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Nobody's Tour around the Realms of Aging: A Study of Dickens's *Little Dorrit*

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Little Dorrit (1857) is sometimes called "Dickens's darkest novel," in which "imprisonment" is "a profound symbol of the universal condition of life" (Miller 156, 228). In relation to its darkness, another critic points out that " the brooding introspective quality of the novel that is so strongly focused in Arthur. . . comes from the crises in Dickens's own life, over his marriage, children, his work and the state of his country" (Lucas 250). This indication is more than penetrating, because, despite its title, the novel seems to concentrate more on Arthur Clennam, who is about the same age as Dickens himself. It is widely known, moreover, that the original title for this novel was *Nobody's Fault*, which refers to "the maladministration of the country" (Ackroyd 745), but the word "Nobody" recurs in the chapters on Arthur's unrequited love.

On the other hand, Kay Heath, who insightfully points out "Dickens's increasing preoccupation with aging," designates a positive view, especially with regard to the conclusion of the novel: "Clennam is transformed from a shrinking, self-deprecating case of age anxiety to a confident husband. . . . A combination of manly work and midlife crisis enable the middle-aged suitor to learn he can still find romantic and sexual consummation" (Heath 54).[1] The traditional plot of the

1 She finds the close connection between Dickens and the male protagonists in his novels such as *David Copperfield, Bleak House*, and *Little Dorrit*: "Dickens's novels written in the years just preceding her [Ellen Ternan's] advent into his life make plain that during that time he was haunted by the question of a midlife man's affective viability . . .When considered together, these novels reveal Dickens's increasing preoccupation with aging" (Heath 42).

alliance of the hero with the heroine, however, does not seem brilliant enough to extinguish the "shadow of the Marshalsea wall" (530). Angus Wilson considers that the ending "appears, for all its sincerity, too simple for the all-pervading grey evil of the world that the novel has described" (Wilson 201). It is true, in any case, that the choice of the central character foregrounds the question Arthur poses: ". . . what is to be expected of *me* in middle life? Will, purpose, hope? All those lights were extinguished" (59). Once we begin to concentrate on middle-aged Arthur, we cannot fail to notice various allusions and depictions about age, aging and elderly characters in a variety of communities in this novel. They all play crucial roles and lead us to recognize that aging has a definite significance in the world of *Little Dorrit*.

The purpose of this paper is to pay attention to and analyze Arthur Clennam's pilgrimage from the state of "Nobody" to Somebody, and to reconsider the nature of the tenacious shadow in *Little Dorrit* in terms of the motif of aging, especially when "T[t]he aged in Dickens, like their counterparts in Victorian society, are at once everywhere and overlooked" (Chase 48). First, we will focus on the household of Mrs. Clennam, which is a closed community of the aged as well as being one of the omnipresent prisons. And then, the issue of the Marshalsea and its relationship with the Dorrits, especially William Dorrit, will be discussed at some length, as it is the next place for Arthur to set his foot in. The last part will deal with the society the Dorrits stray into after their emancipation. Given the fact that "the aged were a Victorian media event" (Mangum 102), and that they were becoming "threats and burdens" (Fallis 37), we will be able to throw some new light on the novel by turning our eyes to this aspect.

I.

Little Dorrit begins with a scene of a prison in Marseilles and sets up the keynote of imprisonment in the following scenes, one of which is Mrs. Clennam's house, where she has lived "in prison and in bond" (89).[2] This house, besides being a small-scale prison, has a peculiar feature that should not be neglected: it is a community of three elderly people, Mrs. Clennam, Jeremiah Flintwinch and his wife Affery. Although there is no reference to their exact years, the Flintwinches are often mentioned as "the old man" and "the old woman" while Mrs. Clennam's "cold grey hair" and her being the mother of a forty-two-year-old man safely categorize her as an aged lady. In this community of the aged, a young seamstress Amy Dorrit, is regarded as "nothing" (80), and appears "so conscious of being out of place among the three hard elders" (93). This community seems to have its own hierarchical order, in which Mrs. Clennam sits at the top as the mistress and next comes Jeremiah, who has superiority over Affery as her husband. The youngest and non-resident Amy does not even seem to be included in the order. The apparent power balance in this closed society, however, begins to reveal its instability on Arthur's visit. The following part will centre round this closed community and clarify the nature of aging in this novel.

