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## **Dickens's nonconformist treatment of stained women in *David Copperfield***

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### **Abstract:**

*David Copperfield shows an advance in Dickens's treatment of stained women in his earlier works. In this novel he takes the subject inside the closed doors of respectable people to influence their attitudes and to bring a shift in society's attitude towards them. Dickens's presentation of stained women is lapped by romantic pathos and supported by a number of devices which aim at securing the sympathy of his readers. In saving them from public retribution, Dickens has turned the bitterest aspect of conventions to a more generous end trying to indicate that it requires sympathy and an ameliorating Christian response, rather than downright condemnation. He supports reformation which leads to rehabilitation and a return to respectability. In his treatment of Emily, Martha Endell, Rosa Dartle and other tarnished women, Dickens could reconcile his charitable inclinations with the imperatives of respectability and could also show the necessity of giving stained women a second chance at home or abroad.*

### **1. Introduction**

The prevalence of what came to be called "the great social evil" of the 1850s shocked the sensibility of many mid-Victorians who realized the need for action.<sup>1</sup> As mere social condemnation of this vice proved fruitless and incapable of stopping the evil or preventing it, philanthropists, moralists and benevolent people began a campaign to rescue these wretched women and help them. W. R. Greg took to the press to appeal to people to abandon their customary attitudes and extend their pity and compassion for the wretched outcast. In his famous article on "prostitution", he called on readers who showed concern over the problem to shake off mischievous delicacy and to face the problem courageously for:

[...]no good can be hoped unless we are at liberty to treat the subject, and all its collaterals, with perfect freedom, both of thought and speech—convinced that the evil must be probed with a courageous and unshrinking hand before a cure can be suggested, or palliatives can safely be applied. (1850, p. 449)

Many Victorians with generous sympathies took part in this campaign of reform. Refuges and penitentiaries were established in different parts of the country with the aim of rescuing and reforming fallen women. According to Henry Mayhew, “there were twenty-one institutions in London devoted to these objects, and unitedly providing accommodation for about 1200 inmates” (1861, p. xxxv). The irredeemable outcast of the 1840s became the lost Magdalen, who should be helped, and there was a great deal of hope for her reformation. Organizations such as “The London Society for the Protection of Young Females”, “The Midnight Meeting Movement”, “The London Female Preventive and Reformatory Institution”, and some others were actively involved in “researching, reforming and improving the “nymphs of the pavé” (Basch, 1974, p. 207).

The rescue work attracted many notable figures who eagerly sought to assist these women to reformed lives. Men as different as Lieutenant Blackmore, the superintendent of “The Female Temporary Home” (founded in 1852), and W.E. Gladstone wandered the streets of London at night looking for those who were led astray from the paths of virtue and trying to persuade them to change their ways (Basch, 1974, p. 207). The philanthropic spirit, which was to characterize this decade made it possible even for women to interest themselves in the welfare of those outcasts under the name of charity. The sight of their wanderings at night, Dickens wrote, “moved Angela Burdett Coutts to compassion as she sat watching from the window of her home in Piccadilly, and the thought of their wretchedness and squalid lives made her heart bleed and troubled her” (Storey & Fielding, 1981, p. 698). Motivated by a humanitarian feeling and a benevolent intention to assist, she decided to open “at her own expense, a place of refuge very near London, for a small number of females, who, without such help, are lost forever” (ibid.), and she applied to Dickens for guidance and advice.

Dickens knew enough about the prostitutes to offer Miss Coutts the practical help she needed. His eager response to the idea of the refuge was caused by a genuine wish to alleviate

this great social vice, and his involvement in its management for more than ten years was a model of earnest social concern and practical philanthropy (Collins, 1962, pp. 111-112). The main purpose of the home was to “take off the streets any women who sincerely wished to escape from such a life, clean up their manners and morals, and ship them off to the colonies” (Fielding, 1965, p. 125). In a letter to Hiss Coutts in which he outlined the principles and policies of the home, Dickens wrote: “I would put it in the power of any penitent creature to knock at the door, and say For God’s sake, take me in” (Johnson, 1953, p. 78). He was actively involved in establishing and running the Home and was interested in the day-to-day running of such an operation.

