And now, as Dickens might have written, comes the crowding in of the dreadful masks—the ogres and giants, the tyrannical Sultans, the dolls and the puppets with their collapsing legs. For the child must now confront all of the fearful or pathetic figures ever encountered in story book or dream—all disguised as adults encountered in life. Far from enjoying the ideal childhood, in reality all children must thread a precarious way through a crowd of dangerous adults in a position to control their lives. Milling about in the scene as object lessons are also other half-adults, permanently crippled as a result of their own blighted childhood or from having no childhood at all.

These are the actors in the scenario to unfold in this chapter: the defective adults, the hapless children, and their adult oppressors. The story that develops through their interactions points to a deeply felt conviction of Dickens: adults may not exploit childhood without releasing powerful forces of revenge, for some power in the world will not permit the violation to take place without imposing just consequences. Although Dickens may sometimes even go so far in discursive explanation as to deliver this warning in an oratorical statement reminiscent of Thomas Carlyle, it is also tellingly conveyed as his other messages are: directly through the images and patterns in which he embodies his felt thought.

We have already encountered several adults *mangue* in Scrooge, the gentleman for Nowhere, Grewgious, and Tulkinghorn. The
last of these, however, is somewhat different from the other three, each of whom has a soul, however crippled. If Tulkinghorn ever had one, it long ago atrophied and died. Tulkinghorn is quite openly an object lesson in the totally destructive effects of childhood blight, for he actually lives beneath a “painted ceiling, with foreshortened Allegory staring down at his intrusion” and pointing a vague finger into the room. Tulkinghorn’s deprivation, we are told, seems principally to be that he is “an Oyster of the old school, whom nobody can open.”

This marsh creature lives in an apartment as withdrawing as he is. Even “the titles on the backs of his books have retired into the binding; everything that can have a lock has got one; no key is visible” (BH, ch. 10). Tulkinghorn is the tight-lipped depository for all the secrets of the great ones of the earth. What a comfort to them to know that he is an “Oyster” whom nobody can open! But he is likewise an oyster in a much more significant sense, for nobody can open him to any kind of emotion or sentiment. Although he would certainly resist Lady Dedlock’s attempts to soften him, the narrator marvels, he surely might have been expected to feel something like triumph after he had succeeded in publicly revealing to her, in a slightly veiled version, his knowledge of her story? Not even this feeling, however, is available to him: “To say of a man so severely and strictly self-repressed that he is triumphant, would be to do him as great an injustice as to suppose him troubled with love or sentiment, or any romantic weakness” (ch. 41).

With his customary fanciful inventiveness, Dickens has found the striking controlling metaphor for Tulkinghorn’s nature, rigidly closed to all human feeling. He is likewise a closed oyster to the reader; if he possesses an inner life, it is not revealed. Although little sympathy is engendered in Bleak House for this man, the description of him as “of what is called the old school—a phrase generally meaning any school that seems never to have been young” is a glancing acknowledgment of the deprivation that has destroyed his humanity.

Mr. Tulkinghorn is a projection into adulthood of the child born old and (therefore) somehow soulless. He has his child counterparts in the allegorical monster children of A Christmas Carol and The Haunted Man. These are the children revealed to the shrinking gaze of Scrooge by the Ghost of Christmas Present, brought forth from the foldings of its robe after Scrooge has seen something not quite clear—is it a foot or a claw?:
two children; wretched, abject, frightful, hideous, miserable. They
knelt down at its feet, and clung upon the outside of its garment. . . .
They were a boy and a girl. Yellow, meagre, ragged, scowling, wolf-
ish; but prostrate, too, in their humility. Where graceful youth should
have filled their features out, and touched them with its freshest tints,
a stale and shrivelled hand, like that of age, had pinched, and twisted
them, and pulled them into shreds. Where angels might have sat en-
throned, devils lurked, and glared out menacing. No change, no deg-
radation, no perversion of humanity, in any grade, through all the
mysteries of wonderful creation, has monsters half so horrible and
dread. (CC, stave III)

A similar apparition materializes before the chemist Redlaw, the
“haunted man”: a “something” rushing past him to crouch in a cor-
ner; “a baby savage, a young monster, a child who had never been a
child, a creature who might live to take the outward form of man,
but who, within, would live and perish a mere beast” (HM, ch. 2).

The very existence of these children, who will live to prey on
mankind as monster adults, sounds a dark note of foreboding.
They are obviously not intended to be real children. Rather, they
are Dickens’s emblems for an abhorrent condition of society in the
most abhorrent analogy he can conceive: that of the child turned
into an aged monster as a result of “blight” by the indifference and
neglect of society.

Other victims of the same social conditions are less able to
avenge themselves; for example, the blighted children bred like
maggots in the dilapidated street described here: “These tumbling
tenements contain, by night, a swarm of misery. As, on the ruined
human wretch, vermin parasites appear, so, these ruined shelters
have bred a crowd of soul existence that crawls in and out of gaps
in walls and boards; and coils itself to sleep, in maggot numbers,
where the rain drips in; and comes and goes, fetching and carrying
fever” (BH, ch. 16). This is Tom-All-Alone’s: home of “Name, Jo.
Nothing else that he knows on. Don’t know that everybody has two
names. Never heard of sich a think. . . . No father, no mother,
no friends. Never been to school. What’s home?” (ch. 11). This
anonymous child of ignorance and want is likewise a walking alle-
gory with his constant “moving-on” past the indifferent stream of
society, befriended only by another nameless outcast: “‘Nemo!’
repeats Mr. Tulkinghorn [lest we miss it]. ‘Nemo is Latin for no
one’” (ch. 10).

Many of the other blighted children in Bleak House are the vic-
tims, not of an anonymous society, but of specific individual adults who are careless or neglectful. While these individuals usually represent societal types, they are also the particular adults—parents—who might be expected to be careful and attentive to the needs of children. Their peccadillos and families have received adequate attention elsewhere, and need only to be mentioned here: the Jellybys, the Pardigles, the Coavises, the Skimpoles. The source of such neglect is either parental preoccupation, such as that of Mrs. Jellyby with a distant “good cause” that blinds her to the reality around her; or absorption in their own selfish desires, which makes them callous, as with Harold Skimpole (to be discussed in ch. VII).

In addition to such children of neglect, other people have been denied their childhood by design. One such child who must be shaped “to accomplish a destiny” is little Paul Dombey who, seemingly knowing what was in store for him, came into the world, as already seen, with his fists clenched as if “squaring at existence for having come upon him so unexpectedly.” Says Mr. Dombey: “‘There is nothing of chance or doubt in the course before my son. His way in life was clear and prepared, and marked out before he existed’” (DS, ch. 11). As a result, Paul, apparently aware that his destiny could never afford the luxury of a leisurely childhood, looks and talks “like one of those terrible little beings in the fairy tales, who, at a hundred and fifty or two hundred years of age, fantastically represent the children for whom they have substituted” (ch. 8). Paul, as we are frequently reminded, is “old-fashioned.”

