ANGELS AND MONSTERS. THE IMAGE OF WOMEN IN CHARLES DICKENS

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Abstract. *Dickens created most of his female characters under the influence of strict Victorian gender codes. As well as the norms and traditions of Victorian social structure, Dickens' personal experience with women also played a major role in the formation of his female characters. Although, Charles Dickens's female figures illustrate this ideology of womanhood they also subvert that ideology because his female figures can be divided into two types: the angelic female figures who are associated with the devotion to domestic and maternal duties and the dangerous female figures who are associated with sexuality/passion. Angelic women play multiple roles at a time as a lover, nurse, daughter, adviser, wife, mother, and nurturer. The female characters, who try to break the chains of conventionality, who do not conform to the ideal of feminity go through sufferings and conflicts. Modern readers tend to criticize his stereotyped characterization of women, his vision being considered sexist, sentimental and derogatory. Even though there are similarities between the female characters he created, one can easily see that they follow a great diversity and there are significant changes in his treatment of female characters, as they may gradually grow out of the stereotypes and become individualized, developing characters.*

Keywords: *female, angelic, dangerous.*

As most would admit one of Dickens's strengths lies in the creation of memorable vivid characters which make him unique. They are strange and complicated, and sometimes clichéd but complex and endowed with "the wonderful feeling of human depth" (Forster, E.M., 1985). As for the female characters of his work, Dickens created most of them under the influence of strict Victorian gender codes.

By the Victorian era, the patriarchal model, which established the husband as head of the household and moral leader of his family, had been already established in British culture. A wife's role was to love and obey her husband. Her place in the family hierarchy was secondary to her husband, but it was not considered unimportant; a wife's duties were considered "crucial cornerstones of social stability by the Victorians". (Hoppen, 2000:89).

The two sexes inhabited what Victorians considered as" separate spheres", only coming together at breakfast, at dinner and certainly at night. The ideology of Separate Spheres was based on a definition of the "natural" male supremacy. Women were considered physically and intellectually weaker but morally superior to men, which meant that they were meant to the domestic sphere. Domesticity and motherhood were considered by Victorian society to be a sufficient emotional fulfilment for females. This stereotype required them to provide their husbands with a clean home, food and to raise their children. Women's rights and social status were extremely limited in this era (Buckner, 2005: 92)

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Many Victorian women endured their husbands' control and even cruelty, including sexual violence, verbal abuse and economic deprivation. While husbands had affairs with other women, wives endured infidelity, as they had no rights to divorce on these grounds and divorce was considered to be a social taboo. (Hoppen, 2000:110)

For women, sex was allowed with only their husband. However, it was acceptable for men to have multiple partners in their life; some husbands had affairs with other women while their wives had to accept it since a divorce would have brought social stigma and meant moral ruin for them. If a woman had sexual contact with another man, being married or with a man outside marriage she was seen as "fallen". Victorian literature was full of examples of marginalized women because they disobeyed social and moral codes. Representations of ideal wives were plenty in Victorian culture, providing role models for women as it is in *The Angel in the House*, a popular poem by Coventry Patmore, published in 1854.

At the other end, the prostitute was a usual companion for the well-off middle-classes. She served the needs of men, not just before marriage, but sometimes during it too. Prostitution was a flourishing occupation in Dickens' time; that is why many charities tried to reform prostitutes. Charles Dickens encouraged Caroline Chisolm and Angela Burdett-Coutts, advocates of female emigration and even collaborated with the philanthropist Angela Burdett-Coutts to set up a "Magdalen House" in Shepherd's Bush called Urania Cottage, which would prepare such girls for a new life in Australia. In *David Copperfield, Dickens* sends many of his redundant characters – the Micawbers, Mr. Peggotty and Little Em'ly, Mrs Gummidge – to New South Wales at the end of the book.10 years later, Mr. Peggotty returns, to tell David what has happened to them. Mr. Micawber has become a magistrate, Mrs. Gummidge received an offer of marriage, Martha has married a farm labourer, and Em'ly has begun a new life and escaped her reputation of fallen woman.

As well as the norms and traditions of Victorian social structure, Dickens' personal experience with women also played a major role in the formation of his female characters.

His parents, John and Elizabeth Dickens were an outgoing, social couple. They loved parties and dinners and were irresponsible with personal finances. The costs of a large family and of entertaining exceeded John's salary. In 1824, John Dickens ran into debt and was incarcerated in the Marshalsea Prison for debtors, and all the family accompanied him. Dickens, who was 12 at the time, was sent to Warren's Blacking Factory so that he could contribute to the family's income. After his father had come to an agreement with his creditors, Charles's mother, Elizabeth, wanted her son to return to work. Instead, John Dickens sent Charles to Wellington House Academy.

