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POWER OF CONVERGENT IDENTITIES IN DICKENS AND ELIOT**

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ANGELIC AND DEMONIC WOMANHOOD: THE PROVOCATIVE POWER OF  
CONVERGENT IDENTITIES IN DICKENS AND ELIOT

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By  
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## **Introduction**

In the ongoing exploration of gender and women's issues within Victorian novels, one would be remiss not to point out the well-known dichotomy of female characters at the time: the angel in the house and the fallen woman. Charles Dickens, most notably, set the stage for the era of dividing his women characters into these two types: on the one hand, the loving mother, dutiful wife, and spiritual light of the domestic sphere, and, on the other hand, the prostitute, the unwed mother, or the wronged and jilted lover. Plenty has been written about how the major novelists of the era portrayed female resistance and resilience within their works, whether these novels were amalgamations of societal gender expectations at the time or forward-thinking depictions that pushed readers to reconsider their gendered worldviews.

Whatever the final opinion of such depictions of these female characters, one must consider that despite the Victorian insistence on realist novels, there was also a countervailing emphasis on romance that colored realistic character depictions. Often, realism found its home in an idealized middle-class society that valued male chivalry and female adherence to the path of courtship and marriage. Though the idea that the majority of female characters fit the mold of just two stereotypical roles for women seems counterproductive to realism, as if female characters were overlooked in attention to authentic detail, such depictions tell much about the reality of nineteenth-century middle class society. Middle-class women, the primary audience for most Victorian novels, were expected to marry and thrive in a domestic setting in order to secure their place in society. Therefore, the reality of a society in which romantic notions of femininity are emphasized begs the question: how will the heroine secure this state of domestic bliss, and if she does not, what will become of her? Indeed, at first glance, this dichotomy seems quite

limiting. From the start of the nineteenth-century novel, both women's paths appear defined; the angel in the house will fulfill her domestic duties, honor traditional womanly conventions, and be rewarded with financial security and love through marriage, while the fallen woman will lose her purity and begin a downward spiral of guilt and depravity ending in death. Of course, the two respective "deserved" results hardly encapsulate historical realities of the time, and the stark caricatures of domestic angels and condemned harlots appear very artificial constructions of womanhood.

Nevertheless, the dichotomy should not be disregarded as false or mere propaganda promoting a traditionalistic confinement of women to the domestic sphere. To do so would be to ignore the way in which these women characters demonstrate unexpected strength and resilience within their respective roles. Although the labels of "angel" and "fallen woman" no doubt resulted in various limitations for historical Victorian women and their literary counterparts, they also defined possible pathways to empowerment available to them in the nineteenth century. In this essay, I will explore how both the fictional Victorian angels in the house and fallen women worked within the confines of their seemingly rigid social roles to negotiate and transgress boundaries of social power. Furthermore, I will examine the convergence of angel and prostitute identities in Dickens' *Dombey and Son* and George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* to argue that while Victorian novels themselves often subscribed to traditional tropes around these two character types, their authors communicate much more than meets the eye; through their works, they use both angelic/fallen females to push the boundaries of social norms, provoking their readers' anxieties on social issues related to fallenness in the Victorian era—most specifically, class relations and "the woman question." The result, I will argue, is that the angel in the house

and the fallen woman are not polar opposites but actually reflections of each other, two modes of women demonstrating resilience by utilizing their defined roles to gain social and spiritual agency. The fallen woman escapes traditional relegation to the domestic sphere and displays otherworldly power that threatens to unsettle the patriarchal expectations novel readers at the time were familiar with. Although a formidable threat, her fallen status brings her closer in alignment with moral wisdom, allowing her a retrospective moment in which she recapitulates an earlier expression of feminine vitality before her eventual downfall—usually death. The angel in the house wages a quieter war on patriarchal values by challenging the authority of the domineering men in their lives, subtly subverting Victorian domestic expectations for women ultimately to push against the boundaries of separate sphere ideology. In short, I will argue for a redefinition of Victorian female agency based not on the woman's ability to control her circumstances but (despite the lack of social power she wields) her ability to provoke anxiety in the reader on issues of class and gender through her spiritual capacities.

