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**Secrets and Hiding Places:
The Worth of Women in *Nicholas Nickleby***

by Elizabeth Redmond

requirements for the degree of Master
of Arts in the Department of English
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Abstract

In early Victorian England, married women were denied the legal right to own property, and social convention remanded them to ostracism if they chose to remain single. Likewise, jobs that were available to women failed to pay a living wage, so women were placed under tremendous economic and social pressure to marry. In Charles Dickens' novel, *Nicholas Nickleby*, he depicts how marriage becomes manipulated within the working and middle classes as a means to acquire wealth. Dickens also compares the repression of women to the abuse suffered by school children in the Yorkshire schools, which had a reputation for neglecting students and misappropriating tuition. Dickens also attempts to show that the denial of property rights to women also affects the broader society. He presents male characters as feminized and infantilized to show that brutal capitalism stands to emasculate men who are unwilling to stoop to corruption in order to be successful.

Until the late nineteenth century, marriage laws in Victorian England prohibited women from owning property. When *The Life and Adventures of Nicholas Nickleby* was initially published in 1838, women had no rights of ownership over the wages they earned from employment, inheritance bequeathed to them from family, or property they owned prior to being married. Because the employment opportunities available to women paid them less-than-subsistence wages and because social conventions esteemed women only when they embraced domestic roles, women were not only under tremendous social pressure to marry, but they also imposed that same pressure on themselves. To remain single condemned the Victorian woman to poverty and social ostracism. Because the acquisition of property became legally attached to the acquisition of a wife, marriage became a means for men to improve their economic status, and the offer of a marriage proposal to a wealthy woman had to be viewed as suspect. Courtship became an exercise in fortune hunting, and a dowerless woman had to submit to marriage proposals from any libertine who wanted to exploit her sexually or abuse her physically; and again, the legal system offered her no recourse if her husband were abusive. In Victorian culture, married women ceased to be individuals and instead became commodities.

Charles Dickens, who is known for deriving his inspiration from episodes in his own life, focuses, in *Nicholas Nickleby*, on the plight of working-class and middle-class characters. Although in his early youth, Dickens enjoyed a middle-class upbringing, his security was dashed when his father's financial imprudence resulted in the elder Dickens being arrested and incarcerated in the Marshalsea debtor's prison. Because young Charles was already an adolescent when his father was arrested, he was prohibited from joining his family in the decrepit cloister and was instead compelled to take a job filling and labeling bottles at a boot blacking factory (Ackroyd 10-11). Dickens suffered inexorable humiliation as a result of his unexpected

slide into poverty, which made him see the tenuous divide between the classes. The thin veil that separated the sated from the hungry could be easily ripped away without warning, and the measures that the middle class took to ensure their financial security were often self-serving, predatory, and unforgiving.

His exile to the blacking factory also revealed to Dickens the acute state of his helplessness. Being a child, he relied on his father to secure his financial future, and he had had no say in stopping the ax of his father's debts from falling upon him. When his father was imprisoned, Dickens was forced to support himself and contribute to the support of his family by working in a dingy factory, so the illusion of patriarchal security was obliterated. Dickens imprints his own experience on the predicament of Victorian women. The Victorian legislature and judiciary failed to recognize married women as separate individuals from their husbands because the assumption was that once a woman married, her husband guaranteed the satisfaction of her needs. In truth, men often acquired wives to siphon their assets and use their wives as a means of support. The changing economic landscape created a new class structure, and as a result, invited exploitation of citizens who were not endowed with legal rights.

As the economic culture shifts in Victorian England from rural agricultural to urban industrial, the aristocratic landowners play less of a role in the plight of the common people. Fewer people are working as tenant farmers for wealthy landowners, and instead the masses are funneling into cities to work in factories. With the change to industrialism, the financial divide between the middle class and the working class is narrowed compared to the divide that had been measured between the aristocracy and tenant farmers. Dickens postures the urban middle class as the new grasping middle class and the working class as the new aspirational working class. The middle class was "grasping" to avoid being pulled down into the pit with the poor, and the

working class was “aspiring” because Dickens believed in the power of individual ingenuity and creativity to remedy a life in despair, and he eschewed any social system that constrained individuals from operating to improve their lots. The aristocratic class has been replaced in *Nicholas Nickleby* by the indolent class; that is, characters who lack royal pedigrees but who have access to capital. Ralph Nickleby, Mr. Lillyvick, and Arthur Gride do not actually perform any kind of labor; instead they are money lenders and money collectors. Members of the indolent class make no pretense about wanting to be viewed as beneficent landowners because they are as vulnerable as the characters on whom they prey to the caprices that eviscerate fortunes and condemn the indigent to work houses and debtor’s prisons. Unlike the old money of the aristocracy which comes with the assurance of legacy, the new money of the indolent class is precarious. Rather than being handed down through generations, wealth becomes ephemeral, and women and their property become a means to add to the coffers.

Before the passages of the Married Women’s Property Acts of 1870 and 1882, which gave married women rights to property ownership, “under the common law a wife was in many ways regarded as the property of her husband. The common law doctrine of coverture dictated that when a woman married, her legal personality was subsumed in that of her husband” (Shanley 8). In addition, “a man assumed legal rights over his wife’s property at marriage, and any property that came to her during marriage was legally his” (Shanley 8). By attaching the ownership of women’s property to marriage, women could have no confidence that suitors sought a match because of any sincere or honorable intentions. While the stakes involved in marriage were straightforward, men’s motives, as Dickens portrays, were not. Because the law sanctioned viewing marriage as synonymous with the acquisition of property, a gentleman incurred no social stigma in seeking a match that would yield the best financial advantage.

Likewise, a moneyed individual, who did not need to marry a woman with a fortune, could use his wealth to “purchase” a bride because of her beauty and sexual attractiveness. Victorian society did not visualize a woman as single and independent; therefore, being unable to support herself, a woman had to entertain proposals from men who sought her as they would the services of a prostitute. Because women could retain no control over their assets, even wages that they earned while working, women enjoyed little better status than children in Victorian society. Like children, who were economically dependent on their parents for subsistence, women were also relegated to this dependent status.

