

# Dickens's Signs, Readers' Designs

## New Bearings in Dickens Criticism

*edited by*

Francesca Orestano and Norbert Lennartz

*foreword by*

Michael Hollington



Copyright © MMXII  
ARACNE editrice S.r.l.

[www.aracneeditrice.it](http://www.aracneeditrice.it)  
[info@aracneeditrice.it](mailto:info@aracneeditrice.it)

via Raffaele Garofalo, 133/A-B  
00173 Roma  
(06) 93781065

ISBN 978-88-548-4767-5

*I diritti di traduzione, di memorizzazione elettronica,  
di riproduzione e di adattamento anche parziale,  
con qualsiasi mezzo, sono riservati per tutti i Paesi.*

*Non sono assolutamente consentite le fotocopie  
senza il permesso scritto dell'Editore.*

I edizione: maggio 2012

Angelika Zirker

**Weak, Sexless, One-dimensional, Boring?  
Reading Amy Dorrit**

Among Dickens's works, *Little Dorrit* is the only novel featuring a title heroine. Interestingly, it is also this novel which is considered to be particularly "weak."<sup>1</sup> This weakness has been linked primarily with the portrayal of the protagonist, Amy Dorrit, whom critics have dubbed as "really rather odd. Odd and flat,"<sup>2</sup> "lowly" and "sexless"<sup>3</sup> as well as "one-dimensional [...], unconvincing and boring,"<sup>4</sup> to list only a few voices. These

---

<sup>1</sup> "The plot of *Little Dorrit* is often said to be one of Dickens's weakest. But that is in keeping with the book's aesthetic of flatness and its disillusioned spirit." Dominic Rainsford, "Flatness and Ethical Responsibility in *Little Dorrit*," *Victorian Newsletter* 88 (1995), p. 16. See also the unsigned obituary of Dickens, published in the *Saturday Review* on June 11, 1870: "With the single exception of *Little Dorrit*, there is not one of [Dickens's] numerous stories that has not touches of the masterhand and strokes of indisputable genius." Quoted by Brian Rosenberg, *Little Dorrit's Shadows: Character and Contradiction in Dickens*, Columbia, University of Missouri Press, 1996, p. 31.

<sup>2</sup> Rainsford, p. 14.

<sup>3</sup> David Holbrook, *Charles Dickens and the Image of Woman*, New York, New York University Press, 1993, p. 78 and p. 87. See also Efraim Sicher, *Rereading the City, Rereading Dickens: Representation, the Novel, and Urban Realism*, New York, AMS Press, 2003, p. 288.

<sup>4</sup> Kathleen Woodward, "Passivity and Passion in *Little Dorrit*" *The Dickensian* 71 (1975), pp. 140-148. Agnes in *David Copperfield* and Lucie Manette in *A Tale of Two Cities* have suffered a similar fate. See, e.g., Nina Auerbach, *Women and the Demon: The Life of a Victorian Myth*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1982; Nancy Klenck Hill, "Woman as Saviour," *Denver Quarterly* 18 (1984), pp. 94-107; Lisa Robson, "The 'Angels'

rather disparaging views are at one end of the scale of readings of Amy Dorrit's character. At the other end of this scale, she is valued because of her goodness. Critics attribute her with "saintly" qualities:<sup>5</sup> she is called "the Paraclete in female form"<sup>6</sup> and regarded as "a symbolic dramatization of the state of innocence that mortals lose as they become contaminated by the sordid realities of life."<sup>7</sup>

This disparity in reading and evaluating Amy Dorrit's character is quite symptomatic when it comes to critical reactions to the representation of women in Dickens's novels. Ayres therefore comes to the conclusion that "critics have not been able to agree in their assessment of Dickens's portrayal of women."<sup>8</sup> But rather many critics actually seem to agree in their view that, probably because of his unrequited love for Mary Hogarth and, later in his life, his own unhappy marriage,<sup>9</sup> Dickens was only able to deal with women in his novels who fall into three categories: "evil (associated with passion or parental neglect); angelic (associated with the selfless devotion to domestic and maternal duties); and comic (associated with silliness)."<sup>10</sup>

in Dickens's *House: Representation of Women in A Tale of Two Cities*," *Critical Essays on Charles Dickens's A Tale of Two Cities*, New York, Hall, 1998, pp. 204-21; see also Sicher.

<sup>5</sup> Lionel Trilling, "Little Dorrit," *The Opposing Self: Nine Essays in Criticism*, London, Secker & Warburg, 1955, p. 60.

<sup>6</sup> Trilling, 65.

<sup>7</sup> Sylvia L. Jarmuth, *Dickens's Use of Women in His Novels*, New York, Excelsior Publishing, 1967, p. 138.

<sup>8</sup> Brenda Ayres, *Dissenting Women in Dickens's Novels: The Subversion of Domestic Ideology*, Westport, Greenport Press, 1998, p. 6. For an overview of general studies concerning Dickens and his portrayal of women see Ella Westland, "Dickens and Women," *Dickens Quarterly* 11 (1994), pp. 187-96.

<sup>9</sup> See Trilling: "after so many years and so many children, his relations with his wife were insupportable," p. 62; and Slater's *Dickens and Women*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1983, pp. 36-39.

