AMPHIBIOUS PEOPLE, savages, and cold-blooded monsters are the travesties of human life to be found haunting river and marshland. Fully alive human beings, like the lighthouses and chimneys—emblems of the light and warmth of human society—do not belong here; even dead ones come no closer than the bordering graveyard. These marsh denizens are either for some reason subhuman, or else have been in some way dehumanized; that is, they may be drawn into the marsh either because they themselves share its characteristics, or because they have been blighted by it. The aura of ambiguous guilt continues to prevail here, where even the victim is usually not completely innocent. (Conversely, few villains are completely guilty.) The responsibility for a person’s condition may rest upon that person, or upon society—or vaguely on both. This double source of guilt is doubly felt by a sensitive individual, such as Pip; whether the guilt is Pip’s alone, or his as a representative of society—or both—he is always guilty. However civilized he may be, he is made to realize that he contains the savage and the monster within himself.

True marsh creatures are not this sensitive to their condition or they would struggle against it. But sometimes, with varying results, the marsh reaches outside itself, as in the cold east wind, to touch sensitive human beings. John Jarndyce is only chilled, but Lady Dedlock and other more susceptible people freeze or are blighted by this touch.
Great Expectations, with its initial physical setting in the marsh, is once again an obvious place to begin as we look for evidence of marsh dwellers. Pip, “growing afraid of it all and beginning to cry,” suddenly hears a frightening confirmation of his terror:

“Hold your noise!” cried a terrible voice, as a man started up from among the graves at the side of the church porch. “Keep still, you little devil, or I’ll cut your throat!”

A fearful man, all in coarse gray, with a great iron on his leg. A man with no hat, and with broken shoes, and with an old rag tied round his head. A man who had been soaked in water, and smothered in mud, and lamed by stones, and cut by flints, and stung by nettles, and torn by briars; who limped, and shivered, and glared, and growled; and whose teeth chattered in his head, as he seized me by the chin. (GE, ch. 1)

Has the “fearful man” come out of the grave or out of that “distant savage lair” described in the preceding chapter? Either origin would be appropriate for this gray, water-soaked, mud-smothered, shivering-cold, threatening creature. Vague suggestions of guilt surround him. Is he perpetrator or victim? The images hint at both: the great iron on his leg and his being lamed by stones and cut by flints suggest both guilt and martyrdom. In his savage figure are epitomized Pip’s felt terror of the sea, the marsh, and the graveyard. Primitive creatures, it seems, still roam this world, and dead men may rise to haunt the living.

At the end of the episode between Pip and the “fearful man,” the man looks across the “cold wet flat” with the wish that he might have been a “frog” or an “eel.” As he lurches away into the marshes, hugging “his shuddering body in both his arms—clasping himself, as if to hold himself together—” he seems a monster from the primitive past; he is also somehow tied to Pip’s individual past as he picks his way past the green mounds looking “as if he were eluding the hands of the dead people, stretching up cautiously out of their graves to get a twist upon his ankle and pull him in.” Pip takes to his heels, but: “presently I looked over my shoulder, and saw him going on again towards the river, still hugging himself in both arms, and picking his way with his sore feet among the great stones dropped into the marshes here and there for stepping-places when the rains were heavy, or the tide was in.”
The feeling of terror pervading this first chapter of Great Expectations intensifies with the simple action, "I looked over my shoulder," for looking over one's shoulder is a particularly fearful way of looking, experienced by all children and remembered by all adults as a fragile defense against shadowy pursuers. The pictorially affective value of the scene is further enhanced by the "great stones" dropped "here and there for stepping-places when the rains were heavy or the tide was in." Although neither condition prevails at the moment, the apparently chance comment superimposes them both upon the picture spread before the reader, so that the primitive creature, larger than ordinary men in order to utilize the "great stepping-stones, appears to be making his rain-blurred way back into the flood-tided sea.

Pip's attention reverts to the marsh itself until drawn back to the man, who is now near the gibbet with the "chains hanging to it which had once held a pirate." Pip imagines that "the man was limping on towards this latter, as if he were the pirate come to life, and come down, and going back to hook himself up again." The indelible marsh picture in Pip's mind is a flat, featureless world with lines stretching forward, back, right, and left as far as the eye can see. Against this background the three monolithic representations of humanity rear upward, black and distinct and ugly: the beacon, the gibbet, and the primitive monster. "It gave me a terrible turn," says Pip; "... now I was frightened again, and ran home without stopping."

This important day in Pip's life marks the beginning of the feeling of personal guilt that is to haunt him. Part of its power over him comes from his unwilling identification with this primitive criminal-martyr, who comes out of and returns to the mysterious marsh. Later, he will have much difficulty in reconciling this image of Magwitch with his image of his fairy godmother. Meanwhile, it takes the strongest of holds upon him.

Two important associations here attach to the figure of Magwitch. First, he is twice associated with stones, once lamed by them, and once picking "his way with his sore feet among the great stones." The cold stone and the frozen rigidity of death look much alike, and the stone association quickly suggests the connotations of the marsh—ambiguously, for the laming by stones, which causes Magwitch to limp like a marsh monster, also hints at the martyrdom of St. Stephen. This marking of marsh monsters or victims through a
stone association is a frequent leitmotif in Dickens. Just as earlier we learned that Pip found it difficult to dissociate his brothers from “five little stone lozenges,” so in other contexts people who are affectively “dead” become stony people.  

The second association attaches to the “old rag” tied round Magwitch’s head, which imaginatively fuses with the cut throat immediately preceding it, as well as with the later suggestions that the convict is a temporarily revivified hanged man on his way back to the gibbet. The hangman’s noose figures prominently in Dickens’s depiction of marsh monsters.

The lower river of *Our Mutual Friend* provides another physical setting understandably alive with marsh creatures. Two of these are Gaffer Hexam and Rogue Riderhood, whose archetypal habitat, though they make their living on the surface of the river, is the muddy river bottom that merges with the marshland. Gaffer is much the more complex—and therefore more nearly human—of the two. His boat is “allied to the bottom of the river rather than the surface by reason of the slime and ooze with which it was covered, and its sodden state,” and he himself is “half savage . . . with no covering on his matted head, with his brown arms bare to between the elbow and the shoulder, with a loose knot of a looser kerchief lying low on his bare breast in a wilderness of beard and whisker, with such dress as he wore seeming to be made out of the mud that begrimed his boat” (*OMF*, bk. I, ch. 1). The man, like the boat, seems entirely at home in this primeval world of slime and ooze. The only item of his dress emerging clearly from the mud is the loosely knotted kerchief, suggestive of the hangman’s noose.

That Gaffer is not completely subhuman, however, is evident in his tender relationship to his daughter Lizzie. As a web of circumstantial evidence seems to tighten around her father, Lizzie grows extremely apprehensive and susceptible to suggestion: it is the evening of the day when she associated the red sunrise with blood and fire. Her father, angry at his runaway son, repeatedly strikes his knife wrathfully into the table as he discusses the situation with Lizzie. His daughter cannot contain a cry of horror as she begs him to put the knife down. Bewildered by her obvious fear, he questions her. “What should I hurt?” he asks.

“Nothing, dear father. On my knees, I am certain, in my heart and soul I am certain, nothing! But it was too dreadful to bear; for it
looked—" her hands covering her face again, "O it looked—"
"What did it look like?"

The recollection of his murderous figure, combining with her trial of last night, and her trial of the morning, caused her to drop at his feet, without having answered. (bk. I, ch. 6)

Now, in contrast to his earlier threatening appearance, Gaffer tries "with the utmost tenderness" to revive this "best of daughters," and failing in his efforts runs out the door with the empty brandy bottle clutched in his hands. But:

He returned as hurriedly as he had gone, with the bottle still empty. He kneeled down by her, took her head on his arm, and moistened her lips with a little water into which he had dipped his fingers: saying fiercely, as he looked around, now over this shoulder, now over that:

"Have we got a pest in the house? Is there summ'at deadly stick- ing to my clothes? What's let loose upon us? Who loosed it?" (bk. I, ch. 6)

Ironically, as with Magwitch, what he seeks and fears as he looks over his shoulders is embodied in himself. His fierce and bewildered questions are vaguely accusatory, giving him the pathetic helplessness of an innocent, held semi-savage through no volition of his own. He is as complete a human being as circumstances have enabled him to be.

Gaffer's children also demonstrate his potential humanity. His daughter, Lizzie, is warmly and completely human; his son, Charley, stands somewhere between his father and his sister.

There was a curious mixture in the boy, of uncompleted savagery, and uncompleted civilization. His voice was hoarse and coarse, and his face was coarse, and his stunted figure was coarse; but he was cleaner than other boys of his type; and his writing, though large and round, was good; and he glanced at the backs of the books, with an awakened curiosity that went below the binding. No one who can read, ever looks at a book, even unopened on a shelf, like one who cannot. (bk. I, ch. 3)

The boy foreshadows the man, for though his reading marks him as a potential human being with "awakened curiosity," the effects of the marsh stay upon him.

