

The Representation of Fallen Women in *Oliver Twist* and *David Copperfield*

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Introduction

In the 1840s and 1850s, there was a considerable amount of literary works which concerned prostitution and other sexual transgressions and, where women who had lost their virtue were severely condemned as fallen women. Charles Dickens (1812-1870) challenged the idea that fallen women were the source of disease, moral pollution and degradation when they lost their chastity. The three female characters, Nancy in *Oliver Twist* (1837-9) and Little Emily and Martha in *David Copperfield* (1849-50), re-evaluate the popular misconceptions about fallen women. These three characters are described as both victims and subjects of exploitation and betrayal in Dickens' novels. Dickens criticises the cruelty of society, people, and social value towards fallen women. He illustrates the causes of downfalls of fallen women and the cures for the disgraceful condition. It is undeniable that Dickens sees the goodness in fallen women and questions the prevailing image of corruption. The aim of this essay is to consider the corrupting situation and the causes and cures for the ruin of fallen women, Nancy, Little Emily and Martha in *Oliver Twist* and *David Copperfield*.

The Murder of Nancy in *Oliver Twist*

In the preface to *Oliver Twist*, Dickens writes: "It is useless to discuss whether the conduct and character of the girl seems natural or unnatural, probable or improbable, right or wrong. IT IS TRUE" (36). Nancy has particular significance, because she represents Dickens's first concerns about fallen women. Though there is no allusion that Nancy's occupation is a prostitute except in the preface, her job can be easily forecasted from her manner, appearance and friendship. Nancy is parentless and works on the streets since childhood. She dresses in a "red gown, green boots, and yellow curl-papers" (138), and has the companion of thieves. Her bond with a cruel thief, Fagin, and her lover, Sikes, is evidence of her malicious and degenerated life in the London underworld. Nancy's rough and inappropriate manner and language indicate that she is

uneducated and ignorant. At the same time, Dickens reveals that Nancy has a sense of guilt and shame as an “infamous creature” (362). These words of Nancy sigh that Nancy was not innately depraved. It is suggested that there are other reasons for her disgraceful situation.

Through the novel, Dickens portrays Nancy as possessing a moral conscience, kindness, fears and courage. Nancy’s emotional complexity is her inner conflict between good and evil. It is first demonstrated through her meeting with a little orphan boy, Oliver Twist, and then through her decision to save him from kidnapping by her thief companions, Fagin and Sikes. At first, Nancy agrees to capture Oliver, who runs away from Sikes and Fagin to a benevolent gentleman, Mr. Brownlow, without too much reluctance. However, after they recapture Oliver, Nancy’s trembling hand and deadly white face, when she talks with Sikes, reveal Nancy’s fear of Sikes and compassion for Oliver. When Fagin tries to hit Oliver’s shoulders with the club, Nancy arouses her anger to protect the child, in contrast with the thieves’ indifference to the life of Oliver and their own cruelty. As Slater notes, Nancy’s inner conflict and various emotional mood are dramatised by her sudden pity for Oliver and outbursts against Fagin (221). Nancy’s reluctance to recapture Oliver and consideration towards Oliver express her affection and warmth as well as moral conscience.

Furthermore, Dickens successfully breaks the depraved image of the typical fallen women through his descriptions of Nancy’s further treatment of Oliver. Nancy’s rescue of Oliver from Fagin’s violence leads Oliver to return to a normal life, and Oliver starts feeling an attachment to Nancy. There is a trust between them. The orphan Oliver can find a sense of family in his pretend sister, Nancy (Gold, 1972:56). Later, Nancy takes the risk of facing the anger of her accomplices and saves Oliver, who again runs away from the thieves, from Fagin and Sikes. Dickens writes Nancy’s goodness in saving Oliver without any regard for her own safety: “something of the woman’s original nature left in her still” (360). In chapter 40, in order to keep Oliver under the protection, Nancy visits the rich family area where Rose Maylie, who protects Oliver. The meeting of Rose and Nancy represents that two girls hold the same purity and goodness. When Nancy and Rose face each other, it is obvious that these two young girls are very

different. Rose is the one being rescued fortunately from illegitimate birth and loved by Mrs. Maylie and Mrs. Maylie's nephew, Harry. Rose's purity, innocence, and good nature make her almost angelic. On the other hand, Nancy lives in a brutalised world and has never known love from anybody in her childhood. Whilst their worlds are opposites, their basic shared goodness makes the two become one; Nancy rescues Oliver acting as an elder sister, and Rose, as his guardian, protects him and is later identified as his real aunt (Gold, 1972: 56). These two girls live in a separate condition, between the world of richness and happiness and the world of poverty, misery and cruelty. Yet they fundamentally have the same good nature. Thus, Nancy's tenderness for Oliver and the fact that she rescued him from Sikes' inhuman treatment succeed in emphasising her essential purity and goodness.