<sup>10</sup> Robert Sirabian, "Dickens's *Little Dorrit*," *Explicator* 54 (1996), p. 216. Sirabian goes on: "This type of division not only creates a limited conception of gender roles but also oversimplifies Dickens's attitudes towards his female characters and their relationships with men," p. 216. While Sirabian criticises such categorisation, Golden stands much in favour of it: "I group Dickensian



Amy Dorrit has suffered from particularly harsh criticism. If one looks at evaluations of her character more closely, one finds a strange, almost paradoxical view: "she is [...] submissive, totally loyal, innocent, quiet, and wholly under control: everything, that is, that no real woman is." Holbrook here links her being "loyal, innocent, quiet" to her being unreal and unconvincing.<sup>11</sup> This means that *because* she is good, critics do not seem to like her: "The trouble with Little Dorrit is that she is too good;"<sup>12</sup> "she is far too good;"<sup>13</sup> "an insipid good[y]."<sup>14</sup> For this reason she "is also a 'Medusa': the petrifying power of her role as feminine ideal effectively paralyzes any woman who fails to live up to her standard."<sup>15</sup> Those who regard her goodness as a failure or a weakness come to the conclusion that Dickens "ties the morality of ideal womanhood to hearth and

---

women into three types that resonate in Victorian literature: angels, fallen sisters, and eccentrics," p. 6.

<sup>11</sup> Holbrook, p. 82. Another one of Holbrook's comments can be read in the same light: "So, Little Dorrit [...] is an angel. But that is the trouble with her: *as an embodiment of Christ's forgiveness she is too much inclined to condone and so to forfeit her own authenticity*: she becomes an idealized all-pardoning submissive," p. 75 (my italics). See also Nancy Aycock Metz, "The Blighted Tree and the Book of Fate: Female Models of Storytelling in *Little Dorrit*," *Dickens Studies Annual* 18 (1989), pp. 221-241: "The woman whose diminutive name gives this novel its title is a good deal harder to sell to modern audiences than the more substantial, less well-behaved Flora. Her qualities of gentleness, modesty, humility, empathy, compassion, tenderness, nurturance, sensitivity, and unselfishness have been shown to constitute a perilous and limiting ideal for women".

<sup>12</sup> Holbrook, p. 78.

<sup>13</sup> Woodward, p. 142.

<sup>14</sup> Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics*, New York, Doubleday, 1970, p. 90. Williams even judges her goodness to be ineffective: "[...] how effective is Little Dorrit's goodness? It would seem that the effect is minimal. The worst character in the book, Merdle, is universally praised, while the best, Amy, is almost universally slighted. Dickens knows that people will go on taking advantage of her; indeed he makes it clear in the last paragraph that her future life will be one of caring for her shiftless family and getting no praise or rewards," p. 86.

<sup>15</sup> Sarah Winter, "Domestic Fictions: Feminine Deference and Maternal Shadow Labor in Dickens's *Little Dorrit*," *Dickens Studies Annual* 18 (1989), pp. 243-250.

home,” an assessment which is, particularly in the case of Amy Dorrit, simply not true.<sup>16</sup>

One also finds, with regard to these views, that most evaluations of her character are based on chiefly two (ideological) premises. To them, goodness and innocence, as represented by Amy, is either a sign of an anti-feminist stance or of bad writing.<sup>17</sup> One part of the critics condemns Amy Dorrit as she embodies a kind of womanhood that is defined by the house and

---

<sup>16</sup> Catherine J. Golden, “Late-Twentieth-Century Readers in Search of a Dickensian Heroine: Angels, Fallen Sisters, and Eccentric Women,” *Modern Language Studies* 30 (2000), p. 7. See Nathalie McKnight on this aspect: “Dickens’s young women characters are the ones most open to the charge of ‘stereotypes’ because they so consistently reflect the gender expectations of young Victorian women. [...] Little Dorrit’s selfless labors [sic] enable the rest of her family sink deeper into selfishness and denial. So, while Dickens uses the stereotypical image of the Angel in the House, he almost always does so in a way that reflects the fault-lines in the image,” p. 195. She comes to the conclusion that “[i]t is easy to overemphasize Dickens’s reliance on Victorian gender stereotypes, but to do so is to miss the richness of his fictional characterizations,” p. 197. N. McKnight, “Dickens and Gender,” *A Companion to Charles Dickens*, ed. David Paroissien, Malden MA, Blackwell, 2008, pp. 186-98. See also Ayres, p. 7: “Dickens’s women are anything but stereotypical. They cause disruptions in the text that make their reality ever so accurate, their silences ever so telling, and their complex dynamic authentic phenomena from the Victorian archives of sexual politics.”

<sup>17</sup> I would here like to contest one of the charges laid at Dickens’s door, namely that he was not able to create an individualised heroine: “Dickens is evidently ambitious of achieving a heroine [...]. It is a laudable ambition, for heroines are a sadly featureless class of well-intentioned young women in these days. [...] In the ordinary type of heroines – in the Agnes Wickfield, the Ada, the Kate Nickleby – Mr Dickens is very generally successful. These young ladies are pretty enough, amiable enough, generous enough, to fill their necessary places with great credit and propriety, but to produce an individual woman is another and quite a different matter.” Margaret Oliphant, “Mrs. Oliphant, from Charles Dickens’s *Blackwood’s Magazine*,” *Dickens: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Philip Collins, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971, p. 334. See also Hill who speaks of the “saintly, self-effacing attributes to many of Dickens’ early and middle heroines,” p. 101. In my opinion, Dickens’s ongoing popularity speaks against such views: he would have been forgotten long ago if he had never managed to create a heroine his readers are able to engage with.

home, too much in the vein of the Victorian image of the 'Angel in the House;' the other part because they claim that a person like her cannot be found in real life and that her character portrayal is, therefore, artistically unconvincing as a novel should represent reality or have at least some claim to a mimetic description that can be linked to the actual world.

