VICTORIAN THEME AND CONVENTION IN THE
NOVELS OF CHARLES DICKENS

Iain Crawford

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FOR JELENA

who, "several months before there was any possibility of our becoming personally acquainted," had more influence on this than she can ever have known.
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This thesis is a study of Dickens's narrative technique and its relation to certain key themes of his fiction, in particular those concerned with the response of his heroes and heroines to one another. It is based upon analysis of his treatment of conventional forms of genre, plot device and characterization and relates these to moral and emotional themes important to both Dickens and the Victorian age as a whole. The methodology adopted is a combination of survey and close analysis, with the intention of providing both a sense of the wider context in which Dickens's writing may be seen and also some detailed insight into the workings within his novels of the topics considered.

The argument is arranged in three sections. Part One deals with the model available to Dickens from eighteenth-century picaresque fiction and explores his own variations upon its form and themes in Nicholas Nickleby and Martin Chuzzlewit. In Part Two, four thematic conventions, characteristic of Victorian fiction in general and of central importance to Dickens, are surveyed, with the emphasis mostly upon their workings in a small number of novels selected from different stages of Dickens's career. Part Three concludes the thesis with a study of the contrasting operation of these conventions in David Copperfield and Great Expectations. It is suggested that these two novels, the first less consciously, but the second quite deliber-
ately, re-work many of the techniques and themes Dickens had developed in his early novels and that, with varying degrees of awareness, they offer a critical presentation of certain key nineteenth-century beliefs through their treatment of the conventional assumptions of early-Victorian fiction.

This thesis was first conceived in Finland, was largely undertaken at the University of Leicester, and has been completed in Yugoslavia. During its peripatetic progress I have had invaluable help from a number of people, whom it is now my pleasure to thank and acknowledge.

Professor Philip Collins, my Leicester supervisor, has provided unfailing guidance, aid and encouragement, without which this thesis could have been neither begun nor completed.

For their kindness, advice and assistance, I should like to thank the following people: Professor Sonia Bićinić; Mr Philip Dodd; Dr Robin Gilmour; Mr Ian Hilson; Mr Graham Mott; Dr Jasna Perućić Nadarević; Dr Elvira Petrović; Dr Lois Potter; Dr Michael Slater; the secretarial staff of the Department of English, the University of Leicester; the staff of the British Council, Zagreb, and in particular Mrs Zdenka Odovićić.

I should also like to acknowledge the assistance of Pedagoški Fakultet, Osijek, for two grants of study leave and financial help which have enabled me to complete the thesis.

Finally, I thank my mother and, above all, my wife for their spoken and unspoken patience, help and care.

Osijek, 11 October, 1981.
ABBREVIATIONS

The following abbreviations are used for reference to Dickens's novels:

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<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Title</th>
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<tr>
<td>BH</td>
<td>Bleak House</td>
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<td>BR</td>
<td>Barnaby Rudge</td>
<td>Clarendon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DC</td>
<td>David Copperfield</td>
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<tr>
<td>D&amp;S</td>
<td>Dombey and Son</td>
<td>Clarendon</td>
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<tr>
<td>GE</td>
<td>Great Expectations</td>
<td>Clarendon</td>
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<tr>
<td>LD</td>
<td>Little Dorrit</td>
<td>Clarendon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MC</td>
<td>Martin Chuzzlewit</td>
<td>Penguin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NN</td>
<td>Nicholas Nickleby</td>
<td>Penguin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OCS</td>
<td>The Old Curiosity Shop</td>
<td>Penguin</td>
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<td>OT</td>
<td>Oliver Twist</td>
<td>Penguin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PP</td>
<td>Pickwick Papers</td>
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The edition used is that of the Penguin English Library, with the exception of Oliver Twist, Dombey and Son, and Little Dorrit, where the Clarendon texts have been employed. The Clarendon edition of Copperfield was, unfortunately, not available to me.

The following abbreviations are also used:

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>P</td>
<td>The Pilgrim edition of The Letters of Charles Dickens, ed. Madeline House, et al. (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1965-). References are by date, volume and page number. I have been unable to consult the recently published fifth volume.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dkn</td>
<td>The Dickensian.</td>
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<td>NCF</td>
<td>Nineteenth-Century Fiction.</td>
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I

DICKENS AND THE PICARESQUE
1. THE PICARESQUE LEGACY

Supposing one wrote an essay on Fielding, for instance, and another on Smollett, and another on Sterne, recalling how one read them as a child (no one read them younger than I, I think), and how one gradually grew up into a different knowledge of them, and so forth - would it not be interesting to many people? I should like to know if you descry anything in this. It is one of the dim notions fluctuating within me. . . 1

One of the many ways in which Dickens was such a representative man of his age was in this love for the eighteenth-century novelists that he suggests here and to which he testifies even more explicitly both in the autobiographical fragment he gave to Forster and in chapter 4 of David Copperfield. For these writers remained highly popular well into the Victorian period and are lovingly recalled by George Eliot in Mr Brooke's advice to the recuperating Casaubon:

"Or get Dorothea to read you light things, Smollett - Roderick Random, Humphry Clinker: they are a little broad, but she may read anything now she's married, you know. I remember they made me laugh uncommonly - there's a droll bit about a postilion's breeches. We have no such humour now. I have gone through all these things, but they might be rather new to you." 2

The popularity of the novels is well testified by the suggestion that Casaubon would not know them and it is also characteristic of Mr Brooke, in so many ways behind the times, that they should be the novels he recalls. Moreover, even a man more in touch with contem-

porary life such as Arnold was prepared to recommend Humphry Clinker enthusiastically to the youthful Stanley: "Oh, you must read Humphry Clinker; if you have not got it, I will lend it to you, it is not too much to say that I have read it through fifty times."  

It may be conjectured that nostalgia played some part in the enormous popularity of Pickwick and Nickleby with their many similarities to eighteenth-century picaresque fiction both at the time of their first publication and throughout the Victorian period. For it is apparent that, despite a movement in taste that was to make little Nell's death an occasion for laughter rather than tears, the early picaresque novels remained Dickens's most popular works. Their abundant humour, mellowness and mood of general benevolence ensured their lasting appeal and were qualities whose absence was frequently lamented by readers of the later novels.

However, the proximity of Dickens's early work to the novels of his eighteenth-century predecessors is perhaps less complete than many of his early readers and, indeed, some more recent critics have assumed. In particular, the term "picaresque" is used with some freedom, generally to refer to the peripatetic structure of the novels, the presence of a young and mobile protagonist, and, on occasion, to suggest the lack of other, subtler forms of organisation. Thus for Robert Barnard, Martin Chuzzlewit "will always be admired less for the dawning awareness of form than for its richness of caricature and its exuberant picaresque narrative." Similarly, William J. Palmer

writes to "deny that any drastic change from picaresque carefreedom
and benevolence to dark 'bitterness and frustration' really occurred
in Dickens' vision."6 Such assumptions tend to beg the question of
how far and in what ways Dickens was indebted to the eighteenth-
century novel, both for specific borrowings and, more generally,
for his first conceptions of the nature and methods of fiction, and,
rather than simply contrasting his earlier and later work, it is
necessary to explore what kinds of model were available to Dickens
in the development of his own writing.

What "picaresque" actually means has been the subject of consid-
erable critical debate and, even though there appears to be broad ag-
reement upon the episodic nature of such fiction, its dominance by
a peripatetic central character of low or at least dubious social
origins, and the importance of first-person narration, there is no
consensus upon the relative importance of such component elements
or upon the extent to which picaresque is or is not a genre which
transcends historical and geographical boundaries.7 For the purposes
of this argument, such wider issues will not be considered and instead
the emphasis will be upon suggesting the kind of picaresque model
Dickens would have found in *Gil Blas* and those eighteenth-century
British novels he is known to have read and loved throughout his life.
Further, the focus here will be upon one particular version of pic-
aresque - that in which a youthful male hero is dominant - and thus

7. Among the most important of such discussions are: Robert Alter,
*Rogue's Progress: Studies in the Picaresque Novel* (Cambridge,
Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1964); Stuart Miller, *The
Picaresque Novel* (Cleveland: Case Western Reserve University,
1967); Alexander A. Parker, *Literature and the Delinquent*
(Edinburgh University Press, 1967); Richard Bjornson, *The
Picaresque Hero in European Fiction* (University of Wisconsin
novels in which a child or adolescent picaro or picara plays an important part (such as Colonel Jack or Moll Flanders) and which are therefore in fact closer to the original Spanish picaresque will not be so fully considered. For it is the gentleman-picaro of Le Sage, Smollett and Fielding who re-appears in Dickens and not the wily youthful criminal Defoe specialized in and who is the successor both of Lazarillo de Tormes and of the anti-heroes of British crime fiction. From this central figure and his relationship to society derive many of the other basic features of eighteenth-century picaresque, conditioning, above all, novelists' treatment of inherited picaresque themes and conventions.

Gil Blas, which Dickens considered the greatest work of fiction after Don Quixote, exercised enormous influence upon his predecessors, so much so, in fact, that Smollett could quite candidly admit modelling Roderick Random upon it. Even if Smollett felt it necessary to refine Le Sage somewhat, Gil's fundamental respectability is readily apparent and marks his greatest difference from the amoral and dishonest Spanish picaro he himself derives from. His origins are humble but not low and his progress is one of slow but continuous social ascent. Although he begins by working for a gang of thieves, his other sixteen jobs take him up and up Spanish society until he becomes principal aide to the prime minister. Moreover, he does not simply take random employment, but cultivates his abilities as a steward from his first

tenure of such a position with Arsenia's theatrical company (III, 9-12). He is not, however, to be seen as a superior butler, for his literary abilities play an important part in his life and work. He first develops these while working for the saloniste Marchioness of Chaves (IV, 8-9) and then later as critic-sycophant to the Archbishop of Grenada (VII, 2-4), so that when he comes to work at Court and must write briefs for the Duke of Lerma he is ready to combine his literary and managerial skills in a post of considerable responsibility and even succeeds (VIII, 5) in impressing the king with his style. In this he is to be contrasted with the Spanish picaro who ostentatiously lacks formal culture and whose involvements with literature tend to be restricted to casual engagements with troupes of travelling actors. Gil exists within established society, defining himself in its orthodox terms and seeking conventional, if unusually ambitious goals. He is, indeed, as Frank J. Kearful has put it, "a handsome young French gentleman masquerading as a Spanish picaro", and he provides an archetype of the gentleman-picaro upon which many of his British successors were to be modelled.

Roderick Random, Peregrine Pickle and Tom Jones are all very clearly members of established society and indeed are so to the extent that, though they may dabble with work, this tends to be a brief excursus on their road to inherited and usually landed wealth. They are not required to survive on their wits for long and their adventures take something of the nature of a playful interlude so that their hardships, while frequently uncomfortable, do not in general

11. The Adventures of Gil Blas of Santillane (London: Dent, 1910). References will be given by Book and, after the comma, chapter.

threaten to blight their lives or even to kill them. Roderick alone comes close to death, while such episodes as Tom Jones' wounding and subsequent escapades at the inn tend to be exploited chiefly for their comic value. 13

Paradoxically, the least respectable of these British picaresque characters suggests the power of the drive for social orthodoxy more forcibly than any of her more established counterparts. Moll Flanders continually vacillates between the excitement of a life of crime and the security of an honest life. In so far as she escapes from this dilemma, she does so through her love for Jemmy, since he can offer her both settled emotional security and, with her financial support, the "gentility" she finds so attractive. Although Moll may appear to be closer to her predecessors in Spanish picaresque than many of the characters of the eighteenth-century British novel, she never forgets, or allows the reader to forget, that she is erring from social and religious standards she herself accepts as valid. Her progress is towards a secure marriage combining both love and social status and in this she is far closer to the gentlemen-heroes of Smollett and Fielding than to the Spanish picaro.

Although the gentleman-picaro shares the assumptions of his society, he does not, of course, gain his rightful place in it at once and, indeed, like his Spanish predecessors, begins by being expelled from his childhood environment into a more or less hostile world. This is manifestly the case with Roderick Random, Peregrine Pickle, Moll Flanders and Tom Jones, each of whom is forced to wander through the world, surviving as best he or she can. However, and unlike the earlier versions of picaresque, eighteenth-century novels do not simply develop a random set of haphazard encounters between the pro-

agonist and chance-met characters but instead follow more of what Stuart Miller has termed a "dance pattern" whereby the plot is given some order and stability through the re-introduction of characters at different points in the hero's progress. This is made even more noticeable when, as is increasingly the case, these characters come from the hero's own family and when the plot thus involves the clarification of his familial relationships and, frequently, the establishment of his identity through the revelation of ties of kinship. Instead of the sense of open-ended life continuing on beyond the end of the narrative that had been normal in Spanish picaresque, there is an emphasis upon a resolved and definitively settled set of specific circumstances. The picaro himself becomes less of an isolated figure operating on the fringes of society and is instead placed more and more precisely within the context of the family group. This pattern develops gradually throughout eighteenth-century fiction but hints of it may be detected as early as *Gil Blas*.

The novel is structured not only by Gil's successful progress up through Spanish society but also by his changing relationship with his family and native village. At his uncle's insistence, Gil is sent away to complete his education and thus falls into the adventures with which his story is to be taken up. During this progress he largely neglects his home, never sparing it a thought, and does not return to it until he himself has fallen from grace and undergone a reformative illness in the Tower of Segovia (IX, 8). Fate sees fit to punish him, however, and his father dies immediately after Gil's arrival (X, 2). Even though he goes on to found a family of his own with his marriage to Antonia, his new strength of mind is soon put to the test by her death and that of their son (XI, 1). He does,
however, emerge from this with greater assurance and is thus prepared both for the resumption of his career at Court and for his second marriage which closes the novel.

British picaresque takes this even further and both Smollett and Fielding place the family group at the centre of their novels. Roderick Random, for instance, is deprived of his birthright and forced to wander the world until eventual reunion with his father restores his fortune and enables him to marry Narcissa. Even if this resolution is effected through the crude device of an unlikely meeting in Buenos Aires and despite the fact that, until then, Roderick has shown no concern for his father's whereabouts, Smollett is using as the basis of his story that relationship between the central character and various groups which he had described in the Preface to Ferdinand Count Fathom. Fielding, of course, takes this even further, since the entire plot of Tom Jones turns on the relationship between the hero and his family and leads to the discovery of Tom's identity by birth.

If this emphasis upon the hero's ties with his family anticipates much in the plots of nineteenth-century novels, so too Lionel Trilling's definition of "the young man from the country", a basic stereotype of Victorian fiction, looks back to Augustan picaresque:

He need not come from the provinces in literal fact, his social class may constitute his province. But a provincial birth and rearing suggest the simplicity and the high hopes he begins with - he starts with a great demand upon life and a great wonder about its complexity and promise. He may be of good family but he must be poor. He is intelligent, or at least aware, but not at all shrewd in worldly matters. He must have acquired a certain amount of education, should have learned something about life from books, although not the truth. 15

The contrast between ignorance and acquired knowledge, between

provinciality and sophistication is essential to all the many versions of picaresque, appearing in Gil Blas and the eighteenth-century British novel in a modified form whereby the hero progresses from his rural origins out into the wilderness of the world (generally represented by the capital city) and finally returning, after a fortunate fall and subsequent moral reform, to his country home. This final stage is usually completed simultaneously with the restoration of his rightful wealth and the consummation of his pursuit of the heroine. Something of this is evident in Gil Blas’ story, while both Roderick Random and Tom Jones follow the pattern even more closely. Similarly, Goldsmith employs it in The Vicar of Wakefield, though applying it to the Primrose family as a whole with their corruption by the city-influenced Thornhill and final recovery of pristine innocence. The ambition to return to one’s rural home is a markedly quietist ideal which completely inverts the traditional picaro’s vital involvement with a society which, paradoxically, has no place for him and which he is consequently forced to deceive and plunder continually in order to stay alive. In the first phase of his progress, Roderick Random is close to this older pattern, while in the second he shifts abruptly into the newer model, and the disparity between the two does much to account for the novel’s unevenness. But simply because he is so much a product of his society, and indeed a highly successful one, the gentleman-picaro is typically able to withdraw from any active participation in its concerns, his very success being itself an endorsement of the society which has produced him.

This should not, however, be regarded as a blandly simplistic depiction of an idyllic society, for novelists insist upon presenting the hero’s success in more than material terms. Ronald Paulson
has, on a number of occasions, argued that the eighteenth-century novel represents a developed expression of the Protestant-Puritan heritage of a spiritual progress in this world and that it owes a considerable debt to the two great works of that tradition, *Paradise Lost* and *The Pilgrim's Progress*. The gentleman-picaro thus undertakes not merely a quest for material success but a secular pilgrimage which takes him from his first home in a rural Eden out into the corrupting world and which finally leads him, after a process of pride, fall and reform, back to that Eden. This pattern is visible, to a greater or lesser extent, in *Gil Blas*, *Roderick Random*, *Tom Jones* and *The Vicar of Wakefield* and, in various ways, is a model Dickens draws upon from *Pickwick* to *Great Expectations*.

This basic theme of a progress towards harmonizing the hero's relations with his family, society and heaven affects not only the episodic structure of primitive picaresque, turning it into a more dramatically unified and coherent form, but also influences the emergence of a changing type of central character. If to call the hero a gentleman-picaro was something of a contradiction in terms, his later evolution into a completely sentimental hero takes him as far from his picaresque ancestors as it is possible to be. Although many traditionally picaresque narrative techniques continue to be employed in the British novel, they consequently take on new roles and convey meanings appropriate to what is a very different kind of fiction from that in which they first emerged.

First in *Gil Blas* and then in the British novel, the gentleman-picaro develops as a sentimental hero with an emphasis upon his gentleman sensibility and concern for the feelings of others. Gil's most appealing characteristic is his ready sympathy and it is the loss of this capacity which is the gravest defect in his Court character. Moreover, it is precisely this change in him that is singled out by a visiting former schoolfellow:

"You form project after project to make a fortune, and the more you realize, the wider your views of aggrandizement extend. But this is not the worst! You no longer have that expansion of heart, those open manners, which form the charm of friendship. On the contrary, you wrap yourself round, and shut the avenues of your heart even to me. In your very civilities, I detect the violence you impose upon yourself. In short Gil Blas is no longer the same Gil Blas whom I once knew." (VIII, 13)

Regaining this quality is to be an essential part of his reform and recovery and is first evident in his less arrogant attitude towards his confidential servant, Scipio, when the latter visits him in the Tower of Segovia (IX, 7). By the end of the novel, Gil has completely recovered and is the same warm, though now sadder and wiser, character he had always fundamentally been.

Roderick Random is another mixed case, since in him callousness and sympathy exist side by side. Like Gil, he treats his servant with utter selfishness but, unlike his predecessor, he never includes Strap in the benefits of his reformed character. On the other hand, he is capable of entirely generous help to the unfortunate Miss Williams (120-2), although again he is less than completely selfless towards his principal benefactor, his uncle (23). In view of all this, his claims (228) to have been purified by his love for Narcissa must be regarded with a degree of scepticism and it is clear that Smollett has either not chosen or been unable to
depict a hero of any single complexion.

Such, however, is not the case with Fielding who, in the character of Tom Jones, perfects the type of the sentimental peripatetic hero. This is not to say that Tom is a moral paragon but, fundamentally, his heart is always in the right place. Indeed, his ready sympathy for others is often too powerful for his own good, since it leads him into precipitate involvements with the troubles of the ladies he meets on his travels, and, if he does not require penitential reform in the manner of Roderick Random, he certainly does want discipline. He is saved from banality, in so far as he is, by his energy and vigour and, possessing considerable vitality but lacking any psychological complexity, he was surely a model for the heroes of Dickens's early models. It is, however, worth recording Sir George Russell's recollection of Dickens's comments on Fielding:

Unlike Thackeray, Dickens was not a great admirer of Fielding. "Tom Jones is always in tears and rouses my contempt," he said, "and excepting Blifil, there is not an original character in the book." 17

Curious as this may seem, both in the light of Dickens's comment to Forster (see above, p. 1) and of the name he gave his sixth son, it does not prevent Tom from standing, even if only faute de mieux, as ancestor to such characters as Nicholas Nickleby, Martin Chuzzlewit and Walter Gay. Indeed, such a remark may even suggest that Dickens shared the lack of enthusiasm for these characters that most modern readers surely feel and, be that as it may, there can be no question but that his male leads only become interesting in their own right when the author begins to put more of himself into them.

One of the most revealing characteristics of the sentimental

gentleman-picaro is to be seen in his attitude to women. Whereas Spanish picaresque habitually degrades women in what has been suggested to be a parody of both Renaissance neo-platonism and romance literature, eighteenth-century fiction tends to reverse this pattern. Thus, as the gentleman-picaro becomes a sentimental hero, so too his story becomes increasingly a romance plot, dramatically integrated by chance meetings and unexplained benevolence, and tending towards a single goal, that of marriage to the heroine. Even though the unlikely encounters and reunions of this plotting seem to bear a superficial resemblance to those of earlier picaresque, they should really be seen as deliberately purposeful elements in sustaining a dramatic plot and not as merely random occurrences.

While this romantic concern becomes of predominant importance in the British novel, it is anticipated towards the end of Gil Blas when the hero evidently feels it is time that he married and settled down. His choice falls upon the fair Antonia, daughter of one of his tenant-farmers, whom he idealizes in terms that would do justice to a princess (X, 8). A similar pattern of engagement with the corrupt world and then concentration upon the innocent heroine is also to be seen in Roderick Random where the hero, after first declaring a lust as brazen and single-minded as that of any of his Spanish predecessors (37, 94, 240), is gradually converted towards a purer perception of Narcissa:

Her age seemed to be seventeen, her stature tall, her shape unexceptionable; her hair, that fell down upon her ivory neck in ringlets, black as jet; her arched eyebrows of the same colour; her eyes piercing, yet tender; her lips of the consistence and hue of cherries; her complexion clear, delicate, and healthy; her aspect noble, ingenuous, and humane; and the whole person so ravishingly delightful that it was impossible for any creature endued with sensi-

bility, to see without admiring, and admire without loving her to excess! I began to curse the servile station that placed me so far beneath the regard of this idol of my adoration! and yet I blessed my fate, that enabled me to enjoy daily the sight of so much perfection! (219-20)

Such idealization is, of course, taken even further by Fielding in his depiction of Sophia Western who, like Narcissa, wants for neither physical charms nor strength of mind. Indeed, if no writer of fiction after Fielding was "permitted to depict to his utmost power a man", it is surely no less a cause for regret that Victorian novelists, and Dickens in particular, felt themselves equally unable to reproduce the vibrant femininity of the eighteenth-century heroine in their own creations. Dickens did, however, affirm his predecessors' conception of the heroine as an ideal figure who is only to be won when, through a process of fall and reform, the hero has become fit for her. He was thus to continue the development of a type of heroine influenced by romance who acts as an ideal rather than a source of corruption and takes a very different role in the hero's spiritual progress from that allotted her by Christian tradition.

However, the hero's progress from his childhood home out into the world and then, having won his bride, back to that first Eden is complicated not only by his own corruption and reform but also by the introduction of a character-type found neither in the original picaresque nor in Gil Blas. Where earlier picaros had been forced to leave home because of the sheer lack of means to support them, the British characters are usually evicted through the machinations of an enemy within the family. Both Roderick Random and Tom Jones, for example, are thus the victims of internecine plotting on the part of characters who are clearly intended to be contrasted with the more or less virtuous heroes. In plots where the key issue is the
nature of the relationships between the hero and the rest of his family, this emphasis on such intimate hostility is not surprising. Moreover, the villain's use of deceit and dissimulation, qualities especially pernicious within the intimate circle of the family, makes an appropriate contrast with the virtues represented by the outgoing and generous sentimental hero. This is true of both Roderick Random, Peregrine Pickle and Tom Jones and can also be seen to apply to The Vicar of Wakefield, where Thornhill's plotting threatens to destroy Primrose's family by dividing the children from their parents. The courtship plots of these novels are thus complicated by the introduction of a villain who often seems to embody that hypocrisy, trickery and deceitfulness typical of the original picaro but entirely alien to the sentimental hero. Against this character, the hero, through the very openness of his nature, is largely helpless and relies upon providential assistance or the aid of a benevolent avuncular figure for rescue from his predicaments. Both the role of the villain and the manner of his defeat are to be closely imitated by Dickens in his early novels.

This development of the villain and his association with characteristics previously embodied in the picaresque trickster is a feature unique to British versions of picaresque and it may well have been this that Dickens appreciated in Fielding's achievement with Blifil. However, this type of villain is often limited to rather simplistic evil and perhaps the most interesting and significant effect of his appearance is to be seen in his implications for the gentleman-picaro. If the villain assumes something of that trickery so typical of the original Spanish characters, the gentleman-picaro becomes an increasingly straight figure, lacking in guile and versatility, and quite
incapable of the free role-playing innate to his predecessors. This is most apparent in the use made of encounters with literary life and, above all, the theatre and it can be seen that what is a simple narrative device in Spanish picaresque is used by eighteenth-century novelists to far more deliberate effect.

The morality and value of the theatre and literature is a recurrent theme in *Gil Blas* and may even be said to be an important factor in creating the novel's unity. Gil encounters his friend Fabricio, ex-barber turned writer, on a number of occasions and these generally serve as opportunities to criticize the nature of the writer's life and work, a criticism the plot endorses by making Fabricio's career one of greater vicissitudes than even Gil's and by showing him finally engaged in the hack work of writing pamphlets for money (XII, 7). This, of course, is to be contrasted with Gil's development of his own literary abilities for more practical purposes (see above, p. 5). Similarly, though even more powerfully, Gil attacks the dangers of association with the theatre and, though he himself never becomes an actor, even his time as steward to Arsenia's company is seen as a fall from grace:

I was borne down by the torrent for three weeks, and ran the career of dissipation in my turn. But I must at the same time say for myself, that in the midst of pleasure I frequently felt the still small voice of conscience, arising from the impression of a serious education, which mixed gall in the Circean cup. Riot could not altogether get the better of remorse; on the contrary, the pangs of the last grew keener with the more shameful indulgence of the first; and, by a happy effect of my temperament, the disorders of a theatrical life began to make me shudder. (III, 12)

Even though it may well be felt that he overdoes this, the novel as a whole is curiously vindictive towards the theatre and Gil's lament that he should have been fooling there is one that many of the other characters would echo. His first love, Laura, is an
actress who ends up losing her daughter (incidentally, after Gil has persuaded the girl to become the king's mistress) and subsequently retires to a convent for female penitents (XII, 3). Don Raphael, a thoroughly picaresque figure who acts as a counterpart to Gil, indicating what might have become of him, had an actress for his mother and habitually uses disguise and picaresque dissemblance. Inevitably, he goes too far and is last seen walking in procession to his execution (XII, 1).

The lesson, which is reiterated throughout the novel, is clear: to play a part is to lose one's "real" identity and will be followed by downfall. It is this fate which Gil prepares for himself through his overweening behaviour at Court, although, to his credit, in recollection he does seem aware of it:

All day I was the hero of my own stage, or rather of the duke's. It was a principal part that I was playing. But when I retired from this brilliant theatre to my own cockloft, the great lord vanished, and poor Gil Blas was left behind, without a royal image in his pocket, and what was worse, without the means of conjuring up his glorious resemblance. (VIII, 5)

After his reform and on his second promotion to Court, Gil is to present the theatricality of his situation with light-hearted irony and self-awareness (XI, 5) and it is clear that he has learned from his mistakes.

Gil's British successors are even more conventional in their behaviour. Roderick Random trifles with love poetry as a student (27, 32) and takes it up again more seriously over Narcissa, but this is hardly of major importance. Peregrine Pickle does actually become an author but this is a mere interlude in his progress.

Tom Jones touches neither literature nor the theatre which is not perhaps surprising, since he is not required to go through the same sort of process of fortunate fall and reform as Gil, Roderick and Peregrine. Only George Primrose approximates closely to earlier picaresque models. He follows a conventional pattern of wandering the world in search of a living and attempts, in a way that looks on to Nicholas Nickleby, to be usher, tutor, writer, companion and, finally, actor. But he is a very minor figure in the novel and his picaresque narrative owes such life as it has more to the tradition from which it is adapted than to any original force of its own. Moreover, it is perhaps not without significance that Primrose recognizes him just as he is about to make his stage debut and that he is thus prevented from even beginning to act, an escape he himself acknowledges with some relief. It is also worth noting that, unlike his Spanish predecessors and even Gil Blas, his associations are not with low theatre - his part was to have been that of Horatio. But it was not to be and thus in the British eighteenth-century novel the role-playing and conscious theatricality that had been essential in earlier versions of picaresque is either largely disregarded or relegated to the most minor significance.

The decline of this particular technique is important because it reveals just how inflexible a character the conventional hero becomes. He lacks the plasticity of the traditional picaro and thus cannot perceive the relative quality of the values to which he adheres and which he indeed embodies. In this he is to be contrasted with the trickster figure as he appears in earlier picaresque and as defined by Peter Berger:

The great swindler is a very different figure from the rebel

or from the one who withdraws from society. Unlike these, the swindler is fully in society. He understands it, operates fully within it, and has all the skills needed to do so successfully. It is not only his morals which separate the swindler from the average citizen but his perspective on the social structure... what to the average citizen is destiny is for him a possibility. What to the average citizen is law is for him a technique. 21

Berger's related concept of "alternation" - "the perception of oneself in front of an infinite series of mirrors, each one transforming one's image in a different potential universe" 22 - is also applicable to the capacity of the original picaro to stand outside his social roles and to see them for the subjective creations that they are. This, however, is a characteristic entirely alien to the gentleman-picaro who identifies both with his society and with the absolute religious beliefs which underlie it; by his very nature he cannot see these as other than absolute values. In much of his early fiction Dickens too presents heroes who accept their world entirely uncritically and it is only in the later novels that his male leads come to perceive the social structure for the artefact that it is. But, if the orthodox principal characters long remain strait-jacketed by their conventional roles, Dickens's free-standing comic figures, while generally more moral than the swindler, possess in abundance his insight into fictitious nature of social life.

The social conventionality of the eighteenth-century hero may finally be seen in novelists' treatment of two narrative motifs common to both Spanish picaresque and its French and British descendants, the relationship between master and servant and the picaro's

struggle to remain clothed. Although the master and servant relationship undoubtedly has a Spanish precedent in *Don Quixote*, it is not part of the picaresque legacy and is, indeed, an inversion of the typical situation of original picaresque. For the gentleman-hero becomes master instead of servant; the very presence of a servant accompanying the hero throughout his career implies a degree of stability quite absent from the world in which earlier picaros had lived; and this servant, by his existence as a subordinate obedient to his master’s commands, help to define the hero's sense of his social status both to himself and to others.

Thus Gil Blas is faithfully served by Scipio whose loyalty through thick and thin is quite invaluable to his master. Such fidelity in the face of occasional neglect is made credible by the fact Scipio himself has in the past been something less than an angel and so can understand Gil in his period of arrogance and corruption. Gratitude, moreover, is a key emotion in the novel and Scipio repays Gil's fundamental if sometimes wavering loyalty by his fidelity when his master falls from favour, so that an important plot device is also included within one of the novel's major themes. The two characters also share humble social origins, which may be of importance in enabling them to sympathize with one another and which is certainly not to be the case in the British novel.

For, although Roderick Random, for example, depends entirely upon Strap's unfailing loyalty, his behaviour towards his servant is hardly his most endearing feature. In London he soon grows ashamed of his dependence on the barber and then of his very company (100, 113) and Strap's departure to the continent as a gentleman's valet comes to him as some relief. Later, when Roderick is plodding through Germany as a mercenary in the French army, he is rescued by
a chance meeting with the now resplendent Strap (249-50) and is appropriately grateful. This, however, does not last long and, once dressed again as the fine gentleman (254), he soon resumes his old manner and bullies Strap cruelly (294).

A similar, though far milder, pattern is also observable in Tom Jones where, if Partridge is not treated badly by the hero himself, he is subjected to considerable physical indignity by being made the butt of numerous comic situations. Both Strap and Partridge thus suffer in a way reminiscent of the Spanish picaro but, where his degradation served to comment upon the hypocrisy of those higher in the social order, their function is only to reinforce the lines of class division. For they are contrasted with the elegant and generally more glorious hero and thus, despite the beguiling comic give and take often present in their relationship with him, tend to reinforce the lines of class distinction so important to the English novel. Dickens, however, is to treat this motif rather more subtly and, as N. N. Feltes has shown, in his mature fiction he explores the relationship between master and servant with considerable insight.

This pattern is also reinforced by the presentation of one subsidiary motif, that of clothes. The Spanish picaro had often struggled just to have something on his back and, as Nina Auerbach has discussed, when he is clothed he is rarely what he seems, for disguise is indispensable to his role as a swindler. The British gentleman-picaro, however, must always have a sufficient quantity of fine clothes as an emblem of his social status, just as he must

have his servant. Thus after he has been admitted back into the company of gentlemen by gaining the post of surgeon's assistant on board the Thunderer, Roderick Random has his status endorsed by gifts of clothes from both Thomson and Morgan (151). Even Tom Jones, who has none of Roderick's preoccupation with social standing, needs Partridge to carry an adequate quantity of clean shirts for him on the road to London (383). This again is a motif Dickens is to make considerable and varied use of, from *Nickleby* to *Great Expectations*.

Finally, just as the plot, characters and narrative motifs of Spanish picaresque take on quite new qualities in eighteenth-century versions of the genre, so too there is considerable development in the forms of narration employed by the later writers. In particular, first-person narration, which is not only a very simple technique but is also appropriate to picaresque's "fictional confession of a liar"\(^\text{25}\), is presented quite differently. The principal cause for this lies in the appearance of the plot pattern of fortunate fall and subsequent reform which emphasizes the responsibility of the characters for their actions and thus complicates their narrations considerably.

Perhaps the richest example of this is to be found in *Moll Flanders*, where the tension between Moll's diverse motivations creates a narrative of complex ambiguity. This, however, is not typical and the eighteenth-century hero is in general less engaged with his story than had been his predecessors. Although Gil Blas, Roderick Random and even Doctor Primrose do tell their own tales, their narration has little in common with that of the early picaros.

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Roderick even closes the first chapter of his account by calling it "memoirs" (12), a term suggesting the sort of recollection in tranquillity which is appropriate to his story but which also implies a kind of finality that is quite new in picaresque narratives. In *Tom Jones*, of course, the hero loses his function as narrator and is replaced by the author's omniscient presence and this is surely another cause of the lack of interest he inspires in the reader.

Indeed, first-person narration is generally subordinated to patterns which tend to the break-up of the hero's monopoly of the point of view. The fall and redemption structure is one of these; another is the increasing amount of social satire within the novel. This latter is quite different from the kind of satire associated with the Spanish picaresque, since, because the gentleman-picaro is basically good, his viewpoint can be used to draw attention to corruption in society, even though he himself will succumb to this corruption during the lowest phase of his progress. Gil's time at Court, Roderick's performance in the fashionable worlds of London and Bath, Tom Jones' falling under the spell of Lady Bellaston, the Primrose family's similar fate at the hands of Thornhill, are all instances of this and are to be contrasted with the Spanish picaro's (and also Moll Flanders') acceptance of and participation in such social corruption.

Moreover, much of the corruption that is presented in the eighteenth-century novel has nothing to do with the hero and the development of a larger and more dramatic plot enables the gentleman-picaro to be contrasted with a number of other characters who fail to redeem themselves from vice. Don Raphael in *Gil Blas*, Banter and Jackson in *Roderick Random*, the Old Man of the Hill in *Tom Jones*, are all instances of this. More generally, the presence of
other characters with stories of their own moves the narrative away from the exclusive control of its protagonist. Original picaresque is highly egotistic in this respect, for the narrator rarely allows other characters to tell the reader anything about themselves. Moll Flanders is a striking instance of this, since she reveals almost nothing of the many people who enter her life and only Jemmy and her "mother" stand out with any individuality of their own. Gil Blas, however, makes effective use of the stories of characters other than its hero and also contains several interpolated stories which introduce characters completely outside the main narrative. These tales, and the romances among them in particular, sometimes appear to have only the entertainment value of stocking-fillers. Occasionally, though, they can be more important. Don Raphael's lengthy autobiography (V, 1-2) is considerably longer than Lazarillo de Tormes and is in effect a full-length picaresque history within a fundamentally non-picaresque novel. It thus acts as a contrast to Gil's own story of rise, fall and reform, and rise again and plays an important part in the plot as a whole.

In these first movements towards a multi-plotted novel the significance of eighteenth-century picaresque for Dickens is again apparent. This fiction was not, of course, his only model and both eighteenth-century drama and the novels of Scott might be shown as helping to influence at least his early work. Nevertheless, Augustan picaresque gave Dickens a legacy of conventional plot, character and narrative stereotypes which was to appear throughout his own work. Using them at first uncritically, he soon developed his own unique variations upon them and in his later novels, above all Great Expectations, explores both them and the assumptions upon which they were based.
Although *Nicholas Nickleby* is Dickens's first full-length version of the picaresque novel, both of his previous fictions show many, albeit incidental, resemblances to the genre. The loose episodic nature of *Pickwick's* plot and its peripatetic qualities clearly look back to the form of eighteenth-century fiction, although, as studies of both the interpolated tales and the novel's chronology have demonstrated, there is more organization to this plot than at first meets the eye. More specifically, the unfortunate Pickwick's confusions at the Ipswich inn are a bowdlerized version of Roderick Random's nocturnal adventures (107-9) or, more closely, Tom Jones' stay at Upton (342ff). Again, Roderick's imprisonment for debt in the Marshalsea (369-94) suggests several of the details and much of the tone of Pickwick's sojourn in the Fleet. Similarly, *Oliver Twist* has some links with Defoe's version of picaresque in its story of the helpless child thrust out into the world and soon caught up in a life of crime. But Dickens's essential point about Oliver is, of course, that he remains untouched by evil, and characteristics traditionally associated with the youth-


2. Forster (p. 90) links this with Peregrine Pickle's imprisonment but, and especially in the light of David Copperfield's comparison of the Micawbers with Roderick Random (*DC*, 221), it may be that Smollett's earlier novel was more in Dickens's mind here.
ful picaro are therefore transferred to the Artful Dodger and Noah Claypole. It is not until *Nicholas Nickleby* that Dickens comes to use the picaresque legacy as the substantive basis for a novel and, although a number of critics have usefully suggested ways in which his third work anticipates the themes of his later fiction, it is important to see how it also expresses his response to the eighteenth-century model.

In his 1848 Preface to the Cheap Edition of the novel Dickens wrote:

> I cannot call to mind, now, how I came to hear about Yorkshire schools when I was a not very robust child, sitting in bye-places, near Rochester Castle, with a head full of Partridge, Tom Pipes, and Sancho Panza. . . (48)

Such memories of his childhood reading were surely still powerful when he came to write *Nickleby* and they provide the novel with both numerous minor details and also, more generally, with a great deal of such structure as it may be said to possess. Squeers's tyrannical fiefdom, for example, might be thought to be one of Dickens's most typically original creations but it surely owes something, in fact, both to Goldsmith's account of an usher's life (*The Vicar of Wakefield*, chapter 20) and, even further back, to *El Buscón*:

> I found insects, twigs, and candlewicks hundreds of times in the stew. She put everything in so it could make a stand in our bellies and pad things out. We endured this hardship until the following Lent. At the beginning of the season one of the boys became ill and, to save money, Goat didn't call the doctor until the boy was asking to make his last confession more than anything else. Then he called in a cheap doctor who took his pulse and said that hunger had killed the lad without giving him a chance to do so. 3

In details such as this and in the extent to which Nicholas' charac-

ter and career derive from eighteenth-century picaresque, Dickens reveals a debt far greater and more significant than any he may have had to the popular drama and fiction of his day. 4

For Nicholas certainly bears a considerable resemblance to his eighteenth-century predecessors. Born into the landed gentry, he belongs to the same social grouping as Roderick Random, Tom Jones and Peregrine Pickle, even if his family's exact standing is rather imprecisely defined; he loses his father after his character has been formed through education and the sheer process of growing up; and he leaves his rural home to seek fortune in the metropolis. Young, genteel, and vigorous, he has all the usual qualities of the gentleman-picaro, but - and this is Dickens's major development of the character-type - none of the vices. It thus seems surprising to find, again in the 1848 Preface, such a defence of the hero:

If Nicholas be not always found to be blameless or agreeable, he is not always intended to appear so. He is a young man of an impetuous temper and of little or no experience; and I saw no reason why such a hero should be lifted out of nature. 52

While we may agree that Nicholas is certainly a raw young man from the country, his nearest approach to a fault is surely only that vigorous pride which makes him intolerant of wrongdoing and which is far more a virtue than a vice. It may, indeed, be thought that a few more vices would have made him an altogether more appealing character, although this is perhaps to neglect the very real interest he creates up until chapter 35 and his meeting with the Cheerybles. He is thus a refined and, ultimately, rather bloodless version of

the type of sentimental hero developed most fully in Tom Jones.

His wanderings are also presented in ways which follow and yet which substantially alter the pattern of eighteenth-century picaresque. Even Smike is an example of this, since he is quite obviously not the conventional accompanying servant and, in fact, his utter dependence upon Nicholas is a complete reversal of the conventional balance in the relationship. More generally and also unusually, Nicholas does not travel alone in his attempts to restore his family affairs to their rightful order but takes his mother and sister with him to the metropolis. The peripatetic role thus given to the family allows both Kate and Mrs Nickleby to play episodic parts in the plot, a device hinted at in Roderick Random but more fully developed with Sophia Western. This has varying success, for, if no reader of the novel would wish to do without Mrs Nickleby's incidental absurdities, equally there can be few with a kind word to say for Kate. In both Nickleby and Chuzzlewit Dickens is to use this episodic heroine in a role subordinate to the male lead and it is not until he reverses this pattern in Dombey and Son that he creates a significantly effective heroine. (Little Nell, of course, takes the part of wanderer through the world but she is to be seen more as a symbolic figure than as a living and developing human being.) Kate's presence in London is essential to the development of the plots against her, but it also suggests a new and more personal concern with his family on the part of the hero.

Nicholas certainly feels that his family is the most important thing in his life:

To have committed no fault, and yet to be so entirely alone in the world; to be separated from the only persons he loved, and to be proscribed like a criminal, when six months ago he had been surrounded by every comfort, and looked up to as the chief hope of his family - this was hard to bear. He had not deserved it either. (328)
This is rather self-pitying and it is certainly not an effective presentation of psychological processes, but it does emphasize the importance of his family to Nicholas and, indeed, his only ambition is to restore their fortunes and regain their home in Devon. Moreover, it is remarkable how passive an ideal this is: any country retirement must involve withdrawing from the larger world, but there is an immense distance between Tom Jones' settling down with Sophia and the Nicklebys' fading into Arcadia. This is not simply a question of Dickens's inability to realize the joys of rural life, for it is clear that the ideal is essentially a static one and that it has none of the vitality that is so much a part of eighteenth-century novelists' image of the earthly paradise. Nicholas thus preserves the old house exactly as it is (932) and it is notable that the epilogue mentions both his mother and sister but neither his wife nor brother-in-law. Indeed, the development of a romantic interest is perhaps the worst thing in a plot which contains much that is very poor indeed and there even suggestions that Dickens himself cannot take it entirely seriously. The farce with Miss Bobster and Madeline's less than elegant surname do little to render the love story an important concern of the narrative and it seems clear that Madeline exists as a substitute for Kate and Frank for Nicholas himself and that these romances are only conventional patterns overlaying the novel's more urgent concerns.

What these are may be seen in the many references to memory and death in the novel. These two are often linked, both by the characters themselves and by Dickens:

> It is an exquisite and beautiful thing in our nature, that when the heart is touched and softened by some tranquil happiness or affectionate feeling, the memory of the dead comes over it most powerfully and irresistibly. It would almost seem as though our better thoughts and sym-


Pathies were charms, in virtue of which the soul is enabled to hold some vague and mysterious intercourse with the spirits of those whom we dearly loved in life. (652-3)

Whatever this may owe to the death of Mary Hogarth (and it surely does owe a great deal), it is a major theme in the novel. For Dickens frequently suggests that only in death is perfection possible, since the soul's progress in this world is away from an original innocence:

If we all had hearts like those which beat so lightly in the bosoms of the young and beautiful, what a heaven this earth would be! If, while our bodies grew old and withered, our hearts could but retain their early youth and freshness, of what avail would be our sorrows and sufferings! But the faint image of Eden which is stamped upon them in childhood, chafes and rubs in our rough struggles with the world, and soon wears away: too often to leave nothing but a mournful blank remaining. (120)

Filtered through Romantic sensibility (the Immortality Ode and Wordsworth's "Upon Epitaphs" are surely in the background here) and through Dickens's own predilections, this is a very different image of Eden from that anticipated in the dénouement of the eighteenth-century novel. It is essentially linked with the family and thus it is not without significance that, even though no one is aware of the fact, Smike should return to his family home to die seeing a vision of Eden (864). For Nicholas, however, the glory and the dream are attainable on this earth in the restoration of his family to their home and in fidelity to the memories of what has passed, so that even Smike is to become an enriching remembrance:

Many and many a time in after years did Nicholas look back to this period of his life, and tread again the humble quiet homely scenes that rose up as of old before him. Many and many a time, in the twilight of a summer evening, or beside the flickering winter's fire - but not so often or so sadly then - would his thoughts wander back to these old days and dwell with a pleasant sorrow upon every slight remembrance which they brought crowding home. . . . every little incident, and even slight words and looks of those old days, little heeded then, but well remembered when busy cares and trials were quite forgot,
came fresh and thick before him many and many a time, and, rustling above the dusty growth of years, came back green boughs of yesterday. (732-3)

The appalling quality of the prose and the maudlin nature of the sentiment are by no means indications of lack of sincerity on Dickens's part, but, in fact, suggest quite the opposite. For this is a theme which preoccupied him in the aftermath of Mary Hogarth's death and which is prominent in both *Nickleby* and its successor, *The Old Curiosity Shop*. Moreover, this concern with death as the only form of absolute innocence accessible to mortals and with memory as our one link with it fundamentally transforms the nature of Nicholas' picaresque progress. The return to Eden is no longer a celebratory recovery of a paradise from which the hero had been wrongfully expelled, but instead marks the translation of Nicholas and his family out of this world and into a passive, inert and death-like state, absolved from all mundane concerns. Where marriage and the prospect of reproduction were essential emphases in eighteenth-century picaresque, Nicholas' and Kate's marriages are merely conventional forms of conclusion and carry no further significance and, indeed, very little conviction. It is therefore appropriate that Nicholas should possess little of the exuberant vitality of his predecessors and none of their cheerful promiscuity. The undisciplined sexuality of the eighteenth-century hero is finally channelled into the creation of a new generation of his family. By contrast, the very slackness of Nicklebean propagation ("there came gradually about him a group of lovely children", 932) fails to suggest any convincing vitality. Dickens has borrowed a form of eighteenth-century picaresque but does not show sufficient interest in it to endow it with effective life. His emphasis instead is upon an ideal which seems only inertly quietistic.
The real problem with this rather deathly ideal is that it fails to include a variety of other energies at work in this enormously exuberant novel. Not only does Dickens, the first-person narrator, speak with his own authorial voice but he also speaks as narrator in a number of different, and unreconciled, tones. Perhaps the most important contrast of all is that between the ideal of memory and death and the role given to theatricality in the novel.  

For this is a quality which finds no place in Nicholas' musings on death and the past yet is something in which he is wholeheartedly indulged during the early phases of his career. The character who can beat Squeers and stride upon the Portsmouth stage is but palely reflected by the end of the novel - indeed, in the final chapters even Frank Cheeryble comes to have more life in him than Nicholas. The extent of this transformation should not be underestimated, for at the outset Nicholas is really quite a lively character, seeing, for instance, the humorous possibilities at Fanny's tea-party and playing up to them fully (172-8). To judge by his delighted description of the party's end, Dickens surely intended this as a coup de théâtre:

With this parting benediction Miss Price swept from the room, followed by the huge Yorkshireman, who exchanged with Nicholas at parting that peculiarly expressive scowl with which the cut-and-thrust counts in melodramatic performances inform each other that they will meet again. (178)

Nicholas, in fact, behaves theatrically throughout the novel, but there is something of the chameleon in him and he generally takes

5. Theatricality in Nickleby has been discussed by a number of critics and most usefully by Michael Slater in the Introduction to his Penguin edition of the novel.

6. Forster (p. 125) also records Dickens' pleasure at the Keeleys' dramatization of this particular scene.
his colour from those around him. Nor is this the infinite plastic-
ity of the original picaro, for he always remains true to his
character as the complete gentleman-hero. Thus, if in the early
stages of his progress he is able to adapt and change according to
the situations in which he finds himself, once his career becomes
more orthodox (that is, when he begins to work for the Cheerybles
and to love Madeline) he adopts a more serious mode of behaviour and
his theatricality is confined to distressingly lame expressions of
his feelings. Even when, in the most comic episode in the novel,
he acts for Crummles' company and gives full play to his dramatic
powers, much of the humour is based upon a contrast between his
"genuine" behaviour and the endless theatricality of those around
him. It must, however, be said that he himself often seems aware of
this, as in his teasing of Curdle (386), and that he is quite prepared
to deflate the role-playing that is being indulged in. Thus in his
confrontation with Lenville (457-9) he demands that his vanquished
foe apologize "Humbly and submissively" and then, in true melodramatic
style, breaks his ash stick in two and throws him the pieces. Similarly,
his ability to laugh heartily at Crummles' suggestions for a spectacle
with the Phenomenon and fireworks (463-4) is again evidence of a
sense of humour that unfortunately is to desert him in the later
stages of his career.

The process is a gradual one and, at the outset of his love
for Madeline, he is still capable of the endearing minor selfish-
ness of wondering whether Frank Cheeryble can possibly be of the
right age to have been a temptation to her (647-8). Later, however,
he becomes far too good to be true:

"I will keep my word, as I have pledged it to her," said Nicholas, manfully. "This is no common trust that
I have to discharge, and I will perform the double duty
that is imposed upon me most scrupulously and strictly. My secret feelings deserve no consideration in such a case as this, and they shall have none." (719)

Clearly, Nicholas is succumbing to the power of the theatrical mode in which he has always existed but which he had hitherto been able to take with a grain of saving humour. From this point in the novel, interest in him continually declines and it is by no means inappropriate that such a leaden remark as this comes at the start of a chapter which is to see the last appearance in the novel of Crummles and company. Dickens was surely aware that to juxtapose the actors with such characters as Madeline and Kate would have disastrously revealed the latter pair in all their lifelessness and thus rendered the main plot utterly unconvincing. If the brief reappearance of Crummles has something of the air of a return by popular demand, there can be no doubt that his departure is necessary if Dickens is to preserve the main plot as something to be taken with any degree of seriousness.

