

## **Chapter 1:**

### **Dickens's Dark Imagination**

"If we all knew our own minds (in a more enlarged sense than in the popular acceptance of that phrase), I suspect we should find our nurses responsible for most of the dark corners we are forced to go back to, against our wills", Dickens wrote in The Uncommercial Traveller (150). He was referring to his nursemaid, Mary Weller, who was in charge of him while his family lived at Ordnance Terrace, Chatham. She delighted in terrifying

the impressionable young boy with stories of ghosts and ghouls, stories which frightened him a great deal and were to haunt his imagination for the rest of his life.

Christopher Hibbert, in The Making of Charles Dickens, quite rightly stresses Mary Weller's influence in the developing chimera of Dickens's imagination, citing such stories as that of "The Black Cat", about a "weird and supernatural Tom" which preyed on children, as well as stories about a satanic rat and of an amorphous, death-foreboding creature. These tales of the uncanny, along with such reading fare as "The Arabian Nights" and "Tales of the Genii" were instrumental in keeping alive what Dickens called his "fancy", and his hope of something beyond that place and time. Dickens, throughout his life, demonstrated an acute sense of curiosity, a keen sensitivity and a remarkably vivid imagination. It was only natural for him to be open to a belief in such paranormal occurrences as mesmerism, precognition, clairvoyance and apparitions. He was known to have attended at least one seance, and to have practised table-spinning. His belief in the occult was so powerful that Forster was driven to speculate in The Life of Charles Dickens, that "but for the strong restraining power of his common sense, he might have

fallen into the follies of spiritualism" (1: 401). Dickens's readers have long observed that much of the author's life is echoed in his works. His interest in the supernatural is no exception. Hints of his deep interest in the paranormal are found interspersed in his writing, and these, for the most part, are closely connected to Dickens's life.

Throughout his life, Dickens experienced the uncanny firsthand, and may have even been endowed with a sixth sense. He told Forster once that at the Doncaster races he bought a betting card on impulse and humorously wrote down three names for the winning horses of the three main races, never having heard or thought of any of them: "...and if you can believe it without your hair standing on end, those three races were won, one after another, by those three horses!!!" (1: 192). Many of Dickens's experiences seem to have some connection with dreams. Forster writes also in his biography that Dickens once dreamed he saw a lady in a red shawl who introduced herself as Miss Napier. "All the time I was dressing next morning, I thought- what a preposterous thing to have so vivid a dream about nothing! and why Miss Napier? for I never heard of any Miss Napier. That same Friday night,

I read. After the reading came into my retiring -room, Mary Boyle and her brother, and the Lady in the red shawl whom they present as 'Miss Napier'!" (2: 402). The Encyclopedia of Mystical and Paranormal Experience defines dreams as states in which issues, events and people in the life of the dreamer are dealt with in a metaphorical sense, and "some are paranormal, involving clairvoyance, precognition and telepathy". Dickens's dream of Miss Napier may have very well been an extraordinary instance of precognition. On the whole, however, most of his dream experiences seem to be subconscious efforts to cope with the trials of an often difficult life. After Mary Hogarth, his sister-in-law, to whom he was very much attached, died in 1837, Dickens dreamed of her incessantly. He wrote to her mother, Mrs. George Hogarth, six years later: "After she died, I dreamed of her every night for many months- I think for the better part of a year- sometimes as a spirit, sometimes as a living creature, never with any bitterness or sorrow, but always with a kind of quiet happiness, which became so pleasant to me that I never lay down at night without a hope of the vision coming back in one shape or other." (Letters 3: 483-484). While in Italy, Dickens stayed at the Palazzo Peschiere, which he



