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Explosive intimacies: Family and gender roles in Dickens's early novels

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Rice University, 1991

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EXPLOSIVE INTIMACIES

FAMILY AND GENDER ROLES IN DICKENS'S EARLY NOVELS

by

ROSEMARY G. COLEMAN

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IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
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ABSTRACT

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Charles Dickens's early novels are engendered by what David Copperfield calls an "old unhappy want or loss of something," and the "something" wanted is the paradigmatic mother, providing perfect love, plenitude, and unity, while avoiding the female threats of desire and domination. Dickens's almost obsessive need to construct nurturing mothers from wives, sisters, daughters, and aunts, combined with his refusal to acknowledge his heroes' passivity, creates photographic double exposures in which a "happy family" overlays an isolated young mother/madonna and her adult male child, a domestic text half hides subtextual layers, and incestuous desires are disguised by returns to childhood innocence. When we read each narrative as if it were a palimpsest, using a three-layered psychoanalytic model, his representations of family and gender roles are startlingly different from accepted Victorian paradigms.

The topmost layer of meaning, the manifest content, is that in which the realistic world of the novel is represented: family structures are created here, and family roles and relationships form the patterns of meaning. The second layer is comprised of primitive fantasies, wherein male fantasies of need for the nurturing breast,
desire for the erotic breast, and fear of the smothering bad breast, pull the surface meanings into new designs. Here, gender roles and relationships form the crucial patterns. The third layer may be likened to dream work: meaning is encoded in representations of the body, its illnesses, and its metonymies. Each of the layers glosses and subverts the others, creating stories of crippled, ill bodies, mythic female roles, and narratival ambivalence.

*Oliver Twist* constructs the paradigmatic hero who finds a mother after the mutilation of both male and female bodies. *Nicholas Nickleby*’s hero avoids adult sexual stains by a return to his childhood and his sister. *The Old Curiosity Shop* offers serial primal fantasies wherein the heroine’s body becomes increasingly dangerous and must be constrained. Finally, *Dombey and Son* constructs a heroine who becomes a mythic madonna and a hero who returns to passive infancy. The early novels thus enact a meta-narrative in which both male and female bodies are controlled by illness and disfigurement.
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And much more than thanks to John, who asked me every night - "How many pages today?" - and whose good humor and affection remained unchanged no matter what the answer. His strength and support allow me to believe that something will always turn up.
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CHAPTER ONE
FAMILY CIRCLES AND DOMESTIC SPHERES

A ragged, starved child of six, "a baby savage, a young monster, a child who had never been a child," shrieks, "Where's the woman? I want to find the woman. Let me go to the woman!"

A terrified and abused boy who has known neither affection nor kindness is nursed through an illness by a young woman whose loveliness, virtue, and compassion cause the child to feel, the narrator tells us, that he "could have died without a murmur."

A young man comforts himself for the loss of a young woman to a second man by assuring her, and himself, that "a young and lovely girl is growing into a woman expressly on my account, and is now saving up for me."

A young man is haunted by an "old unhappy loss or want of something," and realizes that his young, desirable wife will never be able to fill his emptiness. Later, he takes a second wife whom he likens to a Heavenly light, whom he elevates above himself as both guide and solace, and without whom, he tells us, "I were nothing."

A male narrator switches from the third person to the second, in order to speak both of himself and of all men, as he ecstatically describes how a man can discover his identity and value reflected in a lovely woman's eyes. In the next moment he remembers that the woman can just as easily allow her "too impartial eyes" to reflect the image of any man.
Another young man tells the girl whom he hopes to marry that his love for her is both torture and bondage. He can neither rid himself of her image nor control himself when she is near. He feels himself possessed by her, believing that she can draw him to "any exposure and disgrace," or to "any good." In either case, he is merely her passive creature.

A man sits alone in his room explaining to himself the reasons for his obsession (he calls himself "possessed") with the memory of a young girl lying in her bed, surrounded by "distorted figures," "strange furniture that might have been designed in dreams," "fantastic carvings," and other "grotesque companions." As he tries to rid himself of the girl's image, he sees before him a region "on which I was little disposed to enter." After a week of combatting his obsession, he is impelled to find the girl again.

A middle-aged man assures himself that he is not to be moved by a pretty face because he sees beneath the facade to the "grinning skull beneath it." And yet he thinks of how his cold fireside might be warmed by the presence of his beautiful young niece.

An old man pleads with a young girl not to leave him, for he can't live without her: "If I lose thee too, my dear, I must die!" Although she always walks behind him in their wanderings, yet somehow she contrives to lead him on.

A middle-aged man watches, twice a day, day after day, from a darkened anteroom while the wet nurse he has engaged to replace his wife, dead in childbirth, nurses and caresses his newborn son in an adjacent room whose walls are glass. He is alone. [1]
Each of these scenes features a boy or a man who yearns for a woman, a need replicated throughout the Dickens canon. The starved "baby savage's" unadorned demand is the most elemental cry, but all these males echo versions of his extremity, whether they require organic, emotional, or erotic nourishment. Oliver not only requires love and care, but he and his narrator share a world in which love is conflated with death and/or betrayal. David Copperfield finds it safer to marry a saintly mother figure who can discipline his dangerously erotic heart, than to marry a desirable girl who can gratify his body. He occupies an emotional world in which desire for the female body and desire for maternal nurture are mutually exclusive, and can only be satisfied serially. Bradley Headstone's drowned corpse graphically illustrates how lethal an obsessive love for the woman can be. Master Humphrey is not allowed to continue his narration because he becomes possessed by his heroine. The scene in which the rigidly wooden Dombey, so starved and damaged himself, watches his son receive the sensuous gratifications of the breast is perhaps the most poignant and multivalent of all. Dombey, his eyes avid in the darkness, epitomizes all the components of the primal fantasies which underlie the male need for the female in Dickens's novels. Dombey wants the love and nurture which only the woman can provide, while simultaneously desiring her body and fearing her power. His conflation of fear, desire, and need reduces him first to the role of adult voyeur, and finally to that of a child.
All of Dickens's male protagonists of all ages both want and fear "the woman," the nurturing maternal figure who will assuage their hungers and draw a circle of safety around them in a world which is dark, cold, and hostile, but who also may tempt and swallow them. All of them dream of the "young and lovely girl" who grows into a woman expressly on their account, her youth and frail body meant to be a guarantee of her tractability. It is the charge of each of the novels to find the nurturing female for its male protagonist, a charge made the more difficult by the necessity that she be an embodied oxymoron: fragiley strong, untemptingly lovely. Men who don't find the woman often die; men who desire her body also die; men who do find her pay a very high price for the privilege. Only the childlike, passive man is safe; only the slender, virginal girl need apply.

Diane Sadoff has recently argued that Dickens's narrative project has the primal scene as its central metaphor, that

his novels track down the father's sexual and violent rape or wrong as narrative origin, deny the hero could have been conceived by that sinful figure, structurally and surreptitiously kill the father, and proceed to engender the hero as subject with language; the figure of the daughter serves to efface these sonly activities. [2]

Sadoff believes that "at the end of narrative, the mystery of parentage yields up the name of the father, he who originates character and so identity, he who initiates the events of narrative and so sequence." [3] But an examination of the other component of the parental equation may be even more productive in opening up the
meanings of family and gender in Dickens's novels. I am suggesting
that the narratives are engendered by what David Copperfield calls an
"old unhappy want or loss of something," and that the "something"
wanted is a carefully constructed mother figure who provides perfect
love and plenitude. I further suggest that while each text mounts an
attempt to find this perfect relationship for a needy male, each text
fails, requiring that the search be renewed all over again. Sadoff
calls her text "father ridden," and I can hardly doubt that my own is
mother ridden, or at least "heroine ridden," but no more so that
Dickens's own narratives. His preoccupation with his heroines as
nurturing figures for his male protagonists, combined with his refusal
to acknowledge his heroes' passivity or their fears, creates the
frequent disjunctions and contradictions of text and subtext, of family
and body, which are so fruitful in revealing and multiplying meanings
in each novel, as well as in revealing new patterns and relationships
among the novels.

Many of Dickens's young women have already practiced motherhood
on a variety of trying father figures. The need for the good mother is
so central to the meaning of each narrative that the heroine must often
rehearse in order that her performance shall be perfect. And the
narrative voice or presence of these early novels always insists that
her performance is perfect; that the male protagonist, whatever his
relationship to the newly minted nurturer, has entered on a realm of
happiness and contentment when he enters the circle of familial safety
that she alone can guarantee. Each narrative enacts a version of the
family romance in which a new family is created for the hero, an
infinitely superior family, perfectly loving and perfectly suited to his needs and intrinsic worth. The newly constructed family is the great second chance of childhood fantasy, the chance to recast the unsatisfactory dramatis personae of childhood, and replace them with a perfect mother love. Unfortunately, disjunctions and contradictions are woven into the very fabric of each text’s affirmation so that a second more subversive narrative is folded into the first.

In the following chapters, then, I examine the creation and subsequent modifications of the prototypical Dickensian hero and heroine, as well as Dickens’s construction, use, and distortion of familial and gender roles. I am reading the novels not only in the light of the male’s need for the nurturing woman, but also in the shadow of his search for safety from the desirable or desirous woman, from the dangerous fictional world created by each narrator, and from the desires of his own body. I begin with Oliver Twist in which the hero is born, and end with Dombey and Son, in which the hero is metaphorically re-wombed, awaiting a rebirth. [4]

Chapter Two deals with Oliver Twist and Nicholas Nickleby. In the former, the needy and passive Oliver becomes the model for future heroes, and two female bodies are mutilated in order to be rendered safely nonthreatening. If Oliver Twist is a novel of childbirth, pain, and blood, Nicholas Nickleby is an experimental novel in which the narrator wills himself to believe that his young hero can go home again, and that once there, he will be safe from desire and fear, pain and blood, and be forever cared for by his sister. It is a novel
which avoids feverish temperatures and sexual complications by its insistence on the primacy of the brother/sister relationship, and its elegiac reverence for the past. My emphasis in this chapter is on the birth and deployment of the Dickensian hero, and the measures each text takes to ensure his safety and happiness, however that "happiness" is defined.

Chapter Three deals with The Old Curiosity Shop, a narrative in which the erotic body of the heroine becomes increasingly dangerous, while the families formed at closure become both more vestigial and less convincing as havens. The Old Curiosity Shop exhibits anomalous patterns and is given almost wholly to a series of primal fantasies about mythic female roles, fantasies rendered problematic by the all too powerful and magnetic body of the heroine. In this third chapter, I concentrate on the construction of this heroine, and the methods deployed to control and contain her body and energy. While chapter two examines the prototype for the male protagonists of the novels to come, here I examine Dickens's experiment with two different kinds of heroines, one of them rendered bodiless, the other voiceless, with both models eventually discarded because they are too dangerous.

Finally, Chapter Four discusses Dombey and Son as a major turning point in the canon. As rosy, cosy little Nell modulates into tear-stained Florence, the asexual heroine is perfected, but with some disquieting results. The heroine ceases to be ill or to require mutilation, but the male protagonist falls victim to an illness so debilitating that he becomes childlike. The woman so desperately sought ceases to be a sister/mother in Dombey, and becomes instead a mother to
her father, and a female deity in a world composed of marginalized, childlike men. In *Dombey* we see the artistry, and the narratival contortions, necessary to maintain an uneasy mix composed of a resolutely asexual heroine, a hero safe from his own desires, and a narrator safe from a too penetrating knowledge of either.

In section ii of this introductory chapter, I discuss Dickens's depressive childhood, reading it through the screen of object-relations theory in which the experience of a cold, non-nurturing mother is pivotal in the creation of the depressive personality. I further indicate how this depressive childhood influenced Dickens's domestic narratives, and how we can use the one to gloss the other, thus producing readings of gender and familial issues in the novels. In section iii, I briefly consider the novels' social context in terms of a few of those areas in which Dickens's fictional performance intersects with Victorian domestic ideology. His attitudes toward the family, the female body, and gender relationships, for instance, meet those of his age in his twinned fear of and desire for the female body. In sections iv through vii I discuss object-relations theory, and outline the tripartite psychoanalytic model I employ to read Dickens's narratives: the text's manifest story, its primitive or primal fantasies, and its dreamwork. Chapter One concludes with a discussion of Dickens's use of splitting, and of the narrative presence or voice of the novels.
An enormously gifted child grows up in a dysfunctional family, the son of a weak and feckless father and of a mother whom he perceives as cold and domineering. [5] He marries, and over the years creates a second dysfunctional family of his own: an eventually discarded wife; a spinster "sister" who dedicates her life to his service; a teenaged mistress; one daughter who never marries, remaining at home to care for her father; a second daughter who makes a bad marriage in order to get away from her father; six sons who fail and disappoint; and one son who makes a success of his life. [6] As Dickens creates a maladaptive family in real life, he simultaneously creates numerous fictional families intended to be havens of happiness, nurture, and safety. And yet these happy families, despite their narrators' best intentions, are as perverse and aberrant as their counterpart in reality. Familial and gender roles are contorted and contrived; relationships and emotions are distorted and obsessive. Dickens's male protagonists who hungrily search for a nurturing breast yet simultaneously fear the erotic, powerful female body, are generated by the pain and fear of their author's depressive childhood.

A weak father and a cold, domineering mother are a common parental combination for the depressive. [7] The young Charles was displaced as the baby of his family when he was two years old, and his mother was increasingly beset by sorrow and trouble, including the deaths of children and John Dickens's mounting indebtedness and
impoveryment. Charles did not receive the education he thought his due, or live in the home he thought his right. As an adult, Dickens was much given to slighting remarks about his mother and her care of him as a child. He spoke of himself as having been "a very small and not-over-particularly-taken-care-of boy," and remarked, in telling an anecdote from his childhood, about "my poor mother, God forgive her." [8] It may be that God did forgive Elizabeth; certainly her son did not.

In his autobiographical fragment, Dickens blames his mother not only for her coldness and abusiveness in setting him to work in the blacking warehouse, but also, by juxtaposition, for the downfall of his father and the household. [9] His biographers have frequently been puzzled by his evident resentment of his mother; they cite the comments of contemporaries who knew her casually and thought of her as a good and lively woman. [10] But this son perceived his mother not only as the callous, exploitive woman of the blacking-warehouse experience, not only as the domineering wife who controlled and manipulated his weak but much-loved father, but also as the cold, withholding mother who inspired the barely repressed rage and anxiety of his earliest years.

There is one piece of evidence about Elizabeth Dickens which is relevant here, and the more so because it was adduced by its author in praise of her. In 1874, an acquaintance of the Dickens family wrote in Lippincott's Magazine that Mrs. Dickens possessed an extraordinary sense of the ludicrous, and her power of imitation was something quite astonishing. On entering a room she almost unconsciously took an inventory of its contents, and if anything
happened to strike her as out of place or ridiculous, she would afterwards describe it in the quaintest possible manner. In like manner she noted personal peculiarities of her friends and acquaintances . . . . Mrs. Dickens has often sent my sisters and myself into uncontrollable fits of laughter by her funny sayings and inimitable mimicry. Charles was decidedly fond of her. [11]

On the record, one doubts that fondness. What is clear, however, is the portrait of a woman with the sharpest of tongues who excelled at ridicule and criticism, not perhaps the most comfortable mother for a sensitive, very bright child.

Dickens's experience at the blacking warehouse has always been interpreted as the core of those events which formed his character and inform his work. We can hardly doubt the emotional trauma caused by his separation from his family while they lived in the Marshalsea and he, a mere child of twelve, lived alone and supported himself. We can imagine what the child must have felt in his isolation and deprivation, and we know what the adult Dickens felt when he remembered and mourned his child-self in the autobiographical fragment and in his novels. Michael Allen has remarked that other biographers have recognized the effect that Warren's Blacking had on Dickens, and consequently on his life and work, but have "perhaps not quite understood why the period should have been so traumatic." Allen attributes the extreme trauma to the fact that the incident lasted twelve or thirteen months, rather than the four to six months which most authorities have previously
estimated. [12] I suggest further that the experience became a kind of all-purpose metaphor which could stand for earlier (repressed) emotional crises and trauma, as Dickens tried to make narrative sense of his childhood during a troubled adulthood. Increasingly restless and unhappy, he sought to construct an explanation for his black, depressive moods. The blacking warehouse provided both focus and justification in a self-told narrative of the past with which he could live, and which would also be convincing to John Forster, his chosen confidant and biographer. [13]

The dominant notes of the autobiographical fragment are rage, humiliation, hunger, and abandonment, all at bottom attributed to the mother. The adult mourns for himself, both as child and man, and blames the mother who never loved him enough: "I never afterwards forgot, I never shall forget, I never can forget, that my mother was warm for my being sent back." In Dickens's mind, one person caused his own and his father's grief, and one person wanted to extend that grief: the cold, non-nurturing mother. He had, as infant and child, looked into the face of that woman, and there encountered the cold gaze of Nina Auerbach's mermaid: woman as demon. [14] He carried the imprint of that cold gaze into both his life and his fiction.

"From that hour until this," he writes, "my father and my mother have been stricken dumb upon it. I have never heard the least allusion to it, however far off and remote, from either of them." That is how trauma is routinely handled in dysfunctional families; in silence and secrecy the wounds are allowed to fester. This experience, then, becomes the outward and visible sign of the mother's (and through her,
the father's) abandonment. That abandonment, and the resultant need to fill
the emotional void, is played out repeatedly in his novels as Dickens tries to heal the old wound with the creation of new families and new "mothers" who will surely this time get it right. "No words can express," he says in the fragment; his misery and shame "cannot be written," he adds. But write them he does, as he writes his hurt and his need throughout the canon. When he remembers this experience, he tells us, "I forget even that I am a man." He further explains that "they" had broken his heart, that he received "no advice, no counsel, no encouragement, no consolation, no support." It is a litany, and the litany laments an entire childhood, as well as the specific year of his trauma. It is meant to explain and to excuse his depressions, his restlessness, his often aberrant behavior, and his voracious needs.

[15] In his disastrous courtship of Maria Beadnell, Dickens recapitulated his relationship with the mother who withheld her love. In reaction to the pain inflicted by Maria, he married a woman whom he could control, one who would never humiliate him or leave him bereft and alone. From the beginning, he dominated Catherine, making her plead for forgiveness whenever there was a disagreement between them. [16] Catherine was tractable, but she could not fulfill his impossible fantasies or his equally impossible and contradictory needs. No woman could fulfill them, and so he created fictional women who were childlike yet maternal, frail yet strong, self-abnegating but indomitable. These fictional women were both dangerously more and disappointingly less than he required, or than were safe for his
fictional men. The early novels enact the creation of this fictional heroine, although her successful construction required the deaths or near-deaths of several trial models.

Dickens's need, in Alice Miller's phrase, "to see himself in his mother's eyes," was partially and temporarily fulfilled by the success of his novels and his resultant fame. [17] He sought mirroring eyes in still another way; his theatrical performances and public readings were attempts to generate love and approval in the eyes of a physically present audience. [18] As he grew older, and more "restless," or more unhappy, he increased the number and intensity of his public performances until they became a drug without whose stimulation he could not live. As the years drew on, however, neither his performances nor Ellen Ternan were enough to ease his pain or fill his emptiness. Immense vitality and huge stores of near-manic energy continued to carry him forward, but his letters are both clear and self-serving on the subject of his misery:

I seem to be always looking . . . for something I have not found in life. (1852)

Restlessness . . . whatever it is, it is always driving me. (1854)

[A] sense always comes crushing upon me now . . . as of one happiness I have missed in life, and one friend and companion I have never made. (1855)

I am in a state of restlessness . . . impossible to be described - impossible to be imagined - wearing and tearing to be experienced. (1855)
The old days - the old days! Shall I ever, I wonder, get the frame of mind back as it used to be then? Something of it perhaps - but never quite as it used to be. I find that the skeleton in my domestic closet is becoming a pretty big one. (1856)

[Gl]rim despair and restlessness . . . . [I must] escape from myself . . . my misery is amazing. (1857) [19]

And so the pain increased, as Dickens searched for some external source of fulfillment, someone or something to heal the restlessness and provide the "one happiness." Fred Kaplan has commented that Dickens tried to become "the supreme self-provider, the self-healer and self-sustainer." [20] These attempts to heal the self are efforts to re-create an illusion of connection with an idealized maternal figure, a fantasy bond with the lost mother. This fantasy bond "can be understood in analytic terms as a self-nourishing mechanism to compensate for maternal rejection." [21] It is an imagined physical fusion with the mother's body, especially the breast, which the damaged adult then attempts to transfer to "significant figures in [his] personal relationships." [22] Dickens derived some self-nourishment from his wildly successful career, and he further compensated himself for maternal rejection with the creation of idealized heroines. In the end, however, neither public career nor private fantasy sufficed to fill his emptiness or restore the lost unity with the imaginary mother figure.
A model derived from a standard study of depression presents striking parallels with Dickens's life, and accounts for the intensity of his desire for the nurturing mother as it is enacted in his fictions. [23] This study of depression describes familial environments which are likely to produce children who become depressives and/or manic depressives as adults. The model supposes that a child is born to an acceptable, duty-bound mother. The child exaggeratedly introjects the mother; he is very dependent on her for approval, nurture, and love. He tends to be an extrovert and a conformist. In the second year (approximately) of his life, his mother develops a new attitude toward the child, thus drastically changing his environment. There is perhaps a new baby which requires her attention, and she makes new demands on the older child to control both his bodily functions and his bodily pleasures. A covert hostility on the part of the mother may be manifested in her overtly increased expectations of him. In addition, both the child's parents are often dissatisfied with themselves and with their lives. He experiences an overwhelming sense of loss as his feeling of unity with his mother is disrupted and replaced by her hostility and carelessness. The child feels threatened but he cannot reject the mother because of his dependence on her care. Rather, he hopes that by obedience and hard work he will recapture her love, as well as his fantasies of Edenic bliss in infancy. At the same time, he fears further punishment if he doesn't do what the mother expects of him. His choice is to submit, or to be further rejected. As a result, at an early age he assumes adult
responsibilities such as helping to support the family, or rescuing the
family honor through his own achievements.

The child’s longings for nurture, safety, and love are heavily
invested in his mother, his Significant Other. In some cases, the loss
of the Significant Other is followed by a lifelong search for a
replacement, a new "mother" who will nurture and love. In others, the
loss is replaced by ambition for a Significant Goal: a career which
will supply esteem and a sense of self-worth. In this way, the adult’s
career becomes a component of his search for love. Beneath the hard
work and self-discipline required to achieve success, however, is a
sense of rage and hostility. The rage is repressed either until the
adult reaches his goal, only to discover that it cannot supply him with
what he needs, or until he discovers that he cannot reach the goal at
all. At this point, he is no longer able to repress his rage, and it
manifests itself as despair, restlessness, and a sense of emptiness and
purposelessness.

The depressive personality has a rigid need for order and
cleanliness and regularity. He works incessantly, and yet experiences
feelings of futility and emptiness. What he really wants, beneath the
veneer of success and activity, is a return to the imagined bliss of
his early life when he was dependent on, and satisfied by, his mother.
He feels he will never again achieve a sense of well-being. He grieves
for himself, for the self deprived of love and nurture, for himself
both as child and as adult. He experiences a pathological need to be
dependent, and undergoes a libidinal regression to the oral stage. He
is often willing to make a bargain in his relationships: he will deny
himself autonomy and power in return for maternal nurture. He may marry a submissive and frightened woman to ensure that she will stay with him, and then discover that she cannot satisfy his needs.

Eventually, the Significant Goal is no longer enough, and he restlessly experiments with changes in his life. He is aloof and self-involved, but also forces himself into frenzied moods which shut out introspection. He may exhibit intense energy and manic frenzy, the other side of the coin of incipient depression. The one characteristic of the depressive which is unanimously emphasized in the psychiatric literature is his pathologic dependence; that is, his need for an idealized figure who will nurture him, take care of him, and mother him. [24] This figure, the "dominant other," is symbolic of the depriving mother. It is impossible for the deprived depressive to find sufficient self-approval within his own autonomous achievement; instead, he requires the presence of an external agency, a pair of "mirroring eyes," in order to derive satisfaction. This scenario, one model for the making of a severe depressive, or manic depressive, was not written with Dickens in mind, although its conformity with his life makes it seem as if it were. [25]

Of course Dickens's novels are not rigidly predetermined and patterned by his psychic wounds, nor was his life merely a series of compensations for such wounds. [26] But within the magnificent complexity of his fictional worlds lie recurring familial arrangements and patterns which are consonant with the psychic configurations of his life and experience. Michael Allen concludes that Dickens's disappointments about his lack of education, his experience in the
blacking warehouse, and the imprisonment of his father "probably turned the child to seek even more than before stimulation from his own resources. The independence and inner strength of his adult character can be seen to have grown out of the adversity of such childhood situations." [27] Allen is undoubtedly right, but when the painful experience of a non-nurturing mother is added to this list of childhood adversities, then it becomes clearer that the torments of dissatisfaction, emptiness, and "restlessness" are the other, darker side of the coin of Allen's "independence and inner strength."

Undersized and sickly as a child, subject to attacks of "spasm" which prevented him from physical exertion, the young Charles often experienced feelings of helplessness and humiliation. In reaction he became determined, as an adult, that whoever opposed him should always give way. Control became a major issue for him: control of others, of his environment, and of himself. Forster speaks of his "stern and even cold isolation of self-reliance side by side with a susceptivity almost feminine and the most eager craving for sympathy." [28] Edgar Johnson calls him "overbearing and domineering," and speaks of him as "hard and relentless" in all disputes, whether with friends, family, or business associates. [29] A visitor to the Dickens family in 1840, Emma Pickin, wrote that his entire family, including his then-aging parents, were afraid of him, and that they all kept a sharp eye on his moods. [30]

He was a man who was apparently warm and open, a good friend, a wonderful companion. In the popular mind, then and now, he is associated with Christmas galas, roaring fires, and equally roaring bonhomie. Those associations are facets of a more complicated truth.
He was also the most intensely reserved of men, and one of the least affectionate. He dated what he called the "suppression of my feelings" from his experience with Maria Beadnell. Johnson dates it from his experience in the blacking warehouse. It seems more likely that his extreme guardedness derives from a much earlier period when he first learned not to trust, a lesson taught him by his first teacher, his mother. From her he learned to fear women while simultaneously continuing to need and desire them: "I want the woman."
Dickens meets his age on the conflicted ground of the female body and psyche, the site of complex and discordant desires and fantasies. At the same time, his fictions often diverge from and undermine historical paradigms of Victorian family or domestic ideology. As he examines and constructs families, metes out rewards and punishments, creates hells and havens, he both participates in and subverts Victorian discourse on domestic sexuality and family and gender roles. Peter Gay has recently sought to add an optimistic note to our ideas about nineteenth-century bourgeois sexuality, and to temper accusations of its censoriousness and rigidity by emphasizing its opportunities for "escapes to pleasure that many respectable people in search of sensual gratification could take in safety." It is Gay's project to correct those tenacious misconceptions that have dogged our reading of Victorian culture as a devious and insincere world in which middle-class husbands slaked their lust by keeping mistresses, frequenting prostitutes, or molesting children, while their wives, timid, dutiful, obedient, were sexually anesthetic and poured all their capacity for love into their housekeeping and their child-rearing. [31]

Whether or not anyone really holds such extreme misconceptions, and whether or not the sources on which Gay relies are numerous and convincing enough to allow him to succeed in a project which deals with such a broad subject as bourgeois sexuality, he makes the case that
the bourgeois family was something more than a hotbed of emotional conflicts and sexual catastrophes. "The husband and father as tyrant, the wife and mother as vampire, were far rarer than dramatic fictions would suggest. The family formed little sensual worlds." [32] In a chapter which he calls "Fortifications for the Self," Gay defines one of these fortifications as the bourgeois family, "the supreme haven of privacy": "Private life became the hidden lair in which men and women bound up their wounds, recouped their forces, and acted out their passions with manageable risks." [33] It is enlightening to compare Dickens's construction of Victorian family life with these definitions. In his novels, we find neither the paradigm Gay wishes to debunk, nor that which he wishes to substitute for it, neither the father as tyrant, nor the "little sensual worlds." Clearly Dickens's "dramatic fictions" lie elsewhere on the spectrum, or perhaps on an entirely different grid than that which Gay offers.

Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, seeking to define Victorian bourgeois "family ideology," stress the fact that a new middle-class identity was constructed in the course of the nineteenth century, an identity mirrored in the construction of the bourgeois family. They find that this bourgeois identity was intensely gendered, dividing life into separate spheres for men and women. The ideology of the family stressed feminine domesticity, categorizing the woman/wife as dependent and fragile, yet at the same time making her the chief support of the family structure. By the 1830's and 1840's, argue the authors, the domestic scene was peopled almost solely by women and children; men were the absent presence. "Woman's place" was to be enclosed in the
home, ruling the moral world, making people happy. As property was increasingly hedged and walled in, as gardens were enclosed, so was the woman enclosed and walled away within the home. [34] To compare Dickens's family dispositions with this statement is once again to find a wide divergence between text and context. While his fictions certainly represent the woman as "the chief support of the family structure," they do not simply aim at her sequestration. Rather, their goal is to enclose the male protagonist safely in the domestic sphere with her, in the "woman's place."

Judith Newton finds the same ambiguous attitudes toward women as do Davidoff and Hall. She analyzes nineteenth-century women's advice manuals to show that the ideology of woman's proper sphere and of the family were the creation of women as well as men. Female writers of women's manuals defined the middle-class woman's role in life as the exertion of moral influence upon men, and simultaneously the provision of refuge for men. Woman, then, is vital to her man, and Newton finds that the female's increasing importance in his life, and in the life of the family, increased the need, felt by men, to control and contain her. [35] But here again, Dickens's texts both differ from and resemble historical reconstructions of context. In his fiction, it is the male protagonists who feel the need to be controlled and protected by the woman, while at the same time they must be protected from the heroine whose energies constantly threaten to exceed safe boundaries.

As heretofore accepted paradigms about the Victorians are modified, assumptions about Victorian family ideology must also be recast. Gender hierarchy was no doubt more complex in its structure
than we have hitherto believed. Separate spheres for men and women and assumptions of male aggressiveness and female passivity probably had more complex shadings than we have heretofore allowed. [36] Certainly we have learned to recognize the Victorian era as an age of anxiety not unlike our own. [37] The Victorians were as anxious about the institution of the family and the role of women as they were about so much else. Many contemporary commentators feared that male authority was being eroded by those women agitating for the vote and for jobs outside the home. [38] Dickens's fictional families are surprisingly insulated from that kind of anxiety; the threats to his families are overwhelmingly internal rather than external, the result of inappropriate desires, confused relationships, and multiple fears.

Sociologists, medical doctors, and female authors of advice books all propagated the idea that woman's duty lay in a well-defined and narrow area in which she was to be a "relative creature": wife, mother, moral guide. [39] Not only did Victorian family ideology posit separate spheres, it created rigidly constructed concepts of how sexuality should be defined and expressed. Jon Stratton suggests that the "bourgeois experience of reality is founded on a fundamental fracture which reconstitutes sexuality as both non-existent and everywhere." [40] Far from repressing sexuality, the middle class sexualized its entire world, talking endlessly about it, inventing discourses about it, and creating mechanisms for changing it. Michel Foucault suggests that the bourgeois family locates sexuality, confines it, and intensifies it, the family thus becoming the very site and origin of sexuality. [41] But the place in which we first learn and
practice sexual roles is also the place where sexual relationships are forbidden. That contradiction is precisely the crux of so many of Dickens's fictional families' problems. It is his project to allow both characters and narrators to circumvent this antinomy while remaining safely ignorant of it. The cracks and fissures which result from such multiple contradictions become most readily apparent in the texts' representation of women. Women are simultaneously dangerously sexual and yet they are the keystone of the (presumably) asexual family. The fracture at the heart of the representation of women both reflects and causes the fracture at the heart of the representation of the family. Part of Dickens's project, never wholly successful, is to desexualize the heroine, thus sanitizing her domestic world in behalf of his heroes, and disguising the fundamental fracture in both family and woman. Thus is the male protagonist to be held harmless from the temptations of the female body and the lusts of his own.

One way to accomplish this project is to represent female sexuality as secondary, derived only from the woman's maternal instinct. Both Dickens's novels and Victorian ideology attempt to enact that project. [42] Implicit in this representation of female sexuality is the idea, or perhaps the hope, that women closed their eyes and thought not only of England, but of the child which would result from an otherwise unpleasant encounter. It is impossible to say how many women felt that way, or thought they should feel that way, or how many men wanted them to, or hoped they might, or believed they did. Like the contradictions inherent in the simultaneously sexual/asexual family, the contradictions inherent in the
sexual/asexual woman can only lead to incoherence. The woman does not desire, although she is dangerously desirable. She is the safeguard of the asexual family, so she is not dangerously desirable. She is born to be a mother; mothers are neither desirous nor desirable; therefore, she is neither. But men desire her, and someone has to take the blame. This chain of absurdity only begins to illustrate the magnitude of a problem which pervades all of Dickens's fictions. The work of two nineteenth-century sociologists reflects (and no doubt helped to create) the combined fear and idealization of women. Frederic LePlay and Wilhelm Riehl both espoused the belief that women rule the moral world, but both were, at the same time, deeply fearful of women's sexual and maternal powers exercised within the intimacy of the family where they believed that men were so vulnerable. As Peter Gay remarks:

These spokesmen for the notion of woman's secret power seem to have displaced their awe at the mystery of her sexuality, so nearly concealed in the inward parts of her body and so ominously disclosed during menstruation, onto her impact on the world. The fear of woman on top was . . . [an] often hidden theme in the age. [43]

The fear of female sexuality, and the inability of the male, despite his best efforts, to confine and define it as secondary is further illustrated in the Victorian debate over the use of anesthesia in childbirth. Mary Poovey has traced the role of nineteenth-century doctors in formulating a scientific justification for keeping women in their "proper place." [44] Women are represented in this debate as
governed and defined by their reproductive capacity. One doctor remarked succinctly that it were "as if the Almighty, in creating the female sex, had taken the uterus and built up a woman around it." Moreover, women require control because of the insatiable sexual appetite which is part of their biological nature. They are often represented in nineteenth-century medical literature as erotically excited under anesthesia and avidly desirous of the obstetrician's speculum "as a means of sexual gratification." [45] Poovey goes on to define the relationship between the medical men and their representation of the female body and its sexuality, a definition which glosses Dickens's representation of women, as well.

What medical men identified as women's sexuality is obviously as thoroughly what they did not want to see in themselves as it was what real women actually felt. Externalizing this distressing sexuality was, theoretically, one way of controlling fears about it. But in making anxieties about themselves dependent on their own definition and control, men set up an inherently unstable situation - in which they had to regulate both feelings and fears that were externalized because they could not regulate them when they were parts of themselves. In other words, the very instability of woman that mandated medical control also always exceeded that control - precisely, but paradoxically, because this instability was produced simultaneously as the condition, the origin, and the
object of that control. This is why doctors' representations of women always include representations of themselves as victims: the consultant is made complicitous by the secrets he must guard; the obstetrician becomes the guilty partner in the woman's sexual display. [46]

The novelist as Victorian doctor presents a fruitful trope. Dickens, like the medical man, externalizes his own sexual fears onto his characters. He is forced to "operate" on his heroines in the early novels in order to make them (and his heroes, and himself) safe and asexual. But he finds that even such radical surgery never cures the illness because it is his own unacknowledged desires with which he is really dealing, or not dealing. And so he is eventually forced to emasculate his heroes as well, through illness, in order to achieve the elusive safety and control he seeks. But with each new novel, Dickens remains somehow complicitous, his new male protagonists potentially "guilty partners" until they are rendered passive and childlike.

In the worlds of Dickens's novels, the adult hero cannot survive outside the loving arms of the pure, idealized heroine. The paradoxical need for the very woman whom one fears (it is she who may be an insatiable animal or who may unleash in himself an uncontrollable frenzy of desire) infects both the Victorian context and the Dickensian text. To map safety onto danger and asexuality onto sexuality, while remaining determinedly unaware of either project, is to teeter constantly on the brink of anxiety. The need to allay anxiety and to avoid awareness creates disjunctions in the text and dysfunctions in
the context. And it is impossible to separate the pervasive fear of woman from her equally prevalent idealization since the two are mutually dependent, each the cause of the other. Ruskin, who set such stringent standards for the ideal woman in *Sesame and Lilies*, wrote some years later in a new preface to that work that

"too much of what I have said about women has been said in faith only. . . . I wrote the *Lilies* to please one girl; and were it not for what I remember of her, and of few besides, should now perhaps recast some of the sentences in the *Lilies* in a very different tone:

for as years have gone by, it has chanced to me . . . to see the utmost evil that is in women, while I have had but to believe the utmost good." [47]

Woman as haven exists only in Ruskin's "faith," in his ability to believe her perfect, not in her abilities and qualities. As in the subtexts of so many of Dickens's novels, the male is represented as a victim, this time of his own goodness and credulity as well as of the woman's "evil."

What Nina Auerbach calls woman's "disruptive spiritual energy" empowers her as outcast, as demon, as sexual threat. [48] Judith Newton more recently has shown how the ideology of woman's proper sphere produced "sexual horror" in the male. She reads *Dombey and Son* as an example of this sexual revulsion, arguing that it suggests "how deeply fear of women's power shaped the culture we refer to as simply patriarchal or male-dominated." [49] For Newton, *Dombey* is a "covert rendering of women's debilitating power" in which men appropriate
women's virtues so that they no longer need Florence, or any woman. [50] I am suggesting that Dickens was enmeshed in a much more complicated paradox in his representations of the relationship between men and women, a paradox in which, despite the threat that Florence poses, she remains necessary to both Dombey and his world, just as Ruskin needs to believe in the woman, despite her "evil." Dombey's need of Florence is encoded in the manipulations and representations of both the male and female body; the narrator's fear of Florence is encoded in the trope of the waves. Both body and trope demand careful reading in order to sort out the complexities of the paradox at the heart of Dombey and Son; Newton's "sexual horror" is only a beginning. Despite the horror, the female presence remains necessary for the very bodily survival of the male. The stakes are higher than the mere provision of an emotional haven in a heartless world; the stakes are life and death.

A literary genius, shaped by his age, by a depressive childhood, and by his own exuberance of energy, meets the cultural beliefs, limitations, and prejudices of an age which seems to mirror his own Jekyll/Hyde bifurcation of positive creative energy and anxious, rigid depression. Out of the fifty-eight years of this encounter come fourteen finished novels in which the man writes his needs, his age, and his experience. His internal personal world and the external public world meld, each shaping the other. That which Dickens offers as domestic solution to a variety of ills - the family and the woman - are also what he shows to be the cause of the illness. Many of his
contemporaries, like Riehl and LePlay, saw the family as a battleground on which men were vulnerable. Others saw it as the salvation not just of individuals, but of England herself. As the *Saturday Review* of April 19, 1856, put it:

   Mistrust the man who speaks jestingly of hearth and home. Not from a corrupt spring can pure waters flow . . . . If we would make fast the foundations of England, and further the reign of peace and happiness, truth and justice, religion and piety, we must do all that in us lies to cultivate a reverence for the household gods. Family, country, humanity, these three - but the greatest of these is Family. [51]

It was Dickens's gift, as well as his cross to bear, that he participated in both views. The family, and the woman at its heart, were both cause of and cure for a man's unease and disease.
My reading of Dickens's life is based on the assumptions of object-relations theory, as are my analyses of his novels. He almost obsessively sought to solve his heroes' emotional and social problems by the construction of happy families. [52] My readings are thus broadly structured and organized in terms of the problems and solutions offered by textual families, and the representation and influence of gender and familial roles. Dickens's textual and structural use of family is closely related to his use of the primitive fantasies of childhood experience which are the raw materials of his imagination. He formally shaped those fantasies into patterns of gender and familial roles, working and reworking the primal fantasies derived from his depressive childhood, and solving their imperatives through the social medium of the family. [53] Object-relations theory provides us with an explanation of the supreme importance of that family and its members.

Object-relations theory "shares with other psychoanalytic perspectives an emphasis on the basic importance of sexuality and agrees that sexuality is organized (distorted, repressed) during the early years." [54] Unlike the instinctual determinists, however, object-relations theorists argue that it is the child's relationships with other people in his environment, and their effect on him, which determine his psychological growth and personality formation. The passage from oral to anal to genital stages, rather than being determinative, is itself determined by particular social interactions;
that is, by the early relationship of the child with the primary caretaker. "The quality of the whole relationship affects both the development of persons generally and the way they experience, manipulate, and fixate on bodily zones." Bodily zones become eroticized because they are, for the child, "vehicles for attaining personal contact." We will see in subsequent chapters the importance of this statement as we note the ways in which Dickens represents the female body, so often in terms of the breast. Innate drives, then, do not naturally determine behavior and development; rather, people manipulate and transform drives in order to attain or retain certain relationships. [55] It is just this obsessive need to form a relationship with a nurturing, maternal female which is the determining factor in the construction of so many of Dickens’s fictional families. Thus he replicates his own object-relations experience in his fictional characterizations and relationships.

But there is still another element in the familial mix. Exclusively maternal care, with little paternal care, produces a feeling in the son of the mother as overwhelming: "too much of mother," as Nancy Chodorow puts it. It is this perception of an overwhelming mother which creates resentment and fear of women in men, and instigates their search for "nonthreatening, dependent, even infantile women - women who are simple, and thus safe and warm." [56] The tragedy for Dickens, as for so many others, is that the mother can be cold and non-nurturing, while at the same time she is also smothering and threatening. She can combine the worst of both worlds: too much and yet not enough. The psychic scars produced in Dickens by
this pattern of mothering determine the personality and body of his typical heroines, the neediness and illnesses of his male protagonists, and the subtextual patterns of the relationship between hero and heroine. Michael Balint suggests that the goal of all "erotic striving" on the part of the male is a return to the bond of unity between mother and infant. This unity allows regression to an infantile stage which is characterized by a sense of oceanic oneness, the absence of reality testing (a lack of recognition that the mother has, or could have, any separate interests from those of the child), and a tranquil sense of well-being in which all needs are satisfied. The goal is a feeling which says: "I shall be loved always, everywhere, in every way, my whole body, my whole being - without any criticism, without the slightest effort on my part." [57] Dickens's males often exhibit this longing in their love relationships. Their erotic object is young and outwardly passive, slender and fragile, uncritical and adoring. She offers unquestioning love; she is self-sacrificing and self-abnegating. She seems to demand nothing and to give everything: the good mother of fantasy.

It is a frequent though unacknowledged need of the male in Dickens's early novels that he be able to find in the heroine's eyes a mirror which reflects no desires except those which complement and satisfy his own. In sharp distinction to the representation of the female (in advice books and conduct manuals, for instance) as the exemplar who provides moral and spiritual inspiration, the Dickensian heroine is actually required neither to inspire nor to uplift, but rather to mirror and nurture. Dickens's heroes are already good,
either instinctively or as the result of debilitating illness. Oliver, for instance, is born good and never changes, despite all temptation. Young Martin Chuzzlewit learns his moral lessons from a male companion and from illness. Tom Pinch requires no moral lessons; he is already perfect. Dombey is broken, not uplifted. The Dickens hero doesn't need a good teacher; rather, he needs a second chance at a good mother.

An emotionally healthy male will have experienced a mirroring, nurturing mother, and will not be anxiously needy when he searches for a mate. As Alice Miller has put it,

the mother gazes at the baby in her arms, and baby gazes at his mother's face and finds himself therein . . . provided the mother is really looking at the unique, small, helpless being and not projecting her own introjects onto the child, nor her own expectations, fears, and plans for the child. In that case, the child would not find himself in his mother's face but rather the mother's own predicaments. This child would remain without a mirror, and for the rest of his life would be seeking this mirror in vain. [58, my italics]

Unsatisfied needs for maternal echoing, mirroring, and understanding are characteristic of Dickens's male protagonists and of Dickens himself. In each novel he mounts a new and anxious search for the mirroring female who will fulfill those needs.
There is a startling moment of recognition in Martin Chuzzlewit which illustrates the importance of the mirroring eyes. The narrator is describing how Ruth Pinch greets John Westlock, but he suddenly begins to speak in the second person, and it becomes clear that he has entered his own scene and imagines himself reflected in Ruth's "bright eyes." There were, he tells us

a crowd of welcomes . . . gleaming in her bright eyes. By-the-bye how bright they were! Looking into them for but a moment, when you took her hand, you saw, in each, such a capital miniature of yourself, representing you as such a restless flashing, eager, brilliant little fellow -

Ah! if you could only have kept them for your own miniature! But, wicked, roving, restless, too impartial eyes, it was enough for any one to stand before them, and straightway there he danced and sparkled quite as merrily as you!

(690 - 691, my italics)

The woman can perform a miracle of validation; she can show you to yourself as an eager, brilliant fellow. The narrator's addition of "little" indicates that he understands how childlike and demeaning is the need to see oneself reflected flattering in a woman's eyes. Immediately after the miracle of self-validation comes disillusionment and pain. If her eyes so easily reflect you, then they may reflect anyone. The narrator is not able to sustain a belief in Ruth, or in any woman, as a mirror faithful only to one man. The seductive body
and the wicked eyes are capable of betrayal. And yet the entire canon records repeated efforts to create a woman whose eyes will not be "too impartial," a woman who will be both nurturer and mirror.

Mark Poster offers an integration of Freudian concepts, object-relations doctrine, and historical context in his formation of a critical theory of the family. His theory offers a useful commentary on Dickens's shaping of fictional families, and on the ways in which Dickens was, in turn, shaped by his real family. [59] Poster believes that the family is both a psychic structure and a social space "where generations confront each other directly and where the two sexes define their differences and power relations," where "generational and sexual conflict can be captured and understood." When Freud's theory of psycho-sexual development (the oral, anal, and genital stages) is set in a context of age and sex hierarchies, the family appears as an emotional configuration which generates personality types. Patterns of authority and love appear which can be interpreted in terms of emotional tensions between adults and children. These patterns form the child's psyche and establish in him or her a general set of feelings toward the body. They internalize sexual identity, form an ego which defines the ways the self will relate to society, and govern how the individual will respond to external authority.

Poster offers a bourgeois family paradigm, specifically the product of the nineteenth century, neither biologically nor socially inevitable. Within this family structure, the desire for the mother is engendered by specifically Victorian bourgeois familial arrangements: the middle-class emphasis on delay of gratification; the containment of
mother and child in an isolated sphere; the seclusion of the family from the wider community; and the intense focus of family members on each other as primary source of emotional satisfaction. All of these factors, according to Poster, combine to create relations that are so imploded that the parents alone are emotionally significant figures for the child during the early years. It is these same omnipotent parents, Peter Gay might add, whose internalized voices instill the "ever-present bourgeois sense of guilt," full of threat and menace. "Against such noisy power, a search for safety seemed perfectly rational and the place to find it, precisely where insecurity had begun: at home." [60]

Heavily gendered spheres of activity governed relations within the family: the husband was the dominant authority, an autonomous being, while the wife, "considered less rational and less capable," was concerned only with domestic duties and derived her sense of self from her husband’s status. Her attention was to be given primarily to her children, who assumed a new importance and required a new degree of care never before seen in family history. She was responsible for making the children moral and respectable; the leverage she used to do so was the deeply-felt dependence and love of the child for the parent. The family was considered to be a private micro-world, a place of safety into which no outsider could penetrate, a place of warmth and emotive relations. Child-rearing methods changed sharply from those of previous ages. Because of the close bond between mother and child, in the oral stage the child was "immersed in a heaven of sensual and emotional gratification." Yet because the mother was felt to have
total responsibility for the child, both physically and morally, the interaction between mother and infant was fraught with anxiety.

