Death and the Primacy of Love in Works
of Dickens, Hugo, and Wilder

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ABSTRACT

Major works of three noted authors, Charles Dickens, Thornton Wilder, and Victor Hugo, contain fictional accounts of death and other passages with elements of near-death experiences (NDEs). These NDE-like accounts are examined in relation to the themes of these authors' works and relevant biographical patterns. Each author emphasizes the transformation of characters into more loving, compassionate people who are more appreciative of life. These transformative patterns are similar in a general way to the kinds of value transformations reported by NDErs and are discussed in that light.

INTRODUCTION

Since coming to substantial public attention in 1975 with the publication of Raymond Moody's *Life After Life*, the near-death experience (NDE) has been regarded primarily as an anomalous phenomenon in a materialistic culture. Much effort has been directed at investigating the NDE in terms of its basic patterns and dimensions, the kinds of transformations experiencers undergo, possible physiological and psychological explanations, and the like.

The existence in literature of NDE-like phenomena has as yet received relatively little attention. This paper is an effort to initiate such inquiry by examining NDE-like elements in some of the major works of three very well-known authors: Charles Dickens, Victor Hugo, and Thornton Wilder. Focusing mainly but not exclusively on the best known works of these authors, I will examine how NDE-like phenomena are related not only to significant events in the authors' lives, but also how the literary depictions of NDE-like events, while seldom directly parallel to actual NDEs, nonetheless are directly connected to major themes of the primacy of love, compassion, transformation, and forgiveness.
There are a number of works of literature and drama that are central to our shared cultural consciousness, so familiar to so many and read and performed so often that they have become popular classics. Three such works are Charles Dickens’s *A Christmas Carol*, Victor Hugo’s *Les Miserables*, and, more recently, Thornton Wilder’s play *Our Town*.

While popularity is often no measure of worth, the enduring nature of these works is strong testimony that they provide insight into the human condition. Dickens’s *A Christmas Carol* was enthusiastically received when it was first published in 1843 and has done much to establish and maintain the spirit of Christmas. *Les Miserables* has been widely read since its publication in 1862 and has been made into film versions in France, the U. S., and elsewhere. Since it first appeared in 1938, *Our Town* has been performed thousands of times and continues to be one of the most popular dramas of all time.

Though none describes a full NDE as such, each of these three works (in addition to other works of Dickens, Wilder, and Hugo) contains references to and descriptions of experiences similar to NDEs. In a previous article, I discussed how Dante’s *Divine Comedy* is an instance of a literary classic with NDE-like elements (Flynn, 1982). In the present article, I will examine how the three works cited above not only incorporate NDE-like events in varying ways but also contain central thematic elements quite similar to the moral, ethical, and related “lessons” that NDE researchers have found most frequently mentioned by NDErs. These include an often newly positive attitude toward and appreciation of life, and the importance of loving and caring for others and not being judgmental toward them.

Each of the three works and others by the three authors I will discuss here focuses on individuals’ transformations. *A Christmas Carol* concerns the transformation of a greedy, selfish, and unfeeling person into a generous, loving, kindly soul. *Our Town* attempts to transform our perception of life through its depiction, in its final scenes, of a deceased young woman’s transformed appreciations of the richness and grandeur of everyday human existence. *Les Miserables*, likewise, portrays the transformation, through an act of exceptional compassion, of an embittered convict into a kind, generous, effective individual who maintains these qualities despite extraordinary circumstances and pressures.

The transformations depicted in these works are similar in direction and content (though perhaps more dramatic) to the kinds of trans-
formations reported by NDErs. The substantial majority of NDErs interviewed by me and other researchers spoke of becoming more loving, more caring, more compassionate, and more appreciative of life (Moody 1975, 1977; Ring, 1980, 1984; Sabom, 1982; Gallup, 1982).

