

"The Wife of Lucifer"

Women and Evil in Charles Dickens

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Abstract

This thesis examines Dickens's presentation of evil women. In the course of my reading I discovered that most of the evil women in his novels are mothers, or mother-figures, a finding which altered the nature of my interpretation and led to closer examination of these characters, rather than the prostitutes and criminals who may have been viewed negatively by Nineteenth century society and thereby condemned as evil. Among the many unsympathetically portrayed mothers and mother-figures in Dickens's works, the three that are most interesting are Lady Dedlock, Miss Havisham, and Mrs Skewton. Madame Defarge initiates the discussion, however, as a seminal figure among the many evil women in the novels.

Psychoanalytical and socio-historic readings grounded in Nineteenth century conceptions of womanhood provide background material for this thesis. Though useful and informative, however, these areas of study are not sufficient in themselves. The theory that shapes the arguments of this thesis is defined by Steven Cohan, who argues strongly that the demand for psychological coherence as a requisite of character obscures the imaginative power of character as textual construct, and who both refutes and develops character theory as it is argued by Baruch Hochman. Cohan's theory is also finally closer to that outlined by Thomas Docherty, who provides a complex reading of character as ultimately "unknowable".

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Notes on Abbreviations and Spelling

The original spelling of both primary and secondary sources has been retained throughout.

<i>BH</i>	<i>Bleak House</i>
<i>DC</i>	<i>David Copperfield</i>
<i>DS</i>	<i>Dombey and Son</i>
<i>GE</i>	<i>Great Expectations</i>
<i>HT</i>	<i>Hard Times</i>
<i>LD</i>	<i>Little Dorrit</i>
<i>NN</i>	<i>Nicholas Nickleby</i>
<i>OMF</i>	<i>Our Mutual Friend</i>
<i>OT</i>	<i>Oliver Twist</i>
<i>SB</i>	<i>Sketches by Boz</i>
<i>TTC</i>	<i>A Tale of Two Cities</i>

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Chapter I
Introduction
Between Coherence and Construct

It is no chance matter we are discussing, but how one should live.

Plato, *Republic*

Throughout the ages, attempts have been made to explain or justify the problem of evil – why do people behave the way they do? Why do we inflict such appalling suffering on one another? Is evil a deviation from good, as Socrates believed, or is good a deviation from evil? What is ‘evil’? What is ‘good’? These are questions philosophers have tried to answer since time immemorial, and ones they continue to ask today – the problem of evil is in some sense unanswerable, and perhaps the virtue lies in trying to find the answers, rather than in coming to any conclusive ones. The *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy* defines ‘evil’ as “serious unjustified harm inflicted on sentient beings” – harm “serious enough to damage its victims’ capacity to function normally” (Kekes 463). Two types of evil have been commonly distinguished: “natural evil” is a “product of nonhuman agency” such as volcanic eruptions or floods, which bring death and disaster to human beings; and “moral evil” is the “product of human agency” (463). Moral thinking tends to focus on the latter, and has been interpreted in three main ways. The first, initiated by Socrates, defines moral evil as “deviation from the good”; the second, based in Stoic-Spinozist philosophy, sees it as “illusory”; and the third, originated by Leibniz, sees it as “a contrast necessary for the existence of good” (463). Of these three, only the Socratic version is potentially appropriate for a study of Dickens’s evil women, and even that is problematic.

Plato's Socrates defines evil as deviation from the good only insofar as it is due to a "human defect in cognition or intention" which leads to mistaking appearance for reality. The central thesis behind this is that no human being commits evil "knowingly" – an evil action must therefore be the result of mistakenly believing that the action is good; or it must be done unintentionally, through accident, coercion, or incapacity (464). His assumption is therefore that "human agents are normally guided in their actions by what seems to be good to them" (463-64), thereby effectively removing responsibility from the "agent", and using their ignorance as an excuse. Interestingly, however, the idea that our actions are guided by what seems to be good *to us* may be an answer in itself: what may be 'good' for Charles Manson or Jack the Ripper is not necessarily 'good' for you or me. It is, of course, entirely probable and very often likely that serial killers do believe that they are justified – that they are cleansing the earth of its scum, for example – and in that context, what they are doing *could* be loosely defined as 'good'. At the same time, however, such horrors are good for them, that is, for their own purposes, in the same way that selfishness and greed are 'good' for a person like Mrs Skewton, while the ramifications are evil for her daughter.

Colin McGinn identifies two types of "moral psychology" – the G-beings (good, or virtuous people), and the E-beings (evil people). One will derive pleasure from another's pain and pain from another's pleasure; the other will derive pleasure from another's pleasure, and pain from their pain – the two species simply reverse each other's "hedonic dispositions" (61-62). What is good for one, in short, is not good for the other, so that Socrates's definition of evil as the deviation from what is good becomes highly problematic and vague – it does not, for example, conclusively state whether evil is a

deviation from good, or good a deviation from evil (Kekes 464). At the same time, however, his definition of evil as a deviation from the good is significant for this thesis. There is no particular paradigm of evil that can be successfully imposed upon Dickens in the context in which his work is examined here – the most fruitful course of action is to examine the texts themselves, since it is through these that his understanding of feminine evil emerges.

Both Colin McGinn and Martha Nussbaum have noted the importance of literature for the philosophical endeavour. In the Preface to *Ethics, Evil, and Fiction*, McGinn writes that, in the field of moral philosophy,

the potential contributions of literary fiction have been systematically neglected. For fiction fails to conform to any of the methodological paradigms that have dominated philosophy at large. Yet in fiction we find ethical themes treated with a depth and resonance that is unmatched in human culture. Literature is where moral thinking lives and breathes on the page. Philosophers of morality therefore need to pay attention to it. (v- vi)

In the same vein, Nussbaum insists that “certain literary texts ... are indispensable to a philosophical inquiry in the ethical sphere: not by any means sufficient, but sources of insight without which the inquiry cannot be complete” (23-24). Like McGinn, she argues that the form and content of literary fiction is particularly significant for any exploration of ethical issues, and that philosophical discourse is actually inadequate at times:

there may be some views of the world and how one should live in it – views, especially, that emphasize the world’s surprising variety, its complexity and mysteriousness, its flawed and imperfect beauty – that cannot be fully and adequately stated in the language of conventional philosophical prose, a style remarkably flat and lacking in wonder – but only in a language and in forms themselves more complex, more allusive, more attentive to particulars.

(Nussbaum 3)

In explaining the connection between ethics and aesthetics, Nussbaum writes that, for the Greeks of the fifth and early fourth centuries B.C.E, questions of aesthetics and questions of morality and philosophy were not “to be studied and written about by mutually detached colleagues in different departments” – instead “dramatic poetry and what we now call philosophical inquiry in ethics were both typically framed by, seen as ways of pursuing, a single and general question: namely, how human beings should live” (15). For the citizens of Greece, then, to attend a tragic drama was “not to go to a distraction or fantasy, in the course of which one suspended one’s anxious practical questions. It was, instead, to engage in a communal process of inquiry, reflection, and feeling with respect to important personal and civic ends” (15), to attempt to answer the question, what is it to live the good life?

McGinn contends that the “human ethical sensibility works best when dealing with particular persons in specific contexts”, that “abstract generalities are not the natural *modus operandi* of the moral sense” (3). One purpose of literary fiction, therefore, is “to

present and reveal character in such a way as to invite moral appraisal.... And one purpose of literary criticism or commentary is (or ought to be) to make clear the ethical import of the actions and experiences of fictional characters” (2-3). Literature deals with human life “as it is lived” (6 fn), and thus, “When it comes to morality, there is more truth in fictional truth than is dreamt of by philosophers” (McGinn viii). In this context, art is a vehicle for a moral lesson, an attempt to answer important questions about life and human nature in relation to particular individuals. We read, like David Copperfield, “for life” (4.54), to find out how to live the good life. For this thesis, we read how not to be a good mother, and Dickens facilitates this by demonstrating what it is to be a bad mother.

Any exploration of Dickens’s novels will reveal his fascination with evil. In general, his ‘evil’ characters are more memorable, more vividly portrayed, and more interesting, than the good ones. For the purposes of this thesis, the most obvious demonstration of this would be the difference in the reader’s response to the ubiquitous seventeen-year-old girls representing absolute goodness, and their response to more ambivalent figures such as Rosa Dartle, Miss Wade, or Madame Defarge. There is something unforgettable about these characters (Black 93), something that grabs the reader’s imagination, and that ‘something’ does not exist to the same degree in Dickens’s characterization of, for instance, Florence Dombey. At the same time, it must be asserted that the ‘seventeen-year-olds’ have been by and large misrepresented. The general tendency has been to dismiss them collectively as “dreary Victorian prig[s]” and “‘virgin-heroines’” (Jacobson 95,97), although some critics have tried to move beyond this. Michael Slater’s *Dickens and Women*, for example, does attempt “to refute the long-

standing notion that Dickens's presentation of his female characters is 'false' and 'feeble'" (Knoepflmacher 75).

The inclination to disregard the seventeen-year-olds is often unwise and unfruitful. There may, on the whole, be many more similarities between Florence Dombey and Rose Maylie than there are between Rosa Dartle and Miss Wade, but each of the seventeen-year-old figures functions in a particular way in her particular novel, and is not simply a colorless romantic interest in a serial soap opera. Both Agnes Wickfield and Lucie Manette, for example, are profoundly significant figures in *David Copperfield* and *A Tale of Two Cities*. Agnes is David's guiding angel and the voice of his conscience, her father's domestic angel, as well as the angel of death. Her name associates her with *Agnus Dei*, the Lamb of God, so that Agnes becomes a powerfully spiritual and almost sacred figure. Wendy Jacobson's article on Lucie reveals that she too exists as a guiding angel (96), as the "spirit of self-realization enabling individuation for Carton" (106), and as the "regenerative influence" of light and grace who takes her father out of derangement and into sanity (98).

It may seem pointless to examine Dickens's good women when the subject at hand is the evil ones, but the two are opposite sides of the same ethical coin, and it is almost impossible to write about one without mentioning the other. Possibly the most important point to make about the good women is what they represent, on the whole, because it is so closely related to what Dickens ultimately presents as feminine evil. Although there is no established ethical lens through which we can view the novels, the closest version, as cited above, is the Socratic one – but it needs to be interpreted slightly differently. Socrates's definition of evil as deviation from the good can also be loosely

defined as ‘perversion’ – the Collins Concise Dictionary defines ‘perverse’ as “deliberately deviating from what is regarded as normal, good, or proper” (998). Nineteenth century conceptions of womanhood located the norm, or what was “good and proper” for women, in the domestic sphere; notwithstanding Dickens’s creation of characters like Lucie and Agnes as more than just domestic angels, he does locate the ‘ideal’ in the domestic sphere. Even Lucie and Agnes, who are so many other things, are ‘angels of the hearth’. Possibly the most famous document testifying to the apotheosis of “Home” is John Ruskin’s “Of Queens’ Gardens”, which positions woman firmly in the domestic sphere.

Ruskin’s lecture, given in 1864 and published in book form in *Sesame and Lilies* in 1865, stemmed from the same society out of which Dickens was writing, and reflects the reverence that seemed in general to have characterized the Nineteenth century conception of “Home”, and into which much of the novelist’s work taps. Of this Victorian preoccupation, Kate Millet writes that it is “significant as one of the most complete insights obtainable into that compulsive masculine fantasy one might call the official Victorian attitude” (122). It is dangerous to generalize about “the Victorians” or “the Nineteenth century”, and quite easy to say any one of a number of things which would be correct. But for the purposes of this thesis, it is necessary to establish some broad parameters, particularly in relation to this ‘domestic’ question. Ruskin’s lecture is centered on the idea that Home is “the woman’s true place and power” (112):

[Man] guards the woman from all [peril, trial, danger, and temptation]; within his house, as ruled by her, unless she herself has sought it, need enter no danger, no temptation, no cause of error or offence. This is the true nature of home – it is the place of Peace; the shelter, not only from all injury, but from all terror,

doubt, and division. In so far as it is not this, it is not home.... But so far as it is a sacred place, a vestal temple, a temple of the hearth watched over by Household Gods, before whose faces none may come but those whom they can receive with love, – so far as it is this ... so far it vindicates the name, and fulfills the praise, of Home. (111-12)

Despite the inadequate education he allows for them, and perhaps because of this absurd elevation of woman, Ruskin paradoxically holds the female race responsible for all the injustice in the world: women bear the guilt for all war, suffering, and misery, not because they have caused it, but because they have not prevented it (135). This put enormous pressure on women to fulfill what amounts to an ideal, and they were seriously condemned if they failed to achieve it. In an article entitled “My Girls”, Wilkie Collins reflects a similar stance. He writes that:

Women have, or should have, no identity wholly their own, no separate existence in themselves – this is treating of women in their natural state of alliance with men. If a woman (speaking generally) so allied, has any thought at all, except for her husband and children, she is nothing.¹

Dickens’s own ideas, however, are less clear-cut. While he does seem to subscribe in part to the domestic ideal, his fiction also reveals that he knew there were problems with it, particularly in terms of female education. The novels have their share of characters like Agnes Wickfield and Florence who manage to be convincing domestic angels, yet his awareness of the dangers inherent in female ‘education’ is witnessed in his creation of Dora Spenlow and Mrs Pocket who are pretty, ornamental, and entirely domestically incompetent. Dickens saw “female education” as the pursuit of “giddy frivolities, and

empty nothings”, because it did not train women for that “quiet domestic life” in which they showed to such great advantage (*SB* 74).

It is a well-established fact that Nineteenth century preconceptions of womanhood included the condemnation of those who fell from the ‘ideal’ in sexual terms. As far as this is concerned, Dickens’s attitude is likewise ambiguous. Despite the accepted morality of his time, his novels do not reveal any indication that he included fallen women in his categorization of feminine ‘evil’. On the contrary, they are very often sympathetic figures. Nancy (*OT*) is a victim of a system that enslaves her from her infancy, and gives her little choice. Alice Marwood (*DS*) is likewise a victim of James Carker, and Martha Endell (*DC*) is fallen to a local gigolo, but achieves redemption in the narrative through helping Mr Peggotty find Emily, another fallen woman. All these women are presented in keenly sympathetic terms – for all their fallenness, they could hardly be considered ‘evil’. Their actions possibly constitute moral failing, but ‘evil’ is too strong a word.

Dickens’s real condemnation of feminine evil does originate in the domestic sphere, but is directed particularly at mothers. His attitude towards parents on the whole is problematic – there are very few convincingly good parents in the novels. Most parents are either inadequate to their task, absent, negative, or dangerous, but Dickens aims his most savage attack at mothers rather than at fathers. Good mothers are few and far between in the novels. Mrs Bagnet (*BH*), Polly Toodle (*DS*), and Betsey Trotwood (*DC*) are the three most significant figures who come to mind, but they are far outweighed by the vast list of negatively or unsympathetically portrayed mothers – Polly and Mrs Bagnet in particular are also less convincingly ‘good’ than Mrs Skewton is convincingly bad. The good mother is thus defined in part by her absence, a matter discussed at length by

Carolyn Dever, who believes that the “near-total absence of actual examples” of good mothers in both Victorian fiction in general, and Dickens in particular, is not just coincidental, but is emblematic of the Nineteenth century crisis of origins. She argues that:

Victorian dead-mother plots facilitate a number of cultural processes, functioning most prominently, perhaps, as a means of addressing the question of origins in terms at once physical and psychological. Reflecting concerns most famously articulated in *The Origin of Species*, fictional texts in the mid-nineteenth century express the epistemological crisis of origins through the representation of maternal loss, in a translation of Darwin’s phylogenetic theory to an ontological scale. (6)

Dever equates the ‘good’ mother with the maternal ‘ideal’, arguing that the “maternal ideal” is achieved “in absence” (7), and the idealization occurs “not only in her death, but quite remarkably, *through* her death” (26). Consequently, the only mothers who exist in the novels are bad ones. The absence of convincing good mothers in Dickens can be attributed to a number of possible sources – the crisis of origins referred to by Dever; a recognition that the maternal ideal by its very nature (as an ideal) could not exist, and the ‘good mother’ therefore could not be represented; or Dickens’s own childhood experience of what he perceived as his mother’s betrayal, which may have profoundly affected his capacity to create authentic good mothers. Michael Slater refers to Elizabeth Dickens’s “catastrophic maternal failure” (11) in being “warm” for her son being sent back to work in the blacking-factory, and also notes Dickens’s far harsher judgement of his mother than of his father (10). Slater writes that Dickens’s barely disguised

“resentment” and “anger” at his mother emerge in his early novels (11), but the distinct lack of good mothers in his *oeuvre* as a whole suggests that the influence of his mother’s “ultimate betrayal” (11) was abiding. While he may be less than successful at creating good mothers, however, Dickens is very good at creating bad ones such as those examined in this thesis.

The notion of absence expounded by Dever is important, in a larger context, for this thesis. The characters I have chosen to discuss are examined not in isolation, but in relation to other characters in the various novels because in some sense they too are ‘absent’. It is not that they do not exist in the novels – Mrs Skewton is clearly more fully present in the novel than the first Mrs Dombey – but in a more metaphorical kind of ‘absence’ better defined in terms of character theory. It is an ‘absence’ most effectively shown in the figure of Lady Dedlock, but is also a reason for viewing Miss Havisham, Madame Defarge, and Mrs Skewton partly through the lens of other characters in their novels. The absent ‘good’ mother’s presence in the novel is shown through signifiers in the text – a painting of her, her strong resemblance to her daughter, her story being told, or a monument marking her resting place. The evil female characters I have chosen to discuss here are ‘absent’ in a different way – they shift between coherence and construct,² or like Lady Dedlock, between ‘melting’ and ‘freezing’.

In his essay on the readability of character, Steven Cohan argues that critical theorists have been too dependent upon psychological coherence as a prerequisite for defining character as “readable” (5). Cohan cites a number of theorists who have recognized the need for a more liberal theory of character,³ but notes that in spite of this, all of them conclude with defining character in psychological terms. Seymour Chatman, for example, sees

character as a “paradigm of traits” implying the psychology of the figure as one organized around behaviour,⁴ while for Tzvetan Todorov, a text requires “psychological determinism” in order to endow a character with character.⁵ Leo Bersani argues that character is inseparable from the specific psychological values of “predictable continuities”, and that “behaviour in realistic fiction is continuously expressive of character”.⁶ The trouble with all of these views is that “readable character” comes to be equated with what Bersani calls “the representation in narrative of a ‘coherent, unified, describable self’” (Cohan 7). This assumption, that the readability of character has to be grounded in the ideology of psychological coherence is problematic, because it “obscures the imaginative function of character by making it a primary avenue of entrance into the debate over the merits of realism as a mode of representation and hence, as a psychological ideology” (7).

Cohan thus argues that an examination of the readability of character must be grounded not in psychological realism or representation, but in the space between the text and its reader, for it is here that the coherence of character as a “virtual existent” becomes apparent (8). Wolfgang Iser’s explanation of the reading process approaches reading as an act of “ideation” – according to Iser, the text relies on what he calls its “blanks”, or indeterminacies, to force the reader’s active participation.⁷ These blanks and negations stimulate the reader’s imagination to provide the connections that the text does not provide. According to Iser, Laurence Sterne’s conception of a literary text is that it is:

something like an arena in which reader and author participate in a game of the imagination. If the reader were given the whole story, and there were nothing left for him to do, then his imagination would never enter the field, the result would be the boredom which inevitably arises when everything is laid out cut and dried before us. A literary text must therefore be conceived in such a way that it will engage the reader’s imagination in the task of working things

out for himself, for reading is only a pleasure when it is active and creative. (Iser 1998: 212-213)

In explanation of Iser's point, Cohan uses Sterne's characterization of the Widow Wadman in *Tristram Shandy*. Sterne begins his description of the Widow by giving two blank pages and instructing the reader to "paint her to [his] own mind" (Sterne 470). Despite this apparent free rein, however, the text does direct our imagination of the Widow by indicating through details such as her behaviour with Uncle Toby how we should 'co-create' her, so that we cannot ignore the text altogether (Cohan 11). It is not the "paradigm of traits" the Widow exhibits that makes her a readable character, but rather that the text provides us with a "coded set of instructions" for how we imagine her (11). In the same way, Dickens provides us with a series of details about his characters, thereby directing us to our understanding of them, but does not lay it all out in the "cut and dried" way Iser finds so unhelpful. He does not give us the whole story, and we are thus engaged in 'co-creating' the character by extrapolating from the details given in the text. Cohan's example of this process is Mrs Snagsby.

According to Cohan, Mrs Snagsby is what E.M. Forster would have described as a "flat" character (12), one who is unsurprising "because her behaviour follows a predictable, unvarying pattern" (12). But while she may lack the "psychological determinism" mentioned by Todorov, she is still quite vivid as an imaginative construct (12). As Cohan points out, Dickens's description of Mrs Snagsby focuses the reader's attention primarily on her nose, which becomes a synecdoche for her entire being – it is "a sharp nose like a sharp autumn evening, inclining to be frosty toward the end" (*BH*.10.143). The "rhetoric" Cohan ascribes to Dickens (12) invites us to collaborate with the text to complete the image, and make of Mrs Snagsby:

more than the sum of the few words affixing her to the text. The sharpness of a frosty autumn evening connotes a range of sensation larger than the actual subject matter of this...statement - her nose - would suggest, releasing...a sense of the shrillness of her 'sharp' personality so that we experience her figure as more than just the rhetoric it is in the text. (12-13)

Mrs Snagsby's existence is thus dependent on our co-operation with the directions encoded in the text to fill in the blanks or indeterminacies, the things left unsaid, to construct her. She remains, however, "limited to the same 'sharp' note trumpeted every time she appears" – the text "does not change or extend the coding for our construction of her ... existence" (13).

Through the example of Mrs Snagsby, we thus see that "to understand character as a readable figure we need to distinguish between its psychological attributes as a representational figure and its phenomenological identity as an imagined figure" (15), that is, the difference between its psychological coherence and its position as an imaginative construct.

Cohan argues that "much of what we customarily attribute to the significance of character as the primary human referent in a novel's text ... has become equated with the example of Nineteenth century realism, which orients its representation of experience around character as an intelligible psychology" (6). In *The Test of Character*, however, Baruch Hochman argues that the Victorian conception of character was a failure because of the absence of psychological determinism. By contrast, he holds the Modernist conception of character to be successful (12). According to Hochman, the Moderns rebelled against the Nineteenth century effort to "capture the seemingly solid social and moral surfaces of the self" (11), and focused instead on "the play of individual sensibility, the mobility of affective responses, and the flow of consciousness" (12). In particular, Hochman centres his argument on the Victorian depiction of adults, although he also states that "the young who struggle ...

are generally not interesting or richly dimensioned people, in the way that the tragic young, like Hamlet or even Achilles and Electra are” (15). In contrast to the “sympathy and roundness of response” (13) with which the Moderns depict their adult characters, the Victorians lack the “rich and ramified configuration of human inwardness as we know it in life, and elsewhere in literature” (14). The “staggering concreteness” of Joyce’s characterization of Stephen Dedalus (48) is something which apparently eludes the Victorians altogether. Adults in Nineteenth century fiction “rarely appear as embodied human beings whose feelings engage our sympathy” (15), and instead tend to be “flattened figures, or violently stylized ones” (13), whose passions are “revealed in spiritless, ritualized, or affectively brutal ways” (15).