Other people denied their childhood by design are all the members of the Smallweed family in Bleak House. The first member of this family to appear is Bart, already “an old limb of the law” at something under fifteen. Indeed, whether he “was ever a boy, is much doubted in Lincoln’s Inn”:

He is a weird changeling, to whom years are nothing. He stands precociously possessed of centuries of owlish wisdom. If he ever lay in a cradle, it seems as if he must have lain there in a tail-coat. He has an old, old eye, has Smallweed: and he drinks and smokes, in a monkeyish way; and his neck is stiff in his collar; and he is never to be taken in; and he knows all about it, whatever it is. In short, in his bringing up, he has been so nursed by Law and Equity that he has become a kind of fossil imp. (BH, ch. 20)

Bart is the scion of a most unusual family: “There has been only one child in the Smallweed family for several generations. Little old
men and women there have been, but no child, until Mr. Smallweed's grandmother, now living, became weak in her intellect, and fell (for the first time) into a childish state" (ch. 21). As already suggested in Bart's being nursed "by Law and Equity," it was not neglect but plan that turned the younger Smallweeds into little old men and women, committed by their elders to the pattern of life they must follow.

Responsibility for monstrous children falls always and totally on the adults—the gardeners—controlling their world. When, instead of nurturing and protecting the childhood garden, adults invade and manipulate it for reasons of their own, the children whose lives they touch stand in grave danger: as tender plants, the growth of the garden, children are readily susceptible to blight.

Every one of these children "without a childhood" is deficient in precisely those qualities dependent for their development on the conditions of the childhood garden: imagination and fancy, the sense of wonder and fear, love and sentiment. All are qualities rooted in the "child's heart" and related to the inner life whose reality is asserted in that Edenic world sheltered from time and responsibility.

Edith Granger (to become Edith Dombey) was brought up on a system whose tenets denied the childhood conditions for developing the soul. As an adult, Edith is well aware that a designing mother, Mrs. Skewton, denied her a protected childhood. Edith is provoked into retaliation when her mother insists upon calling her daughter her "darling child":

"A child!" said Edith, looking at her, "when was I a child! What childhood did you ever leave to me? I was a woman—arbitrary, designing, mercenary, laying snares for men—before I knew myself, or you, or even understood the base and wretched aim of every new display I learnt. You gave birth to a woman. Look upon her. She is in her pride tonight. . . . Look at me," she said, "who have never known what it is to have an honest heart, and love. Look at me, taught to scheme and plot when children play; and married in my youth—an old age of design—to one for whom I had no feeling but indifference." (DS, ch. 27)

Five little Gradgrinds also were brought up on a system obstructing the development of the soul. Like Edith, Louisa as a young woman is aware that she was never truly a child. Now she confronts her father with the knowledge:
“The baby-preference that even I have heard of as common among children, has never had its innocent resting-place in my breast. You have been so careful of me that I never had a child’s heart. You have trained me so well that I never dreamed a child’s dream. You have dealt so wisely with me, Father, from my cradle to this hour, that I never had a child’s belief or a child’s fear.” (HT, bk. I, ch. 15)

Louisa Gradgrind also understands exactly both the nature and the source of her deprivation: “‘What do I know, Father,’ said Louisa in her quiet manner, ‘of tastes and fancies; of aspirations and affections; of all that part of my nature in which such light things might have been nourished? What escape have I had from problems that could be demonstrated, and realities that could be grasped?’” Louisa knows that her unfitness for identification with humanity, despite her instincts of kindness and compassion, is traceable to the “stony” home to which she physically returns on the occasion of her mother’s death. Otherwise, “she had no inducements to go back and had rarely gone”:

Neither, as she approached her old home now, did any of the best influences of old home descend upon her. The dreams of childhood—its airy fables, its graceful, beautiful, humane, impossible adornments of the world beyond: so good to be believed in once, so good to be remembered when outgrown, for then the least among them rises to the stature of a great Charity in the heart, suffering little children to come into the midst of it, and to keep with their pure hands a garden in the stony ways of this world, wherein it were better for all the children of Adam that they should oftener sun themselves, simple and trustful, and not worldly-wise—what had she to do with these? (bk. II, ch. 9)

The “airy fables” denied Louisa are emblems, as everywhere in Dickens, of the stimulus and nourishment the imagined story provides the soul.

Although adults manqué like Tulkinghorn, who totally lack awareness or understanding of their deficiencies, appear to be without souls, both Edith and Louisa, who have the inner capacity to understand their situation and to comment upon it, show evidence of a soul struggling for survival. Paul Dombey, as a matter of fact, suffers from a soul too large for his body. Mrs. Chick early points out Paul’s problem to his father. “‘The fact is,’” she says, “‘that his mind is too much for him. His soul is a great deal too large for his frame’” (DS, ch. 8). Nonetheless, Dombey, intent only upon his design for his son, remains exultant as his six-year-
old changeling enrolls in Dr. Blimber's educational establishment. "'You are almost a man already,'" he assures Paul; "'Almost,'" returns the child (ch. 11). "'Shall we make a man of him?'" says the Doctor; "'I had rather be a child,'" Paul replies, "'with a curious expression of suppressed emotion in his face.'"

Paul's dreams for the future are of being able to "'go away into the country with my darling Florence, have a beautiful garden, fields, and woods, and live there with her all my life'"—in a touching reversal of the natural order of life—"'if I grow up'" (ch. 14). The childhood garden and the suppressed emotions live wistfully together in his dreams.

Dombey's rigid design for Paul is typical of the parental meddling in the maturing process of children that prevents their natural growth. The father's enslavement to some idea according to which he controls his child's "education" has ruled out the childhood influences that nourish the soul.

In most instances of parental meddling, the "idleness" of reading fairy tales or of "playing" must be rigidly weeded out of children for their own good. In _Bleak House_, the Smallweed achievement of a complete family of adults has resulted from rigid avoidance of such stimulus and nourishment:

During the whole time consumed in the slow growth of this family tree, the house of Smallweed, always early to go out and late to marry, has strengthened itself in its practical character, has discarded all amusements, discontenanced all story-books, fairy tales, fictions and fables, and banished all levities whatsoever. Hence the gratifying fact, that it has had no child born to it, and that the complete little men and women whom it has produced, have been observed to bear a likeness to old monkeys with something depressing on their minds. _BH_, ch. 21

The "Hard Facts" school of _Hard Times_ has built the same discipline into an educational system. Fact one, as expounded to Mr. M'Choakumchild's class by the gentlemen who was a government officer, "'You must discard the word Fancy altogether'":

"You have nothing to do with it. You are not to have, in any object of use or ornament, what would be a contradiction in fact. You don't walk upon flowers in fact; you cannot be allowed to walk upon flowers in carpets. You don't find that foreign birds and butterflies come and perch upon your crockery; you cannot be permitted to paint foreign birds and butterflies upon your crockery. You never meet with quadrupeds going up and down walls; you must not have
quadrupeds represented upon walls. . . . This is the new discovery. This is fact. This is taste.” (*HT*, bk. I, ch. 1)¹

Fancy, as Mr. Gradgrind later explains, includes “‘anything fanciful, fantastic, or (I am using synonymous terms) sentimental’” (bk. I, ch. 15). Fact Two, as propounded by Mr. Bounderby: “‘An idle imagination, Gradgrind, [is] a very bad thing for anybody’” (bk. I, ch. 4). Fact Three, communicated as a reproof to Louisa Gradgrind, overheard saying to her brother, “‘Tom, I wonder’”: “‘Louisa, never wonder’” (bk. I, ch. 8). Fact Four, remarked upon when Sissy Jupe irrationally expects to get a letter from her vanished father: “‘If Jupe had been properly trained from an early age she would have demonstrated to herself on sound principles the baselessness of these fantastic hopes’” (bk. I, ch. 9). All of these facts upon which the system is based can be reduced to one principle: always reject and deny the world of dreams—of fancy, imagination, wonder, and hopes—in which the soul finds its true home. Any children so unfortunate as to fall into this bondage are doomed to a blighted childhood.

