It cannot be effectively denied that Dickens dealt sentimentally with children; yet to dwell too much upon those instances when he pulled out the stops on a melodramatic theme is to blind oneself to the allegorical significance of children in the Dickens view. Children in their sunny innocence far upriver presumably live in an Eden lost long ago by humankind and more recently by every individual adult. Nonetheless, the belief that as long as humanity endures, children will never cease to inhabit the springtime garden repeatedly sends a breath of renewed hope into people who recall as a distant dream their own childhood, however flawed, when anything seemed possible. The tears for a lost Dombey or Jo or Little Nell thus have universal wellsprings much deeper than the sentimental pathos attendant upon propaganda or a cheap play on the emotions.

In addition, childhood itself has for Dickens a special meaning related to a configuration already asserted in this study: When David looks back across his memory to observe a boy, a little fellow who “seems to be no part of me; I remember him as something I have passed, rather than have actually been,” he is calling forth an interpretation of the human consciousness so natural to his creator that its reflection is met everywhere in his works. This is the con-

Four main sources will be used to put together the composite picture of childhood depicted in this chapter: three Christmas stories—“The Child’s Story” (CS), “A Christmas Tree” (CT), and “The Haunted House” (HH); and one novel—David Copperfield (DC).
figuration of the person as a composite of successive figures, one of whom exists physically at a given time, but the remainder of whom live intact in memory. The condition of each successive existence depends upon what has been the fate of its predecessor. Many "blighted" characters turn out to include in their processions a "child with no childhood"—or to lack the child entirely. Our friend who finds himself in Mugby Junction (see ch. IV), for instance watches go by him on "the train of a life" a "child who had never had a childhood or known a parent." Mr. Grewgious, talking with his ward, Miss Rosa Bud, in The Mystery of Edwin Drood, attributes his "dry" nature to a similar situation:

"I mean," he explained, "that young ways were never my ways. I was the only offspring of parents far advanced in life, and I half believe I was born advanced in life myself. No personality is intended towards the name you will so soon change, when I remark that while the general growth of people seem to have come into existence, buds, I seem to have come into existence a chip. I was a chip—and a very dry one—when I first became aware of myself." (MED, ch. 9)

"Given the deficiencies in the nature of this human being," these comments seem to reason, "one can only infer that he was deprived of the childhood which would have furnished him with what he lacks." This reasoning in turn rests upon well-developed and firm assumptions regarding the pattern of an ideal, natural childhood, a pattern which can readily be reconstructed from Dickens's direct statements on the subject.

In order to illuminate ensuing configurations, this chapter will temporarily suspend the method of analysis used elsewhere in the study. Instead, it will tell the running story of the ideal childhood, describing its surroundings and narrating its events, for among the phenomena of this childhood will be encountered the elements that will return, often grotesquely distorted and perverted, in many subsequent configurations to test and criticize society, or to evaluate individuals.

Dickens's actual tracing of the permanent imprint made on a child's mind as a result of associating certain images with certain affective attitudes is a record comparable in a number of ways to Wordsworth's Prelude. At first, the natural condition of childhood, as allegorically pictured in "The Child's Story," is idyllic and innocent. Life in the garden of childhood is beneficent and carefree, and the business of life is only "playing." A traveller setting out on
the journey of life comes first upon a beautiful child in this garden who says: "I am always at play. Come and play with me." A little later the traveller loses the child, but meets a boy who says to him: "I am always learning. Come and learn with me." And yet a little beyond, he loses the boy likewise but comes upon a youth who says: "I am always in love. Come and love with me" (CS).

These three, the child, the boy, and the youth, all live in the idyllic garden where they develop the emotional responses that will equip them for life, because the sensitive young human soul must be protected and well prepared if it is to develop to accomplish a destiny. "Fair seedtime had my soul," Wordsworth wrote of a similar idyllic garden where a child also matured through three stages, "and I grew up / Fostered alike by beauty and by fear" (The Prelude, Bk. I, ll. 305–6). Dickens's idealization of childhood bears a marked resemblance to that of Wordsworth, for he too sees it as a "seed-time" indispensable for the natural development of the soul, which is "fostered alike by beauty and by fear." Although it is doubtful that Dickens would have echoed the Wordsworthian sentiment that his soul had had such a "fair seedtime" (if, indeed, he thought any child knew it in its totality), nonetheless, like Wordsworth, he found rushing out upon him from childhood certain epiphanal experiences with elemental forces, which would remain with him throughout life as types or emblems of those forces.

