MEDITATIONS ON INNOCENCE IN LITTLE NELL'S DEATHBED SCENE: DECONSTRUCTING LITTLE NELL

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Abstract: *This article makes a deconstructivist reading of Little Nell's deathbed scene from Dickens's novel The Old Curiosity Shop. It challenges certain claims of Dickens's "bad writing" in portraying the death of the young heroine, and comments on the readers' evolving reception of the scene up to the present day. The analysis uses Deleuze and Guattari's idea of "deterritorialization" and "reterritorialization" as developed in Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia and its sequel, A Thousand Plateaus, which allows for an allegorical and metaphorical reading of the scene and traces the transcendence of innocence therein in a tacit resistance to power and domination. The results affirm Dickens's extreme treatment of an "angelic daughter" whose sacrifice in the text discloses the possibilities of new fascinating interpretations.*

Keywords: *deterritorialization; reterritorialization; transcendence; Victorian; angelic daughters;*

Little Nell from Dickens's *The Old Curiosity Shop* first published in 1841 belongs to a list of several female characters with the narratorial diminutive *little* applied to their names, that can be categorized as "angelic daughters"[1] in the British writer's early and mid-Victorian oeuvre – young girls in their marrying age or on the borderline of entering that age – who are exceedingly kind to male members of the family or other men. They seemingly abstain from consumption and their valiant self-sacrificial efforts have earned them the pity of feminist critics in a vitriolic condemnation of their author for starving the girls so the said male characters can thrive and prosper[2]. A deconstructivist discussion of the issue may point out certain feminine stratagems hidden in this docile anorexic conduct aiming for enticing an appropriate man (Boev 50). Despite their "wonderful qualities" and a possible deeper and *darker* purpose to their enthusiastic servility, certainly Monika Fludernik is correct in noting that angelic girls among whom Little Nell and Little Dorrit "have proved disappointing to the twenty-first century reader, although some critics have managed to rehabilitate Dickens's women characters," arguing that there is more to their seeming insipidness (Fludernik

[1] The latter were famously referred to by George Orwell as "Dickens's legless angels" – see Schor, H. M. (2004). *Dickens and the daughter of the house*. Cambridge University Press (p.1). – a. n.

[2] In "Vulgarity in Literature" (1930), Aldous Huxley voices a strong disagreement with such a portrayal of women: "when a girl was marked with the stigmata of anaemia and chronic constipation, you knew she was a lady" (*Music at night and other essays*) (p.278). – a. n.

72). It is also true what Natalie McKnight claims, and namely that "Dickens's young women characters are the ones most open to the charge of 'stereotypes' because they so consistently reflect the gender expectations of young Victorian women" (McKnight 195). It is not until Dickens's later works that those stereotypes remain very much in place and his angelic daughters Florence[3], Amy[4], Dora and Agnes[5] among others would be almost indistinguishable from one another in their arduous and arguably insidious phallocentrism were it not for the significance of their names[6]. Of course, it should be noted that Estella Havisham (*Great Expectations*) does not quite fit this paradigm, being raised by a men-hating woman – Miss Havisham, nor does Nell Trent, for that matter, being too young and occupying the unique in this line position of "an angelic granddaughter".

While these manifestations of self-denial could be considered ingenious stratagems for attracting the husband of the girls' choice and there is enough evidence for such a reading[7], that is not the case here unless we speak of a direct match between Nell and a manly God in a posthumous heavenly existence[8] – Nell Trent aka Little Nell is permanently attached to her ailing grandfather, his presence effectively preventing her from indulging in any such fantasies (also impeded by her tender age of 13). So, with Old Trent's proving to be a burden, which is insurmountable for sustaining life in the novel, she dies in one of the most controversial scenes in Dickens's works. While it is true that Dickens's readers were supposed to equally share the laughter and the tears that alternate in the writer's texts, certain late Victorians and early modernists begged to differ. In line with this harsher perception since the end of the Victorian period modern readers have been finding it increasingly hard to cry over such passages while they still laugh with the Victorians where laughter is due. In the scene in question Dickens lapses into blank verse which can also be viewed as "strained prose […] [that] makes little headway among contemporary readers, who tend to deplore such obvious pathos" (Ballinger 331). Strained as it may be perceived by modern readers, it must be said that the scene is not by any stretch incongruent to the rest of the

