the rich bourgeoisie are not immune from "deprivation." The severe parental pressure inflicted on Alice Marwood, the

transported thief and prostitute, is echoed in genteel fashion by Edith's purchasable status in the Victorian marriage market. Dombey's money protects Paul from having to work, like David Copperfield, in a blacking factory; money cannot, however, protect him from the crushing hopes of his father or, finally, from death. Paul's question, "What's money after all?", may be unanswerable, but it is certainly not naïve.

On the level of narrative, Paul, unlike Nell, is not the principal protagonist of his novel. His death, despite its status as a highly crafted set piece, serves as far more of a device to the central plot, the rejection and eventual acceptance of Florence by Mr. Dombey. Paul certainly holds thematic significance—in a novel full of marine metaphors, the waves that bear him out of the world are the most important—but he is not what the novel is about. *Dombey and Son* is "a daughter after all" (DS 253) and we know quite positively that Paul's death, unlike Nell's, was intended from the very beginning and precisely planned: "Paul, I will slaughter at the end of number five," Dickens wrote to a friend (Life 346). But Dickens began by deceiving his readers, focusing their attention on Paul while the true protagonist, Florence, slips under the reader's radar as well as her father's.

Dombey and Son makes more of Paul's infancy, stretching typically overlooked years—birth to age six—to fill a large section of the novel and give his truncated life significance. The narrative scrutiny his infant years receive mirrors the impatient, overzealous attention paid by Dombey to his heir's first years. Just as Dombey misinterprets Paul's strangeness and gravity as readiness to begin a stringent education, the reader is invited to interpret—or misinterpret—

which “deprivations” or “chills” are responsible for Paul’s weakness. Dickens suggests, for example, that the iciness of the Dombey home itself, or the emptiness of Dombey’s religious ritual, may have had its own devastating effect: “The chill of Paul’s christening had struck home, perhaps to some sensitive part of his nature, which could not recover itself in the cold shade of his father; but he was an unfortunate child from that day” (DS 107-8). The “perhaps” leaves room for doubt, but the unusual elevation in importance of one day’s temperature in the life of an infant is typical of the life of Paul, the hyperobserved center of the Dombey household.

Threads of causality are more fully developed here than in *The Old Curiosity Shop*: Paul’s illness feels more real than Nell’s, in part due to its basis in established, plausible events in Paul’s early life. Paul’s death may be sentimental, but the causes for the death itself are far more clinical. The chapter in which Polly Toodle is dismissed as Paul’s wet nurse is entitled “Paul’s second deprivation,” the first being his mother’s death in childbirth. Both deprivations have a straightforward element—the loss of breastmilk, the lack of which made Oliver Twist and Pip so underdeveloped and runty—and an emotional or even spiritual one, the loss of the mother-figure. Paul’s sister Florence can attempt to step into the role of both—as when she comes to bring Paul home from school and says “I’ll nurse you, love”—but the damage is done (DS 222).

The second deprivation—Polly’s dismissal—could have been justified in the narrative by her endangerment of young Florence, who is abducted by the witchlike Good Mrs. Brown after the unfortunate trip to the Toodle home in

Stagg's Gardens. But Dickens reframes Paul's "second deprivation" as Dombey's unreasonable horror at Paul's trip to a lower-class home. Paul is never physically endangered like Florence, but Polly unintentionally gives Dombey proof to support his darkest fear: that Polly Toodle's milk would serve as a gateway to class contamination. In this, Dombey's position is utterly indefensible. The risk to Paul's health from such an abrupt weaning, which Victorian parents certainly would have been sensitive to, did not outweigh, in Dombey's cold calculation, the risk of a further connection with the insinuating Toodles. It would be characteristic of Dombey to even doubt the necessity of his son's lingering dependency on breast milk, as it may interfere with Paul's "steeple-chase towards manhood" (DS 107).

While the narrative implicates the loss of breastmilk and his funereal christening, it is made clear that the deathblow is dealt by Paul's premature education. Dickens, a frequent observer of forms of education, obviously has little affection for the Blimber "forcing apparatus" Paul is subjected to, where all students are made, regardless of inclination or ability to understand, to master huge quantities of Greek and Latin. "All the boys blew before their time," he writes, and six-year-old Paul is in a position to "blow" much earlier than most (DS 162). Being sent to school is Paul's third deprivation—the separation from Florence. Dombey, having seen the obvious effect of Polly's removal on his son's size and strength, is more cautious in sending him to Blimber's:

‘If I have any little uneasiness in my own mind, Mrs Pipchin, on the subject of this change, it is not on that head. My son not having known a mother has gradually concentrated much – too much – of his childish

affection on his sister. Whether their separation – ’ Mr Dombey said no more, but sat silent.

...It was plain that he had given the subject anxious consideration, for he had formed a plan, which he announced to the ogress, of sending Paul to the Doctor’s as a weekly boarder for the first half year, during which time Florence would remain at the Castle, that she might receive her brother there, on Saturdays. This would wean him by degrees, Mr Dombey said; possibly with a recollection of his not having been weaned by degrees on a former occasion. (DS 160-1)

Florence is perceived, even by the generally unperceptive Dombey, as being both a concentration point for Paul’s redirected mother-love and as having a strengthening effect on Paul that it would be disastrous to “wean” him from too suddenly. Florence remains in Brighton for the sole purpose of seeing her brother on Saturdays, a mutually cherished time, but it is not enough—she cannot entirely shield her brother from his work, try as she might to learn Latin for him. Paul weakens in the face of the magnitude of what is set before him, with the best intentions, by Cornelia Blimber—in a sense due to the sheer absurdity of placing a six-year-old under such mental strain. But the serious danger, I suggest, stems from confinement as much as overwork. The comparison between Paul before and after the commencement of his education is stark.

Paul’s health improves after he is placed under the care of Mrs. Pipchin, the harsh lady who operates “an infantine Boarding-House of a very select description” in Brighton (DS 116)—but it is during this period that he first develops his obsession with “what the waves were always saying” (DS 248). His strengthened state emboldens Dombey to start Paul on the road to adulthood. “Six will be changed to sixteen, before we have time to look about us,” Dombey claims. When Mrs. Pipchin points out that ten years is a long time, he retorts, “It

depends on circumstances” (DS 159). Dombey’s goal is that of *Hard Times*’s Gradgrind, who tells his daughter: “It has always been my object so to educate you, as that you might, while still in your early youth, be . . . almost any age” (HT 102). Dombey intends to manipulate “circumstances” and further his son’s premature aging by removing Paul from his chosen society, namely Florence and Glubb—”a weazen, old, crab-faced man, in a suit of battered oilskin, who had got tough and stringy from long pickling in salt water, and who smelt like a weedy sea-beach when the tide is out” (DS 127). Florence represents both maternal devotion and childish pursuits to Paul. Glubb, a very minor character, also induces particular associations for the child:

‘I haven’t been well. I have been a weak child. I couldn’t learn a Latin Grammar when I was out, every day, with old Glubb... He’s a very nice old man, Ma’am,’ he said. ‘He used to draw my couch. He knows all about the deep sea, and the fish that are in it, and the great monsters that come and lie on rocks in the sun, and dive into the water again when they’re startled, blowing and splashing so, that they can be heard for miles. There are some creatures,’ said Paul, warming with his subject, ‘I don’t know how many yards long, and I forget their names, but Florence knows, that pretend to be in distress; and when a man goes near them, out of compassion, they open their great jaws, and attack him. But all he has got to do,’ said Paul, boldly tendering this information to the very Doctor himself, ‘is to keep on turning as he runs away, and then, as they turn slowly, because they are so long, and can’t bend, he’s sure to beat them. And though old Glubb don’t know why the sea should make me think of my Mama that’s dead, or what it is that it is always saying – always saying! he knows a great deal about it.’ (DS 172-3)

The above passage occurs just after Mr. Dombey and Florence have left Paul alone, standing vulnerably on a desk, in Dr. Blimber’s study. He immediately, and with precocious eloquence, illustrates the unsuitability of Blimber’s establishment. Dombey’s snobbishness has not had the desired effect on his son after all; Paul’s tone conveys respect for an immense knowledge of what is

important (to Paul, the sea and by extension death), in opposition to what is unimportant (the practice of “working in the graves of deceased languages” (DS 163) like Latin). In this we see what Angus Wilson called “Paul Dombey’s refutation of the calculating materialist world” (Wilson 226). It is Paul’s separation from what he holds to be actually important in his life—the affection of Florence, the pull of the sea—that contributes to Paul’s eventual demise quite as much as the sheer strain of classical memorization.

According to Lerner, when Paul pokes holes in Mrs. Pipchin’s tedious moral stories, he evokes the archetypal “wise child,” for whom the prototype was a young Jesus Christ, arguing with the rabbis in the Temple (Lerner 86). If so, the accompanying prophetic strain grows deeper in his days at Blimber’s establishment. Jesus himself indirectly watches over Paul in his illness:

He had to think of a portrait on the stairs, which always looked earnestly after him as he went away, eyeing it over his shoulder; and which, when he passed it in the company of anyone, still seemed to gaze at him, and not at his companion. He had much to think of, in association with a print that hung up in another place, where, in the centre of a wondering group, one figure that he knew, a figure with a light about its head – benignant, mild, and merciful – stood pointing upward. (DS 218)

Just as the portrait has singled out Paul as specially chosen, Paul feels a connection to the figure of Christ, whom he “knows,” despite no previous mention of any religious education or practice in the Dombey home beyond mere form—marriages, christenings and funerals. What’s more, Paul enacts his growing connection to the Christianized sentiment embodied in the picture—benevolent, rather than doctrinal—through his new behavior towards people who

are not Florence, or people he has taken a fancy to such as Mrs. Pipchin, Glubb or Toots.

Like Jenny Wren, Paul is at first “never so distressed as by the company of children”:

‘Go away, if you please,’ he would say to any child who came to bear him company. ‘Thank you, but I don’t want you.’

Some small voice, near his ear, would ask him how he was, perhaps.

‘I am very well, I thank you,’ he would answer. ‘But you had better go and play, if you please.’

Then he would turn his head, and watch the child away, and say to Florence, ‘We don’t want any others, do we? Kiss me, Floy.’ (DS 127-8)

After entering Blimber’s and becoming, as the whole house would have it, more old-fashioned, he becomes far more conciliatory for reasons he “imperfectly” understands:

He had secretly become more and more solicitous from day to day, as the time of his departure drew more near, that all the house should like him. From some hidden reason, very imperfectly understood by himself — if understood at all — he felt a gradually increasing impulse of affection, towards almost everything and everybody in the place. He could not bear to think that they would be quite indifferent to him when he was gone. He wanted them to remember him kindly . . . (DS 209)

It may be an overstatement to see in Paul’s “impulse of affection” a simpler, more childish version of Christ’s universal love, but what does seem clear is that Paul is preparing for his absence, not just for the holidays, but for ever. Instead of reserving the vast majority of his love for Florence, he is expanding his circle in preparation for the onset of death, which he does not comprehend, but somehow acknowledges. Paul wants to be remembered kindly, as Kit remembered Nell; since he is far more of an eccentric than Nell, he requires quasi-divine inspiration in order to aspire to her state of universal belovedness.

Paul's prophetic "powers" and his foreknowledge of death are granted—by some indefinable benevolent force, or by the author—to somehow compensate for his lack of resources in the face of suffering. This foreknowledge of his death manifests itself earlier, though not as strongly as it does in his final illness at school, when Paul first becomes fascinated with "what the waves were always saying." To Paul, the waves speak of death and the country beyond to which the tide will bear him, but he cannot initially translate this meaning. His ceaseless listening and questioning, however, do not just foreshadow his death: they reinforce Paul's bridge to the other shore, forged by his mother's death at his birth, by his weakness, by his old-fashionedness. This last, as Dickens reminds us, is "the fashion that came in with our first garments, and will last unchanged until our race has run its course, and the wide firmament is rolled up like a scroll. The old, old fashion – Death!" Paul's visionary grasp of his curtailed future is a gift to him, rendering him kinder, less solipsistic; it also aids him in effecting a smooth withdrawal from life, going with the current, as it were. All of these things serve to make his death the more emotionally affecting.

