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Structures of the Feminine in *Oliver Twist* and *Nicholas Nickleby* by Charles Dickens

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1. Introduction

The aim of this thesis is to present and analyse recurring Dickensian female character types in two Victorian novels published between 1837 and 1839, *Oliver Twist* and *Nicholas Nickleby.* These characters will be explored within the context of the historical period in which the novels were written, as well as the author's background and its influence on their portrayal. In Yildirim's words, "the analysis of Dickens's female characters should be based on the guidelines concerning the social standing and perception of women's role in society throughout the Victorian era" (116). Since "Dickens was a man of his times, not ahead of his times, in his attitude towards women" (Schotland 439), the historical context in which novels were written is particularly important. However, it is first necessary to explore the impact of the numerous conduct books written in the centuries preceding the publication of the novels. These conduct books aimed to make "young women desirable to men of a good social position" (Armstrong 59) by prescribing proper social conduct. Furthermore, it is necessary to examine how the desirable traits in women changed, particularly during the time in which *Oliver Twist* and *Nicholas Nickleby* were written, as women's societal roles in this period greatly affected the formation of Dickens' characters in these novels.

Until the end of the seventeenth century, the great majority of conduct books, designed specifically to educate women on social norms, "were devoted mainly to representing the male of the dominant class" (Armstrong 61). However, "by the mid-eighteenth century the number of books specifying the qualities of a new kind of woman had well outstripped the number of those devoted to describing the aristocratic male" (62) and those writings "became very popular once [they] broke free from the aristocratic model" (ibid.). Armstrong argues that "during the early eighteenth century most authors regarded differences of status as the only accurate way of identifying individuals" (65) but "by dividing the social world on the basis of sex, this body of writing produced a single ideal of the household" (69). Therefore, in the early decades of the

nineteenth century, the period in which the novels discussed herein were written, "sexual differences appear to have become much more important than economic differences in defining an individual's place in the world" (74). This curriculum, Armstrong goes on to explain, "aimed at producing a woman whose value resided chiefly in her femaleness rather than in traditional signs of status" (20). It was more important for a woman to possess "a psychological depth rather than a physically attractive surface" (ibid.). Authors started to present the value of individuals in terms of their qualities of mind, meaning that "neither birth nor the accoutrements of title and status accurately represented the individual; only the more subtle nuances of behaviour indicated what one was really worth" (4). In other words, conduct books portrayed a universal set of desirable qualities in women. The following sections will show that Dickens was influenced by the Victorian ideals portrayed in many conduct books. However, it is important to mention that conduct books were not the only genre that influenced perceptions of women in British culture, but domestic fiction, such as the works of Dickens, also made an impact. Literature must not be understood solely as a reflection or expression of social life. It is much more; it is language as a form of art and, as such, it represents one of the ways through which social life is established (Solar 16).

Domestic fiction introduced "a new form of political power" which "emerged with the rise of the domestic woman" who had power over everything "we associate with private life," such as "authority over the household, leisure time, courtship procedures, and kinship relations" (Armstrong 3). In the nineteenth century, gender marked "the most important difference between individuals," meaning that "the difference between male and female was understood in terms of their respective qualities of mind" (4). This thesis shall demonstrate that the female characters in *Oliver Twist* and *Nicholas Nickleby* are portrayed as bad or good according to their qualities of mind, rather than their social class, title or financial status. However, it shall also demonstrate that Dickens placed his female characters in socially predetermined roles,

particularly those of ‘angels’ and ‘the fallen,’ where the former embody the Victorian ideal and the latter are created to “deglamorize thieves, prostitutes and murderers” (Blount 16) with the main objective of giving the readers a moral lesson on what is socially accepted and what is not.

Authors such as Armstrong, Yildirim, and Golden have expressed similar opinions of the Dickensian female archetypes. For instance, Yildirim points out that Charles Dickens “is believed to have created most of his female characters under the strong influence of this notion denoting the strict Victorian gender codes” (114). He divided Dickens’ female characters into “the rewarded and the defeated,” where the rewarded are usually those who conform to the traditional roles of women, and “the defeated are those who dare to trespass the boundaries of culturally determined roles” (121). Similarly, Golden divided Dickens’ female characters into two categories: “selfless angels functioning as the holy refuge for her brother, father, or husband” and “fallen women doomed because they have violated the approved sexual code” (Schotland 444). Armstrong points out that “Dickens clearly breaks down the character of the self-possessed woman into those two familiar Victorian stereotypes, the virgin and the adventuress” (55). Therefore, this thesis will address the characters who fall under the category of the Victorian ideal along with the characters who are considered to be fallen and unrewarded.

Furthermore, Barnard observes that “changes in social structures, beliefs, and expectations were explored through characters who exploited – or were victimized by – powerful institutions and vested interests” (81); this thesis shall also address the characters who are victimized by men and society, and used as means of economic exchange that “permeates the Dickensian world” (Armstrong 88). However, the analysis begins with mothers, whether alive or dead, as Dever argues that “the ideal mother is the ghost that haunts the Victorian novel” (xi) and that “the maternal absence is one of the most powerful tools in the maintenance of the nineteenth-century maternal ideal” (6).

2. The (Non) Motherly Figure

Novels in the Victorian period "almost always represent mothers as incapacitated, abandoning, or dead" and "the phenomenon of the dead or missing mother in Victorian narrative is central to the construction of the good mother as a cultural ideal" (Dever i). However, it "only rarely embodies that power in the figure of a mother" (ibid.). "Instead, Victorian novels almost invariably feature protagonists whose mothers are dead or lost;" therefore "the maternal ideal in fiction thus takes its shape and its power in the context of almost complete maternal absence" (ibid.). In addition, Dever observes that "the Victorian novel conventionally opens with a scene of family rupture, frequently a maternal deathbed or a tale of wanton maternal abandonment" (1). Indeed, Oliver Twist's mother passes away in the opening scene of the novel, moments after giving birth to him. Seconds before her death "she imprinted her cold white lips passionately on [Oliver's] forehead" (Dickens, "Oliver Twist" 4). This kiss, as Dever characterizes it, "operates as a form of baptism for Oliver" (27). Dever explains that "even this brief moment of connection with his mother establishes her definitively as the standard of goodness and virtue for the boy" (ibid.). In Chapter II of the novel, the narrator says that "nature or inheritance had implanted a good sturdy spirit in Oliver's breast" (6). Miller argues that what Oliver has inherited from his parents is necessary for survival, along with the goodness of character he has by nature (42). Ginsburg points out that the theme of the novel is that the natural goodness of character that one has inherited or obtained by nature "cannot be corrupted by immorality" (222), so a mother, even if she is dead and therefore not present, transfers goodness onto her child which helps "keep him alive" (Miller 42). Nonetheless, throughout the novel, Oliver encounters numerous characters who fill the role of the parental figure he lacks.

