

## FROM “URBAN GOTHIC” TO HAUNTED HOUSE AND MINDS: THE GOTHIC IN *OLIVER TWIST* AND *LITTLE DORRIT*<sup>1</sup>

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### Introduction

Eighteenth-century novels conventionally associated the Gothic with the Catholic countries of southern Europe and were often set in an earlier time period like the Middle Ages; however, in nineteenth-century works the Gothic gradually came closer to home as it was relocated in England, more specifically in London, in the contemporary scene, and in the minds of fictional characters. Dickens played a key role in this transformation (see Mighall 2008, p. 82; Hollington 2008, p. 457). The aim of this essay is to analyze the development of Dickens’s use of the Gothic by examining one early Dickens novel – *Oliver Twist* (1837-1839) - and one later novel - *Little Dorrit* (1855-1857) in order to contrast the historical and geographical dimension of the Gothic in *Oliver Twist* with the combination of commercial and psychological elements in *Little Dorrit*. In the early novel, the Gothic elements - the “Urban Gothic” (Mighall, 1999, p. 31),<sup>3</sup> that is, the motif of the city or parts of the city as dangerous and criminal labyrinth, as well as the ancestral curse, and the Gothic villain – help to

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<sup>3</sup> I am indebted to Robert Mighall 1999 for the concept of the Urban Gothic, although he ignores the role of the Gothic villain.

create the context of poverty and crime which Oliver endures and successfully resists, although later in the novel there is a psychological dimension to the Gothic when the text dramatizes the fears of characters like Nancy and Bill Sikes. Conversely, in *Little Dorrit* the Gothic tropes are primarily centered on the Clennam house as a version of the haunted house as crypt and the locus of the uncanny, and as both the setting and the embodiment of the theme of the ancestral curse which haunts Arthur Clennam and his mother in different ways, where Affery, Dickens's grotesque version of the Comic-Gothic heroine, "dreams" the events of the family secret which is at the heart of the novel's convoluted plot, and where the Gothic businessman-villain, Blandois,<sup>4</sup> brings his knowledge of the family secret to blackmail the Clennam family and is finally buried when the house collapses. While in *Oliver Twist* the image of the city as labyrinth is opposed by those of the respectable London suburbs and the countryside as middle-class havens of purity and escape,<sup>5</sup> in *Little Dorrit* it is suggested that there is no escape from the Gothic labyrinth of London with its tainted and prison-like houses where the Gothic is, in Julian Wolfreys's word, "with us and in us" (2002, p. 50; see also Bodenheimer, 2007, pp. 156-157). Whereas *Oliver Twist* uses Gothic elements to highlight disparate elements of plot, theme, and character, in *Little Dorrit* the Gothic elements are fully integrated into the novel's vision of mid-nineteenth century London's family and business worlds. Moreover, the limited use of the Gothic as a way of exploring heightened states of consciousness in the earlier novel gives way to a much greater emphasis on the psychological dimension of the Gothic in the later one. However, in both, "Gothic hauntings act as an alternative to state retribution, creating a kind of uncanny justice beyond the law" (Ballinger, 2008, p. 39), that is, as part of Dickens's exposure of the inability of the law to counteract human iniquity.

### The "Urban Gothic" of *Oliver Twist*

#### Buildings.

*Oliver Twist* is characterized by a somewhat random use of Gothic elements. The various settings, as Mighall argues, constitute "an 'Urban Gothic' landscape" which "[locates] terrors and mysteries in criminalized districts in the heart of the modern metropolis" (1999, p. xxii) and, indeed, elsewhere. All these locales – the ramshackle houses and buildings and the London streets - are characterized by neglect, decay, poverty and/or crime, and a confusion-inducing labyrinthine quality.

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<sup>4</sup> Most critics refer to this character as Rigaud; I refer to him as Blandois since this is the name he uses in his dealings with the Clennams in the "locked box" plot as Jonathan Grossman calls it (2012, pp. 202).

<sup>5</sup> These idyllic suburban and rural setting are, however, also lifeless; they are associated with "heaven" and therefore death (Dickens, 2003, *Twist*, pp. 106 and 262); see also J. Hillis Miller, 1970, pp. 78-81 and F. S. Schwarzbach, 1979, p. 61.

The trope of the labyrinth or the maze is a key element in the development of the Gothic mode in fiction in the nineteenth century.<sup>6</sup> Two of the best examples of the Urban Gothic setting in the novel occur in *Mudfog*, the town of Oliver's birth - the first in a poor neighbourhood where Oliver and his master Mr. Sowerberry go to arrange the burial of a pauper woman, the second in the much later scene where Monks (alias Edward Leeford, Oliver's half-brother) meets the Bumbles to buy and then destroy the proofs of Oliver's identity - while a third prominent example is to be found at the end of the novel in the description of the London slum of Jacob's Island, the final refuge of Bill Sikes and the other members of Fagin's criminal gang. In the first, in the poorest part of *Mudfog*, there are "people of the poorest class" who "occasionally skulked like shadows along" (Dickens, 2003, *Twist*, p. 40), while the second is inhabited by "none but low and desperate ruffians, who . . . subsisted chiefly on plunder and crime" (Dickens, *Twist*, 2003, pp. 306-307), and Jacob's Island is the home of "unemployed labourers of the lowest class, ballast-heavers, coal-whippers, brazen women, ragged children, and the very raff and refuse of the river" (Dickens, *Twist*, 2003, p. 417). In all three locations, there are houses which are about to collapse. In *Mudfog* the "high and large, but very old" houses "were prevented from falling into the street by huge beams of wood which were reared against the tottering walls, and firmly planted in the road" (Dickens, 2003, *Twist*, p. 40), while the former manufactory where Monks and the Bumbles meet is "tottering and bending over the dark stream" and "seem[s] but to wait a favourable opportunity of following its old companion" which has "already sunk down into the water beneath" (Dickens, 2003, *Twist*, p. 307), the personification of the inanimate (a favourite rhetorical device of Dickens) underlining the precariousness of the human situation in view of the building's apparent desire for self-destruction. Again, in Jacob's Island, "the visitor" "walks between tottering house-fronts projecting over the pavement, dismantled walls that seem to totter as he passes, chimneys half crushed, half hesitating to fall" and "when his eye is turned to the houses themselves, his utmost astonishment will be excited" by "wooden chambers thrusting themselves out above the mud and threatening to fall into it" (Dickens, 2003, *Twist*, pp. 416-417). In the final example, the inclusion of the perspective of the supposed spectator or "visitor" and his astonishment which, as Mighall says, is shared by the narrator (1999, p. 45), enhances the alien and threatening Gothic quality of the scene.