Examining the deaths

Lerner, in his analysis of Paul Dombey's death-as-setpiece, identifies three aspects that give it its particular cultural impact: "the absence of physical distress, the ubiquitous goodwill, and the religiosity" (Lerner 92). Neither Nell nor Paul experience severe agony: she dies with a "lovely smile" on her face (OCS 541), while he is borne slowly away by the waves that have constantly fascinated him.

Paul's final "weakness and mild delirium," according to Lerner, "makes [his illness] the fascinating occasion for fantasy" (Lerner 92). Paul's heightened perception, one of his most childlike characteristics, becomes heightened as his condition weakens: again, child death shows a *regression* back into the "darkness" from which the child came, echoed by Paul's ebbing maturity. The second category, "ubiquitous goodwill," manifests itself in the universal kindness Paul finally receives from those who had once challenged him: Mrs. Pipchin, for example, or his tutor Cornelia Blimber.

It is generally acknowledged that Dickens's heavenly appeals lack theological content, but the commonplace signs of religiosity are present: beautiful music that only Nell can hear, a glimpse of Paul's departed Mama (and perhaps Christ) on the other side and, of course, angels.⁵ The final illustration for *The Old Curiosity Shop* shows Nell, eyes closed in death, sleep, or anticipation, as winged angels bear her skywards to presumably take on her promised angelic role. In both cases, we can assume that Dickens is thinking of his readers: he excites pitiful emotion, but does not allow the reader to wallow in it. The child is ready, even happy, to go. In Nell's case, one is even robbed of the immediate, vicarious emotion of the deathbed scene; the reader arrives, like Kit, too late for Nell's last moments.

⁵ Nina Auerbach argues in *Woman and the Demon* that the "angels" Dickens invokes were "emanations of an intensely felt non-Christian religion" or, in other words, emotional symbols rather than theological personages (82). Similar assessments have been made by Janet Larson (*Dickens and the Broken Scripture*, 1985) and Dennis Walder (*Dickens and Religion*, 1981). Contemporaries also took issue with the doctrinal emptiness of Dickens's religiosity. A review in the *North British Review* declared that "poetry and sentiment are not religion, and most miserable substitutes for it" (qtd. in Larson, 114). Harriet Beecher Stowe remarked that Dickens did not appear to have heard of "such a person as Jesus Christ" (qtd. in Bowen, 23).

It is true that Paul, like Nell, gets a gradual build-up to his death—his ill health is always a clue to his eventual fate. But Paul's death is also sudden, a quick descent into the preternatural, heightened perception that accompanies his delirium. Nell actively or passively wills herself into the grave, but Paul is unambiguously carried there by forces too strong for him, just as his father's formidable dynastic hopes molded and squeezed his personality into that of the premature businessman. He is fascinated by death, but does not seek it:

His only trouble was, the swift and rapid river. He felt forced, sometimes, to try to stop it – to stem it with his childish hands – or choke its way with sand – and when he saw it coming on, resistless, he cried out! But a word from Florence, who was always at his side, restored him to himself; and leaning his poor head upon her breast, he told Floy of his dream, and smiled. (DS 248)

Paul is initially disturbed by the river, clearly symbolic of death and its unstoppable mission to bear Paul away, because Florence ties him to the world. Nell has lost faith in mankind: she has heard, uncomprehendingly, that honest Kit betrayed her family, just as she has seen her grandfather steal from her while she pretended to sleep. Paul, on the other hand, experiences no outright betrayal and does form relationships, even with the ogress Mrs. Pipchin and the foolish Toots.

Paul is no perfect child; in addition to being imperious and occasionally saucy, he is otherworldly, a “young goblin.” Nell is a saintly heroine, and Florence Dombey is to some extent her heir, but Paul is one of Dickens's eccentrics. He has more scope, up to a certain point, to define his reaction to death: once he reaches that point, the commencement of the deathbed scene proper, he is constrained by the adult sensibilities of his readers and the sentimental orchestration of his author. Paul behaves, just before death, as he

never could have behaved at any other point in the novel. He is sweet, emotional, endearing, full of exclamations: quite unlike Mrs. Pipchin's fireside familiar or the inscrutable questioner who asked his father, "What's money?" The self-conscious stage-managing Dickens does at Paul's death is very similar to Nell's case: in both, he is careful to dictate our responses, and our lack of them. But while Nell's actual moment of death is avoided, with the truly pathetic elements displaced onto her grandfather's incipient breakdown, Paul's is fully embraced.

Dickens is perhaps the writer most associated with dramatic child deaths, but he certainly did not pioneer the concept. As Samuel Pickering points out, the didactic religious literature of the late eighteenth century "lean[t] heavily on tearful but apocalyptic death scenes" (Pickering 70). Dickens ridiculed evangelistic writing, but easily could have appropriated the well-known conventions of works such as *The Dairyman's Daughter* (1814), which utilize the premature deaths of the virtuous young. In this, he worked in the tradition of sentimentality.

Sentimentality can be simply defined as the building up of a disproportionate excess of emotion for a given situation; applied to Dickens, it is almost always used as a pejorative in reference to his allegedly self-indulgent portrayals of death, child death in particular.⁶ What differentiates sentimentality from melodrama, Lerner suggests, is that sentimentality is "sadness that has lost

⁶ Barbara Hardy argues that in writing the deaths of Paul and Jo, Dickens "stays on the right side of the dangerous verge between sentiment and sentimentality," a possible explanation for Paul Dombey's continuing interest to critics in comparison with Nell. This may be, she suggests, due to Paul's reluctance to immediately give in to death and the heightened sense of his illness (again, compared to Nell or Smike). Hardy also notes how Dickens is "economical" with elements such as elegiac description and "Christian appeal" (Hardy 68-72).

all unpleasantness and become a warm glow.” “Physically repulsive” details are scrupulously avoided: they might interfere with the luxuriousness of our sorrow

(Lerner 183). Wendy Lesser writes:

...the basic idea [of many critics] is that Dickens cheats us by giving us an unreal situation and expecting real emotions in return. What this view ignores is that for many readers the Dickensian scenes of pathos *do* succeed in producing emotion: his sentimentality may be enormously manipulative, but it often works... It is essential that his pathetic deaths have the quality of a death-bed “scene”—a picture seen from the outside, and not fully accepted as real. Only then can the reader give way to sympathetic emotion and still retain the privileged role of audience. (Lesser 193-4)

Lesser addresses here the crux of the issue: if scenes of sentimentality are somehow false, why were the deaths of Nell and Paul—both agreed-upon exercises in sentimentality—so affecting to their audience, who received both with rapture and grief? Perhaps, Lesser suggests, precisely because Dickens’s readers were an “audience,” as opposed to participants. Nell’s death is seen only in flashback, and while Paul’s illness is at first described from his childish perspective, we are not invited to identify with him during his final moments.

Rather, we stand hovering with the other witnesses, alienated:

I would like to suggest that the essence of sentimentality is itself a kind of alienation: a separation between viewer and object which allows the viewer to indulge in self-pity at a distance, to expend the kind of emotion that he would be afraid to expend upon himself... Sentimentality allows us to feel a kind of superficial pain which closely resembles pleasure. It allows us not to substitute ourselves for another (as the empathy experts would have it), but to substitute another for ourselves as a sacrifice to feeling. (Lesser 197)

The deaths of Nell and Paul, in this formulation, were wildly successful due to Dickens’s carefully orchestrated evocation of sorrow inflected with pleasure. If readers felt the lure of cathartic, self-indulgent release in a death scene, they could

be brought to a recognition of the perils of childhood. John Forster, writing to Dickens after reading the death of Nell, said, “I felt this death of dear little Nell as a kind of discipline of feeling and emotion which would do me lasting good” (Letters 2:187). Child death is moral, educational, public, as G.K. Chesterton recognized:

Humour is expansive; it bursts outward; the fact is attested by the common expression, ‘holding one’s sides.’ But sorrow is not expansive; and it was afterward the mistake of Dickens that he tried to make it expansive. It is the one great weakness of Dickens as a great writer, that he did try to make that sudden sadness, that abrupt pity, which we call pathos, a thing quite obvious, infectious, public, as if it were journalism or the measles. (Chesterton 24)

In a less obvious way, Dickens is being as didactic as the evangelical literature he both derided and adapted. Legh Richmond, a chaplain and writer of tracts, tried to “excite tender emotions, favorable to serious impressions” (qtd. in Miller, 137). I argue that Dickens does the same. In these earlier works of his career, Dickens is enlightening his readership by any means necessary as to how drastically high the stakes are for the suffering child.

CHAPTER TWO:
AMY DORRIT: DEVICE AND FAIRY-TALE LABOR

In turning from the small corpses of Nell and Paul, my focus now shifts to the strengths Dickens attributes to his survivors: the children who will grow into adulthood. In this chapter, I explore device as a strategy and saving grace as embodied in *Little Dorrit's* titular heroine, Amy, a character who recalls Nell's mild self-sacrifice but also presages Dickens's strangest daughter, Jenny Wren.

Raymond Williams positions Amy Dorrit as a figure of "indestructible goodness," growing up pure within the corrupt air of the Marshalsea prison (Williams 96). Born to both gentility and destitution, Amy is the archetype of the virtuous, laborious daughter. But her genesis within one of Dickens's most socially conscious novels begs the question: why is *Little Dorrit's* labor valued as a positive, when it could easily have been portrayed as exploitative, a punishment for the sins of the father? Amy's imperative to work, as I discuss in this chapter, is not simply imposed upon her: it is a calling, a strategy, and a means to autonomy that other characters, particularly female ones, can also access. But the imperative to work rarely occurs in isolation: daughters contrive on behalf of their fathers.¹

Dickens's body of work is full of daughters. Daughterhood is a status that all women may be said to possess, but in Dickens, it is a role of particular

¹ Or, occasionally, their brothers: in *Our Mutual Friend*, Charley Hexam's education is his sister Lizzie's "contriving."

importance. Daughterhood is a way of life, shaping and defining the daughter's character from a young age, in the process creating a recognizable Dickensian archetype. A daughter in Dickens is quiet, kind, and above all, devoted to her father or, in Little Nell's case, grandfather. In these relationships, the father is generally a weak character, requiring constant attentiveness and self-sacrifice from the daughter. She is the guiding light, the angel in the home, the little housekeeper. To Dickens, such a character embodies the "natural" parent-child relationship, as we see in Florence Dombey:

It had been hard – how hard may none but Florence ever know! – to have the natural affection of a true and earnest nature turned to agony; and slight, or stern repulse, substituted for the tenderest protection and the dearest care. It had been hard to feel in her deep heart what she had felt, and never know the happiness of one touch of response. (DS 655)

Florence's love for her father is "natural," rooted in her "true and earnest nature," and thus is indestructible in the face of his neglect. Dombey eventually strikes Florence across the breast and turns her out of the house, but Florence remains loyal even in exile; her daughterly virtue is eventually rewarded.

Loving daughters may be idealized, but their paths are never easy; they inspire our pity through their assumed burdens. The vacuum of paternal responsibility creates an imperative to work. Nell, condemned to interminable wanderings and the assumption of complete responsibility over her grandfather, seeks employment with Mrs. Jarley's traveling waxwork show. Lizzie Hexam denies herself social improvement rather than leave her father, and instead rows him on the river as he trolls for corpses. Girls and women who labor for the preservation of others, leaving the father's home and going into the streets

unprotected, captured Dickens's imagination again and again. While David Copperfield's factory work causes him deep anguish, and Pip grumbles against his future as a blacksmith before receiving his expectations, female labor is not simply undergone cheerfully—it is a means to financial self-assertion and autonomy.

