

The Inner Drama of Characters in *Little Dorrit*¹

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Basic Design

Many topical allusions in *Little Dorrit*, whose satirical intent was fully understood and reacted to by the contemporary readers,² have lost their poignancy after the lapse of a century. They are considered, today, as outward and visible signs of what the novel is basically concerned with: the internal futility of man and society. Sabbatarianism, Merdleism, Circumlocution and Toadyism, which were "the common experience of an Englishman" in the 1850s, are integrated so as to express Dickens's view of, and his despair about society.

Yet *Little Dorrit* is not entirely dark. Retaining much of his despair about society, Dickens scrutinizes the possibilities and potentialities of human beings, and by using apparently religious references throughout the novel, he creates life-in-death out of death-in-life. The basic organization of the novel is strongly religious, and we can see it neatly begun in the early chapters.

The novel begins with the description of Marseilles. The sun blazes over the city and all living things on earth droop beneath its stare. People seek some shade to keep out of that stare, which is so oppressive. But there is a villainous prison in the city—so repul-

sive a place that even the obstrusive stare does not come in. And there we see two "vermin," Blandois and Cavalletto. But Blandois is a villain and Cavalletto a good man. Why are they called vermin? To this, Angus Wilson gives us a clue:

Never did Dickens portray so many characters who are grey rather than black and white—there are a few out-and-out villains, and one very striking embodiment of evil, but for the most part, 'bad' humanity is seen to have its redeeming features, as 'good' humanity is seen to have its blemishes.³

The fact that the villain and the good man are imprisoned—and the prison is the darkest of the shade that "descendants from all the builders of Babel"⁴ seek—signifies that everyone on earth is imprisoned in some way or another. According to John Lucas, "*Little Dorrit* provides an exploration of a society whose essential movements are created by and so create the pervasive prison-taint of class and all that it involves: envy, vanity, wounded pride, the desire for power and dominance, . . . deference, money-lust, respectability and gentility."⁵

The contrast between the sun and the shade is very clear, but we come across many forms of contrast in the opening chapter: there is a clear demarcation between "the foul water within the harbour" and "the beautiful sea without;" Marseilles is "burning" under the sun while there are "light clouds of mist" in the distant line of Italian coast. At the end of the chapter, "stars in the heavens" and "the fireflies in the lower air" are polarized as if they signified eternity and the human. These contrasts seem to suggest that the

novel remains essentially within the possibilities of human experience, and uses eternity as a mode of giving utterance to a human desire for a way out. Indeed, the title for the chapter "The Sun and The Shadow" seems to signify a large, almost a symbolic contrast between a cosmic world above and the prison-tainted world below; a metaphysical world of love, truth, and freedom, and the human condition below. If we follow the imagery of sun and shadow and see how they function within the context of the novel, it becomes fairly clear that 'sun' or 'light' suggests life, hope and truth, while 'shadow' or 'shade' often implies negation of life, falsity, or evil.⁶ Particularly towards the end of the novel they are skilfully used to illustrate the different footings of Mrs. Clennam's creed and that of Little Dorrit: that is, the Old Testament and the New.

Towards the end of the first chapter we come across the following sentence:

. . . so deep a hush was on the sea, that it scarcely whispered of the time when it shall give up its dead. (14)

Here again is a suggestion of a metaphysical aspect of the novel. The last phrase refers to Revelation, xx, 13: the whole sentence carries a strong suggestion that people on the earth "shall be judged every man according to their works." And interestingly enough, we remember the climactic collapse of the three "houses" in the novel: Mr. Dorrit's "castle in the air," Mr. Merdle's financial house, and Mrs. Clennam's actual house—with "a noise like thunder" (793). All shams fall.

In *Little Dorrit*, almost all the characters are prison-tainted, emo-

tionally or spiritually. They stick to their own beliefs and assumptions about life at the expense of humanity and the inner life. This is a penetrating insight into human nature and human conditions, and Dickens further brings into focus the image of individuals as travellers, and makes the novel more dramatic than static: he says that all human beings are "restless travellers," climbing up dusty hills and toiling along weary plains, "through the pilgrimage of life" (27). Because of the phrase, "the pilgrimage of life," another religious reference in the novel, we realize that all human beings are travelling in search of eternity.

Many characters in *Little Dorrit* travel in one way or another, or they are travellers. Among others, Arthur Clennam and William Dorrit become of central importance to the novel, as they present a wonderful inner drama during their pilgrimage in search of their true self. In the following pages, I am going to study the drama of Dicken's novel, by concentrating on these two characters.

It may not be fruitless here to compare the first chapter of *Little Dorrit* with the last, which begins with a healthy autumn day, full of affirmation of life: "the golden fields" have been "reaped and ploughed," and "the summer fruits" have "ripened." "From the sea-shore the ocean [is] no longer to be seen lying asleep in the heat, but its thousand sparkling eyes [are] open, and its whole breadth [is] in joyful animation, from the cool sand on the beach to the little sails on the horizon . . ." (815). Here is a strong sense of relief from oppression. We further notice that there is no longer a demarcation between the sea within the harbour and without, as there was in chapter 1.⁷ We realize, accordingly, that the novel moves

from annihilation of life to the golden harvests, from gloomy despair to a gleam of meaning in life.

With the contrast between heaven and earth, the immanence of the last judgment and the pilgrimage of life, the novel is very religious in its design. And with the religious frame in mind, Dickens inquires into the almost unbridgeable gap between truth and falsehood, between humanity and human institutions. Vacillating between life and death, which the novel is very much about, Dickens tries to find some signs of affirmation of life in *Little Dorrit*. As Jerome Beaty says, "the vision of *Little Dorrit*, perhaps the 'darkest' of Dickens' novels, is still that of a world in which Nature sings to man 'soothing songs' (815) of the ultimate goodness of God's world audible even amidst the turbulent uproar of the contemporary urban world."⁸

Arthur Clennam

The story of Arthur Clennam is essentially concerned with his recovery from various illusions as well as with his emotional void. He is an unusual hero, being forty and unglamorous, and having no "[w]ill, purpose, hope" (20). We meet him in chapter 2 with the Meagleses in a quarantine, as a traveller. He is on his way home after twenty years' stay in China.

