Death of the Child and Death of the Aged : A Study of Dickens's *The Old Curiosity Shop*

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The Old Curiosity Shop (1840-41), Dickens's fourth novel first published as a serial in weekly parts, has been often criticized severely by various critics, especially for its sentimentality and flaw in structure. While the contemporary readers were much in tears over Little Nell's death, it is well known that Oscar Wilde attacked it, saying "One must have a heart of stone to read the death of little Nell without laughing."[1] Steven Marcus comments, in *Dickens from Pickwick to Dombey*, that the novel "is least likely to be read with sympathy today, " and its "very intensities. . . are those least suited to command the attention of modern literary mind."(129) He even goes on to say, "T[t]here is not much doubt that *The Old Curiosity Shop* is Dickens's least successful novel." Another critic mentions that "its weaknesses and failures are so obvious that they hardly need detailing" (Lucas 73). Marcus, on the other hand, recognizes the "development of the mind of a novelist," just as a later critic, Paul Schlicke, positions *The Old Curiosity Shop* as "the end of his literary apprenticeship" (4) and "a giant stride towards the maturity which was to make him the foremost novelist of the age"(8). While admitting the "rough edges" in the novel, he duly commends it, saying "Dickens achieves artistic coherence far more complex and satisfying than anything in his previous work, and liberating for the novels yet to come"(9).

It seems to me, however, the theme of death, which permeates the novel and has

been blamed as "the public indulgence of private sorrow"(Marcus 129), especially concerning its culmination in Nell's end, has more profound significance than it appears on the surface. Though the novel may have started as Dickens's "effort to come to terms with Mary Hogarth's tragic death"(Lucas 73), that is, the premature death of his wife's sister, the presentation of Nell's death in the book is worth much more careful consideration, for he did not plan to have the girl die at the beginning of his creation.[2]

Different from the death scenes in the author's later novels (such as little Paul Dombey's death in *Dombey and Son* or Abel Magwich's death with the hero Pip at his side in *Great Expectations*), or even from the death in this book of the little schoolboy she meets on her journey, Nell's dicease is not directly witnessed by the reader. We are not allowed to be present at her deathbed to confront the moment simultaneously as it proceeds. When the group of Nell's friends, who have tried to find out the whereabouts of the grandfather and the girl and have pursued them, finally come up with the two wanderers, Nell is already dead, and we, together with them, receive the accounts of her last moments only at second hand. Although the death of the young girl is pitiful enough even through its indirect presentation, it is the response and attitude of people around her that the novel seems to focus on. Moreover, by unfolding the girl's death in this manner, the author not only makes the reader share the hopeless and grieving sense of being too late, which Kit and other pursuers of Nell should be feeling on the spot, but augments the symbolic function of Nell's existence. The purpose of this essay, therefore, is to reconsider little Nell's symbolical death from the viewpoint of continuity/discontinuity of the stages of life, such as childhood and adulthood, or of this world and the other world, adopting the sociological notion of life course or life cycle.

I.

"The symbolic burden placed on Nell Trent's famously frail shoulders," according to Patricia and Çolin Robson, is "perhaps the heaviest carried by any girl in literature" because she represents, at once, "a safe home, a happy childhood, and an idyllic rural past"(75). Little Nell has been regarded as the incarnation of purity and innocence just like Oliver Twist, who was intended to show "the principle of Good surviving through every adverse circumstance," as the author himself declares in the preface to the novel. A critic, Malcolm Andrews, defines Nell and Oliver as "C[c]hildren central to his earlier novels. . . not . . . allowed to grow up" (135). Interestingly enough, he also suggests that there was a Victorian view of a child as "a diminutive version" of a grown-up person and the idea of the "continuity of development," that is, the belief a child will develop into a full-sized grown-up, while the same period saw some evidences of the totally opposite notion : "G[g]rown-ups are presented as dismal grotesque and hopeless materialists, a doomed race" and the "bright beautiful little creatures. . . belong almost to a different race"(179). These two views, each laying stress on continuity and discontinuity of development raise the sociological notion of life course, life stage or life cycle, and the author's choice of a grandfather and a girl for the main characters of his novel seems to signify more than mere "positive relationship between young and old"(Covey 61). This section will begin by discussing how these two opposite views are presented in the novel.

