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TOUCHED BY LOVE: FLORENCE AS CHRIST-FIGURE IN *DOMBEY AND SON*

An Essay Submitted to the
Office of Graduate Studies
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By
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The essay of Sarah Flenniken is hereby accepted:

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A recent movement in Victorian literary criticism involves a fascination with tactile imagery. Heather Tilley wrote an introduction to an essay collection that purports to “deepen our understanding of the interconnections Victorians made between mind, body, and self, and the ways in which each came into being through tactile modes” (5). According to Tilley, “who touched whom, and how, counted in nineteenth-century society” and literature; in the collection she introduces, “contributors variously consider the ways in which an increasingly delineated touch sense enabled the articulation and differing experience of individual subjectivity” across a wide range of novels and even disciplines (1, 7). In other words, by looking closely at tactile imagery, we can discover another avenue through which nineteenth-century authors articulated individuality in their work, and expressed the subjectivity of their characters.

Pamela Gilbert also focuses on touch and the self in Charles Dickens’ *David Copperfield* and notes:

The sense of touch was also undergoing a revaluation. From classical times to the eighteenth century, sight was broadly considered the monarch of the human senses: touch, like smell, was considered both more animal and less precise than sight...But in medicine and philosophy in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the self increasingly came to be seen as based on the sensing body, and this encouraged a reappraisal of touch....By the mid-nineteenth century, touch emerged as a central and privileged sense in materialist studies of the mind by physiological philosophers such as Alexander Bain and Herbert Spencer. (4)

Gilbert argues that Dickens engages with the general interest of touch in the period, and that “his use of hands is generally exemplary of fictional techniques of the day, which

focused on the body as a signifier of character,” echoing Tilley’s introductory comment about touch showing the interconnectedness of mind, body, and self through touch (9). While Gilbert thinks that Dickens’ use of hands does show character, she takes her argument further: “Dickens’s hands also reveal intention and will through their actions” (9). Ultimately, Gilbert shows that “in focusing on David [Copperfield’s] long journey to self-education, and thus to knowing and harmonizing his true will with his outer character and actions, Dickens often focuses on touch as transformative” because touch shows the character’s actions transformed as those actions align with the character’s will (15). She focuses on touch within the context of the self in the material world, and characters in that world enacting their will through touch.

While I agree with Gilbert that Dickens represents touch as transformative, I view touch in Dickens as transformative because it is a conduit of love, and I wish to extend her argument into another work by Dickens to illustrate a different type of transformative power. Touch is not merely transformative because it shows the harmony of will and action in the material realm; rather, touch is transformative because it can show a divine love that transforms the will itself within a spiritual context. In this paper, I will argue that in *Dombey and Son*, touch is transformative because it shows and enacts divine love in an embodied way. Mr. Dombey, a wealthy trader and businessman, and his daughter Florence, whom he consistently neglects despite her love, illustrate the transformative power of touch most powerfully. Florence’s love transcends the materiality of the physical realm that Gilbert focuses on, because her touch ultimately shows her ability to transform and redeem; Dickens uses touch not only to express Florence’s earthly self, but to show Florence becoming a type of female Christ for others. While touch does take

place in the physical world, I argue that Dickens is using touch in a way that ultimately transcends the material realm, as Florence's touch expresses a love which transforms and redeems those around her.

Dickens uses touch to represent transcendent themes in a material world because Christianity permeates Dickens' work. In a letter written to a friend, Dickens explains that "one of my most constant and most earnest endeavours has been to exhibit in all my good people some faint reflections of the teachings of our great Master... all my strongest illustrations are derived from the New Testament; all my social abuses are shown as departures from its spirit; all my good people are humble, charitable, faithful, and forgiving" (qtd. in Timko 30). If Dickens tried, in every good or pure character, to reflect some element of Christ, it is not surprising that he created a type of Christ in Florence. Clearly, Dickens wanted to make Christian doctrine an integral part of his literature. Robert Butterworth argues that "Dickens' religion is absolutely central to his work" and also notes that Dickens saw Christianity as "the solution to all society's problems" (2). While some have argued that Dickens' strong stance on many societal issues at his time meant that he maintained just a humanitarian view of Christianity, Dickens' moral vision goes beyond social issues. For example, in an editorial letter he wrote about capital punishment, Dickens presents an argument from a pamphlet written by Reverend Henry Christmas; the pamphlet references "five versions of the Old Testament," and in his letter, Dickens uses the pamphlet to argue against capital punishment "in quite a scholarly way" (4). Butterworth cites Dickens' familiarity with the Old Testament and closely argued case as evidence of a deep and thoughtful faith. Certainly, Dickens is not "somebody with only a superficial engagement with religion" who cares just about the

social ramifications of moral living (4). Instead, Dickens' faith goes beyond the social in both his life and his work.