To illustrate my point, I will begin by engaging three critical works that seek to address female power surrounding the two types of female characters mentioned above to discuss some of the key work already produced on this topic. Drawing on these criticisms, I will then move into two analyses: first, a discussion of the anxieties provoked by heroine Florence Dombey's close alignment with and reflection of fallen "harlots" Edith Granger and Alice Marwood in Dickens' *Dombey and Son*; and, second, an analysis of the evident intersections between angelic and demonic qualities in George Eliot's Maggie Tulliver in *The Mill on the Floss*. I will conclude by drawing parallels between these two analyses to solidify the angel and the harlot as

sites of anxiety for the middle-class Victorian reader and to redefine female agency as the ability to challenge class and patriarchal norms.

### **Defining Agency in the Angel and Fallen Woman: A Review of the Literature**

As mentioned before, much has been written about conceptions of angelic and demonic womanhood and corresponding levels of agencies to these identities. Amanda Anderson explores the plight of the fallen woman in *Tainted Souls and Painted Faces: The Rhetoric of Fallenness in Victorian Culture* (1993). Anderson analyzes the conceptions around the “Great Social Evil” of the Victorian era, ultimately arguing that the Victorian rhetoric surrounding the fallen woman dictates that she lacks agency and even identity (1-2) altogether due to the contaminating threat to respectable society she embodies (58). In an era in which middle-class women were expected to uphold the institution of the family—acting as “a crucial psychological anchor, providing a ground for personal identity [of males predominantly] and warding off the destabilizing effects of transgressive desire”—female corruption of any kind threatened a violent upheaval of societal morals upon which Victorian society depended (13). Therefore, the fallen woman is often linked with other threats of degeneration facing middle-class Victorian society, namely class tensions due to middle-class fear of violence and depravity among the “vicious poor,” the social class to which the prostitute typically belonged.

Anderson argues that Dickens wholly deprives his fallen women of agency, defending her initial assertion that “the fallen woman is less a predictable character than a figure who displaces multiple anxieties about the predictability of character itself” (2). Specifically, Anderson maintains that fallen women, especially in Dickens, bear the narrative burden of the novel, which “ward[s] off perceived predicaments of agency by displacing them onto a

sexualized feminine figure” (107). Anderson explains that because the fallen woman character is utterly determined, “trapped” in her situation, the reader perceives the narrator and other more privileged characters as freer (9), assuaging narrative fears of lack of self-control or autonomy in these privileged characters (47). Therefore, the virtuous angel in the house is seen as the true site for female realism in Dickens’ novels, while the prostitute is keenly aware of her “falseness” (77) in the tortured self-knowledge of her depraved state in which she “reads herself as already written,” and thus utterly doomed to a downward path (92). She may be “aware but [she is still] utterly determined” (91). In short, Anderson argues that because of this falsifying self-objectification, the fallen woman has “no self to reform” and thus her story must end in death (77).

In *Nobody’s Angels: Middle-Class Women and Domestic Ideology in Victorian Culture* (1995), Elizabeth Langland deconstructs the angel in the house from a historical standpoint, maintaining that this figure was much more complex than popular novels at the time cared to admit. Langland explains that contrary to Victorian social myth in which the angel naturally imbued the home with spiritual goodness, purifying her husband and children on a moral level for their worldly endeavors, the angel actually occupied the much more practical role of a “middle-class manager” of her household (47). Langland maintains that middle-class society was set up in such a way that while men controlled the financial capital, earning income, women worked to turn that financial capital into social capital through household managerial skills. Rather than a spiritual oasis away from the troubling and depraved outside world, the home was in fact, according to Langland, a site of class tensions. As the middle-class accumulated wealth and status, more households began to employ hired help than ever before, thereby opening up the

possibility of class conflict, not in the streets where one might expect, but in the very heart of what was supposed to be the most sacred and life-giving place for the middle class: the home. Just as the middle-class woman finds herself afflicted by patriarchy and limited to management of social capital, she also occupies a position of power over the lower classes by instructing them in the lessons of patriarchy, helping to maintain the social order of the middle class, in which she actively participates and by which she benefits. In other words, the angel in the house was responsible for much more than the spiritual wellbeing of her family, playing an essential role in maintaining the strict class oppression by and social functioning of the middle-class.