described as "more like an enchanted palace in an Eastern story than a grave and sober lodging", a place which the Genoese avoided after dark in the belief that it was haunted. This was the setting for a bizarre experience for Dickens. One night he dreamed he was visited by "poor Mary's spirit", dressed in blue drapery, "as the Madonna might in a picture by Raphael" (1:336). He described this experience to Forster, in great detail, telling him that he awoke with tears streaming down his face, "exactly the condition of the dream". "I wonder", he continues, "whether to regard this as a dream or an actual vision" (1: 337). The intensity of his reaction to this sort of experience was acutely felt by Dickens, and he was to incorporate this into his nightmare fiction. There is a great deal of evidence that there was a dark side to Dickens's imagination, a trait which permeates much of his writing, a trait which prompted Edgar Johnson, in his biography, to declare emphatically that "no writer so intimately fuses the familiar and strange as he does". This very fusion of dreamlike fantasy and reality allowed Dickens to reveal his innate and very personal preoccupation with the darker side of existence, the supernatural. This fusion also allowed him to metaphorically deal with very personal aspects of his

life, events in his life that plagued and tormented him as well as his concern with what he saw as the shortcomings of his society. In my second chapter, I hope to show how this method is used, quite successfully, in Oliver Twist, in relation to the author's childhood experiences.

Dickens's tendency to instill his dark imagination into his work through a fusion of the real and unreal is conspicuous even in his travel writing. In American Notes, Dickens writes of his visit to the Eastern Penitentiary in Pennsylvania. He tries to picture for himself the thoughts and feelings natural to a prisoner in solitary confinement, a punishment he saw as extremely harsh and hideously irrational. He writes how he imagines himself, as the solitary prisoner, wondering if the other prisoners were "white" and "spectre-like" (106). He imagines the white walls of the cell to have "something dreadful in them". The "ghastly ceiling" seems to look down at him and the light of day seems to have "an ugly phantom face" (107). The cell is "every night the lurking place of a ghost" (107). The solitary prisoner, Dickens finds, is placed in the unnatural situation of being deprived of all human contact. The

thought of being confined in this manner, was, to the gregarious Dickens, so terrifying that he associated these terrors with the terrors of the uncanny. In the chapter from Pictures from Italy bearing the title "An Italian Dream", he describes the floating city of Venice in a dreamlike manner. He writes of walking up a "phantom street", into a "ghostly city" with a "bridge of sighs" and a Giant's staircase (330, 332). "And in the dream", Dickens continues, "...I thought that Shakespeare's spirit was abroad upon the water somewhere: stealing through the city" (336). This was the only way in which he knew how to effectively describe a totally alien experience, the experience of touring a city with waterways as streets. The dream mode, as well as images derived from the world of the supernatural are integrated in one ingenious stroke to allow the author to organise experience in real life as well as in his fiction. It is interesting to realise that one phrase in "An Italian Dream" is reproduced verbatim over seven years later. Dickens writes that his Italian dream had "days and nights in it..." (335). In Bleak House, Esther Summerson uses these very words when she describes her dream as she lies in a hallucinatory state during her near-fatal smallpox attack. Both situations have

one thing in common. Dickens uses the dream mode to unify sensory and psychological perceptions with the overall sense of the unreal, to describe a seemingly logic-defying circumstance. In Venice, he is confronted with something which seemed quite incredible, a city with waterways instead of streets, with gondolas instead of Hansom cabs and carriages. In Bleak House, the sense of far-reaching injustice so overwhelmed him that he expresses it through Esther Summerson's dream, a point I will deal with in my third chapter.

Dickens clearly harboured a fascination for the Cimmerian aspects of existence. The fusion of fantasy and reality through dreamlike or nightmarish descriptions served as a way of revealing the dark side of Dickens's personality, a side which he was forced to conceal due to the harsh strictures of the era in which he lived. Dickens was a living embodiment of the dichotomy of Victorian experience. The dark facets of life were kept hidden behind a cultured façade of gentility -a dichotomy evident in the writing of other Victorians, such as Robert Louis Stevenson's Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. Dickens, who prided himself in achieving a respectable standing in society was also entranced with the darker

side of life, relishing every detail of executions he attended, and regularly visiting morgues, hoping to catch glimpses of corpses. Peter Ackroyd reiterates, in his recent biography, that Dickens also had a short and violent temper which he seemed to have inherited from his father. Ackroyd points out that Dickens, in his letters, refers to his temper as "indomitable", "savage", "unalterable", and "demoniacal" (250). He used to love the idea of threatening to seize someone by the throat and has often been described as working himself into a frenzy of excitement, especially when in the midst of his writing, or when involved in reading excerpts from his works. These character traits were at odds with the other aspect of his character which involved a need to appear self-possessed, disciplined and self-restrained. "There is no doubt", Ackroyd writes, "that there was within Dickens's consciousness a private world built upon nightmares and fantasies and anxieties that he chose not to reveal to anyone except, of course, to readers of his fiction" (378). He seems to express his dark, nightmarish disposition in many of his works.