Dickens saw religion as life- and self-changing, not just a moral or social code. Gary Colledge discusses Dickens' work *The Life of Our Lord* and addresses the critics who see Dickens' religion as mere humanitarian relief:

some would suggest that Christianity in Dickens is irrelevant. With or without it, nothing would really change. Neither the presence nor absence of Christianity would change his narrative worlds or his worldview. Seen in terms of the faith statement articulated in [*The Life of Our Lord*], however, the humanitarian compassion that so characterizes Dickens is a genuine compassion and a concern grounded firmly in and emerging from his understanding of the message of the gospels and in the life and teaching of Jesus. (*Dickens, Christianity* 19)

In other words, Dickens' Christianity is not a feel-good set of instructions, but a life-changing faith that shaped the way he lived, worked, and wrote. Evidence of this robust faith appears in a letter Dickens wrote to his sons, in which he urges them to adopt "a submission to 'our Saviour, as separated from the vain constructions and inventions of men'" (*God* 26). While social change certainly marked his interest, Dickens also cared deeply about personal change and submission to a Saviour who was "at the center of Dickens's faith and the essential element in it" (26). For Dickens, what made outward change and compassionate humanitarian actions possible was a change of heart. This change in the self that occurs through faith in Christ, at the personal level, resonates with the transformation many of his characters undergo. For them, Christianity provides a framework in which the self is affected and shaped by a divine love.

The centrality of Dickens' Christianity to his demonstration of transformative touch is not a coincidence; touch is an important aspect of the Bible throughout the Old and New Testament. For example, in Genesis, the creation of man and woman involves touch; God spoke the rest of the world into being, but "the Lord God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life" (*English Standard Version*, Gen. 2:7). When God creates Eve, He "took one of [Adam's] ribs and closed up its place with flesh," once again using touch (Gen. 2:21) and thus imbuing touch with a sense of significance. Touch is an important trope in the Old Testament and fulfills many purposes such as creation, purification and communicating truth. *Baker's Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology* notes that "through his divine touch, God turns people to him (1 Sam 10:26), purifies them from sin (Isa. 6:7; Jer. 1:9), and imparts divine truth through them (Jer. 1:9; Dan.10:16)" ("Touch"). Yet the clearest examples of touch in the Old Testament deal with the holiness of God, and punitive uses of touch to maintain His holiness.

On the one hand, God's people are forbidden from touching certain items or places because their touch would infringe upon His holiness. In Leviticus 11, for example, it is written that "every animal that parts the hoof but is not cloven-footed or does not chew the cud is unclean to you. Everyone who touches them shall be unclean. And all that walk on their paws, among the animals that go on all fours, are unclean to you. Whoever touches their carcass shall be unclean until the evening" (Lev. 11:26-27). Merely touching these unclean animals made someone unclean. On the other hand, touch is used as a punitive force to maintain purity. As Baker's Dictionary explains:

God's holiness was severe: upon the threat of immediate death, no one was to touch Mount Sinai while God's glory was upon it (Exod 19:12) or the sacred furnishings of the tabernacle except Aaron and his sons (Num 4:15; cf. 2 Sam 6:6-7)...God graciously gave these prohibitions (cf. Lev 27:34) to provide a way for sinful people to approach him. The link to moral purity is evident in Leviticus 7:21: "if anyone touches something unclean and then eats any of the meat of the fellowship offering, that person must be cut off from his people." These laws helped clarify the terms of purification by which one could come to God and, in turn, God's expectations for the continuing moral cleanness of his people.

(“Touch”)

In other words, touch was linked to moral purity, and touching or not touching the right or wrong objects had severe consequences.

More importantly, the Lord would often smite or strike His people to maintain His holiness. For example, in 2 Samuel 6, the Israelites transport the sacred Ark of the Covenant. As they travel, “Uzzah put out his hand to the ark of God and took hold of it, for the oxen stumbled. And the anger of the LORD was kindled against Uzzah, and God struck him down there because of his error” (2 Sam. 6:6-7, *ESV*). Here, ironically, Uzzah’s touching of the Ark, which displays direct disobedience and disregard for God’s holiness, leads to God’s punitive smiting. There are numerous examples of smiting; in fact, the word “smite” appears in the Old Testament in the King James Version of the Bible 121 times (King James Bible Online). The Lord speaks about smiting the Egyptians with His wrath when they do not free the Israelites; the Mosaic Law commands that if a man smites down another man, he shall also die. The Lord also smites other nations and

severely punishes those who do not follow His laws. Overall, the idea of smiting and touch as a punitive force pervades the Old Testament, most often dealing directly with God's righteous use of smiting in order to maintain His holiness and protect His people. In Dickens' work, there are often overtones of smiting and punitive touch.

Yet unlike the righteous smiting of the Old Testament, enacted by a holy God to protect His people from impurity, the smiting in Dickens' work is enacted by severe characters out of unholy pride or a perverted sense of justice, rather than righteousness and perfect holiness. Mrs. Clennam, a severe woman in *Little Dorrit*, exemplifies this perverted sense of justice. Her son expresses his plans to leave the family business, a proclamation which angers Mrs. Clennam, and brings her strongest judgement: "great need had the rigid woman of her mystical religion, veiled in gloom and darkness, with lightnings of cursing, vengeance, and destruction...Smite thou my debtors, Lord, wither them, crush them" (29). Mrs. Clennam's desire to smite those who she feels wrong her contrasts strongly with the Biblical instances of smiting that protect and guard holiness. Ronald S. Librach argues that "Mrs. Clennam...is associated throughout *Little Dorrit* with a *fiercely* Calvinist brand of religion, which she bases on what she takes to be the death-exacting justice of the God of the Old Testament" (544). Notice that Mrs. Clennam is associated with *what she takes* to be the death-exacting justice of God—whether she has correctly interpreted the Scriptures and her role in demanding justice is another matter. Librach notes, for instance, that "when Arthur visits [Mrs. Clennam] for the first time, he finds her seated on 'a black bier-like sofa...propped up behind with one great angular black bolster, like the block at a state execution' (I, 3, p.33): for Dickens suggests that the retribution which her faith teaches is nothing more than a religious model for the