When he arrives in London, he finds the city "gloomy, close and stale" (28). Everything is "bolted and barred." The description of London resounds with Arthur's personal feeling about his boyhood, and through his memories of miserable and resentful Sundays we come to realize the kind of "religion and morality" (28)

under which he has been brought up. The detestable memories take the clearest form when he remembers his mother, who sits all day "behind a bible—bound like her own construction of it, in the hardest, barest, and straitest boards," "with a wrathful sprinkling of red upon the edges of the leaves, as if it, of all books! were a fortification against sweetness of temper, natural affection, and gentle intercourse" (29-30). She looks like a pagan god with a bible of her own construction, pouring forth curses and vengeance. "The beneficent history of the New Testament" (30) is no part of her religion.

At homecoming, he finds his house "dark and miserable" (31). His mother's house is "propped up" (31); his invalid mother is sitting "on a bier-like sofa," "propped up behind with one great angular black bolster, like the block at a state-execution in the old good times" (33).⁹ As to the family servant, his head was "awry" and he had "a one-sided, crab-like way," and "a weird appearance of having hanged himself" (37). The entire house is crippled even down to the furniture: we notice "a maimed table" and "a crippled wardrobe" (38). A celleret, a closet, a large clock and the panels of staircases all convey the association of death and hell. The crippled condition of the house and household bespeaks the crooked and perverted morality in it, when we think of Arthur's "gloomy sacrifice of tastes and sympathies" (21). We immediately notice here the central theme of the novel: life against death, nature against its suppression. Already the differing qualities of the Old Testament and the New are set in contrast, to prepare the way towards the final judgment.

Arthur's childhood has been his mother's daily reproaches; his

spontaneity suppressed or prohibited, he has gradually formed a tendency to dream in the face of crucial problems of life. His homecoming on Sunday reveals to us an urgent personal criticism of life. He renounces the business of the house and the influence of his mother, and tries to find his own life and its meaning. We are yet to find out how restrained he is emotionally. In his attitudes towards three women, Flora Finching, Pet Meagles and Little Dorrit, we come to understand the kind of hold he has on reality, his crippled psyche, and his way of attaining emotional fulfilment.

First, Flora Finching. She is Arthur's old love, whom his mother separated him from in his boyhood. They have lived for twenty years on the opposite side of the earth from each other. But when he is informed that she is a widow, is well-to-do, and will be his if he likes her, her image "soar[s] out of his gloomy life into bright glories of fancy" (40).

So he visits her with her old image in his old sacred place. The narrative here, however, is carefully embedded with ironic ticking of various "clocks" at Casby's house—a clock up the staircase, a songless bird in his cage, the parlour fire, the Casby's loud watch, and the servant-maid—to suggest how illusory his expectation is. As soon as he sees her, his old passion breaks to pieces. At once he finds her "very broad" and "short of breath" (150), and he does not have the patience to listen to her dislocated gibberish. But she, not noticing his feelings, revives the old happy days, "when [=although] the stage [is] dusty, when the scenery [is] faded, when the youthful actors [are] dead, when the orchestra [is] empty, when the lights [are] out" (155). He feels that this is sad and comical at the same

time. His old fantasy disrupted by reality, he is utterly miserable.

It is at such a moment that Pancks says:

“ I like business....What’s a man made for?”

“ For nothing else?” said Clennam.

Pancks put the counter question “ What else?” It packed up, in the smallest compass, a weight that had rested on Clennam’s life. (160)

He is brought back from his dreaming self to stern reality and to his keen sense of the purposelessness of life. He “ could not have felt more depressed and cast away if he had been in a wilderness ” (161). From his wilderness of despair, indecision and inaction rises a question: “ What have I found?” And significantly enough, a voice, as if answering his question, sounds into his room while he broods over the misdirection and lack of happiness in his life: “ Little Dorrit ” (165). It seems to throw a ray of hope into his crushing despair as if this humble little girl were going to awaken him to a sense of meaning in life.

Arthur’s inaction and indecision are presented in a clear light when he falls in love with Pet Meagles. “ The pretty girl ” (40) has caught his special attention, and he meets her at her house in Twickenham. He keeps asking himself whether he could allow himself to fall in love with her. He imagines a situation where all his natural emotions will be accepted and Mr. Meagles will favour him with agreement; but almost at the same time he resolves not to fall in love with her, because he has so many deficiencies in age, fortune and prospect. Again his natural self asserts itself; and once

more it is pushed down by the counter force. There is in him a curious counter-reaction against his natural feelings. His "wise" (202) and "noble" (308) resolution gets the better of natural emotion. We sense in him a crippled mentality—crippled because it has not been nurtured with love, but with suppression. He has grown up to be "nobody" (200)—a man of no feeling and of no existence. His mind is tortured by these two elements contending for supremacy, until Pet confides that her mind is on Henry Gowan. He finally throws away "the dying hope that [has] flickered in nobody's [=his] heart so much to its pain and trouble" (334). The vacillation of "nobody's" state of mind is thus put to an end, and he gently launches the roses which Pet has given him onto the flowing river.¹⁰

It is through Little Dorrit that Arthur's psychological fulfilment is attained. She appears in the novel as "nothing" (40), as Affery says, and Arthur, who is "nobody," comes to be interested in her. One day he follows her hurrying home, meets her father, and locks himself within the bars of a prison. His imprisonment bears a double function: in a psychological sense, it is congenial and his finding a way out will be one of the main interests of the novel. From the point of view of structure, it brings the two threads of the narrative together: Arthur begins to wonder, in the prison, if his mother has something to do with the imprisonment of the Dorrit family—a pregnant question that finally leads to his parentage and Little Dorrit's claim to a legacy.

