Relationships in the Retribution: Mr Dombey and Florence in *Dombey and Son*

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Dombey and Son (1848) "is generally regarded as the first novel of Dickens's maturity" (Purton xxv), largely because it was the first novel Dickens really planned. As John Butt and Kathleen Tillotson remarks, based on Dickens's letter to John Forster[i], "the emphasis [of the book] is almost wholly on […] the dynamic relation between Dombey and Son and Daughter" (Butt and Tillotson 94), Dickens's central scheme was to show the relationship between Mr Dombey and his children, especially daughter Florence. The man full of pride and jealousy, who at first disregards and even despises his own angelic daughter, comes to find her most valuable of all to him in the end.

The argument of "so-called 'violent change' in the hero" (Forster 471), which has been attacked and defended since Taine and Forster, is settled by Tillotson's following statement:

> The difficulty, especially to a writer more practiced in exhibition than analysis, is to suggest the secret self-doubting of 'stiff-necked sullen arrogance'. Such suggestion is conveyed sometimes by the use of carefully timed silent pauses in the narrative, moments sharply presented to the sight and impressing the imagination […]. Or by a revealing but unannotated gesture […]. In Mr. Dombey Dickens achieves the remarkable feat of making us aware of the hidden depths of a character, while keeping them largely hidden; his method respects Mr. Dombey's own proud reserve. (Tillotson 167)

Mr Dombey's "secret self-doubting" is hinted in his inability to forget the scene of his first wife, Fanny's death, "which was at once a revelation and a reproach to him" (30), and in which he felt himself totally alienated, apart from the affectionate ties between his own wife and daughter. From the very beginning of the novel, Florence's deeds deriving from her overflowing love affect and disturb Mr Dombey's loveless mind, and his constant and obsessive recollections of them that are repeated in the novel remind readers of his guilty conscience.

This paper aims to account for Mr Dombey's chance of alteration, when he finally sees Florence without bias. He becomes free from the haunting vision not only through his recognition of Florence's never changing affection, but through his own experience that relives young

Florence's ordeal. The analysis will clarify the organic relationship between the narratives of Florence's experience and Mr Dombey's retribution.

I.

Florence and her mother's mental and physical attachment on the verge of death shuts out the cold-hearted father, leaving an "extraordinary" (30) uneasiness within him that is to turn into "positive hatred" (*Letters* IV 589) toward Florence.

Hilary Schor aptly expresses it that Florence seems "to consist in her willingness to render her father illegitimate: to exclude him" (Schor 53). Florence's affectionate deeds ironically again and again isolate Mr Dombey, augmenting his resentment and jealousy against her.

The effect is conspicuous in one of the most memorable scenes in the novel. Hearing "a soft voice singing" (94), Mr Dombey looks out of the room and sees Florence and Paul ascending the stairs:

> She was toiling up the great, wide, vacant staircase, with him in her arms; his head was lying on her shoulder, one of his arms thrown negligently round her neck. So they went, toiling up; she singing all the way, and Paul sometimes crooning out a feeble accompaniment. Mr. Dombey looked after them until they reached the top of the staircase - not without halting to rest by the way - and passed out of his sight; and then he still stood gazing upwards, until the dull rays of the moon, glimmering in a melancholy manner through the dim skylight, sent him back to his own room. (94)

Q.D. Leavis notes Mr Dombey's "exclusion" (Leavis 15) in this scene, and the father is again set apart. Mr Dombey sees his daughter and son going up away from him, and leaving him below. Mr Dombey is thus detached from his offspring. They are to grow and improve, but he is to be left where he is. He does not have the will to ascend the stairs anyway, as his pride satisfies him with his present state. Thus Mr Dombey is left behind on the lower floor, having nothing to do with his children's movement. He is powerless over his children being called to heaven, and Paul dies despite his wish. The figure of Mr Dombey standing gazing upwards, the moon, and the skylight add ethereal impression to the scene. Florence and Paul's toil without rest suggest their constant and restless struggle in life, and their disappearance foretells their leaving from the house

of Mr Dombey; Paul soon after in early death, and Florence later in her rejected flight.