In the anal phase, the bourgeois respect for cleanliness required that the child "master ruthlessly its own body," and "regard its body as a container and producer of filth." If the child did not learn to be disgusted by, and to control, its bodily excretions and pleasures, the price in terms of maternal withdrawal of affection was very high indeed. The passage from the oral to the anal stage was thus inevitably difficult, as was the passage from the anal to the genital phase. The nineteenth-century family exerted "a new effort to desexualize children," and developed an obsessive horror of masturbation. The bourgeois child was given the choice between the pleasures of its body and parental love and approval. The child, in fact, experienced a double bind: it dared not rebel overtly against parental commands because parents were not only all-powerful and terrifying, but also the only source of love and nurture. The denial of bodily pleasure might result in the child's anger, but that anger could only be suppressed and internalized, thus resulting in depression. The unconscious of the bourgeois child was "defined in terms of the denial of the body." As a result of this family structure:

    Sexual differences become sharp personality differences.
    Masculinity is defined as the capacity to sublimate,
    to be aggressive, rational, and active; femininity
    is defined as the capacity to express emotions, to
    be weak, irrational and passive. Age differences become
internalized patterns of submission . . . Passage to adulthood requires the internalization of authority. Individuality is gained at the price of unconsciously incorporating parental norms. [61]

Poster's discussion of the bourgeois family, with its integration of the individual's object relations into the historical and social context, sets the stage for our deeper understanding of the conditions which impelled Dickens to solve emotional, social, and sexual problems in terms of the creation of a family, and in terms of the woman at the heart of that family. It explains his combined fear of and need for the woman, as he sought fictional amelioration for problems suffered in real life. Faced with the problem of compensating for the deprivations of the anal stage, the repressions of the genital stage, and the seclusion of mother and child in the isolated domestic sphere, Dickens re-enacts the search of the needy son for a woman who can be controlled rather than controlling, nurturing rather than demanding, receptive rather than seductive. In his novels, he proffers a series of women: Rose, Kate, Nell, and Flo. But like the real life woman and the real life mother, all of them prove to be powerful and uncontainable. None is the perfect mirror reflecting the son in her eyes. Thus we see how Dickens's depressive childhood and his historical milieu come together to create the kinds of psychic longing found in the novels.
In subsequent chapters, I approach Dickens's novels as a palimpsest, each narrative consisting of overwritten layers of meaning, and each relating to its predecessor(s) in terms of partially erased layers of meaning. I use a model derived from Meredith Skura's analysis of psychoanalytic criticism as process and method, a model in which there is no simple dichotomy of conscious/unconscious meaning, but rather only "different ways of being aware of things and different aspects of a text which compel a certain kind of awareness." [62] The topmost layer of meaning, what Skura calls the manifest content or manifest story, is that in which the realistic world of the particular text is represented. In this seam of the narrative, family structures are created and replaced, and family roles form the patterns in which I am interested. The second layer of meaning is made up of primitive fantasies, the "true building blocks of the imagination." [63] These fantasy structures, which in Dickens are male fantasies of need for the nurturing breast, desire for the erotic breast, and fear of the domineering bad breast, pull the surface meanings into new designs as the two layers form meaning together. In this layer of the narrative, gender roles and relationships form the important patterns.

The third layer of meaning might be likened to dream work, work which Dickens accomplishes through his textual representations of the body. Here meaning lies on another level of consciousness altogether; it is encoded in descriptions of the body, its illnesses, and its metonymies. This layer of the narrative glosses, deepens, and/or
subverts the meanings of the manifest content and the primitive fantasies. And on all these levels, wrapped around them, moving among them, is the narrative presence, or narrative voice, of each novel. This narrative presence sometimes weaves himself into the narrative; at other times he finds it expedient to distance himself so as to offer another perspective. Sometimes he is omniscient, sometimes he wills himself to ignorance, sometimes he is unreliable; but always he is there, one of the players of the fictional games presented by the story weaver at his loom.

When we look at the surface of the text, the manifest story and its family structures, we seldom find even here a conventionally domestic Dickens. Alexander Welsh has suggested that "if the problem that besets [Dickens] can be called the city, his answer can be named the hearth." [64] A close look at Dickens's families, however, shows that the hearth, and all that it stands for, is itself one of the problems which the texts want to solve. When there is a domestic hearth at all, whether objectified or metaphoric, the family members seated there are often cruel or feckless parents, abused children, unfaithful spouses, frightened men and enigmatic women, all enmeshed in stunted, paradoxical, and non-nurturing relationships. When these originating families are replaced by those constructed at closure, the new families are as aberrant as the old. The hostility and dangers of the city may be menacing, but no more so than the unmet needs and deeply felt anxieties of hearth and home. It is difficult to find a conventionally happy family sitting by a cosy hearth. [65] We do not
see Rose and Harry Maylie by the fireside with a cluster of rosy children, nor Nicholas and Madeline Nickleby, Ruth and John Westlock, or Florence and Walter Gay. The happy union of husband, wife, and offspring, at home and at peace, is something these texts neither imagine nor show. When familial happiness is represented, it occurs well outside the environs of the traditional bourgeois family. In the conventional marriage plot, a young couple is romantically joined and the union knits them into society, thus perpetuating the social structure. [66] In Dickens, however, conjugal coupling is only incidental to a sister's continued nurturance of her brother, or an aunt becoming mother to her nephew, or a daughter becoming mother to her father. Moreover, neither the married couple, nor the brother/sister pair, nor the daughter/father pair is, in fact, knit into society. On the contrary, they are sealed off in an Eden in the country, or on a deserted autumnal beach, by a narrator who wishes to quarantine them from the contagion of the world.

Repeatedly Dickens's closures feature anxious declarations of happy pairings which are really unions with death, sealed in idyllic sterility, between a passive child/man and a self-abnegating girl/woman. The brutal outside world is hardly more frightening than the hermetic interior of these charmed circles in which Death is one of the family. Often we read Dickens through Ruskin's idealized and perverse fantasies of the Victorian husband and wife, believing that Dickens shared, or wanted to share, the Ruskinian fantasy of the passively spiritual woman and the strong man. [67] And yet his fictional families, despite or perhaps because of his best efforts, do
not enact the ideal so yearningly articulated by Ruskin. For Ruskin, the man's power is "active, progressive, defensive. He is the doer, the creator, the discoverer, the defender." The woman's role is "true wifely subjection," even as she fulfills a "guiding function." "Her greatest function is Praise . . . By her office and place, she is protected from all danger and temptation." [68] Her home is sacred, a temple; she is incorruptibly good, self-renouncing, and wise in modesty of service. Ruskin could leave out of account altogether the temptations and desires of the body, but Dickens knew instinctively what Ruskin sought to ignore: danger and temptation need not enter the home from the outside because they are already inside, implicit in the healthy human body and in the often unhealthy relationships between family members. A creator of powerful women, passive men, and children whose sole function often seems to be to mourn the dead, Dickens has in fact (however unwillingly) stood Ruskin on his head.

Dickens's narrators and characters oscillate between two emotional extremes: on the one hand there is the male need for the woman; on the other, his almost feral fear of her power. His representations of women cluster now at one pole, now at the other. Because the woman (and thus marriage and family as well) is so contradictory and multivalent for him, his narratives often attack their own premises and characters in a series of guerilla raids on women's bodies. Just as Mrs. MacStinger carries danger and death in her name, so does the heroine carry (ambiguous) salvation and (problematic) safety in her frail, submissive body. The problem is to keep the two separate, to make sure that the young, slender girl does not metamorphose into the
huge, smothering wife, the bad breast. A second problem is to ensure that the healthy male body doesn't fall victim to its own instincts and desires; and further, to ensure that male power and ambition are obliterated lest they turn to sexual aggression and lust.

Despite these problems, Dickens continues to seek safety in the family structure, no matter how unconventional and ringed about with risk it may be. Peter Gay sees this search for safety as one of the great nineteenth-century bourgeois goals: safety from the upheaval caused by sexuality, and safety from the brutal outside world in the refuge provided by the hearth, within the bosom of the family. [69] In his efforts to achieve safety for his fictional heroes, Dickens internalizes a fantasy "family" (the family as it should be, nurturing and protective), and maps that fantasy onto the families he creates at each novel's closure. [70] He puts his faith not in the traditional hearth, not in marriage, but in his own peculiar definition of family: a fantasied "good breast" who draws a passive male into the safety created by her selfless nurture. With her, he is theoretically safe from the snares of erotic temptation, from the lusts of his own body, and from the dark, dangerous outside world. These "family"/family relationships are at the heart of Dickens's mixture of fantasy and reality, as each of the early novels draws to its close.

We have looked at the family as that structure which carries the text's plot or its manifest story, and we have seen how unconventional are the fictional families which Dickens creates. We have looked at the woman at the heart of each of these families, a woman who is the fulfillment (or the nightmare) of male fantasy, just as the family is
itself a structure designed to protect the male. When we look further inside the macro-structure "family," we see that it is, in reality, composed of only two figures, a young girl/mother and a male adult/child. Dickens has taken the paradigmatic family and simply erased portions of it: he has erased the traditional husband and wife, erased the children, and retained only a young woman nurturing an adult male. The newly constructed family is a verbalized rendition of "Roman Charity" (see illustration, next page).

Martin Meisel examines the iconography of the daughter figure in Dickens's *Little Dorrit*, relating Little Dorrit's nurture of her father to the legend (and its interpretation in a series of paintings and prints) of "Roman Charity," in which a young woman physically suckles her father. [71] I am suggesting that this picture offers a figural or iconic representation of the relationship which Dickens offers metaphorically in his novels when he constructs "family." The male protagonist becomes the suckled child in an adult body; the heroine is the nursing mother. There are other figures in Dickens's fictional carpets, but this figure, the daughter as mother to her father, or her husband, or her brother, is crucial. It allows us to unlock some of the secrets of his fictional families and worlds, as both family and world so often shrink to these same two figures at closure. "Roman Charity" glosses the familial and sexual relationship between men and women, as well as Dickens's representations of both the ill male body and the ambiguously dual female breast. The painting makes graphically clear the complexities and paradoxes of both relationship and body. In this disturbing image, this mis-mapping of mother onto daughter,
144. Andrea Sirani, Roman Charity (1630-1642), engraving by J. Saunders (1799), London, British Museum.
asexuality onto sexuality, we approach an explanation for the frail, almost wasted bodies of Dickens's heroines. Those slender bodies are the solutions to problems: how to be simultaneously sexual and not sexual; how to be virginal, and yet a mother; how to obtain the breast for the adult male without the stain of eroticism. First the female body must appear thin and uncurved. The breast must be available for comfort, but not for fondling; the uterus available for birth, but not for intercourse. The undeveloped body of a young girl must be mapped onto the nurturing mother; the wasted body of the recently ill father or brother mapped over the potent body of the sexually active male. In effect, Dickens has repainted this picture in his narratives. He has air brushed the swollen breast, changed gushes of milk to fountains of love and fidelity, and called the result by a variety of names: Rose Rescues Oliver; Nell Nurtures Grandfather; Florence Mothers Dombey.

R. D. Laing points out that people often superimpose one set of relations onto another, and the two sets frequently do not match. Laing's "superimposition" is very much akin to Dickens's process of familial role transposition in which sisters and daughters are mothers, while brothers and fathers are children. Because of the "family"/family mapping process, the preservation of the fantasy "family" is equated with the preservation of both self and world. [72] And thus do we arrive at an estimation of the importance of "family" in Dickens's novels. On the constructed family, and the presence of the woman at its heart, depends the preservation of the male protagonist, his bodily survival, and the survival and integrity
of his world. Dickens maps closure, satisfaction, and safety onto the female nurturer and the family which only she can create.

It is a commonplace of Dickens commentary that at the heart of his work lies his need to rewrite the story of his childhood, and his desire to give that story a happy ending. While the richness, complexity, and variety of the novels cannot be reduced to one simple model, still there are discernible patterns and structures embedded within the narratives, and worked and reworked throughout his career. The novels exhibit a series of trials and experiments, not unlike Jenny Wren's "tryings-on" in which she compares her dolls' dresses with the living models to see if they "fit." Each narrative invokes an attempt to find a way to be, to find a mode of survival in a dangerous world. In his fictions, Dickens tries on the possible domestic roles into which a male at different ages and stages can fit himself. He tries on, one by one, those familial relationships which a man can best sustain, or more importantly, those which can best sustain him. He writes the neglected child; the humiliated husband; the cosseted brother; the emotionally starved father. Always the male roles require re-vision and re-creation, and there is no final solution. The process of creating wholeness and nurture must be re-enacted in each novel, as another slender young madonna provides both danger and safety for yet another needy male who harbors within himself some version of Oliver Twist.
Even on the topmost layer of meaning, then, two contradictory designs are interwoven. In one design, satisfaction and fulfillment are granted, while in the other they are withheld. The narrator tells us, for instance, how happy is the little society formed around Oliver and Rose at the end of *Oliver Twist*, but he shows us a sterile, frozen community in which the central figures are principally engaged in the celebration of death and loss. Just beneath this already bifurcated manifest story lies a second level of meaning, the primitive fantasy structure of the text, which further comments on the meanings of the topmost layer. This second layer is composed of primitive fantasies of hunger, need, desire, and fear which form the imaginative cruxes of Dickens's narratives, emerging out of his childhood experiences and his early object relations.

These primitive unconscious fantasies underpin the conscious patterns, and form an additional way of seeing the world. As Meredith Skura puts it, these primitive fantasies are not a retreat from reality, but are, rather, an alternate version of it. In this primitive form of thinking,

we "identify" with the whole scene, rather than locating ourselves within a single character . . .

Emotions are registered as landscape; external intrusions seem as inescapable as do parts of the body; wishes and fears are magically realized as facts. [73]
Within the meanings of the primitive fantasy, the fantasizer's identity is based on internalized relationships from his childhood. His current inner battles are repetitions of his childhood struggles with parents; his state of mind is based on what he saw and experienced as a child.

What we find on the level of the primitive fantasy is often contrary to the meanings declared on the surface of the text. *Oliver Twist* once again helps to illustrate the point. When Oliver says "Please, sir, I want more," he articulates one component of Dickens's primitive fantasies, the fantasy of oral need. Oliver's immediate demand is for gruel; beneath that is a cry for safety and satiety; and beneath both is the inarticulate desire for a nurturing mother, for "the woman." On the level of the manifest story, Oliver finds a father and a "sister" who form a happy family in an idyllic community. On the level of the primitive fantasy, however, the father is of little or no importance, while slender Rose dominates both the little society and the text's closure as mother, nurturer, and good breast. The bad mother or bad breast, Agnes, is dead and satisfactorily replaced by Rose. But both narrator and Oliver return to Agnes at closure, as if her erotic energy and unquiet spirit cannot be contained. The text tells several stories simultaneously, and each story both enriches and subverts the others.

All these levels of need and thwarted need, desire and thwarted desire, comprise the content of the primal or primitive fantasy. The fantasies have varied derivatives, and they evolve and develop over time. They are a "set of ingredients or a structure of conflict rather than a finished product." [74] These ever-changing fantasies of
need, desire, and fear do not replace Dickens's adult experience, but they do focus the emotional intensities of his childhood experience on adult life as it is narrated in the novels. The voracious neediness of his childhood gives rise to his whole way of seeing the world, indeed to his creation of a specific kind of world. If Oliver, for instance, were not so heavily defended by middle-class gentility, the harsh exigencies of his world would turn him into just such another as the starved urchin in _The Haunted Man_, screaming "I want the woman." From innocent Oliver to the almost Lovelace-ian Eugene Wrayburn, Dickens's male protagonists live in brutal, murderous worlds. His fictional solutions to his protagonists' problems change and grow ever more complex from novel to novel, as the man himself changed and grew more complex and artful. [75] But underlying the differences and complexities is the primal fantasy of the unprotected and hungry male who must find a nurturing female, and then rid both her and himself of a dangerous sexuality on which the mother/child relationship might founder.

Narrative needs and characters' desires are granted through the mediation of familial roles (slippery as they may be) and familial constellations. [76] But although the text declares that the characters' needs are met, and that consequently the primal fantasy is implicitly satisfied, still the basic dysfunctions and ambiguities of both familial and gender roles remain unsolved. Sexuality is split off from the maternal heroine; she is not allowed to be anything other than the "good breast." Autonomy is split off from the childlike male hero; he often retreats into near-hysterical illness, or into neurasthenia.
And both sexuality and passion are split off and removed from marriage. Family is indeed the answer which Dickens's texts so often proffer, but the answer is inadequate for fictional worlds in which the integrity of both body and psyche is threatened by sexuality on the one hand and deprivation on the other. Solutions are advanced in terms of familial roles and relationships, but then are snatched away in terms of gender roles and problems. [78]

In June, 1845, Dickens outlined to Forster his idea for a periodical which would contain "a vein of glowing, hearty, generous, mirthful, beaming reference in everything to Home, and Fireside." [79] What might have been possible in a periodical, however, was never enacted in the novels. The primitive fantasy of need is never entirely satisfied; indeed, it cannot be satisfied without the payment of a ruinously high price, despite all narratival protestations to the contrary. Further, a drama of partially withheld gratifications is played out on the level of the body, where satisfaction can be simultaneously affirmed and denied, and where neither narrator nor author is obliged to acknowledge openly what is being withheld, nor even exactly what is desired.
Beneath the level of the primal fantasies of need, then, is still a third level of narrative which enacts itself on the body. Meredith Skura has defined "dream-work language" as presenting "no recognizable reality at all, but only a coded version of it." [80] Dickens's deployment of both the healthy and the ill and mutilated human body is a coded version of language in which the body and its metonymies become signifiers. The body itself, in its physical changes and illnesses, is a kind of sub-language or dream-language which interacts with the psychic reality projected in the texts' primal fantasies. Although Dickens's manipulations of the body are not precisely what Skura is describing when she speaks of literature as dream, they are nonetheless very similar. Dickens often uses the body as a means to represent those fears and feelings which he does not allow himself to put into words, or which his narrator does not allow himself to bring to the level of his consciousness; those things, in fact, which are in dangerous opposition to "glowing, hearty, generous, mirthful, beaming reference in everything to Home, and Fireside."

In his fictions, Dickens manipulates characters' bodies in order to fulfill unadmitted infantile wishes, to satisfy unarticulated regressive desires for safety, passivity, and dependence. The psychic reality of the fantasy of need is thus in synergy with the coded and secret dream reality of the body, as both are manipulated within the topmost layer of the manifest story. As all three of these layers collapse in upon and gloss one another, the texts attempt to withdraw
their male protagonists to a place of safety where they can be protected from both hot desire and cold deprivation. The narrator is deployed to declare that the safe haven has been found, while he simultaneously maintains a steadfast ignorance of having narrated anything more unusual than a conventional happy ending enacted in the conventional way of the realistic novel.

The early novels exploit a series of illnesses and/or bodily deformations and disfigurements by means of which the dangers of the healthy human body are short circuited and held harmless. Each of the novels adopts its own methods and scenarios for controlling or immunizing the body, and each must be considered separately and in some detail. For now, suffice it to say that the body, its size, its unease and dis-ease, its wasting or fattening, is central to an understanding of the relationships between Dickens's men and women, both those who survive, and those who succumb to danger and/or punishment. Encoded in the often-ill hero's body, in the physically punished (often self-punished) bodies of the passionate male villains, in the frail (yet somehow strong) bodies of the heroines, in the large (even obese) bodies of domineering and threatening female figures, is the knowledge that the texts' primal fantasies of need, desire, and fear subvert and contradict each other, and thus can never be satisfied.

For Dickens, both the male and the female bodies are problematic. He not only fears the powerful and lustful female body with its half-hidden temptations and its potential for humiliation of the male; his fear of masculine desire is equally threatening. The
fear of loss of control, whether over himself or his emotional environment, is palpable in both his life and his fiction. Textual preoccupation with the fictional female body is a scarlet thread running from Rose and Nancy in *Oliver Twist* through Florence and Edith in *Dombey and Son*. As I will suggest in subsequent chapters, in each novel Dickens takes measures to control the female body and its erotic appeal. With his creation of Paul Dombey Senior, however, he discovers that he is also faced with the unruly if healthy male body and its desires. Added to that issue, moreover, is the residual power of the female whose body, though shorn of desire and desirability, continues to carry an immense charge of energy which threatens to intensify and engulf both hero and text.

Dickens's problems with the representation of the body were certainly not unique to him. Nineteenth-century science encountered the same perplexities, and added its voice to those who were fashioning an ideology of gender. Anatomists first drew illustrations of the female skeleton in the eighteenth century, and it was on their work that nineteenth-century hypotheses were based. These anatomists "mended" skeletal reality to fit emerging ideals of masculinity and femininity. They hypothesized that woman's skull was smaller, her pelvis wider, her resemblance to a child greater than to her adult male counterpart. It comes as small surprise that the skeletons they drew for anatomy textbooks confirmed those hypotheses. As a result, the scientific and medical community agreed that the female of the species remained at an arrested stage of development: childlike, less
intelligent than the male, and structured primarily to bear children. [81] Dr. J. J. Sachs wrote in 1830 that the male body expresses positive strength, sharpening male understanding and independence, and equipping men for life in the State, in the arts and sciences. The female body expresses womanly softness and feeling. The roomy pelvis determines women for motherhood. The weak, soft members and delicate skin are witness of woman’s narrower sphere of activity, of home-bodiness, and peaceful family life. [82]

The passage might have been written by Ruskin himself, had he been capable of a discussion of the female body at all. These ideas of the childlike woman, of woman as homebody, were in the ideological air Dickens breathed. But Dickens’s demands of a woman’s body were even more stringent and complicated. It must be childlike, yes - but it must also be strong. In addition, that roomy pelvis must be carefully hidden within a slender, frail body. And, while fulfilling its function to bear children, the body must be innocently asexual. [83] Small wonder that he couldn’t get the female’s body right in his first attempts; small wonder that radical solutions were necessary.

Adding to the difficulties already outlined is the fact that the female body in Dickens’s fictions changes in value and meaning as it changes in size, age, and physical maturity. It means one thing when it is the body of a female child; still another when it is a pre-pubescent but budding body; something else again when it is a virginal but sexually mature body; and something quite different still when it
becomes a sexually active body. What it means to be sexually active in Dickens's novels is a difficult subject in and of itself. Florence Dombey is sexually active, as is Sikes's Nancy. In Florence, sexual relations are solely a means to maternity, but in Nancy's case, sexuality is an end in itself, perhaps even a pleasurable one. The different fates of the two women are instructive, and are the direct result of the uses and pleasures of their bodies. Nancy breaks the interdiction which forbids mixing maternity and eroticism, as well as that which forbids simultaneous loyalties to two males with different and contradictory needs: she dies in a welter of blood. Florence is transformed from abused child to spiritual mother, without an interval of sexual budding and blossoming: she becomes the center of power in her world.

But from Oliver Twist to Dombey and Son, no matter what the signification of the woman's body, both her body and her psyche are projections of the male's psychic and physical needs rather than components of a subject having value in and of itself. To be sure, she has value, the highest of value, but it is the value of a "relative creature." The novels do not create patriarchal worlds in which men are omnipotent because of their intrinsically superior abilities and strength. Rather, Dickens's males are able to survive solely because they are gifted with a talismanic woman. His heroes do not control his heroines by superior strength or intelligence, or by superior masculine vitality and aggressiveness. There is no sense in which Dombey, for example, is more powerful than Florence, or in which Tom Pinch is more powerful than Ruth. In terms of the fantasy of family, the needy hero
is attached to the pure young heroine by ties of tender sentiment, affection, and duty. At the subtextual level of the body, however, the male and female are attached physically; that is, she provides a metaphorical breast, and/or a metaphorical uterus for him. Uterus and breast are translated as home and nurture, and the female body supplies both food and shelter as well as being the source of love and affection. Unfortunately for the happy ending, the woman’s body has other, more ambiguous meanings as well.

Freud theorized that sexuality is the weak spot in human cultural evolution, that area least easily restrained, least easily made "normal." [84] Had Dickens been given to generalizing about man’s sexual condition, he undoubtedly would have agreed. His narrators and narratives approach the erotic in one of several ways. Desire may be displaced onto an habitual vice, such as Grandfather’s nocturnal obsession with gambling. It may be split off and externalized in a villainous character who serves as "penis man": Gride, Quilp, or Pecksniff are examples. [85] It may be both disguised and attributed to some other thing or person, especially when it is the narrator himself who is sexually titillated. For example, the narrator of Nicholas Nickleby tells us that the sun ogles Kate’s clothing, making her dress and shoes into erotic objects of desire, although clearly it is the narrator who ogles and fantasizes. The narrator of Martin Chuzzlewit tells us that it is Tom Pinch who is all aflutter about wicked little Ruth, although again it is the narrator who is excited. Desire may be disguised in the act of watching, in the act of collecting and possessing, or even in the act of playing the organ. When it is a
question of the sexuality of a "good" character, however, desire is nearly always manifested in infantile ways: in orality, anality, scopophilia, or autoeroticism. Beginning with Paul Dombey (Senior), the only cure for the disease of desire in the male body is a devastating illness which wastes the body, infantilizes the psyche, and disciplines the heart. Beginning with Florence Dombey, the body of the heroine no longer requires a cure; she becomes the cure, and perhaps the disease as well.
If the subtext of the body and its illnesses becomes a means to
gloss and subvert the conventional happy ending, there is still another
means which Dickens uses to protect his characters, and himself, from
feelings which are unacceptable or dangerous or both. He utilizes
splitting and projective identification to defend against emotions
which he deems threatening to the safety of his male protagonists, such
as feelings of ambition, aggression, confidence, and erotic desire. As
R. D. Laing sums it up: "I slice my experience into inside-outside:
real-unreal: me and not-me." [86] So long as "I" can slice my
experience successfully, and project and externalize what is
unacceptable or uncontrollable or frightening, then "I" (and Oliver,
and all his avatars) can remain perfectly good: passive, asexual and
safe. The process of splitting is somewhat different from that of
doubling. Robert Patten has anatomized Dickens's uses of doubling over
the course of the novelist's career, and concludes that
doubles thus for Dickens become ways of expressing
the spectrum of possibilities for character and of
enacting alternative futures for the protagonist.
For the most part, at least through 1851, different
characters enact different possibilities and
fates, and they are kept as discrete and separate
entities. [87]
Doubling thus results in an exfoliation of character. But if we concentrate on the results of splitting for the stem character - for Oliver, for example - then we see that the process results in safety and virtue for a protagonist whose creator's anxieties require that he remain spotless under all circumstances. From one point of view, Monks's very presence in *Oliver Twist* enlarges "the spectrum of possibilities for character." From another point of view, he becomes a container designed safely to encapsulate and quarantine varied manifestations of narcissism, auto-eroticism (expressed in his self-mutilations), and self-destructiveness. As a result of Monks's illness and disfiguration, Oliver can remain healthy. Monks is Oliver's Mr. Hyde, but totally and safely externalized.

The result of the splitting process, particularly in these early novels, is that two or three characters may be required in order to constitute what E. M. Forster would have been satisfied to call a round character. Such dispersion of personality is responsible for the occasional accusations of readers that Dickens's characters are cardboard, lacking in vitality, or bloodless. [88] The accusation is true enough of Oliver, Nicholas, young Martin, and Walter. What must not be forgotten, however, are the very real purposes which their lack of passion serves in their several fictional worlds. One of those purposes is to insure safety amidst the dangers of desireus full-bloodedness, and its attendant potential for sexual humiliation: twin dangers which Dickens both recognized and feared.
If troublesome feelings are often split off from the male protagonist onto several separate characters, sometimes families must be doubled in order to ensure the happiness of the hero. In these early novels, two young women are often needed to make one young man happy. For example, Nicholas is gifted with both Madeline and Kate. Or two families are required to provide nurture for one child. Oliver requires a little community, with a "father" in one house, and a "mother" in a second house. Or two families are formed, but the adult male at the heart of the narrative is the head of neither, as is the case with Tom Pinch. The subject of a nurturing family and its constitutive factor, the nurturing woman, is so important and so vexed for Dickens, the problems of creating an adequate familial environment so myriad, that the novelist must not only split his characters to keep them good, he must also double their women and families to keep them safe and satisfy their voracious hungers. After Nicholas Nickleby, the creation of an Edenic community composed of closely related families ceases even to be possible. The subtext of physical bodies, the use of indeterminate and confusing tropes, the creation of structures in which happiness is only in the past, and never in the present, and the multivalent voices of the narrator all serve to subvert the happy ending.

The narrative presences or voices of these early novels are protean, fluid, and amorphous. They are now here, now there; now ironic, now erotically engaged; now transparent, now opaque. The narrative voice becomes, like the female body, a floating signifier, changing form and content as it changes position and context. The
reader is presented with a narrative which, like an archaeological dig, is a series of layers, and a voice which is always voices, a presence which advances and retreats, weaving itself around and over and under all the layers. Meaning does not lie in any one of the seams of the narrative, nor in the pronouncements of the narrative voice, but in all combined. [89] Dickens himself is not synonymous with any of his characters, but is, rather, distributed throughout the entire design of each text. Multiple voices, multiple meanings, multiple primitive fantasies; fluid narrators, fluid heroines who change their meanings: these are only a few of the problems involved in laying hold of meaning in these complex texts.

The author knows, on some level of consciousness, all the meanings of the text, and all the subversions of meaning. The text, like its creator, knows but often won't admit its own multiplicity. The narrator is something else again. He often chooses not to know all the implications and contradictions of his own words, and sometimes tries to obfuscate that which he unintentionally reveals. The text is not always under his control, although he chooses not to know that either. While changing shape and distance, he also changes intention and meaning, but he wills himself to remain ignorant of many of the problems revealed by his own ambivalent or multivalent words. He may, for instance, posit and praise an angelic heroine, an idealized hero, and a happy Eden, as at the closure of Oliver Twist. The text, however (and Dickens himself, of course), is aware of, and reveals to the reader, the contradictions inherent in that closure, in which both a woman and a family are required to be simultaneously sexual and
asexual. The narrator may declare a happy ending while his own words reveal its sterility. He may posit and praise a successful Nicholas or a reformed Dombey, but the text shows us a protagonist who is passive and childlike in a society which demands strength and aggressivity, a protagonist who thus cannot succeed or survive without help and protection.

Dickens's fictional worlds match his historical world in many respects. In both, the woman is so idealized that she becomes dangerous, so necessary that her menace increases as the male is perceived to be the more vulnerable. Both male and female must be controlled, he by means of his passivity and illnesses, she by illness and deformation of her body, or by the simple pretense that she has no body at all. The heroine remains an ongoing problem - not just for Dickens but for his contemporaries as well. The anatomists "mended" her skeleton until she was childlike. The obstetricians "mended" her reproductive organs until she was merely a uterus around which a body was constructed. Ruskin "mended" her morality so that only she bore the blame for evil in the home. Dickens "mended" her sexuality until it was obliterated. Text meets context on the body of the woman, constructed so as not to tempt the desirous man who fears his own desires, so as not to revulse the frightened man who fears the blood and pain of the body of the Other, and so as not to terrify the needy man who requires her breast for nurture and comfort. The female body must be so constituted as to reassure the needy man who fears above all the very entity which he perceives to be his only salvation. Both hero and heroine are caught in a dance of life and death. He must be
protected from himself and her; she must somehow provide him with the protection.
NOTES

[1] These textual situations are taken from *The Haunted Man*, *Oliver Twist*, *The Old Curiosity Shop*, *David Copperfield*, *Martin Chuzzlewit*, *Our Mutual Friend*, *The Old Curiosity Shop*, *Nicholas Nickleby*, *The Old Curiosity Shop*, and *Dombey and Son*. All subsequent quotations from Dickens's novels are from the Penguin editions. Page numbers are inserted parenthetically in the text.


[4] I have chosen to exclude *Pickwick Papers*, *Barnaby Rudge* and *Martin Chuzzlewit* in order to keep the discussion within manageable limits.

[5] All of Dickens's biographers agree that this statement is a proper assessment of John Dickens, for whose repeated financial troubles there is ample evidence. There is little independent evidence about Elizabeth Dickens and her performance as a mother. We have the perceptions of her gifted son, however, and it is his perceptions with which we are concerned here.

[6] There is ample evidence for the dysfunctionality of Charles's family life with Catherine; his life and letters, and the futures of his children, are the record of that dysfunctionality. For examples, see Edgar Johnson, *Charles Dickens: His Tragedy and Triumph*, revised and abridged (New York: Penguin Books, 1986); Fred Kaplan, *Dickens: A Biography* (New York: William Morrow and Co., Inc., 1988); and

[7] Silvano Arieti and Jules Bemporad, *Severe and Mild Depression: The Psychotherapeutic Approach* (New York: Basic Books Inc., 1978) 38. Kaplan assumes the importance of bad mothering in Dickens's life, but neither argues his case nor applies his assumption to an interpretation of the novels. Jack Lindsay, *Charles Dickens: A Biographical and Critical Study* (N.p.: Philosophical Library, 1950) also emphasizes Elizabeth's importance for Charles, but makes only the traditional Oedipal argument that Dickens wanted to possess his mother. Harry Stone, "The Love Pattern in Dickens's Novels," in *Dickens the Craftsman: Strategies of Presentation*, ed. Robert Partlow (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1970) 9, argues that Dickens's mother betrayed him (as did his sister and Maria Beadnell): "What Dickens sought was a wife who would be a companion, a sexual partner, a bearer of children, but at the same time . . . be steadfast and innocent, untouched and untouchable, the matured and idealized image of his childhood sister. The very terms of his desire made it unattainable; for to find the paragon wife was to destroy the sister, and to preserve the immature sister was to have no wife at all." Stone does not argue the meaning of the mother. Slater, like Stone, emphasizes the importance of Fanny Dickens, and is somewhat puzzled at Charles's evident resentment of his mother. I do not disagree that the child Charles for a time found in his sister a partial substitute for a nonnurturing mother, but Fanny was clearly not able to heal the wounds or fill the emptiness created by Elizabeth. Moreover, as is clear from
the autobiographical fragment, Fanny became a feared and resented rival when she became the recipient of the education of which Charles was deprived.


[10] For example, Slater (6) defends Elizabeth, and finds it "hard to reconcile" Dickens's comments about her with the novelist's own recollection of her daily concern for his early education. Slater attributes Dickens' resentment and dislike of his mother to the shock of the blacking warehouse experience. I am suggesting that the anger began much earlier.


[13] Steven Marcus, *Dickens from Pickwick to Dombey* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1965) argues that the blacking warehouse experience was a screen memory for an earlier primal scene experience. Alexander Welsh, *From Copyright to Copperfield: The Identity of Dickens* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1987) 101 - 102, believes that the autobiographical fragment results from Dickens's questioning of his own identity during the 1840's, a period of depression and uncertainty in which he tried to gain control over his past as well as over his present. Both explanations, the one privileging Freud, the other privileging adult experience, are undoubtedly partially correct. I speculate, however, that his hard edge of rage against his mother could only have been inspired by very early negative experiences with her, and not just by the shock of witnessing the primal scene. I further speculate that while Dickens wrote the fragment for himself, he also had Forster in mind. He must have taken into consideration, on some level, what would be convincing and appealing to his future biographer.

prevailing forms of collaboration between the sexes, both man and woman will remain semi-human, monstrous."

[15] Robert L. Patten, "Autobiography Into Autobiography: The Evolution of David Copperfield," Approaches to Victorian Autobiography, ed. George P. Landow (Athens: Ohio UP, 1979) 277, argues that Dickens generated autonomy, independence, and self-creation from the blacking warehouse experience. By positing an abandoning mother, he implies "a kind of masculine independence involving self-sufficiency, skill in work, sympathy with the oppressed and abandoned, and creation through imagination and language." I would only add that he was able to achieve "a kind of masculine independence" in his life in part because he created so many dependent men in his fiction.


[18] One of the sure-fire ways for the young Charles to garner praise was to sing, with his sister Fanny, before audiences of family and friends. His father proudly exhibited their talents, and the connection between performance and praise was clearly not lost on Dickens. In the adult feverishly (and self-destructively) enacting the
murder of Nancy before audiences of thousands, we see the child Charles dancing and singing shrilly at his father's behest.

[19] These are only a few examples of many similar complaints voiced by Dickens throughout his adult life, testimony to his recurrent depressions. They can be found in any of the biographies, or in any edition of his letters.

[20] Kaplan 181. Kaplan is referring to Dickens’s attempts to alleviate his own emotional impoverishment by transforming Christmas spirit into financial profit in the Christmas books and stories.


[22] Firestone 36.

[23] This material is derived from Arieti and Bemporad 130 - 155. Although the authors emphasize the importance of the cold, non-nurturing mother, they are far from being determinists. They believe that even after a psychological pattern is established, people are capable of dealing with their environment in different ways. However, there is often a rigidity of personality in the depressive which makes it possible to predict his future course, as they have done. Arieti and Bemporad are using object-relations theory in mounting their own theories.


[26] Kenneth Burke, *The Philosophy of Literary Form* (Los Angeles: U of California P, 1973) 18, makes the case for a judicious use of an artist's life in conjunction with his work. Burke points out that to use an artist's "disease" in analyzing his work is neither to equate genius with disease, nor to reduce the work to a reflexive pre-determined response to an illness or a psychological disability, for "the true locus of assertion is not in the disease, but in the structural powers by which the poet encompasses it."

[27] Allen 78. Patten, "Autobiography Into Autobiography," 275, notes that Dickens's childhood experiences, while full of deprivations, also had "certain covert and hard-won advantages. If there is no author to one's existence, no causal agent, one can make oneself, as Dickens did, becoming extremely skilled at his task, forcing a stoic silence on the pain, establishing by his conduct and manners 'a space' between the others and himself . . ." Through one prism, we see the man who did indeed "make himself," and magnificently. But through another prism, we see not only the man who authored himself, but the emotional price he paid in feeling himself alienated and alone to such a degree that he was forced to do so.

[28] Forster 1: 35.


[36] For example, Newton, *Women, Power* (19), using material from conduct manuals addressed to genteel women, argues that an "ideology of woman’s sphere" was developed in the early part of the century, designed to counteract the perception and/or reality that middle-class women's economic and domestic influence had shrunk as a result of capitalism under which middle-class men's economic status, choices, mobility, and power had increased. Newton adds that "the establishment by the mid-nineteenth century of an ideological emphasis on women's influence was largely an attempt to resolve this economic contradiction and to maintain the subordination of middle-class women to middle-class men, an attempt to keep the lid on middle-class women by assuring them that they did have work, power, and status after all." I am suggesting that we need to note Dickens's partial divergence from the idea of separate spheres, and, in addition, that we
ask whether the desire of his male protagonists for safety and passivity within the woman's sphere might also be reflected in the male members of his huge popular audience.

[37] Walter Houghton, The Victorian Frame of Mind: 1830 - 1870 (New Haven: Yale UP, 1957) 341 - 345, characterized the Victorians as anxious in 1957, and few have cared to challenge that conclusion. Houghton, however, tends to except the concept of the family and the home from that anxiety, discussing them as havens and sacred places of peace.


[43] Gay 431. Riehl and LePlay are discussed by Gay 422 - 438. Both Riehl and LePlay published their works on the family in 1855: the first in Germany, the second in France. They were echoed, however, in both England and America.

[44] Mary Poovey, "'Scenes of an Indelicate Character': The Medical 'Treatment' of Victorian Women," in *The Making of the Modern Body: Sexuality and Society in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Catherine Gallagher and Thomas Laqueur (Berkeley: U of California P, 1987) 137 - 168. Doctors feared that women became sexually excited when they were relieved from labor pains, thus regressing to an uncontrollable, animal-like "state of nature." The woman would thus experience sexual pleasure, of which the obstetricians disapproved, be out of control, and offer possible temptation to the attending medical man.


[48] Auerbach, Woman 1. Auerbach argues that Ruskin empowers the woman as a mythic queen even as he denies her social power (58 - 61). She is right insofar as the essay itself is concerned, but the Preface, from which I am quoting, empowers the woman in a very different way.


[51] Quoted in Gay 429.

[52] Richard Barickman, Susan MacDonald, and Myra Stark, Corrupt Relations: Dickens, Thackeray, Trollope, Collins, and the Victorian Sexual System (New York: Columbia UP, 1982) 59, have remarked Dickens's propensities for familial solutions, noting that "social roles resolve themselves into a fundamental symbolic duality, the relations between parent and child." They focus on the tyranny of the father, however, to the exclusion of what I see as additional complexities.

[53] Davidoff and Hall have pointed out how literature mediates between the private (family) and public spheres, as it defines new modes of feeling, new modes of relationship, codifies middle-class beliefs and practices, and helps to construct a middle-class identity and a domestic ideology. I am arguing that Dickens not only helped to constitute a middle-class ideology, he also simultaneously subverted his own and his age's most cherished (at least on paper) beliefs.

[55] Chodorow 185. She is primarily interested in "the ways that family structure and process, in particular the asymmetrical organization of parenting, affect unconscious psychic structure and process" (49). I am interested in tracing that unconscious psychic structure in the work of an author, as he replicates and reworks his own object-relations experience in fictional relationships.

[56] Chodorow 185.


[58] Alice Miller 32.


[60] Gay 422.

[61] Poster 177 - 178.


[63] Skura 78.

[65] Vineta Colby, *Yesterday's Woman: Domestic Realism in the English Novel* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1974) 20, notes that the Victorians and Victorian domestic novelists "liked interior domestic scenes even better than outdoor ones . . . . the group sitting near the fire or around the parlor table, the home their castle." If Colby is right, then the issue of hearths is still another way in which Dickens does not conform to the perceived models of his era.

[66] Joseph Allen Boone, *Tradition Counter Tradition: Love and the Form of Fiction* (Chicago: The U of Chicago P, 1987) 8 - 10, defines marriage as the heart of the traditional love-plot of the nineteenth-century, and a symbol of order. Marriage is a move toward stasis and stability, as the closed happy ending upholds the "wedlock ideal," the "desired goal and natural end." The novelist, Boone argues, coerces reality in order to convince us that beyond the event of marriage, no comment is necessary. For a still different view of the "good marriage," see Nancy Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel* (New York: Oxford UP, 1987) 48. Armstrong sees marriage in the novel as a way of resolving class conflict by enclosing such conflict "within a domestic sphere," and demonstrating "that despite the vast inequities of the age virtually anyone could find gratification within this private framework . . . . in this way, novels helped to transform the household into what might be called the 'counterimage' of the modern marketplace, an apolitical realm of culture within the culture as a whole."
[67] Houghton 343, for instance, defines family in terms of Ruskin's essay "Of Queen's Gardens," focusing on the idea of family as a source of virtues and a shelter from the anxieties of life.


[72] Laing 6 - 14.

[73] Skura 78 - 79.

[74] Skura 59.

[75] For an example of changes in the fantasy of need, compare Dombey, united in oceanic, boundless, limitless love with Florence, to John Harmon, united in a much more earthly bliss with flirtatious but womanly and maternal little Bella, who has to be tricked into knowing what is good for her - and him.

[76] There are several more recent studies of Dickens which read his life and work at least in part through the concept of the family. For instance, Lawrence Frank, Charles Dickens and the Romantic Self (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1984), Karen Chase, Eros and Psyche: The Representation of Personality in Charlotte Brontë, Charles Dickens, and
George Eliot (New York: Methuen, 1984), and Robert Higbie, Character and Structure in the English Novel (N. p.: U Presses of Florida, 1984). None of the three, however, places familial and gender roles at the heart of the discussion.

[77] Carol Christ, "Victorian Masculinity and the Angel in the House," A Widenig Sphere: Changing Roles of Victorian Women, ed. Martha Vicinus (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1980) 146 - 152, argues that in the nineteenth century, man is defined by his desire to achieve, but that desire only brings him anxiety and pain. He experiences intense ambivalence about a concept of manhood defined as active and aggressive because both are frightening and unattractive qualities. Woman, who "represents a possibility of freedom," embodies attractive qualities, and so the artist (Christ deals primarily with Patmore and Tennyson, but cites Dickens as another instance of the same case) idealizes feminine passivity because it frees women from the obligation of accomplishment that man finds burdensome. The same ambivalence, Christ adds, holds for sexuality. Victorian men idealized women's purity and were ambivalent about their own sexuality. She believes that male images of women tell us as much about the males themselves as they do about women. Their idealization of women's passivity is an expression of values they themselves would like to possess. I am suggesting that Dickens, in fact, makes his men passive, and tries to make them asexual, in complex ways, and for complicated reasons.

[78] Barickman 84, notes that Dickens always operates "within the context of the Victorian middle-class idealization of the family, which is itself based on idealization of Victorian women." The authors
believe that Dickens is involved with a "fundamental reconsideration of the place of women in society," and that by distorting female roles he raises fundamental questions about his culture's sexual practices.


[80] Skura 126.


[82] Quoted in Schiebinger 69.

[83] Davidoff and Hall 322, also point out the contradictory expectations of women which were a part of the ideology of gender. "Idealized womanhood was asexual and chaste, yet the supreme goal for women was marriage and motherhood, conditions which publicly proclaimed sexuality." Helena Michie, The Flesh Made Word: Female Figures and Women's Bodies (New York: Oxford UP, 1987) 5, traces how Victorian novels "center on a physically beautiful heroine and trace the disposition of her body in either marriage or death," but the "body itself appears only as a series of tropes or rhetorical codes." Language itself is used as a means to desexualize the female body, a process we will see Dickens enacting as we examine the early novels.

Books, 1974) 271, offers an economic explanation for the demand for female asexuality. Women were idealized as asexual in order to allow men to repress their own sexual instincts, pleasure, and eroticism so that they could use their energies solely for work and production.


[85] Pecksniff, for example, in his role as "Penis Man," metaphorically rapes Mary Graham in his garden. His "fat thumb" traces the course of her blue veins; his eyelids are heavy and languid; he "chafes" her captive hand and clasps her waist; threatens to bite, but then kisses her finger instead; and is then described, post coitus, as "shrank and reduced" and "limp."


[89] Skura 57.
CHAPTER TWO
OUT OF THE WOMB: CONSTRUCTING THE HERO

Dickens appended the subtitle The Parish Boy's Progress to Oliver Twist, and tells us, in his Preface, that he "wished to show, in little Oliver, the principle of Good surviving through every adverse circumstance, and triumphing at last." [1] In the final quarter of the narrative, as Monks is about to divulge his secrets, Mr. Brownlow defines "the object we have in view"; that is, "the discovery of Oliver's parentage, and regaining for him the inheritance of which...he has been fraudulently deprived" (373). It would seem that Oliver, "the principle of Good," requires help in "surviving" and "triumphing," and that his triumph is not simply that of virtue in its well-known guise of its own reward, but encompasses rewards of a more material nature as well. But if the object which Mr. Brownlow has in view is genealogical and economic, the object toward which the text drives is both more urgent and more difficult to attain.

The narrative seeks to enact the destruction of its own dark and ambiguous world, a world in which good and evil are fatally mixed in the human psyche, a world of blood and pain in which safety is only a temporary illusion, and omnivorous mobs hunt down the isolated and terrified male. Sadistic human predators hunt Oliver like an animal for blood sport; sadistic spectators, excited by an animal at bay, threaten to engulf Sikes with their sheer numbers; "gleaming eyes" penetrate Fagin with the white glare of their collective gaze. In place of this dark world, the text tries to construct a world of
light: a Great Good Place in which a child can be conceived without the stain of human sexuality, born without agony or tears, and nurtured in safety and sunshine by a beautiful young sister/mother with whom the child is forever joined in blissful unity. In the process of destroying the dark world, the text rescues Oliver from a series of bad parents and supplies him with a "little society" in which he can find "perfect happiness." The parish boy's progress requires nothing less than a dystopia destroyed by catastrophe and replaced by utopia. We know that happiness, safety, and contentment are achieved at closure because the narrator tells us so. But the original world created within this text is so dark, and the punishments inflicted on the bodies of its characters so extreme, that the triumph of a principle of Good becomes suspect, as does the attainment of the Great Good Place in the world of light.