This explosion of interest in the rescue of unfortunate women in the 1850s was accompanied by a long series of articles and books that brought the problem into the open. The decade opened with W.R. Greg’s article in the *Westminster Review* in which he tried to “protest against the manner in which prostitutes [were] almost universally regarded, spoken of, and treated in this country, as dishonouring alike to our religion and our manhood” (1850, p. 450). *The Lancet* published letters and short articles on this subject. The publication of William Acton’s book on prostitution was followed by a spate of letters and articles in *The Times*. Dante Gabriel Rossetti produced his famous painting “found” in which he portrayed an encounter between the shame-stricken girl and her former lover. It was one of many paintings of the time on this theme such as “The Outcast” (1851) in which Redgrave took the story of the helpless and erring daughter driven out of doors by her stern and unforgiving father, and “The Awakened Conscience” (1854) in which William Hunt chose a theme dear to “the Victorian moral sensibility—that of the sinner resolved to repent” and “applied it to the subject” (Roberts, 1980, p. 65). It became a recurrent theme in public comment, poetry, fiction, theatre, and found expression in other arts as well” (Reed, 1975, p. 62), that Tait’s *Edinburgh Magazine* (1859) protested that “the subject of the social evil has been over-done” (ibid., p. 372).

## **2. *David Copperfield***

In fiction, a considerable number of minor and major writers contributed to the rising discussions about the problem and called for a change in society’s attitude and the necessity of bringing a shift in the prevailing social and moral standards as is evident in Dickens’s treatment of the subject in *David Copperfield*. In addition to his practical involvement in Urania Cottage<sup>2</sup>

and the rescue work, Dickens tried in this novel to take the subject inside the closed doors of respectable people, influence their attitudes to it, and “do some good” by drawing their attention to the suffering of these cast-off women (Dexeter, 1938, p. 194). In a letter to Miss Coutts on 4th February 1850, he made his intention clear: “I have not the least misgiving about being able to bring people gently to its consideration. You will observe that I am endeavouring to turn their thoughts a little that way, in *Copperfield*” (Johnson, 1953, p. 165).

*David Copperfield* does not only show an advance on his early treatment of the subject in *Oliver Twist* and *Dombey and Son*, but it also embodies the more advanced view of the 1850s on this problem. Although Emily is “the conventional seduced girl” and Martha “the stereotyped prostitute”, they both escape the “traditional” end, which most writers at that time brought their unfortunate outcasts to, as we see in *Mary Barton*, *Oliver Twist* and other novels of the period. Emily is a frivolous poor girl who falls into the trap of seduction as a result of a step she takes on the false path to fulfilling her childish aspirations. From the early chapters of the story and in her first meeting with David, she shows dissatisfaction with her status as the orphan niece of a fisherman and tells of her dreams of becoming a lady so that she might give her uncle “a sky-blue coat with diamond buttons, nankeen trousers, a red velvet waistcoat, a cocked hat, a large gold watch, a silver pipe, and a box of money” (Dickens, 1981, p. 30).<sup>3</sup> Somewhat like Esther, she finds in Steerforth the means of fulfilling her dreams. She elopes with him to Italy in the hope that he will marry her and make her a lady. After seducing her, Steerforth abandons her and Emily goes back to London with no other alternative but to follow the traditional path of prostitution. Up to this point, we see that Dickens follows the stereotypical situation of the time as described in fiction, verse and melodrama.

The new thing about the book is Dickens’s departure from the traditional end awaiting the seduced girl. Emily’s seduction does not result in condemnation, ostracism and prostitution. Her uncle’s attitude after her elopement and “fall”, is unconventional. Instead of expelling her from the family circle, he devotes his life to finding and saving her. Dickens makes of her guardian’s love and forgiveness the redemptive power through which she is rescued.