In contrast to Gaffer, Rogue Riderhood, though crafty, is a simple man with uncomplicated purposes. As he sets about his evil
purpose of fastening the supposed murder of John Harmon upon Gaffer, Mortimer Lightwood and Eugene Wrayburn follow him and observe him closely.

He went on before them as an ugly Fate might have done, and they kept him in view, and would have been glad enough to lose sight of him. But on he went before them always at the same distance, and the same rate. Aslant against the hard implacable weather and the rough wind, he was no more to be driven back than hurried forward, but held on like an advancing Destiny. There came, when they were about midway on their journey, a heavy rush of hail, which in a few minutes pelted the streets clear, and whitened them. It made no difference to him. A man's life to be taken and the price of it got, the hailstones to arrest the purpose must be larger and deeper than those. He crushed through them, leaving marks in the fast-melting slush that were shapeless holes; one might have fancied, following, that the very fashion of humanity had departed from his feet. (bk. I, ch. 12)

Gaffer was savage, but this man is a monster like the antediluvian reptiles, with impenetrable hide and shapeless feet crushing his unswerving way through the marsh, outside the movement of time, "no more to be driven back than hurried forward." He has the absentmindedness of obsessive, destructive purpose: heedless, impervious, implacable like the weather he ignores. Later on, Rogue is himself fished from the river into which so many in this book fall. Although he is unconscious and near death, it becomes apparent that he will not after all die: "the low, bad, unimpressible face is coming up from the depths of the river, or what other depths, to the surface again" (bk. III, ch. 3). The depths of the river, the depths of the marsh, the depths of death, the depths of time, the depths of depravity: all are conjured up by this reverberating sentence.

Rogue Riderhood seems to sense other marsh creatures. Later in the story he realizes the murderous intentions of Bradley Headstone and decides to lay a trap for the schoolmaster. Rogue suspects that Headstone is deliberately copying his dress so that evidence will point to him when the murder is committed. Rogue therefore decides to alter one article of his clothing.

Rogue Riderhood went into his Lock-house, and brought forth, into the now sober gray light, his chest of clothes. Sitting on the grass beside it, he turned out, one by one, the articles it contained, until he came to a conspicuous bright red neckerchief stained black here and there by wear. It arrested his attention, and he sat pausing over it,
until he took off the rusty colourless wisp that he wore round his throat, and substituted the red neckerchief, leaving the long ends flowing. “Now,” said the Rogue, “if arter he sees me in this neckhankecher I see him in a sim'lar neckhankecher, it won't be accident.” (bk. IV, ch. 1).

Neither is the choice of a “neckhankecher” with its interplay of marsh colors an accident. It is related to the “loose kerchief” worn by Gaffer and to the hangman’s noose. On the occasion already noted when Eugene and Mortimer are following Riderhood, the two exchange comments regarding their impression of him: “‘Look at his hang-dog air,’ said Lightwood, following.” To which Eugene replies, “‘It strikes me rather as a hang-man air. . . . He has undeniable intentions that way” (bk. I, ch. 12). Here, as elsewhere in Our Mutual Friend, an ambiguity of guilt hangs over Riderhood as it did over the others. Victim or sinner? Probably both. Regardless, he is an evil monster.

Both Gaffer the savage and Riderhood the monster belong among “those amphibious human creatures who appear to have some mysterious power of extracting a subsistence out of tidal water by looking at it” (bk. I, ch. 6). Their counterparts are sprinkled throughout Dickens's works. When the actual term “amphibious” occurs the reference is usually to anomalous creatures along the waterfront who, like Charley Hexam, are “hoarse” and “coarse” and “stunted.” Unlike him, they are usually mud-covered, simple-minded, and singleminded, often seen in dogged pursuit of some undeviating purpose. Or, as with the “two or three amphibious creatures” around Temple Stairs when Pip and Herbert are getting into their boat, their presence merely implies the marsh setting. Sometimes savages or monsters, they are always a little less than human—reiterated reminders of that gray borderland between man and reptile.

The long parade of marsh monsters in the Dickens novels began many years before either Great Expectations or Our Mutual Friend was written. Fagin and Bill Sikes head the procession. Dickens introduces Fagin as “a very old shrivelled Jew, whose villainous-looking and repulsive face was obscured by a quantity of matted red hair. He was dressed in a greasy flannel gown, with his throat bare; and seemed to be dividing his attention between the frying-pan and a clothes-horse, over which a great number of silk handkerchiefs were hanging” (OT, ch. 8). This conspicuously bare throat begins a leitmotif between handkerchiefs and throats that runs
through the book. An important stock-in-trade for the old master thief is the silk handkerchief; it is one of the first items he teaches his boys to filch with deftness. In any “Emporium of petty larceny” to be found in the narrow and dismal alley leading to Saffron Hill, these pilfered articles are offered for sale:

In its filthy shops are exposed for sale, huge bunches of second-hand silk handkerchiefs, of all sizes and patterns; for here reside the traders who purchase them from pickpockets. Hundreds of these handkerchiefs hang dangling from pegs outside the windows, or flaunting from the doorposts; and the shelves, within, are piled with them. (ch. 26)

Quite understandably, Fagin and his companions have a very sensitive feeling about their throats.

In an early conversation between Sikes and Fagin, the former indulges in a bit of descriptive pantomime: “tying an imaginary knot under his left ear, and jerking his head over on the right shoulder; a piece of dumb show which the Jew appeared to understand perfectly” (ch. 13). On a later occasion, Fagin finds it useful to remind Bolter of the one fact none of them forgets for long: “‘Only think,’ said the Jew, shrugging his shoulders and stretching out his hands; ‘only consider. You’ve done what’s a very pretty thing, and what I love you for doing; but what at the same time would put the cravat round your throat, that’s so very easily tied and so very difficult to unloose—in plain English, the halter!’” (ch. 43). Thus Fagin shows his affinity to the marsh in this preoccupation with the gibbet.

On the “chill, damp, windy night” when he sets out to plan the robbery intended to ensnare the innocence of Oliver, Fagin slinks quickly down the street in the direction of Spitalfields.

The mud lay thick upon the stones, and a black mist hung over the streets; the rain fell sluggishly down, and everything felt cold and clammy to the touch. It seemed just the night when it befitted such a being as the Jew, to be abroad. As he glided stealthily along, creeping beneath the shelter of the walls and doorways, the hideous old man seemed like some loathsome reptile, engendered in the slime and darkness through which he moved: crawling forth, by night, in search of some rich offal for a meal. (ch. 19)

He has now emerged as an undisguised marsh monster.

Fagin’s fellow conspirator, Bill Sikes, is a savage monster rather than a loathsome reptile. He appropriately appears on the scene with a snarl on his lips:
The man who growled out these words was a stoutly built fellow of about five-and-thirty, in a black velveteen coat, very soiled drab breeches, lace-up half boots, and grey cotton stockings, which enclosed a very bulky pair of legs, with large swelling calves; the kind of legs, that in such costume, always look in an unfinished and incomplete state without a set of fetters to garnish them. He had a brown hat on his head, and a dirty belcher handkerchief round his neck: with the long frayed ends of which, he smeared the beer from his face as he spoke; disclosing, when he had done so, a broad heavy countenance with a beard of three day's growth: and two scowling eyes; one of which, displayed various parti-coloured symptoms of having been recently damaged by a blow. (ch. 13)

With necessary adjustments for the change of environment, he looks much like the convict Magwitch. Bill develops, however, as a complete savage with none of the redeeming tenderness of Magwitch or even Gaffer Hexam. Late in the story, as he makes his murderous way home after learning that Nancy has betrayed him, his figure sheds all pretence to civilization: as with Rogue Riderhood, "the very fashion of humanity had departed from his feet."

Without one pause, or moment's consideration: without once turning his head to the right, or left, or raising his eyes to the sky, or lowering them to the ground, but looking straight before him with savage resolution, his teeth so tightly compressed that the strained jaw seemed starting through his skin; the robber held on his headlong course, nor uttered a word, nor relaxed a muscle, until he reached his own door. (ch. 47)

Implacable and impervious to Nancy's pleas for mercy, Bill beats her face savagely with his pistol. Now, in melodramatic contrast to the halter-neckerkiefs throughout the novel, Nancy draws "from her bosom a white handkerchief—Rose Maylie's own" as she breathes a last prayer before Bill, like a primitive savage, "seized a heavy club and struck her down."

Nancy is dead, but poetic justice pursues her murderer. Quickly leaving the scene of the murder, Bill wanders aimlessly through the country, accompanied by a growing terror that the murdered girl is dogging his steps, "a ghastly figure following at his heels": "At times, he turned, with desperate determination, resolved to beat this phantom off, though it should look him dead; but the hair rose on his head, and his blood stood still: for it had turned with him and was behind him then. He had kept it before him that morning, but it was behind him now—always" (ch. 48). Three days later, "the very ghost of Sikes" appears at Jacob's Island. Here, "He laid his
hand upon a chair which stood in the middle of the room, but shuddering as he was about to drop into it, and seeming to glance over his shoulder, dragged it back close to the wall—as close as it would go—ground it against it—and sat down” (ch. 50). Thus the fearful “look over the shoulder” intensifies into mortal terror, which will lead Bill to hang himself accidentally: “looking behind him on the roof,” he “uttered a yell of terror”: “The eyes again!” he cried in an unearthly screech.” The noose he has intended to slip under his armpits is instead around his neck as he plunges from the roof, finally to fulfill the prophecy of the ominous handkerchiefs.

