Literature and Religion in Mid-Victorian England

From Dickens to Eliot

Carolyn W. de la L. Oulton
Literature and Religion in Mid-Victorian England
Also by Carolyn Oulton – poetry:

THE RAIN
LEFT PAST THE MOON
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From Dickens to Eliot

Carolyn W. de la L. Oulton
To Paul
for always getting it right.

Also to my mother,
whose influence is so much for good
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And all is well, tho’ faith and form
Be sunder’d in the night of fear;
Well roars the storm to those that hear
A deeper voice across the storm

Tennyson, *In Memoriam* CXXXVII
Evangelicalism has never been easy to argue against. In the nineteenth century, its opponents were traditionally those of liberal belief who found its harsher tenets unacceptable, or those who rejected traditional religion in favour of materialism. Famous Victorians who grew up in evangelical belief, only to lose their faith altogether, include Carlyle, George Eliot and T. H. Huxley. Then as now, evangelicals placed considerable emphasis on an in-depth study of the Bible. Able to sustain their arguments by reference to the highest authority, they assumed an immediate advantage over the ‘fuzziness’ of many Broad Church apologists.

But there were liberal Christians who took up the questions posed by evangelicalism, and answered them on their own theological ground. Among these predictably were churchmen and theologians, but there were also writers who engaged imaginatively with what they saw as the flaws in evangelical thought. I am concerned in particular with two liberal Christians, Dickens and Wilkie Collins, who tackled the evangelical ethos throughout their work and found a convincing resolution in Broad Church belief.

Dickens and Collins met for the first time in 1851, approximately eight years before the publication of Darwin’s *Origin of Species*, and remained friends until Dickens’s death in 1870. Collins made regular contributions to Dickens’s periodical *Household Words* throughout the 1850s, joining the staff in 1856. He also collaborated with him in the writing of various stories, including *No Thoroughfare*, in addition to *The Lazy Tour of Two Idle Apprentices*. In 1860, Collins’s brother Charles married Dickens’s younger daughter Kate. It was during this period of what has come to be seen as a general ‘crisis of faith’ that Dickens and Collins became close friends, travelling and working together as Dickens’s relationship with his wife itself reached crisis point. Indeed
Collins appears to have been the only one of Dickens’s friends who was able to avoid taking sides on the issue of his separation from his wife in 1858, remaining on good terms with both. But writing ventures and family ties did not provide the only common ground. A liberal Christian faith, vehemently opposed to sectarianism of all kinds, informed the thinking of both.

A close reading of their work shows that both writers were more profoundly religious than is often realised and that they responded to topical religious debates in their writing. Specifically I am concerned to assess the impact of evangelicalism on Dickens and Collins in the 1850s and 1860s, and to show that their response was more complex than past criticism has allowed. The influence of evangelicalism can be shown to be pervasive and diverse, and furthermore I will argue that in Collins’s case this influence was largely positive. Collins can be seen to have derived a positive emphasis on the individual soul from his evangelical upbringing; meanwhile Dickens’s Broad Church belief will be shown to be less liberal than is generally assumed. An examination of Collins’s religious position reveals that he handles questions of doctrine with greater confidence than is shown by Dickens. Though Dickens is commonly represented as ultra-liberal in his religious beliefs, a comparison with Collins clearly highlights the severity of his views on Judgement, and the difficulty with which he liberalised this concept in his novels. In this context his writing shows him to have been greatly influenced by evangelical thought, even as he satirised it in his writing.

Despite these influences Dickens and Collins both felt a deep aversion towards evangelical doctrine, which they present as being inconsistent with sympathetic feeling based on the teachings of the New Testament. But they reacted to this phenomenon in different ways. Dickens made a painstaking effort to replace vicarious with personal Atonement, before finally accepting the sacrament of Baptism as a symbol of inner regeneration. The struggle to accommodate the fear of Judgement to a liberal religious outlook informs every one of Dickens’s novels from David Copperfield onwards. This theme often centres on the issue of a character’s active repentance, making amends on his own account, before the doctrine is finally displaced by the sacrament of Baptism in the last completed novel, Our Mutual Friend. At no point does Collins insist with the same intensity on a relationship between active ministry and Redemption; repentance in his novels is often demonstrated by a specific personal sacrifice, which itself leads to sanctification.
The 1850s–60s was of course a period of great religious controversy in England. The religious census of 1851 highlighted the national lack of church attendance; F. D. Maurice was dismissed from his post at King’s College in 1853 for expressing doubts about the orthodox view of Hell; Darwin’s *Origin of Species* was published in 1859; then followed the controversial *Essays and Reviews*, published in 1860. Bishop Colenso’s *Pentateuch*, disproving the myth of the Great Flood by geological methods, was published in 1863. Despite the conservative backlash, by 1865 treatises impugning the divine nature of Christ were being widely read.

As early as 1834 the philosopher Thomas Carlyle was propounding a demystified version of Christianity. Though the ethic of sedulous application and spiritual earnestness that he advocates is suggestive of his Calvinist upbringing, his own beliefs are not easy to pinpoint. His stylistic technique of treating the physical as a metaphor for the spiritual, imbibed from his reading of German literature, has been described as furnishing:

> a way to regain and maintain his deepest convictions while allowing him to attack the Church and the religious thought of his time. It gave him the status of priest and prophet while it provided him with a justification for his departure from conventions.

But it is often unclear from his writing precisely what his beliefs are when divested of the language of metaphor. In *Sartor Resartus*, published in 1834, he argued that religion is necessarily organic; that it must adapt itself to different times in order to grow, and ultimately to survive. Insisting that ‘Thought without Reverence is barren, perhaps poisonous’, he yet reduces the presence of God in the world to a moral order. Religion becomes the means by which we can know God, and God himself has been discreetly disposed of by the end of the book, the premise being that religion is composed of various symbols, and that the symbols appropriate to one generation (including Christ himself) are not always helpful to the next. So: ‘Whatsoever sensibly exists, whatsoever represents Spirit to Spirit, is properly a Clothing, a suit of Raiment, put on for a season, and to be laid off.’ Carlyle never fully explains what, if anything, he perceives as lying behind the clothing or symbol, but he remains notably anxious to preserve the ethics of Christianity, through this reverence for a nebulous moral order. To this end he is willing to countenance what he sees as a deception, the preaching of certain tenets as having proceeded from God:
in several provinces, as in Education, Polity, Religion, where so much is wanted and indispensable, and so little can as yet be furnished, probably Imposture is of sanative, anodyne nature, and man’s Gullibility not his worst blessing.  

From the 1840s onwards orthodox anxiety came to focus not only on the Broad Church but particularly on critics who expressed doubt on moral, historical or scientific grounds. Higher Criticism was making its presence felt in English intellectual circles at this time and this led to concerns about the divine inspiration of the authors of the Bible. At about this time scientific advance was subverting the traditional explanation of the six-day creation. Not all those who absorbed a scientific view of the world were led to reject the Christian religion, but some felt unable to reconcile their intellectual knowledge with the doctrines upheld by the Church. To Thomas Huxley, for one, there seemed to be an inconsistency in retaining some miraculous doctrines and not others. In 1897 he commented, looking back over the previous thirty years:

> School-children may be told that the world was by no means made in six days, and that implicit belief in the story of Noah’s Ark is permissible only, as a matter of business, to their toy-makers; but they are to hold for the certaintest of truths, to be doubted only at peril of their salvation, that their Galilean fellow-child Jesus, nineteen centuries ago, had no human father.

But the questioning of religious orthodoxy at this time involved a moral as well as an intellectual challenge. The strict morality of evangelical households produced a generation of thinkers who felt that the form of religion in which they had been brought up was in itself immoral. Huxley had himself been born into an evangelical family and justified his rational approach to religion in 1889 with the argument:

> I verily believe that the great good which has been effected in the world by Christianity has been largely counteracted by the pestilent doctrine on which all the Churches have insisted, that honest disbelief in their more astonishing creeds is a moral offence, indeed a sin of the deepest dye, deserving and involving the same future retribution as murder and robbery.

Another thinker to reject an early evangelical belief on moral and intellectual grounds was George Eliot, whose famous translation of Strauss’s
Life of Jesus in 1847 gave popular hearing to the theory that Jesus was not divine. Notwithstanding her controversial humanist status, Eliot herself felt a great respect for all forms of sincere religious belief, including Evangelicalism. Writing to a friend in 1859, she complained:

I can’t tell you how much melancholy it causes me that people are, for the most part, so incapable of comprehending the state of mind which cares for that which is essentially human in all forms of belief, and desires to exhibit it under all forms with loving truthfulness. Free-thinkers are scarcely wider than the orthodox in this matter ...  

But in common with Dickens she herself displays an invidious attitude towards uneducated Dissenters. In a revealing letter to her friend Sara Hennell in 1870, her continuing respect for Calvinism is counterpoised by her disgust for unsophisticated preaching. The famous preacher Charles Haddon Spurgeon deliberately tailored his discourse to the capacity of a largely working-class audience. Eliot was not impressed, fulminating:

And the doctrine! It was a libel on Calvinism, that it should be presented in such a form. ... We had plenty of anecdotes, but they were all poor and pointless – Tract Society anecdotes of the feeblest kind. ... with all Europe stirred by events that make every conscience tremble after some great principle as a consolation and guide, it was too exasperating to sit and listen to doctrine that seemed to look no further than the retail Christian’s tea and muffins. 

Influenced by the Positivism of Auguste Comte and by the ongoing Higher Criticism, Eliot had lost her own faith in the 1840s but retained a strong sense of the value of religious motivation. Her novels of the 1850s and 60s attempt to establish some means of incorporating a Christian ethos into a rationalist view of the world. In her first work of fiction, Scenes of Clerical Life, she argued that:

No man can begin to mould himself on a faith or an idea without rising to a higher order of experience ... 

The struggle for some idea that would encompass the imperatives of duty and responsiveness to individual suffering is present in Eliot’s writing from the beginning. Her rendering of evangelical belief is
subtle and convincing, while her citation of appropriate doctrine is scrupulous almost to the point of pedantry. The problem starts in her attempt to replace the evangelical code with a tenable alternative.

This is certainly not achievable through a reductive dependence on Science, which proves to be no less fallible than religious interpretation. In Middlemarch, the idealistic Lydgate begins by adapting a traditional ‘watchmaker’ view of the world, but taking science as the medium through which an interconnected whole can be understood. But in the course of the novel a parallel is built up between the medical and clerical professions, in which each is damaged by internecine disputes and patterns of compromise and retrogression. The clergy is represented by the obsolete theories of Casaubon, and at the other extreme, the lax Cadwallader who shows more interest in fishing than in his pastoral responsibility. There is no more satisfactory organisation within the medical profession. Lydgate himself is hampered both by popular suspicion of innovation and by personal animosity generated by his social status and his connection with Bulstrode. Lydgate’s experience is radical in undermining scientific knowledge as a means of explaining and ordering the world; in the same novel Dorothea seeks knowledge as the only aspiration left in a world without miracles.

From faith in orthodox religion, or a personal system such as Lydgate’s view of a perfectly ordered body, Eliot’s redeemable characters typically move to a pragmatic belief in the sufficiency of human relationships. However the humanist philosophy they acquire is not clearly defined and often serves to obfuscate the very questions it purports to resolve. Scenes of Clerical Life emphasise the necessity of religious commitment without privileging any one form of belief; Silas Marner makes no attempt to reconcile Silas’s early faith with his acceptance into the community of Raveloe, as the novel works towards Eppie’s christening and marriage in the village church, as symbols of social rather than religious belonging.

In Middlemarch Dorothea Brooke asserts the value of whatever form of Christianity offers ‘the greatest blessing’ but this is hardly a satisfactory explanation – her pronouncements throughout the novel seem shadowy and confused as compared with the close analysis of Bulstrode’s Evangelicalism. While her initial desire to repress in herself anything from which she derives too much enjoyment is reminiscent of evangelical strictness, Dorothea herself believes that a sense of the miraculous is no longer attainable in the nineteenth century. Her view of miracles as belonging to an earlier phase of religion, and her questioning of Casaubon as to the common root of all ‘mythologies’, is sug-
gestive of Carlyle’s *Sartor Resartus*. The novel is set just before the first Reform Bill, but as Barry Qualls has pointed out with reference to Eliot’s fiction generally: ‘The voice which places and focuses our attention always speaks out of an intense awareness of Sartor and of Darwin …’\(^{11}\) Even Casaubon’s ‘scholarly reservations’ on the issue of revealed religion receive little sympathy from the intellectual Will – with tendentious anachronism, Eliot suggests that these doubts have already been worked out in depth by the German Higher Criticism, and so radically suggests that a clergyman’s religious doubt is already obsolete!\(^{12}\) Eliot’s view of religion as a helpful medium for human duty and responsiveness works to diminish the importance of any precise belief system and so precludes any consistent line of thought on Dorothea’s part either. The only resolution the novel provides is a somewhat reductive suggestion of the value of work (which here replaces religious belief rather than conveying an inner conviction as in Dickens). This ambiguity lies at the very heart of Eliot’s writing and is perhaps inevitable, given the value she attaches to a form of belief that she is ultimately unable to endorse. It is significant that evangelical belief, however sympathetically treated, is set in a historical context and therefore lacks the immediacy that makes it so threatening for Dickens and Collins.

Given Eliot’s rejection of the supernatural elements of Christian belief, eternal life cannot be presented as a means of justifying present suffering, and this renders the status of human life potentially problematic. Some comfort is found in the Positivist idea of Subjective Immortality, in which good action will be diffusive in its effects and individual life can therefore retain meaning through being held in the memory of those who remain. In ‘Janet’s Repentance’, Tryan tells Janet that he himself has been redeemed by the memory of his dead friend’s example, and when he himself dies it is with confidence that she will adhere to his teaching. While Tryan himself believes in a future meeting in Heaven, the significance for Eliot is in the immediate effect that his faith has on those who survive him. She herself does not dwell on the limitations of Subjective Immortality as an idea, although Hardy typically punctures the hope contained in its central message, positing the memory of a dead friend as slowly dwindling. After some years he enquires:

If aught remain of him unperished still;
And find in me alone, a feeble spark,
Dying amid the dark.\(^{13}\)
As one biographer suggests of Eliot:

As she reaches the limits of her philosophical position and observes it may not accommodate alternative lives, she enters into that Victorian crisis of belief and, in her way, becomes its voice of both yearning and doubt.

... part of it was the abiding Victorian fear that chaos and even anarchy would prevail if traditional religion failed to make the parts cohere ...^{14}

All that Eliot feels able to do is to posit a law of consequences, an impersonal series of causes and effects that justify her protagonists in pursuing a moral course unobserved by any higher power. This insistence on duty and responsibility is the one point of reference taken from her youthful Evangelicalism.

But the challenge of defending Scripture against such humanist encroachments was taken up by another influential group in the 1830s. The Oxford Movement, famous for its High Church tendencies as for its intellectual authority, resolutely attacked what they saw as liberalising tendencies within the Anglican Church at this time. Crucially they referred questions of dogma and interpretation to the authority of the Church, in deliberate opposition to the individualist emphasis of the Evangelical movement. In so doing they exposed themselves to the charge of Anglo-Catholicism, particularly when Newman, who had himself entertained Calvinist convictions as a young man, published his most controversial treatise as part of a series known as *Tracts for the Times*. Tract 90, published in 1860, argued that the 39 Articles of Anglican belief had been drawn up in such a way as to be compatible with a Catholic interpretation. His later conversion to Rome in 1845 gave rise to accusations that he had been attempting to proselytise on behalf of the Pope from within the Church of England during his Oxford ministry.

Popular prejudice against ‘Romanism’ had not been substantially allayed by the Catholic Emancipation of 1829 and centred on two perceived evils, the restriction of individual freedom and the dangerous influence of the Catholic priesthood. By extension, sexual laxity was sometimes attributed to its proponents. In 1837 a tract appeared sensationally ‘exposing’ such abuses through a discussion of *Popery in Convents – the Awful Disclosures of Maria Monk, Satisfactorily Established and the Fallacy of the Alleged Refutation by the Rev. R. W. Wilson, Roman Catholic Priest, Nottingham, Clearly Exposed*. Liberally scattered with ref-
erences to licentiousness and the Inquisition, which the author implies
to be a very real threat in the nineteenth century, this pamphlet plays
on the fears of its readers with more imagination than subtlety.

Hardly less striking is the language of The Rev. Henry Melvill, who
published a sermon the following year to the effect that Catholicism is,
in itself, a ‘masterpiece of Satan’: ‘if it insult the understanding, bribes
the lusts, and buys reason into silence with the immunities which it
promises’.15

The Protestant Association re-formed in response to the
Emancipation Act (it claimed no fellowship with the eighteenth-
century body responsible for the Gordon Riots of 1780) declared dra-
matically in 1839 that:

The grand object with the Roman Catholic in all parts of the
islands, at the present moment, is the destruction of the Established
Church, which forms the chief, if not the only obstacle to the re-
establishment of Popery.16

Such fears were not allayed by the reinstatement of an episcopal
hierarchy in 1850, which quickly became known as the Papal
Aggression.

But the unsubstantiated accusations of promiscuity are particularly
interesting in the light of Kingsley’s later attack on Newman. Their
famous confrontation of the 1860s, leading to the publication of
Newman’s persuasive and dignified defence of his Catholic faith in
Apologia Pro Vita Sua (a book much admired by George Eliot inciden-
tally), involved an insinuation by Kingsley that Newman himself was
either not troubled by sexual instincts at all, or at any rate, had little
sympathy with heterosexual relationships. In the latter half of the-
century this association between Catholicism and homosexual inclina-
tion was caught by Samuel Butler in The Way of All Flesh. The hero
Ernest Pontifex is ordained in a spirit of religious fervour, only to be
embezzled by his High Church colleague Pryer. Ernest is naively: ‘sur-
prised to find that this gentleman, though attentive to such members
of his flock as were young and good-looking, was strongly in favour of
the celibacy of the clergy...’17 The hint is developed in the course of
Ernest’s association with Pryer. In the course of conversation:

His eyes wandered curiously over Ernest, as Ernest had often noticed
them wander before... As regards the clergy, glimpses of a pretty
large cloven hoof kept peeping out from the saintly robe of Pryer’s
conversation ... He was restless, as though wanting to approach a subject which he did not quite venture to touch upon, and kept harping (he did this about every third day) on the wretched lack of definition concerning the limits of vice and virtue, and the way in which half the vices wanted regulating rather than prohibiting.18

Certainly neither Dickens nor Collins approved of Catholicism in any form. Though Dickens had Catholic friends, his declared intention in writing his Child’s History of England was to save his child from imbibing any ‘High Church notions’, and his disgust at Catholic ceremonial is apparent in the description of Easter Day in Pictures from Italy, when ‘Cardinals rattled to the church of the Poor Fisherman in their state carriages’.19 In a letter of 1863 he went so far as to exclaim:

To think that any human creature should seek out this time of day to set up the tottering monster in England here! Yet there are politicians wanting despotism, and idiots wanting a sensation, who would do it if they could.20

Collins was clearly not convinced by Newman’s arguments and continued to suspect the power of Catholic priests in their influence over individuals. The dangers of such influence were to appear in his later fiction, most famously in The Black Robe, in which a convert leaves his Protestant wife in order to become a priest. While neither writer attacked the Catholic faith on such tendentious grounds as the authors quoted above, neither did they come close to Victor Hugo’s sympathetic treatment of the ascetic nuns who educate Cosette in Les Misérables; while distancing himself from the self-abasement he describes, he nonetheless praises their sanctity and willingness to sacrifice themselves for their faith.

Unwilling to identify with Catholics any more than with Evangelicals on the one hand or sceptics on the other, the position adopted by Dickens and Collins was much closer to that of the liberal churchman F. D. Maurice. In 1853 Maurice responded to the threat of humanism and the loss of faith by adopting Carlyle’s imagery of renewal and new life to attack a Unitarian view of Christ’s humanity on the levels of feeling and reason simultaneously. Boldly inviting scrutiny, he declared:

These truths are compelled to come forward from amidst the cobwebs in which we have left them, to prove that they can bear
the open day, and that they bring a more glorious sunlight with them, which may penetrate into all the obscurest caverns of human thoughts and fears.21

Maurice stresses the need for a revelation of Christ’s nature but goes on to enlist the Unitarian philosophy of reason on his own side, pointing out that Unitarianism propounds the strict truth of the Bible as distinct from later appurtenances and is therefore obliged by definition to describe Jesus as the Son of God as written in Scripture. Furthermore the Unitarians protest against idolatry; therefore if Christ is not divine and yet is reverenced for his sacrifice more fervently than is God the ‘dim and distant vision’, this in itself constitutes the setting of a man above God. In this way logic and rhetoric are combined on the side of orthodox religion, although much of the attendant dogma is kept in the background. However Maurice insists on the actual nature of Christ. Arguing directly against the symbolic interpretation of religion put forward by Carlyle he maintains:

... it becomes us most earnestly, for the sake of our fellow-men, and of all the thoughts and doubts which are stirring in them so mightily at this time, not to let the faith in an actual Son of God be absorbed into any religious or philosophical theories or abstractions.22

In this context it has long been noted that the issue of Collins’s religious beliefs is a problematic one. Even in his own lifetime comments tended to be either vague or vituperative. A particularly complimentary review by Paul Forgues in 1855 avoided the spiritual implications of his philosophy altogether, noting simply that:

Il n’est á son aise et heureux d’écrire que lorsque ses personnages bien-aimés sont eux memes dans toute la plénitude d’un complet bien-être...23

[He is only at ease and happy in writing when his dearly loved characters are themselves in all the fullness of a complete well being.]

In 1866 a less favourable reviewer denounced *Armadale*, fulminating: ‘Mr Wilkie Collins once nearly succeeded in making a mad woman popular, but he has now perfectly succeeded in making religion ridiculous’.24

Certainly Collins did not attend a public place of worship as an adult, and his own declarations suggest that his views underwent various changes during the course of his life. But this failure to attend
church, unusual as it was, does not necessarily mean that he was not interested in religion. The main sources for Collins’s few direct statements of belief are a collection of letters written to Edward Piggott in the 1850s and the written recollections of a friend in later life. His fiction does not provide the same level of overt religious debate as, say, that of the Brontës. But though Collins’s novels are not written primarily as religious works, it is possible to glean from them some idea of his personal beliefs.

Taking a generally rational line, he presented God as the great engineer who had designed the world, but did not believe in the literal truth of every word in the Old Testament. Both he and Dickens believed in the Trinity, but were otherwise wary of recondite doctrine, which they saw as potentially divisive. As Collins had put it in 1852:

I make no claim to orthodoxy. I am neither a protestant, a catholic nor a dissenter. I do not desire to discuss this or that particular creed but I believe Jesus Christ to be the Son of God.25

Though this letter was written at a time when Collins was perhaps influenced by the beliefs of his evangelical parents, he had already shown himself willing to offend their religious sensibilities, as Catherine Peters has shown,26 and it is reasonable to suppose that he was conscientiously expressing his own opinion rather than deferring to that of his family. A belief in Christ as the son of God, enunciated by both Collins and Dickens, is important, as the ongoing debate between the two schools of thought makes plain. According to Bernard Reardon: ‘Liberal Protestantism has centred its belief on the historical figure of Jesus as the one supreme revelation of the divine.’27

But even such a belief was not always seen at the time as an all-sufficient declaration of faith; prolonged and often minute discussion of ‘this or that particular creed’ was not always easy to avoid in the 1850s, as the evangelical movement came into very public conflict with rationalism in particular. Brian Spittles convincingly explains the upsurge in dissenting sects from the 1830s onwards in the light of growing disbelief:

This frenzy of activity reflected the zeal of people who were determined to get belief right, even to the fine details, on which they were likely to argue with their neighbours. It was in part an urgency created by a world in which faith was becoming ever-increasingly difficult. The more tenuous the hold on an idea of a divinity
became, the closer it was clutched – and the interpretation of a verse of scripture could become a point of everlasting schism...\textsuperscript{28}

Nor did evangelicalism recognise a significant difference between rationalism and the liberal Christianity proclaimed by Dickens and Collins. As Ian Bradley explains it, evangelicalism was in direct opposition to the liberal outlook:

Important though its doctrines were, Evangelicalism was never really a theological system so much as a way of life. It did not present itself to its adherents as a logical set of beliefs but rather as a series of vivid and compelling personal experiences. The strongest of these experiences were associated with the anxiety and fear which had first caused the conversion to vital religion: a dread of the terrible power and presence of a Wrathful God...\textsuperscript{29}

Such imperatives were necessarily incompatible with the Broad Church emphasis on human perfectibility and divine forgiveness embraced by Dickens and Collins.

But despite his declaration of faith, Kirk Beetz is almost alone in acknowledging that Collins retained identifiably Christian beliefs until the end of his life.\textsuperscript{30} Beetz points out that:

Every biographer and scholar has held that Collins was an atheist, or no more than a ‘materialist’, yet at age 28 he was enough of a Christian to risk losing friendship and employment for his faith.\textsuperscript{31}

The dispute to which Beetz refers occurred in 1852. In this year Collins wrote to Edward Piggott to say that he would no longer allow his name to be appended to articles published in \textit{The Leader}, because he disapproved of the way in which religious issues were presented ‘cheek by jowl’\textsuperscript{32} with secular topics. His letters make it quite clear that Collins regarded this casual attitude towards religion as a profanation, and Beetz stresses the devotion to his faith to which these letters testify.

Modern criticism has tended to bypass or deny this aspect of his writing. Catherine Peters for instance quotes the letters to Piggott in which Collins declares himself a Christian (quoted on page 1), but will only allow him to have been a freethinker, the implication being that his philosophy was bound by no doctrines and that he had no belief in an afterlife.\textsuperscript{33} Sue Lonoff, in one of the longest disquisitions on this subject, quotes the same letters to Piggott as evidence that Collins retained some notion of Christian morality, but insists nonetheless that:
Like many thoughtful Victorians, Collins was troubled by doubt – doubt about the nature of God and Christianity, doubt about the efficacy of reason, and doubt about the ultimately moral and beneficent purpose of the universe. ... But nothing in Collins’s work suggests that he suffered intense and lasting anguish. In his case... doubt seems to have taken the form of a deep-seated, abiding skepticism. While he never fully abandoned his belief in God and the ethical values of the New Testament, he eschewed conventional social forms as well as conventional Christianity. As a popular writer, however, he was bound to satisfy an audience that practised traditional forms of Christianity, believed in a moral and rational universe, and trusted the Almighty – or his surrogate in fiction, the omnipotent author – to set everything to rights in the end.\(^{34}\)

In an article entitled ‘The Religion of Wilkie Collins: Three Unpublished Documents’, Keith Lawrence begins with the cautious statement that ‘Collins consistently veils his personal beliefs’ and goes on to place the word religion in inverted commas when referring to his thinking.

The lack of seriousness with which Collins’s professions of faith are commonly taken is reflected in the accounts of his use of providence in the novels. He is often supposed to have offered a providential view without subscribing to such a belief himself, either as a means of resolving an intricate plot or in deference to the expectation of his readers. The following brief and largely unsupported analysis, made by Christopher Kent, is typical of this interpretation of Collins’s attitude towards religion: ‘it can be said that Collins’ interest in providence lay in the extent to which others believed in it, and found in it an adequate explanation of events.’\(^{35}\) The article in which this statement appears is concerned with probability rather than with Providence, but the author expresses the view in passing that Collins did not share his father’s belief in an active Providence, but used it as a convenient if vague term for encoding chance or probability.

But despite his interest in chance and coincidence, demonstrated in the complicated plots for which he is famous, Providence is crucial to an understanding of all Collins’s major novels. Count Fosco in *The Woman in White*, attempts to deny the providential order and asserts that morality is an arbitrary social construct enforced by human intelligence rather than divine law; he is often taken as a mouthpiece for Collins in this speech to the more simple-minded Laura and Marian. In
his assertion that an intelligent criminal will usually outwit the police and that conventions of virtue are unstable and often unjust, Fosco can indeed be allowed to speak for Collins. But in cynically valuing the intelligence that can get away with crime, he rather misses the point. Tellingly he employs sophistry to conflate the two questions under discussion – denying that crime causes its own detection, he attempts to justify criminality by comparing it to the stupidity of the police and the hypocrisy of public morals. In other words, he suggests that if a criminal is able to outmanoeuvre the police and gain the sympathy of the public, his very success in so doing justifies his actions. But the Count’s claim to be objective through his status as an amoral and purely rational character is not entirely trustworthy. Even as he mocks conventional moral values, he himself lays claim to both sensibility and virtue. Furthermore, he attempts to justify his criminal behaviour, insisting on his own mercy in sparing Laura’s life, at ‘immense personal sacrifice’, and urges the reader to exempt him from serious blame. And as Jerome Meckier points out, the Count’s grandiose claim that he alone exposes the true face behind the mask, is unsubstantiated:

Tearing off pasteboards is never among Fosco’s accomplishments. His plan to improve his own fortunes along with Sir Percival’s requires the substitution of Anne Catherick for Laura Fairlie in a conspiracy tailored to install a mask for the true face.

Notably the Count is far from being as insensible to popular opinion as he claims. In conversation with Sir Percival he appears to dismiss Laura contemptuously as ‘that poor, flimsy, pretty blonde wife of yours’ but he later admits that he has never forgiven her for calling him a spy (this furious reaction is all the more surprising in that he turns out to be a member of a secret society). His pronouncements must therefore be taken with caution.

In his final confession Fosco mocks Walter’s providential view of the world, in words that might almost have come from that character: ‘Oh, omnipotent Destiny, pull our strings gently! Dance us mercifully off our miserable little stage!’ But it should not be forgotten that the Count’s betrayal of the Italian Brotherhood does lead directly to an apocalyptic revenge, nor that Sir Percival dies in the church he has desecrated, despite Walter’s merciful attempts to save him. In a parallel with *The Frozen Deep*, the responsible agency is human in both cases, but in each case the manner of death is heavily symbolic. Fosco’s early crime leads to a quasi-divine retribution and Sir Percival, having
refused the saving religion offered by his wife, is burned alive in a church. The punishment of crime does not follow directly according to a universal law, but providential interference is implicitly upheld in the narrative; it is explicitly cited by Hartright and this interpretation is upheld by Marian’s diary.

Peter Thoms acknowledges the importance of the theme of Providence in *The Woman in White* and *No Name*, but does not confront the issue of Collins’s personal belief: ‘... what the unorthodox Collins is enunciating is not necessarily Christianity but a mode of living based on its precepts of love, generosity and sympathy.’ In *Armadale* and *The Moonstone*, Thoms suggests, the providential order is treated with greater scepticism, through Lydia Gwilt’s subversive presence and Gabriel Betteredge’s parodic citations of *Robinson Crusoe*, respectively. But in effect, Thoms is simply assuming a shift in narrative emphasis, away from celebration of such ordering and towards satire. His analysis ultimately fails to acknowledge the way in which Collins’s novels uphold a belief in God (as opposed to a vaguely defined ‘supernatural order’) and makes no attempt to account for this narrative framework in relation to Collins’s personal beliefs.

In *Armadale* Midwinter’s response to the Christian faith urged by the Reverend Brock is perceived as:

not a passive act but essentially one of creative interpretation. Midwinter creates the purposeful design he sees by imposing meaningful closure on the sequence of the inherited story. He may feel that the final pattern is providential, but it is a design which he ... helps to bring into being.41

Providence is, in this way, ultimately explained away in essentialist terms. Thoms suggests that what it represents in the novels is a Carlylean moral order represented by the idea of God and discerned by the central protagonists as they themselves create a pattern for their own experience. In this novel the providential order is symbolised, as Thoms and Lisa M. Zeitz have shown, by Major Milroy’s clock:

when Collins was writing *Armadale* the foundation of the design argument’s use of the clock metaphor – the idea that a clock reflects its maker – would have been one of the recognisable associations that the literary image of the clock might convey. Collins’s choice of the Strasbourg clock for Major Milroy’s model in *Armadale* strongly suggests that he wished to invoke the image of the clock as an ‘intellectual artefact’ that illustrated ideas about the nature of the world.42
But their interpretation surely breaks down in assuming that Collins uses the smaller clock to represent a lack of faith in a providential order. The Major’s clock plays marches in place of psalms, and the mechanism does not work effectively. But the Major is escaping domestic troubles in turning to his machine, and it could be said that he has attempted to reduce the workings of Providence to a personal fantasy, in which he can control the overall mechanism. The Strasbourg Clock was designed to celebrate the natural order as ordained by God, while the Major’s offers only an escape from the world around him while positing him as the sole creator. Collins had seen the original Strasbourg Clock while travelling with Dickens, and was not particularly impressed by its reductive symbolism. His writing emphasises again and again the importance of relating divine mysteries to the human experience, rather than portraying them in static and abstract terms; nor did he promote the definition of experience in terms of simplistic precepts.

In fact, in this extensive use of providential patterning and intervention as a theme in his novels, Collins is not simply allowing a meaningful narrative pattern to be discerned or subverted. Rather he is engaging in the religious debate of his time, by taking one of the evangelicals’ choicest weapons and using it to subvert their judgemental version of Christian morality. Evangelical thought stressed a providential plan based on intervention at every level from the personal to the national, a belief shared by William Collins. This belief often emphasised a retributive rather than a benevolent plan, involving acts of vengeance for sin committed or duty left undone (the turbulence of the French Revolution, for instance, was cited by evangelicals as an instance of divine castigation for the godlessness of the French nation, and Sabbatarians warned that England might soon suffer a similar fate if strict Sunday observance was not upheld).

But Collins insists that divine intervention is beneficent in intent, and is more often aimed at saving humanity from the effects of sin than at executing justice. In *No Name*, the narrator asks whether the central character Magdalen Vanstone is saved from suicide by chance or by providence – as far as the evangelical ethos went, an attempt at suicide would be sure to bring its own punishment, and certainly would not merit a divine interference with the number of ships passing a window. Apart from anything else, they regarded gambling as a sin in itself!

The view that Wilkie Collins was indifferent to religion and did not believe in God is not borne out by the evidence contained in his novels and in his correspondence. But it is nonetheless the view put
forward by Collins’s friend Wybert Reeve, who had what must have been a fraught conversation with him in 1873, on the evening of Charles Collins’s death. As Reeve recorded after Wilkie’s own death:

The death seemed to have made a strong impression on him, and led him to speak of a future state of existence, in which he had little belief. He was a Materialist, and urged that death meant a sleep of eternity; it was the natural end of all living things.\(^{44}\)

There is no reason to doubt the accuracy of this account. But even such an emphatic expression of religious doubt at such a traumatic time is not inconsistent with Collins’s assumption of faith in his letters and fiction. What can be ascertained from this story is that Collins, in common with more than one of his characters, suffered from doubt at times of severe affliction.

As his mother died, to be followed over the next twenty years by Dickens, his brother and other close friends, Wilkie’s personal letters alternate between an avowed resignation to the will of God:

Submission – there is nothing for it but dogged submission to the ‘all-wise and beneficent Providence’ who created all living beings to die – and to eat each other, while they live.\(^ {45}\)

and outright bitterness:

That cruel institution of ‘the all merciful Creator’ which has said Live (in one breath) and Die in another (has left me very few friends)...\(^ {46}\)

Though he retained his personal belief – he was infuriated by the MP Charles Bradlaugh, who in 1884 ‘has issued his one hundred and fifteth assertion of his right to ignore God and take his seat in Parliament’\(^ {47}\) – he frankly admitted in several letters that a belief in the afterlife provides no immediate comfort to the bereaved. On 11 February 1886 he wrote to one friend:

The state of mind which finds relief in the ‘consolation of religion’ is, I am sorry to own it, a state of mind unintelligible to me ... In my experience there is no true consolation to be found, except in the lapse of time, and the one “palliative” in the meanwhile is work.\(^ {48}\)

In an 1885 novel, I Say No, he tackles the despair experienced by those who are left behind, interposing through the narrative voice to present
doubt as a momentary thought in the mind of every Christian at times of bereavement.

Are there not moments – if we dare to confess the truth – when poor humanity loses its hold on the consolations of religion and the hope of immortality, and feels the cruelty of creation that bids us live, on the condition that we die, and leads the first warm beginnings of love, with merciless certainty, to the cold conclusion of the grave?\(^\text{49}\)

Collins may have been reticent about his faith, but he was nothing if not honest.

It is interesting to note in passing that Anne Brontë’s orthodox heroine Helen Huntingdon herself contemplates the possible death of her infant son in similar terms to those discussed by Collins:

\[
\text{my heart shrinks from the contemplation of such a possibility, and whispers I could not bear to see him die, and relinquish to the cold and cruel grave this cherished form, now warm with tender life ...}^{50}
\]

Considerably more has been written on the subject of Dickens’s religion. John R. Reed’s perceptive account allows that:

\[
\text{From the outset of his career Dickens was deeply concerned with the need for withholding judgement, extending compassion, and, with evidence of repentance, assuring forgiveness. But he was equally convinced that transgressions required retributive punishment.}^{51}
\]

But his detailed discussion of forgiveness and retribution surely goes too far in assuming that Dickens was comfortable with a wholly orthodox view of religion. Reed’s perception of a sense of balance in the punishment and forgiveness meted out at the end of each novel, suggests that providential retribution operates in Dickens’s work as a definitive form of resolution. I will argue that, on the contrary, Dickens laboured over a period of years to diminish the sense of condign suffering lying in wait for his errant figures after death.

Few other critics, with the notable exception of Jerome Meckier, have read Dickens as having any leanings towards orthodoxy. As in the case of Collins, the issue of his beliefs is one which seems to cause critics a degree of embarrassment. During his lifetime, the aunt of his estranged wife observed bitterly to a friend: ‘...his sentimentality and professed benevolence are more resembling fairy tales than the philanthropy founded on a religious basis.’\(^{52}\)
Ironically enough, this vindictive remark has been echoed by critics ever since. Humphrey House, whose chapter on Dickens’s religion has been described as ‘the best general account of Dickens’s religious beliefs and attitudes’, appeals to an understanding of Dickens’s outlook as ‘Christain sentiment uncorseted by dogma.’ Moreover, according to House: ‘His religion is emphatically one of works, not faith; but there is no dwelling on any religious merit works may win.’

David Holbrook similarly acknowledges Dickens’s religion only in terms of ethics:

Dickens’s moral concern is perhaps more devotedly Christian than we tend to recognize, more conscious of the ethical precepts of Jesus and the New Testament.

Lance St John Butler goes so far as to say that:

he is a radical doubter, whether he knows it or not, about the metaphysical structure of the universe and about the tendency of good to prevail.

Meanwhile Janet Larson describes as early a figure as Florence Dombey as ‘less God’s agent than his replacement’ and maintains that ‘religious language serves finally to enforce closure on enquiry’.

But Dickens seeks neither to impugn the providential order nor to stall enquiry. Though he frequently attacks religious bigotry in his novels, the sincerely religious are in less danger of judgement in his work than those who seek to deny religion altogether. If fanaticism is presented as a perversion, spiritual materialism is a self-fulfilling prophecy that leads to disintegration. The precise danger of replacing religious obeisance with the pursuit of wealth, for instance, is emphasised in the charged language surrounding Mr Merdle in *Little Dorrit*, who is sought out as an apostle of Mammon, and ends the novel as a carcass. He moves among people who prostrate themselves before his wealth in the belief that he can cure their poverty. In seeming defiance of the notion that superfluous wealth deadens religious commitment, Mr Merdle is described ironically as:

The rich man, who had in a manner revised the New Testament, and already entered into the kingdom of Heaven. The man who could have any one he chose to dine with him, and who had made the money! As he went up the stairs, people were already posted on
the lower stairs, that his shadow might fall upon them when he came down. So were the sick brought out and laid in the track of the Apostle – who had not got into the good society, and had not made the money.\textsuperscript{60}

In this case Mr Merdle does not cure the sick but infects the previously healthy. As Mrs Clennam represents the perversity of adhering to Old Testament traditions in preference to the mercy of the New, so materialism attempts to substitute itself for the teachings of Christ. Mr Merdle, who has throughout the novel displayed a nervous habit of clenching his wrists as if ‘taking himself into custody’, turns out to be a swindler, who only escapes prison by committing suicide. It is now revealed that:

he, the shining wonder, the new constellation to be followed by the wise men bearing gifts, until it stopped over a certain carrion at the bottom of a bath and disappeared – was simply the greatest Forger and Thief that ever cheated the gallows.\textsuperscript{61}

It is generally accepted that Dickens’s beliefs place him in the Broad Church tradition, and the few critics who accept that Collins did retain recognisably Christian beliefs in his adult life, would probably place him in the same bracket. It is also widely accepted that in fact such a definition encompasses a broad spectrum of beliefs:

The Broad Church was not a faction but a restless and critical attitude of mind, and Broad Churchmen were drawn together more by the hostility they provoked than by their common ideas.\textsuperscript{62}

It is worth bearing in mind, when analysing the beliefs of each writer, that:

to think at all in that environment of clashing theories and onrushing knowledge was to arrive at some individual cross-blend of ideas that was, or seemed to be, different from anybody else’s.\textsuperscript{63}

Dickens makes exactly this point in a letter of 1861, in which he defends his Broad Church outlook on the grounds that:

I ask no man how he settles for himself questions of theology (on which it is easy for any number of men to say they are agreed, but very difficult for any two men to be really agreed) ...\textsuperscript{64}
Nor will Collins be drawn into any overt debate about the particulars of his faith. But the ethos underlying his novels reveals an active engagement with the questions of his time. A reluctance to discuss their views overtly in conversation or in their correspondence makes reconstructing Dickens’s and Collins’s position deeply problematic. But what is clear from a reading of their letters and novels is that they were far from sharing the agnostic humanism of many contemporary intellectuals.

Their religious position was however incompatible with the conservative stance of those members of the Church, Evangelical or simply reactionary, who opposed the principle of scientific advance. One such was H. L. Mansel, who categorically denounced the application of reason to theological understanding. Mansel feared that intellectual standards were not only an unsuitable measure of the doctrines of Christianity, but were potentially dangerous to the foundations of the faith itself. His collected sermons of 1858 put forward this point with vehemence, in attacking the hypothetical critic of Biblical truth:

It may be that this man has defended, on reasonable grounds, none but the most essential articles of the Christian faith, but has he pointed out any rule which can hinder the same or similar reasoning from being advanced by another in support of the most dangerous errors? It may be that that man has employed the test of reasonableness, only in the refutation of opinions concerning which the Church has pronounced no positive judgement; but has he fenced his method round with any caution to prevent its being used for the overthrow of Christianity itself?65

This admission that reason is potentially detrimental to Christianity rather belies the calmness of the preceding argument, which suggests that reason is simply irrelevant:

Faith, properly so called, is not constructive, but receptive. It cannot supply the missing portions of an incomplete system, though it may bid us remain content with the deficiency.66

The intellectual threat to the Christian Church, as perceived from the inside, is that its existing dogmas will be seen as having been disproved, and that it will ultimately be perceived as lacking authority or even truth. According to Mansel, reason was threatening to highlight the allegorical nature of much that had hitherto been taken as absolute
fact, and he feared that such discovery could lead to the rejection of the central doctrines of the Christian faith. Such protectiveness of church doctrine was not limited to Mansel, as the reception accorded to *Essays and Reviews* in 1860 clearly shows. This controversy ‘even for a time drowned the noise over Darwin’.67

Dickens took issue with the conservative argument, in his reaction to the *Essays and Reviews* controversy. The seven essayists, six of whom were ordained clergymen, aimed to show that scientific and historical criticism were not incompatible with Christian belief. Benjamin Jowett’s essay on biblical criticism caused particular offence. Jowett’s essay ‘On the Interpretation of Scripture’ was seen by many as little short of blasphemous, because he suggested that the Bible should be interpreted historically, with the same thoroughness that would be accorded to any other important manuscript. Today the tenets of this essay seem indubitably sensible. Notably Jowett points out that:

> Without criticism it would be impossible to reconcile History and Science with Revealed Religion; they must remain for ever in a hostile and defiant attitude.68

It has been suggested of Dickens, by Philip Collins among others, that:

> In his religion, as in the rest of his life and work, Dickens was lacking in intellectual rigour. He naively skirted the difficulties he found in the Bible, by the simple device of writing off the Old Testament, and he seems to have been almost unaware of those disputes about Christian Evidences which made ‘honest doubt’ so familiar to his generation.69

This conclusion is unfair to Dickens, who held strong views on the question of Biblical criticism. In 1863 he wrote to M. De Cerjat on the subject, strongly supporting Colenso and Jowett:

> The position of the writers of *Essays and Reviews*’ is, that certain parts of the Old Testament have done their intended function in the education of the world as it was; but that mankind, like the individual man, is designed by the Almighty to have an infancy and a maturity, and that as it advances, the machinery of its education must advance too ... What these bishops and such-like say about revelation, in assuming it to be finished and done with, I can’t in the least understand.70
In this accommodation of religious understanding to scientific discovery, Dickens is not simply being pragmatic, as his reference to God’s assistance makes clear.

His argument that science should be used to enlighten religion echoes both his Unitarian friend the Reverend Tagart, and Jowett himself. As early as 1846 Tagart had postulated:

science is the hand-maid of religion. All knowledge is eminently subservient to a rational piety ... Everything that strengthens our acquaintance with nature, every enlargement of the boundaries of human intelligence, every new treasure that enriches the archives of science, appears to me in the same proportion to enhance our ideas of the great Creator, to make our adoration and service more worthy of his perfections.\textsuperscript{71}

Jowett argued along similar lines, claiming that:

The same fact cannot be true in religion when seen by the light of faith and untrue in science when looked at through the medium of evidence and experiment ... As the idea of nature enlarges, the idea of revelation also enlarges; it was a temporary misunderstanding which severed them ... It may hereafter appear as natural to the majority of mankind to see the providence of God in the order of the world as it once was to appeal to interruptions of it.\textsuperscript{72}

Inevitably, such readiness to welcome scientific or historical criticism as Jowett displayed, was anathema to evangelicals. Writing in 1862, the Reverend Arthur Baker stressed sophistry again and again as the favourite tool of Satan:

Surely it is a masterpiece of Satan’s craft to make us think slightly of heresy and schism, nay of the smallest differences in Christian doctrine. A sceptical frame of mind is his easiest prey; and it is astonishing how from the smallest beginnings of questioning and doubt, he beguiles souls on into avowed and positive infidelity.\textsuperscript{73}

This argument begs the famous pre-emptive assertion, ‘Doubt comes in at the window when Inquiry is denied at the door.’\textsuperscript{74} But what is most surprising about Jowett’s essay is that it caused such a stir in the first place. Jowett says little or nothing that has not been said by Paley before him. For instance, Jowett was condemned for his belief that:
There is no appearance in their writings that the Evangelists or Apostles had any inward gift, or were subject to any power external to them different from that of preaching or teaching which they daily exercised; nor do they anywhere lead us to suppose that they were free from error or infirmity.\textsuperscript{75}

But this was exactly the point made by Paley in 1790, and he concluded his treatise on the evidences of Christianity by saying:

When we once feel a foundation; when we once perceive a ground for credibility in its history, we shall proceed with safety to inquire into the interpretation of its records, and into the doctrines which have been deduced from them. Nor will it either endanger our faith, or diminish or alter our motives for obedience, if we should discover that these conclusions are formed with very different degrees of probability, and possess very different degrees of importance.\textsuperscript{76}

Jowett too wished to emphasise that the Bible was to be examined in the same way as other books because by its very nature it would be able to withstand such scrutiny; the human errors of the writers would in no way diminish the important spiritual truths contained within it. Paley’s book was reprinted throughout the-century, indeed it was reprinted in 1860, and was used to uphold the Christian religion seemingly on the very grounds for which Jowett’s essay was condemned, namely the possibility of examining the Scriptures and finding them to be valid despite any inconsistencies occasioned by the errors of the writers.

