

IDIOTS AND EGOISTS: AN EXPLORATION OF MORAL GROWTH AND  
RESPONSIBILITY AMONG CHILDREN, THE CHILDISH, AND THE CHILD-LIKE  
IN THE WORKS OF GEORGE ELIOT AND CHARLES DICKENS

by

Carrie Hildebrand

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Arts

at

Dalhousie University  
Halifax, Nova Scotia  
December 2010

© Copyright by Carrie Hildebrand, 2010

DALHOUSIE UNIVERSITY

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

The undersigned hereby certify that they have read and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies for acceptance a thesis entitled “IDIOTS AND EGOISTS: AN EXPLORATION OF MORAL GROWTH AND RESPONSIBILITY AMONG CHILDREN, THE CHILDISH, AND THE CHILD-LIKE IN THE WORKS OF GEORGE ELIOT AND CHARLES DICKENS” by Carrie Hildebrand in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

Dated: December 5, 2010

Supervisor: \_\_\_\_\_

Readers: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

DALHOUSIE UNIVERSITY

DATE: December 5, 2010

AUTHOR: Carrie Hildebrand

TITLE: IDIOTS AND EGOISTS: AN EXPLORATION OF MORAL GROWTH  
AND RESPONSIBILITY AMONG CHILDREN, THE CHILDISH, AND  
THE CHILD-LIKE IN THE WORKS OF GEORGE ELIOT AND  
CHARLES DICKENS

DEPARTMENT OR SCHOOL: Department of English

DEGREE: MA CONVOCATION: May YEAR: 2011

Permission is herewith granted to Dalhousie University to circulate and to have copied for non-commercial purposes, at its discretion, the above title upon the request of individuals or institutions. I understand that my thesis will be electronically available to the public.

The author reserves other publication rights, and neither the thesis nor extensive extracts from it may be printed or otherwise reproduced without the author's written permission.

The author attests that permission has been obtained for the use of any copyrighted material appearing in the thesis (other than the brief excerpts requiring only proper acknowledgement in scholarly writing), and that all such use is clearly acknowledged.

---

Signature of Author

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	v
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	vi
CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION.....	1
CHAPTER 2 NATURE, NURTURE, AND THE ROLE OF SUFFERING.....	15
CHAPTER 3 CONCEPTIONS OF CHILDHOOD AND MORAL GROWTH.....	40
CHAPTER 4 CHILDISH ADULTS.....	74
CHAPTER 5 THE MORAL IMPLICATIONS OF IDIOCY.....	91
CHAPTER 6 CONCLUSION.....	110
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	113

## ABSTRACT

This thesis explores these attitudes towards sympathy and moral growth as illustrated in several novels by Charles Dickens and George Eliot. The issue of moral growth is what definitively separates Dickens and Eliot in their fiction and informs their interpretation of realism, suffering, and sympathy. Following the examination of the role of suffering in moral development in the first chapter of the thesis, the second chapter will look at how each author views childhood and the moral implications of inexperience. A further key area, and the subject featured in the third chapter of the thesis, is how the conflicting representation of childhood in the novels is extended to the portrayal of childish adults. Examining the depictions of intellectual disability and the distinction between “idiot” characters and merely childish or immoral adults offers another important dimension to the comparison between two of Victorian fiction’s key players. The final chapter deals with the role of “idiocy” within each author’s moral framework, and further illuminates the distinct ideologies of moral growth that essentially shape and differentiate their works.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

This thesis would not have been possible without the generous dedication of many within the English Department. A heartfelt thank you goes out to my readers, Dr. Marjorie Stone and Dr. John Baxter, as well as to Mary Beth MacIssac for her inexhaustible kindness and willingness to answer endless questions.

To my supervisor, Dr. Rohan Maitzen, I am forever indebted. Though I am extremely fortunate to have had such a dedicated and knowledgeable advisor, I am most grateful to have had her as a teacher. Not only has she made it possible for me to undertake such an ambitious research project through her encouragement and insight, but started it all by introducing me to the love of my life: Victorian literature.

Finally, I would like to thank my friends and family for their wonderful encouragement and support throughout this process, and especially my brother, Ben, who inspired me to celebrate the special characters who are so often overlooked.

## CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

The treatment of morality and its relation to society's well being is often the foundation upon which Victorian authors build their narratives. The conventions of Victorian fiction produce ideal conditions for or novelists tackling social problems such as the woman question and the condition of England, whether through the lens of fanciful caricature, or through faithful realism. While the key moral focus for both Dickens and Eliot is fostering a more sympathetic society bound by fellow-feeling, both authors approach the representation of those issues differently in accordance with their particular attitudes toward moral growth. Eliot emphasizes the communal aspect of sympathy by sharing in how we are "correspondingly affected by the same influences" (OED), while Dickens alternatively focuses on the sympathetic impulse of being "moved by the suffering or distress of another" in feeling "pity that inclines one to spare or to succour" (OED). This thesis explores these attitudes towards sympathy and moral growth as illustrated in several of the authors' most important novels. The issue of moral growth is what definitively separates Dickens and Eliot in their fiction and informs their interpretation of realism, suffering, and sympathy. Following the examination of the role of suffering in moral development in the first chapter of the thesis, the second chapter will look at how each author views childhood and the moral implications of inexperience. A further key area, and the subject featured in the third chapter of the thesis, is how the conflicting representation of childhood in their novels is extended to the portrayal of childish adults. Examining the depictions of intellectual disability and the distinction between "idiot" characters and merely childish or immoral adults offers another

important dimension to the comparison between two of Victorian fiction's key players. The final chapter deals with the role of "idiocy" within each author's moral framework, and further illuminates the distinct ideologies of moral growth that essentially shape and differentiate their works.

Eliot, as a champion of realism, insists that an unembellished but thoughtfully presented illustration of humanity in all its ugliness, complexity, and contradictions, will teach us to sympathize with those among whom we live, and that engaging with realistic fictions can prepare us for the moral challenges we will face in everyday life. Eliot's commitment to faithful representation allows readers to experience these situations vicariously, and to better understand their own morality by reading about complex characters who make mistakes, suffer, and grow. Dickens, in contrast, offers examples of those who get it right and those who do not. In general, though exceptions abound, Dickens's characters are either irreproachable (such as the angelic Amy Dorrit), or irredeemable (such as the undeniably sinister Rigaud): a separation which makes it easy for us to sympathize with the deserving, and to condemn those past all hope of redemption. Alison Booth discusses the development of Victorian fiction as "a marked transition from the Dickensian to the Eliotic" in that "readers were taught to expect realistic characterization, and villains and saints were banished from the pages of novels" (197). Dickens, however, laments that his imaginative depiction of characters is often seen as an artistic failing. He claims that

the merit of art in the narrator, is the manner of stating the truth....And in these times, when the tendency is to be frightfully literal and catalogue-like...I have an idea...that the very holding of popular literature through a



kind of popular dark age, may depend on such fanciful treatment. (qtd. in Booth 197)

Dickens defended the fanciful treatment of truth in his fiction, “repudiating the grey outlook that cannot imagine white or black extremes of character” (Booth 198), as in his preface to *Nicholas Nickleby*:

It is remarkable that what we call the world, which is so very credulous in what professes to be true, is most incredulous in what professes to be imaginary; and that, while, every day in real life, it will allow in one man no blemishes, and in another no virtues, it will seldom admit a very strongly-marked character, either good or bad, in a fictitious narrative, to be within the limits of probability. (4)

Insisting that fanciful depictions are often closer to the truth than is usually credited, Dickens attempts to reconcile imagination with realism by “purposely [dwelling] upon the romantic side of familiar things” (*Bleak House*), and insisting that real life can be as remarkable and exaggerated as fiction, and that a true realist will not attempt to conceal those facts.

Booth asserts that “Eliot’s strategy reverses Dickens’s, albeit with a similar aim,” in that “she strives to school readers to that grey outlook he resists” (198). Not only does Dickens maintain that such extremes do in fact exist, but he argues that employing melodramatic characters in his fiction is a deliberate tool that is remarkable for both entertaining and informing his audience. As Juliet John suggests, “the main function of art, to Dickens, is not necessarily to reflect reality but to improve that reality” (19): an approach that includes “a self-conscious exposure of the fictional nature of his ideals”

(19) in order to draw attention to the imaginative colouring that separates his representation from strict realism. Dickens's "melodramatic models" exaggerate and personify various moral states in explicitly fictional characters while simultaneously revealing truths about human nature and society. Melodramatic techniques aside, a general flair for hyperbole in Dickens's fiction allows his characters to speak to the reader through more than their dialogue. As James Brown suggests, Dickens's use of exaggeration accepts that "his characters are presented in extreme terms that the essence of society may be seen more clearly" (18). Throughout his novels,

the typical Dickens characters embody essential aspects of their society, in their most highly developed and concentrated forms [...] Thus the extremely defined, highly concentrated presentation of character is not a failing in Dickens's realism (as compared to the careful, intricate revelation of inner life which we find in the novels of George Eliot) but is a consequence of the social basis of his realistic method. (Brown 18-9)

Asserting that Dickens employs a different brand of realism from Eliot's—rather than viewing it as a separate representative model altogether—Brown goes even farther to suggest that "the concern to depict society in its essential aspects is often regarded as characteristic of 'true realism' as against the superficial realism of the naturalist school" (14 Brown). The authors reveal their alternative models as Dickens's imaginative and embellished style inspires sympathy through an emotional response, while Eliot engenders an intellectual sympathetic reaction by changing our perspective on the kinds of people we see every day. The essential point to consider here, however, is not whether one author's approach to realism is more effective, but rather to understand the

differences as telling symptoms of the moral assumptions that inform their fiction so distinctly.

Stanly Friedman astutely characterizes Dickens's novels as resembling "the popular Gothic architecture found in the homes of many wealthy Victorians: large, highly ornamented buildings, with a complex symmetrical balance of both large and small features—rooms, gables, bay windows, alcoves, and connecting passages" (9), and argues that, for Dickens, we "can only see the forest clearly if we look closely at the individual trees" (11). As Friedman's comparison suggests, though the excess of detail and hyperbole can be seen as distracting, they can also function as tools for reaching closed-minded readers through the imagination. Indeed, "a fantastic detail may lull a reader into approaching moral issues that he or she would prefer to avoid," just as "a realistic touch may encourage suspension of disbelief in an improbable story" (Friedman 11). By colouring the real world with a fantastic brush, Dickens highlights the details that will focus our attention on the issues of importance. In the opening pages of *Bleak House*, for instance, the description of the fog draws attention to the inhospitality of London and creates the mood necessary for impressing the importance of having proper homes for children. Therefore, rather than allowing his readers to interpret his fictional realities as they would their own, Dickens manipulates the reality he presents in a way that forces his readers to see it through his eyes. But while Dickens alters reality in order to highlight certain characteristics, Eliot plays with perspective in order to teach her readers to see differently on their own. Through a process of bringing the reader into intimate acquaintance with a character's thoughts and feelings and then stepping back in

order to gain an objective view of the larger picture, Eliot changes the way we view reality without altering anything other than our point of view.

Though offering idealized examples of children, the poor, or mentally-compromised may quickly gain the sympathy of fellow characters as well as readers, it may lead to a lack of sympathy for individuals in the real world who fall short of their fictional representations. The danger that sympathy will not translate from fiction to real life is precisely what Eliot tries to avoid as a realist. She insists that by modeling her characters after the flawed and complex people with whom we live and interact, we can learn that it is possible to love what is sometimes unattractive and to extend our sympathy even when it requires effort. In Eliot's essay, "The Natural History of German Life," she laments that while

Our social novels profess to represent the people as they are....The unreality of their representations is a grave evil. The greatest benefit we owe to the artist, whether painter, poet, or novelist, is the extension of our sympathies. Appeals founded on generalizations and statistics require a sympathy ready-made, a moral sentiment already in activity; but a picture of human life such as a great artist can give, surprises even the trivial and the selfish into that attention to what is apart from themselves, which may be called the raw material of moral sentiment. (3)

While Eliot is not terribly concerned with the misrepresentation of the "beaux and duchesses" we will never meet, she maintains that it "is serious that our sympathy with the perennial joys and struggles, the toil, the tragedy, and the humour in the life of our more heavily-laden fellow-man, should be perverted" (3). Rather than suggesting that we

concern ourselves with what “the moralist thinks *ought* to act on the labourer or artisan,” we need to understand “what are the motives and influences which *do* act on him,” (3). Eliot’s novels teach us to feel sympathy “not for the heroic artisan or the sentimental peasant,” but rather “for the peasant in all his coarse apathy, and the artisan in all his suspicious selfishness” (3). For all of her comparisons between painting and realism, Eliot qualifies that novels must do more than merely offer a picture (of rural life, for example), by projecting the inner life of the characters as well.

While Eliot praises Dickens as a “great novelist who is gifted with the utmost power of rendering the external traits of our town population,” she argues that he fails to “give us their psychological character—their conception of life, and their emotions—with the same truth as their idiom and manners” (3). Her concern is that Dickens’s “preternaturally poor children and artisans” and melodramatic characters encourage “the miserable fallacy, that high morality and refined sentiment can grow out of harsh social relations, ignorance, and want; or that the working-classes are in a condition to enter at once into a millennial state of altruism, wherein everyone is caring for everyone else, and no one for himself” (4). Though Dickens’s fanciful fiction may successfully draw in those who would otherwise remain unsympathetic to the kinds of people depicted in the novels, Eliot is justified in her concern that such sympathy is useless if it does not transfer to the real people the fiction represents. Eliot makes clear, in both her fiction and essays, that she views moral character as something which is in constant formation and is therefore subject to the circumstances and conditions in which it grows. Still, though she recognizes the impact outside forces can have on one’s development, she nevertheless insists upon a standard of personal responsibility. In her particular understanding of

determinism, Eliot promotes awareness of the conditions that shape our development, and endeavors to overcome those which would hinder our moral development. By recognizing the way our character is formed by our experiences, we learn to consciously override or correct negative influences and to redirect our egotistical impulses into altruistic ones. Eliot takes up Feuerbach's notion of a religion of humanity in which our moral responsibility to ourselves and others replaces deference and fear of God. Integral to this view is the ability to recognize ourselves as part of a community in which our own suffering is woven with that of others: a task at which *Adam Bede's* Hetty and Arthur, and *Middlemarch's* Rosamond fail.

Eliot's crowning achievement, *Middlemarch*, brilliantly illustrates the web of interconnectivity as her heroine, Dorothea Brooke, finally reaches a successful balance between her altruistic outlook and the recognition of her position in the larger whole. Eliot rejects the idea that opening one's consciousness to the fullness of human suffering will result in indifference to the relative smallness of particulars. She insists that "to regard human thought and feeling, pleasure and pain, as matters of little significance because of their physiological basis is [...] 'equivalent to saying that you care no longer for colour, now you know the laws of the spectrum'" (Paris 439). At the same time, however, she concedes that we could hardly bear it "if we had a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life, [for then] it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel's heart beat, and we should die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence" (*Middlemarch* 182). Eliot specifically responds to the idea that a world without God leaves no incentive for moral behaviour outside of the rewards and punishments offered by religion, by insisting that she is "just and honest, not because [she] expect[s] to

live in another world,” but because she is aware of the damage done to others when we fail to act morally. “Through my union and fellowship with the men and women I have seen,” Eliot observes, “I feel a like, though fainter, sympathy with those I have not seen; and I am able so to live in imagination with the generations to come, that their good is not alien to me, and is a stimulus to me to labour for ends which may not benefit myself, but will benefit them” (Paris 425). Though Eliot believes that we are all born as egoists, she remains confident in our ability to mature, as we learn from our experiences and mistakes, into altruistic adults who are sympathetic to those around us.

The process of maturation is one which Eliot explores throughout her novels by depicting those who successfully undergo an altruistic transformation as well as those who are left behind, either as a result of their natural limitations or because of flawed moral training. “The great division among George Eliot’s characters is between egoists and those who approach reality objectively,” and “the complications of her plots frequently stem from the egoism of central characters; and the development of the action often hinges upon or produces the education of the protagonist from egoism to objectivity, from a morally destructive life of selfishness to the religion of humanity” (Paris 432). In light of her determinist ideology, “Eliot believed that individuals have the ability to choose the better over the worse course if [the] motive and determination (themselves products of antecedent causes) are powerful enough” (Paris 439). Eliot suggests that while circumstances push us towards certain ends, there is also the potential to learn from past mistakes and to improve morally within the reasonable limitations allotted to us. “As a realist,” Paris notes, “Eliot recognized that men are not morally responsible for their actions; but as a moralist who based her practice upon the findings

of psychology, she felt that moral judgment of past actions can have a potent influence upon future behavior” (440-1). Though we are ultimately responsible for our actions, an important element of sympathy for Eliot is recognizing the various forces that contribute to leading us astray. Therefore, a complex balance is required between holding individuals accountable for their choices while remaining sympathetic to the outside forces that undoubtedly shape their lives.

For Eliot, “sympathy was not just another virtue like pity, not one moral attitude among others,” Brigid Lowe explains, but “rather the necessary condition of all morality, a fundamental mode of understanding” (112). In her letters, Eliot articulates that the only effect which she ardently longs to produce in her novels “is that those who read them should be better able to imagine and to feel the pains and joys of those who differ from themselves in everything but the broad fact of being struggling, erring, human creatures” (Eliot 502). According to Eliot, “sympathetic understanding is a matter not of objective examination but of subjective participation” (Lowe 12), which is why she feared that “trusting to objectivised abstract knowledge was a sure route to misunderstanding, laissez-fair irresponsibility, and social indifference” (Lowe 116). Rather than filling her novels with sensational tragedies, Eliot dramatizes the seemingly mundane suffering of everyday life. By guiding us into a new perspective through her narratives, Eliot not only reminds us of our participation in a larger society, but also that our sympathy is needed most by those whose lives we inevitably touch.

While Eliot views character as something we have the power to shape ourselves, Dickens maintains a more essentialist view of individuals as either inherently virtuous or flawed. Because Dickens and Eliot adopt distinct views on the issue of moral potential,



they emphasize the role of either nature or nurture as the dominant formative influence. Though each necessarily views the effect that experience has upon moral fiber differently, both look to the role that suffering has upon the characters they portray. Since Eliot trusts in our ability to learn from meaningful, and particularly painful, experiences, suffering in her novels often serves as an awakening through which one grows morally. Alternatively for Dickens, suffering merely serves to confirm what we already know or suspect about a character: namely, that the morally flawed characters are limited by nature and are unlikely to change, and the virtuous are in need of no such transformative moral training.

The first topic for consideration is the role that suffering plays for each author, particularly through examples from Eliot's *Adam Bede* and *Middlemarch*, as well as from Dickens's *Little Dorrit*. The second chapter looks at the authors' distinct attitudes toward moral growth as dramatized through the portrayal of children. Though both authors challenge Romantic conceptions of childhood, Eliot's representations question the validity of such idealized children while Dickens maintains the idealized depiction but changes the environment in which these Romantic children dwell. While Dickens upholds that children's inherent qualities should be protected, Eliot asserts that children require formative life experiences in order to develop morally. Chapter 3 then turns to each author's treatment of childish adults and the resultant moral implications for these characters. Though Dickens stresses that maintaining the spirit of childhood can lead to more benevolent and virtuous adults, he also recognizes, like Eliot, that adults who cling to childishness without growing into an adult role are problematic.

Finally, chapter four turns to another telling illustration of the authors' distinct moral frameworks by looking at the representation of mental disability in their novels. Though we can conclude that some characters are incapable of growth while others require suffering and experience as a guide, how exactly do Eliot and Dickens deal with the characters who cannot be expected to grow given their limited faculties? Because Eliot emphasizes the need for moral growth and Dickens stresses a paternalistic structure in which adults must assume responsibility for others, the question is whether the mentally limited adults are necessarily morally incomplete, or if they might offer sympathetic possibilities that others cannot. In the same way that Dickens and Eliot build upon Romantic conceptions of childhood, so do they borrow from eighteenth-century conceptions of mental-illness, or "idiocy." But while Eliot's use of such characters is scarce and remains consistent with Wordsworthian depictions of mental disability, Dickens's frequent representations of idiocy evolve over the course of his career into promising moral guides. Just as he treasures the child-heart over the intelligence of unfeeling adults, Dickens depicts characters such as Mr. Dick as remaining untouched by the loss of innocence that usually comes with maturation. Because Eliot insists that growth is crucial to becoming a moral being and that we require experience in order to learn to sympathize with others, an adult who remains mentally child-like cannot function as a pillar of moral strength. Since sympathy for Eliot is essentially learned while for Dickens it is an inherent impulse that some, by nature, simply lack, the link between morality and maturation for each author determines the way children are depicted in their novels, and how they function as moral beings.

