Murderous Mothers: The Problem of Parenting in the Victorian Novel

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Since the time of Cinderella, fictional heroines have struggled against destructive maternal figures to the accompaniment of sympathy from writer and reader. This figure so commonly structures the story of women that we fail to give it the critical attention it demands: we cheer the heroine, hiss the villainous mother, and lean back in our seats satisfied that we have served the cause of justice. But our reaction makes us complicit in a set of standards that merit questioning. A closer look at this figure suggests that the destructive maternal character often possesses revolutionary energy. The Terrible Mother, far from being an individual deviant, frequently embodies a radical indictment of her society.

The nineteenth-century novel, which relies as a staple on the story of the maturing and marriage of the young girl, provides us with a range of Terrible Mothers for scrutiny. These women enjoy many characteristics of the archetype as described by Erich Neumann. They are devouring or disinterested, malicious or neglectful; they pose a serious threat to the lives of their offspring. When we consider particular cases, however, we cannot help but be struck by the peculiarities of the phenomenon. Despite appearances, Terrible Mothers are often inadvertently helpful to their daughters, and despite their rhetoric, Victorian novelists often reveal a deep ambivalence about these dangerous women, an ambivalence which asks us to attend to them more carefully.

The reasons for this peculiar ambivalence are embedded in the complex historical realities served by the ideal of the Good Mother. This ideal was promulgated, with particular fervor and political consequence, as a result of the rise of industrialization. The Good Mother—noble, nurturing, necessary—hovered over all strata of Victorian England. The working woman was barraged by Her:

If she be a mother, still higher, nobler is her mission. If to the weak hands is entrusted the task of rearing the young immortals, for service here, and glory
hereafter; if the gem be given to her to polish which shall one day sparkle in the crown of the Saviour, let her walk softly, for angels might envy her high vocation, and the almighty looks to see how she is nursing the child for Him.

So, too, was her middle-class counterpart:

The most anxious, however, if not the most important duty of married life, is that which is due to children, and which in their early years principally devolves upon the mother. None can supply her place, none can feel her interest; and as in infancy a mother is the best nurse so in childhood she is the best guardian and instructress.

The ideal of the Good Mother served a coherent system: with the world divided between public and private spheres, pressure was on the latter to compensate for the increasing ravages of the former. The Angel in the House was caught in a dialectical dance with the demons at the door. The Good Mother was a guardian of the hearth, a refuge from the harshness of the new industrialization: “This is the nature of home—it is the place of Peace; the shelter, not only from all injury, but from all terror, doubt and division. In so far as it is not this, it is not home.” Because the fantasy of such a shelter compensated for the “terror, doubt, and division” of the workplace, the seemingly apolitical ideal of the Good Mother was actually charged with political and economic implications.

A complete examination of these implications lies outside the domain of this paper, but we can note several instances which suggest their scope. The ideal of the Good Mother was often invoked, at the expense of actual mothers, to support male economic interests. For example, we find appeals to the ideal of the Good Mother employed to dissuade mothers from working. Impassioned appeals to maternal devotion and diatribes against working mothers greeted the devastating statistics about the rising infant mortality rate, but the rhetoric invites suspicion. Victorians, in fact, were remarkably complacent about the exploitation and death of children: on one day in February 1814, for example, five children were condemned to death at the Old Bailey for petty larceny. Such evidence has invited historians to speculate that the dedication and skills of working mothers were felt more seriously as a threat to men’s jobs than to children’s lives. Infant mortality may have been the occasion for which the ideal was invoked; the protection of male economic interest was the more likely motive. That the ideal of the Good Mother camouflaged male interests is further suggested by the divorce laws of the time. For all the insistence on the beneficence of maternal childcare and despite instances which outraged even the judges handing down the rulings, the divorce laws discriminated against maternal custody until 1925.
This typical endorsement of male prerogative raises questions about the sincerity of the prevalent propaganda. Nonetheless, the rhetoric was not totally hypocritical. The interests it defended were merely more complex than it could afford to admit. The intensity of propagandistic appeals to maternal duty throughout the century suggests the centrality of the stable home and family in Victorian culture. Still concern for these at times assumed the characteristics of hysteria. While hunger, disease, and dangerous housing were recognized as necessitating state aid to the children of the poor, a terror of the effect of such aid on the stability of the family froze the machinery of the state. Celebrations of the warmth and efficacy of mothers, as opposed to the coldness of government aid, framed the state’s defense of its inaction. Such questionable reasoning which preserved the myth of maternal child care at the expense of the reality encourages a skeptical attitude toward the cult of the Good Mother: whose interest does this ideal woman serve?