As Charles Dickens portrays in *Nicholas Nickleby*, even though unmarried women and their suitors understand forthrightly the financial stakes involved in getting married, courtship and the marriage transaction is still wrought with deception as women’s access to property and their sexuality become viewed as capital. Dickens compares the plight of women to that of the orphans and illegitimate children who are sequestered in the notorious Yorkshire schools; that is, he compares a legally sanctioned social ill to the sinister, surreptitious operations of Dotheboys Hall to expose the abuse of the marriage laws. Once enrolled, the students at Dotheboys Hall become castaways—abandoned indigents, offspring of previous marriages, or illegitimates whose parents want them off their hands. Like women who lose their identities to their husbands in marriage, children lose their identities to a dubious caretaker, Wackford Squeers. The villainous schoolmaster runs Dotheboys Hall like a reform school. While touting the exceptional accommodations and curriculum, he recruits as many waifs as possible to increase his profits. The children are used as a means for Squeers to acquire wealth in the same way that women are treated as commodities, either as means to acquire wealth or to acquire a trophy. Dickens creates no straightforward scenarios of young heiresses evaluating suitors to win the best match for her

money; instead, Dickens conceals motivations within the trope of deception. Dickens examines women in various lifestyles--the poor yet beautiful ingenue, the career woman, and the secret heiress. Dickens also illustrates how women unwittingly give approbation to the system that commodifies them. Understanding that marriage is the means to financial security and social rank, women not only conspire with the system but rival one another to make the best deal. While some of Dickens' female characters form alliances, others become brutally competitive. Instead of uniting to change the system, they enable the system through rivalries. Dickens also reveals the insidious and corrosive nature of the marriage laws in the way that the system ultimately affects men. Access to capital is portrayed as a symbol of male dominance, and Dickens infantilizes and feminizes male characters, who have failed financially, as a means to compare the abuse of these adult characters to the abuse perpetrated on the boys in the Yorkshire school system. Like the boys in Dotheboys Hall, women and men, who are relegated to the roles of women, are depicted as having no voice and no recourse to determine their own financial affairs.

In his preface to *The Life and Adventures of Nicholas Nickleby*, Dickens reports that before writing the novel, he and his illustrator Hablot Browne, known as Phiz, traveled in disguise to Yorkshire where they discovered the grave sites of many students who died in the Yorkshire schools and heard reports of deplorable conditions that may have led to the deaths of these children (Dickens 4). Dickens was not only appalled by the conditions that the students had to endure, but he was equally outraged by the chicanery of the Yorkshire schoolmasters, who advertised their high standards but robbed students of their finery as soon as they arrived at school and forced students to subsist on meager rations as a means to increase profits. Arguably Dickens also objected to the complicity of parents who dumped their children into schools with

such dubious backgrounds, who—if they were truly concerned for the welfare of their children—would have made inquiries and done inspections of the schools. Dickens sees both the schoolmasters and the parents as being in league to abuse children for profit and to deceive the public into otherwise believing that the Yorkshire schools provided a wholesome environment in which to educate children. The belief in this ideology mirrors the Victorian ideology that contended that women were rightly represented by their husbands and had no need of self-advocacy.

Because Dickens is attempting to prove the insidious nature of the marriage laws that prohibit married women's ownership of property, he has to also show that men are stakeholders in the evil that these laws perpetuate. In the novel, characters like Brooker and Noggs, who have served as “drudges” to Ralph Nickleby both lament that Nickleby has contributed to their financial ruination. Dickens portrays these characters as feminine because, like women, they lack access to money and are subject to the brutish whims of capitalists like Nickleby. Dickens implies that any man who lacks shrewdness and financial savvy could be likewise emasculated by predatory profiteers like Nickleby.

In early Victorian society, a woman enjoyed no independence from men. Mary Lyndon Shanley explains, “as feminists pointed out time and again, this assumed that there were three kinds of women—celibate spinsters, wives, and prostitutes—each group defined by the nature of its relationship to men” (Shanley 86). In *Nicholas Nickleby*, Dickens portrays women in these same categories, although he masks the role of prostitute as actresses and entrepreneurs. Miss Knag and Miss La Creevy, although they are working women who are not beholden to men for income, are depicted as spinsters who are embarrassed at their social standing and who fawn and bow to any man in an effort to secure a proposal. Madame Mantalini is a wife who operates a

dressmaking shop but who is being financially used by her husband. Mrs. Kenwigs is a wife attempting to make up for the financial shortfalls of her husband through her wealthy uncle while Mrs. Witterly is wife who plays the role on the invalid to gain her husband's and her doctor's attention. The young unmarried women, Kate Nickleby and Madeline Bray, are portrayed metaphorically in the roles of prostitutes in that powerful men are bidding on them for marriage. The unmarried actresses, Miss Bravassa, Miss Snevellicci, and Miss Petowker, are also portrayed in the roles of actual prostitutes because they perform for men for money but will not be owned by a single man in marriage. Each of these characters has a persona defined in tandem with her relationship to men.

Likewise, Mrs. Nickleby, the widow of Ralph Nickleby's brother, is also defined in relationship to her dead husband. When Mrs. Nickleby presents herself and her children to her brother-in-law, Ralph, following the death of her husband, Ralph repulses her saying sarcastically, "If a man can't pay his debts, he dies of a broken heart, and his widow's a martyr" (Dickens 42). Ralph Nickleby, in making this cruel statement, removes any sense of romance from the marriage contract. Mrs. Nickleby's reaction to her brother-in-law's indifference gives the first example of marriage being portrayed as a business transaction rather than a social institution. In considering how her dowry of one thousand pounds may have yielded her a better return on investment, she "fell first to deploring her hard fate, and then to remarking, with many sobs, that to be sure she had been a slave to poor Nicholas, and had often told him she might have married better" (Dickens 44). In depicting Mrs. Nickleby as a scatterbrained meddler, Dickens is making a statement about the state of women's property. The one thousand pounds that Mrs. Nickleby claims was hers would have been her father's money. If she had not married, that money would not have been hers to invest as she willed, although she does lament that she

could have used those funds to invest in a better husband. Also regardless of whether she married a success or a failure, that money would have remained the property of her husband. Mrs. Nickleby is making a claim to money that was not hers to control, but the system of a bride's family providing a suitor with a dowry makes all marriage contracts suspect relative to their motivations. Mrs. Nickleby speaks of her dowry as payment that could have bought her a more secure lifestyle than the one with which her late husband has burdened her. Mrs. Nickleby, whose character is notoriously based on Dickens' own mother, is depicted as a stupid and ineffectual mother whose meddling caused her husband to go bankrupt. She is also depicted as an enabler of the repression system that compels woman to marry for the sake of money and status. Dickens uses irony to indict Mrs. Nickleby; she recalls of her conversation with her late husband that "anybody who had come in upon us suddenly, would have supposed I was confusing and distracting him instead of making things plainer" (Dickens 469). Dickens makes a condemnation of women who buy into the system that causes them to have no control over family assets.