**DICKENS'S *A CHRISTMAS CAROL***

The story of *A Christmas Carol* is, of course, the transformation of Ebenezer Scrooge from a very negative-minded, cynical, insensitive, selfish, and lonely individual into a loving, kind, generous soul who “became as good a friend, as good a master, and as good a man, as the good old city knew, or any other good old city, town, or borough, in the good old world.” This remarkable transformation is accomplished through a process that, while lacking many of the elements of an NDE as current research has studied the phenomenon, nonetheless exhibits many NDE-like qualities.

The process by which Scrooge is transformed involves being confronted with three Spirits—those of Christmas Past, Christmas Present, and Christmas Future—and witnessing the consequences of his mean-spiritedness in the lives of others. While not identical to NDEs, Scrooge's confrontations have much in common with the life review reported by many NDErs. In particular, NDErs undergoing a life review observe and experience the consequences of their actions for others and come to realize and deeply regret not having shown love to others.

In terms of the weighted core experience index (WCEI) developed by Ring (1980), *A Christmas Carol* exhibits the elements of encountering visible “spirits” and taking stock of one's life, each of which constitutes a score of three on Ring's index of 29 possible points.

In addition, Scrooge's encounters with the three ghosts also include some aspects of seeing light (2 points) and seeing beautiful colors (1 point). For example, as Scrooge encounters the first ghost,

*Light flashed up in the room upon the instant, and the curtains of his bed were drawn... But the strangest thing about it was, that from the crown of its head there sprung a bright clear jet of light by which all this was visible... (pp. 23-24)*

As the second ghost arrives, Scrooge sees a source of light that appears to be in the room adjoining his bedroom but soon enters
the bedroom, which

. . . had undergone a surprising transformation. The walls and ceiling were so hung with living green, that it looked a perfect grove . . . (pp. 38-39)

Thus, depending on how one interprets the events in Scrooge's encounters with the three Spirits, Ring's index would score his experiences from six to twelve on the scale. Ring's criteria judge any scale score less than 6 as failing to constitute a core experience, with scores from 6 to 9 constituting a moderate experience and scores more than 10 deep experiences (Ring, 1980). Thus, in Ring's terms, Scrooge's encounters can be regarded as the equivalents of moderate core experiences, as reported by 22% to 26%, respectively, of the NDErs he interviewed.

It is important, however, to emphasize that Ring and other researchers began with reported NDEs and used the WCEI to place such experiences in the context of others. I believe the WCEI is also a useful instrument for exploring the extent to which passages in literature are like NDE accounts.

But perhaps more significant than such general similarities between Scrooge's experiences and NDEs are the parallels between the transformative capacities of Scrooge's experiences, which are similar to NDEs, and the virtually identical moral and ethical views he and NDErs "come back" with. Like George Ritchie, a noted NDEr whose account of his experience as a soldier suffering from pneumonia in 1943 originally inspired Moody to conduct his studies, Scrooge is taken on a tour by a spirit (in Ritchie's case, identified as Christ) and, invisible, is allowed to witness the consequences of his actions on others (Ritchie and Sherrill, 1978). While Ritchie's experience was more generalized in the sense that he saw how deceased souls tried to "break through" to the material realm and were in essence "punished" by the impossibility of doing so or the futility of trying to attain sensual satisfactions when they no longer had bodies, Scrooge, in a manner similar to many NDErs' life reviews, is able to witness the consequences of his callousness toward others in their disdain for him and their indifference at his death.

Most significant is the transformational similarity, both in attitude and behavior. Like Scrooge, many NDErs report a substantial increase in helping others. As one NDEr, a man in his thirties, told me,
that knows the story, knows the whole ball of wax—that helping people is what we should do. It's beautiful to help people. That's the whole point. To observe the results—the beauty, the love.

Another person, an older lady, summarized the essence of what she had learned from her NDE in a way that Scrooge might well have echoed:

The NDE answered all my value questions completely. It summarized for me what is important in life. Giving of love is sufficiently important. A lot of things people think are important aren't. Basically, the human heart is what it's all about and the rest isn't very important. The NDE confirmed this for me.