Dever argues that "in Victorian novels, representations of maternal loss produce structures of displacement and operate as examinations of the objects substituted in the breach" (4). In *Oliver Twist*, Oliver encounters characters who act as 'surrogate' mothers towards him

and whose behaviour puts them in a certain category that usually exhibits positive characteristics, demonstrating the acceptable behaviour for a mother. For instance, in Chapter VIII, after he escapes Mr Bumble's poorhouse, he encounters an old lady "who had a shipwrecked grandson wandering barefoot in some distant part of the earth" and who "took pity upon the poor orphan, and gave him what little she could afford – and more – with such kind and gentle words, and such tears of sympathy and compassion, that they sank deeper into Oliver's soul" (47-48). In only one sentence, Dickens uses the words "kind," "gentle," "sympathy," and "compassion" to describe her. Sucksmith holds the view that "characters must make an impact on the reader" and that "it is absolutely essential that the writer creates either a strong sympathy for a character or a violent antipathy against him" (15). Although this assertion cannot be universally applied to every character in all works of fiction, it is true that by using such vocabulary in describing the old lady and telling the story about her shipwrecked grandson, Dickens arouses compassion for the character. In addition, her behaviour towards Oliver and the aid she provides also demonstrates her goodness. Then, in Chapter XII, Mr Brownlow, whom Oliver tried to rob, takes him to Mrs Bedwin, "a motherly old lady, very neatly and precisely dressed," (70) who takes care of him. She is portrayed as a gentle woman, doing needle-work and talking softly, looking at him in such a kind and soft manner "that he could not help placing his little withered hand in hers" (ibid.). Again, the words used by Dickens' to describe her and her behaviour towards Oliver casts her in a positive light. Furthermore, Rose Maylie and Mrs Maylie become Oliver's guardians and "Oliver gradually throve and prospered under the united care of Mrs. Maylie [and] Rose" (202). Apart from the fact that they are prototypes of "the Victorian angel," which will be explored in detail in the following section, by the end of the novel, Rose is revealed to be Oliver's aunt, further substantiating her role. Lastly, even Nancy, the prostitute, is given a nurturing role towards Oliver. While at first she pretends to be Oliver's sister in order to re-capture him and bring him to Fagin's gang, in the end she acts like a real sister by saving him from the gang and showing her altruistic nature.

Therefore, Nancy is “the antithesis of the absent mother and an alternative source of nurture as well as a surrogate for that mother” (Armstrong 182). These examples corroborate Dever’s claim that the absence of a biological mother produces characters who act as substitutes, but who are also used to demonstrate the image of an ideal mother.

Oliver is not the only character in the novel whose mother is absent; Rose Maylie is also an orphan. She was adopted and raised by Mrs Maylie and suffers tremendously throughout the novel, haunted by the thought of being an illegitimate child. Dever argues that *Oliver Twist*, written in 1837 when Queen Victoria acceded to the throne, “is the first fully 'Victorian' novel, marking the complete articulation of the psychologized, sentimentalized plot of the dead mother” (26). Clearly, the mothers in *Oliver Twist* discussed in this section are absent and replaced with surrogates, but the same can be observed in Dickens’ other novel.

In *Nicholas Nickleby* much revolves around missing or inadequate parents. The character named Smike is abandoned by his parents and brought to Dotheboys Hall, a school where he is beaten daily and where he meets Nicholas. In Chapter XXII, Nicholas asks Smike: “Do you remember no woman, no kind woman, who hung over you once, and kissed your lips, and called you her child?” (261). The narrator refers to Smike as “the poor creature” after his answer is “no, never” (ibid.). Sucksmith points out that Dickens uses a “sympathetic induction of emotion” as a rhetorical device, meaning that he aims at “arousing sympathy for a character” (123) by making the reader feel pity for him (136). The use of a phrase such as “poor creature” can be interpreted as a deliberate attempt to invoke pity and, in this particular case, engender sympathy for Smike for his lack of a mother. However, like Oliver and Rose in *Oliver Twist*, Smike too finds substitutes for the absent mother figure. Soon after they meet at Dotheboys Hall, Nicholas takes him under his protection and, by the end of the novel, Smike dies of an illness in his arms. Therefore, in Smike’s case, Nicholas took on the mothering role which, evidently, need not be limited to female surrogates. Even Oliver in *Oliver Twist* “has any

number of surrogate fathers, including Bumble, Sowerberry, Fagin, Gamfield, and the Board" (Lucas 43). However, Smike's mother is not the only missing mother in *Nicholas Nickleby*. In Chapter XXXVII, Edwin Cheeryble – a man who runs a business with his twin brother Charles, employs Nicholas, helps the Nicklebys with housing, and protects them from Ralph Nickleby's attempts at hurting them – holds an emotional speech at a dinner organized for Tim Linkinwater's birthday:

> Brother Charles, my dear fellow, there is another association connected with this day which must never be forgotten, and never can be forgotten, by you and me. This day, which brought into the world a most faithful and excellent and exemplary fellow, took from it the kindest and very best of parents, the very best of parents to us both. I wish that she could have seen us in our prosperity, and shared it, and had the happiness of knowing how dearly we loved her in it, as we did when we were two poor boys; but that was not to be. My dear brother—The Memory of our Mother. (446)

Dever insists that "the nostalgia created in the wake of the mother's death simply increases the urgency with which the text seeks to idealize that lost object" (6). In this case, it can be observed that Dickens aimed at accentuating the nostalgia and idealization of the mother by capitalizing the expression "The Memory of our Mother." However, the idealization of a mother need not be produced only by her death; it can be produced by introducing a character that is portrayed as an inadequate parent.

Apart from absent mothers and their surrogates, *Nicholas Nickleby* introduces a concept of the present but inadequate parent. There are various living and present mothers in the novels who do not embody the ideals of motherhood. One of them is Mrs Nickleby, modelled after Dickens' own mother (Bayley 95), who forced him to work at a shoe-blacking factory when he was only twelve years old because, at that time, his father was in jail for debt (Jeffers 56). "He could never entirely forgive his parents, especially his mother" who sent him back to the factory

in order to earn “a few extra shillings for the family exchequer – even after his father’s release” (ibid.). His father eventually wanted him to go back to school, but his mother did not agree, and “her attitude came as a great disappointment for the young Dickens, who later used his mother as the foolish and comic wife of Nicholas Nickleby, one who cannot see the true evil her children encounter” (Yildirim 114). This supports Schotland’s argument that “Dickens’s personal experience with women also played a major role in the formation of his female characters” (114). Consequently, Mrs Nickleby “fails in the most treasured of feminine occupations – that of mothering” (Bowen 169). Barnard observes how, “in his treatment of Mrs. Nickelby and her relationship with her children, [Dickens] is turning … to a theme … of the weak or negligent parent who relies on his child either as physical provider or as moral guide” (38). Barnard also observes that Mrs Nickleby’s attachment to Nicholas and Kate, her children, is “little more than an extension of her own self-regard – a lively source for her delusions of grandeur” (38). “Her insecure moral sense,” he continues, is “the basis of Dickens’s exploration of Mrs. Nickleby’s parental inadequacy” (ibid.). Furthermore, “she has continually to be brought to a realisation of her social and moral duties by her children – though by the very nature of the women such a realization is temporary and partial” (ibid.). She constantly reminisces “like Freud’s hysterical patients” (Bowen 168) and “her speech … constantly disrupts the plots, plans, order and reason of her interlocutors. Constantly attempting consecutive narration, constantly failing, she has the talk but not the cure” (168). For example, in Chapter XI, when Mrs and Miss Nickleby have to move into an old and worn-down house and Kate feels depressed because of it, Mrs Nickleby falls into one of her typical fits, which the narrator also points out:

> 'Why didn't you think of all this before—you are so careless—we might have asked Miss La Creevy to keep us company or borrowed a dog, or a thousand things—but it always was the way, and was just the same with your poor dear father. Unless I thought

> of everything—' This was Mrs. Nickleby's usual commencement of a general lamentation, running through a dozen or so of complicated sentences addressed to nobody in particular, and into which she now launched until her breath was exhausted. (129)

In Bowens' words, "psychic conflict is constantly expressed in the book through somatic symptoms, most usually as emotional crisis accompanied by theatricality" (168), which Freud later named as "paroxystic hysteria" (169). Throughout the novel, Mrs Nickleby exhibits this behaviour, for instance in Chapter XXXV, she falls into "a fit of crying" upon hearing the name Smike which reminds her of Pyke. Her explanation for this behaviour lies in her theory that it is a weakness which runs in their family, and that her mother, Kate's grandma, was the same: "The least excitement, the slightest surprise – she fainted away directly" (417). Then, in Chapter XXXV, she again "talked incessantly" and was of no help while remodelling the Cheeryble brothers' cottage. In Chapter XXXVII, the narrator clearly states that "although there was no evil and little real selfishness in Mrs. Nickleby's heart, she had a weak head and a vain one" (453). She possesses two undesirable features which a woman, especially a mother, should not possess – selfishness and vanity which leads to entertaining aristocratic pretensions.

