The growing disenchantment with the myth of the family: the child without a childhood in Oliver Twist, Little Dorrit and Jane Eyre.

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THE GROWING DISENCHANTMENT WITH THE MYTH OF THE FAMILY:
THE CHILD WITHOUT A CHILDHOOD IN
OLIVER TWIST, LITTLE DORRIT, AND JANE EYRE

BY
MARIA BROSER

A Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies through the Department of English in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts at University of Windsor

Windsor, Ontario
1975.
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ABSTRACT

One type of child that appears often in the Victorian novel is the child who is deprived of a happy childhood. The orphan child and the child who is exploited by society and by his own guardians are major preoccupations of several Victorian writers. In Dickens, for example, the child is harmed both physically and emotionally by his social environment. The pressures of society and the real world make it impossible for childhood to be a very carefree period in man's life. The Victorian treatment of childhood differs significantly from the romantic treatment of childhood. Whereas in romantic poetry the child is found in the natural world, in the Victorian novel, the child appears in a social and in a family environment. The significance of the child without a childhood in the Victorian novel and the role that the family plays in this child's life deserve further exploration.

In Oliver Twist, Little Dorrit, and Jane Eyre we find three different approaches to the child without a childhood. The family and the home are linked to the presentation of childhood that we find in each of the three novels: Oliver Twist is the orphan child who searches for a home where he can find security and protection from the outside world; Little Dorrit is the child within the home which cannot withstand the pressures of the city; and finally, Jane Eyre, another
orphan child, is a psychological human being, who rejects the value of the pseudo-home. In all three novels the family is directly or indirectly responsible for the child not having a happy childhood.

Dickens and Brontë in these three novels reject the romantic myth of childhood. Since the child and the family are inseparable, the discussion of childhood also casts light on the nature of the Victorian home. Both Dickens and Brontë point out the inadequacies and the failures of the home. The family often does not give the child proper care and is, at times, completely ignorant of the child's special needs. When Dickens and Brontë question the romantic conception of childhood, they also expose the Victorian myth of the family. Despite the Victorian ideal of the family as a loving and guiding element in the child's life, the family, as we see in these three novels, differs greatly from the ideal.

Victorian writers, such as Dickens and Brontë, become increasingly more concerned with a realistic and even psychological approach to childhood in their works. With this new emphasis on realism we find not only a more realistic approach to the child, but also a more realistic approach to the child's place in society and in the family. The child without a childhood in the Victorian novel suggests a growing disenchantment with the myth of the Victorian family.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am very grateful to Dr. Colin B. Atkinson for his supervision of this thesis and for his valuable suggestions and recommendations. Also I would like to thank Dr. Lois K. Smedick for reading through the final draft and bringing to my attention stylistic imperfections. Dr. Mansell J. Blair from the Department of Sociology I would like to thank for the information that he provided me with on the family in history.
CHAPTER I

THE MYTH OF THE FAMILY AND THE CHILD

The importance of the family in Victorian society cannot be overstressed since we find, during this period, countless artistic and literary representations of domestic bliss, of the family assembled around the hearth and parents and children seated at the dinner-table. Each of these domestic scenes illustrated the warmth, love, and devotion found within the Victorian home. Family life, sentimentalized and idealized, in both literature and art, was the one institution of the age that promised a sense of solidarity and protection in a society characterized by a state of flux. Embodying the Victorian ideal of the family were Queen Victoria and her family who served as models for the great importance attached to the home, as Janet Dunbar discusses in The Early Victorian Woman:

It was a time of political upheaval on the Continent, and of growing agitation against the social conditions at home. In this uneasiness the Royal couple stood as a symbol of stability and order, both in national and home life. It is not surprising that the cult of home and children should have been sentimentalized, often to absurdity by an unconscious fear of social revolution. 1

For the Victorians the fear of revolution was a very real one. Steven Marcus has stated that the three major Victorian

fears were the fear of revolution, sexuality, and the existence of a meaningless universe.\textsuperscript{2} Revolution and a meaningless universe, in particular, threatened the sense of order within Victorian society. With the rise of industrialism and the breakdown of traditional values and beliefs in the nineteenth-century, the Victorians experienced rapid social changes that left them bewildered, confused, and insecure. The conception of the universe also changed in the nineteenth-century with the collapse of Enlightenment thought. One of the attempts to restore order and stability that was shaken by technological advancements and the breakdown of cosmic order was to emphasize the strength and solidarity of the family. Thus, the family became an important institution in the Victorian Period, serving as a bulwark against the great Victorian fears.

The Victorian home gave a sense of order to the Victorians since within the family structure there appeared a hierarchy in which each member of the family had certain duties.\textsuperscript{3} The husband was head and master of his home; the wife was dutiful to her husband; and the children were obedient towards their parents. While duty and respect were learned in the home, they were not limited to familial relationships, but extended to include God and the Queen.\textsuperscript{4} The home then became a

\textsuperscript{2} Steven Marcus at the Victorian Counter-Culture Conference, Tampa, Florida, February, 1974.

\textsuperscript{3} Walter E. Houghton, \textit{The Victorian Frame of Mind 1830-1870} (New Haven, Conn., 1957), p. 344.

\textsuperscript{4} Frederick Gordon Roe, \textit{The Victorian Child} (London, 1959), p. 46.
microcosmic world, reflecting man's duty in society and his place in the greater cosmos.

Although these are all important factors in the Victorian emphasis on the family, the more immediate purpose of the home was to provide a retreat from the hostile world. In short, the family was a sanctuary where peace, harmony, and love could be preserved, despite the pressures of the city. The following passage from John Ruskin's "Of Queens' Gardens" is truly representative of the Victorian ideal of the home as a place of shelter from the harsh outside world:

This is the true nature of home— it is the place of Peace; the shelter, not only from all injury, but from all terror, doubt, and division. In so far as it is not this, it is not a home; so far as the anxieties of the outer world penetrate into it, and the inconsistently-minded, unknown, unloved, or hostile society of the outer world is allowed either by husband or wife to cross the threshold, it ceases to be home; it is then only a part of that outer world which you have roofed over, and lighted fire in. 5

Walter E. Houghton in The Victorian Frame of Mind further elaborates on the nature of the home as a place where Victorian man could escape from the pressures of the commercial spirit, so prevalent in Victorian society:

It was both a shelter from the anxieties of modern life, a place of peace where the desires of the heart might be realized... and a shelter for those

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moral and spiritual values which the commercial
and critical spirit were threatening to destroy,
and therefore, also a sacred place, a temple. 6

The family, however, as an isolated unit outside the
inimical world, where comfort, emotions, and love were en-
couraged, proved to more idealistic than realistic in ac-
tual Victorian society. With the importance attached to fa-
mily life there developed a myth concerning the Victorian
family as a stable institution governed by happiness. Under-
lying the surface view of the strength of the Victorian family,
was the family unit desperately clinging to its individual
members to preserve order in the social world. The family
failed on two counts: first, the family itself was in a state
of uncertainty, changing from the extended family of earlier
times to the nuclear family, consisting of the couple and
its children; second, the ideal family was the affluent
middle-class family, which excluded the lower-class families,
orphans, and the destitute. The Victorian home, that unshak-
able "rock in the midst of rushing streams" 7 fought for its
own survival, becoming as unsteady as other aspects of Vic-
torian society. Paradoxically then the family was not the
solid foundation of Victorian society that it appeared to be,
but another institution that was caught up in the uncertain-
ties of the Industrial Age.

Despite its shortcomings, one very positive aspect of

6 Houghton, p. 343.
7 Ibid., p. 344.
the nuclear family was the child-oriented home. Thus, we find in the nineteenth-century, a new concern with the child, both in the home and in society. In earlier periods the child had no special place in society, but fitted as well into the community as the adult. There was virtually no distinction drawn between the child and the adult, and the child's needs were not considered any different from those of the adult. In fact, until the late eighteenth-century, the child was portrayed in art as a miniature adult, dressed in adult clothes. This indicates again that, prior to the nineteenth-century, childhood was not regarded as a special phase of life.


10 See Aries, pp. 32-49. Aries contends that childhood was first discovered in the seventeenth century when we find the beginning of the isolation of the nuclear family. The history of childhood is a relatively new field of study and Aries's work, Centuries of Childhood, is one of the first contributions to the study of the child in history. We are becoming more aware of the fact that childhood has not remained the same throughout history. The area of study today is the child within the historical context. For a discussion and criticism of the major works on the history of childhood see Lawrence Stone, "The Massacre of the Innocents," New York Review, (November 14, 1974), 25-31. While it is difficult to pinpoint exactly when childhood was, in a sense, first discovered, we find a great concern with the status of the child in the nineteenth-century. It was in the nineteenth-century that various laws were passed to protect the child in society. This would certainly indicate a new interest in and an awareness of the child's needs.
This new interest in the child in the nineteenth-century is also reflected in the literature of the period. While the child appears in all literary periods, a new approach to children emerged in the Romantic Period as a more direct observation of actual childhood became the trend. Earlier the child in literature was only incidental and of secondary importance, but in the nineteenth-century the child became the subject of the literary work, rather than remaining only part of the background or serving as poetic detail. With the Romantics, particularly Wordsworth, and later, with the Victorian novelists, we find a movement away from a conventional approach to childhood to a more natural description of the child and a closer examination of the child’s world.

We find in nineteenth-century literature three approaches to childhood: first, the romantic conception of childhood where the child lives in communion with the natural world; secondly, the child in society who is still completely innocent; and finally, the child who is found in a social context, interacting with and reacting to its environment. While these three approaches to childhood do overlap to some extent, the basic distinction between the romantic child and the Victorian child can be found here. At this point we can turn to each of these approaches and examine it more closely.

With the exception of Blake, the Romantics usually

11 Blake's treatment of childhood is somewhat atypical of the romantic approach to childhood. The Blakean child, though innocent, is very much affected by its social environment. This is unlike the romantic child in Wordsworth's poetry, for example.
removed the child from society and placed it into the natural world. There the child could remain a creature of love and goodness, untainted and uncorrupted by the civilized world. The child's nature, believed to be one of original innocence, and the child itself, a creature expressing freely its spontaneous emotions, served as appropriate symbols for both the imagination and the natural world. The appeal of the child figure to the romantic imagination is discussed quite fully by Peter Coveney:

The child could serve as a symbol of the artist's dissatisfaction with the society which was in process of such harsh development about him. In a world given increasingly to utilitarian values and the Machine, the child could become the symbol of Imagination and Sensibility, a symbol of Nature set against the forces abroad in society actively de-naturing humanity. 12

The child then was of interest to the Romantics since it was associated with innocence, imagination, and the natural world, all aspects of man's life that were being destroyed by society and civilization. Childhood, in turn, became that blissful, carefree state in man's life when he was closest to nature and least affected by the pressures of society.

The conception of childhood, however, changed somewhat in the Victorian Period. Although the child still had much in

Blake, in removing the child from the pastoral setting and placing him in the social world, as he does in Songs of Experience, resembles the later Victorian novelists, particularly Dickens.

common with the romantic child, the world of the Victorian child changed drastically. In the Victorian novel, the child does not remain separate from its social environment and is no longer found in the pastoral world. In short, the natural world of the romantic child, the world of innocence, is replaced by the social world, the world of experience. The Victorian child then, unlike the romantic child, inherited a world of experience. Once the child was removed from the benevolent natural world and was taken into the hostile social world, the blissful state of childhood also disappeared. The Victorian child, as we find in Dickens, often remained passive and innocent, even in society. Yet, the Victorian child became increasingly more of a social and psychological being, responding to its environment and often, fighting against it.