This essay is an attempt to 're-design' readings of the character of Amy Dorrit and to suggest that her goodness is (or at least may be) artistically a good thing. Amy's goodness is part of a fictional world whose representation is not based on psychological realism. She is not an individual human being but an individual artistic (and verbal) creation; and she is part of a larger world that is being shown by the novelist. But this world does not claim to be a realistic or real world, an aspect long ago recognised by Lionel Trilling:

And we do not reject, despite our inevitable first impulse to do so, the character of Little Dorrit herself. Her untinctured goodness does not appal us or make us misdoubt her, as we expect it to do. *This novel at its best is only incidentally realistic.*<sup>18</sup>

The world portrayed in *Little Dorrit* admittedly has connections with the actual world but it only exists within the novel, and the effect of this novel is based on the textual representation of relationships between characters and events in their lives.

Three brief examples or, rather, readings will exemplify the idea that *Little Dorrit* is not artistically 'weak' because of its heroine's goodness. These readings are based on passages taken from various places within the novel that all are related to Amy's being 'different' from her surroundings. Within a fictional world that consists of a complex structure of prisons,<sup>19</sup>

---

<sup>18</sup> Trilling, p. 65; my emphasis.

<sup>19</sup> For an overview of prisons and imprisonments in the novel see, among others, Robert Barnard, "The Imagery of *Little Dorrit*," *English Studies* 52 (1971), pp. 520-32, H.M. Daleski, '*Little Dorrit*' *Dickens and the Art of Analogy*, London, Faber & Faber, 1970, pp. 191-236, J. Hillis Miller, *Charles*

Amy, the “child of the Marshalsea,” acts as a counterpoint to imprisonment and is able to lead other characters into their own personal freedom as well, as becomes evident at the end of the novel.

### I. Amy's Freedom

Although Amy was born and has spent all her life in the Marshalsea, she is not ‘tainted’ by her life in the prison nor is she imprisoned herself. Still, in chapter seven of book one, she is introduced as “The Child of the Marshalsea”:<sup>20</sup>

No matter through what mistakes and discouragements, what ridicule (not unkindly meant, but deeply felt) of her youth and little figure, what humble consciousness of her own babyhood and want of strength, even in the matter of lifting and carrying; through how much weariness and hopelessness, and how many secret tears; she trudged on, until recognised as useful, even indispensable. That time came. She took the place of eldest of the three, in all things but precedence; was the head of the fallen family; and bore, in her own heart, its anxieties and shames. (*LD* 111-12)

Amy's history is primarily presented as one of hardship: mistakes, discouragement, ridicule, weariness, hopelessness, tears – it should not be forgotten that this is the description of the life of a child. But the depiction of the life of this child is not restricted to hardship: it is also shown how she reacts to all that is bad in her life; and how she feels it deeply in her ‘humble consciousness’ that she is small and little; how she would like to be able to do more. Her ability to “trudge [...] on” no matter what happens moreover shows an incredible strength that everyone around her is lacking. Circumstances in her family are hence reversed: although Amy is the youngest of three, she becomes head of the family – but she never takes “precedence,” which goes together with her “humble consciousness.” She

---

*Dickens: The World of His Novels*, Cambridge, MA., Harvard University Press, 1970, and Trilling, pp. 52-55.

<sup>20</sup> Amy's first appearance in the novel is earlier, at Mrs. Clennam's house (*LD* 5), but there she is only observed by Arthur.

never shows her despair to others: not only does she weep in secret but she also bears all her worries “in her own heart” without disclosing them to anyone. “The Child of the Marshalsea” is presented as unselfish, strong and self-controlled but also as silently suffering from what happens to her.

The reader never explicitly learns who it is that ridicules her “youth and little figure,” but we learn that the moment Amy is recognised as being “useful” by her family she also becomes “indispensable.” Subsequently she sees to her sister getting dancing lessons, her brother an apprenticeship, and becomes a needlewoman to help support her family. What is more, she also takes constant care of her father, who willingly submits to this attention while he is in prison. Already in this first introduction, it becomes evident that Amy is very different from her surroundings, including her family:

[...] born in prison, having lived all her life in prison, she is free day by day to come and go as she pleases. It is as if this freedom is the talisman of an inner freedom, for, in an extraordinary manner, and quite unlike the other members of her family, she remains free from all taint of prison [...].<sup>21</sup>

Without her character, the novel would only be bleak and ‘tainted’ by prisons and imprisonment.

Little Dorrit’s life, though not her character, changes when her father inherits and leaves the Marshalsea. They leave England to travel on the continent, and Amy no longer is busy but waited on herself, and she starts to feel useless:

[...] even as he sat before her on his sofa, in the brilliant light of a bright Italian day, the wonderful city without and the splendours of an old palace within, she saw him at the moment in the long-familiar gloom of his Marshalsea lodging, and *wished to take her seat beside him, and comfort him, and be again full of confidence with him, and of usefulness to him.* If he divined what was in her thoughts, his own were not in tune with it. (LD 531; my emphasis)

---

<sup>21</sup> Daleski, p. 233.

Little Dorrit feels the loss of “confidence” with her father as well as her loss of “usefulness.”<sup>22</sup> She is the only member of the family who does not enjoy the newly gained riches and who recognises that her father will never be able to leave the Marshalsea behind, no matter where and how far he travels.<sup>23</sup> At the same time, however, he does not want to be reminded of the past, and, as a result of this, Amy feels increasingly unhappy.

