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Attitude toward women in Thackeray's "Catherine", Collins's "Man and Wife", and Dickens's "Dombey and Son"

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ATTITUDE TOWARD WOMEN IN THACKERAY'S CATHERINE, COLLINS'S MAN AND WIFE, AND DICKENS'S DOMBEY AND SON

by

DAWN MALLOW

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ABSTRACT

Attitude toward Women in Thackeray's Catherine, Collins's Man and Wife, and Dickens's Dombey and Son

by

Dawn Mallow

Catherine, Man and Wife, and Dombey and Son will be compared with respect to their treatment of women characters. Each novel is either sympathetic to feminism and the treatment of women as equals, or constraining in its attitudes toward women. This assessment will be based on the fate of the rebellious woman character, the degree of conventionality found in its women characters and whether the attitudes toward women expressed generally in the novel are enlightened, or conventional. Also discussed will be how novels by nineteenth-century British novelists such as Thackeray and Collins and nineteenth-century British marriage laws were interrelated. In each of the three novels, there is one unconventional independent woman character whose presence encourages the reader to be sympathetic to women's concerns. However, if the novel views the rebellious woman character negatively andpunishes her, then the novel did not accept this new woman.
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Preface

This paper will examine the difficult plight of nineteenth-century British fictional heroines and how they fought back against abuse and won rights for themselves and for the women who came after them. These fictional heroines had counterparts in the real world, women who instead of bowing to their husband's demands, refused to give up and actually had laws changed so that they could obtain custody of their children, the right to vote, and freedom from violence and rape. Not only were these three novels, particularly Man and Wife, prompted by the unjust, and abusive treatment of wives in England at the time, but the portrayal of strong women characters in these novels may have inspired nineteenth-century British male readers to treat women with more respect and to be more open to nontraditional women's roles.

The case of Caroline Norton, the granddaughter of Richard Brinsley Sheridan, represents the insensitivity of spouses and courts to women's concerns. Norton wrote novels, poems, and political tracts, and was active in social organizations and legal reform. She, like the heroines of Catherine, Man and Wife, and Dombey and Son, had to confront an abusive husband, the loss of her children through the court system, and criticism from the justice system and from her friends for her unorthodox behavior. Like the heroines of the novels, Norton refused
to surrender when faced with adversity. Not only did she leave her abusive husband, but she fought for and eventually regained custody of her children, and, like Edith Dombey in Dombey and Son, made sure that life would be better for women who came after her. Norton assured this better future for women by fighting to have several marital laws passed to protect the rights of women in England, such as the Infant Custody Bill and the Divorce and Matrimonial Causes Bill. In order to bring these laws to the legislature and ensure their passage, she directly lobbied members of Parliament. She also indirectly helped the laws to pass by enlisting the support of the general public through her political tracts, such as English Laws for Women in the Nineteenth Century, A Letter to the Queen on Lord Chancellor Cranworth’s Marriage and Divorce Bill, and Separation of Mother and Child by the Law of "Custody of Infants", and through widely-read fiction in which she was a thinly veiled protagonist. Norton was the prototype for heroines in novels including Thackeray’s Barry Lyndon, The Newcomes, and Vanity Fair, Meredith’s Diana of the Crossways, and Disraeli’s Endymion. (Clarke 338, 340)

Caroline Elizabeth Sheridan married George Norton in 1827 at the age of only nineteen. Although she did not love him, she married him for social and economic reasons. George and Caroline’s troubles began even before their
marriage because of their personal and political
differences. 1 Caroline's family was Whig, while George's
was Tory. Politics were to be closely allied to both the
disgraces and the successes of Caroline's personal life.
Along with political strife, there was economic strife in
their marriage. It turned out that George had greatly
exaggerated his financial means while courting Caroline:

...her suitor pretended to be a man of means. In fact
it was his elder brother, Fletcher Norton, third baron
Grantley, who had money and influence. George Norton
was virtually penniless, and though he had taken a
degree at the Middle Temple, his indolence and
complacent obtuseness rendered him unfit either for
the bar or for politics. (Hoge & Marcus x)

Caroline had to support herself and George most of her
life. In fact, it was Caroline's concern for their
economic welfare that embroiled her in the greatest scandal
of her life and ruined her marriage. Later, Caroline's
mother said that if she had known of George's true
financial standing, she would have strongly dissuaded
Caroline from marrying him.

Throughout his marriage to Caroline, George appeared
jealous of his wife's intellectual prowess, beauty, and
social standing. To compensate for his lack of familiarity
with literary pursuits, he asserted his husbandly power
over her by begrudging her money and abusing her.

Lord Melbourne had not been the first man that
Caroline, as a married woman, had socialized with in
public, but he was probably the one for whom Caroline cared most deeply. Caroline's forward behavior offended not only her husband, but her friends, relatives, the press, and the general public as well:

Often she dined, without her husband, at Rodgers's or at Hayward's, delighting everyone with her informed, witty conversation and holding her own with some of the best minds in England. (Hoge & Olney 5)

Caroline's marital problems were concomitant with and were mutually affected by political problems in England at the time. George lost his seat in Parliament and was about to lose his new position as well:

The new Whig government was pledged to retrenchment and reform, and one of the departments on which they had their eyes was that of Lord Brougham, in which George Norton served as Commissioner of Bankruptcy. It was vital to find him a new niche, and Caroline's thoughts naturally turned to the Whig friends of her grandfather now in power. (Acland 52)

Caroline exhausted all her political connections and was finally able, through Lord Melbourne, to obtain a position for her husband:

...he [Melbourne] used his influence to have George Norton appointed to a judgeship in the Lambeth Division of the Metropolitan Police Courts, with a salary of 1,000 a year. This position, in spite of all that followed, George Norton retained until practically the end of his life. (Acland 54)

But this position was not high-ranking enough to satisfy George. In 1836, George accused Caroline of criminal conversation (adultery) and sued her for 10,000.

(Horstman 43, Hoge & Marcus xi et al.) The critics
disagree on whether Caroline and Lord Melbourne were actually lovers. However it is certain that she spent much time with him every day for five years either alone or in the company of politicians or authors, that they wrote daily, and that he visited her at home. (Horstman 43, Hoge & Marcus xi) The reader should keep in mind that whether Caroline was faithful to her husband or not, George’s suit was done out of anger for her not having procured him a higher position, and out of political motivation, to bring the Tory party back into favor by discrediting the personal morals of the Whigs. It was especially important to the Tories to discredit Lord Melbourne, a very high-ranking Whig:

George Norton’s advisers...saw a unique opportunity...for them to engineer a Whig defeat...That they would risk ruining Caroline’s reputation, and indeed her whole life, would have mattered little to these men.... (Acland 84)

To George and his associates, political advancement was much more important than the reputation and happiness of one woman. George Norton sued Lord Melbourne for criminal conversation (adultery), one of the three ways a husband could obtain a true (a vinculo) divorce. He lost because his claims were unfounded. However, Caroline lost her reputation, her children, her right to remarry, and her friendship with Lord Melbourne. Not only was Caroline denied custody, but also visitation rights. The children’s
welfare was ignored in this ruling—they were not sent to a place in which they would be cared for and loved. The children were beaten by George's relations, sent to harsh English boarding schools, and neglected. All of them were frequently ill, and the youngest died from a riding accident which, if treated, should never have led to illness at all.

Ms. Norton, who had only her personal interests at heart and not necessarily feminist concerns, unintentionally succeeded in helping other women. Her first major effort in this area was to contribute to the adoption of the Infant Custody Bill. This bill established visitation privileges and a procedure for women to solicit custody of children under seven. (Murray 133) Ironically, simply having different laws on the books did not change her husband's underhanded behavior. George still observed and attempted to thwart his wife. He sent the children to Scotland to live with his relatives, where it was legally, financially, and geographically impossible for Caroline to see them. Meanwhile, he taunted her with promises that if she returned permanently to him or signed a new legal agreement, he would let her see the children.

After his separation was legalized, George continued to make life difficult for his wife by threatening to end his economic support to her. Even before suing for
divorce, George had threatened to halt all assistance to Caroline:
"...he replied that her brother had often proposed to keep
her, and she might support herself by her talents and write
for her bread." (Acland 82) As well as withdrawing
additional support, George tried to steal whatever means
for her support Caroline still possessed. He tried to make
an illegal deal with Caroline in order to get his hands on
her Trust Fund by promising her a deed of separation and an
income of L500 a year. However, wives did not have the
power to sign contracts, (Acland 184) so George was
plotting to steal Caroline’s trust fund without giving her
anything in return. George also attempted to punish
Caroline for being the recipient of her parent’s will.
George took the occasion of Caroline’s mother’s death to
halt paying Caroline L500 a year as mutually agreed.
(Acland 196 et. al.) But this L500 was not "pin-money";
Caroline needed the money very badly to support her sons,
one a profligate spender at Oxford University, and the
other ill with tuberculosis. Caroline was very angry at
the fact that even though she was separated from her
husband, her literary earnings and her inheritance legally
belonged to him. She set out to change this situation by
lobbying for the Divorce and Matrimonial Causes Act, by
which:
...a wife might inherit and bequeath property like a single woman and that a wife separated from her husband might be protected from his claims on her earnings. (Hoge & Marcus xiv--xv)

Caroline was aided in her effort by her friends and her father's Whig friends in the government, such as Lord Lyndhurst (Horstman 43-44, Hoge & Marcus xiv-xv):

She had been friends for years with some of the most prominent leaders in government. In the 1850s some of them were still in Parliament, still moved by her descriptions of suffering under the law. (Stetson 32)

Secondly, Caroline enlisted the help of authors such as William Makepeace Thackeray, who depicted her sufferings through the characters of Becky Sharp in Vanity Fair and Clara Newcome in The Newcomes. (Clarke 346-350) Thirdly, Caroline was aided by the general public who read her tracts English Laws for Women in the Nineteenth Century (1854) and A Letter to the Queen on Lord Chancellor Cranworth's Marriage and Divorce Bill (1855) and then lobbied for her cause. The Divorce and Matrimonial Causes Act, amended to Norton's satisfaction, was finally passed in 1857. After these legal successes, Caroline continued to participate in social activities, wrote several successful novels and poems, cared for her children and grandchildren, and married Sir William Stirling-Maxwell.

Though the Acts Norton lobbied for were limited to situations like her own and did not accommodate women who were still married or did not have children, she introduced anew legal and moral attitude toward the rights of women,
both married and single, and proved that a woman could have a dramatic effect on both her individual situation and her society if she acts in self-defense. Several injustices, among them, physical abuse, child custody, a woman’s control of her own earnings, and a woman’s right to testify and to sign contracts, confronted Norton. This study will explore the reforms of three fictional characters to similar injustices: Catherine Hall confronted physical abuse and inability to earn a living, Hester Dethridge confronted physical abuse, lack of control of her own earnings and possessions, and lack of the right to testify against her husband, and Edith Dombey confronted verbal abuse, separation from her stepdaughter, and inability to earn a living. These characters reacted to their situations in different ways. Catherine killed her husband instead of allowing him to leave her penniless. Hester Dethridge killed her husband who was draining her of her hard-earned financial resources, and saved Anne Silvester’s life by frightening her husband Geoffrey to death. Hester’s Confessions left a record for posterity of her experiences and the injustices committed against women in her day. Edith Dombey left her husband to avoid inevitable physical confrontation, and saved Florence from viewing herself as an object of commerce by offering her a different, more powerful female role model.2
Introduction

During the nineteenth century in Britain, a dramatic shift occurred in attitudes toward women. Previously they had been treated as if they were children or animals: they had been excluded from suffrage rights, property rights, custodial rights, contractual rights, and rights to their own earnings. Furthermore, they did not have legal control over their own bodies—-their husbands did.

