



HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS

Hugvísindasvið

“I am not as good a girl as I ought to be”:

Fallen Women in Charles Dickens’ David Copperfield and Oliver Twist

Ritgerð til B.A.-prófs

Unnur Kjartansdóttir

Janúar 2010

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Abstract

This essay discusses Charles Dickens' portrayal of the so-called "fallen" women in two of his works, *Oliver Twist* and *David Copperfield*. The issue of "fallenness" was a matter of great concern in Victorian society as it was widely believed that any woman who lost her sexual innocence and, therefore, violated the much-revered feminine ideal would inevitably lose her respectability and be forced into a life of prostitution.

However, while most women were led into prostitution as a cause of their financial necessities and only practiced the trade for a short period of time, the tragic image of the fallen woman formed part of a salient mythology which was created by the increasingly concerned middle-classes who felt that their moral values were under threat from the radical social and economic changes that had taken place following the industrial revolution. As with many other social issues, Dickens concerned himself with the hardships faced by these women and in the 1840s he participated in the establishment of Urania Cottage, an asylum which was dedicated to the reform and rescue of fallen women and prostitutes. He was also intent on changing people's perceptions of fallen women through his literary work and deviated in many aspects from the common representations by portraying his fallen female characters in an uncommonly sympathetic manner. However, despite Dickens' sympathetic outlook and participation in Urania Cottage, he nevertheless punished his characters for their transgressions and depicted their fall as a transforming event which leads to the permanent loss of respectability. Therefore, as this essay will seek to demonstrate, by employing aspects of the middle-class myth in his works, Dickens helped maintain the common misconceptions that surrounded the life of the fallen woman in Victorian society.

Table of Contents

Introduction	3
1 Acceptable and Deviant Femininity in the Victorian Age	5
2 “Fallenness” in <i>Oliver Twist</i> and <i>David Copperfield</i>	15
2.1 <i>Oliver Twist</i>	15
2.2 <i>David Copperfield</i>	19
3 Dickens’ Adherence to the Middle-Class Myth	24
Conclusion.....	34
Works Cited.....	36

Introduction

I am the infamous creature you have heard of that lives among the thieves, and that never from the first moment I can recollect my eyes and senses opening on London streets have known any better life, or kinder words than they have given me, so help me God! Do not mind shrinking openly from me, lady. I am younger than you would think, to look at me, but I am well used to it. The poorest women fall back as I make my way along the crowded pavement (263).

Thus speaks Nancy, one of the characters from the classic *Oliver Twist* and the first prostitute that appeared in a novel by Charles Dickens (Slater 340). During his extensive trajectory, Dickens addressed numerous social problems in his novels as well as dedicating his own personal time to various charitable causes. In 1847 Dickens assisted his friend Angela Burdett Coutts in establishing Urania Cottage, an asylum which was dedicated to the reform and rescue of prostitutes. The main purpose of the asylum was to instruct the women in household duties with the ultimate aim of sending them to one of the new British colonies where they could establish a home of their own. Dickens played an important role in the management of the asylum and was therefore well acquainted with the inmates whose stories served as an inspiration for a number of his plots (Hartley 64-65).

The obsession of Victorian society with the sexual innocence and moral chastity of women led to an extreme stigmatization and social ostracism of those women, often termed as “fallen”, who failed to meet the high moral standards that society had established. In the eyes of most people, these women had transgressed against their

ordained role within society as domestic angels whose main purpose in life was to watch over the sanctity of the home. Therefore, excluded from respectable society, the fallen woman was doomed to earn her living on the streets where she would eventually die disease-ridden or drowned (Nead 139).

However, this tragic image was not a truthful reflection of reality as most women were led into prostitution not because of moral degeneracy or seduction, which was believed to be the most common cause, but rather because of their poor financial circumstances and the few employment options that working-class women were offered at the time. According to Westland most prostitutes did not live and perish on the streets either, but worked instead as prostitutes for a short period of time before eventually returning to normal life (“Prostitutes”). The tragic image of the fallen woman was, therefore, to a certain extent, a myth created by the middle-classes who were increasingly anxious about the deterioration of their moral values and the prevalent social order which they believed was under threat from the vast social changes which had followed the industrial revolution (Zedner 13).

Dickens concerned himself with the issues of “fallenness” and prostitution not only in his personal life, but also in his novels, and this essay will focus on two novels in particular, *Oliver Twist* and *David Copperfield*. Both novels portray a variety of female characters that for numerous reasons can be termed as fallen. However, despite Dickens’ participation in matters related to fallen women and prostitutes, his characterization of these women, nevertheless, corresponds more closely to the prevalent middle-class myth rather than the actual reality of the matter as he invariably portrays them as sympathetic victims who, burdened by their own shame, have been

permanently cast out from decent society with no hope of regaining their lost respectability (Slater 343-344).

Therefore, the purpose of this essay will be to demonstrate how Dickens' characterization of these characters clearly resonated with the tragic Victorian myth of the fallen woman. The first chapter will discuss the important social changes that took place in England following the industrial revolution and the effect that they had on the perception of gender roles, as well as discussing, to a further extent, the attitudes towards fallen women and prostitution in Victorian society. The second chapter will study the depiction of the fallen female characters in *Oliver Twist* and *David Copperfield*. The main emphasis will be on the causes of their fall, the characters' development and their eventual fate. Finally, the third chapter will compare and contrast Dickens' portrayal with the prevalent Victorian attitudes towards these matters, for example, by examining his own attitudes towards femininity and deviations from it.

1 Acceptable and Deviant Femininity in the Victorian Age

The late-eighteenth and the early-nineteenth centuries marked the beginning of significant social and economic changes in England which were prompted by the industrial revolution and the expansion of the market economy. Among the changes that followed was the increased specialization of work along with the rapid development of business and trade. These developments had a massive impact on people's everyday lives mainly because of the great emphasis which was now placed on the division between domestic life and work, but these two spheres had traditionally been closely intertwined, generally with women participating in both areas. However, the general consensus now dictated that time was to be divided, at least for the male population,

between the public and the private sphere and, furthermore, that working life was to have as little interference with the home as possible. Consequently, the so-called “Cult of Domesticity” was created as the home became defined as a “haven” or a “shelter” where the family could find peace and comfort from the corrupting influences of the outside world (Nead 32-33).

