The approach to the Dickens mode of experience lies along the river and stretches into the marsh. Between them, the river and marsh configurations shape the background against which the drama of human life is played out. Many of their related images reflect the twinned themes of time and death, for whenever one contemplates an individual against the perspective of eternity, attention is drawn both to the brevity of each life and to its sharply defined final boundary. Dickens makes this sensitivity to time—ultimately attentiveness to one's own mortality—the critical test of life in his characters: its presence connotes a full capacity for living, while indifference to time is the mark of the dead or moribund. The river, like time, continuously flows with change; the marsh, like eternity, is static and unmoving. "Tempus fugit" issues glibly from human lips. The image clusters connected with the river and with the marsh through which it flows restore complex life to the dead metaphor in the dead language.

Dickens belongs to a long line of allegorists in viewing individual human life as a linear journey through time from birth to death—resistless, adamant, irreversible. Sometimes this journey lies, like Dante's, through a darkening wood; most frequently, however, it is down a river from source to sea. This river, at its idyllic "garden" source far upcountry, is meandering and pure. As it moves toward the ocean, however, it gathers such force and speed that by the time it flows through the city and under the city
bridges toward the marsh, it heaves and ebbs with the tidal flow of
the nearby sea, and roils darkly with the debris it has gathered
along its course. Dickens develops these features of the river as one
interpretation of the human relationship to time and death.²

In the allegorical “Nobody’s Story”³ (Christmas story for 1853),
a partial picture of this river introduces the story:

He lived on the bank of a mighty river, broad and deep, which was
always silently rolling on to a vast, undiscovered ocean. It had rolled
on, ever since the world began. It had changed its course sometimes,
and turned into new channels, leaving its old ways dry and barren,
but it had ever been on the flow, and ever was to flow until Time
should be no more. Against its strong, unfathomable stream nothing
made head. No living creature, no flower, no leaf, no particle of ani-
mate or inanimate existence, ever strayed back from the undis-
covered ocean. The tide of the river set resistlessly toward it; and the
tide never stopped, any more than the earth stops in its circling
round the sun.

Sometimes the river analogy applies primarily to general hu-
man life, sometimes to the individual life; but most often, as here, it
shifts back and forth between the two. Although “Nobody” lives on
the bank of the river, each “living creature” is understood to travel
down its course. The vague point of view ambiguously identifies
the reader with both Nobody on the bank and the life carried along
in the water, since no “living creature” can escape its tide. Thus, at
times the individual may live beside the river, but at other times the
river may itself be construed as “the living waters” of human life.

A fuller perspective of the river occurs in Our Mutual Friend as
Betty Higden wanders through the country just before her death:

In those pleasant little towns of Thames, you may hear the fall of the
water over the weirs, or even, in still weather, the rustle of the rushes;
and from the bridge you may see the young river, dimpled like a
young child, playfully gliding away among the trees, unpolluted by
the defilements that lie in wait for it on its course, and as yet out of
hearing of the deep summons of the sea. It were too much to pretend
that Betty Higden made out such thoughts; no; but she heard the
tender river whispering to many like herself, “Come to me, come to
me! When the cruel shame and terror you have so long fled from,
most beset you, come to me!” (OMF, bk. III, ch. 8)

Although it were indeed too much to pretend that Betty Higden
made out such thoughts, Dickens takes care that the reader shall do
so: that one shall imagine the pure young river, unhurried and
carefree in an idyllic pastoral landscape; the polluted and rushing river as it approaches the imperiously calling sea; the bridge from which the river may be observed; the siren lure of the water to a troubled human being. As with much of the Dickens imagery, the physical reality depicted, though indispensable, is expressionistic. Betty Higden, looking down at the river from the bridge, completes in her person the analogy set up in the inverted simile. If the young river in which she is reflected is like a dimpled child, she in turn reflects the “old” river. She looks through eyes that have seen both the river and humanity in their polluted lower reaches, and she herself is fast approaching the summoning sea. Betty’s experience attests to the fact that corruption and defilement lie in wait not only for the literal river; human life itself, individually or collectively, moves along in a stream, gathering pollution about it as it grows more concentrated and hurried. For this reason, the heavily populated city along the river is corrupt and defiled. Below the city bridge, the presence of death is felt as an ambiguously guilty or unnatural thing (as in the suggested suicide).

The image of the bridge is conspicuous in the total picture of the lower river. From above (as for Betty Higden, or “you”), it furnishes a view of the river for those in a mood to contemplate. From below, its shadowy arches hover threateningly overhead. From above, the city bridge provides a junction for the two streams of human life, the individual and the collective. The stream of humanity flows back and forth, coming and going across the bridge with the river flowing below it. But at any moment an individual may detach from that stream to peer more or less thoughtfully down toward the river with its awful implications, not only for that person, but also for the entire indifferent stream. The individual may or may not at the moment be completely aware of the implications. The view from the bridge is obscured in *Bleak House*, for example, when “Chance people on the bridges [peep] over the parapets into a nether sky of fog, with fog all round them” (*BH*, ch. 1).

But the view is clear for Master Humphrey of *The Old Curiosity Shop*, an old man with leisure for thought, who is led to speculate at length about “the stream of life that will not stop”:

the crowds for ever passing and repassing on the bridges . . . where many stop on fine evenings looking listlessly down upon the water, with some vague idea that by-and-by it runs between green banks which grow wider and wider until at last it joins the broad vast sea—where some halt to rest from heavy loads, and think, as they look
over the parapet, that to smoke and lounge away one's life, in a dull, slow, sluggish barge, must be happiness unalloyed—and where some, and a very different class, pause with heavier loads than they, remembering to have heard or read in some old time, that drowning was not a hard death, but of all means of suicide the easiest and best. (OCS, ch. 1)

Master Humphrey seems ominisciently aware of the river's implications for everybody in these fancied musings. For each thought, in its own way, says to the pausing wayfarer: "Come to me, come to me!" toward either actual death or the "drowned" death-in-life of the lotus eater on the barge.

Although the death association seems to occur with any bridge, city bridges carry the heaviest weight of meaning. It is important that the city (often London) lies near the sea. In The Mystery of Edwin Drood, a picture develops that brings together upper and lower river, city, bridges, and death. After an idyllic summer boat trip up the river for Mr. Tartar and his friends "came the sweet return among delicious odours of limes in bloom, and musical ripples; and, all too soon, the great black city cast its shadow on the waters, and its dark bridges spanned them as death spans life, and the everlastingly-green garden seemed to be left for everlasting, unregainable, and far away" (MED, ch. 22). The "great black city" here is Cloisterham (Rochester) rather than London, but here too the river is "already heaving with a restless knowledge of its approach towards the sea." The location of the city along the lower river possesses double significance, for by now the river is running very fast, with a sense of urgency; it also seems that the city itself, with its streams of humanity, is responsible for the debris and pollution loading the river. If the "chance people" on the bridge in Bleak House had been able to see through the fog, they would know that the river "rolls defiled among the tiers of shipping and the waterside pollutions of a great (and dirty) city" (BH, ch. 1). But the impenetrable fog in which they stand prevents their sensing either the urgent message of the rolling water for themselves, or the responsibility they might have for its condition.

