

Theses of the PhD dissertation

PATERNITY IN CRISIS: FATHER-DAUGHTER RELATIONS IN CHARLES DICKENS'S DOMESTIC FICTION

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a. Identifying the aims and the subject of the dissertation

The present dissertation has aimed to investigate Dickensian father-daughter dyads and the father-daughter plots both in their particularity in the individual novels and as vehicles suggesting Charles Dickens's attitudes to, and treatment of, Victorian paternity (paternal discourse) and the Victorian politics of the home in general.

The focal point of my investigation has been the relationality of this dyad, especially the various ways in which Dickens stages the daughters' ability to counterbalance the incompetence of their fathers, thereby assuming not infrequently the role of a metaphorical mother or wife as well—not in order to annihilate, but to renew the paternal domestic order. Therefore, I have investigated the father's and the daughter's symbolic roles and patterns of behavior both within and beyond their immediate domestic sphere, emphasizing the dynamics of interactions between them.

The dissertation has grown out of the realization that Charles Dickens's novels return to the father-daughter

relationship with a regularity that verges on the obsessive. Dickens seems to be consciously embedding this special relation in his plots—sometimes more than one in a single novel—even if it turns out to be only marginally important from the perspective of the main plot.

I have analyzed four novels in detail: *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1841), *Dombey and Son* (1848), *Hard Times* (1854), and *Little Dorrit* (1857). The four novels represent aspects of what I see as the most typical kinds of the father-daughter scenario in Dickens, while they are also explorations of the discourse of the father in Victorian fiction.

In order to be able to investigate Dickens's controversial father-daughter plots and to appreciate Dickens's unique position in this respect, it is necessary to place briefly his representation of the daughter figure and the father-daughter dyad in a historical and cultural context—which has also enabled me to place the present inquiry in the context of the most important critical accounts of this issue in Dickens's fiction.

The first crucial thing to note is that the father-daughter relationship in Dickens has to be seen in the context of a broader ideology of domesticity. “The ideological dominance of the nuclear family in the nineteenth century is what best accounts for its reputation as a middle class institution”—claims Paula Marantz Cohen in *The Daughter’s Dilemma* (1993, 10). The middle class was the backbone of Victorian society, the layer on which economy, foreign politics, and the legal system mostly rested and from which, in turn, this class drew its strength. The Victorian middle class could not have fulfilled its social function without a powerful ideology of the domestic sphere. The words ‘domestic’ and/or ‘domesticity’ were increasingly important in Victorian culture, and its contemporary interpretations were inseparable from Victorian understandings of gender roles.

In the center of this domestic ideology stood the middle-class woman, notoriously designated by Coventry Patmore’s narrative poem as “the angel in the house.” The middle-class women, the daughter figures discussed in my dissertation, at least at one climactic point, struggle with the

inevitable necessity of choosing between their problematic father and their often not-less-problematic prospective husband. Florence Dombey in *Dombey and Son* risks her tenuous domestic position when her attachment to Walter Gay further debases her in her father's eyes. Louisa Gradgrind in *Hard Times*, albeit married, chooses to go back to her father, regarding him as someone under whose domestic supervision she has still more freedom than under that of her husband, Josiah Bounderby. Nell Trent in *The Old Curiosity Shop* and Amy Dorrit in *Little Dorrit* do not even dare to consider seriously the plausibility of a matrimonial life without their mentally feeble fathers' future presence in them.

b. An outline of the employed methods

The four novels have been analyzed as four stages of the father-daughter relationship, each one highlighting specific controversial points in the respective paternal-filial relation: Paul Dombey and Florence (displacement and cultural/financial value of the daughter), Thomas Gradgrind

and Louisa (scientific ethos and/or emotions at home), Nell Trent and her grandfather (inversion of roles and household economy), William Dorrit and Amy (financial and emotional exploitation).