The dark, hellish atmosphere in some of his writing, with images of death, monsters and ghouls, is, in one sense, a glimpse into the realm of his dark imagination.

The grotesque Quilp, for instance, could almost be regarded as Dickens's alter ego. Dickens uses shadowy images from the Gothic tradition as well as other sources dealing with the paranormal because these deal with the darker side of the imagination, the darker side which was to haunt him all through his life, like a fiendish doppel-gänger.

The amalgam of the writer's intensely imaginative, personal, brooding nature and his awareness of an inherent gloom and decay in society, as well as a preoccupation with the uncanny and the supernatural are traits shared by Dickens and the writers of the Gothic school. The term "supernatural" covers, of course, the entire spectrum of paranormal phenomena, from astrology to witchcraft and from apparitions and autosuggestion to ghosts and zombies. We find, however, that a few stock supernatural motifs occur time and time again in works by Dickens and in other writers who deal with the supernatural while others are hardly mentioned. Among the motifs which emerge several times are apparitions, foreshadowing or clairvoyant dreams or visions, vampires, witches and werewolves, most of which are drawn from mythic folklore. It is important to briefly examine how

the supernatural is used in the Gothic tradition to create a base for my study, as the Gothic tradition is indelibly linked to the supernatural tradition in literature. Firstly, the link between life and the dark world of the nightmare, a link which was significant in Dickens's life, was also keenly felt by writers such as Horace Walpole, whose classic Gothic novel, The Castle of Otranto (1764) sprang from a vivid dream he had about an ancient castle. Later novels written in the Gothic vein also bear links to dreams, either in conception or content. Mary Shelley's Frankenstein (1818) originated in a dream, while Charles Maturin's Melmoth the Wanderer (1820) is dotted with dreams. Dreams and dreamlike narratives are largely responsible for the narrative spell and unreal quality of many of these novels. This allows full use of the supernatural. Supernatural descriptions are fully utilised to reveal the physical manifestations of depravity and moral decay, as well as in the use of symbolism and the grotesque. In Melmoth the Wanderer, for instance, the central character is a grotesque figure who has sinned in making a pact with the devil, doomed to walk the earth for 150 years until he can find someone desperate enough to exchange places with him. The aura of the surreal in novels such as Melmoth

leads to a suspension of disbelief, as the logic of everyday life is deemed redundant. This prepares the reader for encounters with the uncanny. I will be examining Dickens's use of the dream mode in relation to the surreal and the supernatural in the following chapter, especially when dealing with Oliver Twist.

Secondly, the supernatural device, when used in both Gothic fiction and other genres questions the reader's world view. In a sense, the real and the unreal both deconstruct each other, placing the reader on shaky ground. The reader is thus open to any implicit messages the author may wish to convey, messages that promote, for instance, a deeper awareness of the spiritual. Devendra P. Varma, in "Quest of the Numinous: The Gothic Flame", an essay in Peter Messent's thought-provoking collection titled Literature of the Occult, is of the view that the Gothic arose out of a quest for the numinous, and apparitions of the dead "excite a cold and shuddering sympathy for the beings whom we may ourselves resemble in a few short years" (42). In other words, these manifestations increase our awareness of our own mortality. Margaret L. Carter's close examination of supernatural machinery in Ann