In proof of his argument, Hochman cites Miss Havisham’s sacrifice of Estella’s capacity for love, which, he argues, “is enacted in such fantastic terms that the reader never effectively infiltrates into the feeling-process of either character” (16). Yet this presumes that Dickens’s “fantastic” literary style, which excludes the “rich and ramified configuration of human inwardness” he ascribes to the Moderns, effectively prevents us from feeling any sympathy for the characters at all. Hochman’s objection, however, to the indeterminacies of Dickens’s text demonstrates a reluctance to ideate or actively participate in the text, and thereby to co-author the character in the way that Cohan and Iser have set out. It will be demonstrated in later chapters that the reader does in fact enter sympathetically with Miss Havisham’s suffering, and it is partly this sympathy that stops us from judging her too harshly for the injustices she perpetrates on Pip and Estella. Hochman’s argument thus demands “psychological determinism” of character, and he seems largely to ignore the power of character as an imaginative construct.

Both Hochman and Cohan use Woolf and Dickens for their respective arguments, but while Hochman views Woolf's conception of character as successful and Dickens's as unsuccessful, Cohan sees the one as simply the inverse of the other, and equally successful (19). To demonstrate this, Cohan uses the figure of Lady Dedlock, whose power as an imaginative construct is partly dependent on her psychological indeterminacy. She is not a "cipher" for the text, but neither is she "round", in Forster's definition of the term – she is not explained psychologically by the discourse. While the text's construction of Esther, on the other hand, encourages a psychological understanding of her as she is formed by her childhood, "Lady Dedlock shows how little character need depend upon psychological discourse of that sort to activate our imaginative construction of the figure as a virtual existent" (14). The reader tries to understand her in terms of sexual repression, for example, or the "spiritual bankruptcy of a moneyed class", but despite all this, she remains a "blank", psychologically indeterminate" (14), unknowable, suspended between "melting" and "freezing". Thomas Docherty argues that, "the characters in some of the texts that could be called texts which revive figural novel writing are ... a name, some dispositions, but unpredictable" – essentially they are "unknowable" (14).⁸ Like the other characters examined in this thesis, Lady Dedlock is ultimately "unknowable", and thus, according to Docherty's implied argument, a good character. It is from this foundation of character as "unknowable", a "blank", 'absent'; as between melting and freezing, between coherence and construct, that we derive our definition of Dickens's conception of character, particularly with regard to good and evil mothers.

The four characters examined in this thesis shift constantly between coherence and construct, and exist in varying degrees of one or the other in the different novels for

different narrative purposes. We never have access to their psyches in the way one does with a Modernist character such as Mrs Ramsay, but they have different degrees of psychological coherence depending on the purposes of the novel in which they appear. Mrs Skewton and Madame Defarge, for example, are more powerful as narrative constructs representative of something in the text than as examples of psychological authenticity. By contrast, Miss Havisham and Lady Dedlock, while they are also narrative constructs, are more coherent. As a group, however, they shift between coherence and construct, thus living in a kind of blank space between the two.

Finally, the question has to be asked, why these four characters in particular? There are many fascinating and complex female figures who could have been included, but due to the limitations of what one can adequately examine in the space of a Masters thesis, and due to the demands of my argument, I have focused on certain novels. These four women have been chosen because they are all major characters in their various novels; secondly, because except for Madame Defarge, who is emblematic of the fundamental ‘perversion’ underlying Dickens’s conception of women, they are all mothers or mother figures who have a profoundly damaging effect upon their children. This thesis is not an attempt to say anything definitive or conclusive about evil and women in Dickens’s entire *oeuvre* – I have chosen to focus on fewer characters, thereby giving myself space for some detailed textual analysis, because this is where I believe the most fruitful line of enquiry lies. In the course of my reading I realized that the most evil woman in the novels I read was a mother, so that my argument necessarily revolves around mothers in particular, rather than around characters who could have been construed as ‘evil’ by Nineteenth century society at large, such as Martha (*DC*), who is a

fallen woman, or Molly (*GE*), who is a murderess. The limits of time have also meant that, while I have read eight of the novels, I have not read all of Dickens's novels, so that I have not been able to include an examination of, for example, Mrs Sparsit (*HT*) or Mrs Clenham (*LD*). The reader is thus asked to bear with the limitations placed upon this thesis.

Notes

¹ Wilkie Collins, “My Girls.” *All the Year Round*, 11 February, 1860.

² Throughout this thesis it is necessary to use the terms ‘psychological coherence’ and ‘imaginative construct’, or variants thereof, in what may be an annoyingly repetitive manner. The reader will have to bear with me however, as these are the terms used by the theorists to whom I refer, and which best describe the concepts involved.

³ The following four citations are quoted in “The Readability of Character”, Cohan 6, 9, 11.

⁴ Chatman, Seymour. *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978, pp. 119, 126.

⁵ Todorov, Tzvetan. “Reading as Construction” trans Marilyn A. August. *The Reader in the Text: Essays on Audience and Interpretation*. Ed. Susan R. Suleiman and Inge Crosman. Princeton: Princeton University press, 1980, pp. 76-77.

⁶ Bersani, Leo. *A Future for Asyntax: Character and Desire in Language*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1976., p. 69.

⁷ Iser, Wolfgang. *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978, pp 168-169.

⁸ Thomas Docherty, “Character and the Demise of Experience.” Lecture given at the Department of English, Rhodes University, Grahamstown, 1999.

Chapter II
Un-womanned in folly
Madame Defarge

Thérèse Defarge is the most important evil woman for this thesis because she represents most explicitly the fundamental concept lying behind Dickens's characterization of evil women. Alluding to Elizabeth Dickens's "warm[th]" for her son's being sent back to Warren's Blacking Factory, Michael Slater contends that Dickens's feelings towards his mother must have been characterized by "an enduring sense of horrified dismay and ultimate betrayal" (11). Moreover, Slater argues that these feelings surface in his portrayal of "the almost criminally irresponsible Mrs Nickleby and a whole line of subsequent 'bad mother' figures in his novels" (11). Although it is misleading to get distracted by biographical details, this betrayal, which may or may not be derived from Dickens's childhood experience, is echoed in the betrayal of womanhood (or its 'perversion') shown in *Madame Defarge*, as well as in *Miss Havisham* and *Mrs Skewton*. While *Madame Defarge* is not a 'bad mother' figure, she is a compelling example of the perversion and betrayal distinguishing Dickens's characterization of the 'evil' women examined in this thesis.

Madame Defarge and her husband keep a wine-shop in Saint Antoine. She is the younger sister of the girl and boy killed by the Marquis St. Evrémonde and his brother, and, although unharmed herself, she wants revenge for the injustice perpetrated on her family. In this, she is unfavourably contrasted with Dr Manette who does in fact suffer at the hands of the brothers – they have him incarcerated in the Bastille and leave him "buried alive for eighteen years" (1.3.17). Before Manette loses his mind as a result of the despair to which he finally submits in prison, he writes a document denouncing "to Heaven and to earth" the d'Evrémonde family and "their descendants, to the last of their race" (3.10.410). Yet, when his daughter falls in love

with the son of the Marquis, he is able, albeit unconsciously,¹ to come to a kind of resolution within himself, and chooses not to condemn the man his daughter loves, thereby not visiting upon the child the sins of the father. Thérèse Defarge cannot, or will not, do this. She is incapable of forgiveness, “absolutely without pity” (3.14.447), and it is here that her evil lies.

Slater contends that Madame Defarge is not a realistic figure (294) – she is “essentially a melodramatic creation, like a figure from a Jacobean revenge tragedy”, and, while Dickens gives her a powerful physical presence, she has “no emotional or psychological complexity” (291). Her vitality is derived from her one passion, revenge, and Slater argues that “we know all about her, once we have understood this” – she does not come to seem symbolic of any aspect of human experience or the human condition (291). Barbara Black argues that, contrary to Slater’s “dismissal” of her, Madame Defarge is the “embodiment of life under the Terror” (98). Black’s essay contends that Rosa Dartle, Miss Wade, and Madame Defarge

share origins in dependency and/or rejection at the hands of privileged males. Madame Defarge’s motive for violence, we discover, is avenging her servant-class family and violated sister – “imbued from her childhood with a brooding sense of wrong, and an inveterate hatred of a class, opportunity had developed her into a tigress”. (100)

On one hand then, we may have reason to understand Madame Defarge’s appetite for revenge; on the other, we have a way to understand her as an imaginative construct. As with the rest of the characters examined in this thesis, we do not see Madame Defarge’s mind at work, and know very little about her past. Any psychological coherence such as that required by Baruch Hochman must come from the surrounding narrative, but *A Tale of Two Cities* gives the reader very little indication of a convincing psychology for Madame Defarge. Yet she is a powerful construct within

the text, and her significance is most evident when she is examined in relation to other characters. As shown above, Madame Defarge is contrasted with Doctor Manette; she is also contrasted with Lucie Manette and Monsieur Defarge; but she draws much of her significance as a narrative construct from her association with Lady Macbeth.

Critics have been aware of the association between Lady Macbeth and Madame Defarge for years. Andrew Sanders, for example, observes in his explanatory notes for the novel that the connection is unmistakable. When Madame Defarge decides at the end of the novel that she can no longer trust her husband because he is so weak as to relent towards Doctor Manette, Sanders writes that, “in case we had not already recognized it, this is Dickens’s clearest indication of the extent to which he based Madame Defarge on Lady Macbeth. When the narrator later refers to the fact that she is ‘absolutely without pity’ the parallel is reinforced” (520n). Catherine Waters, too, has commented on Lady Macbeth’s “violent repudiation of maternity” being echoed in Madame Defarge (129). In view of the fact that the link is a long-established critical tradition, this chapter does not attempt to prove *that* it exists, but rather to show *how* it exists. *A Tale of Two Cities* runs a close and illuminating analogy between Lady Macbeth and Madame Defarge, rather than an absolute parallel; it is the differences between them, as much as the similarities, that must be examined in order to elucidate Dickens’s purpose in the novel.

The most important discrepancy between the two women is that Lady Macbeth feels remorse for what she has done, a remorse most clearly illustrated in her sleepwalking scene, and not shared by Thérèse Defarge. Under the watchful eyes of her Waiting Gentlewoman and a Doctor, Lady Macbeth walks with a taper, her eyes open “but their sense ... shut”, and rubs her hands in the action of washing:

Out damned spot – out I say.... What need we fear who knows
it, when none can call our power to account? Yet who would

have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him....
What, will these hands ne'er be clean?... Here's the smell of
the blood still – all the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this
little hand. (5.1.33-50)

Lady Macbeth's ceaseless attempts to remove, in her sleep, the blood and guilt from her hands, are indicative of a profoundly disturbed psyche, and a "heart ... sorely charged" (5.1.51). Madame Defarge, on the other hand, has no such moments of mental disturbance. On the contrary, she remains steady and firm throughout the novel. Lady Macbeth is motivated by ambition, Madame Defarge by revenge. Lady Macbeth has "given suck" (1.7.54), and Madame Defarge has no children.² Lady Macbeth gradually loses control of her mind, and Madame Defarge remains entirely cool-headed. Yet the fundamental correlation between them can be determined by examining Lady Macbeth's speech when she hears of her husband's encounter with the Weird Sisters:

The raven himself is hoarse
That croaks the fatal entrance of Duncan
Under my battlements. Come, you spirits
That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here,
And fill me from the crown to the toe, top-full
Of direst cruelty. Make thick my blood,
Stop up th'access and passage to remorse,
That no compunctious visitings of nature
Shake my fell purpose, nor keep peace between
Th'effect and it. Come to my woman's breasts
And take my milk for gall, you murd'ring ministers,
Wherever, in your sightless substances,
You wait on nature's mischief. Come, thick night,
And pall thee in the dunnest smoke of Hell,
That my keen knife see not the wound it makes,
Nor heaven peep through the blanket of the dark
To cry, "Hold, hold!" (1.5.37-53)

There are a number of details in this speech referring to what is,

fundamentally, Lady Macbeth's renunciation of her womanhood. She wishes to be "unsex[ed]", a statement indicative of her desire to be made 'not-woman'. All the qualities she wishes away are definitively feminine, and her desire that no "compunctious visitings of *nature*" (my emphasis) should turn her from her "fell purpose" reinforces her desire to pervert the 'natural' female state. Instead of compassion, she is filled with cruelty; she has no remorse, no pity; and no conscience. The lines most symbolic of her renunciation are, "Come to my woman's breasts / And take my milk for gall" (1.5.46-47). Unlike her husband, Lady Macbeth does not have the "milk of human kindness" (1.5.16) – it has been changed to gall, so that, instead of being a source of nourishment and compassion, she has become a source of poison and death. Significantly, Lady Macbeth recognizes that in order to achieve her ends, she must abandon her womanhood – that her proposed action is not concurrent with femininity. Her renunciation of femininity and humanity are paralleled in *A Tale of Two Cities*, where Madame Defarge undermines these qualities in a similar way – Dickens's portrayal of Madame Defarge as a Lady Macbeth figure suggests that the idea had some resonance for him.

The opening words of Lady Macbeth's speech are significant in two ways for her connection with Madame Defarge: "The raven himself is hoarse / That croaks the fatal entrance of Duncan / Under *my* battlements" (1.5.37-39, my emphasis). Lady Macbeth's house is her empire, her home, and as 'home' it should represent a haven, a place of safety and shelter. It becomes instead a place of death. This 'perversion' parallels the perversion in *A Tale of Two Cities*, where the Defarges' wine-shop, which should be a place of leisure and sociability, becomes the "vortex" of the raging circle of revolutionaries (2.21.262). Lady Macbeth's words have greater resonance when seen in conjunction with the end of her speech: "Come, thick night, / And pall

thee in the dunnest smoke of Hell, / That *my* keen knife see not the wound it makes” (1.5.49-51, my emphasis): her words indicate that she assumes responsibility for Duncan’s death, so that she is as guilty as is her husband of the murder, even though she does not herself commit the act. Once Duncan has arrived at the castle, Macbeth loses his nerve, and tells his wife, “We will proceed no further in this business”: he knows that the king trusts him, and that Duncan’s “virtues / Will plead like angels, trumpet-tongued against / The deep damnation of his taking-off” (1.7.18-20). It is his wife who becomes the spur to prick the sides of his intent (1.7.25-26). Macbeth’s words indicate that he knows the limits of what is honourable as a man, and as a human being: “I dare do all that may become a man. / Who dares do more is none” (1.7.46-47). Yet his wife is prepared to betray not only her femininity, but also her humanity: “I have given suck, and know / How tender ‘tis to love the babe that milks me; / I would, while it was smiling in my face, / Have plucked my nipple from his boneless gums / And dashed the brains out, had I so sworn / As you have done to this” (1.7.54-59).

It is not important to know whether or not Lady Macbeth had any children – what is significant is that she knows the power of maternal feelings, and yet is capable of casting them aside. If she, as a woman and mother, had made a promise like the one Macbeth has made to kill Duncan, she would kill the child before she would break the promise. This ruthlessness is echoed in *A Tale of Two Cities* when Monsieur Defarge reminds his wife of Manette’s anguish at Darnay’s last trial in Paris. He says that the Doctor has “suffered much” (3.12.419), and interposes a few words for the kind-hearted wife of the Marquis St. Evrèmonde, but Madame Defarge replies: “Tell the Wind and the Fire where to stop; not me!” (3.12.421). Madame Defarge may or may not understand maternal feelings, and Manette’s love for his daughter – the text gives

us no evidence either way – but she does not care, while her husband does. Macbeth recognizes that to kill Duncan would be more than becomes a man and more than becomes a human, yet Lady Macbeth is prepared to defy her both her womanhood and her humanity. At the banquet during which Banquo’s ghost comes to haunt Macbeth, she responds to her husband’s distress with “Are you a man?” (3.4.58), thereby implying that his fear and guilt make him less than a man, that he is “unmanned in folly” (3.4.73). In the same vein, Madame Defarge accuses her husband of being “faint of heart” and sees his compassion for Manette as weakness (2.16.215, 3.14.443).

In “‘The World Within Us’: Jung and Doctor Manette’s Daughter”, Wendy Jacobson argues that Lucie Manette is the positive *anima* figure in the novel, and that her “antagonist ... is set forth in the demonic-*anima* figure of Madame Defarge” (103). Madame Defarge is seen here to be not simply Lucie’s opposite, but her perversion; and if Lucie can be seen as both Domestic and Guiding Angel to Carton, Darnay, and Manette, then Madame Defarge can be seen as a perversion of that Angel. Slater writes that in the case of both Miss Havisham and Madame Defarge, “the perversion of womanhood that the character represents is stamped on our imaginations by our being shown her apparently enacting some conventionally ‘good’ female role or performing some conventionally ‘good’ female activity – but always with some horrible twist given to the thing” (290). Every feminine quality Madame Defarge possesses becomes perverted for evil. She keeps a wine-shop not as a place of conviviality and leisure, but as a place for conspiracy and murder. The rose she wears in her turban is not a feminine ornament or symbol of love, but “a code for political intrigue” (Waters 128) signifying the presence of a spy. She does not knit blankets or shawls, but shrouds (2.15.209). She is beautiful but, unlike Lucie Manette, her beauty

is not characterized by tenderness and compassion. Madame Defarge's beauty is of the kind that imparts to its possessor the "firmness and animosity" (3.14.447) reflected in her unswerving pursuit of revenge, and irreconcilable with feminine nature as it is exalted in Lucie. Her "firmness" echoes Lady Macbeth's words after her husband has killed Duncan, but is too dismayed to look upon what he has done: "Infirm of purpose; Give me the daggers ... 'tis the eye of childhood / That fears a painted devil" (2.2.51-54). She implies that Macbeth's reaction to his foul deed is not manly, and proves herself more capable than he of finishing the act. A corresponding incident in *A Tale of Two Cities* is evidenced when the little wood-sawyer feels sure that should Madame Defarge "take it into her brightly ornamented head to pretend that she had seen him do a murder and afterwards flay the victim, she would infallibly go through with it until the play was played out" (2.15.209) – as Slater notes, "woman's apparently endless capacity for devotion to those she loves is made to turn into devotion to revenge, devotion not to life, but to death" (355).

Madame Defarge and Lady Macbeth both pervert their femininity to achieve their ends; both take charge of their supposedly weak-willed and "infirm" husbands; and both are ruthless and unshakeable in the pursuit of their goals. But while Madame Defarge is "absolutely without pity" (3.14.447), Lady Macbeth shows signs of remorse. Despite being 'unsex[ed]', her "fell purpose" unshaken by "compunctious visitings of nature", we see her confessing, "Had [Duncan] not resembled / My father as he slept, I had done't" (2.2.12-13) – surely not the words of a woman filled "from the crown to the toe, top-full / Of direst cruelty" (1.5.39-40). This moment of insight and regret encourages the reader to pity her in the end. Her final appearance in the play reflects her ambiguous state of mind: "What need we fear who knows it, when none can call our power to account? Yet who would have thought the old man to have

had so much blood in him?" (5.1.35-38). Her determination to play the play out is thus marred by her horror at the amount of blood Duncan's body contains. Just as she recognized that her ruthlessness was not in accordance with being a woman, so she recognizes that she can never regain that woman-ness, and that "all the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand" (5.1.48-49).

Thérèse Defarge, on the other hand, is not troubled by conscience. The first description of her reveals "a watchful eye that seldom seemed to look at anything, ... steady features, ... and great composure of manner" (1.5.37). While Lady Macbeth ultimately reveals a faltering in her ruthlessness, Madame Defarge's steadiness remains her characteristic feature. Her husband is described as "implacable", a man of "a strong resolution and a set purpose; a man not desirable to be met rushing down a narrow pass with a gulf on either side, for nothing would turn the man" (1.5.37), yet Defarge *is* capable of being turned aside. Not only is it he who remembers the gentle wife of the Marquis, and who says that "one must stop somewhere" (3.12.419), but he also has pity for Manette, a quality which we first observe when Mr Lorry and Lucie fetch the Doctor from the garret in Saint Antoine. When Mr. Lorry asks why Defarge keeps Manette locked up, he replies:

"Because he has lived so long, locked up, that he would be frightened – rave – tear himself to pieces – die – come to I know not what harm – if his door was left open."

"Is it possible!" exclaimed Mr. Lorry.

"Is it possible!" repeated Defarge, bitterly. "Yes. And a beautiful world we live in, when it *is* possible, and when many other such things are possible, and not only possible, but done – done, see you! – under that sky there, every day. Long live the Devil." (1.5.42)

Defarge's resentment about the world of Paris under the *ancien régime*, and his paradoxical concern for his old master,³ are not shared by Madame Defarge whose

“steadiness” is a source of fear and trepidation to the other characters in the novel. By contrast, her husband is sometimes “faint of heart” (2.16.215), a phrase reminiscent of Lady Macbeth’s accusation that her husband is “unmanned in folly”. Madame Defarge’s firmness is most dreadfully illustrated in her response to the death of the governor at the fall of the Bastille:

In the howling universe of passion and contention that seemed to encompass this grim old officer conspicuous in his grey coat and red decoration, there was but one quite steady figure, and that was a woman’s.... She stood immovable close to the grim old officer, and remained immovable close to him; remained immovable close to him through the streets, as Defarge and the rest bore him along; remained immovable close to him when he was got near his destination, and began to be struck at from behind; remained immovable close to him when the long-gathering rain of blows fell heavy; was so close to him when he dropped dead under it, that, suddenly animated, she put her foot upon his neck, and with her cruel knife – long ready – hewed off his head. (2.21.267-8)

In the “howling universe of passion and contention” that is the vortex of the novel, there is “but one quite steady figure”. That figure is Madame Defarge, her steadiness emphasized by the repetition of the word “immovable” in the above paragraph, and more terrifying in contrast with its surrounding passion, a passion best illustrated in the scene just preceding Foulon’s murder.