When it becomes clear that something has gone wrong in the disciplined development of Louisa, Gradgrind is confronted with discovering and eliminating the cause. Bounderby is sure the problem is an idle imagination, “‘a cursed bad thing for a girl like Louisa.’” Wherever can it have come from?

“Whether,” said Gradgrind, pondering with his hands in his pockets, and his cavernous eyes on the fire, “whether any instructor or servant can have suggested anything? Whether, in spite of all precautions, any idle storybook can have got into the house? Because, in minds that have been so practically formed by rule and line, from the cradle upwards, this is so curious, so incomprehensible.” (bk. I, ch. 4)

Bounderby (erroneously) identifies Sissy Jupe as the culprit: Sissy, who has already shown herself possessed of a disrupting fancy; who lives in the free and fantastic atmosphere of Sleary’s Circus; and who, he will soon discover, has a disreputable father who encourages her to read him stories “‘About the Fairies, sir, and the Dwarf, and the Hunchback, and the Genies’”—clearly a “case for rigid training” (bk. I, ch. 7).

Gradgrind prattles his theories oblivious, however, to the most basic “fact” of all: that only in the fantastic fairy tale can an analogue be found adequate to describe him. Five little Gradgrinds are held captive by this “monster in a lecturing castle”—“not that they
knew, by name or nature, anything about an ogre.” Like “a dry Ogre chalking ghastly white figures” on the blackboard, Gradgrind, “taking childhood captive, and dragging it into statistical dens by the hair” (bk. I, ch. 3), grinds into the bones of his children the hard facts of life.

In fact, the Gradgrind children live in a world of giants and ogres. Both Louisa and Tom exist in the shadow of the “Giant Bounderby” of “the red brick castle” (bk. II, ch. 4). For Louisa, still a third giant later stalks the world in the form of Mrs. Sparsit, who erects in her mind for the girl “a mighty Staircase, with a dark pit of shame and ruin at the bottom; and down those stairs, from day to day and hour to hour, she saw Louisa coming” (bk. II, ch. 10). The “black eyes wide open with no touch of pity, with no touch of compunction” watch Louisa drifting into the Harthouse plot, descending “this new Giant’s Staircase,” steadily “verging, like a weight in deep water, to the black gulf at the bottom.”

The Dickens fancy dips into a different type of airy fable to depict the blight of childhood brought about by the guilty sultan of the Eastern Arabian Nights. Paul Dombey was born into the empire of such a sultan: a rich, tyrannical “Tartar.”

Though the offices of Dombey and Son were within the liberties of the City of London, and within hearing of Bow Bells, when their clashing voices were not drowned by the uproar in the streets, yet were there hints of adventurous and romantic story to be observed in some of the adjacent objects. . . . Just round the corner stood the rich East India house, teeming with suggestions of precious stuffs and stones, tigers, elephants, howdahs, hookahs, umbrellas, palm trees, palanquins, and gorgeous princes of a brown complexion sitting on carpets [magic?], with their slippers very much turned up at the toes. (DS, ch. 4)

If Dombey and Son is not itself an East India House, it is close to one. Perch, the messenger, hurries about willingly to anticipate Dombey’s every wish and to contribute to his slightest comfort: “so little objection had Perch to doing deferential in the last degree, that if he might have laid himself at Mr. Dombey’s feet, or might have called him by some such title as used to be bestowed upon the Caliph Haroun Alraschid, he would have been all the better pleased” (ch. 13). Dombey, now established as the “Sultan,” occupies the inner room, and next to him as second in degree of descent is the tigerish manager, Mr. Carker, the “Grand Vizier.” This
empire of an Eastern potentate, like the den of the ogre, is a threatening world for a child yearning for love and approval from the stern ruler even while breathlessly waiting for the decree that will mean life or death for him: a child such as Paul.

Though not an ogre himself, Dombey easily finds one to aid him in developing Paul to fulfill his destiny. "'Dear me,'" says Dombey, sitting in the parlour of her "Castle" with that "ogress and child-queller" (ch. 8), Mrs. Pipchin, "'six will be changed to sixteen, before we have time to look about us'" (ch. 11). Although Pipchin croaks unsympathetically that ten years is a long time, Dombey is unperturbed. "'It depends,'" he observes coolly, "'on circumstances.'" Between them, as it turns out, the Sultan and the Ogress will see that the right circumstances prevail to reduce the time.

As Mr. Gradgrind dragged childhood itself captive to his statistical den, so are any children who wander into the Dombey empire in danger of imprisonment. As Rob, Charitable Grinde one hundred and forty-seven, swims before his mother's eyes "with his very small legs" rigidly encased in "red worsted stockings; and very strong leather small-clothes" (ch. 5), she half foresees the threat to his "blessed legs": that he will become, as Paul will, "her own poor blighted child" as a result of Dombey's patronage. The childhood of Dombey's ignored other child, Flo, is indeed externally blighted, like that of Oliver Twist, but like him she survives internally with a kind of magical immunity to the effects of the blight—probably at first because, as Mrs. Chick has said, "'She will never, never, never be a Dombey . . . she is so very unlike a Dombey . . . the child, you see, has poor Fanny's nature'" (ch. 5); and also because so far Dombey has considered her too inconsequential to arrange a destiny for her.

In the course of things, however, Florence too is eventually threatened, for the time has come for Dombey to take a second wife. Unfortunately for him, it is also time for the insubordinate Grand Vizier to assert himself. Mr. Carker, like that "other creature," the Grand Vizier of "The Haunted House" (see ch. V), has long resisted the disposal of events that has put him into "the second male place in the State" and sees a way to advance and avenge himself through undoing the new "Favourite." Mr. Carker has already seen, "in his fancy, a crowd of people slumbering on the ground at his feet, like the poor native at his master's door: who picked his way among them: looking down, maliciously enough: but trod upon no upturned face—as yet" (ch. 26).
Unfortunately for both Sultan and Grand Vizier, the intended victim is another blighted child grown to desperate maturity: proud and handsome Edith Granger. The Sultan finds an eager accomplice in her mother, Mrs. Skewton, another Eastern ruler. This aged “Cleopatra” finds: “There is such an obvious destiny in it, that really one might almost be induced to cross one’s arms upon one’s frock, and say, like those wicked Turks, there is no What’s-his-name but Thingummy, and What-you-may-call-it is his prophet!” (ch. 27). Her readiness thus to convert to Muslimism helps establish her complicity.

As the two conspire to effect a marriage between her and Dombey, Edith responds with bitter understanding. Just as she comprehended her childhood deprivation, she also has an exact perspective on her current situation: she is once again being offered in the slave market and she is about to be purchased by the tyrannical Sultan.

