

**Illegitimacy in the Mid-Victorian Novels of  
Charles Dickens and Wilkie Collins**

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## Abstract

The fiction of Dickens and Collins abounds with references to the illegitimate. In the mid-Victorian period there is an increase in illegitimate characters and circumstances which relates both to the topicality of the issue and to events in the authors' individual and collaborative private lives. Illegitimacy addresses personal and social anxieties in four major novels of the 1850s and 1860s: *Bleak House* (1852-53), *Little Dorrit* (1855-57) by Dickens and *The Woman in White* (1860) and *No Name* (1862) by Collins. Dickens analyses illegitimacy in *Bleak House* psychologically and socially through Esther Summerson, but her narrative reveals contradictions between Dickens' challenge of contemporary attitudes towards the illegitimate and his subscription to the moral code behind the views. In *Little Dorrit* Dickens confines his study of illegitimacy to character in order to examine the psychological consequences of illegitimacy on the individual. The novel suggests that illegitimacy is another form of social and legal imprisonment. In contrast in *The Woman in White* Collins exploits the sensationalism surrounding illegitimacy by using it to create an exciting plot at the inception of the sensation genre. His suggestion in this novel that bastards are legally "blank" and able to reconstruct their identity is continued in *No Name*; this later novel directly challenges the laws defining and controlling illegitimacy. While Collins never matches Dickens integration of social and moral issues into the novel's structure, the older author appreciated Collins' strength in creating detective narratives. Illegitimacy was relevant to the private lives of both Dickens and Collins in the period. While the authors always tried to keep their public and private lives separate, their romantic relationships reveal a personal motive for discussing the plight of the illegitimate in their novels. There is a distinct possibility that Dickens had an illegitimate child with his mistress Ellen Ternan while

Collins had three illegitimate children with Martha Rudd. The novels articulate the tension between what Dickens and Collins the authors were trying to achieve and what the novels themselves disclose.

## Introduction

In the second half of the nineteenth century, the laws and social expectations governing illegitimacy, the rights of married women and the maintenance of the poor reveal an atmosphere in which middle class patriarchy felt itself vulnerable and reacted by seeking to maintain its domestic, economic and political authority. The popular novels of Dickens and Collins from the 1850s and 1860s actively discuss these issues, their effect and the potential for change within mid-Victorian society.

Recent critical debate surrounding illegitimacy in Dickens' work has examined how the author's attitude towards heredity changed as his career evolved. In *Dickens and Heredity: When Like Begets Like* (2000) Goldie Morgentaler details how, for the illegitimate child, the question of identity is especially crucial as "identity becomes synonymous with heredity, since biological inheritance is the only link to family that such a child has" (86). This has an application to both *Bleak House* and *Little Dorrit*. Esther Summerson discovers a personal sense of self only after she has discovered the identity of her mother. In the second novel, Arthur Clennam struggles to overcome his "nobody" persona because Mrs. Clennam keeps the details of his parentage secret. Extending the notion of "biological inheritance" Morgentaler uses the relationship between illegitimacy and disease to suggest that in *Bleak House* smallpox becomes "an instrument of social revenge, carried in the blood of the despised and dispossessed, awaiting an opportunity to infect the well-off and comfortable" (94). I use the link between the two at a more local level, suggesting that as smallpox becomes a symbol of Nemo and Lady Dedlock's sin it is used simultaneously to protect Esther from and remind her of her illegitimacy.

Jenny Bourne Taylor is an established critic in the field of Victorian literature and illegitimacy. For my argument her articles “Representing Illegitimacy in Victorian Culture” and “Received, A Blank Child” make significant comment on the issues of identity that bastardy raises. Taylor discusses how the illegitimate are defined through a set of binary oppositions: “the licit and the illicit, the proper and the improper, self and other, right and left, bent and straight” (121) and that these had particular impact on the creation of the Bastardy Clause of the 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act. Pertinent to my discussion is Taylor’s belief that the distinction between legitimate and illegitimate children is central to “the definition and establishment of patriarchal power, of the ascendancy of the name and genealogy of the father over that of the mother, of the transmission of property and established power” (123). This contrast between legal and illegal offspring feeds Collins’ manipulation of identity in *The Woman in White*; Percival is at once a gentleman and a bastard blurring the supposedly distinct lines between the two. Furthermore, her investigation into the psychology of sensation fiction provides valuable insight into the social anxieties the genre voiced:

Sensation novels offered the widest range of narrative possibilities, for exploring how the concept of illegitimacy throws legitimacy itself into question, in particular, ‘legitimate’ marriage and the position of the ‘lawful wife’, who, like the bastard, is constructed as a legal fiction (6).

In this way, Taylor shows how sensation narrative connects secrets at the heart of the family to the exploration of social and psychic inheritance, the transmission of property and power.

The inability to transmit property or power links the idea of “blankness” in the novels to both the bastard and the married woman. Both Dickens and Collins expose the legal status of bastards which created individuals who were “non-existent” within the law and were therefore free to assume any identity they wished or have an identity imposed on them. Dickens expresses the idea in a more subtle form than Collins, and this is in keeping with their differing views on the art of the novel. Through Esther and Jo the crossing sweeper in *Bleak House* we are aware that having no identity made it difficult for individuals to be recognised as members of society. Esther is able to combat this through her housekeeping role but through Jo Dickens confronts his readers with the current injustice of the bastard’s lack of legal identity. “Blankness” is a central idea in both *The Woman in White* and *No Name*. It allows Percival to masquerade as a gentleman and Magdalen to act as a governess, a lady and a parlour maid. Both authors use the legal position of and attitudes towards bastards to investigate how identity is formed.



## **Background: Laws Governing Married Women and the Illegitimate**

The historical context of illegitimacy and married women's property rights in the mid-Victorian period provides a frame of reference for issues raised in the fiction of Dickens and Collins. The parliamentary debate about and reform of these two areas provided an unavoidable topicality for two authors who frequently used their novels to make social criticism. During the 1850s and 1860s the dominance of the separate spheres was challenged by attempts to give married women independent property rights, and the common law doctrine of *coverture* was undermined by the 1857 Divorce Law. The rights and social welfare of the illegitimate were affected by the Bastardy Clause in the 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act and the 1845 Bastardy Act while the 1858 Legitimacy Declaration Act drew attention to the harsh penalties against the illegitimate in England. While the legal status of the illegitimate did not alter significantly until the twentieth century, the mid-nineteenth-century attempt at reform reveals the ideological importance of stigmatising bastards and an awareness of their problematic legal and social existence. Dickens and Collins were writing among these political debates and legal changes and their novels raise social awareness around these issues.

Women in mid-Victorian Britain were defined subordinately to men – daughter, sister, wife, mother – positions sustained by the patriarchal doctrine of separate spheres. The doctrine, particularly pertinent to the middle-class, gave women a domestic role which emphasised reproduction and care of offspring. In contrast, men were expected to engage in economics and politics, supporting the family from outside the home. Women presided over the house while men “sallied forth into the public realm” (Shanley, *Feminism, Marriage and the Law* 3). This division “both

generated and depended on an arrangement of social and property relations that positioned women as moral superiors and economic dependents” (Poovey 52). Common Law supported the doctrine by making married women the property of their husbands: “the very being or legal existence of the woman is suspended during the marriage, or at least is incorporated into that of the husband” (Blackstone 339). This is evident in a wife’s inability to hold any property she possessed before the marriage (unless there was a settlement) or acquired subsequent to it, to retain any earnings, to make a will without her husband’s permission, to give evidence against her husband, to have custody of her children and to sue or be sued. These restrictions and the consequent loss of identity allowed married women little assistance under the law, an aspect of Victorian legality clear in Caroline Norton’s declaration, “I was ‘non-existent’, except for the purposes of suffering, as far as the law was concerned: it could oppress but never help me” (160).<sup>1</sup> The absorption of the wife’s identity into the husband’s reveals a patriarchal understanding of the marital bond which structured the relationship by male access to, control over and transmission of property.<sup>2</sup> As this unequal power structure was legitimized by the law, it was a major obstacle against any attempt at fundamental changes to the organisation of Victorian marriage.

In the 1850s, individual campaigns and parliamentary debate drew public awareness to married women’s legally “non-existent” position.<sup>3</sup> Proposals to change this status threatened the balance of power within the separate spheres and potentially the stability of the Victorian family home as the law would recognise “the existence of two separate wills within an on-going marriage” rather than one male authority (Norton 46). The argument for women’s property rights also highlighted the conflict between Common Law and Equity which effectively administered two distinct systems of law for married women. The middle and lower classes were governed by

the Common Law doctrine of *couverture* which deemed that a husband must provide shelter and maintenance for his wife and offspring. This “covering” gave working-class women and their children little protection from abusive husbands. In contrast, the wealthy could use the laws of equity to create trust funds and marriage settlements made in the wife’s name prior to marriage to retain separate property. This provision is seen in *The Woman in White* with the importance placed on Laura’s marriage settlement. However, the settlement is later undermined when Sir Percival incarcerates her in an asylum and acquires what would have been her secured property. Changes to property rights and divorce laws and to the ideology of the separate spheres would have most impact on women of the middle class and below. It is, therefore, significant that both Dickens and Collins addressed a predominantly middle-class audience with their work.<sup>4</sup> Their discussion in the novels of social anxieties and the potential for political reform challenged middle-class views. However, the novels themselves reveal a tension between the authors’ attack on and support of the position and legal rights (or lack there of) of married women.

The common law “covering” made it extremely difficult for a woman to obtain a divorce. Prior to the 1857 Divorce Act, the only way to end a marriage other than by ecclesiastical annulment, was by an Act of Parliament – a complex and expensive process.<sup>5</sup> There were two kinds of decree issued by the Ecclesiastical Courts, divorce *a mensa thoro* (from bed and board), a separation which allowed neither party to remarry, or divorce *a vinculo matrimonii* (from the bonds of marriage), an annulment which allowed remarriage. The latter was only granted when the marriage was deemed invalid due to age, mental incompetence, sexual impotence or fraud. In 1850, after two decades of inquiry into changing the complicated nature of the divorce process, the government appointed a Royal Commission on Divorce.

The report, issued in 1853, found that “the jurisdiction of the ecclesiastical courts over secular matters and the use of parliamentary action for what was essentially a judicial proceeding to be inappropriate” (Shanley, “One Must Ride Behind” 37). Additionally, in 1854, the Law Amendment Society used the two sets of rules governing married women’s property as an example of the confusion caused by the courts of equity and common law. These reports revealed not only that divorce was controlled by the wrong court, but also that the injustice caused by the provisions of the laws of equity for the rich was unacceptable. This revelation undermined the central tenets of traditional marriage law in England which were defined as “the ecclesiastical doctrine of indissolubility and the common law doctrine of *couverture*” (Shanley, *Feminism, Marriage and the Law* 38). This movement towards a new Divorce Law was reinforced in 1856 by Barbara Leigh Smith and her controversial pamphlet *A Brief Summary in Plain English of the Most Important Laws of England Concerning Women* which petitioned parliament for married women’s property to be treated the same as that of men.

The campaigners were rewarded on 28<sup>th</sup> August 1857 when the Divorce Act received assent. It established “The Court of Divorce and Matrimonial Causes” to handle divorce, and abolished the jurisdiction of the church courts over nullity of marriage and restitution of conjugal rights (Horstman 79). The Act also provided any woman who obtained either a judicial separation or a divorce all the rights of an unmarried woman with respect to property she acquired after the separation. She was also to be considered unmarried for the purposes of contracts and torts (Holcombe 101). Importantly, one section of the Act specifically dealt with the problem of wives deserted by their husbands, granting them protection of their property against their husband’s common law rights. While the Act was the “first major step taken to

eliminate conflicting jurisdictions and rival courts” (Holcombe 103) and towards recognising the absence of married women’s rights, it can also be seen as confirming the sexual double standard of the period by allowing divorce to be granted to a husband for his wife’s adultery and to a wife for her husband’s adultery *only* when aggravated by incest, bigamy, rape, sodomy, bestiality, cruelty or desertion for two years.<sup>6</sup> The lengthy delay between the beginning of the review of the divorce procedure in the 1830s and the Passage of the Bill in 1857 reveals the male fear that giving married women individual property rights and ability to claim for divorce would disrupt the balance of power within the separate spheres and force changes to both family and political life.

The Divorce Act is directly relevant to Dickens’s private life as the year of its assent was the year he separated from his wife Catherine. Divorce is not campaigned for in Dickens’s fiction as women are revealed as controlled by and subordinate to the doctrine of separate spheres which was supported by common law. The Divorce Act undermined the doctrine by disputing the authority of the common law doctrine of *couverture*. This is a difference between the writing of Dickens and Collins as Dickens seems to support the “angel-in-the-house” ideology while Collins challenges it. Despite this, the potential cruelty of common law against married women is seen in Dickens’ depiction of the abuse of Poor Jenny in *Bleak House* and a critique of the precepts for marriage is made in the match-made relationships of the Clennams and the Gowans in *Little Dorrit*. Collins offers a commentary on divorce with his testimonial-style narrative in *The Woman in White* which John Sutherland states can be read as “a study of divorce Victorian-style” (Oxford 1996, 246). This is evident as the text examines the difficulty in obtaining a legal separation agreement which releases both parties to future relationships. In *No Name*, Collins also criticises the

common law doctrine which the Divorce Act attempted to dispute by showing how Andrew Vanstone was forced to wait until his first wife died before being able to marry the woman who was his wife in every respect other than certification.

The next significant piece of legislation in the campaign for advancing married women's rights was the Divorce and Matrimonial Causes Act, introduced in 1854 by Lord Chancellor Cranworth, and made law January 1st 1858. This Act was a significant step towards acknowledging married women who had separated from their husbands as individuals within the law. As already discussed, prior to reform under common law, wives separated from their husbands had no right to retain any subsequent earnings or property. The Act reversed this, protecting the earnings of separated wives, enabling them to receive maintenance, allowing them to inherit and bequeath property and to sue or be sued. This effectively treated separated wives as unmarried women. However, while this was an important step forwards, the Act did not disturb *married* women's relation to property or address the sexual double standard. Instead "it addressed only the most egregious injustice, the case of the separated wife who had no defence under common law" (Poovey 85). In its favour, the Act did draw further attention to the unequal power structure that controlled Victorian marriage by recognising women as separate identities after divorce.<sup>7</sup> However, the failure of this Act to address the "non-existent" position of married women is reflected in *The Woman in White* where Collins uses Percival Glyde's control and imprisonment of Laura Fairlie to comment on the unchanged powerless and unprotected state of married women.

In Victorian Britain the illegitimate were those "not only begotten, but born out of lawful matrimony" (Blackstone 349). Legally defined as *nullius filius*

(nobody's child) they were legally and socially disadvantaged as living evidence of their parent's sin. As William Blackstone discusses:

The incapacity of a bastard conflicts principally in this, that he cannot be heir to any one, neither can he have heirs, but of his own body, for being nullius filius, he is therefore kin to nobody, and has no ancestor from which any inheritable blood can be derived (352).

A further consequence of having no rights of succession was that if an illegitimate individual had no spouse or offspring and died intestate his personal property passed to the Crown (James 43). The one means for the illegitimate to be legitimated was by an Act of Parliament. However, the cost and lengthy procedure meant "this method was rarely used; the one outstanding example was the legitimation of the illegitimate children of John of Gaunt by a statute of Richard II" (Graveson and Crane 43).

The legal disadvantages were crucial in sustaining the social stigma attached to unmarried motherhood and the legitimacy of primogeniture as one of the fundamental precepts of marriage. The existence of the legitimacy / illegitimacy distinction was important in maintaining marriage customs and laws in the period as well as controlling sexual practices, lineage and inheritance. The social stigma attached to bastards was an extension of this licit / illicit division as their existence "supplied public proof of extra-marital sexual intercourse and that the fundamental precept was a form of intimacy properly existing between those united by marriage" (Wolfram 122). The husband's right to sever the marriage contract because of his wife's adultery supported these legal customs showing that a man's sexual authority and the legitimacy of his offspring were the basic considerations of marriage.<sup>8</sup>

It may initially seem that the illegitimate and the married woman have little in common, especially as one is the product of an illicit union the other's existence contradicts. However, an unexpected link is revealed between the two through the lack of legal identity each has. The illegitimate were unable to inherit property because they lacked paternal ownership, and, as Collins' texts clearly show, the illegitimate were rendered "blank" by their lack of heritage and thus able to assume any identity. A wife was also rendered "non-existent" by laws enabling her to "become" some one else, emphasised by Laura Fairlie "becoming" Anne Catherick in *The Woman in White*. British laws governing inheritance and marriage created married women and the illegitimate "portable property" in a horizontal or vertical transfer:

Inheritance is the transfer of property (either as a set of rights or access to use) down generations through time, while marriage (dowry or bridewealth) is the transfer of property or wealth across kinship groups (Hirschon 9).

Both groups lacked a personal and social sense of self because they are defined as either "no-one's property" or the property of their husband: they have no identity in their own right. The illegitimate had no identity because they could not inherit name or property and they therefore became the property of others, as is shown through Tattycoram's relationship with the Meagles in *Little Dorrit*. Married women lost their identity when they were transferred from father to husband: they too became a form of "property" to be owned. In both cases it is access to and ownership of property which defines the individual. In *No Name* Magdalen comments that marriage has



made her “Somebody’s Wife”, she is not a “Somebody” in her own right (Collins *No Name* 484).

Women constituted a horizontal transfer of property in the transaction from father to husband. The illegitimate had no right to inherit property: as Dickens and Collins show they were able to be “owned” and “transferred” by others. This combination of woman and bastard is most evident in Esther’s “transfer” from Jarndyce to Allan Woodcourt towards the end of *Bleak House*. Married women’s rights to inheritance (vertical transfer) were lost or subsumed into another’s identity; Laura’s marriage to Percival helps his debts because part of her fortune becomes his. In both *Bleak House* and *Little Dorrit* Dickens suggests that the “non-existence” of the illegitimate creates legal and social identity problems. Esther and Jo the crossing sweeper have a shared status as illegitimate orphans and their identities as “housekeeper” and a “nobody” in the novel are conferred on them by others rather than being of their own construction. They and Tattycoram from *Little Dorrit* become, like married women, the property of others because they have no way of entering society than under another’s identity.

Under English Law there was little possibility for a bastard to reverse their lack of paternal inheritance. Illegitimacy was not only an offence against Christian morality and the institution of marriage but because of the financial support it laid upon the parish it was also an offence against the well-being of society. The 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act (particularly the Bastardy Clause) and the 1845 Bastardy Act isolated and condemned single mothers and their illegitimate children in order to alleviate the drain on parish funds and re-assert social discipline. The 1858 the Legitimacy Declaration Act recognised the problem of being unable to prove

individual identity, but failed to reconcile the problematic legal position in relation to inheritance for the illegitimate.