With some asperity, Dickens tells his readers that the purpose of his book is "the stern truth": "IT IS TRUE." [2] The reader is left to decide wherein truth and reality may lie, in the dark world or the light. Whether the enactment of a primal fantasy of fear and need, in which a child is starved and stalked, but finally is united with the good mother, is reality. Or whether stern truth lies in textual representations of the body in which the hard-won rewards of love and safety, declared attained by the narrator, are both questioned and withheld by a subtext of illness. Does truth reside in muddy Folly Ditch, or in the village church? Is reality in the sun-drenched room where Nancy's blood dances and sparkles, or in Rose's garden? In a fictional world where parents are so uniformly dangerous, and marriages
so clearly destructive, does truth lie in Rose Maylie's talismanic nurture, or in Monks's mother's malevolence? The text creates two alternatives, the dark criminal world of the city and the sunny middle-class world of the countryside; the narrator swears to the destruction of the first and the triumph of the second. But the terror for Oliver, narrator, and reader alike is that the two worlds may participate in each other, despite the best efforts of the narrative voice to keep the one free of the contagion of the other. The worse terror is that perhaps only the dark world participates in reality and stern truth, while the light world is a hastily appended coda, mere sentimental wish fulfillment.

When a narrative begins with the birth of its protagonist, it might be expected to deal with accretions to his personality, growth of character, and the acquisition of idiosyncracies. Not so in the case of Oliver. He reaches the apex of his individuality at the age of nine, when he makes his only memorable speech, "Please, sir, I want some more," a speech emblematic of the voracious oral need which organizes this text. Far from acquiring complexity in the course of his "progress," Oliver sheds parents and temptations alike, remaining passive and seamless. He is provided with a succession of parental figures: first a series of mothers, then fathers. None of them proves adequate; all are merely replications in some sense of his biological parents: an absent, cold mother, and a weak, erring father.

The newly-born Oliver is described by the narrator as "an item of mortality," and a "burden." He is greeted by a mother whose physical presence is signified solely by a pale face, a faint voice, "cold
white lips," and frozen blood. She promptly demonstrates her maternal inadequacy by her willingness to die, thus abandoning him to the mercies of his second mother, a drunken pauper woman who dresses him as he cries lustily, the only lusty act he ever commits. There is "no female" in all the workhouse who can "impart to Oliver Twist the consolation and nourishment of which he stood in need," and so the child is put into the hands of Mrs. Mann, the baby farmer who makes her living by depriving her small charges of the barest necessities, beats them when they presume to be hungry, and locks them in the coal cellar for good measure. [3] "You feel as a mother, Mrs. Mann," Mr. Bumble tells her, perhaps unintentionally revealing a good deal about the quality of mothering in this narrative.

Having sampled the nurture of mothers, Oliver is taken from Mrs. Mann's care to try his luck in the world of fathers. The workhouse board, the gentleman in the white waistcoat, and Mr. Bumble all combine to make Oliver as miserable as an orphan/burden can be made. After his request for more, they seek to remove him from the collective hands of the parish by apprenticing him to a chimney sweep who has already "bruised three or four boys to death." Saved from that fate, he is apprenticed to the undertaking Sowerberrys, who replicate the Dickensian parental paradigm: the weak, frightened husband and his cruel, domineering wife. But more ambiguous fathers are to come.

The Artful Dodger rescues and feeds the runaway Oliver on the road to London, the first kindness the child has ever received. He is delivered to Fagin as a potential recruit to the pickpocket business, a life which has its attractions for the starved, abused orphan. Fagin
feeds him, and someone (the Dodger? Fagin?) puts him "gently" to bed. There is companionship and warmth with Fagin and his boys, even laughter and praise. Oliver laughs only twice in the course of this narrative, and on both occasions his mirth is inspired by Fagin. The Jew becomes increasingly sinister as the plot unfolds, but even after Oliver's recapture the old man continues to provide camaraderie and a sense of community. When Fagin exerts himself, Oliver "could not help laughing heartily, and showing that he was amused"; Oliver "laughed till the tears ran down his face" (184, 110). There is little enough in the landscape of this text to cause laughter, but what there is, is associated with a world of outcast males living without women.

The laughter ends in catastrophe, as perhaps it must in a text in which the principle of Good triumphs. Oliver is rescued from a life of criminality by Mr. Brownlow, his next father. If Fagin, Nancy, and the Dodger are a mixed bag so far as "family" is concerned, Mr. Brownlow is simply inadequate in the role of father. He sends the child out into the dangerous streets of London after dark, carrying valuable books and a five pound note, thereby inviting disaster as effectively as if he, like Oliver's other fathers, intended harm to the boy. Try as it may, the text cannot create a wise, strong father. Good men are weak; strong men are evil. There can be no doubt that Mr. Brownlow is intended to be a male authority who can guarantee order and safety. Yet he fails to do so, as so many father figures in the novels to come will also fail. Rescue and safety, unlike laughter and camaraderie, are embodied in female forms.
Just as Fagin and Brownlow are flawed as fathers, Oliver's first female ally is seriously flawed as a maternal figure. Nancy's loyalties are divided, a fatal state for a Dickens heroine. She is torn between her erotic love and loyalty for Sikes, and her protective maternal feelings for Oliver. First she betrays and entraps Oliver, returning him to Fagin's clutches. Then, undergoing a sudden change of heart, she tries to save him from the jaws of Sikes's dog and the blows of Fagin's club. Nancy's internal conflict reduces her to hysterical screams and tears, and violent threats against both Fagin and Sikes. She tears her hair and clothing, biting her lips until they bleed, a prophecy of more bloodshed to come. She vacillates between loyalty to Sikes and compassion for Oliver to the end of her life; it might be said that she dies of her vacillation. Clearly the child can rely on neither Brownlow nor Nancy. He must find someone else who is powerful enough to provide safety and happiness for him.

The text is not long in finding still another mother for Oliver. He is rescued and cared for by Rose Maylie and her aunt. Lovely, calm, orderly Rose, the antithesis of blowsy, hysterical Nancy, is created solely to fulfill a deprived boy's need to be nursed, loved, taught, and fed by a suitable mother at last. There are further complications to be sure, but in the end a united Oliver and Rose, aunt and nephew, brother and sister, son and mother, approach as nearly to a condition of "perfect happiness as can ever be known in this changing world" (476). Mr. Brownlow adopts Oliver, and educates him, while Rose not only mothers him but provides constant companionship as well. The two, each fulfilling multiple roles for the other, spend all their days
together. Oliver's demand for more has been satisfied: a mother is provided, virtue rewarded, and hungers fed. On the topmost level of the narrative, its manifest content, where families are constructed, the narrator has constructed a harmonious community, a nurturing mother, and a happy ending. Let us look now at the layer just below, at the primal fantasy of need which drives the narrative to protect and feed its emotionally and physically starved hero.
One of the ways in which the Dickensian text achieves the protection of its male protagonist is through splitting and externalization. In the case of *Oliver Twist*, Oliver makes one memorable speech and laughs twice, seeming otherwise to be an emotional void at the heart of his own story. He has been stripped of all affect, vitality, and fault in order to insure that he remain a "principle of Good." This text fears passion, desire, and emotion to such a degree that it cannot allow Oliver to feel any of them. As if terrified that the experience of resentment or even liveliness might cause an aroused Oliver to rage out of its control, it embeds him in a monochromatic passivity and goodness very near to death itself. The text deals with its fears by splitting off all human weaknesses and emotions from its protagonist, and externalizing them in other characters.

Bruno Bettelheim discusses the twin processes of splitting and externalization in fairy tales, as they offer figures onto which the child can externalize what goes on in his mind, in controllable ways. Fairy tales show the child how he can embody his destructive wishes in one figure, gain desired satisfactions from another, identify with a third, have ideal attachments with a fourth . . . as his needs of the moment require. [4]
Dickens uses splitting in _Oliver Twist_ in precisely this manner, in order to retain control and to quarantine destructive wishes. He protects Oliver, the narrator, and himself from inadmissible desires by the fairy-tale-like creation of a perfectly good child, and the destruction of the perfectly evil world which threatens him.

As a gangrenous limb is amputated, so evil is eliminated. Consequently, the narrator can continue to believe in the simplicity and virtue of his characters, and in the triumph of Good in a world of light. In such a world, nuances of character and morality are not a problem, nor do characters exceed narratival control. If they should threaten to do so, their quotient of evil is simply increased, or they are removed from the text. Fagin, for example, becomes less ambiguously sympathetic as the narrative unfolds; he can then be safely hanged, a black-hearted madman. The attractive Dodger is transported, the newly conscience-stricken Nancy murdered. The text, able to deal only with the absolutes of black and white, concentrates the self-destructive wishes of the ordinary personality in Monks, and confines male genital sexuality to Sikes. [5] Because of the deployment of splitting and externalization, the narrator remains in control of his _dramatis personae_ who are like combatants in a psychomachia, rather than characters confronting emotional problems in a realistic novel.

When Oliver, as in a waking dream, "sees" Monks and Fagin at his window, he is actually confronting externalized parts of himself. The two criminals leave no footprints because they are components of the child's own psyche: the helpless and passive male child is the core personality; Monks is the guilt-ridden portion, so full of self-hatred
and unvented rage that he tears at his own body; the androgynous Fagin is simultaneously bad mother and bad father, himself hungry, dissatisfied, and needy. Oliver is thus confronted at the window by a hungry and malevolent engenderer who would cannibalize his now comfortable, well-fed "son" if he could, and a hungry and malevolent half-brother who embodies guilt and vice. Both desire to corrupt the core personality in order to integrate it with themselves, on their own terms.

The narrator takes great care in describing Oliver's situation for us in this scene. Oliver is in "a kind of sleep"; he has no control over his thoughts or body, yet he can see everything. Reality and imagination are blended in a hypnagogic state state in which the psyche is able to confront its own darker, unacknowledged facets. Moreover, the confrontation takes place while Rose is still recovering from her illness and thus cannot supply her talismanic protection to the child. Oliver sees the Other, who is also himself, a fact which accounts for Monks's extreme (and otherwise inexplicable) hatred of Oliver, and Oliver's instinctive fear of Monks. "If a crowd of devils were to put themselves into his exact shape, and he stood among them, there is something that would tell me how to point him out," says Monks of his half-brother (309). Oliver's reaction to having seen portions of his own psyche is just as extreme: "their look was as firmly impressed upon his memory, as if it had been deeply carved in stone, and set before him from his birth." Both comments speak of a recognition so profoundly shocking that it has its roots in something much deeper than
a brief encounter at a window. The scene is not engendered by the exigencies of plot, but by the imperatives of a split psyche.

The dreamlike atmosphere of the confrontation calls particular attention to it, but these encounters with the self are frequent in Dickens's novels. Throughout the canon, when the hero meets his villainous, split-off self, instantaneous hatred and violence ensue, both quite unaccounted for by the plot. When Kit Nubbles meets Quilp for the first time, their mutual hatred is immediate. When Nicholas Nickleby first encounters Hawk, when Pip meets Orlick, when David sees Uriah, when Tom Pinch encounters Jonas, there is an exchange of blows. Such inexplicable violence is all the more remarkable when we remember the otherwise amiable and passive personalities of Kit, Nicholas, Pip, and David. The animosity and revulsion of these encounters between a passive, often asexual male and an overtly sexual and powerful villain are the signs of a split between two parts of the self.

There are two occasions, however, on which the idealized, featureless Oliver becomes more than a psychic cypher, when he acquires the body and emotions of a terrified, deprived child. Both occasions serve to reveal and emphasize the primal fantasy of male need for nurture and safety which underlies the manifest content of this text. On the first occasion, as Mr. Bumble delivers the weeping child to Mr. Sowerberry, the narrator tells us that Oliver is emotionally damaged because

instead of possessing too little feeling, [he]
possessed rather too much; and was in a fair way of
being reduced, for life, to a state of brutal
stupidity and sullenness by the ill-usage he had received. \(72\)

The narrator's rhetoric fails to make Oliver's misery and ill-usage a reality. But then, in a few phrases, the narrator shows us a child goaded to the behavior of an animal by starvation and abuse, and makes immediate the intense sense of deprivation which drives this narrative and pervades this world. Oliver covers his face with his hands, and weeps "until the tears sprung out from between his thin and bony fingers." He goes on to tell Mr. Bumble of his loneliness, of his fear that everyone hates him, but it is the "thin and bony fingers" which speak so eloquently in the child's behalf. Delivered to the tender mercies of Mrs. Sowerberry, he is fed cold scraps set aside for the family dog. Once again the narrator makes us feel and see the starving child. Oliver's eyes "glistened at the mention of meat"; he "was trembling with eagerness to devour it." He tears at the dog's scraps with "terrible avidity," with "all the ferocity of famine." The narrator, still very much present, instructs us with irony and indignation: "There is only one thing I should like better; and that would be to see the Philosopher making the same sort of meal himself, with the same relish." But Oliver's glistening eyes and terrible avidity are far more effective than the narrator's rhetorical anger.

For a moment, the child's extremity is real for us. It is no accident that this narrator communicates most effectively when the subject is a hunger whose origins lie not primarily in the stomach. \[6\]
The second point at which the primal fantasy of need is clearly disclosed occurs when the narrator shows us the child as quarry: an exhausted, terrified animal with no one to protect him. He is chased by a mob, less because they believe him to be a thief than because there is a passion for hunting something deeply implanted in the human breast. One wretched breathless child, panting with exhaustion; terror in his looks; agony in his eyes; large drops of perspiration streaming down his face, strains every nerve to make head upon his pursuers; and as they follow on his track, and gain upon him every instant, they hail his decreasing strength with still louder shouts, and whoop and scream with joy. (116)

The terror of the hunted child is almost palpable in this scene, as real as the blood lust and intense pleasure in cruelty exhibited by his hunters. In a short paragraph, the narrative voice makes Oliver's fear and danger clear, as well as the cruelty of the world in which he struggles to survive. Neither Fagin nor Sikes in his worst moments can surpass the casual brutality of this London crowd. It is no wonder that only the gift of a talismanic mother, and the total erasure of this dark world, can ensure Oliver's safety.

The fluidity and transpositions of the narrator during the course of this scene are as striking as the reality of the world he manages to convey. First he hunts with the hounds; then he runs with the foxes. He alternately enjoys the excitement of the chase, and is horrified by the agony it causes, as he both watches and participates. Initially,
he is fascinated with the hunt, speaking of "the magic" of the phrase "Stop thief!" His excitement is reflected in his hyphenated adjectives: "pell-mell, helter-skelter, slap-dash." And in his verbs: tearing, yelling, screaming, knocking down, rousing up, astonishing, splashing, rattling, rushing. And then, quite suddenly, he sees, as if for the first time, the agony of the hunted prey and the cruelty of the mob. He shifts his position, changes his voice, switches his allegiance, all in the space of a few words. As Oliver is the quintessential needy Dickensian male, so we have just witnessed the quintessential floating, fluid, disjunctive performance by the Dickensian narrator. We will see the same mercurial changes in the novels to come. [7]

There is still another instance of the primal fantasy of need, embodied in a single moment of terror but standing for an entire world characterized by deprivation. Oliver has just been entrapped by Nancy and Sikes. Witnesses see a huge man beating a frail child, the man aided by a dog who slavers and lunges at the boy's throat. Far from offering aid to the child, they applaud what they see. The harder Sikes beats Oliver, the more bystanders encourage him with shouts of "That's right! That's the only way of bringing him to his senses!" and "It'll do him good!" (157 - 158). The narrator sums up Oliver's situation, and the dark world for which the situation stands:

Weak with recent illness; stupefied by the blows and the suddenness of the attack; terrified by the fierce growling of the dog, and the brutality of the man; overpowered by the conviction of the bystanders that
he really was the hardened little wretch he was described to be; what could one poor child do? Darkness had set in; it was a low neighborhood; no help was near; resistance was useless. In another moment he was dragged into a labyrinth of dark narrow courts, and was forced along them at a pace which rendered the few cries he dared to give utterance to, unintelligible. It was of little moment, indeed, whether they were intelligible or no; for there was nobody to care for them, had they been ever so plain.

"What could one poor child do?" In this scene, the prototypical Dickens hero is born. He will grow older and acquire complexity, but always he will bear inside himself this child, Oliver. The project at the heart of future narratives, as it is the project at the heart of this one, will be to save him from the "dark labyrinth of narrow courts." The trapped child in a dark world is the outward and visible sign of the inward fantasies of need which drive the Dickens heroes, and power their narratives.

Perhaps nowhere in the canon is the male yearning for the nurturing mother rendered so clearly as the scene in which Oliver sleeps and dreams under Rose's tender care while he recovers from a wound. Rose smooths Oliver's hair, and her tears fall on his forehead:

The boy stirred, and smiled in his sleep, as though these marks of pity and compassion had awakened some pleasant dream of a love and affection he had never known. Thus, a strain of gentle music, or the rippling
of water in a silent place, or the odour of a flower,
or the mention of a familiar word, will sometimes
call up sudden dim remembrances of scenes that never
were, in this life; which vanish like a breath; which
some brief memory of a happier existence, long gone by,
would seem to have awakened; which no voluntary exertion
of the mind can ever recall. (268, my italics)

The passage enacts the dream of the compassionate, loving
mother/madonna. The child Oliver cannot possibly have a memory of such
love, having never experienced a mother, but the narrator remembers, or
wishes to remember, or believes he remembers a "happier existence,"
while at the same time admitting it is a memory of "scenes that never
were, in this life." Rose sums up Oliver's plight as she begs Dr.
Losberne and Mrs. Maylie to consider "that he may never have known a
mother's love, or the comfort of a home." That night "Oliver's pillow
was smoothed by gentle hands," and "loveliness and virtue watched him
as he slept" (271). The object of the primal fantasy has been
fulfilled; Oliver has found the young and lovely woman who was saving
up especially for him.

We have examined the text twice: the first time on the level of
its realistic content, where families are formed and domestic happiness
is granted; the second time on the level of the primal fantasy, where
"memories of a happier existence" are rendered as present actuality.
In each case, we have discovered a happy ending. Let us look at the
narrative yet again, at a third level lying beneath those of family and
fantasy: the layer which enacts the coded dream work of the body, its
illnesses and its punishments. In this layer of the palimpsest, a very different story is told. On both previously explored levels, the creation of two separate worlds, a dark and a light, and the splitting off of negative qualities, served to achieve happiness and fulfillment for Oliver and the "little society." On the level of the dreamwork of the body, however, the narrator's assertion of a happy ending is undermined by the text. Here, other stories are told and other voices are heard, as we look at events through still a third prism.
The world of the workhouse into which Oliver is born is cruel and abusive, like the rural town from which he runs away. Children in this world are victims: they die in chimneys; they are scalded, starved, and beaten. The heavily ironic tones of the narrator, however, distance both him and us from this agony. There is enough material for a nightmare in the town, but the atmosphere and immediacy of nightmare are reserved for Oliver's arrival in London. Once in the city, the narrator exposes the child to new varieties of danger and brutishness. Although Oliver's life has already been nothing if not wretched, the narrator tells us that

[a] dirtier or more wretched place he had never seen.

The street was very narrow and muddy, and the air was impregnated with filthy odours. There were a good many small shops; but the only stock in trade appeared to be heaps of children, who, even at that time of night, were crawling in and out at the doors, or screaming from the inside . . . . drunken men and women were positively wallowing in filth; and from several of the door-ways, great ill-looking fellows were cautiously emerging, bound, to all appearance, on no very well-disposed or harmless errands. (103)

The mud, the dirt, the filthy odors - and then the immediate juxtaposition of the children with this filth, children who are mere "heaps" of refuse. Moreover, the children are bought and sold; it is
they who are the "stock in trade." Their screams may be of agony, hysteria, or something worse; there is no way to tell. Heaps of filth; heaps of children; it is all the same to the "drunken men and women" and the "ill-looking fellows" engaged in "no harmless errands."

This urban nightmare makes the workhouse look almost wholesome. The narrator's description invites us to consider whether Oliver will also become someone's stock in trade, his body bought and sold. The terrors of the country town are physical, those of the city are psychic and moral. The narrator's vision of the town is disapproving, eliciting compassion, while his vision of London is excremental, eliciting revulsion. He is ironic in the town, fascinated in the city.

London comprises a world so threatening (perhaps even so attractive, and the more threatening for that) that only its obliteration can guarantee safety. The denizens of this dark world form the mob surrounding the roof on which Sikes is brought to bay. The crowd is murderous, infinitely more murderous than Sikes himself, an "infuriated throng," pressing forward "with the ecstasy of madmen," "joined... in one loud furious roar." It seems "as though the whole city had poured its population out to curse him"; there are "tiers and tiers of faces in every window; cluster upon cluster of people clinging to every housetop." The very bridges bend beneath the weight of the crowd, and "still the current poured on to find some nook or hole from which to vent their shouts, and only for an instant see the wretch."

The crush is so great that "the narrow ways were completely blocked up" in the "universal eagerness for his capture," the mob so desirous of blood and violence that its members suffocate and trample and crush
each other in their ferocity. Sikes's actual death by hanging may be only a melodramatic cliché lifted from the conventions of the lurid thriller, but this crowd is serious business. The mob is the body of the city: merciless, voracious, alien. An entire urban population, the very city itself, is cast as the Other, just as the crowd which earlier chased Oliver was the entire human race as Enemy. [8]

Fagin's trial is equally surreal and nightmarish. The court in which the Jew is tried is

paved, from floor to roof, with human faces. Inquisitive and eager eyes peered from every inch of space . . . . all looks were fixed upon one man - the Jew. Before him and behind: above, below, on the right and on the left: he seemed to stand surrounded by a firmament, all bright with gleaming eyes.

He stood there, in all this glare of living light, with one hand resting on the wooden slab . . . (466)

All those eager eyes are fixed on him with such intensity that they become a "glare of living light," driving him to madness just as Sikes is driven to his death by the conflated gazes of his victim and the ferocious mob. When Fagin is condemned to die on Monday, there is a "peal of joy from the populace outside"; a "great multitude" assembles to see him hang. Fagin and Sikes die of their isolation, mortally wounded by the gaze of men and women who demand not moral retribution, but a bloody spectacle and a bloody scapegoat. This gaze which disciplines and punishes, which is "penetrating" and "gleaming" like knives, is every bit the equal of the institutional gaze Foucault
posits. [9] Once again, we are asked to consider the terrors of a dark world in which it is impossible to decide which are the more brutalized and brutalizing: the two criminals, or the two mobs who cannot get their fill of looking.

D. A. Miller argues that the police control Fagin, while Brownlow and his middle-class world control Oliver, and get rid of Monks. [10] I am suggesting that it is neither the police nor institutionalized authority who punish Sikes and Fagin, but the gaze of the entire world now become alien and Other, enforcing the individual's isolation and humiliation, and pushing him finally to madness and death. Nor does the middle-class Brownlow control Oliver; rather, Oliver's need for Rose, the mother figure who can protect him from this terrifying world cast as Other, controls both the child and the text's plot.

The narrator's initial irony and indignation have vanished, replaced by a fascination with the process and trappings of punishment, with the bloodlust of the mob, with the imminence of the ultimate isolation, death. Like Fagin and Sikes, he sees eyes everywhere, and he is complicitous with those eyes. He sees crowds of people who are as avid for death and punishment as Oliver was avid for scraps of food, and he is complicitous with them as well. He describes personalities as they disintegrate, and he watches the disintegration with fascination. And then, as if to make up for his own obsession and complicity, or to save himself as well as Oliver, he erases that world of filth, blood, and guilt, and whisks the child away to a light world of "joyous little faces" and "merry prattle," of "goodness and charity," of "smiling untiring discharge of domestic
duties." But his conventional phrases describing the world of light are pale indeed in comparison with the vivid tropes used to describe the living river of the mob at Folly Ditch, a mob whose density clots the streets of the city as blood might clot and block the body's vascular system. "Joyous little faces" don't carry the charge of the avidly cruel faces and "eager eyes" which "pave" Fagin's courtroom. Rose and her Edenic world are abstractions, and the narrator's pallid language in describing that world is an index to his lack of conviction.

Monks, the third villain of the dark world, is often dismissed as a cliche from cheap melodrama, a character who "need not claim much of the reader's attention." [11] But in fact Monks is at the very heart of this novel so concerned with child abuse and dysfunctional families. It is his story that the text does not allow itself to tell, although in Monks's youth he needed nurture and rescue from a vicious mother and an uncaring, weak father fully as much as his half-brother, Oliver, requires rescue in the narrative's present. The text spares Monks the public punishment that Sikes and Fagin endure. Monks punishes himself every day, biting and tearing at his own flesh, suffering fits which leave him writhing and foaming. Within the body of a man (he is "tall," and "strongly made") are the vices and terrors of a child who has turned its hatred and rage on itself. His mannerisms and behavior hint of the solitary sexual practices or "unhealthy vices" of the Victorian medical manuals. The bites and scars on his flesh are signs of a self-hatred so extreme that his autoeroticism verges on an exercise in masochism. Just as Oliver is
carefully represented as a signifier for asexual innocence, and the criminal Sikes for violent genital sexuality, so Monks is a signifier for the dark side of infantile orality, expressed in his self-mutilation and unnamed vices. [12]

Monks wants to punish Oliver, to see the child corrupted, but he is terrified of committing any act of violence himself: "I won't shed blood; it's always found out and haunts a man besides." The simultaneous fear of and fascination with blood in this text is symptomatic of its dark world, and of male fear and desire. Monks is afraid of the dark and of being alone: "the way is lonely and the night is dark, and I hate both when I am alone." He is, in fact, more convincingly childlike in his fears than the genteel and controlled Oliver. Monks dies of "an attack of his old disorder," in prison in the New World. We are not told exactly what his old disorder might be, although syphilis is congruent with the disease whose symptoms are described by Mr. Brownlow as the consequence of

all evil passions, vice, and profligacy, [which]
festered, till they found a vent in a hideous
disease which has made your face an index even to
your mind. (439)

But syphilis cannot account for Monks's attacks on his own body. His parents are his real disease; their sins are written on both his body and his psyche. This narrative, however, can deal only with the innocence of a child's body, not with the distorted and thwarted sexual desire of the adult. It can deal only with externalized threats, not with those internal menaces which are its subtext: the fear of
sexuality; a combined fear of and desire for the murderous mother; a
dread of blood and physical intimacy; and the horror of being alone.
It is these internal threats which maim the male body and terrify the
male psyche. But in this this text so determined that the principle of
Good should triumph, only an innocent child's progress is narratable
while adult torments remain quarantined in bodies destined to die
violent deaths.

Even Oliver does not emerge unscathed. Throughout the years of
neglect, starvation, and abuse in his native town, he is never ill. At
the beginning of his life, the narrator speculates that it is his very
lack of family which allows him to survive: if "Oliver had been
surrounded by careful grandmothers, anxious aunts, experienced nurses,
and doctors of profound wisdom, he would most inevitably and
indubitably have been killed in no time" (45). Unlike Monks, Oliver
is free of the "explosive intimacy" of the disfiguring, dysfunctional
family. [13] Good physical health is equated with freedom from
oppressive, vicious parents: the orphan is free to move toward the
nurture of the idealized sister/mother rather than forced to remain
trapped with a vicious biological mother. The narrator knows precisely
what kind of damage a family can do, especially that damage enacted by
a murderous mother and a weak father. He shows us that damage in his
portrait of Monks, but he gifts his hero with orphanhood.

Apparently healthy with Mrs. Mann and the Sowerberrys, Oliver
remains healthy in Fagin's care. Even when Fagin imprisons him, the
child is never ill. He experiences serious illness on only two
occasions, both of them when he is in the charge of respectable, middle-
class caretakers. The first illness occurs immediately after he is taken to Mr. Brownlow's house. It is described as a physical illness, but the child's symptoms are strikingly like those suffered by hysterical or anorexic heroines who are struggling with an emotional problem. Oliver is "dwindling away," consumed by the "dry and wasting heat of fever." When he regains consciousness, he can neither walk nor eat. It is a psychic crisis rendered as physical illness, the illness intended to be a warrant of Oliver's delicate gentility. The child had been fed, and had gladly eaten. He had laughed, shown striking aptitude at learning the trade of pickpocket, and had generally fattened and prospered under Fagin's care. His illness is designed to purge him of the disease of Fagin, to guarantee that he has not acquired any of that dangerous, lower-class vitality so much a part of the Dodger, and even of Charley Bates, a vitality which could only be an unwelcome, disruptive element in the orderly Maylie/Brownlow world. The illness also has the secondary advantage of guaranteeing to Oliver the total care that is the dream of the damaged psyche: it requires that he be fed, carried, watched, and cosseted. His recovery in the Brownlow household is an illusory and only temporary happy ending, however; the good mother has not yet been provided, nor is Brownlow a protective or capable enough father to keep the child safe from recapture.

The child's second illness is a repetition, a second guarantee of his goodness. [14] Oliver has laughed for the second time, "heartily" in fact, and the narrator tells us that "the wily old Jew had the boy in his toils," that "he was now instilling into his soul the poison
which he hoped would blacken it, and change its hue for ever" (185). That "poison" is cleansed from his system by this second illness (the aftermath of a gunshot wound), which, like the first, "reduced him sadly." Once again his body is thin and wasted, lacking vitality, sans laughter, but certified to be free of contamination from the male, outlaw world of Fagin and Sikes. Illness purifies his body so that he can enter the female kingdom of goodness over which Rose Maylie presides.

The safety Oliver finds in his middle-class world of goodness and light is not without ambiguity, however. Safety and the triumph of the principle of Good, nurture and the triumph of the female principle of Maternity, are closely associated by the text with death. Rose nurses Oliver so well, her ministrations are so tender, the narrator tells us, that the child "could have died without a murmur" (271). Later, when Rose and Mrs. Maylie take Oliver into the country, it is to a countryside of death, designed to ready the visitor for his demise, to teach him to weave garlands for graves. Men who feel "the hand of death upon them" come here to die, to sink into their tombs without protest. Oliver's wasted body does not die here, but his potential for independence and vitality certainly perishes. It is impossible to ignore the fact that this psychic death occurs under the care of Rose, the mother/madonna, the supposed lifegiver. [15] If the dark world of male outlaws is menacing, the light world of female caretakers is no less threatening as it equates love and safety with death and stasis. The text offers a double bind: to be denied love is, like Monks, to be deformed, to lose life; to receive love is, like Oliver, to lose
vitality. The world of darkness celebrates death and violence. The
world of light celebrates death and sterility: Oliver and Rose pass
"whole hours together in picturing the friends whom they had so sadly
lost." The light world is as frightening in its genteel way as the
dark. The text thus enacts a narratival Catch 22: there are two
alternatives, but both lead to loss.

Just as this early novel reveals a process of psychic splitting
in the male protagonist, so does it disclose the classic Victorian
splitting of the female heroine, but with a difference. In Rose and
Nancy, Dickens gives us the Madonna and the Whore, but both require
discipline for their bodies as well as for their hearts. [16] Rose,
seventeen years old, slight, blue-eyed, with a "smile . . . made for
Home, and fireside peace and happiness," will reappear throughout
Dickens's work; Nancy, like Nell, is one of a kind. Dickens remained
fascinated with Sikes's murder of Nancy throughout his life, and
performed it with such intense excitement in his late public readings
that his audiences were mesmerized, and he himself was drained of
energy. What is it about Nancy that makes it necessary for Dickens to
kill her fictionally, and then later to kill her repeatedly in the
public halls of England? Naturally she must be punished for her sexual
relationship with Sikes, but she is also the prototypical prostitute
with the heart of gold. Surely her good qualities might save her from
death, as Martha Endell is later saved. A look at Nancy's development
in the course of the narrative offers an answer.
When we first meet her, Nancy is the prostitute of theatrical cliché, clad in red gown, green boots, and yellow curl papers: sly, loud, vulgar, and not noticeably discontented with either her life or her profession. But Nancy suffers a change of heart, becoming maternally protective of Oliver, and regretting the kind of life she leads. Nonetheless, she is instrumental in planning the robbery of the Maylie house, and in involving Oliver in the crime. She reaffirms her loyalty to Sikes, and Fagin judges the situation accurately when he mutters to himself: "The man against the child, for a bag of gold!" (194). At this juncture, Nancy's sexual loyalty to Sikes is greater than her maternal feeling for Oliver. Even so, she uses liquor to numb her feelings of guilt, and tells Fagin that she cannot bear to have Oliver near her, for the "sight of him turns me against myself, and all of you" (240).

When she overhears the plot between Monks and Fagin against Oliver, she finally intervenes, revealing their plan to Rose. She remains loyal to Sikes, however, and even to Fagin: the one man her lover; the two together her family. She reveals her bondage to Sikes as she perciptiently remarks, "I am drawn back to him through every suffering and ill-usage; and I should be, I believe, if I knew that I was to die by his hand at last" (365). She tells Rose that she has allowed Sikes "to fill the place that has been a blank" for all her life, indicating that Sikes fills her both sexually and as an unborn child might fill the womb, providing someone to love for the prostitute who has "only one feeling of the woman left" (366). She recognizes and voices the unspoken assumption of the later novels that the woman
must both serve the male, and protect him. She shows Oliver the bruises on her neck and arms, and says: "I have borne all this for you already . . . don't let me suffer more for you . . . . Every word from you is a blow for me" (198 - 199). And then to Sikes, after she has cared for him through a desperate illness, "such a number of nights as I've been patient with you, nursing and caring for you, as if you had been a child" (346).

Nancy's miscalculation is to combine the sexual and the maternal, the mother and the whore; to mingle Sikes' criminal world with Rose and Brownlow's world of middle-class respectability; to adulterate her mothering of Sikes with her mothering of Oliver, and both with erotic pleasure. She fails to fit neatly within acceptable female categories, neither the purely good and maternal, nor the purely bad and erotic. In the world of Oliver Twist, a human mixture of good and bad, of desire and sacrifice, is too threatening to be narrated. Nancy's difficulties in traveling from her part of London to Rose Maylie's hotel in another part of the city, and then her further difficulties in gaining admission to Rose's presence, are emblematic of the distance the text wants to maintain between the two worlds and the two women. First Nancy has to dose Bill with laudanum in order to leave him at all. She alternately walks and runs for an hour and a quarter to reach Rose's hotel, only to be turned away by a "smartly dressed female." A waiter tries to push her out the door, and four housemaids "advocate" that she be thrown into the gutter. Even when she is allowed upstairs to see Rose, she only gets as far as a "small antechamber." [17] Newly uncomfortable in her old world, she is also unwelcome in Rose's world.
When women mix sexuality with maternity, they die. Nor is Nancy alone in her fate. Agnes Fleming, Oliver's mother, had committed the same sin, and she too died of it. Nancy and Agnes are clearly bracketed together by the text. Almost the same phrase is applied to each of them to describe their twinned losses of virginity and virtue.

Of Agnes, the text says she had "lost what none could ever give her back"; of Nancy, that she had "lavished" her "priceless treasures" that the "Creator bestows but once and never grants again" (458, 414). Agnes dies in cold blood: "the blood had frozen forever." Nancy dies in hot blood: a "pool of gore that quivered and danced." But both die, in fact, of illicit sexual acts which result in maternity: Agnes's an actual birth; Nancy's an emotional and metaphorical one.

If Sikes has become Nancy's child, as she tells him he has, then his murder of her is a form of matricide. Dickens reaped psychic rewards on several levels in his later public re-enactments of Nancy's murder. He could punish a desiring and desirable woman and kill a mother, all in one reading. Perhaps some members of his audience, wildly excited by his excitement, also participated, however unconsciously, in matricide. Perhaps others simply enjoyed the punishment of a female's sexual sin, and the prowess of a superb performer. In either case, the Whore who takes on characteristics of the mother/Madonna must pay with her blood and her pain. She is punished as fully as would be the respectable wife and mother who participates in illicit sexual pleasure.
The passage in which the narrator describes the murder is strikingly sexual. Nancy is lying on the bed half-dressed when Sikes enters their room. The narrator records, though Sikes himself is past noticing, the look of "pleasure" on her face as she welcomes her lover. She clings to him; her upturned face almost touches his, as in a kiss. And then he bludgeons her to death: first with his pistol, then with a club, he "struck and struck again" in an act of near-orgasmic violence. Nancy in death, her body lying in a pool of gore, fascinates both the narrator and Sikes much more than Nancy in life ever did. Sikes murders her to end her threat to his safety, to punish her, to gain control of her. The narrator's motives and rewards are much the same. But even in death, she is not wholly contained. Even in death her body and blood retain an astonishing vitality. Her corpse lies as if in a spotlight, at the center of a stage. Brilliant sunlight makes its spilled blood sparkle, dance, and quiver. And the audience for whom it dances, as if it is alive, consists of two; Sikes is not alone in that room. The narrator's gaze is also riveted on the body and "so much blood." The sparkling, crimson pool has life; it signifies a first sexual penetration, as well as the hemorrhage of childbirth. Nancy's bludgeoned body is evidence that she has been punished for her desire to have both. Her longing to be a mother to Oliver is offset by Bill's determination to remain her only child, to make sure that the only blood she sheds is the result of the activities of his body alone. [18] Rose's treatment is far different; the text keeps her inviolate and unstained.
As the narrative draws to a close, Oliver and his friends return to the town of his birth. Again he sees the landmarks of his childhood pain, and it seems "as if he had left it but yesterday, and all his recent life had been but a happy dream" (456). Even now, approaching the text's happy ending, both Oliver and the narrator define Oliver's happiness with Rose in the world of light as merely dreamlike while the nightmarish dark world retains substance. And now the pairing of Oliver and Rose as two innocents, two children isolated from the adults, begins in earnest. The men hurry in and out; Mrs. Maylie is called away, returning with eyes swollen from weeping. "All these things made Rose and Oliver, who were not in any new secrets, nervous and uncomfortable." They speak only to each other, in whispers, as if the narrator has created two mutually exclusive groups: the adults here, the children separate, there. We have been told that Rose is seventeen; Oliver is now twelve. [19] Until now, however, Rose has been depicted as an adult, a mother-figure to Oliver. She has pled his cause and been his intercessor from the beginning; it is she who has nursed him back to health and acted as responsible adult and parent. [20]

Now Rose is suddenly a child; like Oliver, she is excluded from the knowledge and doings of the grownups. This abrupt change from mother figure to mere child, or from child to ethereal mother without a period of sexual bloom, occurs frequently in Dickens's young heroines. They, like the narrative presence, are shape shifters, floating signifiers who change in accordance with the text's need to distance either hero or narrator from the potential sexual threat of
the mature female body. One way to diminish the threat is simply to diminish the physical and emotional maturity of the female. It is very important to the text to keep Rose childlike, asexual, and innocent. It must be clear that she is free of her sister's sexual stain, that she is neither erotic threat nor temptation. To be an adult female is to be sexually mature; to be sexually mature is to be dangerous. We have seen this danger enacted by Nancy; she is repeatedly hysterical, "coming over" Sikes with her "woman's nonsense," too often exhibiting divided loyalties. And we have seen the very dangerous Mrs. Bumble who physically beats her husband, humiliates him before witnesses, and is loyal to no man, only to herself.

"There is something about a roused woman," the narrator has nervously told us, speaking of Nancy, and the "something" isn't comfortable for a man (166). Mr. Bumble is reduced to the "lowest depth of the most snubbed henpeckery," and that fate must be avoided, as well. A woman has "strong passions," and those passions may manifest themselves in uncontrollable eroticism, or in domination of the male. There is only one way for a hero to make sure that he acquires a pure woman who will not dominate him. She must be constructed without strong passions, a heroine who is an angel rather than a female, a child instead of an adult woman. Enter angelic Rose, recently ill, now bracketed with the child Oliver, and thus rendered doubly harmless. She is literally a "little woman," an angel in a child's frail, slender body.
In Rose Maylie, Dickens attempts to map fantasy onto reality, to map a nonthreatening, angelic "sister" over the body of the potentially domineering, cold-blooded mother, or the dangerous, hot-blooded lover. His need and his fear oscillate between two contradictions: the female body promises life; the female body threatens death. Dickens's project in all his fictions is to reconcile these opposing statements, a project that remains unexamined and unarticulated because of its very impossibility. "Sister Rose" is mapped onto "Missing Mother"; she and Oliver are simultaneously a pair of children and a mother and son, sharing both grief and a "long close embrace." Their grief is described as if it were a kind of Liebestod: "so softened and clothed in such sweet and tender recollections, that it became a solemn pleasure . . ." (463). The bond between the two is a marked predilection for loss and death. Both are only marginally alive in their countryside of graves.

We have seen how Nancy's murder is the price she pays for her dangerous mixture of sexuality and maternity cum spirituality. [21] Rose Maylie's illness is also emblematic of the early stages of Dickens's erasure of sexuality from his heroines. Even Rose, already so angelic and pure ("earth is not her element"), must be purged of her body. Rose is "in the lovely bloom and spring-time of womanhood," but she is simultaneously an angel "enthroned in mortal form." She is too pure for the "rough creatures" of this earth; nonetheless she is made for "[h]ome, and fireside peace and happiness." She is a nubile young woman whom Dr. Losberne teases about "eligible young fellows." Moreover, she blushes, signifying her awareness of the implications of
his words. If she is a desirable and marriageable young woman, with desires of her own, then she is not too pure for the creatures of this earth. Which is she to be then: ethereal angel or blooming woman? Is she to be fitted with a halo (a "thousand lights" play about her face), or fitted with a hearth and family, the latter of which are begotten by fecund bodies which are almost certainly without haloes? The text solves its heroine's paradoxes by making her almost terminally ill.

When Rose and Mrs. Maylie take Oliver to the country, the narrator's description of the landscape as it changes from spring to summer parallels the disjunction inherent in his descriptions of Rose. The rural landscape which we have previously seen described in terms of "the hand of death" suddenly bursts into bloom. We are made to see the "glow and luxuriance of its richness," "the strong life and health" of its great trees; to smell the "richest perfumes abroad"; to watch the "prime and vigour of the year" in which all things are "glad and flourishing." Surely within the fertility of this moralized landscape Rose will also burst into bloom. Instead, she bursts into illness, an illness designed to resolve the contradictions inherent in the polarities of her personality, and symbolized by the changes in the landscape. The illness of her body is both metaphor and solution for her dangerous sexual maturity, her attraction to and for the "eligible young fellows" who might distract her from the needy Oliver.

The description of Rose's illness, cast in terms of white sanctity and red passion, repays attention. She had been in "high spirits," a state in which the reader has never before seen her, nor ever will see
her again. Her walk with Oliver and Mrs. Maylie "had far exceeded their ordinary bounds." Upon their return, Rose weeps as she plays the piano. She is the victim of "painful thoughts," although of what, we are never told. Suddenly, she shudders "as though some deadly chillness were passing over her." In the next moment she collapses upon a sofa. The "hue of her countenance has changed to a marble whiteness," but then it is "suffused with a crimson flush." "A heavy wildness" comes over her eyes. Then she is, again, "deadly pale." It is hardly surprising that an illness should be described in terms of chill and fever. It is noteworthy, however, that the words chosen to describe the course of this illness should be so sexually evocative: deadly chill and marble whiteness alternate with crimson flush and heavy wildness. It is as if the need for virtuous perfection and pure sanctity is locked in battle with the desire for living passion and the need to "far exceed . . . ordinary bounds." As a result of this battle between passion and chill, the young woman lapses into a dangerous fever and becomes delirious.

Rose has fallen victim to her own potential erotic bloom in the midst of a now-blooming countryside. A local doctor pronounces her illness to be "of a most alarming nature," and her body, lying in the midst of "full bloom" around her, is "wasting fast." Hers is the classic female disease of the nineteenth-century novel: the body discovers its erotic potential, and immediately falls into a wasting illness in order to circumvent or excise its own dangerous sexuality. In this case, it is the author who discovers the eroticism of his creation, and tries to defend both himself and her from its perceived
dangers. Rose survives her disease, but it is only the asexual madonna who remains. The embryonic blooming, blushing, erotic woman vanishes, shorn of her sexuality in the course of the wasting of her body. [22] She atones for the long-past sexual pleasure enjoyed by her sister, and finally washes Agnes's (and Eve's) taint from herself by becoming virtually bodiless.

And we understand just how disembodied Rose has become when we hear her lover's description of her. When she awakens from the deep sleep that marks the crisis of her illness, it is not a kiss from Prince Charming which restores her to life. Rather, she awakens to find that her prince has sanctified her almost into physical nonexistence. She is, Harry says, "trembling between earth and heaven," turning toward her "bright home of lasting rest." She is "one of God's own angels," akin to the "distant world." When Harry proposes to Rose, then, it is to a Rose safely etherealized, anorexic, wasted, and ready to make that "perfect sacrifice of self" which is to be so characteristic of her, and of future heroines in Dickens's texts. The "heavy wildness" which had appeared in her eyes, and was then obliterated, would have made that perfect sacrifice very difficult. Rose's vitality and libido are dead, victims of her wasting illness. What is left is perfectly appropriate for that perfect Eden which she will share with perfect little Oliver. Harry is so devitalized and desexualized that a perfectly numbed and muted Rose is exactly right for him. Rose Red has turned into Rose White.
There are three female deaths in the narrative, then: the deaths of Agnes and Nancy, and the death of Rose's erotic bloom. In addition, the potentially virile male characters either die or are emasculated in a text determined to rid itself of all but the neutered and elderly. The narrative originally proposes a binary opposition between the Whore and the Madonna, but as it progresses the two become fatally mixed. [23] Both women are punished: one is murdered, the other suffers a metaphorical clitoridectomy. The only genitally sexual male, Sikes, dies a painful and wretched death. The other potentially virile young man, Harry Maylie, sacrifices his prospects of wealth and power in Parliament because Rose's "stain" is so deep and pervasive that it may be visited by cold and sordid people upon her, and upon [her husband's] children also: and in exact proportion to his success in the world, be cast in his teeth, and made the subject of sneers against him: he may, no matter how generous and good his nature, one day repent of the connexion he formed in early life. (304)

A country parson is presumably humble enough to avoid such sneers, and his ethereal wife is presumably spiritual enough to dilute the stain. With the disappearance of his ambition, Harry himself disappears from the narrative, leaving the stage, and Rose, to Oliver.

Stains are borne only by women, and are spread only by women. When we read the stains and stained bodies of *Oliver Twist*, we understand why the slender heroine's body is required to be pure and childlike. Unpurged of desire and desirability, Rose could carry the
stain of illicit sexual pleasure into the world of light, and no male would be safe. In the public-house where Sikes takes temporary shelter after his murder of Nancy, a pedlar tries to sell his wares, cakes of cleanser which are an "infallible and invaluable composition for removing all sorts of stain" (426). He makes a little joke about the usefulness of his product, a revealing joke in a novel whose plot revolves on an axis of sexual stains. He tells the men assembled that if "a lady stains her honor, she has only need to swallow one cake and she's cured at once - for it's poison." He is right, for sexual stains are poison to all three of the women in this novel: to Agnes, to Nancy, and to Rose. Only Rose, wasted and virginal, survives.