Beauvoir in *La Vieillesse* understands that Dickens is opposed to the tendency to connect oldness with childhood, and that his bitter attack against old age is expressed in the following passage from *The Old Curiosity Shop*:

> An indistinct idea he had, that the child was desolate and in want of help. . . but he seemed unable to contemplate their real position more distinctly. . . . We call this a state of childishness, but it is the same poor hollow mockery of it, that death is of sleep. Where, in the dull eyes of doating men, are the

> laughing light and life of childhood, the gaiety that has known no check, the frankness that has felt no chill, the hope that has never withered, the joys that fade in blossoming? Where, in the sharp lineaments of rigid and unsightly death, is the calm beauty of slumber, telling of rest for the waking hours that are past, and gentle hopes and loves for those which are to come? Lay death and sleep down, side by side, and say who shall find the two akin. Send forth that libels our own old happy state, and gives its title to an ugly and distorted image.(Ch.12)

The severe voice of the author shown here, Beauvoir analyzes, derives from his irritation against the high rating the aged were invested by the society(233). Dickens, who here seems to challenge Shakespeare's line, "To die: to sleep; No more," not only shows the repugnance towards old age but foregrounds the clear separation between childhood and old age. By denying the similarity of the old man's state to childishness, the author supports the notion that children and adults, especially the aged, are completely different races.

The irretrievability of the past time and lost childhood is effectively represented again towards the end of the book, when the grandfather's brother earnestly implores for the restoration of their past close fraternity:

> Our love and fellowship began in childhood, when life was all before us, and will be resumed when we have proved it, and are but children at the last. As many restless spirits. . . retire in their decline to where they first drew breath, vainly seeking to be children once again before they die, so we. . . will set up our rest again among our boyish haunts, and going home with no hope rearised. . . carrying back nothing that we brought away, but our old yearnings to each other. . . may be, indeed, but children as at first. And. . . even if what I dread to name has come to pass. . . still, dear brother, we are not apart, and have that comfort in our great affliction.(Ch.71)

These passionate words fail to move the grandfather's heart but only invite his

suspicion about their weaning him from his granddaughter. He flatly refuses the entreaty by his once dearest brother, though they are united again after the separation for many years.

Thus, Dickens, on the one hand, stresses the difference between children and grown-ups. Yet, on the other, he suggests the conflicting notion of continuity through Nell's psychological tendencies, which, broadly speaking, seem to proceed in a certain direction: from "hope and confidence" into "loss of hope," which Erikson defines as the qualities of infancy and old age, respectively.[3]

One of the most striking features we find in Little Nell, when the girl is first introduced to the readers through the first person narrator Master Humphrey, is "her confidence" in him, who is a total stranger to her(Ch.1). She has lost her way in the middle of London because of the darkness of the night and asks him to show the right way. Although her request sounds so bold as to make Master Humphrey ask what if he should tell her wrong, she is simply sure that he will not do so. Her intuitive confidence in him, which even seems to increase as they walk together, impresses and pleases the narrator, making him to determine "to deserve it" and "do credit to the nature" which has prompted her(Ch.1). On their way, she talks with him in "an unsuspicious frankness." This trustfulness of the little girl coincides with the syntonic element of the psycho-social crisis of the infant stage, the first of the eight (or nine) stages in human life according to Erikson's epigenetic theory. Nell, of course, is already beyond infancy, but it is noteworthy that the novel opens with the emphasis on this quality in the girl.