One of the most important social changes which were brought about by the separation of the two spheres was the relocation of the bourgeois population to the suburbs. While the more affluent classes began purchasing property in the suburbs, the working-class and the more impoverished citizens stayed behind in the cities. Therefore, this transfer resulted in a significant transformation of the urban populace which not only affected class relations but had also an important effect on the bourgeoisie’s perception of the city. In the eyes of the bourgeoisie the city now became a place full of negative connotations. Not only did they consider the city to be a highly “dangerous and threatening place” whose inhabitants were perceived as a rebellious crowd, but they also feared that the urban poor might pose a particular threat to middle-class moral values and the prevalent social order as they considered them to be both physically and morally inferior to them (Nead 32; Zedner 13).

Furthermore, these immense social transformations not only affected class relations but had a great impact on gender definitions as well. As mentioned before, women had formerly been active in both the public and the private sphere but, as a result of the increased specialization of work, they began to move in growing numbers into the confines of the household. The domestic work of the home was also increasingly assigned to servants, mostly female, although the wife and mother still retained the responsibility for the running of the household (Davidoff 93). The ideal

woman was therefore not expected to do much work at all. Instead, her sole purpose in life was to get married, have children and to obey in every word the will of her father and later her husband (Vicinus x). Consequently, the different spheres which men and women were associated with came to determine the characteristics which each gender was expected to possess. Women were, for example, believed to be innately maternal and especially designed for domestic duties and the management of the household, while men's disposition was supposed to make them especially suited for the public sphere of business and political activities (Nead 32-33).

Because of their important position within the household, women were assigned the role of the guardians of the domestic haven. Men believed that they had been corrupted by the competition and aggressiveness that was prevalent in the market economy but women, because of their social position, were believed to be morally superior to them as they were unaffected by these influences (Zedner 13). Women were therefore expected to be, as Poovey puts it, "his [man's] moral hope and spiritual guide" (10). However, paradoxically it was also a common assumption that women were of a "weaker nature" than men and the home therefore offered an ideal safeguard from any moral misstep (Vicinus xiv). The Cult of Domesticity and the idealization of feminine morality were thus closely linked and could, in fact, not exist without one another. Since women were believed to be morally superior to men, it then became their duty to safeguard the purity of the home, but the shelter which the home provided protected, in turn, the purity and the innocence of the "weaker-minded" female gender (Nead 33-34).

In addition, the ideal of femininity was closely linked to class status and because she could allow herself to remain in the home surrounded by domestic servants, the middle-class woman became the embodiment of the feminine ideal (Zedner 11).

However, the stress on the purity of the home and the ideal of femininity was not confined exclusively to the bourgeois population but had an effect on women from nearly all steps of the social ladder. Zedner even points out that, “So pervasive was this ideal of the ‘angel in the house’, the little wife and caring mother, that only the very lowest stratum of society remained completely immune from its influence” (17). Living up to this ideal, nonetheless, meant a double workload for many working-class women since aside from having to fulfil their duty as the guardians of the domestic sphere, they were also forced to work outside the home because of their financial situation (Zedner 17). Furthermore, the failure of working-class women to adhere to the feminine ideal was even believed to manifest itself in their physical disposition which was generally active and healthy while middle-class women were frail and weak, features which were considered to be defining characteristics of the feminine ideal (Nead 29).

Another important aspect of the feminine ideal and a particular concern for Victorian society was the total lack of any sexual knowledge or desire in women. Up to the eighteenth century, women had generally been compared to their foremother Eve as passionate and in little control of their impulses. However, with the introduction of the Cult of Domesticity this perception of women began to change radically and the image of the pure domestic angel emerged (Poovey 9-10). A woman’s innocence was particularly important as it was commonly believed that all women were endowed with some remains of “paradisiacal innocence” which protected their chastity. Any exposure to indecent knowledge could therefore put it at a risk (Cominos 157). It was primarily the mother’s job to preserve the sexual innocence of her unmarried daughter and once she was married she was to have no sexual longings, although the desire to bear children was of course acceptable and considered natural in women (Vicus ix). Male sexuality,

on the other hand, was considered to be an inevitable evil as it was believed that their lack of “paradisiacal innocence” deprived them of any innate protection against their “lower” natural instincts which put them at a disadvantage (Cominos 160).

However, the unrealistic demands for moral superiority and complete sexual innocence often led to social ostracism for those women who failed to meet them. Sexual promiscuity in women was perceived as “unnatural” because it went against the idealized qualities that they were believed to possess. Therefore, a “fallen woman”, as women who had sexual relations out of wedlock or committed adultery were usually termed, lost her femininity and became a social outcast (Nead 49). It is also important to remember that since women had little or no chance of achieving financial stability or political influence, their worth and status depended almost entirely on how they performed their role of the domestic angel (Zedner 12). Therefore, unsurprisingly, deviant femininity was usually associated with the degeneracy of the domestic sphere as fallen women were believed to come from dysfunctional families if they were so fortunate to have one in the first place (Zedner 41). Thus, deprived of the support from their families and respectable society, a fate which awaited many fallen women was prostitution (Vicus xii).

However, there was no general agreement on how to differentiate a fallen woman from a prostitute. Many believed that all women who engaged in any form of licentious sexual behaviour automatically became prostitutes or as Hemyng asserted in Henry Mayhew’s *London Labour and the London Poor*, “Literally every woman who yields to her passions and loses her virtue is a prostitute” (qtd. in Cominos 166-167). Other social commentators thought that the term was too inclusive. William Acton, for example, chose to define them as following, “What is a prostitute? She is a woman who

gives for money that which she ought to give only for love” (qtd. in Wolff 235).