However, the belief that men should have complete custody of and dominion over women began to change during the Victorian era. Gradually, women began to be granted divorces, separations, and child custody. They also later earned the right to sue for divorce, to sign a contract, and, later, to charge men with rape. Women in the late nineteenth century finally became able to keep earnings from their own work, and to make inroads into previously male-dominated professions such as medicine. Also, women novelists and poets no longer needed male pseudonyms in order to earn literary fame. However, along with women’s newfound privileges and freedom came responsibility. Women were now expected to support themselves, to handle money wisely, and to be arrested if they incurred debts. Barickman, MacDonald, and Stark in Corrupt Relations, list the many strides that were made by British women during the nineteenth century:
...the ultimately successful struggle to change the divorce laws...the even more far-reaching struggle to pass the married women's property bills. The extension of the suffrage...the widening of occupational opportunities for women...and the opening of the universities to women. (Barickman, MacDonald, and Stark 1-2)

The late nineteenth-century British novel showed the struggle between two contrasting attitudes toward the female, that of child and that of autonomous individual. The authors of Corrupt Relations point out that the novels of Dickens, Collins, Thackeray, and Trollope, read in a certain way, reflect as well as encourage a new enlightened view of women:

Their novels all reflect, or perhaps more accurately, refract the changing conceptions of women's roles that characterized Victorian England....Courtship and marriage plots in the works of these four novelists [see above] present the primary issues of identity, freedom, and power as they actually confronted most Victorian women of the period. (Barickman, MacDonald, and Stark 3, 7)

Having acknowledged, as these critics point out, that all four authors deal with the same issues, the reader realizes that they did not all choose to depict women as equal. Collins relegated Hester, the only strong woman in Man and Wife, to the last part of the novel, labelled her insane, and punished her with the loss of her freedom. His titular heroines were conventional, flat, weak, and helpless. The majority of his male characters viewed women as childlike
or as objects to be subdued. Thackeray not only depicted all his women characters as uneducated, conniving, and deceiving, but had all his male characters in Catherine and in other novels express misogynistic, abusive, and demeaning attitudes toward women. Dickens came closest to the modern feminist viewpoint by depicting some strong independent women characters whom he allowed to escape punishment, and by depicting modern male characters who were not afraid of women as equals, supported the education of women, and treated them with respect.

This paper will explore the progression toward acceptance of women’s equality in three Victorian novels, Catherine, Man and Wife, and Dombey and Son. Realistic independent women characters can be found in both male and female novelists of the period; however, it is significant that these three are male canonical novelists because it shows that some men were finally beginning to accept the new self-definitions that women had fought for; it shows that the Victorian society was ready to accept new types of women characters; and these authors were able to affect British laws and general societal attitudes toward women because of their great literary stature and widespread audience. In all three novels, we find unusually strong self-conscious women characters who reject conventional things of value in order to help younger women, or in order
to maintain, regain, or establish self-respect and freedom. These women also criticize the values of the dominant society, proving its underlying misogyny, hypocrisy, prejudice, and inhumanity. In Thackeray’s Catherine, women such as Catherine who do not fit the stereotype and refuse to accept the unjust way they are treated by men are punished with death. In Collins’s Man and Wife, women who fail to fit the conventional stereotype and who demonstrate solidarity with other women, such as Hester Dethridge, are dismissed as insane and relegated to asylums. Man and Wife, with its exploration of sexist marriage practices, such as the husband’s legal right to abuse his wife physically, commit adultery, or steal his wife’s earnings or possessions, suggests a turning point in the nineteenth-century attitude toward women. This more sympathetic attitude toward the female is extended in Dickens’ Dombey and Son, in which not only are abuses against women and low self-esteem in women depicted in a negative manner, but the new worldviews of Edith, Alice, and Captain Cuttle compete with that of the conventional Mr. Dombey. In Dombey and Son, the women, such as Edith, who fight back against their husbands’ attempts to control them, who question sexist childrearing practices, and who act to save the next generation from their own fates, are banished to solitary lives. But, unlike Catherine and Hester, Edith is still
able to critique the way women are treated in her society, to effect change in Dombey, to prevent Florence from following her example, and to make herself into a model for other women. The progression of these three heroines, Catherine, Hester, and Edith, reflects the three stages of later twentieth-century feminism: acceptance of male definitions of the female, then androgyny, rebellion, and adoption of male values, and, finally, celebration of female difference and forgiveness.

The following key elements will be examined throughout this paper: stance of the narrator toward the female protagonist, stance of the love interest of the female protagonist toward her, opportunity that the female protagonist has for development and growth, stance of other characters toward the female protagonist, and the fate of the female protagonist after she has verbally or physically rebelled against the injustice in her life. The novel form as well as each author's unresolved belief about how women should act is the source of the novel's punishment of Catherine, Hester, and Edith. All three women have entered the marriage plot (Catherine and Edith twice) only to reject it in favor of independence and autonomy. The nineteenth-century novel could not accept this rebellion because the marriage plot was the central plot on which all other subplots depended. The authors not only did not want
to alienate their reading public by leaving rebellious
women unpunished, but they might have unconsciously
disliked these women characters because they did not
exhibit traditionally-valued female virtues. Selected
relationships will be examined, including Catherine Hall’s
relationships to Count Gustavus and John Hayes, Hester
Dethridge’s relationships to her late husband and to George
Delamayn, and Edith Dombey’s relationships to Dombey and
the narrator.

Catherine, Hester, and Edith all defy traditional norms
and expectations of femininity. Though all three
characters begin trying to acquiesce and contain their
senses of anger and injustice, they end up recognizing that
they will have to struggle to improve their situations.
They cannot depend on the leniency of their husbands or
even on law enforcement. Sometimes this struggle includes
physical harm to others in self-defense, but only after
legal and nonviolent resolutions have failed. However,
though they all rebel, they succeed to different degrees,
display different levels of self-consciousness and
intellectual aspiration, and are treated in different ways
throughout and at the end of the novel.

There is a rebellion of the female in each of these
three novels, Catherine, Man and Wife, and Dombey and Son,
although the latter two rebellions involve characters other
than the major female protagonist. These independent characters will be referred to as heroines because of their commendable behavior, but it will be understood that none is the young beautiful heroine of the novel’s main marriage plot. We find three distinct attitudes within three novels which were written during the same historical period, reflecting the multiple views in the slow process of enlightenment during the Victorian period. This paper will reflect a changing path from the traditional view of women found in Catherine, through the critique of violence against women and misogynist laws found in Man and Wife, to the acceptance of female autonomy and hope for a new society that treats women as equal found in Dombey and Son.

Thackeray, Collins, and Dickens had a great impact on the public and on legislators by giving fictional testimony to unhappy marriages, unequal marriage laws, and negative attitudes toward women. These authors, through the realistic depiction of intelligent, sensitive women characters who were still unable to escape their tragic situations, showcased the need for reform. All three were able to show, to some extent, the injustice of stereotyping, abusing, or ignoring women. However, Dickens is the most successful, because only he is able to show us the capacity for self-reform and behavioral change in both men and women through Cousin Feenix’s understanding of
Edith’s situation, Dombey’s personal change through the loss of his business and his daughter, and Edith’s sacrifice of herself for Florence and her setting herself up as an example to other women.
Chapter 1

In Catherine, Thackeray's main purpose is to provide a corrective to romanticism and to show the reality of criminal life. Catherine is primarily meant to be a moral novel for the public and a chastisement for other novelists:

Thackeray was one of the earliest, most persistent, and effective critics of this school of fiction [Newgate novel, especially by Bulwer-Lytton] which tended to distort historical facts and to idealize and glamorize criminal life....Thackeray stands on the side of realism: art is the imitation of everyday experience. Bulwer, on the other hand, upholds idealism: art imagines what could be....In them [Thackeray's reviews of paintings] Thackeray calls repeatedly for an end to the "heroic" style of art and to "the classical humbug" that sustains it. (Ferris 13, 14)

Many critics, such as Micael Clark, Catherine Peters, Jack Rawlins, and Ina Ferris have remarked upon Thackeray's failure in Catherine to achieve his primary purpose because he portrays the title character and other rogues too sympathetically. In his letters, Thackeray deplored his failure, and wondered if the book, as a didactic piece, was still of any use. For example, Jack Rawlins in Thackeray's Novels: A Fiction that is True, quotes from one of Thackeray's letters to his mother:

"Catherine...was a mistake all through--it was not made disgusting enough that is the fact, and the triumph of it would have been to make readers so horribly horrified as to cause them to give up or rather throw up the book and all its kind, whereas you see the author had a sneaking kindness for his
heroine, and did not like to make her utterly worthless. (Thackeray, qtd. in Rawlins 78)

It is true that Thackeray does not end up portraying all his characters as evil or depraved, as he had intended. However, unconscionably, his attitude toward women is not sympathetic, but rather misogynistic and brutal.

Though the narrator of Catherine, Ikey Solomons Esq. Jr., pokes fun at lower-class males and females, he is harsher in his attitude toward females. This narrator subscribes to a narrow definition of proper femininity which does not include passion, intelligence, or wit; for example, he describes Catherine as "...the idlest, dirtiest, and most passionate little minx with whom either had ever to do...." (Catherine 12-13, Chapter 1) The narrator pardons male violence against women while punishing females who try to fight back against their predicaments. Catherine’s actions, such as attempting to poison her lover, and decapitating her husband in order to marry this lover, are deplored by the narrator. However, the reader should not be so harsh to Catherine, because he/she must realize that Catherine had no other choice to escape her situation. Catherine’s good-natured but vapid women, such as Mrs. Score, Miss Dripping, and Madam Silverkoop, are handled very realistically with a fine comic touch. However, something prevents the novel from letting a heroic, beautiful, intelligent character such as
Catherine Hall, achieve her full potential. When Catherine rebels against her first repressive lover and acts for her own welfare, she, like Hester in *Man and Wife*, is labelled unfeminine and otherworldly by the narrator and by Count Galgenstein. But when Catherine refuses to be tamed and rebels against her husband Hayes as well, she is finally put to death by the novel as punishment for her lack of femininity. *Catherine* portrays feisty women attractively, but when they question the system or their relations to male characters they must be punished.

