Sexualities in Victorian Britain

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In Dickens's early sketches and novels, tainted female sexuality is almost always located in the realms of urban poverty and among a class of women who, though essentially virtuous, can be sacrificed without harm to the structures of middle-class life. Indeed, the street prostitute Nancy in Oliver Twist carries the burden of any stain that might have shadowed the reputations of Oliver's dead mother or the chaste Rose Maylie and, in some profound sense, her death purges the novel of their taint. With Dombey and Son (1846–48) and Bleak House (1851–53), however, fallen female sexuality is introduced upwards into the middle class: here it cannot be located solely in the lower classes and identified as safely separate from the realm of the bourgeois family. The distinction between the woman of the hearth and the woman of the streets no longer holds: the "prostitute" has become a wife and, with her, urban pollutions of all kinds have invaded the preserves of middle-class life.¹

Raymond Williams writes of connection—the "consciousness . . . of recognitions and relationships"—as the mark of Dickens's vision of London and identifies this vision as that which animates and gives form to his novels.⁴ These connections, which determine urban existence and the structure of Dickens's novels alike, are "the necessary recognitions and avowals of society" and yet "they are of a
kind that are obscured, complicated, mystified." In Dombey, and more completely in Bleak House, those hidden connections that link apparently separate individuals, classes, and neighborhoods include not only moral and physical pestilence but tainted sexuality and its own accompanying legacy of disease. The prostitute—or the sexually suspect woman of the "respectable" classes—embodies and enacts sexual connection and thereby threatens the separateness, health and survival of the middle class. She is associated in middle-class fears with what the French historian Alain Corbin has called a "process of degeneration that threatens to annihilate the bourgeoisie."7

In these two novels, and in much of the social and sanitary reform literature of the mid-Victorian decades, the threat of disease from unsanitary urban conditions and the spread of epidemic illnesses merges with the threat of disease and degeneration from exposure to infected female sexuality. In cultural imagery and scientific discourse, the prostitute was linked through metaphor and notions of contagion with the decay, contaminated waste, and insidious filth of the city. Corbin, in delineating the images associated with prostitution that fueled the demand for its regulation, finds the prostitute linked metaphorically with sewers, drains, stench, rotting corpses, and death.8 Lynda Nead, in her work on Victorian myths of sexuality, shows how the "elements of sanitary debate . . . the tainted air and impure water, the miasma from metropolitan burial grounds" are marshalled in certain textual evocations of fallen women, among them Dickens's description of the prostitute Martha in David Copperfield.9 In those passages from the works of the sanitary reformer James Kay and the venereologist William Acton that stand as epigraphs to this essay, the language of contagious disease helps to create a particular notion of the noxious, epidemic nature of "vice" and prostitution. In the case of Kay, whose book on the "moral and physical condition" of the industrial working class begins as an investigation into the causes and spread of cholera, a carefully established discourse of physical contagion is deployed to indict the moral contagion of sin. In the very name of the laws that regulated prostitution—the Contagious Diseases Acts—venereal disease is euphemistically lost in and merged with a generic contagion: embedded in the vagueness of the language is an association of the prostitute with cholera, typhus, smallpox, and other frightening epidemic illnesses.

Reformers and artists alike sought to elicit the disgust, sympathy, anxiety, and indignation of their middle-class readers, to comfort them with notions of their superiority to the debased and diseased poor and sexually fallen and yet to move them to social action by suggesting that they—the middle class—were not wholly safe from contamination from "below." Acton, while depicting the prostitute herself as a "social pest," also took pains to argue that the majority of such women were transients in their work and were headed ultimately for reintegration into respectable society: "there is . . . never a one of them but may herself, when the shadow is past, become the wife of an Englishman and the mother of his offspring."10 Kay warns of disease which, though presently confined to the dens of the poor, may thicken, with a stealthy step, to invade the sanctity of the domestic
circle; ... unconsciously conveyed from those haunts of beggary where it is rife, into the most still and secluded retreat of refinement." The disconcerting invisibility, the undetectability of this process of invasion and infiltration might inspire the reformer's audience to attack the social problems at hand before they overran the boundaries of the nether world. If the "conscientious parent" (i.e., father) would support the cause of regulating prostitution, argued Acton, "with what diminished anxiety would he not contemplate the progress of his boys from infancy to manhood?"

In Dickens's novels the invasion has been achieved on all levels: disease, sexual sin, and moral corruption have made their way invisibly and momentously into the preserves of the respectable. The mercantile London of Dombey and the litigious, labyrinthine, fog-ridden London of Bleak House connect the high and low through analogy, metaphor, and outright contagion. I want to suggest that in these two London fictions various threats of moral and physical contamination are clustered around fallen female sexuality, that the danger to middle-class survival and renewal is posed in the form of debased womanhood, and that each novel prescribes the redemption of chaste, reproductive female sexuality as the antidote to middle-class barrenness and moral bankruptcy. What begins in Dombey as a tenuous link between the conditions of poverty and prostituted sexuality becomes in Bleak House a tight interweaving of slum-bred pestilence and the inherited taint of illicit sexuality. Florence Dombey, who rescues the "house" of Dombey by ensuring a healthy and reinvigorated family line, stands as a rehearsal for Esther Summerson, whose centrality to the personal and social redemption even tentatively envisioned in the novel is signaled by her role as one of its narrators. The only female character of Dickens to tell her own story, Esther carries out the paradoxical task of establishing an egoless "I," an articulated self befitting the existentially (and physically) disfigured but intrepid woman. Esther's powerful transcendence of the taint of inherited sin makes her the ideal female exemplar: to begin in sexual transgression and ultimately to represent what Ellen Moers called "Right Woman" is not just to enact the redemption of female sexuality but to offer a model for the redemption of society.

In both novels the ascendency of uncorrupted womanhood can only follow the expulsion of debased womanhood, and in both novels the real threat to chastity comes in the form of other women, especially women as mothers. Like the "sordid and rapacious" mother of the teenage prostitutes in "The Prisoner's Van" who had thrown them on the streets at an early age, the mothers of Alice Brown, lower-class thief and whore, and Edith Granger, her middle-class cousin and counterpart, are responsible for their daughters' debasement. Florence must be kept not only from Edith's mother but ultimately from Edith herself, and Esther Summerson, in a much more complicated process of acceptance and distancing, must free herself from the maternal inheritance of guilt. Victorian notions of the source of sexual dejection inform and corroborate Dickens's seemingly symbolic rendering of the threat to female chastity. In discussions of the Contagious Diseases Acts, the site of danger and contamination was imagined to be the woman, the prosti-
tute: it was her body that needed to be regulated, her body that was the pollutant.\textsuperscript{14} According to Sander Gilman, it was after the Enlightenment that women replaced men as the exemplary syphilitic patient in European iconography, "with the female as the image of the source of infection."\textsuperscript{15} If women were imagined as the pollutants of men, they were also seen as a danger to other women and, most particularly, to their own daughters: Nead has pointed out that in some Victorian medical and legal discussions of adultery, female infidelity is defined as "a congenital disorder [that] may be inherited by the female offspring."\textsuperscript{16} But if in Dickens, as apparently elsewhere, chaste womanhood is threatened by womanhood already defiled, it is also the case that only another woman can absolve, reclaim, and expiate the sins of one who has fallen.