This readiness to mediate faith through scientific discovery would also have appealed to Collins, who believed that faith was severely tested by any outrage on common sense. It was largely on these grounds that he attacked Catholicism, arguing in a letter of 1854 about the Pope’s Declaration of the Immaculate Conception:

Now what shakes a man’s faith? – an outrage on his common sense ... But how can that affect individual Romanists – or Romanist congregations. Does any Papist make use of his reason when he lets his Church give him his religion? ... Does not every good Papist who will not let his father, brother, wife, or children, rob him of one particle of his common sense if he can help it, voluntarily hand that common sense over altogether to the keeping of his Priest whenever his Priest asks him for it? ... What is there in the
Immaculate Conception to outrage millions of people who believe (if one may abuse the word by using it in such a sense) – who believe in ‘The Real Presence’? When Smith, a lay Papist, believes that if he gives money to Jones a clerical Papist to pray his soul out of Purgatory, Jones will succeed if Jones prays fairly up to his terms, what in Heaven’s name is there in the Immaculate Conception to stagger Smith?77

Collins placed a strong emphasis on common sense in religion and was presumably exasperated at the Pope’s inconsistency in maintaining a doctrine of original sin with reference to all human beings except one. Kingsley was to apply this criterion to the detriment of Newman in 1864, commenting tartly that: ‘While he tried to destroy others’ reason, he was at least fair enough to destroy his own.’78 It is interesting to note in this context that Newman himself approved the application of reason where possible and did not oppose the principle of scientific advance. In *Apologia Pro Vita Sua* he takes up this very point. In the course of arguing that a belief in Papal Infallibility does not demoralise the intellect, he points out that:

I have not here to speak of any conflict which ecclesiastical authority has had with science, for this simple reason, that conflict there has been none; and that, because the secular sciences, as they now exist, are a novelty in the world, and there has been no time yet for a history of relations between theology and these new methods of knowledge, and indeed the Church may be said to have kept clear of them ...79

He himself was willing to reconcile scientific discovery with Scripture, and had put forward in Tract 90 the relativist idea that:

we do not at all know what is meant by distance or intervals absolutely, any more than we know what is meant by absolute time. Late discoveries in geology have tended to make it probable that time may under circumstances go indefinitely faster or slower than it does at present... What Moses calls a day, geologists wish to prove to be thousands of years, if we measure time by the operations at present effected in it.80

Though this reasoning may seem somewhat abstruse, it makes a valiant attempt to accommodate both a scientific and an orthodox
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world view. Though neither Collins nor Dickens would sacrifice sense
to dogma, both disapproved most strongly of the rationalist idea that
religion should give way to a scientific view of the world. As Collins
himself began to feel old, one of his worthy characters, old Benjamin
in *The Law and the Lady*, was to launch an indignant protest against
new ideas. In a satirical outburst that is not only out of character, but
has nothing whatsoever to do with the plot, Benjamin betrays his
creator’s own aversion to the ‘cant’ of materialists and freethinkers:

let’s hear the last new professor, the man who has been behind the
scenes at Creation, and knows to a T how the world was made, and
how long it took to make it. There’s the other fellow, too... the
brand new philosopher who considers the consolations of religion
in the light of harmless playthings, and who is kind enough to say
he might have been all the happier if he could only have been
childish enough to play with them himself. Oh, the new ideas, the
new ideas, what consoling, elevating, beautiful discoveries have been
made by the new ideas!81

Sue Lonoff, who shares the common view of Collins’s supposed
scepticism, concedes that:

It obviously matters very much to Collins that evolution and the
higher criticism have threatened the old religious verities and the
code of behaviour they supported.82

But such evidence of Collins’s attitude to the agnosticism of which he
himself is so often accused is worthy of more serious attention. The
jab at agnostic thinkers who concede the positive value of religious
faith, while holding it to be rationally untenable, is particularly topical.
T. H. Huxley for one was using just such arguments in the 1870s, and
was to declare in 1889, the year of Collins’s death, that:

No man who has studied history, or even attended to the occur-
rences of everyday life, can doubt the enormous practical value of
trust and faith; but as little will he be inclined to deny that this
practical value has not the least relation to the reality of the objects
of that trust and faith.83

Collins had very little time for this reduction of religion to its purely
social function, as is surely obvious from the passage quoted by Lonoff.
In *Heart and Science*, written in 1882, the ironically named Mrs Galilee has a nervous breakdown, because she has placed her faith in science rather than in religion. At the moment of collapse: ‘“Will somebody pray for me?’ she cried piteously. ‘I don’t know how to pray for myself? Where is God?”’

In a comic inversion of the scientific toleration of religion, Mrs Galilee ends the novel as a harmless eccentric, taking refuge from the outside world in science lectures.

Approving of scientific advance provided that it did not displace religious belief, Dickens and Collins were both reticent about the details of their faith. Quite simply, they wished to avoid any damaging appropriation of religious discourse that might serve to alienate fellow Christians, as they felt evangelical religion did. The evangelicals’ refusal to countenance the application of reason to religious understanding, would not only have seemed absurd to liberal thinkers such as Dickens and Collins. It would also have appeared disruptive to a common belief in religious truths.

Certainly it is tempting to define Broad Church belief in negative terms, most obviously by setting it against the more definitive evangelicalism. But such tenuous parallels leave more liberal thinkers such as Dickens and Collins open to false comparisons. The misconceptions surrounding their beliefs can be traced to a telling observation in an essay by the Reverend James H. Rigg:

> A century ago, a deist might be a Bishop, and a Unitarian stand high in preferment in the Anglican Church. But things are different now. Then, out of Methodism, there was scarcely any earnestness extant, whether in religion or aught else. Now, the world is full of energy, and the age teems with earnest spirits. Now, sincerity, whether in error or in truth, for evil or for good, is counted the ‘one thing needful’, and earnestness is rated as heroism.

Evangelicalism in particular recognised little difference between secularism and Broad Church Christianity, and so collided with the essentially liberal faith of both Dickens and Collins. A telling remark from Walter E. Houghton helps further to explain the assumption often made, both during their lifetime and since, that neither Dickens nor Collins were serious in their religious professions:

> one was now expected, by himself as well as by others, to have an opinion about everything, to take a position on a score of disputed
points in politics, religion and morals. Not to do so was shameful: it implied indifference to crucial issues or failure to keep abreast of advancing knowledge.86

The very public nature of the religious debate at mid-century has led to an assumption that Collins in particular was reticent because he had no strong feelings on the subject. But his letters to Edward Piggott in the 1850s reveal a reluctance to discuss points of doctrine simply because he feels such debate to be damaging to a common belief in Christ as Saviour and as the Son of God. These were the central tenets of his religion, and as he said, ‘I hate controversies on paper, almost more than I hate controversies in talk.’87 Such controversy was not only awkward and potentially divisive, it was also unnecessary. In 1871 Collins wrote a short novel in which a man threatens two women with a pistol. By way of reprimand for the younger woman’s lack of faith, the older says, in words that encapsulate the sense of Collins’s own pronouncements to Edward Piggott: ‘God has been good to us. We are in his hands. If we know that, we know enough.’88

Ultimately both writers attack evangelicalism most forcibly on moral and theological rather than rational grounds. Travelling on the continent as a child, Collins had been obliged by his father to attend weekly Scripture meetings and two church services every Sunday, where the family were preached sermons on the power of the Devil by an evangelical minister.89 As was the case for many children of Evangelical parents, ‘...Sunday did cast a blight over the week,’90 as it does for the young Zack in Hide and Seek. In this fictionalised account, as in Dickens’s Little Dorrit, the religious zealot responsible for inflicting Sunday observance on the child turns out to be hiding a discreditable past, for which he attempts to atone by increased severity in his religious practices.91 But this can hardly be taken as a critique of William Collins. Self-doubting to the point of morbidity, Collins Senior is presented in the memoirs written by his son as genuinely devout. The letters and journal extracts quoted suggest that he was a gentle and affectionate father, keen to stress to his children the value of moral behaviour, rather than the effects of sin:

Go on praying to God, through Jesus Christ, to enable you, by his Holy Spirit, to be blessings to your parents; and then you must be happy. ... A pretty long letter, methinks, for two such short fellows! However, I never regret any trouble I may have in doing anything for good boys.92
This last sentence, conditional as it sounds, comes at the end of a long and cheerful letter about more secular topics which Collins thinks will interest the children.

Less indulgent is the journal that William Collins kept for his own benefit. Many evangelicals kept a daily record of their spiritual life, in which they analysed their own shortcomings in considerable detail. The extracts quoted from the journal in Wilkie’s memoirs must be assumed to show his father at his most introspective. On 27 March 1818 he writes:

This habit of smoking begets an inclination, and in fact a necessity, to allay the heat and dryness of the throat; and, as one smokes in the evening, liquor is always at hand; in addition to which, although I have given up snuff, yet the use of cigars and spirituous drinks would of course beget an inclination for their former companion: seeing all this, I hope I shall be resolute enough to resist the slavery of attachment to what it is best that I should hate.93

His son the bon viveur offers no remark on this extract. More alarming is William Collins’s reaction to the family’s recurring financial difficulties, which he seems to have regarded as arising at least in part from his own negligence. In his journal he wrote:

Notwithstanding my conviction that my troubles are real, and their number great, yet I feel that my desultory habits are adding to the list, (which is voluntarily and criminally incapacitating me for the performance of my numerous duties), and that my prayers for power cannot be from the heart, when the talents I already possess are suffered to lie idle until their whole strength shall be exerted against me; as the sweetest water becomes, under the same circumstances, first stagnant and then poisonous. Fearing consequences, which God of his infinite mercy avert, I once more implore his assistance.94

This self-accusatory tone is consistent with the evangelical fear of the demon within and the punishment sure to follow all turnings aside from the path of duty.

Wilkie Collins’s reaction to the journal entry is revealing. Ignoring the doctrinal assumptions behind it, of which his upbringing must have made him aware, he assures his readers that his father was not the man to be so easily defeated, and that he was soon able to overcome his depression.95 Respect for his father’s memory, and an expressed
dislike of religious controversy, make an open disavowal of his doctrinal position impossible. What comes across from the commentary is that Wilkie regarded such outpourings as self-indulgent or morbid, while renewed vigour and determination are to be admired as an effective antidote. Though in later life Collins’s reaction to evangelicalism sometimes bordered on the hysterical – in one letter, he refers to a devout cousin for whose trust fund he was responsible, as a ‘pious bitch’ – this aversion cannot be taken as a reaction against his father personally. It is far more likely that he is venting his rage at the fanatical associates of his parents with whom he came into contact as a child.

Dickens was not brought up in an evangelical household, but it is clear from his writing that he, like Collins, felt a need to define himself against this type of belief. His earlier writing suggests that he was himself influenced by evangelical tenets at the outset of his career. That there are points of intersection between Dickens’s position and evangelicalism is revealed in his endorsement of the work ethic, as the moral status of characters is made dependent on their willingness and ability to justify themselves through work. Though *David Copperfield* attacks the evangelical characters for their refusal to promote imaginative sympathy in children, David agrees with Miss Murdstone that the young must make their way in the world through work. Whilst denying the necessity of expiation for original sin, Dickens uses work as a sign of inner worth. His interpretation of the proper relationship between impulse and self-discipline reaches fulfilment in the adult David Copperfield. David is allowed to believe that his aunt has been entirely ruined, so that he may become self-reliant and industrious, and the value of this ploy is upheld by the narrative context. Furthermore his adult definition of marriage in terms of religious inspiration – Agnes is universally recalled as the figure pointing upwards – places him in the position of a Coelebs. But the lesson David learns is specifically that of discipline rather than expiation, and the novel celebrates his resilience rather than condemning sin.

The salutary nature of work has a moral significance both for David and later for Pip in *Great Expectations*. In endowing him with money that he has done nothing to earn, Magwitch leads Pip to adopt false values and despise those who work. By extension, Pip comes to feel an increasing sense of contamination in his past association with the criminal whose work takes the form of enforced labour. It is significant that his own charitable venture, directed towards Herbert’s advancement, does not take the form of such expectations. Rather he invests money in a company and allows Herbert to work his own way towards
a partnership. Pip’s action reveals a truly charitable impulse, in that he does not seek to make Herbert dependent on him. When Pip’s own expectations have been disappointed at the end of the novel, he too joins the firm as a clerk and not as a partner, confirming the dignity of work upheld by Joe and wrongly denied by Magwitch, who has sought to raise Pip ‘above’ work. This lowly position enables Pip to make atonement for past levity, through humility and perseverance. This emphasis on self-discipline, both in work and in the affections, is akin to the less extreme aspects of the evangelical code.

Reacting against the more stringent doctrines of evangelicalism, in 1846 Dickens had written *The Life of our Lord*, for the benefit of his children. In it he had stressed Christ’s immediacy and his relationship to human beings. Liberal in intent, this book certainly does not provide, as has been claimed, evidence of Unitarian belief. Literal belief in the devil may be offensive to a liberal thinker, but the devil is not necessary to a tale of temptations – therefore it would be reasonable to expect that a Unitarian explanation would make much of the argument for human susceptibility to weakness. The Unitarian Charles Wickstead’s account allows that Jesus was perfect, but maintains that his perfection was brought about by his resisting the promptings of his own infirmities. He is presented as: ‘...one tempted in all respects like as we are; in whose struggle with, and victory over, evil we may sympathise and share, one made perfect through suffering ...’ Ernest Renan too stresses at considerable length his conviction that Jesus was human (George Eliot, an admirer of Renan’s thinking, maintained that his conclusions could add nothing to the knowledge of the previous fifty years):

L’idéalisme transcendant de Jésus ne lui permit jamais d’avoir une notion claire de sa propre personnalité. Il est son Père, son Père est lui ... L’idée pour lui c’est tout; le corps qui fait la distinction des personnes, n’est rien.

[Jesus’s transcendent idealism precluded his having a clear idea of himself as an individual. He is his Father, his Father is him... For him the idea is everything, the body which separates one person from another is of no significance.]

By way of evidence, Renan maintains that:

Dans ses miracles, on sent un effort pénible, une fatigue comme si quelque chose sortait de lui. Tout cela est simplement le fait d’un envoyé de Dieu, d’un homme protégé et favorisé de Dieu.
[In his miracles one senses a painful effort, an exhaustion as if something were going out of him. All this is but the doing of a messenger from God, of a man protected and favoured by God.]

Alternatively, one desiring to prove that Jesus was at no point endowed with supernatural abilities would seize the opportunity of the temptation story to prove that he was hallucinating under lack of sustenance. Indeed this is precisely the line taken by John Seeley in 1865. In this year Seeley wrote his own account of Christ’s ministry, in response to the unwillingness of some members of the Church to sanction scientific progress. Using Carlyle’s image of clothes to suggest obsolescence, he claimed:

The bridal dress is worn out, and the orange-flower is faded. First the rottenness of dying superstitions, then barbaric manners, then intellectualism preferring system and debate to brotherhood, strangling Christianity with theories and framing out of it a charlatan’s philosophy which madly strives to stop the progress of science – all these corruptions have in the successive ages of its long life infected the Church.

Dickens would have agreed with Seeley so far, but his interpretation of Christ’s ministry as human rather than divine was one, according to Annie Fields, ‘in which Dickens can see nothing of value’. In Dickens’s *Life of Our Lord*, Christ is specifically identified with God at two points in the story, and performs various miracles. However, Dickens’s attendance at a Unitarian chapel during this period is certainly significant in light of his *Life of Our Lord*. He gave as a reason the greater tolerance of Unitarians to those of differing beliefs, and Philip Collins is somewhat dismissive in his comment that:

The moral rather than theological emphasis is typical, and it is probably useless to try to define some consistent position or development in his religious beliefs.

As Forster insisted after his friend’s death, Dickens sought relief from Church of England doctrinal controversy in the liberal outlook of the Reverend Tagart, with whom he remained friends for the rest of his life. Tagart himself would not have believed that Jesus was born the Son of God, rather that he was a man made perfect. Nonetheless he stressed that the Bible ‘shows us in this beloved Son of God a pattern of excellence that transcends our highest aspirations’. Dickens would not
therefore have had to agree with every aspect of Unitarian belief to feel at home in a Unitarian chapel. This comprehensiveness must have been a relief when set against the precise and restrictive doctrines of the Anglican Church. In a letter to his wife, Dickens was later to remark:

Tell Macready that if he doesn’t come to the play, I shall join the Tory ranks in Politics immediately afterwards, and become one of whatsoever religious denominations most requires me, in the words of Miggs, ‘to hate and despise my fellow creetur, as every practicable Christian should.’ Tell him I have not yet settled the exact church I shall favour, there being so many of this kind.\textsuperscript{107}

Believing in Christ as a merciful redeemer, Dickens seems paradoxically to have been influenced during the 1840s by the doctrine of Atonement, insofar as he believed in Christ’s having died in order to offer salvation from an unspecified judgement; certainly his belief in Hell is made clear in his inclusion of the Dives and Lazarus parable in the \textit{Life}. The doctrine of Atonement was associated particularly with evangelicalism and was defined as:

That expiation for sin, by the sufferings and death of the Redeemer, by which the justification of the believing sinner is reconciled with the righteousness of God. We hold that the death of Christ was strictly vicarious, – that he died as our substitute, and by his death made expiation of our sins, – that, having no sin himself, he suffered under the imputation and the penalty.\textsuperscript{108}

It seems that Dickens was influenced during this period by one of the defining doctrines of the sect he so much disliked. In \textit{The Life of Our Lord}, Christ’s status as Saviour is explained in rather vague terms:

because he did such Good, and taught people how to love God and how to hope to go to Heaven after death, he was called \textit{Our Saviour}.\textsuperscript{109}

Quite how Christ taught people to hope to go to Heaven is never explained, but it could plausibly be interpreted as an oblique reference to vicarious Atonement. In 1849, having returned to the Church of England, Dickens was able to appeal to prostitutes through the rhetoric of death and judgement:

… by that dreadful day, and by the judgement that will follow it, and by the recollection that you are certain to have then, when it is
too late, of the offer that is made to you now, when it is NOT too late I implore you to think of it and weigh it well.\textsuperscript{110}

The strength of Unitarian thought was that it did not seek to impose rigid creeds on its adherents. As the Rev. Charles Wickstead perceived it, the glory of Unitarianism was ‘to exercise a comprehensive sympathy and charity towards those who differ from us, to seize with delight the common ground on which we all can stand alike’\textsuperscript{111}

Again Philip Collins is hasty in assuming that: ‘... for adults as well as children, theological niceties seemed to him of secondary importance, a distraction from the clear moral doctrine and spirit of Christ’s ministry. Probably his \textit{Life of our Lord} contained most of what he himself considered necessary for salvation.’\textsuperscript{112}

In retreating from the Church of England Dickens would have been able to affirm his liberalism in a religious environment that obviated the doctrine of Atonement. Ironically enough, the interest in Unitarianism that has led many critics to doubt his belief in the Trinity seems to have provided a temporary escape from gloomy creeds in which Dickens himself was inclined to believe.

Notwithstanding such early influences, it is clear from their writings that both Dickens and Collins were anxious to distance themselves from evangelicalism, both in its introspective emphasis on personal failure and in its accompanying social creed. With the doctrines of evangelicalism Collins had never been able to agree, finding them both limiting and unnecessarily stringent. The notion that the majority of the human race was doomed to eternal fire, for instance, would hardly have appealed to him. Judging by a letter of 1852 in which he acknowledges that the ultimate salvation of Satan is a ‘useful and interesting subject for Christians to speculate on’,\textsuperscript{113} it seems almost certain that Collins was himself a universalist. This interpretation is given credence by the arguments of the Reverend Brock, the liberal spokesman in \textit{Armadale}. The status of this character as a wise and just interpreter of religious truth is upheld throughout the course of the narrative, and in answer to Midwinter’s belief in fate, he urges faith and the possibilities of free will. Brock is arguing against the belief that events are preordained and therefore ineluctable, in words that are surely those of his creator as well as his own:

\textit{The mystery of Evil that perplexes our feeble minds, the sorrow and the suffering that torture us in this little life, leave the one great truth unshaken that the destiny of man is in the hands of his Creator, and that God’s blessed Son died to make us worthier of it.\textsuperscript{114}}
This is an expression of trust in a God who has assured salvation for all, and who died to make man worthier of that salvation. Certainly the thrust of Collins’s major novels tends towards mercy. He presents personal as opposed to vicarious atonement as not only redeeming but sanctifying, sanctification being the process by which human beings endeavour to come closer to Christ’s perfection by a process of emulation. In 1886 he praised Walter Scott in these terms, arguing that he was: ‘a man whose very faults and failings have been transformed into virtues through the noble atonement that he offered, at the peril and the sacrifice of his life.’

The perception of sin being transformed into redemptive virtue is integral to Collins’s treatment of the religious experience of his characters; it is a perception which his evangelical figures do not share. The evangelical emphasis on dying prepared in order to avoid eternal torment is eschewed by Collins. In *The Moonstone* the Broad Church Lady Verinder’s status as a religious figure is affirmed both by her daughter, who describes her as an angel, and by Betteredge, who fervently hopes that when he dies, she will take his hand and lead him into heaven. Hers is ‘the hand that, I pray God, may take mine, when my time comes, and I leave my place for ever!’

In impugning her aunt’s salvation, Miss Clack, who has refused to attend the funeral, exposes her own failure to grasp religious verities. Respectfully discreet in his biography and rather less so in his personal correspondence, Collins was able to make a very penetrating commentary in his fiction through the detached medium of caricature. By way of counterpoint to the protestations of the Evangelical Miss Clack in *The Moonstone*, Gabriel Betteredge is a symbolic guardian both of the Verinder family and of the Christian faith. He is deliberately provocative on the subject of the Victorian Sunday, taking pains to let the reader know that he and most other Englishmen spend the evening asleep in a chair. But it soon becomes clear that when he claims to be acting least like a Christian, his anger has been aroused on someone else’s behalf. When Lady Verinder is distressed by Sergeant Cuff’s suspicions of Rachel, Betteredge wishes him on a desert island, and excuses himself not by drawing attention to his own loyalty, but by a discreet reference to human frailty: ‘I am an average good Christian, when you don’t push my Christianity too far. And all the rest of you – which is a great comfort – are, in this respect, much the same as I am.’

Both Dickens and Collins engage with evangelical assertions at both social and doctrinal levels, often through a sophisticated use of
caricature. The very success of this comic element in such figures as Miss Clack and Mrs Jellyby can all too easily distract the reader from a serious appraisal of the points at issue. But primary sources indicate that both writers acknowledged the serious nature of this subject. Infuriated by the pronouncements of evangelical campaigners, Dickens was able to ridicule such issues as the influence of pre-millennialism, the idea that Christ would return to rule on earth for a thousand years, and would begin by destroying his enemies. In the mid-1840s Dickens had satirised the evangelicals’ appropriation of religious authority in their supposed foreknowledge of this event. By the end of *Dombey and Son* the dissenting Reverend Melchisedech Howler has ‘consented, on very urgent solicitation, to give the world another two years of existence, but ... then, it must positively go.’

The very stringency of evangelical belief is seen as being destructive of common sympathy. In Collins’s ‘Mr Marmaduke and the Minister’, the frequent absences from home of a newly married man lead him to be suspected of adultery, because he is too afraid to confess to his wife’s evangelical father that he is an actor of some repute. A serious critique underlies the humour of such portrayals; all ends well in this short story, but exaggerated piety has been the cause of unnecessary distress.

Ultimately evangelicalism was so unpalatable to both Dickens and Collins because it foregrounded corruption rather than goodness. A collaborative effort written in 1856, ‘The Wreck of the Golden Mary’, presents evangelicalism in its most invidious light, as the emphasis on righteous destruction induces selfishness in its proponent. The old Mr Rarx is avaricious and misanthropic, two traits often associated with evangelicalism in the popular imagination. His apparent love for a young child seems to be his one redeeming quality; however Dickens’s narrative proceeds to reveal, necessarily sidestepping the doctrine of infant depravity, that his motives have been purely selfish. When the ship founders and the child dies, Mr Rarx wails: ‘we shall founder, and all go to the Devil, for our sins will sink us, when we have no innocent child to bear us up!’

In the next section written by Collins, Mr Rarx’s delirium allows him to be symbolically drowned because he will not relinquish the gold he believes himself to have discovered. Evangelicals believed that only a chosen few would be saved from death, and the feverish Mr Rarx shouts out: ‘The gold is heavy, and the water rises fast! Come down and save me, Golden Lucy! Let all the rest of the world drown and save me! me! me! me! me! me!’ Both Dickens and Collins feared that a
doctrine of general sinfulness and condign retribution led to a selfish obsession with personal salvation.

As we have seen, the central tenet of evangelicalism, both Anglican and Nonconformist, was the essential depravity of mankind, redeemable only by the favour and grace of God, shown specifically in the Atonement made by Christ on the cross. The fear and self-loathing induced by such a belief gave evangelical proponents a level of control over individual and social mores that both writers viewed with distrust. Writing on the doctrine of Atonement in the late 1850s, the Reverend J. B. Lowe asseverates that God allows punishment only because it would not be in accordance with the divine righteousness of his nature to do otherwise, and that his divine love finds an alternative in the voluntary atonement made by the sinless Christ. But the frequent occurrence of the word ‘blood’, employed with what can only be described as relish, creates a rather disturbing subtext. The tract details the ancient Jewish practice of making animal sacrifices, and declares that:

The typical atonements are superseded, not because the principle of atonement by blood is no longer acknowledged in God’s dealings with man, but, on the contrary, because of the complete development and realization of that principle – the fulfilment of it, in the death of Jesus.\(^{122}\)

Such tracts and sermons emphasise the utter depravity and worthlessness of man himself, as for instance does the Reverend J. McConnell Hussey in the middle years of the century: ‘... there lurks a traitor within, who is striving, noisily and imperceptibly, to unbar the gates, and roll back the portals, for the enemy’s entrance’.\(^{123}\) Such nationalistic language is perhaps startling, but it demonstrates the connection often made by evangelicals between personal piety and the welfare of the nation. Widespread religious practice is linked to universal benefit, and so religious observance is linked to the common social and economic good, through an ethic of abasement. In particular, the tracts distributed by such organisations as the Lord’s Day Observance Society emphasise the infinite corruptibility of the working classes:

It is manifest that many of our countrymen cannot take care of themselves – have not the forethought or the firmness to exercise self-denial, or to resist temptation, when possessed of the means of indulgence. In cases like these, a wise Legislature will assume a
parent’s authority, and withdraw from her children a liberty which will only be abused to their destruction.\footnote{124}

Significantly, drunkenness will ‘disturb the peace’ of the community in which it occurs. In 1833 The Lord’s Day Observance Society had been able to use such arguments as the above in favour of a bill to close public houses and enforce the nominal observation of the Sabbath, and in 1850 a Bill was put forward to close the post office on Sundays. Throughout the tracts and sermons distributed by the evangelicals between 1830 and 1860, the moral and political security of the nation is made contingent on the religious practices of its members.

The threat of working-class insurrection had already been realised in the French Revolution of the late eighteenth-century, and Sabbatarian propaganda makes much of this. The Rev. J. Mc Connell Hussey links neglect of the Sabbath to social anarchy, with considerable éclat:

> Insurrection, treachery, and anarchy have been spreading their work of desolation on the Continent; and the great ones of to-day have been the outcasts of to-morrow – the throne, that glittered with all its attendant lustre, has been shattered into fragments in but a few moments: and yet here, in our own land, a spirit of order and subordination has everywhere presided, with but trifling exceptions. Is there no oratory in this? Is the language of experience unheeded?\footnote{125}

The alternative to anarchy and godlessness is perceived very much in social and political terms. Church of England Evangelicalism, perhaps surprisingly, stresses the importance of a conservative social system as being divinely ordained and necessary to the welfare of the nation. The working class is presented as potentially dangerous, and the solution to the problem is seen as lying in Sabbatarianism. Hussey goes on to maintain:

> If ye would have your nation retain its honoured name – if ye would see peace and quiet dwelling in our land, and contentment reigning in our hearts – if ye would see the bonds of society firmly riveted, the wisely-appointed gradations of rank and station uninjured – you must become hearty defenders of the Sabbath day. Its employments are calculated to benefit all ranks. The poor man learns the lesson of obedience and contentment, and feels the influence of the Lord’s day in hallowing his thoughts, in removing excitement, and generating a gentleness of spirit. The rich man too may drink deeply at
the stream of Christian instruction,—see the becoming ornament of
humility, the necessity of liberality ... 126

Reading this sermon, it is hardly possible not to observe that the poor
man’s lesson is offered to the rich man as a stream at which he might
care to drink, and that the poor man’s obedience becomes an ‘ornament
of humility’ to be displayed by his more fortunate counterpart. This
distinction is satirised by Anthony Trollope in his portrayal of the
Low Church Mr Slope in *Barchester Towers*, who berates the poorer
members of his congregation without mercy:

> From the poorer classes he exerts an unconditional obedience to set
rules of conduct...With the rich, experience has already taught him
that a different line of action is necessary. Men in the upper walks
of life do not mind being cursed, and the women, presuming that it
be done in delicate phrase, rather like it. 127

However, it soon becomes apparent that Slope’s real purpose is to gain
power over those with whom he comes in contact, and he is last heard
of marrying a rich widow who has come under his sway.

The emphasis of evangelicalism was on the salvation of souls within
a doctrine of original sin. However the movement did extend into the
realm of politics and despite the assumption that few souls would be
able to escape eternal damnation, sometimes seemed ready to save the
nation en masse, principally by the use of threats. The promulgation of
restrictive measures (the proposed ban on Sunday trading, the shutting
of places of amusement and so on) which, as has been often pointed
out, would principally affect the poor, was tied inextricably to issues of
national prosperity and public safety. The evangelicals of the 1830s,
placing little stress on Church authority as compared with the written
word of God, gave warning of divine retribution on the nation as a
whole if their doctrine was not supported by parliamentary Acts.

Dickens took marked exception to what he saw as attempts to
control the poor through harsh doctrines. His aversion to
Sabbatarianism, which he attacked in articles and letters from 1836, is
an obvious example. In an article written in 1836, ‘Sunday Under
Three Heads’, he argued that enforced Sabbatarianism could only be
detrimental to the working-class in particular. As to the argument or-
inginating from Lord Chief Justice Hale and seized upon by Sabbatarians
such as Hussey, that criminals blamed their first offence on a failure to
observe the Sabbath, it is pointed out that such would have been the
case had the holiday itself fallen on any day in the week. Furthermore:
It is too much to judge of the character of a whole people by the confessions of the very worst members of society...Who ever thought of deprecating the teaching poor people to write because some porter in a warehouse had committed forgery? Or into what man’s head did it ever enter, to prevent the crowding of churches because it afforded a temptation for the picking of pockets?128

This article certainly does not provide evidence of laxity in Dickens’s own beliefs. He had himself been offended by Paris, in which:

there was, of course, very little ... to reproach us for our Sunday travelling. The wine-shops (every second house) were driving a roaring trade; awnings were spreading, and chairs and tables arranging, outside the cafés, preparatory to the eating of ices, and drinking of cool liquids, later in the day ... nothing at that hour denoted a day of rest, unless it were the appearance, here and there, of a family pleasure party.129

But as John Forster explained in his biography: ‘The bitter observance of that day he always sharply resisted, believing a little rational enjoyment to be not opposed to either rest or religion; but here was another matter.’130 This indignation at what Dickens perceived as a lack of respect for the Lord’s Day is easily overlooked by the reader of his essays, in which unnecessarily zealous observers of the day are the focus of attack. Dickens objected to strict Sunday observance on the grounds of public welfare, and he was particularly alive to the seeming hypocrisies practised by wealthy Evangelicals. In Nicholas Nickleby a family requiring a cook advertise to this effect:

Cold dinner in the kitchen on the Sabbath. Mr Gallanbile being devoted to the Observance question. No victuals whatever cooked on the Lord’s Day, with the exception of dinner for Mr and Mrs Gallanbile, which, being a work of piety and necessity, is exempted. Mr Gallanbile dines late on the day of rest, in order to prevent the sinfulness of the cook’s dressing herself.131

Furthermore Sabbatarian action sometimes caused unnecessary inconvenience to the general public, not least by interfering with the running of trains; moreover, it penalised the working-classes by depriving them of amusements on their one day off, as Dickens protested in Household Words in 1850.132 Collins’s religious outlook is less socially
oriented than that of Dickens, but in the following year he made out a similar case in ‘A Plea for Sunday Reform’, an article published in *The Leader*.\textsuperscript{133}

Attacking such attempts to control the working-classes in particular, Dickens argued that, if anything, such restrictions would prove to be seditious. Meeting the Sabbatarians on their own ground of working-class volatility, he warned that ‘it is in nations as in families. Too tight a hand in these respects, is certain to engender a disposition to break loose, and to run riot.’\textsuperscript{134} Specifically he traces irreligious practices among the working class directly to Sabbatarianism:

What is it that the Honourable Member for Whitened Sepulchre … wants to do? He sees on a Sunday morning … certain unwashed, dim-eyed, dissipated loungers, hanging about the doors of public-houses … Does he believe that any weight of handcuffs on the Post-Office, or any amount of restriction imposed on decent people, will bring Sunday home to these? … let him get up some statistics of the drunken people in Glasgow, while the churches are full – and work out the amount of Sabbath observance which is carried downward, by rigid shows and sad-coloured forms.\textsuperscript{135}

Moreover he warns the middle class that their own Sunday recreations may be the next to be curtailed:

In our mean gentility … we may try to separate ourselves, as to this question, from the working-man; and may very complacently resolve that there is no occasion for his excursion trains and tea gardens, because we don’t use them; but we had better not deceive ourselves. It is impossible that we can cramp his means of needful recreation and refreshment, without cramping our own, or basely cheating him.\textsuperscript{136}

Not only is the Sabbatarian argument invalid – the holidaymakers and workers in post offices have time to go to church and can be seen to do so, whereas restrictions and sombre observances will only lead to resentment; it is also disingenuous. Legislation was of course passed by the middle and upper classes, and evangelical lobbies gained support, as Dickens was quick to point out, by obviating the indulgences of the rich as ‘necessary’. For instance, a rich man could enjoy a walk in his own grounds even if the public parks were to be shut. But in suggesting that the closing of the post office is the thin end of the wedge, Dickens
advances his argument and makes a clever appeal to the self-interest of the richer classes – they too are workers and as such are linked inextricably to the lower class. As the evangelical tracts make the national security dependent on working-class submission, so Dickens subverts the sense of a relationship between classes to make the wealthier members of society identify their enjoyments with the protection of the amusements of the poor. The clear implication is that the continued protection of their own Sunday recreations depends on their not interfering with those of their compatriots. In this way the amorphous relationship between religious conviction and social oppression is inverted, to bring the rich into alliance with the poor on the question of Sunday observance.

Dickens’s outlook on Sabbatarianism remained hostile throughout his life. In 1851 the Great Exhibition remained closed on Sundays, thus excluding the poorest classes, who worked for six days a week. Lord Shaftesbury was among the few evangelicals whose intentions he generally admired, but Dickens violently opposed his Sabbatarian policy notwithstanding. In a letter to Angela Burdett Coutts in 1854, he once again criticised the evangelicals’ successful efforts to close the Crystal Palace on Sundays: ‘The Crystal Palace People, I venture to predict, will find the general English sense revolt against these monstrous pretences.’

Outraged by the Sabbatarian effort of 1856 to ban military bands on Sundays, he encouraged working people to assert their right to innocent amusement: ‘They have been informed, on the high authority of their First Minister... that they are almost indifferent to it. The correction of that mistake – if official omniscience can be mistaken – lies with themselves.’

Ian Bradley offers a more sympathetic interpretation of evangelical policy, suggesting that:

By far the greatest part of the Evangelicals’ effort to extend their own concept of proper behaviour was directed not at the poor, but at the middle and upper classes. They believed that the morals of the lower classes could best be reformed by prohibitory legislation and prosecution... With the higher classes on the other hand, detailed instruction and exhortation was thought to be a more effective and appropriate way of securing good behaviour.

Clearly Dickens is presenting only one side of the story. Furthermore, evangelical missions to the slums aimed to remedy both spiritual and
bodily ills, in much the same way as Dickens himself had done in his written appeal to prostitutes in 1849. Mayhew was greatly indebted to their experience for the writing of his London Labour and the London Poor and indeed missionaries and their families sometimes died of diseases picked up in the poorer parts of London. As Bradley points out:

Their evangelizing interests took them naturally into those places where humanity was at its least regenerate, into the prisons and brothels, the factories and slums. The cruelty and misery which they saw there angered and appalled them and resolved them to devote themselves to fighting for reforms and improvements.¹⁴⁰

Moreover they were more humane in their charity than the state institutions. Kathleen Heasman pinpoints the more positive aspect of evangelical philanthropy as opposed to the reality of the workhouse: ‘they looked upon the family as the unit for care. Unlike the Poor Law authorities, they tried to keep the family together and when they helped individual members it was usually with the purpose of benefiting the family as a whole.’¹⁴¹ This desire both to convert individuals and to improve their living and working conditions was most famously embodied by Lord Shaftesbury. It is an aspect of evangelical philanthropy that is not given prominence in Dickens’s novels.

But as his writings show, Dickens’s objections to evangelicalism were not inspired only by social or pragmatic considerations. Both he and Collins felt strongly that individual responsibility could be undermined by such all-encompassing doctrines as original sin, as Dickens implies in a comic aside in a letter to Collins in 1854: ‘as the devil would have it (for I assume that he is always up to something, and that everything is his fault – I being, as you know, evangelical), I mislaid your letter …’¹⁴²

Miss Clack’s frequent allusions to ‘fallen nature’ in The Moonstone serve exactly such a purpose. But in the novel Collins satirises this propensity to blame personal failings on universal corruption, because of his belief in the paramount importance of the inner life. From this standpoint, it is significant that so much of his writing is in the medieval tradition of the morality play, in which Everyman finds himself the object of a battle between personified Good and Evil. Pre-Reformation morality plays involve the doctrine of the Atonement and warn against ‘the world, the flesh and the devil’. However, they are also notable for their dramatisation of man’s inward struggle, through personification. The central theme of the late medieval play Mankind,
for instance, lies in the temptations and tribulations of the central figure, who causes pain or relief to God’s representative on earth, by either following or rejecting his advice in the face of various tempters who attempt to debase his spirit. Titivillus makes it clear that he sees the condition of Mankind’s soul in terms of a power struggle between himself and the forces of good:

To speak with Mankind I will tarry here this tide,
And assay his good purpose for to set aside.
The good man Mercy shall no longer be his guide.
I shall make him to dance another trace! 143

Mercy is the guide who has enabled Mankind to avoid sin, but the devil intends to imprison him in wrongdoings from which he will be unable to escape; freedom and freewill are thus associated with God, whilst sin is a form of bondage engineered by the externalised force of evil. This notion of a character being at once responsible for his or her own actions, and on another level being the object of a battle between rival forces of good and evil, is a recurring and sustained metaphor in Collins’s later works. This emphasis on the importance of each individual soul was in line with evangelical thought, but Collins found it necessary to liberalise the accompanying doctrines of original sin.

Dickens remained suspicious of the evangelical emphasis on the individual, and predictably the Ragged School Union, of which Lord Shaftesbury was Chairman between 1845 and 1885, attracted only partial support from him. In response to a request that he write an article for the Edinburgh Review, he asked:

Would it meet the purposes of the Review to come out strongly against any system of education based exclusively on the principles of the Established Church? ...I could give... a description of certain voluntary places of instruction, called ‘the ragged schools’... I could show these people in a state so miserable and so neglected, that their very nature rebels against the simplest religion, and that to convey to them the faintest outline of any system of distinction between right and wrong is in itself a giant’s task, before which mysteries and squabbles for forms must give way. 144

In 1865, Our Mutual Friend criticised the methods employed as inappropriate and as inducing such a one as Charlie Hexam to selfish hypocrisy. Pupils are fed on a diet of propagandist tracts, in which
Providence punishes the wicked and allows material prosperity to the good. This reference to the evangelical habit of referring wealth to moral goodness reinforces the accusation of worldly hypocrisy so often levelled against them. By implication, these imaginary tracts are equating poverty with sinfulness and suggesting that moral goodness will bring benefits in this world. Playing on this belief: ‘Several swaggering sinners had written their own biographies in the same strain; it always appearing from the lessons of those very boastful persons, that you were to do good, not because it was good, but because you were to make a good thing of it.’ Dickens further believed that the insincere would capitalise on this obsession with spiritual regeneration to gain the approval of evangelical zealots, which their more honest compatriots would fail to attract. *David Copperfield* sees Uriah Heep, the product of a Ragged School, attracting the sympathy of prison visitors by insisting that he has been reborn. In 1850 an article in *Household Words* protested that: ‘we have come to this absurd, this dangerous, this monstrous pass, that the dishonest felon is, in respect of cleanliness, order, diet, and accommodation, better provided for, and taken care of, than the honest pauper.’ The theological significance of this perceived discrimination will become clear in the context of Dickens’s view of future Judgement.

Collins likewise takes issue with the social aspect of evangelicalism, particularly as it affects the individual. His novels suggest that evangelical influence is responsible for a circumscribed popular understanding of morality. Less concerned with judgement than Dickens shows himself to be, he attacks evangelical teaching for its harsh interpretations of his characters’ behaviour. By employing female protagonists in all of his major novels, Collins is able to demonstrate very clearly what he perceives as a flaw in evangelical morality. The heroines of his novels are judged more harshly by the society in which they live than are their male counterparts, and this allows them an insight into the tenuous relations between religious theory and social practice. Magdalen Vanstone is forced to abandon a career on the stage because it is supposed by evangelicals, in particular, to be immoral, and has by association damaged her sister’s position. As a direct result, she is driven to marry her hated cousin in a sacrament that is shown to be thereby reduced to an act of prostitution. Fully aware that she will be condemned by the very zealots who have denied her an honest living and caused her to commit a real sin, she writes bitterly to her erstwhile governess: ‘What do good women like you, know of miserable sinners like me? All you know is that you pray for us at church.’ The words ‘miser-
able sinner’, taken from the Book of Common Prayer, lose all meaning in this context, when spoken by someone who ignores the implication that sinners are unhappy and in need of pity. It is this detachment from the transgressor that Collins is most concerned with attacking, insisting on the saving role of Christ in relation to personal sin.

But he makes a further distinction in his novels between evangelicalism itself and those of its proponents who use philanthropic activities to further their own ends. Miss Clack’s ‘Servants’ Sunday Sweethearts Supervision Society’ might have sounded suspiciously familiar to Collins’s mother, who in his father’s lifetime had been a member of the ‘Servants’ Charitable Bible Society’. On a more sinister level, the philanthropist Godfrey Ablewhite so beloved of ladies’ committees is shown to have a dangerous power over vulnerable women like Miss Clack, who are encouraged to sublimate their sexual response to him in religious rapture. Only Rachel Verinder is impervious to Ablewhite’s charms, and she has no connection with the meetings at which he speaks. At the end of the novel he is shown to be a thief and a plunderer, who has used religious oratory to maintain a respectable veneer.

Above all it is this use of evangelical religion to gain social status to which Collins objects. A passing reference to Wesleyanism in No Name suggests that he respected genuine religious convictions, however much they differed from his own. In Lambeth: ‘the followers of John Wesley have set up a temple, built before the period of Methodist conversion to the principles of architectural religion.’ The accusation that the Methodists were becoming more concerned with the chapels themselves than with the congregations who attended them is referable to the process of consolidation that was taking place in Dissent at this time. As Alan D. Gilbert explains:

...the once dynamic movement had assumed a more sedate character by the early Victorian period. The emphasis was now on maintaining, consolidating, and capitalising upon the strong position achieved during the initial phase of mobilisation: Anglican competition was now more fierce, and in any case there was now a huge internal constituency requiring pastoral care and demanding new varieties of religious-cultural satisfaction.

Furthermore, Nonconformity was beginning to attract middle-class congregations, and Collins saw this new respectability as detracting from its earlier independence and fervour.

It has frequently been complained of Dickens that he makes little overt attempt to differentiate in detail between Nonconformist and
Anglican evangelicals. His early presentations of dissenters as socially inferior are however indicative of contemporary feeling. Valentine Cunningham maintains that:

The failure of many Victorian novelists to be open towards Dissent can be seen as an analogue of the social and political disabilities Dissenters were forced to suffer. Churchmen continued throughout the nineteenth-century and beyond to despise Dissenters ... Novelists did not exaggerate when they presented the wide social gulf that lay between Church and Chapel.\(^\text{150}\)

Such figures as Mr and Miss Murdstone, Miss Barbary and Mrs Clennam are all the more threatening because their social status as Anglican evangelicals lends authority to their pronouncements. Notably Dickens’s Anglican evangelicals are treated with increasing sympathy in the later novels, but they do not display comical traits in the way that even Collins’s most sinister figures do. In their condemnation of enjoyment, they are seen powerfully to inflict damage on children, and cannot therefore be presented in a humorous light. But they are accorded a seriousness denied to his dissenting figures until 1868, two years before his death. This initial failure to take Dissent seriously has led some critics to assume that Dickens was consistently more opposed to dissenting evangelicals than to their Anglican counterparts.

Ivor Brown would have it that he was ‘less hostile to the Anglican Church than to the chapels, whose gaseous and self-righteous pastors and preachers he satirised repeatedly and with virulence’.\(^\text{151}\) The sinister behaviour of Mr Murdstone alone stands as a corrective to this simplified appraisal, which fails to take into account Dickens’s immediate reasons for being hostile to Dissent. As unpalatable to him as the evangelical hostility to science, was the Dissenting use of uneducated lay preachers, and the late story ‘George Silverman’s Explanation’, underlines the danger of investing so much power of interpretation in those who had received no formal schooling in theology. Dickens had tried to show in *The Pickwick Papers*:

> how sacred things are degraded, vulgarised and rendered absurd when persons who are utterly incompetent to teach the commonest things take upon themselves to expound such mysteries, and how in making mere cant phrases of divine words, these persons miss the spirit in which they had their origin. I have seen a great deal of this
sort of thing in many parts of England, and I never knew it lead to charity or good deeds.\textsuperscript{152}

It is undeniably true that fiction such as ‘George Silverman’s Explanation’ reveals contempt for uneducated dissenters such as Brother Hawkyard, the drysalter. The Brothers attack Silverman’s decision to go into the Church rather than joining their Chapel, because they themselves would be excluded from preaching in it. But rightly or wrongly, Dickens sees those who take preaching upon themselves, without the necessary qualifications, as indulging in an unpardonable form of self-aggrandisement, and thus debasing the sacred mysteries of religion. Nor are the habits to which Dickens objects associated only with Dissent. Satirising the ‘familiar knowledge of the ways of the sublime inscrutable Almighty’\textsuperscript{153} assumed by the members of this chapel, Dickens shows them indulging in the recognisably evangelical habit, common to both Anglicanism and Dissent, of waiting for inspiration, as did Lord Shaftesbury himself. Hawkyard boasts that he has been given words with which to preach, because God owes him the wages of a faithful servant: ‘Because I have been his faithful servant for five-and-thirty years, and because he knows it. For five-and-thirty years! And he knows it, mind you! I got those words that I wanted on account of my wages.’\textsuperscript{154}

Elisabeth Jay is more perceptive than Brown in her analysis. Conceding that Dickens was more interested in the evangelical ethos as a whole than in the details of sectarian belief, she argues that:

> The dividing line between Evangelicalism and Dissent as seen by Dickens may not conform to that discerned by ecclesiastical historians, but is nevertheless striking. His Evangelicals, Miss Barbary, the Murdstones, and Mrs Clennam have a higher social origin than his Dissenters and are more frighteningly powerful. The material greed of a Stiggins or a Chadband differentiates them from the Evangelicals whose interest is in power over others rather than in an exclusive desire for money and creature comforts.\textsuperscript{155}

But this view fails to allow for the increasing seriousness with which Dickens took Dissent. The machinations of Brothers Hawkyard and Gimblet have a damaging effect on George Silverman. It transpires that Hawkyard and Gimblet are in a conspiracy to defraud him, but their ethos has done him irreparable emotional damage. In this late tale, Nonconformity is no longer reduced to the level of simple
ridicule, as it had been in *The Pickwick Papers*. Convinced of his own ‘worldliness’ by the corrupt ‘Brothers’ who persist in attributing their own faults to him, Silverman is unable to form relationships with those around him, because he genuinely believes that he is not worthy of love. This representation of the effects of an evangelical upbringing is as sinister as anything done to David Copperfield by the more respectable Murdstones, who are themselves motivated by thoughts of Mrs Copperfield’s financial position. The shift in perspective between the comic disruption caused by Stiggins and the emasculation of George Silverman at the hands of Brother Hawkyard suggests the growing status of Dissent. By 1868, when this story was written, Nonconformity was considerably more powerful than it had been in 1836. Responding to the changing situation, Dickens came to include Chapel as well as Church evangelicals in his portrayals of religious tyrants. This changing perspective is already keenly felt in the philanthropic theme of *Bleak House*. The dissenting Chadband is at least partly responsible for Jo’s dying in ignorance of religious truth. He is as destructive a presence as the more middle-class Mrs Pardiggle, who enters a hovel uninvited and presents its starving occupants with a religious tract that she knows they cannot read.

In the 1868 story George Silverman’s first memories are of living in a subterranean slum and being called ‘a worldly little devil’ by his mother, a term of abuse which suggests that she has adapted a phrase picked up from visiting London missionaries. Initially unable to register feelings that do not relate to his physical well-being, the young Silverman is again deemed worldly by the crowd that confronts him on his first escape from the slum, after the death of his parents.

Valentine Cunningham is therefore missing the point in insisting that in Dickens’s account: ‘although he is commonly acclaimed as a radical and a sympathizer with the poor, and doubtless saw himself as that, he seems oddly antagonistic to just those sorts of Dissent that in fact constituted the religious sphere of the poor.’\textsuperscript{156} The gross physicality of Dickens’s Dissenting preachers is certainly hard to miss. But this appraisal rather unfairly compares Dickens’s hatred of evangelicalism to his approbation of ‘Dissent in the shape of aristocratic Unitarianism.’\textsuperscript{157} Unitarianism was more liberal than other forms of Dissent, and therein lay its significance for Dickens. But although it obviated the harsher doctrines of orthodox religious teaching as maintained by evangelicalism, ultimately it was unable to contain his beliefs.
The religious thought of Dickens and Collins is most conveniently defined then in terms of Broad Church Christianity. But such a definition should not be taken to mean that their beliefs were vague or that they were lacking in theological awareness. They were as quick to condemn a purely rational view of the world as they were to denounce harsh religious doctrine. Both attacked evangelicalism on both moral and theological grounds, and both were in some degree influenced by the very ethos that they satirised with such virulence. The complexity of their response to evangelicalism, and the difficulty with which Dickens distanced himself from it, can now be examined in detail.

