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► **To cite this version:**

Kebir Sandy. Little Dorit : Prisons and Prisoners. Alizés : Revue angliciste de La Réunion, 1995, CAPES 96 and Other Essays, 10, pp.87-100. hal-02350306

HAL Id: hal-02350306

<https://hal.univ-reunion.fr/hal-02350306>

Submitted on 6 Nov 2019

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Little Dorrit: *Prisons and Prisoners*

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Dickens's critics generally agree that *Little Dorrit* ² is one of the most significant novels the "Inimitable's" hand ever penned. It is hardly an exaggeration to claim that it is a great literary achievement of the 19th century, a masterpiece whose complexity, depth, intricacy and originality baffle the most blasé critics and even today challenge interpretation.

Of all his novels, *Little Dorrit* should be given special attention and approached only with greatest care as it occupies a unique place in the Dickensian canon. Following *Bleak House* and *Hard Times* and preceding *A Tale of Two Cities*, *Our Mutual Friend*, *Great Expectations* and his last incomplete novel, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, it belongs to the second half of his career, a period generally described as dark, bleak and sad, when Dickens ceases "to transform darkness by setting off comic fireworks" (Hardy 17). The comic characters, funny anecdotes, zany jokes, frivolous scenes and a good number of the hallmarks of the Dickensian tradition have almost disappeared.

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² All references to *Little Dorrit* are from *The Works of Charles Dickens*, 16 vols. (London: Hazell, Watson & Viney, 1933).

Indeed, the rather sunny atmosphere of *Pickwick Papers*, *Nicholas Nickleby* or *Martin Chuzzlewit* has vanished, as have such pleasant pantomimic figures as the Wellers, Mr Pickwick, Jingle, the Artful Dodger, Mrs Nickleby, Mrs Gamp, Pecksniff, Susan Nipper or the Micawbers. On the contrary, the reader encounters monsters, parasites and criminals such as Tulkinghorn, Vholes, Skimpole, Casby, Rigaud, Mrs General, Jasper, Sapsea, Rogue Riderhood, The Vengeance, the Smallweeds, the Merdles, the Barnacles *et al.* Even the topics of these books are grim and repulsive. The tyranny of the legal system in *Bleak House*, the monstrosity of Utilitarianism and Capitalism in *Hard Times*, the inefficiency of government in *Little Dorrit*, the horror of the French Revolution in *The Tale*, the snobbery of a youth in *Great Expectations*, money and corruption in *Our Mutual Friend* are not in the least funny. Besides, London, Dickens's usual setting, is depicted negatively. The English capital is transformed into an inferno in *Bleak House*, into a prison in *Little Dorrit*, into a dust-heap in *Our Mutual Friend*. Indeed, satire becomes extremely bitter and laughter is "constantly inhibited by the consciousness of the unfunny side of life" (Hardy 17).

In fact, having staged his tormented childhood in what is considered as his autobiographical novel — *David Copperfield* — Dickens entered another phase of his life and literary career. As he grew more critical and still more indignant than before, he started seeing life as a grim tragedy and existence as a nightmare. He became satirical, pessimistic and sarcastic. In a letter to his brother artist William Charles Macready on October 4th 1855, he confessed:

I do reluctantly believe that the English people are habitually consenting parties to the miserable imbecility into which we have fallen, *and never will help themselves out of it.* Who is to do it, if anybody is, God knows. But at present we are on the down-hill road to being conquered, and the people WILL consent to bear it, sing "Rule Britannia," and WILL NOT be saved.

In No. 3 of my new book I have been blowing off a little of indignant steam which would otherwise blow me up, and with God's leave I shall walk in the same all the days of my life; but I have no present political faith or hope — not a grain (quoted by Daleski 36n, his italics).

During the second period of his career, Charles Dickens became Boz, the melancholy man. How can we account for such a mutation?