Another characteristic conspicuous in her at the earlier stage in the book is "hope," which is categorized as the distinctive strength of the infant stage. Her night walk mentioned above turns out to be an errand concerning money: her grandfather sends her to Daniel Quilp, one of Dickens's demonic and memorable villains, to borrow money. The grandfather's love toward Nell is beyond dispute, because "the love of two dead people[that is, Nell's grandmother and mother, both of whom died

young and looked quite like the girl]" has been "transferred to this slight creature"(Ch. 69). The old man, however, has somehow chosen to devote himself to gambling as a means to obtain money so that he can save his granddaughter from the present poverty and make her happy. He seems to have become addicted to gambling, going out every night leaving the child lonely at home, losing money and becoming inevitably poorer and poorer. When Quilp finds out that his precious money is spent not on business but vainly on gambling, he takes possession of the debtor's premises and all the things there, with the help of his attorney Sampson Brass. As the villain comes to occupy the house, Nell and the grandfather decide to "wander barefoot through the world, than linger" there, as the girl has suggested to her grandfather a little earlier(Ch.12). At this moment, Nell's heart beats "high with hope and confidence" without any "thought of hunger, or cold, or thirst, or suffering." Such an exalted psychology of the child continues sometime after their departure from the house. We witness, a few days later, Nell springing from the bed early in the morning "hoping and trustful," after sleeping overnight at a public-house (Ch.17).

Her companionship with the show-people, on the other hand, soon brings forth in her the dystonic element of the early childhood stage — doubt. One of the pair, the misanthrope Mr. Codlin, of all people, begins to commend himself so much to her "with a number of benevolent and protecting looks" that she is not "free from a misgiving that they were[are] not the fittest companions"(Ch.19). As Mr. Codlin continues his altered behaviour, Nell is made "more watchful and suspicious." The other man, Short, also causes to increase "the child's misgivings," making her "yet more anxious and uneasy." Even at this point, the girl has undergone quite a change in her state of mind, and her anxiety will continue to grow more and more intense as she is involved with a variety of troubles.

Their final journey out of the great manufacturing town, whose "noise and dirt and vapour" have "hemmed them in on every side" and "shut out hope, and render escape impossible," seems to exhaust whatever energy left in the girl; she pursues the

way "W[w]ith less and less hope or strength"(Ch.45). When they happen to reunite with the old schoolmaster on the way, her condition is such that he remarks she is "O[o]ld in adversity and trial"(Ch.52). Her loss of hope, that is despair, is the dystonic element of the psycho-social crisis of the old age stage.

Thus, a panoramic view of Nell's life is quite similar to the whole course one traces in his/her life. In the following parts, we will dwell on the details of her experiences, first focusing on her association with grown-ups and then on her exclusion from other children.

II.

Nell's journey with her grandfather after leaving their home does seem to present a compressed course of life, more than the cliché comparison of traveling to one's life. Though it is, of course, impossible to apply all the epigenetic stages of Erikson's theory to the episodes of Nell's journey, yet we surely witness her ascending the ladder to the adulthood at unnaturally high speed through her experiences, partly because of her exclusion from other children and her association with variety of grown-ups. The departure from their house marks the departure from her childhood, so to speak. In this chapter, we will pursue Nell's symbolical tread through human life course, though she is actually "not allowed to grow up."

As is mentioned earlier, Nell is full of blind hope at the outset, without concrete fear of the difficulties in the future. The girl does not even know their destination when they get out of the door, and asks the grandfather which way to go. Receiving no answer from the old man, however, she realizes that she should be "thenceforth his guide and leader"(Ch.12). Her sense of responsibility as his guide and leader is seen to grow fast on their way. According to the descriptions of the first day, they have their breakfast in the field, and at a pool of clear water there, Nell cools her own feet first,

and then casts water on her grandfather, too. The grandfather then confesses that he can do nothing for himself and entreats her not to leave him, to which the girl responds not with tears but with a cheerful smile and rallies him. Soothed by her gentle words, the old man falls into sleep "like a little child"(Ch.15). On the second day, at a labourer's hut, we find her selecting the "best fragments for her grandfather" from their basket(Ch.15). Nell refuses, on the third day, "to touch anything in which he was [is] not the first and greatest sharer," so that the landlady of the public house is "obliged to help him first"(Ch.16). Needless to say, her efforts to secure victuals and lodgings, especially for the comfort of the grandfather rather than of herself, ranges over economic concern. Nell attempts, to begin with, to spare the little money she has brought with her, knowing that she has to beg when it is gone: she resolves never to produce a piece of gold, the best she has, except in a case of desperate emergency, and sews it into her dress to hide it. Her little stock, however, cannot last long, and the time comes when only a few coins are left for them, even if they do with "a scanty supper"(Ch.19).