Even a dim awareness of such historical circumstances might explain ambivalence in an artist treating the ideal of the Good Mother or her terrible counterpart. Victorian novelists were certainly not immune to the prevalent propaganda; celebrations of contented mothering are frequent in the fiction of the time. Bella Wilfer in Dickens’s *Our Mutual Friend*, free from her mistaken, lofty ambitions, studies furiously to express her joy as John Rokesmith’s poor wife and the mother of his child. Thackeray’s Amelia Sedley in *Vanity Fair*, scrounging, economizing, sacrificing everything for her child, is but another example of the type. The ideal ignores class boundaries: Lady Jane, the wife of Pitt Crawley in the same novel, is all gentleness and mildness, severe only in the protection of her home and in outrage against Becky’s cruelty toward her child and husband.

The cult of the Good Mother achieves its ultimate expression just after the turn of the century in Lawrence’s apostrophe to Anna, the resolute mother of *The Rainbow*:

There was another child coming, and Anna lapsed into vague content. If she were not the wayfarer to the unknown, if she were arrived now, settled in her builded house, a rich woman, still her doors opened under the arch of the rainbow, her threshold reflected the passing of the sun and moon, the great travellers, her house was full of the echo of journeying.

She was a door and a threshold, she herself. Through her another soul was coming, to stand upon her as upon the threshold, looking out, shading its eyes for the direction to take.  

Anna’s Victorian predecessors enjoy a similar stability and lack of self-consciousness; but they are rarely treated to such a powerful
celebration. Instead the Milquetoast consistency of many Victorian Good Mothers raises questions about the vigor of the ideal which they embody; and these questions are echoed by other peculiarities surrounding the treatment of mothers in fiction throughout the century. According to standard rhetoric, the loss of a Good Mother is crippling to the child, but despite their postures of pity, nineteenth-century novels resound with the success of orphans. Jane Eyre, Emma, Dinah Morris, Becky Sharp—all have the absence of a mother to thank for their social mobility. While Thackeray explicitly regrets Becky’s orphan status, his regret is blatantly insincere. Without a mother, Becky is free to manipulate her audience: her actual mother, an opera girl, would have prohibited her access to the households in which Becky’s fictional mother—a French lady—is an added charm. Similarly Jane Eyre’s status as an orphan forces her to travel and thus to acquire the knowledge she needs to effect a personally and socially successful marriage. The conjunction of motherlessness and power so frequently enjoyed by the novel’s heroine implies an experience familiar to contemporary women—that the life of the mother necessarily impinges on the life of the child. Dickens, in general so ignorant about women, understood this perfectly and gave voice to it on the assumptions governing the life of Georgiana Podsnap:

“I’ll tell you something I know about you, my dear,” returned Mrs. Lammle in her winning way, “and that is, you are most unnecessarily shy.”

“Ma ain’t,” said Miss Podsnap.

“Dearest Georgiana, pardon me if I scarcely see, my love, why your mamma’s not being shy is a reason why you should be.”

“Don’t you really see that?” asked Miss Podsnap, plucking at her fingers in a troubled manner, and furtively casting her eye now on Mrs. Lammle, now on the ground.

The lives of nineteenth-century heroines reveal the naiveté of Mrs. Lammle’s remark. Dickens’s insight invites us to see the relationship of mother and daughter as a relation trapped in the vice of an unyielding world, and this perspective imbues the fictional mother with great potential as a vehicle of social criticism. Her behavior often illuminates the nature of the world which presses in on her and on her daughter. While most novelists, moreover, insist that their Terrible Mothers be severely judged, they frequently betray this insistence with some anomalous treatment of these characters, a treatment which prompts the reader to suspect the standards of judgment which the novel officially invokes. Many Victorian novelists teeter on the edge of a realization common and explicit in
twentieth-century fiction: that the failure of mothers as often reflects a problem with the institutions the woman is expected to serve as it reflects a problem with the woman herself. A close examination of three Terrible Mothers, Mrs. Bennet in Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*; Mrs. Jellyby in Dickens's *Bleak House*; and Hetty Sorrel in Eliot's *Adam Bede* reveals the range of instances which constitute the first rumblings of this realization.

Austen's Mrs. Bennet is but one instance of the inadequate mother who challenges the standards by which she is found wanting. From the first time we see her, helpless before her husband's wit, she is easily dismissed:

Her mind was less difficult to develop. She was a woman of mean understanding, little information, and uncertain temper. When she was discontented, she fancied herself nervous. The business of her life was to get her daughters married; its solace was visiting and news.