Radcliffe's Mysteries of Udolpho (1794) expands this view, and reveals that Radcliffe uses the supernatural to convey a religious message, based mainly on the principle that in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the main aim of the ghost story was to prove that the soul really existed. "A visitation from beyond death proves the existence of the soul, and, therefore, in many apologetic writings of the time, contributes to [sic] proving the existence of God Himself" (23). Ultimately, Carter feels, Radcliffe's message is that the devout have nothing to fear from the forces of evil. In this case, the deconstructive effect of the juxtaposition of the real and unreal causes the rational reader to be open to the numinous, striking a blow against materialism. One cannot help but feel that in Gothic-influenced fiction of the Victorian era, the preoccupation with the supernatural, linked to the numinous reflects a pressing need for greater spiritual awareness. This was in reaction to a materialistic age which focused on systems of thought, rather than on deep-rooted faith. Dickens addresses this issue when he writes about the anti-papery riots in Barnaby Rudge, and about misguided religious individuals and groups in Bleak House. Though the Gashfords, the Chadbands and the Pardiggles of the world

may profess to be religious, they seem to be concerned with all that is worldly, and remain blind to true spirituality. Gashford is interested in his selfish drive for power, Chadband is intent on converting "slumbering Heathens" such as Jo, the unfortunate crossing-sweeper, and Mrs. Pardiggle is concerned only with getting poor families to read the Bible, oblivious to the fact that they are illiterate. Representatives of religion such as these, have no charity to bestow, no love for their fellow humans, and instead are mere propagators of systems of thought, very much rooted in all that is earthly. They can only mouth their beliefs in higher realms, and of heaven and hell, but remain unaware that there is some sort of connection between these realms and earth, a connection made clear by Dickens's use of the supernatural in the descriptions of the Gordon Riots, for instance, and the demonic impulses that drive some of his baser characters. These religious fanatics can be contrasted sharply with characters such as Nell, whose awareness of the spiritual can be seen in both her saint-like perseverance on earth as well as her dreamy visions of the hereafter.

The third function of supernaturalism in Gothic

fiction is linked to the unashamed exploitation of the fear of the unknown, a fear that has long prevailed. H.P. Lovecraft's view that fear is the oldest and strongest emotion of mankind seems to have been shared by writers of the Gothic school. The novel of terror preys on this fear, and, at the same time, combats this fear by giving the reader a sense of control. This heady mix made novels of terror irresistible in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and is probably the reason why novels of terror and suspense are still popular to this day. The reader knows that all he has to do is turn the page or close the book he is reading to escape to the relatively safe world of reality. This powerful, persistent fear of the unknown is at times exploited and used solely as a device to intensify the atmosphere of a story. J.M.S. Tompkins is quite right in stating that we owe the apparatus of novelistic suspense to the Gothic. Although sometimes used to the point of exaggeration, as in the case of Walpole, devices like ghosts and ghouls, complete with clanking chains, atmospheric disturbances, haunted houses and castles, with their compulsory trapdoors and secret passages all create a powerful effect. I suspect that Dickens, with his penchant for all that was dramatically extravagant,

relished this particular aspect of the supernatural. Many Gothic novels comprised plots which were constructed solely for dramatic and emotional effect, giving rise to the idea that novels of this kind offered some sort of emotional gratification. The supernatural in Gothic literature arouses terror, an emotion believed by philosophers such as Longinus to be the strongest emotion of which the mind is capable of feeling. Critics dealing with the occult in literature have long debated over the definitions of "terror" and "horror". G.R. Thompson is of the view that "terror" connotes a "frenzy of physical and mental fear of pain" and "horror" is linked to the fear of something morally and supernaturally evil, a view shared by Dennis Wheatly and H.P. Lovecraft. Peter Penzoldt, in his enlightening study, The Supernatural in Fiction, summarises the diverse opinions on the subject and points out that Boris Karloff and Webster's Collegiate Dictionary give an entirely contrasting view, before coming to the rather vague conclusion that the only difference he concedes to is that of quality and intention (9). We should not focus our attention so much on the qualities of "horror" or "terror" as on their effect. The central issue here is that both involve intense emotional reactions, and the

Gothic novel supplied a need for such reactions at a time when emotional constraint was upheld, symptomatic of emancipation from the predominant Enlightenment of the eighteenth century, and of the advent of Romanticism. The novels of M.G. Lewis, C.R. Maturin, Beckford and Mrs. Radcliffe, all produce moments of extreme terror. It is needless to try to analyse this and break emotion down to components involving its physical, mental, emotional or moral aspects.