A sense of guilt hangs heavy in Arthur's mind when he wonders in that way. And so, with pity and compassion towards Little Dor-

rit, together with his sense of guilt, he is resolved to offer what little help he can to her. He suggests that he will do his utmost to deliver her father from imprisonment. Little Dorrit says, however, "it might be anything but a service to him now" (99). This is divine knowledge, as we find out later; he is "better in than out," as shown in the running title on p. 99. But he begins making efforts towards that end at the Circumlocution Office.

Little Dorrit visits Arthur when he is in utter despair after meeting Flora. She comes to thank him for delivering her brother Tip from debt. But deep in her thankful heart are blended her respect and love towards him. When she takes leave of him, saying "God bless you!" the novelist comments that "she may have been as audible above . . . as a whole cathedral choir" (173). She has daily watched Arthur's window as "a distant star" (170), and when shut out of home into the open air, she is illustrated by Phiz as watching a distant star, far beyond the church spire, thinking of Arthur. If we remember the image of "stars" in chapter 2, used to mean heavenly values, Arthur is given almost a religious sanctity. An immense weight is placed upon his "belief in all the gentle and good things his life [has] been without" (165), to make him a hero. And yet, on the other hand, he feels in his pity towards this diminutive figure,¹¹ "as if he would have been glad to take her up in his arms to carry her to her journey's end" (173). The words "journey's end" carry an immediate association with the pilgrimage of life mentioned in chapter 2. Arthur, as traveller in his pilgrimage of life, is groping for the meaning of life through her. Thus in chapter 14, we notice a conflux of two differing perspectives: Arthur approaching Little Dorrit through

pity and compassion to find a meaning in life, while she, almost an angel in disguise, through respect and love approaches him. The conflux eventually culminates in their marriage.

In chapter 18, Little Dorrit's feeling towards Arthur becomes clearer. But at this stage of development Arthur entertains a dream of love towards Pet, and he does not notice, much less respond to, Little Dorrit's feeling. He simply regards her as a child, but she, on the contrary, recognizes him even by the sound of his steps (260): so intimate is she with him in her thoughts. She is conscious of "someone in the hopeless unattainable distance" (263), and any hint of depriving her of that consciousness makes her exceedingly sensitive and fidgety. When Maggie carries to Arthur the Father's compliments and message (261), Amy is very downcast. Or when Flora says innocently that she, not Little Dorrit, is dear to him, Amy feels sick and goes over to the window (286). All her pent-up emotions gradually create the story of a princess (292-295). Her suffering is greatest when Arthur drops a hint of having been in love with someone and says that he has found out he is an old man. Arthur is innocent of what he says, but the novelist steps in and says:

If he could have seen the dagger in his hand, and the cruel wounds it struck in the faithful bleeding breast of his Little Dorrit! (381)

Here is a strong indication of her love towards him. And when he asks her why he has spoken of this to her, she answers,

"Because you trust me, I hope. Because you know that nothing

can touch you, without touching me; that nothing can make you happy or unhappy, but it must make me, who am so grateful to you, the same." (382)

It is almost a confession of love. The authorial comment calls our attention here to her voice, her earnest face, her eyes and her quickened bosom, and puts stress on her love of Arthur, but he takes her as "a slender child in body, a strong heroine in soul" (382). His failure to recognize her love leads later in the novel to the love throes he has to undergo in the Marshalsea. Yet Little Dorrit, on the other hand, has to shift her love from her father to Arthur. There is a curious, involuntary identification of the hero with her father when she hears of her father's inheritance.

As [Arthur] kissed her, she turned her head towards his shoulder, and raised her arm towards his neck; cried out 'Father! Father! Father!' and swooned away. (415)

But when she visits Arthur in the Marshalsea, after losing her father, she looks "womanly" (757) under "the ripening touch of the Italian sun" (757).

Only after the Dorrit family are set free and are out of England, Arthur begins to think "sadly and sorely" of her. As the firm of Doyce and Clennam acquires a good reputation, he comes to sense a large place in his life left blank. "None of us clearly knows," the novelist remarks, "to whom or to what we are indebted . . . until some marked stop in the whirling wheel of life brings the right perception with it" (720). Arthur's investment in Mr. Merdle's enterprise having proved a heavy debt, he is sent to the Marshalsea prison.

It is not until he is thrown into the prison and cut away from all decent human relationship, that he finds himself so much in need of "such a face of love and truth" (719). In despair, misery and solitude, he, sobbing, blubbers out "O my Little Dorrit" (719).

We find almost religious overtones in his need for "such a face of love and truth." "Love and truth" are the essential qualities of Little Dorrit, and they are repeated in slight variation throughout the novel.¹² Alexander Welsh maintains that Truth, in the sense of loyalty and faithfulness, becomes the single value of widest currency in the nineteenth century. He further remarks, citing Thackeray, that "love and truth are the greatest of Heaven's commandments and blessings to us." Little Dorrit, we come to realize therefore, is the spirit of love and truth, ministering to her father and to the hero.¹³ And the hero's thoughts are now centered upon Little Dorrit, who sets "something like purpose before [his] jaded eyes," and who is "toiling on, for a good object's sake, without encouragement, without notice, against ignoble obstacles." When he is broken-hearted, he sees in her "patience, self-denial, self-subdual, charitable construction, the noblest generosity of the affections" (720). It seems to him "as if he met the reward of having wandered away from her, and suffered anything to pass between him and his remembrance of her virtues" (721).