She is the embodiment of what Wollstonecraft sees as the effects of poor education and practice on women:

... when they marry they act as such children may be expected to act:—they dress; they paint, and nickname God's creatures. Surely these weak beings are only fit for a seraglio!—Can they be expected to govern a family with judgment, or take care of the poor babes whom they bring into the world?

One of Mrs. Bennet's first appearances shows her caught in a battle of simple contradictions with a neighbor's young son; and the characteristics she reveals throughout the novel suggest her fitness for such discourse. She lacks tact, palpitates equally from joy and sorrow, and is unabashedly enamored of wealth and status. She is incapable of discrimination; and her monologues are full of the kind of thoughtless juxtapositions of concern for her daughter's honor and concern for her daughter's wardrobe which mark her response to Lydia's elopement.

In not one of her appearances throughout the novel does Mrs. Bennet display herself to her advantage. Whether she displays herself to her daughters' advantage, however, is another question. Austen explicitly faults her for her daughter's neglect: "Blaming everybody but the person to whose ill judging indulgence the errors of her daughter must be principally owing." And Elizabeth repeatedly worries that her mother will alienate the feelings of Darcy and Bingley. In reality, however, this bad mother facilitates the unions she is feared to endanger. Her motives, maneuvers, and judgment are all wrong, but in "the business of her life" she is successful.
Unwittingly, Mrs. Bennet offers her eldest daughters a flattering contrast. As Darcy assures Elizabeth in his explanatory letter, the mother’s gaucheries enhance the effect of the daughters’ propriety:

But amidst your concern for the defects of your nearest relations, and your displeasure at this representation of them, let it give you consolation to consider that to have conducted yourselves so as to avoid any share of the like censure is praise no less generally bestowed on you and your eldest sister than it is honorable to the sense and disposition of both.13

Though usually unaware of what she is doing, Mrs. Bennet consistently promotes connections threatened by her daughters’ modesty or pride. Early in the novel she forces Elizabeth to defend Darcy by responding at such length to an imagined slight that Elizabeth feels compelled to intervene: “Indeed, mamma, you are mistaken,” said Elizabeth, blushing for her mother. “You quite mistook Mr. Darcy. He only meant that there was not such a variety of people to be met with in the country as in town, which you must acknowledge to be true.”14 This defense anticipates the broader support of Darcy which Elizabeth undertakes toward the end of the novel and it presents Mrs. Bennet as a useful, though inadvertent, instructor. Her mother’s foolishness coupled with her own fear of Darcy’s judgments teach Elizabeth an attentiveness toward that gentleman which anticipates the attentiveness of a lover. The first instance of the lively banter that will characterize their mature relationship is occasioned by Elizabeth’s irritation at her mother. Mrs. Bennet is bragging:

“However, he wrote some verses on her and very pretty they were.”

“And so ended his affection,” said Elizabeth, impatiently. “There has been many a one, I fancy, overcome in the same way. I wonder who first discovered the efficacy of poetry in driving away love!”

“I have been used to consider poetry as the food of love,” said Darcy.

“Of a fine, stout, healthy love it may. Everything nourishes what is strong already. But if it be only a slight, thin sort of inclination, I am convinced that one good sonnet will starve it entirely away.”

Darcy only smiled...15

Mrs. Bennet’s crudity repeatedly stimulates Elizabeth to action which brings her closer to Darcy. The mother’s insensitivity also heightens her daughters’ awareness of their lovers’ qualities. Mrs. Bennet serves Darcy well: “Her mother’s ungraciousness made the sense of what they owed him more painful to Elizabeth’s mind;...”16 And she is no less good to Bingley: “... and he bore with the ill-judged officiousness of the mother, and heard all her silly remarks with a forbearance and command of countenance particularly
grateful to the daughter." Mrs. Bennet is a more complicated phenomenon than the naive reader might suspect: we must distinguish between what she is, an inadequate mother, and what she does, which is inadvertently to make herself of considerable use to those daughters in whom we are asked to take an interest. Whatever is lost to her daughters by Mrs. Bennet’s silliness and want of character is gained back by them from the function she serves in the novel.

