Variety of Death Scenes in Dickens

*In books and on screen*

Ritgerð til B.A.-prófs

Aðalbjörg Halldórsdóttir

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Abstract

The aim of this essay is to explore various death scenes as they appear in variety of Charles Dickens’ novels, how he portrays emotions, and how he sets the mood in those delicate moments. Furthermore, I explore what various critics have had to say about these scenes, and finally I look at how successful, or not, those scenes have been adapted into film and television.

I begin the essay by talking about how the children in Dickens’ world are affected by their upcoming death, focusing on Jenny’s baby son in Bleak House, little Paul Dombey in Dombey and Son, and little Nell Trent in The Old Curiosity Shop. They are all children who die as a result of illness. Possibly, Nell suffers more than the other two, but death does not come quickly to any of them. In the case of Jenny’s baby boy, we mainly understand the sorrow of his departure through his mother, whereas with Paul Dombey and Little Nell, they both face their journeys with maturity beyond their years.

Next I talk about one of the most brutal murders in Dickens’ novels; focusing on Nancy’s death in Oliver Twist, where Sikes allows his anger get the better of him and brutally murders Nancy without knowing all of the facts.

Lastly, I compare two men waiting for death in prison, focusing on the executions of Sydney Carton in A Tale of Two Cities, and Fagin in Oliver Twist, where Sydney dies at peace having followed his will and achieved his redemption, but Fagin gradually becomes insane due to the fear of dying.

Additionally, by exploring how these powerful scenes have been adapted to screen, you get the chance to become more involved with the characters and look at these scenes from a different perspective.
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Introduction

Of all the nineteenth-century British authors one can select, the reader naturally gravitates to Charles Dickens – “naturally” because there are many enduring images of characters at the moment of death in Dickens’ work, so many that a reader may not be able to conclude which character’s death is the most poignant. (Koloze, 2)

There are many significant death scenes in Dickens’ novels that are worth examining in some detail (for example, that of Johnny in Our Mutual Friend, Smike in Nicholas Nickleby, or Little Nell in The Old Curiosity Shop, Krook in Bleak House). Whether Dickens was, as one critic has said, “obsessed by death, fascinated by its demands upon articulation” (Stewart, 56), like so many of his writers of the period is more difficult to say but there is little doubt that he is always affected by death and wants his readers to be too. Indeed, the latest major biography of Dickens by Claire Tomalin opens with an account of Dickens witnessing the trial of a young woman, Eliza Burgess, who is accused of murdering her newborn child.¹ When all the other jurors wanted to see her convicted, Dickens took pity on the woman and argued so well in her defence that she was released. The image of a dead newborn child in a shoebox so shocked Dickens that he still remembered it thirty years later. More often than not, the death scenes in Dickens’ novels concentrate on the poor and the unfortunate. This does not mean that he always sympathises with them, but he is never unfeeling. I have chosen a number of death scenes from the novels, all charged with different emotions.

For the purpose of this essay, I am going to Oliver Twist (OT), A Tale of Two Cities (ATTC), Bleak House (BH), The Old Curiosity Shop (OCS), and, Dombey and Son (DS). First, I look at a few of the children in Dickens’ novels who are victims to an early death and which had a great impact on me as a reader. Then I turn to the brutal murder of Nancy in OT, and lastly, to the executions of Sydney Carton (ATTC) and Fagin (OT). Furthermore, I explore what various critics have had to say about these scenes, how Dickens portrays them and, finally, how successful, or not, those scenes are in film and television adaptations.

1: The loss of a child is never easy

It is never a simple thing when a child dies, in real life or in literature. “Of all deaths, the deaths of children arouse the strongest emotions and may lead to the deepest questionings. When Dickens writes of them he brings us face to face with our own deepest convictions” (Avery & Reynolds, 152).

Jenny’s baby in Bleak House, Paul Dombey in Dombey and Son, and Nell in The Old Curiosity Shop are all children who die as a result of illness. Possibly, Nell suffers more than the other two, but death does not come quickly to any of them. In the case of Jenny’s baby boy in Bleak House, we mainly understand the sorrow of his departure through his mother. Paul Dombey and Little Nell both face their journeys with maturity beyond their years and their hope and lack of fear shines through.

When Jenny’s baby boy dies in Bleak House, a sense of utter sadness and vulnerability erupts through the environment and all the characters involved. You can never read of sufferings of an infant without feeling something; whether it is grief, anger, or an utter loss of hope. When the scene begins and Esther and Ada walk into the cottage we immediately sense fear in the air. There is clearly a man in the house that no one wants to confront, the baby’s father who is angry and verbally abusive. In contrast, Jenny sits there beside the fire, not looking anywhere else but at her baby son:

She only looked at it as it lay on her lap. We had observed before, that when she looked at it she covered her discolored eye with her hand, as though she wished to separate any association with noise and violence and ill-treatment, from the poor little child. (BH, 123)

It is evident that Jenny’s husband has been abusing her and her mother and he is not hiding it. Indeed, he is defiant rather than apologetic. That is evident when he rants on, telling Esther, Ada and Mrs. Pardiggle about his life. “And how did my wife get that black eye? Why, I giv’ it her; and if she says I didn’t, she’s a Lie!” (BH, 122).