Yet, while her father cannot leave the Marshalsea behind, the “shadow of the Marshalsea wall” (*LD* 530) never falls on Little Dorrit. As she is the “child of the Marshalsea,” she misses her old life: she can see that her father has not really gained freedom through his wealth, and her own life is based on being useful and serviceable to others, following the dictum in the *Book of Common Prayer*, “O God [...] whose service is perfect freedom.”<sup>24</sup> The service she can do other people frees her, and she only feels ‘real’ as long as she can be useful and of service:

Sitting opposite her father in the travelling-carriage, and recalling the old Marshalsea room, her present existence was a dream. All that she saw was new and wonderful, but it was not real; it seemed to her as if those visions of mountains and picturesque countries might melt away at any moment, and the carriage, turning some abrupt corner, bring up with a jolt at the old Marshalsea gate.

---

<sup>22</sup> See also Patricia Ingham, *Dickens, Women and Language*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1992, p. 114.

<sup>23</sup> Quite tellingly, he speaks as the “Father of the Marshalsea” the night he collapses at Mrs. Merdle’s party (*LD* 19).

<sup>24</sup> Morning Prayer, 2<sup>nd</sup> Collect for Peace 13. The word “service” is mentioned 48 times in the novel, “services” 24 times, “serviceable” nine times and “unserviceable” twice. The view expressed here goes against that of Holbrook who sees her service as one of the aspects that restrict her: “She always does her duty and shrinks from any recognition of her pains: she is lowly and Christlike. [...] she is too unworldly by half – too innocent. And innocence [...] was the cherished quality in the Victorian woman that inhibited her capacity to be effective and free,” Holbrook, p. 78. He seems to overlook that the quality of innocence was also linked with a particular closeness to God, found most often in children. Adults often expressed a longing for that innocence; see my book *Der Pilger als Kind: Spiel, Sprache und Erlösung in Lewis Carrolls Alice-Büchern*, Münster, LIT, 2010, esp. ch. I pp. 2-3, as well as below.

To have no work to do was strange, but not half so strange as having glided into a corner where she had no one to think for, nothing to plan and contrive, no cares of others to load herself with.

[...]

It was from this position that all she saw appeared unreal; the more surprising the scenes, the more they resembled the unreality of her own inner life as she went through its vacant places all day long. [...] all a dream – only the old mean Marshalsea a reality. (LD 516-17)

Her thoughts constantly dwell on her former life in the Marshalsea, which is the only ‘reality’ she has ever known, while her life in Italy is “a dream.” Her “inner life” has become vacant because she cannot fill it sensibly, that is, by helping others and caring for them. The life she leads now goes against her disposition, and she longs to be back at the prison and to load herself with the “cares of others.”

She is happier when she returns to the Marshalsea and sees its new inmate, Arthur Clennam. Her life is back to what it was before her father inherited: she is again the “little, quiet, fragile figure” (LD 881) she was earlier in her life who can concentrate on her “duty” again and be of service.<sup>25</sup>

## II. An “Inspired” Character

The notion of Amy’s usefulness and her service to others is linked with a religious dimension of her character. This is further emphasised by her introduction as being ‘inspired:’

What her pitiful look saw, at that early time, in her father, in her sister, in her brother, in the gaol; how much or how little of the

---

<sup>25</sup> When she returns to the Marshalsea to visit Arthur, she is observed by Mr. Meagles who describes Amy’s life and character to Tattycoram as an exemplary one: “If she had constantly thought of herself, and settled with herself that everybody visited this place University Presson her, turned it against her, and cast it at her, she would have led an irritable and probably *an useless existence*. Yet I have heard tell, Tattycoram, that her young life has been one of active resignation, goodness, and *noble service*. Shall I tell you what I consider those eyes of hers that were here just now, to have always looked at, to get that expression?” (LD 881; my emphases).

wretched truth it pleased God to make visible to her; lies hidden with many mysteries. It is enough that she was inspired to be something which was not what the rest were, and to be that something, different and laborious, for the sake of the rest. Inspired? Yes. Shall we speak of the inspiration of a poet or a priest, and not of the heart impelled by love and self-devotion to the lowliest work in the lowliest way of life? (LD 111)<sup>26</sup>

The narrator distinguishes between “the inspiration of a poet or a priest” and that “of the heart.” By naming the inspiration of a poet or a priest together, he does not seem to make a distinction between the creative kind of the poet, and the religious side of the priest<sup>27</sup> – but rather differentiates between those and a further category of inspiration, that of the heart. He anticipates some kind of objection and enters into an imaginative dialogue, most probably with the doubting reader, when he repeats the word “inspired” as a question, in order to emphasise his point, namely that Little Dorrit is “animated by [...] divine influence.”<sup>28</sup> This is why her heart is “impelled by love and self-devotion to the lowliest work in the lowliest way of life.” Amy Dorrit embodies this principle of “love and self-devotion,” which also becomes evident through her name: “Amy” is

---

<sup>26</sup> For a close reading of this passage see Matthias Bauer, “Dickens und die Religion: *Little Dorrit*,” *Heilige Texte: Literarisierung von Religion und Sakralisierung von Literatur im modernen Roman*, ed. Klaus Antoni, Matthias Bauer, Jan Stievermann, Birgit Weyel, Angelika Zirker, Münster, LIT, 2012 (forthcoming); and Jefferson, p. 306.

