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# I Dreamed in Terms of Novels: Dorothy Day and the Ethics of Nineteenth-Century Literature

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I Dreamed in Terms of Novels:  
Dorothy Day and the Ethics of Nineteenth-Century Literature

by

Katherine Thomsen Pierson

A THESIS

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The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska  
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I Dreamed in Terms of Novels:

Dorothy Day and the Ethics of Nineteenth-Century Literature

Katherine Pierson, M.A.

University of Nebraska, 2016

Adviser: Peter Capuano

To the extent that she is known, Dorothy Day, a twentieth-century American Catholic journalist and social reformer currently under consideration for sainthood by the Vatican, is recognized for her religious influences. Pope Francis, in his 2015 speech before the American Congress, said she was inspired by “the Gospel, her faith, and the example of the saints.” Yet throughout her life Day was a consistent reader of secular texts and even said she “lived by” the vision of some of her favorite writers. This thesis examines Day’s secular influences—in particular Dickens’s *David Copperfield* and *Little Dorrit*—and begins to trace their effect on both Day’s writing style and her work as an activist. This thesis considers Day’s life and example using the work of ethical theorists Martha Nussbaum and Charles Taylor and argues that it is essential to consider Day’s secular influences—particularly nineteenth-century literature—because Day’s story should be more well-known, in both the field of ethical theory and, more publicly, as an argument for the relevance of literature to political equality, human capability, and the advancement of social justice.

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## Acknowledgements

*My narrative proceeds . . . with a thankful love.*

—Charles Dickens, *David Copperfield*

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*Do not be satisfied with an office theology . . . Good theologians, like good shepherds, smell like people and the street, and with their thinking, pour ointment and wine into the wounds of people.*  
—Pope Francis

## Introduction

*I look at the sunlight coming in at the open door through the porch, and there I see a stray sheep—I don't mean a sinner, but mutton—half making up his mind to come into the church.*  
—Charles Dickens, *David Copperfield*

“What a help Dickens is in time of trouble,” Dorothy Day (1897-1980) says in her diary in 1958 (246). “Bus riding always reminds me of Dickens and his stagecoach rides,” she says in 1960 (*Diaries* 297). “Of course you’ve read Dickens,” she tells her daughter in 1952, “otherwise I’d say Dickens and Jane Austen and the Brontës. Just something to pick up at night and to look forward to during the day” (*Letters* 273). “I was reading in *David Copperfield*,” she says in 1948, “how Betsey Trotwood paced the floor for two hours while she unraveled problems . . .” (*Little* 210). Later that year, “I feel like the Meagles family in *Little Dorrit*,” she says, “who are always talking about how *practical* they are,” (*Long Loneliness* 224). “We have got acquainted with judges, lawyers, police, as well as other prisoners,” she writes in 1955. “It is a new world,” she adds, “as though we had moved into *Bleak House* or *Little Dorrit*” (*Letters* 303). “For a long time we did not believe in the \$55,000. It was like *Bleak House*,” she writes in 1969, after the Catholic Worker was given \$55,000 in a will. “[I]t was like the Circumlocution office” (*Diaries* 471). Someone asked me, she writes in 1965, “why I spoke with literary allusions. It helps balance me: Dickens and Dostoevsky help me more” (*Diaries* 365).

So goes the writing of the Catholic journalist and social reformer Dorothy Day. It brims with references to nineteenth-century writers, and their importance to her is more-than obvious. Toward the end of her life she even said to a group of students that the “meaning of her life” has been to “live by” the work of some of her favorite writers, such as Dickens and Tolstoy (Elie

452). Observers of Day mention, in passing and repeatedly, her devotion to nineteenth-century writers. “She loved *Middlemarch*,” says Robert Coles, “had read it ‘several times’ and quoted from it often” (168). She cherished, Coles says, “Dickens’s efforts to bring the poor to the attention of his readers, Dostoevsky’s religious fervor and philosophical subtlety, Tolstoy’s largeness of mind and heart” (137). Coles says too that Dickens’s writing on forgiveness was important to Day and “she returned to it constantly” (156) and Jim Forest claims it as “truth of a sort” that Father Zosima from *The Brothers Karamazov* was a co-founder of the Catholic Worker movement (207).

Yet, despite her obvious love for literature, Dorothy Day is a social justice figure not at all well-known for her devotion to nineteenth-century novels. Their influence and the influence of the many other not-explicitly-religious texts that made up her wide reading have not been substantially considered as part of Dorothy Day’s life and vision. To the extent that her inspirations are discussed, secular literature is not much measured. Pope Francis, in his fall 2015 address to the American Congress singled out Dorothy Day as a “representative of the American people” (Beckwith). He said:

In these times when social concerns are so important, I cannot fail to mention the Servant of God Dorothy Day, who founded the Catholic Worker Movement. Her social activism, her passion for justice and for the cause of the oppressed, were inspired by the Gospel, her faith, and the example of the saints. (Beckwith)

The Gospel, her faith, and the example of the saints truly did inspire Dorothy Day, very much. But her religious reading is not and cannot be the whole story. Before her commitment to Catholicism—in addition to it, and as part of it throughout her life—came nineteenth-century



novels, and “in these times,” as the Pope says, Day’s devotion to her secular reading is especially important to consider.

Day is significant as a social justice paragon, a person in twentieth-century America with an unusually demanding spiritual commitment. However, she is not as well-known as she could be, especially outside Catholic circles, and—to better understand her relevance to us all, to help her work and life reach a wider audience—her story must be examined through her secular reading. Pope Francis praised Day alongside Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Thomas Merton and, of the four, Day is clearly the least known. It is my belief that presenting her life and work through her secular reading—the famous Dickens, Dostoevsky, and Tolstoy among others—could bring her to a larger, more plural audience as well as more brightly illuminate her vision. Just as significantly, I argue that Day’s devotion to secular literature was so strong that the emotions it raised in her played a role in forming her identity. Long before her conversion to Catholicism, Day was a great reader of nineteenth-century texts, and I argue that without her devotion to literature, she might not have become the person she did. Her nineteenth-century reading is an essential part of her story because it prepared her for her extraordinary Christian vocation. It informed her writing style and her work as an activist—and, more than that, it helped her to become something so astonishing, so rare, that it’s hard to put into words—it helped her to *be* with her fellow man and to live by her vision of true equality.

Throughout my thesis, I will be using the work of ethical theorists Martha Nussbaum and Charles Taylor in support of my arguments. Both Nussbaum and Taylor emphasize the challenges facing us in the modern age. Taylor writes about the demands of universal benevolence that we labor under. “Our age makes higher demands of solidarity and benevolence on people today than ever before,” he says. “Never before have people been asked to stretch out

so far, and so consistently, so systematically, so as a matter of course, to the stranger outside the gates” (*Secular* 696). In our time, we are asked to maintain standards of fairness which cover larger and larger classes of people, he says, and asks, “How do we manage to do it?” (*Secular* 696).

Nussbaum too discusses where we are in our modern world and how we could improve. Economic indicators, she says, don’t really show how people are doing. Instead of traditional cues we should be concerned with “the rule of resources in supporting the *capabilities* of human beings to function in important ways” (439). “We really cannot say, without trying for an indefinitely long time,” she says, “how much illness and misery we are capable of preventing” (419). She adds that “instead of resigning ourselves to tragic necessity” we should ask: what should we do to make sure that injustice doesn’t happen again? (419). Dorothy Day is important to the field of ethical theory because she, too, asked these questions—and she lived her life in answer to them.