This study is concerned specifically with the ways in which they sought to liberalise orthodox doctrine, as put forward by evangelicals. Notably the inconsistencies inherent in Dickens’s theological position were not capable of resolution within the structure of orthodox church doctrine, but neither was his trinitarian emphasis ultimately compatible with Unitarian belief. The most obvious way in which he addressed this dilemma was through ‘manly’ Christianity, which tempers the ‘earnestness’ of the evangelicals with a romantic ‘enthusiasm’. Expiation becomes the willing fulfilment of moral obligations, and denunciation of sin is replaced with a celebration of active goodness. In his earlier novels Collins similarly employs the concept of manly Christianity to deny evangelical teaching on depravity whilst emphasizing the value of personal responsibility. His use of this ethos portrays resistance to temptation as evidence of man’s essential goodness.

The significance of manly Christianity for both writers lies in its treatment of judgement and revenge. Its positive message of human worth is crucial to both writers’ portrayal of judgement, and its teaching is to be found in a modified form throughout their work. It is through adapting and reworking the ideas located in manly Christianity that Dickens and Collins go on to question the validity of evangelical teaching. The endorsement of manly Christianity initially offered by both Dickens and Collins must therefore be examined in the context of their reiterated dislike of evangelical doctrine.
Throughout his work Dickens’s religious ideology remains dependent on particular espoused gender norms. At the simplest level, his female characters are accorded moral status in line with their purity and selflessness; male protagonists must be active and resolute, striving to attain manliness through vicissitude and inevitably, through work. Dickens pointedly describes many of his heroes as ‘manly’, although the term often suggests nothing more definite than a certain ennobling quality that justifies their centrality in the text. He sometimes uses the word as a vague term of approbation, writing to the Reverend William Harness in May 1854, ‘I heard a manly, Christian sermon last Sunday at the Foundling.’

James Eli Adams is one critic to point out that at the beginning of the nineteenth century the term ‘manly’ could be applied to either sex and meant something akin to moral maturity:

Over the course of the century, however, commentators increasingly distinguished between a masculine self-discipline, which they represented as an ongoing regimen of aggressive self-mastery, and a feminine self-denial, which they represented as a spontaneous and essentially static surrender of the will to external authority.

But the question of what constitutes manliness becomes increasingly complex in the context of differing social and religious agendas. Anthony Trollope observed in 1869:

There are not many who ever make up their minds as to what constitutes manliness, or even enquire within themselves upon the subject... That personal bravery is required in the composition of
manliness must be conceded, though, of all the ingredients needed, it is the lowest in value... An affected man, too, may be honest, may be generous, may be pious; – but surely he cannot be manly... Let a man put his hat down, and you shall say whether he had deposited it with affectation or true nature. The natural man will probably be manly. The affected man cannot be so.³

Again Adams explicates the way in which manliness could be linked to the equally vague code of the gentleman, as embodied in the young men from Thomas Arnold’s Rugby, whose moral elevation was conceded by Newman himself even as he abhorred what he perceived as their liberalism. And Norman Vance suggests the way in which:

Dickens and Trollope, like their contemporaries Kingsley and Hughes, tried to make manliness an up-to-date practical ethic for everyman, supplanting the old aristocratic ideal of chivalry but retaining something of its glamour and moral grandeur.⁴

The code of the gentleman put forward by Arnold and made famous by Hughes in Tom Brown’s Schooldays is concerned with defining masculine behaviour both in isolation and in reference to relations with women. Another ideal of masculinity was concerned with the sphere in which men communicated solely with each other. In referring to such all-male bodies as the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood and monastic institutions (the gentlemen’s club would be another interesting example), Herbert Sussman suggests the anxiety about intense male relationships that could be generated by the exclusion of women. Sussman dates the growth of suspicion attaching to all male preserves to the end of the 1840s, but goes on to note the tension between male activity, located outside the home, and the elevation of the domestic:

... if normative bourgeois manliness is defined as success within the world of work inhabited solely by other men, bourgeois masculinity is also defined in relation to the domestic sphere within criteria that value the role of breadwinner for a domestic establishment and that situate affectionate as well as sexual life within marriage.⁵

This version of manliness is the most readily accessible in the literature of the time and underlay much of the debate surrounding the social role of women as well as men.

The ideal of manliness then was a potent one, however defined, and when Kingsley famously attacked Newman in the 1860s this was the
Kingsley accused Newman of a want of openness in his proceedings. The latter explained his own reserve as a desire to avoid what would be an unsettling intercourse with the irreligious world, but conceded that: ‘This self-restraint is the first thing which makes holy persons seem wanting in openness and manliness.’ Manliness then was differently understood by different groups, but it was generally accepted that it comprised certain defining elements such as straightforward honesty, courage and the capacity for struggle or self-mastery. A further hallmark of both Newman’s and Kingsley’s ideal of manliness is asceticism, and this idea is explored in Dickens’s and Collins’s tales of adventure overseas.

But structured norms of masculinity were far from stable in the nineteenth century and Kingsley’s attack on Newman takes advantage of this to appropriate manliness by further obfuscating its meaning. He deliberately equates manliness with a heterosexual robustness that Newman as a celibate priest could not claim for himself. Toward the latter half of the century the term ‘effeminate’, hitherto defined against ‘manly’ to suggest effete or ineffectual, was taking on a specifically sexual connotation. By extension effeminacy or the lack of manliness came to be linked to accusations of perversion. The Catholic Church had been accused of effeminacy and perversion before, by those who wished to suggest that it was archaic and somehow unhealthy. But perversion in the discourse of the time could also suggest homosexuality and Kingsley encapsulates the elision of terms and meanings in his famous jibe that Newman is opposed to the ‘brute male force’ of the heterosexual world. Oliver S. Buckton puts it rather neatly: ‘The usefulness of perversion as a category is that it allows one to cross between the sexual and the religious components of Newman’s transgressions and Kingsley’s phobias.’

In Kingsley’s account, homosexual orientation is linked to effeminacy and weakness, signalled by the Tractarian self-imposed or the Catholic priest’s enforced celibacy – in this account the subject either has no urge towards sexual expression or must suppress his inappropriate desire for other men. But in such an insistent celebration of the healthy male body, the manly Christian is himself open to the suggestion of homo-eroticism, an irony that Kingsley blithely ignores.

The appropriateness of predetermined gender roles was crucial to manly Christianity and this could cause problems even without the vexed issue of directing sexuality into the proper channels. Crucially the question arose of how secular patterns of manliness, associated with resilience and even aggression, could be reconciled with the
milder Christian virtues of self-abnegation and the resignation of worldly power. Furthermore:

... if women as well as men were to be able to identify with representations of the human Christ, these would have to embody the highest attributes of both femininity and of masculinity as they were understood in a society in which gender identities were sharply polarized. For men, Christ had to exemplify those qualities traditionally regarded as feminine and now considered by Christians to be desirable in both genders, but without any loss of their traditional masculine identity.8

Manly Christianity emphasises stalwart endurance through the exercise of self-discipline and resolution. But its nearest approach to gentleness is found in the self-restraint associated with the ennobling forgiveness of others. In a slightly different context Norman Vance explains the tension between these two value systems, as the:

rather equivocal attitude to the tradition of moral and religious manliness, seeking to merge it in the more secular tradition of the gentleman, neatly illustrates the dilemma of the Victorian manly Christians, caught on the fence between the church and the world while trying to deny that the fence existed.9

Allen Warren describes the glorification of rigorous engagement with the elements, which is so central to The Frozen Deep and to Hartright’s experience in South America:

despite its many forms, certain common elements of feeling and attitude can be isolated which informed all its varied social manifestations. There is firstly the close connection between manliness and good health, both physical and moral... There was a widely held belief that a healthy physique was more important than a veneer of social culture. Linked to these concerns was the value of a simple and spartan life away from the debilitating materialism of the city.10

Kingsley is keen to socialise religion through its channelling of physical energy into reforming zeal, as is apparent in Lancelot’s response to the condition of the slums in Yeast.11 Appropriate use of male energy serves to justify the emphasis on physical development and the association of ‘manly’ work with religion would certainly have appealed strongly to Dickens. Furthermore, it encourages co-operation and
social behaviour, most famously through the gamesplaying of the public schools. The moral focus of Thomas Hughes’s novel *Tom Brown’s Schooldays*, based on the ethos of Arnold’s Rugby, is to be found in Arthur’s vision of heavenly workers, a vision which is vouchsafed to him after he has developed his social instincts through sport.

The *Dictionary of Phrase and Fable* defines manly Christianity *per se* in terms of ‘Healthy or strong-minded religion, which braces a man to face the battle of life bravely and manfully’. This circular definition – in which manly religion develops and perpetuates manliness – reveals the shared assumptions inherent in this ideal. Where the evangelicals stress the internal conflict between conscience and temptation, this version of manliness regards life itself as a battle to be fought with valour. In common with evangelicalism, manly religion promotes earnestness, endurance and self-renunciation, but the emphasis is not the same. Evangelical earnestness and endurance are associated with expiation for the sins of mankind; manliness celebrates and directs man’s impulse towards good. Walter Houghton explicates the difference between earnestness and enthusiasm, but posits a close relationship between the two, which he postulates were often held in tension:

In significant contrast with that of moral earnestness, the ethic of enthusiasm assumes that human nature is good; that the organ of virtue is the sensibility rather than the conscience; and that the moral life depends, not on the arduous struggle to master the passions and compel the will to a life of duty, but on the vitality of the noble emotions, inspiring the delighted service of a high ideal.

*The Frozen Deep* and *A Tale of Two Cities* combine this enthusiastic belief in the noble instincts of the manly Christian with an admission of the struggle required to overcome personal weakness. In so doing they contrive to undermine the evangelical insistence on sin.

However, the detractors of this religious ideal, which they dubbed ‘muscular’ Christianity, perceived a glorification of violence in its emphasis on fighting. *Tom Brown’s Schooldays* is certainly open to this charge. At a country feast in the opening pages, villagers play at ‘the noble old game of back-sword’, of which the object ‘is simply to break one another’s heads’. Hughes assures his readers that ‘A very slight blow with the sticks will fetch blood, so that it is by no means a punishing pastime.’ This inconsistency in the ideal of masculinity is pinpointed by Shirley A. Stave, in her analysis of Walter Hartright’s position at the beginning of *The Woman in White*:
On the one hand, maleness/masculinity is typically associated with authority, with the power to speak and act, with Law, with reason, with the establishment of civilization. On the other hand, it is identified with physical strength, brute force, that which is untamable and uncontrollable, the antithesis of civilization.\textsuperscript{15}

Collins’s ambivalent response to manly Christianity, which will be examined in detail, can be traced in part to a dislike of violence at all levels.

Trollope’s reference to personal bravery is telling in this context, in that Evangelical propaganda used the Crimean War to suggest a specific link between military patriotism and religious commitment. In 1854 Dickens adopted this idea in the story of ‘The First Poor Traveller’, an inset tale in ‘The Seven Poor Travellers’ in the \textit{Household Words} Christmas number. The story is set during the Napoleonic Wars. Richard Doubledick is reclaimed from a headlong course ‘to the devil’ by a senior officer, who is then killed by the French. After the war, this dead officer’s mother befriends the man who killed him, not realising who he is. Doubledick’s first instinct is for revenge, but he comes to see that both officers did their duty: ‘And when he touched that French officer’s glass with his own, that day at dinner, he secretly forgave him in the name of the Divine Forgiver of injuries.’\textsuperscript{16} Dickens confessed to having been himself affected by the story: ‘The idea of that little story obtained such strong possession of me when it came into my head, that it cost me more time and tears than most people would consider likely.’\textsuperscript{17} This ideal was not shared by Collins, who saw war as unChristian in itself.

Given this conflict, it is not surprising that of the jointly written stories, only ‘The Perils of Certain English Prisoners’ involves any level of successful violence, and that it was Dickens who planned the story and wrote the first and concluding chapters. It is in the first chapter that the battle with the pirates occurs, and again Christian faith is demonstrated through military discipline. One disenchanted soldier is inspired to save his much-disliked sergeant by his declaring: ‘If you are not man enough to strike for a fellow-soldier because he wants help, and because of nothing else, I’ll go into the other world and look for a better man.’\textsuperscript{18}

In the chapter written by Collins the cruelty inflicted is purely psychological. The pirate captain threatens to blow out a soldier’s brains every five minutes until he learns which of the women are connected with the ship. The pirate holds the pistol against the soldier’s head ‘as perfectly composed, in his cat-like cruelty, as if he was waiting for the boiling of an egg’.\textsuperscript{19} But there are no more casualties until Dickens’s
final chapter, when Christian George King is shot and left hanging from a tree.

In collaborative stories that do celebrate manly Christianity, the emphasis is on heroic survival rather than military prowess. ‘The Wreck of the Golden Mary’, written at the same time as *The Frozen Deep*, and for both the structure and the central idea of which Dickens was responsible, celebrates the selflessness of the ship’s captain. In his heroism the captain disguises the fact that he is barefoot until he collapses in the bottom of the boat; while waiting to be rescued, the passengers and crew pray together. The solidarity of the shipwrecked passengers and crew is contrasted with the individualism of the Evangelical Mr Rarx, whose selfish introversion leads him to pray only for his own salvation even as he declares the common sinfulness of all around him.

‘The Wreck of the Golden Mary’ seamlessly encapsulates the manly Christian ideal, in which physical stamina and endurance operate within a framework of noble self-sacrifice. In this particular tale the antagonist is the natural world itself and valour is easily reconciled with the resignation of self. Tensions arise where the hero comes into direct conflict with another character, whom he must vanquish before a resolution can be attained. *No Thoroughfare*, written in 1867, presents a struggle between hero and villain, set against a backdrop of mountain avalanches. By the end of Act 1, on which they collaborated, the Collinsian theme of specifically moral strength has been introduced. Walter Wilding is scrupulously honest but weak; he wishes to restore an inheritance to its rightful owner, when he realises that he has been confused when very young with another Foundling child. He is nonetheless incapable of coping with the pressures of his moral dilemma when the other child is not to be found, and this leads to his death. His friend Vendale does not lay claim to the same high principles, but the constancy of his friendship is rewarded when he turns out to be the true Walter Wilding. Unlike the dead man, Vendale is capable of perseverance, as Collins shows in Act 2, when he persistently seeks an interview with his lover despite the machinations of her sinister guardian.

It is in Dickens’s Act 3 that the attempted murder of Vendale takes place. Here he justifies what is likely to have been Collins’s dichotomy between force of character and pusillanimity, by equipping Vendale with stamina and physical prowess. Alone with the villainous Obenreizer, Vendale is shown to be the more muscular of the two, and is only pushed off the mountain after his trustful nature has led to his
being successfully drugged by his enemy. In a parallel with *Our Mutual Friend*, Vendale is then rescued from death by the devotion of his lover Marguerite. The comic Joey Ladle of Act 1 is redeemed in Dickens’s eyes by his transformation from a grumbling predictor of evil to a true manly Christian, accompanying Marguerite to the mountains of Switzerland and claiming that his adventure has done him good.

Dickens and Collins can be seen here to diverge significantly in their ideas of strength and weakness. Where Collins presents moral strength in terms of loyalty to the dead, as Vendale takes on his friend’s responsibility as executor of his will, Dickens is more concerned with his resilience, fighting Obenreizer in the snow. Even the central female protagonist is permitted a perilous journey through the mountains, for the sake of rescuing her manly Christian lover. In the first act the figures of the supposed Walter Wilding and the comic Joey Ladle militate against a story of moral victory through physical prowess – the former is killed off to make way for his more muscular counterpart and the latter is converted to Dickens’s way of thinking in the act written solely by him.

But Collins was to have the last word. In 1870, the year of Dickens’s death, he launched an attack against the school of thought that connected muscular prowess with moral strength in *Man and Wife*, in which he takes pains to present a talented athlete as being no better than a thug. This polemic followed in the footsteps of *A Very Strange Story*, in which Edward Bulwer Lytton had associated the excessive worship of youth and vigour with the Satanic, in the figure of the villain. But as early as the 1860s, when Collins was writing his major novels, he consistently refused to employ a ‘manly’ hero as the central figure. The central characters in *The Woman in White* are a woman with masculine traits and an effeminate male villain; *No Name* is concerned with the adventures of a woman, in which her male assistant is a petty criminal. *Armadale* suggests two male figures as possible heroes – one is in robust physical health but lacks constancy and mental ability, while his intelligent and sensitive counterpart is emasculated and socially inept. But whatever their differences of opinion on this subject, both endorse the way in which this emphasis on activity and physical health offers an antidote to ‘diseased’ introspection. Richard Wardour in *The Frozen Deep*, Sydney Carton in *A Tale of Two Cities* and Walter Hartright in *The Woman in White* all seek relief from depression in physical exertion. Each one of these characters seeks to fulfil the ideal of manly Christianity, through active service to others. The ideal of a society informed by manly religion is perpetuated in Sydney Carton’s
vision of social reform in *A Tale of Two Cities*; Sydney’s authority is endorsed by the narrator because he has overcome his inertia, to work assiduously in an effort to bring about Darnay’s release, and subsequently makes a heroic sacrifice of his own life.

A comparison of *The Frozen Deep* with the individually written novels brings the attitudes of each author into sharp relief. Collins’s play, on which Dickens collaborated, allows physical endurance to bring out altruism and comradeship in a group of men on the brink of starvation. Despite Collins’s dislike of violence, he was able to respond to manly Christianity as potentially positive at this stage of his career. Notwithstanding the emphasis on rugged valour, self-sacrifice was an important aspect of the manly ideal, and this proved an important link between Dickens’s adulation of heroism and Collins’s concern with personal redemption. Dickens’s continuing attraction to manly Christianity is clear from his second historical novel, written in 1859. *A Tale of Two Cities* develops the theme of regeneration in a central figure, through involvement in scenes of violence. But by 1860 Collins’s reservations about this religious code seem to have increased. *The Woman in White*, which appeared in *All The Year Round* immediately after *A Tale of Two Cities*, subverts the ideal of manly Christianity to which Dickens still adhered.

This divergence can be presented most clearly by isolating the individual novels from the collaborative work. The impact of Dickens’s thinking on *The Frozen Deep* highlights both the intersections and the points of tension between each writer’s standpoint in 1857. An analysis of Dickens’s subsequent treatment of manly Christianity will demonstrate his continuing preoccupation with this ideal as an answer to evangelicalism, while Collins’s novel *The Woman in White* will be read as a belated attempt to question the effectiveness of that ideal.

The Kingsleyan idea of manly Christianity, whatever may have been Collins’s reservations, was undeniably an effective method of presenting the relationship between religion and the temporal experience. In the event a real situation, which had attracted wide public attention, was to provide the inspiration for a tale of manly religion at its best. Dickens had taken a great interest in the disastrous Franklin expedition of 1854, and hotly protested against any suggestion of its having ended in cannibalism – the leaders of the expedition were highly educated and ‘manly’, therefore they could not have done such a thing.

In April 1856 he wrote to his sub-editor, W.H. Wills: ‘Collins and I have a mighty original notion (mine in the beginning) for another Play at Tavistock House.’ This idea was the origin of *The Frozen Deep*. 
Dickens’s influence on the play is apparent in its conflict between the hostile elements of the North Pole and the determined endurance of the stranded voyagers. The men show an awareness of the value of mutual support and inspiration which is not matched by the women in Devon. Where Mrs Steventon demands angrily: ‘Can a girl like Clara be fonder of her Lover than I am of my Husband?’

Her husband says of Frank: ‘I heard him murmuring her name in his sleep. He set me thinking of my own poor wife.’ Exiled from the safety and restraints of English society, the explorers are faced with hunger, cold and death. The play continually emphasises these deprivations, in order to suggest the moral strength of the characters in resisting temptation. Their inspiration is shown to be specifically religious, though mediated through the channel of human support. The moral conversion of the central character is focused on his love for a woman; nonetheless his dramatised encounter with the forces of good and evil which he himself embodies, is presented by Wardour in terms of a Christian miracle.

This insistence on redemptive miracles discredits the gloomy predictions of Nurse Esther. Mrs Steventon remarks that Clara’s entry after Nurse Esther’s departure is ‘Like a rainbow after the clouds!’ The biblical allusion not only stands as a confirmation that a brighter prospect has triumphed, holding out the promise of renewed hope, and refuting the validity of the nurse’s morbid prophecies; it also introduces the theme of tolerance and mercy, which will prove one of the most important issues of the drama. In revising the script, Dickens brings Esther on to the stage in time for her to have overheard conversations, thus diminishing her credibility. She herself insists that she has ‘second sight’ and can follow the progress of the missing men: ‘Wha’ sees them and follows them in the spirit? Wha’ can give ye news of them when a’ earthly tidings fail?’

The validity of her claims is left open to question; in the midst of her warnings she is shown to believe as fervently in the evils of crossed cutlery as she does in her own ability to see the lost men. She herself claims divine inspiration for her prophecies, stressing that her words accompany the ringing of the church bells. In sacrificial imagery, she terrifies Clara by insisting: ‘I see the lamb i’ the grasp of the lion... I see you and all around you crying bluid!... the stain o’ that bluid is on you!’ This prophecy suggests not only predestination but also the guilt stemming from original sin. Clara is not to blame for what has happened, but the nurse predicts that the stain of the lamb’s blood will be on her. She is implicated both in the murder of her lover, and in the
guilt engendered by the doctrine of Christ’s Atonement. This appropriation of religious language, coupled with her association with the harshness of Old Testament clouds before the rainbow of the New Covenant, places Esther very much in the Calvinistic tradition of ineluctable damnation. The recurring use of animalistic imagery that characterises her prophecies militates against Lucy’s optimistic citation of the wonders of creation as reflecting the love of God.

Dickens himself believed that: ‘There is a soothing influence in the sight of the earth and sky, which God put into them for our relief when He made the world in which we are all to suffer, and strive, and die.’ This hope is reflected in Lucy’s advice to Clara, to find comfort in the beauties of Nature. The second act seems set to belie the hope of divine intervention held out by Lucy, as it immediately ironises her argument regarding the supposed beneficence of nature. It is ‘pinching cold’, Bateson reports. Crayford responds by commenting: ‘And that’s no news in the Arctic Regions, with the thermometer below zero indoors. My poor dear sister, Lucy, what would she say, with her horror of cold, if she knew what our temperature was here!’

The expedition is far removed from the comfortable assurances derivable in an English drawing room. Here the religious principles of the men are to be put to a very severe test. It is at this point that the different concerns of the writers become apparent. Collins, who was responsible for writing the play, posits an opposition between good and evil inclinations, which he externalises through the imagery of ice and snow. Dickens, who was involved in the conception of the play, and who made extensive suggestions and revisions, was specifically interested in vindicating the ‘manliness’ of men such as Franklin.

But both wish to present the ultimate triumph of New Testament regeneration over Old Testament revenge. Wardour’s outlook is initially vengeful, and he is seen to use biblical language as a means of justifying his own hatred. Speaking of his successful rival for Clara’s love, he asseverates:

There is a day of Reckoning appointed between us. Here, in the freezing cold, or away in the deadly heat – in battle or in shipwreck – in the face of starvation or under the shadow of Pestilence – though hundreds are falling around me, I shall live! Live, for the coming of one day – live for the meeting with one man!

This arrogation of the power of judgement can be construed as little short of blasphemy – not only does Wardour ignore God’s recorded
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word that judgement belongs to him alone; he claims divine sanction
for so doing. Crayford denounces Wardour’s conviction as ‘the bloody
superstition of revenge’ unconsciously linking him with the supersti-
tious Nurse Esther. However this interchange has the effect of height-
ening the nurse’s credibility, and so sets the scene for a conflict
between Old and New Testament values. As Wardour realises that his
rival is none other than Frank Aldersley, he persists in seeing the
meeting as preordained, and the appointed day as having arrived. It is
at this moment that the Collinsian theme of the good angel is intro-
duced. Crayford’s interrupting Wardour’s reflections, with the ques-
tion, ‘Did I hear you call me?’ suggests divine intervention. At the
moment of temptation, a moral alternative is set up.

Wardour’s rejection of Crayford’s influence exposes the irreligious
nature of his desire for revenge. As one group of men sets off in search
of rescue, he insists on joining them with Frank. As Crayford attempts
to intervene, Wardour abandons his religious imagery and adopts
instead the language of choice and arbitrary chance. Deliberately
ignoring his friend’s efforts to spare him temptation and to save
Frank’s life, he retorts with phrases such as, ‘chance has decided it’ and
‘Leave him to his choice.’ This shift in register signals a conscious rejec-
tion of the manly Christianity offered in Crayford’s appeals to solidar-
ity and comradeship. He is seen as having refused redemption, and is
excluded from the mutual blessings of Aldersley and Crayford.

The third act reveals that the members of the expedition have been
rescued. John Want comically undermines the status of Nurse Esther’s
psychic abilities, grumbling: ‘I don’t believe her First Sight is much to
boast of, far less mentioning a second one.’

However it soon transpires that Wardour and Aldersley are still
missing. When Wardour then enters alone, the ‘day of reckoning’ is
fulfilled in Crayford’s accusation: ‘Look at the conscience-stricken
wretch! Confess, unhappy ruin of a man! Tell us how it was done.’
His merciful intervention having been rejected, Crayford would appear
to have become a judge. But in Collins’s writing hasty or stringent
judgements are often proved to be invalid. Wardour has in fact saved
Aldersley’s life at the expense of his own. He has made atonement for
his original intention through a pilgrimage, determined to ‘wander’
until he is able to restore Clara’s lover to her.

Wardour explains his conversion in specifically religious terms. It
happened as he lay with Frank, ‘he on one side and the tempter on the
other’. Frank has ‘crept between the Devil and me’ physically, by
placing his head on his enemy’s breast. But he has done this in his
sleep, which diminishes the sense of a voluntary human agency, and as he does so Wardour hears the voice of temptation float away on the night wind.

The ambiguity of this scenario – Frank’s action can be explained in rational terms and Wardour’s deteriorated mental state might serve to explain the voice – in no way weakens its religious element. Rather it contradicts Nurse Esther’s fatalism by emphasising the importance of free will within a context of divine intervention. Wardour is redeemed and becomes a martyr because he has chosen to reject the temptation which faced him. Indeed the compulsion which Wardour felt to avenge himself on his rival has given way to the claims of a sacred pilgrimage. He has preserved the life of his rival at the expense of his own, and dies restoring him to Clara. Echoing Christ’s last words on the cross, he says, ‘I may rest now – I may sleep at last – the task is done, the struggle is over.’ \(^{34}\) Collins presents the repentant sinner, as Dickens finally came to do in *A Tale of Two Cities*, as capable of sanctification through atonement.

*The Frozen Deep* provides a clear expression of the common ground between Collins’s religious beliefs and those of his friend. Inclined to ridicule the concept of manly Christianity, Collins undermines the determination to endure at all costs embodied by the lost men, through the incessant complaints made by John Want, whose very name is synonymous with deprivation. At the North Pole, the men show a determination to be brave unto death if necessary. Want parodies his companions’ discourse; insisting that they will all die soon, he says: ‘When a man gets the cold into him to that extent that he ices his own bed, it can’t last much longer. I don’t grumble.’ \(^{35}\) For Collins, the influence of religion is felt through a personal response to temptation, whereas Dickens sees it operating as a unifying force among a group holding similar ‘manly’ values.

But both acknowledge the importance of human relations as a medium for religious experience and conversion. Nurse Esther may or may not be psychic, but her doctrine of guilt is limiting and ultimately invalid. She does not allow for the redeeming effects of love or for the possibility of human relations being turned to miraculous ends. Interaction between the human and divine is typical of Collins’s writing in the 1860s, and Dickens’s later novels show an increasing level of interplay between the two. By presenting miracles in this way, the play keeps within Collins’s dictum that faith is strengthened by the avoidance of any insult to common sense. Furthermore, Collins’s and Dickens’s shared belief in the doctrine of Free Will allows immoral pur-
poses to be rejected at any moment before they are carried out. This emphasis on free will responding to moral alternatives, mediated through forces of good and evil, is central to the play’s main theme of regeneration. Dickens was so inspired by Wardour’s altruism in dying to unite another man with the woman he loved himself that he went on to base Sydney Carton on the earlier character, presenting his sacrifice too as the result of a religious conversion experience.

Like The Frozen Deep, A Tale of Two Cities presents an interplay of religious and social concerns in an extreme situation. Dickens’s religious agenda operates within a wider spectrum than that of Collins, and this novel demonstrates the way in which manly Christianity informs his social vision. Sydney Carton’s death on behalf of another character stands as a symbol of hope for an entire nation, and in this way the worth of the individual is held in tension with the demands of a broader religious context. The context of the novel is the disruption of social norms by the outbreak of the French Revolution in 1789, and it is within this broader spectrum that manly Christianity is seen to operate, as the emergence of Sydney Carton as a manly Christian posits an alternative to the tenets associated with evangelicalism and upheld by the revolutionaries. Specifically, Carton is seen to offer self-sacrifice and the promise of renewal in answer to the revolutionaries’ demand for retribution, as his sacrifice transforms the doctrine of Atonement into an ideal of sanctification.

In France adherence to Christian virtue has been abandoned in the face of chaos. The religious concept of ‘witnessing’ the coming of Christ has been supplanted by a condemnatory witness in the presence of a tribunal, and this image of condemnation and punishment isironically close to the more extreme forms of evangelical piety which Dickens so disliked. A Tale of Two Cities exposes the way in which the poor masses have been dehumanised by the harsh legislation of the ancien régime, and warns that retribution inevitably follows this kind of oppression. Where conservative evangelicalism cites sinfulness as one of the causes of poverty, Dickens warns that revenge will be exacted on those who fail to take responsibility for the poor. But in transferring this exaction of justice to the realm of the human rather than the divine, Dickens is able to undermine the validity of revenge as an ethical system. As an alternative he offers the New Testament concept of selflessness, as mediated through manly Christianity.

Retribution is presented as not condign but arbitrary in the novel, insofar as it visits the sins of the father on the son, in the manner of Old Testament law. The central characters are threatened with execu-
tion for crimes with which they were not connected, and this ethos is seen to be perverse in its refusal to respect individual life. The fanatical contempt for her own and others’ lives demonstrated by Mme Defarge is contrasted with the selflessness of the converted Sydney Carton, who eventually comes to appreciate the value of the life that he is relinquishing. Carton’s voluntary death is of immense importance in several respects. It allows him to redeem himself through manly Christianity, as an enactment of this code allows him to overcome his feelings of worthlessness. In this sense the sacrifice is akin to that of Richard Wardour in *The Frozen Deep*. Furthermore this resolution to the novel supersedes the doctrine of vicarious Atonement through personal emulation of Christ’s sacrifice, and in this way Carton is able to subvert the ethos of retribution held up by the revolutionaries and associated in a wider context with evangelical and Old Testament teaching on original sin.

In the novel Dickens attacks the introspective emphasis on personal failure associated predominantly with evangelicalism, initially by contrasting the wasted potential of Sydney Carton, whose dissipation is the result of his feelings of inadequacy, with the active worth of his double Charles Darnay. Sydney’s deterministic outlook leads him to believe that his life is irretrievably wasted, and his personality utterly fixed, so that he sees no hope of escape from his self-inflicted degradation. His vision is that of Tantalus, who according to classical mythology is tormented in Hades by delights that are forever out of reach:

> Waste forces within him, and a desert all around, this man stood still on his way across a silent terrace, and saw for a moment, lying in the wilderness before him, a mirage of honourable ambition, self-denial and perseverance. In the fair city of his vision, there were airy galleries from which the loves and graces looked upon him, gardens in which the fruits of life hung ripening, waters of Hope that sparkled in his sight. A moment, and it was gone.36

The narrator distinctly implies that this vision of personal worth as being out of reach is false, deriving its strength from Sydney’s inertia:

> Sadly, sadly, the sun rose; and it rose upon no sadder sight than the man of good ambitions and good emotions, incapable of their directed exercise, incapable of his own help and his own happiness, sensible of the blight on him, and resigning himself to let it eat him away.37

But for Sydney himself, the vision is completed by the marriage of the woman he loves to the man who represents all that he himself might
have been. This despair can only be overcome by the necessity for making a sacrifice of his own life, in order to save Darnay from the guillotine at the end of the novel. Thus inspired by his love for another character, Sydney is ultimately able to escape his malaise, and comes to embody the ideal of the manly Christian. He involves himself in the back street espionage of Paris, from which Darnay has detached himself, and is seen to operate the more effectively for so doing. This ability to move between his own middle-class background and the insalubrious Paris dens makes Carton an appropriate emissary to the revolutionaries. Newly concerned with the cohesive value of communal religious values, he dies with a serene countenance and stands as an inspiration to those who see his death.

The novel draws a parallel between the third estate of France prior to the Revolution and the poor of nineteenth-century England, in order to affirm the responsibility of one class for another. In taking this line Dickens was consciously echoing the point made by the thinker Thomas Carlyle. Some years earlier Carlyle had perceived parallels between the oppression of the third estate and the plight of contemporary workers. Writing in 1838 he described revolutionary France as being: ‘bescoured with a Devil’s Pack, the baying of which, at this distance of half a century, still sounds in the mind’s ear.’

This is the context within which he was to write *The French Revolution*, in which he recorded the events in France of fifty years before. This book had a profound effect on Dickens, who read it several times and himself came to equate the condition of the revolutionaries with that of the working-classes of his own time. Though he was no supporter of revolution, Dickens’s presentation of the reprisals instigated by the mob suggests that such is the inevitable outcome of a harsh political regime. This ambiguity is present in a letter of 1860, in which Dickens is discussing the contemporary uprising in Italy:

> I shudder at the distresses that come of these unavailing uprisings ... yet what is to be done? Their wrongs are so great that they will rise from time to time, somehow. It would be to doubt the eternal Providence of God to doubt that they will rise successfully at last.

One of the reasons Dickens gives for his opposition to revolution is that the leaders are less likely to be slaughtered than their unthinking supporters, who die in large numbers.

Another writer who deplored the reduction of human life in the revolution to a matter of statistics or animal survival was Watt Phillips.
He argued with Carlyle that the ancien régime of France was insupportable, but that revolutionary tactics led to a perpetuation of its evils, insofar as the roles of tyrant and victim were simply reversed. In 1858 his play *The Dead Heart* dramatised the way in which young idealists were hardened by their treatment at the hands of the ruling class to the point of being unable to show mercy themselves after its overthrow. Attacking the arbitrary powers of the ruling classes, as embodied by a corrupt priest, the Abbé de Latour, Phillips traces the effect of a long and hopeless imprisonment on a young man. Latour has his own lascivious motives for imprisoning Robert Landry, and thereby gaining access to his intended wife. But he pretends to be furthering the interests of his friend the Comte de Valérie, who also wishes to marry Catherine. Latour says to his friend: ‘There is no speedier cure for a hot head or heart than a month’s sojourn within the walls of the Bastille.’ But in the event Landry is detained through the Abbé’s influence for the next seventeen years, and Catherine believing him to be dead, eventually marries the Count to save her father from a similar fate. The image of prison as a tomb is evoked by the Abbé himself, shortly after the liberation of the prisoners at the commencement of the revolution. He says of Landry: ‘He was dead, to you, to the world, but they untombed him this morning from the dungeons of the Bastille.’

In a further parallel with *A Tale of Two Cities*, Landry has etched the names of the Count and Latour on the walls of his cell, and has sustained himself in prison both with the thought of Catherine, and with his plan to revenge himself on them. Having become an important official at the time of the Revolution, he orders the execution of the Count’s and Catherine’s son. Landry is ultimately to learn mercy through his love for Catherine, though only once he has killed the Abbé and learned that the Count, too, believed him to be dead. The climax of the play is reached when Landry dies in place of the Count’s son, thus preserving him for Catherine, who realises what has happened too late to intervene if she would. The theme of a selfless exchange of lives, inspired by the ethos of *The Frozen Deep* and *The Dead Heart*, is the central issue of *A Tale of Two Cities*, in which manly Christianity operates as a symbol of unity and reconciliation. Sydney Carton’s death not only saves his rival Charles Darnay from the guillotine, but supersedes the Old Testament revenge enacted by the third estate. Presenting the Revolution as inevitable in the face of aristocratic abuses, Dickens agrees with Phillips in offering symbolic self-sacrifice in preference to revenge.
But the overthrow of an aristocratic order under any circumstances was in itself seen as pernicious by some, who equated it with a contempt for the order created by God; in 1793 even the moderate Thomas Somerville felt that:

The position of scepticism cannot be confined to the member first affected by it. Like a gangrene, it spreads contamination from the extremities to the vital parts... . The duties of fearing God and honouring the king, are wreathed together. Atheists vilify and deride the authority of magistrates....

He continued:

The Christian religion, one of its strongest pillars, being overturned, the whole fabric of morality must totter and soon fall to the ground.

This of course is the very assumption that evangelicals were to use with such skill in the next century. Such anarchic imagery is used to suggest retribution for widespread apostasy, whereas in *A Tale of Two Cities* revolution is the inevitable result of social abuses and this taking of vengeance is not endorsed. Like Dickens, evangelicals used images of the French Revolution to galvanise the public of their own time. But rather than using it as a practical argument for improvements in social conditions for the poor, they threatened national disaster if the country failed to support their view of religion, pointing to France to exemplify the consequences of godlessness. In 1856 the Lord’s Day Observance Society put forward the idea that:

It is a matter of grave consideration, whether our intercourse with those Continental nations, in which pastimes on the Lord’s Day are publicly practised and sanctioned, may not be unconsciously lowering the public standard of right and wrong in things pertaining to God.

The persecution of French priests as monarchists during the Revolution, and the declared atheism of the constitutional leaders themselves, cannot have failed to impress themselves upon the nineteenth-century imagination, particularly under the influence of such tracts as the above. Alan Haig dates the growing importance and power of evangelical enthusiasts within the church to the 1820s.

Still a small and unpopular party before the French Revolution, the fortunes of the Evangelicals rose as the frightened reactions of the
governing classes led to a renewed respect and support for the Church. By the 1820s they formed a substantial and highly active party in the Church; if still widely disliked, they could not be ignored, and they introduced a vision of clerical work based firmly on the salvation of souls.45

This analysis of the growing respect for evangelical bodies underlines the way in which the evangelical message was strengthened by the fear of a mob uprising. Given that the French Revolution was still an active force in the public imagination, the parallel drawn between London and the ‘lawless’ Paris would doubtless have been powerfully suggestive. A. E. Dyson is one of many critics who emphasise the contemporary fear of working-class revolution:

Dickens’s sense of the precariousness of civilisation is one which many Victorians...must have shared... There was great fear of socialist subversion or conspiracy, and a most uneasy consciousness of explosive potential in the working-class...the French Terror operated on Victorian memories much as Belsen and Auschwitz do upon our own.46

In 1831 the Lord’s Day Observance Society had played on this conception of the powerful mob to enlist middle-class help in sending the poor to church. John Wigley cites a tract entitled ‘An Appeal to the Rich’ as warning: ‘that once the poor had broken God’s law they might logically reject all human authority.’47

Such propaganda takes no account of the economic factors behind the Revolution. Carlyle accounted for the uprising in France, as Somerville had done before him, by an appraisal of the disparity in wealth and living conditions between rich and poor. More crucially, both note the corruption of the upper classes, and their indifference to the sufferings of the third estate, through whose payment of taxes the aristocrats themselves maintained their wealth. Carlyle’s history details the mass suffering of men and women whom he says had been reduced to the level of animals long before they debased themselves in the manner of their insurrection; Dickens was later to use this bestial imagery in describing the spiritual condition of the London poor in Bleak House. Carlyle’s analysis of events is primarily social rather than religious, though the physical sufferings of the poor are said to be ‘not unheeded of Heaven’.48

Writing in the 1860s, Victor Hugo adopted Dickens’s technique of illustrating contemporary social ills by reference to the past. Les
*Misérables* is set during and just after the Napoleonic Wars and he, too, describes the very poor as being degraded to the level of animals. Jean Val Jean has been known by a number for much of his life, and the degradation he presents leads the narrator to contemplate:

...il y a un point ou les infortunés et les infames se mêlent et se confondent dans un seul mot, mot fatal, les misérables; de qui est-ce la faute?

[There is a point where the unfortunate and the infamous merge and blend in a single, fatal word, miserable ones; whose fault is it?]

*A Tale of Two Cities* presents the abuses suffered by the peasantry as having led directly to the Revolution in France, whilst creating a sinister picture of the contemporary life of England. Jerry Cruncher, by day a respectable employee of Telson’s Bank, is by night a body snatcher. This dual picture of the impossibility of continuously controlling individual action, and the chaos caused by the revolutionaries in France, suggests that a repressive social system is ultimately more dangerous than working-class freedom. The fundamental decency of the working-class is demonstrated in Mrs Cruncher. She stands as a symbol of religious humility, which is later to be glorified in the person of Sydney, and demonstrates an ideal of working-class piety very far removed from the fears encouraged by evangelical bodies. The popular conception of working-class disorder and godlessness is exposed as exaggeration and hysteria in the calm figure of this woman, and ignorance rather than vice is the most serious impediment to her husband’s conversion. Mrs Cruncher has been accused of cant because of the cleanliness of her house: ‘Mrs Cruncher’s zeal does not reflect any new sympathy on Dickens’s part, if the depiction of Mrs Joe in *Great Expectations* is any guide…’ But Mrs Jo is of course ostentatious in her asceticism and terrorises her husband and young brother; Mrs Cruncher, by contrast, is caught at prayer while she believes her husband to be asleep, and her own son is set to watch her after she has suffered the throwing of a boot at her head. That Mrs Cruncher’s faith is worthy and sincere is surely adumbrated by the neatness of her house, in which she stands in stark contrast to the neglect of domestic matters represented by the evangelical Mrs Jellyby in *Bleak House*. Furthermore her language is simple and concise, and she is not seen either to berate her husband or to exaggerate her own status as martyr to his misconceptions.
But notwithstanding the presence of Mrs Cruncher, the initial presentation of religion in England is not at all promising. Sydney’s negative view of religion is echoed further down the social scale by Jerry Cruncher’s superstition. As has been outlined, Mrs Cruncher’s religious feeling is commendable and humble, but the ignorance of her husband leads him to equate prayer with the casting of spells. His superstition causes him to react violently:

…I won’t be prayed agin, I tell you. I can’t afford it. I’m not a going to be made unlucky by your sneaking. If you must go flopping yourself down, flop on favour of your husband and child, and not in opposition to ‘em. If I had had any but a unnat’ral wife, and this poor boy had had any but a unnat’ral mother, I might have made some money last week instead of being counterprayed and countermined and religiously circumwented into the worst of luck.\(^{51}\)

This attitude towards religion as an insidious instrument of revenge is closely akin to the feeling that leads Dr Manette to curse the family of Evremonde, in the Bastille. Prior to his imprisonment, his sense of Christian responsibility had led him to enact the role of the Good Samaritan, taking up the cause of a peasant family. In prison, this sense of identity with others becomes perverted, and he identifies the entire family of Evremonde with the two brothers who have injured him. With brilliant irony, the narrator implicates what he presents as the warped values of the Old Testament in this superstitious curse. Dr Manette’s manuscript denounces the brothers as being deserted by God, on the strength of their treatment of him, and once again this is reminiscent of evangelical propaganda. In 1851 the Religious Tract Society declared that Sunday observance was the hallmark of religious favour,\(^{52}\) which in effect allowed them to regard their opponents as corrupt. Dr Manette’s document is based on similar principles, claiming divine corroboration of his own viewpoint, and so enabling him to declare the brothers irredeemable:

If it had pleased GOD to put it into the hard heart of either of the brothers, in all these frightful years, to grant me any tidings of my dearest wife – so much as to let me know by a word whether alive or dead – I might have thought that He had not quite abandoned them. But, now I believe that the mark of the red cross is fatal to them, and that they have no part in His mercies. And them and their descendants, to the last of their race, I…denounce to the time
when all these things shall be answered for. I denounce them to Heaven and to earth.53

The theme of vengeance overtaking justice is perpetuated by the revolutionaries themselves, whose uprising leads to popular hysteria and a complete disregard for human life. In their literal application of the tenet ‘an eye for an eye’ they come to echo the more tenuous aspects of Old Testament ideology, which comes to seem arbitrary even in its exactness. The situation of Dr Manette is a case in point – his arbitrary condemnation of the family of Evremonde is used after many years have passed, as a denunciation of his own son-in-law, and Mme Defarge suggests that it may be taken as a condemnation of Charles’s wife, daughter and, completing the irony, father-in-law – Dr Manette himself. Heralded as a hero for his sufferings, his life can yet be held forfeit because he has attached himself to the family who have wronged him. The tribunal completely ignores the erstwhile prisoner’s admission that Charles’s mother was a good woman, who instructed her son one day to make amends to the family of the dead girl, sharing as she did the view that he would otherwise be made to suffer for his father’s crime: ‘I have a presentiment that if no other innocent atonement is made for this, it will one day be required of him.’54

It is the doctor himself who seems destined to pay heavily for his own harshness, until a vicarious atonement is made for him by Sydney. Since his release the doctor himself has renounced ideas of vengeance in favour of reconciliation through his daughter’s marriage to Charles. He is no longer able to identify with revolutionary zeal, rather using his influence for merciful ends. Indeed the image of the crowd welcoming Dr Manette on one day and preparing to sacrifice him shortly afterwards is akin to the story of Christ’s reception on Palm Sunday, as preceding his death on Good Friday at the hands of the same people. But even the noblest sacrifice is not always rewarded, as Jerome Meckier has shown. The doctor believes that his own suffering has been redeemed in the power it gives him to free Charles, and concludes that a form of justice has been achieved. But Charles is almost immediately returned to prison by the revolutionaries, confounding Dr Manette’s principle: ‘Dr Manette fails to locate the true decorum in part because his vision of things, his fairy tale of poetic justice, places him presumptuously (though pathetically) at the centre of the providential intention.’55

Even when presented in terms of a transaction – Dr Manette is in a sense attempting to buy Darnay’s freedom with his own past suffering
– mercy has no place in the political ethos. In the revolutionary regime, strict justice is the only recognised value, and justice has come to be equated with revenge. More frighteningly still, the exaction of suffering from the aristocrats has become the most popular form of entertainment. The death of Foulon is a historical fact, but to it the narrator adds the excitement of Mme Defarge, who exults in the man’s humiliation: ‘“That was well done to tie a bunch of grass upon his back. Ha, ha! That was well done. Let him eat it now!” Madame put her knife under her arm, and clapped her hands as at a play.’

The suggestion of divine mercy is extended to the victim of this assault in a way that had not been open to earlier offenders. In *Oliver Twist* Fagin refuses to benefit by Oliver’s prayers, and Carker’s death in *Dombey and Son* is attended by an ambiguous allusion to the question of salvation: ‘he turned to where the sun was rising…As he cast his faded eyes upon it... who shall say that some weak sense of virtue upon Earth, and its reward in Heaven, did not manifest itself, even to him?’

This question really only serves to strengthen the sense of doom in the negative answer it provokes, particularly as it postulates virtue as a prerequisite for salvation. But in *A Tale of Two Cities* the revolutionaries are reproached for their lack of mercy to an inveterate sinner, and they are implicitly condemned with Foulon for their reluctance to let him be forgiven by God:

> At length the sun rose so high that it struck a kindly ray as of hope or protection, directly down upon the old prisoner’s head. The favour was too much to bear; in an instant the barrier of dust and chaff that had stood surprisingly long, went to the winds, and Saint Antoine had got him!  

As in *Dombey and Son* the sun is a token of divine mercy. However, whereas Carker is more surely than ever condemned in his implied refusal of merciful love, Foulon is denied the choice by his killers. In reacting against such a sign of providential interference, the revolutionaries are become as ‘dust and chaff’, which is a biblical symbol of the unconverted and unredeemed soul. The mob is castigated by the subtext of the narrative not for failing to forgive their tormentor, but for attempting to deny him the mercy of God.

This marked contempt for the value of human life quite deliberately denies the worth of individual salvation as the ethic of retribution comes to seem increasingly arbitrary in its failure to respect individual life. Dr Manette has been wont to think of himself as One Hundred
Man’s Resolution, Woman’s Patience

and Five North Tower under the ancien régime, and Mme Defarge consults the issue of the doctor with Jacques Three in similar terms:

‘Now, let me see,’ said Mme Defarge, pondering again. ‘Yet once more! Can I spare this Doctor to my husband? I have no feeling either way. Can I spare him?’ ‘He would count as one head,’ ‘observed Jacques Three, in a low voice. ‘We have really not heads enough; it would be a pity, I think.’