With the rise of social realism in the Victorian novel, Victorian writers became more aware of the social conditions that prevented many children in their society from having a happy childhood. There was most certainly, in the Victorian Period, a great concern with the abuse of children in the hands of their guardians, educators, and political leaders. The child for many Victorian writers, but particularly for Dickens, was the centre of an area where social reform needed to be brought about to improve the living and working conditions of the poorer children in Victorian England. We find,
in many Victorian novels, a very keen awareness of the effects of the Industrial Age on the child.

Ideally, the solution to the child in the world of experience would be the family. The family supposedly could preserve the child's innocence and protect it from the corrupt world. However, this was not always the case. In many Victorian novels, we find that the Victorian family fails to live up to its responsibilities and cannot provide protection and security for the child. The recurrence of the orphan theme, a manifestation of the nineteenth-century quest for identity, in the Victorian novel, is also one of the major indications of the inadequacies of the Victorian family. Although the family provided shelter for the child who was fortunate enough to have parents, the same protection was not available for the orphan child. Historical data indicate that Victorian England had not arrived at a solution to the problem of orphan children. In fact, the nuclear family was partially responsible for the orphan child's dilemma. In earlier times, such as the Middle Ages, the child without parents was readily adopted by members of the feudal group. For the nineteenth-century child, however, this was not the case. The orphan was a burden to society. Deprived of a normal family environment and left alone in the world of experience, the orphan child was deprived not only of parents, but of childhood itself.


14 Heywood, p.8.
Thus, in reality, only the child who was fortunate enough to have parents had protection from the world of experience.

Though the orphan child, the child outside the home, is a favourite with Victorian writers, the inadequacy of the family is also presented through a discussion of the child inside the home. Even in the home, we find that the child lives in a far-from-ideal environment. In such novels as David Copperfield and Little Dorrit, for example, the parent does not live up to his parental duties and responsibilities, forcing the child to take care of itself and assume adult responsibilities at a young age. The central child figure in these works is, in a sense, also an orphan, experiencing the same sense of isolation and lack of care as that of the orphan child. The lack of parental care in the home then also robs the child of a normal, happy childhood.

In David Copperfield's account of his life we find a passage that is very representative of the moods and sentiments of the child without a childhood:

I was a posthumous child. My father's eye had closed upon the world six months when mine opened on it. There is something strange to me, even now, in the reflection that he never saw me; and something stranger yet in the shadowy remembrance that I have of my first childish associations with his white grave in the churchyard, and the indefinable compassion I used to feel for it lying out alone there in the dark night, when our little parlour was warm and bright with fire and candle, and the doors of our house were-- almost cruelly, it seemed to me sometimes-- bolted and locked against it. 

15 Charles Dickens, David Copperfield, ed. George H. Ford (Boston, 1958), p. 10. All quotations from this novel will be from the Riverside edition.
David's association of his birth with his father's death suggests that his awareness of life and death goes beyond a child's grasp of its surroundings in the protective state of childhood. With the rise of realism in the nineteenth-century novel and the development of the psychological novel, the child is depicted as having real fears, cares, and concerns.

In the novels that will be discussed here, *Oliver Twist*, *Little Dorrit*, and *Jane Eyre*, Dickens and Charlotte Brontë both focus on the child who has no childhood. These particular novels were chosen because each reveals a different aspect of the child robbed of childhood in two major novelists of the period. In both *Oliver Twist* and *Little Dorrit* the child is the central character. These two novels make an interesting comparison since one is a very early novel and the other, a late novel. *Oliver Twist* is Dickens's account of the orphan child, the child outside the home; *Little Dorrit* examines the child within the family. In these two novels we find a child who differs from the romantic child. Dickens's characterization of the female child and the male child cannot be overlooked in a discussion of the child without a childhood. Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, another orphan's tale, is the first female Bildungsroman. We find in this novel a new approach to the female child from a woman's point of view. All three novels deal with the child who is deprived of a childhood and all three examine the role that the family plays in the child's
life.

Dickens and Brontë, in many ways, challenge the romantic myth of childhood in these three novels. Yet, the obvious solution to the child in the world of experience and its lost childhood, the family, is inadequate. We find in these novels varying degrees of disenchantment with the myth of the family. The inadequacies and failures of the family are explored through the presentation of the child without a childhood. Brontë and Dickens expose the myth of the family in their novels as they question the myth of childhood.
CHAPTER II

OLIVER TWIST: THE ORPHAN'S SEARCH FOR FAMILY

There can be no doubt that Dickens is the great Victorian master in his portrayal of childhood. The great number of memorable children that populate Dickens's novels is evidence of his concern with the welfare of the children in his society and of his interest in the childhood phase of life. That the child serves an important function in Dickens's novels is evident from those novels in which the child is the central character: Oliver Twist, Little Dorrit, David Copperfield, and Great Expectations. In addition to the many major child characters, such as Oliver, David, and Pip, Dickens's numerous minor child-figures, which include Tiny Tim in A Christmas Carol and Jo, the crossing sweeper of Bleak House are equally unforgettable. The child in Dickens, whether a central character or only a minor character, is never incidental in the plot development, but serves as an integral part of Dickens's moral vision and his social criticism in each of his novels.

Dickens's evocation of childhood is inherently linked to his moral vision and to the social satire that he presents in each of his works. Being the social critic and reformer that he was, Dickens attacked various institutions in Victorian society and extended his concerns with utilitarianism,
industrialism, and education to include the effects of these aspects of Victorian society on children. Certainly part of Dickens's interest in children is related to his awareness of the mental and physical oppression of the Victorian child, particularly of those unfortunates, the orphan and destitute children. Often the child is directly involved with and affected by the various institutions that Dickens exposes, as in Oliver Twist, for example. In this early novel Dickens objects to the lack of state protection for the child. Dickens expresses, in Oliver Twist, his humanitarian concerns with the treatment of children in his society. Since the child is related to the issues that Dickens presents, it is understandable why the child becomes the centre of the novel. Yet, in several of Dickens's novels the child is only indirectly involved with the societal institutions that Dickens exposes. In these novels the child serves a symbolic function, representing man, untainted and uncorrupted. Dickens utilizes the romantic conception of the child to show how society and its institutions destroy the child physically and emotionally and interfere with man's original innocence and goodness. The effect social institutions have on the child are, in Dickens's novels, more pronounced than the effect of the same institutions on the adult. When the child is, as is so often the case, a victim of these institutions, Dickens's attack on Victorian society and its weaknesses becomes even stronger. The victimized child then is a source
of pathos in Dickens's novels and represents not only the actual child in the Victorian Period, but, on the symbolic level, Victorian man himself, who is exploited and, at times, even destroyed by his society.

While Dickens's social concerns and his humanitarian interests are important factors in Dickens's interest in the child, they are by no means the only reasons why Dickens is so fascinated with the child-figure. As we have seen earlier, the child is a new source of interest in the nineteenth-century when philosophical discussions on the nature of the child take place and when more attention is given to the child and his needs in the child-centred family of the Victorian Period. Dickens, following the tradition of the Romantics, discusses childhood experiences in his novels. Like the Romantics, Dickens also attempts to contribute to the metaphysical debates and discussions involving the significance of childhood in his works.

The child-figure in Dickens's novels, however, does not remain uniform throughout Dickens's career, but definitely changes from a sentimental approach to the child in the early novels, to a more realistic presentation of the child in the later novels.¹ This fact alone would indicate that Dickens's use of the child character is not limited to the child as "a vehicle for social commentary" as Peter Coveney suggests.²

¹ For a complete discussion on changing child-figure in Dickens's novels, see Angus Wilson, "Dickens on Children and Childhood" in Dickens 1970, ed. Michael Slater (London, 1970).

² Coveney, p. 92.
Even in the early novels where it is clear that the child as a character is subordinate to the social message that Dickens wishes to deliver, Dickens's presentation of childhood reflects certain nineteenth-century notions of the nature of childhood. We can say, therefore, that, with the exception of *Great Expectations* and *David Copperfield*, where Dickens aims at a more realistic portrayal of childhood, Dickens combines his social concerns with his philosophical interest in the period of childhood when he focuses on the child in his novels.

*Oliver Twist* is Dickens's first novel of social criticism and marks a change in Dickens's style and tone from the earlier *Pickwick Papers*, characterized by a light-hearted, comical effect. The humorous touches and comical episodes have by no means disappeared in *Oliver Twist*, but certainly the tone is much more serious, as Dickens presents a satiric portrait of the Poor Law, the workhouses, and the charitable organizations that claim to aid the abandoned and orphaned child. Since *Oliver Twist* is Dickens's first novel expressing his social concerns, it is not surprising that it should be here that we also find his first child character. In Dickens's novels of social realism, however, the child is not presented as a completely realistic character, nor as a psychological being, but as a symbolic character, having much in common with the romantic child. Even though the child is unreal, and Oliver is, the setting of the novel and the issues
that Dickens deals with are realistic. The ability to combine symbolism with realism is a distinct feature of the Dickens novel. In *Oliver Twist* Dickens fuses the realistic and the symbolic approach to childhood in his account of the orphan child in search of home and family.

Oliver is, according to Q.D. Leavis, "almost entirely an object used for satiric diatribe against the Poor Law".\(^3\) Leavis's comment is quite valid to a point. Oliver is certainly not the "real child" that David Copperfield is in Dickens's later novel, but serves a symbolic function in the novel.\(^4\) Oliver belongs to the class of Dickensian children who live in a restrictive social environment which threatens to corrupt the child. It is obvious in this novel that Dickens's major concern is to expose the injustices that orphan and illegitimate children suffered in the workhouses and at the hands of those in charge of such charitable organizations. On one level, therefore, Oliver is, as Coveney says, "a vehicle for social commentary". However, the influence of the romantic conception of childhood is quite strong in this early novel. Dickens fuses this symbolic level to the social level by combining the romantic conception of childhood with social realism, to show that the innocent child, when placed in a social setting, must try to avoid corruption and destruction. Thus, little Oliver, even though he has the qualities of the romantic child, is also a realistic figure.

\(^3\) Q.D. Leavis, "Oliver Twist, Jane Eyre and David Copperfield" in *Dickens the Novelist* (London, 1970), p. 108.

\(^4\) Ibid.
in terms of Dickens's discussion of the situation and the problems of the orphan child in Victorian England.

The first aspects of social realism and a realistic treatment of the orphan child are found in the circumstances of Oliver's birth. The reader's sense of pity is immediately aroused for the infant born in a place where his birth is viewed with such indifference:

...he was badged and ticketed, and fell into his place at once-- a parish child-- the orphan of the workhouse-- the humble, half-starved drudge-- to be cuffed and buffeted through the world-- despised by all, and pitied by none. 5

The fate and life of the illegitimate child who survives after its mother dies during childbirth in Oliver Twist is an accurate account of the indifferent and often cruel treatment that orphan children were subjected to in the workhouses that accommodated them. In the society of Victorian England which valued the family and emphasized the self-sufficient nature of the family, the orphan child would indeed find itself all alone, dependent on the type of institutions that Dickens exposes in Oliver Twist. In the workhouses, such as those that Dickens refers to, the child was not given proper care, but was given merely enough food and shelter to subsist. It was into such a workhouse that Oliver was born, struggling in a world that would prefer to have him die:

Oliver and Nature fought the point between them.

5 Charles Dickens, Oliver Twist, Everyman edition (London, 1970), p. 3. All quotations from this novel will be from this edition.
The result was, that after a few struggles, Oliver breathed, sneezed, and proceeded to advertise to the inmates of the workhouse the fact of a new burden having been imposed upon the parish, by setting up as loud a cry as could reasonably have been expected from a male infant who had not been possessed of that very useful appendage....

