

## Dickens: Women's Role in Society

Westland, Ella. "Women and Women's Issues." *Oxford Reader's Companion to Dickens*, edited by Paul Schlicke, Oxford University Press, 1999.

At the heart of Dickens's ideology lies the image of the domestic woman, 'made for Home, for fireside peace and happiness' (OT 29), an ideal expressed in its purest form in such contemporary works as Coventry Patmore's poem *The Angel in the House*, John Ruskin's essay 'Of Queens' Gardens', and the conduct books of Sarah Stickney Ellis. Dickens subscribed to the widely held belief that women were inherently different from men, formed for home-making and a life of the affections. They should be invested with the management of the household and moral sway over the domestic realm, as wives and mothers, sisters or daughters, but at the cost of leaving the public sphere to men. The ideal woman, pretty, chaste, and calmly efficient, was charged with the vital function of holding together the middle-class home, that essential foundation of the Victorian social structure. In promoting the image of the 'Home Goddess' (OMF 2.13), Dickens was therefore playing an influential role in the establishment of a new set of values which underpinned the growing power of the middle classes. Many readers have been critical of Dickens's perfect heroines and disappointingly conservative attitudes. However, these negative views do not give enough weight to Dickens's public involvement in selected women's issues, and seriously underestimate the complexity of his novels and their positioning within the ideological structures of their time.

Although the feminine ideal rose to prominence early in Victoria's reign, many women's issues were intensely debated throughout the century: prostitution, low-paid female work, education, entry to the professions, women's suffrage, divorce, and rights within marriage. Dickens's response to demands for reform was mixed, even hostile at times, and *Household Words*<sup>1</sup> could be outspoken against women's rights. A leading article by Dickens on

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manifestations of 'Bloomerism' adopted the jocular tone of *Punch* cartoons to mock not simply a masculine style of female attire, but women's pretensions to the public platform and public office, and even charity work of an ostentatious kind ('Sucking Pigs', HW 8 November 1851). Another polemical contribution to *Household Words* on 'Rights and Wrongs of Women' (1 April 1854) attacked the kind of woman who undermined the doctrine of separate spheres by aspiring to become an 'inferior man'. The author of this piece, Eliza Lynn-- herself a hard-working journalist-- here adopted a discourse familiar to Dickens's readers, advocating the path of 'a noble, unpretending, redeeming, domestic, usefulness' to be taken by 'the loving, quiet wife, the good mother, the sweet, unselfish sister'. This theme is taken up through the character of Mrs Jellyby,<sup>2</sup> who is heavily satirized for neglecting her own children in favour of the distant natives of Borrioboola-Gha. The reader is told in passing that Mrs Jellyby later directs her energies to a campaign that by implication is equally ridiculous, the right of women to sit in Parliament (BH 67). John Stuart Mill, the feminist reformer, reacted to the novel with anger, attacking Dickens's 'vulgar impudence' in ridiculing the rights of women.

Dickens did not systematically pursue this reactionary philosophy. He associated throughout his life with women from a great variety of backgrounds. His letters reveal his admiration for upper-class ladies who played a significant public role, from the formidable benefactress Angela Burdett Coutts to society hostesses like the author Lady Blessington and the Hon. Mrs Richard Watson. He appreciated the professionalism of women in the theatre, and encouraged women writers to contribute

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<sup>1</sup> a weekly journal edited by Dickens in the 1850s

<sup>2</sup> from Dickens' novel *Bleak House*

to his journals. He believed in a basic education for girls, provided it was biased towards the development of practical domestic skills, and he supported the cause of admitting women to Royal Academy schools. His daughter Kate, who developed a career as a painter with her father's support, attended art classes at Bedford College, one of the main institutions set up in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to improve women's education. However, with a few small exceptions, such as Helena Landless's aptitude for sharing her brother's advanced studies (MED 10), little of this interest in women's education emerges in his fiction.