The descriptions of Nancy in the novel are inspired by Dickens' efforts to reclaim prostitutes to a normal life by the foundation of Urania Cottage, which is the home for homeless women, with the wealthy philanthropist, Miss Angela Burdett-Coutts. Despite Nancy's poor and degraded life, Dickens presents signs that Nancy can be rescued and forgiven. In the scene of Nancy's visiting Rose, Nancy condemns herself and feels ashamed as an "infamous creature" (362). But these considerations about her own disgrace and corruption in front of Rose show Nancy's honest attitude and make her a virtuous and noble character (Watt, 1984:16). In particular, the scene of Nancy's death includes the ritualistic meanings of purifying herself. Nancy's brutal murder by her own lover, Sikes, represents her suffering. She dies on her knees, drawing from her bosom Rose's white handkerchief which Nancy is given at their last meeting and holds the handkerchief up high, saying "one prayer for mercy to her maker"(423). As Watt refers, Rose's white handkerchief describes the ritual's meaning (1984:17). Rose's pity, kindness and forgiving spirit and purity are passed to Nancy through the white handkerchief, which is the symbol of redemption. In Nancy's death scene, there is Nancy's transformation from the prostitute into the pure girl. Dickens presents the possibility of regeneration of fallen women and the salvation of them through Nancy's death.

But, Nancy cannot become another Rose. Nancy is forgiven through her own

death, but her full recovery to a respectable life is not fulfilled. Nancy hates her life which she has spent. It is not Nancy's choice to have the miserable life. Dickens describes the corruption of making Nancy be at the hands of Fagin and Sikes as a cause of her downfall. Nancy's parentless background and living with criminals also determined her ruin. It is obvious that Nancy failed to avoid or run away from the cruel service and life. Nancy says this when she meets Rose:

“‘Thank Heaven upon your knees, dear lady,’ cried the girl, ‘that you and friends to care for and keep you in childhood, and that you were never in the midst of cold and hunger, and riot and drunkenness, and — and something worse than all — as I have been from my cradle. I may use the word, for the ally and the gutter were mine, as they will be my deathbed’” (362).

Nancy's words indicate that she feels the unbreakable bond with the underworld. When Mr. Brownlow and Rose offered to help Nancy to find a new life, Nancy declined their offer. When Rose said it was not too late to turn Nancy from a life of sin and sorrow, Nancy showed her love for Sikes and said “I cannot leave him now! I could not be his death” (364). Her attachment to Sikes explains that she feels these unbreakable bonds with criminals and a sinful life is the punishment for her sins (Basch,1974: 212). Nancy continues:

“‘I only know that it is so, and not with me alone, but with hundreds of others as bad and wretched as myself. I must go back. Whether it is God's wrath for the wrong I have done, I do not know; but I am drawn back to him through every suffering and ill-usage; and I should be, I believe, if I knew that I was to die by his hand at last’” (365).

Though Nancy is not a true fallen woman, she cannot be relieved from the corrupting world. It seems that the uncontrollable fate abandons Nancy in the criminal world and keeps Nancy into the pitiless environment.

It is apparent that the unavoidable fate is on Nancy's life when we compare Rose's birth with Nancy's. There is also illegitimacy and unhappiness in Rose's life. Rose is a sister who has a different mother from Oliver's mother, Agnes Fleming, and their father died of a broken heart and left Rose and Agnes in his sister. Later Agnes gave a birth to

Oliver as the unmarried mother and died alone in her youth. In contrast, Rose was fortunately saved by Mrs. Maylie after she was brought up by the poor cottagers. Despite Rose's illegitimate birth, as Reed points out, Rose is clearly marked virtuous predominance and described as the moral excellence in the novel (1995:78). Considering Rose's fortunes, I believe that Nancy's misfortune can be explained not only from the loss of parents or being treated as a thief's instrument. But, the uncontrollable fate dominates Nancy's life and chains her to the ruin. Nancy is a victim of circumstance. In the hapless fate of Nancy, there are Dickens' intentions that the readers should be aware of the social and moral degeneration and need to examine to see how badness rises, survives and relates with them.

