

Chapter 2:

The Child's Dark Nightmare

In Dickens's shorter stories, his readers are held transfixed by unreal, ghostly encounters. Dickens made full use of his hold on his readers to censure very real social traits, thus fulfilling a role that he took very seriously, that of a social critic. In "The Chimes", for instance, this pattern is obvious. Dickens uses the supernatural to hold his readers' attention with devices such as the eerie summons of the ghostly, tolling church bells. This allows him to condemn the callousness, pride

and hypocrisy of the upper classes. In A Christmas Carol and "The Story of the Goblins who Stole a Sexton", Dickens criticises the qualities of selfishness and greed, through the conversion of misanthropes by supernatural intervention. In "The Haunted Man", Redlaw is coerced into a more congenial state of mind through the same means. In Dickens's longer works, Dickens uses the supernatural for a similar reason. However, encounters with the occult are more episodic and the supernatural is used sparingly, whether directly, in short descriptive or narrative passages, or more indirectly in character portraits with images drawn from the chiaroscuro sphere of the occult. This was necessary because it would have been difficult to sustain the reader's interest without the inclusion of other literary techniques such as characterisation, melodrama, satire and humour.

In order to create an atmosphere which allowed for the use of the supernatural in his novels, Dickens used a device already familiar to enthusiasts of the Gothic, the nightmare mode. Traces of this convention can be found in his short stories, but in novels like Oliver Twist and The Old Curiosity Shop, this method is used to

the fullest, creating a pervasive sense of the unreal. Although referring to Oliver Twist in particular, John Bayley accurately notes that Dickens's main feat, which he claims to be unsurpassed in the history of the novel, was in "combining the genre of Gothic nightmare with that of social denunciation, so that each enhances the other" (Dickens and the Twentieth Century 64). The nightmare device enhances Dickens's social aims by enabling him to effectively denounce moral decay in ways that are forceful and striking. Evil traits are made obvious through the stripping of moral façades, and supernatural images are used to describe the manifestations of warped humanity in an almost Hogarthian sense. In turn, Dickens's social criticism ameliorates the nightmare effect. The author gives us a vivid glimpse of his intensely personal vision of his society, a society he saw as one which was becoming a nightmare in itself due to a rapid degeneration of humanity.

In both Oliver Twist (1838) and The Old Curiosity Shop (1841), the nightmare mode is used very successfully as there is the sense that, as we enter the worlds of Oliver and Nell, we are stepping into the terrifying world of a child's nightmare. Ironically, both these

works have drawn a great deal of scorn from critics due to this very quality of the unreal. Those who apply conventional critical arguments centered on realism seem to have ignored the fact that this sort of critical approach can hardly apply in the context of Dickens's nightmare novels and other works in the nightmare style such as the Gothic. The plots of such works pivot on dream logic, which allows for outrageous coincidence and disjointed structures. Chesterton, for one, deems the plot of Oliver Twist "preposterous". Seen on a realistic level, of course, critics have a point: Oliver Twist, like many Gothic-related works, is not without its failings. Characters are staid and unrealistic, and are constantly brought together through outrageous coincidences. The passive protagonist swings back and forth between the clutches of evil to the safe embraces of the characters representing the forces of good. Oliver is often found in devout prayer, even though no-one has actually taught him about religion and prayer. The psychological power of works such as these does not arise from the power of realism, or of probability of truth to life, but can be attributed to the dream mode which allows for the use of what would otherwise be shrugged off as irrational. This can be linked to Dickens's

efforts in his shorter works to liberate the minds of his readers from the constraints of the rational. Reason has no control over dreams, in which there is a disinterested play of thought, an idea employed in the following century by Breton and other surrealists. The verisimilitude of dreams is not an issue while we are in the process of dreaming. The truth to life of the plots of nightmare novels should, similarly, not be questioned.

Real or not, both dreams and nightmares constitute experiences in their own right, and are capable of powerful effects. A suspension of disbelief is essential in the reading of such novels. Such a suspension will enable us to enter the novels' dream worlds without being weighed down by stifling logic or preconceived notions of what is, and what is not, logical. Dickens himself, in his preface to Oliver Twist, seems eager to draw attention away from the verisimilitude of the elements in the story. "It is useless to discuss," he writes somewhat vehemently alluding to contemporary criticism of Nancy's devotion to the thug, Sikes, "...whether the conduct and character of the girl seems natural or unnatural, probable or improbable, right or wrong. IT IS TRUE" (36).