Armstrong points out that, in conduct books, aristocratic women and those who harbour such pretensions are portrayed "as the very embodiments of corrupted desire, namely, desire that sought its gratification in economic and political terms" (60). Conduct books explain that this corrupted desire "destroyed the very virtues essential to a wife and mother" (ibid.). In these two novels, many female characters lack the qualities necessary to embody a good and worthy woman, mother, and wife, especially those who harbour aristocratic pretensions and seek economic power. Lucas observes that *Nicholas Nickleby* "is very loosely organized around a basic opposition of natural versus unnatural behaviour, where 'unnatural' may be defined in terms of all those people who are willing to sacrifice themselves and others for money or a

place in society" (62). In *Nicholas Nickleby*, Mrs Kenwigs is a mother of seven who does everything to please her wealthy uncle Mr Lillyvick in order to attain his wealth. She even makes her daughter get on her knees and beg her uncle to love her (172). She is "overpowered by the feelings of a mother" (Dickens, "Nicholas Nickleby" 162), as she cries because her children are "too beautiful to live" (ibid.). She uses her children for her materialistic goals – to inherit her uncle's wealth.

A similar character is presented in *Oliver Twist*: Mrs Mann, the superintendent of the juvenile workhouse where Oliver is raised. She is portrayed as a woman who finds it more important to take care of her own needs than the needs of the children she is supposed to look after. "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" (6). Money is more important to her than the well-being of the children in her charge, which makes her desires corrupt and shows that she does not possess the virtues of a mother. "Mrs. Mann," in Meyer's words, "has none of the feminine qualities Dickens admires, and is as far as possible from a nurturing mother, instead taking food out of the mouths of the starving babies she 'farms'" (242). Similarly, Mrs Sowerberry – the wife of the coffin-maker to whom Oliver is apprenticed – finds importance in the economic rather than in nurturing, just like Mrs Mann. For instance, she says: "I see no saving in parish children, not I; for they always cost more to keep, than they're worth" (26). With that, she confirms her lack of morals and motherly instincts, and her desire for economic profit.

While Oliver's deceased mother is a positive invisible force that helps him to rise above his condition and the memory of the Cheeryble brothers' mother is praised in an emotional speech, mothers that are alive and present do not possess desirable qualities and are not praised. Nicholas' mother "has continually to be brought to a realisation of her social and moral duties by her children – though by the very nature of the women such a realization is temporary and

partial" (Barnard 38). Mrs Kenwigs is "overpowered by the feelings of a mother" (Dickens, "Nicholas Nickleby" 162), as she cries because her children are "too beautiful to live" (ibid.) and uses her children to inherit her uncle's wealth. Mrs Mann physically abuses and starves the children in her care. Therefore, the analysis of the mothers in these two novels shows that in the mid-Victorian period, "the *only* good mother is a dead mother" (Dever 19), as dead mothers are idealized, while the living are, in a way, demonized.

3. Victorian Angels

In the Victorian period "the angel in the house was supposed to pay great attention to her manners and keep the home a sacred place where high moral standards were expected" (Yildirim 117). Moran claims that, in the Victorian period, "social structures and institutions tried to impose a single version of ideal femininity" (36), particularly through numerous conduct books. Women were not only idolized and protected, but also oppressed, while the qualities which were required of all women were "innocence, purity and passivity that were routinely celebrated in written and visual culture" (ibid.). Similarly, "the Dickensian angel," in Golden's words, "demonstrates a model of womanhood, exceedingly popular in the 1840s and 50s, that seems too saccharine, self-effacing, and domestic to a late-twentieth-century readership" (6). She further observes that "Dickens also ties the morality of ideal womanhood to hearth and home" (7), while Schechner similarly argues that Dickens "wrote as if he believed a woman's place was mostly in the home, doing domestic things and supporting her husband" (240). This chapter will show that Dickens' female characters who embody the Victorian ideal of femininity are rewarded for remaining pure with happy lives and marriages for love to good men.

During the Victorian period the norm laid out in numerous conduct books was that a young woman "was brought up to find the most suitable partner through courtship. Besides those concerning physical attraction, the only means necessary to achieve this end were the

ability to sing, play an instrument and speak a little Italian or French" (Yildirim 118). In *Oliver Twist*, Rose Maylie exemplifies the "proper" Victorian woman as she "would sit down to the piano, and play some pleasant air, or sing, in a low and gentle voice" (208). In *Nicholas Nickleby*, these qualities are embodied by Miss Kate Nickleby, Nicholas' younger sister. In Chapter III, one of the first references to Miss Nickleby involves her mother who says that "Kate has been well educated," and continues to explain that Kate went far "in French and extras" (31). Furthermore, as conduct books "prohibited female labor" (Armstrong 99), women found themselves with numerous "idle hours" that needed to be spent. These hours encouraged "the very forms of decadence" (ibid.) and thus this problem needed to be addressed. Since "education became the preferred instrument of social control" (17), "certain novels were found fit to occupy the idle hours of women" and "transformed all they contained into the materials of a gendered universe" (18). *Oliver Twist* depicts such conduct, particularly through Rose, as Oliver "would walk with Mrs. Maylie and Rose, and hear them talk of books; or perhaps sit near them in some shady place, and listen whilst the young lady read" (208).

Sucksmith observes that, Dickens' positively portrayed characters "may first be presented with only those amoral qualities which readers instinctively admire" (251), such as good health or beauty. His claim is corroborated by the first description of Rose Maylie in the novel:

> The younger lady was in the lovely bloom and spring-time of womanhood; at that age, when, if ever angels be for God's good purposes enthroned in mortal forms, they may be, without impiety, supposed to abide in such as hers … Cast in so slight and exquisite a mould; so mild and gentle; so pure and beautiful; that earth seemed not her element, nor its rough creatures her fit companions. The very intelligence that shone in her deep blue eye, and was stamped upon her noble head, seemed scarcely of her age, or of the world; and yet the changing expression of sweetness and good humour, the thousand

> lights that played about the face, and left no shadow there; above all, the smile, the cheerful, happy smile, were made for Home, and fireside peace and happiness. (184-186)

In addition, as “beauty is readily associated with goodness and ugliness with evil” (Sucksmith 17), it can be observed that the portrayal of Rose’s physical appearance aims to impact the reader’s perception of her character’s goodness. It is evident that, in the depiction of Rose, Dickens chooses words such as “angels,” “pure” or “noble,” to accentuate his characters' ideal feminine qualities. Similarly, in Chapter V of *Nicholas Nickleby*, Miss La Creevy tells Nicholas that his “sister is a very pretty young lady … and that is an additional reason why she should have somebody to protect her” (49). Therefore, from the very beginning of the novel, the reader is informed that Kate is both beautiful and educated in a manner appropriate for a proper Victorian lady.