However, theatricality does have another important role in the novel, since much of the action of the main plot is conceived and presented in stage terms. This modifies the novel's picaresque qualities considerably and is essential in co-ordinating Nicholas' random wanderings with his struggles against Ralph, the family villain. The picaresque legacy is thus domesticated by its adaptation to a plot of a more characteristically nineteenth-century flavour, although it cannot be claimed that this is a particularly successful achievement. A partial exception to the generally poor staging of the main plot is to be seen in Dickens's presentation of Ralph through techniques of physical description that are, to some extent, derived from contemporary melodrama and this will be
Like Gil Blas, though for a far less convincing reason, Nicholas turns from the life of the theatre and from the free and spontaneous play of personality his early consciousness of the fictional nature of role-playing had given him. Instead, he is stripped to a single part, that of the serious young hero working diligently in the Cheerybles' counting-house and proceeding in the direction of marriage to Madeline, and he thus loses the flexibility that had previously endowed him with a degree of not entirely spurious life. This, however, is not to say that John Lucas is right when he criticizes Dickens for not seeing through the kind of hero Nicholas is and, in particular, his ambitions to be a gentleman. For to read the novel as an unsuccessful Great Expectations is surely both unfair and to miss the point: Dickens inherits the convention of the gentleman-picaro and uses the progress of this fixed stereotype as a stable base from which to depict not only the immensely comic world through which he passes but also, in his conflicts with his uncle, to make a first tentative exploration of darker aspects of Ralph's personality which were not accessible to the eighteenth-century novelist. It is indeed true that he does not probe into the class assumptions on which this version of picaresque depends and it is one of the marks of the greatness of his later fiction that he does then make such an exploration, but such considerations have little bearing on either the successful or unsuccessful parts of Nickleby.

A more generally damning criticism of the novel may be said

7. See below, chapter 7.
to lie in the inconsistencies that exist between its many different parts and notably between the orthodox characters of the main plot and the incidental, comic figures. The Crummles family is the most striking example of this, but further instances are to be seen in the Mantalinis, Kenwigses and even the Squeers's. All of these characters, whatever their moral standing in terms of the main plot, have a vitality, a fecundity, entirely lacking in the Nicklebys and Cheerybles. Moreover, as is often to be the case in Dickens's novels, the main plot imposes a degree of simplistic order upon a world which has been shown to contain a variety of energies, both for good and for evil, that are quite outside the scope of the Cheerybles' benevolence, and such order is achieved through the contrivances of an elaborately unconvincing narrative and thus has the appearance of being striven for rather than emerging from an appropriate resolution of the novel's conflicts.

Nickleby is, indeed, Dickens's most fragmented novel; even Pickwick had greater unity, since its tone was consistently optimistic and the plot required none of the dramatic integration that the later story calls for but does not have. The picaresque device of travel, for example, is clumsily adapted to the needs of the dramatic plot in London, since Nicholas is removed to and from Yorkshire and Portsmouth either just in time to leave Kate to the villains or to return to effect a timely rescue. Other characters are subject to similarly arbitrary import and export: the Crummles family, Squeers, Frank Cheeryble are all examples of this. Nicholas' picaresque predecessors could usually justify their encounters with old friends and enemies by the fact that everyone was travelling and was bound to meet on the road, but Dickens has no such opportunity as he requires his characters both to be estab-
lished in fixed social parts and, on occasion, to become peripatetic.

Similarly, there is not a little discrepancy between the different views of society given at various points in the novel. London in particular is very much all things to all men: Ralph's back garden (66) is an appropriate emblem for the reality behind the luxurious splendour of his home (304); both Nicholas on his return from Portsmouth (488) and Cheeryble (534) also comment on the city's darker qualities; and yet, on the other hand, London is not such a wilderness that it cannot be easily tamed in Tim Linkinwater's square (552-3, 600-1) or escaped from to the cottage at Bow (541). Forster's remark that London's "interior hidden life becomes familiar as its commonest outward forms, and we discover we hardly knew anything of the places we supposed that we knew the best" is remarkable for its truth to Dickens's work as a whole and its complete inapplicability to *Nichleby*. Where the authors of eighteenth-century picaresque had shown their heroes at one with society and had only incidentally satirized social evil, Dickens, in this novel at least, is far less certain about the relationship between hero, society and evil. He will later become more interested in exploring the nature of social evil and it may well be no coincidence that he then also loses interest in the myth of the hero's retreat to an earthly paradise, but in *Nicholas Nickel* he creates neither a convincing picture of the hero's salvation and retirement from the world nor a fully-imagined account of the society from which he withdraws. The two concerns exist uneasily side by side and lead to a degree of unresolved inconsistency.

Inconsistency is perhaps the key word in an understanding of

Nickleby and Dickens's problems in adapting an inherited form to write a novel for his own age are quite apparent. Yet they do not prevent him from creating one of his finest comic triumphs and it may well be that the very strength of the eighteenth-century model, for all the problems that it posed in the attempt to adapt it to nineteenth-century needs, also offered Dickens a clearly-defined form that he was able to use in the shaping of his own kind of fiction. If in Nickleby he often appears defeated by the struggle, then in Martin Chuzzlewit he reveals his triumph, both in his control of the inherited model and in his parody of certain of its most crucial aspects.
3. DICKENSIAN PICARESQUE: MARTIN CHUZZLEWIT

You know, as well as I that I think Chuzzlewit in a hundred points immeasurably the best of my stories. That I feel my power now, more than I ever did. That I have a greater confidence in myself than I ever had. 1

Vague as this may be, there is no doubting that Dickens meant what he wrote in his letter to Forster, and much of this sense of triumph may have come from his feeling of having successfully controlled a full-length novel for the first time. Superficially, Martin Chuzzlewit is far closer to the picaresque model than Nickleby had been: travel plays a much more central role in the development of the plot; the different localities in which the action is set are realized with far greater vividness; and the narrative abounds in those sudden reversals and chance meetings common in picaresque fiction. At first sight, Martin, too, might seem more genuinely the picaro than Nicholas, since he is expelled from his family into an uncaring world and is forced, with only his unquenchably loyal servant to assist him, to wander in search of a livelihood. In fact, however, such picaresque elements and themes are far more fundamentally transformed than had been the case in the earlier novel and, in general, Chuzzlewit marks the displacement of the picaresque as a prominent mode in Dickens's fiction. 2

1. F, p. 305.
Martin himself is as much removed from his eighteenth-century predecessors as they had been from the original picaros of Spanish literature. Although like Tom Jones, Roderick Random and other heroes of Augustan picaresque he is placed within a dramatic plot, moves from expulsion through suffering to penitence and reform, and is eventually both restored to his family and bestowed with wealth and a bride, other features of his characterization render his a very different progress from those of his predecessors. Unlike them, he is already a young man when the novel begins (128) and his character has thus been largely formed - into a blend of good-nature and selfishness. Unfortunately, he is the least effective of Dickens's eponymous heroes and never attains even the degree of liveliness Nicholas Nickleby had displayed in the early stages of his novel. Singularly humourless among so many immensely comic figures, lifeless amidst their ebullience, he is a poor character to be placed at the centre of the action. He has none of the extrovert vitality of his eighteenth-century counterparts, nor is this replaced with any subtler inward depiction of his personality. Not even his love story can bring him to life: it has already been developed before the commencement of the action and one principal source of interest is thus lost; Mary herself, while not as appallingly melodramatic as had been Kate Nickleby, is a rather pallid creation and suffers the usual fate of the episodic heroine; and Martin's own progress is never presented as a quest to win her love or even to become worthy of it. An anonymous reviewer was later to comment upon "the traditional sketchiness of heroes and heroines" as displayed by Martin and Mary, but this was to underestimate the very real forcefulness of their predecessors in

eighteenth-century fiction.

Moreover, while Martin does sustain a degree of independent life during his travels, he loses this once he returns to England and is subsumed by the tortuous resolution of the main plot. This itself bears a considerable resemblance to that of *Nickleby*, as Ross H. Dabney has pointed out⁴, but the hero’s role in it is very different. For whereas Nicholas was from the outset fitted to play the part of champion against the villain, Martin is far less morally worthy. He has to undergo a process of reform or, perhaps more precisely refinement, but this has no connection with his part in the main plot as an opponent of Pecksniff. The villain’s defeat in this novel depends to only a very limited extent on the actions of a virtuous hero and the latter’s progress should be seen within a quite separate context. Further, the real evil in the novel is to be found not in Pecksniff but in Tigg and Jonas Chuzzlewit, characters with whom Martin has very little connection whatsoever.

Indeed, the themes of Martin’s story are largely distinct both from those developed with the other characters and from those found in eighteenth-century picaresque. His two principal concerns are with his personal comfort and with his status as a gentleman. The former is apparent in all his behaviour, be it towards Tom Pinch, the poor families on board the *Screw* (311-12), or Mark Tapley, and his triumph over it is an important part of the lesson he learns in Eden. But this failing, unpleasant though it is, may be seen as the thoughtless extension of his more important assumption that he is a gentleman and that nothing better is therefore to be expected from him. In his exposure of this fallacy, Dickens treats, albeit super-

ficially, a theme that is to become central to his later fiction, yet which is far removed from the assured class attitudes of the writers of eighteenth-century picaresque.

Martin's social status is undeniably that of the gentleman and, as Tom Pinch feels to his discomfort, he has all the appropriate attributes:

He was young - one-and-twenty, perhaps, - and handsome; with a keen dark eye, and a quickness of look and manner which made Tom conscious of a great contrast in his own bearing, and caused him to feel even more shy than usual. (128)

Dickens clearly also intends a contrast to be made with John Westlock who refuses to allow any difference in rank to stand between Tom and himself. Nevertheless, he subsequently has Martin's sense of his position supported by the response of other characters who meet him on his travels. Thus Bill the driver who conveys him to Hounslow is respectfully deferential (276) and declines Martin's offer of sartorial payment, "In regard to the waistcoat, I wouldn't have a man's waistcoat, much less a gentleman's waistcoat, on my mind, for no consideration. . ." (277). In London, reduced to poverty and forced to pawn his clothes (a touch of realism imposed neither on eighteenth-century heroes nor Nicholas Nickleby), Martin's greatest fear is of being seen by or connected with any member of his family, something which inevitably happens when Tigg finds him in the pawnbroker's. Even when he attempts to find a passage to America, his class is both an internal and external obstacle:

He was years and years too old for a cabin-boy, and years upon years too inexperienced to be accepted as a common seaman. His dress and manner, too, militated fatally against any such proposal as the latter. . . although, as we have seen, he was fond of Tom after his own fashion, he could not endure the thought (feeling so superior to Tom) of making him the stepping-stone to his fortune, or being anything to him but a patron; and his pride so re-
volted from the idea that it restrained him even now. (287)

In America, one of Dickens's more scathing ironies is directed against the snobbbery displayed in such an ostentatiously egalitarian society and Martin soon discovers that, even if he wanted to, he cannot suspend his class position temporarily and then still hope to be accepted as a gentleman. Thus the episode with the Norises (348-55) discomforts him even more than had his meeting with Tigg, since he is caught playing a part he can no longer sustain. Moreover, deflation is made all the more galling by the fact that he so evidently enjoys being back in elegant company. This, however, is not the end of his trials, for he must be exposed to all the indignities of American civilization, ranging from mealtime at Pawkins' boarding-house (333-6) to the delectable manners of Hannibal Chollop (590-4). He must also suffer the raising of his hopes of fortune— and his delight (423) at the prospect of becoming a landed proprietor is particularly revealing— and then their being dashed in muddy reality on the banks of the Ohio.

Throughout all this, he is supported, of course, by Mark Tapley whose irrational loyalty recalls that of Strap or Partridge. Mark has the traditional versatility of the picaresque servant, being able to barber a little (312), cook (611), nurse (584ff) and even farm (600), and thus plays the conventional role of provider of essential services to the gentleman-picaro. His nursing of Martin is, however, something new and is crucial to the hero's progress of fall and reform. Moreover, he is subjected to none of the comic degradation that had kept the eighteenth-century servant firmly in his subordinate place and, even if there is something

5. This is further discussed below in chapter 5.
grotesque in his relentless determination to seek out circumstances that will put his jollity to the test, there is no doubt that he is, in every respect, a better man than Martin. There is also, however, no thought, either in his own mind or in Dickens's, of his being anything other than a subordinate and his part thus remains an uncritical endorsement of social norms that the hero's conduct has done much to discredit.

This inconsistency is partly overcome by the fact that, after his dark night of the soul in Eden, Martin not only behaves better to Mark but also comes to voice a major theme of the novel: the idea that good manners and polite behaviour are not merely elegant forms, but express the fundamental quality of the ties which bind society together. America, utterly devoid of social graces, is incapable of achieving any degree of civilization, as Martin asserts to Elijah Pogram:

"The mass of your countrymen begin by stubbornly neglecting little social observances, which have nothing to do with gentility, custom, usage, government, or country, but are acts of common, decent, natural, human politeness. You abet them in this, by resenting all attacks upon their social offences as if they were a beautiful national feature. From disregarding small obligations they come in regular course to disregard great ones; and so refuse to pay their debts. What they may do, or what they may refuse to do next, I don't know; but any man may see if he will, that it will be something following in natural succession, and a part of one great growth, which is rotten at the root." (609)

Even though one might wish to dispute the logic, Dickens's point is clear and Martin's lesson in Eden may thus be seen not so much as a reform but as a refinement of his social behaviour, so that he comes to play a major role in Dickens's account of what is wrong with America. Unfortunately, however, his progress and this depiction of the New World are to be less than completely integrated with the English sections of the story.
Martin's story is thus an elaborated variation of the inherited picaresque narrative. After being expelled from his home (though hardly from the traditional domestic paradise), he undergoes a period of suffering in London. His subsequent escape to America only takes him to another unsatisfactory Eden in which he does, however, experience not only a fall but also reform. However, after his return to England, he gradually fades from the plot and plays only a minor part in its final resolution. Even more surprisingly, and uniquely in Dickens, the epilogue makes no mention of his eventual fate. Although Dickens's instructions to Browne suggest an attempt to create a visual and musical equivalent of the conventional vignette of a happy marriage and growing family, this is by no means effective and does nothing to alleviate the poverty of Martin's role. Nor, at this stage of his career, is Dickens willing or able to question the assumptions on which his hero is based, since Martin has evidently come into those great expectations to which he had been bred (148), and a story which re-works the picaresque model with some degree of subtlety thus proceeds to endorse its typical outcome entirely uncritically. This had not been a problem in *Nickleby* where the model had been followed much more closely but here, where Dickens so often seems to be critically and creatively aware of that model, such a final surrendering to it only deflates his narrative.

Dickens's own unease with this may be suggested by the fact that he gives John Westlock and Ruth Pinch greater prominence in the novel's epilogue, a move which recalls Frank Cheeryble's replacement of Nicholas as a late centre of interest. Indeed, *Chuzzlewit* suffers to no small degree from a division of the reader's attention among the characters of the main plot as the ostensible hero becomes increasingly

6. ?June, 1844, **P., iv, 140.**
attenuated from the action. This is also evident in the prominence
given to Tom Pinch. Jerry C. Beasely is surely overdoing matters
when he claims Tom to be central to the novel as a whole?, but it
can be seen that Tom does inherit some of the picaresque motifs
traditionally associated with the hero. Thus, for example, he has
the conventional notion of the city as a source of corruption, "Mr
Pinch had a shrewd notion that Salisbury was a very desperate place;
an exceeding wild and dissipated city. . ." (123), and this comic
rendering of a formerly serious picaresque motif is continued in
his first encounter with London:

TOM's evil genius did not lead him into the dens of any of
those preparers of cannibalistic pastry, who are represented
in many standard country legends as doing a lively retail
business in the Metropolis. . . He fell into conversation
with no gentleman who took him into a public-house, where
there happened to be another gentleman who swore he had
more money than any gentleman, and very soon proved he had
more money than one gentleman by taking his away from him:
neither did he fall into any other of the numerous man-traps
which are set up, without notice, in the public grounds of
this city. (651)

This reduction of an important assumption of eighteenth-century
picaresque to comic parody suggests the weakening power of that
whole plot pattern of Augustan fiction. Moreover, London is not
only not dangerous but indeed is a source of delight and fascination
to Tom, his sister and John Westlock (692-3, 763, 807). Further, if
the traditional image of the city is thus reversed, so too the entire
plot structure reveals a development away from that of picaresque.

This is most apparent in the way Dickens uses the family as
the basis of the novel's plot, for in Chuzzlewit it loses its role
as both the central focus and principal ideal of the narrative. The

77-89.
opening chapter is a weary piece of unsuccessful humour and sets the tone for the singularly unappealing Chuzzlewit family. Nor are the relationships between its different members in any doubt, so there is no mystery of that sort to be discovered in the unravelling of the plot. Perhaps even more importantly, the plot is no longer essentially domestic in its operations, since its conflicts go far beyond any question of who is related to whom and are more generally social in their implications. Nevertheless, Dickens attempts to build a plot that is both panoramic and which focuses on a single family and this leads to the narrative's becoming laboured and contrived in the extreme. In particular, Martin's story is so separate from most of the other action that Dickens is forced to resort to various unlikely expedients in order to preserve some degree of unity. The most blatant of these must be the wretched coincidence that places Pecksniff in Liverpool just as Martin and Mark land from America. Less obtrusive, but no less contrived, are the chronological sleights of hand pointed out by John Lucas which enable Dickens to co-ordinate the various actions.\footnote{The Melancholy Man, pp. 115-6.}

Just as the family structure fails to provide an adequate basis for the plot, so too the family and the home are not the simple ideal they had often been in earlier versions of picaresque. Only Pecksniff of all the Chuzzlewit family voices the domestic ideal and he does so very much for purposes of his own (221, 754). There is, indeed, no ideal home in the novel - the nearest approach to one is the Blue Dragon - and there are many less than perfect versions of domesticity. The lack of civilized domestic life in America is one of Dickens's strongest complaints about the New
World, but little better is to be found in the Old. The absence of such a domestic focus for the plot perhaps suggests the largely satiric nature of Dickens's purposes and indicates how far removed from eighteenth-century picaresque *Martin Chuzzlewit* is. For the Augustan novel's celebratory emphasis, idealizing the hero's return to his family as an emblem of his secular salvation, has been replaced by a satiric and parodic depiction of the corruption of some of the very ideals upon which Victorian society rested. This, which would have been even more apparent had Dickens retained his original motto for the novel, may well have had something to do with its unpopularity and low sales.

However, although Dickens may no longer wish to give the family the prominence of an ideal image in structuring his novel, he has not yet completed the transition to a fiction in which social institutions are dominant. Thus, his depictions of Tigg and Jonas Chuzzlewit are, while not as fully melodramatic as that of Ralph Nickleby, certainly not fully realistic accounts of social swindlers in the manner of Merdle and the Anglo-Bengalee Assurance Company is more important as a bait to lure Jonas than as an emblem of the fundamental corruption of English society. His emphasis in *Chuzzlewit* lies somewhere between the family and wider social issues and the character uniquely fitted to exploit this divided concern is Pecksniff.

In Seth Pecksniff Dickens creates a character whose "attraction of repulsion" anticipates later grotesque figures such as Uriah Heep and recalls the diabolic energies of Quilp. But, where the latter had been an intensely abnormal creation, the most striking thing

9. "Your homes the scene, yourselves the actors, here!" See *F*, pp. 291 and 311.
about Pecksniff is his profession of bourgeois normality. Behind the placid surface, however, lies a character of enormous energy whose vigour makes the supposedly "good" figures pale non-entities in comparison. Moreover, though his role is indeed that of the villain, Pecksniff is not the chief source of evil in the novel, since Tigg and Jonas are far darker characters than he. Even in his plotting his aims are those of the conventional bourgeois: to secure a respectable living for himself and good marriages for his daughters. Yet, because he possesses such an abundance of energy, he cannot be dismissed as a merely satiric depiction of the Victorian paterfamilias. Dickens may well have been of the devil's party without knowing it, but he was surely aware of the extent to which he was, through Pecksniff, parodying certain moral assumptions of both the inherited fictional tradition in which he was writing and of his own society.

It is not only the fact of Pecksniff's energy that is significant, but also the manner in which it is depicted, for Dickens creates him through techniques that are largely his own and which replace the conventional formulae of the picaresque. Physical description plays an important part in establishing both a visual and moral image of many of Dickens's characters and Pecksniff is no exception to this. His hair, for example, is a protean feature, expressing in small the infinite adaptability of the man. Several important points are thus established in the initial description:

So did his hair, just grizzled with an iron-grey, which was all brushed off his forehead, and stood bolt upright, or slightly drooped in kindred action with his heavy eyelids. So did his person, which was sleek and soft though free from corpulence. So did his manner, which was soft and oily. In a word, even his plain black suit, and state of widower, and dangling double eyeglass, all tended to the same purpose, and cried aloud, "Behold the moral Pecksniff!" (64)
Pecksniff is fond of playing with this hair (65, 67) and it changes according to his mood. In general, he is successful in his schemes and sustains his pretence of moral virtue and his hair thus retains its upright stance, a point emphasized by Browne's illustrations. When he attempts to seduce Mary, however, he is repulsed by the force of unassailable virtue and, though the power of that goodness may carry little conviction, there is no doubting the nature of his defeat:

he seemed to be shrunk and reduced; to be trying to hide himself within himself; and to be wretched at not having the power to do it. His shoes looked too large; his sleeve looked too long; his hair looked too limp; his features looked too mean; his exposed throat looked as if a halter would have done it good. For a minute or two, in fact, he was hot, and pale, and mean, and shy, and slinking, and consequently not at all Pecksnifflian. But after that, he recovered himself, and went home with as beneficent an air as if he had been the High Priest of the summer weather. (555)

Apart from the over-obvious reference to the hangman's rope, this is a superb rendering of Pecksniff's limpness in defeat and is typical of the quality of writing Dickens achieves with the comic, but never with the orthodox, characters of the novel. Moreover, if Pecksniff is down now, he soon recovers himself and returns to the offensive after his eavesdropping in the church:

Looking like the small end of a guillotined man, with his chin on a level with the top of the small pew, so that he might duck down immediately in case of either of them turning round, he listened. Listened with such concentrated eagerness, that his very hair and shirt-collar stood bristling up to help him. (558)

The sexual implications of such descriptions help to endow him with a vitality quite absent from the lacklustre accounts of the two conventional couples, Martin and Mary, John and Ruth.

If Pecksniff's clothes and hair testify to his being something
rather more than the stereotyped villain, description of his hands and eyes suggests the nature of his particular evil. For these features are under greater conscious control than his self-willed hair and indicate the purposefulness of his adopted behaviour. He cannot, for instance, even warm his hands without imparting a moral lesson: "'And how', asked Mr Pecksniff, drawing off his gloves and warming his hands before the fire, as benevolently as if they were somebody else's, not his: 'and how is he now?" (85). His eyes reveal the control exercised over his expressions even more effectively than this. The heavy eyelids and dangling double eyeglass (64) suggest a deceptive languour, for Pecksniff is well in charge of his ocular expressions, whether they be of the contrived tear (his most habitual ploy) or the piously uplifted look (217).

What, though, is most endearing about Pecksniff is his loss of this control on extreme occasions. In this he might be thought to resemble Ralph Nickleby and Jonas Chuzzlewit, both characters whose final demise is anticipated by a gradual loss of physical control over themselves, but this would be too simple a reversal for such a complex character. For part of Pecksniff's essential normality is his capacity to lose control over his act at times of great stress or surprise and even his first appearance, flattened by his daughter and the front door, hardly suggests a villain of the darkest hue:

But as a gentleman's looks, in such a case of all others, are by no means under his own control, Mr Pecksniff continued to keep his mouth and his eyes very wide open, and to drop his lower jaw, somewhat after the manner of a toy nutcracker: and as his hat had fallen off, and his face was pale, and his hair erect, and his coat muddy, the spectacle he presented was so very doleful, that neither of the Miss Pecksniffs could repress an involuntary screech. (61)

He is to lose his self-control, with similarly comic effects, at later points in the narrative. Perhaps the most delightful instance
of this is his drunken behaviour at Todgers's, as he first talks of his dead wife with his eye glazed (208) and then makes one last effort to control himself:

Mr Pecksniff straightened himself by a surprising effort, as every one turned hastily towards him; and standing on his feet, regarded the assembly with a look of ineffable wisdom. Gradually it gave place to a smile; a feeble, helpless, melancholy smile; bland, almost to sickness. "Do not repine, my friends," said Mr Pecksniff, tenderly. "Do not weep for me. It is chronic." And with these words, after making a futile attempt to pull off his shoes, he fell into the fire-place. (210-11)

Pecksniff is, of course, the greatest actor in a novel which contains many dissimulators. He is endlessly resourceful and even the unlooked-for appearance of Jonas finds him not at a loss (753). Quite clearly, he is a man who derives infinite gratification from playing with his public parts and the most delightful thing about him is the energy he brings to the pursuit of such mundane objectives. Unlike the hero and heroine or John Westlock and Ruth Finch, he has no claims to nobler ideals; and, unlike them, he is able to live up to his part. Dickens's joy in his creation is signalled by indulging him with the kind of contrast the author more usually reserves for his own comic commentary:

It is customary with fathers in stage-plays, after giving their daughters to the men of their hearts, to congratulate themselves on having no other business on their hands but to die immediately: though it is rarely found that they are in a hurry to do it. Mr Pecksniff, being a father of a more sage and practical class, appeared to think that his immediate business was to live; and having deprived himself of one comfort, to surround himself with others. (540)

In this Pecksniff is to be contrasted with the all too stagey characters of the main plot and in particular with Martin and his grandfather. Martin never escapes the weary theatricality of his role as vigorous champion of truth and goodness:
He could not help thrusting his hands to the very bottom of his pockets, and muttering at intervals, "Pecksniff too! That fellow! Upon my soul! In-deed! What next?" and so forth: nor could he help occasionally shaking his fist at the chimney, with a very threatening countenance: but this did not last long; and he heard Mrs Lupin out, if not with composure, at all events in silence. (736)

Fortunately, even Dickens seems unable to take this seriously and in the confrontation which shortly follows (746 and illustration, 743, "Mr Pecksniff announces himself as the Shield of Virtue") Martin's noble valour is no match for Pecksniff's comic act. Paradoxically, because he knows he is playing a part, Pecksniff is more alive than the orthodox characters whose roles are determined for them and do not spring from any inner life. Old Martin, in particular, fails as a contrast with Pecksniff not simply because he is woodenly virtuous in the end but because, for much of the novel, he attempts to take on the arch-hypocrite at his own game:

During the whole of the foregoing dialogue, he had borne his part with a cold, passionless promptitude, as though he had learned and painfully rehearsed it all a hundred times. Even when his expressions were warmest and his language most encouraging, he had retained the same manner, without the least abatement. (222)

Who could imagine Pecksniff rehearsing his part? Old Martin's real problem is not that he acts, but that he is such a bad actor. The forces of virtue are thus revealed as lifeless counterparts to the tirelessly energetic and creative Pecksniff whose very vitality makes a mockery of any simplistic division of the novel along absolute moral lines.

Steven Marcus has usefully commented on Pecksniff's particular significance: "It is as if Pecksniff were Mr Pickwick turned inside out, as if he had read Dickens's early novels and assimilated their moral sentiments so thoroughly that he can call up the
popular phrases at will."¹⁰ Nowhere is this more true than in Pecksniff's misappropriation of the Arcadian myth to his own purposes and he thus parodies both that pastoral romanticism important to Victorian secular religion¹¹, and the ideal of a rural retreat that is so important to Augustan picaresque. For his activities are set not only in the context of the Arcadian idyll but also within that created by Paradise Lost. He thus frequently dons the garb of pastoral innocence in explicitly scriptural terms:

"You find me in my garden-dress. You will excuse it, I know. It is an ancient pursuit, gardening. Primitive, my dear sir; for, if I am not mistaken, Adam was the first of our calling. My Eve, I grieve to say, is no more, sir; but: here he pointed to his spade, and shook his head, as if he were not cheerful without an effort: "but I do a little bit of Adam still." (450-1)

After such comedy as this, there is little that can be done to resurrect the Arcadian image as a positive ideal - who but Pecksniff could reverse Biblical precedent and have Eve die before Adam? - and Dickens, in fact, continues to present Pecksniff in parodic terms.

An outstanding example of this is his attempt to seduce Mary which is conducted as a sustained parody of Satan's corruption of Eve in Book IX of Paradise Lost. He comes upon her after an extended description of the beautiful summer day (550) which recalls lines 413-72 of the poem. Like Satan, Pecksniff walks lost in thought of his desire, though with rather less dignity:

Chancing to trip, in his abstraction, over the spreading root of an old tree, he raised his pious eyes to take a survey of the ground before him. It startled him to see the embodied image of his thoughts not far ahead. Mary herself. And alone. (550)


¹¹ This has been usefully discussed by Coral Lansbury, "Dickens's Romanticism Domesticated", Dickens Studies Newsletter, 3 (1972), 39-46.
Pecksniff is subsequently likened to "an affectionate boa-constrictor: if anything so wily may be brought into comparison with Pecksniff" (551), and his eyes have an appropriately reptilian quality (552). Mary, too, thinks of him in similar terms: "she would have preferred the caresses of a toad, an adder, or a serpent: nay, the hug of a bear: to the endearments of Mr Pecksniff" (553). Unlike Satan, however, Pecksniff meets with the "proud disdain" of unsullied virtue (553) and is forced to look away. In this he recalls both Fagin, abashed by Oliver Twist's innate goodness (128), and Ralph Nickleby, subdued by his niece (315). But, just as Kate's power was less than entirely convincing, so too here one has little sense of Mary's force as a vessel of purity and the emphasis instead is upon the comic rendition of an august precedent.

While this is typical of the comic splendour with which Pecksniff is generally realized, his fall is presented rather less happily. Defeated by the Chuzzlewits, he appears shrunken and lacklustre (890) - like the fallen Lucifer, all his former brightness has vanished. The point is made more emphatically by Browne's plate, "Warm Reception of Mr Pecksniff by his Venerable Friend" (883), which includes copies of Tartuffe and Paradise Lost falling to the floor and, as Michael Steig has suggested, such a demise is called for by the moral traditions in which Pecksniff is created. This does not, however, make it any more convincing a victory for the straight characters and there can be no question but that it jars with the earlier comic use of the theme. Although Dickens does not press the point, and indeed allows Pecksniff a last comically defiant speech (891-2), the very concept of defeating such a magnificent

creation merely by unmasking him seems an inadequate response to his exuberant vitality.

Moreover, if Dickens had used Pecksniff to parody the myth of pastoral romanticism, this is not to say that, at other points in the novel, he treats the myth in the same way. He certainly has little time for an idyllic vision of the New World and makes the hostility of an untamed wilderness perfectly apparent in his account of Eden. Like Pecksniff, however, the inhabitants of this world are prepared to misappropriate the pastoral myth for their own benefit, as is evident in Elijah Pogram's account of Chollop:

"Our fellow-countryman is a model of a man, quite fresh from Natur's mould!" said Pogram, with enthusiasm. "He is a true-born child of this free hemisphere! Verdant as the mountains of our country; bright and flowing as our mineral Licks; unspiled by withering conventionalities as air our broad and boundless Perearers! Rough he may be. So air our Barrs. Wild he may be. So air our Buffalers. But he is a child of Natur', and a child of Freedom; and his boastful answer to the Despot and the Tyrant is, that his bright home is in the Settin Sun." (606)

But against this must be set numerous descriptions of rural England (57–9, 395–6, 635–6, for example), all of which follow a similar pattern:

The fallen leaves, with which the ground was strewn, gave forth a pleasant fragrance, and subduing all harsh sounds of distant feet and wheels, created a repose in gentle unison with the light scattering of seed hither and thither by the distant husbandsman, and with the noiseless passage of the plough as it turned up the rich brown earth, and wrought a graceful pattern in the stubbled fields. (57)

Clearly, Dickens is better when parodying the myth rather than when he tries to participate in it himself and this is a tedious piece of pastoral eulogy. Nevertheless, it is surely intended seriously and Lansbury's emphasis upon only the parodic function
of pastoral in the novel is perhaps incomplete. In the light of Dickens's other parodies of the assumptions of eighteenth-century fiction, it may seem particularly ironic that he should also reveal a taste for neo-Augustan ordered landscape, but this is probably better understood as a contrast with the wild disorder of the New World. If Dickens had no profound belief in pastoral romanticism, this is not to say that it had no hold upon his imagination and the novel thus displays a curious mixture of parody of and light attachment to the ideal. Unfortunately, although his use of pastoral is thus highly sophisticated and an indication of the subtlety with which Dickens was now able to employ conventional themes, it is not applied consistently throughout the novel and many of the characters and much of the action (notably that involving Jonas and Tigg) are not included in it.

This, however, is entirely typical of Martin Chuzzlewit's mixture of success and failure and the novel is even more of a curate's egg than had been Nicholas Nickleby. At this stage of his career, Dickens is still learning to control the vast edifice of the twenty-part serial novel and, perhaps for this reason, he continues to employ plots, characters and themes derived from the eighteenth-century picaresque novel, but deprived of much of the belief that gave them force and significance. This is especially true of his rendering of the character of the gentleman-picaro, for his jeunes premiers are pale figures indeed beside their predecessors. This is not to say that Dickens will completely reject the type - he was far too thrifty a writer to waste something so

useful - and instead, in his middle fiction, he employs him in a secondary role. Walter Gay (in his original conception) and Richard Carstone are interesting variations on the conventional type. Not until he creates characters closer to his own experience will Dickens substantially develop the story of the youthful male lead, turning it, in *Copperfield* and *Great Expectations*, into semi-autobiographical Bildungsroman. It is, indeed, fitting that his re-exploration of the type should culminate in *Great Expectations*, a novel which treats many of the assumptions of early Victorian fiction in much the same manner as Dickens's early work treats those of eighteenth-century picaresque. But his later heroes will find life in "this Pilgrim's Progress of a mortal wale" far less amenable to parody and, as they make their progresses through an entirely nineteenth-century world, will find that the image of Eden becomes faint indeed.
II

FOUR VICTORIAN THEMES AND CONVENTIONS IN
DICKENS
4. DICKENS AND THE USES OF TIME

In their adaptations of the picaresque form eighteenth-century British novelists had been led to develop a variety of new plot patterns and conventions: Dickens, as we have seen, both followed and elaborated upon this precedent. This is true of the general nature and form of his fiction and also of his use of a number of specific narrative techniques. One of these is his handling of narrative time. In eighteenth-century picaresque the simple linear, non-causative chronology of the Spanish model gives way to a more complex arrangement of events in time which is evident in all the major writers of the period. Sterne's treatment of time is too well known to need further reference here, but even his less unconventional contemporaries were willing and able to employ elaborate variations upon a simple presentation of fictional chronology, as a number of perceptive studies have shown.¹

Most Victorian novelists tend towards an "objective" representation of time, locating chronology in external events and indicators

and paying less attention to the subjective response to the movement of time by the individual consciousness. This, however, is not to say that they were either unaware of or unconcerned with the importance of time for the lives of their characters and Jerome Buckley has written well on the Victorians' obsession with time: "It was in the nineteenth century, especially in Victorian England, that many modern attitudes toward the whole temporal process emerged. The Victorians, at least as their verse and prose record them, were preoccupied almost obsessively with time and all the devices that measure time's flight." 2 The novelists of the period were no exception to this: Emily Brontë's extraordinary concern with the chronology of Wuthering Heights; George Eliot's rich deepening of the text of Middlemarch through a host of minute references to the time of the first Reform Act; Hardy's interplay of precise timing of the present action with the generalities of mythical and historical time; all reveal a sense of time both as a major element in the narrative and as a significant shaping factor in the lives of the characters. 3

Dickens's treatment of time has been given a certain amount of critical attention. This has ranged from brief dismissals of his chronologies as slapdash and inaccurate to challenging investigations of his conception of the nature of time and its role in human life. 4


Relatively little, however, has been done to establish the actual chronologies of his novels, his habitual practices in creating narrative time and the development he shows throughout his career.\textsuperscript{5} This development, Dickens's increasing ability to integrate time, events and themes, and the extent of his architectural success will be indicated here by studies of three novels taken from different points in his career: Oliver Twist, Dombey and Son, and Little Dorrit. Little will be said about the relationship of chronology to the subjectivity of the characters, both because this has received considerable treatment elsewhere and because it will be dealt with in more detail in the discussions of David Copperfield and Great Expectations.\textsuperscript{6} Instead, the emphasis will be upon Dickens's handling of chronology as a structural device and upon the increasingly subtle use he makes of time in developing the action and themes of his fiction.

**Oliver Twist\textsuperscript{7}**

David M. Bevington's valuable study of Pickwick has shown the importance of the novel's time-scheme to the organization of its action and Dickens's second novel reveals a further development of this technique. Although the advance is at times faltering and uncertain, it is far more assured than some dismissals of the novel's

\textsuperscript{5} Some exceptions to this are: Humphry House, The Dickens World (London: Oxford University Press, 1941; second edition, 1942), pp. 30-5 on Bleak House; Mary Edminson, "The Date of the Action in Great Expectations", NCF, 13 (1959), 22-35; Bevington, op. cit., see above, p. 25.

\textsuperscript{6} See below, chapters 8 and 9.

\textsuperscript{7} This study of Oliver has, in fundamentally the same form, been published under the title, "Time and Structure in Oliver Twist", in *Dkm*, 77 (1981), 23-31.
chronology have assumed. As Professor Tillotson has remarked, "no version of the novel gives us a time-scheme that is completely consistent on the literal level," yet it is also apparent that Dickens uses time in Oliver in a variety of ways, occasionally uncertain but often clearly deliberate, to infuse a degree of unity and momentum into a somewhat laboured plot.

Although he again makes some use of the device of linking the novel's action to the time of year at its serial publication, this is a peripheral concern and is subordinated to a more internalized chronological structure than had been the case in Pickwick. Three aspects of this stand out: the time-scheme of the action, with corollaries in the details of seasonal reference and the characters' ages; the Monks plot and the links which Dickens attempts to establish between the present action and the reported events of the past; and the date at which the novel is actually set. It may be seen that Dickens became aware of the possibilities of a chronological organization of the novel only gradually and that there is some disparity between his use of the device in structuring the plot and in achieving more subtle tonal effects.

Dickens's development of his control of chronological detail is most apparent in the timing of the literal action of the novel. Oliver is evidently born in winter, to judge from the surgeon's warming his hands at the fire (2) or, more precisely, from Monks' later remarks to Bumble (246). The first nine years of his life are passed over - perhaps recalling Fielding's technique of introducing Tom Jones through a mysterious birth and then moving on to his

8. See, for example, Raleigh, op. cit., p. 129.
9. Introduction to the Clarendon edition of Oliver Twist, p. xxxiv. Mrs Tillotson's discussion of the novel's chronology, pp. xxxiv-xxxvi, has been invaluable to the study presented here.
fourteenth year\textsuperscript{10} - until, punctually on his ninth birthday, Bumble takes him back to the workhouse proper. Logically, it should then again be winter, but there is no indication of this and, as is often to be the case when a link might be made between a character's birthday and a specific time of year, Dickens may well not have given it thought. Oliver's removal apparently coincides with the introduction of the provisions of the Poor Law Amendment Act from which he suffers for six months (10) until he is unable to take any more. Such a coincidence might seem far-fetched and later in the novel it will, in fact, become inconsistent with other indications of the historical dating. The reader, however, does not (and in 1837 did not) notice this, for Dickens's concern is clearly with matters far wider than the effects of this one Act which he uses only as a starting point.

No appreciable time-lapse is indicated before Oliver finds himself at Sowerberry's, yet he is able to tell Noah Claypole that he is ten years old (26). The Gamfield episode had occurred within a week of his asking for more and there is little suggestion of any further passage of time before Sowerberry takes him "on liking". There is also some confusion as to how long he stays with the undertaker: he is on trial for a month (34), apprenticed, and then passes many months (35) at Sowerberry's until the fight with Noah which precipitates his departure. However, these "many months" are a revision of the original text in Bentley's Miscellany which read "many weeks". Mrs Tillotson suggests (p. xxxv) that this and other revisions during the early part of the novel were intended to eliminate the inconsistencies which would otherwise appear and also to make Oliver old enough to be apprenticed. This seems very probable, but Dickens does

\textsuperscript{10} Tom Jones, p. 122. Fielding's discussion here of the author's licence to order chronology to his own purposes and his practice of such a theory throughout the novel may well have influenced Dickens.
not perhaps achieve all that he had intended. Oliver can only be nine, not ten, by the time of his arrival at Sowerberry's and his age was apparently not at issue when he narrowly escaped being apprenticed to Gamfield. If there is some inconsistency here, at least the timing of the action is rather more carefully organized than the plotting. The months that Oliver passes at Sowerberry's should, when added to the six months he spent in the workhouse, bring him at least towards his tenth birthday and another winter. Numerous references in the text bear this out: Oliver is bitterly cold in the Sowerberrys' kitchen (28); the pauper's funeral evidently takes place during autumn or winter (31, 33) and it is generally a "nice sickly season" (34). Much of this detail, however, occurs before these months have passed and Dickens would appear to be sacrificing strictly literal accuracy to a chronological telescoping of the action which achieves a powerfully reiterative and seasonally appropriate depiction of this period in Oliver's life.

From this point onwards, moreover, the chronology of the action both becomes more regular and is co-ordinated with the consistent use of seasonal reference to emphasize the tenor of events. This seasonal parallel also follows the time of year at publication from chapter 17 (published in November 1837) to at least chapter 41 (published in October 1838), although this is a subsidiary matter and the pattern of seasonal change has its main importance within the development of the plot.

After leaving Sowerberry's, Oliver survives a week in winter (44, 46) on the road to London and meets with the Dodger and Fagin immediately after his arrival. "Many days" (56) pass before he goes out with the Dodger and Charley Bates, but the "many" is perhaps more a reflection of Oliver's feelings than an indication of any considerable
length of time. Bentley's has "eight or ten days" which, if less expressive, seems the right sort of interval. "Many days" (67) pass again while he lies ill at Mr Brownlow's and there may be a submerged hint of returning spring with Brownlow sitting reading at the window overlooking his garden (84). The interplay of the literal and the metaphorical here is quite delicate, for the hint of warmth is only tentatively evoked and winter soon reasserts itself in the emphasis on gloom and fog after Oliver's recapture. Appropriately enough, winter predominates throughout this phase of the novel and there is almost a complete inversion of the pattern followed in Pickwick, where there was a Christmas but virtually no accompanying winter.

Several of the characters, moreover, are placed against the seasonal setting and through it are revealed and arranged in comparison with one another. Bumble is typically selfish in ignoring the suffering of the two paupers he is taking to London, while he sits wrapped in his "porochial" greatcoat (110). At this point, seasonal reference and time of publication come into synchronization, though this could only be an ancillary effect, since the first references to winter had occurred in chapters 5 and 6, published back in April 1837. Nancy is another to feel the cold (131) but, even though a fallen angel, she still tends the hearth and is seen building up the fire for both Fagin (121) and Oliver (134). The merry old gentleman himself may also feel the cold, but far more striking than this is his identification with the harsh urban environment:

The mud lay thick upon the stones: and a black mist hung over the streets; the rain fell sluggishly down: and everything felt cold and clammy to the touch. It seemed just the night when it befitted such a being as the Jew, to be abroad. As he glided stealthily along, creeping beneath the shelter of the walls and doorways, the hideous old man seemed like some loathsome reptile,
Engendered in the slime and darkness through which he moved: crawling forth, by night, in search of some rich offal for a meal. (120-1)

The prevailing wintry mood of this section of the novel is surely part of the reason why this is so effective and not as excessively exaggerated as, taken out of context, it might otherwise seem. It is also to be noted that Fagin has no fire to offer Monks (169) and that later, on the night of Nancy's murder, he sits waiting for Sikes by an empty grate (317). This wintry emphasis is continued by further references to the weather during the expedition to rob Mrs Maylie's house, although the sun rises between six and seven o'clock (135) which suggests a point in early March. Interestingly, Dickens allows the cheery carter who gives Oliver and Sikes a lift to find it a fine day (137), but the episode, and with it this phase of the novel, end with a reiterated emphasis upon winter and a combination of freezing fog and snow (142-3, 145).

Wounded in the robbery, Oliver is ill for "many weeks" (205), an interval which allows a transition to spring to occur. Both he and the aptly named Rose Maylie look forward to its "pleasures and beauties" and Dickens quickly proceeds to unfold the seasons through spring to full summer. Joseph M. Duffy has provocatively discussed Dickens's treatment of pastoral in Oliver Twist and the extent to which the period at the cottage forms a moral and emotional centre to the novel. He argues, however, that there is no link between this ideal and the real world other than "the mechanical sense of transit", but an attempt to provide at least some structural and thematic unity can be seen in the succession of pastoral summer

after urban winter. This, which recalls yet is substantially different from the eighteenth-century return to rural paradise, is further reinforced by the time of publication - chapter 32 in which the transition to summer is made was published in May 1838 - and by the development of motifs which have recurred throughout the earlier parts of the narrative. Oliver, for example, at last grows "stout and healthy" (213) and, after less than happy experiences with the workhouse and Fagin, is finally given a proper education (211).

Despite this insistence on a successful culmination to Oliver's progress, reservations may still be felt. The depiction of summer is as extreme in its way as had been the earlier image of winter and, while the stylized nature of both accounts is in itself no grounds for objection, the contrast thus made is overt and dangerously simplistic. As in Pickwick, the pastoral scene is something of a genre-painting with its focus on the peace of nature, the trim little churchyard and the poor but contented villagers. But these disembodied clichés contrast weakly with the vigour of the urban scenes and Dickens's prose is slack and full of that over-insistence which so often betrays his commitment to an experience he has not really had:

Who can describe the pleasure and delight: the peace of mind and soft tranquillity: the sickly boy felt in the balmy air, and among the green hills and rich woods, of an inland village! Who can tell how scenes of peace and quietude sink into the minds of pain-worn dwellers in close and noisy places, and carry their own freshness, deep into their jaded hearts! (210)

Such pastoral idealization is an important theme in the early Dickens and, as we have seen, plays a major role in both Nickleby and Martin Chuzzlewit. Moreover, it is important to acknowledge that Dickens was...
not alone in this kind of yearning, for Walter Houghton has shown
how this same "nostalgia for a lost world of peace and companion-
ship, of healthy bodies and quiet minds" was an essential part
of the early Victorian response to the still new facts of urban life.

Nevertheless, to a modern reader the contrast between Fagin's
world and that of the Maylies, which has been partly developed
through the use of seasonal reference, thus comes to a rather
hollow conclusion. However, this should not lead to the suggestion
that Dickens was secretly the devil's advocate, for not only is
such pastoral typical of the age but also Dickens himself never
found an ability to write such descriptions effectively. His
successful accounts of Nature tend to be those, such as the storm
in [David Copperfield], in which her more dramatic side is seen. One
point of interest which does arise out of this pastoral evocation,
however, is its indication of Dickens's early concern with memory.
After the introduction quoted above, he continues with an allusion
to [Paradise Lost (IX, 445), "Men who have lived in crowded, pent-
up streets, through lives of toil: and never wished for change; men
to whom custom has indeed been second nature..." (210) and then
proceeds to develop a lengthy eulogy of Nature's benign effect upon
the dying. This is clearly echoed in [Nickleby], though it is to be
treated rather more sceptically in [Chuzzlewit], and surely also owes
much to Wordsworth and Coleridge. Dickens is so caught up with the
idea that he even proceeds to give Oliver memories of a better,
happier life (210-11), memories stimulated by this pastoral beauty
but whose provenance in Oliver's case seems at least dubious. Thus,
although both pastoral and the ideal of memory are suggested vaguely

14. The Victorian Frame of Mind 1830-1870 (New Haven and London:
and unsatisfactorily, it is notable that what will become one of Dickens's major concerns receives such extended treatment early in his career.

Moreover, the echo of Milton may well be more than incidental, for the language of Dickens's pastoral description is generally reminiscent of the poetic diction of the epic similes in *Paradise Lost* and, to judge by the similar allusion to Book IX in Pecksniff's seduction scene, this episode seems to have been a favourite of Dickens's. It is perhaps not too fanciful to suggest that the description of Fagin quoted earlier (see above, pp. 65-6) also alludes to Satan's return to Hell and the transformation of the devils into serpents (specifically, X, 530-70). However, if the forces of evil are thus enriched through a substratum of allusion to this fundamental Christian myth, pastoral romanticism offers, in this novel at least, an alternative to that evil which Dickens both endorses and strengthens by the pattern of seasonal reference.

This summer interval is only an interlude, however, and again is carefully timed. Three idyllic months pass by (212), only to be broken (apart from the irrelevant digression of Rose's illness) by Fagin and Monks. With this shattering of the mood of tranquillity, the plot's period of suspended animation comes to an end and, not for the first time, Bumble is an important agent in the transition. Marriage has brought him no comfort and he finds summer as cheerless as his empty grate (238). The meeting with Monks which takes place in the ruined mill is, of course, overshadowed by a storm of melodramatic timing and scale. But, while its externalization of Monks' dark passions is crudely done, it does at least find some justification through its occurrence in the wider context of the seasonal setting. For this passage (published in August 1838) is the last
direct description of summer and the plot now moves towards autumn for its final phase. A mood of late summer tranquillity is tentatively evoked in the Maylie group's resolve to go to the coast for a holiday (276), but in Fagin's world, and with the introduction of Noah Claypole to it, the atmosphere is growing distinctly cooler (288). The gloom, cold and mist re-appear when Nancy goes to her rendezvous on London Bridge (310) and, as her death approaches, autumn is explicitly announced (317). Little more than a week (340) is taken over the final sequence of events - Sikes' flight and death; the unmasking of Monks; Fagin's trial and death - and the novel closes with a return, this time permanent, to the Arcadian world.

It is possible, then, to see a fairly coherent and often carefully detailed scheme for the time-scale of the novel's action and thus to refute any notion that "when Oliver gets caught up with Fagin and his machinations, the plot time speeds up while chronological plotting ceases."15 Although there is some degree of confusion in the earlier episodes, even then the seasonal pattern begins to emerge at Sowerberry's. It may be conjectured that the notion of using the natural world to mirror the course of the action only came to Dickens as he was actually writing the novel, but there can be little doubt that it grew to be a conscious purpose - the revisions alone indicate his awareness of the novel's time-scheme. There was some precedent for Dickens to follow, for example Fielding's use of seasonal associations for the characters of Tom Jones16, but his elaboration of the device in Oliver seems to be an original contribution to the novel form. By contrast with his one previous work, the time-scheme

15. Raleigh, op. cit., p. 129.
of *Oliver Twist* is of considerable significance to the novel's internal structure. It also influences the reader's perceptions of the story, since the chronology provides a "map" of the various events and, in this novel at least, does so more effectively than Dickens's descriptions of geographical setting. This is not to say that the achievement is unblemished, for this pattern seems to have been developed independently of another important aspect of time in the novel, the Monks plot and the events of the past.

