



Charles Dicken's  
*Little Dorrit*

Questions for Socratic Discussion  
by Missy Andrews



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# QUICK CARD



<p><i>Reference</i></p>	<p><i>Little Dorrit</i> by Charles Dickens. (1857) ISBN: 9780141439969</p>
<p><i>Plot</i></p>	<p>Arthur Clennam returns home to England to investigate the meaning of his recently deceased father's last words: "Do not forget!" His inquiries lead him to little Amy Dorrit, a seamstress and companion to his harsh, religious mother. Certain that his family's secrets are in some way connected with Amy, Arthur works to better her family's straightened circumstances and to make reparation for whatever damage his family might have caused her. He means to live a blameless life.</p>
<p><i>Setting</i></p>	<p>London, England Venice, Italy The Marshalsea Debtors' Prison Bleeding Heart Alley The Clennam House</p> <p>Book One of the novel transpires in Amy's poverty; Book Two follows her into wealth and society. The story takes place in Arthur's middle age, but chronicles his coming of age on the heels of his father's death.</p>
<p><i>Characters</i></p>	<p>Arthur Clennam: protagonist of the story</p> <p>Amy Dorrit: the story's Christ figure/heroine and the youngest born daughter of Father Dorrit, was born in the Marshalsea Prison and has spent her entire life there</p> <p>William Dorrit: Amy's father, called the Father of the Marshalsea for his long time residence there</p> <p>Mrs. Clennam: Arthur's harsh and bitter, yet religious, mother, a shut-in who hides the family secrets from Arthur</p> <p>Fanny Dorrit: Amy's cynical and base older sister, who works as a dance hall girl</p> <p>Tip Dorrit: Amy's irresponsible elder brother</p> <p>Frederick Dorrit: Amy's impoverished uncle, one-time dance master and clarinet teacher</p> <p>Jeremiah Flintwinch: houseman and business partner to Mrs. Clennam and abusive husband to Affrey</p>

	<p>Mrs. Affery: long time housekeeper at the House of Clennam</p> <p>Mr. Pancks: Christopher Casby's rent collector and a part-time detective</p> <p>Maggy: Amy's poor, feeble-minded friend</p> <p>The Meagles: friends whom Arthur meets on his journey to England</p> <p>Pet: the Meagles' petted daughter and Arthur's love interest for much of the story</p> <p>Tattycoram: adopted sister and companion to Pet who struggles with envy and anger</p> <p>The Merdles: a high society financier and his wife, who is mother to Sparkler and is often referred to as "the Bosom"</p> <p>Sparkler: the daft but loveable suitor of Fanny Dorrit and only son of Mrs. Merdle from a previous marriage</p> <p>Miss Wade: a bitter and corrupt woman who was also on the boat to England with the Meagles and Arthur. She desires to destroy Henry Gowan.</p> <p>Rigaud: aka Blandois, aka Lagnier, the story's sinister villain, a murderer and blackmailer who functions as a sort of <i>deus ex machina</i> in the story. He is in possession of the Clennam family secret.</p> <p>Mrs. General: the pretentious, middle-aged traveling companion and tutor whom Father Dorrit hires to improve his daughters' education in the social graces</p> <p>John Chivery: the son of the Marshalsea turnkey, who loves Amy with fierce, though unrequited love</p> <p>Mr. Gowan and his mother: pretentious and lazy social climbers fallen on hard times. The son courts and marries Pet.</p> <p>Flora Finching: Arthur's childhood sweetheart, now a middle-aged, yet flirtatious widow; Flora cares for her deceased husband's senile aunt</p>
<p><i>Conflict</i></p>	<p>Man vs. Man/Man vs. Self – Arthur wants to discover the family secret and make his family blameless (to discharge his duty), but is thwarted by his secretive mother, the blackmailing Blandois, and even his own foolishness.</p> <p>Man vs. Self – Arthur wants to find love and happiness, but his self-concept and legalism blind him to opportunities.</p> <p>Man vs. Society – Amy longs to improve her family's circumstances and restore her father's happiness, but the debtor's laws of England, the machinations of men, and her father's perverse pride prevent this.</p>

	Man vs. Man – Amy longs to be loved by Arthur, but he is blind to her devotion.
<i>Theme</i>	Mercy, Forgiveness, Self-Sacrificial Love, Duty, Industry, Faithfulness, Law vs. Grace
<i>Literary Devices</i>	Understatement Verbal Puns Satire – the Barnacles and the Circumlocution Office Imagery – the House of Clennam, the Marshalsea prison, and all of Dickens’ finely drawn characters Hyperbole Allusions Symbolism – the Marshalsea, the pocket watch, the rose

# QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: SETTING



## Where does this story happen? (1)

The story happens primarily in London, England, but ranges in Book Two throughout Europe, settling for a long period in Venice, Italy. In particular, major scenes of the story take place in:

### The Marshalsea Prison

In Book One, much of the action transpires within the walls of the Marshalsea Prison, a historic debtor's prison in the heart of London and the only home Amy Dorrit has ever known. The shadow of the Marshalsea symbolizes the lasting influence of the place on the people who have been affected by it and broaches a discussion of the nature of freedom and bondage. Amy notices these shadowy effects in her sister, Fanny, as well as in her father and brother. In chapter 21 of book one, Dickens writes:

“Little Dorrit parted from them at the door and hastened back to the Marshalsea. It fell dark there sooner than elsewhere, and going into it that evening was like going into a deep trench. The shadow of the wall was on every object. Not least upon the figure of the old grey gown and the black velvet cap, as it turned her when she opened the door of the dim room. ‘Why not upon me too!’ thought Little Dorrit, with the door yet in her hand. ‘It was not unreasonable in Fanny.’”

The effects of the wall taint and demean everyone identified with it, but not Amy. In fact, her association with the prison inspires humility and empathy in her.

“With a pitiful and plaintive look for everything, indeed, but with something in it for only [her father] that was like protection, this Child of the Marshalsea and the child of the Father of the Marshalsea, sat by her friend the turnkey in the lodge, kept the family room, or wandered about the prison-yard, for the first eight years of her life. With a pitiful and plaintive look for her wayward sister; for her idle brother; for the high blank walls for the faded crowd they shut in; for the games of the prison children as they whooped and ran, and played at hide-and-seek, and made the iron bars of the inner gateway ‘Home.’”

Amy's familiarity with the prison acquaints her with grief, and her heart is enlarged.

### The House of Clennam

Likewise, in the first book, Arthur returns to his childhood home, which Dickens exploits to develop his characters. The overdrawn depiction of the house serves to illuminate and develop both Arthur and his mother's characters in much the same way the

description of the Marshalsea and its shadows develops the characters of Amy and her family.

Dickens describes the House of Clennam in Chapter 3 when, after much stalling and deliberation, Arthur works up the nerve to return to his family's home. He finds it in the following condition:

An old brick house, so dingy as to be all but black, standing by itself within a gateway. Before it, a square courtyard where a shrub or two and a patch of grass were as rank (which is saying much) as the iron railings enclosing them were rusty; behind it, a jumble of roots. It was a double house, with long, narrow, heavily-framed windows. Many years ago, it had had it in its mind to slide down sideways; it had been propped up, however, and was leaning on some half-dozen gigantic crutches: which gymnasium for the neighbouring cats, weather-stained, smoke-blackened, and overgrown with weeds, appeared in these latter days to be no very sure reliance. (Dickens, 16)

The dilapidated state of the house suggests that it is failing. Dickens' description of the props as crutches suggests that a sickness is at the heart of its condition.

Readers hear from Clennam's own lips that "nothing [was] changed" (Dickens, 16). Arthur muses that it is as dark and miserable as ever. The reader finds, with Arthur, that the dining room is "spare, meagre" (16), and decorated with framed pictures of the plagues of Egypt, dimmed with the deterioration of age and soil. There was a cellaret lined with lead and a closet, both empty. Arthur recalls the closet being used to punish him in his youth. A clock, too, reminds him of the torment of his childhood studies overseen by his exacting mother. On the stairway, he pauses to describe the wall as "panelled (sic.) off into spaces like so many mourning tablets" – an image that conjures up the pallor of death and judgment.

The upper story floor has settled so as to create valleys, in which the fireplace stands. His mother sits upon a "black bier-like sofa" – that is, a sofa done up in black to look like a funeral pyre, and has behind her a black cushion which Dickens describes in appearance as a chopping block at a state execution.

This is not a warm and welcoming scene. Everything about the House of Clennam reeks of morbidity. Even the air is old and foul. The woman who presides over this place seems another fixture within it, an extension of her surroundings – or perhaps it is more accurate to say that her surroundings are an extension of her. Certainly, they reveal the interior condition of Mrs. Clennam's soul.

Arthur finds his bedroom, too, unchanged. Like the rest of the house, it is much unused. Like the dining room, it is meagre and spare (Dickens, 19). Adjectives like *ugly* and *grim* round out the description. The furnishings are worn out, ugly, threadbare, patternless, maimed, and crippled, in Dickens's words. Once again, the very furnishings of the house suggest disease.

Its movables were ugly old chairs with worn-out seats, and ugly old chairs without any seats; a threadbare patternless carpet, a maimed table, a crippled wardrobe, a lean

set of fire-irons like the skeleton of a set deceased, a washing-stand that looked as if it had stood for ages in a hail of dirty soapsuds, and a bedstead with four bare atomies of posts, each terminating in a spike, as if for the dismal accommodation of lodgers who might prefer to impale themselves. (Dickens, 19-20)

The severity and inhospitable nature of the place make clear Arthur's insecurity and his reticence to return.

In other passages, Dickens refers to the rooms of the house as "gaunt," "deserted," "gloomy," "lethargic," and "colorless" (Dickens, 27). Dickens's language paints the house as mean, small, and miserly. Dickens's description seems to indicate that the projections of the house, including the furnishings, are decaying because of the diseased or atrophied "heart" of its mistress. He repeatedly refers to how crooked and dirty the house is, as if to emphasize the crooked and deteriorating soul of Mrs. Clennam.

### **When does this story happen? (2d-f)**

The story takes place in the young adulthood of Arthur Clennam and Amy Dorrit. Both are dutiful children endeavoring to serve their parents, although Clennam's duty is associated with fear and want, and Amy's with pity and love. Their transition from children to adult heads of families makes the action of the story, both internal and external, fraught with significance. The futures of these characters hinges on the story's action. Will they survive the sordid prisons of their childhoods, or will their own lives be tainted, their own hearts poisoned with cynicism and bitterness?

The story takes place in the Victorian period, a time in which the courts were strict and debt laws unyielding. Debtors and sometimes their immediate families were confined in prisons like the Marshalsea until their debts were satisfied. There was no limit placed on their terms in these prisons, and historical records from the period suggest that some were detained for over thirty years. Meanwhile, the free members of the family were left to work off the obligations of the debt to obtain their family member's freedom, since he or she was unable to work while detained.

Additionally, the story takes place in a highly stratified economic society in which wealth and titles bring honor and poverty brings disgrace. Society, as Mrs. Merdle expresses it (and even personifies it) is both "arbitrary" and "exacting." "But...we must take it as we find it. We know it is hollow and conventional and worldly and very shocking, but unless we are Savages in the Tropical seas (I should have been charmed to be one myself – most delightful life and perfect climate, I am told), we must consult it. It is the common lot" (Book 1, Chapter 20). It is the nature and terms of moving in this exacting society that torment Father Dorrit and eventually occasion his demise. Everyone associated with it is insincere, disingenuous, self-serving, and at times even dangerous.





# QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: CHARACTERS



## Who is the story about? [Protagonist] (3)

The story revolves around two major characters, Arthur Clennam and Amy Dorrit, and fruitful discussion can be had regarding which of these is the story's main character. The question is: Which character goes through the most change? Some might answer Amy; she certainly goes through the most change of circumstances. Hers is a rags-to-riches story. However, in terms of character development, she is little changed throughout the course of the story. She remains unflappable and unmolested in spite of all the ill-use and neglect she endures. Even when Mrs. Clennam unburdens herself to Amy near the story's end, Amy responds with grace and compassion. In mercy, love, and graciousness, she remains constant.

Arthur, like Amy, is good and compassionate in nature; however, he struggles against antipathy towards his mother throughout the course of the story. He does stand against this and does his duty in spite of her bitter reception. He comes to her aid even when she wishes that he would not. Though she abandons him, he never abandons her.

More importantly, perhaps, Arthur's relationship with Amy undergoes significant change throughout the story. Initially, he sees himself as Amy's elder benefactor. He considers himself beyond marriageable age, which idea becomes overwhelming after Pet rejects him for Mr. Gowan. This disappointment fits into the narrative of his childhood disappointments. He considers himself beyond the pale of human love, fit only to facilitate the loves of others. When John Chivery reveals Amy's hidden love to Arthur, he is dumbfounded. This revelation changes him. Whereas Amy goes from rags to riches, then to rags again, Arthur goes from loveless to beloved.

One could argue that Arthur's main object in the story is righting the wrongs his father alluded to upon his deathbed (3.m.). His greatest desire is to fulfill his father's last request and to right any wrongs the family has done that might make them vulnerable to judgment, both in the present and in eternity. He has been raised in the shadow of the divine law, and he fears divine retribution if his family has broken the commandments and failed to make restitution. In his conversation with Meagles at the beginning of the story, he references having been raised by legalists:

...strict people as the phrase is, professors of a stern religion, their very religion was a gloomy sacrifice of tastes and sympathies that were never their own, offered up as a part of a bargain for the security of their possessions. Austere faces, inexorable

discipline, penance in this world and terror in the next – nothing graceful or gentle anywhere, and the void in my cowed heart everywhere... (Dickens, 11)

When Arthur reaches home and presents himself to his mother, he finds her as austere and implacable as he remembered. He explains that he has come to ask her help in fulfilling his father's last wishes. Arthur relates: "I never knew my father to show so much anxiety on any subject as that his watch should be sent straight to you... It was not until the last, that he expressed the wish; when he could only put his hand upon it, and very indistinctly say to me 'your mother.' ..." (Dickens, 18). In a subsequent interview with his mother, he speaks of this again, asking her if she knew of any wrong the family had done that needed to be made right. "I want to ask you, mother, whether it ever occurred to you to suspect... that he had any secret remembrance which caused him trouble of mind—remorse? Whether you ever observed anything in his conduct suggesting that; or ever spoke to him upon it, or ever heard him hint at such a thing?" (Dickens, 24) He asks further, "...is it possible, mother, that he had unhappily wronged any one, and made no reparation?" (Dickens, 24) Arthur implores his mother to help him set things right, to illuminate possible past misdeeds so that he might address them: "...For Heaven's sake, let us examine sacredly whether there is any wrong entrusted to us to set right. No one can help towards it, Mother, but you" (Dickens, 24). Unfortunately, Arthur pleads in vain. Mrs. Clennam sets herself up as an opponent and obstacle to the truth Arthur seeks. Even though Arthur wishes to make such reparations at his own expense, to do her a service in this way, she resists:

"Reparation!" said she. "Yes truly! It is easy for him to talk of reparation, fresh from journeying and junketing in foreign lands, and living a life of vanity and pleasure. But let him look at me, in prison, and in bonds here. I endure without murmuring, because it is appointed that I shall so make reparation for my sins. Reparation! Is there none in this room? Has there been none here this fifteen years?" Thus was she always balancing her bargains with the Majesty of heaven, posting up the entries to her credit, strictly keeping her set-off, and claiming her due. (Dickens, 25)

Thus, throughout the story, Arthur blindly works to right his family's wrongs without really knowing what they might be. He stumbles about doing good to those he suspects might have been wronged parties, trying to make his family's heavenly scorecard tally up to righteousness and avert divine, catastrophic judgment.

**Amy's most distinct character qualities: (3b,f)**

- |                                 |   |
|---------------------------------|---|
| -responsible (Dickens, 36 & 38) | -strong   |
| -nurturing                      | -self-disciplined/self-denying (Dickens, 36 & 50) |
| -gracious                       | -kind (Dickens, 37)                               |
| -forgiving (Dickens, 36)        | -capable  |
| -hardworking                    | -humble (Dickens, 37)                             |
| -dutiful/faithful (Dickens, 35) | -loving (Dickens, 36)                             |

### Arthur's most distinguished character qualities: (3b,f)

- dutiful (Dickens, 24)
- faithful (Dickens, 24 & 25)
- generous (Dickens, 84 & 85)
- responsible (Dickens, 25)
- loving
- hopeful (Dickens, 17 & 84)
- honorable (Dickens, 25 & 84)
- suspicious (Dickens, 45)
- kind (Dickens, 43, 50, & 84)
- capable
- gracious (Dickens, 84)
- protective (Dickens, 50)
- disappointed (Dickens, 17 & 84)
- fearful/timid (Dickens, 17)
- depressed (Dickens, 28)

These two characters are in some ways cut from the same cloth. Both are motivated by duty and sympathy and empowered by graciousness. Each overlooks the failings of parents and remains faithful and dutiful. Each takes responsibility for things and circumstances beyond their own. It seems they admire one another for these same character traits. Just as Amy refrains from judging her father and siblings harshly, but thinks on them with love and compassion, softening her evaluation with grace (Dickens, 43 & 50), so too does Arthur choose to look about him with hope and charity, humility and mercy (Dickens, 84). In fact, it seems that Dickens creates a foil relationship between these dutiful characters. Whereas Arthur's duty stems from fear of divine punishment, Amy's duty originates from her understanding of Christian love.

This preoccupation of the major characters with duty and honor suggests that the story will turn on the universal themes of duty, faithfulness, grace, and love. Notably, neither Amy nor Arthur owes the duties they feel to their parents. Their parents' abuses certainly release the children from any filial obligations. Mrs. Clennam mistreats Arthur throughout his life. Her rejection of Arthur and her inattention certainly provoke like treatment from him, and the revelation that she is not, in fact, his rightful mother releases him from any legal obligations of filial honor. Amy too is worn away laboring to provide for her father and older siblings, who fail not only to provide for themselves or to help her in the work, but also to appreciate and recognize her contributions, abusing her motives and character verbally. Amy would be justified in abandoning them all to pursue a better life for herself. Neither Arthur nor Amy, however, return evil with evil. They function according to a different ethic, exchange according to a different economy.

### Who else is the story about? (4)

**Mrs. Clennam** – Cold, bitter, vengeful, severe, and religious, Arthur's mother serves as one of the story's major antagonists. She impedes Arthur's efforts to discover his father's secret and dutifully fulfill his last request to make things right (restitution). She buries her own actions as well. Making herself the arbiter of justice and exacter of punishment, she proposes to balance the scales herself. She is driven by legalistic religion, rather than true Christianity. In this way, she serves as a foil for Amy, the story's Christ-figure, and for Father Dorrit as well. Her severity casts all the victims within the story, who function meekly and humbly and forgive others, in stark relief. She thus advances not only the plot

but also the thematic elements of the story by way of comparison and contrast. From her beetle brow and tight lips to her self-imposed confinement to her room, she lurks in the story's shadows, inspiring the misery she herself feels in those around her.

Dickens further develops Mrs. Clennam's character through descriptions of her home. The home, like its mistress, is severe, dark, brooding, unwelcoming, horrifying, and dying. As a place of business, the house has ceased to function (Dickens, 23). Dickens's language paints the House of Clennam as mean, small, and miserly. It is an unhealthy house, dirty, disused, deteriorating, and diseased. Dickens' description seems to indicate that the properties of the house, including its furnishings, are decaying because of its unsound "heart." Truly Mrs. Clennam, the mistress of the House of Clennam, suffers metaphorically from some sort of diseased or atrophied heart. Dickens describes her as cold, passionless, immovable: "With her cold grey eyes and her cold grey hair, and her immovable face, as stiff as the folds of her stony head-dress, --her being beyond the reach of the seasons seemed but a fit sequence to her being beyond the reach of all changing emotions" (Dickens, 18). When seeing Arthur for the first time in years, she shows no joy or emotion of any kind, offers him no maternal kiss of greeting and raises her cheek for none from him. Her sour reception is intensified by her evening reading from the scriptures, which Dickens describes as stern, fierce, and wrathful (Dickens, 19), during which she calls down judgment upon her enemies, amply indicating that no cheek would be turned to them either:

She then put on the spectacles and read certain passages aloud from a book – sternly, fiercely, wrathfully-praying that her enemies (she made them by her tone and manner expressly hers) might be put to the edge of the sword, consumed by fire, smitten by plagues and leprosy, that their bones might be ground to dust, and that they might be utterly exterminated. (Dickens, 18)

Apparently, her behavior and ritual was as it had ever been, because it led Arthur to remember his childhood and experience "the old dark horrors of his usual preparation for the sleep for an innocent child to overshadow him" (Dickens, 18). Dickens notes:

Great need had the rigid woman of her mystical religion, veiled in gloom and darkness, with lightnings of cursing, vengeance, and destruction, flashing through the sable clouds. Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors, was a prayer too poor in spirit for her. Smite Thou my debtors, Lord, wither them, crush them; do Thou as I would do, and Thou shalt have my worship: this was the impious tower of stone she built up to scale Heaven. (Dickens, 24)

So unfamiliar is this woman with mercy that she expects none for herself. She refers to her physical infirmity, which supposedly confines her to a wheelchair in her room, as just and righteous, as though her illness were in some way deserved. "'Do you consider,' she returned, without answering his question, 'that a house serves no purpose, Arthur, in sheltering your infirm and afflicted – justly infirm and righteously afflicted – mother?'" (Dickens, 23). She betrays this idea further in her conversation with Arthur when he questions the family's need to make any reparations on behalf of his father for unknown, wrongful deeds to an innocent:

“Reparation!” said she. “Yes, truly! It is easy for him to talk of reparation, fresh from journeying and junketing in foreign lands, and living a life of vanity and pleasure. But let him look at me, in prison, and in bonds here. I endure without murmuring, because it is appointed that I shall so make reparation for my sins. Reparation! Is there none in this room? Has there been none here this fifteen years?” Thus was she always balancing her bargains with the Majesty of heaven, posting up the entries to her credit, strictly keeping her set-off, and claiming her due. (Dickens, 25)

In this way, Dickens describes Mrs. Clennam as an exacting woman, who operates according to the economy of law and knows no grace. A diligent householder, Mrs. Clennam misers away her petty pittance of self-righteousness and metes out what small dividends her harsh accounting yields to those around her.