To underlie my findings, particular sections of the novels have been investigated through close reading, exploring the metaphoric layers of the texts, thereby highlighting the pivotal role of the father-daughter pairs in the main plots.

While relying on the insights of cultural studies and gender studies (including feminist criticism, women's studies, and studies of Victorian masculinity as well), the theoretical parameters of my investigation of Dickensian daughter figures have been defined by Janet L. Beizer's *Family Plots: Balzac's Narrative Generations* (1986).

Drawing upon Barthesian narratology, psychoanalytic theory and the insights of feminist criticism, Beizer realizes the deep connection between the ideology of paternity and nineteenth-century narratives. According to her, "[n]ineteenth-century fictions do display the father. But they ultimately undermine his status, his authority, and his

power as lawgiver and regulator of family, social and narrative codes. The nineteenth-century text, divided against itself, repeatedly undercuts the proffered images of its own authority” (Beizer 4). Focusing on nineteenth-century French fiction, especially on Balzac, Beizer claims that, “[s]ince Balzac is an exemplary representative of the traditional novelist, the questions [...] about the father principle in his works will have larger implications for the status of nineteenth-century textual paternity” (4).

Beizer goes on to say that “[t]he sociopolitical structures of the *ancien régime* which laid so heavy a claim to the nostalgia of Balzac and many of his contemporaries were notably patriarchal,” meaning that “father, king, and God exercised an analogous power in their respective (but continuous) domains.” However, what Balzac deplors in postrevolutionary society is the “fall from hierarchic authority to a decentered (or multicentered) individualism. Because symbolic systems are inevitably culture-bound, this lack of a center is conceptualized as the loss of a father. (4-5)

Even though nineteenth-century England was spared the dislocating experience of a revolution, Victorian novelists alerted their readers to the existence of the fault-lines in a decentered patriarchy in ways not unlike those of Balzac.

Thus, several aspects of Beizer's characterization of Balzac's fiction apply to the Victorian, particularly Dickensian, novel: "The problem of paternity is tightly knotted into the Balzacian text, appearing in varying patterns of heredity, succession, paternal tyranny, orphaned and illegitimate children, filial transgression, and parricide" (Beizer 5). Following Beizer, in the analytical chapters, I have referred to the cultural/metaphoric context of my investigated novels as 'the symbolic order,' using the term in a broadly Lacanian manner, presupposing that "the subject is 'constituted in the symbolic order' " (Shepherdson 11).

In my view, Dickens has a comparable—central, even iconic, yet controversial—position in the Victorian discourses of patriarchy, genealogy, and domesticity.

c. The results of the dissertation

“Part of the problem in assessing Dickens’s female characters,” claims Alison Milbank, “lies in deciding what genre of fiction structures them, that is, what kind of work Dickens is writing: popular melodrama, realist novel, moral fairy-tale, political satire or a mixture of modes?” (80). Milbank’s remark is especially important in the light of the differences between the four discussed novels, which differences also define the four father-daughter dyads.

In the Dickensian father-daughter scenario, the daughter tries to save herself through taking care of her father—this is her ‘survival management/strategy’—which in practice means that she aims to render continual help to the incompetent or dysfunctioning representative of patriarchal discourse without consciously subverting the discourse itself. This can be readily observed, for instance, in the historical novel, *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859), which may well be regarded as a kind of epitome of the Dickensian father-daughter representations.

Therefore, it is important to see what Michael Slater notes, that “Dickens [is] apparently preoccupied with women as the insulted and injured of mid-Victorian England yet voicing no general condemnation of prevailing patriarchal beliefs and attitudes.” In fact, as Slater suggests, Dickens “seems to see the social and sexual trials of his heroines as a sort of tragic nurture which serves to bring them to their full ‘womanly’ (or spiritually superior) potential” (*Dickens and Women* 244), reinforcing the widely accepted patriarchal view—interiorized by generations of women—that the essence of femininity is self-sacrifice.