Nevertheless, there was one important distinction made which was essentially determined by the woman’s social standing. The prostitute was generally believed to be a part of the so-called “residuum” or the urban poor and while middle-class women were believed to embody purity and chastity, women of the urban poor were considered to be promiscuous and morally degenerate and therefore no different from the common prostitute (Nead 76-77). The prostitute was also believed to completely transcend the female role in society as her involvement in the public sphere and the financial gain from her work gave her the independence which was usually assigned exclusively to the middle-class man (Nead 95). Therefore, only women from a higher social standing could be termed as fallen because they had a respectable standing to fall from. Unlike the prostitute, the fallen woman achieved no economic gain from her moral ruin but was instead considered a helpless victim of seduction or betrayal (Nead 95-96).

In addition, there were diverse opinions about the causes of “fallenness” as well, although seduction was usually mentioned as the most common one. Seduction was also considered to be an exceptionally serious offence as it was believed by many Victorians to mark the beginning of a woman’s downward spiral into prostitution. The medical journal *The Lancet* even stated that, “In London there are now hundreds of such women in every phase of degradation, whose history is comprised in these words: seduction-desertion-prostitution” (qtd. in Sigsworth and Wyke 84). Some women were also believed to be at a higher risk of being seduced than others, especially governesses and other domestic servants. The blame of seduction was in most cases attributed to the man, which led to an outcry against uninhibited male sexuality (Sigsworth and Wyke 83-84). However, although the man was usually believed to be the perpetrator of the act

and the woman usually considered to be an innocent victim, it was nevertheless the woman, and not the man, who bore the brunt of the harsh social criticism which inevitably followed the act (Cominos 164-165).

Another reason, which was perhaps, contrary to popular belief, more common than seduction, was poverty (Westland, "Prostitutes"). As mentioned before, the demands for complete sexual innocence and moral superiority were quite unrealistic for many middle-class women, but for those of a lower social position they were even further out of reach. Aside from having to work outside the home, where they were exposed to the harsh reality of the streets, working-class women were also forced to live in overcrowded houses where there was little intimacy. The loss of sexual innocence was therefore in many cases inevitable for women living in those surroundings (Vicinus xii-xiii). The difficult financial situation of many poor and working-class women also put them at risk mainly because of the few employment options for women at the time. They were therefore in many instances forced into prostitution as it was the only means they had to support themselves and their families (Roberts 63).

The "Great Social Evil", as prostitution was often referred to, was the cause of great concern and anxiety in Victorian society and throughout the age there were continuous discussions about the nature, definition and the extent of the problem (Nead 95). The historian David Jones also points out that anxiety about moral crimes such as prostitution increased significantly in the period and Zedner even states that it was "out of all proportion to their gravity" (30-31). This obsession can chiefly be explained by the fact that women were believed to have an important moralizing role within society and the prostitute therefore posed a considerable threat because her moral ruin was believed to infect the rest of society and eventually lead to its destruction (Zedner 47).

However, the difficulty in defining the term “prostitute” resulted in widely different figures when assessing the extent of the practice at the time, although most investigators believed it to be an increasing phenomenon. In London, for instance, the numbers were on the scale from 8,000 to 80,000 (Nead 105). Moreover, despite the public outcry against prostitution there were no notable actions from the legislature to curtail the problem until the emergence of the Contagious Diseases Acts of 1865-1869 which were passed in order to protect the armed forces from venereal diseases by imprisoning infected prostitutes (Sigsworth and Wyke 87-88).

As a cause of the extreme stigmatization of female sexual promiscuity, the chances of regaining respectability within society, once fallen, were remote to say the least. In addition, this attitude created a vicious cycle as it prevented those women who wished to reform their lives from getting respectable work which left them with no other option than to continue their work as prostitutes in order to provide for themselves (Zedner 43-44). Nevertheless, there were various associations and charitable societies which were dedicated to the reform of prostitutes and fallen women, especially following the “evangelical revival” which took place between 1850 and 1860, but up to that point most reformatories had been run by public institutions (Nead 198). Many of these societies were run by women although their participation caused quite a controversy as many believed that it diverted their attention from their assigned role within the domestic sphere (Nead 201). Although their success was quite limited, the methods used by these societies usually evolved around guiding the women onto the right path by religious indoctrination and preparing them for work in domestic service or even, in some cases, sending them to one of the British colonies in the search for a new life (Sigsworth and Wyke 89; Nead 158).

However, the common belief that a fallen woman was lost for all eternity and whose life would most likely end in disease or death was, to a certain degree, a middle-class myth. There were numerous examples of women who, after having worked as prostitutes for a time, returned to normal life and even got married and had children. In his book on prostitution, Acton even asserted that, “I have every reason to believe, that by far the number of women who have resorted to prostitution for a livelihood, return sooner or later to a more or less regular course of life...” (qtd. in Auerbach 158). Furthermore, an important contributor to the tragic myth of the fallen woman was Victorian literature. As Westland asserts, literature invariably portrayed the prostitute as a woman who, because of seduction or as a result of her own moral corruption, plummeted to the depths of society and whose lifeless body was usually discovered on the banks of the river Thames (“Prostitutes”). The authors’ condemnation of the women, however, usually depended on their own views on the feminine ideal and to what extent they tolerated deviations from it (Zedner 28). However, although the image of the prostitute as an unscrupulous agent of moral degeneracy was certainly widespread, perhaps the most popular depiction was the one of the innocent victim, the young virgin whose fall was the blame of a villainous seducer who had abandoned her and, in the most gruesome depictions, left her pregnant with an illegitimate child (Zedner 57).

According to Nead this image was quite pervasive in Victorian society and it served, in addition, a specific purpose which was essentially to generate sympathy from the public. As mentioned before, the prostitute was considered to be a dangerous threat to respectable society, but by portraying her as a tragic victim the threat could be diverted through the use of sympathy (138-139). Moreover, the reason for this incongruity between popular opinion and reality was most probably due to the fact that,

in order for society to uphold the idea of the feminine ideal by controlling female sexuality, it was thus, “necessary for the boundaries between the permissible and the forbidden to appear incontrovertible” (Nead 49). In Victorian society, two female figures were prevalent, the asexual Mary and the fallen Magdalene. Therefore, in order to reinforce this dichotomy and consequently maintain the established social order, the divide between the two had to appear insurmountable (Cominos 168).

