

“FOR THE SAKE OF THE REST”: EDUCATION AND MUTUAL RESPONSIBILITY
IN CHARLES DICKENS’S *BLEAK HOUSE* AND *LITTLE DORRIT*

by

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

at

Dalhousie University
Halifax, Nova Scotia
August 2012

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DALHOUSIE UNIVERSITY

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

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Dated: August 21, 2012

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DALHOUSIE UNIVERSITY

DATE: August 21, 2012

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TITLE: "For the Sake of the Rest": Education and Mutual Responsibility in
Charles Dickens's *Bleak House* and *Little Dorrit*

DEPARTMENT OR SCHOOL: Department of English

DEGREE: MA CONVOCATION: October YEAR: 2012

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines how Dickens positions education between self-help and philanthropy in *Bleak House* and *Little Dorrit*. The first chapter examines Dickens's own education as well as his education-related charitable activities to provide context for the following analysis of *Bleak House* and *Little Dorrit*. The second chapter focuses on education in *Bleak House* as a locus both for Dickens's critique of the government's irresponsible failure to educate the poor and for Dickens's depiction of social responsibility motivating individuals to teach others. Finally, the third chapter considers the role of education in *Little Dorrit* by studying Amy Dorrit as an exemplar and teacher of social responsibility who stands in contrast to the prevailing irresponsibility that characterizes her family and "Society."

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my supervisor, Dr. Marjorie Stone, for offering her keen insight and encouragement to me throughout the writing of this thesis. Her constructive criticism and sense of humour made the writing process enjoyable for me, and I am truly grateful to have had the opportunity to work with her.

I would also like to thank those who served as readers for this project—Dr. Rohan Maitzen and Dr. Ronald Tetreault. I deeply appreciate their willingness to read the project and share their knowledge.

To Mary Beth MacIsaac, I offer hearty thanks for her kindness, patience, and calmness, and for answering my questions and helping me navigate deadlines and requirements.

Finally, I would like to thank my family. I am unutterably grateful to my husband, Keith Groen, for his great patience, cheerfulness, and loving support. I am also very thankful for my grandmother, Jantiene Vander Munnik, who at 91 years old still provides me with an excellent role model of wisdom and usefulness, and for my parents, Dale and Elizabeth Williams, who taught me to love learning and who have encouraged me all along.

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

A pivotal scene in *A Christmas Carol* begins with the Ghost of Christmas Present introducing Ebenezer Scrooge to two children: Ignorance and Want. When Ebenezer asks whose the children are, the Spirit answers, “They are Man’s,” and when asked if there is “no refuge or resource” for them, the Spirit repeats Ebenezer’s earlier words ironically: “Are there no prisons? ...Are there no workhouses?” (62-3). Dickens’s view of social responsibility is implicit in this exchange, but Jacob Marley’s ghost articulates Dickens’s beliefs explicitly when he laments, “Mankind was my business. The common welfare was my business; charity, mercy, forbearance, and benevolence, were, all, my business” (23-4). The onus is on the individual—either acting on his own, like Scrooge, or as a responsible agent of a larger system like the government—to take initiative and to reach out to the destitute around him. In Dickens’s eyes, the prisons and workhouses do not solve the problems of ignorance and want; rather, these places are the probable (often inevitable) destinations of the poverty-stricken and uneducated—if no one intervenes.

The Spirit’s characterization of social need suggests that, since ignorance is one part of the problem, education must be a part of the solution. This thesis examines how Dickens positions education between self-help and philanthropy in *Bleak House* and *Little Dorrit*. Carl Dennis writes, “In Dickens’ novels good people are often on the outside of the system, but they want to get in, to find some productive work in society. This goal may be impossible because of existing social defects, but the need remains” (1246). Rather than calling the underprivileged to rise above their social and material circumstances unassisted, Dickens uses fiction to awaken sympathy in the reader and to

inspire action. Thus he calls individuals and the government to intercede for people who want to learn and to find a place in the community where they can be productive: responsible and capable individuals need to teach others their skills and values, and the government needs to create an educational system that can cope with the educational demand.

With this approach to Dickens's work, I unite several overlapping strands of Dickens criticism. Scholars such as Philip Collins and James L. Hughes have written extensively on Dickens and education; others like Norris Pope have investigated Dickens's views about charity; finally, still others such as Walter Crotch and Stanley Cooperman have focused more broadly on Dickens and social reform. This thesis examines how these three threads – education, charity, and social reform – are interwoven by asking how education for the underprivileged functions as mediation in Dickens's paradigm, as a middle space where self-help and charity—that is, personal and social responsibility—meet. Thus this thesis focuses on the “mutual responsibility” that Terry Eagleton calls “the keynote” of Dickens's “later novels” (154).

The huge body of scholarship on Dickens has investigated how Dickens's fiction responds to contemporary Victorian discourses about social “problems” such as urban poverty and juvenile delinquency as well as institutional “solutions” such as prisons and work-houses. Dickens not only interacted with these discourses in his fiction, but also via public speeches and articles he published in newspapers and the journals he edited, *Household Words* (1850-9) and *All the Year Round* (1859-70). In my first chapter, I use Dickens's non-fictional writing and his biographical information to create a framework for my interpretation and understanding of his fiction. Examining Dickens's own

education as well as his education-related charitable activities—in particular his association with the Ragged School movement and his support for Urania Cottage, a “home for homeless women” that has garnered much critical attention from scholars—provides valuable context for my analysis of *Bleak House* and *Little Dorrit* in the following chapters.

My second chapter focuses on education in *Bleak House* as a locus both for Dickens’s critique of the irresponsibility of the government and justice system and for Dickens’s depiction of social responsibility motivating individuals to teach others. Education does not seem to be immediately at the forefront of the novel’s thematic concerns, but *Bleak House* is very concerned with the relationship between systems, individuals, and responsibility—a concern that extends, through the character of illiterate Jo, to the need for the development of a responsible system of education. In this chapter, then, I first consider Dickens’s characterization of Jo. Historical analogues for Jo stem from Dickens’s involvement with the Ragged School movement, the aims of which were, in Dickens’s words, to

introduce among the most miserable and neglected outcasts in London, some knowledge of the commonest principles of morality and religion; to commence their recognition as immortal human creatures, before the Gaol Chaplain becomes their only schoolmaster; to suggest to Society that its duty to this wretched throng, foredoomed to crime and punishment, rightfully begins at some distance from the police office. (“Crime”)

In *Bleak House*, rather than fulfilling its duty to Jo by educating him, the government uses the law to attempt to cast Jo out of society, forcing him to “move on”—a phrase that

implies both Jo's geographical transitions and his transition from life to death, his "passing on." Through Jo in *Bleak House*, Dickens criticizes systemic social irresponsibility and parasitism in the law and the state, emphasizing the profusion of legal paper rather than justice and Parliamentary rhetoric rather than constructive action. This chapter demonstrates how Dickens calls the government to act responsibly by developing an educational system that can reach even the poorest of its people to try to integrate them into, rather than isolate them from, productive society.

Since the publication of *Bleak House*, criticism has focused on Dickens and law reform; my second chapter, however, focuses not only on Dickens's critique of the destructively impersonal and irresponsible legal and state superstructure, but also on Dickens's simultaneous promotion of real charity (immediate individual outreach as opposed to Mrs. Jellyby's distant tunnel-vision) as a constructive solution to social problems. Esther Summerson, Caddy Jellyby, and Charley Neckett demonstrate the ideal relationship between charity and education: Mr. Jarndyce ensures that Esther receives an education, places her in a community, and enables her to work out her strong sense of purpose. This same pattern repeats when Esther reaches out to Caddy and becomes a mentor and surrogate mother to Caddy as she teaches her housekeeping, and again, when Esther mentors Charley. Esther, Caddy, and Charley demonstrate that education is an opportunity for those who are motivated, but disadvantaged, to establish a social place and a purpose. Education enables them to become useful, contributing members of society.

My third chapter examines the role of education in *Little Dorrit* by focusing on Amy Dorrit as an exemplar of social responsibility. In the first part of this chapter, I again

consider Dickens's depiction of social irresponsibility—examining the comparison Dickens makes in *Little Dorrit* between social responsibility as an ethical code and social responsibility as a responsibility to “Society,” to one's class or position. In contrast to this second sense of social responsibility, which Dickens presents as false, I turn to Dickens's representation of Amy Dorrit as an agent of true social responsibility. Amy Dorrit derives her sense of social belonging and purpose from her family's situation in the Marshalsea debtors prison: because of her love and sense of responsibility for her family, she actively seeks education, both by attending an “evening academy” (95) and by searching for mentors among the skilled inmates of the prison. Just as Esther Summerson desires to be useful, to “be industrious, contented, and kind-hearted, and to do some good to some one” (18), so Amy Dorrit desires to learn and be useful: indeed, “she was inspired to be something which was not what the rest were, and to be that something, different and laborious, for the sake of the rest” (71). Esther and Amy are both agents, making an ethical choice to take responsibility for themselves and to be useful for the good of others. As an ideal woman, Amy serves as the image of Urania Cottage's success, the woman Dickens wanted to create through Urania Cottage.

Turning to secondary characters who serve as foils to Amy, emphasizing her ideal nature, I first consider Tattycoram. Tattycoram functions in contrast to Amy Dorrit as the image of Urania Cottage's failure: the angry and unrestrained woman who fails to recognize her responsibility and her opportunity. Consequently, Tattycoram functions not only to highlight Amy Dorrit's goodness and responsibility, but also to highlight the Meagles's goodness and social responsibility, as people who were willing to adopt Tattycoram and who are willing to forgive her and take her back when she returns

repentant. Next I consider Maggy. Amy reaches out to Maggy, serving as both surrogate mother and mentor to her. Considering the nature and effect of the relationship between Amy and Maggy, I look at Maggy's vulnerability as a disabled woman, and then, in contrast, how Maggy is able to flourish because of "little mother's" tutelage, achieving relative independence and security despite the increased vulnerability caused by her disability. Third, I consider Mrs. General as an unethical educator. Whereas Amy has embraced responsibility for herself and others and therefore has sought useful education, Mrs. General seeks to erode Amy's real social responsibility and to imbue her with the insubstantial values of "Society," which revolve around class position, wealth, and appearances. Whereas in *Bleak House*, Esther Summerson's role as a responsible teacher stands in stark contrast to the government's neglect of its responsibility to provide education for the people, in *Little Dorrit*, Amy Dorrit's social responsibility stands in stark contrast to the various strains of self-centered "Social" responsibility displayed by characters such as Mrs. General. Finally, I consider how Amy serves as an exemplar of social responsibility for Arthur Clennam, inspiring his initial desire to be useful and reinforcing his commitment to a life of honest work after he falls prey to the Mr. Merdle's fraud. Thus Amy serves as a standard of responsible behaviour, inspiring other characters to live usefully.

Naturally, in a thesis focused in large part on Dickens's social views and female characters, it is necessary to take into account the problematic question of Dickens's views on class and gender. My thesis considers education that spans the social classes—Mrs. General teaches the requirements of "Society," Esther teaches Caddy in a middle-class setting, and Amy teaches Maggy from a debtors prison—however, the only

education that Dickens criticizes is the socially ambitious education that promotes apathy and inactivity. In contrast, through Esther Summerson and Amy Dorrit and their middle and lower class educations, Dickens promotes not only the domestic ideal, but also self-reliance and usefulness. Significantly, both *Bleak House* and *Little Dorrit* end with the vision of a middle class life of responsibility and practical action. Thus Dickens privileges the middle class.

Acknowledging, as Michael Slater writes, that it “was always in terms of personal relationships, especially within a family grouping, that woman, for [Dickens] as for most Victorians, realized her full moral and spiritual potential” (*Women* 309), my thesis also seeks to acknowledge moments where Dickens’s espousal of usefulness as the goal of education brings his female exemplars to the borders of Victorian gender stereotypes. For example, in *Bleak House* Esther is praised for being “game”—a less conventionally female attribute—while in *Little Dorrit*, Amy takes on her father’s responsibilities as head of the family. Thus, while Esther Summerson and Amy Dorrit do figure largely in conventionally female roles as “natural nurses as well as natural teachers of children” (Slater, *Women* 331), their work also requires them to have “virtues conventionally ascribed to the male” (302), such as assertiveness and self-reliance. Therefore, while my thesis concludes that Dickens’s solutions to social problems do ultimately function within the Victorian gender paradigm, it also recognizes that Dickens’s emphasis on “mutual responsibility” and usefulness does at times lead him to undermine these gender restrictions, intentionally or otherwise.

CHAPTER 2 HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Dickens's biography and non-fictional writing show how education came to be a central element of his social reform agenda: Dickens's educational experiences shaped the beliefs about education that he brought to his involvement with and writing about charitable ventures for the education of the poor—ventures such as the Ragged School movement and Urania Cottage. For Dickens, education is the middle space where personal responsibility (self-help) and social responsibility (ethical action) meet, and the development of this paradigm clearly stems from Dickens's perception of his own educational experiences: Dickens's experience of being mentored led him to emphasize the importance of parental teaching as well as the importance of teaching as an ethical action; the experience of being denied education created his passionate belief that the government has an ethical responsibility to provide education for all people regardless of social position; and the experience of teaching himself led Dickens to emphasize the individual's need to be motivated to improve his or her condition. This chapter explores these connections between Dickens's formative educational experiences and his activities as a social reformer to create a framework for analysis in the following chapters of how Dickens positions education as a middle space between self-help and charity in *Bleak House* and *Little Dorrit*. For Dickens, education is the vehicle of self-help, the means of improving one's condition, and the means of being useful. Thus providing the opportunity for underprivileged people to access education is an ethical action necessary for the "improvement...of the whole social fabric" ("Mechanics" 82).

2.1 DICKENS'S EDUCATION

Dickens's own education began early in his childhood with lessons from his mother, Elizabeth Dickens, and Dickens himself recognized the first early contribution she made to his education. John Forster writes that Dickens was "frequently heard to say that his first desire for knowledge, and his earliest passion for reading, were awakened by his mother, from whom he learnt the rudiments, not only of English, but also, a little later, of Latin. She taught him regularly every day for a long time, and taught him, he was convinced, thoroughly well" (7).¹ Evidence of the formative influence of his mother's teaching also surfaces in Dickens's fiction in the form of memories. According to Forster, David Copperfield's description of being taught by his mother perfectly mirrors Dickens's description of real memories. In *David Copperfield*, Dickens recalls, "I faintly remember her teaching me the alphabet; and when I look upon the fat black letters in the primer, the puzzling novelty of their shapes, and the easy good nature of O and S, always seem to present themselves before me as they used to do" (Forster 7). Dickens paints a similar picture in *Bleak House*, when Esther humorously describes teaching Charley to write, also focusing on the letter O: "'Well, Charley,' said I, looking over a copy of the letter O in which it was represented as square, triangular, pear-shaped, and collapsed in all kinds of ways, 'we are improving. If we only get to make it round, we shall be perfect, Charley'" (378). John Manning notes that Dickens's early "love for reading, certainly acquired without formal schooling, seems to contradict Forster when he says that Dickens owed little to his parents" (24). Although Dickens later felt bitter towards his mother for

¹ Dickens's memory is corroborated by the words of Mary Weller, the Dickens's servant at the time, who echoes both Dickens's assessment and his phrasing, saying that he "had been thoroughly well taught by his aunt and mother" (qtd. in Manning 24).

desiring that he continue to work rather than continue his education,² a fact often emphasized by critics, clearly he also had positive memories of her teaching and recognized that she was responsible for his earliest learning. Michael Slater comments that Dickens's mother "seemed...to have a natural gift for teaching, according to Dickens himself" (*Charles Dickens* 7-8), so it is not surprising that Dickens attributes this same gift to his ideal examples of socially responsible womanhood in *Bleak House* and *Little Dorrit*: Esther Summerson and Amy Dorrit are both surrogate mother-figures and natural teachers.

Although there is debate about whether Dickens attended a "Dame School" in Chatham after his mother's lessons stopped, critics do agree about a second significant educational experience in Dickens's childhood—the year or two, beginning in 1821, that he spent studying in a school taught by Mr. William Giles (Manning 26-8). While it is difficult to provide a concrete picture of the curriculum Dickens might have studied under Giles,³ critics and biographers alike recognize the personal influence Giles had on Dickens as a teacher. Philip Collins writes, "'An accomplished scholar, and a very conscientious, painstaking man', he earned Dickens's lasting gratitude by praising and encouraging him" (*Education* 11). The positive impression was mutual: while the young Charles looked up to Giles as a role model, Giles took on the role of mentor to Dickens as

² Having developed a love for language and reading under his mother's tutelage, perhaps it is not surprising that several years later Charles would bitterly feel his mother's desire to send him back to Warren's blacking factory rather than to school as a betrayal.

³ Manning pieces together a tentative picture of what Dickens might have been taught at William Giles's school in Chatham from advertisements for the four other schools that Giles ran over the course of his career (28): "The prospectus of the Barton Hall school referred to the earlier school at Chatham as a 'classical, mathematical, and commercial' institution. The curricula at Barton Hall included English, commercial studies, modern languages, science, mathematics, and classical studies" (27).

well. Slater writes, “[Giles] was very struck by the young Dickens’s ‘bright appearance and unusual intelligence’ and gave him ‘every encouragement in his power, even to making a companion of him of an evening’” (*Charles Dickens* 10). While he was studying under Giles’s tutelage, Dickens’s extracurricular education continued as well. About Dickens’s learning outside the schoolroom, Slater writes, “So far Dickens may sound like any normal lively schoolboy but he was exceptional in his passion for reading stories, essays and travel literature (‘a terrible boy to read’, Mary Gibson famously called him) and fortunate in that he had the run of his father’s little library” (*Charles Dickens* 10).⁴ Although it is difficult to pinpoint accurately what Dickens’s studies and academic achievements were during the time he spent in school, it is not difficult to understand how the time Dickens spent under Giles’s tutelage and encouragement gained relative importance in his mind during the difficult period that came next, when, according to Dickens’s descriptions, a good teacher (not to mention a good example) and steady instruction were scarce. Perhaps it is paradoxically revealing about the positive influence of the school and Mr. Giles as a teacher that, as Collins notes, “Giles did not make the impact on [Dickens’s] imagination that his vicious successor Jones did. Indeed, [Dickens’s] imagination was rarely fired by good men and institutions” (*Education* 11). While Collins is right to argue that Giles did not impact Dickens’s imagination the way Jones did—being a “good” man, Giles never became one of Dickens’s caricatures of “bad” men—I contend that the emotional significance of the mentoring relationship

⁴ Slater catalogues the books Dickens read in his childhood. He writes that with “his father’s little library,” Dickens “could steep himself in the writings of Defoe, Fielding, Goldsmith, Smollett, Addison and Steele as well as *The Arabian Nights* and *Tales of the Genii* (an eighteenth-century imitation of *The Arabian Nights* purporting to be of ancient origin), *Don Quixote*, Le Sage’s *Gil Blas* and Elizabeth Inchbald’s collection of farces” (*Charles Dickens* 11).

between Giles and Dickens does carry over into the fiction through the prevalence of mentoring relationships in *Bleak House* and *Little Dorrit*. The picture of himself as a bright and eager child, hungry to learn, being taught by—*cultivated* by—an admirable mentor informs Dickens’s later fictional depictions of the mentoring of young characters who are similarly eager to learn, such as Caddy Jellyby, Charley Neckett, and Amy Dorrit.

One of Dickens’s most formative educational experiences—the sudden withdrawal of educational opportunity—is the secret Dickens kept most closely throughout his life, and it has, ironically, become one of the most well-known and oft-cited episodes in his life, in particular because of its formative influence on the social perspective Dickens expresses in his writing. As a twelve-year-old, Dickens’s education ended, for approximately a year, when he worked as child-labourer at Warren’s blacking factory. This period is particularly critical for understanding Dickens’s perspective on education because, in his descriptions of his experiences and feelings while he worked at the factory, Dickens explicitly relates his mental suffering to the termination of his education and the subsequent death of his aspirations. That at the age of twelve Dickens felt he had a right to education is clear in his framing of the blacking-factory narrative in the autobiographical fragment that he later partially integrated into *David Copperfield*. Dickens introduces the narrative by writing of his father’s failure to recognize his parental responsibility: his father “appeared to have utterly lost at this time the idea of educating me at all, and to have utterly put from him the notion that I had any claim upon him, in that regard, whatever” (Forster 16). Wryly emphasizing his “claim” upon his father, Dickens asserts that he had a right to be educated. Dickens similarly concludes the

blackening-factory narrative with bitterness against his mother, writing of what he interpreted as a betrayal by her: “My father said I should go back [to the factory] no more, and should go to school. . . . I never afterwards forgot, I never shall forget, I never can forget, that my mother was warm for my being sent back” (38). Slater writes, “The result was that the figures of inadequate, or downright culpable, parents and hapless, innocent child-victims were deeply imprinted upon his imagination at this time and later became central to his fictional world” (*Charles Dickens* 22). As we will see in the next two chapters, this sense of his parents’ failure is in the bitter flavour of his depiction of Mrs. Jellyby as a negligent mother, but it also conversely leads Dickens to create responsible surrogate parents who succeed where his own parents failed, not only taking in but also teaching the orphaned and neglected children populating his novels: Mr. Jarndyce intervenes for Esther; Esther in turn mentors Caddy and Charley; Amy is Maggy’s “little mother,” and Mr. and Mrs. Meagles adopt Tattycoram.

In the autobiographical fragment in which Dickens details his experience at the blackening-factory, he places the factory in opposition to schooling, equating the factory with despair and education with personal development and opportunity. Edgar Johnson underscores the factory’s significance, noting that for Dickens working in the factory “represented the end of all his hopes” (33): by apparently ending his education, the factory, in young Charles’s eyes, put paid to his prospects. Dickens wrote,

No words can express the secret agony of my soul as I sunk into this companionship; compared these every day associates with those of my happier childhood; and felt my early hopes of growing up to be a learned and distinguished man, crushed in my breast. . . . the misery it was to my

young heart to believe that, day by day, what I had learned, and thought, and delighted in, and raised my fancy and my emulation up by, was passing away from me, never to be brought back any more; cannot be written. (qtd. in Johnson 26)

In his narrative, and with these descriptions, a long-outraged Dickens pictures himself as a living sacrifice to his parents' exigency—in terms of his education, and therefore his personal development and future. Collins writes, “For the boy Dickens, and one would guess for the adult Dickens too, the bitterness [of working in the blacking factory] arose from a sense rather of present social disgrace and blasted future hopes, than of intellectual deprivation” (*Education* 9). Although one might question Collins's light evaluation of the pain of intellectual deprivation for Dickens—a boy who spent a large portion of his childhood reading—it is evident in Dickens's own words that the factory was a place of despair for him because it was a dead end, representing personal and social stultification. It is necessary to recognize in Dickens's later advocacy of the Ragged School movement, in the heat of his rebukes to the government for failing to provide universal education, and I would argue, in his depiction of Jo in *Bleak House*, the frustration of the twelve year-old Charles who was eager to learn and who saw education as the path upward to a better social position.