Furthermore, as Armstrong points out, “neither birth nor the accoutrements of title and status accurately represented the individual; only the more subtle nuances of behaviour indicated what one was really worth” (4). *Nicholas Nickleby* exhibits this with references to Kate’s quality of mind. In Chapter X, while talking to Miss La Creevy about her uncle Ralph Nickleby, Kate says that “his manner is rough,” after which Miss La Creevy calls him “a cross-grained old savage.” However, Kate is unwilling to insult him, saying that she believes it is only his manner and that “she should be sorry to think bad of him until she was sure he deserved it” (115). Miss La Creevy finds her responses to be “very right and proper” (ibid.). Words such as “beautiful,” “educated,” “right” and “proper” are consistently linked to Kate. In Chapter XVIII, Mrs Nickleby expands the discussion of Kate’s character, saying that Kate “knows neither pride nor vanity” (210) and that she is “the sweetest-tempered, kindest-hearted creature – and so clever” (320). Even her uncle, the despicable Ralph Nickleby, describes her as “handsome, poor, [and] unprotected” (316), Sir Mulberry thinks she is a “delightful” (317) and “amiable” creature

(320), while Lord Verisopht – a rich and young nobleman who owes Ralph Nickleby and Sir Mulberry a large sum of money - thinks she "looks clayver" (ibid.) and that "she's a perfect beauty – a – a picture, a statue" (314). Armstrong notes that in *The Character of a Good Woman, Both in a Single and Married State* by Timothy Rogers, "among the qualities of the unmarried woman that the author extols are modesty, humility, and honesty" (66), all of which Kate embodies.

Madeline Bray, another "Victorian angel," is introduced in Chapter XVI. She is described as "a young lady who could be scarcely eighteen, of very slight and delicate figure, but exquisitely shaped" and "neatly, but very quietly attired; so much so, indeed, that it seemed as though her dress, if it had been worn by one who imparted fewer graces of her own to it, might have looked poor and shabby" (180). The narrator states that she is "of most uncommon beauty, though shaded by a cloud of sadness" (ibid.). He then continues to describe the way she walks as "timid," and notes that she speaks in "a very low tone of voice" (ibid.). She reappears in Chapter XXXIX when Nicholas sees this "lovely girl" (482) again, admires her beauty and falls in love with her. Madeline and Kate share admirable qualities of the ideal Victorian woman, such as modesty (492). In Chapter XLVII, her physical appearance is finally described:

> …a young and beautiful girl; fresh, lovely, bewitching, and not nineteen. Dark eyes, long eyelashes, ripe and ruddy lips that to look at is to long to kiss, beautiful clustering hair that one's fingers itch to play with, such a waist as might make a man clasp the air involuntarily, thinking of twining his arm about it, little feet that tread so lightly they hardly seem to walk upon the ground. (573)

It is evident from her physical description that she and Rose are very similar in appearance. The girls are portrayed as young, beautiful, pure, gentle, and lovely. Sucksmith points out that "the overlapping of the moral and the aesthetic is a fact of common human experience" (17), so in

the minds of readers, their positive physical features are easily linked with their qualities of mind.

Apart from major female characters who embody the feminine ideal of the time, Golden observes that "Dickens often created minor characters who mirror the virtuous and the fallen" (11). An example of another positive, yet minor, female character in *Nicholas Nickleby* who mirrors the virtuous is the Nickleby family's landlady, Miss La Creevy, a miniature portrait painter. She calls herself an "unprotected female," as she is not married. She is described as being "very kind, and wonderfully talkative" and Smike "thought, within himself, she was the nicest lady he had ever seen" (Dickens, "Nicholas Nickleby" 416). She has a "cheerful, chattering tone, which was habitual to her" (455-456) and is described as nice and kind. "Miss La Creevy," Basch concludes, "despite her fifty years and a few quirks, was too richly endowed with the qualities of a good wife to remain unmarried in the novel's imaginary world" (147). Therefore, she marries Tim Linkinwater who says that "true worth and cheerfulness of disposition were what a man should look for in a wife" (600), and finds exactly that in Miss La Creevy.

Similarly, Madeline Bray is in the end rewarded with a marriage to Nicholas Nickleby, Kate Nickleby to Frank Cheeryble, and Rose Maylie to Harry Maylie. However, comparing the marriages in Dickens' novels to marriages in the Victorian era reveals great contrast. Yildirim points out that in the Victorian period "love actually had little or nothing to do in the majority of matrimonies that took place" (118). On the contrary, "women did not have any say in the marriage. They were forced to marry because there were no other options" (ibid.). In Dickens' novels, the characters who are ultimately rewarded with marriage to good men are also rewarded with marriage for love. Wilson's opinion is that Dickens' idea of pure love was "a means of redemption of flawed, weak, or sinful men" (17). Additionally, Dickens saw "the idea of domestic happiness as the resolution of, or perhaps more fairly one should say, the

counterpoise to social evil" (ibid.). Armstrong also points out that "the eighteenth century books for women nevertheless agreed that the country house should be the site of the ideal household" (69) and "conduct books from the early decades of the nineteenth century had already come to see the country house, not as the centre of aristocratic (male) power, but as the perfect realization of the domestic woman's (non-aristocratic) character" (74). In that regard, Lucas also observes that Rose's recovery after falling gravely ill towards the end of the novel "fits very snugly into the theme of the persistent and indomitable powers of life in a 'natural' context" (49). The marriage between Rose and Harry is "seen in terms of a return to nature and as offering of a way out of the terrible and destructive falseness of class-considerations" (50). Lastly, at the end of the novel, Oliver is finally happy, also enjoying country life. "It seems that the country world which is paradise on earth to Oliver is merely the diametrical opposite of the city world" (Miller 70) that dooms the "fallen" characters who will be explored in the following section.

4. The Fallen

Female innocence and purity were celebrated in the Victorian era and, consequently, "Victorian women were also judged by their own reputations," meaning that, in terms of sexual conduct, "deviation was not permitted" (Moran 37). Therefore, any "middle-class woman who engaged in sexual activity outside marriage faced exclusion" from almost every sphere, including polite society (ibid.). "A Victorian 'fallen' woman," Moran continues to explain, "might sink slowly into prostitution as the only way to escape starvation" (ibid.). Prostitutes in Victorian England, often referred to as "the Fallen Women" (Yildirim 119), were usually homeless and "doomed because they violated the approved sexual code" (Schotland 444), as prostitution "is the using of her charms by a woman for immoral purposes" and "the surrendering of her virtue to criminal indulgence" (Armstrong 181). However, a way to "save" such women was to take them into one of the asylums specifically created to help put women

back on the right path (Moran 37).

Sucksmith points out that "the rehabilitation of women deeply concerned Dickens" (30), which can be corroborated by Dickens' involvement with "the rehabilitation of prostitutes in the 1840s at Urania House" (Wolff 235), "a refuge for reformed prostitutes" where Dickens helped fallen women get back on the straight path (Langbauer 425). His involvement in the rehabilitation of fallen women suggests that he was not only sympathetic towards them, but also believed they could be redeemed and saved. This can be inferred from his article "Home for Homeless Women" in which he describes the two main objectives of the asylum: "First, to replace young women who had already lost their characters and lapsed into guilt, in a situation of hope. Secondly, to save other young women who were in danger of falling into the like condition" (169). The falling of these women did not only result from sexual misconduct such as prostitution; poverty, suicide attempts, and theft (ibid.) were also culprits that would bring women to the asylum. However, it is visible from his description of women who were taken in that Dickens was wholly sympathetic to them and did not completely blame them for their misconduct, as he called them "starving needlewomen of good character" or "violent girls committed to prison for disturbances in ill-conducted workhouses" (ibid.). He blamed "misfortune and distress" (ibid.) for their condition. However, there is a difference between Dickens' treatment of the real-life fallen women of Urania Cottage and Nancy from *Oliver Twist,* which the following will demonstrate.