Prior to the nineteenth century, the Poor Law of 1733 dictated that the putative father was responsible for the maintenance of his illegitimate child. If he failed to do so, the mother could have him arrested and imprisoned until he was able to. While the father was unable to support his child, the parish was expected to provide relief. In an effort to reduce their liability and the rising costs of poor relief, local authorities forced many fathers to marry the mothers, resulting in premature and unhappy marriages. This solved the parish problem by placing the father under the common law doctrine of having to provide maintenance for his wife and offspring. In 1833 a Poor Law Report criticised this when it found that relief was too readily available for illegitimate children and their mothers and that forced marriages were an inappropriate method of combating the issue. The problem was addressed by the Bastardy Clause of the 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act<sup>9</sup> which essentially ended relief for unmarried women and curtailed the availability of assistance from the father of an illegitimate child.<sup>10</sup> All illegitimate children were to be the sole responsibility of their mothers until they were sixteen years old. Mothers were expected to support their offspring, and if they were unable to do so the child was placed in a workhouse.<sup>11</sup> For the first time, the putative father was absolved of any responsibility for his illegitimate offspring. The goal of the new law was the abolition of support for those who could not provide sufficient income for themselves from employment, “where any relief given to the able-bodied poor was to be in such a form as to make their condition less desirable than that of the poorest independent labourer” (Parker 55). The harsher terms of the Bastardy Clause were intended to single out women to face the humiliation of illegitimacy alone and reinforce social discipline by using

them as a deterrent to others (Pinchbeck and Hewitt 583). Repeating the criteria of the Divorce Law, the Poor Law Amendment Act also stipulated that the mother's word as to the identity of the father had to be corroborated by other evidence (another "reliable" person's report) which was often hard to procure (Teichman 65). In the event that the identity was proven, the new law made it very difficult for a mother to survive without resorting to prostitution as no maintenance from the father was to be spent on the mother. As a result of frequently being unable to provide the "additional evidence" of the father's identity and receive maintenance for her child, mothers were often forced to place their child in the care of the workhouse or a baby farm where their future was uncertain at best.

Dickens most obviously addresses the Poor Law Amendment Act in *Oliver Twist*: "he was determined to dramatize the harshness of the new legislation by showing its effects on a representative of its most helpless victims, an infant born (and immediately orphaned) in a workhouse" (Slater 15). Dickens uses the novel as a vehicle to attack the inhumanity of the New Poor Law (the common name for the Amendment Act). Oliver's birth was a burden on the Parish financially as they were obligated to provide for the orphan. The Parish Council attempted to "farm" him out, firstly to a small trading vessel, but this venture fails, and then to an undertakers. It is when Oliver flees from the Sowerberrys that Dickens turns the focus of the story to London's criminal underworld. Dickens' awareness of the inhumane treatment of bastards is also evident in *Bleak House* as he strongly suggests that Guster was a product of a baby farm; in *Little Dorrit* Old Nandy lives in a workhouse.

Following the 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act, the 1845 Bastardy Act amended a degree of the harshness of the 1834 Poor Law towards "single" mothers and their illegitimate children. In a further attempt to address the continued financial

drain unwed mothers were to a parish, the Act stated that fathers had to legally support offspring until aged thirteen (this was later changed to sixteen). Following the terms of the Poor Law Amendment Act, when mothers were unable to prove the identity of the father, they were obliged to support the child, and if they were unable to do so they could send the child to the workhouse. The 1872 Bastardy Laws Amendment Act altered this by providing that a “single” woman might apply for a maintenance order from the father in respect of her illegitimate child before it was born.

The Bastardy Clause in the Poor Law Amendment Act and the subsequent 1845 Bastardy Act supplied Dickens and Collins with ample material to criticise the legal treatment of the illegitimate. In *Bleak House* an illegitimate daughter, Esther Summerson, narrates almost exactly half the story. The build-up to her discovery of her mother’s identity is central to the development of tension and suspense within the story. I examine whether Esther’s prominence instead of the ostracised position she would occupy in conventional society is Dickens offering a form of rhetorical compensation for her secondary position in society. However, the possible redemption Dickens offers Esther is challenged in *Little Dorrit* where the illegitimate characters remain irreconciled to their heritage: Arthur has only an intuited uncertainty about his background, Tattycoram is painfully aware of her secondary position as Pet Meagles’ maid and Miss Wade is left to the bitter enjoyment of her own and others’ unhappiness. Illegitimacy is the central secret in Collins’ *The Woman in White* and the novel reveals the indeterminate legal position of bastards and questions the hereditary nature of class. This criticism of the disadvantaged position of the illegitimate is continued in *No Name* where Collins uses the plight of the Vanstone daughters to petition for reform of the “non-existent” legal position of the illegitimate. Magdalen

and Norah's position as "Nobody's Children" and Magdalen's subsequent manipulations of the law reveal that bastards are encouraged to adopt identities other than their own in order to be recognised within the law.

Legitimation is "the canonical term for the act by which the irregularity contracted by being born out of lawful wedlock is removed" (Teichman 65). This meant that children who had been born illegitimately were able to be legitimized by the subsequent marriage of their parents.<sup>12</sup> In 1858 England was the only European nation whose laws did not recognise legitimation. It is against this restriction that Collins makes the strongest argument in *No Name*. Here, Mr. Pendril, the family lawyer, admits that the laws of England governing the illegitimate are far from adequate.

The Legitimacy Declaration Act of 1858 appeared as a reprieve for the illegitimate in proving their status as "natural born subjects". However, as Collins clearly shows in *No Name*, the Act did little to help bastards and the law required more radical reform. Prior to 1858 the laws of England provided no means "by which a man could of himself obtain a judicial declaration of particular rights such as his marriage, his legitimacy or any other matters he wished to establish" (MacQueen 348). To remedy this, in August 1858 a bill was passed under the title *An Act to Enable Persons to Establish Legitimacy and the Validity of Marriages, and the Right to be deemed Natural-born Subjects*, more commonly known as the Legitimacy and Marriage Declaration Act. This allowed for any "natural born subject of the Queen" to apply by petition to the Divorce Court for a decree declaring the validity of his father and mother's marriage, or his grandparents' marriage, allowing the court jurisdiction to make a "decree declaratory of the petitioner's legitimacy or illegitimacy" (MacQueen 349). This Act allowed a decree that the person is, and always has been,

the child of specific parents. Once such a declaration had been properly issued it could not be overturned. The provisions of this Act are different to legitimation as it was an Act related to parentage rather than a concept related to marriage. While this appears to help illegitimate children, proving their parents or grandparents were married after their birth, it did not. Their status would have been helped by the process of legitimation, but this was not recognised in England until 1926.

The laws governing married women and the illegitimate in the mid-Victorian period provide an important frame of reference for Dickens' and Collins' fiction. Neither the 1857 Divorce Law nor the 1858 Matrimonial Causes Act successfully changed regulations governing women's right to hold property while married. However, the Acts did highlight the "non-existent" legal state women occupied when they stepped into their expected role of wife and mother. The Acts also enabled separated women the rights of unmarried women, for the first time challenging the ideology of the separate spheres and the supporting common law doctrine of *couverture*. The 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act and 1858 Legitimacy Declaration Act did little to help unwed mothers and their illegitimate offspring. In fact, the Acts appeared to oppress and deny mothers relief to reinforce social discipline by making them examples to others. This political and social change of stigmatising the mother is evident in *Bleak House* as Lady Dedlock refuses further contact with Esther after their first meeting on the basis she would shame her husband and her daughter. The laws against the illegitimate are evident in *The Woman in White* through Walter Hartright's suggestion that the law would remove all Percival owned. However, the penalties are explicit in Collins next novel, *No Name*, where he demonstrates how the laws encouraged bastards to behave illegally in order to be recognised as individuals.

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<sup>1</sup> Norton's battle against the law of *couverture* and her husband George is well-known. An inappropriate marriage led to Norton separating from her husband. As a result she was legally denied the right to see her children, to retain any money she earned from publishing work and she could make no legal claim against him because wives were under the cover of their husbands and as such could not sue or testify against them. Her letters and campaign for the rights of separated wives were influential in passing the Matrimonial Causes Act and reform giving mothers access rights to their children. For further details see chapter three "Covered but Not Bound: Caroline Norton and the 1857 Matrimonial Causes Act" of Mary Poovey's *Uneven Developments: The Ideological Work of Gender in Mid-Victorian England* (1989).

<sup>2</sup> The other central factor in the relationship, as later discussed in the laws governing the illegitimate, was the birth of legitimate offspring.

<sup>3</sup> Individual campaigns were most notably those by Caroline Norton (see above) and Barbara Leigh Smith. For more information see *Caroline Norton's Defense: English Laws for Women in the Nineteenth Century* and Mary Lyndon Shanley's *Feminism, Marriage and the Law in Victorian England, 1850-1895*, particularly chapter one.

<sup>4</sup> Dickens' and Collins' address to a predominantly middle-class audience is discussed in a number of texts and articles including John Kucich's article "Dickens" in *The Columbia History of the British Novel* (1994) and George H. Ford's *Dickens and His Readers: Aspects of Novel-Criticism Since 1836* (1955).

<sup>5</sup> Obtaining a parliamentary divorce was a complex and costly process. Allan Horstman outlines the procedure: "First a plaintiff had to obtain a decree *a mensa thoro* from the ecclesiastical courts. The husband then had to win damages against his wife's alleged paramour by providing evidence of his wife's adultery with the accused. Only after success in these two proceedings could a plaintiff present a bill for parliamentary divorce" (40-41). For further information see chapter two, *Victorian Divorce* (1985) and Joan Perkin's study *Women and Marriage in Nineteenth Century England* (1989). In chapter 11 of *Hard Times* (1854) Dickens deals with the problems facing the working class (Stephen Blackpool) in trying to obtain a divorce from his wife.

<sup>6</sup> This list was amended in 1859 to include a husband's adultery being combined with incest, bigamy and cruelty. For an in-depth study on divorce under different circumstances and the procedure in the Divorce Court see John MacQueen *A Practical Treatise on the Law of Marriage, Divorce and Legitimacy, as Administered in the Divorce Court and the House of Lords* (1860).

<sup>7</sup> The campaign for married women's property rights was continued with the 1870 Married Women's Property Act which was introduced to parliament in 1856. This fourteen year period of debate emphasises the resistance to giving married women equal property rights with their husbands. Even when it was finally passed, the Act was something of a disappointment to feminists of the time as it did not provide women with the same rights as if they were unmarried but allowed that certain kinds of property should be treated as "separate estate" making the laws of equity available to all women. For more information on the Married Women's Property Act of 1870 see Lee Holcombe, *Wives and Property: Reform of the Married Women's Property Law in Nineteenth Century England* (1983) chapters 7 and 8 and Mary Poovey *Uneven Developments: The Ideological Work of Gender in Mid-Victorian England* (1989).

<sup>8</sup> This is shown by the criteria for divorce under the 1857 Act (see p.5) whereby a husband only had to prove adultery for divorce but a wife had to prove adultery aggravated by additional offences.

<sup>9</sup> The 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act is also referred to as the New Poor Law. I will use the first term.

<sup>10</sup> The Bastardy Clause was a highly controversial measure which was overturned by revision of the clause in the Act in 1844. The revision enabled an unmarried mother to apply for an affiliation order against the father for maintenance of mother and child, regardless of whether or not she was in receipt of poor relief (Pollock and Maitland 59).

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<sup>11</sup> For further details on the 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act see Derek Fraser *The New Poor Law in the Nineteenth Century* (1976) and Samuel Mencher *Poor Law to Poverty Program: Economic Security in Britain and the United States* (1974). For further details on the Bastardy Clause see Ann Higginbotham “Sin of the Age: Infanticide and Illegitimacy in Victorian London” (1992).

<sup>12</sup> This was an institution of Roman Law, and is said to have been introduced by the Christian emperor Constantine and perpetuated by Justinian (James 44). In 1236 the barons in England refused to accept this doctrine and it remained so until 1926.



## Chapter One. *Bleak House*: The Master Narrative of Illegitimacy

*Bleak House* was published between 1852 and 1853 and involves two complex story lines. The first is that of Chancery and the long-running Jarndyce and Jarndyce case which involves several of the characters in the novel and through which Dickens comments on the obfuscation of the British legal system. The second is that of the female narrator Esther Summerson and her search for an identity. Through this storyline, Dickens centralises the issue of illegitimacy by questioning the marginal position of bastards in mid-Victorian society.

He does this by examining the relation between illegitimacy and identity in creating Esther as a morally irreproachable character and as a narrator who expresses herself through two opposed voices. In centralising illegitimacy to encourage a more tolerant attitude towards bastards, Dickens' views are seen to be ambiguous as the text reveals a fear that the leniency of punishing the parents and not their illegitimate offspring may result in the disappearance of moral authority altogether; thus Dickens physically scars Esther with the sins of her parents. Dickens' use of his female narrator's identity as a domestic saint to question the treatment of the illegitimate also problematises the ideal of the "angel in the house". This treatment of the character of Esther reveals that the practice of self-denial results in a diminished or non-existent personal sense of self. On the one hand, the text subscribes to and confirms the ideal by making Esther a domestic saint. On the other, her authority as narrator gives voice to a subversive alternative self which contradicts her "angel" identity. The text thus overtly reinforces and contributes to the cult of domesticity but covertly reveals its negative effects. Dickens challenges the traditional treatment of bastards through

Esther's angelic identity and narrative authority but this is complicated by presenting Esther as a domestic saint who is denied a sense of self.

Both Dickens and Collins were interested in the influence of parents on personal identity. A character having multiple names, or conversely no name at all, was one of the primary means by which both authors examined the instability of names as a means of an individual establishing themselves in society. In the Victorian period, surnames provided an individual with legitimate position in society by placing them in relation to fathers and forbears. This was obviously problematic for the illegitimate who were prevented from founding their sense of self on family ties by being legally barred from inheriting the name of their father. A result of this legal restriction was that, paradoxically, a mark of illegitimacy became the use of the mother's surname.<sup>1</sup> Alternatively, bastards who were orphaned could assume a name, such as Summerson, which concealed the guilt of both their parents or, like Jo the crossing-sweeper, only have a Christian name. However, as the novel shows, both of these situations created problems for identity and legal status, as the individual's missing or adopted name related them to no-one.

Dickens' later investigation into the psychology of illegitimacy in *Little Dorrit* is initiated here in *Bleak House* through Esther Summerson. Esther's surname provides no hereditary relationship to her parents and contradicts the view of her birth presented by her aunt. On the one hand Summerson relates symbolically to Esther's role as bringer of light and domestic happiness to Bleak House; on the other it bears no relation to the sinful view aunt Barbary holds of Esther and her birth. This sin is compounded by the fact that English offers only the suffix –son- we have no way of distinguishing a daughter. That Dickens chooses to include “son” in her name confirms his view that the illegitimate should have some status. Esther's Christian

name reinforces her parentless state by directly evoking the Old Testament orphan adopted and raised by a kindly and wiser old man, Mordecai, the counterpart to Jarndyce. Because she lacks paternal identification and thus a sense of location in society in relation to the past, Esther accepts the sense of self imposed on her by others' moral standards and domestic ideals rather than being able to construct one for herself. The resulting tensions in her narrative between self-effacing goodness and subversive desires effectively bring together the elements of Dickens' treatment of the effects of illegitimacy on individual identity.

Esther's initial sense of identity is shaped by the extreme evangelical view of illegitimacy presented by her aunt. Because of Miss Barbary's Calvinist beliefs, Esther has not been allowed, since childhood, to meet her peers. The guardian offers her ward no real affection and convinces Esther her birthday is "the most melancholy day at home in the whole year" (29; ch3). Through Miss Barbary's rigid Calvinism Dickens condemns the conventional attitude towards the illegitimate. Miss Barbary tells Esther that she will understand her disgrace when she is a woman: thus the ignorant child is innocent; the religiously and socially constructed woman is not. Esther's aunt tells her niece that "it would have been far better...that you had never been born" (30; ch 3). She thus instils in Esther the belief that she is her mother's disgrace and that "her birth was a criminal usurpation of a mother's life" (Wilt 299). Esther's internalisation of this shame underlies her constant selflessness and self-effacement. Her aunt encourages Esther to live a life of "submission, self-denial, [and] diligent work" (30; ch 3) to atone for the sin of her birth. Esther adds that she wants to be "industrious" in order to "do some good to some one, and win some love to [herself]" (31; ch 3). Esther initiates the process of literal self-denial by transposing her own suppressed desires and perceived shortcomings on to her doll. Dolly is

initially “the only friend with whom [Esther] felt at ease” and Esther “was to no-one upon earth what Dolly was to [her]” (28-9; ch 3). Dolly represents the desire for affection Esther believes she must deny in order to be loved. Later this has a profound affect on her ability to acknowledge sexual attraction. After her aunt’s sudden death, having been reminded that she is her own misfortune by Miss Rachel, Esther buries Dolly, thereby symbolically committing to self-denial in the hope of gaining others’ love and affection. Because of her aunt’s view of illegitimacy, Esther has an identity of shame imposed on her which she internalises and attempts to atone for by devotion to an ethic of selflessness.

Through Esther’s guardian, John Jarndyce, Dickens articulates his condemnation of Miss Barbary: “the distorted religion clouded her mind with impressions of the need there was for the child to expiate for an offence of which she was quite innocent” (276; ch 17). However, at the same time as recognising Esther’s innocence of her parents’ sin, Jarndyce reveals contradictions in Dickens’ position as author attempting to comment on Victorian ideology whilst standing within it. Jarndyce (or Dickens) allows Esther to internalise the need to expiate her “shame” through duty by making her his housekeeper and domestic saint. Jarndyce acknowledges Esther’s innocence but simultaneously inscribes the angel-in-the-house identity onto her which also denies her a sense of self. This is evident when she momentarily dwells on “the possibility of his [Jarndyce] being my father” but quickly realises this desire does not correlate with her obligation to self-denial and she buries her feelings (103; ch 6). Dickens’ critique of the extreme religious views against the illegitimate is obvious, but he also imposes an identity on Esther which causes her to deny her own sense of self. The subsequent obsessive renaming of Esther after her arrival at Bleak House is symptomatic of Victorian society’s inability to categorise the

illegitimate despite its recurring attempts to do just that and is evidence of the difficulty Dickens has in criticising a culture whilst standing within it.

Soon after her arrival at Bleak House the “housekeeping Esther” is given a number of nicknames which confirm her status as domestic saint but deprive her of her actual name:

This was the beginning of my being called Old Woman, and Little Old Woman, and Cobweb, and Mrs Shipton, and Mother Hubbard, and Dame Durden, and so many names of that sort that my own name soon became quite lost among them (121; ch 8).

The continued use of the names to the very end of the text shows that Esther is “a function of the roles she plays in the household economy” as they deny her a sense of self independent of the identities she has been given (Peltason 673). William Axton’s study of the references of the names shows that they “uniformly refer to witches, old hags, comic old dames and widows of folklore, nursery rhyme and street song” (159). The names contradict the saintly “housekeeper” identity Esther has and thus reveal that names are an unstable means of establishing identity. Furthermore, the conflict between witches and hags and selfless housekeeper compound the difficulty Esther has in defining who she is.<sup>2</sup> The identities of old woman and housekeeper encourage Esther in the belief that she will never “win any love” with a consequent suppression of her sexuality as none of her nicknames are women who would be involved in romantic relationships.

The uncertainty of Esther’s identity is confirmed through the relationship she has to her father. For the illegitimate, the absence of or uncertainty about a name (and

of paternity) defined them legally and socially. Even though she is unaware of his pseudonym, Esther's father was "Nemo" making her legally and literally "Nobody's" daughter. Miss Barbary's letter to Jarndyce reinforces this by telling him that if she were to die before Esther "became a woman, she would be left entirely friendless, nameless and unknown" (276; ch 17). Esther's fear that she will not be known about is compounded by her parents. Her father became "nobody" and her mother thought that Esther died at birth; thus she was non-existent. This sense that Esther is of no importance originates from the view of illegitimacy she is given in childhood, is confirmed by her various nicknames, and clinched by her "nobody" father.