Fagin will shortly fulfill the same prediction as he waits his punishment in Newgate Prison where, at dawn, a bloodthirsty crowd gathers:

A great multitude had already assembled; the windows were filled with people, smoking and playing cards to beguile the time; the crowd were pushing, quarrelling, and joking. Everything told of life and animation, but one dark cluster of objects in the very centre of all—the black stage, the crossbeam, the rope, and all the hideous apparatus of death. (ch. 52)

This brief description of the bloodthirsty crowd returns to a theme introduced earlier by Nancy and now to be fully developed in the melodramatic scenes leading to Bill’s death: the ambiguity of guilt shared by a criminal and by the society that both has produced him and now casts him out.

When Bill arrives at the house on Jacob’s Island, he plunges into a nightmare Hogarthian scene of grotesquely exaggerated images from the marsh and lower river. The tempo quickens in these scenes as a great crowd assembles, with “lights gleaming below, voices in loud and earnest conversation, the tramp of hurried footsteps—endless they seemed in number—crossing the nearest wooden bridge” (ch. 50). As things seem to go badly for Bill, the crowd roars in triumph. Faces hang from every window, and “Each little bridge (and there were three in sight) bent beneath the weight of the crowd upon it. Still the current poured on to find some nook or hole from which to vent their shouts, and only for an instant see the wretch.” Someone spreads the report that an entrance has been made into the house.

The stream abruptly turned, as this intelligence ran from mouth to mouth; and the people at the windows, seeing those upon the bridges pouring back, quitted their stations, and, running into the street,
joined the concourse that now thronged pell-mell to the spot they had left: each man crushing and striving with his neighbour, and all panting with impatience to get near the door, and look upon the criminal as the officers brought him out. (ch. 50)

It has become appallingly clear that the bloodthirsty horde of people who come to revel in Bill’s apprehension—this “stream” of indifferent humanity with its flooding currents from bridge and lower river—matches him in guilty loathsomeness.

The imaginative textural richness of this remarkable chapter recording Bill’s death is, I believe, surpassed nowhere else in Dickens: an achievement largely of resonant imagery, which he has permitted to carry its message without any of the discursive explanation and moralizing to which he so often resorts in this early work. By projecting these events through a carefully designed point of view, Dickens has artfully conveyed the complexity of human guilt, fully felt. This point of view might be described as a movement shifting outward—from the inner torment and terror of the criminal individual, to the vengeful ardor of the pursuing mob, to the encompassing perspective of a remote spectator able to perceive and judge them all.4

Scarcely have Fagin and Bill departed from the scene (1839) before another marsh creature—Daniel Quilp—begins to prowl through the rambling pages of Dickens’s next novel, *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1840). Although Quilp like his predecessors shows an affinity for the gibbet, he himself is much more like that other monolith of the marsh, the ugly lighthouse. His identity develops slowly. When Little Nell appears for the first time with the dwarf in tow, we note his “coarse hard beard,” “discoloured fangs,” “dirty white neckerchief,” “grizzled black hair,” and hands of “rough coarse grain” (*OCS*, ch. 27). These details, appropriate to many contexts, are not in themselves conclusive evidence of the marsh. The first trip to Quilp’s Wharf adds a few more scraps:

On the Surrey side of the river was a small rat-infested dreary yard called ‘Quilp’s Wharf,’ in which [was] a little wooden counting-house burrowing all awry in the dust as if it had fallen from the clouds and ploughed into the ground. . . . On Quilp’s Wharf, Daniel Quilp was a ship-breaker, yet to judge from these appearances he must either have been a ship-breaker on a very small scale, or have broken his ships up very small indeed. Neither did the place present any extraordinary aspect of life or activity, as its only human occupant was an amphibious boy in a canvas suit, whose sole change of occupation
was from sitting on the head of a pile and throwing stones into the mud when the tide was out, to standing with his hands in his pockets gazing listlessly on the motion and on the bustle of the river at high-water. (ch. 4)

Quilp’s Wharf (with the imaginative suggestion of pilings), the dreary yard on the Surrey side of the river, with its amphibious boy monotonously throwing stones into the mud at low tide, begins to associate Quilp somewhat more clearly with the marsh. The “little wooden counting-house burrowing all awry in the dust” looks irrelevant unless one holds actively in memory “a little squat shoal-lighthouse” that “stood crippled in the mud on stilts and crutches.” Even these similarities might remain unnoted—or be summarily discounted—were it not for the immediate repetitious references to broken ships. As it is, memory stirs in a reader familiar with Dickens’s novels.

Now comes a picture of Quilp at home, where he is a cruel tyrant. He forces his wife to sit beside him through the night while he smokes one cigar after another: “the small lord of the creation took his first cigar and mixed his first glass of grog. The sun went down and the stars peeped out, the Tower turned from its own proper colours to grey and from grey to black, the room became perfectly dark and the end of the cigar a deep fiery red, but still Mr. Quilp went on smoking and drinking in the same position” (ch. 4). As Quilp sits through the night surrounded by the marsh colors of gray, black, and fiery red, his ability to remain “in the same position” is highly suggestive of a creature somewhat less than human.

Quilp’s description takes a new turn when, as he is preparing to leave the house the next day, he is surprised by his mother-in-law, Mrs. Jinwin, making in the mirror “a horribly grotesque and distorted face with the tongue lolling out” (ch. 5). This is the face of a hanged man, particularly graphic because at the time he is looking into the mirror, “putting on his neckerchief,” the only item of his dress mentioned.5

Quilp now makes his way again to Quilp’s Wharf. Having taken a boat to the Surrey side, he “caused himself to be put ashore hard by the wharf, and proceeded thither, through a narrow lane which, partaking of the amphibious character of its frequenter, had as much water as mud in its composition, and a very liberal supply of both.” The first thing Quilp sees upon his arrival is the amphibious boy, standing on his head. “And here it may be remarked, that be-
tween this boy and the dwarf there existed a strange kind of mutual liking."

Later in the story, Quilp has decided to set up bachelor quarters in an interesting room

which, by reason of its newly-erected chimney depositing the smoke inside the room and carrying none of it off, was not quite so agreeable as more fastidious people might have desired. Such inconveniences, however, instead of disgusting the dwarf with his new abode, rather suited his humour; so, after dining luxuriously from the public-house, he lighted his pipe, and smoked against the chimney until nothing of him was visible through the mist but a pair of red and highly inflamed eyes, with sometimes a dim vision of his head and face. (ch. 50)

This malfunctioning chimney with which Quilp is identified as they smoke foggily together suggests the earlier occasion when he smoked a cigar rather than a pipe. The picture of “red and highly inflamed eyes” seen through the “mist” coalesces fleetingly with the image of the ugly lighthouse. The opening paragraph of a much later chapter draws a pointed parallel to this scene with an interestingly inverted analogy: “A faint light, twinkling from the window of the counting-house on Quilp’s Wharf, and looking inflamed and red through the night-fog, as though it suffered from it like an eye, forewarned Mr. Sampson Brass” (ch. 62). Here, finally, the total cluster—counting-house/lighthouse, smoke/fog, red eyes/red light—is brought strikingly together.

As Quilp sits, first with his cigar glowing fiery red through the dark; then with his red and inflamed eyes looming through the smoke; and finally with the inflamed, redly lighted window of his counting-house looming like an eye through the fog, the reasons for which he is known as a “ship-breaker” now seem much clearer. Both in his person and in his place of business, Quilp resembles the deceptive lighthouse, surrounded by death.

Like many other marsh creatures, Daniel Quilp meets his end in the cold dark water of the lower river, into which he accidentally falls as he is about to be apprehended. Behind him, the counting-house has been set afire by an overturned stove. Although “the strong tide filled his throat,” he struggles desperately to save himself. Suddenly he makes out a black object he is drifting close upon. “The hull of a ship! He could touch its smooth and slippery surface
with his hand. One loud cry now—but the resistless water bore him under it, carried him away a corpse” (ch. 67). The water

toyed and sported with its ghastly freight, now bruising it against the slimy piles, now hiding it in mud or long rank grass, now dragging it heavily over rough stones and gravel, now feigning to yield it to its own element,7 and in the same action luring it away, until, tired of the ugly plaything, it flung it on a swamp—a dismal place where pirates had swung in chains, through many a wintry night—and left it there to bleach.

And there it lay, alone. The sky was red with flame, and the water that bore it there had been tinged with the sullen light as it flowed along. The place the deserted carcass has left so recently, a living man, was now a blazing ruin. There was something of the glare upon its face. (ch. 67)

The ominous inflammation of the red eye has spread to consume the ugly lighthouse itself and garishly light the last trip of the old ship-breaker, fittingly broken against a ship and carried by the river to the marshland where he belongs.