2 “Fallenness” in *Oliver Twist* and *David Copperfield*

2.1 *Oliver Twist*

Despite the 170 years that have passed since its first publication, the story of *Oliver Twist* has maintained its astounding popularity to this day and is still being adapted to both theatre and film all over the world. The novel, which follows the trials and tribulations of its eponymous child protagonist, gained immediate recognition when it was first published in serial instalments in the 1830s. Westland claims that even Queen Victoria, who had recently ascended the throne, was reported to have read it (“Introduction” xi). In the novel, Dickens offers a harsh criticism of the existing Poor Laws and on the dire conditions of the infamous workhouses (Smith 14). The reader also gets a glimpse into the London underworld and into the lives of the various characters that inhabit it, most notably, the members of Fagin’s criminal gang. Among those characters is Dickens’ perhaps most intriguing female character, Nancy, who, as mentioned before, was the first prostitute that appeared in his novels. Dickens’ incorporation of Nancy is also quite interesting as the publication of the novel coincided with the increasing discussion and concern about prostitution in Victorian society (Wolff 234).

Nancy is introduced to the reader, along with her friend Bet, through Oliver’s childish eyes as he describes them as “remarkably free and agreeable in their manners” and believes they are “very nice girls indeed” (57). Although there was no general consensus about the exact nature of prostitution at the time and though Dickens does not explicitly affirm that Nancy and Bet are indeed prostitutes,¹ the description of their

¹ Dickens, nevertheless, affirmed that ‘The girl is a prostitute’ in the preface of the novel in 1846 (Slater 340).

rather disordered outward appearances is, nevertheless, a clear indication of their real occupation, “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” (57; Wolff 235). The prostitute’s moral deterioration was believed to manifest itself in her extravagant attire as opposed to the modest appearance of the respectable woman. Therefore, a lot of hair and heavy make-up would have been a rather unsubtle hint to the nineteenth-century reader (Nead 173-174). In addition, Nancy and Bet’s “stout and hearty” physical disposition would also have been interpreted as a lack of respectable femininity as frailty and weakness were considered to be more desirable characteristics in women’s physicality (Nead 29).

The causes behind Nancy’s decline into the criminal world are explained quite clearly in the novel. Raised in poverty and trapped by Fagin, the criminal gang leader, at a very young age, she has been a part of the London underworld for a long time: “‘I thieved for you when I was a child not half as old as this!’ pointing to Oliver. ‘I have been in the same trade and in the same service for twelve years since’” (105). In fact, this was not an uncommon pattern among criminal women as studies from the period often depict them as fully integrated members of the criminal world who had, nevertheless, been led astray and influenced by a fellow male member (Zedner 58). Therefore, although Nancy can be considered as a victim of her social circumstances and the villainy of Fagin, she nevertheless identifies herself as a member of the gang; this is clearly portrayed when she refuses to betray it to Rose Maylie and Mr. Brownlow, “There are many of us who have kept the same courses together, and I’ll not turn upon them, who might –any of them-have turned upon me, but didn’t, bad as they are” (305).

However, despite Nancy's extensive criminal career and although criminal women were believed to be bereft of all traces of femininity, Dickens, nevertheless, affirms that "there was something of the woman's original nature left in her still" (262; Zedner 43). Nancy is quite conscious of the future that will lie in store for Oliver if he becomes fully immersed in the gang and she is therefore determined to prevent it, although the alternative might seem quite morbid: "I hope he is dead, and out of harm's way, and out of yours" (166). Therefore, as Westland points out, the remorse that Nancy experiences after having assisted in the kidnapping of Oliver and her determination in helping him reveals that she has preserved a sense of compassion and maternal instinct which was believed to be a part of "woman's original nature" ("Introduction" xx). Furthermore, Oliver's circumstances also compel her to reflect on her own life which arouses feelings of frustration and shame within her: "I can't bear to have him about me. The sight of him turns me against myself, and all of you" (165). Her sense of shame is also further enhanced by the presence of the angelic Rose Maylie, who is the epitome of the feminine ideal in the story: "she felt burdened with the sense of her own deep shame, and shrunk as though she could scarcely bear the presence of her with whom she had sought this interview" (262).

Furthermore, Nancy's downtrodden life among criminals has not prevented her from desperately trying to achieve a sort of domestic stability with the brute Bill Sikes. Throughout the story she tries to fulfil the role of the "angel in the house" by performing domestic duties and nurturing her "husband" as was expected of the ideal woman: "such a number of nights as I've been patient with you, nursing and caring for you, as if you had been a child" (251; Slater 340). Therefore, Nancy's position at the bottom of society has evidently not made her exempt from the "pervasive ideal" of

femininity (Zedner 17). In addition, Zedner points out that this kind of devotion to vicious criminal men was a common problem among women with a similar background as Nancy and which often hindered their efforts towards improvement (58). Thus, as it turns out, Nancy's attachment to Sikes eventually leads to her brutal death at his hands and, even at the very end, she clings on to the hope of attaining peaceful domesticity as she tries to plead with Sikes to accompany her abroad where they can establish a home and start a new life (313).

Although radically different from the portrayal of Nancy, another example of "fallenness" in the novel is the account of Oliver's mother, Agnes Fleming. Judging from the surgeon's remarks after her death, her tragic story of seduction and abandonment clearly resonated with many similar tragedies from the period, "The old story," he said, shaking his head; "no wedding-ring, I see" (4). In addition, because of Nancy's lack of a family, aside from Fagin's gang perhaps, Agnes' story casts a clearer light on the consequences that a woman's moral ruin could have on her family. Her father, for instance, is forced to flee with his daughters, "Goaded by shame and dishonour" (343) from the social ostracism which would surely await them in their community. Her sister, Rose Maylie, also inherits the dishonour which was caused by her moral error, although she is led to believe that she is paying for her mother's sins at first, "there is a stain upon my name which the world visits on innocent heads" (229). Because of her family's reputation, Rose is therefore barred from aspiring to a higher social status by marrying the prosperous Harry Maylie. Consequently, Harry is forced to renounce his privileged social position and become a clergyman in order for them to marry and live in pastoral domestic bliss, "there stands a rustic dwelling which you can make me prouder of than all the hopes I have renounced, measured a thousand-fold.