Truly, she is the vanishing point of his life. He has "travelled thousands of miles towards [the innocent figure]" (733).

... previous inquiet hopes and doubts had worked themselves out before it: it was the centre of the interest of his life; it was the termination of everything that was good and pleasant in it;

beyond there was nothing but mere waste and darkened sky.¹⁴
(733)

Such is the truth he, so haggard and ill, has arrived at after a dozen more weeks of imprisonment. And just at such a moment he receives a visit from Little Dorrit in her old clothes. How dearly he loves her, yet he could not believe that all the devotion of this great being is turned to him in his adversity. Of course he does not know that Little Dorrit has long been in pursuit of "a bright star shining in the sky" (759) as if it were the fervent purpose of her own heart shining above her. At the end of Book I, Arthur carried her insensible form in his arms; the situation is now reversed and she visits him in adversity, bestowing angelic comfort and goodness upon him. He now feels the immense weight of the value of liberty and hope, which he has bought at such a price.

Arthur's sense of guilt, which has never left him since his return to England, is to be purged and his true past exposed. It is done while he is in bed, very ill and faint, in the Marshalsea. This purification is somewhat like a ritual. Threatened by Blandois, Mrs. Clenham reveals all the concealed facts about Arthur's parentage and her suspension of a legacy to Little Dorrit. She is particularly fierce and passionate in expatiating her creed. She has "reversed the order of Creation and breathed her own breath into a clay image of her Creator" (775). All her life she has believed herself to be "righteous" and "appointed" and has believed in "the just dispensation of Jehovah" and "the will of Disposer" (777). But now realizing that Little Dorrit will soon come within knowledge of the concealed facts, she rushes out of her house to the Marshalsea, and

begs forgiveness of Little Dorrit.

Symbolically, when Mrs. Clennam does so, she is “in the shadow” while Little Dorrit is “in the light” (790). Little Dorrit implores her to be guided by God and follow Him—a simple belief in “the healer of the sick, the raiser of the dead, the friend of all who [are] afflicted and forlorn, the patient Master who shed[s] tears of compassion for our infirmities” (792). All through their interview, Mrs. Clennam is “in the shade.” The teaching of the Old Testament and that of the New Testament are put in contrast in favour of the latter. As Mrs. Clennam and Little Dorrit hurry home to Mrs. Clennam’s house, “great shoots of light streamed among the early stars, like signs of the blessed later covenant of peace and hope that changed the crown of thorns into a glory” (793). They seem to justify and symbolize Little Dorrit’s love, grace, and forgiveness. Little Dorrit is the final, humble purpose of the travellers in life, and she embodies in herself eternity—light, hope and everlasting values—almost a religious solemnity.

Arthur and Little Dorrit are married. But the novel does not end with optimism, for nothing has changed in the world of *Little Dorrit*. It is still essentially a hostile world.

They went down into a modest life of usefulness and happiness. . . . They went quietly down into the roaring streets, inseparable and blessed; and as they passed along in sunshine and shade, the noisy and the eager, and the arrogant and the froward and the vain, fretted, and chafed, and made their usual uproar. (826)

It is a quiet ending. In this tumultuous world, the only things that

can be affirmed are the "usefulness and happiness" of an individual. It is identical with the world of Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach." David Gervais says, "The tragic voice is still large enough to silence any gratuitous optimism and impart a sombre hue to the future."¹⁵ John Lucas comments further that "for Dickens to be able to sustain his complex vision to the novel's very last words is the remaining evidence on which I would base my claim for *Little Dorrit's* supremacy among the great novels of the language."¹⁶

William Dorrit

William Dorrit is conceived of as a traveller: he goes on a grand tour of Europe with his family, after more than twenty years of imprisonment in the Marshalsea. His story is of special interest in the sense that imprisonment induces him to build a world of deception in which he lives complacently, though his deception comes into constant collision with his reality. His final release from deception in death gives a suggestion that he himself is a pilgrim in search of love and truth.

William Dorrit is a "helpless, shy, retiring man with irresolute hands" (58) when he comes into the Marshalsea, but he soon gets the title of the "Father of the Marshalsea" and welcomes new Collegians "with a kind of bowed-down beneficence" (65). The Collegians around him pity and sympathize with him as the most pitiable of all shabby people, but he regards the pity and sympathy as a respect they duly pay to the Father. Hence, the more pitiable the more "respected." Thus he loses self-respect, and dignity of

character, and people "respect" him for his "forlorn gentility" (73). On this inverted respect, William Dorrit builds his genteel society, where he behaves as "Father" in a "courtly" (221) and "Royal" (425) manner.

The word "inverted" is appropriate here because the Marshalsea is "the world in reverse." Everything in it is "unwholesome and unnatural" (71) and the condition in which inmates live is "false even with a reference to the falsest condition outside the walls" (78). Arthur Clennam looks at the inmates as "strange spectres" (88), but the "long-initiated" Tip says "the way to be healthy, wealthy, and wise is to come to the Marshalsea" (88). Moreover, the doctor in the prison, who is "an old jail-bird" (63), says:

We are quiet here; we don't get badgered here; there's no knocker here, sir, to be hammered at by creditors and bring a man's heart into his mouth. Nobody comes here to ask if a man's at home and to say he'll stand on the door mat till he is. Nobody writes threatening letters about money to this place. It's freedom, sir, it's freedom! . . . we have got to the bottom, we can't fall, and what have we found? Peace. That's the word for it. Peace. (63)

Once tainted by "the turbid living river" (78) that flows through it, few people hope for freedom outside the wall. There in the prison, nature is prevented, life buried under false pretense, goodwill simply taken advantage of, and liberty attained only in imprisonment.