Oliver's age provides the first indication of this. According to the action, approximately two years elapse between his removal to the workhouse and the end of the novel. (This, it may be noted, also comes to be roughly the time-span of the action in some of Dickens's later novels: *Martin Chuzzlewit*, *Bleak House* and *Little Dorrit*, for example.) It is possible, just, that the "many months" at Sowerberry's imply the passing of another year, but this seems unlikely. Oliver is thus in theory approaching his eleventh (or twelth) birthday at the novel's end. However, to be consistent with his past as it is later revealed he should be fourteen. Grimwig, in fact, says he is twelve (279), but the real difficulty stems from Brownlow's remark to Monks, "I speak of fifteen years ago when you were not more than eleven years old" (333). This reveals the ages of some of the other characters at the time of the action: Monks must now be twenty-six (confirming Nancy's impression, 314); Rose, two or three then, is now seventeen, as we know (187). Oliver's age is more problematic, however. Brownlow's account is somewhat vague - "fifteen years ago", "the end of a year", "at length", (333-4) are all mentioned. To fit in with this, Oliver should be at least thirteen and perhaps even older. Clearly, he is not, even if
Cruikshank's later illustrations, which Forster and Dickens so disliked, tend to imply otherwise. The detail itself seems trivial - certainly no one stops to worry about it in reading the novel - but it is notable that Dickens was concerned enough with maintaining chronological accuracy to attempt to co-ordinate the main plot with the events of the past. His uncertainty about precisely what he was going to do with the story is suggested as late as March 1838 in a letter to Yates: "I am quite satisfied that nobody can have heard what I mean to do with the different characters in the end, inasmuch as at present I don't quite know, myself." Although there may be something tongue-in-cheek about this, what may perhaps have happened is that he began the novel without any clear idea of how it would work out, gave Oliver an arbitrary age and then later found that this involved him in some inconsistency as he developed other characters and events. Of course, to avoid this kind of error requires having a very definite and detailed idea of the future course of the novel and this is by no means the last time that Dickens makes such a mistake. Not until Little Dorrit will he be in control of every detail of the timing of a novel.

However, Oliver's age does serve to draw attention to another pattern of chronological contrasts that emerges as the novel progresses. It is perhaps surprising to realize how many of the characters' ages the reader is told or may infer. Both the Artful Dodger (46) and the rest of Fagin's pupils (50) are the same age as Oliver, although in appearance and experience they are far older than he.

17. F, p. 112. But see Mrs Tillotson's qualifications, Clarendon edition, Appendix E, pp. 392-3. Dickens's objection that the "Fireside" plate shows Rose and Oliver as too old is a perhaps not uncharacteristic instance of his left and right hands being in ignorance of one another.

Moreover, there is little doubt of the nature of that experience nor of their future prospects, and it is notable that an image which will constantly recur in Dickens's novels makes its first appearance here:

Several rough beds made of old sacks, were huddled side by side on the floor; and seated round the table were four or five boys: none older than the Dodger: smoking long clay pipes, and drinking spirits, with the air of middle-aged men. (50)

These prematurely aged children, with only transportation or the gallows before them, contrast strongly with Oliver's naive innocence. Nancy is approximately seventeen (104), the same age as Rose, and this reinforces the contrast between them that Dickens clearly intended. His softened attitude towards Nancy is also evident in the change in Bill Sikes' age, from forty-five in Bentley's to thirty-five in later editions, a revision which Professor Tillotson links (pp. xxxv-xxxvi) with other small alterations of detail in the depiction of Nancy. Harry Maylie, of whom we know very little apart from his age, is twenty-five (222) and is thus to be contrasted with the twenty-six year old Monks. Fagin, "a very old shrivelled Jew" (50), is opposed by Brownlow, an "old gentleman" (57), and to a lesser extent by Grimwig, Mrs Maylie and Losberne.

It seems clear, then, that Dickens wanted to make a series of closely paralleled contrasts between the good and evil characters through reference to their ages, almost as if he were creating the different generations of two opposing families within the novel. Oliver, of course, is asked to consider himself one of several families between the workhouse and the end of a novel whose entire plot hinges on his familial past. This may account for Brownlow's reference to fifteen years ago as a necessary contrivance to make

the series of contrasts possible. Moreover, this pattern, although somewhat contrived, is by no means obtrusive and gives the novel another, subtle form of unity.

This may also be seen as a further variation on the picaresque model of the hero's expulsion from and ultimate return to the bosom of his family. Oliver retraces the familiar eighteenth-century path of rejection, wandering through the wilderness of the world, and then finally returning to his family and a rural paradise. Unlike his predecessors, of course, he does not set out from that paradise, but, like theirs, his story revolves around the mystery of his parentage. Like Tom Jones, he finds out the secret only after his parents are dead, yet gains an avuncular protector figure in their place. But, while adhering to this broad outline and retaining the basic eighteenth-century contrast between the rural paradise and the corrupt urban world, Dickens has chosen to put far more emphasis upon the depiction of the city than had his predecessors. Moreover, this familial structure works not so much to present a didactic contrast between the two worlds as a series of mirror images. Oliver, of course, is neither the picaresque vagabond (Noah Claypole, in fact, seems to take over this role) nor a successor to the gentleman-picaro and his origins seem to be both in general Romantic conceptions of the innocent child and, as Robert A. Colby has suggested, in early Victorian fortunate foundling literature. He nevertheless is linked with the evil in the novel and in ways that are more complex than might at first appear. If the contrast between the worlds of


good and evil is too simplistic to be effective, the interaction of the two which is suggested partly through this parallel familial structure is far subtler. While the resolution of the plot shatters Fagin's world completely, does not the seasonal parallel also imply that his winter must come again? Although this is to extend the implications of the narrative further than Dickens allows, the potential of effect achieved through a simple device is readily apparent.

Finally, and most uncertain, is the question of the date of the novel's setting. Keith Hollingsworth has attempted to place this, with certain reservations, fairly exactly between 1828 and 1831, but to do so requires an uncritical acceptance of Dickens's statements about Oliver's age and is also to look for a precision alien to his spirit, at least at this stage of his career. Indeed, the action seems to occur at a number of different dates: 1828 or later is implied by the presence of the policeman who arrests Oliver (60), yet the old Watch, supposedly abolished by the Police Act, is still in existence later in the novel (267). Nancy meets Rose and Brownlow on the old London Bridge (310), which was demolished in 1831, although it may also be noted that Cruikshank's illustration appears to be of its successor. The workhouse scenes imply a depiction of the new, post-1834 system, but might easily refer to the earlier, often equally inhuman one.

24. I owe this point to Dr Andrew Sanders who made it to me in correspondence.
must undoubtedly be allowed for in attempting to date these changes, yet this imprecision itself only emphasizes the difficulty of pinning down the novel's action to external events.

In his later fiction, Dickens habitually establishes the main setting of the action somewhere in the 1820's and then modulates between this period and the time of writing through occasional immediately topical references. This seems an essential feature of his writing and he never ties himself, other than in his two historical novels, to a specifically defined period as, for example, George Eliot and Thackeray may do. Although this may also be the case in Oliver, a certain amount of confusion is created by the fact that the time of writing and the date of the setting are so close. Be that as it may, Dickens's social concern in this novel is evidently both general and particular in its nature. His reference (286) to the street improvements and slum clearances that had failed to eradicate ugly sores just across the road from his homes in Furnival's Inn and then Doughty Street was applicable several years before, and indeed after, the novel's publication. Yet it also had a specifically topical relevance, since in February 1838 a Select Committee had been set up to consider plans for the improvement of London's streets. Its conclusions were to present a picture very similar to that Dickens shows and are summarized by Percy J. Edwards:

There were districts in London through which no great thoroughfares passed, and which were wholly occupied by a dense population composed of the lowest class of persons who being entirely excluded from the observa-
tion and influence of better educated neighbours, exhib-
it a state of moral degradation deeply to be deplored. 26

But its report, along with those of the eleven or twelve other committees set up between 1832 and 1851, was not followed by any

action. In this light, Dickens's reference to "improvement" may be sardonic in tone but, whatever the case, it is noteworthy that his well-known later concern with public health makes a first, tentative appearance here.

Elsewhere in the novel, Dickens goes out of his way not to give the date, first at Oliver's birth - "on a day and date which I need not trouble myself to repeat, inasmuch as it can be of no possible consequence to the reader" (1) - and then at Mrs Corney's interview with old Sally on her deathbed (155). In the latter case, Dickens altered MS "name" to "year", perhaps deliberately emphasizing the vagueness of the dating, and both of these examples thus provide a curious contrast with his other uses of time in the novel. It may be that he employed chronology at least in part instinctively and certainly the notes that have survived from his Number Plans for Dombey and Great Expectations suggest that he often only worked out a novel's time-scheme retrospectively at a stage in the writing when some clarification had become absolutely necessary. Certainly, in Oliver there is little to imply that he intended any exact historical dating and it is perhaps most profitable to concentrate upon the significance of the novel's internal chronological structure.

The degree to which chronological precision is deliberately controlled and subordinated to larger significance is remarkably complete. But even to say this should not imply any conscious, premeditated design on Dickens's part, for it is clear that such was not the case. What can be seen, however, is that in writing the novel his awareness of both the problems and the possibilities of its time-scheme developed gradually. He evidently became concerned to give the novel a plausible time-scheme but he also discovered
the value of chronological detail in giving an unsteady plot both
unity and momentum and in developing its apparently simple contrasts
into something far more effective. There were, of course, limitations
to this achievement and in his later novels Dickens uses narrative
time with far more elaboration and sophistication. Yet for Oliver
Twist he surely chose an appropriate form: the combination of the
haphazard and the careful, the specific and the more general, played
a vital part in his creation of a story that has attained almost
mythic status in English culture.

Dombey and Son

Dombey is a very different kind of novel from those of Dickens's
earlier period. It is his fifth full-length serial work, but is
only the first in which he relinquishes the picaresque-derived
form for a completely dramatic plot that is firmly established in
near-contemporary society. Professors Butt and Tillotson have shown
how both the title and the semi-allegorical cover illustration indi-
cate a move away from the "life and adventures" story pattern27 and
Mrs Tillotson has also effectively described how Dombey is Dickens's
first novel "in which a pervasive uneasiness about contemporary
society takes the place of an intermittent concern with specific
social wrongs."28 This development is also apparent in Dickens's
handling of time in the novel and, while many of the techniques
used are similar to those employed in Oliver Twist, he can also

27. John Butt and Kathleen Tillotson, Dickens at Work (London:
28. Kathleen Tillotson, Novels of the Eighteen-Forties (Oxford:
be seen to be attempting to use chronology in ways appropriate to the needs of a more elaborated plot. But, while he remains concerned with chronological accuracy and uses time in various ways to underline the novel's themes, Dickens also finds a number of problems posed by this new elaboration of the plotting and he is unable to resolve these with complete success.

The actual chronology of the plot is generally clear and quite accurate. In a sense, this is only to be expected in view of Dickens's obvious endeavours both to control the time-scheme and to keep his readers aware of it. Moreover, for no other of his novels has so much evidence of his chronological intentions survived: letters to Forster and Browne provide considerable insight into the planning of the early numbers and the uniquely detailed "Mems" on Florence's age show him calculating the workings of the time-scheme at a much later point in the action. Concern over how much time should be allowed to pass between Paul's babyhood and death is to be seen in a letter to Forster of October 1846:

> do you think it would be advisable to make number three a kind of half-way house between Paul's infancy, and his being eight or nine years old? - In that case I should probably not kill him until the fifth number. Do you think the people so likely to be pleased with Florence, and Walter, as to relish another number of them at their present age? Otherwise, Walter will be two or three and twenty, straightway. I wish you would think of this. . . 29

This sense of the characters developing in time and of the readers being responsive to this is something apparently new in Dickens and anticipates both his increasingly subtle control of chronological detail and his development of an interest in and ability to render characters' subjective experience of time. His concern with what will please the readers and his readiness to rely on Forster's

29. 3 October, 1846, P, iv, 628-9.
advice are also notable. With Browne, however, Dickens was quite
definitely in command:

Paul, as last described, but a twelvemonth older. No
collars or neckerchief for him of course. I would make
the next youngest boy about three or four years older
than he. 30

The face of Florence strikes me as being too old,
particularly about the mouth. 31

She is about thirty - not a day more - handsome, though
haughty-looking - good figure. Quite a lady in appearance,
with something of a proud indifference about her, suggesti-
ve of a spark of the Devil within. Was married young.
Husband dead. 32

There are other examples of this in Dickens's correspondence with
Browne (see, for instance, above p. 45, n. 6) and it seems reasonable
to assume that this is simply recorded evidence of an habitual practice.

That there is so much documentation for Dombey may be attributed to
the peripatetic life Dickens was leading at the time and it is
perhaps not mere coincidence that these detailed instructions all
date from after 20 November 1846, when the family arrived in Paris.
Prior to that, while they were in Switzerland, Forster presumably
handled the illustrations.

As well as this work behind the scenes, we may also detect a
sustained effort by Dickens to keep his readers abreast of the
chronological movements of the plot. Almost every number opens
with or has in its first paragraphs some reference to the passing
of time and an indication of what new point has now been reached:
Number III thus begins, "Beneath the watching and attentive eyes
of Time..." (90); Number VIII, "Florence lived alone in the great
dreary house, and day succeeded day" (310); Number XIII, "Time, sure

30. ?6 December, 1846, P, iv, 678.
of foot and strong of will, had so pressed onward, that the year enjoined by the Instrument-maker. . . was now nearly expired" (521).
The only complete exceptions to this are Numbers IV and XVIII (the opening chapter of which latter, however, is punctuated with references to the timing of Carker's flight and death.

In the light of this very evident concern with time - a concern which, although anticipated in A Christmas Carol\textsuperscript{33}, is made far more apparent to the reader than had been the case in any of Dickens's earlier novels - it comes as some surprise to find that the overall chronology maintains its fluency only through numerous authoreal sleights of hand. This may be due to the fact that Dombey's plot was more demanding and difficult to organize than anything Dickens had previously attempted and it may also be the case that the peripatetic existence which led Dickens to write such detailed instructions to Browne had some effect upon the cohesion of the novel.

This combination of care and error can best be indicated by considering the development of the novel in its five main chronological phases: the first six months or so of Paul's life; the period from shortly before his fifth birthday until his death; Dombey's courtship of and marriage to Edith; the events of the subsequent two years until her elopement and its aftermath; and Dombey's collapse and restoration by Florence.

The first phase of the novel (Numbers I and II) covers the six months from Paul's birth to his christening and Polly's dismissal the following day (62, 64), and finishes a few weeks thereafter (87). As the christening takes place on a decidedly autumnal day (54, 62),

\textsuperscript{33} See Patten, "Dickens Time and Again", above p. 60, n. 4.
Paul must in theory have been born some time early in the summer. This, however, is to assume that Dickens was more concerned with chronological accuracy than with the locally opportunistic use of seasonal setting and, as events of the next phase of the action will indicate, such an assumption may turn out to be as unwarranted here as it had been in Oliver Twist (see above, p. 63). One refinement upon another technique employed in the earlier novel is also to be noted here, the use of characters' ages. In Dickens's later fiction it becomes his practice to establish the age of his characters within the first few numbers and then to make such use of these facts as later seems appropriate. Dombey is no exception to this and so we learn the ages of the members of the central family and some of its entourage. The details in themselves are not particularly significant, although we do meet in Mrs Chick the first of many characters who are to feign the appearance and manner of youthfulness (5), and it might also be suggested that the broken, prematurely aged figure of John Carker (79) is an early, if very ineffective, anticipation of the passive heroes of some of Dickens's later novels. However, as the plot develops, these characters will be compared and contrasted with those in other parts of the action and the details of their ages will then come into play.

A period of time is now allowed to elapse (Forster evidently having agreed with Dickens's proposal for Number III) and the action resumes when Paul is nearly five (92) and he and Florence are sent to Brighton. They spend a year at Miss Pipchin's (138) and Paul then goes to Blimber's for six months (141). He is now six (139, 140) and, to be consistent with a summer birthday, he and Florence should have first gone to Brighton in the summer and then he to
Blimber's in the summer of the following year. His six months there would thus have ended in winter and not, as they do (181, 183), at midsummer and it is thus again clear how far Dickens is willing to forego pedantic accuracy for the sake of seasonal effect. This also helps to create that "poetical art" that Forster praised and which Dickens no doubt intended:

Much that the ordinary reader may pass carelessly in the book will seize upon the fancy alive to poetical expression, and accustomed to poetical art. The recurrence of particular thoughts and phrases is an instance of the kind, running like the leading colour through a picture, or the predominant phrase in a piece of music, because subtly connected with the emotion which it is the design of the story to create. 34

Chronological effects in general and seasonal effects in particular are another instance of that kind and contribute importantly to create the leading colours, especially at the time of Paul's peaceful, summer death.

The third phase of the action begins after Paul's death and it is at this point that problems in the chronology first appear. During and after Paul's last illness, the plot expands considerably and Dickens has some difficulty in co-ordinating all the various actions that he initiates. Walter is about to be shipped off to Barbados and the preparations for his departure involve Dombey, Carker, Florence, Sol Gills and Captain Cuttle. At the same time, Dombey is to set off for Leamington and to there begin his courtship of Edith. Although these various actions are necessarily presented sequentially, they in fact take place almost simultaneously and, although such a montage effect is not new in Dickens, what is

original here is the manner in which the separate actions are causally linked and thus dependent upon one another. By way of contrast, we may compare Martin and Jonas Chuzzlewit, two characters who have little more than their name in common and whose progresses are quite unconnected. However, it becomes apparent that Dickens does not as yet possess the ability to integrate these various actions chronologically and is thus forced to resort to a number of makeshift, albeit unobtrusive, solutions.

The Mems on Florence's age assume that one year passes between Dombey's departure for Leamington and his marriage. There is, however, no real indication of this and the summer of Paul's death seems to continue uninterrupted (315, 368) until indeed the wedding (420, 425). This may seem rather hasty, although it is in keeping with a general tendency for Paul's death to be pushed back into the past very soon after its occurrence. There are also certain simple errors in the time-keeping, especially in the details of Dombey's trip to Leamington. Thus, for example, his letter to Carker (294) refers both to his feeling no need to return to London and to the possibility of keeping Walter in England after all, and yet, after what seems but a short lapse of Leamington time, he is hastening back to the capital (380) after having successfully proposed to Edith. In the meantime, not only has Walter departed but he has also been reported lost and Sol Gills has gone off in search of him.

There seems, therefore, to be some inconsistency over the amount of time that has actually passed and this is confirmed by a consideration of developments in other parts of the action. Walter's departure takes place in chapter 19 and has been prepared for in "early summer" (205). This must be an error, since Paul has already died after midsummer. Paul's death, in fact, takes place on a Sunday
(206) and Walter is due to sail within a fortnight of this (228). Yet Dickens overlooks (and evidently - and rightly - expects the reader to overlook) the proximity of the two events when he sends Cuttle to visit Carker (229ff) in what can only be the shortest of intervals after Paul's death. Even the tone of Florence's farewell to Walter (261) lacks the poignancy of a very recent bereavement and Dickens is clearly making use of the break in reading experience afforded by serial publication. Once Walter has gone, though, things get even worse. Sol Gills flies quite soon afterwards (344) and far too soon, in fact, for any realistic chance of Walter's "loss" to have been reported. Then Carker arrives in Leamington (352) for what is evidently only the first time and, before the end of the same number, Dombey is on his way back to London. The Dombey action now continues uninterrupted until the wedding which, as we have seen, also takes place in summer. Dickens then returns us to the Midshipman and shows Cuttle alone in the shop for several weeks (436) so that it comes as no surprise (439) that it is now autumn. Toots arrives with news of the loss of the Son and Heir on this appropriately miserable evening and, at first sight, we congratulate Dickens on another successful blending of scene and season. But which autumn is this, that of the same year as Paul's death or of the one following?

Suspicions that it must be the same year are confirmed by considering what Florence has been doing in the meantime. Her summer (334) has been spent with the Barnet Skettles's from whence she returns (383) to find her home being renovated in preparation for the wedding. Although Skettles Junior evidences a lack of enthusiasm for the Blimbers as holiday guests (333) and an even greater reluctance to return to Brighton with them (386), this does not convince us that he has already spent a year in their custody.
and is quite insignificant in relation to the chronologies of other, more important parts of the action.

What, then, has Dickens done? It would seem that he has expanded the summer of Paul's death to encompass a number of different and, to some extent, disparate developments of the plot. He had already used this ploy in *Chuzzlewit* (see above, p. 47), but the problem in *Dombey* is that the separate actions are dependent upon one another and that the chronology has to be manipulated in order to sustain the integrity of the action. Was Dickens aware of what he did? The Mems would suggest otherwise, despite the fact that Skettles Junior's complaints and Florence's reference to Carker's two or three visits to Twickenham (383) help to give an illusory appearance of order to this rather untidy chronology. Nor, if we are to believe the Mems and their assumption of the passage of a year, was Dickens making the point about the haste of Dombey's marriage that the chronology would suggest and which would, indeed, be highly apposite.

What appears to have happened is that Dickens relaxed his control over the chronology of this phase of the novel, allowing the various actions to develop in a loose field of temporal proximity without too much concern for strictly accurate coordination. This is probably a result of insufficiently detailed planning, for Dickens finds himself faced with the twin problem of having to develop new actions and at the same time not knowing quite what to do with other parts of the plot. Thus, as Butt and Tillotson have noted, Sol Gills becomes superfluous and so is packed off in search of Walter. Similarly, Dombey is sent to Leamington and kept there in a state of suspended animation for three numbers. This is a large amount of space for what is, in fact, a fairly small

amount of action and an evidently small lapse of time and may explain how some of the problems of chronological co-ordination arose.

The fourth phase of the action involves the two years of Dombey and Edith's marriage and the events of the elopement. After their wedding in Number X, the happy couple are absent throughout Number XI for the few weeks of their honeymoon. The latter number is, in fact, something of a space-filler and is taken up with news of Walter, contrasting descriptions of the two Carker homes, and the introduction of Alice Marewood. Some use is made of the autummal setting in describing Alice's approach to the modern Babylon (462), but in general Dombey does not reproduce the pattern of seasonal reference created in Oliver Twist. Much of the action takes place in summer and Dickens makes little use of autumn and winter to emblematize any of the major characters. His use of pastoral imagery is now focused on ideas of growth (as in Elimber's hothouse, 142) or floral beauty (as, of course, in Florence and also in some of the heroines of the later novels.) One reason for this may be his development away from a belief in simple and absolute solutions to the conflicts dramatized in his novels and his growing sense of the restrictions imposed by adhering to a pattern of seasonal reference and of the inadequacy of pastoral as a metaphor of human perfection.

Number XII occupies but a few weeks (488, 501) and covers the return of Dombey and Edith, their housewarming, Cleopatra's illness, and Miss Tox's revival from depression and visit to the Toodle family. This latter occurs six weeks after Mrs Chick has had her eyes opened (511) and, as there seems little reason to suspect that Dickens was cutting back in time here, this probably fixes the endpoint of this action. It is, in fact, a feature of Dickens's control
of chronology throughout Dombey, but particularly during this phase of the novel, to focus on a series of dramatically linked events closely grouped in time and then to pass over an interlude to the next such series. This in a sense parallels the use of montage arrangement of the separate actions and has been seen by Ian Milner and Kathleen Tillotson as characteristic of and important to Dickens's success in the depiction of the internal states of his characters at this stage of his writing.36

However, if Dombey's internal life can be effectively suggested through Dickens's very reluctance to explore it, the same cannot be said for a character such as Florence. Her inviolable innocence is often regarded as one of the novel's limitations and it may well be felt that such a character belongs to Dickens's early fiction rather than in the socially realistic novels of his mature career. Certainly, the technique of moving from major event to major event with little indication of anything that happens in between prevents Florence from coming alive as a developing young woman. She is, in effect, spared day by day exposure to the horrors of life chez Dombey and, while this is perhaps essential to the credibility of the survival of her innocence, it is undoubtedly a restriction upon the extent of the novel's realism. In this, she may be contrasted with Amy Dorrit whose constant and continual suffering for her family is essential to her depiction. After Dombey, in fact, Dickens was to be far less willing to allow a character to develop episodically - subsequent heroes and heroines, it might be said, develop more in keeping with the realities of their lives than in

relation to the needs of the plot - and this leads to a quite different handling of narrative time.

In Number XIII Dickens moves on a year to the departure of Rob from Captain Cuttle (526-7), Dombey and Edith's quarrel (540ff), and the departure of Edith and her mother to Brighton (548). Accurately enough, it now seems to be autumn/winter once again (550). Some months after his flight from the Midshipman (566), Rob is to attend on Dombey and Carker during the interview which opens Number XIV. Six months later, the second wedding anniversary is approaching (621) and Dickens thus seems to be maintaining an accurate flow of time. However, at this point he evidently wanted to be sure that such was indeed the case and so sat down and produced the Mems on Florence's age:

APPENDIX B

Florence's age. Mems: Florence was little more than a child, in years—not yet fourteen.

After that, comes Mr Dombey's journey to Leamington, and his courtship, and his return to town, and his marriage—say, in all, a space of One Year.

After that, comes their journey to Paris, and their return home, and their dinner-party, and Mr Carker's first interview with Edith about Florence, and Mrs Skewton's first attack of Paralysis—say, in all, a space of (nine) six months.

After that, comes the interval described in the chapter, headed "Domestic relations" (page 397), and the scene between Mr Dombey and Edith, where he rejects Edith's proposal, and they become Strangers to each other, and the departure to Brighton for Mrs Skewton's health—the lapse of time at Brighton—and the period of Mrs Skewton's death, and the period after Mrs Skewton's death—say, in all, a space of one year.

After that comes the Interview between Carker and Mr Dombey at the former's house—here they speak of the period before Mrs Skewton's death, and Mr Dombey's hurt on the same day, and Carker's interview with Her, immediately afterwards, and the interval between those descriptions, and the resumption of the Family in No 15—say, in all, a space of—six months.

making Florence in No 15 nearly seventeen.

Before Mr Carker goes down to Leamington, and there meets the Major and Mr Dombey's Intended, Uncle Sol disappears. And a year is said to have taken place between Uncle Sol's disappearance, and Mrs Skewton's first attack of Paralysis, which seems to agree, perfectly, with this calculation.

1 See p. xlv above. 2 P. 251 above. 3 P. 538 above.

That Dickens had to reckon up the chronology in this way is a strong indication that, for Dombey at least, he had no advance plan and had been content to proceed instinctively. Now, when he feels it necessary to be sure that all was chronologically in order, he appears to find - and to be pleased with himself for finding - that everything fits. But does it? His calculations are themselves rather loose (the phrase "in all" occurs four times) and they do not, in fact, accord with the more precise indications of time contained in the actual text of the novel. This has already become apparent from the summer of Paul's death - and, remarkably, Dickens makes no mention here of the double time-scheme - and is also applicable to the subject of the Mems, Florence's age. She was six when Paul was born (3), is therefore twelve when he goes to Blimber's (139, 140), and can be thirteen when he dies. This allows her to be fifteen or at most sixteen by the time of the second anniversary and not seventeen as Dickens calculates. The detail itself, of course, is trivial and does not admit of complete accuracy, since there is never any reference to Florence's birthday. Moreover, Dickens seems sufficiently unconcerned with strict accuracy to overlook the need for her to obtain parental permission to marry Walter. One possible explanation of the error here may be that he maintained a sense of Paul's being slightly older than he in fact makes him (as in n. 29, above, p. 79) and that this then affects his notion of Florence's age. Be that as it may, it is clear that in the Mems he was striving to achieve a degree of chronological accuracy that he had not created in the text and which, evidently, he had not planned for in advance. The fact that he regarded such accuracy as a desirable goal, however, is significant and, in his later novels, this is something he will manage with greater success.
This striving for accuracy and an inability to achieve it consistently are particularly apparent in Dickens's control of chronology during Edith's elopement and the events which follow. Throughout chapters 47 and 48, the passage of time is marked in considerable detail and this reiteration intensifies the drama of the episode, especially as it is largely experienced from Florence's point of view. After this, however, a certain vagueness drifts into Dombey's search for Edith and Carker: time passes (688-90) as he looks in vain (692). This seems reasonable but things become unclear in chapter 53 just after Rob has informed on the runaway pair. For the Carkers are visited by Perch "on the very same day whose evening set upon the last chapter, and when Mr Dombey's world was busiest with the elopement of his wife" (706). The clumsiness of style here is matched only by the confusion this brings to the chronology: if this is immediately after the elopement, how can Dombey have been looking for some considerable time, as he has already said? The wedding, it will be remembered, took place in summer as did the elopement, but sufficient time has passed for it now to have become spring (682, 690). This seems too long an interval not only for Dombey to wait to dismiss Carker but also for the runaways to delay before their rendezvous in Dijon. Clearly, Dickens has made something of a mess of things. To some extent, this is probably just clumsiness, although it is surprisingly clumsy for an author so manifestly concerned with chronological accuracy. On the other hand, however, Dickens may have been looking forward to his account of Carker's flight which comes to its climax on a beautiful summer's morning and thus have been wanting to move the action on to this time of year. Similarly, he is to contrast Florence's summer wedding (768) with her father's and it may be that he was trying to make more
points through timing than the chronology of the novel can actually sustain. If this is so and not just poor plotting, then it may be seen that he has again been prepared to sacrifice strict accuracy in the cause of dramatic effect.

Carker's flight, in particular, is without doubt a superbly realized episode. The movement of time is part of a whole carefully orchestrated effect, built upon a remorselessly reiterative prose style which draws upon the rhythms of the day to make a contrast with the feverish haste of the pursued man:

Of morning, noon, and sunset; night, and the rising of an early moon. Of long roads temporarily left behind, and a rough pavement reached; of a battering and clattering over it, and looking up, among house-roofs, at a great church-tower; of getting out and eating hastily, and drinking draughts of wine that had no cheering influence. (738)

Accuracy is once again sacrificed to effect as (743) Dickens has Carker's last sunrise take place at 4 a.m. - something that never happens in southern England. It seems curious that he should go to such trouble to indicate the passing of the very hours here and then be factually inaccurate. But the contrast between the beauty of the day and the manner of Carker's death remains, nevertheless, one of the finest effects in the novel.

The fifth and final phase of the novel takes place a year later (773) and so once again in a summer setting. If he had been somewhat careless in bringing the action to its climax, Dickens takes more pains with the dénouement.^38^ The various actions are far more neatly co-ordinated as the House collapses (773-6), Harriet and Alice talk (783) and Florence returns with

^38^ Dickens's care is also discussed by Butt and Tillotson, *op. cit.*, p. 110.
her baby (802), all of which events are explicitly defined as taking place after the lapse of a year. It was, of course, easier to harmonize such essentially separate actions than it had been to coordinate the interdependent events of the novel's earlier phases and, by its very nature, such a dénouement/epilogue gives the author more freedom than he had had previously. Even Blimber's annual party with quadrilles as its object comes round with remorseless regularity (804). This, together with Dombey's illness which lasts throughout the summer (819), acts as a reminder and, indeed, a reversal of the events of the last summer of Paul's life and thus affords another instance of the kind of paralleling action which Dickens experiments with in this novel and is to bring to its fullest fruition in Little Dorrit. Finally, appropriately and not entirely sentimentally, Dickens closes the novel on an autumnal note which again recalls and reverses an early episode of Paul's life (833).

Dickens's use of time in the structure of Dombey is thus very different from that in Oliver. The pattern of linking a cyclical plot to the movement of the seasons - a device no means unique to Dickens - is replaced by a more discursive movement through time, with some emphasis upon summer and autumnal setting. The action,

moreover, is discontinuous in the sense that the novel has a multiple plot, the various parts of which are developed both synchronically (through the use of montage) and diachronically in parallel (but with a suspension of action during time-lapses.) Similarly, there is in Dombey only a very slight and probably entirely fortuitous connection of the time of action with the season or month of publication: this occurs in Numbers I-II, VIII-X, and XIII, but it is very limited and is not to be compared with the powerful evocation of appropriate seasonal reference evident in Oliver Twist.

Another technique, repeated from Oliver but with diminished effect, is the use made of characters' ages. Walter, Susan, Rob the Grinder and Toots are all about the same age, with Florence a few years younger, and together they make up a group of youthful characters who all go through the process of growing up and finding a place in the world. Although there are limitations upon this, it is the first time that Dickens shows a number of characters making the transition into adulthood in parallel and thus marks another move away from his early picaresque mode with its almost exclusive concentration upon the single central figure. There are also links between the older characters: Edith and Alice are deliberately made the same age (286, 462) and are further linked in appearance by Browne's plate, "A Chance Meeting" (552). This also applies to their mothers (70, 283) and Dickens's willingness to sacrifice probability to effect is again noticeable - if Cleopatra is seventy when Edith is thirty she must have become a mother exceedingly late in life. A looser group of contrasting characters might be seen in Dombey, Cuttle, Gills and Morfin, but Dickens does not attempt to make very much of this and it is apparent that he is not employing the device of parallel groups to the extent that he had done in Oliver.
One minor extension of this which may be noticed is how Carker stands alone in age as he does in many other respects. He is thirty-eight to forty (172) and has no peer in the novel. He lives alone, of course, well away from any of the other characters and at the other end of London from his brother and sister. Indeed, he is seen to have no human ties and is the most isolated of Dickens's villains. He does, however, retain some feeling for his sister and it has been persuasively suggested that his vulnerability to such sentiment is to prove the cause of his undoing.  

In its historical dating, Dombey both recalls Oliver and looks forward to Little Dorrit. In all three novels, Dickens indicates the setting of the action through only a small number of references and places it some time before the date of writing. Dombey, however, is more nearly contemporary than the other two and may, indeed, be the most closely topical of all Dickens's novels. The Bryanstone Square address (23-4) indicates that Dombey lived in a fashionable area of the 1830's and Dickens's accounts of the building of the railway out of Euston allow the action to be dated even more precisely. Chapter 6 must refer to the period 1834-8 and chapter 15 to some point after 1838 when the railway was opened. As some six years of Paul's life elapse in this time, the setting has presumably moved on into the 1840's, an impression which is to be confirmed by two later references. Browne's illustration "Abstraction and Recognition" (607) includes an allusion to Massinger's The City

40. See Anne Humpherys' perceptive essay, "Dombey and Son: Carker the Manager", NCF, 34 (1980), 397-413.

41. This is pointed out by Peter Fairclough in his edition of Dombey and Son (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970), pp. 981-2.
Madam which, as Michael Steig has pointed out, was revived in 1844. This may or may not be consistent with the novel's internal chronology - and we might notice that the same plate also alludes to Cruikshank's The Bottle, published in 1847 and bought and read by Dickens in September of that year. Finally, the sense of the 1840's is confirmed by Dickens's famous description of the cholera-breeding urban slums (619-20), a passage which, if of only the slightest relevance to the action, does have the effect of connecting the novel to the time of its writing.

Besides these rehearsals of techniques employed in the earlier fiction and particularly in Oliver, Dombey also reveals certain innovations of its own. The general attempt to integrate the multiple plots both dramatically and chronologically is the most obvious of these, but not the only one. For one of the most important ways in which the novel's characters define themselves is through their attitudes to time and throughout Dombey Dickens can be seen, as a number of critics have shown, to be developing his interest in and ability to present subjective experiences of time. One instance of this may be seen in the contrast between Dombey and Cuttle, Florence's real and "foster" fathers. Dombey can never stop trying to hasten Paul's progress towards adulthood, while Cuttle invariably takes things just as they are. The point is emphasized by their personal time-pieces: for Florence, "a very loud ticking watch,

43. E, p. 463.
44. See, for example, Marcus, Dickens: From Pickwick to Dombey, p. 332; Janice Carlisle, "Dombey and Son: The Reader and the Present Tense", The Journal of Narrative Technique, 1 (1971), 146-58. For a contemporary parody of this feature of the novel see Collins, Dickens: The Critical Heritage, p. 222.
embodied her idea of a father" (51), while Cuttle is always trying, and finally succeeds, to give away his imperfectly accurate watch. Many of the other characters also have a typical response to the fact and passing of time and this pattern marks an important development in Dickens's use of chronology. As is the case with several other aspects of his narrative technique, time is no longer simply a source of external, objective reference in the text but also contributes to his rendering of the internal lives of the characters. This is particularly apparent in his dramatizations of extreme states of consciousness (such as Carker's during his flight or Dombey's (798-801) as he prepares to commit suicide) and, although his experiments are as yet fairly tentative, they are not without success and provide indications of a course he was to follow with even greater effect in his later novels.

In Dombey and Son, then, time is less integral to the novel's structure than it had been in Oliver Twist, although paradoxically it is more evident in the later novel and was given more conscious thought by Dickens. In part this is due to the fact that he was beginning to write a new kind of novel, moving away from the simpler pattern of the gentleman-picaro involved in a plot of courtship and developing instead a more elaborate, multiple-action kind of fiction which called for a more flexible use of chronology than had been required previously. This leads him to experiment with new techniques of montage, cutting, time-lapse, concentrated focusing, and the presentation of subjective experiences of time. Much, however, still remains to be done - we may find less praise in the charwoman's comment, "'Lawk, ma'am! I thought that three or four men must have put together Dombey!'"^45 than Dickens apparently did - and his new

45. E, p. 454.
innovatory techniques are by no means realized to their full potential. Even so, Dickens's handling of chronology in *Dombey and Son* contains much that is effective and, even more, that is to be the basis of the achievement of one of his finest novels, *Little Dorrit*.

*Little Dorrit*

If Dickens's revisions of *Oliver* and his letters during the writing of *Dombey* provide evidence of his attention to chronology earlier in his career, then the text of *Little Dorrit* is itself an entirely convincing indication of his continuing and developing interest in narrative time in his later fiction. There are some two hundred references to time in the course of the novel and collectively these enable the reader to respond to its movement in a way that is without parallel in Dickens's work. *Little Dorrit* is, indeed, the densest of all his novels and its narrative is made up of a wealth of highly detailed and carefully orchestrated minutiae, some aspects of which will be further discussed in later chapters. On a larger scale, the plotting of the novel has come in for both praise and blame, but it will be argued here that the chronology provides convincing evidence of Dickens's superb control over his narrative and its themes. It has often been felt that there is some tension between suggestions that Dickens had a clear idea of the novel as a whole from its outset and the equally well known fact that he only made a number of major decisions (most notably, over the central theme of the novel and the role in it of Amy) once he

46. See below, chapters 5-7.
was some way into the writing. But this contrast between conscious plan and unconscious design is by no means unusual in Dickens and, if the novel's chronology is taken as a criterion, it becomes clear that he had, from the beginning, a very definite sense of the novel's course. In the absence of surviving evidence, it is impossible to know how conscious a sense this was, but from the outline of the chronology that will be detailed below it may be deduced that his practice in *Little Dorrit* was certainly more deliberate and purposeful than that revealed in either *Oliver* or *Dombey*.

The actual chronology of the narrative is so simple that it may be indicated without the necessity of referring to every minor detail. Essentially, the plot covers a period of two years, from its opening at Marseilles in the August (1) of what later transpires to be 1826 (206) to Clennam's release from the Marshalsea two autumns later (419, 790, 795). Dickens takes great care to move the narrative through this period without leaving unwieldy gaps or trying to force too much into an improbably short space of time. Thus Clennam arrives back in London by September (34) with the equinox marked (86) by appropriately stormy conditions. Cavalletto, meanwhile, is re-united with Rigaud on a gloomy autumn night (117) and, when he arrives in London, it is, quite plausibly, winter (173). Not only does Dickens move the separate actions in chronological parallel, he also avoids the problem he had created for himself in *Dombey* of leaving a character for such a long period of time that it then became difficult to synchronize one action with others supposedly taking place at the

47. This is effectively discussed by Harvey Peter Sucksmith in the Introduction to his Clarendon edition of the novel, pp. xiii-xiv, xviii-xxi. Both Dr Sucksmith (pp. xxii-xxiii) and Professors Butt and Tillotson, *op. cit.*, pp. 224-5, also consider the role of the cover in revealing Dickens's plans.
same time. Every number is carefully placed in time and every indication of time moves the narrative smoothly forward. Thus, for example, Number VII first focuses on the events of a few days (257-9) as Clennam buys a partnership with Doyce, then allows two months to pass so that this arrangement becomes a part of everyday life (259), and then focuses again on a period of a few days (259ff) in which Pancks, Clennam and Cavalletto begin to come together to search for evidence of Dorrit's title to his family's wealth.

The narrative progresses to summer (316, 392) and to Pet's wedding and Dorrit's release. One unusual feature of the chronology, especially in the first Book, is the amount of action which takes place at weekends. Time after time, Dickens insists on its being a Saturday or Sunday: Clennam's return to London; weekend visits to Twickenham; the meeting of Pancks and friends as the enquiry progresses (291-4) are all instances of this. This is unparalleled in Dickens and does not admit of any obvious explanation. Part of the reason for it may be that Dickens establishes the ordinary working lives of his characters with great care - work, of course, being such a central theme of the novel - and does not wish to spoil this by allowing them to carry on other occupations at the same time. He takes considerable pains to make *Little Dorrit* a very realistic account of Victorian life and an accurate rendering of the characters' days is both an important part of this and one of the many ways in which the novel is distinguished from his early fiction where the demands of plot had frequently taken precedence over more mundane realities.

Book II resumes in autumn (419) and then passes through winter in Rome (498) to Fanny's marriage in the spring (536, 538, 585) and 48. See below, chapter 6.
the subsequent deaths of her father and uncle. Three months later (672), it is past midsummer (674) and Merdle commits suicide. As in Dombey with the episode of Edith's elopement, Dickens here increases the emotional intensity by marking the passage of time in some detail: from the death at about eleven-thirty on a Sunday night (686-7 - and how appropriate that Merdle should use the weekend to avoid the exposure the working week will bring), through the shifting rumours of the following day (689-91), Clennam's ruin on Tuesday (693) and his arrest on Wednesday (697). Three months now pass with Clennam in the Marshalsea (715) before the dramatic week which culminates in Rigaud's death (771-2), and the novel ends, some short time later, with Clennam's release for his marriage to Amy on an autumn morning (795).

This is a general outline of an extremely accurate and highly detailed chronology, the qualities of which are made all the more remarkable by the fact that there is no extant evidence of Dickens's having consciously planned it. Its accuracy is testified by the almost complete absence of errors. To be very pedantic, it might be said that Numbers VI and VII do not indicate a sufficient lapse of time for it to have become summer by Number VIII. This, however, is neither overt nor, indeed, of any great significance, since the important thing is that the various actions are kept in synchronization with one another. Similarly, other, more definite errors are only trifling: Mrs Clennam is first stated to have been a widow for fifteen months (34) but this later becomes fifteen years (347). Merdle's death and Clennam's subsequent imprisonment take place after midsummer (674) yet, despite the fact that Clennam then spends three months in prison, it remains midsummer (767, 771).

49. This is made more apparent by the first proof reading, "this was the end of July."
These three slips seem to be the only mistakes Dickens made in his handling of a time-scheme that is far more detailed and complex than that of either Oliver or Dombey and are really of little importance. There is, however, also one curious comment by the narrator during the Roman episode:

> At three or four o’clock in the afternoon, English time, the view from this window was very bright and peculiar; and Little Dorrit used to sit and muse here, much as she had been used to while away the time in her balcony at Venice. (576)

As so often in the novel, a character is sitting gazing out of a window, unable to escape from a prison that is either spatial or temporal or both, but why the reference to English time? Is this merely a curious remark by the narrator or did travellers abroad retain English time on their journeys in rather the same manner as, until 1840, different parts of the country set their clocks differently? I am unable to discover the answer but, whatever it may be, this seems a strange kind of Podsnappery that intrigues the modern reader.

Within this overall time-scheme Dickens employs chronological effects in both familiar and new ways. The difficulties he had in Dombey with co-ordinating the various actions of the multiple plot were only too apparent, but here he is able not only to cope with this with ease but can also set different actions with and against one another to considerable effect. Number II offers a good example of this. Chapter 5 which opens it traces Arthur’s first working day with his mother and marks off the hours from the moment "the city clocks struck nine on Monday morning" (43), through Mrs Clennam’s eleven o’clock oysters (52) and to dinner "served up
in a penitential manner" (57) punctually at two. The utter monotony of Mrs Clennam's life is made quite apparent through this leaden reiteration of the hours of her day. Meanwhile, Amy has been introduced and the chapter ends with a reference to the lapse of "about a fortnight" (57) which de-focuses time and leads towards the Number's central chapters. In these Dickens tells the retrospective story of the Dorrit family in prison and does so with considerable chronological accuracy. Thus, five or six months after Dorrit is admitted (60), Amy is born on a "hot summer day" (61) and this accords both with her being twenty-two in the present action (52) and with Dorrit's later remark (224) that he is in the twenty-third year of his imprisonment. Clennam's interest in Amy which had served to introduce this retrospect also leads out of it as Dickens returns us to the present (118) and the events of an evening and a night when Clennam visits the Marshalsea and is then obliged to stay the night. The shift between present action and retrospective narration is thus handled with considerable skill and the two actions are as skilfully linked technically as they will later come to be in terms of the plot.

This is even more apparent in Numbers XII-XIV where Dickens handles the shifts between London and Italy to great effect. The period covered here is from the autumn of the Dorrit family's journey to and arrival in Venice (419, 452, 453), through their wintering in Rome to Fanny's tacit engagement the following spring (575). The action in England and Italy is carefully co-ordinated as time passes, slowly and heavily, for both Clennam (503) and Amy (455ff, 534, 538). Appropriately, these two are seen to be separated through what is the second winter of the novel and this is typical of Dickens's economic and skilful indications of the passage
of time. Thus, for example, Arthur appears not to have seen Flora for more than three months (517), a comment sufficient in itself. Amy, on the other hand, tells him of Pet's having had her baby (536), a remark which both serves to suggest the lapse of time since the wedding the previous summer and also to reveal something of how she "employs her father's aggressive-submissive psychological tactics when her own deepest interests are at stake." This development of their relationship during separation is extremely effective and might be contrasted with the boy and girl romance of Florence Dombey and Walter Gay. There, Dickens uses the eighteenth-century picaresque convention of sending the hero away on a voyage that will both try his mettle and make his fortune, but he does so, in fact, merely to get Walter off-stage until the domestic plot calls for his re-entry. Amy, moreover, is a far more credible and richly realized depiction of a young woman secretly in love than the blushingly innocent Florence and her skill in tacitly offering that love to Clennam is one of the many details which make her surely the most effective of Dickens's heroines.

Throughout these numbers Dickens continues to develop a theme that is central to the novel, that of age. Characters' attitudes to aging had been a minor concern in Dombey and Son, but in Little Dorrit the theme is taken much further. Minnie Gowan's baby may be contrasted with Clennam's continuing insistence upon the fiction of his being old and worn-out (504, 566). This in turn might be contrasted with a glimpse we are given of the revitalising effect of freedom on old Nandy (557) which itself recalls Dorrit's pretensions about his "old pensioner" (367). These will themselves be

shown for what they are by Dorrit's subsequent decline and death, a point that is underlined by the contrast between Amy's perception that her uncle is growing young again (618) and Dorrit's reaction to this idea (620-1). The chronology of the narrative is thus closely linked with the various characters' senses of their own or other characters' ages and this connection is itself something new in Dickens. Similarly, although there is in Dombey some relationship between the characters' view of time and the historical realities of the age (this applies most of all to Dombey himself, of course), in the later novel Dickens develops this to far profounder effect. Amy is again the key as Italy is presented through her eyes:

It appeared on the whole, to Little Dorrit herself, that this same society in which they lived, greatly resembled a superior sort of Marshalsea. Numbers of people seemed to come abroad, pretty much as people had come into the prison; through debt, through idleness, relationship, curiosity, and general unfitness for getting on at home. . . They prowled about the churches and picture-galleries, much in the old, dreary, prison-manner. They were usually going away again to-morrow or next week, and rarely knew their own minds, and seldom did what they said they would do, or went where they said they would go. . . (497)

This surely is neither intended nor acts as an ironic commentary upon her inability to escape the perspective of the Marshalsea; rather, as F.R. Leavis has remarked, it becomes apparent that reality in the novel is a collaborative creation, a fiction produced by the various characters in tacit agreement.\footnote{51} This passage, together with Amy's earlier thoughts on Italy (451-2), is important not only for its critique of the new way of life her family has adopted but also because it indicates that the contrast between Italy and England (and, above all, Merdle) is only deceptive. Throughout this phase of the novel, Amy is constantly linked with all the various aspects

of the chronology - narrative time-scheme, seasonal setting, age, historical dating - and she serves as a touch-stone; where she was, too, something real was.

One further indication of Dickens's skill in the handling of the serial parts may be given. Little Dorrit has some seventy chapters, which is more than any of his other full-length monthly serializations but is in keeping with a general tendency to increase the number of chapters in a novel that is apparent throughout his career. The greater number of divisions is not purely arbitrary but allows Dickens to heighten his dramatic effects by more marked shifts from scene to scene. How this actually works may become clearer through a study of one example, Number XVIII. The three chapters that appeared in May 1857 are linked by the repetition of "Marshalsea" in their titles: "The Pupil of the Marshalsea"; "An Appearance in the Marshalsea"; and "A Plea in the Marshalsea". This paralleling is further developed within the chapters - which cover the period from Clennam's first day in prison to Amy's return - and is also linked to the various chronological techniques Dickens employs.

Thus Book II, chapter 27, which picks up from Clennam's sad cry "O my Little Dorrit!" (699) at the end of the previous number, deals extensively with the first day in prison, emphasizing the effect upon Clennam by the amount of space devoted to such a short time. He also has two contrasting visits: the first, his crucial conversation with John Chivery which finally opens his eyes to the fact of Amy's love; the second is from the Plornishes who, as ever, offer an image of domestic tranquillity unique in the novel. Dickens then allows a time-lapse of ten or twelve weeks (715 - the vagueness is appropriate for an imprisoned character who inevitably tends to
lose track of time, and is a device also employed in Oliver and Dombey - see above, pp. 64-5, 97) before Clennam receives two more contrasting visitors in chapter 28. This time they are the engaging Ferdinand Barnacle and the rather less agreeable figure of Rigaud. The latter, of course, announces his ultimatum of a week to Mrs Clennam (728) and thus complicates the narrative's appearance, at this point, of drifting, aimless time by introducing an element of pressure, of what David Higdon has called "barrier time".\(^{52}\) As a result of this, Clennam passes the final chapter of the number and six days of the allotted week in a fever of anxiety (733-4) from which he is rescued by Amy's timely arrival (735). Her appearance is heralded by the flowers she brings him, a gift which not only contrasts her with Minnie and Flora but which also emphasizes her link with the summer setting in which the narrative is placed. (This, incidentally, might also explain Dickens's "error" in not moving on from Merdle's midsummer suicide - it may be that, as in Dombey, he sacrifices chronological accuracy in order to achieve a specific seasonal effect.) We may also note that, for the first time in his dealings with women, Clennam does not worry about his own age but instead notices Amy anew:

She looked something more womanly than when she had gone away, and the ripening touch of the Italian sun was visible upon her face. But otherwise she was quite unchanged. The same deep, timid earnestness that he had always seen in her, and never without emotion, he saw still. If it had a new meaning that smote him to the heart, the change was in his perception, not in her. (737)

This is a far richer response to another person than any of Dickens's previous heroes had realized and indicates again how successful is

his depiction of the central relationship in the novel. This penultimate monthly part thus ends on a double note - of relief at Amy's return and Arthur's revival, yet also of continuing suspense over Rigaud's approaching deadline - and Dickens's great skill in fusing the various forms of narrative time and using them to structure the number is again evident.