Mrs. Bennet’s success raises questions about the standard of good mothering Austen seems to be endorsing. Although it is not clear how conscious this ambivalence was, Austen is certainly conscious of her use of Mrs. Bennet to suggest the limitations of the prevailing social order. In a typical irony, Austen uses Mrs. Bennet to explode a myth which this character herself cherishes: the myth that family or status is equivalent to worth. Those characters, such as Lady Catherine deBourgh and Miss Bingley, who assume this equivalence attack Mrs. Bennet as a means of forestalling any union between Elizabeth and Darcy. But in so doing they reveal more than bad manners; they display historical naivety as well. They fail to recognize that such appeals to class no longer control their world. The novel endorses social mobility, and their response to Mrs. Bennet is reactionary.

Like many Terrible Mothers, Mrs. Bennet is a useful tool for social criticism. As a touchstone for judging the character of others, she suggests the necessity of weighing an individual in her or his own terms. In this she anticipates the radical social change that was to produce the powerful middle class of that century. Her character also suggests of the world some serious activities to replace the frivolous, corrupting concerns of the average woman. Her function, as trigger to her daughters’ activity or occasion for their painful silence, calls attention to the passivity of women and suggests the limitations of the decorum which enforces it. Despite herself, this Terrible Mother is one of the more progressive elements in the novel.

Mrs. Jellyby is an even more interesting case of the Terrible Mother, one who, despite her author’s express intentions, suggests a feminist alternative to the sacrifices demanded by the feminine ideal. Like Mrs. Bennet, Mrs. Jellyby is indicted for neglect. Absorbed in plans for African reform she has neither attention nor benevolence to spare for her family. Her home is plagued by dirt and disorder. Fires smoke, dinners are served raw, kettles decorate dressing tables, doors don’t close, envelopes peek out from the gravy, children tumble down stairs: the Jellyby establishment is a prototype of bad management. Everywhere the
woman sits, she spews forth waste paper, and her typical activity, the dictation of letters, is symbolic of her involvement with the distant at the expense of the immediate. Active in the outside world and indifferent to the affairs of the hearth, she is the negation of the Victorian myth of the Good Mother.

The novel presents extensive evidence of Mrs. Jellyby’s neglect. Esther loses no opportunity to point to the defects of Mrs. Jellyby’s household management; and only the shock of so much dirt and disorder could elicit wit from a narrator who is habitually restrained by a tedious self-effacement:

The lodging was rather confined as to space, but I fancied that if Mrs. Jellyby’s household had been the only lodgers in Saint Paul’s or Saint Peter’s, the sole advantage they would have found in the size of the building would have been its affording a great deal of room to be dirty in. I believe that nothing belonging to the family which it had been possible to break was unbroken at the time of those preparations for Caddy’s marriage; that nothing which it had been possible to spoil in any way was unsplint; and that no domestic object which was capable of collecting dirt, from a dear child’s knee to the doorplace, was without as much dirt as could well accumulate upon it.18

Even the rhetorical flourish of the last sentence is sufficiently unlike Esther to compel our attention. Mrs. Jellyby’s sublime indifference so disrupts the lives of others that her daughter Caddy’s prediction is ultimately realized:

Pa will be a bankrupt before long, and then I hope Ma will be satisfied. There’ll be nobody but Ma to thank for it... When all our tradesmen send into our house any stuff they like, and the servants do what they like with it, and I have no time to improve things if I knew how, and Ma don’t care about anythink, I should like to make out how Pa is to weather the storm.19

The profusion of objects which rain down out of Mrs. Jellyby’s closets may be a wonderful hodgepodge:

... bits of mouldy pie, sour bottles, Mrs. Jellyby’s caps, letters, tea, forks, odd boots and shoes of children, firewood, wafers, saucepan-lids, damp sugar in odds and ends of paper bags, footstools, black-lead brushes, bread, Mrs. Jellyby’s bonnets, books with butter sticking to the binding, guttered candle-ends put out by being turned upside down in broken candle-sticks, nutshell, heads and tails of shrimps, dinner-mats, gloves, coffee-grounds, umbrellas...20

but the list is also reminiscent of the chaos which threatens human life in the London of the novel.

Neglect of one’s family is a serious error; and in the context of a novel abounding in the suffering of orphans the error is almost transformed into sin. The number of orphans—Esther, Ada, Richard, Jo,
Rosa, Charley, Tom, and Emma—in *Bleak House* is remarkable even for Dickens and reflects the novel's concern for proper parenting. *Bleak House* is full of disruptions and even perversions of family life. The world in which Skimpole plays at being a child while Charley has to work to support her younger brother and sister deifies the well-regulated household and parental care. The concern for both is so strong that the novel translates all beneficient human feeling into parental love for a child. Esther looks after Ada and calls her her "darling." Lady Dedlock responds to the serving girl Rose with maternal concern. Caddy refers to her fiance as "my darling child," and while we can account for the peculiarities of Caddy's speech by pointing to Dickens's difficulty in imagining adult sexuality, this is not sufficient for the general phenomenon. The excess of parenting in the context of so many painfully neglected children comes to seem like a desperate solution to social disaster.