LOVE AND IMMORTALITY IN DICKENS

In addition to *A Christmas Carol*, a number of other works of Dickens contain deathbed scenes with elements similar to those reported by NDErs. In *Nicholas Nickelby*, for example, Smike, a poor boy victimized by the ruthlessness of an acquisitive society, speaks while he is dying of "beautiful gardens, which he said stretched out before him, and were filled with figures of men, women, and many children, all with light upon their faces; then, whispered that it was Eden—and so died" (1839, p. 239).

Likewise, the death of Little Nell in *The Old Curiosity Shop* includes elements reminiscent of NDEs:

“Oh! The glory of the sudden burst of light...—all, everything, so beautiful and happy! It was like passing from death to life; it was drawing nearer Heaven” (1840, p. 398).

Though there are no specific references to a tunnel or other NDE-like phenomena other than the light, that passage is, according to critic Dennis Walder, “a representation of the belief that after death there is a resurrection, when man will come face to face with God, the source of all light. Nell’s final ‘assumption’ is prefigured by that burst of light—an image reinforced by recurrent references to light...in the novel” (1981, p. 78).

These and similar references to NDE-like phenomena in Dickens, while not as clearly similar to Ring- and Moody-type patterns of NDEs, reflect a set of thematic concerns apparent throughout Dickens's work that are similar to the kinds of moral and ethical emphases stressed by NDErs as central to the “lessons” their experi-
ences gave them. Specifically, Dickens was strongly concerned with the injustices and inequities of his society and strove in his writings to make people aware of the sufferings of the poor. *Oliver Twist* (1837-1838) as well as other works such as *Bleak House* (1853) and *Dombey and Son* (1848), sought to show how selfishness as well as dogmatic, uncompassionate forms of Christianity could and did lead to misery for the dispossessed.

Coupled with this strong social concern was a view that society could be transformed through the moral actions and example of individuals such as Little Nell, Florence Dombey, and Amy Dorrit. In *Dombey and Son*, for example, the Scrooge-like Mr. Dombey is saved by the infinitely forgiving love of his daughter Florence, who comes to him after his passion for financial gain has been broken by economic and moral ruin.

Dickens strongly favored those kinds of Christianity involving direct compassionate efforts for the poor and unfortunate, as opposed to what he regarded as the hypocrisy and puritanicalness that often condemned and neglected victims of society. He also had a tendency to portray and symbolize love in the form of young, saintly women who die and attain not only a kind of immortality, but affirm the love and compassion they personify. This idealization had its root in a relationship and event that had a central impact on Dickens: his platonic love and veneration for his sister-in-law, Mary Hogarth, who died suddenly and unexpectedly at the age of seventeen in Dickens's arms in May, 1837.

Dickens's biographers agree that Mary Hogarth's death and his subsequent emotional obsession with her idealized memory had a profound, lasting impact on him and affected his work substantially, both in terms of the thematic emphases of his works and with regard to the many young women like Mary who are major figures in his works. Dickens dreamed of Mary nightly for months after her death and regarded her as the epitome of virtue and compassion. Moreover, his deep devotion to her memory caused him to believe in a hereafter. According to Dickens's major modern biographer, Edgar Johnson,

It is impossible to exaggerate the significance of this early love and early sorrow for Dickens. His devotion to Mary was an emotion unique in his entire life, not only more enduring and unchanging than any other, but one that touched his being in a way no other did. (1952, p. 203)

The extent to which Dickens's concern with the afterlife was con-
ditioned by his grief for Mary is apparent in a letter he wrote to a friend who was bereaved at the loss of a daughter:

I lost in one short night a young and lovely creature whom— I can say even to you now— I loved with the warmest affection that our nature is capable of. The first burst of anguish over, I have never thought of her with pain—never. I have never connected her idea with the grave in which she lies . . . . I have long since learnt to separate her from all this litter of dust and ashes and to picture her to myself with every well-remembered grace and beauty heightened by the light of Heaven . . . . (Johnson, 1952, p. 201)

Thus, the death of Mary and its continued impact on Dickens’s life meant that “the idea of blissful reunification after death took a powerful hold upon his mind” (Walder, 1981, p. 28). However, it would be wrong to assume that this was in isolation from Dickens’s social concerns. Throughout his life, Dickens sought through his literature to bring about a “change of heart” in his readers and in society in general. He upheld love of neighbor and charity as the epitome of virtues. Though he was very much aware how unjust social institutions and values prevent the actualization of such love, he saw a transcendental realm as the source of the love that performed saving acts in the lives of the unfortunates he portrayed.

Perhaps nowhere is this link between earthly benevolence and the light of love emphasized by NDErs so apparent as in this passage regarding the death of Little Nell in *The Old Curiosity Shop*:

There is nothing, no, nothing innocent and good, that dies and is forgotten. Let us hold to that faith, or none. There is not an angel added to the Host of Heaven but does its blessed work in those that loved it here. Forgotten! oh, if the good deeds of human creatures could be traced to their source, how beautiful would even death appear; for how much charity, mercy, and purified affection, would be seen to have their growth in dusty graves! (1840, p. 406)

**HUGO’S MYSTIC VISIONS AND THE COMPASSIONATE IMPERATIVE**

The same theme of social injustice and misery alleviated by the saving power of a transcendently based love found in Dickens is also central to the theme of Victor Hugo’s masterpiece, *Les Miserables*. Neither Victor Hugo’s classic nor his other works I will discuss briefly here contain detailed accounts of NDE-like experiences. However, they do contain intriguing references to NDE-like
phenomena and thematic elements parallel to the major moral lessons of love and compassion reported by NDErs.

Les Misérables, perhaps Hugo’s best known and most widely read work, focuses on a dramatic transformation caused by an exceptional act of love and forgiveness. Jean Valjean, the hero of the novel, is a poor workman who is sent to the galleys in early nineteenth-century France for stealing a loaf of bread to feed his starving sister and her family. He makes repeated efforts to escape, which add to his sentence, but after nineteen years is released. He wanders the countryside and is repeatedly rebuffed by innkeepers and others when he asks for a night’s food and lodging. Finally, a kindly bishop welcomes him, feeds him, and gives him a place to sleep.

Bitter and disillusioned because of his painful life, Valjean awakes in the middle of the night, takes the bishop’s silver plates, and steals away from the rectory. Picked up by the gendarme, Valjean is brought back to the bishop. Expecting to be angrily accused, and then re-imprisoned and sent back to the galleys, Valjean instead is astounded to find the bishop asserting to the police that the silver plates had been given to the ex-convict. In an extraordinarily moving scene, the bishop tells Valjean to take two silver candlesticks as well, and tells the wretched man that his soul has been redeemed through forgiveness.

Soon thereafter, Valjean leaves and establishes himself in another town as a highly successful, extremely benevolent factory owner who engages in a great deal of service to the townspeople. A police commissioner who had known him in the galleys, however, discovers Valjean, and the transformed man is returned, only to escape again.

Finally, after many other events, Valjean is placed in a situation where he could take his tormenter’s life, but he forgives him instead. Overcome, Javert, the convict’s pursuer, commits suicide after himself letting Valjean go.

While Les Misérables is a very complex novel full of characters and happenings not dealt with in the brief summary above, its major theme is the transformative power of love, particularly love in the form of forgiveness. Moreover, in the figures of the bishop and Valjean, on the one hand, and Javert on the other, we have characters who symbolize what might be termed, respectively, the morality of love and forgiveness on the one hand, and the morality of guilt, law, and punishment on the other, and the ultimate triumph of the former over the latter. This same theme, interestingly enough, was also central to most of Dickens’s works, in which Old Testament
harshness, which is seen as the source of misery and pain, is con-
trasted with New Testament compassion, which heals and trans-
forms such Dickens characters as Oliver Twist and David Copper-
field, among others.

