Chapter-V

MOTIF AND SYMBOLS IN *LITTLE DORRIT*

*LITTLE DORRIT* is a novel by Charles Dickens, published in monthly parts, (1855-57). The novel was heavily criticized on publication, largely for its sombre tone and complex plot, but later critics such as George Bernard Shaw, Lionel Trilling, and Angus Wilson have done much to reverse this judgement. Penetrating in its explorations of themes of imprisonment, hypocrisy, loyalty, and betrayal, it is now among the most widely admired of Dickens's novels. In the words of Lionel Trilling - "the subject of *Little Dorrit* is borne in upon us by the symbol, or emblem, of the book, which is the prison. The story opens in a prison in Marseilles. It goes on to the Marshalsea, which in effect it never leaves." (94). For *Little Dorrit* is, in essence, a plotless novel. For all the scurry of events on its surface, it never for a moment suggests genuine movement. It is an intricate labyrinth, designed so that the reader, on whatever path he sets out, will always be brought back to the point where one or other of the two principal metaphors is confronting him. It does not matter at what point we enter this labyrinth. Obviously Dickens could not be expected to flout literary convention so thoroughly as to dispense with plot altogether; it is hardly likely that any such idea would have crossed his mind. But his heart lay in the devising of the labyrinth.

*LITTLE DORRIT* is Dickens’s most tragic novel. It deals tragically both with society and with personal relationships; and it is engineered so as to convey, ineffaceably, that the two are inextricably blended. The determination with which Dickens interweaves the two themes is not a mere matter of artistic unity; it arises from his belief that when a society becomes oppressive, human relationships within that society become warped.
There is, for once, no ‘happy ending’, though the difficulties are resolved as well as can be expected under the circumstances—by which one means, as usual, that the author marries off his principal couple. These consist of a girl who has put all her energies into relieving the sufferings of her weak and selfish father, and as a result is left in a permanently disabled psychological state in which the relationship of father and daughter is the only one she can think of as real; and a man whose emotional life has been stifled by the harshly repressive behaviour of his mother, so that for years he has been in the habit of thinking that a normal marriage is something he can no longer hope for. Before taking any more steps, let us have before us the outline of the plot, as given in that compendium of the novel-reader, *The Oxford Companion to English Literature*:

William Dorrit has been so long in the Marshalsea prison for debtors that he has become the ‘Father of the Marshalsea’. He has had the misfortune to be responsible for an uncompleted contract with the Circumlocution Office (a satiric presentment of the government departments of the day, with their incompetent and obstructive officials, typified in the Barnacles). His lot is alleviated by the devotion of Amy, his youngest daughter, ‘Little Dorrit’, born in the Marshalsea, whose diminutive stature is compensated by the greatness of her heart. Amy has a snobbish sister, Fanny, a theatrical dancer, and a scapegrace brother, Tip. Old Dorrit and Amy are befriended by Arthur Clennam, the middle-aged hero, for whom *Little Dorrit* conceives a deep passion, at first unrequited. The unexpected discovery that William Dorrit is heir to a fortune raises the family to affluence. Except *Little Dorrit*, they become arrogant and purse-proud. Clennam, on the other hand, owing to an unfortunate speculation, is brought in turn to the debtors’ prison, and is found in
the Marshalsea, sick and despairing, by *Little Dorrit*, who tenderly nurses and consoles him. He learns the value of her love, but her fortune stands in the way of his asking her to marry him. The loss of it makes their union possible, on Clennam’s release. (598)

With this cardinal and supreme motif is wound the thread of an elaborate conundrum and riddle. Clennam has long suspected that his mother, a grim old puritanical paralysed woman, living in a crepuscular house with a former attendant and present business partner, Flintwinch, has done some wrong to *Little Dorrit*. Through the agency of a stagy villain, Rigaud, alias Blandois, this is brought to light, and it becomes clear that Mrs. Clennam is not Arthur’s mother, and that her religious principles have not prevented her from suppressing a codicil in a will that benefited the Dorrit family.

After this noble effort of disentanglement, the summarizer feels impelled to touch up, the wealth of material which, as far as the plot is concerned, remains unassimilated. The Marshalsea scenes have more reality than the rest of the story, for Dickens’s father had been immured in that prison. Of course Dickens’s plots are always the weakest point in his novels, so much so that one is generally driven to push them to one side and go ahead with a purely thematic analysis. In *Little Dorrit*, for the most part, Dickens seems to be co-operating fully with any wish of this kind; ‘theme’ is so much in the foreground, ‘plot’ so much in the background. Still, having taken the trouble to think up a plot that runs very steadily parallel to the theme, there are moments when he cannot resist nudging the reader to make sure that the more obvious links are not being overlooked. When Clennam, visiting William Dorrit, does not get out of the Marshalsea fast enough and is obliged to spend the night within its walls,
Dickens explains in the baldest manner just why the episode was introduced. "A swift thought shot into his mind. In that long imprisonment here, and in her own long confinement to her room, did his mother find a balance to be struck? I admit that I was accessory to that man's captivity. I have suffered for it in kind. He has decayed in his prison; I in mine. I have paid the penalty." (87)

Actually Dickens has laced the two themes together so well that there was no real need for this flourish; that Mrs. Clennam had been personally involved in William Dorrit’s financial ruin, and thus made it necessary for the pair of them to go to prison for life, hardly matters, in view of the book’s insistence that we are all involved one with another. So long as England is ‘a family with the wrong members in control’, everything is bound to go wrong in both public and private life. *Little Dorrit* is the child of a father whose mind has been rotted by imprisonment. Her life is mainly spent among the poor; and in Bleeding Heart Yard she is surrounded by the same pattern of twisted parent-child relationships. One of her special protégées, the half-witted girl Maggy, addresses her always as ‘Little Mother’. Old Casby, the extortionate landlord, manages, by dint of deputing the thumb-screwing to Pancks, to appear in the light of a father to his tenants, and is known as ‘the Patriarch’. The one really harmonious family in the book, the Plornishes, are deprived of their genuine Patriarch, Mrs. Plornish’s father, by the fact that poverty has driven him into the workhouse; all they can do is to make heart-rendingly much of him on his infrequent days off. Meanwhile, on a slightly higher social level, Mr. and Mrs. Meagles are systematically ruining their daughter’s chances of happiness by smothering her in kindness and protecting her from life to such an extent that she will presently arrive at womanhood with no more knowledge of herself than to marry a cad who will make her miserable. The cad himself, Henry
Gowan, is expressly shown as the product of another distorted family relationship; his history is sketched so as to imply that he could hardly have turned out any better than he did.

