**The Displaced Daughter in Charles Dickens’s *Dombey and Son***

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**Abstract:**The House of Paul Dombey is divided almost irreparably from the outset of *Dombey and Son*. Mr. Dombey, a prominent London merchant, leads his professional and private existence with absolute self-confidence, without willing to differentiate between the two. In my paper I shall highlight the significance of Victorian patriarchal discourse in *Dombey and Son*, drawing attention to the daughter’s being a *metoikos* in the family due to the authoritarian, masculine family structure where not only the mother and the son, but even the father’s sister and the nurses as foster-mothers try to maintain the *status quo* of the symbolic order. I shall examine, moreover, how the daughter’s domestic “placelessness” appears and undergoes significant changes as the plot moves on.

**Keywords:** domesticity, gender issues, father, daughter

*“[A]nd every […] house divided against itself shall not stand.”*

(St. Matthew XII. 25.)

The House of Paul Dombey—either as a circumscribed domestic sphere or a prominent business house in the City—is divided almost irreparably from the outset of *Dombey and Son*.[[2]](#footnote-3) Mr. Dombey, a prominent London merchant, leads his professional and private life with absolute self-confidence, feeling simultaneously “pride and a mercenary attitude toward [his] human relations.” What is more, “not only is Mr. Dombey guilty of both, he views them as virtues” (Reed 169). As a consequence, it is hardly surprising that he is *not* willing or able to differentiate between his professional and private existence, his business and domestic relationships.

To protect his own domestic and business interests, while at the same time to conceal his own inadequacy in some of his human relationships (with, for instance, his daughter Florence), Paul Dombey deliberately maintains an unsociable relationship with his co-workers which seems hardly different from the one with his two wives (Fanny and Edith) and of course his daughter at home.

Arriving at his offices, “[a] solemn hush prevailed, as Mr. Dombey passed through the outer office” (*Dombey and Son* 161); within his business realm he carefully maintains self-protective, societal buffer zones, that is, “[b]etween Mr. Dombey and the common world, […] Mr. Carker in his own office was the first step; Mr. Morfin, in *his* own office, was the second. […] Mr. Carker, as Grand Vizier, inhabited the room that was nearest to the Sultan. Mr. Morfin, as an officer of inferior state, inhabited the room that was nearest to the clerks” (162). The hierarchical organization of his business house already anticipates Paul Dombey’s overt desire to be in touch with as few people as possible in his business and his private life. Still, for the sake of financial stability, he does need some people who represent the same strict attitude to business—all in the interest of the future owner of the firm: Little Paul Dombey. The “Grand Vizier” and especially the “Sultan” as orientalizing symbols allude to twofold absolute power: one in his family (thinking of the tangible aim of a purdah either in the sense of a harem or simply a curtain segregating females [wives and daughter] as private properties of a sultan), and another in his public (in our case business) affairs. Mr. Dombey’s approach to society (not only in his business life) seems to be expedient if he wishes to embody the “economic man—that is, a model of humanity understood principally as a selfish, profit-seeking agent, motivated only by a desire to increase his own wealth” (Guy 128). Dombey’s inability to distinguish between home and business, to divide his life, is the source of the division he is not even aware of: the alienation between him and his daughter, Florence.

The narrator makes it clear at the very beginning that the plot in Mr. Dombey’s mind, the masterplot that he thinks ought to organise the narrative, is conceived as the Father-Son plot, suggesting the Biblical sense of *the* Father and *the* Son in their own timeless domestic sphere as private universe. From the start, Dombey Junior is referred to—through Mr. Dombey’s perspective—as “Son”, with a capital “S”, as if it were a proper name, whereas it is simply the word that will appear beside that of the Father’s in the name of the firm. The ironic effect is that this “business” naming also invokes the Biblical Father-Son plot and setup through its capitals. Dombey’s perspective—which dominates the narrative in the opening sentences—suggests an immutable present, where the “I am that I am” Biblical allusion[[3]](#footnote-4) can only be attached to the patriarch and his offspring. “Those three words [Dombey and Son] conveyed the one idea of Mr. Dombey’s life. The earth was made for Dombey and Son [for the firm as well as for the family]” (*Dombey and Son* 6). Later on in the chapter, we see that even Mr. Dombey’s sister Mrs. Chick (*née* Louisa Dombey) and her friend Miss Tox (self-appointed female ideologists of the Dombey household) also admit the significance of the superiority behind the name, as a result of which, the “recognition of Dombey and Son, […], was so palatable to him [to the father]” (11). For Dombey, this “recognition” is tantamount to the acceptance not simply of the existence but also of the viability of the firm into which the heir as a “new partner” (6) is born, whose presence will perpetuate the business and the family ethos of the father.