Only after confronting her illegitimacy, which represents her heritage, can Esther meet her mother. The smallpox scars become the external symbol of Esther's illicit heritage and deprive her of her inheritance of looks. No longer publicly recognisable as related to Lady Dedlock, the mother and daughter can meet without fear of their true relationship being discovered. While the scars protect Esther and her mother from public recognition and thus condemnation, at the same time, since their origin is the paupers' graveyard where Nemo is buried, they affirm the moral authority that bastards should be punished by a physical visitation of the father's sin on his unacknowledged daughter.<sup>3</sup> Here Morgentaler links illegitimacy to disease through "the notion of unchecked reproduction of moral stain, symbolized by the decomposing body of the sinning father, passed on as the disease which afflicts and scars the innocent daughter" (96). The scars physically confront Esther with her illegitimacy. On seeing her reflection for the first time after the illness, Esther thinks that her face seems "so strange" but it becomes familiar as she comes to terms with the mark of her heritage:

Then I put my hair aside, and looked at the reflection in the mirror:  
 encouraged by seeing how placidly it looked at me. I was very much changed  
 – O very, very much. At first, my face was so strange to me...very soon it  
 became familiar...it was not like what I had expected; but I had expected  
 nothing definite, and I dare say anything definite would have surprised me  
 (572; ch 36).

The changeable identity of the illegitimate is reiterated here as Esther expects  
 “nothing definite” when she looks at herself because previously her “self” was  
 defined by the “angelic” roles (such as housekeeper) assigned to her by others.<sup>4</sup> For  
 Esther, confronting her illegitimacy is only possible after the illness during which  
 Dickens uses the fever to allow her insight into her true self. Facing herself in the  
 mirror Esther loses the control she had maintained over her inheritance of shame by  
 her devotion to duty at all costs:

At once a child, an elder girl, and the little woman I had been so happy as, I  
 was not only oppressed by cares and difficulties adapted to each station, but by  
 the great perplexity of endlessly trying to reconcile them. I suppose that few  
 who have not been in such a condition can quite understand what I mean, or  
 what painful unrest arose from this source (555; ch 35).

It is only after realising the difficulty of reconciling the roles she has assumed in order  
 to suppress her “shame” that Esther can confront her “self” - her illegitimacy - in the  
 mirror. Having achieved this, later in the same chapter Esther can confront her  
 mother.

Esther's gradual discovery of the identity of her mother is central to the suspense plot in the novel. Critics have discussed the importance of the recognition between mother and daughter prior to their secret meeting.<sup>5</sup> What is significant in terms of Dickens' view of illegitimacy is that Esther is reconciled to her illegitimacy through her illness, but is denied the opportunity of a relationship with her mother. As soon as they are reunited, Lady Dedlock requests that they never communicate again and Esther does not question how it can be for her own good that the mother she has just met must abandon her as she did unwittingly at Esther's birth:

We never could associate, never could communicate, never probably from that time forth could interchange another word, on earth...but not so much for her sake, since she asked nothing, as for her husband's and my own – I must ever more consider her as dead (580; ch 36).

The lack of maternal relationship before and after the meeting is reinforced by the fact that Esther never meets her father. Nemo's significance to the investigation of illegitimacy in the novel is almost entirely in terms of his death which produces the illness which infects his daughter.<sup>6</sup> Critics have frequently focused on the symbolism of the absence of a mother-daughter relationship in terms of the broader political scene<sup>7</sup>; however, my focus relates to society's punishment of the innocent offspring and how this problematised identity and relationships for those "guilty" parents and their children. Esther's internal conflict is between the desire to be loved (which she repressed in her childhood) and the need to be selfless to atone for her "shame". Her mother's conflict is the knowledge that her daughter is alive but that in order to protect her husband and daughter from the shame of illegitimacy, Lady Dedlock



cannot have any contact with Esther. She reveals this internal conflict to Esther when they meet in secret: “if you hear of Lady Dedlock, brilliant, prosperous, and flattered; think of your wretched mother, conscience-stricken underneath that mask!” (582; ch 36) The proud lady’s public identity is exposed as a lie. Honoria Dedlock does reveal a maternal side prior to her meeting with Esther in her relationship with her maid Rosa. The care Lady Dedlock takes in looking after her maid acts out a mother-surrogate daughter relationship which leads the reader to question whether Esther might have had a very different fate had her mother not been told her daughter died at birth. Even as her own crisis escalates with Tulkinghorn learning the truth of her past, Lady Dedlock helps Rosa in her future marriage saying that she wished to make her happy as much as she wished to make anyone on earth happy (736). Rosa alone sees Lady Dedlock without her proud exterior, as she “really is” and the relationship between Lady and maid mimics that which could have existed between mother and daughter. The Lady Dedlock-Rosa relationship underscores that illegitimacy denies motherhood and can destroy the natural bond between mother and daughter.

In their fictional investigations into the effects of illegitimacy on identity both Collins and Dickens show an important link between illegitimacy and sexuality. In *Bleak House* and *Little Dorrit* the mother is viewed by society within the text as primarily responsible for the sexual sin of fornication outside marriage and the subsequent birth of an illegitimate child.<sup>8</sup> The biblical basis for punishing the children for their parents’ sin was that it was the sins of the *fathers* that were to be visited on the children, but as the doctrine of the separate spheres saw the woman as the upholder of standards of morality she was blamed for all sexual misdemeanours and their consequences and the 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act reinforced her punishment.<sup>9</sup> Thus in assigning blame for illegitimacy Victorian ideology reversed

the guilty party from male (as stated in the bible) to female. The traditional view of the illegitimate child as the mother's fault is reinforced in *Bleak House* by the father's "lack of substance as a living being"; therefore, while Honoria appears to escape from her sinful past into an aristocratic marriage, Dickens shows that her earlier sexual sin cannot be left unpunished (Morgentaler 87). Lady Dedlock flees her home after Mr Tulkinghorn tells her he knows her past and she later reads the letter implicating her as his murderer. Esther and Inspector Bucket trace Lady Dedlock through the outskirts of London to Islington and then the paupers' graveyard. At the Snagsbys' residence Esther receives a letter her mother left for her explaining that: "It was right that all that had sustained me should give way at once and that I should die of terror and my conscience" (910; ch 59). Dickens uses the letter as a vehicle to express his condemnation of Lady Dedlock's affair with Captain Hawdon by having her die of the mental torment caused by her earlier immoral behaviour. However, Dickens complicates the condemnation of mothers of bastards as in this instance the father dies too; the sexual double standard usually allowed the man to escape unscathed. In this novel both parents are punished and the innocent child is redeemed of her parents' sins.

Sexuality and illegitimacy are not only linked through Lady Dedlock but also through the denial of motherhood that Esther imposes on herself in childhood. This denial is represented through Esther burying doll as she is symbolically burying the mother-daughter bond her illegitimacy denies her. For Victorian women marriage equated with motherhood and Esther is led to believe by her aunt that she is undeserving of that role. Episodes with John Jarndyce and Mr Guppy the law clerk reveal Esther's inability completely to suppress her desire to be a mother. Although she had little previous contact with him, Mr Guppy visits Esther at Bleak House and

proposes: “Miss Summerson! In the mildest language, I adore you. Would you be so kind as to allow me (as I may say) to file a declaration – to make an offer! (150; ch. 9) Esther responds by demanding that Guppy leave immediately and then organises the household accounts believing she had “quite dismissed this unexpected incident” (151; ch. 9). However, later she “felt as if an old chord had been more coarsely touched than it ever had been since the days of the dear old doll, long buried in the garden” (152; ch. 9). Esther feels unease at having her desire for marriage and motherhood awakened in her when she believed she had successfully buried it with Dolly.

Esther’s denial of the mother-daughter relationship in childhood develops into a denial of marriage, as this would allow motherhood in adulthood. After her illness, Esther renounces any feelings of love she may have had for Alan Woodcourt because she believes that her scarred face, thus her illegitimacy, makes a romantic relationship impossible. Before Esther follows her mother’s flight from Chesney Wold, Jarndyce proposes to Esther through a letter asking her to become the mistress of Bleak House. Esther answers that “she will do all she can to make it [Bleak House] happy” (790; ch 51). However, Esther finds herself “rather disappointed” as though she is partly aware that she is committing herself to Jarndyce out of gratitude rather than love. In marrying Jarndyce, Esther will become Mrs. Jarndyce, mistress of Bleak House; she will finally have place and position in society. But Jarndyce is aware that Esther commits herself to him out of appreciation for his past care and future security and acknowledges this by “gifting” her to Woodcourt and establishing the couple in a second Bleak House:

I had no doubt of your being contented and happy with me, being so dutiful and devoted; but I saw with whom you would be happier...’Allan’ said my guardian, ‘take from me, a willing gift, the best wife that ever a man had’’ (965-6; ch 64).

Esther as a “willing gift” is disturbing in terms of both her passive acceptance of transference from one man to another and Jarndyce’s Victorian assumption that he has the right to transfer her. This situation is explained by Esther’s unwillingness to challenge the man who secures her future as an ideal wife. Jarndyce’s “fatherly” presumption of “gifting” Esther results from a sense of duty of care which intensifies his paternal control.

For Esther the double negative of illegitimacy and the secondary position of women are offered a form of rhetorical compensation through her narrative. For all that Esther conforms to the ideal of selfless woman, as author and narrator of her text she also holds a position of traditionally masculine control. The right she is afforded to construct her own history can be seen as rhetorical compensation for the secondary position she occupies in society as a bastard and a woman. However, there are limitations on her expression. As Esther traces her origins, she must also keep her parentage secret in order to preserve her image of domestic saint and to protect the identity her mother created for herself within the aristocracy. Additionally, as much as Dickens compensates Esther’s position by using her as a narrator, we must remember that all the while Esther is writing, Dickens maintains the power of writing *her*. This situation of writer being written gives two voices to Esther’s narrative. The dominant voice cheerfully accepts and selflessly accommodates and the muted one which inquires, criticises and defends (Graver 4-5). This muted voice, like the conflicts

revealed in his views of illegitimacy, emerges despite rather than because of Dickens' conscious intentions. The two voices reveal Esther's internal conflict in trying to atone for her illegitimacy by dismissing her own desires as "fancies" or "foolish weakness" and hints at but does not openly acknowledge the insecurity that she will never gain any affection for herself even through obedience and duty.

After Richard reveals his determination to support himself and Ada, Esther cannot sleep and will not openly admit that it is because she envies a relationship which she believes her illegitimacy prevents her from having:

I was so little inclined to sleep, myself, that night, that I sat up working. It would not be worth mentioning for its own sake, but I was wakeful and rather 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. At any rate, I made up my mind to be so dreadfully industrious that I would leave myself not a moment's leisure to be low-spirited (273; ch 17).

Esther busies herself with her role as "housekeeping Esther" to conceal her fear that her "shame" means she will never win any love. Graver explains this internal division by stating that the two voices Dickens gives Esther reveal how "her culture's expectations of women, together with her own self-divisions, cause her to shape a self-conception that denies, conceals, or evades vital parts of herself, all the while giving them indirect expression" (10). Dickens clearly intended us to see more than Esther's overt statements but the narrative also subconsciously reveals the pressure the ethic of selflessness imposed on women and that Dickens imposed on Esther by making her an "angel". As Dickens tries to enclose Esther within Victorian

boundaries of femininity to highlight the traditional marginal treatment of illegitimacy, his own narrative (as woman's writing) represents a struggle against such enclosure as it assumes an authority traditionally denied to women. Esther's narrative "inadvertently but severely undercuts the benevolence and absolute value of the domestic ideology that the Dickensian text has attempted to construct and advocate" (Ayres 153). The ideological fractures exposed in Esther's narrative reveal the difficulty of criticising a culture whilst standing within it.

Esther does at last gain an identity, though it is as ambiguous and provisional as the identity of domestic saint imposed on her throughout the text. In the final chapter we are not given closure to the story as Esther's final "supposing" questions her status as housekeeper in the new Bleak House and her ability to escape her illegitimate heritage. Dickens provides a happy ending sanctioning domesticity as we discover that Esther has been married for seven years and has found her identity as the doctor's wife: "the people even praise Me as the doctor's wife...they like me for his sake, as I do everything I do in life for his sake" (989). Even at the end of the text Esther still believes that the only way to be loved is to sacrifice herself to others, and she still lacks an individual name: "I have never lost my old names...Dame Trot, Dame Durden, Little Woman! – all just the same as ever" (988). Dickens further complicates his final closure of Esther by leaving her last sentence unfinished: "they can do very well without much beauty in me – even supposing – "(989). Does this indicate that by the end of her story, Esther is still unable to recognise herself in spite of confronting her illegitimacy? Or is the female writer not allowed to bring any closure to her own story? The final line leaves us guessing and perhaps Esther withdraws mid-sentence so that we cannot abandon her as she was twice abandoned by her mother (Briganti 225). What is clear is that all her identities – revolving around

her as domestic saint – which have been provisional throughout the novel, remain so at the end: hence that last incomplete sentence.

Dickens' use of Esther's uncertain or changing identity to question the marginal position of bastards in Victorian society is reflected in her morally irreproachable angel-in-the-house characterisation. However, as much as Esther subscribes to this ideal, her private musings and reservations challenge her very ability to conform to the "angel" stereotype. Michael Slater defines Dickens' ideal woman as one who "embodied the grace and mercy of God, with powers to uplift, regenerate and redeem" (308-09). Dickens subscribed to and confirmed the doctrine of separate spheres which assigned to women the primary role of bearing and nurturing children and maintaining the family home. The home was supposed to be a haven from the outside world, a retreat for the husband after toiling in the public sphere. This domestic role demanded a selfless attitude from women; her "self" was always secondary to the needs of others. Sarah Ellis, one of the foremost proponents of the separate spheres ideology, outlines that women were expected to have "a contented mind, an enlightened spirit and an exemplary life" (114).<sup>10</sup> The woman's dedication to the social and moral well-being of the man regulated behaviour into specific gender roles: "the woman was supposed to be soft, meek, quiet, modest, submissive, gentle, patient and spiritual" (Ayres 4).<sup>11</sup> Dickens frequently depicted this idea of woman as a domestic "angel" in his fiction.<sup>12</sup> However, his interest in fractured and dysfunctional families also led him to portray women who subverted the middle-class norm. This conflicting interest in the idealisation of women is evident in *Bleak House* with Esther appearing to be a domestic "angel" but struggling to reconcile the identity of selflessness with her identity as an illegitimate daughter. In a bid to rectify her inheritance of shame, Esther adopts an attitude of self-denial and

submission from childhood which conforms to the ideal of womanhood Dickens endorsed. This presentation is problematized by the two voices in Esther's narration, one which agrees with the ideal and the other which subverts it.

Wifely duty is made obvious early in the novel after Esther's first encounter with the Jellybys. During and after this meeting Dickens makes his belief that the home was a woman's proper element most clear. The predicament of Mrs Jellyby's family on account of her "telescopic philanthropy" shows that Dickens believed "once a woman ventured outside the family and sought to do good on a large and public scale the result was bound to be unsatisfactory" (Slater 312). Esther, clearly here speaking for Dickens as well, outlines this to Jarndyce: "'we thought that, perhaps,' I said hesitating 'it is right to begin with the obligations of the home, sir; and that, perhaps while those are overlooked and neglected, no other duties can possibly be substituted for them'"(83; ch 6). Following this, Esther takes on the role of housekeeper in the community of Bleak House, an obligation required of an ideal woman. While Esther's character conforms to stereotypical expectations of women, the text also conveys how women lost their sense of self in the process of meeting angel-in-the-house demands. This is most obvious in the previously cited passage of Esther's thoughts during her illness:

At once a child, an elder girl, and the little woman I had been so happy as, I was not only oppressed by cares and difficulties adapted to each station, but by the great perplexity of endlessly trying to reconcile them (555; ch 35).

Here, when forced to relinquish her housekeeping duties because she has contracted smallpox, Esther reveals the difficulty in trying to reconcile female "self" to gender



expectations. The disease, symbolic of Esther's illegitimacy, forces her to deny herself (by being housekeeper) *and* forces her to relinquish her role as housekeeper.

Dickens' exploration of how individuals without parents form a stable identity and meet gender expectations includes orphans Ada Clare and Richard Carstone. Like Esther, neither Ada nor Richard has a secure identity as their lack of parentage leads them to create socially constructed identities so that they will be accepted by society even though they have no inheritance. We are introduced to Ada as "a beautiful girl! With such rich golden hair, such soft blue eyes, and such a bright, innocent, trusting face" she has the appearance of another of Dickens's "angels" but later defies the obedience expected of her gender (44; ch 3). Richard Carstone, "a handsome youth" and distant cousin of Ada's, is used to represent the consequences of Chancery on its subjects. His relationship to Chancery and search for an identity is specifically related to his desire for an inheritance which he hopes Chancery will recognise. Esther and Ada have a shared status as outsiders through orphanhood and illegitimacy. Their attempts to conform to the ideal of womanhood unintentionally reveal cracks in the ideology itself. For the majority of the novel, Ada lives at Bleak House with Esther, fulfilling her domestic duties and waiting for her fiancé to establish himself in a vocation to provide enough financial support for them to marry. However, when Richard decides that his fortune lies with the Jarndyce and Jarndyce case, her guardian requests that she and Richard break off their engagement until he finds an occupation which will support them. Ada agrees but later disobeys this wish and secretly marries Richard while still a ward of Jarndyce. It is only the day after her twenty-first birthday that she reveals: "I am going to stay with my husband. We have been married above two months. Go home without me, my own Esther; I shall never go home anymore!" (786) Ada was forced into action and uses the law of *couverture*

to ensure her inheritance will pay off Richard's debts. Ada's character is not a perfect "angel"; she defies her guardian by directly contradicting his wishes and the expected submission and self-denial of womanhood. Dickens sanctions the ideal of woman but unintentionally reveals an element of paradox as Ada sacrifices her own possessions for the sake of a man thus revealing the contradictions inherent in the ideology.

Richard's obsession with Chancery stems from a desire to locate himself in society and secure provision for his future. Richard is a ward of Jarndyce and is offered the choice of several different vocations from medicine to the law which he starts but fails to apply himself to any one of them; this leads to a dependence on the Chancery case for financial success. Esther notices that "Richard had a carelessness in his character that perplexed me – principally because he mistook it, in such a very odd way, for prudence" (138; ch 9). This "carelessness" relates to the unstable heritage Richard experienced as an orphan, relating him to Esther as more than just a fellow ward of Jarndyce. Marie Maclean's comment that "the question mark hanging over one's identity led to a capacity to remake that identity" epitomises Richard's predicament of being unable to make a real identity from vocation because identity was supposed to have its grounding in hereditary ties (8). This grounding has an interesting relation to Esther and her multitude of names. Names were supposed to provide hereditary ties but Esther's distance her from her parents reminds her of her position in Bleak House. Richard's search for identity is specifically related to a search for an inheritance that he hopes Chancery will recognize. Esther's is for the heritage that is her mother. Heritage is specifically related to a form of property passed from one generation to another. Inheritance can also be property but has a biological application as well. Morgentaler states that for the illegitimate child "identity becomes synonymous with heredity, since biological inheritance is the only

link to family that such a child has” (86). Esther believes that knowing who she is in relation to her mother provides a sense of heritage, a sense of herself founded on bloodlines rather than family ties, and therefore a place in society. Richard substitutes inheritance for heritage and thus uses the past to provide for the future which explains why he is left with no money, no future and no identity. Richard leaves a wife and a son when he dies after realising that all the money involved in the Jarndyce case has been used up in the legal procedures. Richard’s and Esther’s characters and their histories reveal that without adequate parents, individuals are forced to attach themselves to an institution, such as Chancery, or an ideology, such as angel-in-the-house, in order to gain a sense of personal and social identity.