ultimate punishment” (544). In other words, Librach argues that Mrs. Clennam’s religion is based solely on the Old Testament, and is one of law and retribution by a wrathful and exacting God, which Mrs. Clennam (wrongly) believes that she must enact. Yet she is not God; she is not holy or righteous enough to enact the retribution she desires. Therefore, her retribution becomes blasphemous and eventually destroys her. Similarly, as I shall show below, Dombey’s paternal use of punitive force in *Dombey and Son* is unjust and based firmly in his pride, and so almost destroys him.

Contrastingly, through Christ, God provides for the moral purity and sanctification of His people so that the old law and harsh restrictions on touch are no longer necessary, and punitive smiting is no longer prevalent in the New Testament; rather, touch is often associated with healing and restoration. Sara Wuthnow observes that many of the healing stories throughout the Gospels “involve Jesus healing by touch, motivated by his deep compassion. For example, in Luke 5:13, Jesus heals a leper with touch; in Luke 13:12-13, a woman bent over for many years straightens up at his touch; in John 9:6-7, a blind man sees when mud is touched to his eyes” (222). Wuthnow also references the healing of Jairus’ daughter and the healing of a woman with an issue of blood found in Luke 8. During his betrayal, one of Jesus’ disciples reacts strongly to the soldiers who have come to take Jesus away and “struck the servant of the high priest and cut off his right ear. But Jesus said, ‘No more of this!’ And he touched his ear and healed him” (Luke 22:50-51). Throughout the New Testament, Jesus serves as a Healer, healing the physical while ultimately concerned with the inner self. In *Dombey and Son*, Florence’s touch often aims to heal or soothe, as she expresses the love that Christ

demonstrates through her affection; ultimately her touch serves as a transformative and redemptive force, healing and restoring the selfhood of those around her.

I argue that Dickens laced *Dombey and Son* with instances of both punitive and healing touch. In the novel, punitive touch shows judgement or damnation—while this judgement is sometimes just, it is often unjust and destructive. Healing touch, however, leads to a type of redemption or restoration. Tactile moments occur most tellingly between Florence, Mr. Dombey, and Edith, his second wife. Ultimately, Dickens uses instances of redemptive and punitive touch to present Florence as a Christ-like or redemptive figure; her touch has the power to heal and restore both her father and Edith because of her great and self-abnegating love. It is helpful to understand Edith, Dombey, and Florence as representing certain moral and religious types or attributes. D.M. Yeager argues that Dombey is pride, Edith is wrath, and Florence is love (180-181). Throughout the novel, Dombey “believes himself to be perfectly reasonable, but he reasons within the cage of his stupendous ego,” Florence embodies “improbable, unbelievable, unrewarded, self-emptying love,” and Edith “is a smoldering fire of resentment and rage” (180-181). Edith and Dombey try to defy and thus destroy one another, and in that battle of the wills, it is loving Florence who is “both a hostage and a casualty” (181). Yet Florence grows away from her role as a casualty, and ultimately serves as the figure in the novel who offers redemption and restoration through her physical affection and touch. The clearest recipients of this restoration are her father, Dombey, and her step-mother, Edith, rescued from their respective pride and wrath despite their unjust and destructive punitive touch.

From the opening scene of *Dombey and Son*, many small moments revolve around tactile imagery in Florence’s relationship with her father. One of the largest

injustices throughout the novel is the disparity between Dombey's treatment of his son and heir, Paul, and that of Florence, fueled by his unhealthy pride in his firm and the future he sees for his son. His pride is also what leads to Dombey's ultimate use of punitive touch in the critical scene in the novel when he strikes Florence. Yet his pride manifests itself in smaller ways in the opening scene of the novel, in which Dombey's son, Paul, is born. For example, it would not be unusual for a father to hold his new-born son, but there is no physical contact between Dombey and little Paul. Instead, Dombey sits on an arm-chair, and "Son lay tucked up warm in a little basket bedstead, carefully disposed on a low settee immediately in front of the fire" (11). In fact, instead of touching or holding his newborn son, "Dombey...jingled and jingled the heavy gold watch-chain that depended from below his trim blue coat" (11). Dombey dwells on the potential for future glory when his son will assume control of his trading company, his impatience for that future day manifested in his jingling of the watch, and highlighted by the lack of physical affection in the present. Clearly, Dombey's love for his new son is completely based on the future moment when Dombey's all-encompassing ambition will be realized.

While Dombey is not antagonistic towards his son, simply proud to a fault, Dombey's antagonism towards Florence appears in tactile language when she tiptoes towards her brother in the same scene. Dombey cautions his daughter: "You may go and look at your pretty brother, if you like, I dare say. Don't touch him!" (13). The grudging admission that she may look at her brother coupled with the firm command *not* to touch highlights Dombey's poor treatment of Florence through tactile language. Even though the little girl has done nothing wrong, Dombey has no room for her in his visions of the future. His words are harsh, a sort of verbal smiting—"Don't touch him!" Dombey's

pride only involves his son and himself; there is not room for any other type of love in Paul's universe. It is striking that even in the opening scene of the novel, his pride appears through his treatment of Florence.

