Dickens against the Grain

Gendered Spheres and Their Transgressors in *Bleak House, Hard Times, and Great Expectations*

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**Introduction**

Charles Dickens certainly cannot be considered a participant in a precursory movement towards feminism; in fact, many of Dickens’s novels uphold traditional ideas about femininity and punish the usurpation of male privilege. In *Bleak House*, *Hard Times*, and *Great Expectations*—the three novels that form the basis of this study—Dickens punishes characters who transgress gender norms (such as Mrs. Jellyby, Louisa, and Mrs. Joe) both through explicit condemnation by the narrator and the adversity that befalls them in the plot. These characters have been created to appear ridiculous, no matter their accomplishments in the community or in the world at large.

Yet in these same novels, Dickens presents a socially relevant depiction of female power and agency that subverts the sexism he exhibits in the creation and punishment of other characters. Dickens presents female characters as superior to male characters because they are idealistic, imaginative, and knowledgeable. I will show that in all three novels, those female characters who conform to Dickens’s ideal of femininity are permitted to assert agency that overpowers that of their male counterparts. Unsurprisingly, Dickens’s novels explicitly reject proto-feminist ideas about women’s participation in the public world and express concern about the implications of proto-feminist views. What is surprising, though, is that Dickens’s female characters also show that the author values nontraditional forms of femininity.

The traditional separation of men and women into separate spheres is a lens through which the reader can analyze this nontraditional femininity. Eleanor Gordon
and Gwyneth Nair’s historical work *Public Lives: Women, Family, and Society in Victorian Britain* is appropriate for this analysis. According to Gordon and Nair, the private sphere consists of all that is domestic: housekeeping, spousal duties, and motherhood. In contrast, the public sphere consists of public works, political participation, and financial gain. These spheres are gendered feminine and masculine, respectively. However, the authors argue, the idea of gendered public and private spheres is complicated by those women employed in the public sphere. They discuss the ways in which the definition of the private sphere has changed over time to define a practice (for example, one of caretaking) rather than a specific place inside a home. In contrast to their male counterparts, nineteenth-century women were able to move with relative ease between spheres because they were able to appropriate traits that had historically been considered natural to womanhood to establish superiority in settings like hospitals and orphanages. The idea that women were natural rulers of the private sphere and therefore more qualified to make decisions about domestic matters inhibited the male usurpation of female power in the public and private realms. Gordon and Nair demonstrate the ways in which nineteenth-century women found it increasingly possible to thrive in public roles; however, these authors also show the ways in which societal convention consistently encouraged women to adopt caretaking roles that closely paralleled their roles in the private sphere. While the new position of women in the public eye represented an expansion of the public activity of women, society still confined women to traditional essentialist stereotypes.
The doctrine of separate spheres has important implications for the Dickens novels and characters in this study. In these three representative novels from his mid-career, Dickens’s female characters feel a responsibility to hold public roles and work towards the public good, but this work is rewarded only when it occurs in a way that does not conflict with domestic responsibilities. *Bleak House* is a prime example of a Dickens novel that divides masculine and feminine tasks into the separate spheres of the public and private. In this novel, the author thoroughly chastises women like Mrs. Jellyby and Mrs. Pardiggle who have excessive public sphere responsibilities that take time and attention away from domestic duties like housekeeping and childcare.

Still, Dickens shows that female characters can be simultaneously publicly involved and idealized. Esther’s participation in public causes, though on a small scale, constitutes political involvement with potential for resistance in line with Victorian scholar Elizabeth Langland’s concept of “charitable visiting.” Langland describes the ways in which charitable visitors have control over the distribution of goods and services, and, in the case of Esther, knowledge. Despite his manifest conservatism, Dickens *is* proto-feminist insofar as his novels demonstrate the ability of women like Esther to effectively hold power in the public sphere. Idealized characters in these novels are somehow able to balance public and private responsibilities without a problem; it is not undertaking public duties per se that incurs censure in Dickens’s novels, but rather the inability to maintain this crucial balance between the home and the world outside.
My thesis is divided into three chapters. In the first chapter, entitled “Transgressive Characters,” I argue that Dickens creates and punishes characters that reject his ideals about femininity and transgress sphere boundaries in explicit and marked ways. These characters fall into types: philanthropists, politicians, aggressors, and unfeeling women. Typically, these characters are deemed transgressive because they exhibit some sort of excess (for example, of philanthropic activity or political opinions). Because of their transgressive qualities, Dickens punishes all of the characters discussed in this chapter, whether through the narrator’s opinions and explicit criticism or events in the novels that leave them without spouses, children, or happiness. This facet of Dickens’s novels makes him a very conservative writer, attempting to uphold the status quo by punishing characters who transgress the separate sphere binary.

Dickens does not punish all of his female characters; indeed, he celebrates them in significant ways. In fact, Dickens specifically differentiates these idealized characters against those discussed in Chapter One. Chapter Two (“Idealized Characters”) will argue that Dickens punishes some characters and glorifies others. In contrast to transgressive characters, these women embody an ideal form of private sphere authority that at times extends to public sphere matters. While Dickens celebrates some characters for their adherence to traditional gender norms, the idealization of women and domesticity as opposite and outside the public sphere has subversive potential insofar as it supports the idea of a home as refuge from the public world. Home as a “haven” of safety makes changes in the home seem less threatening,
even though changes in private sphere authority have serious political potential in that they inevitably resist patriarchal domination. In addition, Dickens idealizes publicly involved characters in new and revolutionary ways, more explicitly creating political spaces for women in the public sphere.

In my third chapter, “Female Power in Unusual Places,” I argue that Dickens creates a large number of female characters who dominate their male counterparts, suggesting that Dickens values nontraditional depictions of femininity. The strength of the female characters’ actions and personalities coupled with male characters’ silence and lack of agency gives women superiority in the home that also overflows into the public realm. This superiority allows women to expand their roles in both spheres. When sphere transgression is not harshly punished by Dickens, he—perhaps inadvertently—expands gender boundaries and carves out new political spaces for women.

Thus, as my thesis will show, in *Bleak House*, *Hard Times*, and *Great Expectations*, Dickens punishes female characters that transgress sex and gender norms while exalting traditional attributes of femininity in his female characters. Yet, I argue, Dickens also allows his female characters to possess surprising, nontraditional forms of power. By reading against the grain, even novels by an author like Charles Dickens can be read as proto-feminist.
Chapter One: Transgressive Characters

In *Bleak House*, *Hard Times*, and *Great Expectations*, Dickens creates and punishes characters that reject his ideals of femininity and transgress gender boundaries in explicit ways. Many female characters in Dickens’s novels are transgressive insofar as they do not acquiesce to their relegation to the private sphere. Characters like Mrs. Jellyby, Mrs. Pardiggle, Miss Wisk, Mrs. Joe, Louisa, and Estella are punished for their transgressions of gender boundaries through the narrator’s explicit criticism as well as violence, death, unhappy marriages, or spinster lives. Dickens forms their characters as examples to his readers—especially those who are female—of qualities that women should not possess and activities that they should not pursue.

Characters coded as transgressive do not conform to nineteenth-century ideas about the natural place of women as rulers of the home and hearth. As Victorian scholar Mary Poovey notes in her work *Uneven Developments: The Ideological Work of Gender in Mid-Victorian England*, ideal women in the Victorian period do not pursue the public world; instead, they are “antidotes to the evils of competition, not competitors themselves” (144). Many of Dickens’s characters do not fit this ideal; these characters are explicitly punished for their transgression. They also have few, if any, redeeming qualities that allow the reader to see them sympathetically.

There are four different categories of transgressive characters in the novels analyzed for this study. The first is the female philanthropist who allows her social work to infiltrate her home. The second is that of the outspoken female politician who
publicly decries traditional femininity and its place in the private sphere. Third is the female aggressor who utilizes explicit violence to rule her home. Last is the female character unable to feel emotion, especially affection. Dickens creates these characters to publicly punish and decry women who do not possess traditional Victorian femininity, upholding traditional and conservative ideas about a woman’s place in the home.

**Female Philanthropists**

Victorian women are typically portrayed as rulers of the private sphere. These women are expected to participate in the upkeep of their home and children and remain outside the public world of employment and politics. They are also expected to be involved in some form of charity work, typically through the intermediary of a religious institution. The expectation of involvement in philanthropy comes with a stipulation: a woman’s charity work should not infiltrate her home by reducing the time that she has to fulfill her housework and childcare duties.

This topic is a central concern of *Bleak House*. Mrs. Jellyby is a prime example of transgression as a character obsessed with a philanthropic cause in Africa who neglects her motherly and wifely duties. Dickens’s explicit criticism of excessive involvement in public causes stems from the injustice inflicted upon family units by such involvement, as seen in the unhappiness and disrepair that plagues Mrs. Jellyby’s family. The second ambitious female character criticized in *Bleak House* is Mrs. Pardiggle, a woman who has also undertaken social work and allows it to infiltrate the lives of her miserable children. These two characters are treated as transgressive both
by the idealized narrator, Esther, and by the characters that surround them in *Bleak House*; the reader can infer that Dickens also takes a decidedly negative stance with regards to the ambition that Mrs. Jellyby and Mrs. Pardiggle possess.