“There is no slave in a market; there is no horse in a fair: so shown and offered and examined and paraded, mother, as I have been, for ten shameful years,” cried Edith, with a burning brow, and the same bitter emphasis on the one word. . . . “Who takes me, refuse that I am, and as I well deserve to be. . . shall take me, as this man does, with no art of mine put forth to lure him. He sees me at the auction, and he thinks it well to buy me. Let him! When he came to view me—perhaps to bid—he required to see the roll of my accomplishments. I gave it to him. When he would have me show one of them, to justify his purchase to his men, I require of him to say which he demands, and I will exhibit it. I will do no more. He makes the purchase of his own will, and with his own sense of its worth, and the power of his money; and I hope it may never disappoint him.” (ch. 27)

The underlying threat in her words promises that it will not be a happy marriage. Indeed, by the time the Dombey’s have been two years married, his disappointment with his purchase approaches desperation.

By now, the haughty Sultan with “his cold and easy arrogance” has encountered an unexpected problem with the second Mrs. Dombey. With his first wife, he had no such trouble:

He had asserted his greatness during their whole married life, and she had meekly recognised it. He had kept his distant seat of state on the top of his throne, and she her humble station on its lowest step; and much good it had done him so to live in solitary bondage to his
own idea! He had imagined that the proud character of his second wife would have added to his own—would have merged into it, and exalted his greatness. He had pictured himself haughtier than ever, with Edith’s haughtiness subservient to his. He had never entertained the possibility of its arraying itself against him. (ch. 40)

But it has arrayed itself against him. He must therefore remind her of their respective roles as master and slave. Only now, as the weapon against his unruly wife, has Flo become important enough to her father for him to arrange a destiny for her. He therefore sends a message to Edith that her attentions to his daughter displease him and must cease. He has no way of knowing that in making Carker his messenger he has provided his subordinate with the opportunity to advance and avenge himself against the Sultan, for both Sultan and Grand Vizier, each in his own way, expect with this errand to enhance their own respective positions as her lord and master.

Some of the children whose souls stand in peril from the controlling adults around them manage to escape at least some of the consequences of childhood blight. Rob the Grinder is fortunate in having a careful mother who encased his legs in “very strong leather small-clothes.” Other children find within themselves both the strength and the will to survive or even to triumph over the circumstances of their lives. These are often children like Louisa and Edith, whose “largeness of soul” enables them to see and evaluate their oppressors and thus to acquire a power soon to be demonstrated.

For a blighted child in *Bleak House*, Esther Summerson, it takes many years of patient endurance and outside nurturing influences before her life acquires something like a natural equilibrium. Brought up by an aunt enslaved to the notion that the child must pay for the sins of her parents, Esther is taught to flee (like the gentleman for Nowhere) the very thought of her own birthday, to see it as the anniversary of a tragedy for herself and everyone else involved. During these childhood years, Esther’s only companion and comfort is her “dear faithful Dolly,” whom she loves and clings to as a real person: “How often I repeated to the doll the story of my birthday, and confided to her that I would try, as hard as ever I could, to repair the fault I was born with . . . and would strive as I grew up to be industrious, contented, and kind-hearted, and to do some good to some one, and win some love to myself if I could” (*BH*, ch. 3). After her aunt’s death (her “godmother,” though far
from a fairy one), Esther "wrapped the dear old doll in her own shawl, and quietly laid her—I am half ashamed to tell it—in the garden-earth." She is about to set out into a new phase of her life.

The last blighted child in the Dickens gallery, Miss Jenny Wren, shares with Paul Dombey both the large soul and the crippled legs. The schoomaster, Bradley Headstone, along with Charley Hexam, is the first person in Our Mutual Friend to meet this eccentric figure. In response to Charley's knock on the door:

the door promptly opened with a spring and a click. A parlour door within a small entry stood open, and disclosed a child—a dwarf—a girl—a something—sitting on a little low old-fashioned arm-chair, which had a kind of little working bench before it.

"I can't get up," said the child, "because my back's bad, and my legs are queer. But I'm the person of the house." (OMF, bk. II, ch. 1)

This child/"person of the house" explains her "trade" to Headstone and Charley. She works, she says, for a clientele of "Fine Ladies," who are, it turns out, "'Dolls. I'm a Doll's Dressmaker.'" These fine ladies are not an easy group to work for. They pay her poorly and are inconsiderate.

"I had a doll married, last week, and was obliged to work all night. And it's not good for me, on account of my back being so bad and my legs so queer. . . . And they take no care of their clothes, and they never keep to the same fashions a month. I work for a doll with three daughters. Bless you, she's enough to ruin her husband!" The person of the house gave a weird little laugh here, and gave them another look out of the corners of her eyes. (bk. II, ch. 1)

Headstone asks Jenny whether she is always alone: "Don't any of the neighbouring children—?"

"Ah, lud!" cried the person of the house, with a little scream, as if the word had pricked her. "Don't talk of children. I can't bear children. I know their tricks and their manners." She said this with an angry little shake of her right fist close before her eyes.

Perhaps it scarcely required the teacher-habit, to perceive that the doll's dressmaker was inclined to be bitter on the difference between herself and other children. But both master and pupil understood it so. (bk. II, ch. 1)

Jenny continues with an account of how children tease her, mocking her bad back, and leading her to concoct plans to get even with them. Her conclusion is firm.
“No, no, no. No children for me. Give me grown-ups.”

It was difficult to guess the age of this strange creature, for her poor figure furnished no clue to it, and her face was at once so young and so old. Twelve, or at the most thirteen, might be near the mark.

“I always did like grown-ups,” she went on, “and always kept company with them. . . . And I mean always to keep among none but grown-ups till I marry. I suppose I must make up my mind to marry, one of these days.” (bk. II, ch. 1)

Despite her afflictions, Jenny is hopeful about her future and will indeed continue with nothing but grownups, for she considers and treats as dolls all those adults in her environment who still function as children. Prematurely catapulted into responsibility, Jenny has surrounded herself with a society that, like David's reading, keeps her fancy alive and does her no harm.

All of the fairy-tale oppressors of children are emblems for Dickens of the tyrants who appear in actual life in other guises. Playing out their fairy-tale roles, these adults set about to invade and destroy the childhood garden by various methods, usually by either “forcing” or “cultivating” (though sometimes by “spoiling”) the development of the children entrusted to them. Dombey, for instance, finds “forcing” perfectly adapted to his purposes in preparing Paul for his destiny.

Although a condition of the springtime garden is its freedom from the restrictions of time, Dombey's whole concept of time blinds him to the effects of his view on his son. Impatient with the measured movement of time, he sees no reason to give in to its natural processes. Though he loves his son with all the love he has, he does not love him “as an infant or as a boy, but as a grown man—the 'Son' of the Firm.” As a consequence,

He was impatient to advance into the future, and to hurry over the intervening passages of his history. Therefore he had little or no anxiety about them, in spite of his love; feeling as if the boy had a charmed life, and must become the man with whom he held such constant communication in his thoughts, and for whom he planned and projected, as for an existing reality, every day. (DS, ch. 8)

He sets out, that is, to abolish time. As he has pointed out to Mrs. Pipchin, it is no trouble at all to reduce ten years to nothing, given the circumstances of Dr. Blimber's “forcing” establishment.