Dickens establishes from the beginning of *Nicholas Nickleby* that young Nicholas and his uncle, Ralph Nickleby, are polarized between good and evil. Ralph is the villain who represents old-school patriarchal oppression, and Nicholas is the young hero who represents reform. At their first encounter, "the old man's eye was keen with the twinklings of avarice and cunning; the young man's, bright with the light of intelligence and spirit" (Dickens 43). Ralph is depicted as the shrewd, obdurate miser who despises the youthful reformer, who seeks to shine a light on his clandestine dealings. Ralph's understanding the contrast between Nicholas and himself, "it galled Ralph to the heart's core, and he hated Nicholas from that hour" (Dickens 43). Dickens stamps Ralph Nickleby with an appellation of evil so that when he arranges to have Nicholas

take a position as an assistant in Dotheboys Hall in Yorkshire, the offer is already tainted with suspicion. That Nicholas encounters the sadistic brute of a schoolmaster, Wackford Squeers, solidifies Dickens opinion that the Yorkshire schools are veritable prisons for children and their schoolmasters as charlatans looking to bilk parents and get rich. As Arthur Adrian comments:

... parents of the early nineteenth century, before Dickens had aroused their sense of humanity, were singularly indifferent to the sufferings of children. Of the gross ignorance and utter lack of qualifications of the Yorkshire schoolmasters, furthermore, many persons took little heed (Adrian 238).

While early Victorian parents may have been unsympathetic to the plight of suffering children, Dickens interjects the problem of deception. Wackford Squeers is not simply abusing children with the approbation of their parents, he is also practicing a fraud on Victorian society and making them complicit in the diabolic conduct. As he had in *Oliver Twist*, his second novel, which preceded the publication of *Nicholas Nickleby*, Dickens introduces a sympathetic character. Smike, like Oliver, is an innocent who becomes the embodiment of the stream of abuse that flows through Dotheboys Hall. Like Oliver, Smike has a secret lineage. Unknown to anyone except Brooker, Smike is Ralph Nickleby son's through his secret marriage to an heiress who leaves him because he refuses to publicly acknowledge her. The lies, neglect, and deceit of multiple characters, Brooker, Ralph Nickleby, Mr. Snawley, Mr. and Mrs. Squeers—become heaped on this one figure.

In creating scenarios in which his characters can prove themselves, Dickens portrays many of them as fortune seekers and makes distinctions between those characters who are virtuously pursuing success and those who are pursuing success through exploitation. As John Bowen comments:

Characters are constantly impelled by economic motives in the book, but Dickens is not concerned simply with the depiction of a multiplicity of human agents whose economic situation and motives are constantly in play; he also attempts to depict economic forces that are not reducible to individual intentions (Bowen, 154).

As a usurer, Ralph Nickleby is empowered to exploit women and children without legal restraint. He has ownership of monetary capital and has the ability to charge for the use of that capital. Because characters like Kate Nickleby, Ralph Nickleby's niece, and Newman Noggs, Nickleby's clerk, have no recourse to an economic system that demands a minimum wage or equitable payment between the sexes, they must submit to Ralph's villainy. In the same manner, Wackford Squeers is operating without oversight that would demand that he be accountable for how he spends students' tuition. Because the system allows the villains to earn money in exploitive ways, they take full advantage. Whether seeking their fortunes nobly or nefariously, the characters' acquisition of wealth is made possible through their relationships with women and children.

Unlike other characters who are seeking a fortune, Mr. Lillyvick has already acquired property that he understands he can use coercively to the subjugation of both women and children.

The dear old gentleman was by no means scrupulous in appropriating to himself the property of his neighbours, which, on the contrary, he abstracted whenever an opportunity presented itself, smiling good-humouredly all the while, and making so many condescending speeches to the owners, that they were delighted with his

amiability and thought in their hearts that he deserved to be Chancellor the Exchequer at least (Dickens 176).

Mr. Lillyvick, a government employee, is a collector of water rates. Like Ralph Nickleby, he does not actually perform any labor; he collects money for a living, and he has a position that allows him to use punitive sanctions against citizens who do not pay. He first meets his fiancée, Miss Petowker, at a gathering at his niece's home. Mr. Lillyvick marries Miss Petowker in secret specifically because she is an actress, and in Victorian society, actresses, because they are in a sense entrepreneurial, are construed as prostitutes. As Kerry Powell explains:

What disturbed Victorian men, therefore, was not only the actress's dramatization of many selves, but of varied sexualities as well . . . the speaker is troubled by actresses because they cannot "belong" absolutely to one man—their thoughts and feelings, as well as bodies, seem to be commodities in a free market of men at large (Powell 31).

All of Mr. Lillyvick's actions show that he does not want the marriage to escape the knowledge of theatre folk. When he comes to watch Miss Petowker perform, he shields his identity from the audience with an umbrella (Dickens 319). When Nicholas questions Mr. Lillyvick on the actress's becoming "Mrs. Lillyvick," he responds, "actresses, sir, always keep their maiden names" (Dickens 319). The maintaining of her maiden name would be another means for Miss Petowker to be denied the status of a married woman. When Mr. Lillyvick swears Nicholas to secrecy about his marriage, he tells Nicholas he fears the Kenwigs "have got out a commission of lunacy, or some dreadful thing," (Dickens 321) if they had known he had intended to marry. Mr. Lillyvick suggests to Nicholas "suppose a man can get a fortune in a wife instead of with her" (Dickens 320). The fortune that Mr. Lillyvick wants to acquire in his wife is her beauty, but

he wants to be able to marry her; that is, have sex with her, without having to socially acknowledge that he has married an actress. That Mr. Lillyvick travels to a remote location to intercept the theatre troupe so that he may marry privately suggests his unscrupulous motivation. Dickens speaks of theatre people as being false, “here all the people were so much changed, that he scarcely knew them. False hair, false colour, false calves, false muscles—they had become different beings” (Dickens 302). In the company of the theatre, Mr. Lillyvick does not worry about condemnation because they do not represent real society.