Finally, presenting Day through literature is a case for literature itself. For in the twenty-first century, the humanities are in peril. Literature—that “affirmation of the human spirit”—(Ellmann 96) is increasingly considered irrelevant. And in these times Dorothy Day can serve as a model reader, a person whose life argues for the humanities. In her claim that literature is the gateway to compassion, Nussbaum says, “[t]here is nothing trivial or obvious about this: the humanities and the arts are increasingly being sidelined in education at all levels” (426). Cutting the arts, she says, is a “recipe for the production of pathological narcissism, of citizens who have difficulty connecting to other human beings . . .” (426). It is in the context of these concerns: the general lack of enthusiasm for the pursuit of the humanities, Taylor’s “How do we manage to do it?” and Nussbaum’s “How much misery are we capable of preventing?” that I want to present

Dorothy Day as a twentieth-century American, an absolutely committed Catholic, a social reformer and journalist, *and*—through everything else—a *reader of literature*. Someone who, perhaps ahead of her time, was inspired by her reading to meet every stranger at the gate. Secular literature glows throughout her being—it is in her writing and in her action—and it must be considered as very much a part of her idealism. Of her beloved mentor Peter Maurin, Day says in her autobiography, “He was no more afraid of the non-Catholic approach to problems than St. Thomas was of the Aristotelian” (170). And it is in that universal spirit that this work on Day and secular literature is offered here.

**Part 1**  
**A Brief History of Dorothy Day**

*Welcome misery, welcome houselessness, welcome hunger, rags, tempest, and beggary! Mutual confidence will sustain us to the end!*  
 —Charles Dickens, *David Copperfield*

Dorothy Day has been called “the most influential, interesting, and significant figure” in the history of American Catholicism (Martin 226). She had what Robert Ellsberg calls “a political holiness,” of a sort that “makes even some devout Christians uncomfortable” (Martin 227). She combined her work with the poor with a harsh critique against the system that created such conditions. Unlike Mother Teresa she was “vigorously opposed” to accepting money that she felt had been earned from the sweat of poor people (Martin 227). She lived for much of her adult life in voluntary poverty, as a journalist and activist and, in 2000, “the Vatican officially accepted her cause for canonization, and she received the formal title ‘Servant of God’” (*Diaries* xxiii).

Day was born in Brooklyn, New York, and grew up in a not-so-religious Protestant family. As she explains in her autobiography, she was eight years old, living in San Francisco, on April 18, 1906, when the legendary earthquake hit. Her home “cracked from roof to ground” (21) and she saw, in the days following the catastrophe, people helping each other, all usual barriers down. She was struck by the scene and came to live most of her life trying to recreate, on a daily basis, what she’d witnessed as a child in California. She wanted every home, she says, to be “open to the lame, the halt and the blind, the way it had been after the San Francisco earthquake” (39). Shortly after the earthquake, the family moved to Chicago where her mother raised the five children, and her father was a sportswriter. His sports columns were peppered with references to

Shakespeare and the Bible, and he was very particular about what literature was brought into the home. “We had,” Day writes, “Scott, Hugo, Dickens, Stevenson, Cooper, and Poe” (25). Day’s childhood was, according to her autobiography, a happy one. She describes, for instance, an especially good year when the family often made hot cocoa over the fire before bed. Outside, she says, the wind blew and snow fell, but inside, “a fire glowed in the basket grate and a smell of fresh bread filled the house—this was comfort, security, peace, community” (30).

Day attended college at the University of Illinois, where she was “greedy” for books and worked to be able to afford them, then moved to New York and began working for radical newspapers (43). She covered strike meetings and picket lines. She reported on the work of organizations fighting for peace, to prevent entry into the Great War (57). Yet, in her autobiography, she laments her early efforts. “I was not a good radical,” she says, “not worthy of respect like those great figures in the movement who were fighting the issues of the day” (59). In 1917 Day went to prison for her involvement with a group of suffragist picketers. She participated in a hunger strike and “lost all consciousness of any cause . . . lost all feeling of [her] own identity” (78). “Why were some caught, not others?” she asks in her autobiography, “Why were some termed criminals and others good businessmen?” (78). She worked as a nurse in 1918, during the flu epidemic, but left it to pursue writing. She married briefly, traveled Europe and came back to the United States and settled again in Chicago, where she made radical friends, got involved in Socialist groups, and earned money by working at Montgomery Ward and by posing for art classes (95). In 1919 she was arrested because she and another woman were found in a flophouse and assumed to be prostitutes. This incident in prison, Day says, was more harrowing than the first because of the shame attached to it. In prison, she heard the howls of a drug addict. “I have never heard such anguish,” she writes, “such unspeakable suffering” (104).

She was haunted by the experience. She knew she could get away, because of her own advantages, “but,” she asks, “what of the others?” (105). In Chicago she shared an apartment with Catholic girls, who had their God and their saints. But, she writes, “I had nothing” (106). She wrote and published a book (a semi-autobiographical novel, which she later tried to suppress) and received \$5,000 for its movie rights. She used the money to buy a house on the beach in Staten Island, where she settled down to study, write, and live with her common-law husband, Forster Batterham. “I was an indefatigable novel reader,” she says, “and spent those first few winters on the beach with Tolstoy, Dostoevsky and Dickens” (114).<sup>1</sup>

There on the beach, Day began to pray daily and go to Mass. Though he was against religion, Forster’s love for nature helped turn her to God, she says, as did the birth of their daughter, Tamar, in 1926. She was attracted to the Catholic Church, she writes, because her “radical” self, her “whole make-up” led her to desire association with the masses (139). She made the decision to baptize her daughter Catholic and become Catholic herself, and, although it cost her Forster Batterham, she felt joy in her conversion. She writes, for example, of the “beautiful clear summer in 1932,” when she read and wrote and loved “the wide avenues . . . trees and little porches” of New York (159). Yet, the Depression was on, people were unemployed, and Day keenly felt her work “puny” and “self-centered” (165). Then, in 1933, she met Peter Maurin, a Frenchman 20 years her senior, who knew the countryside and the demands of physical labor. He’d been sent to Day, he said, by an editor, who told him that they “think alike” (169). He had ideas about how Catholics, how people, should live. Peter, Day says,

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<sup>1</sup> The spelling of Dostoevsky and Tolstoy varies in Day’s published writing. This crucial sentence in the text of her autobiography reads, “I was an indefatigable novel reader and spent those first few winters on the beach with Tolstoi, Dostoevski and Dickens.” For consistency, throughout my thesis I use the spelling adopted by translators Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky.

“aroused in you a sense of your own capacities for work, for accomplishment” (171) and continually taught Day “that we must have a sense of personal responsibility to take care of our own, and our neighbor, at a personal sacrifice” (179). Together, Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin began the Catholic Worker Movement, a movement, Day says, directed toward any “who worked with hand or brain” but “primarily” for the poor (204). The movement included a newspaper, sold at one cent a copy, houses of hospitality, working farms, protests, and arrests, all in the name of radical equality. The mission of the Catholic Worker was to practice the Works of Mercy as well as “protesting and resisting the social structures and values that were responsible for so much suffering and need” (*Letters xxi*).

As part of her work with the movement, Day took on the voluntary poverty that she kept for the remainder of her life. “Going around and seeing the sights is not enough,” she says in her autobiography, privacy must be given up, suffering shared (204). During the Depression, the movement fed the hungry and housed the homeless. The *Catholic Worker* newspaper was launched on May 1, 1933, and in an editorial Day describes the paper’s aim:

For those who are sitting on park benches in the warm spring sunlight.