"IT IS TRUE". What the author stresses here is that the world of his novels is not entirely removed from the world of his era, however unreal and dream-like the novels may seem. In order to illustrate this point, we need to turn to The Uncommercial Traveller, in which Dickens describes a surrealistic nocturnal walk, riddled with people akin to spectres. "Are not the sane and insane equal at night as the sane lie a dreaming? ... Are we not nightly persuaded ... that we associate preposterously with kings and queens, emperors and empresses, and notabilities of all sorts? Do we not jumble events and personages and times and places...?" (131-132). Strange as these events may be, Dickens goes on to conclude that dreams are "the insanity of each day's sanity", inextricably linked to life as we know it, but sometimes hardly recognisable as such. Dreams are a reflection, however distorted, of reality. They are allegories of life. Dickens does not deal so much with notabilities and royalty as with thieves and criminals, the baser elements of Victorian society, elements which would perhaps be overly offensive were they to greet his readers in an atmosphere of realism. The nightmare or dream framework, because of its inherent surrealism, also permits the use of the supernatural when dealing with

the ugly side of life in Victorian England. The traits Dickens perceived in his own society as ugly or threatening, such as hypocrisy and greed, as well as the ugliness of systems such as those concerned with the New Poor Law, could be portrayed through the grotesque and the distorted. Dickens's writing, like that of Walpole, Maturin and Samuel Lewis, and later the novels of Shelley and Brontë are haunted by nocturnal and supernatural shapes which do not belong in the glare of daylight.

The reader's awareness of a realm other than one of controlled logic does not come as suddenly in Oliver Twist as it does in A Christmas Carol, through a sudden, forced acknowledgement of the supernatural in general and apparitions in particular, but through far more subtle means. Early in Oliver, after the young boy is introduced to Fagin, he falls into a deep sleep. Dickens takes great pains to describe his frame of mind the next morning:

There is a drowsy state, between sleeping and waking, when you dream more in five minutes with your eyes half open, and yourself half conscious of everything that is passing around you than you would with your eyes fast closed,

and your senses wrapt in perfect unconsciousness. At such times, a mortal knows just enough of what his mind is doing to form some glimmering conception of its mighty powers, its bounding from earth and spurning time and space, when freed from the restraint of its corporeal associate. (106)

The dream, according to Dickens, is a sort of altered state of consciousness, and he emphasises the freeing of the mind from the constraints of factual reality, without altogether losing touch with reality itself. Once the dream mode is established and affirmed, Dickens is able, like the writers of the Gothic, to achieve a richness of depth. His nightmare novels are an avenue for indirect social criticism. Images of the paranormal abound in the denunciation of the immoral. In Oliver Twist, greed and selfishness are manifest in the physical appearances of various characters, and Dickens attacks, for example, those who are irresponsible guardians of innocents. This was a particularly sore point for Dickens. As a child, he grew up without the guidance of a role model or father to protect him, and he often felt alone and vulnerable. When Mr. Bumble sells Monks the only clue to Oliver's parentage, his mother's locket, the atmosphere is

horrific: "The sickly rays of the suspended lantern falling directly upon them, aggravated the paleness and anxiety of their countenances; which, encircled by the deepest gloom and darkness, looked ghastly in the extreme" (339). Mr. Bumble is, in effect, Oliver's officially appointed guardian and yet does very little to help the young orphan. Instead he is motivated by greed and self-interest. The witchlike hags at the deathbed of Old Sally who drink the hot wine prescribed for the dying woman, are similarly selfish: "The flame [of the fire] threw a ghastly light on their shrivelled faces, and made their ugliness appear terrible" (225). Under the Poor Law, medical facilities were sparse, and old paupers like these women had to administer to sick workhouse inmates. Mr. Bumble and these shrewish women are totally devoid of benevolent sympathy, a sympathy necessary in the positions ascribed to them by the system.