Distorted family relationships, then, and particularly those between parent and child, make up one side of the coin. Dickens was determined that no reader should overlook the theme of imprisonment. No one can ever have missed the moral of the whole story of the Dorrit family’s Grand Tour; on being released from the debtors’ prison, they set off on a journey across Europe which bears no more relation to freedom than does exercise in the yard. No reader, can ever have missed the point; but just in case anyone’s attention might wander, Dickens provides a sustained overt comparison in which all is made explicit:

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 were brought into these foreign towns in the custody of couriers and local followers, just as the debtors had been brought into the prison. They prowled about the churches and picture-galleries, much in the old, dreary, prison-yard manner. They were usually going away again tomorrow 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: in all this again, very like the prison debtors. They paid high for poor accommodation, and disparaged a place while they pretended to like it: which was exactly the Marshalsea custom. A certain set of words and phrases, as much belonging to tourists as the
College and the Snuggery belonged to the gaol, was always in their mouths. They had precisely the same incapacity for settling down to anything, as the prisoners used to have; they rather deteriorated one another, as the prisoners used to do; and they wore untidy dresses, and fell into a slouching way of life: still, always like the people in the Marshalsea. (483)

But of course not only the fashionable Continental resorts but every locale mentioned in the book is a prison, or is capable of becoming one, just as every relationship is, potentially or actually, familial. The opening scene establishes the achingly real physical contrast between the blistering heat of Marseilles and the dank rottenness of the prison in which we find ourselves with Rigaud and John Baptist. The first words spoken in the book, Rigaud’s ‘To the devil with this Brigand of a Sun that never shines in here!’ are invested with a significance that gradually builds up as the story progresses. One of the main abstract facts for which the metaphor of imprisonment provides a concrete embodiment, is the fact of repression; the emotions bundled away out of sight and left to fester until the whole organism is infected. One of the things that makes a prison prison-like is precisely that the sun never shines into it. The London scene is immediately described in terms that establish its prison-like character:

It was a Sunday evening in London, gloomy, close, and stale... Everything was bolted and barred that could by possibility furnish relief to an overworked people. No pictures, no unfamiliar animals, no rare plants or flowers, no natural or artificial wonders of the ancient world—all taboo with that enlightened strictness, that the ugly South Sea gods in the British Museum might have supposed themselves at home again. Nothing to see but streets, streets, streets.
Nothing to breathe but streets, streets, streets. Nothing to change the brooding mind, or raise it up... Miles of close wells and pits of houses, where the inhabitants gasped for air, stretched far away towards every point of the compass. (31)

Altogether, the opening scene is an essential induction to the main body of the novel, since it introduces not only the physical contrast between prison and the world outside, but also the disfiguring social relationships that create such prisons. *Little Dorrit* has a balance and logic sufficient to avert that loss of energy which is so evident in Dickens’s early novels. Everyone now realizes that Dickens was a great novelist, and that his greatness lay in his inexhaustible imaginative fertility, his promptness with dabs of unforgettable detail, and his breadth of human sympathy. At the same time it is generally conceded that his earlier output is marred by a curiously facile optimism and by a tendency to build his imaginative structures on perfunctory foundation. Sometimes defenders of Dickens try to evade these two charges by presenting him as first and foremost a poet. It is true that Dickens had more of the spirit of poetry in him than most of the verse-poets of his day; he created a unified imaginative world by an unprecedented use of the pathetic fallacy which caused the inanimate to rise and engulf the animate; he's always giving us people who resemble pieces of furniture and furniture that resembles people, so that we soon become aware of inhabiting what Miss Dorothy Van Ghent (with a wealth of illuminatingly chosen detail) calls ‘The Dickens World’. It is also true that Dickens saw the inherent poetry of the big city and gave it memorable expression before that poetry became one of the commonplaces of Western European literature. *Little Dorrit* is the most satisfying of his books because it is both grand and apocalyptic, setting out a vision of human society that includes nearly
everything of importance, and also lovingly shaped, his most solid attempt at solving the specific problems of long fictional narrative.

Dickens never loses sight of the fact that the human condition cannot be divorced from the social context. The novel is a deeply pondered statement about the human condition, and it has a heavy, almost oppressive brooding quality. It is not a pessimistic novel, but it is certainly a very sombre one. And much of its characteristic quality comes from the near folk-tale element of its plot, which is made out of sets of apparent contingencies and accidents that reveal themselves as part of an inexorable pattern. *Little Dorrit* suggests that he did not want his novel to be regarded primarily as a social satire, and it also implies that he is more concerned to direct our attention towards the qualities of his heroine. This should not be taken to mean that the novel can somehow be abstracted from the social considerations it so obviously deals in. To try and make it a symbolic statement about eternal human verities without reference to its view of society would be an absurdly procrustean exercise. One of the novels concerns is with the impossible dream of freedom and Dickens’s treatment of the dream is very brilliant. The novel opens with an evocation of a terrible elemental world too awful almost for human beings to bear:

The universal stare made the eyes ache. Towards the distant line of Italian coast, indeed, it was a little relieved by light clouds mist, slowly rising from the evaporation of the sea, but it softened nowhere else. Far away the staring roads, deep in dust, stared from the hill-side, stared from the hollow, stared from the interminable plain. Far away the dusty vines overhanging wayside cottages, and the monotonous wayside avenues of parched trees without shade, drooped beneath the stare of earth and sky... Everything that lived or grew, was
oppressed by the glare; except the lizard, passing swiftly over the rough stone walls, and the cicada, chirping his dry hot chirp, like a rattle. The very dust was scorched brown and something quivered in the atmosphere as if the air itself were panting. (5)