Numerous and varied are the causes which can justify Dickens's new cynicism. In addition to his own domestic problems, Dickens was profoundly hurt

by the dire state of the country. In spite of the numerous measures taken in the field of social legislation in the 1830s-1840s, England in the 1850s was still a place where genuine happiness was unlikely. Due to the political confusion, the country's affairs were mismanaged; the government was not only inefficient, but also arrogant, irresponsible, and indifferent to crises. Its behaviour in the Crimean War clearly shows its weakness and disorganisation. In the economic field, the *laissez-faire* policy entailed chaos: many cases of fraud, false speculation and corruption were brought to light. Three banking houses went bankrupt and a famous banker, John Sadleir, committed suicide at the time of *Little Dorrit*, in which Mr. Merdle appears as a fictionalised version of him. The poor in slums were often the victims of infectious diseases, whereas the aristocracy shamelessly boasted Britain's industrial power in the Great Exhibition of Hyde Park. Dickens clearly challenges Victorian England's urban growth and its industrial network because they mutilate and imprison the individual. Moreover, the sway of the Roman Catholic hierarchy grew in the country during this period under the influence of the Oxford Reformers; this event alarmed Dickens, for a rekindling of religious feeling might lead to social unrest, and ultimately to a violent revolution.

If we bear in mind his courage and his noble heart, Dickens was no passive spectator. Either in the articles of his magazines, *All The Year Round* and *Household Words*, in public meetings or in his letters, he did not hesitate to unveil the faults of his society and express his strong indignation. Even his novels testify to his commitment. In *Bleak House*, he mainly directs his vehement attacks against the British legal system based on hypocrisy and selfishness. The Lawyers of the Court of Chancery are unresponsive to the misery of their unfortunate clients; they are depicted as so many parasites, or birds of prey whose main and only target is to bleed their victims dry. England itself is described as a hopeless, chaotic, hostile, and threatening world. The readers of Dickens, of course, are reminded of the opening paragraph in which they are introduced to a world gone wrong, where nothing is what it should be, a jungle in which only the most powerful and the most crafty can survive.

In its sequel, *Hard Times*, Dickens continues waging his merciless war against the system, painting an English society beyond hope, wallowing in hell, immersed from top to bottom in monotony and sadness. But this time, Dickens chooses a different topic — though not a new one — Utilitarianism. Through the story of the two monsters, Gradgrind and Bounderby, he tries to show the tragic

consequences of Benthamism. He presents this theory as an austere, blind and narrow one, denying any form of spontaneity, discarding wondering, regarding poetry and literature as nonsense, strangling feelings and emotions as if they were empty words that should not be "breathed." Instead, Benthamism insists mainly on reason, hard facts and figures. Indeed, since their early age Gradgrind's children have been condemned to a hard diet of facts. Consequently, as they grow up, they are doomed to miserable, boring lives, which ultimately climax with Tom's robbing Bounderby's bank and Louisa's unsuccessful marriage.

Yet, *Little Dorrit* ranks amongst the most bitter, stinging satires of Victorian England; Dickens paints in it a sinister, sombre portrait of his society. In fact, as critics have suggested, it is his "darkest novel" (see for instance Hillis Miller 227) The atmosphere of the book is gloomy and cold. The tone is sad, sardonic though edged. The Dickensian humour is no longer invigorating and pleasant; it is monstrously subdued. With the exception of a few figures like Mr F's Aunt, Flora Finching and Cavaletto, there are no typically Dickensian comic characters like Mrs Nickleby or Mrs Gamp.

The sharp satire in *Little Dorrit* derives its force mainly from two sources which distinguish it from its predecessors, *Bleak House* and *Hard Times*. On the one hand, although the immediate occasion of the novel is a political one — the pressing necessity of the reformation of the Civil Service — Dickens does not direct his onslaught only at the government and the Establishment; he also criticises English society as a whole and English citizens themselves. In other words, he intends to spare nobody, from the lords of the Circumlocution Office — the Merdles and the Barnacles — to the poor tenants of Bleeding Heart Yard, and the unfortunate prisoners of the Marshalsea. He attributes the tragic state of the world to a collective human crime of selfishness, despotism, tyranny and arrogance. Indeed, the novel was originally to be called *Nobody's Fault* which is another way of saying "everybody's fault." This ironical insistence on the theme of irresponsibility — paradoxically enough — is to be compared to *Thrift* (1875), by S. Smiles, who advocates this very theme from his optimistic viewpoint on the Industrial Revolution. As the reader might have noticed, the titles of a number of chapters echo the idea of a collective involvement: "Nobody's Weakness," "Nobody's Rival," "Nobody's State of Mind," "Nobody's Disappearance." It is worth noticing that a few weeks after he had written the chapter entitled "A Shoal of

Barnacles," he published an article in *Household Words* called "Nobody, Somebody, and Everybody."