The fact that both Dickens and Eliot use their novels to discuss moral issues implies that they trust in the novel's ability to have a positive influence over their readers. While debate surrounds fiction's ability to spark altruistic behavior, the didactic nature of the Victorian novel and its social role place the argument in a different context from that of a discussion of novels from another period. While critics such as Suzanne Keen are skeptical about the ethical consequences that fiction is capable of rendering, Martha Nussbaum insists that fiction provides a more digestible medium through which important moral and philosophical ideas can be discussed, and allows us to practice extending our sympathy by exposing us to types of people with whom we may not have contact in our everyday life (*Love's Knowledge*). Mary-Catherine Harrison notes that "Keen does not give the same attention to the ways in which particular authors and texts might have positively shaped the attitudes and actions of historical readers" (258). Harrison continues Nussbaum's argument in light of recent psychological research, and turns to "the Victorian novel as a particularly salient case of how narrative empathy can inform our study of literary history" (258). "Indeed, early accounts of sympathy—empathy's conceptual ancestor and etymological cousin—assume that our emotional response to characters in a tragedy is no less universal than our response to the suffering of other men" (Harrison 257). Research shows that "altruistic behaviors are motivated by imagination and emotion" (258), and that "rather than excuse or deter readers from ethical behaviors, emotional responses to individual characters can translate into improved attitudes and actions towards people in the real world" (Harrison 260). In particular, some research shows that "in the case of Victorian literature about poverty

[...] reader's relationships with individual poor characters can affect their attitudes about poverty and their behavior towards poor contemporaries" (261).

While it is legitimate to question the effects that sympathy in fiction has on real life, it is clear that authors such as Dickens and Eliot saw their fiction as playing an important part in the moral education of their contemporaries. The synecdochal power of representing society through specific individuals wielded by Victorian authors such as Dickens and Eliot was essentially a given, assuming that the specific characters they represent are merely an example of the countless "real" sufferers around us every day. Indeed, Harrison recounts a cabman's "spontaneous eulogy of the author upon his death," in which he had hoped that the great gentleman who looked out for the poor would give the cabmen a turn next, in a statement which reveals public confidence "in the ethical consequences of fiction" (271). The way that sympathy informs our morality, whether as the signal of an inherent sympathetic capacity or as a result of moral growth through experience and suffering, is what distinguishes the authorial tone that Dickens and Eliot adopt and shapes the kind of memorable characters they create.

## CHAPTER 2 NATURE, NURTURE, AND THE ROLE OF SUFFERING

Both Eliot and Dickens grapple with themes of morality and question which factors are most important in determining our ability to sympathize with others. Eliot's emphasis on growth and development leads her to place moral responsibility on individuals, even if such growth necessitates struggling to overcome their natural or circumstantial limitations. Dickens alternatively weighs nature more heavily and is sceptical of an individual's ability to be schooled in what should be a natural impulse to sympathize. His belief that good people are inherently sympathetic speaks to the essential separation of Dickens from Eliot in valuing the heart above the head, or emotion and instinct over intellect and experience. While both authors recognize nature and nurture as limiting forces on moral growth, Eliot remains confident in our ability to overcome our limitations and to learn from our experiences—perhaps none more influential than suffering. Though suffering for Eliot awakens one's sympathetic impulse and thus is a catalyst for moral growth, for Dickens it primarily reveals one's true character rather than transforming it. Suffering, for Dickens, may plant the seeds for sympathetic understanding, but one's ability to flourish into altruism and compassion largely depends upon the soil in which the seeds are planted. Eliot, on the other hand, trusts in the catalyzing force of suffering to promote growth even in infertile territory. Though Eliot allows for the possibility that even morally limited characters will grow with a healthy dose of suffering, Dickens places much more weight on the quality of the soil. Therefore, suffering for Dickens gains its importance by illustrating the inherent goodness of a character in the face of misfortune rather than as a catalyst to the process of development—in demonstrating one's morality rather than transforming it. Though these

fundamental differences resonate throughout both author's works more largely, they are clearly demonstrated in Eliot's *Adam Bede* and *Middlemarch*, in comparison with Dickens's *Little Dorrit*.

In her first full-length novel, *Adam Bede*, Eliot dramatizes her deterministic philosophy and explicitly plays out the implications of irresponsible moral choices. Critics such as Courtney Berger note that while Adam exemplifies the awareness of his actions that Eliot promotes, Arthur and Hetty's failure to consider their action introspectively threatens the fabric of the community and necessitates their removal. Because Eliot trusts in our intellectual capability to overcome our limitations and to recognize that our choices directly impact other people, she holds everyone responsible for the health of the community. The morally-upright eponymous hero, Adam, learns to sympathize with the flawed and erring only after he is forced to recognize that a variety of factors can lead a person into trouble. Moreover, he is forced to acknowledge that blame and punishment do less to induce moral growth than the extension of one's fellow-feeling and understanding. Early on we are told that Adam

had too little fellow-feeling with the weakness that errs in spite of foreseen consequences. Without this fellow-feeling, how are we to get enough patience and charity towards our stumbling, falling companions in the long and changeful journey? And there is but one way in which a strong determined soul can learn it—by getting his heart-strings bound round the weak and erring, so that he must share not only the outward consequence of their error, but their inward suffering. (190)

Initially, Adam is inclined to sympathize only with those upon whom misfortune is inflicted, and remains staunchly intolerant of the mistakes of those who have contributed to their own suffering. While he upholds a high moral standard for those he deems capable of reason and restraint, Adam removes such expectations from women by presuming that they have the same limited mental faculties as children. Because Adam views Hetty as “all but a child—as any man with a conscience in him ought to feel bound to take care on” (278), he immediately blames Arthur Donnithorn, a privileged and educated gentleman, for the seduction and ruin of the impressionable country girl. Further prejudiced by his affection for Hetty, Adam insists that the “blame lay with that man who had selfishly played with her heart—had perhaps even lured her away” (356) and demands that Arthur be brought to justice:

‘I want him to feel what she feels. It’s his work...she was a child as it ud ha’ gone t’anybody’s heart to look at....I don’t care what she’s done...it was him brought her to it. And he shall know it...he shall feel it...if there’s a just God, he shall feel what it is t’ ha’ brought a child like her to sin and misery’.... (379)

In order for Adam to extend his sympathy to Arthur, he must recognize that Hetty is also responsible for her situation and that she is not merely the ignorant child he supposed. Furthermore, Adam must admit that, while Arthur is better acquainted with reality than Hetty, he too is something of a child in that he does not possess the moral strength Adam expects of him.

While his sympathetic impulse is initially awakened by the suffering of an innocent victim, it is the appeal to Adam’s reason that allows him to recognize the

complexity of the situation and to realize that those who stumble and make mistakes need our sympathy as much as those who are simply wronged. Mr. Irwine responds to Adam's passionate thirst for justice by pointing out that Hetty is not the only one suffering, and that Arthur is going to feel the shock of what he has done for the rest of his life (379). Acting as the voice of calm reason, Irwine notes that "in these cases we sometimes form our judgment on what seems to us strong evidence, and yet, for want of knowing some small fact, our judgment is wrong" (378). Continuing in this vein, he cautions Adam in having

no right to say that the guilt of her crime lies with him, and that he ought to bear the punishment. It is not for us men to apportion the shares of moral guilt and retribution. We find it impossible to avoid mistakes even in determining who has committed a single criminal act, and the problem how far a man is to be held responsible for the unforeseen consequences of his own deed, is one that might well make us tremble to look into. The evil consequences that may lie folded in a single act of selfish indulgence, is a thought so awful that it ought surely to awaken some feeling less presumptuous than a rash desire to punish...if you were to obey your passion—for it is passion, and you deceive yourself in calling it justice—it might be with you precisely as it has been with Arthur; nay worse; your passion might lead you yourself into a horrible crime. (379-80)

Once Hetty is delivered from harm (though admittedly exiled to Australia), and Adam's protective fervour has been tempered by an appeal to Arthur's suffering, the rivals are



able to reconcile in sympathetic understanding. Adam can finally admit that he has been accustomed to being too hard upon others:

I'm hard—it's in my nature. I was too hard with my father for doing wrong. I've been hard t' every-body but her. I felt as if nobody pitied her enough—her suffering cut into me so; and when I thought the folks at the Farm were too hard with her, I said I'd never be hard to anybody myself again. But feeling overmuch about her has perhaps made me unfair to you....I've no right to be hard towards them as have done wrong and repent. (421)

We are told by the narrator that Adam feels his own pain merged in sympathy for Arthur (421), and we are shown that Adam has finally learned to sympathize through the education of suffering. For Arthur, however, the experience does not seem to have the same morally transformative effect.

With an intense desire to be well-liked by everyone and a squeamishness for the pangs of remorse, Arthur, through his wilful failure to engage in honest introspection, offers a striking contrast to Adam's belief in personal responsibility. In their first oppositional scuffle after Adam catches Arthur kissing Hetty, the confrontation results in Arthur's attempts at a "hasty reconciliation" (281) and Adam's demand for more than superficial and "prompt deeds of atonement" (281). Because "Adam's grating words, disturbed his self-soothing arguments" and because Arthur's bitterness "could only show itself against the man who refused to be conciliated by him" (281), the former friends begin to view each other as standing in the way of one another's happiness. Indeed, after Arthur has left Hetty broken-hearted and removes himself by joining the army, he is

delighted to learn that Adam and Hetty are to be married, not out of joy for the couple's happiness, but out of his own relief that he has done no lasting damage to Hetty's reputation and ruined her chances in marriage, nor blighted Adam's hopes of marrying her.

Rather than learning that in the future he must recognize the difference between his motives and the reality of his choices, Arthur simply believes that because his motives were innocent, nobody needs to suffer for his mistake. Arthur is much more concerned with being absolved of guilt than making genuine atonement, which is all too evident in his relief upon learning that he will no longer be viewed as a villain and his desire to rid himself of the uncomfortable sensation of self-rebuke. Upon receipt of the letter detailing the engagement,

Arthur felt there was not air enough in the room to satisfy his renovated life, when he had read that passage in the letter. He threw up the windows, he rushed out of doors into the December air, and greeted every one who spoke to him with an eager gaiety, as if there had been news of a fresh Nelson victory. For the first time since he had come to Windsor, he was in true boyish spirits: the load that had been pressing upon him was gone; the haunting fear had vanished. He thought he could conquer his bitterness towards Adam now.... (394)

Though his rapturous demonstration could be easily mistaken for Scrooge on Christmas morning, Arthur's euphoria results from his belief that the mistakes of his past has been erased, rather than the determination to lead a better life in the future, as the moral of *A Christmas Carol* suggests. While Adam learns to sympathize with Arthur because he

acknowledges his own mistaken judgement and his contribution to the suffering that he and Arthur share, Arthur never really learns to accept responsibility for his actions. Convinced that if Adam knew the pain of bitter repentance he would surely be more generous (420), Arthur fails to understand that sympathy comes from the ability to recognize our shared human weaknesses, and that Adam can feel for Arthur while also demanding that they both learn from the experience. Arthur demonstrates a childish egocentrism that allows him to maintain the implicit confidence that, because “he was really such a good fellow at bottom, Providence would not treat him harshly” (285). Because “he had never meant beforehand to do anything his conscience disapproved [but] had been led on by circumstance” (284), he believes that “he did not deserve that things should turn out badly” (284). Because “consequences are determined not by excuses but by actions” (285), however, and because “our deeds determine us as much as we determine our deeds” (283), Arthur’s plaintive whining holds very little moral weight. Though he convinces himself that “he had said no word with the purpose of deceiving [Hetty], [and that] her vision was all spun by her own childish fancy” (282), he is “obliged to confess to himself that it was spun half out of his own actions” (282). Arthur’s underwhelming acceptance of “half” the responsibility for Hetty’s ruin illustrates that he resists the moral lesson that his suffering has to offer. In the name of maintaining a clear conscience, Arthur fails to regain a sense of moral agency by recognizing that while we cannot choose our circumstances, we do have the power to choose our actions within them.

While Adam needs to temper his judgment of others with more compassionate recognition of the forces that can obscure our moral view, he is right all along in his

understanding of conscientiousness as the foundation of a strong community, as articulated in his philosophy of workmanship:

‘I’ve seen pretty clear, ever since I could cast up a sum, as you can never do what’s wrong without breeding sin and trouble more than you can ever see. It’s like a bit o’ bad workmanship—you never see th’ end o’ the mischief it’ll do. And it’s a poor look-out to come into the world to make your fellow-creatures worse off instead o’ better’. (151)

As Berger notes, the ethics of workmanship reflect one’s commitment to the social good: a commitment that Eliot promotes throughout the novel. Both Berger and Eliot stress that “by crafting [our] actions, or attempting to make sure that an action will bear out well under its probable circumstances, individuals both take care to produce good in the world and shelter [ourselves] from the burdens of liability” (311). Nevertheless, Berger questions whether the failure to adhere to conscientious self-reflection necessarily leaves one responsible for making bad decisions. Because Eliot acknowledges the “backstairs influence” of “secret agents” in Arthur’s consciousness and admits that “the soul is a very complex thing” (*Adam Bede* 172), we might ask whether Arthur is responsible for what may occur without his complete and conscious knowledge, or if the fact that these events occur within Arthur’s mind negate the possibility that he could be uninvolved in the end results (Berger 314). While maintaining that Eliot upholds a high standard of personal responsibility, Berger also believes that, rather than abandoning the role motives play, Eliot sees them as a complication in judging one’s actions because they introduce subjective standards (314). The important point here, however, is that the benignity of our motives does not alter the threat they pose in the resulting outcomes. Because Eliot

insists that we are all capable of a morally responsible evaluation of our actions, she does not excuse those who fail to engage in the introspective process. Though Berger is right to note that “conscientiousness can only function as a mode of social cohesion if you banish or exclude those who will not or cannot comply” (316), proper adherence to Eliot’s philosophy means that such a failure is understood as an act of will, rather than a moral impossibility. While Eliot tempers her demand for conscientious introspection with a sympathetic acknowledgement of the forces that complicate our ability to do so, *Adam Bede* makes explicit that sympathy should function as an agent of moral growth rather than as an excuse for carelessness.

Despite her insistence on moral responsibility, Eliot demonstrates that for some characters suffering has inadequate force to crack the hard shell of egoism, as is demonstrated by Rosamond Vincy in *Middlemarch*, for instance. Eliot shows, in examples such as Adam Bede and Dorothea Brooke, that the experience of suffering allows us to acknowledge individual pain in others as we are united in our human capacity for sympathy. Rather than our experiencing suffering and hardship as purely isolated occurrences, it can also form a bond between ourselves and others whom we know to be experiencing their own difficulties: difficulties, moreover, that we should feel compelled to alleviate through the impulses of fellow-feeling. In realizing our own peripheral place in a complex web and discovering that we are not in fact at its centre, we can be ennobled, destroyed, or affected only momentarily, as indeed “some fly back to subjectivity, seeking an opiate by which they can escape pain and retain their sense of selfhood” (Paris 434). In order to understand why Rosamond flies back to subjectivity after Dorothea opens her eyes to the suffering of others, we must consider the

contributing factors and resulting implications for Eliot's doctrine of responsibility. While Eliot acknowledges the inherent qualities which contribute to Rosamond's egocentrism, the novel unquestionably blames her upbringing and the gender expectations which lead to her selfish outlook and failure to sympathize, just as Arthur's difficulties stem from his indulgent lifestyle and social status.

Upon our introduction to Rosamond, only a few pages are needed to suggest bleak prospects from both her nature and her nurture. She seems to have inherited her father's self-importance and snobbery as well as her mother's vacuous delight in all things superficial, but with the dangerous addition of sharp perception and intelligence. Bred into an environment steeped in egoism, her naturally selfish tendencies are exaggerated by her education and the continuous reinforcement of her unparalleled beauty and talents, both at home and at school. Rosamond is the celebrated jewel of Middlemarch; most men, in fact, "except for her brothers, held that Miss Vincy was the best girl in the world" (104), though she herself "felt that she might have been happier if she had not been the daughter of a Middlemarch manufacturer" (93). She is also "admitted to be the flower of Mrs. Lemon's school, the chief school in the country, where the teaching included all that was demanded in the accomplished female—even to extras, such as getting in and out of a carriage" (89). Although Rosamond "had been at school with girls of higher position" (90), "Mrs. Lemon herself always held up Miss Vincy as an example: no pupil, she said, exceeded that young lady for mental acquisition and propriety of speech, while her musical execution was quite exceptional" (89). Mrs. Vincy similarly reinforces Rosamond's scholarly superiority by deferring to her in matters of phrasing and vocabulary, responding to Rosamond's reproach for the use of a "rather vulgar

expression” (91) by asking for her correction, since, “with [her] education [she] must know” (92).

Rosamond assumes a position of superiority and control at home as well as in her community in flaunting her intellectual authority over her mother and in her confidence in her ability to manipulate Mr. Vincy into acceding to her every demand. With her “nymph-like figure and pure blondness” (89) and her “eyes of heavenly blue, deep enough to hold the most exquisite meanings an ingenious beholder could put into them, and deep enough to hide the meanings of the owner if these should happen to be less exquisite” (104), she is well-equipped to manipulate others. Always on display, and always cautious of concealing the dimples she thinks so unfavourably of by “smil[ing] little in general society” (91), her “every nerve and muscle... [were] adjusted to the consciousness that she was being looked at” (109). As contrived as her performances may seem, the narrator assures us that Rosamond “was by nature an actress of parts that entered into her physique: she even acted her own character, and so well, that she did not know it to be precisely her own” (109). Her brother Fred, however, is perceptive to the artificiality that has been amplified and encouraged by her education and indulgent treatment at home. Fred, whom she considers a mere wastrel produced specifically to annoy her, insists that “disagreeable is a word that describes [her] feelings and not [his] actions” (93): feelings, moreover, that result from the “finicking notions which are the classics of Mrs. Lemon’s school” (93). Though Fred shares the same parents and home life as Rosamond and is doted upon by his affectionate mother, he maintains a good humour and lack of snobbery that contrast with his sister. Rather than attributing Rosamond’s sour disposition to her nature, Fred insists that she has been groomed into

such irritability and dissatisfaction by the unrealistic standards imparted by her education: a position that the novel supports throughout. Rosamond, as we are told, is incapable of distinguishing between fancy and reality, and is unlikely to believe that she ever could, or should, behave differently. The emphasis on Rosamond's personality as contrived and having been constructed by those around her suggests that, had such a role not been presented to her, or had she not been nurtured in such a way, she might have acted differently.

In contrast, Mary Garth's "reigning virtue" is in her "intelligent honesty" and "truth-telling fairness" as "she neither tried to create illusions, nor indulged in them for her own behoof, and...had humour enough in her to laugh at herself" (105). Though the two certainly have very different home-lives fitted with very different parental role-models, we are told that "the two girls had not only known each other in childhood, but had been at the same provincial school together (Mary as an articulated pupil)" (101). Though Rosamond and Mary receive the same education, even their positions within the school are characteristic of the crucial distinction which permeates each woman's upbringing and leads them to be nurtured very differently. While Rosamond undergoes her education in a position of privilege, Mary has to work for the opportunity to learn. Just as Mary's position as a tutor at school and her mother's assistant at home prepares her for a life of usefulness, Rosamond's experience of ease and praise prepares her for life as a decorative and idle doll. As Anne E. Patrick points out, Rosamond fits the feminine ideal in terms of her beauty, her lack of interest in masculine concerns, and the focus of her attention on the domestic sphere (227). The fact that Rosamond has no parallel ambition to Lydgate's medical research is both a symptom and a cause of her



problems (Patrick 237). “True, her greatest concern is with the central figure of the domestic sphere—herself—and it is clear that George Eliot deplors Rosamond’s egoism,” says Patrick, but Eliot also recognizes that Rosamond has been socialized to accept such a feminine role which has prepared her “nicely for getting a husband but not for relating to one” (228). While Mary’s principles are founded on honesty, practicality, and helping others, Rosamond “cares about refinements, and not about the money that was to pay for them” (110), and “would rather not have anything left to [her] if [she] must earn it by enduring much of [her] uncle’s cough and his ugly relations” (94). She exhibits her lack of sincerity and inability to consider others simultaneously, as her eyes swerve “towards the new view of her neck in the glass” even as she insists to her plain companion, Mary, that “beauty is of very little consequence in reality” (105).

Eliot alerts us to the fact that Rosamond is in dangerous moral territory when she uses her as a prime example of egoism in the illustrative pier-glass passage of chapter XXVII, in which we are told how reflective surfaces can offer an unrealistic, but flattering, sense that the world is ordered around us.

Your pier-glass or extensive surface of polished steel made to be rubbed by a housemaid, will be minutely and multitudinously scratched in all directions; but place now against it a lighted candle as a centre of illumination, and lo! The scratches will seem to arrange themselves in a fine series of concentric circles round that little sun. It is demonstrable that the scratches are going everywhere impartially, and it is only your candle which produces the flattering illusion of a concentric arrangement, its light falling with an exclusive optical selection. These things are a

parable. The scratches are events, and the candle is the egoism of any person now absent—of Miss Vincy, for example. Rosamond had a Providence of her own who had kindly made her more charming than other girls.... (248)

Bernard J. Paris echoes the above passage in asserting that “instead of cultivating a true vision of causal sequences, [the egoist] delights in imaginatively shaping the future into accord with present wishes” (433). Just as Arthur Donnithorn is able to convince himself that his flirtation with Hetty will have no negative impact on her future because his intentions are innocent, Rosamond imaginatively constructs her future by exaggerating the seriousness of her flirtation with Lydgate. In creating her dream vision, “Rosamond had registered every look and word [from Lydgate], and estimated them as the opening incidents of a preconceived romance” and that, in her romance, “it was not necessary to imagine much about the inward life of a hero...” (155-6). Rosamond not only imaginatively shapes her future, but she imaginatively shapes her husband as well, failing even after years of marriage to imagine Lydgate’s inner life. Egoists such as Rosamond and Arthur regard others “either as extensions of [themselves] or as objects to be manipulated...[which] often brings great suffering to those who are so regarded; for not only do they find their own purposes frustrated, but also their sense of their own selfhood is challenged, and they feel dehumanized or depersonalized” (Paris 434). After only their first brief meeting, Rosamond finds “Mr Lydgate suddenly corresponding to her ideal, being altogether foreign to Middlemarch, carrying a certain air of distinction congruous with good family, and possessing connections which offered vistas of that middle-class heaven, rank: a man of talent, also, whom it would be especially delightful to enslave...”