Because Ralph Nickleby refuses to give his family monetary assistance, Nicholas becomes the patriarchal figure of his family and must seek his fortune to rescue his sister and his mother from the poverty into which Mrs. Nickleby’s widowhood has compelled them. Nicholas accepts his Uncle Ralph’s offer to take a position at Dotheboys Hall as a gesture of good faith until he realizes that the primary male figure remaining in his life is competing with him, not attempting to assist him. His first opportunity to acquire wealth, albeit ill gotten wealth, is when Wackford Squeers’ daughter falls in love with him. Nicholas vehemently protests Miss Squeers’ advances saying, “this is the grossest and wildest delusion, the completest and most signal mistake, that ever human being laboured under, or committed“ (Dickens 153). Inasmuch as the virtuous Nicholas repels Fanny Squeers because he has no attraction to her or to the lifestyle of a Yorkshire schoolmaster, “Miss Squeers reasoned that . . . her father was master, and Nicholas man, and that her father had saved money, and Nicholas had none, all of which seemed to her conclusive arguments why the young man should feel only too much honoured by her preference“ (Dickens 154). Despite Nicholas’ emphatic railing against Miss Squeers, her thinking is not so preposterous. Like Mrs. Nickleby, Miss Squeers would first be determining what her father’s money could buy in terms of a husband. She would have surmised that

Nicholas was thinking in the same way; that is, that he could (and rightfully should) look to acquire wealth through her dowry. Fanny Squeers is also conditioned to commodify relationships through her witnessing of the way in which her father runs the Dotheboys schools. As Arthur Adrian reported of Yorkshire schoolmasters, they were “interested not in the welfare of the child, but in quick profits, the schoolmasters fed their pupils the coarsest and cheapest food and added many extra fees to the quarterly accounts“ (Adrian 238).

When Nicholas’ outrage over the cruel treatment of Smike forces him to flee Dotheboys Hall with Smike in tow, Nicholas meets up with a traveling band of actors and is offered a job. Although Nicholas’ employment with the wandering Crummies acting troupe earns him subsistence, it fails to bring him fortune. He does not have the opportunity to acquire a fortune until the Cheeryble Brothers, philanthropic twin brothers who are competitors of Ralph Nickleby, give him a job. Still, not until he becomes interested in Madeline Bray, does he earn his fortune. Although he is a much admired employee of the Cheeryble Brothers, he earns his initial fortune from his marriage to Madeline who has inherited from her grandfather.

Beyond the middle classes, Dickens portrays how people in the theatre community also had agency through women and children to acquire capital. When Nicholas meets the family of the Mr. Vincent Crummies, a traveling theatre troupe, he learns that their star attraction is their daughter, Miss Crummies, whom they bill as the “infant phenomenon.“ Not only does Mr. Crummies misrepresent her age as being much younger than she actually is but he also abuses her admitting, “she had been kept up late every night, and put upon an unlimited allowance of gin-and-water from infancy, to prevent her growing tall“ (Dickens 292). While Dickens allusion is meant to be exaggerated and comedic, the image reveals that Victorian parents, like those who hide their unwanted children away in country schools, would physically abuse their children if

that abuse led to a profit. Whether or not “gin-and-water” is actually able to stunt growth, Vincent Crummles has a vested interest in keeping his daughter from reaching maturity. Miss Crummles is being exploited both as a woman and as a child so that Mr. Crummles can earn a livelihood. Mr. Crummles attests to his daughter’s being ten years old, but “had a comparatively aged countenance, and had moreover been precisely the same age . . . for five good years,” (Dickens 292) so Miss Crummles is at least a teenager. If she is 15 years old, then she is approaching marriageable age. Crummles not only faces the loss of his meal ticket, but he also must provide a dowry for his daughter to marry.

In seeking a means to support his family, Nicholas briefly accepts a position as a private tutor for the Kenwigs family. Through the example of the Kenwigs, Dickens shows that avarice is not confined to the moneyed classes but also has become the agent of the middle classes. Mr. and Mrs. Kenwigs, who have had five children in eight years, are seeking to enamor their children to Mrs. Kenwigs’ bachelor uncle, Mr. Lillyvick, so that he will leave the children his estate. Like Miss Crummles, the infant phenomenon, the Kenwigs girls have been trained to perform for an audience, the audience being their uncle. “The great man—the rich relation—the unmarried uncle—who had it in his power to make Morleena an heiress, and the very baby a legatee” (Dickens 186). The Kenwigs’ girls have been clothed and coiffed in expectation of being the brides of royalty. As Mrs. Kenwigs says of Morleena, her eldest daughter, “if she grew up what she is now, only think of the young dukes and marquises” (Dickens 179). Being the children of a father who is a craftsman, the Kenwigs girls will not have dowries adequate to convince aristocrats to marry them. By naming her first son after Mr. Lillyvick, Mrs. Kenwigs is pandering to her uncle’s vanity and bribing him into remaining a bachelor so that his hoarded wealth will allow the girls to marry well, and she and her husband can live off the bounty

secured through her daughters' marriages. Mr. Kenwigs' understanding that he has more daughters than he can provide dowries for, allows his wife to continue to lavish upon the girls fine hair dressers and dancing lessons because he fully expects to reap the reward. Dickens depicts the Kenwigs children as having been bred like show dogs who will turn a profit for their breeders, Mr. and Mrs. Kenwigs. Because the Kenwigs' plan is apparently thwarted when Mr. Lillyvick marries Miss Petowker, both parents react violently. When Mrs. Kenwigs learns from Nicholas that Mr. Lillyvick has married, she says hysterically, "my children, my defrauded, swindled infants!" (Dickens 453). Mr. Kenwigs begins to disown his children saying of his infant son, "let him die . . . in the torrent of his wrath. Let him die! He has no expectations, no property to come into. We want no babies here . . . Take 'em away, take 'em away to the Fondling!" (Dickens 454). If the children cannot be used as magnets to attract money, then they are simply mouths to feed, and the Kenwigs are panic stricken at the thought that they wasted their resources. When Miss Petowker leaves Mr. Lillyvick and elopes with a "half-pay captain" (Dickens 666), Uncle Lillyvick is immediately restored to the seat of superiority in the Kenwigs household and resolves, "I shall, to-morrow morning, settle upon your children, and make payable to the survivors of them when they come of age or marry, that money which I once meant to leave 'em in my will" (Dickens 667). Notable is that despite Miss Petowker's still being married to Mr. Lillyvick, she has no say how he bequeaths his money. When he leaves the marriage, she leaves with nothing.