Of course, this description creates an immediate empathy for Arthur, who grew up in this ascetic environment. Interestingly, Dickens manages this without entirely damning Arthur’s mother. While there is nothing in Mrs. Clennam to provoke love, her meanness and the futility of her moral accounting system makes her a pitiful and sympathetic character. How can one hate the dying? Mrs. Clennam, like her house, has ceased to live. Even so, this woman sets herself as an implacable and immovable object against Arthur’s desire to fulfill his father’s dying wish and so becomes the story’s major antagonist.

As the story progresses and the secret is revealed, Mrs. Clennam’s antipathy for Arthur and herself is understood. Wronged by Arthur’s father in her girlhood, she sets her heart on exacting revenge, calling it justice in order to justify her conduct to herself and silence her smarting conscience. So invested is she in her project for self-righteousness that even her extreme want proves insufficient to drive her to tell Arthur the truth about who she is and what she has done. Only the subversive threats of another antagonist, the notorious Blandois, eventually motivate her to confess and repent.

**Blandois** – (aka Rigaud, aka Lagnier) The story opens on this consummate, amoral criminal, imprisoned under suspicion of murdering his wife for profit. Threatening and predatory, he stalks through the novel like Lucifer himself, “a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour” (1 Peter 5:8). When information regarding the Clennam family secret falls into his hands, he begins blackmailing Mrs. Clennam, who mistakenly believes that her houseman, Flintwinch, has destroyed all implicating documents regarding her past. Confronted by the truth, she makes a sudden “recovery” and races through the streets to find Amy and retrieve the damning documents herself. Consequently, Blandois functions as a sort of *deus ex machina*; readers recognize him as a providential tool to drive Mrs. Clennam to confession and the story to a satisfying conclusion. He is providentially judged at the story’s conclusion when he is killed in the collapse of the House of Clennam. In this manner, Dickens assures his readers that, although the world runs on an economy of grace, true justice remains.

**Father William Dorrit** – Amy’s father functions as another antagonist in the story. Introduced as the “Father of the Marshalsea,” his history explains his character. Cast in prison for a debt he didn’t understand and could not pay, this landed gentleman languishes, losing everything but the love of his children and his prideful bearing. Depleted of his honor, he stakes a tenacious claim to his legitimate and historic family gentility and distinguishes himself as the oldest prisoner in the Marshalsea, requesting “remembrances” from visitors and other sad prisoners as tokens of respect for his rank and privilege. He keeps to the code of “gentleman,” refusing to stain his hands with low work and remaining at his leisure. He demands that his impoverished children behave likewise, turning a blind eye to Amy’s industry and charity toward himself and the rest of his children.

This willingness to sacrifice Amy to his own needs, which characterizes so much of his behavior, makes him an antagonist in the story. For example, he willingly subjects her to attention from John Chivery, an unwanted suitor, to insure John’s continued “patronage.” He finds himself always at his ease to receive visitors in his poor parlor, his hand thrust forward to receive “tributes,” his eyes studiously averted to maintain his lordly dignity. His thinly veiled beggary combined with his condescension embarrass Amy, but infect the rest of his children with similar arrogance. Although all the Dorrits are indebted to Amy for her quiet and selfless labor, love, and support, all but Uncle Frederick disregard her and abuse her charitable, good nature. They heap abuses upon Amy, whose mild and modest predisposition and unpretentious movements fail to uphold, in their estimation, the family dignity. They make clear to Amy that she must maintain the family fiction: “So, over and above other daily cares, the Child of the Marshalsea had always upon her the care of preserving the genteel fiction that they were all idle beggars together” (Dickens, 37). This snobbery extends to Father Dorrit intentionally snubbing Arthur after rising in society, demanding that Amy no longer associate with him. This mortifies Amy, who feels indebted to Arthur for his kindness to her family. In addition, it separates Arthur from her, delaying their eventual understanding and marriage. Superficiality, class consciousness, selfishness, and money-grubbing hypocrisy color the Dorrits, but never Amy. Father Dorrit’s narcissistic pretense and concern for the respect of society eventually rob him of his sanity. He dies without dignity, selfish to the end, a shell of the man he once had been.

**Fanny Dorrit** – Amy’s sister provides a foil for Amy. By juxtaposing the two, Dickens underscores Amy’s industry, humility, sincerity, and lack of pretense with Fanny’s laziness, vanity, superficiality, and pretension. Since both girls have been affected by their father’s fall from society, their differences are striking. While Fanny continues like her father to preen and peacock, Amy’s modesty and demeanor make her shrink from the public eye. Far from disillusioned by society, Father’s fall from social grace only makes Fanny hungry for status; she is a climber. Amy, on the contrary, prefers a quiet life with friends to social rank and distinction.

**The Merdles** – With so much emphasis upon social distinction and wealth, Dickens contrasts the poverty of the Dorrits with the wealth of the Merdles. Mrs. Merdle, whom Dickens refers to as “the Bosom,” redefines pretense and condescension, presiding over her family and the social scene with supreme snobbery. Her own ungentle history ironically likens her to Fanny (another foil), whom she hypocritically rejects as an unacceptable mate for her dimwitted son, Sparkler. When her dishonest husband commits suicide to evade the consequences of the nefarious ponzi scheme he so long concealed, she must foot it with her children to escape the society she has so long courted. The Merdles underscore the difference between appearance and reality – the falsity of society. Since the Merdles’ dishonesty in business ruins Arthur and Amy financially, they become inadvertent antagonists in the story.

**Mr. Pancks** – A scapegoat rent collector for the seemingly benign Mr. Casby, Pancks also works as a hired detective for Arthur. Pancks’s investigation of the Dorrit’s history uncovers a hidden legacy that delivers the Dorrits from debt and raises them to high social rank. Described as dirty but industrious, he is characterized as a steam-tug, taking Casby in tow. Dickens uses the character not only to advance the plot, but also to depict the true source of the English economy; not the Merdles and Casbys, but the Pancks of England tug the national interests along with their labor. Their dirt is England’s bread and butter.

**Mrs. Wade** – Bitter and shrewd, this one-time governess and jilted girlfriend of Henry Gowan hires Blandois to trail the Gowans on their honeymoon, seeking a chance for revenge. A minor antagonist because of her association with Blandois, she holds the documents that would ruin Arthur and his family. Her hatred of men and desire to avenge herself on the sex makes her dangerous to Arthur.

**Daniel Doyce** – Arthur Clennam’s intelligent and industrious business partner, he graciously forgives Arthur’s poor investments and satisfies his debtors, underscoring the story’s themes of mercy and grace. He functions as a foil for the Barnacles, for Merdle, and for all the idle fops who populate the pages of the story.

**Mr. and Mrs. Meagles and Pet** – Friends that Arthur meets on his voyage home to England, the Meagles’ sincerity and honesty stand in sharp contrast to the Gowans. Their moral rectitude drives home the threat of Mrs. Wade, who becomes a minor antagonist as a cohort of Blandois.



**Tattycoram** – The ungrateful, adopted companion of Pet Meagle, her loneliness, bad temper, and sense of entitlement throw her into the path of Mrs. Wade, who preys upon her ill nature and anger. Her discovery of the box of secrets Mrs. Wade keeps hidden for Blandois provokes her return to the Meagles and helps to resolve the major story conflict.

**Flintwinch** –Mrs. Clennam’s butler. His shrewd self-interest and sense of entitlement lead him to steal the documents he was supposed to destroy so that he can use them as leverage with his employer. He abuses his wife Affrey, the simple-minded maid in the House of Clennam.

**Mrs. General** – Much like Mrs. Merdle, yet not nearly as successful, Mrs. General attaches herself to wealthy families as a governess, teaching others to assume the airs she herself affects. She preys on Father Dorrit because of his wealth, but demonstrates her disingenuousness when she deserts him in his need.

**The Barnacles** – This family populates the Circumlocution Office, the government office where all requests to the government for information or legal authorization to pursue business and invention go to die. Dickens’s humorous opinions regarding the nature of government employees comes through in their name.

**Flora Finching** – Arthur’s childhood sweetheart, she and Arthur were separated by her snobby father. She comes to the story a middle-aged widow, still hoping to capture Arthur with her faded feminine wiles. Her basic decency, kindness, and genuine affection for Arthur make her sympathetic to Amy, whom she employs as a seamstress.

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# QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: CONFLICT AND PLOT



**What does the protagonist want? (5a,b,d,e)**

**This story is about the protagonist trying to discover a family secret, to fulfill his father's dying wish, and to make any reparations necessary to avoid divine wrath and retribution.**

**(4a)**

Question three above argues that Arthur is the more defensible protagonist in the story. By this reading, Mrs. Clennam's secrecy and Arthur's dogged determination to discover the secret and fulfill his father's dying wish propel the plot forward. His acquaintance with the Dorrits and with Blandois both originate in the Clennam house. He follows up every individual he finds there in an attempt to uncover the mystery. After witnessing an interview between Amy and his mother and discovering Amy's hidden life and family, he ponders:

“What if his mother had an old reason she well knew for softening to this poor girl! What if the prisoner now sleeping quietly – Heaven grant it! – by the light of the great Day of Judgment should trace back his fall to her. What if any act of hers and of his father's, should have even remotely brought the grey heads of those two brothers so low! A swift thought shot into his mind. In that long imprisonment here, and in her own long confinement to her room, did his mother find a balance to be struck? ‘I admit that I was accessory to that man's captivity. I have suffered for it in kind. He has decayed in his prison: I in mine. I have paid the penalty.’ When all the other thoughts had faded out, this one held possession of him. When he fell asleep, she came before him in her wheeled chair, warding him off with this justification. When he awoke, and sprang up causelessly frightened, the words were in his ears, as if her voice had slowly spoken them at his pillow, to break his rest: ‘He withers away in his prison; I wither away in mine; inexorable justice is done; what do I owe on this score?’” (Dickens, 45)

Mrs. Clennam's self-justification only increases Arthur's misgivings.

Under the influence of his suspicions, Arthur works to do good to the Dorrit family. He finds only partial success in this. While his favor does lead to the discovery of a heretofore unclaimed inheritance of the Dorrits, which releases them from debtor's prison and elevates them to their previous social standing and affluence, his own financial miscalculations leave him a debtor himself, unable to aid Amy when trouble strikes the Dorrit family again. In addition, Arthur's imprisonment for debt hinders him from

playing the good son to his mother in her affair with the threatening blackmailer, Blandois.

Although Arthur, in his good intentions, works to right every wrong, the limitations of his own knowledge of the circumstances and his own faulty decisions render him largely impotent. In the final analysis, he finds himself indebted and imprisoned in the same cell that Amy and her family had occupied for a quarter of a century.

Ironically, when this truly just turn of events occurs, Amy does not rejoice in the evil, but returns evil with good. Not only does she forgive his debt to her and her family, but she hides all evidence that it ever existed, lest it cause him a moment of uneasiness. She essentially, as a Christ figure within the story, blots out the Clennam transgressions and returns their evil with her blessing and love.

Arthur's inability to rescue himself portrays the plight of Everyman. Although a man of character and good intentions, Arthur's finitude leaves him subject to chance and circumstance and makes him ultimately guilty of failure. Arthur stands in need of grace, and his future with Amy is the result of its dispensation.