<sup>27</sup> On the concept of poetic inspiration see, e.g., Sir Philip Sidney’s *Defence of Poesy*: “[the poet] calleth the sweet Muses to inspire into him a good invention.” *Sir Philip Sidney: The Major Works including “Astrophil and Stella*,” ed. Katherine Duncan-Jones, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 235. This is, however, not a merely a ‘secular’ kind of inspiration as the poet is likened to God in that he is also a “maker:” “but rather give right honour to the heavenly Maker of that maker, who having made man to His own likeness, set him beyond and over all the works of that second nature,” Sidney, p. 217.

<sup>28</sup> *OED* “inspired, *ppl. a.*” p.4. See also Job 32:8: “But there is a spirit in man: and the inspiration of the Almighty giveth them understanding.”



“sprung from *amo*.”<sup>29</sup> Her love includes her serving others – and she is already blessed by doing this, since “it is more blessed to give than to receive” (*Acts* 20:35). Contrary to Afery’s statement that Amy is “nothing” (*LD* 80), she is here described to be “something.” Her being different from the rest is connected with this: “She was inspired to be something *which was not what the rest were*.” Work and the service for others are at the centre of her life, she is able to feel pity for others,<sup>30</sup> and thus a divine connection is being established that can be found throughout the novel and that is an essential part of her character:

Little Dorrit turned at the door to say, “God bless you!” She said it very softly, but perhaps she may have been as audible above – who knows! – as a whole cathedral choir. (*LD* 215)

That she is “perhaps [...] audible above [...] as a whole cathedral choir” indicates her connection with God: although she speaks only softly on earth, the narrator assumes that she is being listened to above and heard there.

This connection, combined with her goodness, is also associated with light, which becomes obvious particularly when Amy visits Arthur at the Marshalsea, after her return from Italy: “As they sat side by side, in the shadow of the wall, the shadow

---

<sup>29</sup> Charlotte M. Yonge, *History of Christian Names*, Whitefish, MT, Kessinger, 2004, p. 181. In contrast to William Dorrit’s aspirations, Amy’s name is a “peasant name in the West of England,” see Yonge, p. 182. See also Avrom Fleishman, “Master and Servant in *Little Dorrit*,” *SEL: Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 14 (1974), pp. 575-86: “Her name itself is love,” p. 680; and Slater, p. 38. For further connotations of the name see F.T. Flahiff, “Mysteriously Come Together”: Dickens, Chaucer, and *Little Dorrit*,” *University of Toronto Quarterly* 61 (1991), pp. 250-68; and Sylvia Manning, “Dickens, Januray, and May,” *Dickensian* 71 (1975), pp. 67-75.

<sup>30</sup> Already when a child she has a “pitiful look.” See “he saw, in the loving, pitying, sorrowing, dear face [...]” (*LD* 825); see also the etymological link between “pity” and “piety;” *OED* “pity, *n.*” Ruth Bernard Yeazell, “Do It or Dorrit,” *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 25 (1991), pp.33-49, also notices the “religious overtones” of this characterisation.

fell like light upon him. She would not let him speak much, and he lay back in his chair, looking at her" (*LD* 827). That "the shadow fell like light upon him" is a paradoxical notion, but it shows that she indeed literally brings light into his life: Amy Dorrit is a figure of light.<sup>31</sup>

Her light literally shines forth on Arthur Clennam, who is so influenced by her that he likewise becomes "inspired:" "Yet, it [Amy's devotion to him] inspired him with an inward fortitude, that rose with his love. And how dearly he loved her, now, what words can tell!" (*LD* 827). He now seems to be aware of both his love for her as well as of the fortitude he gains from her. But her inspiration has been there already far earlier, though largely unrecognised by him, as she is the one who gives his life a purpose – a process which comes to its conclusion through their marriage. When earlier in the novel he ponders about the purpose in his life, he exclaims in despair:

"What have I found!"

His door was softly opened, and these spoken words startled him, and came as if they were an answer:

"Little Dorrit." (*LD* 207)

To Clennam at this moment it only seems "as if," but actually it turns out to be the case that Little Dorrit is the answer to his being: in her he finds everything he needs, which first consists in his trying to be "of service,"<sup>32</sup> and finally in his marry-

---

<sup>31</sup> This can be seen in the illustration "Leaving the Marshalsea" on the title page of the first edition, where Amy leaves the prison, and rays of light shine upon her in an environment that lies in shadows. She is in some ways similar to Lucie Manette, whose very name means light. See Yonge, p. 132. Also see Robson, p. 206. Amy and Lucie also have in common that they are unselfish, that they help their (formerly) imprisoned fathers overcome their trauma; they moreover share being misjudged for their goodness by critics. One might argue that it seems as if Dickens wrote Amy forth in Lucie, as *A Tale of Two Cities* followed upon *Little Dorrit*.

<sup>32</sup> "I did so, that I might endeavour to render you and your family some service" (*LD* 125); "And if you will be so good, in your better knowledge of the family, as to communicate freely with me, and to point out to me any

ing her. Being of service eventually leads to being rewarded, and the final reward for Amy and Arthur results in their marriage.<sup>33</sup>

### III. Marriage and the Ending

The marriage of Arthur Clennam and Amy Dorrit is another point of dissatisfaction for critics: they claim that the couple is “sexless,”<sup>34</sup> that Arthur can only regard his wife as a child, and that their wedding and, therefore, the ending of the novel are rather disappointing.<sup>35</sup>

It is true that Amy is very much presented as a child and that Arthur calls her ‘Little Dorrit’ because she looks so much like a child to him. But it is not his “*mistake* [...] to identify Little Dorrit’s goodness with childhood:”<sup>36</sup> this is rather a natural connection that can be linked to her being inspired and her not having lost childlike qualities. Both Little Dorrit and the

---

means by which you think I may be delicately and really useful to Little Dorrit, I shall feel under an obligation to you” (*LD* 183); “He would probably need no thanks, Clennam said. Very likely he would be thankful himself (and with reason), that he had had the means and chance of doing a little service to her, who well deserved a great one” (*LD* 210).