Nancy's blood leaves stains all over the room in which she is murdered; even the dog's feet are soaked in blood. Sikes is unable to remove her stains from his clothes despite his desperate efforts. Agnes sheds blood when her body is sexually penetrated, and her sin stains not only herself but her three-year-old sister as well. Moreover, the mark of sexuality is so powerful that it endures for fourteen years, making the innocent Rose unmarriageable. Not only is the sister stained at secondhand, Agnes's stain is powerful enough to be carried into the blood of Rose's children. "I will carry it into no blood but my own; and the reproach shall rest alone on me," she tells Harry in refusing his proposal of marriage. The stain has, in fact, mutated into a disease capable of spreading through the bloodstream of a second generation.
We can learn a great deal about the world of this novel, and about the importance of female purity, when we consider that the stain so easily transferred from sister to sister (and the younger sister a mere infant) is somehow not transferred from erring mother to her bastard son. Mr. Brownlow, the only character who is allowed to make semi-official pronouncements about guilt and innocence and right and wrong, calls Oliver "innocent and unoffending," and rules that his illegitimacy reflects no disgrace on him. It certainly reflects disgrace on Rose, however: a man who marries the stained Rose may one day "repent of the connexion." The taint resides in the potential of the uncontrolled female body to create desire, and thus is not passed on to the male child, only to the female. The difficulty of neutralizing Rose's body marks the power with which this text endows the female. First Rose suffers an illness so extreme that her body metamorphoses from blooming woman to frail child. Second, the abstract language of both the text and her lover idealize and etherealize her out of humanity into angeldom. And finally, she must be quarantined in the secluded countryside. Such stringent measures are necessary to diminish her power and cleanse her female stain.

In Dickens's fictional worlds, with very few exceptions, women are punished for giving or taking bodily pleasure, while men are punished for exercising power and ambition. Erotic women tempt men; powerful men are tempted to become complicit with the pleasures and dangers of the body. Only weak and passive men remain safely virtuous. The people who surround Oliver and Rose at closure are uniformly safe, elderly, and asexual. The magic circle of safety is drawn for the
first time, accommodating a childlike madonna and a young boy carefully represented as too young and innocent to experience erotic desire. The sister/mother nurtures the needy child, but the world of light is a world purchased by death.
At closure, there are four houses containing four families who together form one family constellation. The first family is that of Rose and Harry Maylie, now married and living in the village parsonage with Mrs. Maylie. Less than a mile away are Mr. Brownlow and Oliver, whom Brownlow has adopted. Just outside the village lives the doctor, frequently visited by Mr. Grimwig. Together these asexual, elderly men lead an idyllic existence of gardening, carpentering, and fishing. And, very near the parsonage, is the village church in which Agnes's marble tablet stands. Both Agnes's spirit and the narrator himself haunt the tablet in the church.

Rose's marriage to Harry produces children but Oliver is the only important child for Rose. Harry's virtual absence from the text at closure assures that Rose, unlike Nancy, will not be troubled by divided loyalties or conflicts between maternity and sexuality. The narrator calls this cluster of families, safe in the country, "a little society" of "perfect happiness" (476). The families are so inseparable and interdependent that two servants care for all of them equally, and "to this day the villagers have never been able to discover to which establishment they properly belong" (477). Monks, Sikes, and Fagin are all dead, Fagin's family members either dead or scattered. Only Master Bates survives in England in respectability. The dark world is effectively destroyed; the city is erased.
As for Mr. Brownlow and Oliver, the narrator gives their connection short shrift. The relationship between the child and his adoptive father is a matter "which need not be told." Both child and adult remain blanks, mere abstractions to the end. The narrator tells us that Oliver will become all that Mr. Brownlow wishes him to become, although what that might be is among those things that "need not be told." Finding a father is not the important goal of this narrative, nor is recording any part of a purely theoretical journey to maturity. Even at closure the text does not hint at a potentially adult Oliver. But there are other things that do need to be told, and foremost among them is the narrator's frustrated longing to remain in his newly-constructed Edenic world of safety with Rose. We feel his yearning presence more than that of any of the male characters. He is in love with an ideal, but the words he employs to embody that ideal are pale and conventional. He has erased one world and replaced it with another, but the world of light exists only momentarily, at the outermost boundaries of the text, where both world and woman are revealed as chimeras, lacking substance and conviction even to himself.

He tells us that his hand falters, and that he "would weave, for a little longer space, the thread of these adventures." He would "fain linger yet with a few of those among whom I have so long moved" (479). Yet those few rapidly dwindle to two: Rose and Agnes. Of Rose he says, "I would show Rose Maylie in all the bloom and grace of early womanhood," but that is precisely what he cannot do. Both narrator and text are heavily invested in limiting Rose either to girlish innocence or to ethereal motherhood. Rose has a tear in her "soft blue eye," and
a clear laugh. She is "the life and joy of the fireside circle." That is all we know; that is as far as the narrator can go. The interdiction on desirable young women whose bodies are sexually mature is so strong that the wish ("I would") must substitute for the reality. Rose must retain her childlike demeanor and slender body to the last; even early womanhood in bloom is unarratable. Like the "baby savage," like Oliver, the narrator also "wants the woman," but the text has created something both more and less than the woman he wants. She is a quiet, slight, childlike domestic goddess, more child than woman, more chimera than child, and more deadly perfect and perfectly dead than either. This Rose who withers on the margin of the text has one advantage however; she is perfectly non-threatening. Her illness has bleached the female stain she bears, and a deathlike pallor remains to signal the nonthreatening character of her wasted, devitalized body.

But the narrator's last words are not of the contradictory Rose, so impossibly and simultaneously stained and pure. Rather, he moves on to still another woman, the dead Agnes, now fittingly reified as a "white marble tablet." If Rose is reduced to tractable perfection by illness and pale words, Agnes has been sanitized long ago by pale death, reduced to the white coldness of stone. And yet some fascination remains which causes the narrator to linger here in this church with Agnes's unquiet spirit, which "sometimes hovers round that solemn nook." The narrator tells us that her spirit returns to the place where "those whom she knew in life" still love her. But those comforting and forgiving sentiments are cancelled by his last words
about the too-desirable and too-desirous Agnes: "she was weak and erring." The words accentuate the sin of the mother: her body gave (and received?) sexual pleasure at the very moment that it conceived the hero. Her sin, the female stain, lies in that duality, and it is her sin that the narrator emphasizes as he ends his story. Rose and Agnes, both sisters and mothers, are doubles: the Madonna and the Fallen Woman. The one is pure, the other stained; the one rewarded, the other punished. Yet both are constrained and contained, the one by illness, the other in the grave. Both will return in other guises throughout the canon. Their energy can never be entirely dissipated; their bodies never totally etherealized; their stains never wholly removed. Other narrators will continue to employ illness, deformation, dead words, and death itself to protect themselves and their worlds from the female forcefields so simultaneously dangerous and necessary, but other narrators will also be unsuccessful in their efforts.

The "happy ending" of Oliver Twist does not posit a warm and cosy interior enlivened by contented family members. The conventional Dickensian hearth proves to be an illusion of the Christmas stories, not a component of the novels. [24] The needy male finds "the woman," synonymous with home and safety, but she remains both too ambiguous and too powerful to be restricted to the hearthside. Even pale Rose wanders "the sultry fields at noon" and "the moonlit evening walk," rather than occupying a seat by the fire. The final illustration, so angrily demanded of Cruikshank by Dickens after the artist had produced a plate showing Harry and Rose by the fireside, shows Rose and Agnes together in the church, perhaps in the hope that both can be contained
there by a power stronger than that of mere man. [25] Dickens's domestic iconography is in direct opposition to that of the conventional fireside with its happy family, just as the actual course of the Dickens protagonist is a mirror image of the paradigmatic course of the hero who moves from immaturity to maturity. Dickens's early protagonists either remain in a state of childish dependency, like Oliver, or pursue a reverse journey away from maturity, passing backward from adulthood to a state of infantilization, like Dombey. As Oliver Twist is brought to its ambiguous closure, the family romance is pronounced finished, but only temporarily. Nicholas Nickleby will engage the same issues, needs, and fears, but it will experiment with new solutions.
If Oliver's life is the enactment of a primal fantasy of need for nurture, and Little Dick's death the nightmarish underside of that fantasy, then young Nicholas Nickleby continues the fantasy, with the child ostensibly grown to manhood and the text determined to establish him literally in his father's place. Smike's abuse and death comprise a leitmotif, an elaboration of Little Dick's truncated life, but this time the ravages of abuse wreaked on Smike's body and psyche are mourned, and he enshrined. Where Oliver's need was quite simply for a nurturing, protective female, Nicholas's needs are somewhat more complicated. He must at least appear to inhabit man's (and his father's) estate while in fact replicating a fantasied childhood with an adoring and unthreatening sister. The text is organized so that Nicholas can go home again and, in going home, can avoid the adult dangers of desire, pain, and responsibility. It proposes to rewrite the Oedipal myth, but this time to get it right: the biological father dead; a second, usurping father also dead; the bad mother verbally skewered, as effectively punished and possessed through satire as if she had been physically penetrated; the good sister established as both nurturer and chaste companion; a shadowy and undemanding double of the sister established as a window-dressing wife.

The narrative seems, on the level of its manifest content, to be an uneasy mélange of fairy tale, eighteenth-century picaresque, and domestic novel. [26] Beneath its appearance of baggy monster, however, Nicholas Nickleby is Dickens's experimental novel, an attempt to enact
a primal fantasy in which the hero returns to his Edenic childhood, and
to a fantasied unity with a sister who is his mirror, reflecting her
brother in her adoring eyes. Its closure is a declaration that the son
has indeed taken possession of the father's house, of the mother, and
of the past, but still remains a child. Moreover, in this best of all
possible worlds, neither murderous nor sexual violence on the part of
the son is necessary to obtain those desirable goals. Rather, his
escape into the past of childhood ("nothing with which there was any
association of bygone times was ever removed or changed") is especially
designed to occur through the actions of others, while guaranteeing
Nicholas' innocence and passivity (932). His enemies are punished
either by their own hand, or by narratival edict. For the first and
only time, the hero becomes his childhood self again without paying the
price of an infantilizing illness. At the mythic ending, the text gifts
Nicholas with a confl ation of congenial ages and roles; he is allowed
to be simultaneously innocent child, cosseted adult, and contented old
man; son, husband, and brother, all at once. As all three, he is
comfortably insulated from the storms and stresses of desire and pain
by the care of "the woman."

The novel falls into two distinct parts, the first of which is a
picaresque narrative in which Nicholas and his sister, Kate, undergo a
variety of adventures after being forced into the world by the death of
their weak father and the burden of their deluded mother. In the course
of this initial narrative, which ends happily at the conclusion of
chapter thirty-five, Nicholas endures hardships but is, in the main,
nurtured by the various parodic families he encounters. [27] Kate is
not so lucky; she encounters both male sexual threats and female betrayals and jealousies. The paradigm of the brave, young hero and the shrinking, fragile heroine is, not for the last time, inverted. It is she who is tested and trained for her future career as "true gentle creature," "fond sister," and "treasure" to her brother. Nicholas himself is never forced to make his own way in the world; rather, twin fairy godfathers rescue him and ensure his economic and social success.

By the end of chapter thirty-five, Nicholas is provided with a job and a house by the Cheerybles, and contentedly possesses the most important woman in his life, his sister Kate. She is everything to him: housekeeper, companion, nurturer, and virginal wife. Smike is their child, and Mrs. Nickleby is both comic relief and the cross they must bear. It is the perfect home and family, where all was hope, bustle, and light-heartedness . . . all the peace and cheerfulness of home restored, with such new zest imparted to every frugal pleasure, and such delight to every hour of meeting, as misfortune and separation alone could give. In short, the poor Nicklebys were social and happy. (542 - 543)

It is also the perfect Dickens closure, as near as the canon comes to a truly happy domestic situation. And yet there is a second novel to come, thirty more chapters which eventually arrive at a second happy ending, this one mythic and ambiguous where the first is domestic and simple. One function of these additional chapters is to contrive a
traditional façade of marriages for the reluctant Kate and Nicholas. The clearly contented brother and sister are not to be allowed to live together, whether in peaceful virginity or no, without the additional safeguards of separate marriages and separate establishments.

But a second function of these additional chapters is to tell and yet not tell Ralph Nickleby’s story. He is the villain who must be displaced and punished, but the real reasons for his suicide are provided only in glimpses. Ralph carries the emotional charge of the novel; he is much more than a mere cardboard villain, but his psyche is explored only fleetingly. [28] He is the aggressive, resourceful male, the powerful figure whom Nicholas must not emulate. Certainly Ralph commits a sufficiency of punishable sins in the course of the narrative, the abandonment of his child to abuse and death not the least of them. But perhaps his most serious sin is voracious ambition and vitality: the desire to control his world and the power to do so. In a narrative in which only the passively virtuous are rewarded with safety and survival, Ralph must die. In addition, he must die because this text is intensely concerned with the opposition between old and young, father and son, and the cards are stacked in favor of the father’s displacement. Powerful Ralph is replaced by the benevolent Cheerybles, non-threatening, non-competitive fathers. The text never intends to make the son replace the father, or to give the son his man’s estate. Not only is Cinderella a young boy; he is also Peter Pan, who will never have to grow up.
Ralph is the usurper, the malevolent father who would kill the son if he could. The usurper is momentarily tempted to take the female prize for himself in order to make her his own domestic goddess. But in the end, Ralph cannot soften his heart sufficiently to attach himself to "the woman." This fictional world, like Dickens's other novels, is so arranged that the price for such unwillingness is very high. There are two occasions on which Ralph almost succumbs to feelings of attachment and tenderness for his niece. Immediately after Sir Mulberry Hawk insults Kate, Ralph treats her tenderly. The narrator tells us, quite unconvincingly, that her sorrow and tears remind Ralph of his dead brother as a child, and the old man "who was steeled against every tale of sorrow and distress - staggered while he looked [at Kate], and reeled back into his house, as a man who had seen a spirit from some world beyond the grave" (316). Staggering and reeling are strong reactions to the memory of a long estranged brother, but such a reason is more acceptable than the probability that both Ralph and the narrator are staggered by and suffused with a sudden knowledge of Kate's desirability, induced by Hawk's lewd desires and suggestions.

But other and equally compelling reasons for Ralph's embryonic attachment to his niece are suggested as well. Kate's image continues to haunt Ralph, and he tells himself,

I am not a man to be moved by a pretty face . . . There is a grinning skull beneath it, and men like me who look and work below the surface see that, and not its delicate covering. And yet I almost like the
girl, or should if she had been less proudly and
squeamishly brought up. If the boy were drowned or
hanged, and the mother dead, this house should be
her home. I wish they were, with all my
soul. (480)

Ralph's thoughts make clear his murderous desire to possess this
young woman, and to destroy her brother. But his meditation on the
"grinning skull," and his later suicide, also serve as a dark
commentary on the fate reserved for those men who insist on seeing "the
girl" too clearly, in a world in which male survival depends on the
construction and idealization of a young female nurturer. Men must not
"look and work below the surface"; they must not penetrate (in any
sense of the word) the pretty façade. To be aware of the skull is to
be painfully and fatally aware of that which is best ignored. The skull
"below the surface" is a reminder of the dirty and dangerous female
genitals lurking beneath the innocent veneer of a creature who is
simultaneously salvation and doom. Those who insist on the presence of
the skull cannot be saved.

The narrator goes on to tell us of Ralph that there was
something humanizing and even gentle in his thoughts
at that moment. He thought of what his home might be
if Kate were there; . . . he strewed his costly
rooms with the hundred silent tokens of feminine presence
and occupation; he came back again to the cold fireside
and the silent dreary splendour; and in that one glimpse
of a better nature . . . the rich man felt
himself friendless, childless, and alone. (481)

Friendless and alone he remains. Ralph's life and death are both metaphor and warning for Nicholas, and for the male protagonists of subsequent novels. The "feminine presence" is talismanic; it brings warmth and gentleness to cold firesides and friendless men; its absence is death. But a "very slight circumstance was sufficient to banish such reflections from the mind of such a man," and Ralph "exchanged his dreamy posture for his accustomed business attitude." He chooses the world of business where his power is assured, rejecting the feminine world of the "hundred tokens," where his power might become impotence. Ralph is condemned to a fatal isolation because he sees too clearly, because he looks and works below the safe surface. At the same time, he is condemned because he does not see clearly enough; that is, he refuses to recognize his need for the "feminine presence." The text catches him in an ambiguous and slippery double bind, forcing him to play a lose/lose game.

Ralph and Smike, father and son, are two sides of a coin minted especially as a warning to Nicholas. While Ralph is too arrogant and isolated to attach himself to "the woman," Smike is too damaged and helpless to be saved. The text will guide Nicholas so that he can walk that fine line between the male as villain and the male as victim. Villains are assertive and ambitious: they die. Victims are weak and impotent: they also die. Heroes who want to live happily ever after must determinedly ignore the grinning skull, retain their innocence and passivity, and exchange their potential for ambition and power for the
hundred silent tokens of the feminine presence. And still they require the complicity of plot and narrator in order to survive and prosper in a world made perilous by male desire and need, and female desirability and energy. In the end, Nicholas marries happily and prospers on his father’s country estate with a wealthy wife and a loving sister. He has escaped both extremes of the male continuum, and the narrator declares a happy ending and a happy family on this topmost layer of the manifest story. Let us look at the layers just beneath it to see what stories they tell.
The underlying primal fantasy of Nicholas Nickleby is that of a return to childhood innocence, a fable of paradise lost and paradise regained. In that fantasy, there is no place for the sexual body, or for the fecund wife or hordes of children we have found at least nominally on the topmost layer. The meanings of the primal fantasy are best examined as the text moves to its closure, but before considering the Edenic solutions this text offers, let us look at its treatment of the body.

Sexual desire is such a powerfully explosive force in Nicholas Nickleby that it must be displaced, disguised, or punished. Male desire is diffused and defused by externalizing it onto the morally and physically deformed Grind. Such displacement camouflages desire by burying it among other threatening traits, and splitting it off in a character who displays no redeeming qualities. Female desire is a problem of such magnitude that it must be erased, as it is in Madeline and Kate, or it must be rendered ridiculous, and thus harmless, by satire. The portrait of Mrs. Nickleby, for instance, is cruel and funny in a hundred ways, but it is perhaps most revealing in its brutal portrayal of what the text defines as the middle-aged woman's deluded desire to be desired. [29] Mrs. Nickleby is effectively punished and neutralized for her nearly psychotic belief that every man she meets lusts after her, and her specific folly of mistaking a lunatic for a legitimate lover. At bottom, what she cannot be forgiven is her self-absorption, a narcissism which prevents her son from finding his
reflection in her eyes. There is more than a little of the resentful son's defense against his own disappointed desire in this portrait, but it is not Nicholas who is enraged at his mother. It is, rather, the narrator whose rage against this woman is disguised as amused satire.

If the heroines of Oliver Twist are posited initially as a binary opposition, the heroines of Nicholas Nickleby are, from the beginning, two of a kind. Unlike Rose and Nancy in the past, and Nell and Ruth in the future, neither heroine ever threatens to escape the text's control. Kate Nickleby and Madeline Bray are pure, compliant, and devoted. Madeline has already had practice in the art of being both nurturer and doormat through her experience as daughter/mother to her own infantile and tyrannical father. Kate was apparently born adoringly devoted to her brother; even as a child, she encouraged him in all his adventures "by the intensity of her admiration." Since Nicholas has always been able to find himself reflected in her eyes, Kate requires no practice to continue her roles as nurturer and mirror. Her marriage to Frank Cheeryble is solely a matter of propriety, an exogamous guarantee that she is safely asexual, forbidden, and non-desirable so far as her brother is concerned. Rule A is that Nicholas does not desire Kate. Rule B is that he desires her so little that there is no need for Rule A. Rule C is that characters, narrator, and reader alike should remain unaware of Rules A and B. Kate's marriage has absolutely no effect on her already-established career as virginal companion to Nicholas. Both Frank and Madeline are necessarily absent from the text's fantasy of Nicholas's return to childhood at closure.
The text is very careful to insure that both Kate and Madeline's relationships with Nicholas are non-erotic, and that Nicholas himself is neither aroused nor desirous in the course of the narrative. But that is not to say that neither woman is the object of male desire. Old Gride slavers and lusts after Madeline. Hawk overtly indulges an idle itch for Kate, while the narrator displaces his own covert desire for her so successfully that he need never acknowledge it at all. Gride and Hawk are punished for their illicit and aggressive desire, while Nicholas remains healthy throughout the course of the narrative, the only male protagonist in the canon whose body neither falls ill nor wastes away. Nicholas escapes illness, so often a means to erase male desire, because he is, from the beginning, determinedly and carefully represented as non-desirous.

Kate and Madeline are very young: the first seventeen, the second barely eighteen. They are very minimally described by the narrator as beautiful and slight. The sexual appeal of both girls is conveyed to the reader solely through the responses of the men who desire them. Hawk's erotic response to Kate is cast in euphemistic terms; he speaks of her eyelashes, her beauty, her castdown eyes. Unlike his language, however, his actions are overtly and aggressively sexual. The scene in which Kate attends an all-male dinner at which she seems destined to be the dessert has the potential to be extremely salacious. But in fact, all Hawk gets is a handful of Kate's dress and her demand that he "unhand" her. [30] When Nicholas later overhears drunken, bawdy talk of his sister, the narrator relays it strictly in abstract generalities. Kate's virtuous conduct is "jeered at and brutally
misconstrued; . . . her name banded from mouth to mouth, and herself made the subject of coarse and insolent wagers, free speech, and licentious jesting" (495). Compared to Grind's lubrious description of Madeline, this is tame stuff indeed. But Kate is too important to this narrator to allow her to be sullied with the explicit sexual language of blackguards and rakehells. Whatever is said, whatever is threatened vis-à-vis Kate, is carefully softened and muted.

It is the language of the narrator himself which verges on the erotic when he describes Kate. He ostensibly enumerates her preparations for her uncle's dinner, but his enchantment with his heroine is patent. His titillation is disguised and sanitized, however, by its displacement onto her clothing. Perhaps we will be not quite so surprised at Kate's later effect on Hawk when the narrator tells us that the sun himself (and he a feeble winter sun at that) is brightened by his sight, even through a "dim" window, not even of Kate herself, but simply of her clothing. "All Kate's little finery" is arranged as if it were "moulded . . . to the owner's form." The black silk dress is "the neatest possible figure in itself." The shoes are small and delicate, the "little pair of black silk stockings" are gazed upon, and the other "little devices" are enumerated, and then summed up as "ingenious . . . for the tantalization of mankind" (303).

If the narrator is excited by his lingering look at Kate's ensemble, it is no wonder that "mankind" is likewise excited at the infamous dinner, when not just Kate's dress, but her body itself, is displayed to the collective male gaze. Both narrator and Kate remain safely innocent, however, since overt desire is displaced onto the
wicked Hawk, a convenient scapegoat for all male desire. The narrator's desire is further displaced onto innocent clothing, rather than an erotic body. And, in a last line of over-determined defense, it is only the sun who looks through that dim window anyway. Male desire thus remains innocently unacknowledged on the narrator's part, safely contained and externalized onto Hawk, and yet satisfactorily punished by Hawk's death. A more deft solution to a problem which must remain unexamined can hardly be imagined.

Gride's function is twofold. He mediates Nicholas's lack of desire for Madeline, while at the same time siphoning off Ralph's covert desire for Kate. Ralph's desire is so implosively repressed that it must be displaced in two ways: onto Gride as a surrogate, and onto money as a substitute. The plot to marry Madeline to Gride has several advantages for Ralph. It is a means to humiliate the hated rival, Nicholas, while simultaneously reaping a financial profit. It is also a sexual adventure which Ralph can observe, but in which he himself takes no erotic risks. "Be careful, Gride, be careful. It's a triumph too to tear her away from a gallant young rival; a great triumph for an old man," he says to his surrogate, although he also clearly speaks of himself (808, my italics). Voyeurism ensures both safety and pleasure. It insulates Ralph from the possibility of humiliating rejection, from the threat of uncontrollable passions, and from the potential danger of domination offered by the woman. The voyeur is rewarded on many levels, except that of human warmth and contact.
Gride's desire for Madeline is unsubtle and powerful. The narrator allows himself to look only at Kate's clothing, but he allows Gride to fixate on Madeline's body. A lecherous old man with a face filled with "liquorish devilry," and a voice rising to "a rapturous squeak" as he speaks of Madeline, Gride is one of the least attractive of Dickens's creations. Both he and his lust are clearly labelled "Disgusting and Illicit," and are held to be the more harmless for their transparency.

The "ecstatic" Arthur begins his description of Madeline temperately enough: she is "a young and beautiful girl; fresh, lovely, bewitching, and not nineteen." But as he enumerates her specific charms his excitement grows. She is his "dainty chick," his "tit-bit," his "delicate morsel." The imagery of cannibalization is clear, as the girl becomes a bite to eat, a meal to compensate for a lifetime of hunger, a morsel both to enjoy on the tongue and to tear with the teeth. Gride goes into raptures, finally unable to find words commensurate with his near frenzy. Madeline's charms are fingered and sorted over, her

[d]ark eyes - long eyelashes - ripe and ruddy lips that
to look at is to long to kiss - beautiful clustering
hair that one's fingers itch to play with - such a waist
as might make a man clasp the air involuntarily, thinking
of twining his arm about it - little feet that tread so
lightly they hardly seem to walk upon the ground - to
marry all this, sir, - this - hey, hey! (707)
The heavily hyphenated sentences give body to the spasms of ecstasy so patently felt by Gride as he comes to a figurative orgasm in his final inarticulate "hey, heys!" He transforms the female body into a series of synecdoches, thus making it fragmented and susceptible to his control and possession. [31] Madeline is reduced to a mere medley of those characteristics which are safely and conventionally equated with female desirability. The erotically tempting woman has "ripe and ruddy lips": ripe for biting and eating, like fruit. The lips are made to be kissed, metaphoric genitals. Her hair is "clustering," like pubic hair. The speaker's fingers "itch" to play with it - to touch, possess, penetrate, and twine it. The waist, that area which received so much Victorian attention as the zone between the sexually exciting breasts and genitals, causes a man to make "involuntary" movements when he merely thinks of physical contact with it. To marry all this; to possess all this; to enjoy all this: the thought brings Gride at last to a metaphorical climax of nonsense syllables as he contemplates his own fetishization of the female body. [32]

Karen Horney has suggested that there is a general male fear of women which predates the Oedipal fear of castration. Horney argues that this fear of female sexuality prompts men to defend against their anxiety through the denigration of women, "especially those aspects of woman's body most closely associated with her genitals." But men also "overcompensate for their fears and hostility by romanticizing women, especially those parts of a woman's body and behavior not immediately associated with genital sexuality." [33] The passage in which Gride verbally possesses Madeline exhibits just such a compensation, a
process in which sexual desire is displaced onto romanticized external characteristics, genuine genital lust disguised as expatriation on hair, lips, and "little feet." The text thus manages to defend itself from both male desire and female temptation. The female body is reduced to its culturally acceptable parts, while what Helena Michie calls its "unnameable whole/hole" is ignored. [34] Male desire is gratified, but without genital risks. Gratification is safe at last, the product of three defenses: voyeurism, imagination, and words.

It is illuminating to compare Gride's sexual excitement with the narrator's description of Nicholas' reactions upon his first visit to Madeline. Where Gride's unruly passions exceed the conventions of sugared lust, Nicholas's feelings are described in semi-religious clichés which reveal his lack of passion. Madeline is etherealized into nonexistence, erased by language which is itself long dead and meaningless. Neither Nicholas nor the narrator feels genuine emotion. This is a passage in which we truly see the flesh made mere word. The narrator tells us that Nicholas felt as though the smile of Heaven were on the little chamber; as though the beautiful devotion of so young and weak a creature, had shed a ray of its own on the inanimate things around and made them beautiful as itself; as though the halo with which old painters surround the bright angels of a sinless world played about a being akin in spirit to them, and its light were visibly before him. (698)
This angelic creature, haloed and sinless, bodiless and sexless, is the same Madeline who excited Gride to linguistic orgasm. In the disjunction between the two descriptions lies the problem and the tragedy inherent in the Dickensian heroine. Her body is destined either to be ignored, disguised, and etherealized, or fragmented, fetishized, and cannibalized. In either case, her body can only be safely enjoyed in the distanced safety of the male mind or gaze, never in the warmth of touch and mutual pleasure. The only concrete adjective applied to Madeline in this passage is "weak." She is the true "little woman," fragile and diminished, and because of those very qualities, safely non-threatening. Abstractions do not bleed; angels neither tempt nor demand. As Oliver was protected from desire by his status as a child, so the narrator's language here protects Nicholas from even the suspicion of desire.

Madeline is both slave and mother to her father, a religious icon to Nicholas, and a titbit to be consumed to Gride. In the end, she fades from the story, a nonentity who had life and substance for one brief moment in the words of a dirty old man. Neither she nor Kate is allowed a body whose secretions or attractions might stain or strain the delicate fabric of domestic safety so carefully woven by the narrator in Nicholas' behalf. An erotic female body has no place in the son's return to his fantasied Edenic childhood.
At closure, Nicholas and Kate retire to their father's estate in the country. The brother and sister form the nucleus of a little society whose chief characteristics are an elegiac reverence for the past, and a determination to preserve and relive it. But if health and exuberance are hardly the essence of the Nickleby menage, there is one couple in the world of this text whose physical well-being and warm contentment are almost palpable. When Nicholas visits John and Tilly Browdie, the description of the Browdie establishment is among the most bounteous in all of Dickens. Every object has its adjective denoting plenitude: huge settle, blazing fire, enormous bottle, broad grin, great red face, jolly giant, vast mounds, heavy relays, very plump servant, very pretty wife. John and Tilly also share an openly satisfying physical relationship, replete with squeezing and "connubialities." We will seldom see their like again. There are other happy families in Dickens, but none who exhibit such joyous physicality and generosity as John and Tilly Browdie.

When Squeers is sent to prison, and Dotheboys Hall is broken up, it is John Browdie who rescues Mrs. Squeers and Fanny from the vengeance of their victims, and who then helps the stranded boys on their way with "a hearty meal of bread and meat, [and] with sundry shillings and sixpences." But Nicholas's reaction when John asks him to accompany him to the Hall is puzzling. Nicholas declines on what seem to be the most feeble of grounds, that "his presence might perhaps aggravate the bitterness of their adversity" (927). Instead of
helping, he spends his day strolling in the very neighborhood where the small, lost boys wander, alone and hungry. The contrast between John and Nicholas is instructive. John Browdie's big body radiates human warmth and energy. Nicholas's body is slight; his reactions are often sentimental but seldom simply warmly generous. John's solid contentment with the present is a subtle commentary on Nicholas's preference for the past of his childhood. Steven Marcus comments that Nicholas seems "staged," "melodramatic and incredible," and concludes that his unreality is the result of Dickens's determination that his hero should never be contaminated by the world or defiled by society. [35] But when John Browdie's warmth glosses cool and genteel Nicholas, we see that the text is protecting its protagonist not merely from the contamination of "society," but from life itself. Nicholas is to be insulated from blood and pain, from desire and stains, from adulthood and adult emotions. As a consequence, he lacks real warmth of feeling, generosity, and physical satisfactions. John does good; Nicholas allows others to do good for him.

Just as the second half of the narrative enacts Ralph's punishment, thus effectively ridding Nicholas of the usurping father figure, it also provides conventional mates for the brother and sister whose peaceful union has been the aim of the text from its inception. Kate and Nicholas must have a husband and wife, respectively and respectably, in order to disguise the text's determination to return them to an uncomplicated, happy childhood in which they can play house together. But even though the text is resolved to marry them exogamously, they are both embarrassingly willing to forego the mates
provided for them. Reasons of plot are advanced for their reluctance but, as their conversations make all too clear, so long as they have each other, neither is eager to have anyone else.

Whenever Nicholas starts to speak to Kate of his ostensible attachment to Madeline, he always ends by speaking of the satisfactions of his relationship with Kate herself. Never one to make authentically impassioned speeches, he is at his most tepid when he considers Madeline. She must never know of his love, he says. When he thinks of telling her, it is in a time so far off, in such distant perspective, so many years must elapse before it comes, and when it does come (if ever), I shall be so unlike what I am now, and shall have so outlived my days of youth and romance - though not, I am sure, of love for her - that even I feel how visionary all such hopes must be. (893 - 894)

Has any lover ever marshalled so many years and so much distance between himself and his loved one? His hasty protestation of lasting love is lost in his almost desperate enumeration of the difficulties between them. The words fairly gush from him, how "base" to take advantage of Madeline, how "mean" to entrap her, and then the real truth:

I, too, whose duty and pride and pleasure, Kate, it is, to have other claims upon me which I will never forget, and who have the means of a comfortable and happy life already. (895, my italics)
Kate is the "pleasure"; Madeline is "this weight" which he desires to remove from his mind (895). Nicholas already possesses his key to a happy life; Madeline is extraneous and unwelcome.

Nicholas tells Kate of the "strong chain that binds us together," and can scarcely wait for his and Kate's old age together when life will be peace and pleasure, just as their childhood together was peace and pleasure. In Nicholas's mind, the only happiness possible is that which occurs when he and Kate are innocent children, or innocent old people:

It seems but yesterday that we were playfellows, Kate, and it will seem but tomorrow that we are staid old people . . . recollecting with a melancholy pleasure . . . Perhaps then, when we are quaint old folks . . . we may even be thankful for the trials that so endeared us to each other, and turned our lives into that current down which we shall have glided so peacefully and calmly . . . the old bachelor brother and his maiden sister. (896, my italics)

When he later reviews this conversation, he thinks to himself that any man would be sufficiently rewarded for any sacrifice by the possession of Kate's heart. He brings himself up short, admonishing himself that he is "thinking like a lover" (897). The flavor of Nicholas's words is not of sorrow that his love for Madeline must be postponed, but rather of relief that things will go on as they have been between himself and his sister, that neither marrying nor penetrating a female body is necessary. Postponement holds no terrors;
on the contrary, he wishes to postpone a married state which will only force on him emotions and responsibilities he wishes to avoid, require of him a desire he does not feel, and remove him from his "days of youth" and their peace and calm.

There is, implicit in Nicholas's reluctance, a feeling of dread, a fear that marriage means both bloodshed and pain, an expenditure of semen and thus of vitality, a begetting of children (more blood) and thus of responsibility, an exhaustion of energy and life itself. There is an unspoken assumption that companionship with a beautiful sister, whether in innocent childhood or neutered old age, avoids such expenditure and exhaustion, leaving a man safe and whole, the recipient of female nurture but not the target of female enslavement. Just beneath Nicholas's almost unseemly willingness to postpone and defer his courtship lies a very real dread of both the physical and emotional costs of marriage and its attendant rituals.

We know that Dickens displayed increasing revulsion for Catherine's lyings-in, and increasing irritation at the number of their children. He was obsessively clean and orderly, and he required his children and household to be so as well. That obsessive orderliness and his need to control everything and everyone around him is closely associated with fear and guilt elicited by the blood and pain of sex and birth, and the secretions and stains of the female body. Nor is the dread of blood and pain and loss of vitality confined to Nicholas, this text, or their creator. Many of Dickens's contemporaries felt a similar revulsion for coition, pregnancy, and childbirth. William Buchan, author of Domestic Medicine, called the delivery of babies "a
disagreeable branch of medicine." Women were viewed as "ritually unclean" in childbirth, as well as unclean during their menses. There was widespread agreement among the medical profession that women were a "temple built upon a sewer." What men regarded in themselves as dark and dirty sexual drives were thus split off and externalized on women. Women, tainted by the male sexual drive, could achieve redemption only by travelling a road "through the uncleanliness of childbirth to the temple of pure and undefiled motherhood." [36] What we witness in Nicholas Nickleby is a marked attempt to protect Nicholas from having to travel that particular road with a woman.

Jack Lindsay makes the argument that Dickens associated the adult world with his child-bearing wife, Catherine, and the virginal, innocent world of happy childhood with Mary Hogarth, her dead sister. [37] Most certainly he associated his wife with blood - of first penetration, of the menses, and of birth. In short, Catherine belonged to the sewer, with the unclean woman. Dickens's fictions seek constantly to construct a countermanding "clean" woman: the young, slight, virginal heroine who occupies the temple without sliding into the sewer of intercourse and birth. A "sister" is ideal for such a heroine. Kate Nickleby is what Kate Dickens could not remain: immaculately pure. Nicholas's union with Kate mirrors Dickens's fantasy union with Mary Hogarth, the return of the sister. Through Nicholas, Dickens dwells in a world of innocence with his "sister," both of them always either children or "old bachelor brother and maiden sister."
In fact, were it not for the indefatigable Cheerybles, Nicholas might continue to allow his "hopes" of Madeline to remain purely "visionary." The Cheerybles literally push the young couples together: "Brother Charles began the clearance by leading the blushing girl himself to the door." The brothers also make sure that no effort or sacrifice is required of Nicholas to guarantee his financial success. No heroine of fairy tale was ever treated better than is Nicholas by these father substitutes whose only characteristic is an unfocused "goodness" which translates primarily to a willingness to pay for everything. Since they have no substance, they are the perfect replacement fathers for the family romance woven by this text. But even such ephemeral fathers as these have no place in the son's idyll in the country. Nicholas occupies the enviable position of both father and son, both child and adult, both playmate and mate to his sister.

In the concluding chapter, where fates are adumbrated and loose ends are tied, there is no mention of the respective marriages of Nicholas and Kate. There is no mention of "perfect happiness" at closure, as there was at the end of Oliver Twist, but we have been made acquainted, earlier in the narrative, with those times that Nicholas (in later life) remembers as happy. The first instance of his happiness, as we have noted, is the time he spent with Kate and Smike in the cottage given to them by the Cheerybles. It was a time of "hope, bustle, and light-heartedness," of "peace and cheerfulness" (541 - 542). In fact, it is exactly this life that Nicholas posits as ideal in his conversation with Kate, when he envisions their future
together once they have renounced Frank and Madeline. And it is to this time, the narrator tells us, that Nicholas looked back "many and many a time" in later years, at the "humble quiet homely scenes that rose up as of old before him." He remembers "every little incident, and even slight words and looks" of the time he and Kate spent in the little cottage where they all sat together, figuring such "happy futures." He remembers Kate's "cheerful voice and merry laugh," and how, whenever she was away, they scarcely broke the silence except "to say how dull it seemed without her" (732). It is this time, when Kate was sister, companion, domestic goddess, virginal lover, and nurturer, that Nicholas remembers as "rustling above the dusty growth of years, . . . green boughs of yesterday" (733).

But the first and most important Great Good Place, that which the little cottage only imitates, is Nicholas's childhood home, the purchase of which is his "first act" when he gets control of his wife's money and becomes a wealthy merchant. "His father's old house" in the country has to be altered and enlarged to accommodate Nicholas's "group of lovely children," but "none of the old rooms were ever pulled down, no old tree was rooted up, nothing with which there was any association of bygone times was ever removed or changed" (932, my italics). With Nicholas, Dickens tries the great experiment of returning the hero to the actual spot of his Edenic childhood. The text, having enacted Nicholas's expulsion, now enacts his paradise regained, a return associated, above all, with Kate and childhood innocence.
Here "the happiest years of his life had been passed," until "he and his had wandered forth from their old home, cast upon the rough world and the mercy of strangers" (857). Here occurred the long-remembered childhood scenes in which Kate urged him on to new exploits "by the intensity of her admiration." Here all his days had been "summer mornings," and the brother and sister had "gathered wild flowers together" amidst the "green fields and shady paths" (858). Nicholas and Kate as children were Adam and Eve before the Fall, and now the text gives them the opportunity to be so again, to go back to the Never Never Land of an innocent childhood impossibly conflated with a peaceful old age. In Nicholas's father's house, it is always the yesterday of children, or the tomorrow of old bachelor and maiden sister, but never the today of desirous husband and fecund wife. Here, the associations of "bygone times" are treasured and kept inviolate. [38] Nicholas lives in the temple with Kate; the sewer is erased.

Spatial relationships among the various subgroups of this family constellation are more claustrophobic than at the closure of Oliver Twist. There is Nicholas, with his "group of lovely children," living in his father's house, keeping it intact, a shrine to his now replicated childhood. "Within a stone's-throw" is "another retreat": Kate's home. The narrator has placed Kate as near to Nicholas as possible while still granting her a conventional establishment of her own. Kate has "many new cares and occupations, and many new faces courting her sweet smile" (932). But the narrator reassures us that she is the "same true gentle creature, the same fond sister" that she was when she was a girl. Kate is a mother ("new faces") to children of
her own only by inference; primarily she is sister, companion, and mirror to Nicholas, as she had always been in their happier past. There is no mention of her as a wife.

The third house in this familial configuration is a "little cottage hard by," occupied by Newman Noggs. He, rather than Nicholas or Kate, is in charge of the children, with whom he is "master of the revels." And the fourth "house" is Smike's grave in the churchyard nearby. The configuration resembles the one constructed at the closure of Oliver Twist; once again it requires more than one family in order to close the narrative, although a mile's distance has narrowed to a stone's throw. The narrator leaves us with a vision of "the children," but their function is curious. They are twining garlands to lay on Smike's grave, and shedding tears as they freshen the flowers. Happiness remains as elusive, as much in the past, for the second generation as for Nicholas himself. Even the future, personified in the children, is mortgaged to the past and to the dead. The children, like Madeline and Frank, are window dressing, mourning paraphernalia. Nicholas is the real child.

As Oliver Twist closes with a marble tablet, signifying the death of the mother, so Nicholas Nickleby closes with weeping children who mark the death of the damaged son. Where Agnes is only equivocally forgiven, however, Smike is celebrated and nurtured. The children provide him with fresh flowers; the grass is green above his head. He is the recipient, in death, of more care and love than ever he was in life. With Smike and the nurturing children, perhaps Dickens laid to rest some part of the pain and terror of his childhood. Comments by
the narrator point toward a conflation of Smike's experiences and those of Dickens's child-self. The narrator speaks of the darkening of Smike's mind through the abuse and neglect he has suffered, and explains, "To prepare the mind for such a heavy sleep [Smike's feeblemindedness], its growth must be stopped by rigour and cruelty in childhood" (587). It was just such a "heavy sleep" of the mind that Dickens tells us he feared for himself during his blacking warehouse days. To mourn for Smike was, for Dickens, to mourn for himself. To ensure Nicholas's triumph was to make good on his own old losses.

The real darkness of Nicholas Nickleby lies elsewhere. The childish survivors of Squeers's school are left to wander the countryside, lost and starved, terrified and unclaimed, and at last forgotten. Some are afraid to leave the only home they know, no matter how cruel it has been; some are found crying under hedges, "frightened at the solitude." One child lays himself down to die when his caged bird dies, and another is guarded by a dog who licks his face as he sleeps. The narrator's dismissal of these lost children is casual in the extreme, as he simply gives up on their struggles, commenting only that "by degrees they were claimed, or lost again; and in course of time Dotheboys Hall and its last breaking up began to be forgotten by the neighbors, or to be only spoken of as among the things that had been" (930, my italics). These helpless, abused, starved children find neither fairy godfathers nor nurturing sisters; for them, happiness of any kind is clearly an impossibility. The neighbors forget the school and its victims, and the narrator is eager to forget them, too. Their fate is a dark passage in the Dickens canon, in which the great
chronicler of childhood leaves them to be "lost again," and then forgotten. The cruelty and brutality of the world of Nicholas Nickleby, in which there is no happy present and too few nurturing sisters to go around, is written on their bodies.

What may have seemed at its outset to be a young man's story, focused on finding a job and founding a family, is actually the story of a return to mythic childhood innocence. Nicholas is Oliver Twist grown older, but searching still for the slender girl who will mother but never threaten him, who will be his companion but never offer a sexual challenge. Here the young protagonist looks to his past for happiness, as an old man approaching his end might look back. Steven Marcus suggests that the London of Nicholas Nickleby "is charged with opportunity and possibility," and that "no one in the novel is permanently lost or solitary - at least in a material, economic way." He sees the novel as an affirmation of the "natural tendency of life toward reconciliation and harmony." [39] I am suggesting that while London may be charged with opportunity and possibility, this text does not leave its dramatis personae there, but in a countryside redolent of the past and death. Moreover, the Dotheboys Hall children are "permanently lost and solitary." The text may want to affirm "reconciliation and harmony," but its affirmation is illusory, based as it is on an impossible return to the Great Good Place where everything is granted and nothing is demanded. The experiment in which the hero can go home again has failed, its failure signalled in the elegiac tone at closure. The truths of unassuaged neediness are written on Ralph's
corpse hanging behind the attic door, and on the bodies of the lost boys, too damaged to be reclaimed.

In this chapter, I have traced the creation of the Dickensian hero, originally cast as a child who needs a mother, and then as a passionless, passive young man steeped in nostalgia and determined to avoid adulthood and desire. Each of these heroes requires a young woman to care for him, but in both novels the women are firmly under control, even if Draconian measures are necessary to ensure that control. In Chapter Three, we will focus on a female heroine who is out of control, and who requires the most stringent of measures in order to contain her.
NOTES

[1] Burton M. Wheeler, "The Text and Plan of Oliver Twist," Dickens Studies Annual 12 (1983): 41 - 61, argues that Oliver Twist is the product of a radical change of plans, that it "was begun as a short serial, that Dickens had already published four installments before deciding to convert it into a novel, and that its plot did not take shape even in general form until he had published yet another three installments" (41). Wheeler speculates that Dickens had originally meant only to show a representative "Parish Boy's Progress," "from workhouse to criminal associates to deportation or the gallows," and that "efforts to represent Oliver Twist as a unified, planned work are . . . misbegotten, a misrepresentation of Dickens's early genius." Precisely why a change of plan should preclude interpretations of the novel as a unified work is unclear. A contrasting theory is propounded by Kathleen Tillotson, introduction, Oliver Twist, by Charles Dickens, ed. Kathleen Tillotson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966) xv - xlvii. She argues for "a long incubation for the novel," perhaps beginning as early as December, 1833.

[2] Charles Dickens, preface, Oliver Twist 36. Forster 1: 70, tells us that Dickens prided himself on being a realist, and was always indifferent "to any praise of his performances on the merely literary side, compared with the higher recognition of them as bits of actual life, with the meaning and purpose on their part, and the responsibility on his, of realities rather than creatures of fancy."
[3] Robert Patten, "Capitalism and Compassion in Oliver Twist," Studies in the Novel 1 (1969): 207 - 221, argues that the "respectable" world of the parish authorities, including Mrs. Mann, is connected with Fagin's dark criminal world by their mutual espousal of the utilitarian philosophy.


[7] For another analysis of the narrator's voice, see James Kincaid, Dickens and the Rhetoric of Laughter (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1971). Kincaid believes that the shifts of the narrator's voice serve to dislocate the reader and subvert the distance between narrator and reader. J. Hillis Miller, The Form of Victorian Fiction (Cleveland: Arche Press, 1979) 76, cites the "disproportion between Oliver's inarticulate sufferings and the narrator's ornate style" which "maintains firmly the narrator's detachment from the events and
experiences he describes." Miller believes that as the novel progresses, the mind of the protagonist approaches that of the narrator, who is an uncritical spokesman for the middle-class world of closure.


[11] Angus Wilson, introduction, *Oliver Twist*, by Charles Dickens, ed. Peter Fairclough (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1986) 25, for example, believes Monks to be of no importance at all because he is "a bogeyman with little relation to reality."