*Bleak House* is no exception to John Butt and Kathleen Tillotson’s assertion that “none of Dickens’s novels is innocent of topical appeal” (177). Their in-depth discussion of the novel’s historical context covers for example the confusion and costly procedure of the Court of Chancery, sanitary reform and the Metropolitan Police Force.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, Humphry House and Andrew Sanders have discussed the condition of London slums in relation to the novel.<sup>14</sup> This latter focus has been exemplified through the characterisation of Jo who has also been used to discuss the appalling condition of graveyards in the period.<sup>15</sup> But none of these critics have recognised that the Victorians’ ongoing concern about illegitimacy informs the novel. In terms of illegitimacy, Jo plays a significant role at the inquest on Nemo’s death and later functions as the transmitter of smallpox.

Jo is an important figure for his depiction of the effects of illegitimacy on legal and social identity. His ability to withstand the discrimination against his birth, his relationship with Nemo and role in rejoining Captain Hawdon and Lady Dedlock show his importance to both the story and the topical debate on illegitimacy. Jo’s

illegitimacy is probable from his own admission at the inquest that he only has one name and no parents: "Name, Jo. Nothing else that he knows on. Don't think that everybody has two names. Never heard of such a thing...No father, no mother, no friends" (177; ch 11). Here Jo reveals himself as an almost living parallel to Nemo's name, knowing nothing, belonging to nobody and as a result any information he offers is invalid. Dickens uses this situation to highlight that as the illegitimate were unable to legally prove their existence in relation to their parents, they were considered an unreliable witness. Jo's treatment at the inquest outlines the need for legal reform so that bastards are also considered valid citizens.

The connection between Jo, Nemo and Lady Dedlock is important for its joining of the separated lovers through a child who, like their own daughter, is illegitimate. Nemo becomes a presence in the novel through Jo and the connection between the two is solidified through disease and identity. Both are nameless outcasts, attracted to one another by their lowly position in society. Nemo has no identity, other than that of an opium addict, that anyone at the inquest can prove and neither does Jo, other than as a crossing sweeper. Jo appears to be the only character who openly grieves for Nemo and has to witness the body being stomped on to get it into the ground at the paupers' graveyard. The body becomes the site of the smallpox Jo contracts and passes to Charley and finally to Esther thus linking father and daughter; it is important that the vehicle transmitting the illness was an illegitimate orphan. Lady Dedlock asks Jo about the burial of Nemo strengthening the connection between herself, Nemo and Jo as the information provides her with a destination to flee to once the affair is discovered. Through Jo's lack of a legal identity and his role as transmitter of smallpox Dickens suggests that the illegitimate are not the nonentities society would have them be.

In the novel the repression of female identity so that women conform to society's expectations directly relates to the legal reform for the rights of married women so that they did not become the property of their husbands. This is a topic discussed more thoroughly in relation to Collins who takes a differing view to Dickens in his novels. Dickens presentation of Mr. Jellyby as "merged into the more shining qualities of his wife" (50; ch 4) articulates the male fear of what giving women increased rights could do to the control men had over women through the doctrine of separate spheres. Dickens shows his support for maintaining the secondary status of women and the separate spheres. Esther's passive acceptance as a "willing gift" from guardian to husband supports the idea of women as, to use Wemmick's phrase, "portable property" controlled by men. Furthermore, Ada married Richard because she wanted to give him her inheritance to clear his debts and in marriage all that was hers would become his. The actions of these characters show that Dickens' position on these issues was different from Collins' in *The Woman in White*.

*Bleak House* questions the marginal position of the illegitimate in mid-Victorian society by examining the relation between illegitimacy and identity in Esther's character. The text suggests that the parents can be punished without visiting their sins on the innocent children but that illegitimate heritage must be confronted in order to define a personal and social sense of self. As one of Dickens's domestic "angels" Esther contributes to the cult of domesticity Dickens in his novels reinforced, but the subversive voice in her narrative suggests how the ethic of selflessness in the ideal of angel-in-the-house created a non-existent personal sense of self. Dickens does challenge the secondary position of the illegitimate in society in this novel but reveals that the expectations of the "angel" ideal on women caused an inner struggle at odds with the outward conformity.

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<sup>1</sup> This supports the Victorian belief that bastards were the mother's issue not the father's, a belief evident in the legal restrictions for financial support for single unwed mothers made by the 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act which denied mothers of illegitimate children monetary support from either the father or the parish.

<sup>2</sup> The problem of misnaming is continued in *Little Dorrit* with the character of Harriet Beadle, an illegitimate orphan adopted by the Meagles who rename her as Tattycoram showing their ownership of her as servant-daughter rather than an equal individual. See discussion in Chapter Two.

<sup>3</sup> Goldie Morgentaler discusses the role of smallpox in the novel as an instrument of social revenge, "carried in the blood of the despised and dispossessed, awaiting an opportunity to infect the well-off and comfortable" (94). This relates to the topicality of the position of Jo the crossing-sweeper and Charley Neckett in the slums in comparison to the aristocracy represented by Lord and Lady Dedlock. See the later discussion of the topicality of Jo to illegitimacy.

<sup>4</sup> Collins uses this "blankness", or ability to adopt different identities in *No Name* to demonstrate how it allowed bastards to choose their identity. See chapter four for details.

<sup>5</sup> See Morgentaler, "So intent is Dickens on stressing the absolute resemblance between parent and child as a metaphor for blood-tie, that not only does Esther notice the resemblance between herself and her mother, so does everyone else – Mr George, the law clerk Guppy, and Jo, the crossing-sweep" (96). For further details on the Lady Dedlock-Esther relationship see also Marcia Renee Goodman "I'll Follow the Other: Tracing the (M)other in *Bleak House*" from *Dickens Studies Annual* vol. 19 pp. 147-167 and Maria Nicholls "Lady Dedlock's Sin" from *The Dickensian* vol. 89, pp. 39-44.

<sup>6</sup> Morgentaler further relates Nemo's "lack of substance as a living being in the novel" to the idea "of the illegitimate child being the mother's issue" (87).

<sup>7</sup> For example William Axton has presented reasonable evidence that the lack of relationship between mother and daughter was symbolic of the aristocracy's "unconscious abrogation of its parental responsibilities in the English national family" (159).

<sup>8</sup> This female responsibility for illegitimate children is used by Collins: in *The Woman in White* Anne Catherick's mother is socially outcast because of the possibility of her being involved in an extra-marital affair. See discussion in chapter three. In *Little Dorrit* Arthur's real mother is punished by having her son removed from her care and having no further contact with him or his father.

<sup>9</sup> "Visiting the sins of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generations" Numbers 14.18.

<sup>10</sup> The two most relevant of Ellis's domestic help books to this topic are *The Wives of England: Their Influence and Responsibility*. London: Langley, 1843 and *The Women of England: Their Social Duties and Domestic Habits*. London: Langley, 1843.

<sup>11</sup> Ayres outlines that by contrast the man was to be "aggressive, assertive, rough, altogether gentlemanly, tough-skinned, self-controlled and independent" (4). For further details on the regulation of the separate spheres see Martha Vicinus (ed.). *Suffer and Be Still: Women in the Victorian Age*. Bloomington: Indiana U P, 1972 and Brian Harrison, *Separate Spheres: The Opposition to Women's Suffrage in Britain*. London: Croom Helm, 1978. For information on the 'angel-in-the-house' ideology see Deborah Gohram *The Victorian Girl and the Feminine Ideal*. Bloomington: Indiana U P, 1982 and Sally Mitchell, *The Fallen Angel: Chastity, Class, and Women's Reading, 1835-1880*. Ohio: Bowling Green U Popular P, 1981.

<sup>12</sup> Examples of this are Agnes Wickfield, Esther Summerson and Amy Dorrit.

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<sup>13</sup> See Butt and Tillotson *Dickens At Work* (1957) Chapter seven: The Topicality of *Bleak House*, pp. 177-200.

<sup>14</sup> See Sanders, A. *Charles Dickens: Resurrectionist*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1982, pp.121-136 and House, H. *The Dickens World*. Oxford: Oxford U P, 1941, pp. 193-222.

<sup>15</sup> Alexander Welsh examines the problem of "where bodies went in London" through relating the burial ground near Tom-all-Alone's to an actual burial ground near Drury Lane. Welsh states that Jo's witness of Nemo's corpse being stomped on to get it under ground highlights the need for the "prohibition of burial in the most crowded districts of London". He also details the opposition to such reform (61). See *The City of Dickens*. Oxford: Oxford U P, 1971.

## Chapter Two. *Little Dorrit*: The Psychology of Illegitimacy

*Little Dorrit* focuses on the theme of physical and mental imprisonment which Dickens uses to air his views on the social and political condition of England in the 1850s. Between Dickens completing *Bleak House* in 1853 and starting *Little Dorrit* in 1855 the Crimean War broke out and it was the British Government's maladministration in dealing with the war that fed one of the central themes of the later novel. *Little Dorrit* revolves around the nature of individual life in the modern world and Dickens' belief that when society becomes oppressive, human relationships within that society become warped (Wain 176). This sense of corruption "of the whole condition of things" and the science of government is relayed through the evasiveness and endless red tape of the Circumlocution Office, a direct criticism of the British Government (Butt and Tillotson 203). This institution of 'How not to do it' expresses the novel's concern with how individuals find difficulty in functioning and forming relationships with others in a dysfunctional society.

Such social dysfunction is seen at the local level in one of the two main plots, the story of Amy Dorrit and her dysfunctional family from their life of poverty in the Marshalsea debtors' prison to one of riches when an inheritance is discovered. This plot intersects with Arthur Clennam's investigations to discover if his clearly dysfunctional family unintentionally wronged someone in the past and made no reparation. It is only retrospectively that we discover this "wrong" is Arthur's illegitimacy.

Dickens investigates these issues of family and illegitimacy through many characters having more than one name and creating false identities for themselves. Arthur's adoption of the "nobody" persona (the novel's original title was "Nobody's Fault" and four chapters contain that word) is significant in terms of the reader's



retrospective knowledge of his illegitimacy and how this influences his self-perception. His identification as “nobody” also relates him to Amy Dorrit the “stain” of whose prison birth presents another form of illegitimacy. This play with complicated identities also relates to the illegitimacy of two other characters, Miss Wade and Tattycoram, who are more mutedly presented than Esther in *Bleak House* and accordingly are seen at the local level of character rather than as part of a master narrative. The seemingly marginal but over-emphasised characters Miss Wade and Tattycoram are interesting both individually and in their intense relationship with each other.

*Little Dorrit's* suggestion that illegitimacy is a variation on the novel's obvious theme of imprisonment is conveyed through Tattycoram. Tattycoram is introduced as Pet Meagles' maid early in the novel and while she is denied a narrative herself, Dickens' continued emphasis on such a marginal character highlights both the topical reference to the London Foundling Hospital and the position of the institutionalised illegitimate in Victorian society. The London Foundling Hospital was established in 1739 by retired sea captain Thomas Coram who was urged into action “by the all-too-frequent sight of the bodies of new born infants left in ditches or discarded on dung heaps” (Bourne Taylor “Received A Blank Child” 310). The Hospital initially accepted all babies under two months old but laid down an admissions policy in 1801 due to limited resources. The policy stated that the child must be illegitimate (except for children of soldiers or sailors killed in war), they must be under one year old and the mother should not have applied to the parish for assistance and should be of good character, poor, without family and deserted by the father (Bourne Taylor “Received A Blank Child” 316). The institution defined the

orphan through the story of the mother, thus doubly emphasising that both responsibility for and consequences of illegitimacy primarily fell to women.<sup>1</sup>

Dickens, who always named his characters with extreme care, has clearly chosen to name Tattycoram with the Foundling Hospital in mind. Indeed, the Hospital's teaching is reflected in Dickens' *Household Words* article of March 1853, "Received, A Blank Child" which records the author's tour of the Hospital and his finding that the children were trained as "productive agents who successfully internalised the institution's regime" (Bourne Taylor "Received A Blank Child" 348). As a maid in the Meagles' household, Tattycoram embodies the ideal of domestic servitude female orphans were trained in but she resents the position from the start. Furthermore Mr. Meagles' final words to Tattycoram echo the Hospital's encouragement to its apprentices: "Duty Tattycoram. Begin it early, and do it well; and there is no antecedent to it, in any origin or station, that will tell against us with the Almighty, or with ourselves" (II.34.846). The Hospital urged the foundlings not to be ashamed of their upbringing but to "own it: and say, that it was through the good providence of Almighty God that you were taken care of" (HW 1853, 52). The conclusion of Dickens' article, "such is the home of the blank children, where they are trained out of their blank state to be useful entities in life" (53) makes a strong comment on the non-existent social and legal identity of the illegitimate. The title and reference comes from the form recording each child in the Hospital, the record simply had "blanks" for the child's name and date received. This relates to the legal status of bastards as *filius nullius* and the manner that foundlings in particular had their identities "written" on them as the blanks in the form were filled. Tattycoram is an excellent example of this: the changing of her name from Harriet Beadle to Tattycoram by the Meagles shows their ownership of her and reveals Dickens'

apparent endorsement of the idea that illegitimate children are “blank”. This differs from *Bleak House* in which Dickens suggests that bastards have a personal sense of self but are denied it by identities ascribed to them by society.

Tattycoram’s internal division relates to the ambiguity of her position, as both servant and family member, and the Meagles’ renaming of her. Dickens’ obvious sympathy towards the illegitimate in *Bleak House* has become muted in *Little Dorrit* as the understanding he gives Tattycoram of her illegitimacy is not the personal insight he gives Esther but rather a relationship with the understanding but bitter Miss Wade. Realising that the relationship would only turn her into another version of the older woman, Tattycoram returns repentant to the Meagles and her illegitimacy is suppressed by her apparent acceptance of her secondary position. This suppression is reflected through the retention of her adopted name, Tattycoram. It is Arthur Clennam who first enquires as to the oddity of this name; Mr. Meagles explains the origin of it. Tattycoram was called Harriet Beadle in the Foundling Hospital and when they took her home they changed Harriet to Hatty and Hatty to Tatty thinking that “a playful name might be a new thing to her, and might have a softening and affectionate kind of effect” (I.2.33). Mr. Meagles had a particular dislike of the name Beadle and so gave Tatty the surname Coram, after Thomas Coram: “at one time she was Tatty, and at one time she was Coram, until we got into a way of mixing the two names together, and now she is always Tattycoram” (I.2.33). It is significant that there is no distinction between Tattycoram’s Christian and surnames, which marks her illegitimacy by showing the Meagles’ ownership of her in their renaming. Dickens’ apparent endorsement of the “blank” nature of bastards is also seen in Miss Wade who does not have a Christian name but is only known by the indiscriminate “Wade”.<sup>2</sup> The Meagles believe that the name Tattycoram will show their affection for

her but fail to consider the effect of being named after a foundling institution might have on the orphan's already heightened awareness of her birth. Mr. Meagles totally misunderstands Tattycoram; he cannot admit to himself that he is unable to give her equal status with his daughter and forces the maid to count to twenty-five when she is angry instead of seeing that there is another way to help.

The renaming of Tattycoram can be compared with the nicknames Esther is given when she moves to Bleak House. Both women are illegitimate and both are placed in a position of domestic servitude and renamed accordingly. However, Esther's nicknames define her position within the household economy and provide her with the opportunity to be a selfless "angel" thus giving her the opportunity to escape the illegitimate label her aunt imposed on her as a child. Contrastingly, Tattycoram's nickname firmly places her in the tradition of the Foundling Hospital and constantly reminds her that she is a bastard. Miss Wade impresses on Tattycoram that she is "set apart" both in the Meagles' household and in society: "you can have your droll name again, playfully pointing you out and setting you apart, as it is right that you should be pointed out and set apart. (Your birth, you know; you must not forget your birth)" (I.26.348). This comment causes Tattycoram to become increasingly angry as she is reminded of her inequality with Pet. Miss Wade's words echo those of Miss Barbary to Esther: "You are different from other children, Esther, because you were not born, like them, in common sinfulness and wrath. You are set apart" (3.31). The renaming of Tattycoram and Esther is a significant reminder of society's treatment of the illegitimate, who are so manifestly set apart, as "blanks" to be written on and legitimised by others.

While Tattycoram represents the illegitimate orphan, Miss Wade is something of an anomaly in Victorian society: single and uninterested in marriage and raising a

family. She would have believed that this position was her choice, but the text reveals it to be the consequence of social attitudes towards illegitimacy. She is introduced early in the novel as: “a handsome young English woman, travelling quite alone, who had a proud, observant face, and had either withdrawn herself from the rest or been avoided by the rest” (I.2.36), Miss Wade is defined from the outset by her hardness, her rigid control of her emotions and seemingly bottomless capacity for revenge and hate.<sup>3</sup> However, through her relationship with Tattycoram and her own awkwardly interpolated narrative in chapter 21 of book II, these characteristics are revealed as a protective façade against people’s reaction to her illegitimacy. In this way, Dickens at once shows little sympathy for Miss Wade’s supposedly self-inflicted position but simultaneously suggests that she is a victim of contemporary attitudes towards illegitimacy.

Miss Wade first meets Tattycoram when they are in quarantine at Marseilles and she believes that they have a natural affinity because they are both bastards. Discovering Tattycoram privately raging against the Meagles’ treatment of her, Miss Wade enjoys seeing Tattycoram tormented: “it was wonderful to see the fury of the contest in the girl, and the bodily struggle she made as if she were rent by Demons of old” (I.2.42). Miss Wade’s belief that people’s kindness towards her disguises their condescension towards her has allowed her to manipulate any sense of gratitude she felt towards others as hatred, isolating her but preventing her from being hurt. She sees the potential in Tattycoram for becoming like herself and tries to teach the younger girl hatred and derision towards everyone in a relationship that has distinct overtones of lesbianism.<sup>4</sup> After meeting Tattycoram in quarantine, Miss Wade writes to the “little maid” offering herself as a sympathetic party if Tattycoram should feel wronged in any way. Tattycoram does run away to Miss Wade when she is no longer

able to tolerate the Meagles' constant adoration of Pet and ignoring of her.<sup>5</sup> Miss Wade's "interest" in Tattycoram relates to the younger girl appearing to be as vulnerable as herself, knowing what it feels like to be illegitimate and "consequently to pose no threat of an equally feared benevolence or disdain" to the defensive older woman (Daleski 227). Miss Wade believes that she has finally found someone on whom she can bestow her pent up feelings, someone who will not reject her as Henry Gowan, fiancé to Pet and former lover of Miss Wade, has done. Mr. Meagles, in his plea to Tattycoram to return home, recognises the "perverted" relationship Miss Wade has engineered even if Tattycoram cannot:

I don't know what you are, but you don't hide, can't hide, what a dark spirit you have within you. If it should happen that you are a woman, who, from whatever cause, has a perverted delight in making a sister-woman as wretched as she is (I am old enough to have heard of such), I warn her against you, and I warn you against yourself (I.351).

In this relationship we see the more sympathetic side of Dickens' attitude towards illegitimacy. Dickens allows us to understand some of the causes of Miss Wade's emotional crippling, but his distaste for lesbianism is still clear. He recognises that as a bastard it would be difficult for Miss Wade to marry as she has nothing to offer; her failed heterosexual relationship with Henry Gowan supports this. Thus Dickens sympathises with the "sex more exposed to [illegitimacy's] cruellest consequences" by questioning what form of emotional attachment remains for socially outcast bastards (Leavis 231).