David Copperfield, however, catches all such implications. He and Mr. Peggotty, he writes, were following the desperate Martha through the river streets of London in the vicinity of Blackfriars Bridge. Instead of going across the bridge, as he had expected, she led them away from the peopled thoroughfare along the river bank choked with refuse waiting to fall over the brink into the water.
David comments on how quickly she moved “when she got free of the two currents of passengers setting towards and from the bridge” (DC, ch. 47). They made their way through a dreary neighborhood, where “a sluggish ditch deposited its mud at the prison walls,” where “carcases of houses . . . rotted away” and “the ground was cumbered with rusty iron monsters.” Here:

Slimy gaps and causeways, winding among old wooden piles, with a sickly substance clinging to the latter, like green hair, and the rags of last year’s handbills offering rewards for drowned men fluttering above high-water mark, led down through the ooze and slush to the ebb tide. There was a story that one of the pits dug for the dead in the time of the Great Plague was hereabout, and a blighting influence seemed to have proceeded from it over the whole place. Or else it looked as if it had gradually decomposed into that nightmare condition, out of the overflowings of the polluted stream.

As if she were a part of the refuse it had cast out, and left to corruption and decay, the girl we had followed strayed down to the river’s brink, and stood in the midst of this night-picture, lonely and still, looking at the water. (ch. 47)

In the light of this discussion, the implications of this passage begin to shift subtly back and forth through levels of significance. On the first level, Martha, viewing the scene, finds an analogy between the river and her own life. “‘I know it’s like me!’” she exclaims. “‘I know that I belong to it. I know that it’s the natural company of such as I am! It comes from country places, where there was once no harm in it—and it creeps through the dismal streets, defiled and miserable—and it goes away, like my life, to a great sea, that is always troubled—and I feel that I must go with it!’” She therefore feels the urge to throw herself into the river to become another piece of debris drawn along by the ebbing tide: the lifeless human body adding the final corruption as the river approaches the sea. Then David adds: “I have never known what despair was, except in the tone of those words. ‘I can’t keep away from it. I can’t forget it. It haunts me day and night. It’s the only thing in all the world that I am fit for, or that’s fit for me. Oh, the dreadful river!’” Martha’s strong sense of personal guilt leads her to her conclusions.

But what of the other stream that David fancies has cast her out, the “polluted stream”? In his view (the second level), the river is not her life, but that other stream of indifferent humanity: the guilt is not hers, but theirs in thus abandoning her to death. Beyond these two layers of meaning, human guilt does not go. But the “corrup-
tion" present in the disinterred or floating bodies is the final defile-
ment by death itself. Independent of human iniquity, yet vile and
terrible, it projects the meaning onto a third level of significance to
question the source of human suffering itself, and also to provide
firm warning of the destination to which time brings everyone.

The value of these multilayered images of impending death lies
in their power to evoke the questions of human guilt and suffering
in all their complexity, and to make it difficult to rest on glib an-
wers. A similar unsettling uncertainty attends a passage from Our
Mutual Friend. Here again, two outside observers, Eugene and
Mortimer, are making their way down to the riverside to investi-
gate the supposed drowning of John Harmon: “The wheels rolled
on, and rolled down by the Monument, and by the Tower, and by
the Docks; down by Ratcliffe, and by Rotherhithe; down by where
accumulated scum of humanity seemed to be washed from higher
grounds, like so much moral sewage, and to be pausing until its
own weight forced it over the bank and sunk it in the river” (OMF,
bk. I, ch. 3). Once more, what forces the human debris into the
river? Is it pushed in, as suggested by “moral sewage,” or does it fall
by its own weight of corruption? The question remains open. What
stands sure is that below the city bridge, corruption points with
vague accusation, like Mr. Tulkinghorn’s finger of Allegory in Bleak
House.

Dickens’s craftsmanship was not always in command of this
multilayered imagery at the expressive level. The author was going
into his late thirties when he wrote David Copperfield; he was less
than twenty-five when he began Oliver Twist. Yet Martha is already
imaginatively prefigured in Nancy of the youthful novel. The dif-
ference in craftsmanship in their presentation is noteworthy. Like
Martha, Nancy looks back with regret upon a life that separates her
from “virtuous” women to such an extent that they righteously
shrink away from her. Like Martha, she considers herself beyond
redemption. Nonetheless, she is determined to save innocent Ol-
iver from Fagin and Bill Sikes and thus makes arrangements for
periodic rendezvous with Rose Maylie and Mr. Brownlow. “‘Every
Sunday night, from eleven until the clock strikes twelve,’ said
the girl without hesitation, ‘I will walk on London Bridge if I am alive!’”
(OT, ch. 40). As we shall see, the unhesitating choice of place illus-
trates the way in which Dickens’s own experience led him to inter-
weave the river-bridge analogy and Nancy’s approaching murder. 6

Two Sundays later, unknowingly followed by Noah Claypole, Nancy makes her way toward the bridge: “The church clocks
chimed three quarters past eleven as two figures emerged on Lon-
don Bridge” (ch. 46). A very dark night, “and at that hour and place there were few people stirring. Such as there were, hurried quickly past: very possibly without seeing, but certainly without noticing, either the woman, or the man who kept her in view.” These two “crossed the bridge, from the Middlesex to the Surrey shore.” Just before the arrival of Rose and Brownlow, “the heavy bell of St. Paul’s tolled for the death of another day.”

Nancy, afraid to talk on the public bridge, leads Rose and Brownlow to a flight of steps “which, on the Surrey bank, form a landing-stairs from the river.” The scene is carefully, even laboriously, described.

These stairs are a part of the bridge; they consist of three flights. Just below the end of the second, going down, the stone wall on the left terminates in an ornamental pier or pedestal facing towards the Thames. At this point the lower steps widen, so that a person turning that angle of the wall is necessarily unseen by any others on the stairs who chance to be above him, if only a step. (ch. 46)

Noah, who has slipped ahead of them, pauses in this angle, “as there seemed no better place of concealment, and, as the tide being out, there was plenty of room.”

Visually imagined, this scene suggests the total bridge picture. The configuration on the bridge is that of indifferent passing stream and detached individuals, with Noah at one point even “leaning over the parapet” to conceal his figure from the girl (like the “chance people” in Bleak House “peering over the parapet” into the concealing fog). The descent upon the stairs moves the visual scene below the bridge, and imagination supplies the shadowed arches looming above. Brownlow asks Nancy why she has brought them to “‘this dark and dismal hole,’” and she replies that all day she has had “‘horrible thoughts of death, and shrouds with blood upon them.’” Reading a book, “‘I’ll swear I saw “coffin” written in every page . . . —aye, and they carried one close to me, in the street tonight.’”

Whether the introduction of the associational bridge imagery in this chapter of Oliver Twist was unconscious on the part of the young author, whether he feared that his readers would miss the implications, or whether he purposely built the effect rhetorically, the insertion of the tolling bells and the macabre fears reenforces meanings that the more accomplished craftsman in later books would
entrust to the river-bridge imagery alone. Evidently, the young writer had not yet assimilated the separate elements into a well-defined, self-supporting analogical unit.

Nancy’s confidants, fearing for her future after she has made her revelations about Fagin and Bill, urge her to come with them to begin a new life. But she chooses to return, for she feels chained to her old life although she hates it.

“What,” cried [Rose], “can be the end of this poor creature’s life!”