Nowhere is public involvement more criticized than in the character of Mrs. Jellyby. Mrs. Jellyby’s involvement in a philanthropic cause in Africa is not only an extraneous activity—it is an obsession that leaves her no time for housework or childrearing. In his study *Dickens and Women*, Michael Slater correctly notes that

The clinching image comes in a description of the disorganized family dinner during which Mrs. Jellyby imperturbably continues dealing with her business correspondence, receiving so many letters that Richard Carstone, sitting by her, sees “four envelopes in the gravy at once”. It is an unforgettable emblem of the domestic wrecked by the intrusion of the outer world. (315–16)

Moreover, Mrs. Jellyby first appears in conjunction with the name of the utterly ridiculous-sounding African tribe with which she is obsessed: the Booriboola-Gha; though Dickens could have chosen any name for this African tribe (or indeed not named it at all), he instead does so with the intention of making Mrs. Jellyby increasingly absurd.

Dickens asserts that Mrs. Jellyby is a cruel and neglectful mother, further marking her as transgressive. In fact, Mrs. Jellyby’s inability to parent is Dickens’s most stringent criticism of her. Esther, presented in *Bleak House* as a model of female domestic success, decries Mrs. Jellyby’s constant philanthropic efforts: “‘It must be very good of Mrs. Jellyby to take such pains about a scheme for the benefit of Natives—and yet—Peepy and the housekeeping!’” (58). Mrs. Jellyby’s children understand that they have been neglected and find it hard to have any sort of
connection with their mother. When Esther criticizes Caddy Jellyby’s disrespect of her mother, Caddy tells Esther “‘O! Don’t talk of duty as a child, Miss Summerson; where’s Ma’s duty as a parent? All made over to the public and Africa, I suppose! Then let the public and Africa show duty as a child; it’s much more their affair than mine’” (65). Caddy sees Mrs. Jellyby’s philanthropy as an all-consuming substitute for all facets of childrearing and throughout the novel evinces no emotional attachment towards her mother; the same indifference is reciprocated by Mrs. Jellyby, who does not react when Caddy announces that she is engaged and will be leaving home. Mrs. Jellyby’s lack of emotion with regards to her children makes her a cold, distant character instead of a character with a heightened sense of responsibility for others.

Caddy especially finds her mother inadequate in her own inability to keep a house, which she learns from Esther before she moves in with her husband. This facet of Mrs. Jellyby’s parental neglect is unique because her husband, Mr. Jellyby, is specifically aware of it. When Caddy announces her desire to marry, Mr. Jellyby responds by saying “‘My poor girl, you have not been very well taught how to make a home for your husband; but unless you mean with all your heart to strive to do it, you had better murder him than marry him—if you really love him’” (475). The reader can thus infer that marriage to Mrs. Jellyby is akin to death for Mr. Jellyby, who clearly desires a more traditional marriage.

Mrs. Jellyby materializes as a more explicitly proto-feminist character as the novel develops. Brenda Ayres, Dickens scholar and author of *Dissenting Women in Dickens’ Novels: The Subversion of Domestic Ideology*, finds it significant that “Mrs.
Jellyby was last heard of campaigning for ‘the rights of women to sit in Parliament’. This for Dickens . . . and for the great majority of his fellow-citizens, represented the height of perverse female heroism” (316). In Nobody’s Angels: Middle-Class Women and Domestic Ideology in Victorian Culture, Victorian scholar Elizabeth Langland notes with little surprise that in Bleak House, “The least talented housekeeper becomes the most vocal feminist” (96). Langland explicates Dickens’s portrayal of Mrs. Jellyby as dissatisfied with simply destroying her own home and desiring to cause more destruction in the rest of the world: “Dickens’s irony suggests [that] she intends to wreak havoc on the country if her folly is not stopped” (96).

The large scale of Mrs. Jellyby’s involvement is one important facet of Dickens’s criticism of her, as noted by Michael Slater: “Once woman ventures outside the family and seeks to do good on a large and public scale the result, Dickens felt, was bound to be unsatisfactory” (315). Alison Milbank also notices in Daughters of the House: Modes of the Gothic in Victorian Fiction that “Dickens criticizes action taken at a distance” (89). Dickens’s portrayal of Mrs. Jellyby makes her decidedly reproachable. Rather than rewarding the feminine agency that Mrs. Jellyby demonstrates across large distances, Dickens upbraids her due to her neglect of the private sphere.

Brenda Ayres points out that Dickens’s extreme distaste for female philanthropists like Mrs. Jellyby is ironic: “Here they are submitting themselves to what many believe to be the highest male authority on earth, and the text satirizes them” (95). While the involvement of women in public causes does not always entail
an act of submission to God, the fact that women like Mrs. Jellyby submit so fully to societal expectations and then are satirized is surely ironic.

Ayres also notes the ironic treatment of Mrs. Pardiggle, another philanthropist in *Bleak House* who concerns herself with bestowing charity on the local poor:

As a woman, she is expected to visit the poor and the sick as if all women have a natural aptitude for charity. On the other hand, the text calls her the “inexorable moral policeman.” Insofar as this was exactly the duty expected of every woman, it is ironic that the text mocks Mrs. Pardiggle when she performs hers. If a woman shows too much aptitude and devotion for “the Lord’s work,” she must be contained. (96)

The novel upbraids Mrs. Pardiggle for the neglect of her domestic duties even as it expects social work from her. Moreover, Dickens criticizes Mrs. Pardiggle for the attitude she adopts while carrying out a philanthropic act, evincing that the manner in which women perform public works is also important.

Like Mrs. Jellyby, the welfare of Mrs. Pardiggle’s children is the main authorial criticism of her character. The narrator speaks of Mrs. Pardiggle’s children thus: “We had never seen such dissatisfied children. It was not merely that they were weazen and shriveled—though they were certainly that too—but that they looked actually ferocious with discontent” (125). In addition to criticizing Mrs. Pardiggle for the unhappiness of her children, the author chastises this character for forcing her children to donate the small amount of money they have to charity. In fact, Mrs. Pardiggle’s enlistment of her children in a philanthropic cause to gain a competitive edge over other women in social work makes her entirely unsympathetic.

Dickens also criticizes the way that Mrs. Pardiggle enacts her social service by implying that she forces her actions on unsuspecting victims; her “one infallible
course was her course of pouncing upon the poor, and applying benevolence to them like a straight waist-coat” (482–83). Mrs. Pardiggle’s philanthropic approach sets her apart as an intruder instead of a charitable contributor. If Mrs. Pardiggle had a less aggressive approach toward charity efforts, the recipients of her social work would presumably resist less.

Dickens prioritizes a separation between domesticity and social or political action. This criticism applies to both Mrs. Jellyby and Mrs. Pardiggle in that they both allow their social work to infiltrate their homes in contrast to the balance achieved by the idealized character Esther. Dickens seems to believe that philanthropy should not usurp time reserved for the private sphere; for this reason, both Esther and the narrator staunchly criticize Mrs. Jellyby and Mrs. Pardiggle.

Dickens values both domesticity and the feminine autonomy required to initiate acts of social work. Instead of idealizing characters that fully fulfill one of these traits, Dickens demonstrates the expectation that female characters should perfectly balance their identities as domestic goddesses and public servants. This idea is inherently antithetical to a proto-feminist position, both because it confines women to specific forms of public involvement and creates a hard-to-reach ideal met only by characters like Esther.

Female Politicians

The punishment of female transgressors for what is represented as their excessive involvement in public works parallels Dickens’s other criticisms of women in public roles. The author takes an explicitly condemning stance regarding the
involvement of women in government, presumably due to his adherence to traditional assumptions about male dominance in politics. Ayres’s *Dissenting Women in Dickens’s Novels* asserts that Dickens’s “satire is most apparent when [he] takes on women’s rights advocates and bluestockings” (98). Esther, the narrator, first introduces minor character Miss Wisk at a dinner party with her guardian; her character is instantly met with hilarity and mockery (by Esther and Jarndyce). In contrast to most other characters in *Bleak House*, Miss Wisk has absolutely no redeeming qualities. Indeed, Dickens constructs her as ridiculous by portraying her beliefs about female participation in political processes as “radical.”

Miss Wisk and Mrs. Jellyby become satirical characters through Dickens’s portrayal of their beliefs about women in government; political participation according to the author should come from a masculine body even when the source is a woman, as in the marriage of Mr. and Mrs. Bagnet. Dickens’s attitude toward feminine autonomy in a political form is unsurprisingly and decidedly negative, especially when describing unmarried characters like Miss Wisk that have not yet taken on a true domestic role as wife and mother. Miss Wisk is ridiculed not only by Esther but also by her guardian; she is introduced to the reader thus, as

a young—at least, an unmarried—lady, a Miss Wisk, who was also there. Miss Wisk’s mission, my guardian said, was to show the world that woman’s mission was man’s mission; and that the only genuine mission, of both man and woman, was to be always moving declaratory resolutions about things in general at public meetings. (482)

Though Dickens does not validate Miss Wisk’s opinions about the respective missions of women and men, her political opinions opposing traditional female roles in the
private sphere are not the reason for her textual ridicule. The frivolity of her character lies more in the fact that Miss Wisk has nontraditional ideas about female participation in political processes and surprisingly less in the fact that she does not have a husband to act as her political intermediary.

The narrator also criticizes Miss Wisk for her opinions about the restraints that the male sex collectively has placed upon women. Dickens presents these beliefs to the reader in an attempt to make her character seem illogical and even offensive; Miss Wisk believes “the idea of woman’s mission lying chiefly in the narrow sphere of Home was an outrageous slander on the part of her tyrant, Man” (482–83). Miss Wisk’s crime is not that she believes a life in the private sphere too confining but that she denigrates all traditional domestic roles.