Amy Dorrit gives us a rare portrait of the prematurely aged, laboring child as an adult. She is the youngest daughter of the irresolute, imprisoned William Dorrit, who has long since resigned himself to permanent residence in debtor's prison. William's fortunes are narrated from the beginning of his imprisonment, with the story culminating in Amy's birth within the prison walls and their shared, gradual attainment of local folkloric significance—the Father and Child of the Marshalsea, a designation William even comes to take pride in.

The containment that subtly crushes Paul in *Dombey and Son* is a full-blown theme in *Little Dorrit*. Robert Higbie writes in *Dickens and Imagination*:

Little Dorrit, like *Bleak House* and *Hard Times*...begin[s] by presenting a strongly negative view of the reality in which their characters must live. As in *Bleak House*, that reality is represented by a symbol—in this case, the prison... From a social perspective the prison symbolizes a society that encloses and corrupts people, warping them so they worship money instead of God. (Higbie 132)

Amy, born inside the prison walls, is stunted physically by growing up caged. She retains the physical appearance of a prepubescent girl into her twenties. By implication, she is not stunted morally; the single “speck” the prison atmosphere leaves on her mind only serves to make her seem all the more virtuous: “With the thought, her purity and goodness came before [Arthur] in their brightest light. The little spot made them the more beautiful” (LD 444). She rejects the “cynicism or

the escapism [the prison] could cause,” according to Higbie (136). Though the family has fallen on hard times, Amy is the only Dorrit who can easily forsake her share of the family pride. After the death of Mrs. Dorrit, Amy becomes a necessary presence and aid to her father and takes on added responsibilities:

Through this little gate, she passed out of childhood into the care-laden world.

What her pitiful look saw, at that early time, in her father, in her sister, in her brother, in the jail; how much, or how little of the wretched truth it pleased God to make visible to her; lies hidden with many mysteries. It is enough that she was inspired to be something which was not what the rest were, and to be that something, different and laborious, for the sake of the rest. (LD 86)

Dickens does not make light of Amy’s “inspiration,” which he frames as a higher calling, like that of a poet or priest, which manifests itself through drudgery.

Daily, she leaves her father’s prison home to work as a seamstress in private homes—a fact that William can never be brought to acknowledge:

The more Fatherly he grew as to the Marshalsea, and the more dependent he became on the contributions of his changing family, the greater stand he made by his forlorn gentility. With the same hand that he pocketed a collegian’s half-crown half an hour ago, he would wipe away the tears that streamed over his cheeks if any reference were made to his daughters’ earning their bread. So, over and above other daily cares, the Child of the Marshalsea had always upon her the care of preserving the genteel fiction that they were all idle beggars together. (LD 88-9)

William, by disclaiming all knowledge of Amy’s place in the city’s workforce, keeps his image of himself as a gentleman intact as he complacently eats the food his daughter smuggles home for him. But while Amy is self-sacrificing—like Nell, she seems to need no food at all for herself—she uses her father’s blind spot to effect a role reversal and become the head of her family. Dickens writes, “She took the place of eldest of the three, in all things but precedence; was the head of

the fallen family; and bore, in her own heart, its anxieties and shames” (LD 87). Or, in the admiring words of Pancks, “And what’s this thinking for ‘em all? Why, this is you, Miss Dorrit!” (LD 307). Like Lizzie Hexam, Amy’s “contriving” secures her siblings’ education, to the general neglect of her own. She secures her sister Fanny’s career on the stage by obtaining dance lessons for her—which Amy procures by trading on her identity as the mystical Child of the Marshalsea. She attempts to find useful employment for her brother Tip in various respectable trades, though he finds it impossible to remain in any position. She reserves for herself the humble occupation of seamstress, all the while colluding in her father’s “genteel fiction.” Like Nell, Amy’s role is parental; Dickens even compares the emotional comfort William receives from his daughter to breastmilk:

There was a classical daughter once—perhaps—who ministered to her father in his prison as her mother had ministered to her. Little Dorrit, though of the unheroic modern stock and mere English, did much more, in comforting her father’s wasted heart upon her innocent breast, and turning to it a fountain of love and fidelity that never ran dry or waned through all his years of famine. (LD 247)

The allusion is to the story of Evander, the king of Syracuse, and his daughter Euphrasia, who saved her father from starvation by breastfeeding him. Despite the goodness and self-sacrifice Dickens attributes to Amy in fulfilling this role, his metaphor continues to reinforce the role reversal. Dianne Sadoff writes, “The motherly act of breast feeding upsets the generations, makes the father dependent...”² I would agree that the “collapse of the metaphor into the literal”

² In fact, Sadoff goes further and claims that such a metaphor “sexualizes the father-daughter relationship” and brings the specter of incest into the Dorrit family (Sadoff 133). I am less than convinced.

signals a fundamental problem within the Dorrit family, a vacuum of authority that Amy must fill (Sadoff 133).

To assert herself, Amy constructs a self-enabling fairy tale that permits her to pacify her father's social pretensions, as well as work outside the home. Amy "knew well – no one better – that a man so broken as to be the Father of the Marshalsea, could be no father to his own children" (LD 87). In this sense, she is a realist; rejecting her family's "delusions," however, forces her to create new ones:

'I pretend to-night that I am at a party.'

As she made the confession, timidly hesitating, she raised her eyes to the face, and read its expression so plainly that she answered it. 'Oh no, certainly! I never was at a party in my life.' She paused a little under his attentive look, and then said, 'I hope there is no harm in it. *I could never have been of any use, if I had not pretended a little.*'

She feared that he was blaming her in his mind for so devising to *contrive* for them, think for them, and watch over them, without their knowledge or gratitude; perhaps even with their reproaches for supposed neglect. But what was really in his mind, was the weak figure with its strong purpose, the thin worn shoes, the insufficient dress, and the pretence of recreation and enjoyment. (LD 185, emphases mine)

She fills the parental gap as best she can for Fanny and Tip, but ends up mothering her own father: putting the best face on their troubles, going without food, and telling him more pleasing fictions to keep him at ease. As Pancks's observation suggests and Hilary Schor affirms, Amy's role towards her family is "almost narratorial" (Schor 128). Amy is of course the literal narrator of two chapters of *Little Dorrit*, which take the form of letters from Amy to Arthur; Schor points out that she is "the only character to speak, uninterrupted, for two chapters, and to make so powerful a claim for herself and her way of seeing" (Schor 142).

But in addition to these “anxieties and shames,” there is the money. Amy cannot earn the Dorrits into prosperity, but she can make herself indispensable monetarily as well as emotionally. Purchasing power is a subject William is anxious to avoid, both as a gentleman and as a permanent insolvent, and to some extent the text itself does not draw explicit attention to these vulgarities. They are simply there: for example, in Young John’s practice of buying William’s good will with cigars from his family’s shop, or in Fanny’s decision to trade the attentions of a rich young fop for his mother’s jewelry. Amy is too “tender-hearted” to refuse to share anything with her father, as her friend the turnkey laments, but the mere fact of her earning power makes her impossible to dominate without her consent. In addition, the quality of industriousness, as opposed to idle charity-seeking, enables Dickens’s characters to make claims on sympathy and aid as members of the deserving poor.³ Device brings with it autonomy. Amy resembles in this regard Lizzie Hexam, whom according to Schor “draws on her life of labor as a form of authority” (Schor 181).

Insofar as Amy grows in parental, financial and moral authority, her reversal is also one of gender. As Amy becomes more self-sufficient, her father becomes more helpless, in a way that appears merely simultaneous but is also causal. The more paternal William becomes towards the Marshalsea and its “collegians,” the more he “disowns paternity and purpose” within his own family, and the more paternal Amy becomes—the “head” of the family (Sadoff 131).

When Dickens focuses attention on William’s “irresolute hands” and “effeminate

³ Other examples would be Charley Neckett, a young orphan who “earns” the protection of Jarndyce by working as a servant to support her siblings, or Betty Higden, an old woman whose abhorrence of charity “earns” her the protection of the wealthy Boffins.

style” (LD 73), we note that Amy is rarely irresolute and never exaggeratedly feminine—especially in comparison with the other women in Arthur’s life, Flora Finching and Pet Meagles.

All Amy’s responsibilities are assumed when she is still very much a child. Dickens notes that she could keep the family accounts and budget for their needs at the age of thirteen—also, coincidentally, the age of Nell and Jenny Wren. Amy surpasses them in years, but not in physical maturity. During the action of *Little Dorrit*, she is twenty-two years old, but retains the appearance of a child:

Now that he had an opportunity of observing her, Arthur found that her diminutive figure, small features, and slight spare dress, gave her the appearance of being much younger than she was. A woman, probably of not less than two and twenty, she might have been passed in the street for little more than half that age. Not that her face was very youthful, for in truth there was more consideration and care in it than naturally belonged to her utmost years; but she was so little and light, so noiseless and shy, and appeared so conscious of being out of place among the three hard elders, that she had all the manner and much of the appearance of a subdued child. (LD 67-8)

Why give us a heroine so infantilized? The narrator insists that while Amy is “worldly wise in hard and poor necessities, she was innocent in all things else” (LD 93). Certain knowledge is too dangerous for Amy to possess; she can use her skills to avoid ruin, but not her body. Youth alone can safeguard Amy, keep her pure—in particular, female youth. While poverty and neglect have clear corrupting effects on Dickensian boys, feminine goodness is far more resistant to decay.⁴ Even fallen women are unanimously ashamed and repentant in the presence of purity, as we see in the encounter of Nancy and Rose Maylie in *Oliver*

⁴ Raymond Williams, in his essay “Dickens and Social Ideas” identifies Little Dorrit as the most obvious example of Dickens’s repeated use of “indestructible goodness” that “emerges, as it were miraculously, from conditions which in others breed vice.” Interestingly, he links this goodness to the “positive innocence of childhood” (96).

Twist. There is a similar encounter between an angelic woman and a “fallen sister” in the pages of *Little Dorrit*:

She [the prostitute] was young – far too young to be there, Heaven knows! – and neither ugly nor wicked-looking... The supposed child [Amy] kept her head drooped down, and kept her form close at Maggy’s side.

‘Poor thing!’ said the woman. ‘Have you no feeling, that you keep her out in the cruel streets in such a time as this? Have you no eyes, that you don’t see how delicate and slender she is?... Kiss a poor lost creature, dear,’ she said, bending her face, ‘and tell me where she’s taking you.’

Little Dorrit turned towards her.

‘Why, my God!’ she said, recoiling, ‘you’re a woman!’

‘Don’t mind that! ...let me speak to you as if I really was a child.’

‘You can’t do it,’ said the woman. ‘You are kind and innocent; but you can’t look at me out of a child’s eyes. I never should have touched you, but that I thought you were a child.’ And with a strange, wild cry, she went away. (LD 191)

When the adult Amy says she is not afraid of her, she replies, “You had better be” (LD 191). With females, the onset of sexual maturity is necessary for potential wickedness; the prostitute is not afraid of corrupting a little girl who cannot comprehend her sin. Male children, like *Oliver Twist*, are conversely in danger of contamination by corrupting influences like Fagin, as his large “family” of enthralled children suggests. But as Lerner writes, “Childhood is the cure for sex” (Lerner 113). By constantly reinforcing Amy’s female innocence and childlike attributes, she is made safe from her environment and the sullyng effects of experience in a way that her sister is not. Fanny is trapped more than once by her attempts to dabble in complicated sexual politics. Amy’s innocence is emphasized most of all through her nickname, “Little Dorrit,” that gives her the same air of diminution as Little Nell or even Tiny Tim.

In being childlike, Amy is particularly suited for her chosen love, Arthur Clennam. Both are the children of fathers who, while present in their lives, are

fundamentally absent figures who have abdicated their “proper” supportive role. Stewart writes of him, “Clennam is one of Dickens’s most important studies of the extirpation of fancy from infancy, the casting out of all ‘graceful or gentle’ influence from childhood” (Stewart 182). Arthur describes himself to Mr.

