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‘The Monstrous Feminine’ Female Abjection in the Works of Charles Dickens

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Introduction

This research thesis consists of two main parts. In the first part, a theoretical framework will be established, explaining the broad concept of abjection, defined by several scholars. Further on the notion of abjection will be applied on the female sex, on Victorian women in particular. Several aspects of abjection will be given, including a link with the similar concept of 'the uncanny' or 'das unheimliche' by Freud followed by a enumeration of the various improper Victorian women and in addition, to establish a contrast, of the Victorian ideal, the so-called 'angels of the house' image as well.

The nineteenth century was a period characterized by rapid technological changes such as the development of railways, steamships, telegraphs and photography. The population increased enormously due to the lack of big epidemics and augmented fertility rates. However, a large part of that population consisted of poor working-class individuals. As a result, workhouses were founded where the poor could live in atrocious circumstances. The keystone of society was the home and the family. Consequentially, a female ideal was developed called 'the angel of the house'. This 'angel of the house' was the perfect wife and mother and generally possessed the following characteristics: submissive, obedient, loving, unselfish, ignorant (both sexually and intellectually) and lacking of any opinion. She was the counterpart of 'the fallen woman'. Typically, fallen women were individuals who literally fell into sin, mainly by having premarital intercourse (mostly prostitutes) or committing adultery. However, the notion of 'fallen women' can be broadened if spinsters, women denying motherhood and new women were included as well. There was thus a strict social hierarchy which distinguished properness from improperness.

To apply these concepts of abjection and improperness, three novels by Dickens were chosen where several female characters will be analyzed. These novels were selected because they contain a wide variety of both improper women and abject mothers. This thesis aims to demonstrate that the concept of abjection is applicable to not only these novels by Dickens, but also to the Victorian society in general. The first novel to be discussed, one of Dickens' earliest works, is 'Oliver Twist', published between February 1837 and April 1839. The various mother figures for Oliver will be analysed, both the 'good' mothers like Agnes and Nancy and the 'bad' mothers like Mrs Mann and Mrs Sowerberry, although it should be noted that the distinction between good and bad is questionable. In the second novel 'Bleak House', published between March 1852 and September 1853, the female protagonist Esther Summerson will be reviewed, who -due to her sinful origin and masculine features- presents a case of doubt as to the labelling of properness. However, the main focus will be on the grotesque mothers Mrs. Jellyby, Mrs. Pardiggle and most importantly lady Dedlock, who embodies both the persona of adulteress and abject mother. The third novel we will concentrate on is 'Great Expectations'. The work was published between December 1860 and August 1861 and is one of Dickens' last novels. Although the novel contains many improper females, we will limit our focus to only two of them. The first will be Miss Havisham. Her improperness is twofold; she not only constitutes the role of an unmarried woman or spinster, but also functions as an abject mother for Estella, her adopted daughter. The second character will be Molly, the housekeeper of Mr Jaggers. She is improper because she denies motherhood to her daughter Estella.

Chapter 1: An Introduction to the Theoretical Framework of Abjection

Defining Abjection

The word abjection is a difficult concept to define. In Merriam Webster's dictionary (2013), abjection is described as 'a low or downcast state'. Georges Bataille (in Kristeva 56) gives a slightly more elaborated description of the concept in his 'Essais de Sociologie': "Abjection [. . .] is merely the inability to assume with sufficient strength the imperative act of excluding abject things (and that act establishes the foundations of collective existence). [. . .] The act of exclusion has the same meaning as social or divine sovereignty, but it is not located on the same level; it is precisely located in the domain of things and not, like sovereignty, in the domain of persons." We can deduce two conclusions from this rather complicated definition. Abjection is not being able to exclude downcast things and the concept has to be applied on objects rather than humans. According to Kristeva (64), Bataille was also the first to specify that the core of abjection is the subject/object relationship instead of subject/other subject.

Julia Kristeva (4) provides a more understandable definition and describes abjection as follows: "Abjection, on the other hand, is immoral, sinister, scheming, and shady: a terror that dissembles, a hatred that smiles, a passion that uses the body for barter instead of inflaming it, a debtor who sells you up, a friend who stabs you." She describes it through a series of contradictions; abjection is the fusion of two elements that do not belong together. Abjection thus consists of two aspects: repulsion and fascination.

The concept of abjection can be linked to the Freudian idea of 'the uncanny' or 'das unheimliche' (in Sandner 76), the notion of something being at the same time foreign and

familiar which results in the creation of cognitive dissonance. The individual is both repelled and fascinated by the object. This cognitive dissonance can result into a rejection of the object. Abjection can be uncanny in the sense that, despite the fact that the object is foreign, we can still identify familiar aspects in it. According to Freud (241 in Lougy 477), it is "[i]n reality nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old—established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression." Kristeva's definition can also be associated with the uncanny; she uses for example the idea of a 'metaphorical friend', who instead of embracing you, betrays you. The concept of a friend is familiar and even the concept of betrayal is known. However a friend is a person who is supposed to be trustworthy. Thus betrayal in a friend can be considered as foreign. Tatum paraphrases Julia Kristeva in 'The Powers of Horror', in saying the following:

Kristeva defines abjection as a simultaneous fascination and repulsion toward corporeal reminders, reminders which Kristeva argues are rooted in the subject's primal relation to the mother. These reminders include viewing corpses, bodily wastes, fluids, and everything symbolically associated with these. These elements lead to abjection because they remind the viewer of the frailty of the Symbolic order, on which life as an autonomous subject depends (242).

Julia Kristeva (13) herself states that a corpse is the ultimate example of abjection: "The corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life. Abject. It is something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object." She argues that the body both represents the familiar subject; the corpse having been a living individual before; and the foreign object; the

corpse being lifeless in its current state. The experiencing subject is both attracted and repulsed by the corpse.

Kristeva (64) also describes the mother as being abject. She argues that "[h]er being coded as 'abject' points to the considerable importance some societies attribute to women (matrilineal or related filiation, endogamy, decisive role of procreation for the survival of the social group, etc.)." Thus in societies where women would receive a high social status, as is the case in some African tribes, the chance of becoming abject would be lower. Further on, Kristeva distinguishes between two types of mothers; the first category is seen as the positive mother: "Ideal, artistically inclined, dedicated to beauty, she is, on the one hand, the focus of the artist's gaze who admits he has taken her as a model." (157) The other category constitutes the abject mother: "The other maternal image is tied to suffering, illness, sacrifice, and a downfall [...] This kind of motherhood, the masochistic mother who never stops working is repulsive and fascinating, abject." (158) Kristeva applies this abject mother to Louis Ferdinand Céline's novel 'Death on the Installment Plan'. The following excerpt is given to illustrate the 'masochistic mother': "As long as it was lousy work, as long as there was plenty of sweat and heartache, she was satisfied . . . That was her nature ...[...] She was really attached to her horrible fate . . ." (295 in Kristeva 158)

Abjection in Women

The broad dimension of abjection is often used to describe marginalized groups and can thus be narrowed down to women. In particular, those women who do not succeed in meeting the expectations of society, the so-called grotesque women. The concept of the uncanny can also be applied on these women; they are familiar because they carry traces of women, but they are

at the same time foreign because their behaviour is un-womanly. Leisha Jones (62) comments on this: “To spit back the feminine in its adulterated state suggests that soft, wet, empathetic, small, gentle, loving, tentative, pliable, frivolous, flaky, and sweet smelling could kill you.”

Grotesque women have been an important part of literature for centuries. As Creed (67) points out: “Classical mythology also was populated with gendered monsters, many of which were female.” In Homer’s Odyssey, he describes an encounter with several sirens who can be seen as grotesque females; they were both dangerous and beautiful creatures who occupied themselves with the luring of sailors passing by with their bewitching music. Their main objective was to cause a shipwreck and ultimately the death of the sailing crew. Other examples include the furies; the goddesses of pain and Circe; the evil sorceress who turned men into animals. Creed (67) herself gives the example of Medusa: “The Medusa, with her ‘evil eye’, head of writhing serpents and lolling tongue, was queen of the pantheon of female monsters; men unfortunate enough to look at her were turned immediately to stone.” The influence of these grotesque female creatures reaches beyond the classical period; even Dante made use of them in his ‘Inferno’. He describes harpies who had the body of a bird and the head of a woman, living in the infernal wood:

Here the repellent Harpies make their nests,

[...]

They have broad wings, a human neck and face,

Clawed feet and swollen, feathered bellies; they caw

Their lamentations in the eerie trees. (Dante, 2005)

In this thesis, however, we shall concentrate on women in the Victorian age. Critical theory (Kincheloe & McLaren 90), engaging in reflective criticism of society and culture, states that within different groups of society, there is always going to be a conflict of power interests. Privileges groups will try to maintain their advantages by repressing the remaining individuals. This Critical Theory can be linked to the concept of abjection. According to Jones (63) "Abject beings are pushed beyond the margins of subjecthood". The repressed individuals of the Critical Theory can be considered as abject beings, residing on the borders of society, not seen as a subject anymore. In the nineteenth century, there was an inequality between two main groups of society: men and women. The male sex was seen as the dominant one. Men provided for their families, protected them against the evils of daily life and had rights. Men ruled society and in order to maintain their high position, they established a social code for women, who were clearly seen as the weaker gender and only had limited rights.

According to Marta Vicinus (IX), young girls were brought up to be 'innocent' and 'sexually ignorant'. After marriage, a woman's body became the property of her husband. He was allowed to use it in any way he pleased, including beating his wife and demanding sexual intercourse with her. Carpenter (75) illustrates this in 'Love's Coming-of-Age: a series of papers on the relations of the sexes'. He argues that many women had delusional romantic ideas about the domestic life and were often disillusioned once they had been married: "The girl, full perhaps of a tender emotion, and missing the sympathy and consolation she expected in the man's love, only to find its more materialistic side. This, this then is what I am wanted for". Additionally, not only the wife's body, but also her property became possession of the

husband. John Stuart Mill, philosopher and economist was an advocate for women's rights and defined marriage as 'domestic slavery'. He states that "English law permitted a husband to exercise what amounted to a total control over his wife's property, so stringent that even under the settlements of the rich, she had virtually no access to it in her own right." (in Millet 131)

Some middle class women (married or single) were allowed to work to earn some money, but only certain kinds of employment; most commonly teaching, governessing or working in a shop. If these women were married, their wages went directly to the husband. For married women, divorce was generally not an option. Or as Sigsworth and Wyke (86) put it: "It must also be remembered that marriage, [. . .], was, once contracted, difficult to end by divorce." While men 'only' had to prove their wives' committing adultery, women had to prove that their husbands were also guilty of incest, bigamy, desertion or extreme cruelty. In very few cases (especially couples from the upper class), the non-consummation of the marriage was also accepted as a reason for annulment. In the cases where divorce did happen, the custody over the children was entirely given to the husband. "Under the law, as Mill points out, the father owns the children entirely. Should his wife leave him, she is entitled to take nothing with her" (in Millet 131). In 1839, the 'Custody of Infants Act' was accepted, granting mothers at least limited access to their children.

The Victorian period was a rather complicated era with regard to morals and the way women were viewed. Victorianism is characterized by a double moral standard. On the one hand, women were supposed to behave in a proper manner. Several manuals for women were published, the best known one being Isabella Beeton's manual 'Mrs Beeton's book of household management'. The manual contains several recipes to serve on dinners or parties,

etiquette rules and instructions on how to manage the household as a good wife. Manuals like these were very popular in the nineteenth century. The ideal woman was seen as the 'angel of the house'. She was silent, obedient, had no opinion and was a loving mother and wife or as Vicinus (X) puts it: "Young ladies were trained to have no opinions lest they seem too formed and too definite for a young man's taste, and thereby unmarketable as a commodity". Women were thus literally seen as goods in the marital market. Virginia Woolf gives the following description of the angel of the house:

> She was intensely sympathetic. She was immensely charming. She was utterly unselfish. She excelled in the difficult arts of family life. She sacrificed herself daily. If there was chicken, she took the leg; if there was a draught she sat in it--in short she was so constituted that she never had a mind or a wish of her own, but preferred to sympathize always with the minds and wishes of others. Above all--I need not say it---she was pure. Her purity was supposed to be her chief beauty--her blushes, her great grace (2).

Gilbert and Gubar (20) argue that the origin of 'the angel of the house' can be dated back to the Middle ages where the Virgin Mary was considered to be the prototype of female purity. However, this vision of Mary changed in the nineteenth century. According to Carol Marie Engelhardt (160), Victorian Anglicans did not regard Mary as the feminine ideal, although she allegedly lived up to the angelic myth of being simultaneously a virgin and a mother. Engelhardt (160) points out that the reason for this is twofold. First of all, the creation of the Anglican church went hand in hand with anti-Marianism. The most important reason is however that the Virgin Mary was considered to be a powerful woman whereas the angel of the house was on the contrary the inferior submissive counterpart of her husband.

