'Dickens and Women Trouble'

by Alison Hennegan

Dickens had trouble with women for most of his life. Or, as he might more probably have put it, women *gave* him trouble for most of it – and that's true of both the life and the fiction.

In life, there was initially trouble with his mother, whom he always blamed for a childhood episode for which she may or may not have been to blame, but which he never forgot and certainly never forgave.

A dispiriting *procession* of unsatisfactory mothers trail their way through his fiction – loveable but ineffective ones such as Nicholas Nickleby's mother, blithely incompetent ones such as Mrs Jellyby, in whom the maternal instinct, in its conventional forms, seems entirely lacking – she always far too busy thinking about poor little black babies in Africa to have time to worry about her own accident-prone infant son tumbling – *again!*– down the stone stairs into the area ; there are almost entirely *absent* mothers such as Lady Dedlock, who, like Mrs Jellyby, is to be found in *Bleak House;* and coldly heartless ones such as Mrs Clennam in *Little Dorrit.* And some mothers, of course, unlike Lady Dedlock, have no choice in whether or not they stay to care for their children: they die, in childbed, or shortly after (as Oliver Twist's mother did; and little Paul Dombey's mother in *Dombey and Son,* harried, poor woman, till the end by a sister-in-law who even as she lies dying urges her to 'make an effort!'.

In such a world it's little wonder that some of the best 'mothering ' is in fact done by women who have no children (Peggotty, Davy Copperfield's beloved nurse, for example, or his aunt Betsy) or by those who are themselves children – Little Nell caring for her increasingly confused and incompetent grandfather; Charley, at twelve the oldest of three orphaned children, whom she struggles to mother, until rescued by Mr Jarndyce in *Bleak House*; Amy Dorrit who, for years before we encounter her in the novel, has battled to manage an unruly and ungrateful brood of weak and unprincipled siblings. But then, they lack not only a mother but, in effect, lack a father too, since Mr Dorrit, worn down and institutionalized by his years in the Marshalsea Prison, is little more than a cypher.

But if many real mothers are bad, wives are often no better. Dickens's own wife, Catherine, Kate, he seemingly loved rather less than his sister-in-law, Mary Hogarth, who, most

shockingly, collapsed, in her bedroom in Dickens's and Catherine's house after a visit to the theatre, and died shortly after. She was seventeen: Dickens mourned her all his life and possible versions, memories, dreams of her thread their way through his fiction – a procession of pure, vulnerable girls and very young women – Little Nell, for example; Dora, David Copperfield's first wife; Peg Meagles of *Little Dorrit* and, for much of the book, Little Dorrit herself. Nevertheless, despite the terrible loss of Mary Hogarth, Dickens's marriage to Kate worked, more or less, until the point when it spectacularly didn't and Kate found herself set aside for a much younger woman.

Daughters could be trouble, too. There was his own daughter, another Kate, whom, in the best traditions of life and fiction, he probably loved most of all his children, even though – or perhaps *because*? – she gave him a harder time than any of them. Dickens's fiction offers plenty of *good* daughters– Esther Summerson of *Bleak House*, Amy Dorrit, Agnes Wickfield who will eventually become the second Mrs Copperfield. But there are also some memorably troublesome ones – Bella Wilfer, for example, who leads her long-suffering and loving father such a terrible dance for much of *Our Mutual Friend*

Dickens was not, of course the only Victorian Englishman having trouble with women: this, after all, was the century for it. For hundreds of years *individual* women had noted, with varying degrees of hurt, bewilderment and pure rage, that something was very rotten in the state of England as far as their position was concerned – they'd written poems, plays, novels, polemical pamphlets, political analyses, philosophical treatises, religious meditations; they'd signed petitions, fought some isolated battles in the law courts over property and various forms of maltreatment and injustice – and that was as true of queens and princesses as it was of those more lowly placed. But not until the nineteenth century did something that deserved to be called a *movement* emerge.