When Foulon is discovered alive in the country, it is The Vengeance, and not Madame Defarge, who, “uttering terrific shrieks, and flinging her arms about her head like all the forty Furies at once, [tears] from house to house, rousing the women” (2.22.272). The fury exhibited by The Vengeance and the other women is never seen in Madame Defarge. Passion of such energy could wear itself out, but she remains calm and cold to the end. The description of the women in this scene is lengthy, but worth quoting in its entirety, not only because its accumulative effect is so impressive,

but because it sweeps the reader irresistibly along:

The men were terrible, in the bloody-minded anger with which they looked from windows, caught up what arms they had, and came pouring down into the streets; but, the women were a sight to chill the boldest. From such household occupations as their bare poverty yielded, from their children, from their aged and their sick crouching on the bare ground famished and naked, they ran out with streaming hair, urging one another, and themselves, to madness with the wildest cries and actions. Villain Foulon taken, my sister! Old Foulon taken, my mother! Miscreant Foulon taken, my daughter! Then, a score of others ran into the midst of these, beating their breasts, tearing their hair, and screaming, Foulon alive! Foulon who told the starving people they might eat grass! Foulon who told my old father that he might eat grass, when I had no bread to give him! Foulon who told my baby it might suck grass, when these breasts were dry with want! O mother of God, this Foulon! O Heaven, our suffering! Hear me, my dead baby and my withered father: I swear on my knees, on these stones, to avenge you on Foulon! Husbands, and brothers, and young men, Give us the blood of Foulon, Give us the head of Foulon, Give us the heart of Foulon, Give us the body and soul of Foulon, Rend Foulon to pieces, and dig him into the ground, that grass may grow from him! With these cries, numbers of the women, lashed into blind frenzy, whirled about, striking and tearing at their own friends until they dropped into a passionate swoon, and were only saved by the men belonging to them from being trampled under foot. (2.22.272-73)

This, one of the most violent scenes in the novel, centres its violent action upon the women, who beat their breasts and tear their hair, scream wildly, lash themselves into a blind frenzy, and strike and tear at their friends. Their initial cries of rage are to mothers, sisters, and daughters – it is only later that they call to the men, but even then, their words perpetuate the violence: “Husbands, and brothers, and young men, *Give us* the blood of Foulon, *Give us* the head of Foulon, *Give us* the heart of Foulon, *Give us* the body and soul of Foulon, Rend Foulon to pieces, and dig him

into the ground, that grass may grow from him!” (2.22.273, my emphasis). Like the repetition of the word “immovable” in the description of Madame Defarge next to the “grim old officer” of the Bastille, the repetition here of the phrase “Give us” shows how the women, like Lady Macbeth, assume responsibility for Foulon’s murder. The description is terrifying partly because it runs so brutally against feminine nature which in this novel is most persuasively evoked in the characterization of Lucie Manette, and partly because it reveals the violence raging beneath the cold exterior of Madame Defarge. As Waters has observed, “it is the extraordinary tension between her hidden fury [as represented by the women in the above scene] and her façade of equanimity that makes her so fascinating and formidable” (126). Like Lady Macbeth’s ability to deny ‘natural’ maternal feelings, these women abandon their traditional roles as women in favour of vengeance and retribution: they run from their “household occupations ... from their children, their sick and aged”, urging one another on instead “to madness”. In one sense, the women represent the exploited peasant class of France – the suffering of Madame Defarge’s family at the hands of the brothers d’Evrémonde is reflective of the larger social issue underlying the novel: the wretchedness of the oppressed and abused lower classes under tyrannical aristocrats.

Dickens clearly condemns the French aristocracy, contrasting the misery of the peasants, who do not even have stones to mark the burial of their dead (2.8.139), with the wealth of the Marquis, who feels, for example, that he can pay for the child he kills with his carriage (2.7.132). The aristocracy is also presented in satirical terms, one of the most striking examples being Monseigneur’s absurd chocolate-drinking ceremony:

It took four men, all four a-blaze with gorgeous decoration, and the Chief of them unable to exist with fewer than two gold watches in his pocket, emulative of the noble and chaste fashion set by Monseigneur, to conduct the happy chocolate to Monseigneur's lips. One lacquey carried the chocolate-pot into the sacred presence; a second, milled and frothed the chocolate with the little instrument he bore for that function; a third, presented the favoured napkin; a fourth (he of the two gold watches), poured the chocolate out. It was impossible for Monseigneur to dispense with one of these attendants on the chocolate and hold his high place under the admiring Heavens. Deep would have been the blot upon his escutcheon if his chocolate had been ignobly waited on by only three men; he must have died of two. (2.7.123-24)

In contrast to the affectation and posturing of Monseigneur and his underlings, the dignity of Madame Defarge's brother as he tells Manette his story is poignant and compelling. Despite his status as a peasant, he speaks with righteous and eloquent indignation. Manette writes that "his spirit spoke with a dreadful emphasis" against the wrongs done to his sister:

"Marquis," said the boy, turned to him with his eyes opened wide, and his right hand raised, "in the days when all these things are to be answered for, I summon you and yours, to the last of your bad race, to answer for them. I mark this cross of blood upon you, as a sign that I do it. In the days when all these things are to be answered for, I summon your brother, the worst of the bad race, to answer for them separately. I mark this cross of blood upon him, as a sign that I do it." (3.10.404)

Like the speech of Lucie Manette, which is "a rich romantic style remote from the prose of common reality" (Jacobson 96), the boy's speech is structured around the repetition of syntactic patterns – "In the days when all these things are to be answered for ... I summon ... I mark this cross of blood" – thereby making it powerfully emotive. The effect is that of rhetoric, conveying powerfully his condemnation of the brothers in terms that take him out of a 'realistic' account by an oppressed peasant,

and put in him the voice of an outraged class of sufferers. The horror of what happened to Madame Defarge's family is thus not diminished in any way, but the narrative is constructed so that we know Madame Defarge and her lack of pity long before we have any reason to understand her incentive. In this way, Dickens delays any empathetic response we may have, and his deliberate comparison of her with other characters in the novel emphasizes the unsympathetic response we are intended to have.

While the boy's is the voice of a people unjustly treated, the women rushing from their homes convey the blind rage that derives from years of helplessness under the *ancien régime*. They are the curse of the boy brought to life, the cross of blood that demands that what has been done be answered for. But in forsaking the domestic in favour of revenge, they also reflect the perversion that makes Thérèse Defarge the prime example of an evil woman in Dickens's novels. It is Madame Defarge who drags Foulon through the crowds to the nearest streetlamp, and then lets him go,

as a cat might have done to a mouse – and silently and composedly looked at him while they made ready, and while he besought her: the women passionately screeching at him all the time, and the men sternly calling out to have him killed with grass in his mouth. Once, he went aloft, and the rope broke, and they caught him shrieking; twice, he went aloft, and the rope broke, and they caught him shrieking; then the rope was merciful, and held him, and his head was soon upon a pike, with grass enough in the mouth for all Saint Antoine to dance at the sight of. (2.22.275)

Madame Defarge's capacity to stand "composedly" watching a man about to be slaughtered and to feel no pity for his terror and pain is a composure that is possible because she is entirely without compassion, and therefore unfeminine, and even inhuman. This composure is also echoed in the way she knits – over and over in the novel, Madame Defarge is seen to knit steadily (2.16.222); leans against a

doorpost, knits, and sees nothing (1.6.57); knits on “with the steadfastness of Fate” (1.7.133), and collects her death registers and shrouds (2.15.209). Her knitting is not a domestic skill providing comfort and security, but is a register of death from which Defarge says that it would be “easier for the weakest poltroon that lives, to erase himself from existence, than to erase one letter of his name or crimes from the knitted register of Madame Defarge” (2.16.208). Instead of bringing positive connotations of “creativity, nurture and maternal affection”, her knitting brings negative connotations of “vengeance, violence and death” (Waters 127). Her shrouds are not for those who have died from poverty and illness, but are instead an encoded list of the identities of the Revolution’s victims. Madame Defarge is seldom seen without her knitting: it is always with her or in front of her, caught in its terrible creative process. When she does not have it, for example on the day the people kill the governor Foulon, she carries a knife, axe, or pistol, tools far more suggestive of her cruelty than knitting needles.

As Jacobson has noted, Lucie and Madame Defarge are strongly contrasted, and their contrast is illustrated in their first real meeting.⁴ The note Lucie receives from her husband to say that he is alive and well moves her so much that she turns to Madame Defarge and kisses one of her knitting hands: “It was a passionate, loving, thankful, womanly action, but the hand made no response – dropped cold and heavy, and took to its knitting again” (3.3.327). Lucie’s action is passionate, loving, and, more importantly, *womanly*; but Madame Defarge does not respond. Her imperviousness is, for Slater, an indication of the degree to which Madame Defarge’s “woman’s nature” has been perverted (370). She is cold, while Lucie is warm; she is also unresponsive to Lucie’s later appeal to her as “sister-woman” (3.3.327); and her shadow falls “threatening and dark” on both Lucie and her child (3.3.328). When

Madame Defarge sets out at the end of the novel to find Lucie, she does so knowing that Lucie will be “mourning and grieving. She will be in a state of mind to impeach the justice of the Republic. She will be full of sympathy with its enemies” (3.14.446). She seeks Lucie out, not to respond as a “sister-woman” to her grief and pain, but in order further to justify the “extermination” of the d’Evrémonde family. Rather than a compassionate heart, her bosom hides “a loaded pistol” and at her waist she carries “a sharpened dagger” (3.14.448), such as the one she used without hesitation to cut off Foulon’s head.

If *A Tale of Two Cities* represents true womanliness in the figure of Lucie Manette, then Madame Defarge is a travesty of everything Dickens saw as inherent in womanhood. More than any other woman abused by the wretchedness of the time, she has been “dreadfully disfigur[ed]” (3.14.447) – ruthless, fearless, and without pity even for herself. The narrator tells us that if she had been ordered to the guillotine, she would have gone without any softer feeling “than a fierce desire to change places with the man who had sent her there” (3.14.448). To appeal to her is hopeless because, like Lady Macbeth, Thérèse Defarge has been “unsex[ed]”. Madame Defarge may not have a coherent psychology, but she is a powerful imaginative construct emblematic of the fundamental issues involved in an examination of Dickens’s evil women. She does not substitute masculine qualities for feminine ones – instead, she retains those feminine attributes and mutates them, thereby remaining indisputably female, but also ‘evil’ – not Lucifer himself, but, fascinatingly and terrifyingly, the “wife of Lucifer” (3.14.452-53).

Notes

¹ We have no reason to believe that Manette is consciously aware of the letter he wrote condemning the d'Evrémonde family: his obvious distress and bewilderment when the document is read out at Darnay's last trial testifies to his repression of this incident.

² Her childlessness is, Black argues, a necessity that enables her to “engage in the new, demonic type of proliferation (replete poverty and plentiful death) for which the Guillotine is responsible” (100).

³ Defarge's compassion is also revealed in his manner of entering Manette's room: he strikes “twice or thrice upon the door—evidently with no other object than to make a noise there” and “with the same intention” draws the key noisily across the door and puts it clumsily into the lock, turning it “as heavily as he could” (1.5.44), thereby warning the old man that someone is about to enter, and not frightening him. Again, when Manette sinks in Lucie's arms and begins to weep, the sight is “so touching, and yet so terrible in the tremendous wrong and suffering which had gone before it that *the two beholders* covered their faces” (1.6.54, my emphasis).

⁴ I refer to the time Madame Defarge and her husband bring Lucie a note from Charles in prison. Although the two women do see each other right at the beginning of the novel, when Lucie and Mr Lorry fetch Dr Manette, it cannot be classified as a real meeting, as they do not speak to each other.

Chapter III
Arrested Development
Miss Havisham

Steven Cohan has pointed out that Lady Dedlock's success as an imaginative construct is partly dependent upon the absence of information given about her in *Bleak House*. As "the most psychologically elusive of the characters in *Bleak House*, [she] is, ... actually the most imaginatively compelling, precisely because she seems so blank a page as a 'person'" (14). Just so with Miss Havisham: Dickens's characterization of her from the outside, giving us just the contour lines, so to speak, means that we can find ways to write her story in response to a set of coded instructions we receive in the text. It is by these means that Miss Havisham is revealed as both psychologically coherent, and a powerful imaginative construct, and therefore a readable character. She may not be a successful characterization of an evil woman, because, as will be demonstrated, she is not evil; but she is a successful characterization of something else.

Miss Havisham is the most compelling bad mother figure in *Great Expectations*. Catherine Waters argues that she is "the most bizarre example of maternal deviance" (157) in a novel "filled with defective parents and dysfunctional families" (152); but the initial representative of such a role is Pip's sister, Mrs Joe. This thesis contends that evil women in Dickens are characterized predominantly in terms of their 'perversion' of womanhood, and it is therefore interesting that Waters points out that Mrs Joe is "clearly defined by her lack of maternal qualities and her perversion of domestic virtues" (153). She wears a "coarse apron, ... [with] a square impregnable bib in front that was stuck full of pins and *needles*" (2.13) – not only does the apron literally repel affection (Waters 153), but it is also indicative of Mrs Joe's hard and unyielding nature, which is further emphasized by her insistence on

bringing up Pip “by hand” (2.12) and the Tickler. She feeds her family “without love or ceremony” (153), as evidenced in her “trenchant” manner of cutting bread and butter (2.14), and makes “her cleanliness more uncomfortable and unacceptable than dirt itself” (4.23). This last point is most painfully made in the violent ablutions she inflicts upon Pip before his first visit to Miss Havisham (7.45).

Mrs Joe’s physical violence signifies her failure to be a good mother. Pip says that home “had never been a very pleasant place ... because of [his] sister’s temper”, but that Joe had sanctified it (14.86). As Waters notes, there is a reversal of convention in the way Mrs Joe and Joe are described. Joe is “a fair man, with curls of flaxen hair on each side of his smooth face, and with eyes of such a very undecided blue that they seemed to have somehow got mixed with their own whites. He was a mild, good-natured, sweet-tempered, easy-going, foolish, dear fellow” (2.12-13). By contrast, Mrs Joe is “tall and bony”, with black hair and eyes, and “such a prevailing redness of skin that [Pip] sometimes used to wonder whether it was possible she washed herself with a nutmeg-grater instead of soap” (2.13). Joe’s “feminisation in the narrative is an indication of Mrs Joe’s emasculating power, and Pip’s need for a mother surrogate” (Waters 152). Pip’s dream is to become a gentleman, to escape the marshes, the forge, and his sister, and her ill-treatment of him prepares him for the obsession he later develops with Miss Havisham, Estella, and Satis House. For the first time in his life, he has a means of escape, and it is impossible for him to let it go.

Miss Havisham’s success as a textual construct is linked to her psychological coherence, though she is not coherent in the same way as is Mrs Ramsay. Dickens’s construction of Miss Havisham was founded on his observation of recluses and eccentrics, so that even in her immediate appearance Miss Havisham is a ‘realistic’ (or coherent) characterization of a grim and peculiar lady. At the same time, she is

powerfully representative of a certain state of mind. Miss Havisham is thus psychologically coherent not only in an individual but also in a collective capacity, and her success as an imaginative construct lies within this coherence.

As an individual, Miss Havisham is a complex, credible, and thus coherent portrayal of a rich, proud woman who has been betrayed, publicly humiliated, and has consequently become a recluse. In *The Narrative Art of Charles Dickens*, H. P. Sucksmith examines three separate ideas that may have influenced Dickens's characterization of Miss Havisham. The first is that of "the upper-class female recluse" (179), found in a letter Dickens wrote to John Forster from Paris in 1856, telling of the murder of one of his neighbours:

The Duchess who is murdered lived alone in a great house which was always shut up, and passed her time entirely in the dark. In a little lodge outside lived a coachman (the murderer), and there had been a long succession of coachmen who had been unable to stay there, and upon whom, whenever they asked for their wages, she plunged out with an immense knife, by way of an immediate settlement. The coachman never had anything to do, for the coach hadn't been driven for years; neither would she ever allow the horses to be taken out for exercise. Between the lodge and the house, is a miserable garden, all overgrown with long rank grass, weeds, and nettles; and in this, the horses used to be taken out to swim—in a dead green vegetable sea, up to their haunches. (2.4.174-5)

Sucksmith argues that what Dickens found interesting about this event was not the horror of the woman's death, but the odd facts of human behaviour it revealed. There is, he says, no attempt to involve the reader emotionally, and the victim is not given any sympathy – on the contrary she appears faintly amusing, even in her death (178). The event is recounted as "an impression of life recorded directly", and, "[f]ar from there being any effort to unify the impression created by the passage, the effect is allowed to wander back and forth between the curiosity evoked by odd behaviour, the

relish excited by the scandal, the amusing and the bizarre” (178).

Forster recounts another anecdote sent by Dickens in the same year, one which Sucksmith believes illustrates the idea of “the sexually frustrated woman who seeks revenge through a perversely educated child” (179):

The Squire had married a woman of the town from whom he was now separated, but by whom he had a daughter. The mother, to spite the father, had bred the daughter in every conceivable vice. Daughter, then 13, came home from school once a month. Intensely coarse in talk, and always drunk. As they drove about the country in two open carriages, the drunken mistress would be perpetually tumbling out of one, and the drunken daughter perpetually tumbling out the other. At last the drunken mistress drank her stomach away, and began to die on the sofa. Got worse and worse, and was always raving about Somebody’s where she had once been a lodger, and perpetually shrieking that she would cut somebody else’s heart out. At last she died on the sofa. (2.4.176)

Along with these two sources, a third idea may have contributed to the making of Miss Havisham. The story of ‘The White Woman’ is found in an article Dickens contributed to *Household Words* in 1853.¹ He writes of a woman, “a conceited old creature, cold and formal in manner” who dressed entirely in white, in her “bridal dress”, with white boots and a white umbrella to match, and who paraded up and down Oxford Street, on her way to church to marry “the false Quaker” who Dickens supposes must have rejected her.

The common factor in each of these cases is that Dickens makes no attempt to imagine the women’s mental processes, but is fascinated by the details of their strange behaviour. Similarly, in *Great Expectations*, we do not see Miss Havisham’s mind at work – we simply observe the way she acts. The startling parallels between these three women and Miss Havisham make her more “coherent”, not only as an individual, but as a portrayal of some psychological landscape. As Sucksmith points out, the

character of Miss Havisham is much more complex than any of the three originals (184), because it combines the various elements as well as transforming them into something else. What is missing from Dickens's accounts of the three originals, however, is "a structure determined by effect and vision", or what Sucksmith defines as rhetoric (181). Miss Havisham's characterization is intricate because it has this structure and effect, and employs more than the immediate curiosity and amusement evoked by 'The White Woman', the Duchess, or the Squire's drunken wife. Her psychological coherence as a portrait of a mad recluse, then, is transformed and complicated by her power as an imaginative construct: Miss Havisham's characterization signifies more than the odd mannerisms of a mad woman – it is a metaphor for a diseased mind.

The reader's first impression of Miss Havisham conveys this complexity:

Whether I should have made out this object so soon, if there had been no fine lady sitting at it, I cannot say. In an arm-chair, with an elbow resting on the table and her head leaning on that hand, sat the strangest lady I have ever seen, or ever shall see.

She was dressed in rich materials – satins, and lace, and silks – all of white. Her shoes were white. And she had a long white veil dependent from her hair, and she had bridal flowers in her hair, but her hair was white. Some jewels sparkled on her neck and on her hands, and some other jewels lay sparkling on the table. Dresses, less splendid than the dress she wore, and half-packed trunks, were scattered about. She had not quite finished dressing, for she had but one shoe on – the other was on the table near her hand – her veil was but half-arranged, her watch and chain were not put on, and some lace for her bosom lay with those trinkets, and with her handkerchief, and gloves, and some flowers, and a Prayer-book, all confusedly heaped about the looking-glass. (8.49-50)

At first glance, Miss Havisham appears to be a rich lady caught amid preparations for her wedding day, and as Sucksmith writes, "the richness and splendour of her dress

[and] the brightness of her many jewels...lend her dignity” (181). The only hint the reader has that there is anything peculiar about her is Pip’s reference to her strangeness and her white hair. It is only in the next paragraph that this initial effect is undermined. By withholding information in this way, Dickens gives the reader no option but to encounter Miss Havisham in the same manner as Pip – what we initially see constructs the impression of a rich woman on her wedding day. The horror with which we react when our expectations are so dramatically undermined is thereby more effective because it is so unexpected:

I saw that everything within my view which ought to be white, had been white long ago, and had lost its lustre, and was faded and yellow. I saw that the bride within the bridal dress had withered like the dress, and like the flowers, and had no brightness left but the brightness of her sunken eyes. I saw that the dress had been put upon the rounded figure of a young woman, and that the figure upon which it now hung loose, had shrunk to skin and bone. (8.50)

Miss Havisham’s pose as a bride turns out to be a “bitter ironical burlesque. Behind the appearance is the mocking reality of withered age, sterility, and decay” (182), a reality underscored by Pip’s memory of the waxwork at the Fair, and the skeleton in the ashes of a dress, which he immediately associates with the figure before him. Miss Havisham’s image is “more grotesque because of its convolution of the symbolic import of a wedding scene – rather than signifying the celebration of a joyous personal and social event, the remains of the aborted wedding signify just the opposite” (Raphael 402). Instead of celebrating a day of joy, Miss Havisham is trapped in a celebration of her death, and it is therefore significant that the day of her aborted wedding is also her birthday (*GE* 7.72). Miss Havisham does not suffer the day to be spoken of, both because it is a reminder of her birth as a living ‘corpse’, and because it is symptomatic of her denial of the passage of time. She chooses to let her

betrayal assume more significance than her birth, thus symbolically allowing life and joy to be consumed by death and pain.

As Sucksmith notes, however, the horror Pip feels in watching the “dark eyes that moved and looked at [him]” is part of a bigger effect. The spectacle provoking his horror, this “living corpse in its bridal shroud,” simultaneously arouses pity and irony through the defeat it represents (183). It is thus a combination of horror and pity that Pip, and the reader, takes away after his first encounter with Miss Havisham. Dickens’s revisions in the manuscript stress that the defeat exhibited in Miss Havisham’s posture is deliberately aimed at winning the reader’s sympathy:

Miss Havisham’s face ... had dropped into a watchful AND BROODING expression – most likely when all the things about her had become transfixed – and it looked as if nothing could EVER lift it up again. Her chest had dropped, so that she stooped; and her voice had dropped, so that she spoke low, and with a curious dead lull upon her; ALTOGETHER, she had the appearance of having dropped, <altogether> BODY AND SOUL, WITHIN AND WITHOUT, under the weight of a <blow> CRUSHING BLOW. (*GE* 8.52, qtd in Sucksmith 183)²

Our response is not simple condemnation, horror, or curiosity, such as might have been felt for the three ‘originals’, but a complex one including pity and compassion. Yet the effect noted above is not without irony: immediately preceding this scene, Miss Havisham holds a whispered conversation with Pip in which he admits to being infatuated with Estella even as he is wounded by her insults. Immediately after this, Estella “beggars” Pip in their game of cards, which, as Sucksmith points out, holds the roots of a more metaphorical game Miss Havisham is playing with both Pip and Estella:

Love has become a power game to Miss Havisham and Estella.