Despite of the social requisite for proper women, England was widely supplied of brothels and prostitutes in the Victorian period. Some counts even mount up to 300.000 prostitutes, demonstrating the striking demand of Victorian men (Sigsworth and Wyke 78-79). The same gentlemen who commissioned their wives to be 'angels of the house', would visit brothels with a high frequency. The counterpart of 'the angel of the house' image, was the so-called 'fallen woman'. Although prostitutes were the most striking examples of fallen women; the divorced woman, the woman rejecting motherhood and the spinster or 'redundant woman', as social critic W. R. Greg called them, can also be included. One could argue that the entire female sex could already be seen as abject, in a sense that they were seen as the inferior counterpart of men. Fallen women, who were the inferior counterpart of proper women would then be the ultimate model of abjection. As already discussed above, Jones argues that abject beings are marginalized and she continues to argue that "they may also push back, challenging the stability of readable and enforceable norms." This definition is very applicable on Victorian improper women; they carry traits that are not approved by society and are therefore seen as a threat.

First of all, it should be noted that a very clear distinction was made in the Victorian era between the sexual cravings of men and those of women, as Carpenter argues (63): "Sex in men is an organized passion, an individual need or impetus; but in women it may more properly be termed a constructive instinct, with the larger signification that that involves." Male cravings were seen as a necessary need, something natural like the need to sleep or consume food. Female cravings, on the other hand, were defined as dangerous, something to be repressed. So men were allowed to have sexual cravings and in women it was considered to be inappropriate. Therefore, women who occupied themselves with having sexual intercourse for money were without doubt fallen women. In addition, there was another

hypothesis about female cravings. 'The Westminster Review' (1850: 456-457 in Sigsworth and Wyke 82) claims that sexual desire in women was simply absent; the desire is 'dormant', 'non-existing' until intercourse takes place. Acton (1865: 113 in Sigsworth and Wyke 83) extends this theory by saying that even after marriage, the wife's true passions are 'the home', 'the children' and 'the domestic responsabilities'. Consequentially, Acton believed that women saw procreation more as a duty than as a joy and that they would rather avoid it.

It is slightly difficult to give an exact number of prostitutes in the nineteenth century. It is however possible to provide an estimation. According to Sigsworth and Wyke (78-79), the reason for the uncertainty about the precise amount is twofold. Firstly; in the official counts, the number of clandestine prostitutes was not included. Secondly; the number also depended on the demand for prostitution; it could differ from season to season. Generally, the numbers varied from 50.000 up to 368.0000 which would make prostitutes the fourth largest group in the occupational hierarchy.

Judith Walkowitz (15-16) argues that most prostitutes were working class women. They came from the countryside, not wanting to be a burden on their poor families anymore. She estimates that approximately half of them previously worked as servants. Other previous occupations were shop girls, waitresses and barmaids. Due to the low wages, most of them had no other option to survive than to become a prostitute: "Most women's entry into prostitution appears to have been circumstantial rather than pre-meditated" (14). However, the profession did not save them from falling into poverty or being the subject of their customer's violence: "Streetwalking may have afforded poor women a certain degree of autonomy, but it did not liberate them from a life of poverty and insecurity" (21).

Spinsters constituted a considerably large part of the total population as well. Michael Anderson (378) gives some concrete numbers in his paper 'the Social Position of Spinsters in mid-Victorian Britain'. He claims that in 1851, there were approximately over one million unmarried women aged 25 and over. Also the widows (who lived in circumstances similar to the spinsters) were well represented in the British society with over 750.000 cases. He states that "in all the total number of women of this age [25 and over] who had to survive without a husband was over 1.8 million or 8.9 per cent of the whole population". Anderson (383-390) continues to argue that being a spinster produced two main issues: being able to maintain yourself and finding a place to live. Since unmarried women did not have a husband to provide for them, they had to find employment themselves in order to survive. Approximately half of all women worked in so-called 'caring services' or 'domestic services' as, for example, teachers or domestic servants. Other occupations include food production and clothes manufacture. Professions in administration and distribution were much less common, although not impossible.

With regard to housing, many spinsters lived in their parental home, even after they had reached the age of 35. When their parents died, they had several options. They could start to work as a live-in servant. However, the domestic servant began to disappear in the 1860s, closing off this option for unmarried women. Another option was to live with a relative, most commonly a sibling. The worst alternative was to live in an institution; either a workhouse or a lunatic asylum. This was especially the case for the spinsters of old age (383-390). Anderson concludes his paper with the following statement which reflects the perspective of the Victorian society on spinsters: "Spinsters in old age were the residuum who failed to marry in a society in which the assumption was that all women should expect to marry" (392). Vicinus (XII) also states that spinsters were often a laughing stock in art performances such as

operettas. She elaborates that "society trained women for one function, marriage, and then mocked those who sought this idyllic state after having reached maturity."

Since procreation was considered to be the main objective of a wife, women who denied to devote themselves either biologically or emotionally to motherhood were considered to be failures. Carpenter (56) states the following: "And since motherhood is, after all, women's great and incomparable work, people will come to see that a sane maternity is one of the very first things to be considered – and that really, though not the only consideration, it is a work which if properly fulfilled does involve the broadest and largest culture." These women can be divided into two main groups: the women who did have children but either disposed of them through infanticide or neglected them in terms of affection, protection and alimentation and the women who deliberately chose not to have children (and not to marry either), the so-called new women.

The first group can be described as abject and uncanny mothers: they are mothers, they are familiar, they have fulfilled the objective of procreation. However, they are also unfamiliar because they do not behave as a mother should; there is no sign of commitment towards the child. According to Higginbotham (319), infanticide happened quite often, especially in big cities such as London where it was fairly easy to give birth anonymously. She comments that "Reformers warned that parents, midwives, and childminders destroyed infants with impunity while London newspapers reported on the tiny corpses found in the back passageways of the metropolis." She quotes W. T. Charley (295 in Higginbotham 319), parliamentary spokesman of the Infant Life Protection Society when he said that most of the victims were firstborn children of parents who were not married. She thus establishes a clear link between infanticide and illegitimate children. Higginbotham clarifies why so many

unmarried mothers would have seen no other option than to kill their newborn baby, in the following excerpt:

> The unmarried mother, it was recognized, faced enormous difficulties. The New Poor Law ended outrelief for unmarried women and curtailed the availability of assistance from the father of an illegitimate child. Women with illegitimate children were often servants, sweated workers, or factory hands, with few resources to support a family on their own. England lacked the system of foundling institutions that provided alternatives for unmarried mothers on the continent (321).

These unmarried women thus had no possibility to feed their children, so they had to choose between two evils; either kill the infant and continue with their lives (possibly with a sense of guilt) or turn to prostitution in order to be able to maintain their family. No matter what they chose, they ended up as a fallen woman (Higginbotham 322).

The second group of women rejecting motherhood consists of feminist individuals resisting the norms of society by not getting married and refusing procreation. These are the so-called 'New Women'. By the end of the nineteenth century, women became more aware of their low social status and started to fight the conservative ideas of a male-dominant society. Although Gail Cunningham (1978: 4) points out that "the 'woman question' had formed an essential part of Victorian though during most of the reign" and that "there had already been much agonizing over both the formal status of women and general conceptions of the female role" (1978: 4), things only started to change when the century was nearly over. A change, moreover, that happened very slowly. The traditional woman who sacrificed herself for her

family was replaced by an intelligent and above all independent woman. Peter Cominos comments on this:

> social character and the family system were seemingly self-perpetuating in an unbroken circle. The family produced a specific type of character and the womanly character perpetuated the family. The circle was broken during the late-Victorian period. The consciousness and existence of well-to-do women were increasingly challenged and the womanly woman was turned into a beleaguered model rivaled by a new competitor known as "the new woman" (171).

The concept of the 'New Woman' started to gain popularity when it was used in novels by proto-feminist writers such as Sarah Grand, Emma Frances Brooke and Mona Caird. The protagonists were no longer either silent and obedient women who were considered to be proper or grotesque women, condemned by society, but strong independent women, as A. Cunningham (1973: 178) points out: "all employed as mouthpieces women unusually independent, intelligent and free from convention"

The heroines refused the traditional female role, as can be seen in Cunningham (1973: 178): "The heroines depicted by the popular novelists were New Women in the sense that all rejected some features - though by no means always the same ones - of the feminine role as then defined. These novelists wanted to show how the socially-sanctioned structure of marriage discriminated against women". The fact that most of them rejected marriage does not mean that the new woman rejected relationships between both sexes as well. According to feminist thinking, a relationship should be based on honesty and respect, an idea that was frightful to most conservative Victorians, as can be seen in Cunningham (1973: 180): "all

aimed for a frankness and honesty in relationships between the sexes which struck terror among conventionally-minded parents anxious to preserve the ideal of marketable innocence in their daughters".

The ultimate objective of these New Women was to obtain more rights for the female sex with regard to marriage, divorce, custody, property and education. Additionally they wanted to achieve equality between both genders. In the last decade of the nineteenth century, some progress was made, slightly facilitating the lives of the female members of society. Gail Cunningham elaborates on this:

By the 1890s, then, when the New Woman began to emerge with a distinct identity, a good deal of progress had been achieved in the two areas most affecting modern women. Reforms in the law and in educational and professional institutions had opened up a wider range of opportunities than had ever previously been available; and frank discussions of sexual questions, together with rational investigations of woman's place in contemporary society, had done much to dispel the stifling clouds of mystique which had gathered protectively round the fair sex (1978: 10).

Although some essential rights like the right to vote were still denied to her, the situation had improved greatly. The Victorian women was no longer a second hand citizen, but an actual individual with rights, able to 'make her own choice about having children' (1978: 10), 'select her sexual partner' (1978: 10) and opt for 'short hair and comfortable clothes' (1978: 11). It must be noted that a change in legislation did not always go hand in hand with a change in people's way of thinking. Cunningham states that frequently, when women who came into contact with some of these new laws, they were looked down upon by

society. Cunningham gives the example of the Matrimonial Causes Act: “though the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857 meant that divorce was no longer a total impossibility for the majority, it embodied in law a tacitly accepted moral inequality which proved very hard to dislodge” (1978: 4).

Chapter 2: Female Abjection in the life of Dickens

The female characters in Charles Dickens' novels are often represented as black or white characters, either proper or improper, there is no way in between, no 'grey zone'. Karen Elizabeth Tatum (242) comments on this: "Dickens' works portray an inability to balance the attraction/repulsion aspects of abjection. Indicative of Victorian culture itself, which Dickens imbibes in his novels, women are portrayed as either Angels or Demons, Sinners or Saints, Virgins or Whores."

One can wonder whether this black/white vision has resulted from Dickens' own experiences with the women in his life. Tatum (244) argues that the relationship with his own mother was rather thorny: "Although it was Dickens' father that put the family in the poor house, Dickens never forgave his mother for putting him to work in a blacking factory when he was 12 years old. Once he achieved literary fame, he continued to complain about his mother's embarrassing behavior in not dressing according to the standards of his success and the money he gave her, as well as in constantly asking him for money." The relationship with his sister was somewhat complicated; although he loved her, he was also envious of her because she got the education that was denied to him. Kluger (97) explains the reason for the difficult sibling relationship: "His parents had enough money to pay for schooling, but not for both him and his older sister, Frances. They made what was, in the nineteenth century, the uncommon choice of educating the girl in the family, sending her to the Royal School of Music. Charles went to work in a bootblacking factory."

In addition, he also had a difficult relationship with his first wife Catherine Hogarth. Although she came fairly close to the 'angel of the house' model by being a good housewife

and giving him ten children, he tired of her after 25 years of marriage, divorced her and remarried a young actress named Ellen Ternan (Tatum 244). As a result of these rather negative experiences with women, Dickens developed what is called by Tatum 'a flawed psyche', which may explain his tendency to use the virgin/whore dichotomy in his novels. He was a ardent believer of the value of the Victorian home.[1] Virtuous characters are therefore always rewarded by society. The improper characters, on the other hand, are bound to be disciplined in some way. As argued earlier, female cravings were seen as sinful in the Victorian age. Dickens clearly shared this opinion, since sexuality in women is always punished in his works: "In all of his novels, which span approximately 35 years, Dickens repeatedly tried to come to terms with his mixed feelings of hatred, love, and guilt, but seemingly failed, because in all of his works, there is never a good sexual woman who does not meet some violent end" (Tatum 256-257). Although most novels by Dickens contain grotesque women, this thesis will limit itself to the discussion of three of them: 'Oliver Twist' (1837 – 1839), 'Bleak House' (1853) and 'Great Expectations' (1861). These three were chosen because they posses a variety of improper characters, going from prostitutes to abject mothers.

[1] "Dickens stood second to no one in his celebration of Victorian domesticity." (Nemesvari, 16)

Chapter 3: Oliver Twist

Oliver Twist tells the story of an orphan boy, struggling between good and evil as he is growing up in London and surroundings. The novel is filled with improper women. Already at the beginning of the novel, his own mother is represented as improper. Oliver's mother Agnes was seduced as a young adult by a friend of her father. She was brought up with Victorian morals and like most girls her age, she remained very naïve and sexually ignorant. As a result, she got pregnant without being married and died giving birth to Oliver. Tatum (243) argues that she died because she, as an unmarried woman, was a threat to society: "By having this child out of wedlock, Agnes threatens the social order, and because she threatens the social order, she is abjected from the novel."