All these taints are powerfully represented by William Dorrit. The "helpless, shy, retiring man" is now at the top of the hierarchical

society. As Father, he receives people at a "Levee" (83), and, when they are set free, he sends them away at the gate and receives some money for his benignity and patronage during their stay there. He is so proud of this habit, that when Arthur Clennam is locked in the prison for the first time, he asks a "testimonial" of him, as if it is taken for granted, though through broken words and clearing of throat—the apparent sign of the sense of shame within him.

It is interesting to note that the shining outside of the Father and his covert sense of shame are presented together at this moment to give us a further understanding of this man. We remember him cast down and weeping once, when a poor plasterer puts "a little pile of halfpence" in the Father's hand. The smallness of the sum cuts right into his heart, for it suggests to his mind not so much a respect for the Father as a poor contribution to a miserable beggar-prisoner.

The instance is worth remembering, for the two aspects of William Dorrit will go farther and farther apart from each other, as the story develops. The more he deceives himself, the more drastically he comes to realize his true self. The profound sense of uncertainty is a visible characteristic of his. Dickens gives two scenes in which he projects the inside view of William, and in which, when deception fails, he suddenly exposes himself as a miserable prisoner-father. In both scenes, in Chapter 19 (Book I) and in Chapter 5 (Book II), Mr. Dorrit is alone with his favourite daughter—the faithful minister who embodies in herself eternal values.

The first scene is the night when Mr. Dorrit reproaches his daughter for having refused the proposal of marriage of Chivery, the turnkey's

son. Before he broaches the subject, an uneasiness steals over him that is "like a touch of shame," and when he speaks, it is "in an unconnected and embarrassed manner." When he fails in conveying the intended meaning, because he is so conscious of that touch of shame, he remains silent and shrunk in his chair. After a dead silence, he cries out:

"What does it matter whether I eat or starve? What does it matter whether such a blighted life as mine comes to an end, now, next week, or next year? What am I worth to anyone? A poor prisoner, fed on alms and broken victuals; a squalid, disgraced wretch!" (227)

When he loses his mask of deception, he reveals his miserable self as a prisoner who has sunk too low to care even for being despised. The next moment he talks of some respect paid to him by the Collegians, and then after subsides into bewailing his wretchedness and pities Amy for her years of care and labour for him. "With the strangest inconsistency" (227) he swings from boasting to despair, and from despair to boasting. After going to bed, he wakes up and talks to Amy both soothingly and proudly: "Both the private father and the Father of the Marshalsea [are] strong within him" (230) at this moment. His characteristic swing from one extreme to another comes from the two opposing selves within him: as a private father he sees himself as he is, but as "Father," he is forced to assume the attitude of self-approval and thus suppress the weaker self. This gives a clue as to the extent to which he can impose upon himself.

A wonderful illustration of the vacillation of William Dorrit between his opposing selves is his treatment of old Nandy at tea, followed by a family quarrel. It so happens that he sees his daughter walking with old Nandy, and his soaring pride is greatly wounded. He mentions to Amy that he has exerted himself very hard to raise the family name, and expresses his regret at seeing such a shameful sight before him—the sight of his daughter and a shabby old pensioner walking together. All of a sudden, however, Mr. Clennam's visit is announced and a letter containing a bank-note is brought to the Father. Immediately his manner undergoes a drastic change. He takes the money with a little blush, greatly patronizes old Nandy, and invites him to tea—but at a window-sill, thus creating a “gulf” (373) between him and the old pensioner. He gives him a shilling, at parting, with a kind word to mind the steps. All this to the greatest consternation of Arthur Clennam.

It is not his fate, however, to remain at the height of triumph. Soon after this, Tip comes in and joins the family. Finding Mr. Clennam among them, he begins accusing Mr. Clennam of having withheld a temporary loan of money from him. He angrily says he has not been treated like a gentleman. At this the Father's mind is suddenly thrust down upon his humiliation. He cannot let it go as a matter of his son's ill-feeling against Mr. Clennam. He himself feels insulted by his son's remark, because he received a bank-note only a few hours before, not to mention having received money on other occasions. His immediate reaction is to defend himself by attacking his son. He calls him “not filial,” his principle “unnatural,” and his assertion “parricidal.”

He tenaciously sticks to falsehood, because he knows that he is a miserable poor prisoner. But so long as he remains within the prison, his illusion of gentility is tolerated by the Collegians because they know the truth about him. They sometimes laugh at him.

Once Mr. Dorrit steps outside the wall of the prison, however, the situation changes. The world outside takes him as he looks, and therefore he is forced to deceive himself and put off the marks of his imprisonment, in speech, manner, and outward appearances. Angus Easson considers the actual situation in the real prison and argues that William Dorrit could not have been tolerated as "Father." What Dickens chooses to do in *Little Dorrit* is to create "the tone of gentility within the prison" so that the pretensions of William Dorrit can take root. His character becomes important, because his pretensions correspond to the social pretensions of Gowans, Barnacles, Stiltstalkings, and even the Merdles.¹⁷

By dividing the novel into two books, Dickens further develops the character of William Dorrit with regard to how long he can deceive himself in the actual world outside the prison wall. At the end of Book I, when he hears that he has inherited a great fortune, he begins to "shake as if he were very cold" (419), and faints. The shaking is the first of many symptoms of illness that befall him at crucial times when his ever growing deception is undermined by the counter force that brings him back to reality.

Book II begins with the Dorrit family on their Grand Tour at the St. Bernard hospice. In distance and altitude the family is severed from poverty, and, by means of the inherited fortune, it has transformed itself into an aristocratic family. William Dorrit is effulgent

in greatness, wealth, freedom, and grandeur, with no shadow of the past visible. He employs, into the bargain, Mrs. General, who is a model of surface and varnish. But Frederick, on the other hand, though "having performed some ablutions as a sacrifice to the family credit" (457), is silent and retiring, and has no use for speech and no desire to be waited upon.