Clennam's final ability to forget his age and to accept Amy as a woman is, in fact, the climax of a theme that has run throughout the novel. Dickens does not draw attention to the change that occurs, yet the reader feels it immediately because Clennam's previous continual worry has been so central to his character. Such a technique of depicting a negative obsession and a final mute change is common in Dickens's mature fiction and, in this case, is all the more effective because Clennam is only one of many characters trapped in a self-willed perception of time and age. This also represents a further sophistication upon Dickens's familiar technique of noting the ages of his characters, a device which he makes considerable use of in Little Dorrit.

As has come to be his usual practice, Dickens provides many of the basic details during the first two numbers. Thus we learn that Clennam is forty (16); Rigaud thirty-five or perhaps a little more (10); the Meagles's in their mid-fifties (16); Minnie about twenty (16); Tattycoram twenty-two or three (25); Miss Wade indeterminately young and old (25); Dorrit must now be old, since he was middle aged when he entered the Marshalsea (59); Tip is twenty-six (60) but is to become another young old figure (781); Fanny twenty-five (60); and Amy twenty-two (52). Later, we will also be told that Gowan is thirty (197); John Chivery twenty-three (205); and
Edmund Sparkler twenty-two or three (234). Other characters, such as Mrs Merdle and Doyce, are not given an exact number of years but are defined more generally, the one no longer in her first youth (233), the other grown old in the turmoils of the Circumlocution Office (117). As is consistent with his other uses of time in the novel, Dickens is thus both careful and precise in specifying the ages of almost all his characters and this further contributes to the sense of realism that is so evident throughout Little Dorrit.

Moreover, it also becomes apparent that he is playing a number of variations upon the usual patterning of characters by age. The central relationship between Amy and Clennam is, of course, especially unconventional and is the first complete break in Dickens's fiction with the stereotyped young lovers. (One indication of this besides their ages is the fact it is difficult to decide whether to call the hero "Clennam" or, as his role would usually demand, "Arthur".) There is, indeed, no youthful heroic figure in the novel and instead we have John Chivery who, as Angus Easson has noted, serves the purpose of being an inadequate suitor who keeps alive the idea that Amy is a woman to be loved during the large part of the novel in which the real hero remains unaware of this fact. Even more, there are no innocent young characters in this novel - apart from the eternally childish Maggie - for the world of Little Dorrit is one in which there is no place for complete innocence. Only in Great Expectations will Dickens return to the figure of the youthful, initially innocent hero and then his perspective will be that of the older, wiser and less ignorant Pip.

But perhaps the most significant development in this novel is

the extent to which Dickens makes the characters themselves aware of time. Hardly a major character in *Little Dorrit* is without the sense of time - not time as historical reality so much as a subjective value in their own lives. Cavalletto is one exception to this, since he has both an uncanny innate sense of objective time and yet seems quite unconcerned with the passing of time. He is, however, the exception that proves the rule and there has been considerable critical interest in the attitudes of characters in the novel to time. For the purposes of this discussion, one example of this may suffice.

Dorrit himself grows into old age during his twenty-three years in the Marshalsea and develops a curious web of attitudes towards time. Never admitting his own aging, he transfers it instead to his brother (217, 620-1). He never acknowledges the fact that his children have grown into adulthood and need providing for, but instead leaves Amy to get them work and remains "ignorant" of the fact. Most revealing of how deeply imprisonment has affected him, perhaps, is the contrast between his apparent acquiescence in prison life and insistence upon leading it with absolute regularity (217) and his reaction to the news of its end. As he looks at Clennam, he "seemed to change into a very old haggard man" (406); his acquiescence is given the lie by his tears of wrath at not being able to leave at once (409) and by his poignantly revealing and almost immediate desire to buy a watch (408). In Book II he is to continue this endeavour to catch up on the years he has missed, so much so that, but for death's intervention, he would even have proposed to Mrs

General. This sense of lost years, which is so delicately evoked, does much to alleviate our contempt for his exploitation of Amy and, indeed, creates considerable sympathy for him. It also suggests that, although she might in general have been right to comment that Dickens "scarcely ever passes from the humorous and external to the emotional and tragic, without becoming as transcendent in his unreality as he was a moment before in his artistic truthfulness".  

George Eliot was rather too hasty as far as Dorrit was concerned and might have done better to allow the novel to proceed to its completion rather than censuring it when only eight numbers had appeared.

Considerable critical discussion has also been devoted to the topicality of Little Dorrit in the mid-1850's, although it should also be noted how far the action is actually set in another, earlier period. In this the novel is to be distinguished from Dombey and Son where Dickens had kept both topicality and setting fairly close together. From the opening phrase of Little Dorrit, however, he takes extraordinary care to keep the action located in the mid-1820's. As well as that initial "thirty years ago" (1), there are references to subsequent street improvements (31), the introduction of gas-lighting (218), the disappearance of the Marshalsea (58), and the absence of large numbers of steam boats on the Thames (514). But


perhaps most unlikely of all is the care given to the dating of John Chivery's imaginary tombstones which appear in Number V (written January-February 1856 and published in April of that year). These are dated to 1826 (206, 213) which sustains the thirty years ago (if at the expense of ignoring the fact that Number I was published at the end of the previous year) and, more specifically, are labelled "December" and are thus in keeping with the novel's internal timescheme (see above, p. 99).

However, if the narrative is thus securely dated in the 1820's, it must be said that this is a very different decade from that depicted in Oliver and that, like the earlier version, it is largely lacking in period colour. Indeed, and as has been widely noted, the actual flavour of the novel is very much of the mid-50's and this is again an instance of Dickens's ability to modulate fluently between a setting some decades before the time of writing and details and themes of immediate topical relevance. Feltes' sense that "Dickens conflates several eras for his thematic purpose" may not be entirely to the point, since Little Dorrit surely only moves between its 1820's setting and the events of the late 1840's and first half of the 1850's. As Sucksmith has said, "Dickens sometimes thought of the novel's action as occurring just before the Reform Bill of 1832, sometimes as during the early eighteen-fifties, and he draws on certain parallel situations and celebrities from both periods to give political verisimilitude and universality to his work." 58

Why he should have done this is less verifiable. At the time he wrote Oliver the 1820's were, of course, very recent history and

it is not to be wondered at that he took details from them. What is more surprising is that he continues this practice for the novels of his later career - *Great Expectations* is also set back in the earlier decade. Habit may have had something to do with this. Another reason, of particular relevance for this novel, is that it allows him to draw upon memories of his own father's imprisonment for debt in 1824. A third possibility may lie in his "nervous dread of caricature" which, although partially overcome in *Dorrit*, could still have influenced him towards the habit of retrospective setting. There is certainly a distinction to be made between his willingness to attack contemporary institutions and his reluctance to satirize openly living individuals and this may have been a deep personal feeling. On the other hand, if Dickens drew so much from recent history, he tended to do so in matters of incidental detail and was not interested, as was, say, George Eliot, in using his fiction to explore the sources of social change and development. There is, then, perhaps some mystery as to why he so habitually placed his novels in the years before 1830 and only intermittently and allusively approached the actual date of their writing.

The extent and skill of Dickens's use of the various forms of chronology in writing the novel should be apparent and an awareness of this enriches a reading of *Little Dorrit* considerably. It is

60. *Ibid*, p. 625.
61. Sir George Russell tells the story of a cricket match at Gad's Hill in which the two star batsmen of the house team ran into one another and so caused themselves to be run out. Dickens did not join in the general laughter, not, apparently, because he did not see the humour of the situation, but because his sense of the ridiculous merged in his sympathy for their mortification and disappointment. *Russell, Swallowfield and its Owners*, p. 306.
perhaps significant that only one major episode is not integrated into the overall time-scheme - that of Clennam's trip to Calais and his reading of Miss Wade's memoir - and it is noticeable that this, whatever its merits as a psychological study and its links with the histories of other obsessed characters in the novel, is generally felt to be obtrusive and out of place. Dickens himself realized the structural problems the episode caused, but he also explained how he had quite deliberately chosen to present it as he did:

I have no doubt that a great part of Fielding's reason for the introduced story, and Smollett's also, was that it is sometimes really impossible to present, in a full book, the idea it contains (which yet may be on all accounts desirable to present), without supposing the reader to be possessed of almost as much romantic allowance as would put him on a level with the writer. In Miss Wade I had an idea, which I thought a new one, of making the introduced story so fit into surroundings impossible of separation from the main story, as to make the blood of the book circulate through both. But I can only suppose, from what you say, that I have not exactly succeeded in this. 62

It is significant that we find, even in so late a novel as Little Dorrit, such clear evidence of Dickens's looking back to eighteenth-century writers for a precedent and his organic metaphor for the book seems entirely appropriate for a novel that is, this episode apart, so subtly unified. The various and numerous chronological details are important to this, lying, as it were, under the surface of the novel as a continual part of its rhythm, and Dickens's practice may be contrasted with a passage from Hardy's "lost" novel, An Indiscretion in the Life of an Heiress:

The day and minute... became registered in his mind with the indelibility of ink. Years afterwards he could recall at a moment's notice that he saw her at eleven

62. F., p. 626.
o'clock on the third of April, a Sunday; at four on Tuesday, the twelfth; at a quarter to six on Thursday the twenty-eighth; that on the ninth it rained at a quarter past two. .. 63

Moreover, Dickens's recording of time is a part not only of the rhythm of the novel as it progresses but also of its completed structure. This may become apparent if the time-scheme is shown diagrammatically:

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Each of the novel's two Books thus follows a similar chronological structure: beginning at the end of summer or the start of autumn, moving into winter and then, with hardly any sign of spring, on into summer. The two years covered by the plot are thus divided into two equal and almost exactly parallel chronological parts.

Similarly, the plots of the two Books echo one another in some detail: each opens with a journey, one to England and one from it; in Book I the movement of the plot is to bring about Dorrit's release from the Marshalsea, in Book II to imprison Clennam there - and in both cases speculation is the cause of...

downfall. In each Book the action climaxes with a marriage, first Minnie and Gowan's and then Amy and Clennam's. In each case this is preceded by a misguided courtship and Clennam and Dorrit mirror one another in this respect as in several others. It would perhaps be possible to continue such a list of parallels, but it is surely evident that Dickens designed the two Books as twin halves of a single work. The plan for two contrasting Books was decided on by the end of October 1855 and it is clear that both their titles and the close links between their opening chapters were intended to draw the reader's attention to this basic contrast.64

This use of mirroring, reversal and inversion in *Little Dorrit* has been widely noted65, but the extent to which the novel's chronology contributes to it has perhaps not been so fully discussed. A number of critics have interpreted this pattern of inversion as a negative indicator, stressing the chaos it implies. Thus J. Hillis Miller has emphasized, for example, the imagery of the labyrinth which "suggests that life is not immobile enclosure but is endless wandering within a maze whose beginning, ending, or pattern, cannot be perceived", and Rupert Roopmaraine, in his discussion of time in the novel, sees temporal circularity as a pessimistic metaphor of imprisonment.66 There is undoubtedly something of this in *Little Dorrit*

64. See an unpublished letter to Bradbury and Evans, 29 October 1855, cited in the Clarendon Introduction, p. xxi.


66. Charles Dickens: The World of His Novels, p. 232; R. Rupert Roopmaraine, "Time and the Circle in *Little Dorrit*", *Dickens Studies Annual*, 3 (1974), 54-76. Roopmaraine's discussion is valuable for offering a different interpretation of an approach similar to that pursued by Miller.
Dorrit, but is it everything? When in only the third number Dickens comments on Clennam and Amy and remarks on "that beginning of the destined interweaving of their stories" (95) he is surely not envisaging an endlessly futile journey for them? The chronology of the novel, with its parallel structure and its ultimately comic rather than tragic reversal, endorses an optimistic interpretation of the narrative, suggesting that out of all the horror some human triumph can and does come. To be sure, it is a muted victory and both the chronology, which brings Arthur and Amy to church on an autumn morning (801), and the novel's superb closing paragraph fully acknowledge this. Yet it nevertheless is success and the chronology which has brought us through two dark winters to this final autumnal mellowness plays an important part in establishing the rightness of such an outcome.

The brilliance of Dickens's handling of time in Little Dorrit is apparent. He evidently regarded an accurate time-scheme as an essential part of his craft and took chronological unity with rather more seriousness than he had allowed Mr Curdle: "'The unities, sir,' he said, 'are a completeness - a kind of universal dove-tailedness with regard to place and time - a sort of general oneness, if I may be allowed to use so strong an expression'" (NN, 386). Dickens worked long and hard to achieve such a "general oneness" and finally succeeds in Little Dorrit where it is a technical and artistic achievement of some magnitude. The sheer professionalism of his craft and its contribution to his artistic success leave us only able to sympathize with the feelings of the Newcastle theatre-hand on that extra-dramatic occasion in 1861: "The more you want of the master, the more you'll find in him."67

Illness and its attendant features - the sick-room, doctor, death-bed and funeral - are so integral to Victorian fiction that it can hardly be imagined without them. In this it is particularly distinguished from the novels of the periods that both preceded and followed it. Medical matters were, in general, one of the great preoccupations of the age: public health was a principal object of reform and the Public Health Act of 1848 marked the first attempt by the state to clean up England's less than entirely green and pleasant land. The medical profession itself, as W.J. Reader has shown, improved its competence and its social standing enormously during the century, developing from a group of variously qualified and competent physicians, surgeons and apothecaries into a disciplined and organized body, controlled and protected by Act of Parliament.

For the ordinary individual, illness was, of course, a part of life to an extent unimaginable today and, considering the limitations of medical knowledge, always something to be taken with the utmost seriousness. Not surprisingly, the Victorians were also well


2. David Newsome in his Godliness and Good Learning: Four Studies on a Victorian Ideal (London: John Murray, 1961), pp. 75-8, illustrates this with an account of Catharine Tait's description of the deaths of all five of her daughters from scarlet fever in the space of six weeks during 1856.
acquainted with death and John Morley has described their attitudes to it in fascinating detail. It is only to be expected, then, that the novels of the age should embody these concerns and are thus packed with illnesses, doctors, deaths and funerals.

This is a particularly nineteenth-century theme and is far less evident in eighteenth-century fiction. The characters of eighteenth-century picaresque tend to be far more robust than their later counterparts and, indeed, rarely suffer from illnesses. They are vigorous, active often to the point of violence and seem to negotiate the many vicissitudes of their chequered careers with hardly a scratch. Moreover, the convention of the reformative illness, which is to become of considerable importance in Victorian (and especially Dickensian) fiction, is less significant in the eighteenth-century novel. There are instances of it, however, although they tend to be incidental and have little of the deeper moral value the device will be given by nineteenth-century novelists. Thus, for example, Moll Flanders' gentleman lover gives her up after the recurrence of a serious illness; Peregrine Pickle finds that

A seasonable fit of illness is an excellent medicine for the turbulence of passion. Such a reformation had the fever produced in the economy of his thoughts, that he moralized like an apostle, and projected several prudential schemes for his future conduct. (Chapter 79)

and there had also been some precedent for this in Gil Blas' penitential illness in the Tower of Segovia (IX, 8).

More usually, however, the gentleman-picaro keeps as far from both disease and doctors as he possibly can and this leads to the development of a vein of satire against the medical profession that

may be found in novels throughout the century. The actual rogue physician is, as Frank Chandler has remarked\(^5\), a type found more on the Continent than in England and is particularly evident in *Gil Blas*. Dr Sangrado, with his warm water panacea, became such a by-word for medical corruption that Dickens was to be able to allude to both the doctor and his treatment with comic effect.\(^6\) Gil himself is to suffer more from his doctors than from the illnesses they are supposedly curing (VII, 16) and this may well be Providence's revenge for his having previously worked as an assistant to Sangrado (II, 3-5). In the British novel, satire of the sheer incompetence of doctors becomes the norm and is to be seen both in *Tom Jones* (75, 117) and, at greater length, in *Roderick Random*. For here, of course, the hero himself becomes a naval surgeon, having picked up sufficient knowledge from his various employers to gain a license, and he works as such after being press-ganged on to the *Thunderer*. Smollett is clearly drawing upon his own experiences here and it is no coincidence that the brutally vivid scenes of life on board are the most vivid in the novel.

However, once this episode is completed and the plot moved elsewhere, Roderick ceases to be a surgeon and, indeed, would appear to forget that he has ever been such. Smollett had evidently wished to take the plot in a specific direction for his satiric purposes and, once his aim had been achieved, he felt quite at liberty to give the hero new and quite unrelated parts to play.

Q.D. Leavis has remarked upon the physician's appearing in the nineteenth-century novel in his "traditional aspect of either

wise family friend or humorously as self-important humbug"?, but,
in fact, eighteenth-century tradition does little to accord him
either of these two aspects and, in general, does not anticipate
the use made of the doctor and illness as integral parts of the
nineteenth-century novel.

When Bunsby alludes (Dombey and Son, 530) to a common Victorian
epitaph:

Afflictions sore long time I bore,
Physicians were in vain;
Till death did seize and God did please
To ease me of my pain.

he also sets the tone for that earnest treatment of sickness and
death found widely in Victorian fiction and particularly in Dickens.
Even though Dickens was to play upon this same epitaph rather more
comically in his next novel (DC, 64), like his contemporaries he
never treats illness itself lightly. Thackeray's contrast between
Miss Crawley's free-thinking tendencies in good health and the fear
with which she is prostrated by illness, is typical of the power of
sickness has over the characters of the nineteenth-century novel.
For these characters do not often suffer the mundane afflictions
of everyday life and, apart from colds and headaches (which latter
are often regarded as mere affectations), illnesses which occur
tend to be extremely serious. If a major character falls ill, this
tends to be in one of three contexts: as a preliminary to death and
the passage to heaven; as a reaction to a crisis in one's own or
another's life; or, and especially after such a crisis, as a pur-
gatorial act in which the errors of one's past are cleansed. The

7. Dickens the Novelist, p. 179. See also, pp. 179-183, 279-80.
pp. 228-9.
Victorian novelist thus habitually treats illness as a moral activity and not merely as chance occurrence and this is undoubtedly the most important feature of the convention in the fiction of the period. More ordinary realism—such as Mrs Gaskell’s consideration of the need to wash and dress the dead, or Kingsley’s allowing a character to suffer from backache (though, admittedly, this is induced by her having to bear the burden of her husband’s ill-temper)—tends to be the exception to this more general rule and is largely absent from Dickens.

This, however, is not to say that illness is used exclusively for the development of the moral progress of the leading characters of the novels and it also has an important function in the stage-managing of the typical Victorian multiple plot. Thus, minor characters may be killed off, both to remove them from the action and to produce dramatically effective consequences for the principal players (as is the case in Middlemarch with Raffles). Or again, an illness may remove some restraint from the development of one action in a novel: such is the case in Wives and Daughters when Dr Gibson is removed at a timely point in his daughter’s life by having to go to consult about Lady Cumnor, and also in Wuthering Heights where Nelly’s illness (the first she appears to suffer) allows Cathy and Linton Heathcliff to pursue their courtship and thus has major consequences for the latter stages of the plot. Unlike other

11. Two Years Ago (London: Macmillan, 1892), chapter 3.
forms of coincidence, this has the advantage of not forcing events into unlikely symmetry but instead it simply removes an obstacle to something taking place and thus appears all the more natural.

Illness therefore came to be a very useful item in the Victorian novelist's stock-in-trade, not least because it could be employed in a variety of ways and was not a rigidly stereotyped situation. Most writers used it both as a plot convention and as a more or less developed theme of their novels and established a distinct and characteristic treatment of the convention which often throws light on the wider nature and purposes of their work. The range of possibilities in such a fundamentally simple device can be seen by the difference between *Middlemarch* and Kingsley's turgid, though interesting *Two Years Ago*, and Dickens, too, makes a rich and varied use of the convention.

Dickens's use of the various forms of illness reveals a great deal about his concerns as a novelist and how these differ from both those of his contemporaries and from his own journalistic interests. Like other Victorian novelists, he treats illness and death very seriously, although he does permit himself the comic account of Dick Swiveller's illness and two superbly humorous deaths, those of Mrs Weller and Barkis. No other major Victorian writer could have brought such a touch to death and it is one measure of Dickens's richness that his work contains both a Mrs Weller and a little Nell. The best known, and, indeed, the most notorious, aspect of his use of the convention is to be found in his deathbeds, but these, while undoubtedly important as incidental scenes, are not so significant to the novels as those illnesses from which a recovery is made. For the penitential illness, leading
to reform and a restoration of moral and emotional health, becomes a thematic convention of increasing importance as Dickens's career develops. It is, therefore, Dickens's use of death-beds and of the reformative illness which will form the main subject of the discussion here; social conditions and public health, which receive far less attention from Dickens the novelist than from the editor and public speaker, will, accordingly, be less fully considered.

For his contemporaries, death-beds were unquestionably a hallmark of the Dickensian style. As the Saturday Review tartly remarked in assessing the 1858 Library Edition of Dombey, "No man can offer so large a stock of death-beds adapted for either sex and for any age, from 25 downwards." However, in truth these scenes are neither so numerous nor, in general, so overbearingly sentimental as might be thought. There are, of course, some that are very sentimentalized and very few which have the brutal realism of those in, say, Mary Barton, but there are, in fact, fewer than thirty death-beds throughout the major fiction and the mawkishness of little Nell's passing is the exception rather than the rule. In Sketches by Boz and for much of Pickwick death is described almost journalismically, with a minimum of authoreal comment:

"He had raised himself up, so as to seat himself in bed - a dreadful change had come over his face, but consciousness had returned, for he evidently knew me... He grasped my shoulder convulsively, and, striking his breast with the other hand, made a desperate attempt to articulate. It was unavailing - he extended his arm towards them, and made another violent effort. There was a rattling noise in the throat - a glare of the eye - a short stifled groan - and he fell back - dead!" (PP, 110)

Only later in *Pickwick* do we see the first signs of the typical Dickens death-bed, first (368-9) as Hayling's wife dies and then more fully in the death of the Chancery prisoner:

His breathing was hard and thick, and he moaned painfully as it came and went. At the bedside, sat a short old man in a cobbler's apron, who, by the aid of a pair of horn spectacles, was reading from the Bible aloud. It was the fortunate legatee.

The sick man laid his hand upon his attendant's arm, and motioned him to stop. He closed the book and laid it on the bed.

"Open the window," said the sick man.

He did so. The noise of carriages and carts, the rattle of wheels, the cries of men and boys, all the busy sounds of a mighty multitude instinct with life and occupation, blended into one deep murmur, floated into the room. . .

"There is no air here," said the sick man faintly. "The place pollutes it. It was fresh round about, when I walked there, years ago; but it grows hot and heavy in passing these walls. I cannot breathe it."

"We have breathed it together, for a long time," said the old man. "Come, come."

There was a short silence, during which the two spectators approached the bed. The sick man drew a hand of his old fellow prisoner towards him, and pressing it affectionately between both his own, retained it in his grasp. . .

He folded his hands, and murmuring something more they could not hear, fell into a sleep - only a sleep at first, for they saw him smile.

They whispered together for a little while, and the turnkey, stooping over the pillow, drew hastily back. "He has got his discharge, by G-11!" said the man.

He had. But he had grown so like death in life, that they knew not when he died. (718-9)

Here, in Dickens's first novel, is the archetype of most of his major death scenes and the details of this passage will be repeated time and again in the later novels. The setting at twilight or early in the evening; the open window through which drift the sounds of continuing life from the city street; the dying person's readiness for the passage to heaven; the last communion between he and his closest friend, sealed with a parting touch; the smile before death - some or all of these details will be found in most of Dickens's later death-beds and together they create a scene that is full of restrained emotion and which moves by its dignity rather than through
excessive use of pathos.

Dickens's concern to avoid extreme sentimentalization is perhaps suggested by the way in which he often ends such death-beds. For he frequently closes the scene with a comment, either by a character or the narrator, which moves us away from an entirely emotional response to the events which have just taken place. Such a purpose is served here in *Pickwick* by the turnkey's final remark, followed by the narrator's comment with its effective closing iambic movement. Similarly, Miss Tox's "Dear me, dear me! To think... that Dombey and Son should be a Daughter after all!" (D&S, 225) acts as a marked contrast with the tone of Paul's death-scene previous to this point. (It may, in fact, be thought to rather deflate the pathos and this, perhaps, was why Dickens deleted it from the 1859 and 1867 editions of the novel.) A third and more assured example may be taken from *Our Mutual Friend* where little Johnny's long and extremely pathetic death is ended with a touch of delicate irony:

With a weary and yet a pleased smile, and with an action as if he stretched his little figure out to rest, the child heaved his body on the sustaining arm, and seeking Rokesmith's face with his lips, said:
"A kiss for the boofer lady."

Having now bequeathed all he had to dispose of, and arranged his affairs in this world, Johnny, thus speaking, left it.

(385-6)

It might therefore be said that the death of little Nell is uncharacteristic of Dickens: not only does it take place off-stage, but its whole tone is elegaically sentimental. Moreover, not only is Nell unique among Dickens's heroines in dying but also, and entirely appropriately for a character so manifestly destined for heaven, the emphasis is not upon the act of dying but upon her being dead. It is not, then, surprising that, apart from her being said to have stretched out a hand to her grandfather at the end (654),
none of Dickens's habitual descriptive details are present in the account of her death. For, although Dickens almost invariably emphasizes his belief that death is but a passage to heaven, The Old Curiosity Shop is unusual in the stress it places on the heroine's having already achieved angelic status. More usually, the focus in Dickens's death-bed scenes is on the impact of death upon those around, the "spectators" of the Chancery prisoner's last moments. Death for Dickens, as for many of his contemporaries, was essentially theatrical, an edifying spectacle for those present to observe it, and Nell's passing is atypical because of its tableau qualities - by the time we see her, it is already too late for the development of the kind of emotional responses more frequently associated with a death-scene. 15

By contrast, Dickens gives an entire chapter to the death of Paul Dombey and thus immerses the reader in all the sentiment of the occasion. However, even if this account is even more cloying than the death of Nell, it does have much wider relevance to its novel than had the earlier scene. For Dickens succeeds in linking the habitual details of his death-bed descriptions to patterns of imagery and motif that run throughout the novel and Paul's death thus comes to be linked with the continuing action long after he has vanished from the novel. The summer setting is, as we have seen (pp. 83, 93 above), subsequently to be connected with the contrasting summers of Florence's wedding and her return to rescue her father. Although Paul spends much of his final chapter gazing out of the window and hearing the ordinary sounds of the day, what he mostly sees is the reflection of the sunbeams on the wall of his

15. This is more generally discussed by Reed, Victorian Conventions, chapter 7, "Deathbeds", especially pp. 168-71.
room as they ripple like water. His death may thus be contrasted with Mrs Skewton's by the sea at Brighton and, more generally, is to be associated with that major image of the surrounding sea which, for better or worse, is repeated throughout the novel. Or again, the motif of the final parting touch is here given a new significance:

Paul looked it in the face, and thought, was This his father? But the face so altered to his thinking, thrilled while he gazed, as if it were in pain: and before he could reach out both his hands to take it between them, and draw it towards him, the figure turned quickly away from the little bed, and went out at the door. (222)

On the next occasion that his father comes to visit him, Paul does succeed in putting his arms around his neck (222), but, at the end, it is to Polly, Walter and, finally, Florence that he clings. Dickens surely did this quite deliberately, since he wrote to Forster of his plans for Dombey to "always remember how the boy had his arm round her neck when he was dying, and whispered to her, and would take things only from her hand, and never thought of him..." 16 Dombey will suffer from this until almost the end of the novel when Florence finally rescues him from his imprisoning isolation and the way in which the sentimentality of the early fiction is thus adapted to a more poetically integrated text is typical of Dombey's place at a turning-point in Dickens's career.

Jo's death in Bleak House indicates how far Dickens has progressed from his early sentimental mode and is now able to use a death to focus the themes of a novel. For Jo has always lived amidst filth and disease down in Tom-All-Alone's and he plays a crucial role in linking several of the major characters. He is thus central to the theme of disease that is so important to the novel and the very fact of his death is more important than the manner of his death...

dying. This latter is, nevertheless, still important and Dickens makes it one of his most striking death-scenes. Certainly, it is not the habitual death-bed details that create the effect here, but instead their general absence and the bare simplicity of the account. Jo dies in George's Shooting Gallery, closed away up a passage, not looking out into a calm evening:

"I hear you, sir, in the dark, but I'm a-gropin - a-gropin - let me catch hold of your hand."
"Jo, can you say what I say?"
"I'll say anything as you say, sir, for I knows it's good."
"OUR FATHER."
"Our Father! - yes, that's very good, sir."
"WHICH ART IN HEAVEN."
"Art in heaven - is the light a-comin, sir?"
"It is close at hand. HALLOWED BE THY NAME!"
"Hallowed be - thy - "

The light is come upon the dark benighted way. Dead! Dead, your Majesty. Dead, my lords and gentlemen. Dead Right Reverends and Wrong Reverends of every order. Dead, men and women, born with Heavenly compassion in your hearts. And dying thus around us every day. (705)

The scene is brought to life above all because Dickens allows the characters to act it out and restrains himself from authoreal comment until Jo has actually died. Moreover, that comment, when it does come, and its effective iambic rhythms, is full of a vigorous and convincing anger at the wastefulness of such a death which is entirely appropriate to a novel so concerned with the state of England's social health.

After Bleak House, child deaths in particular and death-beds in general become less frequent in Dickens's fiction. There are still fine examples of the convention (notably Magwitch's death) but they are rare and less central to the novels in which they occur. Similarly, the child-victims of the earlier fiction tend to give way to more vigorous adolescent or youthful characters who are in far less danger of dying than their former counterparts had been.
Pip, Estella and Bella Wilfer, for instance, never show signs of any inclination to go into a decline and in Amy Dorrit we may see a character who, despite her diminutive stature and frequent suffering, displays only resolution and strength in the face of difficulties that would have ensured the early Dickensian heroine a speedy passage to heaven.

Once characters have actually died, Dickens shows very little interest in them and, although no one but he could have given us such creations as Messrs Mould and Joram and their families, funerals are not particularly significant in the novels. Dickens himself had no time for the elaborations of the full Victorian funeral and his references to the lavish provisions made for Anthony Chuzzlewit (NC, 383-90) and Mrs Joe (GE, 298-301) are designed more for the purposes of satire than to evoke sorrow in his readers. Although he does display an early tendency to sentimentalization of the grave (OCS, 186-7), this soon gives way to the bitter realities of urban burial in Bleak House. Again, as with death-beds, Dickens shows even less interest in graves in the later novels.

By contrast, however, he is continually interested in the illnesses his major characters suffer and makes considerable use of the conventional reformative illness. This is largely metaphoric in its nature, which may well be the reason why he only occasionally describes the actual nature of a disease, despite the fact that he was a sufficiently precise observer for certain of his accounts of illness - notably that of Smike's "hectic fever" - to find their

17. See the directions he gave in his will for his own funeral, F, p. 859.
Such clinical accuracy is reserved for his minor characters; when major figures become ill he invariably selects a disease appropriate to their personalities and stories. This is true even when the illness is not one which leads to reform and thus Nell and Paul Dombey could only suffer gradual declines, while Mrs Skewton and Sir Leicester Dedlock seem almost to call for paralyzing strokes. Both in their nature and timing such illnesses owe more to the requirements of the story than to the chance occurrence of ordinary life and this becomes particularly apparent in the use Dickens makes of the reformative illness.

Although this is a highly conventional device and liable to abuse in the hands of weaker novelists, Dickens generally succeeds in employing it with both skill and subtlety. In The Old Curiosity Shop, for example, he resolves the problem of what to do with Dick Swiveller - who is not quite respectable enough for association with the novel's more orthodox characters but who clearly does deserve to be included in the happy ending - by putting him through a purgatorial illness and enabling him, through the Marchioness, to rescue Kit. The illness itself is surely the most delightful in all Dickens, bringing together, as it does, two of his most endearing characters, and it makes an importantly comic contrast with the much somber account of Nell's decline and death.

In Martin Chuzzlewit the purgatorial illness is used to bring the eponymous hero out of a state of moral and spiritual failure, although its effectiveness is limited by the poverty of Dickens's overall depiction of Martin. What, however, is interesting here is that the moment of repentance does not come on the sick-bed nor even

at the hour of death, as is often the case in Victorian fiction, but at quite a different stage of the illness. For - and this is Dickens's particular contribution to the convention - an essential point about the purgatorial illness is that the sufferer is always nursed through it by the character closest to him in the novel and, only in the convalescent phase, is inspired to repentance and reform by the selfless devotion of that nurse. Thus the process of change may be a gradual one, a dawning realization of past errors, and this is more convincingly naturalistic than the abrupt conversions many Victorian novelists insist upon. In *Chuzzlewit* the convention is given an additional twist by the fact that Mark falls ill and that Martin's reform is completed, not in convalescent tranquillity but in taking himself the role of nurse:

Now, when Martin began to think of this, and to look at Mark as he lay there; never reproaching him by so much as an expression of regret; never murmuring; always striving to be manful and staunch; he began to think, how was it that this man who had had so few advantages, was so much better than he who had had so many? And attendance upon a sick bed, but especially the sick bed of one whom we have been accustomed to see in full activity and vigour, being a great breeder of reflection, he began to ask himself in what they differed. (596)

Martin's pondering continues throughout the months of their stay in Eden and eventually brings him (597) to an understanding of his own selfishness. Although this is still a long way from the subtlety of Dickens's rendering of guilt and reform in *Pip*, it is a far more serious business than the casual reform of Martin's eighteenth-century predecessors. Roderick Random, for example, may have come as close to death as Martin does, but this is not at all related to his later reform. Dickens requires a deeper level of self-knowledge in his characters than had Augustan novelists and makes greater moral demands upon his heroes than they had. Thus Martin's reform is the
only tangible result of the American phase of the novel and his quasi-picaresque mobility brings him moral health but does nothing to reproduce the eighteenth-century pattern of providing him with the wealth that will enable him to marry the heroine.

It would seem that Dickens believed most people to possess a core of goodness, a best self, and that his main purpose in using the reformative illness in his novels is to provide a shock that will return an erring character to that self. In Martin Chuzzlewit and, even more, in the characters of his mature fiction, he creates figures who have been seduced by the world into creating layers of unreality around themselves and who have thus lost sight of the essential truths of their lives. Martin is a rough prototype of this, but Dickens's interest in the pattern is evident both from the Christmas Books and in his next major novel.

Paul Dombey is one of the best examples of this type, since, by any worldly standard, he is a successful man but he has also, of course, stifled his emotional life through coldness and jealousy. He does, indeed, seem to one of those to whom Carlyle was speaking in 1843:

Thou there, the thing for thee to do is, if possible, to cease to be a hollow sounding-shell of hearsays, egoisms, purblind dilettantisms; and become, were it on the infinitely small scale, a faithful discerning soul. Thou shalt descend into thy inner man, and see if there be any traces of a soul there; till then there can be nothing done! O brother, we must if possible resuscitate some soul and conscience in us, exchange our dilettantisms for sincerities, our dead hearts of stone for living hearts of flesh. 19

For Dombey there is to be no Morrison's Pill but, instead, he will be saved by Florence's continuing love. Unusually, however, Dickens anticipates this eventual salvation by subjecting Dombey

to an accident and revealing his potential for reform even before
the plot reaches its climax in Edith's flight. Florence's view of
her father asleep after his fall is perhaps essential both to sustain
the reader's belief in the credibility of her continuing love and to
make Dombey's final redemption less melodramatically forced:

She had never seen his face in all her life, but there
had been upon it - or she fancied so - some disturbing
consciousness of her. She had never seen his face in all
her life, but hope had sunk within her, and her timid
glance had drooped down before its stern, unloving, and
repelling harshness. As she looked upon it now, she saw
it, for the first time, free from the cloud that had
darkened her childhood. Calm, tranquil night was reigning
in its stead. He might have gone to sleep, for anything
she saw there, blessing her. (583)

This, which may be compared with the tranquil look upon William
Dorrit's face in death (LD, 631), marks an escape from a very
different kind of emotional failure than that associated with the
eighteenth-century hero, and Dickens has clearly developed his own,
essentially Victorian variation of the penitential illness.

However, his use of the convention as a device to redeem an
erring character is restricted and, while it will save Dombey, there
are several other characters in the novel who will be less fortunate.
Villains in Dickens may suffer feverish delirium in the panic of
their last moments, but they are never allowed to recover and lead
reformed lives, so that Carker, for example, is somewhat excessively
punished for abuse of his position and attempted adultery. Even less
mercy is shown towards women: Dickens's standard of womanhood is so
high that those who fall from it may reform but cannot be allowed
full recovery. Thus Edith, who may strike us as more sinned against
than sinning, loses Florence's love (which she probably deserves rather
more than does Dombey) and is written off into Sicilian exile. Alice
Marwood, another victim of the Dombey family, is granted an opportunity
to repent and is then ushered out of this world.

This uncompromising attitude is surely an extension of Dickens's insistence upon an ideally pure femininity and may be related here to his depiction of the woman as nurse. This itself is a development of his stress on the nursing role in *Chuzzlewit* and it comes to be perhaps the most important indicator of the relationship between the heroes and heroines of his later novels. Professional nursing is not, of course, relevant here, for Mrs Gamp was seen by Dickens's contemporaries as all too true a picture of reality, but genuinely caring attendance in the sick-room is one of the highest vocations a Victorian novelist can bestow upon a character. George Eliot describes this in terms which revealingly echo Dickens's language in *Chuzzlewit*:

> As we bend over the sick-bed, all the forces of our nature rush towards the channels of pity, of patience, and of love, and sweep down the miserable choking drift of our quarrels, our debates, our would-be wisdom, and our clamorous selfish desires. This blessing of serene freedom from the importunities of opinion lies in all simple direct acts of mercy, and is one source of that sweet calm which is often felt by the watcher in the sick-room, even when the duties there are of a hard and terrible kind. 20

Even in the early novels, there are many such watchers, from Nancy who tends Bill Sikes lovingly (*OT*, 258) to Kate Nickleby who brings the insufferable Madeline through the illness which follows (822) upon her rescue from marriage to Grinde. However, it is in the mature fiction that this role comes to have its full importance for Dickens.

Florence Dombey's patient care of first her brother and then her father both anticipates the work of her Crimean namesake and is

also to be contrasted with the behaviour of the other principal female character in the novel, Edith. It may be noticed that, together with Polly who is a second mother to Paul, she supplies the affection that is missing in her brother's life and tends him through his last illness. She later plays a similar role with her father, rescuing him from suicide and then caring for him in his subsequent recovery. Edith, however, shows affection for neither her husband (her indifference to his accident is explicitly contrasted with Florence's concern) nor her mother. The depth of the gulf between parent and child may be indicated by Mrs Skewton's last words to her daughter, "For I nursed you!" (561), a remark that fails to generate any affection at the last but which does suggest the link between the two roles of mother and nurse in Dickens's mind.

The significance of this connection becomes most fully apparent in *Little Dorrit* and in Amy's contrasting relationships with her father and Clennam. This is a novel full of sick people, though, and in contrast to *Bleak House*, they are usually more mentally than physically disturbed, and to many of them Amy brings a healing touch. She is a permanent nurse to Maggy and she cares for her brother when he is sick in Sicily with such effectiveness that even the languid Fanny can find time to praise her: "There are times when my dear child is a little wearing to an active mind; but, as a nurse, she is Perfection. Best of Amys!" (677). But it is her nursing of her father and her future husband that is to be most important. She alone sustains Dorrit in the Marshalsea and Dickens emphasizes the value of this in what is, for him, an uncharacteristic use of classical allusion:
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. (222)

The reference to Euphrasia effectively suggests, without stating directly, the complexity of Amy's relationship with her father and she may perhaps derive as much security from this nursing role as does he. However, and in contrast with Dombey and Son, where Florence's marriage to Walter does not convince us that she has truly liberated herself from her father, Amy is finally to succeed in creating a more fully adult relationship with Clennam. The nature of that relationship, however, is not so very different from the one she had had with her father:

As he embraced her, she said to him, "They never told me you were ill," and drawing an arm softly round his neck, laid his head upon her bosom, put a hand upon his head, and resting her cheek upon that hand, nursed him as lovingly, and GOD knows as innocently, as she had nursed her father in that room when she had been but a baby, needing all the care from others that she took of them. (736)

For Clennam, too, this is a recovery of the lost past:

Yet Clennam, listening to the voice as it read to him, heard in it all that great Nature was doing, heard in it all the soothing songs she sings to man. At no other Mother's knee but hers, had he ever dwelt in his youth on hopeful promises, on playful fancies, on the harvests of tenderness and humility that lie hidden in the early-fostered seeds of the imagination; on the oaks of retreat from blighting winds, that have the germs of their strong roots in nursery acorns. But, in the tones of the voice that read to him, there were memories of an old feeling of such things, and echoes of every merciful and loving

21. On this, see, for example, Edmund Bergler, "Little Dorrit and Dickens' Intuitive Knowledge of Psychic Masochism", American Imago, 14 (1957), 371-88; Fleishman, op. cit., (see above, n. 50, p. 104); Eliot, Scenes from Clerical Life, pp. 383-4.
whisper that had ever stolen to him in his life. (790)

Just as Amy has replaced her father by a husband with whom she can continue to play her old part, so too Clennam has found a new and happier version of the relationship with his mother that has dogged his life. Both parents are, of course, dead at this point in the novel, but, by this re-creation of their former roles, Dickens insists upon their inescapable presence in Amy and Clennam's emotional lives. The hero and heroine's new version of those past relationships is without doubt a far more positive affair, but the very fact that it must be couched in the terms of the earlier ties reveals Dickens's refusal - or inability - to imagine his characters other than in terms of connection to their parents. That it is inability rather than merely refusal may be suggested by his stress upon Amy's innocence in cradling Clennam's head - even in this, surely the most convincing of all Dickens's courtships, there is very little sense of femininity as anything other than maternal feeling. Not until Great Expectations will Dickens openly emphasize the sexual character of the hero's desire for the heroine and then, of course, Estella will not play this quasi-maternal role and Pip's love for her will, in the original ending at least, remain only a consummation devoutly to be wished for.

The figure of the nurse thus takes a central place in Dickens's fiction and may be seen as a further aspect of that idealization of women which Dickens shared with many of his contemporaries and which has been effectively described by Alexander Welsh. In her role as the one who tends at the boundaries of life, the nurse is to be associated with the angels who wait on the other side of the bar. But in

Dickens, the nurse rarely loses her patient and, in general, is able to redeem him and lead him through illness and suffering to restored physical and, even more important, emotional health. This illness almost invariably comes just after the climax of the action and before the novel's dénouement and is followed by marriage between the nurse and her patient. She is, therefore, the earthly bride who resolves both the immediate crisis of the hero's life and, through marriage, the sexual turmoil of his desires for lover, sister and mother.

This, however, is a peculiarly Dickensian rendering of the type and may be contrasted with attitudes to nursing found in other Victorian novelists. Thackeray, for example, may indulge Amelia with a rather sickly description of the angelic nurse (Vanity Fair, 702), but he is rather more effectively realistic with his account of Becky's care for Miss Crawley (173). The limitations of the male conception of what nursing consists of are also suggested in Villette as Paul Emanuel's idealization is contrasted with Lucy's experience of the more basic realities of attendance upon the sick.23 But Dickens is not concerned with such mundane realism, since his purpose in the depiction of illness and nursing is to develop the relationship between hero and heroine in one particular way. If there is any limitation here, then it is in his whole conception of women and further evidence of this may be seen both in his treatment of the notion of earnestness and his physical descriptions of characters24 and also in the two novels discussed at the end of this thesis, David Copperfield and Great Expectations.

24. See below, chapters 6 and 7.
This emphasis upon the role of the nurse does much to explain the relative unimportance of the doctor in treating Dickens's ill characters. Indeed, Dickens's own comment, "The longer I live, the more I doubt the doctors"\textsuperscript{25} might be applied as much to his novels as to his opinion of medical advice on the healthiness of Undercliff where he was holidaying at the time. While he does not take his attacks on the profession to the lengths of his eighteenth-century predecessors, few of Dickens's fictional doctors do their patients much good and Dr Sangrado is never, perhaps, very far from his thoughts. Indeed, doctors play such a limited role in his novels that the most recent study of this topic is more a catalogue of the physicians Dickens creates than a critical discussion of their importance in his fiction.\textsuperscript{26} Similarly, Dickens hardly features at all in Philip Collins' lively survey of the part played by the medical profession in nineteenth-century novels\textsuperscript{27}, which seems curious in the light of his friendships with a number of prominent Victorian doctors.

Doctors in Dickens's novels, as in those of many of his contemporaries, can do little to help their patients. The ineffectual gentleman who attends Oliver Twist (\textit{OT}, 68-9) is but a kindly version of the type more bitterly satirized in \textit{Mary Barton}:

"Oh! much as all doctors say: he puts a fence on this side, and a fence on that, for fear he should be caught tripping in his judgement. One moment he does not think there's much hope - but while there is life there is hope; th'next he says he should think she might recover partial, but her age is again her. He's ordered her leeches to her head." (253)

\textsuperscript{25} \textit{F}, p. 502.


\textsuperscript{27} "Physicians in Victorian Fiction", an unpublished public lecture given at the University of Leicester in 1976.
Dickens hardly ever describes what treatment is ordered and the reader is thus never told whether a particular doctor is of the old cupping, blistering and bleeding school, or less bloody and more up-to-date in his methods. Similarly, he rarely makes the physician more than a temporary resident of the plot and does nothing to create a sense of the doctor as a vital part of the community, so that there is no Dickensian equivalent of Dr Gibson or George Eliot's rural apothecary, Dr Kimble:

Time out of mind the Raveloe doctor had been a Kimble; Kimble was inherently a doctor's name; and it was difficult to contemplate firmly the melancholy fact that the actual Kimble had no son, so that his practice might one day be handed over to a successor with the incongruous name of Taylor or Johnson. But in that case the wiser people in Raveloe would employ Dr Blick of Fitton - as less unnatural. 28

Dickens's doctors are instead only society practitioners - the Tumley Snuffims and Parker Peps's of his novels - whose principal characteristic is a well-heeled inability to do anything that might actually help their patients. Manner rather than matter is the secret of their success - as in Parker Peps's "round, deep, sonorous voice, muffled for the occasion, like the knocker" (D&S, 4) - but this lacks even the comforting effect Thackeray attributes to it:

It is not only for the sick man, it is for the sick man's friends that the Doctor comes. His presence is often as good for them as for the patient, and they long for him yet more eagerly. How we have all watched after him! what an emotion the thrill of his carriage-wheels in the street, and at length at the door, has made us feel! how we hang upon his words, and what a comfort we can get from a smile or two, if he can vouchsafe that sunshine to lighten our darkness. 29


This distrust in the efficacy of the medical profession may have been a fashionable attitude but it seems unlikely that it was wholly without foundation and it may be that Dickens's emphasis on simple nursing was not only an extension of his conception of femininity but also true to the facts of nineteenth-century medical knowledge.

Such, however, is not the whole case and his novels do contain a number of kindly and perhaps more effective doctors. Some of these are apothecaries (OT, 152-3, L&S, 190) who have none of the social pretensions of their more elevated seniors. Then again there are physicians or surgeons who make brief but effective appearances: Losberne in Oliver Twist and the Saint Bartholomew's surgeon who sets Cavalletto's leg (LD, 156-7) are examples of this. However, Dickens has only two important characters who are also doctors, Allan Woodcourt (who will be considered below in the discussion of Bleak House) and Physician.

Much - perhaps too much - has been written about this latter character. He is certainly unique in Little Dorrit for his abilities in perceiving the realities of life and bringing the deepest truths out of other characters (683-4). He is thus a more effective counsellor than even the clergyman - a point also made by Tom Thurnall in Two Years Ago (chapter 10, p. 161), and something which was perhaps especially true in a time of such religious diversity and uncertainty. However, it is easy to exaggerate Physician's significance in one's relief at finding one entirely trustworthy character in Little Dorrit and it should be noted that he is really only associated with Merdle, serving to provide the reader's one insight into the financier's buried.

30 A point made by E. Gaskell, op. cit., p. 3.
life. He has nothing at all to do with the novel's other principal characters and little is done to exemplify the insights Dickens attributes to him. He is, moreover, very much a unique figure in Dickens's novels and, in those which follow Little Dorrit, there is hardly a doctor of any significance (Manette's interest for the reader is as patient rather than physician).

In keeping with this attitude to doctors and the contrasting elevation of the nurse, Dickens has, in his fiction at least, very little time for hospitals. To enter a hospital is to admit that one has nobody closer to provide care and this is an idea Dickens voices as early as Sketches by Boz:

Who, but they who have felt it, can imagine the sense of loneliness and desolation which must be the portion of those who in the hour of dangerous illness are left to be tended by strangers; for what hands, be they ever so gentle, can wipe the clammy brow, or smooth the restless bed, like those of mother, wife, or child? 31

There is, in fact, only one other hospitalization in the major novels besides Johnny's in Our Mutual Friend (see above, p. 126), that of Cavalletto (LD, 205) who, being both poor and a foreigner, has no alternative but to take public help. But even he completes his recovery in Bleeding Heart Yard once he has been adopted by la padrona Flornish and become an unofficial part of her extended family. This lack of interest in the hospital reveals a contrast between Dickens as novelist and Dickens as editor of Household Words and public speaker. For he is clearly not concerned to use his novels to dramatize the actual state of public health and to raise support for the medical profession's attempts to improve it. His depiction

of public health is thus very different from that found in *Mary Barton, Two Years Ago*, or *Middlemarch*, for example, and he tends to emphasize the moral rather than the merely physical consequences of England's sickly state. This is something that is both consistent with his stress upon personal illness as a way to reform and is a theme that becomes of increasing importance in the later novels.