After the death of his mother, he is taken to a baby-farm, supervised by Mrs Mann. She is the first mother figure that Oliver encounters in his life. Unfortunately for him, she is not much of a mother at all. Instead of properly raising the orphans under her care, she prefers to largely keep the weekly wages she receives for them; causing the orphans to be malnourished and poorly dressed, as can be seen in the following excerpt:

Upon this the parish authorities magnanimously and humanely resolved, that Oliver should be "farmed," or, in other words, that he should be despatched to a branch-workhouse some three miles off, where twenty or thirty other juvenile offenders against the poor-laws, rolled about the floor all day, without the inconvenience of too much food or too much clothing, under the parental superintendence of an elderly female, who received the culprits at and for the consideration of sevenpence-halfpenny per small head per week. Sevenpence-halfpenny's worth per week is a good round diet for a child; a great deal may be

got for sevenpence-halfpenny, quite enough to overload its stomach, and make it uncomfortable. The elderly female was a woman of wisdom and experience; she knew what was good for children; and she had a very accurate perception of what was good for herself. So, she appropriated the greater part of the weekly stipend to her own use, and consigned the rising parochial generation to even a shorter allowance than was originally provided for them (Dickens, 1992b: 5-6).

After nine years, Oliver has 'outgrown' the baby-farm and is placed in a working house. The circumstances are similar to those of the baby-farm; the children in the working house barely get food and all suffer from starvation. When Oliver asks to have a little more food, he is looked upon like a criminal and eventually given away as an apprentice to an undertaker called Mr. Sowerberry. Mr. Sowerberry's wife is to become the second mother-figure in his life. Her name, Mrs. Sowerberry, already indicates what type of person we can expect her to be. She is described in the novel as "a short, thin, squeezed-up woman; with vixenish countenance" (Dickens 1992b: 26).

Already on the night of Oliver's arrival, the motherly commitment of Mrs. Sowerberry is displayed. To still Oliver's hunger, she feeds him "the dainty viands that the dog had neglected" (Dickens 1992b: 29). The relationship between Oliver and Mrs. Sowerberry becomes worse due to the more or less respectful attitude of Mr. Sowerberry towards Oliver. Together with Charlotte the maid and Noah the apprentice, Mrs. Sowerberry forms an alliance against poor Oliver: "Charlotte treated him ill, because Noah did; and Mrs. Sowerberry was his decided enemy, because Mr. Sowerberry was disposed to be his friend" (Dickens 1992b: 37). In addition, Mrs Sowerberry seems to be the dominant person in the Sowerberry household, as can be seen in the excerpt beneath:

Mr. and Mrs. Sowerberry- the shop being shut up- were taking their supper in the little backparlour, when Mr. Sowerberry, after several deferential glances at his wife, said, "My dear-" He was going to say more; but, Mrs. Sowerberry looking up, with a peculiarly unpropitious aspect, he stopped short. "Well," said Mrs. Sowerberry, sharply. "Nothing, my dear, nothing," said Mr. Sowerberry. "Ugh, you brute!" said Mrs. Sowerberry. "Not at all, my dear," said Mr. Sowerberry humbly. "I thought you didn't want to hear, my dear. I was only going to say-" "Oh, don't tell me what you were going to say," interposed Mrs. Sowerberry. "I am nobody; don't consult me, pray. I don't want to intrude upon your secrets." As Mrs. Sowerberry said this, she gave an hysterical laugh, which threatened violent consequences. [. . .] This is a very common and much-approved matrimonial course of treatment, which is often very effective. It at once reduced Mr. Sowerberry to begging, as a special favour, to be allowed to say what Mrs. Sowerberry was most curious to hear. After a short altercation of less than three quarters of an hour's duration, the permission was most graciously conceded (Dickens, 1992b: 30).

Although Dickens is commenting that this is a ‘very common and much-approved matrimonial course of treatment’ (Dickens, 1992b: 30), this passage seems to suggest that Mrs. Sowerberry has the habit of emasculating her husband to the extent that her husband is humbled by her. In a patriarchal society like the Victorian, this would probably have evoked disgust in many readers. Not only is she completely neglecting Oliver’s needs, she is also threatening society by being more dominant than her husband. She is truly a grotesque woman and mother.

When Oliver has a dispute with the charity boy Noah Claypole; Mrs. Sowerberry, perhaps seeing the opportunity to finally put Oliver in his place, interferes. Instead of investigating the cause of the fight, she immediately takes Noah's side and convinces her husband to punish Oliver severely. Mr. Sowerberry did not intend to punish the boy, but after hearing his wife's lamentation, he is morally obliged to do it, otherwise he would be considered as being a cruel husband to Mrs. Sowerberry, as is demonstrated in the following excerpt:

> Mrs. Sowerberry burst into a flood of tears. This flood of tears left Mr. Sowerberry no alternative. If he had hesitated for one instant to punish Oliver most severely, it must be quite clear to every experienced reader that he would have been, according to all precedents in disputes of matrimony established, a brute, an unnatural husband, an insulting creature, a base imitation of a man, and various other agreeable characters too numerous for recital within the limits of this chapter. To do him justice, he was, as far as his power went- it was not very extensive- kindly disposed towards the boy; perhaps, because it was his interest to be so; perhaps, because his wife disliked him. The flood of tears, however, left him no resource; so he at once gave him a drubbing, which satisfied even Mrs. Sowerberry herself, and rendered Mr. Bumble's subsequent application of the parochial cane, rather unnecessary (Dickens, 1992b: 44).

In these first years of his life, Oliver is confronted with only negative mother-figures. Michael Slater (312 in Tatum 243) states that "There are fully developed, sympathetic sisters and daughters in Dickens' novels, but not many good, biological mothers live far past childbirth. If they do, either they are, consequently, not good mothers or they are old, widowed, and grandmotherly, like Mrs. Maylie or Mrs. Bedwin". Tatum (243) agrees with

Slater by saying that "The ‘‘bad’’ mother figures in the novel, like Mrs. Corney, the matron of the workhouse, Mrs. Mann, the matron of the baby farm, and Mrs. Sowerberry, the undertaker's wife, are odiously present. Their overbearing presence, resulting from the fact that they survive long after childbirth, is depicted as precisely what makes them ‘‘bad’’ mothers." There is, consequently a clear female opposition in the novel; either the women are reasonably young, do not fulfil the biological mother role but take on the care of infants (like Mrs. Mann or Mrs. Sowerberry), or they are able to be affectionate towards the child but are represented as aged.

Tatum (243) continues by saying that "it would seem that in Oliver Twist, the only ‘‘good’’ mothers are dead mothers." She is clearly referring to Oliver's mother Agnes. This statement is strangely enough contradictory to what she said earlier about Agnes being a threat to society and therefore abjected from the novel. It is very likely that the Victorian reader would have considered Agnes to be an improper woman involved in extramarital intercourse and would have looked upon her as a bad mother, since the child was illegitimate. Oliver is thus the child of sin, a sin big enough to tear apart a whole family, as Archibald (55) explains: "Oliver's very existence is evidence of his mother Agnes's fall, through seduction by a married gentleman. As a direct result of Agnes's fall, she dies; her family literally breaks apart; her sister, Rose, is tainted forever; and Oliver is doomed to a childhood of poverty, misery, and abuse."

Tatum paraphrases Kristeva (28 in Tatum 242) discussing the mother-child relationship in saying that "[i]n order to remain a viable, independent subject, he [the child] abjects anything relating to the maternal. Often he may create a threatening image of the feminine to protect himself from the death that could potentially result from his compelling

desire to return to his mother. He fears this potential death, which he projects onto her." Applying this to Oliver, he does not need to abject his real mother since she dies in childbirth. His surrogate mothers Mrs. Mann and Mrs. Sowerberry are already represented as monstrous mothers, facilitating Oliver's creation of Kristeva's 'threatening image of the feminine'.

After his punishment by Mr. Sowerberry, Oliver runs away to seek his fortune in London. He is taken in by Fagin and his gang of thieves, including the prostitute Nancy or also referred to as the "whore with a heart of gold" (Archibald 57). Sutphin (512), discussing the presence of prostitutes in Victorian novels, points out the following: "Although prostitutes are named in literary works, they are often marginal characters constructed in the third person by male authors and do not themselves speak extensively about prostitution." This certainly seems to be the case for Nancy as well, she is represented as a working class girl and although we know that she is a prostitute, it is never explicitly mentioned in the novel. The first description Dickens gives us of Nancy is a rather positive one, describing her as 'a nice girl', as can be seen below:

When this game had been played a great many times, a couple of young ladies called to see the young gentlemen; one of whom was named Bet, and the other Nancy. They wore a good deal of hair, not very neatly turned up behind, and were rather untidy about the shoes and stockings. They were not exactly pretty, perhaps; but they had a great deal of colour in their faces, and looked quite stout and hearty. Being remarkably free and agreeable in their manners, Oliver thought them very nice girls indeed. As there is no doubt they were (Dickens, 1992b: 57).

Although Nancy later in the novel becomes a mother-figure for Oliver, defending him and caring for him, she initially is an accomplice of Sikes and Fagin. When Oliver is taken in by Mr. Brownlow, Nancy agrees to retrieve him in fear that he might betray Fagin and his group of thieves. She is asked to find out the current location of Oliver. On discovering him, she refers to him as 'the young brat' (Dickens, 1992b: 94). The turning point for her occurs when Oliver is kidnapped and brought back to Fagin. He attempts to escape and Nancy, fearing that Sikes' dog will tear apart the boy, begs Sikes to "Keep back the dog" (Dickens, 1992b: 103). She goes even further by telling Sikes that "the child shan't be torn down by the dog, unless you kill me first" (Dickens, 1992b: 103). Possibly, her maternal instincts are aroused by seeing the vulnerability of Oliver, causing her to protect him. Astonished by her unexpected reaction, Sikes immediately proclaims her as being insane.

Nancy is considered to be a fallen woman in the beginning of the novel, however towards the end of the novel, she begins to display certain qualities, typically present in the proper Victorian woman or 'angel'. She starts to develop maternal feelings for Oliver (supra) but moreover she also behaves like a wife towards Sikes. After he has been wounded in the burglary, she is taking care of him like a wife would take care of her husband. Sikes is very aware of this, realizing that without Nancy he would probably not have survived (Dickens, 1992b: 251): "Such a number of nights," said the girl, with a touch of woman's tenderness, which communicated something like sweetness of tone, even to her voice: "such a number of nights as I've been patient with you, nursing and caring for you, as if you had been a child". One could even argue that Nancy's maternal instincts are even extended to Sikes, caring for him 'like a child' upon seeing him so vulnerable.

Eventually, Nancy will have to choose between staying loyal to Sikes or saving Oliver. She elects the second alternative by confessing everything she has heard in a previous conversation between Fagin and Monks to Miss Maylie. By doing so, she betrays Sikes and becomes a threat to him. However, when Miss Maylie offers her protection, she denies it, saying that she 'must' go back to Sikes, that she cannot leave him. She further on attempts to explain the reason to Miss Maylie (Dickens, 1992b: 266): "'I don't know what it is," answered the girl; "I only know that it is so, and not with me alone, but with hundreds of others as bad and wretched as myself. I must go back. Whether it is God's wrath for the wrong I have done, I do not know; but I am drawn back to him through every suffering and ill usage; and I should be, I believe, if I knew that I was to die by his hand at last"

After examining this passage, one could wonder whether Nancy returns to Sikes because she feels affectionate towards him or perhaps she sees spending time with him, including the 'ill usage' as a form as self-punishment. She refers to herself as being wretched and evil and believes that she deserves to be miserable for the wrongs she has done. She even already anticipates her own ending, believing that she will die 'by his hand'. Archibald (57) points out that Nancy is stuck in a destructive relationship with Sikes. Although she frequently gets beaten up by him, she cannot distance herself from him. Archibald (57) also states that "Dickens himself was well aware of the behavior of women caught in such destructive relationships, and he knowingly draws an accurate and insightful picture of such pathology in Nancy."

The chapter describing the conversation between Nancy and Miss Maylie begins with the following sentences (Dickens, 1992b: 262): "The girl's life had been squandered in the streets, and among the most noisome of the stews and dens of London, but there was

something of the woman's original nature left in her still". We can deduce that Dickens did not consider fallen women to be innately evil, but rather that the circumstances forced those women to fall. Although they are fallen, there still remains something good in them. In Nancy's case, becoming part of Fagin's gang was the cause of her fall. Nancy herself blames Fagin (Dickens, 1992b: 292): "bitter as were her feelings towards the Jew, who had led her, step by step, deeper and deeper down into an abyss of crime and misery, whence was no escape". This idea of improper women shoved into the margins of Victorian morals is also expressed by Cunningham (1978: 21). She argues that many of the fallen women were victims of society, that "they did not jump but were pushed to their fall by some callous profligate". Archibald (59) makes an interesting comparison between Nancy and Rose Maylie. She points out that it is due to Nancy's miserable childhood, in which she was either orphaned or abandoned by her kin, that she is leading a bad life. Rose could have shared the same faith, being nearly abandoned as well. Rose also became an orphan at a young age, however she was lucky enough to be taken in by Mrs. Maylie who raised her like a niece. The following excerpt is used to illustrate the thin line between good and bad (Dickens, 1992 b: 263): "'Thank Heaven upon your knees, dear lady,' cried the girl [Nancy], 'that you had friends to care for and keep you in your childhood, and that you were never in the midst of cold and hunger, and riot and drunkenness, and—and—something worse than all—as I have been from my cradle".