Although Arthur learns the secret sin of his father which led to his own birth, he never discovers the bitter actions of Mrs. Clennam, which separated him from his mother, kept him from love, and consigned Amy and her family to years of poverty and imprisonment. This Amy keeps from him, forgiving the desperate Mrs. Clennam and her "house" in one magnanimous gesture: "Do not kneel to me." Amy's words to Mrs. Clennam in this scene make clear her intentions and their source, the gospel of grace and forgiveness in Jesus Christ:

"O, Mrs. Clennam, Mrs. Clennam,' said Little Dorrit, 'angry feelings and unforgiving deeds are no comfort and no guide to you and me. My life has been passed in this poor prison, and my teaching has been very defective; but let me implore you to remember later and better days. Be guided only by the healer of the sick, the raiser of the dead, the friend of all who were afflicted and forlorn, the patient Master who shed tears of compassion for our infirmities. We cannot but be right if we put all the rest away, and do everything in remembrance of Him. There is no vengeance and no infliction of suffering in His life, I am sure. There can be no confusion in following Him, and seeking for no other footsteps, I am certain.'" (Dickens, 403)

Amy's selfless forgiveness and grace not only release Mrs. Clennam from her self-imposed prison, but also make a future marriage between herself and Arthur possible. In this way, Amy functions as the heroine and Christ-figure in the story. Arthur, whose imprisonment for debt leaves him helpless not only to rescue his mother and Amy, but even to help himself, finds that he is loved despite his impoverished condition and the sins of his family. His freedom is purchased, not by his own deeds, but by his friends. He is beloved. Arthur's object - to right the wrongs of his father and prevent calamity from falling upon him and his house - is secured not by his duty or industry, but by Amy's love and mercy.

While some argue that the story's title proves Amy to be the main character, it seems clear that Dickens wrote Amy, the Christ-figure, as his title character because she most represents the story's major themes of grace and forgiveness. Arthur's condition, established by the legalism of his mother and maintained by his own fear of retribution, is reconciled by the gracious act of his beloved Little Dorrit. Consequently, Arthur is the story's major protagonist and Amy its heroine. Far from needing rescue, Amy is the rescuer in the story. She rescues her father, her siblings, her friends, and finally Arthur by laying down her life in love and service.

### **Why can't he have it? (6e-f)**

Arthur is hindered by:

- His mother's secrecy (Man vs. Man)
- Blandois's blackmailing (Man vs. Man)
- The Merdles' dishonesty in business (Man vs. Society)
- The government's severe debtor's laws (Man vs. Society)
- Mrs. Wade's intervention (Man vs. Man)
- His own ignorance and poor decisions, which lead him to poverty and render him impotent to help either his mother or Amy in their trouble (Man vs. Himself)

### **What other problems are there in the story? (7b,e,f)**

In addition to the main story problem (Arthur's attempts to discover the Clennam family secret and make restitution) there is the problem of Amy's mistreatment by her family (Man vs. Man), Flintwinch's abuse of Affery (Man vs. Man), Pet's mistreatment by Gowan (Man vs. Man), Mrs. Wade's mistreatment by Gowan (Man vs. Man, Man vs. Society), the Meagles's mistreatment by Gowan's mother (Man vs. Man, Man vs. Society), Doyle's mistreatment by the government in the Circumlocution Office (Man vs. Society), the public's mistreatment by Mr. Merdle (Man vs. Society), Fanny's mistreatment by Mrs. Merdle (Man vs. Society), and Tattycoram's mistreatment by Mrs. Wade (Man vs. Man) and mistreatment of her adoptive family (Man vs. Man, Man vs. Himself). Blandois (aka Rigaud and Lanier) threatens not only the Clennams, but also the character Cavaletto (Man vs. Man). So, too, Mr. Casby's disingenuous treatment of his tenants and his abuse of Pancks colors the action (Man vs. Man, Man vs. Society). The entire narrative suggests the injustice of Victorian England's harsh and abusive legal stance toward the debtor (Man vs. Society).

These minor plots serve the larger one, raising issues of law and justice alongside the larger story issue of law and grace. In the case of legal injustice and witting, secret sin, divine justice rights the story's wrongs. In the case of personal relationships, however, mercy prevails. For example, Amy forgives Mrs. Clennam for her personal abuses, extending grace in a way that restores broken relationships and fosters love. Yet her very

forgiveness convicts Mrs. Clennam of her deeper sins of idolatry and self-justification. Divine judgment finds the woman out when her house falls before her eyes:

“In one swift instant the old house was before them, with the man lying smoking in the window; another thundering sound, and it heaved, surged outward, opened asunder in fifty places, collapsed, and fell. Deafened by the noise, stifled, choked, and blinded by the dust, they hid their faces and stood rooted to the spot. The dust storm, driving between them and the placid sky, parted for a moment and showed them the stars. As they looked up, wildly crying for help, the great pile of chimneys, which was then alone left standing like a tower in a whirlwind, rocked, broke, and hailed itself down upon the heap of ruin, as if every tumbling fragment were intent on burying the crushed wretch deeper....” (Dickens, 404)

In this destruction, both the murderous and lying Blandois and the House of Clennam receive their just reward. The “placid sky” and the stars visible beyond the dust and rubble seem to suggest God’s omnipotent sovereignty. The destructive action counters both villains’ perceptions of personal agency with “‘Vengeance is Mine; I will repay,’ sayeth the Lord” (Rom. 12:19). Dickens’s narrative suggests that while man rages, God remains immovable in His authority and power, unchangeable in His justice. Likewise, the terrible end of the Merdles underscores the message that cheating and lying do not pay: “Be not deceived. God is not mocked. As a man sows, that he shall reap” (Gal. 6:7-9). Even the drubbing Casby receives at Pancks’s hand in the end demonstrates this principle. Father Dorrit dies pitifully from mental illness originating from his own improper desire for honor and his improper fear of man: “The fear of man brings a snare” (Proverbs 29:25). The larger portion of his misery stems from his self-pity and pride. How like this is to Tattycoram’s self-induced predicament and Mrs. Wade’s self-made prison of bitterness. Actions have consequences, according to Dickens, and God’s grace does not negate His justice.

In addition, Arthur’s larger conflict is complicated by his love relationship with Amy, presenting a conflict within a conflict. The family secret, revealed by Mrs. Clennam before Flintwinch and Affrey under the duress of Rigaud, involves an affair between Arthur’s father and a dancing girl, the product of which was Arthur himself. This affair so wounded and incensed Mrs. Clennam that she vowed to right the injustice. Cloaking her unforgiveness and lust for revenge with religion, she perceived herself as the instrument of divine justice and separated the two lovers. Unsatisfied, she likewise separated the babe from his mother, raising him in loveless severity under the pretense of being his true mother, never telling him his true heritage. The uncle, Gilbert Clennam, uneasy at his death, willed a great deal of money both to the wronged mother and to the youngest daughter or niece of the kind music instructor that cared for her in her cast-off condition. That instructor was Frederick Dorrit. Since he was childless, the beneficiary would have been Amy Dorrit. Unfortunately, Mrs. Clennam concealed the will and neither woman ever saw the bequest. Consequently, Amy’s family remained in poverty and confinement in the Marshalsea Prison long after the inheritance could have freed them. The Clennams, then, are ultimately responsible for all the Dorrit’s misery. Arthur,

then, is not Amy's benefactor, but party to her persecutors. Amy must forgive the Clennam family to secure her happiness with Arthur.

### **What happens in the story? How is the main problem solved? (9a-e)**

If Arthur's object is to right the wrongs of his family and restore their good reputation – that is, to earn justification – then this story is a tragedy of sorts. He fails. Instead, hope comes from the outside. The story turns in a few possible places:

**Arthur's interview with Blandois in prison**, during which he receives the following memo from his mother: "I hope it is enough that you have ruined yourself. Rest contented without more ruin. Jeremiah Flintwinch is my messenger and representative. Your affectionate M.C." (Dickens, 383). This marks the end of Arthur's work to right the wrongs done by his father and clear his family's name and reputation. She issues the judgment: "You, Arthur, have failed yourself and the family. Get out of my way." This represents a sort of circumstantial resolution, since Mrs. Clennam relieves Arthur of his responsibility to make restitution. (9.d.)

**Amy's first visit to the prison.** Therein, Arthur reveals his love for her, but refuses to realize it:

"...if I had then known, and told you that I loved and honoured you, not as the poor child I used to call you, but as a woman whose true hand would raise me high above myself and make me a far happier and better man; if I had so used the opportunity there is no recalling – as I wish I had, O I wish I had! – and if something had kept us apart then, when I was moderately thriving, and when you were poor; I might have met your noble offer of your fortune, dearest girl, with other words than these, and still have blushed to touch it. But as it is, I must never touch it, never!" (Dickens, 387)

Arthur refuses Amy's help and indicates that if he had realized his love for her earlier, he might have accepted her offer of help, but that he could never accept her fortune in his reduced conditions. It was unseemly. Amy's response is telling: "You will surely not desert me so!" (Dickens, 387). In the interest of living lawfully and balancing his own ledger, functioning notably under the influence of his mother and the worldview she provided for him, Arthur fails to do what he set out to do – he fails to serve Amy and rectify the wrongs done her. This demonstrates that legalism, even when well-intentioned, produces death. Again, this represents Arthur's failure to make proper restitution. Even his nobler intentions damn him.

**The Fall of the House of Clennam:** Dickens contrives a poetic justice for Mrs. Clennam:

"In one swift instant the old house was before them, with the man lying smoking in the window; another thundering sound, and it heaved, surged outward, opened asunder in fifty places, collapsed, and fell.... There Mrs. Clennam dropped upon the stones; and she never from that hour moved so much as a finger again, or had the power to speak one word. For upwards of three years she reclined in a wheeled chair, looking attentively at those about her and appearing to understand

what they said; but the rigid silence she had so long held was evermore enforced upon her, and except that she could move her eyes and faintly express a negative and affirmative with her head, she lived and died a statue” (Dickens, 404).

Arthur’s work fails to redeem Mrs. Clennam. She would not be helped. Rather, she works against Arthur in his efforts to make restitution to those they wronged. In so doing, she works her own downfall. The Clennam house and reputation are both ruined. Again, Dickens uses this plot development to suggest the end of the legalism: death.

**Arthur’s redemption** from prison, by Doyce and Meagles, from his family affair by Amy’s action of grace and forgiveness. Help for Arthur comes from the outside. His redemption by these acts of forgiveness and love indicate that life – rich, full, life in relationship with others – comes not by justice, but by grace. In fact, the story points to grace as the fountain of life and everything good. It is redemptive. In addition, it suggests the finitude and helplessness of even the best of men, who need mediated grace in relationships. Thus, the story furnishes a contrast comparison of law and grace. It studies the relationship between the biblical old covenant and new.