In *Woman and the Demon: The Life of a Victorian Myth* (1982), Nina Auerbach focuses on the convergence of myths surrounding the fallen woman and the angel in the house, specifically bringing attention to the porous barrier between the two modes of woman. Auerbach points out the astounding differences between historical reality and literary characterizations of the angel and the fallen woman but chooses to focus her attention on how these literary tropes informed reality rather than deconstructing literature from a historical standpoint as Langland does. Auerbach reshapes the conversation around the death of the prostitute across Victorian literature from one of social punishment into a means of solidification of spiritual power. Auerbach explains that “women exist only as spiritual extremes [in the literature of the time]: there is no human norm of womanhood, for she has no home on earth, but only among divine and demonic essences” (64). Therefore, Auerbach claims that the inability or unwillingness of (mostly male) Victorian writers to depict the humanity of women actually empowers both fallen and angelic characters to trespass the boundaries of categorization. She remarks that “female demons bear an eerie resemblance to their angelic counterparts” because both characters are

imbued with the ability to transform their worlds through their marked and powerful spiritual capabilities. The angel brings about social harmony and domestic bliss through her Christ-like love (74) while the demon woman threatens by her ability to “destroy and reconstruct her world” (162). In fact, Auerbach argues that these two women are one and the same when she states that “the woman I claim is at the center of Victorian woman worship seems a monster of ego. As angel, she is militant rather than nurturing, displacing the God she pretends to serve. As angelic demon, she becomes the source of all shaping and creative power, dropping the mark of humility as she forecasts apocalyptic new orders” (185). In other words, the demonic woman is quite literally a fallen angel, and the line between these two assumed extremes is a thin barrier easily breached due to her extraordinary spiritual capabilities.

Although all arguments prove extremely useful readings to draw on, I find some more persuasive than others going forward with my analysis of Dickens and Eliot. In particular, while I appreciate Anderson’s thorough exploration into textual analyses of self-reflexivity in the fallen woman, I have reservations about her definition of female agency as the ability to control one’s fate and about her argument that the fallen woman erases her own selfhood and dooms herself when she begins to reflect on the moral consequences of her fallenness. The issue seems not to be that the fallen woman is truly denied all agency within Dickens but the fact that authors such as Dickens were expected to conform to tropes that fit in with middle-class Victorian standards. In the Victorian didactic novel, most characters’ paths were written out in accordance with poetic justice. Virtuous, hardworking people typically are rewarded with a “happy ending” while the villains are punished, and both heroes and villains are often coded as such early on in the text. It

is, therefore, debatable whether controlling one's fate is fully possible or a reliable definition of agency.

While Langland certainly captures the historical realities and avenues toward power of the middle-class angel/household manager, she seems to view Victorian female power primarily in financial and social terms instead of spiritual terms. She breaks down the myth of the "idle woman" in the home and instead stresses the permeable boundary of separate-sphere ideology, dispelling images of and perhaps even reducing the importance of the literary angel in the house. While a fascinating historical analysis and helpful reminder that historic reality and literature are never one and the same, I feel that this argument perhaps overlooks the mythic power of womanhood in "negating" the novelistic image of the angel in the house and the impact this spiritual, goddess-like icon had upon Victorian culture.

For me, Auerbach best addresses the rich culture surrounding mythic Victorian womanhood and the convergence of angelic and demonic identities I discovered in my readings of *Dombey and Son* and *The Mill on the Floss*. Additionally, Auerbach deals with questions of female agency through a radically different approach than Anderson; instead of stressing a lack of agency due to social situation, Auerbach seems to argue that the very act of attempting to deprive the Victorian woman of agency is the catalyst for her fierce mythic power to rise. While I believe Auerbach occasionally allots more agency to such characters than may be their due, I still find her conceptions of mythic power and agency in the Victorian female character the most sound and useful for my purposes.