The supernatural elements inherent in the Gothic, such as the dreamlike sense of the unreal, the questioning of the reader's worldview and the exploitation of a prevailing fear of the nebulous, in essence, allowed Dickens and the writers of the Gothic school to write in response to a social need to escape from the harsh emotional and social realities of life in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In one respect, as Brendan Hennessy maintains in The Gothic Novel, the Gothic novels of Walpole, Radcliffe and Matthew Lewis sustained a "hunger for mystery to replace the certainties of the eighteenth century, awe and fear to replace rationalism" (8). The Gothic fulfilled a need for freedom, a chance to escape from harsh, rational

reality. Devendra Varma puts it succinctly. "The Gothic quest was not merely after horror- a simple succession of ghastly incidents would have supplied that yearning- but after other-worldly gratification. These novelists were seeking a 'frisson nouveau', a 'frisson' of the supernatural. They were moving away from the arid glare of rationalism towards the beckoning shadows of a more intimate and mystical interpretation of life..." (41). Gothic fiction provided a respite from reality by offering the reader "other-worldly gratification", obtained through a means of escape from the rational into the irrational realm of the imagination. Both the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries saw a rise in materialism as well as in rational thought. The Gothic schools of these eras grew in reaction to this rise, and allowed for the expression of pure emotions, emotions which were deemed by those extolling rationalism to be illogical, such as the intensely personal fear and terror associated with the numinous, as well as for the expression of the uncanny and nebulous itself, which defied rational explanation due to its very nature. Dickens's dark imaginative nature seemed instinctively to rebel against the constraints of his age. His works were cathartic, in a

sense, providing an imaginative release for himself as well as for his readers.

Dickens wrote several memorable short stories and short novels in the Gothic mode, prompting Forster to state that "[a]mong his good things shall not be omitted his telling of a ghost story" and to claim that "out of heaped-up images of gloomy and wintry fancies, the supernatural takes a shape which is not forced or violent and the dialogue which is not dialogue, but a kind of dreary, dreamy echo, is a piece of ghostly imagination better than Radcliffe" (2:59). This may be shrugged off as over-enthusiastic praise from a loyal supporter, but even a cursory reading of Dickens's ghost stories will prove the truth of Forster's words. Dickens seemed instinctively to know that an eerie atmosphere could best be sustained in short stories, rather than in longer novels, in which situations involving the occult were inclined to be more episodic in character. In his shorter stories, found scattered throughout his writing career in The Pickwick Papers, The Lazy Tour of the Two Idle Apprentices and All the Year Round, he revels in Radcliffian suspense and terror, sometimes purely for its own sake. Capable of sending shivers down one's spine,

Dickens's moments of terror often possess the intensity of the original Gothic works. In "The Haunted Man" (1848), for instance, Gothic conventions abound in the evocation of atmosphere. Michael Slater, in his introduction to this story in the Penguin Collection of Dickens's Christmas Books, quotes one early reviewer as saying that Redlaw is "far more suggestive of the mysterious astrologer of the northern turret of a baronial castle... than of a well-bred and clean shaven expositor of science in the nineteenth century" (2:237). Gordon Spence expands on the Gothic elements in "The Haunted Man" in his journal article, "The Haunted Man and Barbox Brothers", and states that the function of the Gothic mode in this case is to "build up the stature of the hero in contrast with the ordinary people who have contact with him " (The Dickensian 76: 152). Spence claims that the spectre, that of Redlaw's own alter ego, teaches Redlaw an important moral lesson. Moral lessons aside, however, most critics tend to miss the point that Dickens here fulfils one important function of the Gothic. Here we have an instance of what Devendra Varma overlooks by not giving "horror" its dues as an integral part of the "other-worldly gratification" afforded by the Gothic. Here is pure, unadulterated enjoyment of terror



for its own sake. Although "The Haunted Man" was never read out loud by its author, Dickens clearly intended to include it in his performances, along with his other Christmas tales. One can imagine Dickens describing aloud Redlaw's quarters, "now the obsolete whim of forgotten architects," a place "so remote in fashion, age and custom; so quiet, yet so thundering with echoes when a distant voice was raised or a door was shut,- echoes not confined to the many low passages and empty rooms, but rumbling and grumbling till they were stifled in the heavy air of the forgotten crypt where the Norman arches lay half-buried in the earth." The inner chamber is replete with "spectral shapes" and "shadows". Redlaw's dwelling is a perfect setting for the appearance of the wraith itself- "As the gloom and shadow thickened behind him, in that place where it had been gathering so darkly, it took, by slow degrees, or out of it there came, by some unreal, unsubstantial process, not to be traced by any human sense,- an awful likeness of himself!" (The Christmas Books 2: 246, 247, 264). A gradual buildup of suspense of this sort is a *sine qua non* of Gothic artistic manipulation.