One of the conspicuous characteristics of the chief of the community is her association with religion. Covey points out that "There has been a long tradition of associating older people with key religious figures and with religious practices and teachings" (Covey 165), and Mrs.Clennam is just one of such figures. On the occasion of Arthur's visit after his long absence, he hears her "read certain passages aloud from a book—sternly, fiercely, wrathfully—praying that her enemies. . . might be put to the edge of the sword, consumed by fire, smitten by plagues and leprosy. . . and that they might be utterly exterminated" (75). Her ireful prayer suggests that she has

2 Citations from Dickens's novels will be referenced with page numbers only.

lived "always balancing her bargains with the Majesty of heaven. . . strictly keeping her set-off, and claiming her due" (89). Mrs. Clennam threatens her son by holding a commentary book on the Bible, mentioning "the Lord, who would have cursed their [pious people's] sons" and creating "a general impression that it was [is] in some sort a religious proceeding" (90).

The problem here is that her sort of "religious proceeding" is felt by her son to be merely "monstrous" (90): her belief does not bring about consolation or relief but rather reminds him, even before seeing his mother, of "a long train of miserable Sundays," and of the boyhood horror he felt about "going to Perdition" (69). The unchangeableness of her house serves to overlap the past with the present, producing the effect of her religious belief in her younger days having been intensified and consolidated all the while. Her role as a religious figure, then, is not the one endowed as a natural result of "the wisdom and understanding that come with old age" (Covey 165), but the one she has partaken of her own accord without any recognition by those around her. Her oldness, in this sense, is no positive quality—it rather presents the abhorrence and ugliness that old age can possess. Her widow's dress and "her mystical religion veiled in gloom and darkness with lightning of cursing, vengeance, and destruction, flashing through the sable clouds" (86) even renders her a figure of a witch to be ostracized rather than a sage to be venerated.[3] Her religion has made her an inadequate parent, who "do[es] not provide [the children with] the requisite guidance and support necessary to achieve healthy adulthood" (Heath 83), and her son, without proper religious or other instruction from the former generation, has to remain "Nobody" at midlife.

Some other negative images of aging Mrs. Clennam typically denote "the long held associations between old age and illness, disability, disengagement and decline" (Featherstone and Wernick 31). Her son, soon after arrival, notices "a change from your [her] old active habits": she has been shut up in her room as if the "world has

3 Covey mentions "the labeling of older women as witches" (Covey 73).

narrowed, "because of her "rheumatic affection, and what with its attendant debility or nervous weakness" (73).[4] She is still able to attend to her business duties, but she apparently needs the help of her servant Jeremiah Flintwinch as her business partner, which position she has, in vain, expected her son to accept. As Mrs. Clennam lives in a very restricted world, it falls to Jeremiah to "receive letters, and comers, and keep books, and correspond" besides going out "to other counting-houses. . . and on 'Change" (388). As might be supposed, her "old and faithful servant" (92) betrays her about a significant codicil of the late Mr. Clennam. This treachery on the part of her partner ironically gives her enough vigour, after twelve years' imprisonment, to get out of her room and "run wildly through the court-yard and out at the gateway" (854). Her desperate dash, however, does not promise her recovery from illness; it is somewhat like the last flash of a candle-light, and is gone when she comes back and witnesses her old house literally collapse and fall: ". . . she never from that hour moved so much as a finger again, or had the power to speak one word. . . . and she lived and died a statue" (862-3). Affery escapes the disaster, while her husband Jeremiah's body is never to be found among the ruins. The fall of the old house announces the end of the household of the three aged people, symbolizing the demise of an elderly-centered community.

While Mrs. Clennam suffers from sickness and disability as many aged people do, the other two in the household are free from any significant physical illness. It cannot be denied that the depiction of "bent and dried" Jeremiah, together with a reference to his "shuffling step," do suggest that some physical deterioration has been brought about by his age.[5] His physical defects, however, are not serious enough to make him a feeble and helpless elderly person. He is "as tough as an old

4 She is referred to as "the invalid" or "the sick woman" and resorts to her wheelchair for moving around even in her own room, "the little sick-room" (73-4, 221).