[3] Aka Little Florence from *Dombey & Son* (1848). – a. n.
[4] Aka Little Dorrit from the eponymous title *Little Dorrit* (1857). – a. n.
[5] From *David Copperfield* (1850). – a. n.
[6] See Boev, "Anorexia Mirabilis Decoded: Rereading Female Corporeal Consumption in Dickens's Angelic Daughters" (44-50). – a. n.
[7] See Boev, "Anorexia Mirabilis Decoded: Rereading Female Corporeal Consumption in Dickens's Angelic Daughters" (51-3). – a. n.
[8] It is to be noted that the word *little*, usually applied to Nell, in the deathbed scene under scrutiny is only applied to Nell's bird, but not to Nell herself, which suggests that only in death Nell is woman enough to be married to a nonearthly (heavenly) being of the male sex. – a. n.

novel; rather, it reads as an apogee to and quintessence of the strained life of a precocious Victorian child whose fate was not at all unusual in those times.

> She was dead. No sleep so beautiful and calm, so free from trace of pain, so fair to look upon. She seemed a creature fresh from the hand of God, and waiting for the breath of life; not one who had lived and suffered death. Her couch was dressed with here and there some winter berries and green leaves, gathered in a spot she had been used to favour. 'When I die, put near me something that has loved the light, and had the sky above it always.' Those were her words. She was dead. Dear, gentle, patient, noble Nell was dead. Her little bird – a poor slight thing the pressure of a finger would have crushed – was stirring nimbly in its cage; and the strong heart of its child-mistress was mute and motionless for ever. Where were the traces of her early cares, her sufferings, and fatigues? All gone. Sorrow was dead indeed in her, but peace and perfect happiness were born; imaged in her tranquil beauty and profound repose (Dickens 1052-3).

I propose, therefore, to examine a passage from one of the most famous scenes in the history of British Literature – Little Nell's death. Over almost 200 years since Dickens published *The Old Curiosity Shop* this passage has provoked passionate reactions which started almost immediately after the novel appeared. Crowds of Americans anxiously waited at the docks for the ships coming from England to receive news from the novel's next installment of the whereabouts and wellbeing of Little Nell, an angelic little girl not yet fourteen, who flees London on a perilous journey into the countryside in the company of a mentally infirm grandfather with a passion for gambling. All the good and evil forces in the novel pursue her, the former trying to save her from the clutches of the latter led by the grotesquely deformed moneylender, the dwarf Quilp – a kind of articulate malicious Quasimodo with no redeeming qualities. The Victorian reading public in general, with the notable exceptions, were deeply moved by the death of Little Nell. Although Dickens was inundated with letters entreating him to spare her, later dissenting voices – most famously the scathing criticism of Aldous Huxley, who referred to this passage in "Vulgarity in Literature" (1930) as "distressing in its ineptitude and vulgar sentimentality" (Huxley 334) – attacked the scene. Oscar Wilde has been famously quoted to have said that "one must have a heart of stone to read the death of Little Nell without dissolving into tears … of laughter." G. K. Chesterton sums up the controversy surrounding Little Nell's literary existence and death neatly: "some implored Dickens not to kill her at the end of the story: some regret that he did not kill her at the beginning" (Chesterton 36). Twentieth and twenty-first-century literary criticism, however, as mentioned, has pointed out possibilities for rehabilitating readings of this and

similar passages by Dickens[9]. In his 1907 edition of *The Old Curiosity Shop*, Chesterton was one of the first to remind us that a definite artistic idea exists behind the death of Little Nell, an idea that accounts for the fact that Nell could not have been spared. Responding to F. R. Leavis's indictment that Little Nell is nothing but "a contrived unreality" aiming to indulge in quenching the reader's thirst for sentimentalism, John Bowen, while acknowledging the unfortunate premise of "notorious sentimentality, morbid and uncontrolled, embarrassing and absurd by turns" (Bowen 13), argues for allegorical interpretations of Little Nell's character (14). The latter is suggested by Dickens himself in an eerie early scene where Nell Trent is left with the initial first-person narrator (Master Humphrey) momentarily as she nonchalantly proceeds to go to sleep guarded by "angels" at her grandfather's bidding (Dickens 27). Once outside, the narrator approaches the house again, this time with Little Nell already sleeping inside, only to find the place "dark, and silent as the grave" (28), the sensation being enhanced by a second look which confirms the house as "black, cold, and lifeless as before" (29). Dickens's heavy symbolism, which portends the magnificent wellbeing or sad demise of a character, is at work here as it is on the first pages of early to mid-Victorian novels of development such as *Oliver Twist* (1838) and *Dombey and Son* (1848). But it is more than that – it contains a certain duality with Little Nell alive, but not appearing so, entombed in a house-grave. The scene with the small invisible life within represents death-in-life and is an early sign of what Chesterton refers to as "an artistic idea", what effectively constitutes an inkling of the deathbed scene in the novel – where Nell is lying dead in an eternal sleep surrounded by well-wishing characters. F. S. Schwarzbach in his influential *Dickens and the City* (2014) confirms such a reading by remarking that "she is placed in a city which is quite literally a city of death, then is made to flee London for the unspoiled countryside, where she seeks a total and absolute peace and stillness which is none other than death itself" (Schwarzbach 70). This is confirmed in no uncertain manner by her being irresistibly attracted to graves as soon as she sets an eye on them, which she this time around finds above the ground – not the thinly veiled symbols of the catacombic big city that she has previously inhabited – but the clearly designated places for eternal rest of the ones no longer living – "a curious pleasure in lingering among the houses of the dead" (Dickens 251).

