CHAPTER TWO

VARIETIES OF INNOCENCE

Dickens has been called the 'heir to the romantic poets' in his exaltation of the spontaneity of innocence combined with maturity of experience and his handling of the evolving organic pattern. The greatness of Dickens is evident not only in the way he treated the motif of childhood but in the way he assimilated the romantic tradition and enlarged the scope of the child's essential nature by portraying varieties of innocence and experience on the part of the child. F.R. Leavis accepted Peter Coveney's view that Dickens is 'the greatest of the romantic novelists' in the way he presents the child's view of human beings and the child's view of the world. Dickens would suggest that we should learn from children who alone restore harmony and happiness in a

1. See Peter Coveney, The Image of Childhood, p.114. Also see David Grylls, Guardians & Angels, p.133. Grylls also called Dickens an "heir to the Romantic poets and essayists" inasmuch as he exalted the "cult of juvenile innocence." In contrast to Dickens, Romantic concepts of innocence or intuitive wisdom are of little use to Jane Austen. She did not believe in them. She cannot make much allowance for freedom and spontaneity (p.130). It is here that Dickens offers a marked contrast.

2. F.R. Leavis, Introduction to Peter Coveney's The Image of Childhood, p.20.
world which is made insufferably bad by the adults.

In his development of the concept of childhood and childhood innocence Dickens can be seen to respond to and assimilate the romantic tradition. Ordinarily, no grown-up human being would look upon his childhood as something memorable or worthy. Most of us would like to consider that part of our life as an episode to be forgotten. But for Dickens, who understood the romantic tradition, childhood seems to be a period if not invariably of joy or a period of paradisal bliss, at least a period of innocence when it receives its shocks of life and experience. Just as the Romantics recognized the place of intuition and the place of the prelapsarian innocence in children, Dickens too considered the child, "a type of the regenerate man, the New Dispensation, the New Adam," as rightly observed by Robert Pattison.

Dickens, however, seems to hold an equivocal attitude to childhood innocence, knowledge and joy. It is possible to mistake this attitude for one of

nostalgia for the state of innocence which we all have. It may be compared to the true Christian's essential longing to recover some of the prelapsarian bliss of man. We all would like to return to our childhood. But in Dickens it was not just nostalgia. It was his firm belief that childhood innocence and the childhood vision of life can alone make for happiness. He would never grant that reason could be superior to or more powerful than innocence. He might grant that one cannot fully recover the prelapsarian innocence but, according to him, children and the childlike attitude retain not only the prelapsarian innocence but also prelapsarian wisdom. The lives and careers of almost all his child characters are governed by the principle of the 'Fall' followed by a conscious recovery of lost innocence.

Besides the prelapsarian innocence, there are other varieties of innocence and experience which Dickens associates with childhood. Unfortunately, the study of innocence in his fiction has not been taken up in right earnest by the critics of Dickens. Angus Wilson has no doubt distinguished between 'childish' innocence and 'childlike' innocence and
also pointed out how the various child characters exemplify these two kinds of innocence in the novels of Dickens. It may be useful to examine in some detail the name and nature of innocence as Dickens seems to have conceived it.

Innocence means many things to Dickens. First, it suggests naivété, ignorance or simplicité; secondly, it may stand for inherent virtues such as affection, love and faith. Innocence may also symbolize a divine quality, the joy of the unfallen state. Based on these meanings or connotations, Dickens's concept of innocence can be brought under three varieties - childish (naive) innocence, childlike (mature) innocence, and paradisal (prelapsarian) innocence.

Childish innocence is a simple state. Its nature is so simple that it has the ability to see, but it does not possess the capacity to learn from what it sees. It is not alive to the value of experience, as Blake would put it. In its involvement with

childish innocence does not develop into experience but just retains its state unaffected from first to last for want of the power of assimilation. It is, no doubt, a sign of immaturity, but Dickens would not consider that a great drawback.