Complex critical interpretations of Dickens's ghost

stories from various moral, psychological and allegorical angles, then, should not detract us from enjoying them as ghostly tales. Dickens seems to sense, though, that his readers needed more than gratification through intense horror. He takes this process a step further, seeing a need for laughter as another antidote for the stresses and emotional constrictions of his age. He treats many of his ghosts with typical Dickensian facetiousness. In "The Story of the Goblins who stole a Sexton," an interpolatory story in The Pickwick Papers, the first goblin is capable of petrifying Gabriel Grub, but appears occasionally comical:

... the goblin gave a loud shrill laugh, which the echoes returned twenty-fold: and throwing his legs in the air, stood upon his head, or rather upon the very point of his sugar-loaf hat, on the narrow edge of the tombstone: whence he threw a somerset with extraordinary agility, right to the sexton's feet, which he planted himself in the attitude in which tailors generally sit upon the shipboard.... (Selected Short Fiction 43)

One cannot help but recognise this acrobatic goblin to be the predecessor of Quilp. We find Dickensian humour

also in his most famous ghost story, A Christmas Carol, where, we find, amongst the stock elements of the conventional ghost story like chain-dragging spectres, a certain element of comedy: "[t]he ghost ... set up another cry, and clanked its chain so hideously in the dead silence of the night, that the Ward would have been justified in indicting it for a nuisance" (The Christmas Books 1: 62). This tongue-in-cheek vein runs through most of Dickens's works, even when dealing with the most serious of topics. Dickens's stories dealing with the supernatural are no exception. This infusion of facetiousness is where Dickens differs most from the mainstream writers of the Gothic school.

To glean the most from the emotional satisfaction afforded by the supernatural in the original Gothic tales and by Gothic tales of the nineteenth century, including those by Dickens, a certain degree of imaginative vision is essential as these writers depend substantially on the imaginative faculty in the evocation of feelings and atmosphere. Many Dickensian short stories deal with the importance of the imagination. These stories are, in effect, imaginative flights of Dickens's fancy, transcending the limits of ordinary physical reality, and

acting as what Deborah Thomas has identified in her introduction to the Penguin edition of Dickens's Selected Short Fiction as "an infallible panacea for a debilitating overdose of fact" (13). She points out that the word "fancy" crops up often in Dickens's writing, and was perceived by him to be "roughly synonymous with imagination" (13). This preoccupation with "fancy" and "imagination" appears, for example, in Hard Times, and applies to many of his short stories of the supernatural. Dickens wrote to his correspondent, Angela Burdett-Coutts, describing "The Bride's Chamber", a tale found in The Lazy Tour of the Two Idle Apprentices as a story with a wild, picturesque fancy in it. Stories like "A Christmas Tree" and "The Haunted House" directly deal with this issue, and reveal Dickens's attempts to create an awareness about this inherent, and yet rarely used faculty. "A Christmas Tree", often completely ignored by critics in studies of his works, is vital, as it tells us how such a simple object as a Christmas tree can be used as a catalyst for imaginative liberation, allowing the author to indulge in his "youngest Christmas recollections" as well as in ghost stories in which there is "no end to the old houses with resounding galleries, and dismal state-bedchambers, and haunted wings shut up

for many years, through which we may ramble, with an agreeable creeping up our back, and encounter any number of ghosts..." (Christmas Stories and Pictures from Italy 15)