On the other hand, in *Little Dorrit*, Dickens chooses a more profound and complicated metaphor: prison. Dickens has already used symbolic or emblematic devices in several of the books of his late period, such as the fog in *Bleak House* or the dust-heap and the river in *Our Mutual Friend*; but these do not equal, neither in force nor in efficiency, the jail image which permeates the whole atmosphere of the novel. This is due to the fact that the prison is the representation of down-to-earth reality as well as a symbol, an abstract tool. Besides, as Lionel Trilling has convincingly argued, the prison is endowed with a high symbolic value: being a means of negating man's will, the jail is the right metaphor for the Victorian society in which man's freedom is fettered because of various obstacles: social, political, religious, etc.. However, *Little Dorrit* should not be considered as a pamphlet upon the reform of prisons. The Marshalsea had been abolished in 1842, the Court of the Marshalsea in 1849; imprisonment for small debt would continue till 1869, a year before Dickens's death.

It is to be underlined that all his life Dickens had been strangely and constantly fascinated by prisons, prisoners and imprisonment. There is scarcely a novel in which they are absent or overlooked. They appear in *Sketches By Boz*, *Pickwick Papers*, *Barnaby Rudge*, *David Copperfield*, *Great Expectations*, *The Tale*, *Our Mutual Friend* and, of course, *Little Dorrit*, Dickens's greatest novel of imprisonment. He was not obsessed by English prisons only; wherever he went, in Italy, France or America, he visited prisons. In New York, for instance, the first building he inspected was a jail. This obsession stems from his parents' traumatic experience of confinement when he was a child. His father, John Dickens, was incarcerated for debt for three months in the Marshalsea in 1824; this event, along with his sad period in Warren's blacking factory, would be a constant source of shame and humiliation for him and would never leave him till his death.

Unquestionably, Dickens's use of prison is nowhere, not even in *Great Expectations* and *The Tale*, as striking and intense as in *Little Dorrit*. The recurring direct references to imprisonment show that the author is determined to leave no reader indifferent to such a theme. The shadow of the prison looms over everyone and everything, and its suffocating, oppressive "enclosure" corrupts the atmosphere of the whole book, sparing nobody and nothing. Once the reader

steps into its gloomy world, he finds himself in an intricate labyrinth; although he "moves" from one locale to the other, there is always a prison close by. Whatever path he takes, it does inevitably lead him to a jail. In fact, there is "no genuine movement." John Wain was right when he wrote that *Little Dorrit* is Dickens's "most stationary novel."¹

Right from the very first scene of the book, the novelist focuses on prisons and what they implicitly mean. He introduces the reader to the Marseilles jail in which Rigaud and Cavaletto are confined.

A prison taint was on everything there. The imprisoned air, the imprisoned light, the imprisoned damp, the imprisoned men, were all deteriorated by confinement. As the captive men were faded and haggard, so the iron was rusty, the stone was slimy, the wood was rotten, the air was faint, the light was dim. Like a well, like a vault, like a tomb, the prison had no knowledge of the brightness outside; and would have kept its polluted atmosphere intact, in one of the spice islands of the Indian ocean" (Bk. I, I, 10).

The two prisoners are chilled to the bones, for the blazing sun which scorches Marseilles does not penetrate to their damp, dark cells. Hence Rigaud's angry words: "To the devil with this Brigand of a Sun that never shines in here!" (10) Before he makes them move from Marseilles to London, Dickens adds one more variation of the same motif, as though he were anxious to impose the theme of imprisonment to the reader's mind. He stages a group of travellers, Miss Wade, Arthur Clennam and the Meagles, shut up in a quarantine which is nothing but another prison, though a temporary one. They even talk about this very theme.

The reserved Englishwoman took up Mr. Meagles in his last remark.

"Do you mean that a prisoner forgives his prison?" said she, slowly and with emphasis.

"That was my speculation, Miss Wade. I don't pretend to know positively how a prisoner might feel. I never was one before."

"Mademoiselle doubts," said the French gentleman in his own language, "its being so easy to forgive?"

"I do." (Bk I, II, 26).