Dickens, however, reaches descriptive heights when it comes to Fagin, who comes closest to being Oliver's guardian. He is seen as an embodiment of evil in the book as he is intent on destroying the childlike innocence of Dickens's "principle of good" (33). He

tells Sikes, "Once let him [Oliver] feel he is one of us; once fill his mind with the idea that he has been a thief; and he's ours!" (192). When he has the boy in his clutches, he attempts to instil into his soul "the poison which he hoped would blacken it, and change its hue forever" (185). He gives Oliver a book to look at, about the lives of great criminals, the very pages of which seem to inexplicably "turn red with gore; and the words upon them to be sounded in [Oliver's] ears, as if they were whispered, in hollow murmurs, by the spirits of the dead" (197). Oliver is able to withstand this sinister, demonic corrosion of his innocence by falling on his knees in fervent prayer. Fagin is described as demonic to reiterate this idea of corruption. He is "old and shrivelled", has a red beard, and can distort every facial feature with a "hideous grin" and expressions of "villainy perfectly demoniacal" (189). Derek Jarret, in The Sleep of Reason, points out that in the 1840's there was a revival of interest in the devil and hell (12). Dickens, aware at all times of the direction of public interest, could not, apparently, resist placing a toasting-fork in Fagin's hand or describing his "matted red hair" when Oliver is first introduced to the villain. Fagin is Jewish because it was a Victorian convention to

associate the Jews with the devil. True to the nightmare mode, Dickens does not restrict his descriptions to the demoniacal, but instead gives Fagin an amorphous quality. At times he is spectre-like. For instance, when he feels threatened by Nancy's betrayal, his face becomes "so distorted and pale, and his eyes so red and bloodshot, that he look[s] less like a man, than like some hideous phantom, moist from the grave, and worried by an evil spirit" (417). He is referred to elsewhere by Sikes as "a [sic] ugly ghost just rose from the grave" (187). In Chapter 19, Dickens describes him as a subhuman beast: "As he glided stealthily along, creeping beneath the shelter of the walls and doorways, the hideous old man seemed like some loathsome reptile, engendered in the slime and darkness through which he moved: crawling forth, by night, in search of some rich offal for a meal" (186). Here, Fagin is serpentlike, and Dickens successfully draws on the Biblical image of the devil in the Garden of Eden. Whatever form he is described as, Fagin is unmistakably evil. When he meets Monks, yet another embodiment of evil, whom he himself describes as "a born devil", there seems to be a concentration of evil energy:

"It's as dark as the grave," said [Monks],

groping forward a few steps."Make haste! Shut the door!" whispered Fagin from the end of the passage. As he spoke, it closed with a loud noise."That wasn't my doing," said the other man, feeling his way. "The wind blew it to, or it shut of its own accord: one or the other..." (242-243)

The dark forces and evil elements surrounding the two seem to create a psychokinetic energy, an energy born of evil. The sinister slamming of the door exemplifies this. What makes this evil most sinister is the fact that they are both directing their evil energies towards a young, helpless innocent, Oliver.

The book is, in a sense, Oliver's personal nightmare. He is a child thrust into the Cimmerian world of degenerate crime and evil. We share his blood-curdling moments of terror as well as his helplessness, a sense of helplessness which Freud identifies as being related to certain dream-states (Art and Literature 359). When Oliver believes himself to be safely ensconced in the safe haven of the Maylie cottage in the country, Dickens prepares us for yet another uncanny episode by reminding us once again of the possibility of a dream-

state where reality and imagination become so strangely blended that it is "almost a matter of impossibility to separate the two" (309). It is interesting that Dickens directly alludes to this disjunction between imagination and reality, as Freud believes that one way in which an uncanny effect is achieved is "when the distinction between imagination and reality is effaced" (367). Oliver "sees" Fagin and Monks glaring at him through an open window. "Good God! what was that which sent the blood tingling to his heart, and deprived him of his voice, and power to move!" Dickens writes. "It was but an instant, a flash, before his eyes; and they were gone" (311). A consequent search by the entire Maylie household proves fruitless, and no trace of footsteps are to be found. The entire scene is rendered uncanny as Dickens intended to drive home the sheer, inexplicable terror of the young boy whose innocence is at risk, a young boy relentlessly pursued by those who wish to corrupt him, and drag him into the mire of crime.