I can find the unfortunate fate on the innocent girl, Nancy. However, there is little about the cure of Nancy's condition in the novel. I believe that Nancy's death represents the spiritual salvation of fallen women which is achieved by their suffering and death. However, the recovery to a normal and respectable life cannot be fulfilled in Nancy. As Watt points out, it is necessary to see a reformed prostitute dying a pure woman because Dickens effectively challenges the prejudice inherent in "once a harlot, always a harlot" (1984:17). In fact, Dickens' attitude to Nancy links to his work in the regeneration of prostitutes with Miss Coutts. But, *Oliver Twist* does not depict a complete restoration of the fallen woman to a normal life.

The Fall and Rescue of Little Emily and Martha in *David Copperfield*

In comparison with Nancy in *Oliver Twist*, I can find several different aspects of the presentation of the fallen women, Little Emily and Martha, in *David Copperfield*. As for Emily, she is first introduced as an orphan who is later brought up as a daughter of a fisherman by Mr. Peggotty and Mrs. Gummidge in a little cabin in Yarmouth. Ham, who is another orphan, is Emily's future fiancé. The family forms a warm and peaceful home though they are poor. As David's impression on Emily at their first meeting illustrates, Emily is presented as a young, honest, innocent, pure, and attractive girl. She comes across to the readers almost as an angel.

David's admiration continues when he meets Emily, who has grown up, though he

notices Emily's changes. Emily has grown to be a woman of sexual attractiveness, maintaining her innocence and purity. Whilst Emily's pretty figure, kindness and love for her family and other people are admired through David's words, Emily's coquettish behaviour to "tease" and "torment" (138) David and Ham signify her sexual fascination. The opposite sides of nature, purity and sexuality, are coexisted in Emily, which predicts us the possibility of her downfall.

The first meeting of Emily and Steerforth, who is the upper class son, is the beginning of her fall. During Steerforth's story of shipwreck, his nobility, charm and talented nature fascinate Emily. Steerforth and Emily fall in love and elope together. Yet finally Emily is discarded by him. Though the reasons for Emily's fall and the destruction of her life are complex and include various elements, one of the pitfalls of her ruin is her ignorance and innocence. Although Emily is an orphan, she is neither deprived nor in unhappy and miserable conditions. She is protected by her uncle, Mr. Peggotty, and does not know the severity of society. Basch points out that Emily's happy background with Mr. Peggotty and Ham constructs the mini-paradise of order and propriety (1974:221). Thus, it seems to me that Emily's small and peaceful world, full of love and protection from her family, makes her ignorant and innocent to society and to male behaviour.

Another reason for the destruction of Emily's life is her sexual attractiveness, passion and ambition. As David finds Emily's wild behaviour and frivolity when he meets grown-up Emily, Emily's sexual charm explains that she easily becomes the target of male sexuality. The danger of female sexuality is described through Emily as well as through Nancy who works as a prostitute. Furthermore, Emily's elopement with Steerforth signifies her passion and desire for better life. Reynolds and Humble point out "Emily's destructive potential is released through the sexuality she embraces" (1993:19). Emily's meeting with young Steerforth helps to expose her passion and eagerness for social situation. In particular, Emily's dissatisfaction with her own status strongly relates to her destructive power. The following lines between David and Emily address Emily's desire for better conditions, and this desires for status hints at the elopement with Steerforth:

“‘You would like to be a lady?’ I said. Emily looked at me, and laughed and nodded ‘yes.’ ‘ I should like it very much. We would all be gentlefolks together, then. Me, and uncle, and Ham, and Mrs. Gummidge. We wouldn’t mind then, when there come stormy weather. — Not for our own sakes, I mean. We would for the poor fishermen’s, to be sure, and we’d help ‘em with money when they come to any hurt’” (42).

As Basch mentions, it is difficult to point out the real reasons of Emily’s fleeing; whether she really loves Steerforth or whether she was simply moved by a desire for social rank when she elopes with him (1974:222). However, Emily later addresses in a letter to her family that she will never “come back, unless he (Steerforth) brings me back a lady” (419); and it is clear that Emily wants to become a wife of high social rank. Dickens describes her vanity for better conditions, and her elopement with Steerforth is influenced by her desire to become a lady. However, Emily’s yearning results in the ruin of her life and her family. The elopement of Emily and Steerforth leads to the seduction and destruction of the lower class female by the upper class male. Additionally, the elopement which relates to love, passion and ambition disrupts the class system and moral code in the Victorian age, which invites the further destruction to Emily. Dickens presents the danger of female passion and vanity through describing the ruin of Emily.