Although the text seems to reinforce the father’s masterplot, the play with the perspectives undermines the absolute authority of the father from the start: “Dombey was about eight-and-forty years of age. Son about eight-and-forty minutes. Dombey was rather bald, rather red, […]. Son was very bald, and very red, […]. On the brow of Dombey, Time and his brother Care had set some marks, […] while the countenance of Son was crossed and recrossed with a thousand little creases, […]” (*Dombey and Son* 5). The very basis of the masterplot, the similarity between father and son, is described by the narrator in a playful and potentially subversive manner, indicating the extremely meagre basis for the likeness: redness and wrinkledness do connect the father and the son, and they do represent a kind of likeness, but it is a likeness that is certainly not spotted by the father, one that can only be noticed from an external and detached perspective, and thus these similarities are very far from consituting a reassuring foundation for a genealogical masterplot.

The supreme importance of the Father-Son masterplot is indicated by the fact that the mother is fully expendable in this plot: she is simply the necessary vehicle of producing the son, thereby enabling the continuity of the Father-Son narrative, which can survive her death as an acceptable loss, especially as the father already sees the future exaltation of his House in his son, his own reincarnated younger self, which fact points beyond a mere name identity (“[t]his young gentleman has to accomplish a destiny” [7]). Referring to this fictional pattern, Patricia Tobin points out “the nineteenth century’s ‘unshaken faith in the structural reliability of the *genealogical imperative*,’ […]” (qtd. in Beizer 3, emphasis added); in other words, several narrative constructs in the very first chapter of the book effectively show a marked paternal yearning for of an undisturbed father-to-son genealogical process, which is to ensure the continuation of patriarchy in the family: “Dombey, exulting in the long-looked-for event, jingled and jingled the heavy gold watch-chain that depended from below his trim blue coat, […]. Son, […] seemed, in his feeble way, to be squaring at existence for having come upon him so unexpectedly” (*Dombey and Son* 5). The watch suggests the primacy of (patriarchal) temporality, however, the scene is subversive rather than assertive, for instance because the size of the timepiece and the infantile manner in which the father is using it suggest an uncertainty at the heart of the masterplot. One could suggest that the jingle of the gold watch-chain stands for the ringing of the bells that would be, for the father, the adequate response to the birth of his heir.

The father’s solipsistic self-absorption, which, besides the wish to accumulate profit includes the attempt to appropriate his son as his exclusive heir, inadvertently directs attention to his daughter’s illusory presence in the novel, whose existence as a *metoikos* forces her to become early a social hermaphrodite[[4]](#footnote-5)—a female member of the family whose every word and deed in the household, while reinforcing her physical presence, simultaneously excludes her from the symbolic order almost entirely.

Florence Dombey’s appearance in the patriarchal structure of the household is a demonstration of her ‘nonexistent’ existence. She is first discovered as a series of emphatic paternal negations:

[U]ntil this present day […] Mr. Dombey […] had had *no issue*.—To speak of; *none* worth mentioning. There had been a girl some six years before, and the child, who had stolen into the chamber unobserved, was now crouching timidly in a corner whence she could see her mother’s face. But what was a girl to Dombey and Son! In the capital of the House’s name and dignity, such a child was merely a piece of base coin that *couldn’t* be invested—a bad boy—*nothing* more.

(*Dombey and Son* 6-7, italics added)

This quotation, though indirectly, shows—from the father’s perspective—the proper figurative place of principal family members in Paul Dombey’s patriarchal establishment. However, what we see as spatial arrangement—from the daughter’s viewpoint a kind of still-life in the reality of the novel—is at the same time the order of significance in the household.

Although Fanny Dombey, the mother, is temporarily the center of the picture, her spectacle there suggests nothing more than a misleading pseudo-centrality, due to her fulfilled maternal duty in providing a son (the real center within the picture/paternal order). Her imminent death soon entails her final banishment from the symbolic order as a whole. She has done her ultimate marital duty in delivering a male heir to Mr. Dombey after having “entered on that social contract of matrimony” (6), and therefore her decease cannot substantially upset the well-established (patrilineal) flow of events. The mother’s death is even useful since, as Marianne Hirsch reminds us, “in Victorian fiction the distance between the heroine and her mother needed to be maintained […]” (*The Mother/Daughter Plot* 97), for the sake of the daughter to be able to rise as the sole heroine of domestic fiction. And this is what gradually unfolds in *Dombey and Son* also, beginning with the development of a distinctive father-daughter-son domestic triangle.[[5]](#footnote-6)

We see on the one hand a cold, tyrannical paterfamilias whose main concern is to create the best possible domestic environment for the infant successor, so that his son may grow and develop into the next head of the family. Little Paul Dombey appears very early in the novel as a precocious child, who, despite his often straight-to-the point questions put to his father or sister, still seems like a ‘babe in the woods’ within the patriarchal world. And there is Florence Dombey, a capable intruder, whose presence frequently disturbs the developing father-son harmony at home.