Then, the narrative moves from Marseilles to London. The English capital is described as a huge prison, a city with everything "bolted and barred." Like the

¹ "Little Dorrit," in *Dickens and the Twentieth Century*, John Gross and Gabriel Pearson eds. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962) 175.

Marseilles jail, it is a dismal place with a "polluted atmosphere," where there is nothing to see but "streets, streets, streets." It is the city of restlessness, despair and stagnation. Its inhabitants are desperate and in need of anything but "a stringent policeman." Here is the London to which Arthur returns after a twenty years' absence abroad.

It was a Sunday evening in London, gloomy, close and stale. Maddening church bells of all degrees of dissonance, sharp and flat, cracked and clear, fast and slow, made the brick-and-mortar echoes hideous. Melancholy streets in a penitential garb of soot, steeped the souls of the people who were condemned to look at them out of windows, in dire despondency. In every thoroughfare, up almost every alley, and down almost every turning, some doleful bell was throbbing, jerking, tolling, as if the Plague were in the city and the dead-carts were going round. Everything was bolted and barred that could by possibility furnish relief to an over-worked people. No pictures, no unfamiliar animals, no rare plants or flowers, no natural or artificial wonders of the ancient world—all *taboo* with that enlightened strictness, that the ugly South Sea gods in the British Museum might have supposed themselves at home again. Nothing to see but streets, streets, streets. Nothing to breathe but streets, streets, streets. Nothing to change the brooding mind, or raise it up . . .

. . . Fifty thousand lairs surrounded [Arthur Clennam] where people lived so unwholesomely, that fair water put into their crowded rooms on Saturday night, would be corrupt on Sunday morning; albeit my lord, their county member, was amazed that they failed to sleep in company with their butcher's meat. Miles of close wells and pits of houses, where the inhabitants gasped for air, stretched far away towards every point of the compass. Through the heart of the town a deadly sewer ebbed and flowed, in the place of a fine fresh river . . .

He sat in the same place as the day died, looking at the dull houses opposite, and thinking, if the disembodied spirits of former inhabitants were ever conscious of them, how they must pity themselves for their old places of imprisonment. Sometimes a face would appear behind the dingy glass of a window, and would fade away into the gloom as if it had seen enough of life and had vanished out of it . . . (Bk. I, III, 33, 35).

Through gloomy London, the reader follows Arthur Clennam to his mother's house, a striking instance of incongruity and abnormality; it foreshadows Miss Havisham's "crazy" mansion — Satis House. It is a small Marshalsea in which Mrs Clennam has jailed herself, shunning daylight for many years, the monstrous Jeremiah Flintwinch acting as a turnkey. Beside the description of the house, Dickens emphasises the point more than once through Mrs Clennam's soliloquy.

. . . look at me, in prison, and in bonds here. I endure without murmuring, because it is appointed that I shall so make reparations for my sins. Reparation! Is there none in this room? Has there been none here this fifteen years? (Bk. I, V, 50).

Indeed, in the world of *Little Dorrit*, no locale is spared the taint of prison. Houses are denied their usual function; they are no longer warm cradles but jails in miniature. Mr Merdle is imprisoned in a close, dull, rotten house, with the Chief Butler as a jailer; when he manages to escape his servant's eyes, he stands "with his hands crossed under his uneasy coat-cuffs, as if he were taking himself into custody" (Bk. II, XII, 474). Mrs Gowan lives at Hampton Court in a residence which is described by her son, Henry, as a "dreary red-brick dungeon" (Bk. I, XXVI, 266). Mr Casby is incarcerated in a "gloomy," "silent" house. Mr Barnacle has retreated in Mews Street in "a squeezed house, with a ramshackle bowed front, little dingy windows, and a little dark area like a damp waistcoat-pocket. . . . To the sense of smell, [it] was like a sort of bottle filled with a strong distillation of mews" (Bk. I, X, 100). Miss Wade's dwelling in Calais is no exception; when he visits it, Arthur is immediately reminded of the Marshalsea.

