

# The Old Curiosity Shop

Published as a serial from 1840–41 during the height of Dickens' popularity with the general public, *The Old Curiosity Shop* tells the story of Little Nell, an innocent, 13-year-old girl who takes care of her grandfather and his curiosity shop (a kind of antique or secondhand store). When the grandfather, a gambler, is forced to borrow money from the evil Daniel Quilp, they lose the shop. Little Nell and her grandfather flee to the countryside where Quilp pursues them. In the next-to-last installment of the novel, Little Nell, reduced to begging, becomes dangerously ill. So worried were Dickens' readers about what would happen next that they wrote to him by the thousands begging him not to let Nell die. According to the Victorian Web site at [victorianweb.org/authors/dickens/index.html](http://victorianweb.org/authors/dickens/index.html), "Daniel O'Connell, the great Irish member of Parliament, read the account of Nell's death while he was riding on a train, burst into tears, cried 'He should not have killed her,' and threw the novel out of the window in despair...Crowds in New York awaited a vessel newly arriving from England with shouts of 'Is Little Nell dead?'" Though few modern readers may be moved to the same extent by Little Nell, this story of a vulnerable and innocent girl threatened by evil is timeless.

## Discussion Questions

1. **NOVEL TO FILM:** Although the death of Little Nell was devastating to the book's Victorian audience, modern readers have generally found it mawkish and sentimental. (Oscar Wilde said about it, "One would have to have a heart of stone to read the death of Little Nell without dissolving into tears...of laughter.")\* Compare the film version, in which the death is shown on screen, to the novel's version, in which it happens offstage (Read Chapter 71, also available at [19thnovels.com/theoldcuriosityshop.php?c=71](http://19thnovels.com/theoldcuriosityshop.php?c=71).) Why do you think Dickens chose to write it the way he did? What death scenes from film or literature are the most memorable for you? Why?

\*Quoted in *Oscar Wilde* by Richard Ellmann (Knopf, 1988)

2. Has any book, film, television show, or other work of fiction had a similar appeal to the public imagination in our time as the story of Little Nell had during Dickens' time? If so, why do you think it was so popular? Who was its primary audience? How can you explain the public's investment in the plight of the hero or heroine?
3. *The Old Curiosity Shop* is a kind of fairy tale made vivid by dramatic contrasts, especially between innocent youth and corrupted age. Dickens said about writing

the book, “I had it always in my fancy to surround the lonely figure of a child with grotesque and wild, but not impossible, companions and to gather about her innocent face and pure intentions, associates as strange and uncongenial as the grim objects that are about her bed when her history is first foreshadowed.” How does the film contrast the “innocent face and pure intentions” of Little Nell with the “strange,” “uncongenial,” or “grim”? Which side do you think triumphs in the end? Why?

4. How is Little Nell more a perfect idealization of innocent girlhood than a full-rounded character? How is she a mirror for the other characters’ needs and desires? Of what other child heroes and heroines in Dickens’ works—or in contemporary works—does she remind you?
5. In a typical Dickens novel, darkness and pathos are relieved by flashes of the comic and absurd. How, for instance, does the scene in which Mrs. Quilp, Sampson Brass, and others discuss Mr. Quilp’s possible death work to relieve the tension of the previous scenes? What other scenes use this technique?

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