Florence Dombey, the (seemingly) absolute misfit within the patriarchal confines of the House—unlike her conforming mother, her aunt Mrs. Chick and Mrs. Chick’s friend Miss Tox—is not more than a negligible item, compared with her brother, among the vital statistical data (“*some* six years before” was she born [*Dombey and Son* 7]) in the ‘domestic ledger’ of Dombey and Son being alluded to by her peripheral, barely visible presence in the delivery room (“stolen into the chamber unobserved” and “crouching timidly in a corner whence she could see her mother’s face” [7]) from where her mother is departing, and where her brother has just begun to exercise his yet rudimentary influence over even his father. The financial metaphor further underlines her insignificance—although her name may as well allude to the former gold coin of England (‘florin,’ first issued under Edward III)—she is only “a piece of base coin,” debasing her in the eye of her father to be “nothing more” than a worthless financial asset, put another way, a valueless flesh-and-blood entity (7). Florence is “a bad boy” (7) in the sense of a worthless child, especially as the prerequisite of being ‘a good boy’ in the interpretation of Paul Dombey, Esq., would be the historic event of being born a male child; ‘a good girl,’ as a domestic category, simply does not exist in the patriarch’s vocabulary. Janet L. Beizer succinctly summarizes this cultural principle by stating that “the law of generations, represented symbolically by transmission of the father’s name, has become the Law. […] [S]on replaces father, life redeems death. All seems recuperated within the paternal economy” (*Family Plots* 44), consequently, there seems to be no fundamental need for the presence of a daughter in the family who loses her name (that is, her progenitor’s name) when married, in this way substantially weakening the culture-forming presence of the patrilineal line to which she belongs.

The death of the mother, however, unavoidably draws attention to the daughter. Florence, a half-orphan after her mother’s death, “attempts to play the role of maternal daughter […] making advances to her father [as well] that are coldly, even viciously, rejected out-of-hand […]. Dombey will not cooperate. Her every gesture increases his hostility” (Zwinger 425). Paul Dombey does not need a mother surrogate for little Paul in the person of Florence, that is why she is “waiting for the precious, ungraspable prize of her father’s love” (Cockshut 1551) in vain. By refusing her help as a potential nurse functioning as a ‘little mother’ beside Paul, Mr. Dombey, out of a perverse rivalry stemming from the wish for the exclusive possession of his son’s affection, negates yet again his daughter’s existence in the household in which, in her father’s eye, she has never been socially viable.

However, even though the House of Dombey, “[t]hat small world, like the great one out of doors, had the capacity of easily forgetting its dead […]” (*Dombey* *and Son* 24), Florence’s symbolic death or social nonexistence cannot be looked upon by her father in exactly the same way as her mother’s biological decease. Metaphorically speaking, “that small world” with all its social and financial aspects is Paul Dombey’s own embodiment. This reality, as an authoritarian premiss, has been inculcated in little Paul as is evident from his own reference to his father as “Dombey and Son” (146), as well as in James Carker, who he refers to Mr. Dombey as “the presence of the very House” (167). In this House only one type of female character has the right to exist, and that is the conforming Mrs. Chick/Miss Tox/Susan Nipper (the nurse beside Florence) type. Weak females like Fanny Dombey and Florence can merely be nuisances at best, or, at worst, serious sources of danger to the existence and prosperity of the family, because, at least according to Mrs. Chick, the principal female ideologist of the Dombey domestic universe, weakness (both physical and psychical) may well have been the underlying problem leading to the death of both the mother and the son:

Why were we born? […] To make an effort. […] We have but too much reason to suppose, […] that if an effort had been made in time, in this family, a train of the most trying and distressing circumstances might have been avoided. Nothing shall ever persuade me, […] but that, if that effort had been made by poor dear Fanny, the poor dear darling child would at least have had a stronger constitution. […] Therefore, Florence, pray let us see that you have some strength of mind […]. (*Dombey and Son* 227)

Oddly enough, the lack of stregth and subsequent death of the son is explained by the *mother’s* inadequate attitude to life—of whom Florence’s domestic presence continually reminds both her aunt and her father.