Instead of merely begging, the girl strikes upon an idea of making some wild flowers into nosegays to sell to the people coming to see the horse-racing. This idea must have come to her not only because she has seen her fellow travellers, Codlin and Short, perform their show here and there, but because she notices the horse-racing town is greatly enlivened by the event, with a lot of people flowing in, public-houses crowded, and various tradespeople crying out on the wayside or common ground. She senses a chance of business here, as it were, though her intention is foiled by "many balder beggars" and "other adepts in their trade," and she ends in receiving a little money from only one lady(Ch.19). Nell's first attempted business, in spite of its failure, brings about another chance for her, which is more rewarding and stable: a lady on a caravan, Mrs. Jarley, who remembers having seen the girl at the horse-racing town, provides a certain position to her as a guide and attentdant for Mrs. Jarley's wax-work exhibiton.

Mrs. Jarley first invites the child and the old man to have tea, and then offers a ride to the next town. On their way, the lady learns that these two travellers are wandering around without any particular employment, and that the girl can read and write, while the lady herself is lacking in those arts. She then proposes "a good situation" for the girl, but they do not accept it immediately: they negotiate with her, insisting that they will never part from each other. A little disconcerted by their response, Mrs. Jarley next suggests that the old man has to help her with whatever he can while the girl should point out and tell the history of the wax-work to the company. She goes on into "the details of common life," remarking that "with reference to salary" she will decide the sum when she has "sufficiently tested Nell's abilities, and narrowly watched her in the performance of her duties," and that she will provide "board and lodging" for both of them, adding that "the board should always be good in quality, and in quantity plentiful"(Ch.27). It is Nell that finally announces they will accept the offer, and concludes the contract with this shrewd lady, though she does so after consulting with her grandfather about the conditions. She now is fully and formally employed to earn the living for the old man and herself, discharging her role as the "guide and leader" of the grandfather.

While thus bearing an unchildlike responsibility to support her family, Nell is required to display her childlike beauty by Mrs. Jarley. This lady always calls Nell "child" without using her proper name, as if she thought it was Nell's quality as a child that really counted for her business. Mrs. Jarley's "inventive genius" creates, one after another, "various devices for attracting visitors to the exhibition": she asks a poet to write an acrostic for advertisement, haggling over its price; she does not hesitate to make changes in the figures and costumes of the wax-work to alter a clown into a grammarian, a murderess into a religious writer and Queen Mary of Scotland into Lord Byron, when she is expecting young ladies of boarding-schools as the audience (Ch.29). Her genius cannot overlook little Nell as one of her devices:

The light cart in which the Brigand usually made his perambulations being

> gaily dressed with flags and streamers. . . Nell was accommodated with a seat beside him, decorated with artificial flowers, and in this state and ceremony rode slowly through the town every morning, dispersing handbills from a basket. . . . The beauty of the child, coupled with her gentle and timid bearing, produced quite a sensation in the little country place. . . . This desirable impression was not lost on Mrs. Jarley, who, lest Nell should become too cheap, soon sent the Brigand out alone again, and kept her in the exhibition room, where she described the figures every half-hour to the great satisfaction of admiring audiences.(Ch.29)

Nell is here utilized as a little "living wax-work," to use Jennifer Wicke's expression in *Advertising Fictions* (74), and it might be regarded as an example of the "society's exploitation of children"(Andrews 2) . Through the contradictory roles as a parent to her grandfather and a mannequin to represent the value as a beautiful child, Nell must undergo an identity crisis, the role confusion typical of the adolescence stage. Her natural quality as a child, in addition, seems to be transformed, or deformed, by the decorative commercialism of Mrs. Jarley to be assimilated into the world of grown-ups.