5 ". . . he had a one-sided, crab-like way with him, as if his foundations had yielded at about the same time as those of the house, and he ought to have been propped up in a similar way" (82).

yew-tree," so that Arthur later is worried that "S[s]uch a man, coming behind a much younger and more vigorous man, and having the will to put an end to him and no relenting, might do it pretty surely" (744). Despite his age, Jeremiah still maintains, or at least appears to maintain, the physical strength to compete with the younger.

Jeremiah's oldness foregrounds another intriguing issue concerning age: that is age and masculinity. While masculinity in the Victorian Era came to be measured by "physical ability at its youthful height," and "the older man increasingly was pushed to the margins" (Heath 30), it has been pointed out, that age for a male "was largely determined by his ability to work" (Mangum: 98-9). In Jeremiah's case, Arthur's return could cause the old man's loss of position,[6] but the alternation of generations does not take place here—Arthur, suspecting some past injustice caused by his mother upon the Dorrits, relinquishes the business. As a result of the rightful successor's refusal, Jeremiah is promoted to the vacancy and gains the position of Mrs. Clennam's partner. Moreover, when Mr. Blandois comes to Mrs. Clennam's, the elderly lady calls Jeremiah the "representative" of her House: "My sex disqualifies me. . . from taking a responsible part in the business, even if I had the ability" (403-4). Here, their positions are reversed due to their gender. Jeremiah is given superiority to his mistress in the business of this House because he is a male.

If the position in business is one significant aspect of aging and gender, another point concerning the aged and the "ability to maintain mastery" can be witnessed in his relationship with his wife (Heath 27). Jeremiah makes his wife Affery "shake from head to feet" in spite of his inferior frame: "Though a tall, hard-favoured, sinewy old woman. . . she collapsed before the little keen-eyed crab-like old man" (76).[7] He is characterized by his "natural acerbity and energy" (77), and Affery is totally afraid of her husband who, she believes, is so clever as to conquer even Mrs.

6 Mrs. Clennam has expected that her son "would infuse new youth and strength into it [her business]" (92).

7 This reminds us of Daniel Quilp, also a short old man, in *The Old Curiosity Shop*, who keeps frightening his gentle wife.

Clennam.

The physical strength, unwaning cleverness and ability concerning business, together with his mastery over his wife seem to emphasize Jeremiah's manliness, which is closely connected with youthfulness disproportionate to his actual old age. While an aged man endowed with these features could be accepted as a positive figure, he can also be "one recurring character type" that hints "older people who held on too tightly to property or to power were more unnerving than those who became burdens" (Mangum 101). Although he might be free from the "feminizing effects of old age" (Mangum 99), his cunningness and his mastery allow his treachery against Mrs. Clennam. Having "been rasped these forty years" by her "taking such high ground" with him, Jeremiah discloses all the truth and finally brings about the literal breakdown of their community (851).

The other old inhabitant Affery is also free from physical weakness, though she admits her own mental inferiority to the other two, calling them "two clever ones" (78).[8] Contrary to her mistress, whose elderliness makes her suffer bodily infirmity, Affery presents an instance of older people "viewed as foolish, senile" (Covey 61). Throughout the novel, there are chapters which centre around the strange dreams she has, and in addition to these dreams, she is often "frightened by a sudden noise"—the mysterious noise that makes her believe that the house is "haunted" (222). She suffers from these so much that she seems "never to emerge from her ghostly, dreamy, sleep-waking state" (388), and her state of mind has become "so expressed in all her looks and actions" that the other two hold her "in very low account" "as a person. . . becoming foolish" (389). Her superstitious belief in ghosts and her senility represent the mental infirmity of old age.

Towards the end of the novel, however, she plays an important role in the

8 The definition of old age in the Victorian period tells "a person must exhibit behavior betraying physical and mental failure" (Magnum 98).

destruction of this community. When the villainous Rigaud visits Mrs. Clennam's for the final transaction concerning the past secret, Affery virtually gets behind this gentlemanly blackmailer by venting what she has seen in her dreams, which turn out to have been reality, though her husband has tricked her into believing them to be just visions in sleep. The strange noises she keeps hearing, moreover, are the squeals of the old bending house and precursors of the fall of the building. She is not as senile or mentally deteriorated as she has appeared to be, but the old woman, just like her husband, functions as an agent for overturning the seemingly orderly world of the aged, shaking it from inside.[9]