The traveller, then, responds in turn to the child, the boy, and the youth. In the idyllic garden of the child

he played with that child, the whole day long, and they were very merry. The sky was so blue, the sun was so bright, the water was so sparkling, the leaves were so green, the flowers were so lovely, and they heard such singing-birds and saw so many butterflies, that everything was beautiful. This was in fine weather. When it rained, they loved to watch the falling drops, and to smell the fresh scents. When it blew, it was delightful to listen to the wind, and fancy what it said, as it came rushing from its home—where was that, they wondered!—whistling and howling, driving the clouds before it, bending the trees, rumbling in the chimneys, shaking the house, and making the sea roar in fury. But, when it snowed, that was best of all; for, they liked nothing so well as to look up at the white flakes falling fast and thick, like down from the breasts of millions of white birds; and to see how smooth and deep the drift was; and to listen to the hush upon the paths and roads.

They had plenty of the finest toys in the world, and the most
astonishing picture-books: all about scimitars and slippers and turbans, and dwarfs and giants and genii and fairies, and blue-beards and bean-stalks and riches and caverns and forests and Valentines and Orsons: and all new and all true. (CS)

All of the forces of life play benevolently about the trusting child as he plays: whether sun, rain, wind, or snow betokens the changing seasons. "everything was beautiful." The child in the garden is also surrounded by human creations: "the finest toys in the world" and "the most astonishing picture-books"—"all new and all true." Sun, rain, wind, snow, dwarfs and giants and genii and fairies: all the "bran-new" objects of experience impinging on his consciousness have equal integrity: there is nothing to choose among them for truth or goodness or beauty.

With the help of the objects of experience about him, the developing boy begins to discriminate among the separate forces in the outside world, to learn that they are not all merely a sympathetic extension of himself. These objects are more clearly seen in another Christmas story, "A Christmas Tree," where Dickens hangs upon the Christmas trees of childhood memory the specific toys and books glancingly referred to in "The Child's Story." "All toys at first, I find": the Tumbler, the Jack-in-the-box, the cardboard dancing lady and the cardboard man on a string, the mask, the Doll's house, and the toy theatre. All in their turn acquire special meanings to be permanently etched on the boy's memory. First the toys in the form of human figures, the puppets and dolls, whose superficial resemblance to real people but fundamental difference from them would fuse in the child's imagination, provide many a later analogy helping to interpret life for his successors in the procession, such as the Tumbler who wouldn't lie down, but "persisted in rolling his fat body about, until he rolled himself still, and brought those lobster eyes of his to bear upon me—when I affected to laugh very much, but in my heart of hearts was extremely doubtful of him." The "infernal snuff-box" from which sprang "a demoniacal Counsellor in a black gown, with an obnoxious head of hair, and a red cloth mouth, wide open" developed a scary habit of flying "out of Mammoth Snuff-boxes in dreams, when least expected" and "in a highly magnified state." The cardboard lady who "stood up against the candlestick to dance" was beautiful, but the larger cardboard man had "a sinister expression in that nose of his."

What was awakening in the child soul was the sense of wonder,
a compound of beauty and fear—an apprehension of "unknown modes of being" latent even in the inanimate objects one could touch and feel in everyday experience.

But no other of the toys held the possibilities for terror that resided in the "dreadful Mask":

When did that dreadful Mask first look at me? Who put it on, and why was I so frightened that the sight of it is an era in my life? It is not a hideous visage in itself; it is even meant to be droll; why then were its stolid features so intolerable? Surely not because it hid the wearer's face. An apron would have done as much; and though I should have preferred even the apron away, it would not have been absolutely insupportable, like the mask. Was it the immovability of the mask? The doll's face was immovable, but I was not afraid of her. Perhaps that fixed and set change coming over a real face, infused into my quickened heart some remote suggestion and dread of the universal change that is to come on every face, and make it still? Nothing reconciled me to it. . . . Nor was it any satisfaction to be shown the Mask, and see that it was made of paper, or to have it locked up and be assured that no one wore it. The mere recollection of that fixed face, the mere knowledge of its existence anywhere, was sufficient to awake me in the night all perspiration and horror, with "O I know it's coming! O the Mask!" (CT)