Meagles:

‘I am the only child of parents who weighed, measured, and priced everything; for whom what could not be weighed, measured, and priced, had no existence. Strict people as the phrase is, professors of a stern religion, their very religion was a gloomy sacrifice of tastes and sympathies that were never their own, offered up as a part of a bargain for the security of their possessions. Austere faces, inexorable discipline, penance in this world and terror in the next—nothing graceful or gentle anywhere, and the void in my cowed heart everywhere—this was my childhood, if I may so misuse the word as to apply it to such a beginning of life.’ (LD 35)

In short, Arthur is a cautionary tale: raised without tenderness or fancy, he is as an adult almost unable to access “[w]ill, purpose, hope” (LD 35). On returning to London from China, he finds his former love Flora completely changed: “Flora, whom he had left a lily, had become a peony... Flora, who had been spoiled and artless long ago, was determined to be spoiled and artless now” (LD 165).

Arthur, on the other hand, has not changed, as Flora perceives: he has lost his childhood, but cannot achieve full adulthood either. Arthur forms relationships with two young women: the sheltered, Dora Spenlow-esque Pet Meagles, for whom he suppresses a strong infatuation, and the hard-working Little Dorrit, who holds a strange fascination for him he barely comprehends. His fantasy of “altering her whole manner of life, smoothing her rough road, and giving her a home...as his adopted daughter” is fundamentally wrong-headed: it is he that needs parenting, a second chance at childhood’s values (LD 205). When he

himself becomes a prisoner of the Marshalsea, Amy gives him the same motherly care she once provided her father; she even “nurses” him on her bosom as she once did William. If Clennam’s real mother, the grim invalid who invokes God’s vengeance, is an Old Testament mother, Amy is the merciful New Testament iteration. “Be guided only by the healer of the sick, the raiser of the dead, the friend of all who were afflicted and forlorn, the patient Master who shed tears of compassion for our infirmities,” she says in gentle rebuke of Mrs. Clennam (LD 826). Arthur’s psychic damage seeks healing and refuge in the childishness of Pet and the merciful Amy. And in Amy’s blend of perennial youth and premature maturity, of maternal and paternal impulses, he can find both a return to his natural role as “a dreamer” and a partner willing to share his burdens.

Amy is, however, difficult to simply group with the rest of Dickens’s pure, faithful daughters: she has a lesser tendency to grate on the modern reader. Lionel Trilling is one of the many critics who almost express surprise at the success of Amy’s characterization: “Her untinged goodness does not appal [*sic*] us or make us misdoubt her, as we expect it to do” (Trilling xv). Rarely saccharine or cloying, Amy Dorrit asserts her agency in two ways that are utterly foreign to Florence Dombey or Agnes Wickfield. First, she sees her father’s weakness clearly: she does, of course, forgive it, but she is unable to be deceived by her father, practiced as she is in deceiving him. When he crosses the line in obliquely asking her to entertain the advances of the turnkey’s son Young John Chivery, she reproaches him powerfully without words. It points to how successful Amy’s quiet usurpation of power has been: William is almost

unconscious of it. He is prone to profound agitation and jealousy in the moments when he realizes that Amy's submission comes from her wish to please those she loves, and not from obedience to his individual, patriarchal authority. The last of these moments—when William sees Amy treating his brother, Frederick, with the same maternal sweetness she once reserved for him in their days of poverty—is one of the implicated causes of William's collapse and death.

Second, she is an active agent in her own marriage plot. Rather than wait to be collected at the end of the novel by Arthur Clennam, she writes him letters, pays a visit to his rooms at night, and haunts the Iron Bridge she associates with his presence. It is Amy who proposes to Arthur:

‘I have nothing in the world. I am as poor as when I lived here... O my dearest and best, are you quite sure you will not share my fortune with me now?’

Locked in his arms, held to his heart, with his manly tears upon her own cheek, she drew the slight hand round his neck, and clasped it in its fellow-hand.

‘Never to part, my dearest Arthur; never any more, until the last!’
(LD 849-50)

Her boldness, admittedly, is predicated on Clennam's fall from middle-class wealth to the utter destitution she herself has grown up with; prior to his insolvency, she is careful to hide her emotions.

When Amy finally does express desire, as Schor and Barbara Hardy point out, it is through an unusual fairy tale she makes up for Maggy about a “tiny woman” who lives in a cottage, spinning at her wheel and guarding a secret⁵:

⁵ For further analysis of Amy's story, see Nancy Metz's “The Blighted Tree and the Book of Fate: Female Models of Storytelling in *Little Dorrit*” and Elaine Showalter's “Guilt, Authority and the Shadows of *Little Dorrit*.”

‘It was the shadow of Some one who had gone by long before: of Some one who had gone on far away quite out of reach, never, never to come back. It was bright to look at; and when the tiny woman showed it to the Princess, she was proud of it with all her heart, as a great, great treasure. When the Princess had considered it a little while, she said to the tiny woman, And you keep watch over this every day? And she cast down her eyes, and whispered, Yes. Then the Princess said, Remind me why. To which the other replied, that no one so good and kind had ever passed that way, and that was why in the beginning. She said, too, that nobody missed it, that nobody was the worse for it, that Some one had gone on, to those who were expecting him—’

‘Some one was a man then?’ interposed Maggy.

Little Dorrit timidly said Yes, she believed so... (LD 314)

Regarding Amy’s story, Higbie writes, “Dorrit chooses as protagonist a ‘tiny woman’ whose size (like Dorrit’s) suggests an acceptance of the way reality diminishes our fulfillment and who is cut off from the idealized fairy-tale world” (Higbie 137). The self-effacing Amy, whom Dickens has named his novel after, cannot write herself into the narrative as a heroine. When Arthur comes to the Marshalsea and asks her, “Why have you kept so retired from me?” she responds: “I am better here. My place and use are here. I am much better here” (LD 405). Uneasy with the attention she receives from other characters and within the narrative itself, Amy tries to escape notice by keeping herself voluntarily locked in prison. Just after the above exchange, Maggy interrupts, repeating for Arthur a garbled version of Amy’s fairy tale of the “tiny woman.” The message is clear: despite Amy’s attempts to marginalize herself, she cannot escape the novel’s gaze.

Amy’s fairy tale does not offer wish fulfillment: Amy is resigned to the impossibility of her love for Arthur, whom she believes by turns is in love with Flora Finching and Pet Meagles, with some justification. She still remains true to

her remembrance of him, the “shadow” she keeps, which she expects to “sink quietly into her own grave” (LD 314). But this is one of the only times the uncomplaining Amy gives voice to dissatisfaction with her situation; she sees herself as poor and inconsequential, always working and always alone.

Work is Amy’s solace and her punishment. She flits in and out of the houses of the well-to-do like a “domesticated fairy” (as Clennam fancies her), apparently living on air (LD 277); her dress may be shabby, but Dickens is careful to note how neat she keeps it. She performs a kind of cheerful fairy-tale labor, where usefulness is redemptive. Clennam also works at “The Works,” and claims “a feeling of pleasure in his pursuit that was new to him” (LD 285). But as Sadoff points out, “We never see Clennam working or enjoying his work. Dickens makes his usual claims for the value of work, but fails to show us that value in the action of the novel, just as he fails to do so at the end of Pip’s great expectations” (Sadoff 125). By and large, work is performed by women: Amy sewing, Jenny weaving straw for tiny bonnets, Charley Neckett’s soapy arms, the multitude of little housekeepers jingling their keys. They do not complain. Angus Wilson writes, “We may imagine that Florence or Lou [Gradgrind] would have suffered much drudgery in order to be needed like Little Dorrit or Little Nell; and we know that Little Nell would evade many benefits rather than give up their drudge’s roles” (Wilson 208-9). In Sadoff’s less arch argument, working women access “a perfect union of love and duty” (Sadoff 132). And yet, in scenes such as the one where Amy and Maggy wander the streets all night waiting for the Marshalsea gates to open—her father thinks she is at a party—she is lightly clad and

susceptible to cold. She does give way to frustration and tears when Tip is imprisoned or when Arthur seems particularly out of reach. It is intolerable for her to sit sewing dresses for Flora while the latter talks incessantly about Arthur's old love for her. And so Amy suffers, and repels suffering, through active hands—through device.

For while the name “Little Dorrit” speaks to her size and innocence, it is also her working name, the name she is known by in the Clennam household where she sews. It is this identity that she embraces:

She speaks to me by my name – I mean, not my Christian name, but the name you gave me. When she began to call me Amy, I told her my short story, and that you had always called me Little Dorrit. I told her that the name was much dearer to me than any other, and so she calls me Little Dorrit too. (LD 578)

Arthur, to whom Amy writes, did not “give” Amy her name as she attests; he only made the choice to borrow the name people outside her family and the prison use for her. The word “Amy,” in the mouths of the rest of the Dorrit family, tends to precede some patronizing or ungrateful thought. “Amy...I am going to put something into your little head,” says Fanny (LD 528). “You needn't call me Tip, Amy child,” says her brother with a frown (LD 477). But “Little Dorrit” always receives respect. “Little Dorrit” is useful, skilled, valued, indispensable, a worker. She may choose that name as being “dearer to [her] than any other” because of its association with Arthur, but it is by far the most appropriate name for her to use to create her own identity. Amy is incapable of being comfortable with riches like Fanny, or of maintaining a sense of bitterness against the world like the self-tormenting Miss Wade. What she desires and gets is, according to Hardy, “local

happy ending”—“a modest life of usefulness and happiness” with Arthur (LD 859)—within the “desolation of the larger scene” (Hardy 57)—a continuance of her days as Little Dorrit. Her redemptive strategies of industriousness and self-creation are amplified, as we will see in the next chapter, in the person of Miss Jenny Wren.

CHAPTER THREE:
JENNY WREN: THE SYNTHESIS OF VISION AND DEVICE

After Amy Dorrit, who uses device to assert herself and prevent utter subordination, Dickens created *Our Mutual Friend*'s Jenny Wren, another skilled worker keeping her household afloat. While Amy's fable focuses on her unimportance and seclusion, Jenny reinterprets and re-creates herself positively: her creative powers elevate her above Amy in both artistic ingenuity and the ability to contrive on her own behalf. But Jenny suffers, as did Paul, from an inescapable debility—in her case, a body twisted and marked by pain. Device, thus limited, is augmented by vision—in this case, imaginative access to the preternatural or quasi-divine, bestowed as compensation for suffering. In employing a union of vision and device as a survival strategy, Jenny becomes the most hopeful iteration of the victimized child. In his *Our Mutual Friend*, his last completed novel, Dickens offered through his dolls' dressmaker a resounding affirmation of the power of imaginative capacity to redeem and save the unhappy life.

Whether prosperous or deprived, childhood is never easy in a Dickens novel. A kind and loving parent is never a guarantee, or even the norm. It is a state of starvation: voluntary (Amy Dorrit), involuntary (Oliver Twist), or emotional (Paul and Florence Dombey). Survival is a key theme, though in order to make a sufficient impression of the severity of the situation, death is no rarity

in Dickens's novels. In *Bleak House*, Jo and Charley Neckett contract the same illness, but only Charley survives. Her industrious care for her younger siblings earned her a place in the Jarndyce home, thus affording her medical attention. Jo, on the other hand, is denied shelter even in the stables. In *The Old Curiosity Shop*, Nell and the Marchioness both suffer and starve, but only Nell gives up on life. And while Oliver Twist's ignominious banishment from the workhouse does not seem to be an immediate improvement, the end of the novel reminds us that staying was the death of his playmate Dick. Survival is often, though not always, a reward or a choice, reaffirming the old, old belief that in fiction (if not on earth), virtue will be rewarded.