National retribution was a threat that English evangelicals took very seriously at the time when *A Tale of Two Cities* was written, but this portrayal of revenge in temporal terms exposes such an ethic as irreligious and unjust. Rather than promoting virtue, the fear of retribution simply invites a struggle for self-preservation. Beneath the chaos of the Revolution, so gruesomely emphasised by its system of numbering, the one remaining social contract lies in the purely animal desire for survival. Mme Defarge is willing to sacrifice her life to what she sees as the cause of justice. But those most likely to survive her sacrifice are the self-seeking bargainers for life, such as Barsad the spy. This character has exploited his sister and has been exposed early in the tale, thanks to Sydney’s comprehension of the market for information, as a perjurer and a purveyor of political secrets to the highest bidder. Co-operation has become degraded to the level of mutual advantage and blackmail. Amidst the dangers of revolutionary France, Barsad is now masquerading as a Republican patriot, but is in fact prepared to save his own life by making a bargain with Sydney to liberate an aristocrat. Barsad is in a sense the logical embodiment of a system which rejects Christian charity and social co-operation, and espouses instead an animalistic struggle for supremacy as a working system of government. The refusal of the revolutionaries to respect individual life leads to a situation in which those who share neither their fanaticism nor the heroic altruism of figures such as Dr Manette, are bound to subjugate all wider concerns to the preservation of their own specific interests.

Sydney represents the specifically Christian response to this perversion of social responsibility. According to orthodox Christian doctrine, Jesus adhered to the principle of exchange in his own voluntary death, giving up his life in order to take the sins of the world upon himself. Sydney enters into a transaction with Barsad, the terms of which are that the spy will be permitted to remain at large if he will help Sydney to die in the place of Charles. Able to move across the social spectrum from the upper-middle to the lower classes, Sydney is in a position to manipulate the rationale both of revolutionary France and of the
English underworld. It is this versatility that enables him to effect Charles’s escape. Dr Manette has attempted to reason with the tribunal and has not prevailed; it is left to Sydney to engineer a transaction with a character who relates to nothing but the basic laws of survival. Once more this is close to the orthodox interpretation of the crucifixion story, in which Jesus allows himself to be betrayed for money in order that he may die in the place of mankind. Sydney enters into a contract with Barsad in his own purely pragmatic and selfish terms, but he does so in order to make an altruistic sacrifice of his own life. Charles’s naive attempt to reject the implications of his class has signally failed; Dr Manette’s status as hero of the Revolution has proved to be not only limited but also assailable; nor has the angelic Lucie’s appeal to the realm of feeling been efficacious in bringing about the release of her husband. Sydney is able to perform a moral action precisely because he is aware of the fundamental social rules governing the actions of others, and he turns Barsad’s fear of death to good advantage, using it to secure his own execution. As Sydney engineers an agreement with Barsad, each adopts the other’s language in order to emphasise their mutual interest in the exchange, and to remind one another of their mutual dependence. Sydney addresses Barsad in the deceptively calm language of the gambler for high stakes: ‘I play my Ace, Denunciation of Mr Barsad to the nearest Section Committee. Look over your hand, Mr Barsad, and see what you have. Don’t hurry.’ Sydney’s sacrifice of his own life under such circumstances is central to the novel. In earlier novels the figure of the profligate or sinner had served largely as a vehicle for the religious impulses of the central protagonists. In *The Pickwick Papers* Jingle is quietly saved from prison and redeemed through the good offices of Mr Pickwick; the prostitute Nancy in *Oliver Twist* is murdered shortly after receiving a benediction from Rose, who wishes to help her. But Sydney is redeemed through his own love for another character, and goes on to supplant Charles as the heroic martyr. Like Wardour, he is
able to achieve heroic status through the ideal of Christian manliness, his active saving of another man’s life taking the form of a self-abnegating sacrifice. This tension between action, arranging Charles’s rescue and drugging him, and passivity, allowing himself to be executed by the mob, is new in Dickens’s fiction. It is important in that it reconciles the Christian ideal of passive endurance with the social ethos of direct involvement in the world. Ackroyd suggests that for Dickens heroism was equated with passivity and the suffering of unwarranted persecution; it is certainly true that religion is seen at its best when under attack.

Charles achieves the wish-fulfilment ending common to many Dickensian heroes; that is, by the end of the story he has suffered tribulations but has retained his virtue throughout and is ultimately restored to domestic security and happiness. Harsh judgement on the part of Dr Manette and the revolutionaries, rather than his own innate corruption, has been the indirect cause of Charles’s death sentence. Sydney’s sacrifice of himself saves the other not from a deserved punishment, but from himself becoming a scapegoat. However, it is not Charles but Sydney who demonstrates the great Christian principle of forgiveness of one’s enemies. Radically echoing the sacrifice made by Christ, Sydney overcomes the need for reciprocity and dies in the place of his rival at the hands of a bloodthirsty mob, assisted by a Judas figure. The only recognition he receives is from another prisoner, who is to die with him, and who in her innocence embodies his vision of a renewal of the working-class. As the time of sacrifice draws near, Sydney is depicted in increasingly religious language, and he exchanges his ambiguous moral status for a vision of martyrdom that is upheld by the narrative. As he has once been pitied and sustained by Lucie, so he now does the same for a Lucie figure, the doomed seamstress: ‘As the last thing on earth that his heart was to warm and soften to, it warmed and softened to this pitiable girl.’

The seemingly incidental reference to the last thing that he was to love on earth is important as the first reference to Sydney’s assured salvation, and he is then able to transform the increasingly warped ideal of common identity contained in the ‘fraternité’ of the revolutionary motto. He soothes the young girl by saying that she may hold his hand, ‘Yes, my poor sister; to the last.’ Identifying with the sufferings of the French peasants, Sydney is able to embrace a vision of their future, rather than denouncing them for their cruelty to him. The vision is specifically one of atonement and renewal rather than of castigation, and the vision is confirmed by the comments in the city that
he died with a sublime and prophetic look on his face. He is imagined as saying to himself: ‘I see a beautiful city and a brilliant people rising from this abyss … I see the evil of this time and of the previous time of which this is the natural birth, gradually making expiation for itself and wearing out.’

Sydney’s personal vision is specifically religious, but it is a message which encompasses the social state of France. The beautiful city is perhaps an image of Jerusalem or even of Heaven itself, but it is nonetheless to be realised in the earthly Paris at some future date, and will be explicable in terms of social and economic evolution. His message of hope and renewal is powerful because it is at once spiritual and temporal, confirming both the afterlife and the relative importance of the here and now. Religious feeling must serve a practical purpose, and to do so it must be divested of its erudite associations. Sydney’s religion is not wholly intellectual, and encompasses his relationship with the world about him, rather than being separated from it. This assimilation of religious faith into the temporal world does not signal a diminution. If the concept of rest was troublesome to the Victorians as seeming too close to a state of eternal unconsciousness, Sydney resolves the paradox rather neatly, in his statement that his rest will be better than any he has experienced and in a better place than he has known before. He is further inspired by imagining Lucie and Darnay’s son bearing his name, and envisages their descendants remembering his sacrifice on the anniversary of his death. In his vision he combines both Eliot’s ideal of Subjective Immortality, in which the significance of his life will communicate itself to future generations, and the Christian belief in a personal afterlife that she was unable to endorse.

Sydney’s, and Dickens’s, practical view of religion is echoed further down the scale in Cruncher’s conversion. Jerry does not imitate the eloquence of Sydney’s scriptural language, as Barsad attempts to do – rather he expresses himself through the words he has used before. But now ‘flopping’ has ceased to be a denigrating term for spell-casting, for he has come to realise the value of prayer:

‘…them poor things well out o’ this, and never no more shall I interfere with Mrs Cruncher’s flopping, never no more!’

‘Whatever housekeeping arrangement that may be,’ said Miss Pross, ‘I have no doubt it is best that Mrs Cruncher should have it entirely under her own superintendence…’.

‘I go so far as to say, miss, moreover,’ proceeded Mr Cruncher, with a most alarming tendency to hold forth as from a pulpit, – ‘and
let my words be took down and took to Mrs Cruncher through yourself – that wot my opinions respectin’ flopping has undergone a change, and that wot I only hope with all my heart as Mrs Cruncher may be a flopping at the present time.\textsuperscript{67}

Jerry’s words, so ludicrously misinterpreted by Miss Pross, are nevertheless indicative of his new conception of religion – it is not to be understood in purely mystic terms, but is to be an integral part of his own life, and praying can therefore be termed ‘flopping’ without disrespect. Jerry has taken on a new vocabulary – significantly he has used the words ‘hope’ and ‘heart’ – but his new-found fervour is sincere and personal, and must therefore be described in his own terminology, rather than in abstruse intellectual language. In this conversion Jerry is set apart from Barsad, who fails to comprehend the nature of Sydney’s sacrifice because he does not care to understand. In this way Jerry foreshadows the realisation of Sydney’s vision – tribulation has shown him the value of religion and he becomes a figure of renewal and rebirth.

The warning against revolution in \textit{A Tale of Two Cities} is clear enough. To dehumanise a nation by failing to care for its members is to encourage an animalistic individual struggle, and ultimately to invite chaos. Nor is fundamentalist Christianity without danger, in that it excludes so many from the hope of salvation, and therefore leads to despair and dissipation. On a large scale, such despair can lead to a total disregard for the value of human life. The New Testament concept of universal love is of immense importance in determining the wellbeing of a society, since it dictates mutual co-operation and forbids anarchy. Religion must not be separated from other aspects of social life, but rather must inform them. Sydney’s pragmatism allows him to put his religious feelings into practice. Jerry Cruncher comes to understand the value of Christian faith in his own language and through his own experience of revolution. This emphasis on individual conversion is central to much of Collins’s writing, but here it takes on a wider implication. The individual becomes a symbol of redemption and hope for the society in which he lives.

In \textit{A Tale of Two Cities} manly Christianity is seen as a radical response to the dangers of the revenge ethic. From \textit{Dombey and Son} onwards, forgiveness of the individual has been a more important issue than the condemnation of sin \textit{per se}, as embodied in a particular figure. The grotesques have been reduced in number, coming under threat from more amorphous figures such as Mr Dombey and Steerforth (the first of Dickens’s villains to show signs of a conscience).
The reduction of moral judgement is reinforced by the overcoming of weakness in place of its punishment. In *A Tale of Two Cities*, sin has become largely socialised – Mme Defarge and her compatriots are presented as products of a diseased order, and the narrator acknowledges that the same system would, in any case and at any time, have resulted in the same perversion of humanity. It is this sense of humanity which must be restored, and it is made possible in the effect that Sydney’s death has on those around him. In transforming the doctrine of Atonement into an ideal of human martyrdom, he is able to reassert his relationship with his persecutors. This understanding of common humanity, reinforced through religious practice, is the basis of Sydney’s vision for a new society. Manliness and religious faith are to be fused together, in order to avoid lawlessness and disregard for human life. The conversion experience that transforms his view of the world parallels the experience of Wardour, whose love for another human being makes him receptive to religious experience. But the potency of Sydney’s spiritual regeneration is felt in a broader context, leading to an act of atonement for the sins of an entire country.

*The Woman in White* can be taken as an answer to Dickens’s presentation of religious commitment in *A Tale of Two Cities*. Jerome Meckier discusses the later novel in these terms, but locates the site of conflict in providentialism:

Collins objects to the defamation of providence as a mindless natural force, less obedient than wind or fire. Providence in Collins is not just something feral to be unleashed. Collins’s providence is also a containing agency, often as anxious to hold things together as to tear them apart, disciplinary but not heedlessly destructive, therefore a more intelligible factor than its counterpart in Dickens.68

*A Tale of Two Cities* offers a critique of revenge as a purely temporal force, in order to discredit the evangelical view of condign retribution. Providence in this novel is not a punitive agency, but offers a vision of renewal through altruistic sacrifice. It is not Dickens’s view of Providence but manly Christianity that is reviewed in *The Woman in White*. In the 1860s it took a writer like Wilkie Collins to disrupt the gender roles so carefully outlined by his own hero, and what is arguably his most famous novel sees him gleefully wreaking havoc on manly Christian assumptions about morality, gender and sexuality.

In this novel manly Christianity is not sufficient to overcome judgement. Rather its insistence on highly specific male and female roles
allows Laura to be judged by its proponents when she fails to conform to an angelic but childlike role. During the course of the novel Laura develops a more complex religious understanding, and her inner state becomes a vehicle for the expression of Collins’s own religious ideas. But her deviance from the ideal set out not only by manly Christianity but also by evangelicals and by Dickens himself is seen as threatening by other characters, who fail to appreciate the religious significance of this personal renewal. This conflict stresses Collins’s belief that religious understanding is not compatible with a simplified concept of feminine purity, and foreshadows his later treatment of this theme in the careers of Magdalen Vanstone and Lydia Gwilt.

In *The Frozen Deep* and *A Tale of Two Cities* manly Christianity is able to redeem the central protagonist and offer a sense of common purpose to the community as a whole. But Collins’s primary interest was always in the status of the individual, and by 1860 he had come to doubt the efficacy of this religious ethos in containing personal experience. Nor did he feel that it went far enough as a religious code in subverting the harsh judgements inherent in evangelical belief. Collins’s first major novel implicitly questions the validity of manly Christianity, insofar as it seeks to contain religion within an unnecessarily rigid moral framework. This dogmatic approach is seen to be ultimately untenable, not least because it transfers religious experience to the realm of physical action. Available only to men, it necessarily undervalues the religious lives of women and renders them vulnerable to false judgements. *The Woman in White* demonstrates the limitations of this ethos in regulating and explaining the religious experience of its female Broad Church protagonists, Marian Halcombe and Laura Fairlie.

As Dickens had made clear in *A Tale of Two Cities*, manly action was perceived largely in relation to female weakness. Lucie Manette is the angelic inspiration for Sydney’s sacrifice of his life, bringing out the good qualities latent within him. She shows courage in remaining in France while her husband is on trial, but places herself under male protection at all times. In *The Woman in White*, Collins exposed the flaws in the ideal of manly Christianity which he had begun to question in *The Frozen Deep*. The major conflict in the novel takes place in the domestic sphere and does not involve immediate physical danger, thereby rendering bodily strength redundant. Manly Christianity is shown to be inadequate to the exigencies of Marian’s and Laura’s situation. As women, they are not able to enact such a rôle, and when Marian attempts to do so the removal of her restrictive outer garments leads her, symbolically, to take a fever. There are socially prescribed
limits to her sphere of action and in overstepping them, she plays into the hands of her male enemies, as she is later to do in rescuing Laura from the lunatic asylum by illicit means.

Walter Hartright, the manly Christian of the novel, fails to recognise the limitations of his religious position. His preamble begins, however unintentionally, by highlighting a contradiction in the religious code he has embraced. One of the buzzwords of this ideal was ‘endurance’, and he begins by enlisting it on the feminine side, using his wife’s patience as a foil to his own more active virtue. Ignoring the moral courage of Marian and Laura, he remarks somewhat complacently that: ‘This is the story of what a Woman’s patience can endure, and what a Man’s resolution can achieve.’

Simultaneously celebrating patience as a virtue and subordinating it to resolution, Walter is setting up the dichotomy between male and female integral to the manly ideal. He is also exposing, albeit unwittingly, the inconsistency that makes it so problematic as an ideal – according to Christian belief, Christ embodies both active resolution and self-abnegating resignation. But this internal logic, balancing active and passive virtues, is not encoded by manly Christianity. Rather Walter must be counterpoised by complementary but negative virtues, located in the female characters. As Kingsley outlines it, the manly Christian possesses intellect and courage and turns to a woman for the gentleness which would be inappropriate in himself. His knight teaches the heroine: ‘where her true kingdom lay, – that the heart, and not the brain, enshrines the priceless pearl of womanhood... before which gross man can only inquire and adore.’ Presumably he does not go out of his way to teach her that a pearl can be appropriated and so possessed by the same adoring man.

In associating endurance with patience, Walter is already betraying the inadequacy of a religious ethos that locates specific and separate virtues in each gender. In particular, he suggests the inconsistency inherent in Dickens’s ethos, wherein women are required to be courageous whilst maintaining an air of dependent weakness. This apportioning of characteristics according to gender is questioned in the presentation of the characters themselves.

Walter himself has been used to being: ‘admitted among beautiful and captivating women much as a harmless domestic animal is admitted among them.’

In other words, he is obliged to abandon his masculinity in the presence of his pupils, and become temporarily sexless. On his arrival at Limmeridge he is immediately appropriated by his male employer,
who describes himself as being ‘so glad to possess him’. Frederick Fairlie is described as having a selfish obsession with his own health more commonly associated with women. He has ‘effeminately’ small feet, and the hint is clarified in Hartright’s impression that there is something disturbingly unmanly in his face that would nonetheless not serve to make him a pretty woman. As the story progresses it becomes increasingly clear that Fairlie is simply effete, or effeminate in the older sense of being ineffectual. Averse to the company of women, he is no more interested in physically possessing the men he controls – his valet is described as a ‘human portfolio stand’ and he expresses no desire for a second interview with Walter.

Gender patterning in this novel is deceptive, as Marian’s first appearance shows – Walter’s artistic sense is thrown completely off balance on their first meeting, as he first admires her figure and movement, only to realise on closer inspection that she has facial hair and heavy features. Pesca is of small stature and first appears as a comically feminised character, yet it is he who is able to unnerve the Count in his role as Secretary of the sinister Brotherhood. Further vexing the issue of what constitutes masculinity, the Count himself is described by Marian as ‘a fat St Cecelia masquerading in male attire’. But not only is he vigorously heterosexual (always allowing for his attraction to Marian on the basis that she reminds him of a man) – this character, who is insistently described as ‘nervous’ and ‘effeminate’, and so linked at one level to Frederick Fairlie himself, turns out to be a more dangerous enemy than the conventionally attractive Sir Percival. It will be remembered that the latter is portrayed in terms suggestive of impotence – he displays sexual jealousy of the banished Walter, whom he threatens to horsewhip if they ever meet, and yet he states that Laura is not at all likely to produce an heir. The implications of a religious ideal based on gender difference are confronted directly in Walter’s reaction to Marian and Laura, as the novel progresses.

The female characters in Collins’s novel are required by the male hero to conform to clearly defined rôles, in order to complement his own development as he attains ‘manliness’. This development through vicissitude is characteristic of the manly hero in Victorian fiction and Herbert Sussman identifies this ideal progress in the culture of specifically bourgeois masculinity, to which Hartright belongs: ‘For the Victorians manhood is not an essence but a plot, a condition whose achievement and whose maintenance forms a narrative over time.’

But Collins exploits the prescription of gender roles to show their inappropriateness to the experience of the female protagonists. Marian
herself is reminiscent of the ideal of manly Christianity. Her masculinity is initially signalled in the references to physical traits such as facial hair; moreover she is described on more than one occasion as possessing supposedly masculine qualities, such as intelligence and courage. Like Hartright himself she must gain awareness through trial. When dismissing him as a suitor for her sister at Limmeridge, she had made a virtue of disregarding the difference in rank between himself and Laura, only to take offence at his asking if Percival was a knight or a baronet. A witness to her sister’s unhappy marriage, she comes to realise that the status of gentleman is not attainable through rank – and ironically Sir Percival turns out to be illegitimate, meaning that technically he is not a baronet himself.

Marian’s progress fulfils the traditional trial and attainment of knowledge appropriate to the manly Christian. But as a woman she is debarred from action. Having been insulted by Sir Percival, she records in her diary: ‘If I had been a man, I would have knocked him down on the threshold of his own door... But I was only a woman – and I loved his wife so dearly! ... She knew what I had suffered and what I had suppressed.’ It is this combination of forcefulness and self-control that makes the strength of her character and restraint is celebrated by the manly ethos, but a consciousness of her negative status as a woman leads Marian to equate self-control in herself with helpless passivity. Her lack of both fortune and physical attractiveness allows her a certain licence, and she uses this freedom to approximate herself to the emblem of manly religion, feeling for instance that she is in competition with Sir Percival for the guardianship of Laura’s welfare. But her power is limited, as she is forced to give way to male counterparts, and the restrictions on her behaviour lead to her neurotic contempt for herself as ‘only a woman’. Fulfilling all the necessary criteria for a ‘manly’ hero, she constantly pre-empts rejection from this rôle by belittling her own moral status. She outmanoeuvres the Count and manages to overhear his conversation with Sir Percival, by climbing out of a window in her underwear, only to insist that ‘My courage was only a woman’s courage.’

Walter perpetuates such assumptions by emphasising his own growth into a manly Christian. The providential nature of his deliverance from death is made clear by Marian’s dream at Blackwater Park, in which he tells her that he will miraculously be saved on three separate occasions. She then sees him escape disease, hostile Indian arrows and shipwreck. It is within this wider providential context that the characters develop their several views of religion. As in Marian’s vision Walter
endures various hardships in Central America and then returns to face the Count and Sir Percival. From this point onwards he presents himself as having undergone a religious experience through physical exertion:

From that self-imposed exile I came back, as I had hoped, prayed, believed I should come back – a changed man. In the waters of a new life I had tempered my nature afresh. In the stern school of extremity and danger my will had learnt to be strong, my heart to be resolute, my mind to rely on itself.\(^75\)

It is significant however that the dream predicting these events is accorded to Marian rather than to Walter himself. Walter’s allusions to providence as beckoning him onwards on an unknown journey stress the inconsistency of his own assumption of authority. Religious truth is not so easy of definition.

Marian’s passionate and instinctive faith informs her love for her sister, through whom much of her religious ideology is mediated. Laura herself becomes a truly religious figure when she offers mutual forgiveness to a man she now knows to be corrupt. The integrity sustained by both sisters throughout their ordeal at Blackwater Park is shown to be more valuable by far than mere bodily courage. Laura stands as a counterpoint to Walter’s ‘manliness’ and provides an ideal of religious purity that Marian does not desire for herself. But running parallel to the enaction of manly religion is an alternative set up by these two sisters. Marian’s religion is romantic and immediate. It is she who is vouchsafed a vision of Walter’s preservation, in which he appears to pass unscathed through the Biblical trials of war, drowning and disease. On meeting him again in Limmeridge churchyard, Marian becomes a mediator between him and God, praying, ‘Father! help him in his hour of need.’\(^76\) This is the only moment in Collins’s major fiction when a character appeals directly to God as ‘Father’, and it serves to emphasise both Marian’s feeling of closeness to God and the idea of his immediate presence in the novel. It is this direct relationship with God that Walter appears to have lost, coming to use religion as a form of self-aggrandisement where Marian’s prayer is instinctive and selfless. Marian shows considerable courage in the novel, but her robust physicality is combined with more traditionally feminine qualities. She is receptive to direct religious experience, and later appeals to God rather than trusting entirely to her own resources. Though the dream affirms Walter’s status as a manly Christian, it is Marian who
combines both his courage and Laura’s instinctive faith. This combination of qualities both resolves the tensions within manly Christianity and highlights the inadequacy of Walter’s religious expression, which invests men and women with complementary but separate attributes.

However on Walter’s return from South America Marian is displaced, as he takes over the responsibility for outwitting the Count. Marian is now compared to Laura in the descriptions of her wasted arms and haunted eyes, and his reaction to her is notably insensitive. She admonishes him to remember her courage when ‘the time comes’, which in his narrative he claims to have done – in fact he will not allow her to accompany him to Count Fosco’s house, insisting that she stay with Laura. Ignoring her active rôle in protecting her sister hitherto, Walter now insists on presenting her in mystical terms, as a ‘good angel’. This terminology suggests that Marian is a spectator rather than an active participant in events. In relegating her to the sidelines, Walter imbues her with symbolic purity only at the cost of her active resolution.

This need simultaneously to adore and dismiss qualities such as innocence and purity is shown by both Walter and Marian in their understanding of Laura. Walter encapsulates this inconsistency when he refers to her love for him as ‘her sacred weakness.’ Marian, too, makes Laura a repository for the virtues which she herself disclaims:

Everybody thinks me crabbed and odd (with perfect justice); and everybody thinks her sweet-tempered and charming (with more justice still). In short, she is an angel; and I am – Try some of that marmalade, Mr Hartright, and finish the sentence, in the name of female propriety, for yourself.

It is this misrepresentation by both Marian and Walter that misleads readers and whips them into fury with Laura herself. Nina Auerbach memorably refers to Laura as ‘nebulous’, ‘incompetent’, ‘vapid’ and infantile in the course of three pages in which her character is not even under discussion! Before Laura’s marriage, Marian herself adopts the position of ‘manly’ protector of her sister. Every time Laura displays resolution, Marian defensively insists that it is the first occasion on which their roles have been reversed, and perceives the situation as unnatural and unpropitious. This division of putative characteristics is typical, as has been seen, of the dichotomy upheld by manly Christianity.

Laura is the central religious figure in the novel, and her complex response to religion has been too long overlooked by those who take at
face value the descriptions of her by other characters. The insistence that she remain innocent does not initially permit her to develop an active faith. Even Anne Catherick, whose simplicity permits her to see visions as Marian does, dreams of Laura in company with an angel marrying Sir Percival standing by a devil. In this simplistic view of a completely pure Laura who is incapable of saving herself, the angel is insufficient to rescue her and is seen to be weeping.

Laura has been brought up in a sheltered environment, and this in itself is shown to be damaging. Her nervous gestures betray the difficulty with which she sustains her angelic image, and yet she is not equipped to deal with life outside Limmeridge. As Philip O’Neill puts it:

It is Laura’s tragedy that she too easily accepts appearance for reality and does not recognise the danger of always accepting things at face value. This does not mean that she belongs to the corrupt world of appearance but rather represents the Edenic world where appearances and reality do coincide. 80

This is the danger of her upbringing, that she is not able to distinguish between truth and falsehood. Her code of morals is noble, but inadequate to the situation in which Sir Percival places her. In confessing to him that she loves another man, she gives him an opportunity to force her into marriage by praising her rectitude and insisting that he will try to be worthy of it. In order to approximate to Walter’s manly development, Laura must adopt a more complex religious stance, through an encounter with ‘fallen’ human nature outside Limmeridge. Her marriage to the villainous Sir Percival forces her to come to terms with a world less heroic than she had assumed it to be. Throughout her vicissitudes she retains her own goodness, but she finds it necessary to conceal the realities of her relationship with her husband for as long as possible. Not only does she seek to preserve Marian’s view of her as untainted; she has learned to be self-sufficient and wants to protect her sister’s peace of mind. This growing awareness of corruption, as Sir Percival repeatedly accuses her of ignoble behaviour, allows her to show true Christian mercy and humility. Her experience at Blackwater Park allows her to show a more mature commitment to religious principles than has hitherto been practicable. Her sacrifice of herself in marriage was undoubtedly noble, but her last conversation with her husband is more admirable yet. Leaving him to go to London, she says unaffectedly, ‘Will you try to forgive me, Percival, as heartily as I forgive you?’ 81 This practical demonstration of Christian virtue has a
marked effect on the sanctimonious housekeeper, whose citing of religious precepts is temporarily quelled. She admits that: ‘I thought of saying a few comforting and Christian words to the poor lady, but there was something in her face, as she looked after her husband when the door closed on him, that made me alter my mind and keep silence.’

Significantly, Laura makes no reply when Mrs Michelson recovers sufficiently to inform her that we all have our cross to bear. Mrs Michelson, the widow of a clergyman, represents a comic version of what was Laura’s own reliance on simplistic precepts before her marriage. Laura now affects her to the point where she begins to question her own maxims, and cannot concentrate on her husband’s collection of sermons. Inspired by Laura’s example in enacting the religious ideal on a personal level, she starts to imbue practical acts of charity with religious worth, taking over the nursing of Marian. Trite proverbs are now replaced with ‘hope’ and ‘belief’ in a practical religion, as she writes: ‘The precious blessings of religious consolation which I endeavoured to convey were long in reaching Miss Halcombe’s heart, but I hope and believe they came home to her at last. I never left her till her strength was restored.’

Laura is shown at this point to inspire religious feeling in others not only through her symbolic purity, but also through her response to adversity. Marian’s perplexed references to her will-power and resilience make it clear that she finds this aspect of her sister’s personality threatening. But the passive resistance shown by Laura is an appropriate and practicable female alternative to manly Christianity. She is able to defend herself against the machinations of her husband and the Count, by refusing to betray her own principles. Keeping within the bounds of propriety, she stymies the plan to rob her by refusing to sign a document she has not read, and of which she might be ashamed. In so doing she redefines female virtue, emphasising the positive value of inaction as passive resistance to corruption, while feminine submission becomes a self-control capable of turning the other cheek. Jenny Bourne Taylor notices this relationship between passive resistance and self-control, though she rather unfairly attributes it solely to Marian: ‘It becomes a subtle form of female resistance – the way that patience can be turned into resolution.’

Nor will Marian and Walter acknowledge this transition as it applies to Laura, and attempt to reinstate her in her former simplistically innocent role. No compromise is allowed, because in upholding the ethos of specifically manly Christianity, Walter requires the defenceless
counterpart without which his rôle as protector would become redundant. It is essential to his religious understanding that Laura should maintain a passive innocence seemingly without effort. Only by containing his wife’s purity within his own more active virtue can Walter envisage a balance between the complementary positive and negative elements of religion. Barbara Fass Leavy explains this complex issue in terms of a: ‘splitting in the Victorian mentality which, in order to protect its feminine ideal, had to keep her free of, on one side, the sexuality and intellect of one sister, and, on the other side, the maturity that comes from a confrontation with pain and suffering.’ Laura’s increased maturity is ignored by her husband and sister, who attribute any change in her to the effects of a mental collapse.

Walter cannot or will not accept Laura’s increased knowledge of the world, threatening as it is both to her innocence and to his masculine status. Laura’s new understanding cannot be contained within the ideal dichotomy of manly Christianity, and so it is denied. In adopting such a rigid view of religion, Walter is in danger of becoming brutalised and losing the ‘feminine’ sensitivity which had been so obvious in him during his time at Limmeridge. In assuming the ethos of manly Christianity Walter has lost the power he previously possessed to empathise with Laura in particular, and he is no longer personally receptive to religious influences. This loss of receptivity is masked by his citation of providential deliverance as a sign of special favour:

From thousands on thousands of miles away – through forest and wilderness, where companions stronger than I had fallen by my side, through peril of death thrice renewed, and thrice escaped, the Hand that leads men on the dark road to the future had led me to meet that time.  

Significantly, he perceives a link between his deliverance from death and Laura’s vulnerability – now that she is divested of her identity, he is able to fight on her behalf in the chivalric tradition. In locating strength in himself rather than in God, he further loses his humility and even the sense of humour on which it was based. According to Collins, it is in this arrogation of power and moral judgement that the primary danger of manly Christianity lies.

At the temporal level, it is also potentially damaging to individuals. Laura’s position as the mediator of religious values places her under enormous pressure, as the figure of female virtue who must inspire the more active characters. She is a symbol of religious purity, and as such
she must live up to the expectations of those around her in order to provide a focus for their faith. Marian declares quite specifically that she believes in Laura as she believes in her religion. It is the stress of these expectations that is betrayed in her longstanding nervous habits, the contraction round her mouth and her restless hands. Walter takes on the same nervous twitch in his face as he is forced to leave her, a link with the sensitive Laura that is wrongly interpreted by Gilmore as a sign that he is losing his moral character. Before he leaves Limmeridge, Walter senses: ‘something wanting. At one time it seemed like something wanting in her: at another, like something wanting in myself, which hindered me from understanding her as I ought.’

He later comes to connect this ‘lack of something’ with Laura’s resemblance to Anne Catherick, which is strengthened by her ordeals in the later stages of the novel. But in coming to embody the manly Christian hero, he has lost his ‘feminine’ powers of intuition, and fails to comprehend that he himself perpetuates the likeness by imposing such a stringent rôle on her. The appearance of something ‘lacking’ in Laura is traceable to the onus she is under to repress aspects of her character which are incompatible with her angelic status. On his last night at Limmeridge Walter comes close to comprehending this repression, if only in relation to her love for him:

The cold fingers that trembled round mine – the pale cheeks with a bright red spot burning in the midst of them – the faint smile that struggled to live on her lips and died away from them while I looked at it, told me at what sacrifice of herself her outward composure was maintained.

Similarly, Marian can acknowledge her sister’s self-control only in the specific terms of her love for Walter. She is surprised by the ‘passive force’ she displays and does not see it as extending beyond the sphere of her relations with Walter and Sir Percival.

She is repulsed by the idea of Laura’s future role as the sexual partner of Sir Percival, and describes her as having lost her innocence when she has had this side of marital relations explained to her, somewhat prematurely as it turns out. Laura’s innocence is essential to her emblematic religious role, and Sir Percival’s exclusion from the possibility of redemption is made clear when he refuses to believe in it. Accusing her publicly of having had improper relations with Walter before her marriage, he tells the Count that he believes in ‘nothing about her but her money’. This cynicism emphasises Sir Percival’s corruption and
reminds the reader of the symbolic purity of his wife, in relation to whom he is tested. But this mystical status means that Laura cannot be allowed to deviate from the parameters that have been set up for her. Unlike Marian, she cannot indulge in displays of temper, nor is she allowed to betray imperfections by representing herself in a diary. After her marriage she maintains a steady reserve, refusing to divulge the humiliations inflicted on her by her brutal husband, for fear of distressing her sister.

Only on the borderline between sanity and insanity can she emulate marginalised figures such as Anne Catherick, becoming at once a more complex and more threatening figure. This disintegration of social identity does not simply disempower Laura by reducing her to ‘a persecuted alien’ with a ‘death wish’, as her detractors often suggest. Released from the confines of her emblematic purity, she is able to relinquish responsibility for sustaining the others’ belief. As Catherine Peters suggests:

The fear of losing complete possession of oneself is a fundamental one; but it often carries with it a secret sense of exhilaration. To be another person, for a while at least, can be liberating as well as terrifying.

Appearing by her own gravestone, she takes on a ghostly dimension, and Marian seeks to spare Walter the sight of her face. Walter later recalls Laura’s appeal to be taken seriously in language that seems to condemn her for making it: ‘I raised her head, and smoothed away the tangled hair that fell over her face and kissed her – my poor, faded flower! My lost, afflicted sister!’ This declamation employs the evangelical language of ineluctable damnation, at the moment of Laura’s only rebellion.

In *The Frozen Deep* and *A Tale of Two Cities* a central male figure is able to fulfil the ideal of manly Christianity by making an ennobling sacrifice. In each case he denies his own happiness and even his life in order to procure the happiness of the woman he loves, with another man. This abnegation of personal desire is only achieved in the context of a conversion experience, in which the character derives strength from a renewed faith in God. Furthermore, both Wardour and Carton incorporate the feminine ideal of selflessness into what is otherwise a masculine commitment to personal heroism.

By the time Collins came to write *The Woman in White*, his response to manly Christianity had become much more complex. As he makes clear at the beginning of the story, the very basis of this ideal is a
glorification of perceived masculine qualities. In becoming a manly hero Walter is obliged to substitute assertiveness and self-preservation for humility and self-denial. He comes to rely more on himself than on God, revelling as he does in his new-found physical and mental prowess. It is no coincidence that he begins to make judgements about other characters at this point, pondering with something akin to satisfaction that it is not for him to say that the Count will escape judgement, and thoughtlessly describing Laura as a ‘lost sister’. In mediating his religious beliefs through his own resolution, and through Laura’s perceived patience, Walter comes to fulfil the ideal of manliness in its specifically religious sense. However in so doing he embraces a religious code that is not simply inadequate but potentially damaging. Vance’s analysis underlines the way in which the ideal of manliness could come into conflict with Christianity:

It was inevitable that manliness and Christianity should sometimes be uneasy together. The entertaining and healthy activism of the manly hero, whether in fact or fiction, was bound to jar with the less vivid religious imperatives: patience and heroic martyrdom, self-abnegation and the discipline of the will. The secular hero is captain of his fate and master of his soul, confidently dominating the action. But sooner or later the Christian hero must acknowledge Christ as captain and master.94

An adherence to this code induces Hartright to assume an inappropriate degree of spiritual authority and renders him insensible to his wife’s religious development. But the central message of manly Christianity remains important in relation to Dickens and Collins, despite the dangers articulated in *The Woman in White*. Its positive significance lies in its celebratory emphasis, offering symbols of renewal and triumph over weakness. Essentially this is the outlook that pervades the writing of each. *The Woman in White* suggests that the scope of this religious ethos should be extended and liberalised, allowing female characters to participate in the inner renewal that Collins regarded as essential to religious experience. Marian and Laura prove susceptible to judgement by other characters, but the narrative refusal of judgement will resurface more dramatically in later novels, as the figure of the redeemed female sinner herself finds religious expression.

Such celebration of human potential is directly opposed to the evangelical insistence on innate depravity, a conflict that both writers explore in their major novels. Their response to evangelical doctrines
and practices will therefore be examined in the light of their own more optimistic standpoint. It will be seen that the central message of manly Christianity, which teaches the value of human instinct, is brought to bear on the doctrines of Original Sin and Judgement; its influence will further be seen in the themes of personal responsiveness and responsibility upheld in the novels of both writers.
As we have seen in their treatment of manly Christianity, both Dickens and Collins are particularly concerned with subverting doctrines of insurmountable corruption. Neither writer was prepared to accept the evangelical insistence on human depravity, which is replaced in their writing with the theme of spiritual renewal, as innately good characters overcome their weaknesses and so fulfil their potential for good. At least where this potential is reached, judgement is undermined or discredited. Humphry House’s remark on Dickens, that ‘Virtue for him is the natural state of man’ could be applied with equal validity to Collins.

But while Collins engages confidently with evangelical doctrine, reinterpreting it within a liberal framework, Dickens’s novels reveal the struggle involved in disentangling his own beliefs from evangelical influence. We will see how from an uneasy standpoint containing both orthodox and Broad Church elements, he gradually comes closer to the more liberal and cohesive position represented by Collins in his major novels of the 1860s.

Collins’s memoirs of his father William Collins reveal an aversion to any form of religion that encourages such obsessive self-denigration, in the association he assumes between continued introspection and intermittent depression. It will be remembered that Wilkie turns with relief to his father’s renewed optimism, having cited a diary entry in which William dwells at length on his own failings. Wilkie hastily assures the reader that his father’s resolute strength of character enabled him to overcome these feelings of worthlessness.

In his obvious anxiety to explain away his father’s introspective tendencies, Wilkie is as emphatic about the need for healthy feeling in religion as Dickens himself. But notwithstanding such reservations, the inner drama is of tantamount importance for Collins, as he relates in
his novels the way in which the soul achieves its capacity for redemption. Dickens, who was more specifically concerned with the impact of liberal religion on the community, focuses on the introspective aspect of evangelicalism in order to symbolise the unhealthy nature of its doctrines. In *A Tale of Two Cities* Sydney Carton becomes a figure of religious worth only in overcoming his feelings of self-loathing, and this move is signalled by the abandonment of his former dissipated habits, as he engages in healthy and energetic action on behalf of others. In this way Dickens rebuts the individualism so beloved of Collins and evangelicals alike. This conflict between ‘healthy’ resolution and the individualism he connected with ‘unhealthy’ introspection is crucial to Dickens’s treatment of evangelical doctrine. It is a distinction that Collins might not have entirely appreciated.

But regardless of these differences, both were agreed in their abiding aversion to the rigid and exclusive code of belief associated with evangelicalism. Dickens memorably defended his anti-evangelical stance on the grounds that: ‘I discountenance all obtrusive professions of, and tradings in, Religion, as one of the main causes of real Christianity’s having been retarded in this world.’ This was one of the values central to the religious thought of both – the Christian religion, properly understood, should operate as a unifying force among all believers, differences of opinion being subordinated to a common belief in the message of Christ as Redeemer.

Though unable to assent to Christ’s divinity, George Eliot likewise stressed the value of shared moral values, represented by both traditional religion and science. In *Middlemarch* the beneficent altruism of the Broad Church clergyman (whose family names of Farebrother and Noble are heavily suggestive) is sufficient in itself to belie the doubts he feels about his fitness for the Church. Able effortlessly to reconcile his clerical role with an interest in natural history, his commitment is discreetly suggested by his preaching extempore, rather than writing or borrowing sermons for regular use, and his objection to evangelicalism is heartfelt and specifically religious in tone: ‘they are a narrow ignorant set, and do more to make their neighbours uncomfortable than to make them better. Their system is a sort of worldly-spiritual cliqueness: they really look on the rest of mankind as a doomed carcase which is to nourish them for heaven...’

Evangelical religion was potentially divisive, not least in its insistence that the majority of the human race was eternally doomed. Dickens and Collins insistently stressed mankind’s potential for good, and objected strenuously to evangelical teaching on depravity. This
ethos was itself based on a literal belief in original sin, the doctrine according to which: ‘God does not will the birth of children, because Adam and Eve came together in unsanctified lust and therefore their offspring are an innately corrupt product.’ According to the writer of this particular tract, Satan’s designs on mankind are therefore just, though restrained by the mercy of God. Collins uses the doctrine of providential intervention, associated by evangelicals largely with retribution, to subvert a belief in original sin and to stress God’s beneficent involvement with the figure of the sinner. Dickens similarly denies original sin, but replaces expiation with a drama of personal justification, rather than with assurances of divine mercy. Both Dickens and Collins attack the doctrine of original sin as being in itself irreligious, and this theme is developed by Dickens through its effect on children in particular. They further attack evangelical teaching on depravity on the grounds that it could be used tendentiously, either to obviate personal responsibility or to gain ascendancy over others. An insistence on original sin could act as a form of self-deception. But more threateningly, it could also be used as a means of controlling dependants, most poignantly children. In *Little Dorrit* Arthur Clennam’s return to England after a protracted absence abroad leads him to review his own unhappy childhood through the gloom of a London Sunday. The vivid description of the darkened streets is too well known to need rehearsing here; it is sufficient to note that Sabbatarianism is charged with the imprisonment of the populace. In a phrase bristling with sarcastic meaning, the narrator levels a familiar charge at evangelical legislation, which was widely perceived as a means of moral and social control: ‘...what secular want could they possibly have upon their seventh day? Clearly they could want nothing but a stringent policeman.’ Whilst social measures restrict the action of the country at large, moral pressure could also be brought to bear on individuals. Introspection, fostered for the purpose of encouraging repentance, isolated the individual from outside influences and could be used as a means of indoctrination.

This threat is present in *The Moonstone*. It is only partly true that:

The character of Miss Clack, with her eternal tracts, comes closer to caricature than any other in the novel but gives a wonderfully entertaining picture of the evangelical type whose religious cant Collins so despised.  

Certainly her constant distribution of religious tracts is presented with great humour, and the exasperation she causes to the other characters
is reminiscent not only of Collins's own, but equally of Dickens's reaction to evangelical literature. While on holiday in Broadstairs a few years before, Dickens had written to his daughters: ‘An evangelical family of most disagreeable girls prowl about here and trip people up with tracts, which they put in the paths with stones upon them to keep them from blowing away.’ In *The Moonstone* Miss Clack similarly places tracts in strategic positions, where Lady Verinder is most likely to come across them. But despite the recognisably parodic medium through which Miss Clack presents herself, there is a more troubling side to her. She is a manipulative figure, confidently awaiting a nervous collapse on Rachel’s part after her coming confrontation with Ablewhite senior:

> A salutary moral depression would be the effect. Her pride would be exhausted, by the resolute resistance which it was in her character to make under the circumstances. She would turn for sympathy to the nearest person who had sympathy to offer. And I was that nearest person....

This gleeful prediction is the more sinister in that many people were converted to evangelicalism during times of illness and depression. Miriam Bailin discusses the ‘double status of illness as both scourge and boon’ in terms of a shared cultural experience that removed the invalid from the norms of life outside the sickroom. At this remove, the isolated and depressed figure would be particularly vulnerable to the persuasions of anyone who ministered to their physical and emotional wants. Miss Clack intends to take advantage of Rachel’s exhausted state, ostensibly with a view to saving her soul, but really because she wishes to learn what has happened to the Moonstone.

This arrogation of authority is of great significance within families, as children are subjected to parental control. Particular attention will be drawn to Dickens’s treatment of the doctrine of infant depravity, which will illuminate his treatment of original sin. *David Copperfield* is important both as a study of the potential damage done to children by an insistence on original sin, and also as a personal expression of Dickens's religious thought as he had formulated it by 1848, at a time when he was still involved in disentangling his own beliefs from evangelical suggestion. It demonstrates the fruition of a religious concept through the moral progression of the central protagonist, who is confronted with different versions of religious belief. The autobiographical element allows Dickens to identify his own moral development with that of David Copperfield, the
first-person narrator. The religious ideal set up in this transitional novel is based on earnestness and discipline; mediated through cheerfulness, forgiveness, and an active engagement with the lives and concerns of others. Dickens himself aimed in the novel to promulgate the subjection of impulse to discipline, but he was aware of the danger inherent in this doctrine, as his emphasis on cheerfulness suggests. The experience of David himself sets up a dichotomy between Dickens’s religious agenda and that of the Evangelical Murdstones.

Both writers strenuously deny the validity of original sin, but as the detailed experiences of George Silverman (discussed in Chapter 1) and David Copperfield make clear, Dickens was particularly incensed by the doctrine of infant depravity. Having himself been shown affection by his Evangelical father, Collins does not emphasise the potential traumas suffered by children in evangelical households to anything like the same extent. In Antonina the heroine’s father Numerian:

> Not content with distorting all his own feelings and faculties... perpetrated his insane austerities upon the child as well. He forbade her to enter a theatre, to look upon sculpture, to read poetry, to listen to music. He made her learn long prayers and attend to interminable sermons.\(^{11}\)

But Antonina’s love for her father is clearly reciprocated. He is ultimately converted to a more liberal form of Christianity and having undergone a dangerous illness, comes to realise that: ‘God’s blessing goes forth from children like you, – it has fallen upon me, – it has raised me from the dead!’\(^{12}\)

Zack Thorpe in Hide and Seek has difficulty sitting through a long sermon, but though he is driven to rebel against his father’s rigorous discipline, he is not emotionally traumatised by his Sunday deprivations. Zack’s sympathetic grandfather is exasperated by this system of restraint, which he feels to be inappropriate; rather he advocates a system of religious education which was often put forward by Dickens as a model for instruction:

> ‘Let his morning service be about ten minutes long; let your wife tell him, out of the New Testament, about Our Saviour’s goodness and gentleness to little children; and then let her teach him, from the Sermon on the Mount, to be loving and truthful and forbearing and forgiving, for Our Saviour’s sake.’\(^{13}\)

The significantly named Mr Goodworth is obliged to defend himself against the imputation that he himself lacks religious conviction, as
Zack’s evangelical father insists that such an approach is purely ‘rationalist’:

‘you think I’m wrong in only wanting to give religious instruction the same chance with Zack which you let all other kinds of instruction have – the chance of being made useful by first being made attractive. You can’t get him to learn to read by telling him that it will improve his mind – but you can by getting him to look at a picture book. ... You admit this sort of principle so far because you’re obliged; but the moment anybody wants (in a spirit of perfect reverence and desire to do good) to extend it to higher things, you purse up your lips, shake your head, and talk about Rationalism – as if that was an answer!’

The old man’s ideal of religious education can no doubt be taken as that of the author himself. But unguarded as Collins is in this early novel, he does not present the elder Mr Thorpe as being wilfully unmindful of his son’s welfare, nor is his home intended to be a place of unmitigated suffering. Ian Bradley maintains that:

Perhaps the most valuable gift which those brought up in Evangelical homes obtained in their childhood was the love of their parents. The numerous letters which Evangelical mothers and fathers wrote to their children were often full of censure and admonition but they were also shot through with deep compassion and affection. Evangelical families were bound together by very strong ties of love. They exhibited a unity of purpose and a depth of fellowship which provided a model of the stereotype Victorian happy family group engaged together in the pursuit of some innocent recreation around the hearth.

Certainly one is reminded here of William Collins’s letters to his children, who seem certainly not to have been deliberately tortured with the more damaging doctrines of their father’s faith. It is notable that in Hide and Seek the erring Mary Grice and her illegitimate child are condemned not by Mary’s father but by her aunt Joanna, who alone invokes divine retribution on her niece’s sin, and subsequently disowns the child. The following discussion of infant depravity will therefore be confined almost exclusively to Dickens.

In his writing he continually cites, often with reference to this concept, the story of Jesus setting a child in the midst of the disciples.
David Copperfield and Little Dorrit take issue with evangelical belief specifically on these grounds. In each case the child who is tormented with doctrines of depravity is the object of love to at least one parent figure, and this is shown to be the real tragedy. David Copperfield’s mother has been persuaded by her villainous husband and his sister that David is evil. Arthur Clennam’s adoptive mother does express love for him in her confession to Amy Dorrit, but her own upbringing has persuaded her that it is inappropriate to show affection to children.

The fundamental purity of children is clearly indicated in the symbolic restoration to childhood through death, as J. Hillis Miller points out in a discussion of Little Dorrit: ‘If so disfigured a character as old Dorrit returns to the goodness of childhood at his death, we can accept that all of the people in Little Dorrit, without exception, were innocent and good as children.’¹⁶ In other words, the doctrine of infant depravity is utterly false. Dickens’s first person narrators have all been subjected to evangelical influence, and all repeatedly expose the abuse of power of which their guardians are guilty. In a discussion of the ways in which such female figures as Mrs Joe, Miss Barbary and Mrs Clennam define themselves in terms of quasi-patriarchal authority over the family, Richard Barickman, Susan MacDonald and Myra Stark convincingly argue that:

Extreme Calvinism provides the typical model of dress and behavior for these despotic maternal figures and also the code of values that justifies it. The point is not just to satirize an abhorrent religious creed; this motif also suggests the most extreme form that patriarchal claims can take – the claim to divine sanction. Characters like Miss Barbary have so permanently terrorized the children consigned to them that the assumption of Godlike power is hardly false in its psychological dimension, however it degrades and falsifies religious values.¹⁷

The presentation of the perpetual and irrational guilt children undergo under such a regime is sufficient in itself to subvert the doctrine of their depravity. In the emphasis on the impressionability of children, David Copperfield, Bleak House and Great Expectations provide a parallel to the version of Christian belief presented in Dickens’s letters and other writings at this time, in which he reiterated his belief in the value of childish innocence as represented in the teaching of Christ. The very innocence of these children renders them vulnerable to false teaching. The precepts used to govern David, Esther and Pip are instru-
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mental in determining their adult behaviour, and even Uriah Heep is seen to be the product of an evangelical education.