Esther and Ada notice that not everything is as it should be with Jenny and her child and go over there to see if the baby is ill. Unfortunately, they come upon a dreadful and heart-breaking scene. “Ada, whose gentle heart was moved by its appearance, bent down to touch its little face, As she did so, I saw what happened and drew her back. The child died” (BH, 123). The horrifying moment when Ada discovers
what has happened is shattering. Every feeling she has ever felt emerges in this single moment. Her motherly instincts all flash at her at once when she discovers that a mother has lost her only child. This truly is a mother’s worst nightmare. “The suffering, quiet, pretty little thing! I am so sorry for it. I am so sorry for the mother. I never saw a sight so pitiful as this before! O baby, baby!” (BH, 123). Here we have an infant dying in the arms of its mother. It is hard to imagine the loss of a child if you do not have one, but merely reading the scene when Ada bends down to console Jenny and Jenny discovers that her baby is dead you can start to imagine the loss that is taking place; a loss of mother’s identity one might say:

Such compassion, such gentleness, as that with which she bent down weeping, and put her hand upon the mother’s, might have softened any mother’s heart that ever beat. The woman at first gazed at her in astonishment, and then burst into tears. (BH, 123)

Esther’s presence in this scene is just as important as Ada’s. While Ada consoles the grieving mother, Esther plays a more ritualistic role. She takes the baby from Jenny and tries to find a way for the child to rest in peace and thereby makes this horrific scene a little more tolerable. “Presently I took the light burden from her lap; did what I could to make the baby’s rest the prettier and gentler; laid it on a shelf, and covered it with my own handkerchief” (BH, 123). The handkerchief could be seen as some kind of symbol for inner peace and hope. By laying it on the baby Dickens makes us feel that the baby has gone to a better place, a place away from “the violence and ill-treatment” of the world.

The scene of this unbearable event is the same for a long time afterwards; the loss in the atmosphere is evident. Everything is untouched as to preserve the child’s existence in the home, as if any change would disturb the infant’s rest. The atmosphere is church-like, as if there is a service taking place at their home:

No effort had been made to clean the room – it seemed in its nature almost hopeless of being clean; but the small waxen form, from which so much solemnity diffused itself, had been composed afresh, and washed, and neatly dressed in some fragments of white linen; and on my handkerchief, which still covered the poor baby, a little bunch of sweet
herbs had been laid by the same rough scarred hands, so lightly, so tenderly! (*BH*, 125)

Jenny clearly has a very good relationship with her mother. When she discovers that her baby son has died, her mother’s soothing voice helps her calm down and forget, if even for a second, that her worst nightmare has indeed come true:

An ugly woman [. . .] hurried in while I was glancing at them, and coming straight up to the mother, said, ‘Jenny! Jenny!’ The mother rose on being so addressed, and fell upon the woman’s neck. She also had upon her face and arms the marks of ill-usage [. . .] when she condoled with the woman, and her own tears fell, she wanted no beauty [. . .] her only words were ‘Jenny! Jenny!’ All the rest was in the tone in which she said them. (*BH*, 123-124)

Moreover, Esther and Ada sense a powerful relationship between the two oppressed women coming together in the time of need. Her words truly shine a light upon how important it is to have someone to get you through the rough times in your life. A sense of companionship in a horrific scene of events; in a nightmare:

I thought it very touching to see these two women, coarse and shabby and beaten, so united; to see what they could be to one another; to see how they felt for one another; how the heart of each to each was softened by the hard trials of their lives. I think the best side of such people is almost hidden from us. What the poor are to the poor is little known, excepting to themselves and GOD. (*BH*, 124)

The last paragraph of the chapter is powerful, when Esther looks upon the dead little baby boy and thinks about where he is going now; who is going to take care of him in heaven:

How little I thought, when I raised my handkerchief to look upon the tiny sleeper underneath, and seemed to see a halo shine around the child through Ada’s drooping hair as her pity bent her head – how little I thought in whose unquiet bosom that handkerchief would come to lie, after covering the motionless and peaceful breast! (*BH*, 125).
Many adaptations of *Bleak House* have been made, too many for each and every one being mentioned here, but the recent BBC TV mini-series that I have chosen deals with this incident particularly well.²

This adaptation portrays Jenny’s loss in a convincing way and the atmosphere of grief is evident, although some facts are altered and some are missing and therefore the scene is not entirely as it is in the novel. The scene where they come back to Jenny’s house after the child has died is completely omitted, which is a moment I miss seeing in the series. Furthermore, in this adaptation Esther is the one who engages only with Jenny, whereas in the book Ada is also involved and is the one who discovers the horrifying incident that has taken place. Esther is made the more important character in this scene. Furthermore, I find that Charlie Brooks, who plays Jenny, manages to show her emotions very well as well as being able to tap into the feelings of the audience. She is entirely credible. When Esther and Jenny look into each other’s eyes we feel the loss that is taking place in Jenny’s heart. More might have been made of the handkerchief. Esther takes the child from its mother’s arms, puts it on the mantle and finally puts the handkerchief on its face, but it is as if something is missing from the scene. If Esther had not left straight away, this moment of hope, so obvious in the novel might have had more emotional impact. Having said that, when they leave the cottage we catch a glimpse of Ada who sheds a tear, and when Esther leaves she looks at the mother one last time, and again we are left with a scene that is incredibly sad and filled with loss.

On a slightly different note, the death of Little Paul in *Dombey and Son* shows a six-year-old child, destined to being weak from birth, facing his fate with a maturity well beyond his years. It is one of the more tragic deaths in Dickens’ novels. Being weak and often ill in his childhood does not take away the sadness the reader feels when he dies. Throughout the novel, Little Paul is described as being an “old-fashioned” child and his death is truly tragic. Instead of becoming angry or difficult, Paul always tries to make others feel better around him. He does not want anyone to worry about him, especially not his father. “[V]oices asked his attendants softly how he was. Paul always answered for himself, ‘I am great deal better, thank you! Tell papa so!’” (*DS*, 208). A sick, dying, little six year old being so calm and mature about his death is something

² 2005, directed by Justin Chadwick and Susanna White.
you do not see often. He finds it calming thinking of the river. The river is a symbol of hope and happiness for him:

His fancy had a strange tendency to wander to the river, which he knew was flowing through the great city; and now the thought how black it was, and how deep it would look, reflecting the hosts of stars – and more than all, how steadily it rolled away to meet the sea. (DS, 207)

Although Paul is repeatedly shown to be mature through his final days, one also sees a glimpse of a frightened, little six year old boy just wanting to be taken care of. When Paul has nightmares, or is confused, he can always turn to his older sister, Florence, who never leaves his side and always makes him feel better. “[A] word from Florence, who was always at his side, restored him to himself; and leaning his poor head upon her breast, he told Floy of his dream, and smiled” (DS, 208). They are there for each other through thick and thin and their bond and their love is unbreakable. It is heart-warming when Paul tells his sister that he wants to take care of her just as she has been taking care of him. “Floy could always soothe and reassure him; and it was his daily delight to make her lay her head down on his pillow, and take some rest. ‘You are always watching me, Floy. Let me watch you, now!’” (DS, 208). The relationship of Paul with his older sister is amazing and you truly sense the love between them. She stays beside him day and night and is devoted to her little brother through thick and thin. The goodbye scene between the siblings shows us how they come together as one:

Sister and brother wound their arms around each other, and the golden light came streaming in, and fell upon them, locked together. ‘How fast the river runs, between its green banks and the rushes, Floy! But it’s very near the sea. I hear the waves! They always said so!’ (DS, 211)

Moreover, yet again, we see the maturity in the six year old Paul when he takes his father’s neck and convinces him that he will be alright, that he is not afraid to die:

Don’t be so sorry for me, dear papa! Indeed, I am quite happy!’ His father coming and bending down to him [. . .] Paul held him round the neck, and repeated those words to him several times, and very earnestly [. . .] This was the beginning of his always saying in the morning that he was a great deal better, and that they were to tell his father so. (DS, 209)
For a six year old child reassuring his father and everyone around him that he will be alright is inspiring. His hope and optimism reassures the reader that Paul will be safe where he is going. In addition, Paul has a lot of love in his life. His sister, Florence loves him unconditionally and his father, who favours his children, loves him also. The truth is that throughout the novel you feel that the love his father has for Paul is selfish. He loves him so because little Paul is the heir of the company, the son in Dombey and Son. You might say that his father’s love for him comes from his own personal gain. Of course, there is a father-son bond between them but you cannot dismiss the personal gain:

The death of little Paul reiterates the deaths of Oliver’s avatars in *Oliver Twist* and the death of Nell in *The Old Curiosity Shop*, but Paul is inexorably destroyed by a mistaken, selfish, and all-devouring love rather than by the complete absence of love. (*The Dickens Critics*, 371)

His last words to his father are linked to his sister. “Remember Walter, dear papa,” (*DS*, 211). Walter had always been kind to Florence and helped her. It is touching that even in his last breath he is thinking of his sister and how her future will unfold. He is trying to make it so that her life will be happy and beautiful.

Florence is not the only person who loves little Paul unconditionally. Their nurse is the closest thing the siblings know as a mother and it is heart-warming when the nurse has arrived at Paul’s deathbed. The grief is evident and you sense her loss. You might say that it is a loss of one of her own; the loss as that of a mother:

No other stranger would have shed those tears at sight of him, and called him her dear boy, her pretty boy, her own poor blighted child. No other woman would have stooped down by his bed, and taken up his wasted hand, and put it to her lips and breast, as one who had some right to fondle it. No other woman would have so forgotten everybody there but him and Floy, and been so full of tenderness and pity. (*DS*, 211)

Paul is ready to go and his state of mind is clear when he says his goodbye. To imagine a six year old child being ready to leave this world and not being afraid is unbelievable, but once again this proves his maturity and him living up to his reputation of being an “old-fashioned” child. The scene where he is on the verge of parting ways with this world is notable. He sees his mother which shows us that there is someone
waiting for him on the other side and perhaps reassures us that he will be alright and is going to a better place where he will be happy:

He put his hands together, as he had been used to do at his prayers. He did not remove his arms to do it; but they saw him fold them so, behind her neck. 'Mamma is like you, Floy. I know her by the face! (DS, 211)

Unfortunately, not many adaptations of *Dombey and Son* have been made throughout the years but the most memorable one from recent years is the 1983 TV mini-series. This version follows the novel very well and not much is deviated from the novel. Although, I would have wanted to see more of the sibling love and bond that Floy and Paul share. Having said that this version portrays Paul's death and all the characters involved very well, especially the nurse and her loss. Moreover, it is hard to ignore the grief in the room. You immediately get emotional, as you do in the book. Overall this TV series manages to portray Paul and his passing in a believable manner.

*The Old Curiosity Shop* is less realistic, more like a fairy tale. Nell and her grandfather go through adventures and meet various strange and funny characters. But, yet again, we have the death of a young child; a mature, kind, thirteen-year-old girl. At the time, many of his readers thought it was very strange that Dickens should kill his main character, but this becomes easier to understand when we know that he based Nell on his seventeen-year-old sister-in-law, Mary, who died suddenly at his home:

It is evident [. . .] that Dickens felt most poignantly for and with his Little Nell; that he wept over her sufferings, piously revered her goodness and exulted in her joys. He had an overflowing heart; but the trouble was that it overflowed with such curious and even rather repellent secretions” (*The Dickens Critics*, 153).

The relationship between Nell and her grandfather is beautiful and very special. The scene where she dreams of their time together truly demonstrates their love for each other. In her final hours, she does not remember the sufferings that came their way, but only the wonderful events in their past travels:

They could tell, by what she faintly uttered in her dreams, that they were of her journeying with the old man; they were of no painful scenes, but of

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3 1983, directed by Rodney Bennett.
those who had helped and used them kindly, for she often said ‘God bless you!’ with great fervour. (OCS, 530)

When Nell is moments away from her last breath and she says goodbye to her grandfather for the last time, the reader can almost see the love in the air and also the tragedy of the loss of a girl with her whole life ahead of her:

Opening her eyes at last, from a very quiet sleep [. . .] she turned to the old man with a lovely smile upon her face – such, they said, as they had never seen, and never could forget – and clung with both her arms about his neck. They did not know that she was dead, at first” (OCS, 530).