After Dickens's father liberated him from the blacking factory, Dickens's formal education resumed with his enrolment at Wellington House Academy. Although one might expect that Dickens would have dived into education, after having suffered so much according to his own descriptions from the lack of it, accounts from Dickens's schoolmates, biographers, and critics vary in their assessment of Dickens's academic

achievements at Wellington House Academy. Perhaps one reason why Dickens did not apply himself as much as one might expect was the school itself: Forster includes the report of Dr. Henry Danson, one of Dickens's schoolmates, who records, "It was considered at the time a very superior sort of school, one of the best indeed in that part of London; but it was most shamefully mismanaged, and the boys made but very little progress" (47). While Dickens's various schoolmates wrote letters to Forster demonstrating their belief that Dickens was an unexceptional student—one says, "I do not remember that Dickens distinguished himself in any way," and another that Dickens "was not particularly studious...nor did he show signs of special ability" (Forster, qtd. in Collins, *Education* 13-4)—Johnson and Manning provide circumstantial evidence to support Dickens's claims that he did win a prize for Latin (33).⁵ In response to the claim that Dickens did not master English at Wellington House Academy, Ackroyd writes, "Even if his knowledge of the English language was acquired, as one colleague remarked, 'by long and patient study after leaving' it still seems that he already possessed more than the rudiments of his tongue" (109). Summing up the critical debate about Dickens's academic achievements at Wellington House Academy, Slater redirects the focus away from Dickens's formal education and points it back to Dickens's early extracurricular education, noting that "the foundations of this 'wonderful knowledge and command' had been laid three or four years earlier during his voracious private reading of literary classics in his Chatham days" (*Charles Dickens* 26).

⁵ Although Collins records the general perception that Dickens was unremarkable, he too ultimately seems to agree that Dickens did win a prize for Latin, even if Collins's mention of it comes with less than glowing commendations. He writes, "He was 'put into Virgil', but even the Latin-prize he won did not stimulate him to a permanent affection for the language or its literature" (*Education* 13).

Dickens's formal education at Wellington House Academy in London and at Giles's school in Chatham are similar in that critics debate what Dickens learned and achieved in school, but agree about his reading and activities outside school. Of his extracurricular reading at Wellington House Academy, Slater writes, "As to what mainly fed his imagination during these two years we must look for this not to the school curriculum but to the various cheap weekly magazines to which he and his schoolfellows were addicted" (*Charles Dickens* 26), and Ackroyd comments, "his own reading was of a varied if not always educational sort" (109). While on the one hand these "cheap weekly magazines" support Johnson's interpretation of Dickens's time at Wellington House Academy as "a buoyant period of recovering from the anguish of the blacking warehouse" wherein Dickens learned "to be something like a cheerful everyday boy again" (50), they may also indicate the truth of Collins's assertion that "he displayed no conspicuous or specific intellectual ambitions" because "he wanted the ordinary schooling of his social class, which would fit him for such occupations as, in the event, he did enter, clerking and shorthand reporting" (*Education* 9). Ackroyd similarly notes a certain career-mindedness in Dickens at the close of his formal education. He writes, "His two years of schooling were over but, curiously enough, there is no sign or sense that he resented this abrupt removal from a standard middle-class education. Perhaps he really did wish to 'begin the world'" (115). Indeed, writing about education as a successful author and social figure, Dickens's views about education were more pragmatic than intellectual; for Dickens, education involved developing basic abilities and a personal sense of capability so as to find a useful occupation and place in society, rather than the less pragmatic pursuit of intellectual development alone. Consequently, in

Dickens's writings about the Ragged School movement and in his design for Urania Cottage, as well as in his fiction, education enables useful occupation as much as, or more than, it serves as an end in itself.⁶ Thus, having now had as much education as necessary to enable him to "make his own way in the world," Dickens was ready to begin a career.

Dickens's second foray into the working world began in May 1827 in the law offices of Ellis and Blackmore where he worked as a "writing clerk", which was really only the glorified equivalent of an office boy with very few prospects of promotion" (Ackroyd 115). Ackroyd notes that in 1828, after eighteen months of working as a writing clerk for Ellis and Blackmore, Dickens moved to another firm, working for a man named Charles Molloy, but his time working for Molloy did not last long either. Of Dickens's eagerness to move on, Ackroyd writes, "Dickens was and remained a most ambitious person—how could he, who had already suffered so much and proved to himself that he could rise above such suffering, how could he endure the life of a 'writing clerk'?" Consequently, the next step in what Johnson calls "Ambition's Ladder" was for Dickens to learn shorthand with the aim of becoming "a reporter in the press gallery of the House of Commons." Ackroyd observes, "This may not appear to be a particularly exalted position but, in that period, it was a well-established commencement for many great careers and, in addition, it was the best-paid work then available for a stenographer" (124). While Collins downplays the extent and significance of Dickens's self-education, saying, "Acquiring technical expertise in shorthand was the only specific course of self-

⁶ Ackroyd continues, "Certainly he seems never to have regretted not attending a university and, if further proof were needed, perhaps it lies in the fact that he showed no great inclination for his own children to do so—he seems to have preferred that they left school young and went into 'business' or some allied worldly pursuit" (115).

instruction Dickens undertook in his youth” (*Education* 15), Ackroyd acknowledges the difficulty of learning shorthand. He writes, “Perseverance was certainly necessary since the acquisition of shorthand skills is a painful and frustrating business at the best of times, what with its dots and lines and circles and squiggles and ‘marks like flies’ legs’ (124).⁷ Forster also describes Dickens’s motivation and the process of learning shorthand in slightly more glowing terms than Collins:

He set resolutely therefore to the study of short-hand; and, for the additional help of such general information about books as a fairly educated youth might be expected to have, as well as to satisfy some higher personal cravings, he became an assiduous attendant in the British-museum reading-room. He would frequently refer to these days as decidedly the usefulest to himself he had ever passed; and judging from the results they must have been so. (53)

Taken together, the accounts of Dickens’s childhood and education demonstrate the breadth and variety of his education, and the example of shorthand is only one point proving Dickens’s father’s claim that “he may be said to have educated himself!” (Collins, *Education* 8) to be at least partly true: Dickens’s mind was as much formed by his informal learning experiences as his formal education.

Dickens’s education ranged from being taught at home to attending a reputable private school, and Manning asserts that together the major experiences in Dickens’s childhood outside school gave him an alternative practical education alongside his formal

⁷ Ackroyd notes that “his writing of fiction seems to come from the same potent combination of determination and hard work, enormous ability and almost phenomenal energy, as if his very novels were a task which had to be conquered in the same way as he had once conquered shorthand” (125).

education that influenced him greatly as a novelist: “He had learned, as we have seen, self-reliance, determination, the necessity of hard work, the acceptance of responsibility, the value of security, and the isolating effects of sharp social contrasts. He had taught himself order, method, and punctuality. He had developed...a flowing well of sympathy for children and the poor” (44). The first four items Manning mentions—“self-reliance, determination, the necessity of hard work, the acceptance of responsibility”—these are the motivational values that Dickens promotes in his novels and embodies in his ideal fictional characters; as we will see in the next two chapters, these values characterize his major heroines, Esther Summerson and Amy Dorrit, as well as his minor heroines, Caddy Jellyby and Charley Neckett.

Dickens’s “well of sympathy for children and the poor” was truly fellow-feeling, as throughout his life Dickens remembered and struggled with and processed in writing the difficult experiences of his childhood—pawning the family furniture, visiting his family in the Marshalsea, working at Warren’s blacking factory. As Steven Marcus writes, “[working at the blacking factory] was without doubt the most important event in Dickens's life. In it the most intense emotions of poverty, loss, betrayal, loneliness, desolation, and estrangement are to be found. And these are combined with ungovernable feelings about social displacement, family ruin, shame and loss of respectability and self-respect” (94). As the autobiographical fragment suggests, Dickens saw the factory and education in opposition, and the effects of the factory and education are similarly opposite: while the factory caused Dickens to have “ungovernable feelings about social displacement, family ruin, shame and loss of respectability and self-respect,” Dickens later describes the general effect of education in these terms:

[T]he power of knowledge, if I understand it, is to bear and forbear; to learn the path of duty and to tread it; to engender that self-respect which does not stop at self, but cherishes the best respect for the best objects; to turn an always enlarging acquaintance with the joys and sorrows, capabilities and imperfections of our race to daily account in mildness of life and gentleness of construction, and humble efforts for the improvement, stone by stone, of the whole social fabric. (“Mechanics” 82)

Years after his blacking-factory experience, when Dickens spoke about the importance of education, he explicitly connected education, self-respect, and social welfare. For Dickens, education is goal-oriented, and it is tied up in self-respect and the need to be useful—elements that motivate both self-help and charity.

Given that Dickens’s own education ranged beyond the academy and thus was in many ways more practical and less formal and intellectually-driven than it seems Collins approves of, it stands to reason that there might be much to gain from an exploration of alternative education in Dickens’s novels. But in order to understand how alternative education functions in the novels, it is first necessary to examine how Dickens worked out his beliefs about education as a middle space between self-help and charity in the real world, through his interaction with and involvement in two educational ventures for the poor and underprivileged, the Ragged School movement and Urania Cottage, a home for homeless women.

2.2 THE RAGGED SCHOOLS

Perhaps partly as a result of his adolescent experience of living and working among the poor and feeling trapped by his family's impecuniousness, Dickens's "well of sympathy" for the poor was never stagnant, actively working itself out not only through literary advocacy in his fiction, speeches, and articles, but also through his involvement in charitable enterprises. "I have great faith in the Poor," he wrote. "[T]o the best of my ability I always endeavor to present them in a favorable light to the rich; and I shall never cease, I hope, until I die, to advocate their being made as happy and as wise as the circumstances of their condition in its utmost improvement, will admit of their becoming" (*Letters* 4: 95).⁸ One of Dickens's primary concerns in regard to the condition of the poor was the relationship between poverty, ignorance, and crime. Norris Pope notes that Dickens was "well-versed in the progressive notion that environmental factors, such as poverty, unemployment, lack of education, and bad housing were often primarily responsible for crime" (*Charity* 159), and thus Dickens believed that "if you would reward honesty, if you would give encouragement to good, if you would stimulate the idle, eradicate evil, or correct what is bad, education—comprehensive liberal education—is the one thing needful, and the one effective end" ("Conversazione" 63).⁹ In a speech Dickens gave in October 1843—given less than a month after his first visit to the Field Lane Ragged School—Dickens discussed "the comparative danger of 'a little learning' and a vast amount of ignorance," asking his listeners rhetorically which they thought was

⁸ Julia Fesmire also quotes this letter (written to J.V. Staples, 3 April 1844), noting in reference to it that Dickens "always wrote sympathetically about the poor" and that the "pity and pain of their condition was always apparent to him" (79).

⁹ With regard to correcting "society's fail[ure] to prevent crime," Collins argues that Dickens "exaggerated the efficacy of education" (*Ed.* 72).

“the most prolific parent of misery and crime?” (“Athenaeum” 47). The sheer volume of criticism on Dickens and education—including key works such as *Dickens on Education* by John Manning and *Dickens and Education* by Philip Collins—leave little doubt as to Dickens’s answer to his own question and demonstrate the fundamental place education had in his social outlook.

In September 1843, Dickens became acquainted with the Ragged School movement, a burgeoning movement that addressed the interrelated issues of poverty, ignorance, and crime by setting up free, volunteer-operated schools in the slums to teach children who were too poor and too “ragged” to obtain formal education elsewhere (Pope, *Charity* 152-4). Dickens’s first visit to the Field Lane Ragged School in September 1843 was motivated not only by his own interest, but also by the curiosity of the wealthy heiress and philanthropist Angela Burdett Coutts—with whom Dickens enjoyed a long working relationship as what Ackroyd calls “the serious custodian of her philanthropic interests” (532). The visit was inspiring, prompting a flurry of activity in support of the movement from Dickens. After his visit to the school, Dickens wrote a letter to Burdett Coutts, describing the poverty, ignorance, and dirtiness of the children attending the school, the character and “moral courage” of the volunteer teachers, and the management and teaching techniques used by the teachers to maintain order and to reach their students. In this letter he also suggests practical means by which Burdett Coutts could assist the movement, specifically by providing areas for washing to improve sanitation (Collins, “Ragged” 98). Dickens also “undertook to approach the Government with enquiries” about the possibility of a grant to benefit the Ragged Schools; however, despite Dickens’s efforts, “the Government was unmoved,” and nothing came of his

enquiries (99). Another result of Dickens's visit to the Field Lane school was that he wrote to the editor of the *Edinburgh Review* with the offer of "an article on the education of the poor" (99) in which Dickens wished "to come out strongly against any system of education based exclusively on the principles of the Established Church" (Johnson 463).¹⁰ While Dickens never wrote the article—which seems to be attributable to a combination of Dickens's own busyness as well as editorial nervousness about its potentially controversial argument—Collins notes that Dickens still showed interest in writing the article as late as February 1844, when he re-visited the school ("Ragged" 99-100). But, as Johnson indicates, by February 1844, Dickens's first visit to the Field Lane Ragged School had already contributed to the production of another work of fiction: *A Christmas Carol*. Johnson writes, "The task that prevented Dickens's writing the Ragged School article for the *Edinburgh Review* was a tale that came to be called *A Christmas Carol*" (464), and Collins notes, "The *Carol* contained a vision of the two children, Ignorance and Want—'wretched, abject, frightful, hideous'—perhaps a memory of the pupils at the Ragged School he had seen for the first time a month or so before" (*Education* 73).

¹⁰ Pope notes that Dickens's own denominational allegiance shifted over the course of his life, "from the Establishment to Unitarianism, and then back to the Establishment" ("Religion" 131), and he defines Dickens's Christianity as "vague, undoctrinal, and liberal" (131). Gary Colledge describes the shift in Dickens's denominational affiliation, explaining that "he was exasperated by the petty bickering and quarreling over ecclesiastical minutiae within the Anglican Church. For example, Dickens took exception to the use of 'the church catechism and other mere formularies and subtleties, in reference to the education of the young and ignorant'" (87)—a point which ties Dickens's shift in religious affiliation to his educational views. Thus Colledge concludes that "it would seem that his 'joining' the Unitarians was a pragmatic decision, not a doctrinal or ideological one. It must be allowed that Dickens meant no more by his 'joining the Unitarians' than that he was joining them in their concerns and positive social action. The very anti-sectarian bias that Dickens wore on his sleeve would have kept the doctrines of Unitarianism, or any organized religion for that matter, at arm's length" (87).

After Dickens's second visit to the Field Lane Ragged School in February 1844, nearly two years passed before he made his next and "most important contribution to the early phase of Ragged School work" (Pope, *Charity* 161): in early February 1846, Dickens publicly advocated for the Ragged Schools by writing an article in the *Daily News*. Although, as Collins notes, Dickens is "not silent about his reservations" about Ragged Schools in "Crime and Education" (*Education* 100)—in particular, he notes that the teaching is not "sufficiently secular...presenting too many religious mysteries and difficulties, to minds not sufficiently prepared for their reception" ("Crime")—he clearly uses the weight of his literary reputation to bring attention and support to the schools. Addressing the readers, he writes, "I might easily have given [these remarks] in another form; but I address this letter to you, in the hope that some few readers in whom I have awakened an interest, as a writer of fiction, may be, by that means, attracted to the subject, who might otherwise, unintentionally, pass it over." He urges

those excellent persons who aid, munificently, in the building of New Churches, to think of these Ragged Schools; to reflect whether some portion of their rich endowments might not be spared for such purpose; to contemplate, calmly, the necessity of beginning at the beginning; to consider for themselves where the Christian Religion most needs and most suggests immediate help and illustration; and not to decide on any theory or hearsay, but to go themselves into the Prisons and Ragged Schools.

("Crime")

The article was a public relations success, a "propaganda triumph" (Pope, *Charity* 161). Collins notes that "Dickens was certainly the most important literary supporter of Ragged

Schools, in their earlier years. He was active on their behalf...at a time when (as a Ragged School spokesman put it twenty years later) they were generally ‘sneered at by worldlings, or, at best, were merely regarded as another illustration of the eccentric ideas of Evangelicals’” (“Ragged” 94). While Dickens makes note of his reservations about the religious underpinnings of the Ragged Schools in the article, he also clearly emphasizes his desire to assist the movement, saying, “I should very imperfectly discharge in myself the duty I wish to urge and impress on others, if I allowed any...doubt of mine to interfere with my...true wish to promote them by any slight means in my power” (“Crime”). After all, the Ragged Schools were a step in the right direction toward universal education, a “beginning at the beginning.”

The seeds of Dickens’s increasing frustration with the Ragged School movement over the course of the next decade are visible in “Crime and Education.” Collins recognizes the attraction and goodwill Dickens felt toward the Ragged School movement as well as his reservations about it: he writes that Dickens “was sensible and good-hearted...when he helped even the Ragged Schools, though he realised they were very unsatisfactory stopgaps. Better them than nothing: but, he insisted, they were ‘at best, a slight and ineffectual palliative of an enormous evil’” (*Education* 71). Although Dickens “was a valuable ally to its social and moral endeavors” (Collins, “Ragged” 109), he saw the Ragged School movement as a beginning rather than as a permanent solution to the pressing need for comprehensive liberal education for the poor; consequently he “increasingly stressed the need for more potent solutions to slum problems and juvenile crime” (Pope, *Charity* 152), an emphasis which is very clear in *Bleak House*, where he criticizes the government’s failure to improve slum conditions in Tom-all-Alone’s and

where his frustration with the government's unwillingness to take up the cause of universal education erupts in the narrator's commentary on the life of Jo.

The Ragged School movement's inability to cope with the size of the ragged urban population in need of education, however, was not the only issue that Dickens had with the movement; he was also concerned about the nature of the education being offered in the schools. As a primarily religious movement, "'the great aim of Ragged Schools...'" wrote the Editor of their *Magazine*, "is to impart religious instruction. Other objects they undoubtedly have; but these are all subordinated to the chief end of bringing neglected and ignorant children within reach of the doctrine of Christ" (Collins, "Ragged" 95). This would not do for Dickens. Although he was not opposed to the teaching of "broad Christian truths" (98)—a turn of phrase that seems to indicate sympathy with the Broad Church movement¹¹—Dickens strongly disapproved of "injudicious catechising" and attempts to teach "religious mysteries," not least because of the denominational controversies liable to occur over which doctrines should be taught—again, a critical element he weaves into *Bleak House* through Jo's puzzlement about preachers disagreeing over doctrine and his acceptance of the simple comfort offered by Allan Woodcourt. "Dickens gave less priority to religion, particularly in so doctrinal a

¹¹ Gary Colledge notes Dickens's sympathy with the Broad Church movement, commenting "Perhaps Dickens's most conspicuous point of contact with the Broad Church is his admiration for Thomas Arnold and the fundamental Christianity that they shared. Charles R. Sanders says of Arnold... 'He followed Coleridge... in making the supreme test of truth a moral one. He accepted or rejected various beliefs in accordance with how they were related to the will and to conduct—to how they worked out in action' (100). The same could be said of Dickens. For him, like Arnold, Christian truth was not measured in terms of theology and doctrine, but in terms of moral responsibility and practice" (141).

form,” Collins writes, continuing, “Better teachers and better premises seemed much more important than such doctrinal niceties” (*Education* 88).

In addition to the mistake of puzzling, if not completely driving away, their students with complex doctrine, Dickens believed that Ragged Schools were also committing another sin in regard to religious education. In the midst of an emphatic speech on the type of education he believes is productive and necessary, Dickens includes, as a point of contrast, a sharply-worded aside on the transformation of religious texts into textbooks:

Schools of Industry, schools where the simple knowledge learned from books is made pointedly *useful*, and immediately applicable to the duties and business of life, directly conducive to order, cleanliness, punctuality, and economy—schools where the sublime lessons of the New Testament are made the super-structure to be reared, enduringly, on such foundations; not frittered away piecemeal into harassing intelligibilities, and associated with weariness, languor, and distaste, by the use of the Gospel as a dog’s-eared spelling-book, than which nothing in what is called instruction is more common, and nothing more to be condemned—schools on such principles, deep as the lowest depth of Society, and leaving none of its dregs untouched, are the only means of removing the scandal and the danger that beset us in this nineteenth century of our Lord. (qtd. in Crotch 72)

If students were not already confused when they were taught doctrine and catechism in the classroom, using Scriptures and religious literature to teach other subjects such as

spelling, Dickens believed, was impractical and would devalue the religious message as well.

To have such strong opinions about the teaching material and methods used in Ragged Schools, Dickens clearly had to have his own ideas about what constituted a proper secular liberal education. In fact, Dickens felt strongly enough about the Ragged School movement and his own educational principles to approach another prominent advocate for education, James Kay-Shuttleworth, with the idea of opening his own Ragged School. “‘What I want to do, before moving legislatively in the matter,’ he wrote to Kay-Shuttleworth three years later,” records David Paroissien, “‘is, to try an experimental Normal Ragged School, on a system.’ By ‘system’ Dickens meant a curriculum designed to amuse and instruct by encouraging ‘much greater hopefulness’ among the young charges. ‘Then the boys would not be wearied to death, and driven away, by long Pulpit discourses’” (265-6). Dickens, however, never followed through on this idea. Collins writes about Dickens’s pragmatic views about industrial education and the teaching of trades. He notes that articles in the journals edited by Dickens often emphasized “the importance of giving pauper children sound ‘industrial’ training: the boys should learn farming or a trade, and the girls, growing up without the domestic training they would get in a family, should learn cooking and other skills” (*Education* 81)—as we will see later in this chapter, domestic training for girls was an ideal which Dickens actually did put into practice in the teaching offered at Urania Cottage. Collins states that “Dickens always wanted education to be practical and ‘useful’, especially when the children’s parentage was such that they were likely to become paupers or criminals unless they could start life knowing an honest trade” (*Education* 81). These

emphases—on *useful* education in trades for boys or domestic training for girls—are emphases that carry over into Dickens’s fiction, influencing his depictions of the education obtained by characters like Charley Neckett, Amy Dorrit, and Maggy.

Paroissien qualifies Collins’s understanding of Dickens’s pragmatic approach to education by pointing out the room Dickens left for “fancy” in education (278). Alongside his aversion to the teaching of doctrines and catechism in school, Dickens objected to what Paroissien calls “the mechanical practice of catechizing pupils” (269), believing that fact-based learning was less useful than skill-based learning. Paroissien argues that Dickens disapproved of “fact-based teaching” (274), which emphasized rote learning and memorization, because it was both product and symptom of a deeper problem in the Victorian educational ethos. He writes, “Steadfast opposition to the ‘iron binding of the mind to grim realities’ and to the destructiveness he associated with the ‘mere utilitarian spirit’ deeply embedded in Victorian thought constitutes one of Dickens’ most deeply held principles” (278). Instead, Paroissien writes, Dickens believed that fiction such as his own could offer “entertainment no less ‘useful’ than ‘lessons’ based on everyday reality” (279), teaching morality and sympathy, “the sentiments and affections” (279)—all the virtues and benefits that Dickens believed he had taken from his voracious reading as a child¹² and that he sought to promote through his own novels. Taken together, Collins and Paroissien show Dickens’s views on education to be consistent with

¹² Dickens wrote, “From that blessed little room, *Roderick Random*, *Peregrine Pickle*, *Humphrey Clinker*, *Tom Jones*, *The Vicar of Wakefield*, *Don Quixote*, *Gil Blas*, and *Robinson Crusoe* came out, a glorious host, to keep me company. They kept alive my fancy, and my hope of something beyond that place and time—they, and *The Arabian Nights*, and the *Tales of the Genii*—and did me no harm” (qtd. in Ackroyd 44).

his views about people in general, being at once a combination of determined practicality and sympathy.