David Copperfield’s first tribulations begin at home, when his frivolous mother is persuaded to marry the evangelical Mr Murdstone. The seriousness with which this issue is to be taken is signalled almost at once, in Mr Murdstone’s evident affection for his wife. Middle-class and Anglican, he is at once more complex and more threatening than the comic dissenting hypocrites of earlier novels. The danger of this figure lies in his very sincerity. His sister Miss Murdstone is quickly drafted in, and the sanctity of David’s childhood home is violated, most poignantly when his mother is coerced into surrendering her household keys to her sister-in-law. David’s attendance at church, which has hitherto been a reasonably happy experience, is henceforth notable for Miss Murdstone’s gloomy enjoyment of the sterner creeds, during which she inflicts physical pain on the child whenever he moves (this failure of the church to inspire, let alone protect children, is similarly experienced by Pip in Great Expectations).

In David Copperfield the new Mrs Murdstone is subjected to lectures on self-control, designed to alienate her affections from her son, and David himself is held up as an example of childish depravity. Though the Murdstones insist that he join them in the parlour every evening, as Pip is obliged to sit with his sister and her guests, he is not permitted to play with other children: ‘for the gloomy theology of the Murdstones made all children out to be a swarm of little vipers (though there was a child once set in the middle of the Disciples), and held that they contaminated one another.’\(^{18}\) The narrator’s, and Dickens’s own, opinion of this doctrine is clear from the parenthesis. As Ivor Brown notes: ‘He did not believe in original sin; the original virtue of the child was implicit in his view of human nature. Sin is a word which occurs scantily in his vocabulary. Crime was what horrified him…’\(^{19}\)

Dickens’s outlook was less clearly defined than this analysis permits. Though he had no belief in original sin, he does portray the sins committed by his characters as having potentially serious consequences. However crime in the novels is presented as being particularly reprehensible, and the relevance of this distinction to David Copperfield becomes clear, as the innocent child may come to be guilty of adult sin, but only the irredeemably corrupt are tempted to turn to crime. The young David’s experience parallels the sufferings of Esther Summerson in Bleak House, who is not permitted to visit the homes of other children. She is brought up by an evangelical aunt, who impresses on her the doctrine of original sin. This aunt insists that Esther is ‘set apart’ by
her illegitimate birth, and that she must therefore make all the atone-
ment in her power if she is to avoid being castigated for her parents’
waywardness. Esther is irreparably damaged by the evangelical insis-
tence on work and incessant self-examination. She grows up deter-
minded to ‘win’ love in any way she can, and there is a sense in which
her charitable efforts are geared towards self-vindication.

The innocence of children is further vindicated in Great Expectations,
as once again they are seen to be at risk from perverse doctrine. Estella
believes herself to be incapable of feeling, because she has been taught
to equate the inspiration of love with revenge, by a character whose
diseased mind is directly related to evangelical thought. Furthermore
she has been the object of envy to Miss Havisham’s supposedly reli-
gious family. As she explains to Pip:

‘You had not your little wits sharpened by their intriguing against
you, suppressed and defenceless, under the mask of sympathy and
pity and what not that is soft and soothing – I had. You did not
gradually open your round childish eyes wider and wider to the dis-
covery of that impostor of a woman who calculates her stores of
peace of mind for when she wakes up in the night. – I did.’

Quite clearly, the child is corrupted by adult tuition, rather than being
innately wicked. Only towards the end of the novel is evangelical reli-
gion cited in connection with two of the most problematic characters,
Magwitch and Miss Havisham, but its pervasive influence is felt immedi-
ately in the harshness of Pip’s upbringing and in the isolation he feels.

In the first page of the novel, Pip is terrorised by a convict over the
very graves of his parents, who would ideally be there to protect him
from adult tyranny. Elizabeth Campbell can certainly be excused for
thinking that God is absent from such a scene, in making what is oth-
wise a penetrating analysis: ‘the high seriousness is conveyed by the
stark image of the man taking communion, as it were, in a graveyard
and from the pocket of a trembling boy – rather than in the church
and by the grace of a heavenly father…’

In the tradition of Mrs Brown in Dombey and Son, Magwitch threat-
ens the child with revenge in his own home unless he brings him food
in secret. Like Florence in the earlier novel, Pip is the more easily prac-
tised on because his home is already a place of suffering rather than a
sanctuary. He is made to feel guilty by his sister for being born, and
complies with the demands of a starving man not out of sympathy,
but in an attempt to avoid retribution. The parallel with evangelical
teaching, which emphasised the penalties of disobedience more mem-
orably than the virtue of spontaneous acts of sympathy, is extended when Pip is beaten at home for being late. Though he remembers feeling the injustice of such treatment, the narrator also describes the guilt involved in smuggling his own supper to an outcast. Similarly his sister's act of charity in bringing him up 'by hand' is shown to be meaningless in Pip's connection of the phrase with physical violence. As a child he is deemed to be ungrateful because he is, as Mr Hubble puts it, 'naturally vicious'. This comment is strongly suggestive of the evangelical doctrine of original sin, according to which even children are innately corrupt. What Mr Hubble conveniently forgets is that the rule does not apply specifically to children.

Children then are presented by Dickens as being particularly vulnerable, through their exposure to the doctrine of infant depravity. Nor is the Church providing adequate support. Feeling guilty on Christmas Day for having offered charity to a convict, the guilt-ridden Pip in *Great Expectations* is not convinced that the Church would be sufficient to protect him from the convict were he to turn there for relief, and the service is remarkable only for Wopsle's ostentatious reading of the psalm, and for his 'punishing' of the Amens (Wopsle later confirms this egotistical motive for his involvement in the Church by exchanging it for a career on the stage). Meanwhile Pip's proffered charity to the convict on the marshes has no reference to the spirit of Christmas, and the men who come to reclaim Magwitch are made welcome by Pumblechook. Ritual welcoming of guests has become what to Pip seems like an invasion, as Joe is forced into uncomfortable clothes and he himself is hectored by the assembled company, who compete with each other at his expense as they liken him to the pig they are about to eat. The guests then tell him that he is 'improving himself' through being present at their conversation.

The experience of children in evangelical households was not always purely negative, as Collins's affection for his parents makes clear. However, Collins does acknowledge the possibility of violence in evangelical circles, and condemns it. In *Armadale* Midwinter's stepfather is a strict evangelical, and Collins is more subtle here than Dickens was inclined to be, acknowledging the strength of Alexander Neal's sense of religious duty as 'the quickest sense in his nature'. 22 Strict evangelicals however were not always indulgent parents, and Midwinter's first memory is of Alexander Neal beating him across the shoulders. In later life he attributes this harsh treatment to a form of hatred, and not to a belief in the necessity of mortifying the flesh. Midwinter remains nervous and self-doubting throughout the novel.
The inefficacy of corporal punishment as a form of moral education is convincingly demonstrated by David Copperfield’s experience at Salem House. The headmaster, a friend of Mr Murdstone’s, is a self-confessed sadist, who was originally to have been an evangelical and who openly takes pleasure in belabouring the boys and terrifying his wife and daughter. Where Collins presents Alexander Neal as an ambiguous figure, whose maltreatment of Midwinter is motivated by shame (Midwinter will one day learn that his real father was a murderer), Dickens offers no psychological reason for Mr Creakle’s brutality. The result of his system is to encourage sycophancy and disingenuousness among the pupils, whose only concern is to avoid being victimised. The exception to this rule is Traddles, who takes the blame for Steerforth’s misdoing rather than betray him to Mr Creakle. This sacrifice is particularly noble in that Steerforth’s position as a parlour boarder renders him safe from the belligerent impulses of the headmaster. This good-humoured endurance of undeserved punishment commences the theme of cheerful integrity embodied by Traddles later in the novel.

The influence of education on character is reinforced by the various institutions portrayed. David’s own education is completed at an establishment in Canterbury, superintended by a character reminiscent of the Dr Arnold of Tom Brown’s Schooldays. The absolute importance of such an education, in which earnestness and honour are the watchwords, is repeatedly stressed by the narrator. Prior to being taken in by his aunt, David himself has barely been educated. Removed from Salem House on the death of his mother, he has been put to work in the Murdstone family business, partly as a means of breaking his ‘rebellious’ spirit. This experience isolates him from all imaginative impulses, so essential to Dickensian religion, and deadens his understanding. In common with the Murdstones, David believes in the formative nature of childhood experience. They insist on these grounds that work is of paramount importance to a child, telling him:

‘to the young this is a world for action, and not for moping and droning in. It is especially so for a young boy of your disposition, which requires a great deal of correcting; and to which no greater service can be done than to force it to conform to the ways of the working world, and to bend it and break it.’

This ethic is clearly detrimental to the young David, who recalls in the words of Dickens’s own biographical fragment: I know that, but for the
mercy of God, I might easily have been, for any care that was taken of me, a little robber or a little vagabond.’ In sending him into the working world at such a young age, the Murdstones are denying their moral responsibility for David and placing him in the way to become a petty criminal, meet for transportation. It is only by the ‘mercy of God’ that he escapes this fate and is taken in by his beneficent aunt, his lawful guardians having failed to recognise that they are at least partly responsible for his moral wellbeing.

The Murdstones are convinced that David is in need of rigorous training, and difficult work is inflicted on him with a view to the constant occupation of his mind (Miss Murdstone later tells Peggotty that idleness is the root of all evil). David’s inability to acquit himself well under the watchful eye of the Murdstones is cited as an example of his indolence and intractability. Narrating his own story from an adult perspective, David remembers this accusation as a self-fulfilling prophecy, the natural result of which was to make him sullen and dull. Ultimately he is beaten by Mr Murdstone for failing in his lessons, and retaliates by biting him on the hand.

The very real influence that evangelical teaching has had on the young David is revealed in his own reaction to the encounter with Mr Murdstone: ‘My stripes were sore and stiff, and made me cry afresh when I moved; but they were nothing to the guilt I felt. It lay heavier on my breast than if I had been a most atrocious criminal, I dare say.’ This likening of himself to a criminal highlights Brown’s point, that Dickens was strongly opposed to a religious ethic that presumed to treat children like criminals.

Such treatment leads less moral characters, such as Uriah Heep, to develop criminal impulses. More sympathetic protagonists such as David himself are imbued with deep feelings of guilt, which stultify their adult development.

In *David Copperfield* this ethos is shown to be as detrimental to the mother as to the child himself. By the time David is released from captivity in his bedroom, his mother herself is convinced that he harbours ‘bad passions’, which she is called upon to forgive. She has been made to feel ashamed of her love for her child, while being instructed that the subjugation of the flesh through the brutality of corporal punishment is necessary to his salvation. Again Mr Murdstone’s belief in this form of castigation as salutary, is genuine enough; he himself has been brought up in this way. But Miss Murdstone’s urging of such a course in shown to be more sadistic than pious – she is ready enough later to admit the virtues of her
brother's child, who she insists will grow up to be nothing like David.

David Copperfield's renunciation of evangelical doctrine is shown in his expressed wish to have died with his mother and her new baby, in a state of childish innocence. But Dickens's personal religious ethos is based on the assumption of responsibility, in ways that are denied by continuing childishness. While commending the innocence of children (Emily hopes that if she is forgiven, she will wake in Heaven as a child), the narrator does not consider juvenile qualities appropriate to adult life. Though the figure of the child is celebrated, adult responsibilities must sooner or later be assumed. Unbounded optimism is irresponsible in Mr Micawber, and helpless dependence is dangerously close to pusillanimity in Dora. Only in an unbalanced figure such as Mr Dick can such childishness be endorsed. Dickens's repeated allusions to the innocence of childhood suggest a deep consciousness of adult fallibility even as it denies original sin. But the importance accorded to earnestness and discipline, though redolent of evangelical thought, does not imply a need for expiation. The movement in *David Copperfield* is towards vindication of the protagonist's moral status rather than purgation. David’s early education at the hands of the evangelical Murdstones has damaged rather than assisted this development. He repeats Mr Murdstone's actions, marrying a childish wife and then attempting to imbue her with firmness. He suggests to Dora that both he and she are passively corrupting the servants, in their inability to manage their domestic affairs. Or as he puts it: ‘there is contagion in us. We infect everyone about us.’ This excessive language is reminiscent of evangelicalism in tone, and Dora responds by taking it literally to mean that David thinks her wicked. He denies this charge somewhat impatiently, but his neurotic insistence on his own accountability adumbrates the connection between his current rigour and the false lessons of his childhood. Having been told that he is depraved and innately corrupt, he seems literally to believe that he contaminates those around him. Nor is Dora’s essential innocence sufficient to exempt her from this charge, because she is seen to abrogate responsibility in failing to control the servants. David’s metaphorical use of the doctrine of innate depravity is not appropriate; however it is momentarily lent weight by Dora’s inability to take responsibility for those under her charge.

Personal responsibility is a crucial tenet of Dickens’s belief, but it must not be inspired by doctrines of innate corruption. The destructive effects of encouraging self-loathing in a child are further exemplified in Esther
Summerson in *Bleak House*. Following Miss Barbary’s advice, Esther renounces personal ambition and sets herself to work and live for others. Her housekeeping at Bleak House acts on one level as a form of therapy, as she constantly rattles her keys and exhorts herself to duty. But she is convinced that her life must be one of renunciation and devotion to others, leaving no room for personal desires. Inspired by this feeling, she comes to embody the fault of which evangelicals were often accused – in her obsessive insistence that she is unimportant to the narrative, she will not let the reader lose sight of her for a moment. Her narrative is similar to a diary in its chronicling of events from a personal point of view, and again this operates within an evangelical tradition. Esther determines on recording her every thought and weakness, but in her detailed account of the reactions accorded to her, she comes to seem vain of her own goodness even in insisting that she is unworthy.

Dickens repeatedly portrays the suffering inflicted on individuals within a family unit, through an insistence on original sin. In *Little Dorrit* the evangelical Mrs Clennam effectually emasculates her son Arthur in her reliance on this doctrine, which she feels can only be expunged through suffering. These negative interpretations of religious truth are opposed by Little Dorrit and by Clennam himself, who stand as Dickens’s representatives in their central beliefs. Clennam has rejected the ethos of his parents, through innate sympathy with the romantic values of the Broad Church to which Dickens subscribed. Elisabeth Jay describes Dickens’s belief in terms of opposition to the doctrine of original sin or predestination: ‘He saw people not in the light of the theological division between the saved and the damned, but as innocent or corrupt.’27 The simplicity of this contention must be disputed: Dickens quite clearly believed in damnation, as is clear from the allusions to Rigaud as irredeemable and as being akin to a devil. Nonetheless he does place considerable emphasis in his novels on questions of innocence and corruption, in order to reassess the innate human corruption perceived by evangelicalism. He attacks the evangelical belief in original sin by implying that the doctrine itself is corrupt or perverse, and contrasting it with the ethos of more liberal figures. Clennam and Little Dorrit are both essentially innocent figures, able to maintain their integrity in the midst of corruption. Clennam’s lack of response to religious indoctrination highlights the way in which Mrs Clennam has perverted the message of Christ, through the triumph of his own instincts over false teaching. The narrator makes it quite clear that this goodness is instinctive, and therefore an important aspect of his created nature:
he was a man who had, deep-rooted in his nature, a belief in all the
good and gentle things his life had been without... Bred in a creed
too darkly audacious to pursue, through its process of reversing the
making of man in the image of his Creator to the making of his
Creator in the image of an erring man, this had rescued him to
judge not, and in humility to be merciful, and have hope and
charity.28

This emphasis on Arthur’s instinctive goodness ironises Mrs Clennam’s
insistence that he is innately corrupt, a doctrine which is seen to be
itself a perversion of Christian thought.

Dickens again relates the doctrine of original sin as a form of perver-
sity in *Great Expectations*, translating it into individual terms in the
figures of Miss Havisham and Magwitch. Her feeling that all men
should suffer for the sins of one links Miss Havisham to the evangelical
tradition and this use of the evangelical ethos as a measure of pervers-
y is strengthened when she visits her own sins on the next genera-
tion. Miss Havisham’s morbid vanity in nurturing her unhappiness is
compared directly to religious fanaticism, and she inflicts it on the
young Estella with damaging effect. Similarly Pip is corrupted by the
plan of his adopted father to gain revenge on powerful men who
ignored his plight as a child.

But Collins goes further in representing this doctrine, associated pre-
dominantly with the teaching of the Old Testament, as lying at the
heart of nineteenth-century social life. The plot of *No Name* hinges on
a point of law – the daughters of the wealthy Vanstones are acciden-
tally dispossessed when their parents marry, and subsequently die
without having been able to make a new will. Legally the children of
this union are still considered to be illegitimate, and their fortune
therefore passes automatically to their uncle, Michael Vanstone. The
family lawyer Mr Pendril immediately locates this law in the tradition
of Old Testament judgemental morality, which he does not hesitate to
condemn as unjust in its vicarious retribution: ‘It visits the sins of the
parents on the children... in the names of morality and religion.’29
Collins’s awareness of specific doctrines is of great use to him, enabling
him to undermine social attitudes by pinpointing their source in austere religious codes. Notably Walter Hartright in *The Woman in
White*, written immediately before *No Name*, feels a horrified fascina-
tion for this doctrine – he successfully demystifies its implications by
suggesting that Philip Fairlie’s irresponsible behaviour has led to
Laura’s trials while God’s intervention has led her to her mother’s
grave and so back to Walter himself. *No Name* was written in 1862 and contains Collins’s most coherent response to this influence, in replacing evangelical ideas with a religious framework of his own. This framework is established through the fall and redemption of the central character, Magdalen Vanstone. In the novel a rigid and uncompromising doctrine is shown to be integral to middle-class morality, a form of morality that adversely affects women in particular. The novel is set in the 1840s, at a time when the influence of evangelical thinking on the country at large was quite considerable. However Josef L. Altholz testifies to the harshness of its control in his claim that: ‘The conflict between humane ethics and rigorous dogma was responsible for some of the more spectacular losses of faith in the 1840s.’30

The doctrine of original sin, with its accompanying threat that the sins of the father will be visited on the children, forms one of the major themes of the novel. The moral development of the two sisters is in itself a defiant answer to those who believed illegitimacy to be a mark of divine disfavour. Norah Vanstone is sanctified through suffering, as her dogged reserve is transformed into patient self-reliance. But her younger sister, who has set social values at defiance and openly debased the institution of marriage, becomes the major religious symbol of the novel. This emphasis on the deviant figure develops the theme of *The Woman in White*, in which Marian was accorded a licence denied to the symbolically pure Laura. In the later novel the central religious figure is permitted to enact a more disturbing moral conflict without sacrificing her religious status. Magdalen’s repentance is seen to be ennobling, as she embraces the Christian values of humility and forgiveness. Not only does Collins refuse to countenance the doctrine of original sin; he replaces expiation with a form of sanctification through atonement, in Magdalen’s symbolic act of renunciation as she tears up the will that would restore her fortune. This issue of sanctification is not only one of the central themes of the novel, it is one of the most radical aspects of Collins’s faith.

In this he goes further even than Eliot, who allows perfectibility only to her innately moral characters such as Dorothea. Crucially Janet Dempster in the story ‘Janet’s Repentance’ has always been possessed of neighbourly virtue and has been driven to alcoholism by the brutality of her husband (it is certainly not an option for less statuesque protagonists like Hetty Sorrell, who is summarily disposed of at the end of *Adam Bede*). But just as definitive authority becomes increasingly problematic for Collins, Eliot employs a guiding narrative voice in her more mature fiction not to enforce, but to withhold judgement. While the
multiple narrators of *The Woman in White* make a consistent moral voice hard to pinpoint, the apocalyptic ending suggests a direct judgement – this is not a feature of Collins’s later novels. And similarly Eliot moves from the meting out of reward and punishment in *Scenes of Clerical Life* and *Silas Marner* to a more complex moral framework. By the time of writing *Middlemarch* she is ready to comprehend the mental processes of a criminal who uses evangelical doctrine to justify murder. The morally certain Lydgate begins by condemning Farebrother’s gambling, only to succumb himself under financial strain, and this incident suggests the danger of presuming to judge others’ behaviour.

Collins was strongly opposed to arbitrary or thoughtless judgement, and coming to regard evangelical belief in even divine retribution as a superstition, he again replaces it with his own Broad Church faith in *Armadale*. In that novel the threat of superstition is internalised in the person of Ozias Midwinter, whose father has urged him in a deathbed letter to believe in avenging fate rather than in Christian love. Tormented by the remembrance of his crimes, Midwinter’s father does not believe that he can be forgiven, but rather fears that his son will suffer vicarious retribution. In the evangelical tradition, Midwinter’s father quotes the Bible to support such a view:

‘...I, going down into my grave with my crime unpunished and unatoned, see what no guiltless minds can discern. I see danger in the future, begotten of the danger in the past – treachery that is the offspring of his treachery, and crime that is the child of my crime. ... I look into the Book which all Christendom venerates; and the Book tells me that the sin of the father shall be visited on the child.’

The letter ends with a warning to the son to avoid all those who were connected with the crime, and their descendants. In particular, the letter warns against all contact with Allan Armadale, the son of the murdered man. Reading this, Midwinter comes to believe that he will harm his friend Armadale in some way, against his own will, and makes periodic attempts to end their friendship. This fatalistic view is strenuously denied by the clergyman Mr Brock, who also leaves deathbed instructions to Midwinter, in this case in an attempt to increase his Christian faith. Operating within a recognisably Broad Church tradition, the clergyman emphasises the liberality of the New Testament. Taking his stand on the issue of human love and charity as opposed to ineluctable vengeance, Brock insists that natural and super-
natural occurrences come equally from God and that man must trust to his beneficent purpose. Collins in particular presents evangelical doctrines as being irreligious or perverse, offering instead a Broad Church framework for belief.

But not only did Dickens and Collins object to evangelical doctrine on principle; they further believed that it could be used tendentiously, insofar as its emphasis on universal depravity could obviate responsibility on the part of the individual. In *David Copperfield* the Murdstones justify their neglect of David through the doctrine of infant depravity, and Mrs Clennam in *Little Dorrit* justifies peculation in the same way, urging that she is sparing Amy from temptation by appropriating her inheritance. In *Bleak House* the doctrine of original sin allows the domineering Mrs Pardiggle to bully her family in an ostentatious display of personal piety. An insistence on constant activity, both to make the best possible use of time and to keep sinful thoughts at bay, is a recognisably evangelical trait, and one shared by Esther in the same novel. Though Dickens himself was remarkable for his need to be constantly occupied, he presents it in his evangelical characters as a mark of vanity, as they use philanthropic missions to suggest their piety. Mrs Pardiggle involves her entire family in her activities, forcing her children to give their pocket money to worthy causes. Such activity is used to demonstrate her moral strength in overcoming her own corrupt nature, and so in effect she is emphasising her own virtue in visiting the poor. David Englander further explains the appeal of evangelicalism:

Its doctrines dwelt chiefly on the fall of man; the atoning death of Christ; grace the sole originating cause of man’s salvation; justification by faith the sole instrumental cause; the need of a new birth, and of the constant and sustaining action of the Holy Spirit – and were both a strength and a weakness. By the close of the nineteenth-century, its vision of eternal damnation was said to be alienating and outdated, but at the opening of the Queen’s reign it was the evangelical emphasis upon the natural equality and moral deficiency of all men before God that was so attractive.\(^{32}\)

In practice, this notion of equally corrupt origins could be seen as giving rise to a sense of moral superiority among those who regarded themselves as ‘elect’, or chosen for salvation. Anxious to stress her sanctity in making expiation, Mrs Pardiggle defines herself in terms of the good use she makes of her time: ‘I am a School lady, I am a Visiting
lady, I am a Reading lady, I am a Distributing lady; I am on the local Linen Box Committee, and many general Committees; and my canvassing alone is very extensive...’33

Expressions of self-loathing could be used in a similar way to suggest sanctity, insofar as an awareness of innate corruption underlined adherence to the strict evangelical code. In Bleak House Mr Chadband adopts precisely these tactics, making out a running account between himself and God, which he attempts to conceal as humility. Having attempted to cheat the cab driver at Mrs Snagsby’s door, he turns the man’s complaint to his advantage in this way: “My friends,” says he, “I remember a duty unfulfilled yesterday. It is right that I should be chastened in some penalty. I ought not to murmur.”34

In this way he contrives not only to excuse his behaviour, but further to display his humility in a public invocation of personal sin.

Chadband is a deliberate hypocrite, who uses evangelical religion both to gain the respect of those around him and to accrue material benefits. But similar behaviour is attributed to the more sincere evangelicals. Castigation is often seen to be self-imposed, as evangelicals attempt to expiate their sins. It has long been noted that imprisonment lies at the thematic centre of Little Dorrit. But the complexity of this pervasive image as a religious emblem has yet to be fully explored. This emblematic imprisonment infuses the novel at various levels, both social and individual. Most obviously, the literal imprisonment of Mr Dorrit, with his daughter Amy in attendance, creates a parallel with the voluntary incarceration of the fanatical Calvinist Mrs Clennam. In each case, the purpose is reparation or repayment of debt. Ironically Dorrit is unable to pay his debts, incurred by his business partner and not directly by himself, because he is unable to earn money in prison; Mrs Clennam meanwhile believes that she can repay her vicarious ‘debt’ of inherited sin by emulating this confinement, rather than by giving the Dorrits money that is rightfully theirs and which would secure Mr Dorrit’s release. Elisabeth Jay explains the problematic nature of the Doctrine of Original Sin, which could lead to just such an abrogation of responsibility: ‘The difficulty in distinguishing original sin from individual sin provided the chink in the evangelical armour where confusion and self-deception could appear.’35

This reliance on original sin informs the thinking of Miss Clack in The Moonstone. She constantly alludes to mankind’s ‘fallen nature’ in order to justify her aberrations, but references to such doctrines arising from a belief in ‘the Fall’ as a literal event, are shown to be no more than an attempt at self-vindication. Similar acts of self-deception
abound in Dickens’s evangelical figures of all denominations, as they conceal their genuine failings behind ostentatious humility, but nowhere is his portrayal as complex as in the figure of Mrs Clennam. She is seen to deny her true motives not simply because she is a bigot or a hypocrite, but because she is bodily and mentally incarcerated, as is Mr Dorrit. In each case the psychological effects on the prisoner are described in terms of disease or rot – Mrs Clennam’s body has literally begun to decay through lack of use, and her incapacity becomes a symbol of perversion as she is trapped within a diseased and rigid code of belief. Dorrit, who enters the prison as a hapless and childlike figure, becomes increasingly complacent as he is divested of all personal responsibility. As he begins to take pride in his title of ‘Father of the Marshalsea’, adopting it as a distinction, so Mrs Clennam deceives herself in her professions of self-loathing, with which she attempts to appease a vengeful God. She insists that her affliction is a form of reparation, allowing her to atone for original sin: ‘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.’

The irony of Mrs Clennam rather than God claiming her due, adumbrates the arrogance of her modifying the image of her creator to meet her personal requirements. But there is a further significance in this use of financial language. There was a strong connection between evangelicalism and business acumen, which could lead to pointed inconsistencies between ethic and practice.

This is a connection that George Eliot was to exploit in *Middlemarch*: in a parallel with *Little Dorrit*, she suggests disreputable practices on the part of the wealthy banker Mr Bulstrode. Like Mrs Clennam, Bulstrode is guilty of withholding an inheritance from the rightful legatee and uses his position in Middlemarch to appropriate spiritual authority as well. His belief system allows him to deceive himself as to his own motives, as the narrator wryly points out:

> It was a principle with Mr Bulstrode to gain as much power as possible, that he might use it for the glory of God. He went through a great deal of spiritual conflict and inward argument in order to adjust his motives, and make clear to himself what God’s glory required.

His purblind insistence on evangelical doctrine is predictably detrimental to the fever hospital he wishes to fund, as the inappropriate appointment of Tyke in place of Farebrother makes abundantly clear.
Disastrously he fails to allow for the peculiar nature of the townspeople and the need to adapt any moral teaching accordingly. The liberal counterpart to Bulstrode’s assumption of original sin, Farebrother: ‘is an effective cleric... preaching sensible sermons, and giving practical advice and sympathy, because of his awareness of his own shortcomings, a perception equivalent to a kind of personal suffering.’

Bulstrode’s inability to recognise the value of Farebrother’s practical ministry is an aspect of his own narrowness, particularly as Farebrother is admired by the commendable Garth family (whose own moral status is consistently upheld by the narrator).

Bulstrode’s dependence on the doctrine of original sin is genuine enough, although he uses it tendentiously to demonstrate his own religious consciousness and to exert power over others – memorably he offers gratuitous advice to Mr V Vincey on the subject of extravagance before he will assist Fred in pacifying a rich uncle. His apparent separation between doctrine and fellow feeling is inimical to any understanding between Bulstrode and the community and as his crimes are revealed, the narrator comments on the greater danger inherent in any such reliance on abstract doctrine: ‘There is no general doctrine which is not capable of eating out our morality if unchecked by the deep-seated habit of direct fellow-feeling with individual fellow-men.’

This remark could have come straight out of Dickens. The parallels between Bulstrode and Mrs Clennam are further striking in terms of both their hard-won social status and their self-deception. It will be remembered likewise that the sinister Mr Murdstone in *David Copperfield* is a partner in a London firm. Ian Bradley explains the reasons behind this seemingly inconsistent link between evangelical religion and commercial success:

The ideal life as put forward by the evangelicals, in which constant application and activity guarded the soul against the sin of sloth, and a task shirked or an appointment missed meant sure retribution from above, could almost have been designed deliberately for businessmen and financiers. So could the evangelical values of accountability, regularity, honesty and integrity.

Not only is Mrs Clennam successful in business because of her religious insistence on unremitting, methodical work; her beliefs are warped to the point that she sees the religious life in terms of a financial exchange, with God as ‘a higher sort of clerk’. As Elisabeth Jay observes:
Novelists... demonstrated how rigid orthodoxy could become a cloak for individual fears and dislikes whilst self-mortification might be practised as a substitute for positive religious experience. The effort to maintain a favourable spiritual bank balance by acts of gratuitous self-punishment provides the common denominator in characters otherwise as diverse as Mrs Clennam, Miss Clack..." 42

In fact Miss Clack never really makes it to the self-punishment stage, but her denunciations of humanity’s ‘evil passions’ serve a similar end. Like Mrs Clennam, Miss Clack justifies her desire for money through religious language. But like Mrs Clennam, she gives herself away, in her use of financial terminology. She has tormented her dying aunt by forcing tracts on her and by invading her privacy with letters of admonition from her ‘serious’ acquaintance. She has attempted to convert Lady Verinder to evangelicalism, and there is some suggestion that her motive may have been to persuade her to change her will. On learning that she is not included in it, she herself protests against the doctors in terms that point to her own hidden motive: ‘Precisely the same blinded materialism (working treacherously behind my back) now sought to rob me of the only right of property that my poverty could claim – my right of spiritual property in my perishing aunt.’ 43

In this context, ‘materialism’ suggests the double meaning of both irreligiousness and avarice. The word ‘perishing’ underlies Miss Clack’s insistence that Lady Verinder is not destined for heavenly bliss, and should in itself stand as a reminder to her that this is not the time to be dwelling on monetary affairs. Evangelical figures such as Miss Clack and Mrs Clennam not only disguise their less worthy motives through religious discourse, but define their deprivations literally in terms of an investment, balancing accounts with God as if he were party to a business transaction. This reduction of religion to the level of a trade-off, displacing gratitude for a voluntary sacrifice, is disguised by the insistence on personal sin. Miss Clack manipulates the doctrine of human depravity to justify her acceptance of Franklin’s bribe: ‘My nature is weak. It cost me a hard struggle, before Christian humility conquered sinful pride, and self-denial accepted the cheque.’ 44

Collins pays closer attention to the doctrinal issues raised by his character, but her failure to recognise true Christianity when she sees it, and her insistence that only evangelicals are to be spared from an eternity in Hell, affirm the validity of Dickens’s presentation of evangelical females. Miss Clack uses religious language and philanthropic ventures to justify her own spite and sensuality, and in order to
increase her self-importance. As Catherine Peters assesses her: ‘Dripping piety and venom in equal measure, she reflects Wilkie’s continued irritation with the religion of his childhood.’

Jealous of the beautiful young heiress, Rachel Verinder, Miss Clack uses religious doctrine as a weapon against her, and gives herself away in misapplying it. She confides to the reader that: ‘knowing Rachel’s spirit to have been essentially unregenerate from her childhood upwards, I was prepared for whatever my aunt could tell me on the subject of her daughter.’ The complex question of whether or not a soul was regenerate must have troubled many evangelicals. But to be regenerate means to have been absolved from the consequences of sin and therefore among those who have been chosen for salvation, the only difficulty being to determine at what point one could be considered safe. For Miss Clack to reduce this doctrine to the level of insult, saying that Rachel has been unregenerate from her childhood upwards, suggests that the concept itself has no objective meaning for her. This use of doctrine as a weapon against those she dislikes is again reminiscent of the self-deception practised by Mrs Clennam, who is presented as praying to God to slaughter her enemies. It is the same false reasoning that Bulstrode will use to castigate those who offend him in Eliot’s Middlemarch. Assuming their own vindication through belief in the Atonement, these characters attribute corruption to others more readily than to themselves.

Terms suggestive of corruption are essential to Miss Clack’s discourse, but in common with Mrs Clennam she lets slip that in describing herself as a fallen being, she feels that she has vanquished sin. At a more worldly level, it is through the use of such terms, and in describing herself as one of a select band of pious Christians, that she endeavours to overcome her marginalised position as an impetuous spinster. By implication, Miss Clack’s code of doctrinal belief is simply a means of raising herself above the reach of those who threaten her.

In the work of both Dickens and Collins the issue of Judgement is integral to the treatment of original sin, and this belief is similarly used as a means of self-vindication. A belief in Judgement is vindicated by the evangelical figures through references to providential interference. Collins himself shared the evangelical insistence on providential interposition, emphasising God’s involvement with individual souls (the immediacy of such intervention belies Peter Thoms’s interpretation of providence in the novels as a pattern perceived only by the characters themselves as a means of imposing
order on their experience). But his novels continually subvert the accompanying doctrine of retribution. Providential intervention is attributed by such figures as Michael Vanstone and Miss Clack to a wrathful God, exacting expiation for original sin and for sins committed. More often than not, this sin is located in their opponents rather than in themselves. Miss Clack perceives human misery in terms of a providential order which she alone can see, and which she often appears to dictate. Conversely, she attributes her detractors' success to their having been abandoned to the devil. She describes Bruff, for instance, as ‘the chosen prophet of Law and Mammon’. 47

In *No Name* the inheritor of Magdalen’s and Norah’s fortune, Michael Vanstone, justifies his position in terms of providential sanction. An evangelical figure comparable in his actions to the Murdstones and Mrs Clennam, he combines avarice with a vindictive feeling towards the brother whom he believes to have cheated him out of his own inheritance. His response to the Vanstone sisters’ claim is at once pietistic and vengeful. Ignoring his moral responsibility to provide for them on the grounds of family relationship alone, he insists on regarding Andrew Vanstone’s ignorance of the law, which has led to this situation, as ‘a Providential interposition’. Supposed knowledge of Providential retribution immediately condemns Michael Vanstone in the reader’s mind. Seemingly troubled by no regret at having been to the last unreconciled, he writes in deliberately disparaging terms of his deceased brother:

He appears to have systematically imposed a woman on Society as his wife, who was not his wife; and to have completed the outrage on morality by afterwards marrying her. Such conduct as this, has called down a Judgement on himself and his children. I will not invite retribution on my own head, by assisting those children to continue the imposition which their parents practised… 48

This judgement of the children for the sins of the parents is self-interested and vindictive, but Michael Vanstone justifies his position by invoking original sin and claiming providential sanction for so doing. But in the narrative of *No Name* the doctrine of original sin is actively denied rather than affirmed, by providential interference. The war between Good and Evil is symbolically externalised, but the career of each character is dependent on free will alone. Human error may
bring its own retribution, but God is presented as intervening in temporal affairs only with the most beneficent of motives.

Appropriation of providential discourse as a means of self-vindication was to be heavily satirised in *The Moonstone*, in which characters who rely on Providence are not necessarily acting in a religious spirit. Miss Clack, like Michael Vanstone, uses the doctrines of man’s fallen nature and providential intervention either to excuse her spite or to suggest piety. Miss Clack cites Providence as an active force in her daily life and in presenting herself as a chosen instrument she is in some danger of appropriating a providential role. On hearing that Lady Verinder is terminally ill, she at once places herself at the centre of this drama, using it as an opportunity to display her piety and to suggest that God finds her indispensable. Significantly it is redemption of Lady Verinder’s ‘fallen nature’ and not of her own that Miss Clack offers as a divine motive for this putative intervention:

Little did my poor aunt imagine what a gush of devout thankfulness thrilled through me as she approached the end of her melancholy story. Here was a career of usefulness opened before me! Here was a beloved relative and perishing fellow-creature, on the eve of the great change, utterly unprepared; and led, providentially led, to reveal her situation to Me!49

Miss Clack later implies to Rachel that Lady Verinder has been consigned to an eternity in hell, for refusing to adopt evangelical religion before she died. Where Rachel herself insists that her mother having been a good woman on earth is now an angel in heaven, Miss Clack sees only merited retribution for original sin.

Dickens too satirises this tendency to assume knowledge of the divine will, in the figure of Mr Podsnap in *Our Mutual Friend*, who always knows what Providence means because it is invariably what he means himself. But the issue is particularly sinister in *No Name*, as both social mores and the law itself countenance what is morally an act of theft, and do so, as Mr Pendril complains, in the names of morality and religion. Michael Vanstone manipulates the doctrine of providential interference to justify his own ends, shirking his responsibility to his brother’s children and insisting that they must suffer for their parents’ wrongdoing. In answer to his claims, the course of the narrative reinterprets the doctrine of divine intervention in a liberalising context, through the experience of Magdalen Vanstone.
But Providence itself is not discredited in either *No Name* or *The Moonstone*; it simply allows an exposé of characters who wish to bend it to their own ends, or who cite it to avoid personal responsibility. The doctrine of inherited guilt, or original sin, is transformed into a belief that good comes out of evil. Characters are further enabled to atone for their own sins or for those of others. Ultimately providential design denies the validity of original sin, as benevolent intervention rescues characters from the consequences of the sins they actively commit. In all his major novels after *The Woman in White*, Collins assiduously avoids assuming the rôle of Providence himself, and so leaves judgement in the hands of the reader. In the most dramatic scene in *No Name*, as the ships pass the window, the narrative subverts Michael Vanstone’s view of providential intervention, as has been discussed elsewhere. As Magdalen is saved from suicide by the result of her gamble, she raises a question which will be finally answered in her symbolic rescue and redemption at the end of the novel. In the description of the last ship counted as a ‘Messenger of Life’, it is made clear to the reader that God has intervened to save her. She herself has yet to comprehend this: “‘Providence?’ she whispered faintly to herself. “Or chance?’”

As has been suggested, Collins does retain a belief in divine intervention, but he presents it in this novel in purely beneficent terms. Magdalen has been unable to trust entirely to God at times of difficulty, questioning his act of intervention in the matter of the ships. Only when her exertions leave her in a state of fever does she become responsive to religious influences and return metaphorically to the community of the Church. Captain Kirke, whose name connects him with the church and whose father was once ‘the salvation’ of Andrew Vanstone, makes a miraculous appearance to save Magdalen from death. He has no hesitation in answering the question she herself had posed earlier in the novel: “‘What has brought me here?’ he said to himself in a whisper. “The mercy of chance? No! The mercy of God.’” Given the importance of this affirmation, it is worth considering the ammunition that has been brought to bear against it. Philip O’Neill’s seemingly formidable objection is worth quoting at length:

This final accolade to Christianity may be interpreted as the ultimate acknowledgement of the...divine order of the world but it is rather flat and unconvincing when considered alongside the passage which describes how Magdalen rejects suicide... And while Kirke does answer Magdalen’s question, his all too succinct and complacent reply is a
poor counter-statement to the very forceful passage where chance is given such room to operate. Kirke is allowed to focus on the mercy of God, but in the text, this belief in divine Providence is counterbalanced by this insistence on the role of chance.  

But O’Neill fails to acknowledge at starting that Magdalen has deliberately invoked chance, whereas Kirke has been led to Aaron’s Buildings through no design of his own. More importantly, he misses the significance of Collins’s theological design – divine intervention operates within a context of chance and free will as opposed to being cataclysmically imposed. Thomas Vargish details the way in which providence was popularly assumed to operate through the free action of human beings, and observes that throughout the nineteenth-century instances of specific intervention were increasingly used in fiction to suggest an underlying pattern of divine will: ‘The concept of providence itself becomes progressively less an image of order, regulation, grand planning, and more an intimate solicitude for human lives.’  

This liberal interpretation of divine intervention also informs Armadale, in which natural impulses are continually made the medium for providential design. As William Marshall puts it: ‘The plot of Armadale works out in rational terms the events which the most significantly moral character attributes to higher causes.’ It is to this external operation of the providential law that Midwinter must trust. As Mr Brock has exhorted in his deathbed letter, ‘No evil exists, out of which, in obedience to His laws, Good may not come.’ The letter goes on to suggest that should Allan ever be in danger, Midwinter may be ‘the man whom the providence of God has appointed to save him’. Midwinter does indeed save his friend’s life, and in adopting Brock’s Christian faith he comes to reinterpret Allan’s prophetic dream, telling him at the end of the novel that:

‘I once believed that it was sent to rouse your distrust of the friendless man whom you had taken as a brother to your heart. I now
know that it came to you as a timely warning to take him closer still. ...Happen what may, God is all-merciful, God is all-wise. In those words, your dear old friend once wrote to me. In that faith, I can look back without murmuring at the years that are past, and can look on without doubting to the years that are to come.57

The faith eventually adopted by Midwinter is based on the premise that good can come out of evil according to a providential plan. According to this belief, guilt can be transformed into atonement, as in the case of Lydia when she makes the sacrifice of her own life in place of her husband’s. William H. Marshall postulates that:

Resisting classification more than any of Collins’ other novels, it is primarily an exploration of the nature of guilt, both personal and inherited. If the conclusions implied in the novel are less than clear, the fact may simply reflect Collins’ own uncertainty about aspects of man’s relation to the evil around him.58

Certainly the question of guilt is an important one in the novels, but it is an issue that tends towards a positive resolution. The criminal Miss Gwilt’s marriage for love to the son of the man she helped to cheat of his wife, sustains the link between natural affection and supernatural design perceived by Mr Brock. It is the strength of her love for Midwinter that causes Lydia to turn aside from her criminal purpose, and she reverts to it only when she becomes convinced that her husband no longer loves her in return. In a parallel to Lydia’s own symbolic reparation, Allan’s decision to shield her from universal condemnation even at the expense of his own reputation, allows him unwittingly to make amends for the thoughtless way in which his mother treated her many years earlier. It has even been suggested by Marshall that:

Midwinter’s marriage to Lydia, taking place not long after the death of Mr Brock, assumes something of the quality of the ritual of sacrifice – his atonement for the sins of his father. He thereby takes upon himself... the suffering and perhaps the destruction intended for his friend.59

This shielding of Armadale from imminent danger is certainly the effect, if not the intention, of Midwinter’s marriage to Miss Gwilt. The sanctification through atonement demonstrated by both Magdalen Vanstone and Lydia Gwilt militates against a belief in
original sin, as providential design brings good out of evil, rather than infecting the innocent with original sin. This sanctification through an act of reparation not only obviates the doctrine of vicarious atonement, but celebrates the potential worth of the sinner. Collins certainly does not affirm the providential retribution discerned by such characters as Michael Vanstone and Miss Clack, who use this doctrine to judge others whilst vindicating themselves. Jerome Meckier rightly concludes: ‘Collins’s providence is always on the job at life’s darkest moments, patiently drawing long-range good out of present suffering.’60 But this is to acknowledge one aspect only of Collins’s agenda, for he goes further than this. The suggestion of providential design pervades the deaths of Sir Percival and the Count in The Woman in White, but in Collins’s other major novels of the 1860s providence acts as a purely protective agency, allowing erring characters to make amends on their own account.

This use of providential interference is of course not open to an agnostic writer such as Eliot. Where Collins liberalises this doctrine, she demystifies it altogether, reducing it to a Law of Consequences under the terms of which human action is widely diffusive. Famously treated in Adam Bede, this idea posits a possible impact of the smallest action on the surrounding world. In Janet’s Repentance the eponymous heroine is saved from her disillusionment by the Dissenting Tryan when she overhears him talking kindly to a poor parishioner; in Silas Marner Godfrey Cass’s abandonment of his child and concealment from Nancy of his first marriage lead to future isolation when she will not hear of adopting Eppie. Though the outcome may seem coincidental, the narrator in each case purports to detail a logical chain of moral cause and effect. As David Maria Hesse explains: ‘...life, to [Eliot], was bearable because it was ordered by lawful determinism, shedding a positive light on all aspects because nothing was essentially unforeseeable (or if it was it was at least explainable). Belief in chance, on the other hand, held nothing but obscurity and life-negating force.’61 This determinism can be extremely positive, as it is in Middlemarch, when Dorothea’s altruistic visit to Rosamond reconciles her to her husband and brings about her own union with Will Ladislaw. She is ushered out of the novel as one who never made a name in the world, but whose impact on those around her was ‘incalculably diffusive’.

At one level such a treatment of personal responsibility would have appealed strongly to Dickens. He does not invert the doctrine of providential interference in the same direct way as Collins, choosing...
like Eliot to emphasise the personal responsibility of his characters. But it is misleading to claim, as Barbara Hardy does, that: ‘Both Providence and material success are tainted concepts for Dickens...and the typical conversion of the great Victorian novel is not a religious conversion but a turning from self-regard to love and social responsibility.’ Nor is it valid to claim, as does J. Hillis Miller, that for Dickens Providence is unknowable or unattainable. Miller argues for instance, that in *Bleak House*: ‘the world can only be seen as Esther sees it, as moral, as containing an immanent Providence, through her eyes. The narrator cannot see the world in this way through his own neutral point of view.’

The immorality inherent to the world of *Bleak House* is traced by the omniscient narrator to national abuses, justified historically, it is noted, by the evangelical belief in poverty as divinely ordained. However it will be seen in a later discussion of the novel that the poor are abandoned not by providence, but by those appointed to their relief. Set as a counterweight to the destructive forces represented by Chancery and the associates of Mr Chadband, Esther serves to remind the reader of God’s mercy, in her efforts to ameliorate the condition of the poor. In the later novel *A Tale of Two Cities* Sydney Carton expresses a vision of providence working through such abuses, as he foresees the people of France expiating the sins to which they have been led in overthrowing an obsolete and tyrannical regime. France will be renewed, even by means of past corruption and present bloodshed, as a providential plan turns even cruelty and suffering to good effect.

It is true that Dickens’s novels do not assert direct providential intervention to the same extent that Collins’s do; rather his belief in Providence is mediated through the very presence of such essentially angelic figures as Esther Summerson and Little Dorrit. Furthermore Dickens himself stated quite explicitly that the resolution of his fiction was intended as a reflection of the ways of providence, insofar as an underlying purpose would be revealed as the plot reached its resolution. Vargish defines the very form of much Victorian fiction, including that of Dickens, as being in itself part of a providential tradition:

> If there is virtue in design, in formal arrangement, then believers in providence will wish to see everywhere, even in their fiction, the fullest possible design, the roundest plot – complete with foreshadowings, parallels, and analogies... Novels could be structured to reflect the order and method of providential design, and by
reflecting that design could... make a powerful claim to the most serious attention.\textsuperscript{65}

Jerome Meckier’s astute observation affirms the importance of the overarching providential order in Dickens’s and Collins’s novels:

That confidence in providence was never simply a Victorian convention becomes manifest when one comprehends how seriously Dickens and Collins took each other’s efforts to be its architect. Each wanted to be its spokesman in the struggle against more optimistic novels of their mutual opponents who minimized providence’s authority.\textsuperscript{66}

But a belief in providence does not necessarily imply pessimism as Meckier asserts. Reliance on providence as a punitive agency is subverted in \textit{Little Dorrit}, as Mrs Clennam’s invocation of original sin and divine retribution is not only discredited, but itself requires forgiveness. Dickens’s move in the later novels away from reward and punishment is in line with Vargish’s appraisal of his changing providential aesthetic. Whereas in earlier novels the moral order was so structured as to appear almost preordained (ultimately the good prosper whilst the bad fail) later novels show God working, if more obscurely, then also more immediately. According to Alexander Welsh: ‘Distribution of rewards and punishments is the major index of providential design in fiction.’\textsuperscript{67} According to this view of providence, heroes such as Nicholas Nickleby are predestined for ultimate reward in this life, while evildoers will come to a sticky end. But Vargish has traced a more complex development of the theme, as providence in the later novels: ‘must be glimpsed obliquely in certain shining particularities, in a personal sacrifice, a gratuitous charity, the purity of a virtuous heroine, the courage of a good man.’\textsuperscript{68} Meckier too asserts this providential design as hidden yet continually active:

At a time when many intellectuals considered it unfashionable if not ridiculous to speak of supernatural direction, Dickens endowed the mystery novelist with a special mission: detecting providence’s carefulness, despite its increasingly hidden or obscured designs. In large, complicated novels the melodramatic realist can uncover programs which the general reader may then perceive in real life, amid the welter of a modern, scientific, industrial society.\textsuperscript{69}

The lessening rigidity of the moral structure in Dickens actually serves to reveal God’s active presence in the world, as he intervenes directly
in human affairs. But contrary to Meckier’s insistence on divine justice, providence in the later novels is increasingly seen offering forgiveness rather than imposing a strict order of justice.