A dead sort of house, with a dead wall over the way and a dead gateway at the side, where a pendant bell-handle produced two dead tinkles, and a knocker produced a dead, flat surface-tapping, that seemed not to have depth enough in it to penetrate even the cracked door. However, the door jarred open on a dead sort of spring; and [Arthur] closed it behind him as he entered a dull yard, soon brought to a close at the back by another dead wall, where an attempt had been made to train some creeping shrubs, which were dead; and to make a little fountain in a grotto, which was dry; and to decorate that with a little statue, which was gone (Bk. II, XX, 559).

Before continuing the journey which eventually leads to the Marshalsea — the metaphor of *Little Dorrit* and the image which broods over the novel — we must evoke an institution in London which, like the debtors' prison, also poisons spirits and enhances Dickens's theme of imprisonment: the Circumlocution Office. Like the Court of Chancery in *Bleak House*, it is an institution which has been transformed into a prison. When Arthur visited it, he "was generally ushered into [its rooms] by its janitors much as a pickpocket might be shown into a police office" (Bk. II, ch. X, p. 459). Headed by such irresponsible, greedy, indifferent imposers as the Barnacles, it holds people captive in its endless corridors, shuts out warm feelings and humanity as effectively as the walls of the Marshalsea or the Marseilles jail shut out the light of day. It is worth noting that the ominous image of the Circumlocution Office was, among other elements, what motivated George Bernard Shaw's declaration that *Little Dorrit* was "more seditious than *Das Kapital*" (quoted by Davis 224), which led him to become a socialist.

Having gone through these prisons, we come to the Marshalsea — a prison as dark, narrow and airless as the jail in Marseilles or the house of Mr Tite Barnacle — and to the Dorrit family. They have been locked in this world of sufferings, hardships and privation for many long years, which probably justifies the peculiar characters old Dorrit and his two children, Tip and Fanny, have developed. When we meet Old Dorrit, he no longer is the merry young gentleman he used to be when he was brought to the Marshalsea for the first time. Twenty-three years of confinement have tragically affected his personality. He is represented as a selfish, pompous, self-deceiving old man. His son, Tip, is a shabby, good-for-nothing, violent brute. His daughter, Fanny, is a social-climber, a self-seeking, snobbish creature. She is an “Angry Young Woman” in revolt against life and the world around her. The only member of the Dorrit family who has not been tainted by prison, though she was born in it, is Little Dorrit, the heroine of the novel, a generous, kind, angelic figure.

With bitter irony, Dickens sees more than a prison in the Marshalsea; it is a microcosm of the society outside, with its snobbery, self-delusion, and hypocrisy as the use of euphemisms reveals: the prisoners call themselves “Collegians” and refer to their tiny, squalid common-room as the “Snuggery.” To some extent, they feel free: for instance, they are no longer harassed by creditors. This is the opinion of Dr Haggage, an old jail-bird:

. . . elsewhere, people are restless, worried, hurried about, anxious respecting one thing, anxious respecting another. Nothing of the kind here. . . . We have done all that — we know the worst of it; we have got to the bottom, we can't fall, and what have we found? Peace. That's the word for it. Peace (Bk. I, VI, 60).

Yet, this is far from being completely true, for even within the walls of prison, there is a frightful hierarchy. The old birds and the fledglings are not on an equal footing. Old Dorrit struggled for numerous years to reach the top of that hierarchy and to be called the “Father of the Marshalsea.”

Besides, the prison is as corrupt as the outside world. Money holds the same value and the same influence in both places. Rich convicts are respected, served and granted comfortable cells, whereas the poor are forgotten and abandoned to starvation and physical degeneration in squalid rooms. Like the Fleet prisoners in *Pickwick Papers*, they are miserable and desperate: there is no way out for them, except death. Prison, like the exterior world, is ruled by selfish,

ruthless attitudes and patronage. Like Mr Merdle, Mr Barnacle, Henry Gowan or Rigaud, old Dorrit is greedy for patronage. He considers the Marshalsea as his own kingdom, his own property in which he wants to reign as he wishes. He extorts money from the people he dominates. His misbehaviour does not spare his own progeny, namely Amy, whom he treats in a cruel way. Not only does he exploit her, but he attempts to corrupt her, when he asks her to accept young Chivery's amorous advances for his own sake. His patronage extends beyond the walls of the Marshalsea. His immediate victims are his brother Frederick and Mrs Plornish's father, old Nandy. In his presence, Frederick is said to be "submissively . . . accepting his patronage" (Bk. I, XIX, 193); he receives old Nandy "as if the old man held of him in vassalage under some feudal tenure" (Bk. I, XXXI, 312).