This is my rank and station now, and here I lay it down!” (348).

2.2 *David Copperfield*

Charles Dickens claimed that the “semi-autobiographical” *David Copperfield*, which was initially published in monthly serial numbers from 1849 to 1850, was his favourite among all of his novels (Gavin xi-xii). The novel is narrated by the protagonist, David Copperfield, and traces his eventful life from childhood to his adult years. However, what is particularly interesting about the novel is that Dickens incorporated events and characters from his own life into the story, such as his painful experience of working in the Blacking Factory as a child (Smith 4). He, nevertheless, altered the autobiographical elements significantly (Gavin xiii). It also presents a rich variety of characters, but among them there are two female characters that are especially relevant to this discussion, Little Emily and Martha Endell.

Little Emily is presented fairly early in the novel as David’s childhood sweetheart. As they spend their days playing together on Yarmouth beach, David becomes quite fascinated with her and he wishes that time would stand still and that their childhood would last for evermore, “The days sported by us, as if Time had not grown up himself yet, but were a child too, and always at play” (36). According to Flint the foreshadowing of impending sorrows and anxiety about time’s passing are common themes in the novel and David’s concern about eternal childhood and, consequently, childhood innocence, is therefore quite logical when considering the clear foreshadowing of Emily’s misfortunes early in the story (“Middle novels” 46). During one of their games by the sea Emily puts her life in grave danger, and this has such an impact on David that he comments that:

The incident is so impressed on my remembrance, that if I were a draughtsman I could draw its form here, I dare say, accurately as it was that day, and little Em'ly springing forward to her destruction (as it appeared to me), with a look that I have never forgotten, directed far out to sea. (35)

Moreover, the remembrance of this incident and Emily's actual fall later in life compels David to contemplate if it would have been for the best if Emily had drowned that day (36).

Furthermore, it is quite clear that Emily's ambitions reach much further than being a fisherman's daughter and, as a child, she expresses her desire of becoming a lady instead: "I should like it very much. We would all be gentlefolks together, then" (35). Emily's father was lost at sea and she has undoubtedly heard many accounts of other fishermen who have perished in the same manner. The fear of her beloved adopted father Mr. Peggotty and her cousin Ham sharing the same destiny seems therefore to be the main motivation behind her high aspirations: "'I'm not afraid in this way,' said little Em'ly. 'But I wake when it blows, and tremble to think of Uncle Dan and Ham, and believe I hear 'em crying out for help. That's why I should like so much to be a lady'" (35). However, as she gets older, she does not relinquish this wish until the well-off and bedazzling Steerforth comes along and offers her the perfect opportunity of realizing her dream as she claims that she will not return from their elopement "unless he brings me back a lady" (386). Therefore, as Slater points out, it is not Steerforth's debilitating charms and good looks which is the main reason for her fall, but rather his ability of fulfilling her dream in order for her to demonstrate her devotion to Mr. Peggotty (347).

However, a popular icon among many writers of the period was the young working-class girl who falls victim to a thoughtless upper-class man who perceives her as nothing more than a mere distraction at his disposal (Vicinus xiii). Consequently, it seems that Emily is destined to follow into the same footsteps as it is quite clear from the beginning that Steerforth is a capricious man who gives little heed to the consequences of his actions: “I had it in my thoughts to remonstrate with him upon his desperate way of pursuing any fancy that he took” (365). It is therefore no wonder that he becomes bored of Emily quite quickly as his servant, Mr. Littimer, relates to David, “Mr James he began to be restless again” (569). However, it is quite unlikely that Steerforth had any intentions of marrying Emily in the first place as a marriage with her would have meant a significant step down the social ladder as Mrs. Steerforth makes blatantly clear when Mr. Peggotty asks for her help: “It is impossible. He would disgrace himself. You cannot fail to know that she is far below him” (400). As a result, Emily, as the majority of girls who found themselves in a similar position, is forced to bear the brunt of the harsh consequences following the elopement as is evident from the townsfolk’s reactions: “Many were hard upon her, some few were hard upon him” (389).

Furthermore, Emily’s fate seems to be closely entwined with that of Martha Endell, the other fallen female character of the novel. The bond between them as well as Emily’s imminent fall is clearly foreshadowed when Martha is depicted as a lurking shadow which follows Emily, a sight which leaves Steerforth quite confounded: “‘That is a black shadow to be following the girl,’ said Steerforth, standing still; ‘what does it mean?’” (279; Slater 346). The reasons behind Martha’s fall are not overtly explained, although she has probably suffered the same fate as Emily. It is, however, mentioned

that she became an orphan at an early age, and the lack of a family was often believed to contribute to moral ruin (583; Zedner 41). Nevertheless, as a result of her fall, Martha has become a social outcast and has had to endure the scorn of the whole town; as Ham points out, “‘It’s a poor wurem, Mas’r Davy,’ said Ham, ‘as is trod under foot by all the town’” (288). In addition, the social exclusion that she has suffered at the hands of the townsfolk has barred her from finding respectable work. Therefore, her only alternative is to seek the help of Emily and escape to London where she must provide for herself on the streets and hide her shame in the anonymous crowd: “No one knows me there. Everybody knows me here” (290).

A further indication of the bond between Emily and Martha is the tremendous guilt that they both experience because of their fall. For instance, after Emily has assisted Martha and witnessed her anguish she is painfully reminded of her own sombre future, “Oh, I am not as good a girl as I ought to be. I am not, I know!” (292). It is also striking that, after their fall, both women remain mostly mute throughout the story except when expressing their guilt and shame. In fact, the only occasion that Martha actually expresses herself about any other subject is when she agrees to assist in the rescue of Emily, which she does after a long soliloquy of dramatic self-deprecation: “Stamp upon me, kill me!” (582). Poovey also calls attention to the fact that Emily is practically eliminated from the story after her failed elopement (96). Consequently, letters and the messages of others become her principal means of communication and she only uses her own voice to defend herself from Rosa Dartle’s verbal attack. Furthermore, on the few occasions that Emily actually makes an appearance, she is depicted with an air of shame and humiliation, although she manages a final good-bye wave before heading off to Australia: “Then, I saw her, at her uncle’s side, and

trembling on his shoulder. He pointed to us with an eager hand; and she saw us, and waved her last good-bye to me” (691).