Little Paul’s death prepares the ground for one of the climaxes in the novel’s father-daughter plot which, after all—and despite Mr. Dombey’s exclusive investment in his Father-Son masterplot—does constitute the organising strand. A significant crtisis in the main plot-line comes when Mr. Dombey, losing his self-control, hits his daughter. The incident happens as a consequence of another two losses: Edith Dombey (his matrimonial partner) elopes with James Carker (his business partner)—an ironical but apt consequence or corollary of Mr. Dombey’s refusal to distinguish between home and business. Mr. Dombey gradually loses everyone important around himself; however, each human loss—irrespective of its characteristics—forces him to turn his thoughts to the only constant person beside him: his daughter.

While the loss of the first wife is compensated, at least, by a (temporary) heir, the loss of the second wife yields virtually nothing apart from bitterness, but again draws the paternal attention to the only remaining family member in the house, Florence, who quickly becomes a scapegoat, an object within easy reach for Mr. Dombey to give vent to his morally blind anger as “he […] struck her […]” (615). To lend impetus to Paul Dombey’s behavior as an emerging madman, the physical contact between him and his daughter is preceded in the chapter by repetitive segments in the narration: when finding a letter from Edith, “[h]e read that she was gone. He read that he was dishonoured. He read that she had fled […]” (614). Athena Vrettos comments that in *Dombey and Son*, “[v]erbal repetitions frequently mark moments […] when language has been emptied of emotional meaning. They signal the tendency for minds to behave increasingly like machines” (“Defining Habits” 416). The madman-machine analogy is especially important in the case of Paul Dombey as he consciously endeavors throughout the novel to appear immutable in his human relationships both at work and at home. When, however, he is confronted with the betrayal of his wife and head clerk, one of the severest blows on his self-built world order, shaking its very foundation, he is no longer capable of suppressing his anger; therefore, striking his daughter is the ultimate emotional valve by which he aims to react upon the altered, adverse circumstances around him—projecting his impotent rage on Florence. As a result, “she saw him murdering that fond idea to which she had held in spite of him. She saw his cruelty, neglect, and hatred dominant above it, and stamping it down. She saw she had no father upon earth, and ran out, *orphaned*, from his house” (*Dombey and Son* 615, emphasis added). This is the moment when it becomes clear for Florence Dombey that she has always been a *metoikos* in the domestic patriarchal frame of reference. The physical contact is proof for her that her father is more than an idea, a type of patriarchal projection upon the Dombey domestic establishment: he is a flesh-and-blood entity, who, however, has just committed a symbolic suicide against himself and his daughter simultaneously by murdering the positive paternal idea of a father. The use of the word “murder” in the quotation implies premeditation on the father’s part, further anticipating the unwillingness—again on Mr. Dombey’s part—to reconceive the Dombey household. By identifying Florence’s state figuratively as “orphaned,” the narrator draws attention to a kind of “literary murder” (Beizer 41) committed by Paul Dombey *on* himself. This can be labelled as a type of “parricide,” which “nullifies [paternity] utterly;” which means that “the paternal symbol is effaced,” generating “more far reaching consequences” (Beizer 41). We may further add that “it is here the father’s *position* which is [or rather has become] absent, nonexistent: all signifying systems are endangered, because the ultimate signifier has come undone” (Beizer 41-42, emphasis in the original). By becoming a person, revealing more than mechanical rudimentary ‘emotional sparks’ towards her daughter, instead of strengthening at least his “position” if not his existence as a real human being, Paul Dombey becomes absent from the system of which he has always been the primary authentication. However, it is not only Florence who leaves the House “orphaned,” but at the same time, her father also ‘leaves his House bereaved’ in a symbolic sense by breaking the last psychological cord between himself and his daughter. What has remained of their barely visible father-daughter bond seems to be irreversibly disrupted; still, as Kathleen Tillotson reminds us, “[t]he relation between Mr. Dombey and Florence is the backbone of the *whole* book,” (qtd. in Price 119, emphasis added). Also, for Paul Dombey,

Florence may serve […] as an externalized conscience, a troublesome and even hated reminder of the whole world of feeling […] because something within him responds to her. Before Paul’s birth, he had been merely indifferent; afterward this indifference turns to uneasiness and resentment, which increase after Paul’s death. But in this resentment there is an unadmitted sense of guilt, and even the seeds of repentance. (qtd. in Price 122)