In this context, this “great staircase”, later mentioned as “where the lord of the place so rarely set his foot, and by which his little child had gone up to heaven” (309), works as a link connecting the worldly region of the house where Mr Dombey, and further below the domestic servants, reside, and the unearthly region where Florence occupies, who is repeatedly called “an angel”.

In this scene of Florence leading Paul upstairs, Mr Dombey’s limitation of power over his children is shown, and Florence appears to work as a device to pull Paul away from the father. The sight becomes a traumatic obsession in Mr Dombey’s mind. It recurs to him persistently throughout the rest of the novel. Consequently, Florence unintentionally augments Mr Dombey’s envy and unfavorable impression of her, and the painful endeavors to approach him on her part all end in vain.

Yet we should not dismiss another implication in this scene which is ruthless isolation on Florence’s part. The staircase Florence toils up being “wide” and “vacant” implies her solitary difficulties in her life. She, full of virtue, goes heavenward aspiring for the better, and yet she has to walk in the wild world without any protector. Feeble Paul beside her, the only accompaniment she has in her life, is to pass away soon and to leave her alone.

In order to gain her father’s love, Florence makes it her ritual to repeat the secret visit to his room at night:

> She could not go to bed, poor child, and never had gone yet, since then, without making her nightly pilgrimage to his door. It would have been a strange sad sight, to see her now, stealing lightly *down the stairs* through the thick gloom, and stopping at it with a beating heart, and blinded eyes, and hair that fell down loosely and unthought of; and touching it outside with her wet cheek. But the night covered it, and no one knew. (248, italics mine)

Going down from her room, Florence hesitates “on the staircase” (248), the intermediate zone between her ethereal region and his world. Her repeated trials are the trials of an angel descending to save a poor soul, to lead him to a higher place. She thus constantly and unavailingly tries to save her father from sheer pride and foolishness.

It is almost a grotesque parody of the celestial scene in which Paul and Florence ascend the stairs in cooperation, when just before the marriage, Mrs Skewton, mother of Edith Granger whom Mr Dombey takes as his second wife, and Mr Dombey descend the stairs together: "Cleopatra [Mrs Skewton] skip[s] off her couch with tolerable briskness after the last benediction, [and] Mr Dombey [takes] her arm in his and [leads] her ceremoniously downstairs" (413). In this scene, furthermore, Mrs Skewton pleads Mr Dombey to take her downstairs "'like an angel'" (413), which sounds very ironically when we remind ourselves that it is indeed Florence who is truly angelic in this novel, and Mr Dombey is far from it.

The act of going down, and that with Mrs Skewton implies the path Mr Dombey is about to take. The matrimonial transactions are solely based on commercial interests, and Mrs Skewton and Mr Dombey are both motivated by their pride. This loveless marriage further degrades Mr Dombey's humanity.

The haunting vision of Florence and the staircase, which Mr Dombey beholds repeatedly in his fancy, reveals the intensity of his sense of injustice that works deplorably in augmenting his hostility against her. Yet at the same time, the satirical reverse-experience at the stairs prepares for his train of experiences, which are repetitions of Florence's trials, that he goes through in his misery.

II.

At the basis of their characteristic contrast lie similarities and common experiences between unloving Mr Dombey and angelic Florence.[ii] Nina Auerbach, while placing Mr Dombey and Florence as "absolutes", or the "polar deities" of the "polarized novel" (Auerbach 96), notes also their kinship. They are both silent and expressionless characters toward one another, and when they meet, contrasting the harmonious relationship between Polly and her family, they are both at a loss of what to say.

What Auerbach names the "single-minded obsessiveness of approach to life" (Auerbach 101), attributed both to Mr Dombey and Florence, derives from their common fundamental blindness. When Florence goes to her father's room at night, her eyes are always "blinded" (248) by tears.