There are, however, indications of this use of disease as a metaphor for the condition of society in the earlier novels, especially in the neglected *Barnaby Rudge*. During the Gordon Riots Dickens sees London as ravaged by fever and conveys this through a powerful combination of images:

> Each party swelled as it went along, like rivers as they roll towards the sea; new leaders sprang up as they were wanted, disappeared when the necessity was over, and reappeared at the next crisis. Each tumult took shape and form from the circumstances of the moment; sober workmen, going home from their day's labour, were seen to cast down their baskets of tools and become rioters in an instant; mere boys on errands did the like. In a word, a moral plague ran through the city. The noise, and hurry, and excitement, had for hundreds and hundreds an attraction they had no firmness to resist. The contagion spread like a dread fever: an infectious madness, as yet not near its height, seized on new victims every hour, and society began to tremble at their ravings. (484)

Here, the infection is but temporary and order will be restored within a short space of time, but in the later novels Dickens will insist on disease as being an endemic state of society. *Bleak House* is the best-known example of this and will be discussed separately below, but in *Little Dorrit* Dickens also depicts a moribund England which, if less lethally infectious than that shown in the earlier novel, admits even smaller chance of escape.

In *Little Dorrit* speculation takes on the role played by rioting in *Barnaby* and Chancery in *Bleak House*, seizing upon both Pancks and Clennam (565-6) and leading to the latter's ruin. But society's per-
ception of Merdle is more profoundly awry than even the judgement of these hapless individuals:

Merdle! O ye sun, moon, and stars, the great man! The rich man, who had in a manner revised the New Testament, and had already entered into the kingdom of Heaven. The man who could have any one he chose to dine with him, and who had made the money! As he went up the stairs, people were already posted on the lower stairs, so that his shadow might fall upon them when he came down. So were the sick brought out and laid in the track of the Apostle - who had not got into the good society, and who had not made the money. (593)

Although Dickens cannot resist over-emphasizing his point, this is not without effect, since it is only one of many scriptural allusions in the novel which collectively "serve the purpose of contrasting the averred ideals of this community with its real aspirations." Moreover, Merdle is surely to be contrasted with Amy's healing of the sick and it is unlikely that chance alone determines the nature of her appeal to Mrs Clennam:

"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. We cannot but be right if we put all the rest away, and do everything in remembrance of Him. There is no vengeance and no infliction of suffering in His life, I am sure. There can be no confusion in following Him, and seeking for no other footsteps, I am certain." (770)

Amy cannot cure the ills Merdle creates in society but she can offer effective help to the individuals around her and it is perhaps a measure of the novel's qualified pessimism (or, equally, its qualified optimism) that she may do this much, but no more. However, even if this is a quietist attitude, revealing no sense that the wrongs of the world can be easily righted, it is at least

also a faith in the certainty of all ills finally being redeemed.

Finally, we may consider the importance of illness in one novel, *Bleak House*, where Dickens uses it as plot convention and theme more extensively than in any of his other works. For the novel contains numerous actual illnesses, some of which are essential to the workings of the plot; several major deaths and death-beds; a trio of contrasted doctors; a wide range of comments upon public health; and a continuous underlying theme of illness as a metaphor for the condition of England.

Illnesses play a considerable part in the plotting of the novel. Esther is first made an "orphan" by the death of her aunt and will, in the course of the story, lose both her parents. Her father's decline and death are, of course, crucial in initiating the sequence of events that will eventually lead to her mother's discovery and death. Jo's infectious fever, which (683) emblemsizes the corrupt state of English society, will also affect Esther and thus place a temporary obstacle in the development of her romance with Woodcourt. Her illness is an unusual one: not only is it the first instance in Dickens of the kind of subjective rendering of delirium that becomes increasingly important in his later novels, but also it is one of a very few cases in which a Dickensian heroine is allowed to survive a major illness. Lastly, Sir Leicester Dedlock is disabled by a stroke, yet not so severely as to prevent his forgiving his wife and seeking to rescue her. The importance of the role of illness in the plotting is thus apparent, though it should also be noted that it is very dependent upon coincidence. One example of this would be Woodcourt's having sold opium to Hawdon for eighteen months (190) and then arriving on the scene just after his customer's death.
While such use of coincidence is quite normal in Victorian fiction, what is unusual here is the way its effects are rarely benevolent, thus inverting David Goldknapf's notion of coincidence as a fictional representation of the workings of Providence in the world, and this seems entirely appropriate to a novel in which illness becomes almost a normal state of health.

An extension of this may be seen in the many deaths which occur in the novel. These range from that of Liz's baby (160), probably the most poignantly simple death in all Dickens, to such major set-pieces as those of Gridley and Jo. Uniquely in Dickens's fiction, some seven important characters die: Hawdon, Krook, Gridley, Jo, Tulkinghorn, Lady Dedlock, and Richard. Such wholesale slaughter of leading characters (Hawdon may be included because of his relevance to the plot, even though he makes no living entry to it) is unparalleled in Dickens. Moreover, only three of these deaths are accompanied by the traditional death-bed with its emphasis upon peace at the last and a sight of awaiting heaven. Hawdon, Krook, Tulkinghorn and Lady Dedlock die, as it were, off-stage and are only discovered in variously wretched circumstances. There is no dignity in their deaths, no final comfort, and, while it seems difficult to realize that Dickens was writing in this way a little over ten years after the death of little Nell, this does create an effective variation upon the reader's conventional expectations from a death-bed and thus intensifies the usefulness of a stock-effect.

In the face of so much illness and death, medical aid proves all but helpless, yet, if Bleak House is unusual for the amount of sickness it contains, so too it is distinguished for having a trio

of contrasting doctors - Bayham Badger, Skimpole, and Allan Woodcourt. It is also, of course, unique in Dickens's major fiction in having a doctor as its hero. However, two of these characters are, at least as doctors, of very little consequence. Bayham Badger's principal function in the plot is to provide an opportunity for Richard to try out one of the several professions he goes in for and, this and his subservience to his wife apart, he remains little more than a cut-out figure. Skimpole, by contrast, is anything but feebly depicted and gives a characteristically delightful account of his misspent employment as physician to a German prince (119). However, his less agreeable side is later revealed in his refusal to help Jo (489-91) and his taking a bribe from Bucket (832) which leads to Jo's forced flight from the care offered him and, indirectly, to his subsequent death. This is one of those points at which the reader's tolerance of - and, indeed, occasional delight in - Skimpole's levity breaks down completely, and his neglect of common human decency, let alone his abandoned profession, is to be contrasted strongly with those characters in the novel who go out of their way to tend the sick.

Woodcourt's case is rather more complicated, since Dickens evidently desires his readers to endorse him as both man and physician and so does his best to provide an entirely favourable account of his doctor-hero. But Woodcourt has so little to do in the plot and makes so little impact that Dickens is obliged to resort to an unconvincing, if not even ludicrous, description of his heroic behaviour in the shipwreck (555-6) - which has, of course, nothing to do with his professional talents - to give him any substance. Although he may also be contrasted favourably with Bayham Badger and Skimpole and is, indeed, a humbler and more earnest character than many of Dickens's doctors, this is not enough to give him any great
individual life of his own. He may be closely compared with Alfred Heathfield but this is not perhaps a strong recommendation for successful fulfilment of the role of male lead in a full-length novel.

Indeed, the problem with Woodcourt is that he is not really much of anything. By contrast with, say, Lydgate, he is virtually anonymous as a doctor, having a predilection for hopeless cases and invariably arriving on the scene when the patient is either already dead or rapidly dying. He does not effect a single cure and the utmost he can do forJo is to give him some comfort and, more importantly for Dickens, spiritual help at the end. Nor is he made a social reformer, working to improve the living conditions of the poor and to eradicate the physical causes of their diseases. While this is consistent with Dickens's emphasis throughout the novel that such disease is, at root, a moral problem of society and thus not to be solved by medical means alone, it does have the effect of leaving the hero in something of a professional vacuum. Moreover, Dickens is inconsistent in this, since, having for the bulk of the novel refused to make Woodcourt a reforming doctor in the manner of Tom Thurnall or Lydgate, he finally turns him into just this very type for the purposes of the epilogue. Not only is Esther's account of her husband's work weak in comparison with the power of illness as it has been felt throughout the novel, but there is also something lacking in their relationship. It has, of course, been developed in a very sketchy manner and one revealing instance of the problems this causes may be seen in Esther's illness. For this involves a

reversal of the usual situation in Dickens, since the heroine is the one who falls ill. Woodcourt, however, is far away at this stage of the novel and so can do nothing to help. Nor, one imagines, would Dickens want him to, as the essential point about the nursing relationship had been the heroine's redemption of a suffering, erring hero, something quite inapplicable to this novel and these two, excessively virtuous central characters.

Esther and Woodcourt, then, offer no solution to the ills revealed in *Bleak House* and any suggestion that these can be resolved by the conventional happy ending must ring hollow. The strength of the novel lies in its diagnosis of the state of England, not in any notion as to what will heal it, and it is the suffering we remember rather more than the glibly optimistic epilogue. Perhaps the saddest and most telling example of this is the ill-fortune that haunts poor Caddy Jellyby: from her first appearance she is unhealthy (85) as a result of overwork in the cause of Borioboola-Gha; overcoming this and, against all the odds, marrying happily, she then has a deaf and dumb baby (933) and her husband, who had always been weak (593), finally goes lame (933). Such a share of suffering is almost gratuitously harsh and certainly jars with Esther's unmixed final blessings. Yet it may also be seen as a piece of tough-minded realism and as an important contribution to making *Bleak House* Dickens's grimmest picture of nineteenth-century England and his most sustained and elaborate treatment of the many forms of the convention of illness.
Blessed is he who has found his work; let him ask no other blessedness. He has a work, a life-purpose; he has found it, and will follow it! How, as a free-flowing channel, dug and torn by noble force through the sour mud-swamp of one's existence, like an ever-deepening river there, it runs and flows; – draining-off the sour festering water, gradually from the root of the remotest grass-blade; making, instead of pestilential swamp, a green fruitful meadow with its clear-flowing stream. How blessed for the meadow itself, let the stream and its value be great or small, labour is Life: from the inmost heart of the Worker rises his god-given Force, the sacred celestial Life-essence breathed into him by Almighty God; from his inmost heart awakens him to all nobleness, – to all knowledge, 'self-knowledge' and much else, so soon as Work fitly begins. ¹

As so often, Carlyle voices the spirit of his age: nothing, perhaps, is so characteristic of the early and mid-Victorian period as this belief in work as life-fulfilling, therapeutic and, ultimately, religious.² The work ethic included, however, not only mere labour but also a range of associated moral and emotional qualities – duty, resolution, self-denial and, most important of all, earnestness:

Next day the author of all this hubbub was actually christened. Theobald had proposed to call him George after old Mr Pontifex, but strange to say, Mr Pontifex overruled him in favour of the name Ernest. The word 'earnest' was just beginning to come into fashion, and he thought the possession of such a name might, like his having been baptised in water from the Jordan, have a permanent effect

¹ Past and Present, III, ii, p. 190.
² Houghton, The Victorian Frame of Mind, chapter 10, "Earnestness", has the most complete discussion of this topic.
upon the boy's character, and influence him for good during the more critical periods of his life.

Although the name is to prove less than efficacious, Ernest's grandfather was certainly alive to the moral climate of the age, since this takes place in 1835 and just when the new fashion for earnestness was taking off.

It would be surprising if the most popular novelist of the century were untouched by this ethic and, indeed, we are told by Mary Weller that it worked its influence upon him long before his thoughts can have turned to his future career:

A rather favourite piece for recital by Charles at this time was "The Voice of the Sluggard", from Dr Watts, and the little boy used to give it with great effect, and with such action and such attitudes.

Dickens may not have always taken the good Doctor with such seriousness - he is, for example, quite content to parody him through the person of Miss Monflathers in The Old Curiosity Shop (308-9) - but this is not to say that he was anything but at one with his age in its belief in work. The story of how he first came to aspire towards Gad's Hill Place is well known and both work and earnestness were, to him, vital parts of life.

Two references to Macready, one of his closest and most admired friends, bear this out well. Remonstrating with Overs in 1841, he described Macready as

a man who by long study, liberal education, incessant application and constant self-denial, combined with

divers physical and mental gifts, has raised himself, slowly and in the course of years, to the summit of an art in which few attain to excellence. 6

By 1856, however, Macready had retired into rural solitude, a sight which, as Dickens wrote to Forster, deeply saddened him:

It fills me with pity to think of him away in that lonely Sherborne place. I have always felt of myself that I must, please God, die in harness, but I have never felt it more strongly than in looking at, and thinking of, him. However strange it is to be never at rest, and never satisfied, and ever trying after something that is never reached, and to be always laden with plot and plan and care and worry, how clear it is that it must be, and that one is driven by an irresistible might until the journey is worked out! 7

For Dickens, there could be no question of rusting unburnished and, indeed, it is surely clear that he was one of those many Victorians who found in work a refuge from spiritual despair. 8 Orwell's contention that Dickens "has no idea of work" 9 will, then, need some qualification and may be seen to be only partially true.

However, for Dickens there was something more important than mere work and this was that utterly Victorian quality of earnestness. Although the word has now lost much of its earlier force, both before and during the Victorian period it had an important function as an intensifier and this sense of intensity became a part of its more developed nineteenth-century meaning. To be earnest was to be deeply and morally serious and to be entirely sincere in whatever one did. It was fundamentally a religious quality, even if it nevertheless retained enormous power for agnostics such as George Eliot, and it

6. 23 November 1841, E, ii, 427.
was certainly felt as such by Dickens. Writing to Charles Watson in 1844, he stressed its importance to his writing:

I run into /Blank verse/, involuntarily and unconsciously, when I am very much in earnest. I even do so, in speaking. I am not prepared to say that this may not be a defect in prose composition; but I attach less importance to it than I do to earnestness. 10

His advice to Emmely Gotschalk to fill her life with "active sympathy and cheerful usefulness" is rounded off with a revealing emphasis upon earnestness:

Be earnest - earnest - in life's reality and do not let your life, which has a purpose in it - every life upon the earth has - fly by while you are brooding over mysteries. The mystery is not here, but far beyond the sky. The preparation for it, is in doing duty. Our Saviour did not sit down in this world and muse, but labored and did good. In your small domestic sphere, you may do as much good as an Emperor can do in his. 11

For Dickens, earnestness seems to be an essentially feminine quality, marked by purity of heart, gentleness rather than gentility, and distance from the things of this world. It is, therefore, embodied in his heroines who, through their roles as domestic angels and tenders of the sick, may transmit something of it to their erring hero-lovers and thus redeem them from the struggles of worldly life. This is not to say that the hero may not be earnest himself, but the real force of the quality is invariably located in the heroine and this has an important effect upon the place of work in Dickens's fiction. For the emotional earnestness of the Dickensian heroine may be seen to be a passive, Christian quietude whose furthest ambition is to endure, not to reform, this world, and we find little, for

10. 25 April 1844, p, iv, 113.

11. N, ii, 203. The connection between this and David Copperfield (which Dickens was writing at the time) will be discussed below in chapter 8.
example, of George Eliot's sense of a contrast between reformist idealism and a final notion that "the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistorical acts" (Middlemarch, 896).

The tendency of Dickens's plots is to move hero and heroine towards a final union that will simultaneously take them away from the cares of the mundane world and, although the hero may well work during the course of his story, this will neither be essential to his final success nor will it often be important in the epilogue's projection of his future life. Orwell's comment that Dickens's "heroes work in order to make a living and to marry the heroine, not because they feel a passionate interest in one particular subject"¹² is surely to the point and it is remarkable how little attention is paid to the careers of these characters. Indeed, Dickens shows very little interest in reflecting those changes in professional life that were doing so much to alter the status of the middle classes in nineteenth-century England. There is but one doctor in the major fiction and his limitations as an example of a professional type have already been suggested.¹³ The idea of a young lawyer seems quite incompatible with Dickens's habitual description of the legal world and, when two do appear in Our Mutual Friend, their professional lives are of little significance to the novel. As for the other newly dignified careers - such as architecture or the various kinds of engineering - Dickens has almost nothing to say, although it is worth noting that Edwin Drood intended, typically of his age, to set out for Egypt as an engineer. More usually, however, Dickens shows little concern with the relationship between the individual career and public life, so that we find in him nothing of that

¹³ See above, pp. 148-50.
Victorian sense of duty, which pushed forward social effort at a time when the individual and not the state was modelling a new society. The individual responds to the challenge of his environment through integrity of character. Private and public life interact. \(^{14}\)

There may, therefore, be in Dickens some inconsistency between the ideals of work and earnestness and this becomes increasingly apparent in his later fiction. Theoretically, such need not be the case, since the Puritan ethic would appear to accommodate earnestness as an aspect of work, but, in fact, for Dickens the two come to be divided. The reason for this may be seen in the distinction he makes between the social and domestic worlds: while he develops an ever greater distrust of and disbelief in the total social order, at the same time he retains a belief in the home and in the presence there of the earnest heroine who embodies qualities that have no place or role in the world outside. This is, perhaps, one of the most important themes of his fiction and plays a major part in it from the early picaresque novels until at least *Great Expectations*.

One of the limitations of both *Nicholas Nickleby* and *Martin Chuzzlewit* is Dickens's failure to take any great interest in depicting the working lives of his eponymous heroes. They may thus, as Michael Slater has remarked, be contrasted with such figures as Squeers and Mrs Gamp, whose work is vital to their mythic status. \(^{15}\) Neither of these two gentleman-picaros come into the good things of life by the sweat of their brows and they are, in fact, established in comfort by external benevolence combined with a legacy. Even though they may take some occupation during the course of the plot,


\(^{15}\) Introduction to the Penguin edition of *Nickleby*, p. 13.
this is very much a token offering and is more to be valued for the characteristics it reveals than as productive work likely to achieve actual results. There is little sense of a career as part of the hero's life and working, as Alexander Welsh has put it, is seen "not as an experience but as a moral score." Although there is also little sign of the fully-developed earnest heroine, there are suggestions of a prototype in Kate Nickleby and, even more, Mary Graham. Moreover, and perhaps more importantly, some indications of why Dickens should have later evolved such a heroine may be seen even in these early novels.

In merely numerical terms, Nicholas Nickleby is the most experienced of all Dickens's heroes, since he has some four jobs before his final retirement to the country. However, none of these lasts more than a very short time and all of them are introduced to the plot for reasons which have very little to do with Nicholas' making his way in life. This is patently true of his teaching at Dotheboys, his tutoring the Kenwigs children and his theatrical interlude and, though his willingness to turn his hand to anything may be admirable, it is also both a simple legacy from eighteenth-century picaresque and a device for him to mark time until Dickens turns up something more substantial. His eventual niche in the bourgeoisie is also anticipated by the reasons he gives for not wishing to return to Crummles:

Independently of those arising out of its spare and precarious earnings, and his own internal conviction that he could never hope to aspire to any great distinction, even as a provincial actor, how could he carry his

16. The City of Dickens, p. 78. Professor Welsh's discussion here, chapter 5, "Work", pp. 73-85, has been of considerable value to my own study.
sister from town to town, and place to place, and debar her from any other associates than those with whom he would be compelled, almost without distinction, to mingle? (530)

Dickens solves his hero's dilemma by providing the Cheerybles but their inane benevolence can no more be regarded as introducing Nicholas to a real working world than could his experiences in Yorkshire. Ultimately, he is freed from any necessity of even appearing to work by Madeline's inheritance of £12,000 (911) and is thus also enabled to make the morally righteous gesture of refusing to touch his uncle's money (931). The contrast is somewhat facile and Dickens makes rather uncritical use of the familiar convention of the fortuitous legacy to provide hero and heroine with suitably "laundered" money that will allow them to withdraw from the social world into a timeless domestic paradise. 17 At this stage of his career, Dickens was willing to use both fictional convention and related social assumptions quite uncritically and he thus presents Nicholas as an example of the orthodox Victorian conception of the gentleman: "an amalgam which included gentle birth, the ownership of land and if possible of money also, some degree of education, courage and a high sense of honour, generosity and unselfishness." 18 Work, however, forms no part of Nicholas' final identity and, like his eighteenth-century predecessors, once he no longer has to work he appears to forget that he has ever actually done so.

Martin Chuzzlewit, who in many ways is Nicholas cast in a different plot, is subjected to rather more critical inquiry and

17. See above, pp. 29-32.
is at least given some shortcomings to overcome but, in the end, is endorsed as fully as his predecessor had been. His working life is even less significant than Nicholas', however, and contributes neither to his moral reform nor to his eventual success: he neither wants to become an architect nor is his success in designing the grammar-school in the least credible. His real ambition, of course, is to preserve his own social status\(^\text{19}\) and in this he may be simply continuing that "assimilation of the picaresque format to the expression of a bourgeois world view influenced to varying degrees by aristocratic ideological assumptions" which Richard Bjornson has seen as typical of eighteenth-century European picaresque fiction.\(^\text{20}\)

This, however, may be contrasted both with the novels of Dickens's later career (in particular, with \textit{Great Expectations}) and with the work of his contemporaries.

George Eliot, for example, treats a similar theme very differently in her depiction of Fred Vincy. Like Martin, he is educated as a gentleman and has to learn that the world does not owe him a living. But, where Martin escapes from his difficulties with some ease, Fred first has his great expectations disappointed and then has to make a career for himself with Caleb Garth. And he begins, not by dashing off a grammar-school, but by measuring a field for the new railway (605) and learning to make his gentleman's handwriting legible (611-2).

Similarly, Mrs Craik's \textit{John Halifax}, an exemplar of bourgeois self-help, is made to struggle long and hard for his eventual success.\(^\text{21}\)

\(19.\) See above, pp. 42-4.
\(20.\) \textit{The Picaresque Hero in European Fiction}, p. 244.
\(21.\) Robin Gilmour, "Dickens and the Self-Help Idea", in John Butt and I.F. Clarke, eds., \textit{The Victorians and Social Protest} (North Pomfret, VT: David and Charles, 1973), pp. 71-101, has a useful discussion of this novel and in general explores the work-ethic in Dickens from a different position than that taken here.
One significant aspect of Mrs Craik's characterization is her emphasis upon John's religion and he is thus made to qualify the idea of self-help by seeing himself as "what God made me, and what, with His blessing, I will make myself." So too, he must, of course, be a gentleman and it is not without importance that his future wife, herself a member of the upper classes, cries out, "You have but showed me what I shall remember all my life - that a Christian only can be a true gentleman" (chapter 17, p. 224). The link between self-help and religion was a commonplace of nineteenth-century versions of the work ethic, but, although it also appears in Dickens, it does so rather differently from such orthodox renderings as this. Despite her apparently assured blend of religious and social values, it may be felt that Mrs Craik does not, in fact, resolve one of the most habitual Victorian oppositions, that between the trader and the gentleman. John has a measure of distaste for the tanning trade from the outset and, revealingly, never seems to lose this, so that he can later say that it "is only my calling, not me" (chapter 16, p. 209). The implications of such an opposition are, of course, major, but the author seems to find them too much for her and so quietly drops the matter. Her novel thus leaves the distinct impression of an unresolved conflict between the hero's two natures, those of the trader and the gentleman, a contrast it had ostensibly set out to deny.

There may also be something of this in at least the early Dickens and particularly in Martin Chuzzlewit. For Dickens never suggests any limitation in Martin's conception of social relations and even uses him as a mouthpiece to attack American commercialism.

when (409-10) he disdainfully ignores Lafayette Kettle's comment on knowing the value of one's produce. Moreover, Martin's gentility (or his early want thereof) is seen in emotional and moral terms and not as a mark of social status so that Dickens not only has little time for commercial values but he also makes his hero's progress entirely separate from mundane worldly success. Unfortunately, however, there still remains a need to endow Martin with wealth at the end of the story and so Dickens falls back again on the conventional figure of the benevolent relative and thus leaves a continuing discrepancy between his conception of the gentleman as a moral value and as social category.

A potential but, in this novel, undeveloped way out of this dilemma lies in the person of the earnest heroine. Like Kate Nickleby, Mary Graham endures all the trials that are put upon her and is thus contrasted with "the common metal of love-worn young ladies":

But she had been reared up in a sterner school than the minds of most young girls are formed in; she had had her nature strengthened by the hands of hard endurance and necessity; had come out from her young trials constant, self-denying, earnest, and devoted: had acquired in her maidenhood... something of that nobler quality of gentle hearts which is developed often by the sorrows and struggles of matronly years, but often by their lessons only. (297)

Mary cannot really be convincing because so little is seen of her and because Martin's reform takes place without her aid, but Dickens's early conception of a character type that will become central to his subsequent novels is, nevertheless, clear. However, before going on to study the heroines of Dombey and Son, Bleak House and Little Dorrit, and the relation of their earnestness to other forms of the work ethic, something must first be said about little Nell.
Although Nell is a unique creation, she does have certain qualities which are also to be found in Dickens's other earnest heroines and, in particular, she has a religious significance not found in Mary Graham, perhaps, but essential to Florence Dombey and Amy Dorrit. The word "earnest" and its collocations appear over fifty times in *The Old Curiosity Shop*, a considerable increase in comparison with Dickens's previous novels, and Nell, together with Kit Nubbles, accounts for approximately half of its appearances.

Nell herself is never anything but earnest and, through its associations with her, the word comes to take on far richer implications than it has had previously in Dickens. As she remarks to her grandfather, "if ever anybody was true at heart, and earnest, I am. I am sure you know I am" (247). In her care for him, she both recalls Kate Nickleby's earnest nursing of Madeline (NN, 822) and anticipates the tender heroines of the later novels:

> When he could for a moment disengage his mind from the phantom that haunted and brooded on it always, there was his young companion with the same smile for him, the same earnest words, the same merry laugh, the same love and care that sinking deep into his soul seemed to have been present to him through his whole life. (119-20)

Arthur Clennam will feel the same way as a result of Amy's care (LD, 790, quoted above, pp. 137-8), but the *Curiosity Shop* is not a novel in which the nurse will save either her patient or herself. For Nell's progress is, of course, one towards not life but death and, the closer she comes to her goal, the more earnest she is seen to be. She gazes at the village church earnestly (479), is fascinated by its appropriateness as a place to die in (482), and duly vanishes from life:

> For the rest, she had never murmured or complained; but, with a quiet mind, and manner quite unaltered - save that she every day became more earnest and more
grateful to them - faded like the light upon a summer's evening. (655)

It may well have been the description of Nell's death-bed that Dickens had in mind when he wrote to Watson to contrast the technical merits of blank verse with its expression of his earnestness, and through Nell the idea of earnestness is hallowed and gains a religious value which is seen to increase in direct proportion to her distance from the world. The frequent allusions to Bunyan during the course of the novel and its general structuring as a latter-day Pilgrim's Progress reinforce this sense of the essentially unworldly quality of earnestness in Dickens's mind and may be contrasted with the more material progresses of his gentlemen-picaros.

It should, however, be noted that this passive, quietist version of earnestness is a peculiarly Dickensian belief and would not, for instance, have been shared by Charlotte Brontë. For Jane Eyre, St. John Rivers' earnestness is powerfully and awfully compelling:

In the prayer following the chapter, all his energy gathered - all his stern zeal woke: he was in deep earnest, wrestling with God, and resolved on a conquest. He supplicated strength for the weak-hearted; guidance for the wanderers from the fold: a return, even at the eleventh hour, for those whom the temptations of the world, and the flesh were luring from the narrow path. He asked, he urged, claimed the boon of a brand snatched from the burning. Earnestness is ever deeply solemn: first, as I listened to that prayer, I wondered at his; then, when it continued and rose, I was touched by it, and at last awed. He felt the greatness and goodness of his purpose so sincerely: others who heard him plead for it, could not but feel it too. 24

No Dickensian heroine will bring such vigour to her earnestness and Nell, in particular, is conceived in an entirely different and altogether milder manner.

Throughout the novel, there is a suggestion that to remain in the earthly city imposes an inevitable limit on the degree of earnestness one may attain. Nell's attendant group of characters are all on occasion described as earnest but, besides the fact that they are a most dreary lot, they obviously have none of the aura that surrounds her as she moves towards death. The less savoury characters are, not surprisingly, rather less in earnest: Samson and Sally Brass would appear never to have heard of the word, while Quilp only uses it with mocking irony (449). However, this also introduces a problem that will become increasingly important in Dickens's novels, the fact that not only are such characters as Quilp (and also, for example, Jonas Chuzzlewit, Carker and Uriah Heep) far more realistic instances of the success of the work ethic than Dickens's heroes, but also they embody qualities of vigour, strength, resolution and dynamic energy that are undeniably of value but which find no place in Dickens's conception of earnestness. There are, of course, partial exceptions to this, but in general it remains true to say that Dickensian earnestness is a passive quality which is marked by disengagement from the social world and an alternative emphasis upon the values of the hearth and home.

It may also be noted that this earnestness tends to be kept distinct from the comic characters of the novels. Thus here Dick Swiveller is only allowed to be earnest and to associate with the Nell group after he has suffered his mild case of reformative illness and when he is endeavouring to rescue Kit from prison and transportation (586). This will also be true in Dickens's subsequent novels and it would clearly suggest that his version of earnestness does not include that "evident possession of Christian joyousness" which was frequently an essential part of Victorian seriousness and which
made it far less drab a creed than it might at first appear.\(^{25}\)

Between them, Forster and Lord Jeffrey saw how Florence Dombey both looks back to little Nell and yet also anticipates the still muted but rather less passive heroines of Dickens's later novels.\(^{26}\) Thus, like Nell, she seems to do nothing without being in earnest but also, like Mary Graham, she has "all the firmness and self-reliance of a character that her sad experience had prematurely formed" (76). The combination is not entirely convincing here, since Florence seems to grow from childhood to adulthood without any intervening adolescence and the chronology of the novel, as we have seen\(^{27}\), functions to shield her from the real horrors of life in the Dombey family. However, this slightly unrealistic depiction is perhaps essential to Dickens's conception of her earnestness and his emphasis upon her sheer innocence. If she does not quite trail clouds of glory, there is no question of the importance of her childlike innocence in preserving "the natural affection of a true and earnest nature" (579) which is her most characteristic feature. Although it is her fate for much of the novel to be earnest with those who cannot respond to her (such as Mrs Chick, 239), she preserves her fundamental nature:

Timid and retiring as her solitary life had made her, it had not embittered her sweet temper, or her earnest nature. A child in innocent simplicity; a woman in her modest self-reliance, and her deep intensity of feeling; both child and woman seemed at once expressed in her fair face and fragile delicacy of shape, and gracefully to mingle there; as if the spring should be unwilling to depart when summer came, and sought to blend the earlier beauties of the flowers

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27. See above, pp. 88-9.
with their bloom. But in her thrilling voice, in her calm eyes, sometimes in a certain ethereal light that seemed to rest upon her head, and always in a certain pensive air upon her beauty, there was an expression, such as had been seen in the dead boy... (624)

This, in a nutshell, is the earnest Dickensian heroine and some or all of these qualities will be found in each example of the type, from Agnes Wickfield to Amy Dorrit. The intense calm, innocence and, despite that unfortunate ethereal light, saintliness of these maidens are their most important characteristics. No less significant, however, are their chosen roles in life, since, Nell apart, they devote themselves not to self-help but to aiding and protecting the men they love. Florence, of course, spends much of her novel caring for Paul and her father and the contrast between the strength of her feelings in these two relationships and her rather less evident enthusiasm for Walter does much to explain what is wrong with the courtship plot in Dombey.

Florence is evidently to be contrasted with Edith who, for Dickens, has been too corrupted to be fully rescued. Edith fails as daughter, mother and wife and thus has no place in Dickens's ideas on the roles available to women, a point she conveniently endorses: "The germ of all that purifies a woman's breast, and makes it true and good, has never stirred in mine, and I have nothing else to sustain me when I despise myself" (382). She is, however, sufficiently amenable to Florence's influence to reveal the remnants of enough maternal qualities to be partially redeemed at the end of the novel. But it is notable that this influence in effect subdues the very qualities that make Edith what she is:

Was this the woman whom Florence - an innocent girl, strong only in her earnestness and simple truth - could so impress and quell, that by her side she was another creature, with her temper of passion hushed, and her very pride itself subdued? (409)
Although, as Alexander Welsh has said, "truth becomes the single value of widest currency in the nineteenth century"\textsuperscript{28}, we should perhaps be chary of accepting uncritically a scheme of values which not only plays down the importance of the more forceful human emotions but also presents them as rather simplistic moral catagories. This, nevertheless, is clearly what Dickens requires of his readers in their response to Edith, so that it is not without significance that the failure of her attempt to treat with Dombey should see her temporary "pale blank earnestness vanish like a mist" (545), nor that she will be eventually lost to Florence:

Little by little she receded from Florence, like the retreating ghost of what she had been; little by little, the chasm between them widened and grew deeper; little by little, all the power of earnestness and tenderness she had shown, was frozen in the bold, angry hardihood with which she stood, upon the brink of a deep precipice unseen by Florence, daring to look down. (623-4)

Florence is by her very nature unable either to perceive that precipice or to look into it and, while this is vital to the preservation of her innocence, it also suggests a certain limitation in the ideal of which she is such an exemplar.

This is further apparent in the development of the romance between Florence and Walter Gay. Walter himself is entirely earnest and dutiful - "If I do my duty, I do what I ought, and do no more than all the rest" (263) - and, indeed, is far too much so for there ever to have been any real possibility of Dickens's having made him go wrong.\textsuperscript{29} Although his worldly success belongs more to the fortuitous world of eighteenth-century picaresque than it originates in the Victorian work ethic, his earnestness is undoubtedly an essential

\textsuperscript{28} The City of Dickens, p. 168. Welsh's discussion throughout chapter 10, "The Spirit of Love and Truth", pp. 164-79, is relevant to the theme of this chapter.

\textsuperscript{29} F, p. 473.
qualification for both that success and Florence's hand. Similarly, although they are to marry as adults, his conception of her remains closely tied to Dickens's own emphasis upon her earnest innocence:

In a word, Walter found out that to reason with himself about Florence at all, was to become very unreasonable indeed; and that he could do no better than preserve her image in his mind as something precious, unattainable, unchangeable, and indefinite—indefinite in all but its power of giving him pleasure, and restraining him like an angel's hand from anything unworthy. (216)

 Appropriately, their relationship long remains that of brother and sister and, indeed, never really becomes anything else. Dickens attempts to create a transition from this status to that of young lovers (675-9) but it can hardly be said to succeed and, in fact, their responses to one another are couched in terms which exactly prevent it from being convincing. For each continually insists upon the earnestness of his feelings and, since such earnestness has been consistently defined as non and even anti-sexual in its nature, this has the effect of subverting Dickens's intentions and of keeping Florence and Walter in much the same kind of relationship as they have previously had.

If earnestness in Dombey and Son is thus seen as divorced from romantic and sexual feeling, it also has little place in the everyday world of the novel and Dombey might even be seen as an early version of that image of a society lacking in earnestness that is so prominent a part of Dickens's writing in the 1850's. Although we learn very little of the working lives of the characters, it is clear that neither earnestness nor the work ethic have much to do with their relative degrees of success or failure. Dombey and Carker are, in worldly terms, the two most successful characters in the novel, but Dickens is not so much interested in the work they do as in their
emotional failings towards their respective families. Similarly, the Toodles, while at the other end of the social scale, are measured not so much by their industriousness (although they do, in fact, work hard and are an image of ideal self-help) but rather by the emotional ties which make their family so much more successful than Dombey's. Thus, as is so often the case in Dickens, the values of the family take precedence over almost all other considerations and, in this particular instance, render the work ethic largely irrelevant to the reader's response to the novel.

There are, then, in Dombey two conflicts which focus a problem that has developed throughout Dickens's early fiction: the qualities which achieve worldly bourgeois success may well be inimical to those which ensure earnest purity of heart (although at the same time a need is felt to bestow wealth upon the earnest hero and heroine); and this earnest simplicity is itself something inviolable and evidently incompatible with many other qualities - notably those of comedy and sexuality - which play an important part in the novels. The endeavour to resolve this set of irreconcilable attitudes is a major theme of Dickens's fiction throughout the 1850's and appears most fully in Bleak House and Little Dorrit. Although David Copperfield's insistence upon the earnestness with which he pursues his career as a writer might lead one to think that he is the most characteristic spokesman for the quality in Dickens, it will be later argued that this is anything but the case and the novel will, therefore, not be considered here.30

Esther Summerson is, at first sight, the best exemplar of the work ethic in all Dickens. She takes her aunt's cold words very

30. See below, chapter 8.
much to heart and in fact regulates her whole life by them:

"Submission, self-denial, diligent work, are the preparations for a life begun with such a shadow on it. You are different from other children, Esther, because you were not born, like them, in common sinfulness and wrath. You are set apart." (65)

Just like Arthur Clennam, Esther is formed by this savagely righteous creed and comes to make diligence, order, industriousness and - here unlike Clennam, of course - domesticity the bases of her life. Indeed, that life does much to encourage her in this way of thinking:

Then I went on to think, as I dressed my hair before the glass, how often had I considered within myself that the deep traces of my illness, and the circumstances of my birth, were only new reasons why I should be busy, busy, busy - useful, amiable, serviceable, in all honest, unpretending ways. This was a good time, to be sure, to sit down morbidly and cry! (668)

Esther would thus seem to be giving herself the same advice as that Dickens offered Emmely Gotschalk, but, in fact, her attachment to the work ethic is motivated not so much by a belief in its positive values as by a sense of its capacity to give her life some purpose. Nor is this a purpose related to God's will in the universe, as was orthodox in Victorian treatments of the work ethic, but is associated with those characters upon whom she is emotionally dependent and thus seeks to please. In this, she certainly differs from Florence Dombey, since she embodies work rather more than spiritualized earnestness, and may also be distinguished from Amy Dorrit, who finally succeeds in combining the two qualities. Moreover, Esther often finds in work a refuge from realities she prefers not to face and her thoughts on Mrs Woodcourt reveal more than simple coyness:

Why was it so worrying to me to have her in our house, and confidential to me every night, when I yet felt it was better and safer, somehow, that she should be there
than anywhere else? These were perplexities and contradic-
tions that I could not account for. At least, if I could -
but I shall come to all that by and by, and it is mere
idleness to go on about it now. (470-1)

In all this, Esther might be contrasted with a close contem-
porary of hers, Lucy Snowe, who faces a similar situation with more
chilling realism:

My work had neither charm for my taste nor hold on my
interest; but it seemed to me a great thing to be without
heavy anxiety, and relieved from intimate trial. The
negation of severe suffering was the nearest approach
to happiness I expected to know. Besides, I seemed to
hold two lives - the life of thought, and that of reality;
and, provided the former was nourished with a sufficiency
of the strange necromantic joys of fancy, the privileges
of the latter might remain limited to daily bread, hourly
work, and a roof of shelter. (Chapter 8, p. 83)

The Dickensian heroine, not benefited with the advantages of a
life of thought and always committed to domestic joys, cannot
possibly accept such isolation and invariably strives to reach
out to those around her.

Esther might also be contrasted with Valentia St. Just of
Two Years Ago who is reformed by the influence and love of Frank
Headley, the local curate. In a crucial scene, she makes a cri de
coeur that cannot fail to affect her unrequited lover:

"You do not know - you do not know -. I have envied the
nuns their convents. I have envied Selkirk his desert
island. I envy now the milkmaids there below: anything
to escape and be in earnest, anything for some one to
 teach me to be of use! Yes, this cholera - and this
war - though only, its coming shadow has passed over
me - and your words too" - cried she, and stopped and
hesitated, as if afraid to tell too much - "they have
wakened me - to a new life - at least to the dream of
a new life!" (Chapter 20, p. 344)

If such writing does something to suggest why Kingsley is no
longer read, it also suggests how important a theme this was
during the 1850's. Esther, however, is little touched by it, since,
although she is undoubtedly serious and industrious, she cannot be said to be earnest, either in Kingsley's sense or in the way Dickens's heroines usually are. The problem with Esther is that, while we sympathize with her need to be diligent and to work hard, the nature of that need diminishes the value of these qualities as independent ideals. For she has none of the ethereal earnestness of Nell or Florence Dombey and, even though she is a far more fully realized character than either of them, this itself works against her, since it allows the reader to perceive her emotional dependence upon qualities which are, in theory, held up as ideals for simple endorsement. It must also be said that Esther is one of the least attractive of Dickens's heroines, however much we may sympathize with her, and this itself detracts from the appeal of the values she embodies. Even if Skimpole hardly has the right to criticize her, it is hard not to agree with him when he protests against the overweening assumptions of Bees. He didn't at all see why the busy Bee should be proposed as a model to him; he supposed the Bee liked to make honey, or he wouldn't do it - nobody asked him. It was not necessary for the Bee to make such a merit of his tastes.

(143)

Although he finally becomes an entirely disgusting character, on the way he displays a wonderfully imaginative irresponsibility which suggests a freedom Esther's notion of duty could never admit to exist and which brings a certain freshness into her rather claustrophobic world.

The most important contrast with Esther and her values is, however, made not through Skimpole but through Richard Carstone. Richard starts the novel with his world apparently before him: young, educated, energetic, everything seems possible to him and he is potentially an ideal development of the gentleman-picaros of
Dickens's early fiction. His is the greatest tragedy in the novel, since all this comes to nothing and he is, in a way that recalls the original plan for Walter Gay, brought to ruin and death. He himself attributes this failure to a single flaw in his character:

"My dear Mother Hubbard," he said, "that's the very thing! I have thought of that, several times; and have been quite angry with myself for meaning to be so much in earnest, and - somehow - not exactly being so. I don't know how it is; I seem to want something or other to stand by." (285)

Richard does not understand that earnestness is an essentially internal quality and that no one can give it to him; he is nearer the mark when he wishes (375) that he were more constant to himself, but recognizing the need brings him no nearer supplying it. For, "postponing his best truth and earnestness" (578), he is unable to live in the present and fulfil those ordinary duties of life on which Dickens (and Esther) place so much importance. He, like Skimpole, is one of those characters whose temporal maladjustment is "decisive in showing them to us as the characters they are."31 Lured into the ultimate fiction that is Jarndyce and Jarndyce and presenting an ironic contrast with the heroes of the early novels and their great expectations, he makes a sad picture of unnecessary waste:

"It can't last for ever", returned Richard, with a fierceness kindling in him which again presented to me that last sad reminder. "I am young and earnest; and energy and determination have done wonders many a time. Others have only half thrown themselves into it. I devote myself to it. I make it the object of my life." (582)

In all of this, Richard is clearly to be contrasted with Allan Woodcourt. Their attitudes to their professions are strikingly

different, Woodcourt travelling the world but with a constant purpose, while Richard vacillates and gets nowhere. They also pursue similar patterns in attempting to and finally succeeding in winning the hands of the women they love, but, where the one finds happiness and fulfilment in a northern industrial town, the other dies, broken by his struggles in Chancery. However, Woodcourt is a dull, lifeless creation and cannot compete with Richard's sparkling vitality so that, although the latter may be defined by his failure to be earnest, this should not be taken to mean that the contrast between the two men gives any new viability to the values of work and earnestness.

George H. Ford has penetratingly discussed Dickens's treatment of the work ethic in *Bleak House* and shown the ways in which, through the novel's less savoury characters, he presents some of the less attractive aspects of the ideal. 32 In considering Sir Leicester Dedlock, he points to "the persistent attacks made upon the Puritanism and mere respectability which the new middle class was imposing like a strait jacket upon all classes of English society." 33 This may well be true and there can surely be little question but that Sir Leicester has many valuable qualities, including an earnest love for his wife (850) that is to be directly contrasted with the earnest self-help of Rouncewell and his class (452-3, 710). Both men, however, combine a sense of purpose in their worlds with a great emphasis upon the importance of their family happiness and, while Dickens fully acknowledges that they belong to different orders, one dying and the other coming into its power, he also insists upon their equal value

as human individuals, a value which they earn not through their commitments to a particular social order, but for their fidelity and honesty in personal relationships.

In *Bleak House*, then, Dickens treats the theme of work and earnestness with more complexity than ever before. Instead of the earnest heroine, struggling to preserve her purity in the face of the forces of evil, he presents a character both more worldly and less assured than her earlier counterparts. Moreover, the values she clings to are a source of strength and comfort to her and do not gain their significance from her character as had been the case with Nell and Florence. The world around Esther is one of largely misguided work, from the interminable Chancery suit to the missions of the charity workers, and is filled with characters who, when they are earnest, are far more mundane than the earnest figures of Dickens's earlier fiction. Even Rouncewell, however favourably he may be presented, is a secondary character and, looking forward to *Little Dorrit*, it should be remembered that Sir Leicester's class is still very much in control of England and that it is "particularly careful not to be in earnest, or to receive any impress from the moving age" (211).

By *Little Dorrit*, in fact, Dickens has evidently come to see the rule of the entrenched aristocracy as poisonous to the country's very creativity:

one who worthily invents must be in earnest, and the Barnacles abhorred and dreaded nothing half so much. That again was very reasonable; since in a country suffering under the affliction of a great amount of earnestness, there might, in an exceeding short space of time, be not a single Barnacle left sticking to a post. (500)
The Barnacle family has grown cancerously into every position of power in the realm and, existing for no good other than its own, has ruined the lives of men such as Doyce. He himself refuses to give up, answering Clennam's advice to do so ruefully:

"He can't do it," said Doyce, shaking his head with a thoughtful smile. "It's not put into his head to be buried. It's put into his head to be made useful. You hold your life on condition that to the last you shall struggle hard for it. Every man holds a discovery on the same terms." (185)

Doyce clearly represents, like Rouncewell, the kind of force which alone can give England a positive future and, though neither he nor his invention come fully to life, it is also evident that, in this novel, Dickens has less faith in the triumph of the new than he had in Bleak House. Perhaps the most pessimistic indication of this is to be seen in Plornish's account of the inhabitants of Bleeding Heart Yard:

There was pretty well all sorts of trader you could name, all wanting to work, and yet not able to get it. There was old people, after working all their lives, going and being shut up in the Workhouse, much worse fed and lodged and treated altogether, than - Mr Plornish said manufacturers, but appeared to mean malefactors. Why, a man didn't know where to turn himself for a crumb of comfort. As to who was to blame for it, Mr Plornish didn't know who was to blame for it. He could tell you who suffered, but he couldn't tell you whose fault it was. It wasn't his place to find out, and who'd mind what he said, if he did find out? (136)

There is, in Little Dorrit, very little hope that society as a whole may be saved and Dickens's emphasis turns instead to the way in which, through work and earnestness, the individual may find a measure of salvation. This, however, is not such an unpalatable ideal as it had been in Bleak House and its qualities

may best be defined through a study of a trio of contrasting characters, Gowan, Amy and Clennam.

Gowan is an entirely selfish creature in whom we see an exact inversion of the Victorian norm for members of his class under which "the virtually certain prospect of responsible office called for unending efforts to make oneself worthy and for intensive self-examination." He treats even his alternative profession with some disdain, insisting (493-4), as had Skimpole to Sir Leicester (659), that he is too much of an amateur to take it seriously. Again revealingly, and in contrast to Dickens's young men before Bleak House, he is said to have had great expectations that have not been realised (506). This, however, by no means justifies his conduct and Dickens evidently desires the reader to view Gowan with far less sympathy than he had created for Richard Carstone. For, unlike Richard, Gowan is not redeemed by his love for his wife, as Amy perceives:

Little Dorrit fancied it was revealed to her that Mr Gowan treated his wife, even in his very fondness, too much like a beautiful child. He seemed so unconscious of the depths of feeling which she knew must lie below that surface, that she doubted if there could be any such depths in himself. She wondered whether his want of earnestness might be the natural result of his want of such qualities, and whether it was with people as with ships, that, in too shallow and rocky waters, their anchors had no hold, and they drifted anywhere. (480)

Only when Mr Meagles makes a heart-felt appeal to him to take care of Minnie (397) is Gowan touched into earnestness. This, however, does not last and it is again Amy who sees the subsequent effects upon Minnie:

I thought he was not earnest enough - I don't mean in that respect - I mean in anything. I could not keep it

35. Newsome, Godliness and Good Learning, p. 19.
out of my mind that if I was Mrs Gowan (what a change
that would be, and how I must alter to become like her!) I
should feel that I was rather lonely and lost, for the
want of some one who was steadfast and firm in purpose.
I even thought she felt this want a little, almost with-
out knowing it. But mind you are not made uneasy by this,
for she was "very well and very happy." And she looked
most beautiful. (455)

Thus, if somewhat artfully, Amy manages both to spell out Gowan's
limitations and, at the same time, to endeavour to wean Clennam
away from Minnie and towards herself.

Amy is, of course, entirely earnest and she marks the culmina-
tion of Dickens's interest in the frail but steadfast heroine who,
by her diligence and devotion, redeems the erring hero. Although
this particular type is very much a Dickensian creation, the more
general conception of femininity it involves is more widely Victorian
and might also, for example, be seen in Dorothea Brooke:

while she was full of pity for the visible mistakes of
others, she had not yet any material within her experi-
ence for subtle constructions and suspicions of hidden
wrong. But that simplicity of hers, holding up an ideal
for others in her believing conception of them, was one
of the great powers of her womanhood. (Middlemarch, 829)

Even though Dickens's emphasis is to be a more religious one, both
he and George Eliot share this ideal vision of the woman's innocence
and her capacity to save others, particularly the hero, through her
belief in them. Perhaps precisely because their religious beliefs
are so different, the two novelists see their heroines in quite
different relations to the social world: Dorothea becomes the
supportive wife of a public man, while Amy and Clennam have a life
which, if not as withdrawn as those of Dickens's earlier couples,
is certainly not one of active involvement in the world. Even the
gesture made in this direction with Esther and Woodcourt has been
lost by Little Dorrit.
Accordingly, while Amy is hard-working and diligent, she devotes herself, not to building cottages for her father's tenants, but merely to supporting her family. Her duty and industriousness are testified to frequently (53, 72, 177) and their value in Dickens's eyes is suggested by his comment, "Shall we speak of the inspiration of a poet or priest, and not of the heart impelled by love and self-devotion to the lowliest work in the lowliest way of life!" (70). What is important here is clearly not so much the work itself nor even its results, but rather the denial of self and the dedication to helping others. Even if Amy does gain a certain measure of security from the roles she plays, this does not lessen her value to those she helps or diminish the contrast between her and the rest of the Dorrit family.

For the family are only too willing to accept her sacrifice and to allow her, as she works to keep them and even finds them work of their own, to become the effective head of the family. Moreover, they themselves are less than enthusiastic about work: Fanny and Tip regard it as a necessity to be dispensed with as soon as possible; and their father maintains the fiction that his children do not work for a living - a pretence that is revealed for what it is in his reaction to the news that he has become rich, "We owe it as a duty to them and to ourselves, from this moment, not to let them - hum - not to let them do anything" (408). It is one of the less pleasant features of the Dorrit family that they should use the word "duty" in this way. Fanny will similarly comply "dutifully" with her father's insistence that Mrs General be told of the forthcoming marriage (582), while Dorrit himself soon after suggests to Amy that it is now her duty to get married and to leave him free to marry again (582). The Dorrits thus have no sense of
that more characteristically Victorian earnest sense of duty as the
"recognition of something to be lived for beyond the mere satisfaction
of self, which is to the moral life what that addition of a great
central ganglion is to animal life." Unlike both them and Esther
Summerson, Amy never insists upon her duties or virtues but, and
this is one of her more attractive characteristics, simply gets on
with them.