Magwitch, Hexam, Riderhood, Fagin, Sikes, and Quilp are a formidable troop of monsters developed in a somber setting. But it does not always suit Dickens’s purposes to present his marsh creatures with so much solemnity. Sometimes he catches them deftly and suspends them momentarily wriggling on a rapier point before he tosses them aside. The result is satirical ridicule in which they are reduced to contemptible size.

David Copperfield, recalling an incident from his childhood, records what apparently he just “happened” to remember as the sequence of events on an occasion fraught with associational significance.

Peggotty and I were sitting one night by the parlour fire, alone. I had been reading to Peggotty about crocodiles. I must have read very perspicuously, or the good soul must have been deeply interested, for I remember she had a cloudy impression, after I had done, that they were a kind of vegetable. I was tired of reading, and dead sleepy, but having leave, as a high treat, to sit up until my mother came home from spending the evening at a neighbour’s, I would rather have died upon my post (of course) than have gone to bed. (DC, ch. 2)

Now, fearful that he will fall asleep, he engages Peggotty in an apparently irrelevant discussion about marriage that obviously makes her uneasy.
I couldn't understand why Peggotty looked so queer, or why she was so ready to go back to the crocodiles. However, we returned to those monsters, with fresh wakefulness on my part, and we left their eggs in the sand for the sun to hatch, and we ran away from them, and baffled them by constantly turning, which they were unable to do quickly, on account of their unwieldy make, and we went into the water after them, as natives, and put sharp pieces of timber down their throats; and in short we ran the whole crocodile gauntlet. I did, at least, but I had my doubts of Peggotty, who was thoughtfully sticking her needle into various parts of her face and arms all the time.

We had exhausted the crocodiles, and begun with the alligators, when the garden-bell rang. We went out to the door, and there was my mother, looking even unusually pretty, I thought, and with her a gentleman with beautiful black hair and whiskers, who had walked home with us from church last Sunday. (ch. 2)

This gentleman, Mr. Murdstone, pats David on the head and tries to ingratiate himself with the boy. David, however, is for some reason reluctant and suspicious. "'Come! let us be the best friends in the world!' said the gentleman, laughing. 'Shake hands!'

This is an effective sequence of grim humor. Starting innocently with the child's book about reptiles and the child's questions about marriage, the two subjects become uneasily related in David's sleepy consciousness because of Peggotty's strange manner, and then (as he senses the reason for her uneasiness) they merge to produce growing nightmarish apprehensions about his mother and the whiskered laughing gentleman. Murdstone's relationship to the marsh is further signaled (as is Headstone's) by his name: as Aunt Betsey says, David's mother "goes and marries a Murderer—or a man with a name like it" (ch. 13).

Another "chance" association acquires similar heightened satirical meaning in Our Mutual Friend, on an occasion when Mr. Boffin, "the Golden Dustman," is visiting Venus's specialty shop (which features such wares as stuffed birds, artificial limbs, bones, and a "Hindoo baby in a bottle"). The unexpected appearance of Silas Wegg, who has earlier profited from Boffin's employment, precipitates an amusing sequence of events. At this point in the developing narrative, the reader has been led to believe that Boffin has lost his warm, human qualities and has become a dehumanized miser. Venus finds a quick way to hide him from the new visitor:

"Hush! here's Wegg!" said Venus. "Get behind the young alligator in the corner, Mr. Boffin, and judge him for yourself. I won't light a
candle till he's gone; there'll only be the glow of the fire; Wegg's well acquainted with the alligator, and he won't take particular notice of him. Draw your legs in, Mr. Boffin, at present I see a pair of shoes at the end of his tail. Get your head well behind his smile, Mr. Boffin, and you'll lie comfortable there; you'll find plenty of room behind his smile. He's a little dusty, but he's very like you in tone." (OMF, bk. III, ch. 14)

The indoctrinated reader, having to agree that "he's very like you in tone," is amused.

Upon being admitted into the shop, Wegg indulges in some accusatory comments about Boffin that lead to the authorial observation that many slanderers and traitors similarly "transform their benefactors into their injurers." Whereupon: "the yard or two of smile on the part of the alligator might have been invested with the meaning, 'All about this was quite familiar knowledge down in the slime, ages ago.'" It is now treacherous Mr. Wegg who is associated with the alligator. The shift from the ridiculous picture of Boffin to the ugly picture of Wegg is emphasized in what takes place after Wegg's departure.

Mr. Boffin disengaged himself from behind the alligator's smile, with an expression of countenance so very downcast that it not only appeared as if the alligator had the whole of the joke to himself, but further as if it had been conceived and executed at Mr. Boffin's expense.

"That's a treacherous fellow," said Mr. Boffin, dusting his arms and legs as he came forth, the alligator having been but dusty company. "That's a dreadful fellow."

"The alligator, sir?" said Venus.

"No, Venus, no. The Serpent." (bk. III, ch. 14)

In light of later revelations, when Boffin's fall turns out to have been a benevolent deception, the alligator indeed seems to have had the whole of the joke to himself at Boffin's expense, for the treacherous fellow has tricked the reader into laughing condescendingly at the good Golden Dustman. Wegg, however, is neatly reduced even lower by Boffin's correction of Venus: Wegg is not just a harmlessly smiling alligator; as a betrayer of goodness, he is the reptilian incarnation of evil itself.

Such then are the creatures to be found in the marsh. Insensitive, cold-blooded, unfeeling like their reptilian ancestors, true marsh creatures relentlessly seek the satisfaction of their own primi-
tive appetites and desires, for thoughtless egocentricity lies at their center instead of a heart. When Pip finally grows aware of the great heart of Magwitch, he also realizes that the convict has been a victim of the marsh, rather than one of its monsters as he appears.

2

Even warm-blooded human beings are not safe from the destructive effects of the marsh, for a deadly miasma seeps out of its confines and spreads everywhere to infect those susceptible to its touch. This miasma is the monotony that, creeping with the fog through the opening chapter of *Bleak House*, also envelops Lady Dedlock in ennui, the smothering atmosphere surrounding those “In Fashion” being the same as that around those “In Chancery.” Lady Dedlock has come up to London to escape her “dreary place” in Lincolnshire. “My Lady Dedlock says she has been ‘bored to death’,” though she lives “at the top of the fashionable tree,” comments the narrator (*BH*, ch. 2).

To Dickens, a monotonous existence and the boredom attendant upon it are as destructive to human beings as the egocentrism of the marsh dwellers. Related to the marsh by its uniform grayness and pointless repetitions of lines and streets and days and actions (cf. the description of Coketown), a monotonous existence is the very negation of life. Sometimes people are thrust as victims into a monotonous existence, as with the amphibious boys or the “Hands” in Coketown, whose marshlike environment reduces them to primitive creatures seemingly without the passions and feelings that characterize humanity. More often, however, those touched by this miasma are people who for some reason perceive their lives as reduced to a meaningless existence of monotony and boredom. Such people may become “frozen” to the life-giving and warm-hearted emotions in such fashion that they resemble the cold-blooded creatures of the marsh. Lady Dedlock, it seems, has been thus affected:

How Alexander wept when he had no more worlds to conquer, everybody knows—or has some reason to know by this time, the matter having been frequently mentioned. My Lady Dedlock, having conquered her world, fell, not into the melting, but rather into the freezing mood. An exhausted composure, a worn-out placidity, an equanimity of fatigue not to be ruffled by interest or satisfaction, are
the trophies of her victory. She is perfectly well-bred. If she could be translated to Heaven tomorrow, she might be expected to ascend without any rapture. (ch. 2)

On "this muddy, murky afternoon," my Lady sits in her room in her town house with her husband and Mr. Tulkinghorn the lawyer. She is attempting lamely to explain away the unprecedented animation she has manifested in response to the handwriting on a paper tendered her by Tulkinghorn: "Anything to vary this detestable monotony," she says. Mr. Tulkinghorn fears my Lady is ill, but Sir Leicester reassures him: "She really has been bored to death down at our place in Lincolnshire."

Lady Dedlock's life, the narrator reports, has become a continual flight— from Chesney Wold yesterday, to London today, off for Paris tomorrow. They are all the same to her. Day after tomorrow she flies back to Lincolnshire: "Weariness of soul lies before her, as it lies behind—her Ariel has put a girdle of it round the whole earth, and it cannot be unclasped" (ch. 12). A "weary manner," languor, and fatigue surround the figure of Lady Dedlock except on the rare occasions when for some reason, as in the exchange with Tulkinghorn, her interest is surprised into being. As Tulkinghorn sets about to "close in" on her, her freezing mood becomes more and more confirmed and finally closes completely about her. She is at last "as indifferent as if all passion, feeling, and interest had been worn out in the early ages of the world and had perished from its surface with its other departed monsters" (ch. 48).