In her last conversation with Miss Maylie, who is accompanied by a friend, Nancy is asked to give up Fagin. In spite of her hatred for the foul man, she is not able to do it. She argues that although he has led a bad life, she is in no position to judge him because she has led a bad life as well. She considers herself no better than him. She thus acknowledges her own wickedness and understands that there is no hope left for her, no chance to redeem her

sins. By realizing this, she transcends her marginal working-class status and achieves moral wisdom not expected from a mere prostitute. Although Nancy is not able to help her companions with Fagin, she is however willing to give up Monks, describing him in detail which will eventually lead to his capture. With this brave action, Nancy has secured a safe future for Oliver but has sealed her own pitiful faith in return. Miss Maylie, once more, tries to convince her to be helped. She offers protection to Nancy, even to transport her to another country if she does not feel safe in England. Instead of accepting the outreach of Miss Maylie, she decides to face the consequences of her actions in the betrayal of Fagin and Sikes. When Miss Maylie's friend asks what he can do to serve her, she simply answers 'nothing sir' (Dickens, 1992b: 306).

Unfortunately, this conversation is overheard by Noah Claypole, an accomplice of Fagin who then reports the whole story to the Jew, who in his turn confides in Sikes. Upon hearing of Nancy's betrayal, Sikes becomes enraged and hurries home to confront Nancy. In a desperate attempt to convince Sikes to spare her life, she creates a perfect alternative life for the both of them, living in a foreign country happily together as is demonstrated in the following excerpt:

"Bill," cried the girl, striving to lay her head upon his breast, "the gentleman and that dear lady, told me to-night of a home in some foreign country where I could end my days in solitude and peace. Let me see them again, and beg them, on my knees, to show the same mercy and goodness to you; and this dreadful place, and far apart lead better lives, and forget how we have lived, except in prayers, and never see each other more. It is never too late to repent. They told me so- I feel it now- but we must have time- a little, little time!" (Dickens, 1992b: 313)

Her plea for pity does not have effect, for he answers it by striking her twice on the head with his pistol and eventually killing her with a club. The reason for her death could be interpreted in many ways. Traditionally, she would have to die because she is a fallen woman, displaying her sexuality and therefore constituting a threat to society. However, Tatum (243) argues the opposite: "Once Nancy, the prostitute, displays characteristics of the Angel in the House in her instinctively maternal protection of Oliver, she threatens Sikes' control over her, and he kills her." It is due to her evolution from improperness to becoming more proper, that she threatens Sikes' authority and must therefore die. Tatum's argument antagonises a reverse of the moral hierarchy. Perhaps, for Dickens, in spite of her going from improper to proper, she still remained a fallen woman and had to be dealt with. Archibald (57) claims that "Nancy's death is a kind of martyrdom, self-sacrifice of the stained for the safety of the innocent." She thus sacrifices herself in order to save an innocent child.

Tatum (245) applies Kristeva's notion of abjection on the Nancy/Sikes relationship. She suggests that Sikes is unable to reunite the two aspects of abjection in Nancy, being fascination and repulsion. As a result, he engages in violence which ultimately leads to Nancy being bludgeoned to death. The excerpt below discusses this link between violence and abjection:

This reveals that male violence against women stems from a flawed psyche and the inability to reconcile the love/hate aspects of the subject's relationship with his mother. The failure of reconciliation results in binary portrayals, fascination (angels) or repulsion (whores or hags), in which the subject projects his own flawed psyche and the image of the maternal within that psyche onto all women in the Symbolic order. While Kristeva's theory of abjection posits that abjecting maternal reminders is necessary to a degree for the subject's

survival, the problem of violence against women results from an inability to reconcile and balance both aspects of abjection (Tatum 245).

Nancy is thus a challenging character; she is presented as a prostitute and therefore being grotesque. "Once Nancy, the prostitute, displays characteristics of the Angel in the House in her instinctively maternal protection of Oliver, she threatens Sikes' control over her, and he kills her. The mixing of angel/whore attributes in Nancy causes her to become an intriguing, but problematic character for both Sikes and Dickens. She is intriguing because more fully human, but disturbing to those, like Dickens himself, who are unable to reconcile maternal conflicts" (Tatum 243). Nancy becomes the object of Sikes' abjection. Sikes' fascination/repulsion dichotomy is clearly represented in the novel. Sikes is extremely capricious and his opinion of Nancy changes constantly, calling her on different occasions 'an honour to her sex' (Dickens, 1992b: 81), 'mad' (Dickens, 1992b: 103) and a 'She-devil' (Dickens, 1992b: 312). Eventually, the repulsion will overpower the fascination which results in the violent death of Nancy. Additionally she also becomes the object of abjection for the reader. We as readers are both fascinated by her for having good qualities such as motherly love towards Oliver, responsibility, the ability to do the right thing and courage to stand up against Fagin and Sikes. However, we also have to bear in mind that she possesses certain negative aspects as well, the worst being the fact that she sells her body to survive.

The peculiar thing about Nancy's evolution is that it goes backwards. Generally, a good woman, due to difficult circumstances like being poor or led by her sexual cravings, falls into sin and becomes a social pariah. This is not the case with Nancy. She starts out as a thief and a prostitute, under the malicious influence of Fagin and Sikes. However, Oliver seems to be her moral trigger, encouraging her proper traits to rise to the surface and

ultimately letting her good side win by warning Miss Maylie and consequentially saving him. Nancy's moral evolution is thus reversed.

Chapter 4: Bleak House

In Bleak house, the autobiographical story of Esther Summerson is presented. The main difference with the other two novels, is that the protagonist is a female first person narrator, although it might be said that she does posses a number of rather male traits. Esther herself will be shortly discussed, followed by the more inappropriate women in the novel such as Mrs. Jellyby, Mrs. Pardiggle and Esther's mother, lady Dedlock. The novel can be linked closely to the concept of the uncanny, as Lougy (477) deduces after reading Dickens' own comments on the novel: 'In his final prefatory remarks to *Bleak House*, for example, Dickens tells us that "I have purposely dwelt upon the romantic side of familiar things," thereby alerting us to the fact that his novel will be situated at the site of Freud's uncanny, the unfamiliar in the familiar, "*das Unheimliche*" in "*das Heimliche*"'.

Esther is the extramarital child of lady Dedlock and Captain Hawdon (also called Nemo). However, lady Dedlock believing that both her lover and child are dead, marries Sir Leicester and spends the rest of her days in boredom. Esther therefore is raised by her aunt, although she is not aware of the fact and thus calls her aunt 'godmother'. In the years that she resides in her aunt's house, she becomes very aware that there is something different about her. In her childhood years, she starts to develop a low self-esteem. The reason for this is twofold. On the one hand, she constantly compares herself to her godmother who is in her eyes almost a saint, as can be seen in the description beneath:

I felt so poor, so trifling, and so far off that I never could be unrestrained with her — no, could never even love her as I wished. It made me very sorry to consider how good she was and how unworthy of her I was, and I used ardently to hope that I might have a better

heart; and I talked it over very often with the dear old doll, but I never loved my godmother as I ought to have loved her and as I felt I must have loved her if I had been a better girl (Dickens, 1930: 29).

On the other hand, she becomes aware that she is the result of sin, which is explained to her by her godmother on one of her birthdays. Her godmother states that "It would have been far better, little Esther, that you had had no birthday, that you had never been born!" (Dickens, 1930: 30). Her aunt continues by saying " "Your mother, Esther, is your disgrace, and you were hers. The time will come — and soon enough — when you will understand this better and will feel it too, as no one save a woman can" (Dickens, 1930: 30). She is indeed the illegitimate result of lady Dedlock's adultery; although she initially does not know this.

Esther remains a difficult character to understand. In spite of her loveless infancy, she manages to develop various 'angel-like' characteristics. She is affectionate, gentle and helpful. When she is sent to Miss Donny's school to be further educated, she immediately becomes loved by all. For the first time in her life, she feels needed and thus is finally able to give back some affection to someone other than her doll. She soon becomes an indispensable presence in the house, as becomes clear from the excerpt beneath:

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. At last, whenever a new pupil came who was a little downcast and unhappy, she was so sure — indeed I don't know why — to make a friend of me, that all new comers were confided to my care. They said I was so gentle; but I am sure they were (Dickens, 1930: 37).

However, some scholars like Eleanor Salotto and Martin Danahay also recognize a hint of masculinity in her. Salotto (333) argues that Esther's narrative contains traces of male discourse: "Esther, in effect, copies masculine discourse, but she also writes over it imprinting her own signature. Esther's writing sheds much light on the text's obsessive focus on writing and copying; she produces copy, the copy of a Victorian ideal woman, but in doing so she engenders blots that preclude a unidimensional reading of her." Salotto quotes Joan Riviere (35 in Salotto 334) in saying that "women who wish for masculinity may put on a mask of womanliness to avert anxiety and the retribution feared from men" Thus, according to Salotto, Esther puts on a mask of femininity to disguise her true masculine identity. Salotto points out that Esther does this by inserting typical male traits in her narrative.

One of these male traits would be the use of the third person narrative, which Danahay (426) calls "impersonal, authoritative and masculine". Esther indeed refers to herself in the third person various times during the novel. The following excerpt may serve as an example: "I said to myself, "Esther, my dear, you surprise me! This really is not what I expected of you" (Dickens, 1930: 96). However, Danahay [2] suggests that her masculinity never becomes threatening because Esther is presented as a modest character who uses these third person forms to describe "the effects of hegemony in the form of personal neuroses" (426).

Danahay attributes another aspect of masculinity to Esther. She is expected by Mr. Jarndyce to become the housekeeper of the estate and thus receives power in bleak house. She is given "a basket […] with two bunches of keys in it, all labeled" (Dickens, 1930: 74).

[2] "The modesty tropes that Dickens uses to create the character of Esther Summerson correspond to her ideological position as a woman working within masculine terms." (426)

Danayhay [3] argues that, unlike characters like Mrs. Jellyby and Mrs. Pardiggle, Esther's power does not become menacing because she is not aware of it and can thus not abuse it. If she would be aware of her power, the male figures attached to her like Mr. Jarndyce and Dr. Woodcourt would be reduced to inferiority.

Although Esther finds herself in the 'right' circumstances to become improper, she ends up being an angel of the house character. The years of guilt and unhappiness with her godmother could have given her the perfect opportunity to choose the wrong path. Some similarities can be seen between the lives of Esther and of Estella in 'Great Expectations'. They are both abandoned by their families and taken in by a secluded spinster. The main difference is that Esther is saved by Mr. Jarndyce. After the death of her godmother, she is sent to Miss Donny's school and is surrounded by good people. Estella is less fortunate, she is obligated to remain in the presence of Miss Havisham and turns into a femme fatale, unable to love for the rest of her life. Esther on the other hand, is rewarded at the end of the novel. Danahay (425) points out the following: "She voluntarily enters into matrimony at the end of the novel, the perfect good woman and housekeeper, a model wife for any professional man. Esther becomes for Dickens a paragon, the very embodiment of hegemony as the subject's willing submission to ideology."

One could argue that lady Dedlock is the abject mother par excellence, abandoning her child. However, Lougy (489) suggests that there is an even more grotesque mother present in the figure of Mrs Jellyby. He states that "The figure of the mother as monster or monstrosity appears most prominently in the novel in the form of Mrs. Jellyby, a Kristevan archaic mother

[3] "It is important that Esther be unaware of the basis of her professional prestige, […], because a too self-conscious woman would upset her role as supporter of the male professional provider. If Esther were aware of her own power then Mr. Jarndyce or Dr. Woodcourt would be in danger of becoming a marginal figure like Mr. Jellyby or Mr. Pardiggle, and the smooth functioning of the family would be disrupted." (423)

feared because of her generative power; but she is controlled in this text, her transgressive powers subdued not so much by her man/child of a husband who is deprived both of voice and virility, but by a text that contains her within the language of caricature and satire." Before moving to bleak house; Esther, Ada and Richard lodge at the home of Mrs. Jellyby who is indeed presented as a caricature-like figure. She is obsessed with her charity work for Africa, to the point that she is completely neglecting her family. She spends her days dictating letters to her daughter concerning "the cultivation of coffee" (Dickens, 1930: 47) and "the education of natives of Borrioboola-Gha" (Dickens, 1930: 47) instead of cleaning her house or looking after her children. Upon her arrival in the Jellyby house, Esther describes Mrs. Jellyby's office as "strewn with papers and nearly filled by a great writing-table covered with similar litter" (Dickens, 1930: 47) and "not only very untidy but very dirty" (Dickens, 1930: 47).

It is not the concept of philanthropy that is being mocked here, but the inability to prioritize the domestic life over charity. As was already said in the introduction about Dickens, he considered domesticity to be the highest value in Victorian life. Women who disregard their households would consequentially be reduced by him to a laughing stock. Normally, a male presence in the house would establish the domestic equilibrium, since males were considered to be the patriarchs of the family. However, by turning Mr. Jellyby into a mute, the gender balance is disrupted, giving Mrs. Jellyby the power to be the dominant force in the household. The excerpt beneath renders Esther's perception of Mr. Jellyby, who is presented as almost invisible:

I was a little curious to know who a mild bald gentleman in spectacles was, who dropped into a vacant chair (there was no top or bottom in particular) after the fish was

taken away and seemed passively to submit himself to Borrioboola-Gha but not to be actively interested in that settlement. As he never spoke a word, he might have been a native but for his complexion. It was not until we left the table and he remained alone with Richard that the possibility of his being Mr. Jellyby ever entered my head. But he WAS Mr. Jellyby; and a loquacious young man called Mr. Quale, […] informed her [Ada] that he called the matrimonial alliance of Mrs. Jellyby with Mr. Jellyby the union of mind and matter (Dickens, 1930: 50).