Henry James, in his well-known 1865 review of *Our Mutual Friend*, saved a great deal of choler for Jenny Wren and her ilk:

What do we get in return for accepting Miss Jenny Wren as a possible person? This young lady is the type of a certain class of characters of which Mr Dickens has made a speciality, and with which he has been accustomed to draw alternate smiles and tears, according as he pressed one spring or another. But this is very cheap merriment and very cheap pathos. Miss Jenny Wren is a poor little dwarf, afflicted, as she constantly reiterates, with a 'bad back' and 'queer legs,' who makes dolls' dresses, and is for ever pricking at those with whom she converses, in the air, with her needle, and assuring them that she knows their 'tricks and their manners.' Like all Mr Dickens's pathetic characters, she is a little monster; she is deformed, unhealthy, unnatural; she belongs to the troop of hunchbacks, imbeciles, and precocious children who have carried on the sentimental business in all Mr Dickens's novels; the little Nells, the Smikes, the Paul Dombey's.¹ (CH 470-1)

¹ Hilary Schor suggests that James's distaste for Jenny Wren may stem from "Jenny's resemblance to James's own Rose Muniment, the sickly and quite weird sister of Paul Muniment in *The Princess Cassamassima*, who bears more than a passing resemblance to Alice James (whose sickness and weirdness gave her a remarkable amount of power)... James's disavowal of this figure suggests some of his own anxieties about fiction, power and the female body" (Schor 229).

James sees Jenny as belonging to a similar breed as Nell and Paul, who are similarly aged prematurely by suffering; in Dickens, he sees a puppetmaster, pressing Jenny's "springs" to make her an amusing shrew or an abused young thing as situation or whim dictates. But it seems to me that Jenny is something quite new and unusual in Dickens: she is a success story. Though perhaps brought into the narrative in order to suffer for the sins of her society and "draw alternate smiles and tears," she does not sit comfortably either as victim or as comic grotesque. How is she only a victim, when she controls her livelihood, her house, her refuges? How can she just be comic relief, when her influence is so vital to the successful conclusion of the Eugene/Lizzie plot—and, by extension, to Dickens's narrative union of the upper and lower classes. James sees ways to connect Jenny through debility, poverty and precocity to other Dickensian children and calls her "the type" of them all. In so doing, he misses how distinctive she is. She does not give in to darkness like Nell; she does not passively submit to the crushing weight of the world, like Paul. She is the creator of her own circumstances. Turning her "bedstead" into a bookcase is far harder for her than it is for Dick Swiveller—she is, after all, genuinely stunted and often in pain—but the ingenuity she uses actively in her own defense is closely related to Dick's, and by implication to Dickens's own considerable ingenuity.

Jenny Wren is one of the *Our Mutual Friend's* more memorable characters, so much so that it is surprising to discover, in repeat readings, that she is absent from the first of the three 'books' that constitute the novel. Gregg

Hecimovich associates her appearance with similar introductions of new, secondary characters and plots:

The novel's major plot lines, even after they finally become discernible, are constantly truncated, interrupted by seemingly unrelated chapters on the Veneerings, Podsnaps, and Lammles. New characters—Fledgby, Riah, Jenny Wren—appear just when the reader has begun to assemble the novel's major threads. (Hecimovich 967)

Jenny's presence and influence in the narrative only becomes necessary after Lizzie, one of the novel's two heroines, is set adrift, unguided, in the city.

Jenny's introduction coincides with the aftermath of Gaffer Hexam's death and Lizzie's resultant freedom from her life on the riverside. Lizzie quickly becomes caught between Eugene Wrayburn and Bradley Headstone and the differing lives they offer her. With reference to Jenny, Hecimovich's choice of the word "threads" is especially apt. Garrett Stewart, in his excellent essay on Jenny's symbolic centrality in *Our Mutual Friend*, writes, "For Jenny is a maker; she stitches, and binds, and seams, and in so doing tries to repair the chaos of her days" (Stewart 199). Jenny appears abruptly before the crisis with a vital role to play in preparing both Lizzie and Eugene for their eventual future together—in short, she must make Lizzie into a wife, with the same dexterity as she would use to dress a doll.

Like Amy's, Jenny Wren's story is a sad one and is only told after we have met her for the first time. But while Amy's first impression is physical, as interpreted through the interested gaze of Arthur Clennam, Jenny speaks for herself from the start with utter confidence:

‘I can't get up,’ said the child, ‘because my back's bad, and my legs are queer. But I'm the person of the house.’

‘Who else is at home?’ asked Charley Hexam, staring.

‘Nobody’s at home at present,’ returned the child, with a glib assertion of her dignity, ‘except the person of the house. What did you want, young man?’ (OMF 222)

Jenny’s “dignity” as person of the house is unimpeded by her disability, which she draws the strangers’ attention to immediately in a way designed to both deflect pity and assert authority. Despite being described as “the child,” a designation used often for Little Nell, she is immediately condescending to Charley, another young character hyper-aware of his own importance. But this fits the first physical impression made by Jenny on her surprised visitors, who see “a child—a dwarf—a girl—a something—sitting on a little low old-fashioned arm-chair, which had a kind of little working bench before it” (OMF 222). Is Jenny, in Miss Abbey’s words, “child, or woman?” (OMF 435). Is she even human? She is “lame,” but her stridency is such that it is not immediately pathetic as in the case of, say, Tiny Tim. When Charley calls her “a little crooked antic of a child, or old person, or whatever it is” (OMF 228), he responds to the ambiguity of Jenny: as in Gradgrind’s preferred vision of childhood, she might be “almost any age” (HT 102).

When Lizzie turns home and takes her brother for a walk, his bluntness where Jenny is concerned seems justified until Lizzie offers the backstory:

‘How came you to get into such company as that little witch’s?’

‘By chance at first, as it seemed, Charley. But I think it must have been by something more than chance, for that child—You remember the bills upon the walls at home?’

‘Confound the bills upon the walls at home! I want to forget the bills upon the walls at home, and it would be better for you to do the same,’ grumbled the boy. ‘Well; what of them?’

‘This child is the grandchild of the old man... The terrible drunken old man, in the list slippers and the night-cap.’

The boy asked, rubbing his nose in a manner that half expressed vexation at hearing so much, and half curiosity to hear more: ‘How came you to make that out? What a girl you are!’

‘The child’s father is employed by the house that employs me; that’s how I came to know it, Charley. The father is like his own father, a weak wretched trembling creature, falling to pieces, never sober. But a good workman too, at the work he does. The mother is dead. This poor ailing little creature has come to be what she is, surrounded by drunken people from her cradle—if she ever had one, Charley.’ (OMF 227)

Lizzie here introduces the conflict between the image Jenny projects, quite deliberately, to strangers—that of a worldly wise “little witch,” not to be trifled with—and the “poor ailing little creature” that Lizzie both pities and identifies with her own troubles, stemming from the corrupting influence of the river and its dead. Dickens has placed Jenny in her wretched situation to augment a sympathetic reaction to her. In this way, Lizzie’s interpretation of Jenny as a pitiable child is a true one.

But the image she projects is not merely assumed, but actually created; it would be wrong to assert that Jenny somehow pretends her way through life. Jenny Wren changed herself, created herself, in order to simultaneously change the life dealt to her. This is nowhere made clearer than in the eventual introduction of her name she chooses for herself, much like Amy’s decision to remain “Little Dorrit” even in prosperity. In her first chapter, she is merely “the dolls’ dressmaker” or “the person of the house.” These are titles she has given herself as well, but it is of greater significance when she creates herself as a character by revealing her chosen name: “‘This is what your loving Jenny Wren calls the best time in the day and night,’ said the person of the house. Her real name was Fanny Cleaver, but she had long ago chosen to bestow upon herself the

appellation of Miss Jenny Wren” (OMF 233). Dickens’s novels are full of women named Fanny, as well as surnames as amusingly evocative as Cleaver. How significant, then, that Jenny has chosen to forsake both the conventionality and violence of her given name for that of a bird. Wrens are typically small, active songbirds, all of which is appropriate to Jenny herself. Additionally, the *OED*’s definition of a jenny wren is a “popular, and esp. nursery, name for the wren...: sometimes regarded in nursery lore as the wife, bride, or sweetheart of Robin Redbreast.”

Jenny has cast herself in a fairy tale, much like Amy Dorrit; as Stewart notes, “Surely [Jenny’s name] must deserve space on the roster of allegorical names in Dickens, for she has tried to enroll it there herself” (Stewart 205). Just as the proverbial Jenny awaits Robin Redbreast, Dickens’s Jenny is always on the watch for “Him,” her future husband, whose eventual arrival she never doubts. Jenny and Little Nell share the same approximate age—thirteen—but Jenny knows desire and, crucially, amorous possibility in a way utterly foreign to Nell. Jenny’s life is more like Amy’s: in both lives, the elements of fairy tale are present. Both are secluded and confined (Amy in her prison-house, Jenny in her own body) and give an impression of singularity, if not explicit oddness. Amy reduces herself to a tiny, inconsequential woman, but Jenny re-creates herself in a more optimistic way: she is petite rather than stunted, active rather than overworked, a fanciful wren instead of a practical cleaver. These polarities are reminiscent of those found in fairy tales that explore, as Bruno Bettelheim claims, “the opposite aspects of one and the same person: that which pushes him to

escape into a faraway world of adventure and fantasy, and the other part which keeps him bound to common practicality” (Bettelheim 83-4). Jenny’s fanciful fable-self is completely removed from the suffering self she is “bound” to within her own disabled body and her dysfunctional home: she occupies both personas fully, but never simultaneously.

Jenny’s association with fairy tales also includes her special habit of playing with words or rhymes during conversation, such as:

““You one two three,
My com-pa-nie
And don’t mind me...” (OMF 225)

Her chosen role is intelligently confirmed by Riah, who calls her Cinderella in response to her chosen epithet for him, “Fairy Godmother.” Her talk of Riah creating a coach and six out of the ground “like the fairy godmother in the bright little books” is playful (OMF 429), but her wishes for a better “child” (father) and respite from pain reveal how much she truly craves magical, fairy-tale aid. When Jenny is deceived into believing Riah is actually a wicked, avaricious moneylender, she conceives of him as “the Wolf in the Forest, the Wicked Wolf!” (OMF 562). More generally, Jenny’s life does, when stripped of its more sordid attributes, resemble a fairy-tale character, mainly kept indoors by her debility, “work, work, working” (OMF 237). Her isolated state and long, golden hair are almost Rapunzel-like; like Rapunzel, she awaits “Him.”

But realism intervenes in the creation of Jenny’s fairy tale—namely, the inescapable presence of her alcoholic father that renders it impossible for Jenny to be mere comic relief. Schor writes, “Not that Jenny has narrative autonomy. Her

life story is written by the incessant and draining labor her father's drunkenness commits her to" (Schor 201). To minimize the horror of it, she has undercut his ability to hurt her by reinventing herself as her father's mother, removing him completely from any position of authority in his home. Or, as Lerner claims, "She is not the only Dickens heroine who mothers her father (there are Agnes Wickfield, Amy Dorrit, and, of course, Nell looking after her grandfather); but Jenny is the only one who has devised a myth to draw attention to the reversal" (Lerner 109). While Amy similarly takes charge of her household, she had the choice to continue idly like the rest of her family in the Marshalsea's "protective" shadow. In Jenny's case, the situation is more dire, violent: she rises to the occasion by wielding outright power, fierceness of imagination, rather than Amy's subtler influence. Her father, moreover, does not seem to object to his daughter's firm rule. Jenny's father may be, as Lizzie notes above, a "good workman," but he appears to lack a creative character or the industriousness that both Amy and Jenny use as a basis for their claims. Jenny, by "work, work, working all alone in the summertime," earns both money and moral power (OMF 237); like Lizzie or even Pleasant Riderhood, the small-time moneylender, she has carved out a position of authority for herself. She walks the streets with a purpose: to plan her designs by imagining great ladies trying them on for her. And while Jenny chose her own name on her own terms, her father passively accepts Eugene's derisive appellation, Mr. Dolls. To the extent that Mr. Dolls resembles the blank-eyed, lifeless creations of his daughter, the act of naming defines what is named.

The assumption of parental power that Jenny effects does not solve her problems; in fact, it makes her caustic, or in Dickens's words, "a quaint little shrew" (OMF 243). But a shrew is, by definition, not a victim. Jenny's recreation is, at heart, an effort to avoid pity—a response to her situation she defuses from the moment she preemptively draws attention to her bad back and queer legs, or when she summons up her caustic wit, or "laugh[s] satirically to hide that she had been crying" (OMF 523).