Though Catherine Hall has many suitors and others who long to be suitors such as Thomas Bullock and the Count’s second-hand man, Tom Trippet, she only has two long-term romantic relationships in her life, that with Count Galgenstein, and that with the carpenter John Hayes. Both these relationships are filled with strife. Neither of these male characters is beyond rebuke. Catherine is physically as well as verbally abused by both her lover, Count Galgenstein, and her husband John Hayes. The Count courts Miss Dripping behind Catherine’s back and plots to marry her, and he plans to leave Catherine penniless. When Catherine finally kills her husband so she can marry the Count, he refuses to marry her once more, as Brock had predicted. Catherine has faced injustice from Count Galgenstein, among others:
...in about a week, he began to be indifferent, in a month to be weary, in two months to be angry, in three to proceed to blows and curses; and, in short, to repent most bitterly the hour when he had ever been induced to present Mrs. Catherine the toe of his boot..." (Catherine 37)

Catherine has faced humiliation from the Count as well:

"Yesterday, after the knife-and-beer scene--no wonder I threw the liquor in her face; it was so dev'lish flat that no gentleman could drink it: and I told her never to draw it till dinnertime..." (Catherine 38)

Count Galgenstein, Catherine's first love, who is a major character, encourages wife-beating:

"Women, look you, are like dogs, they like to be ill-treated: they like it, sir; I know they do. I never had anything to do with a woman in my life but I ill-treated her, and she liked me the better..." (Catherine 38 Chapter 2)

The text in no way directly criticizes this viewpoint or shows alternative, more humane ways of treating women, as we find in the Dickens novel. However, for Thackeray, there is a strict double standard: men can abuse women, but women cannot even fight back in their own self-defense. When a wife threatens her abusive husband, she is labelled unnatural or unfeminine. For example, after Galgenstein finds out that Catherine has tried to murder him, he associates her with something inhuman, calling her "infernal", "a fiend", "a devil", "a she-devil", and "a savage." (Catherine 55-59, 174)

John Hayes, Catherine's husband, drinks too much, threatens to murder her teenage son, and plans to leave her penniless. He abuses her verbally: "'Do you think I care
for a bastard and a ---?'" (Thackeray 174) He plans to leave her without sending her an allowance each month, even though she has no way to earn a good living for herself and her son. He also abuses her physically:

He had often struck her before when angry, and heaped all kinds of bitter words upon her; but, in the morning, she bore no malice, and the previous quarrel was forgotten, or, at least passed over. Why should the last night's dispute not have the same end? (Catherine 178, Chapter 11)

It is true that Catherine does not possess as much opportunity for personal growth as Hester and Edith do; however, she is a developing character because she finally reacts to her slowly incarcerating situation, unlike Anne in Man and Wife. Catherine does what is necessary for her own survival when she realizes what she has to do—kill her husband: "the man to whom she was tied for ever—for ever! The bar between her and wealth, happiness, love, rank perhaps. 'If I were free...Max would marry me; I know he would; he said so yesterday!'" (Catherine 179) Catherine's actions, killing Hayes, attempting to kill Count Galgenstein, and attempting to remarry the Count, may be seen as heroic by a reader sympathetic to the plight of abused women. Until she faced the law, Catherine refused to let herself be a victim. Catherine was probably illiterate: "...it must be stated that the young lady did not know her letters..." (Catherine 13, Chapter 1). With
her lack of education, her low income, manners, and style of dress, she was likely to be dependent on either a husband or a relative for her survival. Catherine’s main motivation was simply to provide for herself financially: "...he would wager she was thinking how much better it would be to be a Count’s lady than a poor miser’s wife."

(Catherine 179, Chapter 11) Catherine decides that she needs the Count’s money to support herself and her son. She will only get the Count’s money if she can get the Count to marry her, by proving Hayes is dead by natural causes or by proving that she and Hayes were never legally married.

Tom Billings uses his mother to escape an abusive family, then to get wealth to squander on his sweetheart. Corporal Brock and John Hayes observe that if Tom had not pressed Catherine so hard, she probably would not have tried to seduce the Count again. The reader tends to agree with Brock’s assessment of the situation. Catherine bows to Tom’s suggestions because her very strong maternal instincts demand that she provide for her child at any expense. Tom Billings takes advantage of Catherine’s maternal nature by leading her to kill Hayes in hopes of gaining the Count’s money for himself: "Mr. Billings was wofully disconcerted; for his mother and he had agreed that as soon as his father saw him he would be recognised at
once, and mayhap, made heir to the estates and title..."

(Catherine 152)

Corporal Brock is primarily interested in his own financial gain. He knows Catherine is trying to poison the Count, but he does not try to stop her because he knows where the Count’s money is hidden. Furthermore, Brock incites Catherine to murder Hayes. A few days previous to the murder, Brock plays on Catherine’s maternal feelings as her son does: "'As sure as you leave Hayes without some security from Max [the Count], the boy’s ruined: he who might be a lord, if his mother had but...’" (Catherine 185, Chapter 11) Also, Brock plays accomplice to the murderer, waylaying and plying the escaping Hayes with alcohol so that Catherine can murder him: "'...as Mr. Hayes passed, the old gentleman addressed him in a friendly voice, and, wondering that he had been such a stranger, invited him to sit and take a glass of wine.'" (Catherine 194, Chapter 12) The novel is unfair in that Catherine ends up being put to death, whereas the equally responsible Tom Billings and Brock are not held even partially accountable by the novel.

After Catherine kills Hayes, she is killed for her crime. Thackeray claims in his text to be merely recounting a historical truth: "The subject is strictly historical, as any one may see. ...we are bound to stick
closely, above all, by THE TRUTH--the truth, though it be not particularly pleasant to read of or to tell."

(Catherine 204, 88) However, the reader believes that this story, with its punishment of females who cross over the boundaries of the passive Victorian stereotype, appeals to Thackeray because it gives him power to punish females. Catherine is one backlash against early feminism by a man who feels threatened by women or needs to feel superior to them. Catherine is abused verbally and physically by her lover and husband. They both threaten to leave her destitute:

He determined to fly...He would go, and live away, abroad in some cheap place--away from that boy and his horrible threats. The idea of freedom was agreeable to the poor wretch; and he began to wind up his affairs as quickly as he could. (Catherine 182)

Thackeray sentences her to death for her crime without considering these mitigating circumstances, unlike the way Dickens treats Edith in Dombey and Son. In an expurgated earlier version of Catherine, Thackeray puts the title character in the category of "...cut-throats and other such prodigies of evil." (Catherine x). One critic, Catherine Peters, while allowing that Thackeray is sometimes sympathetic toward fictional women, astutely stresses that he is not usually pro-feminist, but rather regressive in his attitudes toward women:

In a letter to Isabella before their marriage, Thackeray gave an eccentrically all-embracing
definition of frivolous women...He is joking, of course; but it is difficult to see what an unfrivolous woman was supposed to be doing. Thackeray certainly didn’t want or expect her to go out to work,...the only alternative suggested was that men should set women apart, as a higher order of moral beings not expected to struggle with the everyday business of life...that women should be given more control of their lives through political and educational reform-- was seen as dangerous to women themselves...He [Thackeray] assumes for example, that women do not want to work outside the home. If they do so, it is another example of their exploitation by men. (Peters 78, 79, 80)

However, not all critics would agree with Peters that Catherine is traditionally Victorian in its attitudes toward women. For example, Micael M. Clarke sees a connection between Thackeray’s novels and laws passed in England to protect women, based upon Thackeray’s association with Norton:

...His novels are informed by some remarkably liberal views regarding the nineteenth-century women’s movements...Gradually the Victorian public was beginning to recognize the injustices of the laws....Thackeray’s novels and Norton’s political writings were a factor in that shift in public opinion... (Clarke 338, 349)

Clarke conjectures that:

...if Thackeray had not "re-invented" Norton’s history as fiction, such important legal measures as Infant Custody and the Divorce Act might not have been accomplished when they were. (Clarke 350)

However, Clarke does not account for the facts that Catherine was written between 1839-1840 (Ferris 14), five years before Thackeray met Norton in 1845 (Clarke 337). Catherine was written too early to be affected by Norton. Thackeray is incapable in his early novels of freeing women
from their Victorian stereotypes. However, in his later novels, especially *Vanity Fair* and *The Newcomes*, Thackeray shows the influence that Norton had on him by portraying and commenting on the injustice and double standard that women faced. Dickens also shows many stereotypical, flat women characters, especially in his earlier novels. *Dombey and Son* comes from the end of Dickens’s middle period, directly before *David Copperfield*. But though both authors show a progression, there is a clear difference in the two novelists throughout their oeuvre. Even in Thackeray’s later novels, he portrays his women characters with elements of dishonesty, superficiality, and connivance, and his narrators profess anti-woman sentiments. On the other hand, even in Dickens’s early novels, women are treated with respect and reverence by the narrator, and violence against them, if it exists, is viewed by the narrator and other characters as abhorrent. The authors of *Corrupt Relations*, like Clarke, view Thackeray as sympathetic to women’s causes and as critiquing the patriarchal system that granted women power which was not true power:

By placing "bad" or even criminal characters...in positions of power, they imply...the radical idea that the "good" woman has little independence or power. And by presenting the "bad" woman as a victim of a cruelly oppressive sexual system, they undermine the orthodox position still further. (Barickman, Macdonald, and Stark 9)

Like Clarke, these authors tend to highlight the attitudes
found only in the central, canonical novels, while subsuming the more problematic attitudes of the lesser-read, earlier novels. Secondly, these authors are imposing their own idealized view of how progressive they think Thackeray should be onto a novel, *Catherine*, which exhibits a plot and narratory stance that is inherently unfair to women. For example, *Catherine* condones wife-beating, ridicules maternal love, and portrays women as silly, conniving, and lacking in self-esteem.

The attitudes toward women in *Catherine* are not ahead of their time, as the attitudes found in *Dombey and Son* are. In *Catherine*, men and women exhibit the same morally questionable actions, such as participating in murder or being unfaithful to their lover or spouse, but women in this novel are judged much more harshly than men are, for the same actions. For example, Brock and Billings participate in Hayes' murder, but are not punished by the novel. Also, Count Galgenstein's illicit relationships while he is living with Catherine are condoned by the narrator as typical of men, but Catherine's re-infatuation with the Count when she is married to Hayes are seen as evil by the narrator. Furthermore, the narrator of *Catherine* espouses many misogynistic doctrines such as that women enjoy being the objects of male violence, that men cannot be monogamous while women are expected to be
strictly so, and women are only interested in money. Thackeray does not show the consequences of physical violence against women as Collins does, or the existence of strong, independent, intelligent women characters, as Dickens does.
Chapter 2

One of the two major purposes in Man and Wife is to give a more realistic picture of the "Rough" than that which most novels of the time contained:

We...class our savages as a representative part of our population, under the newly invented name of "Roughs." Public attention has been directed by hundreds of other writers to the dirty Rough in fustian....But he is bold enough to direct attention to the washed Rough in broadcloth.... (Collins preface 5)

George Delamayn is Collins's example of the middle- to upper-class "rough" who looks like a gentleman, but acts like a brute. Geoffrey's story is the story of an atrophied vital power caused by overstrainingous physical exercise incited by greed and the need for popularity, which corresponds to an atrophied moral sense and lack of respect for women. Like Thackeray, Collins wanted to show that the crimes of the Newgate calendar, and those who commit them, are sordid and hurtful.

Man and Wife's other major project is to improve the plight of women, the marriage laws, and the behavior of men. It does this through the sympathetic portrayal of Hester Dethridge's struggle with her husband. In Man and Wife, Collins illustrates most of the same women's concerns as are represented in the Caroline Norton case. Among these are the fact that what a woman earned at that time was not legally hers, that women could not obtain divorces
for personal reasons, and that women were legally required
to live with their husbands, even if they were abusive.
Collins may have written Man and Wife because he was aware
of these inequalities, and he avoided marriage to Caroline
Graves and Martha Rudd because he did not want to be a
party to women's oppression. (Peters 314, Clarke, and
O'Neill 135, 143, 147) However, Man and Wife exhibits
stereotypical, contradictory, and misogynistic attitudes
toward women too many times for the reader to deduce that
the novel is generally sympathetic to women.1
Stereotypical and misogynistic attitudes toward women are
found in all the major characters, but, most importantly,
in the narrator. Furthermore, Collins, typical of the male
Victorian writer, does not choose to portray women as
complex characters, and is unable to portray realistic,
active women characters, though he shows several strong
men, such as Sir Patrick, Geoffrey Delamayn, and Arnold. On
the other hand, Dickens is able to portray the inner
psychological workings and subjectivities of his female
characters well, as in the cases of Edith Granger Dombey,
Florence Dombey Gay, Alice Brown, and Miss Tox. Therefore,
Collins stands at a halfway point between the misogyny of
Thackeray and the pro-feminist sympathy of Dickens.