This issue of forgiveness itself testifies to Dickens’s growing liberalism. In *David Copperfield* the Murdstones are discredited as the narrator develops his own religious thought in direct opposition to the doctrines of depravity that were forced upon him as a child. But in *Little Dorrit* Dickens inverts the doctrine of original sin by calling upon Arthur to forgive its proponent Mrs Clennam. Towards the end of *Little Dorrit* Mrs Clennam is accorded a measure of sympathy by the narrator. She is permitted to tell her own story rather than hearing it from the irredeemable Rigaud, and so it is presented in the most favourable light. Brought up by strictly evangelical parents, she has spent her childhood in ‘days of wholesome repression, punishment and fear’.70

By the 1850s a belief in predestination was uncommon even among Calvinists, but this is the belief in which she has grown up, and her voluntary incarceration over a period of some years has prevented her from being exposed to more enlightened influences. It is largely for this reason that she has deprived Arthur of affection. The illegitimate son of her husband from a previous liaison, Arthur is in her eyes doubly cursed, and her instinctive love for him directly opposes her belief that he is preordained to an eternity in hell. In blighting his childhood, she has exacted vengeance on his father but equally she has attempted to outwit her own belief:

I devoted myself to reclaim the otherwise predestined and lost boy; to give him the reputation of an honest origin; to bring him up in fear and trembling, and in a life of practical contrition for the sins that were heavy on his head before his entrance into this condemned world.71

Arthur has confided the story of his upbringing to Mr Meagles, without acknowledging his father’s painful position or appreciating the forces which have shaped his mother:

I am the only child of parents who weighed, measured, and priced everything; for whom what could not be weighed, measured, and priced, had no existence. 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 part of a bargain for the security of their possessions.72
What is particularly interesting in *Little Dorrit* is the complexity with which Dickens endows Mrs Clennam, who is seen perpetually: ‘to argue with some invisible opponent. Perhaps with her own better sense, always turning upon herself and her own deception.’\textsuperscript{73}

Mrs Clennam claims to have taken in her husband’s child in a spirit of vengeance, which she attributes to God’s design; however, she is clearly disappointed when he does not grow up loving her, and readily admits his duty and integrity. This explanation further underlines Clennam’s own lack of insight in ignoring the traditions which have shaped his parents. Bradley explains the evangelical religious experience in terms of a ‘dread of the terrible power and presence of a Wrathful God; a perpetual sense of accountability for every lapse from the highest standard of Christian behaviour...’\textsuperscript{74}

It becomes clear towards the end of the novel that Mrs Clennam is not entirely disingenuous in her expressions of self-loathing, and judgement of her becomes increasingly untenable. Where Miss Murdstone was positively sadistic in her harassment of the young David, Mrs Clennam is acting against her instincts in distancing herself from Arthur. It is not strictly true that:

The narrator’s censorious depiction of Mrs Clennam is unrelenting, with the one exception of her tenderness toward Little Dorrit. And the great disclosure scene near the end of the novel discovers how deeply intertwined and confused the secular and spiritual strains are in this fierce old woman.\textsuperscript{75}

During the course of this revelation, the reader comes to feel a degree of compassion for Mrs Clennam, and the narrator seems at least as confused in his assessment as the character herself is blind to her own ignoble motives.

*Little Dorrit* develops the theme of personal responsibility set up in *David Copperfield*, but there is surely less judgement of the central evangelical figure, who is seen to be the product of her own upbringing and who herself seeks consolation in religion for the emotional deprivations of her early life. Mrs Clennam’s state of mind at the end of the novel can only be surmised, but no definitive judgement is passed on her. Narrative judgement of evangelical proponents is further diminished in *Great Expectations*. Miss Havisham, whose machinations are designed for the sole purpose of bringing suffering to many men as compensation for the past sins of one, is ultimately purged in fire, having asked forgiveness of her primary victim.
Maintaining an invincible dislike of the doctrines of original sin and infant depravity, Dickens nevertheless began in the 1850s to explore this ethos in environmental terms as a perversion of religious feeling, rather than simply attacking its proponents as corrupt or absurd. The question of divine judgement continued to trouble him, as the next chapter will show.
4

Subverting Judgement: the Case for Redemption through Sanctification of the Sinner

The desire for sanctification is characteristic of liberal Christianity and provides a point of intersection with more orthodox belief. Newman repeatedly stresses the sanctity of the Church in his writing, and *Apologia Pro Vita Sua* reveals a concern with personal sanctification as a religious experience. Treated by an agnostic writer such as Eliot, this doctrine becomes a struggle for perfection within a purely temporal framework. Its most notable feature, as in Dickens, is the relation of good intent to individual relationships. Her clergy are judged not on their doctrine but on their assumption of social responsibility. This is apparent in the early *Scenes of Clerical Life*, in which evangelicalism is shown to be potentially redemptive, rescuing first Tryan and through him Janet, from despair.

In *Middlemarch* the Church is not a reliable source of spiritual authority. It is linked to the medical profession not only through Farebrother’s interest in natural history, but also through a series of parallels – there is roughly the same number of clerics in the novel as there are medical practitioners; each reflects the ignorant disputation of the other, and both are corrupted by the want of money. The clerics in the novel are as much in need of redemption as anyone else, and they are assessed in terms of their professionalism rather than their theological standpoint. As Oliver Lovesey astutely notes:

In *Middlemarch*, the clerical character is, more obviously than in Eliot’s other fiction, a character defined by professional role. The inscribing feature of this professional role is the incumbent’s possession of sympathetic fellow feeling, which is often the fruit of personal suffering. The parson’s sympathetic understanding of others and his function as a stabilizing influence in the parish, and not any
spiritual duties of the clerical office, the novel suggests, must be preserved in English society.¹

Less radical than Collins, Eliot allows perfectibility only to those characters who seem close to attaining it before the story has properly begun – Dorothea’s unhappy marriage gives a focus to her inherent virtue, and her later struggle with herself when she believes Will to be faithless, culminates in triumph. Not even through the influence of this saintly character is Rosamond to be redeemed, and her view of her second marriage as a ‘reward’ is deeply ironic. In Eliot’s work redemption does not imply any relation to an afterlife, but it is crucial in societal terms. Altruism and a willingness to sacrifice personal happiness are central to this, as is the withholding of personal judgement, which is meted out instead by the narrator.

For Dickens, as for Collins, sanctification has a directly religious signification and he had always emphasised the authority of the New Testament with reference to forgiveness. But the oblique influence of evangelicalism on his thinking is more complex than his sometimes heated pronouncements would suggest, and he is not able to present sanctification of sinners with anything like the same confidence. John R. Reed’s presentation of Dickens as orthodox in his religious thinking bypasses his struggle towards greater liberalism, but otherwise presents these conflicting impulses with considerable insight:

From the outset of his career Dickens was deeply concerned with the need for withholding judgement, extending compassion, and, with evidence of repentance, assuring forgiveness. But he was equally convinced that transgressions required retributive punishment.²

Equally, Jerome Meckier’s emphasis on the justice meted out by Dickensian providence makes no allowance for his changing outlook, in highlighting the authoritarian tendencies within his writing. These tendencies were based in the early works on a literal belief in Judgement – the famously cheerful book _A Christmas Carol_ works towards a comic resolution, but significantly the spirits who visit Scrooge are sent to save him from damnation; if he fails to repent he will suffer the consequences after death, as Marley does.

Extricating himself from a belief in Judgement only with considerable difficulty, Dickens was forced to replace it with a form of individual atonement for sin, and so came dangerously close to the evangelical ideal of spiritual expiation. His erring but redeemable char-
acters in the novels written before *Our Mutual Friend* routinely suffer in isolation before they can be accorded providential or authorial sanction. For instance even a basically moral character such as Arthur Clennam must be chastened in prison for his one offence (speculating rashly and so by implication attempting to acquire an unearned fortune) before he can attain his reward, and Pip of *Great Expectations* is able to redeem himself only through hard and initially unremunerative work; the less sympathetic Mrs Joe must be bludgeoned half to death by Orlick before she can be considered to have paid for her sins against Pip. Again Reed’s analysis is succinctly perceptive: ‘Dickens was a great believer in the value of suffering for purifying the soul, but he believed even more in the preservation of innocence.’ This duality justifies the sense in which:

Orlick may be seen as the means of Mrs Joe’s salvation. She has been punished not merely for her treatment of Orlick, but for her generally loveless nature. She can no longer actively atone, but she can demonstrate repentance and ask forgiveness, and this is a great deal, especially as it comes, in the evangelical tradition, just before death.

The conflict between judgement and forgiveness of Dickens’s fallen characters is apparent in the fate of figures as diverse as Steerforth in *David Copperfield* (Ham’s desire to die in his place is not sufficient to save him, but rather ensures that Ham himself dies in a state of grace, having forgiven his enemy) and the disgraced Lady Dedlock in *Bleak House*, who allows herself to die quite literally of exposure before Esther has had a chance to bring her husband’s message of forgiveness. Whereas Collins repeatedly refuses judgement in the resolution of his major novels, Dickens’s uncertainty on the question of divine judgement is made manifest in the ambiguous fate of Mrs Clennam, who is left in a kind of limbo after refusing the offer of redemption held out by Little Dorrit.

Collins suffers no such uncertainty, citing divine mercy and human perfectibility in answer to a belief in Judgement. His first two published novels, *Antonina* and *Basil*, do contain vague references to an undefined future judgement, but this doctrine is shown primarily in its most beneficent aspect, of encouraging mercy on earth. In *Antonina* Numerian prays for his dying brother despite their former enmity, and in *Basil* it is the forgiving nature of the hero that leads him to visit his estranged wife as she is dying, on the grounds that she is going ‘before the throne of God’. Basil feels that: ‘The sole resource for her which
human skill and human pity could now suggest, embraced the sole chance that she might still be recovered for repentance, before she was resigned to death. But such beliefs are not upheld, even in this most positive form, in Collins’s more mature work: in *Hide and Seek* the worthy Mrs Peckover is convinced that Mary Grice’s seducer is already suffering eternal torment, but she is proved wrong when he is discovered to be alive and far less blameworthy than has been assumed. His only punishment is the temporal one of exile from his home, and even this allows him time for repentance. Even in *Basil* Margaret is allowed a last moment of remorse, as her husband prays by her deathbed. Symbolically the dawn breaks, offering hope as Basil: ‘burst into a passion of tears, as my spirit poured from my lips in supplication for hers – tears that did not humiliate me; for I knew, while I shed them, that I had forgiven her.’ Consignment to damnation is accepted as a possibility in these novels, but nonetheless human forgiveness holds out the hope of divine mercy.

Like Dickens, Collins seems to have developed a still more liberal outlook as his writing matured, and in his major novels of the 1860s he repeatedly subverts the idea of Judgement. It has been seen how he uses providentialism to subvert a belief in original sin, and in his major novels he forcefully denies future judgement by the same means, while atonement is invariably presented positively, as a means of sanctification. The perpetual inner struggle Magdalen Vanstone undergoes in *No Name* is presented as a conflict between personified forces of Good and Evil, the object of which is the conquest of her soul. Though this battle is externalised through personification, it is nonetheless clear that the real conflict is an inner one, as she inclines to one side or the other in her response to temptation. This emphasis on the inner state, as it undergoes flux and change, is in keeping with contemporary evangelical thought. Interestingly, in 1839 William Carson had denied that evil was an external force, urging: ‘good and evil may be defined to consist in the coincidence or in the separation or departure of finite wills from the infinite will of God....’ The crucial importance of the individual, as testified by the sometimes dramatic inner life, was as central to Collins’s religious belief as it had been to the faith of his father. But unlike the Evangelicals, Collins did not adopt this stance in the fear of damnation. Rejecting the evangelical ethos which condemns her, and which is upheld or implied by the minor characters, the narrator of *No Name* avoids any suggestion that Magdalen is in immortal peril of any kind. The issue is not her eternal fate, but the condition of her soul as the repository of good and evil inclinations, a
condition which determines her responsiveness to God. For Collins it is possible for sin not only to be forgiven, but to give way to virtue. The erring central figure in both *No Name* and *Armadale* is not only forgiven, but becomes a moral focus capable of ennobling virtue. This is one reason why the concept of judgement is so inappropriate to his liberal and optimistic conception of religion.

In the first chapters of *No Name* the fundamental conflict between these opposing religious values is set up. In conversation with the redoubtable Miss Garth, whose views on sin are somewhat severe to say the least, Mr Pendril urges forgiveness of Mrs Vanstone in the name of specifically New Testament charity:

‘Let strict morality claim its right, and condemn her early fault. I have read my New Testament to little purpose indeed, if Christian mercy may not soften the hard sentence against her – if Christian charity may not find a plea for her memory in the love and fidelity, the suffering and sacrifice of her whole life.’

Furthermore he represents the marriage of the Vanstone parents as being a reward for Mrs Vanstone’s love and fidelity to the man she saved from a life of dissipation. The notion of reward would inevitably seem blasphemous if devotion to the married Andrew Vanstone were to be considered sinful in itself. Notably the merciless Michael Vanstone will acknowledge only the sin involved in living a life of adultery, and confutes mercy to the woman who becomes the second Mrs Vanstone with complicity in vice. But the injustice of such a judgement warns the reader against judging Magdalen Vanstone, in her plot to regain her inheritance by any means. *No Name* could be taken as a celebration of the one sinner who repents as opposed to the ninety-nine just men who have committed no sin. But it also has a wider significance as a statement of Collins’s own religious position. In it he systematically replaces the central tenets of evangelical belief with his own religious thought. That thought is based on a central belief in God as merciful and forgiving. Magdalen does suffer retribution for her sin in considering suicide, but Collins makes it clear that this castigation does not arise from divine wrath. When Mrs Lecount finds the laudanum and assumes that it was to be used as a weapon with which to murder Noel Vanstone: ‘The suicide-despair, in which the poison had been procured; the suicide purpose for which, in distrust of the future, the poison had been kept, had brought with them their own retribution.’
This invocation of moral cause and effect is reminiscent of the Law of Consequences associated with George Eliot (intriguingly Catherine Peters compares the novel to those of Eliot, in its psychological analysis of character). While Collins was ready to believe in providential assistance, as has become clear, he seems to have had no real belief in divine retribution. It is this religious context that renders Magdalen’s reformation at the end of *No Name* so compelling. The brevity with which her return to virtue is treated, has led to the claim, most pithily expressed by Lilian Nayder, that the resolution of the novel is: ‘less a sign of Collins’s mixed feelings about his aggressive heroine than a half-hearted attempt to draw a moral lesson from a subversive story to soothe ruffled readers.’ But Magdalen’s reintegration into the community is radical in itself, and her repentance does not preclude her from maintaining an assertive character – the same resoluteness that leads her to make the necessary advances to Captain Kirke, claiming him as ‘my husband’, is apparent in her decisive action of tearing up Noel Vanstone’s will. The salvation of Magdalen is the moral towards which the plot has been working.

*David Copperfield*, written before the first meeting between the two men, suggests Dickens’s preoccupation with judgement. Liberal treatment of sin has repeatedly been claimed for Dickens’s writing. But the tenets of evangelicalism permeate this novel in particular. Though the narrator upholds the value of forgiveness as a Christian virtue, the penitent sinner is not yet allowed any approach to sanctification, and may indeed be judged by God. Emily’s doubt of the divine forgiveness emphasises her genuine repentance, but it recalls Dickens’s appeal to the prostitutes of London in 1848, urging them to turn aside from their courses before it is too late. The final Judgement is referred to at several points, most notably in David’s address to the departed Steerforth. Unable wholly to abjure his old admiration for his friend, he nonetheless believes that he will be called upon to testify against him after death: ‘My sorrow may bear involuntary witness against you at the Judgement Throne; but my angry thoughts or my reproaches never will, I know!’

But notwithstanding this effusion, David’s religious thought differs in several important respects from evangelicalism as represented in the novel. Most importantly, he urges the value of instinctive and unostentatious forgiveness, though a level of narrative judgement is preserved. Mr Peggotty begins by being contemptuous of the prostitute Martha, but is reconciled to her when his own niece becomes Steerforth’s mistress. Before setting off in search of Emily he has left a message that his love for
her is unchanged and that he forgives her. Ham goes further than his uncle, telling David: ‘‘T’ant that I forgive her. ‘Tan’t that so much. ‘Tis more as I beg of her to forgive me, for having pressed my affections upon her’.12 It is in keeping with Dickens’s New Testament emphasis on forgiveness that Emily should be eventually redeemed, but her rescue is ultimately justified by the chastened and sorrowful demeanour she is to maintain for the remainder of the novel. Nor does she go wholly unpunished. Her uncle is able to rescue her, but not before she has received a severe dressing down from Rosa Dartle.

Ham himself becomes a martyr towards the end of the novel, dying in an abortive attempt to save Steerforth from drowning. His awareness of the identity of his enemy is implied in David’s own recognition of Steerforth’s characteristic gesture as he clings to the mast of his sinking ship. Ham’s effort to save his rival belies David’s former fear that he might wish to kill him, and gives new significance to the fisherman’s constant looking out to sea, which has caused David to wonder if he is contemplating suicide. Again, forgiveness by an injured character is as important as narrative judgement. But the emphasis is on the forgiver, rather than the object of forgiveness. Ham’s altruistic death is not sufficient to secure salvation for Steerforth, who dies unredeemed. Though *David Copperfield* and *Little Dorrit* each offer a critique of the shaping factors behind protagonists’ sin, social determinism is not allowed to interfere with the judgement appropriate to each.

Both Collins’s Lydia Gwilt and Dickens’s Uriah Heep seek to gain ascendancy over their employers through blackmail. Uriah later reveals that he has learned the means of inveigling his way into Mr Wickfield’s confidence through using the precepts of his charity school. Even as a child, he will not let David teach him Latin, lest it belie his claim that he is ‘umble’. But he contrives to become a partner in Mr Wickfield’s concern, and explains to David how his professions of humility have served to his advantage, allowing him to advance by slow degrees to a position of considerable power. It is at this point that David acknowledges the partial responsibility of a faulty system of education in producing such characters. Uriah tells him:

‘Father and me was brought up at a foundation school for boys; and mother, she was likewise brought up at a public, sort of charitable, establishment. They taught us all a deal of umbleness – not much else that I know of, from morning to night. We was... always to know our place, and abase ourselves before our betters. And we had such a lot of betters!’
In appropriately biblical language David reflects: ‘It was the first time it had occurred to me, that this detestable cant of false humility might have originated out of the Heep family. I had seen the harvest, but had never thought of the seed.’ An insistence on the humbleness of social origins, rather than personal humility in a religious context, has encouraged Uriah to be crafty and to take advantage of the snobbery inherent in such an ethos. He is also quick to make use of religious teaching on self-denial and forgiveness. The representative evangelical hypocrite in the novel, he provokes David into slapping him and then assures him:

‘you can’t make this a brave thing, and you can’t help being forgiven. I don’t intend to mention it to mother, nor to any living soul. I’m determined to forgive you. But I do wonder that you should lift your hand against a person that you knew to be so umble!’

The habitual repression of his instincts allows Uriah to offer this ostentatious forgiveness by way of further provocation. In assaulting him, David has given his enemy an opportunity to assert moral superiority.  

*Little Dorrit* characteristically celebrates the characters who forgive sin, whilst preserving a level of judgement of the sinner. Arthur Clennam is implicitly called upon to forgive the teaching that his mother had intended to be his salvation. But both he and Amy are themselves subject to narrative judgement. Little Dorrit is made uncomfortable by her family’s materialism and finds fulfilment only in ministering to others. But though her innocence and altruism are continually stressed, she is not infallible. As Charlotte Rotkin illustrates in a radical reinterpretation of this character, she is constantly drawing attention to her own virtue in appearing to disclaim it. For instance, her habit of encouraging her father’s selfishness inevitably leads to her being admired by other characters. As Rotkin explains:

One of the author’s misleading techniques is to betray the reader into believing that Amy personifies many of the standard Victorian virtues, which in fact she does. However, since she is also a human and complex character, Dickens invests her personality with unpleasant traits as well, which he points to more obliquely than he does to her good qualities. ...he disguises her unlikeable characteristics beneath a saintly exterior.

This is always the danger of overt saintliness, that it will foster a degree of false humility. As in Mrs Clennam’s case, a long confinement leads
to a danger of perversion, in which motives are difficult to ascertain. Though Little Dorrit’s moral status is affirmed by the text, she remains an ambiguous figure in her appropriation of virtue.

Collins is rather less forgiving in his presentation of such ostentatious virtue, more often associated as it is with evangelical figures than with Broad Church proponents such as Amy. The modest self-effacement displayed by Dickens’s Amy Dorrit is associated in Collins’s writing with a simplistic view of religious experience. In *Armadale* he subverts ostentatious sanctity through the observations of his most subversive heroine, Lydia Gwilt. In its interpretation of religion as mediating between the spiritual and the temporal, *Armadale* seeks to reconcile a radical New Testament ethos with the actualities of human relations. The evangelical characters insist on ‘propriety’ or ‘respectability’ as the embodiment of religious principles in the social world. Their patronage of Miss Gwilt is made dependent on her conforming to their ideas of propriety, and she is able to use this inconsistency to subvert their concept of Christianity. Such facile judgements have already been questioned in *The Woman in White* and more urgently in *No Name*. Lydia’s falling out with the village philanthropists comes about when they learn that she has visited Armadale alone, after his having made enquiries about her. At this point Miss Gwilt points out that such a visit is in line with the Christian ideal of forgiveness of one’s enemies, knowing that this will be provocative. She writes in her diary:

> I have noticed that the Christianity of a certain class of respectable people begins when they open their prayer-books at eleven o’clock on Sunday morning, and ends when they shut them up again at one o’clock on Sunday afternoon. Nothing so astonishes and insults Christians of this sort as reminding them of their Christianity on a week-day.\(^{16}\)

Making no pretension to virtue of her own – she herself draws attention to the ringing of the church bells while remaining inside – Miss Gwilt is in an ideal position to observe the inconsistencies and contradictions of overtly religious characters such as the ladies of Thorpe-Ambrose. Such women are self-righteously committed to the old distinction drawn between the deserving and the wicked, the idea that misfortune was the result of sin – an idea which still persisted in the 1850s and 1860s among some evangelicals. This being the case, any sympathy accorded to Miss Gwilt is made dependent on her behaviour – she is required to justify her powerless position by conforming to a
strict social code. This relation of propriety to virtue is in sharp con-tradistinction to the novel’s upheld ethos of instinctive behaviour. The notion of ‘good conduct’ is double-edged – for the philanthropic women, it entails an observance of propriety, which to them is syn-onymous with virtue. This interpretation is at odds with the purely religious idea of conduct as charitable action, having no relation what-ever to prevailing social norms.

Like Uriah Heep, Lydia Gwilt takes advantage of middle-class patron-age, attracting the sympathy of the Thorpe-Ambrose ladies by her humble demeanour. But she is allowed to satirise the women who con-descend to her, where Uriah is presented always at a disadvantage. Beautiful where he is rebarbative, she is able to distance herself from her own professions through the writing of a diary; Uriah is never able to address himself so directly to the reader. Only in his later novels could Dickens mitigate judgement of sin by referring it to past circum-stances as Collins does.

More inclined than Collins to uphold self-effacement as a feminine virtue, Dickens offers such ‘good conduct’ as a point of merit in Little Dorrit. However it is in this novel that he begins to develop a more complex view of morality. Like Esther in Bleak House, Little Dorrit is guilty of false humility – her very virtues have been distorted through a life in the Marshalsea, and can only be fully vindicated when she is faced with a complex moral dilemma. Having voluntarily returned to the Marshalsea, she is able to resume her role of nurse and guardian angel, this time to Clennam. But she is able to take on a less equivocal rôle only through her involvement with his mother. Threatened with exposure by Rigaud, Mrs Clennam finds herself able to walk for the first time in years. Disorientated by the outside world, as Little Dorrit herself had been on her father’s release, she makes her way to the Marshalsea in order to appeal to the younger woman’s sense of com-passion. The miraculous nature of this experience is revealed as each puts forward a different view of religious truth. Mrs Clennam is not recovered, rather she is likened to a statue that has begun to move. However the offer of healing is implicit in this scene, as she responds to Little Dorrit’s offer of forgiveness:

‘God bless you!’
She stood in the shadow so that she was only a veiled form to Little Dorrit in the light; but the sound of her voice, in saying those three grateful words, was at once fervent and broken – broken by emotion as unfamiliar to her frozen eyes as action to her frozen limbs.
The obvious symbolism of light and darkness surrounding each seems to be breaking up, as Mrs Clennam shows responsiveness, and for the first time invokes God’s blessing rather than his vengeance, on another person. But while she recognises the merciful nature both of Amy and of her son, Mrs Clennam is not prepared to overcome her bitterness. Ironically she invokes the doctrine of the sins of the father being visited on the son, failing to acknowledge that she herself has arbitrarily made Arthur suffer for his father’s transgression. It is her continued insistence on her role as ordained avenger that leads Little Dorrit to remonstrate with her in the name of Christ.

In arguing against this emphasis on divine wrath, Little Dorrit takes on a purely symbolic role; it is notable that this status is only available to her once she has agreed to deceive her future husband in mercy to his mother. Having made the difficult decision to compromise her own integrity in order to spare Mrs Clennam’s feelings, her saintliness no longer appears disingenuous. Only as a tried and fallible being is she able to comprehend another’s weakness and divulge the forgiving nature of Christ. At this point she is no longer proffering her own virtue, but offering to share in a common religious experience:

‘Be guided only by the healer of the sick… the patient Master who shed tears of compassion for our infirmities.’ …

In the softened light of the window, looking from the scene of her early trials to the shining sky, she 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.¹⁸

But Mrs Clennam refuses to acknowledge such teaching. She does not wish to be healed and is seen to have refused redemption when the miracle of her walking is reversed and she is left completely paralysed. In attempting to secure Mrs Clennam’s salvation, Little Dorrit has simply confirmed her own.

One of the unsung heroes of Little Dorrit is Physician, who is first seen in the inauspicious surroundings of Mr Merdle’s house. Significantly he is a figure of healing, who acknowledges sin without attempting to judge it:

Many wonderful things did he see and hear, and much irreconcilable moral contradiction did he pass his life among; yet his equality of compassion was no more disturbed than the Divine Master’s of all healing was. He went, like the rain, among the just and unjust,
doing all the good he could, and neither proclaiming it in the synagogues nor at the corner of streets.¹⁹

This ‘equality of compassion’ in the face of social injustice, wickedness and avarice, becomes the province of Little Dorrit as she offers forgiveness of Mrs Clennam’s fraud, through which her father spent 23 years in prison. In allying these qualities with Arthur’s robust concept of ‘Duty on earth, restitution on earth, action on earth’,²⁰ she comes to embody Dickens’s religious ideal. The separation of such qualities according to gender has of course been more fully discussed in the last chapter. This action on earth, allied with forgiveness of others, is intended to resolve the threat of perversity inherent in both Mrs Clennam’s Calvinistic creed and the materialism that looks set to destroy polite society.

The one character in the novel who is not offered the possibility of redemption is the murderer and blackmailer Rigaud, who is affiliated with the devil. He is presented as being utterly without morals, his only aspiration being to be thought a gentleman. In a novel concerned largely with explaining and compassionating human weakness, there is still no place for a murderer to repent or be forgiven. As Dennis Walder assesses him: ‘Rigaud is important in that he reminds us of Dickens’s continuing belief in the possibility of absolute evil.’²¹ The validity of this interpretation is placed beyond all doubt by the text itself, which shows Dickens’s habitual suspicion of the sympathy accorded to criminals. Travelling through France, Rigaud hears the landlady of an inn, often a plain and insightful figure in Dickens’s novels, dismiss the application of philosophical philanthropy in these terms:

‘...I tell you this... that there are people... who have no good in them – none. That there are people whom it is necessary to detest without compromise. That there are people who must be dealt with as enemies of the human race. That there are people who have no human heart, and who must be crushed like savage beasts and cleared out of the way...’ The landlady’s lively speech was received with greater favour...than it would have received from certain amiable whitewashers of the class she so unreasonably objected to, nearer Great Britain.²²

The spiritually paralysed may reject the offer of salvation, but as Walder observes, the offer is not open to dangerous criminals:
...although the contrast between the two aspects of the biblical teaching receives in *Little Dorrit* a more intense and consistent realisation than before, Dickens reveals in pursuing Rigaud a sympathy for that Old Testament ethic of revenge he otherwise rejects.  

Rigaud is killed in an apocalyptic fashion when Mrs Clennam's house collapses and crushes him. The destruction of the house itself is reminiscent of such Biblical emblems as the Tower of Babel and the insecure foundations of the house built on sand. Rigaud is destroyed in embodying the novel’s theme of Mammon worship, but his only connection with religion is to be killed defying it. In the person of Rigaud, Dickens’s religious optimism comes into collision with his personally hostile attitude to criminality. Fred Kaplan notes the contradiction in Dickens's presentation of moral sentiment or its absence as innate. He observes:

> His villains seem always to have been and always to be unredeemable. It is one of their great attractions. It is also a complicating, enriching element in his fiction, a drama of the elect and the damned, the chosen and the forsaken, being played out on the same stage on which there is also being performed an optimistic human comedy about the triumph of the moral sentiments. That Dickens permits the possibility that there are people who do not possess moral sentiment at all is, however, a darker element in his vision of the human condition than his conviction that environmental corruption creates unnaturalness.

It is worth noting however that in the later novels it is specifically criminal villains such as Rigaud who are seen to be irredeemable. As Dickens’s religious ethos becomes more liberal, the status of the sinner becomes increasingly complex, and Physician is celebrated for his impartial treatment of the sick, having no regard to their moral status. But both *David Copperfield* and *Little Dorrit* seem to deny the possibility of criminal rehabilitation. Admittedly, Cavalleto has been a petty smuggler, but this is a minor offence he makes no attempt to deny. Rigaud’s crime is simply a manifestation of the evil he himself embodies. Ultimately *Little Dorrit* is unable to detach itself from the judgemental code it spends nearly nine hundred pages attacking.

Where Dickens presents Rigaud as an embodiment of evil tendencies, Collins stresses the potential worth of another criminal figure, in *Armadale*. Lydia Gwilt’s redemption is redolent with Christian tradi-
tion. Realising that she has been poisoning her husband and not the hated Armadale, she rescues him and dies in his place, thus transform-
ing a criminal act into an atoning sacrifice. The radical nature of this sacrifice is made clear by Barbara Gates’s appraisal. She points out that until 1880 suicides could not be buried in consecrated ground, such was the general conviction that to take one’s own life was the ultimate sin. In social terms, Miss Gwilt’s suicide is almost more unforgivable than the intended murder would have been. Gates explains that suicide was seen as: ‘an audacious personal challenge to the will of God in which human justice could never really interfere. Thus if murder caused sensation among the Victorians, suicide was a source of anxiety and disgrace.’

But Miss Gwilt’s act is accompanied by a prayer for the mercy of God, and she believes that she is saving her husband from future unhappiness by dying in his place. It is not accurate to claim, as William H. Marshall does, that: ‘Lydia Gwilt saves Midwinter from death because her sins have made her not so much repentant as weary; then she dies.’ Her increasing dissatisfaction with herself, and her attempt to overcome her criminality in marrying Midwinter suggest that Miss Gwilt, like Dickens’s Sydney Carton, is likely to be receptive to religious promptings. In embracing this final act of sacrifice, she fulfils the theme of atonement enacted by each of the major charac-
ters. In her case, the atonement is not simply a sign of God’s beneficence in bringing good out of evil – it is a literal attempt to make amends for the harm she has done. Barbara Gates affirms that: ‘Without doubt, Lydia Gwilt’s eventual suicide is intended as atone-
ment.’ In making this atonement, Miss Gwilt not only displays repentance, but becomes a martyr. She has already displayed humility in asking Bashwood’s forgiveness, and as she dies she appeals to God in terms that force the reader at least momentarily to reassess the terms of her criminal past: “Oh, God, forgive me!” she said. “Oh, Christ, bear witness that I have suffered!” This implied demand that the reader should not judge her caused offence in more than one quarter. Dickens’s caution when the novel was later dramatised, is telling in itself. The scenes would be enacted in front of real people, who would be judging the characters, and could only be sustained: ‘by the help of interest in some innocent person whom they placed in peril, and that person a young woman. There is no-one to be interested in here.’ Lydia Gwilt is no injured innocent, and cannot therefore expect to receive sympathy.

The basis of evangelical philanthropy was the reclamation of sinners, in the hope that they might become instruments of God’s will and
continue the work of plucking brands from the burning. There are instances on record of reformed prostitutes becoming missionaries, but the reclamation of a successful criminal in Armadale seems to have caused a great deal of offence. This is due in part perhaps to the detailed descriptions of Miss Gwilt’s murky past, and surely in part to the poise she maintains almost throughout the novel. She does not repent her sins publicly, and the diary containing her confession has begun as an aide-memoire to assist her in her plot against Armadale. Furthermore, she does not lament her innate unworthiness, but reflects on what her life might have been had she not been maltreated by the middle classes and by a priest. Nor is the motivation for her sacrifice derived specifically from religious feeling, but from her love for her husband. As if this were not provocative enough, she describes her own death specifically as atonement, which might suggest a lack of belief in the doctrine of vicarious Atonement. Miss Gwilt’s suggestion that she can raise her own moral status by committing what was perceived as the one unforgivable sin could not have failed to horrify an evangelical reader in particular, especially as the text seems to uphold such a reading. As she is about to enter the room suffused with poisonous air, having assured herself that Midwinter will live, the narrator comments:

She silently bent over him and kissed his forehead. When she looked up again, the hard despair had melted from her face. There was something softly radiant in her eyes, which lit her whole countenance as with an inner light, and made her womanly and lovely once more.30

There is no doubt that far from being the last despairing act of an unrepentant sinner, in the spirit of the first suicide attempt in London, Lydia Gwilt’s taking of her own life is intended to be read as an act of self-sacrifice. In what would seem to many contemporary readers a contradiction in terms, she redeems herself through suicide. Ironically, it is the murderous Dr Downward who receives a testimonial by subscription, which suggests that good actions are less admired by evangelicals than a respectable veneer. This theme is sustained by the orthodox ladies of Thorpe-Ambrose, whose moral status has been undercut by Lydia’s shrewd observations. These lady philanthropists are shown to be more interested in gossip and scandal than in the welfare of any one member of the community. It is suggested that such women use the Church both as a badge of respectability and as a source of gossip and entertainment. Some hint as to the motive of such
women is presented through their reaction to Dr Downward, in his new role as proprietor of a sanatorium for the prevention of insanity. Women flock to his opening day, simply because:

> In the miserable monotony of the lives led by a large section of the middle-classes of England, anything is welcome to the women which offers them any sort of harmless refuge from the established tyranny of the principle that all human happiness begins and ends at home.31

Collins presents these evangelical women as seizing one of the few available outlets for their energy, but at the same time he eschews their behaviour.

In linking criminality to the fashionable world (the dubious Mother Oldershaw becomes a popular preacher and Doctor Downward’s career seems assured), and through presenting a conflict between charity and social norms in the person of Lydia Gwilt, Collins is able to challenge contemporary notions of virtue and so preclude judgement. But predictably enough Lydia Gwilt was seen by many as a threat to the social order. As H. F. Chorley fumed in the *Athenaeum*:

> Those... who represent the decencies of life as too often so many hypocrisies, have placed themselves in a groove which goes, and must go, in a downward direction, whether as regards fiction, or morals.32

Nicholas Rance links this typical reaction to the sensation novel to evangelical influence:

> It is in the context of adherence to a doctrine which ratified the representation of failure or suffering as merely one’s just desert that the venom which sensation novelists elicited from reviewers must be understood.33

Certainly reviews such as this refused to acknowledge Collins’s radical logic in the portrayal of a former sinner who dies a saint, in the tradition of St Paul. As Collins himself put it so succinctly:

> Estimated by the Clap-trap morality of the present day, this may be a very daring book. Judged by the Christian morality which is of all time, it is only a book that is daring enough to speak the truth.34

Lydia Gwilt’s reparation through her sacrificial death endorses Mr Brock’s belief in the divine order and transforms her earlier act of despair in attempting to take her own life.
Dickens’s response to the figure of Miss Gwilt underlines his reluctance to forgive criminal as opposed to merely sinful behaviour. But his own liberalising tendency is more in evidence in the later novel he wrote in the first person, *Great Expectations*. These first-person novels allow Dickens greater imaginative involvement with the central characters, and Pip’s fallibility in the latter of the two signals a more complex understanding of sin and redemption. This movement towards redemption and forgiveness is in line with the conversion of Collins’s Magdalen Vanstone, assisted by the sympathy of Captain Kirke. Rather than inviting the reader’s forgiveness, as Dickens had done in *David Copperfield* and *Little Dorrit*, Collins insists on identifying Magdalen with erring humanity as a whole, in the preface to the novel. In it he represents: ‘the struggle of a human creature, under those opposing influences of Good and Evil, which we have all felt, which we have all known.’

Pip’s increased sympathy with his sufferings leads to Magwitch’s conversion experience, as human love becomes suggestive of the divine. Pip’s irrational sense of guilt is shown to interfere with his compassion from the outset, in his desperation to distance himself from the fallible Magwitch rather than sympathise with him. This refusal to identify with the plight of others is initially shared by Miss Havisham and Estella, who must learn humility before they can offer or accept charity. Miss Havisham’s perversion of love, as humiliation and submission, gives way to humility and self-denial as the new perspective of each character allows them to offer genuine charity to one another. *Great Expectations*, written shortly before *Our Mutual Friend*, allows a vengeful woman and a convict to be redeemed, as Dickens adopts Collins’s belief in good coming out of evil. Miss Havisham is redeemed when she asks Pip’s forgiveness and he rescues her from the purgatorial flames in which she becomes engulfed. Her suffering has ultimately allowed her to feel pity, and at this point the imagery surrounding her moves from that of moribund decay to purifying fire.

As Pip’s efforts to save Magwitch take on a more personal character, mercy and forgiveness take the place of judgement. Magwitch, as he is condemned to death, informs the judge that he has already received sentence from God, insofar as he knows himself to be dying. Pip notices that a beam of light levels the judge and jurors equally with Magwitch, and reminds the reader that judgement belongs to God alone. As his friend lies dying, Pip repeats the words of the publican that he is now too feeble to say for himself, ‘Oh Lord, be merciful to him, a sinner!’ In these words Pip offers the prayer that he believes is
most acceptable to God, and he goes on to seek forgiveness for his own sins. He too is cleansed of his guilt in realising that human sinfulness requires not guilt but humility and repentance. This new outlook militates directly against the evangelical tradition by which his upbringing has been influenced, and enables him to offer true charity.

This pattern of repentance and forgiveness offers a viable alternative to the moral framework of judgement and exchange offered by false philanthropists. Magwitch learns the value of Pip’s sympathy that is greatest when he is most beset, and is offered not in return for his expectations but freely given as the property is lost. When Pip returns to the forge, he is able to accept charity from those he has wronged, as the false patronage of Pumblechook is revoked. The link between this return and religious feeling is cited by Armstrong, though Pip’s return symbolises a renewal rather than a vague attempt to recapture lost faith: ‘To return in some way to the childhood home might offer some hope of regaining faith, and this might be a literal return, in the spirit of the Prodigal Son.’ In a circular motion, Pip celebrates the potency of charity, both in its sense of love and as the act of beneficence that this love inspires, in the home where he was once abused. Love has transformed the forge and it is here that he returns as a welcome penitent. But even Magwitch and Pip must demonstrate repentance before they can be forgiven.

Pip’s symbolic illness, in which he is nursed by Joe, brings about a state of inner renewal. The conversion theme in *Great Expectations* is comparable to the treatment of religious renewal in Collins’s 1860s novels. Towards the end of *No Name* Magdalen undergoes a similar experience, regaining a level of innocence through a serious illness. The significance of such illness in Victorian fiction is examined in detail by Miriam Bailin. She explains:

The Victorian sickroom, at its most typical, serves as a kind of forcing ground of the self – a conventional rite of passage issuing in personal, moral or social recuperation. The scenes are precipitated or fortuitously linked to moments of crisis during which the sufferers, or those who are called upon to minister to them, have become separated from the social roles and norms by which they previously defined themselves...

Magdalen’s illness offers a possibility of detaching herself from previous associations, as she gains a greater religious insight. She is permitted in this way to assume a new persona on recovering her health.
Both writers coincide with evangelicalism in their use of illness to signal conversion or regeneration. But apart from serving as a useful plot device, this association of illness with spiritual renewal is significant in having its roots in the experience of many evangelicals, whose conversion was brought about during the stress of a protracted illness, as has been seen in Miss Clack’s narrative in *The Moonstone*. Dickens and Collins both attach considerable importance to the sickroom as a scene of moral development. But the isolation of these scenes from outside influences allows not evangelicalism but the liberal Christianity of Captain Kirke to stand as the ultimate authority, replacing the more severe tenets imposed on Magdalen hitherto. In *No Name* moral order is restored as Captain Wragge appears, in a newly sympathetic role that exposes the complicity of the public in the deception he practises on them, and so diminishes their moral authority; Magdalen’s illness will further lead her to confess to Captain Kirke and so receive absolution. It is because he is ‘innocent’ of worldly knowledge that: ‘he knew the priceless value, the all-ennobling virtue, of a woman who speaks the truth.’

Religious renewal holds out the possibility not simply of redemption but of sanctification, and so adumbrates the familiar Collinsian theme of good coming out of evil. This resolution is confirmed as Magdalen learns:

> Openly and honourably, with love on one side and love on the other, Norah had married the man who possessed the Combe-Raven money – and Magdalen’s own scheme to recover it had opened the way to the event which had brought husband and wife together.

> As the light of that overwhelming discovery broke on her mind, the old strife was renewed; and Good and Evil struggled once more which should win her – but with added forces this time; with the new spirit that had been breathed into her new life....

Magdalen’s misguided actions have been the means of uniting her sister and George Bartram, and her illness has brought with it the moral strength to overcome her pride. She is able to renounce her legal right to the money that was taken from her, insisting that she will accept it only as a voluntary offering. This renunciation of her rights operates in the text as a form of atonement that leads, in keeping with Collins’s beliefs, to sanctification. As William Marshall perceives:

> The comprehensive view of the novel, the ‘meaning’ of the myth, is explicitly on the side of Norah, and is supposedly made clear when she in her meekness retrieves her inheritance. Ultimately, however,
Norah does so only because Magdalen, having in her humility the lesson of Norah’s truth, destroys in a final gesture of expiation, the Trust....

Evil is not so much defeated as transformed, as past sin becomes the means of displaying Magdalen’s integrity, in the making of a voluntary confession. Furthermore she is able to conquer her perversity and offer an act of renunciation to those she has wronged. Resignation to circumstances is upheld as a virtue, but Collins’s overriding interest is in the figure of the repentant sinner who goes on to achieve a state of grace through atonement.

In this he was markedly different from Dickens, whose atoning characters are more chastened than invigorated. *Great Expectations* endeavours to transform sin through suffering – Mrs Joe’s improved temper after her assault foreshadows the theme of conversion through suffering later embodied by the central protagonists; Estella’s ordeal gives her back, in figurative terms, the heart that Miss Havisham has stolen; and Pip’s downfall becomes the means of his redemption. But none of these characters retains the exuberant spirit shown by Collins’s Magdalen.

Greater liberalism is developed as *Our Mutual Friend* follows the progress of a putative murderer but no judgement of him is expressed. The central ethos of the novel is concerned with life and death rather than reward and retribution. This more liberal emphasis is reminiscent of *No Name*, in which Magdalen’s momentary loss of faith is suggestive of spiritual death rather than of coming retribution. As she considers suicide, Life and Death are presented both in symbolic terms, as adversaries fighting for her, and as a choice that she herself must make. As she lifts the laudanum to her lips:

> her strong young life leapt up in her leaping blood, and fought with the whole frenzy of its loathing against the close terror of Death. Every active power in the exuberant vital force that was in her, rose in revolt against the destruction which her own will would fain have wreaked on her own life... trembling on the verge of human existence, she stood; with the kiss of the Destroyer close at her lips, and Nature, faithful to its sacred trust, fighting for the salvation of her to the last.

Nature is acting not only to save her life, but also to save her in a religious sense, as she almost abandons faith in God in a gesture of despair. But the passage implies that God himself intervenes to save her.
Dickens also argued against the doctrine of providential retribution and its accompanying stress on human expiation. But Collins’s radicalism is apparent in his use of an ambiguous heroine to undermine this theological position. Magdalen is continually described in terms of perversity – her better instincts are warped by her contact with social injustice to the point where she commits sin in order to gain an end. Nonetheless she avoids judgement and ultimately achieves sanctification, as has been seen. The provocative nature of this character’s story lies, as Catherine Peters rightly argues, in its translation of New Testament teaching into contemporary social terms:

A novel which has, for most of its length, been a daring and convincing defence of criminal behaviour manages, in the end, to persuade the reader that it is possible to take the black sheep back into the fold with no recriminations. Wilkie... had the impudence to take Christ’s teaching literally, retelling the parable of the prodigal son, but applying it to a clever and beautiful woman. No wonder the reviewers objected.43

Magdalen Vanstone’s career is prompted by the failure of those around her to act in a Christian spirit, and she ultimately takes on a sanctified role. The focus on her name foreshadows this symbolic role:

Magdalen! Surely, the grand old Bible name – suggestive of a sad and sombre dignity; recalling, in its first association, mournful ideas of penitence and seclusion – had been here, inappropriately bestowed? 44

This oblique hint at the future of the vivacious second daughter in itself suggests a reversal of the expectations set up around her. Magdalen represents the perversion of ratified moral principles, as her efforts to achieve justice lead her into sin. She makes a series of attempts to regain the fortune of which she and her sister have been robbed, and represents this struggle to herself as a sacred quest.

The practice of mercy and forgiveness of sin embodied in New Testament theology, is persistently rejected by conventional moralists, as Norah is warned to abandon her sister or jeopardise the sympathy and protection of her friends. The disapproval Norah’s loyalty to her sister incurs, emphasises the extent to which evangelical doctrine has become socialised; the warnings to disassociate herself from Magdalen’s adventures echo in tone Michael Vanstone’s contention
that to return the Combe Raven money would be to condone his brother's adultery. The validity of this presentation is confirmed in the reaction of contemporary reviewers of the novel. Mrs Oliphant for one protested against the happy ending accorded to the erring heroine and H. F. Chorley complained of the author that: 'too many of his leading characters are detestable... too small is the amount of healthy air let into the picture.' As Catherine Peters comments:

Reviewers were shocked the novel contained a sympathetic character who outraged the standards of English society and got away with it. The story of the elder Vanstones, who lived in happy and apparently guilt-free domestic harmony though unmarried, was bad enough. Still worse was that of their daughter Magdalen, whose devious and near-criminal acts are finally rewarded by a happy marriage to a loving and protecting older man. These affronts to the convention that demanded prompt fictional punishment for social deviation were thought too blatant.

In condemning Magdalen outright, this critical reaction embodies the rigid orthodoxy which the novel seeks to undermine. As she herself is to remark at the end of the novel, perhaps with one eye on the contemporary reader:

'Do I deserve my happiness?'... 'Oh, I know how the poor narrow people who have never felt and never suffered, would answer me... If they knew my story, they would forget all the provocation, and only remember the offence – they would fasten on my sin, and pass all my suffering by.'

As William Marshall perceives: 'Magdalen develops to fit her name; her story becomes a myth about the possibility for fall and redemption in the modern world.' As in The Frozen Deep, Magdalen’s response to various influences makes her responsible for her own regeneration, within a symbolic framework of externalised good and evil.

Dickens’s 1840s and 1850s novels, in particular, are notable for the judgement accorded to each character. In Little Dorrit, a level of sympathy is accorded to the bigoted Mrs Clennam, but her rejection of forgiveness can be read as a foil to Little Dorrit’s sanctification, as each is surrounded by light and shadow respectively. Born and bred in prison, Amy is nonetheless associated with religious rites of passage. The clergyman at her marriage describes her most appropriately as a ‘curiosity':
'Her birth is in what I call the first volume; she lay asleep, on this very floor, with her pretty head on what I call the second volume; and she's now a-writing her name as a bride on what I call the third volume.'

Mrs Clennam herself is preserved from moral judgement only by being petrified, in which condition she can neither commit offences on earth nor brave a post-mortem judgement.