Ayres notes that Miss Wisk could be satirically interpreted as accurately translating the political needs of women; these needs, however, were not as threatening as Dickens might have desired to represent them:

The implication . . . is that these women were denying their own womanhood and perceiving men as tyrants. This was supposed to be a terrible thing, but one could interpret the text as making a straightforward declaration about what women did want: that is, to reinvent womanhood according to their own terms and understandings, as well as to free themselves from the tyranny of patriarchal control. (98)

The way that Dickens presents Miss Wisk could more accurately define the desires of proto-feminists than he realized. However, Miss Wisk is presented as a character type, rather than simply a character; she participates in few scenes in Bleak House, and Dickens’s intention is to ridicule proto-feminists by making her character a representative example. Overall, his attempt was successful.
Female Aggressors

Dickens is particularly harsh on those characters who transgress his feminine ideal by displaying excessive aggression to those over whom they have power. Mrs. Joe from *Great Expectations* epitomizes this kind of transgression, using violence to create her authority, symbolized by the main instrument she uses for punishment: the Tickler. Joe, a submissive husband, financially supports the family, but he does so without control over how it runs. Mrs. Joe, instead of Joe, primarily disciplines Pip (and Joe as well). These unusual interactions show that Mrs. Joe possesses almost all power in her marriage. Dickens asserts through this relationship that a happy marriage contains a division of responsibilities and power and implies that partners should perform the tasks that best suit their genders, according to conventional gender ideology.

An immediately evident facet of her character, Mrs. Joe’s name presages her dominant role in the family. While most women are defined and shaped by the identities of their husbands, Mrs. Joe’s husband instead changes his identity as a result of his marriage to her. Joe’s mother’s unhappy life has made him eager to adapt his actions to better suit Mrs. Joe:

‘And last of all, Pip—and this I want to say very serous to you, old chap—I see so much in my poor mother drudging and slaving and breaking her honest hart and never getting no peace in her mortal days, that I’m dead afeerd of going wrong in the way of not doing what’s right by a woman, and I’d fur rather of the two go wrong t’other way, and be a little ill-conwenienced myself.’ (60)

It is surprising that Joe has made the active decision to refrain from fighting a character like Mrs. Joe. However, it is more significant that Joe has decided to make
compromises and personality changes for her; one would assume that a typical marriage would involve the adjustment of a woman to the new expectations and standards of her husband’s house. Instead, Joe is the partner who adjusts; accordingly, Pip considers all household items to be the property of Mrs. Joe rather than Joe.

Mrs. Joe is also marked as transgressive by the household objects with which she associates. Mrs. Joe uses her main instrument of punishment, the Tickler, to attack the males (and only the males) in her life and make them frightened. Moreover, she is also associated with sharp objects like straight pins, which are accidental snacks for Pip and Joe. In *Daughters of the House*, Alison Milbank notes that the transference of private sphere power allows Mrs. Joe the ability to turn housewifely activities into noisy acts of aggression. So, for example, Pip’s bread and butter might contain pins and needles as the result of its production so close to her bepinned chest. Joe and Pip are chivvied about, their throats forcibly opened for a dosage of tar-water, and Pip’s head often tingles “from Mrs. Joe’s thimble having played the tambourine upon it.” (124)

Though these domestic objects are typically associated with traditional female roles, the ways that they affect Mrs. Joe’s family make them uniquely abrasive. For example, though Mrs. Joe probably uses straight pins as aids for traditional domestic pursuits, these objects presumably result in pain for Joe and Pip instead of in new clothing.

As a result of the pain and suffering she causes her family, Mrs. Joe endures a violent fate: a physical attack by Joe’s coworker Orlick that renders her incapacitated and eventually results in her death. The direct cause of her punishment by Orlick and by Dickens is Mrs. Joe’s inability to conform to her prescribed identity as acquiescent
wife and loving mother, as Matthew McGuire notes in *The Role of Women in the Novels of Charles Dickens*:

Pip’s domineering sister’s harsh speech to Orlick (who later viciously attacks her and leaves her helpless and senseless) is a manifestation of her unfulfillment as a Mother-Protector who is playing her role grudgingly while desiring material wealth. (43)

By “Mother-Protector,” McGuire refers to the necessity for women to rule the private sphere as mothers and also to protect this sphere from public intrusion, solidifying its position as a safe space in an increasingly evil and corrupt public world. It is appropriate, says Milbank, that a violent, masculine character like “Mrs. Joe is destroyed by a man who represents all that is bestial and elemental about masculinity” (125). Orlick, as physical laborer in the forge, represents a true masculine aggressor; his attack is an attempt to reassert his masculine control. As a result, Mrs. Joe loses not only her physical and mental capacity but also her “mastery over the men in the house” and control over “female housewifely duties” (125).

However, Milbank fails to note the significance of the loss of Mrs. Joe’s voice. In the beginning of the novel, Mrs. Joe’s voice is the tool that she uses to control Pip and Joe and the way that she asserts her masculine authority to people like Orlick. After Mrs. Joe is maimed, the most significant emblem of the loss of her masculine control is her inability to speak.

Oddly enough, some critics have sympathy for Mrs. Joe, in spite of the fact that Dickens presents her as a violent, harsh woman. In *Corrupt Relations: Dickens, Thackeray, Trollope, Collins and the Victorian Sexual System*, Richard Barickman,
Susan MacDonald, and Myra Stark note that Dickens provides information about her that could foster a sympathetic understanding of her dominion:

Mrs. Joe is not tyrannized by Pip or Joe or even by the drudgery necessary in a poor village household, but she is more subtly tyrannized by a society that offers no satisfying way of life to a poor woman with Mrs. Joe’s shrewd intelligence and fierce energy (and very few options to any woman). Frustrated by this most elusive of oppressors, she may understandably—if unjustly by ordinary ethical standards—rage against a marriage virtually forced upon her and an unwanted child certainly forced upon her, against a husband who seems her inferior by all society’s standards except the all-important one of sex, against the domestic conditions that constrain her life into the narrowest scope. (72)

These authors add that for a poor woman like Mrs. Joe, marriage is a financial necessity rather than an option. This reading is striking because Dickens does not facilitate this sympathy; the narrator merely notes in passing Mrs. Joe’s qualities and family history. This notation is not enough to make Mrs. Joe a tragic character; indeed, her reluctant role as wife and mother implicitly makes her punishment even more deserved. Yet Barickman and his coauthors are justified in sympathizing with Mrs. Joe in that she is rendered truly pathetic and helpless after Orlick’s attack.

Unfeeling Females

In addition to characters like Mrs. Joe who exhibit violent behavior, Dickens’s novels contain characters that are desensitized and unfeeling; Dickens criticizes and punishes this lack of affectionate impulse in women as seen in Estella, Pip’s wealthy and cultured love interest in Great Expectations, and Louisa, main character and daughter of educator Thomas Gradgrind in Hard Times. These women have been conditioned into an inability to feel affection. In Hard Times, Gradgrind’s school removes qualities of femininity that are generally considered innate in women, and
Louisa’s resulting lack of emotion and fancy cause her to feel out of place, especially in romantic interactions. In the same way that Gradgrind eradicates his daughter Louisa’s feelings, Estella’s benefactor Miss Havisham removes her ability to love in *Great Expectations*. Dickens implies that these qualities are necessary to women; without them, women are unnaturally unemotional. Though Estella and Louisa are both eligible to marry, their inability to love has left them unable to fit the Dickensian feminine ideal. This lack of affectionate capacity plagues both of them with unhappy marriages and romances. Dickens presumes that Estella would be able to find affection if she could feel it; however, Estella’s actual marriage to Bentley Drummle in *Great Expectations* is arbitrary and lacks romantic feeling. Similarly, Louisa does not love either her husband or her suitor due to her lack of affection.

Louisa is introduced to the reader through the eyes of her father, Thomas Gradgrind, whose Utilitarian school teaches Louisa to value facts and definitions instead of feelings or emotion. Louisa is rarely humanized in *Hard Times* because her education has removed feelings from her. Emotion, especially of the romantic variety, is coded as essentially feminine; without feelings, Louisa is not a “real woman” like Sissy, her imaginative adopted sister, rendering her incapable of making decisions and domestically useless in her marriage. According to Victorian scholar Nancy Armstrong’s *Desire and Domestic Fiction*, “by the novel’s end, Louisa is ‘returned to her father in a state of infantile dependency’” (164). Armstrong overstates the extent of Louisa’s incapability since she is independent at the end of *Hard Times*. This
independence does not redeem her, however, and Louisa ends the novel without a traditional family.

Louisa blames her father for eradicating the emotional parts of her personality. Louisa’s confusion and frustration in response to suitor Josiah Bounderby’s marriage proposal demonstrate her awareness of Gradgrind’s responsibility:

“What do I know, father,” said Louisa in her quiet manner, “of tastes and fancies; of aspirations and affections; of all that part of my nature in which such light things might have been nourished? What escape have I had from problems that could be demonstrated, and realities that could be grasped?” (95)

The bitter tone of this passage exhibits Louisa’s desire to “naturally” experience and understand female emotion. The impact of Gradgrind’s education on Louisa is monumental, making her think of Bounderby’s proposal in a rational way instead of an emotional one.