In this scene, Florence's mother, who dies within the first chapter of the book and almost completely disappears from the narrative afterwards, offers a balm against Dombey's harshness. A few lines after his command not to touch, "the lady had opened her eyes and the child [ran] towards her...[and] had clung about her with a desperate affection very much at variance with her years" (13). Florence embraces her mother as a reaction to Dombey's pride. Their embrace highlights Florence's own need for affection, physical or otherwise, yet also reveals Florence's instinct to offer affection to the weak and hurting— she clings to her mother, as if her touch could heal the sick woman. Florence's instinct towards touch as a healing force foreshadows her use of physical touch to redeem her father and other characters later in the novel.

Florence's aptitude for loving others and displaying that love through physical affection continues throughout the novel, and appears most significantly in her relationships with Dombey and with Edith, whom Dombey marries later in life. Both Dombey and Edith need redemption, and it is through Florence that they ultimately find restoration. Yet Florence needs to grow into her role as redeemer throughout the novel, and ultimately it is not until after her father's blow that she is able to restore Dombey and Edith.

Before addressing the complex relationship between Dombey and Florence, it is helpful to consider Edith and her relationship to Florence. As Yeager observes, "Florence is the only person who has ever loved Edith simply and sincerely, and Edith responds (so

far as her burnt spirit can) to this holy touch” (181). Yeager correctly identifies Edith’s need for redemption; her burnt spirit smolders with resentment at her ill-usage, and she needs the simple and sincere love Florence offers. While some may say that Edith’s anger is justified due to her upbringing at the hands of a mother eager to “sell” her into marriage, Yeager argues that Edith’s anger poses a deeper problem for Dickens:

There is no question that Edith’s anger is just anger, so on what grounds does Dickens object to it? He objects, it seems to me, not because her anger is not constructively channeled but for three reasons that display his debt to the Christian tradition that he obliquely invokes: (1) anger forecloses change, (2) anger deadens, and (3) anger is inimical to repentance and forgiveness. (181)

In other words, Edith’s anger is what damns her simply because it is anger—the difference between Edith and Dombey is that she knows she needs redemption, and he initially does not (182). Edith’s anger may be justified, but Dickens’ Christian framework means that Edith’s anger keeps her from living a hopeful or vibrant life—instead she is trapped in her wrath, and needs the touch of Florence’s love to escape her own anger and engender change in her circumstances; she needs the transformative touch of Florence’s love to heal and grow.

Edith’s wrath is displayed through tactile language in *Dombey and Son*. When Dombey’s sexually predatory assistant, Carker, visits Edith and Florence, “he ventured—with one more glance towards Florence at the moment--to take [Edith’s] hand, and bending over it, to touch it with his lips” (654). “Despite the flush upon her cheek, the bright light in her eyes, and the dilation of her whole form,” Edith does not respond violently to Carker’s touch because of Florence’s restraining presence, a fact Carker

certainly anticipates (654). Yet shortly after he leaves, Edith takes the hand he kissed and with violent wrath “struck it on the marble chimney-shelf, so that, at one blow, it was bruised, and bled” (655). In a twisted moment of punitive touch, Edith smites her own hand as a way to protect herself from the impurity of Carker’s unclean touch. She holds the hand that she struck in her anger “near the shining fire, as if she could have thrust it in and burned it” (655). This fire mirrors Edith’s fiery wrath, and represents the fire of damnation that her anger drives her towards, if not for the intervention of redeeming love.

Edith’s wrath and brokenness keep her from offering true forgiveness and restoration to her mother, as demonstrated in another scene rich with tactile language. Mrs. Skewton, infirm and vain, raised Edith to seek material wealth, and trained her daughter to be a marriage commodity in a childhood void of love. Thus Mrs. Skewton’s death is painful and slow and she is tormented by “a stone arm—part of a figure off some tomb, she says—[that] is raised to strike her” (634). The stone arm evokes a sense of Old Testament wrath, the hand of God raised in just and holy judgment of Mrs. Skewton’s sins. It must not be a coincidence that the hand is a stone arm—the Bible is laced with commands to stone sinners as a form of execution. While in other places in the novel punitive touch is used unjustly through pride like Dombey’s, the voice of the omniscient narrator indicates that Mrs. Skewton’s judgment is just, and the smiting of the stone hand is deserved. The stone hand falls, “and then a dumb woman lies upon the bed, and she is crooked and shrunk up, and half of her is dead” (634). Mrs. Skewton still lingers after the stone hand drops. She sits and listens to the ocean, which often represents the after-life in *Dombey and Son*, and sees “but a broad stretch of desolation between earth and heaven” (634). Death holds no hope for Mrs. Skewton as she has lived

a life in need of redemption. As she approaches death, “her wandering hands upon the coverlet join feebly palm to palm, and move towards her daughter” (635). Notice the tactile language here, as she moves her hands in the position of prayer towards Edith and begs for comfort, forgiveness, and redemption. Yet Edith herself needs redemption, and her forgiveness is ineffectual.