Therefore, when considering all the similarities between Emily and Martha, it is quite fitting that Martha is able to return Emily’s favour in the end by rescuing her from the same life on the streets that she has had to endure. However, because of their status as fallen women, Emily and Martha have been permanently excluded from decent society and, as a result, hindered from providing for themselves in a respectable manner. Therefore, their only viable option is to emigrate together to Australia in the search for a new life: “No one can’t reproach my darling in Australia. We will begin a new life over there! (620; Zedner 57). In fact, Dickens himself delighted in the idea of the inmates of Urania Cottage emigrating together (Ackroyd 295). However, it is interesting that, once in a new colony, their lives turn out quite differently. Martha, for instance, achieves domestic stability in the wilderness after she receives a wedding proposal: “They was married, and they live fower hundred mile away from any voices but their own and the singing birds” (738). Emily, on the other hand, establishes a home with Mr. Peggotty where she dedicates herself to domestic duties and to the service of others. However, because she betrayed her promise to Ham, Emily believes that marriage is no longer a realistic option for her as Mr. Peggotty relates at the end: “She might have married well a mort of times, ‘but, uncle,’ she says to me, ‘that’s gone for ever’” (738).

3 Dickens' Adherence to the Middle-Class Myth

In his leaflet "An Appeal to Fallen Women", which Dickens wrote and handed out to female prisoners in order to introduce them to Urania Cottage, Dickens laid out Ms. Coutts' intentions for the asylum:

She has resolved to open, at her own expense, a place of refuge very near London, for a small number of females, who, without such help, are lost for ever: and to make it HOME for them. In this Home they will be taught all household work that would be useful to them in a home of their own, and enable them to make it comfortable and happy. (qtd. in Slater 342)

Although the asylum was financed by Ms. Coutts, who was one of England's wealthiest women, the ideology behind it and the management was in the hands of Dickens himself (Hartley 64). The idea of converting the inmates into domestic angels agreed quite well with his views of ideal femininity as he believed, as did most of his contemporaries, that women were innately suited for household duties and the management of the domestic sphere. Consequently, he considered that prostitutes must be exceptionally miserable because they were unable to perform their ordained role (Slater 348). He was, therefore, convinced that the prospect of domesticity in one of the British colonies would act as an encouragement to the women to reform their lives which he further promoted by giving the asylum a domestic atmosphere as opposed to the habitual institutional environment of most reformatories (Pope).

Furthermore, as Flint asserts, Dickens not only advocated the Cult of Domesticity through his charity work, but through his literary work as well and, as a result, became an important contributor to the image, which was held so dear by the

middle-classes, of woman as the “angel in the house” (Dickens 114-115). Therefore, when studying the female characters in *Oliver Twist* and *David Copperfield* it is hardly surprising that the women that Dickens clearly finds the most agreeable, most notably Rose Maylie and Agnes Wickfield, are repeatedly described as domestic. For instance, in addition to being described as, “so mild and gentle, so pure and beautiful, that earth seemed not her element, nor its rough creatures her fit companions” (186), Rose apparently glows with cosy domesticity as her smile is said to be “made for Home, for fireside peace and happiness” (186). Dickens goes even further, and many have suggested, completely overboard, in showcasing Agnes’ domestic abilities as she is referred to as Mr. Wickfield’s “little housekeeper” who faithfully carries out her domestic duties with her little basket. In addition, she is described as being so “staid” that she reminds David of a stained glass window that he had once seen in a church (193-194). However, although these descriptions might appear quite farcical to the modern reader and though Kate Millet complained that the majority of Dickens’ female characters seem to be “insipid goodies carved from the same soap as Ruskin’s Queens” (122), these characters, nevertheless, represent all the qualities that Dickens believed that the ideal woman should possess (Slater 372).

However, although Dickens held the domestic ideal in the highest esteem and was convinced of the beneficial influence that it could exert on the inmates of Urania Cottage, he was, nevertheless, quite aware of the fact that his enthusiasm would not be shared by all the inmates. In a letter to Ms. Coutts he even declared that, “many of them would go on well for some time, and would then be seized with a violent fit of the most extraordinary passion, apparently quite motiveless, and insist on going away” (qtd. in Slater 341). In addition, Dickens came across numerous cases where he considered that

the girl's moral decline was of such an extent that reform was no longer a viable option as in the case of an inmate named Sesina who exasperated Dickens to the point that he asserted that she would be able to "corrupt a Nunnery in a fortnight". Nevertheless, despite Dickens' familiarity with such cases and the realities of prostitution that he undoubtedly became acquainted with through his work in Urania Cottage, his experience did not have a perceptible effect on his representation of fallen women and prostitutes in his works and he seems rather to have forced his own views of these women upon his characters (Slater 343-344).

Therefore, because he believed that women were innately suited for the domestic sphere, Dickens invariably portrayed prostitutes, no matter how destitute they were, as desperately longing to fulfil the ideal of domesticity and womanhood (Slater 339-340). For instance, despite her wretchedness, Nancy proves to be no exception and her devotion to Sikes and her continual striving to fulfil the role of the "angel in the house" seems to be caused by her anxiety over the lack of a home and a husband to take care of, as she explains to Rose, that her devotion to Sikes is caused by the fallen woman's need to "let him fill the place that has been a blank through all our wretched lives" (266). The loss of a home after her failed elopement also appears to be the cause of great anxiety for Emily and in her lowest moment as she is being viciously taunted by Rosa Dartle, she cries out in desperation, "Oh, home, home" (610). In addition, as Westland points out, contrary to wicked girls such as Sesina, Martha, who is portrayed as a repentant prostitute who is rewarded with domestic stability in a foreign country, would have been, in Dickens' opinion, the ideal inmate for Urania Cottage ("Prostitutes").