Man and Wife is also concerned with the threat of
lower-class rebellion. Jenny Taylor in The Secret Theatre
of Home sees Collins’ purpose as expressing a fear of working-class rebellion:

...it [Man and Wife] takes up the increasing middle-class fear of the violence of a degraded urban class and turns this round into an attack on the "savagery" of English upper-middle-class customs and ideals of masculinity... (Taylor 214)

Taylor’s point is that what appears to be an attack on individual hostile behavior is really a broad attack on a certain class. Thus Taylor sees Hester as being punished by Collins not because of her gender, which is threatening to the male, but because she is part of the working class, which might rebel against the middle class at any time. Two replies to Taylor’s position are that women in Dombey and Son are discriminated against no matter what class they are in, and more women are members of the lower class than men are. While not the usual heroine of Victorian literature, being neither young nor beautiful, Hester is important to Collins’ treatment of women; so important, in fact, that Collins mentions her as being of at least equal importance with the hero Geoffrey Delamayn. Hester’s story, in O’Neill’s words, "illuminates how the law treats married women." (O’Neill 150) Collins adds in his preface to Man and Wife:

...while I write these lines, Parliament is bestirring itself to remedy the cruel abuses which are here exposed in the story of "Hester Dethridge." There is a prospect, at last, of lawfully establishing the
right of a married woman, in England, to possess her own property, and to keep her own earnings. (Collins 5)

Although _Man and Wife_ does deal with abuse of women, and their less than full status as citizens, yet it retains a traditionally passive stereotypical view of what a woman should be. For example, the weak heroine Anne Silvester runs away from conflict and the truth, is not able to stand up to strong male characters, sacrifices herself and submits to the cruel Geoffrey, and depends on Hester to save her. Hester, on the other hand, is a strong female character who acts strangely, lacks beauty and youth, and is independent. Because Hester does not fit the traditional definition of a feminine heroine, she is portrayed negatively by the novel. The narrator's attitude toward Hester is one of fear and loathing. The narrator views women and men as two distinct species. To the narrator, women are weak, false, dissimulating, defensive, and irrational. For example, Blanche's mentioning Sir Patrick's name is irrational, but typical of women, the narrator thinks: "But Blanche--with one act of rashness already on her conscience--rushed, woman-like, straight to the commission of another." (Collins 136) He/she does not even attempt to examine her circumstances or upbringing, as the narrator of _Dombey and Son_ does for its characters, in order to understand why she did what she did. Instead, her behavior is simply written off as "insane." After Hester's
second murder, she is punished by being sent to an asylum. Although *Man and Wife* shows concern with extreme physical violence against women and with married women’s property and earnings not being legally theirs, this novel still cannot accept women who are so strong that they are willing to kill men to save their own lives or those of other women. Hester could have been praised by other characters in the novel for risking her life to save Anne, but instead she is imprisoned in an asylum. The attitude of the narrator toward women in general is oftentimes alarming. Here we see the narrator expressing a patriarchal, misogynistic attitude:

However persistently the epicene theorists of modern times may deny it, it is nevertheless a truth plainly visible in the whole past history of the sexes that the natural condition of a woman is to find her master in a man. Look in the face of any woman who is in no direct way dependent on a man; and, as certainly as you see the sun in a cloudless sky, you see a woman who is not happy. The want of a master is their great unknown want; the possession of a master is--unconsciously to themselves--the only possible completion of their lives. (*Collins 129 Chapter 31*)

Hester is very badly treated by her husband, so badly in fact that she kills him in self-defense. Joel Dethridge, her husband, is an alcoholic whose drinking is uncontrollable, who is unable to work, and who often beats his wife, as Count Galgenstein and Hayes beat Catherine. He beats her so hard one time that she is temporarily
struck dumb and ever afterwards has flashback spells in which she loses touch with reality. Unfairly, he sells Hester’s furniture and belongings and spends all Hester’s wages. Joel Dethridge represents the degree to which Victorian law favors the man. An unemployed, lying, drunken, gambling womanizer, Joel nevertheless is granted by society whatever power he wants over the woman he has married. A man, no matter if his status in society be the lowest, still is granted by society complete legal, physical, and economic power over women.

Hester undermines conventional assumptions about the lack of strength and intelligence in females. She is a strong female character who is independent and not conventionally beautiful and young, but she may serve as a heroine to the reader and to the character Anne. Hester also does not stay where she is not wanted; for example, she leaves Lady Lundie’s home to support herself by renting out to boarders. Hester Dethridge, like Catherine Hall, ought to be exonerated for her crime. Her murder of Joel is done in self-defense, after having exhausted all legal and nonviolent efforts first. Also, according to her Confession, she tries legal means and moral pleading as Edith does with Dombey before resorting to physical violence. Hester attempts to make a living on her own, but her efforts are useless because her husband steals her
money and possessions. She asks for a divorce, and warns all the proper authorities about her husband, but they claim they can do nothing, given the circumstances and the current law that a man's wife and all her property legally belongs to him. Hester, in killing Joel, takes desperate action to save her life and sanity. Hester shows that it is possible for women to be physically strong—she proves that the male does not always win. Hester triumphs over Joel. Hester ought to be exonerated for her killing of Geoffrey too, because in the process she saves another woman’s life. Anne’s family tries to get Geoffrey to agree to a separation and a monetary settlement first, but he declines. Hester shows herself to develop during the course of the novel. Hester not only saves Anne’s life, but also contributes to Blanche’s, Arnold’s, and Sir Patrick’s happiness. Hester’s defense of Anne against Geoffrey proves her development as a character. She moves from contemplation to action. She sees herself in Anne as Edith sees herself in Florence. Thus, by killing Geoffrey, she not only saves Anne’s life, but also relives and reaffirms the justified killing of her own husband. Hester proves that seemingly weak older women can triumph over young proud athletes. Hester triumphs again over Geoffrey: "The homicidal frenzy possessed her. She flew at his throat like a wild beast. The feeble old woman attacked
the athlete!...Hester Dethridge pounced on his prostrate body--knelt on his broad breast--and fastened her ten fingers on his throat." (Collins 237) Hester has seen beneath the veneer of Geoffrey's popularity and good looks to recognize a cruel, selfish man. If Geoffrey had been stronger, he might have been able to fight off Hester. Thus, Collins here combines two themes, that of the violent husband, and that of the injunction against strenuous debilitating physical activity. Hester threatens not only other characters, but also general assumptions about women found in the rest of Man and Wife. She is an independent single woman who is strong, and who acts in her own self-defense and in the defense of other women.

The attitudes that Geoffrey, Lady Lundie, Anne, Sir Thomas, Sir Patrick, and Blanche hold toward Hester generally echo those of the narrator: fear, loathing, misunderstanding, and stereotyping. Geoffrey views Hester as the physical embodiment of his conscience. He is troubled with images of her whenever he considers doing something underhanded to Anne. After the first time Geoffrey sees Hester, he continues to be haunted by her until the end of his life. Geoffrey thinks Hester is "mad" (Collins 94 Chapter 20), he is "frightened" (Collins 94 Chapter 20) of her, and he cannot get her out of his mind. Geoffrey is uniquely understood by Hester, his foe, in the
same way that Edith is understood by her enemy Carker. Geoffrey, unlike Joel Dethridge, represents men who quash their moral scruples about their inhumane treatment of women through exercise and anger. Joel may be partially exonerated because he is unconscious of the unfairness of his behavior. However, Geoffrey may not be because he is completely conscious of his unfairness in his treatment of Anne, but he represses this emotion. His insecurity and rage at having failed in the race and in his father’s eyes overcome him and he takes out his anger on Anne, whom he has already wronged by impregnating her, abandoning her, and trying to marry her to his best friend. Lady Lundie, Sir Thomas’s second wife, hates Hester because she does not understand her, and thus she is afraid of and feels threatened by her. She has never encountered anyone like Hester before, and thus searches for any excuse to fire her:

Over and over again, Lady Lundie had decided, naturally enough, on no longer keeping such a servant as this; but she had never yet carried the decision to execution. (Collins 46 Chapter 8)

When Hester acts independently to tell Blanche of Anne’s whereabouts, Lady Lundie terminates Hester from her job: "That reply settled the question of the cook’s dismissal—the question which had been pending for months
past." (Collins 48 Chapter 8) Lady Lundie has failed to get Hester to answer questions about her past, as well as to agree that her conduct in relation to Blanche is wrong. Lady Lundie represents women who need control over other people. This control is manifested over other women, because women had little power over men in the Victorian era. Lady Lundie, like Dombey, is more concerned about appearances than about people's true welfare. She does not really care for Anne, but views her as an outsider and as a member of the working class. it is ironic that at the end of the novel Anne usurps Lady Lundie's position by marrying Sir Patrick, and Lady Lundie in turn becomes the outsider.

Anne Silvester's overwhelming emotion in relation to Hester is that of fear. Anne's life has been saved by Hester twice, but Anne continues to exhibit fear toward Hester instead of gratefulness. Anne describes Hester as "strange", "mad", "dreadful", "horrid", "hard", "cold", and "dismal" (Collins 80, 180, 181) near the beginning of the novel. Even after Hester has come to live with Anne to protect her from Geoffrey, Anne mistakenly still thinks of her as "horrible", "hard", "pitiless", "ghastly", and "deranged." (Collins 209, 213, 231) Anne's consistent feeling toward Hester is one of fear, dislike, and repugnance. Anne represents women who judge people on their physical appearance more than on their character or
faithfulness. Furthermore, Anne represents "male-affiliated" women like Mrs. Chick in *Dombey and Son*. Rather than try to bond with Hester against Geoffrey, Anne secludes herself and tries to appease the threatening Geoffrey. Anne is a passive Victorian woman who does not try to fight back against Geoffrey, in part because she has internalized the negative labels that her society has placed upon her—she believes she deserves to be punished for her sexuality and the betrayal of the trust Blanche has placed in her.

Sir Thomas' and Sir Patrick's retaining Hester in her job as cook is really self-serving:

In consideration of this last merit [being one of the best cooks in England], the late Sir Thomas had decided on giving her a trial, and had discovered that he had never dined in his life as he dined when Hester Dethridge was at the head of his kitchen. (Collins 46)

As Dombey regards Polly Toodle (Richards) simply as nursemaid to Paul, Sir Thomas thinks of Hester only as "cook", not as a human being. Sir Patrick treats her not as "cook", but as a psychological object of study. (Collins 180 Chapter 44) Sir Patrick represents men who see women, especially those of other classes, only as objects that benefit them. He does not really care about Hester because he does not complain when Lady Lundie fires her. Furthermore, Sir Patrick represents men who feel threatened by women. This is probably why he has avoided
all women before Anne. Sir Patrick likes Hester because she is quiet; if an object talked, one would not be able to treat it like an object any longer. Hester has a strong negative effect on Blanche as well. Like most other characters, Blanche is very afraid of Hester:

Blanche turned from the sight of the slate, and from the sight of the woman, in horror. "You frighten me!" she said. "You will frighten her if she sees you. I don't mean to offend you; but--leave us, please leave us." (Collins 99 Chapter 22)

Blanche represents women who accept society's definition of them without question, and who cannot imagine solidarity with other women against men. It is nearly unbelievable, that Blanche can be so afraid of Hester, and so trusting of men, who have betrayed herself, her friend Anne, and Anne's mother.