The intense concentration of evil and ugliness in the total opposite of Little Nell, the dwarf Quilp has not passed unobserved either, being

[9] One such rehabilitation is provided by Maia McAleavey (2011) in "The Discipline of Tears in *The Old Curiosity Shop*" (*Dickens Studies Annual*, Vol. *42*, AMS Press, Inc.) where she claims that "*The Old Curiosity Shop* advocates tears not as an easy escape or self-deceiving wallowing, but as a rare release from the social structures it more frequently emphasizes" (p. 124). – a. n.

condemned as politically incorrect and offensive to little, short, or handicapped people. This rather limited reading of Dickens leaves out a consideration for the Victorian sensibility as well as the fact that the reading public nowadays, unlike its Victorian counterpart, does not spend so much time reading, computers and multimedia having invaded the lives of everyone in our epoch, including the people accustomed to reading books, thus even further distancing us from the reading reception Dickens necessitates. We might as well mention a Freudian approach to Little Nell in which sexuality is never stated but always implied based on the idea that we can discover hidden truths deconstructing literary texts of which even the writers themselves were not conscious by exploring binary oppositions like the one of presence-absence, etc.

In this paper, I shall also use an allegorical interpretation of Little Nell's character in general and this scene in particular through the principles of deterritorialization and reterritorialization as developed by Deleuze and Guattari in *Capitalism* and *Schizophrenia* and *A Thousand Plateaus* (1972-1980) – regarding bodies as territories whose essence can be displaced (deterritorialized) and then reconstituted elsewhere (reterritorialized) as an ultimate evasion of power and domination[10]. Nell Trent, one could argue, renounces everything material – from supplying food to the body to the material constructions allowing her body to be sheltered, unaware of any internal organs that she may have (none mentioned), a reduced version of a human being – only her limbs serving her to move about and be of assistance to her grandfather and her forehead and mouth to receive and provide a grateful kiss, thus becoming some latent feminine kind of his bodily extension, coming close to Deleuze and Guattari's idea of *the body without organs* (*corps sans organes*) in *Anti-Oedipus*, which the two critics refer to as "ultimate residuum of a deterritorialized socius" (Deleuze and Guattari 33). Furthermore, in the same study they ask: "If the universal comes at the end – the body without organs and desiring production – under the conditions of an apparently victorious capitalism, where do we find enough innocence for generating universal history?" (139). In *A Thousand Plateaus* (2005) the two authors further develop the idea of changing territoriality in terms of energies or intensities (Deleuze and Guattari 3). They also see deterritorialization and reterritorialization as a kind of corporeal transformation: "the mouth as a deterritorialization of the snout […] female breasts – deterritorialized mammary glands," etc. (61). In my analysis I examine innocence as embodied in Little Nell as a latent energy or intensity which through her attenuating body

[10] Also proposed as an assessment of Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus* in the Preface to the study by Michel Foucault where he claims that the text in question resists "the fascism in us all, in our heads and in our everyday behavior, the fascism that causes us to love power, to desire the very thing that dominates us and exploits us (Foucault xiii). – a. n.