All these examples both parallel and contrast with that of the Clennam house which from the very beginning of *Little Dorrit* "had had it in its mind to slide down sideways" and which "had been propped up . . . and was leaning on some half dozen gigantic crutches: which . . . appeared in these latter days to be no very sure reliance (Dickens, 2003, *Dorrit*, p. 46). The house finally *does* collapse at

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<sup>6</sup> See Richard Maxwell, 1992, pp. 79-86, Mighall, 1999, p. 32, and 2008, p. 311, and Schwarzbach, 1979, pp. 45-48.

the end of the novel, thus symbolizing the destruction of the house of Clennam (in both private and business senses), while the various tenements in *Oliver Twist* remain as they are, precarious but standing, and quite unrelated to each other. They function as signifiers of the world of poverty and crime which determines the lives and deaths of many of the characters of the novel, with the significant exceptions of Oliver, Nancy, and, eventually, Charley Bates, but they are not as intimately connected to the central events of the plot and its associated themes, as is the Clennam house in *Little Dorrit*

### **The Streets of London and Other Gothic Spaces.**

In addition to these ramshackle buildings and neighborhoods, the Urban Gothic in *Oliver Twist* is exemplified in the streets of London, where both Monks and Fagin lurk, and where Nancy has her visions of spectral coffins being carried through the streets at night. Significantly, we see the streets mainly at night, although the scene in which Oliver is recaptured by Sikes and Nancy as he tries to take Mr. Brownlow's books back to the bookseller at Clerkenwell occurs in broad daylight, underlining the dangers of the city and the proximity of its criminal and respectable neighborhoods. In this scene the narrative presents Oliver as "little dreaming that he was within so very short a distance of the merry old gentleman", getting lost, and very soon afterwards being recaptured by Sikes and Nancy and "dragged into a labyrinth of dark, narrow courts" where "the few cries he dared to give utterance to" were "wholly unintelligible" (Dickens, 2003, *Twist*, pp. 120, 123). A more typical description of the streets, however, is to be found when Fagin goes to see Sikes to plan the Chertsey robbery:

The mud lay thick upon the stones, and a black mist hung over the streets; the rain fell sluggishly down, and everything felt cold and clammy to the touch. It seemed just the night when it befitted such a being as the Jew to be abroad. 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. (Dickens, 2003, *Twist*, p. 153, my emphasis)<sup>7</sup>

The darkness, the mud, mist, and wet, the "cold and clammy" sensation evoked, and the adjectives "hideous" and "loathsome" as well as the verbs, "glided", "creeping", and "crawling", construct a

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<sup>7</sup> For similar passages, see Dickens, 2003, *Twist*, pp. 55, 306.

Gothic setting. Later Fagin is evoked through similarly spectral imagery: waiting to tell Sikes of Nancy's supposed betrayal of him and the gang, he is described as "less like a man than some hideous phantom, moist from the grave, and worried by an evil spirit" (Dickens, 2003, *Twist*, p. 390). The implicit comparison of Fagin to the devil in the words, "the merry old gentleman", links Fagin to the devil and thus to the Gothic tradition of works like *The Monk* and *Melmoth the Wanderer*, while the description of him as a "hideous phantom, moist from the grave" suggests his vampiric qualities, which are also underlined by the fact that he is often seen in the streets at night.

Nancy's journey through the streets of London to meet Rose Maylie and Mr. Brownlow, similarly, takes place on "a very dark night", at midnight when "the heavy bell of St. Paul's tolled for the death of another day"<sup>8</sup> before Nancy and her interlocutors arrive at a "dark and dismal hole" down by the river (Dickens, 2003, *Twist*, pp. 379, 380, 381). There Nancy tells them: "I have such a fear and dread upon me to-night that I can hardly stand", explaining: "I scarcely know of what. . . . I wish I did. Horrible thoughts of death, and shrouds with blood upon them have been upon me all day"; she adds: "I'll swear I saw 'coffin' written in every page of the book [I was reading] in large black letters, -- ay, and they carried one close to me in the streets to-night" (Dickens, 2003, *Twist*, pp. 383-4). Brownlow responds: "There is nothing unusual in that . . . they have passed me often", only to be told by Nancy: "*Real ones* . . . . This was not" (Dickens, 2003, *Twist*, p. 384). Nancy's fears and her hallucinations of coffins are the stuff of a classic Gothic vision; moreover, they foreshadow her imminent death at the hands of Bill Sikes. Unknown to her, during this conversation Nancy is being spied on by Morris Bolter (alias Noah Claypole) who will report the conversation to Fagin who convinces Sikes that Nancy has betrayed the gang. The "Urban Gothic" element of Brownlow's realization that seeing coffins in the streets is a normal feature of city life and Nancy's vision of a ghostly coffin combine in a version of the Gothic which is both geographical and psychological.

Another example of the use of the Gothic to illuminate a psychological state occurs when Sikes, trying to escape detection, finds himself first pursued by the "ghastly figure" of Nancy: "If he ran, it followed – not running too, that would have been a relief, but *like a corpse endowed with the mere machinery of life*, and borne upon one slow melancholy wind that never rose nor fell" (Dickens, 2003, *Twist*, p. 402, my emphasis). The simile of the corpse brought back to mechanical life inevitably evokes the parts of corpses which Frankenstein endowed with galvanic power to create his Being and Sigmund Freud's identification of the automaton as one of the most common embodiments of the uncanny (2003 p. 135). Soon after this Sikes is again haunted, this time by Nancy's eyes:

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<sup>8</sup> As Alexander Welsh notes, the city is frequently associated with death in Dickens (1986, p. 59), which adds another dimension to the city as Gothic space, although Welsh does not mention the Gothic.