Consequently, as Waters suggests, by portraying the lack of domesticity as a cause of great distress and anxiety, the Cult of Domesticity is established as the norm

which all women inevitably desire (130). As a result, there is a clear divide between the fallen and the ideal female characters in the novels which is further enhanced by the paring of characters such as Rose Maylie and Nancy. Although this sort of Mary/Magdalene dichotomy was certainly not an invention of the Victorian age, it became an exceptionally common feature in the perception of women during the period because of the extreme stigmatization of female sexual transgression (Davidoff 91). Nevertheless, there is evident amiability between the characters, which is no wonder, as Dickens believed that one of the heights of “womanliness” was the ability of displaying “sisterly” affection towards another woman (Slater 164). Therefore, even though Dickens habitually showed aversion to women’s philanthropic efforts, as was so memorably portrayed in his depiction of Mrs. Jellyby in *Bleak House*, Rose’s sisterly devotion towards Nancy would have been particularly agreeable to Dickens: “do not turn a deaf ear to the entreaties of one of your own sex; the first-the first, I do believe, who ever appealed to you in the voice of pity and compassion” (265; Slater 309).

However, the division between respectable and deviant femininity in the novels is, nevertheless, further highlighted by what Auerbach terms as “the absolute transforming power of the fall” which she claims was a particularly characterizing feature in the myth of the fallen woman (160). For instance, the fall of the hapless Tess in Thomas Hardy’s *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* (1891) leads to a complete transformation of her character: “Almost at a leap Tess thus changed from simple girl to complex woman” (qtd. in Auerbach 160). A similar transformation is illustrated in the alteration of Little Emily’s personality, for she is at first depicted as a spirited girl, but once fallen she becomes quiet and reserved. In addition, the metamorphosis of the fallen woman appears to come about even more abruptly because Dickens, as most Victorian authors,

steered clear of mentioning the actual sexual act which caused the fall in the first place (Auerbach 155). However, perhaps the clearest example of this curious transformation of the fallen woman can be seen in the hysteria surrounding the suspicious relationship between Annie Strong, the wife of David Copperfield's schoolmaster and her cousin, Jack Maldon, which instantly alters David's perception of Annie: "The innocent beauty of her face was not as innocent to me as it had been; I mistrusted the natural grace and charm of her manner; and when I looked at Agnes by her side, and thought how good and true Agnes was, suspicions arose within me that it was an ill-assorted friendship" (242).

An additional effect of the "transforming power" of the fall is that it seems to convert the women instantly into a "source of moral contagion" as is evident from David's contemplation of the relationship between Annie Strong and Agnes Wickfield (Zedner 47). As most of his contemporaries, Dickens accepted the notion of women as morally superior and he frequently uses this element in his characterization of women, for instance, in his description of Agnes Wickfield, "the better angel of the lives of all who come within her calm, good, self-denying influence" (232; Slater 309).

Nevertheless, the widespread fear of the fallen woman's ability of infecting her surroundings with moral degeneracy is also apparent, for example, in his portrayal of Mr. Peggotty who, despite his benevolence, recoils in horror at the thought of Martha's and Emily's friendship: "he couldn't, kind-natur'd, tender-hearted as he is, see them two together, side by side, for all the treasures that's wrecked in the sea" (289; Zedner 47). In addition, it is interesting how the idea of women's "paradisiacal innocence", which Cominos discussed earlier, is depicted in David's inability to discuss his suspicions about Annie Strong to Agnes because of his fear that anything inappropriate might

weaken her chastity: “It was not a subject I could discuss with Agnes, and Agnes certainly had not the least suspicion of what had passed” (529).

Furthermore, the moral error of the characters seems to evoke images not only of moral, but also of physical and environmental contagion as well. As mentioned before, the physical deterioration of the prostitute was believed to be a manifestation of her moral degeneracy as was portrayed earlier in the ragged appearances of Nancy and Bet (Nead 173). Nancy’s wretched life in the criminal world has also taken a toll on her looks as she says to Rose that, “I am younger than you would think, to look at me” (263). Emily is also depicted in a state of physical weakness in the first glimpse that the reader gets of her after her elopement with Steerforth, “I could just see her, on her knees, with her head thrown back, her pale face looking upward, her hands wildly clasped and held out, and her hair streaming about her” (611). Moreover, the depiction of Martha standing by the River, “as if she were a part of the refuse it had cast out, and left to corruption and decay” (578) was also a common representation of the prostitute, but as Nead points out, the rapid increase of the urban population was a matter of great concern in nineteenth-century society and since prostitution was regarded as an urban problem, the prostitute was subsequently regarded as an intricate part of the images of filth and moral decline which were associated with the city (116-117).

In addition, the River was a clear motif in the myth of the fallen woman and Nead declares that it became synonymous with the “lowest and most degraded level of prostitution” (125). Martha’s description of the parallel routes of the river and her own life further accentuates this connection: “It comes from country places, where there was once no harm in it-and it creeps through the dismal streets, defiled and miserable-and it goes away, like my life, to a great sea, that is always troubled-and I feel that I must go

with it!” (580). Furthermore, although Emily is rescued from the miserable life of the prostitute, her dangerous childhood game by the sea is, nevertheless, a clear foreboding of what was widely considered to be the fallen woman’s inevitable fate. However, the disturbing bond between the River and the fallen woman is not only exemplified in *David Copperfield*, but in *Oliver Twist* as well, as is portrayed in Nancy’s answer to Rose when she asks how her life will come to an end: “Look before you, lady. Look at that dark water. How many times do you read of such as I who spring into the tide, and leave no living thing to care for or bewail them! It may be years hence, or it may be only months, but I shall come to that at last” (307).