It seems that essentially the description struggles to glimpse or notionalize a non-human universe, drained of life and of value. The imprisoned air, the imprisoned light, the imprisoned damps, the imprisoned men, were all deteriorated by confinement. And of course everyone in Little Dorrit is tainted by the prison. It is the condition of being human. To escape the prison is to come into that world of pitiless sun. Amy Dorrit is the figure around whom the novel’s assertions are built. On the whole critics prefer to see Little Dorrit as a merely gloomy or pessimistic novel about society as intolerable prison. Amy Dorrit was born in the Marshalsea and not in Heaven, and if she symbolizes anything it is the power of the human to cope with the worst that society is and does. It is relevant to mention here how hard he worked on his manuscript, how much he revised, edited, and cut. The novel acknowledges the social pressures which surround and threaten the individual. Class-snobbishness, amateurishness, money-lust, the dark horror of nonconformist religion, irresponsible government; and on the other side, work, good fellowship, love, duty, the family: all these familiar themes are explored in ways that make them utterly unfamiliar in the novel. Little Dorrit uses the parodic echoic structure that Dickens had first discovered for himself in Dombey and Son and which he had enlarged on in Bleak House. And in Little Dorrit the echoes and parodies are of the prison.

But if the novel were merely concerned to highlight the absurdities and disasters of appearance it would be satire and nothing more. And it is so much more. For it
becomes great as it enquires beneath the surface, into what happens to people who struggle for appearance. William Dorrit is certainly the occasion for satire, but that is not what makes Dickens’s study of him so great. Dorrit is also a very disturbing character, as in the scene where Plornish offers him some halfpence:

The Father of the Marshalsea had never been offered tribute in copper yet. His children often had, and with his perfect acquiescence it had gone into the common purse, to buy meat that he had eaten, and drink that he had drunk; but fustian splashed with white lime, bestowing halfpence on him, front to front, was new. ‘How dare you!’ he said to the man, and feebly burst into tears. The Plasterer turned him towards the wall, that his face might not be seen; and the action was so delicate, and the man was so penetrated with repentance, and asked pardon so honestly, that he could make him no less acknowledgement than, I know you meant it kindly. Say no more. (67)

In any illustration of Little Dorrit’s greatness that passage is a very good one from which to start. We notice in it Dickens’s sure placing of self-deception, his ability to pin down without making coarse the fact of vanity and its accompanying self-pity, his recognition that the vice of appearance works at all levels of society. And it is remarkable but true, that although Dorrit is presented to us in all his faults of selfishness, weakness, vanity, self-deception, yet he never entirely forfeits our sym-
pathy. Compassion is a word that is over-used and consequently degraded in critical discussion, but no other will do justice to Dickens’s treatment of Dorrit. It took a great one to write the following dialogue, where Dorrit tries to apologize to Amy for her life in the Marshalsea:
‘My love, you have had a life of hardship here. No companions, no recreations, many cares I am afraid.’

‘Don’t think of that, dear. I never do.’

‘You know my position here, Amy. I have not been able to do much for you; but all I have been able to do, I have done.’

‘Yes, my dear father,’ she rejoined, kissing him. ‘I know, I know.’,

‘I am in the twenty-third year of my life here,’ he said, with a catch in his breath that was not so much a sob as an irrepressible sound of self-approval, the momentary outburst of a noble consciousness. ‘It is all I could do for my children-I have done it. Amy, my love, you are by far the best loved of the three; I have had you principally in my mind- whatever I have done for your sake, my dear child, I have done freely and without murmuring.’ (219)

He demonstrates it in the beautiful and attentive way the working of Dorrit’s mind from genuine concern for Amy through the gathering excuse that begins to ward off acknowledgement of guilt, to the final justification and retreat into self-pity. The novel provides a great creative criticism of the terrible damage done to human potentialities by beliefs, assumptions and social attitudes that seem to exercise a vast and growing tyranny over the finer possibilities of life. Dickens is especially good at noting the sheer aggressiveness of people to each other. He is of the opinion that deference, money lust, respectability and gentility: in short, all such elements merely curb or thwart the decent human energies. Yet Dickens probes deeper still. He enquires into prisons of self whose cause is certainly problematic and which may not have all that much to do with the social content.
The nature of *Little Dorrit* would not permit so simple a confrontation. It is more that his study of her raises profoundly disquieting possibilities which, if they look inward to her own tormented way of life, also look outward to the society which seems to have much to do with creating it. This point leads us to other prisons of self that the novel explores. For surrounding all the other prisons is a pervasive atmosphere of predatoriness. This is not entirely new. It is there already in *Oliver Twist*, although in that novel its cause is identified purely in economic and class terms. People who are starving or rejected by society do not owe it anything and therefore get what they can the nearest way. This notion is still present in *Bleak House* and it certainly has not disappeared from *Little Dorrit*.. One way of explaining this, would be to say that in *Little Dorrit* Dickens has come to accept both that there is a horrifying mystery about the prisons people build for themselves and that there may be such a thing as motiveless evil. If men are forced to operate in fixed patterns untrue to their own capacities and interests, Ruskin says, then their free spirit will be destroyed- "It is verily this degradation of the operative into a machine, which more than any other evil of the times, is leading the masses of the nations everywhere into vain, incoherent, destructive struggling for a freedom of which they cannot explain the nature to themselves."(161)

*Little Dorrit* is without doubt Dickens’ darkest novel. No other of his novels has such a somber unity of tone. Though we move from house to house and from one extremity of society to the other we never lose for more than a moment the sense of shadowed, suffocating enclosure which oppresses us from the beginning. Dickens, then, has found for this novel a profound symbol for the universal condition of life in the world of his imagination: imprisonment. The enclosure, the narrowness, the blindness, of the lives of most of the characters in all Dickens’ novels receive here their most
dramatic expression. And, lest we should imagine that this condition is really peculiar to one time or place or kind of civilization, Dickens in one passage explicitly defines human life in any place or time as imprisonment like a slant across the city, over its jumbled roofs, and through the open tracery of its church towers, struck the long bright rays of the early morning sun, bars of the prison of this lower world. All the world’s a prison, and even the bright sunshine itself is only a barrier cutting this lower world off from heaven. Imprisonment has, we can see, a religious or metaphysical meaning for Dickens as well as a psychological or social one. To be in this world at all, whether one is good or bad, rich or poor, a lord of the Circumlocution Office or a debtor in the Marshalsea, is to be in prison, and this condition will apparently persist as long as life itself.