Although Ralph Nickleby exhibits an instant disdain toward his nephew, Nicholas, upon their first meeting, he warms--to the degree possible for a recalcitrant old miser--to his niece Kate. Despite this seed of affection and Ralph Nickleby's wealth, he fails to offer to support his brother's family, even his coquettish niece. Whether Ralph Nickleby finds Kate employment

because of affection for her or purely to use her as a pawn to advance his business interests is ambiguous. He has not volunteered to assist her in seeking employment as a means to avoid having the family continue to entreat him for support. When Brooker, Ralph's former clerk who has returned from being transported as a criminal, approaches Ralph Nickleby and attempts to extort him, Ralph dismisses him, so Ralph is not a character who will succumb to tenacious importuning. Ralph uses his influence as a usurer to secure a position for Kate in Madame Mantalini's dress shop. Madame Mantalini accepts Kate even though Kate has no experience and has the potential to be a financial burden to Madame Mantalini because she cannot produce at the rate of an experienced seamstress. Ralph is, however, asserting his masculine power over a woman who has been placed in Ralph's debt as a result of her husband's excesses. The sweet, self-effacing, morally upright Kate Nickleby epitomizes the Victorian ideal of the "angel in house," but the villainous Ralph has no intention of inviting Kate to keep his house. He does, however, use her in the sense that she has no experience, but she becomes a symbol of coercion over the Mantalini's who owe Ralph Nickleby money. Kate Nickleby is depicted as the young but impoverished ingenue who is condemned to work through the accident of her circumstances. Even though Kate secures employment, she still lacks financial independence. The family has moved into a dilapidated house that Ralph owns, so Kate and her mother are still beholden to Ralph for shelter. Likewise, Kate and her mother are both expecting to supplement Kate's wages with Nicholas' earning from Dotheboys Hall.

As Mary Lyndon Shanley reports, "the pressures on women to marry were enormous in nineteenth-century England . . . the plight of a woman who did not marry, who in the parlance of the age was 'left on the shelf,' could be economically as well as socially disastrous" (Shanley 10). Dickens sympathizes with unmarried women saying that "men were strange creatures and a

great many married women were very miserable, and wished themselves single again with all their hearts” (Dickens 149), but he does not play the role of social reformer in depicting his unmarried female characters as reformers who are attempting to thwart the system. Instead, he portrays them as somewhat pathetic and who rely on the accidents of fortune for rescue from their plights. Miss Knag, Madame Mantalini’s shop assistant, is initially depicted as a jealous spinster rather than as a career woman who has defied social convention. Understanding that she is one of the women who has been “left on the shelf,” Miss Knag prefers to think of herself as being much younger than she actually is. Because she is attempting to retain the self-delusion of youthfulness, she attempts to form a liaison with Kate Nickleby. As soon as she meets her:

Miss Knag did feel a strong interest in Kate Nickleby, it should not rather have been the interest of a maiden aunt or grandmother; that being the conclusion to which the difference in their respective ages would have naturally tended. But Miss Knag wore clothes of a very youthful pattern, and perhaps her feelings took the same shape (Dickens 223).

Miss Knag is attempting to do more than innocently fib about her age, she is attempting in her outward behavior to retain a youthfulness that would make her a marriageable prospect. When an elderly aristocrat visits Madame Mantalini’s shop with his fiancée and her bridal party, the young bride says of Miss Knag, “I hate being waited upon by frights or elderly persons. Let me always see that young creature . . . whenever I come” (Dickens 230). In this scene, Dickens allows the young bride to protest about her own plight of being married off to a rich, impotent old man. The bride cannot dismiss her aging suitor, so she takes her wrath out on Miss Knag, who consequently takes her wrath out on Kate saying, “I hate her . . . I detest and hat her. Never let her speak to me again; never let anybody who is a friend of mine speak to her; a slut, a hussy,

Lord Hawk, Kate could be used as a weapon against Ralph whereas Ralph can use Kate as a lure to bilk the gullible Lord Verisopht.

The first encounter with the entrepreneurial woman in the novel is with Miss La Creevy, who is a spinster, painter of miniatures, and owner of the house in which the Nickleby family live when they first move to London after the death of their father. Ralph attempts to have the family evicted from Miss La Creevy's rooms, and when he implies that Mrs. Nickleby may be unable to pay for her weekly lodgings, Miss La Creevy responds, "I who am, *at present*—hem—an unprotected female, cannot afford to lose by the apartments" (Dickens 40). Like Miss Knag, Miss La Creevy uses the qualifier "at present" to indicate that she is not only amendable to marriage but that she understands that her being unmarried is to most degree a social disgrace. Understanding that left to her own resources, Miss La Creevy no doubt lives on a meager income, Ralph Nickleby attempts to frighten her into evicting the Nickleby's implying that she will be unable to collect the rent she requires for her living. Miss La Creevy acknowledges her compromised position when she agrees with Ralph Nickleby that she cannot afford to lose the income from her apartments which provide a necessary part of her subsistence. That Miss La Creevy uses the term "unprotected female" is ironic in that Mrs. Nickleby was protected in the sense that she was married but is still suffering the pains of her husband's bankruptcy. Even if her husband had lived, his bankruptcy may have meant life in a debtor's prison for the family. Likewise, Madame Mantalini is married and, therefore, protected in Miss La Creevy's estimation; however, her husband is squandering on frivolities the income she derives from her dress shop. As a result, she loses her shop to the spinster Miss Knag. The idea that marriage protected a woman from financial misfortune was a myth.

Dickens also discusses the social isolation that is attached to the life of a single woman. Characters like Lord Mulberry Hawk and Lord Frederick Verisopht, who are bachelors, are depicted as being up all night carousing throughout London, but of Miss La Creevy, Dickens says:

Here was one of the advantages of having lived alone so long . . . one of the many to whom, from straitened circumstances, a consequent inability to form the associations they would wish, and a disinclination to mix with the society they could obtain, London is as complete a solitude as the plains of Syria, the humble artist had pursued her lonely, but contented way for many years (Dickens 250).

As an unmarried, unescorted woman, Miss La Creevy would have had no access to society, but Dickens is implying that removal from London society was not necessarily just a bad consequence of being single, as society was filled with rakes like Hawk and Verisopht.

Miss La Creevy, like Miss Knag, is unable to perceive her superior position in being single. Miss La Creevy confides in Newman Noggs that she has made her first visit in 15 years to her estranged brother, and when she confides that her brother and his family have invited their maiden aunt to come live with them, Miss La Creevy tearfully says, "I never was so happy; in all my life I never was" Dickens (396). Miss La Creevy points to the disturbing options for Victorian woman; that is, to be alone or abused. Remaining unmarried allowed a woman to save herself from fortune predators, but at the same time, forced her to live on meager wages and live in social isolation.