A second distinguishing feature of the book is Dickens’s presentation of “Little Emily” in a manner much more sympathetic than his treatment of fallen women in earlier novels. We see her through the loving eyes of David and her misfortune is “lapped by romantic pathos from start to

finish, from the tearful farewell letter... to Mr Peggotty's touching picture of her sorrowing away her days" (Thomson, 1956, p. 124). From the early chapters in the novel, we see that she is portrayed as a mixture of goodness and weakness. Her weakness is exhibited in her frivolity, coquetry and dissatisfaction with her condition. She likes David, yet she teases him and torments him constantly, and when he professes his love for her, she laughs and calls him "a silly boy", but she does it so charmingly that David loves her more. She entertains the idea of becoming a lady from her early childhood, and the scene in which she tells David of her dreams bears a relevant indication of her future life. According to K. J. Fielding her "seduction", or "fall", "had been planned from the first number when she told David she wanted to be a lady and ran out along the baulk of timber overhanging the water" (1965, p. 133). This desire is the only fault in Emily's nature and apart from it, she is too good to be true. She shows a great love for her uncle and her poor relations. Her love for him and her own people represents the good side of her character which awakens public sympathy. Being a lady means not only status, but wealth. Her ambition for this does not spring from a selfish interest, but out of a sincere desire to be able to help her uncle, Ham, and her own people around her. She tells David

I should like it very much. We would all be gentle folks together, then. Me, and uncle, and Ham, and Mrs Glunmidge. We wouldn't mind then, when there come stormy weather — Not for our own sakes, I mean. We would for the poor fisherman's, to be sure, and we'd help 'em with money when they come to any hurt. (*DC*, p. 30)

Even Littimer, Steerforth's scoundrel servant, cannot hide his admiration of her: "the young woman was very improvable, and spoke the languages; and would not have been known for the same country-person. I noticed that she was much accredited wherever we went" (*DC*, p. 570). Emily's practices and merits as revealed in the novel, according to Humphry House, show her "worthy to become the lady she hoped to be. Even Pamela only did better in being more cunning" (1979, p. 162).

Dickens supports his sympathetic presentation of Emily by a number of devices which aim at securing the sympathy of his readers for her. Her affair with Steerforth abounds in pathos and offers little study of motivation. Though she is presented as a pretty doll-like figure, and Steerforth never ceases to be the charming dandy, Emily's sexual charms and the spell of

Steerforth's masculine attraction over her, are not developed. Her elopement with him is made to appear as out of a childish fancy to become a lady rather than physical attraction, while her shrinking from Ham could be interpreted as a whim rather than revulsion. Added to that is the guilt and self-justification in which she indulges through the book. From the time she leaves her home to her last appearance in the novel, Emily is shown to be continuously sad and regretful with no moment of forgetfulness.

Though we may accept Edgar Johnson's protest that Emily's "self-abasement and remorse are intensified to a sentimental luxuriance" (1953, p. 697), I still find it difficult to agree with him that this intensification entails "too much of the assumption that she is irretrievably stained forever" (1953, p. 697). On the contrary, I tend to take Alexander Welsh's view that Dickens's aim behind the exaggerated portrayal of his heroes dramatic feelings of guilt "is to expel them" and that "charges of guilt, and accompanying anxieties, are levelled against heroes so that their innocence can be proved" (1971, p. 107). This view falls in line with the extenuating factors with which Dickens evolves Emily's "fall" and is also supported by many contemporary feminists who look at her as a pitiable creature who is more of a victim than an agent.

Dickens's sympathy for Emily aims at softening the Victorian readers' attitudes towards the social outcast and awakening pity and compassion in their hearts for her. That this intention was close to his heart is proved by a letter to Cerjat on 29 December, 1849, in which he wrote:

I had previously observed much of what you say about the poor girls. In all you suggest with so much feeling about their return to virtue being cruelly cut off, I concur with a sore heart. I have been turning it over in my mind for some time, and hope, in the history of Little Emily ... to put it before the thought of people in a new pathetic way, and sometimes to do some good. (Butt & Tillotson, 1957, p. 148)

The other stained woman in the book is Martha Endell who stands as a warning of the risk for the seduced and rejected girl sinking forever into the sin of great cities" (Basch, 1974, p. 223). Martha is the fictional outcast of the period, and her character is "obscured by conventional darkness and gloom" (Thomson, 1956, p. 123). She is introduced as "a black shadow" dogging the feet of Little Emily, and she remains a shadowy and a minor character in the background, making her few brief appearances under the cover of darkness. She is described as "lightly dressed; looked bold, and haggard" (*DC*, p. 277). Her past life is not revealed, but we know from