Love was the cause of proud Miss Havisham's great defeat in life. Through love, she will avenge this defeat. Estella will defeat Pip in this sinister game also. But through her apparent victory, Miss Havisham will sustain a second defeat with its own pathos, irony, and horror. And Estella will only lose in the end. (184)

Miss Havisham is more than simply eccentric, simply horrifying, or simply pitiful, and Dickens's characterization of her continually undermines each effect as it is evoked in the reader. Along with Pip, we first feel curiosity for her as a grand lady, horror when we realize that she is in a state of arrest, like the living dead, and finally pity when we register the defeat and suffering revealed in her posture. Our compassion is undermined, though, by the fact that even in their first meeting, Miss Havisham is already trifling with Pip.

The Duchess's neglect of her house was simply one of her idiosyncrasies as a recluse, but "the neglect and decay of Satis House is a parallel to the physical decay of its mistress [and] both forms of disintegration are outward manifestations of her emotional decay" (Sucksmith 184), thus linking her psychological coherence to her position as an imaginative construct.³ This connection is best illustrated during one of Pip's visits to Satis House after he has moved to London:

As I looked round at [the candles], and at the pale gloom they made, and at the stopped clock, and at the withered articles of bridal dress upon the table and the ground, and at her own awful figure with its ghostly reflection thrown large by the fire upon the ceiling and the wall, I saw in everything the construction that my mind had come to, repeated and thrown back to me. My thoughts passed into the great room across the landing where the table was spread, and I saw it written, as it were, in the falls of the cobwebs from the centre-piece, in the crawlings of the spiders on the cloth, in the tracks of the mice as they betook their little quickened hearts behind the panels, and in the gropings and pausings of the beetles on the floor. (38.229)

The “construction” Pip speaks of is his recognition, finally, of Miss Havisham’s defining characteristic, the point around which her character is created. The extract is a literary construction showing how Miss Havisham’s surroundings reflect her not only as an authentic psychology, but also as a narrative construct. It contains in microcosm all the details explaining Miss Havisham’s fundamental nature as this thesis argues it. The candles with their “pale *gloom*” giving off “artificial” light, the “withered” bridal articles, and the stopped clock, represent on one level Miss Havisham’s state of mind. She has arrested time and life, and become trapped in a continuous acting out of one terrible moment, a strange kind of celebration of her betrayal, thereby making a travesty of her wedding. On another level, the description is reflective of her as a narrative construct: the cobwebs in the room across the landing write her story of arrest, distortion, and death-in-life, all of which serve to describe Miss Havisham for what she means in terms of the text. Her wedding dress, which has “withered” like her body and mind, has become a set of grave-clothes; her veil has become a shroud; she is no longer a young bride, but a “skeleton in the ashes of a rich dress” (5.50-52), a combination of arrest and motion, always in the same state of physical and emotional decay, but never any closer to death until she finally dies.

The reader even witnesses the symbolic structures being repaired – after the quarrel between Miss Havisham and Estella, Pip returns to see Estella sitting at Miss Havisham’s knee sewing not her dress, but the tatters on it (38.231). The dress has to remain in a permanent state of collapse, yet must be continually “repaired to stay in disrepair, so that the spectacle she represents..., a ‘skeleton in the ashes of a rich dress’ can continue” (Schor 174). Pip visits Satis House a number of times throughout the novel, but “there [is] no change” in either the House or in Miss Havisham (38.228) – she does not age or decay between visits and it is this arrest of time that Pip and the

reader find so terrifying about her. In noticing that Miss Havisham puts down the jewel she picked up in exactly the same spot, and that the stocking on her shoe-less foot is “trodden ragged”, Pip observes, “Without this arrest of everything, this standing still of all the pale decayed objects, not even the withered bridal dress on the collapsed form could have looked so like grave-clothes, or the long veil so like a shroud” (5.52).

It is Miss Havisham’s arrest of time that makes her so like something from the grave. Dickens’s first description of her is the most powerful, and illustrates how this ‘arrested development’ is reflected in her environment. Around Miss Havisham lie half-packed trunks and scattered dresses, she wears only one shoe, her veil is half arranged, and her watch and chain are not put on (5.52). The image is all the more compelling considering that later descriptions of Miss Havisham are given in much less detail: the emphasis subsequently is placed on the fact that “there [is] no change in Satis House” (38.228), which has itself been taken under the spell of Miss Havisham. It is a deserted place, with a “wilderness of empty casks”, defined by the absence of things: the absence of pigeons from the dovecot, of malt from the storehouse, of horses from the stable, of pigs from the sty (5.54). Likewise, Miss Havisham has frozen her life in one moment. By denying the mutability of her humanity, she has become death-in-life – while she holds onto her pain, she is so much like a body “buried in ancient times” that Pip believes “the natural light of day would have struck her to dust” (5.52). It is significant that Dickens uses the term “*natural* light of day” because it implies that Miss Havisham’s condition is unnatural, and thereby that she has perverted certain things about herself. It also introduces the image of daylight, with which Dickens illustrates what she has really shut out of her life.

Miss Havisham's aversion to daylight is not an echo, but a development of the Duchess's desire to live in total darkness, and Estella's words to Miss Havisham in their only confrontation demonstrate what it really means:

“Or,” said Estella, “– which is a nearer case – if you had taught her, from the dawn of her intelligence, with your utmost energy and might, that there was such a thing as daylight, but that it was made to be her enemy and destroyer, and she must always turn against it, for it had blighted you and would else blight her; – if you had done this, and then, for a purpose, had wanted her to take naturally to the daylight and she could not do it, you would have been disappointed and angry?” (38.231)

Estella and Miss Havisham have not been arguing about daylight, but about what it represents – love. In trying to explain why she cannot be expected to love, Estella significantly uses the metaphor of daylight. She has been taught all her life that love, like daylight, is her enemy, and that she should always turn against it, lest it blight her. The literal darkness of Satis House thus signifies the emotional darkness in which she has been raised. Estella cannot love anyone, not even Miss Havisham, because she has never known love. Pip, by contrast, is able to love Estella despite her bad treatment of him, because although he has experienced the heavy hand of his sister, he has also known love through Joe. Miss Havisham's exclusion of daylight from the coffin of Satis House in which she has entombed herself echoes her exclusion of love from her life. The darkness of Satis House is therefore not just actual but metaphorical – it is not just the absence of light, but also the absence of love.

Miss Havisham's refusal to acknowledge the passage of time is a development of this exclusion of healing influences. In turning her back on time and the light of the sun, she is metaphorically refusing the possibility of change and development, “rejecting life and nature”, “refusing to accept the goodness of growth, [and] allow[ing] ascendancy to the nightmarish evil of decay” (Sucksmith 185). She has

embraced the horror of stagnation in the moment of her betrayal, and thus, although the novel appears to emphasize Pip's unhappiness because of Miss Havisham's influence (and although she asks Pip's forgiveness, and not Estella's), it is not his own misery for which he finally judges her:

That she had done a grievous thing in taking an impressionable child to mould into the form that her wild resentment, spurned affection, and wounded pride, found vengeance in, I knew full well. But that, in shutting out the light of day, she had shut out infinitely more; that, in seclusion, she had secluded herself from a thousand natural and healing influences; that her mind, brooding solitary, had grown diseased, as all minds do and must and will that reverse the appointed order of their Maker; I knew equally well. (49.297)

We therefore see that the essence of what we can loosely define as Miss Havisham's 'evil' is not so much her treatment of Pip as it is her denial of the natural forces of time, light, and change. Out of this denial arises her perversion of Estella's nature, a perversion which has led to the suffering of both Estella and Pip.

Some critics do not believe that Miss Havisham is psychologically coherent. Michael Slater, for example, argues that what happens in *Great Expectations* between Estella and Miss Havisham is not psychologically realistic. He compares Estella and Miss Havisham to Edith Granger and Mrs Skewton (*Dombey and Son*), and writes that:

Both [characters] have been exploited and corrupted by their mothers ... and both are cold and haughty in their general demeanour. But while it is psychologically plausible that a child may be pushed into scheming and mercenary behaviour by a mother like Mrs Skewton, what Miss Havisham is supposed to have done to Estella surely belongs more to the realm of moral fable or fantasy than to that of psychological realism. Edith's coldness is an understandable defence mechanism, Estella's is that of a fairy-tale ice maiden. (281)

As Slater argues, Edith Granger's coldness is an understandable defence mechanism. But Estella's wits are sharpened by the insincerity of Miss Havisham's relations, and her adoptive mother almost devours her with a twisted kind of 'love', so that her coldness is just as plausibly a defence mechanism as it is a part (and a consequence) of her role as the novel's ice maiden. It is part of her characterization to be the star after whom Pip yearns, the unattainable, beautiful, accomplished princess whose hand he believes he will win; but it is just as much a part of her that she has been surrounded by people she cannot trust and against whom she has had to defend herself. If it is plausible that Edith "may be pushed into scheming and mercenary behaviour" by Mrs Skewton, then it is just as conceivable that Estella, taught to be cold, proud, and hard, might become just that. Estella has learnt her lessons well, and she becomes what Miss Havisham wanted to be herself, invulnerable, until suffering at the hands of Bentley Drummle teaches her that, like Edith, she has a heart after all. *Dombey and Son* may present Edith's psychology more convincingly than *Great Expectations* does Estella's, but for the purposes of the text, Estella's psychology is sufficiently realistic.

Slater's belief that Miss Havisham's story is a moral fable rather than psychological realism is close to the truth of her position as a construct. He argues that Miss Havisham is presented as a "fantastic creation, a being who has once been human, but whose life has been frozen as by some evil enchantment", that she has become an "evil spirit casting a spell over Estella and, through her, over Pip too" (292). It is intriguing that Slater uses the word 'evil', considering that Dickens does not use the word once in relation to Miss Havisham.⁴ The word is most significant in the novel in describing "that evil genius Compeyson" and the criminal environment of lies and deceit in which Jaggers works.⁵ This indicates that while Dickens does condemn Miss Havisham, he also encourages us to forgive and pity her, which does

not seem consistent with Slater's argument that Miss Havisham is a kind of evil spirit.

Slater does also say that one of the many ironies of the novel is that Pip is

destined finally to exorcise Miss Havisham's evil spirit, to restore her to humanity (so that she can address him with an 'earnest womanly compassion...') by holding up to her a looking-glass in which she suddenly sees and rejects the monstrosity of what she has done and become. (292)

Linda Raphael claims that Miss Havisham is "one of the most significant figures in the novel, in terms of affective power" (401). She embodies "the mythic horrors of countless cruel mothers, stepmothers, and witch-like figures [and] has often been described by critics as one more instance of an irrational and vindictive female figure" (401). She cites Slater, who says that among those Dickensian female characters "perverted by passion", Miss Havisham is "the most compelling and haunting" (Slater 291); and in *The Providential Aesthetic*, Thomas Vargish calls her more "clearly culpable" than Magwitch, because her "twisting of Estella's nature seems more consciously malevolent than his plan for Pip" (152-153). As a narrative construct, Miss Havisham could be seen as an evil spirit, casting with her "wasting hands" (38.235) a spell of arrest over Satis House, Pip, and Estella; but she is also the figure of a rich, proud, beautiful woman who has fallen very hard in life. In *Dickens and the Romantic Self*, Lawrence Frank writes that Magwitch's story humanizes him (172), but so too does Miss Havisham's humanize her. We do not feel pity for Mrs Skewton, both because she does not suffer and because she has failed to love; we do not pity Madame Defarge who is an iconic figure with "no emotional or psychological complexity" (Slater 291); but Miss Havisham is humanized through a suffering that could only come about with such complexity. Thus Dickens combines the 'fantastic' narrative of Miss Havisham as an evil spirit or wicked stepmother with the psychologically authentic narrative of a proud woman living out the story written by

her father, her lover, and society.

If *Great Expectations* is a moral fable, as Slater claims, then we must judge Miss Havisham as good or evil. But her case is ambiguous. Mrs Skewton is evil: she has not suffered, her actions come out of greed and selfishness, and we are not encouraged to pity her. Madame Defarge has an integrity that Mrs Skewton does not have – she would go to the gallows or die in the streets as soon as kill someone opposing the Republic (3.14.448) – but she does not pretend to be anything else. She too is evil, but she is avenging her family and fighting for the Republic, so that even while she holds innocent people responsible for the crimes of others, and has no pity, there is reason and passion behind her behaviour. Miss Havisham's case is not that simple. Her 'actions' could be described as evil, but unlike Mrs Skewton, we can separate her from these actions – Mrs Skewton *is* her 'evil'. Miss Havisham's 'evil' is derived from pain and betrayal, but Mrs Skewton's is a fundamental part of her nature, and inextricable from her personality.

There are a number of reasons why Miss Havisham cannot be described as 'evil'. The first is that although she causes both Pip and Estella injury, she does so in response to her own torment. The text of *Dombey and Son* explains Mrs Skewton's cruelty and malevolence as avarice. But we are given no details about her past, and are consequently unable to 'write her story'. Miss Havisham's characterization, on the other hand, is calculated from the beginning to induce compassion in the reader. Although we only see her through the eyes of the other characters, and do not even hear her story from her own lips, we can 'write' it for her and find a way to view her with sympathy, even as we judge her mistreatment of Pip and Estella.

Miss Havisham is a sympathetic character for the reader not only because she has been betrayed by the man she loved, and has responded to that pain by lashing out

at the world, but because her plan rebounds so appallingly upon her. Her heart does not break once, but twice – firstly when Compeyson betrays her, secondly when she realizes that her plan has succeeded, and she has made a man feel the pain she felt. But this man is Pip, and Miss Havisham recognizes too late that she loves him, and has hurt someone she cares for. When Estella tells Pip that she is going to marry Drummle, he declares his love for her and says:

“It would have been cruel in Miss Havisham, horribly cruel, to practise on the susceptibility of a poor boy, and to torture me through all these years with a vain hope and an idle pursuit, if she had reflected on the gravity of what she did. But I think she did not. I think that in the endurance of her own suffering, she forgot mine, Estella.” (44.270)

Miss Havisham’s response to these words is to “put her hand to her heart and hold it there,” in the same way that she put her hand to her heart the first time she met Pip and told him her heart was broken (8.50). Her heart breaks again when she realizes the severity of what she has done to the boy she loves. It is only now, at the end of the novel, that she sees in Pip a mirror reflecting what her heart used to be, but her affection for him is evident long before that. On one visit to Satis House, when Pip is harassed by Jaggers, Miss Havisham interposes to Pip’s relief with “Jaggers, leave my Pip alone and go with him to your dinner” (29.185). Pip makes no comment about this affectionate address and Miss Havisham’s endearing use of the possessive pronoun, but it is early evidence that she loves him. Her affection is more obviously displayed in their final meeting, when Pip tells Miss Havisham that if she can ever undo something of what she has done to Estella, she should try to do so. In answering that she had only meant to protect Estella, to save her from pain like her own, Miss Havisham’s “earnest womanly compassion” is revealed in what Pip calls her “new affection” with the words, “But, Pip – my Dear! My Dear!” (49.298). Of course, her

affection is not new, but Miss Havisham has realized it too late.

The reader's sympathy for Miss Havisham is compounded by the fact that her moment of pain and betrayal is re-enacted once more when Estella will not, or cannot, return her love. The difference is that this time the demon is of Miss Havisham's own making – she has reconstructed in Estella a female Compeyson to wreak vengeance upon the male race, and it is thus a female Compeyson who rejects Miss Havisham's love a second time. Linda Raphael contends that Miss Havisham's *modus operandi* becomes narcissistic rage, which includes converting a passive experience into an active one, identification with the aggressor, and seeking revenge for past humiliations:

In acting out the ambivalent passion for Compeyson which she has repressed through Estella, and thus against Pip, Miss Havisham converts her pitifully passive role in the fate of her betrothal into an active one, while her identification with the aggressor allows her endless repetitions of the painful wound. Dressed as herself, the bride, and acting as Compeyson, the aggressor, she incorporates into one person the potential for continual re-enactment. (409)

Not only does this theory fortify Miss Havisham's power as a textual construct, and enhance her psychological coherence, but it explains convincingly why the reader pities her. The "continual re-enactment" of which Raphael writes is illustrated in the novel not only through Miss Havisham's refusal to move out of one moment in time, but that she is ultimately hurt by Estella in the same way she was hurt by Compeyson. Ironically, only when she realizes that she has hurt Pip can she break out of the moment, and move on to forgiveness and death. She is ultimately the victim of her own revenge plan – betrayed by the person she loves, and it is her own fault.

The second reason Miss Havisham cannot be condemned as evil is that although she is wrong in punishing Pip as a representative of the male race,⁶ she is not

entirely responsible for his suffering. Lawrence Frank argues that Pip has very little proof that Miss Havisham is his benefactress, and that as a matter of fact, he has a lot to the contrary. As Jaggers is later to say, “not a particle of *evidence*” (40.251, my emphasis) connects him to Miss Havisham beyond a chance encounter with a nameless, unremembered boy some ten years before (166). Frank writes that the stipulation that he should bear the name ‘Pip’, the only name by which the convict knows him, is one of the signs Pip misreads. Miss Havisham, as benefactress, would seek to eradicate the stigma of a name linking Pip to his common origins, just as she obliterated Estella’s connections to her origins by refusing to make inquiries of Jaggers (164). Yet the first thought that crosses Pip’s mind when he is informed of his expectations is, “My dream was out ... Miss Havisham was going to make my fortune” (18.109).

Pip chooses to see his first meeting with Miss Havisham and Estella as the shaping event in the narrative that is his life (154). He consciously links Jaggers with Miss Havisham, and not with the convict on the marshes, and as a result convinces himself that he is meant to win Estella’s hand. Yet Pip is warned not only by Joe, but also by Estella of the mistake he is making in deliberately writing his story in these terms. Estella warns him that she has no heart (29.183), and openly admits that she deceives and entraps Drummle as she does all men save Pip alone (38.235). Despite her repeated warnings, it takes Pip a long time to realize that she is “set to wreak Miss Havisham’s revenge on men” (38.228), and even then, he persists in believing that once she has done so, she will be given to him. It does not occur to him that if Estella is meant to wreak vengeance upon the male race for Miss Havisham’s betrayal by her lover, then as Estella’s oldest, most consistent admirer and the man who truly loves her, he may be the primary target of Miss Havisham’s revenge.

Yet, while there may be no “evidence” for Pip’s assumption that Miss Havisham is his benefactress, it is nonetheless a fair one. There is no reason he should assume that the convict is even alive, let alone wealthy enough to be a benefactor. Miss Havisham is the only person Pip knows who is financially capable of filling the role. Pip’s relationship with Mrs Joe has also predisposed him for his vulnerability to Miss Havisham and Estella. Although Joe undoubtedly loves him, his sister’s “bringing up” has made him sensitive, and he has from babyhood sustained “a perpetual conflict with injustice” (8.54). Herbert Pocket scorns Estella as a “Tartar” (22.139), and recognizes that she has been so damaged by Miss Havisham as to be dangerous, but Pip is unable to detach himself because these two women represent an escape from the life he wishes to leave behind. Entering Satis House and coming under the spell of Miss Havisham is a way for Pip to escape the forge, his sister, and poverty, and a chance for him to become the gentleman he has for so long wanted to be.

Frank argues that at Satis House Pip’s conception of himself and “the identity of things” (*GE*, 1.9) has been profoundly altered. He has experienced “the ineluctable reality of a self conditioned by the perspective of others” and is dealing with serious existential issues that Joe does not understand (153). When Pip lies about what happened in his first encounter with Miss Havisham, Joe reprimands him with “Lies is lies”, thereby taking the case out of the region of metaphysics, and, Dickens writes, by those means vanquishing it (9.59). Frank believes that Joe has missed the real point (158), that his observation “obscures ontological issues, rendering their full significance inaccessible, and allowing Pip, and the reader, to take refuge in the ethical platitudes of a Joe or a Biddy” – what he sees as “a shift in focus from the ontological to the reassuringly ethical” (153). Frank’s observation is astute: Joe does

not understand the ontological issues with which Pip is wrestling. Despite all this, however, Joe is presented as a kind of moral touchstone. His ethical standpoint is unassailable, and simple as he may be, time and time again he proves himself a stronger, wiser, and better man than Pip. At the end of his first awkward visit to London, he tells Pip:

“It ain’t that I’m proud, but that I want to be right, as you shall never see me more in these clothes. I’m wrong in these clothes. I’m wrong out of the forge, the kitchen, or off th’ meshes. You won’t find half so much fault in me if you think of me in my forge dress, with my hammer in my hand, or even my pipe. You won’t find half so much fault in me if, supposing as you should ever wish to see me, you come and put your head in at the forge window and see Joe the blacksmith, there, at the old anvil, in the old burnt apron, sticking to the old work. I’m awful dull, but I hope I’ve beat out something nigh the rights of this at last.”

(27.173)

Joe’s acceptance of himself is contrasted with Pip’s discontent and pretensions to greatness. Pip only vaguely suspects that he is at as much of a “personal disadvantage” in his new gentleman’s clothes as Joe is in his Sunday best (19.122), and recognizes that Herbert Pocket carries off his old suit much better than he carries off his new one (22.140). Joe may be “awful dull”, but he is honest, faithful, and true, and we trust his judgment. He may not see the complexity of Pip’s ontological concerns, but he sees to the core of the matter, that lying is no way to be “oncommon.” Joe understands that, once Pip has received his indentures, he is to be forever exiled from Satis House:

“When Miss Havisham done the handsome thing by you, she called me back to say to me as that were all.”

“Yes, Joe. I heard her.”

“ALL,” Joe repeated, very emphatically.

“Yes, Joe. I tell you, I heard her.”

“Which I meantersay, Pip, it might be that her meaning were – Make an end on it! – As you was! – Me to the North, and you to the South! – Keep in sunders!” (15.89)

Miss Havisham’s meaning seems unambiguous: as Frank phrases it, “she turns Pip over to his master, consigning him forever to the world of the forge” (164). Pip cannot accept this, because it would mean abandoning his dream, so that when he is told of his fortune, he immediately wills Miss Havisham into existence as his fairy godmother, and is thereby partly responsible for writing his own narrative of unhappiness and heartbreak. Miss Havisham recognizes that Pip is continuing in a mistaken belief, but allows him to persist because it drives Sarah Pocket wild with envy and curiosity (19.123). She is wrong in this, but while she has done nothing to correct Pip’s mistake, she does nothing to validate it either. Her position as the most powerful bad mother figure in the novel, then, is partly mitigated by her pain, and partly by the fact that Pip is a willing, if unconscious, accomplice to the narrative the two of them write.