For now a vision came before him, as constant and more terrible than that from which he had escaped. Those widely-staring eyes, so lusterless and so glassy, that he had better borne to see than think upon, appeared in the midst of the darkness; light in themselves, but giving light to nothing. They were but two, but they were everywhere. (Dickens, 2003, *Twist*, p. 403)

The expression, “light in themselves, but giving light to nothing”, evokes the description in *Paradise Lost* of hell where “one great furnace flamed; yet from those flames/No light, but rather darkness visible/Served only to discover sights of woe” (Milton, 2011, Book I, ll. 62-64), and thus links Sikes’s mental torture to that of the ancestor of all Gothic villains, Milton’s Satan. While the Gothic vision of Nancy and her eyes dramatize Sikes’s tortured psyche, the eyes finally contribute to his inadvertent death: as he tries to evade the mob by escaping from the roof of the derelict building in Jacob’s Island, Nancy’s eyes appear to him again, causing him to lose his balance and hang himself (Dickens, 2003, *Twist*, 428), an early example of the Gothic’s power to “enact justice” in Dickens (Ballinger, 2008, pp. 37, 39).

### **Monks and the Gothic/Melodramatic Plot.**

In addition to these urban Gothic settings and hallucinatory and uncanny experiences, the Gothic in *Oliver Twist* is embodied in the stereotypical characterization of Monks as Gothic villain and the Gothic plot of secrets embodied in lost or hidden objects.<sup>9</sup> Monks is, as Brian Cheadle points out, “a villain from stage melodrama, with intimations of the Gothic in the allusion to ‘Monk’ Lewis” in his assumed name (2008, p. 313), a name which refers to both the author and the protagonist of *The Monk*, who is also a stereotypical Gothic villain; Monks’s plot to disgrace Oliver and thereby inherit all of their father’s estate revolves around the secret of Oliver’s true identity and the provisions of the will of Edwin Leeford, the man who is both Monks’s and Oliver’s father. Monks is often seen at night, and he is first described simply as “a dark figure . . . in deep shadow” who waits to talk to Fagin and who “glide[s] up to him unperceived”, before complaining that “his blood was chilled with standing about so long, and the wind blew through him” (Dickens, 2003, *Twist*, pp. 211, 212). The somewhat contradictory implications of “glided” and “the wind blew through him” as opposed to “his blood was chilled with standing about so long” make Monks a composite of vampire or non-human entity and human villain. When we (and Oliver) next meet him, he is described as “a tall man wrapped in a cloak” who no sooner sees Oliver than he curses him in the exclamatory style identified

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<sup>9</sup> As Maxwell asserts, in Gothic or mystery fiction, “often secrets become objects” (1977, p. 193).

by Michael Meeuwis as typical of Victorian melodrama and popular theater more generally (2011, p. 81): ““Death! . . . Who’d have thought it! Grind him to ashes! he’d start up from a marble coffin to come in my way”, adding: “Rot his bones!”, to which Oliver responds, with (presumably unintended) comic effect: “I am sorry, sir . . . I hope I have not hurt you”, whereupon Monks falls into a fit, the first of several in the book (Dickens, 2003 *Twist*, p. 269). Later, seeing Oliver again through the window of the Maylies’ country house, Monks assures Fagin that the boy is indeed Oliver:

“could I mistake him, think you? If a crowd of devils were to put themselves into his exact shape, and he stood amongst them, there is something that would tell me how to point him out. If you buried him fifty feet deep, and took me across his grave, I should know, if there wasn’t a mark above it, that he lay buried there. Wither his flesh, I should!” (Dickens 2003, *Twist*, p. 283)

On both occasions Monks’s curses have the vampiric suggestion of Oliver rising from the grave which Monks wishes him in, reflecting the fact that Monks is haunted by Oliver even as he tries to bring about his death and disgrace. Significantly, and in accordance with the eighteenth-century Gothic tradition which associated the dark deeds and cunning plots of the Gothic villain with countries outside England (usually Catholic ones), Monks is associated with non-English contexts. He owns an estate in the West Indies (a colonial slave-holding economy), he and his mother are later described as travelling to Paris to look after his father’s property, and he is finally exiled to “a distant part of the New World” where he finally “die[s] in prison” (Dickens, 2003, *Twist*, p. 451).

While Monks is motivated by both hatred of his virtuous half-brother and avarice, it is left to one of the minor villains of the novel, Mrs. Bumble, to see the information about Oliver’s birth which she possesses as a commodity, bargaining with Monks to make him pay her “five-and-twenty pounds in gold” before she delivers to him the ring and the locket which establish Oliver’s identity and which Monks promptly drops into the river (Dickens, 2003, *Twist*, p. 310). Monks protests that is it “a large sum for a paltry secret, that may be nothing when it’s told!” (Dickens, 2003, *Twist*, p. 310), but he does pay up in order to try and ensure that the truth about Oliver’s birth will remain a secret, although in this he fails. While this commercial transaction bears no specific relation to the novel’s themes, in *Little Dorrit*, when Blandois describes the secret of the information which he possesses about the truth of Arthur Clennam’s birth to Clennam himself as “a commodity [which I have] to sell to my lady your respectable mother” (Dickens, 2003, *Dorrit*, p. 779, my emphasis), the description is intimately connected to the novel’s examination of the duplicities and secrets of both business and family affairs. In *Oliver Twist* the final revelation of the secret of Oliver’s birth and true identity

brings about the restitution of his fortune and secures his place in the “little society” of the virtuous established at the end of the novel “whose condition approached as nearly to one of perfect happiness as can ever be known in this changing world” (Dickens, 2003, *Twist*, p. 451); but *Little Dorrit* ends with no such evocation of the happy few, and Arthur Clennam never discovers the secret of his birth and true identity (like Oliver, he is illegitimate). Oliver has resisted contamination by the Gothic labyrinth of crime and poverty which surrounds him, largely by virtue of his birth, it seems, whereas in *Little Dorrit*, there can be no escape for Arthur since he remains in ignorance of the truth about his family, and since the Gothic labyrinth is internal as well as external, as I will demonstrate below.