To compare the relationships of Tattycoram and Miss Wade with that of Ada and Esther is instructive. While the earlier relationship can be seen as a form of compensation for the lack of maternal love Esther receives from her mother, it also seems occasionally to border on lesbianism. When the two meet after Esther's illness there is much hugging, crying and kissing and the "bond" between the two women sometimes seems to push the boundaries of "acceptable" female friendship.<sup>6</sup> The relationship between Tattycoram and Miss Wade can be seen as a more overt version of that between Ada and Esther. As an orphan, Miss Wade had no one to form a normal emotional attachment to, thus the detachment Arthur first observes has been her only option of self-preservation. However, when she finds Tattycoram, Miss Wade is no longer isolated, thus revealing the detachment as a façade. The relationship between the two becomes a perversion of each of their desire for love: "their compulsive attraction to each other is suggestively sexual and gives their liaison unmistakable lesbian overtones (Woodward 144). Tattycoram appreciates Miss Wade's encouragement that she indulge in her passionate, resentful temper. However, the foundling soon realises Miss Wade to be a more dominating master than Mr. Meagles had ever been: she enjoys controlling the younger, socially inferior girl as it gives her a position of power society denies bastards.

Dickens' insertion of "The History of the Self-Tormentor" (II, ch. 21) further reveals his conflicted attitude towards Miss Wade and establishes the conditions for her developing a lesbian relationship with Tattycoram. As Peter Myers says, the awkwardness of the narrative draws attention to it and means that it cannot be explained away as mere background or the tying up of loose ends (86). The narrative allows Miss Wade to describe her discovery of her illegitimacy, her consequent self-imposed isolation and how she let her guard down when she met Henry Gowan: "the

first person [she] had ever seen in [her] life who had understood [her]" (II.21.700). Miss Wade believed that Gowan understood her because he was disdainful of everything and everyone around them. She relates to this "essential nihilism" and Dickens suggests through the phrase "they became too close" that the pair had an affair (II.21.701) (Leavis 65). However, the relationship fails showing both Gowan's later manipulation of Mr. Meagles' desire to be well-connected and a reason for Miss Wade resorting to a fellow bastard to gain emotional attachment and release.

Miss Wade's extreme sensitivity towards her illegitimacy draws little sympathy from Dickens and he leaves her to her bitter enjoyment of others' unhappiness as it mirrors her own. Esther Summerson, too, is extremely conscious of her illegitimacy but responds to it very differently.<sup>7</sup> Esther feels that she must serve others to compensate for her birth while Miss Wade withdraws herself from society believing that her illegitimacy prevents her forming equal relationships. Esther believes that as a bastard she must sacrifice her own desires and devote herself to the service of others. Through this belief she integrates herself in society in spite of her illegitimacy. Contrastingly Miss Wade consciously removes herself from society in order to protect herself from negative attitudes towards the illegitimate. This removal allows Miss Wade to form relationships only with those whom she sees as on equal footing, such as Henry Gowan, or with those she is in a position of authority over, such as Tattycoram.

The dual response of the illegitimate either to withdraw from or integrate themselves into society is evident in Arthur Clennam's "nobody" identity. Arthur's illegitimacy retrospectively explains his sense of himself as "nobody", a variation of illegitimacy onto which he projects his romantic desires. "Nobody" also forms a parallel with Amy Dorrit's "illegitimacy" both inside and outside the prison where the



circumstances of her birth define her. It is worth remembering that the novel's original title was "Nobody's Fault". Comparisons can be drawn between Arthur and Esther's earlier narrative through the difficulty both have in conceiving of themselves as real people. Less overt than Esther's hyper-awareness, *Little Dorrit* tells of Arthur's search for his identity, one which somewhat evades him as he only has an intuited uncertainty about his background which he never confirms. This distinction between knowledge and ignorance of illegitimacy explains the difference in each character's ability to form relationships and function in society.

Arthur's failure throughout the novel to discover the truth of his parentage from his surrogate mother Mrs. Clennam, results in his self-definition as "nobody"; four chapters support this: "Nobody's Weakness" (16), "Nobody's Rival" (17), "Nobody's State of Mind" (26) and "Nobody's Disappearance" (28). (The "nobody" identity is similar to Esther who denies herself her true desires in order to compensate for her illegitimacy.) "Nobody" allows Arthur to project his desires onto a non-identity and describe himself as an old man finished with romantic relationships. In "Nobody's Weakness" Clennam resolves not to allow himself to fall in love with Pet Meagles (I.16.213) and he then begins the detachment from his desires by referring to himself in the third person. Dickens leaves us in no doubt as to the role of each of Arthur's identities with an Esther-like unfinished sentence: "if Clennam had not decided against falling in love with Pet...and found that all was lost; he would have been, that night, unutterably miserable. As it was-" (I.17.228). Dickens uses the name Arthur for the practicalities, vocation and platonic friendships while "nobody" deals with desire and affection. However, there are occasions when the distinction between the two is unclear. Here are distinct similarities between Arthur and Esther; she refers to herself in the third person when she reminds herself of her "duty" to suppress her

desires and the close of her narrative is unresolved with “even supposing-“. Esther is able to deal with the practicalities of household management, to care for her fellow orphans and to commit to a loveless marriage out of duty but is unable to cope with romantic attraction, seen in incidents with both Mr. Guppy and Alan Woodcourt.

There are parallels between the two protagonists, Esther buries her conscious awareness of her desire with her doll as a child and Arthur’s has been suppressed by his mother having dominated his will for forty years. However, Esther’s suppression of desire is self-inflicted through her self-consciousness of her illegitimacy while Arthur is ignorant of his but feels guilty that his family did some wrong in the past which remains unresolved. Esther is overly conscious of her illegitimacy thanks to Miss Barbary’s continual reminder that she is “set apart” from others by being her mother’s sin and here we can see a distinct parallel with Mrs. Clennam’s control over Arthur.

Dickens continues his criticism of extreme Evangelical religion’s erosion of the self in *Bleak House* through Mrs. Clennam in *Little Dorrit*. Calvinism’s self-righteous hatred of illegitimacy deforms Esther’s perception of herself by encouraging her to believe that as a bastard she will never be equal with others. Here Mrs. Clennam’s overpowering beliefs controlled Arthur’s childhood, making him lose all “will, purpose and hope” by forcing him to submit to her will thus deforming his sense of self in the process. Mrs. Clennam’s private profit and loss account with God caused her to self-righteously punish Arthur for his father’s pre-marital affair of which Arthur was the illegitimate product. Punishing herself by imprisoning herself in her room physically and within the confines of her religion mentally, Mrs. Clennam believes she then has the authority to deny Arthur the truth about his birth. Arthur’s intuition that he is the cause of a past wrong initially prevents him from considering a

romantic relationship with Amy Dorrit. However, when he is imprisoned for his own mistake of investing Daniel Doyce's money in the Merdle scam, he is released from the guilt of his past by taking responsibility for himself. This releases him to marrying fellow "nobody" Amy Dorrit.

Amy Dorrit offers an interesting variation on illegitimacy. Her birth inside the prison and the fact that she has no mother from an early age makes her another kind of "illegitimate" as these circumstances impact on her social position both inside and outside the Marshalsea:

Born and bred, in social condition, false even with a reference to the falsest condition outside the walls; drinking from infancy of a well whose waters had their own peculiar stain, their own unwholesome and unnatural taste (I.7.86).

Just as the illegitimate were defined by their birth, Amy is defined by the social institution of the prison. Here there is a distinct correlation to Tattycoram who is defined by the Coram Fields Hospital and is actually illegitimate, thus confirming Amy's illegitimacy. The suggestion of Amy's birth in the prison as "unwholesome and unnatural" relates to beliefs on illegitimacy, that bastards were the product of "unwholesome" or "unnatural" relationships. Amy uses being born in the Marshalsea to identify herself: "if you please, I was born here, sir" is the address she uses to get dancing lessons for her sister and needlework training for herself (I.7.87-88). Amy is not identified with either of her parents but with the prison by being the Child of the Marshalsea; and her natural father is transformed into her institutional one since he is Father of the Marshalsea. The "stain" of her birth gives Amy purpose and place in the prison; Dickens here relates illegitimacy to imprisonment showing that bastards are

imprisoned by the illicit circumstances of their birth. Amy's situation changes dramatically when her father comes into an inheritance and the Dorrits become wealthy. They physically escape the Marshalsea walls by moving to Italy and here Amy finds that now no one needs her, she is incapable of adjusting to what freedom is possible. "Having learned to live only by serving others to the complete suppression of herself, in Italy she is unhappy and depressed and cannot serve herself" (Woodward 143). Amy becomes a "nobody" outside the prison and, after her father's death in which he mentally retreats to the "genteel fantasy" of the Marshalsea, she goes to the prison and rescues Arthur.

*Little Dorrit* suggests that illegitimacy is another form of social and legal imprisonment, consistent with the overall theme of the novel and Dickens' beliefs about the condition of England in the 1850s. The presentation of illegitimacy is more muted than that of *Bleak House* but there remains the tension from the earlier novel between agreement with and conflict against the treatment of and attitudes towards bastards. Unlike Esther, the illegitimate characters are at odds with their heritage and only Arthur and Amy are offered a positive future. However, Arthur does not have full knowledge of his birth and the couple's happiness is seen as an isolated incident within the degrading condition of English society. The idea of the illegitimate as "blanks" to be written is reflected in Tattycoram who has identities ascribed to her by the Foundling Hospital and later the Meagles and is an idea much developed by Collins in both *The Woman in White* and *No Name*. The tension in Tattycoram's character is intensified by Miss Wade's bitterness and the close relationship between the two characters. The hyper-awareness Tattycoram, Miss Wade and Esther have of their birth and the manner that it dictates their actions supports Dickens' belief that attitudes towards illegitimacy needed to change.

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<sup>1</sup> This is emphasised in the admissions policy which required that the mother tell the story of how she came to have an illegitimate child before a panel of male assessors who then decided whether or not the child would be accepted.

<sup>2</sup> This lack of names and similarity in 'blankness' relates to her comment to Clennam and Mr. Meagles that "She [Tattycoram] has no name, I have no name. Her wrong is my wrong" (I.27.351).

<sup>3</sup> This is shown from the start by Miss Wade's conversation with Mr. Meagles about prisoners being able to forgive their prisons once they have left them (I.2.37-8).

<sup>4</sup> I am aware that several critics have disputed the belief that Miss Wade portrays lesbianism but agree with those who read a degree of sexuality into the intense female-female relationship. I also believe Dickens is questioning what emotional compensation is available to the illegitimate when legitimate options are denied to them. See Janet Retseck "Sexing Miss Wade" *Dickens Quarterly* 14-15 and Anna Wilson "On History, Case History, and Deviance: Miss Wade's Symptoms and their Interpretation" *Dickens Studies Annual*, 1998.

<sup>5</sup> Tattycoram is enraged by the Meagles' constant discussion of Pet's future: "She was younger than her young mistress, and would she remain to see *her* always held up as the only creature who was young and interesting, and to be cherished and loved? No" (342).

<sup>6</sup> Another example of the relationship between Esther and Ada being closer than normal occurs after Ada reveals she has married Richard and will no longer be returning home with Esther. Esther leaves the house distraught, feeling bereft at the loss of her 'friend'.

<sup>7</sup> The use of illegitimacy to direct character actions is an aspect Collins uses in *The Woman in White* with Percival and in Chapter Three I compare his negative actions with those of Esther.

### Chapter Three. *The Woman in White*: Illegitimacy and Plot

Wilkie Collins was a prominent and successful author in the mid-Victorian period. One reason for his success was his exploitation of sensational contemporary topics to generate exciting and dramatic plots. This is evident in *The Woman in White*; published between 1859 and 1860 in Dickens' *All The Year Round*, the novel uses the concealing of illegitimacy as a plot mechanism to create a Victorian best-seller. Unlike *Bleak House* and *Little Dorrit*, the text is not a critique of the laws governing the treatment of children deemed to be illegitimate; rather illegitimacy directs characters' actions and is the central "secret" throughout the novel, thereby creating sensational events. Collins uses illegitimacy as a plot function to address topical concerns around married women's property rights, insane asylums and, less obviously, illegitimacy itself. These three historical issues are connected in the text through the way that each issue has a role in creating "blank" characters or "writing out" individuals, especially, but not exclusively, women. The title encapsulates this gendered blankness.

*The Woman in White* is an exciting story about mercenary marriage, inherited property, legitimate identity and true love, which keeps the reader in suspense. Laura Fairlie's marriage to Sir Percival Glyde and life at Blackwater Park voices Collins' opinion on married women's property rights. Laura's legal "non-existence" or "blankness" as Percival's wife is emphasised by the illegitimate characters in the novel. Percival Glyde is illegitimate and creates a fragile aristocratic persona by literally writing himself into existence when he falsifies a marriage register. Percival's true identity is mirrored by Laura's illegitimate half-sister, Anne Catherick, whose mysterious appearances emphasize and prolong the suspense surrounding Percival

and the concealment of his “secret”. Percival tries to conceal his illegitimacy by plotting with Count Fosco to incarcerate Laura in a lunatic asylum. However, Laura is rescued by her half-sister Marian and ex-art tutor, Walter Hartright. Walter goes on to expose Percival’s true identity and normality is restored. Collins uses illegitimacy to create a sensational novel that simultaneously questions the certainty of using appearances to determine identity.

Publishing the novel in 1860 but setting it retrospectively emphasises that no significant change had occurred in twelve years. Much of the recent criticism of *The Woman in White* has focused on Collins’ critique of the issues of married women’s property rights and of false imprisonment in asylums.<sup>1</sup> The story is set in 1848 when wives were bound by the Common Law doctrine of coverture and so, as Lady Glyde, Laura becomes legally “non-existent”. Collins uses Laura’s position to show how the law which placed married women under the legal covering of their husbands exposed wives to abuse rather than protecting them. Even though the 1857 Divorce and Matrimonial Causes Act offered income and protection to separated wives, it did nothing to alter the legal “non-existence” of married women. Through Laura, and later Eleanor Fosco, Collins “creates a radical critique of married women’s lack of legal identity” (Ledwon 20) an issue which remained a topic of intense debate until 1872.<sup>2</sup> The presentation of mental asylums in the novel specifically corresponds to the publication and widespread discussion of the Parliamentary Select Committee Inquiry into the Care of Lunatics and their Property in 1858-59.<sup>3</sup> This further relates to the increased contemporary interest in physiological signs of madness and sensation caused by newspaper reports of false incarcerations. Collins exploits these through Anne’s escape from the asylum Percival placed her in and Laura’s later imprisonment in the same place.

However, my focus will be on illegitimacy which was still a topic of contemporary interest, and through which Collins created a sensational story line. It was also relevant to the Victorians' social anxiety about how individuals were socially perceived and accepted. In "Representing Illegitimacy in Victorian Culture" Jenny Bourne Taylor discusses bastardy as "a series of meanings based on a discursive and symbolic division between legitimacy and illegitimacy" (120).<sup>4</sup> This has a specific relation to Collins' sensation work as a whole and *The Woman in White* in particular as Taylor shows how the bastard and the wife were placed in similar positions of powerlessness in spite of the differences between them: "the positions are...seemingly so opposed, but in fact both legal constructions...undermine legitimate subjectivity" (139). Taylor discusses this in relation to the interchangeability between Laura and Anne; I use the link between the bastard and the lawful wife to support the idea that those people created "blank" by the law have the opportunity to construct their own personal identity.<sup>5</sup>

*The Woman in White* was a formative text in "the evolution of the sensation novel as a genre" (Sutherland "Wilkie Collins" 250), probably because its readers were intrigued by the Glyde family secrets.<sup>6</sup> A considerable number of sensation novels were generated by *The Woman in White*, and invariably had plots centring on some menacing secret that threatened to expose family identity as a humiliating lie.<sup>7</sup> The genre gained its title through the physiological "sensations" the novels supposedly caused in readers and the sensational events they recorded. From the outset the genre caused both contemporary excitement and grave concern for the way in which its content and style voiced social and cultural anxieties in the period. This phenomenon was perceived as more threatening than previous fiction as it took its material from contemporary records of crime and villainy, revealing that such events



could, and did, occur in respectable Victorian society. Evidence of this with *The Woman in White* is that Collins took the outline for his novel from a French report he bought on a trip to Paris in 1856 called *Recueil des causes célèbres* by Maurice Méjan. The report was an account of the Madame de Douhalt case in the late eighteenth century and involved Douhalt being drugged and falsely incarcerated in a lunatic asylum (Kendrick 28).<sup>8</sup> Contemporary critics claimed the sensation novel was “aesthetically inferior and by implication morally questionable” (Cvetkovich 17). The words “unnatural” and “unwholesome” were applied to the genre by critics who, in doing so, only exaggerated the degree to which the novels were evidence of contemporary anxieties:

Precisely as certain diseased conditions of the body give rise to a craving for unnatural food, so do certain morbid conditions of the mind produce an appetite for literary food which a sound mental organization would reject (Murray 1873).

Written in an environment where appearances were not always what they seemed and conservative middle-class forces felt that traditional certainties, such as the social structure of the family and class order, were being undermined, sensation fiction challenged constructs which were fundamental to the organization of society: namely, the family and the law. This created anxieties about how individuals were perceived socially and how identity was constructed.

Collins uses the character of Sir Percival Glyde to show that identity can be a social construction. He was the son of unmarried parents, and his illegitimacy would have debarred him from polite society; however, Percival creates his own identity as a

gentleman. His success at convincing people is evident in Mr. Gilmore's testimony: "a really irresistible man – courteous, considerate, delightfully free from pride – a gentleman, every inch of him" (147). Gilmore's misperception of what constitutes a gentleman is based on Glyde's manners, something Dickens makes central in *Great Expectations*, the novel that followed *The Woman in White* in *All The Year Round*.<sup>9</sup> Percival's deception reveals that his identity is a social construction of his relationships and roles in society rather than his inherent nature (Pedlar 69). Because he uses his courteous manner, in this case towards courting Laura and his succession to his father's role at Blackwater Park, society simply accepts that Percival is a legitimate gentleman. After Percival and Laura return from their honeymoon, Percival drops the pleasant manners he adopted to court Laura, but not his façade as a gentleman. Marian leaves the reader in no doubt that appearances are definitely not what they may seem at first:

His elaborate delicacy; his ceremonious politeness, which harmonized so agreeably with Mr. Gilmore's old-fashioned notions; his modesty with Laura, his candour with me, his moderation with Mr. Fairlie – all these were artifices of a mean, cunning and brutal man, who had dropped his disguise when his practiced duplicity had gained its end (255).

The mask Percival used to secure marriage to Laura falls away suggesting that he may be concealing further secrets behind his gentlemanly façade.

Collins uses Percival's real identity as a bastard to express the idea that the law makes individuals legally "blank". This idea feeds Collins' ongoing preoccupation in this novel and *No Name* that identity is a social construction.

Marian's disclosure increases reader curiosity about the real motive behind Percival's actions. The "secret" that dominates the novel is found to be a text which rules Percival's existence. Walter discovers that the original marriage register is blank where Percival's parents' marriage would have been:

Not a vestige of the entry which recorded the marriage of Sir Felix Glyde and Cecilia Jane Elster, in the register of the church!...The last entry on one page recorded the marriage of the man with my Christian name. Below it, there was a blank space...that space told the whole story! (520)

The "blank space...that [tells] the whole story" suggests that Percival's existence is founded on nothing. If his parents' marriage were recorded, his existence would be determined in relation to theirs; he would have a heritage. As the marriage did not occur, he is illegitimate and thus he has no legal existence. It is significant that being a bastard disguised as a gentleman seems to Walter an unimaginable offence:

Of all the suspicions which had struck me in relation to that desperate man, not one had been near the truth. The idea that he was not Sir Percival Glyde at all...had never once occurred to my mind. At one time, I had thought he might be Anne Catherick's father; at another time I had thought he might be Anne Catherick's husband – the offence of which he was really guilty had been, from first to last, beyond the wildest reach of my imagination (521).