Oliver's birth in the workhouse, under the most unsanitary conditions with an incompetent surgeon and an inebriated midwife assisting, reveals the lack of concern for the health of the unwed mother and her illegitimate child. The attitudes of the attending doctor and the midwife towards Oliver and his mother are typical of Victorian attitudes towards the unmarried woman and her child. Both are considered a burden to society. At the very moment of birth, Oliver's life is in jeopardy, as he lies poised between life and death. Later Oliver's life is again at stake when he is placed in the workhouse where he is provided with only a meagre diet. Little Dick, another of the parish boys, is not so fortunate as Oliver, who eventually survives his workhouse experiences: Little Dick dies in the workhouse at a very tender age. Dickens's discussion of workhouse children and the physical hardships that they endure is not an exaggeration given the high mortality rates of lower-class children, children in the factories, and orphan children in workhouses, as a result of unsanitary working conditions, improper diet, and lack of adequate medical care in the nineteenth-century.

So much has been written about the exploitation of children in Victorian society that there is no question that what Dickens describes about workhouses and the treatment of orphan children in *Oliver Twist* is true to fact. There is, therefore, no need to elaborate here on the living and working conditions of the nineteenth-century orphan in Victorian England, the historical accuracy being so very obvious in the novel. Although *Oliver Twist* is a novel of social realism in which Dickens reflects the social conditions of England in his references to the great number of orphaned and abandoned children, the orphan child has a symbolic, as well as a realistic significance. Jan B. Gordon, discussing the significance of the orphan in Victorian literature, points out that although there were a large number of orphans in this period, historical data indicate that there were no greater number of orphan children in Victorian England than in the preceding age. The orphan child in Victorian literature reflects again the new concern with children in general in the nineteenth-century. This may partially account for the appearance of the orphan child in several of Dickens's novels. Dickens's concern for realism and social reform is, however, only a partial answer to his interest in the orphan. Furthermore, since the orphan's story

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is one that recurs in the Victorian novel and is not limited to the works of Dickens, we can conclude, as Gordon does, that the orphan in Victorian literature has also a general or metaphoric significance. 9

George H. Ford, in his introduction to David Copperfield, makes a very interesting comment on Dickens's use of the orphan child:

By representing the world as a place where normal family relationships are abnormal or non-existent, by giving us a sense that we are all, in effect, orphaned, Dickens achieves a consistent perspective from which to view the drives and desires of the child and man. What, in particular, does the orphaned person want? In a world where unpredictability seems to reign, he needs warm love and affection....

The orphan child then, as Ford explains, symbolizes nineteenth-century man who lives in a rapidly changing world and feels isolated and alienated from his society. That entire sense of disconnectedness, discontinuity, and instability, that so pervades the Victorian Period, is expressed in literature through the figure of the orphan child who wanders searching for love and a permanent home. 11 At this point, it is necessary to turn to the novel to examine more closely the symbolic significance of the orphan child in Oliver Twist.

In addition to its realistic value, the birth scene in

9 Gordon, p. 98.
the first chapter of Oliver Twist has also a metaphoric significance, which is directly related to the image of the orphan child. Dickens's description of the infant's first cry suggests the physical struggle involved in the infant's entry into the world. Childbirth, as Dickens describes it, is associated with pain and discomfort for the infant since it must fight against death at the very moment of birth. The physical life-and-death struggle at birth continues throughout the child's life, often as an emotional as well as a physical struggle. This is seen in the history of Oliver Twist who attempts to escape from physical and emotional harm in a society where evil pervades. After birth, the infant, separated from its mother, enters the hostile world. Since the infant no longer remains in the sheltered womb, it is now exposed to both physical and moral dangers. Symbolically, birth, a separation from the mother, represents the fall from innocence to experience. In later childhood, innocence can be retained only if the child resists the forces of evil that he meets with. The entire responsibility rests on the child since it has no mother, as an orphan child, to shield it from harm.

In Oliver Twist, Dickens combines the physical dangers and the moral dangers that the orphan child faces in the world of experience. Throughout the novel Dickens refers to the physical threats to Oliver's life to suggest also the threat of his loss of innocence. The relation between physical
and moral perils is evident in Oliver's association with the underworld of Fagin. Although Fagin takes the child in and provides him with food and shelter, Oliver's alliance with Fagin and his boys jeopardizes his innocence, almost making him a child criminal like the other boys in Fagin's gang. Only when Oliver is rescued from the evil influence of Fagin and removed from the underworld environment by Brownlow, is the threat of moral corruption also removed. From this point on, however, Fagin and Monks become a physical threat to Oliver's life when they pursue him and attempt to take his life. In the birth scene, Dickens first draws the parallel between the newborn infant's vulnerability to physical dangers at birth and the child's vulnerability to evil during his childhood.

Oliver Twist is born into a world of experience where he must encounter the forces of society. Although Oliver has many of the characteristics of the romantic child, he differs from the true romantic child who is allowed to remain pure and innocent outside the realm of society. Precisely what type of child inherits the world of experience needs further clarification here, since it will help us to understand the essential differences between the romantic child and the Victorian child. Peter Coveney in his work: The Image of Childhood suggests that there is a continuity between the romantic child and the Victorian child. Yet, although Dickens

12 Coveney, p. 161.
utilized the romantic conception of childhood, the child, even in his early novels, differs from the romantic child. The difference lies not so much in the presentation of childhood, as in the type of world that the Victorian child inherits. Living in the world of experience, the Victorian child comes into contact with its social environment. Thus, it no longer lives in the blissful state of childhood as the romantic child does.\textsuperscript{13} For this reason the innocence of the child in the Victorian novel is vulnerable to the forces of experience. For the Romantics, on the other hand, the pressures of society and experience do not threaten to destroy the child's purity, nor do they endanger the child's life since the childhood phase of life represents a temporary, yet protected stage in man's life when he is shielded from evil and harm. As the child matures and enters adulthood, it loses its original innocence, not because of its contact with the social world, but in the maturation process itself. However, the children deprived of a childhood, in the Victorian novel, are denied this sheltered state, either because they are orphans, as Oliver Twist is, or because they live with irresponsible parents or guardians as we shall see when we examine Little Dorrit.

For Oliver, passivity and escape into the natural world, two characteristics associated with the romantic child, are

\textsuperscript{13} For a discussion of the romantic child's world and the Victorian child's world see Wilson, p. 201.
not the answers to his survival. Since Oliver has neither a family nor a normal childhood, he must, on his own, protect himself. Although Oliver is considered by many critics to be a totally passive child, in several episodes in the novel, Oliver takes action against those who threaten him. We have only to recall that memorable scene in which Oliver, prompted by the boys in the workhouse and by his own hunger, approaches Bumble and asks for more gruel. This incident reveals his courage and aggressiveness. Thus, unlike the child in romantic poetry, Oliver, though innocent, cannot be considered totally passive. This distinguishes Oliver from the Blakean children in Songs of Experience, who accept their fate in life and who do not fight against the injustices that they suffer. The aggressive nature of Oliver and his ability to fight back are continually developed in the novel. For example, when Noah Claypole constantly taunts him, Oliver again takes action to protect himself:

Crimson with fury, Oliver started up, overthrew the chair and table; seized Noah by the throat; shook him, and in the violence of his rage, till his teeth chattered in his head; and collecting his whole force into one heavy blow felled him to the ground.

(p.43)

Dickens's account of this particular incident with Noah Claypole indicates that Dickens is not dealing with a passive, romantic child who embodies original innocence.

Even as a child Oliver has characteristics of anger, rage, and violence, which are generally associated with the adult world. We can see now that the basic distinction between the romantic and the Victorian child lies here: the romantic child is able to retain its virtues during the period of childhood, living in a world separate from the world of experience; the Victorian child, on the other hand, living in the world of experience, inherits elements of the adult world. This is not to say that Oliver is a corrupted child, however, because, Oliver, although he encounters evil, successfully avoids being taken in by evil. Dickens here is not so much questioning the child's innocence as he is presenting a rather realistic account of the orphan child's world of experience. The child who survives in this type of world is the child who asserts its will to live as Oliver does; the child who does not fight back, on the other hand, dies an early death, becoming a martyr-figure as Little Dick becomes in *Oliver Twist*. The death-scene of Little Dick clearly reveals the passive child's inability to survive in the world of experience. Only through death can this child be relieved of the physical and emotional pain that it suffers:

"...I know the doctor must be right, Oliver, because I dream so much of Heaven, and Angels, and kind faces that I never see when I am awake...."

(p.51)

Little Dick exemplifies Dickens's sentimental approach
to childhood. The death-scene of the child in Oliver Twist is one of many such scenes in Dickens's novels. Other examples of the dying, passive child include Jo in Bleak House, Smike in Nicholas Nickleby, and Little Nell in The Old Curiosity Shop. They are all children who are destroyed by society and are, in Angus Wilson's words, Dickens's "early demonstrations of the sacrifice of young lives to faulty systems of upbringing, or of social cruelty and neglect". 15

The victimized child, such as Little Dick, is certainly a source of pathos. Yet, Little Dick's function in the novel entails much more than this. Dick's relation to the other child characters in the novel, the Artful Dodger and Oliver himself, is an important point to consider. All three children are orphaned or abandoned children who live in the world of experience. Both Oliver and Little Dick are innocent children who retain their innocence. In the case of Oliver, however, it is only through an active role that he is able to do so. The Artful Dodger, like Oliver and Dick, a child without a family and home, represents the child who has been corrupted. 16 In his portrayal of the child criminal, Dickens deviates from the romantic conception of childhood, as well as from his usual idealization of the child,

15 Wilson, p. 197.

even in this early novel. The study of the child criminal in Oliver Twist is a realistic and sensitive one showing the child as vulnerable to the evil forces in society and turning to a life of crime out of necessity for its own survival. Thus, we find in Oliver Twist, the world of experience threatening the child's innocence. In the three child characters, Oliver, Dick and the Artful Dodger, we are presented with the three responses of the child in its social environment: the passive child who dies and retains its innocence; the active child who fights against the forces of experience and also retains its purity; and the child who is totally corrupted by its social environment.

It is no coincidence that in the novel all three major child characters, Oliver, Little Dick, and the Artful Dodger, are children who have no parents since, on the symbolic level, the orphan is the prototype for the child in the world of experience. In particular, it is the absence of the mother-figure, to love and guide the child, that casts it prematurely into the world of experience. The motherless child is more vulnerable to physical and moral dangers than the child who is protected by a home and family. In Oliver Twist the mother-figure is important. Even though he has no actual recollections of his mother, Oliver is very preoccupied with thoughts of his mother and continually sees visions of his mother's grave. The following passage illustrates Oliver's
need to feel his mother's presence:

Oliver often wandered here; and thinking of the wretched grave in which his mother lay, would sometimes sit down and sob unseen; but when he raised his eyes to the deep sky overhead, he would cease to think of her as lying in the ground, and would weep for her, sadly, but without pain.

