

A Dark Night's Work

In 1862 Dickens wrote to his editor Henry Wills, "I see that Mrs. Gaskell has put a name to her story—at the end, instead of the beginning—which is characteristic. The addition of one word will make it a striking name. Call the story 'A Dark Night's Work'" (164). ECG's original title was 'A Nights Work'

- 1 From the title of this novella, what are our expectations as readers and how would they have been different had Dickens kept ECG's original title-A Nights Work?

2 Does the work actually live up to these expectations? How dark is 'A Dark Night's Work'? **3 Which title do you prefer, Gaskell's or Dickens' and why?**

What is Gaskell trying to achieve in Chapter 1?

1. How does Gaskell present Edward Wilkins and how is his portrayal significant to the events of the narrative?
2. What are your views of Dunster? What is his role?

What devices does ECG use to create tension in ADNW looking specifically at the murder extract copied below?

3. How successful an exercise is this?
4. Why does ECG make the actual events of that dark night so 'insignificant'?

Gaskell uses a strange and powerful vocabulary here. Why might she talk of an 'incubus' and 'an unhaunted dwelling'? What is the spectre here? How does this extract make the link between Gaskell's title and Dickens'?

7 None knew how strong was the instinct of self-preservation, it may almost be called, which impelled Ellinor to shake off, at any cost of present pain, the **incubus** of a terrible remembrance. She wanted to go into **an unhaunted dwelling** in a **free, unknown country**—she felt as if it was her only chance of sanity.

3 What point is Gaskell trying to make here about a) Ellinor and b) Corbett?

Ellinor bent forward, and saw, just emerging from the shadow of the trees on to the full afternoon sunlit pavement, Mr. Corbet and another gentleman; the former changed, worn, aged, though with still the same fine intellectual face...

6 Married judge though he was, he was not sure if she had not more charms for him still in her sorrow and her shabbiness than the handsome stately wife in the next room, whose looks had not been of the pleasantest when he left her a few minutes before. He sighed a little regretfully as Ellinor went away. He had obtained the position he had struggled for, and sacrificed for; but now he could not help wishing that the slaughtered creature laid on the shrine of his ambition were alive again.

- a) **Who is Ralph referring to here-Ellinor or his own younger self? Might Gaskell mean both?**
- b) **What else/who else has been sacrificed to ambition?**
- c) **Does this last section, pages 160-162 at the end of the novel, change our views of Ralph?**

7 The ending of ADNW has also been criticised as a 'sudden and illogical closure' What are your views on Gaskell's ending?

Discussion The Murder

...No! there was the swell of voices coming up through the window from her father's study: angry voices they were; and her anger rose sympathetically, as she knew that her father was being irritated. There was a sudden movement, as of chairs pushed hastily aside, and then a mysterious unaccountable noise—heavy, sudden; and then a slight movement as of chairs again; and then a profound stillness. Ellinor leaned her head against the side of the window to listen more intently, for some mysterious instinct made her sick and faint. No sound—no noise. Only by-and-by she heard, what we have all heard at such times of intent listening, the beating of the pulses of her heart, and then the whirling rush of blood through her head. How long did this last? She never knew. By-and-by she heard her father's hurried footstep in his bedroom, next to hers; but when she ran thither to speak to him, and ask him what was amiss—if anything had been—if she might come to him now about Mr. Livingstone's letter, she found that he had gone down again to his study, and almost at the same moment she heard the little private outer door of that room open; someone went out, and then there were hurried footsteps along the shrubbery-path. She thought, of course, that it was Mr. Dunster leaving the house; and went back for Mr. Livingstone's letter. Having found it, she passed through her father's room to the private staircase, thinking that if she went by the more regular way, she would have run the risk of disturbing Miss Monro, and perhaps of being questioned in the morning. Even in passing down this remote staircase, she trod softly for fear of being overheard. When she entered the room, the full light of the candles dazzled her for an instant, coming out of the darkness. They were flaring wildly in the draught that came in through the open door, by which the outer air was admitted; for a moment there seemed no one in the room, and then she saw, with strange sick horror, the legs of some one lying on the carpet behind the table. As if compelled, even while she shrank from doing it, she went round to see who it was that lay there, so still and motionless as never to stir at her sudden coming. It was Mr. Dunster; his head propped on chair-cushions, his eyes open, staring, distended. There was a strong smell of brandy and hartshorn in the room; a smell so powerful as not to be neutralized by the free current of night air that blew through the two open doors. Ellinor could not have told whether it was reason or instinct that made her act as she did during this awful night. In thinking of it afterwards, with shuddering avoidance of the haunting memory that would come and overshadow her during many, many years of her life, she grew to believe that the powerful smell of the spilt brandy absolutely intoxicated her... But something gave her a presence of mind and a courage not her own. And though she learnt to think afterwards that she had acted unwisely, if not wrongly and wickedly, yet she marvelled, in recalling that time, how she could have then behaved as she did. First of all she lifted herself up from her fascinated gaze at the dead man, and went to the staircase door, by which she had entered the study, and shut it softly. Then she went back—looked again; took the brandy-bottle, and knelt down, and tried to pour some into the mouth; but this she found she could not do. Then she wetted her handkerchief with the spirit, and moistened the lips; all to no purpose; for, as I have said before, the man was dead—killed by rupture of a vessel of the brain; how occasioned I must tell by-and-by. Of course, all Ellinor's little cares and efforts produced no effect; her father had tried them before—vain endeavours all, to bring back the precious breath of life! The poor girl could not bear the look of those open eyes, and softly, tenderly, tried to close them, although unconscious that in so doing she was rendering the pious offices of some beloved hand to a dead man. She was sitting by the body on the floor when she heard steps coming with rushing and yet cautious tread, through the shrubbery; she had no fear, although it might be the tread of robbers and murderers. The awfulness of the hour raised her above common fears; though she did not go through the usual process of reasoning, and by it feel assured that the feet which were coming so softly and swiftly along were the same which she had heard leaving the room in like manner only a quarter of an hour before.

Her father entered, and started back, almost upsetting some one behind him by his recoil, on seeing his daughter in her motionless attitude by the dead man.

“My God, Ellinor! what has brought you here?” he said, almost fiercely.

But she answered as one stupefied, “I don’t know. Is he dead?”

“Hush, hush, child; it cannot be helped.”

She raised her eyes to the solemn, pitying, awe-stricken face behind her father’s—the countenance of Dixon.

“Is he dead?” she asked of him.

The man stepped forwards, respectfully pushing his master on one side as he did so. He bent down over the corpse, and looked, and listened and then reaching a candle off the table, he signed Mr. Wilkins to close the door. And Mr. Wilkins obeyed, and looked with an intensity of eagerness almost amounting to faintness on the experiment, and yet he could not hope. The flame was steady—steady and pitilessly unstirred, even when it was adjusted close to mouth and nostril; the head was raised up by one of Dixon’s stalwart arms, while he held the candle in the other hand. Ellinor fancied that there was some trembling on Dixon’s part, and grasped his wrist tightly in order to give it the requisite motionless firmness....

All in vain. The head was placed again on the cushions, the servant rose and stood by his master, looked sadly on the dead man, whom, living, none of them had liked or cared for, and Ellinor sat on, quiet and tearless, as one in a trance.

EXTRACT