Frederick Dorrit, William's brother, has not seemed to be an important character up to this point. But after the family leaves the prison, the contrast between the two brothers becomes of marked interest. Whenever William is portrayed in his display of pride and vanities, his brother Frederick is portrayed in an exactly opposite state. While one enjoys his position at a Levee, the other is depicted as almost a lifeless being: he says, "I am merely passing on, like the shadow over the sundial" (80). He is "the shadow," the unconscious self, the conscience of the shining William. Dickens seems to have portrayed in the two brothers the two opposing aspects that may occur within a single man: false representation and truth; a "castle in the air" and reality; the conscious and the unconscious. The assumption is not inappropriate, since in the number plan for chapter XIX, Dickens emphasizes the two brothers by underlining them three times.¹⁸ When William is "courtly, condescending, benevolently conscious of a position" (221), Frederick is "humbled, bowed, withered, faded" (221). William pities his brother because he is not "under lock and key," but the fact that he is free from imprisonment means that he possesses a certain portion of nature and freedom unspoiled, which, through incessant frictions, will eventually triumph over false pride. It is Frederick, we are to remember, who

recognizes the patient effort of Little Dorrit, reminds his brother of her truthfulness, and honours her before he dies.

William Dorrit, being set free from imprisonment, soon finds that the monastery on the Alps is "so very contracted" (441), and Little Dorrit regards the place as something like "a prison" (442). The association of a prison is always with them, and cannot be eradicated from them. To Little Dorrit, the whole society comes to resemble "a superior sort of Marshalsea" (511). Numbers of people behave and talk like those in the Marshalsea. The world is, as it were, a prison.

And so, the physical deliverance from imprisonment does not produce the mental deliverance. William Dorrit keeps going his own way while Little Dorrit remains what she has been. After being among Counts and Marquises for a long time in Venice, he one day talks with Mrs. General concerning the matter of his daughter's recent behaviour. In his talk with her, however, we fear he might at any moment disclose his life in the Marshalsea. A word or two referring to it might escape his mouth at any moment, once his efforts to control himself fail. So precarious is his confrontation with reality. He even has to watch his man-servant severely lest he should refer to some Collegiate joke. He delivers his observations disapproving of Amy's conduct in the presence of Mrs. General, and in his words and bearing towards her, Little Dorrit finds "the well-known shadow of the Marshalsea" (478). When he and Amy are left alone, he complains to her, not to her face but to the empty air, that only Amy among his family has still kept the mark of the past humiliation. His mind is totally centred on his self-justification, on "sweep[ing]

that accursed experience off the face of the earth" (479), and not on his favourite child. Towards the end he is not able to keep up the deception and turning his eyes from the empty air to the dejected figure with its drooping head and trembling hands, he becomes jerky and, after a silence, begins to whimper. Then he exclaims that "he [is] a poor ruin and a poor wretch in the midst of his wealth" (480). Struck by the patience and love of his neglected daughter he is brought back to his true self. But it is his fate to continue deceiving his true self, otherwise he will lose everything. He presently regains his former attitude and soon after he becomes very high with his servant.

But in this brief moment, he senses something that thwarts his self-deception. Behind his conscious mask of deceit, he is looking unconsciously for that which will set him free from a self-deceiving life, and which will promise him a peaceful life. His pilgrimage in life is to get away from self-deception or self-defence, and come to recognize the love and respect he entertains towards his daughter in his innermost heart. To our interest, Frederick has acquired during his stay in Venice a habit of going to picture galleries. And he becomes greatly pleased whenever Little Dorrit accompanies him there. On one of these days she happens to mention her wish to pay a visit to Mrs. Gowan, and the family members do not receive it kindly. But as soon as Edward (once called Tip) explains that the Gowans are known to the Merdles, Little Dorrit's wish is gratified. Seeing how much she is slighted by the rest of the family, Frederick Dorrit suddenly exclaims, "To the winds with the family credit! . . . Brother, I protest against pride. I protest against ingratitude" (485). His eyes are bright at this moment and markings of purpose

show up again on his brow and face, after having faded from them for five-and-twenty years. William Dorrit becomes "unusually pale" (486), another symptom of illness, and he even dismisses Fanny's harsh words against her uncle, by entreating her to spare his brotherly feelings.

As Frederick, the representation of his brother's suppressed inner self, revives from lifelessness, William begins to lose his spirits. His homecoming to England accelerates this process a great deal. This is a special ordeal for him. At Mr. Merdle's house, he is constantly in "confinement" (619) under the penetrating gaze of the Chief Butler, and a host of fantasies are given rise to by the fear of his past being exposed. Equally, when Mrs. Finching visits him, he is so much reminded of his daughter's having earned bread by needlework, and of the vivid scene of his release from prison, that he is emotionally so sick as to decline Mr. Merdle's invitation to dinner; he takes a short sleep for the sake of his better recovery. At another time when he comes back to his hotel, triumphant after a farewell banquet with Mr. Merdle, he finds Chivery waiting for him. From his dismay, miscalculating the purpose of his visit, he dashes up to him and collars him. But when he realizes that he is utterly mistaken, he looks "tired and ill" (632). With the Channel between him and Chivery, he begins to find that the foreign air is lighter to breathe than that of England. Finally, when he gets back to Italy, he is driven to jealousy by the sight of Little Dorrit and Frederick sitting together very cheerfully. Stormed by jealousy he refers to his brother's failing health and sends him to bed, interspersing such epithets as "drivelled" (642) and "somnolent" (644), but all in all it is nothing but the

reflection of his own failing health. When again he and Little Dorrit are left alone, he looks around to assure himself that they are not in the old prison-room. And whenever the old association gets strong, he turns his conversation to riches and the great people around him. But fits of dozing come often and get more apparent with him, and he gets "shrunken and old" (646), even though his attire is refulgent.