(110). While the egoist can be “shrewdly practical,” the “ends are always selfish and his calculations often misfire for want of real insight into the subjectivity of other people” (Paris 434), as is indeed the case when Rosamond undermines her husband’s wishes in order to satisfy her own.

The precarious nature of the illusions with which the egoist surrounds herself, however, are subject to destruction when reality is thrust upon her, as they are at least momentarily by Will Ladislaw. After berating Rosamond for driving Dorothea away from him, Will makes clear that he perceives Rosamond as entirely her inferior:

while these poisoned weapons were being hurled at [Rosamond], [she] was almost losing the sense of her identity, and seemed to be waking into some new terrible existence...what another nature felt in opposition to her own was being burnt and bitten into her consciousness. (*Middlemarch* 732-3)

While the event, which causes suffering for her as well as alerting her to the suffering of others, serves to momentarily destabilize Rosamond’s egocentricity and provides an opportunity for sympathetic understanding between herself and Dorothea, she finds an “opiate by which to escape pain” and rebuild her illusions. By attributing Will’s objective criticism to his opinion alone, Rosamond continues to revel in admiration from the rest of her small world rather than undergoing a meaningful transformation. Dorothea, however, is importantly affected by her suffering in that she gains a wider perspective that results in a deeper understanding of others. The fact that Dorothea is consistently characterized as ardent and genuine in her desire to ease the suffering of others while Rosamond is described as false and superficial suggests that there is an essential

difference between the two women. The appearance of an essential difference in nature as responsible for Dorothea and Rosamond's distinct outlooks is, however, reductive and misleading, since the novel serves to emphasize the greater role played by nurture.

While the same narrow scope offered women has very different consequences for an extraordinary nature like Dorothea's than it does for Rosamond (Blake 303) and suggests a fundamental distinction between the two women, this does not serve to undermine the influence that nurture has over their characters. While Dorothea is consistently described throughout the novel as having an "ardent nature," the narrator also acknowledges that "character too is a process and an unfolding" (140), and that even what is intrinsic about us is subject to influence and evolution. While it may be true that Dorothea is more naturally altruistic or of an extraordinary nature, it does not mean that Rosamond is incapable of attaining a selfless outlook. Because they have been raised differently and undergone different formative experiences, Dorothea's harsh acquaintance with reality results in a clearer sense of her societal role and the ability to balance her desires for both her personal and public life, while Rosamond's dismantled fantasy is easily rebuilt and does not result in a lasting moral transformation. Though little is revealed about Dorothea's education, it is clear that rather than being confined to the artifice and unvaried society of a grooming school, she has travelled widely and been socialized outside of the kind of small-town parlour in which Rosamond has exclusively resided. Though Dorothea experiences an overwhelming outpouring of sympathy as she confides with Rosamond, Rosamond seems to be responding primarily out of intense guilt. Rosamond feels "urged by a mysterious necessity to free herself from something that oppressed her as if it were blood-guiltiness" (749), and is relieved less by her ability

to enlighten Dorothea about Will's feelings than by the idea that "he cannot reproach [her] any more" (750). Like Arthur Donnithorn, Rosamond is more affected by the relief of having escaped blame than by having undergone moral growth. Dorothea, on the other hand, "with her usual tendency to over-estimate the good in others[...] felt a great outgoing of her heart towards Rosamond for the generous effort which had redeemed her from her suffering, not counting that the effort was a reflex of her own energy" (750).

Though Rosamond is able to sympathize with Dorothea, she remains indifferent to her husband's suffering and withholds her sympathy and companionship until his early death. Rather than recognizing that Lydgate's matrimonial ideals have been utterly disappointed, and that he finds himself alone in his marriage without a true companion, Rosamond is only conscious of her own disappointments, and feels herself finally rewarded for her suffering upon her second marriage to a wealthy older man. While Dorothea is also disappointed by the reality of her marriage to Casaubon, she nevertheless learns to sympathize with her husband's suffering and to recognize him as perhaps being as frustrated in his dreams as she has been in hers. Rosamond, however, fails the test of sympathy when her husband needs it most. When Lydgate is publicly disgraced and reaches out to his wife for support, she regards this, like the rest of their shared troubles, "as if it were hers alone," (713). With the realization that "he was always to her a being apart, doing what she objected to," he learns that "he must bend himself to her nature, and that because she came short in her sympathy, he must give the more" (713). Rosamond's preference for the mirrored cloister which she has been conditioned to regard as truth causes her to consciously choose to remain ignorant of the suffering in the world outside. While acknowledging Dorothea's suffering and

responding sympathetically poses no real threat to Rosamond, and in fact selfishly allows her to clear her conscience, a similar act towards Lydgate would result in the loss of her upper hand, and likely in the removal of the remaining marital comforts she has been able to retain. While Rosamond's nature and conditioning make it difficult for her to make an altruistic leap, such a leap is not inherently impossible, and we can therefore assert that her ability to remain unmoved through suffering is the result of a deliberate choice.

While *Adam Bede* and *Middlemarch* reveal Eliot's belief that everyone must be held morally accountable in order to maintain a healthy society, *Little Dorrit* and *David Copperfield* illustrate that Dickens reserves such great expectations for the special few who cannot be corrupted by their unwholesome conditions. In *Little Dorrit* we are shown that since most individuals succumb to the corruption of social forces, those with the inherent virtue to withstand corruption are responsible for maintaining glimmers of moral hope through the dense fog of selfish irresponsibility. George Holloch draws attention to Amy and Arthur's ability to overcome their conditions while the majority of characters in the novel become part of Dickens's social critique on the institutional avoidance of responsibility. Dickens's fiction leaves it up to those of unconditioned virtue to regenerate the diseased community. As noted earlier, suffering illustrates the inherent goodness of a character in the face of misfortune rather than prompting moral development. For instance, while numerous characters in *Little Dorrit* suffer, it seems that those who are morally irreproachable remain virtuous in their misfortune while the selfish and morally corrupt are poisoned by it. While suffering for Eliot consistently awakens the sympathy of egoists as well as altruists, suffering for Dickens can act as a catalyzing agent in either direction: exaggerating the inherently virtuous characters as

more keenly sympathetic while driving the naturally immoral characters farther away from compassionate fellow-feeling. The neglected and essentially nonexistent childhoods of Amy Dorrit and Arthur Clennam do not result in morally compromised adults who are incapable of compassion, but rather in selfless individuals who are quick to sympathize with the virtuous and flawed alike, suggesting their inherent goodness. Because the positive influence of suffering on Amy and Arthur is countered by evidence that suffering has an embittering influence over other characters, we can see that suffering has a very different function for Dickens than it does for Eliot. The examples in *Little Dorrit* imply that, for Dickens, while characters may attribute their virtues or vices to misfortune, nature essentially plays a larger role than experience and circumstances.

While the majority of characters in the novel function as part of Dickens's social critique of selfish irresponsibility, Amy and Arthur serve to represent Dickens's belief in the power of the human heart, or what Barbara Hardy calls the "division between the society he rejects and the humanity he believes in" (4). Hardy suggests that what distinguishes Dickens's moral questioning from Eliot "is his combination of social despair and personal faith...in the power of human love" (3), and in his continuing fantasy about ideal and unconditional virtue (4). Rather than taking a uniformly realist approach to playing out the kinds of moral issues that readers may struggle with, Dickens blends realism with melodrama. Though many important characters in his novels are treated with more depth and psychology than mere stock characters of the melodramatic tradition, there are many occasions in which Dickens departs into a world in which cause and effect are not always related: where the villainous get their comeuppance and the virtuous find a happy ending against all odds. In *Little Dorrit*, Dickens offers a kind of

social satire in which melodramatic characters, like Blandois and his sinister mustachioed grin, strike a dramatic and exaggerated contrast to the consistently well-meaning Arthur and Amy. Rather than always presenting his characters and the world they inhabit as a mirror to our own, Dickens often casts his narrative in a melodramatic light in order to focus our attention on the larger social critique. With a view to moral instruction through this melodramatic approach, “Dickens sees imaginative role-playing and escape from the self as crucial to the education and cultural inclusion of the masses” (John 6) and trusts that the cultivation of imagination should theoretically make for a better society (John 5). Just as the Circumlocution Office figures as an example of “How not to do it” (119), the novel itself provides a critical treatment of society that can only be fixed by the little Dorrits who ask, “what is to be done?” (Newsome 71). In *Little Dorrit*, the effect that suffering has on an individual is wholly determined by his or her natural disposition, so while someone good at heart will become more sympathetic after their own suffering, an already bad egg, such as Miss Wade, is likely only to get worse in the face of affliction.

While Amy has the misfortune to grow up in prison and is forced to take responsibility for her family despite being its youngest member, Dickens emphasizes her inexhaustible benevolence and the sympathetic gaze she bestows upon others—“a pitiful and plaintive look for everything indeed” (84), from her earliest days. At only eight years of age, Amy loses her mother and sees her father a widower, “from [which] time the protection that her wondering eyes had expressed towards him, became embodied in action, and the Child of the Marshalsea took upon herself a new relation towards the Father” (86). It is “through this little gate [that] she passed out of childhood into the care-laden world” (86), and “with no earthly friend to help her...the Child of the Marshalsea



began her womanly life” (86). Losing one parent to an untimely death and the other to self-pity, Amy’s impulse in her grief is to turn her sympathy outward and to alleviate any further suffering of her father and siblings. The trials which inspire Amy’s altruistic efforts demonstrate that she is reminded, in her troubles, to think of others who may be suffering as opposed to being engulfed by self-pity. In response to the paralyzing effect that her mother’s death has upon her father, Amy takes his place as the head of the family “and [bears], in her own heart, its anxieties and shames” (87). On the one hand, we are told that “at thirteen, she could read and keep accounts” and that “she had been, by snatches of a few weeks at a time, to an evening school outside, and got her sister and brother sent to day-schools,” as it was clear that “the Father of the Marshalsea, could be no father to his own children” (87). For Amy’s father and siblings, on the other hand, suffering seems to feed their self-absorption and sense of irresponsibility rather than having a humbling effect that would cause them to think of others. Though the Dorrits spend over two decades in prison, Amy acknowledges that “people are not bad because they come there,” and that she has “known numbers of good, persevering, honest people, come there through misfortune...[and] they are almost all kind-hearted to one another” (112). Amy’s tireless efforts to ease her family’s discomfort go almost unnoticed, as the egoistical Dorrits remain blind to the suffering of others while being wholly occupied with their own. As an incarnation of unconditioned virtue, Amy presents “an absolute disjunction between her moral character and her social surroundings” (Holoch 343), and while her timidity and self-doubt may be the consequences of her upbringing, her unselfish love is simply “a given” (Holoch 343) or natural. Upon their re-emergence into genteel society the Dorrits show no sign of moral improvement, but rather are more

selfish and obsessed with their own sense of importance. Holoch is right to point out “that the miraculous liberation of the family from prison implies no significant change [but] merely provides the occasion for them to enact their social fantasy on a larger scale” (345). The Dorrits engage in society by becoming complicit in the kinds of empty social prejudices that often run counter to positive moral action, while Amy remains aloof from her family’s facade of prestige because it feels so unnatural to her. Though Amy’s suffering serves to polish up the virtues of this diminutive diamond in the rough, her benevolent brilliance remains consistent through both wealth and poverty while the same circumstances have a corrupting influence on the rest of her family as a result of their inherent moral weakness.

Like Amy, Arthur Clennam is buffed to a greater shine by his suffering. Though born into prosperity, Arthur is nevertheless neglected and deprived of a happy childhood and a loving home. As he describes to his friend, Mr. Meagles: “Austere faces, inexorable discipline, penance in this world an terror in the next—nothing graceful or gentle anywhere, and the void in my cowed heart everywhere—this was my childhood, if I may so misuse the word as to apply it to such a beginning of life” (35). Not only does Clennam withstand such a beginning while remaining tender and compassionate himself, but we are told that it is this very coldness which “rescued” him from ever becoming like his parents:

...he was a man who had deep-rooted in his nature, a belief in all the gentle and good things his life had been without. Bred in meanness and hard dealing, this had rescued him to be a man of honourable mind and open hand. Bred in coldness and severity, this had rescued him to have a warm

and sympathetic heart [...] this had rescued him to judge not, and in humility to be merciful, and have hope and charity [...] a disappointed mind he had, but a mind too firm and healthy for such unwholesome air. Leaving himself in the dark, it could rise into the light, seeing it shine on others and hailing it. (181)

The narrator suggests that suffering was necessary to save Clennam from “the whimpering weakness and cruel selfishness” of his parents by turning him against such a miserable life. However, within the same passage there is the insistence that his mind, “too firm and healthy,” is what alienated him from such an “unwholesome air,” once again placing the emphasis on his natural goodness.

In comparing Clennam’s childhood and resulting outlook to the experiences of his cruel mother and of the embittered Miss Wade, we are given a parallel to Amy’s divergence from the rest of her family despite their shared circumstances. Mrs. Clennam purports to have undergone the same poisonous upbringing, though she insists that suffering contributed to her hateful disposition rather than deterring it:

‘You do not know what it is...to be brought up strictly, and straitly. I was so brought up. Mine was no light youth of sinful gaiety and pleasure. Mine were days of wholesome repression, punishment, and fear. The corruption of our hearts, the evil of our ways, the curse that is upon us, the terrors that surround us—these were the themes of my childhood. They formed my character....’ (807)

The above examples demonstrate that suffering cannot be a consistent origin of sympathy if the moral potential does not already exist in the individual. While the Dorrits remain

egoists through their suffering, Arthur Clennam reverses the process by maintaining his moral integrity not only after the suffering of his childhood, but after the financial ruin that results in his own imprisonment. While his self-hatred for ruining his business partner through an unlucky investment takes a physical toll on Clennam, his suffering in prison neither causes him to retreat into self-absorption, nor results in a sympathetic awakening, since even before his incarceration his devastation is the result of the harm he has caused his partner rather than by self-pity for his own ruin. Miss Wade's history is another interesting consideration as she shares the kind of cynical outlook as Mrs. Clennam though without the abusive childhood. While she believes herself to have suffered, it is made very clear that she has simply always been a paranoid, angry, resentful individual who has willfully misinterpreted all attempts at kindness as slights against her and believed "people triumphed over [her], when they made a pretence of treating [her] with consideration, or doing [her] a service" (695). The novel suggests that characters are, essentially, good or not, and that while periods of trial and prosperity will prove demonstrative of their nature, suffering does not result in turning a virtuous character to corruption or a corrupted one to virtue.

In the examples from *Adam Bede* and *Middlemarch*, Eliot pairs her successful sympathizers, Adam and Dorothea, with the morally limited Arthur and Rosamond in order to allow the reader to understand—from a critical distance—that certain characters fail to undergo meaningful change, and that they are accountable for it. While Eliot concedes that nature may limit one's potential, she insists that we are all capable of achieving a new perspective from which we are forced to recognize our interconnection with others. For egoists like Arthur and Rosamond, however, allowing themselves to

acknowledge the immaturity of their fantasies about the future, to be displaced from the centre of the universe by acknowledging their small role in a larger network, or to recognize that they are not the only ones in the world who suffer, poses a serious threat to their sense of identity. While Rosamond may be capable of growth, she clings to the illusion that she is not accountable for the impact her decisions have on others and that her personal perspective is the right one. In *Little Dorrit* and *David Copperfield*, however, natural limitations are treated differently. While characters such as Arthur Clennam may attribute their sympathetic outlook to an experience of suffering early in life, Dickens demonstrates that the more important condition for a healthy morality is a good heart. While hateful and sympathetically deficient characters such as Miss Wade and Mrs. Clennam insist that they have been corrupted by their hardships, we learn not to credit their attempt to blame suffering since we have seen its positive effects on naturally good characters. Since Eliot believes that everyone has the potential to grow through suffering, those who remain immovable may need more time, and more suffering, to change them, or they are so selfish that they turn away from their sympathetic impulses consciously as a means of self-preservation. For Dickens, suffering reveals one's true character by exaggerating one's natural virtue and benevolence, or selfishness and moral corruption. Though suffering is only likely to have a positive effect on Dickens's already moral characters, it is a test that can allow us to sift through and separate the good soil from the bad.

### **CHAPTER 3 CONCEPTIONS OF CHILDHOOD AND MORAL GROWTH**

With the advent of Romanticism, a general shift in the attitudes towards childhood begins to take shape so that by the Victorian period. “the child is no longer viewed as the “miniature adult,” but rather as an essentially different and discrete biological and social category” (Berry 16). As societal values change, “the child becomes the repository for certain valued and post-Enlightenment traits such as innocence, liberty, and naturalness” (Berry 16), and is understood to be privileged with a kind of emotional intelligence that is lost to the older population. As childhood begins to be understood as conceptually distinct from adulthood, “the division between the two worlds can be seen in the way in which childhood itself becomes a Golden Age to which adults long to return, but know that they cannot” (Andrews 23).

Though there is a broad ideological shift taking place throughout the nineteenth century it is Dickens who is “conventionally credited with having imported into a central role in the novel the figure of the innocent child—often suffering and orphaned, abandoned, or simply neglected—from Romantic poetry, where it (and its healthier and happier siblings) had been celebrated” (Newsome 92). Earlier conceptions “which had assumed children to be essentially animalistic and uninteresting, or merely deficient, underdeveloped, and incomplete adults” (Newsom 92), are replaced in the late eighteenth century by a recognition of the child as “a qualitatively different being, perhaps closer to humankind’s original, natural, even prelapsarian state, and deserving of special care—both for the sake of its healthy cultivation and to preserve innocence for as long as possible” (Newsom 92). Of course Blake “Songs of Experience” is an example of

Romantic poetry that begins to examine the abuse and exploitation of children, and draws attention to the transition taking place. Once we enter into the pages of *Bleak House*, however, it becomes clear that “there is more than a little distance between the Wordsworthian account of the child ‘trailing clouds of glory’ and the starving Dickensian waif” (Berry 16). Unlike the Romantic child, then, the Victorian child is no longer merely a symbol, but a subject, and is cast as a victim as opposed to the representation of transcendent virtue (Berry 16).

Though both Dickens and Eliot exemplify the Victorian model of childhood in their works to some degree, they are distinguishable in their approach to sympathy in that, while Dickens essentially draws upon pathos for virtuous victims, Eliot encourages a more deliberate decision to sympathize. The essential difference in each author’s sympathetic framework can be seen in the distinction between the idealized children in Dickens’s novels and Eliot’s children who betray a complex mix of innocence *and* moral underdevelopment. We can also distinguish the portrayal of children Dickens and Eliot offer by noting that while both include children of the naughty and the nice varieties, each author foregrounds them differently. While Eliot features Maggie, a mischievous “naughty” child, and uses idealized children like Lucy for contrast, Dickens features virtuous and well-behaved children such as Esther Summerson while making use of rascals as peripheral characters for the purposes of contrast and comic relief. Again, this crucial difference in characterization is a direct reflection of the sympathetic aims that are distinct to each author. While Dickens uses idealized and immediately sympathetic children as a method to prompt an emotional response, Eliot creates more challenging child characters with whom we must decide to sympathize, even against our inclinations.

Children are particularly important to understanding the ideas about morality that Dickens and Eliot set forth, as Dickens extends Romantic conceptions of children as the exemplars of inherent and incorruptible virtue, and Eliot resists this idealization to insist upon the necessity of moral development through experience and suffering.

By being cast as virtuous victims, Victorian children can be at once sentimentalized and more realistic than Romantic depictions. Dickens—with his characteristic exaggeration—intensifies the shift by giving us the narratives of children such as David Copperfield and Esther Summerson in their own voices. Susmata Bhattacharya rightly points out that “the charges of exaggeration that have been brought against Dickens tend to ignore the fact that the most successful portions of Dickens’s novels present the world ‘from a child’s point of view’” (53), and therefore necessitates that he reproduce the child’s hyperbolic perception. In his biography, John Forster explains that Dickens’s fiction reflects the child’s fantastic perspective because he himself “saw all from a child’s point of view—strange, odd, queer, puzzling [...] confused men and things, animated scenery and furniture with human souls, wondered at the stars and the sea, [...] all in the childish fashion” (728).