Before Mr. Dombey’s “seeds of repentance” begin to work, he must undergo a gradual psychic regeneration, as a consequence of which his daughter, at the end of the novel, is able to discover a tangible father. Early in the book, however, the case is the opposite: Mr. Dombey’s attitude, as a response to his daughter’s domestic presence, reveals his “indifference” at best and “uneasiness” and “resentment” at worst stemming from that unshakable bond between the dying mother and the daughter in the mother’s death scene, in which he, as father, has no share. Looking at them as if from a distance by a river, he sees them “[…] at the bottom of […] clear depths of tenderness and truth, […] those two figures clasped in each other’s arms, while he stood on the bank above them, looking down a mere spectator—not a sharer with them—quite shut out” (*Dombey and Son* 31). The narrator adds that due to being “unable to excude these things from his remembrance, […] [Mr. Dombey’s] previous feelings of indifference towards little Florence changed into an uneasiness of an extraordinary kind” (31), culminating in the morbid fear of losing little Paul in the battle for the son’s affection. That is why, on the one hand, Mr. Dombey maintains a marked distance between himself and his daughter (“Come in,” he said, “come in: what is the child afraid of?”, “Come here, Florence,” said her father coldly. “Do you know who I am?”, “Mr. Dombey took [Florence’s hand] loosely in his own […] looking down upon her, […] and regarding her as it were by stealth with a disturbed and doubtful look.” [3]); on the other hand, the father expresses the necessity of creating “sufficient alienations” (134) between the son and the daughter by sending Paul to Doctor Blimber’s boarding school, which “would wean him by degrees” from Florence (134). The word “wean” alludes to Florence as a capable mother surrogate who, nevertheless, even in this seemingly useful domestic position remains undesirable for the father; still, Mr. Dombey “was afraid that he might come to hate her” (31-32), at least because even he cannot negate his daughter’s efficiency in domestic troubles pertaining to his son, still unsolvable by him or Mrs. Chick. In Chapter 5, Florence appears like a court jester before the “throne of [Mr. Dombey’s crying] son and heir,” and “lured him to bend down from his high estate, and look at her” (*Dombey and Son* 56). When, however, the “son and heir” dies the court jester’s presence becomes increasingly superfluous.[[6]](#footnote-7)

Only the financial ruin of the House persuades the father that his House and his household are indeed fundamentally one and the same establishment because of their social and economic symbiosis; that is, the subversion of one necessarily entails the collapse of the other, that is why, by the end of the novel, “Dombey and Son was no more—his children no more” (775). Realizing the essence of his relationship with his daughter, Paul Dombey “thought, now, that of all around him, she alone had never changed” (771). She is the Florin, the golden coin that never loses its value, the good coin, the good money unaffected by inflation or usure. “His boy had faded into dust, his proud wife had sunk into a polluted creature, his flatterer and friend had been transformed into the worst of villains, his riches had melted away, the very walls that sheltered him looked on him as a stranger; […]” (771). Everything and everyone has become meaningless, has lost its merit for Dombey—except his newly discovered daughter, Florence. The harshest verdict upon himself is formulated in this critical moment: “She had never changed to him—nor had he ever changed to her—and she was lost” (773). This is, however, the turning point in the novel when the daughter reappears in the house and tries for the last time to establish a bond between her father and herself by asking his forgiveness for abandoning him after his act of violence. Dombey is no longer able to hide behind his arrogance, he yields to this manifest affection, and asks for his daughter’s forgiveness, which act eventually saves him from a total alienation from the one surviving member of his family, and finally results in re-establishing “Dombey and Son,” which, in reality, has always been “a Daughter, […], after all” (777-78).

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2. Jack Lindsay points out that the Victorian household, that is, “[t]he House (representing the Family and above all the maternal body) is for him [for Dickens] a refraction of the whole of society,” moreover, it often “comes to stand for all that is most enclosing—restrictive, repressive, alienating—in Victorian society” (qtd. in Gross and Pearson 100). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. See Exodus III. 14. (Authorized [King James] Version). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Not to mention the fact that the name ‘Florence’ can be looked upon as both a feminine and a masculine forename meaning, among other things, ‘prosperous.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. A more or less similar family triangle as dominant underlying plot pattern may be observable in Charles Dickens’s *Hard Times* as well as in Elizabeth Gaskell’s *The Doom of the Griffiths* or *North and South*. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. The “son and heir” dies almost three times in the novel, as beside young Paul Dombey, a boat named *Son and* *Heir*—aboard it Walter Gay, Florence’s future husband, the new ‘son and heir’—is rumored to be lost at sea (428). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)