Ham that she had been a friend of Emily at school and that the two of them “sat at work together, many a day, at Mr Omer’s” (*DC*, p. 287). After her fall, she seeks out Emily as the only woman in Yarmouth who may help, and she makes her appeal to her “Emily, Emily, for Christ’s sake have a woman’s heart towards me. I was once like you” (*DC*, p. 287). She wants to leave the town and go to London, and when Ham asks her why, she answers: “If you’ll help me away. I never can do worse than I have done here. I may do better... take me out of these streets, where the whole town knows me from a child” (*DC*, p. 288). Dickens’s presentation of her helplessness and his description of her as “a poor wurem [...] ‘as is trod under foot by all the town. Up street and down street. The mowld o’ the churchyard do not hold any that the folk shrink away from, more’” (*DC*, pp. 286-7) shows clearly that it is the harsh attitude of the public and their ostracism that have put her where she is.

In London, Martha sinks deeper in suffering and destruction, and when David and Peggotty come upon her to enlist her help in their search for Emily, they find her hastening to a specific destination, the river, in a run-down polluted area that looks as if “she was a part of the refusal it had cast out, and left to corruption and decay” (*DC*, p., 580). The metaphoric connection “becomes even more explicit in Martha’s own impassioned speech, in which she sympathetically identifies with the river” (Allen, 2008, p. 64). She cries passionately “‘Oh, the river!’ [...] ‘I know it’s like me!’ [...] ‘I know that I belong to it. I know that it’s the natural company of such as I am!’” (*DC*, p. 581). When they are finally able to calm her, she makes a speech which suggests the guilt of a society which has closed its doors on her and denied her any help, and reveals her own readiness to repent. They ask for her help in tracking and finding Emily. She responds positively and refuses the pecuniary reward which they offer her “to give me money would be to take away your trust, to take away the object that you have given me, to take away the only certain thing that saves me from the river. [...] If any good should come of me, I might begin to hope” (*DC*, p. 585).

Her endeavours culminate positively in saving Emily from slipping onto the vile path of other wretched women in the same miserable situation, and this changes Peggotty’s attitude toward her. He tells David “the time was, Mas’r Davy... when I thowt this girl, Martha, a’most like the dirt underneath my Em’ly’s feet. God forgive me, there’s a difference now” (*DC*, p.

479). Peggotty's change of heart dramatizes the message that Dickens wants to convey to his readers and to bring them gently to consider her plight.

He gives Emily and Martha far fewer faults than actual women in their respective positions, and ignores the information he has about wretched women in real life. From her first appearance in the novel Martha is shown as a shame-stricken woman who never forgets the disgrace she is in for a moment, and demonstrates an intense and sincere desire for expiation. Her language is not the offensive language of the common streetwalker, and even her profession is not directly referred to. Unlike Mrs Gaskell, who used "the word 'prostitute' to refer to Esther in *Mary Barton*, Dickens indirectly suggests her profession by using phrases such as "take me out of these streets" and "I was once like you" (DC, pp. 287-8). While Emily's seduction is understood to have taken place between chapters, Martha's seduction is not mentioned at all. She is shown as "a solid female figure" (DC, p. 578) on the edge of suicide with no companions; even the men from whom she earns her living are not referred to, however briefly.

In her study of "The Rise of the Fallen Woman" Nina Auerbach writes that "Victorian conventions ordain that a woman's fall ends in death" (1980, p. 30). Conventionally, "her death is the one implacable human change, the only honourable symbol of her fall's transforming power. Death does not simply punish or obliterate the fallen woman: its ritual appearance alone does her justice" (1980, p. 35). Dickens's treatment of Martha's fate is different from the conventional treatment of the time. Although she is as "fallen" as Nancy and Esther, she is "not forced to seek her redemption in death" (Thomson, 1956, p. 124). When we encounter her in Peggotty's house, the pictures around her on the walls of Eve and the Serpent, and Mary Magdalen at the feet of Christ, hint that a similar forgiveness for giving way to temptation is right. She is portrayed in a positive light. She is an orphan who has missed the guidance of loving parents, or the care of surrogate relatives. She is presented as an example of the penitent outcast who wants to change and to do good. She takes the job of tracking Emily and finding her as a sacred mission. She shows a selfless love for Emily and contributes to her salvation. She is saved from the traditional end engineered by Victorian conventions and is transported to the new colonies where she starts a new life.