For those who are huddling in shelters trying to escape the rain.

For those who are walking the streets in the all but futile search for work.

For those who think that there is no hope for the future, no recognition of their plight—  
this little paper is addressed. (*Diaries xv*)

The mission of the Catholic Worker, the living out of the Works of Mercy, continued in the 1940s when the movement took an unpopular position against WWII. “We continue our Christian Pacifist Stand” a banner headline blazed in 1942 (*Diaries xxix*). The Catholic Worker continued its ferocious fight against the system in the 1950s, advocating voluntary poverty and

peace even throughout post-war consumerism and Cold War nationalism. In the 1960s, the *Catholic Worker* was involved in non-violent protests and the civil rights movement—yet Day personally worried about the “general revolt against traditional moral values” (*Letters* xxiv). Throughout her life, Day was arrested several times and in the 1970s, she was “arrested for the final time” for picketing with the United Farm Workers (*Letters* xxiv). Near the end of her life she began to receive reverent consideration from the church and the media—attention which continues today.

Dorothy Day died in November 1980. She is now being considered for sainthood and still in the news. In May 2016, for example, *America* ran a story on the death of the Jesuit priest and activist Daniel Berrigan and quotes Berrigan as saying, in 2008, “Dorothy Day taught me more than all the theologians” (Hansen 8). Much has been written by her—her own autobiography, her contributions to the *Catholic Worker* newspaper, her diaries and letters—and much has been written *about* her: published interviews, admiring biographies, essays on her connection to religious figures, essays about Peter Maurin’s influence.

However, with the possible exception of Paul Elie’s wonderful *The Life You Save May Be Your Own* (2004), a study of Day and three other American Catholic writers, most writing on Day is directed toward a Catholic or, at least, a Christian audience. She has not been studied, as I intend to study her, for a wider audience, in-depth as a reader of secular texts and a student of literature. No one has looked directly and specifically at the nineteenth-century novels that influenced her work and life and traced that influence, to see how it played out in her writing and her activism. “For a person so intensely engaged in the world, it often surprises people to discover how much quiet time there was in Dorothy’s life, and how much reading,” writes Forest (207). I intend to spoil that surprise and form more of an association between Dorothy Day and



literature. It is that “quiet time” that I plan to use as the backbone to my work. I will use literature to present her life as a crucial study for anyone interested in political equality and human capability.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Although I in no way want to diminish Day’s faith commitment, the crux of my argument is that her story—her belief in personalism, of the value of the human personality—should be more widely known, outside even Catholic and Christian audiences. Day is a witness for peace, a voice for union in our very complex world with its insistence on categories and separation.

**Part 2**  
**Theoretical Approaches:**  
**Identity, Compassion, Prayer, and an Orientation Toward the Good**

*I must really beg that you will not interfere with me,  
 unless it is to confirm what I say.*  
 —Charles Dickens, *David Copperfield*

**Martha Nussbaum's *Upheavals of Thought***

The major aim of Nussbaum's *Upheavals of Thought* (2001) is to make an ethical claim for compassion in political life. Compassion, she says, is an "invaluable way of extending our ethical awareness and of understanding the human meaning of events and policies" (14). If we concede that emotions are valuable in forming beliefs, she says, "we can readily see how those beliefs can be powerfully shaped by social norms . . . and we can also see how changing social norms can change emotional life" (142). The major battle to be waged, she says, is against disgust. "One might say without exaggeration," she says, "that the root of disgust is primitive shame, the unwillingness to be a needy animal" (221). Her claim is that to make a just society, compassion is necessary to overcome disgust. We must realize, she says, that all are "imperfect and needy" (227). And that sometimes, to varying degrees, need is keeping people from their own capabilities. "We can acknowledge the extent to which we are at the world's mercy," she says:

The extent, for example, to which people who are malnourished, or ill, or treated with contempt by their society have a harder time developing their capacities for learning and choice – even ethical choice . . . . Indeed, it is only when we have noticed that and noticed how these capacities need support from the material world, and therefore exert a claim against our own comfort and effort, that we have appropriately respected them.

(372)

In a compassionate society, she says, needs are recognized and acted upon. Nussbaum develops her pro-compassion argument by basing it on literature and connecting literature to the imagination (15). Reading literature, she claims, is a vital exercise in compassion development because, through the emotions brought about by literature, the imagination is developed and “imagination is a crucial part of the reproduction of healthy character, and hence of a society’s transgenerational stability” (237). History tells us what has happened, she says, but may not show us anything interesting about our own possibilities. Literary works, by contrast, show us general plausible patterns of action, “‘things such as might happen’ in human life” (243). When a literary work is not successful, we know it, because we don’t *feel* anything. When the work *is* successful, we feel it and, according to Nussbaum, have:

1. Emotions toward characters: (a) sharing the emotion of a character by identification, (b) reacting to the emotion of a character.
2. Emotions toward the ‘implied author,’ the sense of life embodied in the text as a whole: (a) sharing that sense of life and its emotions through empathy, (b) reacting to it, either sympathetically or critically. These emotions operate at multiple levels of specificity and generality.
3. Emotions toward one’s own possibilities. These, too, are multiple and operate at multiple levels of specificity and generality. (242)

It’s these emotions, Nussbaum argues, that are at the root of literature-derived compassion. We *feel* things for characters, develop sympathy, and realize our own possibilities.

Like Dorothy Day, Nussbaum is well-versed in her Charles Dickens. Her entryway into the topic of emotions is the death of her mother, and much of *Upheavals of Thought* is quite

personal, as she describes her reactions to her mother's death. When she sees her mother "lying dead in the hospital bed," she says, "I saw, too, the many times that I had seen her lying asleep at home, in just that position, with just that lace collar around her neck" (174). Then, in the notes, she adds:

This perception is shaped, in turn, by the emotional impact of Dickens's description of Steerforth in *David Copperfield*, as David 'saw him lying with his head upon his arms, as I had often seen him lie at school' . . . When I saw how my mother's posture in death was so like her characteristic posture in life, that sentence came into my mind, and I could describe the scene in no other way. (174)

The significance of that description is Nussbaum's choice of words, "I could describe the scene in no other way." In a sense, literature prepared her for her mother's death and came to mind in the wake of an emotional upheaval. "It seemed to me as if a nail from the world had entered into my insides," she says, "a person of enormous value . . . is there no longer" (39). Yet—as was the case for Dorothy Day—Dickens was there for her in time of trouble.

Nussbaum further champions Dickens as she describes her work with economist Amartya Sen. The emotion that comes from the imaginative exercise of reading literature provides, she says, "information without which no informed decision about allocation can be made" (440). For this reason, she says, "Sen and I placed a section from Charles Dickens's *Hard Times* as the epigraph to our volume on *The Quality of Life* (1993): we wanted to emphasize that traditional economics needs to be infused with the information, and the emotional responses, supplied by 'fancy'" (440).

"Fancy" is necessary, literature is necessary, Nussbaum consistently claims, for compassion development because it "creates for the reader a possibility of unselfish and

undemanding love . . . art offers us the only possibility of genuine human contact, and therefore the only possibility of a love that is reciprocal rather than solipsistic” (518-519).