For the entirety of Dickens's lifespan, 1812-1870, women increasingly dominated public debate, whether as speakers or the spoken of. Eleven years before Dickens's birth, the Census of 1801 had revealed the alarming fact that there were 400,000 more women than men in England, and far too many of them were not married, and only too likely, it was feared , to 'fall upon the parish' and become a financial burden . It was difficult to know which to fear the more: single women *dependent* on men, a drain on their finances; or women alarmingly independent of men, thinking their own thoughts, going their own way and voicing their own

discontents and demands. Some males took defensive measures: in 1803, for example, the Methodist Conference banned women from preaching, which was one way of dealing with the problem.

During Dickens's actual lifetime a series of battles about the right and proper place of women was being fought – through public debate, political organizations, direct action, legislation , scientific discourse, religious controversy, and active suppression of the troublesome. So, for example, in 1823, when the young Dickens was just eleven years of age, the philosopher, theorist, and champion of women's rights, John Stuart Mill, was imprisoned for distributing pamphlets which offered advice on birth control. (In 1869, just a year before Dickens's death, Mill would publish his great, passionate but reasoned cry for female emancipation, 'On the Subjection of Women'.)

By the time Dickens died, he had seen many legislative and other changes. So, for example, the Child Custody Act of 1839, reversing the practice of centuries, made it possible for a *mother* to be awarded custody of a child provided it was under seven years of age (hitherto custody had gone unquestioningly to the father: after all, the child was, legally, one of his possessions.) A succession of Factory Acts increasingly sought to make the industrial workplace less physically dangerous and onerous for women and children. A ruling of 1852 established that a man had no right to force his wife to live with him; the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857 gave a legally separated wife the right to keep all her earnings, although the same legislation also enabled a man to divorce his wife solely on the grounds of adultery, whereas she must prove his adultery *and* cruelty or desertion.

And rumbling through British political and social life, from 1864 until 1886, were the many embittering consequences of the Contagious Diseases Acts, of 1864, 1866 and 1869. They offered a stark demonstration of the sexual double standard at work throughout British society.

When venereal disease in the British Army reached epidemic proportions, the authorities took urgent but ill-considered action. Measures, initially confined to garrison towns, later extended throughout the country, gave police the right to apprehend, and medically examine, women suspected of being' common prostitutes'. If found to be venereally infected they could be confined in 'Lock hospitals', initially for three months, later for a year, held until 'cured' .

No equivalent regime was imposed upon the women's actual, or prospective, male clients**.** The inequitability was glaring, and quickly roused the anger and resistance of some remarkable women, especially the redoubtable Josephine Butler, who campaigned vigorously and adroitly against the Acts until they were finally repealed in 1886, sixteen years after Dickens's death.

The 'fallen woman, becomes one of the major subjects of Victorian literature, openly debated by both men and women. However 'indelicate' the subject might be deemed for ladies, many women had no intention of remaining silent about a subject which came so close to 'nice' homes; many a fallen woman fell because she was first seduced by a nice lady's son or husband; many a nice lady found herself venereally infected by an errant husband, sometimes with disastrous consequences for her own hopes of healthy children;

Dickens himself was fascinated for most of his life by the complexities of female prostitution, the web of social, economic and personal factors which made up each individual girl's or woman's story. He was well aware that the opprobrium, contempt , anger and fear, levelled against the female prostitute conveniently obscured the *other* story, the story of her, often very 'respectable', male clients.

Readers would have been aware of a concern already clear in his creation of Nancy, in his second novel *Oliver Twist* (1839), They would have seen how close the evil comes to Kate Nickleby, Nicholas's sister, and witnessed the sad progress of Little Em'ly, who 'falls' because of Steerforth's irresistible blandishments, and is then betrayed and abandoned by him, in *David Copperfield* (1850).