Dickens eventually told his friend John Forster that he considered his mother's actions a serious maternal betrayal. He wrote, "I never afterwards forgot, I never shall forget, I never can forget, that my mother was warm for my being sent back."(Forster, 1983).

Certainly, Dickens was deeply marked by these experiences and by the resentment against his own mother; his literary work is full of bad mothers.

She inspired the characters of Mrs. Nickleby in *Nicholas Nickleby* and Mrs. Micawber in *David Copperfield*. Dickens's novels present a conception of motherhood that would necessarily have an innate inclination toward tenderness. Most mothers are bad

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mothers in his works not because that they do not have that inclination but they are not able to protect their children. Mrs. Nickleby is both useless and foolish. David Copperfield's mother, gentle and loving, fails to protect her son from her physically abusive husband. There are also mothers or surrogate mothers who do not have motherly inclinations. Pip of *Great Expectations*, an orphan, must bear the harshness of his older sister, Mrs. Joe Gargery. The eccentric and infamous Mrs. Havisham, mourning for her scorned love, raises Estella to be heartless, flirtatious and cruel and manipulates Pip to love her surrogate daughter.

If we take into consideration Charles Dickens and his relationships with the opposite sex, women, particularly those who shared his life, also inspired the female characters in his books as well. When Dickens was eighteen years old when, working as a reporter in the Houses of Parliament, he met Maria Beadnell. She was a pretty, wealthy girl who rejected his attentions cruelly, a situation reflected as in a mirror, in *David Copperfield,* when David has his first meeting with Dora Spenlow. As a revenge, Maria Beadnell served as a model for the grotesque Flora Finching, in *Little Dorrit,* the portrait of an old woman who wants to rekindle a romance with the lover who is disappointed and shocked of what she has become.

"Dickens' affections were often bestowed on the young, the lovely, the virginal" (Margoyle, Fraser, 2011: 35). He married young Catherine Hogarth, the daughter of a co-worker at the Morning Chronicle newspaper and they had 10 children before they separated in 1858; however, it was not Catherine but her younger sister, Mary, who was the inspiration for many of Dickens's literary heroines. The writer was often seen not only with his devoted wife, but also with her sister Mary Hogarth who was seventeen when she suddenly died in the Dickens' house. Curiously, when Mary died, Dickens bought a double plot in Kensal Green cemetery, with the intention to be buried alongside her when he died; Little Nell was created out of memories of Mary and the death of Little Nell is the death of Mary Hogarth. She remained to him an ideal of womanhood that found expression in characters such as Rose Maylie in *Oliver Twist*, and Agnes Wickfield *in David Copperfield*.

In 1842, Catherine's other sister Georgina (who was then fourteen years old), came to live in the Dickens' home. Years later, when Dickens' separated from his wife, humiliated her and claimed she was mad, Georgina remained in the family house at Gadshill as Mr. Dickens' housekeeper. She was with him on his deathbed and she received most of his wealth. Georgina Hogarth had performed the same role in much the same way, as a self-sacrificing sister in a sexless relationship. Her pure devotion was perhaps the inspiration for Little Dorrit, the child-wife and daughter-slave in *Little Dorrit.*

As a husband and father, Dickens cruelly remarked that he had not wanted "more than three children.", and by the end of his life he described his marriage as a "skeleton in the closet." (Forster, 1983).

Ellen Ternan was eighteen years old and Dickens was forty-five when they met. Their clandestine relation was hidden from the world in houses around London, where she lived under various names. But, as his reputation was based on being a devoted family man and supporter of Victorian Values, he did not admit any fault in his family life. Dickens's secret sexual relationship with Ellen Ternan and his fear of exposure, as well as his guilt over how he had treated his wife and family, caused a great deal of distress. Perhaps this, in

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addition to the workload of his last years, novel writing and public lectures, contributed to the stroke that led to his death at the age of only fifty-eight.

Dickens's attitude to woman "was compartmentalized" (Holbrook, 1993:169) and was reflected in the creation of his female characters who are generally classified into two basic types: "angels" or "monsters", angelic or dangerous female figures. However, inside these two large categories his genius created a large variety of characters. First, the angel in the house, the idolized sister-wife or child-wife which suggests Dickens's nostalgia for childhood. Agnes in *David Copperfield* and Rose Maylie in *Oliver Twist*, Little Nell, Florence Dombey, are angelic and beautiful, devoted, as objects of pure admiration. Even they are not beautiful like Jenny Wren in *Our Mutual Friend* they have the same devotion to the male of the family, husband or father.