In contrast to Mrs Skewton, who also ruins her daughter’s life, as Slater has noticed, but who will not accept responsibility for her complicity in Edith’s suffering, Miss Havisham acknowledges her culpability and asks Pip to pardon her. Dickens thereby encourages the reader to pity her. It is interesting then, that although Pip condemns Miss Havisham for having stolen Estella’s heart and left ice in its place, and for denying the possibility of change, it is Pip of whom she begs forgiveness, and not Estella. Miss Havisham may act out her part as wicked stepmother or evil spirit, casting her spell of arrest on Pip and Estella and using her position as adopted mother

and mother figure to ruin both their lives and damage them, but she changes. She commands Pip to love Estella though his heart is torn to pieces, as though love were a curse (29.184), but after Estella is married to Drummle, she asks Pip compassionately, “Are you very unhappy now?” (49.296). By the end of the novel, she has moved out of self-pity into compassion for others: Pip is no longer a “model with a mechanical heart” (39.243), an instrument, as she was for Compeyson – she has come to recognize in him a suffering human being, someone like herself. Earlier on in the novel, when Pip asks her if it was kind to let him continue in his mistaken belief about the identity of his benefactor, Miss Havisham flashes out wrathfully, “Who am I, for God’s sake, that I should be kind?” (44.269). By the end of the novel she has recognized that her own suffering does not justify the perpetration of her pain on Pip and Estella. This recognition and development is something Mrs Skewton, by contrast, is unable to make, and is a powerful argument for the reader to grant Miss Havisham compassion.

The word ‘evil’ is not often mentioned in the novel, but the most significant instances refer to “that evil genius” Compeyson, and the atmosphere of evil in which Jaggers works: when Jaggers tells Pip Estella and Miss Havisham’s story (without admitting anything), he says, “Put the case that [Miss Havisham’s legal advisor, that is, Jaggers] lived in an atmosphere of evil, and that all he saw of children, was, their being generated in great numbers for certain destruction” (51.307). That the emphasis is laid in these areas may suggest that Dickens intends us to view Miss Havisham partly as a victim of the social systems Jaggers and Compeyson represent. Barbara Black argues that “an etiology of [the pain of Miss Wade, Madame Defarge, and Rosa Dartle] reveals that all three enraged, beautiful women share origins in dependency and rejection and/or violence at the hands of privileged males” (100). While Miss

Havisham has not been subjected to the physical violence Rosa Dartle has suffered,⁷ she has suffered similar unhappiness. Like the women in Black's essay, Miss Havisham is an enraged and once beautiful woman who allowed herself to become emotionally 'dependent' upon Compeyson – as Herbert Pocket says, she loved him with a susceptibility of passion (22.143) which left her effectively defenceless against his treachery.

Miss Havisham's story as Herbert tells it to Pip is that of a "motherless young girl whose father, anxious about his newly-achieved financial status, doted on her and neglected his son, who in turn resented the child so clearly favoured" (Raphael 402-03). The story is "on one hand that of a spoiled and proud woman who, when her expectations are disappointed by a jilting fiancé, spends the rest of her life raging at the forces that worked against her" (403). Raphael believes that readers generally consider Miss Havisham's isolation to be self-inflicted, but that probing reveals the "workings of a complex system which has made her reclusiveness inevitable" (403). Her choice to live secluded in Satis House, she argues, repeats the fate of many Victorian women – her confinement to closed spaces is, as with Bertha Rochester in *Jane Eyre*, "a metaphor for entrapment in a society whose functioning depends in part on females' complicity with their own imprisonment" (402). Raphael contends that while Miss Havisham's "financial independence has allowed her to escape confinement to an asylum, a fate we would imagine for a woman who behaved as she but did not have property or money, she lives as disconnected from the outside world as if she were institutionalized" (403). It must also be recognized, however, that Bertha Rochester was literally imprisoned in an attic by a society who could not understand or deal with her. She is a prisoner in a way that Miss Havisham is not, and part of the point Dickens is making is that Miss Havisham made a conscious decision

to imprison herself, because she is wealthy enough to indulge her anger and pain.

Raphael thus argues that Dickens's condemnation is ultimately aimed not at Miss Havisham, but at the society that formed her and allowed her no other choice (403). The cultural directives informing her behaviour thus make her plausible, or 'readable', and her character is thereby a comment on the system in which she and the other characters operate (406):

The tragedy of [Miss Havisham's] life is not that Compeyson failed to show up at the altar; it is not even that he and her step-brother had plotted against her – it is that she fails to understand the system that works against her. Rather than seeking whatever small, but personally significant, change she might effect, she seeks to revenge herself against society on its own terms. In other words, she acts on the belief that it is only through dehumanising and often brutal deceit and abuse that desire can be satisfied. (Raphael 410)

The ending as Raphael sees it is profoundly pessimistic, but Miss Havisham does acknowledge what she has done; and even though Pip and Estella are severely damaged, Dickens suggests at the novel's close that they too acknowledge their situation, and at the very least will not perpetrate their suffering on others as Miss Havisham did. While Estella warns Pip again and again that she has no heart, at the end of the novel Pip has the assurance that "suffering had been stronger than Miss Havisham's teaching, and had given her a heart to understand what [his] heart used to be" (59.359). Miss Havisham's final response to Pip's pain shows that she too has a heart to understand what his heart is, though she has realized it too late. Estella and Pip are both "bent and broken" at the end of their stories (59.358), but not into the same shape of "wild resentment and wounded pride" as their adoptive mother (49.297).

The reader's response to Miss Havisham is a combination of curiosity, horror,

and pity. This pity is part of why we cannot condemn her as 'evil' in the unhesitating way we condemn Mrs Skewton, yet it does not absolve her from responsibility. Miss Havisham can be unfavourably compared to Betsey Trotwood, who experienced the same kind of treatment by a man, but responded in a positive way. In *Dickens and Women*, Michael Slater writes that Betsey Trotwood, like Miss Havisham, suffered at the hands of a passionately loved man, but that unlike her, she has not become "unbalanced or frozen in her sympathies" (272). Aunt Betsey could be described as a 'comic' figure rather than a 'tragic' one, and she fulfils a different role in *David Copperfield* to the one Miss Havisham fills in *Great Expectations*. Yet it is valuable to compare these two characters. Aunt Betsey could be described as the first Dickensian feminist. She is abusively treated by her husband, who was rumoured to have beaten her and had on one occasion "made some hasty but determined arrangements to throw her out of a two pair of stairs' window" (1.4-5). Her response is to pay him off, effect a mutual separation, restore her maiden name, and buy herself a cottage in a hamlet on the coast, where she establishes herself as a single woman, rules as a queen, and refuses to accept defeat at the hooves of the ubiquitous donkeys (1.5-6). The pain she suffers does not cause her to destroy other lives, as Miss Havisham does with both Pip and Estella: on the contrary, Aunt Betsey cares very much, not only for David, but for Dora, Agnes, Mr Dick, Peggotty, and even the husband who treated her so appallingly. Her only retribution against the male race is attempted through a series of maidservants she takes into service "expressly to educate in a renouncement of mankind, and who ... generally [complete] their abjuration by marrying the baker" (13.185) – her efforts to get them to reject the male species are, as Slater notes, hardly of a very serious or determined kind (272). Although we understand Miss Havisham's behaviour in the framework of *Great Expectations*, it is difficult to see her in an

entirely sympathetic light when compared to Betsey Trotwood, even if, as Chesterton claims, there is “something worse than a common tale of jilting ... behind the masquerade and madness of the awful Miss Havisham” (1913:129). Like Pip, Miss Havisham is warned of her mistake, and she too refuses to listen and so creates her own snares. Pip is cautioned by Estella that he will be hurt, and warned by Joe that things have come to an end between him and Miss Havisham, but he will not listen. Matthew Pocket warns Miss Havisham that she was giving Compeyson too much financial power, but she will not listen. If we hold Pip partly responsible for his suffering, we must hold Miss Havisham partly responsible for hers. Victim or not, Miss Havisham is guilty of stealing Estella’s heart and leaving ice in its place (49.298), and of forgetting Pip’s suffering in the endurance of her own, forgetting that he who would suffer when his heart was broken, just as she did.

As seen in this thesis, ‘perversion’ is a common medium through which Dickens describes ‘evil’ women. It is possible that he derived this from the Nineteenth-century conception of women, which naturalized the mythology of the Angel in the House, so that Dickens’s description of Polly Toodle, for example, illustrates what was commonly perceived to be the ‘natural’ state of women:

[She] was a good plain sample of a nature that is ever, in the mass, better, truer, higher, nobler, quicker to feel, and much more constant to retain, all tenderness and pity, self-denial and devotion, than the nature of men. (*DS*, 3.29)

In the creation of Madame Defarge, Mrs Skewton, and Miss Havisham, Dickens exploits a ‘perversion’ of this ideal to indicate that there is something amiss. The ‘perversion’ of these characters does not necessarily constitute their ‘evil’, but is part of how it is manifested in the novels. Mrs Skewton’s evil lies in her perversion of motherhood – she loves only herself, and unapologetically uses her daughter to secure

her own happiness, with no thought for that daughter's suffering. Madame Defarge's 'perversion' is found in her similarity to Lady Macbeth, and particularly in the fact that she has been unsexed. Similarly, in *Great Expectations*, the image of Miss Havisham in her bridal gown is horrific because it is a travesty. Miss Havisham has turned her wedding clothes into grave-clothes, her veil into a shroud, and her 'love' for Estella into a "dreadful" fondness and "fierce" affection (38.228-29). While Mrs Skewton tries to convince the world and herself that she is young and beautiful, Miss Havisham revels in the fact that she is "yellow skin and bone" (11.70), and there is a "kind of boast" in the way she tells Pip that her heart is broken (8.50). Both characters deny the passage of time, but while Mrs Skewton remains trapped in her past out of vanity and denial of her age, Miss Havisham clings to hers because she is unwilling to deal with and overcome her pain.

Possibly the most powerful manifestation of Miss Havisham's 'perversion' is demonstrated in her description of 'love':

"I'll tell you what real love is. It is blind devotion, unquestioning self-humiliation, utter submission, trust and belief against yourself and against the whole world, giving up your whole heart and soul to the smiter – as I did!" (29.184)

That Miss Havisham uses the word "smiter" instead of "lover" is powerfully indicative of how distorted her understanding of love is. Significantly, it involves the kind of complete self-sacrifice given by the Angel in the House, the kind of love characterizing Esther Summerson or Agnes Wickfield. But Miss Havisham takes it a step further, towards masochism: not a sacrifice *for* someone else, but a sacrifice *to* someone else. This is the kind of love Miss Havisham had for Compeyson, and the love she wants Pip to feel for Estella; it is a love that denies the self totally for the "smiter", a love that is a curse. The failure of her vision is born out by Estella's failure

to love: Miss Havisham tells Estella that she wants love, and Estella responds, “You have it” (38.230). But the only kind of love Estella is capable of giving Miss Havisham is part of the contract or “compact” (37.230) she sees as their relationship. She cannot conceive of the kind of all-giving love Miss Havisham demands, because she has not been taught to love, and because she has not been loved. Miss Havisham protests that she loves Estella, but though it originated in a sincere desire to “save [Estella] from misery like [her] own” (49.298), her ‘love’ has been warped into something beyond that, which Estella cannot return. The novel ends on a positive note, however, when Estella can tell Pip that her suffering has been stronger than Miss Havisham’s teaching, that she has a heart to understand what Pip’s heart used to be. Although educated to be impervious to “softness ... sympathy ... sentiment ... nonsense” (29.183), Estella can finally come to an understanding of love, demonstrating that Miss Havisham’s distorted education is not powerful enough to have damaged her beyond repair.

Miss Havisham’s case is hence not uncomplicated. She is not an evil woman, because although she wrongs Pip and Estella, she has done so out of pain, and acknowledges her crime and has her moment of redemption. The focus on the word ‘evil’ in the novel rests more on Compeyson and the criminal world than it does on Miss Havisham, and she is shown to be its victim, so that while we can ultimately judge her actions as ‘evil’, we do not judge *her* as evil. Her suffering and her self-awareness redeem her in our eyes. In the case of Miss Havisham, we can hate the sin, not the sinner – in the case of Mrs Skewton, we cannot separate the two. Dickens’s characterization of Miss Havisham is such that, even though we do not see inside her mind (and she thereby remains “unknowable”), we are able to write her story, to pity her, and to understand why she does what she does. That we can surmise all of this

from Dickens's characterization of her, even while it depends on her 'unknowability,' means that she is a successful character. Miss Havisham is thus not a successful characterization of an evil woman, because she is not evil. But she is a successful characterization of a state of mind, and therefore a 'readable character'.

Notes

¹ Charles Dickens, “Where We Stopped Growing.” *Household Words*, vi, 1 January 1853, pp 361-363.

² The manuscript of *Great Expectations* is held in the Berg collection in New York and is impossible to access from South Africa, thus necessitating the use of Sucksmith’s citations of the original.

³ As Hilary Schor notes, Miss Havisham has also, like any hysteric, turned her body into its own sign. She is the symbol of her own grief, and it is not surprising that she appears in her brother’s dream with the metaphor made literal, with blood on her chest where her heart was broken (174).

⁴ The importance of this is potentially undermined, however, when one considers that in the novel featuring the most evil female character, Mrs Skewton in *Dombey and Son*, the word does not appear.

⁵ This information comes from the University of Virginia Library Online edition of the novel (see *Works Cited**).

⁶ We could hardly feel pity for Drummle, who seems incapable of feeling anything. He is likely to have been supremely untouched by Estella’s indifference and coldness, and in fact attempts to beat it out of her. He succeeds too – at the end of the novel she tells Pip that suffering was stronger than Miss Havisham’s teaching and that she had been given a heart to understand what his heart used to be (*GE*, “The Original Ending”, 359).

⁷ The reader will recall that James Steerforth tells David of the time he lost patience with Rosa and threw a hammer at her (20.279), cutting open her face and leaving her unforgettable scar.

Chapter IV
A House of Painted Cards
Mrs Skewton

Madame Defarge is “absolutely without pity” for anyone, including herself, and embodies the fundamental concept upon which this exploration of Dickens’s evil women has been based – that of ‘perversion’. Her association with Lady Macbeth illustrates powerfully the definition of ‘perversion’ as it is submitted in this thesis: a deliberate deviation from what is commonly regarded as good or proper. In *Dombey and Son*, we meet another character who perverts nature, and through that character we see Dickens directing his most powerful criticism of evil in women at the mother of a daughter.

In his introduction to the Rochester edition of the novel in 1900, George Gissing writes that Dickens “is not given to ‘analysis’; it is his merit that he makes us see and know his people directly, rarely endeavouring to dissect their minds for us” (49-50). This is a particularly apposite description of Dickens’s method of characterization as it is seen in the four main “people” discussed in this thesis. Of these, Mrs Skewton, or ‘Cleopatra’, as she likes to call herself, is the most evil, but she is not what Hochman would view as a successful character. Dickens does not attempt to describe, or “dissect”, Mrs Skewton’s mind any more than he does Madame Defarge’s, Miss Havisham’s, or Lady Dedlock’s; he characterizes them rather through what they say and how they say it, what they do and how they do it. We feel compassion for Miss Havisham and Lady Dedlock because of their pain; we understand what drives Madame Defarge so remorselessly towards extermination, even while we condemn her for her lack of pity; but we have no such framework for Mrs Skewton. Both Miss Havisham and Mrs Skewton use their daughters’ beauty to achieve certain ends. Unlike Miss Havisham, however, Mrs Skewton does so not out

of bitterness and despair, but out of greed and selfishness – she is “absolutely without pity” for anyone *but* herself – and while Miss Havisham moves at last out of self-absorption into self-awareness, thereby achieving redemption, Mrs Skewton remains to the last caught in her own conceit and egoism.

Mrs Skewton is not a psychologically authentic character, and in the introduction to the Everyman edition in 1907, G. K. Chesterton explores this when he compares Mrs Skewton to Mrs Nickleby. He writes that “Mrs Skewton is really very funny”, but an inferior creation to Mrs Nickleby because “she has something to do in the plot”: that is, to trap Mr Dombey into marrying Edith. By contrast, Mrs Nickleby:

has nothing at all to do in the story, except to get in everybody’s way. The consequence is that we complain not of her for getting in everyone’s way, but of everyone for getting in hers. What are suns and stars, what are times and seasons, what is the mere universe, that it should presume to interrupt Mrs Nickleby? (57)

It is interesting that Chesterton compares these two characters. Mrs Skewton and Mrs Nickleby are not entirely dissimilar: both are prepared to compromise their daughters for their own benefit. Edith is “hawked and vended” (27.381) up and down the country in search of a rich husband; and Mrs Nickleby ignores Kate’s anguish at being sexually harassed and persecuted by the revolting Mulberry Hawk, because she too would like her daughter to marry well (26.314). Vain and silly as Mrs Nickleby is, however, Kate emerges relatively unscathed from her unfortunate encounter with Hawk. Edith, on the other hand, is so emotionally and psychologically damaged by her mother that she is incapable of loving anyone, except Florence, and feels nothing for herself but loathing (27.381). Like Betsey Trotwood, Mrs Nickleby is a comic character, while Edith Dombey is, like Miss Havisham, a tragic one.

Mrs Nickleby’s refusal to acknowledge her daughter’s distress cannot be dismissed – it is an oversight with potentially grim consequences – but the reader does

not see her as a serious force for destruction. As Dickens says, “there was no evil, and little real selfishness in Mrs Nickleby’s heart, [but] she had a weak head and a vain one” (37.447). Mrs Nickleby may be weak and vain, but she is without the malice and cunning characterizing Mrs Skewton, and causes no lasting damage to anyone. She is also, as Chesterton implies, very funny, but while we laugh at Mrs Nickleby’s antics with her marrow-wielding neighbour (41.490), there is something distinctly ominous about Mrs Skewton, even when she is being what could be called ‘amusing’. Mrs Nickleby’s ‘unconsciousness’, notwithstanding her disregard of Kate’s obvious anxiety, endears her to the reader; Mrs Skewton, on the other hand, is fully conscious of what she is doing to Edith, but does not recognize it as wrong.

As Chesterton argues, Mrs Nickleby may be a superior creation to Mrs Skewton, and a credible portrayal of a vain and silly woman, but in the context of *Dombey and Son*, Mrs Skewton does not require an adequate or credible psychology. Instead of portraying a vain and selfish individual, Mrs Skewton is a characterization of vanity and selfishness. She is thereby ‘coherent’ in a representative capacity, rather than in an individual one. Surprisingly, though, some of Dickens’s early critics tended to favour her authenticity. In 1882, for example, A. W. Ward wrote that, “neither Edith Dombey nor Mr Carker is a character of real life”, that Edith was “cold and unreal”, but that there were undeniable “flashes of human nature in the pigments and fragments of her hideous old mother” (45-6). Interestingly, it was Edith, and not her mother, who was considered ‘perverted’. In 1874, John Forster wrote that, “Edith’s worst qualities are but the perversion of what should have been her best. A false education in her, and a tyrant passion in her husband, make them other than nature meant” (2.2.33).

Despite Ward’s contention that she is more “human” than her daughter, Mrs

Skewton does not have any moments wherein the reader can even attempt to see beyond her 'construction' to something resembling humanity. Once again, this is possible with Miss Havisham because Dickens takes her beyond the point of a narrative construction and humanizes her through suffering. Mrs Skewton, however, never manifests any real affliction, and the reader consequently finds it almost impossible to understand or empathize with her as an authentic human being. By contrast, Edith is a much more convincing "configuration of human inwardness" (Hochman 14). It is important for the text that the reader recognizes the extent of Edith's suffering at her mother's hands, and this is most effectively communicated through the narrative granting her interiority, something Mrs Skewton is never given.

As Slater has suggested in his comparison of Edith and Estella, Edith's coldness is psychologically credible (281). To outsiders, she is composed and indifferent, but her words to Mrs Skewton when they are alone convey the true measure of what she endures, and the reader is thereby encouraged to pity her. Edith, in solitude, is always in emotional upheaval. The night before her wedding, for example, she forgives Mrs Skewton her part in the next day's "wickedness", leaves her "without a tremor in her voice, or frame, ... passing onward with a foot that set itself upon the neck of every soft emotion," and goes to her room:

But not to rest; for there was no rest in the tumult of her agitation. To and fro, and to and fro, and to and fro again, five hundred times, among the splendid preparations for her adornment on the morrow; with her dark hair shaken down, her dark eyes flashing with a raging light, ... pacing up and down with an averted head, as if she would avoid the sight of her own fair person, and divorce herself from its companionship.

(30.420)

This description of Edith's agitation contains a vividness and energy never seen in descriptions of Mrs Skewton. When she leaves her mother Edith wears a mask

of indifference and control, but her disturbance of mind is clearly evidenced in the details of her appearance as they follow. Her dark hair is “*shaken* down,” her eyes flash “with a *raging* light,” and she paces restlessly up and down in her room all night “[wrestling] with her *unquiet* spirit, tearless, friendless, silent, proud, and uncomplaining” (30.420, my emphasis). These words do not describe the “pasteboard creature” Slater believes Edith to “stiffen into” through the absence of Dickens’s “comic genius” (261), but describe a passionate and indignant woman struggling to come to terms with the injustice that has been perpetrated upon her. By contrast, Mrs Skewton is never seen alone – we only see her acting out her role as Cleopatra, or alone with Edith, and we thus have no means of connecting with her. The only time she displays any ‘vulnerability’ is after her stroke, when her attitude towards Edith changes, becoming a complex blend of awe, fear, and peevish emotional manipulation (37.512). Mrs Skewton, like Miss Havisham, seems ultimately afraid of her daughter and of what she has created in her. But while Miss Havisham, who watches her ‘daughter’ with “something like fear” (38.232) in her face, is ultimately capable of self-knowledge, Mrs Skewton cannot acknowledge what she has done.

While Madame Defarge’s characterization is grounded in her perversion of feminine qualities, so that she becomes the demonic-anima figure of *A Tale of Two Cities*, and Miss Havisham’s originates in her arrested development, Mrs Skewton’s characterization has its point of departure in her literal and metaphorical artificiality. She may not be a convincing portrayal of an individual human psyche, but she is a compelling narrative construct, and it is primarily in her artifice that this construct is manifested. Steven Marcus argues that *Dombey and Son* directs the reader’s attention to important changes in human existence – death, life, and birth, and that characters in the novel are “brought into action” by means of their response to the realities of

change (313-14). Like Miss Havisham, Mrs Skewton denies change and the passage of time, yet she is “their most absolute victim”. Fixed in an ‘attitude’ of her youth, denying time, mortality, and change, she “has ceased being human”, and has become “something less than real” (314). Mrs Skewton has literally constructed herself as a young, beautiful, and loving mother of a darling daughter whose happiness means everything to her; an innocent Arcadian, who knows “but little of the world” (26.355) of marriage and money. But behind this mask lies the reality of Mrs Skewton’s evil, her deliberate betrayal of motherhood, and an abuse of her daughter in order to ensure her own security.