### **How does the story end? (10)**

Blandois returns to extract more money from Mrs. Clennam, and she sets her face like a flint. Yet when he reveals the documents that have fallen into his hands and their incriminating evidence, she defends herself. Flintwinch triumphs over her as an enemy bested; yet even in the face of catastrophe, she maintains her innocence and rights:

“More than forty years had passed over the grey head of this determined woman, since the time she recalled. More than forty years of strife and struggle with the whisper that, by whatever name she called her vindictive pride and rage, nothing through all eternity could change their nature. Yet, gone those more than forty years, and come this Nemesis now looking her in the face, she still abided by her old impiety – still reversed the order of Creation, and breathed her own breath into a clay image of her Creator. Verily, verily, travelers have seen many monstrous idols in many countries; but no human eyes have ever seen more daring, gross, and shocking images of the Divine nature than we creatures of the dust make in our own likenesses, of our own and passions” (Dickens, 393-394).

She defends her vindictive actions as the vehicle of God’s just retribution and would blame Flintwinch for her predicament, but he lays her unholy motives bare so that she herself cannot help but see them:

“I think I see your pride carrying it out, with a chance of being suspected of having kept it by you. But that’s the way you cheat yourself. Just as you cheat yourself into making out that you didn’t do all this business because you were a rigorous woman, all slight, and spite, and power, and unforgiveness, but because you were a servant and a minister, and were appointed to do it. Who are you, that you should be appointed to do it? That may be your religion, but it’s my gammon” (Dickens, 398).

Her situation clear, Rigaud threatens to reveal her game to Amy Dorrit and Arthur. This moves her. She rises from her wheelchair and, bent, races to the Marshalsea to discover Amy before her secret is known. Her confession to Amy is less heartfelt repentance than terrified need. She desires that Amy hide her transgression from Arthur until she herself has died. She maintains her pride until the end, intent that she never be discovered by Arthur as less than she made herself to be:

“I would not, for any worldly recompense I can imagine, have him in a moment, however blindly, throw me down from the station I have held before him all his life, and change me altogether into something he would cast out of his respect, and think detected and exposed. Let him do it, if it must be done, when I am not here to see it. Let me never feel, while I am still alive, that I die before his face, and utterly perish away from him, like one consumed by lightning and swallowed by an earthquake.”  
(Dickens, 403)

In all of these words, Mrs. Clennam maintains her just cause: “I have done... what it was given to me to do. I have set myself against evil; not against good. I have been an instrument of severity against sin. Have not mere sinners like myself been commissioned to lay it low in all time” (Dickens, 403). Amy’s response recalls her to a more graceful mean. Standing by Amy’s side, Mrs. Clennam becomes yet another foil to Amy’s goodness.

Yet, Mrs. Clennam has won only half of her object; she begs Amy to return with her to the House of Clennam to silence Rigaud and deliver Arthur from his tormentor. Of course, Amy complies; yet with the house in their view, the walls begin to quiver and the entire house collapses. Mrs. Clennam falls prostrate and suffers a kind of stroke. These events indicate a kind of divine justice alongside the major theme of grace.

With the fall of the House of Clennam, Mrs. Clennam is silenced and her pursuit of agency is stilled. Blandois is killed in the catastrophe, ending his reign of terror. Flintwinch absconds with what remains of the Clennam fortune, leaving Affery free of his abuse. Amy sets about to recover the documents Blandois held against the Clennam family. She appeals to Mr. Meagle for his aid, and he and his wife set out to discover the location of the box with the documents. He traces it, with intelligence from Amy, to Mrs. Wade, who lies to evade discovery. However, Tattycoram, hidden in a room adjacent, finds the box and runs to deliver it (and herself) to the Meagles. All are reunited. In this way, further blackmail is avoided. Meagles conveys the box to Amy, whose gratitude the narrator expresses: “The secret was safe now! She could keep her own part of it from him; he should never know of her loss; in time to come he should know all that was of import to himself; but he should never know what concerned her only. That was all passed, all forgiven, all forgotten” (Dickens, 413). Meagles points Amy out to Tattycoram as an object lesson in the happiness and respect duty engenders, making Tattycoram another foil for Amy in the story.

Amy reveals to Arthur that she, too, has been reduced to poverty by Merdle’s machinations. This leaves Arthur free to marry her, and she vows never to be parted from him:



“Never to part, my dearest Arthur; never any more, until the last! I never was rich before, I never was proud before, I never was happy before, I am rich in being taken by you, I am proud in having been resigned by you, I am happy in being with you in this prison, as I should be happy in coming back to it with you, if it should be the will of God and comforting and serving you with all my live and truth. I am yours anywhere, everywhere! I love you dearly! I would rather pass my life here with you, and go out daily, working for our bread, than I would have the greatest fortune that ever was told, and be the greatest lady that ever was honoured. O, if poor papa may only know how blest at last my heart is, in this room where he suffered for so many years!” (Dickens, 416).

With Arthur safe from evil doers, Meagles sets out likewise to restore his liberty. He travels to fetch Doyle, who, rich from his foreign investments, pays Arthur’s debts and forgives his losses, hiring him back as a full partner and investing full confidence in him. Amy punctuates the happy ending by asking Arthur to satisfy her fancy by burning a piece of folded paper. Unbeknownst to Arthur, this paper is the recovered will:

“I want you to burn something for me”

“What?”

“Only this folded paper. If you will put it in the fire with your own hand, just as it is, my fancy will be gratified.”

“Superstitious, darling Little Dorrit? Is it a charm?”

“It is anything you like best, my own...” (Dickens, 419).

Arthur never learns its incriminating contents, which would have revealed the depth of her love and forgiveness. This is her gift – her grace.

The story ends with Arthur and Amy married, happy, and fruitful. Dickens describes their lot as two who:

“[w]ent down into a modest life of usefulness and happiness. Went down to give a mother’s care, in the fulness of time, to Fanny’s neglected children no less than to their own, and to leave that lady going into Society for ever and a day. Went down to give a tender nurse and friend to Tip for some few years, who was never vexed by the great exactions he made of her in return for riches he might have given her if he had ever had them, and who lovingly closed his eyes upon the Marshalsea and all its blighted fruits. They went quietly down into the roaring streets, inseparable and blessed; and as they passed along in sunshine and shade, the noisy and the eager, and the arrogant and the forward and the vain, fretted and chafed, and made their usual uproar” (Dickens, 420).

In summary, Amy’s forgiveness of the Clennam debt and her decision to keep from Arthur the truth of the Clennams’ offenses against her resolves the major tension of the story. What cannot be repaired is forgiven. In addition, the child that Arthur’s great uncle willed to inherit his fortune (in a futile effort of his own to make restitution to Arthur’s mother) poetically marries his great nephew in the end. Dickens suggests in his final lines that a quiet, modest, and useful life (rather than a life in Society) is the happiest life of all.

His story indicates that such a life is predicated upon duty, love, self-sacrifice, forgiveness, and grace.

**What does the protagonist learn? (11)**

Dickens uses the resolution of the story to emphasize his themes of law and grace. While Arthur remains in the dark, truly receiving everything he needs from outside help, readers see the deliverance as an act of mercy and grace. Arthur is not changed, but is delivered. In this way, the story is a kind of dramatic allegory. Even so, Arthur's circumstances are changed and his troubles relieved not by his observance of duty, but by his creditor's love.

**What do the other characters learn? (12)**

Neither is Amy changed by the story's resolution. Rather, she is affirmed in her role as the story's Christ-figure, a living vehicle of grace to everyone involved. Yet, her circumstances, too, are changed. As a result of her continued kindness and mercy, she finds everything she needs.

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# QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: THEME



## What is the main idea of the story? (13a-c)

Dickens worked in caricatures. Like an editorial cartoonist, he populated his pages with colorful personalities through the art of exaggeration. By enlarging quirks and magnifying mannerisms, he manufactured memorable characters, beloved for their idiosyncrasies and the faults which illustrate their humanity. Moreover, by associating each character with a particular quality or feature, Dickens recalled the art of allegory in his storytelling. Just as in allegory, individual characters symbolize ideas, and in similar fashion the exaggerated personalities and attitudes of Dickensian characters foster observations about the larger ideas they represent. This is most evident in *Little Dorrit*. Here, Dickens draws two female characters as foils to foster a comparison and contrast of the Christian ideas of Law and Grace. Mrs. Clennam, the story's antagonist and self-defined instrument of divine wrath and justice, embodies the Law; Amy Dorrit, the story's title character and Christ-figure, embodies grace. Animating these caricatures, Dickens creates an extended comparison of the nature and effects of two prevalent perceptions of the Christian God.

Mrs. Clennam recalls the wrathful God of the Old Testament. Indeed, in a conversation with Amy Dorrit, she goes so far as to identify herself as God's instrument of justice: "'I have done,' said Mrs. Clennam, 'what it was given me to do. I have set myself against evil; not against good. I have been an instrument of severity against sin. Have not mere sinners like myself been commissioned to lay it low in all time?'" (Dickens, 403). Understanding God to be concerned primarily with the punishment of sin, she sets about exacting revenge for sins against herself, legitimizing her own sinful wrath and bitterness in the process.

Other characters, however, take issue with her self-justification, questioning her perceptions of both self and God. Her shrewd servant, Jeremiah Flintwinch, confronts her ideas in a pivotal scene: "... you cheat yourself into making out that you didn't do all this business because you were a rigorous woman, all slight, and spite, and power, and unforgiveness, but because you were a servant and a minister, and were appointed to do it. What are you, that you should be appointed to do it? That may be your religion, but it's my gammon" (Dickens, 398). Flintwinch questions the integrity of Mrs. Clennam, calling her quest for revenge by its true name.

The author, too, impugns her motives and her theology in both word and tone throughout the work. He locates her in a home which is on the brink of utter ruin, even as she herself totters on the edge of destruction. Her lack of attention to the physical realities of her home, which mirrors her truculent refusal to acknowledge her own wretched spiritual

condition, have brought her to this fatal juncture. He describes her as dour, sour, bitter, and unfeeling, picturing her, attired in black and impassive in countenance, seated upon a “black bier-like sofa” with a black cushion behind her, which he describes in appearance as a chopping block at a state execution (Dickens, 17). He pictures her religious rites in like color:

She then put on the spectacles and read certain passages aloud from a book – sternly, fiercely, wrathfully – praying that her enemies (she made them by her tone and manner expressly hers) might be put to the edge of the sword, consumed by fire, smitten by plagues and leprosy, that their bones might be ground to dust, and that they might be utterly exterminated. (Dickens, 18)

The narrator’s tone and aside make it clear that he in no way condones Mrs. Clennam’s posture or perceptions. Rather, he indicates a different understanding of the book from which she reads. Placing observations in the mouth of her son, Arthur, he describes her Bible: “. . .--bound, like her own construction of it, in the hardest, barest, and straightest boards, with one dented ornament on the cover like the drag of a chain, and a wrathful sprinkling of red upon the edges of the leaves—as if it, of all books! were a fortification against sweetness of temper, natural affection, and gentle intercourse” (Dickens, 15). Arthur disagrees with his mother’s interpolation of the Bible. Likewise does the narrator object to her execution of the supposed injunctions she reads within it. Dickens notes,

Great need had the rigid woman of her mystical religion, veiled in gloom and darkness, with lightnings of cursing, vengeance, and destruction, flashing through the sable clouds. Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors, was a prayer too poor in spirit for her. Smite Thou my debtors, Lord, wither them, crush them; do Thou as I would do, and Thou shalt have my worship: this was the impious tower of stone she built up to scale Heaven. (Dickens, 24)

Dickens indicates that Mrs. Clennam’s perception of a severe and wrathful God has blinded her to biblical expressions and injunctions of mercy and has augmented the impiety of her vindictive judgments.