In "The Haunted House", Dickens further laments the suppression of the imagination. In this story, Dickens's narrator scoffs at his psychic travelling companion who claims to "pass the whole of [his] time ...in spiritual intercourse," and answers the self-proclaimed spiritualist in a "rather snappish manner" (Christmas Stories and Pictures from Italy 165). The spiritualist seems to be Dickens's caricature of a Mr. William Howitt, who drew his scathing criticism in works such as "Rather a Strong Dose" in Household Words. Although Dickens was fascinated by the realm of the supernatural, he was repelled by the arrogance and fanaticism of spiritualists who were out for financial gain. The narrator stands in contrast to the pomposity of his travelling companion as he possesses a genuine imaginative sensitivity. This faculty is suppressed in favour of all that is rational. Having once seen the "apparition" of his dead father, he convinces himself that there is "no such thing". Dickens allows him to undergo a lesson in imagination when he

stays in a house which is haunted together with his sister and a few friends, all of whom represent different streams of rational thought. The narrator has fantastic and uncanny experiences linked to the imaginative fancies of childhood, and soon discovers that "The Ghost in Master B's Room" is the ghost of his childhood, which he has put to rest along with his "airy belief", his imagination. Dickens here suggests that this is exactly what many of his contemporaries have done. They have put their imaginations to rest.

Dickens's emphasis on the imaginative faculty was only a part of a larger revolt against a general repression of the mind's emotional and creative powers.

In Dickens's chilling tale, "The Signalman", an unnamed narrator relates how he becomes acquainted with a signalman who has premonitory visions just before tragedy strikes on his particular stretch of railroad. Dickens's contemporaries would have nodded their heads in agreement as they read of the narrator's scepticism and his attempts to provide a rational explanation for the signalman's visions. "I showed him how this figure must be a deception of his sense of sight; and how that figures, originating in a disease of the delicate nerves

that minister to the functions of the eye, were known to have troubled patients" (Selected Short Fiction 84). The narrator is barely able to conceal his shock when the signalman himself is killed by a train under eerie circumstances. He is told by the driver of the engine how he had attempted to warn the doomed man by calling out to him and gesturing in the very same way the signalman had claimed the previous spectres had done. This story reveals the fallibility of rational explanations, and posits the possibility of paranormal experience. The narrator, in clinging to all that is rational, is deeply rooted in the world of reality and acts as a contrasting agent to the uncanny atmosphere of the story he tells. This has a deconstructing effect, as the real and the unreal both react against each other.

The fine line between the natural and the supernatural is thus either blurred or erased entirely, causing the reader to question his once complacent stand. Is it, after all, natural to ensure a complete standardisation of human behaviour, as in the signalman's case? Is it not natural for his intuition to exert itself in a seemingly supernatural manner? Ewald Mengel, in his essay, "The Structure and Meaning of Dickens's 'The Signalman'" perceptively observes that "the image of the signalman on

duty in the unnatural and dark ditch answering the calls of the railway bell, is on the realistic level of the story, a powerful image of man's alienation by technological progress." Progress requires the signalman to act in a conditioned manner, and he loses his individuality. Mengel aptly points out that we do not even know the signalman's name. The signalman appears, at times, preternatural, like a spectre himself. "The monstrous thought came over me as I perused his fixed eyes and saturnine face," the narrator remarks, "that this was a spirit, not a man" (80). This idea, that technology robs men of their humanity and makes them spectre-like, is also evident in The Old Curiosity Shop, in which men working in the furnaces of a town representing industrial England are seen as "demons among the flame and smoke" (417). The signalman is a sort of spectre himself because he has been robbed of the emotional and creative powers of his mind. The premonitory visions that haunt him are the assertions of a facet unacknowledged in the era of technological advancement, an assertion of the intuition, something which has no place in a rational age. The signalman's frustration becomes evident:

"If I telegraph Danger, on either side of me,



or on both, I can give no reason for it," he went on, wiping the palms of his hands. "I would get into trouble and do no good. They would think I was mad. This is the way it would work: Message: 'Danger! Take Care!' Answer: 'What Danger? Where?' Message: 'Don't Know. But for God's sake take care!' They would displace me. What else could they do?"

(87)

The signalman is a dehumanised victim of progress as an essential part of his nature has been ignored by those who only acknowledge the rational. Even the narrator is sceptical, and all he does is recommend that the tormented man go to "the wisest medical practitioner we could hear of in those parts" to obtain a rational medical opinion.