Hester has the potential to become a very powerful female character, so she is banished to an insane asylum by the end of the novel before she can challenge the novelist's and the reader's views of women and before she can formulate her experience into a critique of her society.2 Luckily, unlike Catherine Hayes, Hester is not put to death for her crimes against men. However, she is not granted the independence, full life, and social acceptance which Edith is granted in Dombey and Son either. Hester is dismissed at the end of the novel. It is easier to blame Hester's behavior on madness than to examine the
cruel conditions that led her to commit her crimes.

Marshall and O'Neill view *Man and Wife* as a critique of the popular Victorian view of women. In Marshall's view, Hester's confinement to an asylum suggests that she is superior to the Victorians who judge her:

That society finally concurs and confines her for life to an asylum may constitute as full a judgment upon society as upon Hester...in her violent moment of moral resolution Hester Dethridge excluded from further contact with herself a morally inconsistent society. (Marshall 91)

This separation from society which elevates the loner and allows him/her an outside view of the dominant society would apply to Edith at the end of *Dombey and Son*, but not to Hester, who completely shuts herself out from the world and from whom we never hear again after her second crime. O'Neill reads *Man and Wife* as a critique of the view of women as commodities. (O'Neill 126) One example of commodification of women in *Man and Wife* is when Anne's parents search for feminine traits in their daughter which will supposedly earn her a good husband: "Anne's parents were heartless and depraved. Their one idea, in connection with their daughter, was to speculate on her beauty, and to turn her abilities to profitable account." (Collins 9) It is ironic that it is not her beauty, but her kindness and generosity in giving herself to Geoffrey so that Blanche and Arnold may finally marry, that actually earns her a husband. A second example of commodification of women in
Man and Wife is when Sir Patrick compares a wife to an adulterated package of sugar:

"You go to the tea-shop, and get your moist sugar. You take it on the understanding that it is moist sugar. But it isn’t anything of the sort. It’s a compound of adulterations made up to look like sugar...Your wife is an adulterated article. Her lovely yellow hair is--dye. Her exquisite skin is--pearl powder. Her plumpness is--padding. And three inches of her height are--in the boot-maker’s heels. Shut your eyes, and swallow your adulterated wife as you swallow your adulterated sugar..." (Collins 38)

In the cases of both marriage and sugar, Sir Patrick says, the reality is not as satisfying as the appearance. Man and Wife here views Blanche as a commodity because she is about to become Arnold’s wife; ironically, Sir Patrick is questioning the authenticity of his own niece.

Furthermore, Sir Patrick marries Anne at the end of Man and Wife; unless Anne is unique, this means that Sir Patrick himself is caught in what he believes to be the falseness of love. O’Neill’s reading of Man and Wife is a feminist reading because feminists would want to resist the portrayal of women as material objects which have only market value and are replaceable, in both fiction and real life. The view of women as something to be circulated and not as ends or beings in themselves dehumanizes them, because they are never sure if their husbands will replace them with the next woman who comes along. Their intellectual qualities are ignored by their parents and
suitors, in favor or social or physical qualities, as in the case of Edith Dombey. Also, men can justify brutalizing women this way, if females are seen only as objects and not as human beings. But we cannot in this case attribute these feminist leanings to the novel or the author, because the novel relies on objectification of women throughout and does not posit any alternatives. Although we can identify the objectification of women in *Man and Wife*, and point out that this objectification by both women and men proves harmful to women, the novel itself shows no connection between objectification and violence against women, lack of self-esteem among women, or capitalism and materialism run amok. The novel deplores physical violence against women while ignoring its true causes, which are rooted not in the individual, but in society, and attempts to hold onto all the old-fashioned stereotypes of women.

However, in *Dombey and Son*, a clear connection is drawn between socialization and men’s brutality along with women’s acceptance of this. Unlike *Man and Wife*, which simply depicts the status quo, *Dombey and Son* actually critiques these beliefs and creates new ones in their places. It is true that Edith Dombey and Alice Brown are sometimes viewed as commodities in *Dombey and Son*. But whereas the view of women as commodities is common to all
characters in *Man and Wife* except Hester, this view of women is held only by a few selfish characters with limited perspective, such as Dombey, Mrs. Skewton, and Good Mrs. Brown. Dickens, then, is able, through the portrayal of characters such as Toots, Walter, and the Toodles, to contrast the view of women as commodities with a more human, equal and respectful view of women which foreshadows the feminist perspective.
Chapter 3

*Dombey and Son* indicts a capitalist industrial society in which economic success is the primary goal and concern for fellow humans is secondary. In this novel lack of financial success can split lovers, as in the case of Walter and Florence, or brothers, as in the case of the two Carkers. Financial downfall leads to imminent social and romantic downfall, as in the case of Dombey.

From a feminist perspective, one problem with this money-centered society is that it can lead women to marry wealthy, powerful men whom they do not love, just to survive in a patriarchal society that does not grant women equal opportunities. In *Catherine* and *Man and Wife* the negative consequences of choosing romantic love over practical love were examined. But marrying for social position and money can also have negative consequences, especially for headstrong, proud individuals such as Dombey and Edith Granger. To Dombey, Edith's privileged relationship with Florence is a painful reminder of the love he lacks in his own life, and this leads him to hate Edith. Dombey's insistence that Edith obey, submit, and appear cheerful annoys and goads Edith, since her pride and independent thoughts are virtually the only vestiges she has left of her former self. For example, immediately before Edith requests a separation, she urges Dombey to
understand that she has tried, and cannot force herself to submit to him:

I would now if I could— but I cannot, my soul recoils from you too much—submit myself wholly to your will, and be the meekest vassal that you have!... I will do nothing that you ask! (D & S 748)

Edith is not the only woman character to be treated as a commodity in *Dombey and Son*. Alice Brown has been bought by Carker and sold by her mother. Polly Tootle (Richards) is also bought and sold, but in a temporary and businesslike manner. Polly is bought by Dombey to care for Paul and sold by her husband. Dombey puts strict limits on Polly’s name (by changing it from Polly Tootle to simply "Richards"), speech, dress, and emotional freedom. In *Dombey and Son*, even though a few male characters such as Carker and Walter are bought, most often it is the case that the person being bought is a woman, and that she pays a higher psychological and physical price for her status as object of commerce. In *Dombey and Son*, the common notion that a woman is an object to be bought by her employer or husband for the highest price is clearly being criticized—Dickens successfully shows the inherent injustice of the plights of Polly Tootle, Alice Brown, and Edith. On the other hand, in *Man and Wife*, the narrator adopts the common standard of judging and treating women himself. Mary Montaut, in "The Second Mrs. Dombey", argues that Dickens was only being sympathetic to an individual situation, not
feminist, in pointing out injustice against Edith in *Dombey and Son*. However, with all the narrator’s and Edith’s self-conscious statements, it is nearly impossible to believe that Dickens did not intend Edith to be representative of all women. It is not Edith’s individual situation, but the fact that her individual situation is so widespread that is so troubling to the reader.

Raymond Williams reads *Dombey and Son* as a critique of the capitalist system that exploits men and women by alienating them from the fruits of their labor: "In what is called his mode of caricature, Dickens is here [through the character of Polly Toodle] profoundly expressing a practical alienation." (Williams 26) Polly Toodle is alienated from her charge, little Paul, by Dombey’s cruelty. Dombey has no idea that children need human interaction and comfort in order to grow up healthy. Williams fails to see that women are exploited in more deeply-rooted and multiple ways than men are.

Traditionally, whereas female identity is rooted in personal relationships, male identity is rooted in work and other solitary pursuits. Thus, since it is so crucial to a woman’s self-identity to find and please her partner, she will be more invested in self-scrutiny and self-analysis. It would be the exception, especially before the twentieth century, for a woman not to look at herself as a "marriage-
object", and to compare herself to standards of culturally ideal femininity. Also, women are often victimized by multiple oppressions of gender, birth class, race, and present socioeconomic level. Men can never be oppressed as fully as women can be, because the oppression of women is based on a cultural bias ingrained from childhood that males have more value than females. This is the value that Dombey believes and tries to instill in Paul and Florence. All women, regardless of class or race, start out oppressed in at least one way because of their gender, whereas theoretically men of certain races and classes would not be oppressed at all.

Another problem with this type of society from the feminist perspective is that it judges women primarily in terms of their social accomplishments, such as drawing, painting, or playing the piano, or in terms of their bodies, which are directly related to the social (wife as status symbol) or childbearing (woman as producer of male heir and successor) functions of marriage. Instead of viewing women as whole people with independent minds, it views them as producers or showpieces. Surendrini Perera in "Wholesale, Retail, and for Exportation: Empire and the Family Business in Dombey and Son", condemns the fact that female beauty in Dombey and Son is often seen as a possession:
A second indicator of value on the same scale [of economic value] is female beauty. ... Alice and Edith are fatally linked by the unnatural transformation of personal gifts into salable goods... (Perera 613)

Perera is correct that Edith and Alice are linked; this is major support for the argument that the narrator of Dombey and Son is self-conscious and that Dombey and Son is a pro-feminist novel. However, Dickens, unlike Collins and Thackeray, did not himself see female beauty as a possession, but was pointing out and critiquing this view in his society.

In Dombey and Son, the reader is shown the negative and tragic consequences of marriage for money, alienation in the home and at work, and superficial judgment of women's value. Collins has shown us these same negative consequences, but he has not shown pro-woman views through the narrator, has not shown any possible solutions to these societal problems, and has not expounded on these problems theoretically the way the Dombey narrator has. Alice Brown ends up poor, depressed and battered, and Edith ends up alone. In Dombey and Son, a society is painted which demoralizes and ruins promising women, but there exists an element of cautious optimism about the better treatment of women in the future. Jonathan Loesberg, in "Deconstruction, Historicism, and Overdetermination", concludes that it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to escape defining something, even a person, by
its economic exchange value: "The problem...was to construct an alternative to economies that was not already economic." (Loesberg 455-456) However, Loesberg does concede that *Dombey and Son* is pivotal and reflects a change that occurred in the Victorian era:

...her [Edith Dombey's] ambiguity, moral, and representative, foreshadows the role of the marriage plot as it detaches itself from external social significance in later Victorian fiction. (Loesberg 459)

From an opposing viewpoint, Loesberg sees Dickens as torn between reproducing those economic values that have been inculcated in him, and rebelling against them: "...as a result of the discourse of political economy, which Dickens's fiction both opposed and reproduced..." (Loesberg 39) Collins would be closer to Loesberg's description of Dickens, since Collins shows us many women characters who deserve criticism, and at the same time condemns abuse of women by society. Perera, like Loesberg, sees a "tension" (Perera 608) between what she sees as the reabsorption of Florence into the patriarchal scheme through motherhood and "women's work" (Perera 617) and the fundamental difference and escape of Alice Marwood and Edith Dombey. Living on the fringes of society and having others forgive you is much less harsh than being executed by the state, put in jail or sent to an insane asylum, or having your loved ones hate you for life, as in the cases of Catherine Hall and
Hester Dethridge. Dickens still has a long way to go in order to reach twentieth-century feminist consciousness, but he is far ahead of his time in identifying the relationships among socialization, materialism, and abuse of women, and in proposing tentative solutions.