The ramifications of the fearful mask reach out later through many a death-related analogy. The early memories of the gentleman for Nowhere, for instance, are filled with fearful masks. In a dreamlike vision, a parade of the adults who played a part in shaping his lost soul passes before him, each asking of him: "What am I like, Young Jackson?" First he responds to a woman, who is "like a blight all through the year to me. You hard-lined, thin-lipped, repressive, changeless woman with a wax mask on. You are like the Devil to me; most of all when you teach me religious things, for you make me abhor them" (MJ, ch. 1). Later he answers a man—"like my father, I sometimes think. You are hard enough and cold enough so to have brought up an acknowledged son. I see your scanty figure, your close brown suit, and your tight brown wig; but you, too, wear a wax mask to your death. You never by chance remove it—it never by chance falls off—and I know no more of you."

The result of subjection to these masked figures is another memory, of a child held prisoner behind "that horrible mask" and fated to eat and drink "in silence and constraint with the mask before me, every day." The deathlike mask is indeed a fearful appari-
tion. But the difference between the experience of the child in the

garden and the blighted child, such as the gentleman for Nowhere,

is that the former has time to assimilate the idea of the mask (as of

other threatening forces) before he must encounter it in reality.

Then, in contrast to the mask with its presentiments of death:

"Ah! The Doll's house!" with its wonderful miniature furniture

"perched among the boughs as if in preparation for some fairy

housekeeping."

I don't admire the Houses of Parliament half so much as that stone-

fronted mansion with real glass windows, and door-steps, and a real

balcony—greener than I ever see now except at watering places; and

even they afford but a poor imitation. . . . Could all the Temperance

Societies of these later days, united, give me such a tea-drinking as I

have had through the means of yonder little set of blue crockery,

which really would hold liquid (it ran out of the small wooden cask, I

recollect, and tasted of matches), and which made tea, nectar. (CT)

The affective values of the abundantly fitted-out Doll's house be-

come inseparably associated with it: its warmth and safety and deli-
cious pleasures epitomize a snug security magically provided long

after the traveller has left both child and boy behind. 1

And now, on the Christmas tree, "How thick the books begin to

hang"—"What fat black letters to begin with!" as the boy learns

that "A was an archer, and shot at a frog" (CT). The whole pan-

orama of the human imagination spreads before him. Everything

in the books pulsates with imagined life, from the alphabet on. "To

this day," David Copperfield recalls, "when I look upon the fat

black letters in the primer, the puzzling novelty of their shapes, and

the easy good nature of O and Q and S, seem to present themselves

again before me as they used to do" (DC, ch. 4).

With the appearance of the books, the mysterious forces of

beauty and fear, of good and evil, begin to open before the boy

with increasing complexity and ambiguity. "Jack and the Beanstalk"

fires his imagination with dreams of heroic exploits against those

"dreadfully interesting, double-headed giants" (CT). He falls in

love with Little Red Riding-Hood, and gains understanding of "the

cruelty and treachery of that dissembling Wolf who ate her grand-
mother." He travels to far lands with Sinbad the Sailor, and lives in

the fairy-tale land of wish fulfillment where giants always fall and

Jack lives happily ever after—the only land the boy will ever know

where, with the help of a fairy godmother and one's own "sword of
sharpness, and . . . shoes of swiftness” (CT), one’s dreams and great expectations all come true.

Now vague presentiments of a threatened paradise are gradually succeeded by the disturbing certainty that not all the new things are equally true—at least not all true in the same way. “I seem to have walked along a path of flowers,” writes David, for whom the realization comes as an abrupt shock, “as far as the crocodile book” (DC, ch. 4). Ogres and giants are sometimes overpowering, and even Jack may tumble from his beanstalk country in the sky.