Nell’s only love in the world is her grandfather and even though he is the cause of some of their sufferings she does not let that change her relationship with him. He is the only thing she truly needs and to lose that bond would only do more harm than good; their bond is unbreakable. Jeff J. Koloze mentions this bond in his essay:

Throughout The Old Curiosity Shop Nell treasures not any material good, whether in the curiosity shop where they first lived or on the road as they fled from London and those who would torment them, but her grandfather himself. Even when he steals money from her to satisfy his gambling obsession, Nell cannot accuse her grandfather, so much does she love him and so constant is her devotion. (Koloze, 4)

It is difficult to read the scene where her grandfather finally comes to terms with Nell’s death. He finally faces the harsh truth of the loss of his only love in life. “Then pointing to the bed, he burst into tears for the first time, and they who stood by, knowing that the sight of this child had done him good, left them alone together” (OCS, 531).

Even though we have a child dying of illness and exhaustion, her death is somewhat serene and beautiful in a sense. Of course, the sense of sadness is overwhelming and you cannot get through the description of her final hours without shedding a tear, but somehow we know that Nell will be alright and this is the ending that should have been. The description of her death is exquisite. You do not see a child that has been through more sufferings than a human being should have ever have to go through, but we see a child, happy with the life she led:

She was dead. No sleep so beautiful and calm, so free from trace of pain, so fair to look upon. She seemed a creature fresh from the hand of God,
and waiting for the breath of life; not one who had lived and suffered death. (OCS, 528)

In this sense, Nell is similar to Little Paul, who is ready to leave this place and we know she will be happy wherever she goes next. You could also say that she dies at peace, ready to forget the sufferings and ready to move forward. The description of Nell after her death is powerful, showing how serene she looks after her passing. “Where were the traces of her early cares, her sufferings, and fatigues? All gone. Sorrow was dead indeed in her, but peace and perfect happiness were born; imaged in her tranquil beauty and profound repose” (OCS, 529).

Nell is laid to rest at the one place she always felt calm. There she went to think and there she had the chance to be herself without any troubles. This is a place where they know she will rest in peace; the place she called home:

They carried her to one old nook, where she had many and many a time sat nursing, and laid their burden softly on the pavement. The light streamed on it through the coloured window – a window, where the boughs of trees were ever rustling in the summer, and where the birds sang sweetly all day long. With every breath of air that stirred among those branches in the sunshine, some trembling, changing light would fall upon her grave. (OCS, 532)

Finally, her grandfather cannot live without her. He spends his days by her grave, hoping that she will come for him. These last scenes of her grandfather express eternal love between him and his Nell. Her grandfather cannot imagine his life without his Nell and therefore he does not want to be anywhere else than beside her grave. Now this is his home, with his “little Nell”. The story of Nell and her grandfather comes to an end when he dies at her grave. At last, Nell has come for him and now they truly are together forever; together in peace. They are together in life and death. “They laid him by the side of her whom he had loved so well; and, in the church there they had often prayed, and mused, and lingered hand in hand, the child and the old man slept together” (OCS, 536).

Many adaptations have been made of The Old Curiosity Shop, ranging from mini-series, films, animations and musicals and, like with Bleak House, I cannot cover
them all. Among them the 2007 BBC version\(^4\) portrays Nell’s death very well. This version alters the end and some scenes are omitted and more is made of the moment where Nell’s father arrives at her death bed. But that does not diminish how the actors who play the two characters manage to portray the unbreakable bond between them. I felt that Derek Jacobi, who plays Nell’s grandfather, was the star of the scene in this version. His portrayal of the character is impeccable and he took me with him on an emotional ride. His last words to her made me cry, “You’ll live forever in my heart”. The only thing I can find a real fault with in this version is not seeing the ending as it was in the novel. I would have liked to see when Nell’s grandfather sits at her grave and in the end parts with his little Nell. That is such a memorable part of the novel and it would have been fascinating to see how that would have been portrayed on screen. Having said that, this version does the novel good justice and perhaps by altering the ending this way the audience is left to decide for themselves how her grandfather, her father and Kit will live their lives from now on; with Nell in their hearts forever.

A death of a child is never an easy thing to come to terms with but Dickens manages to portray the loss in a way that evokes something positive, mainly by concentrating on the emotional effects. Moreover, the reader has an opportunity to catch a glimpse of the world as it was in the 19\(^{th}\) century, where the death of a child at an young age was, unfortunately, very common. He manages to portray the emotions of the people closest to the children in a realistic manner and with that he manages to pull the reader into the story. As a reader you become involved in the surroundings. In addition, by having a chance to see these moments on screen makes this more real and more believable. It makes it seem like you are a part of all the sadness that is taking place and you are one with the characters involved. I am going to finish this chapter with these powerful words from the novel *Dombey and Son* that seemed to fit perfectly in regards to the death of young children. “The old, old fashion – Death! Oh thank GOD, all who see it, for that older fashion yet, of Immortality! And look upon us, angels of young children, with regards not quite estranged, when the swift river bears us to the ocean!” *(DS, 212).*

\(^4\) 2007, directed by Brian Percival.
2: An unexpected death

Nancy’s death in *Oliver Twist* is the most brutal in any of the Dickens’ novels. In a sense, the environment at the beginning of the novel sets the reader up for the murder. The reader is introduced to a horrifying reality where anything can happen:

The first eleven chapters of *Oliver Twist* are an evocation of misery and horror. We have been drawn straight with the first sentence [. . .] into a world of the most appalling poverty and ugliness, a world of brutality and violence in which life is cheap, suffering general and death welcome.