Yet the very fact that Lady Dedlock "fell into the freezing mood" implies that she has not always been the cold and haughty Lady who tries to fly from the weariness of soul that possesses her. That weariness, as she tells Esther, arises from guilty memory, which will not let her rest. She urges her daughter to see beneath the fashionable figure to the reality within: "'Think that the reality is in her suffering, in her useless remorse, in her murdering within her breast the only love and truth of which it is capable! And then forgive her, if you can; and cry to Heaven to forgive her, which it never can!'" (ch. 36). Her consciousness of guilt growing out of an experience in which she was part perpetrator, part victim (her guilty love affair and the desertion of her daughter) has made her susceptible to the miasma of the marsh and has turned the entire world for her into a gigantic monotonous wasteland, she herself be-
coming frozenly dehumanized, having "murdered" within her breast the capacity to feel human emotions. That they are not really dead is manifested by her animated response to the handwriting of her former lover.

From almost our first glimpse of her, Lady Dedlock is seen to be in the "clutch of the Giant Despair." This despair deepens through the course of the book as Tulkinghorn closes in on her. She longs for his death as a solution to her problems. When it providentially occurs, she learns that she has been "but wishing that all he held against her in his hand might be flung to the winds and chance-sown in many places. So, too, with the wicked relief she felt in his death. What was his death but the key-stone of a gloomy arch removed, and now the arch begins to fall in a thousand fragments, each crushing and mangling piecemeal!" (ch. 55). Lady Dedlock has acquired one more reason for self-accusation: her "wicked relief" in his death. Her despair is complete as the "terrible impression steals upon and overshadows her that from this pursuer, living or dead . . . there is no escape but in death." The crumbling of the "gloomy arch" has completed the process already in threatening operation long before when it was observed at the dreary place in Lincolnshire that "an arch of the bridge in the park has been sapped and stopped away" (see ch. II).

Lady Dedlock is not the only one in Bleak House who leads a weary, dreary life of dreadful monotony related to the emblematic marsh.10 All of the suitors caught in the Jarndyce case reflect the stultifying effects of this deadly repetitiveness. Richard, for example, the counterpart "In Chancery" of Lady Dedlock "In Fashion," flits from profession to profession—rather than from city to city—as a relief from sameness and as a preliminary to falling victim to its deadly effects: "It's monotonous," he explains to Esther and Ada as the reason for leaving Mr. Bayham Badger's; "'and to-day is too like yesterday, and to-morrow is too like to-day'" (ch. 17).

Three years after publication of Bleak House, Dickens produced in Little Dorrit another character remarkably similar to Lady Dedlock. This woman is Mrs. Clennam, who created and inhabits the marsh world in which Arthur grew up, and which still holds him captive.

On the evening Arthur arrives home, he is appropriately met at the door by the marsh creature Flintwinch. "'I doubt,' said Flintwinch, 'if your mother will approve of your coming home on the Sabbath'" (LD, bk. I, ch. 3). Arthur follows the crablike old man
through the old house to the tomblike room where his mother sits paralyzed by the monotonous world surrounding her.

There was a fire in the grate, as there had been night and day for fifteen years. There was a kettle on the hob, as there had been night and day for fifteen years. There was a little mound of damped ashes on the top of the fire, and another little mound swept together under the grate, as there had been night and day for fifteen years. There was a smell of black dye in the airless room, which the fire had been drawing out of the crape and stuff of the widow's dress for fifteen months, and out of the bier-like sofa for fifteen years. (bk. 1, ch. 3)

The malfunctioning fire with its “mound” of damp ashes, the black smell in the room without air, and the repetitive drone of phrases point to the monotony of her existence as she sits “with her cold grey eyes and her cold grey hair, and her immovable face, as stiff as the folds of her stony headdress.” As she explains to Arthur: “The world has narrowed to these dimensions. . . . I have lost the use of my limbs. I never leave my room. . . . All seasons are alike to me. The Lord has put me beyond all that.” The narrator adds that “her being beyond the reach of the seasons, seemed but a fit sequence to her being beyond the reach of all changing emotions.”

Mrs. Clennam's Lord is the stern, unforgiving god of the Old Testament. Arthur remembers the “dreary” Sundays of his childhood: “when his mother, stern of face and unrelenting of heart, would sit all day behind a bible—bound like her own construction of it in the hardest, barest, and straitest boards . . . as if it, of all books! were a fortification against sweetness of temper, natural affection, and gentle intercourse.” Now, she sits before him within “the gloomy labyrinth of her thoughts” (bk. 1, ch. 3). Putting on her spectacles, she begins to read certain passages aloud from “a” book. Later, in “her frozen way,” she speaks of herself as “your infirm and afflicted—justly infirm and righteously afflicted—mother” (bk. I, ch. 5). Her belief requires that her suffering must be the just consequence of wrongdoing, although it is not yet clear whether she knows what she is guilty of. In her affliction, she continues to find consolation in her religion.

Great need had the rigid woman of her mystical religion, veiled in gloom and darkness, with lightnings of cursing, vengeance, and destruction, flashing through the sable clouds. Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors, was a prayer too poor in spirit for her. Smite thou my debtors, Lord, wither them, crush them; do Thou as I would
do, and Thou shalt have my worship: this was the impious tower of stone she built up to scale Heaven. (bk. I, ch. 5)

Mrs. Clennam’s Lord, we see, is created in her own image.

Eventually we discover that, like Lady Dedlock, Mrs. Clennam carries the guilty burden of having “murder[ed] in her breast” the warm human emotions of love and forgiveness. When she learned many years ago, soon after her marriage, of the illicit love affair between Arthur’s father and the young girl who had borne him a son, Mrs. Clennam set out on a path of “justice” modeled on her idea of God. Convinced of the sinfulness of the affair, she closed her heart to her husband, subjected his sweetheart to cruel punishment, and reared their son, Arthur, under the stern religion supposed to protect him—as it had protected her—against evil. Her righteousness turned into self-righteousness; self-righteousness, into rage; and rage, into vengeance.

Now, these many years later, as she and Arthur confront one another, she remains in frozen bondage to her religious convictions. She stoically accepts her infirmities and afflictions as the just and righteous outcome of her own wrongdoing, whatever that may be. She still hides from herself, however, the possibility that her motives were anything but good, or that what she imposed on her husband, his sweetheart, his child, and herself as “justice” could be wrong.

She therefore responds with explosive anger to Arthur’s suggestion that his father might have suffered from some “kind of secret remembrance which caused him trouble of mind—remorse?” Arthur, fearing that the wealth of the House may rightfully belong to someone else, urges upon her the idea of “reparation”: “‘Someone may have been grievously deceived, injured, ruined,’” he surmises. “‘If reparation can be made to any one, let us know it and make it.’”

In a fury, Mrs. Clennam accosts her son. She finds it outrageous that he should spurn as “plunder” an inheritance of valuables “‘which we have painfully got together early and late,’” and that “‘he asks to whom they shall be given up, as reparation!’”

“Reparation!” said she. “Yes truly! it is easy for him to talk of reparation, fresh from journeying and junketing in foreign lands, and living a life of vanity and pleasure. But let him look at me, in prison, and in bonds here. I endure without murmuring, because it is appointed that I shall so make reparation for my sins. Reparation! Is
there none in this room? Has there been none here this fifteen years?’" (bk. I, ch. 5)

Mrs. Clennam has twisted Arthur’s notion of reparation as some kind of repayment or compensation to an injured party into conformity with her own rigid beliefs: reparation to her means paying in suffering for one’s sins. Since she genuinely believes what she says, she is like other marsh dwellers, both perpetrator and victim of her marsh world.

Toward the end of the novel, in the “Closing In,” “Closed” chapters (like the “Closing In” of Tulkinghorn on Lady Dedlock), a remarkable change occurs. As Mrs. Clennam perceives that the whole story, which she has concealed for years, is about to come out, she is transformed. “‘It is closing in, Flintwinch’” (bk. II, ch. 30), she says to her servant. To Rigaud she explains, “‘I am a resolved woman.’” Rigaud, agreeing, describes her resolve in interestingly selected terms: “‘a resolved lady, a stern lady, a lady who has a will that can break the weak to powder: a lady without pity, without love, implacable, revengeful, cold as the stone, but raging as the fire.’”

Her resolve is finally to make full reparation for the wrong she has done to her husband, his sweetheart, and their child. We realize now that her kindnesses to Little Dorrit have been her feeble efforts to assuage the twinges of conscience she could not completely suppress. In her new resolve, the bonds of paralysis begin to fall away “with [a] new freedom in the use of her hand of which she showed no consciousness whatever.” Learning that Little Dorrit has the papers that will accomplish her “reparation,” Mrs. Clennam springs to her feet (“almost as if a dead woman had risen”) and takes off through the early evening.

The sun had set, and the streets were dim in the dusty twilight, when the figure so long unused to them hurried on its way. In the immediate neighbourhood of the old house, it attracted little attention for there were only a few straggling people to notice it; but, ascending from the river, by the crooked ways that led to London Bridge, and passing into the great main road, it became surrounded by astonishment.