But within his books imagination can still run free, and the boy can redress many a grievance against hard reality by (writes David) “impersonating my favourite characters in them—as I did—and by putting Mr. and Miss Murdstone into all the bad ones.” David recalls with gratitude the books from his father’s library: “From that blessed little room, Roderick Random, Peregrine Pickle, Humphrey Clinker, Tom Jones, the Vicar of Wakefield, Don Quixote, Gil Blas, and Robinson Crusoe, came out, a glorious host, to keep me company. They kept alive my fancy, and my hope of something beyond that place and time,—they and the Arabian Nights, and the Tales of the Genii,—and did me no harm.”

For now comes “the setting-in of the bright Arabian Nights” (CT). In the fancy of the boy, the hero Jack gives way to a glamorous “Eastern King with a glittering scimitar and turban. . . . Oh, now all common things become uncommon and enchanted to me. All lamps are wonderful; all rings are talismans. . . . Any iron ring let into stone is the entrance to a cave which only waits for the magician, and the little fire, and the necromancy, that will make the earth shake.”

The boy discovers that the land of the imagination is a seductive Eastern land. He proposes to “another creature like myself, also with the smoothest of faces and the shortest of legs” an astounding thing: that they form with their schoolmates a forbidden sweet thing called “a Seraglio” (HH, ch. 2). He becomes the “Sultan Haroun Alraschid” and basks “in the smiles of eight of the fairest of the daughters of men.” Miss Bule, a young lady “whom I judge to have attained the ripe age of eight or nine,” becomes the “Favourite.” He maintains his position not without some objection from the other creature, who “had already fallen into the second male place in the State, and was set apart for Grand Vizier. He afterwards resisted this disposal of events, but had his hair pulled until he yielded.”

The seraglio must be kept secret from Miss Griffin, the mistress
of the school, who was "a model of propriety" and must never know when "she paraded us down the Hampstead-Road two and two, that she was walking with a stately step at the head of Polygamy and Mohamedanism." The boy also waits breathlessly with Dinerzade and Scheherazade as they cleverly lead the tyrannical Sultan into granting one more day of life, after which grace "we all three breathe again" (CT). Part of the time the boy parades proudly in the secret splendor of the Sultan, while at other times he resists or cowards before his tyrannical power.

Significantly, at about this time the boy begins to see "a prodigious nightmare" crouching indistinctly among the leaves of the Christmas tree—like the mask: "I don't know why it's frightful—but I know it is." It advances and recedes before his eyes:

> When it comes closest, it is worse. In connexion with it I descry remembrances of winter nights incredibly long; of being sent early to bed, as a punishment for some small offence, and waking in two hours, with a sensation of having been asleep two nights; of the laden hopelessness of morning ever dawning; and the oppression of a weight of remorse. (CT)

David has similar impressions of the terrible five days of imprisonment by Mr. Murdstone when, ridden by guilt, he wondered fearfully whether prison or hanging was to be his fate—of "The length of those five days I can convey no idea to anyone. They occupy the place of years in my remembrance." He recalls "the uncertain pace of the hours, especially at night, when I would wake thinking it was morning, and find that the family were not yet gone to bed, and that all the length of night had yet to come—the depressed dreams and nightmares I had." And all of this remembrance surrounded by an atmosphere of "gloom, and fear, and remorse" (DC, ch. 4).

Somewhere along the way, it seems, the reality of malevolent and evil forces, long suspected and increasingly corroborated by experience, has increased its personal threat by moving inside the boy himself. The glittering Sultan with his cruelty and his harem is an ambiguous figure of enticing guilt. The well-preserved secret of the seraglio is a "mysterious and terrible joy" until the awful moment one Sunday morning in church "when the description of Solomon in his domestic glory happened to be read" and "conscience whispered me, 'Thou, too, Haroun'":

> The officiating minister had a cast in his eye, and it assisted conscience by giving him the appearance of reading personally at me. A crimson blush, attended by a fearful perspiration, suffused my fea-
tures. The Grand Vizier became more dead than alive, and the whole Seraglio reddened as if the sunset of Bagdad shone direct upon their lovely faces. At this portentous time the awful Griffin rose, and balefully surveyed the children of Islam. My own impression was, that Church and State had entered into a conspiracy with Miss Griffin to expose us, and that we should all be put into white sheets, and exhibited in the centre aisle. But, so Westerly—if I may be allowed the expression as opposite to Eastern associations—was Miss Griffin’s sense of rectitude, that she merely suspected Apples, and we were saved. (HH)

John Jarndyce would detect a strong “East” wind as the boy finds himself guiltily poised between the Eastern Sultan and the Western “Apples” on the very borderland of the prelapsarian garden and about to be expelled from it, for whether green apples or apples of Eden, their consumption brings disastrous consequences. Certainly one with such growing knowledge of good and evil cannot long continue in the garden of innocence.