(*The Dickens Critics*, 253)

In this particular scene we find an unstable man pushed to reach his inner angry self and therefore leading him to murder the woman he loves in the belief that she has betrayed the gang. He allows his anger get the better of him and beats Nancy to death without knowing all of the facts.

It is evident that Nancy is stuck in a life of crime and that Sikes has power over her. She is a good human being, but it is effectively too late for her to escape from it. We see the hold that Sikes has over her when Rose asks her to come with them. Ultimately, she loves Sikes and will always be loyal to him no matter what. This place of darkness and law-breaking is her life and that can never change. Before the fatal day, Nancy has a premonition. She does not know what to make of it. Of course, it does not even cross her mind that this is a warning that her life is coming to an end and that she will be murdered by the man she lives for:

I told you before [. . .] that I was afraid to speak to you there [. . .] I have such a fear and dread upon me tonight that I can hardly stand [. . .] Horrible thoughts of death, and shrouds with blood upon them, and a fear that has made me burn, as if I was on fire, have been upon me all day. I was reading a book tonight [. . .] and the same things came into the print5.

(*OT*, 302)

Fagin plays a large part in this. Even though he does not perform the act himself, he pushes and “helps.” Even though he does not want Bill to kill Nancy, he persuades him to go to her to talk some sense into her, knowing how angry Bill has become.

5 The word “casket” appears in the print reputedly.
Before he tells Sikes what happened by the bridge he asks him over and over again what he would do if someone betrayed him. “What then?” replied Sikes, with a tremendous oath. ‘If he was left alive till I came, I’d grind his skull under the iron heel of my boot into as many grains as there are hairs upon his head” (OT, 310). When Fagin knows how Sikes would react he tells him about Nancy and exaggerates the truth so that Sikes goes mad with rage. You might say that, without realising, Fagin sets Sikes up for murder. “She told it all, every word, without a threat, without a murmur – she did – did she not?” cried the Jew, half mad with fury. ‘All right,’ replied Noah, scratching his head. ‘That’s just what it was!” (OT, 311). Noah obviously does not really want to take part in all this but is dragged into it by Fagin, which further proves that Fagin exaggerates the truth so that all the facts do not come out. Sikes goes mad with rage and storms out knowing exactly what he is going to do. “Let me out,’ said Sikes. ‘Don’t speak to me! it’s not safe. Let me out, I say” (OT, 312).

One cannot say that Sikes carries out this horrible deed simply in blind fury. It is obvious that he has every intention of killing Nancy. It is premeditated and cannot be dismissed solely as an act of passion. It is a cold-blooded murder and the evidence is clear in the description when he walks to his house:

Without one pause or moment’s consideration; without one turning his head to the right or left, or raising his eyes to the sky or lowering them to the ground, but looking straight before him with savage resolution [. . .] the robber held on his headlong course, not muttered a word, nor relaxed a muscle, until he reached his own door. He opened it softly with a key; strode lightly up the stairs; and entering his own room, double-locked door, and lifting a heavy table against it, drew back the curtain of the bed. (OT, 312)

Furthermore, when Nancy awakens and tries to adjust the light for a conversation, Sikes’ words prove even more the fact that Sikes knows exactly what he is doing and he certainly cannot play the accident card. “Let it be,’ said Sikes, thrusting his hand before her. ‘There’s light enough for wot I’ve got to do” (OT, 312). Even more proof of guilt of premeditated murder is when he is about to kill Nancy and takes the time to think of how he is going to kill her. He decides to beat her with his gun instead of actually firing it because of the possibility of somebody hearing the shot:
The housebreaker freed one arm, and grasped his pistol. The certainty of immediate detection if he fired flashed across his mind even in the midst of his fury; and he beat it twice, with all the force he could summon, upon the upturned face that almost touched his own. (OT, 313)

A man committing murder in the heat of the moment, as an act of passion, would not take the time to think about being discovered. When Sikes prepares to finish Nancy off, he covers his eyes as not to see her die. He obviously loves Nancy, yet not enough to allow her to live. “It was a ghastly figure to look upon. The murderer, staggering backwards to the wall, and shutting out the sight with his hand, seized a heavy club and struck her down” (OT, 313).

One cannot forget the fear in the air when Nancy manages to say a prayer before the final blows of Sikes gun. She knows what is about to happen and tries, as her last act on this earth, to be salvaged. It is her last prayer for a place in Heaven:

She staggered and fell, nearly blinded with the blood that rained down from a deep gash in her forehead; but raising herself, with difficulty, on her knees, drew from her bosom a white handkerchief – Rose Maylie’s own – and holding it up in her folded arms, as high towards heaven as her feeble strength would allow, breathed one prayer for mercy to her Maker. (OT, 313)

Ultimately, Sikes cannot forget what he has done because of guilt. He stares at her body. Because he covered his eyes when he gave the final blow, her eyes are what he sees again and again as he flees from the scene of the crime. Clearly, Sikes has a conscience and that makes us sympathize with him. Ultimately, he is a man who cannot escape from himself:

Sikes is gathered into the world that has begotten him and the image of that world makes us understand him and even pity him, not with an easy sentimentality, but through a sense of all the hideous forces that have made him what he is. (The Dickens Critics, 269)

As I read this scene I was curious how this would be portrayed on screen. Oliver Twist has been adapted to stage, film and television more times than any other Dickens book, excluding A Christmas Carol, but for the purpose of this chapter I have chosen
the 1948 film version\(^6\), and the 2007 BBC TV series version\(^7\). They provide a good comparison of how this horrifying scene has haunted readers and viewers for so long.