In both of these novels a vigorous and moral bourgeois ethos is under siege and in need of defense: not the smarmy, hypocritical middle-class complacency pointedly exemplified by Mr. Vholes, who blathers about his devotion to respectability and to his father and three daughters while ruthlessly taking advantage of the weakness and dwindling fortune of chancery supplicants, but the energetic, efficacious and generative spirit of the Bagnets, symbolic of good family, healthy sexuality, even of sane and hearty empire.\textsuperscript{17} Social and economic changes, changes in class relations and technology, promise improvement and simultaneously unsettle social equilibrium. The railroads, the new entrepreneurship, the obsolescence of old ways of measuring time and distance and of doing business in Dombey, the new power of industry, the political ascendancy of the industrialist, the fading of the aristocracy in Bleak House, are all viewed with hope and suspicion. At the same time, within this nexus of change, progress and loss, contagion and tainted inheritance—both moral and physical—threaten to enmesh in the past a society that must go forward to renewal. It is here that the role of woman and of female sexuality is crucial: woman stands either to destroy or to recreate, to foster sterility or to make fertile, to cure pestilence or to be the agent of its circulation.

The London of Dombey and Son hovers between a bygone but exotic world of exploration and trade, represented by the antiquated nautical instruments of Sol Gills's Wooden Midshipman, and the new world of the powerful, demonic railroad: a world changing with ruthless speed as a result of what Gills calls "competition, competition—new invention, new invention—alteration, alteration."\textsuperscript{18} Needing to negotiate but more often neglecting the economic implications of this change, Mr. Dombey doggedly pursues the production of a male heir and the continuance of his name according to an ethic better suited to a would-be aristocrat than to a businessman of the upper bourgeoisie. Just as he ignores the insidious results of his manager, Carker’s, "extending and extending his influence, until the business and his owner were his football" (840), Mr. Dombey remains oblivious to the economic and spiritual value of his female progeny. As a consequence, he is impotent in business, in his overweening will, in his second marriage, in his ability to produce his own future. He must learn that a daughter, who had to him been "a piece of base coin that couldn’t be invested," can indeed offer a return on
his investment and redeem the moral and physical health of the family, the firm and, by extension, the life of the middle class.19

As a result of Mr. Dombey’s failure to understand the power and place of redemptive femininity or the true nature of inheritance, he unleashes on his own family the treachery of debased (female) sexuality. After the death of Paul, son of Mr. Dombey’s sickly and discarded first wife, he must find another suitable woman to produce another male child. Edith Granger, procured for him by the tumescent (“swollen and inflamed about the head”) pandar Joey Bagstock, promises to fit the bill: she has no money but does have aristocratic connections, “blood,” and beauty, and she has proven herself capable of producing a son but is no longer encumbered with the child, who has drowned. She also promises to make no demands on Mr. Dombey’s blocked and tightly restrained emotions, for her air of “exquisite indifference” gives his pride and coldness free reign. Because she has been bred by her mother to be bought on the open market—“hawked and vended here and there, until the last grain of self-respect is dead within” (473)—she regards marriage as a business transaction in which she is commodity rather than buyer or seller: she expects and asks for no psychic sustenance from it for herself.

Mr. Dombey thus makes the error not only of valuing his offspring according to an outdated economic calculus but of relying on the cash nexus to determine the realm of sexuality as well. He buys the maternal sexuality of Polly Toodles in an effort to preserve his son’s life and then buys the reproductive sexuality of Edith Granger so that he can replace that son. Edith herself is from the first remarkably clear-eyed about her role in this process of buying and selling: “I have been offered and rejected, put up and appraised, until my very soul has sickened. I have not had an accomplishment or grace that might have been a resource to me, but it has been paraded and vended, to enhance my value, as if the common crier had called it through the streets” (845). And the novel is equally direct about the analogy between middle-class marriage and prostitution that is exemplified by Edith and her cousin Alice Brown, who explains that her mother, “covetous and poor, . . . thought to make a property of me” (847). I want to suggest, however, that the novel proposes more than a relationship of analogy or parallelism in its representation of these two women and of prostituted sexuality in two different classes. The women are linked to one another directly by blood, by the identical seducer, and by traits of debasement that make them both, however victimized themselves, a threat to the purity of individuals and society. Their fathers, we learn quite late in the narrative, were brothers, “the gayest gentlemen and the best liked” that Good Mrs. Brown had ever encountered—two rakes, one of whom married Edith’s upper-class mother, and the other of whom dallied with Alice’s, a “fresh country wench,” and left her with a child. The taint the women share is not just a parallel one engendered by grasping, corrupt mothers who act as bawds for their own daughters, it is the same one: inherited, congenital, physiologically borne. The stain on Alice’s character is deepened by poverty and illegitimacy, and part of the novel’s point is to suggest the unfairness of Alice’s suffering as compared with Edith’s prosperous, albeit exiled, survival. But the novel also points in
another direction: both of these women are indelibly, dangerously marked—and in the same manner—so that to save the Dombey family and, above all, Florence from contamination, Edith, like Alice, must be removed.

Florence, although apparently incorruptible and unchangeable, is repeatedly exposed to women who threaten to infect her with their own depravity, whether by intention or by means beyond their control. The brief and seemingly purposeless kidnapping of Florence by Good Mrs. Brown early in the novel is paradigmatic of this ongoing threat to the child’s purity. The hag snatches Florence from her two good mothers, Polly Toodles and Susan Nipper, in Stagg’s Gardens and takes her through a wasteland of brick-fields and tile-yards to a hovel surrounded and blackened by mud and cinders. There she removes the child’s clothes and shoes and replaces them with rags and the “crushed remains of a bonnet that had probably been picked up from some ditch or dunghill” (130). She threatens to cut off Florence’s long curls but spares her this because of the daughter far away who had been proud of her beautiful hair. Mrs. Brown’s ostensible motive for terrorizing Florence is the desire for indirect revenge on Mr. Dombey’s manager, Carker, the man responsible for ruining Alice; and she takes the girl’s clothes—and would have taken her hair—for their marketable value. But on a more powerful symbolic and affective level, Mrs. Brown threatens to turn Florence into what her daughter has become and enacts this transformation in just a few moments. Her fairy tale identity as the bad Mrs. Brown, the witch who might kill or devour the innocent princess, only heightens the sense that an emblematic defloration of the child is being threatened: “Florence was so relieved to find that it was only her hair and not her head which Mrs. Brown coveted” (130–31).

Florence continues throughout the novel to be exposed to predatory or dangerously polluted mothers. Later on, just as Edith Granger is about to marry Mr. Dombey, Florence must be protected from Mrs. Skewton, Edith’s mother, who threatens her in precisely the same way Mrs. Brown had. Mrs. Skewton wants to claim possession of the girl and remarks too on Florence’s resemblance to her own daughter when young. Edith, assessing the situation correctly, orders her mother to return Florence to her home: “It is enough,” she admonishes her mother, “that we are what we are. I will have no youth and truth dragged down to my level. I will have no guileless nature undermined, corrupted, and perverted, to amuse the leisure of a world of mothers” (514). Finally, it is Edith herself from whom Florence must be protected. As Carker begins to dominate and threaten Edith, she starts to withdraw from her stepdaughter, and as she is about to run off with him she warns the girl not to come near her or speak to her or touch her. Like “some lower animal” Edith crouches against the wall so that Florence cannot reach her, and then she springs up and flees, as if her touch would defile the girl. Even at their final meeting, when Edith assures Florence that she has not in fact committed adultery, she nevertheless acknowledges a guilt that must “separate [her] through the whole remainder of [her] life, from purity and innocence” (965). The novel suggests that, though not set on corrupting Florence in the way that her mother and her aunt had been, Edith would ultimately have the same effect by her
very presence. Though Florence is her stepdaughter and therefore in danger of contracting the infection Edith cannot help but embody, she is not Edith’s daughter and so does not automatically inherit a taint that must be actively purged.