But, even in its psychological or social context, imprisonment is in *Little Dorrit* not simply a powerful symbol of enclosure or limitation imposed from without by an indifferent or unjust society administering impersonally its absurd or wicked laws. As Edmund Wilson has observed, *Little Dorrit* advances beyond Dickens’ earlier novels in the way it shows so persuasively that imprisonment is a state of mind. The word “shadow” is Dickens’ key term linking physical imprisonment and imprisoning states of soul. Like the word “gentleman” and the word “secret,” the word “shadow” recurs again and again in *Little Dorrit* in the most diverse contexts. These words tie together the lives of all the various characters we meet and remind us that they are all like one another. Each use of the keywords reflects on all the others, and eventually these words take on a subtly ironic meaning contracting in a single node all the complex themes of the novel. So the ambiguities of “Society” are defined by the interaction of various uses of the word “gentleman”: “Gentleman” is the word the diabolically villainous Blandois
uses to describe himself; the Circumlocution Office is a “school for gentlemen”; old Dorrit’s progressive degradation in the Marshalsea is marked by his increasing insistence on his “forlorn gentility”. And so the word “secret” is used again and again to express the isolation of the characters from one another either in their inturned and interned selfishness or in their self-effacing goodness. But “shadow” is the most frequently recurring of these key words. It is used most obviously to express the literal shadow of the Marshalsea, but it appears, often metaphorically, in connection with almost all the characters and eventually we understand that the real shadow here is a deeper shadow than the shadow of the Marshalsea Wall; and that to be “shadowed” by some sadness or blindness or delusion or deliberate choice of the worse rather than the better course is the universal condition of all the dwellers in this prison of a lower world. The “shadow,” then, is spiritual rather than physical. It is only by recognizing this crucial extension of imprisonment from physical to spiritual incarceration that we can understand, for example, that Mrs. Clennam is as effectively imprisoned within the walls of her false interpretation of Christianity as Little Dorrit’s father is imprisoned by the walls of the Marshalsea. It is just as true to say that Mr. Dorrit’s literal imprisonment is only the physical correlative of his imprisonment within the labyrinth of his own weakness, vacillation, and selfishness as it is to say that Mrs. Clennam’s physical paralysis and enclosure in her dark house are the expression and result of her mental condition.

Indeed, all the many forms of imprisonment in this novel are primarily spiritual rather than physical: Miss Wade’s imprisonment within the narrow circle of her sadism toward others and masochism toward herself; Merdle’s suicidal anxiety, evident in his way of oozing “sluggishly and muddily” around the rooms of his luxurious mansion.
and in his unconsciously symbolic habit of taking himself in custody as if he were a criminal — which he is; Flora Casby’s imprisonment within the mad sequences of her own involuntary mental associations and within the perpetual reenactment of her lost past; Blandois’ wicked imprisonment in his idea of himself as a gentleman by right and by natures; John Chivery’s constant anticipation of his own death, comically expressed in his habit of composing epitaphs for his own tombstone; Pancks’ slavery to his master, Casby, always conjugating in the present tense, imperative mood, the verb “to keep at it”; Mrs. Merdle’s servitude to society; the sprightly Ferdinand Barnacle’s willing acquiescence in the sham of the Circumlocution Office; Little Dorrit’s brother’s corruption by the prison atmosphere, so that wherever he went, this foredoomed Tip appeared to take the prison walls with him, and to set them up in such trade or calling; and to prowl about within their narrow limits in the old slip-shod, purposeless, down-at-heel way.

But the central event of *Little Dorrit* is itself an explicit dramatization of this discovery that imprisonment is not accidental and exterior, but inner and permanent. *Little Dorrit*’s father, after his imprisonment for debt, languidly slips into a smooth descent, and never more takes one step upward until finally he reaches a complete state of degradation, now boasting, now despairing, in either fit a captive with the jail-rot upon him, and the impurity of his prison worn into the grain of his soul. Then suddenly, and just as unpredictably as he was first imprisoned, Dorrit is discovered to be the inheritor of a great fortune, and becomes a free and wealthy man. But his story is not merely another expression of Dickens’s notion that life in the city is commanded by incomprehensible forces. Its real significance is defined by Little Dorrit’s sorrowful acknowledgment “that no space in the life of man could overcome that quarter of a
century behind the prison bars. And there is no more poignant or effective expression of the theme of *Little Dorrit* than old Dorrit’s dying speech. He suffers a stroke at a fashionable dinner party, and, imagining himself back in the Marshalsea, welcomes the dinner guests to what is symbolically their true abode:

> Ladies and gentlemen, the duty.—ha—devolves upon me of—hum—welcoming you to the Marshalsea. Welcome to the Marshalsea! The space is—ha—limited—limited—the parade might be wider; but you will find it apparently grow larger after a time—a time, ladies and gentlemen—and the air is, all things considered, very good. It blows over the- ha-Surrey hills. Blows over the Surrey Hills. This is the Snuggery. (612)

Old Dorrit, then, does not escape from the Marshalsea when he leaves its walls, and like all the characters in the novel is doomed to carry his prison with him wherever he goes. But the image of static enclosure, the prison cell, is interwoven with two other images which are almost as important as definitions of life in the world of *Little Dorrit*: the image of a labyrinth and the image of life as a journey. The image of a labyrinth suggests that life is not immobile enclosure but is endless wandering within a maze whose beginning, ending, or pattern cannot be perceived. Since all places within the maze are the same, its prisoner moves freely but without getting anywhere, and without coming any closer to an understanding of his place in the world or of the forces determining his life. The image of the labyrinth is Dickens’ way of expressing the idea that the human world is an incomprehensible tangle. People find it even more impossible here than in *Bleak House* to understand how things got the way they are or what is the meaning of the present situation. *Little Dorrit* was originally to be called *Nobody’s Fault*, which is another way of saying it is everybody’s fault, that the sad
state of this world is the result of a collective human crime of selfishness, hypocrisy, weakness of will, or sham. No specific cause or explanation of any individual’s suffering can be found. Thus Mr. Dorrit has no idea how much money he owes to whom or what he might do to get out of prison, and Mr. Plornish’s perplexed monologue on the life of the poor and unemployed inhabitants of Bleeding Heart Yard ends with another version of the image of a labyrinth:

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? He only know’d that it wasn’t put right by them what undertook that line of business, and that it didn’t come right of itself. And in brief his illogical opinion was, that if you couldn’t do nothing for him, you had better take nothing from him for doing of it; so far as he could make out, that was about what it come to. Thus, in a prolix, gently-growling foolish way, did Plornish turn the tangled skein of his estate about and about, like a blind man who was trying to find some beginning or end to it, until they reached the prison-gate. (136)

*Little Dorrit* creates a disquieting sense of the selfish indifference diffused everywhere in things and people. By making certain characters vessels for the concentration of this guilt, it allays our terror and gives us something concrete to hate and fear. Mrs Clennam, Merdle, Blandois, and Casby are materializations of this undefined evil, but in *Little Dorrit*, nevertheless, evil exceeds any particularization of it, and we are left at the end with an undefined and unpurged sense of menace. The image of the labyrinth is one of Dickens’ chief ways of pressing the mystery of evil. The most striking appearance in *Little Dorrit* of the symbolic labyrinth is the Circumlocution
Office, with its inextricably tangled halls, offices, passageways, and levels of authority through which Arthur Clennam and Daniel Doyce meander hopelessly, filling out reams of forms and making appeal after appeal without coming any closer to a satisfactory answer to their question:

Numbers of people were lost in the Circumlocution Office. Unfortunates with wrongs, or with projects for the general welfare (and they had better have had wrongs at first than have taken that bitter English recipe for certainly getting them), who in slow lapse of time and agony had passed safely through other public departments; who according to the rule, had been bullied in this, overreached by that, and evaded by the other; got referred at last to the Circumlocution Office, and never reappeared in the light of day. Boards sat upon them, secretaries minuted upon them, commissioners gabbled about them, clerks registered, entered, checked and ticked them off, and they melted away. In short, all the business of the country went through the Circumlocution Office, except the business that never came out of it; and its name was Legion.

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As in the stories of Kafka, though without quite Kafka’s deliberate universalization of the labyrinth as a symbol of the metaphysical alienation of man, the individual’s relation in *Little Dorrit* to any sort of tangible earthly authority is expressed as an impossible appeal for judgment on his case, an appeal addressed to an infinitely complex bureaucracy dedicated to the science of how not to do it. Like one of Kafka’s heroes, Daniel Doyce is made to feel like a criminal as soon as he becomes related to the Circumlocution Office, though he is not conscious of having done wrong, and Arthur Clennam’s appeal to the Circumlocution Office on behalf of his friend
never receives any definite response at all. In *Bleak House* the case of Jarndyce and Jarndyce at least finally came to an end, though only because all the money was consumed in costs, but Clennam’s search for an answer from the Circumlocution Office remains at the end of *Little Dorrit* like a loose thread of the plot dangling unresolved. The Circumlocution Office is the labyrinthine prison transformed into an institution of government. Produced by the irresponsibility and greed of the upper class, with its legion of parasitical “Barnacles,” the Circumlocution Office can imprison a man in its endless corridors and miles of red tape as securely as any Marshalsea or as any moral flaw. The ominous portrait of the Circumlocution Office is one of those elements of *Little Dorrit* which have led Marxist critics to find Marxism in Dickens and which led G. B. Shaw to say that *Little Dorrit* made him a socialist. Dickens was neither socialist nor Marxist, but his judgment of the Circumlocution Office is as near as he ever gets to asserting the radical instability of the present social order:

As they went along, certainly one of the party, and probably more than one, thought that Bleeding-Heart Yard was no inappropriate destination for a man who had been in official correspondence with my lords and the Barnacles—and perhaps had a misgiving, also, that Britannia herself might come to look for lodgings in Bleeding-Heart Yard, some ugly day or other, if she overdid the Circumlocution Office (118).

If the symbol of imprisonment expresses Dickens sense of human life as enclosed and limited, whether by physical or spiritual walls, and if the image of life as a labyrinth expresses his sense that human beings are all lost inextricably in a maze without beginning, end, or pattern, the recurrent image of “travelers on the pilgrimage of life” expresses the idea that people are fatefully intertwined in one another’s lives,
often without knowing it or intending it. It also expresses Dickens’ sense that a human life is not motionless but is perpetually flowing on with the river of time toward its destined adventures and toward the ultimate ocean of death: "And thus ever, by day and night, under the sun and under the stars, climbing the dusty hills and toiling along the weary plains, journeying by land and journeying by sea, coming and going so strangely, to meet and to act and react on one another, move all we restless travellers through the pilgrimage of life.” (30). The image of life as a long arduous journey like images of prisons and labyrinths, recurs again and again in the novel. It reinforces the others by suggesting that this world is a lonely place where man is a stranger passing continually on in search of a haven which is not to be found anywhere in the prison of this lower world. Taken all together these three images, the basic symbolic metaphors of the novel, present a terrifyingly bleak picture of human life. But what is perhaps darkest of all here is Dickens’ new way of slowing many of Ms characters altogether aware of their spiritual states and even deliberately choosing them. There is a great increase here over the earlier novels in the self-consciousness and articulateness of suffering or malice, an increase of which the extraordinary chapter of “The History of a Self Tormentor” is only the most striking example. Of this chapter Dickens wrote to the uncomprehending Foster, who found it “the least interesting part of Little Dorrit”: “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.” We can indeed see that the lifeblood and kernel of the novel flows through Miss Wade’s interpolated story when we recognize how frequently her coldly lucid justification of a life of self-destructive selfishness is echoed in various ways in other characters: in Merdle and Mrs. Merdle, in Henry Gowan and
Ferdinand Barnacle, in Mrs. Clennam’s justification of her distorted Christianity, and in Casby’s deliberate cultivation of a hypocritical surface of benignity. Of all Dickens’ novels it is true to say that many of the characters exist in a nightmare of unreality, committed to lives of self-seeking, sham, or vacillation. But the novelty of the novel lies in the fact that many characters are perfectly aware of this, and therefore live in a condition of continual restlessness or anxiety, even of despair or paralysis of will, incapable, like Arthur Clennam, of deciding what to do with their lives, or incapable, like old Dorrit, of making the least motion of spiritual ascent.