While Martha, the downtrodden prostitute and the character whose story is presented alongside Emily's, is allowed to marry in the Australian outback, Emily is not. Instead, she devotes her life to good works, and refuses all marriage proposals, telling Peggotty that "that's



gone forever” (DC, p. 744). The end to which she is brought is ambiguous and somehow controversial. Readers and critics are divided on her allotted fate. On one side, we have those, like Sally Mitchell, who believes that Emily “has no excuse for her actions” and “she is responsible for her own destiny” (1981, p. x). On the other side, there are those who oppose this view and see her as an orphan victim who is:

[...] over-sheltered and indulged by her family in the boat, and moreover given to understand by Steelforth that he will “make her a lady” and he, so to speak, vouched for as to character by being David’s old friend and hero; and in addition there is her intolerable position of being about to marry her dull cousin Ham, having yielded to pressure to engage herself to him to please her uncle. All these points are piled up to amount to a demand for a verdict of Not Guilty, even from strict Victorian moralists, presumably. In consonance with this, the blame is firmly laid at Mrs Steelforth’s door. (Leavis, 1970, pp. 77-78)

They argue that if Martha, the true prostitute, is saved and given a second chance to marry and start a new life in the colonies, Little Emily deserves, at least, a similar chance. Like Charlotte Bronte, Elizabeth Browning and some fellow women writers who protested against the sad end of Mrs Gaskell’s Ruth and her sacrificial death,<sup>4</sup> feminists and modern critics like Q. D. Leavis believe that “one mistake of a very young girl with Emily’s excuses can’t be supposed to entail ruin for life” (1970, p. 79). Emily’s allotted fate does not seem to satisfy them. However, if we take into account the time of writing the book, and Dickens’s endeavours to soften the hearts of his middle-class readers and win their sympathy for his stained outcast, we can say that her end serves his moralistic and charitable message. Giving Emily also a happy end would spoil his efforts and his attempt to put the case of the fallen outcast “in a new and pathetic way” (Butt & Tillotson, 1957, p. 148). He has a personal interest in their respective fates. The sad end is supposed to stir the readers’ sympathy for her and soften their hearts for her plight.

No study of stained women in this novel is complete without looking at the case of two women in the subplot whose names and reputations become tarnished. Most studies on *David Copperfield* refrain from dealing with the situations of Annie Strong and Rosa Dartle, two victims of David and his associates. David acts as the narrator of Annie’s story, and in judging her behaviour, the readers’ attitudes are very much influenced by his judgments and remarks which prove him at the end to be mistaken in observation and perception. From the first time he

meets her, David is struck by her prettiness and supposes that she is Dr Strong's daughter, but later realizes that she is his wife. David's "confusion and mistaken assumptions clearly arise from his youthful naivete and inexperience" (Mundhenk, 1985, p. 7). Annie girlish prettiness and attractiveness is the cause of all the suspicion and deception that surrounds her character:

But, sitting at work, not far from Doctor Strong, was a very pretty young lady—whom he called Annie, and who was his daughter, I supposed—who got me out of my difficulty by kneeling down to put Doctor Strong's shoes on, and button his gaiters, which she did with great cheelfulness and quickness. When she had finished, and we were going out to the schooh·oom, I was much surprised to hear Mr Wickfield, in bidding her good morning, address her as 'Mrs Strong'; and I was wondering could she be Doctor Strong's son's wife, or could she be Mrs Doctor Strong, when Doctor Strong himself unconsciously enlightened me. (*DC*, pp. 282-283)