Childish innocence may be defined, from the point of view of fiction, as a mode by which a state of arcadian bliss stands exemplified. This definition of childish innocence may be applied to two sets of characters. The first set comprises innocent fools, the fools who are mostly comic, while the second set includes innocent victims who evoke Dickens's pity more than his comic sense. Thus, childish innocence provides two modes of existence and presentation: one comic and the other pathetic.

'Pickwick, Tom Pinch and Barnaby Rudge may be regarded as 'big babies.' They represent Dickens's idea of childish innocence. They believe in some kind of childish innocence such as naïveté, ignorance and simplicité.' They begin as innocents and end up as innocents.
Pickwick, for example, shows no growth. Essentially innocent, he does not know his way about in this world. He always relies on his servant Sam Weller who is his friend, philosopher and guide. In one of his adventures, he meets a person who becomes a mystery to him.

"And who was he?" inquired Mr. Pickwick. "Wy, that's just the wery point as nobody never know'd," replied Sam. "But what did he do?"
"Wy, he did wot many men as has been much better know'd has done in their time, sir," replied Sam, "he run a match agin the constable, and vun it" (PP,p.577).

Through this and many other passages in the novel, Dickens brings out a contrast between Pickwick and Sam Weller, a contrast between a man who is innocent and one who is worldly wise. Sam has an adult's knowledge of the world. He knows all that Pickwick does not know. For everything, Pickwick's favourite questions are 'who', 'what' and 'why'. This is the kind of innocence Dickens portrays in the character of Pickwick.
The interesting fact is that throughout Pickwick remains an innocent 'child' as it were. His experiences with the world do not help him to grow, to mature and to evolve. That is because his innocence fails to help him to assimilate his experience of the world. Consequently, he is lost in the world. Moreover, his naivety leads him to such comic and near tragic situations as his holding Mrs. Bardell in his arms, his entering the boarding school at Bury St. Edmunds at midnight and, above all, his losing his way at the Ipswich Inn at midnight and settling down by mistake in a lady's room. In all these situations, he amuses others but becomes a "butt." He himself admits:

"I have seen enough," said Mr. Pickwick, as he threw himself into a chair in his little apartment, "My head aches with these scenes, and my heart too. Henceforth I will be a prisoner in my own room" (PP, p. 646).

Nothing can make him learn the ways of the world and grow out of his vulnerable innocence. The world has

made no impact on him nor has he made any impact on
the world except to amuse the world by his comic
adventures. It is not surprising that he should
settle down in his village where he is treated with
respect by the rustics.

The children idolise him, and so indeed does
the whole neighbourhood (PP, p. 803).

In the words of Humphry House, it is only gradually
that he begins to appear as "a person to be admired
rather than laughed at." 6

Like Mr. Pickwick, Barnaby Rudge too begins his
career not as a grown-up adult but as a 'big baby'.
He is an innocent, idiotic adult with the mind of a
child who will never grow old. 7 Dickens describes
the poor idiot, the innocent boy, as follows:


7. Dickens seems to feel that the children are what
they are because of their parents and the way they
are brought up by them. Rudge's father can only
think of cursing his son both before and after his
birth. His idiocy can be traced back to his father's
stabbing some one just before he was born. Again,
when he becomes a grown-up boy he threatens to kill
him and he exploits his good nature. See David
Grylls, Guardians and Angels, p. 137.
He was about three-and-twenty years old, and though rather spare, of a fair height and strong make. His hair, of which he had a great profusion, was red, and hanging in disorder about his face and shoulders, gave to his restless looks an expression quite unearthly enhanced by the paleness of his complexion, and the glassy lustre of his large protruding eyes. Startling as his aspect was, the features were good, and there was something even plaintive in his wan and haggard aspect. But the absence of the soul is far more terrible in a living man than in a dead one; and in this unfortunate being its noblest powers were wanting (BR, p.28).