“What!” repeated the girl. “Look before you, lady. Look at that dark water. How many times do you read of such as I who spring into the tide, and leave no living thing, to care for, or bewail them. It may be years hence, or it may be only months, but I shall come to that at last.” (ch. 46)

Like Martha once more, she clearly considers “the dreadful river” to be “the only thing in life that I am fit for.” By daylight on that very morning, Bill Sikes murders Nancy, fulfilling her premonition of a violent death, a fate to which she, at the least, acquiesces.

As in Martha’s case, whose was the guilt? Bill killed her, to be sure, but what held her to the life to which she felt chained? Once more, Dickens has left nothing here for the “imagination” to grasp, for he has already had Nancy answer these questions in the earlier conversation with Rose. “‘I must go back,’” she explains. “‘Whether it is God’s wrath for the wrong I have done, I do not know; but I am drawn back to him through every suffering and ill-usage: and should be, I believe, if I knew that I was to die by his hand at last’” (ch. 40). Nancy accepts her guilt, but what does she mean by: “I am drawn back to him through every suffering and ill-usage”? Here is more than a suggestion of layered meaning. Are she and Bill perpetrators or victims of the suffering and ill-usage that draws them together? To emphasize the ambiguity, she has just explained to Rose that her situation might have been quite altered had indifferent humanity earlier shown her the compassion communicated now by Rose. “‘If I had heard [such words] years ago, they might have turned me from a life of sin and sorrow; but it is too late, it is too late!’”

Thus at discursive length Dickens piles up and spells out in *Oliver Twist* the death-associated meanings of the bridge and the lower river. At the other extreme, these meanings are so muted that they are almost subliminal, as in the following passage from *Bleak House*, where contrasting images are innocently separated by
the chapter division. Jo has temporarily paused from his incessant “moving on” toward his death. He sits “munching and gnawing” near St. Paul’s Cathedral.

There he sits, the sun going down, the river running fast, the crowd flowing by him in two streams—everything moving on to some purpose and to one end—until he is stirred up and told to “move on” too.

Chapter 20

The long vacation saunters on towards term-time like an idle river very leisurely strolling down a flat country to the sea. Mr. Guppy saunters along with it congenially. (BH, chs. 19, 20)

The urgency of time running out permeates the first sentence: Jo’s personal river drawing fast to the sea, the streams of people flowing indifferently past him in two directions, until someone casts him out (like Martha) and moves him on away from the main current of people preoccupied with “some purpose,” while all thoughtlessly move on “to one end.” With the next sentence, Mr. Guppy, finny inhabitant of the main stream, saunters along, complacently unconscious of approaching “term-time,” through a “leisurely” pastoral scene literally set in that same London. He may even be one of the “crowd flowing by” Jo. Multilayered irony cuts sharply between the two chapters: Jo, the innocent doomed child, belonging to and yet cast out from the corrupt stream in which Guppy moves; Guppy pursuing his childlike course along the innocent up-country river without thought of responsibility; and the actual river, unnoticed by Jo, Guppy, or the crowd, though it is “running fast” past the little scene. The function of the river cluster is pivotal for the ironic accents with their implicit warning, later in the story to be made most abundantly explicit as Jo proves his universal brotherhood by democratically sharing his disease: the indifferent river of humanity can ill afford to ignore the corruption and urgency of the river beside which Jo sits momentarily.

At all times the river flows fast as it approaches the sea, but it flows fastest when the tide is ebbing; now of all times and between the tidal boundaries of all places is a human body likely to be found floating among the other refuse. Part of the impact of the analogy to life arises, as usual, from the fact that the statement is literally true. Mr. Crisparkle, joining the search for Edwin Drood, uses this fact to guide him: “No search had been made up here, for the tide had been running strongly down... and the likeliest places for the discovery of a body, if a fatal accident had happened under such
circumstances, all lay—both when the tide ebbed, and when it flowed again—between that spot and the sea" (MED, ch. 16). If a body exists anywhere in the river, most likely it will be here. But the meaning quickly spills over into the terrifying knowledge that a human body in the river is a somehow guilty thing. Who in reading of this does not find reenforced the presentiment that Edwin Drood has been foully murdered?

Gaffer Hexam makes a living from knowing where a body may be found. In the first chapter of Our Mutual Friend, he and his daughter Lizzie are abroad on the river at a crucial time, for “the tide, which had turned an hour before, was running down” (OMF, bk. I, ch. 1). Lizzie, guiding the boat, watches her father’s face to catch his signalled directions, and “in the intensity of her look there was a touch of dread or horror.” Somehow, if her father is not the cause of her horror, he is in some way implicated. The man is completely absorbed by the immediate situation, but whatever the business at hand, he trusts the girl to guide the boat according to his signals. This situation calls forth Lizzie’s reaction of terror as the light from the setting sun “glanced into the bottom of the boat, and touching a rotten stain there which bore some resemblance to the outline of a muffled human form, coloured it as though with diluted blood.” The “rottenness” of this stain has no literal referent. The description is furnished by the girl’s suggestible state of mind: the affective value of the statement is a deepened suggestion of human involvement in some horrible act.

Although the surface hint throughout this chapter suggests that Gaffer might himself be a murderer, and although Dickens makes the most of the uncertainty in the later accusations against the man, he is not as a matter of fact guilty of the charge—nor does Lizzie herself harbor the clear suspicion. The guilt invoked is more profoundly the vague guilt implicit in the image clusters of the lower river and the ebbing tide. Lizzie’s feelings of terror are heightened by her father’s matter-of-factness. He reasons with her, pointing out her ingratitude to the provident river, and the impossibility of hurting a lifeless body. To him, the human body is merely valuable salvage drifting among the other debris, and after this successful expedition, he glances with nothing but satisfaction over the stern “at something the boat had in tow.” The girl, however, has “pulled the hood of the cloak she wore over her head and over her face.”

The course of the river, then, provides a persistent pattern of images suggestive of the course of human life. Although its irre-
versible movement from source to sea relates it to time, the river and time are not the same. A highly charged passage from Our Mutual Friend dramatically illustrates their interlaced yet separable meanings. Bella is on a train rushing her to the bedside of Eugene Wrayburn, who is expected to die momentarily.

Then, the train rattled among the house-tops, and among the ragged sides of houses torn down to make way for it, and over the swarming streets, and under the fruitful earth, until it shot across the river: bursting over the quiet surface like a bombshell, and gone again as if it had exploded in the rush of smoke and steam and glare. A little more, and again it roared across the river, a great rocket: spurning the watery turnings and doublings with ineffable contempt, and going straight to its end, as Father Time goes to his. To whom it is no matter what living waters run high or low, reflect the heavenly lights and darkneses, produce their little growth of weeds and flowers, turn here, turn there, are noisy or still, are troubled or at rest, for their course has one sure termination, though their sources and devices are many. (OMF, bk. II, ch. 11)

Then into a carriage, and “the nearer they drew to the chamber where Eugene lay, the more they feared that they might find his wanderings done.” Finally, Bella sits by the bedside with the others, silently waiting: “And now, in this night-watch, mingling with the flow of the river and with the rush of the train, came the questions into Bella’s mind again...”

Within the images of train and river here associated, two ways of looking at time are portrayed. One of these pictures presents time as a metronomic and objective measurement of duration. This is the train rushing straight through the night at unvarying rate. The other picture, of the turning and doubling river, presents the relative and subjective measurement of duration. However long and leisurely a summer day may seem to Guppy, it is still only twenty-four hours long. All the “watery turnings and doublings” by which an individual may gain the illusion that time has stopped cannot negate the objective fact that it actually carries him along at exactly the same rate.