One of the major lessons of the NDE that many experiencers
report is that they become much less judgmental as a consequence
of what they have learned. The overwhelming love they encounter
in the Light is similar in many respects to the striking love the bishop
shows to Valjean. And, like so many NDErs who have been
judgmental and even, in some cases, bitter before their experience,
Valjean becomes transformed in such a way that he is able to extend
the love he has been shown to others.

One NDEr I interviewed, for example, reported that he was very
judgmental before his experience, even, in many instances, acting as
the equivalent of a policeman toward those whom he believed were
guilty of such things as traffic offenses. His experience, like that of
many other NDErs, changed this dramatically.

I was much less judgmental after the NDE. Before I was so righteous,
so judgmental. “Justice” was so important that I would be doing the
policeman’s work to see that justice was done. I mean, I would chase
people, like a cop does, people who had cut me off in traffic or something
like that. A minimum requirement for another person related to incidents
like this would be a realization on their part that they had done wrong,
and that I was right. But that would never happen now. Now, nobody can
offend me. I have to smile because I realized how much I’ve changed since
the experience.

Another NDEr described his changed outlook the following way:

I just can’t condemn people anymore, even if they’re “bad” people according
to society. You can accept any kind of person for him or herself, no
categories.

In addition to these transformational similarities, Les Miserables
also contains brief but very intriguing references to NDE-like
phenomena. One of the major acts of kindness Valjean engages in
after his transformation is taking in and caring for a starving pregnant
woman named Fantine. Despite his best efforts, the woman dies. Hugo describes the scene as follows:

Jean Valjean took Fantine’s head in his hands and arranged it on the
pillow, as mother would have done for her child . . . This done, he closed
her eyes.
Unfortunately, Hugo doesn’t elaborate on the last statement. At the very end of the book, however, he again makes reference to NDE-like phenomena, particularly the Light, in his description of Valjean’s death:

From moment to moment, Jean Valjean grew weaker . . . . The light of the unknown world was already visible in his eye.

And Valjean’s last words are,

Love each other dearly always. There is scarcely anything else in the world but that; to love one another . . . . I see a light . . . . I die happy . . . . (1963, pp. 331-333)

How can such references, also apparent in some of Hugo’s other works, be accounted for?

First, there are interesting parallels between Dickens and Hugo. Both were strongly influenced by the deaths of young women they knew well. While Dickens, as we have seen, was motivated to understand immortality by the sudden death of his sister-in-law, the 1843 death of Hugo’s eighteen-year-old daughter Leopoldine in a boating accident had a profound impact on his life and prompted his curiosity concerning the afterlife.

As Mary Hogarth was to Dickens, Leopoldine Hugo was very close to her father, a kind of alter ego for him. His eldest child, she “showed spirit and good sense, and seemed to understand her father very well. In appearance she resembled him quite strongly . . . . and was not only quite beautiful, but had eyes shining with the joy of life. As a grown girl she would read to him when his eyes gave him trouble; she would answer letters for him when he was overwhelmed by correspondence. Almost hungrily he loved her” (Josephson, 1942, p. 253).