Some of Dickens's female characters fall, some resist, but Dickens constantly makes his readers aware of how perilously narrow the gap may be between female virtue maintained and disastrously lost. The books are full of vulnerable young woman, either lacking entirely the male protection of a father, brother, fiancé , husband, *or* burdened by a man who *should* fulfill those functions, but fails miserably to do so: Madeline Bray, for example whom Nicholas Nickleby will eventually marry but who struggles before that to support herself and a pseudo-invalid father of surpassing selfishness and corruption; or Little Nell trying to be a support to

her ailing and increasingly disorientated grandfather (the list of such beleagured young women would be a long one and I merely indicate it here).

.Some of Dickens's many girls and young women may seem to be conventionally pure, as in *The Old Curiosity Shop*'s Little Nell. She, however, shares the book with Daniel Quilp, a malign dwarf, with his unappealing figure, unkempt, dishevelled, and whose filthy fingernails complete his claw-like hands. Yet, despite – or *because* of – a physicality which meets none of the requirements for conventional male beauty, he exercises a most powerful attraction for many women. One of the most unsettling and queasy episodes in Dickens is to be found in the description of the tea-party which Quilp's pretty young wife is giving, in her husband's absence, for her mother and her mother's female friends. Quilp's unexpected irruption into this gathering sets all the women a-twitter, hens in the hen-house when the fox is suddenly, in their midst. They panic but they're also excited, and they both recognize and resent the fact.

Little Nell, herself becomes the object of Quilp's sexual interest and although she does not understand the nature of it, she knows that it frightens and threatens her. Dickens, however, can make clear to us the nature of the danger Nell cannot fully articulate for herself.,

Such are the confusions around sex, girls, and women in this period that Dickens can write quite openly about types of sexualized exchange between adult men and very young girls in ways which our own age might well find too shocking to include in a work whose readers would include the very young.

Here, for example, in chapter 6 of *The Old Curiosity Shop,* published in 1841, is the malevolent Daniel Quilp, making clear to Little Nell his own hopes and plans for her:-

‘‘There's no hurry, little Nell, no hurry at all,' said Quilp. 'How should you like to be my number two, Nelly?'

‘‘To be what, sir?'

‘‘My number two, Nelly, my second, my Mrs Quilp,' said the dwarf.

‘‘The child looked frightened, but seemed not to understand him, which Mr Quilp observing, hastened to make his meaning more distinctly.

"' To be Mrs Quilp the second, when Mrs Quilp the first is dead, sweet Nell,' said Quilp, wrinkling up his eyes and luring her towards him with his bent forefinger, 'to be my wife, my little cherry-cheeked, red-lipped wife. Say that Mrs Quilp lives five year, or only four, you'll be just the proper age for me. Ha ha! Be a good girl, Nelly, a very good girl, and see if one of these days you don't come to be Mrs Quilp of Tower Hill.'

"' So far from being sustained and stimulated by this delightful prospect, the child shrank from him in great agitation, and trembled violently. Mr Quilp, either because frightening anybody afforded him a constitutional delight, or because it was pleasant to contemplate the death of Mrs Quilp number one, and the elevation of Mrs Quilp number two to her post and title, or because he was determined from purposes of his own to be agreeable and good-humoured at that particular time, only laughed and feigned to take no heed of her alarm.

'"You shall come with me to Tower Hill and see Mrs Quilp that is, directly,' said the dwarf. 'She's very fond of you, Nell, though not so fond as I am. You shall come home with me.'

Later, in chapter 9 of the *The Old Curiosity Shop* we encounter Quilp now talking openly to Nell's grandfather about her:

"' She's so,' said Quilp, speaking very slowly, and feigning to be quite absorbed in the subject, 'so small, so compact, so beautifully modelled, so fair, with such blue veins and such a transparent skin, and such little feet, and such winning ways-- but bless me, you're nervous! Why neighbour, what's the matter?"

What, indeed?