Thus the muted ironic warning contained in the juxtaposed passages from Bleak House receives in Our Mutual Friend a more direct and rhetorical statement. Human life, it reiterates, may sometimes meander and dawdle with a quite unwarranted sense of leisure, while time thunders relentlessly across it at the same pace whether the river is far up country or close to the sea. Although a
Guppy or a Gaffer does not see it, the warning flows along under their noses. The more thoughtful among mankind, however, feel with Lizzie the terror of its threat and, like Bella, are led to question the course of their lives.

2

The marsh assemblage of images implies the mystery shrouding the beginning and end of temporal existence. These images form an ambiguous grouping in which the origins and destiny of every individual are darkly linked in the unknown preceding birth and following death. Life comes up out of the sea through the marsh; it is drawn back through the marsh into the sea. Water, air, land, and stones mix confusedly here. The picture is a landscape only—not a seascape—for visibility ceases this side of the point where the land finally disappears. One hears and feels the sea in the winds surging inland, but it is not clearly seen.

The marsh, then, borders the sea. Long lines stretch across it: the river, the edge of the sea, streaks in the sky, occasional stepping-stones. It is a featureless waste, broken only where some man-made structure rears up blackly against the sky, or where some living creature passes momentarily across it. It is a place of fog, darkness, cold, wet, east wind and implacable wintry weather. Time is of no consequence in this world where it is perpetually twilight or nighttime. Such life as the marsh affords has come up out of sea and mud. It is primitive and threatening: reptiles, amphibians, and huge monsters; cold-blooded, mindless, sometimes savage. These creatures lurch and waddle and limp and jerk in a fearful parody of the rhythmic grace of life. An aura of vague guilt pervades the marsh. The only colors here are black, gray, and the lurid red or purple of violence, often brought together in the red sunrise or sunset. At the edge of the marsh the graveyard lies in the shadow of the vaguely suggested church. The church/graveyard itself is an uneasy border between life and the ambiguous marsh country.

This is recognizably the land where the reader first meets Pip, "a small bundle of shivers growing afraid of it all and beginning to cry" (GE, ch. 1). Although Great Expectations is narrated by a grown-up Pip who at first expects to look back on his childish view of things with a mixture of amusement and condescension, his detachment quickly vanishes as memory draws him back to be again that child; for however intellectually superior the adult may be to
his childish concepts, their emotional impact upon him is as compelling as ever. What has created his terror? Pip recreates his impressions for the reader:

Ours was the marsh country, down by the river, within, as the river wound, twenty miles of the sea. My first most vivid and broad impression of the identity of things seems to me to have been gained on a memorable raw afternoon towards evening. At such a time I found out for certain that this bleak place overgrown with nettles was the churchyard; and that Philip Pirrip, late of the Parish, and also Georgiana Wife of the Above, were dead and buried; and that Alexander, Bartholomew, Abraham, Tobias, and Roger, infant children of the aforesaid, were also dead and buried; and that the dark flat wilderness beyond the churchyard, intersected with dikes and mounds and gates, with scattered cattle feeding on it, was the marshes; and that the low leaden line beyond was the river; and that the distant savage lair from which the wind was rushing was the sea; and that the small bundle of shivers growing afraid of it all and beginning to cry was Pip. (ch. 1)

This memorable raw afternoon brings to birth Pip’s first real apprehension of his own identity as a mortal human being as he finds out “for certain” what the graveyard and the marsh mean. The flat, ritual intonations induced by the repeated words—“that”/“and that” (repeated seven times) and “dead and buried”/“dead and buried”—well convey his chilling certainty regarding the bleak “identity of things.” The father and mother and little brothers, no longer comfortably interchangeable with the letters on a tombstone or with “five little stone lozenges” were all real people, “dead and buried,” to whom he himself is ominously linked. His origin and his destiny lie together in the graveyard. Simultaneously he feels a fearful relationship between himself and the sea, unseen but sensed in the wind across the marsh. The darkness, the flatness, the low leaden line (all somehow the negation of life) bring close that “distant savage lair” from which not only the wind but all kinds of monstrous creatures might momentarily emerge.

In this setting, Pip has his encounter with “the fearful man,” who will be more fully discussed in the next chapter. All of Pip’s impressions of the convict Magwitch are derived from, magnified by, and indelibly recorded on his consciousness by association with this marshland. At the end of the episode, his fear of the man himself is not sufficiently engrossing to prevent a last sweeping glance across the total landscape:
The marshes were just a long black horizontal line then, as I stopped to look after him; and the river was just another horizontal line, not nearly so broad nor yet so black; and the sky was just a row of long red lines and dense black lines intermixed. On the edge of the river I could faintly make out the only two black things in all the prospect that seemed to be standing upright; one of these was the beacon by which the sailors steered—like an unhooped cask upon a pole—an ugly thing when you were near it; the other a gibbet, with some chains hanging to it which had once held a pirate. (ch. 1)

The Dickens language and imagery everywhere show a lively apprehension that diversity is a basic quality of life and an indispensible sign of life: the monotony of the marsh bespeaks its lifelessness. It is appropriately significant that the only features breaking this monotony—"the only . . . things in all the prospect that seemed to be standing upright"—are manmade intrusions: grave-like mounds and mound-like humps, a gibbet, and a lighthouse that is, perhaps not surprisingly, an "ugly thing." Since human life does not really belong in the marsh, its representations there are all ominously cold and deathlike things. When young David Copperfield comes down to Yarmouth for the first time, however, he finds he would welcome even these dark evidences of life. He reports:

I was quite tired, and very glad, when we saw Yarmouth. It looked rather spongy and sopy, I thought, as I carried my eye over the great dull waste that lay across the river, and I could not help wondering, if the world were really as round as my geography book said, how any part of it came to be so flat. But I reflected that Yarmouth might be situated at one of the poles, which would account for it.

As we drew a little nearer, and saw the whole adjacent prospect lying a straight low line under the sky, I hinted to Peggotty that a mound or so might have improved it, and also that, if the land had been a little more separated from the sea, and the town and the tide had not been quite so much mixed up, like toast and water, it would have been nicer. (DC, ch. 3)

Thus innocently the frozen ("at one of the poles") featureless landscape and the mounds have glancingly foreshadowed the death association.

The mounds of the marsh are obviously death emblems, frequently employed and running through other clusters to which they are appropriate. The marsh lighthouse (the beacon of Great Expectations, "an ugly thing when you are near it"), though less obvious, is even more insistent. It has an especially ominous value, for
while mounds are fulfilling their intended function by containing death, the lighthouse makes a promise of safety it does not fulfill; it is surrounded by death and may sometimes deceptively lure people to it.