Resolute and wild of look, rapid of foot, and yet weak and uncertain, conspicuously dressed in its black garments and with its hurried head-covering, gaunt and of an unearthly paleness, it pressed forward, taking no more heed of the throng than a sleep-walker. More remarkable by being so removed from the crowd it was among, than if it had been lifted on a pedestal to be seen, the figure attracted all
eyes. Saunterers pricked up their attention to observe it; busy people, crossing it, slackened their pace and turned their heads; companions pausing and standing aside, whispered one another to look at this spectral woman who was coming by; and the sweep of the figure as it passed seemed to create a vortex, drawing the most idle and most curious after it. (bk. II, ch. 31)

The details here invite comparison with Rogue Riderhood. As with him, the “very fashion of humanity had departed from [her] feet.” Reduced to a “figure,” an “it,” she shares with him the implacable, unswerving purpose of a primitive creature. But, in contrast to Riderhood, her resolution to accomplish a benevolent rather than a sinister purpose indicates a singularly complex marsh monster.

As Mrs. Clennam relates to Little Dorrit the entire history of what she has done, it becomes apparent that her action has at least temporarily released her emotions from their paralysis. This woman who has herself been so unforgiving throws herself on the mercy of Little Dorrit, begging her not to reveal the story to Arthur, at least not until after Mrs. Clennam’s death. “‘Will you promise to spare me until I am dead?’” she asks. When Little Dorrit responds affirmatively, she says simply, “‘GOD bless you!’” As she does so: “she stood in the shadow so that she was only a veiled form to Little Dorrit in the light; but, the sound of her voice, in saying those three grateful words, was at once fervent and broken. Broken by emotion as unfamiliar to her frozen eyes as action to her frozen limbs” (bk. II, ch. 31).

Mrs. Clennam explains that while she can face Little Dorrit as a relative of the young girl who wronged her and to whom she administered “justice,” she can find no such justification for her treatment of the innocent child, Arthur. In final analysis, then, she must remain a permanent victim of the marsh, for she cannot free herself from belief in justice as the fundamental good. She still must defend her motives as justification for her actions. “‘If this house was blazing from the roof to the ground,’” she has said, “‘I would stay in it to justify myself, against my righteous motives being classed with those of stabbers and thieves’” (bk. II, ch. 30).

Even with regard to Arthur, Mrs. Clennam explains to Little Dorrit, what she did was “‘for his good. Not for the satisfaction of my injury.’”

“What was I, and what was the worth of that, before the curse of Heaven! I have seen that child grow up; not to be pious in a chosen way (his mother’s offence lay too heavy on him for that), but still to be
just and upright, and to be submissive to me. He never loved me, as I
once half-hoped he might—so frail we are, and so do the corrupt
affections of the flesh war with our trusts and tasks; but, he always
respected me, and ordered himself dutifully to me.” (bk. II, ch. 31)

In the conflict within her between the gods of the Old and the New
Testaments, the Old Testament god prevails. “I have done,” said
Mrs. Clennam, ‘what it was given to me to do. I have set myself
against evil; not against good.”

Mrs. Clennam returns home to witness the final collapse of the
old house, fated not to “burn,” but rather to fall into dusty rubble
as a result of its weakened foundation and structure.

There, Mrs. Clennam dropped upon the stones; and she never from
that hour moved so much as a finger again, or had the power to
speak one word. For upwards of three years she reclined in her
wheeled chair, looking attentively at those about her, and appearing
to understand what they said; but, the rigid silence she had so long
held was evermore enforced upon her, and, except that she could
move her eyes and faintly express a negative and affirmative with her
head, she lived and died a statue. (bk. II, ch. 31)

Thus Mrs. Clennam ends her days in the deadly monotony that has
characterized most of her life.

The message is that a monotonous existence cannot be imposed
upon human beings by either their environment or their own doing
without catastrophic consequences. The life forces that charac-
terize human beings—their warm-blooded emotions—may be tem-
porarily “frozen” or controlled, but sooner or later will assert them-
selves, if necessary in devastating ways. The “Hands” in Coketown,
for example, will explode into destructive rebellion. The narrator
of *Hard Times*, turning from the poor factory workers to the rich
Gradgrind children subjected to the “Hard Facts” school of educa-
tion, is mildly astonished to note a possible parallel between their
lives. “Is it possible, I wonder, that there was any analogy between
the cases of the Coketown population and the case of the little
Gradgrinds?” (*HT*, bk. I, ch. 5). Could it be that there was any
“Fancy” in them “demanding to be brought into healthy existence
instead of struggling on in convulsion: That exactly in the ratio as
they worked long and monotonously, the craving grew within them
for some physical relief . . . which craving must and would be satis-
fied aright, or must and would inevitably go wrong until the laws of
Creation were repealed”? Monotony, Dickens asserts repeatedly
and in many ways, is antithetical to life. Its existence creates a human craving for "physical" relief. If that relief does not come in creative and life-sustaining ways—"be satisfied aright"—it must and will "inevitably go wrong." This is a warning to be sounded often in the chapters yet to come.

Sometimes the monotony of existence breeds its own marsh monsters. Coketown has lured into itself such a monster from London. James Harthouse: bored, weary, completely indifferent, frozen against all human feeling. Superficially like Lady Dedlock, unlike her he is a destructive monster far more dangerous than even a Bill Sikes. He appears on the scene playing with his watch-chain "wearily," with "all imaginable coolness," and with a "certain air of exhaustion upon him." According to the narrator: "It was to be seen with half an eye that he was a thorough gentleman, made to the model of the time—weary of everything, and putting no more faith in anything than Lucifer" (bk. II, ch. 1).

We quickly learn that this gentleman has "tried life as a Cornet of Dragoons, and found it a bore," has "strolled to Jerusalem and got bored there," and has finally "gone yachting about the world, and got bored everywhere" (bk. II, ch. 2). A gentleman eminently equipped to meet the approval of the Hard Fact Fellows. As he explains to Louisa Gradgrind:

"I have not so much as the slightest predilection left. I assure you I attach not the least importance to any opinions. The result of the varieties of boredom I have undergone is a conviction (unless conviction is too industrious a word for the lazy sentiment I entertain on the subject) that any set of ideas will do just as much good as any other set, and just as much harm as any other set." (bk. II, ch. 2)

To him, ideas of good and evil are meaningless. The world of values is as undifferentiated and monotonous as everything else. He is committed to nothing.

Even after the machinations of Harthouse are well advanced and their outcome in human grief is evident, his motives could not be said to be committedly evil: "he had not, even now, any earnest wickedness of purpose in him." But this fact does not soften the excoriations of his creator:

Publicly and privately, it were much better for the age in which he lived that he and the legion of whom he was one were designedly bad than indifferent and purposeless. It is the drifting icebergs, setting with any current anywhere, that wreck the ships.
When the Devil goeth about like a roaring lion, he goeth about in a shape by which few but savages and hunters are attracted. But when he is trimmed, smoothed, and varnished, according to the mode; when he is aweary of vice, and aweary of virtue, used up as to brimstone, and used up as to bliss; then, whether he take to the serving out of red tape or to the kindling of red fire, he is the very Devil. (bk. II, ch. 8)

This demonic wrecker of ships, this “drifting iceberg” devoid of human feeling, understands very well that boredom and indifference are his elemental qualities. He senses at once, for instance, when Tom will be willing to help in the scheme against his sister. “Tom is misanthropical today,” says Harthouse, “as all bored people are now and then” (bk. II, ch. 7).

Harthouse, then, is seen to be a type of monster related to the marsh—cold, rigid, and monotonous. He is a relatively uncomplicated ancestor of John Jasper, the complex and guilt-ridden character who dominates The Mystery of Edwin Drood.

Without any preparation, Dickens plunges the reader directly into the consciousness of John Jasper in the brilliant associational paragraph that introduces the novel. This paragraph describes an opium dreamer’s slow return to consciousness:

An ancient English Cathedral Town? How can the ancient English Cathedral Town be here! The well-known massive grey square tower of its old Cathedral? How can that be here! There is no spike of rusty iron in the air, between the eye and it, from any point of the real prospect. What IS the spike that intervenes, and who has set it up? Maybe it is set up by the Sultan’s orders for the impaling of a horde of Turkish robbers, one by one. It is so, for cymbals clash, and the Sultan goes by to his palace in long procession. Ten thousand scimitars flash in the sunlight, and thrice ten thousand dancing-girls strew flowers. Then, follow white elephants caparisoned in countless gorgeous colours, and infinite in number and attendants. Still the Cathedral Tower rises in the background, where it cannot be, and still no writhing figure is on the grim spike. Stay! Is the spike so low a thing as the rusty spike on the top of a post of an old bedstead that has tumbled all awry? Some vague period of drowsy laughter must be devoted to the consideration of this possibility. (MED, ch. 1)

An unoriented reader groping for footing in this confusion must struggle along with the disoriented consciousness of the dreamer to find some semblance of reality in the images flashing past apparently chaotically, though actually in a pattern of beautifully synthesized dream logic. Bedpost, tower (spire), spike, and
scimitar merge together without quite coalescing. Why has the bed-
post become the spike? Why does the spike with the suggestion of
an impaled human figure hover before the Cathedral tower? They
are all drawn together by the ambiguous guilt within the dreamer.
The images interplay from three different levels of experience. In
the immediate situation, Jasper is aware that he has perverted his
capacity to dream into the guilty journey of the opium dream,
whose “Eastern” attraction is yet so powerful that he cannot resist
it. In the larger world of Cloisterham, he knows he conducts a hypo-
critical and guilty relationship to the Cathedral, which should lead
to salvation but for him leads only to the graveyard. And in be-
tween, the glamorous, guilty Sultan flashes past in resplendent col-
ors at once alluring and repellent. Thus, in its interpretation of
experience, the dream consciousness has hooked external reality
together with two configurations—the marsh and the fairy tale—
on the point of a shared image. The ironic, drowsy laughter ac-
knowledges the power of the mind to construct so much from the
rusty spike on the old bedstead—as Proust would later marvel at
the conjuring powers in a bit of madeleine and a cup of tea.