All of these women threaten Florence with the “unnaturalness” to which the narrative keeps circling back in a variety of ways. Mrs. Skewton’s affected devotion to “Nature” combined with her absolute and total artificiality signals the beginning of an exploration of the connection between the commodification of sexuality and its perversion. Both Alice and Edith display characteristics that mark them as unnatural, if not demonic. When Alice weeps at Harriet Carker’s kindness to her, she is described as “[n]ot like a woman, but like a stern man surprised into that weakness” (564). Her hair, once her pride, as her mother told Florence, is now the object of her rage, and she seizes it “as if she would have torn it out,” then flings it back “as though it were a heap of serpents” (565). Not only Alice, however, is evoked as a gorgon: Edith, after her marriage to Dombey, is likened to a “beautiful Medusa” who would strike dead an unnamed “him” had she the charm (741).

Although the text suggests Alice’s unnatural manliness (like Miss Blimber she is unsexed, albeit in a radically different way), it need not indicate the debased nature of Alice’s sexual relationships, because such relationships in the life of a prostitute are by definition perverse.22 In the case of Edith, however, a careful case is constructed to signal the frigidity of her relations with Dombey on the one hand and the sado-masochistic qualities of her strange tie to Carker on the other.23 When Dombey and his second wife return from their continental honeymoon, the question of whether Edith will produce an heir is all but answered by the news that they both had found Paris cold and dull (583). Repeated references to Edith’s bosom, which throbs, swells, and causes her diamonds to rise and fall, bespeak a passion that is thwarted, locked in, the source of no pleasure to herself, and out of reach to her husband (650–51). The marriage is barren in its failure to produce a child and sterile in its sexual—as well as emotional—coldness. The sexual passion that lies stifled and restrained but still discernible beneath the diamond necklaces, erupts in Edith’s response to Carker’s sadistic advances and takes the form of pain inflicted upon herself. At her husband’s discussion of Carker’s growing role in the marriage, Edith turns a bracelet “round and round upon her arm; not winding it about with a light, womanly touch, but pressing and dragging it over the smooth skin, until the white limb showed a bar of red” (653). The jewelry that plays such an important role in the representation of Edith’s sexuality suggests in a graphic and literal way the symbolic effect Mr. Dombey’s wealth has had on his wife. In addition, the emphasis on the unwomanliness of Edith’s gesture with the bracelet again underscores the distortion of “natural” sexuality that his wealth and its uses have engendered. Still unable to unleash her loathing for Carker at him directly, she continues to cause pain to herself, striking the hand he has just kissed against a marble chimney-shelf rather than against his “fair face” and causing the hand to bleed (692). Carker, the predator, the wolf, smells blood with pleasure and associates the “mystery of [her] gloved hand” with the promise of sexual passion (735).
What might be lightly dismissed as melodramatic excess in the depiction of these relationships seems rather Dickens's careful portrayal of a sexual pathology that is specifically the result of buying and selling what he believes ought to be given naturally. He wants to create a nexus of unnatural desires and responses that are not simply symbolic of but organically and profoundly tied to making people into property. The organic nature of these disturbances further establishes Edith Dombey's influence as unalterably insidious.

The novel's theme of the natural and the unnatural culminates in a long meditative passage in chapter 47, just before Edith flees with Carker and before Dombey, in angry and vicious response, strikes his daughter. The passage evokes a world in which unnatural humanity has become the "natural" result of the cruel conditions, "enforced distortions," and imprisoning monomanias of modern life. But the unnaturalness that Dickens's narrative voice addresses here is not only the perverseness at the heart of the Dombey-Edith-Carker triangle; it is also (and in a way that is implicitly linked with the unnaturalness of the rich) the unnaturalness of the poor, the sick, the slum-dweller, the convict. The movement from Dombey's "master-vice" to the "Vice and Fever" of dark haunts and "wicked cities" might seem almost gratuitous, a lengthy and artificial digression to strike a blow for sanitary reform, but it serves as a point of connection for the social, psychological, moral and physical pestilence that runs throughout and blights society.24 The prose here shifts from moral taint to physical—the "noxious particles that rise from vitiated air"—and back to moral:

But if the moral pestilence that rises with them [the noxious particles], and in the eternal laws of outraged Nature, is inseparable from them, could be made discernible too, how terrible the revelation! Then should we see depravity, impiety, drunkenness, theft, murder, and a long train of nameless sin... overhanging the devoted spots, and creeping on, to blight the innocent and spread contagion among the pure.... Then should we stand appalled to know, that where we generate disease to strike our children down and entail itself on unborn generations, there also we breed, by the same certain process, infancy that knows no innocence, youth without modesty or shame, maturity that is mature in nothing but in suffering and guilt, blasted old age that is a scandal on the form we bear. (738, emphasis added)

These shifts between the moral, or the metaphoric, and the physical ultimately cancel themselves out, for in the end there can be no sustainable separation between spiritual and bodily taint or, for that matter, between the spread of cholera and the spread of evil.25 The city breeds "Vice and Fever"; and the innocent are struck down by both inheritance and contagion. The passage alludes to Mrs. Brown's urban wasteland dwelling where Florence's purity was threatened, the "convict-ships" that took Alice across the sea, the sexual taint—both physical and psychic—that infects Dombey's second marriage, the feebleness of body that Mr. Dombey passed on to his son, and the feebleness of both body and soul that Mrs. Granger and Mrs. Brown passed on to and nurtured in their daughters. The "disease" that entails itself on unborn children appears as a conflation of poverty-bred
and sexually transmitted illnesses. The covert reference to syphilis here serves to connect the taint of the slums with the taint of the middle-class family in a way that recalls Blake’s culminating vision of the blighted “Marriage hearse” in his “London” poem. Although never explicitly mentioned elsewhere in the text, syphilis haunts the plot because of its association with the prostitute and her death on the one hand and the barrenness of middle-class marriage on the other. This passage makes clear that the middle class is endangered not only by virtue of its willful ignorance of the miasmic haunts that breed pestilence but because it has already assimilated into its ranks “perversions of nature” of all kinds.