Nancy from *Oliver Twist* is one of "the most typical 'impure [women]'" in Dickens' novels (Basch 210). Although the novel does not state that Nancy is a prostitute, Dickens does indeed reveal that fact in the 1841 preface to the novel (211). However, readers can infer that Nancy is involved in prostitution because she keeps the company of thieves and works in the streets. Basch observes that another hint of her "'profession' could be her protests of guilt and perhaps the angelic Rose Maylie's instinctive reaction to move away from Nancy for a moment"

(ibid.). In addition, the descriptions of Nancy's physical appearance and manners reveal much about her. She is described as "gaily, not to say gorgeously attired, in a red gown, green boots, and yellow curl-papers" (81) and additionally, In Chapter IX, she and Bet, the other prostitute, are described as follows:

> 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)

Nancy had a "disordered appearance" and smelled of "a wholesale perfume of Geneva," which "afforded strong confirmatory evidence of the justice of the Jew's supposition," meaning she "was not exempt from a failing" (167). Recognizing Nancy as a prostitute because of her colourful clothes, cheap perfume, and overall unpolished look can be affirmed by Wolff's claim that prostitutes can be recognized either as "painted, dressy women," or as "half-fledged nurselings" (238). As noted, "beauty is readily associated with goodness and ugliness with evil" (Sucksmith 17), so it can be said that an attempt to portray someone as ugly is an attempt to show that something about their character is foul. Consequently, Bet and Nancy - the fallen women - are portrayed as messy and "not exactly pretty," while Rose is portrayed as "pure and beautiful." The only time Nancy looks like a proper, respectable woman is when she has "a clean white apron tied over her gown, and her curl-papers tucked up under a straw bonnet" (81). This is, ironically, when she is about to do something that is of questionable morality – re-capture Oliver for Fagin; it is also a time when she pretends to be proper and respectful. Lucas observes that "society is founded upon cloth" (40) and that *Oliver Twist* is "an excellent example of the power of dress" (41), meaning that "respectable society exists by cloth so it becomes dehumanized, incapable of recognizing and therefore living by the sort of humane values Nancy struggles to assert" (ibid.). Therefore, when she is dressed in clothes that are considered respectable, she is viewed as being respectable too, although her actions and intentions are

immoral. According to Bayley, the scene in which Nancy puts on an act at the police station in order to obtain information of Oliver's whereabouts and help re-capture him while wearing a white apron over a gown instead of yellow curl-papers, is a "parody of social pretences and what they conceal" (94).

Apart from describing the obvious differences in physical appearances between Rose and the prostitutes, Dickens also made their speech different to emphasize their differences in morality. Ginsburg observes that, in the preface, Dickens points out "that the representation of the slang (or cant) of the criminals obeys a mimetic logic," or in other words, it "is designed to show [the criminals] as they really were" (220). For instance, although Oliver spent a great deal of time with criminals, "the incorruptibility of his language is the triumph of good over evil" and "has to be understood as a metaphor for the pure soul" (221). Similarly, Lucas observes how Nancy's "mode of speech … is often socially unplaced" (28). Nancy comes from the criminal world and is a part of the Fagin gang; whenever she is doing something morally wrong or participating in the wrongdoings of the gang "her speech is marked, indicating both her social and moral position" (Ginsburg 223). "When she pretends to be Oliver's sister in order to get him back to Fagin" (ibid.) she says: "Thank gracious goodness heavins, I've found him!" (Dickens, "Oliver Twist" 95). Commenting on her theatrical performance while in search of Oliver, Sikes says that "she's an honour to her sex … wishing they was all like her" (81). The fact that the criminals praise this type of behaviour can be interpreted as Dickens' attempt to show readers that this is not acceptable behaviour, nor adequate for a young woman.

However, when Nancy speaks to Rose Maylie in order to help Oliver by providing information about his evil half-brother Monks, her speech is no different than Rose's and they are able to understand each other – they are essentially equal in character. The morality of her attempt is shown through the "pureness" of her speech. At this point in the text, the narrator even describes Nancy as "the earnest girl" (265). This shows that "the variations in her speech

express variations in her moral position" (Ginsburg 225) meaning that "Nancy's unmarked language in her encounter with Rose Maylie underlines her moral stance at the moment" (227). The conversation between Rose and Nancy in Chapter XL shows that Nancy, although a product of the criminal world, still has a "spark of goodness" inside her (Ginsburg 223). It is evident that, as much as beauty is associated with goodness and ugliness with evil, "'bad' language is also 'foul'" (Sucksmith 17) and "good" language is proper. Lucas observes that "what she is differs from what she is seen to be" so this might be the reason that "she is given a manner of speech that belies her outer appearance" (28). Yet lower class characters speak in unmarked language "only before they die" because "they cannot live to become members of the middle class" (Ginsburg 230). Thus, very soon after Nancy talks to Rose, attempting to reveal Fagin's plans and help Oliver, she is brutally murdered.

The main difference between the upbringing of Rose and Nancy is that they grew up in different social and moral conditions. What they have in common is the absence of a mother whose role is replaced by parental surrogates. Although parentless and therefore exposed to the possibility of having a "fallen" life, Rose was fortunate enough to be saved from illegitimate birth – adopted and loved by the wealthy Maylies who also prove to be good people. In contrast, Nancy does not share the same destiny, as she grew up in the streets surrounded by crime and poverty, raised by criminals instead of in a loving home. As Rose and Nancy's circumstances differ greatly, this proves to be fatal for one and prosperous for the other. Rose had a chance to grow into a "proper" woman, while Nancy was "exposed to every influence of evil, and knowing none for good" (Armstrong 93), and thus did not have a chance to become a "proper" woman due to no fault of her own. Yet despite the fact that the girls were raised in distinct circumstances – one enjoying wealth and happiness, the other living in misery and surrounded by crime – they both prove to be essentially good. However, their fates are different – Rose is rewarded with marriage while Nancy is brutally murdered.

Through the contrasting fates of girls with similar inner goodness, Dickens may be showing that "justice is very much a class-matter" (Lucas 23). Yildirim observes that women were forced to be economically dependent on men, whereas "only an accident of birth prevented women of the middle classes from resorting to prostitution to support themselves and their children" (119). Similarly, Houghton observes how a Victorian woman who, for instance, had an illegitimate child, was "made an outcast by the Victorian code of purity" and consequently the only thing they could do to support themselves was turn to prostitution (366). Bayley argues that, in *Oliver Twist*, Dickens adopts a "notion of the innocent warped and made by evil institutions" (86). "The 'free' world is the world of the Maylies, of money that can buy a rural retreat far from the corruptions" (Lucas 36-37), thus a character like Nancy who lives in poverty does not have an equal chance to escape the corrupted city and continue her life in the countryside.

Yet "Dickens' pathos had a social purpose. The heart that is purified by pity for the dead may be readier to feel pity for the living" (Houghton 277). Therefore, by portraying Nancy as essentially good despite being fallen, making the reader feel pity for her, and then murdering her and making her death "the most brutal thing in the novel" (Lucas 47), perhaps Dickens succeeds in changing his readers' opinion of fallen women in society. If readers admire Rose for her purity and goodness, they may "carry a condemnation of a society which creates criminals against which the good individual is powerless" (28). In addition, Lucas argues that "Nancy's true nature is not the same as her class-identity" (ibid.) and that the life to which Nancy is 'chained' "does not truly identify her worth" (40). In *Desire and Domestic Fiction*, Armstrong similarly links British fiction to the "empowering of the middle classes in England through the dissemination of a new female ideal" (9).