In fact, Dr. Blimber's establishment was a great hot-house, in which there was a forcing apparatus incessantly at work. All the boys blew before their time. Mental green-peas were produced at Christmas
and intellectual asparagus all the year round. Mathematical gooseberries (very sour ones too) were common at untimely seasons, and from mere sprouts of bushes, under Dr. Blimber’s cultivation. Every description of Greek and Latin vegetable was got off the driest twigs of boys, under the frostiest circumstances. Nature was of no consequence at all. No matter what a young gentleman was intended to bear, Doctor Blimber made him bear to pattern, somehow or other. This was all very pleasant and ingenious, but the system of forcing was attended with its usual disadvantages. There was not the right taste about the premature productions, and they didn’t keep well.

(ch. 11)

Despite Paul’s failing health, he submits bravely to the forcing routine of Dr. Blimber, who, “in some partial confusion of his ideas, regarded the young gentlemen as if they were all Doctors, and were born grown up” (ch. 12). Paul’s natural cleverness makes his father “more bent than ever on his being forced and crammed.” Dr. Blimber is confirmed as usual in his practices: “In short, however high and false the temperature at which the Doctor kept his hot-house, the owners of the plants were always ready to lend a helping hand at the bellows, and to stir the fire.” In this fashion, blowing at the bellows and stirring up the fire, Dombey succeeds overnight in turning six into sixteen, but simultaneously reduces a lifetime to a few unnatural years.

Paul himself, meanwhile, has been “forced” into an early realization of his true relationship to time. He is very sensitive to the fact that time and life are inseparable. Paul’s best friend during these months in Dr. Blimber’s establishment, in addition to his sister Florence, is the great clock in the hall, which he never passes without its inquiring, “‘how, is, my, lit, tle, friend? how, is, my, lit, tle, friend?’” “‘Very well, I thank you, sir,’” he replies (ch. 11).

Paul soon loses “such spirits as he had” in the new environment, and becomes “even more strange, and old, and thoughtful, than ever before. . . . He loved to be alone; and in those short intervals when he was not occupied with his books, liked nothing so well as wandering about the house by himself, or sitting on the stairs, listening to the great clock in the hall” (ch. 12). As Paul grows so weak that he must spend much time in bed, he discovers one day when he goes downstairs that:

Lo and behold, there was something the matter with the great clock; and a workman on a pair of steps had taken its face off, and was poking instruments into the works by the light of a candle! This was a great event for Paul, who sat down on the bottom stair, and watched
the operation attentively: now and then glancing at the clock-face, leaning all askew, against the wall hard by, and feeling a little confused by a suspicion that it was ogling him. (ch. 14)

So Paul looks on “until the clock had quite recovered its familiar aspect, and resumed its sedate inquiry.” The clock and he continue to exist in a sympathetic relationship while his time continues to run out.

When Dombey conceives the design to take a hand in his daughter’s life, an invasion into the childhood garden of a somewhat different type—“cultivating”—is contemplated, this time with the collusion of “Cleopatra.” As soon as they meet, Flo identifies Edith with her own mother, and Edith also sees a mother/child relationship between them, though in a different sense. What Edith was, Florence is now: a warm, loving, human child suffering under a blighted childhood. Behind this concept lies a familiar image pattern: a continuum of life along which people at various stages of development proceed to a shared destination—Edith and Florence on the same continuum. Mrs. Skewton, in pointing out the resemblance between Florence and Edith at the same age, also presents her plan for improving the child as she has improved Edith: Florence, the “flower” of the garden, must be “cultivated”: “I do think that I see a decided resemblance to what you were then, in our extremely fascinating young friend. And it shows,” said Mrs. Skewton, in a lower voice, which conveyed her opinion that Florence was in a very unfinished state, ‘what cultivation will do.’” Edith responds sternly: “‘It does indeed’” (ch. 30).

In fact, the picture of the cultivation process is so deeply engraved in Edith’s mind that her one purpose in life becomes to protect the threatened child’s soul. Skewton has conceived the idea of keeping Flo with her during the wedding trip of Dombey and Edith. Dombey would be delighted for this prompt attention to the formation of his child’s mind. But they have reckoned without Edith, whose ultimatum is absolute: either the child goes home, or there will be no wedding. The program for Florence’s cultivation must therefore be postponed. But now, two years later when the rift comes between Edith and her husband, the message carried by Carker tells her that time on the postponement has run out: the cultivation process will begin.

Although Paul Dombey is literally unable to survive the forcing process to which he is subjected, Edith has survived through withdrawal into a cold condition distancing her from her own troubling emotions. After the humiliating message carried by Carker, she
retires completely behind a frozen facade: “Little by little, she re- ceded . . . like the retiring ghost of what she had been” and “be- came frozen up in the bold, angry hardihood with which she stood, upon the brink of a deep precipice” (ch. 47).

It is not surprising to find Louisa Gradgrind Bounderby simi- larly frozen. As a young woman married to a man she detests, and keenly aware of her lack of those qualities needed to be a warm and loving human being, Louisa seeks to make her father understand what has happened to her. She turns instinctively to the garden im- agery: “What have you done, oh, Father, what have you done, with the garden that should have bloomed once, in this great wilderness here?” As she speaks, she strikes herself “with both her hands upon her bosom.” Despite his blindness, she cannot believe that he would knowingly have so deprived her.

“Would you have doomed me, at any time, to the frost and blight that have hardened and spoiled me? Would you have robbed me—for no one’s enrichment—only for the greater desolation of this world—of the immaterial part of my life, the spring and summer of my belief, my refuge from what is sordid and bad in the real things around me, my school in which I should have learned to be more humble and more trusting with them, and to hope in my little sphere to make them better?” (HT, bk. II, ch. 12)

Both Louisa and Edith demonstrate that the marsh-related frozen condition of adults, despite the fiery passions pent up within them, may result from blight of the springtime garden.

It would seem at first that the giants and ogres, the tyrannical Sultans and other monstrous adults have it all their own way: that a child in the garden is totally powerless against them, whether they fail to protect the garden through indifference or invade it through design.

But this is not the end of the story of the blighted children.

2

It is not by chance that Mr. Tulkinghorn lives and dies under the warning finger of Allegory. Even after his death, it continues helplessly to point at him from night to morning, “lying face down- ward on the floor, shot through the heart” (BH, ch. 48). If warning is contained in this finger of Allegory, it is certainly justified in the case of Tulkinghorn. It would be hard to argue that “justice” was not seen by the stern Roman with the implacable finger, no more stern and implacable than the lawyer himself. Yet whatever warn-
ing resides in the finger—pointing "with far greater significance than he ever had in Mr. Tulkinghorn's time, and with a deadly meaning"—could not be intended for the dead man, but rather appears to say to whom it may concern: beware this sad fate of a man who was never nurtured with memories and hopes, or led to wonder, or sensitized to human feelings and dreams.

Like all of the other notes of warning sounded by Dickens, Tulkinghorn's fate reflects an unquestioned assumption of some kind of Nemesis operant in human affairs, a belief in a kind of retributive justice that not only rectifies inequality, but does so in a poetically appropriate way. The operation of this justice is most blatantly evident when Dickens is being frankly the propagandist and social critic, as he is in his allegorical portrayals of monster children: "This boy is Ignorance," warns the Ghost of Christmas Present. "This girl is Want. Beware them both, and all of their degree but most of all beware this boy, for on his brow I see that written which is Doom, unless the writing be erased!" (CC, stave III). The retribution here will be direct and uncomplex. These monster children will go forth as monster adults to wreak their vengeance upon a society that continues to deny them their humanity.