The 'disorder' of his hair, his 'restless looks,' the 'paleness of his' complexion' and his 'large protruding eyes' are all expressive of the disorder of his mind. Moreover, his stunted intellect and the consequent deficient understanding destined him to remain forever a child. It is in this sense that he may be called an 'unfortunate being' and a 'big baby' and his innocence may be regarded as simplicité. It is this simplicité which accounts for Barnaby's attitude to his father. He is intended to be an innocent who serves as a living reminder to his father's act of murder. The Locksmith pleads with him:
Barnaby - good Barnaby - dear Barnaby - if you know this gentleman, for the sake of his life and everybody's life that loves him, help me to raise him and lay him down (BR, p. 29).

Barnaby begins to hunt his father, seeking to capture him and have him hanged at Tyburn. But his native simplicité does not permit him to harm his father.

Barnaby's experiences at the Gordon Riots and in the streets of London do not teach him the ways of the world. Like Pickwick, he loses his way in London streets and finally settles down in a country. He confesses in his simplicité:

But neither to visit them, nor on any other pretence, no matter how full of promise and enjoyment, could he be persuaded to set foot in the streets: nor did he ever conquer this repugnance or look upon the town again (BR, p. 618).

Barnaby is thus an innocent from the beginning to the end.

The second type of childish innocence includes characters like Paul, Smike, Jo and Nell who die young.
Death alone brings true happiness to these characters. The vital difference between the two sets of characters of childish innocence is that while the first set is ready to gain experience which always proved to them bitter, the second set of characters always considers that in the world of experience they have to compromise their essential innocence which they cannot afford to lose, rather would not wish to lose. They tend to keep their essential innocence and they have a felt conviction that they can attain true happiness only in the hereafter. In a way, they refuse to compromise. They cannot.

The second variety of innocence at work in Dickens may be called childlike innocence. Its nature, unlike that of childish innocence, is a complex one. It has certain distinctive features. It is associated with childlike virtues such as, 'affection', 'love' and 'faith'. Unlike childish innocence, it has the power of assimilation.

In terms of a fictional mode, childlike innocence may be defined as one in which spontaneity of innocence and virtue are emphasized and in which
there is specific provision for a growth-process because of the power of assimilation. This definition implies that essential innocence and inherent virtue combined with the value of experience make childlike innocence a happy and desirable state. The combination of these three elements, which may be described as an adult and mature innocence, leads to a complex state. This mode is 'Blakean' in its tradition. For, what one finds in this mode is that in the juxtaposition of three elements, the values of innocence and experience are not excluded from each other. They are only complementary to each other as they are found together in Blake's vision of life as seen in his Songs of Innocence and Songs of Experience.

Oliver Twist, Florence, Little Dorrit and Esther Summerson symbolize childlike innocence. They are endowed with virtues such as 'goodness' in Oliver and Little Dorrit, 'love' in Little Nell, 'affection' in Florence, and 'faith' in Esther Summerson. They exhibit from the beginning these virtues which can only be described as adult or mature and they are found together with innocence which they do not lose.
They would not compromise their essential innocence. Their childlike innocence only helps them to include and transcend human realities and establish enduring relationships. Oliver and Florence may be taken up for a brief discussion here.

Oliver, the deprived, outcast workhouse orphan, is an embodiment of innocence. Besides, he is a reservoir of 'goodness.' Dickens himself says in the Preface to the third edition (1841): "I wished to shew in little Oliver the principle of Good surviving through every adverse circumstances and triumphing at last." Such experiences will strengthen Oliver's virtues and at the same time enable him to ground his innate 'goodness' upon a mature understanding of life.

Dickens further emphasizes the childlike trait of the boy saying "nature or inheritance had implanted a good sturdy spirit in Oliver's breast" (OT, p.5). These childlike qualities help the boy to grow up through experience. He proceeds "from
innocence, through suffering to learning." Moreover, it is such a co-presence of the spontaneity of innocence with the maturity of experience that enables the boy to encounter and overcome his ordeals in the workhouse, in the London underworld and in the Fagin academy instead of succumbing meekly to them. For example, Oliver, in his innocence, takes a long time to understand Fagin's business of pocket-picking, but we are made to see the boy as an intelligent child.