With Nussbaum’s arguments for literature and emotion in mind, then, I return to Dorothy Day’s comment on the meaning of her life. “I’m always telling people to read Dickens or Tolstoy,” she said, “or read Orwell, or read Silone” (Elie 452). Nearing the end of her life, with decades of reflection and experience behind her, Day tells students to *read literature*—arguably because she, like Nussbaum, knows what literature does to emotion. Due to her lifelong commitment to literature, Day made good on the possibility of genuine human contact and unselfish love. “By the age of 10,” Forest says, Day “had become a passionate reader. Sitting with her back to the gas lamp in the library of the Webster Avenue house [in Chicago], she read Victor Hugo, Charles Dickens, Robert Louis Stevenson, James Fenimore Cooper and Edgar Allen Poe” (14). It is easy, then, to imagine young Dorothy Day as a child:

who has been prepared by early wonder and the cultivation of the imagination, and who is psychologically able to have concern about people outside herself, and [who] will greet the shape of another human person with those narrative habits. She will attribute to this shape thoughts and feelings that are in some ways like her own, and in some ways strange and mysterious. She will form the habit of empathy and conjecture, as she tries to make out what this other shape is feeling and thinking. She will become good at decoding ways in which different circumstances shape those insides. (Nussbaum 427)

Arguably, Nussbaum’s claim for human capabilities and material support is similar to Day’s commitment to the Works of Mercy as part of the Catholic Worker. Day worked with, in particular, to use Nussbaums’s words, people “treated with contempt by their society,” and both Nussbaum and Day, very significantly, argue strongly for literature.

### Charles Taylor's *Sources of the Self*

In the previous section, I ended with Nussbaum's claim that a child who has been prepared by early wonder and a cultivation of imagination will be psychologically able to have concern for people outside herself. My ultimate argument is that Dorothy Day's secular reading formed her identity to such an extent that it prepared her for—and sustained her during—her committed Christian vocation. In his *Sources of the Self* (1989) Charles Taylor defines *identity* as an orientation toward “the good” and his book is a history of how we access and conceive of that “good” (47). Much of Taylor's argument rests on the tremendous shift that has taken place in Western human culture. Our holding in awe something *internal* to humans—instead of external—is, he says, a revolution in moral consciousness (94) and the purpose of his *Sources of the Self* is to trace how the West got to this point, to seeking the good as something within instead of outside ourselves.

What has happened over the last few hundred years, Taylor says, is the rise of a worldview that is mechanical and functional—and along with it an instrumental stance toward the body and passions, when firmness and control of desire, a subset of warrior-aristocratic virtues, are no longer played out in public (on the battlefield) but *internally*. Crucially, Taylor says, to use reason is no longer to orient yourself to a system outside yourself—but, instead, to internalize control. To discipline the self no longer means to orient it to an outside source but to control its economic, moral, and sexual desires. Taylor says that so pervasive is this viewpoint that we've come to think that this kind of disciplined disengagement is “natural” for a better understanding of any given scenario (152).

Taylor's *Sources of the Self* intersects with my argument for Dorothy Day and literature at the point where he discusses the special spiritual significance of art. He discusses the idea of

*transfiguration* when, through either the subject or the artist, something ordinary is made significant (443). Arguably, for Dorothy Day, daily life is the ordinary something that was made significant—and that transfiguration began with literature. “For Dorothy Day,” says Coles, the connection between ‘art’ and ‘life’ was real, substantial, a powerful influence on her everyday actions” (21). Day’s devotion to literature was so strong that, arguably, it opened her up to the sanctity of her own life and—unusual for the modern age—oriented her to something external. She told Coles, with “a catch in her voice”:

I try to think back; I try to remember this life that the Lord gave me; the other day I wrote down the words ‘a life remembered,’ and I was going to try to make a summary for myself, write what mattered most – but I couldn’t do it. I just sat there and thought of our Lord, and His visit to us all those centuries ago, and I said to myself that my great luck was to have had Him on my mind for so long in my life! (16)

The main relevance of Taylor’s argument to my own—for the need to consider Day’s secular reading as part of her vision—is a matter of art. Taylor’s conception of identity as an orientation toward the good is significant toward my overall argument on Dorothy Day and literature because Day found her orientation to the good through art—and she was able to do something unique: to “live by” the vision of her favorite writers and orient herself to their conception of mercy.

### **And Then Something Happens**

In *A Poetry Handbook* (1994), the poet Mary Oliver uses the phrase “something begins to happen” (7). That *something*, she says, occurs when Romeo and Juliet make appointments and keep them. If they had failed to meet, “there would have been no romance, no passion, none of the drama for which we remember and celebrate them” (7). Oliver is talking in terms of poems

here—what she describes as a “love affair” between emotion and the “learned skills of the conscious mind” (7). But what she says about making and keeping appointments can be also applied to prayer. For when anything is performed, steadily and ritualistically, something does begin to happen. Oliver says as much later when she describes the importance of forgetting the self, which, she says, “keeps open the gates of prayer” (*Dance* 99). In their book *Prayer: A History* (2005) Philip Zaleski and Carol Zaleski describe the great variety of practices and modes of prayer throughout cultures and history. In a particularly beautiful example, they include a quotation from the twentieth-century Jewish theologian and activist Abraham Joshua Heschel, who describes how he felt in Berlin when he neglected the ritual of prayer that he had grown up with: “Suddenly I noticed that the sun had gone down, evening had arrived . . . . I had forgotten God – I had forgotten Sinai – I had forgotten that sunset is my business – that my task is ‘to restore the world to the kingship of the Lord’” (52). Zaleski and Zaleski write, “The magic inherent in Jewish prayer comes from God as a gift and returns to God as a thank-offering” (52).

Part of my argument for Dorothy Day and literature considers Day’s reading as prayer. Although Day is critical of her own practices in the years before her conversion, she was consistently reading nineteenth-century novels during that time—and something was happening. “I read Dickens every evening,” she writes about her years on the beach on Staten Island (*Long Loneliness* 133). And well before that—when she was still in college—“The only thing I was really interested in was reading the books I selected for myself,” she says in her autobiography (43). “The Russian writers appealed to me . . .” she writes, “and I read everything of Dostoevsky as well as the stories of . . . Tolstoy. Both Dostoevsky and Tolstoy made me cling to a faith in God . . .” (*Long Loneliness* 43). She regularly read nineteenth-century texts before her conversion—and she kept at it throughout her life. Less than a year before her death, Coles asked



her what she was reading and she told him, he says, “her beloved Tolstoy – ‘The Death of Ivan Ilyich’ – and Dickens – *Little Dorrit*” (16).

At a high level of commitment to any given concentrated effort, something *does* happen. In *David Copperfield*, for example, David says, about his success as a writer, “I never could have done what I have done, without the habits of punctuality, order, and diligence, without the determination to concentrate myself on one object at a time, no matter how quickly its successor should come upon its heels” (613). Nussbaum likewise, again discussing compassion, cites Iris Murdoch’s stress on “the long and patient effort of vision, the painstaking inner moral work, that is required if we are to change our ways of seeing people we fear, or hate, or resent. Precisely because such matters are both habitual and important to us, change will not be easy” (233). All her life, Day sought out nineteenth-century literature for its attention to the poor, to forgiveness, to mercy—and that continual effort, that concentration, was a form of prayer. Throughout her active life, literature kept the steady beat.