Mrs. Pardiggle is the double of Mrs. Jellyby. Instead of turning her efforts towards Africa, she puts her energy into the education of poor people. She takes pride in teaching her 'little family' the value of altruism taking them with her everywhere she goes. Mrs Pardiggle, like Mrs. Jellyby is depicted as ridiculous, one might even say carnivalesque for her exaggerating need to do charity work, even for people who do not appreciate her presence, like the brickmakers family. She makes a habit out of visiting the poor, reading the bible to them and forcing books upon them, even though they are not able to read due to illiteracy. She does not even seem to notice that she is not wanted in their home; saying that she "shall come again" (Dickens, 1930: 110). Also in her own family, she does more bad than good; she 'supposedly' gives her boys allowances only to donate the money to charity, as the excerpt beneath emphasizes:

"These, young ladies," said Mrs. Pardiggle with great volubility after the first salutations, "are my five boys. You may have seen their names in a printed subscription list (perhaps more than one) in the possession of our esteemed friend Mr. Jarndyce. Egbert, my eldest (twelve), is the boy who sent out his pocket-money, to the amount of five and threepence, to the Tockahoopo Indians. Oswald, my second (ten and a half), is the child who

contributed two and nine-pence to the Great National Smithers Testimonial. Francis, my third (nine), one and sixpence halfpenny; Felix, my fourth (seven), eightpence to the Superannuated Widows; Alfred, my youngest (five), has voluntarily enrolled himself in the Infant Bonds of Joy, and is pledged never, through life, to use tobacco in any form (Dickens, 1930: 101-102).

Mrs. Pardiggle fails to realise that she occupies herself too much with these charity matters, bullying her children around, causing them to be miserable. Donovan (182) makes a good point when he says that "Every child begets a responsibility in his parents; in Bleak House Dickens examines a wide range of cases in order to trace the extent to which that responsibility is successfully discharged. Only a very few parents in the sick society of this novel manage to maintain a healthy and normal relation with their children". Esther perceives the children's destitution by merely looking at them: "We had never seen such dissatisfied children. It was not merely that they were weazened and shrivelled — though they were certainly that too — but they looked absolutely ferocious with discontent (Dickens, 1930: 102). The children themselves (especially the older ones) despise the hypocrisy of their mother, complaining to Esther that the pocket money they receive is 'a sham', as Egbert, the oldest son, elucidates: " "What does she make a sham for, and pretend to give me money, and take it away again? Why do you call it my allowance, and never let me spend it?" "(Dickens, 1930: 105)

Esther, upon the first encounter with either women, is immediately astonished by the lack of responsibility towards their families. They both neglect their domestic duties in favor of charity, while their main duty is to nurture their children. Danahay (423) suggests that this negative reaction of astonishment is applied to distinguish Esther from these grotesque mothers: "Esther, as a potential threat, must be carefully differentiated from the circle of

female philanthropists in the book who are shown as destructive of their own households because their energies are directed outward toward society rather than inward into preserving the domestic sphere."

Due to the similarity between the two dominant women, Esther also immediately establishes a link between Mr. Jellyby and Mr. Pardiggle. Both men are repressed by their wives and would likely have a lot to talk about when meeting each other, as Esther cleverly remarks: "Suppose Mr. Pardiggle were to dine with Mr. Jellyby, and suppose Mr. Jellyby were to relieve his mind after dinner to Mr. Pardiggle, would Mr. Pardiggle, in return, make any confidential communication to Mr. Jellyby? I was quite confused to find myself thinking this, but it came into my head (Dickens, 1930: 103). Danahay [4] (423) points out that the two husbands are considered to be weak and have lost their influence on their wives. He states that both women cross the gender boundaries by intervening in spheres which are inappropriate to their position as females.

John Butt (14) already noticed that Mrs. Jellyby and Mrs. Pardiggle are used as examples of female emancipation, he states the following: "In no other novel does Dickens make such play with female emancipation and female management, and perhaps in no other novel could he have used these themes so satisfactorily. Every reader of Bleak House can see in what directions the energy of these women might more properly have been turned." Both women can thus be considered to be examples of 'new women'. The new woman, as already

[4] "Dickens suggests that the husbands of Mrs. Jellyby and Mrs. Pardiggle are weak and ineffectual and have let their women get out of hand. By concentrating on issues outside the home, all three women challenge the domestic vision of labor along gender lines. Rather than policing their own families, these women go around stirring up trouble in spheres not appropriate to their stations." (Danahay, 423)

mentioned earlier, opposed herself to the institution of marriage and the domestic life, including the upkeep of the family. Although Mrs. Jellyby and Mrs. Pardiggle are married, their husbands do not form a threat because they are overruled by their dominant wives. They additionally both have a rather large family to take care of, however, they are more concerned with their work than the upbringing of the children. They thus give priority to their philanthropist activities. Cunningham (1978: 10) argues that this way of reasoning was characteristic for the New Woman, he states that: "She [the New Woman] could now elect to put her energies into professional rather than matrimonial achievement, and could justify her decision by pointing out that marriage, as conventionally defined, was a state little better than slavery."

Butt (15) remarks that "[t]he only occasion for surprise is that Mrs. Jellyby did not reject the petticoat in favor of the trousers". He further on explains the concept of 'Bloomerism' [5] which referred to the concept of Victorian women wearing a garment somewhere in between a trousers and a petticoat [6], first worn by a Mrs. Bloomer. Dickens himself was not very keen on the changing 'state of mind' of these new women[7] and thus used his power as an author to ridicule them. The moral of the novel that we as readers were expected to deduce was that "the work at home must be completed thoroughly, or there is no hope abroad" (Butt 15). The author concludes by saying about Mrs. Jellyby and Mrs. Pardiggle that "They did not adopt the bloomer costume, but in all other respects they were

[5] "In the early summer of I85I Punch received the intelligence that an American lady, "a Mrs. Bloomer," had adopted male attire" (15-16)

[6] See appendices.

[7] "It was not long before Dickens offered his comments. In an article entitled" Sucking Pigs," published in Household Words on November 8 , I85I, he showed his strong distaste, not so much for the change in fashion, as for the state of mind implied in the change and for the proselytizing fervor accompanying it." (Butt 16)

enlisted under the banners of Bloomerism." (16) by which he means that even without the progressive garments, they exhibited the feminist way of reasoning.

Gail Cunningham (1978: 11) elaborates on the social class of these new women. She states that the new woman was mainly middle-class. According to her, the concept of domesticity and the problems attached to it like arranged marriages and inequality were not relevant for the lower classes since a working-class women had to handle different kinds of problems than middle-class women[8]. Mrs. Jellyby and Mrs. Pardiggle are indeed both middle-class women and overshadow the working-class characters like Jenny the brick maker's wife who barely has a voice in the novel.

As already mentioned above, Lady Dedlock is Esther's biological mother. She tries to repress the past by leading a trivial life at Chesney Wolt with her husband Sir Leicester. She has hidden her secret for years, but it is finally beginning to catch up with her, with both Mr. Guppy and Mr. Tulkinghorn bringing together the pieces of the puzzle. Although it must be noted that the two men have different intentions. Mr. Guppy, in love with Esther, tries to use his knowledge about the past events to his advantage by blackmailing Lady Dedlock. He wants her to convince Esther to marry him. Mr. Tulkinghorn on the other hand is defending the interests of his client Sir Leicester and finally sees his opportunity to get rid of Lady Dedlock with whom he never has had a good relationship.

[8] Working-class women, […] still led lives so totally remote from the cosy domesticity and shining female ideal against which the New Woman was reacting that this kind of revolt could do nothing for them. It was pointless to warn a working-class woman against the evils of an arranged marriage to a dissolute aristocrat, or to urge her to undertake activities more fulfilling than embroidery and visiting. (Cunningham 11)

Lady Dedlock first sees Esther in church during mass. But it is only when Mr Guppy comes to talk to her, that she starts to realize that her child is not dead after all and that her sister has raised the girl. Mr. Guppy has found several pieces of evidence to link Esther to Lady Dedlock. He starts by points out the physical similarities between the two women, showing Lady Dedlock a photograph/drawing of herself and claiming that Esther, who's image is 'imprinted on his heart' (Dickens, 1930: 360), has a very similar face. Afterwards, he reveals that he has spoken to the old maid of Esther's godmother. She told him the real name of Esther's godmother was Barnaby, coincidentally the same one as Lady Dedlock's maiden name. Mr. Guppy also discovered that Esther's real name is Hawdon, a name that the dead lodger of Krook also carried. Finally, he has seen a letter from Nemo, stolen by Krook, written by a lady.

Although Mr. Tulkinghorn has always suspected Lady Dedlock of hiding something, he was never able to figure out what. He explains that "I have suspected it a long while — fully known it a little while (Dickens, 1930: 505). Later on, he elaborates that he has been a true tracker in following the matter through: " […] I might have known it from what I have seen of your strength of character. I ought not to have asked the question, but I have the habit of making sure of my ground, step by step, as I go on (Dickens, 1930: 508). Lougy (490) argues that the fact that Lady Dedlock was able to keep her secret for such a long period, was her cunningness to apply certain tactics to distract the lawyer: "Lady Dedlock, guilty of sexual transgression, if not adultery, fears such exposure, engaging from the beginning in strategies of evasion and denial with Tulkinghorn, a monk-like figure given to nosing around in other people's affairs".

Mr. Tulkinhorn starts his investigation after the death of Nemo. He discovers the tramp boy Jo and tries to pull information out of him. Unfortunately, Jo knows very little about Nemo, he does not even know Nemo's real name. However, he finds another lead when some correspondence between Lady Dedlock and Nemo are discovered after Krook has died of 'spontaneous combustion'. To seal his proof, Mr. Tulkinghorn needs something in captain Hawdon's handwriting to compare the letters found in Krook's house. Mr. Tulkinghorn is persistent and eventually finds a man who served under Nemo in the army who can help him.

In order for Lady Dedlock to be safe, both men are to be silenced. Mr. Guppy promises to keep Lady Dedlock's secret out of respect for Esther. Mr. Tulkinghorn is a more difficult case. He is a vulture of the law and will not be persuaded by emotions like Mr. Guppy. At the end of chapter 48, Mr. Tulkinghorn is shot and dies. As readers, we would immediately suspect Lady Dedlock to be guilty because she would be the greatest beneficiary. Apart from an abject mother and fallen woman, she would thus be a murderess as well, making her even more monstrous. Luckily she is soon lifted from suspicion and the true murderess is revealed.

Many scholars like Lougy (490) and Danahay (420) , when analyzing Lady Dedlock, mention her adultery. However, Dickens tells us that Lady Dedlock was engaged to captain Hawdon and got pregnant. Later on she received the message that Hawdon had died, thus annulling the engagement. When she gave birth, she was told that the baby was stillborn. Consequentially, because she believed both her lover and her child to be dead, she took the decision to marry Sir Leicester. One could thus not really speak of adultery, because Lady Dedlock was not yet married to Sir Leicester when the baby was born. She is however guilty of premarital intercourse which would define her as a typically fallen woman.

Lady Dedlock has passed the years filled with guilt and very aware of her own wretchedness. She realizes that by having a premarital child, she is banned beyond the boundaries of properness, as Lougy (490) points out: “Lady Dedlock is filth, for she too has been jettisoned out of a boundary, moved to the other side, beyond its margins.” When Lady Dedlock meets Esther in Chesney Wolt to reveal to her that she is Esther’s mother, she uses the following words: "Oh, my child, my child, I am your wicked and unhappy mother! Oh, try to forgive me (Dickens, 1930: 446). Esther’s first reaction is not one of abjection, she does not reject her mother but on the contrary immediately forgives and even loves Lady Dedlock: “I told her — or I tried to tell her — that if it were for me, her child, under any circumstances to take upon me to forgive her, I did it, and had done it, many, many years. I told her that my heart overflowed with love for her, that it was natural love which nothing in the past had changed or could change” (Dickens, 1930: 449). One would think that after a happy reunion with her child, Lady Dedlock would try to reinforce the maternal bond with Esther. This is however not the case. Lady Dedlock, already aware of the harm she has done to her husband’s reputation, wants to protect Esther from sharing the same fate and parts from Esther with the words “We shall meet no more” (Dickens, 1930: 451).

Throughout the novel, Lady Dedlock is confused with several other characters. Taylor Stoehr [9] places emphasis on three of them: Hortense (the French maid of Lady Dedlock), Esther and Jenny the brickmaker’s wife. Interestingly, all of these three women have something in common with Lady Dedlock. The character is Hortense is defined by her cold-bloodedness; she indifferently kills Mr. Tulkinghorn and feels absolutely no remorse. One could argue that Lady Dedlock is cold-blooded as well because she manages to keep her secret hidden for al these years and even when she confronted with the accusations of Mr.

[9] “Lady Dedlock with Doppelgangers like Mademoiselle Hortense, Esther, and Jenny the brickmaker's wife, figures who seem like quasi-magical refractions or projections of aspects of her own self.” (137-70 in Herbert 114)

Tulkinghorn, she continues to be tranquil. Esther's being is connected to sin, as is Lady Dedlock's, with the only difference that Lady Dedlock is the committer of sin and Esther the product. The resemblance between Jenny and Lady Dedlock is explained by Sally Ledger (595): "Both Jenny, the bricklayers' wife, and Lady Dedlock, the wife of a Baronet, have lost their babies: the one to poverty and disease, the other to the moral codes of social propriety". Additionally, Ledger [10] also draws a link between Lady Dedlock and the prostitute who kills herself by drowning in the river Thames.