He indicates further that this impiety finds at its heart a confusion of God with man:

More than forty years of strife and struggle with the whisper that, by whatever name she called her vindictive pride and rage, nothing through all eternity could change their nature. Yet, gone those more than forty years, and come this Nemesis now looking her in the face, she still abided by her old impiety—still reversed the order of Creation, and breathed her own breath into a clay image of her Creator. Verily, verily travelers have seen many monstrous idols in many countries; but no human eyes have ever seen more daring, gross, and shocking images of the Divine nature than we creatures of the dust make in our own likenesses, of our own bad passions. (Dickens, 395)

With these words, Dickens indicts Mrs. Clennam of idolatry and identifies the God she presumes to serve as the embodiment of her own vengeful bitterness, rather than any true likeness of the Old Testament biblical God.

Conversely, with his characterization of Amy Dorrit, Dickens depicts a contending view of God, predicated upon the New Testament person of Jesus Christ, whom Amy references in the pivotal scene of confrontation between herself and Mrs. Clennam:

O, Mrs. Clennam, Mrs. Clennam,' said Little Dorrit, 'angry feelings and unforgiving deeds are no comfort and no guide to you and me. My life has been passed in this poor prison, and my teaching has been very defective; but let me implore you to remember later and better days. Be guided only by the healer of the sick, the raiser of the dead, the friend of all who were afflicted and forlorn, the patient Master who shed tears of compassion for our infirmities. We cannot but be right if we put all the rest away, and do everything in remembrance of Him. There is no vengeance and no infliction of suffering in His life, I am sure. There can be no confusion in following Him, and seeking for no other footsteps, I am certain. (Dickens, 403)

Amy's remarks here clarify her attitude and actions throughout the story. Amy patterns herself after her God, the Suffering Servant Jesus. Not only does Amy freely and quickly forgive Mrs. Clennam when she reveals herself as an adversary, but she also exhorts the elderly woman to pursue a better way, a newer covenant than the one which had compelled her to self-justification and retributive justice over the course of her adult lifetime.

Beatific as Dante's Beatrice, Amy is ever gracious, kind, forgiving, dutiful, humble, loving, and selfless. Her service to her family and her persistent refusal to so much as notice their ungrateful abuses and ingratitude demonstrate her will to love others and take no thought for herself. Amy sees at an early age the mean circumstances of her father and family and devotes herself to improving their lives:

What her pitiful look saw, at that early time, in her father, in her sister, in her brother, in the jail; how much, or how little of the wretched truth it pleased God to make visible to her; lies hidden with many mysteries. It is enough that she was inspired to be something which was not what the rest were, and to be that something, different and laborious, for the sake of the rest. Inspired? Yes. Shall we speak of the inspiration of a poet or a priest, and not of the heart impelled by love and self-devotion to the lowliest work in the lowliest way of life!

According to Dickens, Amy is inspired to live for the benefit of her family members. He continues: "she drudged on, until recognized as useful, even indispensable. That time came. She took the place of eldest of the three, in all things but precedence; was the head of the fallen family; and bore, in her own heart, its anxieties and shames" (Dickens, 36).

Amy serves her family selflessly, never blaming them for their personal imprudence, self-pity, or general misbehavior. She excuses their sins in light of their fallen circumstances, their suffering, and the stain of the Marshalsea which society had impressed upon them. Dickens records her consequent work to improve and provide for each of her siblings: She arranges dancing lessons for Fanny with the dancing-master (Dickens, 36). She appeals to her godfather, the prison turnkey, Bob, for help obtaining a position for Tip (Dickens, 38). She improves herself, too, teaching herself to read and keep accounts, and learning the trade of a milliner as well (Dickens, 36-7).

Of her narcissistic father, she postulates that “a man so broken as to be the Father of the Marshalsea, could be no father to his own children” (Dickens, 36). She excuses his improprieties, his begging, his pride and his self-seeking even at the cost of her own dignity. For her father, she brings home food and necessities from her earnings, all the while careful to preserve “the genteel fiction that they were all idle beggars” (Dickens, 37). Not only does Amy do the work to provide for her father and siblings, but she also shields her father from the ignominy of that service, never allowing him to know where the provision came from and certainly never expecting her father to own that it came through her own industry and labor. Amy does everything without expectation of reward, thanks, or even acknowledgement, which is good since she never receives any. In fact, Amy spends little time caring for herself at all. Rather than recording the abuses she has herself endured at the hands of a merciless society and narcissistic family, she pities instead the misfortunes of her abusers and endeavors to soften their way if she can. She considers it all an effect of the far-reaching shadow of the Marshalsea wall (Dickens, 125). Her uncanny ability to empathize with those suffering around her and to forgive their imperfections in light of their circumstances lifts her above mere mortals and places her among the saints. While some readers complain Amy is too perfect, Dickens represents her perfection with intentionality.

Clearly Dickens makes of Amy a Christ-figure in *Little Dorrit*. For it is through her that every character within the story receives compassion, forgiveness, and the offer of redemption. In truth, it is through Amy’s suffering and graciousness that the major story characters experience the goodness of life. Her siblings enter main stream society and find employment at her hand. Her father experiences the comforts of home and kindness at her hand. Her neighbors discover compassion and aid at her hand. Her secret tormentor Mrs. Clennam experiences mercy and forgiveness at her hand.

Protagonist Arthur Clennam himself is redeemed by Amy’s self-sacrificial act of forgiveness, making Amy the story’s heroine. When Amy finally becomes aware that the machinations of Arthur’s family kept her own family impoverished for many years, making the Clennams truly responsible for her childhood in the Marshalsea, she determines not only to forgive, but also to hide this fact from Arthur lest he be troubled with sorrow at her suffering. Once in possession of the will Mrs. Clennam had so long suppressed, she rejoices: “The secret was safe now! She could keep her own part of it from him; he should never know of her loss; in time to come he should know all that was of import to himself; but he should never know what concerned her only. That was all passed, all forgiven, all forgotten” (Dickens, 413). To ensure that this personal secret should never surface to trouble Arthur, Amy punctuates her act of forgiveness with definitive action. She speaks to Arthur: “I want you to burn something for me...only this folded paper. If you will put it in the fire with your own hand, just as it is, my fancy will be gratified” (Dickens, 419). By requiring Arthur to burn the will, Amy places the offenses of the past permanently behind them and out of the reach of Arthur’s suspicion, underscoring the genuineness of her forgiveness and selflessness. In Amy, Arthur is saved by grace. Amy’s constant self-denial, longsuffering service, empathy, mercy, forgiveness, and love identify her as a disciple of Christ, an embodiment of His teachings.

By caricaturing Amy Dorrit and Mrs. Clennam, Dickens successfully highlights the opposing theological doctrines which animate them. He observes the striking contrast their two figures create: “In the softened light of the window, looking from the scene of her early trials to the shining sky, [Amy] was not in stronger opposition to the black figure in the shade than the life and doctrine on which she rested were to that figure’s history” (Dickens, 403). With his allusion to the life and doctrines of Christ in this passage, Dickens suggests his intention to contrast these two prevalent perceptions of the biblical God and the doctrines of law and grace associated with each. In Mrs. Clennam, Dickens condemns common perceptions of a wrathful God who exacts His vengeance with ire. With his heroine Amy, Dickens champions instead the New Testament incarnation of God, who suffers and dies for His people to pay their debts and provide them with life.

By contrasting Mrs. Clennam and Amy, several things become apparent about the economies that each represents. Mrs. Clennam functions according to the economy of law in keeping with her concept of God as the divine bookkeeper. She expects perfection from her people and requires ample restitution when they fail. Her merciless judgment effectively isolates her from human relationship and leaves her in terror of her own imperfections, frantically working to justify herself before her own judgment should approach. In truth, the fall of her house comes as no surprise. Like the foolish woman of the proverb, she does in fact tear down her house with her own hands. Conversely, Amy functions according to the economy of grace in keeping with her concept of Jesus, who claimed to be the very likeness and image of God. Full of humility, Amy expects nothing from her people, forgiving them freely when they fail, pitying their frailty and sacrificing herself to soften their circumstances. Her mercy and love make of her a fountain for the thirsty, who flock to her like sheep and drink their fill of her goodness. Amy is life to all her own, Arthur most of all. The results of her gospel doctrine furnish her with loving relationships which send her “down into a modest life of usefulness and happiness... inseparable and blessed...” (Dickens, 420). Readers find her at the story’s end standing not in the shadow of the Marshalsea wall, but in full sunshine, unperturbed by the throngs of men Dickens terms arrogant and forward and vain, fretted and chafed, herself living a blessed life of loving relationship in their midst.

Unlike the literary realists of his era, Dickens portrays truth not through the verbal equivalent of photographic images, but instead through hyperbolic caricatures of human traits. Far from representing slipshod workmanship, Dickens’s depictions represent an ingenious and signature style of characterization. Adapting the artistic caricature to the written word, Dickens employs it (much like his counterparts the cartoonists) as a vehicle for his greater editorial observations and thematic ideas. In this way, he makes timeless observations regarding the damning effects of the law and the salvific nature of grace in *Little Dorrit*.

**NOTES:**

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# QUESTIONS ABOUT STYLE: LITERARY DEVICES



## Does the author use common words and phrases in uncommon ways? (15)

**Hyperbole** – Often called overstatement, hyperbole serves Dickens’s comedic purposes nicely. Consider his John Chivery, the turnkey’s son, whom Dickens commonly refers to as “young John.” His tale of youthful, unrequited love is dramatized with narrations of his daydreams of a lifetime with Amy, which always end with visions of their tombstones. When he believes himself winning in the love department, he imagines the tombstones with the following engraving:

Sacred to the Memory of JOHN CHIVERY, Sixty years Turnkey, and fifty years Head Turnkey, Of the neighbouring Marshalsea, Who departed this life, universally respected, on the thirty-first of December, One thousand eight hundred and eighty-six, Aged eighty-three years. Also of his truly beloved and truly loving wife, AMY, whose maiden name was DORRIT, Who survived his loss not quite forty-eight hours, And who breathed her last in the Marshalsea aforesaid. There she was born, There she lived, There she died. (Dickens, 108)

Defeated in love, he imagines differently:

Here lie the mortal remains of JOHN CHIVERY, Never anything worth mentioning, Who died about the end of the year one thousand eight hundred and twenty-six, Of a broken heart, Requesting with his last breath that the world AMY might be inscribed over his ashes, Which was accordingly directed to be done, By his afflicted Parents. (Dickens, 112)

The effects of these overly dramatic and sentimentalized scenarios perfectly convey John’s youth and affection for Amy, winning him sympathy from readers, even through their laughter.

Dickens indulges in hyperbolic descriptions of the House of Clennam as well:

He came at last to the house he sought. An old brick house, so dingy as to be all but black, standing by itself within a gateway. Before it, a square courtyard where a shrub or two and a patch of grass were as rank (which is saying much) as the iron railings enclosing them were rusty; behind it, a jumble of roots. It was a double house, with long, narrow, heavily-framed windows. Many years ago, it had had it in its mind to slide down sideways; it had been propped up, however, and was leaning on some half-dozen gigantic crutches: which gymnasium for the neighbouring cats, weather-stained, smoke-blackened, and overgrown with weeds, appeared in their latter days to be no very sure reliance...He went up to the door, which had a projecting canopy in

carved work of festooned jack-towels and children's heads with water on the brain, designed after a once-popular monumental pattern, and knocked. (Dickens, 16)

Inside, he continues in like manner to describe the house and its occupants in exaggerated terms, all with the same humorous effects. These overblown descriptions depict the characters and scenes in brilliant imagery.