In the scenario which has been the focus of my dissertation, the relational dynamics of the father-daughter relationship follows a recognizable pattern. In the analyzed novels, the fathers are either emotionally unstable figures (Nell Trent’s grandfather in *The Old Curiosity Shop* and William Dorrit in *Little Dorrit*), or coldly self-assertive characters (Paul Dombey in *Dombey and Son* and Thomas Gradgrind in *Hard Times*). Their emotional attitude to their daughters is not unrelated to their success in the public world of money and prestige; within the domestic sphere,

however, their emotional condition is complemented, fostered, and indicated by the daughter.

To offset the father's inefficiency or defects, the daughter is instinctively strong (in contrast to their shared epithet: Little Nell and Little Dorrit), while the daughter is at least seemingly weak when the father seems to be strong (like Florence Dombey and Louisa Gradgrind). In the analyzed novels, the father's actual and symbolic strength or weakness is always dramatized in and through the relationship with his daughter. This, however, is only one aspect of the father-daughter scenario.

Through the father-daughter scenes of the novels, Dickens also explores the sustainability of the patriarchal discourse itself. In other words, the question to which these novels return with a sense of urgency is whether the actual physical father's weakness or incompetence (e.g., Paul Dombey's inability to love) is more than a personal deficiency and signals larger issues, that is, whether it undermines the discourses and institutions of the symbolic Victorian paternity as well.

In my discussed novels, women, regardless of their age, are somehow unable to conform to their role of ‘domestic angels.’ The cause of this failure, however, is usually not their revolt against patriarchal principles, but, paradoxically, the male head of the house, the figure with the authority to define both feminine and masculine roles in domestic ideology: it is the father who prevents women—daughters and wives alike—from fulfilling the domestic roles prescribed to them. The ubiquity of paternal failure or incompetence in Dickens is so striking that the phenomenon cannot be attributed to the individual shortcomings of father characters: the reasons must be sought in more general and systemic malfunctionings. The inability of Dickensian fathers to perform their patriarchal roles has to do with the crisis of the institution of paternity and the increasing difficulty of conforming to the expected role.

In Dickens’s fiction, the father represents the state of the social, the financial, and the domestic order. A financial disaster always serves to bring out a ‘truth’ that has been hidden behind the domestic facade: it is the father’s economic incompetence and/or irresponsibility that bring

ruin to the family, while the daughter turns out to be the representative, within the confined sphere of domesticity, of economic prudence and competence (after all, the word ‘economy’ derives from the Greek *oikonomia* meaning ‘household management’, ‘thrift’) and moral integrity, thus becoming the redemptive agent of household affairs.

This ‘rhetoric of ruin’ is observable in *The Old Curiosity Shop* and *Little Dorrit* where the irresponsibility of Nell’s grandfather and William Dorrit, the feeble self-victimized fathers, results in their financially perverse domestic ethos—both starting and ending in ruin—the most obvious victim of which is their daughter.

In sharp contrast to the emotionally unstable father, the coldly self-assertive father type tries to assert itself through an unemotional approach to family life. Paul Dombey in *Dombey and Son* is the typical *paterfamilias* who, merging public and private lives, does not even attempt to hide his inadequacy as a caring father toward his daughter. Thomas Gradgrind in *Hard Times*, at least, tries to pose as a caring father; his efforts, however, are no more successful than Dombey’s indifference and revulsion.

What connects these different fathers is that they both share a moment of epiphany that relates to their respective daughters. Albeit they both fail in relation to their daughters, it is only through their failures that they can perceive and understand the necessity of their daughter's transforming domestic presence.

Conversely, from the daughter's perspective, it is their victimization that seems to be an inevitable element of these plots. This victimization reaches mythical dimensions, to the point where the daughter becomes what Northrop Frye calls "the figure of a typical or random victim," who may well be called a "pharmakos or scapegoat" (41). In this respect, the Dickensian daughter is not far from Iphigenia, someone who is willing to die for the sake of her father, who seems to embody a higher purpose in life, even if this higher purpose (exemplified by Thomas Gradgrind's 'scientific parenting') turns out to be absurd—as it does in these four novels by Dickens.