The future society envisioned by Dickens treats men and women as equals: it does not judge men by how much money they make, or women by how pretty, docile, artistically talented, or physically equipped for childbearing they are. Dickens saw several examples of this future society even in his time. These characters, such as Toots, the Toodles, Florence, Susan Nipper, Miss Tox, Captain Cuttle, Jack Bunsby, and Sol Gills, are able to see beneath appearances to the good heart in a person, if it exists. It is important to note that these characters are from all social classes, they range from the working class of Bunsby and Cuttle to the educated class of Florence and Toots. These special characters are unselfish in their devotion and value the possession of love over the possession of wealth. Garrod points out that it is heart, humanity, and goodness that Dickens values, not money, power, or intellect:

...it would be wrong to suppose that here, or anywhere, Dickens ridicules the people who are all heart, that he disparages pathetic effects...The defects of the second part of Dombey and Son are defects not of heart, but of head. (Garrod x-xi)
The narrator of *Dombey and Son* juxtaposes a critical, cold, outside view of Edith with a sympathetic, forgiving, understanding view of her. The narrator sometimes takes a scientific detached view of Edith; however, at most times, the *Dombey* narrator describes Edith more sympathetically with psychological fullness. Unlike the two previous novels then, *Dombey and Son* is able to move beyond limited descriptions of women to full, autonomous, rich depictions of them. The narrator ingeniously shows us Edith’s independent thoughts, reactions, and plans even when on the surface she acquiesces to Dombey:

She bent her eyes upon him steadily, and set her trembling lips. He saw her bosom throb, and saw her face flush and turn white. All this he could know, and did: but he could not know that one word was whispering in the deep recesses of her heart, to keep her quiet; and that the word was Florence....The arch of diamonds spanning her dark hair, flashed and glittered like a starry bridge. There was no warning in them, or they would have turned as dull and dim as tarnished honour. *(D & S 748)*

Here the reader sees the embodiment of Florence in Edith’s mind that is her guide. The diamonds symbolize the material aspect of Dombey’s marriage to Edith. The bridge represents the foreshadowing that Edith and Dombey’s marriage is doomed. The marriage looks fine from above like calm water below a bridge, but once one is thrown from the bridge of superficial appearances, the water and Dombey’s marriage are dangerous. What the reader notes is
that Dombey sees Edith’s prideful anger, but does not realize Florence’s effect on delaying Edith’s departure, or the fact that his marriage will end up ruined. One of the questions the narrator of *Dombey and Son* deals with is whether class or gender is more responsible for the degradation and unfair treatment of women. Tying Edith and Alice together, the *Dombey* narrator sees that both women of opposing social classes are treated inhumanely based on their gender, not on their class rank:

In this round world of many circles, do we make a weary journey from the high grade [Edith and Mrs. Skewton], to find at last that they lie close together, that the two extremes touch, and that our journey’s end is but our starting-place? (D & S 579)

The answer the narrator offers is that gender is a more determining factor in the way women are treated than class is because middle- and upper-class women are not immune from unequal treatment either. The narrator of *Dombey and Son* is a forerunner of "radical feminism" because he/she sees gender as more determining than class as a factor in why women are oppressed. Here is a definition of "radical feminism" from the editors of *Sex and Class in Women’s History*:

The rudiments of gender analysis, for example, appeared early in the 1970’s in the politics and theories of radical feminists, who saw something called sex, sex-class, or sex caste as the most fundamental, most oppressive social division. (Newton, Ryan, and Walkowitz 4)

The narrator of *Dombey and Son* is very self-conscious about
his judgments and about the predicaments of the characters in his novel. This self-consciousness shows that Dickens is criticizing the unequal treatment of women in his time, rather than accepting the beliefs that lead to these injustices, as Collins and Thackeray do.

Dombey marries Edith because she can fill certain requirements for him. He wants a woman whose appearance and behavior are pleasing at social gatherings:

It flattered him to picture to himself, this proud and stately woman doing the honours of his house, and chilling his guests after his own manner. The dignity of Dombey and Son would be heightened and maintained, indeed, in such hands. (D & S 509)

He thus wants a "trophy wife", an object displaying his attainment of financial success. He also wants a young woman who appears capable of bearing him a "Paul", as his first wife Fanny had done:

That the hope of giving birth to a new partner in such a House, could not fail to awaken a glorious and stirring ambition in the breast of the least ambitious of her sex...Mrs. Dombey [Fanny] had entered on that social contract of matrimony... (D & S 50-51)

He sees women only as potential creators of and mothers for males. He further wants a woman accomplished in social graces such as singing, playing the piano, drawing, and painting:

"Have they [landscape drawings] that interest?" said Mr. Dombey. "Are they yours?"
"Yes."
"And you play, I already know."
"Yes."
"And sing?"
"Yes." (D & S 369)
Here artistic accomplishments are distorted from pleasure and beauty into a contest to see who will make the best wife. Lastly, he aspires to a wife with an unblemished reputation and a good character.

Most significantly, Dombey desires a woman like himself, who is proud, bows to no one, and serves as a model for others to emulate. However, Dombey fails to realize the consequences of what probably would occur when two strong natures disagree about social engagements or the upbringing of the children, for example. Ironically, it is Edith's pride, which initially attracts Dombey to her, that turns against him and is the major agent in the breakup of their marriage. Edith and Dombey are too alike in their intractability and pride for their marriage to survive:

Their pride, however different in kind and object, was equal in degree; and in their flinty opposition, struck out fire between them which might smoulder or might blaze, as circumstances were, but burned up everything within their mutual reach, and made their marriage way a road of ashes. (D & S 736)9

Dombey's foremost goal is to force the intransigent Edith to submit. Like Geoffrey Delamayn, Dombey delights in power over women. He has never encountered anyone before Edith who challenged him. As Carker remarks, throughout Dombey's life he has been surrounded only by business subordinates, dependent relatives, and acquiescent women:

Mr. Dombey has had to deal, in short, with none but submissive and dependent persons, who have bowed the knee, and bent the neck, before him. He has never known what it is to have angry pride and strong
resentment opposed to him. *(D & S 718)*

If people had anything bad to say about Dombey, they did not say it directly to him. Edith is the first person to ever openly challenge Dombey. Dombey fights against anything interfering with his wishes:

> Mr. Dombey was resolved to show her that he was supreme. There must be no will but his. Proud he desired that she should be, but she must be proud for, not against him...Her cold supreme indifference--his own unquestioned attribute usurped--stung him more than any other kind of treatment could have done; and he determined to bend her to his magnificent and stately will. *(D & S 650)*

Because of Dombey’s and Edith’s contrasting headstrong natures and because of Dombey’s unrealistic view of women, their marriage was doomed from the start, as we see in the bridge metaphor. Dombey is not concerned with having an equal relationship with Edith; he is only concerned with having more male children to take over his business and with appeasing his business colleagues.

When we meet Edith for the first time, we find a woman already reflecting on her fate. Edith’s psyche, her resistance to the demands of Dombey, Carker, and Mrs. Skewton, her maternal and feminist traits, and the fact that she does not appear solely from Dombey’s or Carker’s perspective, all encourage the reader in his/her view of Edith as a true heroine. Edith defies such powerful male authority figures as Dombey and Carker and also causes the reader to realize that his/her expectations of Edith have been far too low; Edith shows herself to be noble and
selfless, even toward those who have wronged her in the past. Edith reflects on how her behavior can serve either as a positive role model or as a negative example to other women. Unlike Alice, who believes her situation to be unique, Edith as a middle-class woman believes her situation is typical of all women, and she wants to alter the place of women in the future. She has come to realize that she is selling herself in marrying Dombey:

"You know that he has bought me", she resumed. "Or that he will, tomorrow. He has considered of his bargain; he has shown it to his friend; he is even rather proud of it; he thinks that it will suit him, and may be had sufficiently cheap; and he will buy tomorrow...There is no slave in a market: there is no horse in a fair: so shown and offered and examined and paraded, Mother, as I have been, for ten shameful years...Have I been hawked and vended here and there, until the last grain of self-respect is dead within me, and I loathe myself?..." (D & S 472-473)

Edith’s whole life has been spent perfecting her outward appearance to gain a rich husband. She never had a real childhood. Edith’s first husband, Mr. Granger, was very similar to Mr. Dombey; she married him, too, for a way to survive, not because she loved him. Notwithstanding this mercenary background, Edith’s respect for herself and for the young women of the future is greater than that of many other characters in Dombey and Son. However, what is shown in Dombey and Son is that Edith is an exception; most of the time women not only are unaware of and unable to escape their treatment as objects, but they unconsciously
inculcate these same destructive principles into their daughters and the other youth of their society. The critiques found in Dombey and Son of Victorian materialism and of the unequal treatment of women in Victorian society are interrelated because women were viewed as the most desirable object and the possession of these objects was the possession of societal power. Unlike Edith, not every female succeeds in overturning stereotypes. Alice is unable to view herself as anything other than an object, and Mrs. Skewton implants her nonfeminist principles into Edith and attempts to force them into Florence as well. Edith is rare because she learns from her suffering and refuses to let future generations of women suffer too. She is a prototype of the new feminist woman, who sees herself not as an isolated individual, but as connected to future generations of women by common obstacles of exploitation and limited opportunities, if nothing changes in the future. This recognition of something that is very common, but is denied outwardly by her society, shows that Edith is very astute. It is difficult for one to look at himself or herself from an outside perspective, but Edith accomplishes this. So, Edith’s first major accomplishment is her understanding of the true role she and other women like her play in society. The images of horses and slaves that Edith compares herself to suggest that there are a myriad of women in a similar situation. Second, Edith has learned
by the time we meet her to uphold her own moral standards, and to prevent the same thing from happening to future generations of women. For example, she refuses to let Florence be corrupted by her mercenary mother:

"It is enough", said Edith, steadily, "that we are what we are. I will have no youth and truth dragged down to my level. I will have no guileless nature undermined, corrupted, and perverted, to amuse the leisure of a world of mothers. You know my meaning. Florence must go home." (D & S 514)

Mrs. Skewton has proposed that Florence stay with her on Edith and Dombey's honeymoon, but Edith is afraid that Florence will turn out like herself. Thirdly, she tries to avoid hurting other women by offering to let herself be the object of Dombey's jealousy and anger rather than Florence:

"Dear Florence, it is better--it is necessary--it must be--that our association should be less frequent. The confidence there has been between us must be broken off. (D & S 648, 720, 741)

This sacrifice for Florence's present and future happiness is Edith's major heroic act, and corresponds to Anne's sacrifice of herself to Geoffrey for Blanche. Fourth, by the end of the novel, Edith gains an even broader perspective, understanding not only those women like herself, but the motivations of the characters who have been complicit in her objectification. This broader perspective is an essential element of feminism because it is only through understanding influence and desire that we can try to change the actions of those who would keep women
at a lower level than men. Edith is able to forgive Dombey because she realizes that, like herself, he has been shaped by forces beyond his control, and that he may have changed, as she has. Even though Dombey has married Edith considering her to be an object for him to possess, has rejected her when he finds out that she has an independent mind, and has tried to coerce her into acquiescing to him by making life difficult for Florence, Edith is able to forgive him:

"...he knows there is one feeling in common between us now, that there never was before...when I thought so much of all the causes that had made me what I was, I needed to have allowed more for the causes that had made him what he was. I will try, then, to forgive him his share of blame. Let him try to forgive me mine!" (D & S 968)

This conversation occurs when Florence visits Edith to ask her forgiveness because her father is very ill. After enduring Dombey's humiliation of herself as well as the loss of Florence, Edith is still not bitter. Another proof of Edith's growth as a character is her ability to forgive her mother for forming her character to be so mercenary:

"I forgive you your part in to-morrow's wickedness. May God forgive my own...I told you then that I forgave your part in it, and prayed God to forgive my own. I told you then that the past was at an end between us. I say so now, again. Kiss me, mother." (D & S 673-674)

The above conversations refer to the eve of Edith's marriage to Dombey and the last hours of Mrs. Skewton's life. Even though her mother has corrupted her and
threatened to corrupt her stepdaughter Florence, Edith is
noble enough to understand and forgive her. Edith finally
realizes that her mother loved her and was trying to
provide for her in the only way she knew. Edith sees no
reason to punish people for what has happened in the past,
but she does not want the same thing happening to Florence
that happened to her. Edith sees herself in Florence as
Hester saw herself in the young Anne. This recognition
that future generations of women are doomed connects women
of all ages and classes, and transforms Edith into a
protofeminist character. Edith’s realizations that she is
not alone in being seen as an object and in being thwarted
in her potential because of her gender are essential
elements of the feminist perspective. Edith’s sacrifice of
herself for Florence shows a concern for the younger
generation and a feminist sensibility that the other
characters in *Dombey* lack. Edith does not want the cycle
of objectification of women by men and women’s acceptance
of this to continue; she allows us to envision a world
populated by women who respect themselves and are respected
by men. To Edith, the correct socialization of Florence
represents hope for the future—the hope of new upbringing
for female children, and the hope of a new love between the
sexes based on equality.