### **The Gothic in *Little Dorrit*: The Haunted House and the Reconstituted Gothic**

In *Little Dorrit* Dickens reformulates some key Gothic elements, notably the Gothic castle, the Gothic villain, and the Gothic hero and heroine in relation to a mid-nineteenth-century version of the Gothic plot of hidden identity, retribution, and revenge, mixing private secrets and public “accounts”, in both senses of the word, “accounts”. In *Little Dorrit* the Gothic castle becomes a version of the haunted house which is relocated in the modern city (Mighall, 1999, p. 70) and which Anthony Vidler (1994, p. 17) has identified as one of the key locales of nineteenth-century Gothic.<sup>10</sup> Embodying the themes of death-in-life, haunting, and the uncanny, the Clennam house provides a fitting context for Mrs. Clennam as a version of “dead/undead gothic mother” (Hoeveler, 1998, p. 4), and it is finally the burial place of the Gothic villain, Blandois. I shall examine Dickens’s creation of the Clennam house as uncanny, and the Gothic plot in relation to Arthur Clennam and Blandois as hero and villain respectively, with the “dreaming” Affery as a comic version of the Gothic heroine.<sup>11</sup>

#### **A House Is Not a Home: Mrs. Clennam and the House of Clennam.**

In *Little Dorrit* the Clennam house functions as both private and public space.<sup>12</sup> As Wolfreys points out, in the nineteenth century, “banks and offices” were also called “houses” (2002, p. 99; see also Houston, 2006, p. 3). This applies to the Clennam house, which can be elucidated through both

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<sup>10</sup> See also Ayşe Çelikkol, 2011, p. 130 and David Jarrett, 1977, p. 156.

<sup>11</sup> It is also possible to read *Little Dorrit* as a version of the Gothic heroine, but space does not permit me to discuss both her and Affery. For a comparison of *Little Dorrit* as Gothic heroine in relation to Emily in *The Mysteries of Udolpho* see Milbank, 1992, pp. 102-120.

<sup>12</sup> Mighall argues that *Little Dorrit* is an example of Dickens’s “Domestic Gothic” (2008, p. 90), but he ignores the fact that the Clennam house also acts as the place of business of the family bank.



the generic conventions of the Gothic as described by Diane Long Hoeveler<sup>13</sup> and through Freud's idea of the *unheimlich* or uncanny, especially his assertion that the uncanny is defined most of all by the intrusion of the *unheimlich* into the realm of the *heimlich*, both of which rely on the idea of haunting (2003, p. 132). In *Little Dorrit* "The Clennam family house is the most obvious site of haunting . . . though by no means the only one" (Wolfreys, 2002, p. 106).<sup>14</sup> Vidler offers a suggestive description of this haunted locale:

The house [in the nineteenth century] provided an especially favored site for uncanny disturbances: its apparent domesticity, its residue of family history and nostalgia, its role as the last and most intimate shelter of private comfort sharpened by contrast the terror of invasion by alien spirits. (1994, p. 17)

Vidler's comments, however, need some modification: the Clennam house's domesticity is *only* "apparent", "family history" is itself uncanny, and nostalgia perverse, as Clennam discovers at the very beginning of the novel (Dickens, 2003, *Dorrit*, p. 48). Moreover, there is and has never been any "intimate shelter of private comfort" since the house is less "[invaded] by alien spirits" than by the spirit of an outdated version of capitalism and by Mrs. Clennam's Calvinist self-righteousness which masks a vindictive desire for revenge expressed as religious retribution. Affery *is* induced to believe that the house is haunted by "alien spirits", although in fact she suppresses her own knowledge that the evil spirits of the house are not alien at all, but those of her mistress and husband, Jeremiah Flintwich or "them two clever ones" as she calls them (Dickens, 2003, *Dorrit*, p. 54).

The "domesticity" of the Clennam house is undermined from the beginning of the novel, as we first see it through the perspective of Arthur Clennam. He sees

a double house, with long, narrow, heavily-framed windows. Many years ago, it had had it in its mind to slide down sideways; it had been propped up . . . and was leaning on some half

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<sup>13</sup> Hoeveler argues that "middle-class women writers of this period [the eighteenth century] were particularly attracted to the female gothic novel because they could explore within it their fantasized overthrow of the public realm, figured as a series of ideologically constructed masculine 'spaces,' in favor of the creation of a new, privatized, feminized world" (4). This analysis needs some modification in relation to the Clennam house, however. It might be argued that Mrs. Clennam tries to create what Hoeveler calls "a new, privatized, feminized world" (444) by turning her bedroom into her business place where she can exercise complete control, but she is ultimately unable to stop Flintwich discovering her secret or Blandois invading this world by bringing into it a corrupt version of public/private business in the form of blackmail.

<sup>14</sup> Others might be the Marseilles and Marshalsea prisons, the "dream-like" landscape of Venice as seen through *Little Dorrit*'s eyes, and the London houses of the Merdles and Fanny and Edmund Sparkler.

dozen gigantic crutches: which . . . appeared in these latter days to be no very sure reliance. (Dickens, 2003, *Dorrit*, p. 46).

Just as the fall of the House of Usher is foreshadowed from the start by the crack which the narrator of Poe's story notices when he first sees the house (Poe, 2010),<sup>15</sup> so the final collapse of the Clennam house is anticipated here. The narrator's use of the phrase, "in these latter days", in relation to the "crutches", moreover, adds an apocalyptic connotation to the future fall (Dickens, 2003, *Dorrit*, p. 929 n. 20), a connotation appropriate for Mrs. Clennam and her Calvinist focus on (the Day of) Judgment and punishment. "Nothing changed", thinks Clennam, thus inaugurating one of the dominant leitmotifs of the novel in relation to his mother and the house,<sup>16</sup> which is then reinforced by the description of her room:

There was a fire in the grate, *as there had been night and day for fifteen years*. There was a kettle on the hob, *as there had been night and day for fifteen years*. There was a little mound of damped ashes on the top of the fire, and another mound swept together under the grate, *as there had been night and day for fifteen years*. There was a smell of black dye in the airless room, which the fire had been drawing out of the crape and stuff of the widow's dress *for fifteen months*, and out of the bier-like sofa *for fifteen years*. (Dickens, 2003, *Dorrit*, pp. 46, 49, my emphasis)<sup>17</sup>

The insistence on the time that has passed which, paradoxically, intimates the stopping of time,<sup>18</sup> the negation of the difference between day and night in the repeated phrase "as there had been night and day for fifteen years", and the parallel which the final sentence creates between Mrs. Clennam's "widow's dress" and her "bier-like sofa" together suggest a willed rejection of life and change. Vidler's comment that "the house [of Usher] was . . . a crypt, predestined to be buried in its turn" (1994, p. 18) describes the Clennam house too.