Thus, the aged community of Mrs. Clennam's household represents the negative aspect of the elderly, to whom "E[e]xperience, instead of lending wisdom, compassion, gravitas, brings. . . cynicism, narrowness of mind and heart": they "become so self-concerned and so absorbed by the past that they are immune to the claims of moral principle and future possibility" (Small 62). It is the utmost irony that Little Dorrit, who is "nothing" in this circle, is the key person to the family secret. Moreover, Arthur himself accelerates the ruin of the house by refusing to take over the business and by cultivating an interest in the family secret. The closed society of three aged people is, as it were, deranged by the stimulus of the younger force from outside. At the same time, the hierarchical order based on rank and gender is disturbed also by the insurrection from inside. The collapse of this aged community finally reveals the frailty immanent in the community and presents a case of failure in succession not only of power but of wisdom and precept from the older generation to the younger. The failure is symbolically forwarded by the hidden fact, which is disclosed just before the breakdown, that Arthur is not Mrs. Clennam's biological son.

9 She has even had her own plans and designs, watching "the two clever ones" "to enforce resistance" to them and believing that Arthur "should be pitted against them" (96).

II.

In the former section, we traced how the elderly community of Mrs. Clennam is ruined both from outside and inside, illustrating the problems and difficulties concerning aging. Now we will expatiate on another closed society and its inhabitants—the Marshalsea and the Dorrits—to pursue the issue. The Marshalsea Prison, the chief symbol in *Little Dorrit*, not only represents physical and mental prisons of various dimensions, but plays a significant role in relation to the so-called "Golden Age fantasy":

> The belief in a past when the old were revered led to two common assumptions that have survived into the present. First, it was assumed that at some earlier time in history older people were venerated for their wisdom; and, second, it was believed that in this imagined past the elderly were lovingly cared for by families. (Magnum 100)

The Dorrit family is a parody of these assumptions. No other family is more suitable than the Dorrits for discussing the theme of "the Golden Age fantasy," because it stands on its own "family fiction" (280) and on an"old fiction of the family gentility" (257).

The uniqueness of the debtors' prison, that the prisoners can bring their families to live together with them, first of all, brings the second assumption in the "Golden Age fantasy" into question. Though William Dorrit "was so perfectly clear. . . that he was going out again directly" (98), he decides to call his family to keep him company. Their stay in the prison, however, does not end in a few weeks, but William finds "the lock and key that kept him in, kept numbers of his troubles out" (103). His wife gives birth to their third child Amy, or the Child of the Marshalsea, who grows up to be twenty-two in her peculiar "Home" (109).

Although Amy is the youngest child of the family, she takes, after her mother's death, "the place of eldest of the three" and virtually functions as "the head of

the fallen family" (111-2). In her relationship with her father, the "protection. . . expressed towards him" becomes "embodied in action" (111). Arthur Clennam, on his first visit, observes the most illustrative scene of father and daughter at the supper table: Amy sits beside her father, putting "all the little matters of the table ready to his hand," but taking nothing herself, "all devoted and loving" (122).[10] This scene seems to present a typical picture of an aged parent well attended and taken good care of by his affectionate daughter. On the contrary, it is a kind of illusion, based on the aforesaid "family fiction." The father closes his eyes to the fact of "his daughter's earning their bread," while most of the food he eats is what Amy brings back from Mrs. Clennam's house without eating it herself (114). The "family law," moreover, asserts that Amy is "a plain domestic little creature, without the great and sage experience of the rest" (279-80).[11] Thus, the Father of the Marshalsea is allowed to enjoy his position and title, appearing as a happy old figure, supported by his children, although only one actually supports him while the other two merely cooperate to maintain the "family fiction."

Incidentally, the idea of a family taking care of the elderly is also seen in the household of Mr. Casby and Mr. Plornish. Old Christopher Casby lives with his daughter Flora in an old house filled with "staid repose" (186), and the family includes another elderly lady, "Mr F.'s Aunt," whom Flora introduces "rather triumphantly" before a "neatly-served and well-cooked dinner" (199). Mrs Plornish, who is "proud of her father's talents," asks Old Nandy to sing after the meal (414). These two families, however, are not without their problems. On the one hand, Mr F.'s Aunt shows "extreme severity and grim taciturnity; sometimes interrupted by a propensity to offer remarks," which are "traceable to no association of ideas," and

10 Amy's presiding at the supper table reminds the reader of the depictions in *The Old Curiosity Shop* of Nell's busying herself "in preparing supper" for her grandfather (6).