Even more direct and immediate will be the justice wrought for the children of Tom-All-Alone's. Jo, for instance, urged to "move along," travels other roads than the literal one intended by an indifferent society concerned only with getting rid of him. Like Betty Higden, he travels also that linear road to death on a figurative cart shaking him harder and harder as the road grows rougher. But of most interest in the present context is the road along which he is ironically driven for a rendezvous with all sorts of unlikely people: a rendezvous that will establish all human beings as his brothers and sisters: 6

What connexion can there be, between the place in Lincolnshire, the house in town, the Mercury in powder, and the whereabout of Jo the outlaw with the broom, who had that distant ray of light upon him when he swept the churchyard-step? What connexion can there have been between many people in the innumerable histories of this world, who, from opposite sides of great gulf s, have, nevertheless, been very curiously brought together! (BH, ch. 16)

Very soon, in the inevitable convergence of the twain, revenge is wrought by Tom-All-Alone's for each of his blighted children, befriended in time by "no one," but pushed on to spread his contagion, of whatever variety, wherever they go:
[Tom] has his revenge. Even the winds are his messengers, and they serve him in these hours of darkness. There is not a drop of Tom's corrupted blood but propagates infection and contagion somewhere. It shall pollute, this very night, the choice stream (in which chemists on analysis would find the genuine nobility) of a Norman house, and his Grace shall not be able to say Nay to the infamous alliance. There is not an atom of Tom's slime, not a cubic inch of any pestilential gas in which he lives, not one degradation about him, not an ignorance, not a wickedness, not a brutality of his committing, but shall work its retribution, through every order of society, up to the proudest of the proud, and to the highest of the high. Verily, what with tainting, plundering, and spoiling, Tom has his revenge. (BH, ch. 46)

This concept of a kind of cosmic justice seems to echo the thunder of the Carlylean belief that “the great soul of the world is just and not unjust”: at least it makes a useful weapon to brandish about.

It might be possible to dismiss the concept as a rhetorical tool of social criticism were it not for the manner in which the same idea filters its way into all kinds of situations where it would be curiously Chadbandian to hold anything so imposing as a “great soul” responsible for what happens. Take, for example, the case of Grandfather Smallweed, who has been known to say “with sharp sly triumph,” “No, no. We have never been readers in our family. It don’t pay. Stuff. Idleness. Folly. No, no!” (BH, ch. 21). Grandfather, however, is deluded, for he himself is the victim of a sly trick played by the discountenanced inhabitants of idleness and folly to be found in the enchanted world of childhood. As if to point out to him that an adult without childhood has poor underpinnings, he has been reduced to a helpless puppet from the toy theatre, for “he is in a helpless condition as to his lower, and nearly so as to his upper limbs.”

Though physically helpless, Grandfather is given to violent expressions of abuse, and “the contrast between those powerful expressions and his powerless figure is suggestive of a baleful old malignant, who would be very wicked if he could”: an old sinner who sometimes is capable of “an Ogreish kind of jocularity.” Fortunately, “his mind is unimpaired. It holds as well as it ever held, the first four rules of arithmetic, and a certain small collection of the hardest facts. In respect of ideality, reverence, wonder, and other such phrenological attributes, it is no worse off than it used to be.”

Unfortunately, Smallweed must play out the roles of the puppet he has become. He is wheeled from place to place by his granddaughter “Judy,” who as a child “never owned a doll.” Now, how-
ever, she has something suspiciously like one as she and her grand-
father go about in their own "Punch"-and-Judy show, for he has a habit under duress of sliding down into a bundle of clothes, "a mere clothes-bag with black skull-cap on the top of it,"—"like a broken puppet." He does not become animated again "until he has undergone the two operations at the hands of his grand-daughter, of being shaken up like a great bottle, and poked and punched like a bolster."

In the absence of Judy, Grandfather finds it necessary to call upon Mr. George to "shake me up a little."

Mr. George... takes his venerable acquaintance by the throat on receiving this request, and dragging him upright in his chair as easily as if he were a doll, appears in two minds whether or not to shake him into his grave. Resisting the temptation, but agitating him violently enough to make his head roll like a harlequin's, he puts him smartly down in his chair again, and adjusts his skull-cap with such a rub, that the old man winks with both eyes for a minute afterwards. (ch. 21)

Judy has acquired her doll too late to do her any good.

Jenny Wren, on the other hand, well knows what she is doing when she gives her drunken father the name of "Mr. Dolls" and treats him as her "bad child." "A muddling and a swipey old child," said Miss Wren, rating him with great severity, 'fit for nothing but to be preserved in the liquor that destroys him, and put in a great glass bottle as a sight for other swipey children of his own pattern,—if he has no consideration for his liver, has he none for his mother?'" (OMF, bk. III, ch. 10). The answer, of course, is "No." Like the Hindoo baby, Mr. Dolls is a monstrously preserved child who is frequently in a "worse than swinish state (for swine at least fatten on their guzzling, and make themselves good to eat)." Jenny threatens him with a fate similar to that of Grandfather Smallweed: "'You wicked old boy,' Miss Wren would say to him, with a menacing forefinger, 'you'll force me to run away from you, after all, you will; and then you'll shake to bits, and there'll be nobody to pick up the pieces!'" (bk. IV, ch. 8). Nonetheless, Jenny takes good care of her wayward child and when he dies pronounces fair judgment on him: "'If my poor boy,' she would say, 'had been brought up better, he might have done better. Not that I reproach myself. I hope I have no cause for that'" (bk. IV, ch. 9).

Jenny also has the last word on the "real" fine ladies, those "dolls" whom she forces to serve her in her role as Doll's Dress-

maker. "The fun is," she says, "how I make the great ladies try my dresses on."

"When I see a great lady very suitable for my business, I say 'You'll do, my dear!' and I take particular notice of her, and run home and cut her out and baste her. Then another day, I come scudding back again to try on, and then I take particular notice of her again... saying to myself, 'I must hollow out a bit here; I must slope away there;' and I am making a perfect slave of her, with making her try on my doll's dress." (bk. III, ch. 2)

Once again like David, she has managed to reduce her oppressors to figures from childhood where nothing is but thinking makes it so.

Such is another case of selective vengeance based on something like poetic justice, but the spirit behind it resembles more that malign sprite with his oblique light and his volleys of silvery laughter—a comic spirit rather than a cosmic soul, which reduces its targets to their ridiculous and pitiable size.

So long as the stories of childhood rising up to avenge its blighted children remain on the comic level, the tone remains relatively light. When the story is seen through the eyes of suffering children, however, the vision darkens and the retribution becomes more terrible.

Little Paul Dombey is one of those who must pay for the sins of their fathers. "Fulfilling a destiny," it seems, is a very tiring business. Sitting before the fire warming his hands and "looking in between the bars of the grate, as if some ghostly puppet-show were performing there," Paul says wearily: "'I am so tired some times... and my bones ache so (Mrs. Wickam says it's my bones), that I don't know what to do'" (DS, ch. 8). Mr. Dombey is irritated. Why on earth should anyone have been discussing his son's bones? "'He is not a living skeleton, I suppose.'" Mrs. Chick murmurs "'Very far from it,'" but "with an unspeakable expression": "'If the dear child,' pursues Mrs. Chick, '... has some temporary weakness in his system, and does occasionally seem about to lose, for the moment, the use of his—'" Considering Dombey's objection to "bones," Mrs. Chick is a little afraid to venture "limbs"; but after some assistance from Miss Tox she decides to be quite direct about it: "'I say, if our dear Paul should lose, for the moment, the use of his legs, these are casualties common to many children at his time of life, and not to be prevented by any care or caution. The sooner you understand that... and admit that, the better.'"
As a matter of fact, Paul is the star of the “ghostly puppet-show” he discerns in the fire, suffering pathetically from the same ailment that makes Grandfather Smallweed with his collapsing legs a figure of ridicule. Grandfather Smallweed is a comic type of figure to be laughed—however bitterly—out of the structure of society, while Paul is seen tragically as an individual who has lost his one chance at life. Like the puppets in the toy theatre, they both seem like normal people until they try to stand up.