(p.242)

On the realistic level, the mother-figure is associated with love and protection, satisfying both the physical and emotional needs necessary for the child's survival. Joseph Gold in his study of the novel, comments on the mother-image and its connection with Oliver's survival:

The single figure who embodies these provisions [food and love] for the child is...the mother, and we would expect the orphaned Oliver, in his desperate need to satisfy both kinds of hunger, to be intensely conscious of the absence of and the need for a mother. The mother and the child form the primal image of the human community. The novel shows that the Progress is marked at every stage by a preoccupation with food and some suggestion of parental relationships. 17

The mother-figure and her association with the security and the protection that the child is given in a normal family environment foreshadows Dickens's idealization of the mother-figure in his later novel, Little Dorrit. Since the focus in Oliver Twist is on the orphan, rather than the mother-figure, a fuller discussion of the woman-figure will be more useful when we examine Little Dorrit. There is, however,

17 Gold, p. 32.
a special symbolic meaning to the mother-figure, that is very close to the orphan child in both *Oliver Twist* and *David Copperfield* which deserves careful consideration here. The separation of mother and child in both novels is the major event in the child's life which separates it from the child with a normal childhood.

The image of the mother's grave in *Oliver Twist* resembles the vision that David Copperfield has after his mother's death. David imagines himself to be the dead infant in his mother's arms:

The mother who lay in the grave, was the mother of my infancy; the little creature in her arms, was myself, as I had once been, hushed forever on her bosom.

(p. 109)

His mother's death marks the end of his childhood and his entry into a new state of existence, that of the orphan child. The child's separation from the mother, first, in the birth process when the child leaves the mother's womb and next, in the physical separation of mother and child brought about by the mother's premature death, in both *Oliver Twist* and *David Copperfield*, is central to the concept of the child without a childhood. The separation of mother and child suggests the child's passage into a stage of life that is no longer protective, but one that thrusts the child into the adult world without the natural transition from childhood to adulthood. Both David and Oliver are children whose childhood has been disrupted because of the death of their mothers. There is a
rather striking parallel in the two novels between Oliver's first cry at the moment of birth and the older child's cry in David Copperfield. After David learns of his mother's death, he recalls: "I had already broken into a desolate cry, and felt an orphan in the wide world" (p.101). The significance of the mother's death in the child's life now becomes quite clear. In both novels, the loss of the mother emphasizes the orphan's world of experience and its lost childhood.

J. Hillis Miller has stated that Oliver's progression in the novel is marked by his attempts to find a place in society and to discover his own identity. This is certainly evident in the central mystery of the novel, the secret of Oliver's family, which is eventually solved. The development of the plot moves towards this end: the discovery of who Oliver's mother really is and the placement of Oliver in a permanent home. Oliver's sense of identity is associated basically with the mother-figure. Gold points this out in his reference to the incident with Noah Claypole and suggests that Oliver strikes back because Noah has insulted his mother, and thus, has threatened Oliver's identity. Gold writes:

"Who is my mother?" is no step at all from "Who am I?" Oliver fights Noah Claypole, and will fight all the world if necessary, out of a desperate need to preserve all he has, an image of his mother, and thus a sense of origin and his very existence. 19

19 Gold, p. 30.
However, Oliver's identity is not firmly established until he is taken into the Brownlow home. The image that Oliver has of his mother cannot give the child a true sense of identity that an actual mother and home could. On both a symbolic and a realistic level, the orphan child is an outcast who has no home and parents and thus, no place in society and no identity. The orphan's search for identity is a theme that is not unique to Dickens, but one that reappears in the Victorian novel, another manifestation of the nineteenth-century quest for self.

Although the theme of the quest for identity is evident in Oliver Twist, there is in the search for the mother-figure and a family a theme that is more closely related to the orphan child. Oliver is, after all, not a child with a normal childhood and Oliver Twist is not a Bildungsroman; therefore, we do not find in Oliver the usual stages of development in one's discovery of self. It is not so much a sense of identity that the orphan child seeks, as it is a childhood. In short, Oliver's search for a home, for love, and for the mother that he never knew, are all attempts to recover his lost childhood. While the search for self is a universal quest, the search for childhood is a problem reserved only for the orphan child. A statement by Gøfd, suggesting Dickens's inversion of the middle-class norm of domestic bliss in Oliver Twist, also illustrates the inversion
of the normal pattern of development for the orphan child:

Most people in the comfortable middle-class world from which Dickens departs are born, discover their mother and then seek independence. Oliver must 'grow down' and discover the childhood and the love that he is denied. 20

Love, protection, security, the physical and emotional needs are all aspects of a normal childhood that are lacking in Oliver's life. The search for these takes place in the various households and institutions that take Oliver in. In each episode of the novel, Oliver is found searching for a home where he can find warmth and love. Mrs. Mann, Mr. Sowerberry, Mrs. Bedwin, and even Fagin represent in Gold's words, "surrogate parents" 21 who take Oliver in and offer him a home where he is given food and shelter for survival. While these "surrogate parents" provide him with the necessities of life, the element of love is still missing in these homes. In fact, Oliver is usually exploited by these characters who use him for their own gain. It is not until Oliver meets Rose and Mrs. Maylie that he is shown and given love. In many ways, Rose is, for Oliver, the mother that he never knew and we see here again how love and protection are directly associated with the mother-figure. Oliver's substitute homes and families, in the workhouse, in the Sowerberry household, and in Fagin's 'den', are inadequate in meeting the needs of the

20 Gold, p. 33.
21 Ibid., p. 47.
child. The child is considered a burden and is either mistreated or treated with indifference in these various homes. Although Oliver's association with Fagin almost corrupts him and teaches him the art of stealing, there is a sense of familial attachment and loyalty in Fagin's family that is lacking in the other homes where Oliver was placed. Until Brownlow and the Maylies rescue Oliver from the negative influence of this environment, Fagin and his boys, in a sense, offer Oliver a better home than that of the impersonal workhouse or Sowerberry's residence where he is unwelcome and cruelly treated.

In *Oliver Twist* the child wanders alone searching for a home, at last finding refuge and comfort in the Brownlow household. Dickens, at this stage in his career, sees the solution for the homeless, unloved orphan and the solution to the uncertainties of the nineteenth-century world in the family. The resolution of *Oliver Twist* reflects the great respect and reverence that the Victorians had for the family and suggests that Dickens himself finds in the home and family relationships, solidarity and an answer to the problems of an industrialized England. In a passage from "Sketches of Young Couples" Dickens expresses his faith in the family:

> Before marriage and afterwards, let them with their young couples learn to centre all their hopes for real and lasting happiness in their fireside, let them cherish the faith that in home, and all the English virtues which the home engenders, lies the only true source of domestic felicity; let them believe that
round the household gods, contentment and tranquility cluster in their gentlest and most graceful forms; and that many weary hunters of happiness through the noisy world, have learnt this truth too late, and found a cheerful spirit and quiet mind only at home at last. 22

The world of the Maylies and Brownlow is representative of the middle-class ideal of the family. Both of these homes offer Oliver protection from the evil forces in the outside world and the childhood that he never had. In early novels, such as *Oliver Twist*, Dickens still has some faith in the strength of the family, but in his later novels, as we shall see when we examine *Little Dorrit*, Dickens exposes the Victorian myth of the family. In these novels, the family falls short of its ideal as Dickens focuses on irresponsible parents and the children who are exploited by their guardians.

Even the resolution of *Oliver Twist*, however, where the child is sheltered from the corrupt world in the country retreat is insufficient. Concerning this rather fragile resolution, J. Hillis Miller writes:

> The ending of *Oliver Twist* is a resolution of Dickens's single great theme, the search for status and identity, but it is based on self-deception and on an unwillingness to face fully his apprehension of the world. It is a resolution which will not satisfy him for long. 23

Miller is referring here specifically to the retreat into the country, the typical conclusion of Dickens's early novels,


23 Miller, p. 84.
but one that does not appear in the later works. John Lucas in _The Melancholy Man_ discusses the essential difference between the endings of the early and the late novels: in the early novels, Dickens's answer to the evil and corruption of the city is a retreat into the natural world; in the later novels, however, a form of retreat is no longer possible.\(^{24}\) Though the solution of _Oliver Twist_ seems, at first, to be acceptable to Dickens, there is some indication in the novel that the resolution is not totally satisfactory. We find, for instance, in the novel a very strong suggestion of Dickens's ambivalence towards the natural world. Since the natural world is combined with the home in the conclusion of the novel, there is also a suggestion of an ambivalence towards the home. To fully see this early ambivalence, it is necessary to turn to Dickens's view of the natural world in _Oliver Twist_.

The pastoral world, a temporary refuge for Oliver during his flight from Monks, is linked to Dickens's view of the protective nature of the home and family. It is in the natural world that Oliver is comforted and feels his mother's presence. The world of nature, however, does not give the child sufficient protection from the physical and emotional dangers that he faces in the world of experience since we find that the criminals, Fagin and Monks, intrude into the country and disturb the peace that Oliver momentarily finds

there. The only sanctuary that Oliver finds from the exploitative world is in the homes of Brownlow and the Maylies who offer Oliver a home that is removed from the city. Interestingly enough, the middle-class home in Oliver Twist is the country home, which, like all Victorian homes, is a refuge from the harshness of the city. J. Hillis Miller, in his study of Dickens's novels, discusses the connection between the natural world and the middle-class country retreat:

The country world combines the freedom Oliver had when he lay dying in the open with the enclosedness of the claustral interiors to produce a protected enclosure which is yet open to the outside and in direct contact with it. It is a paradise not of complete freedom, but of a cosy security which looks out upon openness and enjoys it from the outside. 25

The Maylie country home is an ideal setting where Oliver is, in Miller's words, "securely enclosed in a refuge which is yet open to the outside, in direct contact with the outside air and commanding an extensive view into the distance". 26

The purpose of the Victorian family is identical to the purpose of the country home to which the characters in Dickens's early novels retire: the family and the country home protect the child from physical and moral dangers, yet still allow him to have contact with the outside world. Although Miller contends that this solution, the retreat into the country home, is unrealistic and overly optimistic, in terms of the

25 Miller, p. 71.
26 Ibid., p. 72.
Victorian ideal of the family, this solution is perfectly acceptable.

The natural world alone, however, without a home or family environment that Brownlow and the Maylies provide, is not a protective element in the child's life. Lucas describes the type of pastoral that we find in the novel, a natural world that is significantly different from the benign world of nature in romantic poetry:

But what is the free world? Clearly it isn't the one Rousseau envisaged, for although it takes in the natural life it has become very much associated with middle-class values; the 'free' world is the world of the Maylies, of money that can buy a rural retreat far from the corruptions which even so come to threaten it. 27

As Lucas points out, the middle-class country home is also exposed to dangers and cannot entirely keep out elements of the corrupted world. Even when Oliver is within the Maylie home, he is still within the reach of Fagin and Monks. In fact, Oliver's experiences with death do not end when he is taken into the Maylie home, but continue even in the pastoral world where Oliver is reminded of his mother's death. Angus Wilson finds that Oliver's goodness and innocence is associated with death since several passages in the novel refer to the tranquil sleep, almost synonymous with a death-like state, that Oliver falls into, such as in the following passage:

27 Lucas, pp. 36-37.

28 Wilson, p. 198.
...the boy was lying, fast asleep...so pale with anxiety...that he looked like death; not in the guise it wears when life has just departed; when a young and gentle spirit has, but an instant, fled to Heaven, and the gross air of the world has not had time to breathe upon the changing dust it hallowed.

(p. 147)

The peaceful sleep that overcomes Oliver always occurs in the countryside setting. Thoughts of death often interrupt the calmness that he finds there, as we see in the following passage:

There was such peace and beauty in the scene...so much life and joyousness in all; that, when the boy raised his aching eyes, and looked about, the thought instinctively occurred to him, that this was not a time of death; that Rose could surely never die when humbler things were all so glad and gay...

A knell from the church-bell broke harshly on these youthful thoughts. Another! Again! It was tolling for the funeral service. A group of humble mourners entered the gate: wearing the white favours; for the corpse was young.