**Does the author use descriptions and comparisons to create pictures in the reader's mind? (16)**

**Imagery –**

The description of the Clennam household and Mrs. Clennam herself are beautiful examples of imagery.

So too is the description of Flora, Arthur's childhood love, seen again for the first time in her middle-age:

Flora, always tall, had grown to be very broad too, and short of breath; but that was not much. Flora, whom he had left a lily, had become a peony; but that was not much. Flora, who had seemed enchanting in all she said and thought, was diffuse and silly. That was much. Flora, who had been spoiled and artless long ago, was determined to be spoiled and artless now. That was a fatal blow. (Dickens, 76)

Another great example can be found in Dickens's description of Mrs. Merdle, whom he nicknames, "The Bosom":

The lady was not young and fresh from the hand of Nature, but was young and fresh from the hand of her maid. She had large unfeeling handsome eyes, and dark unfeeling handsome hair, and a broad unfeeling handsome bosom, and was made the most of in every particular. Either because she had a cold, or because it suited her face, she wore a rich white fillet tied over her head and under her chin. And if ever there were an unfeeling handsome chin that looked as if, for certain, it had never been, in familiar parlance, 'chucked' by the hand of a man, it was the chin curbed up so tight and close by that laced bridle. (Dickens, 121)

Dickens's descriptions employ metaphor and sensory language, pay much attention to detail, and utilize repetition to great effect.

**Does the author use the characters and events in her story to communicate a theme that goes beyond them in some way? (17)**

**Irony –**

Dickens develops his characters and theme through elements of verbal (sarcasm) and situational irony. For example, he draws Mrs. Clennam as a very devout, religious woman, but underscores her violent, self-serving, unforgiving temperament in a passage where she dutifully performs her evening prayers:

She then put on the spectacles and read certain passages aloud from a book – sternly, fiercely, wrathfully-praying that her enemies (she made them by her tone and manner expressly hers) might be put to the edge of the sword, consumed by fire, smitten by

plagues and leprosy, that their bones might be ground to dust, and that they might be utterly exterminated. As she read on, years seemed to fall away from her son like the imaginings of a dream, and all the old dark horrors of his usual preparation for the sleep of an innocent child to overshadow him. (Dickens, 18)

Likewise, he uses names in similar fashion to sardonically suggest the nature of the individual. Consider the Barnacles, those government “workers” in the Circumlocution Office (another ironic moniker), who leech off the taxpayers and largely do nothing in an office that, like so many government offices, exists only to gum up the works of public productivity by moving needless reams of legal papers around from desk to desk in ceaseless repetition: “Whatever was to be done, the Circumlocution Office was beforehand with all the public departments in the art of perceiving – HOW NOT TO DO IT. ...In short, all the business of the country went through the Circumlocution Office, except the business that never came out of it; and its name was Legion” (Dickens, 52-53).

Again, Dickens employs irony in the message Mrs. Clennam sends Arthur in prison: “I hope it is enough that you have ruined yourself. Rest contented without more ruin. Jeremiah Flintwinch is my messenger and representative. Your affectionate M.C.” (Dickens, 383). The “affection” simply drips from her pen!

### **Allusion-**

Dickens makes Biblical allusions in several passages of the story. In Mrs. Clennam’s final interview with Amy, she references what many perceive to be the wrathful God of the Old Testament: “She not only sinned grievously against the Lord, but she wronged me...I have done...what it was given to me to do. I have set myself against evil; not against good. I have been an instrument of severity against sin. Have not mere sinners like myself been commissioned to lay it low in all time?” (Dickens, 403) In her response, Amy alludes to Jesus, the friend of sinners: “...but let me implore you to remember later and better days. Be guided only by the healer of the sick, the raiser of the dead, the friend of all who were afflicted and forlorn, the patient Master who shed tears of compassion for our infirmities. We cannot but be right if we put all the rest away, and do everything in remembrance of Him. There is no vengeance and no infliction of suffering in His life, I am sure” (Dickens, 403).

In chapter 7 of Book 2, Gowan refers to Father Dorrit as Blandois’s Maecenas, a wealthy Roman patron and benefactor of Horace and Virgil.

In chapter 9 of Book 2, Flora remarks upon learning of Amy’s location in Venice:

...is she really in that favoured land with nothing but blue about her and dying gladiators and Belvederes though Mr. F. himself did not believe for his objection when in spirits was that the images could not be true there being no medium between expensive quantities of linen badly got up and all increases and none whatever, which certainly does not seem probable though perhaps in consequence of the extremes of rich and poor which may account for it... Venice Preserved too... (Dickens, 272).

She references two famous sculptures: that of a dying Gaul and another of a 3rd century Greek personage, the “Apollo Belvedere.” The final reference to Venice Preserved alludes to a play by Thomas Otway published in 1682. (Dickens, 425)

In chapter 15, an allusion is used ironically to poke fun at Fanny for her interference with Father’s relationship with Mrs. General when she calls Amy a “little Marplot,” a reference to a fictitious character who meddled in the love life of others. This good-humored teasing continues in his characterization of Fanny’s preparations for her honeymoon when he describes the progress of her new and expensive wardrobe through Europe’s custom houses under the escort of “shabby mendicants in uniform who incessantly repeated the Beggar’s Petition over it, as if every individual warrior among them were the ancient Belisarius...” (Dickens, 309). The “Beggar’s Petition” was a poem by T. Moss which referenced the necessity to bribe the customs officers before they would allow a trousseau to pass. Belisarius, on the other hand, was the Emperor Justinian’s revered general who died in poverty. (Dickens, 424)

Dickens utilizes allusions to such an extent that a good scholarly edition of the story will include end notes to illuminate them. This guide references The Encyclopaedia Britannica’s *Great Books of the Western World*, Volume 47, with notes by John Holloway. These notes are available also in Penguin Classic’s 1967 edition of *Little Dorrit*.

## **Symbolism**

### The Watch –

Arthur’s father’s watch becomes an image associated with the inexorable and relentless nature of consequences, which come to all in good time. Dickens makes it a symbol of the major plot conflict, the Clennam secret and the threat it represents.

### The Shadow of the Marshalsea –

The Marshalsea Prison itself represents the government’s merciless judgment on the impoverished debtors in Victorian society. Dickens utilizes the “Shadow of the Marshalsea” to figuratively reference the effects of this debtor’s prison on its occupants: degradation, beggary, and shrewd, self-centered baseness. It’s obvious in the family’s attitudes toward John Chivery before Amy rejects his proposal:

Her brother and sister were aware of [John’s crush], and attained a sort of station by making a peg of it on which to air the miserably ragged old fiction of the family gentility. Her sister asserted the family gentility by flouting the poor swain... Tip asserted the family gentility, and his own, by coming out in the character of the aristocratic brother... These were not the only members of the Dorrit family who turned it to account. No, no. The Father of the Marshalsea was supposed to know nothing about the matter, of course: his poor dignity could not see so low. But he took the cigars, on Sundays, and was glad to get them; and sometimes even condescended to walk up and down the yard with the donor... (Dickens, 108)

Amy notes its presence in Fanny, Tip, and her father, but wonders how she herself has evaded it. She considers this after the interview with Fanny and Mrs. Merdle leaves her ashamed and startled by Fanny's eagerness to profit from her admirer's mother through extortion. While Fanny defends her actions as "self-respect" and "spirit" before a society that has cast them down, Amy feels the ignominy of the situation deeply. As she leaves Fanny, she contemplates the reasons for her sister's moral failings:

Little Dorrit parted from [Fanny and her uncle] at the door, and hastened back to the Marshalsea. It fell dark there sooner than elsewhere, and going into it that evening was like going into a deep trench. Not least upon the figure in the old grey gown and the black velvet cap, as it turned towards her when she opened the door of the dim room. 'Why not upon me too!' thought Little Dorrit, with the door yet in her hand. 'It was not unreasonable in Fanny.' (Dickens, 125)

This lasting effect of the Marshalsea, this shadow pervades Father Dorrit most of all, corrupting his morals, shaping his identity, and darkening his memories until all else is extinguished. In the moment of his sickness and senility, the richness of his new surroundings darken to become the shadowy prison of his past:

The broad stairs of his Roman palace were contracted in his failing sight to the narrow stairs of his London prison; and he would suffer no one but her to touch him, his brother excepted. They got him up to his room without help, and laid him down on his bed. And from that hour his poor maimed spirit, only remembering the place where it had broken its wings, cancelled the dream through which it had since groped, and knew of nothing beyond the Marshalsea... (Dickens, 330-331)

The Shadow of the Marshalsea plagues its occupants long after they have left its confines: "in the meantime, the shadow of the Marshalsea wall was a real darkening influence, and could be seen on the Dorrit Family at any stage of the sun's course" (Dickens, 129).

#### Society –

Society is considered an entity of itself in the story, with collective morals, expectations, and judgments, all of them merciless and superficial. Dickens casts the Merdles as the face of society, and Mrs. Merdle herself describes it in her interview with Fanny and Amy:

"Society," said Mrs. Merdle, with another curve of her little finger, "is so difficult to explain to young persons (indeed is so difficult to explain to most persons), that I am glad to hear that. I wish Society was not so arbitrary, I wish it was not so exacting -- ...But... we must take it as we find it. We know it is hollow and conventional and worldly and very shocking, but unless we are Savages in the Tropical seas (I should have been charmed to be one myself—most delightful life and perfect climate, I am told), we must consult it. It is the common lot. Mr. Merdle is a most extensive merchant, his transactions are on the vastest scale, his wealth and influence are very great, but even he--..." (Dickens, 121-122)

Mrs. Merdle not only courts Society, but holds court for it. Her husband is forced to bow to its dictates, as his wife apes them ceaselessly:

This great and fortunate man had provided that extensive bosom which required so much room to be unfeeling enough in, with a nest of crimson and gold some fifteen years before. It was not a bosom to repose upon, but it was a capital bosom to hang jewels upon. Mr. Merdle wanted something to hang jewels upon, and he bought it for the purpose... Like all his other speculations, it was sound and successful. The jewels showed to the richest advantage. The bosom moving in Society with the jewels displayed upon it, attracted general admiration. Society approving, Mr. Merdle was satisfied. He was the most disinterested of men, -- did everything for Society, and got as little for himself out of all his gain and care, as a man might. (Dickens, 125)

Society, by this account, might be described as what others think, and its influence controls the Merdles as much as the Shadow of the Marshalsea affects the Dorrits.

Bleeding Heart Yard – a place for impoverished blue-collar workers who deserve our empathy.

The Circumlocution Office – a government office that specializes in red tape. Legal papers, such as applications for consent and registration of patents, are merely moved around, rather than formalized and processed.

The Barnacles – a family name which symbolizes the nature of many government employees/jobs, which leech off of the taxpayers' efforts without contributing much of anything.