<sup>33</sup> “Little Dorrit’s service ultimately wins her the love and domestic happiness [...] she desired,” Winter, p. 249. See also Flahiff, p. 263 for a similar reading.

<sup>34</sup> See Woodward: “Little Dorrit clearly represents the ideal. [...] She is not only not troubled by sexual feelings, she has none at all,” p. 141. “The relationship of Arthur and Amy has too much the air of a chastened father-daughter relationship, from which all libidinal elements have been excluded, and in which the main dynamic, if it can be called that, is a dutiful relegation of the world,” Holbrook, p. 77.

<sup>35</sup> Holbrook writes about the conclusion of the novel: “Little Dorrit, the embodiment of a certain image of idealized woman, becomes virtually the angel who is to lead the deprived victim of life, Arthur, to heavenly bliss,” p. 114. But this reading does not necessarily imply the conclusion he draws: “Little Dorrit’s reduction to a pure, all-good, submissive, ideal child-wife requires a parallel reduction in the hero to sexless, past-the-tender-stage-of-life, paternalistic ‘caring’: in this image of man-woman relationship, Dickens falls a long way short of anything we can accept as a definition of love or even good relationships,” Holbrook, p. 176.

<sup>36</sup> Miller, p. 241 (my emphasis). For a more qualified view see above n. 24.

gaoler's daughter, another prison's child, are described as being angelic – "The fair little face, touched with divine compassion [...] was like an angel's in the prison" (*LD* 43); "So faithful, tender, and unspoiled by Fortune! In the sound of her voice, in the light of her eyes, in the touch of her hands, so Angelically comforting and true!" (*LD* 825); "Dear girl! Dear heart! Good angel!" (*LD* 884). Little Dorrit, despite her bad fortune, has remained uncorrupted, and this is one of the artistically important functions of her character in the novel: "It is her freedom from the social corruption which infects almost all the characters in the novel that has given rise to a religious interpretation of her significance."<sup>37</sup> Amy Dorrit has preserved the qualities of a child, and this establishes her goodness as well as her divine connection, her "being inspired."<sup>38</sup> But at the same time, Amy is not a child.<sup>39</sup> Arthur himself notices that, after her return from Italy, she looks "something more womanly" (*LD* 716): "Arthur Clennam realizes that she is both good and adult, and his fatherly affection turns to love."<sup>40</sup>

The ending clearly highlights the idea that they enter into a life of happiness, which includes marital bliss – a different read-

<sup>37</sup> George Holoch, "Consciousness and Society in *Little Dorrit*," *Victorian Studies* 21 (1978), pp. 335-51. For further religious implications see below.

<sup>38</sup> Miller feels that *Little Dorrit* is the dramatisation of the idea expressed by Christ in *Matthew 18:3-4*: "Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven." See also Jarmuth, p. 141; Ronald S. Librach, "The Burdens of Self and Society: Release and Redemption in *Little Dorrit*," *Studies in the Novel* 7 (1975), pp. 545-46, and Karl Smith, "*Little Dorrit*'s 'Speck' and Florence's 'Daily Blight': Urban Contamination and the Dickensian Heroine," *Dickens Studies Annual* 34 (2004), pp. 117-54.

<sup>39</sup> The often-quoted incident when Amy meets the prostitute should not be forgotten in this context: Amy in this scene is clearly recognised as a woman, not as a child (see *LD* 218).

<sup>40</sup> Jarmuth, p. 140. Arthur Clennam does not "den[y] Little Dorrit's adulthood." Robert J. Heaman, "Love and Communication in *Little Dorrit*," *Dickens Studies Newsletter* 12 (1981), pp. 39-42. p. 41. "Clennam is conquered by Little Dorrit's love, [...] the heroine wins her romantic suit for the hero by the force not of her attractiveness but of her submissiveness: *eros* triumphs by *agape*." Fleishman, p. 581.

ing would make the conclusion of the novel a very sad and even tragic one:<sup>41</sup>

They all gave place when the signing was done, and Little Dorrit and her husband walked out of the church alone. They paused for a moment on the steps of the portico, looking at the fresh perspective of the street in the autumn morning sun's bright rays, and then went down.

Went down into a modest life of usefulness and happiness.

Went down to give a mother's care, in the fullness of time, to Fanny's neglected children no less than to their own, and to leave that lady going into Society for ever and a day. Went down to give a tender nurse and friend to Tip for some few years, who was never vexed by the great exactions he made of her, in return for the riches he might have given her if he had ever had them, and who lovingly closed his eyes upon the Marshalsea and all its blighted fruits. They went quietly down into the roaring streets, inseparable and blessed; and as they passed along in sunshine and shade, the noisy and the eager, and the arrogant and the forward and the vain, fretted, and chafed, and made their usual uproar. (*LD* 894-95)

It is their shared "life of usefulness and happiness" that characterises the two main figures of this novel at the end. The notion that she and Arthur are at the end described as "blessed" shows the religious dimension(s) of their life but also of their portrayal as characters in the novel.<sup>42</sup> That they "went down" does not mean a descent into an unfulfilled and unhappy life – it

---

<sup>41</sup> "And there is Little Dorrit, and, finally, marriage, with the fittingness, not to be dismissed as romantic or sentimental, that makes it something quite other than a conventional conclusion," F.R. Leavis and Q.D. Leavis, *Dickens the Novelist*, London, Chatto & Windus, 1970, p. 220. See also Alison Booth, "Little Dorrit and Dorothea Brooke: Interpreting the Heroines of History," *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 41 (1986), pp. 190-216.