Mrs Skewton’s falseness, which is consistently challenged by the narrative, is most explicitly manifested in her outward appearance, but her physical ‘construction’ simply represents the metaphorical falseness of her character as a whole. The first description of Mrs Skewton shows her “settling her false curls and false eyebrows with her fan, and showing her false teeth, set off by her false complexion,” drawling and lisping her way through conversation with Major Bagstock and Mr Dombey. She is full of platitudes about “Eden”, “Nature”, and “the perfume of her artless breath,” but rustles a handkerchief that is “faint and sickly with essences” (21.278). Like that handkerchief, Mrs Skewton’s ‘nature’ is only ever an approximation. Her aspirations to being an “Arcadian” (21.280), and her preoccupation with “Heart” and “Soul” (36.501), are consistently undermined and satirized by her apparent inability to remember certain words or phrases for which she substitutes “what’s-its-name” (21.280) and “thingummy” (27.371). In company, Mrs Skewton speaks insipidly, mincingly, and with a “ghastly archness” (21.280). She drawls, lisps, whines, and whimpers; she is pettish and coquettish. But her affected and rambling manner of speech, while in keeping with her façade of naïveté, is inconsistent with the “sharp

glance” and “well-thought out purpose” we later realize she has (36.501). Her response to the first domestic conflict Edith and Mr Dombey experience after their honeymoon and housewarming dinner is indicative of this purpose:

“I am glad to take this slight occasion ... that is so replete with Nature, and your individual characters, and all that – so truly calculated to bring the tears to a parent’s eyes – to say that ... I shall never attempt to interpose between you, at such a time, and never can much regret, after all, such little flashes of the torch of What’s-his-name – not Cupid but the other delightful creature.” (36.501)

There is “a sharpness in the good mother’s glance” (36.501) that does not accord with the ostensibly meandering quality of her words. Her purpose, as revealed above, is “providently to detach herself in the beginning from all the clankings of their chain that were to come, and to shelter herself with the fiction of her innocent belief in their mutual affection, and their adaptation to each other” (36.501). Having married her daughter off to a wealthy man for whom she knows Edith feels nothing but indifference, Mrs Skewton absolves herself of all responsibility for the conflict likely to follow. By perpetuating the lie of her innocence and ingenuousness, she can enjoy the benefits of Edith’s marriage without having to acknowledge her own complicity in the unhappiness that she was always aware would result from such a union. Her conversation with Major Bagstock the day they arrange to marry Dombey to Edith Granger reveals her recognition of the inevitable problems in their union. In response to the Major’s words, “Dombey is as proud, ma’am, as Lucifer”, Mrs Skewton lisps, “A charming quality, reminding one of dearest Edith” (26.359). The ramifications of their mutual pride are later witnessed when Mr Dombey confronts Edith in an attempt to force her recognition of his supremacy: “I am to be deferred to and obeyed.... I am used to this. I require it as my right. In short I will have it” (40.544). Edith’s response

is evidence of her own pride, and the impossibility for her of yielding to him: “You know how different I am.... You know my general history. You have spoken of my mother. Do you think you can degrade, or bend or break, *me* to submission and obedience?” (40.546). Neither of them is prepared to yield an inch, and their inability to compromise is part of what destroys them and their marriage in the end.

Mrs Skewton’s affection for Edith, like her Arcadian leanings and her physical person, is insincere. During her conversation with Major Bagstock the morning they plan to “marry” Edith to Dombey, Mrs Skewton insists of her relationship with Edith that, “The confidence that has subsisted between us – the free development of soul, and openness of sentiment – is touching to think of. We have been more like sisters than mama and child” (26.357). Her affection for Edith is manifested to outsiders in a series of exaggerated and repetitive endearments that ring suspiciously untrue – she peppers her conversation with phrases such as “my dearest” (21.280), “my darling girl” (26.360), “my sweetest”, and “my beautiful pet” (26.357). Each of these phrases significantly incorporates the possessive pronoun – this is particularly resonant in the last one cited: Edith is Mrs Skewton’s possession, her pet. Her endearing terms are forcefully undermined, however, when we see Mrs Skewton and Edith alone.

Although the reader is alerted from the beginning to Mrs Skewton’s “fiction” by her inconsistencies and overcompensation, it is in her solitary interview with Edith that Dickens for the first time explicitly undermines her ‘construction’.

Mr Dombey having asked Edith if he can call “by appointment” the next morning, Mrs Skewton reposes on her sofa with her fan, watching her daughter “stealthily”, a phrase inconsistent with the sisterly intimacy she professed to the Major earlier on in the proceedings:

Thus they remained for a long hour, until Mrs Skewton’s maid appeared, according to custom, to prepare her gradually for

night. At night, she should have been a skeleton, with dart and hour-glass, rather than a woman, this attendant; for her touch was as the touch of Death. The painted object shrivelled underneath her hand; the form collapsed, the hair dropped off, the arched dark eyebrows changed to scanty tufts of grey; the pale lips shrunk, the skin became cadaverous and loose; an old, worn, yellow, nodding woman, with red eyes, alone remained in Cleopatra's place, huddled up, like a slovenly bundle, in a greasy flannel gown.

The very voice was changed, as it addressed Edith, when they were alone again.

"Why don't you tell me," it said sharply, "that he is coming here to-morrow by appointment?"

"Because you know it," returned Edith, "Mother."

The mocking emphasis she laid on that one word! (27.380)

This scene presents in unambiguous tones the physical abomination that lies, literally, beneath Cleopatra's "blooming" juvenility. Under the hands of her ironically named maid, Flowers, Mrs Skewton is gradually dismantled to reveal what is described in terms of a corpse. Far from revealing any kind of interiority such as Edith has when she is alone, the adjectives describing Mrs Skewton reveal "something less than real" (Marcus 314). She *shrivels* and *collapses*, her lips *shrink*, and her skin becomes *cadaverous* – the words describe the reduction of something, a process of disintegration, so that the creature finally displayed in its greasy flannel gown, is not even human any more. Ward's contention that "the pigments and fragments" of Mrs Skewton's character contain "flashes of human nature" (46) is, in one sense, correct. To the extent that Mrs Skewton represents an aspect of a particular section of society, and a specific kind of individual, she does evince "flashes of human nature". That they are revealed in "pigments and fragments" is, however, part of the point. Mrs Skewton is literally comprised of paint and fragments – Dickens describes her as a "painted object" and "a house of painted cards" (30.418); and when she is found struck by

Paralysis at her looking-glass, they take her “to pieces in very shame”, and put “the little of her that was real” on a bed (37.509). As a “painted object”, Mrs Skewton is both artificial (an object), and has her true identity as an object hidden, by being painted. As a “*house of painted cards*”, she is another kind of construction, and the “cards” are particularly significant in view of her predilection for playing games not only with cards, but also with people.¹

Lawrence Frank contends that “psychic paralysis leads, at last, to the fragmentation of the self” (48), and Mrs Skewton’s refusal to acknowledge time and change, her “psychic paralysis”, therefore, leads to the literal fragmentation of her self. She is a collection of “pieces” constituting a travesty of humanity – human nature, its greed and avarice, is reflected in her “pigments and fragments”, but not necessarily in her as an individual. If the construction of her character revolves around her literal and metaphorical artificiality, then the scene with Flowers articulates the deconstruction of both. In constructing herself as Cleopatra, Mrs Skewton denies time and change, but also denies her humanity. As witnessed, she is no more loving mama than she is youthful Arcadian, but the construction hides her “well-considered purpose” of shielding herself from responsibility. By presenting herself as a naïve child of Nature, who desires only to be surrounded by cows (21.281), and who spends her life in the thrall of Nature’s “artless breath” (21.278), Mrs Skewton makes certain that no one could ever suspect her of the deceit and plotting of which she is guilty. Likewise, her saccharine affection for Edith ensures that, from outward appearances at least, people have evidence for nothing but a loving and considerate disposition. In fact, she perverts maternal love for a daughter into love only for what that daughter’s beauty can bring her.

John Reed describes the major ‘crime’ in Dickens as the “betrayal and

subversion of charity and love” (92), which allows villains to treat others as if they were commodities. Wrongdoing in Dickens’s novels “is not defined by an act; it is not a matter of a crime or of unethical conduct. Wrongdoing in Dickens is defined by an entire life” (Fisher 110). Thus, Miss Havisham has conducted herself in an “unethical” manner, and committed ‘crimes’ against Pip and Estella; but Mrs Skewton’s ‘crime’ is defined by her entire existence. Her life has been a series of attempts to marry Edith to rich men in order to establish her own financial security: as Major Bagstock says, “Cleopatra the peerless, and her Antony Bagstock, will often speak of this, triumphantly, when sharing the elegance and wealth of Edith Dombey’s establishment” (26.359). Edith’s “mocking emphasis” on the word “mother” in the scene above is indicative of how little a mother Mrs Skewton has been, and how much she has mocked what it is to be a mother. She has perverted maternal love, and the natural desire to find a secure and loving partner in marriage for a daughter, into selling that daughter as a product.

Dombey and Son is largely ‘about’ buying and selling, and the most powerful manifestation of this in the novel is the trade in human beings, where daughters become commodities. Both Mrs Skewton and her counterpart, Mrs Brown, reify their daughters’ youth and beauty into marketable items. They are emblematic on one hand of a social system that sanctions the traffic in women, and, on the other, of two individuals who perpetuate that system for their own benefit. That the novel presents them in the viciously satirical manner it does indicates Dickens’s critique of both the system that allows them to flourish and breed across the social scale, and also of the individuals who keep that system alive. In other novels throughout his *oeuvre*, Dickens explores this same idea, always with the same condemnation directed at those responsible for hawking and vending their children. In *Nicholas Nickleby*, his most

vigorous attack is directed not at Mrs Nickleby, but at Mr Bray, who sells his daughter to the hideous Arthur Gride for a small fortune (47.572). In *Our Mutual Friend*, Mrs Lammle and her husband join in a scheme to sell Georgiana Podsnap “into wretchedness for life” (2.33.398). Mrs Lammle is not Georgiana’s mother, and she ultimately takes pity on Georgiana and asks Mr Twemlow to save the girl, but her intentions initially mirror Mrs Skewton’s.

Dombey and Son’s preoccupation with money and possession is evidenced early in the narrative. Mr Dombey’s attitude towards Polly Toodle as wet nurse, for example, denies her humanity and identity and turns her into nothing but a “milk-producer” (Smith 105):

“It is not at all in this bargain that you need become attached to my child, or that my child become attached to you... When you go away from here, you will have concluded what is a mere matter of bargain and sale, hiring and letting: and will stay away. The child will cease to remember you; and you will cease, if you please, to remember the child.” (2.18)

Similarly, Mr Dombey’s thoughts upon his wife’s imminent death are, “that if his wife should sicken and decay, he would be very sorry, and that he would find a something gone from among his plate and furniture, and other household possessions, which was well worth the having, and could not be lost without sincere regret” (1.7). Mrs Dombey’s death is not the loss of a *someone*, a human being for whom he cares, but the loss of a *something*, a possession. Mr Dombey’s marriage to Edith is similarly the purchase of a “valuable object on the open market” (Smith 106), and reduces her to the same commodification as his first wife – she exists “as his property, as an extension of his conception of himself as Dombey and Son ... to adorn the name of the firm and to provide the male heir required to make his identity complete and enduring” (Frank 52). The difference is that Edith, the second Mrs Dombey, is

painfully aware of her status as a bought object, and while she “submits to the financial arrangement that is her marriage, she does so refusing to accept any pretence about the nature of the transaction” (Waters 50):

“Who takes me, refuse that I am, ... shall take me, as this man does, with no art of mine put forth to lure him. He sees me at the auction, and he thinks it well to buy me. Let him! When he came to view me – perhaps to bid – he required to see the role of my accomplishments. I gave it to him. When he would have me show one of them, to justify his purchase to his men, I require of him to say which he demands, and I exhibit it. I will do no more.” (27.382)

Edith enters the novel as an adult, “fully conscious of, and articulate about, her victimisation” (Slater 263), and as the novel’s voice of moral consciousness, she speaks out for herself in an individual as well as in a collective capacity, against the corrupted social values embodied by Mrs Skewton. Ward argues that Edith’s speeches are “lapses into sentiment” (45), but it is through these speeches that the reader comes to understand the real horror of her position. Mrs Skewton’s justification for teaching Edith to scheme and plot is that they “have been making every effort to secure to [her] a good establishment. That has been [her] life. And now [she] has got it” (27.381). But Edith’s bitter response reveals the anguish that has characterized her existence:

“There is no slave in a market; there is no horse in a fair: so shown and offered and examined and paraded, mother, as I have been, for ten shameful years,” cried Edith, with a burning brow, and the same bitter emphasis on the one word. ... “The licence of look and touch,” she said, with flashing eyes, “have I submitted to it, in half the places of resort upon the map of England. Have I been hawked and vended here and there, until the last grain of self-respect is dead within me, and I loathe myself? Has *this* been my late childhood? I had none before. Do not tell me that I had, to-night, of all nights in my life!” (27.381)

Her words poignantly undermine Mrs Skewton’s fiction of the concerned mother who

wants her daughter's peace of mind and financial security – Edith describes herself in terms of a marketable item, an animal, a slave, a possession.

Part of Mrs Skewton's position as a textual construct is through her parallel with Mrs Brown, and the subsequent link drawn between Mrs Skewton and Mrs Brown validates Edith's conviction that her mother has sold her as merchandise.

'Good Mrs Brown' and her daughter, Alice Marwood, are linked to Mrs Skewton and Edith by more than Dickens's desire for an artificial symmetry of plot. They symbolise the fatal mingling in society of those evils that creep from high to low like the greed-engendered cholera coiling from the slums into lordly homes. (Johnson 634)

Mrs Skewton is constructed as Cleopatra both by herself and by the narrative of *Dombey and Son*, but the strong similarity between her and Mrs Brown is clearly demonstrated in Mrs Skewton's deconstruction. When Mrs Brown first enters the novel, she is described as "a very ugly old woman, with red rims around her eyes, and a mouth that mumbled and chattered of itself when she was not speaking" (6.71). Notwithstanding Mrs Skewton's first appearance with her "blooming" face and juvenile attire, when Flowers finally divests her of the paraphernalia of Cleopatra, she is revealed as "an old, worn, yellow, nodding woman, with red eyes" (27.380). The similarities are not merely accidental, and are reinforced as the novel progresses, particularly after Mrs Skewton is struck by Paralysis at her looking-glass (37.509), after which event she increases in imbecility, so that when she and Mrs Brown eventually meet during their walk on the Downs, Edith thinks of the latter as "a distorted shadow of her mother" (40.553).

The connection between Mrs Brown and Mrs Skewton is made evident much earlier on in the novel, though, on the night Alice arrives back from the penal colonies in Australia. Up to this point, we have heard the voice of Edith condemning her

mother for hawking and vending her up and down the country like a prize horse, but in this scene, Dickens makes explicit that Mrs Skewton's behaviour constitutes prostitution, and is accepted or justified because it happens in the upper echelons of society. The novel ultimately presents Mrs Brown and Mrs Skewton as the same woman, on opposite ends of the social scale, and the relationship between Alice and Mrs Brown mirrors that of Edith and Mrs Skewton in a number of ways that reinforce this.

Edith and Alice are both proud and beautiful women who have been exploited by their mothers, and are eloquent in their condemnation of their plight. When Harriet Carker expresses pity for Alice on her road to London that dark, wet night, and says, "There is nothing we may not hope to repair; it is never too late to amend.... You are penitent –", Alice responds, "No, I am not! I can't be. I am no such thing. Why should I be penitent, and all the world go free? They talk to me of my penitence. Who's penitent for the wrongs that have been done to me?" (33.466). Upon her return to her mother's house, she relates the narrative of her life in the following terms:

"There was a child called Alice Marwood ... born, among poverty and neglect, and nursed in it.... The only care she knew ... was to be beaten, and stunted, and abused sometimes; and she might have done better without that. She lived in homes like this, and in the streets ... and yet she brought good looks out of this childhood. So much the worse for her. She had better have been hunted and worried to death for ugliness. There was a girl called Alice Marwood. She was handsome. She was taught too late, and taught all wrong.... What came to that girl comes to thousands every year. It was only ruin, and she was born to it."

(34.470)

Alice's words are strongly echoed in Edith's story of her past the night before Mr Dombey comes to propose. Her tone of "burning indignation", and the content of her speech repeat the story Alice tells of her childhood: "When was I ever a child? What

childhood did you leave to me? I was a woman – artful, designing, mercenary, laying snares for men – before I knew myself, or you, or even understood the base and wretched aim of every display I learnt” (27.381). The exploitation of beauty and youth, and its subsequent suffering and ruin, characterizes both narratives. Edith is, of course, not ‘ruined’ in the same way as is Alice, but the psychological ramifications for the two daughters are the same. While both are proud women, they nevertheless retain a pride in which they retain “shameful consciousness of [their] objectification” and a “self-alienation ... directly attributed to [their] commodification” (Waters 50). Edith and Alice also express their self-loathing and humiliation in gestures of self-mutilation (51). The chapter in which Mr Dombey commands Edith to obey and defer to him shows her “turning a bracelet round and round upon her arm; not winding it about with a light, womanly touch, but pressing and dragging it over the smooth skin, until the white limb showed a bar of red” (40.545). Similarly, Alice is “contemptuous” of her bleeding foot on the way past Harriet’s house, and in speaking of how she had once been handsome, seizes her hair roughly, “as if she would have torn it out; then, threw it down again, and flung it back as though it were a heap of serpents” (33.465).

Alice and Edith are also, however, capable of forgiveness and compassion, thereby showing a generosity and integrity of spirit in which they are unfavourably contrasted with their mothers. The night before her wedding, Edith tells her mother, “The object of our lives is won. Henceforth let us wear it silently. My lips are closed upon the past from this hour. I forgive you your part in to-morrow’s wickedness. May God forgive my own!” (30.420). Similarly, Alice concludes her life story with, “There! I have done, mother, ... I have said enough. Don’t let you and I talk of being undutiful, whatever we do. Your childhood was like mine, I suppose. So much the worse for both of us. I don’t want to blame you, or to defend myself; why should I?

That's all over long ago." (34.471)

By contrast, Mrs Brown and Mrs Skewton do nothing but complain about how good they have been as mothers, and how ungrateful their daughters are, remaining to the last unrepentant of the injustices they have inflicted. Mrs Brown repeatedly complains of Alice that, "She don't care for me! after all these years, and all the wretched life I've led!" (34.469); and tells Mrs Skewton on the Downs that Alice is her "handsome and undutiful daughter" who gives her "nothing but reproaches" for all she has done for her (40.553). Likewise, Mrs Skewton continually protests that Edith has no "natural affection" for her (37.511) and will not treat her in a filial manner (30.419). While Mrs Skewton continues to remind Edith of what she has gained, and whom she has gained it through, and to demand love and gratitude, Edith repeatedly tells her mother, "I reproach you with nothing. I do not mean to wound you, mother. Have you no remembrance of what has passed between us? Let the Past rest" (37.511). Edith remains true to her word, and her lips are closed upon the past from the night before her wedding. She says nothing until the night her mother dies, but her final words to the woman who has exploited her for almost thirty years are words of forgiveness:

"Can you recollect the night before I married? I told you then that I forgave you your part in it, and prayed to God to forgive my own. I told you that the past was at an end between us. I say so now, again. Kiss me, mother." (41.564)

Alice's compassion is finally demonstrated in her relenting towards Carker: she wishes to "repair what [she has] done, if it is possible", even though she says it is "without reason" (53.724).

The chapter in which Alice's relationship with Mrs Brown is discussed, titled "Another Mother and Daughter", ends significantly, with Dickens for the first time

drawing an explicit parallel between the two pairs of women. Significantly, the chapter comes directly before the one in which Edith and Mr Dombey return from their honeymoon, thereby reinforcing the connection between the two women:

Were this miserable mother, and this miserable daughter, only the reduction to their lowest grade, of certain social vices sometimes prevailing higher up? In this round world of many circles within circles, do we make a weary journey from the high grade to the low, to find at last that they lie close together, that the two extremes touch, and that our journey's end is but our starting place? Allowing for great difference of stuff and texture, was the pattern of this woof repeated among gentle blood at all?

Say, Edith Dombey! And Cleopatra, best of mothers, let us have your testimony! (34.477-79)

As much as Mrs Brown has prostituted her daughter, Mrs Skewton has prostituted hers – the ‘crime’ is no less heinous because it happens in high society. Catherine Waters contends that, “Since Mrs Skewton has had almost nothing else to live upon but ‘the reputation of some diamonds, and her family connections’, her daughter’s marketing has been the object of all her ‘pains and labour’” (49). Mrs Skewton’s only real possession is her daughter: she sees Edith’s beauty as her capital, and invests it with skill. But the analogy Dickens draws between her and Mrs Brown indicates his condemnation of such attitudes, regardless from which end of the social scale they stem. The two mothers epitomize a society that gives women very little choice but to effectively sell themselves into marriage.

The night before Mr Dombey’s proposal, Edith accepts the fact that she has no choice but to subscribe to the system: “So, as we are genteel and poor, I am content that we should be made rich by these means” (27.382). Yet the appalling truth of what she is forced to do is clear. Her mother asks: “What are you, pray? What are you?” and Edith’s response demonstrates her recognition of the reality of her situation, and

how closely allied it is to Alice's:

“I have put the question to myself,” said Edith, ashy pale, and pointing to the window, “more than once when I have been sitting there, and something in the faded likeness of my sex has wandered past outside; and God knows I have met with my reply. Oh mother, mother, if you had but left me to my natural heart when I too was a girl – a younger girl than Florence – how different I might have been!” (30.419)

Edith has been both prostituted, and consequently, as Forster notes, ‘perverted’ (2.2.33), by her mother. Her distorted “education” was completed too long ago for her to “take a new course, and to stop [her mother’s], and to help [her]self” (27.382).