Henry James accused Jenny of being a stock character: a deformed child could, in his view, only exist to carry out "the sentimental business" of a Dickens novel. But I argue that is precisely how she does not function. Jenny has gone to great pains to make herself far less pitiable than the un-deformed Amy Dorrit: she talks of her thriving business, her affection for her "particular friend" Lizzie, and her imminent wedding day much more than she talks about being in pain. We can certainly choose Lizzie's point of view and look past Jenny's constructed self to the actual neglected child; the narration invites us to do so—but never in exhortations. Unlike Nell or Oliver Twist, Jenny is not an allegorical substitution for the principle of Neglected Childhood, but a very particularized individual: too strange to be a heroine, but too human to be entirely grotesque.

To reiterate Stewart's point, Jenny is a maker. She is a deviser of refuges. She is more than once described as taking shelter in the "golden bower" of her long, bright hair. Stewart points to these references as carrying immense significance: Jenny does not have to retreat from the world to a bower, like Wemmick of *Great Expectations*, because she is the bower. But beyond her hair,

she also creates the haven on Riah's rooftop, which I explore at length further on, where one can "feel as if you were dead" (OMF 279). And its association with Riah and Lizzie speaks to another act of creation on Jenny's part, but one that is not unique to her: the Dickensian habit of forming one's own family. Lizzie is Jenny's "particular friend," but their bond is far more familial; Riah is Jenny's "fairy godmother" (OMF 787). Later, all of them will be swallowed up into the Harmon family, which idealistically seeks to redress all wrongs by bringing all the good folk of the novel into its happy orbit:

Mr and Mrs John Harmon's first delightful occupation was, to set all matters right that had strayed in any way wrong, or that might, could, would, or should, have strayed in any way wrong, while their name was in abeyance. In tracing out affairs for which John's fictitious death was to be considered in any way responsible, they used a very broad and free construction; regarding, for instance, the dolls' dressmaker as having a claim on their protection, because of her association with Mrs Eugene Wrayburn, and because of Mrs Eugene's old association, in her turn, with the dark side of the story. It followed that the old man, Riah, as a good and serviceable friend to both, was not to be disclaimed. (OMF 782)

The Harmon-Boffin family, in embracing Jenny, brings about her meeting with the man we are encouraged to believe will be "Him," Jenny's paramour—none other than Sloppy, a fellow artisan. The new, amalgamated family will thus continue to perpetuate itself.

Jenny displays an unusual abundance of vital imaginative capacity, particularly for one of Dickens's daughters, that often manifests itself in lucid revenge fantasies. Lerner, in disagreeing with Henry James's likening of Jenny to Nell, writes, "Little Nell is not grotesque: she hasn't enough corporeal existence for that. Jenny differs from Nell precisely in the lively grotesqueness of her imagination" (Lerner 110). If so, Jenny shares more with Dickens and the aims of

his own “grotesque” imagination than Nell could possibly aspire to. Charley Hexam, disgusted with Jenny’s proximity to his sister, asks Lizzie when she intends to settle “in some Christian sort of a place” (OMF 226). Jenny, placed in opposition, is identified as a kind of pagan, or at the very least Old Testament, kind of character. Consider her elaborate revenge fantasies, which surface in response to the actual misdeeds of Fledgeby or the imagined ones of her future husband, as here:

‘I was thinking,’ she returned, coming out of a deep study, ‘what I would do to Him, if he should turn out a drunkard... I shall try to take care of it beforehand, but he might deceive me. Oh, my dear, all those fellows with their tricks and their manners do deceive!’ With the little fist in full action. ‘And if so, I tell you what I think I’d do. When he was asleep, I’d make a spoon red hot, and I’d have some boiling liquor bubbling in a saucepan, and I’d take it out hissing, and I’d open his mouth with the other hand—or perhaps he’d sleep with his mouth ready open—and I’d pour it down his throat, and blister it and choke him.’

‘I am sure you would do no such horrible thing,’ said Lizzie.

‘Shouldn’t I? Well; perhaps I shouldn’t. But I should like to!’

‘I am equally sure you would not.’

‘Not even like to? Well, you generally know best. Only you haven’t always lived among it as I have lived—and your back isn’t bad and your legs are not queer.’ (OMF 242-3)

Lizzie’s insistence on Jenny’s ability to forgive is at no point convincing to Jenny herself. The hypothetical punishment she devises is satisfying to her: it originates from her own specific and horrific circumstances, it fits the crime, and has a certain childish literalness to it. Her imaginative impulse lends her the strong image of her husband’s mouth hanging open in sleep, and Jenny must have often imagined liquor choking her father as he drank it. “Jenny’s fantasies are Quilp’s acts,” notes Lerner, in reference to Quilp’s practice of drinking burning liquids: in short, her thoughts are not easily dismissed as harmless (Lerner 111). When she

comes to Fledgeby's rooms shortly after he has been choked and caned by Lamble, she accedes to his request to bandage him, but having figured out his plan to reveal Lizzie's secret location, she adds a few grains of pepper to the plasters. Rather than simply abandoning him to his wounds, she finds a way to punish him that is again somewhat whimsical, but fundamentally disturbing. And while Riah, Dickens's Christianized Jew, is eager to turn the other cheek by aiding Fledgeby in his time of need, Jenny is blunt with him: "One would think you believed in the Good Samaritan. How can you be so inconsistent?" (OMF 708). Jenny's experience has been too sordid for her to accept with ease the value of forgiveness that Lizzie and Riah gently instruct her in. The narrative is far more pitying than judgmental towards her, as Angus Wilson notes approvingly:

There is less stress upon childhood's claims in his last two works, a more mature concern for young people and adolescents which make the heroes and heroines of *Our Mutual Friend* and *Edwin Drood* more subtle and serious than their predecessors. He can allow a cripple just the disturbing sadism of Jenny Wren without losing compassion for her patient courage. (Wilson 227)

Authorial value judgments seem neutralized by Jenny's own words: "Your back isn't bad and your legs are not queer." Or, as she later informs Sloppy, it is impossible to understand her fully, as Charley tries and fails to do, without knowing what she has suffered. But in another sense, the novel may not want to "forgive" her for her anger. Robert Garis argues:

The dolls' dressmaker's anger is much less efficiently held in check by Dickens's moralistic habits than the anger of the other characters, and she is indeed one of the novel's liveliest successes... Jenny Wren's speech has a vitality, a particularity of detail, a sharpness of idiom, a fullness of spirit that makes her anger seem an act of life. It has an absolute authority as a response to human suffering. (Garis 250)

It is deeply satisfying, in other words, to see one of Dickens's poor "little people," harshly treated by the world, finally lash out, unqualified by Little-Nellish piousness.

Schor writes, "Dickens cannot stay any longer than Jenny with misery, but must, like her, move between the visionary and the infernal" (Schor 201). Jenny's vindictive moments are offset by imaginative powers that provide respite for Jenny and allow her to show her "better look." She is a sufferer of chronic physical pain, of a lifelong debility, of the taunts of other children, of poverty, and of parental neglect. Her strategies are very much her own—her niche trade, for example, is particularly ingenious—but there are certain mechanisms she possesses that are extrinsic, somehow bestowed. Jenny Wren is also the recipient of quasi-divine compensation, and in her case, much like Paul Dombey's, it brings her very close to death. "Jenny does not die," Lerner writes, "but [readers] would have been forgiven for expecting her to, for death seems ever lurking when she appears" (Lerner 107).

Jenny has visions. We learn of them after we hear Lizzie's account of Jenny's history, but before the first appearance of her father, Mr. Dolls. After dismissively saying to Eugene, "You have a sort of an idea in your noddle sometimes," she says "in a changed tone, 'I wonder how it happens that when I am work, work, working here, all alone in the summer-time, I smell flowers'" (OMF 237). It is then Eugene's turn to be dismissive when he suggests that she smells real flowers. But Jenny, speaking still in her "changed tone," does not rise to the bait:

‘No I don’t,’ said the little creature, . . . ‘this is not a flowery neighbourhood. It’s anything but that. And yet as I sit at work, I smell miles of flowers. I smell roses, till I think I see the rose-leaves lying in heaps, bushels, on the floor. I smell fallen leaves, till I put down my hand—so—and expect to make them rustle. I smell the white and the pink May in the hedges, and all sorts of flowers that I never was among. For I have seen very few flowers indeed, in my life.’

‘Pleasant fancies to have, Jenny dear!’ said her friend: with a glance towards Eugene as if she would have asked him whether they were given the child *in compensation for her losses*.

‘So I think, Lizzie, when they come to me. And the birds I hear! Oh!’ cried the little creature, holding out her hand and looking upward, ‘how they sing!’

There was something in the face and action for the moment, quite inspired and beautiful. (OMF 238, emphasis mine)

Jenny, who has little firsthand knowledge of flowers, smells blooms she cannot identify, that may not even belong to real flowers. But despite Lizzie’s quick attempt to classify the smells as “fancies,” what is most striking is how tangible and sensual the flowers are, lying in “heaps, bushels” close to Jenny’s hands. One senses they would have to be almost real and, as Jenny says, “smell better than other flowers” in order to act in the way Lizzie intuitively—as a compensation to make up for the idyllic, fairy-tale life Jenny craves and finds out of reach. Her flowers and birds are not strictly real, but they are “better” because they are transcendent in nature and particularly her own.

Similarly, though she knows a negative type of childhood intimately—”chilled, anxious, ragged, or beaten”—she is also given visions of bright, kind, ethereal children who never mock:

‘Such numbers of them too! All in white dresses, and with something shining on the borders, and on their heads, that I have never been able to imitate with my work, though I know it so well. They used to come down in long bright slanting rows, and say all together, “Who is this in pain! Who is this in pain!” When I told them who it was, they answered, “Come and play with us!” When I said “I never play! I can’t play!” they swept

about me and took me up, and made me light. Then it was all delicious ease and rest till they laid me down, and said, all together, “Have patience, and we will come again.” (OMF 238)

Just as the painting of Jesus is never explicitly identified as such in Paul Dombey’s experience, Jenny does not call these visitors angels, but rather children. To Dickens, when writing in a particular strain, there is not much difference between the two. He shows little interest in the magnificent, martial angels that interested Milton.² Dickens’s angels, and perhaps even his Christ, are not theological so much as emotional. It is also significant that Jenny, despite priding herself on her “taste and invention,” has never been able to reproduce anything like the dresses her children wore, despite the experience being as real and tangible to her as the heaps of rose-petals she smells (OMF 714). Jenny can, in some ways, create her way out of her problems—by establishing her power over her father as “person of the house,” or by deriving comfort from her art in times of trouble, as she does following the death of her father. What makes her momentarily “quite inspired and beautiful” (or, as Dickens’s shorthand has it, “her better look”) is something she cannot create herself. Much of what protects Jenny from mistreatment or ridicule is intrinsic, starting with her half-whimsical, half-defensive challenge to newcomers: “My back’s bad, and my legs are queer.” But from the actual ravages of physical pain, help must be bestowed upon her. The children come less frequently to her as she grows older and, implicitly, more self-reliant, but even the memory of them, of being made “light” and free of care,

² John Carey writes, “For the seventeenth century the angels were all created long before the first man, and immensely excelled man in power and intellect. They were not remotely like a dead child. In *Paradise Lost* they wear armour and hurl mountains about. The deterioration of the angel is a further sign of Victorian religion ebbing into sentiment” (Carey 140).

is central to her character. When Lizzie, as she falls in love with Eugene, is obviously headed for a painful time, Jenny instinctively turns to her memory of otherworldly support: “My Lizzie, my poor Lizzie! O my blessed children, come back in the long bright slanting rows, and come for her, not me. She wants help more than I, my blessed children!” (OMF 344).