*Dombey and Son* and *Hard Times* are of special interest in examining the total view of the blighted child and the sense of justice, which imaginatively control both novels. The one may be read as a tale from the Arabian Nights; the other, as a fairy tale. In both, as already illustrated, the besieged children must suffer under the domination of giant, ogre, or tyrannical sultan invading the childhood garden, and in both, as will now be shown, the elements of the denied child world rise up triumphantly to avenge or rescue its children.

The weapon of vengeance in *Dombey and Son* has for a long time lain hidden within the bosom of Edith Dombey. On the occasion of a picnic to Warwick Castle prior to the Dombey marriage, this weapon flashes for a brief moment in a private clash between Edith and her mother. The observant Carker knows how to pick up the threads of glance and innuendo to weave a plan for the undoing of the Sultan. But within the chatter of polite conversation, he misses the significance of this verbal interchange, though it is charged with eventual meaning for himself. Edith has just assured Mr. Dombey that, in spite of her previous visits to Warwick Castle, she will be “not at all” bored with the present excursion:

“We are all enthusiastic, are we not, mamma?” said Edith with a cold smile.

“Too much so, for our peace, perhaps, my dear,” returned her mother; “but we won’t complain. Our own emotions are our recompense. If, as your cousin Feenix says, the sword wears out that what’s-its-name—”

“The scabbard, perhaps,” said Edith.

“Exactly—a little too fast, it is because it is bright and glowing, you know, my dearest love.”

Mrs. Skewton heaved a gentle sigh, supposed to cast a shadow on the surface of that dagger of lath, whereof her susceptible bosom was the sheath: and leaning her head on one side, in the Cleopatra manner, looked with pensive affection on her darling child. (*DS*, ch. 27)
The significance of this interchange is completely ironic in its foreshadowing. First of all, it is obvious that the "emotions" of Cleopatra are nonexistent. The callousness with which she has destroyed her daughter's emotional life is clear evidence that she possesses no normal human feelings. If, as she says, "our emotions are our recompense," hers is a sterile—though just—compensation. Whatever resides in her bosom can be only a "dagger of lath." Edith, on the other hand, has a strong emotional nature, which has been suppressed and denied. A Grand Vizier from the Eastern land of scimitars and bright daggers might have caught the warning that within the cold, smooth scabbard of Mrs. Granger's breast might gleam the sharpest of blades—no "dagger of lath," but the "bright and glowing pent-up emotions of a life-time waiting to dart out and destroy." Neither the Sultan nor the Grand Vizier, however, accurately measures the passion of their victim or anticipates the effect of their strategy.

And now there is a party on the eve of the second anniversary. After dinner, Mr. Dombey informs Mrs. Dombey that he is planning another small dinner party for the next evening: "I do not dine at home," says Edith (ch. 47). Dombey's insistence, his demand for subservience, makes the outcome of the clash inevitable: "I will do nothing that you ask," she says, adding: "I will hold no place in your house to-morrow, or on any recurrence to-morrow. I will be exhibited to no one, as the refractory slave you purchased at such a time. If I kept my marriage-day, I would keep it as a day of shame. Self-respect! appearances before the world! what are these to me? You have done all you can to make them nothing to me, and they are nothing."

The Sultan's authority has been defied. But he still has one means of control. Give her her freedom? "No, madam. There is no possibility of separation between you and me." He has apparently not heard that the opinion of the world is nothing to his wife or that she is willing to commemorate her wedding day as "a day of shame." When he manages the next morning to force his way into her room, he finds a letter saying that "she had fled, upon her shameful wedding-day, with the man whom he had chosen for her humiliation."

The triumph of the Grand Vizier is short-lived, however. Even as he advances complacently toward his "queen" in the delusion that "in the idliest and easiest part of the world, my soul, we'll both seek compensation for old slavery," he confronts the knife she has
caught up from the table. Cowed in spite of himself, he sits in the chair as she commands. “She put the knife down upon the table, and touching her bosom with her hand, said—‘I have something lying here that is no love trinket; and sooner than endure your touch once more, I would use it on you—and you know it, while I speak—with less reluctance than I would on any other creeping thing that lives’” (ch. 54). At this moment both the literal and the figurative daggers, fusing together, have been drawn against her oppressors, and especially against the tyrannical Sultan. As she reveals to Carker the depth of her contempt for both him and her husband, she is being simultaneously revenged on them both for the greatest humiliation in a life of humiliation. Will he go out and boast of his conquest over her? He well may—but both she and he know the boast will be a falsehood:

“In every vaunt you make,” she said, “I have my triumph. I single out in you the meanest man I know, the parasite and tool of the proud tyrant, that his wound may go the deeper and may rankle more. Boast, and revenge me on him! You know how you stand cowering there; you see yourself in colours quite as despicable, if not as odious, as those in which I see you. Boast then, and revenge me on yourself.” (ch. 54)

But in addition to achieving her own vengeance, Edith “Granger” has succeeded in sheltering the threatened child in the garden, Florence. Also, as a blighted child herself, she has likewise been the instrument of the child world to avenge little Paul and all the other victims of the Dombey empire.

In the metaphor of the sword that wears out its scabbard, Dickens has once more found a contextually appropriate figure to embody one of his recurrent insights: the world of the emotions and inner life can be suppressed and contained, but they cannot be permanently denied. A related insight is caught by Louisa Gradgrind in another contextually chosen analogy, though it is missed by her father, who does not see “the application of the remark.” In the fire that she is so fond of watching, Louisa observes a significant phenomenon: fire inwardly contained and allowed to smoulder without free access to the air might suddenly flare into life. In the Coketown chimneys “‘there seems to be nothing . . . but languid and monotonous smoke. Yet when the night comes, Fire bursts out’” (HT, bk. I, ch. 15).

Like Edith Dombey, Louisa conceals the intensity of her inner feelings behind a frozen façade. While she herself clearly perceives
the probable explosion consequent to such suppression, Harthouse, the bored and misanthropic “drifting iceberg” is understandably misled. He is very quickly drawn to frozen Louisa. As Carker believes their shared “slavery” makes a real bond between him and Edith, so Harthouse believes that their shared indifference makes a real bond between him and Louisa: “The only difference,” he explains to her, “between us and the professors of virtue or benevolence, or philanthropy—never mind the name—is that we know it is all meaningless, and say so, while they know it equally and will never say so” (bk. II, ch. 7).