(pp. 251-52)

In this passage the tranquility of the natural world is broken when Oliver's thoughts turn to the seriously-ill Rose. Oliver's attempts to escape from harm by retreating into the pastoral world clearly reveal that the consolation of the natural world is only limited. The reality of death and physical and moral dangers always intrude whenever Oliver retreats into the natural world, either in actuality or in his imagination.

Wilson's suggestion that death and its close association
with the natural world reveals the child's purity is inadequate in explaining the precise significance of the nature passages. The Wordsworthian nature passages seem very romantic on the surface, but there is a very strong indication that Dickens does deviate from the romantic belief in the innocent child and its pastoral environment. The very association of death with the natural world suggests a negative view of the child who seeks refuge in nature. J. Hillis Miller's insight into the nature passages is much more precise than Wilson's. Miller contends that the association between death and the natural world suggests that the state of moral goodness can only be reached through death. The natural world, therefore, instead of preserving the child's innocence, draws it toward death. It is quite apparent here that Dickens alters the romantic conception of nature. In *Martin Chuzzlewit*, for example, the natural world is not necessarily a beneficent one. The natural world of America is a horror and the murder in the novel takes place in the country. Clearly Dickens views the country with some distrust. In *Oliver Twist* we find that the child is removed from the rural world, and we can say therefore, that, for Dickens the answer to the child's life and the preservation of its innocence, as well as a form of protection, lies not in the

29 Miller, p. 79.

natural world, as is the case in romantic poetry, but in the family.

For the orphan child the search for its lost childhood and for protection in the world of experience is over when the child has found a home, as Oliver has. While the solution to the problem of the orphan child lies in the family, there is a very strong indication in the novel that perhaps the family is not the strong institution, "the rock in the midst of rushing streams", of the Victorian myth. We see in the novel that in order for the family to be any sort of protective element in the child's life, the home is removed to the country; only in the country world, distant from the city and from society, can the family and home function effectively. Even then elements of the corrupted world still intrude. There is then, even in *Oliver Twist*, a realization that the family cannot completely cope with the pressures of society and cannot provide a true retreat from the city. *Oliver Twist* is Dickens's first novel where he suggests implicitly the unrealistic expectations of the Victorian family. In the later novels, such as *Little Dorrit*, Dickens discusses quite openly the failures of the Victorian family.
CHAPTER III

LITTLE DORRIT: THE FAMILY IN DISARRAY

Little Dorrit, one of Dickens's dark novels, typifies the very serious tone, the bleak setting, and the more pessimistic attitude of the later Dickens. It is in the dark novels, Hard Times, Bleak House, Little Dorrit, and Our Mutual Friend, that Dickens attacks several aspects of society and reveals carefully the harm that societal institutions do to the individual in each level of society. In short, Dickens's attack in these later novels includes a much more generalized range of issues than in the earlier works as Dickens probes deeper into the inadequacies of his society. While at one level the issues and references (e.g., to the Marshalsea in Little Dorrit and the Chancery in Bleak House) are topical, there is a certain degree of universality to these Victorian institutions and the mechanisms of Victorian society. In no novel is this more clear than in Little Dorrit, where the central image of the prison suggests the restrictions that society places on man in each level of society. The prison image is not limited to the actual prison, the Marshalsea, but extends to include all classes of society and all characters in the novel who are confined by society. Dickens's concept of society in Little Dorrit is expressed very simply in an ironic comment by Mrs. Merdle:

"but we are not in a natural state, much to be
lamented, no doubt...but so it is. Society suppresses and dominates us--Bird, be quiet!" 1

Mrs. Merdle's statement on the loss of the natural state is particularly central to the novel. Little Dorrit does, in fact, deal with the operation of society, whether it be actual institutions, such as the Marshalsea Prison or individual characters, such as Mrs. Merdle, Mr. Casby, and Mrs. General. The irony of Mrs. Merdle's statement becomes apparent when, as she makes this comment, she dominates and suppresses the pet parrot that is confined within its own cage. The image of the caged parrot is an effective and appropriate symbol for man imprisoned within his own society, as Mrs. Merdle herself is. The individual's lack of freedom takes many forms in the novel: social class, values and mannerisms, and physical and emotional incarceration. Each of the characters represent one of these forms of suppression. In Little Dorrit Dickens explores societal pressures and effect of these pressures on the individual.

Dickens, however, does not limit his discussion to the individual and society. In many of his novels Dickens is interested in the interaction of individuals in the various levels of the social scale. While this is also true of Little Dorrit, Dickens's particular interest here is the family and the influence of society on the family group. Dickens, in this novel, is extremely aware of the difficulty of maintaining

adequate family relationships in society. In Oliver Twist, as we have already seen, a suitable home for Oliver was found only in the country, away from the city. Society and the city, in Little Dorrit, play much larger roles in shaping familial relationships. Thus, we find parent-child relationships that are distorted and entirely inadequate.

In contrast to the myth of the Victorian family which views the family as an institution that can and does remain separate from the pressures of the outside world, in Little Dorrit the family cannot withstand the forces of society which prevent wholesome relationships from developing. The inadequacy of the family in meeting the child's needs is presented in the novel through Dickens's discussion of parents who are, in one way or another, inept parents, who are unable to provide a happy home life for their children.

The parent-child relationships in the novel fall roughly into two categories: the perverted parent-child relationships and the reversed parent-child roles. In the former category, the child, although it is not directly mistreated by its parents, lives in an environment that prevents it from having a happy childhood and that is later damaging to its adult life. Both the Clennam family and the Meagles family are examples of homes where parent-child relationships have been distorted. In the former, Mrs. Clennam's strict Calvinistic upbringing of her son, Arthur, causes him much unhappiness and results in his inability to live an adequate
emotional life in adulthood; in the latter, the Meagles's indulgence in the upbringing of their daughter Pet spoils her as a child and leads to a most disastrous marriage to Gowan when she becomes a young woman. Likewise, the Meagles's treatment of Tattycoram, the orphan child that they adopt, is an ironic reflection on their attitudes towards their natural child. Both children are, in effect, objects for amusement, and any material gifts or emotional support given to them by their parents are given only for the satisfaction and the pleasure of the Meagles rather than for the benefit of the child. Both Mrs. Clennam and Mr. Meagles are parents who do not consider the needs of the child and, as a result, cannot provide a good home life for their children.

The reversed parent-child roles, a more extreme case of inadequate parent-child relationships, occurs in the Dorrit family where the parent, in this case, William Dorrit, is a completely irresponsible parent, unable to care for his family. Here, the child, Little Dorrit, acts as parent and manages the family. Since the reversal of roles between parents and children occurs in many of Dickens's novels and is of central importance in Little Dorrit it deserves fuller discussion here.

Arthur A. Adrian in his article, "Dickens and Inverted Parenthood", discusses Dickens's preoccupation with abnormal parent-child relationships in his novels:

Time and time again his sternest censure is aimed at parents who fail to assume their responsibilities, who fail to exert a healthy influence over
their children. Such parents he variously delineates as parasitical, helpless, self-indulgent, materialistic— all symptomatic of a sick society. Among the multitude of parent-child portraits in the novels one pattern—that in which parent and child exchange places—recurs so constantly as to be nothing less than an obsession. 2

In as early a novel as *David Copperfield* a parent-child re-reversal appears. David, though still a child, must go out into the world to earn a living. It is his mother who is referred to as a baby and must be protected by her own son. In *Bleak House* we find another child-like adult, Mr. Skimpole, who is naive about all matters, especially financial matters, and thus, avoids his family responsibilities.

Although Dickens's concern with unnatural familial relationships may be partly autobiographical, 3 the reversed parent-child roles are especially curious features of Dickens's novels. The selfish, irresponsible parents in the novels are realistic portraits of the types of guardians that Dickens sees in his own society. The parent-child reversals, however, have a symbolic, rather than a realistic significance. In *Little Dorrit* the parent-child reversal is one of many reversals in the novel. 4 The world that Dickens depicts in *Little Dorrit*

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3 Dickens's childhood experiences in Warren's blacking factory and his father's imprisonment in a debtor's prison may account, at least partially, for Dickens's description of inadequate family relationships in his novels. See Adrian, p. 7. Also see Wilson, pp. 202-203.

is a world that has been turned upside down. When Amy Dorrit leaves the Marshalsea Prison, her home, and ventures into the city, she enters a world of confusion and chaos outside the prison walls:

At last they came to a maze of dust, where a quantity of people were tumbling over one another, and where there was such a confusion of unaccountable shapes of beams, bulkheads, brick walls, ropes and rollers, and such a mixture of gaslight and daylight that they seemed to have got on the wrong side of the pattern of the universe.

(pp. 225-26)

Clearly the world in Little Dorrit is a disordered one. The society in disarray is suggested in Dickens's frequent descriptions of the maze-like city in the novel. We can turn again to Mrs. Merdle's parrot whose upside-down posture symbolizes man's place in such a society:

...there was a parrot on the outside of a golden cage holding on by its beak with its scaly legs in the air, and putting itself into many strange upside-down postures.

(p. 229)

In this type of "world in reverse" the child and parent reverse roles, the child fulfilling parental duties and the parent assuming a child-like nature, dependent on his child, financially and emotionally. The reversed parent-child roles then, reflect the loss of order within society.

Several critics conclude, as Adrian does, that the distorted relationships within the family structure in Little Dorrit reflect the unnatural relationships within the social

5 Stang, p. 140.
structure. Adrian writes:

On a larger scale these inversions function as unifying metaphors. Just as family after family is portrayed with the natural guardians assuming no control, so Victorian England is to be viewed as one vast family with incompetent and indifferent leadership.

Like William Dorrit who fails to live up to his parental responsibilities, the leaders in society also ignore their responsibilities; the neglected child and the inept parent correspond to the victimized citizen and the incompetent leader of society. Dickens is drawing a parallel between the state and the family. He is using the family and the parent-child relationships as metaphors for man and his society, yet he is also examining the family per se in a growing disillusionment with the Victorian myth of the family. In Little Dorrit, as well as in several other novels, the distorted family relationships suggest that Dickens was attempting to expose the myth of the family and to reveal the areas in which the family falls short of its ideal.

In idealistic Victorian terms the family is the solution to the chaos of the city. However, in Little Dorrit, this is clearly not the solution, since parent-child relationships are as much affected by societal factors as other aspects of Victorian society. Society and the city, therefore, interfere


7 Adrian, p. 7.
with familial relationships and the security found within the home. There is in the novel no opportunity to escape into some sort of country retreat where the protective nature of the Victorian home can be preserved as there is in Oliver Twist. When the home can no longer function as a guiding force in the child's life, the carefree state of childhood also disappears and the child becomes, as Little Dorrit does, a child who really has no childhood. Not at all unlike Oliver Twist, Amy Dorrit is deprived of a normal family environment, in her case, however, because of her father's inability to run the household. It is partly Dorrit's imprisonment, but also his emotional immaturity that prevents him from being an adequate father. Ironically, Little Dorrit, though in actuality, twenty-two years of age, is still a child yet is able to take on the responsibilities of the adult. Without the care and love of Little Dorrit, who replaces her mother, the Dorrit household would certainly fall apart.