Madeline Bray represents the secret heiress, the Cheeryble Brothers revealing at the end of the novel the discovery of a will through which "Madeline's maternal grandfather [bequeathed] her the sum of twelve thousand pounds, payable upon her coming of age or

marrying” (Dickens 776). Arthur Gride, who—through some felonious means—knows of the bequest—conspires with Ralph Nickleby to gain Mr. Bray’s consent to allow Arthur Gride to marry Madeline. When Gride announces to Nickleby that he intends to marry and before Gride reveals to Ralph Nickleby that he has knowledge of Madeline’s potential inheritance, Ralph immediately evaluates Madeline as a sexual commodity. Before knowing the pecuniary motivation behind Gride’s wanting to marry Madeline, he taunts Gride asking him of his future prospect, “to some old hag?” (Dickens 594) to which Gride retorts, “to a young and beautiful girl; fresh, lovely, bewitching, and not nineteen.” (Dickens 594). Instead of responding to Ralph Nickleby that his objectives are purely avaricious, Gride defends his choice of a bride who is a young, comely sexual viable woman. When Nicholas appeals to Gride to postpone his wedding to Madeline, Gride reacts not as a businessman defending his cache but as a jealous lover saying, “She’s my wife, my doting little wife. Do you think she’ll miss you? Do you think she’ll weep? I shall like to see her weep, I shan’t mind it. She looks prettier in tears” (Dickens 681). Both Ralph Nickleby and Arthur Gride understand that along with a woman’s dowry, her youth and beauty carry a monetary value. They inflame men’s passion, and as a result, can be used for the exchange of capital. Nicholas reveals to Madeline, “You are betrayed, and sold for money: for gold, whose every coin is rusted with tears, if not red with the blood of ruined men, who have fallen desperately by their own mad hands” (Dickens 674).

The manner in which Madeline Bray is depicted as a laborer also reveals the limitation through which women could be used as conduits to acquire wealth. In the fair market, the handwork that Madeline makes would not earn her enough money to support herself or her father. The Cheeryble Brothers “make a feint of purchasing her little drawings and ornamental work, at a high price, and keeping up a constant demand for the same” (Dickens 582). Inasmuch

as their intentions are altruistic, the Cheeryble Brothers use deception as a means to control her. Madeline is the daughter of a woman with whom Charles Cheeryble was in love and who, he laments, “married her choice” (Dickens 579). The benevolent Charles Cheeryble was thwarted in love by the despicable Walter Bray, and because Brother Cheeryble cannot devise a means by which to have Madeline abandon her abusive father, Charles has found a surreptitious way to support her. If the Cheeryble Brothers had not provided Madeline with a meager income, then the alternative would have been that she had to marry. Had she married in advance of Arthur Gride’s procuring knowledge of her legacy, she might have been an heiress without the Cheeryble assistance. Dickens describes Madeline Bray’s engagement to Arthur Gride as “unnatural,” and Nicholas laments the forces that compel her to agree to marry him, “The father urges, the daughter consents. These demons have her in their toils; legal right, might, power, money, and every influence are on their side” (Dickens 657). And that no legal recourse existed to that which Dickens portrays as an abomination. “The mere circumstance of the compact between Ralph Nickleby and Gride would not invalidate the marriage, or render Bray averse to it” (Dickens 656).

Women also had little recourse in the law to divorce abusive husbands. As published in *All the Year Round*, a periodical that Charles Dickens edited, “many poor women were at the mercy of lazy and dissolute husbands, who acquired their wives’ property upon marriage and proceed to squander it on drink, horses, or mistresses” (Shanley 60). Dickens’ characterization becomes embodied in the character of Mr. Mantalini, who bleeds his wife of income she earns from her dressmaking shop. As Mary Lyndon Shanley explains, before the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857:

England had no provision for civil divorce other than the extraordinary procedure of a private act of Parliament. Divorce was seen essentially as a punitive measure against an adulterous wife, and a way for a man to assure himself of legitimate offspring. Obtaining a parliamentary divorce was legally complex and extraordinarily expensive (Shanley 36).

Working class and middle class women had virtually no recourse to divorce, and wealthy women had only limited relief.

Minor children were also used as weapons to coerce their mothers into remaining in opportunistic or abusive marriages. Under British law, fathers were the custodial guardians of their children. Not until the passage of the Custody of Infants Act of 1839 was a mother able to: Petition in the equity courts for custody of her children up to the age of seven, and for periodic access to children age seven or over. A mother could not avail herself of even these limited rights if she had been found guilty of adultery either in an action for criminal conversation or in an ecclesiastical court (Shanley 137).

When Dickens publishes *Nicholas Nickleby* 1838, he would have written the character of Smike, Ralph Nickleby's son through his secret marriage to an heiress, understanding that Nickleby's wife would have had no recourse when Nickleby sent him to live in the country to conceal his existence from his brother-in-law. While the contemporary reader is inclined to judge the young mother for abandoning her child, a Victorian readership would have understood that if Ralph Nickleby wanted the child removed to the country, his wife would have had no legal grounds to contest his decision. Minor children become their father's pawns in the same manner as their mothers.

There are two incidences in the novel that suggest women being separated from their husbands—Madame Mantalini's separation from her philandering husband and Miss Henrietta Petowker's flight from her pompous, controlling husband, Mr. Lillyvick. As Kelly Hager comments about Victorian marriage:

The marriage plot is traditionally seen as establishing closure, as insuring the social order. For this reason the divorce plot has a very hard time finding its way into a Victorian novel. Further, divorce bespeaks the existence of extramarital desires within a marriage. Divorce is thus as sexual and as "not English" a subject as adultery or procreation precisely because the granting of a divorce would make available a relationship which was in some sense adulterous (Hager 993).

Of the married female characters, Madame Mantalini is the only one referred to as "madame." Although "madame" in its French spelling refers to, "the title frequently assumed by a schoolmistress, dressmaker, fortune-teller, etc., esp. to imply skill and sophistication, or foreign origin," in its English spelling "madam," it can mean, "a kept mistress, a courtesan, or prostitute." (OED). The allusion can be made that rather than a career woman giving working class girls honest employment, Madame Mantalini is running a brothel with her pimp husband and creating working girls as prostitutes. The dichotomy reveals how social convention can force women into a pigeon hole into which they do not belong. That Madame Mantalini seeks separation from her husband, despite his transgressions, calls her own character into question. Madame Mantalini says to Nickleby:

I insist on being separated and left to myself. If he dares to refuse me a separation, I'll have one in law—I can—and I hope this will be a warning to all girls who have seen this disgraceful exhibition (Dickens 560).