The novel’s carefully developed commentary on social sterility and disease, then, places sexuality at its center: but it is not sexuality conceived in a general way, touching on male and female alike, it is sexuality as it resides in woman. Although Carker is in some important sense the cause of both Edith and Alice’s sexual fall and a creature of monstrous and predatory appetites who, like Bill Sikes, must be brutally destroyed, he merely exploits the weaknesses of which these women’s mothers had been the origin. In the world of Dombey, as in certain strains of Victorian sexual mythology, men like Carker take advantage of what is already set in motion by maternal inheritance. The clearest indication of the need to root out dangerous female sexuality and replace it with its redemptive, reproductive form is, of course, the expulsion of Edith from England and the narrative alike and the reformation of Mr. Dombey—far guiltier of inhumanity than his wife—through the integration of Florence into his psychic and familial life. Given the discourse of contamination that pervades the narrative, Edith cannot be redeemed: the only partial rehabilitation she is allowed comes, of course, through Florence’s ability to soften her stepmother, to make her weep and ask forgiveness. It is asking forgiveness of her father, the guilty party in their relationship, that makes clear Florence’s Christ-like transcendence of the ordinary human need to understand justice as revenge. She must take her father’s sins upon herself. And she must marry a brotherly figure, ensuring the chastity of their bond, as well as a man of the lower classes. Walter Gay offers Mr. Dombey’s family and class not precisely the proto-Lawrentian energies of Mr. Toodles but the ancient, mythic energies of a Dick Whittington. Though chaste, the marriage of Walter and Florence is importantly reproductive, and it breaks the cycle of death and impotence that had plagued the line. They will present Mr. Dombey with two grand-children, a girl he “hoards in his heart” and a boy to continue, in reinvigorated form, the house of Dombey. Through the daughter then, as Mr. Toots explains, “Dombey and Son will ascend...triumphant!” (974). In order that patriarchy might flourish, a particular kind of womanhood must be recognized, celebrated, and absorbed.

On the “woman question” the novel appears to stand unapologetically against the powerful anger and bitterness of those women who have been society’s victims. Edith Dombey and Alice Brown can serve as the means to mount a powerful critique of a proud and mercenary patriarchy, but the indelible stain they bear makes their continued presence in the narrative not only expendable but untenable.
This enmeshes the novel in the tensions, not to say the contradictions, associated with a vision of women as dangerous, though not culpable, victims. The text wavers between the desire to marshall the spirit of reform and the need to protect the sanctity of middle-class life. That Dickens appears to be fully aware of the varieties of women’s opposition to patriarchal order and to have chosen carefully which sort to rescue and which to reject can be confirmed in the person of Susan Nipper, the sharp-tongued mother of three daughters. “If ever the Rights of Women, and all that kind of thing, are properly attended to,” her husband, the added Mr. Toots, declares, “it will be through her powerful intellect” (946). The novel can absorb Susan Nipper and her barbs, aimed repeatedly against the hierarchy of the sexes, but it keeps her securely on the margins, a bit-player whose class position and comic presence make her particular kind of rebelliousness instructive yet benign, no real threat to the ultimate health of the middle-class family. When Dickens next creates a female character explicitly devoted to the Rights and Emancipation of Women, it will be Mrs. Jellyby, whose position as a disastrous middle-class mother makes her not just a comic figure but a malignant one.

What is merely suggested about the connections between urban blight and sexual contamination in _Dombey and Son_ becomes the very machinery that drives the text of _Bleak House_. The tainted sexual legacy of Lady Dedlock and the fever that spreads from the pauper’s graveyard in London via Jo, the crossing sweep, to the protected middle-class preserve of John Jarndyce’s home near St. Alban’s determine the novel’s plot and governing images. The opening paragraphs of the text establish the inseparability of urban pollutions and social sin: at “the very heart” of the fog that “rolls defiled among the tiers of shipping, and the waterside pollutions of a great (and dirty) city” sits the Lord High Chancellor, “most pestilent of hoary sinners.” Just as fog, mud, and gas invade all of London and its environs, so does the Chancery suit of Jarndyce vs. Jarndyce taint all of its wards and supplicants, and so too does Lady Dedlock’s past defile Esther’s life and the life of the aristocratic family into which she has married.

The unexpected connections between classes that in _Dombey and Son_ are centered in the relationship of Alice Brown to Edith Dombey here become pandemic: identity, kinship, affinity, and correspondence can be said to define the very condition of social and spiritual life in this novel. In answer to the narrator’s question, “What connexion can there have been between many people in the innumerable histories of this world, who, from opposite sides of great gulfs, have, nevertheless, been very curiously brought together” (272), the novel answers: every kind. Chancery is but the most obvious connector of lives and stands, as many have commented, as an analogy to the condition of society itself. But there are also apparently insignificant blood-relationships—Sir Leicester Dedlock is, for example, related to John Jarndyce, Ada and Richard—and nearly gratuitous connections from the distant past—Mr. Jarndyce and Miss Barbary (now Mrs. Chadband), Boythorn and Lady Dedlock. The novel abounds in emblems of connection that reproduce and reinforce one another: the fever that spreads
through Jo, the handkerchief that links Esther to the brickmaker's dead baby and ultimately to her own mother (also the mother of a "dead" baby), the clothing these two mothers—Jenny and Lady Dedlock—ultimately exchange, the veils worn variously by Lady Dedlock, Hortense, and Esther, and the "starry circle" of which Esther yearns not to be a part in her fever-induced delirium. As has also often been observed, the slime of Tom-all-Alone's is prominent among the novel's points of intersection: it signals a correspondence between the pestilential haunt that nurtures Jo and the case of Tom Jarndyce, for whom the slime may have been named; it is part of the property of the Jarndyce estate and linked to the house—Bleak House—where Tom's descendants now live; and it is also connected, the narrator tells us, to the "place in Lincolnshire, the house in town, the Mercury in powder," that is, to the Dedlocks and their own family secrets and inheritance.

Less obvious to readers of Bleak House is that Tom-all-Alone's also stands as a point of intersection for society's crimes against the poor and the inheritance of sexual taint. In a passage that personifies "Tom" and makes him a moving agent of contamination, the trope of marriage makes this hidden connection clear:

There is not a drop of Tom's corrupted blood but propagates infection and contagion somewhere. It shall pollute, this very night, the choice stream (in which chemists on analysis would find the genuine nobility) of a Norman house, and his Grace shall not be able to say Nay to the infamous alliance. There is not an atom of Tom's slime, not a cubic inch of any pestilential gas in which he lives, not one obscenity or degradation about him, not an ignorance, not a wickedness, not a brutality of his committing, but shall work its retribution, through every order of society, up to the proudest of the proud, and to the highest of the high. (683)

Like the long set-piece in Dombey that joins the pestilence of disease to moral pestilence, this passage collapses the distinction between real infection—like Jo's fever—and all the invisible corruptions for which disease ordinarily stands as metaphor. But it also collapses the distinction between the contagion of disease and the transmission of sexual taint: the "blood" of a Norman house shall be polluted through an alliance that cannot be prevented. The aristocracy—particularly those families that are, like the Dedlocks, "as old as the hills"—stand to lose their purity, their health, their fecundity as a result of exposure to the contaminated blood of "Tom," who is imagined as the carrier of all manner of disease. Inheritance and contagion know no separation, neither in the realm of epidemic disease nor in that of sexual corruption. The street of "perishing blind houses, with their eyes stoned out" (147) is echoed in Esther Summerson's blindness during her illness, an illness carried by Jo and linked to the blight she inherits from her mother. Lady Dedlock's dowry and legacy of sexual sin, then, have the same meaning, origin, and result as the plague that Jo, inhabitant of Tom-all-Alone's, transmits to her daughter.