For Pip, the ugly lighthouse becomes indelibly associated with his first impressions of the convict Magwitch. Many years later it likewise becomes identified with his last desperate effort to save the life of his benefactor. Even though the trip down the river has seemed to start auspiciously ("The crisp air, the sunlight, the movement on the river, and the moving river itself—the road that ran with us, seeming to sympathize with us, animate us, and encourage us on—" [GE, ch. 54]), the presence of "two or three amphibious creatures" (typical of marsh life) as Herbert and Pip cast off from the Temple Stairs into the falling tide become foreboding signs. Gradually apprehension grows when "by imperceptible degrees, as the tide ran out, we lost more and more of the nearer woods and hills, and dropped lower and lower between the muddy banks . . ." Now the country around begins to lose its differentiated features and the banks form a monotonous, muddy continuation of the river. Pip recalls:

It was like my own marsh country, flat and monotonous, and with a dim horizon; while the winding river turned and turned, and the great floating buoys upon it turned and turned, and everything else seemed stranded and still. . . . Some ballast-lighters, shaped like a child’s first rude imitation of a boat, lay low in the mud; and a little squat shoal-lighthouse on open piles stood crippled in the mud on stilts and crutches; and slimy stakes stuck out of the mud, and slimy stones stuck out of the mud, and red landmarks and tidemarks stuck out of the mud, and an old landing-stage and an old roofless building slipped into the mud, and all about us was stagnation and mud.

We pushed off again, and made what way we could. It was much harder work now, but Herbert and Startop persevered, and rowed, and rowed, and rowed, until the sun went down. By that time the river had lifted us a little, so that we could see above the bank. There was the red sun, on the low level of the shore, in a purple haze, fast deepening into black; and there was the solitary flat marsh; and far away there were the rising grounds, between which and us there seemed to be no life, save here and there in the foreground a melancholy gull. (ch. 54)

This complex mingling of the marsh features and colors brings violence and death very close. Of particular interest at the moment is
the little shoal-lighthouse, which "on open piles stood crippled in the mud on stilts and crutches." A deceptive lighthouse, through no fault of its own: the promises of safety are shipwrecked around its broken foundations as the ballast lighters "shaped like a child's first rude imitation of a boat" lie low in the mud.

The two references to red, the violent color associated with the marsh, are noteworthy in the neighborhood of the lighthouse. This color has its own little family of associations that play back and forth together throughout Dickens's writings and which need to be discussed before the ugly lighthouse can be fully explored. In the passage above, the "red sun" stands in ominous contrast to the earlier bright, cheerful sunlight that filled Pip with hope.

The appearance of the red sun(set) marks the entry into the night and violence of the marsh country, for to the sensitive person it suggests both destructive fire and spilled blood. It heightens the terror felt by Lizzie Hexam in the beginning of Our Mutual Friend, for instance. She steers her father's boat as it cruises the river on its obscurement threatening business. Suddenly,

a slant of light from the setting sun glanced into the bottom of the boat, and, touching a rotten stain... coloured it as though with diluted blood. This caught the girl's eye, and she shivered.

"What ails you?" said the man, immediately aware of it, though so intent on the advancing water; "I see nothing afloat."

The red light was gone, the shudder was gone, and his gaze, which had come back to the boat for a moment, traveled away again. (OMF, bk. 1, ch. 1)

The red light of the setting sun and the association with spilled blood—suggested to Lizzie, though lost on her father—fuse and fade together.15

Later in the story, Lizzie is waiting beside the river for her father, who has been gone all night. The concentrated terror of the opening scene has given way to a haunting fear surrounding her thoughts of him. Appropriately: "The white face of the winter day came sluggishly on, veiled in a frosty mist, and the shadowy ships in the river slowly changed to black substances; and the sun, blood-red on the eastern marshes behind darks masts and yards, seemed filled with the ruins of a forest it had set on fire" (bk. 1, ch. 6). At dawn, that other boundary of the night, the sun is also red. Here it trails in its wake the two violent associations of spilled blood and destructive fire.16
Still another variation occurs later in the book when Rogue Riderhood is stalking the murderously inclined Bradley Headstone, who is rowing along the river.

The boat went on, under the arching trees, and over their tranquil shadows in the water. The bargeman skulking on the opposite bank of the stream, went on after it. *Sparkles of light showed Riderhood when and where the rower dipped his blades, until, even as he stood idly watching, the sun went down and the landscape was dyed red.* And then the red had the appearance of fading out of it and mounting up to Heaven, as we say that blood, guiltily shed, does. *(OMF, bk. IV, ch. 1. Emphasis mine.)*

The italicized sentence shows the Dickens style at its poetic best, as the images coalesce differently in the imagination from the way in which they are physically presented. The “sparkles of light” flashing when and where the rower dipped his “blades” turn to red drops on a knife or dagger before the reader’s eyes, while spilled blood stains the landscape.¹⁸ The conventional analogy of the next sentence reduces the felt thought to the banality frequently evident when Dickens abandons his images and lapses into discursive explanation of their meaning. This passage from one of the last novels illustrates that, despite the evidences of developing craftsmanship in compression, economy, and control, Dickens never learned dependably to rely on presentation—on “showing”: he might well occasionally add the damaging pedestrian explanation in late as in early works.¹⁹

It is now possible to discuss the ugly lighthouse, which is frequently drawn into the configuration of red sun, fire, and blood. Sometimes its red light imitates the red sun to designate it as a siren beacon luring into the marsh. Sometimes unlighted itself, it draws redness to itself, as in the unspecified “red landmarks and tidemarks” that are neighbors to the crippled lighthouse observed by Pip.

In *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, the reader gradually comes to realize that John Jasper lives in an ugly lighthouse. Literally, to be sure, his dwelling is “an old stone gatehouse crossing the Close, with an arched thoroughfare passing beneath it.” But:

Through its latticed window, a fire²⁰ shines out upon the fast-darkening scene, involving in shadow the pendent masses of ivy and creeper covering the building’s front. As the deep Cathedral-bell
strikes the hour, a ripple of wind goes through these at their distance, like a ripple of the solemn sound that hums through tomb and tower, broken niche and defaced statue, in the pile close at hand. (MED, ch. 2)

Already the description contains oblique allusions to the lower river in the suggestion of the arched bridge with a stream flowing under it. The fire, barred by the lattice, is not cheery, but creates obscuring shadows. The "rippling" wind carries a hint of the sea, its connotations of death enhanced by the companion ripple of solemn sound humming through tombstones and stone representations of life. But these are only suggestive wisps. Midway through the story, the allusion becomes pointed. Jasper and Durdles, about to make a midnight excursion into the crypt of the cathedral, pause to glance around them: "The whole expanse of moonlight in their view is utterly deserted. One might fancy that the tide of life was stemmed by Mr. Jasper's own gatehouse. The murmur of the tide is heard beyond; but no wave passes the archway, over which his lamp burns red behind his curtain, as if the building were a Lighthouse" (ch. 12). Jasper's gatehouse, then, stands on the edge of the graveyard, the borderland beyond which life does not go. His lighthouse with its red light and ambiguous meaning is of the marsh: an ugly beacon surrounded by death.

On the evening Edwin will disappear, a terrible storm arises. As it continues through the night, John Jasper's gatehouse light "burns" reassuringly.

The red light burns steadily all the evening in the lighthouse on the margin of the tide of busy life. Softened sounds and hum of traffic pass it and flow on irregularly into the lonely Precincts; but very little else goes by, save violent rushes of wind. It comes on to blow a boisterous gale. (ch. 14)

Further on:

No such power of wind has blown for many a winter night. Chimneys topple in the streets, and people hold to posts and corners, and to one another, to keep themselves upon their feet. The violent rushes abate not, but increase in frequency and fury until at midnight, when the streets are empty, the storm goes thundering among them rattling at all the latches, and tearing at all the shutters, as if warning the people to get up and fly with it, rather than have the roofs brought down upon their brains.
Still, the red light burns steadily. Nothing is steady but the red light. (ch. 14)

Despite the reassuring lighthouse, morning reveals the devastation all about, while time discloses that Edwin has vanished mysteriously sometime during the tempestuous night: the ominous steadiness of the deceptive red light has signaled not safety, but destructive violence.