<sup>42</sup> For religious implications of the novel see Stanley Cooperman, "Dickens and the Secular Blasphemy: Social Criticism in *Hard Times*, *Little Dorrit* and *Bleak House*," *College English* 22 (1960), pp. 156-60; Mark Knight, "Little Dorrit and Providence," *Dickens Studies Annual* 32 (2002), pp. 179-93; Dennis Walder, *Dickens and Religion*, London, George Allen & Unwin, 1981, and Alexander Welsh, *The City of Dickens*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1971, esp. pp. 171-79. Walder writes that "religion is *itself* the central theme of *Little Dorrit*," p. 172.

means that they “went down” from their elevated position to help others and be of service to those in need of their support.

#### IV. Signs and Redesigns

When critics regard Little Dorrit as “weak, sexless, one-dimensional, boring,”<sup>43</sup> and claim that she is “too good,” they overlook that this, as such, is not necessarily a bad thing and they also fail to notice that they are talking about a fictional and verbal construct. Amy Dorrit exists in a fictional world only, and to evaluate her character on the basis of her being realistic or not does not do justice to the novel as a work of art. It eventually does not matter if (or not) she is “everything [...] that no real woman is.”<sup>44</sup>

In his Introduction to the Penguin edition, this aspect is emphasised by John Holloway: he writes that *Little Dorrit* must be approached *as fiction* that provides its readers with “a more visionary dimension of life,”<sup>45</sup> a life as it might or even should be. Sir Philip Sidney, who undoubtedly inspired Dickens in more than one way, wrote in his *Defence of Poesie* that “nature’s world is brazen, the Poets only deliver a golden.”<sup>46</sup> We do not find a representation of a “golden” world in *Little Dorrit*, but a glimpse of one example of what life could be like, including one representative of the principle of good, the character of Amy Dorrit.

The portrayal of her character is not based on psychological realism but rather focuses on certain qualities that can be linked to religious concepts and to a certain degree to idealism on Dickens’s part. Amy Dorrit represents the survival of goodness

---

<sup>43</sup> These are attributes mentioned by Holbrook and Woodward; see above.

<sup>44</sup> Holbrook, p. 82.

<sup>45</sup> “[A] fiction sets before its readers not only generalized truths about life, but also, and indeed more characteristically, a more visionary dimension of life: possibilities and potentialities.” Holloway, “Introduction,” p. 27.

<sup>46</sup> Sidney, p. 216. One instance of Sidney’s influence on Dickens are the names he gave to his characters in *Great Expectations*. On further points of influence see M. Bauer, *Das Leben als Geschichte. Poetische Reflexion in Dickens “David Copperfield,”* Cologne, Böhlau, 1991.

in a corrupted world – very much like *Oliver Twist*.<sup>47</sup> But this does not diminish Dickens's artistic achievement – his signs of idealism should be recognised and valued by his readers and not redesigned by ways of ignoring the novel as a work of art.

### Works Cited

- Auerbach, Nina, *Women and the Demon: The Life of a Victorian Myth*, Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press, 1982.
- Ayres, Brenda, *Dissenting Women in Dickens's Novels: The Subversion of Domestic Ideology*, Westport, Greenwood Press, 1998.
- Barnard, Robert, "The Imagery of *Little Dorrit*," *English Studies: A Journal of English Language and Literature* 52 (1971), pp. 520-32.
- Bauer, Matthias, *Das Leben als Geschichte: Poetische Reflexion in Dickens's "David Copperfield"*, Cologne, Böhlau, 1991.
- \_\_\_\_\_, "Dickens und die Religion: *Little Dorrit*," *Heilige Texte: Literarisierung von Religion und Sakralisierung von Literatur im modernen Roman*, ed. Klaus Antoni, Matthias Bauer, Jan Stievermann, Birgit Weyel, Angelika Zirker, Münster, LIT, 2012 [forthcoming].
- The Book of Common Prayer*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2006.
- Booth, Alison, "Little Dorrit and Dorothea Brooke: Interpreting the Heroines of History," *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 41 (1986), pp. 190-216.
- Carlisle, Janice M., "*Little Dorrit*: Necessary Fictions," *Studies in the Novel* 7 (1975), pp. 195-214.

---

<sup>47</sup> See Dickens's "Preface" to the third edition of *Oliver Twist*: "I wished to shew, in little Oliver, the principle of Good surviving through every adverse circumstance, and triumphing at last," p. liii.