The second and last major article Dickens wrote about the Ragged Schools, “A Sleep to Startle Us,” was published in his own journal, *Household Words*, in March 1852. As in “Crime and Education,” Dickens describes a visit to the Field Lane Ragged School, documenting the problems alongside the progress. In the article, Dickens is particularly enthusiastic about the Industrial School, where students were learning practical skills “with great industry and satisfaction.” He notes, “All were employed in mending, either their own dilapidated clothes or shoes, or the dilapidated clothes or shoes of some of the other pupils,” and he describes their focus and progress, saying that “all were deeply interested and profoundly anxious to do it somehow or other. They presented a very remarkable instance of the general desire there is, after all, even in the vagabond breast, to know something useful” (578). Dickens also writes positively in regard to the new Dormitory, not only because it offers shelter and “excellent baths, available also as washing troughs” to promote cleanliness, but also because it serves as an incentive for the students to attend the schools regularly and work diligently:

No man or boy is admitted to the Dormitory, unless he is a regular attendant at the school, and unless he has been in the school two hours before the opening of the Dormitory. If there be reason to suppose that he can get any work to do and will not do it, he is admitted no more, and his place is assigned to some other candidate for the nightly refuge: of whom there are always plenty. There is very little to tempt the idle and profligate. (578)

Rather than requesting assistance from his readers as he did in “Crime and Education,” Dickens ends “A Sleep to Startle Us” with an address to “Lords and Gentlemen” about the need for government support of Ragged Schools (580), an address reminiscent of the address to “my lords and gentlemen” following the death of Jo in *Bleak House*. “A Sleep to Startle Us” is the last article written entirely by Dickens in support of the Ragged Schools, and Pope notes that “by the mid-1850s Dickens’s interest in the ragged schools had diminished” (*Charity* 164).

Despite his frustration with the Ragged School movement’s primary aim being the spread of religion, Dickens’s writings in support of education for the poor in general, and the Ragged School movement in particular, do appeal to basic Christian principles, but he does so to inspire social responsibility in his readers. Dickens’s rhetoric is ecumenically Christian, and he frequently describes the poor in terms that emphasize both their humanity (or “creatureliness”) and the immortality of their souls as “images of God” (*Letters* 5: 183). In the *Daily News* article where he first describes Ragged Schools, Dickens wishes to further the recognition of “the most miserable and neglected outcasts” as “immortal human creatures” (Pope, *Charity* 153); writing to Angela Burdett-Coutts, he calls the Ragged School movement a “great effort, beginning at the right end, among thousands of immortal creatures, who cannot, in their present state, be held accountable for what they do” (159); and in a later article he speaks of the moral destruction of “a few odd thousands of immortal souls” before change will come (196). Dickens grounded his humanitarianism in Christianity, but he emphasized practical humanitarian concerns over doctrinal concerns because he believed that sympathy for others—and the poor in

particular—is the heart and soul of the Christian religion.¹³ As we will see in the next chapter, Dickens prioritized and promoted useful action over correct doctrine and adherence to social or religious forms; describing his beliefs about “[t]rue religion,” Dickens argues that “the Form of religion does not so greatly matter, if we try to do good” (*Letters* 4: 196). True Christianity, for Dickens, is not a matter of rhetoric (a point Dickens makes abundantly clear through his satirical depiction of the religious windbag Mr. Chadband in *Bleak House*), nor is it exemplified by sectarian debates (another error that Dickens chastises in *Bleak House*). True Christianity, Dickens believes, is ethical action.

The manner in which Dickens describes the beginning of Jesus’s ministry in *The Life of Our Lord*, the condensed version and interpretation of the New Testament he wrote for his own children, is particularly illuminating about the relationship Dickens saw between social responsibility and true Christianity. Dickens describes Jesus calling the twelve disciples, saying,

[H]e chose them from among Poor Men, in order that the Poor might know...that Heaven was made for them as well as for the rich, and that God makes no difference between those who wear good clothes and those who go barefoot and in rags. The most miserable, the most ugly, deformed, wretched creatures that live, will be bright Angels in Heaven if they are good here on earth. Never forget this, when you are grown up.

¹³ The hypocrisy of adhering to religious principles and failing to recognize that true religion involves concern for the welfare and relief of one’s neighbour is one of Dickens’s favourite satirical targets. Thus, for example, in *Bleak House* he indicts both Mrs. Jellyby for her inability to see the poverty in her immediate vicinity and Mr. Chadband for the abundance of his religious pomposity and his corresponding dearth of real, active charity.

Never be proud or unkind, my dears, to any poor man, woman, or child. If they are bad, think that they would have been better, if they had had kind friends, and good homes, and had been better taught. So, always try to make them better by kind persuading words; and always try to teach them and relieve them if you can. And when people speak ill of the Poor and Miserable, think how Jesus Christ went among them and taught them, and thought them worthy of his care. (27)

This passage highlights what Johnson calls Dickens's sense of "the human value of human beings" (486). This sense is at the heart of morality for Dickens, and it forms the basis of Dickens's view of ethics, as he recognizes the value of both the individual and society: "Concern for one's self and one's own welfare is necessary and right, but true self-love cannot be severed from love of others without growing barren and diseased. Only in the communion of brotherhood is it healthy and fruitful" (Johnson 487). In "The Life of Our Lord," Dickens emphasizes the importance of personal action, teaching his children to accept their individual responsibility to "teach and relieve" the poor. Stanley Cooperman writes, "It is precisely the failure of individual responsibility which calls up Dickens' most devastating satire – an attack limited, furthermore, only to those whose political, intellectual or economic power makes productive responsibility a possible and therefore morally binding choice" (159). He explains, "This power may not be earned and may not be great; the test is neither in its source nor in its quantity but rather in its use—its productivity for individuals and society" (159). As the next chapters will demonstrate, Dickens eviscerates this real failure of responsibility by the socially

powerful through the Boodles and Buffies in *Bleak House* and the Barnacles and Stiltstalkings in *Little Dorrit*.

Dickens's description of the calling of the disciples not only describes the responsibilities of those with position and power, but it also demonstrates Dickens's belief in the negative influence of external surroundings on the moral condition of the disempowered, rather than any inherent tendency toward crime. Walter Crotch writes, "Dickens's view of the poor was simple. He refused absolutely to think of them as a class apart, conspicuous either for wickedness or inertia. He held that the fault of their condition lay not in them, but in bad laws, defective social arrangements, inefficient administration and general neglect. In short they were creatures of their environment" (122). Because of his belief in the influence of environment on one's morality, Dickens emphasizes education for the poor as intervention, outside influence that counteracts or mediates environmental influences. Dickens's depiction of Jo in *Bleak House* springs from this belief: as Harold Skimpole argues, if the systems of social power do not recognize their responsibility for the desperately poor and provide for them, then the desperately poor will turn to crime to survive.

In Dickens's writings about the Ragged Schools, he combines his concerns about charity, social reform, and education by being both pragmatic and sympathetic, seeing the practical means by which the physical and mental environments of the poor could be changed, and at the same time recognizing them as people whose education should suit their needs. The goal of Ragged Schooling, for Dickens, was ultimately to foster a sense of individual and social responsibility where it was lacking, to give the individual the skills that would enable him or her to be useful and productive, and to promote a sense of

self-respect, and these are ideas that Dickens also carried into his involvement with the “Home for Homeless Women” at Urania Cottage.

2.3 URANIA COTTAGE

In the mid-1840s, Dickens became much more closely involved in another charitable and educational venture with Angela Burdett Coutts, helping to organize, establish, and run a “Home for Homeless Women” at Urania Cottage. Slater notes that “in the summer of 1847 [Dickens]... began to devote a truly prodigious amount of his time and energy first to the establishment and then to the week-by-week running of Burdett Coutts’s home” (*Charles Dickens* 268). While the home was originally meant to be a refuge and reformatory for prostitutes, in the article “A Home for Homeless Women” written by Dickens in April 1853, he indicates that the women taken in by the Home included “starving needlewomen,” “violent girls” from prison, “poor girls from Ragged Schools,” “young women from the streets,” and “domestic servants who have been seduced” (170). Emphasizing the link he saw between morality and environment, Dickens wrote to Burdett Coutts, “It is dreadful to think how some of these doomed women have no chance or choice. It is impossible to disguise from one’s self the horrible truth that it would have been a social marvel and miracle if some of them had been anything else than what they are” (*Letters* 5: 185). Of Dickens’s familiarity with the same negative environments from which he sought to save the young women at Urania Cottage, Ackroyd writes, “One cannot help but think that the youthful wanderings of Dickens through the streets of London—and indeed his youthful experience of the Marshalsea, where promiscuity must have been rife—provide at least some of the reasons

why he should characteristically link the sexual appetite with poverty and with degradation” (90). Between them, Dickens and Burdett Coutts designed Urania Cottage with the intention of providing women with a refuge from negative environmental influences so that they would have the means and opportunity to avoid “falling” in the first place, or, if they were already fallen, to gain a new character through “repentance and reform” (*Letters* 4: 553). In “A Home for Homeless Women,” Dickens described the goal of the house this way: “The object of the Home was twofold. First, to replace young women who had already lost their characters and lapsed into guilt, in a situation of hope. Secondly, to save other young women who were in danger of falling into the like condition, and give them an opportunity of flying from crime when they and it stood face to face” (169).

Dickens asserted that a potential candidate should be “tempted to virtue” by the presentation of the advantages Urania Cottage could offer her. He wrote to Burdett Coutts, “They cannot be dragged, driven, or frightened. You originate this great work for the salvation of these women who come into that Home; and I hold it to be the sacred duty of every one who assists you in it, *first to consider how best to get them there, and how best to keep them there*” (*Letters* 5: 183). One of the means which Dickens used to attract young women to Urania Cottage was “An Appeal to Fallen Women,” a letter he wrote to be given to young women who might be suitable for placement in the home. Quoting “An Appeal,” Rachel Marks notes that it was “designed to appeal to the ‘virtuous inclinations’ lingering within the women to whom it was given and to hold out to them the possibility of becoming ‘faithful wives of honest men’ in distant countries”

(413). “An Appeal” offered women a chance for self-improvement and a fresh start, presenting Dickens’s vision of the feminine ideal as an achievable goal:

If you have ever wished (I know you must have done so some time) for a chance of rising out of your sad life, and having friends, a quiet home, means of being useful to yourself and others, peace of mind, self-respect, everything you have lost, pray read [this appeal] attentively and reflect upon it afterwards.

I am going to offer you, not the chance but the *certainty* of all these blessings, if you will exert yourself to deserve them.

In this statement, Dickens combines his belief in teaching practical skills, his belief in usefulness as the goal of education, and his beliefs about women’s nature and the domestic sphere as the place where women could be most useful. Thus through Urania Cottage, Dickens sought to enable women to achieve his vision of the feminine ideal, which Slater describes this way: “It was always in terms of personal relationships, especially within a family grouping, that woman, for him as for most Victorians, realized her full moral and spiritual potential” (*Women* 309). Thus Dickens holds out the opportunity of “having friends, a quiet home, [and] means of being useful to yourself and others” (“An Appeal”). Dickens describes how the women could be transformed into ideal housewives, explaining that those who come “will be taught all household work that would be useful to them in a home of their own and enable them to make it comfortable and happy”—the same goals espoused by Caddy Jellyby as she teaches herself and is mentored by Esther Summerson in *Bleak House*. Unlike Caddy Jellyby, however, the women at Urania Cottage were in need of social redemption, and Urania Cottage

provided an opportunity to “learn many things it is profitable and good to know, and being entirely removed from all who have any knowledge of their past career [to] begin life afresh and be able to win a good name and character” (*Letters* 5: 698-9). Through Urania Cottage, Dickens presented a fresh chance for “fallen women” to live up to the womanly ideal.

While in “An Appeal” Dickens encourages young women with “constant resolutions” to consider coming to Urania Cottage, he strongly discourages those less dedicated to changing their lives from filling a spot “unworthily and uselessly” (699): the “Home for Homeless Women” is an opportunity for the *motivated*. One of Dickens’s letters describes an incident where a girl was given a second chance to stay at the home, but only after a letter written by Dickens was read aloud to all the girls. The letter said that the trustees “pitied such deluded creatures, and knew the remorse that always came upon them as soon as they were outside the gate; but the greatest object of our pity was the miserable girl in the streets who really would try hard to do well if she could get into the Home, and whose place was unjustly occupied by such a girl as this” (qtd. in Marks 417-8). The contrast between the ideal, motivated candidate and the ungrateful and unmotivated candidate is mirrored to some extent in *Little Dorrit* through the difference between Amy Dorrit, who is responsible, actively seeks education, and is eager to learn, and Tattycoram, who is preoccupied with her social position and the treatment she receives rather than recognizing the opportunity the Meagles have given her.

Just as he highlighted the relationship between education, responsibility, and self-respect in his public speeches to various organizations and his writing about Ragged Schools, so Dickens emphasizes that the education offered at Urania Cottage will foster

self-respect in its inhabitants and that self-respect would inevitably transform their understanding of their place and role in society:

It is expressly pointed out to [the new recruit], that before she can be considered qualified to return to any kind of society...she must give proofs of her power of self-restraint and her sincerity, and her determination to shew that she deserves the confidence it is proposed to place in her. Her pride, her emulation, her sense of shame, her heart, her reason, and her interest, are all appealed to at once, and if she pass through this trial, she *must* (I believe it to be in the eternal nature of things) rise somewhat in her own self-respect. (*Letters* 4: 553-4)

This concern to stimulate a sense of responsibility and honest pride formed part of the system on which the house was run, so that “[i]n every room, every Monday morning, there is hung up, framed and glazed, the names of the girls who are in charge there for the week and who are, consequently, responsible for its neat condition and the proper execution of the work belonging to it,” with the result that the inmates felt “greater pride in good housewifery, and a greater sense of shame in the reverse” (Dickens, “Home” 170). Having written that the “power of knowledge...is... to engender that self-respect which does not stop at self, but cherishes the best respect for the best objects” (“Mechanics” 82), and that there is a “general desire... after all, even in the vagabond breast, to know something useful” (“Sleep” 578), Dickens emphasized that the women taken into the home needed to be inspired to believe that they could be productive members of society.

The education that Dickens and Burdett Coutts devised for the women at Urania Cottage involved educational staples such as reading, writing, and arithmetic, but it also taught what Dickens considered the practical abilities necessary for housekeeping and everyday life. In an article about crime in London, Dickens describes the social problem that Urania Cottage sought to address: “Of this vast number of women who have no trade or occupation—seventeen thousand out of twenty thousand—it is pretty certain that an immense majority have never been instructed in the commonest household duties, or the plainest use of needle and thread.” He continues, “Every day’s experience in our great prisons shows the prevailing ignorance in these respects among the women who are constantly passing and re-passing through them, to be scarcely less than their real ignorance of the arts of reading and writing and the moral ends to which they conduce” (qtd. in Crotch 71). In designing the education at Urania Cottage, Dickens sought to incorporate both “book-learning” and practical “domestic” education. Describing to Burdett Coutts the sort of practical education that Urania Cottage could offer to its inhabitants, Dickens writes that “it is very essential...to have a system of training established, which, while it is steady and firm, is cheerful and hopeful.” He explains, “Order, punctuality, cleanliness, the whole routine of household duties—as washing, mending, cooking—the establishment would supply the means of teaching practically, to everyone” (*Letters* 4: 554). In addition to the opportunities for practical teaching everyday life in the home would entail, the women would also receive “book-learning.” Several years later in his article about the Home he notes, “The book-education is of a very plain kind, as they have generally much to learn in the commonest domestic duties, and are often singularly inexpert in acquiring them. They read and write and cypher.

School is held every morning at half-past ten (Saturday excepted) for two hours” (“Home” 170). If, as Paroissien argues and as Dickens own description confirms, Dickens believed that book-learning could teach morality by awakening sympathy, then Dickens saw industriousness as the out-working of that sympathy in the desire to be productive and useful. Pope explains that for Dickens, “Industriousness was ultimately as much a moral commitment as a practical necessity. At Urania Cottage, industrial training was certainly of crucial importance” (*Charity* 178). Thus, for Dickens, domestic education and the education derived from books went hand in hand.

In addition to the practical domestic education and book education at Urania Cottage, Dickens also instituted a strict Marks system based on the system devised by the penal reformer Captain Alexander Maconochie. Based on the premise that good behaviour translated into marks, while bad behaviour meant a loss of marks, the system’s value, Dickens argues, is “that it is not a mere form or course of training adapted to life within the house, but it is a preparation—which is a much higher consideration—for the right performance of duty outside, and for the formation of habits of firmness and self-restraint” (*Letters* 4: 553-4), habits that Dickens, and Victorian gender ideology in general, problematically associated with ideal femininity. As he notes in the article “Home for Homeless Women,” the headings under which the women could obtain positive marks included “Truthfulness, Industry, Temper, Propriety of Conduct and Conversation, Temperance, Order, Punctuality, Economy, Cleanliness” (171). Self-respect, self-restraint, morality, capability, purposefulness, industry: these were the goals of the education Dickens instituted at Urania Cottage for the reformation and reintegration of fallen women into society.

In contrast to Dickens's satisfaction with the Marks system as a means of forming "habits of firmness and self-restraint," the speaker in Augusta Webster's dramatic monologue "A Castaway"—Eulalie—provides a different interpretation of the virtues that Dickens values so highly, censuring refuges and reformatories like Urania Cottage for their gravity and restrictiveness. In the poem, Eulalie rejects the ideal of the domestic female that undergirded reformatory programs like the Urania Cottage program and criticizes specific restrictive aspects of life in a refuge like Urania Cottage.¹⁴ She laments,

I might again live the grave blameless life
Among such simple pleasures, simple cares:
But could they be my pleasures, be my cares?
The blameless life, but never the content—
Never.

.....
Quiet is hell, I say—as if a woman
could bear to sit alone, quiet all day,
and loathe herself, and sicken on her thoughts.

They tried it at the Refuge, and I failed:
I could not bear it. Dreary hideous room,
coarse pittance, prison rules, one might bear these
and keep one's purpose; but so much alone. (l. 226-30, 236-242).

¹⁴ In her passionate rejection of the refuge, Eulalie expresses, at least in part, the tumultuous feelings of resentment and restriction that Dickens embodies and chastises in the characters of Tattycoram and Miss Wade in *Little Dorrit*.

Although Eulalie points to specific burdens that refuges imposed on residents that also pertained to the program at Urania Cottage—such as “prison rules”—she primarily rejects refuges for imposing a lonely life on their residents, and this was a specific area in which Dickens sought to make Urania Cottage different from other refuges. While Dickens did emphasize self-restraint—the women needed, he thought, to “establish habits of the most rigid order, punctuality, and neatness” (*Letters* 5: 179)—at the same time Dickens was also adamant that it was necessary “to make as great a variety in their daily lives as their daily lives will admit of...and to render them an innocently cheerful Family while they live together there,” insisting that “[o]n the cheerfulness and kindness all our hopes rest” (179). Thus while Dickens and Burdgett Coutts did strive to inculcate the domestic ideal through the Urania Cottage program, they also endeavoured to create a program that was less grave and isolating than programs run by other refuges and reformatories.

Dickens wrote to Angela Burdett Coutts, “The design is simply, as you and I agreed, to appeal to them by means of affectionate kindness and trustfulness,—but firmly too. To improve them by education and example” (*Letters* 5: 179). Dickens believed that the best way to teach the women in the “Home for Homeless Women” how to lead morally decent and productive lives in society, how to be good women and good wives was to establish Urania Cottage as a home, a place and a community that the women could invest in. Establishing Urania Cottage as a home, in Dickens’s eyes, would give women the opportunity to learn in the environment where they were naturally suited to be useful. The home would be the example of moral and social living and of purposefulness and industry that they could follow in their new lives.

2.4 CONCLUSION

The interplay between the individual and the other, the self and society, is an important element of Dickens's beliefs about education, forming the basis of Dickens's sense of ethics, where the self and society meet in mutual responsibility. As we have seen, Dickens saw education as a key element of social responsibility, necessary for the development of useful, responsible, and productive members of society. Dickens strongly believed that it was necessary for education to be accessible to everyone, even—or perhaps *especially*—for the most poor or “ragged” people. It was the responsibility of society, particularly those in power, Dickens thought, to ensure that everyone who wanted to learn could have the opportunity to receive an education. The poor often became criminals and preyed on others, Dickens believed, because the poor were negatively influenced by their environment and they had no other opportunities. Consequently, if the socially empowered came together to provide educational opportunities for the poor and to improve their living conditions, then society would be living out one of the highest Christian mandates, to love one's neighbour, and everyone's social welfare would be improved. This is the ideal behind Dickens's support for the Ragged School movement and his involvement in Urania Cottage; however, while Dickens's emphasis on the necessity of universal education was progressive, the Victorian ideology about women's essentially relational and nurturing natures and their inherent suitability for the domestic sphere that he advocated in Ragged Schools and built into not only the education at Urania Cottage, but also his depictions of women in his novels, is problematic and will be considered further in the following chapters.

For Dickens, empowerment, opportunity, usefulness, and the mutual responsibility shared by the individual and society are at the heart of education. Dickens's own childhood provides the explanation for his vehemence on this subject as well as the pattern for his depiction of the motivated child who hungers to learn but is denied access to education. Dickens's own desire for education, however, appears to have been motivated by not only his love of learning, but also his social ambitions, rather than the predominating desire to be useful that he attributes to the poor in his writing about the Ragged Schools and Urania Cottage, as well as to his fictional characters Esther Summerson and Amy Dorrit. In contrast to the ambitious motives behind Dickens's own education—his aspiration to be a gentleman—in his fictional characters, Dickens consistently makes a sense of responsibility the motivating factor behind education and makes ethical action (or “usefulness”) education's end goal. As we will see in the following chapters, this shift in emphasis reflects the shift in Dickens's respect for social position, in particular, his growing disillusionment with the rich and powerful: by the time he wrote *Little Dorrit*, he was emphatically distinguishing between social responsibility as the ambitious internalization of the goals of “Society” and social responsibility as ethical action, privileging the rhetoric of responsibility and usefulness “for the sake of the rest” over the ambitious embrace of “Society” which by this point in his writing has become merely “surface.”

CHAPTER 3 *BLEAK HOUSE*

In the title of his monograph on *Bleak House*, Norman Page defines it as “A Novel of Connections.” Page writes that in the novel Dickens “undertook...to give a full picture of English society and a revelation of what it is that keeps people apart and binds them together” (17). This chapter argues first, that Dickens presents responsible action (recognition of and response to others) as binding people together and irresponsibility (refusing to recognize one’s duty to others) as driving people apart, and second, that education is a locus for Dickens’s examination of social responsibility and irresponsibility in *Bleak House*. Representing social irresponsibility, Dickens creates an analogy between Mrs. Jellyby, a mother who does not nurture or teach her children, and the government, which punishes poor people such as Jo rather than creating a system that can integrate them into productive society by teaching them useful skills. While Dickens uses Jo to emphasize the government’s failure, Jo also points to the Ragged School movement as an example of a socially responsible institution making strides to educate the poorest people, even though Dickens also criticizes the Ragged School movement for its own institutional issues. Finally, Dickens presents characters such as Mr. Jarndyce, Esther Summerson, and Allan Woodcourt as socially responsible individuals, who actively improve social welfare by educating those who want to learn and providing work for them.

Given that Dickens presents social responsibility as a choice, a decision to act for the benefit of others, Joseph I. Fradin rightly points to the centrality of the will and society in *Bleak House*; however, Fradin focuses on the bleak effect of the parasitic will

to power that prioritizes the individual over the other. Focusing on the will to power, Fradin underestimates the other, very important end of the spectrum of will presented in *Bleak House*: the will to love. Fradin writes, “In Esther as in Little Dorrit, Dickens intends to create a central character who draws her goodness and her peace from sources which the world cannot contaminate, a character whose connection with the world, as an expression of her essential nature, is not will but love—in other words a saint” (44). This chapter seeks to demonstrate, in contrast, that Esther’s love (and, as we will see in the next chapter, Amy Dorrit’s love) is a moral choice, an act of the will. Whereas the will to power is divisive, driving people apart in its quest to promote the individual, the will to love recognizes relationships and responds responsibly. H.M. Daleski notes the importance of interpersonal connections in the narrative form and plot of *Bleak House*, saying, “The point at which the two narratives become inextricably linked is also the thematic centre of the novel. Since it is a point at which apparently exclusive worlds are symbolically shown to be kith and kin, the theme suggested is the inescapable oneness of various social classes or groups” (15). For Daleski, the novel’s overlapping narratives represent the intrinsic nature of social connections. Daleski explains, “[*Esther’s*] story is an integral part of the narrative that is concerned with Lady Dedlock; the omniscient narrative, in other words, is also *Esther’s* story, and once again what appears to be separate is not. It is all one, and the plot, with its central revelation of the relationship between Esther and Lady Dedlock, is an organic part of the whole conception” (15). J. Hillis Miller calls this vital aspect of *Bleak House* the “law of interdependence” (“Introduction” 12).