With returning consciousness, the man moves about the opium
den, while the reader moves outside to observe him. The dream
world is much on the man’s mind as he unsteadily contemplates the
sleeping Chinaman, the Lascar, and the haggard woman, who has
lapsed again into unconsciousness after performing her duties as
hostess. “What visions can she have,” he muses. She mutters; he
listens. “Unintelligible,” he comments. When the Chinaman and
the Lascar also give indications of some kind of internal activity, he
regards them with equal bafflement and the repeated observation:
“Unintelligible.” He thus reassures himself with the reminder that
nobody can penetrate the dream world of another to violate his pri-


That same afternoon, the massive grey square tower of an old cathe-
dral rises before the sight of a jaded traveller. The bells are going for
daily vesper service, and he must needs attend it, one would say, from
his haste to reach the open cathedral door. The choir are getting on
t heir sullied white robes, in a hurry, when he arrives among them,
gets on his own robe, and falls into the procession filing in to service.
Then, the Sacristan locks the iron-barred gates that divide the sanctuary
from the chancel, and all of the procession having scuttled into
their places, hide their faces; and then the intoned words, “WHEN
THE WICKED MAN—” rise among groins of arches and beams of
roof, awakening muttered thunder. (ch. 1)

For the observer, too, the tower of the old cathedral is ominous as,
without suggest of sanctuary, it receives the “jaded traveller” returning from the London opium den. The service is one he “must
needs attend” as he hastens to join the choir (with its rhyming echo
of spire)” getting on their “sullied” white robes “in a hurry,” like
prisoners falling tardily into a procession “filing” into service, while
the Sacristan “locks the iron-barred gates” behind them. The jaded
traveller, among the other figures of guilt, like them hides his face
while the accusing words echo through the threatening arches.

Within the course of the three pages of chapter 1, the point of
view has moved progressively away from the anonymous man whose
view we are experiencing, from the completely subjective to the
completely objective. In the first paragraph, we peer out through
this man’s eyes; in the last paragraph, we have moved far out to be-
come detached and unacquainted observers—strangers to the man
through whose consciousness we entered the world of the novel. In
between, we hover intimately over this man to observe closely his
every move, but without the power to enter again the secret re-
cesses of his consciousness.

This process invests John Jasper with deep mystery because the
reader remembers his complex and enigmatic internal world and is
now excluded from it. The total effect of this introductory chapter
enlarges the meaning of the mysterious man, whose anonymity is
preserved throughout, to include others as well. John Jasper there-
fore becomes an allegorical figure projecting the reader into a
world where one must attempt self-reconciliation. Whatever the in-
dividual guilt of John Jasper, it looks basically to be the guilt of Ev-
eryman, torn between the unlimited dream and the circumscribed
reality, and with a propensity to corrupt both.

As Jasper hurries from the sordid episode in the London opium
deri to the evening service in Cloisterham cathedral, he begins to
shift ambiguously between good and evil, the angelic and the de-
monic. While he is master of the choir, he dons a “sullied robe.”
Some of the characters, like his nephew Edwin, greatly respect him; others, like Rosa, are terrified of him. In an early scene, Edwin speaks admiringly of the place of honor his uncle has earned for himself by his good work in the church. He finds his uncle's response bewildering: "I hate it. The cramped monotony of my existence grinds me away by the grain." The service, which to Edwin sounds "quite celestial," to Jasper seems "devilish." He explains:

"I am so weary of it. The echoes of my own voice among the arches seem to mock me with my daily drudging round. No wretched monk who droned his life away in that gloomy place, before me, can have been more tired of it than I am. He could take for relief (and did take) to carving demons out of the stalls and seats and desks. What shall I do? Must I take to carving them out of my heart?" (ch. 2)

In Jasper, as in the Coketown population, the craving grows for "some physical relief—which craving must and would be satisfied aright, or must and would inevitably go wrong." Asking his nephew to "take it as a warning," Jasper explains that "even a poor monotonous chorister and grinder of music—in his niche—may be troubled with some stray sort of ambition, aspiration, restlessness, dissatisfaction, what shall we call it?" Here are the forewarnings of the potential explosive outlet.

His association with the stonemason Durdles identifies Jasper more specifically with the criminal-martyr of the marsh. More than a hint of analogy glances between the name of the one and the occupation of the other. What could a stonemason have to do with "Jasper," except perhaps in a carving way? Around the person of Durdles, Dickens has assembled a fantastic array of stone images and associations. He is chiefly "in the gravestone, tomb, and monument way, and wholly of their colour from head to foot."

He is an old bachelor, and he lives in a little antiquated hole of a house that was never finished:14 supposed to be built, so far, of stones stolen from the city wall. To this abode there is an approach, ankle-deep in stone chips, resembling a petrified grove of tombstones, urns, draperies, and broken columns, in all stages of sculpture. Herein two journeymen incessantly chip, while other two journeymen, who face each other, incessantly saw stone; dipping as regularly in and out of their sheltering sentry-boxes, as if they were mechanical figures emblematical of Time and Death. (ch. 4)

Durdles, known among the urchins of the town as "Stony," has hired one of them for the unusual occupation of stoning Durdles
home on any occasion the urchin catches him out “arter ten.” Jasper is curious enough about the significance of his friend’s nickname to drag the question into a conversation quite gratuitously. “‘There was a discussion the other day among the Choir,’” he observes, “‘whether Stony stood for Tony; . . . or whether Stony stood for Stephen; . . . or whether the name comes from your trade. How stands the fact?’” (ch. 4). Although he gets no answer from his uncommunicative and apparently unhearing companion, the various possibilities have been suggested, prominent among them the name of the stoned martyr. Lest the point be missed, however, Dickens labors it further a short time later when Jasper and Durdles are accosted by a group of stone-throwing urchins.

“Stop, you young brutes,” cried Jasper angrily, “and let us go by!”

This remonstrance being received with yells and flying stones, according to a custom of late years comfortably established among police regulations of our English communities, where Christians are stoned on all sides, as if the days of Saint Stephen were revived, Durdles remarks of the young savages, with some point, that “they haven’t got an object,” and leads the way down the Lane. (ch. 5)

Jasper, like Quilp with the amphibious boy, feels a kind of kinship with “The Stony One,” a feeling given some objectivity in this shared stoning. He recognizes that both live a “curious existence” inasmuch as their “lot is cast in the same old earthy, chilly, never-changing place,” though he considers that Durdles has a much more mysterious and interesting connection with the Cathedral than his own. On the midnight excursion made into the crypt by the pair, Durdles falls unaccountably asleep after imbibing from his companion’s wicker bottle, while Jasper himself comes and goes shadowily through the night on some undisclosed business. In Dickens’s total depiction, Durdles remains enigmatic, but he seems to be a figure of allegory, partly identifying Jasper ever more unmistakably with the criminal-martyr of the marsh, partly personifying some kind of nemesis operant in Jasper’s life.

Soon after the midnight excursion comes Christmas Eve—the night Edwin Drood is to disappear. Three men are to meet in the gatehouse/lighthouse on this night: Jasper, Neville, and Edwin. During his preparations for this occasion, John Jasper begins to emerge clearly as a marsh monster with marked similarity to Rogue Riderhood. It has been a good day for the singing master. He has never sung better; his time is perfect. “These results are prob-
ably attained through a grand composure of the spirits. The mere mechanism of his throat is a little tender, for he wears, both with his singing-robe and with his ordinary dress, a large black scarf of strong close-woven silk, slung loosely round his neck” (ch. 14). Jasper has been out on chores of hospitality. Now he hurries to get home before his guests arrive, singing delicately in a low voice as he goes. “It still seems as if a false note were not within his power tonight, and as if nothing could hurry or retard him. Arriving thus under the arched entrance of his dwelling, he pauses for an instant in the shelter to pull off that great black scarf, and hang it in a loop upon his arm.” Like Riderhood, this man pursues some unswerving and cataclysmic course. Looking “as if nothing could hurry or retard him,” he too might be compared to an ugly fate, or be described as impervious to implacable weather. Attention is drawn to the scarf to reenforce its analogy as he hangs it “in a loop upon his arm.”