But even within this dialectic of intrinsic and extrinsic methods of survival, the line is blurred when it comes to the forming of refuges. Jenny’s personal imaginative and creative power is needed to turn Riah’s quiet rooftop into a stand-in for the serenity of death. This power is as much a part of her as her floor-length hair, which Dickens refers to repeatedly as her “golden bower”:

“You are talking about Me, good people,” thought Miss Jenny, sitting in her golden bower, warming her feet. “I can’t hear what you say, but I know your tricks and your manners!” (OMF 435)

As [Riah] stood there, doing his methodical penmanship, his ancient scribelike figure intent upon the work, and the little dolls’ dressmaker sitting in her golden bower before the fire, Miss Abbey had her doubts whether she had not dreamed those two rare figures into the bar of the Six Jolly Fellowships, and might not wake with a nod next moment and find them gone. (OMF 435)

Miss Jenny gave up altogether on this parting taking place between the friends, and sitting with her back towards the bed in the bower made by her bright hair, wept heartily, though noiselessly. (OMF 723)

The dolls’ dressmaker, with her hands before her face, wept in her golden bower. (OMF 732)

The repetition of the term, which would have been sufficiently evocative if only used once, brings home that the choice of the word “bower” is not an idle one. Jenny’s actual abode is in a neighborhood with “a deadly kind of repose on it, more as though it had taken laudanum than fallen into a natural rest” (OMF 221-

2). In the chaos of London, Jenny has access to a bower, with all its connotations of rusticity and naturalistic enclosedness (rather than urban claustrophobia), simply by letting down her hair. In the second quotation above, Miss Abbey does not simply see a girl with her hair loose, but a dreamlike, unreal figure, actually set apart—embowered—from her. As Stewart notes, “Jenny Wren physically incorporates the retreat she has beaten from the world. She has sought a bower apart from ‘the weariness, the fever, and the fret’ of society, and in searching she has become that bower” (Stewart 199).

Stewart classes Jenny with *The Old Curiosity Shop*’s Dick Swiveller in terms of imaginative proliferation, and writes of him: “Dick quotes ‘scraps of verse as if they were only prose in a hurry’ because it is his purpose to divert poetry into the normal, prosaic rhythms of everyday life, as a means of coloring and controlling a reality too bleak if unadorned” (Stewart 104). To Dick, cold gin-and-water is not simply called “the rosy wine” to be poetic or cynical: it *is* rosy wine to him. His mind transforms a single room into “apartments,” a bedstead into a bookcase:

There is no doubt that by day Mr Swiveller firmly believed this secret convenience to be a bookcase and nothing more; that he closed his eyes to the bed, resolutely denied the existence of the blankets, and spurned the bolster from his thoughts . . . Implicit faith in the deception was the first article of his creed. To be the friend of Swiveller you must reject all circumstantial evidence, all reason, observation, and experience, and repose a blind belief in the bookcase. (OCS 60)

The bookcase is, of course, a “pleasant fiction,” a “flight of fancy.” But because the fancy is real for Dick, it has real implications to his life, and to those who enter his “apartments.” “To name,” Stewart argues, “is to nominate for a reality

of one's own choosing" (Stewart 105). Dick cannot make the Marchioness an official member of the aristocracy, but his mental conception of her creates a new persona where there had been none—just a nameless, half-starved servant girl who says her name is "Nothing." Dickens is himself in service to this imaginative ideal, the essential truth of the heartfelt illusion, through the very act of creating his London-world.

And so when Jenny creates her rooftop haven, it is not childish make-believe. She is not above pretending, as we see at other times when she is with Riah, but she is playfully conscious of the artifice. On the rooftop, her imagined refuge yields her actual effects:

‘And you see the clouds rushing on above the narrow streets, not minding them, and you see the golden arrows pointing at the mountains in the sky from which the wind comes, and you feel as if you were dead.’ ...

‘How do you feel when you are dead?’ asked Fledgeby, much perplexed.

‘Oh, so tranquil!’ cried the little creature, smiling. ‘Oh, so peaceful and so thankful! And you hear the people who are alive, crying, and working, and calling to one another down in the close dark streets, and you seem to pity them so! And such a chain has fallen from you, and such a strange good sorrowful happiness comes upon you!’ (OMF 279)

Robert Higbie writes of this passage, “Imagination cannot wholly overcome reason’s awareness; she remains conscious of ‘the close dark streets’ down below. But that awareness enables her to feel ‘pity’; imagining heaven, she can keep from resenting reality and can instead pity those whom it cuts off from higher awareness” (Higbie 155). Jenny’s version of death has nothing to do with nonexistence or oblivion, but rather appears as a heightened experience of life, graced with gratitude. Though Riah and Lizzie are also present on the rooftop (with Fledgeby, on whose mind Jenny’s fanciful profession “made rather strong

demands” (OMF 278)), they are not the ones who increase the rooftop’s meaning—only Jenny, the embodied bower, can do so with her own creative power. And yet its effectiveness is clear, both for herself (making her “peaceful and thankful” rather than harried and bitter) and for Riah. Jenny says of him, “I fancied I saw him come out of his grave! He toiled out at that low door so bent and worn, and then he took his breath and stood upright, and looked all round him at the sky, and the wind blew upon him, and his life down in the dark was over!” (OMF 279). Jenny is transported, but her evidence is empirical; coming up to be dead is not a private delusion, but a gift she gives to others through a melding of her contrivance (device) and imagination (vision). Even Fledgeby appears to sense it, though his mind is unable to heed her truly:

As he mounted, the call or song began to sound in his ears again, and, looking above, he saw the face of the little creature looking down out of a Glory of her long bright radiant hair, and musically repeating to him, like a vision:

‘Come up and be dead! Come up and be dead!’ (OMF 280)

She has become radiant and vision-like, invoking the power of the visitation she received from the bright children when in pain. Now, rather than relying on them completely to bear her weight, she is able to complete part of the transformative experience herself.

The fourth and final book of *Our Mutual Friend* continues to show Jenny’s power to share her visionary experience with others growing, particularly in the two chapters entitled “The Dolls’ Dressmaker Discovers a Word” and “Effect is Given to the Dolls’ Dressmaker’s Discovery.” These chapters come on

the heels of the death of Mr. Dolls, Jenny's father; Jenny speaks to Riah after the funeral of being inspired to make a new clergyman doll:

‘Not a funeral, never fear!’ returned Miss Jenny, anticipating his objection with a nod. ‘The public don’t like to be made melancholy, I know very well... But a doll clergyman, my dear, —glossy black curls and whiskers—uniting two of my young friends in matrimony,’ said Miss Jenny, shaking her forefinger, ‘is quite another affair. If you don’t see those three at the altar in Bond Street, in a jiffy, my name’s Jack Robinson!’ (OMF 716)

It is just as she shows the completed doll to Riah that Mortimer Lightwood arrives to bring her to Eugene Wrayburn's (supposed) deathbed at Eugene's request. Her arrival there will directly result in Eugene's marriage to Lizzie. The clergyman doll is therefore obviously prophetic on Jenny's part, but not nearly as impressive as what follows—Jenny's discovery of the word that makes Eugene's redemption possible.

After Jenny arrives and Eugene is made aware of it, he only then reveals the purpose for which he sent for her:

‘Ask her if she has seen the children.’

Mortimer could not understand this, neither could Jenny herself, until he added:

‘Ask her if she has smelt the flowers.’

‘Oh! I know!’ cried Jenny. ‘I understand him now!’ Then, Lightwood yielded his place to her quick approach, and she said, bending over the bed, with that better look: ‘You mean my long bright slanting rows of children, who used to bring me ease and rest? You mean the children who used to take me up, and make me light?’

Eugene smiled, ‘Yes.’

‘I have not seen them since I saw you. I never see them now, but I am hardly ever in pain now.’

‘It was a pretty fancy,’ said Eugene.

‘But I have heard my birds sing,’ cried the little creature, ‘and I have smelt my flowers. Yes, indeed I have! And both were most beautiful and most Divine!’

‘Stay and help to nurse me,’ said Eugene, quietly. ‘I should like you to have the fancy here, before I die.’ (OMF 718)

In this rich passage, Jenny is able to understand Eugene without the use of Mortimer as an interpreter once she realizes they are sharing, in a sense, a common language. Though Eugene once scoffed at her flowers, he now sees “pretty fancy” as valuable in itself—the only thing he requires as he dies. This, Higbie argues, is what will save him: “He can be saved, unlike Bradley Headstone, because he has (despite his doubts) the capacity to allow imagination, which Bradley lacks, a capacity shown in Eugene’s playfulness earlier in the novel” (Higbie 156). Jenny is “hardly ever in pain now,” but can transfer the effects of the divine compensation she once needed so badly for herself to a receptive third party, as she did on the roof with Riah. “Only now in her own person,” Stewart claims, “selflessly and feelingly, can she become that accommodation which she could not willfully achieve in her art” (Stewart 220). Through her fancy, she can understand Eugene’s real need as he approaches death as no one else can.

On the rooftop, we have already seen Jenny’s affection for being “as if you were dead”—not actual death. As Stewart states bluntly, “This has nothing in common with Little Nell’s actual death-wishes” (Stewart 214). Jenny, after all, does not take the path of least resistance like her father—she survives. And yet, with the relationship she feels with death and the divine, she is the obvious choice to mediate with Eugene as, repeatedly, “his spirit would glide away again and be lost” like the rising and sinking of a drowned man:

It was amazing through how many hours at a time she would remain beside him, in a crouching attitude, attentive to his slightest moan . . . Through this close watching (if through no secret sympathy or power) the

little creature attained an understanding of him that Lightwood did not possess. Mortimer would often turn to her, as if she were an interpreter between this sentient world and the insensible man; and she would change the dressing of a wound, or ease a ligature, or turn his face, or alter the pressure of the bedclothes on him, with an absolute certainty of doing right. The natural lightness and delicacy of touch which had become very refined by practice in her miniature work, no doubt was involved in this. (OMF 720)

The “close watching” and attention to detail are echoes of what we know of Jenny’s unfailing industriousness and artistic ability. The “secret sympathy” Dickens ambiguously credits her with could be her close understanding of pain. And the “power,” I argue, is her special connection to the otherworldly, to the spiritual, to death, which bridges her to an understanding of what could bring Eugene peace. When he speaks unintelligibly to Mortimer of a “last service” and repeats Lizzie’s name incessantly, Jenny uses this power to solve the riddle and, again prophetically, divine the word:

‘Shall I give you a leading word to say to him?’

‘O Jenny, if you could only give me the right word!’

‘I can. Stoop down.’

He stooped, and she whispered in his ear. She whispered in his ear one short word of a single syllable. Lightwood started, and looked at her.

‘Try it,’ said the little creature, with an excited and exultant face. She then bent over the unconscious man, and, for the first time, kissed him on the cheek, and kissed the poor maimed hand that was nearest to her. Then, she withdrew to the foot of the bed...

‘Don’t speak, Eugene. Do no more than look at me, and listen to me... Is the word we should soon have come to—is it—Wife?’

‘O God bless you, Mortimer!’ (OMF 722)

Wife, not husband. Jenny addresses the earlier problem she faced when talking to Lizzie—the latter’s inability to conceive of herself as a lady or, implicitly, a proper wife. It is Jenny who retrieves what is good in Eugene’s impulses from his stupor and transforms both him and Lizzie through marriage—Eugene in offering

it to the “female waterman,” and Lizzie in receiving it despite her self-doubt (OMF 794). Once his wife, Lizzie has the power to call him back as he drifts, and Eugene’s recovery begins.