The end of the elopement is the damage, dishonour and severe attacks on Emily and her family. In particular, the scorn and hatred from Mrs. Steerforth and Miss. Rosa Dartle show the stereotyped pitiless attitude of people towards fallen women. Mrs. Steerforth and Rosa criticise Emily’s humble connections and desire to punish her, because Emily breaks the rule of morality and class difference and brings discord between mother and son. Mrs. Steerforth says: “What compensation can you make to me for opening such a bit between me and my son? What is your love to mine? What is your separation to ours” (435)? Steerforth is not entirely blamed for his behaviour in this scene. Standards of behaviour differ from class to class, despite the existence of an apparent moral consensus. Mrs. Steerforth shows forgiveness to her son if he gets rid of Emily, comes back and asks Mrs. Steerforth forgiveness as follows.

“‘Let him put away his whim now, and he is welcome back. Let him not put

her away now, and he never shall come near me, living or dying, while I can raise my hand to make a sigh against it, unless, being rid of her for ever, he comes humbly to me and begs for my forgiveness. This is my right. This is the acknowledgement I *will have*” (435).

Mrs. Steerforth expresses the importance of preservation of honour and pride for the family name rather than of love for her son in this scene. She does not forgive her son's disdainful behaviour to the family if he continues his relations with Emily. Collins points out that the forgiveness which Mrs. Steerforth gives to her son is an acknowledgement that the sinner has been obedient to her authority (1964:193). Mrs. Steerforth's authoritarian comments indicate that she is a heartless mother. At the same time, Mrs. Steerforth justifies the superiority of her own son to Emily and thinks Emily to be guilty of sexual imprudence as a fallen woman. It is the antagonism between the classes; Mrs. Steerforth voices the inequable Victorian social and moral code. This unequal moral and social rule increases the possibility of fall of a lot of women and sends them into the further despair and suffering.

The physical and psychological agony is characteristics of fallen women. Basch refers there are stereotyped feelings of the sinner condemned to the torments of hell in Emily's letter to her family: her grief, sense of worthlessness, remorse and pain (1974:224). As a result of Mrs. Steerforth's refusal to marry Emily and Steerforth, Emily was driven into the miserable journey from Italy to London and likely to become a prostitute after Steerforth left her. Mrs. Steerforth's decision prevents Emily from returning to an ordinary social life. Emily was put into the desperate despair and a sense of guilt and worthlessness in the humiliation and reproach.

The words and gestures of Martha, who is Emily's friend and a prostitute and who kindly saves Emily, at Mr. Peggotty's house clearly accounts for the difficulty of living in the ordinary society once they lose their chastity. When Martha appears to David and Steerforth, Steerforth finds a “black shadow” to be following Martha and says, “a beggar would be no novelty” (305). Martha's decision to leave for London explains that she feels ashamed at living in the town, hides herself and lives quietly: “If you'll help me away. I never can do worse than I have done here. I may do better.... Take me out of these streets, where the whole town knows me from a child” (317)! Furthermore Martha,

who wanders on the bank of the Thames, clearly pictures us of her pain, sense of sin and desire for death. There is no excuse for the corruption of fallen women and fallen women never defend themselves. Dickens portrays that the typical psychological and physical agony of fallen women which is despair, grief and guilty through the afflictions of Martha and Emily. Their agony indicates Dickens' hope for female purity and virtue as well as his intention to present to the readers the social problems of prostitutes as a philanthropist.

What makes the difference between Nancy in *Oliver Twist* and Emily and Martha in *David Copperfield* can be found in the end of fallen women. What Emily's family shows to her is the forgiveness which is in contrast with what Steerforth's family presents to him. When the seduction takes place, Mr. Peggotty's attitude towards Emily is against the marriage across the class attitude. Mr. Peggotty asks for permission of the marriage between Emily and Steerforth. He believes that this will save Emily from total disgrace. Mr. Peggotty implores that the marriage should be allowed. Furthermore, after Emily's disappearance from Italy, Mr. Peggotty decides to take a journey in order to search for Emily and save her. He says:

“ I'm a going to seek her, fur and wide. If she should come home while I'm away, — but ah, that ain't like to be! — or if I should bring her back, my meaning is, that she and me shall live and die where no one can't reproach her. If any hurt should come to me, remember that the last words I left for her was, 'My unchanged love is with my darling child, and I forgive her'"(438)!