Louisa more explicitly defines her frustration later in the novel, lamenting her education and chastising her father:

“How could you give me life, and take from me all the inappreciable things that raise it from the state of conscious death? Where are the graces of my soul? Where are the sentiments of my heart? What have you done, O father, what have you done, with the garden that should have bloomed once, in this great wilderness here!” (194)

Mrs. Gradgrind, Louisa’s mother, expresses similar frustrations when she is on her deathbed and unable to recognize and understand pain; she says “‘I think there is a pain somewhere in the room . . . but I couldn’t positively say that I have got it’” (180). Dickens portrays both Louisa and her mother as confused characters—almost to the point of hilarity—because of their inability to feel. These characters are more tragic in
that they are aware of their faults; many of the characters considered transgressive by Dickens either do not notice their transgressions or do not see their actions as transgressions.

Dickens also explains that female characters without imagination are more tragic than male ones; Louisa’s transgression is one that could only occur in a female character. Louisa is a resilient character who is aware of her lack of emotion and rebels against it. The significant difference in the temperaments of Louisa and her brother, Tom,—both given the same education—indicates that Louisa is particularly frustrated with her repressive education in a way that Tom is not. The narrator notes that

There was a peculiar air of sullenness in them both, and particularly in the girl; yet, struggling through the dissatisfaction of her face, there was a light with nothing to rest upon, a fire with nothing to burn, a starved imagination keeping life in itself somehow, which brightened its expression. (16)

Though the “sullenness” described by the narrator applies to both Tom and Louisa, Louisa bears an extra burden. She does not show remorse when she is caught red-handed observing the circus, defending herself because she has “been tired a long time” (16). The “starved imagination” in this passage describes Louisa, not Tom, implying either that he does not have imagination or that his father has removed from him the fanciful inclinations preserved in his sister. This passage romanticizes Louisa’s inability to adhere to her upbringing, simultaneously disparaging Tom’s machine-like impulses.

Louisa shows stirrings of emotion at some points in the novel; in contrast, the indoctrination of the male characters makes them callous and narrowly self-interested.
For example, when Louisa meets Stephen Blackpool, a factory worker wrongfully terminated by her husband, her voice and features “soften” (146) and she offers Stephen money to begin a new life. Though she feels compassion towards Stephen, she is confused about her emotions; Dickens states that Louisa “looked, in part incredulous, in part frightened, in part overcome with quick sympathy” (147). Moments of emotion are significant but rare for Louisa; thus, she is very rarely coded feminine. Though Louisa does evolve into a semblance of happiness at the end of *Hard Times*, her inability to fulfill Dickens’s ideal leaves her without a family, a harsh punishment for a Victorian woman.

Louisa is an especially tragic example of transgression because her transgression is not her fault; the blame for her life’s misfortunes rests on her father. In the same way, Estella’s transgressions are unfortunate because her bitter guardian Miss Havisham facilitates them. Though Estella elicits less sympathy than Louisa because of her cruel attitude, these two women are similar in their inability to feel emotion.

According to Ayres, Estella is “the archetype of ‘woman’ bred to be desired but able to have no desire herself” (90). In many ways, she is Louisa Gradgrind’s doppelganger insofar as an authority figure has rendered her unable to experience emotion. The difference between the two characters lies in Estella’s sexual objectification; Pip desires Estella even though she is cold and emotionless. She is cold and calculating in opposition to tragic Louisa. She also does not exhibit the despondency with which Louisa analyzes her life. Instead, Estella makes desperate
decisions about her fate—randomly deciding to marry Bentley Drummle—without the agony Louisa demonstrates; indeed, Estella does not care much at all about her happiness. Estella’s Utilitarian education has a unique result, giving her the ability to use her lack of emotion to her advantage: “She is, nonetheless, a woman who has been trained to garner agencies of female power and to use them to balance the scales” (Ayres 90). Rather than lamenting her incapacities, Estella accepts them unconditionally and mechanically, noted by Michael Slater in Dickens and Women:

When Estella tells Pip, ‘very calmly’, that she can only understand his meaning in saying that he loves her ‘as a form of words’ (‘You address nothing in my breast, you touch nothing there’), he exclaims, ‘Surely it is not in nature’, and the reader who pauses to reflect can only agree with him. Estella’s retort, ‘It is in my nature . . . It is in the nature formed within me’, underlines the fact that we must here stretch our understanding of nature to accept the idea of an ice-for-heart transplant if we are to maintain ‘that willing suspension of disbelief that constitutes dramatic faith’. (280)

Estella and Louisa are transgressive in different ways. Many critics consider Estella’s lack of emotion complex considering her random outbursts of feeling and effortless acceptance of her fate. Though Estella transgresses, her punishment is different from other transgressive characters because she is indifferent about her fate.

Dickens’s creation of transgressive characters serves to punish those who exist too far outside of Victorian gender stereotypes. By meeting such characters with ridicule and adversity, Dickens makes them into cautionary figures for real life women. Thus, in the cases discussed in this chapter, Dickens upholds gender stereotypes and punishes women who possess public power. Surprisingly, however, Dickens does not uniformly punish all women that are nontraditional. Chapter Two
will discuss idealized characters who subvert traditional gender behavior, expanding roles for women.
Chapter Two: Idealized Characters

In addition to creating characters that are marked as transgressive, Dickens creates female characters that he denotes as ideal. This chapter will outline these characters and contrast them with the transgressive characters discussed in the previous chapter.

Some characters discussed in this chapter are idealized as a whole while some simply have ideal traits. Dickens allows idealized characters to move more fluidly between the public sphere and the private without enduring the censure that characters in Chapter One receive. Though these portrayals capitalize on female public sphere authority—thus lacking the potential to radically change the social position of women—female characters create important opportunities that make social change possible. The characters’ idealizations pave the way for the feminist movement by allowing women greater mobility between the public and private spheres.

There are four different categories of idealized characters in the novels analyzed for this study. The first is the soft-spoken female that contrasts Mrs. Joe’s violent persona. The second type is the deep-feeling (Romantic) woman, unlike cold-hearted, numb Louisa and Estella. Although these two categories uphold standards of traditional feminine behavior, these characters actively participate in the creation of the home as a safe space separate from the public world. As Elizabeth Langland argues, though Dickens’s portrayal of these women upholds traditional Victorian femininity, “Victorian idealizations of home as outside of politics, as a refuge from strife, helped to facilitate its operation as a new base for struggle” (97). Perpetuating
conceptions of the home as distinct from the corrupt public world furthers the idea that the home is a safe haven, allowing political change to occur in less threatening ways. When the home is connoted as safe, female authority can exist in the home—even in regards to public sphere matters—without seeming radical or even feminist.

The second two categories of women more explicitly expand public sphere roles. The third character type is that of the female philanthropist: Dickens contrasts the positive forms of public involvement of characters like Esther with the demeaned work of Mrs. Jellyby and Mrs. Pardiggle. The final type is the traditionally feminine activist as distinguished from a progressive character like Miss Wisk. These two groups of characters use their idealization to subvert traditional feminine behavior and become important components of the public sphere.

*Soft-spoken Women*

In *Great Expectations*, Dickens idealizes Biddy for her soft, quiet nature in contrast to Mrs. Joe’s punitive and violent one. Biddy, Pip’s childhood friend and tutor and Joe’s second wife, is an authority figure both in Pip’s education and in keeping Joe’s house after Mrs. Joe’s incapacitation. Biddy later becomes Pip’s stepmother; she is an ideal feminine character precisely because she is out of Pip’s reach when he finally recognizes his pursuit of Estella as foolish. Biddy’s traits are especially important because her life and marriage are presumably happy at the end of *Great Expectations*.

Compared to the other three characters discussed in this chapter, Biddy receives the least narrative space. Biddy participates in fewer scenes than Pip or
Estella and has comparatively fewer aspects of her character to discuss. Still, Biddy is an ideal character because both Joe and Pip find her desirable. She represents Pip’s lost opportunity for happy marriage, punishment for his obsession with wealth and social standing. Finally, Biddy is a clear contrast to tyrannical Mrs. Joe insofar as she literally replaces Mrs. Joe as wife to Joe and mother to Pip.

Dickens idealizes Biddy because she is a traditional Victorian female who values her role as docile wife and mother. Throughout *Great Expectations*, Biddy performs only private sphere tasks; first, Biddy is Pip’s patient tutor, and later, she is Mrs. Joe’s selfless and unassuming nurse. Biddy’s selflessness makes her an ideal. Biddy establishes authority in the private sphere insofar as she maintains the domestic sphere as quiet and uncorrupt; although Biddy’s authority remains muted, the other characters discussed in this chapter apply their private sphere authority to public sphere decisions discussed or enacted in the home.

*Female Romantics*

Dickens genders the division between fact and fancy in *Hard Times*. In contrast to Estella and Louisa, Sissy—Louisa’s adopted sister—epitomizes idealized female romanticism. Using his narrator to criticize Mr. Gradgrind’s fact-based, masculine-coded education, Dickens glorifies stereotypically feminine traits like compassion, love, and imagination. Women in *Hard Times* find it difficult to adapt to Gradgrind’s rigorous and industrialized education; those that are able to meet Gradgrind’s standards eventually lose “essential” parts of their femininity. The novel implies that an education grounded in the private sphere would be more appropriate
for women. Though idealized female characters in *Hard Times* resist Gradgrind and embrace imagination, they still depend on male characters in a public sense for social standing and financial support.