11 Though it is actually Amy who saves her sister from life in prison, Amy's brother fails in all his jobs and comes back to the Marshalsea as another prisoner, but this fact is kept secret from their father.

these produce "a depressing effect" at the table (199, 320). On the other hand, it is not every day that Old Nandy dines with his family, as he is now in the Workhouse due to his son-in-law's difficulty. The family, so to speak, live on their family fiction that "Father will soon be home. . . for good" (415).[12] The daughter's pride cannot prevent the Marshalsea dweller from lamenting over the "humiliation" of Amy's walking "with a Pauper" (418,419). Although Karen Chase mentions Old Nandy to exemplify "the Dickensian ideal of a green old age," "a stubborn and surprising resilience" in the elderly (36,41), he, together with other old characters, reveals the cruel and harsh realities surrounding the aged in those times.

As for reverence towards the aged, there does exist a kind of patriarchal quality in the closed world of the Marshalsea. William Dorrit, though he first appears as a middle-aged gentleman, outlives the turnkey and becomes the oldest inhabitant. The turnkey has often proudly mentioned William "in laudatory terms," which has helped to establish the tradition that "the shabby old debtor" is "the Father of the Marshalsea" (104,105). William himself is so proud of the title that he makes it a rule to welcome the new-comers "with a kind of bowed-down beneficence" (105), and, from those leaving the place, to receive some coins, understanding them as "tributes, from admirers, to a public character" (106).[13] Moreover, on the occasion of Arthur Clennam's visit, William suggestively mentions that "it does sometimes occur that people who come here desire to offer some little—Testimonial" (123). It is clear that the Father of the Marshalsea, despite his legend, is paid tributes, not out of admiration for his wisdom but because he demands them. The old prisoner cuts a figure more of "avarice" than of "wisdom," both of which characteristics are often connected with the elderly, and his legendary aura is drowned by his mere greed

12 Although he hopes to "resume that domestic position" in the house named Happy Cottage, he is "resolved to remain one of these little old men" in the Workhouse (414).

13 On receiving the money, however, he would walk around the yard "lest the transaction should be too conspicuous to the general body of collegians" (107).

(Covey 51, 61).

The fictitiousness in a patriarchal community is repeated in Christopher Casby, who lives in a house characterized by its oldness and unchangeableness. Arthur, visiting the house to gain some information about Little Dorrit, feels it "little changed" (186). The master of the house is also free from alteration: "recognizable at a glance—as unchanged in twenty years" (186). His appearance and demeanour even inspire "V[v]arious old ladies in the neighbourhood" to speak of him as "The Last of the Patriarchs" (187). The old man apparently assumes the role of a sage, often associated with the elderly:

> What with his blooming face, and that head, and his blue eyes, he seemed to be delivering sentiments of rare wisdom and virtue. . . . Nobody could have said where the wisdom was, or where the virtue was, or where the benignity was; but they all seemed to be somewhere about him. (188)

The repeated use of the word "seemed," however, suggests some deep-rooted dubiousness about the positive quality of this aged character. Arthur used to feel "certain audacious doubts respecting the last of the Patriarchs" (190), and his "sensorium" turns out to have been accurate: the disreputable nature of The Last of the Patriarchs is exposed, following the chapter that describes the collapse of Mrs. Clennam's house. As in the case of Mrs. Clennam, Mr. Casby's employee Mr. Pancks, a rent collector, who "is paid to squeeze," finally becomes impatient and rebels against him (866). Mr. Pancks reveals, without reserve, that the Patriarch has been "a screwer by deputy, a wringer, and squeezer, and shaver by substitute" (869). Now "The last of the Patriarchs" is like a "phantom," "not in the least impressive, not in the least venerable" (872)—he is just another old man, typically characterized by his "avarice."

Thus, just as the episode of the "Last of the Patriarchs" emphasizes the wide gap between surface and reality, the patriarchal community of the Marshalsea, in which the oldest inhabitant Mr. Dorrit appears to be venerated both by his family and

the inmates, apparently representing the idea of the "Golden Age," is actually based on the "family fiction" of the Dorrits, and is, therefore, insubstantial. The depictions of the community in the debtors' prison and its fictitiousness reveal the grim contrary truth and accentuate the negative features of the elderly.