I want to argue that the various threats to social health represented by the slime of Tom-all-Alone's are ultimately resolved in the novel in the realm of female
sexuality. Inheritance and contagion reinforce one another and merge most forcefully in the text in the person of Esther Summerson, whose role as narrator signals the importance of her story to the working out of this double blight. Dickens creates and sustains a female narrative voice for the first and only time to illustrate from the inside and with considerable psychological complexity the trajectory of a threatened and ultimately efficacious female sexuality and to underscore the importance of this trajectory to the creation of a (re)productive and efficacious middle class. Donning the mask of female self-effacement, Dickens is able to assert the value of a female sexuality that falters but then succeeds. Florence Dombey never overshadows her stepmother, even after Edith is banished from the scene; but Esther Summerson, in part because she has been granted the voice that Florence never had, dominates the novel with her overworked modesty and supplants her mother’s story of sin and pride with her own narrative of triumph. The argument has been made, most cogently by Virginia Blain, that even at the conclusion of her story Esther is sexually repressed, makes an asexual marriage and pays for her mother’s errors by remaining essentially virginal, without desire. I would suggest, however, that Esther’s narrative carefully charts the evolution of a woman who begins in radical repression and ends in a state of what Dickens and the culture he helps to create would understand as healthy female sexuality. The problematic set out by the novel—how society will emerge from the corruption of tainted inheritance—finds its solution in Esther’s ability to marry the reforming physician Allan Woodcourt, who promises as well to cure the ills of poverty and the infirmities of his own class.

At the outset of her narrative Esther is a reluctant storyteller and claims to have difficulty imagining herself as the subject of her own story: “It seems so curious to me to be obliged to write all this about myself! As if this narrative were the narrative of my life! But my little body will soon fall into the background now” (73–74). Her reluctance to narrate and to tell her story is bound up, of course, with the notion her aunt worked hard to establish, that she bore the mark of her mother’s disgrace and embodied it at the same time. She has difficulty beginning because, she says, she is not clever and has known this since earliest childhood. To write is to claim the legitimacy of her existence, and this she has been taught never to do. In spite of this professed reluctance—or perhaps because of its defensive powers—she finds herself “always writing about myself” when she “mean[s] all the time to write about other people” (162). The “little body” will not only not fade out of the picture, but it will become the very focus of Esther’s narrative when her illness and disfigurement become central to her story.

Esther’s wish that her body “fall into the background” also suggests discomfort with her femaleness and, ultimately, with her sexuality. The connection between her reluctance to narrate and her will to deny sexual desire expresses itself as a recurrent narrative tick in Esther’s references to Allan Woodcourt. Her initial allusions to him are a maze of indirection: “there was someone else at the family dinner party. It was not a lady. It was a gentleman. . . . I thought him very sensible and agreeable. At least, Ada asked me if I did not, and I said yes” (233). From
a very early point in the narrative Esther starts to withhold information about Allan and, more specifically, about her feelings for him. I have omitted to mention . . . , "I have forgotten to mention—at least I have not mentioned . . . ," are the phrases that invariably preface her codelike references to him, just as ellipses or dashes often conclude them (233, 255). Certain passages circle around her feelings of longing and leave a blank at the center: "I was wakeful and low-spirited. I don't know why. At least I don't think I know why. At least, perhaps I do, but I don't think it matters" (288). The language of the narrative makes clear that Esther's interest in Allan is neither belated nor lukewarm, but it does so precisely by representing that interest—or desire—as an absence. And it represents the absence itself as a pathological inability—or refusal—to narrate the sexual self.

For much of the novel, then, Esther can only narrate herself as the bearer of instinctive maternal powers joined to a perpetual celibacy. When she arrives at the Jellybys for the first time Caddy and Peepy are immediately drawn to her and recognize her as a source of the maternal comfort they have never found in their own mother. In a novelistic world populated by bad mothers, orphaned or neglected children and infantile, helpless men, Esther holds the "keys" to domestic peace. Equally apparent, however, is that Esther is fated to mother children not her own: to care for Caddy and Peepy, to shop for Caddy's trousseau, to tend Caddy's ailing baby, to participate in Richard and Ada's courtship as a maidenly observer. The nicknames given her by the inhabitants of Bleak House—"Little Old Woman," "Old Woman," "Mother Hubbard"—underscore a maternal yet sexually superannuated identity. Like the type of the Victorian spinster sister-in-law, who figured so prominently in Dickens's own experience, Esther is sexually out of the running. That maternal inheritance and its psychic scars have made Esther's biological maternity impossible is borne out by her response to Mr. Guppy's proposal. Though she doesn't want Guppy for a husband, his proposal nevertheless arouses deep sorrow in her, as well as the feeling that "an old chord had been more coarsely touched than it had ever been since the days of the dear old doll, long buried in the garden" (178). The long discarded hope of living the life of a "normal" woman makes even marriage to the law clerk impossible and ultimately makes a truly asexual and, in all likelihood, sterile marriage to the fatherly Jarnedyce the only imaginable course.

Lady Dedlock's legacy to her daughter does not end with illegitimacy and the inheritance of guilt: she also passes on to Esther the blight of barrenness that here, as in Dombey, follows upon the taint of unlicensed sexuality. Lady Dedlock herself is described when she first makes her appearance in the novel as "childless" and, although this identification is meant to resonate with irony later in the text and to establish the mystery of her past, she has indeed become, as a result of that past, a barren woman. Her marriage to Sir Leicester, like Edith Granger's to Mr. Dombey, is sterile and, like Edith too, she is icy and anesthetic: "having conquered her world, [Lady Dedlock] fell, not into the melting, but rather into the freezing mood." (255). She is, indeed, the reincarnation and fulfillment of Sir Morbury Dedlock's wife, the ghost of Ghost Walk, who had neither children nor a drop of
"Vitiated Air"

"the family blood in her veins." The "family blood" of the Dedlocks, understood as an undefiled male line, boasts the inheritance of gout, a condition passed down through the men and worn like a badge of honor by Sir Leicester. Unlike contagious diseases that suggest exposure to the poor or to tainted female sexuality, or an inherited venereal disease, or an illness that can be found among the hoi polloi, gout bespeaks class privilege and maleness: "Other men's fathers may have died of the rheumatism, or may have taken base contagion from the tainted blood of the sick vulgar, but the Dedlock family have communicated something exclusive" (271). Women who marry into the family—Sir Morbury's wife, the current Lady Dedlock—are cast as the bearers of corruption, polluters of the "choice stream," and agents of sterility. Even Esther, the child to whom Lady Dedlock did give birth, has a stillborn shadow self that is identified with the brickmaker's dead baby through Esther's handkerchief, Lady Dedlock's assumption that her baby died, and the clothing Lady Dedlock wears as her final disguise. When Esther and Bucket finally discover Lady Dedlock at the culmination of their search, Esther records that she "saw before [her] . . . the mother of the dead child" (868).

Among Esther's many alter egos in the novel, the one who connects her most definitively with the conditions of urban poverty and decay is Jo, the crossing sweep. But Jo is linked to Esther not only through the fever he brings to her home from the pauper's graveyard in London: he also signals her relationship to her father, Captain Hawdon, and the other half of her genealogy. Jo, the child of no one, is the spiritual child of Hawdon/Nemo and thereby stands as a kind of sibling to Esther. Like Nemo, Jo has no legal identity, no origins, no inheritance, apparently no last name: the legal copyist had been good to the boy and, as a result, Jo remains loyal, sweeps the passage and steps to the pauper's graveyard where Nemo's body has been thrown, and wishes to be buried near him there, however a "place of abomination" it may be. When Jo becomes infected with the fever and then contaminates Esther, he passes on to her her father's legacy. If the origin of the disease is not actually Nemo's corpse, it is at least the burial ground where he lies, the place "pestiferous and obscene, whence malignant diseases are communicated to the bodies of our dear brothers and sisters" (202). The fever, then, is emblematic both of the urban blight centered in the foulness and inhumanity of the pauper's graveyard and of the illegitimacy and guilt of Esther's birth: the fever joins the social and the personal plots, and not only as an agent of connection. A number of interesting investigations into the identity of the fever of Bleak House have focused on Dickens's choice of an illness—in all likelihood smallpox—that was contagious and not, as was believed of something like cholera, "miasmic," or environmentally caused. Although the communicable nature of the fever is essential to the plot and the symbolism of the novel, the connection of the disease to the hideous sanitary conditions of the lives—and deaths—of the poor seems equally important. Just as Jo is a victim of both the conditions into which he is born and his exposure to the diseased corpses in the graveyard, so is Esther a victim of both inheritance and contagion.