Dickens idealizes Sissy because of her possession of “natural” feminine impulses like affection, fancy, imagination, and emotion. In the beginning of the novel, Gradgrind frequently chastises Sissy for her inability to recognize factual information as more important than imagination. Sissy’s inability to accurately explain the definition of a horse to Gradgrind sets her up not only as an opposite to Louisa but also to male characters in *Hard Times*. Sissy is idealized insofar as she changes those around her for the better; Slater states that “Gradgrind and his daughter are regenerated spiritually and morally through their contact with Sissy Jupe” (308). Sissy also eventually becomes a role model and advice-giver to Louisa.

Dickens also values Sissy for her soft-spoken and passive nature. Michael Slater notes that Sissy must prepare to become strong and dominant, even in extreme situations:

Sissy has to be turned up to full strength for her scene with Louisa’s would-be seducer, Harthouse, and imposes her influence on him through her “modest fearlessness, her truthfulness . . . her entire forgetfulness of herself in her earnest quiet holding to the object with which she had come”. Because she herself is not threatened she can go on the offensive against villainy without appearing self-assertive, but Dickens is significantly careful to qualify both her fearlessness and her earnestness as “modest” and “quiet”. (259)

Slater persuasively argues that Dickens goes to great lengths to maintain Sissy as a passive character, even when she takes a stand against Louisa’s scoundrel suitor, Harthouse. Dickens describes Sissy thus:
The child-like ingenuousness with which his visitor spoke, her modest fearlessness, her truthfulness which put all artifice aside, her entire forgetfulness of herself in her earnest quiet holding to the object with which she had come: all this, together with her reliance on his easily given promise,—which in itself shamed him,—presented something in which he was so inexperienced, and against which he knew any of his usual weapons would fall so powerless, that not a word could he rally to his relief. (207)

Thus, Sissy’s “child-like” and “modest” nature are the source of her power over Harthouse. By utilizing her docility as aggression, Sissy surprises Harthouse and renders him powerless:

If she had asserted any influence over him beyond her plain faith in the truth and right of what she said; if she had concealed the least doubt or irresolution, or had harboured for the best purpose any reserve or pretence; if she had shown, or felt, the lightest trace of any sensitiveness to his ridicule or his astonishment, or any remonstrance he might offer, he would have carried it against her at this point. But he could as easily have changed a clear sky by looking at it in surprise, as affect her. (209)

Sissy’s stereotypically feminine passivity and humility makes her non-threatening even when she acts as an aggressor. Sissy’s portrayal as non-threatening even while threatening Harthouse perfectly embodies the potential for change in the similarly “non-threatening” domestic sphere.

At the end of the novel, Sissy is the only character in *Hard Times* that has a happy life that includes marriage and children. In comparison, tragic Louisa is relegated to the role of aunt to Sissy’s children. Sissy retains her role as idealized female because she receives the ultimate reward for living an ideal life: a happy ending as wife and mother.

In opposition to characters like Mrs. Bagnet, Sissy is idealized not for her masculine traits but for those traditionally associated with femininity. Her ability to
relate to others and feel emotion is more important than her public roles. Overall, romantic Sissy is a non-threatening, soft-spoken character; indeed, she is the embodiment of the traditional domestic realm. Comforting, docile characters like Sissy and Biddy actively maintain the home as a safe haven absent of public sphere contamination, establishing authority that facilitates small but significant changes in a non-threatening environment.

**Female Philanthropists**

Esther, housekeeper and narrator in *Bleak House*, is Dickens’s ideal social worker. Her philanthropy is quite different from that of Mrs. Jellyby and Mrs. Pardiggle. Dickens’s punishment of Mrs. Jellyby and Mrs. Pardiggle demonstrates that philanthropy should be a personal act, not a broad-scale social one. Surprisingly, Esther’s one-on-one social work has a uniquely public flavor; as an idealized character, she is a role model for women in public roles like hers.

Esther’s successful philanthropic efforts differ greatly from those of her disparaged counterparts. Esther addresses injustice on a smaller scale than Mrs. Jellyby or Mrs. Pardiggle. Esther’s philanthropy also takes on the form of “charitable visiting,” defined by Elizabeth Langland as the spread of domestic knowledge from one woman to another in the private sphere; Esther takes an active role in disseminating information to Caddy Jellyby about running a household after Caddy’s engagement. According to Langland, charitable visitors possess power in their ability to determine who deserves knowledge. Langland does not explore, however, the ways in which “charitable visiting” is a public act; though these visits occur in a private
sphere, they do not occur in Esther’s private sphere. Because Esther leaves her home to spread housekeeping information to Caddy, her visits become public acts of charity, albeit on a small scale.

Matthew McGuire notes that Esther also interacts with others in need of assistance:

Esther matures as a woman through her interactions with the two young wives, Jenny and Liz, whose plight is poverty and ill-treatment from their husbands. Through the kindness Esther shows them and the kindness they return to her, a bond of sisterhood is established among the three. (47)

Though critics like McGuire define Esther’s relationships with Jenny and Liz as charitable, few note that the main charitable relationship that Esther maintains is with Caddy. The “bond of sisterhood” that Esther shares with Caddy is much stronger than the one she shares with Jenny and Liz. Esther serves as a mentor to Caddy throughout *Bleak House*, teaching her the housekeeping skills that her mother lacks. Dickens does not punish Esther’s “charitable visiting” as Caddy Jellyby’s confidant and domestic instructor in spite of the fact that her visits insert the private sphere into the public world.

Esther’s housekeeping lessons would have been unnecessary if Mrs. Jellyby had fulfilled her role as Caddy’s mother; similarly, Esther’s charity would be unnecessary if Jenny and Liz had not lived in poverty. Through Esther’s kindness, Dickens provides commentary on the poverty that necessitates such philanthropic work. Her role as a friend and listener to those less fortunate is more constructive than the “forced benevolence” of Mrs. Pardiggle and the letter-writing campaigns of Mrs. Jellyby. Dickens implies that the government is ineffective—typified by the never-
ending Jarndyce suit—and should be providing for the basic needs of everyone. Then, philanthropists’ only role would be to disseminate knowledge through friendship as Esther does. Rather than acting as an authority to the people she helps, Esther attempts to fit in and offers non-monetary solutions to her friends’ problems. Thus, Esther does not simply extend the private sphere; she also expands roles for women in the public sphere.

Though Mrs. Jellyby and Mrs. Pardiggle donate material goods and money to improve the conditions of the impoverished, the aid that Esther offers is more immediately helpful. Esther’s qualitative approach to philanthropy educates those who are disadvantaged instead of simply keeping them dependent. Esther’s attitude toward social work is also much different from that of Mrs. Jellyby or Mrs. Pardiggle. These two women brag about the charity work that they perform and constantly remind Esther that they are busy. Mrs. Jellyby works on correspondence for her African project during family meals, and Mrs. Pardiggle forces her children to donate the little money they have to charity. Esther does not force those that she visits to accept her help as Mrs. Pardiggle does with the local poor and Mrs. Jellyby does with the Booriboola-Gha; instead, Esther refrains from helping people until they ask. Esther’s idealization demonstrates that Dickens favors personalized acts of charity but has a decidedly negative view of wide-scale philanthropy.

The power inherent in Esther’s idealization is further signified by her possession of household keys, literal objects that give her the ability to unlock the secrets of all of the characters in *Bleak House*. Alison Milbank notes that Esther’s
“role of housekeeper, and thus keyholder, that she there assumes expresses . . . her status within the house by the nature of her role as narrator: opening up a situation and its mysteries to the reader” (83). Storytelling is a public role for a Victorian woman; the power to record and disseminate stories about people is an important one, though not as expressly public as the ability to participate in political processes.

Though Esther’s position as housekeeper places her in a subordinate role to nonworking characters in *Bleak House*, Milbank demonstrates that

> The nearest she comes to cooking or cleaning is her dusting of Jarndyce’s books, which is the sort of task any young lady might not wish to leave to a servant. Rather Esther is overseer and guardian of the house; her keys help her to keep accurate lists of stocks of linen and china; she attends to the contents of larder and still-room; it is she who holds the records of the contents and transactions of the household. (84)

Milbank argues persuasively that Esther has significant power in her position as housekeeper. Esther’s frequent interactions with John Jarndyce, the owner of *Bleak House*, further indicate her authority and power. In contrast, Ada and Richard, her young companions, spend very little time in the homeowner’s company, signifying their lesser importance to the home.

Furthermore, Milbank shows that Esther’s status as a newcomer to *Bleak House* and an outsider to the Jarndyce lawsuit gives her more power in the house:

> Esther functions as a Petrine key, a key of judgement, and precisely because of her outsider status. Illegitimate, she is outside the cognizance of the law, as the good Samaritan of the parable, and like him, she can act when those within the law cannot. (96)
Milbank neglects to recognize that Esther’s status as an outsider and newcomer further contributes to her role as disseminator of advice to all characters, including Mr. Jarndyce; dispensing advice is the epitome of a public act with implicit power.

The reader sees other powerful traits in Esther as well. In *The Novel and the Police*, D.A. Miller notes that Esther is disengaged from the corrupt Jarndyce lawsuit, stating that she enacts an “absolute refusal to be touched by the suit” (76). Though Esther’s strictly domestic occupation could justify her separation from the lawsuit, Esther makes an active choice to remain separate from the lawsuit and encourages characters like Richard to do the same. Esther’s frequent interactions with Mr. Jarndyce, Richard, and Ada, all of whom are involved in the lawsuit, make the fact that she refuses to participate obvious and meaningful; Esther thus exercises her power over the public realm in her refutation of it.