Because of the disparity between her and her old husband, David suspects that Annie has married Doctor Strong for self benefit. Her marriage is looked at with suspicion and this later leads David and those around him, namely Mr Wickfield and Uriah Heep, to believe that there must have been a concealed motive behind this marriage, and that Annie has found her fulfilment in a relationship with her cousin, Jack Maldon. This causes them to make several ominous statements presuming that Annie is stepping out on her husband because Doctor Strong is too nice to suspect her of infidelity, and that Annie is "a charming young girl" and Doctor Strong is not "quite a charming young boy" (*DC*, p. 155). The spectre of betrayal, David believes, will taint not only Dr Strong's family life, but also his educational career and school. He sees Maldon departing the house carrying in his hand what seems to David something cherry-coloured and Annie in "a swoon on the hall floor, a cherry-coloured ribbon missing from the bosom of her dress" (*DC*, p. 194). The scene seems to make David suspect that Annie has compromised herself. When he returns later that night, unseen and unnoticed, he comes upon Annie kneeling at her husband's feet.

Distinctly as I recollect her look, I cannot say of what it was expressive. I cannot even say of what it is expressive to me now, rising again before my older judgment. Penitence, humiliation, shame, pride, love, and trustfulness – I see them all; and in them all, I see that horror of I don't know what. (*DC*, p. 197)

This scene is “choreographically identical to the scenes of Martha and Emily’s abasement, David stands on as voyeur while a woman kneels penitently” (Anderson, 1993, p. 102). Dickens “carefully maintains the ambiguity” (Mundhenk 1985, 12), David’s “frequent use of the words ‘seemed’ and ‘appeared’ emphasizes the fact that the reader’s knowledge depends upon David’s limited observations and assumptions” (Mundhenk, 1985, p. 13). In her revelation, Annie attributes her swoon to the horrible discovery of the dark suspicion that has shadowed her life when Mr Wickfield stood in the middle between his daughter Agnes and Annie to prevent a goodbye embrace. “I saw a double meaning [...] in Mr Wickfield’s scrutiny of me. I perceived, for the first time, the dark suspicion that shadowed my life” (*DC*, p. 564). This, in turn, means that “Maldon doesn’t really shock Annie into a swoon; the swoon issues out of her own fall into suspicion”. So, Annie is “less a victim of fallenness per se than a victim “that suspicion produces” (Anderson, 1993, p. 103).

However, David’s suspicion remains inarticulate and it is Uriah Heep, the serpentine machine of evil who wrongly maligns her. He tells Doctor Strong that the whole world thinks that Annie has been having an affair with her cousin Jack Maldon. This libel of waywardness makes the old husband sad. He feels that it is his fault for marrying such a young lady and for being too boring for her. In “the exoneration scene” Annie defensively states that she has married Doctor Strong in good faith, because she admired and loved him. She knows that some people may think that she has married Doctor Strong out of self-interest, but this is not the case. She reaffirms her true love for her husband in spite of the suspicions and gossip of others. She has married Doctor Strong, whom she dearly loves and respects. She reveals that she and Jack Maldon may have been childhood sweethearts, but they really have nothing in common. She has not spoken one word to him for a considerable time, and explains how she had realized the true character of Jack Maldon and wished to have no more to do with him. She adds that it is only Doctor Strong who has been the true companion of her soul. She pleads: “If I have any friend here, who can give a voice to any suspicion that my heart has sometimes whispered to me I implore that friend to speak” (*DC*, p. 564). Through the revelation that Annie is not a fallen woman, we “suddenly see lit up the narrative strategies that have operated on the figure of the fallen woman generally [...] voices David’s innermost, still inarticulate thoughts, for example, it is revealed that David identifies most deeply with a character who must protest that she is not fallen” (Anderson, 1993, p. 101). Annie’s fall, however, is a fall not into sexuality but into

suspicion. Suspicions of Annie, and her own suspicion of those suspicions, taint her self-perception and contaminate the narrator (ibid.). At the meeting, usually referred to as “exoneration scene”, she tells David, Mr Dick and the rest of the group, including Doctor Strong “there can be no disparity in marriage like unsuitability of mind and purpose” (DC, pp. 45, 565). She is much younger than her husband and they are incompatible in age, but it would be worse if they were incompatible in “mind and purpose.” Dickens indicates here that true love and successful marriage should be built on equality of souls, equality of purpose and goals, and this is the lesson inherent in his message.