The hallmark of Dickens’s fiction can be seen as the “romantic realism” which is wholly intentional as a part of his programme for cultural reform, though Malcolm Andrews notes that the style and nature of Dickens’s fiction will be misunderstood “as long as it is seen as accidentally defective realism” (173). Regarding fancy and reality “as having become forced too far apart in his own age,” Dickens dedicated himself to creating a “fusion of the graces of imagination with the realities of life” (Andrews 42). Stressing that Dickens’s fiction is the result of this fusion rather than *confusion*, Andrews



recognizes the connection between Dickens's respect for the childhood perspective and his hopes for social reform. When Dickens does offer us a "realistic" child who squirms, grumbles discontentedly and is a general nuisance, however, they are usually there to further emphasize the contrasting virtue of his protagonists. In addition to providing a moral contrast, Dickens appears to feel secure enough in having gained the reader's sympathy for his tiny heroes to integrate comical realistic touches, such as those offered by Peepy Jellyby in *Bleak House* and the eldest Micawber boy in *David Copperfield*. While Dickens is rightfully hailed the master of childhood pathos and is famous for such faultless angels as Tiny Tim and Little Nell, we cannot ignore the plethora of little scamps that run amuck throughout his narratives. While Eliot challenges romantic conceptions of childhood by populating Wordsworth's idyllic rural setting with complex and flawed children, as we will see, Dickens maintains the Romantic notion of the innocent child while changing the scenery to the cold, harsh streets of London. In *Bleak House*, for example, Dickens examines dysfunction at the domestic level in order to comment more broadly on the poor housekeeping of the nation. Through what J. Hillis Miller identifies as its "synecdochal" structure, the novel looks to the absent parents and neglected children in the numerous bleak houses of London in order to enter into a discussion on the condition of England. Central to the concerns of the novel and a primary concern of Dickens in general, however, is the condition of children.

Much of Dickens's fiction and journalism "disparages what it sees as the new, rampant commercialism and the ubiquitous influence of utilitarianism, which combine in the criminal act of 'boyslaughter' and the banishment of fancy" (Andrews 44). By maintaining the kind of idealization of children found in Romantic poetry in an industrial

Victorian setting, Dickens launches an attack on the ideology that fails to respect the treasure of childhood rather than suggesting that children have changed. Indeed, the “deformity of childhood under the pressures of the new age” results in the crippling of boys into little, prematurely old men (Andrews 18), though we also see troubling instances of premature motherhood in girls such as Jenny Wren of *Our Mutual Friend*, Little Dorrit, and “Dame Durden” (Esther Summerson). The deprivation of what Dickens regards as the proper culture of childhood, such as the cultivation of sentiment and affection, imaginative play, and fairy-tales, is likely to produce deformed adults (Andrews 84). Under the various social pressures that aim to extinguish the inefficiency of childhood frivolity, there is what Frederic Adye refers to as the “glamour of melancholy” over Dickens’s child characters. Driven in upon themselves towards premature introspection, children become “old-fashioned” and internally crippled (Adye 286-292). Within this industrial climate that demands maturity, Dickens perceived children as an endangered species whose “natural habitat was being plundered by clumsy adult predators” (Andrews 172-3). It is not surprising, therefore, that Dickens chooses to portray his children in a Wordsworthian light in order to gain sympathy from the many adults who associate childhood nostalgia with rural life:

Most Victorian city dwellers in the early nineteenth century had either grown up in the country or in a country town [...] In these circumstances the pervasive changes over the first half of the nineteenth century, most notably the change from a predominately agrarian, pre-industrial culture to the modern age of the great cities, from the pastoral to the metropolitan. (Andrews 43)

Conceptually, the Wordsworthian idea of childhood no longer has a place among the values of Victorian culture. Outside of the idealized recollections of adults, a Romantic, pastoral youth is no longer possible.

Dickens is concerned with children's struggle to maintain their essential goodness and innocence as opposed to focusing, as Eliot does, on their struggle to overcome the limitations that are inherent in childhood. Because young Esther Summerson and Amy Dorrit can function positively in the adult world, we do not get the same emphasis on learning from childish errors and outgrowing naivety as we do with Maggie Tulliver, who clearly has yet to learn how to reconcile her impulses and societal expectations. Rather, Dickens is able to emphasize the tragedy of a compromised childhood because his idealized children inherently govern themselves with the moral responsibility of an experienced adult. Precocity for Dickens's children is usually the result of inept parents, and is therefore tinged with a sense of loss for the child's carefree youth. While Dickens is certainly sympathetic to Amy Dorrit and Agnes, for example, they are also placed on a pedestal as exemplars of ideal Victorian femininity: deferential, selfless, and flawlessly domestic.

Andrews observes that "nearly all the delinquent grown-up children are boys: nearly all the pure, idealized grown-up children are girls," and that "with these idealized female figures the childlikeness and the maturity are not actually in conflict, as they so often are with the precocious boys who represent a moral deformity" (86). We can attribute this differentiation to the cultural expectations of gender for the Victorian middle class, in which

idealized womanhood came to have strong affinities with childhood. Both were disenfranchised dependants upon men. Both were conventionally expected to preserve a degree of decent innocence about the world which rendered them somewhat childlike. Both were expected, by nature, to possess a high degree of sensibility and intuitive understanding of human nature.... (Andrews 86-87)

While the prematurely mature girls of Dickens's novels figure as idealized miniature angels in the house, we can see that despite being positively depicted, such examples reinforce gender stereotypes and the confining expectations for the female sphere. Though Dickens's little women may appear to be positive and highly sympathetic representations at first glance, they do nothing for the real little girls who fail to live up to such ideals.

In addition to promoting sympathy for his child characters, Dickens also critiques the institutions responsible for the abuse of childhood. By portraying neglected children as he does in *Bleak House*, Dickens critiques both the parents who fail to provide proper homes as well as the paternal figures of Britain who prove to be unfit parents for its citizens. As David Plotkin argues, neatly ordered homes and proper families are necessary for the cultivation and growth of children in *Bleak House* (17). Particularly through his portrait of Jo, Dickens dramatizes the devastating moral impact that results when children are deprived of nurturing homes and forced to reside in corrupt and infectious environments. In what seems to be direct response to the pre-enlightenment notions of children as undeveloped and animalistic, Dickens considers what it must feel like to a child such as Jo to be treated thus by the community that would prefer he had

never been born, and that demands his removal as a consolation for the unfortunate reality of his existence:

To be hustled, and jostled, and moved on; and really to feel that it would appear to be perfectly true that I have no business, here, or there, or anywhere; and yet to be perplexed by the consideration that I *am* here somehow, too and everybody overlooked me until I became the creature I am! It must be a strange state, not merely to be told that I am scarcely human [...] but to feel it of my own knowledge all my life! To see the horses, dogs, and cattle, go by me, and to know that in ignorance I belong to them, and not to the superior beings in my shape, whose delicacy I offend! (237)

Dickens restrains himself from bestowing Jo with impossible capabilities, such as abnormal intelligence and perfect elocution, and narrates the boy's lowly condition with an ironic edge rather than with explicit sentimentality—not unlike Eliot, in fact. While no one is named responsible for Jo's ignorance and deprivation, it is made explicit that Jo is not the one accountable. Though Dickens adopts the animalistic comparisons of pre-enlightenment thought, it is, again, thoroughly ironic:

Jo, and the other lower animals, get on in the unintelligible mess as they can [...] The blinded oxen, over-goaded, over-driven, never guided, run into wrong places and are beaten out; and plunge, red-eyed and foaming, at stone walls; and often sorely hurt the innocent, and often sorely hurt themselves. Very like Jo and his order; very, very like! (237)

With a clear emphasis that Jo and his fellow-beings are “blinded” and “never guided,” it is those who toss them into the “unintelligible mess” with their eyes open who are responsible.

In addition to the animal imagery used to depict Jo’s lack of education, physical disease is equated with moral decay and the perpetuation of an ill-nurtured society. Tom-all-alone’s, where poor Jo resides, “is a black, dilapidated street, avoided by all decent people” (236), but “whether the traditional title is a comprehensive name for a retreat cut off from honest company and put out of the pale of hope; perhaps nobody knows” (236). The “tumbling tenements [which] contain, by night, a swarm of misery,” become the breeding ground for corruption:

As, on the ruined human wretch, vermin parasites appear, so, these ruined shelters have bred a crowd of foul existence that crawls in and out of gaps in walls and boards; and coils itself to sleep, in maggot numbers, where the rain drips in; and comes and goes, fetching and carrying fever, and sowing more evil in its every footprint.... (236)

Dickens does not, however, reserve his scorn merely for the uninhabitable hovels into which the likes of Jo are swept, ignorant and parentless, but also critiques the homes in which mothers neglect their own children in favour of an apparently altruistic gaze upon others. The Jellyby children, for example, are not so much raised by their mother as left to tumble down stairs by their own devices. With her attention permanently fixed on foreign aid initiatives, Mrs. Jellyby overlooks the disorder of her own home and the impossibility of her children being properly cared for within it. That “the consequence of a poorly kept house is poorly raised children [...] is made clear to us in our introduction to

the Jellyby household, when we meet a dirty ‘young Jellyby’ with his head stuck between two railings” (Plotkin 24). While matriarchs such as Mrs. Jellyby and Mrs. Pardiggle extend their sympathetic glances to the poor and uneducated, the more important message to bear in mind is what they are *failing* to look at. While various critics, such as Judith Newton (“Historicisms New and Old”) have argued that Dickens may in fact be critiquing foreign aid projects out of racist favouritism, or that he may be imparting a disturbingly chauvinistic message to women who dare to look outside the walls of the home, we can also focus on his examples of dysfunctional homes as specifically concerned with maintaining the integrity of childhood. As *Bleak House* serves to criticize the patriarchal institutions such as law and government as much as the disappointing matriarchs, we can read the latter as merely a microcosmic illustration of the degeneracy that also takes place on the national scale. Rather than reading Dickens’s critiques as gender-specific, (Mr. Turveytop is ridiculed as a parent too after all), the more important message seems to be that certain roles must be filled for the sake of the children, and for the nation, and that those roles must be adopted with great care and attention.

If neglect and disorder are the disease, however, Esther Summerson is the antidote. H. M. Daleski rightly argues that Esther demonstrates, on the domestic scale, the perfect government of an orderly system, and “in effect demonstrates what is required for the efficient running of the ‘great country’” (189). Rather than promoting a total revolution, *Bleak House* calls “for nothing more subversive than a change of housekeepers” (189), in both the domestic and political spheres. While Mrs. Pardiggle fails to effect any meaningful change in the lives of the poor to which all her energies are allegedly dedicated, Esther’s practicality, organization, and genuine sympathy (all

qualities that are beneficial in the government of both home and nation), yield positive results. Mrs. Pardiggle fails to connect with the poor “both because she has no real sympathy for the brickmakers, only a ‘rapacious benevolence,’ and also because she does nothing to change the conditions of their existence” (Plotkin 25). The ironic and disingenuous nature of the charitable efforts of Mrs. Jellyby and Mrs. Pardiggle are painfully depicted as Jo sits down to eat his dirty bit of bread on a stoop in front of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts:

Jo comes out of Tom-all-alone’s, meeting the tardy morning which is always late in getting down there, and munches his dirty bit of bread as he comes along. His way lying through many streets, and the houses not yet being open, he sits down to breakfast on the door-step of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign parts, and gives it a brush when he has finished, as an acknowledgement of the accommodation. (237)

Even poor Jo, who is denied any home at all and always ordered to “move on” nevertheless occupies himself in “the futile attempt to sweep the debris and muck from London’s streets” in an attempt to establish order (Plotkin 27).

It is Esther, however, who is the exemplary model for good-housekeeping. Though Esther’s adept housekeeping and compassion for children make her a model of parental virtue, she also figures as one of Dickens’s victims of blighted childhood. Illustrating Dickens’s penchant for faultless children who are bewilderingly abused by their guardians, Esther receives constant rebukes from her godmother despite her obedience and quiet affection. Like David Copperfield, Little Dorrit, and Oliver Twist, who are disliked and mistreated for reasons wholly unconnected with their actual



behaviour, Esther is blamed for the sin of her illegitimate conception. Perhaps fearful that obtaining sympathy for a love-child would be unlikely among a puritanical Victorian readership, Dickens makes it impossible for us to actually hold little Esther accountable despite her godmother's claims, or indeed to find any fault in the humble and irreproachable sentiments of her narrative. On Esther's birthday, which "was the most melancholy day at home, in the whole year" (25), her less than enchanting godmother tells her, with "knitted brow and pointed finger: 'your mother, Esther, is your disgrace, and you were hers,'" and that "submission, self-denial, diligent work, are the preparations for a life begun with such a shadow on it" (26). Esther's "Dolly" who sits "propped up in a great arm-chair, with her beautiful complexion and rosy lips," is the only creature to whom Esther opens her heart (24). Though Esther is shown no sympathy from her only guardian and is checked in any attempt to extend her sympathy to her godmother, she nevertheless reveals her inherently sympathetic heart by using her inanimate friend as an outlet. Even the rather limited sympathetic capacity of her doll inspires Esther to provide such comfort to others in their hardship, and perhaps to receive some sympathy in return:

Imperfect as my understanding of my sorrow was, I knew that I had brought no joy, at any time, to anybody's heart, and that I was to no one upon earth what Dolly was to me [...]and confided to her that I would try, as hard as ever I could, to repair the fault I had been born with (of which I confusedly felt guilty and yet innocent), and would strive as I grew up to be industrious, contented and kind-hearted, and to do some good to some one, and win some love to myself if I could. (27)

With her virtuous nature, inherent sympathy, and desire to help those in need, Esther is further groomed to be a new model of responsible government by the gentle promptings offered by John Jarndyce. Daleski notes that Jarndyce endeavours to help those in need by enabling them to help themselves, and by demonstrating that assuming responsibility and remaining faithful to those who can help you are the invaluable ingredients to maintaining a meaningful life. Jarndyce functions both as a model of patriarchal governance as well as a kind of maternal, domestic one in that he promotes the idea that those who can take responsibility do so, and yet feels tenderly towards those who cannot and takes them under his protective wing. As Daleski argues, Jarndyce is “a kind of natural guardian (as other men are natural athletes),” and argues that he is depicted as “performing functions on a personal level that are supposedly fulfilled by institutions (such as Chancery and Parliament) on a national level” (187). An important differentiation between Jarndyce’s guardianship and mothers such as Mrs. Jellyby is that he is able to care for numerous orphans at once “without in any way neglecting other responsibilities” (Daleski 187). While Jarndyce’s redemptive powers are capable of helping those who are willing to learn from him, selfish and ungrateful characters such as Skimpole “remain impervious even to a Jarndyce” (Daleski 189-90), and his failure to recognize Skimpole’s moral limitations not only endangers his foster children, but endangers his position as reliable guardian as well.

In addition to portraying inept parents, Dickens frequently centers his novels on angelic children who are born with the benevolence and patience of a saint despite their often unwholesome upbringing, and who “seem to be shut off from corruption but have enough connection with the environment to be able to heal and rescue” (Hardy 5). Rather

than encouraging us to sympathize with challenging but realistic children, Dickens exaggerates the innocence and moral perfection of the child and the cruelty and indifference of the world around them with a view to extending the sympathy felt for Oliver and Nell, for example, to children more universally. But while Dickens relies upon the child-mother's thankless domestic efforts for gaining sympathy, Eliot alternatively chooses not to filter out the flaws of her complex female characters, but rather to draw attention to the social constraints that contribute to those flaws.

Eliot's emphasis on moral growth leads her to portray children in a way that is distinct from the sentimental Dickensian illustrations that stress preservation over development. While Eliot's treatment of children and the value of childhood are primarily shaped by her determinist views, she is also conscious of the evolving conceptions of the child's moral value in the literary tradition. Interestingly, Eliot can be read both as complying with and challenging the earlier Romantic conceptions of childhood, and reacting in her fiction with a mix of nostalgia and criticism. *The Mill on the Floss* not only demonstrates the interplay of nostalgic sentimentality for childhood with the demand for moral progress, but features this delicate balance as a key moral issue in the novel. While she allows her novel to bear the Romantic colouring of a rural Wordsworthian childhood, Eliot is also careful to point out—in true realist form—that idealization can be dangerous. Because Eliot is teaching us to sympathize with those who are struggling and learning to do the right thing rather than applauding those for whom moral perfection is a given, she focuses our attention on children like Maggie Tulliver who is unconventional, passionate, and who misbehaves. Though Maggie continually gets things wrong, it is she who gains our interest rather than her uninteresting but well-

behaved cousin, Lucy. In contrast, Eliot objects to Dickens's idealistic approach on the grounds that once readers look to examples of children in real life who fall short of the endearing fictions, readers will be even more critical and less likely to sympathize with as a result of their disappointed preconceptions. Though she leads us to expect a high moral standard and to demand growth and accountability, Eliot also reminds us "that the tragedy of our lives is not created entirely from within" (401), but rather is subject to the circumstances thrust before us and is therefore worthy of our sympathy and understanding.

Though Maggie is clearly at fault for her impulsive actions, Eliot is nevertheless sensitive to the intensity of childhood suffering, especially when it is exacerbated by a guilty conscience. While emphasizing growth, Eliot repeatedly reminds us of our own young sorrows and that while our self-pity and despair may have been exaggerated, it was nevertheless devastating at that stage of our inexperience. She pauses to reflect that "there is no hopelessness so sad as that of early youth, when the soul is made up of wants, and has no long memories, no superadded life in the life of others" and that "though we who look on think lightly of such premature despair, as if our vision of the future lightened the blind sufferer's present" (235), we must not forget the child's perspective.

Despite

the real troubles of mature life [...] we have all of us sobbed so piteously, standing with tiny bare legs above our little socks, when we lost sight of our mother or nurse in some strange place; but we can no longer recall the poignancy of that moment and weep over it, as we do over the remembered sufferings of five or ten years ago. Every one of those keen

moments has left its trace, and lives in us still, but such traces have blent themselves irrevocably with the firmer texture of our youth [...] and so it comes that we can look on at the troubles of our children with a smiling disbelief in the reality of their pain. (65-66)

Though she pauses to deliver such moments of sympathy for childhood woes, the emphasis throughout the novel remains focused on the child's imperfect understanding and inexperienced morality.

Though the narrator's asides are often touched with sentiment, the more specific description of Maggie's suffering, and violent coping strategies, remind us again that we are sympathizing with a "real" girl, and not a Dickensian angel or "little mother." Escaping to the gloomy attic where Maggie "talked aloud to the worm-eaten floors and the worm-eaten shelves, and the dark rafters festooned with cobwebs [...] she kept a Fetish which she punished for all her misfortunes" (28):

this was the trunk of a large wooden doll, which once stared with the roundest of eyes above the reddest of cheeks; but was now entirely defaced by a long career of vicarious suffering. Three nails driven into the head commemorated as many crises in Maggie's nine years of earthly struggle [...] the last nail had been driven in with a fiercer stroke than usual, for the Fetish represented Aunt Glegg. (28)

Though Eliot brings us up to Maggie's damp hideaway to witness her anger, we are not privy to Maggie's internal experience. Rather, we receive a more objective, though sympathetic, account from the narrator. While the narrator's interjection between ourselves and Maggie is effective in reminding us to adopt a wider view than that of the

characters, Eliot wonders if “there is any one who can recover the experience of his childhood, not merely with a memory of what he did and what happened to him [...] but with an intimate penetration, a revived consciousness of what he felt then” (66). While Dickens is commonly attributed with precisely this kind of “intimate penetration” into the child’s mind and heart and effectively gains our sympathy, such a representation is incomplete for Eliot since it discourages objective judgment alongside our sympathy. Eliot’s portrayal of the complex inner lives of her adult characters is importantly shaped by their childhoods, but it is Dickens’s departure into sentimentality which allows him to write his children with such honesty. Eliot insists that “surely if we could recall that early bitterness, and the dim guesses, the strangely perspectiveless conception of life that gave the bitterness its intensity, we would not pooh-pooh the griefs of our children” (66). Indeed it would be nearly impossible to pooh-pooh little David Copperfield or Esther Summerson as they weep for the affection that is withheld from them, particularly when receiving their accounts of abuse and neglect in the first person, and with the painful accuracy of their recollected childhood perspectives. While Dickens may succeed in returning us to the child’s perspective with pitying remorse, Eliot is able to simultaneously sympathize with the child’s imperfect perspective while looking objectively at their errors. Without idealizing or sentimentalizing Maggie, Eliot gains our sympathy not simply for a victim, but for a realistic child who misunderstands and chooses poorly.

While Eliot may pause to wax sentimental about Maggie and Tom’s childhood, she is also passing judgment on their decisions and mistakes. Demonstrating her sympathy for children as they struggle to learn and understand, Eliot nevertheless

maintains the idea that children are morally undeveloped. While Eliot acknowledges the necessity of trial and error through life, the emphasis in *Mill* is to learn that errors are often the result of our impulsive actions. Eliot believes that children are essentially like animals in that they make decisions through instinct and passions rather than through intellect and reason. Though Eliot can be sympathetic to children while recognizing their moral failures, the fact that she often compares children with animals is reminiscent of earlier, pre-enlightenment attitudes towards childhood. Prior to the romantic depictions from Blake and Wordsworth, the general consensus was that children were essentially “animalistic and uninteresting, or merely deficient, underdeveloped, and incomplete adults” (Newsome 92). While Eliot describes Tom and Maggie as bearing “a humiliating resemblance to two friendly ponies” (39), she also seems to lament the loss of the earnest affection we readily demonstrate as children.