There seems, then, no escape from shadow in the world of *Little Dorrit*. Whether the characters are literally imprisoned or not, they are condemned to an endless wandering in a narrow dark labyrinth whose stations repeat one another as Calais and Italy repeat the Marshalsea. But there does seem to be one part of the lower world which is at peace and has no tinge of the restlessness and anxiety of the city. Bob the turnkey takes Little Dorrit as a child to the country to see meadows and green lanes, buttercups and daisies; her favorite resting place as an adult is the Iron Bridge where she can watch the river and see the free sky and the clouds above the crowded city; and it is in the country that Arthur Clennam recognizes the radical difference between nature and human nature:

Within view was the peaceful river and the ferryboat, to moralise to all the inmates, saying: Young or old, passionate or tranquil, chafing or content, you, thus runs the current always. Let the heart swell into what discord it will, thus plays the rippling water on the prow of the ferry-boat ever; the same tune. Year after year, so much allowance for the drifting of the boat, so many miles an hour the flowing of the stream, here the rushes, there the lilies, nothing
uncertain or unquiet, upon this road that steadily runs away; while you, upon your flowing road of time, are so capricious and distracted. (183)

Whereas the city is cut off altogether from the divine, the country is close to heaven, as close as life is to death, or as close as trees by the riverside are to their shadowy reflections in the water: “Between the real landscape and its shadow in the water, there was no division; both were so untroubled and clear, and, while so fraught with solemn mystery of life and death, so hopefully reassuring to the gazer’s soothed heart, because so tenderly and mercifully beautiful”(316). The temptation is not simply to let the restful peace of the country sink into one’s soul, but to try here and now, in the human world, to imitate the divine calm of nature. Such is the escape Arthur Clennam imagines from the painful anxiety and indecision of his life:

Why should he be vexed or sore at heart? It was not his weakness that he had imagined. It was nobody's, nobody's within his knowledge: why should it trouble him? And he thought — who has not thought for a moment, sometimes? — that it might be better to flow away monotonously like the river, and to compound for its insensibility to happiness with its insensibility to pain. (191)

But, alas, anxiety and responsibility are the lot of man, and the only rest available here is the dangerous peace of acquiescence in the false quiet of the prison and its easy path downward into deeper and deeper moral disintegration. This peace is only a horrible parody of the divine calm, as hell is an inversion of heaven. So Arthur Clennam when he finds himself in the Marshalsea as a prisoner experiences the unnatural peace:
Arthur Clennam dropped into a solitary armchair, itself as faded as any debtor in the gaol, and yielded himself to his thoughts. In the unnatural peace of having gone through the dreaded arrest, and got there — the first change of feeling which the prison most commonly induced, and from which dangerous resting-place so many men had slipped down to the depths of degradation and disgrace, by so many ways- he could think of some passages in his life, almost as if he were removed from them into another state of existence. (680)

And so Doctor Haggage, the dirty, drunken prisoner who officiates at *Little Dorrit*'s birth, delivers her father a sermon on the advantages of the Marshalsea:

That a child would be born to you in a place like this?’ said the doctor. Bah, bah, sir, what does it signify? A little more elbow-room is all we want here. 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 doormat till he is. Nobody writes threatening letters about money to this place. It’s freedom, sir, it’s freedom! . . . Elsewhere, people are restless, worried, hurried about, anxious respecting one thing, anxious respecting another. Nothing of the kind here, sir. We have done all that — we know the worst of it; we have got to the bottom, we can’t fall, and what have we found? Peace. That’s the word for it. Peace. (63)

Apparently one must endure the anxiety and suffering of the human condition without any hope of respite. But there is, of course, one way to leave this world altogether: death, the final escape from the “contradictions, vacillations,
inconsistencies, the little peevish perplexities of this ignorant life, mists which the morning without a night only can clear away” (604). There is, then, a world beyond this one, a light beyond the darkness, freedom and peace beyond the shadows and anxiety of this imprisoned world. But, though this light is the very radiant center and source of this world, it exists in its purity, in *Little Dorrit* as in *Bleak House*, only as something transcendent, as a promise of reconciliation either at the end of an individual life or at the end of the world itself:

The beauties of the sunset had not faded from the long light films of cloud that lay at peace in the horizon. From a radiant centre over the whole length and breadth of the tranquil firmament, 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. (749)

Dickens, however, as we have seen throughout his work, is interested in finding some way to make life in this world tolerable. One of his chief objections to Mrs. Clennam’s perverted Christianity is to its otherworldliness, its willingness to barter a life of narrow and bitter repression here for some supposed benefit in the life hereafter. Arthur Clennam has escaped from his mother’s dismal doctrine by accepting a morality centered on right action in this world:

As the fierce dark teaching of his childhood had never sunk into his heart, so the first article in his code of morals was, that he must begin 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, action on earth: these first, as the first steep steps upward. (302)
But what sort of right action is possible if every human institution, profession, or mode of life is darkened by the shadow of selfishness or imposture? Is there nothing to do but suffer passively through life, subject in one way or another to the illusions and injustices of the prison of the lower world, and waiting only for the escape at death into the morning without night? Is Dickens’ a wholly Manichean world, divided absolutely between the darkness of earth and the brightness of heaven? The answer is given in Dickens’ description of the death of old Dorrit:

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 zigzag 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. (616)

To die is to return momentarily to the self when one was as a child, and to reveal the fact that the innocence of childhood is the one stage of life. The purity of childhood is the only part of a man which is really worthy to be taken up into the morning without a night, and it is this nucleus, miraculously preserved in the depths of the human spirit, untouched throughout all the vicissitudes and delusions of life, which returns to the surface at the last moment and displaces the shams and weaknesses which have made the face a distorted mask. If so disfigured a character as old Dorrit returns to the goodness of childhood at his death, we can accept the notion that all of the people in Little Dorrit, without exception, were innocent and good as children. The horror is that so many of them have been able to alienate themselves almost completely from this kernel of authenticity, and to live as pure self-seeking, illusion, surface, convention, what Dickens calls “varnish.” The tragedy of Little Dorrit, then, is the tragedy of
childhood distorted, betrayed, forgotten, buried so far down that it no longer seems to exist. Dickens’ world is not Manichean at all. Rather, he sees in all but the most exceptional individuals (such as Blandois in this novel) a mixture of good and evil, of reality and sham, and he is ready to believe that even the most hardened and corrupt persons may perhaps reestablish contact at last with the incorruptible goodness within them, as Mrs. Clennam saves herself by her tardy confession to Little Dorrit, and as the grubby Pancks asserts himself at last by unmasking his employer, the fake Patriarch Casby. The “Prince of this World” in Little Dorrit is no positive devil, but is rather a negative illusion which will be dissipated in a moment when the mists are cleared away at death. If he exists embodied in a single person, as in Blandois in this novel, that person will be powerless against the good, an impotent posturing pasteboard figure who is destroyed in the end by his own selfishness, as Blandois is crushed in the collapse of the Clennam house.