“And now it was, at the height of enjoyment of my bliss, that I became heavily troubled.” Reality interposes to assert the impracticality of taking the harem home to mother at Midsummer. Then one day, doubly oppressed by guilt and anxiety, the boy sees a strange man talking with Miss Griffin. “Supposing him to be a minion of the law, and that my hour was come, I instantly ran away, with the general purpose of making for Egypt.” But the man has really come to tell the boy the stark fact that “‘Your pa’s dead!’”8 At these words, “Haroun Alraschid took to flight . . . ; the Seraglio vanished; from that moment, I never again saw one of the eight of the fairest of the daughters of men.” Now comes debt at home as well as death, and for him a great cruel school “where the boys knew all about the sale, before I got there, and asked me what I had fetched, and who had bought me, and hooted at me, ‘Going, going, gone!’ I never whispered in that wretched place that I had been Haroun, or had had a Seraglio.” The world of fact and the world of dream are coming to seem less and less satisfactorily related: while nightmare slides in and out of life in a frightening fashion, the wonderful dream seems more and more reserved for a world apart.

But, in compensation, as the traveller is about to leave the boy behind him, a most fair thing appears under the Christmas tree:

I see a wonderful row of little lights rise smoothly out of the ground, before a vast green curtain. Now, a bell rings—a magic bell, which still sounds in my ears unlike all other bells—and music plays, amidst
a buzz of voices, and a fragrant smell of orange-peel and oil. Anon, the magic bell commands the music to cease, and the great green curtain rolls itself up majestically, and The Play begins. (CT)

Remembering the days when he could forget hard reality by "impersonating," the boy discovers that in the pantomime and the toy theatre he can still live with the old freedom as he weeps for Jane Shore or George Barnwell, or marvels at Harlequin, Pantaloon, and the Clown. In the theatre:

Everything is capable, with the greatest of ease, of being changed into Anything; and "Nothing is, but thinking makes it so." Now, too, I perceive my first experience of the dreary sensation—often to return in after-life—of being unable, next day, to get back to the dull, settled world; of wanting to live for ever in the bright atmosphere I have quitted; of doting on the little Fairy, with the wand like a celestial Barber's Pole, and pining for a Fairy immortality along with her. (CT)

The boy—and later the man—delights in the experience of restoration for the time to a world where "nothing is but thinking makes it so": where distasteful "realities" can simply be made to disappear. He has also begun to sense, however, the danger attached to the seductive allure of withdrawing permanently into a fantasy world: it can become a boundary experience between life and death where the return to this "world of effort" would seem to be not worth it. Nonetheless, so magical is the bell of the toy theatre that its memory will always surround with charm the "dark, dirty, real Theatres in the day-time, adorned with these associations as with the freshest garlands of the rarest flowers."

And now the traveller comes upon the youth, "always in love," for whom the "everlastingly green garden" revives once more as the whole world becomes transformed with the freshest garlands of the rarest flowers. David captures most poignantly the dazed rapture of this enchanted time as he tells of falling in love with Dora. David has just been articled to Spenlow and Jorkins. Now he has been invited to the home of Mr. Spenlow, of whose private life David knows only that he is a widower with one daughter. He walks into Spenlow's house quite his own man; even though rather shaken by recent worldly experiences, he is feeling a rather confident young man of the world, with a coolly appraising if appreciative eye for his surroundings:

There was a lovely garden to Mr. Spenlow's house; and though that was not the best time of the year for seeing a garden, it was so beau-
tifully kept, that I was quite enchanted. There was a charming lawn, there were clusters of trees, and there were perspective walks that I could just distinguish in the dark, arched over with trellis-work, on which shrubs and flowers grew in the growing-season. "Here Miss Spenlow walks by herself." I thought. "Dear me!" (DC, ch. 26)