In the last pages of the novel, left incomplete but clearly approaching its crisis, Mr. Datchery, one of Dickens’s indefatigable bloodhounds, has appeared mysteriously on the scene. Convinced of Jasper’s guilt in the disappearance of his nephew, Datchery has his own interpretation of the lighthouse: “John Jasper’s lamp is kindled, and his lighthouse is shining when Mr. Datchery returns alone towards it. As Mariners on a dangerous voyage, approaching an iron-bound coast, may look along the beams of the warning light to the haven lying beyond it that may never be reached, so Mr. Datchery’s wistful gaze is directed to this beacon, and beyond” (ch. 29). The “warning light” has no power to deceive Datchery with its steadiness. Its warning for him is different as he warily seeks a way past it to the “haven” that is sure evidence of Jasper’s guilt, the end of the case.

The ugly lighthouse takes its place along with the gibbet and the mounds as a prominent feature in the perspective picture of the marsh, itself a monotonous design of long horizontal lines against which such human structures of violence and corruption jut guiltily into the sky. As monotony is the prevailing characteristic of the marsh, human affairs smelling of the marsh share this characteristic. A striking example appears in *Hard Times*, in the portrayal of Coketown, a displaced marsh town.²¹

Let us strike the keynote, Coketown, before pursuing our tune.

It was a town of red brick or of brick that would have been red if the smoke and ashes had allowed it; but as matters stood it was a town of unnatural red and black like the painted face of a savage. It was a town of machinery and tall chimneys, out of which interminable serpents of smoke trailed themselves forever and ever, and never got uncoiled. It had a black canal in it, and a river that ran purple with ill-smelling dye, and vast piles of buildings full of windows where there was a rattling and a trembling all day long, and where the piston of the steam-engine worked monotonously up and down like the head of an elephant in a state of melancholy madness. It contained several large streets all very like one another, in-
habited by people equally like one another, who all went in and out at the same hours, with the same sound upon the same pavements, to do the same work, and to whom every day was the same as yesterday and tomorrow, and every year the counterpart of the last and the next. (HT, ch. 5)22

The affective description of this industrial town produced by the marsh images once more reveals the analogizing nature of Dickens’s thought as his fancy finds appropriate contextual parallels for the originally conceived interpretation. The long lines of river and sky become streets stretching off monotonously in all directions. It is a town of red, black, gray, and purple, with its own appropriately polluted river. The buildings stand in “vast piles” reminiscent of the open piles of the little shoal lighthouse, and their guilty man-made chimneys rear up to belch corrupting “serpents” of smoke, later described as the “monstrous serpents of smoke” which, “submissive to the curse of all that tribe, trailed themselves upon the earth” (ch. 11). Coupled with the painted savage and the mindless elephant, they represent the typical life of the marsh. Chimneys, like lighthouses, do not really belong in the deadly marsh except when they are “ugly”: promising a cheery fireside, they produce only smoke or destruction (cf. the toppling chimneys in Edwin Drood). Chimneys in Coketown, “for want of air to make a draught, were built in an immense variety of stunted and crooked shapes,” like the crippled little shoal-lighthouse. The only people who live “in the innermost fortifications of that ugly citadel,” Coketown, are amphibious marsh creatures, “walking against time toward the infinite world,” and “generically called ‘the Hands’ — a race who would have found more favour with some people if Providence had seen fit to make them only hands, or, like the lower creatures of the seashore, only hands and stomachs” (ch. 10).23

Everything in this world moves monotonously and mechanically: drearily, wearily, “in a state of melancholy madness.” Added to the monotony of place, the deadly monotony of undifferentiated marsh time makes today like yesterday and tomorrow like today.

The London of Bleak House is also a marsh town. In the introductory chapter, emphasis falls on the “implacable weather” of the marsh, its wintry season, and its typical time of day: late afternoon, when the shadows are lengthening and no kind of light can illumine clearly enough for visibility. Later on, lamps will be effective; earlier, the sun was bright and cheerful. But now all light is swallowed in twilight:
Implacable November weather. As much mud in the streets as if the waters had but newly retired from the face of the earth, and it would not be wonderful to meet a Megalosaurus, forty feet long or so, waddling like an elephantine lizard up Holborn Hill. Smoke lowering down from chimney-pots, making a soft black drizzle, with flakes of soot in it as big as full-grown snowflakes—gone into mourning, one might imagine, for the death of the sun. Dogs, undistinguishable in mire. Horses, scarcely better; splashed to their very blinkers. Foot passengers, jostling one another’s umbrellas in a general infection of ill temper, and losing their foot-hold at street-corners, where tens of thousands of other foot passengers have been slipping and sliding since the day broke (if this day ever broke), adding new deposits to the crust upon crust of mud, sticking at those points tenaciously to the pavements, and accumulating at compound interest. (BH, ch. 1)

Here the waddling reptile (the “elephantine lizard” imaginatively merging with the Coketown elephant) and the modern creatures abroad in “London, Michaelmas term lately over, and the Lord Chancellor sitting in Lincoln’s Inn Hall,” all slip and slide together through the eternal mud, the time between them completely canceled out. The guilty drizzle of smoke parodies snow in its flakes of soot, which, along with the fog rolling through the next paragraph, reduce vision to a blur. It is a “raw afternoon” with: “Gas looming through the fog in divers places in the streets, much as the sun may, from the spongy fields, be seen to loom by husbandman and ploughboy. Most of the shops lighted two hours before their time—as the gas seems to know, for it has a haggard and unwilling look.” This eerily luminous gas, like the lighthouse and chimney, belongs here because of its gloomy failure to achieve its usual purpose. It “has a haggard and unwilling look,” and may be seen “much as the sun may”—which is to say very little on this day of the sun’s death.

If London is like the marsh, so is the Court of Chancery, with its own analogous images: its “groping” and “floundering”; with the “foggy glory” around the head of the Lord High Chancellor appropriately sitting on “such an afternoon,” outwardly “directing his contemplation to the lantern in the roof, where he can see nothing but fog”; the members of the High Court “mistily engaged” and “tripping one another up on slippery precedents, grooping knee-deep in technicalities,” and running their heads against “walls of words”—or accumulated mud; the “crimson cloth and curtains” and “red table”; the “wasting candles” in the “dim” court where “stained glass windows lose their colour and admit no light,” where
the chancellor looks into “the lantern that has no light in it,” and where “the attendant wigs are all stuck in a fogbank.” All of these images establish the Court of Chancery as authentic marsh country “which gives to monied might the means abundantly of wearying out the right.” The case of Jarndyce and Jarndyce, the most monotonously pre-eminent of the suits in chancery, “still drags its dreary length before the court, perennially hopeless.” This wounded snake, sluggish and crippled, looks quite at home in the surrounding marsh. Equally at home, “in the midst of the mud and at the heart of the fog, sits the Lord High Chancellor in his High Court of Chancery.”

“Mr. Tangle,” says the Lord High Chancellor, latterly something restless under the eloquence of that learned gentleman.

“Mlud,” says Mr. Tangle. (ch. 1)

Thus innocently Dickens touches together two strands of meaning to create a titillating shock of recognition in the imaginative fusing of his Lordship and the obstructive mud.