Dickens, in my understanding, consciously draws attention to both the inadequacy of the father and the absolute necessity of the daughter at home. He gives center

stage to the daughter consistently by killing off the (incompetent) mother and by moving the son into the background. Thus, the apparently systematic Dickensian elimination of the mothers (and their sons) can be seen to have a twofold role.

On the one hand, it is due to the death of the mother that the daughter, propelled into the foreground of the domestic world, becomes a visible female alternative to the father, a capable, symbolic mother/wife surrogate, who can assert her female presence even beyond the narrow confines of domesticity.

On the other hand, the mother's removal is also a strategy to set the stage for the ritual victimization of the daughter, a ritual sacrifice on the altar of the idea of paternity. Still, the plot that is predicated on the absence of the mother and the son, the failure of the father, the victimization of the daughter, and the father's acknowledgement of and redemption by the daughter's sacrifice, eventually results in a new paternal order. Although the new domestic order is modified, the father no longer authoritarian and the daughter no longer victimized,

the seamlessness of Victorian domestic ideology is ultimately restored and reinforced after a deep crisis.

In Victorian fiction (and society), the daughter can be the key to the solution of paternal crises precisely because she is initially victimized, but it is important to see that Dickens by no means judged Victorian domestic ideology and power position encoding aggression from a feminist viewpoint (Gilbert and Gubar 24-26, 617, 619; Auerbach 82-88, 159-60); rather, his aim was to arouse sympathy or empathy in his (ready) readership (Andrews 93-94). Put another way, as Frances Armstrong claims, “[m]ale writers, including Dickens, showed themselves aware of the difficulties of the woman’s task in catering to their desires, but considered less often whether home satisfied any of her own needs” (17), just like the fathers towards their daughters in my investigated novels.

Dickens’s fiction is hardly imaginable without some patriarchal figure, even if the father in question is not self-evidently authoritative (or authoritarian). He clearly subscribes to the dominant Victorian ideology; thus, even though the concrete fathers in his novels prove to be

incompetent, paternity as a symbolic principle or discourse remains intact.

Drawing upon the Beizerian theoretical framework outlined above, one can conclude that no Dickensian domesticity can be sustainable without a capable daughter figure; moreover, the father in Dickens's fiction can embody the notion of the God-king-father triangle at home only to the degree that his daughter enables him—the daughter who, oddly enough, never intends to *consciously* subvert the paternal domestic ideology.

Nevertheless, the daughter can facilitate and embody the solution for the crisis of paternity because of a crucial Victorian shift in the perception of the father, which Susan Morgan calls the historicization of the father. It is as a result of this change that the father can become “recognize[d] [...] as a matter of culture, rather than of nature, and as having particular, and changing, clusters of attributes” (6).

This historical shift in the perception of paternity and of the relationship between the ideology of fatherhood and the actual practice of being a father paved the way for an altered domesticity. According to Morgan, “[t]hat sense

of history, including the sense that character means character in process, self is self in time, celebrates qualities of connectedness the culture has traditionally undervalued and labeled as feminine.” Therefore, “the qualities of mercy and forgiveness consistently appear in these novels as progressive models of human relations” (Susan Morgan 17), which in the works of Dickens are subtly shaped by the daughters.

Hence, in the domestic world of Dickens, the crisis of paternity can only be solved by the redemptive agency of the daughter.



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List of publications related to the dissertation

Foreign language Hungarian book chapters (2)

1. **Nyári, R.:** Malfunctioning Domesticity in Charles Dickens's *Hard Times*.
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2. **Nyári, R.:** Paternal Devaluation and Revaluation of the Female Protagonist in Charles Dickens's *Hard Times*.
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