Rosa Dartle is the last of the tainted women in *David Copperfield* and another victim of Steerforth, David’s friend and “great hero”, who crushes Little Emily’s aspiration of becoming a lady, ruthlessly seduces her, and carelessly brings pollution and disgrace to an honest home, and turns a young, poor and trusting girl into a social outcast. Despite the momentary fits of self-reproach which Steerforth shows and David’s boyish admiration of him in the early chapters of the novel, Steerforth remains the upper-class seducer who looks down on the poor and the lowly and who thinks little of their moral sensitivity and value. His seduction of Emily is prepared for by his response to Rosa Dartle’s question whether the lower classes are “animals or clods without feeling” in which he answers “They are not to be expected to be as sensitive as we are. Their delicacy is not to be shocked, or hurt very easily... they have not very fine natures, and they may be thankful that, like their coarse rough skins, they are not easily wounded” (Dickens, 1981, p. 251). Since his early boyhood at school and in his treatment of Mr Mell he shows a snobbish and inconsiderate nature and does not hesitate to make use of the financial and social advantages of his class to wash away any responsibility which results from his malicious acts. After he gets Mr Mell sacked from Creakle’s school, Steerforth tosses away Traddles’ accusation of ill-using Mr Mell by a promise to write home and “take care that he gets some money” (DC, p. 86). In the same way, he later tries to brush aside his responsibility towards Emily’s tragedy by marrying her off to his servant, Littimer. His seduction and ruin of Emily is not only the result of youthful indulgence, but the product of a selfish and capricious nature that sees other people as objects and playthings. His treatment of his other victim, Rosa Dartle, confirms this.

As her name suggests, she is the withered rose whose thorns have become darts or arrows and her function is not to give pleasure, but to wound. In addition to her fierce argumentative nature and the “piercing look” of her eyes and “their hungry lustre” (DC, p. 368), Rosa is

characterized by a scar which, more than any other physical feature, dominates David's image of her. She is a distant relative of Steerforth's family who, after the death of her parents, came to be a companion to Steerforth. Her physical deformity is the result of a wanton act of violence by Steerforth, who, when a boy, threw a hammer at her and left her with this mark, indelible, as the moral disfigurement he brings upon Little Emily. Rosa might have been a wife and a match for Steerforth. She gives herself to him as a plaything and surrenders her heart in the hope of fulfilment. After taking advantage of her, Steerforth elopes with Emily leaving her frustrated and trapped with no outlet for her emotions nor any opportunity for a happy marriage. Steerforth has scarred her both physically and emotionally beyond all hope of inspiring love or receiving it, and G. K. Chesterton describes her as the "lonely woman in whom affection itself has stagnated into a sort of poison" (1906, p. 194).

In her relationship with Steerforth, Rosa loses the innocence of maidenhood, and among the women characters of the book, she stands in the middle between the virgin and pure minded Agnes, and Martha the prostitute. Although in her address to Mrs Steerforth at the end of the book we may find certain phrases that bear a hint that she has been seduced, there is nothing in the novel to support this impression. Her hatred and jealousy of her rival – who has taken from her what she could never possess – grows beyond all bounds of rationality. Her taunts and harshness towards the betrayed and miserable Emily in their scene of confrontation make the reader forget about Emily's coquettish behaviour, and enact the dutiful audience to decry the villain who is persecuting the unhappy innocent. While suffering and patient endurance teach Peggotty, Emily and Martha to strengthen their human connection and extend it, Rosa Dartle's heart is embittered and hardened by her grief. Like Mrs Steerforth, she is unable to soften and forgive, or even feel compassion for others. In the closing pages of the book, Emily and Martha board the ship to start a new life somewhere else, while she is left to live out her desolate years in frustration and misery.