Dickens's most notable intervention in women's issues was his share in the establishment of Urania Cottage, a home for the rehabilitation of prostitutes and women at risk. He recognized harsh economic circumstances as a significant factor in tempting women onto the streets, and exposed the scandal of badly paid women's occupations in his novels and magazines. The vision sequence of *The Chimes* uses Meg's fate to attack the iniquitous system of sewing outwork, a cause taken up in other mid-century social protest works like Thomas Hood's famous poem 'The Song of the Shirt', and paintings of seamstresses by Richard Redgrave and Anna Elizabeth Blunden. The treatment of servants was another topical issue: during the 1860s the number of female domestic servants in England exceeded 1 million, a considerable number of them under 15 years old. Like the rest of the middle classes Dickens took the necessity of having servants for granted, but he strongly opposed their exploitation. In *The Old Curiosity Shop* the working conditions of Barbara, servant to the benevolent Garlands, are described as thoroughly enjoyable; by contrast, the nameless little skivvy working for the Brasses is little better than a slave. At a higher social level, the plight of respectable women working as governesses was highlighted in *Household Words* ('Only a Governess', HW 7 May 1859) and in a brief episode encapsulating Ruth Pinch's daily humiliations at her employers' hands (MC 36).

Dickens was openly committed to one feminist cause: the need for urgent changes in the divorce laws and dramatic improvements in the rights of married women. In *Hard Times*, published as the recommendations of a Royal Commission on Divorce were being translated into a parliamentary bill, Dickens gave unequivocal support to affordable divorce through the case of Stephen Blackpool. The novel's emphasis was on the plight of the wronged husband rather than the wife, but the episode in which Stephen's drunken wife returns home was published in the same number of *Household Words* as a pro-divorce article by Eliza Lynn based on the widely publicised case of Caroline Norton ('One of our Legal Fictions', HW 29 April 1854). Further references to the iniquities of a matrimonial system where the woman's person, property, and children belonged to her husband appear throughout *Household Words*: during the controversy preceding the 1857 Matrimonial Causes Act, another of Eliza Lynn's articles called the English husband an 'absolute lord' over his 'conjugal prisoner' ('Marriage Gaolers', HW 5 July 1856).

The heartless dealings of the middle-class marriage market, and its tragic consequences for women in particular, form a major theme of Dickens's fiction. In *Little Dorrit* Fanny and Sparkler's nuptial carriage, 'after rolling for a few minutes smoothly over a fair pavement, had begun to jolt through a Slough of Despond, and through a long, long avenue of wrack and ruin' (2.15). In *Our Mutual Friend* Sophronia and Alfred Lamble betray each other into wedlock, though Georgiana Podsnap resists the upper-class matchmaking that treats her as part of the family furniture. The

patriarch Mr Dombey tries to subjugate Edith as his 'chattel'; Edith, who wears the jewels bestowed by her marriage settlement like chains, retaliates with the harshest blow she can deliver, ruining Dombey's reputation by an apparently adulterous liaison. As an act of revenge, the unimpeachably respectable Mr Dombey strikes his daughter across her breast.

The threat of mental cruelty and physical violence to women is never far in the background of Dickens's novels. Weaker women like Clara Murdstone, Mrs Gradgrind, and the first Mrs Dombey fade away under harsh treatment. Men like Bill Sikes, Jonas Chuzzlewit, and Betsey Trotwood's husband deliver blows and worse. In *Little Dorrit*, Rigaud is accused of wife murder, Pet Meagles naively ties herself to a heartless husband, and Affery graphically describes marriage to Flintwich as 'a Smothering instead of a Wedding' (1.3). Behind the façade of the Dickensian marriage could be untold misery and even murder, and it was nearly always the woman who paid. However, Dickens did not condone flouting the moral code. In his novels there was no question of escaping the marriage trap simply by living in sin with a more congenial partner; once a mistake has been made, as in *David Copperfield's* marriage to Dora, death is the only release. Dickens seems to have applied rather different standards to his own friends, not least George Cruikshank and Wilkie Collins, who both conducted two domestic establishments, and in the case of Ellen Ternan, whom he may have kept quietly as his mistress for many years after the break-up of his own marriage. The women must have experienced more serious problems than their partners in living through the daily disadvantages of such socially unacceptable arrangements.