Thus from the beginning the Clennam house is both familiar and strange/ estranging, and the Freudian uncanny is given a public dimension by virtue of the fact that it, and more specifically Mrs.

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<sup>15</sup> Although Jarrett's title, "The Fall of the House of Clennam", suggests Poe's story, the article does not refer to it but instead links the fall of the Clennam house to the collapse of the castle at the end of Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (p. 160).

<sup>16</sup> Other houses are similarly unchanging, like the Casby house (Dickens, 2003, *Dorrit*, p. 160).

<sup>17</sup> Rosemarie Bodenheimer (2007, p. 156) points out the "airless stuffiness and . . . bad smells" of the London houses in *Little Dorrit*. See also Dickens's note in the Number Plans for Book I, chapter 10: "House like a bottle of smell" (Dickens, 2003, *Dorrit*, p. 869).

<sup>18</sup> As Dianne F. Sadoff says, the novel's complicated plot makes "temporal sequence virtually pointless" (1982, p. 18).

Clennam's bedroom, is also the place where she has conducted the business of the Clennam bank, which seems primarily to have been connected with China, thereby inevitably evoking the opium trade, as both Ayşe Çelikkol (2011, p. 126) and Jeremy Tambling (2012, pp. 573-574) have argued. Moreover, the house also conforms to the Freudian notion of the uncanny since it embodies "something that was long familiar to the psyche and was estranged only through being repressed" (Freud, 2003, p. 148), and since, in Tatar's words, "For Freud, the uncanny is connected to the reappearance of something familiar from the childhood of an individual" (1981, pp. 169-170), that is, in this case, Arthur Clennam's completely repressed memory of his biological mother. Yet in *Little Dorrit* the uncanny involves not only the reappearance of repressed secret knowledge, but also of a secret which has been consciously and explicitly *suppressed* by Mrs. Clennam, the woman whom Arthur supposes to be (but who is not) his mother, and who resists any attempt on the part of her supposed son to disinter it.

Mrs Clennam, one of Dickens's most original creations in the realm of the uncanny and the Gothic, can be seen as an example of Derrida's definition of the spectral as "*neither alive, nor dead*" (qtd. in Wolfreys, 2002, p. x). It might initially seem that she is the novel's version of the Gothic mother or mother figure who is hidden or locked away in the house by the villain (Hoeveler, 1998, p. 59); yet it is she herself who wills her own imprisonment and, indeed, condemns herself to immobility in her wheeled chair, as perverse punishment and retribution for the crimes of the past, most notably her husband's adultery (Dickens, 2003, *Dorrit*, p. 64). When Mrs. Clennam and her room are first described, readers see:

a dim bedchamber, the floor of which had gradually so sunk and settled, that the fireplace was a dell. On a black, bier-like sofa in this hollow, propped up behind with one great angular black bolster, like the block at a state execution in the good old times, sat his mother in a widow's dress. (Dickens, 2003, *Dorrit*, p. 48)

Like her house, Mrs. Clennam is "propped up", this time by a bolster which is compared to "the block of a state execution in the good old times", thus exemplifying Dickens's idea in the Number Plans for the novel: "People like the houses they inhabit" (2003, *Dorrit*, p. 875). Dickens underlines this idea by also emphasizing the parallel between the house and Jeremiah Flintwich:

His head was awry, and he had a one-sided, crab-like way with him, as if the foundations had yielded at about the same time as those of the house, and he ought to have been propped up in a similar manner. (Dickens, 2003, *Dorrit*, p. 48)

As Vidler says of E. T. A. Hoffmann's settings, the parallels between the Clennam house, Mrs. Clennam, and Flintwich show the house as "not simply [an illustration] of primitive Gothic terror but the constructed [equivalent] of the psychological uncanny in architecture" (1994, p. 28). Dickens underlines this "psychological uncanny" by drawing his readers' attention not only to the parallel between the house and its mistress but also between the house and her servant.

Moreover, just as the wooden props holding up Mrs. Clennam's house are implicitly related to "these latter days" of judgment and apocalypse, so she herself, metonymically (through the bolster), is related to the past in the form of "the good old days": she and the house are out of time and disconnected from the present. Clennam emphasizes this disconnection when he tells his mother:

"our House has done less and less for some years past, and our dealings have been progressively on the decline. We have never shown much confidence, or invited much; we have attached no people to us; the track we have kept is not the track of the time; and we have been left far behind." (Dickens, 2003, *Dorrit*, p. 60)

He goes on to say of the house:

"In my father's earlier time, and in his uncle's time before him, it was a place of business – really a place of business, and business resort. Now it is a mere anomaly and incongruity here, out of date and out of purpose." (Dickens, 2003, *Dorrit*, p. 60)

to which his mother replies "Do you consider . . . that a house serves no purpose, Arthur, in sheltering your infirm and afflicted – justly infirm and justly afflicted – mother?" (Dickens, 2003, *Dorrit*, pp. 60-61), adroitly playing off the (completely inappropriate) domestic meaning of the word, "house", against Clennam's reference to its business meaning, and ignoring what he says about the anachronistic state of the business.

Mrs. Clennam's pose as Clennam's "mother" (which she is not, either in terms of biology or nurture) is a bitter and grotesque parody of what a mother might be, just as her room is a parody of domesticity. Moreover, at the end of their conversation, after Clennam has urged her "If reparation can be made to any one, if restitution can be made to any one, let us know it and make it", Mrs. Clennam not only rejects his talk of reparation by referring to herself "in prison, and in bonds here" (the prison meaning of "bonds" being neatly accompanied by the financial meaning), but also

reveals the falsity of her pose as a mother by threatening to renounce her “son” if he ever tries to talk about reparation and secrets to her again, telling him: “if you ever renew that theme with me, I will renounce you; I will so dismiss you through that doorway, that you had better have been motherless from your cradle” (Dickens, 2003, *Dorrit*, pp. 63, 64, 66). Cowed, Clennam backs down, little knowing that he has effectively been “motherless from [his] cradle” since Mrs. Clennam deprived him of his biological mother.