There is no doubt that Mrs. Jellyby is a Terrible Mother; yet the absence of consequences to her behavior asks us to rethink the value of the ideal from which she departs. Railing against a world that murderously ignores Jo, dealing death as punishment to other neglectful parents, Dickens is curiously lenient toward Mrs. Jellyby. Mrs. Jellyby's household may be dirty, but no one sickens from the grime. Her children may fall every which way, but Dickens's perspective makes them art works rather than sufferers: "The children tumbled about, and notched memoranda of their accidents in their legs which were perfect little calendars of distress...." The bankrupt father proceeds as usual, and the two children whose suffering we actually witness turn out surprisingly well: Peepy finds work and a patron and Caddy, despite such a bad example, or, as she herself suggests, because of it, becomes a model wife and mother. If we knew only of Caddy, we might imagine Mrs. Jellyby quite the perfect Angel in the House. Again, the Terrible Mother is of more use to her child than we are invited to suppose and a more complex figure than the standard moral response will admit.

Conversely, the Good Mother in *Bleak House* is not only ineffective; she assumes the proportions of a grotesque as she attempts to salve the injustices of the world. Esther Summerson, the ideal little mother, jiggling her keys, cheerfully pursuing little systems of household management, dispensing charity in the neighborhood, is singularly powerless in her world: she cannot save Richard or Jo or Lady Dedlock from the ravages of an inhumane social system. Her helplessness, moreover, leaves her in postures which invite us to suspect the ideal she represents. Her first response to Lady Dedlock's
revelation that she is Esther's mother is typical of the extraordinary and cloying humility she manifests throughout the book. Immediately she feels gratitude for the disfiguring smallpox which conceals any family resemblance that might have threatened her mother's safety. That Esther's concern for her mother prompts pleasure in her own mutilation is a particularly disturbing instance of a recurrent self-abnegation so extreme that it is disfiguring. As Alex Zwerdling points out, Esther's attempts to be self-effacing throughout the novel distort her perceptions and her language. She is repeatedly questioning or apologizing for her critical intelligence; and she is unable to admit, even to herself, her own interests. Mentioning Mr. Woodcourt, she becomes a verbal cripple: "I believe—at least I know—that he was not rich?" "I think—I mean he told us—that he had been in practice three or four years. . . ." "And so we gave him our hands, one after another—at least, they did—and I did." Her willingness to marry Mr. Jarndyce merely brings to a climax her consistent deformation of her own sexuality.23

Esther's extreme lack of self-interest raises serious questions about the expense of nurturing and so, too, does Dickens's treatment of other female characters. The sharp divisions of this world present women with absurdly limited choices: they can either be interested in the public world, as is Mrs. Jellyby, or they can nurture children in the private sphere, as does Esther. Lady Dedlock never even has the choice implicit in her situation, that of nurturing her child at the expense of respectability. The one woman who attempts activity in both worlds, Caddy Jellyby, is delivered of a deaf and dumb child: punishment for hubris or bad luck? Either way, the Angel in the House, responsible for mediation between the home and the world, faces an almost impossible task if the primary object of mediation, her child, resists all efforts at communication.

The ideal of the Good Mother is, finally, one means by which Dickens evades the radical implications of his own vision. We need to consider Mrs. Jellyby in the context of a novel which observes systemic problems and offers individual moral solutions to them. Dickens exposes the evil of Chancery but proposes the insufficient remedy of personal industry and benevolent paternalism as appropriate responses. Yet the novel admits the inadequacy of these imagined solutions: human care is usually too late or too weak to protect those caught up in the machinery of this world. Similarly, the novel endorses the ideal of the Good Mother but implicitly reveals that the ideal is an exercise in self-mutilation. Mrs. Jellyby becomes less funny and less culpable if we consider that, perhaps, only rigidity such as hers can overcome the powerful
seduction of self-sacrifice to which most mothers fall prey. In this light, her far-sightedness becomes something other than a joke: it suggests a corrective to the disfigurement which the Victorian ideal of motherhood required.