Not only does Dickens give his readers a hint that fallen women deserve sympathy despite taking the wrong path and exchanging their bodies for economic profit, but he also

shows that they are not completely responsible for their own downfall and that society is to blame. "*Oliver Twist* is … determined to confront its audience with worlds that will not go away no matter how much they may be ignored" (Lucas 39), such as the world of prostitution. Wolff notes that "we must not here lose sight of the fact that the desire for sexual intercourse is strongly felt by the male on attaining puberty, and continues through his life an ever present want" (238). Furthermore, "this desire of the male is the want that produces the demand, of which prostitution is a result" (ibid.). In addition, Houghton points out additional factors that led to the increase of prostitution in the nineteenth century:

> The growth of industrial cities providing a cover of secrecy, the starvation wages of women at the lowest economic level, the maintenance of large armed forces, and the social ambition which required the postponement of marriage until a young man could afford to live like a gentleman were important causes. (366)

Fallen women were made "outcast[s] by the Victorian code of purity [and] had little else to turn to for support" (ibid.) even though the reasons they turned to prostitution lay in social circumstances out of their control.

When Oliver first encounters Bet and Nancy, the prostitutes, he thinks of them as being very nice girls, "as there is no doubt they were" (Dickens, "Oliver Twist" 57). In this regard, Susan Meyers notes that, "Dickens uses Oliver's humorous misperception ... not to mock the girls for their immorality, but to express sympathy for them and a sense of shared humanity" (Meyer 245), just as he expressed sympathy and empathy for real-life fallen women in his article "Home for the Homeless Women." Therefore, "Dickens demonstrates his empathy for women who must work in order to survive" (Yildirim 121) and are victimized by society and men. "The first step to reclaim, to humanize such a mind," says Armstrong, "would be to place it in a moral atmosphere, to cultivate and raise its intelligence, and to improve its physical condition" (93). A perfect place for "reclaiming" or "humanizing" such a mind, would be in one of the asylums,

such as Dickens' Urania Cottage. In Chapter XLVI, Miss Rose and Mr Brownlow offer Nancy "a quiet asylum" (306) where she could leave the criminal world behind and start anew. However, she refuses to do so, saying: "'I am chained to my old life. I loathe and hate it now, but I cannot leave it. I must have gone too far to turn back" (307). Nancy's refusal to take refuge in one of the asylums can be interpreted as the reason Dickens treats her differently than the real-life women of Urania Cottage and is what ultimately determines her fate in the novel.

However, Nancy's death by the hand of Sikes, can also be perceived as a means of purifying her soul, as she refused to get back on the straight path while she was alive. "Nancy dies on her knees," Basch observes, "raising high Rose Maylie's white handkerchief, the symbol of a possible redemption she finds in death" (213). "Since death is the most powerful of all adversaries, potentially it is the source of the keenest pathos" (Sucksmith 138). Thus, through Nancy's death, Dickens creates sympathy for fallen women; he arouses compassion, reveals the problems these women faced, and criticizes society for putting women in this position.

5. The Unrewarded

Not only women who indulged in sexual relations outside of marriage or got involved in prostitution were considered "fallen" in the Victorian period. "Even women who stepped outside social convention in ways that seem so unremarkable – in dress, speech, interests, through living a single life … could expect criticism" (Moran 38). As Dickens often uses minor characters to mirror the virtuous and the fallen, the aim of this section is to present the female characters who do not use their "charms … for immoral purposes" (Armstrong 181), but who simply "stepped outside social convention" (Moran 38) by harbouring interest in their own economic benefits or speaking in a manner distinct from the norms of the Victorian era. Dickens does not reward these characters with what they desire, such as wealth, marriage, or a happy life; hence, they are unrewarded or defeated.

In *Nicholas Nickleby*, one of the characters who belongs to this category is Miss Knag, Mrs Mantalini's assistant and the forewoman at the dress shop. The narrator emphasizes the significant difference between her and Miss Nickleby, a Victorian angel. In Chapter XVII she is described as "a short, bustling, over-dressed female, full of importance" (200) so that the description of her physical appearance does not resemble any of the previous descriptions of the angelic characters. She likes to compare herself to Miss Nickleby, saying that she and Miss Nickleby "are quite a pair" (ibid.). "Only I am a little darker than Miss Nickleby," she says, "and – hem – I think my foot may be a little smaller" (ibid.), at which point she continues to talk without any purpose about her small feet. Apart from being nonsensical, her speech is also very unladylike – "every now and then, she was accustomed, in the torrent of her discourse, to introduce a loud, shrill, clear 'hem!'" (202). There are many possible reasons for that, the narrator continues, two of which could be exaggeration or wanting to add a word into her monologue, so that no one else can interrupt her (ibid.). Furthermore, "she was weak and vain, and one of those people who are best described by the axiom, that you may trust them as far as you can see them, and no farther" (ibid.). Therefore, she does not possess the qualities that are attributed to Miss Nickleby or Miss Bray, such as modesty and humility. She is not pretty nor humble, but weak, vain, and untrustworthy. Jealous of Miss Nickleby's beauty and mad at her after a customer prefers to be served by Kate rather than herself, she demands that Kate "shrink[s] from attracting notice by every means in her power" and remain in the background (208). Moreover, by saying things about Kate such as "I detest and hate her" or calling her "a slut, a hussy, an impudent artful hussy" (217), she further demonstrates the contrast in their manners. She is an unmarried woman, her speech does not adhere to social conventions, she is not pretty nor good in character, she fosters aristocratic delusions (Barnard 50), and is therefore not rewarded with marriage like Dickens' "angelic" characters. In Basch's words, she "is a shrew, jealous of Kate, and she abuses her authority. Her profession is only one of the means

by which she manifests her cantankerous and authoritarian nature, immunizing her - unlike Kate who is sweet and gentle – to the hard work in the shop" (145).

Another unrewarded character is Miss Squeers, a 23-year old girl who is the daughter of Wackford Squeers, the man who runs Dotheboys Hall where Nicholas worked as a teacher. In Chapter IX the narrator says that, "if there be any one grace or loveliness inseparable from that particular period of life, Miss Squeers may be presumed to have been possessed of it, as there is no reason to suppose that she was a solitary exception to an universal rule" (99). This implies that a woman of her age should exude grace and loveliness. However, the narrator continues to describe her physical features, saying that she is not tall like her mother, "but short like her father," while "from the former she inherited a voice of harsh quality" (ibid.). Both inherited traits, although one comes from her mother and the other from her father, are masculine and thus not ladylike. Therefore, Miss Squeers' introduction leads the reader to believe that she does not embody the qualities of a delicate and lovely girl such as Miss Nickleby or Miss Bray. Furthermore, in Chapter XII, the narrator clearly states that Miss Squeers "was quite lazy enough (and sufficiently vain and frivolous withal) to have been a fine lady; and it was only the arbitrary distinctions of rank and station which prevented her from being one" (132). She falls in love with Nicholas and upon hearing that her friend Tilda Price – five years her junior – is getting married, the jealous Miss Squeers invents a lie that she is also soon to be engaged "to a gentleman's son" (103). She adds that he is not a "corn-factor," like Tilda's fiancé, "but [a] gentleman's son of high descent" (104). After being refused by Nicholas, she becomes desperate:

> Refused! refused by a teacher, picked up by advertisement, at an annual salary of five pounds payable at indefinite periods, and 'found' in food and lodging like the very boys themselves; and this too in the presence of a little chit of a miller's

> daughter of eighteen, who was going to be married, in three weeks' time, to a man who had gone down on his very knees to ask her. (139)

Women who "harboured aristocratic pretension," Armstrong says, are "the very embodiments of corrupted desire, namely, desire that sought its gratification in economic and political terms" (60). "This form of desire," she continues, "destroyed the very virtues essential to a wife and mother" (ibid.), which is the reason that Miss Squeers cannot ultimately be rewarded with what she desires – marrying "a gentleman's son of high descent." In *Nicholas Nickleby*, "even in the lowest reaches of society, aristocratic pretensions are parodies" (Barnard 50). Miss Squeers' "flattering maid and her disgust at being rejected by an upstart usher are parodies of aristocratic life and attitudes" (ibid.). With this, Dickens "appears to be making a moral point" (Bowen 163) when, with Miss Squeers and Miss Knag, he moves "in an instant from conduct-book politesse or sisterly solidarity to the frankness of 'Tilda I hate you'" (ibid.).