Edith cannot muster any emotion to care for her mother. In fact, “without a tear, [she] kneels down to bring her voice closer to the sinking head” (635). The interaction between Edith and her mother that follows is dry and emotionless. Edith attempts to forgive her mother, using the correct language, and even offering physical affection: “I told you the past was at end between us. I say so now, again. Kiss me, mother” (635). Edith “touches the white lips,” a sterile kiss (635). Yet despite the listless kiss and attempted forgiveness, death still holds horror for Mrs. Skewton. She does not die peacefully, redeemed for her lifetime of sin. Instead, she dies in fear and unrest, drawing the curtains close, and trying to block out the final judgment that death brings, uneasy by her daughter’s attempts at redemption. The narrator commands: “draw the rose-coloured curtains. There is something else upon its flight besides the wind and clouds. Draw the...curtains close,” expressing stern and deserved judgment for Mrs. Skewton’s actions (635). Edith needs to be restored by holy touch herself; her resentment keeps her from offering the forgiveness her mother seeks, and explains why her mother’s death makes such a painful scene.

While Edith’s wrath potentially damns her, it is Dombey’s pride, often demonstrated through tactile language, which illustrates his need for redemption. For example, in the beginning scene of the novel, Dombey stares at his newborn son and talks

about grand schemes for the future: “as he thus apostrophized the infant he raised one of his hands to his lips, and kissed it; then, seeming to fear that the action involved some compromise of his dignity, went, awkwardly enough, away” (14). Even from the beginning, Dombey’s pride keeps him from expressing love. Dombey condemns himself through his treatment of Florence most of all. Her loving heart makes Paul fond of her; Dombey cannot bear their mutual love and is jealous of the girl to a fault. It is interesting to note the use of another sensory mode to demonstrate Dombey’s pride and his disapproval of Florence. Stacey Kikendall observes that Dombey uses his vision to alienate Florence: “Dombey accomplishes ... rejection of Florence through his gaze, and the looks he turns on his daughter are described as ‘cold’ and ‘frigid.’ He uses his disciplinary gaze to force her withdrawal from him” (73). This withdrawal that Kikendall notes is reinforced through tactile means as well.

From the beginning of the novel, a barrier appears that keeps Florence from enacting her full love. Florence misses a mother’s love, and then lives her entire childhood without a father’s love, either. In fact, Dombey sees Florence for the first time after her mother’s death only because of the maneuverings of Polly, Paul’s nurse. After asking Mr. Dombey if Florence and Paul could play together, Polly wonders if Dombey does not want to see his daughter:

And she was right. The last time he had seen his slighted child, there had been that in the sad embrace between her and her dying mother, which was at once a revelation and a reproach to him. Let him be absorbed as he would in the Son on whom he built such high hopes, he could not forget that closing scene. He could not forget that he had had no part in it. That, at the bottom of its clear depths of

tenderness and truth, lay 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. (42)

Dombey does not want to see his daughter because her presence reproaches him for his lack of love for his late wife, and his neglect of his daughter. He was entirely shut out of the affection of the two women in his family, and that fact is a blow to his pride and perhaps a sting to his conscience. I also find it ironic in this passage that Dombey has set his high hopes on his own son, rather than the Son of Man whose love has the power to change him; ironically, it is Dombey's daughter, Florence, who embodies the love of Jesus and ultimately redeems her father.

Dombey cannot keep himself from thinking about the final moment between his wife and daughter, "visible to him through the mist of his pride" (42). As Dombey dwells on the scene, "his previous feeling of indifference towards little Florence changed into an uneasiness of an extraordinary kind... [he felt] as if she had an innate knowledge of one jarring and discordant string within him, and her very breath could sound it" (42).

Dombey senses that Florence has insight into his character, but through his clouded and prideful vision he is uneasy about her ability, and transfers that uneasiness to her.

Florence, still a child, feels this uneasiness as she stands before him, and if Mr. Dombey had looked closely and "with a father's eye, he might have read...the passionate desire to run clinging to him, crying, as she hid her face in his embrace, 'Oh father, try to love me!'" (42). Unfortunately, Mr. Dombey does not read Florence's eyes, and instead takes her "trembling hand" and "held it loosely in his own" after "patting her on the head," all weak gestures compared to the passionate embrace Florence desires (43). Dombey's

pride has led to an uneasiness with Florence that will, throughout the novel, grow into a hatred for what he cannot understand: her love.

Mr. Dombey's distaste for Florence grows, though at times it seems as if he may be more inclined to love her. Shortly after his marriage to Edith, Mr. Dombey looks at Florence, and "softened to her, more and more...he felt inclined to speak to her, and call her to him" (548). However, this feeling ends when Edith takes Florence away for a quiet confidential talk. After they leave, "a darkness gathered on his face, exceeding any that the night could cast, and rested there" (549). The close-knit relationship between Edith and Florence stirs his pride, and he begins to view Florence as a rival once again. He is shut out from their loving relationship, just as he was excluded from the love between his first wife and Florence, or between Florence and Paul. As Lynda Zwinger observes, "Dombey's hostility towards Florence is compounded by his reading her as... 'his own successful rival in that son's affection' (p. 252) ...his second wife's presence in his home increases Dombey's uneasy sense of the threat represented by his lovable daughter," and so Dombey's pride keeps him from accepting Florence's love (425). As Andrew McDonald notes, Dombey "observes the intimacy between Edith and Florence [and] his reaction is one of jealousy that another of his possessions should turn to Florence, as Paul had... he becomes fixed in a resentment that verges on malice toward both Edith and Florence" (6). He must be the ultimate figure in the lives of those around him; ironically, his pride blinds him to receiving the love of the daughter who craves his love the most. In fact, not only does Dombey not appreciate Florence's love, but her love also fuels his hatred and anger towards her.