If laxness of authorial judgment suggests ambivalence about some Terrible Mothers, implacably severe judgment draws our attention to others. While Mrs. Bennet and Mrs. Jellyby are quite harmless, Hetty Sorrel in George Eliot’s *Adam Bede* is literally a murderous mother; and she is harshly punished for her sins. From the first, when we see her admiring herself in the polished furniture and pewter dishes of the Hall Farm, Eliot depicts Hetty as a vain, unfeeling creature. Despite strong family obligations, she lacks any family feeling. A coquettish Narcissus, she is clever in maintaining the regard of men with whom she has no active sympathy. The limits of Hetty’s perspective are emphasized in the context of a novel which celebrates the perspective of the distant observer. The artificial device of the traveler at the beginning of the novel establishes a viewpoint, the importance of which is suggested by its recurrence. Some of the most stirring praises of Adam are evoked by the image of him striding the countryside; and the sign of Dinah’s deep love for her husband is her ability to spot him at a distance before he is visible to others. In this context, Hetty’s repeated refusal or inability to meet another’s gaze—whether as with Donnithorne, from modesty, or in the prisoner’s dock, from shame—is suggestive of a basic defect. The only image capable of engaging her is her own.

Eliot carefully prepares us for Hetty’s crime. Early in the novel Dinah imagines

... that sweet young thing, with life and all its trials before her—the solemn daily duties of the wife and mother—and her mind so unprepared for them all, bent merely on little foolish, selfish pleasures, like a child hugging its toys in the beginning of a long, toilsome journey, in which it will have to bear hunger and cold and unsheltered darkness.\(^{24}\)

Pregnant from her affair with the young squire, with Dinah’s figurative musings having been transformed into literal constraints, Hetty wanders the countryside, desolate until brought by desperation to the murder of her newborn child. Condemned to death for her crime, humbled to religion, and brought to the moment of execution before her sentence is transmuted to transportation, Hetty suffers the most severe punishment the novel dispenses. She even dies just as her sentence is about to expire. Hetty is the one character in the novel whose sins are so severe that she cannot, even over a lapse of years, be readmitted into the country, much less into the community.
Although Hetty is not an endearing character and her crime is certainly serious, nonetheless there is something discordant in the extremity of her punishment which suggests that she, too, like Mrs. Bennet and Mrs. Jellyby, is more complex a character than she seems. Eliot consistently belittles this murderous mother, describing her throughout the novel as childlike and making repeated analogies between Hetty and tiny animals, analogies which impress us with her helplessness and which suggest the unlikelihood of her being held accountable for her actions. Eliot even gives explicit instructions about the appropriate response to Hetty: “Try rather to divest yourself of all your rational prejudices, as much as if you were studying the psychology of a canary bird...” And the author seems to support Adam in his insistence on transferring blame from Hetty to Arthur with her sympathetic evocation of Hetty’s sufferings and with her repeated use of patronizing analogies such as the following:

Yes, the actions of a little trivial soul like Hetty’s, struggling amidst the serious, sad destinies of a human being are strange. So are the motions of a little vessel without ballast tossed about on a stormy sea. How pretty it looked with its parti-coloured sail in the sunlight, moored in the quiet bay!

“Let that man bear the loss who loosed it from its moorings.”
But that will not save the vessel—the pretty thing that might have been a lasting joy.

And yet, for all the care with which Eliot elaborates the extenuating circumstances, she finally becomes the agent of the community she has characterized as ignorant and punishes Hetty mercilessly for her crime. In a novel whose hero’s one fault is the absence of charity toward the weakness of others, such severity is particularly noticeable.

Eliot sacrifices Hetty to teach Arthur a lesson about the irrevocable, but the sacrifice serves more than the interests of the plot. It also reveals Eliot’s discomfort with strong female sexuality. The two sexual women Eliot creates, Hetty and Maggie Tulliver (Mill on the Floss), she destroys. The power of these women as well as the extremity of the danger they represent can be inferred from the extreme measures Eliot takes to put them to death: Hetty’s fate has already been mentioned; Maggie perishes in a flood which engulfs two towns. Both these characters suffer from the stereotypes which the human imagination has typically imposed on sexual women. Eliot situates Hetty within the firmly established tradition of the Dark Lady—seductive, dangerous, taboo—and presents her with a contrasting complement. Dinah, Mrs. Payser’s niece, sprung from the maternal line, is fair, self-sacrificing, industrious, sympa-
thetic, one of the most fully realized embodiments of the Angel in the House in Victorian fiction. Hetty, Mr. Poyser’s niece, occupies the other half of the world: selfish, striking, sexual bait, she is irresponsible sunshine to Dinah’s calm moonlight. Where Hetty is indifferent to children, Dinah is overindulgent toward them. The contrast is made explicit and the impossibility of merging the two worlds is suggested when Hetty dresses up in Dinah’s clothes and the effect is first shocking and then laughably inappropriate.