More visibly, in 1971, Day prayed at the grave of Dostoevsky, her “mentor for more than half a century” (Forest 175). This outward prayer illustrates the exchange of gifts described by Heschel in his “the sunset was my business.” Literature—the gifts of Dickens, Tolstoy, and Dostoevsky—was given to Day, and she gave back her life, through “living by” their vision. As when Nussbaum thought of Steerforth when she saw her mother’s body, Day saw Dickens in the poor. “Certainly,” Ellsberg writes in his introduction to Dorothy Day’s Diaries, “for Dorothy, writing was a form of prayer . . . It is striking how many entries in her diaries refer specifically to prayer . . .” (xxvi). Writing can indeed be prayer, yet arguably Day’s reading, too, was an ongoing conversation with God, an exchange of gifts. St. Teresa of Avila defined prayer as “nothing but friendly intercourse, and frequent solitary converse, with Him who we know loves

us” (*Diaries* xxvi), and the amount of time Day spent reading, the ritual aspect of it, its pride of place in her routine, all give it very high spiritual status.

In her argument for literature as a crucial way to develop compassion, Nussbaum uses, as she says, “a very Stoic image” (75). In describing levels of emotion, she says, “the background emotion is the wound, the situational emotion the world’s knife entering the wound” (75). For Day, her firm and consistent reading of nineteenth-century novels created the wound. ““All my life I have been haunted by God,”” Day says in her autobiography, “as Kiriloff said in *The Possessed*” (11). “I do believe every soul,” she says on the next page, “has a tendency toward God” (12). Her reading of nineteenth-century texts opened up her own tendency toward God—and, when the “world’s wound” entered her—during her active life as a person committed to radical equality—she responded with empathy, justice, and courage, because it was an extended prayer, an exchange, a return of what literature had given to her.

**Part 3**  
**Dickens as an Influence on Day**

*I have loved you all my life!*  
 —Charles Dickens, *David Copperfield*

Before I begin discussing Dickens and Day together, I must briefly address the viewpoint that Charles Dickens's characters are unrealistic or too-good-to-be-true. Indeed, when presented with such a character as Amy Dorrit or Agnes Wickfield or Mr. Peggotty, it's hard to imagine anyone so good existing in the "real world." Dorothy Day knew that, and, for her, it was a matter of training. She struck "an attitude of optimism about . . . possibilities for attaining important goals," to use Nussbaum's discussion of psychologist Martin Seligman's view (103). Then, once decided, Day consistently lived out that optimism. She says, "[I]f you have only managed to survive the filth, the misery, the destitution of our American skid rows by seeing Christ in the people thereon, you've got yourself pretty well trained to find the good, to find concordances, to find that which is of God in everyone" (*Little* 306). With that autobiographical statement in mind, I suggest that Dorothy Day was aware of the unlikelihood of "real" people being as consistently selfless as Little Dorrit—yet she admits that she has herself "pretty well trained to find the good." In even this, she took a cue from Dickens, who was certainly aware of the "bawling, splashing, link-lighted, umbrella-struggling, hackney-coach-jostling, patten-clinking, muddy, miserable world" (*Copperfield* 296) and still wrote characters such as Mr. Peggotty, Agnes, and Little Dorrit. Dorothy Day *chose* to "live by" what she saw as the good in Dickens novels, the themes of forgiveness and mercy. It may be claimed that Day's version of Charles Dickens's novels is too rosy or simplistic. However, I argue that, as her moral training demanded, Day chose to emphasize the virtue she saw in Dickens and elected to live by that vision.

Likewise, before discussing Day and Dickens together, I must also acknowledge that we can never know, precisely, to what extent one writer influences another. Yet since Dorothy Day repeatedly mentions her reading of Dickens, it is safe to assume, to a certain extent, that she *was* influenced by him—and that seeking his influence is a worthwhile endeavor. I offer the caveat, of course, that all discussions of influence are ultimately fluid. But, more significantly, I suggest that even such fluidity has value because it shows the ripple effect of literature, the way it shapes human culture and the way it stays *alive*.

### **Day and Dickens: A Matter of Style**

Day, it seems, had a complicated relationship with writing. She was certainly drawn to it: she mentions the “irresistible urge to write” (*Long Loneliness* 94). Yet she struggled to balance her writing with the demands of the world around her: “The sustained effort of writing, of putting pen to paper so many hours a day,” she says, “when there are human beings around who need me, when there is sickness, and hunger, and sorrow, is a harrowingly painful job” (*Long Loneliness* 11). Fortunately, despite her reservations, she did write—and wrote well. At the end of her *The Art of Memoir* the celebrated autobiographical writer Mary Karr offers a list of recommended memoirs, “Required Reading,” she says, and marks with an asterisk the memoirs she’s taught—among them Nabokov’s *Speak, Memory* (1951), Angelou’s *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969), Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior* (1976) and Dorothy Day’s *The Long Loneliness* (1952). About the asterisk, Karr says, “Does this mean they’re better written? Absolutely” (221). Even living in voluntary poverty, Day managed to write what Karr considers a great memoir, and I propose Charles Dickens as one reason why. “I have always been a journalist and a diarist pure and simple,” Day says, “but as long as I could remember, I dreamed

in terms of novels” (*Long Loneliness* 161). To “dream in terms of novels,” suggests that, although she was not a fiction writer, Day wrote via the *form* of the novel. Under the influence of nineteenth-century masters, particularly Dickens, Day understood the everyday and wrote with great honesty and characterization.

Taylor, in *Sources of the Self*, writes of the novel: “The very form of narration, relating the—sometimes minute—particulars of life, puts all events and lives on the same stylistic footing” (287). Day indeed writes of the particulars of life, the sometimes minute. Her surname is perfect—perhaps providential—because she writes of each day. Her conception of herself as a diarist and journalist who dreamed in terms of novels is perfectly suited for her descriptions of her own experience and the lives of people she knew. “Journal” derives from the Old French for a day’s work. It comes to us, too, through the late Latin “of or belonging to a day” (OED). Diary, likewise, comes from the Latin “diarium” meaning daily allowance” (OED). Novels, says Taylor, unlike previous kinds of literature were “reserved for the everyday reality of common people” (*Sources* 287). Day’s style is precisely that: it *is* the reality of the people, their lives by the day—and Dickens’s influence is clear. Over and over—Dorothy Day *daily* and *journalistically* illuminates the reality of the common people. Focusing on *David Copperfield* and *Little Dorrit*, two Dickens novels that, according to Coles, Day “especially loved” (169), I will now examine ways that the novels influenced Day in style and in action.

### **Autobiographical Writing and *David Copperfield***

*David Copperfield*, says Jeremy Tambling in his introduction to the Penguin edition, “has had profound influences . . . in English literature” (xvi). He mentions *Copperfield*’s sway on such writers as Henry James, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Freud, Joyce, and George Eliot. To that list

of luminaries, I suggest the addition of Dorothy Day—for *David Copperfield*, in its presentation and style, influenced very much her autobiography *The Long Loneliness*.