Dombey's hatred of Florence, Zwinger argues, stems from his pride, and escalates with the birth of his son—he dislikes the closeness between Paul and Florence because he wants to be the center of his son's universe. For example, when Dombey and Florence leave Paul at Dr. Blimber's school, Paul's sorrowful expression "was not addressed to [Mr. Dombey]. No, no. To Florence..." (170). Just as being shut out of the embrace of his first wife and daughter injures Mr. Dombey, Mr. Dombey's pride cannot bear Paul's attachment to Florence, and he dislikes Florence for her love for Paul, blind to the fact that Florence also loves her father. Arthur A. Adrian discusses Dombey's "inner conflict" throughout *Dombey and Son* as Dombey's memories are "poisoned by the knowledge that his dead son had preferred her to himself... [and] his daughter continues her efforts to penetrate the barrier between them" (100). Directly after Paul dies, Adrian notes that Florence "tries to fill the void in [Dombey's] life, to share his loneliness, to wait on him tenderly," but Dombey refuses to accept her advances (100). In the text, Dombey sees her come "close before him with extended arms," ready to offer comfort and love in the form of an embrace (284). Instead, Dombey gives her a cold glance and "took her by the arm. His hand was cold, and loose, and scarcely closed upon her." Dickens uses the word loose again to connect to the earlier scene when Dombey loosely held Florence's hand shortly after the death of his first wife (285). Florence's willingness to offer a warm embrace stands in stark contrast to Dombey's stiff, cold hand that hardly touches his daughter.

Adrian notes that throughout the text Dombey "has 'rejected the angel' and taken up 'with the tormenting spirit crouching in his bosom' (Chap. 20) ...in portraying Dombey's inner conflict, Dickens wants it understood that his regeneration, when it

comes will not be unmotivated” (102). In other words, Dombey needs regeneration, and it will ultimately be motivated by Florence, who saves Dombey from himself and his own pride. Yet clearly Dombey needs to be a broken man before he can respond to Florence’s love. Florence herself also needs a sort of crisis; she is stunted by Dombey’s pride in a way that keeps her from fully displaying her affection, instead often trembling and unsure in his presence while simply wishing for or imagining his affection. Florence craves love from others given her father’s rejection and her absent mother. For example, Miss Tox and Mrs. Chick talk about how Florence is not a Dombey, and because of that “she’ll never glide and nestle into the bosom of her papa’s affection” (63). It is implied that Florence hears that conversation between the two women, and the thought that she will never win her father’s affection strikes her deeply. After hearing Mrs. Chick and Miss Tox speaking, Florence tears up and begs to “lie by my brother’... with a frightened look, and in a voice broken by sobs and tears” (64). Polly grants her request, and Florence “crept as near him as she could without disturbing his rest; and stretching out one arm so that it timidly embraced his neck,” she nestled close to her brother and gave him the affection that she herself craved and had just heard she would never receive, according to her foolish aunt (64). Yet Dombey’s disapproval of Florence appears most strongly in an instance of tactile imagery at the pivotal point in the novel.

Dombey’s blow against Florence in the stairwell of their home comes at a moment when Dombey’s pride has been deeply wounded. He learns that his wife has left him, fled with Mr. Carker, and possibly cheated on him. Dombey discovers her flight after examining her dressing room where “thrown down in a costly mass upon the ground, was every ornament she had had, since she had been his wife; every dress she

had worn; and everything she had possessed” (720). These abandoned symbols of his wealth amplify his injured pride. Florence hears the news, and yields “to the impulse of her affection, timid at all other times, but bold in its truth to him in his adversity, and undaunted by past repulse” (721). As Florence “hastened towards him unchecked, with her arms stretched out...as if she would have clasped him round the neck,” Dickens once again displays her embodiment of love through tactile language (721). Although Florence wants to heal her father’s pain with her embrace, she is stopped by his broken pride and terrible rage: “in his frenzy, he lifted up his cruel arm and struck her, crosswise, with that heaviness, that she tottered on the marble floor” (721).

I argue that Florence is a Christ-like character, love incarnate, who serves as a redeeming figure to multiple characters in the novel, and the significance of Dickens noting that Dombey’s blow was “crosswise” cannot be missed. This scene reads as Florence’s crucifixion, where she is rejected and spurned, punished for the sins of others (i.e., Edith and Carker). This moment is an ironic and sickening twist of the punitive touch in the Old Testament, in which Dombey unjustly smites Florence despite her innocence. Dombey’s blow will later haunt him; in his pride, he has enacted a punitive gesture that is deeply unjust, and thereby blasphemous, and leads to his near destruction. On the other hand, Florence’s love for her father mirrors Christ’s act of love on the cross. Dickens viewed imitation of Christ as the highest calling of a Christian. In fact, Colledge argues that “Dickens would place the highest premium on faith demonstrated in selfless service to others; in a faith that seeks to be an expression of Christ’s love and compassion” (*God* 27). For Dickens, “the imitation of Jesus was the definitive mark of the real Christian” (29). Florence imitates Jesus’ goodness and compassion throughout

the entire novel; now, she also experiences rejection and a crushing blow that leads to suffering, despite her innocence, just like her Savior.