We find in Little Dorrit two ironies concerning the home and the child in the home: the family, though it is inadequate, as the Dorrit home is, still provides some sort of protection from the outside world; and secondly, the child, though it is deprived of a normal childhood in the home, is still able to retain its childhood purity within the family environment. Amy Dorrit, though she, like Oliver Twist, has never known a true childhood, can maintain her innocent nature when she takes on adult responsibilities at a very young
age. Little Dorrit, though not an actual orphan, has much in common with the orphan child since she also has no parental care and guidance. Though Little Dorrit cannot return to the childhood days that she missed, as Oliver does, the home and her role as child-mother allow her, to some extent, to recapture her childhood. The home and its association with childhood is quite clear in a letter that Little Dorrit sends Arthur Clennam after the Dorrit family has left the Marshalsea:

...I have always dreamed of myself as very young indeed! I am not very old, you may say. No, but that is not what I mean. I have always dreamed of myself as a child learning to do needlework. I have always dreamed of myself as back there, seeing faces in the yard little known, and which I should have thought I had quite forgotten....

(p. 526)

The home then, as we see here, is a very comforting place for Little Dorrit. Yet, it is only a sanctuary when she herself takes the role of mother. The significance of the child-mother will be discussed more fully later in this chapter.

The prison imagery looms large in the novel and, as we might expect, the various homes that Dickens describes are not free of the prison taint. The very association of the home with the prison would, in itself, suggest a negative view of the home. Certainly for Arthur Clennam, the Gothic nature of his mother's home, represents a confining place. When he returns to his mother's home after several years abroad, he recalls his childhood fears occasioned by his mother's
Calvinistic teaching:

There was the dreary Sunday of his childhood, when he sat with his hands before him, scared out of his senses by a horrible tract which commenced business with the poor child by asking him in its title, why he was going to Perdition? (p. 34)

Mrs. Clennam continues to be a very repressive figure for Arthur. His passivity and his inability to express his emotions in his adult life are the result of his upbringing in a loveless home.

The Meagles's home, though less obviously, is also a prison for both Tattycoram and Pet. Tattycoram, the adopted daughter of the Meagles, is particularly unhappy in their home, since she was brought there, more or less, against her wishes. Despite Mr. Meagles's claim to have helped the orphan child, Tattycoram is very bitter about the treatment she receives in their home. She is treated as a servant girl, rather than as a member of the family, and is expected to wait on the Meagles's own daughter. Yet, the Meagles's over-indulgence towards Pet is no more satisfactory than their treatment of Tattycoram. Both girls then are restricted in the Meagles household.

For Little Dorrit, her home is an actual prison. Ironically, on a superficial level, the home is a place where Little Dorrit can live a dutiful life and where she can find comfort. For William Dorrit, the prison home allows him freedom from the pressures of the outside world and from his responsibility
as a provider for his family. However, at a deeper level, the home is not completely liberating. Little Dorrit, like her father, desires to retreat from the outside world. The sacrifice that she makes for her family when she lives a completely unselfish life, cuts her off, in many ways, from the real world.

In all three families, the Dorrits, the Meagles, and the Clennams, we find a home that is too confining. Dickens views the family here as entirely too suppressive and over-dependent on its individual members. This is a very different view of the family than in Oliver Twist, where the child could enjoy sufficient freedom in the outside world within the protective enclosure of the home. In Little Dorrit, however, the home takes on prison-like qualities, restricting the child, rather than giving it freedom to grow.

In Oliver Twist the solution to the orphan child's dilemma is found in the home. However, in Little Dorrit, it is obvious that Dickens can no longer idealize the hearth and family relationships; these no longer provide an adequate solution to the problems encountered in the city. Yet, the conclusion of Little Dorrit does not leave us without some degree of hope, nor without any solution at all. At this point in his career Dickens turns to the woman-figure to provide love and guidance in the hostile world. The woman-figure, in the case of Little Dorrit, the child-mother, cannot be separated from the family since she is associated with the love and protection found within the Victorian home.
While Dickens's attitude toward the family changes in the darker novels, his heroine is nevertheless a heroine of the hearth. Alexander Welsh in *The City of Dickens* describes the Dickensian heroine whom he believes reaches mythic proportions:

Dickens has in mind an emblematic, classical figure; he has in mind his own conception of the child-mother; he joins Scott and George Eliot, Thackeray, and Trollope in quest of an unheroic heroine of the home; and outdoes them all by choosing the humiliated home...the debtor's prison.

The Dickensian heroine, it should be noted, is not necessarily an actual mother. In fact, she is usually not. She is, however, a mother-figure who fulfills the role of the woman in the home. One of the recurrent features of this woman-figure is that she is often a sister or daughter, as Little Dorrit is. This again reinforces the idea of familial love and loyalty since the role of mother, daughter, and sister are all interrelated.

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Ibid.

10 The sexlessness of the Victorian heroine is discussed by Welsh: "The timelessness of the female principle is important, and a factor that in itself opposes the finite experience of the city and legislates against the sexuality of heroines. Sexuality brings only the survival of the race, not their redemption...sexuality cannot bring personal survival to...the male individual who is at the centre of this myth. It implies, on the contrary his biological death. And it is against death...that the heroines of the hearth are finally enlisted" (*The City of Dickens* [Oxford, 1971], p. 157). The sexlessness of the Victorian heroine suggests the permanence and solidarity of familial love found in the home. Sexual love, on the other hand, is transient and finite.
Alexander Welsh, discussing this feature of the Dickensian heroine writes:

The point of transmuthing sweethearts and wives into sisters and daughters, or of living snugly with sisters and daughters, as well as wives, was not necessarily to substitute one for the other female relation, but ideally to enjoy both, or all three relations in the enclosure of the hearth. 11

The love and care provided by the woman in the home is evident in Little Dorrit’s relationship with both her father and with Arthur Clennam. After William Dorrit’s death, Amy returns to the Marshalsea where Arthur is imprisoned and cares for him as she had once cared for her own father. In presenting a parallel between William Dorrit’s imprisonment and Arthur Clennam’s imprisonment, Dickens suggests the transference of the daughter’s loyalty and love from her father to her husband. Little Dorrit, after she sees Arthur through his illness in the Marshalsea, becomes his wife. Since the female figure in Dickens’s is associated with the love, security, and comfort found in the Victorian home, she is never equated with sexuality, even in the husband-wife relationship. For Arthur Clennam, Little Dorrit becomes the loving mother whom he has never known in his childhood, rather than a woman to whom he is sexually attracted.

Another characteristic of this type of female figure is her ambiguous nature. Little Dorrit is both child and woman. In two specific instances in the novel, Little Dorrit

11 Welsh, p. 155.
is mistaken for a child. The first is Arthur Clennam's first meeting with Little Dorrit when he returns from abroad. The second instance occurs when Maggy and Amy, locked out of the Marshalsea, must spend the night outside the prison walls. The fallen woman who approaches them mistakes Amy for a child and Maggy, because of her size, for her mother. When she realizes her mistake, the woman turns away, fearing that she will destroy the child-mother's innocence. By presenting Little Dorrit as both a child and a woman, Dickens reveals, as J. Hillis Miller would say, the preservation of innocence in adulthood:

And this miraculous goodness is imagined as the persistence into adult life of the purity of childhood.... Little Dorrit derives all her power to help her father and others around her from her preservation of the simplicity, loving-kindness, and faithful preservance of childhood. 12

The ideal heroine, such as Little Dorrit, who embodies original innocence in a fallen world, is usually a static character.13 As we see in Little Dorrit, Amy never changes and never develops. This suggests Amy's passivity which is a Victorian "feminine" virtue and is also characteristic of static romantic innocence. Even in her physical appearance she remains a child, physically little, and having the facial features of a child. While Amy can retain the innocence of childhood in her adult life, Amy's father is not able to


do so. This is apparent in his death. When William Dorrit dies, Amy notices that her father returns to a "younger likeness of himself". Miller makes a very interesting comment on this particular scene:

To die is to return momentarily to the self one was as a child, and to reveal the fact that the innocence of childhood is the one stage of life which escapes the shadow of the prison...The tragedy of Little Dorrit...is the tragedy of childhood distorted, betrayed, forgotten, buried so far down that it no longer seems to exist. 14

It is only through death, therefore, that one can return to a state of innocence associated with childhood.

Although Little Dorrit and several other child characters in Dickens's novels are angelic figures, total innocence is usually reserved for the female child. In David Copperfield and Great Expectations, for example, the male child is far from perfect. Nina Auerbach in her essay, "Alice and Wonderland: A Curious Child", states that in Victorian literature boys often manifest evil impulses, but girls are usually angelic. 15 Auerbach writes:

...novels in which the boy is the central focus are usually novels of development in which the boy evolves out of his inherent violence, working out the brute in an ascent to higher spiritual planes. This tradition seems foreshadowed by the boy in Wordsworth's "Prelude", whose complexity undercuts the many Victorian sentimentalities about Wordsworth's children. 16

14 Miller, p. 239.
15 Auerbach, p. 45.
16 Ibid.
In *Oliver Twist* we have already seen that Oliver exhibits qualities that are, at times, far from innocent. The female child, on the other hand, such as Little Nell, Little Dorrit, and Florence Dombey, continues to be an innocent, passive child. This is not to say, however, that all of Dickens's female children are entirely perfect beings, for we do find several spoilt and selfish children, such as Fanny Dorrit and Estella in *Great Expectations*. The heroine of the Dickens novel, however, is always a redemptive figure, exemplifying "female caritas", who brings love and truth to everyone that she comes into contact with.

The change in Dickens's attitude toward the family from *Oliver Twist* to *Little Dorrit* is quite obvious. In *Little Dorrit*, the answer to the city and the pressures of society are no longer found in the home, since the home succumbs to those very pressures. Dickens, though he does not entirely dismiss the positive value of the family, sees it as failing to live up to its ideal, and thus, shifts his focus from the family as an entire unit to the woman in the home. Also in the latter part of his career, Dickens abandons the idea of the benevolent gentleman, the paternal figure associated with the home, as Brownlow is in *Oliver Twist*. In *Little Dorrit* the father-figures, William Dorrit, the Father of the Marshalsea, Casby, the Patriarch, and Mr. Meagles, are satiric portraits of the earlier benevolent gentlemen. This

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suggests further Dickens's disillusionment with the family. While the female figure in the home seems to satisfy Dickens as a solution to the problems of the city, the view of the woman and the home changes drastically when we examine *Jane Eyre*. Charlotte Brontë's novel examines the orphan child's childhood and the Victorian family in light of the nineteenth-century attitudes to and opportunities for women.
CHAPTER IV

JANE EYRE: AN EXPOSE OF THE FAMILY

Charlotte Brontë's novel marks a new approach to the Victorian woman in literature. Jane Eyre is a female Bildungsroman tracing the emotional, psychological and spiritual development of the little girl into an independent young woman. Like Oliver Twist, Jane Eyre also deals with the child outside the home, the orphan child, who searches for love and a place in society. However, Brontë's characterization of the female child and the Victorian woman reveals a very different attitude toward the woman, and in turn, toward the home and family than we find in Dickens's novels. The usual Victorian idealization of the woman and the sentimentality that surrounds the woman's function within the family circle in the domestic novels of the period are absent in Brontë's realistic portrayal of the woman.¹ Like the Dickens novels already examined, Brontë's novel follows the pattern of an increasing discontentment with the myth of the family in the Victorian novel. However, Jane Eyre is a remarkable achievement since it is a woman's viewpoint of the inadequacy of the family.

Brontë alters the usual Victorian idealization of the home when she exposes some of the areas in which the family

is a negative influence on one's life: the cruel treatment of the child within the home in the Gateshead passages; the loveless marriage which becomes a Gothic nightmare in the Thornfield chapters; and the Victorian over-emphasis on duty and service in the husband-wife relationship in the Moor House episodes. In addition to the realistic treatment of the nature of the home in Jane Eyre, Brontë's treatment of childhood is equally realistic and perceptive. Again, in her treatment of childhood, Brontë departs from the Victorian idealization of the child, particularly the female child, who is, in Dickens's novels, for example, a very innocent and angelic figure. Jane Eyre is, according to Peter Coveney, the first heroine in the Victorian novel to be given a psych chic whole. The treatment of the female child deserves further consideration here.