Attitudes toward Edith in *Dombey* fit into three
categories: negative, such as that of Mrs. Chick, who
believes Edith is completely to blame for the breakup of her marriage; openminded, such as that of Cousin Feenix, whose harsh view of Edith turns to sympathy; and positive, such as that of Florence, who accepts Edith despite her imperfections. The opinions that the different characters have of Edith are varied. This variety of viewpoints, and even the variability within the same character’s view of Edith throughout the novel, such as that of Cousin Feenix, is a welcome change from the one strong misogynistic attitude toward women that we find in Catherine and Man and Wife, expressed by narrator and characters alike.

Carker and Mrs. Chick are examples of characters with extremely negative, disrespectful, and condescending attitudes toward Edith. Carker sees Edith as having sold herself to Dombey from the moment he sees her parading her social and artistic accomplishments for Dombey in return for the hope of marriage with him:

Thinking, perhaps, as he rode, that even this trivial sketch had been made and delivered to its owner, as if it had been bargained for and bought. Thinking, perhaps, that although she had assented with such perfect readiness to his request, her haughty face, bent over the drawing, or glancing at the distant objects represented in it, had been the face of a proud woman, engaged in a sordid and miserable transaction. (D & S 470)

To Carker, Edith’s producing a drawing at Dombey’s request makes her into another of Dombey’s monetary transactions. Carker takes pleasure in Edith’s dependence upon him as
Dombey's messenger and revels in her discomfort. He has no respect for marriage vows, and attempts to force Edith into a life of adultery. Carker enjoys the power that Dombey has bestowed upon him, the knowledge he possesses about the couple, and the opportunity to torture Edith mentally and emotionally. Carker is a sadistic individual who enjoys hurting and criticizing others, such as Walter Gay, his older brother James, and Dombey, but he is especially cruel in his behavior toward women. Men like Carker would be threatened by women like Edith if women were capable of achieving more power. From a feminist perspective, Carker is very dangerous because his brand of misogyny and cruelty toward women is surreptitious and accepted by his society. Mrs. Chick is upset when Dombey's second wedding takes place because her own favorite, Miss Tox, has not been chosen. Immediately after she hears of the failure of Dombey's second marriage, Mrs. Chick severely upbraids Edith, claiming that she has never been "a real Dombey" and that she has not "made an effort":

"My dear Paul!...your wife! that upstart woman! Is it possible that what I hear confusedly, is true, and that this is her return for your unparalleled devotion to her; extending, I am sure, even to the sacrifice of your own relations, to her caprices and haughtiness? My poor brother!" (D & S 807)

Mrs. Chick has made similar comments demeaning to women when Fanny, Dombey's first wife, was dying of childbirth complications. Mrs. Chick always believes that Dombey is
blameless. Therefore Mrs. Chick, like most of society, automatically blames the woman for a failed marriage. Mrs. Chick's attempt to affiliate herself with powerful males, and not to bond in sisterhood with other women is evident in her relations with other women characters too. For example, Mrs. Chick drops her friend Miss Tox once she has been rejected by Dombey. The reader can see that Mrs. Chick thinks that a woman is nothing without a man. From a feminist perspective, Mrs. Chick represents women who encourage other women to be dependent on men, and who adopt the male perspective themselves, ignoring the hardships of other women. She is a "good daughter" and a "good Dombey."

Cousin Feenix is an example of an openminded attitude toward Edith. He is very pleased when the wedding takes place, but at first he completely blames Edith when her marriage to Dombey falls apart:

"I am extremely anxious, Major, that my friend Dombey should hear me express my very great astonishment and regret, that my lovely and accomplished relative, who was possessed of every qualification to make a man happy, should have so far forgotten what was due to--in point of fact, to the world--as to commit herself in such a very extraordinary manner." (D & S 811)

Cousin Feenix's attitude is found not only in most men in this society, but also in females in male-dominated societies, such as Mrs. Chick, who always sees the woman as being at fault. However, Cousin Feenix is a unique character who was ahead of his time in many ways. Over time, Cousin Feenix comes to understand and forgive Edith,
and even enables Florence to meet Edith for their final reconciliation. Cousin Feenix represents Dickens’s optimism about the future, and the fact that humans are capable of changes in perception and of reparation. Cousin Feenix is a paradigm for growth, and he is proof that an error in perception, however widespread, can be corrected. Florence is an example of a constant positive, pro-woman, sisterly, and sympathetic stance toward Edith. Florence brings out the soft, nurturing, selfless side of Edith’s nature. Florence sees Edith as a substitute for her mother.

Fanny:

And now Florence began to hope that she would learn from her new and beautiful Mama, how to gain her father’s love; and in her sleep that night, in her lost old home, her own Mama smiled radiantly upon the hope, and blessed it. Dreaming Florence. (D & S 486-487)

Florence understands that Edith loves her even when her stepmother leaves Dombey’s home for good; Florence believes in Edith when no one else does:

Florence had heard enough before quitting the room, to know that Edith loved her yet; that she had suffered for her sake; and that she had kept her sacrifices quiet, lest they should trouble her peace. (D & S 751)

At their final meeting, Florence is able to forgive Edith fully because she understands now the reasons why she left. The reader sees in Edith a heroine who verbally and physically rebels against the injustices in her life. She upbraids Dombey and her mother for attempting to corrupt
Florence:

"It is enough", said Edith, steadily, "that we are what we are. I will have no youth and truth dragged down to my level. I will have no guileless nature undermined, corrupted, and perverted, to amuse the leisure of a world of mothers. You know my meaning. Florence must go home." "I have put the question to myself", said Edith, ashy pale, and pointing to the window, "more than one when I have been sitting there, and something in the faded likeness of my sex has wandered past outside; and God knows I have met with my reply. Oh mother, mother, if you had but left me to my natural heart when I too was a girl--a younger girl than Florence--how different I might have been!" (D & S 514)

She also criticizes Dombey for letting Florence see that

Dombey thinks of Edith as an object:

You add to all this, do you, the last crowning meanness of making her a witness of the depth to which I have fallen; when you know that you have made me sacrifice to her peace, the only gentle feeling and interest of my life... (D & S 747-749)

Edith does not want to humiliate Dombey; she respectfully asks him for a separation when she realizes that he is becoming increasingly more totalitarian toward herself and

Florence:

"Tell him", said Edith, addressing her proud face to Carker, "that I wish for a separation between us. That there had better be one. That I recommend it to him. Tell him it may take place on his own terms--his wealth is nothing to me--but that it cannot be too soon. (D & S 749)

Only when her request is denied does Edith decide to flee:

Without a word, without a shadow on the fire of her bright eye, without abatement of her awful smile, she looked on Mr. Dombey to the last, in moving to the door; and left him..."Why, if", she said, surveying him [Carker] with a haughty contemplated disgust, that he shrunk under, let him brave it as he would, "if all my other reasons for despising him could have been
blown away like feathers, his having you for his counsellor and favourite, would have almost been enough to hold their place." (D & S 856)

But Edith never resorts to committing a crime to gain her freedom as Catherine and Hester do. Edith decides to leave Dombey, therefore preventing the need to hurt herself or him. Neither Catherine nor Hester were psychologically able to leave their husbands when this became necessary.

The narrator of Dombey and Son exhibits major differences from the narrator of the traditional nineteenth-century novel. Despite Edith’s self-assertion and acts of independence, the narrator does not choose, as previous novelists might have done, to describe Edith in primarily negative terms. Because Edith has only violated social mores and not actually broken the law, she cannot be arrested, put to death or sent to an insane asylum as Catherine and Hester are. Unlike the narrators in Catherine and Man and Wife, the narrator of Dombey and Son is not concerned with convicting this woman who has crossed over the boundaries of nineteenth-century gender lines. On the contrary, the narrator explains away Edith’s behavior by mentioning the extenuating circumstances of her sexist upbringing several times in the course of the novel, and emphasizing her reform when she sacrifices herself for Florence and forgives her mother and Dombey. Unlike the unfortunate Hester and Catherine, who are punished severely, Edith is finally able to escape her abusive
situation without committing a crime, and to make a new
life for herself. Loesberg sees Edith’s escape as even
more complete: he does not look back sentimentally on the
Victorian materialist society that Edith chooses to leave
behind: "By embodying a conflicted representation, Edith
succeeds in escaping the various economies of the novel."
(Loesberg 459) And even more strikingly, Montaut sees
Edith as completely free and as heroic: "...an independence
all the more real for being free from the ordinary cares
and 'woman's work'...The grandeur and honesty of Edith's
stand..." (Montaut 150) The positions of Loesberg and
Montaut would strengthen the argument for Edith as proto-
feminist Victorian woman.

Perera takes a middle ground by maintaining that
Edith’s and Alice’s stories cannot be fully incorporated
into a regenerated patriarchal and imperialist system:

Inscribed in the broader polemic of revelation and
retribution is Alice Marwood’s story...the triumphant
regeneration of expansionist mercantilism in Dombey
and Son is undercut by a subtext that cannot dismiss
the costly returns of empire, even as it labors to
reenact the outdated Whittington legend. (Perera 618,
620)

Taking the opposite viewpoint, Michael Slater, in
Dickens and Women, chooses to ally Edith with other Dickens
heroines who are punished:

A frozen life, a premature death, a life selflessly
devoted to the service of others: such are the fates
of Edith Dombey, Lady Dedlock [Bleak House], and
Louisa Gradgrind [Hard Times]. When we note that one
or other of these fates is also allotted to nearly all
Dickens’s women characters who are endowed with passion we can register just how disturbed he was by this quality in the opposite sex...his relentless punishing of his passionate anti-heroines like Edith Dombey... (Slater 265, 349)

Robert Clark in "Riddling the Family Firm: The Sexual Economy in Dombey and Son", sees Dickens’s sympathetic depiction of Edith’s plight only as a setup for his later punishment of her for transgressing Victorian boundaries:

...the apparently sympathetic representation of Edith Granger’s plight as a commodity available to the highest bidder in the marriage market was made possible by Dickens’ intention to ruin her in the end. To know one’s place as lucidly as Edith does is to ensure that your husband, or your author, will put you away." (Clark 72)

However, it is difficult to see how the Victorian woman’s plight could be seriously examined with its full effect on its female victims, and then simply reinstated by Dickens. Slater and Clark choose to focus on Edith’s losses and their own interpretation of what she should find of value in life, like marriage, motherhood, and business parties.