Walter's incredulous reaction to discovering Percival's "secret" reveals how serious the threat of Percival's successful fraud was to the nineteenth century concept of social and legal identity.

Percival forges the existence of the marriage by writing the details on the new record; however, the original text exposes him as a blank, literally in the pages of the register and figuratively in society, as a bastard having no claim to his father's heritage. The "blankness" of his identity because of his illegitimacy causes him to write himself into existence and Collins uses this as the centre of the plot. This link between illegitimacy and social identity is similar to but not the same as what we see in *Bleak House* and *Little Dorrit*. Esther's narrative provides her with the opportunity to write her own history and Miss Wade is given a similar chance in *Little Dorrit*. Through these self-constructed histories, Dickens shows the psychological turmoil the illegitimate experienced in trying to distinguish a personal sense of self from those imposed on them by society. By contrast, Collins uses Percival's construction and concealment of his heritage to create an exciting story. This different use of illegitimacy substantiates Dickens' belief that Collins' work was too plot focused and gave the reader too little credit for being able to understand the meaning from the story without obvious signposting.<sup>10</sup>

Percival's identity is fragile and the possibility of discovery a constant fear. Because of the need to protect and preserve his "secret", the awareness of his illegitimacy directs his actions throughout the novel, creating a contrast and comparison with Esther in *Bleak House*. An opposite to the female narrator who tries to compensate for her illegitimacy by devoting herself to the needs of others, Percival is a villain because he allows his illegitimacy to dictate his actions negatively. He constantly tries to contain threats which may reveal the truth, most obviously in Anne

Catherick and her incarceration but also in relation to Walter's detective efforts. Percival, fearing that she knows his origins, has Anne locked up in an asylum. Anne escapes and her random mysterious appearances and further attempts to speak with Laura increase the reader's suspicion of Percival's past. Later, Percival tries to stop his illegitimacy being discovered by Walter: two of Percival's thugs follow Walter from Welmingham to Knowlesbury and initiate a fight with Walter which delays his inquiries. However, Percival's actions do not stop his illegitimacy being exposed. The disclosure of the "secret" is shocking, but Collins puts an end to the threat posed by Percival's fraud by "writing him out" in the vestry fire scene. It was necessary for Collins to ensure Percival's death because of the threat to class identity posed by his fraud. Had Collins allowed him to survive, a nineteenth-century reader would have been confronted with the possibility that a bastard could become a gentleman, thus threatening social order and class distinctions. Walter recognizes the harsh penalties of the law as "deprive[ing] him, at one blow, of the name, the rank, the estate, the whole social existence he had usurped" but reminds the reader that the implications of "usurp[ing]" a "whole social existence" had to be prevented (521). This idea is fictional but at the same time it raises "real" social issues: what constitutes a gentleman. In this way, fiction is a discourse that addresses concerns about a "whole social existence" as this novel clearly reveals that in being made legal "blanks", the illegitimate are able to usurp another existence and claim it as their own.

A character whose "blankness" also defines her identity in the novel is Anne Catherick. The illegitimate daughter of Philip Fairlie and Mrs. Catherick, her main function in the novel is silently to mirror Percival's indeterminate social position and intensify the suspense surrounding his mercenary plans. Like Percival, Anne is also "the illegitimate child of a married woman and an adulterous peer" (Tromp 79) and

thus her “blankness” as a bastard emphasises his. Anne is legally “blank” because she lacks the status in middle-class society and the ability to inherit. She is also metaphorically “blank” because she has no actual knowledge of Percival’s “secret”; she only knows there is one. Anne’s secret meeting with Laura at the boatshed conveys the power associated with knowledge of the “secret”: “if *you* know his Secret, he will be afraid of you; he won’t dare use you as he used me. He must treat you mercifully for his own sake” (285). Anne’s supposed knowledge and attempts to tell Laura are a threat to Percival’s power over Laura as her husband. If she had known his true status, he would have been unable to marry her and would have lost his identity as a gentleman. Anne is also something of a physical “blank” as a mysterious woman in white: her ghostly appearances and deluded mental state imply that she is somehow incomplete as a physical being. Schoolboy Jacob Postlethwaite believes that he saw a ghost when it was actually Anne: “arl in white – as a ghaist should be” (86). The legal “blankness”, supported by the metaphorical and physical “blankness”, embodies what Percival has the potential to become.

Anne’s apparent “non-existence” is reinforced by her interchangeability with Laura, a plot device enabling Laura to be incarcerated as Anne. Just as Anne mirrors Percival, in another way she is Laura’s ghost: “she is the trace, the shadow, and the mirror of the social and subjective transformation which Laura undergoes” (Bourne Taylor *The Secret Theatre of Home* 101). Collins uses the likeness between the half-sisters to exaggerate the danger of establishing identity only on appearances, in the same way as he established this with Percival. The resemblance between Laura and Anne is physical evidence of their father’s affair, “rendering concrete, literally embodying the hidden causality that connects them” (Cvetkovich 89). The absorption of one identity into another occurs twice for Laura: once when she is absorbed into

Anne's identity, and again when she is "covered" by her husband's legal existence. Laura is made legally non-existent by the law and literally non-existent by her resemblance to Anne. In this way, Laura joins two significant aspects of the plot, but is one of the two main characters denied a narrative herself. This emphasizes the silence of wives under British law and the silence of her supposed death when she is given the identity of a bastard. In terms of illegitimacy as a plot function, Laura's significance lies in her ability to "become" her illegitimate half-sister.

Collins explores the way people define themselves and others in creating a character who experiences a social and legal death. The removal of Laura's clothing, home, friends and family allow her to mentally and physically become Anne. Percival and Count Fosco contrive a plan which swaps the identities of the half-sisters, and as Anne dies as Lady Glyde, so too does Laura. With this change, Collins raises the idea that just as a bastard can become a gentleman, so a lady can become a bastard. When Marian rescues Laura from the asylum, she is shocked at the change and fears it will mean Laura will never return to her former "dead" self: "the outward changes wrought by the suffering and the terror of the past had fearfully, almost hopelessly, strengthened the resemblance between Anne Catherick and herself" (442). Afterwards Marian and Walter have no proof that Laura lives. Glyde has constructed apparently irrefutable evidence: Laura's death certificate, the testimony of Frederick Fairlie that his niece is dead, the funeral and gravestone. Mr. Kyrle agrees that it appears impossible to prove that Laura remains alive contrary to the evidence: "questions of identity, where instances of personal resemblance are concerned, are, in themselves, the hardest of all questions to settle" (452). Through switching Laura's and Anne's identities Collins uses illegitimacy to create a dramatic story which reflects current concerns of how identity is constructed.

It is clear that Collins uses illegitimacy as a function of the plot whereas Dickens is more interested in its psychological implications. The difference between the two is evident in the way parenting an illegitimate child is presented in each novel. In *The Woman in White* Anne's mother Mrs Catherick is selfish and more interested in her local reputation than a relationship with her daughter. After Mrs. Catherick is deserted by her husband, she threatens to reveal the truth about Percival's past in order to redeem herself. Unfortunately, this would have simultaneously caused her to be exposed as a fallen woman and her child as a bastard even though Walter has no doubt of Anne's illegitimacy.<sup>11</sup> To protect herself, Mrs. Catherick leaves the care of Anne to others and focuses on gaining the respect of the villagers. Under Percival's orders Mrs. Catherick remains in Old Welmingham aware that if it became known that she conspired to forge his authenticity her hard-won position would vanish.<sup>12</sup> Encouraging readers to condemn her, Collins has Mrs. Catherick absolve herself of responsibility towards her illegitimate daughter. She does not grieve for her ill and later dead child, nor does she prevent Anne from being locked up in a lunatic asylum. In contrast, there is sympathy for Lady Dedlock who forgoes her relationship with her daughter in order to protect the Dedlock family name. Through this protection, class becomes an issue for Lady Dedlock in a way it cannot be for Mrs. Catherick who knew her daughter from birth and did not marry above her station. The brief meeting between mother and daughter after Esther's illness and Lady Dedlock's later flight to her former lover's grave reveals the warm heart behind the icy façade. She is presented as a mother who, against her natural desires, denied herself the maternal bond with her daughter because of the social conventions governing single mothers and their illegitimate offspring. Unlike Collins, Dickens is not using illegitimacy as a tool of sensationalism but as a feature which allows him to explore its impact on



mother-daughter relationships. Its historical basis is the 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act which saw mothers of illegitimate children ostracised and separated from their children who were then forced into workhouses. Dickens does not support illegitimacy but clearly criticises the harsh punishment of bastards and its effect on natural family relationships.

The role of absent fathers in both *The Woman in White* and *Bleak House* is also significant in terms of the different uses Dickens and Collins make of illegitimacy. Philip Fairlie dies before the story begins but his sin is embodied in Anne and interferes with Laura's life through the likeness between the half-sisters. Collins exploits the drama arising from illegitimacy for his plot in order to explore the consequences of basing an evaluation of identity solely on external appearances. In comparison, Nemo's role in *Bleak House* can be seen as a visitation of the sins of the father on his innocent daughter. It is ambiguous because he indirectly protects Esther from her illegitimacy by preventing her from being publicly recognised as Lady Dedlock's daughter through the smallpox scars. This sequence of events serves two purposes: to show that the author does not condone the birth of illegitimate children but disagrees with social attitudes towards them; and to support the moral idea that the rich cannot absolve themselves of responsibility by segregating themselves from the poor.

Collins was extremely successful in using the concealment of illegitimacy within the plot to generate suspense. The topic also questions how people's true identity can be established when identity is based on appearances which can be manipulated. This dual function is evident in the "blank" illegitimate characters Collins creates. Collins clearly does not make the same use of illegitimacy as Dickens and the function of it as a plot mechanism in this text pales somewhat in comparison

to the profound psychological investigations Dickens makes in both *Bleak House* and *Little Dorrit*.

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<sup>1</sup> On married women's property rights refer to Chapter One. See also Lee Holcombe, *Wives and Property: Reform of Married Women's Property Law in Nineteenth Century England* (1983) chapters 7 and 8. On lunacy and reports of false incarceration see Thomas Boyle, *Black Swine in the Sewers of Hampstead: Beneath the Surface of Victorian Sensationalism* (1990) and Winifred Hughes, *The Maniac in the Cellar* (1980).

<sup>2</sup> Married women's property rights remained a topic of intense parliamentary debate until 1872 when married women were granted separate legal identity from their husbands in certain circumstances. See chapter one and also Lee Holcombe, chapters seven and eight.

<sup>3</sup> The relationship of *The Woman in White* to lunacy reform is discussed in Barbara Fass Leavy (1982) "Wilkie Collins's Cinderella: the history of psychology and *The Woman in White*," *Dickens Studies Annual* 10, pp.91-141.

<sup>4</sup> "Representing Illegitimacy in Victorian Culture" is from *Victorian Identities: Social and Cultural Formations in Nineteenth-Century Literature*. Robbins, R. and Wolfreys, J. (eds.), New York: St Martin's Press, 1996.

<sup>5</sup> In her text *Mixed Feelings: Feminism, Mass Culture, and Victorian Sensationalism* (1999) Anne Cvetkovich also discusses the issues of identity Collins addresses through the physical similarity of Laura and Anne, pp.89-93.

<sup>6</sup> Support for Sutherland's comment is found in Henry James' letter to Mrs. Braddon on 9<sup>th</sup> November 1865: "To Mr. Collins belongs the credit of having introduced into fiction those most mysterious of mysteries, the mysteries that are at our own doors" (Norman Page, *Letters of Wilkie Collins* 485).

<sup>7</sup> Collins helped generate a phenomenon which dominated during the 1860s and 1870s, several extremely popular texts were: M.E. Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* and *Aurora Floyd*, Mrs. Henry Wood's *East Lynne* and Rhoda Broughton's *Cometh Up As A Flower and Not Wisely But Too Well*.

<sup>8</sup> Collins acknowledged that the idea for the story came from the report but also later claimed that he received a letter asking him to intervene in a wrongful confinement case as he was planning the novel which gave him added impetus for using the idea (Bourne Taylor "Representing Illegitimacy" 23).

<sup>9</sup> Dickens contributed to the sensation genre with *Great Expectations* which was published immediately after *The Woman in White*. The novel is evidence of the authors' collaboration as Dickens recognised the success of Collins' novel and tried the sensation technique himself.

<sup>10</sup> For Dickens' comments to Collins that his work is "too plot focused" and gives "the reader too little credit" see complete references in Chapter Five. *The Public and Private Lives of Dickens and Collins, and the Pilgrim Letters of Charles Dickens*, vol. 8.

<sup>11</sup> "It had been positively ascertained, by calculations of time and place into which I need not enter particularly, that the daughter who bore her [Mrs. Catherick] husband's name was not her husband's child" (482).

<sup>12</sup> Mrs. Catherick caught Percival forging his parents' marriage in the register at Old Welmingham and bribes him for her silence. The gifts she receives from him cause her husband to suspect her and she refuses to reveal the truth. Mr. Catherick leaves England altogether and Mrs. Catherick remains in the village determined to disprove that she was guilty of any offense: "I came here robbed of my character and determined to claim it back. I've been years and years about it – and I *have* claimed it back. I have matched the respectable people fairly and openly on their own ground" (498).

#### Chapter Four. *No Name*: The Questioning of the Legal Status of Illegitimacy

In this novel Collins extends the plot function of illegitimacy as he used it in *The Woman in White*. While the earlier novel used the concealment of illegitimacy to create a dramatic plot, *No Name* approaches the issue differently as the text directly challenges the legal status of bastards in mid-Victorian Britain. Published serially between 1862 and 1863 but set retrospectively in 1848, the novel highlights the injustice of the legal status of bastards in Britain: until 1926, England was the only country in Europe whose laws did not recognise legitimation (that the subsequent marriage of a bastard's parents legitimized the child).<sup>1</sup> The novel was phenomenally successful; it went into seven editions in England between 1862 and 1926 making readers aware of the unjust legal and social position of the illegitimate.<sup>2</sup> *No Name* focuses on one of two disinherited daughters, Magdalen Vanstone, and her attempts to reclaim her father's fortune and her own identity. In outlining her predicament and her resolution Collins questions the validity of a law which is authorised to take from people their identity as individuals recognised by law. Like its predecessor, the novel was particularly unsettling to its contemporary readers for its critique of the reliability of appearances in establishing identity. Magdalen's acting and use of costume to change her identity reveals the slipperiness of identity in a class-gender system reliant on outward appearances. Similarly, Magdalen's use of the fraudulent Bygrave family to regain her inheritance exposes the hypocrisy of the laws governing marriage as similar to those governing the illegitimate.

The original success of *The Woman in White* may be primarily ascribed to the suspense and melodrama generated by Sir Percival's "secret". Collins informs the reader in the Preface that *No Name* is different from previous works because the secret is revealed near the beginning, and the novel's concern is with working out the

consequences of the secret rather than its slow revelation.<sup>3</sup> Thus, as Deirdre David states “the narrator offers an opportunity for readers to experience plot-in-process rather than plot-as-product” (186). The sanctity of the domestic setting which opens the novel is soon disturbed by an undercurrent of anxiety; beginning with the Vanstone parents’ secret journey to London. Soon after, as Norah and Magdalen are coming to terms with their parents’ sudden deaths, they are informed by the family lawyer, Mr. Pendril, that for the majority of their lives their seemingly conventional parents were unmarried and consequently the girls are now nameless and penniless bastards. Norah takes the expected path by following her governess, Miss Garth, into the older woman’s profession. But Magdalen refuses to accept her fate as Nobody’s Child and the novel follows her as she enlists the help of her step-uncle Captain Wragge and adopts various disguises to reclaim her own and her sister’s inheritance. In doing so, she challenges class boundaries and social proprieties. Collins uses Magdalen’s acting talents to show how British laws on illegitimacy in this period invalidated citizens who were previously accepted in society and the same laws justified “non-existent” individuals in using illegal means to recover their identity.

Both *The Woman in White* and *No Name* explore how a social self and a legitimate identity can be a manipulation of codes of behaviour. However, in *No Name*, Collins uses this exploration overtly to critique the legal status of illegitimate people in a way the previous novel did not. Showing his own legal knowledge and giving his attacks on British Law “more authority and impressiveness”, Collins uses lawyers to clearly express his opinion that the law should be changed to allow offspring to be legitimised when their parents are married after they are born (MacEachen 122).<sup>4</sup> Mr. Gilmore and Mr. Kyrle were used in *The Woman in White* to

make pointed remarks about marriage settlements and questions of identity based on physical appearance: in this novel Collins uses Mr. Pendril to voice his opinions:

I am far from defending the law of England, as it affects illegitimate offspring. On the contrary, I think it a disgrace to the nation. It visits the sins of the parents on the children; it encourages vice by depriving fathers and mothers of the strongest of all motives for making the atonement of marriage; and it claims to produce these two abominable results in the name of morality and religion....The more merciful and Christian law of other countries, which allows the marriage of parents to make the children legitimate, has no mercy on *these* children (110).

Because Andrew Vanstone's will predated his marriage to the girls' mother, they are automatically disinherited and rendered nameless on a legal technicality. Collins reveals the hypocrisy of the law by showing that the Vanstones' perfect partnership is considered legally invalid for lack of a certificate, but Magdalen's marriage to Noel Vanstone, achieved by fraudulent means, legally validates a previously unrecognised subject. In Collins' previous novel, Percival's manipulations of Laura reveal that the law was an institution which exposed individuals to abuse rather than protecting them. This novel extends that idea by revealing how the law not only abuses people but also is authorised to take people's identity as British subjects by removing their names and consequently their social status. The novel further suggests that the law can be manipulated for personal gain for, although Magdalen is rendered "non-existent" by the law, it later becomes her friend as it enables "Nobody's Child" to become "Somebody's Wife" (484).

In *No Name* Collins explores the consequences thrown up by having no legal and thus no social identity. As the title suggests, the novel examines the fate of two daughters who become nameless as a result of their father's "sins": "Mr. Vanstone's daughters are Nobody's Children and the law leaves them helpless at their uncle's mercy" (113). The law's removal of Magdalen's surname renders her a "blank" and able to assume any identity. She is free from the social and moral responsibilities of a gentleman's daughter: "whether I succeed, or whether I fail, I can do myself no harm, either way. I have no position to lose and no name to degrade" (144). For Magdalen, "Vanstone" was a social marker defining the daughter through the father and thus contributing to the formation of her personal and social identity. Being a Vanstone made Magdalen a gentlewoman and this position defined her in Victorian society. She is able to marry young because her father would supply a generous dowry so that her fiancé, in this case Frank Clare, would not need to be completely financially stable. When Magdalen's surname is removed, she finds she has no identity other than as "Nobody's Child" and can no longer be engaged to Frank as she is forced to "earn [her] own independence" (130). This complete removal of personal and social factors which formed Magdalen's identity in society give the roles she plays increased significance: no longer having an identity of her own, she seems literally to "become" the characters. Captain Wragge documents the amazing credibility of Magdalen's impersonations: "Her knack of disguising her own identity in the impersonation of different characters, so completely staggers her audiences, that the same people came twice over, to find out how she does it" (198).