Miller demonstrates that *Bleak House* revolves around depictions of the domestic world:

*Bleak House* speaks not merely for the hearth, in its prudent care to avoid materials or levels of explicitness about them unsuitable for family entertainment, but from the hearth as well, implicitly grounding its critical perspective on the world within a domesticity that is more or less protected against mundane contamination. (82)

Miller recognizes the separation and protection of the hearth as an active protest against the corruption of the public sphere. Esther publicly decries this “mundane contamination” in her rejection of the corrupt lawsuit.

Esther’s writing empowers her. As a storyteller, Esther does not simply engage in the public act of sharing knowledge; she also expands the importance of the
thoughts of women to all of her readers, contemporary and otherwise. While some critics read her character as confused and contradictory, she is instead the embodiment of the unimportance thrust upon Victorian women’s feelings and opinions. Overall, Dickens’s attempt to portray her as traditionally domestic and therefore lacking opinions on public sphere matters is not effective.

Brenda Ayres argues that Dickens’s use of Esther as narrator reflects his attempt to portray a female character who is unobtrusive and upholds traditional domestic ideology; this attempt is especially evident in Esther’s erasure of her feelings from her writing. Some critics, Ayres included, believe that Esther’s confusion parallels Dickens’s uncertainty about writing from a woman’s perspective. Ayres notes that

All the while that the text constructs Esther as an exemplar of womanhood and a female advocate for domesticity, it also struggles to convey Dickens’s understanding of women, and at the same time to convey Victorian woman’s attempt to understand herself. This is no easy task because Esther is constantly being either defined or effaced by other people. (141)

Additionally, Ayres’s analysis persuasively argues that Dickens does not fully understand the way that Victorian women think (141). She fails to recognize that Dickens’s confusion about the self-image of Victorian women easily translates to uncertainty about their public roles.

In *Dickens and Women*, Michael Slater also finds Esther’s perspective problematic and argues that Dickens’s portrayal of Esther as a narrator is inconsistent: “Dickens seems, in fact, to be trying to make Esther function both as an unreliable and as a reliable narrator at the same time and the result is, not surprisingly,
unsatisfactory” (257). Esther’s confusion about her proper place in the private and public spheres is significant. The fact that she exhibits anxiety about her positions and still fulfills Dickens’s feminine ideal demonstrates that confusion is an acceptable—if not desirable—quality in women.

Given evidence of Dickens’s conventional view of gender roles elsewhere in these novels, we might expect his portrayal of Esther’s writing to support the patriarchal status quo of eliminating the importance of women’s thoughts; yet Esther makes the reader care about her opinions, feelings, and actions. Though she makes her desires seem unimportant and frequent changes in narration style erase her thoughts, Esther still writes about her feelings. Ayres says this:

At another time Esther tries to tell that her attitude about Allan need not be mentioned; [indeed,] Esther’s writing is an attempt to erase herself from the narrative. She not only does not succeed, she effects just the opposite. The effort itself highlights her desires and needs when domesticity would deny that women possess such things. (149)

Esther’s act of self-sacrifice in her decision to marry her guardian is another example of Ayres’s point; though Esther attempts to make it seem as though romantic love is not necessary for her to be happy in marriage, the reader gets the distinct impression not only that Esther does not desire to marry Jarndyce but also that she wants to feel affection for the man she marries. Esther’s attempt to erase her important thoughts and feelings only makes them more obvious to the discerning reader. Thus, the domestic woman’s attempt to erase her identity calls attention to self-subjugating processes that would not have existed in a male-centered narrative. This subversive text gives woman’s voice (through Dickens) the space to articulate struggle and pain when women were supposed to aspire and moderate their behavior...
toward an angel-in-the-house ideal naturally and joyfully. Esther has constantly resisted her own dissent, and the text has portrayed her as forcing herself to conform. Through ink on the page, the female inadvertently but severely undercuts the benevolence and the absolute value of the domestic ideology that the Dickensian text has attempted to construct and advocate. (153)

Esther’s process of conforming is obvious and even tragic, forcing the reader to sympathize with Esther and others who force themselves into conformity. By underscoring the importance of her feelings, Esther makes them important to the reader, subverting traditional Victorian femininity that assumes that a woman’s feelings are irrelevant.

Esther also redefines the ways that women participate in the public sphere. Though Esther is deeply involved in many other characters’ lives, she is never considered a gossip or busybody like Mrs. Jellyby and Mrs. Pardiggle. Though Ayres is correct to assert that “Esther’s interests focus on the personal and the domestic; she gives herself to relationships within those parameters” (142), Ayres does not recognize that Esther’s relationships with people, though they develop in the private sphere, are nonetheless public because they do not occur in Esther’s private sphere. Because the maintenance of Esther’s friendships occurs in the private spheres of Caddy, Liz, and Jenny, among others, her personal relationships take on a public flavor.

Dickens transforms the private sphere in Bleak House; rather than portraying it as a bastion of safety and comfort, Dickens’s private spheres are rife with problems. The impoverished homes of characters like Jenny and Liz, the relationship difficulties between both Ada and Richard and Esther and Mr. Jarndyce, and the scandalous uncovering of Esther’s parentage are all situated in the private sphere. The problems in
the novel that occur in the public sphere—Richard’s debt, for example—cause interpersonal problems in the private sphere instead of affecting public sphere reputations or involvement. Esther’s idealized character is simple and joyful; as dispenser of advice, storyteller, and philanthropist, she tackles the problems of the public world. Her success in this task suggests that the expansion of female activity into the public world would produce positive results.

Female Activists

_Bleak House_ presents the reader with another ideal form of citizenship, in addition to charitable giving. Dickens contrasts Miss Wisk, whose brand of political participation is punished in the novel, with Mrs. Bagnet, another minor _Bleak House_ character. Mrs. Bagnet controls her husband’s opinions even in conversations between males and in public matters like criminal investigations. Though Mrs. Bagnet is not wholly idealized, her involvement in the public sphere decidedly garners praise from her husband and other characters.

Dickens finds value and even political potential in female domesticity, especially in characters like Mrs. Bagnet. The narrator prioritizes political resistance inside the home; though Mrs. Bagnet’s primary role in _Bleak House_ is a domestic one, she has the unique responsibility of announcing her husband’s opinion—at his request—to anyone who asks: “‘Old girl!’ murmurs Mr. Bagnet, after a short silence, ‘will you tell him my opinion?’” (542). Even though Mrs. Bagnet usurps power from her husband, Ayres notes that “Mrs. Bagnet in _Bleak House_ is one of Dickens’s few examples of a mature woman functioning admirably as wife and mother” (313). Mr.
Bagnet relies wholeheartedly on his wife to know and share “his” thoughts, even in public sphere business decisions. Surprisingly, Mr. Bagnet is happy with his wife’s role in their marriage and thinks very highly of her; indeed, he would be a lost and incapable individual without her. Thus, Dickens demonstrates his belief that political participation through a male intermediary allows a female to balance her domestic and political roles. Though Ayres sees the idealization of Mrs. Bagnet’s quasi-public role as “subject for affectionate humour on Dickens’s part” (313), Mrs. Bagnet’s character is both idealized and subversive, demonstrating the potential for the superiority of women in the private sphere to overflow into the public world.

Dickens strongly associates Mrs. Bagnet with essentially masculine qualities. She is described as a systematic, logical person, especially in her domestic duties:

> In the distribution of these comestibles, as in every other household duty, Mrs. Bagnet develops an exact system; sitting with every dish before her; allotting to every portion of pork its own portion of pot-liquor, greens, potatoes, and even mustard; and serving it out complete. Having likewise served out the beer from a can, and thus supplied the mess with all things necessary, Mrs. Bagnet proceeds to satisfy her own hunger, which is in a healthy state. (442–443)

The author also associates Mrs. Bagnet with aggressive masculine behavior: “‘George, you know the old girl—she’s as sweet and as mild as milk. But touch her or the children—or myself—and she’s off like gunpowder’” (544). Mrs. Bagnet’s association with masculine character traits is appropriate given her level of control of her marriage and home. Surprisingly, Mrs. Bagnet retains these masculine qualities without becoming wholly masculine (and without being punished, like Mrs. Joe); instead, she is an exemplar of traditional Victorian femininity.
Though Mrs. Bagnet is a traditional housewife, her role as decision-maker inserts her decidedly into the public sphere. She is the only character that can authorize important family decisions, even those that include business transactions with other men:

“George,” says Mr. Bagnet. “You know me. It’s my old girl that advises. She has the head. But I never own to it before her. Discipline must be maintained. Wait till the greens is off her mind. Then, we’ll consult. Whatever the old girl says, do—do it!” (441)

Though the requirement of a male intermediary like Mr. Bagnet problematizes a view of Dickens as proto-feminist, a strong yet idealized female character like Mrs. Bagnet has revolutionary potential. Even her husband is complimentary: “‘George,’ says Mr. Bagnet, looking straight before him, ‘the old girl—can’t do anything—that don’t do her credit. More or less. I never say so. Discipline must be maintained’” (544).

Though Mr. Bagnet’s refusal to praise his wife is unfortunate, he does recognize her value, giving Mrs. Bagnet serious power in the home and in the public sphere; Mrs. Bagnet makes decisions about both the dinner menu and business transactions. A partially idealized character like Mrs. Bagnet has incredible potential to expand notions of “appropriate” public involvement for all Victorian women.