Thus the Clennam house remains a repository of secrets (another of the novel’s leitmotifs),<sup>19</sup> a feature which colours a long description of the house late in the novel. As Clennam walks towards “his mother’s dismal old house”, “his imagination [is] sufficiently impressible to see the whole neighbourhood under some tinge of its dark shadow”, and consequently, to see everything as the embodiment of secrets:

The deserted counting-houses, with their secrets of books and papers locked up in chests and safes; the banking-houses, with their secrets of strong rooms and wells, the keys of which were in a very few secret pockets and a very few secret breasts; the secrets of all the dispersed grinders in the vast mill, among whom there were doubtless plunderers, forgers, and trust-betrayers of many sorts, whom the light of any day that dawned might reveal; he could have fancied that these things, in hiding, imparted a heaviness to the air.” (Dickens, 2003, *Dorrit*, p. 567)

In fact it is his mother’s house which contains “secrets of books and papers locked up in chests and safes” in the form of his biological mother’s letters to Mrs. Clennam begging for the restitution of her son, locked up in the box which Blandois obtained from Ephraim Flintwich, Jeremiah’s brother (and which he has left with Miss Wade); it is his mother’s house which contains keys to the truth about the family in “very few secret breasts”, and it is, again, his mother’s house which contains “plunderers, forgers, and trust-betrayers of every sort” in the persons of both Mrs. Clennam and Blandois, Mrs. Clennam because she has effectively stolen the money left to Arthur’s biological mother and then by default to Amy Dorrit after the death of Arthur’s biological mother by the codicil in his father’s uncle’s will, Blandois because he is blackmailing Mrs. Clennam for £2,000 since he has gained control of the “precious commodity” of the secret of Arthur’s birth (Dickens, 2003, *Dorrit*, p. 779).

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<sup>19</sup> Typically, Dickens offers a variety of treatments of secrecy: the comic-pathetic version in the story Amy Dorrit tells Maggie of the secret love of the “little old lady” (an avatar of Amy herself), the farcical version of Flora Finching and the (open) secret of her past youthful love affair with Arthur Clennam, etc. (Dickens, 2003, *Dorrit*, pp. 311-315 and 165-170).

Appropriately enough, at the end of the novel, the house collapses, burying Blandois but neither Flintwich (who escapes to Antwerp where he effectively becomes his own double, his brother) nor Mrs. Clennam, who, towards the end of the novel, propelled by Blandois's blackmail and her fear that her "son" will learn the truth about his birth and her actions, rises from her wheeled chair, in a vision which is every bit as shocking as the reappearance of the buried Madeline Usher, and staggers through the London streets to the Marshalsea Prison to see Amy Dorrit to persuade her (successfully) to keep the secret of his birth from her supposed son, Arthur. This hysterical action is short-lived and when Mrs. Clennam witnesses the collapse of the Clennam house, she returns to complete silence and immobility for the three years for which she survives. Finally she thus does become an exemplar of the Gothic mother silenced and imprisoned in the Gothic castle; previously, although she lived in self-imposed paralysis in the house which was her physical prison, she dominated its inhabitants and her son through her speech. Now the house has been destroyed and she has also lost the power of speech through which she imposed her will on others, and she is now truly powerless for the first time.

#### **The Gothic Plot: the Villain, the Hero, and a Comic-Gothic Heroine.**

If the treatment of the Gothic setting changes dramatically from *Oliver Twist* to *Little Dorrit*, with the disparate locales and varying focus of the Gothic of the former being replaced by the concentration on one haunted site and its associated plot and themes of the latter, there is a distinct similarity between the plots of *Oliver Twist* and *Little Dorrit*: both hinge on the identity of the protagonist which is kept secret, both use the device of the will, and both rely on the figure of the Gothic villain who is opposed by the hero who is either passive, relying on others to defeat the villain in Oliver's case, or ineffectual, and finally also relying on others to carry out his plans to unmask the villain, as in Clennam's. The plot of *Little Dorrit* (a plot so complicated that the recent Penguin edition includes as Appendix I a summary of the Clennam family history, the will and its codicil), like the plots of so many Gothic novels, turns around a family secret and the idea of punishment and retribution. However, the ideas of punishment and retribution are recast in nineteenth-century Calvinist mode as Dickens creates Mrs. Clennam as a vindictive, self-punishing and self-righteous avenger of the wrong done to her by her husband in his adulterous relationship with the unnamed "dancer" who was Arthur's mother and who goes mad and dies, tended by Ephraim Flintwich, Jeremiah's double and brother. It is this secret which Blandois manages to gain possession of by getting the "locked box" from Flintwich's brother, Ephraim, and which he uses to blackmail Mrs. Clennam.

In *Oliver Twist*, the villain, Monks, speaks in the exclamatory language of melodrama or the popular Victorian theater, and he is identified with the non-English colonial world of the West Indies and the immorality of Paris and the continent more generally.<sup>20</sup> In *Little Dorrit* the Gothic villain, Blandois is also associated with the non-English world, this time in the form of cosmopolitanism: he constantly claims that he is “a cosmopolitan gentleman” (Dickens, 2003, *Dorrit*, pp. 24) and his speech is often represented through markers which identify it as translated French rather than (or sometimes along with) the melodramatic register which Monks uses.<sup>21</sup> However, from his first appearance the spuriousness of Blandois’s claims to be a gentleman is clearly intimated when the jailer’s young daughter instinctively shrinks from him (Dickens, 2003, *Dorrit*, p. 20), and when the landlady of the Break of Day Inn describes him as a murderer who has unaccountably escaped justice, one of those “people who have no human heart, and who must be crushed like savage beasts and cleared out of the way” (Dickens, 2003, *Dorrit* p. 142). The characterization of Blandois, like that of Monks, is an example of the intersection of the Gothic with the theatrical or the melodramatic, while Blandois’s non-English identity has been interpreted as a critique of free trade (Çelikkol, 2011, pp. 130-131). Indeed, in *Little Dorrit* Dickens transforms the Gothic villain into one of the novel’s fraudulent businessman and speculators when Blandois gains possession of the Clennam family secret and both exploits and describes it as a “precious commodity” with which he attempts to blackmail Mrs. Clennam (Dickens, 2003, *Dorrit* p. 779). As Ballinger has noted, the novel effects Blandois’s punishment when he is buried alive (and killed) in the Clennam house when it collapses: he may have escaped the law but he does not escape the functioning of Gothic “poetic justice” or retribution (2008, p. 41).