Jane is, according to Q.D. Leavis, "neither a typical nor a sentimentalized child and never used as a stalking horse". Brontë is very much concerned with the child as a realistic, psychological being, rather than as a "vehicle for social commentary", as Oliver Twist is, to some extent. Social issues, such as the treatment of orphans in Victorian England, do not play a very large in Brontë's realistic portrayal of the child. Bronte's interest in the psychological aspects of the child's life, its emotions and fears, has much 

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2 Coveney, p. 105.

3 Q.D. Leavis, p. 109.
in common with David Copperfield which is also an expression of the child's view of life. It is Charlotte Brontë's psychological interest in the child that prevents her heroine from being an idealized figure of love and forgiveness. Like Oliver, Jane is also capable of expressing her anger and her rage. In the family incidents at Gateshead, we find Jane striking back at her cousin John who provokes her:

He ran headlong at me; I felt him grasp my hair and my shoulder; he had closed with a desperate thing. I really saw him a tyrant; a murderer.... I don't very well know what I did with my hands, but he called me "rat! rat!" and bellowed out loud.  

Such aggressiveness would certainly not be found in the Dickensian female child. When the Dickensian female character has flaws, they usually take the form of selfishness or pride, but never maliciousness or evil. As we have already seen, traits of "Satanic impulses" appear only in the male child. While Jane is not an evil child, her temper and her aggressiveness, indicate the traits which separate her from the romantic child discussed earlier.

Whereas in Dickens's novels, social pressures transform the child and rob it of its childhood, in Brontë's novel, it is the child's own psychological make-up that

4 For a discussion of the similarities between David Copperfield and Jane Eyre, see Q.D. Leavis, p. 109.


6 Auerbach, p. 45.
distinguishes it from the romantic, carefree child of romantic literature. Bronte's psychological realism in her portrayal of childhood emotions reveals that the period of childhood is not a blissful state. Jane is, like the Dickensian children discussed in this paper, a child without a childhood. She, like Oliver and Little Dorrit, also lacks a normal family environment. In her case, however, the normal childhood fears become even more acute without the support and love of the family. In fact, as we see in the Gateshead passages, the home is the very source of the child's fears. In *Jane Eyre* then, Bronte develops two ideas: the inaccuracy of the view of childhood as a period of innocence and happiness; and the home as a contributing factor in the child's unhappiness. The orphan child in *Jane Eyre*, like Oliver Twist, also searches for a place in society. Bronte, however, reaches a very different conclusion in her discussion of the inadequacy of the home.

The first indication of the far-from-ideal familial relationships in *Jane Eyre* is the appearance of the orphan child. Although Jane is taken into her Aunt Reed's home, she remains an intruder there and is subjected to the belittling insults and the physical threats of the Reed children. The orphan child here, as in *Oliver Twist*, is a burden to society and to the guardians who are forced, out of a sense of duty, to take into their homes the parentless child. Jane's disruption of the closed family circle of Mrs. Reed and her
three children, is evident in the opening of the novel where Jane is excluded from the Reed's family activities:

The said Eliza, John, and Georgina were now clustered round their mama in the drawing-room: she lay reclined on a sofa by the fireside, and with her darlings about her (for the time neither quarrelling nor crying) looked perfectly happy. Me, she dispensed from joining the group; saying, "She regretted to be under the necessity of keeping me at a distance; but until she heard from Bessie, and could discover by her own observation that I was endeavouring in good earnest to acquire a more sociable and childlike disposition...she really must exclude me from privileges intended only for contented, happy, little children."

(p.1)

The illusory nature of the domestic bliss of the Reed family becomes quite clear in the succeeding chapters. The Reed children are not the happy, angelic figures that Mrs. Reed describes them as, nor is Mrs. Reed herself an ideal mother. Her over-indulgence in the upbringing of her own children and her cruelty towards Jane reveal her failure as a mother. Brontë's ironic use of this false domestic scene suggests the discrepancy between the ideal of the family and the family as it really is. The fate of the Reed family—Eliza and Georgina's discontentment and bitterness, and John's debauchery and eventual suicide—contrasts with the scene of domestic family bliss early in the novel. In Brontë's presentation of the Reed family, the reality behind the domestic scene is closely examined. The root of Jane's unhappiness at Gateshead is her exclusion from the family activities.

Since the Reed home offers no love and warmth and makes Jane
feel as an intruder, the home is clearly not the answer to Jane's loneliness.

Since Jane is considered an outsider in the Reed household, she is sent off to a school where she can no longer interfere with the Reed's familial activities. Ironically, Lowood, the institution where Jane is sent, proves to be a more desirable place for her than Gateshead. Despite the coldness, the hunger, and the impersonality of the educational system, Jane is much more content there. While Lowood is not a substitute for familial belonging, it is, at least, for Jane, a place where she is accepted and where she experiences some sense of belonging.

The institutional life at Lowood, however, is not sufficient in keeping Jane happy. When Jane first arrives at Lowood, she sees it as a welcome escape from the physical and emotional cruelty that she suffered at Gateshead. Contributing to the true happiness that Jane knows for the first time in her life, are the friendships that she forms at Lowood, particularly with Helen Burns and Miss Temple. Helen Burns is Jane's first close friend. Miss Temple provides the warmth and love in the home that Jane does not have. The role of a supportive, comforting mother-figure that Miss Temple represents is apparent in her relationship with both Jane and Helen Burns. Miss Temple's room and the fire that she has going when the girls visit with her, create a sense of love, separate from the rigidity and formality of the
daily activities at Lowood. Miss Temple cannot, however, become a mother to Jane, although her relationship with Jane is far more beneficial than Mrs. Reed's.

The contrast that Brontë develops between the home environment and the school environment is in keeping with her later discussion of Thornfield and Moor House. In both of these homes, as we shall see later in this chapter, Brontë uncovers elements that contradict the apparent harmony of the home on the surface. Brontë deliberately inverts the association of love and comfort with the home in the Lowood chapters. Lowood is, in some ways, a substitute for a home. Yet, we should be aware of how Lowood differs from the home. During her stay at Lowood, Jane does not really find familial relationships. Brontë stresses the education that Jane receives and the friendships that she forms while at Lowood. The satisfying love that Jane finds in her friendships at Lowood is not necessarily found in the family. These friendships replace the nurturing love found in the home and make Jane's life at Lowood a rather happy one.

Jane Eyre's real need is not so much to find a home, as it is for Oliver Twist, but to find love. Her strong need for love and companionship is best seen in her encounter with Brocklehurst. When Brocklehurst humiliates Jane in front of

the other students, what troubles Jane is not the unjust
punishment that follows, but her fear that she will lose
the respect of her fellow classmates. In one of her conver-
sations with Helen Burns, Jane explains her need to be loved:

"...if others don't love me, I would rather die
than live--I cannot bear to be solitary and hated,
Helen. Look here; to gain some real affection from
you, or Miss Temple, or any other whom I truly
love, I would willingly submit to have the bone
of my arm broken, or to let a bull toss me...."

(p. 80)

As an orphan Jane feels the need to love and be loved
more acutely than the child in the average home environment.
Along with this desire to be loved, is her fear that she
will remain a stranger and an intruder wherever she goes.
Brocklehurst's chastisement of Jane's conduct reawakens
those feelings of isolation which Jane experienced at Gates-
head. In a passage reminiscent of Mrs. Reed's criticism of
Jane, Brocklehurst makes the following public announcement
to the school girls:

"My dear children...this is a sad, melancholy
occasion; for it becomes my duty to warn you,
that this girl, who might be one of God's own
lambs, is a castaway: not a member of the true
flock, but evidently an interloper and an alien.
You must be on your guard against her; you must
shun her example...."

(p. 76)

Brocklehurst's cruel references to Jane as an "alien" and
"interloper" are very damaging to her. Jane's new friendships at Lowood are, in Jane's mind, still fragile. Brocklehurst's comments threaten to once again ostracize her. Although Jane's mind is put to rest when she is given a public apology for Brocklehurst's unfairness to her, Jane's security at Lowood and her friendships at Lowood do come to an end, as she had feared. Helen Burns's death 8 and Miss Temple's marriage bring the sense of love at Lowood to an end.

Lowood provides Jane with an adequate education and the opportunity of developing her talents, necessary to her independence as a young woman. When Jane has learned all that she can learn from Lowood, she seeks new experiences and desires a greater knowledge of the world. The limited experiences at Lowood are realized by Jane shortly after Miss Temple's departure. Jane realizes her dependency at Lowood and the need now to go out into the world and become an independent woman. Since Lowood cannot offer her any new experiences, Jane is resolved to find, in her own words, "a new servitude". By the time Jane leaves Lowood she no longer needs a home since she is already a grown woman. The various homes that Jane enters after she leaves Lowood, are not pseudo-homes, but places and environments where she can develop to her full potential.

8 The death of Helen Burns brings to mind the death of Little Dick in *Oliver Twist*. Like Little Dick, Helen is also a martyr-figure and represents the passive child who dies in the world of experience. Jane, on the other hand, like Oliver, is the aggressive child who fights against its environment, and thus survives.
Jane's growing restlessness at Lowood leads her to take a position as governess at Thornfield. The role of governess in *Jane Eyre* deserves careful consideration since it is inherently connected with Brontë's view of the family. We cannot proceed to examine this connection until some preliminary statements concerning the Victorian governess are made. In a very enlightening essay, "The Victorian Governess: Status Incongruence in Family and Society", M. Jeanne Peterson discusses the nature of the governess's employment within the home:

The loss of a governess's home, where she should have had not only maintenance, but protection, led her to seek a surrogate home in her employer's house. For both governess and employer this constituted what can be called a retreat to a traditional mode of relationship. The governess entered the economic market-place, but the employer tried, in his home, to preserve her gentlewoman's position, traditionally defined in terms of personal and familial relationships and not in the contracted terms of modern employment. 9

In short, the woman who found herself in a position where she must support herself could become a governess and work within the respectable woman's sphere, the home, and not violate the code of respectability which looked down on the woman employed outside the home. 10 Nevertheless, as Peterson so carefully points out, the role of governess is inconsistent and incongruent with the traditional role of the woman. 11 The alternative to marriage for the financially


10 See Peterson, 9-10.

11 Ibid., 10.
insecure woman was the position of governess where her employer provided the financial protection that the father and later, the husband would have provided. However, the fact was that the governess was employed, hence, in a very real sense, economically independent, and that the home in which she was employed was really not a "surrogate home" at all. The ambiguous status of the governess was at best an uneasy Victorian attempt to maintain the traditional role of the woman by encouraging the woman who was forced to provide for herself to accept a position as a governess. The occupation of governess was, in Victorian society, the only one available for the gentlewoman.

In Jane Eyre, Jane's attraction to private employment as a governess is not an indication of her desire to find a home. Brontë's emphasis on Jane's independence throughout the novel is central to the Thornfield chapters. Prior to Rochester's proposal, Jane does not consider Thornfield Hall a home. Jane forms no emotional attachments there that could compare with familial relationships. Although Jane expresses a fondness for Adèle, it is a teacher-student relationship, rather than a mother-child relationship. Mrs. Fairfax, the housekeeper, is a kind and good-natured woman, who provides Jane with the company of another adult, but no strong companionship develops between the two women. Rochester's indifference and aloofness to Jane's presence does not allow any friendship to develop between employer and employee. We can conclude then that Jane sees herself as an employee in
the household, rather than a family member. Even after Rochester's proposal, Jane is reluctant to give up the economic independence that she enjoyed in her profession and engage in domestic activities. She protests, for example, against Rochester's insistence on presenting her with a lavish wardrobe:

...the more he bought me, the more my cheek burned with a sense of annoyance and degradation..."It would, indeed, be a relief," I thought, "if I had ever so small an independency; I never can bear being dressed like a doll by Mr. Rochester, or sitting like a second Danae with the golden shower falling daily round me."