[12] Leonard Shengold, *Soul Murder: The Effects of Childhood Abuse and Deprivation* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1989) 110 - 117, discusses teeth and biting as manifestations of anxieties and wishes to cannibalize. Shengold analyzes Dickens's relations with his parents, the stories his nurse told him, the blacking-warehouse experience, and looks at their impact on *Little Dorrit* (181 - 208).

[14] For a different interpretation of Oliver's illnesses, see Kenneth Frederick, "The Cold, Cold Hearth: Domestic Strife in Oliver Twist," College English 27 (1966): 465 - 470. Frederick sees the Brownlow and Maylie households as retreats or hospitals where Oliver and Rose become ill, rather than the homes for happy families which they are supposed to be. The illnesses and the unhappy marriages are designed to show how corrupt society has become.

[15] For a discussion of the Dickens heroine as the Angel of Death, see Welsh, City. Welsh does not include Rose Maylie in his discussion.

[16] Slater believes that Dickens's young women in the early novels are either Maria Beadnell or Mary Hogarth, either Flirt or Angel. But such an either-or opposition does not take into account the complexity of Dickens's "little women," or the contradictions he mapped onto their personae. Angels may also be seductive (Ruth Pinch and Nell); Flirts may be chastened and turned into Angels (Dolly Varden). And what is to be done with the Whore who threatens to participate in Angel-dom?

[17] D. A. Miller 5 - 6, concludes that the novel forms a cordon-sanitaire around the criminal world in order to keep it separate from the respectable world, and draws "impermeable boundaries" between Rose and Nancy.

[19] Tillotson, xxxiv - xxxv, gives an account of Dickens’s difficulties in keeping Oliver’s age consistent with events in the narrative.

[20] When Oliver is ill, Rose watches by his bed and takes care of him. Later, in the country, a relationship develops in which Rose’s role is more complex, but still primarily maternal. Oliver is Rose’s "young charge" (367).

[21] Armstrong 182, also notes that it is Nancy’s mixture of "illicit sexual features with the attributes of the good mother that makes her body the site of sexual violence."


[23] Forster 1: 79, quotes Dickens as writing, "I hope to do great things with Nancy. If I can only work out the idea I have formed of her, and of the female who is to contrast with her, I think I may defy Mr. -------- and all his works." Although we can see that the binary opposition between Nancy and Rose was consciously planned, I think the movement of each toward the other was worked out on a deeper level of awareness.

associated with greenery, food and drink, and fire. "This hearth domesticates Nature to man's purposes and comfort, turning night into day, cold to warmth, loneliness to community, selfishness to charity, brooding to acting, and man to Christian." I am suggesting that it is exactly this kind of talismanic hearth, so present in the Christmas stories, which is so absent from the novels, and from their "happy endings." In the Christmas stories it may be Nature which requires domestication; in the novels, it is man and woman who prove difficult of domestication and uneasy at the fireside.

[25] Robert Patten first called my attention to the controversy between Dickens and Cruikshank over the Fireside and Church Plates. Perhaps Dickens became so angry (he demanded that the plate be designed "afresh, and do so at once," Forster 1: 88) because the Edenic world he had created is not really concerned with family, marriage, and hearth. Its object is, rather, a happiness so perfect that it is deathlike, and a "mother" and child united in oceanic oneness to the exclusion of all others, especially an extraneous husband. Cruikshank wrote of the Church Plate, in a December 30, 1871, letter to the The Times, "There was not anything in the latter part of the manuscript that would suggest an illustration; but to oblige Mr. Dickens I did my best to produce another etching, working hard day and night, but when done, what is it? Why, merely a boy standing inside of a church looking at a stone wall!" Personal communication from Robert Patten, April, 1990.
[26] A. E. Dyson, *The Inimitable Dickens: A Reading of the Novels* (London: Macmillan, 1970) 19, comments that "Nicholas Nickleby is a sprawling, picaresque work... the only real loose baggy monster in the oeuvre. In other words it is the only Dickens novel which either has no clear organic unity, or which has one that the present reader has failed to find." I think the bifurcation of the text and its radical rewriting of the Oedipal myth offers at least a species of interpretive unity.

[27] The Crummles and Kenwigs both offer nurture and help to Nicholas, as well as a job. Even the Squeers family would have been glad to be benevolent had Nicholas, like Barkis, been willing.


[29] There is general agreement that Dickens patterned Mrs. Nickleby after his mother (see, for example, Slater 16). Whether Dickens's evident resentment of and rage with his mother were justified or not hardly matters. What is important is the intensity of the satire (and clearly the feelings behind it) aimed at her illusions about her sexuality and desirability. As Elizabeth Dickens grew older, her son's animosity did not decrease. I think Mrs. Skewton, for instance, is in part a portrait of an aged Elizabeth, as she declined into dementia but continued to insist on the rags and tatters of her Regency youth.

[31] See Michie 97 - 102, for a discussion of the heroine's body and the use of synecdoche.


[34] Michie 141.


[37] Jack Lindsay, *Charles Dickens*. Albert Guerard, *The Triumph of the Novel: Dickens, Dostoyevsky, Faulkner* (New York: Oxford UP, 1976) 78, argues that the death of Mary Hogarth precipitated in Dickens a lifelong revery or fantasy of an ideal virginal lost love, and of forbidden games of marriage with sister-in-law/sister/daughter. I would suggest that his fear of sexuality (his own as well as that of the female) and his revulsion for female blood, dirt, and stains far
predated the entry of Mary Hogarth into his life. If there had been no Mary Hogarth, Dickens would have invented one; and, in fact, he did just that. When his fear of and revulsion for the mature woman are coupled with his need for a non-threatening, nurturing mother figure, then the ideal woman becomes the virgin sister: safe because forbidden; safe because immature and "slight"; safe because devoted.


CHAPTER THREE

INTO THE TOMB: CONSTRAINING THE HEROINE

In the late summer of 1840, as Dickens continued to work on The Old Curiosity Shop at Broadstairs, a group of people came together who created an extraordinarily illuminating vignette, almost as dramatic as one of the charades or tableaux vivant of which they were so fond. Sometime in early August Dickens had met the nineteen-year-old, blonde Emma Pickren who subsequently spent the late-summer holiday at Broadstairs, staying with her relatives, the Smithsons. [1] During the course of the vacation, the Smithson and Dickens parties met daily, and Dickens "pretended to be engaged 'in a semi-sentimental, semi-jocular, and wholly nonsensical flirtation'" with Emma. Clearly both nonsense and flirtation got out of hand, as did the behavior of some of the other guests. Amidst widely spread rumors that Dickens had gone mad, his eccentric houseguest, Angus Fletcher, publicly swam nude in the ocean. Moreover, on three occasions, Dickens seized pretty Emma and ran her down a jetty until she was knee-deep in water, with the breaking waves spoiling her clothes. He proclaimed in mock romance cadences that he would hold the screaming girl in the water until the tide submerged them both, and he did hold her there while the water stained her silk dress and she pleaded with Catherine Dickens to make him stop.

The moment is suggestive. His desire to stain the girl, his wildness of behavior perpetrated under the guise of humor and before the eyes of the yet again pregnant Catherine, combined with his
frighteningly sudden changes of mood, all suggest something more serious than good-natured hijinks. Present at Broadstairs that summer were the two female archetypes whose conflation in Nell was to be fatal to "the child." Mary Hogarth, spiritualized and idealized, was always present in Dickens's mind as he created Nell, and Emma Picken, innocently erotic and still "unstained," was physically present in his home, both offering a contrast to the thickening, familiar Catherine. What either woman was or was not, in actual fact, hardly matters; erotic innocence and erotic spirituality came together in explosive combination, mirroring Nell's fatal attraction and ultimately resulting in her martyrdom and death. Emma's erotic appeal, and Dickens's evident desire to stain her and submerge them both, present a powerful and Quilpish metaphor for that struggle within him which contributed so much energy, both expressed and repressed, to his creation of Nell Trent.

By October 2, still at Broadstairs, Dickens was writing to Chapman and Hall that he suffered "insupportable torture from some complaint in the face - whether rheumatism, tic doloureux, or what not, Heaven knows." He experienced the facial pain at the same time that the vacation interlude with Emma was drawing to a close, and also at the very time that he was describing, in chapter forty-five, the pains that rack Nell's joints as she slips into the illness caused by Grandfather's criminal activities. Soon after his return to London on October 11, he decided to end the flirtation with Emma. He thus avoided a submersion in passion, having substituted for it one in
water, but the disfigured and dying bodies of the Shop reflect their author's unquiet spirit and speak of the stain on a silk dress.
In the preceding chapter, I explored Dickens's deployment of two different kinds of familial structures. Oliver Twist requires and then acquires a mother and an extended family. Nicholas Nickleby is gifted with a triumph over a wicked father figure and a pernicious mother, taking possession of his father's house, repossessing his childish innocence, and reliving a childhood idyll with his sister. The primal fantasy of Oliver Twist is the hungry male mouth, that of Nicholas Nickleby the murderous son re-transformed to innocent child. Each primal fantasy is acted out both in the formation of families and in the deformations of bodies. The narrators of both novels declare their plots resolved and their characters' needs fulfilled in Edenic closures, but both closures are actually based on and composed of contradiction and ambiguity.

In this chapter on The Old Curiosity Shop, and in the subsequent chapter on Dombey and Son, I examine Dickens's increasingly foregrounded uses and abuses of the body. Each novel ends in violent and/or fatal disfigurations and deformations. While Dombey is the more complex of the two, the Shop is equally interesting because it marks such a departure from the familial and domestic concerns of its predecessors. Nell's adventures are a series of almost unmediated primal fantasies enacted on the female body, with only the thinnest of domestic veneers laid on to provide the manifest content of domestic plot. For this reason, the tripartite analytic model that I employed in chapter two must be modified and truncated. In a novel so anxiously and obsessively devoted to first the construction and then the destruction of its heroine, primal fantasies substitute for manifest
content and plot, and the dreamwork of the body crowds out character and familial relationships.

The Old Curiosity Shop is Dickens's most anti-domestic novel, and one of his darkest, wherein he offers a subversive recasting of the closures of his two previous novels, almost as if he has turned their idyllic endings inside out. The narrative begins in fairy tale, and goes on to enact a pilgrim's regress in a far from idyllic countryside, culminating in an incestuous nightmare. Having both assaulted and exhausted Innocence, the narrative transforms itself into the chronicle of a death march, the goal of which is to entomb Nell. At closure, the text briefly attempts to heal its own disease, and to establish domesticity and family, but only a few pale survivors are left to stagger on in the wake of a failed conventional morality.

John Forster tells us that the novel took form "with less direct consciousness of design on [Dickens's] own part than I can remember in any other instance throughout his career." Forster maintains that it was he who convinced the author that Nell would have to die when the narrative was already half-finished. [2] Two months after the completion of the novel, however, Dickens wrote to another correspondent that "I never had the design and purpose of a story so distinctly marked in my mind, from its commencement. All its quietness arose out of a deliberate purpose; the notion being to stamp upon it from the first, the shadow of that early death." [3] Whether or not Dickens consciously designed Nell's death from the outset, certainly it became inevitable so soon as he realized, on whatever level, the inordinate power of his own creation. [4]
In November, 1840, as he was writing chapter fifty-three, he told Forster that "All night I have been pursued by the child; and this morning I am unrefreshed and miserable." [5] His pursuit by "the child" is susceptible of two readings, reflecting the disjunctive halves of both Nell and her creator. On the one hand, he does not want to kill the innocent young girl, and is haunted by her impending death; on the other, he feels himself "pursued" by the erotic power of his own creation. Nell is the quintessential pubescent heroine as oxymoron: Erotic Innocence. She embodies an unintended and powerful magnetism which Dickens and all his male characters feel, but which only Quilp is allowed to acknowledge, and which finally must be erased. The presence of such an erotic forcefield is further revealed when Dickens subsequently links Nell and Mary Hogarth:

Nobody will miss her like I shall. It is such a very painful thing to me, that I really cannot express my sorrow. Old wounds bleed afresh when I only think of the way of doing it . . . . Dear Mary died yesterday, when I think of this sad story. [6]

Memory maps Nell onto Mary, herself already an idealized and fictionalized construct, and further maps desire and fantasy onto confused and ill-defined familial roles. Altogether too much love suffuses and surrounds both Nell and Mary, and it carries the powerful taint of unadmitted eroticism and unacknowledged fear, both of which must be defended against at all costs. Mary Hogarth died, thus remaining virginal and pure. Nell will also die in the cause of
purity, but the question of whose purity requires protection remains to be examined.

Modern readers of *The Old Curiosity Shop* are often fascinated with Quilp, or they concentrate on Dick Swiveller and the Marchioness in a burst of relief at the opportunity to avert their eyes from Nell and Grandfather. [7] But the eyes of the characters who inhabit this fictional world, whether filled with lust, or adoration, or some combination of the two, are firmly fixed on Nell. She is a black hole whose terrific gravity pulls everything around it into its center. Dickens's usual concerns with the provision of home and nurture for a passive male protagonist become secondary in this narrative dominated by problematically strong female bodies and neutered, crippled male bodies.

The text parodies both the family and the hearth. There is a marked diminution in the ability to envision individual, familial, or communal happiness at closure. The evident desire of both narrators is to represent the heroine first as innocent child, then as sacred angel, but she is the object of so many eyes and so much desire that in the end her creator must "murder" her, Dickens's own term. [8] Caught in multiple contradictions, the text creates desire while simultaneously denying it. It maintains an obsession with female purity, but finds the purity of Nell's pubescent body an impossibility this side of the grave. It declares an equation between "family" and the "propagation of goodness and benevolence," but consistently undercuts its own declaration (667). The following examination of the novel's topmost layer or manifest content, its familial structures, its peculiar
construct of domestic happiness, and its bizarre hearths, reveals just how vestigial is the role played by family in this oddly anti-domestic narrative. In the Shop, filled as it is with grotesques and curiosities, with bodies and emotions skewed and distorted, domesticity is notable for its absence, or its perversity, or its parodic nature.
It is not easy to find domestic happiness of any kind in this fictional world. The Quilp ménage is out of the question, characterized as it is by the dwarf's sadism and his wife's bondage. He bites and pinches her, and forces her to stay up all night with him while he sucks on his cigar and his bottle. Despite his vicious and obsessive orality, Mrs. Quilp remains fascinated with him, maintaining that "the best-looking woman here couldn't refuse him if . . . he chose to make love to her." Whatever shreds of domesticity they may share at the outset soon disappear entirely when Quilp abandons wife and home for the masculine delights of his snuggery on the Wharf, with only Tom Scott for company. The Brasses are worse still, one of the canon's few brother and sister pairs who do not provide domestic bliss for each other. Sally and Sampson share a commercial relationship compounded of mutual dependence and mutual dislike, their domestic arrangements a cruel parody of Nicholas and Kate Nickleby keeping house in their little cottage.

The Garlands are figures of fairy tale: the benevolent Cheeryble brothers transmogrified to man and wife. Their domestic arrangements might be a model for a Disney version of the seven dwarfs' cottage after Snow White becomes their housekeeper, but it is no model for human domesticity. [9] Kit and Barbara, with their respective and omnipresent mothers, are altogether too much of the serving class to qualify for anything except cosy subservience. The bachelor, the schoolteacher, and the single gentleman are never conventionally
domesticated at all; they are much more suited to allegory than to the demands of home and family. The only domestic situation textually marked as "happy" occurs in the past: the life Nell and Grandfather enjoyed before he fell into the grip of his obsession. And their version of joyful domesticity is very strange indeed.

Nell confides to Mrs. Quilp how she and her grandfather were once so "very happy," and he "so cheerful and contented." Her tale of domestic satisfactions, however, is equivocal at best. The two spent their days walking in the fields, exhausting themselves because "when we came home at night we liked it better for being tired." And, though their home "was dark and rather dull," that was good, too, because it only made them look forward the more to leaving it for their next walk. Their "long evenings" were spent with Nell on Grandfather's knee, as she listened to him tell how she looks and sounds exactly like both his dead wife and his dead daughter, and how her mother is not in her grave, but rather in a "beautiful country beyond the sky" (97 - 98). This somewhat somber and altogether curious idyll is blighted at an unspecified time, for an unspecified reason. Nell earnestly assures Mrs. Quilp, however, that her Grandfather loves her "better every day," despite his nightly absences and strange preoccupations. Still, something is wrong, and the something has a great deal to do with the "child's" body, which Quilp has immediately recognized as budding and desirable. The idyll of childhood has ended, and that most dangerous time for a Dickens heroine has begun: the time when her body acquires flesh, curve, and erotic bloom.
When Nell envisions future happiness for herself and her grandfather, it occurs neither in a snug house nor by a warm fire. Rather, she imagines a life spent begging on the road. "Let us leave this sad place to-morrow, and beg our way from door to door," she tells him (122). When Grandfather accedes to this plan, it causes Nell's heart to "beat high with hope and confidence." Surely these two will find happiness in an escape from the dark and twisted shapes which haunt their current domestic arrangements. But instead they take the danger and the twisted shapes with them, in Nell's budding body and Grandfather's diseased mind. The only trace of domestic happiness ever remotely connected with Nell lies in the rumor, spread after her star turn with Mrs. Jarley's wax-works, that she "was the child of great people who had been stolen from her parents in infancy" (446). The family romance is Nell's only family, a fantasy her only domestic happiness.

A series of bizarre hearths offer further testimony to the parodic nature of this text and its dark view of domesticity. The first hearth by which Nell and Grandfather find shelter appears to be domestic comfort incarnate:

A mighty fire was blazing on the hearth and roaring up the wide chimney with a cheerful sound, which a large iron cauldron, bubbling and simmering in the heat, lent its pleasant aid to swell. There was a deep red ruddy blush upon the room . . . the flames skipping and leaping up . . . a savory smell, while the bubbling
sound grew deeper and more rich, and an unctuous
steam came floating out, hanging in a delicious
mist above their heads. (196)

The wonderful warmth and sound of a crackling home fire, and the
succulent aroma of hot food guaranteed to nourish both the body and the
soul, seem to herald the apple-cheeked housewife, the contented
husband, and the pretty children welcoming their guests to that
domestic tranquillity so often associated with Dickens's happy
familial hearth-sides. But this hearth, containing the only cheerful
fire in the novel, is in a public inn, and the "family" gathered around
it consists of Jerry and his dancing dogs, the none too honest
proprietors of a Punch and Judy show, the owner of a freak show, and a
card trickster. Nell and Grandfather find temporary comfort here,
among the freaks and show people, discussing "used up giants" and well-
wrinkled dwarfs. In the world of the Shop a cosy hearth can only be
rented by the night, complete with domestic companions who are freaks
and carnival people. The text presents a parody of domestic bliss, of
both familial hearth and heart, in much the same way that Nell and her
grandfather constitute a parody of a loving familial relationship.
And the next hearth by which the pair finds shelter is no less
bizarre. If "home" is first reduced to a public house, it is next
presented in a form so like the underworld as to be unrecognizable as
domestic at all. By the furnace of an iron foundry, amidst "unearthly
noises," among men who move "like demons," Nell and Grandfather take
shelter for a night in Hell, in a world bereft of affection and drained
of domestic comforts.
Certainly one of the least conventional hearths and homes is the "little wooden countinghouse burrowing all awry in the dust" of Quilp’s Wharf. Quilp needs neither wife nor mother nor sister; he is happiest and snuggest when availing himself of "an agreeable freedom from the restraints of matrimony," by "a fireside to himself; and when he was disposed to be convivial, to enjoy himself alone" (465, 613). His is a male paradise and the more subversive for that: a warm blaze, beefsteak, a great bowl of hot punch, his pipe, and Tom Scott to serve him. Quilp, the sole site of vitality in the text, resolutely excludes the Angel in the House from his hideaway. His is the life of the "jolly bachelor," the "devil-may-care bachelor," a life in which he neither needs, desires, nor fears "the woman." He eats voraciously, freely indulges himself in violence, howls like a maniac, bites whatever he doesn’t like, and altogether experiences utmost happiness and contentment. Surely domestic ideals are effectively skewered at his hearthside; pure libido is seldom inclined to the joys of matrimony and domesticity.

The last and most perverse hearth is located in Nell’s last home: a fire burning in a domesticated tomb, a mausoleum with housekeeping privileges. If vitality and libido in the person of Quilp exclude the woman and her domesticity, Death welcomes both. In this tombhouse, Nell builds a "cheerful fire glowing and crackling on the hearth, and reddening the pale old wall with a hale and healthy blush" (483). She mends and sweeps, creating a domestic interior in which she, her grandfather, and the schoolmaster form a peculiar domestic circle. But the most powerful member of the family is omnipresent Death, and no
fire can bring a healthy blush either to his or to Nell's face. By the side of this last and most subversive hearth, the narrator tells us that Nell's mind becomes "purified," perhaps cleansed from the contamination of the male gaze which the competing claims of her body and her spirituality have attracted throughout her odyssey. Here she makes herself ready for her last admirer, the last in the long line of grotesques who stare at her. Death is at once domestic and erotic, the only male entity allowed to participate in both qualities. The sole conventional hearth belongs to him in a narrative which transforms the figural term "Angel in the House" into a literal description, and savagely rejects the cozy domestic interior.

The text presents Nell in a series of domestic roles denominated by conventional names but characterized by bizarre lineaments. Theoretically a cherished granddaughter she is, in fact, her grandfather's mother: his caretaker, cook, and guide. At the same time, she is his victim and his prey. Theoretically a sister to Fred Trent, she is actually a maidenhead attached to an (imagined) inheritance, to be tricked into a marriage profitable to her brother. She is posited as "the child," an innocent in need of rescue from a threatening world. In fact, the only damage she incurs comes from her grandfather and her creator, not from outsiders; and, far from requiring rescue, she manages quite capably to find employment to support herself and the old man. She is theoretically a helpless orphan, the relict of an evil father and a dead mother: a maiden who dies prematurely before she can assume the offices of a woman. Actually, in this novel so preoccupied with playing out its fantasies
of the female, she enacts all the mythic roles of the Victorian woman, from forbidden bud to bidden angel. In the following section, I examine the text's primal fantasies as they are written on the bodies of its characters, both fantasies and bodies so tightly interwoven with one another as to be inextricable.
As we have seen, the Shop carries only an insignificant superstructure of domestic plot; its truest realities are its fantasies as they are manifested on its deformed bodies. At the core of the text's meanings lie a series of primitive portrayals of mythic female roles. These roles, created and defined by the male narratival voice and by the gaze of the male characters, are played out by Nell. Just as Quilp discharges his rage and aggression on the scarred ship's figurehead, so does the text work out accumulated lust, fear, need, and rage on her body. The Old Curiosity Shop is itself a curiosity in its resolute obsession first with the erotic female body, and then with the dead female body. Themselves crippled and disfigured, the male characters and narrators perform a dance of fascination and desire around Nell. If Oliver is the hero as Lost Child, Nell is the heroine as Primal Innocence, unexpectedly thrust onstage costumed as Awful Temptation, and requiring to be somehow rendered Harmless Angel.

In the course of Nell's and Grandfather's adventures, the text presents its variations on a theme: a succession of mythic female roles played out for the delectation of author, narrator, characters, and reader. It initially portrays the heroine as pubescent bud amidst leering grotesques; next as self-sacrificing nurturer and caretaker amidst the dangers of the countryside; then as virtually incandescent star, a popular idol to be gazed at in wonder; later as victim and martyr, her body bleeding and bruised; then as redeeming saint and religious icon; and finally, as safely forgotten. In the course of
these permutations, Nell is menaced and menacing, endangered and
dangerous, and finally contained and controlled. The text's fantasies
are cast in the forms of fairytale, the picaresque, and allegory.

The narrative begins as menacing fairy tale, that most preeminent
form of primal fantasy. Dickens wrote of Little Red Riding-Hood:
"She was my first love. I felt that if I could have married Little Red
Riding-Hood, I should have known perfect bliss." [10] Little Nell is
indeed Little Red Riding-Hood, the paradigmatic tempting female, but
no one will be allowed to marry her. Bruno Bettelheim suggests that
the warring desires of the male are acted out in "Little Red Riding-
Hood" when the wolf/seducer is opposed by the hunter/rescuer. The
reader of the story is aware, if only subconsciously, of the "deathly"
fascination of sex, "which is experienced as simultaneously the
greatest excitement and the greatest anxiety." [11] The Shop is so
filled with sexual anxiety that the "deathly fascination with sex"
must be transmuted into a form which is less frightening; that is, the
primal fantasy becomes a sexually charged fascination with death.
Erotic desire is cloaked in the guise of excessive grief, to be safely
and openly enjoyed upon Nell's demise. There is no hunter or rescuer,
only a series of wolves in disguise, the last of which are Death
himself and the narrator who employs and enjoys Death's effects.

At first, then, Nell is a "pretty little girl" lost in the
thickets of London. She inevitably encounters the Wolf, as would any
"scantily attired" young female wandering the streets of the city. He
is cleverly disguised as Master Humphrey, who returns her to her
Grandfather's house in another part of the forest. It requires very
little editing to turn the first two paragraphs of Master Humphrey's narrative into the apologia of a very atypical psyche:

Night is generally my time for walking . . . .
saving in the country I seldom go out until
after dark . . . I have fallen insensibly into
this habit, both because it favors my infirmity
and because it affords me greater opportunity . . .
The glare and hurry of broad noon are not adapted
to idle pursuits like mine; a glimpse of passing
faces caught by the light of a street lamp or a
shop window is often better for my purpose than
their full revelation in the daylight . . . (43)

Master Humphrey's opening meditation is the more bizarre by reason of what follows it. He moves directly from a consideration of his own voyeurism to the suggestive metaphor of a "sick man" driven mad by the incessant tread of feet and sounds "of the stream of life," an image which then seamlessly dissolves into that of a man who is condemned to "lie dead but conscious," with "no hope of rest for centuries to come." From this vampiric image he segues into a meditation on suicidal passersby, and thence to a paragraph on prostitutes and their drunken purchasers. A very odd series of images indeed for a narrator self-presented as a kindly old man who means nothing but good. Odder still is the end to which these images are tending: his meeting with "a pretty little girl."
"I love these little people," he remarks, but his words and actions are ambiguous in the extreme. To Nell's request for directions, Humphrey's first response is "Suppose I should tell you wrong" (45). His second is to take her home by "the most intricate" route so that she won't know where she is, or when she is near her destination. If Nell is, for Quilp, a bud which he would like to deflower, for Master Humphrey she fulfills the role of victim in his private sadistic fantasies. Pacing up and down Nell's street, he promises himself "that every time should be the last, and breaking faith with myself on some new plea as often as I did so" (54). Unable to tear himself away from the vicinity of the shop until the early hours of the morning, he fantasizes about "all possible harm that might happen to the child," and feels "as if some evil must ensue" for her. He calls up "all the strange tales I had ever heard of dark and secret deeds" of which Nell might be the innocent object.

Even after his return to his own home, he remains obsessed with his visions of "the child in her bed," bed and girl metonymically linked, both "so very small" and "so prettily arranged." As his imagination becomes more heated, he sees her "in her future life, holding her solitary way among a crowd of wild grotesque companions." Immediately he checks himself, "for the theme was carrying me along with it at a great pace, and I already saw before me a region on which I was little disposed to enter" (56). Master Humphrey may not recognize that obsessive fears are often cousins to repressed desires, but Dickens almost certainly does, for Humphrey is abruptly banished from the story altogether. There were plenty of technical reasons for
Master Humphrey's disappearance, but equally compelling must have been the fact that Dickens simply could not allow the tale to be told by a narrator so patently and immediately obsessed with Nell's little bed, and Nell's little body.

Quip, a Rumplestiltskin-figure, invades a tale that initially did not belong to him. While others are obsessed with thoughts of Nell and her little bed, the dwarf takes actual possession of the latter, "coiling" his body in it and replacing Master Humphrey in the role of the Wolf. He is unashamedly carnal as he propositions Nell, "How should you like to be my number two, Nelly? . . . . my little cherry-cheeked, red-lipped wife" (93). As Grise embodies Madeline, so also it is Quip who gives a body to Nell:

Such a fresh, blooming, modest little bud
. . . such a chubby, rosy, cosy, little
Nell . . . . so small, so compact, so beautifully
modelled, so fair, with such blue veins and
such a transparent skin, and such little feet, and
such winning ways. (127)

As he describes Nell's charms so vividly, his description fully as suggestive as Grise's, he smacks his lips and leers, delighting in tormenting old Grandfather with his insinuations, and in exciting himself with his erotic language. Certainly Quip is meant to be the villain of this piece, but in a text so fractured and fragmented there are other stories with other villains as well. Quip's lust seems almost refreshing, for example, when compared with the village sexton's altogether bizarre insistence that Nell visit the old well. The death-
obsessed old man can't wait to get Nell down into the church crypt, "dim and murky," and "black and dreadful." As she looks down into the well, he watches her with avid eyes. In Maclise's illustration of the scene, the sexton's gaze is half-crazed and wholly focused - on Nell. In the look on the old man's face, Maclise has caught the essence of the male gaze at the girl. No lewd suggestion offered by Quilp exceeds the lewd grotesquerie of the grave-digger's expression.

The plot is arranged so that Nell escapes Quilp, running away from a London in which crippled old men pick her up on the street, and dwarfs coil in her little bed at home. At the outset of their journey, Nell and Grandfather seem destined for better things as the narrator emphasizes the "freshness of the day, the singing of the birds, the beauty of the waving grass, the deep green leaves, the wild flowers, and the thousand exquisite scents and sounds" which surround them and "made them very glad" as they reach the countryside. There is even a ritual baptismal scene, in which Nell washes first herself and then the old man from "a pool of clear water" (175). The primal fantasy of the text has changed from a dream of Nell as sexually promising bud, to Nell as nurturer and caretaker. Now the mother of her grandfather, she is his "guide and leader." And then the narrator becomes explicit in defining this second fantasy of the female breast:

But Nature often enshrines gallant and noble hearts
in weak bosoms - oftenest, God bless her, in female
breasts - and when the child, casting her tearful
eyes upon the old man, remembered how weak he was,
and how destitute and helpless he would be if
she failed him, her heart swelled within her,
and animated her with new strength and
fortitude. (246)

Even in this early phase of the journey, however, there are
ominous signs. Nell's feet and appetite are consistent indices to her
bodily and psychic health, and already her feet are "blistered and
sore," and she is unable to eat. In fact, the two wanderers don't
enjoy even relative health and happiness for long; the scene changes
from wholesome countryside to the drunken debauchery of town and races,
from which they must flee yet again. When the pair are taken up by
Mrs. Jarley, Nell undergoes her third transformation; she assumes the
role of the female as popular idol, the cynosure of all eyes, the
glamorous and exotic object of those who pay to gaze at her. She
becomes, in fact, a star. Her stint with the wax-works is not Nell's
first experience as the preoccupation of fascinated watchers. Even
while alone in the shop, she had imagined that there were "ugly faces
that were frowning over at her and trying to peer into the room," an
unconscious register of the gazes she endured (120). Kit Nubbles had
watched for her to appear in her window each night, "his eyes . . .
constantly directed towards one object." Codlin and Short both watched
her surreptitiously, recognizing her value. But now, as never before,
Nell is in the public eye, and the public immediately recognizes her
star quality.

So soon as Mrs. Jarley's caravan arrives "at the place of
exhibition," Nell is the object of "an admiring group of children, who
evidently supposed her to be an important item of the curiosities"
Mrs. Jarley, who is no fool, immediately puts the girl on display, decorating her with artificial flowers and parading her through the town on a cart "dressed with flags and streamers" to advertise the wax-works. The wonderful wax-work Brigand, "heretofore a source of exclusive interest in the streets, became a mere secondary consideration," put in the shade by Nell's rival attractions. The "beauty of the child... produced quite a sensation," and Nell soon becomes Mrs. Jarley's "chief attraction" as "some score of little boys fell desperately in love" with her, and "grown-up folks" admired her bright eyes and her beauty. So popular is she, in fact, that Mrs. Jarley foresightedly removes her from the cart and keeps her in the exhibition room "lest Nell become too cheap." She is both the guide to the show and its headliner, "to the great satisfaction of admiring audiences." The audiences also express their admiration monetarily, and Nell is by way of achieving economic independence as well as celebrity status, the sole support of herself and her grandfather. "I knew she was not a common child," Mrs. Jarley later remarks (445).

And then, in an ominous reprise of the opening scenes in which she was surrounded by the leering faces and skewed grins of the grotesqueries of the shop, Nell is again surrounded at night, in her bed, by the "great glassy eyes" and "dusky figures" of the wax-works. It is simply not possible for a young female to acquire a public reputation, to be self-supporting, and yet to remain safely unmennaced. Only one profession allowed of that kind of success, and Nell will pay a price for her short-lived career in the public eye. For the real danger and the real wolf have not been left behind in London; rather,
they have accompanied her into the countryside in the person of old Grandfather himself. [12] Grandfather is the more dangerous to the degree that his wickedness, unlike Quilp's, is disguised and displaced. He is old, feeble, and a father figure, Nell's natural protector. He suffers a serious, almost fatal illness before their departure, thus weakening him further. Moreover, the old man is addicted to gambling; surely he has neither the time nor the energy to be addicted to Nell as well. But in the country, Nell's nurture and his renewed opportunities to pursue his vice seem to revitalize Grandfather. His feeble passivity turns to feverish rapacity, and Nell's punishment is imminent.

Once again the text's primal fantasy changes, and Nell is transformed from public idol to terrorized victim of masculine violence. Grandfather, enclosed so legally and safely with Nell inside the family circle, violates her. His brutal act occurs at almost midpoint of the narrative, approximately at that moment of the writing of the text that Dickens, according to Forster, consciously knew that Nell must die. Here we see how closely the primal fantasy of the female as rape victim is interwoven with the dreamwork of the disfigured body: Nell's long, wasting illness is most certainly precipitated by her grandfather's act. The girl pays the price for her attractions and her strengths, as the text comes to the realization that no man is safe from temptation so long as rosy, cosy little Nell's blue-veined body remains in its temptingly budlike and available state.
The narrator enacts a fantasy of rape as he describes events on that night when Nell awakens to find a crouching, slinking figure at the foot of her bed. She had earlier dreamed that Grandfather might kill himself and "his blood come creeping, creeping, on the ground to her own bedroom door" (121). Instead, it is the old man himself who comes creeping, creeping to her bedside. His figure is rendered as a synecdochic pair of groping "noiseless hands," and is the more frightening for that. His breath is near Nell's pillow; she fears that "those wandering hands should light upon her face." The figure "busies its hands in something." The "something" is Nell's clothing, as metonymically near to busying itself in and on Nell's body as the narrator can allow. There are resonances here of the Nickleby narrator's desire for Kate, as it was displaced onto Kate's clothing. Finally the figure drops to its hands and knees, creeps along the floor like an animal, and then is gone. "It" is, as Nell later learns to her horror, her own grandfather. She sees his white, white face, his "unnaturally bright" eyes, his "ghastly exultation" over his act.

She fears that he will return to her room, and see her empty bed, while she shrinks "down close at his feet to avoid his touch." She fears this man who seems "like another creature in [grandfather's] shape, a monstrous distortion of his image, a something to recoil from, and be the more afraid of, because it bore a likeness to him, and kept close about her, as he did" (303). Indeed, Nell has seen her fate and her enemy, and has understood them both. "I see too well now," she thinks, "that they would indeed part us if they found us out, and shut him up from the light of the sun and sky" (304). Indeed "they" would,
but the text does not. Rather, it is Nell who will be shut up from the light of the sun and sky; Grandfather remains unexamined and enigmatic.

It is Grandfather’s story that the text does not allow itself to tell. "She [Nell] is all in all to me," he says. "If I lose thee too, my dear, I must die," he tells her. "I can’t leave her," he confides to Mrs. Jarley. "We can’t separate. What would become of me without her?" Mrs. Jarley, a sensible woman, responds with a sharp comment, but the narrator neither questions nor defines Grandfather’s need. Nell resolutely sees him as a child, "a harmless fond old man," and the narrator calls him "the grey-haired child" (399). But both heroine and narrator mistake their man. He is not harmless, although Nell and narrator remain heavily invested in maintaining that he is. What is not explained, what cannot be explained, is this adult male’s consuming preoccupation with, and dependence on, a nubile, fourteen-year-old girl. What cannot be admitted is just how peculiar and pervasive that preoccupation really is.

Part of the curiosity and contradiction inherent in this novel arises from the fact that not only has Dickens mapped his construct of Mary Hogarth, as well as his unconscious understanding of the psychological meanings of Little Red Riding-Hood, onto the hapless and overburdened Nell, but he has also mapped a part of himself and his desires onto Grandfather and the many males, including both narrators, who devour Nell with their eyes and their words. Neither Dickens nor the narrators can acknowledge their illicit desires and so Grandfather remains safely categorized as harmless old man and grey-haired child.
And yet someone must be made to pay for the forbidden desire so pervasive of this fictional world. Quilp is deployed to externalize male appetite, and then scapegoated for his and others' unacceptable longings and behaviors. But even his death is not enough to compensate for the sexual anxiety permeating the text. Nell herself is made to bear the blame for Grandfather's violence against her, thus enacting the most satisfying element of the rape fantasy: not only is the woman violated, but it is her own fault.

When Grandfather is at the height of his gambling passion, he is described in terms suggestive of sexual arousal. His face is "flushed and eager, his eyes were strained, his teeth set, his breath came short and thick, and the hand he laid upon her arm trembled so violently that she shook beneath its grasp" (292). The narrator describes him as wild and restless, feverish and ravenous. In the grip of his vice, he causes the innocent Nell to suffer terrifying anxiety; moreover, he is about to lose all the money that Nell's attractions have earned for them. But when we hear the narrator's commentary on the situation, he blames not the male adult, but instead the female victim:

And yet she was the innocent cause of all this torture, and he, gambling with such a savage thirst for gain as the most insatiable gambler never felt, had not one selfish thought. (297)

The narrator is complicit with Grandfather, and theirs is a lethal partnership.
Having allocated blame, the text begins the process of bringing Nell under control. Now the primal fantasy changes to that of the weakened, suffering female, her body ill and wasted, her punishment extended to the point of her bodily collapse. Nell's body changes from bursting bud to blighted blossom. As she and her grandfather flee yet again, she is subjected to the unwelcome attentions of drunken bargemen and the horrors of brutalizing industrialism, all to the accompaniment of the old man's blame and complaints. Nell's physical decline into illness is explicitly outlined. "The colour forsook her cheek, her eye grew dim" (314). She "shivers with the cold and damp, ill in body, and sick unto death at heart" (414). The blistered feet of the early part of the journey are now "bruised and swollen" (415). She can walk only with difficulty, "for the pains that racked her joints were of no common severity, and every exertion increased them" (423). She is "weak and spent," with "diminished powers even of sight and hearing." She feels a "loathing of food," but her grandfather "ate greedily, which she was glad to see" (426). At last she collapses into unconsciousness, luckily at the feet of the schoolmaster who rescues the pair and takes them to the village where he has been offered employment.

Once again the primal fantasy changes, its new creation the female as saint, and finally as beautiful corpse. Where before her body has suffered and been marked, now there are no longer signs of either pain or illness. Nell's slide into death is beautiful; her body, in fact, more lovely in death, and more lovingly dwelt upon, than ever it was in life. But before that death, Nell's final role is a reprise of her
previous celebrity, this time as religious idol. In the village which is to be her final resting place, Nell's powerful magnetism continues to make her the object of all eyes, even as her body loses flesh. Once again, she finds employment as a guide, this time to sightseers who wish to view the old church. She ostensibly shows the church, but before very long it is really she herself who is the attraction for the tourists. People who come to see the village church "speaking to others of the child, sent more; so that even at that season of the year they had visitors almost daily" (508). Everyone who comes "always praised the child, her sense and beauty." The people of the village elevate and idolize her, feeling a special "tenderness" and "regard" for her. "Some feeling was abroad which raised the child above them all" (509). The "very schoolboys . . . even they cared for her." When she sits in the church, they "peep in softly" at her (508).

When Sundays come, the country folk "for seven miles around" gather at the church and

[t]here, as elsewhere, they had an interest in Nell. They would gather round her . . .

None of them, young or old, thought of passing the child without a friendly word. Many who came from three or four miles distant, brought her little presents; the humblest and rudest had good wishes to bestow. (509)

The common talk is that Nell "will be an angel." At last the text has found a way to contain her power. Not only is she dying, but now she can be categorized and defined in religious terms, and because defined
thus reduced and controlled. A religious relic, an angel, need not be feared. It may be worshipped, but it seldom makes men feverish. Nell is finally neutralized, a process successfully completed by her death. But even in this end time, the text is careful to surround her only with very old men who are ill, confirmed bachelors, or children. Her last act to which we are witness is her visit to the well, "like a grave itself," accompanied by the leering old sexton.

An icon in life, she remains the focus of all eyes on her deathbed, and once again at her burial. The burial day is supposed to "remove her in her earthly shape from earthly eyes for ever," but her interment takes place only after the passage of three days of visual homage paid to the body as it lies in its last little bed. And even after the interment, "the villagers closed round to look into the grave." It is simply impossible to get enough of Little Nell, especially when she lies asleep - or dead. The text's most memorable illustrations of Nell both show her supine figure on her little bed. In the first, her body sleeps; in the second, it is a corpse. In both cases, she is exactly where her narrator wants her: she can't look back. [13]

The final act of Nell's odyssey, and the final primal fantasy, occurs at her deathbed. It is here that we witness the ultimate communion between the omniscient narrator who replaced Master Humphrey and the body of his heroine. He has been fully as fascinated with Nell as everyone else. His descriptions of her indicate his enchantment: her tiny footsteps, her "backward look and merry beck" as she "lured"
old Grandfather on, her "timid and modest" looks. [14] Later he calls her a "superior being," and describes her
delicate face where thoughtful care already mingled
with the winning grace and loveliness of youth,
the too bright eye, the spiritual head, the lips
that pressed each other with such high resolve and
courage of the heart, the slight figure, firm in its
bearing and yet so very weak . . .

(406)

Nell embodies all the contradictions so longed for by each Dickens narrator and male protagonist. She is physically lovely, but her spirituality stands guard on a too appealing beauty. Her character and bearing are firm and steadfast, yet she is simultaneously "so very weak," the weakness a safeguard against too great a power or independence. Young but thoughtful; slight and delicate, but resolved and courageous: each virtue is balanced with its contradiction, also a virtue, in a litany of impossibilities and ambivalences. The fracture in the narrator's desires shows very clearly in this description.

The substitution of the omniscient narrator for Master Humphrey is, then, unsuccessful in controlling narratival obsession with Nell, but the second narrator is, for a time, better able to hide himself, and better able to disguise his "old cupiosity shape" than the self-revealing Humphrey. But when Nell's lovely body lies cold, then the second narrator no longer masks his fascination for her. He loves her most of all when she is safely dead. Then she is docile and yielding, but no longer forbidden; still fascinating, but no longer threatening to swallow up whomever comes near her; still beautiful, but no longer
looking back at those who look at her. The narrator's description of Nell's death is another curiosity of this Shop so replete with curiosities. The death occurs offstage, during a chapter interval, and is only described at a later time and at second hand in the words of a nameless "they." What receives pride of place and pages of praise is the body itself, which we see well before we learn of the circumstances of Nell's death. The narrator speaks about death; he seems to describe death's lineaments; but his real interest is in the figure lying on the bed, and the physical beauty of that figure. The dangerous female body is safely immobilized but still physically unspoiled, and so the narrator possesses the best of both worlds as he celebrates, not a spiritual triumph, but a physical triumph in which a still-lovely body is rendered harmless. Poe himself could hardly have arranged it better.

"For she was dead." But, the narrator adds, Nell's dead body is far more beautiful and calm than any sleep could be, and this despite the fact that he has earlier most explicitly told us that death is a mere mockery of sleep, that the two cannot be compared any more than the childishness of old age can be compared to that of a real child. "Where," he had asked, "in the sharp lineaments of rigid and unsightly death, is the calm beauty of slumber...?" (146). Now we discover where: in Nell's body, which has transcended "unsightly death." Moreover, the body is "free from trace of pain" and "fair to look upon" (652). And then, in a startling metaphor, the narrator comes very near to transforming Nell into Eve at the creation: "She seemed a creature fresh from the hand of God, and waiting for the breath of life; not one
who had lived and suffered death." She is Eve, fresh and beautiful, but she is also dead, thus avoiding the possibility of a reenactment of the temptation and the Fall.

Nell's long decline is the perfect death of a perfect lady. Having endured neither struggle nor pain, her beauty is only enhanced and purified in the process. The narrator emphasizes that this body is "still her former self," "unaltered in this change": "the same sweet face," "the same mild lovely look" (654). There is a great deal of the bride about Nell's body on her death bed: the quintessential "still un ravish'd bride of quietness" who will suffer neither the stain of penetration nor the pain and bloodshed of birth. Decorated with leaves and berries, clad in a white gown and placed on a white bed, she is Sleeping Beauty rather than a body in pain. Both angel and bride, she has lost her power but retained her appeal. For the narrator, it is a most satisfactory dénouement.

The pages devoted to Nell's body conclude with a religious pronouncement from the schoolmaster, ever the spokesman for conventional morality. He ends his speech by proclaiming, "if one deliberate wish expressed in solemn terms above this bed could call her back to life, which of us would utter it!" (654). Even as we register his pious assurance that Nell has gone to a better world, we simultaneously realize that the remark carries quite another meaning as well; that is, which of these male onlookers would make the slightest effort to bring her back to life? Which, indeed, when her current state allows her to be celebrated as Eve, bride, and angel, with no risk or responsibility to those who are left behind. Neither stained
nor staining, Nell will never repeat the transgression which Oliver's mother, Agnes, so willingly committed.

It is only after this interval devoted to adoration of the body that we are made privy to the circumstances of Nell's death two days before. Hers was a passage so painless and so beautifully gradual that they "did not know that she was dead, at first" (655). She exhibited a uniformly quiet mind and quiet manner, her only change consisting in her becoming "more earnest and more grateful to them." She "faded like the light upon a summer's evening," evincing neither pain nor complaint. From this very minimal description, the narrator moves promptly to Grandfather's grief and disbelief. The death is, in every way, secondary to the narrator's concern with the body itself.

There is only brief reference to a possible spiritual or religious meaning that Nell's death may have. The narrator tells us that her mind was clear throughout the hours preceding her death, except for one instance:

Waking, she never wandered in her mind but once, and that was at beautiful music which she said was in the air. God knows. It may have been.

(655)

Garrett Stewart, analyzing this passage, has pointed out "the play between baffled idiom and high surety," and how the phrases hover uncertainly. [15] He concludes, however, that the language of the passage is used "to smooth religious doubt into spiritual celebration." Certainly the intention of these lines, as well as the schoolmaster's pronouncements, is to cast a veil of religious rite and
meaning over Nell's passing. But the implications of the primal fantasy, the female as safely rigid corpse and reified saint, and the primacy granted to the body, dead but beautiful and unchanged, coexist with and contradict the religious meaning. Nell's body on her deathbed resonates as much of Snow White, displayed and enclosed in her crystal coffin after eating the poisoned apple, as it participates in religious solace and significance, as much of fairy tale as of spiritual saga. In the Shop religious doubt is never "smoothed into spiritual celebration"; this narrator doubts deeply. Nell hears the music only when she "wandered in her mind," and the narrator can only go so far as to accede that it "may have been" in the air.