Blandois is opposed by Arthur Clennam, who may be regarded as Dickens’s recasting of the Gothic hero; Hoeveler argues that “[Ann] Radcliffe makes certain that each one of her heroes faces a life-threatening wound before he is allowed to be alone with any of the virginal heroines” (1998, p. 65), and while Clennam is not physically wounded, he is so disabled by his sense of anomie and guilt as to be almost completely ineffectual. Early in the novel he tells Mr. Meagles: ““I have no will” and then gives a long description of himself, characterized by passive forms, describing himself as having been:

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<sup>20</sup>Jeremy Tambling suggests that Monks may be a product of miscegenation (1995, p. 161).

<sup>21</sup> For example, taunting Clennam in the Marshalsea, Blandois declares: “No, my son . . . I play my game to the end in spite of words; and Death of my Body and Death of my Soul! I’ll win it” (Dickens, 2003, *Dorrit*, p. 779).

“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”. (Dickens, 2003, *Dorrit*, p. 35)

Thus Clennam is so psychologically maimed as to be practically incapable of action. He is Dickens’s Victorian version of the gothic hero as “the ideal feminized and sensitive man” (Hoeveler, 1998, pp. 89-90), whose wounds (psychological rather than physical) represent his effective emasculation and powerlessness.

Indeed, later in the novel Clennam finds himself imprisoned (rather like Valancourt in *The Mysteries of Udolpho*), and unable to follow up on his plan to find Blandois after the latter has disappeared, casting the suspicion of murder on the Clennam house. Instead, Clennam is forced to rely on his surrogates, Cavalletto and Pancks, to locate Blandois and bring him to the Marshalsea for their confrontation. Clennam is ineffectual in every sphere: he cannot make his mother or Affery answer his questions or reveal their knowledge of (the clues to) the secrets of the family’s past (and, in fact, unknown to him, his own birth). His mother refuses to answer his or anyone else’s questions as to whether his father had “any *secret* remembrance which caused him trouble of mind – remorse?” (Dickens, 2003, *Dorrit*, p. 62, my emphasis; see also pp. 63, 713-714), and Affery will only give him a conditional promise to reveal the secrets she has “dreamed” (see below pp. 16-18). Similarly, Clennam cannot make the Circumlocution Office bureaucrats tell him what he wants to know, either, and he cannot make any impression on Blandois when he encounters him unexpectedly in his mother’s house. He is also ineffectual in the world of business, losing his own and Daniel Doyce’s money in the Merdle speculation. Thus he is finally reduced to immobility in the Marshalsea when he is imprisoned for debt, and has to be rescued by Doyce and Amy Dorrit’s money, which she finally inherits because of the codicil in Arthur’s father’s uncle’s will. Indeed, Clennam ends the novel still ignorant of the facts of his own birth, although they are known to the woman he marries (Dickens, 2003, *Dorrit*, pp. 824-826; see also Frank, 2012, 881). Arthur Clennam’s ignorance at the end of the novel suggests that he is still in the grip of the uncanny: Maria M. Tatar describes the dissolution of the uncanny as the lifting of the repression of the secret, saying: “Once the token of repression [which she sees, following Freud, as the sign of the uncanny] is lifted from an uncanny event, what was formerly *unheimlich* becomes *heimlich*: the once hostile world becomes habitable again” (1981, p. 182). In Clennam’s case, the “token of repression” is *not* lifted, and the end of the novel which, as Wolfreys notes, “does not lead us into the house, into the home” (2002, p. 109), suggests that the urban world is still “hostile”, with its menacing houses full of secrets.



Moreover, as Alexander Welsh says, the fact that Amy Dorrit is described in the novel as a “vanishing point” and “the termination of all that was good and pleasant” also suggests that Arthur Clennam’s marriage to her is “the culmination of the hero’s life, but also the end of it” (1986, p. 209), making Dickens’s note in the Number Plans for the novel’s “Very quiet conclusion” (Dickens, 2003, *Dorrit*, p. 905) somewhat ironic.

If Arthur Clennam is a recasting of the ineffectual Gothic hero, the Gothic heroine re-emerges in the grotesquely comic figure of the servant, Affery, whose “dreams” in fact offer several clues to the secret concealed in the Clennam house, but who is so crushed by her husband, Jeremiah Flintwich, that she represses her knowledge of the truth until the novel’s dénouement. Affery can be seen as a combination of the Gothic heroine and a comic-grotesque version of the talkative servant who provides clues to the Gothic mystery. Her behaviour throughout the novel is strikingly similar to that ascribed to the Gothic heroine by Hoeveler:

The female gothic heroine spends most of the text cultivating the posture of passive – aggression through the two extremes available to her: hiding in a room/silence/repression of her emotions and her body, or moving through space in a sort of manic dance/hysterically acting out her assault on the patriarchy. (1998, p. 22)<sup>22</sup>

In *Little Dorrit* Affery continually represses her knowledge of what she has seen and heard: she sees her husband handing over the locked box (which contains the documents which could and finally do reveal the secret of Arthur’s identity and establish Little Dorrit’s right to the inheritance from Arthur’s father’s uncle) to his brother and double, Ephraim,<sup>23</sup> but Flintwich tells her that what she saw was a nightmare and persuades her of its unreality (Dickens, 2003, *Dorrit*, pp. 56-57). Similarly, Affery suppresses her knowledge of the noises which she alone hears for most of the novel, and which she explains as the sound of the “haunting” of the house by Arthur’s mother. On one occasion, however, other characters seem to hear what she hears. When Mr. Dorrit, prompted by Flora, visits the house, Affery bursts out “There! O good Lord! There it is again. Hark, Jeremiah! Now!” (Dickens, 2003, *Dorrit*, p. 657). Before Flintwich silences her, the narrator says:

If there were any sound at all, it was so slight that she must have fallen into a confirmed habit of listening for sounds; but, Mr Dorrit believed he did hear something, like the falling of

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<sup>22</sup> Hoeveler’s description might also apply to Mrs. Clennam, although in her case she embodies “the patriarchy” rather than any “assault” on it.