This period of Nell's journey, besides, brings still more predicaments to get over. For one thing, she happens to catch a glimpse of Daniel Quilp who has been the threatening cause of their wandering flight. Though she can hide herself without being seen by him, she feels "as if she were hemmed in a legion of Quilps, and the very air itself were filled with them"(Ch.27). The fear of the man, "a perpetual nightmare to the child"(Ch.29), stirs great uneasiness in her and brings about weariness and over-watching. For another, the grandfather, who is now "in the same listless state, with no prospect of improvement. . . a poor, thoughtless, vacant creature," resumes his gambling habit; his absorption in gambling has been another reason for their decision to leave home. The old man and Nell get caught in a shower while sauntering, and take shelter at a public-house, where the grandfather insists to join the gambling men,

impatiently snatching the purse from his granddaughter. Though he loses on that occasion, he steals into Nell's room at night, takes money and goes out to join them again. When they go back to Mrs. Jarley's, the grandfather requires Nell to hand him all the money left for them, to which request Nell cannot but obey for fear of his stealing from their employer Mrs. Jarley. Witnessing the old man taking part in gambling wildly and enthusiastically, Nell makes up her mind to fly again, and that without waiting for another day. On their new flight, the girl feels that there is "no divided responsibility now; the whole burden of their two lives had[has] fallen upon her, and henceforth she must think and act for both"(Ch.43).

Thus, away from children's society and undergoing various experiences of hardship and anxiety, Nell comes to assume an air of being "old in adversity and trial" (Ch.52). The author deals with the issue of "old children" later again in *Bleak House*, introducing the memorable Smallweed family. The sons of the family, from generation to generation, have always been "early to go out," just as Little Nell is:

> . . . the house of Smallweed. . . has strengthened itself in its practical character, has discarded all amusements, discountenanced all story-books, fairy tales, fictions and fables, and banished all levities whatsoever. Hence the gratifying fact, that it has had no child born to it, and that the complete little men and women whom it has produced, have been observed to bear a likeness to old monkeys with something depressing on their minds.(Ch.21)

Nell, as we have seen, develops a "lean and anxious" mind, which is characteristic of a Smallweed, in a very short time through her troublesome journey of flight with her grandfather. The description of Smallweed children above reminds us of the scene where Nell is too tired and worn out from the care and difficulty of the journey to enjoy the Punch show, while the grandfather laughs loudly and frequently, trying to wake up the girl and share the joy. Just as in the case of Smallweed family, Nell's anxiety of "practical character" "has discarded all amusements. . . and banished all levities whatsoever."

Towards the end of their proceeding, she also comes to suffer from much physical weakness, saying that she has "pains in all my[her] limbs from the wet," just as aged people might suffer pains from neuralgia or rheumatism(Ch.45). At their final dwelling, the old house near the old church, the grandfather, who has been Nell's burden and responsibility, awakes "to the sense of what he owed[owes] her, and what those miseries had[has] made her," and gives up all his selfish thought for the love of her. On the other hand, Nell, who has played the part of a parent to her grandfather and shouldered the care and responsibility of an adult's, is now helped, watched, and cared for, as a person past her prime and in her decline. While her weakness here, of course, can be ascribed to some illness, it represents the resemblance to the natural decay at the end of one's full course of life.

III.

While filled with manifold experiences among the circle of the grown-ups and the aged, Nell's life is marked with her strange exclusion from children's society. In the first chapter of the book, the narrator Master Humphrey feels relieved and even grateful to see the girl "bursting into a hearty laugh" which is "childlike and full of hilarity," when the boy named Kit comes into the house. He describes the boy as "the comedy of the child's life," which is spent alone with her grandfather, surrounded by "old and curious things"(Ch.1). This source of her merriment, however, is soon taken away from the girl by an unjust means of Daniel Quilp. Quilp, who is interested in Nell, tries to acquire some information about the girl's life with the grandfather, taking advantage of her confidence in his wife. He orders his timid wife to talk softly and mildly to Nell, though his wife vainly refuses to deceive the girl. After eavesdropping their conversation, the money lender supposes the grandfather has been spending his money on gambling, which means there is almost no possibility of regaining the

money he has lent. Quilp carries out the attachment of the premises mentioned before, but he cunningly attributes the revelation to Kit, who works for the grandfather and is in the position to learn what is going on in the family. The grandfather easily believes that Kit has worked as a spy for Quilp, and fires him at once, forbidding the boy from even approaching his shop and house. The girl herself visits Kit's house to announce the grandfather's decision, without doubting that the boy is the cause of the old man's misery. Thus Nell has to part with "almost the only friend" of hers, as she calls him (Ch.10).