This description, however, while accurate enough, fails to explore the specificity of Eliot’s concerns. Hetty’s sexuality is more than an offense against prudery; she implies a serious threat to the existing social order. When the author presents Hetty as the person from whom Adam learns the lesson necessary to his future happiness, she loses some of her customary confidence:

That is a base and selfish, even a blasphemous, spirit, which rejoices and is thankful over the past evil that has blighted or crushed another, because it has been made a source of unforeseen good to ourselves. . . . And if I were capable of that narrow sighted joy on Adam’s behalf, I should still know that he was not the man to feel it for himself. . . .

But it is not ignoble to feel that the fuller life which a sad experience has brought us is worth our own personal share of pain: surely it is not possible to feel otherwise. . . .

Eliot’s careful qualifications and tone of appeal suggest an uneasiness about this use of Hetty which is only silenced by the larger uneasiness, permeating the novel, about the forces she embodies. The novel, largely through its characterization of Hetty, imagines radical social change, but finally shies away from such insight and celebrates instead an idealized past.

The world evoked by Adam Bede is leisured, preliterate, and highly stratified: the distinction between a tenant farmer like Martin Poyser and an artisan like Adam Bede may be compensated for by the latter’s industry, learning, and fine prospects; it is never overlooked. The novel literally and symbolically extols this carefully structured world. The time disparities in the novel, for example, significant in Hetty’s assignations with Arthur, have other significance as well. Mrs. Poyser’s eight-day clock is faster than the clocks at the Chase which measure “gentlefolk’s time.” Mrs. Poyser’s clock regulates the household and promotes a life of bustle and accomplishment; but the novel suggests, in undertone, that there is something unnatural about this energy. Mrs. Poyser’s clock is not only faster than the clocks of the nobles; it is a half-hour faster than the sun. The suggested analogy between natural time and the established order is inescapable.
As the dangers of change are realized in the action of the novel, Eliot praises the old ways more frequently until the novel degenerates into a powerful exercise in nostalgia. Toward the end of the novel, a rich and deep conservatism constrains human life. Mrs. Poyser, a strong woman with sufficient economic independence to justify speaking out on the management of the farm, becomes more subdued as the novel moves toward resolution. Interspersed between Adam’s proposal and marriage to Dinah, as if to suggest a bond between that union and old customs, is a detailed evocation of the harvest supper with the traditional harvest song. Dinah uncomplainingly complies with the new Wesleyan edict against women preaching and retreats back into the private sphere “to set th’ example o’ submitting.” Toward the end of the novel Eliot’s nostalgia becomes explicit in her celebration of the days past:

Surely all other leisure is hurry compared with a sunny walk through the fields from “afternoon church”—as such walks used to be in those old leisurely times, when the boat, gliding sleepily along the canal, was the newest locomotive wonder; when Sunday books had most of them old brown-leather covers, and opened with remarkable precision always in one place. Leisure is gone—gone where the spinning wheels are gone, and the pack-horses, and the slow wagons, and the pedlars, who brought bargains to the door on sunny afternoons. Ingenious philosophers tell you, perhaps, that the great work of the steam engine is to create leisure for mankind. Do not believe them: it only creates a vacuum for eager thought to rush in. Even idleness is eager now.

In the context of this kind of celebration, the extremity of Hetty’s punishment becomes comprehensible, for she embodies a serious threat to this old order. She challenges traditional assumptions about the immutability of class distinctions, about the stability of the community, and about the sanctity of the family. More importantly, she suggests the interconnectedness of these values. Her single act of seduction sets all these sacred temples tottering. Hetty doesn’t know enough not to dream of being Arthur’s lady; and where she enjoys some success, she poses a serious threat to the existing social order which depends on the unquestioning acquiescence of the lower classes to maintain its power. Hetty challenges one basis for family stability as she unwittingly violates the absolute barrier between domesticity and sexuality essential to the Victorian mythology surrounding wife and mother. If we return to our first sight of her, we sense the significance of her use of Mrs. Poyser’s furniture as a mirror: she perverts the good manager’s remarkable housewifery into a tool for seduction. This transgression is even clearer in the dairy where Hetty’s one skill, making up the butter, necessitates movements enticing to Captain Donnithorne.
Like Mrs. Bennet, Hetty is a force stimulating activity in the novel, the activity of courtship, and, more importantly, actual travel which enlarges the world of Hayslope and Broxton and the awareness of their inhabitants. She is the occasion for much journeying: Adam and Bartle Massey and Martin Poyser to the court at Stoniton; Mr. Irwine back and forth to Stoniton several times; Dinah, to Stoniton and then back to Hayslope; Arthur, desperate, to Stoniton and then off into the army. In contrast to Dinah, who placates the community and teaches resignation to sorrows, Hetty, in her offense, stimulates the Pysers to think of moving from the Hall Farm, home of the family for generations. She attunes our imagination, therefore, to the kind of progress against which this novel finally stands as a bulwark.