Tambling suggests that “Dickens’s interest in writing a veiled autobiography is matched by the text’s interest in the past and *retrospect*” (xxiii). The same—without the veil—can be said of Day’s *The Long Loneliness*. The word “remember” comes up often in both pieces. “I took my dishwashing very seriously and I remember scouring faucets until they shone,” says Day (24). “Now I am in the garden at the back, beyond the yard where the empty pigeon-house and dog-kennel are—a very preserve of butterflies, as I remember it,” says Copperfield (Dickens 28). “Her mouth was full and childlike and there were dimples in her cheeks,” says Day. “I can remember her face clearly” (48). “I don’t remember that any individual object had a bare, pinched, spare look; but I do remember that the whole place had” says Dickens (264). “I remember one Sunday afternoon out on the prairie when she and the boy to whom she was engaged and I were having a picnic,” says Day (48). “He stood between them, looking on the prostrate girl with a mixture of compassion for her, and of jealousy of her holding any companionship with her whom he loved so well, which I have always remembered distinctly,” says Dickens (346). The frequent use of “remember” is significant because it gives the writing a personal touch. Day thought of writing as “an act of community” (*Diaries* xvii). Writing is, she says, “comforting, consoling, helping, advising on our part as well as asking it on yours. It is a part of our human association with each other. It is an expression of our love and concern for each other” (*Diaries* xviii). Dickens, in his preface to *Little Dorrit* addresses his readers, “Deeply sensible of the affection and confidence that have grown up between us, I add to this Preface . . . May we meet again!” (6). Both Day and Dickens wrote for their readers, and their frequent use of “remember” is a direct address to them and an expression of conversation and trust.

Both Dickens and Day add savor to their stories, too, by emphasizing the ongoing nature of memory. David describes, for example, “common colored pictures” at Mr. Peggoty’s house “such as I have never seen since in the hands of pedlars, without seeing the whole interior of Peggotty’s brother’s house again” (41). Likewise, and even more beautifully, later in *David Copperfield* David narrates,

I cannot call to mind where or when, in my childhood, I had seen a stained glass window in a church. Nor do I recall its subject. But I know that when I saw her turn round, in the grave light of the old staircase, and wait for us, above, I thought of that window; and that I associated something of its tranquil brightness with Agnes Wickfield ever afterwards.  
(233)

Such is the way Day presents her autobiography, too. Recalling the time she stumbled upon her friend’s mother, “in the front bedroom” praying on her knees, Day writes, “as I think back I realize that it was Mrs. Barrett, another neighbor, who gave me my first impulse toward Catholicism . . . I felt a burst of love toward Mrs. Barrett that I have never forgotten, a feeling of gratitude and happiness that warmed my heart” (*Long Loneliness* 25). And, more darkly, describing her time in prison, without food: “Never would I recover,” she says, “from this wound, this ugly knowledge I had gained of what men were capable in their treatment of each other” (79). Tambling calls the sense of space and time in *David Copperfield* “new and modern” (xv) yet it also rings with something much older. In *A Secular Age*, Taylor discusses pre-Reformation conceptions of Christianity, when “power . . . resided in things [and] objects were loci of spiritual power” (32). Much memory is connected with physical objects here: pictures and windows, front bedrooms and food. Both Dickens and Day use objects and memory to convey the enormous spiritual power of everyday life.

## Honesty

The “usual assets will help,” Mary Oliver says, in describing the important and unlikely work of writing *memorably* (*Dance* 96). One of the assets Oliver names is honesty, and arguably honesty is one big reason Dickens’s work is still read today and also why Dorothy Day is now being considered for sainthood. “I have never read the journals of any saint (or soon-to-be-saint),” says James Martin, S.J., in his praise of Day’s diaries, “that are so unflinchingly honest” (*Diaries*). Day writes with disarming honesty—about love, about her search for meaning—and Dickens’s influence is shown again.

Day’s autobiography, *The Long Loneliness*, is written, mostly, as an older self telling the story of a younger self and Day—like Dickens in *David Copperfield*—frequently admits the unreliability of memory. “I write these things now because sometimes I am seized with fright at my presumption,” she says (59). She fears that she somehow is not telling the truth or distorting it and says she “cannot guarantee” her story’s truth, “for I am writing of the past” (59). Likewise, David Copperfield gives himself room for fallibility. For example, when riding with the Omer family he says, “I do not think I have ever experienced so strange a feeling in my life (I am wiser now, perhaps) as that of being with them, remembering how they had been employed, and seeing them enjoy the ride” (139). His hedging words, “I do not think” and “perhaps” give crucial room for error. David also begins his story: “Whether I shall turn out to be the hero of my own life,” he says, “or whether that station will be held by anybody else, these pages must show” (13). He thus leaves room for interpretation, and in the telling of both stories, Day’s and Copperfield’s, there’s a sense of revelation. The narrators are admitting that they’re not at all sure if they’re getting it just right—but that’s part of it too. In both Dickens and Day what the narrative style comes down



to is *honesty*. In telling your own story, if you don't admit that you might not be getting it exactly right, you are not telling the truth.

Further, and just as significantly, both Dickens and Day write honestly of emotion. "The subjects that stir the heart are not so many," says Oliver, "and they do not change" (*Dance* 11). Day understood this. "In the long run all man's problems are the same," she says, "his human needs of sustenance and love" (*Long Loneliness* 10). Both Dickens in *David Copperfield* and Day in *The Long Loneliness* write about these human needs, which can be summed up by the word longing: the longing for another person, the longing for a vocation. No longing is particularly easy to admit. Yet Dickens and Day write memorably because they address that longing. They write about the needs of love and sustenance—physical and spiritual—and they write about how that longing feels.

In *David Copperfield*, for example, Dickens describes the eldest Miss Larkins. "She is dressed in blue," he says, "with blue flowers in her hair—forget-me-nots—as if *she* had any need to wear forget-me-nots!" (279). Later, when Dora exclaims, "My pet!" David narrates parenthetically and pathetically, "The last two words were to the dog. Oh if they had only been to me!" (403). About Steerforth David says, "He did not know me, but I knew him in a moment" (296). And: "I should always love her," David says about Dora, "every minute, to distraction" (494). This *need*—the little words "if" and "only"—is difficult to bring up because it goes against independent sensibilities and admits weakness and imperfection. Yet Dickens's *Copperfield* does it, and Dorothy Day, under his influence, writes honestly, too. About a teenage crush, she says in her autobiography, "We never exchanged a word, but I hungered for his look!" (30). And, later, "The tie between us was that we were in love with the same man" (98). And: "I was ill that winter, and unhappily in love" (101). Day is honest about experiences with the rocky

road of human love. She writes, for example, of Forster Batterham, with echoes of David's love for Dora:

I loved him for all he knew and pitied him for all he didn't know. I loved him for the odds and ends I had to fish out of his sweater pockets and for the sand and shells he brought in with his fishing. I loved his lean cold body as he got into bed smelling of the sea, and I loved his integrity and stubborn pride. (*Lone Loneliness* 148)

In her writing Day does credit Forster's love of nature as leading her to religion. Yet, she also includes her love for him to show the magnitude of the sacrifice she made in turning to God and becoming celibate. "It was years before I awakened without that longing for a face pressed against my breast, an arm about my shoulder," she says, "The sense of loss was there. It was a price I had paid" (*Long Loneliness* 236).

Dickens as Copperfield and Day as herself also are honest about their own search for meaning in their lives. Vocation is certainly a theme in *David Copperfield* and the novel can be defined as a search for sustenance and love, as Copperfield seeks both people and work to sustain him. Lightly threaded throughout the novel is Copperfield's growth as a writer. His growing sense of style is shown in his comment about a note he writes, when he says he "couldn't help feeling, when I read this composition over . . . that it was something in the style of Mr. Micawber" and adds, "However, I sent it" (560). Later he describes his budding fame, "I wrote a great deal now, and was beginning in a small way to be known as a writer . . ." (652). Through it all is a sense of seeking—of a growing firmness in the desire to be of use. About his work, he passionately says that he "truly devoted myself to it with my strongest earnestness, and bestowed upon it every energy of my soul" (849).