resulting in death is being deterritorialized and instantly reterritorialized in an afterlife as the only way for it to be preserved from the capitalism in industrial England encroaching on the girl-child that Nell constitutes, and which would have had Nell compromising innocence in a life of penury. And when I say *innocence,* I mean Nell's not having been tempted by anything material and/or corporeal with her feminine sexual potential unrealized. If we refer to the terminology of *Anti-Oedipus*, she remains *castrated*, *deterritorialized* as a desiring body, having sacrificed herself, without realizing her self-sacrifice, reduced to the extension I have mentioned. "The anguish of the decoded flows" (Deleuze and Guattari 139) is understood as "the business of the socius" (139), in Dickens's novel the gambling father and the predatory Quilp whose direct and indirect supposedly benign influence on the reduced being of Nell result in her trajectory towards death. The kind of innocence in Nell manifested in a total lack of self-consciousness cannot continue indefinitely in the bombardment of matter contained in an earthly life. A solution encompassing elements of magical realism in a corporeal situation bordering on the extreme we find in Garcia Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1973) where a virgin, Remedios, unable to tolerate the gravity of the Earth with its material temptations and encroachments, levitates never to be seen again demonstratively renouncing the material. So does Little Nell, but Dickens, being a British Victorian writer working and living one hundred years before the Columbian writer, resorts to her transposition into the celestial realms.

My analysis also suggests other possible interpretations deriving from the death scene's internal contradictions, and here I shall apply the ideas of deconstruction propounded by Derrida in *Of Grammatology* (1967) – that each entity is inhabited by its *other*; consequently, bodies of literary texts are prime objects of deconstruction – taking the entity apart and reconstructing it differently using the same or other elements hitherto overlooked. I hereby defend the idea that scorning certain passages by Dickens as mawkish is just one way of reading them since his texts presuppose a much bigger range of mutually exclusive interpretations.

How should we understand Dickens then in the twenty-first century? We could be reminded of Harold Bloom's reference to George Orwell's appreciation of the Victorian writer, stating that "Dickens was an implicit radical and a humane liberal, of a kind now virtually extinct" (Bloom vii). The uncompromising poetical justice in Dickens's works turns some of his texts into fairy tales where the humanity of the character, if not the character himself or herself, is ultimately rewarded. Yet, as Chesterton points out, "Dickens's novel was popular, not because it was an unreal world, but because it was a real world; a world in which the soul could live" (Chesterton 27-8). This

literary realism laced with magic and imbued with a habitation of the soul could be the uncanny quality of Dickens's inimitable texts that have made him immensely popular to the present day manifested in the reader's wish that a novel of his might never end (Chesterton 27). It is worth mentioning Orwell's evaluation of Dickens's astonishing capability of creating memorable images against apparent melodrama: "Of course it would be absurd to say that Dickens is a vague melodramatic writer. Much that he wrote is extremely factual, and in the power of evoking visual images he has probably never been equalled" (Orwell 41).

One way of reading this novel regarding the aforesaid and picking up from Bowen's idea would be as a pure allegory of innocence (pre-industrial) impersonated by Little Nell and evil (industrial money dependence) embodied in the physically repelling Quilp. If we take this approach, then Quilp becomes the ugly face of our money-dependent world, and he is ugly not because he is a dwarf, but because money dependence distorts, belittles, and deforms. The very embodiment of innocence, Little Nell is helpless, obedient, and ultimately doomed as innocence always is, losing the battle with the industrial world. Although people can remain innocent up to a point, they lose their innocence sooner or later, becoming not unlike the others. Nell, innocence itself, cannot do so and is bound to succumb to her fate, which is also locked in the play of words on her name: *Nell – knell*.

Another way of reading this story could be as a Victorian fairy tale in which the microcosm of the Old Curiosity Shop shatters, letting loose its characters into the big wide world where they continue acting, interacting, and reacting with one another until they eventually consume their energy in their predestined demise, which coincides with the destruction of their microcosm – The Old Curiosity Shop. As Chesterton suggested, they are curiosities from the shop itself (Chesterton xv), antique primordial forces released into the world populated by normal creatures like Dick Swiveller and the Marchioness, who Dickens places there to establish a link to the normal world and that of the Old Curiosity Shop. In this reading, Little Nell is not just surrounded by grotesque curiosities; she is very much *one* herself. In other words, she is not Dorothy from *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (1939) but instead more like Andersen's Brave Tin Soldier (1835), who, once released into the wide world, can only sadly observe the innumerable misfortunes on his way to his own end. A modern tale where we have a little girl who is, however, only seemingly helpless, is Del Toro's *Pan's Labyrinth* (2006) – there Ofelia is even smaller than Nell, but unlike her, endowed with terrifying agency, so in her death – killed by the fascist captain – she reclaims her place not in heaven since she is technically not innocent any more, but as the princess of the kingdom of the monsters that have assisted her in her dealing with the captain.