Forster explained his desire that Nell should die on the grounds that "the gentle pure little figure and form should never change to the fancy." He adds, "All that I meant [Dickens] seized at once." [16] All that both Forster and Dickens meant is implicit in the very seeds of this novel: in Mary Hogarth's death; in Dickens's memories of Little Red Riding-Hood, the longed-for bride; in Master Humphrey's earliest fantasies; in Grandfather's obsession. No one can save Little Nell because the text's primal fantasies of the docile and pure, yet erotic and powerful, female can only be realized on the safely dead body of the heroine. The text is terrified by the power of its own creation, fearful of the implications of sexuality, threatened by the attractions of the healthy body, menaced by the power of that body to devour and destroy, threatened by the male need for "the woman." It intended to create a pure "little child"; instead, like Dr. Frankenstein, it has created a female monster whose power is all the more sinister by reason
of its desirable body. Where the fairy tale promises redemption and
rebirth with the child's release from the wolf's body, the novel
rejects life and rebirth in favor of a hymn of praise for death. Its
very point is that the pubescent child must not be released into the
world. Instead, it commits itself to representing a dead body as
"fresh," and to disguising sexual fear as spiritual adoration. The
heroine plays out a series of mythic roles, solving the problems
implicit in her first role by the enactment of her last, and granting
her creator and her narrators the satisfactions of fantasy embodied in
prose and figured on deformed and dead bodies.
When Nell is dead, the surviving world is safe from her danger, but it is also deprived of her energy and her organizing force. Nor is there room for the vital and libidinous Quilp in an exhausted society whose cornerstone is the club-footed, attenuated Garland family. Grandfather, reduced to an allegorical figure labelled "Grief," without "power of thought or memory," and shorn of all his wolfishness, also dies: "the child and the old man slept together," is the rather curiously appropriate manner in which the text puts it. [17] The "magic reel" which has powered the narrative, "slackens in its pace, and stops": "the pursuit is at an end" (663). Nell has indeed been pursued, and if she has not been caught by her rescuers, she has certainly been caught by the narrator and the plot. Like the fictional world, like Nell herself, the narrative loses whatever of vitality it possessed at the outset. Here are no declarations of perfect happiness; instead, the narrator announces that the only remaining task is "to dismiss the leaders of the little crowd who have borne us company upon the road" (663).

Dismissed they are, and right summarily, too. The world which survives Nell is divided between the grotesque and the vapid. Sampson and Sally Brass end as specters who frequent obscene hiding places. Having exchanged gender, they become the "embodied spirits of Disease, and Vice, and Famine." The traditional vampire's stake is driven through Quilp's heart. Mrs. Quilp and a "smart young fellow" live a merry life on Quilp's money, her happiness undoubtedly a further
punishment meted out to the dwarf. In *Oliver Twist* and *Nicholas Nickleby*, Dickens made provision for a second generation, describing clusters of children at the maternal knee. The characters of *The Old Curiosity Shop* only replenish the ranks of servants and the handicapped, or they leave no progeny at all. Abel Garland marries, "how it happened, or how they found it out . . . nobody knows," thus propagating goodness and replicating club feet endlessly into the future. The schoolmaster's only attachment is to Nell's "Little Mourner" who replaces his dead pupil. The single gentleman wanders, "a lover of his kind," but neither a lover of women nor father of children. The bachelor lives with the Garlands, and remains a bachelor. Kit and the much patronized Barbara marry and have children, thus assuring the renewal of the servant class. Their children are christened with the names of their parents, relatives, and friends, but there is no second little Nell, a significant omission. The text has no desire to replicate the dangers implicit in Nell's little body and her powerful magnetism.

There is one couple, however, who escapes both the vapid and the grotesque. They have been singled out by critics as a triumph of humor and love, "a very movingly realized alternative" to the pessimism of *The Old Curiosity Shop*. [18] If there is a chance for health and happiness in this novel so dedicated to illness and death, it must lie with Dick Swiveller and the Marchioness. Certainly they are, like the Browdies before them, wonderfully divergent from the usual yoking of the infantilized male and the girlish little woman who organizes his world and his salvation. In a refreshing reversal of roles, the female
Marchioness plays the voyeur, employing her gaze for entertainment and advantage. She watches Dick through the keyhole as he indulges in certain private "fantastic exercises." She uses her "sharp wit and cunning" to survive in a world which starves and beats her. Given the opportunity to shape events, she is energetically willing and able to participate, to act, and to initiate.

The changes which the Marchioness's body undergoes are as instructive as those undergone by Nell, and are governed by their own primal fantasy: the young and lovely girl who is born solely to "save up" for a young man. When Dick first encounters her, her body is starved and her mind stunted: she has "hungry eyes." He feeds her, and she eats heartily and unashamedly. Both he and she have the good sense to nourish her emaciated body rather than to perpetuate it. There is no desire for martyrdom in the "small slipshod girl," no starving, ladylike delicacy. When Dick falls ill, she in turn nurses him competently and lovingly. Neither his illness nor his nakedness (she has had to sell his clothes, leaving him not even an umbrella which, he thinks ruefully, would at least have been "something" "in case of fire") dismays the resourceful and unashamed Marchioness. Dick does not emerge from his illness a dependent child, requiring her to be his mother, another refreshing divergence from the relationships of the later novels. Dick has been called the "classic hero," purged of "passivity and callousness" by his illness, and "made triumphant by his honesty and simple trust." [19] In order to determine whether Dick and the Marchioness are either triumphant in or redemptive of this text's shattered world, let us first consider the case for the
Marchioness as Nell's double; that is, as a split-off from Nell, embodying the vitality and humanity which Nell's iconization denies her.

Few novels are so perfectly circular and static as The Old Curiosity Shop. Nell begins in a room in the old shop, surrounded by grotesques; she ends in a second room in the ruins of an abandoned monastery or nunnery, similarly surrounded by grotesques. But as Nell's story and her life wind down, as her body wanes and her purity waxes, the Marchioness's starved young body flourishes with nourishment, and her story gains importance. Nell and the Marchioness are doubles who embody respectively menace and promise, very much like the dark twin and the light, that beloved convention of horror fiction. Dickens destroys one female body, but then allows Dick, his creature, to nourish its double, a healthy double who is allowed to live and flourish with her creator. Dick feeds her, names, clothes, educates, and marries her. Her mind and body constitute the page on which Dick's creator allows himself, through Dick, to write a vigorous, robust heroine.

The Marchioness first appears in the text almost immediately after Grandfather's violation of Nell, that violation which marks the beginning of her long decline to death. As Nell's cheeks grow pale and her eye dim (314), we meet the "small servant" who efficiently handles all the drudgery of the Brass household, who knows how to lure a prospective renter into the spare room, and whose smallness is rivalled only by her shrewdness (332). The Marchioness is all that Nell is not. Nell's natural habitat lies in the indeterminate upper air
through which the angels in the novel’s last illustration bear her (672). The Marchioness appears "mysteriously from under ground," firmly bound to earth, to sloppy floors, dirty kitchens, and human service. Nell is a beauty: half virgin bride, half angel. The Marchioness is a grotesque, concocted from a "dirty coarse apron and bib, which left nothing of her visible but her face and feet," and a perpetual head cold.

While Nell is pursued by rescuers who adore her, the Marchioness is beaten, starved, and neglected. Everybody wants to see and talk of Nell, but no one "ever came to see [the Marchioness], nobody spoke of her, nobody cared about her" (349). Nell tends the graves of the dead, soon herself to leave life; the Marchioness tends the stricken Dick, bringing him back to life. Kit and his companions try unsuccessfully to save passive Nell; the enterprising Marchioness saves Kit. Noble Nell learns to die and becomes an angel; the shrewd servant learns to play cribbage and becomes a wife. The dark double is a ladylike anorexic, while the light is both cunning and avid for experience. The dark becomes weak and diseased; the light grows strong and healthy. Nell gets lost in the streets of London, trustingly allows herself to be picked up by a man, and has to be taken home. The Marchioness, at exactly the same age, gets lost in the streets of London, shrewdly inquires her way of apple-women until she finds her direction, and single-handedly accomplishes her mission. Nell is the stuff of which martyrs are made: "pure as the newly fallen snow"; "dear, gentle, patient, noble" (658, 654). Sophronia is the stuff of which survivors
are made: "good-looking, clever, and good-humored"; "cheerful, affectionate, and provident" (668, 669).

As appealing as they are, however, Dick and Sophronia Swiveller cannot guarantee a happy ending for their fictional world. They are not the family around which the world of the Shop can rally and be healed. In the first place, they are not fully developed or central enough, either to the narrative or its closure, to offset its sickly pallor. The narrator enfolds their fate, or more nearly, throws it away, among the fates of very minor characters in the last chapter. They appear between the two gamblers, List and Jowl, and the pony, Whisker. Moreover, the Marchioness loses her sui generis qualities as soon as her body and mind mature. Once she has become the good-looking "young lady saving up" for Dick, she is never allowed to speak again. Only the starved grotesque speaks; the young lady is provident and sensible, like any good servant, but she is mute. She knows how to manipulate Dick, having "the good sense" to "encourage rather than oppose" his "occasional outbreak with Mr. Chuckster." But her complaisance hardly compensates for the candor and voice lost in the process of becoming genteel and domesticated.

Both Dick and Sophronia are of doubtful origin, and they remain childless. Whether their lack of progeny is the result of her grisly antecedents, or Dickens's distaste for a fecund domestic ending, is impossible to say. Perhaps they are barren in order to ensure that Sophronia's attentions remain solely directed at Dick and their "many hundred thousand games of cribbage together." If the text proffers their childlessness as a guarantee of marital happiness, that in itself
constitutes a riveting subversion of Victorian shibboleth in this most subversive of Victorian novels. In any case, Dick and Dickens fill the Marchioness's mouth and her mind, but they do not fill her uterus. The one couple whose children might have cast a ray of light in a dark world does not propagate itself.

With the pairing of Nell and the Marchioness, Dickens replicates the sexual ideology of his age as we have seen it articulated in contemporary sociological and medical literature. The subtextual premise of both author and era is that because men desire their bodies, require their nurture, and fear their power, women must be constrained in circumscribed separate spheres. Dickens tries to fit Nell into the Procrustean bed of his own fears and requirements, discovers that she is a misfit for it, and tries again with a second female body. He constructs the clever and resourceful Marchioness, but then transforms her into a respectable young lady, suitable for marriage. The change from the ungrammatical, unfettered Marchioness to the educated, silent Sophronia Sphynx marks the second Procrustean bed of the novel. The Marchioness is intended to be less threatening than Nell, however. She begins as a comic grotesque, not a pubescent bud. Her lack of beauty, social position, and education render her powerless and thus non-threatening. So soon as she is fed and her body ceases to be that of starved dwarf, and becomes that of a rounded, nourished woman, she loses her freedom. She must remain Dick's creation, existing safely as his adjunct, with no power to create an agenda of her own. She is immured in "a little cottage at Hampstead." The only visitor is Mr. Chuckster, and he is Dick's companion in the all-male smoking-box, a
replication of Quilp's masculine snuggery on the wharf. The dark twin is so powerful that she must die; the light twin is sufficiently powerless to be allowed to live, but even she is drained of vitality by the text as her body gains the flesh of womanhood. Present only at the margin of the text's closure, she is too powerless to provide a center for her world as do Rose, Kate, and later, Florence. A diminutive comic grotesque is one thing; a young and lovely woman is quite something else. In the end, Dickens contains and constrains both Nell and the Marchioness, the one in bodiless eternity and the other in voiceless domesticity; the one in the crypt, the other in the cottage.
But this dark text does not end with the happy Swivellers; even their quite modest happiness does not assume pride of place at closure. Instead, the novel trails off into contradiction and ambiguity, focusing on the impotence of narration and the failure of memory. Its final paragraphs constitute another powerful indication of this anti-domestic text's disjunction, ambiguity, and darkness. After Nell's arrival at the church which is to be her tomb, and again over her body, the schoolmaster extols the beauties and blessings of death. He passionately lectures Nell as she grieves that the dead are so soon forgotten:

There is nothing . . . no, nothing innocent or good, that dies, and is forgotten. Let us hold to that faith or none. (503)

Since the text does not hold to that faith, although it asserts it, we are left with that hollow phrase, "or none." The schoolmaster's pious protestations about immortality are roundly negated by the final words of the narrator. [20]

Kit tells his children stories of "good Miss Nell who died," stories which, as related to us by the narrator, prove to be not stories about Nell so much as they are homilies about death, and stories about Kit's own "needy" youth. [21] He takes his children to the street where she had lived, but new improvements had altered it so much, it was not like the same. The old house had been long ago
pulled down, and a fine broad road was in its place.
At first [Kit] would draw with his stick a square
upon the ground to show them where it used to stand.
But he soon became uncertain of the spot, and could
only say it was there abouts, he thought, and that
these alterations were confusing.

Such are the changes which a few years bring
about, and so do things pass away, like a tale that
is told!  (671 - 672)

The narrator thus subverts the specious comfort offered by the
schoolmaster in the earlier passage: nothing good is forgotten, the
latter promises, but we see that Nell is forgotten. Kit is confused,
and cannot remember; yet it is only Kit who remembers her at all.
Oliver and Rose, and the narrator, mourn at the marble tablet erected
in Agnes's honor. The Nickleby/Cheeryble children mourn at Smike's
grave. But in this novel dedicated to death, to Nell, and to the
"Pleasures of Memory," no one mourns at Nell's grave, or even remembers
where she used to live. Once that magnetic body is removed from its
last little bed, once Grandfather joins it under the ground, there is
an almost unseemly haste to forget.

We have travelled a long way from Oliver's perfect happiness and
Nicholas's return to his childhood paradise with Kate. Or perhaps we
have only returned to a much more intensely imagined version of Agnes's
death. With Nell's entombment, however, the narrator is determined to
accomplish two goals left unattained at the closure of Oliver Twist.
This time the desirable young woman will be buried before she provokes
a sexual transgression. And this time, unlike Agnes's unquiet spirit which hangs about the marble tablet in the church, the narrator will make sure that Nell remains vanquished and forgotten. As I have noted, *The Old Curiosity Shop* is a circular novel, and Nell has come full circle in yet another way. At the beginning of the narrative, she was nothing more than a story in a man's mind. Master Humphrey and his creator had a story to tell, and perhaps told more than they intended. At the end of the narrative, Nell is again nothing more than a story in a man's mind. Kit should have a story to tell, but he and his creator tell less than the text's homilies promise: "so do things pass away, like a tale that is told!" The old, dark house has been replaced by "improvements," by "a fine broad road." Neither Kit nor the narrator regrets the changes; they are changes for the better. There is no shrine to Nell, either in the street where she lived or in the minds of these survivors.

But how can it be that iconic, sanctified Nell is forgotten at closure: not just omitted in a hasty summing up, but forgotten? It is both easy and possibly true to say that Dickens is not fully in control of his material. Beneath that lack of control, however, lies an unease so great that it dictates forgetfulness in a novel which insists on its dedication to human immortality. This unease goes far beyond simplistic explanations compounded of Victorian hypocrisy and bourgeois sexual repression. Unwilling to examine its own premises, unable to resolve its contradictions or to bridge its disjunctions, unable to heal its morally and physically crippled bodies, the text resolutely marches Nell to what awaits her, not only scapegoating and
punishing her body just as surely as it scapegoats and punishes Quilp, but erasing her memory and meaning from the world.

It is common critical currency that The Old Curiosity Shop is the least likely of all Dickens's novels to be read with sympathy today because of its cloying sentimentality. [22] The problems of the text are made explicable and untroublesome when consigned to the rubric "sentimentality," and explained as an historical accident attendant on Victorian excesses. But it is more illuminating, though infinitely more troubling, to read that sentimentality as a disguise for profound fears about familial and gender relationships, and a deep unease with desire for the female body. [23] The text presents a radical misfit of disjunctive shapes and ill-adapted disguises, rather than the harmonious patterns and consistencies which its moral explanations and commentaries seem to promise. Sentimental tears for a beautiful death are not enough to glue together the fragments and fractures whose fissures reveal the anxiety beneath. The narrator holds the disparate parts of the narrative together by sheer will alone, the will not to recognize the contradictions inherent in the text and in his own desires.

If the narrator has purchased the safety of ignorance, however, he has paid a high price. There are dark novels to come, but surely none darker than this one. A dead and forgotten Nell, doubled by a domesticated and silenced Marchioness, seem to signal the attainment of that control over the female body for which the text has struggled. Neither male need for a nurturing, ordering figure to provide salvation, nor male desire for "the woman" is vanquished, however. As
capping a gushing well only increases subterranean pressures, the repression of Nell's body and memory only increases the unexpended energies and emotions which lie beneath the textual surface. Female bodies may be murdered and silenced; they may sicken or die. Still, male need and residual female energy remain. The unexpended, unabsorbed energy must go somewhere, and so it spills over into the next novel, and the next, in endless replication. It fuels the later heroines; it lies behind their angelic façades, beneath their gliding skirts, within their slender bodies. It fuels the anxieties and fears of subsequent narrators and subsequent male protagonists as they encounter the paradigmatic, powerful heroines again and again.

There is a second equally important source of anxiety, both in this text and, even more powerfully, in *Dombey and Son*. The single gentleman's speech, in which he defines the "Good Angel of the race," is intended to be a hymn of praise, but it also carries ominous and multiple subtexts of great resonance for the fates of pre-*Dombey*, and the perfections of post-*Dombey*, heroines:

If you have seen the picture-gallery of any one old family, you will remember how the same face and figure - often the fairest and slightest of them all - come upon you in different generations; and how you trace the same sweet girl through a long line of portraits - never growing old or changing - the Good Angel of the race - abiding by them in all reverses - redeeming all their sins -  

(637)
This short passage packs a heavy payload, going far to explain the nature of both the typical Dickensian heroine and the problematic Dickensian family.

According to the single gentleman, the generic young woman is essential; on her depend the family's fortunes and redemption. Her constitutive characteristics are her fair face and her slight figure ("fairest and slightest of them all"). "Fair" and "slight" are adjectives seemingly so empty as to be meaningless, but for the Dickensian heroine, from Rose to Rosa, they are far from simple cliché. The heroine is beautiful, but she is also sweet and angelic, the added adjectives an attempt to hold her beauty harmless and temptationless. She is essential, but she is "slight" - physically weak and unintimidating to the perhaps less than imposing and powerful male. She is always "the same sweet girl": not energetic or enterprising or interesting or intelligent, but "sweet." She is a girl, most emphatically not a woman, and in the denial of her womanhood is a reiteration of "slight," a second guarantee of her harmlessness. Thus far, the contradictions and ambiguities are a repetition of the narrator's description of Nell, as I discussed it previously. But there is much more.

Equally important, she is always the same; the generations march on, men are individually defined and characterized, but the sweet girl is not. She is, like coin, an interchangeable unit: good for any kind of redemption at any time or any place. Moreover, in this male fantasy, she neither grows old nor changes. Always a girl, retaining her fair face and slight figure, she is neither thickened by pregnancy
nor deformed by age. She is both the "Good Angel" who redeems all sins, and the Good Mother, "abiding by them in all reverses," a real bargain in one fair, slight package. So long as she performs as nurturing mother and redemptive angel, with no demands, threats, or pains of her own, she remains free of disfiguration. But since she is packaged inside a fair and sweet body, conflicts among the male's desires almost inevitably develop. As a consequence of those conflicts, it is her body which must pay the price for the impossible idealizations inherent in the primal fantasy of the perfect female.

Most important of all, the passage highlights exactly how confused and ill-defined are female familial roles in Dickens's novels. We have seen that Nell plays a series of mythic roles in her enactment of primal fantasies. But she simultaneously plays multiple domestic roles, and in so doing one role seeps into another, creating a female whose familial roles and relationships lack clearcut boundaries and definition, with disastrous results. Nell is simultaneously wife, mother, daughter, and granddaughter to her grandfather. The single gentleman tells us that the girl looks and sounds exactly like both her mother and her grandmother. No wonder Grandfather loses his sense of what is appropriate in his relations with Nell. When the familial role is ill-defined, when all the female faces and bodies are the same, the kinds of love desired, required, and enacted may easily become inappropriate. Improper demands for inappropriate kinds of love are the inevitable result.
In a recent study of father-daughter incest, Judith Herman finds that "Before the age of ten, almost half (45 percent) of incest victims had been pressed into service as 'little mothers' within the family." She finds further, in studying incestuous fathers, that the father commonly shows "unfulfilled dependent wishes and fear of abandonment. In the father's fantasy life, the daughter becomes the source of all the father's infantile longings for nurturance and care. He thinks of her first as the idealized childhood bride or sweetheart, and finally as the all-good, all-giving mother." [24] Herman's findings go far to explain the multiple familial roles played by Nell, and the series of primal fantasies enacted on her body. Father-daughter incest, with its confusion of the daughter with the fantasy of the Good Mother and the innocent child bride, is a recurrent although disguised theme in the Dickens canon, a theme which helps to explain the murky and puzzling relationships between so many Dickensian heroes and heroines, as well as fathers and daughters.

The "same face and figure": inescapable, never growing old, never weakening, never tiring. The slight heroine is the good mother who never existed, but whose fantasy projection can never be forgotten; the mother whose presence is so necessary, but who cannot and must not ever be possessed. She is constituted to provide the maximum nurture and security to the male, while herself remaining a cypher, a blank in whose spaces can be written any mythic fantasy and any familial role. "The same face and figure" - but because she is constructed of equal parts of Mary Hogarth and Emma Picken, her bifurcation is destined to create unbearable confusion and anxiety. Nell pays the price with her
body; Florence, a very different case, will exact a terrible price on the bodies of others.
The world is turned upside down and inside out in this dark novel, and the representations and fates of the bodies within it are commensurate with its perversities. Healthy female bodies are dangerous: Nell wastes and dies; the Marchioness is starved and tiny; Sally Brass is healthy enough, but she's a "fellow," a stunted male immured in an unattractive female body. Males have unhealthy psyches within contorted bodies. Master Humphrey, "mis-shapen and deformed," entertains sadistic fantasies; the second narrator has pronounced necrophilic tendencies. Both the Garlands, father and son, have crippled feet. Quilp is a dwarf; Dick is a drunken ne'er-do-well; Grandfather alternates between avid addiction and self-pitying feeble-mindedness. Sampson Brass is easily and equally unmanned by Quilp and Sally. Kit begins as a near-moron, a figure of fun, and ends an industrious but not very bright servant. Tom Scott walks on his hands, and even the pony won't go forward properly.

This litany of crippled bodies tells the same story as do the parodic hearths, the fragmented primal fantasies, and the fractured, disjunctive narration. Nell's march to the grave is a Bildungsroman turned inside out. It ends not in maturity, but in death; not in community, but in isolation and entropy. The heroine does not add wisdom; she loses flesh. She does not fall in love; she is raped. She does not marry; she dies. She does not redeem her world; she is forgotten. The novel, which on one level is a sentimental hymn of praise to an angelic child, is on another level a savage attack on
domesticity, the family, and the body. It is saturated with anxiety and fear. Small wonder that readers, gasping for air amidst the sickly fumes of Nell's deathbed, laugh explosively with Oscar Wilde, or desperately look for signs of health in Dick and the Marchioness.

I have suggested in the previous chapter that Oliver is a vacuum at the heart of his novel, and here that Nell is a black hole at the heart of hers. The desire of the text, however, in *Oliver Twist*, is to fill Oliver: he is to be filled with both food and learning, to be provided with love and care. The desire of the text in *The Old Curiosity Shop* is somehow to avoid filling Nell; her body must not be allowed to become more powerful than it already is. Just before Nell's death, Grandfather looks at her "uneasily," and mutters that she "grew stronger every day, and would be a woman, soon" (505). It is precisely just such an outcome that the text is organized to avoid; consequently, neither Nell's mouth nor her uterus is ever filled. If she were to become stronger, and a woman, she might release the wolf in every man, turning each into a helplessly rutting, ravening animal, and then swallowing him, and the world as well. She would defile, and be defiled, her child's innocence and purity forever stained.

John Berger points out that the principal protagonist of paintings of the nude female body is never actually included in the painting. The real protagonist of the painting is the male spectator who stands before the canvas, gazing at the naked woman. [25] It is he who "owns" the nude body before him, he who violates it with his eyes. In one sense, Nell's significance, and that of her iconic body, is like the nude's erotic forcefield in a painting: her body is avidly watched
by the novel's male grotesques who are the real protagonists of her story. But rather than possessing the image of Nell, both characters and narrators are possessed by her powerful image. As Freud remarked so many years later, "the eye corresponds to an erotogenic zone." [26] But the eye can also become enslaved, and Nell dies to cure that enslavement.

In *The Old Curiosity Shop*, then, the redemptive female perishes, and the world is left without her services. The flight to the Edenic countryside, declared a success in the two previous novels, is here revealed to be only another form of evasion. The country is the place where death lives, while the narrative's survivors all live in London. *Oliver Twist* created the Dickensian hero. *Nicholas Nickleby* experimented with one means to grant him safety. *The Old Curiosity Shop* both creates and destroys the Dickensian heroine in a paroxysm of fear and desire. After the male dominated world of *Martin Chuzzlewit*, Dickens again creates a powerful heroine (and the defenses required against her) in Florence of *Dombey and Son*. 
NOTES

[1] She was known then as Emma Picken; later, after her marriage, she became known as Eleanor Christian. The following material is drawn from the Pilgrim edition of Letters 2: 120 121, 130, 152, 173; Kaplan 163; and Johnson 193 - 194. Johnson, writing before the completion of the Pilgrim edition, misdates the episode with Emma by one year. All the accounts are based on Mrs. Christian's "Reminiscences" of 1871.


[4] Hilary Schor, "Riddling the Sphinx: Dickens and the Female Carnival of The Old Curiosity Shop," lecture delivered at the Dickens Project, University of California, Santa Cruz, 1989, argues that Nell must die because the novel needs her death to keep it unified, whole, and permanent.


[7] An example of the critical desire to turn the eyes from Nell is Kincaid. His chapter on the *The Old Curiosity Shop* is a valuable examination of the characters surrounding Nell, but he seldom approaches Nell herself.


[9] "To be sure, it was a beautiful little cottage with a thatched roof and little spires at the gable-ends, and pieces of stained glass. . . . White curtains were fluttering, and birds, in cages that looked as bright as if they were made of gold, were singing . . . and the garden was bright with flowers in full bloom, which shed a sweet odour all round, and had a charming and elegant appearance. Everything . . . seemed to be the perfection of neatness and order" (232).


[12] Guerard (83) also accounts Grandfather as the real threat to Nell. And Carey (158) calls the relationship between Grandfather and Nell "a gruesome union of girl and aged man." Kincaid (80) also sees Grandfather as the main villain, but is able to find reason to laugh at him. The most detailed psychoanalytic examination of the relationship between Nell and her grandfather is in G. Cordery, "The Gambling Grandfather in *The Old Curiosity Shop*," *Literature and Psychology* 33 (1987): 43 - 61. Cordery argues that grandfather has a "pathological personality which is unable to come to terms with Nell as sexual woman except through gambling."
[13] The two illustrations of Nell in her little bed, the first of which shows her asleep, and the second dead, bear a resemblance to some of the drawings used by Charcot to illustrate sexual aspects of certain hysterical states. See George F. Drinka, The Birth of Neurosis: Myth, Malady, and the Victorians (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984), for reproductions of Charcot's drawings.

[14] Audrey Jaffe, "'Never Be Safe but in Hiding': Omniscience and Curiosity in The Old Curiosity Shop," Novel 19 (1985): 118 - 134. Jaffe points out that even when the omniscient narrator replaces Master Humphrey, he does not achieve distance and detachment, "but rather a blurring of the boundaries that define and separate narrator and narration, subject and object." In this fine essay, Jaffe suggests that the omniscient narrator is "caught inside" his narrative. I am suggesting why and how he is caught. She sees him, as I do, "moving between omniscience and character."


[16] Forster 1: 123.

[17] Nell dies clasping Grandfather about his neck, just as Dickens said Mary Hogarth died in his arms. Grandfather is buried with Nell as Dickens so fervently wished to be buried with Mary, so that their dust might mingle.

[18] Kincaid 99. He believes that the Marchioness and Dick are the comic center of the novel, although they are "perhaps not enough to counterbalance the central gloom" (104). Marcus (165 - 168) suggests that Dick is reborn "into authentically heroic circumstances" and that
his "rescue" of the Marchioness is his "heroic ordeal." But Marcus also concludes that "the story of Dick and the Marchioness cannot counterbalance the dead weight of the novel's great theme."


[20] Dickens himself roundly negated the schoolmaster's moral homilies in a January 8, 1841, letter to Forster, in which he said: "I can't preach to myself the schoolmaster's consolation, though I try." Letters 2: 181.

[21] For a more optimistic interpretation of Kit as storyteller, see Jaffe 134. She treats Kit’s subordination of Nell’s story to his own as conveying "a sense that present and continuing life outweigh past sorrows: rather than hover about Nell’s image, the children’s tears seem to disperse it, and narrative itself seems subordinate to the life that goes on around it, learns from it, and will, in a sense, continue beyond it." I would be more convinced if I could see that "life" indeed has "learned" from narrative, and if the survivors were more vigorous.


[26] Freud 35.
CHAPTER FOUR
SAFE AT LAST?

In September of 1844, Dickens dreamed of Mary Hogarth for the first time in over six years. It was a dream so powerful that he awoke, he wrote Forster, in tears. Martin Chuzzlewit was finished, Dombey and Son two years in the future. The experience is significant because it marks a kind of watershed. It provides a pattern for the madonna-like and resolutely bodiless Florence Dombey, while marking a departure from the dangerously fascinating Nell Trent. In this way, the dream is both a harbinger of what is to come and a gloss on what has been. As always, the dead Mary Hogarth provided for Dickens the perfectly malleable material from which he could create his ideal feminine figure. Neither Nell nor Rose, nor the immaculate heroines of the middle period, is based on Dickens's actual experience of the living Mary Hogarth; rather, his memories of her are as carefully constructed as any of his fictional heroines. [1] Mary in death, like Nell in death, is tractable and safely contained at last. Both are infinitely plastic, accommodative of multiple meanings.

In his dream, Dickens cannot make out the face of the Spirit, to whom he refers as "it," nor does he desire to do so. It wears a "blue drapery, as the Madonna might," and is recognizable as Mary's spirit only by its voice. The hallmarks of the vision, then, are its Madonna-like qualities and its bodilessness. Moreover, it exhibits, says Dickens, "compassion and sorrow for me," and heavenly tenderness for me." [2] He stretches out his arms, and calls it "dear," but it
recoils from him. He concludes that he has been too familiar. Even in his dreams of Mary, at least those he articulated, he is so heavily defended against erotic desire that the merest gesture of his body toward hers must be repulsed. The dream figure is totally focused on him, and sends out waves of those emotions of which he had felt himself so deprived as a child. The Spirit tells him that, for him, Roman Catholicism is the best religion; in other words, that religion most pervaded by the healing and mediating role of the Virgin Mother, the redemptive Madonna. Two themes are signalled here, both of which will mold relations between the Dickens hero and heroine in the years to come: a potent defense against the desires of the body, and a poignant need for the nurturing, mythic mother. Both themes are at the very heart of the tangled and multivalent relationship between Dombey and Florence.
While Dickens was writing *Dombey and Son*, he was also trying to come to terms with his past, as well as a present which included six children, increased "restlessness," the apparent loss of his old facility for effortless literary invention, and a wife whose frequent pregnancies he seemed unwilling to connect with any activity of his own. [3] We do not know exactly when he began to write the autobiographical fragment in which he tried to order his past, but certainly he was writing it concurrently with *Dombey*, and equally certainly the twin processes of writing past autobiography and present fiction were intimately connected and interdependent. [4] Small wonder, then, that *Dombey* proceeded slowly. Dickens was simultaneously dealing with present dissatisfactions, reconstructing his most disturbing memories, and constructing both a novel and a Christmas story.

As he was creating the Florence of whom Dombey is so jealous, he was remembering his sister Fanny, for whom he felt both love and bitter resentment. At the time that he was thinking about Florence's eternal and illimitable love, he was remembering the mother whom he blamed for his trauma at the blacking warehouse. His childhood pain and desolate sense of abandonment are written into the complicated, densely textured, and often puzzling relationship between Florence and her father, a relationship which changes shape and emotional content as the narrative develops. While he was insisting in the fragment that he did not "write resentfully or angrily" about his childhood wounds, he was constructing a narrator who refuses to acknowledge either his own
ambivalent feelings about Dombey's characters, or their often ambivalent and aberrant feelings about each other. [5]

Autobiography and novel alike are constructed of the same "true building blocks of the imagination," and share the same primitive fantasies. [6] All the aspects of Dickens's childhood, those events recuperated in the autobiographical fragment as well as earlier and more formative events no longer consciously remembered, are woven into both narratives. The autobiography is truth and fiction in the same way that the novel is truth and fiction, and if Dickens is not in full control of his material, he is certainly in full control of his art. In the novel, as in the fragment, he transmutes primitive fantasies of need, desire, and fear into a narrative which gives the illusion of real life. But only in the novel does he create a narrator whose rendition of the manifest story provides one set of meanings, while his use of tropes woven into the plot often yields quite different significations. This narrator weaves what appears to be a seamless fiction, but within its parameters and layers he begins not one, but many stories.

Not only does the text contain many stories, it shifts and adds, but does not necessarily finish, new stories midway. Characters change personality as their bodies change, while the narrator intrudes in or distances himself from his narrative in ratio to his anxiety about those changing bodies. New stories and transformed characters gloss the earlier stories, and the changes themselves weave new textures into the narrative as a whole. Once again, I find it useful to think about the novel as a series of layers, constituted of manifest content, primal
fantasy, and the dreamwork of bodies, although Dombey, like the Shop, presents problems for the use of this analytic paradigm. Where the Shop is a series of almost unmediated primal fantasies, Dombey is more carefully planned and more skillfully woven than the earlier novels; consequently, the layers are not so easily separated. The manifest content has not only both a text and a subtext, but consists of densely textured, interlocked, and multiple smaller stories as well. The multiple primitive fantasies are skillfully played out in and on the bodies of characters from which they can not be neatly severed.

On the most superficial level of meaning, the text creates a fictional world in which moral lessons are learned, the lost are found, happy families are formed, and a happy ending is constructed. Beneath that world, however, other stories unfold, stories of dysfunctional families, of male hunger, of the search for a nurturing figure, and of men who are humiliated, punished, marginalized, and infantilized. The primal fantasies which underpin the manifest content are attempts to deal with women's power and men's needs. Male hunger and desire are so great in Dombey that the text's primal fantasies render women as breasts. A woman may be imaged as the milk-filled breast, the erotic breast, or the smothering, domineering, "obdurate" bosom. The male characters, acting out emotions determined by their hungers, are rendered as threatened phallics. They are castrated or childlike, but only rarely potent. Where Nell was the victim in many of the Shop's fantasies, it is the males of Dombey who are the victims.
In the layer beneath the manifest content, then, stories are told in which men are saved or destroyed by women, but seldom by their own efforts or powers. Dramas of parent and child, of husband and wife, of adultery, desire, and friendship proceed on one level. On another level, the formerly potent male deity who, in *Martin Chuzzlewit*, for example, ordered the world and meted out reward and punishment, is replaced by a female mythos, a maternal deity. Winding around and among these levels, the relationship between Florence and Dombey forces all the layers into new meanings, as it creates and is created by additional primal fantasies. The narrator sometimes subverts his own story with a sudden, intrusive trope, or he may thrust himself and his own longings into a scene. He refuses to know the implications of some of his stories, and thus can refuse his own meanings. And he employs, as his master trope, a congeries of wave, distant shore, mighty ocean, and unseen region so simultaneously multivalent and vague that it provides a metaphysics and geography of the text susceptible of mutually contradictory meanings. We can begin to understand the complexities of this multivalent text with an examination of its manifest content, where the need to construct a functional family is paramount.
On its topmost layer, the novel enacts a movement from one maladaptive family to another, describing a circle in which the damaged and stunted Dombey's in the darkened room of chapter one are replicated in the final chapter as seemingly happy and functional family members. Dombey himself damages and is damaged by each of the families of which he is a part. In this seam of the narrative, the text declares that Dombey is morally reborn, having learned to love the daughter who has deserved his love for so long. Those characters who have sinned are punished; the others sort themselves into new families which are sources of nurture and satisfaction to their members. Everyone is accounted for, and moral order is re-established. But the subtext of this saga of families tells a more complicated story. It recounts four failed attempts to achieve nurture for a father and a son. In the course of these failures, the son wastes away and the near-suicidal father suffers an illness so severe that he, too, almost perishes.

The narrator supplies fragmentary but critical information about Dombey's childhood and youth, about the past which formed this rigid, wooden man. He grew up motherless in the somber Dombey mansion, "among the dark, heavy furniture - the house had been inhabited for years by his father, and in many of its appointments was old-fashioned and grim" (76). No busy, cheerful little woman was caring for either house or child. In his entire life, Dombey has "never made a friend" (103). Clearly then, it is not pride alone which has created this man whose body is as distorted as his psyche, who can move "only as one piece,
and not as a man with limbs and joints," who can only turn his head "slightly" as if it "were a socket" (67, 110). [7] At 28, he inherits the family firm which is his only interest and in which his entire emotional capital is invested. At 38, he marries "a lady with no heart to give him; whose happiness was in the past, and who was content to bind her broken spirit to the dutiful and meek endurance of the present" (50). After four years of marriage, his wife gives birth to a "bad Boy," a "base coin," a female child who from the beginning arouses fear and uneasiness in him. Now, six years later at 48, he has finally fathered the son who will fill the void in his heart and his firm, and whose birth begins the narrative.

Like Dombey’s birth family, his second family is described only in hints and glimpses. Fanny, like Oliver’s mother, Agnes, proves herself to be maternally inadequate by dying almost immediately after giving birth, leaving baby Paul "likely to be starved to death." Florence, "crouching timidly in a corner" like a frightened animal, is focused on her dying mother. Dombey concentrates on the male baby, clearly an extension of himself. His eyes are half-closed; he is filled with "luxurious satisfaction"; he is "exulting." But even while he enjoys this moment of sexual accomplishment and parental pride, he experiences irritation with his daughter’s "desperate affection" for her mother, with her "ill-advised and feverish proceeding" in clinging to Fanny. The mother is dying; the son will be dead in six years. Father and daughter, far from being isolated and indifferent to each other, are already ominously enmeshed, bound by currents of hostility and mutual suspicion. The narrative concerns itself first with a series of
temporary replacements for the inadequate mother, and finally with the ultimate substitution of a grown-up Florence and a diminished, childlike Dombey for the long-dead Fanny and little Paul, thus proposing an entirely new relationship between Florence and Dombey at closure.

Dombey's third family consists of a harem of females who attempt to keep young Paul alive. Having rejected Mr. Chick's suggestion that "something temporary be done with a teapot," Dombey and the ladies rent a pair of milk-filled breasts. This first surrogate mother, Polly Toodle, is a loving wet nurse under whose care the baby thrives. The narrator's description of Dombey as he watches Polly nurse his son suggests that it is not the baby alone who has been deprived. Dombey's obsessive gaze connotes a near-vampiric need and hunger. He is not the traditional proud father superintending the growth of his son; rather, he is a starved mouth and a hungry heart, satisfying both his erotic cravings and his emotional hunger in twice-daily acts of voyeurism. The mansion itself, appropriate to its owner, is described as if it were a vampire's crypt, or a mausoleum. The narrator tells us that the furniture is "covered over with great winding-sheets," and the looking-glasses are "papered up in journals" which give "fragmentary accounts of deaths and dreadful murders." Each chandelier, muffled in cloth, looks like a "monstrous tear." The house smells like "vaults and damp places," and there are "mildewed remains" of straw blowing around the street.
Dombey immures himself in three rooms on the ground floor of this tomb. His rooms open on one another, and the last of the three is a room of glass, a conservatory with walls of windows. Dombey, "a very shade," sits in the darkened outer room, twice a day "for hours together," and watches Polly nurse his son in the lighted room, as if she were on a spotlight stage and he safely seated in the darkened audience. The scene is simultaneously ghostly, autoerotic, and pathetic. It glosses the biological process of lifegiving nurture with the unnatural environment of the deathlike mansion and the presence of the "hard and cold" Dombey, who can only gaze. Father and son alike require nurture and love, but the father has been so long deprived of both that he has lost his humanity. The narrator makes no attempt to explain Dombey's obsessive watching, nor does he speculate about Dombey's thoughts. The juxtaposition of death and life, of chill and warmth, of a father who is "a very shade" and an infant who is milky and satisfied, of a hungry adult mouth and a milk-filled breast, is perhaps dangerous enough without additional comment.

Paul thrives on Polly's milk, but when she is discharged, he pines and wastes. Other maternal substitutes are offered but none can halt his decline. Mrs. Chick and Miss Tox, both dry-breasted, redouble their supervisory efforts to no avail. Mrs. Wickam, Mrs. Pipchin, and Cornelia Blimber, far from adding health and flesh to Paul's frail body, instead exert a pernicious, wasting influence. Mrs. Wickam's only talent is for pessimism, not for life. Mrs. Pipchin forms an oddly respectful relationship with the child, but does not add flesh to his frame. Cornelia can stuff his head with facts but she can nourish
neither his heart nor his body. Florence is the only person whom Paul loves, but the two are separated when he enters the Blimber establishment. The fantasy of the sister as salvation, so pervasive in earlier novels, is not powerful enough in this text to save the child. Paul tells Mrs. Pipchin that when he grows up he is "going to put my money all together in one Bank, never try to get any more, go away into the country with my darling Florence, have a beautiful garden, fields, and woods, and live there with her all my life!" (259 - 260). The same rural Eden declared to be rewarding reality for Oliver, Nicholas, and Tom Pinch, becomes here merely the impossible fantasy of a dying child. Neither gardens in the country, nor sisters in the gardens, can save either Son or Dombey.

After completing the chapter in which Paul dies, Dickens wrote to Forster that "to transfer to Florence, instantly, all the previous interest, is what I am aiming at." [8] Certainly chapter eighteen deals intimately with Florence, but its very title, "Father and Daughter," reveals the truth: the remainder of the narrative is not about Florence, it is about the dance of attraction/revulsion between her and her father. The two are intensely focused on each other despite Dombey's strenuous efforts to remove himself from her vicinity, and to distract himself from his preoccupation with her. His trip to Leamington is a flight from the daughter who has taken to visiting his room nightly, as much as it is a distraction from his grief. At his journey's end he asks himself, "what was there he could interpose between himself and [Florence's image]?" She is now almost fourteen; as her body matures, Dombey's unease increases, and his dislike of her
turns to hatred and fear. At Leamington, however, he discovers an antidote to Florence, the woman whom he can effectively "interpose between himself and his daughter": Edith Granger. The solution to the danger presented by one female is to substitute an exogamous second in her stead, thus forming the text's fourth dysfunctional family.

Dombey's marriage to Fanny was defined by his desire for a son and heir; the succession of females who enter the family circle or operate on its periphery after Fanny's death are emblematic of his and his son's need for maternal nurture. The marriage with Edith, however, is inscribed with Dombey's erotic desire for Edith's voluptuous body. [9] She is a beautiful woman, elegant and haughty, an enviable possession, and one available for purchase. The narrator understands her potential for both passion and contempt, but Dombey only belatedly realizes how disastrously he has married. Whatever his lack of understanding of his new wife, or his inability to gain ascendancy over her, his desire both to attract and possess her cannot be in doubt. On his wedding morning, this wooden, arrogant man appears in "gorgeous" array: "new blue coat, fawn-coloured pantaloons, and lilac waistcoat; and a whisper goes about the house, that Mr. Dombey's hair is curled" (520).

Edith resembles Sikes's Nancy: both are objects of desire, and both offer their bodies for sale. Edith possesses a "fierce beauty," and the narrator images her as a "wild harp," her emotions "an angry chord." He calls her a "beautiful Medusa," prey to "tempest[s] of passion" which are not so far off from Nancy's fits of hysteria. She clearly recognizes her position as a woman who has hawked her personal attractions on the market, one who has been bought and sold. Also like
Nancy, she mixes strong maternal feelings with her role as object of desire and sexual partner. Immediately upon her first introduction to Florence, Edith "held her to her breast." Her subsequent meetings with Florence are all marked by similar embraces, always with Florence's head nestled or pressed to Edith's bosom. If Edith's breasts are, for Dombey, objects of erotic desire, they are also sources of maternal comfort for the daughter Dombey hates. It is the very mixture which resulted in Nancy's murder, but there is no Sikes in this text brutal and direct enough to kill (or control) Edith, not even the narrator.

Having purchased a new wife, however, Dombey is unable to exact value for his money. Far from subjugating Edith to his will, he is never even her equal. From their first night at home after the wedding trip, to her last night in the mansion, his loss of authority and dignity is steady, his experiment in desire a catastrophe. Her "cold supreme indifference" is a wound from which he cannot recover. He sits alone night after night, "hardening," meditating ways to force her recognition of his supremacy, or even his presence. Finally, he confronts her in her bedroom, as she stands amidst heaps of "costly things," all purchased with his money. Wherever he looks, he sees his "riches, despised, poured out, and made of no account" (651). The despised riches are like his despised seed, also "poured out, and made of no account." Dombey demands that Edith defer to and obey him; he is "swollen" with self-importance; his feelings "burst all bounds." He rises, "a stiffer . . . man than ever." But his "stiffness" is of no avail; Edith remains contemptuous.
In the course of describing this scene, the narrator ignores the implications and contradictions of his own commentary. He tells us that Dombey is complacent, "very dignified, and very confident of carrying out his purpose." (657). But he has already described to us a Dombey very far from either dignity or confidence. Even at the beginning of the interview, Dombey feels a "sense of disadvantage," and is "conscious of embarrassment and awkwardness" (650 - 651). By the end of the interview, as his eyes meet hers in her bedroom mirror, he sees that Edith pays him no more heed than if he had been an unseen spider on the wall, or beetle on the floor, or rather, than if he had been the one or other, seen and crushed when she last turned from him, and forgotten among the ignominious and dead vermin of the ground. (657)

Not only does he fail to find his own image reflected in her eyes, he finds himself reduced to "dead vermin" there. Ever after, when he remembers this scene, it is with an uneasiness so profound that it causes the blood to rush to his face (682). Confidence does not blush, nor does it see itself imaged in the Other's eyes as crushed and dead vermin.

The result of the interview is that Dombey, on some level, at last understands his own powerlessness to control Edith. He calls in Mrs. Pipchin and Carker to be his tools, to exert the authority which he is unable to command. Mrs. Pipchin is delegated to control the household, and Carker to control and humiliate Edith. Useless for the narrator to tell us that such tactics are the mark of a confident man. His self-
contradictory statements here are a startling example of the fissures which open up in the text's surface at those crucial moments when the narrator will not, or cannot, face the implications of his own images. Unwilling to acknowledge Dombey's humiliation and impotence in the face of Edith's contempt, he attempts to conceal both with talk of overweening confidence, pride, and arrogance. His goal is to convince himself and us that Dombey has scored a victory for patriarchy, that the cultural norm of masculine domination remains intact. But when we join Dombey in looking into Edith's mirror, we too see the crushed beetle, and the humiliated man.