Finally, Hetty also challenges the myth of natural mother love in her honest expression of ambivalence toward her child: "I don't know how I felt about the baby. I seemed to hate it—it was like a heavy weight hanging round my neck; and yet its crying went through me, and I darendn't look at its little hands and face." Hetty's honesty prefigures similar maternal conflict revealed by twentieth-century fictional mothers such as the grandmother in Tillie Olsen's "Tell Me a Riddle" or, more dramatically, Eva in Toni Morrison's *Sula*. In her extreme rebellion against the constraints of motherhood, and in Eliot's suggestion that these constraints are interwoven with others into a pattern which constricts human life, Hetty embodies revolutionary energy.

Hetty's violations of tradition suggest Eliot's far-sightedness in her vision of society. The institutions which Hetty implicitly challenges were all to be severely tried in the years following the novel's publication; and Eliot's characterization of Hetty skillfully exposes the economic and social interests vested in the ideal of the Good Mother. And the vehemence with which Eliot banishes Hetty from the novel, allowing her the barest presence in the form of occasional gossip and the slightness of allusion, suggests the power of those vested interests.

Nineteenth-century fiction provides ample evidence of this power and the sensitivity of artists chafing under it. The three Terrible Mothers whom we have examined in detail are but examples of a recurrent phenomenon: Lady Bertram from *Mansfield Park*; Mrs. Reed in *Jane Eyre*; Madame Beck from *Villete*; Mrs. Hale from *North and South*; Mrs. Clennam from *Little Dorrit*; Becky Sharp from *Vanity Fair*; Alcharisi from *Daniel Deronda*; and Arabella in *Jude the Obscure*; the nineteenth-century novel offers a plethora of characters who suggest the need for skepticism and care in our reactions to fictional mothers.
If we return to Lawrence' apotheosis of the Good Mother quoted earlier, we find ambivalence even in the midst of celebration. With its Biblical overtones, the passage elevates Anna as a focal point for the great forces of nature; but she is elevated to the level of the inanimate: “She was a door and a threshold.” In choosing to give up journeying, Anna has given up living; in bearing children, she has lost her own life.

The rash of Terrible Mothers in the novel is an expression of outrage against such a fierce economy. These women reveal terrible failings in their world, a world in which activities are so codified that giving proper nurturance drains the self of all possibilities of self-interest, sexuality, and activity outside the home. The sense of tremendous power, tramped down or twisted, which is implicit in the most destructive of their activities complicates our response to them beyond a simple moral judgment. Even the murder of a child can articulate a protest against an intolerable existence. The anomalous treatment of these women invites us to penetrate the facade of ideology and to uncover a powerful disaffection with the social institutions of the time. In their creation of Terrible Mothers, nineteenth-century novelists leave an indictment, like an open wound, pulsing against a society which is unable, without prohibitive cost, to secure meaningful continuity for itself.

NOTES

12 Austen, _Pride and Prejudice_, p. 249.
13 Ibid., p. 174.
14 Ibid., p. 37.
15 Ibid., p. 38.
16 Ibid., p. 297.
17 Ibid., p. 301.
19 Ibid., pp. 179-80.
20 Ibid., pp. 397-98.
21 Ibid., p. 310.
22 Ibid., p. 63.
25 Ibid., pp. 241-42.
26 Ibid., p. 328.
27 Ibid., pp. 507-8.
28 Ibid., p. 142.
29 Ibid., p. 516.
30 Ibid., pp. 492-93.
31 Ibid., p. 435.
The Victorian age is essentially the age of novel. During this period novel made a phenomenal progress. This was partly because this essential middle-class form of literary art was bound to flourish increasingly as the middle class rose in power and importance, partly because of the steady increases of the reading public with the growth of lending libraries and partly because the novel was the best vehicle best equipped to present picture of life lived in a given society. Dr. West approached the problem of teaching English not from the standpoint of pedagogy, but from the standpoint of social needs of the Indian people. He holds that, "Indian boys need most of all to be able to read English, than to write it, and lastly to speak it and understood it when spoken."