We learn to restrain ourselves as we get older. We keep apart and in this way preserve a dignified alienation, showing much firmness on one side, and swallowing much grief on the other. We no longer approximate in our behaviour to the mere impulsiveness of the lower animals, but conduct ourselves in every respect like members of a highly civilized society. Maggie and Tom were still very much like young animals, and so she could rub her cheek against his, and kiss his ear in a random, sobbing way; and there were tender fibres in the lad that had been used to answer to Maggie’s fondling; so that he behaved with a weakness quite inconsistent with his resolution to punish her as much as she deserved.... (39)

Despite injecting a hint of irony for the respectfulness of civilized society and conceding that certain important qualities are lost in maturity, Eliot's recognition of the tender innocence of childhood should not be mistaken for an assertion that we should strive to retain such qualities. Rather, Eliot makes clear that while certain aspects of childhood are to be missed, they are left behind for a reason.

Though *The Mill on the Floss* is often hailed as Eliot's "most Wordsworthian novel" (Stone 194), Margaret Homans argues that not only are the artistic similarities between Eliot and Wordsworth somewhat incidental, there are also important departures from Wordsworth in Eliot's emphasis on growth over preservation. Arguing that Eliot's "Wordsworthian" moments are as reflective of her natural conceptions as they are of the romantic poet, Homans notes that Eliot described her reading of Wordsworth as a "process of possessing herself of what she already possesses" (125). A distinction that importantly separates Eliot's realist approach from Wordsworth's idealized poetry is that "Maggie Tulliver experience[s] in a realistic social context a Wordsworthian childhood in nature" (Homans 31). By following the Tulliver children through their selfish and impulsive youths, we are prevented from viewing them with blind idealization. Rather, we can trace the experiences during their childhood to their moral development through to adulthood, and acknowledge the impact of circumstances upon that evolution. Though the novel ends with a return to their childhood, it importantly closes off the possibility of a future, since their attempt to regain their childhood relationship results in premature death. While the narrator sentimentalizes this return, it merely "echoes Maggie's longing for an impossible reconciliation" (Ermarth 600). After all, as Ermarth rightly asks, "when did they ever roam the fields in love?" (600). Though Maggie accepts that returning to



her childhood and reinforcing its allegiances necessitates the sacrifice of her current life, all the sentiment in the world is not enough to convince the reader that Maggie has made the right choice. In Eliot's "revision of the Wordsworthian myth," Tom and Maggie "pass through what appear to be Wordsworthian childhoods, not to become romantic poets, but to find that their idealized childhood visions are thwarted by circumstances or by social needs" (Homans 126). Signalling the passage in which the children feel that they "could never have loved the earth so well if [they] had had no childhood in it" (41), Homans notes that in "stressing continuity over growth, the passage suggests how the Wordsworthian features of Maggie's childhood will contribute to narrowing her consciousness, not enlarging it" (128), and romanticizing her childhood in a way that proves fatal in adulthood. Ermarth rightly observes that since "human death comes not only with the deprivation of oxygen but with the deprivation of mental, imaginative, and emotional life [...] Maggie's literal drowning is merely physical corroboration of the more important disaster" (601). The drowning, read metaphorically makes clear that because all signs of life are smothered out of Maggie in childhood, she lacks the skills for survival as an adult. Rather than relying on our understanding in childhood to clarify our moral decisions as we grow, Eliot trusts in our ability to make decisions differently than we would as children, in light of our experiences and our ability to reflect on our past mistakes. Despite the rural setting and Maggie's romanticized nostalgia for her childhood, the novel essentially critiques the Wordsworthian myth by showing us what happens when Maggie steps out of the poetic realm to engage in real life. Rather than feeling less sympathetic for such a flawed character, however, we are encouraged to

regret the variety of circumstances and constraints that have lead Maggie into trouble, and to sympathize with Maggie's desperate attempts to act morally.

In addition to being read as a response to romantic conceptions of childhood, *The Mill on the Floss* has also been interpreted as challenging the conventions of the *Bildungsroman*, or novel of development. Critics such as Susan Fraiman and Henry Alley draw attention to the fact that the traditional narrative about growing-up is necessarily complicated when it features a female protagonist. Eliot questions, and even parodies, the conventions of maturation when applied to womanhood, since, according to those conventions, female growth is less a process of attaining discerning intelligence and active will than an extension of child-like deference for authority and submission to patriarchal rule. While Eliot is critical of Maggie's choices, she also attacks the kinds of choices that are available to her. By structuring the novel to reveal the complications of placing a female character at the centre of her own *Bildungsroman*, Eliot is as critical of the limited female opportunities as she is of individuals. In response to critics who argue that *Mill* is essentially a double *Bildungsroman* that balances both Tom and Maggie's progress, Fraiman argues that while Tom may be engaging peripherally in the traditional male genre, it is essentially Maggie's party we're attending. While Maggie's narrative deposes but not totally displaces Tom's, neither are the two equally balanced (Fraiman 141). By making the genre designated for Tom both coveted and elusive for Maggie, Eliot calls the very conventions of the genre into question. Fraiman suggests that "the rivalry between the sibling narratives has a decentring effect that puts *The Mill* itself at odds with the usual novel of formation" (141), and unsettles not only "Tom's particular story but the genre as a whole and its implied values" (141). Fraiman's argument is

persuasive in suggesting that the conflict between the siblings for centrality indicates a generic tension, and that Maggie's problem is that she cannot participate in the same mode as Tom. By understanding the constraints placed upon Maggie despite her passion and intellect, we are sympathetic to her futile pursuit of self-actualization.

As critics such as Susan Fraiman and Nancy Miller suggest, rather than reading the novel as primarily concerned with Maggie's struggles as she grows up, the more pressing concern, as Eliot illustrates it, is the conventional story of growing up and the assumptions and constraints that hinder meaningful development. *Mill* demonstrates that Maggie's mistakes or social awkwardness are the result of the problematically gendered roles and expectations that constrain and frustrate women who dare to think for themselves or desire personal agency. Because "Maggie is a beautiful, boisterous, quick, sharp-witted, absent-minded, reckless child who is too gifted to practice the age-old vocations which the adult world forces her into" (Bhattacharya 97), and because "the adult world is unable to interpret her dreams and visions...Maggie is a misfit in society" (97). Rather than recognizing Maggie's special qualities as something positive, her family rejects her as a "mistake of nature" (*Mill* 12). Because Maggie demonstrates a "boyish" aptitude for study and critical thought, her parents conclude that by some horrible mistake, nature confusedly bestowed Maggie with a "'cuteness" out of synch with her gender: a mistake, moreover, that must be corrected. As a result, "Maggie is threatened with the withdrawal of approval or love as punishment for being the wrong kind of little girl" (Ermarth 592), which leads her to "promise to be something she cannot be (always good, always remember things) [...] so long as the essential support is not withdrawn" (Ermarth 593). Maggie's need for love becomes a tool by which Tom can

master her. Though her father's love is offered more willingly than Tom's, it comes only when Maggie is in distress rather than in response to her regular attempts to impress him with her cleverness, so that "the love she gets is nearly always payment for humiliation" (Ermarth 594). The novel clearly shows us that the men in Maggie's life respond more positively when she is in a position of vulnerability and submission, which reinforces her dependency and self-doubt. Though her conditioning into stereotypically gendered submission does not excuse her problematic choices, it does awaken us to the complex circumstances that have led to those choices, and prompt the extension of our sympathy.

Eliot undermines the traditional story of maturation by questioning the degree to which children's education can influence their decisions. By examining both the formal and social educations Maggie and Tom receive in childhood, we can recognize the way in which these young "ponies" are trained, and tragically led astray. While Eliot does not hide the fact that Maggie's mistakes are her own and that she is responsible for her actions, she is worthy of our sympathy nonetheless because we can see how she is constrained by her circumstances while struggling to do the right things. Though it may be easier to sympathize with a faultless character, Eliot characterizes Maggie in such a way that she is realistic and often in the wrong, though we are constantly reminded of her efforts to act morally. Even as Maggie's misguided actions follow her into adulthood, we are reminded that while "such things could have no perceptible effect on a thoroughly well-educated young lady, with a perfectly balanced mind, who had had all the advantages of fortune, training, and refined society" (384), Maggie is struggling to do her best in the absence of such preparation for life. It is clear that while Maggie's childhood is important, particularly in the regularity of its morally instructive suffering, its

importance for Eliot stems not from Maggie's ability to preserve her childhood outlook into adulthood, but from her ability to learn from its errors and develop a more informed consciousness. Her inability to separate herself from childhood allegiances and form her own moral guidelines paralyses her sense of personal agency and results not only in her ruined reputation, but in her tragic death. Stressing growth towards a more evolved version of ourselves in which our decisions are based on an informed understanding of our limitations, past mistakes, and moral duties, Eliot demonstrates through Maggie the dangers of clinging to the past, and more specifically, to the inexperience and irresponsibility of childhood.

Though Maggie, as opposed to her self-righteous brother Tom and obedient cousin Lucy, acts out and is considered naughty, she also demonstrates self-reflection and depth of thought about her actions and mistakes in a way that her unquestioning childhood companions never do. Unlike Dickens, who often foregrounds children who do not seem to require a learning process in order to become morally fit, Eliot takes us through Maggie's disappointments and frustrations in order to illustrate how they are necessary in exercising her intelligence and lead her to becoming an experienced individual. Always desperate to please and gain the approval of others, unlike the "Rhadamanthine personage" (52) Tom, Maggie is analytical in viewing her past actions. While Tom remains sure of himself and always insists that he'd "do just the same again" (52), Maggie's self-doubts enable her to learn from her mistakes, making her more human, more respectable, and sympathetic than her self-righteous brother (King 80). Whereas Tom's actions are driven by his rigid notions of justice, Maggie positively oozes sympathy for others. Tom "would punish everybody who deserved it" (and "wouldn't

have minded being punished himself, if he deserved it; but, then, he never did deserve it”) (38), while Maggie is able to appreciate “the gift of sorrow—that susceptibility to the bare offices of humanity which raises them into a bond of loving fellowship” (191). While suffering allows Maggie to sympathize by awakening fellow-feeling, she also insists that far from sympathizing only with those who share her experiences, she “always care[s] the most about the unhappy people” (333). “Of those two young hearts” in the face of hardship,

Tom’s suffered the most unmixed pain, for Maggie, with all her keen susceptibility, yet felt as if the sorrow made larger room for her love to flow in, and gave breathing-space to her passionate nature. No true boy feels that: he would rather go and slay the Nemean lion, or perform any round of heroic labours, than endure perpetual appeals to his pity, for evils over which he can make no conquest. (259-260)

While Maggie’s missteps are often the result of benevolent and affectionate intentions, Tom’s ability to stay out of trouble signals his calculating self-interest rather than an attempt to avoid causing harm to others. We are told that, as a child,

Maggie rushed to her deeds with passionate impulse, and then saw not only their consequences, but what would have happened if they had not been done, with all the detail and exaggerated circumstance of an active imagination. Tom never did the same sort of foolish things as Maggie, having a wonderful instinctive discernment of what would turn to his advantage or disadvantage; and so it happened, that though he was much

more wilful and inflexible than Maggie, his mother hardly ever called him naughty. (65)

Although Maggie makes more mistakes, she tries to learn from every one of them. Unfortunately, Tom obscures her ability to interpret what is right by shifting the definition to whatever suits him.

As the siblings mature, Tom's character undergoes very little change while Maggie learns to control her impulsive nature in order to be respected and taken seriously. In light of Eliot's idea of growth as hinging importantly upon the attainment of a wider world view, Tom's rather narrow perspective is a sign of his failure to mature morally. Though "the down had come on Tom's lip, [...] his thoughts and expectations had been hitherto only the reproduction, in changed forms, of the boyish dreams in which he had lived three years ago" (189). In one of her helpful narrative asides, Eliot explains the consequences for those who, like Tom, resist moral growth despite their life experiences in favour of their own fixed notions. For "uncultured minds, confined to a narrow range of personal experience," she explains, "the same scenes are revolved over and over again, the same mood accompanies them—the end of the year finds them as much what they were at the beginning as if they were machines set to a recurrent series of movements" (280). Having learned that clinging to the aspirations of her youth and allowing herself to be driven by passion places her at odds with her family, Maggie realizes that she "must part with everything [she] cared for when [she] was a child," though "it is like a death" (301). Henry Alley is right in saying that the central interest of the novel "lies in the incompleteness and imbalances of education, both in the broad, psychological sense of the word, and the stricter, more academic sense" (184). As a result

of an imbalanced and incomplete education, Maggie and Tom themselves become unbalanced as Tom grows into detached narrowness and Maggie into a state of exaggerated susceptibility:

Tom and Maggie become, with the breaks in their development, complementary imbalances. Tom, in having his opportunities for self-study denied and finally cut off, becomes hard and practical; he is all detachment. Maggie, in having her lively imagination pushed toward escape, turns oversensitized and inactive; she is all sympathy. (Alley 192)

Because Tom is forced into a grown man's role as head of his household, "Tom's education, then, is anything but natural, since, under the pressures of various choices and circumstances, his nature hardens into a practical detachment" and pushes "down the promise of his imagination and sympathy" (Alley 187). Tom's "self-inflicted maturity" is devastating to his capability for sympathetic understanding, though it is also "in some respects admirable, since, in view of his parents' childlike behaviour, the salvation of the Tulliver household rests with him" (Alley 187). While Eliot generally endorses the reform of society's flaws by allowing intelligent young voices to replace those who have long ceased to think critically, the substitution of the young for the old becomes irrelevant and ineffective if they merely serve to echo the dusty notions of the past. After detailing beliefs and attitudes of the "dull men and women" of rural, traditional communities such as St. Oggs, the narrator explains that while we disagree with such views, it is important for us to understand them:

I share with you this sense of oppressive narrowness; but it is necessary that we should feel it, if we care to understand how it acted on the lives of



Tom and Maggie—how it has acted on young natures in many generations, that in the onward tendency of human things have risen above the mental level of the generation before them, to which they have been nevertheless tied by the strongest fibres of their hearts. (273)

Tom, however, literally makes a contractual agreement with his father to maintain the old family grudges and to do everything in his power to keep the Mill running the same way it always has been. Signing his allegiance to the irrational and unformed views of his “puzzled” father, Tom copies his dictated declaration of vengeance on the flyleaf of the family bible (267).

While Tom assimilates his views to that of his limited parents, Maggie, alternatively, recognizes the problems with their outlook and with all that is left wanting in their unsatisfying explanation for living properly:

She wanted some explanation of this hard, real life: the unhappy-looking father, seated at the dull breakfast table; the childish, bewildered mother; the little sordid tasks that filled the hours, or the more oppressive emptiness of weary, joyless leisure [...] she wanted some key that would enable her to understand, and, in understanding, endure, the heavy weight that had fallen on her young heart. If she had been taught “real learning and wisdom, such as great men knew,” she thought she should have held the secrets of life; if she had only books, that she might learn for herself what wise men knew! (286)

Maggie’s desperate desire for a more meaningful life than the one she sees before her is repeated in *Middlemarch* by Dorothea, and by the eponymous heroine of *Romola*.

Convinced that acquiring the knowledge of great men will then allow them to operate in a man's world, the women lament that their limited education separates them from the academic world rather than preparing them for it. Because Maggie's mother and father are "so unlike what she would have them to be" (287), she conceives of "wild romances of a flight from home in search of something less sordid and dreary" (287). Like Dorothea and Romola, who both dream of seeking out renowned intellectuals as mentors who might offer them a different life, Maggie "would go to some great man—Walter Scott, perhaps—and tell him how wretched and how clever she was, and he would surely do something for her" (287). As the theme of limited female possibilities that recurs throughout Eliot's novels makes clear, circumstances—particularly the strict limitations for females—play a determining role in the maturation of one's character and morality.

Because Maggie's education constantly reinforces that she is unnatural and that her lack of femininity is something she should work hard to correct, her growth into adulthood results in the crippling of her self-confidence and distrust of her instincts. Critics such as Fraiman, Alley and Ermarth convincingly argue that the kind of gendered education Maggie receives is what then leaves her unprepared for her difficult choices in adult life. We can see that "Maggie's fate develops out of her social experience, particularly out of the local attitudes toward sex roles and out of the assumptions behind those attitudes" (Ermarth 587). The unfortunate result for Maggie is that she has learned to defer to the wishes of others, and is unable to interpret her own impulses when they prompt her to act. Because her pride is constantly under attack, "Maggie responds by becoming self-effacing and dependant, buying her identity at the price of her autonomy" (Ermarth 592) and affection at the price of standing up for herself. Battered into

submission to Tom's will until "her only instinct is to wait passively for help" (Ermarth 600), Maggie feels the injustice of Tom's accusation that she has "no judgment or self command" because he fails to recognize that it is only true because she has always been commanded and forced to remain in a state of dependant childhood. Though the Dodsons and Tullivers do their best to correct Maggie's deficiencies—albeit predominantly through unhelpful criticism—Maggie is not universally discouraged from her academic and social desires. Her friendship with Philip offers an uncritical male companion who shares in her interests and engages in un-patronizing discussions about novels and issues of morality. Ermarth rightly observes that Maggie finds fulfillment in the delights of music, books, and conversation, and through these experiences she feels her life growing inside her again (595). Unfortunately, while Maggie clearly shows a more independent spirit and strength of character than most of the women in *St. Oggs*, the tragedy is that "she is strong enough to be suffocated by her narrow life, but not strong enough to escape it" (Ermarth 591). Though Maggie's relationship with Philip encourages her powers of self-actualization over submission, and to pursue her own interests rather than those of her family, her flirtation with Stephen confuses her ability to distinguish her own wishes from those of others.

Maggie's flawed education and childhood experiences leave her unable to discern which choices are the right ones for her to make, and to distinguish which claims have the integrity warranted for her compliance. Maggie's exaggerated sympathy causes her to adopt too many conflicting perspectives from a variety of "imaginative lives [...] so that her powers of decision-making are lost" (Alley 194). While the reader knows that Philip's claim upon Maggie actually has the ultimate authority, this, along with

“Stephen’s temptations and Tom’s irrational demands, all impinge on her with equal force and validity” (Alley 194-5). As Maggie begins to feel an attraction to Stephen, the narrator stops to remind us that the mistake Maggie is about to make has been made possible by the kind of education she has been given:

But you have known Maggie a long while, and need to be told, not her characteristics, but her history, which is a thing hardly to be predicted even from the completest knowledge of characteristics. For the tragedy of our lives is not created entirely from within. “Character,” says Novalis, in one of his questionable aphorisms—“character is destiny.” But not the whole of our destiny. Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, was speculative and irresolute, and we have a great tragedy in consequence. But if his father had lived to a good old age, and his uncle had died an early death, we can conceive Hamlet’s having married Ophelia, and got through life with a reputation of sanity, notwithstanding many soliloquies, and some moody sarcasms.... (401-2)

Because Maggie’s character is shaped by her circumstances, and particularly by the education she receives both from home and at school, Eliot takes pains to remind us that the groundwork over which Maggie will stumble has been laid in part by others. Rather than benefitting from an idyllic Wordsworthian childhood in which her imagination is nurtured, Maggie is constrained and re-shaped into a feminine ideal.

Though Maggie demonstrates an independence of spirit in her youth and confidence in her powers of interpretation, as in her analysis of books and pictures, her confidence is repeatedly undermined by those she looks up to. From both her family and

from the intellectual community (insofar as she views Mr. Stelling as representative of academic authority), Maggie is discouraged from engaging in critical thinking and is taught rather to defer to the men who know best. Unsurprisingly, then, when Maggie is introduced to the confident and charismatic Stephen Guest, she is attracted to his manly capability in caring for demure young ladies such as Lucy and herself. Maggie finds it “charming to be taken care of in that kind of graceful manner by some one taller and stronger than oneself,” though she fails to recognize that she has been conditioned to enjoy it. Though Maggie believes that she “had never felt just in the same way before” (383), it is clear to the reader that Maggie has become all too familiar with “the sweetness of submission” that makes it impossible for her to be scolded for doing wrong. Not only has she been prepared for submission by the demands of her family, but Maggie is made even more susceptible to Stephen’s charms by the triviality of her formal education:

In poor Maggie’s highly-strung, hungry nature—just come away from a third-rate schoolroom, with all its jarring sounds and petty round of tasks—these apparently trivial causes had the effect of rousing and exalting her imagination in a way that was mysterious to herself. It was not that she thought distinctly of Mr Stephen Guest, or dwelt on the indications that he looked at her with admiration; it was rather that she felt the half-remote presence of a world of love and beauty and delight, made up of vague, mingled images from all the poetry and romance she had ever read, or had ever woven in her dreamy reveries [...] the music was vibrating in her still.... (385)

Maggie has been taught to defer to authority, but she remains unprepared to choose between the equally authoritative claims of family, friendship, and desire.

Though Eliot encourages us to recognize the variety of circumstances and choices that invite blame, we should conclude that blame is “everywhere and nowhere” (Alley 187). Eliot’s strategy, as Katherine Hayles notes, “is to invite judgment, then to forestall it by broadening the context so that we see the connection between our faults and those of the character” (25). Since the characters themselves are too entrenched in their own points of view to attain a more objective understanding, “Eliot places the burden on the reader to become wise in these matters” (Alley 187). Alley likens the reader’s position to that of the chorus of the classical tradition:

If, consistent with classical tradition, it is the chorus who must demonstrate the appropriate balance of sympathy and detachment and who must remember past details accurately and apply them with relevance to the present, then it is the educated reader who, in *The Mill on the Floss*, must serve this function, filling in where no character could [...] And as chorus, the reader will neither oversympathize nor overjudge, will neither dismiss the past nor romanticize it. (197-8)

*The Mill on the Floss*, and indeed Eliot’s work more generally, is essentially about balance. In order to live morally, one must recognize the realities of human error while extending one’s sympathy nonetheless. In order to make the right decisions, one must look to the formative circumstances of the past as well as to the limitations of one’s character. And finally, one must balance one’s own moral integrity and perspective against a broader context. While the readers of *The Mill on the Floss* “have had the

benefit of a three-volume novel whose principle educative purpose has been to extend our sympathies [...] and to provide the counterbalancing detachment as well” (Alley 188), we know that the poor Tullivers have not. Though Eliot does not absolve her characters of responsibility of their *actions*, she implores the reader to “remember that the responsibility of *tolerance* lies with those who have the wider vision” (500).