"You're a clever boy, my dear," said the playful old gentleman, patting Oliver on the head approvingly. "I never saw a sharper lad. Here's a shilling for you. If you go on, in this way, you'll be the greatest man of the time. And now come here, and I'll show you how to take the marks out of the handkerchiefs" (61, p.64).

The situation combines innocence with experience. It is the same interaction of innocence and

experience that is, in fact, responsible for Oliver emerging as a mature character. This fact is borne out by the condemned criminal Fagin when Oliver and his adopted father Brownlow meet him in his death-cell towards the close of the novel.

Oliver, too, ... Oliver too — quite the gentleman now — quite the — take that boy away to bed (OI, p. 404).

Another child character who represents this group is Florence. She exhibits her innate virtue of steady 'affection' to her loveless father from first to last. As Dickens says:

in her one absorbing wish to be allowed to show him some affection, to be a consolation to him, to win him over to the endurance of some tenderness from her, his solitary child, she would have knelt down at his feet, if she had dared, in humble supplication (DS, p. 233).

9. Dombey can only look upon his children as a 'personal property.' The absence of love actually prevents their growth. Yet, in the case of Florence, her childlike innocence grows into experience. See David Cryiis, Guardians and Angels, p. 139.
After her brother's death, she shows all her affection to her father, but she does not know how to make him understand it. Her acceptance of the childlike virtue which has the assimilative power helps her to grow and to evolve. Even after her marriage, her affection for her father does not change. She returns at the right time and rescues him in his ruined condition. She asks her father forgiveness, for no fault of hers:

\[ \text{Papa! Dearest papa! Pardon me, forgive me!} \]
\[ \text{I have come back to ask forgiveness on my knees. I never can be happy more, without it!} \]
\[ \text{Unchanged Still, Of all the world, unchanged} \]
\[ \text{(DS, p. 781-2).} \]

Her concern for her father remains 'unchanged' and her affection for him is more a genuinely felt emotion than an abstraction.

Despite the experience, these child characters do not compromise or lose their essential innocence. Childlike innocence in them not only absorbs human realities but also transcends them. Because of the power of assimilation, childlike innocence not only enriches itself with the value of experience but also
attains self-awareness, self-consciousness and self-knowledge — all of which contribute to its complexity and maturity.

*Somewhat akin to the second variety, childlike innocence, which from the beginning to the end exhibits virtue without compromising its essential nature, is the third category of innocence at work in Dickens. This third variety of innocence may be called paradisal innocence or prelapsarian innocence in the religious sense of the term. It is also a mature and complex state. The child usually inherits a legacy of paradisal innocence but the moment it steps into the mundane world and starts growing, it tends to compromise that innocence. Sophistication that looms large over the child eclipses the child's innocence. But, as Elliot Gilbert points out, "it is a positive, not a negative quality; a substantial presence rather than a mere vacancy. Moreover, it is a permanent characteristic of human life and so, unlike other kinds of innocence, can never be lost ... But, in fact, metaphysical innocence is immutable, retaining its
original strength behind the gathering clouds of experience." And Dickens's exploitation of its complexity in the face of maturity depends on the very strength of the nature of paradisal innocence.

Dickens's concept of paradisal innocence is presented in terms of a tension between innocence and experience. In this event, innocence may be reinforced by experience, or the harsh world may prove to be too powerful for the fragility of the innocent soul. David Copperfield and Pip represent two different ways of responding to this conflict.

In *Great Expectations* one can see Dickens's concept of innocence, and of its possible loss and the ultimate growth of that innocence into experience. The whole novel centres round the protagonist's experience. Pip is presented as a victim, exposed to temptations and saved from these temptations by his essential innocence and goodness. Though Humphry House claims that the novel is about

"a snob's progress," it belongs to the class of "education or development-novel" and it describes the progress of Pip "from the country to the city, from innocence to experience."  