When the Dorrits are released from the Marshalsea, Dickens multiplies the images and references to prison and imprisonment. The reader finds himself recurrently locked in a number of metaphorical prisons. In fact, old Dorrit and his children never really escape the world of the Marshalsea during their Grand Tour of Europe. Their journey is nothing but a different kind of imprisonment. First, they are unable to move without an entourage. They are attended by a courier, two footmen and two waiting-maids. Moreover, wherever they go, they cannot forget the walls of the Marshalsea, its darkness and its shadows. The hospitable Swiss convent of the Great Saint Bernard, where they have stopped to rest, has thick walls, heavy doors and iron-gates which seem to Little Dorrit "something like a prison" (Bk. II., II, 376). In Venice, the Gowan's house is located above a suit of rooms "which had the appearance of a jail for criminal rats;" while "the waifs of seaweed" which cling to the walls of the Dorrit residence seem to be "weeping for their imprisoned relations" (Bk. II, VI, 414, 425). During their journey, Little Dorrit, the only one who remains uncorrupted by wealth, sees the actual situation of her family as a dream and is frequently reminded of the place of her birth — the Marshalsea. On one occasion, "it seemed to her as if those visions of mountains and picturesque countries might melt away at any moment, and the carriage, turning some abrupt corner, bring up with a jolt at the old Marshalsea gate" (Bk. II, III, 392). On another, she compares the society in which they make their way with a huge Marshalsea.

It appeared on the whole, to Little Dorrit herself, that this same society in which they lived, greatly resembled a superior sort of Marshalsea. Numbers of people seemed to come abroad, pretty much as people had come into the prison; through debt, through idleness, relationship, curiosity, and general unfitness for getting on at

home. They were brought into these foreign towns in the custody of couriers and local followers, just as the debtors had been brought into the prison. They prowled about the churches and picture-galleries, much in the old, dreary, prison-yard manner. They were usually going away again to-morrow or next week, and rarely knew their own minds, and seldom did what they said they would do, or went where they said they would go: in all this again, very like the prison debtors. They paid high for poor accommodation, and disparaged a place while they pretended to like it: which was exactly the Marshalsea custom. They were envied when they were away, by people feigning not to want to go; and that again was the Marshalsea habit invariably. A certain set of words and phrases, as much belonging to tourists as the College and the Snuggery belonged to the jail, was always in their mouths. They had precisely the same incapacity for settling down to anything, as the prisoners used to have; they rather deteriorated one another, as the prisoners used to do; and they wore untidy dresses, and fell into a slouching way of life: still, always like the people in the Marshalsea. (Bk. II, VII, 435)

The idea that society and prison are one and the same thing is corroborated not only in the above-quoted passage, but also in the scene in which old Dorrit loses his mind during a dinner-party and fancies himself in the Marshalsea.

As the reader can notice, Dickens repeatedly emphasises his vision of society as a vast jail. Whether one is good or bad, poor or rich, a lord of the Circumlocution Office or a poor tenant of Bleeding Heart Yard or a debtor of the Marshalsea, one is a convict. In one passage, he even endows his theme with a wider dimension: he explicitly describes human life at large in terms of imprisonment: "aslant across the city, over its jumbled roofs, and through the open tracery of its church towers, struck the long bright rays (of the early morning sun), bars of the prison of this lower world" (Bk. II, XXX, 649).

The study of the second part of the novel emblematically shows that imprisonment should not be understood at face value only but for its spiritual, psychological, emotional, and social dimensions as well. Men are prisoners of their fears, guilt, despotism, egoism, greed, hatred, inhibitions, misery, puritanism, etc.. The Merdles and the Barnacles are prisoners of power and fashionable society; Rigaud is chained to the idea that he is a gentleman "by right and by nature" and therefore he should be treated as one; Henry Gowan's life is determined by his environment and heredity; old Dorrit is prisoner of his weakness, self-deception and selfishness; his daughter, Fanny, is the captive of vengeance, hatred and vanity; Miss Wade suffers from psychological unbalance: she is shut behind the thick walls of her sadism, her masochism, and repressed lesbian

tendencies; Flora Finching is jailed in fantasies nourished with her past romance with Arthur Clennam; the residents of Bleeding Heart Yard are prisoners of poverty and hopelessness.