After launching on her journey, however, Nell has a couple of occasions to get in touch with children of her own age. The first is at the village school, where Nell and her grandfather happen to approach to ask for a lodging for the night. The school has boys ranging from four years old to fourteen or more, but Nell neither mixes with them nor talks to them: she just sits on a stool by the window and does some needlework there, though attentive to what is going on in the room. The only person she speaks to is the old schoolmaster, who is depressed by the serious illness of his best pupil. Later that day, Nell visits the sick boy's cottage with the schoolmaster, but, again, it is only with the schoolmaster that the boy talks: Nell just presses the passive hand of the boy while the schoolmaster and the pupil hold each other in a long embrace. Soon after that, the boy passes away, without making friends with the girl.

The other chance for Little Nell to come close to children is on her journey with Mrs. Jarley of wax-work exhibition. When Mrs. Jarley's caravan stops at a place of exhibition, a group of children gather around them. These children, however, do not regard Nell as one of their kind but suppose her as "an important item of the curiosities"(Ch.28). While staying in that town, moreover, Nell is told by Mrs. Jarley to visit a girls' school to distribute bills for advertisement. Nell is insulted by the schoolmistress for being a "wax-work child" and not having "the proud consciousness of assisting. . . the manufactures"of the country(Ch.31). The girl cannot but stand with downcast eyes in the middle of the students' gazing eyes, and she starts to cry at the

teacher's words. Although one of the students, Miss Edwards, is kind enough to stoop and pick up the handkerchief Nell has let fall, that student is blamed by the teacher for having an attachment to the lower class, which destroys the opportunity for the two girls to become friends. Some time afterwards, Nell happens to see Miss Edwards spending the vacation with her younger sister who has come to visit her. As the "sense of respect for the short and happy intercourse of these two sisters" forbids Nell to approach them, she just follows them "at a distance," "unseen by them, unthought of, unregarded"(Ch.32). Here again, Nell is alienated from the society of the children, though she feels "as if they were her friends"(Ch.32).

At the end of her journey, when she is provided with a dwelling near an old church, she does find a friend among young children playing in the churchyard and they become "close companions"(Ch.55). Their friendship, however, seems a little different from the ordinary relationship found among children of their age, for it is based on the little boy's anxiety about Nell's leaving them and becoming an Angel before long. The boy has this idea implanted through the rumours among the people around him, all the more because he has a sad experience of having lost his elder brother who was only seven. While imploring her to stay among them, he somehow appears to accept the possibility of her leaving this world to join Willy, the boy's deceased brother, saying: "But if you do go, Nell. . . be fond of him[Willy] for my sake. Tell him how I love him still, and how much I loved you; and when I think that you two are together, and are happy, I'll try to bear it"(Ch.55). It sounds as if he believed that Nell belonged to the other world even at the moment, and it is to make sure of her being still on this side that he so often comes to bear her company. Though they are close, there is a sense of an invisible yet wide ditch lying between them.

As has been discussed, Nell's distance from other children is an important factor to corroborate her symbolical process of life course, which she goes on to follow towards the untimely death. In the following part, we will deal with the issue of death itself, focusing our attention on diverse views of mortality.

IV.

In addition to the characteristics shown so far, another attribute that is peculiar to this girl is her association with churchyards or graves and her involvement in death in a variety of ways, which raise the issue of views on mortality. She and her grandfather happen to meet their first fellow travellers, the Punch-show men, Codlin and Short, when they are straying among the tombs in an old churchyard. They leave the place together to stay at a nearby public-house, but early next morning, Nell strolls back into the churchyard and wanders around the place, reading the inscriptions on the tombs, feeling "a curious kind of pleasure in lingering among these houses of the dead"(Ch.17). Then the girl meets an old lady who has come to her husband's grave there. She tells Nell how moanful and heart-broken she was at her first visit there, which was fifty-five years ago, to pray for her love who had died at the age of twenty-three:

> . . . she spoke of the dead man as if he had been her son or grandson, with a kind of pity for his youth, growing out of her own old age, and an exalting of his strength and manly beauty as compared with her own weakness and decay; and yet she spoke about him as her husband too, and thinking of herself in connexion with him, as she used to be and not as she was now, talked of their meeting in another world, as if he were dead but yesterday, and she, separated from her former self, were thinking of the happiness of that comely girl who seemed to have died with him.(Ch.17)

Here, the old lady presents her view of "separation" of her present self from her former younger self, emphasizing the discontinuity of the younger stage and the older stage of one's life course, or the gap between this world and "another world." On this occasion, Nell does not express any opinion of her own but "thoughtfully retraced[es] her steps." This short scene, however, only foreshadows the later, much more elaborately developed scene centering around death.

At the end of her journey, Nell is reunited with the old schoolmaster, who makes arrangements for the two travellers so that they can live in an old house next to his own residence. These two old dwellings stand close by the ruinous church, which allows the girl an easy access to the graveyard. In the churchyard, Nell becomes acquainted with an old sexton and a man called "the bachelor," the former of whom seems more interesting and requires our attention here. While the bachelor, as a result of his study he has continued, tells Nell tales and legends surrounding the old church, the old sexton bluntly delivers to her what he has learned from his occupation closely related to death. When asked by the girl why the flowers and shrubs in the graveyard grow poorly, the sexton answers that they "hang their heads, and droop, and wither" "B[b]ecause the memory of those who lie below, passes away so soon," and "'tis a good sign for the happiness of the living"(Ch.54). The sexton's too realistic notion of death, which seems to lay stress on the separation between the worlds of the living and the dead, brings tears in Nell's eyes. This old man of seventy-nine has, at the same time, a curious habit of talking about the "next summer," though he has been suffering from serious rheumatism and has to lean on a crutch. His view of *his own* life and death is characteristically described in the scene of his conversation with David, another old man who helps him dig a grave.

While David is working, the sexton talks with him about the woman who is going to be buried there. We notice, quite easily, their chief concern is the age of the dead lady Becky Morgan. At the beginning, the sexton says that Becky was "not more than sixty-four," but David contradicts him by saying she was near their age and declares that she was seventy-nine(Ch.54). After the short conversation with Nell mentioned above, the sexton resumes his discussion on the point of Becky's age, suggesting "that she . . . must have been a deal older," and suppresses David's opposition by arguing, "women don't always tell the truth about their age." David jumps at these words:

'That's true indeed,' said the other old man, with a sudden sparkle in his eye. 'She might have been older.'

'I'm sure she must have been. Why, only think how old she looked. You and I seemed but boys to her.'

'She did look old,' rejoined David. 'You're right. She did look old.'

'Call to mind how old she looked for many a long, long year, and say if she could be but seventy-nine at last—only our age,' said the sexton.

'Five year older at the very least!' cried the other.

'Five!' retorted the sexton. 'Ten. Good eighty-nine. . . She was eighty-nine if she was a day, and tries to pass upon us now, for ten year younger. Oh! human vanity!'(Ch.54)

Still after this, they continue to estimate her age up to a hundred and settle the matter "to their mutual satisfaction." This apparently comical exchange of words between two old men reveals their desperate struggle to push away death as something foreign to themselves, which suggests that they also feel the gulf between the worlds of the living and the dead. Their target is not limited to Becky; the sexton pities David because he is hard of hearing, while David compassionately says that the sexton is failing fast. Two old men part "each persuaded that the other had less life in him than himself," which reminds us of the aged brothers William and Frederick in *Little Dorrit*, where the elder and weaker brother pities and cares for the oldness of the younger. William says, "with an astonishing superiority to his brother's failing powers," "It is painful to me to see you so weak. Ha. It distresses me. Hum. . . You should be more careful," and later he even confirms his impression telling his daughter, "Your uncle wanders very much. . . and his conversation is more—hum—broken. . . Greatly broken. . . "(II; 19).