When Esther falls ill, then, she suffers the full weight of the social crimes the
novel wants to expose and the hereditary taint her own private story tells. The onset of her illness also marks Esther’s initiation into a more penetrating vision of London, a vision more akin to that of the other narrator of *Bleak House* than to her own initial enthusiasm for the “wonderful city” she views on an early morning walk with Ada, Richard, and Caddy Jellyby in the novel’s early chapters. On that morning she had “admired the long succession and varieties of streets, the quantity of people . . ., the number of vehicles . . ., the busy preparations . . ., the extraordinary creatures” (97). Now, just before she makes her fateful visit to the brickmaker’s cottage, where the fever-racked Jo is staying, Esther looks toward London, where “a lurid glare overhung the whole dark waste.” At that moment, unaware of what will soon happen to her, she nevertheless has “an undefinable impression of myself as being something different from what I then was” (484-85). Her face covered by her veil, she then enters the cottage and is greeted by a look of “surprise and terror” from Jo, who thinks her to be the veiled woman (Lady Dedlock dressed in Hortense’s clothes) he had led to Nemo’s grave. Into this moment the narrative compresses all of those elements that will come together in Esther’s illness: the city as point of origin for the fever and all it represents, the transformation in identity she will undergo as a result of physical trauma and the shock of learning about her origins, the link with her mother the illness will bring about and symbolically reinforce, the suggestion of unregulated passion that Hortense, her mother’s and now her own alter ego, embodies throughout the text.” Esther’s illness and subsequent discovery of her history are part of the same process of deepening self-abnegation: she takes on the full burden of her inheritance of sin and bears it, as it were, unveiled on her face. She couples them in her thoughts: “my disfigurement, and my inheritance of shame,” “the deep traces of my illness, and the circumstances of my birth” (667, 668). It is as if she takes her mother’s sin upon herself and bears it as a physical manifestation, a stigmata. At this moment the barrenness of Esther’s future seems to be assured and her woman’s body definitively desexualized, or so it appears to her. When John Jardyce then proposes to her and she agrees to marry him, she enacts the belief that no sexual future can come out of this sexually tainted and now physically marked past. In a paroxysm of self-sacrifice Esther dedicates herself to becoming the mistress of *Bleak House*, to a life of being “busy, busy, busy—useful, amiable, serviceable” (668). What might be read as heroic devotion to duty on Esther’s part is, in the context of the narrative’s inquiry into her evolving psychic condition, a mark of her nearly pathological will to self-suppression.

It is not, however, radical self-abnegation alone that results from Esther’s double trauma. Her crisis also initiates a process of reintegration in which the pieces of her past, as of a puzzle, start to come together, and long-suppressed feelings are allowed to surface. As soon as she allows herself to look at her altered appearance in the mirror—something she does at her mother’s home, Chesney Wold, rather than her own—she acknowledges for the first time in her narrative what the alert reader already knows, that she loves Allan Woodcourt. In a gesture that com-
bines self-abnegation with a new narrative candor she considers throwing away the flowers he had once given her because she wishes to be “generous” to the man she “could have been devoted to” (559). Deciding finally to keep them only as a “remembrance of what was past and gone,” she nevertheless incorporates into her narrative in a way she had previously suppressed the fact of her love for Allan. The “little body” Esther had tried to put in the “background” of her narrative now takes center stage by virtue of its stigmatization.  

Esther’s transformed appearance both registers her tie to her mother and enables her to begin to exorcise her mother’s ghost. Like Edith Dombey, Lady Dedlock must be purged from the text she haunts so that a chaste but truly (re)productive female sexuality can prevail. Esther’s pursuit of Lady Dedlock in and out of London with Inspector Bucket is both a journey toward union with her mother and a flight toward freedom from her. Lady Dedlock enters the nighttime labyrinth of the city on her own, “need[ing] no further escort,” and risking identification with the homeless women, the women by the river, the women who have drowned themselves in the Thames. Esther, on the other hand, goes in the protective company of Inspector Bucket, holder of secrets, who can traverse the city without danger. Tracking Lady Dedlock back to the city’s fetid and polluted center—the pauper’s graveyard, the source of Esther’s illness and the home in death of Esther’s father—Bucket and Esther follow her to her compulsory end. Now dressed as Jenny, the brickmaker’s wife, she appears to Esther to be, as I have said, “the mother of the dead child,” so that her death marks the end, too, of the dead child, Esther’s shadow self. The veiled women—Lady Dedlock, Hortense, the brickmaker’s wife—merge in the night, and Esther emerges, in Bucket’s words, as “Queen.”  

With her mother’s death then, Esther dies into life. The text—and in particular Esther’s narrative—is startlingly silent on the subject of Lady Dedlock after the discovery of her corpse. Even in Esther’s final chapter, in which she sums up the fates of the major players in her story, no mention of the dead mother is made. Esther’s own maternity takes its place: she is able not only to have Allan and to have children, but to have two daughters, suggesting that the taint inherited through the female line has been expunged. By careful contrast Caddy Jellyby’s little daughter, at the conclusion of the novel “deaf and dumb,” suffers the blighted maternal legacy initiated by her grandmother: at birth the child had curious dark marks under its eyes, “like faint remembrances of poor Caddy’s inky days” (736). The healthy maternal body of Esther has replaced the “little body” that promised to absent itself at the beginning of her narrative. The “domestic mission,” which Mrs. Jellyby and her friends revile, concludes—and seemingly takes the place of—the narrative mission that for Esther had proved so problematic. The narrative ends quite literally with Esther’s halting admission of the possibility of her own beauty, suggesting that to be able to acknowledge but not necessarily to articulate her own attractiveness is the fulfillment of healthy sexuality for a woman. Called to domesticity and departing almost coyly in mid-sentence,
the heroine signals that narration itself amounts to a necessary but interruptible mission for a woman like her.

Directly contradicting the proto-feminist ravings of Miss Wisk at Caddy Jellyby’s wedding then, the novel prescribes for middle-class woman the “domestic mission . . . in the narrow sphere of Home” (478). When Mr. Jarndyce presents Esther with the second Bleak House he gives her a home and a husband—Allan, not himself—as the final step in his creation of Esther as the maternal solution to social evils. The reconstituted Bleak House is free from the taint of the Jarndyce inheritance, from the legacy of stunted middle-class life, from the need for a growlery (the wind there is never in the east), from the shadow of London. There in Yorkshire life undefiled will prosper, and the evils represented by Tom-all-Alone’s will, as if by sleight of hand, resolve themselves in Esther and her doctor-husband’s domestic happiness.