Mrs Clennam's case is particularly significant of this state of things. She is prisoner of her guilt, for the harm she did the Dorrit family. She suppressed the codicil of a will which would have left Frederick Dorrit — or in the event of his death, Little Dorrit — enough money to enable his father to be released from the Marshalsea. This guilt feeling is so powerful that she unconsciously paralyses herself, as if it were a way of expiating the moral and legal crimes she committed against the Dorrits. It is also the price for her ruthless, inhuman, diabolic behaviour towards Arthur and her own husband. Once she hears about her husband's new life with a poor dancing-girl, she makes every effort to separate them, takes Arthur with her in order to torment them and makes everyone, including the child, believe that *she* is his mother. She brings him up according to her puritan principles, and especially her hard, grim, masochistic doctrine. When he grows up, Arthur develops a strong hatred for religion. After his father died in the Orient, he returns home on a Sunday, and is immediately reminded of the sufferings he used to undergo on Sundays as a child: "Heaven forgive me . . . and those who trained me. How I hated this day!"

There was the dreary Sunday of his childhood, when he sat with his hands before him, scared out of his senses by a horrible tract which commenced business with the poor child by asking him its title, why he was going to Perdition? . . . when, like a military deserter, he was marched to chapel by a picket of teachers three times a day, morally handcuffed to another boy . . . when his mother, stern of face and unrelenting of heart, would sit all day behind a Bible . . . as if it, of all books! were a fortification against sweetness of temper, natural affection and gentle intercourse . . . when he sat glowering and glooming through the tardy length of the day, with a sullen sense of injury in his heart, and no more real knowledge of the beneficent history of the New Testament, than if he had been bred among idolaters (Bk I, III, 34).

Furthermore, Mrs Clennam joins with Mr Casby to put an end to his love story with Flora, and does all she can to keep him all his life in an emotional jail.

Mrs Clennam's depressing environment and diabolic education have not entirely paralysed Arthur, albeit they have been sufficient to distort his character, to cripple his personality and to make him unable of leading an independent life.

When we first meet him, he is completely lost, impotent, with no will or target, as he himself confesses to Mr Meagles:

I have no will. That is to say . . . next to none that I can put in action now. Trained by main force; broken, not bent; heavily ironed with an object on which I was never consulted and which was never mine; shipped away to the other end of the world before I was of age, and exiled there until my father's death there, a year ago; always grinding in a mill I always hated; what is to be expected from *me* in middle life? Will, purpose, hope? All those lights were extinguished before I could sound the words (Bk. II, II, 25).

He is saved firstly by his firm resolution to separate from his mother and to accept to work with Daniel Doyce, the generous, honest inventor, who cheers him up and makes him self-confident and trustful in his capacities; and secondly by his relationship with Little Dorrit. Although the girl might have been his daughter, she succeeds in bringing a considerable change to his morose, monotonous life and in giving it meaning. She also makes him optimistic, provides him with love and shows him that the flame of passion is still burning in him. When he loses his money in Mr Merdle's enterprise and goes to the Marshalsea, she comes to his rescue and they eventually decide to get married. Little Dorrit, as many critics have pointed out, is undoubtedly the "pivot of his world" (Hillis Miller 245); without her, he would have remained physically, spiritually and emotionally a prisoner.

The issue which the imagery of the novel raises is the absence of any way out for the protagonists. Imprisoned in various jails, they have no possibility of gaining liberty. As we saw clearly, in spite of their long travels and wanderings abroad, men and women are never free; they are always behind bars. Dickens's indictment of Victorian society here is to be compared with the message delivered by other famous polemicists of his time, such as Carlyle, Ruskin and Arnold. The very end of the novel does in fact emphasise this idea. When Arthur and Little Dorrit appear for the last time, they are happy but they are not released from the huge prison of society: "They went quickly down into the roaring streets, inseparable and blessed; and as they passed along in sunshine and shade, the noisy and the eager, and the arrogant and the froward and the vain, fretted, and chafed, and made their usual uproar" (Bk. II, XXXIV, 702). It is clear that they have never left the mad world of their childhood. Indeed, the only way out is *death*.



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