All this, of course, is fiction, so it's worth reminding ourselves that, just eleven years later than Quilp, in 1853, The Reverend Edward White Benson also declared to the twelve-year-old Mary Sidgwick, in the presence of her mother, whose consent he had already secured, that Mary was to be his wife. After an assiduous, seven-year courtship, conducted largely through letters which often make queasy reading in their unpleasant combination of the heavily didactic and the prematurely uxorious, Benson did indeed marry her. *He* was by then the first Headmaster of Wellington College, and the young and pregnant Mrs Benson found herself playing formal hostess to Sixth Formers older than she was herself. Her husband became Archbishop of Canterbury in 1883.

This, as Quilp's conduct towards Little Nell, and Edward White Benson's to Mary Sidgwick indicate , was a period of intense confusion about the age of female sexual maturity. For much of Dickens's life, the age of female sexual consent remained where it had been since Shakespeare's day – twelve, which was also technically the age at which a girl could marry, as would theoretically remain the case until the Marriage Act of 1929). Dickens died in 1870; in 1885 the Criminal Law Amendment Act raised the age of female consent to sixteen for full penetrative heterosexual intercourse, but the law was far less certain about the new legal age of consent for a range of other sexual acts : between 1885 and the early twentieth century the age for those crept up from 13, to fourteen, to fifteen to sixteen – a clear indication of how difficult people were finding it to decide when female childhood ended and 'adulthood' began: and part of the difficulty consisted in uncertainty about the *meaning* of sexual activity; what, for example, is the real connexion, if any between being physiologically capable of consensual intercourse, and emotionally, psychologically and morally ready to deal with the demands of an active sexual life?

Some of those tensions Dickens addresses. His fiction abounds in female characters of ambiguous or uncertain age: the simple-minded Maggie, to whom Little Dorrit extends a quasi-maternal love and protection, and who will never, in some senses, become a woman, whatever her age; and, indeed, we might consider aspects of Little Dorrit herself, who is so very *very* little, and frequently mistaken for a child. Or Dora, David Copperfield's first wife, who dies in pregnancy and who, despite a degree of childishness which has often proved maddening to Davy, reaches at the last a very adult, and poignant, recognition of her own inadequacies.

All *those* women might be ranked amongst the virtuous. But just as the uncertainties about what it means to be a woman, rather than a child, seem to exercize Dickens, so too does the question of what makes a 'good' woman or a 'bad' one, and the unexpected kinship that may be found between them, in a shared love of children, for example, or those dependent on them, and a preparedness to sacrifice for them.

So let us consider this pair : first, Jenny Wren whom we encounter in the last of Dickens's completed novels, *Our Mutual Friend* (1865). Jenny Wren, the crippled, miniaturized child-woman who, by making clothes for dolls, supports both herself and her shambling, alcoholic,

broken father whom she scolds, as her 'bad boy', and loves and protects as a quasi mother – a difficult young person, Jenny, but a 'good' one.

And then there is Nancy, the young prostitute, from one of Dickens's earliest novels, *Oliver Twist* (1839).

I pair these two – Jenny and Nancy – because of ambiguities concerning their age : both Nancy and Jenny are 'old-young' women – Jenny by virtue of Dickens's opaque handling of her age, never clearly declared by him; and Nancy by virtue of the weight and nature of experience which her life on the streets has given her and which so violently reverses all that it is assumed life should be for a young girl.
And it's easy for us to forget just *how* young Nancy is: popular culture, film, television adaptations of *Oliver Twist,* have accustomed us to think of Nancy as a mature woman, possibly beginning now to run to seed, the archetypal tart with the heart of gold: but Dickens's Nancy is a very different, and much younger, creature. Our first encounter with her comes in Chapter 9, which includes a visit she makes to Fagin's rookery, come to see young Charlie Bates, the Artful dodger. Nancy is accompanied by her friend, Bet, another young prostitute:-

". . . a couple of young ladies called to see the young gentleman; one of whom was named Bet, and the other Nancy. They wore a good deal of hair, not very neatly turned up behind, and were rather untidy about the shoes and stockings. They were not exactly pretty, perhaps; but they had a great deal of colour in their faces, and looked quite stout and hearty. Being remarkably free and agreeable in their manners, Oliver thought them very nice girls indeed. As there is no doubt they were."