Furthermore,

- Mrs. Clennam is an embodiment of exacting law and wrathful judgment.
- Amy is an embodiment of Christian virtue (a Christ figure).
- Fanny is an embodiment of pretense and serves as a foil to Amy.
- The Barnacles (see above) represent the nature of bloated government.
- Rigaud, a kind of *deus ex machina*, depicts the justice and judgment of God, who tarries but never forgets according to Dickens.
- So too, the Fall of the House of Clennam affirms the consequences of vindictive bitterness, as does Mrs. Clennam's stroke and subsequent paralysis.

The juxtaposition of Books 1 and 2 allow Dickens to compare and contrast Poverty and Riches, life inside the Marshalsea and life outside in Society. The comparison is interesting, suggesting that poverty has more to do with mind and character than with financial circumstances. The freedom Amy experiences inside the Marshalsea contrasts greatly with the bondage and oppression she experiences in Society. Father Dorrit's mental health, too, declines in the atmosphere of Society. Dickens associates pretense to wealth and social status; he finds reality and substance in the poor.



# QUESTIONS ABOUT CONTEXT



## **Who is the author? Where did the author live? When did the author live? What did the author believe? (18-20)**

Charles John Huffam Dickens was born February 1812 in Hampshire, England, the oldest child of naval clerk John Dickens and his wife Elizabeth Barrow. His early childhood was marred by poverty. When Dickens was 12, his father landed in debtor's prison; Charles left school to support the family by working in a blacking factory. This shaping experience would find its way into several of his most famous works including *Little Dorrit*. Although a windfall inheritance bought John's freedom, the family's growing financial needs kept Charles out of the classroom and in the marketplace.

Eventually, he found work as a freelance reporter in the London courts. This began an illustrious career in letters for Charles. Over the course of his writing career, Dickens edited several journals, wrote 15 well-respected novels, 5 novellas, countless short stories, and numerous non-fiction articles. With his pen, he developed a reputation for humor, wit, and sensitivity, publishing his first book, a collection of stories and articles called *Sketches by Boz*, under the eponymous pseudonym. Historian R. H. Horne declared Dickens "manifestly the product of his age... a genuine emanation from its aggregate and entire spirit... a first-rate practical intellect, with 'no nonsense' about him" (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*). While he was not a philosopher or an intellectual, Dickens's sagacious observations about Victorian England and human nature won him many devoted readers. Nevertheless, his personal experiences colored his perception of Nineteenth Century culture, breeding a general distrust of landed wealth. This "Shadow of the Marshalsea" would remain upon Dickens all his life.

Victorian England was a stratified society; Dickens perceived its excesses and shortfalls, characterizing them satirically in novels such as *Oliver Twist*, *Little Dorrit*, *Great Expectations*, *Nicholas Nickleby*, and *Bleak House*. He found as much virtue in the poor as he found graft and corruption in the rich, and these observations found their way into social satires like *A Christmas Carol*, in which the notorious capitalist Scrooge learns from ghosts and angels to share his blessings with the unfortunate Bob Cratchit and his family. It can be argued that Dickens virtually created the modern concept of Christmas with this novella. While some critics have accused Dickens of creating shallow, one-dimensional caricatures, his critical reputation has endured. Biographer Philip Collins notes: "The centenary in 1970 of Dickens's death demonstrated a critical consensus about his standing second only to William Shakespeare in English literature which would have seemed incredible 40 or even 20 years earlier" (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*).

Working in the genre of realism and in the shadow of the Eighteenth Century picaresque novel, Dickens wove somewhat allegorical tales that targeted the social ills of



his time, lampooning ethical misconduct such as child abuse, unmerciful debt laws, and corporate graft, while showcasing true, Christian morality. Encyclopaedia Britannica lauds him as “the conscience of his age.” A professing Christian, he disliked pretentious religion, preferring instead the sincere faith of those like his character Amy Dorrit.

Dickens was no stranger to immorality, however. In 1858, he betrayed his wife of 22 years, Catherine Hogarth, who bore him ten children, leaving her to pursue the young actress Ellen Ternan, with whom he maintained an affectionate relationship until his death. His work with Ternan paved the way to a love of the theater, and Dickens began to stage readings of his stories for the public. This led to several international tours and great public acclaim. Likewise, it placed considerable strain on Charles, who collapsed on stage in 1869 while on tour. Although he recovered and remained outwardly cheerful, he spent his twilight years in sadness. American Romantic Ralph Waldo Emerson commented that he was a man whose spirit was too large for his frame, and American author Mark Twain, a notable peer, called him a “pioneer” in the oral and written arts. He finished his peerage beneath the stage lights, delivering his final speech on his Farewell Tour with these famous words: “From these garish lights I vanish now forevermore...” Dickens died in June of 1870 from a stroke; he was 58 years old. Modern actor and Dickens historian Simon Callow depicts him in his renowned bi-theatrical, *The Mystery of Charles Dickens*, as an intelligent, energetic, optimistic, but haunted man who craved love and admiration. He courted this in a distant but adoring public that reveres him to the present day.

# ESSAY QUESTIONS FOR WRITING ASSIGNMENTS



1. Who are readers to consider the story's protagonist? Does the story, in fact, have two protagonists? How does your answer to this question affect your reading of the text?
2. How do the circumstances of Amy's birth and her early home affect her personal development throughout the story?
3. How does Dickens's description of the House of Clennam influence readers' understanding of its occupants?
4. What distinctions does Dickens make between Fanny and Amy Dorrit? Indeed, how does young Amy differ from the rest of her family?
5. Dickens portrays few characters as being truly happy in this novel. What are the preconditions for happiness in *Little Dorrit*?
6. What is Arthur Clennam's ultimate object in *Little Dorrit*? What does this suggest regarding Dickens's thematic goals?
7. How does Dickens esteem the merit of chivalric love in *Little Dorrit*?
8. Who is the greatest antagonist in *Little Dorrit*, and in what way does he antagonize the main character? Is it Blandois, Gowan, Mr. Merdle, Mrs. Clennam, Flintwinch? How is this character's antagonism central to the story?
9. The story's action divides neatly into two sections, which Dickens himself terms poverty and riches. How do poverty and riches affect the happiness of the story's major characters? Do these contradictory states affect each of the characters in the same way?
10. How does Dickens treat self-love in *Little Dorrit*? According to his novel, what effect does self-love have upon the happiness of the narcissist and upon those who love him?
11. What motivates Fanny Dorrit and Father? What is their greatest good?
12. How does Dickens's description of Mrs. Clennam's behavior, especially when viewed in juxtaposition with Amy Dorrit, amplify Dickens's ideas of the Christian ideas of Law and Grace?
13. How does Dickens characterize true Christianity in *Little Dorrit*? Several of Dickens's characters profess Christianity in this story. How does Dickens characterize God in *Little Dorrit*?
14. How does Mrs. Clennam's understanding of Christianity affect her happiness? In comparison, how does Amy's understanding of Christianity affect her happiness?

15. Does Amy truly escape the “shadow of the walls” of the Marshalsea Prison? If yes, then how does she accomplish this? If no, then why not?
16. What climactic action in the narrative resolves Arthur’s conflict? What resolves Amy’s? How do these climactic moments interact within the structure of the plot? What thematic ideas do these resolutions suggest?

# STORY CHARTS



The following pages contain story charts of the type presented in the live seminar *Teaching the Classics*. As is made clear in that seminar, a separate story chart may be constructed for each of the conflicts present in a work of fiction. In particular, the reader's decision as to the **climax** and central **themes** of the plot structure will depend upon his understanding of the story's central **conflict**. As a result, though the details of setting, characters, exposition, and conclusion may be identical from analysis to analysis, significant variation may be found in those components which appear down the center of the story chart: Conflict, Climax, and Theme. This of course results from the fact that literary interpretation is the work of active minds, and differences of opinion are to be expected – even encouraged!

For the teacher's information, one story chart has been filled in on the next page. In addition, a blank chart is included to allow the teacher to examine different conflicts in the same format.

# Little Dorrit by Charles Dickens: Story Chart

## SETTING

Victorian England  
& Venice, Italy  
Bleeding Heart Yard,  
The Marshalsea Debtor's  
Prison,  
The House of Clennam,  
High Society  
The Dorrits' Poverty and  
Riches

*Rising Action:* Arthur encounters Amy Dorrit in her employ at his mother's home & suspects she might be at the heart of the mystery. He discovers her residence and penury & makes himself her patron. Engaging Pancks in the investigations, he uncovers a legacy that frees the Dorrits from their debts and elevates them to Society. Father Dorrit declines, shunning his poor friends for the lackluster company of pretentious strangers. Amy remains his faithful, but miserable companion. Arthur's own plans for love and happiness die with Pet's marriage. His poor judgment also leads to bad investments with Mr. Merdle, who swindles him, leaving him in debtor's prison, helpless to aid Amy when her father dies, or to deliver his mother from the blackmailer Rigaud.

*Exposition:* Arthur returns from a long absence to his family home, bearing his father's dying words to an obdurate mother: "Do Not Forget." He determines to uncover the family secret and discharge his father's wishes, making restitution for any wrongs the family might have done in the past. His mother refuses to cooperate.

*Climax:* Amy returns to find Arthur confined. She tends to him, confessing her love, but he refuses to avail himself of her financial help. Confronted by Rigaud, Mrs. Clennam rises from her wheelchair and staggers to the prison to wrest the incriminating letter from Amy. She confesses the truth of her spiteful theft and begs Amy's forgiveness. Amy extends grace and mercy. The two race to the House of Clennam, arriving just in time to witness its collapse. Rigaud is killed in the calamity. Mrs. Clennam suffers a stroke and remains paralyzed & mute.

*Dénouement:* Amy engages Doyce and Meagle to recover the incriminating documents from Mrs. Wade and deliver Arthur from prison. She confesses her own financial loss to Arthur and promises never to leave him. She asks him to burn Mrs. Clennam's will unseen. Amy will never tell him of his family's part in her family's sufferings. All is forgiven. She respects Mrs. Clennam's wishes to hide her identity from him until her death.

*Conclusion:* Free from the shadow of the Marshalsea, Arthur and Amy marry and live a quiet, industrious, happy life out of the light of Society.

## CHARACTERS

Arthur Clennam  
Amy Dorrit  
Mrs. Clennam  
Father Dorrit  
Frederick Dorrit  
Rigaud  
The Meagles  
Daniel Doyce  
Mrs. Wade  
Tattycoram  
Pet  
Flintwinch  
Avery  
Fanny  
Tip  
The Merdles  
Mrs. Governor

## THEME:

Law vs. Grace: Mercy triumphs over judgment.  
The negative effects of unforgiveness.  
Duty and Industry  
The negative effects of a stratified society

## PLOT

## CONFLICT

Will Arthur discover the family secret, discharge his filial duty, escape judgment and danger, and secure love and happiness for himself?

Obstacles:

Mrs. Clennam's vindictive secrecy (Man vs. Man)  
Mr. Merdle's Ponzi scheme (Man vs. Society)  
Father Dorrit's pretense (Man vs. Man)  
Rigaud's blackmail designs (Man vs. Man)  
Arthur's self-concept & poor judgment (Man vs. Self)

# *Little Dorrit* by Charles Dickens: Story Chart