Lean’s 1948 version follows the book to an extent but it also makes various changes. For example, Sikes does not beat Nancy with his gun and some parts of the scene are completely omitted. When Sikes arrives home raging mad he pulls Nancy out of bed but we never actually get to see the murder. In a now famous scene, the camera concentrates on Sikes’ dog, Bull’s Eye, as he scratches frantically at the door. This method shows us how horrifying this scene is without being too graphic. On another note, Nancy’s final prayer is completely omitted. That is a shame because that is such a powerful scene in the novel.

Giedroyc’s 2007 BBC version is not overly graphic either. But, from the beginning when Sikes steps into his house we know what he is about to do to Nancy, just as in the book. Whereas Lean has the dog raging mad trying to get out, in this version the dog simply stands to the side and turns his back on this horrifying event. This is just as effective as in Lean’s version because the dog in both cases is a symbol for guilt. What this version adds to this scene is surprising. After having killed Nancy, Sikes is in denial and begs her to stand up. He does not realise that he has killed her and we see that his intent was only to rough her around a bit and not kill her which is a total contradiction to the novel. In the novel his intent is evident throughout the scene, Sikes is well aware that he is going to kill her. Where others might feel that this deviation from the novel might be a bad thing I actually find that this makes for an interesting turn of events. Having read the novel the reader is expecting this killer in Sikes but in this version we actually see him as a flawed man with anger issues and we end up feeling for him; he is a man with a conscience. Both adaptations manage to portray this murder convincingly and they show the reader that this scene does not have to be overly graphic so that the intent of horror gets through.

Rebecca Gowers novel *The Twisted Heart* is about a literature student who reveals the connection between Dickens’ Nancy and the murder of Eliza Grimwood. An article on the research carried out by Gowers reveals Gower’s findings as an important aspect of this horrifying scene of events written by Dickens:

\(^6\) 1948, directed by David Lean.
\(^7\) 2007, directed by Coky Giedroyc.
For the last 150 years most critics and scholars have dismissed the shocking Bill Sikes and Nancy murder scene in Oliver Twist as over the top, while stage and film adaptations shy away from including it in its full, unexpurgated horror. We should cut Charles Dickens some slack: the scene is based on a true murder. (Brown, 1)

Rebecca Gowers was thought to have “uncovered what no other Dickens scholar seem[ed] to have noticed” when she came across the connection with the murder Grimwood and Dickens’s murder of Nancy.

The evidence is compelling that Dickens had Grimwood in mind. Eliza, like Nancy, was half-dressed in bed, and both were forced to their knees by their killers [. . .] In both cases the killer brutalised the corpse. In both cases there is evidence to suggest the victim knew her killer. Neither screamed for help. In both cases the bloody aftermath is horrible. In Oliver Twist there is even blood on Sikes's dog, while Grimwood's squalid bedroom became a bloodbath. (Brown, 1)

Finally, Nancy dies having had done a very noble thing. She risks her own life for the safety and life of Oliver. You might say she is sort of a saint like Sydney Carton or a Rose Maylie of the underworld. Perhaps Dickens was trying to show that even though a person has been on the wrong side of the law for the greater part of their life it doesn’t mean that that person does not have a heart and is capable of doing good. The last paragraph of the horrific chapter of Nancy’s death is very powerful and portrays just how brutal and vial murder this truly was:

OF ALL BAD DEEDS that, under cover of the darkness, had been committed within wide London’s bounds since night hung over it, that was the worst. Of all the horrors that rose with an ill scent upon the morning air, that was the foulest and most cruel. (OT, 313)
3: Waiting for the end

Sydney Carton in *A Tale of Two Cities* and Fagin in *Oliver Twist* are both sentenced to death at the end of their respective novels. Sydney is beheaded while Fagin is hanged and there would seem to be little that connects them. Yet, in one sense, Fagin is as innocent as Carton. Stealing was a hanging offence in the early nineteenth century – the novel takes place in or around 1808 – but by the time it was published no one had been hanged for theft for over a decade and certainly Dickens was against capital punishment. Sydney, of course, is at peace and happy about the decision to save the love of his life but Fagin goes mad: *Oliver Twist* is not the only Dickens novel that ends with this scene and all its complex components – the dark cell, the totally alone, condemned man, the howling crowd. *A Tale of Two Cities* will later reprise it, though with a completely different, much more positive, spiritual cast. (Palmer, 121-122)

Carton makes the ultimate sacrifice in dying instead so that the love of his life, Lucy, may keep the love of hers, Darnay. Moreover, he is at peace with his decision and he knows that this is his destiny. You could say that he has nothing to live for and that this is a perfect way to leave. In addition, he is lucky seeing that his final days are not spent alone. He is touched by a young woman, an innocent seamstress that is not afraid to die but is weak and needs comfort. Thus, he spends his time with a stranger, a young girl in need of guidance and a sense of hope in these dark times:

> The forlorn smile with which she said it, so touched him, that tears started from his eyes. ‘I am not afraid to die [. . .] but I have done nothing [. . .] As the last thing on earth that his heart was to warm and soften it to, it warmed and softened to this pitiable girl. (*ATTC*, 303)

When the time has come for them to face their unfair destinies you can feel the death in the air and the lack of respect for the people that are about to die is transparent. They are simply seen as some kind of amusement and not as people. “ALONG THE PARIS STREETS, the death-carts rumble, hollow and harsh. Six tumbrils carry the day’s wine to La Guillotine” (*ATTC*, 316). The people awaiting death, their blood, is seen as wine, hence, lack of respect. Carton remains calm the whole time even though
he knows he is to be killed at any moment. He does not stare at the event of the killings and therefore does not dwell on the fact that he is about to die. He simply remains calm by talking to the young seamstress as if it is just another day:

[H]e stands at the back of the tumbril with his head bent down, to converse with a mere girl who sits on the side of the cart, and holds his hand. He has no curiosity or care for the scene about him, and always speaks to the girl. (ATTC, 317)

Carton and the young seamstress hold hands to the last second. He is a guardian angel sent to her and she, likewise, is a guardian angel that was sent to him. He as a sense of comfort, helping her acquiring courage, and she as a partner for him through a lonely and excruciating time:

He has not relinquished her patient hand in getting out, but still holds it as he promised. He gently places her with her back to the crashing engine that constantly whirs up and falls, and she looks into his face and thanks him [. . .] ‘I think you were sent to me by Heaven.’ [she says] ‘Or you to me,’ says Sydney Carton. ‘keep your eyes upon me, dear child, and mind no other object. (ATTC, 319)

Carton dies at peace with his decision with no regrets. This last act of his is his redemption, his release of sin from a life of countless mistakes and misjudgements. “They said of him, about the city that night, that it was the peacefullest man’s face ever beheld there. Many added that he looked sublime and prophetic” (ATTC, 320). He knows that he will be in Lucie’s heart forever as the man who saved her family, as the man who saved the love of her life. He knows that Lucie will never forget him and at last his life has worth. This is a sacrifice worth remembering. Moreover his sacrifice is much more effective because he never told anyone about his plans. He did not even tell Lucie. This was his own choice and he did not want anyone trying to stop him. He knew this was the right choice and the strongest, most important choice of his life; it was the right thing to do. “It is a far, far better thing that I do, than I have ever done; it is a far, far better rest that I go to than I have ever known” (ATTC, 321). These meaningful words capture Carton’s redemption in the most unique and noble way. We see that Carton, by sacrificing himself, achieved his redemption and that he died at peace with his decision.
Fagin, on the other hand, is not a man at peace and he is clearly not ready to die, thus, there lies the main difference in these two character’s final days. “The end of Fagin [. . .] is sensational in the worst sense” (*The Dickens Critics*, 269). He is sentenced to death for a crime that he did not commit, like Carton, but he implicated himself in the death of Nancy and therefore he is thought to be a murderer. When he is asked why he should not be sentenced to death his answer displays a real despair and confusion and what is more, you can see that he is not ready for death; he does not want to die this way. “[H]e only muttered that he was an old man – an old man – an old man – and so dropping into a whisper, was silent again” (*OT*, 350). The majority of his time goes into thinking how his life will end; an endless contemplation. At first he is very confused and does not really rap his head around what has just happened. But after a quick contemplation the reality of the situation sinks in. The fact is that there is no turning back; his days are almost up:

He sat down on a stone bench opposite the door [. . .] tried to collect his thoughts. After a while he began to remember a few disjointed fragments of what the judge had said, though it had seemed to him, at the time, that he could not hear a word. These gradually fell into their proper places, and by degrees suggested more; so that in a little time he had the whole almost as it was delivered. To be hanged by the neck till he was dead – that was the end – to be hanged by the neck till he was dead! (*OT*, 351)

Ultimately Fagin goes insane of all these thoughts and loses his sense of being. It is true when people say that individuals handle various situations differently and Fagin went his own way; in denial. Of course, his insanity does not go unnoticed. Two men watch as Fagin gradually goes insane from all these thoughts of death arriving so soon. “He grew so terrible, at last, in all the tortures of his evil conscience, that one man could not bear to sit there, eyeing him alone, and so the two kept watch together” (*OT*, 352). What is more, the days go by radically faster because of all his thoughts about his upcoming death. “Saturday night. He had only one night more to live. And as he thought of this, the day broke – Sunday” (*OT*, 353).

Additionally, Fagin has visitors, Oliver and Mr. Brownlow, and therefore, he does not spend his days entirely alone, but you cannot be confident that Fagin really knows that they were present. The gravity of his insanity is at a point where no one
really knows what he is thinking or if in fact he knows what is going on. Is this acting or is this real? This whole insanity part could be an act as a way for him to get through these last days. But this also can be real and all these thoughts of death have indeed made him insane. No one can really say for sure, except for Dickens himself of course. When Oliver and Mr. Brownlow leave the prison they hear Fagin’s insane cries, a sound of a desperate soul facing its worst nightmare. “He struggled with the power of desperation for an instant, and then sent up cry upon cry that penetrated even those massive walls, and rang in their ears until they reached the open yard” (OT, 356).

In the last stage, Fagin achieves a kind of redemption, when he tells Oliver where to find the hidden papers of his true identity. But even so, he is not prepared for death and therefore he does not know how to handle it. He is suffering by waiting; waiting for what seems like an eternity. He is waiting for death to arrive at last to end his misery forever. When he dies he will be free of all this despair:

When [Dickens] so vividly describes Fagin’s last hours in Oliver Twist there is, of course, no Sunday sermon (Fagin has, we are told, even refused the prayerful ministrations of ‘venerable men of his own persuasion’). What we have instead is a scene of wretched and lonely despair. It is a representation of a man barely self-aware but tormented by the prospect of death for which he has not prepared himself. (Sanders, 1)

One adaption of each film was viewed for the purpose of this particular chapter: the 1935 film adaptation of A Tale of Two cities⁸, and the 2007 BBC TV-series adaptation of Oliver Twist⁹. They of course have a significant time period in between them but I feel that that makes the contrast of these scenes in these novels more interesting.