Edith can be seen in a more positive light if we regard her as having different, more feminist values than the society she inhabits. Among her values are those of truth, not causing disappointment to those you love, and sacrificing yourself so that those after you can live a more fulfilling life. Edith is exonerated by the novel with the view of her personal history, is allowed to express radical opinions for her time, more than once, about the position of women, and is permitted to escape
alive and free of crime charges. Unlike previous woman characters who challenge the norm, Edith is given several opportunities to expound her views and is left alive after speaking them. This is a tremendous accomplishment for the Victorian novel’s treatment of women. At the end of *Dombey and Son*, Edith is free, she no longer has to live a life of appearances, and she is secure in the knowledge that Florence and women of following generations will have the opportunity to live in a more equal, more fulfilling world.
Conclusion

This thesis has shown a literary progression away from the traditional, stereotypical Thackeray text through the experimental, socially-minded, women-concerned Collins text to the more optimistic, enlightened, multi-voiced, protofeminist Dickens text. In Catherine, women are depicted as fickle, trivial, deceptive, and entrapping. They are shown to deserve punishment by males or by the criminal justice system for their misbehavior or transgressions. It is ironic that Thackeray, who was well aware of social hypocrisy, pretense, and facade in the nineteenth century, should write a novel such as Catherine, which is virtually blind to the unfair treatment of women in that time.

In Man and Wife, Collins, unlike previous novelists, has made limited strides by showing positive images of women, such as those who are independent of male aegis, as in the case of Hester Dethridge. He also portrays male insensitivity as the cause of violence toward women, as in the case of Anne and Geoffrey Delamayn. Unfortunately, however, Collins still subscribes to certain outdated stereotypes of women, such as that silent women are more desirable, that men are physically and mentally superior to women, and that women must relinquish their feminine aspects in return for power and independence. For example, Hester's appearance is so manly that she frightens Blanche
and Geoffrey. The authors of *Corrupt Relations* point out that a dichotomy between femininity and power was present in the majority of nineteenth century novelists, not just in Collins’s work:

In order for the woman of traditional Western literature to act on her own rather than as a reflex of men...--she has to usurp a male position of power...In this unsettled [Victorian] period, a fictional woman who finds a way to evade stereotypic sexual roles, to transform them into satisfying and creative activities, or to fashion some new sphere for female activity is seldom found. *(Barickman et al. 57, 11)*

When considering Dickens on the other hand, the authors of *Corrupt Relations* do not see Dickens as feminist, because whereas Collins sees the patriarchal system as ubiquitous, inescapable, and intolerable, Dickens sees the system as tolerable if one is informed and chooses to create one’s own values. To illustrate how the system can be overcome by certain individuals, Dickens portrays some happy couples who seem to manage to escape the sexist, materialist system, such as Florence and Walter, Susan Nipper and Mr. Toots, Mr. and Mrs. Toodle, and Mrs. MacStinger and Jack Bunsby. In *Dombey and Son*, happiness for the couple and decent treatment for the wife is there despite the system, because it is an individual choice for Dickens. It is true, as the authors of *Corrupt Relations* point out, that there are individuals in *Dombey and Son* who are able successfully to escape the social order, either
permanently, as in the cases of Gills, Cuttle, Toots, the Toodles, Walter, Bunsby; or temporarily, as in the cases of Florence and Edith. However, Dickens in Dombey and Son also shows us many women who are victims of the system: Edith Dombey, Alice Brown, and Florence. Dickens asks the reader to take responsibility for preventing injustice in future generations.

It bothers the critic Robert Clark, too, that Dickens gives as much weight to the happy equal couples such as the Toodles as he does to the unhappy unequal couples such as Edith and Dombey:

...Dickens thus gives backhanded affirmation to the ideology of the family as an ideally nonviolent, noneconomic zone of felicitous relationship. This affirmation...is completely at variance with the recognition not only that Dombey’s household is not like this, but that Dombey’s household is the more general case. (Clark 80)

First, Dickens realizes that society does affect the family relations, but it is not determining. Characters, usually through suffering and loss, can learn that their behavior is wrong and change it, such as in the cases of Edith, Dombey, Alice, and Mrs. Skewton. Some characters, like Toots and Walter, are nonmaterialist and treat all people as equal because of their personalities. Second, Dickens is very well aware that Dombey’s household has economic factors at its very core and that it has the potential to become physically violent. Third, Dickens knows that Dombey’s household was the representative case in his day.
That is one of the main reasons he wrote the novel. Mr. Dombey embodies exactly the popular attitude toward women that was unacceptable and that needed to be changed. Dickens chose to show a few happy equal couples to encourage the reader that change was possible and to offer him/her some hope.

Dickens is more optimistic than Collins about the possibility for individual and societal change as represented by changes in the characters of Cousin Feenix, Dombey, and Edith, among others. By showing us two worlds, the materialistic, misogynistic one of Dombey, Carker, and Mrs. Chick, and the feminist, humanistic, nonmaterialistic one of Edith, Florence, and Alice, Dickens shows the reader the possibility of a world in which all people might be judged on their merit and treatment of others, not in terms of clothing, social standing, or name. For Collins, the system is so repressive and far-reaching as to make any thought of rebellion or permanent change for the future seem futile. Children repeat the behavior of their parents unconsciously, as in the cases of Anne and Geoffrey. But Dickens offers the reader a choice. He is able to show within one novel a warning as well as a ray of hope, by depicting victims of patriarchy, such as Alice and Edith, as well as characters who choose to live their lives according to alternative value systems, like the Toodles
and Captain Cuttle.
Preface

1 Many critics, such as Horstman, Herstein, Hoge, Olney, and Acland agree that Caroline and George Norton were too unlike to be happy together, but nevertheless this did not give him the right to be dishonest with her about his financial situation and his political career. (Horstman 43, Herstein 48, Hoge and Olney 5, and Acland 33)

2 Information for this preface has been obtained from: Caroline Norton by Alice Acland, Selected Writings of Caroline Norton by Hoge & Marcus, vii-xvii, Strong-Minded Women by Janet Murray, 133-138, and Uneven Developments by Mary Poovey, 51-89.

Introduction

1 Like the brutality that Caroline Norton, Catherine, and Hester faced at their husband’s hands, the Jack the Ripper murders of the 1880s and the Yorkshire Ripper murders of the 1970s were influenced by misogynistic attitudes and these crimes were treated leniently by law enforcement officials for the same reason. Just as these Ripper murders were backlashes against feminism, nineteenth-century authors such as Collins and Thackeray keep women readers from rebelling by showing them what happens to females who transgress the norms. In the same way, the Jack the Ripper murders functioned to keep women of all social classes virtually imprisoned at home because of fear, just when they were starting to be allowed a part in the economic and social life of the city. (Walkowitz 3, 225, 231)

Chapter 1

1 The abuse that Count Galgenstein and John Hayes heap on Catherine might seem strange to us, but was accepted treatment of women in Thackeray’s time. (Walkowitz 44) In his later novels, such as Henry Esmond, Pendennis, and The Newcomes, Thackeray portrays mistreatment of women as a common mark of the “civilized” upper class in his day. (Barickman, MacDonald, and Stark 165)
Chapter 2

1 William Clarke points out that Collins's attention to the gender of his children when making his will reveals negative beliefs about women. (Clarke 7) Another proof of Collins's negative attitude toward women is that Hester is invested with a part of himself that he loathed—a laudanum addict. The form that Hester's vision takes suggests that she might be having a drug-induced laudanum vision. Hester's visions in Man and Wife are quite similar to Collins's visions when under the influence of laudanum. In both Collins's and Hester's descriptions there is a double of the self and a struggle with that double. William M. Clarke, in The Secret Life of Wilkie Collins, points out that it has been accepted that Collins's laudanum-taking affected the settings and plots of his later novels. Though Clarke does not assert this, it is possible that even Collins's earlier novels, such as Man and Wife, may have been affected by his laudanum-taking, though they hold to coherent plotlines.

2 The authors of Corrupt Relations point out that in Collins's novels, the passionate, knowledge-possessing, sexually forward women are always punished. (Barickman, MacDonald, and Stark 140)

Chapter 3

1 Robert Clark, in "Riddling the Family Firm: The Sexual Economy in Dombey and Son", starts out explaining that Dombey and Son is Dickens's attempt to make explicit a sexual and economic capitalist system that is normally in effect but not talked about, and then to undermine this patriarchal system. Clark asserts that Dickens "confront[s] the primary engine of patriarchal society" (Clark 72) and "is concern[ed] with the subjection of women." (Clark 72)

2 Horsman points out in his introduction to Dombey and Son that Dickens said that this novel 'should do with Pride what Martin Chuzzlewit had done with Selfishness." (Forster qtd. in Horsman xiv., et al.)

3 As Montaut points out, this blurring of the distinction between traditional male artistic pursuits cheapened by the female role into social graces, may be Dickens's attempt to show the degradation of women by the popular culture: what should have been art becomes "tricks" in the hands of women. (Montaut 147)
4 Mrs. Baillie Saunders points out certain elements of Dickens's optimism. (Saunders 87, 93, 132)

5 Saunders and other critics point out that generally only the lower classes in Dickens's novels are comprised of good characters. Dickens probably used characters who were ostracized, such as Edith, characters from lower social classes, such as the Toodies, nonwhite characters such as Susan Nipper, or characters oppressed because of their gender, women, to critique the dominant Victorian society because these characters were on the fringe and have an original perspective. Though Judith Walkowitz and other critics question the validity of speaking from the margins and whether there really is a margin at all that is relatively free from dominant values, most critics and this paper assume that there will always be a multiplicity of different viewpoints, if from nothing other than varying degrees of oppression and varying participation in materialist goals.

6 The reader's first view of Edith, walking with her mother, is both detached and unflattering. (D & S 359-360)

7 The narrator describes Edith in all her different moods, among these are anger, maternal love, and self-control. (D & S 516)

8 Saunders, going against the norm of her time, believed that Dickens portrayed women realistically, just not as conventional heroines. (Saunders 60-61)

9 Saunders takes a different perspective by theorizing that Dombey and Edith's marriage is doomed to failure because Edith does not really love Dombey: "...where one is false, things go wrong; and where love is degraded by giving itself for money, or rather love is put aside for gain, all goes wrong..." (Saunders 100) However, this sounds like something that Mrs. Chick of Dombey and Son might say, it is essentially blaming the woman for all the problems of the marriage. The reader does not know if Dombey truly loved Edith, or thought of her only as an ornament or baby-producer. Even if Dombey did really love Edith, he was complicit in her exchanging herself for money and status because he was the one who bought her.

10 Montaut sees no need for Edith to ask for forgiveness from anyone. Montaut stresses that 72 Edith has nothing to be forgiven for, which is true. However, Edith can still be sorry about how the situation has turned out without actually taking blame for it.
Dickens realizes that Edith's plight as commercial object is representative of all classes of women. In *City of Dreadful Delight*, Walkowitz argues that prostitution in nineteenth-century Britain affected the way all women could dress and act, whom they could talk to, and the way they were treated by police and by their own husbands. (Walkowitz 159)
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