Dickens has to give them some moral approbation for seeking relief from her husband. Dickens depicts Mr. Mantalini as a dandified opportunist and ravisher who has invented a persona that optimizes his prospects for marriage. Dickens introduces him as “the gentleman in the Turkish trousers” (Dickens 137) who has changed his name from the mundane “Muntle” to the more exotic “Mantalini.” His persona is foreign and suspect and intended to deceive. Dickens reveals that:

He had married on his whiskers; upon which property he had previously subsisted, in a genteel manner, for some years; and which he had recently improved, after patient cultivation by the addition of a moustache, which promised to secure him an easy independence: his share in the labors of the business being at present confined to spending the money (Dickens 137).

Dickens also reveals the manner in which Mr. Mantalini objectifies his wife. He either refers to her as “its” rather than “her,” or he describes her in relationship to some need of his own; that is, “my existence’s jewel” (Dickens 214) or “my cup of happiness’s sweetener” (Dickens 266). The use of the adjective “its” denotes the utility which Mantalini regards his wife. As a dressmaker, she has a source of income, on which Mantalini relies and subsists. Their marriage is not based on mutual affection. To later justify Madame Mantalini’s wanting to divorce (and Dickens uses the word “separation,” not “divorce”) her husband, Dickens has to depict him as a philanderer. Through his flamboyant dress and appearance, his affectatious manner of speech, and his penchant for older women, Mantalini is also portrayed as effeminate. Dickens would not

have risked the horror of his Victorian readership in suggesting something that would be as repulsive to them as homosexuality, but Dickens makes no effort to endow Mantalini with any masculine qualities; he lacks control of capitol, so he lacks masculinity. Victorian culture would fail to see the abuse resulting from Mantalini's spending all his wife's money on self-indulgence, just as Victorian society turned its gaze from the abuses that were being perpetrated on children in institutions like the Dotheboys School, so Dickens has made Mantalini look "unnatural" in some way.

The elaborate schemes perpetrated against women to deny them of wealth is revealed at the end of Nicholas Nickleby when Brooker, Ralph Nickleby's former clerk, confesses the circumstances under which Ralph employed him. He describes Ralph's clandestine marriage saying:

The same love of gain which led him to contract this marriage, led to its being kept strictly private; for a clause in her father's will declared that if she married without her brother's consent, the property, in which she had only some life interest while she remained single, should pass away altogether to another branch of the family. The brother would give no consent that the sister didn't buy and pay for handsomely (Dickens 756).

Ralph Nickleby's wife was constrained by all the male influences. Instead of leaving her money or property outright, her father has placed a condition on her inheritance that her brother must consent to the marriage. Being a rogue, her brother refuses to give his consent.

The deception affected women's relationship's with one another

. . . toiling by day and often too by night, working at the needle, the pencil, and the pen, and submitting, ad a daily governess to such caprices and indignities as

women (with daughters too) too often love to inflict upon their own sex when they serve in such capacities, as though in jealousy of the superior intelligence which they are necessitated to employ. (Dickens 580)

The system that tied wealth in marriage also caused rivalries among women. Because women have limited social and economic prospects if they remain single, they enable the system that suppresses them by competing with one another. Kate becomes subject to this jealousy because her beauty gives her a sexual commodity that carries favor with men that an otherwise dowerless woman would lack. When Kate takes a position as a companion with Mrs. Witterly, Lord Mulberry Hawk uses the opportunity to visit Kate in an effort to seduce her. Mrs. Witterly initially welcomes Kate's ability to draw an aristocrat to her home until she realizes that Kate is the object of the lord's attention:

Mrs. Witterly admitted, though not with the best grace in the world, that Kate *did* look pretty. She began to think too, that Sir Mulberry was not quite so agreeable a creature as she had at first supposed him; for although a skillful flatterer is a most delightful companion if you can keep him all to yourself, his taste becomes very doubtful when he takes to complementing other people (Dickens 357).

Because she cannot gain status as either an ingenue or heiress, Mrs. Witterly takes on another common persona of nineteenth-century woman; that is, the hysteric or the invalid woman. Whenever she seeks attention, Mrs. Witterly collapses in spells. When Mr. Witterly asks his wife's physician the nature of her illness, the doctor replies:

My dear fellow . . . be proud of that woman; make much of her; she is an ornament to the fashionable world, and to you. Her complaint is soul. It swells,

expands, dilates—the blood fires, the pulse quickens, the excitement increase

(Dickens 271).

Mrs. Witterly is feigning illness to gain attention, and as Elaine Showalter observes

When the hysterical woman became sick, she no longer played the role of the self-sacrificing daughter or wife. Instead, she demanded service and attention for others. The family of hysterics found themselves reorganized around the patient who had to be constantly nursed, indulged with special delicacies, and excused from ordinary duties (Showalter 133).

In playing the role of the invalid, Mrs. Witterly employs a mean by which she can compete with the young, beautiful Kate for attention.

Mrs. Kenwigs denounces her relationship with Miss Petowker when Miss Petowker marries her uncle. Ironically, Miss Petowker will not become the beneficiary of Mr. Lillyvick's wealth, but she has the potential to produce children who will. Considering her relationship with Miss Petowker, "Mrs. Kenwigs was horror-stricken to think that she should ever have nourished in her bosom such a snake, adder, viper, serpent, and base crocodile, as Henrietta Petowker" (Dickens 667). Mrs. Nickleby likewise denounces her friendship with Miss La Creevy when Miss La Creevy wins the affections of Tim Linkinwater. She says of Miss La Creevy, who is likely about the same age:

It's her age I speak of. That he should have gone and offered himself to a woman who must be—ah, half as old again as I am—and she should have dared to accept him! I don't signify . . . I'm disgusted with her! (Dickens 782).

Mrs. Nickleby is jealous that the spinster has procured a man while Mrs. Nickleby remains a solitary widow.