Idealized characters serve to create and expand roles for women in the public sphere. Dickens’s female role models possess public power, subverting his conservative, patriarchal analysis of the transgressive characters discussed in Chapter One. Women who exist in the public eye are especially important to proto-feminist aims, expanding “appropriate” public sphere roles through their philanthropy and inadvertent control of their husbands. Surprisingly, even female characters who
uphold traditional gender stereotypes play an important role in social change. Overall, these female characters represent a shift in Victorian perceptions of women in the public sphere.
Chapter 3: Female Power in Unusual Places

*Bleak House, Hard Times,* and *Great Expectations* exemplify the ways in which female characters use their private sphere authority to possess public power. Though the novels analyzed for this study argue that men are necessary to the political public sphere, female characters assert their control in the home in unusual ways. Esther is a prime example. Elizabeth Langland asserts that characters like Esther possess unusual power in their management of servants and other actions in their homes; Langland compares Esther to *Bleak House’s* male public figures Tulkinghorn and Bucket, explaining that “power and control belong to those who have information and understanding, coupled with the determination to impose order on their worlds” (88). Langland shows that “etiquette, household management, and charitable visiting” (8) are a clearly defined space of power for female characters like Esther.

Furthermore, Mary Poovey’s *Uneven Developments* discusses the ways in which public roles become more acceptable for Victorian women because professions in hospitals and orphanages necessitate “naturally” feminine qualities. Poovey uses the example of the female nurse to illustrate that women possess power in these settings by appropriating qualities that are traditionally coded feminine. While Esther is not a nurse, she is a nurturing educator to Caddy Jellyby, a confidant to many characters, and a general problem-solver for Richard and Ada. These three roles closely conform to Poovey’s definition of a nurse in that they capitalize on qualities most Victorians deemed “natural” to women.
Masculine characters in Dickens’s fiction are intermediaries through which women participate in political activity. Many marriages in *Bleak House* contain idealized female characters that support fundamentally conservative arguments against women’s suffrage. To Dickens, political participation through the intermediary of a male character allows a woman to maintain balance in her life, completing domestic tasks while also participating—through her husband—in the public world. This hegemonic view argues for solely masculine participation in politics and government. Dickens creates strong wives that indoctrinate their husbands with their opinions, yet in the process he demonstrates the potential power of women in the political process.

Male characters’ lack of agency provides an opportunity for women to possess power in the home and in the public sphere as well. The novels in this study showcase many married couples in which a wife overshadows and controls her husband. Some examples of this phenomenon are the marriages of Mrs. Joe and Mrs. Bagnet in *Great Expectations* and *Bleak House*, respectively. The prevalence of unbalanced marriages demonstrates a gendered division of silence and loudness in Dickensian marriages; silent characters lack agency, while loud, assertive characters possess power in the home and in the public world. Because male characters are not responsible for private sphere cares like housekeeping and childcare, they are rendered helpless when their dominant wives do not fulfill traditional domestic roles. Because female characters in *Bleak House, Hard Times, and Great Expectations* exist in a vacuum of male power, they easily adopt strong, uncompromising personality traits.
This chapter will transition from discussing more transgressive characters that wield surprising female power to those who are least punished for their authority. While some of these characters—like Mrs. Joe—are quite harshly punished for their expansion of public female roles, they can nonetheless be read as evincing discontent with traditional femininity and expanding the confining domestic sphere. Other characters that are more explicitly celebrated have even greater potential to create a space for women in politics and government.

_Mrs. Joe_

Women in the novels analyzed for this study are unqualified authorities in the private sphere. In contrast, their husbands are silent and submissive at home, epitomized by Joe in _Great Expectations_. Joe lacks control in both the private and public spheres. Mrs. Joe rules the home and Pip considers all household objects her property; Milbank notices that Mrs. Joe “exercises dominance to such an extent that Pip never considers that any household effect might actually belong to Joe, rather than to his sister” (124). Though women in the Victorian period have authority over the private sphere, material possessions in this sphere do not belong to them. Instead, women are charged with maintaining household items in the same way that they are charged with taking care of children. Surprisingly, Mrs. Joe is the owner and caretaker of material possessions in her home, leaving Joe with little authoritative space.

Mrs. Joe’s marriage to Joe is a necessary step toward attaining her independence and authority. An independent character like her would not voluntarily choose marriage and motherhood when she so clearly does not desire it. An unmarried
Mrs. Joe would have remained dependent on her father and inferior to men. Instead, Mrs. Joe uses her undesired marriage to her advantage, creating authority where women typically have none. (As discussed in Chapter One, she pays a high price for usurping male authority.)

Mrs. Joe purposely maintains her husband’s submissiveness. In *Corrupt Relations*, Barickman and his coauthors define Joe as “inferior [to Mrs. Joe] by all society’s standards except the all-important one of sex” (72). However, Joe’s inferiority is a symptom of Mrs. Joe’s poor treatment rather than a cause of it. Mrs. Joe has disciplined Joe into inferiority. Milbank persuasively argues that “Mrs. Joe’s power is so absolute that she reduces her strapping husband to the level of a dependent child” (124). Joe is a grown-up child, constantly Pip’s equal as “fellow-sufferer” and a “larger species of child.” Mrs. Joe’s perpetuation of Joe’s childlike personality traits facilitates his mediocrity and submission; only after Mrs. Joe is not a presence in their home does Joe learn reading and writing skills. Mrs. Joe is not inherently superior to Joe; instead, she creates and maintains his inferiority.

Mrs. Joe also dominates Joe’s working life, the main reason for her tragic end. She is immersed in Joe’s workplace to the point that she argues with Orlick, a forge employee; without this sphere transgression, Orlick would never have attacked her. As a representative of Joe’s life in the public sphere, Orlick is the only person in *Great Expectations* who subverts Mrs. Joe’s authority: “The only man who has the audacity to defy her authority becomes her master, the only man who has defined her nature”
Orlick overthrows the authority of Mrs. Joe literally and symbolically, eliminating her position as ruler of Joe’s public life.

Joe’s silence is necessary for Mrs. Joe’s authority in the public and the private sphere. In fact, the presence of silent male characters like Joe is just as necessary to the expansion of women’s roles in the public sphere as the absence of hyper-masculine and aggressive characters like Orlick. Barickman and his coauthors realize the delicate balance of Mrs. Joe’s authority:

For all her apparent mastery, Mrs. Joe has had to live a life of constant vigilance lest anything threaten her position. Her power, somewhere in her own mind, appears precarious, even though she has the least rebellious of subjects. Her near-hysteria of self-assertion springs from a fear of her own impotence. (71).

Mrs. Joe’s fear of losing power is justified, especially because Victorian society encourages submission and meekness. Her power does not simply seem precarious, it is precarious; Mrs. Joe’s possession of authority—however temporary—threatens patriarchy and begins to expand public roles for women, resulting in her violent demise. While Dickens constructs Mrs. Joe’s authoritative identity as transgressive, he also gives the reader information about the sympathetic complexities of her character. Barickman and his coauthors agree:

though Dickens first presents her as an outrageous tyrant, his remarkable sympathy for any form of suffering and his remarkable insight into the oppressive nature of sexual relations in his society cause him to create a method of implicit characterization that arouses a divided response to Mrs. Joe. (75)

Even though Mrs. Joe is ultimately punished for her gender transgression, as I argued in Chapter One, this “divided response” her character inspires assists in Mrs. Joe’s
already revolutionary usurpation of the male prerogative. Mrs. Joe’s unhappiness in her traditional feminine role—violently enacted upon young Pip and gentle Joe—creates narrative space for more characters like her, for whom a home and income are not enough.

*Mrs. Jellyby*

Mrs. Jellyby is another exemplar of unusual female power. She allows her philanthropic work to take over her life and her home. Indeed, her house is in disarray and her children are unkempt. Her domestic ineptitude is also duplicated in her children. When Caddy, Mrs. Jellyby’s daughter, becomes engaged, she worries that she will not fulfill traditional female roles like her mother.

Mrs. Jellyby and Mr. Jellyby’s relationship is unique insofar as Mrs. Jellyby does not require the presence of Mr. Jellyby to be legitimately publicly involved. Marriage is not a necessity for her as it is for Mrs. Joe, especially because she does not desire authority over men or the public sphere. Though Mrs. Jellyby is immersed in the public sphere, she does not seek to dominate it like Mrs. Joe and Mrs. Bagnet. Indeed, her philanthropic efforts would have been quite similar if she had remained a single woman. Mrs. Jellyby functions in the public world, gives her opinion, and survives, all without Mr. Jellyby. She depends on his income for her ability to participate so fully in her philanthropy efforts; however, Mrs. Jellyby’s father would have provided similar financial support had Mrs. Jellyby remained unmarried.

Even as Mrs. Jellyby is transgressive, her role in philanthropy expands public roles for women. Mrs. Jellyby could easily survive and continue her philanthropic
work without her husband; in addition, Mrs. Jellyby’s ineptitude as a wife and mother imply that Mrs. Jellyby should have remained unmarried. Encouraging such thoughts of independence in women readers is essential to proto-feminist aims; the idea that some women should not be married empowers women who feel as though they have a societal responsibility instead of a familial one. Instead of an “unforgettable emblem of the domestic wrecked by the intrusion of the outer world” (Slater 316), Mrs. Jellyby’s character has been wrecked by the institution of marriage. As Ayres notes in *Dissenting Women in Dickens’ Novels*, “The Dickens text resists women who circumvent patriarchal order through religion but, in so doing, also registers feminine dissatisfaction with restriction to a domestic role” (39).