As Dickens was crushed by Mary’s death, the impact on Hugo was equally as strong, and led to similar kinds of idealization, as well as ruminations about the possibility of her continued spiritual existence:

“She was too happy, she had everything, beauty, mind, youth, love. Her complete happiness made me tremble for her a little. God did not desire a paradise on earth.” Thus he babbled out his despair to the friends who called or wrote him. No loss, one feels, had struck him so hard, and none
would ever wound him so sorely again. . . . Stricken, he . . . sits writing verses to Leopoldine that call back her soul. (Josephson, 1942, p. 255)

In the words of another biographer, Henri Peyre,

The honors he received in the political activities he was involved in did very little to brighten the gloom that Hugo felt developing within him. He had become a poet of darkness and was obsessed with death and what might be beyond it. . . . For about ten years after the death of his daughter, the grieving father reflected slowly but surely on life after death and communication with the dead. (1981, pp. 5-7)

This, in conjunction with other life experiences, particularly his tumultuous political life, which led to his exile in the 1850s, eventually culminated in Hugo’s strong interest and involvement in spiritualistic practices under the direction of a well-known medium of the time. His contacts with the spirit realm were published after his death. They began with his communicating with Leopoldine and later involved contacting and receiving messages from “a whole series of great men, including Shakespeare. In all good faith, Hugo inspired their responses and heard them confirming his philosophical and sometimes literary and political views” (Peyre, 1981, p.8).

Hugo’s mysticism had a profound impact on his life. His concerns with the afterlife led to a great deal of mystical poetry in which he attempted to set forth his view of God as love:

He feverishly composed philosophical meditations, apocalyptic prophesies, and esoteric epics presenting the transmigration of souls and the purification of the wicked by charitable forgiveness, and he attributed long passages in his works to God, Christ, and the Devil. Thus he replaced what he considered implacable and narrow-minded in Christianity by a religion that, while retaining Christianity’s best aspects, would go beyond it . . . .

His ideas were very much his own, and they were the result of his anguish, of his desperate need to believe in something, and of his conviction that morals, history, and politics all had to have a meaning that lay beyond the confines of human life. (Peyre, 1981, pp. 9-10)

In his poetry, Hugo continually affirmed his belief that the essence of God is love. This was often coupled with an identification of God with light and knowledge (similar to many NDE accounts), as in his poem “God”:

Knowledge is life; and life is law. Adoration
Is knowledge; and the celestial gates welcome those who wish to enter.
Whatever man's struggles and troubles and trials,
Each time that he, humble and overwhelmed by doubt,
Grasps a new fact in the darkness, he has had a taste
Of God, of light and of eternity.
And so it should be. It is one step closer to the light.
(Peyre, 1981, p. 80)

In another poem, The End of Satan, hailed as a masterpiece of philosophical insight and profundity, Hugo views Satan as desiring God's love and history ending with God's forgiveness of him. But even more striking is Hugo's depiction of human history and progress as an NDE-like experience. In a speech given in Brussels at a gathering of distinguished individuals in honor of the success of Les Miserables, he described history as what might be regarded as a kind of macro-cosmic NDE:

The tunnel is long, obscure, and terrible . . . But in the nineteenth century, since the French Revolution, there has been hope and certainty. Before us, a point of light appears. It grows, it grows from moment to moment, the future, fulfillment, the end of our miseries, the dawn of joy! The hour approaches when humanity, delivered from the dark tunnel, suddenly brought face-to-face with the sunlight of the ideal, will make its sublime escape into the dazzling sunlight! (Josephson, 1942, p. 448)

Like Dickens, Hugo was strongly concerned with the plight of the poor. As a leading political figure, he supported efforts to ameliorate their condition. Moreover, also like Dickens, Hugo had no use for, and was often actively hostile to, those forms of organized Christianity that failed to concentrate on, or even undermined, charitableness and compassion.