## **Reflections of Angelic & Demonic Womanhood in Dickens' *Dombey and Son***

This convergence of angelic and demonic identities can be seen most prominently in Dickens' *Dombey and Son* through the harlot foils, Alice and Edith, to his angel in the house, Florence. In fact, I would not state that Alice and Edith are foils to Florence so much as they are dark reflections of her, uncomfortable reminders of the social anxieties women provoked in terms of "the woman question" and class tensions in Victorian society. These three female characters operate in close conjunction with one another in the narrative as the primary drivers of action throughout the novel and a representation of female threat to patriarchy at every socioeconomic level. As Auerbach writes of Dickens' *Hard Times*: "Victorian female demons generally provide the active momentum for the works in which they figure: and (...) they keep dangerous if hidden company with their angelic counterparts" (101).

However, this power in the ability for female characters, especially fallen women, to provoke anxiety in the reader can be misinterpreted as embodying remarkable vitality primarily for the purpose of bearing the narrative burden, only to be silenced by the end of the novel when she has benefitted the privileged characters. Anderson identifies former sex worker Alice as one such character whom Dickens at first imbues with vitality but then negates, arranging a "forced fading of her," in which she gradually loses her strength until she is a "pale phantom" on her deathbed (82). While I understand Anderson's frustration with the forced fading of an extremely powerful female character, I disagree that this robs Alice of all agency on the grounds of the didactic conventions to which Dickens was expected to adhere. Dickens by no means obliterated the conventions of his time; rather, he very subtly subverted them in his depictions of fallen women. Most mainstream Victorian audiences would have balked at an ending in which Alice

achieves her full power and avenges the wrongs done to her. While aggressive heroines are celebrated in much of the literature of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the most common way to challenge social norms in the nineteenth century was to work quietly within them to provoke questions. At first glance, this technique may read as mere adherence to the social standard, that fallen women must be subdued and killed off. However, before Dickens “fades” Alice, he imbues her with a subtle degree of agency, not in the ability to control her ultimate fate, but in her ability to produce a lasting effect on the reader. Alice proves at once both a formidable threat in her power of retaliation against her seducer, Carker, and a victim the reader is meant to feel pity for. In her meeting with Harriet well before her death, Dickens writes, “there was a reckless and regardless beauty in [Alice’s face]: a dauntless and depraved indifference... a carelessness of what was cast upon her bare head from Heaven or earth: that, coupled with her misery and loneliness, touched the heart of her fellow woman” (523). Furthermore, Harriet observes the fine womanly qualities Alice once possessed that have been “perverted and debased within her”: the “modest graces of the mind, hardened and steeled (...) the many gifts of the Creator flung to the winds like the wild hair; of all the beautiful ruin upon which the storm was beating and the night was coming” (523). Alice’s dual status of villain and victim provokes an uneasiness in the middle-class reader that lives on in their mind long after the final pages of the story. One sees the striking beauty of a potential angel in the house warped into a threatening, foreboding dark figure, stalking across the stormy landscape as Alice returns for her revenge.

However, the reader is continuously reminded that her threatening nature is due to the circumstances she was forced to endure because of middle-class society’s strict insistence on female purity while at the same time providing little to no help for the poor. And Alice speaks

freely of her duality, owning her narrative in ways in which Dickens' angels in the house or the villains are not typically afforded:

'There was a child called Alice Marwood,' said the daughter, with a laugh, and looking down at herself in terrible derision of herself, 'born among poverty and neglect, and nursed in it. Nobody taught her, nobody stepped forward to help her, nobody cared for her' (...) 'There was a criminal called Alice Marwood—a girl still, but deserted and an outcast. And she was tried, and she was sentenced. And lord, how the gentlemen in the Court talked about it!' (530)