Ayres offers another explanation for Mrs. Jellyby’s involvement for philanthropy besides religious zeal: “a disposition to be spiritually minded could be expected when, without birth control methods, women faced a serious and real risk of dying in childbirth” (39). Using this logic, Mrs. Jellyby’s philanthropic sense can be viewed not as selfish, but as self-preservation.

Unsurprisingly, Mr. Jellyby does not participate in improving the dire situation in his home. Like Mr. Bagnet and Joe, he is silent throughout most of *Bleak House*: “‘[Mr. Jellyby] may be a very superior man; but he is, so to speak, merged—Merged—in the more shining qualities of his wife’” (50). Mrs. Jellyby’s philanthropic efforts define Mr. Jellyby as well, an example of her larger usurpation of his identity. Mr. Jellyby becomes vocal about the nature of his marriage and the state of his home once Caddy prepares for marriage; until this point, Mr. Jellyby does not express any
unhappiness. When Caddy becomes exasperated with her lack of domestic knowledge, Mr. Jellyby states, “My poor girl, you have not been very well taught how to make a home for your husband; but unless you mean with all your heart to strive to do it, you had better murder him than marry him—if you really love him” (475). Mr. Jellyby equates the disarray of his home with his death but does not try to change his situation, a behavior he has in common with husbands in other Dickens novels.

Slater’s portrayal of Mr. Jellyby as “the unfortunate husband [who] sits despairingly in the kitchen with his head against the wall beseeching his eldest daughter never to have ‘a Mission’” (315) is largely accurate. Indeed, Mr. Jellyby acts quite helpless. Rather than helping around the house, Mr. Jellyby wastes his time deploping his marital and familial situation; his lack of agency allows Mrs. Jellyby full control of his marriage and household.

**Miss Wisk**

Miss Wisk also has a silent partner, Mr. Quayle. As the most vocal character about women’s rights in the three novels analyzed for this study, the fact that Miss Wisk’s partner barely exists is no surprise. Indeed, Dickens’s inclusion of Mr. Quayle is unexpected insofar as Miss Wisk will presumably not become a spinster even though she is independent, vocal, and politically-motivated—the epitome of transgression. The presence of Mr. Quayle specifically—and a fiancé in general—is necessary for Miss Wisk to express her opinions.

Miss Wisk represents an expansion of the public sphere as a legitimate place for women, even as Dickens ridicules her and requires her engagement to Mr. Quayle.
Miss Wisk’s presence as a character type in *Bleak House* publicizes her views and implies that some Victorian women think the same way. Moreover, though Miss Wisk is a transgressive character who the narrator ridicules, she is not silenced like Mrs. Joe. Like Mrs. Bagnet, Miss Wisk does not receive a life as an old maid as punishment for her transgression; Dickens demonstrates that even a woman with radical beliefs can remain feminine in marriage.

*Mrs. Bagnet*

Like Miss Wisk, Mrs. Bagnet still retains her femininity despite her involvement in the public sphere, though she does require the presence of her husband. Indeed, Dickens more explicitly admires Mrs. Bagnet than many other characters in *Bleak House, Great Expectations, and Hard Times*. Even though Mrs. Bagnet possesses a great deal of public power, she is overwhelmingly presented to the reader as a character who is competent, authoritative, and—surprisingly—feminine. Dickens frequently describes Mrs. Bagnet as an emblem of ideal femininity; he especially values her because she instills domestic values in her daughters:

> The great delight and energy with which the two young ladies apply themselves to [household] duties, turning up their skirts in imitation of their mother, and skating in and out on little scaffolds of pattens, inspire the highest hopes for the future, but some anxiety for the present. (756)

Mrs. Bagnet not only rules her home using traditional domesticity; she also teaches her daughters to emulate her. Mrs. Bagnet’s children thus have the potential to facilitate their own public involvement.

Mrs. Bagnet’s marriage may at first look like a satirical portrait of Victorian families. Langland says this:
[Mrs. Bagnet], thus, originates “their” opinions and values while he plays out his ideological role as ‘head’ of the family. The two together enact a parodic drama of the cultural myth of dominant husband and submissive wife, while testifying to the wife’s managerial authority. (90)

While Mr. Bagnet can be comical at times, he is not always laughable. Indeed, his character is overtly politicized in a serious way. He repeatedly entreats his wife to bear and express his opinions to other people, even to other men. In fact, Mr. Bagnet does not have opinions. Instead, he seems happy without authority, even during a tense conversation when George, a family friend, is unable to pay his debts: “‘Old girl,’” murmurs Mr. Bagnet, ‘give him another bit of my mind’” (477). Mr. Bagnet defers to his wife in matters of professional or business advice, making him more of an anomaly. When George visits the Bagnets to discuss his debts, Mr. Bagnet tells him that he must wait until after dinner:

‘George,’ says Mr. Bagnet. ‘You know me. It’s my old girl that advises. She has the head. But I never own to it before her. Discipline must be maintained. Wait till the greens is off her mind. Then, we’ll consult. Whatever the old girl says, do—do it!’ (441)

Surprisingly, Mr. Bagnet idolizes Mrs. Bagnet in spite of her control of his life. He frequently elaborates on Mrs. Bagnet’s many merits:

‘When she took me—and accepted of the ring—she ’listed under me and the children—heart and head; for life. She’s that earnest,’ says Mr. Bagnet, ‘and true to her colours—that, touch us with a finger—and she turns out—and stands to her arms. If the old girl fires wide—once in a way—at the call of duty—look over it, George. For she’s loyal!’ (479)

‘You are right!’ says Mr. Bagnet with the warmest enthusiasm, though without relaxing the rigidity of a single muscle. ‘Think as high of the old girl—as the rock of Gibraltar—and still you’ll be thinking low—of such merits. But I never own to it before her. Discipline must be maintained.’ (479)
These quotes are political commentaries on Victorian marriages. In fact, Mr. Bagnet’s comments alert the reader to Mrs. Bagnet’s appreciated but unstated role in the family more than they provide comic relief. In *Dickens and Women*, Slater agrees, characterizing Mrs. Bagnet as “one of Dickens’s few examples of a mature woman functioning admirably as wife and mother” (313) instead of a humorous depiction of the appropriation of male power.

In spite of Mr. Bagnet’s silence, he is a necessary part of Mrs. Bagnet’s political equation; without him, she cannot express her opinions freely or participate in the public sphere. Mr. Bagnet does not have authority either in the home or in the public sphere, but his nod of approval is a necessary precursor to Mrs. Bagnet’s public voice: “‘Old girl!’ murmurs Mr. Bagnet, after a short silence, ‘will you tell him my opinion?’” (542).

Transgressive or idealized, female characters in *Hard Times*, *Bleak House*, and *Great Expectations* have the potential to expand public roles for women in inadvertent ways. The silence of their husbands allows them full control of not only the private sphere but the public sphere as well. Thus, Dickens inadvertently demonstrates that public involvement for women is not necessarily threatening or inappropriate.
Conclusion

Traditionally, Charles Dickens has been read as opposing proto-feminist goals. Many of his female characters uphold stereotypical gendered behavior, and women have little public sphere authority as it is defined today. Indeed, women who demonstrate extreme transgression are harshly punished with death or—perhaps worse for Victorians—the lack of a family. Yet, as Brenda Ayres notes, “many women succeed (they are happy and do not die of brain fever or end up in the workhouse, Newgate, or, worst of all, America) outside domesticity” (3). Dickens’s female success stories may seem unremarkable at first glance; however, a critical reading of Bleak House, Hard Times, and Great Expectations demonstrates that his female characters are nothing if not extraordinary.

Historically, some critics recognize the potential of Dickens’s novels to create social change. Alison Milbank asserts that

It often seems, reading the middle and late novels of Dickens, that he raises questions and shows skepticism about fundamental institutions and social constructs only to fail in nerve when it comes to the means of changing the status quo. (101)

Moreover, critics like Milbank notice that women can appropriate essentially feminine characteristics to make their inclusion in public sphere roles seem more legitimate:

“Dickens takes as given the close association of women and home, and sees women as the group who might be able to extend their natural mothering and housekeeping tasks from the domestic to the public realm” (90). However, many critics do not recognize the great changes that Dickens’s characters have already made to the status quo by
expanding female roles even when they are not closely associated with traditional domestic interests.

This study is not the first to recognize that private sphere authority is powerful. In *Nobody’s Angels*, Elizabeth Langland theorizes that the middle-class home is an especially compelling source of power for women:

Rather than representing the family as a realm idealistically outside of an institutional and public sphere, Dickens positions the middle-class home as a competing site of power, the province of emerging cultural definitions that seek to supplant the cumbersome behemoths of Chancery and the aristocracy with the detective police and the middle-class, to replace external controls with self-discipline. (90)

The parallels between authority in the private and public spheres show the Dickens reader that the personal is political and that power, no matter where it exists, is a step towards equality.

Overall, this study demonstrates that Dickens’s writing is not what it may immediately seem: a punitive portrayal of women who transgress domestic ideology. Instead, Dickens’s fiction is rife with contradictions and complexities, sometimes enforcing the status quo and other times carving out definitive new spaces for women. Indeed, by reading against the grain, a reader can find feminist ideology in quite surprising places.
Bibliography