What preserves her through her struggles and even protects her
from the selfishness of her family is that emotional earnestness that
Gowan so signally lacks. It is a quality made up, as had been the
case with the earlier heroines, of affection, resolution and devotion
to others and it is essentially something which emanates from the
heart (327). Amy gives all she has of these qualities to her father,
but he accepts them unthinkingly and does not appreciate them for
what they are. Only with Clennam is she fully valued and it is this
understanding of her true nature that makes him so attractive to her.

However, Clennam does not come to this recognition immediately
and the story of their relationship is one of his dawning awareness
of what it is that he sees in Amy. This involves a simultaneous
gradual emancipation from the darker aspects of his mother's code
which he feels to have broken all sense of will and purpose in him
(20). But even this code is ambiguous in its nature, since it
contains potential for both good and evil, and this is apparent in
his response to the quest of finding out Amy's "secret":

if his apprehensions should prove to be well founded,
he was ready at any moment to lay down all he had, and
begin the world anew. As the fierce dark teaching of his
childhood had never sunk into his heart, so that first
article in his code of morals was, that he must begin,

36. Scenes of Clerical Life, p. 320.
in practical humility, with looking well to his feet on Earth, and that he could never mount on wings of words to Heaven. Duty on earth, restitution on earth; these first, as the first steep steps upward. (311)

This, allied to that gentlemanly sensitivity which makes him far more responsive to the needs of others than most characters in the novel, gives him an earnestness matching Little Dorrit's own and is certainly something that she finds attractive (82). He, however, long remains blind to her feelings (374) and it is only after he has gone through the purgatorial experience of ruin and illness that he comes to see the true significance of Amy's "deep, timid earnestness" (737). Nevertheless, he has always tried to appreciate her for what she is, even if he does not always completely succeed:

he reasoned with himself that she was just as good and just as true, in love with him, as not in love with him; and that to make a kind of domesticated fairy of her, on the penalty of isolation at heart from the only people she knew, would be but a weakness of his own fancy, and not a kind one. Still, her youthful and ethereal appearance, her timid manner, the charm of her sensitive voice and eyes, the very many respects in which she had interested him out of her own individuality, and the strong difference between herself and those about her, were not in unison, and were determined not to be in unison, with this newly-presented idea. (252)

In this he should be contrasted with such earlier heroes as Walter Gay who fail to see their heroines as anything other than domesticated fairies. Amy and Clennam are very decidedly two people who have gone through considerable struggles and who only come to each other after much suffering. Moreover, their feelings are made up of a more convincing mixture of hope and desire, fear and disappointment, than had ever appeared in the rather fairy-tale romances of the earlier novels.

However, if this is a more realistic conclusion, so too it is also a far more muted one than that of Dickens's earlier fiction and is distinctly less celebratory. Although Dickens does manage to present
the central relationship of the novel as one that is both earnest and between two consenting adults, it is still a rather serious affair and has no contact whatsoever with the more comic characters. Similarly, while Dickens is, as ever, concerned to give hero and heroine sufficient material rewards to enjoy comfort in this life, he insists on the fact that these are something Clennam will have to work for - the loss of Amy's fortune is a condition for the success of her hopes for Clennam and there is to be no retiring to pastoral bliss in this novel. Their work and earnestness are essential to their lives and will guarantee them happiness, but the extent of Dickens's optimism is suggested by the novel's muted ending:

Went down into a modest life of usefulness and happiness. Went down to give a mother's care, in the fulness of time, to Fanny's neglected children no less than to their own, and to leave that lady going into Society for ever and a day... They went quietly down into the roaring streets, inseparable and blessed; and as they passed along in sunshine and in shade, the noisy and the eager, and the arrogant and the froward and the vain, fretted and chafed, and made their usual uproar. (801-2)

It was said of Thomas Arnold that he almost invented the word "earnest"37 and this is almost as true of Dickens. No other Victorian novelist uses the term so frequently as he and it comes to assume a crucial meaning in his fiction. But with Little Dorrit he comes to the end of a theme that has played a major part in his novels throughout the 1840's and 1850's as the relation between work and earnestness is finally seen to collapse. Work cannot resolve the problems of the individual life and its values are seen to be irrelevant to those who control and direct society. Its sole meaning

37. Newsome, Godliness and Good Learning, p. 34. See also Dickens's comment on Stanley's Life of Arnold, "I must have that book. Every sentence that you quote from it is the text-book of my faith", F, p. 350.
rests in its power to indicate the moral quality of those central figures whose earnestness becomes increasingly important to Dickens. But even this earnestness itself undergoes considerable changes and is transformed from an entirely unworldly ethereal quality to a more homely, though no less religious, humility, seriousness and sincerity. In Little Dorrit it has become Dickens's single most important moral value.

Although such earnestness continues to play a part in his remaining novels, it never again assumes the importance it has in Little Dorrit. There is only one later character to compare with these earnest heroines, Lizzie Hexam, and, while she is undoubtedly of crucial importance in bringing Eugene Wrayburn to that earnestness he so lacks (OMF, 337-8), she neither has such a central role as had the earlier heroines nor is she invested with the same degree of religious significance as they had possessed. Earnestness in the later novels, in fact, comes to be increasingly associated with the male characters and with their possession or lack of will-power. This is the case with both Eugene and, of course, with Sidney Carton (TNC, 122). In general, however, it is a quality which is of less importance in the novels after Little Dorrit - it hardly appears at all in what we have of Edwin Drood, for example. This is surely related to Dickens's changing conception of women and must in some way reflect upon events in his life at the end of the fifties but, whatever the reason may be, there can be no question that this theme, which has been so important throughout the first twenty years of his career, loses much of its hold upon his imagination.
Mr Squeers's appearance was not prepossessing. He had but one eye, and the popular prejudice runs in favour of two. The eye he had was unquestionably useful, but decidedly not ornamental, being of a greenish grey, and in shape resembling the fanlight of a street door. The blank side of his face was much wrinkled and puckered up, which gave him a very sinister appearance, especially when he smiled, at which times his expression bordered closely on the villainous. His hair was very flat and shiny, save at the ends, where it was brushed stiffly up from a low protruding forehead, which assorted well with his harsh voice and coarse manner. He was about two or three and fifty, and a trifle below the middle size; he wore a white neckerchief with long ends, and a suit of scholastic black, but his coat sleeves being a great deal too long, and his trousers a great deal too short, he appeared ill at ease in his clothes, and as if he were in a perpetual state of astonishment at finding himself so respectable. (NN, 90)

Such wonderfully comic accounts as this, in which rich imaginativeness and deliberately ordered composure combine to superb effect, are a principal source of that unique delight which is to gained from Dickens's characters. No other Victorian novelist so blends verbal and visual imagination in the creation of character - Hardy alone approaches Dickens in this respect - and in his presentation of character through description of details of physical appearance Dickens is again close to the eighteenth-century tradition. For, like Smollett, he "relies almost completely on external physical reaction to depict the internal emotional states of his characters".

suggestion which is obviously true for such grotesque creations as Squeers but which also, in fact, comes to be increasingly applicable to the delineation of the more orthodox characters of his novels. Indeed, it will be argued here that the presentation of character through appearance and behaviour is essential to Dickens's art and that it plays an ever greater role in his fiction as his skills as a writer develop.\(^2\)

Such an emphasis upon physical depiction should be no surprise in view of Dickens's well-testified powers of observation. He himself is reported to have remarked that "he had trained his eye and ear to let nothing escape him; that he had received most valuable suggestions and hints of character in that way"\(^3\), and contemporaries who accompanied him through the streets would always be likely to have something interesting or unusual brought to their attention.\(^4\) Such acuteness, which may well be related to his ability to describe illnesses with unusual accuracy\(^5\), clearly contributed much to his conception and formation of character.

Further indications of this may be seen in his attitude to the illustrations which were included in almost all of his novels. There can be no doubt that Dickens himself was highly conscious of the relationship between text and illustration and the importance of this link has been effectively demonstrated in several penetrating

\(^2\) Michael Irwin's study, *Picturing: Description and Illusion in the Nineteenth Century Novel* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1979) is the only full-length treatment of this topic and, while it does refer extensively to Dickens, it is marred by superficiality and inaccuracies.

\(^3\) Grace Greenwood (Sara Jane Clarke) recollecting an 1852 meeting with Dickens, in *New York Tribune*, 5 July 1870, p. 6.


\(^5\) See above, pp. 130-1.
Dickens's own concern may be seen from his correspondence, which shows him directing or commenting upon the work of the illustrators for every novel from *Pickwick* to *Dombey*, and the intensity of his interest may be gauged from the extraordinarily detailed instructions he gave Cattermole for Nell's death-bed or from his later comment to the artist, "Believe me that this is the very first time any designs for what I have written have touched and moved me, and caused me to feel that they expressed the idea I had in my mind."

A further important factor in Dickens's development of his visual conception of character and action was surely the influence of the theatre. Dickens's love of drama and involvement with the theatre are too well known to require description here and this enthusiasm clearly spilled over into his novel writing. The manner in which Dickens actually imagined his characters in essentially theatrical terms and even acted out their parts before committing pen to paper has been amply recorded and Philip Collins has also made the further point that Dickens himself seems largely to have avoided the temptation to overact when giving his public readings. His restrained, naturalistic style of performance, which several reviewers found an object for favourable comment, is also apparent in his presentation of character in his novels and becomes increasingly refined and significant as his career progresses.

10. Ibid, pp. lix-lx.
Although Dickens was to say, quite late in his career, that "Every good actor plays direct to every good author, and every writer of fiction, though he may not adopt the dramatic form, writes in effect for the stage," he was usually aware of which dramatic effects were appropriate for his fiction and he only rarely transfers character types or acting styles from stage to novel without some adaptation. Although he does occasionally lapse into purely melodramatic staging, he was quite capable of parodying theatrical excesses and does so with a keen delight, as in his description of Pecksniff after Mercy's marriage and in his sketch of the theatrical young gentleman:

He is likewise very acute in judging of natural expressions of the passions, and knows precisely the frown, wink, nod, or leer, which stands for any one of them, or the means by which it may be converted into any of the other: as jealousy, with a good stamp of the right foot, becomes anger; or wiliness, with the hands clasped before the throat, instead of tearing the wig, is passionate love. If you venture to express a doubt of the accuracy of any of these portraiture, the theatrical young gentleman assures you, with a haughty smile, that it has always been done in that way, and he supposes they are not going to change it at this time of day to please you; to which, of course, you meekly reply that you suppose not. (SB, 533–4)

However much Dickens was to continue to rely upon plot devices akin to those of melodrama, in his characterization he reveals a gradual move away from stage models of description and behaviour. This is in keeping both with his praise for and support of attempts to re-introduce an elevating naturalism to the English theatre and with a more general tendency throughout the nineteenth-century

12. See above, p. 52.
13. See, for example, F, pp. 96–7, on Dickens's hopes for a revival of the English theatre through Macready; and Dickens's own praise for Fechter's naturalistic acting style, "On Mr Fechter's Acting", Atlantic Monthly, August 1869, pp. 242–4.
for "detailed description of atmosphere, character, look, gesture and manner of speech" to creep into stage performances. As Dickens's career progresses, there is, therefore, a gradual replacement of stage behaviour by more naturalistic actions and even an increasing use of theatrical mannerisms as a pointer to failings of character. At the same time, such naturalism is connected with other themes and motifs in the text and has the effect of giving the central characters of the later novels far more convincing reality than had been the case with their counterparts in the early fiction.

While Dickens's physical representation of character is anything but formulaic, he does tend to concentrate upon a limited number of features and to virtually ignore many others. The most important items in Dickensian description are eyes, hands and manner; less essential, though still significant, are details of clothes and hair. Although Dickens does on occasion make telling use of his characters' hair, it is in general a feature of restricted usefulness and is mostly employed for comic effects (as in the cases of Squeers and Pecksniff). Clothes are more important, though still not consistently central to Dickens's description. Despite his use of clothing in the creation of comic effect and in such an outstandingly imaginative piece as "Meditations in Monmouth Street", Dickens does not utilize dress to any great extent in the presentation of his central characters. Middle class Victorian males, who take the leading roles in most of his plots, dressed in an increasingly dull orthodox style which left little scope for the author to associate dress and character. Female dress was also strongly subject to convention and, besides

the fact that to comment upon it, detail would surely have infringed Victorian sexual taboos, did so little to reveal the person within that most nineteenth-century women might, like the Marchioness, "as well have been dressed in a violin-case" (OCS, 332). Dickens is more interested in the character than in the clothes and his descriptions of dress tend to be limited to those details necessary for making a point about the character's personality.

It is not, therefore, surprising that he should concentrate upon the expressive features, notably eyes and hands. Dickens's characters usually display little evidence of an active mental life and are not often very good at talking to one another. Consequently, the expression of their feelings through physical features becomes of considerable importance and is something Dickens is able to suggest with great effect, so that he would surely have agreed with Hardy's comment:

In respect of character a face may make certain admissions by its outline; but it fully confesses only in its changes. So much is this the case that what is called the play of the features often helps more in understanding a man or woman than the earnest labours of all the other members together. Thus the night revealed little of her whose form it was embracing, for the mobile parts of her countenance could not be seen. 16

For Dickens, as for many other Victorian novelists, the most importantly mobile part of the face was the eye, the window of the soul (BH, 416), and the feature through which the heroine may, like Jane Eyre, resist any attack on her purity:

physically, I felt, at the moment, powerless as stubble exposed to the draught and glow of a furnace - mentally,


I still possessed my soul, and with it, the certainty of ultimate safety. The soul, fortunately, has an interpreter—often an unconscious, but still a truthful interpreter—in the eye. My eye rose to his; and while I looked in his fierce face, I gave an involuntary sigh: his gripe was painful, and my over-tasked strength almost exhausted. (322)

But, of course, she does not give way and Rochester is driven to admit his helplessness before that speaking eye. This is an emphasis fully shared by Dickens and one which goes back at least as far as eighteenth-century drama. In discussing Augustan drama's "grammar of passions", Thomas Preston shows how the actor's distinction between different kinds of feeling would be made almost entirely by varying the expression of the eyes and how this was a feature of characterization much imitated by Smollett. 17 Dickens learned from his childhood favourite in this as in much else and he makes eyes and looks one of the more effective aspects of his physical presentation of character. In Little Dorrit alone, for example, there are well over one hundred references to eyes, which perhaps suggests the inadequacy of Irwin's remark that Dickens shows little interest in this particular feature. 18

The stress upon expressive features is also apparent in the use Dickens makes of hands in his fiction. He tends to describe not the hand itself but its activity and it is not perhaps surprising, then, that he should single out this piece of stage business for special comment in his remarks on Fechter. 19 Hands and feet have an important role in expressing emotions that "leak" out of the control that may be more easily sustained over facial expression 20

20. On this see, for example, Michael Argyle, Bodily Communication (London: Methuen, 1975), p. 111.
and this becomes a habitual device of not only nineteenth-century melodramatic acting but also of Dickens’s descriptions of reserved yet powerfully emotional characters such as Ralph Nickleby and Paul Dombey. Hands have a further important role in the establishment of contact between the different characters in the novels and in this a distinction is to be made between Victorian and contemporary Britain. English society today is notable for its lack of physical contact, but there are indications that such was not the case in the past and, to judge by the sheer amount of hand-shaking, embracing, walking arm in arm, that we find in the fiction of the period, the Victorians accepted as normal a far higher level of physical contact than has latterly come to be usual. This is reflected in Dickens’s novels and, because it implies a certain culturally accepted norm, becomes an essential criterion in measuring the emotional health of the relationships of the central characters.

Such an emphasis upon the communicative aspects of physical features leads, not surprisingly, to a keen sense of the importance of behaviour and, in particular, of manner. As Dickens becomes a subtler, more skilful writer, he pays more and more attention to the nuances of feeling that may be expressed through the slightest actions and the effect of this is to enrich the texture of his later works with a wealth of small, but in accumulation, essential details of interpersonal behaviour. As in life, this use of non-verbal communication has a number of advantages: it may, for instance, be more direct than speech; it may also be expressed without the full conscious realization of either party; and it may, in the negotiating stage of a relationship, be used outside conscious awareness and can be easily withdrawn if necessary.  

21 This is not

to say that Dickens attempts to record the full range of non-verbal behaviour present in everyday life. To do so would, of course, be a practical impossibility even if it were artistically desirable and what he, in fact, does is to make his descriptions selective and, in their own way, stylized renderings of normal behaviour. Although he does not create his own "grammar of passions" and has very few absolute rules for the significance of particular aspects of description, in each novel he develops patterns of appearance and behaviour which link the individual characters and do much to enrich the relationships between them. Certain themes do, however, find a continuous form of expression through physical description and some of these will be discussed below. One general point that does seem to hold is that Dickens's increasing interest in subtler naturalistic effects, which from his earliest novels does much to qualify and complicate the character types he often borrows from the stage, eventually makes melodramatic forms of description entirely inadequate to realize less strident psychological complexities.

Like many of his contemporaries, Dickens was much interested in phrenology and mesmerism and these clearly have some bearing on his use of physical description in the novels. The great age of phrenology was, as David de Guistino has described²², from about 1820 until 1840, whereafter it ran out of impetus and was treated with gradually increasing scepticism. Dickens certainly took an interest in it but, unlike, for example, Charlotte Brontë, he gives it very little place in his fiction and his references to it tend to be satiric and even mocking, as in this description of Christopher

Casby:

His smooth face had a bloom upon it, like ripe wall-fruit. What with his blooming face, and that head, and his blue eyes, he seemed to be delivering sentiments of rare wisdom and virtue. In like manner, his physiognomical expression seemed to teem with benignity. Nobody could have said where the wisdom was, or where the virtue was, or where the benignity was; but they all seemed to be somewhere about him. (LD, 140)

David Copperfield shows no more respect with his account of a pigeon-pie whose crust was "like a disappointing head, phrenologically speaking: full of lumps and bumps, with nothing particular underneath" (DC, 474). Apart from its scientific limitations, phrenology also emphasized the brain, intellectual organization, and the material and these, together with its deterministic tendencies, all tended to run counter to Dickens's habitual belief in the saving power of the human heart. Even though he took some interest in it as an idea, it seems likely, in view of his general emphasis on the more actively expressive features, that he can have found little place for it in his physical description of characters.

Mesmerism, however, interests Dickens far more and takes a much greater part in his novels, as Fred Kaplan has effectively shown. It had just the qualities lacking in phrenology: it did not emphasize the material, did not pose any threat to religious belief, and it stressed the dynamic relationship between subject and operator. It was, of course, also something in which Dickens took a keen personal interest. His own eyes were much commented on by his contemporaries who may have been unsure about their colour.


but were unanimous in agreeing upon their beauty and extraordinary animation. That there was more than just simple charm in those eyes could be amply testified by Madame de la Rue, and Dickens's eldest son also recollected his father's mesmeric interests:

Throughout his life my father sympathised strongly with the mesmeric investigations of his friend Dr Elliotson... and had quite an extraordinary power in that direction himself. Indeed the mere intense gaze of those keen and luminous eyes, even without any of the passes and manipulations which form so much of the stock in trade of the ordinary mesmerist, had astonishing influence over many people... and to my mind always seemed as if it could read one's inmost soul. But it was seldom in later years that he used this mesmeric power. It was too serious a matter to trifle with, and "took it out" of the practitioner too much. 26

This sense of the operator's power to read the soul of his subject is far from alien to the novels and Kaplan is surely correct in stressing the importance of the male mesmerist's hold over his female subject. However, this is by no means the only way in which eyes can communicate in Dickens and, while mesmerism is of undoubted importance, it would be wrong to neglect the very significant role of eye-contact in two-way interaction between characters.

It would be neither feasible nor useful to attempt to cover more than a small selection of the examples of Dickens's creation of character through techniques of physical description and his developing skills will, therefore, be illustrated through studies of three novels: Nicholas Nickleby, Dombey and Son and Little Dorrit. Although some attention will be paid to the role of such description in the creation of comic characters and effects, the main emphasis will be on a small group of central characters: hero, heroine, villain

and, where he is distinct from this latter, the parental or quasi-parental figure who opposes the development of the romance between hero and heroine. Although in the early novels these characters often bear close resemblances to stage types and lack the individuality of the comic "character parts", Dickens still usually manages to give them some life of their own. By the mature fiction, he has moved away from simple stereotyping and employs his techniques of physical description to far more original effect.

Nicholas Nickleby

Nickleby is not a novel generally praised for its coherence, but it does gain a measure of unity from patterns of description which link Nicholas, Kate and Ralph. As Michael Steig has suggested, this was a new kind of fiction for Dickens, a novel combining comedy, a single adult protagonist, and both the panoramic sweep of Pickwick and the more focused concerns of Oliver Twist. Steig also argues that Dickens's uncertainties over what he was going to do with the novel acted as a severe check on Browne's ability to respond fully to the text and such may well have been the case. Nevertheless, this does not prevent Dickens from making fairly coherent and moderately successful use of physical description of his characters to define them both individually and against one another, to suggest changes within them during the course of the plot and thus both facilitate the original serial reading of the novel and increase appreciation of its unity as a completed whole. His

success in this should not be exaggerated: much of the characterization in the novel is appallingly wooden and even the more effective figures must be regarded as quite crude achievements. However, even Nicholas and Kate gain some degree of liveliness outside their official roles and in Ralph Nickleby Dickens goes some way towards escaping from the melodramatic stereotype on which he clearly based the character and prepares the ground for those much profounder studies of divided personalities which we find in his later novels.

As is often to be the case, Dickens does not offer a particularly vivid picture of his hero. We know very little indeed about Nicholas' looks and must be contented with the occasional reference to such features as his "beautiful dark eyes" (166). His other features are barely mentioned and he hardly seems to suffer from the vicissitudes of his peripatetic career, complaining but once about not being able to wash (148) and otherwise showing no sign of bodily or sartorial hardship. Although this makes a contrast with eighteenth-century picaresque (where the hero always had to have clothes to maintain his social status), it is not unusual in the Victorian novel: we know very little, for instance, about the looks of Heathcliff, Pendennis, or even such a fully realized character as Lydgate. Moreover, Dickens does take some care to illustrate Nicholas' openness and ready expression of feeling, so that his hero is thus always ready to meet another's eye (900), having nothing to hide, and will shake hands enthusiastically. As Michael Irwin has said\textsuperscript{28}, no novelist makes his characters shake hands so often as Dickens and, while this can be a gesture of insidious intent, more normally

\textsuperscript{28} Irwin, op. cit., p. 58.
it acts as an indication of openness of heart and feeling.

Nicholas, indeed, is very much the orthodox type, derived largely from inherited tradition, and is prized by Crummles for this very typicality:

"There's genteel comedy in your walk and manner, juvenile tragedy in your eye, and touch-and-go farce in your laugh," said Mr Vincent Crummles. "You'll do as well as if you had thought of nothing else but the lamps, from your birth downwards." (359)

Within the context of the company, where theatrical behaviour is regarded as the norm, such woodenness can be taken for real and Nicholas thus benefits from the contrast with his colleagues' clearly adopted extravagances.29 Back in the mundane world, however, it is to seem sadly lacking in vitality and, although Dickens does indulge in a superbly comic scene as Nicholas makes the transition back into the main plot (477), this is but a passing gesture and all too soon our hero has become that "regular stick of an actor" Lenville had always considered him (466). Nicholas declines in interest from this point on, losing even that physical vitality which had enlivened his early career, and is reduced to playing in such tediously melodramatic scenes and tableaux as that in which he confronts Ralph and Gride (816-8).

Lacking even any saving excursus from the main plot, his sister is a far drearier creation. Dickens provides virtually no information about her appearance, limiting himself to such an inept phrase as "a slight but very beautiful girl of about seventeen" (81). Although Victorian heroines could be treated in the same rather vague manner that was common with heroes, more usually novelists took some pains to give them a definite physical presence. Such

29. See above, pp. 32-4.
is the case, for example, with Amelia Sedley in *Vanity Fair* (43),
and George Eliot who, despite her interest in the visual arts, is
not an obvious example of a visualizing writer, went to considerable
trouble over even such a minor heroine as Janet Dempster:

She had on a light dress which sat loosely about her
figure, but did not disguise its liberal, graceful out-
line. A heavy mass of jet-black hair had escaped from
its fastening, and hung over her shoulders. Her grandly-
cut features, pale with the natural paleness of a brunette,
had premature lines about them, telling that the years
had been lengthened by sorrow, and the delicately-curved
nostril, which seemed made to quiver with the proud consc-
iousness of power and beauty, must have quivered to the
heart-piercing griefs which had given that worn look to
the corners of the mouth. Her wide black eyes had a
strangely fixed, sightless gaze, as she paused at the
turning, and stood silent before her husband.

(Scenes of Clerical Life, 284)

The contrast does not flatter Dickens and it is not until much
later in his career that he will be able to realize a heroine with
any degree of physical reality. Like Nicholas, Kate has very little
presence in the text and is largely unaffected by the events that
are supposed to occur in her life, so that, for example, although
Dickens does make the point that she is wearing mourning for her
father (282), he fails to develop this and it thus remains a passive
and uninteresting detail.

In her relationships with the novel's villains, however, Kate
does gain a certain interest. Although her ranting at Sir Mulberry
Hawk (313) is perilously close to that of the stage heroine -
recalling, for instance Susan's spurning of Doggrass in *Black-Ey'd
Susan*30 - she is capable of subtler effects when pleading with her
uncle and displays much of the stage-business that is to become
typical of the Dickensian heroine. Like Rochester before Jane Eyre,

30. Act I, scene iii, in Nineteenth Century Plays, ed. George
Ralph will find himself helpless under his niece's gaze:

Ralph drew back in utter amazement at this plain speaking, and regarded Kate with his sternest look. But she met his gaze proudly and firmly, and although her face was very pale, it looked more noble and handsome, lighted up as it was, than it had ever appeared before. (448)

This is quite frequently the effect produced in such a situation in Dickens and, when Kate proceeds to lay her arm upon "the old man" (448), he is quite unable to resist her. In her study of the miser as a nineteenth-century stereotype, Gillian Thomas stresses how "the miser's daughter or protegee frequently suggests to him the possibility of warmth, domesticity and comfort in contrast to a life of miserable penuriousness and avarice."31 Something of this is evident in both the scene here and in that which had previously taken place between Ralph and Kate (315-6), immediately after Hawk's attempt upon the latter's virtue. What is perhaps most significant here is the contrast between Kate's easy victory over Ralph and her utter failure with Hawk. This is not simply a question of different degrees of villainy nor even of the difference between a more complex and a very poorly melodramatic character, but rather it depends upon the varying quality of the relationships in question. As is often to be the case in later novels, the Dickensian heroine can do little against a man whose attitude towards her is that of the sexual predator, but she is able to exercise considerable power over one who wrongs her by not fulfilling the obligations of family ties.

If this is often rendered in melodramatic form, such may well be appropriate in view of Peter Brooks' definition of melodrama as a genre dealing with pure and polar oppositions and in which the

characters "assume primary psychic roles, father, mother, child, and express basic psychic conditions."

32. Dealing essentially with such primary roles, Dickens often has recourse to their most obvious embodiment in the literature of the day, Victorian melodrama, for appropriate models of character type and behaviour. While he will modify both in the course of his career, the underlying basis remains remarkably constant.

The lack of intrinsic interest in the two central virtuous characters of the plot is made up for to some extent by Dickens's depiction of the forces of evil. Even such lesser villains as the Squeers family are rendered superbly, whether it be in such accounts as the initial description of Squeers himself or through the magnificently grotesque detail of Mrs Squeers' wiping her hands on the curly-headed boy (154). Although Mulberry Hawk and his henchmen fail to provide any significant interest, Ralph Nickleby is quite a different case and may be set beside those other studies of the psychology of evil which populate Dickens's early fiction. Unlike Sikes, Quilp or Rudge, however, he, of course, is an essentially conventional member of society and thus looks on to the succession of respectable "villains" that begins with Jonas Chuzzlewit and continues until John Jasper.

Although Ralph is derived from a melodramatic stereotype, he is something of a variation upon the norm and is certainly the most fully described character in the novel. None of the other characters approaches him in sheer detail of description and much of Dickens's presentation of Ralph's psychology is achieved through accounts of his changing behaviour. There are frequent references to his "cold

restless eye" (66), which is obviously to be contrasted with Nicholas' eyes, and in his ocular hold over Grind (832) and Squeers (842) he marks an early example of the mesmeric operator in Dickens's fiction. But his limitations are perhaps suggested by Squeers' ability to step back and comment upon his patron as "a ugly, old, bright-eyed, stagnation-blooded adder!" (847), a phrase which, if not notable for its verbal restraint, does reveal a healthy refusal to be overawed. Dickens's darkest villains are rarely talked about and never in such disrespectful terms. Ralph's weakness is further suggested in the descriptions of his hands. Again in contrast with Nicholas, he is not a warm hand-shaker (193) and much prefers the stage gesture of fist-shaking (451, 662, 906). However, during the first major scene with Kate (315-6) he is shamed first into awkwardness and then to sympathy:

Ralph took a chair at some distance, then another chair a little nearer, then moved a little nearer still, then nearer again, and finally sat himself on the same sofa, and laid his hand on Kate's arm. (315)

Such delicate staging both makes a fine contrast with many of the less effective scenes in the novel and does much to reveal Ralph as a more complex character than his behaviour would usually suggest. Moreover, it is notable that such a scene could only occur relatively early in the novel: later, when the plot has brought uncle and relatives into greater conflict, such action will not be possible and its absence thus acts as a moderately effective indication of the changing nature of the family relationships.

In his conflicts with Nicholas, Ralph reveals both the limitations of Dickens's ability to define character at this stage of his career and something of the potential that was soon to be developed. Little can be said to redeem the scene which follows Nicholas' timely
arrival at Spigwiffin's wharf, an episode which never rises above the level of its opening:

"A lie!" cried a furious voice, as the door was dashed open, and Nicholas burst into the centre of the room. In the first moment of surprise, and possibly of alarm, Ralph rose from his seat, and fell back a few paces, quite taken off his guard by this unexpected apparition. In another moment, he stood fixed and immovable with folded arms, regarding his nephew with a scowl of deadly hatred, while Kate and Miss La Creevy threw themselves between the two to prevent the personal violence which the fierce excitement of Nicholas appeared to threaten.

"Dear Nicholas!" cried his sister, clinging to him. "Be calm, consider -"

"Consider, Kate!" cried Nicholas, clasping her hand so tight in the tumult of his anger, that she could scarcely bear the pain. "When I consider all, and think of what has passed, I need be made of iron to stand before him." (322)

Woodenness, however, seems amply sufficient for Nicholas' purposes here and throughout the scene Dickens succumbs to the temptation to represent melodramatic action by equivalently heightened vocabulary, over-directs the characters by an excessive use of verbs, and falls back on adverbs to an extent that contravenes Irwin's useful dictum that "the mature novelist only resorts to adverbs when he cannot contrive to imply them." 33 None of the characters involved come out of this well and the scene makes a sad contrast with the interview between Ralph and Kate that had occurred only a few pages earlier.

Later in the novel, however, and especially as the tension between his surface control and buried feelings becomes extreme, Ralph is much more effective and interesting. His emotions always seem "to skulk under his face, rather than play boldly over it" (301) and he only gives vent to his feelings when safely alone (446). But when his plans start to collapse he will lose this ability to control

his expressions:

Ralph Nickleby could not have been more thunder-stricken than he was by this surprise. His hands fell powerless by his side, he staggered back, and with open mouth, and a face of ashy paleness, stood gazing at them in speechless rage; his eyes so prominent, and his face so convulsed and changed by the passions which raged within him, that it would have been difficult to recognise in him the same stern, composed, hard-featured man he had been not a minute ago. (813)

Although this is still not very effective writing and the underlying conception remains tied to stage models, it is a considerable improvement on the earlier confrontation with Kate and Nicholas, providing more of a close-up of character in action rather than the sweeping theatrical gestures of the previous scene. Moreover, the episode is made considerably richer by Dickens's unexpected comparison of the several members of the family present:

The air, carriage, and very look and expression of the brother were all reflected in the sister, but softened and refined to the nicest limit of feminine delicacy and attraction. More striking still was some indefinable resemblance in the face of Ralph to both. While they had never looked more handsome nor he more ugly, while they had never held themselves more proudly, nor he shrunk half so low, there never had been a time when this resemblance was so perceptible, or when all the worst characteristics of a face rendered coarse and harsh by evil thoughts were half so manifest as now. (813)

Through this telling use of physical description, Dickens makes one of his most habitual points about the nature of evil: that it shares many of the qualities of good and is essentially a perversion of the goodness that exists in almost every human being. 34 Everything in his description of Ralph contributes to this impression of a man

34. This and Ralph's complexity have been usefully discussed by John R. Reed, "Some Indefinable Resemblance: Moral Form in Nicholas Nickleby", Papers on Language and Literature, 3 (1967), 134-47; and G.D. Wing, "A Part to Tear a Cat in", Dkm, 64 (1968), 10-19.
who has willed his own evil at the expense of suppressing his true emotional self and the collapse that inevitably results is responsible for providing much of the interest of the final section of the novel.

For, as the plot closes in, Ralph constantly moves between assurance and a loss of self-control until he finally resolves his dilemma by committing suicide. Although he departs from Nicholas and Kate apparently unsubdued, the effects of defeat are soon evident:

There was something so unnatural in the constrained calmness with which Ralph Nickleby spoke, when coupled with the livid face, the horrible expression of the features to which every nerve and muscle as it twitched and throbbed with a spasm whose workings no effort could conceal, gave every instant some new and frightful aspect...

(833)

He regains control (838-9), loses it (864-5) at the opening of the final number, finds it once more at the beginning of his conversation with Charles Cheeryble (866), and continues to fluctuate in this manner until Brooker's revelations (887-90) prove the last straw. It is, of course, essential to Dickens's point that the man who should have so wronged dependent members of his family be punished by fate in such an appropriate fashion and, with this in mind, the melodramatic excess of Ralph's final gesture (906) becomes a fitting expression of his state of mind at the end. Deprived of any need for the control on which he had founded his life and confronted with the absolute loss of any alternative by his treatment of the other members of the family and the death of Smike, melodrama becomes the only form of behaviour available to him.

Ralph is thus by far the most interesting character in the novel and description of his appearance and behaviour plays an essential role in creating him. Although there is much that is crude in this depiction and much that Dickens would later develop
considerably, Ralph becomes a far profounder figure than the two-dimensional stage villains he is modelled upon. He has considerable interest in his own right and is thus able to draw upon melodramatic forms of behaviour while sustaining an integrity that is independent from the stereotype. In this he is, of course, to be contrasted with Nicholas who is largely dependent upon the context of the theatrical interlude to emancipate him from the limitations of his almost entirely conventional character and the role he is required to play in the plot.

Dombey and Son

In Dombey and Son Dickens reproduces that same pattern of relationships between hero, heroine, villain/family relation that had formed the basis of the main plot in Nickleby but with the distinction that the latter role is now divided into two characters, Carker and Dombey. Moreover, Florence's story is further complicated by the presence of a number of other characters in her life: her brother, the alternative family group centred on the little Midshipman, and the surrogate but inadequate mother she finds in Edith. Nevertheless, in their emphasis upon the restoration of normal family relationships and consequent subordination of the romance interest, the underlying plots of the two novels have much in common and in both of them physical description plays an important role in the definition and further development of the characters and their attitudes towards one another.

Looking back on the novel ten years after he had written it,
Dickens remarked:

I make so bold as to believe that the faculty (or the habit) of correctly observing the characters of men, is a rare one. I have not even found, within my experience, that the faculty (or the habit) of correctly observing so much as the faces of men, is a general one by any means. The two commonest mistakes in judgement that I suppose to arise from the former default, are, the confounding of shyness with arrogance—a very common mistake indeed—and the not understanding that an obstinate nature exists in perpetual struggle with itself. (Preface of 1858; reprinted in the 1859 and 1867 editions of the novel)

He was, of course, leading into a defence of his portrayal of Dombey (although these remarks might equally be applied to Ralph Nickleby), and, for the purposes of the argument here, what is particularly interesting about this is the way in which the issues of physical appearance and character observation are juxtaposed. Dickens's concern with Dombey's visual image is well known: it is apparent in his discussions with Forster, for example, and has been frequently considered in critical studies of the novel. The principal details of Dombey's unfeeling rigidity as expressed through feature (1) and dress (3) thus perhaps need little further attention here; but the care Dickens takes to suggest Dombey's unacknowledged emotional depths does require some examination.

For, while Dombey is not a novel in which the discovery of secrets assumes the importance it takes in Dickens's later fiction, it is a work in which revelation of personal feeling forms a major

35. On Dickens's concern with caricature in the depiction of Dombey, see p. 475 and also the reproduction of Browne's sketches for the character, facing pp. 474-5. The letters to Browne comprise a fuller and more elaborate discussion of the illustrations than is extant for any of the other novels and are also considered by Alan Horsman in his extremely useful examination of the collaboration between author and artist. See the Clarendon edition of the novel, Appendix E, pp. 865-71. For the thematic importance of Dombey's appearance, see also Alan Kennedy, Meaning and Signs in Fiction (London: Macmillan, 1979), pp. 70-87.
theme and this is presented largely through details of physical appearance. Dombey himself continually hints at the emotional life within him by giving way to minor but telling expressive gestures. That he should kiss Paul and only shake hands with Florence on leaving them in Brighton (141) marks not only a reversal of conventional emotional expectations but also reveals the strength of his emotional priorities. At moments of stress he will frequently lose control of his hands and is thus driven to the curious ly stagey gesture of pulling his hair in rage (589) when unable to evict Susan Nipper from his sick-room and later strikes the table in anger (626) as Edith refuses to heed him. Although Dickens was later to testify to an interest in "the powerful emotions from which art is shut out in England by the conventionalities" 36, at this stage of his career his ability to depict such feeling was still limited. Nevertheless, the attempt is still an interesting one, for wrath is an emotional force usually confined to his unredeemable villains and its appearance in a character who is ultimately saved suggests an endeavour to achieve a new complexity in the presentation of personality.

Dombey also reveals more than he would perhaps wish to through his eyes. At moments of great suffering he gives way to secret tears, as is the case after his wife's death (20) and as Paul approaches his end (149, 204). The real nature of his frustrations is hinted at, however, more obliquely as Florence observes what a beneficial effect the wedding-journey has had upon her father:

The look was cold and distant enough, but it stirred her heart to think that she observed in it something more of interest than he had ever shown before. It even expressed a kind of faint surprise, and not a disagreeable surprise, at sight of her. She dared not raise her eyes to his any more; but she felt that he looked at her once again, and

36. F. p. 609.
Such a release of feeling is, though, but short-lived and he will soon freeze again into his usual manner of controlled unreponsiveness. But Dickens never allows the reader to forget that this is an assumed mask and he emphasizes the point through several telling references to something quite new in his novels (but which had made a first tentative appearance in *A Christmas Carol*), visual memory. On a number of occasions, and invariably at moments of extreme stress, Dombey sees in his mind's eye another character's physical response to, and usually rejection of, him. Thus he recalls Edith's outstretched arm and parting words (575), Alice reminds him of his eloped wife (691), and, just before Florence rescues him, he is repeatedly struck by visual recollections of her pleading to him and his rejection of those appeals (795, 797).

Dombey is thus presented with some subtlety and is never treated in the heavily melodramatic mode Dickens had drawn upon so extensively in his depiction of Ralph Nickleby. Dickens's success in rendering him as a moderately complex figure is both necessary to the credibility of Florence's continuing love and his own change of heart and also makes an important contrast with Carker and Edith, both characters whose complexity is largely stifled by the manner in which they are depicted.

Although Carker is less of a caricature than he is sometimes thought to be, he is not a very effective creation and Dickens's success and failure with him may be seen in one major description:

> With hair and whiskers deficient in colour at all times, but feebler than common in the rich sunshine, and more like the coat of a sandy tortoise-shell cat; with long nails, nicely pared and sharpened; with a natural antipathy to any speck of dirt, which made him pause sometimes
and watch the falling motes of dust, and rub them off
his smooth white hand or glossy linen: Mr Carker the
Manager, sly of manner, sharp of tooth, soft of foot,
watchful of eye, oily of tongue, cruel of heart, nice
of habit, sat with a dainty steadfastness and patience
at his work, as if he were waiting at a mouse's hole. (292)

That effective touch of Carker's distaste for dirt apart, such
writing is notable only for its limitations: the excessive emphasis
upon feline imagery; the forcing of pejorative significance into the
adverbs; and the clumsy, repetitive structure of the prose. All of
these indicate Dickens's over-exertion in the depiction of a character
and may be contrasted with his subtler and more restrained rendering
of Dombey. Nevertheless, Carker has undeniable power, both over other
characters in the novel and over the reader and it may well be that,
if Anne Humpherys' suggestions about his Gothic origins are correct37,
he draws his force more from the earlier mode than from Dickens's
actual rendering of his physical presence. However, he does also
gain a certain effectiveness from description of his eyes and hands
and this to some extent compensates for the failings of Dickens's
account of his static appearance.

Not perhaps surprisingly, Carker makes a habit of keeping his
hands hidden (176), although he does make appropriate use of them
to applaud Cousin Feenix (432) at Dombey's wedding or to insinuate
himself with his employer during their interview at Norwood (574).
Less obvious and more effective than these, however, is the use
he makes of his hands with Edith: at Warwick Castle (375) he asserts
his right to hand her down from the carriage; he is similarly avail-
able outside Dombey's house (598); and he twice (578, 605) forces
Edith to give him a hand to kiss, despite her obvious repugnance.
He makes much the same use of his eyes: habitually, he casts them

37. "Dombey and Son: Carker the Manager", passim.
to the ground in a gesture of mock discomfort (174, 599, 627, 628); he is, though, also sufficiently quick of eye to rescue Dombey from his horse (576); and watchfulness is one of his principal characteristics (292). His interests take in Florence as well as Edith and, in an image which is to be contrasted with the usual tenor of references to the sea in this novel, he "like a scaly monster of the deep, swam down below, and kept his shining eye upon her" (385). Fred Kaplan has remarked upon his apparently mesmeric hold over Florence and he reveals more of this power in two contrasting interviews that occur within a few pages of one another. With Dombey at Norwood, he is ostensibly the confidential agent, yet he cannot restrain his eager eye (573, 574) as everything seemingly plays into his hands. Soon afterwards, when conveying the news of Dombey's accident to Edith, he asserts control over her with "a secret look" (577), which is consistent with their relationship from its outset. For Edith has always been prepared to make eye contact with Carker and this grants him a measure of power over her which he does not fail to exploit, imposing himself upon her and insisting on the level of intimacy such freedom of gaze normally implies. Dickens's description of Carker's hands and eyes, then, is far from static and does much to suggest the changes that occur in his relationships with both Dombey and Edith. The full effectiveness of this and its contribution to Dickens's successful presentation of his eventual destruction can only be appreciated in relation to Edith and something must, therefore, first be said about her.

There seems little reason to dissent from the general critical


opinion that Edith is ruined by her excessively melodramatic depiction, although some qualification of this judgement is required. Despite the fact that she is such a forceful character, Dickens gives very few details of her actual appearance and instead concentrates upon her manner of behaviour to those around her. It is this emphasis which leads to the problems, since, lacking any specific physical presence, Edith makes her effect only through description of her behaviour and this description is invariably couched in the language of melodrama. Thus, her "dark proud eyes" are all too frequently "flashing" (382, 604); she is overly given to striking her bosom (381) or attempting to injure the hand Carker has defiled (579); and she insists on straining "her rich black hair with heedless cruelty" (631). Dickens, it seems, is unable to describe forceful feminine emotions in any other way and in this he might be contrasted with the Brontës and with Hardy, all of whom seized this particular nettle with markedly greater success.

There is, however, more to Edith than this and, in her relationship with Florence, she occasionally escapes from the melodramatic style. Even though much of this is still over-done (as in the contrast made between her raging self and the calming influence she derives from the sleeping Florence on the night before the wedding, 420), Dickens does sometimes manage to create lighter and more successful effects:

She had exchanged her dinner dress for a loose robe, and unbound her hair, which fell freely about her neck. . . As she sat down by the side of Florence, she stooped and kissed her hand. He hardly knew his wife. She was so changed. It was not merely that her smile was new to him - though that he had never seen; but her manner, the tone of her voice, the light of her eyes, the interest, and confidence, and winning wish to please, expressed in all - this was not Edith! (484)
Both here and in a similar incident later in the story (585-7), Edith fleetingly emerges from that theatrical style of presentation that is her more usual mode but which is also totally inappropriate to a novel that elsewhere - its comic sections apart - insists upon subtler forms of characterization.

Both the extent of and limitations on Dickens's success in his description of Carker and Edith are apparent in the scene at Dijon and the subsequent events which culminate in Carker's death. Although Edith's behaviour has all the failings of previous accounts of her rage and the scene as a whole is uneasily reminiscent of some of the theatrical confrontations in *Nickleby*, its stylization is to some extent crucial to its success, as John R. Reed has shown. Moreover, a subtler form of reversal is apparent in Carker's loss of his power to control Edith physically, something illustrated effectively in Browne's plate, "Mr Carker in his Hour of Triumph" (725), which not only reproduces stock theatrical conventions but also emphasizes the distance that has quite literally come between the two characters. Even more than this, Carker, unexpectedly thwarted and at a loss what to do, loses that control over his own behaviour which had been so important to him:

> Disdaining to reply, she stretched her arm out, pointing to the chair. He bit his lip, frowned, laughed, and sat down in it, with a baffled, irresolute, impatient air, he was unable to conceal; and biting his nail nervously, and looking at her sideways, with bitter discomfort, even while he feigned to be amused by her caprice. (723)

Although still far from great writing, this is an improvement on that first description of Carker and makes effective use of punctuation and syntax to convey his helplessness. Its success is limited not

so much by Dickens's ability as by the fact that such a melodramatic conception of characterization is no longer appropriate to the kind of fiction he was now writing and it is notable that Carker is almost the last such villain in the novels.

In a manner that recalls Ralph Nickleby, Carker continues to lose his self-control throughout the final phase of his story. His journey back to England is marked by an emotional and physical collapse and it is perhaps fitting that his once watchful eyes should now fade (743). Indeed, his downfall is so complete that it is the meeting with Dombey's eyes (743) that causes him to stagger back on to the railway track and become a victim of the passing express' burning eyes.

Whether this superb chapter solves all of Dickens's problems with Carker may, however, be open to doubt and it can be felt that such a topical form of execution rather obscures the fact that death is a very high price to pay for what are hardly the gravest of sins. Dickens has, in fact, got rid of Carker with no more compunction than the authors of Victorian melodrama felt for their villains and this seems a dubious ploy for a character whose potential for a more subtle development has been at least partially suggested through description of his appearance and behaviour. Dickens's failure with Edith might be understood, if not excused, by the fact that the depiction of such violent female emotion seems to run counter to his most fundamental conception of women, but his problems with Carker are more of his own making and leave us with the sense of the loss of a potentially far more interesting character than the one we actually have.

The most important relationship in the novel is not, however,
any of those so far discussed, but that between Florence and her father. Here, physical description has an essential role to play and, in particular, physical contact acts as an integral part of the theme of self-revelation that has already been suggested as one of the narrative's principal concerns.

Florence herself is not described in great detail but it is clear that Dickens takes considerable care over those aspects of her appearance he does choose to emphasize. Her clothes, for instance, play a small but significant part in her life: she is subjected to the humiliation of having them stolen from her by Mrs Brown (74) before being rescued by Walter; her sensitivity to others is neatly caught by her care not to frighten the neighbouring children with her black dress (243); and in an effectively realistic and, for Dickens, novel touch she is shown buying the clothes she needs after fleeing home (653-4). However, it is, as might be expected, in details of her hands and eyes that Dickens makes his main points about her.

Although nothing is said about the appearance of her hands, her urgent need for physical contact with others is one of the strongest emotional impulses she has and is perhaps largely the result of her father's refusal to give her this sort of comforting, loving response. She is always afraid to touch her father (136, 583-4) and even in their mutual sorrow after Paul's death he resists her invitation to embrace (252). The only physical contact between them of any significance is, of course, the blow he inflicts upon her in place of Edith (637). Edith, by contrast, does provide much of the comfort Florence so desperately wants, holding her "as if to reassure her and comfort her" from their first meeting (393). This continues throughout their relationship, is even visible in their parting scene (824, 827) as Edith clasps Florence "in her arms, and seemed to pour
out all her woman's soul of love and tenderness at once", and is one more reason for finding the contrast between Edith's and Dombey's fates somewhat disturbing. It is, indeed, noticeable that Dickens makes a number of subdued links between Edith and Florence: Browne's illustration, "Mr Dombey introduces his Daughter Florence" (392), which is unlikely to have been completed without Dickens exercising his customary control, brings out the physical resemblance between the two; this is further emphasized, of course, by his later plate, "A Chance Meeting" (552), which links Edith and Alice, Mrs Skewton and Mrs Brown, and which also reinforces the effect of the distant blood tie that exists between Florence and Alice. Indeed, Dickens is also (484) to describe Edith and Florence going out of the room like sisters and he has thus created an extensive substratum of ties between three women who have one thing in common, their exploitation by the Dombey family. This to some extent subverts the novel's official moral as voiced in Florence's undying love for and sacrifice to her father, although it must be said that, ultimately, that moral is the most dominant theme of the narrative. Nevertheless, the very fact that such an alternative pattern of reference does exist suggests a complexity in the story quite new in Dickens's fiction and is one of many factors which help to place Dombey at such a pivotal point in Dickens's career.

Florence's relationships with the Midshipman group are, by contrast, far less complex. Cuttle, who is clearly to be seen as an alternative father, cares for her with a solicitude and delicacy that is to be set against Dombey's brutal behaviour a few pages before (640ff). Walter and Florence communicate by touch from their first meeting in the street (77) and their transition from brother and sister to engaged couple is marked by an embrace (679) that, in
this context, is more than merely conventional. However, reservations about this relationship have already been expressed and it clearly lacks any sexual force. Walter, indeed, is a barely defined presence in the novel, being exported wholesale for much of the plot and barely described beyond such details as his curly hair or "flowing hair and sparkling eyes." Although he is amiable enough, he surely commands neither the reader's nor Dickens's interest and exists principally to become Florence's husband and thus provide the conventional ending to the story.