The connection between Mrs Brown and Mrs Skewton is an echo of what Dickens does in *Great Expectations* – by making Compeyson, the villain of the novel, a gentleman turned forger, he demonstrates that evil or “treachery” is not limited to the lower classes (Raphael 405). Compeyson is just as vile and malevolent as Orlick, the blacksmith in training. By making Mrs Skewton and Mrs Brown mirror images of each other In *Dombey and Son*, he reinforces this statement: prostitution is prostitution, whether it comes from the lower classes or those of gentle birth. Phiz’s illustration of this meeting clearly shows the link the reader is meant to draw between the two women. Edith and Alice frame the picture, standing in the same posture, and facing each other with the same facial expression. Between them stand the mothers – one a revolting old crone, the other a mirror image of that crone, but wearing a flowered bonnet (40.554) – both of them wearing the same eager, avaricious expression. The illustration is structured to imply a circular movement: the folds of Edith’s dress lead the eye down towards Mrs Skewton, whose scarf is blown by the wind and almost touches Mrs Brown’s extended hand, and the lines of Alice’s cloak and dress close the ring. The effect is remarkable: Edith and Alice seem to be circling

each other warily, while their mothers form the vortex of the rotation, so that we feel the four women spend eternity walking around each other on the Downs, and never breaking eye contact.

Notwithstanding Waters's contention that Mrs Skewton's only 'possession' is her daughter, and the only way she can make a living, the reader is at no point encouraged to feel that she is justified in what she is doing. Mrs Skewton's 'crime' is ultimately the failure of love, a failure evident not only in her inability to acknowledge this 'crime' against her daughter and ask forgiveness, but also in her attempt to re-enact it with Florence.

From the moment she meets Florence, Mrs Skewton's endearments are ominously similar to the ones she uses in public for Edith. She calls her "my charming Florence", "our exceedingly precious Florence", "my sweetest Florence", "our extremely fascinating young friend" (30.410), and most disturbingly, "my darling pet" (30.410-411). In view of Mrs Skewton's treatment of her daughter as a horse, this last term has particularly sinister resonance for the tale of Florence. The first time she sees Florence, she eyes her through her glass, "as though picturing to herself what she might be made, by the infusion – from her own copious storehouse, no doubt – of a little more Heart and Nature" (28.393). Her idea is quite clearly to take Florence under her wing, now that she has married Edith off, and to have Florence as a replacement article of trade.

The night before Edith's wedding, Mrs Skewton asks Dombey if he will leave Florence with her, as a balm in "the extremely shattered state to which [she will] be reduced" (30.417). Steven Marcus argues that Mrs Brown (and thereby Mrs Skewton) is a witch-figure in the fairy story of Florence (86), and Slater points out that "the kidnapping of the child Florence by Mrs Skewton's *doppelgänger*, 'Good Mrs

Brown', ... powerfully evokes for us the potential moral and spiritual consequences for Florence of now being delivered over to Mrs Skewton for the 'formation of her mind'" (260). Once again, the two old crones are linked, this time through their joint desire to exploit Florence's beauty, instead of their daughters'. Mrs Brown's actions during the kidnapping of Florence when she is a child are an explicit depiction of what Mrs Skewton wants to do: she divests Florence of her beautiful clothes, and even considers cutting off her hair to sell, thereby reducing the child to a collection of marketable items (6.72-73). In being "deprived" of a daughter she does not care for, Mrs Skewton wishes to have a substitute, in whom she will induce the same 'perversity' she did in her daughter, thereby showing that she feels no remorse for the suffering she has caused Edith.

Edith, of course, knows what her mother is conspiring. Despite the fact that she initially tells Florence that she cannot "love, or be loved", her stepdaughter is dear to her (35.488); and Edith thwarts her mother's plan to create for Florence the "miserable and sordid transaction" (27.378) that has been her own life:

"It is enough," said Edith steadily, "that we are what we are. I will have no youth and truth dragged down to my level. I will have no guileless nature undermined, corrupted, and perverted, to amuse the leisure of a world of mothers. You know my meaning. Florence must go home." (30.418)

Mrs Skewton would corrupt and pervert Florence not simply to amuse her in her leisure in the long days before Edith returns, but to marry her off and make some money out of her, and her response to Edith's words shows how artificial her affection for her "sweetest Florence" is in the face of her terror that Edith might tumble her plans into ruins. Far from requiring her as a "balm" to her shattered nerves, Florence means nothing to her: "Let her go!.... I am sure I am willing she should go. What is the girl to me?" (30.419).

Steven Marcus maintains that *Dombey and Son* is a “criticism of English life and society ... written from the dark side of the conception, the side that sees the imbalances and perversions which disrupt the natural processes of human life and civilisation” (320). These ‘perversions’ are most vividly illustrated in Mrs Skewton and Mrs Brown. Mrs Skewton is not a psychologically coherent character, but as a force of perversion and embodiment of the betrayal of motherhood, she is a powerful imaginative construct. Notwithstanding her physical vulnerability at the end of her existence, the reader is never given any access to Mrs Skewton’s psyche. Like Miss Havisham, she is characterized through what (and how) she says and does; but unlike Miss Havisham, she is not presented in terms that encourage sympathy or compassion. Her last words are particularly resonant in view of her inability, or unwillingness, to recognize that she has done anything wrong to Edith:

Her wandering hands upon the coverlet join feebly palm to palm, and move towards her daughter; and a voice not like hers, not like any voice that speaks our mortal language – says, “For I nursed you!” (41.563)

After her stroke, Mrs Skewton becomes “hugely exacting in respect of Edith’s affection and gratitude and attention to her; highly laudatory of herself as a most inestimable parent: and very jealous of having any rival in Edith’s regard” (37.510). She maintains this attitude right up to her death, complaining of the absence of Edith’s “natural affection” (37.511), despite Edith’s repeated assertions that the past is at an end between them, and that she reproaches her mother with nothing. Up to her last moments, she uses her position as mother to demand love and gratitude. The implication of Edith’s words the night before her wedding also disclose the ambiguous nature of Mrs Skewton’s iniquity: for her to sell her daughter as a commodity is condemned by Dickens through the clear association between her and Mrs Brown; but

he also condemns a society which forces women to such extremes. Mrs Skewton's desire to exploit Florence as well takes her far beyond any kind of justification the reader might be able to envision: she sells her daughter, and is prepared to sell Florence, not just for the money, but because she wants to do so. She betrays her role as mother by abusing her position of trust and authority for evil, and by doing so for no reasons the text can ultimately justify. Like Madame Defarge, Mrs Skewton has become a travesty of womanhood, but her perversion is manifested particularly, and powerfully, through motherhood, thereby making her one of Dickens's most evil female characters. She is characterized in much the same way as is Mrs Snagsby in *Bleak House* – as Cohan notes, Mrs Snagsby is a “flat” character “because Dickens's text does not change or extend the coding for our construction of her virtual existent” (13). Just as Mrs Snagsby “remains limited to the same ‘sharp’ note trumpeted every time she appears” (13), Mrs Skewton has the one note of her artificiality “trumpeted” every time *she* appears. The reader's construction of her character remains consistent, and is “continually reinforced by Dickens's narration and her own dialogue” (13). In the case of Mrs Snagsby, this is not extended any further, but with Mrs Skewton it is – she may be characterized partly by the “rhetorical description” of her falseness, but she is also extended through her association with Mrs Brown, and through their representing, within the context of the narrative, the societal trade of human beings for which they are condemned as ‘evil’.

Notes

¹ Mrs Skewton is connected in this sense with Carker, the villain of the novel. Significantly, the description of Carker at his papers

would easily suggest some whimsical resemblance to a player at cards. The face of Mr Carker the Manager was in keeping with such a fancy. It was the face of a man who studied his play, warily: who made himself master of all the strong and weak points of the game: who registered the cards in his mind as they fell about him, knew exactly what was on them, what they missed, and what they made: who was crafty to find out what the other players held, and who never betrayed his own hand. (22.288-89)

The picture could just as easily describe Mrs Skewton. Like Carker, she plays games with both cards and people. The previous chapter, in which Edith and Mr Dombey meet for the first time, ends with Mrs Skewton playing cards with the Major while Edith plays the harp for Dombey. But Mrs Skewton's "sharp eye ... glistened like a bird's, and did not fix itself upon the game, but pierced the room from end to end, and gleamed on harp, performer, listener, everything" (21.288). She watches the cards with which she is really playing – Edith and Dombey. Like Carker, she is also described more than once as a predator. Carker's ominously toothy smile, his sly manner, and watchful eye (22.289), are echoed in Mrs Skewton's "vigilance of eye in respect of Mr Dombey and Edith", which could not surpass that of a lynx, and her "stealthy" glances at Edith (27.379-80).

Chapter V
Between Melting and Freezing
Lady Dedlock

It may seem odd to have a character like Lady Dedlock in a thesis about evil women.

Lady Dedlock is not evil. She is not a bad mother. Yet she is in this thesis for a number of reasons: on a superficial level, Lady Dedlock, like the other characters discussed here, is a major character in the novel in which she features. She is also, like Miss Havisham and Mrs Skewton, a mother figure who has a hugely damaging effect on her daughter, albeit unwittingly and inadvertently. Lady Dedlock is also, however, profoundly ambiguous and mysterious. She exists as the major maternal figure in a novel that is in one sense ‘about’ the absence of mothering. This is most explicitly and unambiguously condemned in the novel through figures such as Mrs Jellyby and Miss Barbary, but Lady Dedlock exists between melting and freezing, between coherence and construct, and as such she represents most compellingly the absence of the mother. Because of her ‘absence’ in the discourse itself, there is not very much to say about Lady Dedlock herself, so that she is most effectively examined through the lens of other characters in the novel, most importantly Esther.

In his essay on the readability of character, Steven Cohan uses Dickens’s characterization of Lady Dedlock to demonstrate “how little character need depend upon psychological discourse ... to activate our imaginative construction of the figure as a virtual existent” (14). He argues that Lady Dedlock is not a “round” character, in Forster’s psychological definition of the term, and that the text gives the reader very little in the way of “helpful direction” when it comes to her, “especially in contrast to the more complete psychological representation of her daughter” (14). This contrast between them,

however, establishes in and of itself a blank or hiatus in the text that draws readers towards the figure of Lady Dedlock, and encourages them to construct her as a virtual existent. Cohan further contends that, “the discourse encourages our interest because it instructs us to envision her not in a ‘melting’, but in a ‘freezing’ mood of inanimation and indolence, as a further pointed contrast to the obsessive, manic energy of the other characters, such as Mrs Snagsby” (14). For the purposes of this thesis, however, it is more appropriate to say that while the text may do this initially, it ultimately encourages us to see her in neither a ‘melting’, nor a ‘freezing’ mood, but somewhere between the two. From the outside, and for much of the text, we see Lady Dedlock’s mask of lassitude and indolence, her ‘freezing’ mood; when she is alone, in what Saunders defines as her “floor scenes”, we see her ‘melting’ mood. According to character theory as it has been laid out, Lady Dedlock’s aloofness and composure may thus be seen to show her ‘construct’, and her floor scenes show her ‘coherence’. She is not a statue, stuck in a ‘freezing’ mood but exists between melting and freezing, and between coherence and construct, and it is here that her importance for this thesis lies.

Esther Summerson, the first-person narrator of *Bleak House*, is much more psychologically authentic than is her mother. The narrative of *Bleak House* tells Esther’s story, facilitating the reader’s understanding of her character as it has been constructed by her childhood, and thereby encouraging us to feel sympathy for her (Cohan 14). Lady Dedlock, “the most psychologically elusive” of all the characters in the novel, is, however, among the most imaginatively compelling precisely because she is such a blank, or so ‘absent’, as a “person” (14). Cohan argues that, “because she is not explained psychologically by the text’s discourse, we construct her figure much in the same way we

do Mrs Snagsby's" (14) – by filling in the blanks of what the discourse does not explicitly provide (13), thereby hoping to ‘understand’ her in a psychological sense. But while Dickens’s characterization of Mrs Snagsby uses details in the text, her nose for example, to facilitate our construction of her character, it is the text of *Bleak House* as a whole that tells us about Lady Dedlock (14). The plot, Cohan points out, seems to provide some explanation for her behaviour, but “when all is said and done it actually gives us very little to go on, since her relationship with Hawdon remains shrouded in unanswered questions about her past” (14). The reader therefore attempts to “coordinate her lack of animation to the recurring images of disease, or to the problem of sexual repression, or to the spiritual bankruptcy of a moneyed class”, but no matter how we try to account for her, she “remains a puzzle, a blank, psychologically indeterminate” (14).

Lady Dedlock is, however, a profoundly sympathetic character from the beginning of the novel, and her power as an imaginative construct depends in part on her psychological indeterminacy. As Saunders notes, the absence of a “clear narrative guide” to Lady Dedlock’s consciousness means that “the focus is as much on the interpretive work of the reader as it is on the [character herself]” (72), and much of this interpretation is grounded in our observation of her “floor scenes” (68). Yet the reader is predisposed to a sympathetic response from the start of the novel, long before the first floor scene, by her relations to certain people around her. Although we are not told much about Lady Dedlock during her first appearance in the novel, her husband is presented as a good and worthy man, and his love for her stimulates the reader’s initial sympathy for her. Sir Leicester Dedlock, described as “a gentleman of strict conscience, disdainful of all littleness and meanness, and ready ... to die any death ... rather than give occasion for the

least impeachment of his integrity” (2.19), marries Lady Dedlock for love, and his gallantry towards her has not changed since the days he first courted her (2.19). His love for his wife is most poignantly evidenced in his distress at and response to her flight at the end of the novel. Standing in his room, once Inspector Bucket has left, his thoughts are for the woman who has been for years “a main fibre of the root of his dignity and pride,” who he “has loved, admired, honoured, and set up for the world to respect ... who, at the core of all the constrained conventionalities of his life, has been a stock of living tenderness and love” (54.774), and whose name he pronounces “in a tone of mourning and compassion rather than reproach” (54.775). Lady Dedlock’s affectionate response to her maid Rosa also helps to undermine the ‘frozen’ façade behind which she lives – her “motherly touch” and “eyes so full of musing interest” (28.420) are inconsistent with the “exhausted composure” and “equanimity of fatigue” (2.19) she displays to the world.

It is Lady Dedlock’s floor scenes that illustrate most explicitly, however, the passion that lies behind her ‘freezing’ mask. Saunders argues that Dickens wanted to “draw from his readers that imaginative understanding denied [Lady Dedlock] by the myrmidons of society” – in *Bleak House*, therefore, Lady Dedlock’s “floor scenes” exist, like Edith Dombey’s, to engender sympathy in the reader (72). In her first floor scene, after Guppy tells her what he has pieced together about her past, the narrative makes evident two important things: firstly, the passion within Lady Dedlock; and secondly, that she is Esther’s mother, yet did not abandon her child, and is in fact as much a victim as Esther of the cruel Miss Barbary. Saunders writes of this scene that, “the violence of Lady Dedlock’s response reveals just how intense her emotions are” (73). Her usual self-possession gradually gives way throughout her meeting with Guppy to a “dead colour” on

her face when he mentions Miss Barbary, and she ejaculated “My God!” at Hawdon’s name. But it is afterwards, in her chamber, that the full extent of Lady Dedlock’s emotional upheaval is most strongly shown, when the cry goes up, “from a wild figure on its knees. ‘O my child, my child! Not dead in the first hours of her life, as my cruel sister told me; but sternly nurtured by her, after she had renounced me and my name! O my child, O my child!’” (29.433). The language used in this scene, “except for her invocations of ‘my child’, is scarcely the language of wild torment: it is the language of an actress conveying an important piece of information to her audience” (Saunders 74). But the contrast between the “wild figure” we see here and Lady Dedlock’s customary poise also makes it an effective conveyor of her anguish. Through the articulation of both her emotional distress and the practical information of what has been done to her, the reader is able to understand and empathize with Lady Dedlock as a suffering human being, notwithstanding the “melodramatic” (Saunders 74) quality of this scene – our sympathy becomes more pronounced as the novel and the floor scenes progress.

Lady Dedlock’s emotion is also conveyed through narrative reticence, as indicated by her gestures and responses when Tulkinghorn confronts her about her secret (Saunders 74). His imperviousness to Lady Dedlock’s distress is reflected in his watching her with “attentive *curiosity*” as he watches the “struggle in her breast” (41.605, my emphasis), and thinks of the “power this woman has, to keep these raging passions down!” (41.604). He twists the screws until “he has conquered her”, and the composed and impenetrable Lady Dedlock of the fashionable intelligence “falters, trembles, and puts her hand confusedly to her head” (41.606). Tulkinghorn knows the uncommon constraint she has been putting on herself, but, the narrator says, he would know it all the better,

if he saw the woman pacing her own rooms with her hair wildly thrown from her flung back face, her hands clasped behind her head, her figure twisted as if by pain. He would think so all the more, if he saw the woman thus hurrying up and down for hours, without fatigue, without intermission, followed by the faithful step upon the Ghost's Walk. (41.610)

The description is reminiscent of Edith Dombey, her dark hair “shaken down” (30.420), pacing restlessly up and down through the small hours of the morning before her wedding. Lady Dedlock, normally calm, disdainful, and self-possessed, is seen “*hurrying*” up and down, her hair “*wildly*” thrown, her face “*flung* back”, her figure “*twisted* as if by pain” – the words powerfully indicate her inner torment.

It is interesting to note how Lady Dedlock's floor scenes change as they progress through the novel. In this scene and the last one before her death, the horror of Lady Dedlock's mental agony is conveyed “through descriptions of innerness” (Saunders 74) that do not require her to verbalize “a horror that is ... unutterable” (55.790). As opposed to her first floor scene, when her words give the reader information about her past, in the later scenes Lady Dedlock utters nothing but moans. While the first scene provokes a more intellectual response to her pain, by conveying knowledge of the injustice that has been done to her by her sister, the later scenes provoke an emotional response in the reader. Her horror is beyond words, beyond expression, but her pain is convincingly portrayed in such a way that the reader is able to empathize with her anguish:

She has thrown herself upon the floor, and lies with her hair all wildly scattered, and her face buried in the cushions of a couch. She rises up, hurries to and fro, flings herself down again, and

rocks and moans. The horror that is upon her, is unutterable. If she really were the murderess, it could hardly be, for the moment, more intense. (55.790)

Dickens's characterization of Lady Dedlock thus combines "narrative reticence and mystery concerning her situation and feelings" with scenes in which she expresses herself (Saunders 75). She therefore moves literally between a melting and freezing mood, between the construct of Lady Dedlock of the freezing mask, and the coherence of Lady Dedlock of the melting mask, in her solitary torment. The novel is thus constructed to provoke sympathy for Lady Dedlock, not just through her relations to other characters, but also through our knowledge of her suffering on both an intellectual and emotional level. Within herself, she has some degree of psychological coherence of the sort that Edith Dombey has – like Edith we see her true colours, her unhappiness and misery, when she is alone, and it is predominantly through these scenes that the reader is encouraged to pity her. Although she is "psychologically elusive", we can find ways to "write" her story for her. We are told very little about Lady Dedlock, and as Cohan intimates, it is the novel as a whole that tells her story. She exists as a kind of absence, halfway between melting and freezing, the most mysterious and complex figure in a novel in which a major concern is the absence of mothering.

The novel directs its most unambiguous condemnation at bad mothers like Mrs Jellyby and Mrs Pardiggle, whose "telescopic philanthropy" is an excuse for the neglect or regimentation of their children (Hochman 74-75); as well as through Miss Barbary, Esther's godmother. All three of these women are also 'absent' mothers in their individual ways. Mrs Jellyby's fine eyes can "see nothing nearer than Africa" (4.47) and the natives of Borrioboola-Gha, and her family falls to pieces under her nose, eliciting

little response beyond a vague annoyance at interruption. As Caddy so ashamedly tells Esther, “The whole house is disgraceful. The children are disgraceful. *I*’m disgraceful. Pa’s miserable, and no wonder!” (4.56). The carpets are so torn as to be dangerous, there is no hot water, the dinner is raw, the rooms bare and disorderly, and the children, Peepy in particular, tumble their way up and down stairs without supervision or concern for their welfare. Mrs Jellyby herself lives in a state of disrepair and slovenliness, with her hair unbrushed and her stays coming apart behind her (4.46-50). Far worse than her physical neglect of her family, though, is Mrs Jellyby’s emotional neglect of them. She is entirely without interest in Caddy’s marriage to Prince Turveydrop, and when her daughter tries to tell her about it, “serenely” remarks that she is about to tell her “some nonsense”, and calls her a “silly chit”, an “absurd girl”, a “nonsensical child”, “degenerate”, and “ridiculous” (353). Her counterpart, Mrs Pardiggle, appears far less frequently than Mrs Jellyby, but she too devotes herself to the welfare of foreigners at the expense of her family, the five Pardiggle boys, who are described as “dissatisfied ... weazened and shrivelled ... and absolutely ferocious with discontent” (8.114).

The role of Esther’s “mother” is initially occupied by an “inadequate surrogate ‘godmother’” (Dever 89), Miss Barbary, in whom the reader witnesses the first instance of bad ‘mothering’ seen in the novel. The only harm Lady Dedlock really does to Esther is to give her life, and it is her absence that helps to define Esther’s identity. But her sister, Miss Barbary, seriously damages the child with her twisted view of guilt and innocence. Miss Barbary will not tell Esther anything about her mother: Esther tells us in her first narrative section that, “I had never heard my mama spoken of... I had never been shown my mama’s grave. I had never been told where it was. Yet I had never been

taught to pray for any relation but my godmother” (3.25). Esther’s plea on her birthday for some information about her mother suggests that she has asked this question many times before, or has always wanted to, and has never been given any justification for the coldness with which she has been treated:

“O, do pray tell me something of her. Do now, at last, dear
godmother, if you please! What did I do to her? How did I lose
her? Why am I so different from other children, and why is it my
fault, dear godmother? No, no, no, don’t go away. O, speak to me!”
(3.26)

Her godmother’s response is to sit her down and to say, “in a cold, low voice” and with a pointed finger, “Your mother, Esther, is your disgrace, and you were hers.... Submission, self-denial, diligent work, are the preparations for a life begun with such a shadow on it” (3.26). These words ring through Esther’s ears for the rest of her life, and they are primarily responsible for her creation of herself as the self-sacrificing and domestic Dame Durden. From the beginning of her consciousness, Esther is punished for her birth, which is not a day of joy, but the “evil anniversary” of her mother’s shame (3.26). According to Miss Barbary’s understanding of their relationship, Esther and her mother are locked in a bond in which the existence of each cripples the other – each is the other’s disgrace, and this shadow on her life prevents Esther from living anything but a life of submission, self-denial, and diligence.