Jenny has already begun the work of making Lizzie into a lady. “What would you think of him, Lizzie, if you were a lady?” Jenny asks; Lizzie’s “fancy is not able to get that far” (OMF 343). But Jenny uses the materials available—to use, as Helena Michie suggests Dickens does, “Jenny’s sewing” as “a metaphor for the possibility of such a female transformation and transfiguration” (Michie 210). Lizzie says she cannot “easily make [a lady] of such material as myself” (OMF 343). But, as Michie argues, “Jenny...consistently produces ‘ladies’ [dolls] from material” (Michie 211) and can redirect Lizzie’s creative impulse into its usual medium of expression, firegazing:

‘But I am in the humour, and I must be humoured, Lizzie, because after all I am a poor little thing, and have had a hard day with my bad child. Look in the fire, as I like to hear you tell how you used to do when you lived in that dreary old house that had once been a windmill. Look in the--what was its name when you told fortunes with your brother that I don’t like?’
 ‘The hollow down by the flare?’
 ‘Ah! That’s the name! You can find a lady there, I know.’
 (OMF 343)

Lizzie does find a lady in the fire, and the lady is herself. This first articulation of her love for Eugene bodes trouble for all concerned—it will nearly cost Eugene his life at Bradley Headstone’s hands—and grieves Jenny immensely. But it may also be seen as the first step towards the mutuality that unites Lizzie and Eugene across the class divide at the end of the novel. Jenny’s encouragement of Lizzie seems to directly foreshadow the concluding scene of the novel, where Twemlow says of Lizzie and Eugene’s marriage: “I think he is the greater gentleman for the

action, and makes her the greater lady. I beg to say, that when I use the word, gentleman, I use it in the sense in which the degree may be attained by any man” (OMF 796). Jenny sees that Lizzie’s designation as a lady can also be attained through Jenny’s contriving on her friend’s behalf, but only once Lizzie creates herself into the role with vision on loan from the dolls’ dressmaker.

Is the visionary Jenny the “real” Jenny? Never for long: as Schor notes, there are multiple Miss Wrens, and “the novel’s ability to keep the human and the inhuman in its gaze at once (to see in Jenny Wren at once the fantasist visionary, the pained and crippled little girl, and something weirdly inhuman and sharply alien) is its chief power” (Schor 205). Stewart argues that Jenny “must always fluctuate between the remembered beauties of her innocent imagination and the sullied bondage of experience, and Dickens himself makes it clear that her “better look” is not something she can choose to wear at all times. But in Jenny’s last appearance in *Our Mutual Friend*, there is reason to hope. In this scene, Jenny meets Sloppy, whom she is predisposed to like after hearing of him having “pitch[ed] somebody into a mud-cart,” just as she undoubtedly would like to have done (OMF 787). Jenny here ceases to rely on defensive deflections regarding her disability; instead of giving Sloppy her standard line about her bad back and queer legs, she simply tells him, “I am lame.” Sloppy, observing her using her crutch, says, “You hardly want it all.” Dickens writes, “The little dressmaker sat down again, and gave it into his hand, saying, with that better look upon her, and with a smile: ‘Thank you!’” (OMF 788). The better look, which has henceforth only been possible when she recalls the ecstasy of her visions, has made an

appearance in a simple moment of friendship. As she laughs with Sloppy—who may be the “Him” Jenny has been waiting for—we are encouraged to hope that Jenny’s struggle is over. Her new home redeems the old:

‘You don’t live here alone; do you, Miss?’ asked Sloppy.

‘No,’ said Miss Wren, with a chop. ‘Live here with my fairy godmother.’

‘With;’ Mr Sloppy couldn’t make it out; ‘with who did you say, Miss?’

‘Well!’ replied Miss Wren, more seriously. ‘With my second father. Or with my first, for that matter.’ And she shook her head, and drew a sigh. ‘If you had known a poor child I used to have here,’ she added, ‘you’d have understood me. But you didn’t, and you can’t. All the better!’ (OMF 787)

Riah, by assuming the role of Jenny’s first real father, has allowed Jenny to drop, except nostalgically, her shrewish mother-persona; she has swept it under the rug with her dismissive sigh of “All the better!” Jenny is a child once more—or rather, she is ready to leave childhood and take on maturity in a more conventional manner than she did through her “dire reversal of the places of parent and child” (OMF 241). The coming of “Him” signals thirteen-year-old Jenny’s imminent threshold of puberty. She outlived her childhood, after all; the greatest danger has passed, and the novel can end.

CONCLUSION

Evolutions

Hilary Schor writes, “Nell’s death is a site of value for Dickens, part of the cannibalizing of young children so central to his early fiction – and indeed, given the sweeping-boy Jo and little John Harmon, it was a taste Dickens was as slow to renounce as his readers” (Schor 41). But as I have delineated, such a casual summary of the evolution of child suffering in Dickens’s novels is an oversimplification. Children do die throughout Dickens, from *Oliver Twist* to *Our Mutual Friend*. But the symbolic centrality of child death that Schor rightly identifies in the early novels shifts later in Dickens’s career to accommodate the value of survival.

Oliver Twist, the “parish boy,” is always a step away from death. Had he stayed in the workhouse, he likely would have died like his double, Dick; had he been apprenticed to Mr. Gamfield, he almost certainly would have been smothered in a chimney, as the workhouse board recognizes. Oliver suffers from intense fevers; he is even shot. Had Oliver not been blessed by his author with the near-supernatural ability to end up under the protection of kind strangers who happen to be relatives, there would be no way for him to remain alive. His survival is attributable to no intrinsic resources of his own. If Oliver and Nell personify Goodness, as Dickens implies or states, it is a goodness of passivity and

weakness, unspeakably fragile in comparison with the fierce, compelling energy of social and psychological evil. Paul Dombey is similarly far too frail to combat the wrongs that crush the life out of him. Dickens, in rendering Paul as a changeling figure, can give him strange maturity and a preternatural knowledge of death. But Paul's sharpness still encompasses his innocence. As Dickens turned to working women, he began to develop a sharpness of experience.

In a progression of characters that started cautiously with Agnes Wickfield and Esther Summerson and ended triumphantly with Amy Dorrit and Jenny Wren, the mothering-daughter role usurped the place of the dying or nearly-dead child. When child death is used in and after *Bleak House*, it plays a far different role than the one we are accustomed to from Nell and Paul. Jo's death is played for anger rather than tears. No narrator claims Jo is only sleeping, or that he will shortly join the choir of angels: instead he excoriates society for letting so many Jo's die in ignorance. Little John Harmon, the child-corpse of *Our Mutual Friend*, only appears once as a healthy child; the space afforded to his death—and by extension, child death in general—in the narrative is minimal, and the scene is too perfunctory to achieve real sentimentality. As a device, his death brings out a warmer side in the mercenary Bella Wilfer and teaches Mrs. Boffin the folly of trying to adopt the perfect, unblemished orphan: she takes in the less glamorous Sloppy, Jenny's creative counterpart, instead.

Dickens's little mothers are no strangers to the sullyng effects of experience, but remain pure within themselves, resistant to degradation. Their strategies developed slowly, starting with the labor of Agnes and Esther, the

housekeepers, that brought them love and honor. Esther and Amy both translated their stories into fairy tales, found ways to re-create the ugliness of experience as myth. And Jenny Wren, a fellow laborer, appropriated the imaginative capacity of Dickens's earlier works and used it to transform her life, to find solace from pain. In Amy and Jenny, we see goodness as a complicated element, struggling to remain pure: it is indestructible *because* it is active and on the defensive, using all its resources to survive.

Modern legacies

As I've discussed, Amy Dorrit and Jenny Wren had difficulty finding a receptive audience when Dickens introduced them to his public—just as Nell would have trouble finding admirers now. This, I argue, would no longer be the case. Amy Dorrit's conflicting impulses towards duty and independence, self-denial and self-fulfillment through love, are familiar to modern readers: they are shared by a quantity of less saintly heroines in popular novels. But does Jenny Wren have fictional descendents? Consider the case of Matilda Wormwood.

Matilda is the heroine of *Matilda* (1988), a children's book by Roald Dahl. A "sensitive and brilliant" little girl, Matilda has a mind that cannot be stifled, even by the ignorance and casual cruelty of parents who treat her like "a scab" (Dahl 10). She cannot, as Jenny did, claim parental authority: she is only five throughout the majority of the novel, and she has two parents to deal with instead of one, neither of whom are incapacitated by alcoholism. She can, however, outthink them. Whenever her father does something horrible, like destroy one of

her library books or accuse her of cheating at a math problem, she devises an elaborate revenge.

Matilda is most famous for the supernatural powers—telekinesis—she develops when her mental energy finds no outlet at school, where she is expected to spell “cat” like the other five-year-olds. But her revenges against her parents rely on nothing more complex than her clever mind. Her father is vain, so she superglues his hat to his head, or causes him to dye his hair platinum. It humbles him for a few days: it gives her space within her home to be herself.

While Matilda can multiply in her head with the speed and accuracy of a pocket calculator, she is also imaginative: in one of her revenge plots, she drives her entire family into a terrified frenzy when they hear a “ghost” in their drawing room. The ghost is actually a parrot belonging to Matilda’s friend, which she has stuck up the chimney, but Matilda interprets the parroted words for her parents: her flat statement of “It’s a ghost” is what truly horrifies them:

“I know it’s a ghost!” Matilda said. “I’ve heard it here before! This room is haunted! I thought you knew that.”

“Save us!” the mother screamed, almost throttling her husband.
(Dahl 48)

Matilda draws her family into a story she creates and manipulates them thoroughly, in a way that would make Jenny Wren proud. In addition, she composes an extemporaneous limerick for her teacher Miss Honey on the first day of school—reminiscent of Jenny’s short snatches of poetry—and loves to read. After she finishes all the library’s children’s books, she asks the librarian for a “famous” book for adults:

Mrs Phelps looked along the shelves, taking her time. She didn't quite know what to bring out. How, she asked herself, does one choose a famous grown-up book for a four-year-old girl? Her first thought was to pick a young teenager's romance of the kind that is written for fifteen-year-old schoolgirls, but for some reason she found herself instinctively walking past that particular shelf.

"Try this," she said at last. "It's very famous and very good. If it's too long for you, just let me know..."

"*Great Expectations*," Matilda read, "by Charles Dickens. I'd love to try it." (Dahl 15)

Each day, Matilda walks to the library to read *Great Expectations* and take refuge in "the spell of magic that Dickens the great story-teller had woven with his words" (Dahl 16). Upon finishing it, Matilda reads *Oliver Twist* and *Nicholas Nickleby* in succession before turning to other writers. We later learn from her conversation that she has read *The Pickwick Papers*.

Why the repeated invocation of Dickens? It is appropriate, I suggest, in view of the modern conception of childhood. On the first page, Dahl summarizes the attitude of his day: "It's a funny thing about mothers and fathers. Even when their own child is the most disgusting little blister you could ever imagine, they still think that he or she is wonderful" (Dahl 7). Matilda, on the other hand, has the polar opposite of doting parents: they are Dickensian in their self-absorption, their willingness to neglect Matilda entirely, and their disrespect of fancy. "You can't make a living from sitting on your fanny and reading story-books," says Mr. Wormwood (Dahl 96-7). As in Dickens, money does not determine happiness; even though Matilda's family is quite well off, she is a victim and will have to build a new family with Miss Honey—Dahl's version of Riah, the "fairy godmother"—to achieve a happy ending for herself. It is in reading *Great Expectations* that Matilda can identify with another unappreciated child, Pip; in

Nicholas Nickleby's Dotheboys Hall, she sees the forerunner of her own sadistic school.

Matilda, like Jenny Wren, suffers for the lack of kind parents and educational stimulation. But she is also like Jenny in that she does not accept the mantle of the victimized child easily. Her punishments deflect her pain onto her parents and establish her as the stronger party:

The new game she had invented of punishing one or both of [her parents] each time they were beastly to her made her life more or less bearable... Her safety valve, the thing that prevented her from going round the bend, was the fun of devising and dishing out these splendid punishments, and the lovely thing was that they seemed to work. The father in particular became less cocky and unbearable for several days after receiving a dose of Matilda's magic medicine. (Dahl 49)

The skill in devising or, to use my usual word, contriving these punishments is her own, but there is an element of magic, of a bestowed gift—especially when Matilda develops the telekinetic powers necessary to destroy the reign of Miss Trunchbull, her Squeers-emulating headmistress. Of Matilda's powers, which make her feel as if she's "flying past the stars on silver wings," Miss Honey says, "They may even be divine" (Dahl 181-2). Matilda, created over a hundred years after Jenny Wren, is still harnessing vision and device in order to even the odds against the uncaring world.

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