Florence's eyes, deep and dark and beautiful enough to attract Carker's attention, are her most active feature, though they are mainly exercised to produce tears. If an early contributor to the Dickensian is to be believed, she appears in tears no less than eighty-eight times in the course of the novel and must thus be by far the most lachrymose of even Dickens's heroines. However, her tears should not be dismissed as mere Victorian sentimentality, for they are also essential expressions of that depth of sympathy which fits her uniquely to be the novel's heroine and which is a central part of that earnestness so important to her. With these "bright and loving," "gently pleading" eyes she constantly attempts to reach out to her father, though in vain. However, both her power and the hope for eventual reconciliation are apparent:

What would have been her thoughts if she had known that he was steadily regarding her; that the veil upon his face, by accident or design, was so adjusted that his sight was free, and that it never wandered from her face an instant. That when she looked towards him, in the obscure dark corner, her speaking eyes, more earnest and pathetic in their voiceless speech than all the orators of the world, and impeaching him more nearly in their

41. See above, pp. 167-8.
mate address, met his, and did not know it. That when she bent her head again over her work, he drew his breath more easily, but with the same attention looked upon her still - upon her white brow and her falling hair, and busy hands; and once attracted, seemed to have no power to turn his eyes away! (483)

This use of the dumb-show of melodrama is extraordinarily effective and may be contrasted with Dickens's earlier use of the convention for charming but only comic effect. 43 Similarly, the power of youthful innocence over evil, something we have already seen in Dickens's presentation of the relationship between Kate Nickleby and her uncle, is here given a new twist. Florence's "speaking eyes", which, like Dinah Morris' seem to have "the liquid look which tells that the mind is full of what it has to give out, rather than impressed by external objects" 44, express more than any other feature that quiet earnestness which is her essential characteristic and which will be the most important agent of her father's salvation.

This latter, however, cannot come about until she has undergone a great deal of suffering and, as well as her tears, Dickens gives Florence a special gesture new to his fiction. On a number of occasions, and always in situations that emotionally overwhelm her, Florence hides her eyes and face in her hands, thus endeavouring to isolate herself from the horror of the events around her. This gesture first appears (3) as she embraces her dying mother and its many subsequent occurrences (336, 485, 626, 655), which are invariably associated with the pain her father causes her, may well mark a reproduction of that initial sense of loss. Florence's use of this gesture both links and contrasts her with Carker who, as we have seen, is fond of hiding his eyes in mock discomfort. Dickens is to make further use of

43. See, for example, OCS, p. 597.
the gesture in his subsequent novels, notably in *David Copperfield* (503, 743, 870, 910, for example) and it is a useful addition to his repertoire of acting techniques. It is also incidentally notable that Browne illustrates Cuttle making the same gesture (443) as Toots tells him of Walter's death and this serves not only to emphasize the parallel between Cuttle and Dombey as good and bad father-figures but also, since there is no support for it in the text, as further evidence of the artist's highly creative relationship with his author.

Dickens's extensive concern with Florence's eyes, tears and lack of physical contact with her father comes to fruition in the eventual reconciliation scene. Florence returns to Dombey and, kneeling before him, finally embraces, kisses and melts him with her tears (802). He, in turn, at last responds to her: "he kissed her on her lips, and, lifting up his eyes, said, 'Oh my God, forgive me, for I need it very much!'" (802). In the light of Dickens's care to develop their relationship throughout the novel in terms of physical description, this should be seen not as mere sentimentality, but as a superbly appropriate culmination to a fully realized central theme. If we do have reservations about it, these should concern not so much the technique Dickens employs - which is surely successful - but the nature of his assumptions about what constitutes an ideal relationship. The fact that Florence's self-sacrifice is both a highly conventional theme and has clear associations with Cordelia's devotion to her father does not fully account for Dickens's refusal to allow her to grow into an adult woman and make a more credible relationship with Walter.

Dickens's treatment of his heroine is still essentially tied to his conception of her child-like qualities and to her role as angel of redemption for her sinning father. Not until Little Dorrit will he succeed in overcoming this and manage to present a heroine who will be allowed to escape from her father and who both is an adult woman and is treated as such by narrator and hero.

Little Dorrit

Although theatrical forms continue to play an important part in Little Dorrit, they have far less significance than had been the case in Dickens's earlier fiction and the novel is marked by a further decline in the relevance of melodramatic styles of characterization. This is particularly apparent in the fate here of the villain: while Rigaud is perhaps the most richly described of all the novel's characters (5, 346), and while (443, 479) he continues to exert a fascination over the heroine similar to Carker's hold over Florence, there is much that is crude in his depiction (the nose and moustache mannerism is especially unfortunate) and his attachment to the main plot is somewhat tenuous. He is too much of the villain of Gothic melodrama and, even if Gothic is an element in the composition of the plot, it seems entirely inappropriate when used among a range of characters whose everyday realism is essential to Dickens's image of them.

Evil in Little Dorrit is no longer solely the province of an individ-


ual character but rests, institutionalized, in the Circumlocution Office. It is, moreover, somehow largely irrelevant to the central emotional concern of the novel, which is to be found in the relationships between Amy Dorrit and her father and Clennam. In presenting these characters and the course of their relations, Dickens makes a fuller and altogether subtler use of physical description than in any of his previous novels.

William Dorrit is, from his first appearance, a helpless figure:

He was a shy, retiring man; well-looking, though in an effeminate style; with a mild voice, curling hair, and irresolute hands — rings upon the fingers in those days — which nervously wandered to his trembling lip a hundred times in the first half-hour of his acquaintance with the jail. (59)

He will in due course become the Father of the Marshalsea but it is already clear that he is not particularly suited to fulfilling his parental obligations towards his own children. Soon, he is but "the shabby old debtor with the soft manner and the white hair" (65) and he becomes perhaps Dickens's finest rendering of shabby-gentility (213-8). Unlike Defoe, whom he criticized for not showing the effects of long imprisonment on Robinson Crusoe, Dickens makes Dorrit's growing emotional dependency upon the Marshalsea essential to his depiction of the character. However, the tension between that reality and the image Dorrit would like to preserve is central to him and is strikingly expressed in his attitude to clothes. Peace is restored after the traumatic scene in which he remonstrates with Amy for not leading John Chivery on by their diverting their thoughts to his dress:

To keep his attention engaged, she talked with him about his wardrobe; when he was pleased to say, that

Yes, indeed, those shirts she proposed would be exceedingly acceptable, for those he had were worn out, and, being ready-made, had never fitted him. Being conversational, and in a reasonable flow of spirits, he then invited her attention to his coat as it hung behind the door: remarking that the Father of the place would set an indifferent example to his children, already disposed to be slovenly, if he went among them out at elbows. He was jocular, too, as to the heeling of his shoes; but became grave on the subject of his cravat, and promised her that, when she could afford it, she should buy him a new one. (223)

As so often in his characterization of Dorrit, Dickens moves us beautifully between quite different shades of emotion, suggesting that, however much Dorrit may disgust us, he is fundamentally incapable of exercising the role of parent to Amy. His first concern, on learning of his new wealth, is that the family be re-clothed and he is delicately careful to improve his own appearance before presenting himself before the other prisoners (408). This concern continues throughout the second Book of the novel (458) but Dorrit's underlying insecurity is established by the suggestion that he, like Merdle, remains subject to the scrutiny of the Chief Butler (598). As his life collapses, Dorrit, like Dickens's early villains, loses his inner vitality: "He then presented himself, in a refulgent condition as to his attire, but looking indefinably shrunken and old" (625). Finally, he returns to the Marshalsea in dress as in imagination, feeling for his old black cap (621) and, most poignantly of all, sending his clothes and jewelry to be pawned (630). Perhaps more than any other major character in Dickens's fiction, he exists in and through his clothes and seems to have little substance without them.

In this he is to be strikingly contrasted with Arthur Clennam who of all the heroes in Dickens's novels (the two first-person narrations excepted) has the least physical presence. This is not necessarily to be taken as an indication of his weakness as a charac-
ter, since there are signs that Dickens has gone out of his way to avoid describing Clennam and, in the later parts of the novel, he will be given certain crucially significant pieces of behaviour. From his introduction, however, the reader learns nothing more than that he is "a grave dark man of forty" (16) and indeed the general effect of chapter 2 is to leave him almost as anonymous as if he had not appeared. Not only is he introduced entirely through conversation with Meagles, itself a novelty in Dickens, but he is continually kept out of the reader's perceptions. He is referred to as "the other" or "the second speaker" and his very name is not mentioned until well into the chapter. Almost nothing of him is revealed by this conversation, save that he feels himself to be lacking in will as a result of his harsh upbringing (20), and it may be that this lack of physical description is intended to reinforce the sense of a rather pallid, uncertain middle-aged man. Certainly, Dickens never makes any worthwhile attempt to give any other impression and even his instruction to Browne, "Please keep Clennam, always, as agreeable and well-looking as possible"[^49], does little to alter this.

The contrast thus made with such earlier heroes as Nicholas Nickleby, Martin Chuzzlewit or Walter Gay is apparent and Dickens perhaps wishes us to understand from the outset that in Clennam we shall find a very different version of heroism from that which had sufficed to determine the lives of his previous male leads. Dickens offers virtually no details of Clennam's appearance but, if he is in this to be contrasted with Dorrit, both men take on their full meaning only in relation to Amy, through whom they are specifically linked and paralleled.

[^49]: N, ii, 810.
Although she might be thought to share something of Clennam's anonymity, Amy is, in fact, quite fully described in the course of the novel and is presented visually from the outset:

It was not easy to make out Little Dorrit's face; she was so retiring, plied her needle in such removed corners, and started away so scared if encountered on the stairs. But it seemed to be a pale transparent face, quick in expression, though not beautiful in feature, its soft hazel eyes excepted. A delicately bent head, a tiny form, a quick little pair of busy hands, and a shabby dress - it must needs have been very shabby to look at all so, being so neat - were Little Dorrit as she sat at work. (53)

Apart from the over-insistent qualification of her shabbiness, this is an effective introduction and serves as an important basis for all subsequent descriptions of Amy. It is, of course, a deliberately unidealized account and its muted tones link her with Clennam even this early in the novel. But this is not to say that she does not have her own beauty and a charm which other characters will frequently refer to. Like many Dickensian heroines, she has hazel eyes and these will later become as important to her as had been Florence Dombey's. But that they are not simply soft and hazel is implied by the woman who encounters Amy and Maggie before dawn and is shocked by the contradiction between the child-like form and the adult experience in Amy's eyes (170). Later, in a chapter which was originally entitled "Little Dorrit's Eyes", Dickens has Amy and Pancks make a superbly communicative eye-contact:

Her eyes met his as she looked wonderingly up into his face, and she thought that although his were sharp eyes, he was a brighter and gentler-looking man than she had supposed at dinner. His eyes were on her hand again directly, and her opportunity of confirming or correcting the impression was gone. (280)

Moments such as this help to make the characters of Little Dorrit more credibly naturalistic than any in Dickens's previous novels
and also suggest the grave limitations of Michael Irwin's comment that Amy's "eyes are easily, and in a sense rightly, forgotten, because it is in her nature to be unnoticeable." Amy is also remarkable amongst Dickensian heroines for her resistance to tears. She does, of course, cry on occasion (455, 631) but this is both rare and, in each case, an entirely reasonable response to events and emotions. More usually, she resists the temptation and simply gets on with solving the problems that confront her and she is thus a far tougher-minded heroine than has so far been the norm in Dickens.

Her hands and dress also reveal much about her. Although her hands are not actually described and the reader is therefore not allowed to imagine the effect of twenty years' life in the Marshalsea and work to support her family, they again express that industriousness which makes her the most practical person in the novel and, later, they will also be essential in revealing the course of her relationships with both her father and Clennam. In her simple, shabby dress she is, of course, anything but the conventional heroine and her refusal to give it up at key points in the plot will testify to her constancy and make a powerful contrast with the other members of her family (417-8) - though it might also be regarded as suggesting her dependence upon the Marshalsea way of life. Even in wealth she does not seem to dress extravagantly (625) and for her wedding she is "simply dressed as usual" (798), an emphasis which is again to be linked with her fundamental humility and Dickens's stress throughout the novel on the meek coming into their due inheritance. This is not to say that she is without imagination: both her sensitivity to her father's needs and her visualisation of Covent Garden (159) show that she is quite capable of appreciating sartorial

values other than those she herself chooses to adopt. But Amy's simplicity, in dress as in much else, is one of her most important personal values and, in a novel where so many of the characters insist on constructing fictions by which they live, it becomes an importantly moral value too. Her ability to appreciate these fictions both for what they are and for their importance to those who create them marks not only her perception of Italian society as another version of the Marshalsea (497) but essentially informs her relationships with both her father and Clennam.

In a manner that both recalls and yet is substantially different from Florence Dombey's relationship with her father, Amy and Dorrit make trusting eye-contact only infrequently and it is almost as if their behaviour towards one another is determined by the fact that both know too much about Dorrit's pretences to be entirely open. There is no question of their love for each other and, at moments of high emotional stress, this will be expressed through touch, embrace and kiss (220-4). What is remarkable about this, however, is the roles they play, which follow the pattern already described in considering the role of illness in the novel. It is Amy who comforts the crying child and soothes his fears and he responds to her as he can to no one else, so that, in Venice, for example, she alone can quiet him:

She laid her hand on his arm. She did nothing more. She gently touched him. The trembling hand may have said, with some expression, "Think of me, think how I have worked, think of my many cares!" But, she said not a syllable herself.

There was a reproach in the touch so addressed to him that she had not foreseen, or she would have withheld her hand. He began to justify himself in a heated, stumbling angry manner, which made nothing of it. (464)

51. See above, pp. 136-7.
Amy has thus, unwittingly, forced him to verbalize his deepest conflicts, which is exactly what she tries not to do throughout their relationship, and the result is a long and painful monologue which only ends when he runs out of impetus and can again take comfort in her arms (465). The need to preserve silence on the most sensitive areas of his life is both essential to the smooth functioning of their relationship and an indication of its limitations. Only when most moved is he able to speak to her openly and then it is either with a sense of the peace he will find in death (221) or, as in this scene, of his impending collapse. At the end, only Amy is there to lead him away from Mrs Merdle's banquet (629) and to watch how

Quietly, quietly, all the lines of the plan of the great Castle melted one after another. Quietly, quietly, the ruled and cross-ruled countenance on which they were traced, became fair and blank. Quietly, quietly, the reflected marks of the prison bars and of the zig-zag iron on the wall-top, faded away. Quietly, quietly, the face subsided into a far younger likeness of her own than she had ever seen under the grey hair, and sank to rest.

(631)

In its superb delicacy, this improves even on a similar passage in *Dombey and Son* (583 - see above, p. 134) and, still more importantly, in this novel the heroine is to be allowed to bury her father and give herself completely to the hero.

Amy's relationship with Clennam is described in physical terms which both contrast strongly with that she has with her father and which serve to give him a measure of life after his very insubstantial introduction. His potential for her is, for instance, apparent when she arrives at his lodgings, full of her imaginative vision of Covent Garden:

The brown, grave gentleman, who smiled so pleasantly,
who was so frank and considerate in his manner, and yet in whose earnestness there was something that reminded her of his mother, with the great difference that she was earnest in asperity and he in gentleness. Now he regarded her with that attentive and inquiring look before which Little Dorrit's eyes had always fallen, and before which they fell still. (159)

For her, this manner is something entirely new and she has to learn to put her trust in it, but before the end of their conversation both are freely and openly making eye-contact (164). What is essential to her in overcoming this first reserve is the fact that Clennam can appreciate her feelings for her father and her need to protect him. This tact is further evident in the contrast between Amy's meetings on the Iron Bridge with first John Chivery (210-13) and then Clennam (253-4) and it enables her to rely more and more upon the latter as the novel progresses. Amy's feelings, indeed, develop more quickly than Clennam's and he thus inflicts pain upon her, albeit unknowingly, by telling of his failed love for Pet (373-4). Nevertheless, the basis of their relationship is essentially sound and its progress is beautifully indicated in Dickens's description of the scene in which Clennam breaks the news of the inheritance:

They stood in a window, and her eyes, full of light, were fixed upon his face. He put an arm about her, seeing her likely to sink down. She put a hand upon that arm, partly to rest upon it, and partly so to preserve their relative positions as that her intent look at him should be shaken by no change of attitude in either of them. Her lips seemed to repeat "Wonderful fortune?" He repeated it again, aloud.

"Dear Little Dorrit! Your father."

The ice of the pale face broke at the word, and little lights and shoots of expression passed all over it. They were all expressions of pain. Her breath was faint and hurried. Her heart beat fast. He would have clasped the little figure closer, but he saw that the eyes appealed to him not to be moved. (402-3)

Such staging as this, combining all the various aspects of Dickens's physical description of character, is one of the qualities which help
to make this pair the most appealing of all his romantic couples. Their complete union is, however, still some way off and, before it can take place, Clennam must come to appreciate the real nature of his feelings for Amy.

His blindness in this is perhaps not to be wondered at in view of the confusions of his emotional history. Three other women stand between him and Amy: his mother, Flora, the lost love of his youth, and Pet, who offers the tempting prospect of the conventional heroine. Not until he has resolved his relationships with each of these will he be free to see Amy as she really is and one of the ways in which his progress towards her is indicated is through a pattern of physical contact. Even after twenty years in China, his mother offers him only the coldest of embraces on the evening of his return (34, 36). Flora, appropriately takes matters to the other extreme and is literally not to be shaken off (153, 666-9). The end of his hopes with Pet is an altogether more delicate affair and their final interview (326-9) sees her, trusting him as had Amy, place her hands on his arm while they extinguish a relationship that had never really had any existence outside his own desires. This pattern of false hopes as expressed through touching and holding not only acts as an inverted contrast with the development of his relationship with Amy but also parallels the repeated motif of flowers being brought to Clennam by the women in his life. It might, however, be noted that, just as his mother is not included in the floral pattern, so too he solves the problems inherent in their relationship only by her death. In this he may be said to resemble Amy, who only escapes from her father with his death, and Dickens would therefore appear to be implying that, although his hero and heroine do succeed in coming to one another, they cannot do so before
dominant parental figures are finally removed from their lives.

Their eventual reunion scene recalls that of Dombey and Son, but with certain fundamental differences, all of which spring from the essential fact that Clennam is, indeed, not Amy's father. She may imitate Florence in kneeling before him and weeping on his breast (735-6) but here there is none of that self-denigration before the undeserving father that had so undermined the earlier scene. She calls herself his "own poor child" (736) and thus reminds us of his attractiveness for her in providing the strength and support her father had never been able to offer, although at the same time she can also continue to play the protective role that has become essential to her and which he so badly needs at this moment. The point is emphasized by Clennam's immediate comment on her returning to him in the old dress, the first thing he had noticed when she came into the room (735), but we are to understand that the innocence Amy possesses (736) is no longer that which had characterized the heroines of the earlier novels: for, to reveal that old dress, she must discard the black mantle she wears in mourning for her father. If her continuing innocence is vital to Dickens's conception of her, it is also something that must be understood as having been learned only through the sadness of experience - Dickens has indeed come a long way from Kate Nickleby. Throughout this scene, details from Amy's relationship with her father will continue to recur in a profoundly altered form, since Clennam has learned to perceive his heroine as the woman she really is - "the change was in his perception, not in her" (737).

The evolution in Dickens's ability to present character and action through physical description is clearly enormous and, indeed,
the kind of writing we find in *Little Dorrit* differs from that of *Nickleby* not only in quality but in its fundamental nature. If Dickens does use physical reaction consistently to register emotion and to express character, the achievement in his later fiction is so refined as to bear very little resemblance to that of the first novels. One thing does remain constant, however, his unique delight in and ability to create some of his richest comedy through such description and we may leave the last words on this to the inimitable Flora Finching:

"Oh good gracious me I hope you never kept yourself a bachelor so long on my account!" tittered Flora; "but of course you never did why should you, pray don't answer, I don't know where I'm running to, oh do tell me something about the Chinese ladies whether their eyes are really so long and narrow and always putting me in mind of mother-of-pearl fish at cards and do they really wear tails down their backs and plaited too or is it only the men, and when they pull their hair so very tight off their foreheads don't they hurt themselves, and why do they stick little bells all over their bridges and temples and hats and things or don't they really do it!" Flora gave him another of her old glances. Instantly she went on again, as if he had spoken in reply for some time. (144-5)
III

TWO STUDIES
8. SEX AND SERIOUSNESS IN DAVID COPPERFIELD

Edmund Wilson's remark that David Copperfield represents a holiday from Dickens's usual concerns\(^1\) is characteristic of responses to the novel which dwell upon its "uniform pleasantness of tone\(^2\) but which perhaps thus neglect its very central place in Dickens's career. For Copperfield is surely the most beautifully balanced of all his works, containing as it does both that abundant warmth of feeling characteristic of the early fiction as well as the darker, deeper colours of the later novels, combining a richly panoramic plot with subtly planned and detailed narration, and blending some of Dickens's finest humour with insights into malignant and corroding aspects of human personality. Some of these qualities are present in all of Dickens's novels but none contains them in such perfect poise as does David Copperfield.

The extent to which Copperfield draws upon Dickens's own life has perhaps been responsible for obscuring its continuity with his early picaresque fictions and the ways in which it is, at least partially, a remodelling of them. In his study of the Bildungsroman, Jerome Buckley identifies a recurrent conventional pattern in the genre that is, in fact, also broadly similar to that of eighteenth-century British picaresque and, in particular, to two of Dickens's

2. E, p. 553.
childhood favourites, Roderick Random and Tom Jones. David's life follows something of this pattern and, externally at least, he bears some resemblance to the gentleman-picaro type developed in Nicholas Nickleby. Indeed, David's story is probably as close to traditional picaresque as it is to Dickens's own life: brought up in the country, he is soon deprived of the schooling and social status that are his right by birth and is expelled out into a hostile world, first to gain some measure of education and then to earn his living. Like Oliver Twist and other orphans of fortunate foundling literature, he undergoes considerable physical hardship during his early years and, true to the traditional last resort of the picaro, takes to the road in flight from his sufferings. It may, however, be noted that David is an innocent in his wanderings and, unlike the traditionally wily picaro, is a victim of the tricks of those he encounters: the boy with the donkey-cart (234-5); Mr Dolloby (236); and Charley the gooroo man (239-42). Later in his career, he imitates Gil Blas, Roderick Random, Peregrine Pickle, and Nicholas Nickleby, as well as Dickens himself, by turning to the pen for his living and, like the fictional heroes but in marked contrast to the author, there is a touch of the fairy-tale in his instant (and very profitable) success.

There is, of course, much in the novel that has nothing at all to do with the picaresque form and it would be an exaggeration to suggest that Copperfield's plot is anything other than sketchily picaresque. Nevertheless, not only are certain borrowings quite evident, above all in the details of David's individual progress, but also David to some extent draws upon eighteenth-century picaresque as a model for his own life. None of Dickens's novels contain as

many direct references to this fiction as does David Copperfield, for on several occasions, and especially in times of trouble, David likens some event in his story to an incident in Roderick Random or Robinson Crusoe (for example, 113, 509, 557). Just as he had drawn comfort from his collection of books in the period after his mother's remarriage (105-6), so too in later life they offer him an imaginative alternative to an unpleasant event in reality. The most revealing instance of this is to be seen during his visit to Micawber in the King's Bench, an episode which may be closely compared with Thackeray's account of Captain Shandon in the Fleet. Although Micawber and Shandon bear with captivity in much the same casual way, the heroes who visit them react to the two prisons quite differently. Where Pen is "struck and excited" (chapter 32, p. 309) by all he sees, David's response is characteristically softer and he reduces the impact of what he sees by likening it to Roderick Random's imprisonment (221). This has the advantages of both reducing the immediate suffering and, by association with the happy outcome of Roderick's story, of suggesting the hope of eventual release. David himself is well aware of this mechanism in his perceptions:

I set down this remembrance here, because it is an instance to myself of the manner in which I fitted my old books to my altered life, and made stories for myself, out of the streets, and out of men and women; and how some main points in the character I shall unconsciously develop, I suppose, in writing my life, were gradually forming all this while. . . When my thoughts go back, now, to that slow agony of my youth, I wonder how much of the histories I invented for such people hangs like a mist of fancy over well-remembered facts! When I tread the old ground, I do not wonder that I seem to see and pity, going on before me, an innocent romantic boy, making his imaginative world out of such strange experiences and sordid things! (224-5)

This consciousness of the habit of adapting literary models as a

4. The History of Pendennis, chapters 31-2, pp. 309-17.
means of digesting personal experience is profoundly revealing and its implications for David's whole narration of his life are considerable.

For David's motives in writing down his "Personal History, Adventures, Experience and Observation" are never entirely clear and there is, indeed, some contradiction between his various statements of intent. Although both the novel's full title and a remark later in the text (671) emphasize the private nature of this narrative, it is difficult not to feel that it is at times a tale in search of the reader's sympathy and that the narrator is rather too concerned that his confessions should indeed be seen as those of a justified sinner. It is notable that all of David's comments on his purposes in writing come during the later stages of the novel, particularly during the process of transferring his affections from Dora to Agnes. This is true of both his explicit remark (671), which forms part of a crucial statement of his earnestness which will be further discussed below (see pp. 252-3), and of the three other occasions when he explains why he is writing. Thus, after vainly trying to "improve" Dora, he turns away and confides to the reader:

I had a great deal of work to do now, and had many anxieties, but the same consideration made me keep them to myself. I am far from sure, now, that it was right to do this, but I did it for my child-wife's sake. I search my breast, and I commit its secrets, if I know them, without any reservation to this paper. (713)

His apparent candour is somewhat disingenuous, preceded as it is by such a blatant appeal for sympathy, and this is equally true of his later comment, "In fulfilment of the compact I have made with myself, to reflect my mind on this paper, I again examine it, closely, and bring its secrets to the light" (765). Not only is this juxtaposed immediately beside another of his laments for the want of something
in his marriage, but also there is surely something rather strained in such formal words as "compact" and "examine". Not until Dora has been removed from the stage can he say, without any attempt at justification, that "this narrative is my written memory" (889) and thus admit the possibility of its being rather more subjective in its essential nature than his previous statements had tended to imply.

In this Copperfield represents something new in Dickens's career, since in his earlier works the author had frequently been at considerable pains to insist upon the objective truth of either the whole or specific parts of the narrative. For David, the fact that his is an essentially subjective progress is crucial. Unlike Nicholas Nickleby or Martin Chuzzlewit, for example, his great expectations are more emotional than material and the fact that the story is his own subjective recounting of his life means that the reader is called upon to interpret the narration as much in terms of what it reveals about David himself as in those of what it purports to tell us. Whether Dickens himself was entirely aware of some of the dualities that appear through the narrative that David chooses to give cannot be determined with any degree of certainty, but it is notable that both character and author seem to share certain blind spots, in particular where women are in question.

The extent to which David's narrative moves between realistic account and fictitious reconstruction of his past life is apparent even in the chronology of the novel, something that perhaps at first sight one might imagine to be more objectively determined. Indeed, Dickens does display that assured control of the time-scheme that is characteristic of his mature fiction and he inserts into the story sufficient indications of time's passing to keep the reader
aware of David's movement through the years, though he does not impose the kind of minute chronological accuracy that is appropriate to novels with tighter plots and shorter time-spans but which would be only clogging here. The chronology of the novel depends, in fact, largely upon the memory of its narrator and, while it does seem to be generally accurate, it is not anchored to either external historical detail or, in the manner of Little Dorrit, to an extensive series of internal temporal cross-references. Some use is made of seasonal effect—both Dora's death (838) and the climactic storm which sweeps Steerforth out of David's life (857) occur in autumn, for example—but even this is only employed for intermittent local effect.

Nevertheless, Dickens's care to construct an accurate time-scheme can be gauged from the insignificance of the few errors that may be noticed. Mrs Copperfield, for instance, dies shortly before what must be David's ninth birthday (119, 175); some months then pass (190, 204); yet, by the time David arrives in the warehouse (208), he is ten. For this to be accurate, he must have been neglected for more than a year after his mother's death, which seems unlikely, and Dickens has perhaps been characteristically careless in his failure to co-ordinate action and birthdays. There is, however, another possible explanation for this, since it may also be seen to bring David rather nearer to the author's own age (just barely twelve) when he began his career in the blacking warehouse. Two other slips are even less important: when opening the chapter that is to lead to his first meeting with Martha, David writes, "I must have been married, if I may trust to my imperfect memory for dates, about a year or so..." (733). In chapter 48, which immediately follows the riverside meeting, he moves on to a point one and a half years after his wedding (758) and yet, shortly thereafter, he seems to have forgotten this and
remarks that "some months had passed since our interview on the bank of the river with Martha" (781). Finally, Micawber goes to work for Uriah some six months after David takes up residence in London (575, 594) and is still so employed some years later at the time of Dora's death. Such stability in so inconstant a character would seem rather unlikely, but it is, in fact, not noticed in reading and is clearly only a contrivance to remove Micawber from the action and then later bring him back into it in the most economical manner. These minor instances apart, the chronology of the novel seems entirely accurate and Sylve Monod is surely exaggerating when he suggests that "the chronology of events in Copperfield is far from clear." 5

More important than the question of detailed accuracy, however, is that of what David does to control the point of view through the temporal presentation of events in his story. It was clearly impossible, even if it were desirable, for equal space to be devoted to each of the thirty-six years or so of David's life which it covers, but the variations are, nevertheless, extreme. Numbers VII to XII, for example, are taken up with the six months from David's leaving school in Canterbury until his engagement, while Number XIV carries the narrative from his reunion with Dora in Putney to their marriage approximately three years later. In terms of plot development, such an imbalance is, of course, entirely understandable and the passage of time in Number XIV is largely accomplished through the second of the Retrospect chapters. However, and despite the often and, indeed, rightly praised beauty of this nostalgic summary, should it be accepted uncritically? From the outset of the chapter which follows it

David begins to comment upon the inadequacies of domestic life with Dora and the comic tone of much of this should not conceal the fact that such complaints form the basis of his (and Dickens's) depiction of her as the false heroine. Not only does this make a somewhat jarring contrast with the idyllic tone of the Retrospect chapter, but it also allows David to focus on Dora's failings and to conceal the fact that, despite having had several years to discover her real nature and come to terms with it, he has utterly failed to do so. Why, we may wonder, has he learned so little that realization should come so suddenly and as an unexpected blight upon their marriage. Such evasiveness—which is repeated at the time of Dora's death through manipulation of the temporal point of view—calls into question the objectivity of David's whole account and, in particular, the honesty of his depiction of his relationship with Dora.

The extent to which subjectivity colours David's narrative is even more apparent in other aspects of his account, notably in the use made of observation and techniques of physical description and in the treatment of earnestness and imaginativeness in the novel. Philip Collins has effectively suggested the limitations of Copperfield's exploration of the intellectual, moral and spiritual dilemmas of the age, especially by contrast with much of its contemporaneous literature, and the novel's real success surely lies instead in its presentation of David's emotional life. Moreover, this emotional life is a very consistent one: the hopes, desires, and the fears of

the sensitive child are also to be found in the adult and it may even be seen that David develops not so much in terms of changing his emotional priorities but of subjecting them to more consciously imposed attitudes.

The continuity of David's feelings is particularly evident from the way his observation and description of other people falls into habitual and extremely revealing patterns which tell the reader more about the secrets of David's breast than he perhaps realizes or would be willing to admit directly. Very little is known about his own appearance, apart from the facts that he is chubby (141), small for his age as a child (216), and that even as a young man he never loses a certain fresh innocence. This latter quality, however, is particularly important, for it is part of a softness and even a pliability that frequently leads other characters to exercise dominance over David, something which is true not only of his encounters with people who are supposed to serve him (from the waiter at the Golden Cross (343-4) to Littimer (385, 402)), but also of the most significant relationships in his life. However, we should neither laugh off this soft weakness as David appears to do nor should we allow it to conceal from us the fact that, from very early in life, he responds to other people in complex and quite discriminating ways.

All of his relationships with other people are strongly defined by physical contact and through touch David expresses much of that personal warmth that is one of his most attractive features. In his childhood and later, he and Peggotty continually and, because of her explosive buttons, comically embrace one another (113, 192, 365). A similar expressiveness marks his relationships with Steerforth (345) and Betsey Trotwood (756-7), as well as those with such less significant
characters as the Peggottys, Wickfield and Dr Strong. The importance of this motif in Dickens's conception of David is indicated by his care to include it when he parts from Steerforth for the last time (498), a detail carefully prepared for in the Number plan.

Similarly, David also reveals his feelings of animosity through physical contact, most notably with the Murdstones and Uriah Heep. From his first meeting with Murdstone, David expresses hostility and reveals a fear of being replaced in his mother's affections:

> He patted me on the head; but somehow, I didn't like him or his deep voice, and I was jealous that his hand should touch my mother's in touching me - which it did. I put it away, as well as I could. (67)

Later, of course, their antagonism will become more open, reaching its climax in the beating Murdstone gives David and the boy's response by biting the hand he so hates (108). Jane Murdstone is indeed her brother's sister, offering David quite the opposite of the warmth he draws from his mother (97) and going into hysterics at the sight of him holding the baby (169-70).

With Uriah, however, David reveals a rather more complex set of responses than this fairly simple opposition of acceptance or rejection. Few characters in all Dickens are so insistently and repetitively described as is Uriah Heep and references to his hands make up an important part of David's response to him. Not only are they clammy and fish-like (293, 673) but they never stop moving, whether it be to rub his chin or, in a superbly grotesque detail, to cover the pony's nostrils after apparently breathing into them (275). David can resist neither the fascination these hands have for him nor Uriah's power to dominate him manually (439, 577, 638) and,

through his repeated references to this and other aspects of Uriah's appearance, he gives ample evidence of the way he is "attracted to him in very repulsion" (444). Moreover, it is a measure of the complexity of response that Copperfield calls for that where every reader will sympathize with David's biting of Murdstone's hand, his striking of Uriah (685-6) evokes only the feeling of shame and faint self-disgust he himself experiences. The hero's virtue is no longer as simply self-evident as had been Nicholas Nickleby's in beating Squeers.

David reveals even more about himself, however, through his observations of hair and eyes. He tends to see other people in very pictorial terms, frequently associating them with one particular image which he retains in his memory like a snapshot. This is especially true of his mother, images of whom he stores away and draws upon for comfort in times of trouble. One of the most important of such pictures is saved from that single peaceful holiday afternoon:

I crept close to my mother's side according to my old custom, broken now a long time, and sat with my arms embracing her waist, and my little red cheek on her shoulder, and once more felt her beautiful hair drooping over me - like an angel's wing as I used to think, I recollect - and was very happy indeed. (165)

The security and protection he thus gains are essential to him and are surely part of that "fanciful picture" of his mother which sustains him on the road to Dover (246). However, his mother also offers him another kind of femininity in the sexual attractiveness of her hair, something she is proud of and of which he is well aware, even as a child:

When my mother is out of breath and rests herself in an elbow-chair, I watch her winding her bright curls round her fingers, and straitening her waist, and no-
body knows better than I do that she likes to look so well, and is proud of being so pretty. (65)

Curls, of course, are also to be an important part of his later description of Dora's girlish charm (603) and, as has often been remarked, in her David rediscovers his mother. However, the fact that his mother also offered him security and that this twin role is expressed through details of physical description has not been so often noticed and will be important in his subsequent dissatisfaction with his child-wife. Like Pendennis, David places enormous stress upon an ideal image of his mother (74) and an awareness of this is crucial to understanding his later relationships with Dora and Agnes.

However, in childhood he is also offered a dominating masculine ideal which contrasts strongly with his mother's delicate femininity. Murdstone is, as even David admits, an attractive man and he brings the best out of Mrs Copperfield (67). Although he may in both appearance and activity resemble the Captain Murderer figure of fairy-tale 10, there is no denying his sexual vitality:

Several times when I glanced at him, I observed that appearance with a sort of awe, and wondered what he was thinking about so closely. His hair and whiskers were blacker and thicker, looked at so near, than even I had given them credit for being. A squareness about the lower part of his face, and the dotted indication of the strong black beard he shaved close every day, reminded me of the wax-work that had travelled into our neighbourhood some half-a-year before. This, his regular eyebrows, and the rich white, and black, and brown, of his complexion - confound his complexion and his memory! - made me think him, in spite of my misgivings, a very handsome man. I have no doubt that my poor dear mother thought so too. (71)

David clearly resents the possibility of being displaced in his mother's affections and the fact that he is helpless to do anything about it. For, just as he had been scared of the geese and crowing

10. See Thomas, The Miser in Dickens's Novels, p. 27.
cock in the yard (62), so too he is terrified of Murdstone's "deep-mouthed and black-haired" dog (93) and, equally, can do nothing to stop his step-father treating him as a dog (95-6). Even when, years later, they meet again in London he is still unable to prevent himself from noticing the older man's still imposing masculinity (537) and it is evident that he never fully escapes from Murdstone's hold.

The sexual connotations of hair are also apparent in a number of other less than entirely benign characters. Steerforth's curls (139), together with his nice voice, fine face and easy manner, suggest that luxuriant sensuality which is central to his character. Rosa Dartle, by contrast, is dark (350), a conventional enough indication of malevolence in Victorian fiction, but will be made far more effective through David's observation of her eyes. Dickens could, however, use such a stock detail with originality, as he shows when introducing Jane Murdstone:

dark, like her brother, whom she greatly resembled in face and voice; and with very heavy eyebrows, nearly meeting over her large nose, as if being disabled by the wrongs of her sex from wearing whiskers, she had carried them to that account. (97)

By contrast with all these characters, Uriah's cadaverously cropped head and lack of facial hair (275) are essential details in David's communication of the sense of horror his would-be rival creates in him, although David's very insistence upon describing Uriah in such detail may also suggest the uncertainty of his feelings towards him. It may, indeed, be noted that Uriah's desire for Agnes is by far the most vivid rendering of lust in the novel, if not in all Dickens, and that beside it the Steerforth-Emily elopement has very little force. If it is probably true, as Ross Dabney has remarked, that

"Dickens makes sexual relationships real only when they are horrible
to contemplate"¹¹, this reflects upon both the author and his character and its implications become further apparent in David's observation of people's eyes.

His many references to the colour and quality of eyes reveal as much about his own emotional priorities as they tell us about the characters they refer to and we may again detect a dual pattern: people whose softness attracts him; and another group who will their fascination upon him.

Both Emily and Dora are blue-eyed (194; 711) and this is a detail David habitually repeats when referring to them (501, 807; 714, 782, 834). He is easily captivated by both of them and they share a certain delicate beauty and easy charm. The colour blue, in fact, unfailingly evokes a positive response from him and in this he may be allied with his creator, whose favourite colour it was.¹² Emily has a set of blue beads (80), which might be contrasted with Jane Murdstone's metallic ornaments (98), and has a lifelong attraction to the seductive blue waters of the Mediterranean (649, 743).¹³ Dora not only has blue eyes but is frequently seen in blue ribbons (455, 612, 695) and is bought a ring of blue forget-me-nots by David (550). That this is not a merely incidental pattern may be suggested by the fact that David also responds to the blue-eyed charms of Miss Larkins (326-9) and is later attracted to the Steerforth's pretty parlour-maid and her blue ribbons (491). Clearly, David has an eye for a pretty girl and, through this recurrent emph-

¹¹. Love and Property in the Novels of Charles Dickens, p. 69.
¹². See, for example, Michael Slater, "David to Dora: A New Dickens Letter", Dkn, 68 (1972), p. 162.
¹³. Again, Dickens himself evidently shared the feeling: "If you ever have occasion to paint the Mediterranean, let it be exactly that colour. It lies before me now, as deeply and intensely blue." F, p. 331.
asis on blue, which acts as an emblem of his romantic fantasy, reveals just how alive to sexual attraction he is.

Against these softer charmers, however, must be set a group of characters who exercise a very different kind of hold over him. Murdstone's fascination for David is partly contained in those eyes from which he can hardly tear his gaze on the ride to Yarmouth:

He had that kind of shallow black eye - I want a better word to express an eye that has no depth in it to be looked into - which, when it is abstracted, seems from some peculiarity of light to be disfigured, for a moment at a time, by a cast. (71)

and we are thus hardly surprised when, a little later, David testifies to the mesmeric power his step-father has over him (95). Uriah's red suns of eyes similarly compel him (278) and constantly haunt him in all their meetings. But perhaps the most revealing account David gives is that of Rosa Dartle:

So surely as I looked towards her, did I see that eager visage, with its gaunt black eyes and searching brow, intent on mine; or passing suddenly from mine to Steerforth's; or comprehending both of us at once. In this lynx-like scrutiny, she was so far from faltering when she saw I observed it, that at such a time she only fixed her piercing look upon me with a more intent expression still. Blameless as I was, and knew that I was, I shrunk before her strange eyes, quite unable to endure their hungry lustre. (491)

No other woman in the novel attracts David as powerfully as Rosa and after their first meeting he had been so spellbound that

I felt myself falling a little in love with her. I could not help thinking, several times in the course of the evening, and particularly when I walked home at night, what delightful company she would be in Buckingham Street. (416-7)

It is perhaps as well that he does not see too much of her, since in both this curious comment and in his later reaction when she brings forward Littimer:
The air of wicked grace: of triumph, in which, strange to say, there was yet something feminine and alluring: with which she reclined upon the seat between us, and looked at me, was worthy of a cruel Princess in a legend. (735)

she evokes responses in him that he would find difficult to reconcile with his feelings for either Dora or Agnes.

It is perhaps not mere chance that Agnes falls into neither of the two emotional patterns David reveals in his habits of observation and description but instead stands outside them as a distinct alternative. She is given almost no physical presence in the novel and the one detail that is insisted upon— that of her "clear calm eyes" (551) — has only a neutral effect. When she and David touch (426, 912), there is nothing at all sexual in the contact and it is harder to believe in the changing quality of their relationship than had been the case with even Walter Gay and Florence Dombey. Dickens does nothing to help the reader believe in this relationship and, as Michael Steig has shown, even Browne's illustrations give Agnes very little presence in the text. 14 In this, of course, she is to be contrasted with most of the other women in David's story. Not only is he keenly alive to the attractions of his mother, Dora and Rosa, but he can also take the time to notice a whole gallery of pretty young women, from the Steerforths' maid to Janet (250) and Minnie Joram (361). If he is so responsive to the physical attractiveness of almost every woman he encounters, why, then, does he so ignore it whenever he mentions Agnes? Moreover, it is noticeable that almost every woman in the novel is attracted to David and that many display an almost maternal protectiveness towards him — the publican's wife (216), Mrs Micawber  

(231), Peggotty and Betsey Trotwood are all instances of this — yet the nature of Agnes's feelings for him remains consistently vague and undefined.

A contrast with **Pendennis** may be instructive here. Pen has an eye for a pretty girl as much as David but, where Dickens conveys this tacitly through patterns of unconscious observation, Thackeray makes his hero's concupiscence an important influence upon the direction of his progress. David, however, for all his latent desire leads a blamelessly chaste life and is never tempted by any equivalent of Fanny Bolton. The case with Laura is slightly less simple, since, although she, like Agnes, is realized without any indications of sexual attractiveness, she does have a certain amount of independent life and vitality. Moreover, not only does Thackeray have the confidence to present her with rival suitors but also he takes care to explain the basis of her affection for Pen:

So then Laura liked Pen because she saw scarcely anybody else at Fairoaks except Doctor Portman and Captain Glanders, and because his mother constantly praised her Arthur, and because he was gentleman-like, tolerably good-looking and witty, and because, above all, it was of her nature to like somebody. And having once received this image into her heart, she there tenderly nursed it and clasped it — she there, in his long absences and her constant solitudes, silently brooded over it and fondled it — and when after this she came to London, and had an opportunity of becoming rather intimate with Mr. George Warrington, what on earth was to prevent her from thinking him a most odd, original, agreeable, and pleasing person? (Chapter 53, pp. 515-6)

Thackeray thus acknowledges and indeed makes central to his hero's story conflicting feelings and desires similar to those David has but which he is less prepared to express directly.

One of the most important outlets for David's unofficial self is to be seen in his relationship with Steerforth where, in however
unsatisfactory a manner, he effects some sort of reconciliation between his various needs and desires. David is, of course, both dominated and protected by Steerforth throughout their relationship and the roles they adopt towards one another suit his needs to perfection:

A dashing way he had of treating me like a plaything, was more agreeable to me than any behaviour he could have adopted. It reminded me of our old acquaintance; it seemed the natural sequel of it; it showed me that he was unchanged; it relieved me of any uneasiness I might have felt, comparing my merits with his, and measuring my claims upon his friendship by any equal standard; above all, it was a familiar, unrestrained affectionate demeanour that he used towards no one else. (358-9)

The emphases on unchanged continuity with the past, on not questioning David's intrinsic value, and on an exclusive kind of affection are all indications of David's greatest weaknesses and show how completely dependent a relationship this is. Moreover, there is surely some considerable disparity between David's vision of Steerforth and the reader's, for, despite this hero-worship or even Mrs Steerforth's insistence on her son's prospects (530), his undeniable charm and putative talents remain far too rootless and unstable to convince us that he could ever be more than a darkly Byronic figure.

Nevertheless, Steerforth clearly does offer an image of masculinity which David finds attractive and he affords him vicarious gratification of desires he surely feels but cannot overtly admit. That David should be so attracted to his friend's ex-mistress is perhaps no coincidence and even the seduction of little Emily may well give him a form of surrogate satisfaction. For, despite his protestations of shock and horror, it is worth noting that David

himself gives some indication (78) of anticipating Steerforth's arrogant dismissal of Ham (376) and he quite openly admits to having never completely lost his childhood love for Em'ly (374). Moreover, he voices very little moral disapproval of the elopement and retains a touching and even beautiful nostalgia for his lost friend:

I should have loved him so well still - though he fascinated me no longer - I should have held in so much tenderness the memory of my affection for him, that I think I should have been as weak as a spirit-wounded child, in all but the entertainment of a thought that we could ever be re-united. That thought I never had. I felt, as he had felt, that all was at an end between us. What his remembrances of me were, I have never known - they were light enough, perhaps, and easily dismissed - but mine of him were as the remembrances of a cherished friend, who was dead. (516)

Although cast by the plot in a conventional and indeed rather peripheral role as the villainous seducer, Steerforth is, in fact, brought into the central emotional tides of the novel and creates far stronger feelings in its hero than he has for either of his heroines. David's very real but largely unacknowledged sexuality finds its only outlet in his attraction to and vicarious identification with Steerforth and this does much to explain his inability to voice outright moral condemnation of the seduction of Em'ly. In contrast to this, however, the woman on whom David's choice finally falls has no difficulty in rejecting Steerforth absolutely and in terms which are astonishingly powerful for a short glimpse across a theatre (426-7). This is surely a case of moral over-kill, for not only is it based on the most superficial of encounters but also, at this stage of the plot, Steerforth has done nothing whatsoever to merit such condemnation. If we cannot share David's enthusiasm for him, we can at least understand it far more than Agnes' rather self-righteous judgement.
Agnes' moral stance does, however, become comprehensible in the light of the role she is called upon to play in resolving the turmoil of David's emotional life, since she is the principal bearer of an ideal upon which he comes to rest, that of earnestness. She, indeed, finds it impossible to be anything other than earnest and, by contrast with Amy Dorrit (LD, 737), her embodiment of the quality overshadows all other physical and emotional characteristics:

There was always something in her modest voice that seemed to touch a chord within me, answering to that sound alone. It was always earnest; but when it was very earnest, as it was now, there was a thrill in it that quite subdued me. I sat looking at her as she cast her eyes down on her work; I sat seeming still to listen to her; and Steerforth, in spite of all my attachment to him, darkened in that tone. (426-7)

Whenever Dickens falls back on description of a character's voice, it can usually be said that this is faute de mieux and Agnes is no exception. Moreover, the writing here is over-insistent and has none of the convincing delicacy David reveals with almost every other character he describes - even Uriah Heep is rendered with a complexity of response that originates from a highly delicate sensibility. Nevertheless, we are clearly intended to take this seriously and, even if Dickens appears to be repeating from Dombey and Son the problem of trying to reconcile unworldly earnestness with depiction of the heroine as a woman capable of sexual response, what he is also doing is building this very opposition into the structure of the novel and, above all, into his depiction of its contrasting heroines.

For Dora is anything but earnest in the way Agnes is and, even more, in the way David comes to place an increasing amount of stress upon as his narrative progresses. She is entirely girlish and her light charm is aptly caught in the nickname that Betsey Trotwood gives her, Little Blossom. This, however, does not mean that she is anything other
than utterly serious in her love for David and, while one would not wish to make great claims for her personality, it is clear that she gives him all that it is in her power to give. He, however, measures her against a standard of earnestness on which she will inevitably be found wanting:

I did feel, sometimes, for a little while, that I could have wished my wife had been my counsellor; had had more character and purpose, to sustain me and improve me by; had been endowed with more power to fill up the void which somewhere seemed to be about me; but I felt as if this were an unearthly consummation of my happiness, that never had been meant to be, and never could have been. (713)

Not only does David seem quite unaware of the self-pitying quality of his prose here and to deny any responsibility for creating the situation in which he finds himself, but also he reveals an entirely characteristic need to depend upon some one else for support - something that he appears to feel is quite a worthy trait. Neither he nor Dickens seem aware of the inadequacies of his response to his wife or of the horrifying convenience of her dying to make way for Agnes, but Dora at least has some revenge in one of her last comments to her husband: "I loved you far too well to say a reproachful word to you, in earnest - it was all the merit I had, except being pretty - or you thought me so" (837). Whether David could affirm a similar fidelity in his love for her seems questionable. 16

Nevertheless, both he and Dickens seem quite confident that Dora was an unfortunate mistake and, while it was good to have loved, it was even better to have loved and lost. Moreover, David's opinion of Dora's failings is given considerable support by Dickens's treatment of the theme of work and earnestness throughout the novel and,

in particular, by the role he gives it in the development of David's career. For, on a number of occasions, David is called upon to supply a want in his character by training himself to be firm and resolute:

"Someone I know, Trot," my aunt pursued, after a pause, "though of a very pliant disposition, has an earnestness of affection in him that reminds me of poor Baby. Earnestness is what that Somebody must look for, to sustain him and improve him, Trot. Deep, downright, faithful earnestness."

"If only you knew the earnestness of Dora, aunt!" I cried.

"Oh, Trot!" she said again, "blind, blind!" and without knowing why, I felt a vague unhappy loss or want of something overshadow me like a cloud. (565)

The fact that such an apparently blameless piece of morality comes from an entirely attractive, if rather eccentric, character only helps to authenticate it and to obscure the extraordinary quality of her "blind, blind!" Although he appears to be candidly admitting a failing in himself, what David is surely also doing is subtly preparing for his later depiction of Dora's inadequacies as a wife. It may also be worth noting that this was written within a month or so of Dickens's letter to Emmely Gottschalk, in which he advocates domestic earnestness as the highest womanly virtue, and character and author are thus once again aligned.