In her association of moral progress with those who stand in need of little forgiveness in the first place, Eliot echoes this ambiguity. But again like Dickens, she becomes more liberal in her later work. If Middlemarch is largely concerned with Dorothea’s spiritual realignment, it also charts the redemption of several minor characters. Fred Vincy is reformed by his marriage to Mary Garth, and Rosamond’s failure to show love to her husband is contrasted not only with Dorothea’s selflessness but also with the underlying worth of her aunt Bulstrode, who has been her double throughout the novel. Where Rosamond compounds Lydgate’s financial and emotional problems, the once frivolous Mrs Bulstrode seeks to reclaim her husband through sharing his humiliation when his history is exposed. The scene in which Mrs Bulstrode assumes plain dress as a symbol of this shared burden is immediately followed by the scene in which Rosamond distances herself from Lydgate, as U.C. Knoepflmacher points out.

Lydgate receives support not from those close to him but from Dorothea, and he invokes her as a secular object of worship in the Comtean tradition; his impression of her is that: ‘She evidently thinks nothing of her own future, and would pledge away half her income at once, as if she wanted nothing for herself but a chair to sit in from which she can look down with those clear eyes at the poor mortals who pray to her.’ This image of Dorothea as a venerable icon allows the novel to suggest religious feeling in the absence of Christian belief. Significantly Dorothea herself makes no judgements about the characters who are measured against her. Liberal in its outlook, the novel is perhaps most radical in its refusal to judge even a murderer, a theme which I will discuss in the final chapter.

For Dickens the issue of judgement remained troublesome, both in temporal and in religious terms. Coming to acknowledge the responsibility of social forces, as both Collins and Eliot implicitly do, he remained uneasy on the subject of personal accountability in the face of a possible post-mortem judgement. Only in his last completed novel does he resolve this dilemma, through an imaginative engagement between the human and divine. Our Mutual Friend is of particular importance, in that it concentrates on a final rejection of Judgement.
and articulates a theological framework more consistent with the author’s personal values and beliefs. A more complex treatment of sin and criminality, in the person of Bradley Headstone, signals a move away from the authorial judgement integral to the other completed novels, while symbolic baptism offers new possibilities of forgiveness and renewal. For this reason Dickens’s last completed novel will now be considered at length.

*Our Mutual Friend* bears comparison with *No Name* in its concern with symbolic choices between life and death. As in *Little Dorrit*, society is governed by ostentatious but unstable wealth, demonstrated here in the *Veneering* dinner parties. This Mammon worship is shown to be flimsy both in its reliance on dust and in the lies it accepts. Credit allows characters to appear richer than they are, and their impostures are exposed when the repayment of their debts is demanded. But the Veneerings’ bankruptcy does not end in suicide and public disgrace, as Mr Merdle’s did – on the contrary the couple leave England for the continent, where they live off Mrs Veneering’s pearls. A clue to the reasoning behind this more liberal treatment lies in the marriage of the Lammles, who are described metaphorically as being ‘shackled’ to each other. The pursuit of money in this novel, symbolised by the mounds of dust round which much of the plot is based, is suggestive of spiritual deadness, and requires no other castigation. As Janet L. Larson puts it: ‘Given the fatal power of money to deplete social meaning, this marriage of scavenging schemers need not await the Great Divorce... the Lammles’ union is already deathly – for Sophronia, a state of fitful dying unto death.’ Andrew Sanders further explains the inherent connection between the themes of God versus Mammon and Life versus Death, in these terms:

Dickens the moralist is opposing God to Mammon as much as he is opposing Life against Death... Treasures laid up on earth are threatened by thieves, and corrupted by rust and moths, while the treasures of true love and sacrifice seem to offer a surer foundation for the aspirations of the heart.

A refusal to contemplate these truths leads to death.

At the lower end of the social scale, Gaffer Hexam is presented as a bird of prey, scavenging money from dead bodies found in the river. His association with the animal world obviates the necessity of judging him even as it effectually bans him from salvation. In accidentally hanging himself and falling into the river from his boat, he simply
becomes part of the cycle which has sustained him. He is ‘baptized unto death’ in imagery that suggests annihilation rather than immortal doom.

The use of baptism reveals an important development in Dickens’s understanding of religion in his writing. Trammelled hitherto by the influence of judgemental theology as presented by both Anglican and Dissenting evangelicals, his last completed novel suggests a move away from this framework. In later novels such as *A Tale of Two Cities* and *Great Expectations*, Dickens had shown an increasing concern with the causes of criminality, particularly regarding the working classes. As early as *Dombey and Son*, he had urged the reader to contemplate the sense in which London slums acted as a breeding ground for ignorance and vice. *Great Expectations* further investigated the moral deterioration of its central characters in ways that made judgement seem increasingly arbitrary. The latter novel employs suffering on earth as a learning experience, that brings about and justifies the moral redemption of sinners. Judgement of Pip and Estella is ultimately circumvented through vicissitude.

*Our Mutual Friend* is also concerned with the process by which its characters deteriorate or are led into sin and crime. But unlike earlier novels, it does not make any serious attempt to enact judgement on the major figures. Rather than undergoing a temporal purgatory in order to be redeemed, a character such as Bella Wilfer is confronted with various moral choices and is able to judge the results of each before committing any irrevocable mistake. For instance Mr Boffin’s supposed miserliness allows her a vicarious insight into her own fate if she continues to place money and material security above all other considerations. Experience of others’ faults rather than personal suffering eventually leads her to reform herself, and the concept of ‘trial’ becomes an opportunity for her to prove her newly acquired moral worth, marrying the man she loves without realising that he is the heir to the Harmon fortune.

The symbol of baptism acts as a theological parallel to this concept of choice. Various figures fall into the river Thames during the story, and their response to their immersion determines whether or not they may be considered to be redeemed. Thomas Vargish contends that though the river offers baptism, this is only available to those ‘who have not put themselves beyond recall’, hence not Headstone or Riderhood. But it must be remembered that Riderhood has rejected the baptismal possibilities of the river, and Headstone chooses death. It is crucial to the religious theme of the novel that redemption is open to
all. Immersion in the water symbolically allows the acceptance or rejection of religious rebirth. In literal terms, sin can be forgiven if characters are willing to repent and be cleansed of their sins. The significance of *Our Mutual Friend* lies primarily in this new liberalism – while corruption will be seen to be largely a social responsibility, redemption is seen in terms of a choice open to all.

While Jo’s death in *Bleak House* raised serious questions about the possibility of salvation for those who die unprepared, the narrator of *Our Mutual Friend* denies the importance of abstract religious understanding to eternal life. Attempting to reassure his horrified wife that Lizzie’s association with Jews will not lead to a fatal apostasy, the Reverend Milvey shows no desire to convert them. He is aware of his own shortcomings and accepts goodness on its own terms. Lizzie herself suggests the true charity of the Jews in their treatment of herself and the respect with which they treat the dead body of Betty Higden. They display true morality in:

> following their own religion and leaving us to ours. They never talk of theirs to us, and they never talk of ours to us. If I was the last in the mill, it would be just the same. They never asked me what religion that poor thing had followed. 

The enactment in social life of religious principles is represented by the model clergyman, the Reverend Frank Milvey. In this figure, Dickens employs his own topical awareness to embody a specific ideal. The Reverend Milvey has entered a profession that was still considered in the Anglican Church at this time to be suitable only for the well-educated, but which brought less status and authority as religious faith in the country declined. Furthermore his and his wife’s social class has accustomed them to a higher standard of living than is possible on his limited income. The Milveys’ acceptance of this situation aligns them with Hugo’s Mr Myriel in *Les Misérables*, whose voluntary poverty emphasises a religious vocation in bringing him closer to his poor parishioners. Dickens had met Hugo in Paris in the 1850s and shared many of the ideas expressed in this novel. Milvey is:

> quite a young man, expensively educated and wretchedly paid, with quite a young wife and half a dozen quite young children. He was under the necessity of teaching and translating from the classics, to eke out his scanty means, yet was generally expected to have more time to spare than the idlest person in the parish, and more money than the richest.
The practical example of the Reverend Milvey is in direct contrast to the Ragged School education received by Headstone and Charley Hexam. This subject will be discussed in detail in the next chapter, but Dickens’s most heartfelt objection to the evangelical Ragged Schools was their form of religious instruction. In the description of Charley’s school, Dickens abandons all sentimental gloss, and points out such instances of absurdity as teaching young prostitutes by pretending that they are innocent. Such girls are inundated with stories of self-denying children, which are clearly inappropriate to their worldly knowledge. Meanwhile boys such as Charley learn to equate virtue with social status, and so become hypocritical or selfish. Ironically he is later to accuse his sister of being a disgrace to him, when she will not marry against her will for the sake of social advancement. The validity of his judgement is undermined when Headstone proves to be mentally unstable and attempts to murder his successful rival. But the significance of Headstone’s role in the novel does not lie in his ultimate end, or in the fate that awaits him after death. Judgement of his actions becomes almost irrelevant, as his inner state contributes to the novel’s theme of death in life. His instability takes on a further significance in subverting not only evangelicalism but also the contemporary ideal of respectability.

Dickens’s increased sympathy with his flawed characters is further and more subtly demonstrated in the less subversive figures of Jenny Wren and the anatomist Mr Venus. The former is described as being habitually sharp and shrewish, while her manner of berating her drunken father is not consistent with Dickens’s feminine ideal. However, she is visited by visions of angels and clearly requires no conversion experience in order to be redeemed. It is she who envisions death as a release from temporal pain, and due allowance is made for her imperfections. She shares responsibility for her moral status with those around her. As the narrator exclaims: ‘Poor doll’s dressmaker! How often so dragged down by hands that should have raised her up; how often so misdirected when losing her way on the eternal road, and asking guidance!’ Jenny’s faults are presented as being within her own control, but it is noticeable that she is ‘lost’, or ‘dragged down’ to the level of sin, rather than being innately corrupt. In one sense her very faults are essential to the place she occupies in the world. As John R. Reed sees it:

She cannot afford to be meek, and indulges her gentler feelings only when she is up on the roof of Riah’s building, dead to the suffering
world below. Then she can pity the suffering she sees, but when she is called to life again, she must put away such damagingly soft sentiments.\textsuperscript{60}

In this minor figure Dickens acknowledges the difficulty of maintaining an ideal of virtue under difficult circumstances. Meekness is simply inappropriate to the demands of Jenny’s life.

Mr Venus is similarly inconsistent in his moral stature, entering into a conspiracy to defraud Mr Boffin of his wealth, as the direct result of a disappointment in love, and later making amends by making a confession. Mr Boffin’s decision to test him allows Mr Venus to prove his innate honesty by refusing to be bribed. His occupation of assembling dead people and animals later gives way to genuine revivification, in his impending marriage to Pleasant Riderhood. Though Mr Venus is rewarded in this happy ending, he is also seen to have made a choice between symbols of life and death. With the exception of the unscrupulous Fledgby, Silas Wegg alone suffers comic retribution, and his eternal fate is not discussed. His wooden leg associates him with the inanimate objects in Mr Venus’s shop, and serves to suggest that like Gaffer Hexam, he was never fully alive:

\begin{quote}
Wegg was a knotty man, and a close-grained, with a face carved out of very hard material, that had just as much play of expression as a watchman’s rattle. When he laughed, certain jerks appeared in it, and the rattle sprung. Sooth to say, he was so wooden a man that he seemed to have taken his wooden leg naturally, and rather suggested to the fanciful observer, that he might be expected – if his development received no untimely check – to be completely set up with a pair of wooden legs in about six months.\textsuperscript{61}
\end{quote}

In this persistent imagery of life and death Dickens is able finally to supersede the language of atonement. As has been seen, religious values are opposed in this novel to materialism, in a conflict suggesting values of renewal and annihilation. The worship of Mr Boffin’s heaps of dust presents a menacing image of burial, and Wegg comes close to burying himself in his pursuit of hidden valuables. The alternative to this image of decay in the return of the body to dust, lies in the doctrine of rebirth into life. Moving closer to the position habitually occupied by Collins, Dickens allows good to come out of evil as fallible characters achieve self-knowledge and are redeemed. The most striking example is that of Bella Wilfer, whose visions of a rich merchant
coming to her across the sea give way to the promise of new life in the image of the water bringing her a child, which is to bear her name. This renunciation of riches could never have come about if she had not believed her benefactor to have become a miser. Among the minor characters, Sophronia Lammle achieves a more sympathetic status, as the plot to entrap Georgiana Podsnap into marriage provokes her into acting against her own interests and saving the girl. Meanwhile Charley Hexam’s very selfishness diminishes the guilt attaching to Headstone, in making him an object of sympathy in his love for his old pupil.

Judgement of these minor characters is suspended as differing perspectives are brought into play. The Reverend Milvey reinforces this refusal to judge, in the light of current theological controversy. The burial service involves an invocation of the resurrection of the body, and this could be contentious in the case of an unrepentant sinner, who would be expected by some to be either annihilated or consigned to hell. This is the context in which *Our Mutual Friend* was written, and in which the narrator denies the clergy a right to pass judgement:

> Some of the Reverend Frank Milvey’s brethren had found themselves exceedingly uncomfortable in their minds, because they were required to bury the dead too hopefully. But, the Reverend Frank, inclining to the belief that they were required to do one or two other things (say out of nine-and-thirty) calculated to trouble their consciences rather more if they would think as much about them, held his peace.\(^\text{62}\)

The Reverend Milvey meditates on his own lack of understanding in the face of the divine, hence his refusal to interfere with the religious beliefs of others.

Sympathy in the context of a common humanity is further explored in the experience of Rogue Riderhood. He is implicated in the attempted murder of John Harmon, whose fall into the river has in fact lent him a symbolic status rather than drowning him. Harmon is able to visit the scenes of his supposed death and reaffirm his belief in human beneficence, when he finds himself kindly remembered by the Boffins. Riderhood himself escapes drowning through the exertions of his enemies, who are momentarily prepared to offer him charity. Refusing to judge him in a struggle for life, they are anxious for him to live: ‘Neither Riderhood in this world, nor
Riderhood in the other, could draw tears from them; but a striving human soul between the two can do it easily. However it quickly becomes clear that Riderhood has rejected the offer of redemption suggested in this scene. His daughter is grateful for the concern of his neighbours and:

Some hazy idea that if affairs could remain thus for a long time it would be a respectable change, floats in her mind. Also some vague idea that the old evil is drowned out of him, and that if he should happily come back to resume his occupation of the empty form that lies upon the bed, his spirit will be altered.

This hope is dismissed by the narrator as a delusion, and when Riderhood recovers, his immediate response is to abuse his daughter and demand legal redress from the ship that capsized him. Rather than responding to the offer of salvation, he takes on a superstitious belief that it is now impossible for him to be drowned. This belief is disproved at the end of the novel, when the despairing Headstone chooses death for Riderhood and himself, jumping with him into the weir whence neither can escape.

In an 1863 essay Dickens describes the horror attached to a suicide in the Thames; regarding her with sympathy he nonetheless describes her as having been ‘dragged down to perdition’. But in the novel he began a few months later the Thames offers regeneration, and even a rejection of this symbolic baptism does not lead the characters to be condemned. According to one view:

Headstone’s final descent into the ‘smooth pit’ of Plashwater Lock and the absence of a reference to a funeral for Headstone and Riderhood at which a clergyman would have to speak hopefully over their coffins leaves the question of future judgement and damnation open.

Another possible interpretation suggests even greater optimism. If it was suspected that Headstone had committed suicide, he would not be entitled to a Christian burial and no hope would be required from the clergyman. His abandonment at the bottom of the lock links his end to the annihilation of Gaffer Hexam and spares him the threat of Hell.

Though no actual good comes out of evil in the case of Riderhood or Headstone, it does in Lizzie’s rescue of Eugene. Headstone has battered
him from behind and thrown him into the river, where he is almost certain to drown before regaining consciousness. Lizzie’s prayer as she rows towards him stands as a reminder that without her former occupation in her father’s boat, she would lack the ability to see and rescue her lover in the dark:

‘Now, merciful Heaven be thanked for that old time, enabling me, without a wasted moment, to have got the boat afloat again, and to row back against the stream! And grant, O Blessed Lord God, that through poor me he may be raised from death...’

The first pages of the novel demonstrated the unsavoury nature of Gaffer Hexam’s trade, in which his daughter was obliged to assist him. It has since become the means of bringing Lizzie and Jenny Wren together (Jenny’s grandfather having been dragged from the river by Gaffer) and of saving Eugene’s life.

Lizzie’s prayer is answered when Eugene recovers consciousness, and it later becomes apparent that he has profited from his symbolic baptism. He is dangerously ill for some time, and this in itself signals the possibility of a religious experience. As Magdalen Vanstone’s illness paves the way for religious influence, so Eugene is susceptible to divine promptings as he lies close to death. He repents of his licentious designs on Lizzie and marries her. Eugene himself doubts the lasting effect of this experience, telling Lizzie that he may disappoint her if he lives. But his self-doubt is conquered when he recovers and finds a new purpose in his life with her. This new moral worth is expressed both in his married life and, inevitably, in a new commitment to work. This resolution, assisted by the intuitive Jenny’s translation of Eugene’s words, creates a suggestive symbol of renewal within the wider framework of the novel. As Michael Wheeler affirms:

the novel’s central conceit of rising and falling, worked out in social climbing and abrupt descents, the amassing and removal of dust, a cityscape of airy rooftops and dark labyrinthine streets, and a river of drownings and rescues, is underpinned with a theological understanding of the fall and of man’s redemption through love, worked out in the here-and-now as an earnest of a future heavenly state.

It is certainly not the case that for Dickens: ‘the city is, first of all, the co-presence of an unimaginable number of people in an entirely
humanized world. And, as entirely humanized, the city can contain no transcendence, Christian or romantic.' The loving interaction between characters is not a substitute for the neglected order of an absent God. Rather salvation is freely offered through the love of God, either directly or as represented by another character. The notion of redemption through love is further mediated through baptism, as a symbol of each character’s participation in his or her own redemption. Eternal life depends not so much on theological understanding as on responsiveness. Personal atonement becomes a sign rather than a condition of salvation, as Lizzie’s desire to make amends to Jenny develops into genuine affection and Eugene’s atonement in marrying Lizzie proves to be the beginning of a happy marriage. Baptism has proved in this case to be a prelude to sanctification.

This diminished judgement, as has been suggested, brings Dickens much closer to Collins’s own standpoint. A further similarity lies in the use of supernatural agency to sanctify human action, in Lizzie’s inspired rescue of Eugene. The river itself becomes a symbol of hope, bringing good out of evil. It is perhaps too pessimistic even to suggest that: ‘To Dickens, the Thames seemed like life itself, imbued with divine judgement, proving the virtuous and drowning the vicious.’ Certain: ‘It reflects the mysterious workings of Providence, though for Lizzie early in the novel it suggests only darkness….’ In allowing her previous occupation to be turned to moral advantage rather than being forgotten, Dickens demonstrates a new liberalism in his treatment of good and evil. This greater liberalism pervades Our Mutual Friend as the symbol of baptism is seen to offer a Broad Church response to the doctrine of ultimate Judgement.

In Dickens’s last completed novel Judgement is superseded by the opportunity of redemption, and Headstone can therefore be presented with a degree of compassion, despite the crimes to which he is led by his monomania. But this liberal stance is not typical of Dickens’s writing before Our Mutual Friend; in earlier novels the tension between forgiving and punitive impulses is notably more pronounced. It has already been argued that Dickens’s social mission was informed by his religious understanding, and particularly by his concern with the doctrine of damnation. He was responsive to the manly Christian emphasis on active usefulness and reform, not least because his belief in human worth was held in tension with a fear of Judgement after death.
The last chapter will further consider this tension, in order to trace the impact of Dickens’s religious thinking on his social pronounce-
ments. His engagement with evangelical doctrine will be seen as integral to the urgency with which his novels demand social reform, and will clarify his attitude towards the criminal poor in particular. Again the contending impulses within his writing will be compared to Collins’s less problematic outlook.
Pet Prisoners and Honest Paupers: Philanthropic Dealings with Poverty and Criminality

Philanthropic practice was central to the agenda of both evangelicals and manly Christians, and the thinking of both groups can be seen to influence Dickens’s concern with urban social reform. For the manly Christian such manifestations of love towards mankind were both a reciprocal duty and an essential aspect of individual character; evangelical missionaries were more specifically concerned with the salvation of souls. Equally, in attempting to save the London poor for evangelical religion they were able to demonstrate their own claim to be considered in a state of grace. The theological implications of Dickens’s and Collins’s social pronouncements can best be understood in this context by reference to their different views on Judgement. This chapter will be concerned specifically with the impact of their religious thinking on their presentation of poverty and criminality, as they engage with what they imply to be the evangelical treatment of the issue of salvation and divine Judgement. Again their personal standpoint will be compared with Eliot’s agnostic treatment in Middlemarch.

In the novels preceding Our Mutual Friend Dickens is concerned that damaging and widespread neglect of the poor will lead them to irreligiousness or crime, for which they will then suffer divine retribution. Satirising the way in which he believed evangelicals treated poverty as a crime in itself, Dickens compares this treatment unfavourably with the attention given to actual criminals. He is particularly incensed by the superior diet enjoyed by prison inmates, pointing out that they eat better than paupers who have accepted indoor relief under the New Poor Law. One of his recurrent complaints about evangelicalism regarded what he held to be its morbid interest in convicted criminals, who were, in his opinion, rather too well treated as it was. Again, Collins’s more liberal standpoint acknowledges the potential worth of the figure of the
criminal and denies the imposition of future Judgement. Where both are agreed is in denigrating the evangelical philanthropists whom they present as perpetuating this cycle of deprivation and crime, though Dickens is generally more accusatory than Collins.

In his book *Dickens and Crime*, Philip Collins discusses the various changes in the popular attitude towards the issue of prison reform, as exemplified by Dickens. New methods such as the Silent System and the Separate System were implemented in the 1840s and 1850s, with a view to ameliorating the problem of crime. *American Notes for General Distribution* records Dickens’s views on the American treatment of criminals during the 1840s; whilst he proposes that prison should be, at least for adults, a place of ignominious punishment, humanitarian concerns are not disregarded. But having therefore opposed the imposition of solitary confinement on the grounds of mental cruelty during a visit made to the Philadelphia prison in the course of his stay, Dickens later came to regard the equivalent English system, wherein convicts were isolated for considerably shorter periods, as conducive to vanity and hypocrisy. *American Notes* takes issue with convicted prisoners who seek to instil virtue in others, and Dickens came to link this trend to the system of solitary confinement. ‘Pet Prisoners’, published in *Household Words* in 1850, satirised the perceived way in which the proponents of this system concentrated on the soul of the prisoner to the exclusion of his or her victims, and argued that this treatment was conducive to calculated hypocrisy or spiritual egoism. The popular association of the Separate System with evangelical attitudes to conversion, taken in conjunction with his authoritarian tendencies, may serve to explain Dickens’s changed outlook as much as the ostensible reason that:

> it being clear that the prisoner’s mind, and all the apprehensions weighing upon it, must be influenced from the first hour of his imprisonment by the greater or less extent of its duration in perspective before him, we are content to regard the system as dissociated in England from the American objection of too great severity.¹

As Philip Collins explains:

> ...the Separatists tended to rely more on producing a change of heart in their prisoners through moral and religious influence, while the upholders of the Silent System believed rather in deterring criminals by a regime of wholesome severity.²
In particular Dickens was horrified by the way in which prisoners seemed to be encouraged under this system to dwell on their own souls rather than on the souls they had led astray, or worse, sent ‘into eternity without a moment’s warning’. During the 1850s, he seems still to have been concerned with the perils faced by an unprepared soul, and was therefore appalled by the complacency with which murderers were taught to regard their own salvation as being of tantamount importance, whilst showing no concern for the souls of their victims. Furthermore, he was not convinced of the sincerity of such repentance, as he demonstrates in David Copperfield.

Collins shared Dickens’s deep dislike of the way in which criminality was made to serve as a focus for evangelical propaganda. In The Woman in White Fosco’s famous satire on conventional morality offers a critique on the way that criminals and paupers respectively are perceived and his denunciation is strikingly familiar to readers of Dickens. The focus of the Count’s speech is a brilliant but superficial defence of his own lack of scruples. But his peroration betrays something of Collins’s own feeling:

‘Is the prison that Mr Scoundrel lives in at the end of his career a more uncomfortable place than the workhouse that Mr Honesty lives in at the end of his career? When John-Howard-Philanthropist wants to relieve misery he goes to find it in prisons, where crime is wretched – not in huts and hovels, where virtue is wretched too.’

Fosco himself has little interest in the unsuccessful criminal, but Collins clearly wishes to attribute this outburst to a fluent and persuasive character (the ensuing tirade about marriages for money as ‘the base horror of the vilest of all human bargains’ is likewise characteristic of Collins himself and resurfaces in his next novel as the narrator’s personal feeling).

In Armadale and The Moonstone Collins suggests that many philanthropists are more interested in criminals than in the poor, and that criminals themselves must be appealing in order to attract extensive sympathy. The ambiguous Lydia Gwilt in Armadale has been released from prison under pressure of strong public opinion. But where she as a beautiful woman is saved from the scaffold by popular demand, Rosanna Spearman, the disfigured housemaid in The Moonstone, is forced to keep her past life a secret for fear of the other servants’ reaction. Miss Clack’s interest in criminality is an outlet for her frustration, and she has turned to evangelicalism for the same reason.
But he does make two important points which qualify Dickens’s presentation. Firstly he points out that this attitude, far from being confined to evangelicals, is not perpetuated primarily by them. Criminality fascinates many middle-class women in particular, predominantly because they are bored or frustrated. The association of propriety with virtue upheld by the Thorpe-Ambrose women, and the early life of Lydia Gwilt, pointedly suggest that less sincere evangelicals will often abandon criminals rather than attempting to save them. However, when evangelical philanthropy is directed towards criminals, it is often designed to aid those who have no sensational value. Unhampered by Dickens’s need to impose atonement as a necessary condition of redemption, and equally untroubled by scepticism about criminal reform, Collins was able to examine the evangelical response to poverty and criminality in a much more sophisticated way. Dickens allows Magwitch the promise of salvation in *Great Expectations*, but only at the cost of his life. Collins was able to satirise the different treatment accorded to poor and criminal figures, without necessarily condemning the latter. Nor does he make evangelicals responsible for creating ‘pet prisoners’; indeed their insistence on sin is seen to be damaging to a criminal who is genuinely committed to self-reform.

Collins’s presentation of specifically evangelical philanthropy is more complex than that allowed by Dickens. He acknowledges the sincerity of evangelical good intentions in *The Moonstone*, through the treatment of Rosanna Spearman, the ex-thief taken from a reformatory into the service of Lady Verinder in Yorkshire. Lacking Lydia Gwilt’s good looks, Rosanna fails to attract popular sympathy and so serves her prison term in full. But unlike Miss Gwilt, she is received into an institution by an evangelical woman committed to her rehabilitation. This experience provides a critique of ‘pet prisoners’ not from the philanthropist’s but from the criminal’s point of view. This type of campaign, it is suggested throughout the novel, has little appeal for the general public who so desired Miss Gwilt’s release in *Armadale*. Collins accords the home qualified approval, allowing Rosanna to say that the matron was a good woman, to whom she remains grateful. Sergeant Cuff himself admits that in general its inmates go on to make good servants when they leave. But with the best intentions, these genuine philanthropists who act solely for Rosanna’s welfare have ended in making her life still more of a burden to her. She confides to her fellow servant Betteredge that she cannot adapt to her new life because she feels unworthy of the company in which she finds herself. For this reason
she is drawn to the gloom of the Shivering Sands, with which she appears to have a fellow feeling:

‘It’s more lonely to me to be among the other servants, knowing I am not what they are, than it is to be here. My lady doesn’t know, the matron at the reformatory doesn’t know, what a dreadful reproach honest people are in themselves to a woman like me.’

This feeling of isolation has taken root because of the severe moral training Rosanna has received in the reformatory. As she explains in her letter to Franklin Blake:

‘My life was not a very hard one to bear, while I was a thief. It was only when they had taught me to feel my own degradation, and to try for better things, that the days grew long and weary.’

F. E. Prochaska discusses the historical experiences of reformed delinquents such as Rosanna within such establishments. The process of reclaiming sinners depended, according to evangelical thought, on making them acknowledge the full extent of their guilt and:

Few things were more disturbing... than an inmate’s unwillingness to confess his or her sin. As with their own children, they believed that severity was needed to produce good effects, to pluck good from evil. Severity went hand in glove with their conception of love. By instilling a sense of shame, or criminality, in their charges, they prepared the ground for conversion and reformation.

But in endeavouring to bring about her reform, the matron and her fellow workers have simply made Rosanna feel branded. Degraded in her own estimation, she is more hopeless now than she was before. Franklin himself tries to protect her from Sergeant Cuff’s suspicion that she has stolen the Moonstone, but in his awkwardness he too contributes to her depression. Ironically enough, Rosanna ends in committing what was considered the unforgivable ‘sin’ of suicide because of clumsy efforts on the part of others to improve her lot. Rehabilitation of criminals is thus shown to be a difficult and complex undertaking. The Verinders offer effective charity in their unobtrusive donations of wine to the sick. But Lady Verinder’s unselfish desire to help Rosanna leads ultimately to the woman’s death, because the means chosen to
reform her prove inappropriate and because her past career has left her unsuited to a life of monotony in the country. In this novel an unprepossessing figure such as Rosanna is the object of sympathy to evangelicals, though she is later shunned by her fellow servants and barely noticed by her employer’s household. But she cannot be said to have derived much benefit from this attention and she makes no attempt to manipulate the reformatory matron; rather, evangelical reform methods are seen to be ultimately destructive of her peace of mind.

Dickens had initially objected to evangelical methods on similar grounds to these. But by the time of writing *David Copperfield*, he had become suspicious not only of evangelical treatment of criminality, but of the prisoners among whom such methods were implemented. In this novel Uriah and Littimer, who has been Steerforth’s accomplice in the seduction of Emily, become ‘model’ prisoners under the Separate System, in which prisoners were denied all contact with each other, and impress prison visitors with their supposed piety. Professing a conversion to evangelical religion, Uriah commands the indulgence of the prison authorities by his display of religiosity. Most notably, he speaks of his own crime in terms of ‘folly’ while lamenting the ‘sin of others’. He is particularly eloquent on the subject of his mother, expressing a wish that she should be: ‘got into my state. I never should have been got into my present state if I hadn’t come here. I wish mother had come here. It would be better for everybody, if they got took up, and was brought here.’ These sanctimonious expressions are contrasted with the genuine repentance of Emily, who is chastened and sad, and who makes amends for her past career by refusing all offers of marriage. In *David Copperfield*, although sin can be forgiven in narrative terms, as in the case of Emily, crime is represented by the irredeemable figures of Uriah Heep and Littimer. As in the case of *Dombey and Son*’s Rob the Grinder, Uriah’s education is cited as the cause of the moral corruption leading him astray. But where Rob is redeemed by Miss Tox before he can become a hardened adult criminal, Uriah’s persistent criminality is irreclaimable, and is indeed perpetuated by the influence of evangelicalism on the prison system.

Dickens allows evangelical teaching to have influenced Uriah Heep, but this does not justify his behaviour. In the same year of 1848 he had argued that a basic education must be given to the poor, at the expense of partisan disagreements, and indeed that education of the poor was essential to the welfare of the country as a whole. In an essay on this subject, he made an association between ignorance and crime, assert-
ing that religious divisions were less important than the provision of education:

Of this vast number of women who have no trade or occupation... it is pretty certain that an immense majority have never been instructed in the commonest household duties, or the plainest use of needle and thread. Every day’s experience in our great prisons shows the prevailing ignorance in these respects among the women who are constantly passing and repassing through them, to be scarcely less than their real ignorance of the arts of reading and writing and the moral ends to which they conduce. And in the face of such prodigious facts, sects and denominations of Christians quarrel with each other, and leave the prisons full of, and ever filling with, people who begin to be educated within the prison walls.  

In this spirit Dickens sometimes co-operated with evangelicals in their efforts to help the poor, most notably through his support of the Ragged Schools. Intended to benefit those children who were too ill-dressed or uncouth to be accepted in a national school, or whose parents could not afford the penny a week to send them, Ragged Schools combined a social mission to the poor with an evangelising campaign. Dickens wholeheartedly believed in educating the very poor before they could turn to crime as the only viable alternative to unemployment. As Philip Collins astutely remarks:

For the young offender he felt a charity and optimism notably lacking in his attitude towards adult criminals. The Ragged Schools, which he supported, were partly preventive but also partly reformatory institutions. He realised that prison was the worst possible solution for juvenile delinquency.  

The Ragged School Union was set up in 1844, with Lord Shaftsbury as its chairman, to superintend the running of these new establishments in which children were given a temporary refuge from their usual environment and, where possible, were fed and clothed. Increasingly the very poorest children were also given accommodation, if they had no homes of their own. On the negative side, the standard of teaching was poor, and equipment was sparse. As Kathleen Heasman explains:

The children mostly sat on the floor; reading books, if available at all, had to be shared, and writing materials were only provided for
the steadier pupils. They were therefore strongly criticised for their low standards... Nor was the Ragged School Union in favour of a high level of teaching, since its primary purpose was to reclaim and civilise the child and make him or her a useful member of the community.\textsuperscript{12}

The schools were effectually superseded in 1870 with the passing of the Education Act.

Dickens strongly approved of the principle of reforming education of the poor rather than blaming them for their condition. However he was exasperated by the evangelical teaching implemented in the Ragged Schools. The evangelical mission to the poor, as has been stated, was as concerned with the making of converts as with the relief of physical conditions. Dickens himself, as he told Angela Burdett Coutts, was: ‘in no danger of allowing my single-hearted desire to do what I can towards the saving of us all from unspeakable wretchedness, to be compromised by any little partizanship whatever.’\textsuperscript{13} However no amount of ‘unspeakable wretchedness’ can excuse adult criminality in his eyes.

Collins’s novels qualify Dickens’s presentation of evangelical philanthropy as being centred unfairly on criminality rather than poverty. Admittedly Miss Clack in \textit{The Moonstone} is exasperated by unpretending virtue, because it leaves her no room in which to operate. Unable to convert Godfrey’s mother, who is seemingly incapable of receiving strong impressions, Miss Clack reflects wistfully:

\begin{quote}
She has gone through life, accepting everybody’s help, and adopting everybody’s opinions. A more hopeless person, in a spiritual point of view, I have never met with – there is absolutely, in this perplexing case, no obstructive material to work with. ... I have done wonders with murderesses – I have never advanced an inch with Aunt Ablewhite.\textsuperscript{14}
\end{quote}

The authorial accusation implicit in this remark, that a murderess is more interesting to this figure than a virtuous but sluggish married woman, would seem to support the oft-repeated attacks of this form of philanthropy launched by Dickens. Significantly Mrs Ablewhite turns out to be apathetic not by nature, but as the result of an unhappy past; she is, in fact, one of a series of peripheral female characters in Collins who have been debilitated by early suffering. Miss Clack lacks the penetration to see beyond her aunt’s habitual behaviour, and is astounded
when Mrs Ablewhite later denounces her as a troublemaker. But the unsympathetic presentation of Miss Clack throughout the novel, does not make her representative of evangelicals in general. Sincere evangelicals in the same novel, as reported by Rosanna, are not described as behaving in this way.

More liberal than Dickens, Collins’s untroubled detachment from evangelical doctrine enabled him to deal mercifully with the criminal even when satirising the response of evangelicals and public alike. Both *Armadale* and *The Moonstone* feature deprived or abused children, neither of whom is accorded much sympathy by the public – Lydia Gwilt as a child, is exploited and subsequently abandoned by guardians and employer alike, and only attracts the attention of the public by her perpetration of a sensational crime, at which point she comes to be seen as little short of a martyr. The detached and cynical James Bashwood is able to appraise the efficacy of her brilliant defence:

> The counsel who defended her at the trial was instructed to hammer hard at the sympathies of the jury: he went over head and ears into the miseries of her past career, and shocked everybody in court in the most workmanlike manner.\(^{15}\)

Only after innumerable vicissitudes has Miss Gwilt turned to crime, but it is only in the character of a tried murdereress that she attracts public sympathy. As Barickman, MacDonald and Stark point out: ‘Her repeated alternation between victim and victimizer shows how respectable society and criminal society prey upon each other.’\(^{16}\) The complexity of this character’s status is most clear on a first reading of the novel, as she appears initially in the role of unfeeling villain and gradually gains the reader’s sympathy, by her vulnerability as much as by her wit and daring. Natalie Schroeder accurately pinpoints the truly radical nature of this representation: ‘Miss Gwilt’s independence does not make her a revolutionary character. Collins’s compassion for her does.’\(^{17}\)

She and Midwinter have both suffered at the hands of secular and religious figures alike, and she, like him, has been in prison. Only towards the end of the novel is her early history revealed. Rescued from the disreputable Oldershaws by the future Mrs Armadale, she has been sent abroad for her share in the deception practised on Mr Blanchard. There she is removed from a school after the music master falls in love with her, and is turned away by a convent of nuns when she decides against joining the order, at which point the priest proclaims that she is possessed by the devil. It is notable however that at
no point is she well received by evangelical figures, who reject her at the very outset of her career. At the end of the novel the vicious Mother Oldershaw is able to attract the fashionable public by giving sensational lectures on her own criminal past, justified by her pretence that she is now an evangelical herself and is speaking with didactic intent. But in her new guise as a supposedly religious figure, she immediately renounces her past associate. Lydia is perpetually condemned by evangelical figures, and only attracts the general sympathy at the point where she is driven to crime.

As this inconsistent treatment comes to light, it becomes increasingly difficult for the reader to judge Miss Gwilt. Neglect rather than fascination on the part of the evangelicals who come into contact with her, allows the narrator to redeem her. Unlike Uriah Heep she is distinguished from her associates, largely by her refusal to indulge in hypocrisy when it can be avoided. Where Mrs Oldershaw writes to her ‘darling Lydia’, Miss Gwilt habitually addresses her in return as ‘Mother Jezebel’. Doctor Downward talks to her much as he talks to his female visitors, suggesting murder to her mind and then disclaiming, ‘I positively blush at my own stupidity in putting a literal interpretation on a lady’s little joke!’ Miss Gwilt refuses to participate in these conventions, meeting the doctor’s disingenuous, ‘Oh, the sex! the sex!’ with ‘Never mind the sex!’ … ‘I want a serious answer – Yes or No?’ She is not above taking advantage of propriety when it suits her purpose, as when she turns Allan’s invidious silence to her advantage and leaves the Major’s house with the approval of the village. But she is frank with her accomplices and honest with herself. Mrs Oldershaw and Dr Downward both come to assume evangelical discourse as a front for their criminality, but Lydia will not do so. It is this frank quality that helps to prepare the reader for her moral transformation, even as it leads to her condemnation at the hands of evangelical women who give ostentatious support to the hypocritical Mother Oldershaw and Dr Downward.

Lydia’s counterpart Midwinter has suffered a similarly deprived upbringing, and he is universally mistrusted for his awkward manner. Miss Gwilt attracts sympathy more easily than does Midwinter, because he is simply neglected and she is a beautiful criminal. As Pedgift Senior ironically suggests: ‘Read your newspaper... and you’ll find we live in piping times for the black sheep of the community – if they are only black enough.’ This comment is reminiscent of Dickens’s disgust at what he saw as a morbid interest in convicted criminals on the part of the English public and evangelicals in particular. But Collins is careful
to suggest that the non-evangelical public are to blame here. Miss Gwilt is convicted for the murder of her jealous husband and sentenced to death, but the press campaigns on her behalf and the verdict is reversed with the approval of the general public. The public reaction accorded to Miss Gwilt’s trial is resonant with topical allusion. One case that springs to mind is the affair of Constance Kent, who was considered too pretty to be capable of murder. Miss Gwilt similarly uses her personal appearance to capture the public imagination; it is suggested that Miss Blanchard (later Mrs Armadale) has taken Lydia into her service on a whim, because of her good looks, and this same advantage later ensures her escape from the hangman. But having obtained this reprieve on her behalf, the philanthropic public begin to feel that they may have been too lenient. As James Bashwood puts it:

You know what happened when the people found themselves with the pet object of their sympathy suddenly cast loose on their hands? A general impression prevailed directly that she was not quite innocent enough, after all, to be let out of prison then and there! Punish her a little – that was the state of the popular feeling – punish her a little, Mr Home-Secretary on general moral grounds. …and then we shall feel perfectly easy on the subject to the end of our days.²¹

The sensational nature of Miss Gwilt’s trial provides another aspect of Dickens’s idea of the ‘pet prisoner’ – she is only interesting to philanthropists as long as she is a prisoner under threat or sentence of death. When the demand for a reprieve is met, she ceases to be a victim of injustice and therefore they feel cheated. A level of retribution is then demanded by the very people who have demanded her reprieve.

Catherine Peters encapsulates one of the reasons behind the conflicting attitudes shown toward this criminal figure in the novel:

Though the main action is set in the early 1850s, partly to disguise Wilkie’s use of contemporary events, the story is concerned with the social life and domestic atmosphere of the 1860s. Attitudes were changing. Views on family life and the position of women were being questioned; women were beginning to be seen as more powerful and more dangerous, above all more devious, polluting the sanctity of home and undermining its security. The typical female crimes were thought to be the secretive ones of poisoning and bigamy.²²

Lydia Gwilt is both a poisoner and, ignorantly, a bigamist. But neither Lydia herself nor the evangelical figures are judged as a result of this
inconsistency in the public attitude. Judgement is reserved for those, such as Dr Downward, whose ostentatious piety serves to conceal their criminal activities. In *Armadale* Collins acknowledges the ironically perceived link between poverty and criminality established by Dickens. In showing his sanatorium to female visitors, Doctor Downward plays cleverly on their paternalistic view of charity. He displays the rooms set aside for the use:

‘of the poorer classes of patients whom I receive on terms which simply cover my expenditure – nothing more. In the cases of these poorer persons among my suffering fellow-creatures, personal piety and the recommendation of two clergymen are indispensable to admission. Those are the only conditions I make; but those I insist on.’

This tactic gains the approval of evangelical females who are flattered at this suggestion of their superior status, and these women are further reassured by the acknowledgement of their own superior virtue implied by such a condition. They fail to see the alternative interpretation of this system, namely that moral weakness is less excusable in the poor than in the rich. They are further pleased by the separation of classes, the bedrooms allocated to the poor being less advantageously placed, and this again is inconsistent with the religious idealism claimed by the doctor, who makes full use of the gullible vanity of his visitors in order to increase his profits.

Assuring his visitors that his establishment is the very model of propriety, the doctor insists that he admits:

‘Only such novels as I have selected and perused myself, in the first instance... There may be plenty that is painful in real life – but for that very reason, we don’t want it in books. The English novelist who enters my house (no foreign novelist will be admitted) must understand his art as the healthy-minded English reader understands it in our time.’

In this way the doctor creates a disturbing point of access from the criminal underworld to the philanthropic public, as the narrator artfully suggests that some evangelical females at least are less interested in real virtue than in ostentatious piety. In this discourse on morality as a refusal to face unpleasant realities, given by a doctor who is in the process of plotting a murder, he further satirises the equation of respectability with morality upheld by the evangelical figures. Anxious
to decry the playing of secular music on a Sunday, these women present the doctor with a testimonial as soon as a mysterious death occurs in his sanatorium. This link between criminality and evangelicalism is confirmed when the disreputable Mrs Oldershaw claims to have been converted, as a front for her criminal activities. Her lectures on her sinful past life are attended by countless fascinated women, many of whom are sporting cosmetics bought from her backstreet salon.

In *The Moonstone* Godfrey Ablewhite, like the less monitory Miss Clack, is presented in largely humorous terms. His account of his ordeal at the hands of the Indians creates a parallel to Miss Clack’s false modesty:

‘I have merely been mistaken for somebody else. I have only been blindfolded; I have only been strangled; I have only been thrown flat on my back, on a very thin carpet, covering a particularly hard floor. Just think how much worse it might have been!’

But farcical as this declamation appears to the reader, Miss Clack is moved by it, and it is in this eloquence that his power lies. Even Rachel is convinced by his seeming altruism when he tells her not to risk her reputation by defending him against his detractors. At the end of the novel, it transpires that Godfrey is indeed the thief of the missing Moonstone, and has deliberately allowed Franklin Blake to appear as the guilty party.

Collins concedes that criminals may conceal their true nature by adopting or seeming to adopt evangelical religion, but conversely this enables him to redeem those who do not indulge in such feints. ‘Pet prisoners’ are as likely to be victims as beneficiaries of evangelical reform and the irresponsible behaviour of the middle class is partly to blame for the criminal careers of Lydia Gwilt and Rosanna Spearman. But the evangelical figures who come to judge them are also presented as having failed in their moral responsibility towards the poor and deprived. Mother Oldershaw maltreats Lydia as a child and later assumes judgement of her; the priest who accuses her of being possessed is also complicit in driving her to crime insofar as he prematurely judges when he should be protecting her. Rosanna Spearman is depressed rather than inspired by the evangelical teaching she receives.

Only in *Great Expectations* does Dickens begin to liberalise his judgement of crime along these lines. In this novel the evangelical ethos again helps to perpetuate criminality, in maltreating pauper children. But in presenting this deterministic view, Dickens concedes for the first time that the adult criminal who is not innately corrupt should therefore be allowed a chance of redemption. The convict Magwitch is an
ambiguous figure in the novel, appearing first as a threatening presence in the graveyard where Pip’s parents are buried. Only later does the cyclical motion between deprived childhood and adult criminality become clear, but it soon becomes apparent that Magwitch has only victimised Pip because he would otherwise starve to death. As he later proves, he is deeply grateful for the food he is given. But Pip feels guilty for having stolen food for him, despite the fact that the encounter takes place on Christmas Eve. The child readily believes that he, too, will become a convicted criminal because he is planning to rob the pantry for such a man. As John R. Reed appreciates:

In the very season commemorating the birth of the Saviour, who instituted a creed based on charity and love, Pip is made to feel guilty for bringing food to a needy creature. Motivated more by anxiety and fear than by benevolence, Pip has to steal food from his own family to satisfy Magwitch’s necessities. Since we know very well what sentiments Dickens considered appropriate at the Christmas season, we can easily assume that he fully intended the ironies of this situation, where mercy, compassion, and forgiveness are transformed into crimes.26

Though Pip has been the first to offer sustenance to Magwitch, he has done so under duress and with no thought of the meaning of Christian charity. He is at this stage mercilessly incapable of feeling sympathy with a criminal, though he likens himself to one. He feels guilty, not for his harsh and uninformed judgement of Magwitch, but for helping a criminal to stay alive. Towards the end of the novel the figure of the convict is allowed to make amends through risking his life in his return to England to see Pip. As Pip listens to the story behind Magwitch’s crime, he gradually reassesses the validity of his own initial judgement. In this account Dickens allows Magwitch’s circumstances to have been instrumental in his downfall, but tellingly emphasises the sincerity of his repentance through Pip’s reflection that he makes no professions or excuses. Distancing this character further from the Separate System most strongly associated with evangelical prison visiting, the narrator is at pains to point out that Magwitch is imprisoned before the days of prison reform. The evangelicals who visit him do not encourage him to repent, but threaten him with damnation. Nor is he properly fed.

Magwitch ultimately reveals that he has turned to a life of crime out of necessity, and that evangelical interference has confirmed him in this course. But Dickens’s own attitude to crime was too complex to
allow any simplistic justification of this sort. For much of the book, the convict who would terrify a young child with threats of murder remains an ambiguous figure. The ambiguity surrounding this figure later attaches to Collins’s Lydia Gwilt in Armadale. In each case the reader must reinterpret events in the light of later understanding. In Great Expectations the feeling of abhorrence shared by narrator and reader alike is crucial to the reworking of the Good Samaritan story. It is a despised figure who interprets this original act in its best light, and goes on to provide a village boy with a means of escape from his monotonous life. Magwitch has retained a strong sense of gratitude, which leads him to provide for Pip financially when he makes money in the colonies. But his redemption process begins when he risks his life to come and visit his early benefactor. Only at this point is he permitted to explain the circumstances of his early life. Magwitch tells Pip that he was forced to steal food as a child simply to survive, and while he is carefully preserved from all association with ‘pet prisoners’, it is clear that his life has been largely predetermined. He offers a critique at this point on the prison visitors who lectured when they should have helped him: ‘give me tracts what I couldn’t read, and made me speeches what I couldn’t unnerstand. They always went on agen me about the Devil. But what the Devil was I to do? I must put something into my stomach, musn’t I?’27 This of course was one of Dickens’s most fervently held beliefs, that no religious instruction would be of use to a child who was dirty and half-starved. Rather sympathy and compassion should pave the way by making him receptive to Christian teaching, and the less said about the devil the better. Magwitch has been given no instruction or guidance in his early life, and almost inevitably has turned to a career in crime. But this fact in itself is insufficient to redeem him. He is shown to be among the redeemed when he openly confesses his sins to Pip, in scenes which avoid all suggestion of self-indulgence and concentrate on the issue of personal responsibility.