In contrast to Esther's angelic identity which firmly places her in middle-class domesticity, Collins uses Magdalen's namelessness to place her "beyond social codification" allowing her to act as a lady even though she no longer is one (O'Neill

157). Dickens attempts to reintegrate the illegitimate into society, Collins emphasises the freedom illegitimacy confers but only at society's margins. Magdalen's freedom "from all home-dependence" and ability to adopt a persona is opposite to Esther's names (168). In *Bleak House* Dickens made a significant point with Esther's names: her surname shows no nominal relation to her parents and her nicknames, conferred on her by men, give her an identity in the household. This "blankness" of identity is shown through Magdalen's disregard for names: when Captain Wragge asks her to choose one for the stage and she responds: "Give me any name you like...I have as much right to one as to another. Make it yourself" (194). Unlike Esther, Magdalen is given the right to choose her "new" name but opts not to. This difference in naming arises from Jarndyce's role as patriarch of Bleak House and his authority over Esther in comparison with Captain Wragge who, like Magdalen, has been marginalised by society and is dependent on Magdalen's talent for financial gain.

Collins exploits the possibilities presented by an illegitimate woman who could act; at the same time as having no name, she can, and does, assume any identity, including those of lower class women. In making Magdalen an actress, that marginalised figure little better than a prostitute, Collins undermines the conventions that govern and uphold the apparent stability of middle-class mid-Victorian society. Magdalen's acting talents are introduced early in the novel when she amazes everyone at Miss Marrable's birthday theatricals by convincingly playing two totally different characters. This offers an interesting parallel to *The Woman in White* through the "blankness" and changing identities of illegitimate daughters. In the earlier novel, the interchangeability of Laura and Anne exposed the dangers of using external appearances to construct personal identity. Here, the opposite occurs as Magdalen's loss of social identity leads her to manipulate the reliance on physical appearance for

establishing identity by disguising herself and impersonating various female roles. Collins describes her impersonation of Miss Garth in no uncertain terms: “Nobody who now looked at Magdalen could have suspected for an instant that she was other than an ailing, ill-made, unattractive woman of fifty years old at least” (218). It is this impersonation that Mrs. Wragge believes is a ghost, effectively bringing together Magdalen’s manipulation of costume to adopt an identity and the “blankness” of her illegitimacy, that enables her to assume the role:

I’ve seen a Ghost!...I’ve heard tell of ghosts in night-gowns; ghosts in sheets; and ghosts in chains...here’s a worse ghost than any of ‘em – a ghost in a grey cloak and a poke bonnet (246).

This ghost is “worse than any of ‘em” because it so closely represents a real person suggesting that it is the clothing of the governess that identifies her. This is similar to the clothing that identifies Anne Catherick in *The Woman in White* after Walter’s encounter with her.<sup>5</sup> Magdalen’s character has effectively revealed the impossibility of a system sustaining itself when it identifies people as they “really are” by their appearance. This idea later proves instrumental in the plot when Mrs. Lecount confirms for herself Magdalen’s real identity through the identification of a piece of costume: a snippet of brown petticoat from Magdalen’s disguise as Miss Garth.

Collins uses Magdalen’s ability to play roles of women in various social stations in order to blur the distinctions between acceptable female gender roles. In doing so, he challenges the dominant code of social propriety. Deidre David comments on Collins’ presentation of class in the novel:



Collins makes us see that disinherited middle-class women, deprived of paternal protection, assume an identity that is both inscribed and concealed by the gender politics of their social class – that of sexual object (36).

Through Magdalen's impersonations, Collins challenges what constitutes conventional female nature by showing a lady to be "a woman who wears a silk gown, and has a sense of her own importance" rather than a product of social class (504). This challenge develops the ideas of *The Woman in White* where Collins disturbed conventional ideas of social order by suggesting that a gentleman and a bastard were interchangeable. Here, as Magdalen is unrecognised as an individual within the law, she is forced to either "efface herself and accept her nothingness" as her sister does, or else take on the identity of someone else (Milbank 33). Magdalen chooses the latter option and assumes the identities of others on and off the stage. The disturbing idea is not only that Magdalen takes on roles of lower class women but also that she uses her sexuality to regain her inheritance. Magdalen realises her best asset is her looks and in manipulating Noel Vanstone she uses them for her own gain:

'I can twist any man alive round my finger,' she thought, with a smile of superb triumph, 'as long as I keep my looks! If that contemptible wretch saw me now-' She shrank from following that thought to its end, with a sudden horror of herself: she drew back from the glass shuddering, and put her hands over her face (248).

Magdalen's upbringing and love for Frank Clare prevent her "following that thought to its end". However, once Frank breaks off the engagement, Magdalen realises that

she can reclaim her “Vanstone” identity by literally selling herself to Noel. It was not a new concept for women to use their looks to marry for money; but Magdalen undermines the system by successfully posing as a lady, highlighting that the system works by prostituting women and blurring social boundaries.

When Magdalen assumes another person’s “skin”, she successfully rejects the passivity associated with a woman’s place by appearing to be a middle-class lady while being a bastard beneath (268-9). Unlike conventional middle-class women, Magdalen earns money and decides her own future. Both Norah and Magdalen “must depend on [their] own exertions to gain [their] daily bread” (179) but Magdalen takes a highly unconventional route to support herself rather than becoming a governess and earning her living “as a gentleman’s daughter should” (130). Determined with an “invincible resolution” to discover details about Michael Vanstone, Magdalen takes to the stage to earn enough money to continue her investigations (123). The heroine’s most successful deception is as Susan Bygrave in Aldborough as she plots to marry her cousin Noel Vanstone, who has legally inherited Andrew Vanstone’s fortune. After posing as Miss Garth and confronting her cousin at Vauxhall Walk, Magdalen devotes herself to disguising herself as a middle-class lady and winning Noel’s affections: “The short way and the vile way, lies before me. I take it – Captain Wragge – and marry him” (277). Through her deception Magdalen goes against her upbringing as a gentlewoman, purposefully manipulating appearances to gain her inheritance.

In the novel Magdalen persuades her maid, Louisa, to train her as a parlour maid so she can gain entry to St Crux and try to find the secret trust. The concept of a gentlewoman acting as a maid challenged nineteenth century convention; however, it was more challenging that the protagonist in a novel was a lady who became an

actress. Magdalen assumes false identities in order to regain her own identity. In *The Woman in White*, Marian Halcombe came close to taking an active role by secretly listening to Fosco and Percival's plotting, but she is ultimately rendered a passive accomplice because of conventional gender expectations. It is Walter who exposes Percival as a fraud and restores Laura's identity; not Marian. *No Name* goes one step further by creating a heroine who becomes an actress. In the mid-Victorian period actresses were considered little better than prostitutes as both roles used femininity to generate a livelihood and took women out of their "proper" place: the home.<sup>6</sup> Norah leaves her job after it is discovered that her sister is an actress and her employers make it a condition of her continuing to work that she should have no contact with Magdalen whilst at their house. Norah resents the implications this has regarding Magdalen's character and resigns. Miss Garth explains to Magdalen why being an actress reflects badly on her sister: "your way of life, however pure your conduct might be – and I will do you the justice to believe it is pure – is a suspicious way of life to all people" (254).<sup>7</sup> The supposedly questionable morals of actresses was not the only reason for unease about them. Art historian Martin Meisel explains it as also being a fear of appearances being manipulated:

It is not so much the professional actress who poses a threat, since she is all too often associated with the roles she plays, becoming the victim of her art. Rather, it is the power of impersonation of being other than oneself that appears as a significant literary symbol of moral peril (30).

Collins deliberately plays on the fear that individuals might successfully assume another identity and therefore undermines class and gender divisions. Magdalen's

manipulation and disguise allow her to act out roles from her previous “legitimate” life; she becomes a governess and a middle-class lady even though she is not supposed to have a legal identity.

As well as challenging the dominant code of social propriety, Collins’ errant heroine disturbs the sanctity of the middle-class family. Magdalen’s attack on Noel Vanstone is achieved by creating a fraudulent “family”, the Bygraves, and this undermines one of the central structures of Victorian social organisation. The novel initially questions the institution of the family by showing that laws governing marriage are a farce. The irony Collins presents is that Andrew Vanstone’s family is said to be false, but it is the only example of a contented, functioning family in the entire novel. The “complete family circle” of Mr. and Mrs. Vanstone and their daughters is not legally considered a family at all, as the parents are unmarried and the children are bastards. However, in Aldborough the fraudulent Bygrave family are accepted even though they are constructed from dead peoples’ identities. Furthermore, when Magdalen marries her cousin, she and Noel instantly become the accepted foundation for a family, even though the match is invalid and illegally achieved. The Vanstone girls were disowned by the law and yet Magdalen is given, by her marriage, the right to exist in a world where there is no legal subject called Magdalen Vanstone. Magdalen is aware that what she has done is legally and morally wrong because of the standards and education her “family” gave her: “if I had been what I once was, I would have thrown myself into that river sooner than done what I am going to do now” (277). But, in marrying Noel, she exposes the hypocrisy of laws governing illegitimacy as similar to the hypocrisy of those governing marriage. Magdalen defends herself to Miss Garth by claiming that her acting has identified her within the law: “you forget what wonders my wickedness has done for me. It has made

Nobody's Child Somebody's Wife" (484). However, Collins "restores" the sanctity of the nuclear family unit through Norah marrying George Bartram and the suggestion that Magdalen will marry Captain Kirke. Like the conventional happy ending we are given at the close of *The Woman in White*, Collins attempts to contain the infractions Magdalen's character made against the family throughout the novel by suggesting that her actions can be contained within a happy ending. After Magdalen confesses to Norah and Captain Kirke she is forgiven and able to have a better life.

Collins seems unable to relinquish the attack against married women's property rights which he made in *The Woman in White* as he explores it again through Magdalen. Although it is not as obvious as the criticism of the laws against the illegitimate, Collins still examines the subordinate position women were forced into upon marriage.<sup>8</sup> Magdalen believes that, by marrying Noel, she gains the recognition of the law and moves from being Nobody's Child to Somebody's Wife, and that the law which robbed her of her inheritance will now restore both to her (484).<sup>9</sup> However, "the goal of marriage inevitably led to a loss of power and independence" and for Magdalen marriage puts her totally under the control of her husband (Milbank 29). Even though she reclaims her inheritance by marrying Noel, as a wife, Magdalen can have no separate identity or property of her own unless her husband dies. Magdalen is recognised now but only under the legal covering of Noel; marriage made her "Somebody's Wife" rather than "Somebody" in her own right (484). Soon after she is married Noel dies, but instead of being independently wealthy, Magdalen loses all that she worked so hard for as Noel, under the influence of Mrs. Lecount, wrote his wife out of his will. Magdalen finds herself in the same position as she was when her parents died: "I am a lonely woman thrown helpless on my own resources, without rank or place in the world" (495). In spite of her brief success at marrying Noel, the

fortune and identity within the law that she gained is quickly lost and Magdalen reverts to her previous methods of deception.

The “blankness” of illegitimacy in Collins’ two texts gives his characters the ability to assume any identity and this leads to individual and collective confusion over legitimate identity. As I have shown, the collective confusion is fed by the fear that appearances can be deceptive and therefore people are not what they may seem at first. On the individual level, when Magdalen devises the plan to marry Noel, she is forced to suppress the moral character of her former upper-class self. Through assuming a false identity for the sole purpose of marrying her cousin, Magdalen loses all connection she had with her personal sense of self at the start of the novel. She confides in Captain Wragge that she would not have been able to carry out her plan if she were still under the social and moral code of conduct that governs a gentlewoman. Saying this, she confirms that upper-class identity to be a part of herself she has lost: “I am nothing to myself; I am no more interested in myself than these handfuls of grass. I suppose I have lost something” (273). This sense of non-existence is important to a discussion of the illegitimate. Dickens also confronted this concept in *Bleak House*. Esther faces her illegitimacy after she has smallpox and realises that she has no personal sense of self other than those roles she has adopted to compensate for her birth. In *The Woman in White*, Percival so totally lacks a sense of self through being a fraudulent gentleman that he would be a figurative “blank” if he were exposed. For both authors, the absence of a personal sense of identity for the illegitimate specifically relates to the inferior moral and legal position allocated to bastards. Dickens uses Esther’s morally irreproachable character to challenge the unfair stigma attached to bastards. Collins uses Magdalen’s “blankness” in two ways: to allow him to ascribe identities to her and challenge gender roles, and to show that

the legal “blankness” of the illegitimate is grossly unfair and encourages “illegitimate” behaviour.

Magdalen’s “assumed characters” (277) not only show that appearances are deceptive, but also point the moral that illegitimacy is irrelevant in terms of a person’s actual character. This idea, combined with the evidence of the unfairness of the laws governing the status of bastards, provides Collins with another method of attack. In the mid-Victorian period, illegitimacy carried connotations of sin and punishment for the mother, the father and the offspring.<sup>10</sup> The status implied that the children were worthless, and as such they were deprived of any legal identity, belonging to nobody, without a name and unable to enter society. Magdalen proves that this is a dangerous position, as it allows individuals to manipulate and adopt any identity they wish. Magdalen outwits the system and re-enters it after she has been systematically excluded. Appearing as a lady in Aldborough gives her moral and social standing in the eyes of society, regardless of her actual character. On the other hand, when she was identified as a bastard the opposite occurred: she was immediately a social outcast even though she had the manners and breeding of a lady. In outlining Magdalen’s complex plans to regain her inheritance, Collins uses each phase to show how the illegitimate could, legally, adopt any identity they pleased because the law and society completely deprived them of one.

Even though the novel criticises the class-gender system which places women in a secondary position, it ultimately seems to endorse their loss of legal identity by presenting the sister who obeyed the rules as the better Vanstone daughter. After Noel’s death and her own financial loss, Magdalen again subverts social codes of behaviour when she poses as a parlour-maid for Admiral Bartram at St. Crux in order to find the Secret Trust. Once again, Magdalen is without an identity and able to

assume any character she wishes. She is tested in the role by her fellow staff; they watch her as she carries out her tasks but Magdalen has “an ever-present remembrance of herself and her place” and so succeeds in maintaining the role (523). But it is Norah, in observing social conventions by becoming a governess, who is rewarded with George Bartram and who thus enjoys the fruits of her father’s fortune.

Collins presents an unconventional heroine who uses her talent as an actress to survive and later to try and regain her inheritance; however, he weakens his criticism of Victorian society through Magdalen by rewarding the sister who followed the expected path without disturbing social boundaries or expectations. In *No Name* Magdalen’s errant ways ultimately fail; she leaves St. Crux without the secret trust and falls ill. She is rescued by the valiant Captain Kirke and, it is assumed, marries him for love alone, not as part of some greater plan or purpose: “[Her] own plot failed, and marriage is brought in as a consolation prize” (O’Neill 33). Through Magdalen’s final fate the plot seems to be presenting the solution to the “real life” problem of illegitimacy as marriage, a suggestion which contrasts with the author’s private dislike of the institution and refusal to commit to it. While Magdalen fails at the task of regaining her inheritance and is redeemed by Kirke, the novel has nonetheless explored the possibilities of women manipulating appearances. This is used in turn to show that the laws governing the legality of a marriage as well as those governing the status of bastards are hypocritical and outdated. As one involved in unconventional relationships and as a father of illegitimate children himself, Collins’ personal interest in having the laws changed cannot be ignored. But, protective as Collins was of his personal life, he seems ultimately to have protected himself against criticism by writing conventional happy endings.



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<sup>1</sup> The legal injustice *No Name* denounced was finally removed, although not until more than sixty years after the novel was first published (MacEachen 138).

<sup>2</sup> Collins' success is also evident in the remuneration he received: 3,000 pounds for the first edition, he sold nearly 4,000 copies on the day of publication, netted 1,500 pounds for the American serial rights and obtained 5,000 guineas from Smith and Elder for his next novel before having written a word (David 187).

<sup>3</sup> Collins writes in the Preface: "It will be seen that the narrative related in these pages has been constructed on a plan, which differs from the plan followed in my last novel, and in some other of my works published at an earlier date. The only Secret contained in this book, is revealed midway in the first volume. From that point, all the main events of the story are purposely foreshadowed, before they take place – my present design being to rouse the reader's interest in following the train of circumstances by which these foreseen events are brought about".

<sup>4</sup> Collins trained as a lawyer before he became a writer (see Chapter Five: The Public and Private Lives of Dickens and Collins) and his knowledge of the legal value of wills and marriage settlements, of marriage and inheritance law and court procedure informed his novels and manifests itself repeatedly.

<sup>5</sup> Walter's encounter with Anne: "There, in the middle of the broad, bright high-road – there, as if it had that moment sprung out of the earth or dropped from the heaven – stood the figure of a solitary Woman, dressed from head to foot in white garments; her face bent in grave inquiry on mine, her hand pointing to the dark cloud over London, as I faced her" (20).

<sup>6</sup> Sarah Ellis, as cited in Chapter One in relation to Esther meeting the stereotypical expectations of women, was the foremost proponent of the domestic spheres. Within this doctrine the rightful place for women was the home.

<sup>7</sup> An enraged Mrs Oliphant commented in 1863 that "Magdalen engages in a career of vulgar and aimless trickery and wickedness, with which it is impossible to have a shadow of sympathy". See *Wilkie Collins: The Critical Heritage*, 143.

<sup>8</sup> The topic was still contentious as no significant change was made until 1872. See Chapter One: Historical Context and Legal Background.

<sup>9</sup> "It was done. The awful words which speak from earth to Heaven were pronounced. The children of the two dead brothers – inheritors of the implacable enmity which had parted their parents – were Man and Wife" (418).

<sup>10</sup> Michael Vanstone echoes the Calvinistic views of Miss Barbary and Mrs. Clennam: "He (Andrew Vanstone) appears to have systematically imposed a woman on Society as his wife, who was not his wife, and to have completed the outrage on morality by afterwards marrying her. Such conduct as this, has called down a Judgement on himself and his children" (123).

## Chapter Five. The Public and Private Lives of Dickens and Collins

During their lifetimes Dickens and Collins were both extremely protective of their private lives believing that their art, not their lives, was public property. However, both authors' novels reveal a preoccupation with illegitimacy that cannot be explained by topicality alone. The friendship, collaboration and romantic affairs of the two expose a personal motivation for investigating the treatment of bastards in their texts. What emerges is a tension between the public and the private, between the professional writer and the personal individual. The 1850s and 1860s were a period of change for the authors; both experienced literary and theatrical successes and both became involved with women who would change their lives. In 1857, the same year the Divorce Act was passed, Dickens separated from his wife Catherine, an event preceded by his meeting and the start of his involvement with actress Ellen Ternan. During this period there was a distinct conflict between the happy marriages Dickens upheld in his novels and the marital discord in his own life. At the same time, Collins was involved in unconventional domestic arrangements: he lived with one woman whilst maintaining another woman and their illegitimate children nearby. As I have argued in the preceding chapters, his novels campaign for the rights of the illegitimate despite the fact that his children were ultimately affected by the very stigma the novels condemn. The biographical details of both Dickens and Collins suggest that the authors may have been using their novels to explore issues and anxieties from their private lives without the reaction caused by open campaigning. Their collaborative involvement in *Household Words* and *All The Year Round* reveals an extension of the topical issues confronted in the novels and in their professional collaboration Dickens became Collins' mentor at the same time they remained close friends.