As Jasper approaches the postern stair, he meets Mr. Crisparkle, the Minor Canon, who has been concerned of late about the choir master’s “black humours.” Jasper is unaccountably buoyant and cheerful. He tells Crisparkle that he plans to burn his diary at year’s end because he has been “out of sorts, gloomy, bilious, brain-oppressed, whatever it may be.” As he explains: “A man leading a monotonous life . . . and getting his nerves, or his stomach, out of order, dwells upon an idea until it loses its proportions.” Crisparkle expresses his pleased surprise at the improvement in his colleague. As David Copperfield’s Martha drew attention to her similarity to the river, Jasper explains himself to Crisparkle in a related analogy: “‘Why, naturally,’” he returns. “‘You had but little reason to hope that I should become more like yourself. You are always training yourself to be, mind and body, as clear as crystal, and you always are, and never change; whereas I am a muddy, solitary, moping weed.’” Despite Jasper’s apparent recovery of spirits, his self-description reminds us of his “muddy” nature on this stormy and destructive night when “nothing is steady but the red light” in the gatehouse. His metaphorical comment also foreshadows his physical condition as he later searches through the muddy land around the river for signs of the vanished Edwin.

On one night when Jasper returns home from this search, Mr. Grewgious, Rosa’s guardian, is waiting for him. Jasper has arrived exhausted, looking rather like Magwitch or Gaffer Hexam: “Unkempt and disordered, bedaubed with mud that had dried upon
him, and with much of his clothing torn to rags” (ch. 15). Grewgious
tells Jasper that Rosa and Edwin are not in fact engaged to be mar-
rried. Although Grewgious does not know it, this is crucial informa-
tion for Jasper. In the case against him that Dickens is building in
the mind of the reader, Jasper has presumably disposed of Edwin
as his rival for the affections of Rosa. Now, as Grewgious fulfills his
errand by delivering a message that renders this act meaningless, a
startling transformation takes place: “Mr. Grewgious heard a ter-
rible shriek, and saw no ghastly figure, sitting or standing; saw
nothing but a heap of torn and miry clothes upon the floor.” Thus
has Jasper, the “muddy weed,” by steps been reduced into a heap
of muddy residue, his human character fallen completely away
from him. And here the unfinished novel leaves John Jasper.

It is tempting to try to solve at least one part of the mystery of
Edwin Drood by extrapolating from an analysis of Jasper’s de-
piction as a marsh monster: what would have been the truth ul-
timately revealed about John Jasper? Actually, there could be no
important truth not already inherent in his portrayal. Whether
he was guilty of the death of his nephew is almost incidental, like
the fate of Browning’s duchess. He has made it clear that he feels
driven by the boring monotony of his existence to any kind of re-
lieving action. Does his desire for Rosa follow or precede his weari-
ness and boredom? In either event, it is a guilty desire, as was Lady
Dedlock’s wish for Tulkinghorn’s death. It seems most probable
that his guilty desire for his nephew’s fiancée helped turn his life
into the “cramped monotony” from which he must seek relief.
Under similar circumstances, Lady Dedlock seeks relief in flight.
Where can he seek it? In the wish-fulfillment dreams of the opium
den? (“Take it as a warning,” he has said to Edwin.) A similarly
wretched ancient monk, he says, could have found relief “carving
demons out of the stalls and seats and desks. What shall I do? Must
I take to carving them out of my heart?” Where Lady Dedlock be-
comes frozenly dehumanized, Jasper becomes a savage monster.
And yet not a monster like Sikes or Riderhood, nor a savage like
Gaffer, nor even quite a suave devil like James Harthouse. Though
savage, he is capable of human thought and feeling; though bored,
he is not indifferent.

After Edwin’s disappearance, Jasper once more makes his way to
the London opium den after a long absence. The haggard woman
who supplies him with his pipe suspects him of some villainous act
and prods him to reveal his secret to her. As the opium takes effect,
he becomes confidential while she intermittently furnishes sympathetic encouragement. “‘Look here,’” he says,

“Suppose you had something you were going to do. . . . But had not quite determined to. . . . Might or might not do, you understand. . . . Should you do it in your fancy, when you were lying here doing this?”
She nods her head. “Over and over again.”
“Just like me! I did it over and over again. I have done it hundreds of thousands of times in this room.”
“It’s to be hoped it was pleasant to do, deary.”
“It was pleasant to do!” (ch. 23)

The savage air with which he makes the final comment demonstrates that the wish-fulfilling power of the opium dream obviously satisfies the craving for physical relief. In fact, strangely enough, it was once better than the actuality has proven to be: “‘I did it so often, and through such vast expanses of time, that when it was really done, it seemed not worth the doing, it was done so soon.’” The implication is clearly that Jasper is guilty of finally making in actuality the journey so often taken in dream; but the implication is almost too clear. Dickens is not to be trusted here: for Jasper to say “when it was really done” is not quite equivalent to saying “when I did it.” One is reminded of the vague false suspicion cast upon Gaffer, of the trick played on good Mr. Boffin by the alligator in Venus’s specialty shop, or of the elaborate circumstantial case built against Lady Dedlock only to be exploded.16

The same scene in the opium den that implies guilt prepares equally well for the opposite conclusion—that he is innocent of the deed. The haggard woman is priming the pump for further revelations.

“I see now. You come o’ purpose to take the journey. Why, I might have known it, through its standing by you so.”

He answers first with a laugh, and then with a passionate setting of the teeth: “Yes, I came on purpose. When I could not bear my life, I came to get the relief, and I got it. It WAS one! It WAS one!” This repetition with extraordinary vehemence, and the snarl of a wolf. (ch. 23)

The present journey he is taking, however, is less than relieving. It is slow in coming (“‘Is it as potent as it used to be?’” he asks regarding the pipe). In addition, the event of which he dreams has presumably now taken place in reality, and “when it comes to be real at last, it is so short that it seems unreal for the first time.” Furthermore, the reality somehow does not equal the dream, being disap-
pointing and unsatisfying by comparison. And, finally, now that “it” is real, the relief of the dream is needed at least as much as it was. Jasper laments:

“It has been too short and easy. I must have a better vision than this; this is the poorest of all. No struggle, no consciousness of peril, no entreaty—and yet I never saw that before.” With a start.

“Saw what, deary?”

“Look at it! Look what a poor, mean, miserable thing it is! That must be real. It’s over.” (ch. 23)

The meaning of “that” and “it” remains shrouded in ambiguity, but it clearly has not finally brought relief to Jasper: it also prevents his achieving relief in the formerly totally satisfying way. The wicked desire for Edwin’s death, like the wicked relief felt by Lady Dedlock, becomes additional cause for Jasper to carve demons out of his heart: “What was his death but the key-stone of a gloomy arch removed?” Although it is of course possible—perhaps probable—that Jasper could have proved to be a murderer, yet I believe it more consistent with Dickens’s practice that he would have been found guilty only as Lady Dedlock was guilty of the murder of Mr. Tulkinghorn: in will, but not in deed. The difference, however, is negligible for the difference made in the effect upon him. Whether he did the deed or not, he is self-condemned by guilt.

With the creation of John Jasper, the last of the monsters to be summoned forth by Dickens, the warning of the marsh necessarily receives its final iteration. He is a subtle monster. Into his nature enter the refinement and sophistication that make of the “drifting icebergs” like James Harthouse a “very Devil,” much more fearful and dangerous than the “roaring lions by which few but savages and hunters are attracted.” He, however, is not protected by indifference: rather, like Pip and Lady Dedlock, he is capable of a sensitive internal torment much subtler than that primitively manifested by Gaffer and Sikes in their fearful looks over their shoulders. Despite their differences from one another, each of the marsh creatures sounds the death-in-life warning: People who think or feel like these creatures, who will or act like them, might as well live in the marsh, for they bring the marsh with them wherever they go. They may live and die as amphibians, as awakenned human beings; tramp mud through the drawing rooms of London; fly into the marsh miasma even while fleeing in boredom from it; or transform a counting/gatehouse into an ugly lighthouse. Subhuman or
dehumanized, victims or perpetrators, they are living reminders that there are many kinds of self-imposed death. People may turn both themselves and those they touch into monsters through forgetting their humane links with others.

The double guilt felt by Pip can be echoed in the heart of any sensitive person. Every marsh monster to be encountered in human affairs reminds us that “All about this was quite familiar knowledge down in the slime, ages ago.” Of what account is our great myth of human progress if we still permit our fellows to remain subhuman or cause them to be dehumanized, or if we ourselves can revert so readily to the monster? This, or something very like it, is the warning of the marsh, allegorically represented in the two journeymen of Stony Durdles, incessantly sawing stone in a petrified grove of tombstones “as if they were mechanical figures emblematical of Time and Death.”