Dickens is remarkably successful in evoking the sense of a young boy's terror because the idea of degenerate corruption is linked to the function of the novel in an autobiographical sense. In one respect, the

nightmares of the author are also the nightmares of his creator. Fagin is named after Dickens's colleague at Warren's blacking warehouse, a boy who represented all that the young Dickens did not want to become. Ackroyd believes that Bob Fagin's very presence evoked a sense of horror in Dickens, the horror of remaining poor for the rest of his life. Bob Fagin trained Dickens in tying strings around blacking bottles, and this activity is paralleled by the fictitious Jew, who trains Oliver in the art of stealing. "Both are introductions to the amorphous world of privation, beggary and want" (83). It is this amorphous world which haunts Oliver, just as it haunted Dickens. This idea is reiterated later in Great Expectations (1861). Magwitch, who is to haunt Pip later in the novel first appears, apparition-like from among the graves, just as Pip is thinking about his dead parents. He disappears from Pip's life during his formative years and is figuratively "dead" until his horrifying reappearance when Pip is twenty-three. "I doubt if a ghost could have been more terrible to me, up in those lonely rooms in the long evenings and long nights, with the wind and the rain always rushing by," Pip confesses (291). Although Magwitch is not an integrally evil character, in the same sense as Fagin and

Monks, he embodies Pip's debilitating fear of becoming less than a gentleman in society's eyes. Magwitch is a criminal, a part of what Pip, and perhaps his creator, plainly saw as the very lowest rung of Victorian society.

The ominousness of this sort of "evil" can be seen in the word "witch" inherent in the convict's name. Great Expectations, Oliver Twist and his semi-autobiographical novels were, for Dickens, essentially cathartic. They were Dickens's attempts to rid himself of the personal fears which haunted him throughout his life. The nightmare mode is used as a means to come to terms with personal anguish, and, at the same time, to express the emotional effects of such agony. I have mentioned, in the previous chapter, that the Gothic allowed for the expression of terror, and afforded some kind of emotional release for the reader. In Dickens's case, this emotional release extends to the very process of writing. The surest way to achieve this sort of release was to allow his public to share in his innermost fears without risking his privacy. He appeals, therefore, to a universal fear of the unknown, and, in particular, to a universal dread of the paranormal. The deaths of the spectres of Fagin and Magwitch are the author's desperate attempts at exorcism.

The subterranean emotions inherent in surreal, dreamlike forms of narrative make these forms ideal vehicles for the depiction of the subconscious, as modern writers like James Joyce and Thomas Pynchon have since revealed. The writers of the Gothic knew this instinctively, as seen in the Gothic projections of guilt interspersed in writing of this genre. Dickens uses this intrinsic sense of the unreal to reveal the complex emotional states of not only the child protagonist, but of other characters as well. Nancy, shortly before she is brutally murdered by Sikes tells Rose Maylie of a premonition. She reveals that she has appalling thoughts of death and of "shrouds with blood upon them, and a fear that has made me burn as if I was on fire". While reading a book, she says that "the same things come into the print," refuting Brownlow's insistence that these images are due to an overactive imagination.

"I'll swear I saw 'coffin' in every page of the book in large black letters, - aye, and they carried one close to me, in the streets tonight." "There is nothing unusual in that," said the gentleman. "They have passed me often." "Real ones," rejoined the girl. "This was not". (409)

One can find the Gothic debt in the suspense and mysteriousness of instances such as these in Dickens. Foreshadowing dreams abound, for instance, in Maturin's Melmoth the Wanderer as well as in later fiction influenced by the Gothic, such as Frankenstein. The nightmare mode and the prevailing sense of the unreal creates a background for such experiences. There is just enough realism, however, to enable us to explore psychological avenues of interpretation. Nancy, at this particular juncture in the story, is under tremendous stress, torn between a sense of loyalty towards her villainous compatriots from the path she has trodden all her life, and an instinctive moral sense of what is fundamentally right or wrong. This conflict could easily result in mentally-projected images of death. The very truth of such a premonition, whether real or not, is dramatically startling. The blood-covered shrouds Nancy sees become her own clothes, and Sikes is appalled after brutally murdering his mistress, that there is "so much blood". John Carey, in The Violent Effigy, is of the view that Dickens "habitually speaks about murderer's mental habits with extraordinary self-confidence, as if he were one himself" (18-19). Anyone reading of Sikes' desperate flight can hardly dispute

this. As he takes the road towards St. Alban's, Sikes has a blood-curdling experience:

Every object before him, every substance or shadow, still or moving, took the semblance of some fearful thing; but these fears were nothing compared to the sense that haunted him of that morning's ghastly figure following at his heels. He could trace its shadow in the gloom, supply the smallest item of the outline, and note how stiff and solemn it seemed to stalk along. He could hear its garment rustling in the leaves, and every breath of wind came laden with that last low cry ... He leaned against the back and felt that it stood above him, visibly out against the cold night-sky. He threw himself upon the road ... [a]t his head it stood, silent, erect and still- a living gravestone with its epitaph in blood.

(428)

Here is a horrible manifestation of a guilty conscience in the form of the spectre of one who has been murdered. A psychological explanation would be quite feasible. Sikes is painfully alone, and in mental anguish. It is dark. The image of Nancy's corpse, and her last, dying

moan have been indelibly imprinted on his memory. He is mentally and physically exhausted. However, there is also the possibility that the spectre is Nancy's spirit, bent on revenge. The amalgam of the real and the unreal throughout Oliver Twist has made this possible. Also, the words chosen throughout this episode have been specifically picked to evoke a Gothic horror far more sinister than that evoked by hallucination, as they draw on a primal fear of the unknown. The figure is "ghastly", uttering a "low cry". The writer skilfully appeals to the visual and auditory senses, and mentions the fact that Sikes' hair "rose on his head"(428). Sikes plunges to his death after seeing eyes peering at him in the darkness, "lustreless and glassy", "light in themselves, but giving light to nothing" (428). The involvement of sensory perception makes the experience physically real, a stock technique of Gothic supernaturalism. Does all of this emerge from Sikes' subconscious? Or, in the process of unnatural crimes, do these criminals unleash forces which are, in themselves, unnatural, invoking the supernatural? Dickens, like most Gothic writers, except for Anne Radcliffe, who chose to give rational reasons for the supernatural in Mysteries of Udolpho, leaves us no answer.

The Old Curiosity Shop is similar to Oliver Twist in many respects. Both draw us into the nightmare of an innocent child. The experiences of Nell and her grandfather, however, do not strike us with as much force as the adventures of Oliver because the sheer power of the nightmare mode is undercut by the use of the fairy tale mode. "No-one," asserts Forster, in his biography of Dickens, "was more intensely fond than Dickens of old nursery tales, and had a secret delight that he was ... giving them a higher form" (1: 301). Hints of this form of writing can be traced in much of Dickens's work. "The Cricket on the Hearth", for one, is unashamedly touted as "A Fairy-tale of Home". Nowhere, however, is this mode used more consistently than in The Old Curiosity Shop. Characters are described in fairy tale terms. Nell is regarded by the narrator of the first few pages of the story, Master Humphrey, as a fairy-like creature. Sally Brass strikes Richard Swiveller as a kind of "dragon", or "griffin" (345). He sees himself as Dick Whittington at one point in the story. The "Marchioness", the abused servant girl who lives in the cellar of Samson and Sally Brass at Bevis Marks bears a strong resemblance to Cinderella. Nell and her grandfather, in their desperate flight, encounter all