The deadening effects of the marsh reach out beyond London to touch other places connected with the story. Esther’s guardian, though he will have nothing to do with the suit, cannot escape being a Jarndyce.

“The Jarndyce in question,” said the Lord Chancellor, still turning over leaves, “is Jarndyce of Bleak House.”

“Jarndyce of Bleak House, my lord,” said Mr. Kenge.

“A dreary name,” said the Lord Chancellor.

“But not a dreary place at present, my lord,” said Mr. Kenge. (ch. 3)

The home of John Jarndyce is not of the marsh, even if its name foreshadows that he must suffer effects from the bleak House of Jarndyce. Lady Dedlock’s “place” in Lincolnshire, on the other hand, is itself a dreary place. “The waters are out in Lincolnshire. An arch of the bridge in the park has been sapped and sopped away. The adjacent low-lying ground for half a mile in breadth is a stagnant river with melancholy trees for islands in it and a surface punctured all over, all day long, with falling rain. My Lady Dedlock’s place has been extremely dreary” (ch. 2). Lady Dedlock feels the dreary effects of the marsh directly, as will be seen in the next chapter.

Jarndyce, on the other hand, acquires his premonitions and ap-
prehensions indirectly, carried along the east wind that blows through the marsh, bitter and cold. This is the wind David Copperfield observes working its chilling effects on Mr. Dick: "How many winter days have I seen him, standing blue-nosed, in the snow and east wind, looking at the boys going down the long slide . . ." (DC, ch. 17). Or, more ominously, it is the "black east wind" of The Haunted Man (Christmas book for 1848), which "would spin like a huge humming-top" through a frozen world. In the case of John Jarndyce, it is even more like the wind used to describe Mr. Twemlow in Our Mutual Friend, where Mr. Veneering's mirror reflects the little man confusedly trying to sort out Veneering's "old" friends: "grey, dry, polite, susceptible to east wind" (OMF, bk. 1, ch. 2). Jarndyce, too, is susceptible to east wind, like Twemlow a kindly and warm human being troubled and easily chilled by marsh weather. In Bleak House, the people around Jarndyce, at first puzzled by his references to the east wind, soon come to accept them as merely his idiosyncratic way of stating alarm. Esther writes:

"The little Jellybys," said Richard, coming to my relief, "are really—I can't help expressing myself strongly, sir—in a devil of a state."

"She means well," said Mr. Jarndyce hastily. "The wind's in the east."

"It was in the north, sir, as we came down," observed Richard.

"My dear Rick," said Mr. Jarndyce, poking the fire, "I'll take an oath it's either in the east or going to be. I am always conscious of an uncomfortable sensation now and then when the wind is blowing in the east."

"Rheumatism, sir?" said Richard.

"I dare say it is, Rick. I believe it is . . ." (BH, ch. 6)

Ada and Esther interpret it differently, as Esther later explains:

Ada and I agreed, as we talked together for a little while upstairs, that this caprice about the wind was a fiction and that he used the pretence to account for any disappointment he could not conceal, rather than he would blame the real cause of it or disparage or depreciate any one. We thought this very characteristic of his eccentric gentleness and of the difference between him and those petulant people who make the weather and the winds (particularly that unlucky wind which he had chosen for a different purpose) the stalking-horses of their splenetic and gloomy humours. (ch. 6)

Jarndyce's references to the east wind ordinarily have a whimsical and humorous look to them, giving him a lovable and eccen-
tric character. But when he encounters the caged birds of Miss Flite, some of whose names indicate the wearying effects of the Chancery Court, the wind grows colder: "'This is a bitter wind!' muttered my guardian. . . . 'If ever the wind was in the east. . . . I think it's there today!'" (ch. 14). Attention in this exclamation, with its darkened tone, draws away from the speaker and more fittingly toward the thing he describes, with its source in the cold marshland: its prevailing east wind emblematizes the chill spirit of the marsh as a force in human affairs: blowing from the bleak wasteland across the entire world, this east wind carries with it everywhere the threat of frozen, guilty death.

Many of the images related to the marsh carry another common thread of meaning: in the marsh the elements have ceased to function in a natural way. In their natural state they nurture and sustain life, but in the unnatural state of the marsh they suspend it in a moribund atmosphere or threaten it with destruction. Water, fire (both light and heat), earth, and air malfunction or commingle to produce destructive paralysis or paralyzing destruction. Lighthouses lure to shipwreck; chimneys lean or topple. The sun either burns everything it touches, casts shadows, or "haggardly" fails to either light or warm the world. In weak imitation, the lamps and lanterns and candles of human creation waste futilely away. Fire burns threateningly or, in a fireplace, creates smoke rather than warmth. Water and earth turn into mud; earth and air become dust—and so on. In this unnatural setting, such "elemental" human structures as church and home similarly malfunction.

An extended example of natural elements gone awry opens Little Dorrit, where Dickens plunges the reader at once into a bewildering confusion of disjointed impressions. Caught between the "Sun and Shadow" of Marseilles, "broiling in the sun" of the "fierce August day," we arrive there along with all the other strangers "stared out of countenance" by the burning sun, the universal stare "making the eyes ache." The stare of this sun shining off every object creates an impenetrable, blinding surface. All of the anonymous inhabitants of Marseilles on this fierce day flee from its blinding stare into the equally obscuring shadowy recesses of houses, churches, or prison. This is not a "natural" sun enlivening a natural scene; rather, it malfunctions as the lighthouses of the marsh do. The city, which should, one would think, be a beehive of activity and life, hangs instead in the motionless suspension of the marsh. Outside the foul water of its harbor lies the natural world of the
“beautiful sea,” but a line of demarcation shows “the point which
the pure sea would not pass” (*LD*, bk. I, ch. 1).

The churches of Marseilles also bear the marks of the marsh-
bordering churches. The sun, which “grant it but a chink or key-
hole . . . shot in like a white-hot arrow,” cannot penetrate their
walls: “The churches were the freest from it. To come out of the
twilight of pillars and arches—dreamily dotted with winking lamps,
dreamily peopled with ugly old shadows piously dozing, spitting,
and begging—was to plunge into a fiery river, and swim for life to
the nearest strip of shade.” These churches lack effective light of
any nature. They exist in a dream world filled with ominous im-
ages. Yet to leave their shadows for the sun or the “river”—un-
naturally fiery—of the outside world exposes one to out-of-control
elements. The prison, too, while shutting out the malfunctioning
sun, has also effectively shut out the “light of day”: “‘Day? the light
of yesterday week, the light of six months ago, the light of six years
ago. So slack and dead!’”

In chapter 3, when Arthur Clennam comes “Home” to London
and to the “House” in which he was reared, the city extending
around him is, like Marseilles, a world suspended in time. He is
surrounded by malfunctioning churches. “Maddening church bells
of all degrees of dissonance” echo hideously around him, newly ar-
ived on this Sabbath day. Also surrounding him are “Ten thou-
sand responsible houses” frowning their disapproval, and “fifty
thousand lairs” gasping for air in the “heart of the town [through
which] a deadly sewer ebbed and flowed, in the place of a fine fresh
river” (bk. I, ch. 3).