The law of interdependence necessitates socially responsible action for the benefit of the other. Given the inherent nature of social connections, the effects of one's actions cannot be limited to one person. Consequently, socially responsible action spreads outward so that "whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me" (*NIV* Matthew 25:40). Trevor Blount explains, "It is part of the scheme of the novel that one kindness generates another, and that doing someone a good turn serves to unite society into a healthy community" (327). Whereas socially responsible action spreads communal health, conversely social irresponsibility spreads social disease. Describing Dickens's "moral vision," Carl Dennis writes,

So complex and subtle are [the connections between people] that no man can foresee the final effect of any action. If he does ill, his crimes cannot be localized against a particular set of enemies, but pass into the bloodstream of society, finally returning to infect and destroy him.... Human relations are so closely interwoven, it is suggested, that if you strike a man hard enough he will turn out to be your own child. (1244)

In *Bleak House*, Chancery's "crimes" have entered "into the bloodstream of society," and the social climate in *Bleak House* is sick with madness and despair: Jarndyce vs. Jarndyce makes Miss Flite mad and sucks the life out of Richard Carstone, while Mr. Gridley's rage at the impersonal system similarly drives him to his premature death. The injustice of Chancery sickens the community.

It is no coincidence that institutions such as Chancery and Parliament are the source of social sickness in *Bleak House*: responsibility to an institution has replaced responsibility to the people and institutionally-sanctioned irresponsibility prevails.

Monroe Engel writes that “*Bleak House* confronts authority—the authority of office, and of money, and of family—with the misery of the world. Mr. Gridley asks who is responsible, and Esther tells Mr. Skimpole that she fears ‘everybody is obliged to be’ responsible” (124). Because lawyers and politicians have abdicated individual responsibility in favour of the “self-proliferating complexity” of the systems of power, institutions like Chancery and Parliament have become unjust, losing their “human meaning and order” (Miller, “World” 951). Instead of actively pursuing justice, the reason for its existence, Chancery engages in “Wiglomeration,” Mr. Jarndyce’s word for the “vastly ceremonious, wordy, unsatisfactory, and expensive” proceedings of Chancery (91). Mr. Gridley’s case provides a pointed critique of individual responsibility being subsumed in the system. Mr. Gridley raves,

"The system! I am told on all hands, it's the system. I mustn't look to individuals. It's the system. I mustn't go into court and say, 'My Lord, I beg to know this from you—is this right or wrong? Have you the face to tell me I have received justice and therefore am dismissed?' My Lord knows nothing of it. He sits there to administer the system. I mustn't go to Mr. Tulkinghorn, the solicitor in Lincoln's Inn Fields, and say to him when he makes me furious by being so cool and satisfied—as they all do, for I know they gain by it while I lose, don't I?—I mustn't say to him, 'I will have something out of some one for my ruin, by fair means or foul!' HE is not responsible. It's the system. (193)

With his characteristic concern for the rights of the individual, Dickens argues through Mr. Gridley against impersonal and unjust systems that only benefit their administrators.

Lawyers such as Mr. Tulkinghorn and Mr. Wholes (who naturally resembles a vampire), and politicians such as Boodle and Buffy, empowered by institutions like Chancery and Parliament, have become parasites, profiting at the expense of the people they ought to protect. Consequently, Dickens argues, institutions such as the State and Chancery actually foster injustice and decay. Daleski asserts that “Chancery...is from the outset associated with the spread of a noxious infection and corruption in the body politic.... Chancery and all its works is presented as the blight of public life, the parasite that consumes the social organism” (23). The very institutions that ought to serve the people are characterized by “predatory social relations” (Columbus 611).

Dickens brings his real concern with social irresponsibility and the need for reform to his portrayal of Tom-all-Alone’s. Discussing the topics revolving in Dickens’s mind as the premise of *Bleak House* slowly took shape over the course of 1851, Michael Slater writes, “Prominent among them were the ruinous delays and labyrinthine complexity of the Court of Chancery, the State’s abandonment of the children of the poor to ignorance, starvation and crime...and the dire necessity of sanitary reform” (*Charles Dickens* 321). The prevalent mention of Tom-all-Alone’s in the alternate titles for *Bleak House*—eight out of Dickens’s twelve projected titles begin with “Tom-all-Alone’s”¹⁵—speaks of its centrality in the novel as a prominent symbol of the destructiveness of

¹⁵ Daleski cites Forster’s list of alternate titles: “1. ‘Tom-all-Alone’s. The Ruined House’; 2. ‘Tom-All-Alone’s. The Solitary House that was always shut up’; 3. ‘Bleak House Academy’; 4. ‘The East Wind’; 5. ‘Tom-all-Alone’s. The Ruined [House, Building, Factory, Mill] that got into Chancery and never got out’; 6. ‘Tom-all-Alone’s. The Solitary House where the Grass grew’; 7. ‘Tom-all-Alone’s. The Solitary House that was always shut up and never Lighted’; 8. ‘Tom-all-Alone’s. The Ruined Mill, that got into Chancery and never got out’; 9. ‘Tom-all-Alone’s. The Solitary House where the Wind howled’; 10. ‘Tom-all-Alone’s. The Ruined House that got into Chancery and never got out’; 11. ‘Bleak House and the East Wind. How they both got into Chancery and never got out’; 12. ‘Bleak House.’” (24).

parasitic institutions that no longer recognize their responsibility to the people. While Chancery is the cause of Tom-all-Alone's terrible condition, Tom-all-Alone's continues to decay because of the politicians' passivity about the welfare of the people and preoccupation with power and position. Just as Engel concludes that "what the legal gentlemen really intend is to enrich and dignify themselves" (125), so Daleski notes that *Bleak House*'s politicians are "not concerned with exercising the responsibilities of their office but only, again like the lawyers, with graciously living on the 'people'" (21).¹⁶ While the politicians debate who is responsible for the country's decline, they fail to use their power to fix problems such as Tom-all-Alone's; consequently Tom-all-Alone's disease spreads unchecked throughout "every order of society" (553). The narrator comments, "Much mighty speech-making there has been, both in and out of Parliament, concerning Tom, and much wrathful disputation how Tom shall be got right... In the midst of which dust and noise, there is but one thing perfectly clear, to wit, that Tom only may and can, or shall and will be reclaimed according to somebody's theory, but nobody's practice" (553). In contrast to the stultified political conversation at dinner in Chesney Wold and the speech-making in Parliament, Tom-all-Alone's descent into chaos is active. The narrator describes how "these ruined shelters have bred a crowd of foul existence that... comes and goes, fetching and carrying fever and sowing more evil in its every footprint than Lord Coodle, and Sir Thomas Doodle, and the Duke of Foodle, and

¹⁶ Politicians like Boodle and Buffy fail to clean up Tom-all-Alone's because they are busy looking out for their party and shifting blame. In dinner conversation at Chesney Wold, the aristocratic seat of Sir Leicester Dedlock, one politician contends that "the shipwreck of the country... is attributable to Cuffy" because "If you had done with Cuffy what you ought to have done when he first came into Parliament, and had prevented him from going over to Duffy, you would have got him into alliance with Fuffy, you would have had with you the weight attaching as a smart debater to Guffy..." (145-6). Political speculation is endless, but responsible action is scarce.

all the fine gentlemen in office, down to Zoodle, shall set right in five hundred years—though born expressly to do it” (197). Dickens emphasizes the active responsibility that goes with a position of power; however, the lawyers and politicians are active in regard to their own interests and passive in terms of their responsibility, only discussing the very problems that they have a responsibility to address.

Dickens critiques the interlocking failure of responsibility in the legal system and the government through Jo, who lives in Tom-all-Alone’s and spreads its disease. As a critique of society’s failure to be socially responsible, Jo embodies the desire Dickens expressed in the article “Crime and Education” to “suggest to Society that its duty to this wretched throng, foredoomed to crime and punishment, rightfully begins at some distance from the police-office” (*The Daily News*, 4 February 1846). As the title of the article indicates, education is a vital aspect of society’s “duty to this wretched throng,” and it is a vital element of the government’s duty that the government has neglected. Dickens conveys this message in *Bleak House* through Jo. Dickens’s characterization of Jo is informed by his knowledge of the Ragged School movement, the contemporary movement establishing schools to teach the urban poor in the absence of a comprehensive state-funded educational system. Norris Pope notes, “Until education and industrial training were made universal, ragged school advocates argued, the legal system must inevitably function as an instrument of class oppression” (*Charity* 169), and Dickens argued similarly, lamenting, “Woe, woe! can the State devise no better sentence for its little children? *Will it never sentence them to be taught?*” (qtd. in Crotch 73). He wrote of his experience of visiting a Ragged School, “The new exposition I found in this Ragged School, of the frightful neglect by the State of those whom it punishes so constantly, and

whom it might, as easily and less expensively, instruct and save...haunted me” (“Crime and Education”). As one of the poor who might have been “instructed and saved,” Jo represents a call to action. As a member—and symbol—of the urban poor, a population bigger than individual charity can comprehensively reach or teach, Jo calls society in general, and the state in particular, to recognize its responsibility to create a system that will teach and enable the uneducated poor to improve their condition and to be socially constructive. For Dickens, the lack of comprehensive state-funded education is a neglect of the state’s basic responsibility, whereas “Ragged Schools, in their efforts to be at once preventative and reformatory, thus indicated an approach to neglected and delinquent children that was far more promising than anything offered by the state” (Pope, *Charity* 157). In *Bleak House*, there is no state system other than the law that will recognize Jo, and the law only recognizes Jo for its own ends and then drives him away. Hence when Jo dies, the narrator addresses the state directly, to remind the state of the existence of the “vast multitude” like Jo that it overlooks (“Crime and Education”): “Dead, your Majesty. Dead, my lords and gentlemen. Dead, Right Reverends and Wrong Reverends of every order. Dead, men and women, born with Heavenly compassion in your hearts. And dying thus around us every day” (572).¹⁷

In March 1852, the same month that the first number of *Bleak House* was published, Dickens wrote “A Sleep to Startle Us,” a follow-up article to “Crime and Education” that discussed Ragged Schools again and pointed forward to Dickens’s

¹⁷ Chapters 46 and 47 trace Jo’s story to its end, and they are bracketed with addresses to Parliament. Chapter 46 begins with Dickens’s critique of Parliamentary speech-making about Tom-all-Alone’s without any action, and chapter 47 ends with the narrator’s Parliamentary-style address, “Dead, your Majesty. Dead, my lords and gentlemen...” (572), thus emphasizing the connection between Jo, Tom-all-Alone’s, and the State’s neglect.

depiction of Jo in *Bleak House* (Blount 335). In the article, Dickens describes contemporary England, saying, “there was, in every corner of the land where its people were closely accumulated, profound ignorance and perfect barbarism” so that “the people would not come to be improved,” and he concludes, “so they lived, and so they died: an always increasing band of outlaws in body and soul” (“Sleep”). Dickens’s description in “A Sleep to Startle Us” of the “profound ignorance and perfect barbarism” that the Ragged Schools seek to address is similar to the narrator’s problematic description of Jo as a “savage” in *Bleak House*:

He is not one of Mrs. Pardiggle's Tockahoopo Indians; he is not one of Mrs. Jellyby's lambs, being wholly unconnected with Borrioboola-Gha; he is not softened by distance and unfamiliarity; he is not a genuine foreign-grown savage; he is the ordinary home-made article. Dirty, ugly, disagreeable to all the senses, in body a common creature of the common streets, only in soul a heathen. (564)

This problematic description of Jo as a “savage” is part of a tendency Anne McClintock sees occurring in “the latter half of the nineteenth century,” when “the idea of racial deviance was evoked to police the ‘degenerate’ classes—the militant working class, the Irish, Jews, feminists, gays and lesbians, prostitutes, criminals, alcoholics, and the insane—who were collectively figured as racial deviants, atavistic throwbacks to a primitive moment in human prehistory, surviving ominously in the heart of the modern, imperial metropolis” (43). Thus, like “genuine foreign-grown savage[s]” (564) who needed to be “civilized,” the “‘degenerate’ classes,” including Jo (who emphatically insists that he is not a criminal, but who represents potential criminality in the

interrelationship of poverty, ignorance, and crime), need to be “domesticated,” or “wrested from their putatively ‘natural’ yet, ironically, ‘unreasonable’ state of ‘savagery’ and inducted through the domestic progress narrative into a hierarchical relation to white men” (McClintock 40). By calling Jo a “savage,” Dickens presents Jo’s ignorance as one of the key elements that separates him from society, and he implies that Jo needs to be taught to be civilized, to be socialized into a respectable position as a productive English citizen.

In Jo, Dickens combines and personifies the figures of Ignorance and Want that he portrayed in *A Christmas Carol* and that we have already seen in connection to the Ragged School movement, and using the figure of Jo as a muse, the narrator comments on the dangers of poverty and ignorance. While Dickens presents Jo as a victim of systemic social irresponsibility—the government should be teaching Jo the skills that will enable him to be a responsible, productive member of society, but it fails to do so—Jo also embodies the potential threat of crime and violence. Mutual responsibility is the ideal Dickens seeks to promote, but mutual irresponsibility is the reality he sees and fears. Despite his inherent irresponsibility, Harold Skimpole expresses Dickens’s beliefs about the connection between poverty and crime in his story about society’s system of spoons. Because society irresponsibly fails to provide a spoon for Jo, Skimpole imagines that “our young friend, therefore, says, ‘You really must excuse me if I seize it’” and Skimpole concludes that “this appears to me a case of misdirected energy, which has a certain amount of reason in it” (385). Crime, according to Dickens, is a result of the failure of mutual responsibility: society has a duty to help the poor, and if it fails to do so, Dickens argues, the desperately poor will turn to crime to survive.

The worst potential outcome of social irresponsibility that Dickens fears and Jo embodies is revolution. Engel notes, “The misery that makes people long for death also and similarly breeds violence. By this time in the fifties, revolution seemed a dreadful and present possibility for Dickens. It is surely the possibility that lurks in the fog and mire of *Bleak House*” (121). In “*Bleak House* and the Struggle for the State Domain,” Pam Morris comments on Dickens’s allusions to the possibility of revolution in the text of *Bleak House*, including “Miss Flite’s apocalyptic waiting on the opening of the seventh seal when, according to the Book of Revelation, ‘the kings of the earth, and the great men, and the rich men’ shall be destroyed while the poor ‘shall hunger no more ... and God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes’” (680). Morris observes,

Such allusions in *Bleak House* are hardly surprising given that Dickens was writing in the aftermath of the 1848 revolution in France and of Chartism and cholera in Britain. The journalism of the time, from all political and religious perspectives, was full of accounts of events in France in 1848 and of the earlier revolution in 1789, stressing the need for government in Britain to take heed of like dangers at home. (680)

Describing the condition of the poor children he saw in Ragged Schools, Dickens wrote, “In the prodigious misery and ignorance of the swarming masses of mankind in England...the seeds of its certain ruin are sown” (qtd. in Pope, *Charity* 159), and this is the fear that Jo embodies. Comparing Jo to a “thoroughly vagabond dog,” the narrator comments, “Turn that dog’s descendants wild, like Jo, and in a very few years they will so degenerate that they will lose even their bark—but not their bite” (199). Through Jo,

Dickens projects his fear that society's failure to do its duty for the poor will be repaid in violence.

Jo's ignorance identifies him as a member of the "band of outlaws" Dickens refers to in "A Sleep to Startle Us," and as such he is exactly the sort of urban street youth that the Ragged Schools teach. Dickens also explicitly characterizes Jo as a "ragged" boy, using the word "ragged" to describe him seven times, often as characters describe their first impression of Jo.¹⁸ However, in *Bleak House* there are no Ragged Schools to teach Jo. The narrator considers Jo's illiteracy, commenting,

It must be a strange state to be like Jo! To shuffle through the streets, unfamiliar with the shapes, and in utter darkness as to the meaning, of these mysterious symbols, so abundant over the shops, and at the corners of streets, on the doors, and in the windows! To see people read, and to see people write...and not to have the least idea of all that language. (198)

In his comparison of Jo and the vagabond dog, Dickens writes that at least the dog is "an educated, improved, developed dog, who has been taught his duties, and knows how to discharge them" (199). How can Jo be incorporated into society and become a socially responsible citizen if he does not have the skills that will enable him to be useful and to make his way in society? Jo's lack of education separates him from society, and thus

¹⁸ Jo is described as "ragged" in the following scenes: when Jo is introduced at Nemo's inquest, the narrator presents him as "very muddy, very hoarse, very ragged" (134); when Jo talks to the disguised Lady Dedlock, the narrator mentions his "ragged head" (201) twice; when Mr. Snagsby answers the door during Mr. Chadband's sermon, he sees "a police constable, who holds a ragged boy by the arm" (238); when Mr. Tulkinghorn, Mr. Bucket, and Mr. Snagsby find Jo in Tom-all-Alone's, the narrator describes him looking "like a ragged figure in a magic-lantern" (280); and finally, when Allan Woodcourt first sees Jo, Allan "sees a ragged figure coming very cautiously along," who "shades his face with his ragged elbow" (555).

Dickens's depiction of Jo criticizes the social irresponsibility of the state that leaves Jo to be "the outlaw with the broom" (197) by not educating him.

As well as being illiterate, Jo also knows nothing about religion. One of Jo's well-documented historical analogues is George Ruby, a boy from the street whose ignorance of basic Christianity was made a matter of public discussion by the newspapers. Page notes, "The prototype of Jo was almost certainly George Ruby, a boy of about fourteen who was called as a witness at the Guildhall on 8 January 1850" (31). Page records that an article was published in the *Examiner* describing Ruby's testimony that "may well have been written by Dickens himself" (31),¹⁹ and he notes, "Dickens's account of the inquest on 'Nemo' (Captain Hawdon)...is very close to [the *Examiner* account]" (31-2). Page also explains that a summary of the *Examiner* account was included in Mary Carpenter's *Reformatory Schools* (1851) as well as in a review of *Reformatory Schools* written by James Hannay and published by Dickens in *Household Words* on 30 August, 1851, "at just about the time Dickens was thinking deeply about his new novel" (32). The *Household Words* account recounts Ruby's statement that "he did not know 'what an oath is, what the Testament is, what prayers are, what God is, what the devil is. *I sweeps the crossing,*'—he added, summing up his position, moral and social, in the universe, in that one sentence (30 August 1851)" (Page 32).²⁰ Similarly, at the inquest for Nemo, Jo's statement establishes that the extent of his knowledge is he "Knows a broom's a broom, and knows it's wicked to tell a lie. Don't recollect who told him about the broom, or

¹⁹ Dickens was connected to *The Examiner* through John Forster, who was its editor from 1847 until 1855.

²⁰ In the article "Poor Jo, Education, and the Problem of Juvenile Delinquency in Dickens's *Bleak House*," Trevor Blount cites George J. Worth, who also makes note of the connections among *Reformatory Schools*, Hannay's review, and Jo's testimony at the "Inkwich" (329).

about the lie, but knows both. Can't exactly say what'll be done to him after he's dead if he tells a lie to the gentlemen here, but believes it'll be something very bad to punish him, and serve him right" (134). Pope notes that Dickens "urged that ragged schools were designed 'to introduce among the most miserable and neglected outcasts in London,'" (of which George Ruby is an example and Jo a type), "some knowledge of the commonest principles of morality and religion" (*Charity* 153). Thus Jo's ignorance of basic Christian concepts explicitly ties him to George Ruby and to the Ragged School mission and discourse.

The Ragged Schools also provided Dickens with a model for Jo in his sickness. In "A Sleep to Startle Us," Dickens describes his visit to a Ragged School dormitory, where he encountered

an orphan boy with burning cheeks and great gaunt eager eyes, who was in pressing peril of death...and who had no possession under the broad sky but a bottle of physic and a scrap of writing. He brought both from the house-surgeon of a Hospital that was too full to admit him, and stood, giddily staggering in one of the little pathways... He held the bottle of physic in his claw of a hand, and stood, apparently unconscious of it, staggering, and staring with his bright glazed eyes... He was gently taken away, along with the dying man, to the workhouse; and he passed into the darkness with his physic-bottle as if he were going into his grave.

("Sleep")

Dickens's description of Jo's illness mirrors the description of the orphan boy at the dormitory in several ways. Blount notes, "The points of comparison are obvious: the

boy's bottle of physic and scrap of writing recall Jo's stolen bundle and fur cap; the 'bright glazed eyes' of the boy recall Jo's 'haggard gaze' and 'burning,' 'lustrous eyes'" (337). Just as the Ragged School boy has been turned away from a hospital that is too full, so Jo's inability to be admitted to a hospital provides an occasion for Mr. Jarndyce to reflect on the state of society when "if this wretched creature were a convicted prisoner, his hospital would be wide open to him" (384). (Later, when Jo is taken into Mr. Bucket's custody, he is placed in the "horsepittle" [559] for a time).

Although Dickens does not picture Jo clutching a bottle of physic like the Ragged School boy does, physic is woven through the story of Jo's illness as a sign of concern for the other. Despite his poverty, Jo fetches physic for the brickmaker's wife, Jenny, when she is ill, an act which Dickens calls an "errand of good nature"(281); similarly, when Jo is ill, Jenny gives him "broth and physic" in return (382). When Esther brings Jo to Bleak House, Mr. Skimpole observes "a bottle of cooling medicine in his pocket" (386) which they administer to him, and similarly, when Allan Woodcourt brings Jo to Mr. George's gallery, he obtains "restorative medicines" (565). Thus Dickens takes the image of the orphan boy's physic bottle and turns it into a symbol of individual acts of kindness done by Jo and for him, in stark contrast to his victimization by the law and the state.

While the Ragged School movement provided several sources for Jo that further Dickens's point about the need for education to integrate the poor into society by teaching them basic knowledge and constructive skills, Jo also communicates Dickens's main criticism of the Ragged School movement as an institution. When Allan Woodcourt asks Jo, on his deathbed, if he ever knew a prayer, Jo explains, "Different times, there wos other genlmen come down Tom-all-Alone's a prayin, but they all mostly sed as the

t'other wuns prayed wrong, and all mostly sounded to be a talking to theirselves, or a passing blame on the t'others, and not a talkin to us" (571). Jo's speech expresses Dickens's frustration with the religious controversy and sectarianism that muddied the waters of Ragged School teaching. Just as Chancery is caught up in its profusions of paper and Parliament is filled with speech-making, so the Ragged Schools are weighed down by controversy. Blount notes the connection between Jo's description of the "genmen.a prayin" and Dickens's frustration with religious sectarianism influencing the teaching at Ragged Schools, commenting that Dickens puts these words "into the mouth of poor Jo to condemn sectarian animosities and religious humbug" (334). Quoting a letter from Dickens to Angela Burdett-Coutts, Blount continues, "In such a Ragged School, Dickens insists, 'the viciousness of creeds and forms in educating such miserable beings, is most apparent. To talk of catechisms, outward and visible signs, and inward and spiritual graces, to these children is a thing no Bedlamite would do, who saw them'" (334). Dickens also expressed this frustration directly in "A Sleep to Startle Us," where he addressed Ragged School teachers and administrators, saying, "Dearly beloved brethren...do you know that between Gorham controversies, and Pusey controversies, and Newman controversies, and twenty other edifying controversies, a certain large class of minds in the community is gradually being driven out of all religion? Would it be well...to come out of the controversies for a little while, and be simply Apostolic thus low down!" ("Sleep"). Whereas the Gorham, Pusey, and Newman controversies dealt with difficult religious issues such as the nature of baptism and the extent of the relationship between the Anglican Church and the Roman Catholic Church, Dickens

encouraged basic secular education and the teaching of useful skills.²¹ If controversy over correct doctrine could negatively affect the teaching in Ragged Schools, then the Ragged Schools were no better than the law and the state, being more speeches and less practice. Thus, it is significant that Jo is introduced to the concept of goodness through an individual whom he trusts, Allan Woodcourt—Jo says, “I’ll say anything as you say, sir, for I know it’s good” (572)—rather than an institution, and that he is introduced to and recites a prayer, “The Lord’s Prayer,” after Woodcourt, rather than learning debatably correct religious doctrine. Blount notes that “Dickens believed that Christianity—felt none too clearly but very warmly in terms of humble charity and love—could offer solace and comfort. Jo’s death scene testifies to this” (330). Perhaps concerns about doctrine struck Dickens as being too close to the self-righteousness of the oily Reverend Chadband, and too far from concern about the moral and spiritual welfare of an individual like Jo.