(p. 338)

The importance of a sense of independence and personal identity to Jane lead her to be somewhat hesitant in accepting Rochester's proposal. Critics often overlook this aspect of Jane's decision to leave Rochester. While Jane must decide whether or not she can live with Rochester as his mistress, her decision to leave is not based entirely on the fact that their relationship would be illicit and immoral. In a frequently quoted passage, Rochester tries to persuade Jane to live with him on the basis of the following argument:

"Is it better to drive a fellow-creature to despair than to transgress a mere human law—no man being injured by the breach? For you have neither relatives nor acquaintances whom you need fear to offend by living with me."

(p. 404)
After Rochester's superficially convincing argument, Jane replies: "I care for myself. The more solitary, the more friendless, the more unsustained I am, the more I will respect myself" (p. 404). A life with Rochester violates not only the moral and social code in society, but more important, violates Jane's own personal moral code, independent of social laws. The latter is the reason for Jane's rejection of Rochester. Yet, even if the marriage of Rochester and Jane were possible, it would be a less than satisfying one for Jane. Jane's self-assertion and her justification of her departure from Thornfield, suggest that, at this time in her life, marriage would be unsuitable. Both the financial dependence and the subservience of the wife in the marital relationship are unappealing to Jane. She rejects the patriarchal marriage, another form of the pseudo-home, which Jane, in the novel, attempts to move away from.

The domestic solution and Jane's return to Rochester would appear, at first, to contradict Brontë's statements on the necessity of a woman's independence and her view that more opportunities should be available to the woman besides her role as wife and mother. Hazel T. Martin in *Petticoat Rebels: A Study of the Novels of Social Protest of George Eliot, Elizabeth Gaskell and Charlotte Brontë*, examines the feminist issues that Brontë discusses, but finds that Brontë's heroines, despite their independence, settle
for domesticity and submission. In *Jane Eyre*, however, the domestic solution is somewhat atypical. Rochester's mutilation, interpreted variously as a symbolic castration and as evidence of Jane's triumph in the battle of the sexes, suggests that Jane's role in her marriage is different from the usual role that the Victorian woman fulfills. Both interpretations of Rochester's mutilation are extreme. A more accurate approach to this particular aspect of the conclusion would be to consider it in the context of Rochester's Byronic qualities and the love relationship between Rochester and Jane. As Richard Chase points out, the hero of *Jane Eyre* is finally domesticated; his passions and energetic spirit are tamed and brought under control. However, the tragic circumstances of Rochester's life, the destruction of Thornfield Hall and his own injury in the fire, are not punishments for his conduct, as some critics have claimed. Instead, these circumstances should be seen as experiences


15 Chase, p. 109.

which permit a more satisfactory relationship to develop between Jane and Rochester. Jane too changes during her absence from Thornfield; her romantic dreams and the intensity of her emotional drives have been put into the proper perspective. When Jane finally returns to Rochester, both she and he are prepared to settle down and lead an unconfining domestic life.

Several critics refer to the equality of Jane and Rochester in their marital union. It is equality that Jane strives for throughout her relationship with Rochester. Apparently, Rochester too wishes to marry a woman who is his intellectual equal. Jane’s superior intellect, her education, and her strong will and decisiveness are more appealing to Rochester than the charm and attractiveness of Blanche Ingram. The only area of inequality between Jane and Rochester are their financial situations. While in her role as governess Jane is able to escape from domestic subservience, the same would not be the case if she had married Rochester when he first proposed. Jane’s return occurs at a time when it is possible for her to retain her independence. It is no mere coincidence that Jane can return and marry Rochester only after her inheritance makes her financially secure.

A relationship based on mutual respect that Jane and Rochester have established during their courtship will continue

17 See Björk, p. 118. Also see Knies, p. 136.

in their married life. Brontë's view of man-woman relationships in *Jane Eyre* suggests a new equality between the sexes. Particularly, in the husband-wife relationship, we find familial roles that differ from the traditional views of the family. Rochester's physical disabilities force him to be partially dependent on his wife. Even so, however, Jane does not define her role in life as a nurse and mother to her husband. She is primarily, it is emphasized, a companion to her husband; and only secondarily, a nurse. This is a complete contrast to the Dickensian heroine who ensures the physical and emotional well-being of her husband or her father. Basically, the difference between the Dickensian heroine and Brontë's heroine is that the latter need not sacrifice her identity to meet the needs of her husband. She can, like Jane Eyre, remain an independent woman and enter into a marriage where she and her husband are equals.

We have, up to this point, been discussing Brontë's view of the man-woman relationship. There is no doubt that the domestic conclusion of the novel is a very idealistic one. Although Brontë is very much in favour of domestic life if the type of relationship that Rochester and Jane have can exist, it would be an error to conclude that Brontë is entirely optimistic about the home. In *Jane Eyre*, Brontë discusses three very different, yet equally inadequate homes: Gateshead, Thornfield Hall, and Moor House. Gateshead and the childhood experiences there have already been discussed. We should, however, turn now to both Thornfield Hall and Moor
House and examine these homes more closely.

Thornfield Hall is far from the typical Victorian home. First of all, the strong familial ties and attachments of the family do not exist there. Adele, the illegitimate daughter of Rochester's former mistress who claims that the child is Rochester's. The master of the home, visiting there infrequently, leaves the child with the housekeeper. Rochester's lack of affection for Adele simply reinforces his past, his loveless marriage to Bertha Mason. Quite clearly, in Thornfield there is no sense of a family unit, nor a sense of familial love. It is little wonder that in such a home, Jane feels, at first, no attachment to its members. Both the parent-child and the husband-wife relationships quite obviously deviate from the normal pattern of family relationships.

A rather unique approach to the family in Jane Eyre is Brontë's utilization of Gothic elements in the Thornfield chapters. The secret of Rochester's marriage to a mad woman is eventually exposed. Raymond Chapman contends that Brontë's Gothicism serves to reveal the horror underneath the smooth surface of nineteenth-century domesticity.¹⁹ There is somewhat of a parallel between the haunting atmosphere of Thornfield which conceals the mad woman and the Gothic visions of spirits which frighten Jane in the red room at Gateshead. Although Jane's terrifying premonitions at Gateshead

¹⁹ Chapman, p. 165.
are the result of the child's over-active imagination, they reflect the cruel treatment that the child can be subjected to within the home. Likewise, the unbearable nature of the loveless marriage that Rochester finds himself in is a constant source of terror for him. Though Brontë's introduction of the mad wife may seem a bit far-fetched, it is a very effective expression of the outcome of a loveless marriage of convenience. The transformation of the home then, into a Gothic castle effectively describes the marital situation of Rochester. We find here again a further explosion of the myth of the family, in this case, in the marital relationship.

In contrast to Thornfield, Moor House is a warm and welcome place, taking Jane in when she is physically exhausted from her journey from Thornfield. By coincidence, St. John and his sisters are discovered to be Jane's true cousins. This brings her even closer to the Rivers family. It is at Moor House that Jane experiences familial love and learns the pleasures of domestic life. She is able to combine here domestic activities with teaching. Jane leads a relatively happy life at Moor House, enjoying her relationships with the Rivers family. Yet, the idyllic nature of this home is broken by St. John's view of marriage and the husband-wife relationship. St. John proposes a loveless, sexless marriage that is based on duty and service. Such a marriage is completely abhorrent to Jane. This is yet another aspect of the domestic myth that Brontë exposes. The Victorian emphasis on duty in the marital relationship does not at all create an
atmosphere of domestic bliss. In *Jane Eyre*, Jane rejects this type of marriage and returns to Ferndean where she will have the domestic warmth of Moor House and also the warmth of masculine love.\(^20\)

Although Charlotte Brontë does not reject the value and importance of the home, she discusses its failures more openly and more realistically than Dickens. For the orphan child, the home is not the answer to its isolation. The Gateshead passages suggest that the home is, in fact, a negative influence on the child's life. When Jane leaves the Reed family, she does not seek new homes to replace the home that she lacks as an orphan child. Lowood, Thornfield, and Moor House, are all environments where she can develop emotionally, spiritually, and psychologically, rather than substitute homes. The novel traces Jane's gradual movement away from the home as she seeks self-identity and independence. On another level, however, the households in the novel are actual homes. When Brontë describes them as such, she presents the dual nature of the family: the home as a place where warm and loving relationships can develop and the home as a restrictive factor in both the child's life and the adult's life. The Gothic elements, in particular, suggest the negative aspects of the home. The paradoxical nature of the home is discussed in *Jane Eyre* from the child's point of view and later, from the woman's point of view. In Brontë we find an expose of the family which shatters the Victorian myth of the family.

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\(^{20}\) Lodge, p. 125.
CONCLUSION

Thus, we have seen in these three novels, Oliver Twist, Little Dorrit, and Jane Eyre, three different aspects of the child without a childhood. Whether it is the fact that the child is an orphan or whether it is the lack of parental care in the home that deprives the child of a normal childhood, the child in the Victorian novel becomes increasingly more of a psychological being. Though Brontë's portrait of the child is much more psychologically accurate than Dickens's, even in Dickens we find somewhat of a realistic approach to childhood. Certainly in a novel such as David Copperfield, Dickens has a very keen insight into the child's emotions and the nature of childhood. Even in an early child character, such as Oliver, we find elements of realism. Oliver and Little Dorrit are social beings who do not remain isolated from their environment. This indicates a very realistic approach to childhood, since the child is found in a social setting, responding to its environment. This is a very different approach to childhood than we find in the poetry of the Romantics.

Both Dickens and Brontë reject the romantic myth of childhood as a period of innocence and happiness. For the children discussed in this paper, childhood is not a happy
period of life. Even as children, Oliver, Little Dorrit, and Jane, are exposed to the harsh realities of life. Again we find here a very realistic portrayal of childhood. The child also experiences the same sense of fear, doubt, and insecurities, that the adult experiences in the real world.

When Dickens and Brontë expose the myth of childhood, they also examine the role of the family in the child's life. With the increasing awareness of the special needs of the child in the nineteenth-century, Victorian writers reject the Rousseauistic notions of childhood. In the world of experience, the child needs protection and security. The answer should be found in the home and yet it is not. We have already seen in Dickens's novels that the family succumbs to the pressures of society and cannot protect the child. In Jane Eyre, Brontë does not stress the social pressures on the family, but she does present the discrepancy between the ideal of the family and the family in reality. By questioning the romantic conception of childhood, both Dickens and Brontë also expose the Victorian myth of the family.

While the family was highly regarded in the Victorian Period, in the Victorian novel we find a gradual disillusionment with the family. The family becomes much more of a negative factor in man's life, rather than a positive one. The major Victorian writers, such as Dickens and Charlotte Brontë, question, to some extent, the beneficence of the home. There is still ambivalence towards the home in both of these writers.
A very bitter attack on and a complete expose' of the family is found in Samuel Butler's *The Way of All Flesh*. The Victorian novel, examining the failures and inadequacies of the family, is a precursor to the twentieth-century novel which exposes the restrictive aspects of the home and the nuclear family.
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