Also in dereliction of its duty, the Court of Chancery manifests the absence of nurturing forces which is largely explained in the novel through various mother figures. It draws people with a “cruel attraction” (35.523) they cannot fight; drawing peace, sense, good looks, and good qualities out of them; and as Miss Flite tells Esther, “You *can’t* leave it. And you *must* expect” (35.523). Chancery has many victims, including the man

from Shropshire and Richard, but perhaps the most poignantly evoked victim is Miss Flite. She is the last member of a family drawn to its ruin, and her story as she tells it to Esther is emblematic of the hundreds of other families who have been born into it, died from it, wedded into it, and inherited it as the years have passed:

“I and my sister worked at tambour work. Our father and our brother had a builder’s business. We all lived together. Ve-ry respectably, my dear! First, our father was drawn – slowly. Home was drawn with him. In a few years, he was a fierce, sour, angry bankrupt, without a kind word or a kind look for anyone. He had been so different, Fitz Jarndyce. He was drawn to a debtor’s prison. There he died. Then our brother was drawn – swiftly – to drunkenness. And rags. And death. Then my sister was drawn. Hush! Never ask to what! Then I was ill, and in misery; and heard, as I had often heard before, that this was all the work of Chancery. When I got better, I went to look at the Monster. And then I found out how it was, and I was drawn to stay there.” (35.523)

Miss Flite’s name has connotations of a freedom which Chancery denies her, and one which she denies her symbolically named birds: “Hope, Joy, Youth, Peace, Rest, Life, Dust, Ashes, Waste, Want, Ruin, Despair, Madness, Death, Cunning, Folly, Words, Wigs, Rags, Sheepskin, Plunder, Precedent, Jargon, Gammon, and Spinach” (14.217) are all locked up in rows of cages in her lodgings, waiting for the Judgement so that they can be restored to liberty (5.67). But the Chancery proceedings are so long that the whole collection, just like the families who have been drawn into the place, has died over and over again.

The absence of nurturing in the novel is, however, most evocatively and ambiguously represented in the figure of Lady Dedlock, who is a profoundly important figure in Esther’s life precisely *because* of her absence. This is explored mainly through

the vehicle of Esther's unhappy psyche as we watch it working around us through the course of the novel. Esther's story, her identity, has been written in terms of her mother's disgrace and her mother's absence. Her godmother's words ring in her ears and define Esther according to another kind of absence – by telling Esther that, “It would have been far better, little Esther, that you had had no birthday; that you had never been born!” (3.26), Miss Barbary prematurely negates Esther's existence, and fosters the creation of her self in terms of absence and denial. Esther's vision of herself, the vision by which she tries to make her life possible, is “deeply rooted in her godmother's conception of her”, but it is an image “conditioned by the inescapable shadow of her illegitimacy”, a self founded upon a twisted definition of innocence and guilt, and therefore false (Frank 106). Her godmother tells her that hers must be a life of submission and self-denial, and Esther grows up believing that if she is “industrious, contented, and kind-hearted, and [does] some good to someone, [she might] win some love to [her]self if [she] could” (3.27). Throughout the novel she retains this attitude that she needs to *earn* love, not that she deserves it as such, an attitude that contributes towards her identity as the self-sacrificing Dame Durden.

Almost the moment she arrives at Bleak House, Esther assumes the housekeeping keys and household duties, and is gradually given a new identity by the people around her, to the extent that her own name becomes lost among them. All the names she assumes deny her existence as a person in her own right and perpetuate her false identity as the submissive, self-denying, and matronly domestic angel: “Old Woman, and Little Old Woman, and Cobweb, and Mrs Shipton, and Mother Hubbard, and Dame Durden”

(8.111). Esther at this point is only in her early twenties. But she assumes the persona of the old woman – contented, industrious, and domestic, thereby:

seek[ing] to deny or to evade the consequences of her illegitimacy by fixing herself psychologically in a time safely beyond that in which her own mother dealt, unsuccessfully, with the fact of her sexuality. For a Dame Durden, a Little Old Woman, a Mother Hubbard, there seems no threat of another dashing captain's appearing to set in motion a painful re-enactment of her mother's fate. (Frank 104)

Esther's denial of herself is also reflected in the narrative she tells. We watch her continually refuse to think or write about herself in any way, to follow her thoughts through to their logical conclusion. Her mother's absence, and her godmother's conception of her, result in Esther's negation of her self to a state of absence. As early on in the novel as Esther's first paragraph, we find evidence for this: in writing of her doll, whom she used to prop up in a chair to talk to, Esther says, "And so she used to sit propped up in a great arm-chair, with her beautiful complexion and rosy lips, staring at me – or not so much at me, I think, *as at nothing* – while I busily stitched away" (3.24, my emphasis). In the most literal sense, Esther's doll is not real, and has no eyes – it cannot look at anything. But the words are also an indication of Esther's negation of her psyche. Her words also foreground and associate her with her father's identity as it is revealed later in the novel (Dever 88) – Captain Hawdon's pseudonym is Nemo, Latin for "No One". Esther's association between "me" and "nothing" thus echoes her father's reduction of himself to a nonentity.

Esther's denial of herself is also seen in the way she tells her narrative. Again and again throughout the novel, she negates herself, and avoids thinking about herself, denying both her existence, and her thoughts about that existence. Esther cannot accept

that the narrative she tells is about her life, as much as it is about others – she tries to think about herself “as little as possible”, and when she finds herself “coming into the story again”, is “really vexed”. But as she notes, “it is all of no use”, and the story *is* her own (9.125). Esther’s persistent refusal to follow her thoughts when they relate to her own life is shown over and over in a particular kind of syntactic avoidance: her sentences suddenly grind to a halt leaving the conclusion or the crux of the matter unsaid, and poorly disguised behind hurried dismissals. For example, she says, “For I was so little inclined to sleep, myself, that night, that I sat up working. It would not be worth mentioning for its own sake, but I was wakeful and rather low-spirited. I don’t know why. At least I don’t think I know why. At least, perhaps I do, but I don’t think it matters” (17.252). Another time, “I don’t know what it was. Or at least if I do, now, I thought I did not then. Or at least – but it don’t matter” (30.433). Her characteristic repetition of phrases such as, “I don’t know” and “it don’t matter” constantly deny the centrality of her own consciousness and are indicative of her refusal to confront it head on and deal with it.

The narrative tells the story of Esther’s journey to find her true identity, and how she can live life for herself, but it does not come to a satisfactory conclusion. Esther Woodcourt, married, happy, mistress of her own Bleak House, and surrounded by the people she loves, ends the novel on a profoundly ambiguous note. Her identity as the prematurely old Little Woman remains even on the lips of her husband, who calls her “my busy bee” and “Dame Durden” to the last (67.914). The final paragraph of Esther’s narrative characteristically validates the beauty of those around her, her husband, Ada,

and Jarndyce, but still cannot validate her own. Her husband asks her if she knows that she is prettier now than she ever was, and Esther's closing words are:

I did not know that; I am not certain that I know it now. But I know that my dearest little pets are very pretty, and that my darling is very beautiful, and that my husband is very handsome, and that my guardian has the brightest and most benevolent face that ever was seen; and that they can very well do without much beauty in me – even supposing –. (67.914)

The implied end to her sentence could be a number of things, one possibility being “even supposing there was any.” Whatever the ending is, however, the implication is that Esther is still unable to affirm herself, to think or write about herself, to take her thoughts to any kind of conclusion. Like Edith, Estella, and Pip, Esther is in some sense permanently scarred by her mother and mother figure, and ends her narrative without resolution. Her godmother and, unwittingly, her mother, have had an enormously damaging effect on Esther – despite the fact that her narrative ends with the usual domestic bliss of wifedom and motherhood, the novel's conclusion confirms that Esther is still unable to move out of the identity she has created for herself out of her mother's disgrace and absence.

Lady Dedlock has three ‘counterparts’ in the novel: Esther, Jenny, and her French maid, Hortense. We have already explored the way in which her existence between melting and freezing defines her ‘absence’ through much of the text. But it is manifested in other ways too, for example, the fact that she literally disguises herself in the clothes of other women, thereby veiling her true identity and assuming the identity of someone else – existing, in other words, as an absence. Lawrence Frank writes that, “Whatever Lady Dedlock has suppressed by falling into a freezing mood ... still exists within her, projected, however melodramatically, in the form of Hortense” (107), and traces the

emergence of the relationship to the moment when the two women are seated together in front of Lady Dedlock's mirror:

One night, while having her hair undressed, my Lady loses herself in deep thought ... until she sees her own brooding face in the opposite glass, and a pair of black eyes curiously observing her.

"Be so good as to attend," says my Lady then, addressing the reflection of Hortense, "to your business. You can contemplate your beauty at another time.

"Pardon! It was your Ladyship's beauty."

"That," says my Lady, "you needn't contemplate at all."

(12.175)

Frank argues that the "juxtaposition of Lady Dedlock's brooding face and Hortense's black eyes metonymically connects the two", although Lady Dedlock has by this point already disguised herself in her maid's cloak to visit Hawdon's grave (106), and thereby initiated the connection between them. What Lady Dedlock sees, he contends, are the "eyes that always lurk within the depths of her habitually languid gaze" (107). Hortense's characterization carries strong premonitions of Madame Defarge. Like her Parisian counterpart, she has dark hair and eyes; and her "watchful way of looking out of the corners of her eyes without turning her head, which could be pleasantly dispensed with – especially when she is in an ill-humour and near knives" (12.171) is strongly evocative of Madame Defarge's watchfulness. Esther makes the connection between them more explicit when Hortense comes to offer her services: she remarks upon a "lowering energy in [Hortense's] face ... which seemed to bring visibly before me some woman from the streets Paris in the reign of terror" (23.339-340).

While Madame Defarge is noted for her alarming composure, Hortense cannot help showing her passion and anger. She is "rich in hate" for Lady Dedlock (42.615), for

example, and her manner of speaking is indicative of her fervour: she has “fierce disdain” for Tulkinghorn, sets her teeth, clenches her hands, and spits out her words with “the bitterest and most defiant scorn” (42.615-16). Her attitude towards Tulkinghorn, who stalks Hortense the same way he does Lady Dedlock, is also indicative of her function as Lady Dedlock’s double. In calling him a “miserable wretch” (42.616), she voices Lady Dedlock’s secret feelings, and in killing the lawyer, she acts out Lady Dedlock’s secret desire – in much the same way that Orlick functions as Pip’s *doppelgänger* in *Great Expectations*, performing Pip’s secret desire to kill Mrs Joe.

Perhaps the most poignant ‘counterpart’ Lady Dedlock has in the novel is Jenny, the mother of the dead baby. The connection between these two women begins when Esther places her handkerchief over the face of the dead child (8.123), and little thinks, “in whose unquiet bosom that handkerchief would come to lie” (8.125). The handkerchief is a link between the baby and Esther, two ‘dead’ children. Carolyn Dever writes that, at the end of her life, Lady Dedlock becomes what she always thought she was, the mother of a dead baby (101). Esther is not dead, but to her mother she had “never ... breathed – had been buried – had never been endowed with life – had never born a name” (36.539). When Lady Dedlock finally comes to rest on the steps of the graveyard, dressed in Jenny’s clothes, and holding the handkerchief that covered the face of one dead child and came from the hand of her own, she becomes that mother of the dead baby. By the same token, Esther becomes what she always thought she was – the daughter of a dead mother. Lady Dedlock’s increasingly confused identity is intensified in the last section of the letter she writes to Esther:

I have done all I could to be lost. I shall soon be forgotten so, and shall disgrace him least. I have nothing about me by which I can be

recognised. This paper I part with now. The place where I shall lie down, if I can yet get so far, has been often in my mind. Farewell. Forgive. (59.841)

Lady Dedlock's 'absence' has become literal in her flight, and her words here actualize this absence, furthering the loss of her identity as it has been manifested in her use of Jenny's clothes – she wants to be “lost”, unrecognizable, forgotten, to negate her identity and existence, to become absent. The confusion between the two women is exacerbated by the mistaken identity of the woman lying on the stairs. What Esther sees on the steps is “the mother of the dead child [who] lay there, with one arm creeping around a bar of the iron gate, and seeming to embrace it ... a distressed, unsheltered, senseless creature” (59.847). What she sees, she thinks, is Jenny, the mother of the dead baby. What she sees in reality is her own mother, who has become in her last moments the “mother of the dead child”. Inspector Bucket's words just before Esther goes forward complicate the issue further: “They changed clothes at the cottage.... And one returned, and one went on. And the one that went on, only went on a certain way agreed upon to deceive, and then turned across country, and went home” (59.844). He does not say who is who – on one hand, he is trying to soften the blow for Esther by simply implying that the woman before them is not who she may think it is. But his words also increase the uncertainty of identity, and echo Jo's words when he sees Esther during his illness: “She looks to me the t'other one. It ain't the bonnet, nor yet it ain't the gownd, but she looks to me the t'other one.... If she ain't the t'other one, she ain't the forrenner. Is there *three* of 'em then?” (31.451, 453). It is only when Esther lifts the “long dank hair” and turns the face that she sees who it is: “And it was my mother, cold and dead” (59.847). The

question asked by Inspector Bucket during their search, the question asked by Esther all her life, “Where is she? Living or dead, where is she?” (56.798), is finally answered.

Esther’s recognition of her mother when she pulls her hair aside like a veil echoes her ‘recognition’ of herself after her illness, when she stands at the glass and pulls aside first the veil, and then her own veil of hair, to gaze upon her face and see it as her own (36.528). The link between mother and daughter is most often explained in terms of mirrors and veils – the obvious point being made is that they are mirror images of each other. Like many other mothers and daughters in Dickens’s *oeuvre*, for example Agnes Wickfield and her dead mother, Esther and Lady Dedlock look so much alike that Guppy recognizes the daughter from a painting of the mother (7.101). Even their voices are similar – on the day of the storm, when they are in the keeper’s cottage, Ada responds to Lady Dedlock’s voice as if it were Esther’s, and Esther suddenly has “innumerable pictures” of herself conjured in her mind (18.274). But they are like each other in more ways than one – Esther thinks that by identifying herself as Dame Durden she will escape her mother’s fate, but what she does in fact is repeat it in an unexpected way. Lady Dedlock gave up her love for Captain Hawdon to marry a man much older than herself, and in abandoning her love for Woodcourt and promising to marry Jarndyce, Esther does exactly the same thing.

Both women also have a variety of ‘identities’ that hide their true selves – Lady Dedlock veils her ‘melting’ mood behind her ‘freezing’ one; Esther veils her self behind the character of Dame Durden. When Esther sees her mother in the Lincolnshire church that day, then, there is “something quickened within [her], associated with the lonely days at [her] godmother’s; ... when [she] had stood on tiptoe to dress [her]self at [her] little

glass” (18.268). Lady Dedlock’s face is like a broken glass in which she sees “scraps of old remembrances”. The fragmented nature of the broken glass reflects the fragmented identity of both women, as well as their mirroring of each other. It also brings associations of Esther looking into her glass through her veiling hair to see who she has become. It is only through moving aside these literal and metaphorical veils that Esther at last comes to see both herself and her mother face to face, to come to some kind of knowledge about who she is, who her mother is, and their real identity. When Lady Dedlock meets Esther in the woods in Lincolnshire, and tells her daughter her story, her last words reflect how the ‘freezing’ mask of Lady Dedlock hides the ‘melting’ reality of Esther Summerson’s mother:

If you hear of Lady Dedlock, brilliant, prosperous, and flattered; think of your wretched mother, conscience-stricken, underneath that mask! Think that the reality is in her suffering, in her useless remorse, in her murdering within her breast the only love and truth of which it is capable! (36.538)

Lady Dedlock thus exists *in absentia* throughout the novel. Her fragmented identity, her shifting between melting and freezing, between coherence and construct, veiling her self in the clothes and identities of other women, her absence from Esther’s life, and even her absence from any kind of conclusive judgment by the narrative, render her a compelling, and mysterious figure. The ending of the novel is ambiguous – Lady Dedlock as a fallen woman should be condemned by Nineteenth century society for having betrayed the feminine ideal. But the narrative itself directs its condemnation not at Lady Dedlock, but rather at mothers or mother figures that deliberately betray their maternal role. From the outset, the novel is constructed to generate a sympathetic response in the reader, and despite the complexity and ambiguity in Lady Dedlock’s

characterization, this is never undermined. Lady Dedlock is not an evil woman, but she is, significantly, an absent mother, and in her absence she represents most poignantly the absence underlying the novel as a whole.

At the end of *Bleak House*, a mausoleum is erected in Chesney Wold for Lady Dedlock (66.907). This monument to her is also a monument to the absent mother in Dickens's novels as a whole – it is reminiscent of the memorial tablet bearing the name “Agnes!” at the end of *Oliver Twist*, which is also a monument to the absent mother, but in a different way. At the end of *Oliver Twist*, “there is no coffin in that tomb” (53.35); at the end of *Bleak House*, Lady Dedlock lies “for certain” in the tomb at Chesney Wold (65.907). While Agnes literally dies at the beginning of the novel, Esther's mother only *seems* to have died. But like Lady Dedlock, Agnes Fleming exists through *Oliver Twist* as a profoundly important ‘absence’. Her absence is what defines Oliver's life, his nature is very much like hers, and the painting in Mr Brownlow's house connects Oliver and his mother the way Lady Dedlock's connects her to Esther. While Agnes's absence is much more literal, however, Lady Dedlock's is more metaphorical. She is physically ‘present’ in the novel in a way that Agnes is not, but her presence is consistently undermined by the manifestations of ‘absence’ explored in this chapter. Through this absence she is emblematic of the way in which Dickens characterizes (for this thesis) evil women in general. The four characters examined in this thesis move between coherence and construct – they have varying degrees of psychological authenticity depending on the purposes of the texts, yet they are not necessarily just one or the other, and their power as characters lies in this ‘shape shifting’. That Lady Dedlock moves literally between these

two extremes makes her significant for this thesis, despite not being in herself an evil woman.

Conclusion

The first character theory examined in this thesis argues that character is only ‘readable’, plausible, or successful if it is psychologically coherent. The second is that such a requirement places limitations upon character and obscures its function as an imaginative construct. What is discovered through a reading of Dickens’s novels, however, is that these two readings are interdependent, so that ‘readable character’ lies somewhere between them. Of course, Dickens does not use any single mode of characterization in his novels, but it is notable that the four characters examined in this thesis are presented in the same way: the reader has no access to their interior lives, in the way we have to the psyche of Virginia Woolf’s Mrs Ramsay, who is held up by Hochman as a model of ‘readable character’. Woolf’s mode of characterization in *To the Lighthouse* emerges out of representing character through stream-of-consciousness in order to reveal a “configuration of human inwardness” (Hochman 14). For Hochman, this distinguishes Mrs Ramsay as ‘psychologically coherent’. Dickens’s characters, by contrast, take their life through details of appearance and descriptions of their actions and behaviour: seldom does Dickens lay out the workings of their minds. There is therefore a lack of what Todorov would call “psychological determinism” (Cohan 6). This does not, however, detract from their ‘readability’, bearing in mind what Thomas Docherty has insisted upon, that character is, in the final analysis, ‘unknowable’ (14).

Colin McGinn and Martha Nussbaum have argued persuasively for the study of fiction as part of the philosophical endeavour. The language and form of literary fiction is “more complex, more allusive, more attentive to particulars” (Nussbaum 3) than is philosophical prose, and is thus an effective way of exploring the question of how to live.

If, as McGinn has argued, the “human ethical sensibility” works best when dealing with the particular rather than the general (3), then an examination of particular characters in particular novels is potentially more illuminating than is a series of “abstract generalities” (3). McGinn contends that literary criticism should explain the importance of a character’s actions (3) and this is best achieved through an analysis of the text rather than through focusing on particular theories of evil, conceptions of womanhood, or Dickens’s biography. These must all be taken into account, and cannot be ignored in the analysis of the novels, but they should not be objectives in themselves.

Fiction presents character in such a way as to invite the reader’s ethical judgement. The characters encountered through reading Dickens’s novels are judged according to what they say and do, and how they say and do it. Dickens does not lay out the mind of a character for the reader and he does not define ‘evil’ that simply. Virginia Woolf wrote of Jane Austen that, “She stimulates us to supply what is not there. What she offers is, apparently, a trifle, yet is composed of something that expands in the reader’s mind and endows with the most enduring form of life scenes which are outwardly trivial” (174). Iser’s comment on Woolf’s observation is equally true of Dickens: “The unwritten aspects of apparently trivial scenes, and the unspoken dialogue within the ‘turns and twists,’ not only draw the reader into the action, but also lead him to shade in the many outlines suggested by the given situations, so that these take on a reality of their own” (213). Dickens guides the reader’s response to his characters through generating sympathy, but he also leaves characters shifting between psychological authenticity and narrative construct, and the reader must negotiate between the two.

What is evil for Dickens? As John Reed has argued, “a cardinal sin in Dickens’

scheme of things” is “the betrayal and subversion of charity and love” (92).

Consequently, feminine ‘evil’ in the novels is not represented by the fallen woman or the criminal, but by the woman who betrays and subverts (or perverts) the feminine ideal of charity and love. For concerns of this thesis, feminine goodness is characterized in the novels through figures such as Rose Maylie, Florence Dombey, and Agnes Wickfield, all of whom epitomize charity, goodness, and love. On the most superficial level, this is manifested particularly in the domestic sphere where they are good daughters who grow up to become good mothers at the end of their novels. The most obvious, and in some ways, the most surprising, representation of this subversion of goodness is to be found in Mrs Skewton, the mother of a daughter whose life is sacrificed to her mother’s egoism and greed. This, then, illustrates John Kekes description of evil as harm “serious enough to damage its’ victim’s capacity to function normally” (Kekes, Routledge 463).

In reading Dickens, we read like David Copperfield “for life” (4.54), and do so in order to answer the question, “How do we live?”. The narrative guides the reader to the “moral appraisal” it finally demands through its characterization of evil women. Dickens does not always present character as a “coherent, unified, describable self” (Cohan 7), but the behaviour of his characters is expressive of their ‘character’, as Aristotle has taught when he shows that “action is brought about by agents who necessarily display certain distinctive qualities both of character and of thought, according to which we also define the nature of the actions” (39). The lack of “psychological determinism” is thus not a limiting factor in our understanding of Dickens’s evil women.

Dickens presents the evil woman as mother, and that his characterization of this figure is profoundly complex. She is more dangerous because unlike the prostitute or

criminal, she is not simply a challenge to the Nineteenth century *status quo* of women, but is a powerfully damaging figure who causes such “serious harm” as to prevent her victim from functioning normally. The lack of psychological coherence in her characterization does nothing to limit her force as a readable character, or as a convincing one, in whatever guise she appears, and the four characters examined in this thesis are, in varying degrees and for varying narrative purposes, therefore powerfully articulated evocations of the “subversion and betrayal” constituting feminine evil in Dickens’s novels.

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