Very much in the same vein of thought, Little Nell, once released from the shop in search of a refuge from the clutches of Quilp, embarks on a journey to a supposed paradise regained. However, while she does regain peace and quiet, her road is beset with death leading only to her own death making happiness only available in another state, a spiritual one. Her deathbed scene deterritorializes *innocence*, which is no longer to be found in the fictional world of the novel. Dickens represents our world deprived of innocence by Nell's death, but innocence is, at the same time, being reterritorialized by her entering another life, supposedly much better than the one we know on Earth: "She seemed *a creature fresh from the hand of God, and waiting for the breath of life; not one who had lived and suffered death"* (1052; italics mine). The contrast of life and death reterritorializes innocence. The natural end of life as we know it is death, so her being innocence itself cannot be associated with a horrible death, the one reserved for Quilp – her opposite and the impersonation of evil. The passing from life on Earth to life in the realm of God is likened to a sleep from which she is about to awake. A similar Keatsian[11] idea was used in the movie *Avatar* (2009) in which the main character Jake Sully, a paraplegic former marine, literally transcends from miserable and rather limited human existence on Earth into the fantastic life in the body of a Navi humanoid by waking up.

Nell's expressed desire to be put near objects after her death that have loved light always pointing to the sky links innocence to the divine celestial realms of God towards which innocence, embodied by Nell, has always aspired during its short existence in industrial England. This also accentuates the fact that innocence must be very transient in our post-industrial world of late or corporate capitalism, and its reterritorialization is established after a very short ephemeral existence. J. M. Barrie, the author of *Peter Pan* (1911), was to say that *two* "is the beginning of the end" (Barrie 7), referring to Wendy and the fact that pure unadulterated innocence can have a very short lifespan after which it can only be modified by certain social factors until it is inevitably lost and gone. The attempt, therefore, to sustain it longer in its pure intact state could be possible in the earlier stages of industrial society, which accounts for the fact that it is reterritorialized in afterlife after almost 14 years of Earth existence. It is not by chance that Dickens chose the age of 13 for Nell Trent since 14 was considered a marrying age in Victorian England. In the novel she could have been married to Dick Swiveller or even Quilp – an early marriage proposal by the dwarf himself which could be materialized upon the eventual death of the pretty and obedient Mrs Quilp (Dickens 91) – and innocence as we know it in her would have ended then and there. Quilp

[11] See John Keats's "On Death." *The Complete Poetical Works and Letters of John Keats* (1-2). – a. n.

would not have had to die, either, in that case as his energy would not have been exhausted in neutralizing innocence. Dickens, however, was after a different solution to the money problem, in which it was innocence that had to be spared by its transposition into a different existence with God, not Nell, who in the novel is nothing but its avatar. It is this avatar of innocence that we observe in her deathbed scene in which all is very calm and peaceful. The overall effect of the novel reads then as *Innocence Uninterrupted*. This was a great consolation for many families in which child death had occurred, a phenomenon much more typical in that age than it is nowadays, a place reserved for Victorian literary children such as Nell Trent and Paul Dombey. Andrew McCann comments on the function of the allegory in *The Old Curiosity Shop* and summarizes the readings it has entailed, advising of what he calls "various forms of lack" (McCann 173). He believes that supplanting the historical, the social, even the human through Nell's aspiration towards the saintly realms leaves the characters the option of "either transcending or falling out of the quotidian experience of the nineteenth century" (173), thus effectively turning Dickens's novel into a Victorian fairy tale with an Andersen's ending as in "The Little Match Girl"[12].

The juxtaposition of peaceful Nell lying in her deathbed and the frantic movements of her bird in its cage emphasizes the contrast of *Innocence Transcended* and petty miserable life continuing (Dickens 1053). These lines from the description of Nell's deathbed scene have given rise to an outcry far exceeding the number of the few detractors mentioned that this is Dickens at his worst. The British Victorian writer is commonly regarded as the single classic of the magnitude of Shakespeare but who has passages of brilliance alternating with badly structured, maudlin, downright mediocre writing by Victorian and modern standards. It should be admitted that critics, such as Wilde and Huxley, condemned Dickens as overly sentimental because the very first lines of this passage catalog Nell's sanctifying qualities, thus elevating her to the pedestal of a saint. But once again, the counterbalance – child – girl in the entire novel referring to Nell or other children of the feminine sex (mostly referents to Nell), gives us an overwhelming ratio of 654 to 51, and in the cases where *girl* refers to Nell, it is almost invariably preceded by the diminutive *little*; hence, it follows that all potential femininity in Nell Trent is smothered by the chastity belt of her being above all a *child*, who, if perceived to be a *girl*, is too little to herald a burgeoning female sexuality. This