Dickens was no more consistent in his fiction than in his life. He deployed a range of standard images which schematically complement the angel figure: the sweet girl or playful puss with the capacity to grow into a domestic woman is at one end of the scale, balanced by the passionate or fallen woman at the other (see sexuality). His old hags (like Mrs Skewton and Lady Tippins) and nagging shrews (like Mrs Weller and Mrs Snagsby), who stand out in humorous relief to his saccharine young women, are created with unmistakably misogynous relish. But there is no way of neatly categorizing Dickens's cast of some 400 female characters. Even conventional qualities can be differently apportioned, as with the pairing of wild Helena Landless and innocent Rosa Bud in *Edwin Drood*: Helena is both gypsy-like and marriageable, while Rosa is both kitten-like and surprisingly resilient. There are many strong portraits, comic and tragic, who do not fit the blueprints, from gruff Betsey Trotwood to sexy Dolly Varden, loyal Mrs Micawber to murderous Madame Defarge, wilful Caddy Jellyby to brave Lizzie Hexam.

Nor is it the case that the territory inhabited by Dickens's fictional women is limited to the domestic hearth. As in Victorian society, women in the novels are realistically shown pursuing a great range of female employment. Some are caricatured to stand for a whole profession, like the line of spinsterish schoolteachers stretching from the Misses Crumpton who keep the Minerva House establishment ('Sentiment', SB), to Miss Peecher and Miss Twinkleton in Dickens's last novels (OMF; MED). More memorable, though still merged with their occupations, are the drunken midwife Mrs Gamp (MC), the landladies Mrs Bardell (PP) and Mrs Crupp (DC), and the innkeepers, motherly Mrs Lupin (MC) and disciplinarian Miss Abbey Potterson (OMF). Other trades are followed by highly individualized characters: Rachael's factory work (HT), Madame Mantalini's dressmaking (NN), Little Em'ly's sewing for an undertaker (DC), Betty Higden's home laundry (OMF), Miss Mowcher's chiropody and hairdressing (DC), Jenny Wren's doll's dressmaking (OMF), and Fanny Dorrit's dancing (LD). Dedicated as he was to the work ethic, Dickens expected well-off women to wear the household keys at their belt and fulfil an active role in the creation of the bourgeois home. Nowhere do we find him idealizing the kind of heroine who merely adorns society with her light accomplishments, a lifestyle that is savagely satirized in *Volumnia Dedlock* (BH). Yet there is never any doubt that home is a woman's first priority and that her labour in the domestic arena should be disguised as far as possible to keep it within the bounds of the feminine. The paragon Agnes Wickfield, 'little housekeeper' and the emotional mainstay of the men in her circle, even makes the addition of a small girls' school to her responsibilities seem apparently effortless, commenting: 'The labour is so pleasant ... that it is scarcely grateful in me to call it by that name' (DC 60).

With the development of sophisticated models for the analysis of gender in literature, a strong case has been made that Dickens's fiction explores the constrictions and contradictions of women's roles rather than merely inscribing the dominant patriarchal ideology. Certainly his later novels, from *Dombey and Son* onwards, demonstrate a growing interest in women's nature, often through the sensitive exploration of a female character at the centre of the text; in *Bleak House* Dickens boldly experiments with writing half the story in a woman's voice. Recent readings of 19<sup>th</sup>-century literature typically refuse to deal with gender in isolation, seeing the construction of femininity and masculinity in

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fiction as inextricably bound up with socio-economic structures. Dickens's female stereotypes, at least as importantly as his individualized characters, contribute to this modern reconstruction of changing Victorian values. Special critical interest has attached to *Dombey and Son*, whose title ironically signals its focus on the patriarchal system while its text replaces a lost son with the claims on the father's-- and the reader's-- attention made by a daughter. In an influential book by Mary Poovey (1989), a chapter on *David Copperfield* is placed alongside the analysis of other social constructs such as law, in order to define the half-hidden ideological systems determining Victorians' view of society and their gendered selves. Such readings expose ambivalence in Dickens's fictional treatment of women that is not accommodated by dismissive emphasis on his household angels. Dickens's oeuvre, and indeed his personal beliefs, are increasingly read as evidence not of Victorian certainties but of discontinuities and conflicts lying deep in 19<sup>th</sup>-century culture.

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