III.

The time comes, after many years' imprisonment, for William Dorrit to be freed from the Marshalsea, where people hold "a personal and traditional regard for a Collegian of so many years' standing" (475), and he is initiated into another world. While the Marshalsea world, however much it depends on the "family fiction," stands for the "Golden Age fantasy" in which the elderly are revered and cherished in the community, the outside world, chiefly treated in the second part of the novel, is a new one for the Dorrits with totally different values and structures. The following section will discuss the aged Mr. Dorrit in this new community.

First of all, the difference between the two communities is significantly indicated in the elder sister's blaming Amy for "rushing about with tumblers of cold water, like a menial" (506), or William's prohibiting his daughter from "fulfilling the functions of . . . a valet," which makes his daughter feel "a space between herself and her father, where others occupied themselves in taking care of him" (516). Their "gentility fiction" has ended, and they must face the real world as members of a truly rich family. In addition, Frederick Dorrit, a brother of Willam, shows some change in his relation with his niece, Amy, in the new world. He used to praise her in "a certain tone of custom" (134), but after the emancipation, "his manner to his younger niece" becomes "refined more and more into a marked respect, very rarely shown by age to youth" (509-10). It is as if he also is now free from the "family fiction," in which it is the family law "N[n]ot to make too much of them [Amy's services]" (280).

We witness both of these assumptions in the "Golden Age fantasy," that the elderly are taken care of by their affectionate families, and are revered for their age, made ineffectual in the society outside the Marshalsea.

The values of the outside world with which the Dorrits have to confront remind us of another closed world: the Circumlocution Office. Besides being one of the objects of Dickens's severe attacks on the flaws in institutions, the Office represents a society in which not age or experience but family name counts. Different from the case of the old-fashioned Tellson's Bank, the Circumlocution Office is always administered by members of the Barnacle family, whether young or old.[14] The one who meets Arthur Clennam at the Office is Barnacle Junior, a man with "a youthful aspect, and the fluffiest little whisker" (149). Even this callow "young bird" can occupy a significant position in the Office just because he is Mr. Tite Barnacle's son. There is even another young Barnacle, described as the "airy young Barnacle," who is "likely to become a statesman, and to make a figure" (157,158).

The great change in their circumstances has various effects on each member of the Dorrit family. Although the youngest Amy keeps feeling that all she sees in the outside world is "not real" (516), she exerts herself to accept its novelty. Others seem to show more adaptability to their new environment: Amy's uncle Frederick is now "rescued from that shadow of old" (509); Amy's brother Edward is "already prepared for the highest associates" (533); sister Fanny "has adapted herself" to the "new fortunes with wonderful ease" (522), and has "become the victim of an insatiate mania for . . . 'going into society'" (533). William Dorrit, too, tries to adapt to the new community, hiding and suppressing his past life. In order for his daughters to have smooth launch into society, he employs Mrs. General, who is "well-bred, accomplished, well connected, well accustomed to good society"

14 At Tellson's in *A Tale of Two Cities*, "the oldest of men carried [carry] on the business gravely" and a young employee is hidden "somewhere till he was old" (62-3).

(501). Mr Dorrit participates "in his elder daughter's society mania" (565), shows interest in association with the people of a higher society, and eagerly seeks to be introduced to the famous Mr. Merdle, who is reputed to be a great person of immense riches.

Significantly enough, Amy senses that their new society "greatly resembled a superior sort of Marshalsea" (565): it is another world based on a different kind of fiction, as represented by Mrs. General who "varnished the surface of every object that came under consideration" (503). Now that the Dorrits have chosen this lady as "the driver and guard. . . through the social mazes," they are destined to be involved in fiction on a much larger scale than their own "family fiction" (500). In this society, however, being aged does not necessarily rouse a sense of veneration in the younger generation. On the contrary, Fanny Dorrit clearly shows disgust and scorn about old age in relation to her future mother-in-law Mrs. Merdle. She tells her sister that, when she gets married, she will "talk of her [Mrs. Merdle] as an old woman" and "make her seem older" by being "so much younger" herself (650). Fanny's words exemplify the double notion of aging as "decline vs. progress" (Gullette 14), and indicate that Mr. Dorrit would find it difficult to hold the same position here as he did in the Marshalsea just because he was the oldest member.