While Jo demonstrates the need for socially responsible action on a broader systematic scale, Mr. Jarndyce and Esther demonstrate the broader social benefits of an

²¹ The Gorham controversy occurred in the Anglican Church, between Henry Philpotts, the Bishop of Exeter, who argued that “belief in baptism as an effective means of spiritual regeneration was an essential dogma of the Church” and George Gorham, an Anglican cleric who had been given a living by the Crown, but who believed that baptism was “merely... a *symbol* of regeneration” (Lentin 96). The Bishop of Exeter “refused to institute Gorham to the living on the grounds that he held heretical Calvinist views”; however, when the issue was taken to the Privy Council in 1850, they decided in favour of Gorham (Lentin 96). The Newman controversy centered on John Henry Newman, who was “the leader of the High-Anglican Tractarian (or Oxford) movement” and “a powerful polemical voice” (Powell). While the Oxford movement “sought to find a *via media*, or middle way” between Anglicanism and Roman Catholicism (Jay), Newman converted to Roman Catholicism in 1845 and later became a Cardinal. Like Newman, Pusey was also part of the Oxford movement. After preaching a sermon on “The Holy Eucharist,” Pusey was banned from preaching for two years; however, the ban cemented his popularity, and he became one of the most influential Anglicans of his time. His followers were called “Puseyites.”

individual's constructive action. Daleski writes that Mr. Jarndyce "perform[s] functions on a personal level that are supposedly fulfilled by institutions (such as Chancery and Parliament) on a national level" (36). In contrast to the abdication of individual responsibility that characterizes Chancery and Parliament, John Jarndyce, Esther Summerson, and Allan Woodcourt demonstrate how critically important constructive action is on an individual scale for counteracting the prevailing social sickness. Joyce Kloc McClure writes, "[Esther's] expanding circle of duty serves to counter the evil emanating from the injustice of the world because other characters respond positively to her affections as well as to her acts of justice. This positive response, in turn, motivates others to act as responsibly as they can in their situation, thereby widening the circle's effectiveness" (40). This, then, is the battle being fought in *Bleak House*: agents of social regeneration, marked by their concern for the other, seek to counteract the social disease being spread by the parasitic and power-hungry. Daleski notes that even though "the novel presents an image of possible social collapse," Dickens does propose a remedy, which is "readiness to make one's own way and to accept responsibility" (Daleski 36). Bleak House, despite the connotations of its name, is a center of social responsibility and philanthropy as well as a place where characters such as Caddy Jellyby and Charley Neckett learn how to contribute to society, an aspect of Bleak House that Dickens reflected in the one of his potential titles for the novel, "Bleak House Academy" (Daleski 24).

Before we can examine how characters learn to be socially responsible, we must first understand how Dickens defines social responsibility. In the essay "Self-Help and the Helpless in *Bleak House*," George H. Ford argues that, for Dickens, there are two

necessary elements in the socially responsible character: heart (the ability to care for others), and work (the decision to use one's abilities productively). Discussing Mr. Jarndyce and Allan Woodcourt as examples of Dickens's ideal, Ford notes that "Mr. Jarndyce is discriminating in his extensive benefactions.... his aim is to supplement self-help, not to provide substitutes for it" (103). Ford proposes that Dickens's espousal of self-help, rooted in a strict Protestant middle class work ethic, is mediated by his desire to promote concern for the other, so that the "assumed ideal [in *Bleak House*] combines the quality of dedicated self-interest with that of social responsibility" (103). Consequently, as Ford notes, there is no contradiction when, describing Allan Woodcourt, Mr. Jarndyce tempers his advocacy of ambition and a strict work ethic with just pride in the very *modesty* and *outward focus* of Allan's ambitions: Mr. Jarndyce describes Allan in glowing terms, as

a man whose hopes and aims may sometimes lie (as most men's sometimes do, I dare say) above the ordinary level, but to whom the ordinary level will be high enough after all, if it should prove to be a way of usefulness and good service leading to no other. All generous spirits are ambitious, I suppose; but the ambition that calmly trusts itself to such a road, instead of spasmodically trying to fly over it, is of the kind I care for. It is Woodcourt's kind. (qtd. in Ford 103)

Allan's combination of self-interest and concern for the other also characterizes Esther, and Fradin remarks that the "degree to which Woodcourt is indeed the right mate for

Esther is... worth noting” because “[l]ike Esther’s, his duty and his benevolence are one” (62).²²

Esther’s goal “to be industrious, contented, and kind-hearted, and to do some good to some one, and to win some love to myself if I could” (20) is the foremost example of the decision to be socially responsible, to adopt a heart-motivated work ethic, in *Bleak House*. Reflecting on the positive results of this resolution, Esther frequently repeats phrases such as “I felt almost ashamed to have done so little and have won so much” (26); thus, Esther emphasizes the connection Dickens makes between giving and receiving. Through Mr. Jarndyce, Esther Summerson, and Allan Woodcourt, Dickens argues that a heart-motivated ethic is not only in the best interests of society, but also of the individual: Mr. Jarndyce receives a family because he has given many orphans a home (although his intentions toward Esther become questionable later in the novel)²³; Esther is loved and receives a home and family because she has given her friendship to Ada, Caddy, and Charley, her companionship and housekeeping skills to Mr. Jarndyce, and her love to Allan Woodcourt; Allan Woodcourt receives Esther’s love and her hand

²² Fradin notes that Woodcourt “is a doctor, which means, since he is a good man, that his function as citizen and his responsibility as a feeling human being can express themselves identically in the act of healing which is at once the measure of what he does professionally and what he is morally” (62).

²³ Mr. Jarndyce is not rewarded with Esther as a wife. While he attempts to ensure that Esther will not feel obligated to accept his offer of marriage, her response is predicated on the denial of her feelings for Woodcourt and is motivated by gratitude rather than love. Patricia Ingham calls Jarndyce’s proposal “moral blackmail” (125) and notes that “the mysterious absence of a mother in *Bleak House* put father and daughter or guardian/father and ward/daughter into the place conventionally filled by girl and lover. These new relationships are then explored in various ways; but each brings the asexual nubile girl into an ambiguous position reminiscent of...ghost-pornography” (119). The characteristics of what Ingham calls “ghost-pornography” are first, “a pattern of menace moving innocence/ignorance to confusion and increasing terror” and second, “varying degrees of voyeurism constituting a male exchange of represented females” (36-7).

in marriage because he has ministered (physically and spiritually) to Mrs. Flite and Jo, and because he has been a friend to Richard. Mr. Jarndyce, Esther Summerson, and Allan Woodcourt are thus all actively beneficent, and Dickens ensures that they are amply repaid for their combination of loving care and good, practical work, illustrating Dickens's point that one's own well-being is tied up in the well-being of others.

If Dickens's ideal socially responsible character is hard-working and productive as well as caring and capable of addressing the needs of others, then Dickens's primary objection to the telescopic philanthropists is that they fail to address the suffering of people immediately surrounding them. Miller points to the impersonal nature of— the lack of charity in—telescopic philanthropy, writing, “The evil of Mrs Jellyby's ‘telescopic philanthropy’ or of Mrs Pardiggle's ‘rapacious benevolence’ is that they treat people not as individuals but as elements in a system of abstract do-gooding” (“Introduction” 25). Telescopic philanthropy, as Dickens perceives and presents it, is not rooted in sympathy for people, but instead in “sympathy with the destinies of the human race” (297), an abstract ideal. In embracing a vast abstract mission, the philanthropists fail to show real compassion to their neighbours, a problem which Dickens demonstrates through Mrs. Pardiggle. Mrs. Pardiggle speaks at the brickmakers, not to them, and she exemplifies the saying “cold as charity,” entering a room “like cold weather” that “seemed...to make the little Pardiggles blue” (93). Thus, Dickens believes, organized philanthropy suffers from the same institutional problem that plagues the Ragged Schools: ironically, the adherence to a mission impedes loving the other in the same way that adherence to religious doctrine impedes loving the other, according to Dickens.

Because Dickens sees organized philanthropy as a system or institution, he characterizes and critiques organized philanthropy in the same manner as he characterizes and critiques Chancery and Parliament. Dickens characterizes Chancery in terms of its paper, and he criticizes its injustice; Dickens characterizes Parliament in terms of its speech-making, and he criticizes its ineffectiveness; finally, he characterizes Mrs. Jellyby in terms of her letter-writing, and he criticizes her far-sightedness. In each case, Dickens attaches a prominent image (paper/speech-making/letter-writing) to the institution or organization that he is criticizing to demonstrate that they are characterized by words rather than actions. Writing back to Mrs. Margaret Cropper, who objected to his blanket depictions of telescopic philanthropists, Dickens expresses his frustration at social discourse without action:

I have such strong reason to consider, as the best exercise of my faculties of observation can give me, that it is one of the main vices of this time to ride objects to Death through mud and mire, and to have a great deal of talking about them and *not* a great deal of doing—to neglect private duties associated with no particular excitement, for lifeless and soulless public hullabaloo with a great deal of excitement, and thus seriously to damage the objects taken up (often very good in themselves) and not least by associating them with Cant and Humbug in the minds of those reflecting people whose sympathies it is most essential to enlist, before any good thing can be advanced. (*Letters* 6: 825)

Here again, as in his criticism of Parliament, Dickens criticizes speech without action, having “a great deal of talking” but “*not* a great deal of doing.” For Dickens, social

responsibility revolves around acting for the good of the other, and he fails to see useful action emanating from organized philanthropy.

In his letter to Margaret Cropper on the subject of telescopic philanthropy, Dickens also introduces another major point in his criticism of the telescopic philanthropists, a criticism that is particularly directed at Mrs. Pardiggle and Mrs. Jellyby as wives and mothers: Dickens believes that philanthropy leads them “to neglect private duties associated with no particular excitement, for lifeless and soulless public hullabaloo with a great deal of excitement.” Given that Dickens believed women were suited by nature to be most useful in the domestic sphere, he interprets the magnitude of Mrs. Pardiggle and Mrs. Jellyby’s public mission and their wholehearted dedication to it as an overextension of their natural abilities that causes them to neglect their natural duties. Slater explains, “Dickens would have agreed with George Eliot in her definition of what actually constitutes...womanliness—‘that exquisite type of gentleness, tenderness, possible maternity suffusing a woman’s being with affectionateness, which makes what we mean by the feminine character’. Involvement in public life would inevitably, Dickens firmly believed, be destructive of this” (*Women* 316). In Dickens’s eyes, as a wife and mother, Mrs. Jellyby’s “concern should be reserved in her first place for the comfort and happiness of her own dirty, suffering family” (Ingham 71-2).²⁴ This is the ideal Dickens presents in contrast to Mrs. Jellyby through Esther: Bleak House and her surrogate family are Esther’s priority and her charitable activities involve outreach on an

²⁴ Ford and Monod note that the “reputed original” of Mrs. Jellyby is “Mrs. Caroline Chisholm (1807-77), whose work in organizing the Family Colonization Loan Society was supported by Dickens but whose housekeeping prompted his comment in a letter (March 4, 1850): ‘I dream of Mrs. Chisholm, and her housekeeping. The dirty faces of her children are my continual companions’” (893).

individual basis that does not threaten her family's claims to her attention. For Dickens, having a public mission and being a responsible wife and mother are mutually exclusive; he does not leave room for the possibility that a woman could do both well.

Consequently, in Dickens's eyes, Mrs. Jellyby's priorities are disastrously wrong—she sacrifices her family to her “Mission,” a point clearly made by Mr. Jellyby when he exhaustedly but emphatically groans to Caddy on the eve of her marriage, “Never have a Mission, my dear child!” (374). As Slater writes, “It was always in terms of personal relationships, especially within a family grouping, that woman, for [Dickens] as for most Victorians, realized her full moral and spiritual potential. Attempts by her to influence the great world by putting herself forward as the champion of some public cause were always terrible or...ludicrous aberrations” (*Women* 309). Thus Dickens's finally indicts Mrs. Jellyby by associating her with the women's rights movement at the end of the novel, a movement that represents for him the height of misguided priorities, of “perverse female heroism” (Slater, *Women* 316).

Dickens's depiction of Mrs. Jellyby's failure to meet the needs of her family—not only domestic, but also, as importantly, her children's need to be taught—functions as part of Dickens's broader critique of social irresponsibility in the nation, especially in light of the parallels Dickens creates in *Bleak House* between the family and society. David Plotkin writes that “*Bleak House*...presents home as a part for the whole, the homeland or nation” (17), and Alicia Van Buren Kelley similarly notes,

The Jellyby's house is a prime example of Chancery-like chaos resulting from a refusal to see actual problems and the desire to create romantic theoretical ones. In the same way that parliament refuses to deal

practically with Tom-all-Alone's, letting the slum run to greater and greater ruin, Mrs. Jellyby refuses to see the confusion of her own household, let alone that of the London slum, preferring to spend her time and energy, and the time and energy of her eldest daughter, on a little-understood state of affairs hundreds of miles away in Africa. (259)²⁵

Being the embodiment of Dickens's domestic female ideal, Esther comments sharply on Mrs. Jellyby's failures as a wife and mother saying, "if Mrs. Jellyby had discharged her own natural duties and obligations before she swept the horizon with a telescope in search of others, she would have taken the best precautions against becoming absurd" (473)—phrasing which points to the domestic role Dickens believes she ought to fill, sweeping the dirt out of her own home. Dickens responded to criticisms about his depiction of Mrs. Jellyby and her mission similarly, arguing that as a country, England ought to focus "on the making of good Christians at home, and on the utter removal of neglected and untaught childhood from its streets before it wanders elsewhere" (*Letters* 6: 707). Consequently, both as the basic unit of the nation, and as an analogy for the nation, the family becomes an important locus of meaning in *Bleak House*, as a place where social values can be taught.

For Dickens, the social evil that comes from neglectful parenting far outweighs the social good that can come from remote charity because the family and home are vitally important as the primary places where a sense of social responsibility is

²⁵ Of course, the parallel between Mrs. Jellyby and the government exists only insofar as both create confusion by failing to recognize their immediate responsibility; however, while Dickens presents Mrs. Jellyby's failure as a wife and mother as a result of her far-sighted philanthropy, he presents the government's failure as a result of its *self*-absorption, its continuous internecine jockeying for power and position.

inculcated. The family instils an ethical sense—both the primary sense of concern for the other and the secondary, contingent sense of work’s necessity and value—not only through explicit teaching, but also through parental role modelling. Thus relationships between parents and children are central to the plot of *Bleak House*, as in most of Dickens’s novels. In the novel, however, many of the main characters—Richard, Ada, Esther, Jo, and Charley, for example—are orphaned, or become orphans, and consequently they must find surrogate families, alternative teachers, or new role models to teach them how to be useful. Mr. Jarndyce constructs a new family by taking in Richard, Ada, and Esther, and his kind action enables Esther to become a teacher and parent figure for Charley Neckett and Caddy Jellyby. Although Caddy is not literally an orphan, Dickens symbolically presents her as an orphan because Mrs. Jellyby neglects her parental responsibility in favour of her “public duties,” which she calls “a favourite child to me” (297). Dickens comments on Mrs. Jellyby’s priorities via Esther, who says, “We thought that, perhaps...it is right to begin with the obligations of home...and that, perhaps, while those are overlooked and neglected, no other duties can possibly be substituted for them” (6). This quote indicates the centrifugal nature of Dickens’s social perspective: duty radiates out from the family into society.

In contrast to neglectful parents such as Mrs. Jellyby who ignore their most basic social responsibility to teach their children and to be role models for them, Mr. Jarndyce and Esther embrace social responsibility by adopting and taking care of others, especially the orphaned or needy. As Miller argues, “Esther Summerson and John Jarndyce are the chief examples in *Bleak House* of Dickens’s commitment to a Christian humanism compounded of belief in ‘the natural feelings of the heart’ (55), in unselfish engagement

in duty and industrious work, in spontaneous charity toward those immediately within one's circle, and of faith that Providence secretly governs all" ("Introduction" 30-1). Unlike Mrs. Jellyby, whose plans for Borrioboola-Gha are mainly manifested in correspondence, Mr. Jarndyce initiates a train of immediate, active philanthropy at the beginning of the novel. Mr. Jarndyce extends charity to Richard and Ada, his family members and fellow participants in the Jarndyce case, and to the needy who cross his path. Plotkin suggests that "creating homes out of bleak houses occupies a central place in the plot of the novel" (18), and Mr. Jarndyce takes the Bleak House that Chancery built and re-humanizes it by bringing in Richard, Ada, and Esther (and later Charley, and at various times Caddy and Jo). Nevertheless, like Ford, Daleski notes that Mr. Jarndyce's assistance is often supplementary, that he "typically helps those in need by enabling them to help themselves" (36). Mr. Jarndyce's "wards" are not only enabled "to help themselves" but also to extend charity to others, and because of Mr. Jarndyce's philanthropy, Bleak House becomes the center from which philanthropic action radiates out into society.

As Daleski notes, Mr. Jarndyce begins his assistance to Esther by ensuring that she receives an education. Whereas the aunt who raised Esther, Miss Barbary, "[w]ished Esther only to know what would be serviceable to her," and taught her "nothing more" (22), Mr. Jarndyce sends Esther to school to prepare for a profession, so that "she shall be eminently qualified to discharge her duty" (23). Mr. Jarndyce arranges for her to be educated to become a governess, a teacher, similar to her real-life namesake, Esther Elton, an orphan under Dickens's guardianship (Slater, *Charles Dickens* 217). Of her training, Esther Summerson notes,

It was understood that I would have to depend, by-and-bye, on my qualifications as a governess; and I was not only instructed in everything that was taught at Greenleaf, but was very soon engaged in helping to instruct others. Although I was treated in every other respect like the rest of the school, this single difference was made in my case from the first. As I began to know more, I taught more, and so in course of time I had plenty to do, which I was very fond of doing, because it made the dear girls fond of me. (26)

When Esther arrives at Bleak House, Mr. Jarndyce establishes her as housekeeper—a position considerably higher in the household than that of a governess (consider Dickens’s depiction of Mrs. Rouncewell and the esteem Sir Leicester Dedlock has for her).²⁶ Throughout the novel, however, Esther often uses her training as a governess, acting as a mentor and teacher for younger girls who have no other means of learning,

Esther is not only a teacher by training, however; Dickens presents Esther as a natural teacher because she is an ideal female role model. Through Esther, Dickens expresses his belief that women are naturally suited to be teachers. Slater comments, “Women were held to be natural nurses as well as natural teachers of children and...Dickens frequently dramatized this belief in his fiction,” noting that “young women like Agnes [in *David Copperfield*] and Esther...show themselves to be natural teachers” (*Women* 330-1). Esther is Dickens’s vision of “a paragon of female virtue” (Slater, *Women* 255), combining the book education she received at Greenleaf with the “quiet, unpretending, domestic heroism” (Slater, *Charles Dickens* 217) of her real-life

²⁶ See Martin A. Danahay, “Housekeeping and Hegemony in *Bleak House*” for a further exploration and explanation of Esther and housekeeping as work.

analogues, Dickens's ward Esther Elton and Dickens's idealized sister-in-law Georgina Hogarth (Ford and Monod 895).²⁷ Esther is not only a very capable person, but also a very moral and responsible person. Ironically, the chronically and consciously irresponsible Mr. Skimpole describes Esther most aptly, when he tells Esther, "You appear to me to be the very touchstone of responsibility. When I see you, my dear Miss Summerson, intent upon the perfect working of the whole little orderly system of which you are the centre, I feel inclined to say to myself—in fact I do say to myself very often—THAT'S responsibility!" (468). Esther is not only an ideal role model as a capable housekeeper, but also as a loving home-maker: "For most of the novel's characters," Plotkin notes, "families are not inherited, but made" (23), and Esther has a corresponding ability to "make a home out of [any] house" (qtd. in Plotkin 23). Consequently, Esther is a teacher of social responsibility in her role as an exemplar of perfect female domesticity.

Although critics have often focused on Esther's quiet domesticity,²⁸ within *Bleak House* she also receives praise for less domestic and conventionally female attributes, and

²⁷ In *Dickens and Women*, Slater discusses how Georgina Hogarth might have served as a model for Esther Summerson. Slater argues that the decision Esther has to make between staying with Mr. Jarndyce as his housekeeper, companion, and wife (which is, to some extent, a sacrifice) or marrying Allan Woodcourt and having a house of her own (her real desire) parallels Dickens's concerns about Georgina preferring to remain in his family rather than getting married. (165-8) Thus, "he suddenly turns Jarndyce into a sort of *deus ex machina*...who ensures that Esther is saved from herself" (257), a move which Slater interprets as Dickens indicating to Georgina that it would be good for her to marry. Slater concludes, "What, one wonders, did Georgina privately think of the way in which Mr Jarndyce settled Esther's fate and did she at all connect it in her mind with Dickens's vigorous praise of Egg, her rejected suitor, in that letter written only a few months later? All we can say is that, whether consciously or unconsciously, she firmly rejected an Esther-ending for herself and continued to make herself useful to Dickens and his family as she had been doing for a decade already" (168).

²⁸ In "Housekeeping and Hegemony in *Bleak House*," Danahay proposes to "read Esther as a 'sign of the feminine,' a character who reveals the Victorian cultural construction of work along gender lines" (416). He continues, "Esther seems to have many roles in the

these attributes also make her a teacher by example—a “pattern” for other women to follow. After spending hours on a cold wintry night pursuing Lady Dedlock by carriage with Esther, the detective Mr. Bucket praises Esther for her fortitude and for being “game,” enthusing,

If you only repose half as much confidence in me as I repose in you, after what I’ve experienced of you, that’ll do. Lord! you’re no trouble at all. I never see a young woman in any station of society—and I’ve seen many elevated ones too—conduct herself like you have conducted yourself, since you was called out of your bed. You’re a pattern, you know, that’s what you are...you’re a pattern. (704).

Mr. George Rouncewell shares Mr. Bucket’s opinion, and his word choice. He writes to Esther, “I esteem the qualities you possess above all others” and anxiously asks his brother if there is anything in the letter that “might not be sent to a pattern young lady?” (747).²⁹ Again, Esther is a pattern, an ideal role model: she is not only industrious and caring, qualities which make her an ideal housekeeper and homemaker, but also quietly assertive or “game,” capable of acting outside the home like her older and more aggressive parallel character Mrs. Bagnet.

novel; she cares for children, she organizes households, and she provides companionship for various male figures. All these roles can, however, be grouped under one term: housekeeper” (416). In *Dickens and Women*, Slater records negative reactions to Esther’s role as the perfect housekeeper: “For many she has simply been an exasperating paragon of virtue: the *Spectator*’s reviewer was provoked into wishing that ‘she would either do something “spicy” or confine herself to superintending the jam-pots at Bleak House”” (255).