The end of the novel coincides with the end of Lady Dedlock. After her husband finds out about her past, she decides not to disgrace him further but instead runs away never to return. Sir Leicester, willing to forgive her, orders Mr. Bucket (with the help of Esther) to find her; a task not easy to fulfill. Lady Dedlock remains one step ahead of them, like she is almost invisible, as Herbert (114) remarks: "She seems to dissolve into thin air. Like Hawdon, she is thus reduced at last to "no one," and friends who strive to reclaim her find that they can only pursue her at a great distance, occasionally getting fragmentary clues to her existence through scraps of writing left behind or reports that filter back from the darkness through word of mouth." They search for days only to find her at the burial ground already 'cold and dead' (Dickens, 1930: 707). Lady Dedlock, due to her past, is beyond saving or as Cunningham (1978: 25) puts it: "[t]he loss of female virtue is truly irretrievable".

[10] "lady Dedlock, the Lady of the Manor, merges, towards the novel's close, with the archetypal figure of the prostitute who drowns herself in the Thames: the "doubling" of aristocratic lady and forsaken prostitute is carefully staged." (595)

Chapter 5: Great Expectations

In 'Great Expectations', the plot revolves around Pip, a pauper struggling to climb the social ladder. One could say that Estella is the main female character in the novel because she is the woman Pip falls in love with. However, the two characters connected to Estella might be more interesting to discuss. On the one hand, there is Miss Havisham, Estella's adoptive mother who had an enormous influence on her. And on the other hand, there is Molly, who is Estella's biological mother but failed to raise the child due to her criminal behaviour.

As we already mentioned in the introduction, Miss Havisham is improper for being both a spinster and an abject mother. Her spinsterhood is a result of a particular occurrence in her early years. She was the spoiled daughter of a rich brewer and grew up without a mother. Her father however remarried his servant and the couple had a son, Miss Havisham's half brother Arthur. Miss Havisham and Arthur never had a good relationship due to her disdain for the lower social classes and she found it difficult to accept that her father had remarried a simple domestic. When she was a young adult, she got engaged to a man named Compeyson. In appearance he resembled a gentleman, he however merely conquered Miss Havisham because he was interested in her fortune, as some of Miss Havisham's relatives already noticed. In the excerpt beneath, Herbert (nephew of Miss Havisham) describes Compeyson to Pip:

'There appeared upon the scene—say at the races, or the public balls, or anywhere else you like—a certain man, who made love to Miss Havisham. I never saw him , […] but I have heard my father mention that he was a showy man, and the kind of man for the purpose. But that he was not to be, without ignorance or prejudice, mistaken for a

gentleman, my father most strongly asseverates; because it is a principle of his that no man who was not a true gentleman at heart ever was, since the world began, a true gentleman in manner (Dickens, 1992a: 154-155).

When the day of the wedding finally came, she discovered a note from Compeyson saying that he had left her, taking a large amount of her money with him. Also her half brother Arthur was part of the conspiracy. In the end, she was betrayed by both her fiancé and her own blood, causing her to despise men for the rest of her life. Due to these events, she became a spinster, refusing to ever getting married, but they were also the base for the abject mother she would become.

Because she refused men, she could not become a natural mother. Therefore she asked her lawyer Mr Jaggers to find her a baby girl to adopt. He finally found Estella for her and Miss Havisham took her in as a daughter, not to love her, but to use her as a tool for her revenge on men. She is already stepping outside of her female role, residing on the margins of properness, but one could even go further and identify her with the masculine role. Raphael (408) points out that Miss Havisham identifies herself more with the male sex due to her ownership of not only the Satis mansion –while property was generally owned by men-, but also of Estella and even manipulates Pip. She consequently reverses the gender roles: "Thus, she may see herself as powerful, the owner of Satis house and an authority over Estella. In each of these powerful roles, she represents the male Victorian figure rather than the female: she own property and she possesses a female-and her own female addition to this is that she also gains power over a male, Pip."

This is exactly one of the reasons why she would have been considered by Victorian readers as monstrous. Ciugureanu (354) points out that "When a woman opposes the patriarchal world, […] she becomes an object of ridicule, a grotesque figure, a monster, a stereotype pitted against that of the angel of the house." Miss Havisham postulates herself as masculine and is therefore a threat to society. Consequentially, she must be punished, preferably by dying and thus re-establishing the gender disequilibrium. Her death can be considered as a moral exemplum to exhibit the possible consequences of improperness. Appropriately, Miss Havisham is severely burned in a fire and dies soon afterwards. She is thus purified by fire, as can be seen in the following extract:

> In the moment when I was withdrawing my head to go quietly away, I saw a great flaming light spring up. In the same moment I saw her running at me, shrieking, with a whirl of fire blazing all about her, and soaring at least as many feet above her head as she was high. […] I knew nothing until I knew that we were on the floor by the great table, and that patches of tinder yet alight were floating in the smoky air, which, a moment ago, had been her faded bridal dress (Dickens, 1992a: 340).

Miss Havisham's flawed psyche does not only reflects itself in her hatred towards men, but also in her morbid attachment to the past. Time literally has stopped for her, freezing the moment of her misfortune. Consequentially, all of the clocks in the Satis mansion are fixed at twenty to nine, which was the exact time when she received Compeyson's note. She is still dressed in the same wedding outfit "in rich materials,—satins, and lace, and silks,—all of white.", accompanied by "a long white veil" and "bridal flowers in her hair" (Dickens, 1992a: 48). Even the wedding cake has been preserved exactly as it was on that unfortunate wedding day. Additionally, she refuses to leave her house, imprisoning not only herself, but

her daughter as well. She has barely any social contact other than with her companion Estella. Occasionally, some relatives like Sarah Pocket and Georgiana, aiming for Miss Havisham's fortune, come to her house and demand to see her, without much result.

These previous traits clearly indicate that she is mentally insane. Linda Rafael (403) points out the following: "While her financial independence has allowed her to escape confinement to an asylum, a fate we would imagine for a woman who behaved as she but did not have property or money, she lives as disconnected from the outside world as if she were institutionalized." She has raised Estella to be the vessel of her revenge plot, teaching her to be cruel, indifferent, cold and unable to feel any affection towards another human being. Eventually, Estella turned out to be an excellent pupil, even incapable of loving Miss Havisham herself, as is demonstrated in the excerpt beneath:

"What!" said Miss Havisham, flashing her eyes upon her, "are you tired of me?" […] Estella looked at her with perfect composure, and again looked down at the fire. Her graceful figure and her beautiful face expressed a self-possessed indifference to the wild heat of the other, that was almost cruel. "You stock and stone!" exclaimed Miss Havisham. "You cold, cold heart!" "What?" said Estella, preserving her attitude of indifference as she leaned against the great chimney-piece and only moving her eyes; "do you reproach me for being cold? You?" "Are you not?" was the fierce retort. "You should know," said Estella. "I am what you have made me. Take all the praise, take all the blame; take all the success, take all the failure; in short, take me (Dickens, 1992a: 259).

Miss Havisham accuses Estella of being cold forgetting that she was the one who encouraged Estella to develop this indifference. Estella defends herself by saying that she has

become exactly what Miss Havisham taught her to become. This is the first moment where Miss Havisham begins to realize that she might have made a mistake in educating Estella. Wilson compares Miss Havisham to Mary Shelley's Frankenstein. They both created a monster and are forced to bear the consequences of their heinous act.[11]

The notion of love, for Miss Havisham has become a vile, negative concept. She explains her definition of it to Pip (Dickens, 1992a: 204): " "I'll tell you, " said she, in the same hurried passionate whisper, "what real love is. It is blind devotion, unquestioning self-humiliation, utter submission, trust and belief against yourself and against the whole world, giving up your whole heart and soul to the smiter—as I did!" ". After her own misfortune, she tends to generalize love, referring to it as a form of humiliation and submission. She is hence unable to believe that love can be possible. Her view on marriage is even more complex. She dies as a spinster, not because she would not have been able to find a partner (which surely she would have, considering that she was rich), but because she refused to. One could thus deduce that she rejects the institution of marriage. However, part of her is still craving for it, still hoping that her fiancée yet reappears. This might explain why she has kept her wedding cake intact for all these years and why she is still wearing her wedding dress.

Eventually, she does manage to realize her mistake and consequentially asks for forgiveness: (Dickens, 1992a: 337): " "My name is on the first leaf. If you can ever write under my name, "I forgive her," though ever so long after my broken heart is dust pray do it!" " Even though her words are aimed at Pip, one might also assume that they apply to Estella as

[11] "Furthermore, like Victor Frankenstein, Havisham is haunted by the inhuman monster she has made: it now undeniably confronts her with the folly of her Promethean ambition, the tyrannous usurpation of a child's life." (161)

well. Miss Havisham explains that it was not her original intention to make a monster out of Estella:

> Believe this: when she first came to me, I meant to save her from misery like my own. At first, I meant no more." […] "But as she grew, and promised to be very beautiful, I gradually did worse, and with my praises, and with my jewels, and with my teachings, and with this figure of myself always before her, a warning to back and point my lessons, I stole her heart away, and put ice in its place (Dickens, 1992a: 338).

If we take the ending into account, we see that although Estella has suffered greatly as a result of her monstrous education, she has learned from it. She was finally able to overcome Miss Havisham's teachings to become a better person: "now, when suffering has been stronger than all other teaching, and has taught me to understand what your heart used to be. I have been bent and broken, but—I hope—into a better shape." (Dickens, 1992a: 412)

Kristeva (in Creed 72) states that "all individuals experience abjection at the time of their earliest attempts to break away from the mother. She [Kristeva] sees the mother–child relation as one marked by conflict: the child struggles to break free but the mother is reluctant to release it." The breaking away Kristeva speaks of can be interpreted in two ways in the novel. First, there is the physical 'breaking away'. As a child, Estella is bound to live in the Satis house, imprisoned by Miss Havisham who refuses to leave the mansion and therefore keeps Estella from leaving as well. She was brought up "in the dark confidement of these rooms" (Dickens, 1992a: 261). When Estella grows up, she is finally allowed to go abroad to study in Paris, parting physically from Miss Havisham. When Estella decides to marry Mr. Drummle, against Miss Havisham's advice, she finally fully disconnects herself from her

mother. However, emotionally Miss Havisham is still bound to Estella although the commitment does not go both ways which results in conflict. This conflict is represented in the excerpt beneath:

> "O, look at her, look at her!" cried Miss Havisham, bitterly; "Look at her so hard and thankless, on the hearth where she was reared! Where I took her into this wretched breast when it was first bleeding from its stabs, and where I have lavished years of tenderness upon her!" […]"What would you have?" "Love," replied the other. "You have it." "I have not," said Miss Havisham. […] "Mother by adoption, I have said that I owe everything to you. All I possess is freely yours. All that you have given me, is at your command to have again. Beyond that, I have nothing. And if you ask me to give you, what you never gave me, my gratitude and duty cannot do impossibilities (Dickens, 1992a: 259-260).

Estella, raised to despise men, can be considered as the younger counterpart of Miss Havisham and thus lacking of an own identity. According to Kristeva (in Creed 72), "the child struggles to become a separate subject". In order for Estella to form her proper identity, it is necessary to emotionally distance herself from Miss Havisham, to which the latter is naturally reluctant. In addition, Miss Havisham is not only the subject of abjection, Lelchuk (424) states that she can also be seen as the object of Pip's abjection: "Pip has a long history, dating back to his first meeting with Miss Havisham, of wishing to violate her brutally. This is a result of his inability to cope with the contradictory impulses she stirs in him of attraction and repulsion". Pip is fascinated by her because he believes her to be his benefactor and thus believes that Miss Havisham "intended me for Estella" (Dickens, 1992a: 125). He even calls her "the fairy godmother who had changed me" (Dickens, 1992a: 134). At the same time, he is also repulsed by her, by the vicious way in which she physiologically tortures him, both by

means of Estella and by her own sick mind games like encouraging him to believe that she is financing his education. As a result, Pip occasionally has morbid outbursts of his revulsion against Miss Havisham. The following excerpt, describing how Pip imagines to see Miss Havisham hang from a beam in the Satis mansion, may serve as an example of such an 'outburst':

> It was in this place, and at this moment, that a strange thing happened to my fancy. I thought it a strange thing then, and I thought it a stranger thing long afterwards. I turned my eyes—a little dimmed by looking up at the frosty light—towards a great wooden beam in a low nook of the building near me on my right hand, and I saw a figure hanging there by the neck. A figure all in yellow white, with but one shoe to the feet; and it hung so, that I could see that the faded trimmings of the dress were like earthy paper, and that the face was Miss Havisham's , with a movement going over the whole countenance as if she were trying to call to me (Dickens, 1992a: 54).

The other character connected to Estella is Molly. She is the natural mother of Estella, however she was not a very good mother at all. When Estella was three, she committed a horrific crime out of jealousy. She murdered another woman in a jealous rage and had to go to trial for it. She was however acquitted due to Mr Jaggers. She was in addition thought to have killed her child as an act of revenge, as can be seen in the following excerpt (Dickens, 1992a: 334): "But the boldest point he made was this: it was attempted to be set up, in proof of her jealousy, that she was under strong suspicion of having, at about the time of the murder, frantically destroyed her child by this man—some three years old—to revenge herself upon him." Whether she actually attempted to commit infanticide or not is not clarified in the novel. It is however certain that Estella survived. Molly chose to commit this dreadful crime

of murder, not caring about the consequences and therefore leaving Estella to her own faith, to be raised by the cruel hearted Miss Havisham. Molly is thus as much as Miss Havisham responsible for Estella's downfall.