Another intriguing aspect of life outside the Marshalsea is the romance between Mr. Dorrit and Mrs. General. It cannot be neglected, as love romance is one of the recurring motifs in this novel, and, before the final alliance between the protagonists Arthur Clennam and Amy Dorrit is attained, various kinds of love, courtship and marriage are depicted.[15] Among these love romances, Mr. Dorrit's case is noteworthy

15 They include Arthur's past love for Flora and his disillusion, Arthur's love for Minnie and his retreat, John Chivery's unrequited love for "the queen of his soul" (255), and Fanny Dorrit's trifling with "the faithfullest and most submissive" Edmund Sparkler (651).

in that it is love between elderly people.[16] It is first mentioned by Fanny, who acutely points out that Mr. Dorrit "considers her such a paragon of accomplishment, and such an acquisition to our family, that he is ready to get himself into a state of perfect infatuation with her" (558). Her observation soon turns out to be correct—in the chapter entitled "A Castle in the Air" (Ch. 18), he goes to the "most famous jeweller's" and purchases for the lady "the love-gift" and "the nuptial offering" (696). His "matchless castle," however, cannot supersede his age (697). He begins to have "a changed and worn appearance" in Amy's eyes, while his brother Frederick seems to her to "have been growing younger for weeks past" (699,701). He refuses to admit himself "not looking well," but he repeatedly falls "into a heavy doze, of not a minute's duration" (701), which ruins the best chance of his courting Mrs. General. His health increasingly and rapidly deteriorates, and the final disaster happens at Mrs. Merdle's dinner: he starts to talk about his days at the Marshalsea, which he has tried to hide so carefully, and back in his home, falls "away into a weakness so extreme that he could[can] not raise his hand" (710). Soon his family finds he has "not the faintest knowledge of her[Mrs. General]" (710). His weakness and senility have deprived him of the power not only to adapt himself to the new circumstances but also to keep building his "castle," and finally crush the dream of rejuvenation.

There is no apparent evidence that his mental and physical disorders are caused by old age, but the depiction of his appearance is suggestive enough: "He then presented[s] himself in a refulgent condition as to his attire, but looking indefinably shrunken and old" (707). It is not the first time that his age is overtly mentioned—when Arthur announces to Mr. Dorrit that he is soon to be liberated from the Marshalsea, he seems "to change into a very old haggard man" (468). He is, of course, already elderly, but the extrication from the prison is, as it were, a cue to

16 Although romantic love, of course, is not the exceptional privilege of the young, its association with youth cannot be denied, as shown by Arthur's denying the possibility of Amy's love for him by speaking "of himself as one who was turning old" (798).

accelerate his aging by his contact with stressful new circumstances. In addition, the fact that Mr. Dorrit keeps shifting his senility onto his brother Frederick gives us a further suggestion. In his Marshalsea days, we have already seen William Dorrit walking up and down "affably accommodating his step to the shuffle of his brother. . . breathing toleration of his infirmities"; "Frederick the free" is "so humbled, bowed, withered, and faded" while "William the bond" is "so courtly, condescending, and benevolently conscious of a position" (265,266). William's condescension and care towards his brother continues during the period of his swift degeneration. Although it is Mr. Dorrit himself who is dozing off, he says "with an astonishing superiority to his brother's failing powers" that it is painful to see Frederick "so weak" (701). He even complains "H[h]e is less. . . coherent, and his conversation is more. . . broken" (702). William repeats his grief over "failing Frederick" in front of Mrs. General: "Unhappily, declining fast. . . A wreck. A ruin. Mouldering away before our eyes" (702,705).[17] William has been witnessed to remark on the "infirmities and failings" not only of Frederick but of Old Nandy, who is "two or three years younger than himself" but of whom he always speaks "as an object of great antiquity" (423,424). These are typical instances of the tendency "T[t]o persist in the view of ourselves as 'not yet really old'" (Small 14). Despite his struggle to turn his back on and deny his own old age, Mr. Dorrit is finally defeated by it and passes away, and so does his lamenting brother Frederick, as if to pursue him.