²⁹ Dickens uses the word pattern similarly to describe Mr. Jarndyce, whom Ada calls “a pattern of truth, sincerity and goodness” (466).

Esther comes into her role as a teacher very early in the novel. As we have already seen, Esther begins to teach while she is at school, but almost immediately after leaving school, even before she reaches Bleak House, Esther's teaching skills again become necessary. Plotkin notes that while "Jo is explicitly described as an ignorant savage...to a lesser degree, other children in the novel reflect his condition, of being untrained and uncultivated" (17), and one of the most prominent examples of these children is Caddy Jellyby. Mrs. Jellyby's description of Caddy is unemotional and work-related: she introduces her as "my eldest daughter, who is my amanuensis" (38). Mrs. Jellyby's relationship to Caddy is a working relationship, as Caddy recognizes, lamenting, "I am only pen and ink to *her*" (169). Rather than teaching Caddy—which would require communication and response—Mrs. Jellyby dictates, and consequently, Caddy embodies Mrs. Jellyby's failure to be a responsible and responsive mother. Esther records Caddy's disorderly appearance and negative attitude, describing her as "a jaded and unhealthy-looking, though by no means plain girl, at the writing-table, who sat biting the feather of her pen, and staring at us. I suppose nobody ever was in such a state of ink....she really seemed to have no article of dress upon her, from a pin upwards, that was in its proper condition or its right place" (37-8). Although Caddy can read and write, she feels "disgracefully" uneducated compared to Esther and Ada. Caddy avers, "I can't do anything hardly, except write" and bemoans being "able to do nothing else" (44). Dickens emphasizes Caddy's "natural affections" (168, 296, 370)—a phrase that recalls Eliot's assertion that "affectionateness" is part of the "feminine character"—in relation to her desire to be useful, and this aligns her with Esther, the "natural teacher" as opposed to Caddy's unnaturally distant mother. Caddy feels deeply her mother's lack of interest in

teaching her the domestic skills that she feels she ought to know, and she reaches out to Esther as a possible surrogate mother and teacher, saying, “You used to teach girls... If you could only have taught me, I could have learnt from you!” (44).

Being painfully eager to learn to be responsible like Esther, Caddy takes control of her own education and makes Esther her role model. Caddy tells Esther and Ada, “I felt I was so awkward... that I made up my mind to be improved in that respect, at all events, and to learn to dance. I told Ma I was ashamed of myself, and I must be taught to dance” (168). As well as improving Caddy’s gracefulness, the dancing lessons also provide Caddy with the opportunity to begin a new life independent from her family through her engagement to Prince Turveydrop, the dancing master. Caddy desires to bring to her marriage the housekeeping skills that her mother neither possesses nor passes on, so she turns her attention to learning the practical domestic abilities “that it would be useful for Prince’s wife to know” (177)—a phrase similar to Dickens’s language in “An Appeal to Fallen Women,” when he describes the skills women could learn at Urania Cottage. In “An Appeal” he writes that women “will be taught all the household work that would be useful to them in a home of their own and enable them to make it comfortable and happy” (698). Practicing housekeeping with Miss Flite, Caddy tells Esther, she has learned “to tidy her room, and clean her birds; and I make her cup of coffee for her (of course she taught me)...I can make little puddings too; and I know how to buy neck of mutton, and tea, and sugar, and butter, and a good many housekeeping things” (177). While the list of household chores that Caddy learns sounds frivolous, underneath the “coffee” and “puddings,” Caddy is learning household economy, so that she can fulfil what Martin Danahay argues is “the housekeeper’s primary role”: “the

conservation or preservation of the family's material possessions" (421).³⁰ Inspired by Esther's example, and desiring Esther's good opinion, Caddy begins to educate herself in practical domestic knowledge and household economy, things that her mother cannot, or will not, teach her.

As Caddy teaches herself, she looks up to Esther as a friend and mentor, and Esther provides a pattern for Caddy to follow, demonstrating how Caddy can express her "natural affections" through useful action. Impressed by Caddy's determined self-improvement, Esther and Ada bring Caddy to Bleak House to prepare for her wedding by "contriving and cutting out, and repairing, and sewing, and saving, and doing the very best we could think of, to make the most of her stock" (370). In addition to learning to save and sew in preparation for the wedding, Caddy is "very anxious 'to learn housekeeping,'" so Esther shows Caddy "all my books and methods, and all my fidgety ways" (370-1). Again, through her wedding preparations and her housekeeping lessons, Dickens represents Caddy learning to manage the household economy responsibly.

Having learned at *Bleak House* "all the household work that would be useful...in a home of [her] own" (Dickens, "An Appeal" 698), Caddy is ready to re-enter the world with her new skills, but before she can marry Prince Turveydrop and establish her own

³⁰ Household economy is one of the areas where Dickens particularly criticizes Mrs. Jellyby through Caddy. Caddy tells Esther and Ada, "Pa will be a bankrupt before long, and then I hope Ma will be satisfied. There'll be nobody but Ma to thank for it...Pa told me only yesterday morning (and dreadfully unhappy he is) that he couldn't weather the storm. I should be surprised if he could. When all our tradesmen send into our house any stuff they like, and the servants do what they like with it, and I have no time to improve things if I knew how, and Ma don't care about anything, I should like to make out how Pa is to weather the storm. I declare if I was Pa, I'd run away" (166-7).

household, she must return to her parents' house to try to make a difference there before the wedding. Caddy and Esther bring their joint housekeeping skills to the Jellyby household, "attempting to establish order among all [the] waste and ruin" (373), and manage to "do wonders with it" (374). If the Jellyby household is one of the bleak houses symbolizing the nation's disarray, then Esther and Caddy's domestic proficiency parallels the active exercise of social responsibility necessary to clean up the nation. Daleski writes,

having achieved 'the perfect working of the whole little orderly system' of which she is the centre, and having achieved it through assuming responsibility in her turn, Esther [and Caddy] also in effect [demonstrate] what is required for the efficient running of the 'great country' and the 'great system' of which Conversation Kenge boasts to Mr. Jarndyce, and of which Parliament and Chancery are the centres. Dickens, in other words, far from being revolutionary, is calling in *Bleak House* for nothing more subversive than a change of housekeepers. (38)

Although, as his depiction of Mrs. Jellyby certainly demonstrates, Dickens believed that women are not suited to public life, through Esther and Caddy Dickens creates an analogy between women's work and men's work in the running of the nation: despite the difference in scale, both should be characterized by the assumption of responsibility for one's own welfare, but also, more importantly, for the welfare of others.

Dickens characterizes Caddy as warm-hearted and eager to learn, and together those virtues make her a dedicated and determined wife and mother—an ideal vision of responsibility, like Esther. Unlike her parents' marriage, Caddy's marriage to Prince is a

partnership, and Caddy learns to play music so that she can help him run the dancing school. She tells Esther, "I am qualifying myself to give lessons. Prince's health is not strong, and I want to be able to assist him.... You see, my dear, to save expense I ought to know something of the piano, and I ought to know something of the kit too, and consequently I have to practise those two instruments as well as the details of our profession" (474). Caddy continues to learn on her own in order to fill her family's needs, and Esther commends Caddy for adopting a heart-motivated work ethic: "For I conscientiously believed, dancing-master's wife though she was, and dancing-mistress though in her limited ambition she aspired to be, she had struck out a natural, wholesome, loving course of industry and perseverance that was quite as good as a mission" (474). Esther's praise of Caddy echoes Mr. Jarndyce's praise of "Woodcourt's kind" of ambition, thus establishing Caddy at the level of goodness occupied by Mr. Jarndyce, Mr. Woodcourt, and Esther, the heroic ideals of *Bleak House*.

Caddy's loving industry characterizes her as a mother as well, and consequently she follows a very different pattern of motherhood than Mrs. Jellyby. Esther explains that "Caddy's poor little girl...is deaf and dumb," and continues, "I believe there never was a better mother than Caddy, who learns, in her scanty intervals of leisure, innumerable deaf and dumb arts, to soften the affliction of her child" (768). Unlike Mrs. Jellyby, who creates affliction for her children by refusing to recognize their needs, Caddy is willing to learn new languages to communicate with her handicapped daughter. Because she was raised in a dysfunctional family, Caddy understands the importance of family relationships and is dedicated to learning whatever is necessary to promote the welfare of

her family. Caddy develops into Dickens's ideal wife and mother because, like Esther, she is willing to learn and to work for the good of those she loves.

When Dickens first introduces the character of Charley Neckett into the plot of *Bleak House*, she, unlike Caddy, is already a capable housekeeper, despite her young age. In fact, when she is introduced, the recently orphaned Charley has already been hiring out her housekeeping services to provide for her younger siblings. Charley explains her motherliness and her domestic capabilities to Mr. Jarndyce, Mr. Skimpole, Ada, and Esther, recounting how she learned out of necessity after her mother died, when "father said I was to be as good a mother to [the baby] as I could. And so I tried. And so I worked at home, and did cleaning and nursing and washing for a long time before I began to go out. And that's how I know" (189). Dickens emphasizes Charley's mature responsibility, despite her young age, in contrast to Mr. Skimpole's irresponsibility despite his physical maturity. Recognizing the value of Charley's responsibility and hard work without feeling any urge to emulate them, Mr. Skimpole claims credit for enabling Charley to develop "social virtues" (195). Skimpole concludes that because he provided work for Charley's father, a debt-collector, through his utter financial irresponsibility, therefore "he had actually been enabling Coavinses to bring up these charming children in this agreeable way, developing these social virtues!" (195). Mr. Jarndyce, however, gives the credit to Charley, and just as he is willing to help Caddy because he values her dedication to self-improvement and the improvement of her family, so Mr. Jarndyce helps Charley because he values her capability and sense of duty. Consequently, when Charley re-enters the story, Mr. Jarndyce has given her a position as Esther's maid at

Bleak House, a position of “great dignity” (379) according to Charley, where she can receive the benefit of Esther’s instruction.

Unlike Caddy, Charley does not come to *Bleak House* for training in household economy or domestic work; rather, at Mr. Jarndyce’s request, Esther tries to assist Charley by teaching her to write. In a scene reminiscent of Dickens’s written memories of his own education at home with his mother—a fact which again points to the importance of teaching in the home and to Esther’s role as a surrogate mother-teacher—Esther describes one of Charley’s lessons. Lamenting, “Writing was a trying business to Charley, who seemed to have no natural power over a pen” and that it “was very odd, to see what old letters Charley’s young hand made,” Esther records the following experience of teaching Charley: “‘Well, Charley,’ said I, looking over a copy of the letter O in which it was represented as square, triangular, pear-shaped, and collapsed in all kinds of ways, ‘we are improving. If we only get to make it round, we shall be perfect Charley’” (378). Despite Esther’s positive outlook, however, Charley’s struggles with writing continue throughout the novel. At various times Esther mentions giving “lessons to Charley” (371), Charley being “at her writing again” (388), “going on with Charley’s education” (447), but these notes are interspersed with comments on Charley’s inability to master grammar: Esther comments that Charley’s grammar, “I confess to my shame, never did any credit to my educational powers” (541); on another occasion Esther notes that although Charley “came through [a lesson] with great applause,” she “was not in the least improved in the old defective article of grammar” (734); and finally, at the end of the novel, Esther remarks that Charley is still “not at all grammatical” (767-8). Thus despite Esther’s “educational powers,” Charley never becomes proficient in grammar.

While Charley's struggles to form letters and to master grammar may represent Dickens's self-deprecating humour—after all, Charley does share his name—on the other hand, the number of times Esther comments on Charley's grammar points to something more significant. Philip Collins notes that Dickens believed that “girls should be educated,” but argues that Dickens

meant, largely, [that women] should be instructed in the domestic crafts and responsibilities equally relevant to a comfortably-off Esther Summerson, jingling her bunch of household keys, or to a working-class girl like Charley Neckett...Certainly, girls should be taught to read, as Esther Summerson recognises when she teaches Charley Neckett...but domestic competence was far more important than intellectual or imaginative range. (*Education* 128)

Even though Charley is wise beyond her years as Miss Flite indicates, “making a variety of motions about her own forehead to express intellect in Charley” and whispering to Esther, “So sagacious, our young friend...Diminutive, but ve-ry sagacious!” (438), and despite the fact that it is important to the novel's perspective on education that Charley should have a basic education—learning how to read and to write—Dickens makes it clear via Esther's reporting that Charley's gifts are in a different area than language.

Dickens characterizes Charley as a mixture of a child and a very capable woman, as “such a little, little creature, in her womanly bonnet and apron” (195), with all the domestic and nurturing abilities that Dickens believes are inherent to true womanhood. Because Charley is a child, she frequently exhibits her excitement in exclamations and round-eyed wonder as she reclaims the childhood that was taken away from her by need;

however, because of the experience need has given her, she is already womanly in her capabilities as a housekeeper and nurse. Mrs. Blinder exclaims, “She’s as handy as it’s possible to be... the way she tended them two children, after the mother died, was the talk of the yard! And it was a wonder to see her with [her father] after he was took ill, it really was!” (190). Similarly, when Esther observes Charley taking care of Jo, she comments on not only Charley’s capability as a nurse, but also her “quiet motherly manner” (382), and during her own sickness, Esther comes to the conclusion that Charley was “sent into the world, surely, to minister to the weak and sick” (433), thus expressing Dickens’s own “[conception] of female nature as ‘ever, in the mass quicker to feel, and much more constant to retain, all tenderness and pity, self-denial and devotion, than the nature of men,’” and his concomitant belief in “women as born nurses” (Slater, *Women* 306). Just as Caddy is a capable writer who learns domestic skills, so Charley is by “nature” and experience a gifted nurse and housekeeper who with some difficulty learns to write. Because of Mr. Jarndyce’s assistance, Charley—whom Dickens initially introduces struggling to survive, much like Jo—is able to settle permanently, being integrated into middle-class society through a respectable marriage: she marries a miller who “is well to do, and was in great request” (768). Despite her grammatical disability, Charley’s story is a success story.

Just as Caddy and Charley are linked by their opposite abilities and inabilities—Caddy can write but must learn housekeeping, while Charley is domestically capable but struggles to learn to write—so Dickens creates a connection between Charley and Jo. When we initially meet them, Jo and Charley are both relatively illiterate orphans struggling to survive by working menial jobs, Jo as a crossing-sweeper and Charley as a

“maid of all work” (Page 68). Dickens makes the connections between Jo and Charley’s history explicit when the third person narrative and Esther’s narrative cross and Jo enters Esther and Charley’s story. Charley tells Esther about Jo’s sickness, describing Jo as “A poor boy...No father, no mother, no any one. ‘Like as Tom might have been, miss’” (379), and Esther comments, “My little maid’s face was so eager, and her quiet hands were folded so closely in one another as she stood looking at me, that I had no great difficulty reading her thoughts” (379-80). Jo reciprocates the sense of connection that Charley expresses, and Esther relates, “My little Charley, with her premature experience of illness and trouble, had pulled off her bonnet and shawl, and now went quietly up to him with a chair, and sat him down in it like an old sick nurse. Except that no such attendant could have shown him Charley’s youthful face, which seemed to engage his confidence” (381). Just as Mr. Jarndyce reaches out to Esther, and Esther to Charley, so Charley is able to reach out to and connect with Jo. When Esther and Charley bring Jo to Bleak House, it seems as though Jo—like Esther, Caddy, and Charley before him—will be saved and put on a useful path through the combination of Mr. Jarndyce’s philanthropic influence and Esther and Charley’s care.

Jo, however, is not saved at Bleak House; he remains a victim of social irresponsibility. In contrast to the many socially responsible characters circulating around and through Bleak House—such as John Jarndyce, Allan Woodcourt, Esther Summerson, Caddy Jellyby, and Charley Neckett—Bleak House is also open to the epitome of entitlement, “the Incarnation of Selfishness” (729),³¹ Mr. Harold Skimpole. While those

³¹ Mr. Skimpole actually uses this phrase in his autobiography to describe Mr. Jarndyce; however, as Mr. Jarndyce is set up as a very generous man, and Skimpole is characterized as a mooch, the irony of the moniker is apparent, and it seems reasonable to bestow the

around him work tirelessly for his welfare and the benefit of others, Mr. Skimpole does not understand that social responsibility is *mutual* responsibility, that in as much as society has a responsibility toward him, he has a responsibility in return. Thus when the feverish Jo is brought to Bleak House, Mr. Skimpole, fearing for his own health, advises Mr. Jarndyce, “You had better turn him out” (385) without seeing the irony of his harshness toward Jo after Mr. Jarndyce’s kindness toward him. Mr. Skimpole not only ignores his ethical obligation to the desperately ill Jo, he also ignores the debt he owes to Mr. Jarndyce when he hands the desperately ill Jo over to Mr. Bucket for a bribe. When Esther later informs Mr. Skimpole that “his conduct seemed to involve a disregard of several moral obligations” (727), Mr. Skimpole explains by disclaiming individual responsibility in favour of responsibility to the system:

Skimpole reasons with himself, [Mr. Bucket] is a tamed lynx, an active police-officer, an intelligent man, a person of a peculiarly directed energy and great subtlety both of conception and execution Now, Skimpole wishes to think well of Bucket; Skimpole deems it essential, in its little place, to the general cohesion of things, that he *should* think well of Bucket. The State expressly asks him to trust to Bucket. And he does.

(729)

Through his self-centredness and his apathy toward Jo, and by making the State and the system his excuse for failing to behave ethically, Mr. Skimpole embodies the social

name “the Incarnation of Selfishness” on Skimpole. After all, Mr. Bucket comments in reference to Skimpole, “Whenever a person proclaims to you ‘In worldly matters I’m a child,’ you consider that that person is only a crying off from being held accountable, and that you have got that person’s number, and it’s Number One” (682).

sickness—the parasitism and blindness to the needs of others—that has created Jo’s physical illness.

Thus, in *Bleak House*, Dickens does depict English society as a bleak house. The social irresponsibility and will to power enabled by institutions like Chancery and the government create places like Tom-all-Alone’s and allow its destructiveness and disease to persist. Characters such as Mrs. Jellyby and Harold Skimpole are unsympathetic, caring more about a Mission or a self-centred desire to be free from obligation than about the people like Jo who surround them. However, despite the bleak social climate in *Bleak House*, the “summer-sun” (Fradin 60) does shine through the fog and Tom-all-Alone’s pestilence in the form of Esther Summerson. Even though Esther does not escape from her encounter unscathed, her recognition of others’ needs and her assumption of responsibility for their care provide a model of housekeeping that encompasses the “[n]ational and [d]omestic” (495). Mr. Jarndyce and Esther recognize their responsibility to others, and their responsibility is evident in their concern for others’ education: by reaching out and teaching those, like Caddy and Charley, who are eager to learn to be useful but have no means of learning useful skills, they reform Bleak House, not only transforming the old Bleak House into a home, but creating a new home in the second Bleak House. Thus, although the end of *Bleak House* is a bleak vision—society in general has not changed—it is also presents the possibility of reform and a call to action.

CHAPTER 4 *LITTLE DORRIT*

In the same way that *Bleak House* revolves around the theme of the law, so *Little Dorrit* revolves around prisons. Prisons are not only a large part of *Little Dorrit*'s physical setting, but also, as Lionel Trilling famously observed, "in a score of ways the theme of incarceration is carried out, persons and classes being imprisoned by their notions of predestined fate or of religious duty, or by their occupations, their life-schemes, their ideas of themselves, their very habits of language" (579). One of the primary psychological prisons that Dickens explores in *Little Dorrit* is the prison created by the desire to live up to the superficial expectations of "Society." In the novel, characters who aspire to be part of "Society" such as Mr. and Mrs. Merdle and William and Fanny Dorrit trap themselves through their own ambition. The need to maintain or elevate their social status by meeting the expectations of "Society" forces these characters to develop a "surface" (474), a "genteel fiction" (89) that prevents them from developing real relationships. "Society" is apathetic: as its primary exemplar, Mrs. Merdle demands of her husband, "I simply request you to care about nothing—or to seem to care about nothing—as everybody else does" (419). Although Mrs. Merdle and William and Fanny Dorrit preach social responsibility, the version of social responsibility that they embrace is skewed because it is a responsibility to one's class or position, rather than to other people. In *Bleak House*, Dickens allowed Sir Leicester Dedlock some inner nobility—a sense of responsibility, of *noblesse oblige*³²—to correspond with his aristocratic pedigree;

³² George H. Ford notes that the "kindly treatment of Sir Leicester Dedlock" shows Dickens's unwillingness to repudiate completely the "aristocratic way of life" when it leads to individual goodness. Ford cites as an example Sir Leicester's defense of Lady

however, in *Little Dorrit*, social aspirants do not share Sir Leicester's virtuous sense of responsibility to other people, but they do share his flawed sense of responsibility to his position, and that class consciousness has become the defining trait of "Society." Thus the selfishness and snobbery of "Society" becomes the very definition of social irresponsibility.

In contrast to the superficial fiction of social responsibility preached by her family and the "Society" that bases worth on appearances and "surface" (474), Amy Dorrit stands out as a practical, caring person—a person of substance—who invests in relationships rather than wealth and who creates a real identity rather than pandering to society's expectations. As the novel's primary example of social responsibility, Amy not only seeks out the basic education and training necessary to facilitate useful and productive work, but also teaches others, both directly, as Maggy's "Little Mother," and indirectly, as an example for Arthur Clennam and Tattycoram. In their positions as a poor needlewoman and an unemployed former maid, both Amy Dorrit and Tattycoram exemplify the type of underprivileged young woman Dickens wanted to teach through the Urania Cottage project; however, as an ideal domestic woman and mother-figure, Amy is a vision of the women Dickens sought to create through the education offered at Urania Cottage, while, in contrast, as a passionate and resentful young woman, Tattycoram is the image of Urania Cottage's failures. Consequently, it is not surprising that at the end of

Dedlock: "When Sir Leicester chooses to defend his wife, his speech...is characterized by Dickens as 'noble...gallant...honourable, manly, and true'" (101). Similarly, the loyalty Sir Leicester garners from his servants demonstrates his inherently respectable character. Pam Morris sees Sir Leicester as an "an elegiac farewell to the order of nobility and chivalry," noting that "Sir Leicester Dedlock is certainly the most affectionate representation of an upper-class character in his fiction" (686). In *Little Dorrit*, the connection between nobility of position and nobility of character has completely broken down; class represents wealth, not character.

the novel, Mr. Meagles—a figure resembling Dickens himself—holds Amy up as a pattern of dutiful womanhood for Tattycoram to emulate. Moreover, as Dickens’s ideal woman, Amy is the vision of social responsibility that points Arthur to a life of usefulness and a sense of purpose. In the same way that Amy’s responsibility provides a critique of Mrs. General’s superficial teaching, Arthur’s development into Dickens’s ideal man provides a pointed critique of government office as a “school for gentlemen” (330) that teaches them to be socially irresponsible.

As a socially responsible person who disregards social class in her regard for other people and desire to be useful, Amy’s lack of concern about her image is at odds with her family’s ambition. When Amy’s skills are no longer necessary for the survival of the family, Mr. Dorrit seeks to resolve through education the growing conflict between Amy’s sense of social responsibility and his understanding of her responsibility to “Society.” In order to integrate Amy into upper class society, Mr. Dorrit hires Mrs. General to re-educate Amy according to society’s superficial standards. Thus, for Dickens, Mrs. General is an unethical educator. Growing up in the Marshalsea has taught Amy the necessity of making moral judgments and her formal education and training have enabled her to be self-reliant and useful—all lessons that she, in turn, has taught Maggy—but Mrs. General’s teaching attempts to undermine all these positive lessons. Instead, Mrs. General promotes apathy and inactivity, denying the existence of unpleasant realities and actively discouraging self-reliance and usefulness. Just as education serves as a gauge of social responsibility in *Bleak House* (the government and Mrs. Jellyby are socially irresponsible because they fail to teach their dependents; Mr. Jarndyce and Esther are socially responsible because they take in society’s orphans and

teach them), so in *Little Dorrit*, education is the arena both where Amy Dorrit works out her real sense of social responsibility and where her sense of social responsibility is challenged by her family's dedication to "Society" and its expectations.