The only character in the novel who attempts to forestall juvenile crime is the seemingly detached and amoral lawyer Jaggers. Unlike an evangelical figure, he will neither attribute sinfulness to the poor nor tendentiously glorify the predicament of convicted criminals. He embodies Dickens’s stance at this time, believing that criminality among the poor should be pre-empted rather than cured. Once a character has become a criminal, there is little chance of genuine repentance – Magwitch himself is allowed to stand as an exception to this rule only because his imprisonment predates prison reform and its accompanying encouragement of ‘pet prisoners’.
Jaggers alone opposes Magwitch in his plans for Pip, having made a similar mistake himself. It is he who is responsible for having placed Estella in Miss Havisham’s care, in order to save her from a future career in crime. Like Esther in *Bleak House*, Jaggers is realistic enough to understand that he cannot change the society in which he lives, and like Pip, he feels tainted by the atmosphere of Newgate. He has in consequence a compulsive habit of washing his hands, which Pip wrongly interprets as an indifferent ‘washing his hands’ of clients and acquaintances. He is in fact attempting to preserve himself from the impure atmosphere of the world in which he is obliged to operate but which he is unable to redeem. Like Wemmick, he separates his humane gestures from his professional persona, and even speaks of his own philanthropic impulse in theoretical terms, as if it applied to somebody else:

‘Put the case that he lived in an atmosphere of evil, and that all he saw of children, was, their being generated in great numbers for certain destruction. ... Put the case that pretty nigh all the children he saw in his daily business life, he had reason to look upon as so much spawn, to develop into the fish that were to come to his net – to be prosecuted, defended, forsworn, made orphans, be-devilled somehow. ...Put the case, Pip, that here was one pretty child out of the heap, who could be saved...’

The reference to being ‘saved’ is no idle figure of speech.

The response of Dickens in particular to evangelical activity is fraught with uncertainty. During most of the 1850s and 1860s he was so imbued with their sense of coming retribution that he could only forgive his unconverted or criminal figures with extreme difficulty. Jaggers, for instance, saves Estella from a pattern in which poor children are brought up to be fit only for the gallows and so by extension for Hell. While Collins’s treatment of the isolation felt by reformed criminals is referred to the evangelical insistence on guilt, Dickens’s presentation of guilt, as seen in the last chapter, has hitherto been set against the honesty of characters who forgive. Furthermore the reader is encouraged to identify with these figures of forgiveness, and so remain detached from the criminal characters. Only with the flawed heroes Magwitch and Pip in *Great Expectations* does Dickens escape this persistent affinity between his own ethos and the evangelical insistence on severe judgement of sin.

He is finally able to forgo judgement of crime in his last completed novel, *Our Mutual Friend*. In this novel the importance of moral
responsibility is upheld, but for the first time judgement of sin is withheld. Like Uriah Heep, Bradley Headstone is a charity schoolboy who rises in the world and subsequently turns to crime. Headstone has become ashamed of his pauper origins and systematically represses his instincts in order to perpetuate the ideal of industrious decency associated with evangelicalism and with the middle classes at this period. In so doing he comes to embody a form of death, as his name suggests. This repression of all natural feeling is attributable to his early education, and so evangelicalism is once again associated with death. Notably the Ragged Schools were predominantly Nonconformist. The teacher’s early history reinforces the danger of Dissent so powerfully illustrated by George Silverman. Dickens’s understanding of evangelical religion and its effects is much more complex in this novel than it had been when he created such figures as Chadband.

Unlike Silverman, the dogged Headstone becomes dangerous rather than emasculated. The threat of disruption implied in his uneasy restraint becomes a subversive force early in the novel, as his marriage proposal to Lizzie takes on the imagery of rape, a symbolic violation that her respectable brother fully approves. His respectable status and self-control disguise the threat of criminality latent in this figure. His growing obsession with Lizzie Hexam operates as a symbolic hell, in which the effort to control his own behaviour becomes increasingly difficult. In his pursuit of Eugene round London he becomes associated with the night, and is ill at ease during the day, when he too is forced to maintain a respectable veneer:

he had been ridden hard by Evil Spirits in the night that was newly gone. He had been spurred and whipped and heavily sweated. If a record of the sport had usurped the places of the peaceful texts from Scripture on the wall, the most advanced of the scholars might have taken fright and run away from the master.29

The very restraint he places on himself during the day aggravates and accentuates Headstone’s erratic behaviour in the dark, as he ultimately rejects the values he has hitherto endorsed. The religious symbolism of the duality inherent in this character is clarified by Michael Wheeler:

Bradley Headstone, mechanical without and primeval within, suffers the torments of one who rejects both law and gospel. Like some jealous fallen angel, he blames Wrayburn for his damned state as one for whom mutual love is unattainable.30
But Headstone’s mental torment is more gruelling than any torture he might imagine as appertaining to hell. This suffering, perceived by the reader, serves to obviate the necessity of judgement at the end of the novel. In *Our Mutual Friend* Dickens succeeds in overcoming the threat of Judgement that pervaded his earlier novels. The link between poverty and criminality, represented in his last completed novel by Gaffer Hexam and Rogue Riderhood, can be overcome through acceptance of spiritual renewal. It is Riderhood’s rejection of this offer that leaves him unregenerate, and there is no suggestion of divine judgement surrounding his death. Even Headstone is linked, as his name suggests, to death rather than to eternal torment.

From this retrospective standpoint the urgency of the satire in *Bleak House* reveals the extent to which Dickens’s religious thinking had progressed. It is not necessary to agree with J. Hillis Miller’s assertion that God is ultimately distant and uninvolved in this novel to accept up to a point his view that Providence does not:

> work within things, nor does it work within all men, or in any man all of the time. It appears to be intermittent, even though it may secretly be continuous. It is only after this grace and the responsibility someone takes to accept it have permitted the creation of a limited circle of duty that this enclosed place can be seen as orderly and intelligible, can be seen as providential.31

Surely it is through the acceptance of responsibility demonstrated by such characters as Jarndyce and Esther that providence is seen to operate ‘within things’. But the providential plan is assumed to function through an acceptance of social duty, neglect of which will bring its own retribution. In this novel just such retribution is enacted at a national level, as disease spreads through Tom-all-Alone’s to all levels of society. Judgement is seen to operate both at the individual level and in the wider context of the country as a whole. The body of Chancery, lying at the thematic centre of the novel, is itself condemned in apocalyptic terms, as is noted by Andrew Sanders:

> Miss Flite not only regards it as a good omen for ‘youth, and hope, and beauty’ to be found in the Court of Chancery, but she chillingly extends her concept of judgement to include the Last Judgement, and confuses the Lord Chancellor’s seal with those of the Book of Revelation. … Images of decay are now given an eschatological magnification; chaos readily threatens to come again, abetted by
supposedly civilised and rational men, though only the distracted Miss Flite seems to recognise the fact.32

Dickens was involved, as Collins was not, in various philanthropic activities in the 1850s, including projects to relieve the poor of London. A close reading of *Bleak House* in the context of his response to evangelical doctrine will illuminate the nature of his concerns about the evangelical attitude towards both poverty and criminality. Unlike Collins, who held a universalist belief, during this period Dickens presented not only sin but also ignorance of religion as a bar to immortal life. This difference renders necessary a more complete exploration of the way in which Dickens presents evangelical philanthropists.

In the early 1850s Dickens seems to have been influenced by the mildly evangelical concept of ‘annihilationism’, the belief that souls could be annihilated after death. It is this doctrine that forms a bridge between Judgement and universal salvation. The evangelical figures in *Bleak House* regard Jo and his like as subhuman and so miss the significance of their degradation. For Dickens the most horrifying aspect of Jo’s plight is that he dies without completing the first prayer he has ever been taught. Repeatedly likened to an animal, Jo’s lack of religious education imperils his salvation. Sanitation was Dickens’s primary concern, partly because he believed that physical deprivation contributed to irreligiousness. In other words, he did not so much oppose as rationalise evangelical arguments about taking religion to the slums.

Jo is described by the omniscient narrator as being on the level of an animal, in that he has no sense of himself as possessing an immortal soul. In his encounter with the officials at his only friend’s inquest, he shows himself to be unversed in eschatology, and is therefore barred from giving evidence on the grounds that he is ‘depraved’. In this rejection the Coroner reveals his own lack of religious feeling, as he fails to value Jo’s testimony that Captain Hawdon ‘wos wery good to me’.33 Nor does he take steps to instruct Jo, having berated him for his ignorance. Dickens wrote feelingly of the mass poverty of the London slums, not only out of concern for physical conditions, but also because he saw in them immortal souls being degraded to the level of beasts. Moreover, he strongly believed that nothing could be done in the way of religious instruction while the London poor were forced to live in such unsanitary conditions.

At the voluntary level, female philanthropists are seen to suspect the poor and uneducated. To Dickens’s disgust the voluntarist principle of
charity was strongly upheld by evangelicals (voluntarist meaning in this instance, not subsidised or controlled by the state). Not only did it allow the less disinterested among them to display piety through donations and acts of charity, it also gave them a measure of control over the poorer classes in linking charity and Bible religion. As Gerald Parsons explains:

Poverty was morally tolerable because it was the inevitable product of a divinely ordained and designed world. Hence whilst charity might alleviate poverty, it would be impious, as well as fruitless, to contemplate the transformation of the social structure itself by human reform. ... Even the practice of charity, moreover, was to be directed towards the deserving poor, whose poverty was identifiably not the result of their own improvidence, intemperance or indolence. Much poverty, it was claimed, was in fact the result of precisely such personal failing, and hence a recompense for sin. 34

Dickens disliked what he saw as a use of charity to gain control of the poor, and further disapproved of the guilt inspired in its objects. Organised evangelical missions are seen as being largely ineffectual. Inclined to deny the effectiveness of those home missionaries who visited the slums, he did not always acknowledge in his fiction the useful role they played. Jo recalls:

‘Mr Chadbands he was a-prayin wunst at Mr Sangsby’s and I heerd him, but he sounded as if he wos a-speakin’ to hisself, and not to me. ... Different times, there was other genlmen come down Tom-all-Alone’s a-prayin, but they mostly all sed as the t-other wuns prayed wrong, and all mostly sounded to be a-talking to theirselves, or a-passing blame on the t’others, and not a-talkin to us.’ 35

Dickens’s co-operation with the London City Mission comes as some surprise in the light of this attack. Donald M. Lewis has since pointed out for instance that:

While LCM [London City Mission] agents (and Scripture readers) were forbidden to act as distributors of charity, they were instructed to inform local charities of needy cases, thereby ensuring that medical advice and drugs, as well as financial relief were channeled to the poor. Instances of city missionaries finding jobs for the unemployed, rescuing prostitutes, reforming drunkards, reconciling couples, and rehabilitating thieves are legion.36
His work with evangelicals, notably during the cholera epidemic of 1848, belies the conviction with which Dickens attacks female philanthropists in particular. But as Norris Pope has argued, his aim was simply to point up abuses and inconsistencies. His point here is that more attention must be focused on assisting the poor, and less on internal disputes – Bishop Blomfield, for instance, initially refused to sanction lay missionary efforts, which he considered the province of the Church. It is Allan Woodcourt who attempts to teach Jo the Lord’s Prayer as he dies; as David Holbrook notes:

Such people can invoke the words of Jesus at the critical moment. ...Clearly, Dickens believed in the urgent necessity of applying the principles of Christian compassion, and conveying the Gospel to those who were lost without it.37

But in Jo’s case it is perhaps too late. He is not able fully to understand the prayer, and Allan does not have time to finish it. It is Allan and not Jo himself who asserts that ‘the light’ is coming, suggesting that Jo does not have access to heavenly visions in the same way as did the dying Paul Dombey. It is not possible for one doctor to redeem Tom-all-Alone’s single-handed. Woodcourt’s first priority has been to give medical aid, and then to offer an explanation of the basic tenets of religion. The inefficacy of this attempt to explain the concept of religion when the child in question is already dying, does suggest an ambiguity in the narrator’s anger towards those who he feels are responsible:

Dead, your Majesty. Dead, my lords and gentlemen. Dead, Right Reverends and Wrong Reverends of every order. Dead, men and women, born with Heavenly compassion in your hearts. And dying thus around us every day.38

It is not clear whether he is berating an imagined audience simply for the physical state in which Jo has been forced to live, or because his eternal fate has been rendered insecure. Throughout the novel, Jo has been described in bestial terms. The narrator is horrified not only that this character is forced to live like an animal, but further that he is degraded to this spiritual level. Jo is repeatedly cited as having been brought to the level of a beast, the implication being that his soul cannot survive his death. For this very reason, Dickens is all the more determined to attack those who show regard only for their own redemption, while failing to provide guidance and assistance to the irreligious London poor.
In the early decades of the nineteenth century the orthodox evangelical outlook on urban poverty was that it was preordained for the purpose of encouraging charity among the rich. Furthermore it was held that even the very poorest should be able to improve their situation through thrift, and poverty therefore came to be associated with indolence and vice. By extension poverty could be seen as a divine judgement on its victims. Dickens attacks this concept in the Ragged School tracts of *Our Mutual Friend*, which promise material benefit to the virtuous, and so imply vice amongst the poor. He uses this belief to suggest that poverty is being judged by evangelicals as a form of criminality or sin. Not only is this attitude reprehensible in itself, it also abandons those such as Jo to divine Judgement at death. It is neither appropriate nor sufficient to cite providential sanction for the plight of the poor, when outbreaks of cholera begin in the slums and come to affect all levels of society.

By 1852, the work of such bodies as the London City Mission had convinced large numbers of evangelicals that the poor were not paying the penalty of their own indolence and vice, but were driven to drunkenness and crime by the conditions in which they were forced to live. Lord Shaftesbury was among the most prominent advocates of this new line of evangelical thought. However, there were still those who were prepared to accuse the slum dwellers of irresponsible or sinful behaviour, and who maintained that this supposed connection between sin and poverty was in accordance with a providential order. Laura Fasick pinpoints the tension between these two points of view:

...the more or less tacit implication that the poor could not be virtuous so long as they lived in misery directly opposed Victorian piety about the efficacy of the individual will and the need for individual responsibility. More disturbingly yet, this assumption that material degradation inevitably led to moral decline could seem a blasphemous contradiction of God’s providential plan, in which no circumstances can overcome the soul’s capacity for moral choice.\(^{39}\)

In his fictional portrayals Dickens was inclined to ignore the liberalising tendencies within evangelicalism, in his concern with pursuing a hostile agenda. This conflict over the onus of responsibility allowed him to portray a society which takes no care of its poorer members, using their condition as an outlet for the vanity of self-important females in particular.

Personal as opposed to social guilt was inevitably encouraged by evangelicals, forming as it did one of the central tenets of their reli-
gious ethos. Though the more liberal among them, such as Lord Shaftesbury, were aware that an improvement in living conditions must accompany any attempt at evangelism in the slums, nonetheless conversion to their doctrines was their ultimate concern. Up and down the land, societies were formed for the assistance and conversion of the working-classes in particular. In *Bleak House*, female city missionaries are replaced by supposedly charitable women who neglect their children in favour of extensive correspondence with like-minded evangelicals; their missionary efforts are directed abroad, the natives of Borrioboola-Gha receiving the sympathy that unattractive London slum children fail to attract. This seemingly inconsistent attitude infuriated Dickens no less than the contemporaneous championing of ‘pet prisoners’. In an article in *Household Words* he fulminated:

There are pious persons who, in their practice, with a strange inconsistency, claim for every child born to civilisation all innate depravity, and for every savage born to the woods and wilds all innate virtue.  

The English poor who do fall into the hands of these misguided females receive from them indignity and humiliation, but little or no practical help.

In neglecting her dependants, Mrs Jellyby embodies the failings of the country’s institutions, as exemplified by Chancery. Similarly, her relationships with other charitable ladies illustrate the corruption of the legal system. Esther describes the assembled party at Caddy’s wedding breakfast as being singular in the respect that:

‘nobody with a mission – except Mr Quale, whose mission... was to be in ecstasies with everybody’s mission – cared at all for anybody’s mission. Mrs Pardiggle being as clear that the only one infallible course was her course of pouncing upon the poor, and applying benevolence to them like a strait-waistcoat; as Miss Wisk was that the only practical thing for the world was the emancipation of Woman from the thraldom of her Tyrant, Man. Mrs Jellyby, all the while, sat smiling at the limited vision that could see anything but Borrioboola-Gha.’

In the novel the question of taking responsibility, on either a national or a personal level, for those in need, is continually deferred. Meanwhile those who live in the tenements of Tom-all-Alone’s are dying and spreading disease.
This is an echo of what happened in the cholera outbreak of 1848–49, when factional disagreements prevented the implementation of a central health authority in London.\textsuperscript{42} The epidemic had killed more than 14,000 people in London alone.\textsuperscript{43} It was widely felt at the time that this catastrophe might have been less severe, or might have been averted altogether, if sanitation had been improved in the slums and if a central body had been appointed in good time to deal with the problem. In the double perspective of the omniscient narrator who comments on this situation, and the first person narrator whose domestic sphere is invaded by disease, the novel creates a sense in which every character is ineluctably connected. Dickens is careful to demonstrate rural as well as urban poverty, and to show a connection between the two. Poor labourers are lured to the city, where they add to overcrowding in the slums, and vagabonds are driven to the country, bringing disease with them. As Norris Pope explicates: ‘though the disease in the novel is smallpox, the lesson is that of the cholera, which did not scruple to abide by the pattern of social discrimination that characterized typhus and the other fevers more or less endemic to slums.’\textsuperscript{44} The principle of guilt often attaching to the recipients of charity is redirected in Dickens’s fiction at the middle classes. In \textit{Bleak House} the corruption of the slums is caused by the redundant forms and rituals of Chancery, which will not establish John Jarndyce’s ownership of Tom-all-Alone’s. The middle-classes are further blamed for their condescending and often callous attitude to the poor, whom they allow to die before their very eyes.

Deborah Epstein Nord locates a more radical transfer of guilt in this novel, through the spread and inheritance of disease. The Contagious Diseases Acts of the 1860s sought to diminish through compulsory health checks the number of prostitutes spreading venereal disease. In particular it was feared that such diseases might be passed on to the middle classes. But in \textit{Bleak House} it is the middle classes who are responsible for the plight of the poor. Nord writes of the diseases act: ‘Embedded in the vagueness of the language is an association of the prostitute with cholera, typhus, smallpox, and other frightening epidemic diseases.’\textsuperscript{45} The disease caught by Jo from the graveyard where Captain Hawdon is buried, and passed on to Esther, is not specified, but it is most likely to be smallpox. If this disease is associated with prostitution, then the sins of Esther’s parents are being visited not simply on her, but also on the population of the London slums. The middle-class figures have been guilty of sexual transgression, and Captain Hawdon becomes the means of spreading a disfiguring disease
in a middle-class household, through the agency of a slum-dweller. From Nord’s perspective, this contamination of the middle classes stands as a warning that social action must be taken, to protect all classes from the spread of venereal disease. But in religious terms, it further condemns those wealthy members of the community who transfer their own guilt to the poorer classes. In this instance it is a respectable man who infects a pauper, and the innocent of both middle and lower classes suffer through the spread of this contamination. In ‘The Sunday Screw’, published in Household Words in 1850, Dickens had urged that the Sunday pleasures of the poor could not be curtailed without the ultimate loss of the pleasures of the rich. Here again he connects the suffering of all classes, in order to relocate responsibility.

Influenced as he was by evangelical threats of coming Judgement, Dickens placed great emphasis on religious instruction; he was in line with moderate evangelical thought insofar as he saw an improvement in living conditions as the essential first step. The missionaries in Bleak House are satirised for passing judgement on the workers rather than taking responsible action in order to save their souls. The home mission comes under specific attack in the portrayal of Mrs Pardiggle, who makes no secret of the fact that she finds her mission ‘exciting’ and that this is the reason for her involvement.

This motive for philanthropic activity is shared by Collins’s Miss Clack in The Moonstone. Miss Clack sees herself as divinely appointed to the ‘blessed work of interference’, and is a member of numerous ladies’ committees devoted to this end. She insists on the beneficent purpose of such organisations as the mothers’-small-clothes-conversion-society, founded to redeem men’s trousers from the pawnbroker and scale them down to make new garments for children. The fact that by her own admission the society is flooded with trousers suggests the extreme poverty of the men whose wardrobes she plunders in this way. Yet it does not seem to occur to her to assist them in any practical manner. But Miss Clack’s charitable efforts, ludicrous as they appear, are potentially destructive. The following declaration encapsulates both comic and sinister elements:

Once self-supported by conscience, once embarked on a career of manifest usefulness, the true Christian never yields... Taxation may be the consequence of a mission; riots may be the consequence of a mission; war may be the consequence of a mission; we go on with our work... We are above reason... Glorious, glorious privilege! And
how is it earned? Ah, my friends, you may spare yourselves the useless inquiry. We are the only people who can earn it – for we are the only people who are always right.46

As recently as July 1855 an attempt to bring in Sabbatarian legislation had been the cause of a potentially dangerous riot in Hyde Park, a riot which according to Donald Lewis:

remained a matter of debate throughout the century: temperance reformers insisted that the disturbances were over Sunday trading rules, not the issue of Sunday closing hours of pubs; Sabbatarians blamed the hostility on the Wilson–Patten Act of 1854. On either count, the discredit fell on one of the twin darlings of the evangelicals....47

Miss Clack’s committees may be largely ineffectual in their aims, but she and her kind are only too capable of causing destruction at all levels.

In Bleak House Mrs Pardiggle’s interference is similarly alienating and irksome to its objects. During her unsolicited visit to the bricklayer’s cottage, she again emphasises her own zeal, even as the man’s child is dying in front of her. The bricklayer points out that he cannot read the tracts she leaves him, and that he and his family are obliged to drink the dirty water which she eyes with disapproval on seeing his daughter washing clothes in it. Mrs Pardiggle takes no notice of this outburst, and leaves the family with the words that she hopes they will be improved before she sees them next. In this scene she embodies Dickens’s greatest complaint against evangelicals, first invading the family’s privacy and then berating them for circumstances beyond their control. Furthermore she addresses the cottagers as if they were recalcitrant children, and then leaves them a tract that Mr Jarndyce himself admits to be stiff reading. Another instance of this type of artistic licence, in which personal experience is subordinated to an attack on evangelicals, emerges in the depiction of the disingenuous Chadband, who is attached to no particular denomination but is clearly a Dissenter. Disliking self-appointed dissenting pastors as much as he disliked female suffrage, Dickens presents Chadband as self-seeking, gluttonous and distinctly hypocritical.

Dickens’s belief that criminals were better treated than institutionalised paupers and slum dwellers, by evangelical authorities in particular, sufficiently explains this deviation from his personal experience. In Bleak House he reverts to a largely obsolete version of evangelical belief
to suggest that Mrs Pardiggle and her associates treat the urban poor like criminals. She and Mrs Jellyby compete over the importance of their respective missions, much as the lawyers compete, at the national level, in the case of Jarndyce and Jarndyce. In each case, the putative beneficiaries of the operation are in fact the objects of harassment or neglect. The Chancery case of Jarndyce and Jarndyce brings only poverty and unhappiness to those it is intended to benefit, while feeding the avarice of the lawyers involved. Disease is being bred in the slums while the case becomes more and more involved, and in a final touch of irony, the slum of Tom-all-Alone’s is shown to be the property of the benevolent John Jarndyce, who cannot improve it because it is in Chancery.

But his correspondence suggests that Dickens’s suspicion of evangelicalism was not motivated by purely religious preoccupations. His outrage on behalf of the poor who found themselves in evangelical hands may well date back to his days of reporting in the House of Commons, when he would have heard speeches in favour of Sabbatarian legislation. One tract in support of the 1833 Bill concerns itself with the poor man’s inability to remain sober if he is allowed anywhere near a public house on Sundays:

It is manifest that many of our countrymen cannot take care of themselves – have not the forethought or the firmness to exercise self-denial, or to resist temptation, when possessed of the means of indulgence. In cases like these, a wise Legislature will assume a parent’s authority, and withdraw from her children a liberty which will only be abused to their destruction.48

Throughout his life Dickens was to protest that in healthy living conditions and not Sabbatarianism lay the answer to working-class inebriety. The tailoring of social policy to evangelical doctrine was to inspire some of his bitterest satire, both in his journalism and in his novels.

In Dickens’s account the evangelical focus on the individual is used to avoid social responsibility. It has been seen that he ignores the more liberal trends within evangelicalism in order to satirise ineffective philanthropic missions. In blaming the poor themselves for their condition, Mrs Pardiggle represents the more traditional evangelical stance, but the question of responsibility is shown to be far more complex than these traditional evangelical assumptions would seem to allow. Individuals like Skimpole who abrogate responsibility, and false philanthropists who are concerned only with distant projects, are compared unfavourably to those who direct their attention to the plight of
the local poor. But individual action is no substitute for legislation, as it was in earlier novels. Retreat from the world is no longer feasible for Esther, as it was for Nicholas Nickleby or Oliver Twist. Esther and Woodcourt create a system of practical aid informed by religious feeling, but this system is implemented in a Yorkshire village, not in London. London itself has become a symbol of hell, in which the rich are watched and beset by the poor, who in turn are left to die through the indifference of the ruling class or hounded by the evangelical missionaries who use them as ‘instruments’ to display their own zeal. Bleak House stands as Dickens’s most far-reaching scourge of a city in which philanthropy exacerbates the ills it is supposed to remedy.

The doctrinal beliefs of each writer clearly lie behind their respective treatment of social evangelicalism. In each case the attack on retrogressive philanthropists is made in theological terms, as evangelical thought is turned against itself. Most obviously the way in which Dickens’s theological understanding developed during the 1850s and 1860s had an enormous impact on the social satire in his novels. 1851 was the year of the religious census that revealed disturbingly low church attendance among the poor in particular. Believing at this time in the annihilation or worse fate awaiting the irreligious, he felt that priority must be given to the poorer classes who were in danger of such an end. In its sympathy with the poor and its fears for their salvation Bleak House is the novel in which Dickens’s religious feeling most clearly informs his sense of social responsibility. While Dickens is renowned for his campaigns to improve the living conditions of the poor, and certainly Bleak House makes a persuasive case for sanitary reform, this novel in particular lays great emphasis on religious verities as inseparable from physical conditions. The infliction of guilt on the poor in this novel is particularly inappropriate, as it is the ruling classes that are to blame for the condition of the London slums. The voluntarist charity upheld by Mrs Pardiggle and her kind is insufficient to redeem London, even when practised by John Jarndyce or Allan Woodcourt. The benevolent Jarndyce is hampered by the Chancery suit of Jarndyce and Jarndyce, which prevents him from repairing the tenements inhabited by Jo and his kind; Woodcourt does not reach Jo in time to save him. Hundreds of souls are being placed in jeopardy, as disease spreads through Tom-all-Alone’s, killing Jo and his like before they can be given adequate religious instruction. This outlook helps to explain the harshness of Dickens’s treatment of criminal characters at this time. Though according to his own rationale, they were in danger of damnation, he felt that they did not merit the attention they
received in the face of overcrowding and disease in the slums. Collins’s conscious rejection of the evangelical belief in Hell, combined with a steady reliance on the benign omnipotence of God, left him free to pursue a universalist and individualist line in his writing.

This difference in emphasis accounts for the treatment of evangelical missions in the novels. Both writers were concerned as much with the motive behind philanthropic endeavour as with the endeavour itself. But while Dickens, who assisted in missionary activity in private, attacked its proponents in his novels, Collins accorded it a level of respect in his novels, provided always that the good intention was genuine. He is able to satirise individual philanthropists such as Miss Clack in isolation from the criminal figures they are ostensibly trying to help, because he does not share Dickens’s urgent sense of impending annihilation. He no more approved of ‘pet prisoners’ than did Dickens himself, though he was generally inclined to look favourably on those who made active attempts to reform ex-inmates who had lost their sensational interest, while Dickens might regard such assistance as an insult to the industrious poor. Collins wrote with considerable feeling of the social isolation of individual criminals who had been subjected to evangelical teaching, because he was aware of the emotional damage that such an introspective religion could inflict. In his examination of criminality in *Armadale* and *The Moonstone* Collins retains the evangelical tendency to monitor an individual according to his or her response to the surrounding environment. But being untroubled by fears of a post-mortem meting out of judgement, he pays less attention than Dickens to the religious status of the London poor as a whole.

Both writers outline the ways in which the devious could ‘work the system’, using the evangelical message of repentance to assume moral authority in the midst of their crimes. Collins could nonetheless support the good intentions of evangelical philanthropists, where Dickens could with difficulty forgive the criminals they were trying to deliver. After Dickens’s death in 1870, George Eliot was to give a radical turn to this theme. In *Middlemarch* she takes up one of the keynotes of *Little Dorrit* and writes about a wealthy evangelical banker who is not only hiding a criminal past, but commits new crimes in order to protect himself. Like Mrs Clennam, Bulstrode has been guilty of peculation. Working for a corrupt firm as a young man he marries his employer’s widow and inherits the entire fortune when he mendaciously claims that her missing daughter from her first marriage cannot be found. When an old associate blackmails him with this secret many years later, he shelters him in the course of an alcohol-induced illness.
and ensures his death by ignoring Lydgate’s instructions for the patient’s treatment.

With considerable subtlety the narrator details the steps by which Bulstrode has brought himself to this position and his sophistry is shown to be the corruption of a deeply felt belief:

The spiritual kind of rescue was a genuine need with him. There may be coarse hypocrites, who consciously affect beliefs and emotions for the sake of gulling the world, but Bulstrode was not one of them. He was simply a man whose desires had been stronger than his theoretic beliefs, and who had gradually explained the gratification of his desires into satisfactory agreement with those beliefs.49

Lydgate’s prescribed course of treatment is innovative and largely untried, making his own and Bulstrode’s actions open to different interpretations. When Raffles unexpectedly dies the objectivity of medical practice is called into question, and religious abstractions are shown to be more insidious yet. Unlike Dickens’s Physician in Little Dorrit, Lydgate finds himself unable to act as an impartial healer removed from the moral complexities of the world he inhabits. But where he interrogates himself with what is literally clinical exactness as to whether he would have investigated the death before having accepted a substantial loan from the man he suspects, Bulstrode tries to argue that he has not been guilty of murder and that the death of Raffles demonstrates the working of divine retribution. His appropriation of doctrine is almost solipsistic, as he comes to see every supposed dispensation purely in reference to himself. Hitherto his sense of himself as a guilty being has had no tangible shape, and has even allowed him to feel a certain complacency:

He was doctrinally convinced that there was a total absence of merit in himself; but that doctrinal conviction may be held without pain when the sense of demerit does not take a distinct shape in memory and revive the tingling of shame or the pang of remorse. Nay, it may be held with intense satisfaction when the depth of our sinning is but a measure for the depth of forgiveness, and clenching proof that we are peculiar instruments of the divine intention.50

This is a theme with which both Dickens and Collins are likewise concerned, the means by which sophistry can creep into the most genuine
belief. But in Will’s scornful rejection of the money with which Bulstrode tries to expiate his sin against Mrs Ladislaw, and in the exposure of his past life to the people of Middlemarch, Bulstrode’s abstract sense of sin is replaced by a very earthly feeling of shame and disgrace. Judgement is now passed on him by his peers and forgiveness is also offered at a temporal level, through the support of his wife. In refusing Judgement as a divine appointment Eliot contrives to make Bulstrode’s position a much more difficult one to himself. Taking him at his word, she exposes his lack of merit and obliges him to accept forgiveness where he would rather confer or even withhold it. U. C. Knoepflmacher perceptively notes that Eliot does not so much reject evangelical doctrine as transform it in realigning the boundaries of a humanist faith. As he puts it:

The close introspection of her early Puritanism, with its meticulous dissection of the hidden motives which prompted men to selfish actions, its deep sense of human depravity and concomitant belief in self-denial, found outlets in the new emphasis on a man-centred order. 51

The resolution to this sense of depravity is found in secular humanism, and in the absence of religious conviction, Dorothea comes to represent an alternative object of worship and inspiration in her selfless response to those around her.

In Middlemarch Eliot pointedly undermines the doctrine of divine retribution. Judgement is relocated to a more immediate tribunal of both clerical and scientific spokesmen, who act as jurors in their insistence that Bulstrode renounce his power in the town. This playing out of judgement and redemption in the sphere of the novel itself allows her to resolve the question of how religious values can be maintained where belief in a deity has been lost.

It has been demonstrated that during the 1850s and 1860s Dickens was moving closer to the liberal religious position occupied by Collins. His novels written during this period reveal a diminishing need for judgement, as redemption and salvation become increasingly accessible. But individualism continued to be the one sticking point between Dickens’s religious outlook and that of Collins. Dickens’s novels before Our Mutual Friend repeatedly make judgements not only about those who actively commit sin, but also about characters who refuse involvement with those around them. This is traceable to his views on moral accountability, which differed from those of Collins. Collins’s sense of
moral accountability is closer to the evangelical meaning. In his concern with the soul of the individual he presents accountability mainly in terms of taking responsibility for personal sin. Repentance signals this acceptance of responsibility and is contrasted with the disingenuous appeal to the doctrine of original sin, as has been discussed with reference to Miss Clack in *The Moonstone*. Dickens placed considerable emphasis on social involvement, and defined responsibility largely in terms of this engagement with others.

The narrator of *David Copperfield* is deeply concerned with the moral accountability of one character for another, a view which he does not feel to be shared by the evangelical Murdstones or the moderate Sabbatarian Mr Spenlow. For this reason he attacks the individualism celebrated by Collins. The Murdstones are individualist in their doctrine, and fail in their duty towards David; even the kindly Mr Wickfield contributes to his own downfall by his introspective fear that Agnes may one day be taken from him. Though he is not an evangelical figure, his morbidity is allied to obsessive religious feeling, and can only be cured by a religious and moral engagement with the concerns of other characters. He comes to realise:

My natural grief for my child’s mother turned to disease; my natural love for my child turned to disease. I have infected everything I touched... I thought it possible that I could only truly love one creature in the world, and not love the rest; I thought it possible that I could truly mourn for one creature gone out of the world, and not have some part in the grief of all who mourned. Thus the lessons of my life have been perverted!

David’s aunt comes to embody both forgiveness and moral responsibility, ministering to her estranged husband as he dies and taking David into her household by way of reparation for having renounced his father. The ever-cheerful Traddles meanwhile marries the daughter of an impoverished clergyman and makes himself responsible for his wife’s nine sisters. This selfless course is rewarded when he becomes successful and wealthy. Such assumption of moral accountability is contrasted with the individualist bias of evangelical teaching, which cannot be forgiven.

A major source of conflict in *Little Dorrit* is the relationship of inner responsiveness to social conditions. Introspection and the worship of money are set in opposition to emotional involvement and support, and this is the antagonism posited as a battleground for Old and New
Testament values. The complex figures of Amy and Arthur reveal the fallibility of Christians who must act in tandem with the material world, and pass through: ‘sunshine and shade, [where] the noisy and the eager, and the arrogant and the froward and the vain, fretted and chafed, and made their usual uproar.’53 This emphasis on involvement in the world militates against Mrs Clennam’s voluntary seclusion that has rendered her unfit for ministry to others. Amy herself has had to contend with life outside the Marshalsea in order to achieve true sanctity. These different definitions of accountability are crucial to each writer’s treatment of evangelicalism, both in its doctrine and in its response to poverty and criminality.
Conclusion

In the early 1860s Victor Hugo wrote in *Les Misérables*:

Au dix-neuvième siècle, l’idée religieuse subit une crise. On désapprend de certaines choses, et l’on fait bien, pourvu qu’en désapprenant ceci, on apprenne cela. Pas de vide dans le coeur humain. De certaines démolitions se font, et il est bon qu’elles se fassent, mais à la condition d’être suivies de reconstructions.¹

[In the nineteenth century the conception of religion is in crisis. We are casting off certain ideas, and properly so, provided that in the process of unlearning this, we learn that. No void in the human heart. Certain things are destroyed, and it is as well that they should be, but on the condition that they are followed by reconstructions.]

It is still assumed by many readers of Dickens and Collins that they were benevolently unconcerned with the details of the doctrinal controversies dividing the religious community in the 1850s and 1860s. Studies of Dickens’s religious beliefs have tended either to isolate his pronouncements from the context of contemporary debate or to posit him in direct opposition to the more vocal evangelical groups. In either case he is most often presented as consistently liberal, even unmindful of theological distinctions, and the complexity of his religious understanding is implicitly denied. Collins meanwhile is rarely allowed to have held any religious beliefs at all, let alone to have expressed them in his novels. This assumption has largely arisen because of Wilkie’s rebellion against the definitive evangelicalism of William Collins senior. But as the Broad Church proponent in *Hide and Seek* warns his evangelical son-in-law: ‘I would recommend you not to be too ready in
future, lightly and cruelly to accuse a man of infidelity because his religious opinions happen to differ on some subjects from yours.\textsuperscript{12} Collins would doubtless have applauded the ironic tone adopted by Emile Montegut in his assessment of English religion circa 1855:

\begin{quote}
Vous ne croyez pas vos doctrines, et cependant vous êtes tous prêts à traiter d’anarchistes ou d’hérétiques ceux qui n’adoptent pas ces doctrines.\textsuperscript{3}
\end{quote}

[You do not believe your doctrines and yet you are all set to treat as anarchists or heretics anyone who does not adopt these doctrines.]

Both Dickens and Collins are famous for their satire of evangelicalism, but this satire is often dismissed as no more than instinctive enmity to a stringent and importunate faith that made its presence felt in all walks of life. Little attention has hitherto been paid to the impact of this most pervasive line of thought on their own religious development. Collins rejected his evangelical upbringing, but nonetheless retained an individualist propensity that acknowledged each human soul as intrinsically valuable, and he brings this heightened awareness of the individual inner life to his fiction. In this sense he occupied a common ground with the evangelical faith he so frequently attacked in his writing. But despite this appropriation of evangelical thought, he categorically refused to accept an orthodoxy that encouraged a belief in Hell; one of his later characters is surely acting on authorial beliefs in recoiling from the ‘superstition of eternal torment’.\textsuperscript{4} Nor did he believe in divine retribution, as dictated by the evangelical ethos, as the natural and just result of original sin. Rather, he reworked the individualism of his childhood to deny the reality of innate corruption and the horrors of hell.

Both he and Dickens satirised Anglican and Nonconformist evangelicalism not simply by way of caricature, as is often assumed, but primarily in order to take issue with its unrelentingly literalist approach to Scripture. Despite Dickens’s own tendency, as detailed by John R. Reed and Jerome Meckier, to mete out orthodox retribution to errant characters, he agreed with Collins in disparaging the gloomy creeds of evangelical belief, which both were to denounce repeatedly in their writing. Furthermore they contrived to express a consistent doctrinal position of their own, with which to counteract the pronouncements of evangelicalism. This position was centred on the liberal teachings of the New Testament, and sought to reinterpret the more stringent doc-
trines of orthodox belief. This liberalising tendency was nonetheless long impeded in Dickens’s case by his own leanings towards orthodoxy. Like his friend, Dickens abhorred the notion of visiting the father’s sins on the child, and believed in the inherent goodness of the human heart. But he struggled through many novels with the idea of ultimate Judgement, alludes in an early novel to adults at least as possessing a ‘fallen nature’, and was never to adopt Collins’s universalist tone. Disturbed by the doctrine of eternal damnation, he could neither accept nor wholly escape its implications for most of his adult life. But by the time of writing *Our Mutual Friend* he was disinclined to assume the authority necessary to such narrative judgement.

One aspect of evangelicalism consistently opposed by both writers was its introspective emphasis on personal sin, which they held to be morally and mentally unhealthy. Evangelical figures, particularly in Dickens, are imbued with images of corruption and disease. Most famously, Mrs Clennam in *Little Dorrit* has literally allowed her body to waste away, and so in enacting her spiritual corruption, she hopes to redeem her soul. Where she endeavours to make appropriate expiation through inviting such unnecessary suffering, the reader sees only a form of perversion, and so interprets the wasting of her faculties as a rejection of religious renewal. It is this ‘unhealthy’ view of religion that Dickens and Collins sought to combat through the indomitable energy of manly Christianity. At its best, manly Christianity offers an alternative to an obsessive concentration on personal failure, and leads instead to spiritual regeneration – and, Dickens might have added, to a life of active worth. The manly emphasis on direct action directly informs Dickens’s treatment of socialised religion, and effectually disproves the taunt of his wife’s aunt that his philanthropy had more to do with fairy tales than with religion. As far as he was concerned, individualism had no place in religion, which should radiate outwards and so permeate every aspect of life. In particular social aid should derive from a belief in the essentials of manly religion, healthy energy and concern for the well-being of others. Collins of course was very far from sharing this deep suspicion of individualism, but he insisted with equal force on the need for ‘healthy’ religious feeling as opposed to morbid introspection. This healthy development was, as he came to see it, precisely what was restricted by manly Christianity, and his later novels show a concerted effort to broaden the parameters of this code to include repentant female figures for whom this ethos seemed to offer no assurance of redemption.
Through the 1850s and 1860s both writers were working towards an increasingly complex model of liberal Christianity. The framework they established during these decades contains elements of manly religion, insofar as it insists on healthy responsiveness to others, and Dickens extends this theme of responsiveness to include active philanthropy. This was a stand taken initially both as an expression of the nature of religious duty, and in order to circumvent the destruction of the irreligious and uninstructed poor. By the end of the 1860s he had found a resolution to the troubling questions of redemption and damnation, positing a choice between life and death through a central image of baptism in the Thames, in *Our Mutual Friend*. The river running through the murkiest areas of inner London stands as an offer of redemption to all who will accept it. Collins had stressed the boundless possibilities of redemption almost from the outset of his career. His sympathy was always with the redeemed sinner and social outcast, whom he saw as being more receptive than conventional characters to religious renewal. This was a position with which Dickens was increasingly ready to sympathise.

It has been shown that both Dickens and Collins were susceptible to the dominant religious motions of their time, and further that they adapted evangelical teaching to their own more liberal faith. It is this complex reworking of religious teaching that lies behind the apparently simple providential structure of their novels. Their overt rejection of all narrowly constructed doctrine is in itself an attempt to interpret the message of Christ in as uncluttered a form as possible. As Dickens insisted in 1864:

> The spectacle presented by the indecent squabbles of priests of most denominations, and the exemplary unfairness and rancour with which they conduct their differences, utterly repel me. ...as many forms of consignment to eternal damnation as there are articles, and all in one forever quarreling body – the Master of the New Testament put out of sight, and the rage and fury almost always turning on the letter of obscure parts of the Old Testament, which itself has been the subject of accommodation, adaptation, varying interpretation without end – these things cannot last.6

A depreciation of abstruse points of doctrine, often cited as evidence that they were irreligious or ignorant of theology, is in fact one of the most important aspects of Dickens’s and Collins’s religion. Their aim was always not to revamp Christ’s message, but to present it as clearly
as possible to a modern reader in a way that would be universally accessible. The subtlety of Collins in particular in his response to evangelicalism, in itself confirms his assertion that he concentrated on the basic framework of Christianity because he found there the essential components of his faith; it was clearly not due to any indifference to its supernatural element. Dickens’s struggle to accommodate what was sometimes an authoritarian outlook to a Broad Church faith again testifies to the seriousness with which his religious professions were made. Both writers ridiculed and suspected the evangelical appropriation of religious verities, precisely because they denied divine authority for such exclusive construction of points of doctrine. They themselves avoided the excessive use of religious language, not because they thought it limiting but because they saw it as all too likely to obscure sacred truths. In their novels, they attempt to reconstruct their perception of these truths for the general reader, through a fictional medium.

Dickens invokes this aspect of his writing quite explicitly in a letter of 1859. In response to a criticism of the structure of *A Tale of Two Cities* he wrote earnestly to Collins:

I think the business of art is to lay all that ground carefully, to show, by a backward light, what everything has been working to – but only to *suggest*, until the fulfillment comes. These are the ways of Providence, of which all art is but a little imitation. ⁷

Collins likewise believed wholeheartedly in the power of fiction as a means of religious instruction, writing in 1886: ‘My own ideas cordially recognize any system of education the direct tendency of which is to make us better Christians.’ ⁸ According to this criterion, he judged Charles Dickens to have been among the great teachers.
Notes

1 Tradings in religion: legislation and crisis at mid-century

1. For example Ernest Renan, *Vie de Jésus* and John Seeley, *Ecce Homo*.
4. Ibid., 55.
5. Ibid., p. 85.
12. It is interesting to note that as early the 1850s, Silas Marner’s obsession with his weaving and hoarding of money is compared with the erudite but futile study of a wiser man who loses his religious faith.
18. Ibid., p. 275.
22. Ibid., p. 89
31. Ibid.
32. Wilkie Collins, letter to Edward Pigott (Pigott Coll., Box 3 by permission of the Huntington Library, California), February 1852.
42. Lisa M. Zeitz and Peter Thoms, ‘Collins’s Use of the Strasbourg Clock in *Armadale’*, *Nineteenth Century Literature*, 45 (1990), 495–503.
46. Ibid. (5th October 1884), p. 473.
47. Ibid., to Sebastian Schlesinger (29 December 1883), p. 464.
55. Ibid., p. 111.
59. Ibid., p. 98.
61. Ibid., p. 777.
66. Ibid., p. 8.
75. Ibid., p. 301.
77. letter to Edward Piggott, (Piggott Coll., Box 3: by permission of the Huntington Library, California), December 1854.
82. Lonoff, *Wilkie Collins and his Victorian Readers*, p. 165.
87. Letter to Edward Piggott, (Piggott Coll., Box 3 by permission of the Huntington Library, California), 1852.
90. Ibid., p. 29.
94. Ibid., p. 117.
95. Ibid.
98. Letter to Mrs Peter Alfred Taylor, 30 July 1863, p. 287.
100. Ibid., p. 162.
117. Ibid., p. 185.
121. Ibid., p. 166.
126. Ibid., p. 15.
135. Ibid., p. 255.
136. Ibid.
140. Ibid., p. 120.
144. *Letters of Charles Dickens 1833–1870*, ed. by his sister-in-law and his eldest daughter, to Mr Macvey Napier, p. 98 (16 September 1843).
147. Wilkie Collins, *No Name*, p. 481.
148. Ibid., p. 211.
154. Ibid., p. 389.
157. Ibid.

2  A man’s resolution and a woman’s patience: fighting the battle of life


22. Ibid., p. 126.

23. Ibid., p. 105.

24. Ibid., p. 104.


29. Ibid p. 135.

30. Ibid p. 137.

31. Ibid., Act 3, p. 146.


33. Ibid p. 159.

34. Ibid p. 158.

35. Ibid., Act 2, p. 120.


37. Ibid., p. 122.


41. Phillips, *The Dead Heart*, Act 1, scene 4, p. 27.


43. Ibid., p. 50.

44. Lord’s Day Observance Society, *Memorial to her Majesty the Queen against the Playing of Military Bands for Public Amusement, the Opening of Public Exhibitions, and Other Desecrations on the Lord’s Day* (London: 1856).


54. Ibid., p. 360.


57. Dickens, *Dombey and Son*, p. 874.


59. Ibid., p. 388.
3 The redeployment of doctrine – treatment of original sin, infant depravity and providentialism


8. *Letters of Charles Dickens*, to the Misses Mary and Kate Dickens, ix, p. 115 (2 September 1859).


12. Ibid., p. 289.


14. Ibid., p. 16.


24. Ibid., p. 216.

25. Ibid., p. 108.

26. Ibid., p. 761.


34. Ibid., p. 317.


40. Bradley, *The Call to Seriousness*, p. 158.
41. Reed, *Dickens and Thackeray: Punishment and Forgiveness*, p. 245.
44. Ibid., p. 215.
47. Ibid., p. 241.
51. Ibid., p. 579.
56. Ibid., p. 624.
57. Ibid., pp. 815–16.
59. Ibid., p. 74.
71. Ibid., 846.
72. Ibid., p. 59.
73. Ibid., p. 407.
75. Reed, *Dickens and Thackeray: Punishment and Forgiveness*, p. 246.

4 Subverting judgement: the case for redemption through sanctification of the sinner

1. Lovesey, *The Clerical Character in George Eliot’s Fiction*, p. 84
3. Ibid., p. 194.
4. Ibid., p. 275.
6. Ibid., p. 299.
12. Ibid., p. 805.
13. Ibid., p. 639.
18. Ibid., p. 861.
19. Ibid., p. 768.
20. Ibid., p. 368.
31. Ibid., p. 768.
40. Ibid., p. 598.
44. Collins, *No Name*, p. 9.
45. Unsigned review in the *Athenaeum*, 3 January 1863, p. 132.
5 Pet prisoners and honest paupers: Philanthropic dealings with poverty and criminality

5. Ibid., pp. 258–9.
7. Ibid., p. 350.
19. Ibid., p. 717.
20. Ibid., p. 444.
24. Ibid., pp. 769–70.
28. Ibid., p. 408.
37. Holbrook, *Charles Dickens and the Image of Woman*, p. 34.
43. Ibid., p. 224.
44. Ibid., p. 228.
47. Donald M. Lewis, *Lighten Their Darkness*, p. 239.
48. ‘Observations on a Bill now pending in the House of Commons for the better observance of the Lord’s Day’ (1833).
6 Conclusion

2. Collins, Hide and Seek, p. 17.
For ease of reference, the Penguin edition of Dickens’s novels has been used throughout. As there is no complete edition of Collins’s novels at the time of writing, various editions have been used.

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