In the 1935 adaptation of A Tale of Two Cities I think Carton’s final days were portrayed well but I missed seeing Carton and the young seamstress holding hands until the end. It was emphasized so much in the book and therefore it would have been good to see it in the adaption because this particular part in the scene is so memorable. On the other hand, the portrayal of the bond between them is very good. Another part of this adaptation that is noteworthy is that it is not overly graphic. We never see the people

⁸ 1935, directed by Jack Conway.
⁹ 2007, directed by Coky Giedroyc.
beheaded up close. We either see it from very far or we simply see the top of the machine and when the blade goes down. With technique and visual effects not quite there yet, this is understandable and I feel that this increases the suspense. In contrast, what is rather strange is the lack of resemblance of the characters that play Carton and Darnay. If this plot is supposed to work in a movie it is important that it is believable that it would actually work in reality and therefore this particular part in the scene fails to be viable enough:

In the 1935 film version [. . .] the lack of similarity is emphasized by the fact that there is absolutely no resemblance between Darnay and Carton [. . .] The fact that Carton and Darnay bear absolutely no resemblance to one another not only alters the syntagmatic face of the plot [. . .] but it drastically changes the original novel’s overarching theme of doubling [. . .] Although this swerve in the adaptation constitutes a major deviation from the original novel, the cohesiveness of the adaptation’s narrative is not affected at all. (Bialkowski 206-207)

In the 2007 BBC version of Oliver Twist Fagin’s final days are drastically changed and some scenes are completely omitted. In this adaptation Fagin is portrayed more as a kind and gentle creature, yet with flaws, and one feels for him in a sense. His final days are not really portrayed as in the novel; we do not follow him through the days as the despair and the insanity gradually overtake him. But we do see when he is taken to the gallows where his sadness and disappointment is noticeable. Moreover, I wondered why the director of this adaptation chose to add a scene where Fagin is asked to convert to Christianity. John Jordan, head of The Dickens Project at the University of California, has this to say on the matter:

Instead [. . .] of taking Fagin's Jewishness away from him, the film makes him proud to be a Jew, and [. . .] adapting a scene from The Merchant of Venice in which Shylock is forced to recant his religion, has Fagin refuse to abandon his faith. No such scene exists in the book, and it was almost certainly introduced to make Fagin's religion appear in a more positive light [. . .] He is, after all, a criminal. The Fagin of the film is, like the Fagin of the book, a complex character with both positive and negative qualities. (Getler, 1)
Furthermore, we see a glimpse of the insanity in his eyes when he talks to The Artful Dodger and, as a result, this adaptation manages to portray Fagin well enough, although, admittedly as a reader, I would have wanted to see every part of his final days.

Overall, these two powerful scenes both portray two men heading towards death in a believable manner. This shows two versions of the same event, one man going at peace with himself following his will, and, one gradually becoming insane due to the fear of dying. They both are innocent men in a sense and they both have some things they regret. Carton got the chance to do what he felt was the right thing to do to release himself from his regrets, whereas, Fagin, on the other hand, did not. His life was taken from him without him being able to acquire peace like Carton. Moreover, by getting the chance to see these scenes on screen makes this more effective. The viewers never forget the peaceful serenity that Carton felt and they will never forget the despair in Fagin’s eyes.
Conclusion

“To write of death is for the novelist to speak of something that cannot talk back, that must be worded from without, from this side of its arrival” (Stewart, 55). Death is a sensitive subject in literature as in life. It comes in many forms, sometimes peacefully, sometimes unexpectedly. Some literary deaths are fascinating; others are not. Dickens’ novels have many different kinds of death scenes, but as one critic has put it, “he typically used death scenes as representations of the final moral worth of the dying” (Evans & Marowski, 1).

Jenny’s baby son and little Paul Dombey die peacefully and we feel sadness, but we also feel a relief because we know that they are finally free. After reading about their final moments you have this moment of realization of how much better they will have it from now on, wherever they will end up going. “In general, children in nineteenth century novels represent innocence, and when they die, they are freed from living a hard life of toil and can be expected to go to a better world” (Evans & Marowski, 1). Similar to little Paul’s passing, Nell’s death is described as something beautiful and furthermore, you never forget the bond between her and her grandfather:

In contrast, Little Nell Trent [. . .] dies without a complaint, and her passing away is compared to a sunset. The death of Little Nell’s grandfather from a broken heart just days after the death of Little Nell shows not only the character of the grandfather but also the worth of Little Nell. (Evans & Marowski, 1)

On another note, although having suffered a horrifying death, Nancy is ultimately redeemed by praying to the Heavens before her final breath. But Sikes, on the other hand, after having murdered Nancy, falls off a roof and is hanged by accident, ultimately paying for his sins. Fagin suffers and does not find any peace in the end and, like Sikes, he ultimately pays the heavy price of death for all his misdeeds in life. Carton, on the other hand, achieves his redemption and goes with peace in his heart.

“Dickens, in the person of Sydney Carton in A Tale of Two Cities, also showed how a person can find solace even while laying down his life” (Evans & Marowski, 1).

Overall, Dickens manages to portray these death scenes in a believable manner and he taps into the audience emotions. You cannot read these scenes without feeling
some kind of emotion; whether it is sadness or anger, or something different all together. Additionally, by having the chance to see these moments on screen you acquire even more chance of diving into these same moments and be a part of a great moment in literature. You will never forget the grief and utter loss when Jenny’s baby, little Paul Dombey and little Nell Trent pass on; you will never forget Nancy’s tragic ending; you will never forget the madness in Fagin’s eyes; you will never forget the bravery of Sydney Carton. These moments stay with you and perhaps force you to take a look at your own life and how you have chosen to live it.
Little Nell „at rest“ (527)
*The Old Curiosity Shop*

„The visit at the Brickmaker’s“ (119)
*Bleak House*

Paul and Florence Dombey
*Dombey and Son*

Bill Sikes
*Oliver Twist*

„Fagin in the condemned cell” (355)
*Oliver Twist*

Sydney Carton and the seamstress
*A Tale of Two Cities*
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