Dombey loses everything: his money and power, his reputation, his beautiful wife, and his loving daughter. His own life recapitulates in reverse the stages of his son's long decline as they were embodied in the women who presided over each of them. Mrs. Pipchin is in charge of Dombey's house and expenditures at first, as she had once been in charge of Paul. When she leaves, Miss Tox and Polly take over and try to provide nourishment and care to a Dombey who is increasingly childlike, ill, and helpless. Finally, Florence returns and replaces Polly. The daughter, recently become a mother, replaces the wet nurse, as in the past the wet nurse had replaced the dead mother. Dombey regresses to childhood, requiring rescue by his mother, just as Paul previously had rejoined his mother in death on the distant shore. Paul's short life is thus re-enacted, and Dombey Senior's course inversely replicates that of Dombey Junior.
The daughter is the mother, her father her child. [10] As Edith re-enacts Nancy's mixture of the maternal and the erotic, so Dombey re-enacts Oliver's illnesses, but he is more childlike and dependent than Oliver ever was. Dombey's illness, like those of later Dickens protagonists, reflects his creator's fear of the healthy male body, a body in which vitality implies the potential for dangerous ambition and erotic desire. [11] The defensive reaction which finds illness to be a solution to danger is certainly not unique to Dickens. The middle-class Victorian woman has frequently been accused of the same displacement, and Freud found the genesis of his new science in just such a twinned desire for safety and sickness. Victorian doctors called it hysteria, and long regarded it as a uniquely female disease. Dickens calls it "Death [standing] at his pillow," or simply "the wandering of his brain" (957). Nonetheless, both doctors and Dickens are discussing the same phenomenon. Dombey's illness enables him to escape his "hard and cold" body, his damaged psyche, and the dangers of adult emotions and responsibility, all at the same time.

The illness ravages him, wasting his body until he bears only the "faint feeble semblance of a man" (958). He has lost his chance of immortality through the death of his son, and his potency in the course of his catastrophic marriage; now he loses both identity and autonomy. Dombey's survival depends on talismanic, maternal protection, but the only acceptable way for an adult male to acquire a mother, while remaining innocent of desire, is to suffer an illness so debilitating that childlike passivity alone remains. As a result of his illness, nothing is demanded of him; everything is provided. And so, at
closure, Dombey plays on an autumnal beach with his grandchildren, the three of them infants together. No longer even pretending to be the powerful patriarch, he is at peace, without ambition, without desire, without fear. He is "always with his daughter," and the waves "speak to him of Florence and his altered heart." Like David Copperfield after him, he has found a mother to discipline his heart.

The family presented to us at closure is Laing's fantasy family, in which space and time are mythic, "eternal and illimitable," and in which everything and everyone is ordered around one center. Dombey, disciplined and diminished, and Florence, mythic and maternal, comprise that center: mother and child bound together in a timeless, oceanic unity reminiscent of a return to the womb. Other families are formed, but those made up of the normal family members have atypical relationships, while those with rewarding relationships have atypical members. These families constitute Dombey's world, but none of them approximates what we have come to regard as the paradigmatic Victorian family: authoritarian patriarch, submissive wife, and thriving children, all united in bonds of affection beside the cosy hearth. We are entitled to ask whether, in fact, this "domestic" novel creates any traditional families living in conventional domesticity.

Certainly one of the most important families is that composed of Captain Cuttle and Sol Gills, living in a wholly masculine ménage at the sign of the wooden Midshipman, but standing very much in a husband and wife relationship to each other. Early in the narrative, Walter tells Sol that the latter needs a wife, "a comfortable, capital, cosy old lady, who was just a match for you." The text provides him with
just such a mate in the person of Captain Cuttle. The Captain falls naturally into the phrases of the marriage service whenever he speaks of Sol. Pointing at the Instrument-maker, he says "Look at him! Love! Honour! and Obey!" (97). He vows to stand by Sol "until death do us part" (407). Gills, though sad at his temporary loss of Walter to marriage with Florence, is "greatly comforted by having his old ally, Ned Cuttle, at his side" (906). [12] Their family nucleus includes, on its periphery, not only Toots but eventually Walter Gay as well, after he has done his duty in replicating Florence and Paul. At the Midshipman, then, a family of men live as happy, contented children, delighting in masculine companionship and their evasion of female control. Even in his role as rising businessman, Walter remains more akin to the boys at the Midshipman than to the mythic unity of Florence and Dombey. He is Gills's "Son and Heir" much more than Dombey's and, in fact, it is Gills's capital which supports Walter, in the form of income from his fairy-tale investment from the past, "lost ships, freighted with gold."

Toots is "rapturous" about his marriage to "that most extraordinary woman," Susan Nipper, and Susan is clearly mother to the addled Toots, whom she early on denominated "that infant." After his marriage, Toots grows "extremely stout," the visible sign that Susan is a good mother to this child who has heretofore been wasting away for love of Florence. When Toots and Susan have children, he refers to them as "an increase to her family," as if they are nothing to do with him. Despite his relentless enthusiasm for his wife, Toots remains, on the one hand, a distant worshipper at Florence's shrine, and on the
other, an intimate member of the world of male children at the Midshipman, where everyone loves to love Florence, but everyone also loves to live safely removed from her orbit. Toots and Susan represent the paradigmatic Victorian marriage and family no more than Cuttle and Gills, or Florence and Walter. [13]

If Gills and Cuttle are "jovial and contented" in their child's world, Captain Bunsby is a terrified victim in Mrs. MacStinger's world, where life is nightmarish, and a church truly is the "house of bondage." Their marriage is a re-enactment of the mating of the black widow spider as she stings her mate into paralysis in preparation for sucking him dry. Captain Cuttle's horror at his old friend's fate is only exceeded by his horror at the sight of young Juliana MacStinger's "deadly interest" in the wedding proceedings. He sees in the daughter "a succession of man-traps stretching out infinitely; a series of ages of oppression and coercion" (954). Juliana is a harbinger of endless generations of voracious females, a bleak forecast for the masculine future. But perhaps women are equated with male destruction only in Captain Cuttle's mind. It is his thoughts which we overhear at this wedding, and it is his conclusion that the "seafaring line was doomed." Perhaps female rapacity is limited by occupational or class boundaries, or perhaps it is limited to the pathological fears of this one man.

Unfortunately, the narrator has already told us that the female's voracious appetite for marriage and men pervades this entire world. When Dombey marries Edith the narrator points out that twenty nursery-maids in Mr. Dombey's street alone,
have promised twenty families of little women, whose instinctive interest in nuptials dates from their cradles, that they shall go and see the marriage.  

(519, my italics)

After the ceremony, Dombey conducts Edith through the twenty families of little women who are on the steps, and every one of whom remembers the fashion and color of her every article of dress from that moment and reproduces it on her doll, who is for ever being married.  

(525, my italics)

Little women of every class, in every street, lie in wait for men, and they begin to practice their vampirish arts in their infancy. The narrator is hardly more optimistic about men’s chances than is Captain Cuttle, although the former often tries to disguise his bleak outlook beneath generous dollops of sentimentality. Woman’s nature, he tells us, is "better, truer, higher, nobler, quicker to feel, and much more constant to retain, all tenderness and pity, self-denial and devotion, than the nature of men" (81). The function of his sentimentality is to hide from us, and more importantly from himself, the fear inspired in him by women. And he replicates his own doubled and ambivalent attitude toward women in Dombey’s obsessive fear of Florence, and his preoccupation with her. As in the case of the Colonel’s lady and Rosie O’Grady, it would require a very finely calibrated measuring device to draw clear lines of distinction among Juliana, the twenty little women, and Florence herself. Nor is Edith essentially different from Mrs. MacStinger as she reduces Dombey to a crushed beetle. Dombey’s life
with Edith is a nightmare in which midnight fears become daytime reality. Men are prey or vermin, but helpless in either case, while women are insatiable or vengeful. One of the great fears of Dickens's domestic fictions is embodied in Edith and Mrs. MacStinger: the full-figured woman, fully sexual, wholly contemptuous, and wholly out of masculine control. Moreover, neither Dombey nor Bunsby has any final appeal against the woman, for there is no old Martin Chuzzlewit in this text to act as male deity and to order the world. There is only Florence.

We have looked at the manifest content of this narrative, and found even on this topmost layer of the text a series of fictional families very different from our view of the conventional Victorian family. We also find a domestic order widely divergent from the paradigmatic world of patriarchy, traditional values, and ideas of community. At closure, despite some very tenuous ties, the families constructed by the text are essentially disconnected from one another. Florence and Dombey and the waves exist in mythic isolation from the rest of this world. The little society of child-men at the Midshipman has very little to do with either the madonna and her infant, or with any other world. They are busy playing at being grown-up capitalists, but the Midshipman does no more business than before. The only real connections between Florence and Dombey and the rest of the world are monetary. Sol's money goes to Walter, who presumably donates a share of it to the iconic Florence. A portion of Harriet and John Carker's money goes to Dombey, so that neither member of the mother and child duo at the heart of Dombey need be concerned with practicalities.
The text does not establish an ideal domestic setting, or in fact any domestic setting at all. [14] It does not offer a scene in which Walter, Florence, and their two children are gathered in familial harmony, an omission further suggesting that Walter’s place is actually with the boys at the Midshipman rather than with Florence. Throughout the narrative, we have seen that Florence is intensely preoccupied with Dombey, and he with her. At closure, their absorption in each other intensifies as their entire emotional world shrinks to include only the other. Dombey "is always with his daughter," listening to the waves speak to him "of Florence, day and night." The narrative moves in a circle of replication and retention: despite deaths, nothing is lost; despite births and marriages, nothing is gained; despite rewards and punishments, nothing is learned. Dombey has not achieved new wisdom, nor has he become a new man. [15]

The chief business of the text as it tells its stories of families is to construct a mother to provide the nurture and safety Dombey never had, a mother who will ensure that he need not repeat his son’s fate and waste away. Dombey and Son turns out to be Dombey and Mother, after all. Like Dick Swiveller, but in a very different context, Dombey might say that a young and lovely girl was growing into a woman expressly on his account, and was saving up for him. Dickens’s careful constructions of mothers, whom he often calls daughters, is a fact of his novels that is seldom remarked. [16] Michael Slater, for instance, comments that there is a striking lack of examples in Dickens’s novels of women who mother, who actually guide or redeem a husband or son. [17] One immediately thinks of Agnes and David Copperfield, but even
more to the point is the fact that Dickens's heroines routinely fulfill roles which demand that they guide and redeem their fathers, to whom they are mothers. Alexander Welsh argues that Dickens kills off mothers, or ridicules them. [18] The statement is true only if we ignore his frantic creations of other mothers from wives, daughters, and sisters. Whether Florence is an unambiguously "good" mother remains to be seen.
Let us now look at the layer just beneath that of the manifest content, using the prism of the primal fantasy through which to read the text. If *Dombey* is concerned, on its topmost layer, with the replacement of insufficient families, on this second layer, the primal fantasy, it is intensely concerned with the causes and results of two other insufficiencies, both of which are intimately connected with fantasies of the body. The first is an insufficiency of nurture, encompassing both bodily and psychic wasting; the second is phallic insufficiency, including efforts to avoid it, efforts to avoid acknowledging it, and the difficult task of offering solutions for that which is not acknowledged to exist. These two deficits are interwoven in the textures of both character and plot. The ways in which the male body is represented, the metonyms employed to signify potency and its lack, and the text's pervasive anxiety about the body are all factors which influence its representation of gender and familial roles. Similarly, to read the female body as the cause of psychic and bodily wasting in the male, as well as the site of the male's physical salvation, is to read the female precisely as this text and its narrator do: fearfully, ambiguously, and desirously. Insufficiencies of nurture and phallus are, in fact, primal fantasies of need and desire. In the case of the complexities offered by *Dombey and Son*, it is once again useful to alter, nor the analytic paradigm itself, but its deployment. Consequently, I discuss in this section the ways in which the fantasy of need and desire is enacted on male bodies, and in
the next section, the fantasy of the hungry mouth and how it is enacted on female bodies.

When we concentrate on men’s bodies, then, we find that other stories are told concurrently with the manifest story which constructs and disposes of families. Dickens and Dombey are mightily concerned with the male body, and how to save it from starvation and humiliation. Three bodies waste away in the course of the narrative: those of Paul, Toots, and Dombey himself. In addition, Carker and Dombey both suffer sexual humiliations which have catastrophic results for their bodies as well as their minds. Helena Michie has suggested that the Victorian heroine’s body is fragmented, that her bodily parts are selected "not only for what they represent but for the absences they suggest." [19] As the bodies of Michie’s Victorian heroines are fragmented, so Dombey’s masculine bodies are represented by metonymies which are significant for what is present, but even more for what is absent. Men’s bodies are frequently imaged in terms of phallic appurtenances, and the exceptions to that rule are, significantly, the only two potent males of the text. The metonymical appurtenances are external and detachable, their appearance and disappearance from the text suggestive of sexual and/or generative success or failure. These successes and failures, and the conditions under which they occur, have their own stories to tell, stories which intensify subtextual meanings of family and gender as well as glossing the surface story which the narrator consciously intends to tell.
The wooden effigy of a Midshipman hanging outside Sol Gills's shop is described in unmistakeably phallic terms. It is "thrust" out above the pavement, its "right leg foremost," and it bears the "most offensively disproportionate piece of machinery." The "machinery" is a sextant, and not only is the Midshipman's sextant phallic, the several sextants hung inside the shop are also suggestive. [20] Phiz's drawing of the effigy's fixed gaze focused through his "disproportionate machinery" is an incomparable visual conflation of scopophilia and male genitality. It is perfectly appropriate to a text in which male sexual anxiety is rivalled only by the intensity of the male gaze. Dombey watches Polly from a darkened room, day after day; he looks at Florence secretly from under a handkerchief. Bagstock spies on Miss Tox from his window through a pair of opera glasses; the narrator, present in a darkened hall, is transfixed by Edith as she waits in a lighted room in Dijon. In all these instances, the man is hidden, the watching intensely secret, the eye a sexual organ - perhaps the only potent sexual organ.

The wooden Midshipman's stare is a metaphor for all the male gazes in this text, but his gaze is distinctive in important ways. It is undisguised, and only he, of all the males, dares openly to "ogle" Florence. As she approaches the shop, she receives "the whole shock of his wooden ogling" (333). Neither the narrator nor any other male character ever admits that Florence might inspire ogling. Only a wooden image has "the indomitable alacrity" and the "callous, obdurate conceit" to make manifest what this text is so invested in concealing: Florence has a nubile body. But despite his ogling and his
disproportionate piece of machinery, the Midshipman has certain disadvantages as an emblem of sexual vitality. [21] His phallus is a machine designed only for looking; he is clothed in an "obsolete" uniform; he is both diminutive and made of wood.

Dombey is also described as if he were a wooden effigy instead of a man. He is like "a tree that was to come down in good time," or like "a man of wood, without a hinge or a joint in him" (49, 456). He is not only rigid, hard, erect, and stiff, but frozen, and "hard and cold" as well. When he looks at the trees outside his window, they drop their leaves "as if he blighted them" (109). The narrator wonders if Dombey doesn't assist in making the church in which little Paul is christened so cold that "the young curate smoked at the mouth as he read." Hard is one thing, hard and cold and blighting quite another. They are attributes which hardly auger well for Dombey's sexual vitality.

But if Dombey seems no more likely than the wooden Midshipman to please either a woman or himself, there is one moment when he demonstrates his potency and feels sexually proud and satisfied. On the first occasion on which we see this hard, cold man he is in the throes of "luxurious satisfaction." His eyes are "half-closed," as if he were inhaling the fragrance of flowers. He is "exulting" over the birth of his son, luxuriating in a moment of sexual accomplishment. At this time of pride in his own potency, as he luxuriates and exults, he "jingled and jingled the heavy gold watch-chain that depended from below his trim blue coat" (49). Whenever the narrator mentions that luxuriantly heavy watch-chain, it signals a moment associated with
sexual potency. When Walter daydreams of marrying Florence, for instance, he feels that he can bear her away "in spite of Mr. Dombey's teeth, cravat, and watch-chain"; that is, in spite of the father's formidable phallic appurtenances. Dombey's moments of sexual pride and potency are few, however, and they come to an abrupt halt with his marriage to the castrating Edith.

The last occasion on which Dombey plays with his watch-chain occurs during Carker's visit to Leamington, a visit expressly initiated by Dombey to afford him the opportunity to display his sexual prowess with his assistant as admiring audience. Major Bagstock rallies Dombey about sending a tender message to the ladies. In a moment of phallic pride, very much akin to the "luxurious satisfaction" he experienced upon the birth of his son, Dombey thinks about Edith and about showing Edith to Carker, and he "twirl[s] his watch-chain" (441). After his disastrous second marriage, there is no further mention of the heavy watch-chain, no satisfied jinglings or twirlings.

Quite simply, Dombey no longer has any reason for exultant satisfaction. His disability is imaged in the disappearance of the metonymical ornament.

Dombey's impotence is further indicated by his employment of others to do his sexual work for him. We initially suppose, as he supposes, that he has twice successfully impregnated Fanny. She surely would have presented no challenge to him with her "broken spirit," but even his conquest of Fanny is rendered suspect. After her death, Dombey finds a letter in her writing desk which he obsessively reads and re-reads. As he reads it for the last time before destroying it,
his actions are "stealthy" and his "arrogant demeanour" is abated; then he tears it "carefully into fragments" (104). The letter is so important that it must never be "re-united and deciphered," and so highly charged in some way that it causes Dombey to brood in solitude "all the evening, in his cheerless room," not even calling for little Paul to be brought to the conservatory. [22] We are never told what the letter's contents are, but they must have dealt in some way with the man who left Fanny with "no heart to give." Even with meek Fanny, Dombey finds, if only posthumously, that he was less potent than he believed.

Dombey is filled with satisfaction at the prospect of possessing Edith, but like Fanny before her, Edith has neither heart nor hymen to give: Colonel Granger, her first husband, has already penetrated and blooded her. After Dombey's marriage, when it has become painfully clear that he cannot control her, he calls in Carker to discipline and punish his new wife. Carker acts as his sexual surrogate, a fact which the Manager seems to recognize and name when he calls himself "the organ of your displeasure" (687). Edith later calls Carker the "tool of the proud tyrant" (859). The only event by which Dombey's impotence becomes public knowledge when Edith and Carker run away together. Dombey's subsequent illness is inevitable. Coupled with his loss of fortune and reputation, it is not only the outward and visible sign of his castration, but also the guarantee of his future asexuality and childish innocence. There will be no more lilac waistcoats and curled hair, no more heavy watch-chains depending from below his coat.
There are three men to whom the text appears to grant potency while in actual fact withholding it. Major Bagstock's entire body is perpetually tumescent. He is "swollen" and "dilated"; even his cheeks are puffed and his eyes bulging. But his tumescence is the result of overeating and extreme irascibility, not sexual arousal, and its only result, far from sexual conquest, is near apoplexy. Major Bagstock does not succeed with Miss Tox, or with any other female, and he is reduced, like the impotent Dombey, to secret watching. Mr. Morfin is the second possibly potent male. He is an "elderly bachelor" whose only distinctive attribute is his violoncello. Its significance as phallic metonymy, however, is severely limited by the fact that Morfin has neither vitality nor even significant bodily presence. Despite, or perhaps because of, his marriage to the angelic Harriet, he offers small hope for potency.

A third possibility of masculine sexual vitality is Mr. Toots. Toots's primary physical characteristics are "a swollen nose and an excessively large head." His potential for positive libido, however, is seriously limited by his notable inability either to think or to speak coherently. A swollen nose, Sterne notwithstanding, is no compensation for a shrunken mind. Preoccupied with his trousers and waistcoats, he is much given to ornament, often appearing as "one blaze of jewellery and buttons," perhaps to disguise his lack of sexual force. Toots is the perfect replica of the parodic Victorian heroine: mindless, bodiless, and dressed to kill. Despite his blazing jewelry, he undergoes a wasting illness brought on by blighted love and
ineffectual desire. He can’t get through his meals; his tailors have had to alter his measure; and he is quietly proud of his decline:

I’m getting more used up every day, and I’m proud to be so. If you could see my legs when I take my boots off, you’d form some idea of what unrequited affection is. I have been prescribed bark, but I don’t take it, for I don’t wish to have any tone whatever given to my constitution. (769)

None of Dombey’s women go into wasting declines or are afflicted with romantic notions of the tomb, but Toots makes a career of both. In the end, he marries and technically fathers three daughters, but he remains what Susan early on perceives him to be, "the devotedest and innocentest infant." Feebleminded when we meet him, feebleminded he remains, an infant with a wasted body who has the good fortune to find a robust wife/mother who nurtures him. All three of these males are parodic: Bagstock of the masculine, virile military man; Morfin of the good hero reduced to the barest and palest outline; and Toots of the romantically anorexic heroine requiring rescue. None of the three is, in any sense, a potent male.

There are, however, two fully virile men in this world, one of whom is punished for his sexuality, while the other rises and prospers. We tend to remember Carker’s teeth since the narrator so often uses that image, but other metaphors employed to embody him are as fully suggestive. Dombey is rigid, a man of wood, but Carker is feline and supple, with a smooth face and a soft hand. Dombey doesn’t know how to play any games, but Carker knows how to play them all, and
he wins. Carker is an animal; he is imaged as a cat, a lynx, a shark, and as a "[w]olf's face . . . with even the hot tongue revealing itself through the stretched mouth" (442). Or he is "a scaly monster of the deep," swimming down below with a "shining eye." Perhaps most revealing of all, we begin to understand that Carker is actually Quilp, though less physically deformed, and more sophisticated. He looks at Dombey with

the evil slyness of some monkish carving, half human
and half brute; or like the leering face on an old
water-spout. (687)

It is Quilp's face and, like the dwarf, he is a satyr, fully sexual, fully potent, the "hot tongue" and the "shining eye" signalling the sexual predator.

It is well-known that Dickens acceded to a request to deny Edith's body to Carker, but on a sub-textual level Carker metaphorically possesses and enjoys Edith long before she spurns him at their final meeting in Dijon. During the interview in which he warns Edith to stay away from Florence, Carker is imaged as a snake, coiled and ready to strike. Edith is like the beautiful bird with soft plumage whose pinion she wears as a fan, and whose feathers she shreds in her agitation. As their conversation unfolds, the snakelike, phallic Carker "unfolded one more ring of the coil into which he had gathered himself," and he catches Edith in his coils just as surely as he catches her with his words. After he leaves her, he remembers "with a dainty pleasure" "how the white down had fluttered; how the bird's feathers had been strewn upon the ground" (721). The snake has struck, and has taken his dainty
pleasure in the strike. Desire is displaced onto aggression, enjoyment of the body replaced by a rape of the mind.

But Carker's success, even of this perverse kind, is only temporary. In Dijon, when his passion is most apparent and he most vulnerable, he pays the price that Dickens's males so often pay for sexual appetite. Openly desirous of Edith, he recalls how he has carried a picture of her in his mind throughout his "cruel probation." The present, he tells her, will only be "more delicious" for the wait. They will go to Sicily, "the idlest and easiest part of the world," where they will "both seek compensation for old slavery" (854). But instead of "Sicilian days and sensual rest," his reward is sexual humiliation as Edith flays him with her words. "He would have sold his soul to root her, in her beauty, to the floor, and make her arms drop at her sides, and to have her at his mercy" (860). Instead, it is he who is at her mercy, unmanned by her contempt. She slips away, and he falls victim to panic and near-delirium.

It is hardly necessary for the train to kill Carker; Edith has already reduced him to raw emotion and raw flesh, even as she reduced Dombey to dead vermin. The narrator finishes him off, long before the train does, with these words:

Spurned like any reptile; entraped and mocked;
turned upon, and trodden down by the proud woman
whose mind he had slowly poisoned, as he thought,
until she had sunk into the mere creature of his
pleasure; undeceived in his deceit, and with his
fox's hide stripped off, he sneaked away, abashed,
degraded, and afraid. (863)

Left with only "an impotent ferocity," he suffers an hysterical breakdown, and is finally finished off by a phallic symbol.

As so often in Dickens, sexuality and death are twinned, as the train becomes a metaphor for both. It is "the monster Death," but its movements are also reminiscent of the sexual act. It comes "piercing through," "fierce and rapid, smooth and certain," "working on in a storm of energy," with a "yell of exultation," "tearing on resistless to the goal" (354 - 355). It is the phallic train, "a great roaring and dilating mass," that delivers Dombey to Edith. Freud cites railway travel as "compulsively" linked to sexuality, a link derived from the pleasureable character of the sensations of movement. [23] Carker, who has lived by the phallus, now dies by the phallus: the train "licked his stream of life up with its fiery heat, and cast his mutilated fragments in the air" (875). The hot tongue, the coiled snake, the lynx - all are reduced to bloody fragments sniffed at by dogs in the road. [24]

There is only one male in the narrative who is both potent and successful, and he, too, is associated with trains. When we first meet him, Mr. Toodle is a stoker with five children, four of them sons, all of them healthy. When last we see him, he has at least nine (perhaps more) healthy children, and has risen to be "an ingine-driver, and well to do in the world" (932). Mr. Toodle has three advantages that allow him to enjoy unpunished virility and economic success. He is lower class, and the lower-class bodies of Dombey are allowed both health and potency: the women have milk-filled breasts that fatten healthy
babies; the men sire strong sons. Secondly, his marriage with Polly is companionable and procreative, but untainted by the debilitating middle-class struggle between the need for purity and the fact of desire. Perhaps most important of all, he is a comic figure. His reproductive success might have aroused anxiety in this text so anxious about bodies, but both children and father are treated as comic relief, the ensuing laughter siphoning off the apprehension.

In order to consider the last group of men's bodies in this primal fantasy of phallic insufficiency, we return once again to the Midshipman, but the metonymic device which is the collective signifier for these men is not the wooden Midshipman's disproportionate piece of machinery, but rather the watch or chronometer. At the Midshipman, men have big instruments, "thick sticks," "tremendous chronometers," and "huge watches," but these instruments are unconnected to their bodies, and curiously ineffective in their functioning. Captain Bunsby, for instance, is shown suffering the very fate about which both text and narrator are so anxious. He is detached from the safely masculine world of his ship and the Midshipman, and reduced to a mere sexual trophy. He is associated with Cuttle and Gills not only by his calling, but also by his watch. When Cuttle sees his old friend after a long absence, Bunsby is firmly trapped under the arm of the triumphant Mrs. MacStinger, on his unwilling way to his own nuptials. He is the victim in "a procession of sacrifice," and she has "attached to her obdurate bosom a stupendous watch and appendages, which the Captain recognized at a glance as the property of Bunsby" (950, my italics). That the watch and appendages are Bunsby's genitals is
clear, as is the spirit in which Mrs. MacStinger wears them. The stupendous watch is associated with Dombey's heavy watch chain, and the removal or absence of both from their proper places signals castration.

There are more watches, and they all have a story to tell. Captain Cuttle has an "immense double-cased silver watch" which he offers to Gills's creditor in payment of the latter's debt, but which is refused with contempt: "sprats ain't whales, you know," says Brogley. When Walter is shipping out for Jamaica, the Captain again tries to give his watch away, as if it were a talisman of male adulthood. The watch is "so big, and so tight in his pocket, that it came out like a bung" (343). But neither Walter, narrator, nor reader can put much faith in the Captain's watch, either as actual timekeeper or as phallic metonymy of no matter what size. The watch does not keep time accurately; it has to be put back half an hour every morning and another quarter-hour towards the afternoon. The narrator tells us that Cuttle is a child, and so it is not inappropriate that his watch can't do the adult job for which it was intended. Moreover, when the watch is finally made "jintly" to Walter and Florence, it proves to be no guarantee of masculine power in their curiously asexual marriage. Once again, a metonymic device signals absence of potency rather more than it signals presence and power. [25]

We know that Walter has a watch because he tells Captain Cuttle that he does, but of its size or effectiveness we hear nothing (343). Its absence, however, is not inappropriate since Walter's presence, whether physical or emotional, is so minimal that when Phiz chooses to depict his return to the Midshipman as a mere shadow on the wall, that
representation exactly fits his lack of substance (785). Walter's feelings toward Florence are reverence and worship, while his speeches to her are dead of their own weight of purity and respect. He tells her that she is his "single, bright, pure, blessed recollection," "something sacred," "never to be esteemed enough," "trusting, pure, and good" (804). The profusion of abstract adjectives is suspect in itself, but when we look at his speech of praise even more closely, we see that Florence is defined by her "lover" as first, a memory; second, a nameless "something"; and third, a negative. We begin to understand why their excitement is so minimal that they both fall asleep immediately after she finally proposes herself to him. Florence becomes a mother after her marriage, but her pregnancy occurs far away on the ocean as well as in the blank space between chapters. It seems as credible that the illimitable, unbounded waves impregnate her as that Walter does. His potency, like his watch, is never a presence.

Sol Gills also has a watch, "a tremendous chronometer," that signals his kinship with the Midshipman's other males. Unlike the Captain's faulty timepiece, however, Sol's chronometer is accurate to the second. And unlike both Bunsby and Cuttle, he retains possession of his chronometer. Sol is, in fact, a special case; his is still another tale told concurrently with the stories of families and phalluses, a story much more intimately linked with Florence than is Walter's. Together, the sagas of the old Instrument-maker and the young woman form a primal fantasy of nurture and redemption which underpins and glosses the domestic plot of the narrative.
From the beginning, Sol is associated with maleness, from his ownership of phallic sextants to his pride in the wooden Midshipman's disproportionate piece of machinery. The instruments for sale in his shop are all designed to measure time and space, and to keep a ship on course. Not only do his instruments serve the masculine functions of measurement and control, they must be protected from the female sea: "Everything was jammed into the tightest cases . . . to prevent its philosophical composure from being disturbed by the rolling of the sea" (88). He is also associated with magic and the fabulous, having a "secret attraction towards the marvellous and adventurous." There is a "spice of the marvellous which was always in his character" (96, 791). He looks "in the close vicinity of all the instruments, like a magician disguised in a Welsh wig and a suit of coffee colour, who held the child [Florence, after her rescue by Walter] in an enchanted sleep." He lives in a "howling garret," higher than all the other lodgers, where the weather is different from that experienced by everyone else. His instruments, and his "tremendous chronometer," his "unimpeachable chronometer," are clearly connected to his magic, and we begin to associate Sol with the idea of a deity with magical powers. Perhaps he is the patriarchal deity of this world who can order and authorize, award and punish, as old Martin Chuzzlewit does in his narrative.

But Sol is very different. Like Martin, Sol is an "old fellow," but unlike Martin he is very tired, and he finds that he no longer understands a world which has gone past him. He tells Walter,

I am an old-fashioned man in an old-fashioned shop,
in a street that is not the same as I remember it.
I have fallen behind the time, and am too old to
catch it again. Even the noise it makes a long way
ahead, confuses me. (94)
Sol's plaint throughout the narrative is that he is old, tired, and out
of touch with his world. Moreover, seven-eighths of his stock, his
masculine instruments, is "old-fashioned." He is "only the ghost of
this business - its substance vanished long ago," and of no use to the
generations who come after (94). Nonetheless, his chronometer keeps
accurate time. He is like the eighteenth-century Deists' Watchmaker, a
god who has set the watch going and is now powerless to alter a world
gone on without him. Unlike the Deists, however, the inhabitants of
Dombey's world are neither optimists nor believers in the idea of
progress. Their world is mad, bad, and dangerous; it requires a deity
able to provide order, calm, and rebirth, not a tired old man who has
"fallen behind the time."

When young Martin Chuzzlewit went off to the New World, old Martin
remained in England. But when Walter goes off to Jamaica in the "Son
and Heir," Sol goes after him. Abdicating his now vestigial position
as deity, he tries to replace himself with his "son and heir" in order
to set the world back on course, a world grown dark, cold, and
unfamiliar. Neither Sol nor Walter is powerful enough to order this
world, but the text momentarily plays with the idea that they could.
It is as if fragments of a story from the failed patriarchal past are
embedded in this story of the present: a past in which male order and
power were a reality, one in which the chronometer was accurate and its
owner virile and confident. The narrator begins that story, or at least makes it a possible alternative, but all the males - Sol, Walter, and the narrator himself - misfire, and this fragmented story of a male mythos, like the other male stories, is changed to one of female domination and male defeat.

Sol's role as failed deity is given the more credence by the fact of his disappearance from both shop and narrative at precisely the juncture that Florence's story is transformed to "Sleeping Beauty." Chapter twenty-three is at the heart of this narrative both literally (it is near the middle) and metaphorically. At the chapter's beginning, the narrator compares the Dombey mansion to a "magic dwelling-place in magic story." He tells us that it is under a spell "more wasting than the spell that used to set enchanted houses sleeping once upon a time," but adds that Florence blooms unharmed within this enchanted place "like the king's fair daughter in the story." In this fantasy within the narrative, Florence is, like Sleeping Beauty, in an adolescent sleep, sexually mature and ready for that event which will awaken her, magically bringing the world back to life again under her rule. The suggestion of Florence's potential magic powers, juxtaposed with the disappearance of the tired male deity, signals a new female mythos. Sol's impotence is further demonstrated by his inability either to find Walter, the son and heir, or to communicate with Captain Cuttle. That it is a female, Mrs. MacStinger, who prevents the delivery of the old man's letters points delicately to the possibility of a female conspiracy.
When Sol does finally return, it is too late: Florence is firmly in charge. Unable to pass his chronometer on to Walter, now about to be united with the female usurper, he is even "thinner and more careworn" than when he left. "I am behind the present time," he tells Captain Cuttle on his return. "I always was, you recollect - and very much confused" (895). Displaced by Florence's milk and tears, his chronometer, though still accurate enough, has become irrelevant. Accurate measurements of space and time are important in a world ruled by men, but a world ordered by Florence is timeless and without boundaries: "eternal and illimitable." Both Dombey and the narrator recognize Florence's ascendancy, the latter commenting that she is "powerful where he [Dombey, but Sol might be added as well] is powerless, and everything where he was nothing!" (748). Once again we see that far from projecting his own desire for passivity onto his female heroines, Dickens instead creates powerful females and passive men. [26]

In Dombey's world, sons and heirs either die, like Paul, or cannot be found, like Walter. The male phallus is metonymically represented as a mechanical instrument unconnected to the body, unconnected to its owner's humanity, and fated to dysfunction. The bodies of the other male characters tell similar stories, and endure deformations and disfigurations. Captain Cuttle has a hook instead of a hand, as well as a watch that can't keep time. Bunsby has one fixed eye, while the other revolves like a lighthouse. His body and head have been battered by repeated falls and knocks. Toots is half-witted, the Major apoplectic, and Sol "unequal" to life. The narrator begins ancillary
and fragmented stories featuring possible male triumphs: Sol seeking a son and heir; Dombey engendering a son and heir; Carker stealing Edith; Bunsby "coming over" Mrs. MacStinger. All of them, however, are begun only to be abandoned. The narrator seems able to finish only stories of female triumph: the creation of a female deity, the survival and triumph of daughters, and the need for male flight to the mother.

If the prism shifts slightly, however, focusing less on phallic success and adult expectations, and more on childlike happiness and satisfactions, then a different fantasy is revealed. The world of the wooden Midshipman offers a homely, if circumscribed, domestic haven of masculine satisfactions and sufficiency as an alternative to the maternal primacy of Florence's eternal and illimitable immensities. The effigy at closure is "more alert than ever," and newly painted as well, although there is no mention of his disproportionate machinery. The shop front is newly adorned with golden characters that spell out "Gills and Cuttle." Old Sol is "full as misty as of yore," but though there are no more customers than there ever were, he is "very jovial and contented." Transformed from failed deity to accidentally successful capitalist (his "money has begun to turn itself" and is turning "pretty briskly"), he is none the less happy for that.

Captain Cuttle has "a fiction of a business" in his mind which is better than any reality. He imagines both himself and old Sol to be men of science, and his "delight in his own name over the door, is inexhaustible." Above all, Cuttle and Gills have each other, and their partnership is better than any traditional marriage constructed by the text. Their contentment is echoed by that other manchild, Toots, who
frequents the Midshipman for social purposes. Toots's freedom from domestic bondage most likely has its source in Susan's humble origins. Like her predecessor, the former servant Sophronia Sphynx, Susan is wise enough to allow her man his freedom in Dombey's version of the all-male smoking box. The boys at the Midshipman maintain a connection with Walter, but are not constrained by domestic ties to any female, whether deity or virago. Snow White has left the little house in the woods to pursue her fate, but Cuttle, Gills, and Toots remain to do the dwarfs in different voices. Although their story of cosy masculine domesticity exists only at the margins of the narrative, nonetheless the Peter-Pan world of the Midshipman controls the capital which finances Florence's future. What price adult autonomy, or deity, or patriarchy, when glasses are filled with grog, pipes are lit, and ships are "freighted with gold"?
The second primal fantasy underpinning the narrative is comprised of male hungers and focused on the female bodies capable of satisfying or intensifying those hungers. "Tis woman as seduces all mankind," says Captain Cuttle, neatly summarizing the text's economy of trespass and blame in which the female body is accounted as both cause and cure (893). And it is surely no accident that the Captain specifically refers to Polly the wet nurse in this general comment about women. Sol Gills has just returned home from the New World, and seems initially more interested in Polly's "pleasant face" than in news of his old friends. Browne's illustration offers a Polly more than merely pleasant. She is amply enough endowed to nurse an entire generation, her figure reminiscent of Chuzzlewit's Mrs. Lupin, "tight as a gooseberry" (891). The captain might have aptly remarked that it is woman who "seduces and nurses all mankind," and that she does the two things simultaneously.

The male characters and the narrator himself fantasize and dream female bodies. Some of the dreams are nightmares, but all of them in some sense image each woman as a pair of breasts. Those women who are not reduced to bosoms are angels or deities, and the more ambiguous for that. When a man dreams a woman, she may be the good mother with milk-filled breasts, the source of life; or she may be the bad, withholding mother of dry breasts and deprivation. She may be the punishing matriarch whose breasts and body smother and subjugate, or the erotic
female whose breasts are a source of temptation and intense pleasure. Freud suggested that the satisfaction of the erotogenic zone is associated, in the first instance, with the satisfaction of the need for nourishment. To begin with, sexual activity attaches itself to functions serving the purpose of self-preservation and does not become independent of them until later. [27] In the stories that this narrator tells, sexual activity never becomes independent of them, especially later. The primal fantasies of hungry need, whether frustrated or satisfied, all tell stories of infantile sexuality. Scopophilia, anality, orality, auto-eroticism: all are enacted within this text. The desire to look, especially to look secretly; the desire to possess and retain; the preoccupation with feeding or starving the male body: all these sexual manifestations obsess Dombey's males; all are played out in fantasies of female bodies, the source of both pleasure and pain.

Dombey's erotic desire for Edith's breasts is reflected and refracted in her need to punish her bosom. The night before her marriage, she paces in a rage,

her broad white bosom red with the cruel grasp of the relentless hand with which she spurned it from her, pacing up and down with an averted head, as if she would avoid the sight of her own fair person. (515)
Dombey's desire to possess Edith, as if her body and presence are simply extensions of his own body and manner, is apparent. His desire for Edith is a repetition of his desire to possess Polly and her breasts as mere appendages to his son's mouth and his own fantasies. Like a good capitalist, he has a record of hire/purchase on the female market: he bought Fanny's uterus; he rented Polly's breasts; and now he buys Edith's breasts and uterus. His need to look - at Polly as she nurses, at Edith as she swells with pride and passion, at Florence as she blooms, - is doubled in the Midshipman's gaze, and in tumescent Bagstock's opera glasses as well.

Polly Toodle is the paradigmatic nurturing, milk-filled breast. But even Polly's genuine affection and kindness are not focused solely on Paul; she endangers and betrays Paul and Florence by visiting her own children, who thus become their sibling rivals. This text questions the sufficiency of any female's nurture. The servant, Susan, is also a milk-filled breast, as Toots's stoutness after their marriage attests. Healthy male bodies are the product of lower-class female breasts in this text so preoccupied with starvation. The dry breasts of Fanny, Mrs. Chick, and Miss Tox are all contributing factors to Paul's death, his dying a long nightmarish meditation on different kinds of starvation, whether physical or emotional. Dry breasts are repeated in the hard, cold body of Mrs. Pipchin, and the dry and stringent body of Cornelia Blimber. While the lower-class female produces male health, her middle-class counterpart offers deprivation or humiliation.
Erotic breasts are doubled in Edith Granger and Alice Marwood, doubled again and parodied in their once desirable mothers. Good Mrs. Brown and Mrs. Skewton were lover and wife respectively to two brothers, "the gayest gentlemen and the best-liked that came a visiting from London." Good Mrs. Brown was "a fresh country wench," and, like her daughter, not only desirable but desirous. There is reason to believe that both mother and daughter experienced pleasure in the course of their falls from virtue, although both pay a high price for that pleasure. Alice's sexuality is most often imaged in her wild, rich hair, but, like Edith, she also has a bosom that heaves and threatens to burst, a pair of breasts once as attractive to Carker as are Edith's in the novel's present (564, 573). Perhaps Alice is condemned to die because she once derived some pleasure from her body, and from Carker's, while Edith need only suffer exile in sunny Sicily because she so evidently finds it impossible to take pleasure from any body, especially her own. Mrs. Skewton must die, not only because she has prostituted and corrupted her daughter, but also because she continues to regard her aging body as erotic and sexual. Mrs. Skewton's grotesqueries, like Mrs. Nickleby's before her, reflect the narrator's disgust with an aging mother who, among other sins, refuses to abandon illusions of youth and physical desirability.

Edith is imaged in terms of passion: her bosom, the erotic breast, heaves and swells with emotion and anger. Despite her evident attractions, however, Edith punishes her body, "spurning" her bosom, and smashing the hand Carker dares to kiss against a marble mantle until the flesh is bruised and bleeding. Her hand becomes a substitute
for her sexuality, which she would obliterate if she could. If her breasts are erotic objects for Carker and Dombey, and a maternal haven and comfort for Florence, for Edith herself they are a source of shame, a pair of misused capital assets. The erotic breast is dangerous not only to the men who desire it, but to the woman who offers it for sale. Despite her shame, however, Edith is powerless to transmute those heaving breasts into maternal pillows for Florence. Unhappy with her role as wife, she is unable to substitute that of mother. The more maternal Edith becomes, the more Dombey believes that she and Florence have formed a female conspiracy against him, shutting him out from their intimacy, and enacting a repetition of the emotional and physical neglect he has suffered all his life at both the female hand and the female breast. Although Edith loses her position and her stepdaughter, nonetheless she triumphs over both the men who desire her, and she deploys her beautiful body to do so. Men may be tempted by the erotic breast, but they do not possess it.

As Polly is the milk-filled breast, and Edith the erotic breast, so Mrs. MacStinger is the nightmarish, murderous breast. We have seen her triumphant display on her "obdurate bosom" of Captain Bunsby's huge watch and its appendages. Captain Cuttle three times offers his friend aid and encouragement to escape, but each time Bunsby is "immoveable." Impossible not to suspect some complicity on Bunsby's part in his own capture, a certain willingness engendered perhaps by Mrs. MacStinger's formidable body, and by Bunsby's own susceptibility to female charms, demonstrated in his earlier amorous attentions to Susan, and his eagerness to "convoy" Mrs. MacStinger home when he first meets her.
Not only does the obdurate bosom subjugate by force, perhaps it entices as well. The narrator creates a vignette whose very point is its bleak vision of male/female relations: she is his merciless, insatiable enemy, he her near-willing victim. As Bunsby so plangently remarks, in reply to Cuttle's urgings to "sheer off," "Where's the good? She'd capter me agen" (954). But only if he is complicit: Captain Cuttle's happier fate demonstrates that an innocently asexual child in a man's body can escape to the boys' world of the Midshipman.

If Mrs. MacStinger's grisly bosom is her chief attribute, and Edith's snowy white bosom hers, Harriet Carker's bosom is notable for its absence. Harriet is constructed solely of a "cordial face," and an anxious, worn air. She is the canon's quintessential angel in the house, the generic Dickens heroine compounded of virtue and housekeeping, presenting neither problems nor temptations. The safe heroine the narrators always want but so seldom get, she is a "redeeming spirit," possessing a "gentle, quiet, and retiring beauty," and a "slight, small, patient figure." Her face is the "mirror of truth." Small and spiritual, her breastlessness guarantees male safety from temptation, but by the same token she can offer neither maternal nurture nor redemption. Appropriately, she marries a man who requires neither, and remains childless. To be breastless is to be an angel, of no earthly good to needy men. Harriet's shadowy presence in the text serves to point up the problems inherent in Florence's physical representation. Easy enough to create a bodiless angel, but how much more difficult to create a heroine who must feed hungry male fantasies and hungry male mouths while remaining redemptive and virtuous. In
other words, how difficult to create a heroine with milk-filled breasts but without an erotic bosom; how difficult to repaint "Roman Charity" minus its shock value.

The great secret of the text is Florence's body, its great project to trace her evolution from six-year-old child to mythic mother without acknowledging that body, or its ripening. As a pubescent girl, her bosom is notable chiefly as a repository of tears and blows. As a woman and mother, it is notable for the milk it supplies to her son, Paul, and for the maternal haven it supplies to her father, Paul. The text simply ignores the time between innocent childhood and asexual motherhood, that dangerous time when both bosom and Florence acquire erotic potential. Her deification as the new Madonna allows her to sustain a necessary contradiction: she is the great mother who gives birth and provides nurture, but she is also bodiless, thus obviating the text's anxieties about male desire and subjugation.

Early in Dombey's serial publication, Lord Jeffrey wrote to Dickens of his delight in reading it, adding:

But it is Florence in whom my hopes chiefly repose;
and in her I see the promise of another Nelly!
though reserved, I hope, for a happier fate, and
destined to let us see what a grown up female angel
is like. [28]

Since she was already more "grown up" than her text and narrator could well manage, we can imagine the chaos engendered by a fully matured and marriageable Nell transported to a text already torn apart by unexpressed desires. But Lord Jeffrey offered a solution even as he
propounded the problem: let Florence be a "grown-up female angel," her angelic spirituality designed to erase the stigmata of the female body. Tear-stained Florence must not acquire the magnetism of dangerous Nell. Neither the text’s attempt to ignore Florence’s body, nor its deification of that body, however, can dissipate the powerful desires inherent in its own primal fantasies.

The narrator, in describing Florence, often resorts to synecdoche in his effort to avoid the erotic. He focuses on those parts of her body which are culturally acceptable, most often the heart and eyes, both filled with tears. But even in his most neutral descriptions, the sexual body becomes a powerfully suggestive subtext. Florence is a "bleeding heart": impossible not to be reminded of the blood of menses, penetration, and birth. Her bosom overflows with love and tears; she is a "stricken breast." But she returns to the Dombey mansion after her marriage, she is also a pair of milk-filled breasts to which she clasps her father’s face (939). On her walk with Walter to the church where they will be married, the narrator refers to her "woman’s heart," with "its undivided treasure" to be "yielded only once" (902). His evasive yet evocative language signals the presence not only of a heart, but a hymen as well. Allowing heart to imply hymen is as close to Florence’s body as this narrator allows himself to approach. The Nickleby narrator remains safe from the heroine’s body by fetishizing Kate’s clothing; the narrator of the Shop is safe because Nell is a corpse. The Dombey narrator purchases safety with the coin of language, protecting himself from his own contradictions with the armor of convention and synecdoche.
Only one figure can subsume those contradictions: the Madonna of Dickens's 1844 dream. Harriet Carker is a breastless angel, but Florence must be the Virgin Mother. Like the Madonna, Florence is indefinable, evading rational explanation. Walter thinks of her as an abstract "something," or as a disciplinary "angel's hand":

something precious, unattainable, unchangeable,
and indefinite - indefinite in all but its power
of giving him pleasure, and restraining him like
an angel's hand from anything unworthy. (288)

Sentimental abstraction and cliche are deployed to erase the heroine's sexuality and her humanity. The text's first line of defense asserts that Florence can never be possessed; the second that she is fixed and immutable, and therefore subject neither to maturity nor desire. Finally, if she is an "angel's hand," then she is safely and entirely removed from the human temptation. If Walter, or anyone else, retains any lingering idea that Florence is rosy, cosy, or budlike, he has only to remember that this angel's hand is employed to "restrain." We are in a world where hearts and hands must be disciplined, hymens ignored, and language itself deployed as the most powerful restraint available to devitalize the male and sanitize the female body.