As has been demonstrated, for Dickens it is the impossibly ethereal and inherently moral children who possess the wider vision and must compensate for the morally blind adults. The common focus on childhood ultimately demonstrates their conflicting approaches to sympathy and realism. Eliot maintains her commitment to sympathy in the face of challenging realism even in the over-sentimentalized territory of the Victorian idealization of children, while Dickens enters such sentimentalized territory to encourage sympathy for children—even if they do not strictly resemble those in real life. Though the responsibility for acting morally and sympathetically is shared between the characters and the reader for Eliot, Dickens essentially removes responsibility from the idealized child characters in order to criticize the parents, and paternalist structures, that neglect them. Though both Eliot and Dickens acknowledge circumstances as an integral component of one’s moral welfare, Eliot offers a more challenging—though empowering—view of individuals as the true masters of their fate.

## CHAPTER 4 CHILDISH ADULTS

“But I am gay and innocent; forget your worldly arts and play with me!” (*Bleak House* 84)

While Dickens may idealize children in a way that Eliot generally does not, they both share a particular distaste for grown-ups who refuse to acknowledge their adult responsibilities. But while Dickens hopes, rather than expects, his morally flawed characters to improve, Eliot demands improvement. Because Eliot maintains a fervent belief in our ability to learn from mistakes and grow through suffering, she is more sympathetic to the morally-challenged characters than Dickens generally proves to be. Though both Eliot and Dickens prove sympathetic to children, they also feature childish adults who test our ability to sympathize, such as *Romola*'s Tessa, *Bleak House*'s Harold Skimpole, and *David Copperfield*'s Dora Spenlow. With modest expectations for moral improvement, Dickens's childish characters only become sympathetic when they recognize their faults and repent. Eliot, alternatively, maintains her intellectual commitment to extend her sympathy even to unlikeable recipients by conceding that a variety of external factors have contributed to the childish individual's limitations for which they cannot be held entirely accountable.

Though he suggests that we can learn a thing or two from children, Dickens does not recommend that we revert to a child-like state altogether. While maintaining a “child heart” in all its benevolence and imagination may allow one to sympathize more readily and to act with compassion, an adult who applies calculating reason in order to remain free of responsibility becomes a hideous corruption of childishness. The qualities of childhood and the corresponding lack of responsibility, while worth remembering, cannot be brought with us into adulthood without dodging our moral responsibilities. While



“Dickens is withering in his scorn for such archetypal enemies of childhood” as Miss Barbary, and applauds those benefactors who enable children to experience imagination and play, Mildred Newcomb explains, “he can be almost equally severe on those who refuse to grow up, such as Harold Skimpole” (102). Childhood becomes a kind of Eden for adults, and the idealization of children is importantly wrapped up in the romanticized reflections of a pastoral and carefree youth. While it is quite natural that one’s childhood memories be riddled with nostalgia, there is a clear division between those who cherish memories of childhood and seek to make such memories possible for future children, and those who greedily scoop up the childish pleasures to which they are no longer entitled. *Bleak House* particularly illustrates this distinction by explicitly tackling issues concerning children as well as childish adults. Jarndyce, as a benevolent patriarch, strives to preserve the innocence of children in order to counteract the selfish irresponsibility of adult society, while Skimpole, in contrast, seeks only to preserve and extend his own childhood. Revealing his sympathetic incapacity, Skimpole can only conceive of working to maintain what is comfortable and pleasant for himself without any altruistic notions of why it might be important to protect the experience of childhood for subsequent generations.

Naturally childish pursuits that are appropriate in youth “grow monstrously grotesque and perverted when unnaturally tampered with and invaded by adults” (Newcomb 100), particularly when they are deliberately abused. Indeed, Skimpole, as an overgrown child, becomes a kind of unnatural monster who feeds on the generosity and sympathy of others while offering none himself. While he is able to charm his parasitic way through life by convincing others that he is a unique and precious anomaly of

innocence that survives experience, many characters eventually begin to see him for what he really is. To be sure, Skimpole is at his most monstrous when we are shown how his own claim upon a carefree and boundless existence corrupts the experience of childhood for those who are forced to pick up the slack. The pre-adolescent girl, Charley, or “little Coavinses” is forced to take on the role of mother and father to her two younger siblings upon her father’s death. In addition to the fact that the father expires in part as a result of his endless pursuit of the evasive Skimpole, Skimpole’s reaction to the orphaned children highlights the moral gap between the premature parent and the irresponsible adult. Esther observes that “the little orphan girl had spoken of their father, and their mother, as if all that sorrow were subdued by the necessity of taking courage, and by her childish importance in being able to work, and by her bustling busy way” (227), and that Skimpole “was such a mirthful child by the side of the graver childhood” (233). Not only does Skimpole remain indifferent to the woes of children generally, but it is obvious that even his own children “had grown up as they could, and had had just as little hap-hazard instruction as qualified them to be their father’s playthings in his idlest hours” (625). The most repugnant example of selfishness can be seen in his total lack of sympathy for the dangerously ill Jo, as Skimpole quickly snuffs out Jo’s chance for survival by turning him out of Bleak House for fear of contagion. His failure in sympathy, in contrast to Esther’s selfless attendance on the sick and Jarndyce’s indiscriminate generosity, ensures that Skimpole himself is cast in an unsympathetic light.

While Skimpole is undoubtedly childish, it does not necessarily follow that all of his child-like limitations are genuine. Though Jarndyce explains that “in simplicity, and freshness, and enthusiasm, and a fine guileless inaptitude for all worldly affairs, he is a

perfect child” (80), Esther cannot satisfy herself that Skimpole’s avowal of his weaknesses and his display of guileless candour are as artless as they seem (549). Upon meeting him, Esther is “delighted with his charming spontaneity and gay manner” though she “cannot quite reconcile what he says with what she believes the duties of life to be” (Serlin 556). Skimpole is described as “a little bright creature, with a rather large head; but a delicate face, and a sweet voice, and there was a perfect charm in him [...] indeed, he had more the appearance, in all respects, of a damaged young man, than a well-preserved elderly one” (81). Esther, as a natural caretaker, seems to be one of the only people to seriously question why exactly Skimpole is excused from all moral and practical responsibility, while others generally fall victim to his charm and supposed innocence. Regarding the “duties and accountabilities of life,” Esther is “confused by not exactly understanding why he was free of them,” but “that he was free of them, [she] scarcely doubted; he was so very clear about it himself” (83).

While Esther is critical of Skimpole’s “innocence,” perhaps as a once blighted child herself, John Jarndyce seems desperately hopeful that such carefree and undesigning happiness can persist into adult life. With his intense fear of the corrupting influence of great expectations that have the power to poison even the most promising of futures—the effects of which he has had repeated demonstrations in Chancery—he willingly blinds himself to what are clearly Skimpole’s selfish impulses. Jarndyce is able to laugh “sincerely at and with Mr. Skimpole, as a child who blew bubbles and broke them all day long” (272), because he “never seemed to consider Mr. Skimpole an accountable being” (456). Esther observes that Skimpole’s “off-hand professions of childishness and carelessness were a great relief to [Jarndyce]...and were the more

readily believed in; since, to find one perfectly undesigning and candid man, among many opposites, could not fail to give him pleasure” (220). Though an otherwise capable parent, Jarndyce demonstrates a serious shortcoming by allowing Skimpole to penetrate Bleak House with his airy and unsustainable notions that lead to the deaths of Jo and Richard.

In an attempt to explain why, for Skimpole, sentiment, susceptibility, sensibility, and imagination “are not regulated in him, somehow,” Jarndyce is given to suppose that “the people who admired him for them in his youth, attached too much importance to them, and too little to any training that would have balanced and adjusted them; and so he became what he is” (619). Even those who admire his childish qualities understand them to be the result of social conditioning as opposed to being natural, though Jarndyce would not go so far as to assert that such qualities are a deliberate and selfish choice. Like Rosamond, Skimpole is an adept manipulator who, because he can get away with it, has no reason to behave otherwise. While he insists that he cannot possibly endeavour to reason upon matters of finance since he is “but a mere child,” he nevertheless proves himself capable of reasoning his way out of trouble and preserving his life of ease and unaccountability. It is clear that Skimpole finds the strength to take care of himself only when it is worth his while, and that his childish observations and meditations are simply part of his innocent act.

A foil to Skimpole’s prolonged and destructive childishness is Lawrence Boythorn, who maintains a childish spirit without the ineptitude of inexperience or selfishness. While Dickens generally endorses our engagement with our inner child and implores us to remember our childhood selves, such recommendations are “qualified by

his keen and thoroughly adult sense of the seriousness of life and the eminently Victorian need always to be up and doing something useful and productive” (Newsom 102).

Rather than applying himself to any one thing, Skimpole dabbles in easy pleasures until faced with difficulty or boredom, in “beginning some sketch in the park which he never finished, or to playing fragments of airs on the piano, or to singing scraps of songs, or to lying down on his back under a tree, and looking at the sky—which he couldn’t help thinking, he said, was what he was meant for, it suited him so exactly” (273). While both men exhibit a kind of childishness, it is easy to distinguish between the inherent generosity and undesigning nature of Boythorn and Skimpole’s theatrical and disingenuous sympathy. “This child heart of Lawrence Boythorn,” Jarndyce explains, “through some magic of invulnerability, has survived even a blighted love to make a pathway of some brightness through the world” (135), and undermines his harsh exterior by radiating his inner softness. As Newcomb notes, however, because “the child heart is such an anomaly in the adult world [...] Boythorn too wears the eccentric look (135), though notably one that is disarming and comedic as opposed to Skimpole’s unsettling carelessness.

Boythorn, while of a childish disposition, is able to maintain his property and finances and to function productively in the adult world, while the “shabby luxury” (621) of Skimpole’s disordered home reveals his youthful recklessness. Boythorn’s seemingly violent outbursts are always fuelled by generous impulses and are cloaked in the gentle kindness of his behaviour. Where Skimpole’s excesses spring from unrestrained selfishness, Boythorn’s exaggerated reactions consistently reveal the underlying desire to protect others. Skimpole insists that Boythorn is “a little too boisterous—like the sea

[...] a little too vehement—like a bull, who has made up his mind to consider every color scarlet” (222): an opinion at which Esther is not surprised given that Boythorn attaches so much importance to many things while Skimpole cares so little for anything (222). Though Boythorn is certainly given to hyperbole, his vehemence and feigned aggression cannot disguise that his heart is in the right place. Even in his ongoing rivalry with Sir Leicester Boythorn maintains his natural generosity. Realizing “that the broken old relic needs the feud to strike some fire of purpose from an otherwise blasted life” (Newcomb 142), Boythorn keeps up his feigned outrage as a friendly gesture. In addition to “the very fury of his superlatives, which seemed to go off like blank cannons and hurt nothing” (*Bleak House* 130), his harmless enthusiasm is further emphasized by his friendship with a “very little canary, who...after taking a gentle flight round the room, alighted on his master’s head” (131). Esther correctly observes that “to hear Mr Boythorn presently expressing the most implacable and passionate sentiments, with this fragile mite of a creature quietly perched on his forehead, was to have a good illustration of his character” (131). While Skimpole “embodies the social threat...confronting human beings when someone decides to remain a preserved child,” Boythorn “suggests the delicate balance that needs to be achieved by the mature adult: in putting away childish things, he must strive to keep the child heart” (Newcomb142-3). Because a childish disposition for Dickens is both so precious and so easily abused, he is careful to distinguish between the child-heart which resides in the benevolent man, and the miser’s heart that disguises itself with the rosy cheeks and innocent smile of a boy.

*David Copperfield’s* Dora Spenlow is another example of Dickens’s child-like adults, though she is spared such moral opprobrium in light of the undesigning nature of

her childishness. While “castles in the air are the grand accomplishment of the child imagination and fancy,” Newcomb argues, “they are not in fact inhabitable” (129) in the adult world. While Dora and Skimpole are both problematic as adults and bear important resemblances, there are also some crucial differences that allow Dora to remain an essentially benign child-wife while Skimpole poses a serious threat. Skimpole’s abdication of adult responsibility is treated more harshly than Dora’s because she is in fact a young, childless adult whilst Skimpole is an aged parent and grandparent responsible for supporting his large family. Dora also avoids responsibility not simply for her own comfort, but also because her attempts to learn prove unsuccessful, while Skimpole is much more deliberate in his avoidance of the reasonable demands for accountability and resourcefulness. Despite Skimpole’s insistence upon his ineptitude, his selfish designs and demonstration of manipulative powers undermine the childish role in which he has cast himself. By doing so, he “demonstrates the destructive consequences of air castles, not because they are airy and unrealizable, but rather because he succeeds so well in making them materialize for his selfish purposes” (Newcomb 130). Because Skimpole is driven by a selfish impulse and is revealed as a designing freeloader, Dickens does not take pains to encourage our sympathy for this overgrown child. For Dora, however, her childishness and genuine incapacity for moral responsibility warrants her sentimental and sympathetic end.

Dora becomes uncomfortable and frustrated when faced with the task of sympathizing because she does not possess the moral or intellectual capability to withstand the suffering or hardship of David’s impending poverty. While Dora’s limitations are disappointing for David, they are not necessarily a moral failing on her

part. Rather, David must accept that he has to pick up the slack for those who cannot overcome their limitations. Instead of offering narrative interjections condemning Dora as Eliot does in the case of Rosamond, Dickens simply allows the reader to contrast Dora's ineptitude with Agnes's maturity. Because Dora can neither be blamed for her shortcomings nor encouraged to overcome them, other characters in the novel insist that David accept Dora for what she is, since he made the decision to marry her in the first place.

Perhaps because Dora's intentions are essentially generous rather than self-serving, or because—as Robert Newsom argues—she has the decency to die young “in order to clear the decks for the more mature Agnes and thus rescue David from ‘the first mistaken impulse of an undisciplined heart’ (102), neither David, the narrator, nor any of Dora's friends seem capable of criticizing her. Just as Rosamond fails to extend her sympathy to Lydgate in his financial disgrace, however, so does Dora fail to sympathize with David when he and his Aunt run into financial difficulties. The difference that allows for irrecoverable distancing in the former and peaceful resolution in the latter is not a moral advantage on Dora's part. Rather, her more childish ability to ignore unpleasant realities and her ability to be subdued by loving caresses whereas Rosamond remains immovable make her a more manageable partner. Like Rosamond, Dora seems to be limited as a result of having been spoiled and praised all her life, but in her case there is also something essential in her nature that restricts her from achieving the rational and moral capabilities of most adults. Her companion, Miss Mills, explains to David that his insistence on Dora's learning about accounts and cookery is an inappropriate “demand on such a simple creature:



“Mr. Copperfield, I will be plain with you. Mental suffering and trial supply, in some natures, the place of years...[and] the suggestion is not appropriate to our Dora. Our dearest Dora is a favourite child of nature. She is a thing of light, and airiness, and joy. I am free to confess that if it could be done, it might be well, but”—and Miss Mills shook her head.

(527)

Hoping that Dora’s behaviour stems from being constantly doted upon rather than being symptomatic of her true character, David bemoans that she is “regarded like a pretty toy or plaything [...] it was very odd to me; but they all seemed to treat Dora, in her degree, much as Dora treated Jip in his” (588).

David suggests to Dora that she might be treated more rationally, but she insists that since everyone is kind to her, and as a result she is very happy, there is no point in making her uncomfortable by being serious and trying to improve her (588). Because they are increasingly cheated and looted by their domestics, however, David revisits his attempts to train Dora to be an angel of the house, rather than merely a decorative cherub. However, David’s Aunt Betsey takes pains to remind him that their “Little Blossom is a very tender little blossom, and the wind must be gentle with her” (621). Failing the likelihood that constant instruction will have any positive effect, Betsey insists that it is David’s duty to estimate Dora “by the qualities she has, and not by the qualities she may not have;” “the latter you must develop in her, if [you] can...and if [you] cannot...[you] must accustom [yourself] to do without’em” (622).

Though Dora’s repeated pitiful attempts at keeping house indicate that she is indeed limited by nature, she believes that if she had “gone down to the country for a

whole year, and lived with Agnes” (626), the epitome of angelic domestic capability, she might have been able to make some improvement in her. Failing her only opportunity with the potential to positively shape her—though we are not entirely convinced of its supposed success—Dora resigns herself to being the “little goose” (619) she naturally is, and asks that David think of her as his “child-wife” (627):

I don't mean, you silly fellow, that you should use the name, instead of Dora. I only mean that you should think of me that way. When you are going to be angry with me, say to yourself, “it's only my child-wife!” When I am very disappointing, say, “I knew, a long time ago, that she would make but a child- wife!” When you miss what I should like to be, and I think can never be, say, “still my foolish child-wife loves me!” For indeed I do. (627)

David comes to the sad conclusion that whether or not she might have been better instructed in her youth, he must accept “that perhaps Dora's mind was already formed” (676), and that it was too late to correct it. Since Dora insists that “it's better to [her] to be stupid than uncomfortable” (677), and that to her “reasoning is worse than scolding” (619), David decides that “if there must be...a shadow anywhere, [he] would keep it for the future in [his] own breast” (676), which is precisely what Dickens would have him do.

In order to keep Dora as a blameless, yet flawed character, Dickens sentimentalizes David's young marriage by putting an early end to it. Perhaps in order to supersede harsh criticism from readers, Dickens bestows Dora with deathbed

clairvoyance that she lacked in health that allows her to articulate precisely what we've all been thinking, and to acknowledge her shortcomings with unprecedented maturity:

I am afraid, dear, I was too young. I don't mean in years only, but in experience, and thoughts, and everything. I was such a silly little creature! I am afraid it would have been better, if we had only loved each other as a boy and girl, and forgotten it [...] As years went on, my dear boy would have wearied of his child-wife. She would have been less and less a companion for him. He would have been more and more sensible of wanting a home. She wouldn't have improved. It is better as it is. (748)

While Dora is redeemed in a sense by the recognition of her inadequacies as a wife—and a woman for that matter—in an apparent last-minute leap of maturity, Eliot's parallel in *Romola's* simple Contadina, Tessa, is not excused for her ineptitude or bestowed with unrealistic maturity in the nick of time. Though Eliot naturally wants her characters to demonstrate moral progression, she must concede that some cannot or will not grow morally within the action of the novel. For Rosamond, we get the sense that she has the potential to grow but chooses to remain an egoist in favour of the comforts such a position entails. For Tessa, however, Eliot shows a woman who seems incapable of growth since suffering fails to inspire sympathy and maturity. Because Eliot clearly articulates her belief that growth is always possible and to be pursued, natural inclinations and limitations can make that either a much easier, or much more elusive, process, depending upon whether one is born with Dorothea's ardent nature or Rosamond's self-interest. Early in the novel we learn that Tessa and Romola are almost the same age, though they are immediately set apart physically and intellectually as woman and child.

Tessa is consistently described as baby-like with a bewildered pout and large blue eyes that always seem in danger of spilling over with tears. Though she is “a young girl, apparently not more than sixteen” (24) she is always referred to as “child” by acquaintances and lovers alike, and described as having a “baby-face” (25) that is either pouting or “contented as a cherub’s budding from a cloud” (105). It is not only Tessa’s physicality that tells of her immaturity, but also her childish understanding and simple nature. In a perfect analogy, the narrator notes that “it takes very little water to make a perfect pool for a tiny fish, where it will find its world and paradise all in one, and never have a presentiment of the dry bank” (110). Not only is Tessa easily contented, but like a young child or pet is driven almost entirely by her bodily appetites, and is often represented as sleeping, resting, and eating, not to mention the innuendo of the naps under the pear-tree with Tito and the “visits” that leave her with child.

In contrast, Romola tirelessly labours for others without complaint, and is never seen indulging in the physical relief of food and rest, but rather is driven by her passion and intellect. Despite her father’s ungrateful and sexist treatment of her, Romola maintains a queenly composure and patience, made possible by her keen sympathy and compassionate nature. In answer to her father’s barking inquiries about his books, Romola is able to defer her indignation because she recognizes that her blind, aged father is worthy of her sympathy. While a “fine ear would have detected in her clear voice and distinct utterance, a faint suggestion of weariness struggling with habitual patience [...] as she approached her father and saw his arms stretched out a little with nervous excitement to seize the volume, her hazel eyes filled with pity” (50). Her “native refinement and intelligence” were “transfigured to the most loveable womanliness by mingled pity and

affection” (50), displaying precisely the kind of complex sympathetic response Eliot endorses. While Romola is able to feel both indignation and pity towards her father, Tessa fails to view relationships in this complex way, and thus knows only when she feels abused, neglected, or loved. In describing her family to Tito, Tessa claims that her stepfather is a cross man, and that she thinks he is wicked, in part, because he is very ugly, and that her mother is unkind to her:

“Ah, my mother herself scolds me: she loves my young sister better, and thinks I don’t do work enough. Nobody speaks kindly to me, only the pievano (parish priest) when I go to confession. And the men in the Mercato laugh at me and make fun of me. Nobody ever kissed me and spoke to me as you do; just as I talk to my little black-faced kid, because I’m very fond of it.” (107)

Eliot makes clear that the two women possess very different powers of understanding, and while Tessa is a contented fish who interprets her thoughts and emotions through her bodily needs, Romola is a more complex, intellectual being who is able to recognize various emotions and desires at once.