As we have seen, the closed community the Dorrits come in contact with outside the Marshalsea is one in which not the aged, but the rich like Mr. Merdle or people from a "good" family, such as the Barnacles, are venerated. Mr. Dorrit, in this new society with its own fiction, makes every effort to adapt himself to the

17 This attitude of the aged man reminds us of the two old men in *The Old Curiosity Shop* trying to persuade themselves that a lady who has just passed away is "F[f]ive years older at the very least" than themselves, while, actually, one of them is exactly her age; when these two aged men part from each other, they go "each persuaded that the other had less life in him than himself" (404,405).

different standards, but his failure seems to prove a lack of "resilience" which might have saved him. His inability to survive outside the Marshalsea points to the reality that the elderly in the Victorian Era had to suffer: "It is only in a static or repetitive society that age becomes a valuable qualification. . . . In the world of change, the aged fall behind. They cannot but become obsolete or be null and void" (Beauvoir 452; my translation via Japanese).

As has been discussed so far, a middle-aged protagonist Arthur, who, at first, believes that the lights of "hope, purpose, will" have been extinguished, becomes attached to a variety of communities in his struggle to "Light 'em up again" (59). Throughout his travels to escape from being "Nobody," he becomes entangled in various communities or circles, each of which manifests some negative aspects of aging. In his mother's house, the exclusive and apparently organized circle of the aged turns out to be filled with treachery and avarice when it is stimulated and shaken from the outside by the younger force, and it collapses both literally and figuratively. The extinction of the house signifies Arthur's release from mother's control and childhood memory, which is one of the necessary processes for him to become "Somebody." The closed community of the Marshalsea brings forth the theme of fictionality and disillusion with the "Golden Age" ideal of reverence for the aged. Finally, the society of the rich and well-born, which is also based on "varnish[ing]," helps to reveal the lack of flexibility and adaptability of the aged, which is symbolically represented in Mrs. Clennam's "immovable face, as stiff as the folds of her stony head-dress" (74).

At the end of his pilgrimage, the middle-aged protagonist chooses Little Dorrit as his life partner, which might well suggest their happy future. A passage in the last paragraph, however, prohibits us from habouring an optimistic view: "[They] W[w]ent down to give a mother's care. . . to Fanny's neglected children no less than

to their own" (895). This reminds us again that *Little Dorrit*, as other novels by Dickens, is deeply related to the theme of inadequate parents mentioned in the first section of this paper.[18] When Margaret Gullette points out that some modern novels regard "the middle of the life course as a period of perilous parenting" and that "the kids. . . figure as signs of the burdensome responsibility of adulthood, a common fate," the marriage of the couple both raised by inadequate parents cannot but throw a dark shadow on the happy occasion (Gullette 66).

In addition, middle-aged Arthur soon has to face his own aging, which is another "common fate," now that he has become "Somebody." Arthur's tour to find a way out of being "Nobody," has exhibited the scenes and people that deny the "images of positive aging" (Featherstone and Wernick 29). While the elderly in other Dickensian novels represent affirmative notions attached to old age,[19] the characters closest to the idea of "positive aging" may be Mr. and Mrs. Meagles here.[20] Despite their "comely and healthy" features, their most striking characteristic is their devotion towards their daughter, who has lost her twin sister (54). The fact that even the Meagles are another example of inadequate parenthood provokes, beyond "perilous parenting," the associations of fearful aging present throughout the novel. "Dickens's darkest novel" involuntarily reveals that the author's interest at his midlife is fettered by the "common fate" of aging, and the undercurrent of gerontophobia is one crucial aspect of the shadow that overhangs *Little Dorrit*.

18 In the first place, Arthur's extinguished lights, mentioned above, were caused by his parents' strict way of raising him; Amy and her father present a case of a reversed parent-child relationship; Mrs. Gowan decides her son's marriage by "political considerations" (439); and now Fanny also joins the group of deficient parents.

19 Mr. Brownlow in *Oliver Twist* and the old schoolmaster in *The Old Curiosity Shop* are such examples.

20 Although it may not be appropriate to call them "aged" when their daughter Pet is still about twenty, Mr. Meagles says he married late and Mrs. Meagles is described as having lived "five-and-fifty years or more" (54), which allows us to categorize her as "aged," as there was a "belief that menopause signaled the onset of old age" (Mangum 99).

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