The disillusioned view, formed around his own mother, was derived from the vision of the angelic ideal woman. His concern for the child, and his defence of the child against brutality was one of his major creative themes. Inside this we have irresponsible mothers like Mrs. Micawber and Mrs. Copperfield, mothers who left or denied their child like lady Dedlock or Molly or grotesque mothers like Mrs. Jelliby, the philanthropist in pursuit of good causes, but without any time to care for her own family.

Surrogate mothers are often meet in Dickens; although they can be very different, they are united by what bad mothers do not possess, strength and affection. The character Betsey Trotwood cannot be easily classified. Identified as one of the "choleric masculine spinsters", she is the surrogate mother who proves to be helpful and affectionate. She saves David from the hands of the Murdstones, frees Mr. Dick from the asylum and supports the Micawbers financially. Her goodness is not passive like that of Agnes; although she dislikes boys, she becomes attached to David and brings him up with loving care.

The fallen women are women associated with sexuality and passion and included those who went beyond the patriarchal system and were despised and marginalized: Alice Marwood in Dombey and Son, Nancy in Oliver Twist, Little Em'ly and Martha Endell in David Copperfield. As prostitution was endemic in Victorian England, especially in London, a huge number of women made a living through prostitution. At the time, the public opinion condemned them while some others like Dickens suggested that they must be reformed. His attitude towards this category indicate that they were seen as victims of social conditions; he tried to reform them through some social activities while in his novels he tried in different ways to suggest a kind of possible redemption.

Dangerous women also included the category of female monsters, a large variety of despicable characters many of them associated with the lack of tenderness, feminity and motherhood. Spinsters like Rosa Dartle and Jane Murdstone in *David Copperfield*, madame Defarge, one of the main villains of *The Tale of Two Cities,* obsessed with revenge, Mrs. Joe Gargery and Miss Havisham in *Great Expectations.* Miss Havisham is perhaps one of the most memorable characters who embodies the destruction of the creative power of emotion and of meaning, by the influence of inheritance and upbringing. "She is the female annihilating figure Freud called the castrating mother" (Holbrook, 1993: 138). Miss Havisham became a monster as a result of being emotionally abused by a man. However, at the end of the novel the figure has become less menacing through repentance and admittance of her faults.

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Estella, another character type, is the prototype of the cold-hearted femme fatale, as Lucie Manette (*Tale of Two Cities*), Bella Wilfer (*Our Mutual Friend*) and Rosa Bud (*The Mystery of Edwin Drood*). According to Michael Slater's classification, Estella is considered to be an "unattainable sexual object", Dickens often described in his later works (Margolyes, 2011:12, Slater,1983: 277).

She was created by Miss Havisham who deliberately perverted her emotions, as an act of vengeance for the destruction of her own emotional life. Yet, with his characteristic belief in human creativity and vision, Dickens makes Estella an inspiration for Pip. It is highly significant that Dickens accepted to change the final part of the novel and by the end, Estella is redeemed by suffering and responds sympathetically to him.

Miriam Margolyes, says that Dickens is incapable of drawing "a complete, believable, fully realised female" (Margoyles, Fraser, 2011 :16). Also because of his rather negative experiences with women and under the influence of Victorian morals, Dickens developed what is called "a flawed psyche", which may explain his tendency to use the stereotyped virgin/whore dichotomy in his novels. (Tatum, 2005). That is why, it seems that he could not create a character who would combine the libidinal and the ideal. However, as Michael Slater writes, Dickens' treatment of women underwent some changes through his career as a novelist (1983: 97) and an attempt to create such a realised believable woman is perhaps best achieved by Dickens in his portrayal of Lizzie Hexam in *Our Mutual Friend,* one of his last novels.

Lizzie Hexam is a strong, responsible women who will never be a fallen one; Lizzie' s approach to death, the ultimate experience of existence, in the mythical river of Dickens's London, make her powerful.

Eugene and Lizzie face impossible barriers; he is a lawyer and she is the daughter of a scavenger; yet their mutual attraction generates a deep respect for one another, and they interact as man and woman on equal terms. Lizzie's concern is to preserve her good name. Eugene's main concern is to offer Lizzie education and make her an equal person. Lizzie saves himself not only from death but also she turns him, despite himself, into a serious person.

"Their marriage is no father-daughter situation nor a man's liaison with a child-wife, nor with an idealised angel figure" (Holbrook, 1993: 163). Lizzie Hexam is a loving, strong and capable woman and Wrayburn is serious and sensitive. Perhaps, Dickens finally says that salvation from the social rules can only come through the reconstruction of the individual self by love.

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