However, despite the images of decay and contagion which are associated with “fallenness” in both stories, the characters themselves are, nevertheless, clearly not to be perceived as a dangerous threat, but rather as tragic victims. According to Westland, Dickens, unlike many of his contemporaries, actually felt sympathetic towards prostitutes and he even managed to soften the public’s attitude towards this group, although his tokens of sympathy might not have been agreeable to all Victorians. For instance, by portraying Emily as a devoted daughter who succumbs to the seduction of an unscrupulous upper-class man, Dickens tried intentionally to evoke sympathy from his readers and encourage them to view “fallenness” from a different perspective (“Prostitutes”; Slater 346). Zedner also points out that the sympathetic depiction of Nancy as a victim of poverty and the villainy of abusive men differed vastly from the common portrayal of criminal women at the time (57). Therefore, by portraying all the fallen female characters as wretched victims who are burdened by their own shame, as Dickens believed that all fallen women were, Dickens managed to evoke feelings of sympathy, rather than repulsion, within his readers and, as a result, the threat of the

fallen woman as an immoral influence was diverted and, instead of being perceived as source of contamination and filth, the contamination was rather to be perceived as a reflection of the fallen woman's dire circumstances (Slater 344; Nead 124-125).

Although Dickens' depiction of Nancy is just as sympathetic as the others, her character is, nevertheless, much more multi-faceted in comparison with the other fallen female characters, or with any of Dickens' female characters for that matter. Wilkie Collins even asserted that, "the character of 'Nancy' is the finest thing he ever did. He never afterwards saw all sides of a woman's character-saw all round her" (qtd. in Slater 221). Furthermore, it is interesting how the class distinction which was used to differentiate between a fallen woman and a prostitute can be clearly discerned when comparing the depiction of Nancy with that of Emily and Martha. For instance, although Emily and Martha do not come from affluent families, as Agnes Fleming does, their loss of sexual innocence, nevertheless, triggers a fall from a respectable social status. Nancy's impoverished background and upbringing in the slums, on the other hand, would not have earned her the status of a fallen woman, but instead, she would have been automatically labelled as a prostitute. Consequently, her energetic character and the initiative that she displays in a lot of her actions certainly appears to endow her with the independence and the power which was often attributed to the prostitute. (Nead 95-96). In addition, while Emily and Martha are clearly portrayed as "mute, enigmatic icons", as fallen women were commonly depicted in Victorian literature, Nancy, on the contrary, is a much more assertive character who takes matters into her own hands instead of waiting for the assistance of others (Auerbach 155).

The unique personality of Nancy, however, comes with a price as she receives a much more brutal fate than the others. Although Urania Cottage had not been

established at the time that *Oliver Twist* was written, Nancy is nonetheless offered what Dickens considered to be the ideal solution for the inmates of the asylum, a chance to emigrate, “a quiet asylum, either in England, or, if you fear to remain here, in some foreign country” (306). Nevertheless, it seems that by refusing Rose and Mr. Brownlow’s offer, Nancy is throwing away her last opportunity of salvation as Rose refers to her, earlier in the story, as a “woman lost almost beyond redemption” (266). Slater also suggests that Nancy is far too immersed in the criminal world to be redeemed as a domestic angel (340). Nancy Armstrong, on the other hand, claims that it is the combination of Nancy’s sinful life among the criminals in Fagin’s gang and her kind-hearted deeds of helping Oliver that was simply not acceptable in Dickens’ mind as it did not concur with his ideology, or as Armstrong herself puts it, “It has to be the mixing of illicit sexual features with the attributes of the good mother that makes her body the site of sexual violence” (182; Westland, “Introduction” xx-xxi).

Nevertheless, although Nancy’s deviation from the feminine ideal might appear more exalted compared to the other characters, none of the fallen women are exempt from receiving some form of punishment. Because they posed such a clear threat to the Cult of Domesticity and the figure of the “angel in the house”, which Dickens himself played such an important part in creating, Dickens invariably perceived fallen women as a “troubling presence” in his novels (Auerbach 180). Therefore, in order to reinforce this ideology, Dickens made use of all the prevalent myths that surrounded the life of the fallen woman in the Victorian period. Consequently, while the reclamation of respectable femininity might not have been such an impossible task in reality, the middle-class myth of the fallen woman offered no such privilege (Auerbach 161). The characters’ signs of repentance and efforts of trying to live up to the feminine ideal are,

therefore, of little avail since it is clearly established in both novels that the fall is a conclusive event which leads to the permanent loss of the woman's respectability, as is clearly implied in the description of Agnes Fleming's fall: "and so she had gone on trusting patiently to him, until she trusted too far, and lost what none could ever give her back" (342).

Conclusion

The important social changes which were brought about by the industrial revolution around the turn of the nineteenth century had a significant impact on the perception of gender roles and imagery. Therefore, while men were expected to dedicate themselves to the ruthless competition of the market economy, women's meek and selfless nature was considered to make them ideally suited for the supervision of the domestic sphere where their vulnerable chastity could be protected within the four walls of the peaceful family home. Consequently, because of her deviation from the feminine ideal, the fallen woman was considered to pose a serious threat to Victorian middle-class ideology. Therefore, those women who did not live up to society's high moral standards were immediately ostracized from respectable society and, although the reality of the common prostitute was quite distinct, the depiction of the fallen woman as "an infamous creature" who was condemned to waste her life away in the squalor and immorality of the city streets became a salient image in Victorian societal discourse and literature which used this dismal image as a mechanism in order to maintain the prevalent social order.

Through his work in *Urania Cottage*, Charles Dickens became acquainted with the personal experiences of the various fallen women and prostitutes who passed through the asylum. However, when assessing the fallen female characters in two of his best known novels, *Oliver Twist* and *David Copperfield*, it is clear that his personal experience of the realities of prostitution did not have any influence on his portrayal as he invariably depicts these characters as guilt-ridden victims of either their poor social circumstances or the seduction of deceitful men. In addition, Dickens was an avid supporter and a contributor to the idealized images of domesticity and the woman's role

within that ideology. Therefore, in order to avoid any ambiguity, he made use of all the common myths that the middle-class had created around the figure of the fallen woman by portraying the fall of his characters as a transforming event which must be castigated with either exile or, in the most exalted cases, a brutal death. However, despite the harsh fate that Dickens dealt to his fallen female characters, he, nevertheless, took a different stance than many of his contemporaries by depicting them in a compassionate manner with the deliberate intention of evoking the public's sympathy towards these mistreated women.

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