As Frederick becomes intimate with Little Dorrit, William's failure in maintaining appearances becomes manifest. These fits of dozing begin to expose the true self suppressed beneath his shining appearance. And at the final dramatic scene in which he attends Mrs. Merdle's dinner, those who are present begin to appear to Mr. Dorrit, whose wall of consciousness is now taken away, as the Collegians of the Marshalsea. Released from the conscious effort not to expose his prison taint, he suddenly begins to talk fluently out of his quarter-of-a-century-long habit, requesting a testimonial to the Father of the Marshalsea, a habit which he has so consistently tried to eradicate. After the address, he collapses and never rises again. During his illness he sends all his personal belongings to an imaginary pawn broker, and in so doing he particularly rejoices in communicating with his daughter. In ten days he dies, and so does his brother. But before he dies, Frederick honours and blesses Little Dorrit with all the remaining power of his honest heart (651).

William Dorrit's life has been "stumblings and wanderings" (651) in search of love and truth, which are available at his elbow, at their faithful place, but he who is thrown in "the living grave" (231) simply overlooks their importance. He is so deeply prison-tainted

as to feel complacent in an inverted morality. But after many scenes of his inner struggle between deception and reality, he finishes his pilgrimage of life by finding the true guardian in his daughter, whom Arthur Clennam once calls a "good angel" (816). Over his body and that of Frederick shines the moonlight, which means, according to what light and shadow signify in the novel, that his death is not the end of a precarious life, but is the beginning of life.

Little Dorrit is a wonderful rendering of Dickens's view of society. It is concerned with various forms of prison in society, and with emotional and spiritual prison as well. It unfolds a grim social picture, but the vision of society in *Little Dorrit* goes deeper than the fact of imprisonment. By spreading the aura of religious references over the grim realities of society, Dickens seriously gropes for some affirmation of life in it. Such contrasts in the novel as sun and shadow, life and death, freedom and imprisonment, are used to suggest the existence of some metaphysical power beyond the reach of human beings, a possible way out of the human condition on the earth. Judgment falls, we notice, on the three sham "houses": on Merdle's, on Mr. Dorrit's, and on Mrs. Clennam's. Furthermore, the vengeance and hatred of the Old Testament are replaced by the love and forgiveness of the New Testament. To crown it all, we read the wonderful stories of Arthur Clennam and William Dorrit on their pilgrimage in search of love and truth. And in those stories, the slim figure, "so faithful, tender, and unspoiled by Fortune" (756) saves Arthur from self-deception, and Mr. Dorrit from false life, thus creating through devotion, duty and endurance, an affirmative meaning in life.

Little Dorrit is indeed a novel about man and religion, or should be read on that level. Starting with the familiar issues of the time, Dickens has created a profound work of art in which he communicates his vision of human nature, the human situation, and human needs.

Notes

1. I should like to express my sincere gratitude to Professor Philip Collins for his valuable comments on this paper and encouragements in the writing of it. I am also grateful to Dr. Ronald C. Taylor for his patient reading of the manuscript.
2. Philip Collins, ed., *Dickens: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971). John Butt, "The Topicality of *Little Dorrit*," *University of Toronto Quarterly*, 29 (Oct. 1959), 1-10. Philip Collins, "Arthur Clennam Arrives in London: A Note on *Little Dorrit*, Chapter III," *Literature and History*, no. 8 (Autumn 1978), 214-222. In this essay Professor Collins abundantly refers to *Punch* for evidence and he even points out the significance of 'The Waiting Room' (*Punch*, XXVIII [1855]), p. 107) which appears in the memoranda for the first number plan for *Little Dorrit*. Nur Sherif, "The Victorian Sunday in *Little Dorrit* and *Thyrza*," *Cairo Studies in English* (1960), 155-65. Also interesting is Graham and Angela Smith's "Dickens as a Popular Artist," *Dickensian*, 67 (Sept. 1971), 131-144, which shows how Dickens, working within the popular frame of reference to money and speculation in early and mid-Victorian society, integrates Mr. Merdle's fall and makes him one of the central figures of the novel, both in its theme and structure.
3. *The World of Charles Dickens* (London: Martin Secker & Warburg, 1970), p. 241.
4. Charles Dickens, *Little Dorrit*, Oxford Illustrated Dickens (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1966), p. 1. All page references are to this edition: hereafter indicated in parentheses by page number.
5. *The Melancholy Man: A Study of Dickens's Novels* (London: Methuen, 1970), p. 267.
6. Throughout the novel, the sun and the shadow are not used in a strict way to suggest positive and negative values. There are instances where they really do not apply. But generally, 'sun' or 'light' does suggest life, hope and truth,

and 'shadow' or 'shade' means negation of life and evil things. For example: Mr. Doyce, the only character Dickens gives credit to in the novel, is "as honest as the sun" (Meagles; 199). Arthur Clennam says "Will, purpose, hope? All these lights were extinguished before I could sound the words" (20). When he starts a firm with Doyce, he sees "a shaft of light" (267) in his workshop, and after this he is set free from an old bondage and a new world opens before him: he comes to believe that "strait [is] the gate and narrow [is] the way" (319). He sees Little Dorrit as "a light" (760), and when recovering from illness in the prison, "the light [is] strong upon [his eyes]" (815). The Collegians, "accustomed to the gloom of their imprisonment," can "not support the light of such bright sunshine" (428). As for the affection and fidelity with which Little Dorrit defends her father, the novelist says "how true the light that shed[s] false brightness round [her father]" (97). When Amy tells a story of a princess, "the sunset flush [is] so bright" on her face (295)—a strong suggestion that her wish will be fulfilled. Later she "comes into the prison with the sunshine" (824) to visit Arthur. When she and Arthur are married, they look at the fresh perspective of the street "in the autumn morning sun's bright rays" (826). "[T]he long bright rays" strike "bars of the prison of this lower world" (763). Mrs. Clennam is exposed to the "dusty twilight" (787) before she throws away her cursing and vengeance. In her encounter with Little Dorrit, she stands "in the shadow" while Little Dorrit is "in the light" (790). After their reconciliation they see "great shoots of light [stream] among the early stars, like signs of the blessed later covenant of peace and hope that change[s] the crown of thorns into a glory" (793).