Thus, both Dickens and Hugo shared tragic losses that formed the basis of their belief in the afterlife. But rather than using such mystical visions as an escape or retreat from life, they saw the misery and degradation of their societies as transcendable through compassion, a profound love and concern rooted in the supernatural. Perhaps nowhere is this better expressed than in Dickens's elegy on the death of Little Nell in The Old Curiosity Shop:

When Death strikes down the innocent and young, for every fragile form from which he lets the panting spirit free, a hundred virtues rise, in the shapes of mercy, charity, and love, to walk the earth and bless it. Of every tear that sorrowing mortals shed on such green graves, some good is born, some gentler nature comes. In the Destroyer’s steps there spring up
bright creations that defy his power, and his dark path becomes a way of light to Heaven. (1840, p. 544)

WILDER’S OUR TOWN AND A TRANSFORMING LIFE REVIEW

The same interconnectedness of love, compassion, and the afterlife, symbolized in the death and NDE-like experiences of a young woman who comes to affirm life fully only after death, is also a central theme of Thornton Wilder’s play Our Town. In the words of critic Brooks Atkinson, the play “transmutes the simple events of human life into universal reverie . . . . By stripping the play of everything that is not essential, Mr. Wilder has given it a profound, strange, unworldly significance. In contrast to the universe that is swimming around it, it is brimming over with compassion” (1938, p. 18).

The play begins with what appears at first to be a depiction of the normal events in a rather typical small American town around the turn of the century. Wilder deliberately emphasizes what are considered to be the small, inconsequential happenings of life—people saying hello to those they encounter on a daily basis, boys playing baseball, etc. But as we get more into the play, Wilder’s purpose is much more meaningful than we have been led to believe. In particular, he shows that the mundane lives of his characters have universal significance. In one early scene between a brother and sister, he makes this explicit by her reference to a letter she had received addressed not only to her at Grover’s Corners, New Hampshire, but the United States, the Western Hemisphere, the Earth, the Solar System, the Milky Way, the Universe, the Mind of God. “What do you know!” exclaims her brother.

This raising of the mundane to universal, and ultimately divine, significance is a major theme that appears in the replies of NDErs when asked about the meaning and lessons of their experiences. Particularly, though not exclusively, among those who report life reviews, NDErs state that what had seemed to be the least important happenings in their lives—everyday occurrences they had largely forgotten about—were raised to substantial significance, whereas the “important” happenings were relegated to lesser, even minor, importance.

The final act of the play takes place in a cemetery, several years after the previous act. Young Emily Webb has died in childbirth, and after her funeral enters the realm of the afterlife with other deceased members of the community.
Though there are none of the characteristic NDE patterns of being out of body, going through a tunnel, encountering the Light, etc. (Emily merely walks out from the midst of the mourners into the group of the deceased, who sit quietly), her reception by those who went in death before her is reminiscent of many NDErs' accounts of encountering deceased relatives and friends who serve as "guides" to the afterlife. In particular, Emily's mother-in-law helps and counsels her, as do others she has known in life.

At first, Emily is still concerned with matters pertaining to her "worldly" existence. She thanks her mother-in-law for providing, through a legacy of several hundred dollars, the means for improving her and George's farm. Soon, however, Emily begins to realize that, as she puts it, "Live people don't understand, do they? . . . They're sort of shut up in little boxes, aren't they?"

Despite this, Emily decides she wants to relive and witness a day in her life—her twelfth birthday. Though her fellow-deceased try to dissuade her, Emily insists on what might be termed a "mini-life review." Though at first delighted, she soon becomes distraught at the way in which she and her family failed to fully live and to appreciate the richness and beauty of their apparently mundane lives. Upon returning to her eternal abode, she cries out, "Oh, earth, you're too wonderful for anybody to realize you. Do any human beings ever realize life while they live it—every, every minute?"

In general the attitude toward life that Wilder portrays in Our Town is not only similar, but virtually identical to what NDErs proclaim as the basic "lesson" of their experience. Both Act III in Our Town and NDEs are, at least on the surface, "about" death. But even more, they are about life. As one NDEr told me,

The near-death experience is not really about death, but about life. The new joy of living, for others as well as themselves, that NDErs exhibit is a beacon that can reaffirm what is truly important in human existence, and can serve to inspire others.