The idea of a female Christ exists elsewhere in Victorian literature. According to Dorothy Mermin, the roots of the female Christ originated with Florence Nightingale: “‘The next Christ will perhaps be a female Christ,’ Florence Nightingale wrote in *Cassandra*; ‘at last there shall arise a woman, who will resume, in his own soul, all the sufferings of her race, and that woman will be the Saviour of her race’” (qtd. in Mermin 112). A female Christ also appears in Christina Rossetti’s “Goblin Market” with Lizzie, who “offers as an alternative both a gift of love and an example of a better way of life.... like Christ, she saves both [herself and her sister] by her self-sacrifice and by her example” (Mermin 112). Notably, Lizzie saves Laura through tactile means; her sister eats and drinks the fruit juice from Lizzie’s own body, just as Florence saves through her touch as another type of female Christ figure.

Some critics take issue with Dickens’ female Christ figures; in fact, Julie Melnyk argues that “both Dickens and Nightingale endorse heretical Christologies, denying the divinity of Christ and, in Nightingale’s case, his resurrection: neither copes with the full complexities and contradictions that less heterodox Victorian Christians confronted, the Christ who is at once feminized and powerful” (131). Yet I think that Dickens’ creation of a female Christ does not deny Christ’s divinity because I would argue that in Florence, Dickens was not trying to create an exact theological double; hence his creation of a type of female Christ is not heretical, but evocative. Florence serves as a *type* of female Christ who reflects some of His love in an embodied and tactile way through her sacrifice and suffering.

Shortly after Dombey's blow, Dickens mentions Florence's true heavenly Father when he writes that Florence "saw that she had no father upon earth," implying that her true Father dwells in Heaven (721). Although Florence has been rejected by her earthly father, Colledge points out that "God steps into the breach, becoming for Florence the father that Mr. Dombey, her earthly father, refuses to be" (*God* 106). A few lines after the blow, Florence leaves her home, and "the close darkness of the shut-up house...yielded to the unexpected glare and freedom of the morning," as Florence, through the awful blow of her father, is resurrected from the dark tomb of the house. This scene is crucial because Dombey's blow severs Florence's ties to the house and to himself. Up until this point in the novel, Arthur A. Adrian argues, "Dickens has yet to show how sacrificial love will eventually transcend the barriers that isolate parent from child" (104). Many chapters after the blow, Florence returns to redeem her father and Edith, but it is not until after this blow that she is able to fully redeem and love them both.

While Paul is alive, Florence can give and receive affection from her little brother; when he dies, she still has some sort of companionship with her maid, Susan Nipper; when Edith appears, McDonald argues that "Florence once again appears to be saved by having a new vehicle for her irrepressible love" (6). These characters receive Florence's love and give her some love in return, yet she still craves love from her father, and wants to express her own love to him. Yet Florence cannot show her father love due to his pride. Ultimately, when Dombey levels his crosswise blow against Florence, that act of anger breaks Florence's ties to the house and finally, it seems, severs the ties between them. Yet that blow is the catalyst for growth that Florence needs. Andrew

McDonald makes a critical argument that the plot of *Dombey and Son* is “a process of isolating Florence, of stripping her metaphorically and even literally” until she loses everything except her “essential innocence” (1). His argument is that “*Dombey and Son* is not just about the pride and fall of Dombey; also, and relatedly, it is about the near loss and eventual finding of Florence, and the survival of the qualities with which she is identified,” qualities such as innocence or, as I would argue, love (1). Dombey’s blow breaks any tie keeping Florence bound to the house, and thus to Dombey himself; McDonald argues that “the blow is the last stage in the stripping of Florence, and the trigger for the predicament which will be the final test of the qualities she represents” (11).

After Dombey’s blow, Florence is truly orphaned, even though her father technically lives. As McDonald notes, she has been isolated from all sources of earthly love and companionship, and “Dombey is now dead in Florence’s heart” (15). After wandering the streets, Florence ends up in Walter Gay’s home. Walter worked for Mr. Dombey as a young man, and views Florence with a special fondness, which she returns throughout the novel. Their friendship is cut off when Mr. Dombey sends Walter abroad; in fact, Florence believes Walter to be lost at sea. Nevertheless, she ends up living in his uncle’s shop, and there “we see Florence once again pining for love, in an image connecting her to Paul; but now her feeling centers on Walter, and her memory of how he had rescued her before” (15). Walter, in fact, is not dead, and he returns to his Uncle Sol’s shop to find Florence. Their relationship begins to shift, and Florence eventually proposes to Walter:

her proposal is only possible in terms of her loss of status, her humility, her innocence, and his reverence. Walter is now transformed from brother to lover, thus finally rescuing Florence from her long-standing isolation and from the dangerous limbo into which Dombey threw her, and also ending the domination of personal relationships by pride and money. (McDonald 16)

Florence, stripped of all human companionship and love, now finds a place where she flourishes as a giver of love, and receives affection in return. This home is only possible due to the harsh blow from her father—if she had remained in Dombey's household, marriage to Walter would have been impossible. Ironically, the blow for which Dombey needs redemption is the only means by which Florence could have escaped his crippling pride before she could fully use the redeeming power of her love. Before he strikes her and she flees the home, she is stuck in between Edith's wrath and Dombey's pride. It is not until Dombey severs her ties to the house that Florence leaves, builds a home where love is reciprocated, and then returns to redeem the fallen. She humbles herself to approach her father, who does not deserve her love or her forgiveness, but who receives both.