Another such character is that of Mrs Kenwigs, a woman who does not possess desirable female characteristics. Firstly, she is an "anxious mother," who is "overpowered by the feelings of a mother," an undesirable characteristic addressed in the first section of this essay, as she falls "upon the left shoulder of Mr Kenwigs dissolved in tears" (162), because she thinks her children are "too beautiful to live." The Kenwigs family is dependent on Mr Lillyvick, their wealthy uncle, therefore doing everything that is in their power to please him in order to ensure that their children remain in his will. In Barnard's words, they are "centring their family life around a pompous and ignorant old man from whom they expect legacies" (50). Mrs Kenwings, therefore, cries "in a torrent of affection" and makes her daughter Morleena get down upon her knees in front of her uncle and beg him to love her, "for he's more an angel than a man" (172). Due to her materialistic pretences and the use of her children for such purposes, Dickens does not allow her to obtain what she desires.

Miss Morleena, Mrs Kenwigs' daughter and the oldest child in the family, is a "natural representative of her mother during her indisposition." Slapping her three younger sisters causes Mr Kenwigs to declare that, "in understanding and behaviour, … [Miss Moreleena] is a woman" (431). He believes that "she will be a treasure to the man she marries" and that "she'll marry above her station" (ibid.). However, upon hearing that Mr Lilywick is married, she "fell, all stiff and rigid, into the baby's chair, as she had seen her mother fall when she fainted away" (435). Therefore, Mrs Kenwigs' children are raised to be just like their mother. Consequently, they will harbour aristocratic pretensions and be materialistic, just like the Squeers women. As noted, "even in the lowest reaches of society, aristocratic pretensions are parodies" (Barnard 50) and "it is emphasized time and time again that such an existence is not a valid objective for his hero" (49). Furthermore, the physical traits of the Kenwigs women are not appealing and, as Sucksmith points out, "the reader may be invited to disapprove at once of a character … solely because she is ugly or has disagreeable personal habits" (252). However, all types of female characters in Dickens' novels – the fallen, unrewarded, and angelic – are victimized and used as means of economic exchange, which the following section will demonstrate.

6. Women as Means of Economic Exchange

Furneaux observes that "the total relationship of exchange which constitutes marriage is not established between a man and a woman … but between two groups of men, and the woman figures only as one of the objects in the exchange" (172). Furthermore, "if it is women who are being transacted, then it is the men who give and take them who are linked, the woman being a conduit of a relationship rather than a partner to it" (ibid.). Although in *Oliver Twist* "Nancy is the most obvious example of personal relationships reduced to money" (Lucas 44), this "transaction" also occurs in *Nicholas Nickleby* with both Miss Nickleby and Madeline Bray, who represent the Victorian ideal. In Lucas' words, "in *Nicholas Nickleby* … all kinds of relationships are open to corruption" (63). In Miss Nickleby's case, it is her uncle and his friends

who are in charge of this attempted "transaction" during a dinner-party in which Kate has no say. Bowen observes that "the description of the dinner-party that Ralph arranges for Lord Verisopht, a man who owns Ralph money, to meet Kate is saturated with economic terms," (162) which further corroborates this transactional concept. Lord Frederick says that Hawk is monopolising Kate (Dickens, "Nicholas Nickleby" 226); Sir Mulberry wants to bet fifty pounds that Kate thought of making love to one of the men at the party (228) and says that "one tolerable look at Miss Nickleby's eyes is worth double the money" (ibid.); Ralph says that he brought Kate "as a matter of business" (231). In addition, when the men are introduced to Kate, Lord Verisopht "precisely estimates … [the] economic value" (Bowen 162) of the business saying that it "would almost warrant the addition of an extra two and a half per cent" (Dickens, "Nicholas Nickleby" 224). To support these observations, Armstrong states the following:

> At the site of the household, family life, and all that was hallowed as female, this gendered field of information contested a dominant political order which depended, among other things, on representing women as economic and political objects. (15)

Kate's uncle, Ralph, feels no remorse for "selling a girl," as he profited nearly two thousand pounds from it already, his reasoning being that "match-making mothers do the same thing every day" (Dickens, "Nicholas Nickleby" 321).

Golden notes that "Dickens's awareness of the victimization of women by villainous men" (5) is noteworthy. Not only is Kate Nickleby regarded as an object of economic exchange among the men, she is also continuously harassed by them. For example, during the dinner with her uncle and his friends, she is exposed to a problematic gaze. She "had sat silently as she could, scarcely daring to raise her eyes, lest they should encounter the admiring gaze of Lord Frederick Verisopht, or, what was still more embarrassing, the bold looks of his friend Sir Mulberry" (Dickens 228). This gaze is followed by impolite remarks towards Miss Nickleby by Sir Mulberry who says that she must have been "'wondering why the deuce somebody

doesn't make love to her" (ibid.). After Sir Mulberry's repulsive gaze, Kate "raised her eyes and looked him in the face" (228). As Armstrong draws her insights from a variety of novels of the time, she observes how in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, one can also encounter the problem of a gaze where the woman "does not behave like the docile object of the gaze, but returns the gaze in a manner – this time not sweetly, but with scorn and desperation" (196). Similarly, Kate objects to their harassment and tells them how their behaviour offends and disgusts her, asking them to leave her alone and rising to leave the room (230). A parallel can also be drawn with Samuel Richardson's novel *Pamela*, as Armstrong observes, where the protagonist grows tired "'of their gazing' and retires from public view into the objects and activities of the household under her control" (124). Correspondingly, Kate found the look he gives her so repulsive that, like Pamela, she escapes the gaze by leaving the room. "She rose and hurried from the room. She restrained her tears by a great effort until she was alone upstairs, and then gave them vent" (228-229). Additionally, Armstrong argues that a woman "could be the object of the gaze and still possess the subjective qualities required of a good wife and mother" (78). Indeed, Kate shows desperation and modesty, calls herself a "helpless girl," (230) and seeks protection from her uncle. She is able to keep the aura of the Victorian ideal even though she responds to the problematic and harassing gaze.