We have examined two primal fantasies of insufficiency, and the ways in which they are enacted in the dreamwork of the body. Interwoven with these primal fantasies, and featuring variations of them, is the tangled and multivalent relationship between Dombey and his daughter, a relationship intensely implicated in all the anxieties
and secrets of the text. Once again it is useful to approach this relationship as a series of densely textured layers interwoven among the fantasies already described.
The question of what Dombey feels for his daughter, and why, is much debated, the answers as many and varied as the critics who propound them. [29] No one, however, remarks that Dombey's feelings for his daughter undergo subtle variations as Florence grows from child to woman, nor that the narrator wishes to ignore both the daughter's physical changes and the father's emotional changes. Florence is most generally treated as if she were an unchanging embodiment of love. Certainly Dombey himself is determined to believe that she never changes, at least in retrospect. In his long meditation about her just before his breakdown and her return, he thinks that "she alone had never changed." Louise Yelin sums up the critical position that agrees with Dombey. Yelin argues that Florence appears to be a constant, virtually the only constant, in a novel which insists that nothing is immune to change . . . . Paradoxically, this novel, which articulates the universality of change, has as its heroine a character who does not - and, it seems, who cannot - change. [30]

But Dombey is not a subtle and penetrating reader of his fellow creatures, and there is no reason to allow him to read Florence for us. Changelessness is impossible in a heroine who grows from a six-year-old child to an eighteen-year-old woman. Such a reading leaves Florence's body out of account, and thus is complicit with the narrator's hidden agenda. I suggest that the changes in Florence's
body as she grows from child to woman are the determinative factors in her relationship with her father, and that Dombey's changing attitudes toward her are a function of her body's maturity. The narrator ignores Florence's physical transformation, insisting almost to the end that she remains an innocent child. A review of the relationship between Florence and her father clarifies the meanings of Dombey and Daughter at closure, as they sit in the window and listen to the waves.

The manifest content tells the story of a once estranged father and daughter. Beneath that topmost layer of the narrative are two primal fantasies, re-enforcing and commenting on each other while changing and glossing yet again the text's representation of gender and family roles. Both are fantasies of need: the first a repressed fantasy of incestuous longing; the second, submerged and suppressed, a fantasy of redemption and rebirth so powerful as to be mythlike. Both are played out on the bodies of the father, who wastes away, and the daughter, who bears the stigma of female sexual maturity in the form of the wound dealt her by her father.

From beginning to end, father and daughter are hopelessly enmeshed with each other; Dombey's entire life is "blotted here and there with Florence - always Florence" (510). Even at her first appearance, when Dombey tells her she may go and look at her pretty brother, and her only reply is to "glance keenly" at her father, while neither moving nor answering, Florence is clearly the poison in Dombey's domestic cup. For a six-year-old child to look "keenly" at her father while her mother is dying argues an unusual degree of self-possession and penetration. Dombey's reaction is also unusual:
"Her insensibility is as proof against a brother as against everything else," said Dombey to himself. He seemed so confirmed in a previous opinion by the discovery, as to be quite glad of it. (52)

Dombey's near malevolent irritation suggests a long-standing animosity, while Florence's reaction to him indicates a long-standing wariness. The narrator records those twinned responses, but refuses to acknowledge how very odd they are. The next time we see Florence, he once again notes her "searching gaze," this time directed at Polly as the child inquires what "they" have done with her now dead mama. He is keenly sympathetic with the unloved child who has "so much affection that no one wants and so much intelligence that no one minds wounding." Moreover, he records the fact that Dombey's attitude toward his daughter has worsened: "his previous feeling of indifference . . . changed into an uneasiness of an extraordinary kind" (83).

The narrator explains this change from indifference (although Dombey's reaction to Florence in chapter one is surely more than mere indifference) to uneasiness on the grounds that Dombey felt quite "shut out" from the embrace between daughter and mother at Fanny's deathbed. But when he tries further to explain the father's unpatrial feelings, he is quite unable to account for "such mysteries" without contradiction and overdetermination. He offers a little history of Dombey's sentiments: his "feeling about the child had been negative from her birth." It had not been an "aversion," an aversion hadn't
"been worth his while," and she had "never been a positively disagreeable object to him." But now 
he felt as if she watched and distrusted him. As if she held the clue to something secret in his breast, 
of the nature of which he was hardly informed himself. 
As if she had an innate knowledge of one jarring and discordant string within him, and her very breath could sound it. . . . He was ill at ease about her. She troubled his peace. He would have preferred to put her idea aside altogether, if he had known how. Perhaps - who shall decide on such mysteries! - he was afraid that he might come to hate her. (84, my italics)

We are left to ask ourselves what kind of knowledge a six-year-old could have, as well as what causes a father to move from "indifference" to hatred and fear of his child. The narrator, seemingly so forthcoming and eager to explain, retreats into silence and ambiguity about the very questions on which the relationship hinges. Even here, at the outset of the narrative, Florence exceeds the meanings of a mere child of six; she is already compounded of contradictions and complexities too dangerous to be explained. And already, her father attributes too much knowledge and power to her. The narrator's silence about her "innate knowledge" and Dombey's "discordant string" is the clearest indication of how tangled Florence's "mysteries" are. A little later, as Florence is brought into the room where her father is, she again gives him a "keen glance." His response is to enquire,
rhetorically, "what is the child afraid of?" And yet Dombey is quite clearly the fearful one, and the narrator is as unable to give a satisfactory explanation as he is to refrain from explanation.

In a text in which the masculine gaze is both charged with sexuality and symbolic of genital insufficiency, the very fact that a female child looks back, even looks back "keenly," inspires unease in both Dombey and narrator. Even though Florence is only a child, Dombey regards her "as it were by stealth with a disturbed and doubtful look" (86). Her manner, when he comes near her, becomes "forced and embarrassed." So very odd, and yet the narrator offers no comment on a child's embarrassment or a father's stealthy look. Years pass: the cherished son wastes away while the hated daughter flourishes. During the course of these years, only one scene bears witness to Florence's changing body. Madeline had her Grinde, Nell her Quilp, but no man savors Florence's beauty, or hints that she might be desirable. Instead, when she appears at the Blimber ball, our sole description of the now budding Florence comes from a woman, and it is reverential: "What eyes! What hair! What a lovely face," says Lady Skettles "softly." Florence is "that angel of a child," "the beautiful little rosebud of the room." The text takes note of the passing years, but ignores the physical changes wrought on Florence by those years. She appears only once or twice in the public gaze, and each time the narrator re-introduces her, he insists that she is only a child.

Upon Paul's death, Dombey tries to deny Florence's very existence by commissioning a tombstone for his son which reads, "beloved and only child." But Florence cannot be erased, and the already vexed and
mysterious relationship between father and daughter moves toward a crisis. Florence is almost fourteen, and despite Mrs. Chick's ominously urgent instruction to her that she "mustn't show yourself to him, child. Don't dream of such a thing," Florence does show herself to her father. The narrator reiterates that Florence is "little more than a child," a "timid child," but Browne's illustration shows a very grown-up young woman indeed(325). In the picture, Florence's body fits the paradigm of the erotic Victorian female. Her waist is tiny; her bosom swells. We see a well-defined slender leg outlined beneath her skirt; her hips swell to form the hourglass figure so often hymned as desirable; her foot is tiny. Everything around her is in leaf and in bloom; the urns, busts, jars, and mirrors which fill the room are all curved, rounded images of fullness and plenitude. Child or woman? Browne and the narrator are clearly at odds over Florence, but the author accepted the artist's illustration without cavil or comment.

The next time we see Dombey and Florence alone together, the crisis in their relations is at hand. The bereaved father is preparing to flee his grief after Paul's death; Florence is filled with love and longing for him: "Nothing wandered in her thoughts but love... turning always to her father" (326). She has been going to his room every night to kiss his closed door, but on this night the door is ajar. Florence can't resist going in, and finds her father at his desk. "He started at her voice, and leaped up from his seat. She was close before him, with extended arms, but he fell back" (328, my italics). The narrator attributes Dombey's singular reaction to his jealousy and hatred of the daughter preferred by his dead son, but it
is clear that Dombey is terrified of her, jumping and then falling back from her advancing figure. She "looked at him as if stricken into stone," and immediately covers her face with her hands, her eyes blinded with tears. But despite the brevity of her gaze, he remembers it the next day as if her eyes had "read his soul, though they were dim with tears, and hidden soon behind two quivering hands" (356). From this point on, the narrator never again allows Florence to look Dombey full in the face. Once Florence is sexually mature, she must not gaze at her father, as if both Dombey and narrator fear what her eyes might see, or suspect that her gaze may have some Medusa-like effect. If she "looked keenly" at him now, when she is pubescent, would it be he who is "stricken into stone"? Nor can the father be allowed to gaze at his motherless daughter while they are alone together in the mansion. And so he flees to Leamington, where he finds a wife to keep him safe from Florence.

This scene in which Dombey is first terrified ("he fell back") and then stern ("What has frightened you," he asks, in a neatly executed projection of his own fear onto her), occurs in chapter eighteen, a chapter about which Dickens wrote to Forster, "I have taken the most prodigious pains with it." [31] Certainly the scene between father and daughter is pivotal. It is this meeting which Dombey remembers so remorsefully during his meditation on suicide, just as the narrator has repeatedly instructed him in a near litany: "Let him remember it in that room, years to come." Scene and chapter mark a concurrence of significant events: Florence's physical maturity; the cessation of her "keen glances"; and Dombey's acute fear and hatred of her. The
narrator refuses to look too deeply into the meaning of these juxtaposed events, as he continues to ignore Florence's physical maturity and to label Dombey's feelings for her as jealousy. But the father's thoughts and actions are those of a man who is not only afraid, but who is obsessed by what he fears.

Chapter eighteen, so carefully written, also marks one of those moments when the narrator reveals himself, and in so doing reveals another facet of the text's underlying primal fantasy. He tells us that Florence habitually watches four motherless daughters who live with their father across the street. The eldest of the daughters is "some years younger than Florence"; she is, then, perhaps eight or nine years old. Florence would see her "sitting by [her father's] side, or on his knee, or hanging coaxingly about his neck and talking to him" (319). The father "would often watch her face as if he thought her like her mother that was dead," a reminder of the single gentleman's hymn to the "same sweet girl" in *The Old Curiosity Shop*. The intimate relationship between father and daughter across the street is surely what Florence wishes were her own reality. And yet the narrator tells us that the sight of the father looking at his daughter in that manner "frightened" Florence, making her "hurry from the window." Florence's evident fascination ("Yet she could not help returning"), combined with her equally potent fear, are puzzling in their ambiguity, but the passage becomes even more complex as it continues.

If Florence desires what she sees, it is equally true that what the narrator watches Florence watching is what he desires. What seems at first to be a reversal of those many scenes in which men secretly
gaze at women is actually only their replication. Here it is once again the male who watches, but the narrator hides himself behind Florence's eyes. He stages a tableau vivant in which an adult male is adored by childish, non-threatening females; the man is the center of "a very nosegay of little faces," the focus of attention. When the narrator describes how the eldest daughter ministers to her father after the younger children are in bed, it is his own domestic fantasy which we are reading. The daughter makes daddy's tea for him - "happy little house-keeper she was then!" "He made her his companion," the narrator tells us, and "she could be as staid and pleasantly demure, with her little book or work-box, as a woman" (319). The language is not Florence's, but that of the enchanted male narrator. The scene is a photographic double exposure. Intended as a feminine fantasy of a loving father/daughter relationship, it is overlaid with a male fantasy in which a man is ministered to and nurtured by a safely childlike but enchanting female whose immature body neither threatens nor humiliates. The daughter becomes the focus of the father's infantile longings for nurture, a combination of idealized childhood sweetheart or bride, and all-good, all-giving mother. [32] The fantasy is so heavily laden with multiple meanings that, although one of its meanings signifies parental love and causes Florence to yearn for what she sees, a second incestuous meaning frightens her.

The fantasied relationship is safe for a man on several counts: a child is incapable of sexually humiliating an adult. In addition, what might be a forbidden object of the male gaze is mediated by its refraction through the innocent Florence's eyes. The scene is across
the street, safely distant; and, finally, only the gaze is implicated. Dombey's narrator is never so safe from his own anxieties and desires as he is here, gazing at the nine-year-old "happy little housekeeper." Happy father at the center of his female world, happy narrator at the center of his fantasy. If Cuttle and Gills in their boys' world at the Midshipman offer one alternative for male happiness, the narrator here constructs a second. Both are notable for their exclusion of the adult woman; both gloss the narrator's ambivalence about mothers, bosoms, hunger, and safety.

The fantasy focused on the daughter/bride/housekeeper/mother (all "the same sweet girl") across the street prepares us for the next scene in which Dombey and Florence find themselves alone together. He and Edith have just returned from a singularly joyless wedding trip. After dinner, Edith goes upstairs, leaving father, daughter, and narrator alone in the drawing room, all three so overwrought that the scene repays close attention. Florence trembles with emotion; her vision is blurred; her father's figure seems to grow larger and then smaller. Dombey hides himself beneath a handkerchief in a darkened corner and watches her covertly - "and once attracted seemed to have no power to turn his eyes away!" The narrator is as excited as either of the two principals, and intrudes himself into the scene to offer some comments. Florence is her father's "natural companion," he tells us, but in what sense "natural" he does not explain. He enumerates Florence's sufferings: she has known a breaking heart, prayed to die young if only she might die in his arms, endured the agony of his
coldness, and yet remained his "better angel." She yearns toward him, yet shrinks from his approach:

Unnatural emotion in a child, innocent of wrong!

Unnatural the hand that had directed the sharp plough,

which furrowed up her gentle nature for the sowing

of its seeds!

(585)

Where did that very sexual plough come from so unexpectedly? Whose seeds, what seeds? The hand, Dombey's hand, is deployed as synecdoche for the phallus, and the subtext of incest is brought to the surface at last. The child is innocent of wrong, but Dombey is not, if we trust the trope. [33] Dombey's hand, characterized as "unnatural" by the narrator, foregrounded by the trope's very unexpectedness, confusing in its multiplicity (it directs the plow, but is also the source of seeds), is an incestuous hand. The "unnaturalness" of the phallic hand causes Florence's "unnatural" emotion (she who should be his "natural" companion), fear. His plow has furrowed her nature (natural? unnatural?), and she is ready for the seed. The confused quality of the trope is the product of a narrator who defends against the red thread of incest in the cloth he weaves, even as he realizes, on some level, that the thread has become a pattern. Dombey's fear of Florence, his preoccupation with and hatred of her, are effectively glossed by the narrator's metaphor, particularly as it is set amidst his repetitions of "natural" and "unnatural."

Immediately after introducing the plough, the narrator speculates on Dombey's thoughts as the father secretly watches his daughter from the darkness. Protected (at least nominally) by the presence of his
new wife upstairs, Dombey "may" have favorable thoughts about his daughter at last. At this critical juncture, the narrator has abandoned omniscience; he only speculates. Perhaps, he says, Dombey experiences some "yielding moments," and realizes that his daughter could have been "a household spirit bending at his feet," that he might have had a "happy home within his reach" all this time. The narrator's rendition of Dombey's thoughts is a repetition of the former's fascination with the rosy daughter across the street, but now it is Florence who is the young girl as household spirit, ministering to her father's every need, occupying her proper position "at his feet," but well "within his reach."

The narrator further speculates that Dombey sees Florence as an "ornament," an appropriate accessory to the "ornament and pomp" of his newly decorated home. Finally, and here the narrator regains his omniscience about Dombey's thoughts and feelings, the father sees her as a kind of nurse, "bending over [Paul's] pillow," but "tending himself no less" (587). In a few short paragraphs, the narrator has fantasized all the mythic roles of the female, providing a quintessentially Victorian definition of "the woman," with all its cultural multivalence and confusion. The young female is beautiful, an "ornament"; she is also a "refuge." She tends death beds, and would "tend [her man] no less." She is a "household spirit" submissively at his feet, a "natural companion" at his side, a "better angel" above him. The seamless shifting of her roles is matched by the shifting of her spatial relationship to the male. Where, in fact, is she: above him, below him, beside him?
The narrator provides a slightly altered and more sharply nuanced version of the single gentleman's remarks about the "same sweet girl." Confusions and ambiguities mark the female: she is everything to her man, yet she remains interchangeable and undefined; she is an angel, and yet she bends at his feet. She is simultaneously daughter, mother, sweetheart, bride, sister - the recipient of both inappropriate kinds of love and inappropriate abuse. The confusion of role and spatial relationship implicit in the narrator's speculations is at the heart of the canon's domestic tangles and mysteries. Only Edith's entrance and Dombey's rekindled jealousy interrupt the narrator's fantasies, perhaps a fortunate interruption insofar as it prevents further narratival confusions and speculations. Dombey will never enjoy the narrator's fantasied relationship of patriarchal father with ministering child-daughter. Florence is already too old, her body too mature, to be the nine-year-old "happy little housekeeper." What he and Florence will be to each other at closure is something very different.

The relationship between father and daughter reaches its ultimate crisis immediately after Edith leaves the mansion. The text has raised the issue of incest; it has removed the wife whose presence nominally prevents it; now it must remove the nubile daughter from what might become the scene of the crime. Florence is, in fact, forced out of Dombey's house by the father's climactic blow to her bosom. In this text, the slightest contact between bodies is of immense significance. From the beginning, when Dombey tells Florence she can look at her baby brother, but "Don't touch him!", to the end when Edith must creep past
Florence on the stairs like a "lower animal" because her slightest touch may infect the daughter with the stepmother's taint ("don't touch me!", she cries), there are no casual bodily contacts. All the more significant, then, that Dombey's blow is full-armed and heavy, so heavy that it marks Florence for weeks.

The blow is specifically linked to sexuality, and to Florence's necessary initiation into womanhood, by Dombey's connection of it with Edith's sexual sin. Dombey, in his frenzy, lifts up his cruel arm, and struck her, crosswise, with that heaviness, that she tottered on the marble floor; and as he dealt the blow, he told her what Edith was, and bade her follow her, since they had always been in league. (757, my italics)

In this text which simultaneously reveals and conceals the theme of incest, it is the father who wounds the daughter into sexuality and forces her outside the family circle into an exogamous marriage. Sleeping Beauty is not awakened by the kiss of the Prince, but rather by the blow of the father. His blow is the perfect solution to the problem of pure Florence's transformation from virginity into maternity. She must marry so that she can become a mother, but there must be neither suspicion of incest nor any actual sexual act involved in her maternity.

Florence is "ashamed" of the mark she bears: the sight of the darkening mark upon her bosom made her afraid of herself, as if she bore about her something wicked. She covered it up, with a hasty, faltering
She wears the female equivalent of the mark of Cain, but the narrator's protestations of her childish purity and shame are intended to neutralize it. Moreover, Walter's speedy return, their very hasty marriage and immediate departure, all enable her to achieve mother/madonna status without the threat of sexual or erotic stains. The narrator's insistence on her angelic, childlike innocence further serves to protect her from any suggestion of maturity or sexuality. Despite the fact that Florence is seventeen (exactly Mary Hogarth's age at her death), and within days of her marriage, she has a "child's heart," a "child's sweet timid eyes and clustering hair" (697). In the chapters which follow the blow, when Florence is living at the Midshipman, she is even more insistently portrayed as both child and angel. Walter tells her that he left a child and finds a woman, but the narrator nonetheless describes her as "a hushed child" even after her betrothal. The insipidity of Walter and Florence's courtship is not a failure of Dickens's art, but a protective guarantee of Florence's innocence. Enshrined as child and angel, she is guaranteed to be free of sexual stain, pain, and blood.

Florence undergoes her transformation to mother/madonna while she is far away across the ocean. The birth of her son is specifically linked to her desire for forgiveness from her father, and to her return to rescue him and become his mother. The salt waves of love are linked to the salt tears so much a part of Florence, further linked to the salt tears Dombey sheds as he thinks of her, still further to the amniotic fluid of the womb, and finally to the waves of the ocean to
which father and daughter listen in the penultimate paragraph. The man who silently watched Polly's milk-filled breasts nourish his son at last is cradled to a second pair of milk-filled breasts, those of his daughter:

Upon the breast that he had bruised, against the heart that he had almost broken, she laid his face, now covered with his hands, and said, sobbing: "Papa, love, I am a mother." (939 - 940, my italics)

His subsequent illness does not mark his rebirth as a more mature, wiser man who has learned from life. Rather, it marks the wasting of his body in preparation for his return to Florence's womb, a return to safety and unity with the fantasy mother who is also the daughter, the bride, and the sister. The tangled relationship of father and daughter finds its ultimate meaning as a relationship between mother and son. Florence, having replaced Gills, the old-fashioned male deity, is the new mythic mother sent to re-order the world and re-womb the hero. The text has escaped from its dangerous fantasy of incest into a second, perhaps safer fantasy of perfect mother love. It has proposed the quintessential family romance in which a fitting and proper mother is provided to the hero and to future generations. When the hero is reborn, he will be undamaged, able to begin anew without hunger and deprivation. The hungry male mouth is fed, the fear of phallic insufficiency is cancelled, the need for incestuous longings obviated. There is only the mother, her son, and eternal, illimitable love: safe at last.
The final scene, though not the final paragraph, of the narrative places Walter, Florence, and Dombey at an open window, listening to what the waves say. The waves apparently say nothing to Walter, whose presence is, as always, incidental and easily forgotten. They speak to Dombey, "day and night," of Florence, and they speak to Florence, in "ceaseless murmuring," of eternal and illimitable love. The scene might be rendered as a Pre-Raphaelite painting of the Virgin and Child: the figure of the Madonna, clad in her intensely blue gown, would fill the window. Her full breasts would be both prominent and partially exposed, perhaps half-hidden by her luxuriant hair. Her expression would be at once sensuous and spiritual, unreadable and dreamy. At her breast would be the infant Dombey. Alternatively, the scene might be rendered simply as another version of "Roman Charity." In either case, Dickens's 1844 dream of Mary Hogarth has been rewritten in the fantasies of Dombey and Son - Dombey and Mother, after all.
Dombey's narrator is fully as interesting as any character in the text. He controls his story, but his unconscious knowledge and repressed desires occasionally escape that control, expressing themselves in intrusive tropes. He controls his characters, but his willed ignorance of their more dangerous proclivities develops fissures, allowing more material to escape than he ever intended. He controls himself, but occasionally intrudes into scenes, appending his own needs and desires to those of his characters. He employs his metatrope, the waves and distant shore, to good effect, but in the end its multivalent meanings exfoliate, causing confusion. His recurrent refusal to acknowledge the implications of what he narrates anticipates Freud's dictum that what the body suffers, the mind is not required to know. His rendition of the theory, however, has its own unique convolution: what Dombey's body suffers, the narrator's mind is not required to know.

Carker describes Dombey as

the slave of his own greatness, . . . yoked to
his own triumphal car like a beast of burden, with
no idea on earth but that it is behind him and is to
be drawn on, over everything and through
everything.  (717)

Carker's understanding of Dombey's character is only partial, and the narrator is determined to share its limitations. He is unwilling to acknowledge Dombey's impotence, his hunger, his incestuous desires, his
weakness, or his need for a passive re-wombing. He means to cast Dombey's odyssey in moral terms: a man sins and errs; he is punished and learns his lesson; he is redeemed. Despite himself, however, his narrative divulges much more. It reveals the primal fantasies from which its manifest content is fashioned; it reveals its meanings in its representations of bodies and its unfinished stories. It remains multivalent and ambiguous, even as the narrator clings to the moral certainties of punishment and reward, of "peals of marriage bells," and of a storm that "has passed for ever," leaving "a clear evening in its track" (970).

Dombey's illness can be interpreted as a moral rebirth, a crisis through which he learns to love. But his illness is also the solution to the problem of his damaged psyche and wooden body, a socially acceptable means by which an adult male may become passive and powerless in a culture in which men are required to be aggressive, strong, and controlling. The pre-eminent fact about Dombey, the putative Victorian patriarch, is that he controls neither his household, nor his business, nor his women. He is not more powerful than Edith; he is not more powerful than the ostensibly submissive Florence; he is not even more powerful than Mrs. Pipchin, who manipulates him and then departs his house with his best chair. There is every reason to question Dombey's effectiveness as the powerful, controlling capitalist businessman. After all, sensible Susan has it on good authority that he "does nothing without Mr. Carker, and leaves all to Mr. Carker, and acts according to Mr. Carker, and has Mr. Carker always at his elbow" (476). Dombey desires two women: Edith and
Florence. In the end, humiliated by his wife and forbidden to possess his daughter, his desire changes. Rather than wishing to possess a woman, he wishes to be possessed by a woman, to return to a womblike world of safety in which there are neither humiliations nor temptations, neither hungry male eyes nor hungry male mouths. All this the narrator refuses to know, even as he divulges it.

We have seen how the narrator's willed ignorance results in his unreliability during the scene between Dombey and Edith in her bedroom. The narrator also becomes an unacknowledged though powerful presence in a scene in which his own desire, though unadmitted, is as palpable as that of his creature, Carker. As Edith awaits Carker's arrival in Dijon, the narrator enacts the role of the hidden male gazer. It is he in the dark hall, secretly watching the woman so fully exposed in the lighted room, his gaze focused on her through "the dark perspective of open doors." It is he who sees the glitter, the gilding, the gay colors, and the beautiful woman. Carker's desire is never in question, but the narrator's desire is equally evident as he describes Edith's movements. He tells us that Edith's hand, thrust into her bosom to reach the knife she has hidden there, is "put with such rugged uncongenial purpose into her white bosom" (860). No one can doubt that it is he who imagines to what better purposes a hand might be put there. While he gives Edith melodramatic speeches, his descriptions of her are erotic and yearning. She is "like an enchantress"; he dwells on her lips and her bosom. His desire swells Carker's desire, the two are conflated, and together they fill the room, fuelled by Edith's passion and beauty.
Opaquely present in this scene of frustrated desire, the narrator attempts to distance and protect himself from Edith by framing her in a lighted room as if she were a costly painting. [34] The tactic is a variation on those descriptions of Florence in which he seeks to protect and distance both Dombey and himself by repeatedly declaring her a child. In addition, he distances himself from desire and from the power of the female body by casting his narrative first as fairy tale and then as myth. In the final scene of the last chapter, he recedes even further, becoming a distanced and impersonal camera recording in freeze frame the manchild and woman at the window, isolated and surrounded by waves. He does not close with this shot of Dombey and Florence at the window, however. His final commentary is a reprise of the image of the sea and the unseen region on the other shore, a last paragraph which leaves the reader wandering in the mists of a very murky metatropes.

The geography of the ocean, river, and shore is never absolutely clear and unambiguous, but a kind of structural picture emerges from the occasions on which the image is employed. If we were to try to schematize the image, as if it were a map, we could place the world of every day "reality" - of people, London, the railroad - at the left-hand side. A river runs through this world; it begins as a specific river, the Thames, but by means of metaphorical accretions it becomes a river of death on which Paul floats faster and faster to the ocean. The narrator tells us that this ocean flows all around our world: Fanny "drifted out upon the dark and unknown sea that rolls round all the world" (60). So we have a river of death which empties into an
ocean where the dead drift. But both image and schema become murkier and more complex.

The ocean has "white arms" which beckon to the dying Paul, and the white arms are also Florence's arms. Paul is thinking about death, and remembering a boat he saw sailing in the moonlight the night before. The boat had a sail, he tells Toots, "like an arm, all silver," and it "seemed to beckon . . . to beckon me to come! - There she is! There she is!" (235). The "she" is Florence, both the silver arm beckoning, and the flesh and blood sister. The silver arm later becomes "white arms," but they continue to beckon. As Paul's death draws nearer, the boat carrying him on the dark river floats out to sea, and he sees a shore before him. On the shore awaiting him is his long-dead mother, and apparently Christ as well. [35] Now we have the human world on the left and the "great ocean" in the middle of the map. The ocean has waves which are also voices associated with both Florence and death:

The waves are hoarse with repetition of their mystery; . . . the white arms beckon, in the moonlight, to the invisible country faraway. (665)

On the right of the map, then, is the "far shore", or the "invisible country," evidently a place of salvation and afterlife where children are re-united with their mothers after a sojourn on the ocean. The ocean is multivalent. It speaks to Florence of eternal love, carries the dead to the far shore, and lies between us and the far shore, whether as barrier or bridge is unclear. It is also the oceanic oneness of mother and child when the child still floats in the
womb. The distant shore, then, is both death and afterlife, and simultaneously a place of birth and new life.

When Florence and Walter sail away after their marriage, she continues to hear the waves speak. They whisper to her
of love - of love, eternal and illimitable, not
bounded by the confines of this world, or by the
end of time, but ranging still, beyond the sea,
beyond the sky, to the invisible country far away! (908)

This love of which they whisper is also multivalent, offering a confusion of meanings. It may be the love between man and woman, God’s all-inclusive love, or the love of the mother for her child. All we really know is that it is a love distinguished chiefly by its lack of physicality and specificity, a love embodied in a female deity who unchangingly and unselfishly loves everyone, and thus perhaps loves no one.

But the boundlessness and endlessness also suggest drowning, ego dissolution, and the wandering of the lost who have no landmarks, and no male instruments, by which to chart a course to safety. The ocean may be love and salvation, but it is also death and suffocation. Death and love are hardly strangers in Dickens’s novels, and here again they are united in this ambiguously multivalent ocean, so closely associated with Florence and mother, with womb and tomb, with waves and amniotic fluid, with desolate separation and blissful unity. Florence is both death and immortality, both birth and lost wandering. When Dombey joins her on the beach, then, is it for re-wombing and rebirth, or for loss of autonomy and a deathlike passivity?
Once lost in the tangle of this recurrent trope which structures the narrative, defines Florence, and thus defines Dombey, we begin to fear that we too are lost in that illimitable oceanic love. Anxiety increases as the narrator moves to closure, and his last reference to the ocean and the invisible shore. Apparently he suffers from anxiety as well. He is as unable as we to decide whether Florence's white arms beckon to salvation or to death, whether her womb is a place of safety or a *vagina dentata* infused with cannibalistic libido. [36]

The last paragraph of the narrative recycles the metatrope in a most puzzling manner:

Never from the mighty sea may voices rise too late, to come between us and the unseen region on the other shore! Better, far better, that they whispered of that region in our childish ears, and the swift river hurried us away! (976)

It is almost impossible to unravel these two sentences. Does the narrator mean that it is better to die young than that the voices from the sea should reach us too late to be a *barrier* between us and the invisible shore? Or a *bridge* between us and the invisible shore? Is it desirable to reach the shore, or is it dangerous? Will the voices, equated with the white arms and thus with Florence, return us to the womb of safety and rebirth, or to the tomb of danger and death?

The answer is yes. The murkiness is the message, and the message is one of anxiety and uncertainty. The narrator cannot be sure, in behalf of Dombey or himself, whether the woman will nurture him - or eat him up. He has tried to hedge his bets by constructing the boys’
world of the Midshipman, but Dombey is so damaged that he requires a mother and rebirth, not playmates and games. The traditional family; the strong male and authoritarian patriarch; the harmlessly pure and purely harmless angel mother; the happy ending - all are held up, examined, and turned inside out by this text. It is impossible to locate safety and salvation, whether on the distant shore or on the ocean, whispering of love; whether at the window overlooking the autumnal beach, or perhaps nowhere at all.

Hillis Miller has suggested that the real center of the novel, however, is parent-child relations, a theme which connects Dombey, back through The Old Curiosity Shop, with Oliver Twist. This is the last of Dickens’s novels in which the establishment of satisfactory relations with one’s parents can be an escape from isolation." [37]

Surely Miller is correct in concluding that the real center of the novel is parent-child relations, but they are not the relations between a father and his daughter. Rather, they are constituted by the provision of a mother/madonna for a damaged and needy male child. Moreover, the text does not provide an escape from isolation; it enacts a more extreme isolation as it seals Dombey and Florence off from the rest of society, like the body sealing off an infection in a cyst. And, finally, it does not establish "satisfactory relations," as we see by that last ambiguous paragraph.
Dombey and Florence and Eternal Love. It is an infantile primal
fantasy of gratification, dreamed by an adult genius who cannot be
certain that it is not a nightmare. Seemingly a dream of satisfied
narcissism and blissful unity, even this subtextual primal fantasy is
subverted and glossed by additional ambiguities. Dombey has lost too
much: his adulthood and vitality, his will and identity. Florence
loves indiscriminately and generally, rather than specifically and
warmly. A world in which "the woman" is so necessary, but so
dangerous, is a bleak world indeed. A world in which the female body
must be ignored and the male body punished by illness offers little
comfort. And, finally, there is that ambiguous coda, dangling at the
end of a closure which only seems to promise peace, only seems to
close. Mrs. MacStinger and Florence are intended to contrast with each
other at opposite ends of the spectrum: Mrs. MacStinger a Medusa who
threatens castration, Florence a mythic deity who offers redemption.
But the narrator clearly fears that the distinction may become fatally
blurred, or that it may ultimately collapse altogether.

Dombey is a novel in which several concurrent stories are begun,
some never to be finished, others seemingly intended merely to subvert
comfortable expectations, but all in some way deconstructing
themselves. It is a novel of substitutions and replications whose
title names the paternal relationship but in fact never enacts it. It
is Dombey and Mother in familial terms, Gills and Gay in business
terms. While appearing to denominate a patriarchal world, it
substitutes a female deity for a male deity, castrates and punishes
males, and transforms men into boys. It offers big male instruments
and disproportionate machinery while simultaneously wasting and destroying male bodies. It kills off, not the neglected and feared female child, but the long awaited, much cosseted male child. It is dangerous to be a male in this narrative: gender kills. Unions which are permitted are not erotic, and those which are erotic are not permitted: sex kills. Small wonder, then, that Dombey, no less than young Oliver, needs a mother to protect him.

Nell died, but the unexpended energy she left behind has spilled over into this later text. One of the dangers that Dombey's narrator fears is that Florence's nubile body will become as fatally attractive as Nell's, the focus of all eyes, a black hole which draws men on to destruction. The need to ignore the heroine's body is the result of this fear. Florence's innocence depends on her continued childishness; Dombey's survival depends on Florence. Theirs is a claustrophobic relationship in a claustrophobic text. But it is no accident that an erring human male is returned to the womb just before Dickens begins his autobiographical novel, David Copperfield, with a first chapter entitled, "I Am Born."
NOTES

[1] As David Parker put it, in a lecture delivered at the Dickens Project, University of California, Santa Cruz, Aug. 1989, Dickens took Mary out of context and put her into text.


[3] All of Dickens's biographers take note, in one way or another, of these problems. Dickens's letters to Forster while he was writing Dombey are particularly useful.

[4] For an account of the intimate relationship between the autobiographical fragment, Mrs. Pipchin, and Paul's death, see Patten, "Autobiography Into Autobiography." Patten is primarily interested in Dickens's self-creation as it is embodied in both fragment and David Copperfield.

[5] Dombey's feelings about Florence are made up of layers of emotions which Dickens associated with several people, and they are the more difficult to sort on that account. Undoubtedly he exhibits aspects of sibling rivalry, for instance, which are traceable to Dickens's unresolved feelings of jealousy for his sister, Fanny. Dombey is jealous of Florence in the way that a brother might be jealous of a sister his own age who receives more love and attention than he receives.

[7] It is often argued that Florence is the unnurtured, neglected child, and that Dickens conflates his own feelings of neglect with hers. Harry Stone, "The Novel as Fairy Tale: Dickens's Dombey and Son," Charles Dickens: New Perspectives, ed. Wendell Stacy Johnson (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1982) 64, suggests that "Dickens was able to project into Mr. Dombey's rejection of Florence, his own sense of parental abandonment." Slater 254, suggests that Dickens's "deepest powers" were always released by the portrayal of a rejected, abused child like Florence. I am suggesting that Dombey himself is fully as needy as Florence, and that Dombey's rejection of Florence is a much more complicated subject than simply "parental abandonment."


[9] The marriage is often accounted for on the grounds that Dombey wants to replace his dead son. Certainly Dombey does ask a question which can be interpreted as a check on Edith's fertility, but he desires Edith as well as desiring the son she might bear.

[10] Deborah Gorham, The Victorian Girl and the Feminine Ideal (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1982) 6 - 7, points out that the daughter had particular significance throughout the nineteenth century. She was portrayed as a special source of tenderness and spirituality in advice literature, poetry, and in art: "an idealized view of the daughter's role is a crucial feature of the cult of domesticity." Gorham suggests that the Victorian idealization of womanhood could be more appropriately applied to daughters than to wives. Women were to be strong but also to remain permanently childlike. If they were to
remain pure, how could they be sexual? Gorham believes that this ambiguity is resolved by a focus on the femininity of the daughter rather than the adult woman. I suggest that the ambiguity was never solved in any way at all, as the contortions of Dombey so amply prove. The daughter is as vexed a subject as the wife or mother.


[12] Newton, "Making" 135, believes that the world of Cuttle and Gills is "characterized less by the masculine values of consuming and taking than by the feminine values of giving and feeding." She sees them as offering "a benign male capitalism," and appropriating women's virtues, whereas I see them as the text's attempt to evade female control. Nina Auerbach, "Dickens and Dombey: A Daughter After All," Romantic Imprisonment: Women and Other Glorified Outcasts (New York: Columbia UP, 1986) 120, also sees the Cuttle/Gills family as related to Florence's female world of sea and tears.
[13] There are two peripheral marriages which also must be taken into account. Connected to Dombey's gaggle of families by their old relation to Toots, the union of Cornelia Blimber and Mr. Feeder is one in which the male remains an independent adult, although he, too, "feeds" on the woman. Mr. Feeder is quite open in his desire for Blimber's school property, a desire which far exceeds any he may have for the "composed," "comfortable and cool" Cornelia. Mr. Morfin presumably remains an adult in his marriage to the angelic Harriet Carker, but like the Feeders, the Morfins are such marginal presences that they cannot serve as familial exemplars. Also on the periphery of the text are Miss Tox and the Grinder. She is firmly in control of the newly domesticated and chastened Grinder, a case of female subjugation of the male.

[14] Jenni Calder, *Women and Marriage in Victorian Fiction* (New York: Oxford UP, 1976) examines aspects of the Victorian home as a domestic ideal. She often uses Dickens's families as examples of both idealized domesticity and terrible misery. Although she sees that Dickens's families are far from the ideal, she is willing to accept his "happy endings" at their face value. She believes, for example, that Florence grew up "to win for herself an ideal - in conventional Victorian terms - domestic setting." In fact, there is no domestic setting at all at the closure of Dombey as far as Florence is concerned.

[15] Stone, "The Novel as Fairy Tale" 55, argues that Dombey is reborn, having perceived the "soullessness of the new business world," and having become a "new chastened Dombey." But in fact Dombey is
supported by money made through his old firm, nor has he ever repudiated his business life. His new life has less to do with moral lessons learned than with a flight from deprivation and adult responsibility.

[16] Paul Schacht, "Dickens and the Uses of Nature," *Victorian Studies* 34 (1990): 77 - 102, notes that Dombey and Son is "a Daughter after all," to quote Miss Tox. This interesting and useful essay remarks the centrality of the nursing image, and the parent-child inversion, in *Dombey*, but develops different arguments and emphases than mine.

[17] Slater 311.


[20] See the illustration on page 182. For the Midshipman himself, see 334 and 539.

[21] The Midshipman and his sextant may have been originally intended to symbolize a place of male potency. According to Forster, it was Dickens's intention to make Walter degenerate into a scoundrel, thus making him an ineligible suitor. Dickens's villains are usually more virile than his passive heroes; accordingly, Walter and the wooden Midshipman might have had phallic qualities in common in the original plan for the novel.
[22] The probability that the letter has sexual significance is increased by the fact that so many barriers must be penetrated before it can be brought to light. It is hidden beneath "cancelled scraps of paper," which are, in turn, locked in a writing desk. Fanny had further concealed the desk in a cabinet in her bedroom.

[23] Freud 68.

[24] Stewart 18, argues that Carker's death is a displacement for Dombey who "undergoes his symbolic mutilation in the delegated person of his manager . . ." I am suggesting that Dombey undergoes his own mutilation or deformation by means of his illness, and thus requires no surrogate.

[25] Captain Cuttle keeps trying to give his watch to men: Brogley, Walter, Dombey. He is always unsuccessful. Eventually he is able to give it away when it makes it over "jintly" to both Florence and Walter. Even if this action can be viewed in some sense as a vote for marriage, nonetheless the watch doesn't run properly and thus can hardly guarantee timely relations.

[26] Barickman 57, suggests that "the power of the female character is the power to arouse male desire and stimulate male action," but it seems to me that the heroine is carefully crafted so that she will not arouse male desire, while the male protagonist seldom takes action but is acted upon.

[27] Freud 47 - 48. Object-relations theory, as we saw in chapter one, agrees.

[28] The letter is quoted in Forster, ed. Ley, 480.
Recent criticism is often broadly divided between two schools: those who think Florence is a killer, and those who think she is a victim of misogyny. A few examples will suffice. Welsh, *Copyright to Copperfield* 99, believes that Dombey hates Florence because he projects his fear of death on her. Sadoff 60 - 63, argues that Florence's is the love that kills, that she "punishes those who love her father by strangling their desire," and that she "appears a dangerous daughter indeed." Julian Moynahan, "Dealings with the Firm of Dombey and Son: Firmness vs. Wetness," *Dickens and the Twentieth Century*, ed. John Gross and Gabriel Pearson (London: Routledge, 1962) 121 - 131, concludes that Dombey was right in the first place about Florence, that "he had everything to fear and nothing to gain from Florence's love." Moynahan reads the closing chapters of the novel as scenes in which a "Victorian patriarchy of stiff and tyrannical men of affairs surrenders to a matriarchy of weeping mothers and daughters." Auerbach, "Dickens and Dombey" 128, sees Dombey and Florence as irrevocably divided in their separate spheres, with "the ocean and the women that belong to it . . . placidly antagonistic to the efforts of a masculine civilization which excludes them." Stone, "Novel as Fairytale" 53, believes that the novel "is designed to explore Mr. Dombey's parental sin and to humble him and shatter his money ethic." Newton, "Making" argues that the novel simultaneously celebrates the power of woman's influence and re-enacts male sexual horror. Dombey's previous life is destroyed, and he enters an autumnal life in which attendance on female feeling is the whole content of his existence. Thus, the novel is a "covert rendering of women's debilitating power"
(134). Louise Yelin, "Strategies for Survival: Florence and Edith in Dombey and Son," Victorian Studies 22 (1979): 297 - 319, suggests that Florence's character is determined by Dombey's treatment of her, and his hatred of her is caused by the fact that she is not a boy, a reflection of the general misogyny of the text. Linda Zwinger, "The Fear of the Father: Dombey and Daughter," Nineteenth-Century Fiction 39 (1985): 420 - 440, argues that "the truth of Dombey and Son, more than any other, is that even when women conform to the images men have prescribed, men do not like women; yet women seem to like men. What accounts for that difference? In the Dombey world women have to like men; men do not have to like women."


[31] Quoted in Forster 2: 32.


[33] The hand, like the eye, has been employed as a sexual organ on other occasions in the narrative, for both genders. When Carker is Dombey's "organ of displeasure," and his own organ of pleasure, he kisses Edith's hand. Her reaction is far more intense than that act might imply. She bangs the hand against a marble mantle until it is bruised and bleeding. After Carker touches her hand with his, and he is alone, he waves "the hand with which he had taken hers, and thrust it in his breast" (721). In contrast, when Florence gives her "little hand" (the hand the symbol for her hymen) to Walter, who has already characterized her as an "angel's hand", she seems to him to rise up on wings "into clearer and serener air," an appropriate fantasy for the
future consort of the Virgin Mother (335). From the adulterous to the divine, then, hands carry multivalent and genital meanings.

[34] Michie 109, discusses how narrators use framing as a device to distance their female characters. She suggests that male characters use framing to distance themselves from the desired woman at the moment of physical attraction, while the narrator uses it to distance the female body at the moment of physical description. I suggest that the narrator here is using it as male character would use it because he is himself implicated in desire for Edith.

[35] That the other figure he sees on the shore is Christ is made clear by his allusion to "the print upon the stairs at school" (297). The print is a picture of a haloed Christ, pointing upward (264).

[36] Shengold 115 - 116, discusses the toothed vagina.

I began with the demand of the "baby savage," the most primitive and direct of the male cries for the woman. I end with Dombey's no less pressing needs: not only for the woman's breast and womb, but for a mythic female deity who can provide both order and love. Oliver's hungry mouth and his demand for more, and Nicholas's desire to return to the innocence of childhood with his sister, are variations on the theme. Each novel struggles with the primal fantasies of the hungry male mouth and the milk-filled female breast, with the desirous male eye and the erotic female bosom, with the threatened male psyche and the woman's threatening body. Each text finds itself forced to disfigure and deform both male and female bodies in order to guarantee innocence and safety within the confines of representations carefully and artfully rendered as photographic double exposures: a mother and son dyad overlaid by an aunt and nephew, a brother and sister, a grandfather and granddaughter, or a father and daughter. The manifest content of each novel declares the construction of a happy family within an integrated community, but the subtext of each enacts isolation and ambiguity.

In each case, the constrained female's energies exceed the text's containment; the passive male's desires and fears survive its solutions. Both spill over, uncontrolled, into the next narrative. Above all, the need for the nurturing, redeeming female becomes increasingly important in the years that separate Oliver Twist and Paul Dombey. Beginning as a devitalized sister/mother, she becomes a
powerful madonna in *Dombey*, so powerful that the narrator dare not decipher all her meanings. The world may have swallowed Nell in her text, but Florence, in a neat reversal, swallows the world in hers. Concomitantly, as the woman becomes more necessary, so do the texts increasingly arrange for separate communities of men who lead happily asexual lives, free of female threat.

The adult David Copperfield, looking back at his child self and assessing both child and adult, tells us that he fell in love with little Em'ly on his first visit to Yarmouth. Far from minimizing that infant love, he defines it as the best and purest that life ever offers. Adult loves of "later life" constitute a falling off from the child's "greater purity and more disinterestedness," he tells us. The passage reveals the fracture at the heart of Dickens's male/female relationships. Only children are capable of purity and innocence in love; only the child's body is unstained. Out of that dark philosophy of human declension come Dickens's "little women" and his passive, often ill men. The novels all seek to re-create the child's innocence within the adult's body, an impossible task requiring deformations, distortions, disguises, displacements, and - of course - consummate artistry.

With *Dombey* Dickens has set the stage not only for his hero's rebirth in *David Copperfield*, but also for a reworking of his own life's manifest content and primal fantasies, in which the happy ending so long sought would surely be achieved, the defective parents so long endured punished and replaced, and "the same sweet face" so deeply desired finally (and safely) possessed. Agnes, Esther, Amy, and Lucie
await (or lie in wait?) his future heroes, offering ambiguous promises of salvation and nurture. Beyond them shimmer Estella, Bella, and Lizzie, new and suggestive variations on the old themes of fear, need, and desire. The man who was determined to found a periodical on the principle of "glowing, hearty, generous, mirthful, beaming reference in everything to Home and Fireside" had instead fashioned wonderfully complex chiaroscuros out of his own demons, delights, and genius.


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