This is a carefully coded piece of writing, of the sort Victorian novelists excel at when they venture into the unseemly, the morally dangerous: the trick is to communicate that, to those able to understand what they're being told, without exposing younger, more innocent readers to a world they should not yet be encountering: Dickens might often express his irritation that English writers of his generation were never supposed to write anything which might 'bring a blush to the cheek of a young person' (that 'young person' always deemed to be female, middle class, and about fourteen), but he was as good as any of them at smuggling his dangerous cargo through to readers able and willing to receive it. And 'dangerous cargo'

though Nancy the young prostitute may be, she will, nevertheless, at fatal risk to herself, help the young Oliver: a virtuous action by a 'vicious' woman.

Dickens is also particularly good at characters whom life has marred, distorted, wrenched out of true, with disastrous consequences both for themselves and those brought into close contact with them. He has an especially keen eye for female cruelty – whether it is the heartlessness of a Miss Murdstone, spinster sister of the young David Copperfield's hated stepfather; or the complicated human *mess* who is *Great Expectations*' s Miss Havisham, a woman who successfully stunts and distorts her young charge Estella, enacting upon , and through the girl and young woman, her own unappeasable rage at the man who betrayed her, and her inconsolable desolation for his loss. Or the elderly Mrs Clennam, of *Little Dorrit,* a woman in whom all humanity appears to have withered long ago, her physical immobility, confined as she is by illness to a single chair in a single room, mirroring her long emotional and spiritual atrophy. Even so, she can always summon the energy for malevolence, much of it directed against her luckless middle-aged son, Arthur, who struggles to offer duty and respect although he receives only cold contempt in return.

And there are women who seem as cold and damaged as Miss Havisham, or Mrs Clennam, but retain somewhere in them the capacity to love, however little they trust the emotion or themselves: someone, for example, such as Miss Wade, also from *Little Dorrit,* in whom love denied 'went bad' some time ago. Yet although her general attitude to the world is one of utter distrust, she is capable of making an exception, as she does for Tattycoram. Tatty is the young, wilful, angry and resentful maidservant whom Mr and Mrs Meagles brought into their family when she was still a child, and her task has been to tend, Peg their own young daughter. The Meagleses are well intentioned, kindly, generous, but seemingly utterly unaware of the impossible tensions of Tatty's situation, tensions which they have created – Tatty is a quasi daughter, who is nevertheless a servant, she grows up with and serves her quasi-sister, who is being brought up and trained to take her place in a world Tatty will never know at first hand. Peg – it seems– is destined to become the much loved, protected, pampered wife of an affluent middle-class – or something more – man. Tatty, if she's lucky, may be permitted to continue to serve Peg in her own household. (Whether or not Dickens himself is fully aware of the impossibilities of Tatty's situation remains a moot point.)

Only the enigmatic Miss Wade seems to understand Tatty. They meet by chance, in Calais, in the second chapter of the book. Both Tatty and Miss Wade are returning to England from France where the Meagleses and Tatty have been travelling, as has Miss Wade. The chapter title, 'Fellow Travellers', is a teasing one, expressing as it does both a literal and mundane reality, but hinting also at affinities yet to be discovered. The party of British travellers, having undergone quarantine, is currently housed in an hotel before embarking for England. I'll read you a little of that first meeting between the young girl and the older woman, but I'll just set it up for you first.