As with Dorothea and Rosamond, Romola and Tessa seem to be distinguishable both by nature and by their distinct upbringings. Heather Armstrong rightly observes that Romola’s father “has raised her in ignorance of the world outside the walls of their home and the pages of his ancient texts,” and that while “she possesses a wealth of knowledge and skills closed to almost all other women...she lacks understanding of some things that even the commonest Florentine women know,” (43) such as the church. Though both Romola and Tessa are raised in ignorance by their parents in one form or another,

Romola demonstrates an inherent maternal impulse, scholarly aptitude, and maturity. Though Tito reveres and loves Romola, her ability to challenge his immoral reasoning and detect his falsity leads him to flee from her to the simple girl who never challenges his self-complacency, and “makes no claims upon him that aren’t easy and pleasant to fulfill” (Armstrong 50). While Eliot illustrates that both women are flawed, the novel impresses to us that it is better to make mistakes through trying to act morally than because we are unable to weigh our responsibilities and defer to others to take care of us.

While Dora is problematic for David because of her failure to fulfill his domestic ideal as a result of her childishness, it is Tessa’s childish ignorance that is the most appealing to Tito. Tessa, as child-wife, is “cheerful, affectionate, unquestioning, unthinking—a vessel offering physical pleasure and asking little in return” (Thurin 221).

Tito is

determined, if possible, to preserve the simplicity on which [Tessa’s] charm depended; to keep Tessa a genuine *Contadina*, and not place the small field-flower among conditions that would rob it of its grace [...] the piquancy of her talk would be all gone, if things began to have new relations for her, if her world became wider, her pleasures less childish....

(300-1)

The fact that Tito fears for Tessa’s “corruption” away from her charming ignorance suggests that she is in fact capable of gaining a wider perspective and becoming self-sufficient. For Tito, Tessa is an escape from the challenges that Romola’s intellect and morality pose to his treacherous indulgences. It is this “sweet sleepy child...without moral judgments that could condemn him, whose little loving ignorant soul made a world

apart, where he might feel in freedom from suspicions and exacting demands” (145), that Tito favours over the woman he truly respects and loves.

For David, Agnes’s competence in traditional feminine roles, her unwavering admiration of David, and her unquestioning support of his decisions make her a much easier and more desirable wife than Dora. Tito’s predicament, however, is precisely the reverse in that the childish Tessa is obedient and loving whereas Romola challenges Tito’s decisions and authority. Because maturity for Dickens means reliability and compliance with traditional gender expectations, and for Eliot a developed and discerning mind, the Madonna characters, Romola and Agnes, are not equally empowering female models. Just as Eliot encourages us to sympathize with those who challenge our natural pathos, so does she position Romola’s challenges to Tito as morally preferable to the easy escape from moral scruples that Tessa offers. Noting that Dickens “idealizes Agnes’s spiritual and occupational chores,” Susan Thurin argues that while Agnes has no need for self-realization, Romola actively seeks it (221). It is easy for us to sympathize with the patient Agnes who waits her turn for David’s attention and gratitude, and Dora who repents her shortcomings in angelic manner, and with her dying breath unselfishly insists that Agnes marry David for the sake of his happiness. Romola, on the other hand, is a sympathetic character even when she makes poor choices and undergoes internal struggles in a way that the idealized Agnes never does. Even Tessa, whom both Romola and the narrator view as rather pathetic, evokes sympathy for her babyish ineptitude that has only been fed by those she has deferred to throughout her life. The very nature of the female relationships, as Thurin points out, reveals the conflicting ideals behind the novels. We can see that in *David Copperfield*, the friendship between Dora and Agnes

“promote[s] the male protagonist and patriarchal values, while in Eliot’s novel, marriage and friendship between women ennoble the female protagonist and propose a matriarchal alternative to traditional sex roles and family structure” (Thurin 219). Where Dora and Agnes unite in order to promote David’s happiness, even to the point of undermining their own wishes for his sake by endorsing the other as an appropriate mate, Tessa and Romola are brought together as a result of Tito’s shortcomings rather than in celebration of love for him.

Both Dickens and Eliot deplore childishness in adults, though the moral problems which arise out of that childishness are tempered by each author’s attitude towards gender roles in the adult world. Because Dickens adopts a paternalistic attitude, both *Bleak House* and *David Copperfield* criticize inept parents in different ways: holding fathers accountable for providing for his home as well as his nation, and mothers for maintaining an orderly home and deferring to her husband’s sound judgment. Dora’s childishness is problematic because it conflicts with David’s (and Dickens’s) notion of what a wife and mother should be. Eliot, alternatively, demonstrates the moral risks of childish and irresponsible adults, though without compromising female responsibility by necessitating a child-like deference to male authority. Tessa is problematic for Tito not because she is a domestic failure, but because she fails to challenge him morally.



## CHAPTER 5 THE MORAL IMPLICATIONS OF IDIOCY

“To this mind of the heart, if I may call it so, in Mr. Dick, some bright ray of the truth shot straight” (607).

While childishness is always problematic for Eliot in light of her focus on personal responsibility, Dickens endeavours to separate the morally deficient from the merely child-like through his portrayal of mentally challenged characters in his novels. Because the characters deemed “idiots” are limited by nature rather than by selfish impulses or flawed morality, and because they do not operate as regular adults with responsibilities, Dickens is able to celebrate their child-like innocence and inherent sympathy which is not only readily extended to others, but teaches others to be more sympathetic. While Eliot does not exempt certain characters from responsibility, Dickens suggests that since idiots may be irresponsible but do not necessarily pose a moral threat, their childish qualities are not problematic. Eliot’s attitude towards the moral implications of idiocy is harder to pin down since such characters are so scarce within her novels. What can be taken from “Brother Jacob,” her only work to feature an idiot, however, is the sense that her depiction of idiocy resembles the kind of early representations Dickens offers in *Barnaby and Smike*: essentially pitiable, if bumbling, clown figures as opposed to fully-realized characters.

While the terminology is offensive today, replacing “idiocy” with the accepted contemporary phrasing risks, as Patrick McDonagh argues, “effacing the historical pressures and processes by which concepts acquire, change or lose meaning” (411). Though it may be tempting to immediately extend our modern understanding and

acceptance of intellectual disability to the characters Dickens presents, Patrick McDonagh notes that “whatever statements we can make about the meaning of ‘idiocy’ to a particular culture must acknowledge those factors—including the economic and political—that shaped the concept” (413). Though some studies, such as David Wright’s, treat Victorian notions of idiocy “as identical to today’s category of ‘intellectual disability’ or ‘learning disability,’ with only the terminology having changed” (413), the term should be recognized as describing the interpretation of mental dysfunction in a specific historical context and in explaining the fears and attitudes towards it. Merely childish adults are problematic in that they behave like carefree children while remaining part of the adult world in which they are expected to assume responsibilities. The characters who are deemed idiots, however, recognize and do not attempt to overstep their limitations. Since intellectually-challenged characters, or idiots, appear in Dickens’s novels frequently over the course of his long career, it is natural that such character types will evolve to reflect not only Dickens’s changing conception of idiocy, but changes in societal opinions as well.

Because idiots were generally viewed as eternal children, this infantilization helped gain the attention of Victorian philanthropists who were already interested in child welfare (McDonagh 417). By acquiescing to the concept of idiots as children in adult bodies, the ready sympathy for children could be easily extended to another marginalized and misunderstood group; whether Dickens exploited this sympathy by using idiots symbolically or was genuinely interested in changing perceptions of mental illness is difficult to pin down. While over time Dickens begins to treat his idiot characters with increasing integrity for their unique qualities and emotional intelligence, critics are right

to point out that his earlier depictions tend to use such characters merely as symbolic stand-ins for issues like paternalism. In his early novel, *Barnaby Rudge*, Dickens casts an idiot for the title role in order to provide an analogy for the justification of a paternalist approach to government. In his presentation as an eternal child “Barnaby becomes the perfect symbol of a people in need of good government” and of “the innocent incapable of knowing the consequences of his actions, and thus requiring a gentle but firm guiding hand” (McDonagh 422). The novel is also interesting in its adaptation of the Wordsworthian treatment of idiocy in that Barnaby is modeled on the “natural” of Wordsworth’s “The Idiot Boy.” Just as Dickens’s other children retain their romantic and idealized characteristics despite their removal from Wordsworth’s rural pastures to suffer on the cold city streets, so is the idiot boy re-imagined by his participation in the complex demands of city life. As Ian Crawford’s insightful reading of the two texts notes, the striking similarities between the idiots depicted are overshadowed by the vision Dickens creates, “which is somewhat more problematic and much darker than that implied by the optimistic resolution of Wordsworth’s poem” (38). Crawford rightly notes that “Johnny Foy and Barnaby Rudge share an undefined, good-natured dementia” and that both are characterized by an unfocused yet resilient vitality (Crawford 39). As both rely on their close relationships to their mothers and “are most at ease in the world of animate and inanimate Nature,” they are explicitly removed from the expectations of the adult world as non-participants. Despite their similar characteristics and behavioural patterns, Dickens “transforms both Johnny Foy and the world in which he lives” (Crawford 39) by forcing Barnaby into the political realm and association with those who would exploit his ignorance.

Though Barnaby echoes the holy fool tradition, he is distinguishable from other fools as lacking any unexplained powers of insight. Rather, his imagination serves to separate him further from the rest of his society instead of helping him make sense of the world in the way imagination usually functions for children in Wordsworth's poetry. True, Barnaby's overall depiction serves to function as a model of intellectual weakness, inability to understand complex politics, and a general helplessness, but he is also recognized throughout the novel as possessing uncommon powers of determination, loyalty, sympathy, and imagination. Though Barnaby's special qualities are not emphatically celebrated and are often recognized by morally questionable characters such as Hugh, they are, however, duly noted. While Barnaby is initially recruited to participate in the Gordon riots because he is easy to exploit, Hugh quickly recognizes Barnaby's determination and trust as surpassing that of most men. Despite his recognition that "he's a rare fellow, is Barnaby, and can do more, with less rest, or meat, or drink, than any of us" (432), Hugh continues to manipulate his helpful assistant. As both men are awaiting the gallows, however, Hugh earnestly appeals for Barnaby to be spared, attesting to his goodness, loyalty, and ignorance of his role in the rebellious destruction:

"I'll say this," he cried, looking round, "that if I had ten lives to lose, and the loss of each would give me ten times the agony of the hardest death, I'd lay them down—ay I would, though you gentlemen may not believe it—to save this one..." "I took him from her in a reckless mood, and didn't think what harm would come of it," said Hugh, laying his hand upon his head, and speaking in a lower voice. "I ask her pardon, and his".... (646)

Though Barnaby is treated sympathetically throughout the novel, he is nevertheless used symbolically to comment on Dickens's political concerns, and is only accepted into the community once he overcomes his idiocy. Following the riots and the re-establishment of normalcy in London, Barnaby becomes "more rational" (687). Though "some time elapsed before Barnaby got the better of the shock he had sustained, or regained his old health and gaiety," his eventual recovery leaves him with a "better memory and greater steadiness of purpose" (687).

While Dickens's early representations of idiocy treat characters like Barnaby sympathetically, if somewhat unrealistically, the tone of Eliot's depiction of Jacob is more difficult to interpret. As a stylistically uncharacteristic work for Eliot, "Brother Jacob" moves away from realism to a more Dickensian allegorical tale and mimics his metaphorical use of idiocy. The parallels between "Brother Jacob" and *Barnaby Rudge* are numerous and the eponymous characters themselves bear remarkable similarities as both essentially recreate the Wordsworthian model of idiocy. Similar to Barnaby's function as a symbol for the ignorant and inept in need of paternalistic guidance, Jacob can be seen as an example of rampant consumerism. As Richard Mallen observes, while consumerism is a modern concept, "the dangers of unbridled consumption were recognized by Victorians and indeed are personified in 'Brother Jacob' by the omnivorous idiot" (50). However, it is not Jacob's voracious appetite that is the primary moral dilemma in the story, but rather his brother David's dishonesty and calculation. "If David is the pure spirit of calculation," notes Susan de sola Rodestein, "Jacob is the principle of pure appetite or consumption" (303), which, though problematic in itself, is what finally exposes David's villainy. Since both David and Jacob prove to be

destructive characters, though Jacob more innocently so, the necessary resolution calls for a “strong and trustworthy authority figure” (Mallen 52) in the form of the eldest brother, Jonathan, and thus reinforces Dickens’s emphasis on the need for paternalistic governance.

While Barnaby and Jacob share a Wordsworthian childishness and cling to their mothers for guidance, Eliot hyperbolizes the infantilization of idiots beyond anything we find in Dickens’s early representations. Barnaby, for example, is loquacious and exercises reason to the best of his abilities, while Jacob is the inarticulate slave of an intense oral fixation that governs his actions. Dickens’s earlier idiots manifest the charming innocence of a young schoolchild who remains affectionate to his mother and is active and inquisitive, much like Wordsworth’s Jonny Foy. Whereas Wordsworth and Dickens illustrate an eternal boyhood however, Eliot halts Jacob’s development in a state of infancy, as is evident through his temperamental and impulsive actions and his “mingled chuckling and gurgling by which he was accustomed to express the milder passions” (483):

Ah, no! It's of no use to have foresight when you are dealing with an idiot: he is not to be calculated upon. Jacob's right hand was given to vague clutching and throwing; it suddenly clutched the guineas as if they had been so many pebbles, and was raised in an attitude which promised to scatter them like seed over a distant bramble, when, from some prompting or other--probably of an unwonted sensation--it paused, descended to Jacob's knee, and opened slowly under the inspection of Jacob's dull eyes.

(482)

Though the narrator of “Brother Jacob” does not condemn Jacob for his idiocy, neither does he praise him, like Barnaby, for his determination, dedication, and affection. Nevertheless, David’s appalling attitude towards his brother’s disability makes him an object of scorn for the narrator and repeatedly alerts us to David’s immorality:

There was no need to think of Jacob; yet David was liberal enough to bestow a curse on him—it was the only thing he ever did bestow gratuitously. What on earth was David to do? It would have been easy to frown at Jacob, and kick him, and order him to get away; but David dared as soon have kicked the bull. Jacob was quiet as long as he was treated indulgently; but on the slightest show of anger, he became unmanageable, and was liable to fits of fury which would have made him formidable even without his pitchfork. There was no mastery to be obtained over him except by kindness or guile. David tried guile. (486)

Though Jacob goes without praise, there are at least two characters, namely his mother and David’s intended father-in-law, who stand up for Jacob and seem to have his best interest at heart. From his younger brother, however, Jacob receives nothing but disgust and hatred.

Though Jacob’s kindness is a secondary emphasis to his more central gluttony, it is conspicuous by contrast to David’s sociopathic attitude toward his family. While David steals from his mother, anxiously awaits his father’s death in order to receive his legacy, and behaves cruelly to his brothers, Jacob remains affectionate and devoted, and expresses great delight in being reunited with his brother:

"Eh, Zavy, come back?" exclaimed Jacob, giving his dear brother another hug, which crushed [David's] features inconveniently against the stale of the pitchfork. "Aye, aye," said [David], smiling, with every capability of murder in his mind, except the courage to commit it. (513)

While Jacob declares his love for his brother upon seeing him again, the feeling is explicitly *not* mutual, and we are told that while "David liked to be envied; he minded less about being loved" (517). David reveals his moral depravity and utter lack of sympathy not only in his repeated wishes for Jacob's death, or the ease with which he drugs and abandons him, but in his failure to regard his brother as anything more than an ogreish inconvenience:

Copious dinner at noon for Jacob; but little dinner, because little appetite, for David. Instead of eating, he plied Jacob with beer; for through this liberality he descried a hope. Jacob fell into a dead sleep, at last, without having his arms round David, who paid the reckoning, took his bundle, and walked off. In another half- hour he was on the coach on his way to Liverpool, smiling the smile of the triumphant wicked. He was rid of Jacob--he was bound for the Indies, where a gullible princess awaited him. (488)

As a prime example of Eliot's egotists, David only thinks of Jacob as an inconvenience, and spares no concern for the idiot's welfare in the name of David's own self-preservation. The only constraint David feels in sending Jacob off to a workhouse is the fear of "awkward effects if his family took the trouble of inquiring after him" (511).



Overall, Jacob appears to be treated with mild sympathy from the narrator merely in order to condemn David as a villain, rather than to validate the idiot brother. While Dickens plays with the balance of rationality and idiocy throughout his novels and reconciles intellectual disability with a heightened emotional intelligence, Eliot's only depiction of idiocy reduces Jacob to mere appetite. Though her single use of a symbolic idiot does not necessarily evince a negative attitude toward idiocy, it is not surprising that Eliot is less willing to explore the possibilities of the intellectually stunted since her moral framework relies so heavily on the rational. Because her focus is on moral growth that results from experience and suffering and allows for the necessary evolution away from our egotistical childish impulses, it seems Eliot is unable to reconcile those who are incapable of such progress with the demands of her moral framework.

While Jacob and Barnaby may primarily function symbolically and maintain the kind of stereotyped characteristics of earlier representations, Dickens's later depictions of idiocy develop fuller characterization of such individuals in their own right. Dickens's own research and experiences of mental illness cause him to take up a different posture towards idiocy, and, as Paul Marchbanks rightly observes, "his intellectually disabled characters demonstrate an increasing quantity of self-reliance and social competence" (177). Though each representation of idiocy throughout Dickens's novels is distinct, there is a general movement from symbolic and sentimental functions to fuller characterization and meaningful participation in the novel. As Dickens's own interest in idiocy and its treatments grew and he investigated various asylums and treatment facilities, his depictions of idiots transform and make room for the recognition of their unique gifts. In his journalism, Dickens "directs his characteristic wit against those

individuals he thinks least inclined to concern themselves with this population [...] in an unabashed effort to awaken everyone's sympathies to the widespread neglect and marginalization of a sizeable, politically neglected population" (Marchbanks 174). The implication of Dickens's growing interest in such characters is that "subsequent idiots in his fiction bear stable intellectual disabilities that nevertheless fail to disqualify them from full participation in those supportive communities benefiting from their presence" (Marchbanks 174). While Barnaby must overcome his disability and become normalized in order to integrate peacefully and easily into society, later characters such as Mr. Dick actually gain importance and relevance through the very qualities that set them apart.

Marchbanks appropriately signals Mr. Dick as an important turning point in Dickens's treatment of idiocy, though he insists that the later depictions such as Maggy and Sloppy are the most successful examples in terms of their independence and usefulness in the community. In terms of demonstrating the special characteristics that are unavailable to other characters, particularly in a heightened sympathetic capacity and intuitive emotional intelligence, however, David Copperfield's child-like friend is unparalleled. Rather than measuring a "successful" idiot by his ability to maintain a functional role in practical everyday tasks *in spite* of his disability, as is the case with Maggy and Sloppy, I wish to consider Mr Dick's value as actually deriving *from* his idiocy. Marchbanks views Mr. Dick not as Dickens's most evolved representation of idiocy, but merely an important turning point that makes way for Maggy and Sloppy insofar as they are the most successful at participating in society as relatively self-sufficient adults. In terms of moral potential and emotional intelligence, however, it is Mr. Dick who demonstrates the most evolved capacity for sympathy. While he is unable

to live independently and must rely on the guidance of Aunt Betsey and David, he is also shown to possess an inherent moral impulse that uniquely allows him to problem solve and care for others in a way no one else can.

In addition to linking Dickens's "more stereotypical portrayals of cognitive disability with those later, more stable and empowering configurations," we can also see Mr. Dick as "a transitional figure within his own novel" (Marchbanks 169), as his interaction with others forces them to view him not merely as a clown, but as an example of true selflessness and friendship. Indeed, David's distrust of Mr. Dick's "wits" is replaced with a genuine reverence for his surprising sympathetic capacity, and transforms David's pity and impatience into gratitude and respect, which in turn leads us to question our own tendency to value intelligence above kindness.