As the novel ends, Dombey is struck by remorse for his poor treatment of Florence, and driven almost to madness by the tragedy of his life. In fact, Dombey's personality splits in two; he views himself as if he does not have control of his limbs. This split personality appears when Dombey contemplates suicide, using strange language; he “walked to and fro with its hand in its breast. He glanced at it occasionally, very curious to watch its motions, and he marked how wicked and murderous that hand looked” (910). Notice that Dombey is observing the murderous intentions of his hand— a

physical limb that he has used to level physical pain against his daughter. A few lines later, “it rose, with a terrible face, and that guilty hand grasping what was in its breast” (910). Dombey describes his guilty limb and his guilty self, both at guilt because of the terrible blow that has come to symbolize his mistreatment of his daughter. Ironically, Dombey’s hand and smiting of Florence freed her to leave, and return as her father’s savior.

Dombey’s hand is not able to carry out the murderous task of suicide he contemplates. Instead, the hand “was arrested by a cry- a wild, loud, piercing, loving, rapturous cry” (910). It is Florence, who returns to give grace; she asks for his forgiveness when he should beg hers. As McDonald notes, “when the old Dombey is within a few seconds of death, he is reborn through Florence” (17). In a beautiful scene of reconciliation, Dombey “felt her draw his arms about her neck; he felt her put her own round his; he felt her kisses on his face; he felt her wet cheek laid against his own; he felt- oh, how deeply! - all that he had done. Upon the breast that he had bruised, against the heart that he had almost broke, she laid his face” (910). In a flood of tactile language, Dickens shows Florence as a vehicle of grace through physical touch. Dombey has pushed Florence away repeatedly—yet here in his time of deepest need, she comes, and with her touch begins the work of healing the broken man, who was at the lowest point of his life. Florence’s love for this man leads to him saying, “Oh my God, forgive me, for I need it very much” (911). Due to Florence’s intervention and her physical expression of her love, Dombey’s pride has been completely undone, and her touch becomes salvific to the point that he can admit his need for forgiveness, and begin to heal and live again—his

selfhood has changed. Florence has “exercised the highest kind of love, one that demands nothing in return” (Adrian 105). Instead, she freely forgives Dombey for his actions.

Florence does not only heal Mr. Dombey—she also heals and redeems Edith, or at least set her on the path to redemption. Florence visits Edith to ask her to consider forgiving Mr. Dombey. Edith responds with bitterness: “Tell him I am sorry that we ever met” (939). Yet after prompting from Florence, and “something in the silent touch of Florence’s hand that stopped her,” Edith softens her anger, “drew [Florence’s] hand within her arm,” and tells Florence that between herself and Mr. Dombey there may exist some mutual feeling of compassion. It is through Florence’s prompting, both verbal and physical, that Edith is able to even admit the possibility of forgiveness between herself and Mr. Dombey. Finally, Edith embraces Florence, and “clasped her in her arms, and seemed to pour out all her woman’s soul of love and tenderness at once” (940). Florence leaves Edith satisfied, “seeing her face no more, but accompanied by her embraces and caresses to the last” (941). Edith’s tender physical affection, Dickens implies, will stay with Florence throughout her life, perhaps just as Florence’s early embraces from her mother gave her much strength and comfort. Florence, through her purifying presence and love of Edith expressed through touch, has healed Edith’s wrath to the point that Edith can allow herself a feeling of compassion, allowing for a partial restoration of relations between Edith and Mr. Dombey.

Throughout *Dombey and Son*, Dickens uses tactile imagery to point towards Florence as a type of female Christ, whose healing touch restores and redeems two broken people. As an embodiment of love, Florence comes into her own as a wife and mother after the terrible punitive blow of her father separates her from her childhood

home. Dickens uses tactile imagery not only to act as clues to the narrative of the story, but also to show the connection between Florence's inner self and her outward actions—she expresses her love in an overflow of physical affection. Throughout the entire novel, “despite neglect, suffering, and danger, despite numerous changes of role and status, she remains the innocent and pure votary of selfless love,” and that love is most often demonstrated and shown through tactile imagery (McDonald 17). Studying the tactile imagery in *Dombey and Son* does indeed, Tilley's words, “deepen our understanding of the interconnections Victorians made between mind, body, and self” and, as I argue, soul (5). As Dombey and Edith experience Florence's love and healing touch, they can see a brighter future for themselves, and change into more hopeful creatures—still broken, but able to change and grow because of the touch of love upon their lives. Florence, on the other hand, is love from the beginning of the novel to the end. Yet by the end of the novel, her love is richer and fuller, refined by long suffering and made sweeter by her faithful enactment of her redeeming power.

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