[12] The lengthy text of the novel – over 1000 pages and sometimes published in two volumes could certainly be read as a very long poem or a fairy tale – it should be noted that not all characters in the novel could be viewed as allegorical, the most conspicuous examples for such readings being the two opposites: Nell and Quilp. Nell's position in the novel is herewith completely otherworldly, which predetermines her early demise. – a. n.

astonishing list of attributes that diminish, even stifle the woman in the girl-child, however, is only natural if we look at the novel in the light of an ode to *Innocence Preserved* or a panegyric alluding to Mary Hogarth, Dickens's beloved sister-in-law who died in his arms of tuberculosis in 1837. It is a well-known fact, stated by Dickens himself, that he "was breaking his heart over this novel" as well as the fact that he would have lapses of didacticism and sentimentalism in any piece of writing he would produce, especially in his earlier works. More attention, in my opinion, should be paid to the stark contrast of the frantic activity of the encaged bird with complete peace and quiet reigning in the room where everyone but the deranged grandfather observes a spell of silence. Why would Dickens have had to put the bird in the same room with Nell lying on her deathbed? Another example of very bad writing? This, like anything else, can only be a subject of interpretation if we take it this way. This passage then illustrates the irrelevance and meaninglessness of life on Earth experienced by other creatures against the passage of Nell into another state of being. According to this reading, Nell's death scene successfully shows the prevalence of insignificant life on Earth over the stately notion of innocence ascending to a better world or a better life. Tyson Stolte also concludes that this is a case of immortal spirituality reigning supreme, stating that "Nell's death in particular is a clear effort to insist on the immateriality and immortality of mind" (Stolte 188). As a continuation to this idea, Adina Ciugureanu argues for Nell playing a role similar to Dante's Beatrice, which allows for a Shakespearian ending of the Dickensian tragedy: "both are pure women whose untimely deaths cause pity, yet their legacy compensates for the grief that follows since what they leave behind is love and a superior understanding of the earthly world" (Ciugureanu 118), the difference between the two lying in the fact that Beatrice has already been awarded with an Edenic life while Nell is on the threshold of being accepted in Paradise, her life on Earth serving as a guiding light for the readers (118). This critic's conclusion is that "Nell becomes the quintessence of purity and love through her transubstantiation from a human being to the idealistic embodiment of mother and child as one indestructible unity" (128). Such an interpretation with cathartic and saintly overtones has certainly been part of the readers' reception over the years and can be considered essential in the novel's enduring popularity with the already established consideration for Nell being a child who performs the phallocentric duties of an angelic girl, but who is categorically denied all appertaining benefits save for the admiration of old, deformed or mercantile men.

A different reading, not impossible, would reveal the irony of life as we know it, where a saintly child, like Nell Trent is survived by a tiny bird, which could easily be killed by anyone's just pressing a finger on it. From this, it only follows that life carries on regardless and objectively nothing has any

meaning at all to the best of our knowledge no matter what qualifications or interpretations we would give it. It is, in fact, the wonder of life and the wonder of death that are being contemplated here and no matter how we would interpret these lines, they go to show that Dickens, even when considered by many to be at his worst, was writing in a manner that challenged the common literary perceptions of his times and still challenges the literary norms of today as much as they exist in (post)postmodernity. We might say that Dickens, just like Shakespeare, had the rarest of gifts – that of capturing the essences of life with the stunning ease of a refined phenomenologist. Added the vivacity of the description, and his characters appear to be more alive than people we know. It is not by chance that the readers have a very vivid image of Dickens's London and are amazed to find that it looks much less gloomy nowadays once they manage to visit the city. Insofar as our acceptance of certain characters goes, including Little Nell, modern film adaptations such as *Dickensian* (2015), a twenty-episode TV series by BBC, offer alternative endings: in this one notably Nell Trent does not die, and Miss Havisham gets married. A notable emancipated transfiguration of Little Nell, among many others, can be found in Angela Carter's highly self-conscious and overly inquisitive Melanie from a modern surrealist version of Dickens's novel – *The Magic Toyshop* (1967).

The proposed interpretations of Nell's character and her deathbed scene do not, by any means, exhaust all the possibilities of deconstructing the analyzed passage. They, together with the ones given by Wilde, Huxley, Chesterton, and the modern readers mentioned, only enrich the scope of possible understandings of this passage and will hopefully open room for yet further analyses.

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