Tatty has taken refuge in her room after a difficult exchange with the Meagleses, and has thrown herself on the floor by her bed, and given way to a storm of tears. Miss Wade, staying in the same hotel , is drawn by the sound of her sobs: she asks Tatty what's wrong. Tatty responds with an outburst of rage. I'll just read you the passage:-

'"It's nothing to you what's the matter. It don't signify to anyone.'

'"O yes it does; I am sorry to see you so."

'"You are not sorry," said the girl, "You are glad. You know you are glad. I never was like that but twice, over in the quarantine yonder; and both times you found me. I am afraid of you."

'"Afraid of me?"

'"Yes. You seem to come like my own anger, my own malice, my own – whatever it is – I don't know what it is. But I am ill-used, I am ill-used, I am ill-used!" .. ...

'The visitor stood looking at her with a strange attentive smile. It was wonderful to see the fury of the contest in the girl, and the bodily struggle she made as if she were rent by the Demons of old."

[Miss Wade then appears to urge restraint, patience, self-control, prudence, and, above all, adjures Tatty to remember her own dependent position.]

'"I don't care for that. I'll run away. I'll do you some mischief. I won't bear it; I *can't* bear it; I shall *die* if I try to bear it!"

'The observer stood with her hand upon her own bosom, looking at the girl, as one afflicted with a diseased part might curiously watch the dissection and exposition of an analogous case."

Miss Wade remains a significant presence in the novel, and in the remarkable twenty-first chapter of Book II, entitled 'The History of a Self-Tormentor', Dickens will offer one of the earliest British literary prototypes of a lesbian woman. To do so, he breaks away from the third person narrative in which the rest of the novel is written, and goes instead to the first person, and creates there a mini version of the female *Bildungsroman,* the novel of personal development from childhood, through adolescence to early adulthood. The authority of the first person voice, Miss Wade's own narrative of herself, counters the more negative, sometimes pathologizing tones found elsewhere in the novel's *third* person accounts of Miss Wade. It's a powerful example of how Dickens can create remarkably intelligent, credible and sympathetic portraits of types of women about whom he might also feel unease, suspicion and active hostility.

****

In the years which separate us from Dickens and the period in which he lived and worked, various revolutions have been and gone. One of the biggest has been a wholesale reconsideration of the part that gender plays in what, and how, authors write, and how *we* read them. We have witnessed fierce debates about whether authors of one sex *can* write about the other, with any hope of doing it truthfully or fairly ; and the nineteenth century in general, and, often, Dickens in particular, has, not without reason, been particularly harshly scrutinized in that regard.

Our own probably ambivalent feelings towards Dickens will be intensified by the loathsome eventual treatment of his own wife, whom he discarded for the younger Ellen Tiernan, doing it with a dismaying mixture of cruelty, cowardice, injustice and denial.

But, despite the extent to which, unsurprisingly, Dickens remained enmeshed in many of his own period's more maddening obtuse and self-serving assumptions about the true and proper end of women's lives, and women's place in the scheme of things, he was also capable of a remarkable generosity of vision, and of a recognition of and sympathy for specifically female discontents. His work constantly shows a generous respect and warmth towards women who *don't* fit the more anodyne stereotypes of Victorian womanhood – the unmarried Miss Abbey Potterson of *Our Mutual Friend*,

who single handedly runs her pub in a rough Thameside area and whose benign despotism is recognized and obeyed by the often violent men who are her regulars; Betsy Trotwood, David Copperfield's aunt, who is not simply a Dickensian grotesque; or 'the old girl', the formidable though very loving wife of Trooper George in *Bleak House*, a woman who, with her very young children has made her own way back to England from half the world away, and who, as her soldier husband well knows, is the real brains and backbone of her family.

The list of Dickensian female characters who constantly buck the trend is long , and their creation frequently confounds our expectations of what a mid-Victorian male author – and *this* mid-Victorian male author in particular – might achieve in his effort to grapple with the period's 'woman trouble' – achievements which, despite some reservations, seems still a cause for considerable celebration.