### **3. Conclusion**

So much attention is paid to this assumption of domestic infidelity and so much weight is placed on her alleged tarnished womanhood and an illicit love affair which was never even contemplated by the wrongly maligned Annie. Dickens calls for

[...] education, discipline, compatibility of values, and a bedrock of love. One

must not marry one's first love and one must seek to tame one's affection. One must seek a mate who shares one's goals and one's habits of mind. Finally, one's love must be the kind that can stand firm. In short, it all comes down to discipline—discipline of heart, of inclination, of temperament, and most of all, discipline of desire. (Hager, 2017, p. 50)

The seduction of the other tarnished woman seems to be in spirit rather than in body. Her role in the novel has been the subject of argument among critics. While some tend to believe that she serves as “a chorus of sarcastic comment on Steerforth's brutalities” (Butt & Tillotson, 1957, p. 138), others like G. B. Needham, see her as an example of “the misery to which the undisciplined heart can doom itself and bring innocent victims” (1954-55, p. 91). That may be so, yet I think that Dickens uses Rosa Dartle equally to soften the reader towards Emily.

In offering emigration as a solution to the problem of the tainted woman, Dickens could reconcile his charitable inclinations with the imperatives of respectability and could also show the necessity of giving her a second chance. There is no death like Nancy's for Emily and Martha because there is a person like Peggotty who rescues both of them with love and gives them a chance to start a fresh life. In sending them to the colonies Dickens supports reformation over condemnation which leads to rehabilitation and emigration. He relies on his practical knowledge and involvement in Urania Cottage<sup>5</sup> which aimed at helping unfortunate fallen women and preparing them for a new life in the New World. In his “Appeal to Fallen Women” which he wrote in 1849 for distribution among women taken into police custody, in the hope of directing them to the established cottage and encouraging unfortunate girls to join, he wrote:

[...] if you have ever wished for a chance of rising out of your sad life, and having friends, a quiet home, means of being useful to yourself and others, peace of mind, self-respect, everything you have lost, pray read it attentively and reflect upon it afterwards [...] I am going to offer you, not the chance but the certainty of all these blessings, if you will exert yourself to deserve them [you] will be treated with the greatest kindness: will lead an active, cheerful, healthy life: will learn many things it is profitable and good to know, and being entirely removed from all who have any knowledge of [your] past career will begin life afresh and be able to win a good name and character. (Storey and Fielding, 1981, p. 698)

By envisaging this end, he wants to indirectly say what he has reiterated several times that the fallen outcast should be given another chance to redeem herself and start a new life albeit in the

distant colonies and stresses his view that forgiveness is needed. Although we cannot call him a feminist writer, the compassionate manner in which he describes these wretched women, his concern about their condition and his untiring endeavours to improve them parallel him with feminist writers.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Walter Houghton cites “an article in the Westminster Review that gave the alarming figure of 50,000 prostitutes known to the police in England and Scotland, 8,000 in London alone. They were highly visible and no one could be ignorant of their existence, not even the pure matron” (1978, p. 197).

<sup>2</sup> The original name “Urania Cottage” was kept by Dickens probably because Aphrodite Urania was the goddess of heavenly love (what these women were hopefully seeking) as opposed to Aphrodite who was the goddess of physical love (the very thing that got them in trouble in the first place). The term “cottage” was kept because it sounded homely as opposed to names such as The British Penitent Female Refuge, another existing institution whose goal was the reformation and reclamation of the fallen woman. (Slater, 2009, p. 269)

<sup>3</sup> *David Copperfield* was published in 1850. The copy quoted in the article was published by Clarendon Press in 1981. References to this edition in the article use the abbreviation *DC*.

<sup>4</sup> There were those who criticized the conventional end of *Ruth* and accused Mrs Gaskell of yielding to the moral climate of her age. Ruth’s death at the end, “sacrificial death” as it seems to be, provoked a protest from Mrs Gaskell’s fellow women writers such as Charlotte Bronte who wrote to Mrs Gaskell: “Yet—hear my protest! Why should she die? Why are we to shut up the book weeping?” (Shorter, 1908, p. 264). Elizabeth Browning also wrote to her “was it quite impossible, but that your Ruth should die? I had that thought of regret in closing the book” (Waller, 1935, p. 42).

<sup>5</sup> Sending inmates to the new colonies in search of a new life was highlighted clearly in his “Appeal to Fallen Women” in which he wrote “when some time shall have elapsed and their conduct shall have fully proved their earnestness and reformation, to go abroad, where in a distant country they may become the faithful wives of honest men, and live and die in peace” (Storey & Fielding, 1981, p. 699). Martha’s treatment corresponds to this policy.

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