Galia Ofek (102) makes an interesting point by saying that apart from the feminine ideal in terms of behaviour, there was a physical ideal as well. She states that "[p]art of the very foundation of the patriarchal Victorian culture consisted of an acceptance of traditional gender characteristics—both anatomical and behavioral— which differentiated male from female, and "fallen" from virtuous women." Traditionally, female characters adopting a dangerous sexuality were given dark hair and women possessing 'angel of the house' characteristics turned out to be blond[12] or as Ofek (103) puts it: "Victorian faith in the equation of golden hair and angelic femininity".

Although Molly's hair colour is never explicitly mentioned, one could deduce from various passages in the text that it must have been dark. There is for example the conversation between Pip and Mr Wemmick where the latter one describes Molly's crime and reveals that Molly has 'gipsy blood'(Dickens, 1992a: 333). Gipsies in the Victorian period were often described as people with dark features, as Deborah Epstein Nord (189) clarifies: "In nineteenth-century lore, gypsies were considered not merely a distinct group with specific social practices and means of subsistence but a separate race […] possessed of "black blood," swarthy complexion, and curling dark hair." In addition, we know that Estella is the daughter of Molly and that she has 'pretty brown hair' (Dickens, 1992a: 50). Consequentially it is very possible that Estella inherited her hair colour from Molly. A brown-haired Molly would fit

[12] "dark hair signified fallen or dangerous female sexuality […] whereas gold hair was deployed by Dickens as a symbol of feminine redemptive and healing powers" (Ofek, 2006: 103)

very well in Dickens' theory of evil dark-haired women. In the three novels reviewed for this thesis, only a few descriptions of the female characters' hair was given. However if we look at the engravings [13] of for example Lady Dedlock, Mrs. Sowerberry and Mrs. Pardiggle, we can see that they indeed are presented with dark hair. This is however not the case for all improper women.

Very few is said about Molly's physical appearance; it is described as neither very feminine nor masculine (Dickens, 1992a: 181): "Rather tall, of a lithe nimble figure, extremely pale, with large faded eyes, and a quantity of streaming hair." However, the same cannot be said about her capacities. Molly is presented by Mr. Jaggers as rather masculine. He displays her as an individual with strength, a trait normally attributed to men only:

"If you talk of strength," said Mr. Jaggers, "I'll show you a wrist. Molly, let them see your wrist." Her entrapped hand was on the table, but she had already put her other hand behind her waist. "Master," she said, in a low voice, with her eyes attentively and entreatingly fixed upon him. "Don't ." "I'll show you a wrist," repeated Mr. Jaggers, with an immovable determination to show it. "Molly, let them see your wrist." "Master," she again murmured. "Please!" "Molly," said Mr. Jaggers, not looking at her, but obstinately looking at the opposite side of the room, "let them see both your wrists. Show them. Come!" He took his hand from hers, and turned that wrist up on the table. She brought her other hand from behind her, and held the two out side by side. The last wrist was much disfigured,—deeply scarred and scarred across and across. When she held her hands out she took her eyes from Mr. Jaggers, and turned them watchfully on every one of the rest of us in succession. "There's power here," said Mr. Jaggers, coolly tracing out the sinews with his forefinger. "Very few men have

[13] See appendices.

the power of wrist that this woman has. It's remarkable what mere force of grip there is in these hands. I have had occasion to notice many hands; but I never saw stronger in that respect, man's or woman's , than these (Dickens, 1992a: 183).

By saying that 'very few men have her power', Mr. Jaggers is rather emasculating the male sex here. He is placing Molly above the gentlemen present and thus disrupting the gender equilibrium. In spite of her masculinity, molly is being described various times in the novel as a "wild beast being tamed" (Dickens, 1992a: 332). She indeed behaved like an animal, killing another woman stronger and taller than her. She is however tamed by Mr. Jaggers when he saves her from imprisonment. She is given two ultimatums, either handing over Estella and becoming as civilized as she can or being left to her own fate by Jaggers. She chooses the first option and becomes Jaggers' servant. Cigureanu (358) argues that Molly's beast-like nature is tempered: "Like Mrs. Gargery, she is "tamed," not by a hard blow on her head, but by blackmail. She is acquitted and allowed to live, due to Jaggers's brilliant, but dishonest defense, on condition that she gives up her daughter and restrains her wild nature."

Ciugureanu (359) compares the life of Miss Havisham to Molly's. according to her, the two women are counterparts, only distinguished by class: "Molly is the other facet of Miss Havisham. The difference between them lies in the distinction between the social classes they belong to. If the financial situation had been reversed, they would have very well fitted into each other's models." Lelchuk specifies the common elements in both women's lives:

Miss Havisham carries all the proper credentials for joining the family. Her ruined house and gardens and brewery are appropriate counterparts to the marshes, prisons, and iron chains of Magwitch. She is both less and more evil than the mother she replaces

(Molly): while she commits no single deed comparable to murder, she commits her will to the systematic destruction of another's happiness (421).

Cigureanu continues by establishing a link between Molly, Mr. Jaggers and the concept of narcissism [14]. She points out that Mr. Jaggers has a narcissistic personality and in order to maintain his power, he needs submissive individuals like Molly to confirm his self-esteem. His power extends to two fields in particular [15], his dominance over his employees in the public sphere and his dominance over Molly in the private sphere. This situation works because Molly accepts her faith and undergoes Mr. Jaggers' dominance without complaining. However, Ciugureanu (359) points out that "the balance of their relationship is rather delicate." The dominant position of Mr. Jaggers would be jeopardized if Molly would decide to revolt against him and speak up. Mr. Jaggers would then loose his power over her and the foundation his narcissistic personality would fall apart [16]. If this were the case, than their relationship would integrate the maternal abjection that can be found in the Havisham/Estella relationship. Molly would thus be the subject of abjection wanting to free herself physically and emotionally from her object (Mr. Jaggers) by rejecting him.

[14] Molly's acceptance of her subjected role in Jaggers's house may be read through the Narcissus-Echo myth as well. Jaggers's narcissistic self-hugging personality needs the support of a mirroring image, an image that would remind him of his God-like power over people's fates and would give him the strength to continue. (358)

[15] Jaggers makes plenty use of his dominant image both at his office (he bullies people around, scares them off) and at home where he treats Molly as if she were a tamed animal. (359)

[16] "As a matter of fact, it may be held under control as long as Molly is kept silent (as she actually is in the novel). If Molly had ever thought of speaking, of telling her own truth, Jaggers's figure would have begun to shrink to a more realistic dimension. As her master's speculum, a speaking Molly would become the pool in which his narcissism would perish" (Ciugureanu 359-360)

Miss Havisham and Molly have several traits in common. Both of them gradually fail Estella. Molly by leading a savage life regardless of the consequences, causing her child to be taken away from her. And Miss Havisham by giving Estella a loveless education and thus turning her into a cruel and insensitive woman. They also both acquire male characteristics. Molly, although being reasonably small and meagre, has the strength of a man, as Mr. Jaggers points out to his friends. Miss Havisham not only succeeds in possessing property (the Satis mansion), but also Estella is under her power and she even subjects Pip through Estella.

Conclusion

The concept of female abjection is perfectly applicable in Dickens, due to his tendency to fill his work with grotesque women. Abjection does not only occur between the personae of the novels, it can also be situated on the level of the reader. The existence of characters like Mrs. Sowerberry, Mrs. Jellyby and Miss Havisham would have both fascinated and repulsed Victorian readers. Fascination would be provoked because these women are seen as misfits or monstrous beings, summoning the feeling that the grotesque is intriguing. Repulsion, on the other hand is incited because all of these women, in one way or another, transcend their female role and enter in domains which are not appropriate for them. Additionally, also traces of the uncanny can be found in for example Bleak House.

The novel 'Oliver Twist' constitutes two groups of mothers. A division is made between the 'good' mother figures like Mrs. Maylie and Mrs. Bedwin who are presented as aged and have fully developed the maternal capabilities, and the abject or 'bad' mother figures like Mrs. Mann and Mrs. Sowerberry who are reasonably young but lack the empathy to be good mothers. The characters of Nancy and Agnes can be situated somewhere in between due to their mixture of both good and bad features.

Agnes is somewhat of a difficult case to situate in terms of social hierarchy. She had her child out of wedlock which would make her improper. However; she was young, ignorant and naïve when she fell in love with a much older man. The question thus remains if she is to blame for her tragic fate. Perhaps society should be hold responsible for keeping young women sexually ignorant, causing them to fall into sin. She is not a malevolent character like for example Mrs. Mann, it is her mere naivety that causes her to become a fallen woman. Due

to her inappropriate behaviour, she cannot avoid her punishment. Dickens' tendency to castigate his sinful women will result in Agnes dying when giving birth to Oliver.

The two first surrogate mothers that Oliver meets in his infancy are both abject mothers. Mrs. Mann uses the weekly wage she receives for 'her' orphans to her own benefit instead of properly feeding or clothing the children. Mrs. Sowerberry sees Oliver as a threat due to his 'good' relationship with her husband and treats him poorly, feeding him leftovers from the dog. She conspires with the maid and the other apprentice Noah to make his life as miserable as she can. Moreover, she seems to hold a powerful position in the Sowerberry household. Her husband is not the invisible mute like Mr. Jellyby or Mr. Pardiggle, but nonetheless allows his wife to overpower him, causing a gender disruption. After the dispute between Oliver and Noah, she obligates her husband to punish Oliver severely, eventually causing him to run away.

Nancy is the character who evolves the most. She starts out as a common prostitute, affiliated in Fagin's gang. However, gradually she establishes a motherly affection towards Oliver, defending him against Fagin and Sikes. She also develops a kind of moral wisdom, allowing her to realize the wickedness of her own life and the people surrounding her. She consequently also understands that she is the product of unfortunate circumstances. If she would have been raised in the protective environment of a loving family like Rose Maylie instead of being taken in and corrupted by Fagin, she most likely would have become a proper woman as well. In the end she chooses to inform Rose Maylie of the complot against Oliver, in order to save him. Rose tries to help her, offering her a chance to escape her wretched fate, but she comprehends that she is 'beyond saving'. There is no consensus as to why she decides to return to Sikes. It might be out of habit; because she feels that she has nothing else to live

for. It might be a form of self-punishment in order to expiate for the many sins she has committed during her short life. Or she might be making the ultimate sacrifice, her life for the safe future of an innocent child. Whatever her reason may be, she ultimately pays for her loyalty to Sikes by dying violently by his hand. Sikes and Nancy are entangled in a relationship of abjection. Sikes feels both fascination and repulsion for Nancy. In the end, Nancy chooses to confess to Rose, which causes her to become a threat to Sikes. The repulsion aspect of the dichotomy in Sikes wins and he kills Nancy.

In 'Bleak House', Esther is quickly set apart from the other improper women. Although her childhood circumstances could have caused her to become a grotesque figure, the benevolence of Mr. Jarndyce saved her from sharing the same faith as many other women in Dickens' novels. Despite the fact that she was an illegitimate child and has had a rather difficult period with her aunt, she becomes a kind and loving person and is ultimately rewarded for it because she ends up marrying a doctor and becomes an affectionate and obedient wife. There are however some masculine traits that she possesses such as the custom of referring to herself in the third person, a feature usually attributed to men, and her powerful position as a housekeeper of bleak house. Nonetheless, neither of these characteristics are particularly threatening because her modesty prevents her from abusing her authority to dominate the male presences in her life. Mr. Jarndyce and Dr. Woodcourt thus continue to carry out the role of pater familias and are not reduced to inferior beings like Mr. Jellyby and Mr. Pardiggle.

Mrs. Jellyby and Mrs. Pardiggle represent the 'new woman' figure. They overpower their husbands, causing them to be nearly invisible in the novel. They neglect their domestic duties, in particular the upbringing of their children. Instead they fully dedicate themselves to

philanthropic work, either in Africa helping the natives get an education or closer by helping the poor. They both intervene in domains which are not appropriate for them as women. The figure of the new woman was exalted by some, mainly women writers themselves. However, most people saw the emancipation of women as something threatening or simply ridiculous. Since Dickens belonged to that second group and was thus not a supporter of the early forms of feminism, he presented both characters of Mrs. Jellyby and Mrs. Pardiggle as caricatures. He was a fervent believer of the traditional domestic system where there was no place for women like Mrs. Jellyby and Mrs. Pardiggle. By ridiculing them, he hoped that his readers would grasp the moral of his novel, being that one must first manage the household before turning to matters abroad. Strangely enough, neither of the two women are punished by Dickens with death, while lady Dedlock, the other monstrous character, is.