The unsettling middle-class romance of maternal sexuality that the novel offers as a resolution to deeply painful and problematic social suffering is linked to the enigmatic transformations that Sir Leicester Dedlock and Chesney Wold have undergone by the narrative’s end. Clearly that aristocratic world has become moribund, like the mausoleum that houses Lady Dedlock’s remains. Yet Sir Leicester’s image after his wife’s death has been radically sentimentalized, ennobled, and redeemed, especially by the devoted presence of Mr. George, who has chosen to remain as a companion to the broken aristocrat rather than to join his industrialist brother in the making of England’s future. Earlier in the novel Sir Leicester’s conviction that the ironmaster’s candidacy for Parliament marked the decline of British civilization stood as an indictment of Sir Leicester’s narrow-mindedness and class snobbery. Mr. George’s decision to stay with Sir Leicester suggests a reversal of this earlier social vision and, at the very least, an unwillingness to abandon old England for new. It is as if Dickens’s uneasiness about the philanthropic middle class—represented by Mrs. Jellyby—and the powerful entrepreneurial middle class—represented by George’s brother, the ironmaster—leads him to imagine Esther’s modest but fecund femininity, her husband’s humanitarian professionalism, and their escape from a polluted and disease-ridden London as the basis for a productive middle-class life. But the replication of Bleak House in the provincial North has a double edge: it remarkes the old Bleak House in a more salutary form, but it also marks both the present and the future of the house with an indelible connection to the legacies of the past and especially to Tom-all-Alone’s, the slum “in Chancery” that nurtured Jo, and that breeds fever still.

In 1850, two years after the publication of the completed Dombey and three years before Bleak House appeared, W. R. Greg wrote a now much quoted review article on prostitution for the Westminster Review. After a measured discussion of poverty as the chief cause of prostitution and a call for “more Christian feelings of grief, compassion, and desire to soothe and to save,” Greg moves on to the subject of prostitute as social contaminant. Two things are worth noting in Greg’s
account: first, that the spread of syphilis is for him a “sanitary matter,” a question to be considered along with “quarantines against the plague” and “precautions against cholera,” and second, that the ultimate toll the disease will take is incalculable because of its spread, through procreation, to “innocent individuals in private life.”\textsuperscript{42} Nothing less than the “deterioration of public health and of the vigor of the race . . . in the course of a generation or two” is at stake. Like many of his contemporaries who wrote on the subject, Greg saw in the prostitute a threat to public and private life, a destroyer of health—like cholera or the plague—and a silent and invisible corruptor of apparently respectable families.\textsuperscript{43} Syphilis was the disease of the city, often alluded to in fiction by the substitution of other communicable diseases associated with urban life and, in particular, with the confluence of rich and poor. It raised the specter of a public threat that, like smallpox or cholera or typhus, might invade the private realm: it marked that point of convergence where the city streets and the middle-class drawing-room might meet.

Not only, then, did female sexuality become imaginatively central to representations of the dangers of the city, but the nature of the relationship between the woman of the streets and the woman of the hearth became a crucial social and symbolic question to ponder. The woman of the hearth might be innocent victim, heroic redeemer, or insidious reflection of her fallen counterpart. In Dickens’s hands, this relationship became a means for exposing social hypocrisy, as in the cousinly connection between Alice Marwood and Edith Dombey, for expressing anxieties about the moral and physical health of the middle and upper classes, as in the barrenness of the Dombey and Dedlock marriages, and for imagining social redemption, as in the purging of Edith and Lady Dedlock and the ascendency of Florence and Esther.

In \textit{Dombey}, the use of female sexuality as a fulcrum for social criticism involves Dickens in a critique of patriarchal values that, at the same time, sacrifices possibly their most powerful, certainly their most dramatic and compelling, critic—Edith. As readers of the novel often feel, although Edith is indeed punished and purged, she leaves an indelible mark on the text. Dickens’s investment in Edith—his use of her to make the statement that middle-class marriage can also be a form of prostitution, his endowing of her with passion, clear vision, and maternal tenderness—makes her sacrifice a gesture that vexes and rankles until the narrative’s end. Never again, and certainly not with Lady Dedlock, did Dickens allow himself that overt identification with female rage and transgression.\textsuperscript{44} In \textit{Bleak House}, rather, the chaste daughter takes the center and successfully eclipses her mother in the narrative in a way that Florence Dombey never manages to do. But her chastity, because of the circumstances of her birth, is an ambiguous matter: in Esther Summerson herself Dickens can plot the entire movement from taintedness to purity, from a blighted female sexuality to the promise of nothing less than social regeneration. “[C]ontamination and foulness,” as Acton wrote, might indeed be carried to every quarter but, through the transformation of female sexuality itself, the social body might be restored to health.
NOTES


3. Alexander Welsh, in The City of Dickens (Cambridge, MA & London: Harvard University Press, 1986), writes suggestively about the connection between sexuality and the city in Dickens’s novels. He outlines an opposition between the “heroines of the hearth,” associated with the domestic sphere, and the fallen, sexualized women, associated with the streets: the first appears as protector and savior, the latter as harbinger of death. Building on the kind of analysis Welsh offers, I want to suggest that in both Dombey and Son and Bleak House this safe distinction is powerfully threatened. See Welsh, chapter IX, “The Hearth.”


5. Williams, p. 155.

6. Lynda Nead, whose work on Victorian sexual mythology has been extremely useful and illuminating, writes that prostitution constituted an “invisible danger”: “In this way the prostitute was the link between slum and suburb, dirt and cleanliness, ignorance and civilization, profligacy and morality; the prostitute made it impossible to keep these categories apart.” See Nead’s Myths of Sexuality: Representations of Women in Victorian Britain (London: Basil Blackwell, 1988), p. 121.


8. Corbin, p. 211.

9. Nead, p. 127. Nead emphasizes the degree to which the sentimentalization of the prostitute in literary and visual representation was a means for the middle class to control its fear of contamination. I am arguing here that in Dombey and Bleak House something beyond sentimentalization, beyond seeing the “prostitute” as victim, is going on in the representation of Edith Dombey and Lady Dedlock: it is perhaps the case that the fallen woman of the lower classes can be safely sentimentalized, while her middle-class counterpart has already made inroads into the respectable domestic sphere and so cannot be managed merely with sentiment.

10. Acton, p. 756.


12. Acton, p. 27.


17. The Bagnet family is constructed as a direct contrast to the Jellybys, even in the latter’s case, whose sentimental attitudes to empire. The Bagnet children, born into a military
family that has roam the earth and now lives modestly, happily, and musically in London, are named for "the places of their birth in barracks": Malta, Woolwich, and Quebec. Mrs. Jellyby, who of course ignores her children while devoting her life to the settlement of English families and the education of the natives in Borrioboola-Gha, lacks the strong, nurturing, common-sense maternality and healthy adventurousness of Mrs. Bagnet.

18. Charles Dickens, Dombey and Son: Wholesale, Retail and for Exportation (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970), p. 93. All references to this text will hereafter be noted parenthetically in the text. In Dickens from Pickwick to Dombey (London: Chatto & Windus, 1965), Steven Marcus calls his chapter on Dombey "The Changing World."

19. For a fascinating analysis of the relationship between lines of descent and business in Dombey, see Robert Clark, "Riddling the Family Firm: The Sexual Economy in Dombey and Son," ELH, 51 (Spring 1984). It is interesting to note that in the end Dombey is bailed out by Harriet and John Carker, inheritors of James Carker's fortune, in whose family the order of inheritance has also been subverted.