She is then both physically and psychologically blinded by her strong love to Mr Dombey's faults. Repeating her "nightly pilgrimages" (585), she sees him asleep on the bed and he "look[s] so solemn in her eyes" (586). However, the narrator's voice repeating "Awake, unkind father!" (586) creates a gap between the figure of Mr Dombey in Florence's eyes and in reality. The repetition and contrast create irony. Florence's eyes repeatedly emphasized as "blinded" (587) signify her unconditional love for her undeserving father. Thus, by the sensitive tears she sheds, Florence fails to see the real and blameworthy aspect of her father.

It is after Edith's flight that Florence wakes from her dream:

> Florence, not knowing what she did, put on a shawl and bonnet, *in a dream* of running through the streets until she found Edith, and then clasping her in her arms, to save and bring her back. But when she hurried out *upon the staircase*, and saw the frightened servants going up and down with lights […], she *awoke* to a sense of her own powerlessness (640, italics mine).

Upon the staircase she confronts the world below where her angelic feature is again but a feeble light as she has been over Mr Dombey's conscience. She is still blinded by filial love when she goes to her father with compassion for him. However, she awakens and sees the truth, when she meets his violence. She at last perceives the reality behind the blindfold of maltreated love:

> She did not sink down at his feet; *she did not shut out the sight of him* with her trembling hands; she did not weep; she did not utter one word of reproach. But she looked at him, and a cry of desolation issued from her heart. For as she looked, *she saw* him murdering that fond idea to which she had held in spite of him. *She saw* his cruelty, neglect, and hatred dominant above it, and stamping it down. *She saw* she had no father upon earth, and ran out, orphaned, from his house. (641, italics mine)

She notices his wickedness and coldness, and flees from her father regarding him as "utterly gone and lost" (654). Mr Dombey, the "blind idiot" (543), on the other hand, is foolishly blind to Florence's virtues. His eyes are opened by encountering what she has suffered, as his retribution.

Mr Dombey's blindness to Florence's virtues contrasts amazingly with his son Paul's appreciative vision, which has been repeatedly praised in the novel's critical history[iii]. Mr Dombey and Paul set side by side as below express each characteristic well:

> The evenings being longer now, Paul stole up to his window every evening *to look out*

> *for Florence*. […] Often after dark, one other figure walked alone before the Doctor's house. […] He [Mr Dombey] would […] *look up at the windows where his son was qualifying for a man; and wait, and watch, and plan, and hope*. […] Oh! *could he but have seen*, or seen as others did, the slight spare boy above, watching the waves and clouds at twilight, with his earnest eyes, and breasting the window of his solitary cage when birds flew by, as if he would have emulated them, and soared away! (166, italics mine)

Paul looks out of his window to see Florence and the waves, clouds and the birds; natural and real things. On the other hand, Mr Dombey looks up, not to see the reality, "the slight, spare boy", but to see his imaginary and ideal future there.

The well-known passages of Mr Dombey traveling on the train with Major Bagstock also reveal his spiritual blindness. He perceives nothing visual, and the scenes mainly consist of his sense of hearing. This again differs from Paul's last moments in the death bed. While the former plot is filled with fatal energy, motion, and sound, the latter consists of passive acceptance, stillness, and quietude. In both scenes, the observers are detached from the objects of their view, but their attitudes toward them are opposite; Mr Dombey perceives there his torment and agony, finding "a likeness to his misfortune everywhere" (274), while little Paul feels affection and "grateful[ness]" (218).

After the bankruptcy and in his ruin, Mr Dombey comes to remember the virtues of Florence. He comes to realize his fault through reliving what he has forced on Florence. Now his sight is cleared: "oh how the mist, through which he had seen her, cleared, and showed him her true self!" (805)

While Angus Wilson comments that "Florence never really leaves her childhood" and that Mr Dombey is "reduced to a childish state" (Wilson 208) in the end, Auerbach challengingly remarks that Dombey becomes Florence[iv]. In fact, Mr Dombey's state in his ruination bears a striking resemblance to that of Florence in her early youth. He thus goes through the same series of experiences Florence has undergone, as his retribution. One of them is the "loneliness" (248) she endures in the stately Dombey mansion all through her early age.