From this statement, one can see that it is undoubtedly true that Alice has been shaped by her circumstances; however, this self-critical language, in which Alice both villainizes and victimizes herself allows her to take over the narrative and quite literally tell her own story. Anderson herself seems to suggest that Alice's "vengeful" nature as a member of the vicious poor allows her a "lucid critical perspective akin to the narrator's own stance"; not only does she break the mold of caricature, but her keen albeit jaded judgments on par with that of the narrator's threaten to topple the carefully constructed social order of the novel (82). While Anderson's statement that an "escape from caricature is no escape at all" may hold true when agency is defined as the ability to change or control one's fate, this ability is by no means required with the revised definition of impacting and provoking anxieties in the reader to spark social change (93). In this way, an escape from caricature is an escape into power. Self-reflexivity is not so much a dooming perspective—yes, it tends to appear as part of the fallen woman's downward spiral—but, above all, it is a tool that allows the fallen woman to gain an authorizing voice in a society that would otherwise relegate her to silence.

Alice's death is not by any means a complete defeat or eclipsing of the notable agency she displays throughout the narrative. Although it is true that Dickens reduces Alice physically to a faint, pale, and weakened state on her deathbed, he does not reduce her in moral stature. The narrator clearly states that just before her death, Alice asks Harriet to read her "the eternal book for all the weary...the wretched, fallen, and neglected of this earth," specifically noting that "the criminal, the woman stained with shame, the shunned of all our dainty clay, has each a portion, that no human pride, indifference, or sophistry through all ages that this world shall last, can take away, or by the thousandth atom of a grain reduce" (892).<sup>1</sup> Here, Dickens clearly specifies through a Christian perspective that no person or force of any kind can rob Alice of her portion of spiritual dignity. Dickens carefully places this language directly before Alice's death as a means to let Alice control her own narrative once more. Although she is about to die, this is no defeat or easy resolution of the audience's anxiety provoked by a formidable female character.

Along with the clear language that she cannot be reduced in dignity, even "by the thousandth atom of a grain," her death provides a flashback to her earlier frightening stalk through the rain: "Nothing lay there, any longer, but the (...) black hair that had fluttered in the wintry wind" (892). Although Dickens asserts that "nothing lay there," which some may argue reduces Alice down to nothingness, this use of the term "nothing (...) but" serves instead to recall the earlier image of Alice's black hair fluttering in the wind, isolating the reader's focus on

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<sup>1</sup> This is most likely a reference to 1 Corinthians 6:9-11: "Know ye not that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Be not deceived: neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with mankind, Nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners, shall inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you: but ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God." Although Alice has occupied these roles, she still has dignity as a human being in that she can repent, and she has been washed clean by her repentance and faith in God.

this single element.<sup>2</sup> In other words, this single image is all the readers have now to reflect on as she leaves the story, a recalling of her earlier dangerous nature as she recklessly trudges through the rain to plot her revenge: “Gone into the deepening night, and howling wind, and pelting rain; urging her way on, towards the mist-enshrouded city where the blurred lights gleamed; and with her black hair, and disordered head-gear, fluttering round her reckless face” (526). Ending Alice’s story with this poignant recollection of the threat she poses to middle-class Victorian society seems counterproductive if the goal is her reduction to nothingness. Instead, Dickens re-energizes Alice one last time before death, a recapitulation of her earlier expression of fierce vitality as the vengeful prisoner from Botany Bay in which she looms as a direct threat to Carker. Despite her repentance for a life of depravity and her role in Carker’s ultimate demise and acceptance of Christianity, the final image of Alice in death consists of her hair still streaming with the formidable energy found in her former vengeful self. On the surface, all seems well. Alice repents and dies in accordance with Victorian moral standards, but the damage has been done to provoke the reader’s anxiety on her threat to patriarchal norms. She has successfully challenged and brought down Carker through revealing his location to Dombey (796); while Carker dies a horrific and grisly death, struck down and torn apart by an oncoming train as a result of his own cowardly reaction in attempting to escape confrontation (842), Alice dies with dignity and with vitality—vitality of an ambiguous nature in that it encompasses the gentleness of her Christianity with the earlier threat she still embodies to bring ruin upon patriarchal figures.