22. Paul Dombey wonders why Miss Blimber's hair doesn't grow long like Florence's and "why she was like a boy" (216). Throughout the novel Dickens signals "unnaturalness" in women by marking them as masculine. See Nina Auerbach, "Dickens and Dombey: A Daughter after All" in Dickens Studies Annual, vol. 5, ed. Ropert B. Partlow, Jr. (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Press, 1976), pp. 95-114, for a discussion of the masculinity of Edith and Alice.

23. See Marcus, Dickens from Pickwick to Dombey (346-51), for a fascinating discussion of Carker as Dombey's double and of the two men as two sides of the author himself.


25. See F. S. Schwarzbach's suggestive article, "Bleak House: The Social Pathology of Urban Life" in Literature and Medicine, v.9: Fictive Ills: Literary Perspectives on Wounds and Diseases (Baltimore & London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990). Schwarzbach makes the important point that social reform movements of the period "treated the social, political, physical, and moral problems of urban England as symptoms of one underlying disease" (95).

26. But most thro' midnight streets I hear
How the youthful harlot's curse
Blasts the new born Infant's tear,
And blights with plagues the Marriage hearse.
—William Blake, Songs of Experience, 1789.

27. Gail Savage, in her essay "The Wilful Communication of a Loathsome Disease": Marital Conflict and Venereal Disease in Victorian England," emphasizes the association of venereal disease with sterility in establishing syphilis as grounds for divorce. See Victorian Studies 34 (Autumn 1990), p. 39. As to the absence of any overt reference to syphilis in the novel, William Acton reminds us at the beginning of Prostitution that as late as the 1850s
the “subject of prostitution and the ‘secret diseases’ could hardly be mentioned outside the pages of the medical press” (7).

28. Charles Dickens, *Bleak House* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), pp. 49–50. All references will hereafter be noted in the text. F. S. Schwarzbach makes the point that the fog of the opening chapter of the novel is a *literal*, not simply metaphorical, bearer of disease (95).

29. Richard, referring to the case and all that accompanies it, declares to Esther that “it taints everybody” (581).


31. In a more sustained and complicated manner Charlotte Bronte creates a heroine with the same habit of obfuscation and suppression in *Villette* (1853). It would be interesting to speculate on Esther as a rewriting of Jane Eyre and Lucy Snowe as a revision of Esther.

32. See Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge, MA & London: Harvard University Press, 1990) for a discussion of the presumed sterility of prostitutes and other “fallen” women during the nineteenth century. Laqueur stresses the economic meaning of the barrenness Victorian culture attributed to prostitutes: they were considered an “unproductive commodity,” as contrasted with a “household economy of sex, which is quintessentially social and productive” (230–32).

33. Dickens enlists an anesthetic response to Paris to suggest the sterility of the Dedlock marriage just as he had done in *Dombey*: the Dombey family had found Paris, the site of their summer, cold and dull, and Lady Dedlock in particular is so extremely bored in the French capital that she cannot get away from it too quickly (204). The narrative of the Dedlock sojourn abroad suggests that those who observe Lord and Lady Dedlock on tour think “he might be her amiable father,” thereby signalling that the fatherly-daughterly relationship of Esther and Jarndyce replicates in an important way the marriage of Esther’s mother to Sir Leicester (206).


35. It is significant that Lady Dedlock does not fall ill after her visit to the pauper’s graveyard to see her former lover’s place of burial: she is perhaps immune from contagion because she is already tainted by sexual sin, the interchangeable analogue to contagious disease in the novel.

36. See Michael S. Gurney, “Disease as Device: The Role of Smallpox in *Bleak House*” and F. S. Schwarzbach, “*Bleak House*: The Social Pathology of Urban Life,” both in *Literature and Medicine*, vol. 9, pp. 79–92 and 93–104. Crucial to Dickens’s use of smallpox to represent, among many other things, cholera, was the general sense of the period that cholera was both contagious and miasmic, communicated through contact with other people and caused by exposure to a polluted environment.

37. See Virginia Blain on Hortense as Lady Dedlock’s alter ego, an embodiment of “the fiendish powers of violent female sexuality” (149). Hortense’s nationalities is, as many have remarked, significant. Lynda Nead points to the iconographical importance of a Balzac novel in Augustus Egg’s 1858 triptych, *Past and Present*, the pictorial narrative of a middle-Kaisen of sexual vitality—the women in two young daughter’s bed a literal house of cards on...
top of the novel, an allusion to the instability inherent in the sexual danger of French culture (73).

38. On this and other related points Helena Michie’s superb article, “Who is this in Pain?”: Scarring, Disfigurement, and Female Identity in Bleak House and Our Mutual Friend, Novel vol. 22 (Winter 1989) is illuminating. Using feminist psychoanalytic and Lacanian theory, Michie writes tellingly of the significance of mirrors in Esther’s rebirth. “In this configuration of mirrors,” she writes, “Esther’s refusal to be identical to and identified as her mother becomes the point in her text where a self begins to emerge. Like the female self in Wittig, Esther must enter the text through the scarring of her body; she moves from figure to body through disfigurement” (202).

39. Virginia Blain sees the pursuit of Lady Dedlock solely as Esther’s definitive casting off of her mother through an alliance with her “father,” Jarndyce, and with Bucket (153).

40. A passage from a speech Dickens gave before the Metropolitan Sanitary Association in May 1851 suggests that the wind in the east that disrupts Jarndyce’s equanimity contains a reference to the polluting breezes that emanate from London’s East End: “That no one can estimate the amount of mischief which is grown in dirt,” Dickens began, “that no one can say, here it stops, or there it stops, either in its physical or moral results, when both begin in the cradle and are not at rest in the obscene grave, is now as certain as it is that the air from Gin Lane will be carried, when the wind is Easterly, into May Fair, and that if you once have a vigorous pestilence raging furiously in Saint Giles’s, no mortal list of Lady Patronesses can keep it out of Almack’s.” See The Speeches of Charles Dickens, ed. K. J. Fielding (London: Harvester, Wheatsheaf, 1988), p. 128.

41. In his piece on prostitution (Westminster Review 53 [1850]) Greg reviewed four works on the subject: Parent-Duchateau’s De la Prostitution dans la Ville de Paris, James Talbot Beard’s Miseries of Prostitution, Dr. Ryan’s Prostitution in London, and Mayhew’s Letters in the Morning Chronicle—Metropolitan Poor.

42. Greg, pp. 467–77.

43. Elaine Showalter has written that the culture of the fin-de-siècle imagined syphilis as a symbol of the disease of the family. While Greg’s and Acton’s warnings about the progression of the disease into the middle-class home suggest that this began before the 1890s, I would argue that in the middle decades of the century syphilis symbolized the disease of the streets, of the city. See Showalter, “Syphilis, Sexuality, and the Fiction of the Fin-de-Siècle” in Ruth Bernard Yeazell, ed., Sex, Politics, and Science in the Nineteenth-Century Novel (Baltimore & London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), p. 89.

44. Laurie Langbauer writes of Dickens’s identification with woman, and especially with Nancy in Oliver Twist, in terms of “his own identification with victimization but also of his desire to elude it.” She reminds us in this context that Dickens was himself a walker of the streets. See Langbauer, Woman and Romance: The Consolations of Gender in the English Novel (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 1990), p. 155.