Nevertheless, the power of the world for corruption is very great, and very great too its power to cover childhood with layer upon layer of forgetfulness and distraction. A world in which the goodness of childhood is doomed to be hidden away and rendered inactive by the mask of adulthood is almost as bad as a world in which childhood can be destroyed altogether. But it is just here that we recognize the crucial importance for the whole work of Dickens of his conception of Little Dorrit. She has the place in Dickens’ imaginative world that Prince Myshkin has in Dostoevsky’s work. Dickens has in Little Dorrit, even more than in Esther Summerson or in the other good women in his novel, dared to imagine a person who is altogether good. And this miraculous goodness is imagined as the persistence into adult life of the purity of childhood. Little Dorrit is again and again spoken of as a child, and is taken as childlike by all of the
characters, including Clennam. She is Dickens’ dramatization of the idea expressed in Christ’s words: “Except ye . . . become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven. Whosoever therefore shall humble himself as this little child, the same is greatest in the kingdom of heaven” (Matt., 18:3, 4). *Little Dorrit* derives all her power to help her father and others around her from her preservation of the simplicity, loving-kindness, and faithful perseverance of childhood.

But the ambiguity of Little Dorrit’s condition, as of Myshkin’s, lies in the fact that she is not a child. She is an adult, and human after all, with an adult’s knowledge of evil, and an adult’s need to combine sexual and spiritual love. This ambiguity is dramatized in her relation to Arthur Clennam. Throughout most of the novel she loves him, not as a child, but as a woman, and to her secret sorrow Clennam persists in thinking of her as really a child. It is only when he understands that she is both good and adult that his fatherly affection gives way to another kind of love and the novel can end with them happily married. Clennam’s mistake is to identify *Little Dorrit’s* goodness with childhood. It derives from that indeed, but *Little Dorrit’s* mystery is that she has been able, unlike any other character in the novel, to carry the innocence and spontaneous love of childhood into adult life. Her innocence is thus even more miraculous, for it is an innocence which knows and understands the wickedness of the world, and is able to accept and live even that. The ambiguities of Little Dorrit’s nature are justly expressed in a scene early in the novel. She is locked out of her home in the Marshalsea and forced to spend a night in the streets, with only Maggy, a hulking idiot girl with the mind of a ten-year-old, for protection. They meet a prostitute in the streets who at first takes *Little Dorrit* for a child, and then recoils in horror when she realizes she has been treating a woman as if she were a child:
Poorthing!” said the woman. “Have you no feeling, that you keep her out in the cruel streets at such a time as this? Have you no eyes, that you don’t see how delicate and slender she is? Have you no sense (you don’t look as if you had much) that you don’t take more pity on this cold and trembling little hand? . . . .

She had stepped across to that side, and held the hand between her own two, chafing it. “Kiss a poor lost creature, dear,” she said, bending her face, “and tell me where she’s taking you.” . . .

*Little Dorrit* turned towards her.

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

“Don’t mind that!” said *Little Dorrit*, clasping one of her hands that had suddenly released hers. “I am not afraid of you.”

“Then you had better be,” she answered, “Have you no mother?”

“No.”

“No father?”

“Yes, a very dear one.”

“Go home to him, and be afraid of me. Let me go. Good night!”

“I must thank you first; let me speak to you as if I really were a child.” . . . .

“You can’t do it,” said the woman. “You are kind and innocent; but you can’t look at me out of a child’s eyes. I never should have touched you, but I thought that you were a child.” And with a strange, wild cry, she went away. . . .(167)
This is one of the most poignant scenes in *Little Dorrit* — perhaps in all Dickens. Here are juxtaposed an adult innocence so pure it is almost childlike and the impurity of the fallen woman. But the juxtaposition shows us that even *Little Dorrit* cannot really remain a child. She is a woman, with a woman’s knowledge, and therefore the prostitute cannot gain, as she expects, a moment’s peace and innocence for herself by kissing her. A real child would not know what she is, and therefore could not hurt her or be hurt by her. Here Dickens approaches Dostoevsky’s recognition of the complicated relations of good and evil in a world in which evil subtly corrupts and frustrates good and even the worst evil is qualified by a small measure good.

But to recall the analogy between *Little Dorrit* and Prince Myshkin is to see immediately how much less subtle than Dostoevsky’s is Dickens’ conception of the drama of absolute human goodness. The distinction lies in the quality of suffering imagined in each case. To oversimplify the comparison one might say that Myshkin is immeasurably more intelligent than *Little Dorrit*, that his suffering derives from the terrifying clairvoyance which forces him to look into the depths of the souls of those around him and to take upon himself their pain. *Little Dorrit* suffers, and even suffers through her understanding of her father’s nature, but she does not have Myshkin’s terrible lucidity of vision. Moreover, Myshkin is torn to pieces by the incompatibility between his own goodness and the fallen world in which he finds himself, and by the split in his own soul between earthly and divine love, whereas Dickens can imagine *Little Dorrit* living happily ever after with Arthur Clennam.

Nevertheless, Dickens has reached one of the peaks of his own artistic success in being able to persuade us to accept so completely the mystery of divine goodness incarnate in a human person. Moreover, *Little Dorrit* contains what is for Dickens a
new and far more profound idea of the reality of love between two human beings. The happy ending of *Little Dorrit* is made possible, through the mutual love of Arthur Clennam and *Little Dorrit*. But Dickens’ new conception of love goes far beyond that presented in any of his earlier novels.