After the deprivation of her only brother, Florence is put in a state of complete isolation, and

unable to bear “to be so lost” (248), she visits her father’s room. In fact, Paul’s death has left similar impressions on Mr Dombey and Florence, and they both suffer from the feeling of “wilderness” within them. Mr Dombey goes upon an above-mentioned journey soon after the funeral, failing to see anything but despair:

> He found no pleasure or of relief in the journey. Tortured by these thoughts he carried monotony with him, through the rushing landscape, and hurried headlong, not through a rich and varied country, but a *wilderness* of blighted plans and gnawing jealousies. (272, italics mine)

The “wilderness” is what Florence also experiences alone at her house: “So Florence lived in her *wilderness* of a home, within the circle of her innocent pursuits and thoughts, and nothing harmed her” (310, italics mine). In unconscious fellow feeling that they both share the same grief, she goes up to her father only to meet the malicious eyes of Mr Dombey full of “mad jealousy and withered pride” (249).

Failing to find a companion, Florence patiently passes time cherishing remembrances, and it is indeed “loneliness” (794), which she recalls later in her life, that she suffers the most in her immaturity. When we take “the episode of the blacking warehouse” (Marcus 337) into consideration as many critics do,[v] it may be that what Dickens wanted to emphasize most in the poor child’s life was this constant feeling of “solitude” (627).

Friendless and forlorn, Florence continually spends time alone watching out of the window, as if to express her wish to replace herself in a better place. She constantly watches the house across the street where “the rosy children lived” (240), which is a contrastive double to Mr Dombey’s house. This family embodies the model of a happy family for Florence. Yet, her own situation, watching from her lonely room half afraid to be noticed, accentuates the detachment and distance from her ideal happiness, and their liveliness strengthens her lonesomeness.

Florence’s loneliness arrives at its climax when she is forced alone on the streets flying from her own father. She is “lost in the wild wilderness of London” (642), and is unable to feel any responsive feelings toward the outer world. However, when her beloved dog Diogenes comes to her side, she overcomes her solitariness and becomes more active and cheerful. The surroundings coincide with her psychological state, and the scene at once becomes lively and full of movement. As Tillotson observes, this scene is “the sole occasion on which she [Florence] is to act as well as

suffer" (Tillotson 174), and submissive Florence is no more.

On Mr Dombey's part, he finally comes to acknowledge his need of a "companion" (805), when he is desperately ruined. Now for the first time he feels "loneliness" (805), and it is the eminent change in Mr Dombey. The same "loneliness" (248), which Florence has once misunderstood that she shared with her father, is finally felt by him. He now learns the solitary feelings he has instilled in her for so many years.

Florence, in her desperate childhood, spends time dreaming when awake, and seeing reflections of reality in her dreams. Confusing dream and reality, she also confuses past and present. As she suffers disappointment in her father's second marriage, she experiences a "change" (625), in which process she comes "to love him rather as some dear one *who had been, or who might have been*, than as the hard reality before her eyes" (624, italics mine). Thus "the father whom she loved beg[ins] to be a vague and dreamy idea to her" (624). As Edith also becomes "like the retiring ghost of *what she had been*" (627, italics mine), she begins to think both of Mr Dombey and of Edith as some relics of the past.

It is interesting to note that this confusion of time and reality occurs in Mr Dombey as well; His state of wretchedness, analyzed by Steven Marcus as confusing "past and present, dead and living" and losing "his sense of reality" (Marcus 330), amazingly resembles that of Florence through her hardship.