<sup>23</sup> Sigmund Freud identifies the double as one of the manifestations of the uncanny (2003, p. 141).

dry leaves. The woman's terror, for a very short space, seemed to touch the three; and they all listened." (Dickens, 2003, *Dorrit*, p. 657)

When Arthur Clennam tries (unsuccessfully) to get Affery to tell him what she has seen and heard, she says: "noises is the secrets, rustlings and stealings about, tremblings, treads overhead and treads underneath", before making the conditional promise: "If ever you [Arthur] begin to get the better of them two clever ones [Mrs. Clennam and Flintwich] your own self . . . then do you say to me, Affery tell your dreams! Maybe, then I'll tell 'em!" (Dickens, 2003, *Dorrit*, pp. 720, 722). However, when Clennam has managed to find Blandois at the end of the novel through the investigations of Cavalletto and Pancks, he is unable to hear Affery's explanations, and she tells them to Cavalletto and Pancks instead (Dickens, 2003, *Dorrit*, pp. 798-800, 804-806), finally forcing Mrs. Clennam to take over the telling of the story of Arthur's mother and the codicil leaving money to her or, by default, to Amy Dorrit.

When Affery hears the story of Arthur's mother, in another nod on Dickens's part to the conventional Gothic plot, she imagines her to be either a prisoner in the Clennam house or a ghost which haunts it and which causes the noises which she alone is able to hear. After Ms. Clennam has risen, Madeline Usher-like, from her chair, Affery begs her: "if it's the poor thing that's kept here, secretly, you'll let me take charge of her and be her nurse", and, having been assured that Arthur's mother is dead, she assures them:

"So much the worse . . . for she haunts the house, then. Who else rustles about it, making signals by dropping dust so softly? Who else comes and goes, and marks the walls with long crooked touches, when we are all a-bed? Who else holds the doors sometimes?" (Dickens, 2003, *Dorrit*, p. 818)

In the dénouement, where the Clennam house collapses, burying Blandois within it, in a scene which recalls the final collapse of the House of Usher, Dickens is able to offer his readers a moment worthy of Ann Radcliffe and the "explained supernatural" (Castle, 1995, p. 121 and see Jarrett, 1977, p. 160) when the mysterious noises which Affery has heard periodically throughout the novel are revealed to be the sounds of the house getting ready to collapse because of structural damage, thus fulfilling the novel's proleptic comment that the house had "had in its mind to slide down sideways" and that the "gigantic crutches" propping it up were "no very sure reliance" (Dickens, 2003, *Dorrit*, p. 46). Affery can be seen as the embodiment of what Wolfreys calls the "Comic-Gothic": "a working-class mode of articulation, which shares certain proletarian affinities with the grotesque, the carnivalesque, the

melodramatic, and the music hall; in short, with all forms of popular entertainment” (2002, pp. 25 and 157 n. 16), and as an example of what Wolfreys sees as the “irreversible movement [of the nature of gothic] from genre to trope [in the nineteenth century]. . . marked by an inward turn perhaps, an incorporation which is also a spectralization” (2002, p. 25). While Wolfreys is right to point out the “inward turn” of much nineteenth-century Gothic, his assertion that in this period the Gothic moves “from genre to trope” is perhaps debatable. Arguably even the eighteenth-century Gothic is just as much a collection of tropes as it is an entirely separate genre: think of the intermingling of the Gothic with the sentimental in Ann Radcliffe’s *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, for example. Still, Wolfrey’s comment reminds us that in *Little Dorrit* the haunted house (or House) of Clennam is paralleled by Affery’s “haunted mind”: the two types of haunting (of/in the Clennam house and of Arthur Clennam and Affery’s minds) *also* reveal the use of the Gothic to dramatize and expose financial fraud as well as family secrets, and so to enact a linking of the public and private which goes beyond a simple exploration of the individual psyche.

## Conclusion

The changes in Dickens’s use of the Gothic from *Oliver Twist* to *Little Dorrit* may be seen as the transition from the predominantly “Urban Gothic” of *Oliver Twist* to the creation of what Alison Milbank calls “the haunted space of the mind” (2002, pp. 158-159) as well as the haunted space of the private and banking house in *Little Dorrit* which links the personal and public/business domains. While in *Oliver Twist* the city as criminal labyrinth is arguably the single most important Gothic trope, in *Little Dorrit* the narrator evokes “the gloomy labyrinth” of Mrs. Clennam’s thoughts (Dickens, 2003, *Little Dorrit*, p. 59), and the image might well be applied to Arthur Clennam and Affery as well as to the reader thanks to the latter’s confusion because of the complications of the plot, especially in relation to the codicil in Arthur’s great-uncle’s will and who exactly the legatee will be, and why. However, the prominence of the psychological dimension of the Gothic in *Little Dorrit*, as I have argued, does not preclude a public or commercial dimension. Indeed, the guilt and *anomie* from which Arthur Clennam suffers can be seen as a reaction to the injustice inflicted on his biological mother and his father as well as on the Dorrit family. While it might be argued that in *Little Dorrit* as well as in *Oliver Twist* the Gothic functions as a means of ensuring justice beyond the law - Nancy’s eyes contribute to Sikes’s hanging while the collapse of the house of Clennam buries Blandois, the Gothic villain, and renders Mrs. Clennam permanently powerless and paralyzed – it is Arthur Clennam’s continual if ill-defined sense of guilt connected with a family secret (which has both private and public/commercial dimensions) which finally brings about the revelation of the truth.

If *Oliver Twist* uses Gothic elements somewhat randomly and depends on the image of the city as criminal labyrinth, the portrayal of Monks as Gothic villain, and the fears and hallucinations of Nancy and Sikes to create the city as an uncanny space where justice can only exist beyond the law in the realm of the Gothic, *Little Dorrit* presents a more carefully integrated version of the Gothic where external and internal elements – the uncanny Clennam haunted house and the haunted minds of Affery and Arthur Clennam – act together both to unsettle the reader and also to ensure, ultimately and belatedly, that justice is done. In both novels the Gothic functions as an alternative to the insufficiencies of the legal system which cannot ensure justice, but in *Oliver Twist* the role of the Gothic in enacting justice is not integrated into the plot - Monks is punished by the Brownlow cabal in a scene which has many melodramatic overtones but few or no Gothic resonances – while in *Little Dorrit* the Gothic enactment of justice is much more coherently intertwined with the plot and the characterization of the Clennams as well as with Dickens's indictment of both Calvinist doctrine and shady business practices.

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