This effect is further reinforced by the fact that David later describes his growth into earnestness in rather an expansive manner and, indeed, attributes all his worldly success to his attainment of the quality:

The man who reviews his own life, as I do mine, in going on here, from page to page, had need to have been a good man indeed, if he would be spared the sharp consciousness of many talents neglected, many opportunities wasted, many erratic and perverted feelings constantly at war within his breast, and defeating him. I do not hold one natural gift, I dare say, that I have not abused. My

17. See above, p. 154.
meaning simply is, that whatever I have tried to do in my life, I have tried with all my heart to do well; that whatever I have devoted myself to, I have devoted myself to completely; that in great aims and in small, I have always been thoroughly in earnest. I have never believed it possible that any natural or improved ability can claim immunity from the companionship of the steady plain, hard-working qualities, and hope to gain its end. There is no such thing as fulfilment on this earth. Some happy talent, and some fortunate opportunity, may form the two sides of the ladder on which some men mount, but the rounds of that ladder must be made of stuff to stand wear and tear; and there is no substitute for thorough-going, ardent, and sincere earnestness. (671-2)

The moving and dignified quality of such writing and the fact that it is, to some extent, a superb testimony to an in many ways admirable ideal should not blind us to its implications for David's character. For he clearly does believe that there is such a thing as fulfilment on this earth, only its name is Agnes and not Dora - to whom he certainly did not devote himself completely. Moreover, his adoption of this creed comes relatively late in the novel and can be seen to only overlay a set of erratic feelings that has been constantly at war in his breast throughout the story. David makes being earnest his most important criterion in judging other people and it is this which allows him to justify transferring his affections from Dora to Agnes.

But what, exactly, is this earnestness? Agnes is clearly related to Dickens's other earnest heroines but, ironically, her and David's very insistence upon the quality does much to render it unpalatable. She does not embody it in the manner of Florence Dombey or Amy Dorrit but instead relies upon David's perception of it in her. This is partly a result of the fact that she has very little to do in the plot other than to sit and wait for David, but it is also related to her role as his spiritual mentor:

She filled my heart with such good resolutions, strengthened
my weakness so, by her example, so directed - I know not how, she was too modest and gentle to advise me in words - the wandering ardour and unsettled purpose within me, that all the little good I have done, and all the harm I have forborne, I solemnly believe I may refer to her. (581)

Her earnestness, therefore, is not defined as an abstract quality but takes its sole meaning and value from her relationship with and support of David himself:

Whatever contradictions and inconsistencies there were within me, as there are within so many of us; whatever might have been different, and so much better; whatever I had done, in which I had perversely wandered away from the voice of my own heart; I knew nothing of. I only knew that I was fervently in earnest, when I felt the rest and peace of having Agnes near me. (631-2)

His gesture towards a generalizing of his situation should not conceal from us the fact that he is, however, speaking quite precisely about his own case and inviting the reader to assent with his retrospective judgement that in loving Dora and thus expressing one vital side of his emotional nature he was not in earnest and therefore not fulfilling his highest self.

David continues to develop this opposition of the values of earnestness and sexual love in his depiction of Em'ly's elopement. Steerforth, of course, is not an earnest character, although he does express a curious "dark kind of earnestness" (381) as his thoughts wander amidst images in the fire. So too Em'ly herself, despite looking so "extraordinarily earnest and pretty" (196) as an innocent child, "wants heart" when she grows up and is easily tempted away from the earnest and hard-working Ham (384, 397, 804) by Steerforth's charm and the offer of becoming a lady without any care for David's ladder of earnestness. Mr Peggotty's sole ambition from this point on is his earnest commitment to bringing her home (793) and, while
there may be something faintly disturbing in such devotion to his niece, there can be no doubting that David is making an equation between earnestness and the values of the family and domesticity, with the corollary that these are disrupted by the undisciplined sexuality of the eloping couple.

The discipline of earnestness is a theme which raises fresh problems, however, and carries implications that David again fails to appreciate. Not only is his insistence upon the undisciplined nature of his heart during his love for Dora wearisome and all too obvious a tactic for defining her unworthiness, but also it brings him into rather unfortunate parallel with his much-hated step-father. Just as both Murdstone and he had courted their future wives with a delicacy and charm emblemized by matching references to geraniums (70, 456), so too both come to find fault with their want of firmness once they are married and are similarly relieved by their subsequent illnesses and deaths. But where there is no question of Murdstone’s personal firmness, David, as we have seen, is in many ways a rather weak character and it is strange to find him complaining of a lack of resolution in others. If he does indeed discipline his heart by the later stages of the novel and thus make himself worthy of Agnes, we may well feel that he has achieved this both at the expense of many of the less controlled, more active emotional qualities he has and at the price of sacrificing his memory of Dora to an ideal that seems seriously deficient in humanity. Earnestness, as it is presented in David Copperfield, is a narrowing exclusive quality which has none of the human warmth or spiritual depth it

18. Geraniums were also, of course, Dickens's own favourite flowers. See Mamie's references to this in her Charles Dickens, by His Eldest Daughter (London, 1885), p. 103, and in her My Father as I Recall Him (London, n.d.), p. 118. Another disturbing connection.
usually bears in Dickens's novels and we should surely resist David's (and Dickens's) attempts to persuade us to accept it as an unquestioned ideal.

It is, however, part of Copperfield's greatness that it entertains characters and values quite inimical to the official beliefs David comes to voice and the same retrospective mode of narration which David uses to re-align certain events in his past with the priorities of his later life also allows and indeed obliges him to present that past in truthful immediacy. As Robin Gilmour has put it, there is "a discrepancy between the attitude to the past required by David's attempt to discipline his undisciplined heart, and the reality of the past as it is re-experienced in his memory." 19 It is, of course, in this re-creation of the past through memory that so much of the novel's beauty lies and through it David does something to offset the rather chilling movement of his progress towards Agnes.

In particular, he gives far more weight to comic and imaginative values which find little place in his and Agnes's scheme of earnestness but which do enrich his narrative immeasurably. The most obvious instance of this is Micawber, whose invulnerability to experience, unruffled poise and continual triumph over all adversities offer an irresistible appeal to both the reader and the helpless child who experiences and remembers them. 20 The dramatic adaptation of Copperfield which


20. See, in particular, William Oddie, "Mr Micawber and the Redefinition of Experience", Dkn, 63 (1967), 100-10.
blended it with *Oliver Twist* and had Micawber rescue Oliver from Fagin's den 21 may well have been closer to the spirit of Dickens's novels than its perpetrators imagined. Moreover, Micawber has no time at all for the values of earnestness, hard work and thrift - simply being Micawber is sufficient occupation for him and something, indeed, always does turn up - and he has a keen sense of the fictitious nature of social life and roles. 22 Clearly, the Micawbers represent an attitude to life entirely at odds with that which David comes to voice and their presence in the narrative is an outstanding example of the way in which Dickens has learned "to use comedy, not simply for farce and satire, but characteristically and most originally, to create surface effects and then tip us into feeling the depths beneath." 23

David himself, however, is not a part of this comedy. Although he often makes us laugh, the humour lies in our and his observation of the discrepancy between the perceptions of the boy or adolescent and the remembering narrator. Such, for example, is the case with his delightful account of his hauntings of Norwood in pursuit of Dora (535). At the same time, though, he is, as he later says (672), quite serious about everything he does at the time he actually does it and he may strike us as a rather serious little boy and youth. His insecurity is surely partly attributable to his lack of a sense of comic imaginativeness but it perhaps also owes something to a feeling of isolation. As a child he is kept apart from other children and, except on his two brief visits to Yarmouth, is never allowed


22. In this he may be linked with the swindler and trickster figure of picaresque; see above, pp. 18-9.

to play with anyone and so broods apart (204). Later, he seems arrested in his boyhood, being, as we have seen, helplessly youthful and, even as a young man, no more able to be the head of his own table (419) than he had been in Salem House (137). Endearingly comic as this is, it should not obscure the limitations it suggests in David's personality, in particular his failure to mature and his continuing subordination to Steerforth.

The often-discussed question of David's credibility as a novelist is relevant here, since it is closely related to the issue of his imaginative life and, through it, to his attitudes to the two heroines. David is clearly highly imaginative and, as we have seen, even as a child he constructs fictions that enable him to cope with the miseries of his existence. It might, however, be noted that his imaginative sympathy seems largely confined to his own feelings and he shows rather less understanding of other people's emotions. Dora appreciates this imaginativeness more perhaps than anyone else and pays tribute to it by describing him, in an outstandingly beautiful phrase, as "full of silent fancies" (715). By contrast, Agnes can only call his writing work and emphasize its value to society (888, 915). However, if Dora realizes the importance of David's imaginative power, this is not to say that she possesses anything of the quality herself and, had he made the point, this would have been a far more effective line of attack for Dickens than his condemnation of her inability to have the meals cooked on time. Unfortunately, though, such an attack would also have drawn attention to Agnes' even greater lack of silent fancy and to the deficiencies in David's (and, in this novel at least, Dickens's) whole conception of women.

David, however, turns, of course, to Agnes, although when he recollects how he "heard her cordial voice so earnest on the shadowy
events of that imaginative world in which I lived" (931) even he seems almost to realize how separate she and it are. His is, as Q.D. Leavis has remarked, surely only "a willed concession to the Victorian ideal"\(^{24}\), for in accepting Agnes he has had to reject many of his most powerful emotions. In doing so he has also been obliged to revive his childhood habit of making an imaginative world by reconstructing his past life in such a way that his relationship with Dora will, in particular, be seen as only a temporary aberration. He is, moreover, also forced to get rid of a number of characters who have no place in Agnes' earnest world and this he effects by death or transportation.

Professor Welsh has remarked how "each death in the novel answers in some respect to an injury to the hero"\(^{25}\) and it is remarkable how completely true this is. Both Mrs Copperfields, Spenlow, Steerforth and Ham, all suffer for crossing David and, pace Professor Welsh, only Barkis makes an exception to this pattern. This is not crudely done and, indeed, Dickens's courage and success in attempting such a new effect as the storm scene at such a late point in the novel deserves the highest praise. Nevertheless, the extent to which illness benefits David is clear and even little Em'ly, who is perhaps the only woman in Dickens to survive a purgatorial illness (794-5), is packed off to Australia where "she had a deal to mind in the way of poultry and the like" (942). David himself is also unusual, since he is one of very few male leads in Dickens to avoid the reformative illness — his reported suffering in the aftermath of Dora's death (889) is perfunctory and more an attempt to gain sympathy than anything else. A few characters who are spared death are physically removed from

24. Dickens the Novelist, p. 65.
25. The City of Dickens, p. 106.
David's life by being sent to Australia: the wholesale exportation of the remaining Peggottys is no more than Dickens's succumbing to a topical literary cliché; and in the shipping off of the Micawbers we are reminded of the fate of the Crummles, a comic group similarly unsuitable to the main moral thrust of the plot who must be duly acknowledged but then speedily despatched.

With all these characters safely removed, David is free to undergo a mild process of purgation and renewal and then return to England to marry Agnes. It is, however, worth noting how subdued this final phase of the novel is in comparison with the rest of the narrative and only Traddles and Sophy supply any spark of life to it (895-902). Indeed, there is ironic, if surely unconscious appropriateness in the fact that David's marriage to Agnes should be a wintry reversal (932, 938) of his radiant summer nuptials with Dora (693-700).

It is perhaps no wonder that Freud so liked David Copperfield:

"Every child at play," he wrote, "behaves like an imaginative writer, in that he creates a world of his own or, more truly, he rearranges the things of his world and orders it in a new way that pleases him better..." David, of course, does exactly this throughout his narrative, re-ordering the events of his past life so that they and the emotions associated with them may be excluded from the present, and Jerome Buckley is surely wrong to suggest that he transcends his miseries and bears few lasting scars. But if, as Matthew Arnold


thought, the novel is an "all-containing treasure-house of English middle-class civilization"\textsuperscript{29}, this does not mean that it is simply "the epitome of Victorian bourgeois morality."\textsuperscript{30} For no fiction is perfect, the treasure-box turns out to be Pandora's and, in opening it, David and Dickens unwittingly indicate the limitations of the very ideals they seek to champion. In reading the novel we are continually aware of that same tension between sympathy and judgement which Robert Langbaum has seen as essential to the dramatic monologue.\textsuperscript{31} Like the speaker of a dramatic monologue, David betrays far more about himself than he consciously reveals and in so doing he presents a deeply imaginative insight into fundamental cultural norms of Victorian society which, ostensibly, his life story uncritically embodies. Whether Dickens himself was entirely aware of how much he had given away is debatable, but that he had not finally resolved the issues raised in \textit{Copperfield} is evident throughout the fiction of the 1850's and, above all, in \textit{Great Expectations}.

\textsuperscript{29} Irish \textit{Essays} (1882); reprinted in Collins, ed., \textit{Dickens: the Critical Heritage}, p. 269.


Writing to Forster with the first instalment of his new serial, Dickens remarked how careful he had been not to repeat details from his "favourite child": "To be quite sure I had fallen into no unconscious repetitions, I read David Copperfield again the other day, and was affected by it to a degree you would hardly believe." Whether this was quite the best way to avoid having the earlier novel in his head as he wrote Great Expectations may seem questionable and there can certainly be no question that it does contain numerous echoes of Copperfield. Both David and Pip are small, quasi-orphaned children; both negotiate an uncertain progress in their endeavours to define their class status and to decide which of two heroines is right for them; and there are numerous incidental resemblances between them (they are both, for example, victims of landladies/housekeepers in their London lives.) Even more importantly, Great Expectations recapitulates themes found throughout Dickens's fiction but it does so in such a way as to question fundamentally many of the assumptions upon which they rest and it thus marks a critical exploration of not only Dickens's own work but also of some of the basic themes and conventions of the Victorian novel as a whole.

This critical spirit is also entirely characteristic of the

1. F, p. 734.
novel's narrator, for Pip, unlike David Copperfield, is unsparing of himself in recounting his early life. He insists upon stripping away all pretence and will not admit any falsely extenuating detail that might excuse his behaviour, whether it concern Joe, whom he quite patently loves:

Whatever I acquired, I tried to impart to Joe. This statement sounds so well, that I cannot in my conscience let it pass unexplained. I wanted to make Joe less ignorant and common, that he might be worthier of my society and less open to Estella's reproach. (137)

or Magwitch, where his feelings are far less certain:

I was seized with a feverish conviction that I ought to hunt the matter down - that I ought not to let it rest, but that I ought to see Mr. Jaggers, and come at the bare truth. I really do not know whether I felt that I did this for Estella's sake, or whether I was glad to transfer to the man in whose preservation I was so much concerned, some rays of the romantic interest that had so long surrounded her. Perhaps the latter possibility may be nearer to the truth. (420)

Although Pip never explains his reasons for writing "this slight narrative" (460), it is clear that he is not attempting, as had David, to re-shape the past in an image suitable to the present in which he writes. For Pip, memory may ease the pain of the past by distancing it, but there can be no question of disguising what that past actually was. If he makes considerable use of comedy to soften the immediacy of recollected experience, this is not to say that his narrative is less directly truthful than David's had been and, indeed, the reverse is very much the case.

That this is so is most generally apparent in the attitudes of the two narrators to their narratives as plotted tales: where David frequently anticipates the eventual outcome of his story and thus does much to sway the reader's judgement of the two heroines, Pip insists upon concealing the dénouement and upon taking the reader
through his own process of discovery and realization. Suspense is thus far more important to the later novel and is used, sometimes overtly (460), to vivify a series of events long since completed. Similarly, as is normal in Victorian fiction, both novels rely heavily upon coincidence, but where David tacitly accepts this and thereby leaves a sense of discontinuity between the ostensibly truthful quality of his autobiography and its evidently fictional artifice, Pip makes the curious power of chance essential to his story:

Still, the coincidence of our being together on the coach, was sufficiently strange to fill me with a dread that some other coincidence might at any moment connect me, in his hearing, with my name. (251)

As Douglas Hewitt has commented, such coincidence in *Great Expectations* is not mere artifice, but creates "a sense of the impossibility of dissociating oneself even from those who seem most foreign which is one of Dickens's most constant themes in his later novels."²

Pip's narrative is, then, far more honest than had been David's, for not only does he insist upon exploring the truth of his own motivations but, in so doing, he frees himself to examine and present the feelings, hopes, fears and desires of other characters as well. Where David's emphasis upon self-justification had led him to present others only or at least largely in terms of their relevance to himself, Pip is far more aware of his significance to others and, indeed, his progress is essentially one of growing sympathy for the needs of the other people in his life.

These varying emphases lead Dickens into quite different use of stock themes and conventions so that details which are prominent

in one novel may be much less significant or employed in quite altered ways in the other. For example, where David Copperfield draws on picaresque and David himself likens his own story to those of his picaresque heroes, Great Expectations clearly has very little relationship with the earlier form. Although Graham Martin suggests that, in his mobility and status as an outsider, Pip embodies something of the free-wheeling quality of the picaro, this is not really the case. For Pip does not travel in the haphazard manner of the traditional picaro and his course is marked out for him by the plans and ambitions of other people. He moves only between London and Kent and cannot be said to be exposed to the chance wanderings that even Nicholas Nickleby had faced. Moreover, while mobility is an important structural device in the novel (of the twenty-four episodes from number twelve to the end of the novel almost half involve some travel between London and Kent), Pip's most important movements are those few which mark a departure from or return to Joe. Even here, where he might seem to be aligned with the traditionally prodigal son of picaresque fiction, he is, in fact, well removed from the model, since he goes out into the world to seek his fortune, not realizing the riches he has left behind him. Nor, in any sense, is Pip an outsider, for his one goal in life is to climb sufficiently high in the established social scale to be, as he thinks, worthy of Estella and this is anything but the cynical exploitation of social values we associate with the traditional picaro. Moreover, the one real transition Pip does make is from his position as Joe's apprentice to that of budding young gentleman and the sense of doubt and anxiety.


this creates in him is, of course, utterly foreign to the traditional British gentleman-picaros who may suffer temporary embarrassment but always is, and never for a moment forgets that he is, secure in his class position. Only in one sense can Pip be said to belong to the picaresque tradition and that, as Nina Auerbach has effectively shown, is in the way his narrative "shows the mutation of the eighteenth-century picaresque success story into the nineteenth-century orphan myth." This, however, is only one part of the picaresque legacy and, significant though Pip's links with Moll Flanders and Oliver Twist undoubtedly are, they are perhaps not as important as his distance from the gentleman-picaros of both the eighteenth-century novel and Dickens's own early fiction.

A particularly revealing instance of this is to be seen in Pip's relationship with Orlick, an aspect of the novel which has received considerable critical discussion, and which recalls Oliver Twist's unlikely links with Bill Sikes. Moreover, just as Oliver and Bill had been contrasted by Dickens's use of Paradise Lost to divide the benign and evil characters, so too here Pip and Orlick re-enact a Victorian version of The Pilgrim's Progress. However, in contrast to both eighteenth-century picaresque and Dickens's early variations of the form in Nickleby and Chuzzlewit, there will be no final return to that first Eden and Pip's progress will lead to no triumphant final salvation.

7. A point made by Mrs Leavis, op. cit., pp. 320-1.
Pip's chronological ordering of his narrative is also significantly different from David Copperfield's. The time-scheme of the novel has been widely discussed and is of special interest inasmuch as this is one of only two instances in which extensive evidence for Dickens's deliberate control has survived. The other case is, of course, Dombey and, as there, Dickens seems to have worked out the chronology of his novel only when he was some way through it. This leads him into some confusion and, as in Oliver Twist, he fails to coordinate the ages of his juvenile characters with the timing of key events in the lives of the older figures. This apart, however, the chronology is quite straightforward and appears to be entirely accurate. It does not have the thematic significance of the time-schemes of novels such as Oliver or Little Dorrit, but neither is time used to manipulate the perspective as had been the case in Copperfield. Although Pip does employ elision to pass over extended periods of time, he does so quite openly (123, 304, 330) and there is no sense that he hides anything thereby. Indeed, this technique of focusing on key periods of his life seems instead to heighten the authenticity of his narrative by rendering its most significant events in greater detail and this is especially evident in the transitions between the different stages of his expectations.

At the ends of both the first and second parts of the novel and at the beginning of the following sections, the narrative focuses after a lapse and concentrates on a closely indicated period. Thus the events from Jaggers' arrival with his offer to Pip until Pip's


9. See above, pp. 89-90.
establishment at the Pockets' last from chapter 18 to chapter 23 but take up only nine days. Jaggers appears on a Saturday night (160); by the following Saturday Pip is in London (165-7); and on Monday he goes to Hammersmith (209). Throughout this period, time is marked frequently, either by the day or even by the hour, and this, as often in Dickens, has the effect of increasing the intensity of the events described. A similar technique is employed on the evening of Magwitch's return and its impact upon Pip is conveyed by the fact that the hours are marked, from eleven in the evening (331) until two or three the following afternoon (349). One final instance of the effectiveness of such focusing is to be seen in the events of the week of Magwitch's escape and Dickens is able to create considerable suspense through the tension between time and the urgency of the need for successful fulfilment of Pip's plans. For not only does Orlick's murderous attempt on Pip's life create fear that the opportunity has been lost (441) but, once they start the escape, a mounting sense of anxiety is generated through the contrast between their controlled haste and the unchangeable times of the tides which, they ardently hope, are to bring Magwitch to safety.

Pip's use of time in organizing his narrative seems, then, to be entirely innocent. We may in retrospect wonder why Magwitch remains in London from a week after Pip's November birthday (330) until March (428) but this hardly disturbs our actual reading of the novel. The actual ordering of narrative time seems both simple and entirely plausible and, in the technique of lapse and focus, may represent another aspect of the cinematic qualities of Dickens's style in this novel. 10 What is really important about time in Great Expectations,

10. This has been effectively discussed by Ana Laura Zambrano, "Great Expectations: Dickens's Style in Terms of Film", Hartford Studies in Literature, 4 (1972), 104-113.
however, is not the actual chronology of the narrative but the way in which

Time is charged with "significance" for man because human life is lived under the shadow of Time, because the question, what am I, makes sense only in terms of what I have become, that is, in terms of the objective historical facts together with the pattern of significant associations constituting the biography or identity of the real self.

Pip's narrative is entirely the account of a self that has become under the pressure of events in time and through a pattern of significant associations and the innocence of his chronological ordering of his story is surely part of that straightforward honesty which is integral to his character as narrator. Time does not obscure as it had done in Copperfield and is indicated only as the essential medium in which the events of Pip's life occur. It is through other aspects of his narrative that he then proceeds to explore the significance of the past.

Like David, Pip possesses a visual imagination of notable acuteness and his observations of people around him thus play an important role in his narration. But where David had tended to reveal much of his subconscious life through such observation, Pip seems more aware of the relationship between his perceptions and emotional priorities, and this leads him to present patterns of physical description in quite different ways. There are, of course, considerable similarities between these two characters and, in particular, their vulnerable sensitivity causes them to share certain kinds of response to others.

Both are easily fascinated and also easily dominated by others and

both reveal much of their delicate sensitivity through their physical responses to other people. At the same time, however, they are in many ways quite different and this also becomes apparent through the cumulative effect of the descriptive details introduced into Pip's narrative.

It is, perhaps, unlikely that there is much more to be said about the significance of hands in Great Expectations, although it should, of course, be noted that Dickens's employment of the motif is only a considerably extended variation of a technique common to all of his novels. It may even be that he over-works this particular device here, since there are almost two hundred references to it in what is rather a short novel and it might be felt that these many hands become just a little too obviously significant. Be that as it may - and there can be no question of the success of such details as the manual rendering of Pip and Magwitch's changing relationship - hands clearly do mean a great deal to Pip and his notation of them does much to integrate and enrich his narrative.

It is thus notable that when he first goes to London there is a descriptive hiatus in chapters 22 to 24 as Pip summarizes the events of his first weeks in the capital. There are very few descriptive details of people in these chapters and their absence, while being appropriate to the kind of recapitulation Pip is giving, also indicates how much immediacy is given to the bulk of his narrative by frequent references to appearance and behaviour. Hands, in particular play a major role not only in the definition of the most

12. This is a topic which has received exhaustive treatment notably by Charles R. Forker, "The Language of Hands in Great Expectations", Texas Studies in Language and Literature, 3 (1961), 280-93; Harry Stone, op. cit., see above p. 266, n. 6; Henri Talon, "On Some Aspects of the Comic in Great Expectations", Victorian Newsletter, 42 (Fall, 1972), 6-11.
important relationships in the novel but also by the way in which they add innumerable touches of naturalness to the story, whether it be Pip's rummaging in his pocket that leads him to find the playbill and thus to Wopsle's Denmark (273) or the delightful accounts of Wemmick and Miss Skiffins (316, 464).

What has been less frequently noted is the extent to which, as often in Dickens, one motif of physical description is linked to others. This is to some extent apparent in Pip's descriptions of eyes and hair but becomes most fully significant in his references to clothes. His very confused feelings about Joe, for example, first emerge in his comments on his brother-in-law's appearance:

Joe laid his hand upon my shoulder with the touch of a woman. I have often thought of him since, like the steam-hammer, that can crunch a man or pat an egg-shell, in his combination of strength with gentleness. . . O dear good faithful tender Joe, I feel the loving tremble of your hand upon my arm, as solemnly this day as if it had been the rustle of an angel's wing! (168)

Although the angel's wing may be a little excessive, there is no doubting the love and security available to Pip and, as often in description of intense feeling, Dickens emphasizes the point by restraining his normally heavy punctuation. Moreover, that very reference to the angel reminds us of David Copperfield's picture of his mother's hair (DC, 165), though with a difference. For the narrating Pip's comparison of Joe's touch to that of a woman is not an idle one and is further reinforced by allusion to Joe's

curls of flaxen hair on each side of his smooth face, and. . . eyes of such a very undecided blue that they seemed to have somehow got mixed with their own whites. He was a mild, good-natured, sweet-tempered, easy-going, foolish dear fellow - a sort of Hercules in strength, and also in weakness. (39-40)

Joe's blue eyes are frequently referred to (75, 77, 98) as is his habit of feeling his moustache indecisively (42, 79, 81, 126) and
these accumulated details reinforce our sense of his helplessness to be anything other than what he is. Nor does Pip intend this as a justification of his own conduct and he goes out of his way both early in the novel to emphasize that Joe's quasi-feminine softness does much to restore the domestic sanctity Mrs Joe so rudely disturbs (80, 134) and, much later, to praise Joe for nursing him (472-81) in a manner normally associated with the Dickensian heroine. Nevertheless, it is clear that Joe lacks other kinds of strength and, in particular, will not be able to keep Pip's heart faithful to life at the forge or to resist the desires of others to move him into a different level of society.

Thus Mrs Joe, with her dark hair and eyes, impregnable bib, sharp pins and ready hand (40), has far more control over Pip's early life than her husband has and it is, of course, she who is eager for him to better himself by going to Satis. Moreover, when he does escape from his sister's tyranny he does so, not into freedom, but into the guardianship of another dark and powerful character:

He was a burly man of an exceedingly dark complexion, with an exceedingly large head and a corresponding large hand. He took my chin in his large hand and turned my face to have a look at me by the light of the candle. He was prematurely bald on the top of his head, and had bushy black eyebrows that wouldn't lie down but stood up bristling. His eyes were set very deep in his head, and were disagreeably sharp and suspicious. He had a large watch-chain, and strong black dots where his beard and whiskers would have been if he had let them.

(111)

In this we are strikingly reminded again of Copperfield and of David's fascinated and awed description of Murdstone (DC, 71), but, while there are distinct physical and emotional similarities between these two older men, Jaggers is, to Pip at least, a far kindlier figure than David's step-father had been to him. Finally,
Magwitch, for all his kindness to Pip, is a strong and violent character, from that first meeting in the graveyard (36-7) to his return from Australia (333) to his vengeance on Compeyson (455), and Pip thus seems continually subject to the dominance of people far stronger than himself. This does not in any way excuse his behaviour, but it does help to explain his helplessness in following a path that is not of his own making.

This dominance by and fascination with such powerful characters also does much to clarify his relationships with Miss Havisham and Estella. From his first visit to Satis, Pip's imagination is overwhelmed by Miss Havisham's ghostly figure (87) and it is hardly surprising that she never ceases to exercise a hold over him until almost the end of her life. In such a context, Estella's charm must only be intensified and this is important because Pip gives us no more details about her actual appearance than about his own. Although he does mention her pretty brown hair (89), she is otherwise physically a cipher. Nevertheless, she remains an entirely convincing creation, partly because even such an unexpressive character as Jaggers is moved to appreciate her (264) and partly because, through the force of his own imagination, Pip brings her vividly to life.

Pip's emotional world is not, however, as bleak as these relationships might suggest, for they are by no means the only ones important to him. If Jaggers is a dark but still benign successor to Mrs Joe, so too Herbert Pocket's nature and role in Pip's London life offer a parallel but more effective equivalent to Joe's influence on his childhood. Herbert may be pale and ungainly, but he is also "light and young" (201) and is unique in the novel for his graceful, selfless charm. He and Pip are always closely affectionate, something that is expressed through their frequent hand-shakes (199, 354, 460),
touching (268, 356), and in the tears of joy Pip gives way to at seeing his friend's happiness on being taken up by Clarriker (317-8). It must not, though, be forgotten that, but for Pip, there would be no occasion for these tears and that Herbert, for all his charm, cannot achieve any worldly success on his own. What he does offer, however, is a certain gentility that is essential in refining Pip into true humanity and which offsets the crudeness of his abrupt social elevation. That he evokes these tears in Pip is one indication of this, for Pip, while never giving any details of his own eyes, does insist upon the importance of crying:

Heaven knows we need never be ashamed of our tears, for they are rain upon the blinding dust of earth, overlying our hard hearts. I was better after I had cried, than before - more sorry, more aware of my own ingratitude, more gentle. If I had cried before, I should have had Joe with me then. (186)

It is a measure of the progress he makes that he will be able to give vent to his feelings with Herbert and he is thus to be compared with other of Dickens's heroes who undergo a similar process of remorse and reform.

For Pip himself the most important of the descriptive patterns is that of clothing and this also reveals his moral and emotional development during the course of the novel. If he says nothing about his own features, he can hardly stop commenting on his sartorial forms and, in a way that reminds us of William Dorrit, clearly feels that these are somehow essential to his identity. In fact, his references to clothes should be seen in parallel to the hands motif, since in both cases he goes through a slow and painful process of emancipation from subjection to standards other people impose upon him. Thus if Mrs Joe brings him up by her forceful hand, she also tyrannizes over his dress: "Even when I was taken to have a new suit of clothes,
the tailor had orders to make them like a kind of Reformatory, and
on no account to let me have the free use of my limbs" (54). Similar-
arily, when he is to go to Satis for the first time, his friends
again treat him as a youthful delinquent:

When my ablutions were completed, I was put into clean
linen of the stiffest character, like a young penitent
into sackcloth, and was trussed up in my tightest and
fearfullest suit. I was then delivered over to Mr Fum-
blechook, who formally received me as if he were the
Sheriff... (83)

Although the older narrator is intervening here to distance his
younger self's pain, there is no doubting the reality of that
suffering and Estella's subsequent remarks on Pip's coarse hands
and thick boots (90) only intensify his agony. However, Pip is
also revealing something of his deepest emotional confusions here,
for, if he feels imprisoned and treated as a criminal through his
clothes, so too, of course, he comes to regard Satis as a form of
prison. Yet his attraction to the house and all it contains and his
subjection to a girl who hurts him far more deeply than even his
sister had both suggest how complete his imprisonment is. For he
cannot escape from Mrs Joe's tyranny into any form of freedom, but
only into more powerful captivity and the tension between his strugg-
lings awareness of this and his inability to do anything substantial
about it creates one of the profoundest conflicts in him.

Not surprisingly, Pip sees his expectations as a form of
liberation and his hopes are sartorially confirmed by the treatment
he receives from Trabb and the other local shopkeepers (177-9).
London and Jaggers' world offer an immediate corrective to such
euphoria (190, 192), but this is something Pip seems only to note
without understanding its implications for himself. He will, though,
gradually realize that his fine clothes do not bring him happiness
and, even worse, that he has created a new form of slavery for himself:

I had got on so fast of late, that I had even started a boy in boots - top boots - in bondage and slavery to whom I might have been said to pass my days. For, after I had made the monster (out of the refuse of my washerwoman's family) and had clothed him with a blue coat, canary waistcoat, white cravat, creamy breeches, and the boots already mentioned, I had to find him a little to do and a great deal to eat; and with both of those horrible requirements he haunted my existence. (240)

At least the comic touches of this (including the allusion to Frankenstein) do much to alleviate the suffering and, indeed, Pip rarely loses some sense of either the inadequacy of his feelings or the possibility of better, more positive emotions. Joe's most uncomfortable visit to his London chambers (241-6), an episode which perhaps echoes Gil Blas' visit by an old schoolfellow¹³, is a good instance of this, for Pip is able to record not only Joe's awkwardness in his Sunday clothes (243-4) but also his own consciousness of the insignificance of this and his inferiority to Joe's honest, loving dignity (245, 247). When shortly thereafter he is summoned to Kent for his sister's funeral, his satiric account of the mourning should perhaps be seen not as merely Dickensian opportunism but almost as recompense for his own earlier blindness. Certainly his perception of Joe a little later:

I noticed that after the funeral Joe changed his clothes so far, as to make a compromise between his Sunday dress and working dress: in which the dear fellow looked natural, and like the Man he was. (301)

is a considerable improvement and, indeed, from this point on he seems to lose his obsession with finery. Even though his complete reform is still some way off, the very fact that he no longer seems absorbed in his own appearance anticipates and helps to prepare for

¹³. See above, p. 11.
Pip's concentration on clothes is to be contrasted with David Copperfield's obsession with details of eyes and hair and results from the fact that their deepest emotional priorities are quite different. Although David does go through a black night of despair in the blacking warehouse and fears he may lose his middle class status for ever, this soon passes and, for almost all of his story, he is far more secure in his class position than he is in his feelings about women. With Pip the case is more complicated, since not only is he chronically vexed by the uncertainty of his place in society but also his feelings for the two women in his life are inseparable from his great expectations. If David thus focuses on physical details which communicate his own feelings about the women he describes, it is not, then, surprising that Pip should worry about the most obvious external indicator of class in Victorian England, dress. Just as he does not know what it is he wants from clothes, so too he is profoundly unsure about the whole nature and significance of his rise in society and his role in life.

To a very considerable extent, this is the fault of Mrs Joe and Pumblechook who instil some degree of class superiority in him from an early age. Mrs Joe's remark, "It's bad enough to be a blacksmith's wife (and him a Gargery) without being your mother" (41), links snobbery and emotional rejection in the impressionable Pip and she never allows him to forget her social aspirations. He is, for example, not allowed to see his casual earnings in order "that our superior position might not be compromised thereby" (74) and Mrs Joe's eager hope that Miss Havisham will make his fortune (82) is unlikely not to have influenced such a sensitive boy. With such
a basis as this, the effect of Satis and, above all, of Estella is not to be wondered at, and Pip's desire to rise in society and to achieve Roderick Random's "independence from the world" is firmly established.

Such desires prove, however, to be deceptive and Pip's progress is to invert the whole convention of early Victorian fiction by which the hero's life is resolved with the gaining of his expectations and a matching bride. But, at the same time, if he loses a great deal by his expectations, he also, indirectly, gains much and his story is thus not a simple cautionary tale but a far more complex exploration of the relationship between personality and class status. His gains lie in the fact that he does finally become a gentleman, even if not as quickly or in quite the same way as he had expected to. Certainly, he has not become one by the time of Joe's visit to London and he will not do so until his softening towards Magwitch and the completion of his reform by illness. There is no question that Pip is improved by his move into society and the influence of Herbert, and Q.D. Leavis is surely right to say that "Dickens undoubtedly believed that there was a respectable content in the idea of a gentleman, and that Pip did well to leave behind him the limitations of the village and the vulgar little world of the market town." 14 Although there is much to be said for Joe and Biddy and no one could deny their value, there is vulgarity in this life and, ever since Martin Chuzzlewit's attack on the coarseness of American society (NC, 609) 15, Dickens has placed considerable emphasis upon the importance of politeness, care for others and the general delicacy associated with the idea of the gentle-

14. Dickens the Novelist, p. 298. See also, Buckley, Season of Youth, p. 58 for a similar argument.
15. See above, p. 44.
Unfortunately, however, this is not enough and, if one would wish to agree with Robin Gilmour when he dismisses John Lucas' comment that "Dickens exactly nails the absurdity that fed the Victorian idea of being or becoming a gentleman", this does not mean that Gilmour's own conclusion is itself complete when he suggests that "the essential development of Dickens's social thinking lies through a rejection of the self-made man, towards an affirmation of a gentlemanly ideal which has been purged of its associations with class and social attitudes." For the gentlemanly ideal is surely inseparable from class: and Dickens, for all his sympathies with the working classes, remains an essentially bourgeois artist, drawing both his themes and ideals from middle class Victorian culture. Moreover, Gilmour suggests a degree of optimism which does not, perhaps, exist in Pip's story and we should consider the measure and nature of any success Pip has in finding a social role for himself.

Unlike all of Dickens's previous heroes and heroines, Pip finds no fulfilment in work and this, allied with his misery in a life of ease, leaves him with no purpose in life other than to devote himself to Estella. Even the early picaresque heroes were at least given a measure of token professional life and, in the middle fiction, Dickens makes work essential to his leading characters. Pip, however, has no heart for his work at the forge and is only kept at it by Joe's good example:

It was not because I had a strong sense of the virtue of industry, but because Joe had a strong sense of the virtue of industry, that I worked with tolerable zeal

against the grain. It is not possible to know how far the influence of any amiable honest-hearted duty-doing man flies out into the world; but it is very possible to know how it has touched one's self in going by, and I know right well, that any good that intermixed itself with my apprenticeship came of plain contented Joe, and not of restless aspiring discontented me. (135)

Whether the opposition of plain with restlessly aspiring is quite convincing may be open to doubt, but what is clear is that Joe is plain and that, in marked contrast to David Copperfield, there is no attempt to convince the reader that work really is an ideal in the novel. Pip certainly does not find it so and is kept at his books in London only by the fact that Mr Pocket plays a role similar to that of Joe at the forge (220). His dependence upon the example of others, which parallels his domination by so many of the more powerful figures in the novel, recalls Arthur Clennam's failure of will, but without the earnestness which drove the earlier hero to work and attempt to make amends for the imagined wrongs of the past. Even if Pip does finally turn to honest work for a living, this is a somewhat perfunctory conclusion and its limitations will be further discussed below.

Moreover, Pip is not alone in his alienation from the work ethic and, indeed, Great Expectations shows work to be a far from simplistically positive force in human life and society. The case of Jaggers and Wemmick has been frequently discussed, most effectively perhaps by John Lucas 18, and London does not, in this novel, offer any ideal image of the busy hum of men. Not even Joe, whom Dickens labelled as "a good-natured foolish man" 19, can offer any adequate ideal of work, other than inasmuch as his industriousness complements his general stability and fidelity. Magwitch, of course, has devoted

himself to work and, true to the Victorian notion of self-help, improved himself from most inauspicious beginnings. The irony, however, is that, as a convicted felon, there is no forgiveness for him and thus, though the court may note his reform (466), it does not allow this to impede its condemnation of his return. Although Magwitch himself can freely accept this as part of the rules of the game, he clings to his belief that he has succeeded in creating his gentleman and thus, as he thinks, in revenging himself upon an unrelenting society. The irony, of course, is not only that he is factually mistaken but that he has surrendered himself to a belief in social forms and a social order which condemn him to remain a perpetual outcast. Pip's position here is ambiguous: it is to his credit that he never destroys Magwitch's dream and, indeed, fosters it to the end; on the other hand, he also shares the wider social refusal to accept Magwitch's success and thus refuses to countenance the thought of taking his wealth. If Magwitch has forced upon Pip a paternal relationship he never desired, Pip's revenge, albeit an entirely innocent one, is to adopt those very social attitudes Magwitch had desired for him but which turn again on their creator. Relationship after relationship in the novel is similarly caught within fixed class attitudes and, however much Pip and Magwitch come to love one another at the end, this should not disguise the fact that, in class terms, they remain profoundly divided.

If work plays so small a part in the world of Great Expectations, it is perhaps not surprising that earnestness is also an idea that finds little place. Indeed, the word itself occurs no more than ten times in the whole novel and on several of these occasions is used merely as an intensifier. The few exceptions to this all involve Pip, Estella and Miss Havisham. In his desperation on hearing of Estella's
forthcoming marriage, Pip pleads to her with such effect that his "earnestness awoke a wonder in her that seemed as if it would have been touched with compassion, if she could have rendered me at all intelligible to her own mind" (337). Similarly, when Miss Havisham at last realizes the full enormity of all she has done, she pleads to Pip with "an earnest womanly compassion for me in her new affection" (411). This, however, is but a faint echo of the quality that had been fundamental to the heroines of Dickens's previous novels and it is notable that Estella herself only comes to earnestness when bidding Pip farewell at the very end (492). Clearly, a quality that had been essential in all the novels from Dombey to Little Dorrit finds no place in Great Expectations and it is this which, far more than the collapse of the work ethic, indicates the starkness of Dickens's vision in his last phase.

For associated with this evident loss of a belief in the all-saving power of earnestness is the disappearance of the earnest heroine. There is, in fact, no heroine in Great Expectations, morally speaking, since Estella is, as Herbert says, "hard and haughty and capricious to the last degree" (200) and she offers Pip quite the reverse of the strength and support the Dickensian hero had come to expect from his leading lady. It is, indeed, entirely characteristic of Pip that he should be obsessed with a woman to whom he feels completely subject:

The air of completeness and superiority with which she walked at my side, and the air of youthfulness and submission with which I walked at hers, made a contrast that I strongly felt. It would have rankled in me more than it did, if I had not regarded myself as eliciting it by being so set apart for her and assigned to her. (258)
Again, we are reminded of Copperfield, for it is almost as if, this time, David has actually got Rosa Dartle - almost. Pip's need to link attraction with subjection, something evident in several of his relationships, is further expressed in the fact that the submissive Biddy, for all her virtues, fails to awaken any interest in him whatsoever. This is despite Dickens's care to present her carefully and realistically, contrasting, for example, her early untidiness (74) with her later improvement (152). Biddy is wholesome, has certain homely and undeniably attractive virtues and, happily not living up to her name, is a far more attractive version of the domestic heroine than had been Agnes Wickfield. She fails, however, to arouse Pip and in this we may see a more truthful co-ordination of the hero's sexual choices with his emotional priorities than had been the case in the earlier novel. Moreover, Biddy also lacks the earnestness of such heroines as Florence Dombey, Esther Summerson or Amy Dorrit and her qualities are clearly of a far humbler order. She does not, therefore, aspire to be the kind of Christian passive heroine who had had such a hold on Dickens's fiction throughout the 1840's and 1850's and the absence of this figure from the novel is the profoundest indication of its difference from his earlier work. Instead we have Estella and thus, for the first time, Dickens has written a novel in which he openly acknowledges the possibility of conflict between class, moral and sexual values and even deliberately builds such a conflict into the fundamental structure of the book. Moreover, and for Pip most bitterly, in the original and surely the most appropriate conclusion, the hero fails to gain either humble virtuous Biddy or the hard-hearted but enthralling Estella and is left, for the first and last time in Dickens, as the unmarried protagonist of his novel.
For, at least as far as Pip is concerned, the conclusion is surely not an optimistic one and Dickens has turned away from that pattern of fortunate fall, reform and marriage to the heroine which is integral to both eighteenth-century picaresque and his own earlier fiction. Milton Millhauser has effectively argued that the novel's work is done before Dickens takes it through a series of endings and Alexander Welsh has also commented on the exceedingly perfunctory nature of the account of Pip's subsequent career. Although Pip returns to the forge on a December evening (489) and thus rounds his story out by the parallel with that first December meeting on the marshes, it is difficult to believe that the encounter with the convict will be matched by a permanent reunion with his daughter. The chronological symmetry is surely only decorative and Pip's story ends, as it has seemed throughout its length, that of a man who has loved but lost. Even if the conclusion is read as the final reconciliation of Pip and Estella, it still lacks either the triumphant bliss of the usual romantic convention or the muted celebration that we find at the end of Little Dorrit. Muted, indeed, seems the right word for this novel's ending, since even such successes as there are - Estella and Miss Havisham's realization of the error of their ways, Pumblechook's being put in his place, the marriages of Joe and Biddy, Herbert and Clara - are subdued and removed from the centre of attention.

If this were all there were, then Great Expectations would

22. The City of Dickens, pp. 77-8. 
indeed be a sombre novel: a story of disillusion and loss; of crime; of obsession; of violence and decay; and all without consolation. But, of course, this is anything other than the impression we take away from it and, though Dickens does seem to have lost active faith in those serious values which had been so important to his previous novels, this is to a large extent both concealed and compensated for through comic celebration and the continual development of Pip's imaginative sensibilities.

Not since Copperfield had Dickens written such a comic novel and, for the first time in his career, he does not rely upon single comic characters held in uncertain suspension within the text but makes comedy integral to the narrator's point of view. Like David, Pip recovers the immediacy of his childhood experience through the use of vividly unlikely images: "I might have been an unfortunate little bull in a Spanish arena, I got so smartingly touched up by these moral goads" (56-7). But where David offset these with unadorned accounts of his deepest pains, Pip always keeps the reader at a certain distance from his past sufferings, either through comedy or by seeing his pain critically in terms of his motivations. Even more importantly, and for the first time in Dickens, nearly all the motifs which carry the serious meaning of the text are also treated in comic fashion, to invigorating effect. Thus, for example, the animal imagery which conveys so much of Pip's feelings of fear and hostility about Magwitch, Satis, Jaggers' world, and Orlick, is offset by such details as Wemmick's delightful pig or Pip's image of Joe before Miss Havisham:

23. This has also been discussed by Robert B. Partlow, "The Moving I: A Study of the Point of View in Great Expectations", College English, 23 (1961), 122-31; and Henri Talon, op. cit., see above, p. 270, n. 12.
I could hardly have imagined dear old Joe looking so unlike himself or so like some extraordinary bird; standing, as he did, speechless, with his tuft of feathers ruffled, and his mouth open, as if he wanted a worm. (128)

Pip treats the other motifs of his narrative in much the same way, mocking even his concern with clothes (279), contrasting London's bleak world with Wemmick's Gothic fantasy in Walworth, and setting the richly significant meals of the novel against such incidental pleasures as toasting and eating the pig (386) or declining Pumblechook's watercress (483). As well as this, there are also such entirely and superbly comic episodes as Wopsle in Hamlet (273-6) or Pip's outmanoeuvering of Jaggers (420-4) and together these do much to alleviate the bleakness that there undeniably is in the novel.

Pip's imaginativeness, moreover, has far more than purely comic implications and is to be linked with his growing ability to sympathize with the needs of others. This, however, requires a long and painful growing process in the course of which he gradually escapes from the fictions which he has allowed to dominate his own life. From the outset of the novel, he, like David Copperfield, has an imagination which is powerfully visual and, like both David and the boat-stealing youthful Wordsworth, projects his guilt imaginatively (48). Such a visualizing imagination is, indeed, essential to the very basis of his style as a narrator, since not only does he present his story in quasi-cinematic form but also he attempts to dramatize the immediacy of consciousness in action.


25. These have been definitively discussed by Barbara Hardy, "Food and Ceremony in Great Expectations", Essays in Criticism, 13 (1963), 351-63.

But even more important than this, however, is the fact that imaginativeness is the very basis of Pip's life, since he founds all his thoughts on the twin fantasies of his great expectations and a belief that Estella is destined for him. For neither, of course, is there anything other than circumstantial evidence and he thus falls victim to fictions which have their basis only in his own imagination and in the twisted obsession of Miss Havisham's life. He does, however, realize the extent of his delusion:

She had adopted Estella, she had as good as adopted me, and it could not fail to be her intention to bring us together. She reserved it for me to restore the desolate house, admit the sunshine into the dark rooms, set the clocks a going and the cold hearths a blazing, tear down the cobwebs, destroy the vermin - in short, do all the shining deeds of the young Knight of romance, and marry the Princess. But, though /Estella/ had taken such strong possession of me, though my fancy and my hope were so set upon her, though her influence on my boyish life and character had been all-powerful, I did not, even that romantic morning, invest her with any attributes save those she possessed. I mention this in this place, of a fixed purpose, because it is the clue by which I am to be followed into my poor labyrinth. According to my experience, the conventional notion of a lover cannot be always true. The unqualified truth is, that when I loved Estella with the love of a man, I loved her simply because I found her irresistible. (253)

These are surely not the words of a man happily recollecting in married tranquillity and it is not difficult to feel that Pip would have made a rather better novelist than David Copperfield, given the insight he here reveals into his own imaginative processes and his general understanding of the power of fiction in human life. However, if Pip's delusion causes him much sorrow, the imaginativeness which creates it also elevates him through the power it gives to his love, something which appears most movingly and poignantly in his lyric cry to Estella at their penultimate meeting (378).

Nor is Pip alone in this need to believe in something finer
than the ordinary world in which he has to live, for this is a characteristic of several of the novel's leading figures - Herbert, Joe, Wemmick, and Magwitch, for example - and even Jaggers, in an uncharacteristic lapse (424), hints that he too has known the value of "poor dreams". The extent to which the need for a personal myth permeates the novel has been usefully discussed by Henri Talon\(^\text{27}\) and perhaps the most significant marker of Pip's progress is his growing understanding of this fact. Only when he does understand it can he forgive Miss Havisham, allow Magwitch to die secure in the belief that his dreams have been fulfilled, and refrain from telling Estella the truth of her parentage. Although he has lost his own dreams, Pip, like Amy Dorrit, has acquired a knowledge of their power in human life and is able to respect other people's need for them. His imaginativeness has thus come the full circle: from guilty fear and solipsistic isolation within his own fantasies and projections to a mellowed sympathy with the hopes, fears, dreams and desires of those around him. Although the world of Great Expectations is, indeed, a bleak one and Pip can draw no comfort from the values which had sustained the heroes and heroines of Dickens's earlier novels, he tells his story with a grace and humanity that do much to compensate for what he has lost. Unlike David Copperfield, Pip has opened himself as his narrative progresses, discovering more and more what it means to be sympathetic to attitudes and beliefs with which he himself may not necessarily agree. This, together with the prevailing comic tone of much of the writing, considerably eases the novel's underlying bleakness. Nevertheless, and even though

Masao Miyoshi's picture of "an aging and exhausted Dickens... mired inescapably in a dismal existence where any further struggle toward self-definition or effect in the world seemed useless" is far too pessimistic a judgement, that bleakness is there and cannot be entirely overcome by the novel's comedy. For Magwitch was deluded far more profoundly than even Pip realized and both Pip's own and the novel's final mellowness is surely only that of tranquil acquiescence in the recollection of an unchangeable past.

CONCLUSION

However much Dickens changed and developed, in one respect he never altered - his unrivalled ability to entertain. This study has attempted to show something of his growing skills and subtlety as a particularly Victorian writer but, as Leonardo Cattermole reminds us, we should never forget that so much of his greatness lies in the power of his novels to hold us and to take us into their world:

Who could tell a story as he did? rivetting the attention from "start to finish", holding his audience magnetically, selecting his subtle tools of narrative and using them always in the right place with effect, carrying his audience entirely with him by means of that power he had of building his story without lumber or extraneous non-important matter, feeding his listeners without satiating them, leaving them always like his own Oliver, wanting "more".

This bibliography lists both those critical and source materials referred to in the text and also such further items as have been directly relevant to the writing of the thesis.


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