Day's autobiography is likewise a search for vocation. In it, she writes of her great friend Reyna Simons Prohme and her "love of truth, her search for it" (70). The same, of course, can be said of Day herself, and her autobiography is very much a story of a seeker. "Whenever I felt the beauty of the world in song or story," she says, "in the material universe around me, or glimpsed it in human love, I wanted to cry out with joy" (29). Yet, she is very critical about her early efforts. She wanted to be imprisoned, to march in picket lines, to be an influence, she says, but laments the "ambition" and "self-seeking" in her desire (60). She writes of seeing, while in college:

Disabled men, without arms and legs, blind men, consumptive men, exhausted men with the manhood drained from them by industrialism; farmers gaunt and harried with debt; mothers weighed down with children at their skirts, in their arms, in their wombs, children ailing and rickety—all this long procession of desperate people called to me. Where were the saints to try to change the social order, not just to minister to the slaves but to do away with slavery? (45)

Much of her autobiography is her about her search for a way to help. After becoming Catholic and just before meeting Peter Maurin, Day prayed, she says, "a prayer which came with tears and with anguish, that some way would open up for me to use what talents I possessed for my fellow workers, for the poor" (166). And, as it does for David Copperfield, the sustenance does come for Day. She finds her vocation at the Catholic Worker and satisfies her "longing to write, to be pursuing the career of a journalist" *and* her desire to change the social order (*Long Loneliness* 93).

Dickens, it is well known, was a social critic too. His writing has been described as "angry or melancholic in tone" (Tambling xi). It is not surprising, then, that both Dickens and

Day describe—honestly—their search for purpose, as they seek for a way to contribute. Due in large part to the honesty they employ as part of the *search*, their writing is so good that it has, in some way, made a difference. Nussbaum believes in a correlation between “artistic merit and the ability to engage the personality at a deep level” (433). “It’s not so easy for just anyone,” she says, “to construct a story that will move the heart” (433). In his honesty about his search for love and sustenance, Dickens was a stylistically important influence on Dorothy Day, who in her turn, wrote honestly about her search too. They both wrote to engage the personality on a deep level, and both continue to engage their readers’ personalities today.

### **Characterization**

It is no great discovery that Charles Dickens is good at writing character. Has anyone ever written in English who is *as* good? To take just a few examples, Dickens, in *David Copperfield* describes Uriah Heep as, “[A] red-haired person—a youth of fifteen . . . whose hair was cropped as close as the closest stubble; who had hardly any eyebrows, and no eyelashes, and eyes of a red-brown; so unsheltered and unshaded, that I remember wondering how he went to sleep” (229). Traddles “[i]n a tight sky-blue suit that made his arms and legs like German sausage, or roly-poly puddings . . . was the merriest and most miserable of all the boys” (102) David says, and adds, “I never think of that boy but with a strange disposition to laugh, and with tears in my eyes . . .” (103). In *Little Dorrit*, Dickens creates such wonders as Pet’s twin sister, who died, says Mr. Meagles, “when we could just see her eyes—exactly like Pet’s—above the table, as she stood on tiptoe holding by it” (34). And Mrs. General, who is “in her element” when “[n]obody had an opinion,” when “[t]here was a formation of surface going on around her on an amazing scale, and it had not a flaw of courage or honest free speech in it” (537). Or Mr. Pancks, whose “very hair seemed to sparkle, as he roughened it . . . in that highly-charged state

. . . one might have expected to draw sparks and snaps from him by presenting a knuckle to any part of his figure” (408).

In writing character, Day’s devotion to novels, her time on the beach, when she read Dickens every night, comes out in her work. In *The Long Loneliness*, she describes, for example, her neighbor, Sasha, who “usually kept a cigarette tucked behind his ear and wore bright red blouses around the house” (123) and his wife, who “never came into my house without husband or children following after . . . she never sat down but stood poised by the window or fireplace with a cup of tea, talking hastily before she was dragged back to find skates or shovels or marbles or a piece of bread and butter” (126). About her beloved Peter Maurin, Day describes “a short, stocky man in his mid-fifties . . . I like people to look their part,” she says, “and if they are workers, to look like workers, and if they are peasants to look like peasants. I like to see the shape of a man’s hands, the strength of his neck and shoulders” (169). She writes a more detailed portrait in 1952, of a Mr. Maurice O’Connell, “A Friend of the Family,” who stayed with the Catholic Worker for at least nine years:

He had come from Ireland so many years before that he remembered, he said, when Canal Street was not a street but a canal. He was one of twenty-one children, and his father was an athlete and a carpenter. Maurice pictured him as a jaunty lad with his children, excelling in feats of strength and looked upon with admiring indulgence by his wife, who, according to Maurice, nursed all her children herself, baked all her bread, spun and wove, did all her housekeeping, and never failed in anything. It was, indeed, a picture of the valiant woman that Maurice used to draw for us when any of the women were not able to nurse their children (not to speak of other failures). (*Little* 128-129)

All these particularities of character—as inspired by Dickens—are important to Day because they are at the burning core of her philosophy of personalism. Day believed, and lived out the belief, that social organizations are sound only as long as they uphold the dignity of every human person. She criticizes in 1934, to give only one example, the “mass care of the impoverished” when men “are hustled through, catalogued, ticketed, stamped with the seal of approval, fed in a rush, and passed on to the baths, the doctor, the beds, all with a grim efficiency” (*Little* 58). It might seem a simple or trivial thing to create a portrait of someone with a few words and colorful phrases—but it’s not. Every word and colorful phrase that distinguishes any one person as an individual is of absolute importance because it shows the dignity of each human soul. Pope Francis praised Day for her contribution to “social justice and the rights of persons” (Beckwith) and Day believed strongly in personalism, especially as against the nameless, faceless system that has a tendency to crush. And it is for this important reason, one among many, that Dickens’s influence—that literature’s influence—on Dorothy Day should be more thoroughly acknowledged.

### **The Works of Mercy and *Little Dorrit***

Day says in 1948, “If our jobs do not contribute to the common good, we pray God for the grace to give them up. Have they to do with shelter, food, clothing? Have they to do with the Works of Mercy? Everyone should be able to place his job in the category of the Works of Mercy” (*Little* 229). What is significant and so very interesting about Dorothy Day is that she set out to “live by” literature. Studying Day through her reading shows that to be influenced by novels doesn’t necessarily mean to become a novelist yourself. Literature doesn’t have to be just studied or written about, it can be *lived*. According to “The Catholic Worker Movement”

website, Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin lived lives of “active love” based on the Works of Mercy in the Christian Tradition:

**The corporal works of mercy:**

feeding the hungry

giving drink to the thirsty

clothing the naked

offering hospitality to the homeless

caring for the sick

visiting the imprisoned

burying the dead

**The spiritual works of mercy:**

admonishing the sinner

instructing the ignorant

counseling the doubtful

comforting the sorrowful

bearing wrongs patiently

forgiving all injuries

praying for the living and the dead (“The Works of Mercy”)

The most obvious Work of Mercy in *Little Dorrit* is visiting the imprisoned. Day had been to prison and was familiar with its reality. “I knew that behind bars all over the world there were women and men, young girls and boys,” she says, “suffering constraint, punishment, isolation and hardship for crimes of which all of us were guilty” (*Long Loneliness* 78). Dickens, too, is bleak in his description: “the imprisoned men,” he says, “were all deteriorated by

confinement . . . the iron was rusty, the stone was slimy, the wood was rotten, the air was faint, the light was dim” (18). Both Day and Dickens are honest in the effect that prison has on human beings. John Baptist, in prison at Marseilles, says, “I can wake when I will, I can sleep when I will. It’s all the same” (18). Likewise, about prison, Day says in her autobiography, “I had an ugly sense of the futility of human effort . . .” (79). The point could be made, using these examples, that prison is the worst thing that could happen to a human. Walter Benjamin, in his essay on history uses the word “acedia” defined by medieval theologians “as the root cause of sadness” (392). Acedia, says Benjamin, is “indolence of the heart” (392). And it is acedia that is evident in both Dickens and Day’s descriptions of prison. That *giving up* is perhaps the worst choice a human could make, so bad that the word “choice” doesn’t quite fit. It’s so meaningless that it’s beyond human agency.