Nell has wondered about this tendency, especially in the sexton, thinking "how strange it was[is], that this old man, drawing from his pursuits and everything around him, one stern moral, never contemplated[s] its application to himself"and seems "to

deem himself immortal"(Ch.53). On the contrary, her behaviour since the arrival at this place seems to suggest her readiness for the approaching end of her own life. On the first night of their arrival, for instance, Nell, while looking at "the dying embers" and looking back at "her past fortunes," feels "the solemn presence. . . of Death" filling her "with deep and thoughtful feelings, but with none of terror or alarm"; there has "grown in her bosom blessed thoughts and hopes, which are the portion of few but the weak and drooping"(Ch.52). A few days later, she spends a long time alone in the old ruined chapel, where time has "trodden out" the pilgrims' track and "Heaven's work and Man's" all find "one common level" and tell "one common tale"(Ch.53). Her quiet and tranquil state of mind, the "calm delight" she feels here seems to have some characteristics common to the state of "gerotranscendence." J.M.Erikson mentions: it involves a cosmic vision, the sense of being part of a larger context, and a change in the perception of time, so that the boundaries between past, present and future are erased; aged people with this transcendent vision tend to spend more time on meditation than on materialistic transactions(181-190). Leaving the chapel, she looks down from the top of the church tower at the fields and woods, the cattle, the smoke and the children, which all appear so beautiful and happy that she feels it is "like passing from death to life. . . drawing nearer Heaven"(Ch.53). What Nell feels here is the sense of fusion of this world and that, continuity between the two, rather than discontinuity. Her act of making the graveyard into "garden," as she calls it, by plucking nettles or clearing the turf of leaves and weeds, also represents the unity in her mind of life and death.

As we have seen, somewhat notorious death of Nell has much more weightiness than it first appears: it seems to derive from more serious requirement than just boosting the sales of the book. We have discussed how the novel shows the contradicting views on the relationship between children and grown-ups, superficially emphasizing their discontinuity, and yet suggesting, at a deeper level, the continuity

through the course Nell proceeds and through her view on life and mortality.

In his later work *A Tale of Two Cities*, one of the characters Mr Lorry, who is an aged gentleman of seventy-eight, says in his conversation with a young man about life and childhood:

> . . . as I draw closer to the end, I travel in the circle, nearer and nearer to the beginning. It seems to be one of the kind smoothings and preparings of the way. My heart is touched now, by many remembrances that had long fallen asleep, of my pretty young mother (and I so old!), and by many associations of the days when what we call the World was not so real with me, and my faults were not confirmed in me.(III; Ch.9)

This sense of cyclical movement of time, which corresponds with Erikson's idea in *The Life Cycle Completed*, is another aspect Nell's death unfolds: she dies as a child, after figuratively tracing the whole life course, overlapping and embodying the death of a child and the aged. Her grandfather's succeeding death at Nell's grave enforces this notion, adds to the sense of continuity among the stages of life, and suggests the blurred boundary between this world and another, which the busy society of the Victorian Period, where everything was felt fragmented, must have strongly yearned for.

Notes

1 This famous phrase is frequently cited, for instance, in *Oxford Reader's Companion to Dickens* 426.

2 Paul Schlicke points out this fact, quoting from John Forster's *The Life of Charles Dickens* (Ed. J.W.T.Ley. London: Cecil Palmer, 1928): 151; 2: Ch.7.

3 E. H. Erikson's Epigenetic Chart is shown in many of his books, for example in *The Life Cycle Completed: A Review.*

E.H.Erikson's Epigenetic Chart

VIII. old age								wisdom
VII. adulthood							care	
VI.young adulthood						love		
V. adolescence					loyalty			
IV. school age				compe-tence				
III. play age			purpose					
II.early childhood		will						
I. infancy	hope							

Basic Conflict in Each Stage

I. trust vs. mistrust II. autonomy vs. shame/doubt III. initiative vs. guilt
IV. industry vs. inferiority V. identity vs. role confusion VI. intimacy vs. isolation
VII. generativity vs. stagnation VIII. ego-integrity vs. despair

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