In an instant, however, he has met Dora ("What a beautiful name!") and "All was over in a moment. I had fulfilled my destiny. I was a captive and a slave." Dora is "a Fairy, a Sylph, I don't know what she was—anything that no one ever saw, and everything that everybody ever wanted." In a daze he tries to make appropriate responses to other guests, noting without alarm the intrusion of Miss Murdstone into the "garden," though as a child he had described the influence of the Murdstones upon him as "the fascination of two snakes on a wretched young bird" (ch. 4). David tries to listen to an amiable gentleman with a polished head who is, appropriately, telling him a long story "which I think was about gardening. I think I heard him say, 'my gardener,' several times. I seemed to pay the deepest attention to him, but I was wandering in a garden of Eden all the while, with Dora" (ch. 26). Looking back on this time from the perspective of years, David says: "There is no doubt whatever that I was a lackadaisical young spooney; but there was a purity of heart in all this, that prevents my having quite a contemptuous recollection of it, let me laugh as I may." This is something of a rueful acknowledgment that youthful love is the last of the experiences in the fair seedtime of the soul before the everlastingly green garden is "left for everlasting, unregainable, and far away." The soul must now put on its maturity.

But it is ready. In the idyllic garden it has been prepared to survive the hard facts of life. In a protected world it has been able to "play" at life before it must take part in the real struggle for existence. It has come to apprehend its own mortality and to envision evil before it has to cope with it; and gradually it has been hardened to reality so that it may leave the garden and proceed upon its journey. In the garden it has expanded to wonder, to know beauty and fear, to imagine, to dream, and to love. The traveller who has accompanied the child, the boy, and the youth through the garden carries inside him a world against which to evaluate and measure the world outside. He will not again fully know the happiness of the garden, for he will never feel quite at home in the world as it is, though it might be "that every object I looked at reminded me of the happy old home, which was like a dream I could never dream
again" (DC, ch. 8) [cf. note 4]). Neither will he again have the freedom from responsibility and from awareness of time that through childhood surrounded him like a protective cocoon. Nonetheless he has memories, which tell him that the objects of the imagination are as precious and real as the objects of external experience; with such resources he is equipped to become a complete human being. The child who has been deprived of this leisurely fair seedtime, however, has a blight upon him from which he may well never recover.

In coming to its radically different conclusion, the Dickensian idealization of childhood is seen to have veered sharply away from that of Wordsworth. It is true that the last item to be hung on the Dickens Christmas tree is the star, tacked on insecurely at the top with suitable and sincere encomiums to the Christ whose teachings Dickens constantly reiterated. Christian concepts, however, belong to Dickens's discursive equipment rather than to his mode of experience, and we shall not meet Christian images among the tapesried associations and analogies. Nor did he, as Wordsworth did, find other transcendental meaning: instead of intimations of immortality, Dickens received from his recollections of childhood those intimations of an earthly paradise that would make of him a humanist and a humanitarian. The very images that would help him interpret life would be embodied, not in clouds and lakes and mountains, but in surrogate human figures, from the snuff-box to the Sultan; not in objects of nature, but in objects of human creation. Furthermore, for Dickens, childhood is not a time or condition to look back upon with nostalgia or to retreat into as an escape from life. One can visualize with some amusement the horror with which Dickens must have regarded the Wordsworthian prayer for the Cottage child:

that this fair creature, checked
By special privilege of Nature's love,
Should in his childhood be detained for ever!

(Prelude, Bk. 7, ll. 374–76)

The nearest approach to such an idea in the Dickens imagery is that bobbing preserved monster in Mr. Venus's specialty shop, "a Hindoo baby in a bottle, curved up with his big head under him, as though he would instantly throw a summersault if the bottle were large enough" (OMF, ch. 7).

For Dickens, the most tragic spectacle was that of a child prevented from growing through a free childhood into maturity, while
one of the most despicable of human creatures was the particular kind of egoist who tried to remain in the idyllic garden after the time had come to put away childish things. In the next chapters, the scene will be filled with such blighted and warped human beings, all caught somehow in configurations naturally appropriate to childhood, but which grow monstrously grotesque and perverted when unnaturally tampered with and invaded by adults.