Through the Dorrit family, Dickens explores these competing concepts of social responsibility: William, Fanny, and Tip Dorrit view social responsibility as a responsibility to "Society," to one's class or position (real or imaginary) rather than to other people, and their view conflicts with Amy and Arthur's understanding of social responsibility as an ethical duty, a way of responding to other people by reaching out. The Merdles and Gowans demonstrate that "Society" revolves around fictions and appearances, and William, Fanny, and Edward Dorrit's "genteel fiction" demonstrates that "in *Little Dorrit* ideological fictions govern perception at every level of society" (Holoch 336). While Mrs. Merdle theatrically assumes the voice of "Society" in her decadent drawing room, the Dorrits ape upper class markers within the Marshalsea, incorporating society's values into their life in the prison. Waters notes that William Dorrit's "position as Father is assumed to be a 'natural' entitlement: less an acquired office than an inherited aristocratic distinction. He becomes involved in the institution of a series of rituals and ceremonies which recognise and consolidate his position" (Waters 104). While Mr. Dorrit accepts financial "tribute" as though he is the aristocratic liege-lord of the Marshalsea (Waters 104) and refuses to acknowledge the fact that his children work for a living, Fanny internalizes Mr. Dorrit's family pride, adopting an archly condescending manner toward the rest of the prison, and Tip lives the indolent life of a "young rake," much like Henry Gowan (Waters 107). The fiction of gentility depends on a sense of position and pride, and consequently it separates William, Fanny, and Tip

Dorrit not only from the rest of the prisoners, but also from humble Amy. Although Dickens emphasizes Amy Dorrit's humility and diminutive size, he emphasizes equally the weight of her sense of responsibility and the strength of her sense of purpose, and it is precisely the contrast between her physical characteristics and her personal character that makes her the heroine of the novel. Criticism of *Little Dorrit* has downplayed the significance of Amy's strength of character, focusing instead on Amy's physical smallness and her quietness: Patricia Ingham focuses on Amy's "willed invisibility" (120) and describes her "speechlessness" as "the perfection of self-abnegation" (121), while Joellen Masters observes that "Little Dorrit's self-effacing and nurturing manner in the novel enacts a persistent process of diminishment that makes her necessary but always secondary to those around her" (59). However, Dickens makes it clear that Amy's love does not diminish her—her family does. For example, in the following passage the narrator highlights Fanny's manipulation of Amy in contrast to Amy's honest love for Fanny, commenting that

indeed, it may often be observed in life, that spirits like Little Dorrit do not appear to reason half as carefully as the folks who get the better of them. The continued kindness of her sister was [a] comfort to Little Dorrit. It was nothing to her that the kindness took the form of tolerant patronage; she was used to that. It was nothing to her that it kept her in a tributary position...she sought no better place. (528)

Rather than reciprocating her active concern for them, Amy's family takes advantage of her love and sense of responsibility for them; thus, Amy's family is the real reason for her "secondary" position. Noting that Little Dorrit's "name itself is love—Amy, from the

French *aimée*”(580), Avrom Fleishman concludes that “Little Dorrit is the servant of servants, the last and the least. In the words of the Gospel, ‘He who would be first among you, let him be the servant of all.’ By the spiritual inversion of worldly values, the lowest is most high, the servant is master. Her heroic strength lies in her very weakness, and readers who are dissatisfied with her feebleness have missed Dickens' ethical revaluations” (580). In *Little Dorrit*, Dickens uses the omniscient narrator and characters such as Arthur Clennam, Frederick Dorrit, and Mr. Meagles to recognize Amy’s moral character and industry, to bring Amy forward as an example of social responsibility and to criticize the contrasting passivity and selfishness of her family.

Although Amy’s family underestimates her value, her concern for others does not make her a doormat. Amy does not bend to pressure when her family’s demands conflict with her moral sense—that is, her sense of her own basic rights or her sense of what is due to others. Like Esther Summerson in *Bleak House*, Amy is able to be quietly assertive. Amy adheres to her sense of social responsibility when she walks arm-in-arm with Mr. Nandy to the Marshalsea, despite Fanny’s disgusted castigations. Amy shows her strength of character by refusing to marry John Chivery because she does not love him, even though her father blackmails her emotionally. Moreover, when her family desires to end their acquaintance with Arthur Clennam despite his large role in their transformed fortunes, Amy acts contrary to their wishes, maintaining contact with him both out of her sense of obligation and because she loves Arthur: through the letters she writes to Arthur from Italy, Amy seeks his attention and subtly courts him. The letters demonstrate that Amy is not speechless: although she is quiet, she has many thoughts to share, and although she speaks of Pet Gowan in the letters, they also communicate her

love for Arthur.³³ Amy's actions on behalf of others, her diplomatic interactions with her family, and both her conversations with Arthur and her letters to him demonstrate her moral backbone.

Unlike her father, brother, and sister, who embrace the "family fiction," Amy accepts the reality of their straightened social and financial position in the first half of the novel and seeks to ameliorate their condition in practical ways. Amy embodies Dickens's "idea of virtuous womanhood as possessed of innate, God-given powers to uplift, regenerate and redeem," an idea that, Michael Slater continues, "is inextricably bound up with his celebrated idealization of the domestic. It was always in terms of personal relationships, especially within a family grouping, that woman, for him as for most Victorians, realized her full moral and spiritual potential. . . . The true source of heroism in woman is always domestic or, if not strictly domestic, then it is a concern personally to save or help individuals" (*Women* 309). George Holloch comments, "Although the narrative establishes [Amy's] timidity and self-doubt as consequences of her birth and upbringing, the unselfish love which is the guiding principle of her action in the novel is simply given, like Clennam's 'belief in the gentle and good things his life had been

³³ For example, Amy writes, "I write to you from my own room at Venice, thinking you will be glad to hear from me. But I know you cannot be so glad to hear from me, as I am to write to you; for every thing about you is as you have been accustomed to see it, and you miss nothing—unless it should be me" (492). In the same letter, she "confesses," "in all [my] thoughts, there is one thought scarcely ever—never—out of my memory, and that is that I hope you sometimes, in a quiet moment, have a thought for me. I must tell you that as to this, I have felt, ever since I have been away, an anxiety which I am very very anxious to relieve" (495). In her second letter, Amy describes her homesickness, writing, "My heart is a little lightened when we turn towards [England]. . . . So dearly do I love the scene of my poverty and your kindness. O so dearly! O so dearly!" (580), and at the end of the letter she enjoins, "Do not forget. Your ever grateful and affectionate Little Dorrit" (580). Finally, when Arthur finds out from John Chivery that Little Dorrit loves him, he re-reads her letters and concludes that "[t]here seemed to be a sound in them like the sound of her sweet voice. It fell upon his ear with many tones of tenderness" (764).

without” (343). Although Holoch is right to represent Amy’s “unselfish love” as “simply given,” as an innate element of Dickens’s female ideal, Dickens also clearly emphasizes Amy’s decision, her moral choice to make her love for others “the guiding principle of her action.” Faced with the reality of her father’s incarceration and his inability—or his unwillingness, from the narrator’s point of view—to take responsible action, Amy compensates: the narrator describes how her “protection” of her father is “embodied in action,” how she “*took upon herself* a new relation towards [her] Father” (86 emphasis added). Being “inspired to be something which was not what the rest were, and to be this something, different and laborious for the sake of the rest” (86), Amy Dorrit enacts Dickens’s exhortation to a real melancholy young woman (a Miss Emmely Gottschalk) as if it had been written for her:

The remedy [for your state of mind]...is easy, and we all have it at hand—action, usefulness—and the determination to be of service, even in little things, to those about you, and to be doing something.

In every human existence, however quiet or monotonous, there is range enough for active sympathy and cheerful usefulness. It is through such means I humbly believe that God must be approached, and hope and peace of mind be won. The world is not a dream, but a reality, of which we are the chief part, and in which we must be up and doing something.

(*Letters* 6: 25)³⁴

³⁴ In the biography *Dickens*, Peter Ackroyd quotes from this letter in his discussion of Urania Cottage as part of Dickens’s “practical” philanthropy, an interesting combination that indicates connections between Dickens, Mr. Meagles, and Urania Cottage.

Whereas the narrator of *Little Dorrit* describes Mr. Dorrit's passiveness saying, "If he had been a man with strength of purpose to face those troubles and fight them, he might have broken the net that held him, or broken his heart; but being what he was, he languidly slipped into this smooth descent, and never more took one step upward" (79), in contrast, Arthur admires Amy's "strong purpose" (185) and considers her "as having risen away from the prison atmosphere" (108-9). While the rest of her family is content to uphold the fiction of their essential gentility, Amy assesses her family's position honestly and takes responsibility. Just as in *Bleak House* Esther Summerson's decision to "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" (20) forms her character, so in *Little Dorrit*, Amy Dorrit's character is shaped by the decision to take responsibility for herself and her family.

Amy Dorrit and Caddy Jellyby from *Bleak House* are similar in that both seek education to enable them to take care of their families: Caddy apprentices herself to Esther Summerson to learn housekeeping skills and teaches herself to be a dancing-mistress to provide for her husband and daughter, while Amy seeks practical education to enable her to take care of her father, sister, and brother. Unlike in *Bleak House*, where there is no systematic means of education for the desperately poor—Jo's illiteracy and the connection between his character and the Ragged School movement demonstrate the need for a comprehensive education system—in contrast, in *Little Dorrit*, Amy obtains basic education through a night school which is at least similar to a Ragged School, if not actually part of the movement. The Ragged School Union Magazine described night schools this way: "The importance of Night Schools is based on the fact that they are

instituted for a class who, from their social habits or daily engagements, will not or cannot attend a Day School. It follows that the attendants at a Night School are of a rougher class, their language less refined, of a more unwashed aspect, and more ragged in attire, than consists with a well-ordered Day School” (15: 250). In *Little Dorrit*, Amy attends “by snatches of a few weeks at a time... an evening school outside [the Marshalsea]” (87) called “Mr. Cripples’s Academy” (109-10). This description from the Ragged School Union magazine fits the students of Mr. Cripples’s Academy. As Stephen Wall and Helen Small note, Dickens’s description of the children attending Mr. Cripples’s Academy as “[bursting] into pebbles and yells, and likewise into reviling dances, and in all respects [burying] the pipe of peace with so many savage ceremonies, that if Mr. Cripples had been the chief of the Cripplewayboo tribe with his war-paint on, they could scarcely have done greater justice to their education” (109) is similar to his naming of Borrioboola-Gha in *Bleak House*. Through his references to their “savagery” and his gibberish names, Dickens connects his depiction of Mr. Cripples’s “savage” students to his similarly problematic depiction of Jo, who is “not one of Mrs. Pardiggle’s Tockahoopo Indians,” “not one of Mrs. Jellyby’s lambs, being wholly unconnected with Borrioboola-Gha,” and “not a genuine foreign-grown savage,” but who is instead, “the ordinary home-made article” (564). Unlike Jo, Amy receives a basic education at Mr. Cripples’s Academy and is able to “read and keep accounts—that is [to] put down in words and figures how much the bare necessities that they wanted would cost, and how much less they had to buy them with” (87).

Because her father has completely given up responsibility for himself and his family, Amy takes his responsibility upon herself and arranges for her own education and

the education of her siblings. The narrator comments, “There was no instruction for any of them at home; but [Amy] knew well—no one better—that a man so broken as to be the Father of the Marshalsea, could be no father to his own children” (87). Waters observes, “Unlike the Father, who constantly exploits his paternal identity to maintain the fiction of his gentility, the Child trades on her title only to obtain employment for her siblings and herself” (108). Amy, however, does not trade on the family fiction to raise herself above the rest of the debtors in the Marshalsea like the rest of the family does; instead, by introducing herself as “Child of the Marshalsea,” Amy indicates her membership in the community of the prison and appeals to potential teachers on the basis of their common plight.³⁵ When Amy approaches the milliner to ask for lessons in needlework, she responds to the milliner’s question, “Why should you do that . . . with me before you? It has not done me much good” (88), by recognizing the value of work. She responds, “Nothing—whatever it is—seems to have done anybody much good who comes here . . . but I want to learn, just the same” (88). Thus Amy embodies Dickens’s belief that “[i]ndustriousness was ultimately as much a moral commitment as a practical necessity” (Pope, *Charity* 178).

Amy’s background and education link her to Dickens’s involvement in Angela Burdett-Coutt’s Urania Cottage project and shed light on Dickens’s vision of the ideal responsible woman. Jenny Hartley has examined how the women of Urania Cottage influenced Dickens’s depiction of women’s secrets in *Little Dorrit*, but Urania Cottage also informs *Little Dorrit* in other ways—in particular, Amy expresses Dickens’s aims

³⁵ Amy does not rely solely on her title: she also offers to pay what she can for tuition. Approaching the dancing-master who could potentially teach Fanny to dance, Amy asks him, “if, while you stay here, you could be so kind as to teach my sister cheap,” and he responds, “My child, I’ll teach her for nothing” (87).

for women's education, the womanly ideal he hoped to create through Urania Cottage. Whereas the ashamed prostitute Amy encounters in chapter 14 of the first book is a prime example of the type of woman Dickens originally thought Urania Cottage could assist (191), Amy Dorrit is the prime example of the type of women Urania Cottage actually assisted—being a combination of “starving needlewomen of good character” and “poor girls from Ragged Schools” (“Home”). In the same way that Jo's character in *Bleak House* derives from Dickens's knowledge of the Ragged School movement, Amy Dorrit's character arises from Dickens's involvement in the Urania Cottage project.

Aspiring to be useful for the sake of the rest, Amy embodies the educational ethos of Urania Cottage as Dickens expressed it in “An Appeal to Fallen Women,” where he offered young women “a chance of rising out of your sad life, and having friends, a quiet home, means of being useful to yourself and others” (*Letters* 5: 698). In his writings about education, Dickens emphasized the importance of teaching useful information in schools, explaining that the nation needed “schools where the simple knowledge learned from books is made pointedly *useful*, and immediately applicable to the duties and business of life, directly conducive to order, cleanliness, punctuality, and economy” (qtd. in Crotch 72), and this is the perspective he brought to Urania Cottage. Urania Cottage offered a curriculum revolving around practical skills, combining a basic education in reading, writing, and arithmetic with housekeeping. Prioritizing learning practical useful skills over intellectual development, both Dickens's factual descriptions and his ideal depictions of the education of lower and middle class women demonstrate his belief that women were suited to be particularly useful in the domestic sphere. Slater observes, Dickens “mock[ed] ‘the pursuit of giddy frivolities, and empty nothings’ that he [saw] as

characterizing middle-class female education. His criticism of it is not that it fails to develop the girls' mental faculties or train their intellects but that it unfits them 'for that quiet domestic life, in which they show far more beautifully than in the most crowded assembly'" (*Women* 324).³⁶ Consequently, the education at Urania Cottage revolved around domestic education, teaching "all household work that would be useful to them in a home of their own and enable them to make it comfortable and happy" (*Letters* 5: 698): "Two hours each day were spent in studying the rudiments of knowledge and the rest in acquiring skill in washing, housework, and the preparation of meals" (Manning 168), and "[a]ll the girls engaged in needlework, and as they sat sewing, someone read aloud to them" (169). Like Charley Neckett in *Bleak House*, Amy teaches herself housekeeping, and, like Caddy Jellyby in *Bleak House*, she also makes use of the "scanty means of improvement" (87) that she can find to learn the necessary practical skills that she cannot teach herself, such as reading, accounting, and needlework—all skills emphasized at Urania Cottage. In this way Amy reflects the goals for women's education around which Dickens developed Urania Cottage. Amy is Dickens's ideal Urania Cottage success story: she is "a blessing to [herself] and others" ("Home").

In contrast to Amy Dorrit, the image of Urania Cottage's success, Tattycoram is the negative result, the image of Urania Cottage's failures.³⁷ In contrast to the overwhelming sense of superiority that characterizes many of the upper class characters

³⁶ Dickens's criticism of the women's education emphasizing "giddy frivolities, and empty nothings" may be reflected through Edmund Sparkler, who is "monomaniacal in offering marriage to all manner of undesirable young ladies, and in remarking of every successive young lady to whom he tendered a matrimonial proposal that she was 'a doosed fine gal—well educated too'" (Slater, *Women* 267).

³⁷ Jenny Hartley also connects Tattycoram and Urania Cottage, describing her as a "friendless orphan and Urania figure" (67).

in *Little Dorrit*, Tattycoram rejects the Meagles's charity because, influenced by Miss Wade the "self-tormentor" (693), she feels a correspondingly overwhelming sense of inferiority, that she is being "ill-treated" (42). Fleishman observes, "It is noteworthy that this Dickensian orphan's rebellion does not take place because the Meagles treat her badly but precisely because they treat her so well. It is not ingratitude that Tattycoram expresses, but the ignominy of inferiority... 'She would take no more benefits from us,' says Meagles, evidently paraphrasing her own words" (577). As a "practical" man, Mr. Meagles tells Arthur that he and his wife were prepared to find Tattycoram difficult to handle, recounting their thought that "if we should find her temper a little defective, or any of her ways a little wide of ours, we shall know what we have to take into account. We shall know what an immense deduction must be made from all the influences and experiences that have formed us—no parents, no child-brother or sister, no individuality of home" (33). In other words, Mr. Meagles recognizes Tattycoram's negative life experience as negative education, and it is precisely that negative education that he seeks to counter with positive instruction and experience. While the similarities of position between Charley Neckett in *Bleak House* and Tattycoram in *Little Dorrit* are striking, the difference in temper and response is undeniable. In *Bleak House*, Charley has accepted responsibility for her family at a young age, and therefore she is overjoyed and proud to be given a position of responsibility as Esther Summerson's maid; in *Little Dorrit*, Tattycoram spent her childhood in an institution, never having had the "individuality of home" (33), and consequently she finds her position as a maid to Pet, a beloved daughter, to be insufferable.

Dickens's association with the Urania Cottage project informs his characterization of Tattycoram's passionate temper and her need for self-restraint. In *Little Dorrit*, Tattycoram's sense of ill-treatment and her ungovernable temper constructs a prison of resentment, just as Miss Wade has obsessively constructed her own imprisoning inferiority complex. Mr. Meagles's "practicality" mirrors Dickens's own: just as Mr. Meagles repeatedly admonishes "Count five-and-twenty, Tattycoram!" (215), so in his description of the "Home for Homeless Women" at Urania Cottage, Dickens notes,

It is...found that a serious and urgent entreaty to a girl, to exercise her self-restraint on some point (generally temper)...often has an excellent effect when it is accompanied with such encouragement as 'You know how changed you are since you have been here; you know we have begun to entertain great hopes of you. For God's sake consider! Do not throw away this great chance of your life, by making yourself and everybody around you unhappy...but conquer this. ("Home")

In this passage Dickens presents Urania Cottage as an opportunity for young women to experience a home-like atmosphere and to change their future; similarly, Mr. Meagles gives Tattycoram an opportunity to share the Meagles's home and to have work as a maid. Much as Dickens enjoins the inhabitants of Urania Cottage to "exercise self-restraint," so Mr. Meagles enjoins Tattycoram to restrain her temper by counting. Swayed, however, more by the influence of Miss Wade than by Mr. Meagles's injunctions, Tattycoram "relapses," as a significant proportion of the young women at Urania Cottage did — 27 out of 56 in its first five and a half years ("Home").

Unlike the young women at Urania Cottage who “relapsed,” Tattycoram eventually returns to Mr. and Mrs. Meagles. In a moment that reiterates and emphasizes the novel’s theme, Mr. Meagles points to Amy’s sense of duty as an example for Tattycoram. He explains,

If she had constantly thought of herself, and settled with herself that everybody visited this place upon her, turned it against her, and cast it at her, she would have led an irritable and probably an useless existence. Yet I have heard tell, Tattycoram, that her young life has been one of active resignation, goodness, and noble service. Shall I tell you what I consider those eyes of hers, that were here just now, to have always looked at, to get that expression?'. . . .Duty, Tattycoram. Begin it early, and do it well; and there is no antecedent to it, in any origin or station, that will tell against us with the Almighty, or with ourselves. (845-6)

According to Mr. Meagles, Tattycoram needs to become practical, like Amy; however, in his practical emphasis on duty, Mr. Meagles overlooks Amy’s love, which, along with her sense of duty, motivates her to be responsible. Rather than patterning herself after Miss Wade, who is a “self-tormentor”—the reflexive nature of the word indicates its compulsive self-centredness—Tattycoram needs to pattern herself after Amy, learning to love other people. When Tattycoram stops seeing herself through other people’s eyes, and learns to see other people truly and to love them as Amy does, then she will earn the approval she desires and her self-centered fears will evaporate.

Whereas Amy teaches Tattycoram indirectly by providing an example of social responsibility for her to follow, Amy teaches Maggy directly. Taking responsibility for

Maggy's welfare on her own shoulders as she takes on the role of Maggy's "Little Mother," Amy ensures that Maggy learns the skills that enable her to thrive, despite her disability. Although Maggy's disability increases her vulnerability and her dependence, Maggy is content, secure, independent, and productive because of Amy's intervention. If, as Patricia Ingham argues, Dickens's ideal young female characters, possessing girlish figures but womanly minds, are often overshadowed by the threat of male violence (36),³⁸ then how much more would Maggy, possessing a womanly figure and a childish mind, be a potential victim living on the streets of London? This point is most clear in the chapter describing "Little Dorrit's Party," where Amy and Maggy are locked out of both the prison and Maggy's residence. Emphasizing the contrast between the two women—they appear to bystanders as "the woman and the child" (190), an ironic truth, as Little Dorrit is a woman who appears childlike, while Maggy is essentially a child who appears womanly—the narrator describes the danger Amy and Maggy face over the course of a night spent walking the streets: "They had shrunk past homeless people.... They had run from drunkards. They had started from slinking men, whistling and signing to one another at bye corners, or running away at full speed" (190). In *Little Dorrit*, Maggy's disability increases the potential risk that she will be victimized; however, at the time Dickens was writing in the 1850s, her "feeble-mindedness" would also have indicated a corresponding lack of sexual restraint. In the Victorian period, Paula Bartley notes,

Those defined as 'feeble-minded' were believed to be more sexually precocious than the rest of the population since their limited intellect made their powers of inhibition and moral constraint correspondingly low. This

³⁸ For an example of this in *Little Dorrit*, Ingham cites Rigaud's obsession with Minnie Gowan (36).

led to a ‘loss of control over the lower propensities’ ‘Feeble-mindedness’ in women, therefore, attracted a moral as well as a mental stigma: prostitution, illegitimacy and sexual promiscuity were taken to be the expected outcomes—the natural consequences—of ‘feeble-mindedness’. (127)

While Dickens does not explicitly point to any sexual precociousness in Maggy’s character, he does include a specific example of Maggy’s lack of restraint—a “weakness” in her character before Amy’s intervention—that might tacitly imply a lack of sexual self-control. Telling Maggy’s story, Amy explains that “because she was very weak; indeed was so weak that when she began to laugh she couldn’t stop herself—which was a great pity. . . . [h]er grandmother did not know what to do with her, and for some years was very unkind to her indeed” (118). Thus, before Amy’s intervention, Maggy’s story embodies the contemporary stereotypes about mental disability, pointing to potential sexual victimization and a potentially dangerous lack of sexual restraint as well as pointing to actual abuse.