Madeline Bray is also treated as an object of economic exchange when her father, Ralph Nickleby and an old man named Arthur Gride attempt to transact her. Mr Gride offers to pay off a debt that Madeline's father owes to Ralph in exchange for Madeline's hand. In addition, Gride has illegally obtained Madeline's grandfather's will which states that she will become an heiress as soon as she is married, which would make her husband the immediate heir of her possessions. In Chapter XLVII, the conversation between Ralph Nickleby and Arthur Gride about this marriage is also filled with economic terms:

> 'If you married this girl without me,' said Ralph, 'you must pay my debt in full, because you couldn't set her father free otherwise. It's plain, then, that I must have the whole amount, clear of all deduction or incumbrance, or I should lose from being honoured with your confidence, instead of gaining by it.' (578)

Miss Bray's mother is dead and she leads "a very miserable and unhappy life, under the strict control of her only parent, who has a violent and brutal temper" (489). In addition, her father is willing to sell her hand in marriage in exchange for ridding himself of debt. "He is making believe that he thinks of her good and not his own" (583). For two years, Madeline has been working day at night, "working at the needle, the pencil, and the pen" and "struggled alone and unassisted to maintain him by the labour of her hands" (559). Schotland points out that "Dickens 'was wholly sympathetic towards women whose employment lay in such traditional female domains as primary education, nursing, needle work and the decorative arts'" (443). Madeline suffers, but in the end, she is rewarded with a happy conclusion: marriage to Nicholas Nickleby. Similarly, Kate Nickleby, a beautiful, humble and timid girl, also suffers throughout the novel. She is harassed by Miss Knag and Sir Mulberry, exposed to an unpleasant gaze, and is forced to work to support her family after her father's death. She is also rewarded with marriage to Frank Cheeryble – the nephew of good brothers Charles and Ned Cheeryble.

Dickens puts his female characters through much suffering and victimization, but if they endure and remain pure, they are rewarded with good lives and marriages. Thus, this type of ending can be interpreted "as offering of a way out of the terrible and destructive falseness of class-considerations" (Lucas 50). However, although Nancy is also a victim of circumstance, society and men, and is portrayed as essentially good in character despite being fallen, she is not entitled to her own happy ending because, as noted, she refuses to go to one of the asylums for fallen women, rejecting the possibility of being redeemed. The marriages that conclude the novels are "an escape from that life [of suffering] and the horrors attendant on it" (ibid.) and

only the women who remain pure can be granted an escape. Additionally, as in the Victorian era "the only career that was deemed as appropriate for a woman was marriage" (Yildirim 118); the 'deserving' angelic characters are given what is appropriate for them in order to further establish their status as Victorian angels. These marriages, however, in the fictitious world of Dickens novels, greatly differ from documented marriages in the Victorian era, when "love actually had little or nothing to do in the majority of matrimonies that took place" (ibid.), as they are marriages for love; women who remain pure, in Dickens' world earn storybook outcomes.

7. Conclusion

The aim of this text was to isolate and define the recurring female character types in Dickens' early novels – *Oliver Twist* and *Nicholas Nickleby*. The research of women's roles in Victorian culture when middle and upper-class women were "'protectively' enclosed in the home and subordinate to senior male figures: father and brothers when single, husband once married" (Moran 36), has demonstrated that female characters in the novels reflect these roles. Furthermore, it has been shown that Dickens' involvement in the rehabilitation of prostitutes and his relationship with his mother also played a major role in the development of his characters.

In Victorian novels, mothers are "almost always … incapacitated, abandoning, or dead" (Dever i). The portrayal of mothers in *Oliver Twist* and *Nicholas Nickleby* does not deviate from this claim, as it has been shown that the mothers of both novels fit into one of these categories. That "the maternal ideal in fiction … takes its shape and its power in the context of almost complete maternal absence" (xi) can be demonstrated by the absence of Oliver Twists' mother who, right before her death, kissed Oliver on the forehead and, with that, established herself "as the standard of goodness and virtue for the boy" (27). In Chapter XXXVII of *Nicholas Nickleby*, another dead mother is praised through an emotional speech given by her son, Edwin Cheeryble.

However, a great number of orphaned characters are given one or several parental surrogates. The wealthy and respectful Maylie family adopts Rose Maylie, while Oliver encounters Mrs Bedwin who takes care of him for a short period of time, but is later adopted by the Maylies as well. However, Nancy, the prostitute, does not share the same luck as the two aforementioned characters, and is instead raised by a gang of criminals for whom she has to engage in immoral activities. It is evident that *Oliver Twist* provides dead or missing and therefore idealized mothers who are usually replaced with parental surrogates, whether positively or negatively portrayed. In *Nicholas Nickleby,* however, apart from dead and idolized mothers, much revolves around the concept of living but incompetent mothers. The foolish Mrs Nickleby was modelled after Dickens' mother, while Mrs Kenwigs fails at mothering due to her materialistic pretences, much like Mrs Mann from *Oliver Twist*. Therefore, in these novels mothers are either dead and idealized, or alive and demonized.

Female characters who are innocent, pure, passive, humble, and beautiful represent the ideal which corresponds to the Victorian ideal of femininity. Dickens bestows his angelic characters with beauty and modesty and, consequently, rewards them with a marriage to good men if they remain pure. Rose Maylie is the character who represents the feminine ideal in *Oliver Twist*, while Miss Nickleby and Madeline Bray epitomize this ideal in *Nicholas Nickleby*. Consequently, they are all rewarded with marriage for love. However, women who do not embody this feminine ideal and deviate from the norm, are ultimately unrewarded, or in the case of Nancy the prostitute from *Oliver Twist*, even brutally murdered. Dickens also used minor characters to portray either the virtuous or the fallen. Therefore, kind and cheerful Miss La Creevy is rewarded with marriage, while the Kenwigs and the Squeers women who harbour aristocratic pretensions do not receive what they want – wealth and marriage.

Finally, Dickens portrays both his angelic and fallen characters as victims of men and society. Apart from suffering tremendously in the novel and being murdered at its end, Nancy

is used as a means of economic exchange as she is forced into prostitution. In *Nicholas Nickleby* both Kate and Madeline are also used as means of economic exchange. Madeline was supposed to enter an arranged marriage with an old and despicable man in exchange for settlement of her father's debts. Kate was forced to attend a dinner party through which Dickens aimed to show the problematic aspect of using an innocent girl as a means of economic exchange by utilizing an array of economic terms in attempts to transact her.

Based on the evidence provided by the novels, the authors who argue that Dickens was a man of his time, but not ahead of his time, are certainly correct, as he rewards the angelic and punishes the fallen. However, glimpses of Dickens' social activism are present in *Oliver Twist* through Nancy who is, in the end, portrayed as a positive character despite her status of a "fallen woman." Fallen women "illustrate and express what Dickens condemns in society: the role of money and commercial value [and] the brutality of manners in the underworld" (Basch 228). Dickens "really did sympathize with every sort of victim of every sort of tyrant" (Chesterton 52). However, although Dickens was wholly sympathetic to victimized and fallen women, and believed that they could be saved – which can be confirmed with his involvement in the rehabilitation of prostitutes at Urania Cottage – he ultimately does not allow Nancy to have a good life and rise above her condition. In the novel, she is given a choice to join one of the asylums that were supposed to give her an opportunity to live a better life, far away from the corrupted city, but because Nancy rejects this opportunity, she ultimately cannot be saved. Her redemption lies in gruesome death.

In comparing the female characters in these two novels it can be argued that Dickens held views typical of the Victorian era and that "in all his tales there is a latent desire to improve and strengthen the charities of life, raise the trampled upon, soften intolerance, diffuse knowledge, [and] promote happiness" (Armstrong 44). In these novels, he parodies aristocratic pretentions and greediness, praises purity and morality, and condemns the victimization of

women. He also condemns the harsh living conditions of the lower classes, especially women, and the societal circumstances that lead to crime and prostitution. However, by not allowing his fallen character to rise above her condition unless she joins one of the asylums for fallen women and rewarding only the ones who remain pure and quiet, he subtly affirms the rules of the patriarchal Victorian society and relegates women to the domestic sphere.

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