As Carker misreads Edith, however, Harthouse likewise misreads Louisa. Her indifference stems not from belief that “it is all meaningless,” but rather from conviction that she cannot relate to a meaningful world of values that she believes in and yearns for. In her passive state she sees no reason to protest Harthouse’s analysis. The narrator asks: “Why should she be shocked or warned? . . . What was there in her soul for James Harthouse to destroy which Thomas Gradgrind had nurtured there in its state of innocence?” Nonetheless, in the final outcome the stifled soul of Louisa gathers enough explosive force to reject Harthouse. At the very moment when he thinks he has seduced Louisa into eloping with him (and when the ogress, Mrs. Sparsit, believes Louisa has finally fallen off the “Giant Staircase” built for her), Louisa confounds them both by returning to her father’s home to confront him directly with the results of his educational system. As Edith undoes both the tyrannical Sultan and his Grand Vizier, Louisa brings down both the monster in a lecturing castle and the drifting iceberg.

This, then, is still another view of childhood rising up to avenge its blighted children. The very forces whose denial blighted the child burst forth in an uncontrollable way, violent and destructive instead of life-giving. Tom’s fate demonstrates the same rebellion by the same unruly forces in a young gentleman who had never had the freedom necessary to learn to guide and control them—unaccountable, says a sarcastic narrator, “that a young gentleman whose imagination had been strangled in his cradle should be still inconvenienced by its ghost in the form of grovelling sensualities—but such a monster, beyond all doubt, was Tom” (bk. II, ch. 3).

Although in Hard Times Dickens the propagandist rides his theme hard for its topical value as social criticism, Dickens the artist constructs the fairy-tale framework to contain a truth much more universal. This truth is the recognition that the creative-destructive Dionysiac forces within a human being will not brook denial. In the
Dickens view, childhood is the crucial time for learning how both to cope and to create with these forces, which are neither good nor bad in themselves. The freedom from responsibility that characterizes the ideal childhood is a license for irresponsibility, for exploring without restraint the dark reaches of the human consciousness, for allowing the forces within and without a chance for free play in the imagination and fancy. Only by coming to know and channel these forces can a person hope to discipline and control them through enlightened rationality.

The perfectly designed Gradgrind/Hard Facts/M’Choakum-child school can in the long run never expect to compete with “Sleary’s Horse-riding” as an educational institution. In forbidding his children to go near the Circus, to which they are irresistibly drawn, Gradgrind shows his awareness of the threat it poses to his rigid training; the uncontrollable elements Gradgrind seeks to stamp out and deny are embraced with joyous gusto by the disreputable circus people. Plato’s concept of the soul as “a winged charioteer driving a team of winged horses”—the spirited horses of the passions and appetites guided and reined by Reason—powerfully informs and energizes the description of Sleary’s Horse-riding.8 The circus people stay at a public house called the “Pegasus’s Arms,” whose name is inscribed in Roman letters “underneath the winged horse upon the sign-board,” while “Framed and glazed upon the wall behind the dingy little bar, was another Pegasus—a theatrical one—with real gauze let in for his wings, golden stars stuck on all over him, and his ethereal harness made of red silk” (bk. I, ch. 6).

Sissy Jupe gets into her first difficulty at M’Choakumchild’s school through her inability properly to define a horse, whereas the colorless boy Bitzer has plenty of “facts” at his disposal to put both the horse and Sissy in their places. This difficulty of hers is all the more remarkable since her father is an employee of Sleary’s Horse-riding. Later, defending himself against Sissy’s charge that he has been chasing her, Bitzer accuses her: “‘You wouldn’t have thought of saying such mischief if you hadn’t been a horse-rider,’” because: “‘The horse-riders never mind what they say, sir; they’re famous for it. You know the horse-riders are famous for never minding what they say,’” addressing Sissy. “‘It’s as well known in the town as—please, sir, as the multiplication table isn’t known to the horse-riders’” (bk. I, ch. 5).

This world of the circus is a wonderful combination of unbridled freedom and amazing feats of control achieved by people
"not very tidy in their private dresses" and "not at all orderly in their domestic arrangements." A remarkable description of their activities captures their essence:

There were two or three handsome young women among them, with their two or three husbands, and their two or three mothers, and their eight or nine children, who did the fairy business when required. The father of one of the families was in the habit of balancing the father of another of the families on the top of a great pole; the father of a third family often made a pyramid of both those fathers, with Master Kidderminster for the apex, and himself for the base; all the fathers could dance upon rolling casks, stand upon bottles, catch knives and balls, twirl hand-basins, ride upon anything, jump over everything, and stick at nothing. All the mothers could—and did—dance upon the slack-wire and the tight-robe, and perform rapid acts on bare-backed steeds; none of them were at all particular in respect of showing their legs; and one of them, alone in a Greek chariot, drove six-in-hand into every town they came to. (bk. I, ch. 6)

A general concept emerges gradually from this particular-to-particular description of the "Horse-riding" way of life: real stability and security must be gained through daring dexterity and the ability to maintain balance amid the precarious and hazardous elements that characterize living. "Horse-riding" itself (especially on "bare-backed steeds") emblematizes all such activities, and the "Greek chariot" driven by "one of them alone" into every town they come to glancingly alludes to Plato's Myth of the Soul. Since for Dickens the development of the soul is the great achievement of the child "always learning," Sleary's Circus provides a perfect environment for the educational process.

It is further fitting that in this despised world of the circus the ogre Gradgrind should find himself not only humbled by, but finally actually indebted to the fanciful world he has forbidden to his children. As an ogre recently returned to human form (having made himself "a party to sentimental humbug"), Gradgrind has appeared on the grounds of Sleary's Circus in a desperate effort to rescue his son from arrest and imprisonment. Young Tom, disguised as one of the black servants, has been hidden from his pursuers through being absorbed into a performance of that "piehe of comic infant bithnith, "Jack the Giant-killer"" (bk. III, ch. 7). The rescue is almost undone by the proudest product of the Gradgrind system, young Bitzer. Bitzer, with great reasonableness, turns against his former mentor the well-learned tenets of the Hard Facts School. Although Bitzer is determined to return the
culprit Tom to his well-deserved punishment, he is no match for Sleary, his dog, and a dancing horse. The despised world of fantasy and fairy tale finally routs the world of fact to send Tom safely off to a new world.

In retrospect, the retributive justice Dickens has brought down upon all these adults who, individually or as a society, have contributed to the blighting of childhood has in no instance been arbitrary or capricious. Upon close examination, it can usually be seen to be inherent in the offense. Thus the pathetic children in the Dickens stories have persistent allegorical referents. The crippling or killing of the child takes place in many more lives than are indicated by the deathbed scenes. Little Paul, with his soul too large for his body, dies when that soul is forced and squeezed out of existence; but Mr. Tulkinghorn lives on like anybody else unless one is acute enough to note the blank spot at the beginning of his procession. Little Paul's collapsing legs signal his approaching total collapse, but Grandfather Smallweed, as well as a host of other Dickens characters, make their way somehow through life, though their helpless limbs reveal the flawed foundation of their childhood. On the one hand, what the child represents cannot be repressed without destroying the essential qualities of a human being and turning what should be full human beings into destructive, sterile, or pathetic half-people. On the other hand, the strong forces of the passions cannot be permanently suppressed and denied, for they will rise up to exact their own revenge in undisciplined violence.

Perhaps Dickens defended the death of Mr. Krook in Bleak House on the wrong grounds: what better explanation could be found for apparent spontaneous combustion than the smouldering fires of the denied soul?