Mr Dombey's mental disorder, especially regarding time, contrasts the beginning of the book where Mr Dombey holds his ticking watch almost as his attribute, and was so impatient: when Paul is born, Mr Dombey repeatedly "jingle[s] and jingle[s] the heavy gold watch-chain that depend[s] from below his trim blue coat" (3). Mr Dombey, expressing his future plans for baby Paul, reveal his "impatience" (90) in unison with his restless attitude. The watch in this scene symbolizes Mr Dombey's impatience and inability. Until the birth of this baby son, "Mr Dombey sat jingling and jingling his heavy gold watch-chain in the great arm-chair by the side of the bed" (5) for ten years awaiting the moment. Even if he believed that "[t]he earth was made for Dombey and Son to trade in, and the sun and moon were made to give them light […]" (4), he is impotent in terms of controlling life and death. Thus clocks and watches are repeatedly mentioned in the passages narrating Fanny's death and Paul's short life. The watches count their remaining lifetime. At the

scene of Fanny's decease, "[t]here was no sound in answer but the loud ticking of Mr Dombey's watch and Doctor Parker Peps's watch, which seemed in the silence to be running a race" (11), and as her death draws nearer, the watches seem to run faster, the race becoming "fierce and furious" (11). As for Florence "a very loud ticking watch […] embodie[s] her idea of a father" (5), the watch becomes a metonymy of Mr Dombey, revealing his tense heartbeat and irritation.

Mr Dombey's impatience continues to be conspicuous in his treatment of his son. When Mr Dombey says to Mrs Pipchin that Paul "'ought to be before them [other children of his age]; far before them'" (137), his wish is already ironically fulfilled in terms of Paul's mental age. Paul, an "old-fashioned boy" (91), young yet old, spends his childhood not playing around with children but sitting in armchairs beside adults. There is an ominous suggestion when Mrs Pipchin enters "the audience-chamber where Mr Dombey was contemplating the *vacant* armchair of his son and heir" (135, italics mine). Many signs in his life, starting with the death of the mother soon after birth, followed by the funeral-like christening, foretell Paul's early decease. "[T]he loss" (138) Mrs Pipchin feels in separating from Paul also sounds sinister. Brought up under the pressure of Mr Dombey's rash expectation, Paul passes through his life too quickly and ends in early death.

Contrasting Mr Dombey, whose feeling "uppermost in his mind, now and constantly intensifying, and increasing in it as Paul grew older, was *impatience*" (90), Florence's conspicuous virtue is her patience. Martha, whom Florence sees at Fulham after Paul's death, acts also as an effective foil to Florence. While Florence "pursue[s] her study *patiently*" (336, italics mine) to learn to obtain her parent's love, Martha "[makes] an *impatient* gesture" (337, italics mine) towards the call from her affectionate old father.

In his thought-provoking discussion on "time" in *Dombey and Son*, Marcus says, "when he [Mr Dombey] collapses he is like a man who has either departed from time" (Marcus 330). Indeed Mr Dombey, in the end, is dismissed with his watch, which represents, to borrow Peter Coveney's words, the "dry mechanical symbolism" (Coveney 141).

In this context, the essence of Mr Dombey's retribution is his repetition of his daughter's experiences which she has long suffered in her early age.

When Butt and Tillotson note that 'he [Mr Dombey] roams the memory-haunted house' (111)

in the closing chapters, we are reminded that Florence also has hovered about the house cherishing remembrance of her dead mother and Paul[vi]. In his "solitude" (806), Mr Dombey goes "softly up the stairs" (806). The mental state and the movement coincide with those of Florence in the past. He "wander[s] higher up" (806), and his act embodies his aspirations for spiritual betterment. Now, Florence and Paul are "reunited […] in his thoughts, and they [are] never asunder" (807). This imagery of his two children melting into one originates in the repeated vision of the two children ascending the stairs together.

As Florence has wandered "through the solitude and gloom" (309) of the house before, now Mr Dombey walks around the rooms, and contemplates death for the first time as Florence has done in her youth. Based on "unmistakably true" (Welsh 87) association of *Dombey and Son* with *King Lear* remarked by Tillotson, Alexander Welsh examines Florence's association with death based on Freudian reading of *King Lear*. He refers to the "demonic powers of Florence" (Welsh 97) and says, Florence prepares "the hero for death" (Welsh 97). Precisely, the image of Florence evokes the fatal death conjured up in Mr Dombey's mind. For, after he sees the vision, Mr Dombey in his despair confronts with himself in the mirror and contemplates suicide. Barbara Hardy points out, in her stimulating essay on the change of heart in Dickens's novels, "in the crisis of conversion the mirror is offered to the character, in effective mime and therapy, as well as to the reader, in irony and generalization" (Hardy 42). We see Mr Dombey facing the mirror when Florence enters. When the idea of death comes into his mind, it affects his sight, showing him "this picture" (808) in the glass:

> A spectral, haggard, wasted likeness of himself, brooded and brooded over the empty fireplace. Now it lifted up its head, examining *the lines and hollows* in its face; now hung it down again, and brooded afresh. (808, italics mine)

The creases in Mr Dombey's face have deepened compared to the opening scene of the novel, in which new born Paul and Mr Dombey is put in a comical juxtaposition:

> On the brow of Dombey, Time and his brother Care had set some marks, as on a tree that was to come down in good time - remorseless twins they are for striding through their human forests, notching as they go - while the countenance of Son was crossed and recrossed with a thousand little creases, which the same deceitful Time would take delight in smoothing out and wearing away with the flat part of his scythe, as a

> preparation of the surface for his deeper operations. (3)

Mr Dombey, who, at the beginning of the novel, has been "rather bald, rather red, and though a handsome well-made man, too stern and pompous in appearance, to be prepossessing" (3), is at the end "a white-haired gentleman" (842). Though Marcus states that the world of *Dombey and Son* exists in the kind of time that is "eternal" and "static" (Marcus 338), Mr Dombey ages and accordingly experiences internal change with the development of the story. Mr Dombey seems to admit the sign of his "imminent impotence and decay" (Zwinger 429), at the end, which Lynda Zwinger suggests that his daughter's presence has long anticipated.

Mr Dombey's eyes, which have not taken heed to nature before, perceive his surroundings now as clearly as those of little Paul:

> It was dimly pleasant to him [Mr Dombey] now, to lie there, with the window open, looking out at the summer sky and the trees: and, in the evening, at the sunset. To watch the shadows of the clouds and leaves, and seem to feel a sympathy with shadows. It was natural that he should. To him, life and the world were nothing else. (827)

He now sees things with existence and reality, and the sympathy he feels toward his environment dismisses his solitude.

Deprived of everything he has once owned, Mr Dombey, as his retribution, experiences and recognizes for the first time the feeling of loneliness in the same ordeal as which Florence has endured in her childhood. The ending, of which "many readers have protested its absurdity" (Moglen 173), shows Mr Dombey weak and emotional. The process afforded him a lesson upon his own powerlessness.

Notes

[i] *Letters* IV: 589-590.

[ii] Dualistic aspects in this novel has been much argued since Julian Moynahan's brilliant essay, "Dealings with the Firm of Dombey and Son: Firmness versus Wetness" in *Dickens and the Twentieth Century*, ed. John Gross and Gabriel Pearson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962): 121-31. Yet I agree more with Helen Moglen, who calls such "binary system" in question, as "analyses of this sort not only limit our readings; they also keep us from conceptualizing dynamic interactions that clear discursive spaces for personal and social change" (Moglen 160), and Robert Newsom who also states, "One of the great pleasures to be had from Dickens' work derives from the apparent paradox of its imaginative diversity on the one hand and its intense coherence on the other" (Newsom 197). My partial argument is intended to find relationships between the apparent dualistic structures in the story.

[iii] The critics who analyze Dickens's "child's-eye view" in this novel include Kathleen Tillotson and Angus Wilson. See also Malcolm Andrews's excellent chapter in *Dickens and the Grown-up Child*. London: Macmillan, 1994.

[iv] "Dombey himself seems less to succumb to Florence than to become her; by the end of the novel, he *is*, literally, 'a daughter after all.'" (Auerbach 112)

[v] Based on Dickens's autobiographical fragment, Marcus concludes, "Dickens was twelve years old at the time he went to work in the blacking warehouse" (Marcus 337).

[vi] This point has been mentioned by Auerbach as well (Auerbach 113).

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