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<sup>2</sup> Wild hair is often associated with the female iconography of the French Revolution. In *A Tale of Two Cities*, Dickens portrays the threat of revolution as a distinctly female one, specifically through the use of the Gorgon’s Head, a mythological creature with snakes for hair and the power to turn men who look into her eyes to stone. The Gorgon’s Head looms in front of Monsieur de Marquis’ mansion for over two-hundred years, beckoning him to look at her and predicting his ultimate murder by Gaspard.

In other words, Alice represents the convergence between angelic and demonic spiritual capacities in the fallen woman, something that attracts a Victorian audience to her in her depth as a character yet challenges moral norms surrounding fallen women in their middle-class society. Dickens seems keen not on easing the audience's anxieties around the threat of the vicious poor or the prostitute, but letting these anxieties linger in the reader's mind. Alice stays in the reader's mind long after she takes her last breath; while the angel in the house and the villain receive their deserved fates and satisfy the reader's need for poetic justice, the fallen angel does not allow herself to be forgotten so easily. She provokes questions about class, gender, and society's conception of fallenness. Although respectable Victorian novel-writing conventions ensure Alice must die, she does not do so without a fight, without first displaying her notable trace of agency, defined as the ability to provoke anxieties of the reader. In this way, an escape from caricature is most definitely a pathway toward agency and one with which Dickens imbues several of his fallen angels.

Dickens himself, a volunteer at the home for fallen women, Urania Cottage, understood the precarious situation of the fallen woman and actively worked to reform the behavior and moral nature for these women to re-enter society. In his "Home for Homeless Women," Dickens adopted "Captain Manocochie's Marks System," a system in which individuals earn marks and corresponding financial rewards for good behavior to move up to a higher "class," which Anderson argues reinforced the same values as prostitution: that women should be "paid to please" (78). Despite the mechanical approach to rehabilitation and some questionable treatment of women unwilling to reform,<sup>3</sup> Dickens formed his plan for Urania Cottage in an effort to

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<sup>3</sup> Dickens often used judgmental language and harsh punishment when dealing with certain inmates of Urania Cottage. In a letter, Dickens described Sesina Bollard as "the most deceitful little minx in this town – I never saw

preserve the dignity of the women. While other asylums at the time often focused exclusively on punishment in the process of reclamation, Dickens' goals were to encourage reform while still instilling responsibility. Jane Rogers writes that Dickens "[discussed] suitable dress for their young women, a garden for flowers and a piano to sing around, and generally looked towards the establishment of a new and innovative asylum" in his letters to owner of Urania Cottage Angela Burdett-Coutts. Additionally, Dickens was keenly aware of the social factors influencing lower-class women to fall. In a letter to Burdett-Coutts, he writes, "It is dreadful to think (...) how some of these doomed women have no chance or choice. It is impossible to disguise from one's self the horrible truth that it would have been a social marvel or miracle if some of them had been anything other than what they are" (105). Here, Dickens shows himself subscribing to belief in a sort of social causation theory. Anderson writes, "Dickens thereby aligns himself with those reformist etiologies that construe the fall as socially predestined, unavoidable because of poverty, a degraded environment, diminished options" (68). Although he believed that the fall was a natural consequence of poverty and lack of moral instruction, it is clear he also truly believed in the fallen woman's ability to reform and reinvent herself (though this transformation seems dependent on middle-class intervention in his novels and at Urania Cottage).

Dickens clearly saw a potential for strength and resilience in Alice and many of the real-life fallen angels who went on to achieve a successful reintegration into society.<sup>4</sup> In other words,

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such a dragged piece of fringe upon the skirt of all that is bad...she would corrupt a nunnery in a fortnight." Additionally, there are recorded instances of Dickens' indignant reactions to or willingness to dismiss inmates from Urania (often when they may have had no other place to go) for acts of drunkenness or robbery (Rogers). These instances likely show that while Dickens insisted on dignified treatments for inmates, he viewed their ability to reform as dependent upon their own consistent commitment to rehabilitation.