Lady Dedlock is displayed as the abject mother and of being guilty of premarital intercourse, although some scholars would argue that her actions could be considered as one of the worst sins in Victorian society: adultery. She had Esther out of wedlock and thought the baby to be stillborn, only to find out years later that her child is still alive. She confronts Esther with the truth but subsequentially, in order to protect her daughter from scandal, decides that they must never meet again. She has spent her life trying to conceal her secret, but it is finally discovered by both Mr. Guppy and Mr. Tulkinghorn. In order to protect her secret, both men are to be silenced. Ironically, not by lady Dedlock herself. After Mr. Tulkinghorn's death, Dickens misleads his readers into accusing Lady Dedlock of yet another sin: murder. It is not until the real perpetrator is revealed that Lady Dedlock is fully acquitted from suspicion. In the end, although cleared for murder, Lady Dedlock is still a fallen woman and social justice must be done. Therefore Lady Dedlock must die in spite of the willingness

of her husband to forgive her even after hearing of her secret past, the ‘adultery’ and the illegitimate child that was the result of it.

In the last novel ‘Great Expectations’, both of the characters discussed are abject mothers. The main difference between them is their social diversity. While Miss Havisham represents the dissolute aristocratic woman, Molly embodies the debauched working-class female. Both women are connected to Estella, either by being the biological mother (Molly) or the adoptive mother (Miss Havisham).

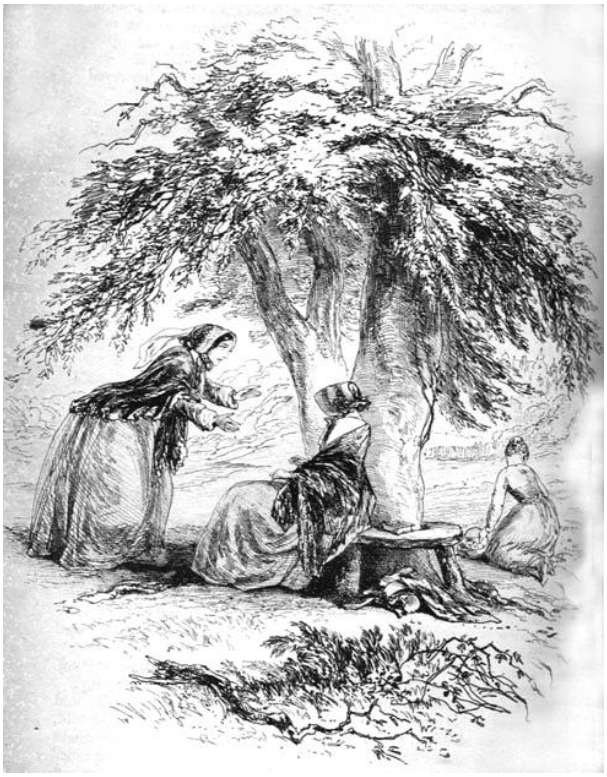
Miss Havisham, traumatized by the deceit of her fiancée and her brother, develops a disdain for the male sex and consequentially feels the need to revenge herself on men by using Estella as a vessel and Pip as the object of her retribution. She raises Estella to be a femme fatale and thus creates a monstrous female like Frankenstein created his monster. Miss Havisham’s ‘flawed psyche’ causes her to display strange behaviour like her morbid attachment to the past and ‘sick fancies’. If it were not for her wealth, she would have been taken to a lunatic asylum. She tries to prevent Estella from breaking free both physically and emotionally. Miss Havisham retrieves herself in her mansion and raises Estella in ‘the dark confidement’ of her home. She is however obligated to let Estella leave in order to finish her education. Estella ultimately physically detaches herself from Miss Havisham by marrying Mr. Drummle. Emotionally, she turns Estella’s heart into ice, but while hoping that her coldness breaks men’s hearts, she fails to realize that Estella’s coldness has become an essential part of her, thus making her unable to show affection for any living creature including Miss Havisham herself. In the end, she will thus obtain neither physical nor emotional commitment. When she realizes the gravity of her errors, she repents her behaviour

asking forgiveness of both Pip and Estella. Appropriately, she dies after being caught in a fire, symbolizing the purification of her sins.

Molly, described as a having gypsy blood, is a savage woman. Jealousy drives her to not only kill another woman, but also threaten to kill her own daughter. She would have been convicted were it not for the cunning capacities of Mr. Jaggers. After being acquitted, she is forced by circumstances to become Mr. Jaggers' servant who changes her from a savage beast to a tamed, submissive woman. Molly is, for Mr. Jaggers, a way to boost his self-esteem. By subjecting her, he obtains the power that feeds his narcissistic personality. Molly could decide to revolt against her master, overthrowing his narcissistic needs, but instead accepts her situation, and is thus reduced to a passive serf. She is however described as a woman with strength, thus crossing, as so many of Dickens' characters, the gender boundaries. She can be compared to Miss Havisham in various aspects of character and living circumstances.

These three novels thus demonstrate in their own way how a complex concept like abjection can be used to describe behaviour and relationships between individuals. The theme is especially suitable to apply on the Victorian age. As already mentioned in the introduction, Victorian women were considered to be inferior to men, thus one could argue that, in the nineteenth century, the entire female sex was already abject. Improperness of men was often overlooked, especially when it came to sexual behaviour, because society tended to turn a blind eye to the debauchery of the male population. Women were less fortunate; even the slightest error could seal their fate and turn them into fallen women, making them perfect subjects for abjection.

Appendices



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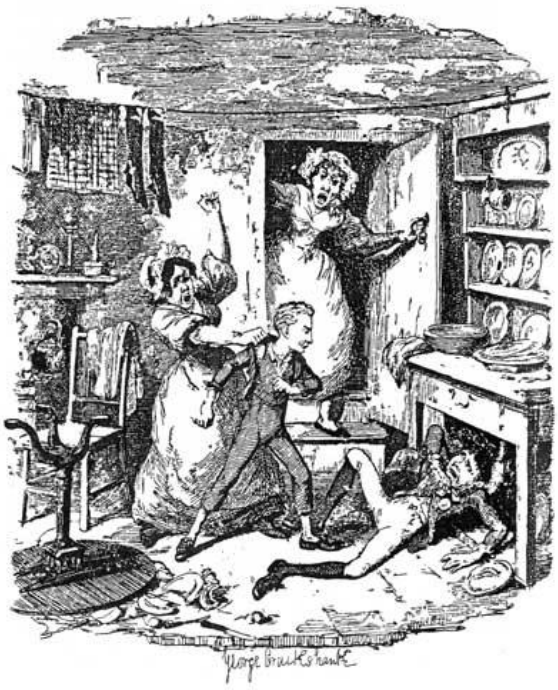

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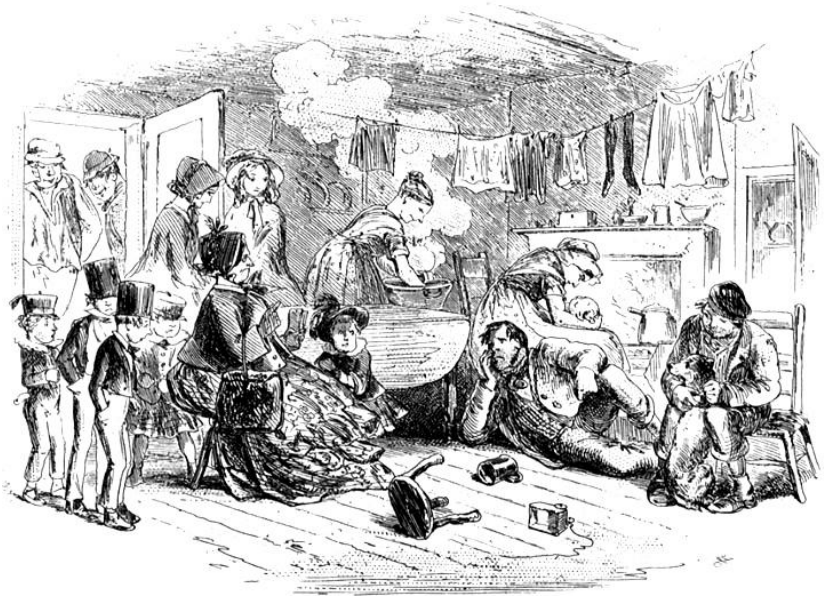

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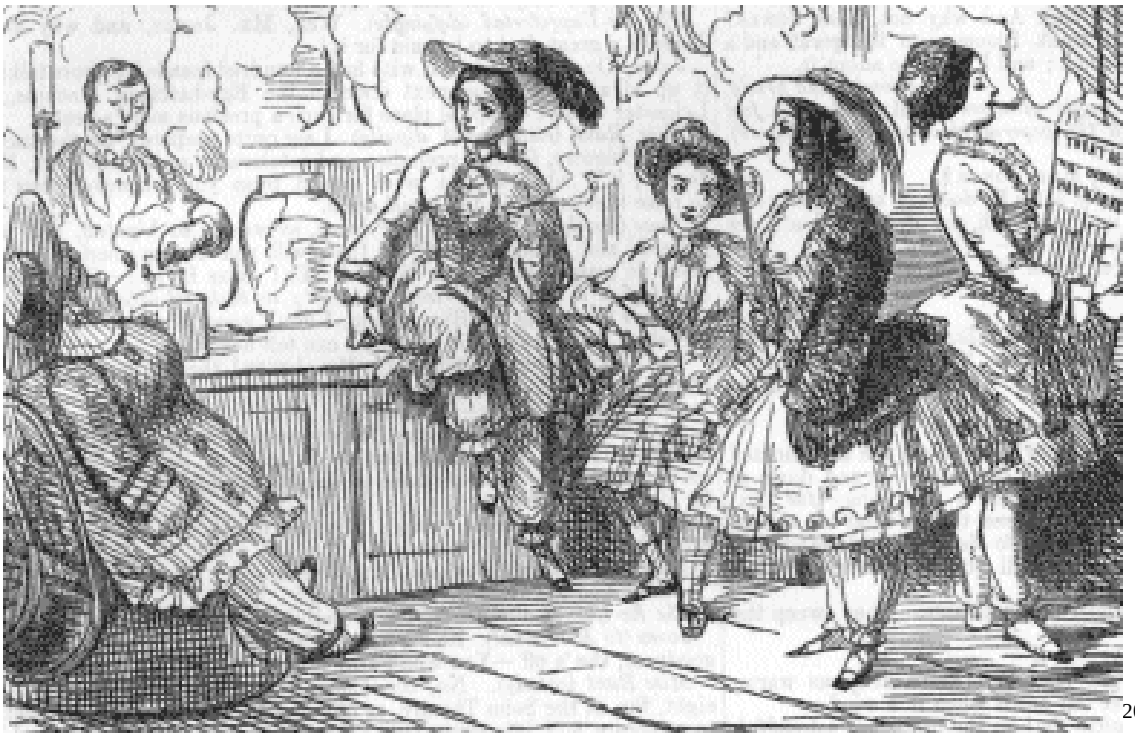
[17] Etching 'Lady Dedlock in the Wood' by Phiz (Hablot K. Browne), 1853, found on p. 447 (chapter 36) of Bleak House, 1930. Lady Dedlock is the figure on the left.

[18] Etching 'Oliver plucks up a spirit' by George Cruikshank, 1838, found on p. 39 (chapter 6) of Oliver Twist, 1992. Mrs. Sowerberry is the woman holding the door open.

[19] Etching 'The Visit at the Brickmakers' by Phiz (Hablot K. Browne), 1853, found on p. 107 (chapter 8) of Bleak House, 1930. Mrs. Pardiggle is located on the left, sitting on a chair.



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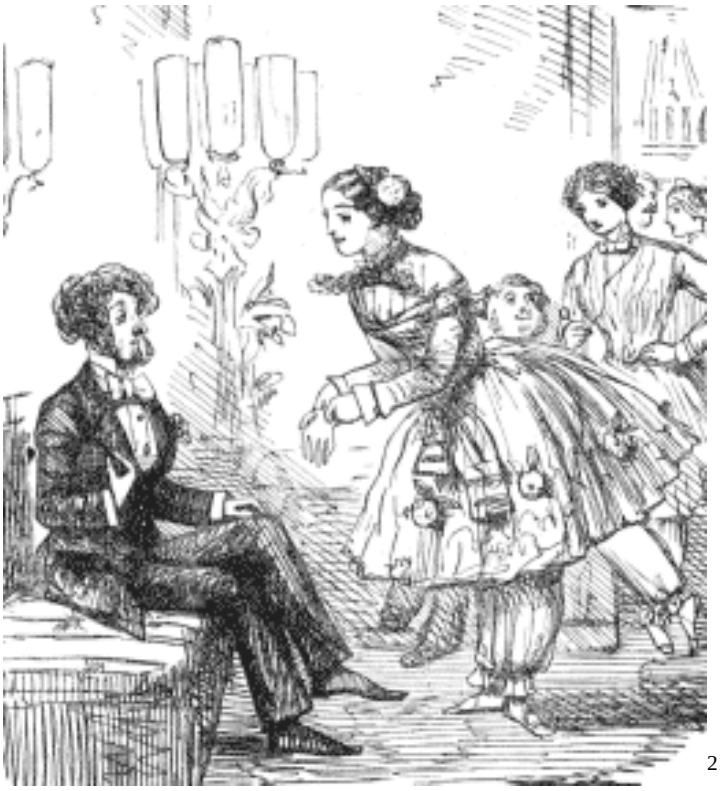

[21]

[20] Etching from Punch (magazine), Jul-Dec. 1851, found on http://www.victorianlondon.org/punch/cartoon17.htm, accessed on May 25th, depicting bloomerism.

[21] Etching from Punch (magazine), Jul-Dec. 1851, found on http://www.victorianlondon.org/punch/cartoon17.htm, accessed on May 25th, depicting bloomerism.

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