In *Nicholas Nickleby*, indigent male characters are feminized and manipulated in the same way as the female characters, as access to capital is construed as a masculine quality. If marriage can be viewed as a manipulation that deprives women of their assets and increases the wealth of their husbands, Newman Noggs' relationship with Ralph Nickleby can be viewed as an abusive marriage. Newman Noggs attributes his impoverished condition directly to his relationship with Ralph Nickleby. When the Cheeryble Brothers present Ralph with his misdeeds, they give Noggs an opportunity to confront Nickleby, during which time he says:

What do you mean when you talk of "a fellow like this?" Who made me "a fellow like this?" I served you faithfully. I did more work, because I was poor, and took more hard words from you because I despised you and them, than any man you could have got from the parish workhouse. I did. I served you because I was proud; because I was a lonely man with you, and there were no other drudges to see my degradation; because nobody knew better than you, that I was a ruined man, that I hadn't always been what I am, and that I might have been better off, if I hadn't been a fool and fallen into the hands of you others who were knaves
(Dickens 743).

Newman Noggs speaks of his relationship with Ralph Nickleby as a form of enslavement. He does not specify the nature of his early relationship, but he refers to an economic dependency. Despite this dependency, Noggs views himself as having attempted to retain some level of dignity and self-esteem within the relationship. He also blames himself for having entering into the relationship unadvisedly, as if with some level of trust. The tale of regret that Noggs is telling in his old age is the same tale that Madeline Bray could have told if her marriage to Arthur Gride proceeded without interruption or the same story that Kate Nickleby could have

told if Ralph Nickleby had seen some profit in having her married to Lord Mulberry Hawk. Noggs is feminized in that in entering the relationship with Ralph Nickleby he has acquiesced to a more dominant male figure. Being unable to defend himself directly against Ralph, Newman Noggs resorts to deception, and embarks on a campaign of espionage against his employer to the benefit of others who stand to suffer from the same fate.

In addition to being feminized, the character of Newman Noggs is also infantilized. Like women, children in Victorian society, like the children who are boarders at Dotheboys School, are voiceless. That Ralph Nickleby regards Noggs in a status no better than that of a child is revealed in the wages that he pays him.

The kind-hearted gentleman omitted to add that Newman Noggs, being utterly destitute, served him for rather less than the usual wages of a boy of thirteen” (Dickens 31).

Like the female characters who are referred to as "girls," Newman Noggs is referred to as a boy; that is, someone who is fully subject to the whims of a patriarch. It is the feminine qualities that Newman Noggs possesses that allow him to thwart Ralph Nickleby. Unlike Nicholas, who overtly defies the villains, Ralph Nickleby, Lord Mulberry Hawk, and Arthur Gride, Noggs kowtows to them and works subliminally for the same ends that the heroic Nicholas does. Noggs uses the same weapon as the villains; he uses deception. In defending his betrayal of Ralph, Noggs declares:

The master's cruel treatment of his own flesh and blood and vile designs upon a young girl who interested even his broken-down drunken miserable hack, and made him linger in his service in the hope of doing her some good” (Dickens 744).

When Brooker encounters Ralph after returning from being transported, he says, "I am a most miserable and wretched outcast, nearly sixty years old, and as destitute and helpless as a child of six" (Dickens 554). Ralph retorts, "I took advantage of my position about you, and possessed myself of a hold upon you, which you would give half of all you have, to know, and never can know but through me" (Dickens 555). He is referring to Brooker as a kept woman who has been cast aside. In seeking revenge against Ralph, Brooker has also resorted to deception.

Another character who is also feminized and infantilized is Smike. Although Nicholas and Smike are approximately the same age, when Nicholas first meets Smike, he observes that:

Although he could not have been less than eighteen or nineteen years old, and was tall for that age, he wore a skeleton suit, such as is usually put on very little boys . . . heaven knows how long he had been there, he still wore the same linen which he had first taken down; for, round his neck, was a tattered child's frill, only half concealed by a coarse, man's neckerchief (Dickens 96).

Smike has no knowledge of his identity. Although he has vague, haunting recollections of the garret in which he was concealed as a child and of Brooker, Nickleby's drudge, who had been charged as his caretaker, he has no memories of specific relationships with anyone who would represent a parent. When Brooker confesses that he dumped Smike at Dotheboys Hall, he says that he gave Smike his name. Dickens does not mention that Ralph Nickleby or his wife had given their son a name or that they attempted to own him in any way. When Squeers attempts to beat Smike, Smike, having been conditioned into a subservient role, is ready to submit to the abuse; however, Nicholas is inflamed with indignation saying to Squeers:

Wretch . . . touch him at your peril! I will not stand by, and see it done. My blood is up, and I have the strength of ten such men as you. Look to yourself, for by Heaven I will not spare you, if you drive me on! (Dickens 164)

Nicholas flies to Smike's aid in the same manner that he flies to Kate's aid when Sir Mulberry Hawk and his cohorts verbally abuse his sister Kate. In thrashing Wackford Squeers, Nicholas is assuming the role of patriarch over Smike. Smike takes on the same status as Kate.

As Bivona and Henkle point out:

. . . many of the positive values—such as redemption—of the middle class must come from the victims and the powerless, from the children and the little people of no economic or apparent social consequence—or at least from the relations between the women in the middle classes and the poor. While that relationship does not establish women as victims in the Victorian period it does show how they became especially sensitized to the effects of victimization, and how they serve as conduits and arbiters of ethical values that are awakened by social injustice (Bivona and Henkle, 66).

In being adopted into the Nickleby home, Smike becomes a sympathetic figure to all characters who interact with the Nickleby family. Smike is the embodiment of victimization; that is, his identity has not only been denied to him but his own father has attempted to impose a false identity on him by having Mr. Snawley make a claim to him; he suffers from tuberculosis, and he is learning disabled from the malnourishment and ill-treatment he has endured throughout his lifetime, and one of the last images that graces his eyes before he dies is the fiend Brooker, who condemned to a lifetime in Dotheboys Hall, skulking behind a tree during his convalescence. If Smike had known and was able to prove his lineage to Ralph Nickleby, his social status may

have created the means of oppression, they must be the conduits through which the oppression is repealed. Dickens supports his position by comparing how children also suffer systematic abuse because, like women, they have no advocate. Dickens attempts to portray also how society is corrupted when groups within that society are marginalized and ignored. As if to ensure that his argument will have an audience, Dickens also argues that the repression of women leads to the breeding of super class of capitalist, libertine bullies who emasculate their rivals. The stakes in reforming the marriage laws are not confined only to women's interests but also to the interests of Victorian men and to the entire culture in general. As a novelist, Dickens offers no real solutions for reform, but he undresses a popular perception and leaves an embarrassed public to raise the alarm for reform.

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