sorts of fairy-tale curiosities, dogs which act like humans, Mrs. Jarley and her waxworks, giants, Punch and Judy puppeteers, and even a little lady without legs or arms. Even Dickens's style occasionally lapses into that of the fairy tale: "Mr. and Mrs. Quilp resided on Tower Hill, and in her bower on Tower Hill, Mrs. Quilp was left to pine the absence of her lord...." (72). The adoption of this manner of writing, juxtaposed with the supernatural, drastically alters the effect of the bizarre. The impression attained is that of fascination and not horror, because the element of fear has been diminished. Freud, in his enlightening essay, "The Uncanny" wrote in 1919 that in fairy tales, " ...the world of reality is left behind from the very start, and the Animistic system of beliefs is frankly adopted. Wish-fulfilments, secret powers, omnipotence of thoughts, animation of inanimate objects, all the elements so common in fairy stories can exert no uncanny influence here " (373). A reaction against supernatural elements, or an "uncanny" feeling does not occur unless there is a certain element of doubt as to the possibility of the existence of such elements, and unless there is a frisson between the real and the unreal. Peter Penzoldt extends this view. "When the author clearly shows from

the beginning that all his spooks, ghosts, and goblins are merely fancy and imagination, we have no reason to fear" (8).

Consequently, the overlying atmosphere of The Old Curiosity Shop is that of the fantastic, the strange and the distorted. Master Humphrey's first impression of the Trent house cum curiosity shop is that the place is full of "...suits of mail, standing like ghosts in armour, here and there, fantastic carvings brought from monkish cloisters, rusty weapons of various kinds, distorted figures in china and wood, and iron, and ivory, tapestry, and strange furniture that might have been designed in dreams" (47, added emphasis). The supernatural here is present in a different guise from the supernatural in Oliver Twist. A fantastic atmosphere is maintained throughout the novel, even the giant steamships on the Thames look like unwieldy sea-monsters. Quilp, the villain of the story also fits in with this pattern. He is, like Fagin, at times described as subhuman and at times, demonic. More than once he is referred to as being "dog-like". His wife and mother-in-law both doubt if he were really a human creature (455). He is also referred to as a "fiend" who is prone to "demon whims"

and is seen in several instances as an embodiment of evil power (475). He terrifies Nell, and poses a "perpetual nightmare to the child" (288). Although some stock Gothic descriptions are apparent, the sense of stark, insidious evil which accompanies Fagin's character seems absent as these descriptions are interspersed with those which are more fascinating than terrifying. Quilp moves in a sort of "skip" at times and is not averse to the occasional gymnastic stunt, very much like the Goblin in "The Story of the Goblins who stole a Sexton". Quilp too, is described as "goblin-like" and is magically capable of fantastic feats, like drinking boiling tea without winking. Dickens never lets us forget his diminutive size, thus reducing his ability to terrify, even though the descriptions sometimes hinge on those of a Gothic werewolf: "The creature appeared quite horrible with his monstrous head and little body as he rubbed his hands slowly round and round again" (69). He is a supernatural fairy tale ogre or troll, and not perceived in the same light as a Gothic demonic figure. Dickens undoubtedly deals with very serious subjects of social interest where Quilp is concerned. The dwarf tortures his wife with physical and emotional abuse depriving her of sleep and making her stay awake throughout the night when

he is angry with her. He has an unhealthy lust for Nell, asking her if she wishes to become the second Mrs. Quilp and sleeping in the girl's vacant bed at the Trent house. The potential horror of such issues is diminished by the prevailing fairy tale atmosphere surrounding the dwarf. Quilp simply does not produce the same effect as Fagin does in this respect. This is further complicated by Dickens's determination to relish the dwarf's comic potential. Quilp is often the propagator of moments of boisterous merriment. When he entertains Sally and Samson Brass at the summer house in the Wilderness seated atop an empty beer barrel "as if it were the most beautiful and comfortable in the three kingdoms", as the brother and sister attempt to ignore the rain dripping incessantly on their party, Quilp seems to share his creator's facetiousness and provides, perhaps, an outlet for Dickens's mischievous energy (476-477). Quilp's horrible death reminds us with a jolt, of the dwarf's inherent evil nature. He becomes the ocean's "ghastly freight" and "ugly plaything" (620). He is buried with a stake through his heart (665). Although suspected suicides were traditionally buried in this manner, this is a fitting end for Quilp, as this was also how vampires were buried. All the laughter and fairy tale

grotesquerie which previously accompanied Quilp abruptly vanishes and we are made to come face to face with sheer repulsiveness.