Dickens met Collins for the first time in 1851 when the younger man was suggested for a part in Dickens' amateur theatrical group. It is significant that they met through the theatre as it played such an important part in their joint and individual private lives throughout the 1850s and 1860s. In 1852 Dickens invited Collins to take on larger roles in the group and in April of the same year the joint acting turned to joint literary ventures when Collins published his first contribution to *Household Words*, "A Terribly Strange Bed". He was made a member of the regular staff of the magazine in September 1856 at a salary of five pounds a week. Collins was initially unwilling to be tied down to writing too many short, anonymous pieces in the "house style" imposed by Dickens, and would only agree to the arrangement if his next novel were serialized in the magazine under his own name.<sup>1</sup> In January 1857 the pair acted in *The Frozen Deep*. The play itself was very much a joint enterprise: the working out of the details of the plot, the first draft and much of the final version were by Collins while Dickens rewrote and added to the dialogue and took entire charge of rehearsals.<sup>2</sup> During 1858 Collins contributed twenty articles for *Household Words* (two of them rewritten by Dickens) and also wrote two episodes and, with Dickens, the conclusion of the 1858 Christmas number.

The views of each writer on the art of the novel were, like their views on marriage, very different. Dickens felt that plot revelation needed to come from characters' interactions thus only hinting to the reader at the complexities of the plot, as is evident in *Bleak House*. Collins believed that the reader needed to be self-consciously directed towards unravelling the plot. Throughout his time at *Household Words*, Collins learnt a great deal from the older writer while certain aspects of Dickens' skills continued to be sharpened by his appreciation of Collins' major strength – detective narratives. Collins lacked the broad social sweep, the

psychological insight and the linguistic resources at the older writer's command; nonetheless he excelled as an entertaining writer of less profound fictions. *The Woman in White* was published serially from 1859 to 1860 in *All The Year Round* and was enormously popular. It did much to secure the circulation of the magazine which was three times that of *Household Words* at its most popular (Peters, *King of Inventors* 239). In January 1862, Collins finally made the decision to leave the staff of *All The Year Round*. He continued to be associated with the magazine as a contributor, and Dickens did not resent his leaving the staff.

Dickens and Collins' comradeship belied opposing attitudes towards domestic arrangements and marriage. A fact reflected in their respective novels from the period. Dickens' unhappy and financially unstable childhood led him to desire a normal middle-class family; an ideal repeatedly reflected as the epitome of happiness in his work. On the other hand Collins' attitude to the traditional middle-class marriage was evident in his unconventional domestic arrangements of maintaining two families. Dickens married Catherine Hogarth on 2 April 1836 and the two went on to produce a large family. Their marriage held together until 1857 when Dickens met Ellen though their relationship was never generally known until the 1930s. Dickens publicly separated from his wife in 1858. Collins met Caroline in 1854 and she and her daughter quickly and quietly became part of the bachelor's whole existence. In 1864 Collins met Martha Rudd and the two became involved. On the surface marriage represents an apparent difference between the authors; Dickens was married for twenty-one years while Collins openly opposed the institution. However, Dickens' relationship with Ellen Ternan during the 1850s and 1860s shows a parallel to Collins' relationship with Caroline. The difference was that Dickens attempted to

maintain the public façade of a happy middle-class marriage prior to 1857 whereas Collins made little attempt to disguise his unusual domestic arrangements.

The view of marriage Dickens upheld in his novels of the 1850s and 1860s conflicts with the events of his personal life. Dickens had depicted many marriages of people who lived happily ever after, such as Esther and Allan in *Bleak House*. As Stephen Leacock has revealed, to Dickens' readers it seemed painful to think that the writer who had created these characters had separated from his wife; that he was unable to exercise neither the tolerance he celebrated nor the quiet devotion he loved to exalt (106). From early 1857 Dickens presented a picture of himself as a long-suffering husband forced into a separation by his wife's inadequacies.<sup>3</sup> During the writing and publication of *Little Dorrit*, Dickens' domestic situation deteriorated and this is reflected in the novel's presentation of dysfunctional families, broken relationships and bitter individuals. The only happy union is that of Amy Dorrit and Arthur Clennam and Dickens makes sure that the reader understands that this is an exception to "the noisy and the eager, and the arrogant and the forward and the vain" (II.34.860) who inhabit the end of the novel.

One reason Dickens did not divorce Catherine was because he could not afford it; despite the recent simplification of the law, divorce was still very expensive. But more importantly for Dickens, a divorce threatened irrevocable damage to the family and reputation of such a public man.

Throughout the ordeal Dickens was concerned that his name be protected for the sake of his children so that the family name would be free from any scandalous implications. This reveals a significant tension between the public and private man. Whilst Dickens tried to contest that illegitimate children would always be second-class citizens because of their inability to inherit their father's name in *Bleak House*,

his private life suggests his awareness of the importance of the “Dickens” name for his children’s future. Whilst his children would never become illegitimate, even after a separation, the family name could be marred by scandal, impacting on Dickens’ children’s future. *Bleak House* suggests that the parents can be punished without visiting their sins on the innocent children as the bible suggests. Esther’s confrontation with her heritage helps her discover a personal and social sense of self by enabling her to function under the “angel” identity. In real life keeping his name free from scandal was a significant priority for Dickens: “I have had stern occasion to impress upon my children that their father’s name is their best possession” (22 July 1858, *Pilgrim* vol. 8 608). Dickens’ awareness of the importance of the family name is evident in *Bleak House*: not having a name is problematic for Jo and not having any nominal connection to her parents creates identity issues for Esther in the first half of the novel. Dickens was always careful and thoughtful in choosing the names of his characters because he knew a name could allow or deny entry into society. This is evident in his naming of Tattycoram in *Little Dorrit* whose name excludes her from “legitimate” society by identifying her with Coram Fields Hospital. It is from this awareness that Dickens wrote a letter to his public under the heading “Personal” in *Household Words* in June 1858 addressing rumours about the separation and that he was having an affair with an actress.<sup>4</sup> Dickens was aware that he could not stop people gossiping about his domestic situation, but because he was in a position to openly deny rumours he was determined to protect and preserve his name for those “dear to [his] heart”: his children (Kaplan 396).

Dickens believed that marriage secured the future of his children through their ability to inherit the “Dickens” name. For Collins, his intense dislike of marriage created an entirely different set of problems for his offspring because he never

married. He maintained his unusual domestic arrangements of a mistress / housekeeper in one house and mistress / family in another until his death. Like the fictional Percival Glyde and Magdalen Vanstone, Collins' own children could not inherit his surname. His texts from the mid-Victorian period obviously campaign for changes to the laws against the illegitimate on the grounds that they were archaic and unchristian. The most obvious such campaign occurs in *No Name* which uses Magdalen to question the validity of a law which is authorised to take from people their identity as individuals recognised by law. However, Collins must have been aware that the situation might not change in his lifetime as he went to the trouble of turning himself into William Dawson, Barrister at Law, after the birth of his first child to Martha Rudd. This gave Martha the name "Dawson" on the electoral register but did not protect his children.

Collins' father, William, seems to have impressed on his sons that, although marriage and fatherhood were a great source of happiness, they were also a great, and almost overwhelming, responsibility. Collins' dislike for marriage is reflected in an article in *Household Words* in 1856 called "Bold Words By A Bachelor" in which Collins plainly stated several reasons for avoiding the married state including that new wives often tried to estrange their husbands from their old male friends. Perhaps Collins feared that marriage would mean less opportunities for his and Dickens' socialising, this happened later when Dickens became more involved with Ellen. Dickens was editor of *Household Words* and so it is reasonable to assume that Dickens supported Collins' view; furthermore, it was published during the break up of Dickens' marriage. The responsibility Collins' father impressed on his son is one reason the author avoided matrimony for his entire life but does not explain why he gave Martha the respectability of marriage in all but ceremony. Collins' legal training

made him keenly aware of the “non-existent” position of married women, and his opinion that married women were exposed to abuse by the law rather than being protected by it is shown in the character of Laura Fairlie and the suffering she undergoes at the hands of her husband. From this textual situation it is possible to conclude that Collins would have sympathised with Dickens’ predicament in trying to separate from Catherine; *The Woman in White* was deliberately set at a time prior to the Divorce Law and demonstrates the difficulty of spouses legally separating. In spite of the recent changes to the Divorce Laws at the time the book was published, Collins was illustrating that escaping from a marriage was very difficult. This argument also suggests that Collins himself did not want to become “trapped” by marriage laws.

Dickens met Ellen Ternan when his dissatisfaction with his domestic life was at its height, and his experience of the theatre had given him some of the happiest moments of his existence. Ellen was eighteen when she met Dickens who was forty-five. She took care to leave no written trace and very few spoken records of the fact that she had even known him (Tomalin 5). The Ternans were a theatrical family, Ellen, her two sisters, her mother, her aunt and her grandmother were all on the stage, mostly from infancy. The culture of the theatre world offered Dickens a private existence in which he could cease to “be either the convivial fraud or the well-organised father and become nothing but a watching eye, a listening ear, a dreaming mind” (Tomalin 107). The transgressiveness of the theatre world, so opposite to the middle class morality presented in Dickens’ novels, offered the author an escape from his stifling public image. Ellen and her associations with the theatre offered him a secret life separate from Dickens the author. However, in reality the situations could not be as separate as Dickens would have liked. He was faced with Collins setting up



a cheerful ménage with Caroline Graves, but was aware that Ellen was not a widow but an untouched girl. “If Dickens once touched her, he would become the villain who put her into the category of his own Little Em’ly...what he wanted was to start life again as a romantic bachelor, in romantic purity” (Tomalin 133). To maintain his relationship with Ellen, Dickens began to lead a double life – on the surface, life at Gad’s Hill went on as usual, but he would vanish for days or weeks at a time, on visits to France or to appear under the alias “Charles Tringham” at houses in Slough and Peckham where Ellen was lodging.

There are two possible occasions when Ellen might have borne a child: firstly in 1862 or 1863 most probably in France; secondly in April 1867. Norman and Jeanne Mackenzie use Kate Perugini’s (née Dickens) comment that her father and Ellen Ternan had a son “who died in infancy” as evidence that there was a child in 1862 or 1863 (352).<sup>5</sup> Letters from Dickens in early 1863 support the premise that there was some crisis: On 6 January 1863 Dickens wrote to Sir Joseph Olliffe saying “On Sunday morning early, I am going away to see a friend concerning whom I am anxious” (Pilgrim, vol. 10, 191). Twelve days later Dickens wrote to Olliffe again complaining of not being able to sleep: “Some unstringing of the nerves – coupled with an anxiety not to be mentioned here – holds sleep from me” (Pilgrim, vol. 10, 196). If Ellen had been pregnant, France would have been a convenient place for concealing it. Evidence of her return to England with her mother is found from the Staplehurst railway accident which was a reminder to Ellen that “she was obliged to live her life somewhere in the gap between what could be said and what really happened” (Tomalin 149). Evidence found in cryptic entries in a secret diary from 1867 also strongly suggest that in April Ellen gave birth to a child which died six days later (Kaplan 377). Unfortunately letters from Dickens to Ellen in this period have

been destroyed (Pilgrim, vol. 11, 528) but there was in fact an exceptional and unexplained use of the word “Arrival” in Dickens’ diary for April 13 and subsequent entries suggest that Ellen was unwell for a few weeks after that. The cottage at Slough would have been a well-situated place for her to recover (Mackenzie 352). While it cannot be definitively asserted that Dickens fathered an illegitimate child, there is too much evidence for the possibility to be merely brushed aside. On May 12, 1869, Dickens signed and had witnessed the will that he had composed himself, with his lawyer’s assistance. The initial provision gave “the sum of one thousand pounds free of legacy duty to Miss Ellen Lawless Ternan, late of Haughton Place” (Forster 480). The bequest’s prominent position made a bold public announcement about her importance to him. But though the amount was large enough to catch people’s attention, it was not large enough to make the statement complete and unmistakable. Even in his death Dickens retained a degree of secrecy in his relationship with Ellen, leaving the rumours and suspicions unsubstantiated.

Dickens’ opinions on the topic are, at times, confusing. His inability to leave behind the middle-class morality which he used to make his work acceptable to the majority of his readers, created an unintentional conflict in his texts from the 1850s. *Bleak House* suggests that illegitimacy can be overcome when society’s attitudes are more forgiving, but simultaneously suggests that the sinners, the parents, cannot go unpunished. His relationship with Ellen influences the less overt presentation of the topic in *Little Dorrit* and the novel’s suggestion that illegitimacy is another form of social and legal imprisonment. He was keenly aware that by having an affair he could cause a woman he loved to become pregnant with a child whom he could never openly acknowledge and which would shame her. He was all too aware that life was not easy for the illegitimate. This novel suggests, therefore, that all bastards must

work to overcome the psychological burden of illegitimacy in order to find a place for themselves in society (Tomalin 145). *Little Dorrit*'s maze of characters with multiple identities speaks of the different sections of Dickens' own life. If he could keep his relationship with Ellen secret, then any children they had would be spared the shame of being the illegitimate child of Dickens. The escape from "Dickens the author" he wanted for himself and Ellen was never realised.

Collins was no stranger to the concept of keeping a mistress. There is a parallel between Ellen and Caroline, but Collins' disregard for conventions meant that Caroline (and her daughter Harriet) were incorporated into Collins' life in a way Ellen could not be into Dickens'. Collins met Martha Rudd on a trip to the country in 1864; this led to the creation of another "family" just a few doors down from his existing one. This idea of a person living more than one life, having dual identities is reflected figuratively through Magdalen's use of her acting talents to manipulate the laws against the illegitimate to her advantage in *No Name*. The idea of two families living in close proximity is replicated through Magdalen taking lodging directly across the street from her cousin in London. The themes of acting and using appearances to establish identity stem from the author's desire, throughout his literary career, to investigate how identity is formed, can be deconstructed and manipulated. Collins' love of the theatre which had its essence in individuals being other than they appear, contributed to his investigation of the theme in the 1862 novel. This interest in things theatrical extends beyond the novel as several of Collins' novels became theatre productions, including *The Woman in White* and *No Name*, and he enjoyed acting himself. It was through the theatre that Collins became acquainted with Dickens and it was a stepping stone to their literary collaborations. For Dickens, a love of theatricals provided Dickens with some of the most enjoyable moments of his career. His public

readings became well-known “performances” (Kaplan 469). Being someone other than himself was probably a relief for Dickens as he was able to escape the middle-class morality with which he publicly identified himself.

The complications and tensions in the private lives of Dickens and Collins created an interest in identity which fed their novels in the mid-Victorian period. In spite of the fact that they both discuss similar issues, particularly illegitimacy, they were conscious of each using very different ways to do so. Dickens told Collins that he believed *The Woman in White* to be: “a great advance on all your former writing, and most especially in respect of tenderness” (Pilgrim, vol. 8, 194). Dickens however, continued “I always contest your disposition to give an audience credit for nothing, which necessarily involves the forcing of points on their attention” (Pilgrim 194). This is evident in *No Name* when Mr. Pendril directly expresses Collins’ opinion of the laws against the illegitimate. Collins thought that Dickens did not tell the audience enough; for him, the art of fiction demanded a sense of self-conscious signposts directing the reader toward an unravelling of a well-constructed plot. For Dickens, the plot revelation needed “to arise organically from the interaction of characters in a narrative pattern in which suggestion and symbol appeal to the reader’s intuition” (Peters, *Charles Dickens* 167). Dickens weaves together a number of storylines in both *Bleak House* and *Little Dorrit* using characters to symbolise and comment on the need to treat bastards more humanely without condoning illicit affairs. By contrast, in *The Woman in White* illegitimacy functions as a plot device in order to create an exciting story rather than as social commentary. Dickens admired this quality in spite of what he perceived as its drawbacks:

You know what an interest I have felt in your powers from the beginning of our friendship, and how very high I rate them: I know that this is an admirable book...no-one else could do it half so well (Pilgrim, vol. 8, 194).

In *No Name* the legal status of bastards is criticised but it occurs in such an overt way that there is none of the subtlety of Dickens, and only a fraction of the psychological insight provided by the earlier novels.

### **Conclusion**

The novels of Dickens and Collins present their differing views on the position and treatment of the illegitimate. After examining the difficulty the illegitimate have in finding a place for themselves in society, Dickens suggests that readers of both *Bleak House* and *Little Dorrit* should cultivate a more tolerant attitude towards bastards whilst somehow simultaneously maintaining Christian morals. This creates conflict within the novels themselves as Dickens tries to criticise certain attitudes whilst standing within Victorian culture and needing to retain his middle-class readership. This conflict is particularly evident in *Bleak House*. For Collins *The Woman in White* established him as an author of note and it was the concealment of illegitimacy in the plot that generated a reading frenzy. Collins' interest in identity led him to examine what happens when identity is removed, reconstructed or never present; this creates a collection of "blank" characters who use society's reliance on appearances to establish identity to recreate themselves. Illegitimacy in relation to Dickens work suggests specific gender differences in dealing with illegitimacy and *Great Expectations* (1862) would be an interesting novel to study from this point of view. Estella is an illegitimate orphan brought up as a lady, an interesting contrast to

Percival, Collins' "gentlemanly" protagonist who preceded what is considered Dickens' "sensation" novel.

Dickens and Collins were both products of the mid-Victorian era, their lives and work reflect tensions between a moralising public front in their novels and an unconventional private life. The recurrence of illegitimacy in their novels of the period can be understood when the parliamentary and legal debate, the authors' private lives and the novels themselves are examined.

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<sup>1</sup> Dickens kept a cautious control over Collins' more radical outbursts in the magazine and he warned his editor, Wills, to look over the articles carefully in his absence: "do not leave anything in that may be sweeping and unnecessarily offensive to the middle class" (Pilgrim, vol 8, 654). This indicates that in general Collins was less conservative than Dickens, as also his more Bohemian lifestyle proved to be.

<sup>2</sup> The idea for the play came from Dickens. The play was based on Sir John Franklin's expedition to the Arctic in 1845 which ended with the death of the entire party. Dickens himself took the central role of Richard Wardour, a villain who redeems himself by saving his rival's life at the expense of his own.

<sup>3</sup> Dickens began to tell people that Catherine suffered from bouts of insanity, that she had never properly connected with her children and that she was an inadequate mother. (Mackenzie, *A Life* 1957) Prior to this, Dickens explained in a "Letter" to Forster that he believed he and Catherine could maintain appearances: "Mrs. Dickens and I have lived unhappily together for many years. Hardly anyone who has known us intimately can fail to have known that we are, in all respects of character and temperament, wonderfully unsuited to each other...For some years past Mrs. Dickens has been in the habit of representing me to go away and live apart...I have uniformly replied that we must bear out our misfortune, and fight the fight out to the end" (Forster 292).

<sup>4</sup> "Some domestic troubles of mine, of long standing have lately been brought to an arrangement [with] no anger or ill will...By some means arising out of wickedness, or out of folly, or out of inconceivable wild chance, or out of all three, this trouble has been made the occasion of misrepresentations, most grossly false, most monstrous, and most cruel – involving not only me, but innocent persons dear to my heart...My conspicuous position has often made me the subject of fabulous stories and unaccountable statements. I solemnly declare, then – and this I do both in my own name and in my wife's name – that all the lately whispered rumours touching the trouble at which I have glanced, are abominably false" (Kaplan 396).

<sup>5</sup> This comment is from Kate's account of the break up of Dickens' marriage and the Ellen Ternan affair in Gladys Storey's text *Dickens and Daughter* (1939). In *The Life of Charles Dickens* (vol. II) John Forster openly disputes that Dickens and Ellen had a child. He goes as far as to write that they were simply friends for a long period after Dickens' separation (459). Furthermore, in *Charles Dickens: His Life, Writings and Personality* (vol. II), Ellen is not mentioned at all, even in relation to the Staplehurst train accident which there is proof Ellen was at with Dickens. This tendency of early biographers to "cover-up" Dickens' relationship with Ellen stems from a desire to protect the author who presented himself as something of a moral guardian to his public – both in and out of his novels.

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