As an innocent child, he feels so deprived of parental love that he visits his parents' tombs in the country marshes. Pip in his childhood innocence remembers his dead parents, brothers, places, things and their identity in this way:

Ours was the marsh country, down by the river, within, as the river wound, twenty miles of the sea. My first most vivid and broad impression of the identity of things, seems to me to have been gained on a memorable raw afternoon towards evening. At such a time I found out for certain, that this bleak place overgrown with nettles was the churchyard; and that Philip Pirrip, late of this parish, and also Georgiana wife of the above, were dead and buried...and that the small bundle of shivers growing afraid of it all and beginning to cry, was Pip (GE, pp.1-2).


The child soon begins to 'cry' longingly for either his identity or the sophistication of a city life in contrast to innocence, and simplicity. As a coarse, common boy, he longs for sophistication. He is brought up on the thief's money but when Magwitch reveals that he is his benefactor, Pip hates the thief.

To my thinking there was something in him that made it hopeless to attempt to disguise him. The more I dressed him, and the better I dressed him, the more he looked like the slouching fugitive on the marshes... and that from head to foot there was Convict in the very grain of the man (GE, p. 317).

This reveals the emptiness of Pip's sophistication. Later, however, as a London youth, he begins to find no delight at the end in his achieved sophistication in contrast to the value of innocence which he had enjoyed in the company of Joe Gorgery and Biddy. He decides to go back to his first home with a repentant heart, thereby getting back to his essential innocence.

The purpose was, that I would go to Biddy, that I would show her how humbled and repentant I came back, that I would tell
her how I had lost all I once hoped for, that I would remind her of our old confidences in my first unhappy time. Then I would say to her: 'Biddy, I think you once liked me very well, when my errant heart, even while it strayed away from you, was quieter and better with you than it ever has been since. If you can like me only half as well once more, if you can take me with all my faults and disappointments on my head, if you can receive me like a forgiven child...I hope I am a little worthier of you than I was—not much, but a little (GE, pp.448-9).

This shows that Pip is no longer a corrupt youth but a child with a child's heart and mind. It also shows that if Pip seems to stray from the state of innocence for some time, he does not take a long time to regain his essential innocence. On the whole, the charm of the novel lies in the balance, which the novelist holds, between the value of innocence and the value of experience through its child hero. We may quote again Robert Stange's observation on Pip's growth:

In the final stage of growth he returns to his birthplace, abandons his false expectations, accepts the limitations of his condition, and achieves a partial synthesis of the virtue of
his innocent youth and the melancholy insight of his later experience.13

Dickens's handling of this mode of paradisal innocence would appear to be based on the assumption that all children are born in this state of bliss which is lost in the course of life in this mundane world. Such an assumption is not different from that of Wordsworth and other Romantics.

To conclude, in Dickens's preoccupation with the innocence of childhood, we notice the manifestations of three modes of innocence. The first of these is childish innocence. Childish innocence is a simple state but a negative quality. The second, which is childlike innocence, is a complex state and a desirable characteristic for every child character as it assimilates everything, accepts human realities and yet transcends them. The third one is paradisal innocence. Paradisal innocence, which is a legacy of the child, is also a complex one. For at the

height of sophistication, it reverts, on account of excessive power of assimilation through experience, to the essential innocence. The determinant factor for these three varieties of innocence is the absence or the presence of assimilative power. The function of these varieties of innocence depends on the capacity of the child characters to combine innocence with experience for the achievement of growth.

In Dickens's portrayal of the growth process, the three modes of innocence as conceived in the novels belong to the romantic tradition. The artist in him still retained faith in childhood and childhood innocence and the way he has combined innocence with experience in the evolution of the children in his novels is part of the romantic tradition. This tradition was of course something that he derived from the 'bildungsroman' tradition. The way he presents patterns of evolution of children in his novels is taken up in the next chapter.