In moments like this, the fairy tale mode is replaced by that of the pure Gothic nightmare, and the contrast allows Dickens to achieve stunning effects. The reader may have found Quilp fascinatingly entertaining, but the innocent child, Nell, never sees the dwarf in this light. Quilp is always a terrifying, ominous figure to the girl. Naïve as she may be, she has an instinctive loathing of the dwarf. The Gothic mode strips away the apparently harmless façade of Quilp's demeanour, and allows us to see him for what he really is. Similarly, this technique of pure Gothic nightmare is used when Dickens wants to expose the threat Nell's grandfather poses to the child. One dark and stormy night, while Nell and her grandfather are at the ironically named "Valiant Soldier", Nell sees a "figure" gliding in the door of her room like a ghost. The entire scene is reminiscent of a Gothic spectral encounter (301). We hold our breath with Nell as the dark form crouches and gropes its way stealthily, with "noiseless hands" (301). Terrified of the "dreadful

shadow", she seeks protection in what she sees as a safe refuge, her grandfather's room, only to find that the old man himself is the figure which terrified her. He has stolen money from her, in order to sustain his addiction to gambling. He is dreadful as he stands, in "ghastly exultation", with his face sharpened and pinched by the greediness which made his eyes unnaturally bright" (302-303). Until this point, the senile old man seems harmless enough, but this episode strips away this apparent harmlessness, and enables us to realise that, in shirking his responsibilities as Nell's guardian, he is exposing the child to all sorts of dangers on their travels. He forces Nell to take over the role of adult, a role she is ill-prepared for, however mature we may find her to be. Beneath the guise of a responsible adult, he is yet another of Dickens's irresponsible guardians, joining the ranks of such as Fagin. Dickens uses Gothic supernaturalism to make both his and Quilp's ugliness apparent, and their ugliness is indeed terrible.

In both Oliver Twist and The Old Curiosity Shop, the child's innocence is contrasted with the ugliness of the surrounding world. One cannot help but wonder what these novels would have been like if Dickens had used the

child's point of view instead of that of the omniscient narrator, as he does in the early parts of Great Expectations. Pip's impressions of Miss Havisham, for instance, have far more impact than Nell's of Quilp, or Oliver's of Fagin, simply because of the first person narrative. The spinster strikes Pip to be a cross between a "ghastly waxwork" and a skeleton, which seems to have "dark eyes that moved and looked at [him]" (60). In both the novels I have briefly examined in this chapter, the child's point of view and that of the narrator have been merged together to create a sense of nightmare which does not solely involve the child, but also encapsulates the fears which were to become the nightmare of an entire country. The preternatural ugliness of the morally-tainted characters in these stories is also seen in the descriptions of the industrial town in The Old Curiosity Shop. Towns like this were, in the ensuing years, to become the nightmare of the nation:

In a large and lofty building, supported by pillars of iron with great black apertures in the upper walls, open to the external air, echoing to the roof with the beating of hammers and roar of furnaces, mingled with the hissing

of red-hot metal plunged in water and a hundred strange, unearthly noises never heard elsewhere- in this gloomy place, moving like demons among the flame and the smoke, dimly and fitfully seen, flushed and tormented by burning fires ... a number of men laboured like giants ... Others, drew forth with clashing noise, upon the ground, great sheets of glowing steel, emitting an insupportable heat, and a deep, dull light like that which reddens in the eyes of savage beasts. (417)

This hellish vision with all its Gothic nuances is the heart of industrial England. Nightmarish, supernatural images abound to capture the strangeness of it all. When the child sees the machines as "wrathful monsters, whose like they almost seemed to be in their wildness and untamed air, screeching and turning round and round again..." and the furnaces as creatures with "blazing jaws" as well as the workers among them, who look "wilder and more savage", we are given a glimpse of degeneration and subhuman wildness (424). The stress on material progress in the Victorian era, a progress extolled ten years after The Old Curiosity Shop by the Great Exhibition of 1851, created a moral vacuum. Matters

which dealt with the spiritual aspects of humanity were of secondary importance, and this led to an accumulation, in Dickens's eyes, of evil, degenerative forces, forces which he was to attempt to deal with in Barnaby Rudge and Bleak House.