Mr. Peggotty's decision to find Emily shows his deep love for her, and this love saves Emily from total disgraceful abandonment. Because of Mr. Peggotty's efforts, he finds Emily in London, rescued and given shelter by Martha. Despite severe reproach and disdain, Mr. Peggotty makes efforts to return Emily and Martha to normal life and decides to immigrate to Australia together for a new live. Later, Emily lives in a small village and devotes herself to work. She prays and repents. Martha even gets married in Australia. There is no death like Nancy's in the end for Emily and Martha in *David Copperfield*. There is a person like Mr. Peggotty who rescues fallen women with love and looks for a chance to lead them to hopeful life. Dickens achieves a fuller treatment

of the problem of fallen women by allowing Emily and Martha to live at the end. Emily's life of redemption and new life, and Martha's happy marriage, and their return to a normal life in Australia are presented as the restoration of the fallen women.

Although immigration to Australia means their re-absorption into a new society, I believe that it is not satisfying end as the full return to society for fallen women from the view point of today. The life in Australia is the restart of life for Emily and Martha. It implies that it is impossible for Emily and Martha and their family to get back to the original and normal conditions in England and recover their honour completely. The end of fallen women in the novels gives the impression that Dickens found it difficult to give fallen women a completely normal life in England with respect and to do justice to social behaviour.

On the other hand, Dickens' correspondence with Miss Coutts around 1846 in support of her plan to establish a home for fallen women and his contributions to run the house demonstrate Dickens's efforts to do many things for those women (Collins, 1964:95-6). As Dickens states in his letter to Miss Coutts in 1850: "It is difficult to approach, in pages that are intended for readers of all classes and all ages of life; but I have not the least misgiving about being able to bring people gently to its consideration" (28)¹. The end of Emily and Martha is definitely influenced by Dickens' further efforts to rescue fallen women and to enable them to live in society, compared with the death of Nancy. Dickens and Miss Coutts finally open "Home for Homeless Women", Urania Cottage in 1847, which was established for fallen women. For four years' talks about Urania Cottage, Dickens and Miss Coutts sent letters to each other many times. Dickens expresses the hope in 1850 that marriage may be one of the ways of rescuing women in one of his letters:

"I am not quite sure that perfect penitence in these women — in the best of them I mean — would lead them in all cases not to Marry; for I can certainly (I think) descry a kind of active repentance in their being faithful wives and the mothers of virtuous children;.." (27)².

Dickens' co-establishment of Urania Cottage with Miss Coutts and his interests in the

conditions of fallen women are reflected in his novels, *Oliver Twist* and *David Copperfield*. In particular, the establishment of Urania Cottage, which was to bring about the redemption of fallen women by their marriages, accounts for a change from the death of Nancy to the transportation of Emily and Martha to Australia in Dickens' novels. Dickens may have found that marriage was more realistic way of recovery which enables fallen women to live in ordinal society.

Conclusion

Dickens's fallen women in *Oliver Twist* and *David Copperfield* are judged by the loss of their purity, but are the victims of society and men. There is goodness in the three girls, Nancy, Emily and Martha. Even if they are seduced or become prostitutes, they are depicted as characters possessing kindness, modesty and purity. Dickens' challenges in the novels are the change of the image of fallen women and to reveal reasons why three female characters are ruined by describing their situation in detail. Dickens criticises that what the Victorian society had is the big reason for the downfall of women: the cruelty of people in the underworld, the inequitable moral code towards women and severe class differences.

Dickens' concern is extended not only about accusing the condition where fallen women were put, but about how women should be restored to decent conditions in society through family and social support. Dickens realised that fallen women who want to make a new start could not get the chance to do so. Nancy's death exemplifies the difficulty in going back to normal life. However, the immigration into Australia of Emily and Martha with Mr. Peggotty means Dickens' hope for fallen women to begin new life with help. Dickens discovers a more positive treatment for girls who broke the moral code through his activities as a philanthropist and demonstrates the possibility of recovery of fallen women to the life in his novels.

¹ *The Letters of Charles Dickens 1850-1852*, 4 February 1850.

² *The Letters of Charles Dickens 1850-1852*, 4 February 1850.

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