<sup>4</sup> Although most fates of the women of Urania Cottage are lost to history, one such reclaimed fallen woman includes Rhena Pollard. Pollard entered Urania Cottage after serving a prison sentence, and although she and Dickens had several conflicts throughout her time at Urania, she ultimately settled in Ontario, Canada, had seven children, and joined the Salvation Army. Pollard is thought to be Dickens' inspiration for Tattycoram in *Little Dorrit* (Green).

Dickens, in his literary and social work, saw himself working to fight against “The Great Social Evil,” against the wickedness grown out of poverty and social neglect that threatened to contaminate all of society. Thus, on the page and in the reform house, Dickens strove to provoke anxiety and thought in the middle class, challenging their notion that once a woman fell, she was doomed to a life of depravity. Instead, she should be treated with dignity and incentivized to reform one day to re-enter society, if not in England, then in Australia.<sup>5</sup>

However, Dickens did not isolate the lower class as the only target for fallen representations of womanhood. Edith, Alice’s biological and representational cousin, encompasses a similar threat to respectable society on the other end of the social spectrum; a member of the aristocracy, Edith marries Dombey for financial gain. Despite differing viewpoints on “The Great Social Evil” between classes, Sally Mitchell maintains that prostitution, deemed a lower-class vice, and respectable middle-class marriage were actually quite similar systems.<sup>6</sup> She explains that both the angel in the house and the harlot relied on men for financial support, and that “marriage could be the same thing as prostitution—an exchange of sex for money” (57). Mitchell claims that although they occupy opposite ends of the socioeconomic spectrum—Alice a member of the vicious poor and Edith of the aristocracy—“The only difference is that Edith is bought with a wedding ring and Alice without” (57). In other words, the idea of securing one’s financial and often social place in the world by offering up oneself to a man proves an ambition across the classes in Victorian England. And although

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<sup>5</sup> Much of the time, fallen women were rehabilitated for the purposes of emigration to Australia as they were still seen as a contaminating threat to much of middle-class English society. Em’ly in *David Copperfield*, a fallen woman, emigrates to Australia and eventually marries.

<sup>6</sup> Although Edith is a member of the aristocracy, she participates in middle-class marriage in her union to Dombey.

courtship rituals among the upper classes were more elaborate and formalized, in the end the angel still used these rituals for purposes similar to those whom the Victorian surgeon James Miller described as the “self-publishing whore” (qtd. in Anderson 59). Just as Miller criticizes the Victorian prostitute for “her offensive publication of herself” in that she advertises her sexual availability on the street corner, one can also see the mark of this sexual self-publication in the angel in the house in that she sought to find a husband through acquiring respectable connections and attending social gatherings. The unspoken promise was that once the angel secured her husband, and thus her place in society and financial security, she would offer up her virginity. Like the prostitute, the angel was, in a sense, “hired” to perform tasks that benefitted her husband. Along with her sexual labor, however, the bourgeois wife would confer various social benefits on her husband the prostitute/mistress was powerless to bestow. Indeed, while Alice is “bought” in an underground exchange for sexual gratification of her clients, Edith is “bought” by Dombey and proudly put on display—her fine personage and haughty manner commodified as a part of Edith’s and Dombey’s opportunistic exchange of goods and services in marriage. Edith gains financial security while her membership in the aristocracy provides Dombey a heightened social status.

Throughout the courtship process, Edith is keenly aware that she is being assessed for her qualities, abilities, and appearance, chastising her mother whom she views as prepping her for the “sale” of herself in marriage to Dombey (326). Although Edith refuses to advertise herself enthusiastically for marriage, she capitulates in the final sale of herself with a heavy heart. The night before her wedding day in which she anticipates giving over her person to Dombey, Dickens writes,

To and fro, and to and fro, and to and fro again, five hundred times, among the splendid preparations for her adornment on the morrow; with her dark hair shaken down, her dark eyes flashing with a raging light, her broad white bosom red with the cruel grasp of the relentless hand with which she spurned it from her, pacing up and down with an averted head, as if she would avoid the sight of her own fair person, and divorce herself from its companionship. Thus, in the dead time of the night before her bridal, Edith Granger wrestled with her unquiet spirit, tearless, friendless, silent, proud, and uncomplaining.