In addition to embodying the contemporary belief that the mentally disabled were more sexually uninhibited, Maggy also embodies the belief that the “feeble-minded” could not be independent. Bartley describes, “it was feared that most ‘feeble-minded’ young women could perform only unskilled work, and that ‘slowly and badly, and for the most part they need constant supervision. They can rarely earn enough to maintain themselves and their mental and moral weakness exposes them to many temptations’” (129). While Maggy’s life as a disabled woman begins by embodying this contemporary stereotype, her story undergoes a swift transition: “At length, in course of time, Maggy

began to take pains to improve herself, and to be very attentive and very industrious; and by degrees was allowed to come in and out as she liked, and got enough to do to support herself, and does support herself” (118). The sudden transition in the story from bewilderment to a sense of purpose marks Amy’s entrance into Maggy’s life. Even though Amy glosses over her involvement, Arthur recognizes “what was wanting to [the story’s] completeness” (188). Just as Amy improves herself, so she teaches Maggy how to be independent, so that when we meet Maggy, in contrast to contemporary expectations for the mentally disabled, she has “a good lodging” (189)—potentially at one of the refuges operated by “the Reformatory and Refuge Union” which “target[ed] young women perceived to be in moral danger” (Bartley 26)³⁹—and she “goes on errands as well as anyone,” “is as trustworthy as the Bank of England,” and “earns her own living entirely” (117). Like Esther Summerson, who acts as a mentor and mother-figure to Caddy Jellyby and Charley Neckett, Amy Dorrit mothers and teaches Maggy. If we consider the contemporary understanding of mental disability as a backdrop for Dickens’s portrayal of Maggy, then her self-restraint and independence stand as a testament to Amy’s tutelage.

Amy begins the novel as an ideal character, and consequently the conflict that *Little Dorrit* records is not her struggle to become a socially responsible character, but her struggle to remain a socially responsible character in the face of her family’s desire to

³⁹ Bartley notes that “Evangelicals advocated an alternative system of reform [for prostitution] and tried to establish a family home system rather than a penitential one. The leading Evangelical Tory, Lord Shaftesbury, was patron of the first society, named the London Female Dormitory, which founded its first home in Camden Town, London, in 1850. Others swiftly followed. Evangelicals formed their own co-ordinating society in 1856, “the Reformatory and Refuge Union” (26). The chapter “Little Dorrit’s Party,” in which Maggy and Amy stay on the street all night, was published in March 1856, and thus is contemporaneous with the development of the Reformatory and Refuge Union.

re-educate her along the socially irresponsible guidelines set out by “Society.” While this pressure exists even in the first half of the novel as the family lives in the Marshalsea, when the Dorrits become rich, Amy inherits not only a fortune but also the full force of the family fiction and the family’s flawed sense of social responsibility. Although Janice M. Carlisle eloquently argues for Amy’s complicity in the family fiction, pointing out that in the first half of the novel “Little Dorrit—not her father or brother or sister—is the character who ‘preserves’ the ‘genteel fiction that they [are] all idle beggars together’” (200), Carlisle fails to make an important caveat: Amy only maintains the family fiction to *protect* her father, not to further her own position or enlarge her sense of self-importance. Moreover, as the chapter entitled “Spirit” forcefully demonstrates through Amy’s willingness to associate with Mr. Nandy, “a Pauper!” (390)—foreshadowing the conflict that will arise in the second book between Amy’s friendships and her family’s concern for position—while Amy preserves the fiction of gentility for her father’s sake, she certainly does not subscribe to the discrimination between people that it entails. Thus, when the Dorrits obtain the wealth that will enable them to enter upper class society, Amy *must* be re-educated.

To teach Amy how to conform to the expectations of “Society” and to direct her in “the formation of a surface” (501), Mr. Dorrit hires Mrs. General, who is the epitome of “surface”—she has no personality, and her only character is the “character reference” that she is given by employers (472).⁴⁰ Holoch argues that Mrs. General’s “association

⁴⁰ Society, expressing its opinion through Mrs. General’s “testimonials,” interprets Mrs. General’s vacuity as virtue. Whereas her testimonials call her “a prodigy of piety, learning, virtue, and gentility” (472), the narrator describes her vacancy, saying, “her eyes had no expression...because they had nothing to express,” and continuing in the

with the Dorrits suggests that they are attempting to enact the dreams of an entire class, but the price of gentility is the simultaneous repression of the self and others” (346). Indeed, Mrs. General’s purpose is “that she might ‘form the mind,’ and eke the manners, of some young lady of distinction. Or, that she might harness the proprieties to the carriage of some rich young heiress or widow, and become at once the driver and guard of such vehicle through the social mazes” (472). Mrs. General’s function is to teach young women how to live up to the social expectations that women of social power and position such as Mrs. Merdle value, and Dickens establishes the link between Mrs. General and Mrs. Merdle through similar characterization: Dickens’s characterization of Mrs. Merdle revolves around the image of her “bosom,” which “was not a bosom to repose upon, but it was a capital bosom to hang jewels on” (265), and his description of Mrs. General as “an article of that lustrous surface which suggests that it is worth any money” (474) is similarly cold and superficial. Holoch notes that the “figures of Mrs. General and the Merdles suggest that society is constituted by the stifling of particular identity” (346). Moreover, the formation of surface that is required in order to enter “Society” is oppositional to the development of moral character: consequently, Mrs. General’s teaching aims to undermine Amy’s self-reliance, usefulness, and moral sense, instead promoting inactivity and moral apathy. Dickens describes Mrs. General’s “element,” saying, “Nobody had an opinion. There was a formation of surface going on around her on an amazing scale, and it had not a flaw of courage or honest free speech in it” (537)—an ending that ironically indicates the qualities that Dickens values in contrast to “surface.” Mrs. General replaces moral sense, which is represented by “courage” and

same vein, “Mrs General had no opinions. Her way of forming a mind was to prevent it from forming opinions” (475).

“honest free speech,” with social appropriateness, which is represented by the “proper, placid, and pleasant” (504).⁴¹ Thus Mr. Dorrit hires Mrs. General to erode Amy’s real social responsibility and to replace it with an appreciation for “giddy frivolities and empty nothings” (Slater, *Women* 324)—exemplified in the catalogue of meaninglessly “appropriate” words such as “Papa, potatoes, poultry, prunes, and prism,” which are “all very good words for the lips” and “serviceable...in the formation of a demeanour” (500).

Although Mrs. General claims that she wishes to be Amy and Fanny’s “companion, protector, Mentor, and friend” (474), her character and the impersonal education she imposes on Fanny and Amy, being superficial, preclude the development of a meaningful relationship; significantly, these attributes—companionship, protection, mentoring, and friendship—already characterize Amy’s relationships, and in particular her relationship to Maggy. Whereas Amy’s decision to “be something which was not what the rest were, and to be that something, different and laborious, for the sake of the rest” (86) has formed her character, her family—the “rest” for whose sake she has worked—does not recognize the inherent value of her responsibility, nor do they recognize how her care and industry have benefited them.⁴² Dickens ironically emphasizes Amy’s strength of character through Mrs. General’s diagnosis that “Fanny...has force of character and self-reliance. Amy, none” (497), and the narrator responds theoretically as Mr. Dorrit (and the reader) should respond: “None? O Mrs General, ask the Marshalsea stones and bars. O Mrs General, ask the milliner who taught

⁴¹ Although Mrs. General states, “A truly refined mind will seem to be ignorant of the existence of anything that is not perfectly proper, placid, and pleasant” (501), she leaves the impression that Dickens equates refinement and ignorance.

⁴² There are intermittent moments when Mr. Dorrit and Fanny do recognize Amy’s worth; however, in the second half of the book, Frederick Dorrit, Amy’s uncle, most consistently recognizes Amy’s true worth.

her to work, and the dancing-master who taught her sister to dance. O Mrs General, Mrs General, ask me, her father, what I owe her; and hear my testimony touching the life of this slighted little creature, from her childhood up!” (497). Thus, because they do not recognize their former dependence on Amy, Fanny and Edward are outraged when she cares for Pet Gowan, and Mr. Dorrit is able to suggest hypocritically to Amy, “Dependents, to respect us, must be—ha—kept at a distance and—hum—kept down. Down” (479). Mr. Dorrit’s view of social relations is centered on the careful creation and maintenance of appropriate distance; in contrast, Amy finds her purpose in creating and maintaining relationships by reaching out to and assisting other people.

Amy’s character is inappropriate in her new social position because it is active and practical—in the Meaglian sense of practicality—rather than passive and superficial; consequently, she feels, “To have no work to do was strange, but not half so strange as having glided into a corner where she had no one to think for, nothing to plan and contrive, no cares of others to load herself with” (488). Amy’s understanding of social responsibility as an ethical duty, a way of responding to others, conflicts with Mr. Dorrit’s understanding of social responsibility as a responsibility to “Society,” to one’s class or position rather than to other people, and therefore Mr. Dorrit is correct to state that Amy “is lost in the society we have here” and that “our tastes are evidently not her tastes,” although he is wrong to assume that this means “there is something wrong in—ha—Amy” (498). While William Dorrit’s assertion that something is wrong with Amy indicates his degradation, Frederick Dorrit’s protection of Amy indicates his corresponding increase in moral strength. In a crucial thematic moment—indeed, the defining moment of his character in the novel—Frederick declares,

To the winds with the family credit!...I protest against pride. I protest against ingratitude. I protest against any one of us here who have known what we have known, and have seen what we have seen, setting up any pretension that puts Amy at a moment's disadvantage, or to the cost of a moment's pain. *We may know that it's a base pretension by its having that effect.* It ought to bring a judgment on us. Brother, I protest against it, in the sight of God! (509 emphasis added)

Recognizing the hypocrisy in the family's prioritization of their aspirations over Amy's welfare, after she has made the family a priority for so long, Frederick defends Amy, making Amy the standard of real moral character against which society ought to be measured.

In her capacity as a "virtuous woman" who "possesse[s]...innate, God-given powers to uplift, regenerate and redeem" (Slater, *Women* 309), Amy is not only a pattern for Tattycoram to follow, but also a pattern of loving purpose, responsibility, and usefulness that transforms Arthur Clennam. When Dickens first introduces Arthur Clennam, Arthur is poised to re-enter English society, and yet, even though he is relatively secure financially, he is aimless and downcast. Describing the trajectory set by his education, upbringing, and business life, he explains to Mr. Meagles, "I have no will...next to none that I can put in action now. Trained by main force; broken, not bent; ...always grinding in a mill I always hated; what is to be expected from *me* in middle-life? Will, purpose, hope? All those lights were extinguished before I could sound the words" (35). Arthur's life has been devoted to the family business, and thus he lacks human connection; he has no meaningful relationships to give him purpose. Imprisoned

by his depressing past and the bleak future that he anticipates will follow his return home, Arthur is a “melancholy searcher after meaning in life” engaged in “a quest for authentic values in a degraded world” (Fleishman 583).

Just as Amy provides a pattern of loving usefulness for Tattycoram to follow, she also teaches Arthur Clennam to find purpose in life. Describing Arthur’s ethical development, Holoch asserts, “What is significant in [Arthur’s] moral and intellectual development throughout the novel is his assumption of responsibility and his recognition of connections that do not depend on the kind of moral bookkeeping represented by his mother, even though he shares certain basic moral assumptions with her” (338).⁴³ Arthur’s quest to take responsibility and make reparations for the wrongs that he believes lie in his parents’ past leads him to Little Dorrit, the perfect exemplar of the responsible ethic that Arthur wishes to embody. Little Dorrit’s selflessness solidifies Arthur’s willingness “to lay down all he had, and begin the world anew” (339); Arthur, Trilling notes, “has by no means been robbed of his ethical will, [and] he can exert energy to help others” (587). Amy’s ethical example, her sacrificial love for her family, as well as his own fear that his parents might be responsible for Mr. Dorrit’s imprisonment inspire Arthur to assist her. Arthur’s strict, loveless upbringing by his dominating mother has

⁴³ That the underlying connections between people and the necessity of ethical action will prove to be an important element of the novel is foreshadowed throughout the first chapter in which Dickens introduces the purposeless Arthur and the practical Mr. Meagles: the chapter is entitled “Fellow Travellers,” and it ends with the statement “thus ever...coming and going so strangely, to meet and to act and react on one another, move all we restless travellers through the pilgrimage of life” (43). Carlisle notes that the “narrator here promises that the characters will meet and act and react on one another. According to this definition, the ‘connections’ Dickens speaks of in the number plans are the primary vital connections of human responsiveness” (205). Thus, the idea of “fellow travellers” establishes the significance of essential connections and the need to respond to the other with ethical action.

demonstrated to him the bleakness of the will to power (Trilling 587), and thus he is determined to be different not only from his mother, whose will is set on justifying herself,⁴⁴ but also from the other members of upper class society whom he encounters, such as Mrs. Gowan, whose will is bent on her own social position, or the Barnacles and Stiltstalkings, whose will is focussed on maintaining their parasitic position without doing work. Instead, Arthur emulates Little Dorrit.

Arthur is inspired by Little Dorrit to share her “concern personally to save or help individuals”; however, while Little Dorrit works out her concern in the domestic sphere, Arthur works out his concern in the world of business, not only seeking to solve the puzzle of Mr. Dorrit’s finances with Mr. Pancks, but also dealing with the Circumlocution Office for Daniel Doyce and taking Doyce under his wing financially. Much as Amy and Tattycoram present the success and failure of Urania Cottage, so through the conflict between Arthur Clennam and the Circumlocution Office, Dickens embodies his views about the opposite education and sense of social responsibility dividing middle and upper class men. While he was “actively contemplating” *Little Dorrit* (Ackroyd 734), Dickens joined the newly-formed Administrative Reform Association—a move that clearly informs his depiction of the Barnacle and Stiltstalking form of administration. Ackroyd notes that the association

embraced aims which were very much those of Dickens himself. And how could it not have done so since its membership was made up of professional men, businessmen, self-made men—in fact the whole range

⁴⁴ Holoch comments that Mrs. Clennam suffers from “the internal contradiction between her knowledge of personal responsibility and her will to be an instrument of divine wrath” (338).

of practical, energetic mid-Victorians who disliked what was still the aristocratic and ‘tuft-hunting’ bias of government, of toadying and patronage, of the sons of sons who packed the various offices of the Civil Service? (734)

The opposition between the “practical, energetic” Doyce and Clennam and the aristocratic and ineffectual Barnacles and Stiltstalkings that Dickens weaves into *Little Dorrit* reflects the opposition between the “practical, energetic” men of the association, including Dickens himself, and the contemporary aristocratic government. Just as Mrs. General’s occupation is to socialize women so that they are inactive and apathetic and therefore fit for “Society,” so the Circumlocution Office socializes upper class men to be equally socially irresponsible. Consequently, Dickens presents the Circumlocution Office as “gentility institutionalized” (Engel 130), “a school for gentlemen” (330), and “a politico diplomatico hocus pocus piece of machinery, for the assistance of the nobis in keeping off the snobs” (131).⁴⁵

In stark contrast to what Dickens presents as the utter uselessness of the Circumlocution Office, Arthur desires to be socially responsible like Amy and seeks ways to be purposeful and useful. The narrator contrasts Arthur’s active “practical” embrace of ethics to insubstantial social rhetoric, noting that

⁴⁵ Edgar Johnson describes Dickens’s frustration with “the incompetence and indifference to human suffering that produced a thousand evils at home” (840), quoting a letter written already several years before *Little Dorrit*, in which Dickens argues that the classes were “set in opposition” because “the upper class... have put *their* class in opposition to the country—not the country which puts itself in opposition to them” (841). Similarly, Johnson notes that Dickens criticized nepotism in the government in an article “called ‘Scarli Tapa and the Forty Thieves,’ in which the robbers’ cave, ‘with the enchanted letters O.F.F.I.C.E.,’ is entered by pronouncing the words ‘Debrett’s Peerage. Open Sesame!’” (841).

the first article in [Arthur's] code of morals was, that he must begin, in practical humility, with looking well to his feet on Earth, and that he could never mount on wings of words to Heaven. Duty on earth, restitution on earth, action on earth: these first, as the first steep steps upward. Strait was the gate and narrow was the way; far straiter and narrower than the broad high road paved with vain professions and vain repetitions. (339)

Discussing this passage, Holoch notes that Arthur's desire to be actively useful is "founded on the renunciation of self, a personal moral counterweight to the various masquerades of self-interest which constitute the world he has encountered" (341). As the fictional representative of the "practical, energetic" men of the Administrative Reform Association, Arthur embodies Dickens's male ideal, even though he has much to learn. When Arthur wants Doyce to explain his invention, Arthur declares that he is "totally uneducated" in mechanics, but Doyce's reply prioritizes Arthur's practical and responsible character over the formal education he has received. Doyce emphatically states, "No man of sense who has been generally improved, and has improved himself, can be called quite uneducated as to anything.... I would as soon, on a fair and clear explanation, be judged by one class of man as another, provided he had the qualification I have named" (540). Thus the male ideal that Doyce describes and Arthur embodies—in contrast to the powerful but parasitic Barnacles and Stiltstalkings—includes the same willingness to learn, self-help attitude, and eagerness to help others that characterize Amy; however, the male ideal works out these social virtues in the "male" sphere of business, mechanics, and government.

The final step in Arthur's education places Arthur in Amy's shoes as a resident of the Marshalsea. Whereas throughout the vast majority of the novel, Amy and Arthur's concern for others enables them to see through superficial fictions—Amy recognizes her family's genteel fiction and Arthur sees Christopher Casby for the patriarchal fraud that he is—nevertheless, Arthur is taken in by the Merdle phenomenon and irresponsibly speculates with his business partner's money. However, unlike characters such as the Merdles, Mr. Dorrit, and the Barnacles and Stiltstalkings who are characterized by their irresponsibility, Arthur's irresponsible act is an isolated error of judgment, and one for which he takes full responsibility because he is concerned for Doyce rather than himself: he states emphatically that "the question with me...is, what can I do for my partner, how can I best make reparation to him?" (747). Because Arthur is a responsible person, he accepts the consequences of his action and is imprisoned in the Marshalsea, and thus he is redeemed. Doyce tells Arthur, "You will profit by the failure, and will avoid it another time....Every failure teaches a man something, if he will learn; and you are too sensible a man not to learn from this failure" (856). Arthur does learn from his failure. Holloch comments, "Clennam's public avowal of responsibility is, in the context of the execration heaped on Merdle, an assertion of his moral independence from the social system that has created Merdle; and his determination to be incarcerated in the Marshalsea is a conscious violation of the social code of hierarchy" (349). During his incarceration in the Dorrits' former room, he reaffirms Amy's position as the exemplar from whom he learned how to be socially responsible:

"When I first gathered myself together," he thought, "and set something like purpose before my jaded eyes, whom had I before me, toiling on, for a

good object's sake, without encouragement, without notice, against ignoble obstacles that would have turned an army of received heroes and heroines? One weak girl!in whom had I watched patience, self-denial, self-subdual, charitable construction, the noblest generosity of the affections?" (753)

By accepting responsibility for his failure and asserting his "moral independence from the social system that has created Merdle," and by recognizing again the standard of social responsibility that Amy sets, Arthur realigns himself with Amy as a socially responsible character.

Just as in *Bleak House*, the socially responsible main characters—Mr. Jarndyce, Esther Summerson, Allan Woodcourt—are rewarded for their social responsibility, so in *Little Dorrit*, Amy and Arthur are rewarded for their social responsibility in their marriage. Amy's marriage to Arthur at the end of *Little Dorrit* stands in contrast to the society marriages of Mr. and Mrs. Merdle, and Fanny and Edmund Sparkler. Whereas the marriages of the Merdles and Sparklers are merely social alliances—Mr. Merdle tells his wife, "If you were not an ornament to Society, and if I was not a benefactor to Society, you and I would never have come together" (418-9)—Arthur and Amy love each other and share a common outlook in their desire to be socially responsible. In Arthur, Amy finds someone who shares her moral standards and her sense of purpose as well as someone who recognizes her worth and who acts in her best interest—all fundamental differences from the attitude her family has shown toward her. Inspired by Amy, Arthur finds purpose, and, following her example, he learns to navigate between true social responsibility and the selfishness that masquerades as social responsibility. Both Amy

and Arthur demonstrate the key characteristics that Daniel Doyce highlights: they are people of “good sense” who have “been generally improved” (540) and who desire not only to improve themselves, but also to help others.

Criticism of *Little Dorrit* has assessed its final statement as bleak, noting that “as [Arthur and Amy] passed along in sunshine and in shade, the noisy and the eager, and the arrogant and the forward and the vain, fretted, and chafed, and made their usual uproar” (860). However, much as at the end of *Bleak House* the legal system has not changed, but John Jarndyce, Esther Summerson, and Allan Woodcourt offer a vision of personal responsibility to counter the injustice of the legal system and the state, so at the end of *Little Dorrit*, although the nature of society has not changed, Dickens offers a vision of real social responsibility to counter the self-centered visions of the individual’s responsibility to “Society” embraced by “the arrogant and the forward and the vain” (860): Arthur and Amy are married, surrounded by the community of friends and witnesses that they have impacted—including Daniel Doyce, Mr. Pancks, Flora Finching, Maggy, and John Chivery—and go “down into a modest life of usefulness and happiness,” being “inseparable and blessed” (859).

CHAPTER 5 CONCLUSION

As we have seen, in both *Bleak House* and *Little Dorrit* Dickens explores social responsibility in the realm of education. In doing so he draws both on his own educational experiences—positive experiences of being mentored and of teaching himself, as well as the extremely negative experience of being denied access to education—and on his knowledge of contemporary educational movements such as the Ragged School movement and Urania Cottage. Dickens embodies the “Ignorance” and “Want” that he saw in the Ragged Schools in the character of Jo, thus criticizing the government’s failure to create an educational system to teach the poor the useful skills that would enable them to improve their condition. Conversely, he represents social responsibility in ideal mentors such as Esther Summerson and Amy Dorrit—the images of Urania Cottage’s success—and these characters teach those who desire to learn, embodying the social responsibility and usefulness that Dickens promotes.

Responsible characters such as Esther Summerson, Amy Dorrit, Caddy Jellyby, and Charley Neckett desire to be educated so that they can be useful; therefore they actively seek good teachers and, when good teachers cannot be found, they teach themselves. Moreover, these same responsible characters, once they have been taught, become teachers in turn, mentoring others who want to learn the useful skills that they possess: Esther mentors both Caddy Jellyby and Charley Neckett, while Amy teaches Maggy directly as a mother-figure and instructs Tattycoram and Arthur indirectly as an inspiring example. In their dual roles as both students and teachers, Esther Summerson

and Amy Dorrit demonstrate how education is a middle space where self-help and charity—personal and social responsibility—meet.

In their socially responsible concern to provide useful education for others, both Esther Summerson and Amy Dorrit serve to critique others' social irresponsibility. Esther Summerson's concern to reach out to others and to teach them useful skills shows up the government's failure to provide educational opportunity to the poor and underprivileged. Similarly, Amy Dorrit's morality and active useful service for others contrasts with the "Society" education—which is taught by Mrs. General, the exemplar of vacuous superficial propriety—that creates "surface," promotes apathy, and actively discourages usefulness. The conflict between the forward-thinking purposefulness of Doyce and Clennam and the static "Circumlocution" of the Barnacles and Stiltstalkings provides a similar critique of upper class education for men.

While the visions Dickens leaves us with at the end of both *Bleak House* and *Little Dorrit* have been labelled as "bleak," I contend that these endings represent a call to action. Even though the visions of the state of society as a whole at the end of these novels may be dark, Esther Summerson and Amy Dorrit end their stories surrounded by the community of people that they have impacted as a result of their decisions to be responsible. Thus, by demonstrating the positive effect of individual responsibility, Esther Summerson and Amy Dorrit are role models not only within their novels, but also for the readers who make their acquaintance.

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