But, into the dark world of Dickens’s *Little Dorrit* a child is born. Mrs. Bangham, former prisoner and current messenger to the outside, describes Little Dorrit, before her birth, as “a little sweet cherub . . . born inside the lock” (77). And, then, throughout the novel *Little Dorrit remains* a sweet little cherub, born inside the lock. She continually performs the Works of Mercy, living with her father within the Marshalsea and offering corporal and spiritual support. She, to take just a few examples: feeds her father [“the table was laid for his supper” (204)]; clothes her father [“his old grey gown was ready for him on his chair-back at the fire” (204)]; comforts the sorrowful [when her father isn’t getting the attention he thinks he deserves, she “soothes” him and tells him she “could not honor him more if he were the favorite of Fortune and the whole world acknowledged him” (247)]; and forgives all injuries [when Clennam’s mother asks, “Can you forgive me?” Little Dorrit responds, “I can, and Heaven knows I do!”



(823)]. And all the while she bears wrongs patiently. She is described as “nothing” and “what they had a right to expect, and nothing more” (55, 109). And yet she continues to give.

And I argue here that, as in all things, literature sustained and inspired Dorothy Day in her *Works of Mercy*. She tells Coles that she found God’s love in “the long-suffering little Dorrit” (158). And perhaps the best account I’ve discovered yet for Day’s vision is Dickens’s description of Little Dorrit:

What her pitiful look saw . . . in her father, in her sister, in her brother, in the jail; how much, or how little of the 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. (86)

In his portrait of Dorothy Day, Coles recounts the first time he met her. In the spring of 1952, he says, he “showed up” at the Catholic Worker soup kitchen on the Lower East Side (xvii). And there he found Day in conversation with another middle-aged woman. “When would it end,” he wondered, “the alcoholic ranting and the silent nodding, occasionally interrupted by a brief question, which only served, maddeningly to wind up the already overtalkative one rather than wind her down?” (xviii). Then after a long time, Coles says, Day asked the woman if she would mind an interruption then walked over to him and said, “Are you waiting to talk with one of us?” (xviii). That question, Coles says, “cut through layers of self-importance . . . [with it] so quietly and politely spoken, she had indirectly told me what the Catholic Worker Movement is all about and what she herself was like” (xviii).

In that scene—which meant so much to Coles, that he was still writing about it 35 years after the event—it is easy to see Day “living by” Dickens’s Amy Dorrit. Through continual exposure and reflection, she had internalized what she saw as the moral ideas of her favorite writers—to the extent that she could behave in a way that continued their work. “Good poems,” says Oliver, “are the best teachers. Perhaps they are the only teachers” (*Handbook* 10). Part of my argument in this thesis is that Dorothy Day had absorbed literature so deeply that she was *living* it and was able to teach others by her merciful example.

### **Conclusion**

The introduction to John Stuart Mill’s *Autobiography* describes Mill’s education as “theological in force, if agnostic in creed, and its most evident engine was moral” (14). Obviously, Dorothy Day operated differently—her creed was far from agnostic. Yet, very like Mill, a moral engine ran strong in her, and I offer her story through literature as part of the ongoing project of humanity. “If individual life is short,” says Mill, “the life of the human species is not short” (*Three Essays* 106). Near the end of *A Secular Age* Taylor writes about metaphors, that it takes many, over and over again, before we can “even distantly hope to capture something of God’s work in the world” (652). The purpose of my literature-based approach to Dorothy Day’s life is to provide yet another metaphor for the work of the world. David Copperfield says, “I had not the hardihood to suggest to Dora’s father that possibly we might even improve the world a little, if we got up early in the morning, and took off our coats to the work” (485). Pope Francis cites Day’s inspiration as the lives of the saints—but inspiration comes in many forms. It can be found in anyone who gets up early and takes off their coats to the work.

Day saw her own life as a continuation of the work of the gospel *and* that of her favorite writers. A study of her life should be studied via literature because Dorothy Day's life *was* a work of literature. "A poem," says Robert Frost, "begins as a lump in the throat, a sense of wrong . . ." (Meyer xxviii). Dorothy Day felt that lump, she felt that wrong, and she *lived*—as one person in the life of the human species—in a way that righted it. Her vision is important to study because the life of the human species is *not short* and we need her vision of equality. Arguably, too, we need to study her commitment not just to religious but to secular literature because each side of Dorothy Day's being complements the other. "No matter how old I get . . . no matter how feeble, short of breath . . . with all these symptoms of age and decrepitude," she writes, as an old woman, "my heart can still leap for joy as I read and suddenly assent to some great truth enunciated by some great mind and heart" (*Diaries* xxii). Day's use of the words "some great truth" and "some great mind and heart" illustrate her ecumenical spirit. Even though she was a committed Christian, "As high as the heavens are above the earth, so high Jesus at whose name every knee should bow," she says, (*Letters* 340) still, in reference to the different parts of her life, she often said: "It all goes together" (*Letters* xxii).

There's the idea, in Judeo-Christian tradition, that God exists in dialogue. In Exodus 37:9 two angels face each other, because that's where God exists: between them (Solomon 207). My entire argument about Dorothy Day and literature rests on the concept of *between*. Dickens himself writes to a friend about writing *Copperfield*, "I am within three pages of the shore; and am strangely divided, as usual in such cases, between sorrow and joy" (Tambling xxii-xxiii). *David Copperfield* is celebrated, too, as Dickens's great novel, "his 'favourite child,'" as Tambling notes, "was the one in the middle, the one in between the two groups [the more comic earlier novels and the angrier later novels]" (xxii-xxiii). Day dwelt in the *between*, too. She said

she wanted to live by the vision of the church *and* some of her favorite writers. Day's secular reading *complemented* her religious reading, the corporal works of mercy *complement* the spiritual works of mercy, and creative energy existed *between* Charles Dickens and Dorothy Day. Dickens influenced Day in the solitary work of writing and in the community work of activism.

In *David Copperfield* David is impressed with a carving of a ship he sees on Mr. Peggotty's mantel-shelf. "[A] work of art," he says, "combining composition with carpentry, which I considered to be one of the most enviable possessions that the world could afford" (42). Dorothy Day's life, too, is a work of art—a combination of what she was made of and the influences that shaped her—and her extraordinary life is a necessary metaphor for the human experience. Day, to the extent that she is known, is known for her study of the Bible and the saints—yet her religious convictions were always lived out in a secular world and her life and example cannot be more wholly understood without appreciating her secular influences, too.

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