As the day dies around Clennam, sitting in a coffeehouse on this
evening of his return home, the rain begins to fall, and the mud
seems “to collect in a moment . . . and in five minutes to have
splashed all the sons and daughters of Adam.” Taking up his hat
and buttoning his coat, Arthur walks out and into the unnatural
rain. “In the country the rain would have developed a thousand
fresh scents, and every drop would have had its bright association
with some form of growth or life.” But here, “it developed only
foul stale smells.”

Proceeding past St. Paul’s and along the river, he passes through
“a narrow alley leading to the river, where a wretched little bill,
FOUND DROWNED, was weeping on the wet wall”; and now “he
came at last to the house he sought”: “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, however, [like the ineffectual little shoal-lighthouse] and was leaning on some half-dozen gigantic crutches.” The House of Clennam is clearly tagged as a marsh dwelling.

Midway through the novel, Dickens reminds the reader of the suspended world through which the story is moving. It is now autumn, with darkness and night creeping up to the highest ridges of the Alps where several groups of weary travellers make their way upward through the Pass of the Great Saint Bernard toward the convent located in the frosty, rarified air at the top. They struggle through barrenness and desolation:

Blackened skeleton arms of wood by the wayside pointed upward to the convent, as if the ghosts of former travellers overwhelmed by the snow haunted the scene of their distress. Icicle-hung caves and cellars built for refuges from sudden storms, were like so many whispers of the perils of the place; never-resting wreaths and mazes of mist wandered about, hunted by a moaning wind; and snow, the besetting danger of the mountain, against which all its defences were taken, drifted sharply down. (bk. II, ch. 1)

Arriving finally at the “weather-beaten structure” like “another Ark,” which is the convent/inn at the top of the pass, the travellers are met by their “host,” a “bright-eyed, dark young man of polite manners . . . who no more resembled the conventional breed of Saint Bernard monks than he resembled the conventional breed of Saint Bernard dogs.” The convent, in fact, functions more as an “inn” than as a religious institution. Thus “rarified” is the representation of the church in the frosty world “up here in the clouds, [where] everything was seen through cloud, and seemed dissolving into cloud.” Like Marseilles on that earlier fierce August day, up here is a dream world arrested in time, in this instance not by unbearable light and heat, but rather by equally unbearable darkness and freezing cold.

Through all of its manifestations in the novels, the static, timeless world of the marsh is a parody of “conventional” ideas about an eternity that contrasts with the temporality of life. Even if behind its images hovers the reality of a mysterious realm preceding birth and following death, the images themselves are analogies for human states of mind and action that imitate the state of death. The
stony coldness of literal death is permanent. Under the proper circumstances, however, the frozen guilty death of the marsh world can be warmed and softened into the flexibility of life.

3

Although the river-marsh configurations have been treated separately so far, in actual practice they are frequently impossible to disentangle without diminishing their combined effect: a clear case where, as is very often true in the functional interplay of the configurations abstracted in this study, the whole is greater—richer and deeper—than the sum of its parts. Dickens provides a fine example of such a combination at the beginning of an obscure journalistic piece (also referred to in note 7), “Down with the Tide,” a title itself alluding to marsh and lower river. Its first few paragraphs are reproduced here:

A very dark night it was, and bitter cold; the east wind blowing bleak and bringing with it stinging particles from marsh, and moor, and fen—from the Great Desert and Old Egypt, may be. Some of the component parts of the sharp-edged vapor that came flying up the Thames at London might be mummy-dust, dry atoms from the Temple at Jerusalem, camels’ footprints, crocodiles’ hatching places, loosened grains of expression from the visages of blunt-nosed sphynxes, waifs and strays from caravans of turbaned merchants, vegetation from jungles, frozen snow from the Himalayas. O! It was very dark upon the Thames, and it was bitter bitter cold.

“And yet,” said the voice within the great pea-coat at my side, “you’ll have seen a good many rivers too, I dare say?”

“Truly,” said I, “when I come to think of it, not a few. From the Niagara, downward to the mountain rivers of Italy, which are like the national spirit—very tame, or chafing suddenly and bursting bounds, only to dwindle away again. The Moselle, and the Rhine, and the Rhone; and the Seine, and the Saone; and the St. Lawrence, Mississippi, and Ohio; and the Tiber, the Po, and the Arno; and the—”

Peacoat coughing, as if he had had enough of that, I said no more. I could have carried the catalogue on to a teasing length, though, if I had been in the cruel mind.

“And after all,” said he, “this looks so dismal?”

“So awful,” I returned, “at night. The Seine at Paris is very gloomy too, at such a time, and is probably the scene of far more crime and greater wickedness; but this river looks so broad and vast, so murky and silent, seems such an image of death in the midst of the great city’s life, that—”
That Peacoat coughed again. He could not stand my holding forth. We were in a four-oared Thames Police Galley, lying on our oars in the deep shadow of Southwark Bridge—under the corner arch on the Surrey side—having come down with the tide from Vauxhall. We were fain to hold on pretty tight though close in shore, for the river was swollen and the tide running down very strong. We were watching certain water-rats of human growth, and lay in the deep shade as quiet as mice; our light hidden and our scraps of conversation carried on in whispers. Above us, the massive iron girders of the arch were faintly visible, and below us its ponderous shadow seemed to sink down to the bottom of the stream. (DT)

Is it by coincidence that this bit of atmospheric reporting contains many of the characteristic images, analogies, and associational relationships of both river and marsh? On the night in question, Dickens was allegedly being given a guided tour of the facilities and activities of the River Police—his guide a matter-of-fact police officer made uneasy by the reporter's apparently rhetorical flights of fancy. His own half-rueful, half-amused acknowledgment of his guide's lack of appreciation masks the fact that, far from being whimsical, every detail belongs in a large picture carried permanently in the mind of the writer.27

The first paragraph reconstructs the marsh through a combination of real and fancied details, carefully conveying that not only the present, but also the whole dead past resides in this timeless world to be blown as dust across the living by the cold east wind. This, then, is the large setting for a night on the river. A middle setting emerges in paragraph three with the catalogue of rivers, which sends the reader's imagination out across the earth as it has already been sent out across time. Thus all time and space hang suspended around the little boat as the writer continues with the analogy toward which he has all this time been working: "This river looks so broad and vast, so murky and silent, seems such an image of death in the midst of the great city's life..."

Now the reporter moves in to describe the immediate scene with a series of carefully chosen details: the "deep shadow," reiterated as "deep shade" and "ponderous shadow"; the bridge; the reiterated arch, the swollen river and the "down with the tide" of the title twice repeated, once verbatim and once as "the tide running down very strong"; the hidden light, the faint visibility, the suggestion of human guilt as they watch "certain water-rats of human growth"; and finally, the imaginative following of the shadow as it
“seemed to sink down to the [muddy] bottom of the stream.” It seems clear that the complex assemblage of suggestive images from river and marsh reflects Dickens’s desire to evoke the background against which to project his ensuing discussion of murder and suicide along the Thames.

Both river and marsh are needed in this picture because, while their connotations are similar in three important respects (their association with death; their ambiguous, vague guilt; their implicit warning), they are very different in their relationship to time. Whereas the warning of the rushing river is of time running out, the timeless world of the marsh, it will be shown, seems to warn even more against death-in-life than it does against the fact of literal death. Human life, it says, which like the marsh is cold, rigid, and monotonous, is no life at all. This warning will be more clearly delineated in the next chapter. Both river and marsh, by projecting the brief human life span against the cosmic background of eternity and infinity, stress the urgency for every individual to live fully each passing moment.