*Little Dorrit*, like *A Tale of Two Cities*, has at its center a recognition of the inalienable secrecy and otherness of every human being. Here Dickens makes explicit his repudiation of the idea that another person can be a kind of transparent alter ego whom one can know and possess without the intervention of any shadow of mystery or strangeness. In these novels one has a diffused consciousness of the ‘opacity of other people. This opacity is present as a kind of heavy thickness in the air, an impenetrable shadows of secrecy. The unknown secrets separating even those closest to one another are related by Dickens to final secrecy of death. The river of life flows inexorably toward the boundless sea of death, but the river too has its secret depths, and the heart of each living person reaches down to an anonymous and mysterious realm, a realm which even that person himself is not able to explore to its bottom. So important are these ideas for the understanding of a fundamental change in Dickens that the two central passages, one from each novel, must be quoted here at some length:

As he went along, upon a dreary night, the dim streets by which he went, seemed all depositories of oppressive secrets. The deserted counting-houses, with their secrets of books and papers locked up in chests and safes; the banking-houses, with their secrets of strong rooms and wells, the keys of which were in a very few secret pockets and a very few secret breasts; the secrets of all the dispersed grinders in the vast mill, among whom there were doubtless plunderers, forgers, and trust-betrayers of many sorts, whom the light of any
day that dawned might reveal; he could have fancied that these things, in hiding, imparted a heaviness to the air. The shadow thickening and thickening as he approached its source, he thought of the secrets of the lonely church-vaults, where the people who had hoarded and secreted in iron coffers were in their turn similarly hoarded, not yet at rest from doing harm; and then of the secrets of the river, as it rolled its turbid tide between two frowning wilderneses of secrets, extending thick and dense for many miles, and warding off the free air and the free country swept by winds and wings of birds. (512)

*Little Dorrit* centers on the secrecy, the otherness, of Little Dorrit herself.

Whereas Esther Summerson got her strength to order the world around her through intermittent contact with the divine transcendence, Little Dorrit is the mystery of incarnate goodness. She does not need to be shown receiving strength from God’s grace, because goodness is permanently immanent in her life, though Dickens does tell us that she is something different from everyone and everything about her only because she has, been inspired to be that something, different and laborious.

Her grace to remain good, Dickens says, is exactly like “the inspiration of a poet or a priest”. *Little Dorrit* is Esther Summerson presented, as it were, through the eyes of Allan Woodcourt. Arthur Clennam, the Woodcourt of *Little Dorrit*, functions as one of the chief protagonists and the central point of view of his novel. At first, when he returns to London after twenty years absence in China, Clennam’s will is paralyzed; he cannot make the least motion of voluntary and directed action; he cannot plan what to do with his life:
I am such a waif and stray everywhere, that I am liable to be drifted where any current may set. . . . I have no will. That is to say, . . . next to none that I can put in action now. Trained by main force; broken, not bent; heavily ironed with an object on which I was never consulted and which was never mine; . . . always grinding in a mill I always hated; what is to be expected from me in middle life? Will, purpose, hope? All those lights were extinguished before I could sound the words. (23)

Indeed, as we have seen, the novel is full of people whose wills are paralyzed, who are, like Miss Wade, self tormentors, but the central dramatic action is Arthur’s own search for some means by which his will may be reconstituted. He tests various modes of relation to society. They all fail, an he finally discovers that the pivot of his world, the center to which all roads lead, is the least, the quietest, and weakest of Heaven’s creatures.

To review his life, was like descending a green tree in fruit and flower, and seeing all the branches wither and drop off one by one, as he came down towards them.

“From the unhappy suppression of my youngest days, through the rigid and unloving home that followed them, through my departure, my long exile, my return, my mother’s welcome, my intercourse with her since, down to the afternoon of this day with poor Flora,” said Arthur Clennam, “what have I found?. . . .

His door was softly opened, and these spoken words startled him, and came as if they were an answer:

“Little Dorrit.” . . . (158)
Looking back upon his own poor story, she was its vanishing-point. Everything in its perspective led to her innocent figure. He had travelled thousands of miles towards it; previous unquiet 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. Without Little Dorrit, Clennam would be, like so many other people in the novel, lost in a patternless maze. Only she gives form to his world and an orientation to his life. She is their center, just as God himself is the hidden radiant center of the larger world.

Clennam’s relation to Little Dorrit is a direct relation to the area of mystery in another person. She keeps the secret of his family’s guilt toward her. She is the center which is absent, the abnegation of perfect charity. By being the absence of self-assertion, total unselfishness, the voluntary refusal to will, she succeeds in dominating the world, or at least a small area of it, whereas total failure results from all the direct selfish attempts either to spread outward and dominate all (like Merdle, or Blandois, or Pancks), or to create or accept voluntarily a private imprisoning circle protected from the world, an enclosure where one will be safe and in complete control of one’s surroundings (Mrs. Clennam, Miss Wade, old Dorrit). She sustains Clennam when everything else collapses beneath him. Indeed, she is really a human incarnation of divine goodness. The latter is present in the novel, but unavailable; it is seen in recurrent glimpses of nature beyond or above the imprisoning city streets. Clennam’s relation to her is a relation to the unattainable divine through her mediation. It is only through her that Clennam can escape from the spiritual (and literal) imprisonment and deathlike stagnation to which his life finally comes:
Changeless and barren, looking ignorantly at all the seasons with its fixed, pinched face of poverty and care, the prison had not a touch of any beauties on it. Blossom what would, its bricks and bars bore uniformly the same dead crop. Yet Clennam, listening to the voice as it read to him, heard in it all that treat Nature was doing, heard in it all the soothing songs she sings to man. At no 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-foster seeds of the imagination. 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 whisper that had ever stolen to him in his life. (75)

But if Clennam can escape from the valley of the shadow only through the miraculous goodness of Little Dorrit, she herself can escape from her isolation only through Clennam’s return of her love, and because he too has kept intact a kernel of his childhood innocence a belief in good. The novel, then, ends happily with the Dickensian scene of reciprocal love, as Arthur Clennam and Little Dorrit leave the Marshalsea for the last time to be married. But here there is even less emphasis on the completeness of the lovers’ escape from the shadow; and there is a firm assertion that their happiness is limited to themselves alone and leaves the selfish, restless, and deluded multitudes still locked in the prison of the world: “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 forward and the vain, fretted, and chafed, and made their usual uproar” (778).
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