The dehumanising effects of rational thought in the suppression of essential areas of human nature is seen also in A Christmas Carol. Scrooge is another product of an age of rational progress. He is portrayed as a misanthrope, incapable of feeling sympathy for his fellow human beings and unable to perceive people in terms other than their economic value. He distances himself both

emotionally and physically from his fellow man. He sees the poor as mere statistics, in true utilitarian fashion and tells two social workers that the poor had better die and "decrease the surplus population" (The Christmas Books 1:51). Dickens attacks the proponents of Malthus's theory that the poor who do not work have no right to exist. Scrooge believes fully in the efficiency of the New Poor Law and Union Workhouses. He is the essential "Economic Man", and the Carol is, according to Edgar Johnson, "an attack on both the economic behaviour of the nineteenth century businessman and the supporting theory of doctrinaire utilitarianism" (The Dickens Critics 270-271). Earle Davis aptly calls Scrooge "Mr. Laissez-faire with a 'Bah! Humbug!' personality and an unchristian spirit" (120). Scrooge is every inch a rational human being, both unwilling and unable to see beyond what is defined by the rational. The supernatural is an integral element of his rehabilitation, as his encounters with Marley's ghost and the spirits of Christmas past, present and future force him to see beyond this limited perspective. At first, when the ghost of his dead partner appears, Scrooge characteristically refuses to believe the evidence of his senses, using a rationale very much like the narrator's

in "The Signalman":

"...a little thing affects them [the senses]. A slight disorder of the stomach makes them cheats. You may be an undigested bit of beef, a blot of mustard, a crumb of cheese, a fragment of an underdone potato. There's more gravy than grave about you, whatever you are."

(The Christmas Books 1:59)

Scrooge is ultimately forced to acknowledge the presence of realities that lie beyond his point of view, and admit that the ghost really is an apparition:

"Man of the worldly mind!" replied the ghost, "do you believe in me or not?"

"I do," said Scrooge. "I must..." (1:60)

This initial shock to Scrooge's system is necessary to force him to acknowledge the fallibility of his beliefs, and paves the way to his conversion. Scrooge is exposed very forcefully to the idea that there is more to life than rational materialism. This is similar in certain respects to Mrs. Radcliffe's far more subtle use of spectres to create religious awareness. Dickens poses the need for a more spiritual attitude, not in a narrow religious sense, but in the promotion of more congenial love towards fellow human beings.

The supernatural is also utilised ingenuously on a more direct and practical level in A Christmas Carol. It is used to link the past, present and future. Scrooge is given a glimpse into his past to understand the development of his character. He sees himself as he grows from a "solitary child, neglected by his friends," to a young man in the "prime of life" whose face had begun to wear the "signs of care and avarice". He sees himself gradually becoming obsessed with what a lady-friend calls his "master-passion - Gain" (1: 71, 79). In order for his transformation to take place, it is important that Scrooge first comes to terms with the painful memories he has suppressed for so long. When he sees the image of Belle, his former girlfriend, he is disturbed. In his youth, their relationship had been severed because Scrooge resisted her attempts to make him aware of what he was becoming. At this juncture, he agonisingly pleads that the first spirit show him no more. "Why do you delight to torture me?" he asks (1:81). The Carol moves towards a happy ending, as Scrooge realises his wrongs, and is able to break free from the fetters which bind his capacity for empathy, the very same fetters which symbolically restrict Marley's ghost with "cash-boxes, keys, padlocks, ledgers, deeds,

and heavy purses wrought in steel" (1:57).

The spectres in A Christmas Carol, and the supernatural devices in his short stories are Dickens's way of rebelling against the constraints of rationalism by granting emotional and imaginative release through the invocation of terror sometimes imbued with humour, as well as through a call to release those areas of human existence hitherto suppressed by all that is rational, and a cry for the adoption of a more open-minded outlook. Is it any wonder, then, that many of Dickens's ghost stories are Christmas tales, outpourings of holiday sentiment, highlighting a need for man's conversion through what Cazamian calls Dickens's "philosophie de Noel", the spirit of Christmas? This was, perhaps, what was needed most in a world that had forgotten its own humanity.