Initially David observes Mr. Dick's "grey eyes prominent and large, with a strange kind of watery brightness in them that made [David], in combination with his vacant manner, his submission to [his] aunt, and his childish delight when she praised him, suspect him of being a little mad" (189). Despite Mr. Dick's tendency for unprompted laughter and his childish dependence on Betsey, he does not bear the clownish appearance of Dickens's earlier idiots such as Barnaby and Smike, though he is treated more comically in the earlier stages of the novel than in the latter. Grey-haired and "dressed like any other ordinary gentleman" (189), Mr. Dick has neither the comical attire or vacant expression of the idiot Barnaby, nor the "shabby luxuriance" of the child-imposter, Skimpole. While Mr. Dick maintains the appearance of a rational adult and even takes on adult functions such as guardianship of David and regular employment, his instincts, generosity, and gentleness are those of a child. Juliet John makes the

interesting and telling observation that traditionally in melodrama, and consequently frequently in Dickens's allegorically-coloured fiction, "villains are often the most intelligent characters in the genre, threatening its general elevation of emotion over intellect" (11). She rightly suggests that "Dickens's novels in fact present a self-consciously idealized and problematized version of reality in which, most importantly, the brain should not be the most important part of either the individual or the cultural anatomy" (20). While Dickens's novels do not serve to denounce intellectualism or condemn the educated population, they do manage to question our assumptions about intellect and morality, selfishness and benevolence. Just as suffering acts as a litmus test for moral virtue, so can intelligence and mental disability serve to reveal one's true moral character. Intelligence itself does not indicate a calculating or malicious character, but it certainly would be exercised in such a way if the person in question was immoral. A person of limited mental powers may similarly use such deficiencies as an excuse from moral responsibility, or, as Mr. Dick does, allow his heart to compensate for the shortcomings of his understanding.

While there are certain tasks for which Mr. Dick exhibits a child-like dependency for instruction, such limitations remain unproblematic since he willingly accepts help rather than attempting to take on what he does not understand. Though Betsey swears that he is "the most friendly and amenable creature in existence" (199) and acknowledges his superior sympathetic abilities, she bears his rational and practical limitations in mind, as with her insistence that "he should account to her for all his disbursements" (242). Even this "failure" in practical monetary responsibilities, however, stems from his

insurmountable natural generosity and further supports Betsey's high opinion of him. On the morning that David is to leave for school, for example, Mr. Dick

was downhearted again, and would have sustained himself by giving [David] all the money he had in his possession, gold and silver too, if [his] aunt had not interposed, and limited the gift to five shillings, which, at his earnest petition, were afterwards increased to ten. (212)

Because he knows his limitations, Mr. Dick is able to bear an active role as an adult without posing a threat to others, and even recognizes the special qualities that his childishness brings. Though he lacks traditional patriarchal attributes, his guardianship of David is nevertheless meaningful in that he is a trustworthy friend and a reminder of moral virtue. David notes that his friendship "was maintained on an odd footing [in that] while Mr. Dick came professedly to look after me as my guardian, he always consulted me in any little matter of doubt that arose, and invariably guided himself by my advice" (246). Marchbanks rightly observes that "Mr. Dick's simple recommendations inadvertently provide Copperfield with a moral yardstick against which he measures himself [...] and supply Miss Trotwood with refreshingly direct propositions that spur her to action" (170). Even when David becomes impatient with Mr. Dick's childish outlook and limited understanding, he is forced to recognize that what Dick lacks in rationality he makes up for in kindness. In the wake of Betsey's financial troubles, David wonders whether Mr. Dick had any understanding of the severity of the situation, and in finding that he does not, loses patience with him:

The only account he could give of it, was, that my aunt had said to him, the day before yesterday [...] "Dick, I am ruined." That then he said "Oh,

indeed!” [...] Mr. Dick was so very complacent [...] that I am sorry to say I was provoked into explaining to him that ruin meant distress, want, and starvation; but I was soon bitterly reprov'd for this harshness, by seeing his face turn pale, and tears course down his lengthen'd cheeks, while he fix'd upon me a look of such unutterable woe, that it might have soften'd a far harder heart than mine. (486)

While unable to exercise an adult-like rationality, Mr. Dick's genuine concern for others manifests in childish problem-solving that is heart-wrenchingly endearing, if ineffective.

Once forced into recognizing the severity of their financial troubles,

his eyes wander'd to [Betsey's] face, with an expression of the most dismal apprehension, as if he saw her growing thin on the spot. He was conscious of this, and put a constraint upon his head; but his keeping that immovable, and sitting rolling his eyes like a piece of machinery, did not mend the matter at all. [David] saw him look at the loaf at supper (which happen'd to be a rather small one), as if nothing else stood between [them] and famine.... (487)

In his concern for the well being of his dear friends, Mr. Dick is detected “in the act of pocketing fragments of his bread and cheese” which David is certain he has done with “the purpose of reviving [them] with these savings, when [they] should have reach'd an advanced stage of attenuation” (487). In his darting eyes, covert rationing operations, and exaggerated fears, Mr. Dick bears remarkable resemblance to the young Pip in *Great Expectations*, and therefore exhibits a child-like perspective with which it is easy to sympathize.

Though Mr. Dick's benevolence is often rendered ineffective by his child-like understanding, his clarity in matters of sympathy and gratitude is unmarred. With full recognition of his limitations, he also maintains faith in the strength of his sympathy and what it enables him to conquer in the name of helping others. Mr. Dick explains to David that he knows he is intellectually "weak" and "simple" despite Betsey's insistence to the contrary, and that it is her support that makes it possible for him to exercise his potential:

She won't hear of it; but I am. I know I am. If she hadn't stood my friend, sir, I should have been shut up, to lead a dismal life these many years. But I'll provide for her! I'll never spend my copying money. I put it in a box. I have made a will. I'll leave it all to her. She shall be rich—noble!" (635)

Though he is willing to defer to Betsey's better judgment in matters of adult responsibility in general, Mr. Dick determines to respond to her devotion in a way that is practically helpful, and of which he feels fully capable. While marked by characteristically child-like exaggeration, Mr. Dick's attempt at financial responsibility is an example of how his inherent sympathy and earnest generosity are ultimately what allow him to function meaningfully in an adult context.

While he may not possess the understanding to fulfill his role as a father-figure in a traditional way, Mr. Dick thrives in the garden of childhood and thus achieves a different, though equally meaningful dynamic with David. Clearly, on the other hand, Skimpole's professed childishness has nothing to do with his kinship with children but rather everything to do with his love of leisure, which is obvious not only in his failure to care for his own children, but in his inhumane disregard for Jo. Mr. Dick, however,

possesses a child's heart that is fullest when he is bringing joy to children. David describes Mr. Dick's visits to David at school as "the happiest days of Mr. Dick's life" and that "he soon became known to every boy in the school" (244).

How many summer hours I have known to be but blissful minutes to him in the cricket-field! How many winter days have I seen him, standing blue-nosed in the snow and east-wind, looking at the boys going down the long slide, and clapping his worsted gloves in rapture! He was an universal favourite, and his ingenuity in little things was transcendent. He could cut oranges into such devices as none of us had any idea of. He could make a boat out of anything, from a skewer upwards [...] but he was the greatest of all, perhaps, in the articles of string and straw; with which we were all persuaded he could do anything that could be done by hands. (244-5)

Though Mr. Dick is entertaining to David and the schoolboys and joyously partakes in their youthful exploits, he nevertheless suffers from serious mental distress when removed from a happy schoolboy setting. His attempts to focus on writing his "memorial" are frustrated as he succumbs to recurring confusion about his relationship to King Charles and the mystery of how "the people about him have made the mistake of putting some of the trouble out of *his* head, after it was taken off, into [that of Mr. Dick]" (197). Determined to deny any "madness" in her beloved friend, Betsey rationalizes Mr. Dick's confusion about King Charles by asserting that it is merely "his allegorical way of expressing it [...] he connects his illness with great disturbance and agitation, naturally, and that's the figure, or the simile, or whatever it's called, which he chooses to use"



(200). Unable to deny that he is in some capacity “ill,” however, Betsey attributes Mr. Dick’s limitations to the neglect and difficult events of his earlier life, and his present confusion as a residual effect of such abuse.

Though the memorial is a fruitless pursuit in that he “hasn’t been able to draw it up yet, without introducing that mode of expressing himself” (200), Betsey notes that “it keeps him employed” (200) as well as serving as practice for focusing his attention. Indeed, he is later able to gain employment with David and his friend Traddles as they conceive of a useful task for Mr. Dick that will also serve as a method of helping him overcome his natural mental distractions. Traddles and David maintain the belief that rather than being rendered ineffective by his disability, Mr. Dick merely requires specialized working conditions:

On a table by the window in Buckingham Street, we set out the work Traddles procured for him—which was to make, I forget how many copies of a legal document about some right of way—and on another table we spread the last unfinished original of the great Memorial. Our instructions to Mr. Dick were that he should copy exactly what he had before him, without the least departure from the original; and that when he felt it necessary to make the slightest allusion to King Charles the First, he should fly to the Memorial [...] My aunt reported to us, afterwards, that, at first, he was like a man playing the kettle-drums, and constantly divided his attentions between the two; but that, finding this confuse and fatigue him, and having his copy there, plainly before his eyes, he soon sat at it in an orderly business-like manner, and postponed the Memorial to a more

convenient time. [...] he was like one under the propitious influence of a charm, from the moment of his being usefully employed... (513-4)

Driven by his desire to be of assistance to those he cares about, and with the aid of some special measures for his concentration, Mr. Dick is able to channel his work ethic into something beneficial whilst escaping the troubling confusion that so often paralyzes his ability to think clearly.

While steady employment serves as an escape from distracting and troublesome thoughts, his participation in youthful activities and play with children most easily and effectively dispels his anxiety. In showing David his large kite, Mr. Dick explains that by covering it with manuscript and having plenty of string, he is able to diffuse his thoughts about King Charles. David reflects that

What he had told me, in his room, about his belief in its disseminating the statements pasted on it, which were nothing but old leaves of abortive Memorials, might have been a fancy with him sometimes; but not when he was out, looking up at the kite in the sky, and feeling it pull and tug at his hand. He never looked so serene as he did then. I used to fancy, as I sat by him of an evening, on a green slope, and saw him watch the kite high in the quiet air, that it lifted his mind out of confusion, and bore it (such was my boyish thought) into the skies. As he wound the string in, and it came lower and down there like a dead thing, he seemed to wake gradually out of a dream; and I remember to have seen him take it up, and look about him in a lost way, as if they had both come down together, so that I pitied him with all my heart. (210-11)

While Mr. Dick is able to control his distractions through kite flying and employment, he does not need to transform or grow out of his illness in order to be accepted as is necessary for Barnaby. Rather, in finding coping strategies to overcome the obstacles that are posed by his disability, Mr. Dick is able to maintain, and use to advantage, the special gifts that come with it.

## CHAPTER 6 CONCLUSION

Not only does Mr. Dick learn to function meaningfully with others by harnessing the unique qualities he possesses, but is remarkably able, through his compassion and unique sympathetic powers, to resolve problems in the adult realm where no other adult can. While David is fully aware of his guardian's limitations, he learns to value Mr. Dick's compassion and sympathetic intuition over his questionable "wits." In the unfortunate misunderstanding between Dr. Strong and his wife, "the only real relief which seemed to make its way into the secret region of this domestic unhappiness, made its way there in the person of Mr. Dick" (607). Though David finds Mr. Dick's singular ability inexplicable, he notes that "there is a subtlety of perception in real attachment, even when it is borne towards man by one of the lower animals, which leaves the highest intellect behind" (607). Without extensive discussion or rational arguments, Mr. Dick's "quiet interest, and his wistful face, found immediate response in both their breasts" (607), and merely by exuding sympathy and friendship to both husband and wife, Mr. Dick "became what no one else could be—a link between them" (607):

expressing as no philosopher could have expressed, in everything he did, a delicate desire to be her friend; showering sympathy, trustfulness, and affection, out of every hole in the watering-pot; when I think of him never wandering in that better mind of his to which unhappiness addressed itself, never bringing the unfortunate King Charles into the garden, never wavering in his grateful service, never diverted from his knowledge that there was something wrong, or from his wish to set it right—I really feel

almost ashamed of having known that he was not quite in his wits, taking account of the utmost I have done with mine. (607-8)

Mr. Dick explains to David that in addition to exuding sympathy for Dr. and Annie Strong, his position as an idiot allows him to engage intimately in their marital affairs without seeming to impose or to cause offense. Insisting that “a poor fellow with a craze [...] a simpleton, a weak-minded person [...] may do what wonderful people may not do” (637), Mr. Dick is certain that they will not object to his intrusion, nor “mind what [he] do[es], if it’s wrong” (637). Finally, David comes to realize that “the mind of the heart” contains “some bright ray of the truth” that is unavailable to those who rely on their intellect in matters of sympathy (607).

Both Eliot and Dickens explore the implications of the childish and child-like, ranging from the immovably egoistical to the inherently limited. But while Eliot recognizes certain limitations, whether legitimate or the product of selfish creation, she is always pushing us to move beyond our moral limits however difficult that may be. Eliot is sympathetic to childish characters while remaining critical of their flaws and moral underdevelopment. Dickens, on the other hand, can applaud child-like adults as long as their youthful hearts are balanced by a mature mind.

While Dickens recognizes, like Eliot, that individuals can be morally stunted by both nature and nurture, he places less emphasis on overcoming those limits than he does on preserving our positive qualities. While both authors represent characters who *seem* to be incapable of growing up in some capacity, the distinction between who we can and cannot hold accountable becomes easier for Dickens by introducing intellectually disabled characters. Though both are critical of the merely childish adults, Dickens

shows a fondness and sympathy for his mentally disabled characters where Eliot is, at best, ambiguous. For Dickens, idiots are distinguishable from the merely childish in that they successfully maintain the innocence of childhood without becoming detestably irresponsible and incapable adults. Eliot on the other hand is much more ambiguous in terms of where we are to draw the line between those who cannot grow up, and those who simply will not.

While Dickens's use of child-like adults makes sense given that what he values most in humanity is the innocence and inherent goodness of children, it is not surprising that such characters will not have the same function for Eliot. While for Eliot *childish* adults are to be criticized, Dickens's *child-like* adults provide a valuable presence in the novels as they not only exude goodness themselves, but bring out the goodness in those around them. Whereas Jacob arouses impatience and even hatred from his siblings and is represented as a burden to the family, Mr. Dick not only contributes meaningfully to the lives of those around him, but moves others to be more compassionate, understanding, and, of course, more sympathetic.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Adye, Frederic. "Old-Fashioned Children." *McMillan's Magazine*. 38. 286-292. 1892.
- Alley, Henry. "The Complete and Incomplete Educations of The Mill on the Floss." *Rocky Mountain Review*, 39.4, pp. 184-201. 1979.
- Andrews, Malcolm. Charles Dickens and his Performing Selves: Dickens and the public readings. Oxford ; New York : Oxford University Press, 2006.
- Armstrong, Heather. Character and ethical development in three novels of George Eliot-- Middlemarch, Romola, Daniel Deronda. Lewiston, N.Y. : Edwin Mellen Press, c2001.
- Berry, Laura C. The Child, the State, and the Victorian Novel. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1999.
- Bhattacharya, Susmita. Victorian perception of Child. Gorakhpur: Kala Parakashan, 2002.
- Booth, Alison. "Little Dorrit and Dorothea Brooke: Interpreting the Heroines of History." *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, 41.2, pp. 190-216. 1986.
- Brown, James M. Dickens, novelist in the market-place. Totowa, N.J. : Barnes & Noble, 1982.
- Clark, William Ross. Discussions of Charles Dickens. Boston, Heath [1961]
- Cockshut, A. O. J. The imagination of Charles Dickens. London : Methuen, 1965, c1961.
- Crawford, Iain. "'Nature...Drenched in Blood': *Barnaby Rudge* and Wordsworth's 'The Idiot Boy.'" *Dickens Quarterly*, vol. 8, pp. 29-37. 1991.
- Daleski, H. M. (Hillel Matthew). Dickens and the art of analogy. London: Faber, 1970.
- Dickens, Charles. Barnaby Rudge. London: Penguin Books, 2003.

- Dickens, Charles. Bleak House. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.
- Dickens, Charles. David Copperfield. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.
- Dickens, Charles. Little Dorrit. London: Penguin Books, 2003.
- Dickens, Charles. Nicholas Nickleby. London: Penguin Books, 1999.
- Eliot, George. Adam Bede. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.
- Eliot, George. Middlemarch. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.
- Eliot, George. Miscellaneous essays ; The lifted veil ; Brother Jacob. 1819-1880. New York: Collier & Son, 1902.
- Eliot, George. Romola. London: Penguin Books, 1996.
- Eliot, George. The Mill on the Floss. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.
- Ermarth, Elizabeth Deeds. "George Eliot's Conception of Sympathy." *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 40. 1, pp. 23-42.
- Evans, Marian. "The Natural History of German Life." *Westminster review*, 1856.
- Fraiman, Susan. Unbecoming Women: British Women Writers and the Novel of Development. New York: Columbia University Press, 1993.
- Friedman, Stanley. *Dickens's Fictions: Tapestries of Conscience*. New York : AMS Press, 2003.
- Ganz, Margaret. *Humor, irony, and the realm of madness* : New York : AMS Press, c1990.
- Gates, Sarah. "'The Sound of the Scythe Being Whetted': Gender, Genre, and Realism in *Adam Bede*." *Studies in the Novel*, 30.1, p. 20. 1998.
- Haight, Gordon S. "Dickens and Lewes." *PMLA*, 71.1, pp. 166-179. 1956.



- Hardy, Barbara Nathan. The moral art of Dickens. London : Continuum International Publishing Group, 2000.
- Harrison, Mary-Catherine. "The Paradox of Fiction and the Ethics of Empathy: Reconceiving Dickens's Realism." *Narrative*, 16.3, pp. 256-278. 2008.
- Hayles, N. Katherine. "Anger in Different Voices: Carol Gillian and The Mill on the Floss." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 12.1, pp. 23-39. 1986.
- Higbie, Robert. Dickens and imagination. Gainesville : University Press of Florida, c1998.
- Homans, Margaret. Bearing the Word. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986.
- Holoch, George. "Consciousness and Society in Little Dorrit." *Victorian Studies* 21.3, pp. 335-351. 1978
- Jaffe, Audrey. Scenes of sympathy :identity and representation in Victorian Fiction. Ithaca : Cornell University Press, 2000.
- Jaffe, Audrey. Vanishing Points: Dickens, narrative, and the subject of omniscience. Berkeley : University of California Press, c1991.
- John, Juliet. Dickens's Villains: melodrama, character, and popular culture. Oxford; New York : Oxford University Press, 2001.
- Kearns, Katherine. Nineteenth-Century Literary Realism. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.
- Keen, Suzanne. Empathy and the Novel. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.
- Lenard, Mary. Preaching Pity. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 1999.
- Levine, George. "Determinism and Responsibility in the Works of George Eliot." *PMLA*, 77.3, pp. 268-279. 1962.

- Lowe, Brigid. Victorian Fiction and the Insights of Sympathy. London ; New York : Anthem Press, 2007.
- Mallen, Richard. "George Eliot and the Precious Mettle of Trust," *Victorian Studies*, 44.1, pp. 41-75, 2001.
- Marchbanks, Paul. "From Caricature to Character: the Intellectually Disabled in Dickens's Novels." *Dickens Quarterly*, pp. 3-14. 2006
- McDonagh, Patrick. "Barnaby Rudge, 'idiocy' and paternalism: assisting the 'poor idiot.'" *Disability & Society*, 21.5, pp. 411-423. 2006.
- McKnight, Natalie. Idiots, Madmen, and Other Prisoners in Dickens. St. Martin's Press, England. 1993.
- Miller, J. Hillis. "Moments of Decision in *Bleak House*." The Cambridge Companion to Charles Dickens. Ed. John O. Jordan. New York : Cambridge University Press, 2001.
- Miller, K. Nancy. "Emphasis Added: Plots and Plausibility's in Women's Fiction." *PMLA*, 96.37, 1981.
- Moxham, Jeffrey. Interfering Values in the Nineteenth-Century British Novel. Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2002.
- Newcomb, Mildred. The imagined world of Charles Dickens. Columbus : Ohio State University Press, c1989.
- Newsom, Robert. "Fictions of Childhood." The Cambridge Companion to Charles Dickens. Ed. John O. Jordan. New York : Cambridge University Press, 2001.
- Nussbaum, Martha. Love's knowledge :essays on philosophy and literature. New York : Oxford University Press, 1990.

- Paris, Bernard J. "George Eliot's religion of Humanity." *ELH*, 29.4, pp. 418-443. Dec. 1962.
- Plotkin, David. "Home-made Savages: Cultivating English Children in *Bleak House*." *This Year's work in English Studies*, vol. 78, pp. 17-31. 1997.
- Putzell, Sara Moore. "The Search for Higher Rule: Spiritual Progress in the Novels of George Eliot." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 47.3, pp. 389-407. 1979.
- Raina, Badri. Dickens and the dialectic of growth. Madison, Wis. : University of Wisconsin Press, 1986.
- Rodestein, Susan de la Sola. "Sweetness and Dark: George Eliot's "Brother Jacob," *Modern Language Quarterly*. 52, pp. 295–317. 1991.
- Shaw, Harry E. Narrating Reality. Ithica: Cornell University Press, 1999.
- Smith, Grahame. Charles Dickens : New York : St. Martin's Press, 1996.
- Stern, Kimberly J. "A Common Fund: George Eliot and the Gender Politics of Criticism." *Prose Studies*, 30.1, pp. 45-63. 2008.
- Thurin, Susan. "The Madonna and the Child Wife in *Romola*." *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, 4.2, pp. 217-233. 1985.
- Walder, Dennis. Dickens and religion. London ; Boston : Allen & Unwin, 1981.
- Wright, David. From Idiocy to Mental Deficiency : Historical Perspectives on People with Learning Disabilities. London : Routledge, 1996.