- Cooperman, Stanley, "Dickens and the Secular Blasphemy: Social Criticism in *Hard Times*, *Little Dorrit* and *Bleak House*," *College English* 22 (1960), pp. 156-60.
- Daleski, H. M., "*Little Dorrit*" *Dickens and the Art of Analogy*, London, Faber & Faber, 1970.
- Dickens, Charles, *The Life and Adventures of Nicholas Nickleby*, ed. Sybil Thorndike, London, Oxford University Press, 1953.
- \_\_\_\_\_, "The Author's Preface to the Third Edition," *Oliver Twist*, ed. Kathleen Tillotson, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1999, pp. liii-lvii.
- \_\_\_\_\_, *Little Dorrit*, ed. John Holloway, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1986.
- \_\_\_\_\_, *A Tale of Two Cities*, ed. Richard Maxwell, London, Penguin, 2000.
- Flahiff, F. T., "'Mysteriously Come Together': Dickens, Chaucer, and *Little Dorrit*," *University of Toronto Quarterly* 61(1991), pp. 250-68.
- Fleishman, Avrom, "Master and Servant in *Little Dorrit*," *SEL: Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 14 (1974), pp. 575-86.
- Golden, Catherine J., "Late-Twentieth-Century Readers in Search of a Dickensian Heroine: Angels, Fallen Sisters, and Eccentric Women," *Modern Language Studies* 30 (2000), pp. 5-19.
- Heaman, Robert J., "Love and Communication in *Little Dorrit*," *Dickens Studies Newsletter* 12 (1981), pp. 39-42.
- Hill, Nancy Klenck, "Woman as Saviour," *Denver Quarterly* 18 (1984), pp. 94-107.
- Holbrook, David, *Charles Dickens and the Image of Woman*, New York, New York University Press, 1993.
- Holloway, John, "Introduction," *Little Dorrit*, ed. John Holloway, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1967, pp. 13-29.
- Holoch, George, "Consciousness and Society in *Little Dorrit*," *Victorian Studies* 21 (1978), pp. 335-51.



- Ingham, Patricia, *Dickens, Women and Language*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1992.
- Jarmuth, Sylvia L., *Dickens's Use of Women in His Novels*, New York, Excelsior Publishing, 1967.
- Knight, Mark, "Little Dorrit and Providence," *Dickens Studies Annual: Essays on Victorian Fiction* 32 (2002), pp. 179-93.
- Leavis, F. R. and Q. D. Leavis, *Dickens the Novelist*, London, Chatto & Windus, 1970.
- Librach, Ronald S., "The Burdens of Self and Society: Release and Redemption in *Little Dorrit*," *Studies in the Novel* 7 (1975), pp. 538-51.
- Manning, Sylvia, "Dickens, January, and May," *The Dickensian* 71 (1975), pp. 67-75.
- McKnight, Natalie, "Dickens and Gender," *A Companion to Charles Dickens*, ed. David Paroissien, Malden MA, Blackwell, 2008, pp. 186-98.
- Metz, Nancy Aycock, "The Blighted Tree and the Book of Fate: Female Models of Storytelling in *Little Dorrit*," *Dickens Studies Annual: Essays on Victorian Fiction* 18 (1989), pp. 221-41.
- Miller, J. Hillis, *Charles Dickens: The World of His Novels*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1970.
- Millett, Kate, *Sexual Politics*, New York, Doubleday, 1970.
- Oliphant, Margaret, "Mrs. Oliphant, from Charles Dickens's *Blackwood's Magazine*," *Dickens: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Philip Collins, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971, pp. 327-36.
- Rainsford, Dominic, "Flatness and Ethical Responsibility in *Little Dorrit*," *Victorian Newsletter* 88 (1995), pp. 1-18.
- Robson, Lisa, "The 'Angels' in Dickens's House: Representation of Women in *A Tale of Two Cities*," *Critical Essays on Charles Dickens's "A Tale of Two Cities"*, New York, Hall, 1998, pp. 204-21.
- Rosenberg, Brian, *Little Dorrit's Shadows: Character and Contradiction in Dickens*, Columbia, University of Missouri Press, 1996.

- Sicher, Efraim, *Rereading the City, Rereading Dickens: Representation, the Novel, and Urban Realism*, New York, AMS Press, 2003.
- Sidney, Sir Philip, *The Defence of Poesy. Sir Philip Sidney: The Major Works including "Astrophil and Stella,"* ed. Katherine Duncan-Jones, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2008.
- Sirabian, Robert, "Dickens's *Little Dorrit*," *Explicator* 54 (1996), pp. 216-20.
- Slater, Michael, *Dickens and Women*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1983.
- Smith, Karl, "Little Dorrit's 'Speck' and Florence's 'Daily Blight': Urban Contamination and the Dickensian Heroine," *Dickens Studies Annual: Essays on Victorian Fiction* 34 (2004), 117-54.
- Trilling, Lionel, "*Little Dorrit*," *The Opposing Self: Nine Essays in Criticism*, London, Secker & Warburg, 1955, pp. 50-65.
- Walder, Dennis, *Dickens and Religion*, London, George Allen & Unwin, 1981.
- Welsh, Alexander, *The City of Dickens*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1971.
- Westland, Ella, "Dickens and Women," *Dickens Quarterly* 11 (1994), pp. 187-96.
- Winter, Sarah, "Domestic Fictions: Feminine Deference and Maternal Shadow Labor in Dickens's *Little Dorrit*," *Dickens Studies Annual: Essays on Victorian Fiction* 18 (1989), pp. 243-54.
- Woodward, Kathleen, "Passivity and Passion in *Little Dorrit*," *Dickensian* 71 (1975), pp. 140-48.
- Yeazell, Ruth Bernard, "Do It or Dorrit," *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 25 (1991), pp. 33-49.
- Yonge, Charlotte M., *History of Christian Names*, Whitefish, MT, Kessinger, 2004.
- Zirker, Angelika, *Der Pilger als Kind: Spiel, Sprache und Erlösung in Lewis Carrolls Alice-Büchern*, Münster, LIT, 2010.

\_\_\_\_\_, "Physiognomy and the Reading of Character in *Our Mutual Friend*," *Partial Answers* 9 (2011), pp. 379-90.