These views are apparent throughout the works of Dickens, Hugo, and Wilder in the ways each shows how the tragic, untimely deaths of young women who symbolize love and compassion paradoxically confirm and strengthen these virtues rather than undermine them. It is especially apparent in Our Town, where Wilder's use of Emily Webb's review of her life deepens her appreciation of it. As biographer Rex Burbank observed:
Emily can appreciate the value of life because she has lost it. From the vantage point of eternity she sees that it is largely wasted and that its tragedy lies in the failure of human beings to feel—as she does as she observes the scene of her twelfth birthday—the full intensity of each moment, good or bad, through the agency of consciousness—love. The moral order of which [the characters in Our Town] are a part and of which they fall short is one in which love is the highest law. (1978, pp. 81-82)

In a preface to an edition of his early dramatic works, Wilder stated that in his works he desired to state religious, specifically Christian, themes in a new, fresh manner free of the dogmatism and narrowness of the ways they had been expressed by much of organized religion. In this sense, as in others, Wilder's overall purposes are similar to those of Dickens:

I hope . . . to discover the spirit that is not unequal to the elevation of the great religious themes, yet which does not fall into repellent didacticism . . . . The intermittent sincerity of generations of clergymen and teachers has rendered embarrassing and even ridiculous all the terms of the spiritual life. (Wilder, 1928, p. 3)

Like Dickens, Wilder used a young woman of high ideals to convey his message of the primacy of love. And Wilder’s Emily, like the young women in Dickens’s works, conveys love’s centrality after a transformation brought about by death. Thus, for Dickens, Wilder, and NDErs alike, death, rather than being ultimately tragic, can be an opportunity to unveil and affirm love as the ultimate value.

Many NDErs maintain that it is not the experience itself that is the real “point” of the phenomenon, but the Love of the Light they feel and try to “bring back” with them and put into practice. Likewise, for both Dickens and Wilder, immortality is not an end in itself, but rather an important element of their work that conveys the ultimate message that “lack of sensitivity to other human beings—particularly the failure to respond to life with love—is the greatest cause of suffering and, therefore, the greatest cause of tragedy . . . “(Burbank, 1978, p. 130).

Conversely, both Dickens and Wilder affirmed that love is the essence of existence, an essence that is not fully apparent without an eternal perspective. In two passages from Wilder’s works he clearly shows the bond between immortality and love, a bond many NDErs have said they felt deeply in their experiences. The first passage is a statement by Wilder’s alter ego, the Stage Manager of Our Town, a part Wilder himself often played:
Now I'm going to tell you some things you know already. You know 'em as well as I do, but you don't take 'em out and look at 'em very often. I don't care what they say with their mouths—everybody knows that something is eternal. And it ain't houses, and it ain't names, and it ain't earth, and it ain't even the stars . . . everybody knows in their bones that something is eternal, and that something has to do with human beings. All the greatest people ever lived have been telling us that for five thousand years, and yet you'd be surprised how people are always losing hold of it. There's something deep down that's eternal about every human being. (Pause) You know as well as I do that the dead don't stay interested in us living people very long. Gradually, gradually, they let hold of the earth . . . and the ambitions they had . . . and the things they suffered . . . and the people they loved. They get weaned away from earth . . . They're waitin'. They're waitin' for something that they feel is comin'. Something important and great. Aren't they waitin' for the eternal part of them to come out clear?

That "eternal part of human beings," for Dickens and Hugo as well as Wilder, is, of course, love. In a work that established his reputation, Wilder examined the lives of three individuals who had died suddenly in the collapse of a bridge in Peru and found that each had, in different ways, learned that love for others is the most important value in life. *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* ends with Wilder's message, which, like that of *Our Town*, is in all essentials the same as what Dickens and Hugo as well as NDErs proclaim as the deepest lessons of their experiences:

The love will have been enough; all those impulses of love return to the love that made them. Even memory is not necessary for love. There is a land of the living and a land of the dead and the bridge is love, the only survival, the only meaning. (1928, p. 132)

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