The shadow is abundant in the Marshalsea; "the shady yard" (721), "the shadow of the wall" (263, 730, 758), "shadows of the yard" (67), "prison shadows" (788). "The shadow of the wall was on every object" (245). "Shadow of the wall was dark upon [Clennam]" (735). "The shadow of the Marshalsea wall was a real darkening influence" (254). Little Dorrit sees in her father's face "a deeper shadow than the shadow of the Marshalsea wall" (650). Mrs. Clennam's house is also covered with shadows: "If the sun ever touched it, it was but with a ray, and that was gone in half an hour" (178). As Arthur approaches the grim home of his youth, "the shadow" "thicken[s] and thicken[s]" (542). "The gathering shadows" make the place "yet more darkly threatening than of old" (585). The spell of secrecy "enshroud[s] the house" (680). "The shadow of a supposed act of injustice" never leaves Arthur (319). Flintwinch's

ways and means are like "the black avenues of shadow" (682) that lie. Upon the Merdle establishment there is "the shadow" of no common wall (246), and the "shadow of Mr. Merdle's complaint" (253) is not on his wife, his son-in-law, or on the Barnacles. "A monstrous shadow" (445) imitates Rigaud on the wall and ceiling at St. Bernard hospice, which is like another Ark, floating "on the shadowy waves" (432).

Sometimes the sun and the shadow are used to emphasize the contrast, in terms of life and death, good and evil, or hope and despair. Little Dorrit "looked down into the living grave on which the sun had risen, with her father in it" (231). The description of the Tattycoram's portion of the house is symbolical. It has "a deep-stained glass" and yet "its more transparent portions [are] flashing to the sun's rays" (191). She first rebels against the Meagleses for their one-sided treatment of her, but after years of misery, suspicion and torment, comes back to their protection. Her inner qualities are neatly epitomized in the description of the place she is in. Or, just before Arthur's hope for winning Pet withers, we see him sauntering in the beautiful landscape of a tranquil summer sunset. The real landscape and its shadow in the water are so clear, yet "so fraught with solemn mystery of life and death" (332-3). While he resumes his way, the shadows "[seem] to sink deeper and deeper into the water." Meeting Pet on the way, he walks with her into the avenue of trees. At first they notice an arch of light at the other end, but at the time when she confides in him about her sweetheart, it is getting dark. When they come out of the avenue, the trees seem to close up behind them in the darkness. His loss of hope is shown through the image of fading light and increasing darkness. He at last takes leave of his old restless doubts.

7. The comparison of the two chapters is carefully considered by H. W. Fawcner, even down to the description of the sea. See H. W. Fawcner, *Animation and Reification in Dickens's Vision of the Life-Denying Society* (Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis: Studia Anglistica Upsaliensia, 31) (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1977), pp. 130-4.
8. Jerome Beaty, "The 'Soothing Songs' of *Little Dorrit*: New Light on Dickens's Darkness," in *Nineteenth Century Perspective: Essays in Honor of Lionel Stevenson*, ed. Clyde de L. Ryals (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 1974), p. 236.
9. Mrs. Clennam is depicted in the same way on p. 353 and on p. 763.
10. The flowers reappear in the novel, with fragrance and hope, at Arthur's sick

- room in the Marshalsea prison. John Holloway gives a suggestive note concerning the flowers. They bring, he says, a symbolic presentation of the three women in Arthur Clennam's life. He also adds that there is, perhaps, a hint of the idea of psychic rebirth in these flowers. (Penguin *Little Dorrit*, p. 912).
11. "So the diminutive is the essential part of the plot. It is also picturesque and symbolical—the small frail figure who is nevertheless the fount of moral strength; the protectress, the neglected, loved by all and, until the end, understood by none." John Butt & Kathleen Tillotson, *Dickens at Work* (London: Methuen, 1957), p. 232.
 12. They are repeated in the following ways: "her love and toil and truth" (419); "so Angelically comforting and true" (756); "with all my love and truth" (817).
 13. Alexander Welsh, *The City of Dickens* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1971). See especially Section X, "The Spirit of Love and Truth."
 14. His view and his prospects in life are dark indeed: when he came home and looked out of the window in Chapter 3, he saw "the old blasted and blackened forest of chimneys" (38). This memory is repeated in Chapter 13, when he reviewed his life after a painful meeting with Flora. He turned his gaze upon the gloomy vista by which he had come to that stage in his existence: "So long, so bare, so blank" (164). While feeling love for Pet, he once looked out of the window at the serene river at night; at another time it rained very hard. When he finally took leave of his hope for Pet, "the trees seemed to close up behind them in the darkness, like their own perspectives of the past" (337). In the Marshalsea, he rose from his bed at twelve or one o'clock and sat at his window looking upward for the first wan trace of day (754).
 15. David Gervais, "The Poetry of *Little Dorrit*," *Cambridge Quarterly*, IV (1968-9), p. 53.
 16. John Lucas, *op. cit.*, p. 286.
 17. Angus Easson, "Marshalsea Prisoners: Mr. Dorrit and Mr. Hemens," *Dickens Studies Annual*, vol. 3 (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 1974), pp. 77-86.
 18. The number plans for *Little Dorrit* are reproduced and discussed by Paul D. Herring in his "Dickens' Monthly Number Plans for *Little Dorrit*," *Modern Philology*, 64 (August 1966), pp. 23-63.