(474-5)

Both Alice and Edith, therefore, represent Dickens' fallen angels in that they offer up their bodies to "buyers," making themselves sexually available to either male clientele or husbands in order to be financially secure. Dickens criticizes both institutions—prostitution and marriages of convenience—as social evils in his depictions of Alice and Edith. Both women are bound by circumstances of their respective classes, naturally falling into the depraved traps society sets up for them. Indeed, one sees many similarities between the demonic imagery associated with both Edith and Alice. Both women possess wild, streaming hair, threatening expressions of either rage or aloofness, and a sense of corrupted womanhood. Like Alice, Edith possesses a demonic energy that threatens patriarchal norms. Just as Alice cannot be used sexually and discarded by Carker without her returning to bring about his demise, Edith cannot be bought and kept docile, an accessory to Dombey's social status. Ultimately rebelling against her patriarchal husband's cruel treatment of her, Edith plots to disgrace and ruin the powerful man who "bought" her by pretending to abscond with Carker. Edith seems already to have fallen the moment she consents to marry Dombey, becoming a sort of prostitute, but this fall is only acknowledged by society

when she uses her beauty and charms to destroy patriarchy. Although she dooms herself to the status of a fallen woman in the process, reduced to a life of isolation and hiding under a wealthy relative by the end of the novel, Edith, like Alice, retains traces of an earlier vitality in her eventual fate. In her final meeting with Florence, Edith refuses Florence's offer to reconcile Dombey and Edith, swearing before God that although she has done much wrong in her life, her ruin of him brings her no guilt (936-7). This refusal to admit any wrongdoing toward Dombey serves as a recapitulation of the earlier imperious and haughty nature she utilizes to challenge the patriarchal men around her. When Dombey attempts to cut Edith down to size, he is instead threatened by her powers of beauty and arrogance:

If she had been less handsome, and less stately in her cold composure, she might not have had the power of impressing him with the sense of disadvantage that penetrated through his utmost pride. But she had the power, and he felt it keenly (...) The very diamonds—a marriage gift—that rose and fell impatiently upon her bosom, seemed to pant to break the chain that clasped them round her neck, and roll down on the floor where she might tread upon them. (611-2)

Dombey's attempt to chide Edith for her extravagant spending and haughty behavior fails as he becomes overwhelmed by her threatening beauty and stature: "He felt his disadvantage, and he showed it (...) he was conscious of embarrassment and awkwardness" (612). While Dombey still makes his concerns known, Edith refuses to capitulate to his will, overtly challenging his patriarchal power over her. She serves a direct threat to his utmost concern in life, financial success, as her intimidating form seems to physically reject Dombey's will. She refuses to act as a social accessory to Dombey's financial wealth; thus, instead of proudly displaying the

diamonds he bought for her on her person, a walking testament to his wealth, the jewels seem apt to break off of their chain and fall to the ground to be trampled by her.

Similarly, when Carker interrupts Edith's conversation with her mother, Dickens writes that Edith is "Entrenched in her pride and power (...) with all the obduracy of her spirit summoned about her (...) her commanding face exacting his humility, her disdainful lip repulsing him, her bosom angry at his intrusion, and the dark lashes of her eyes sullenly veiling their light, that no ray of it might shine upon him" (568-9). Of course, beneath his submissive façade, Carker still holds a large degree of power over Edith; she "[knows], in her own soul, that the cases were reversed, and that the triumph and superiority were his and that he knew it full well" (569). Although Edith finds a worthy opponent in Carker, and he is her downfall, she is also his. Edith manipulates Carker's seduction plan in order to lure him to a hotel where she knows Dombey will search for and likely find him. As she stands before Carker, wielding a knife and explaining that his downfall is sure to come, Dickens writes, "he could not look at her, and not be afraid of her. He saw a strength within her that was resistless" (826). In this moment, Edith finally emerges victorious in her long-fought battle against Carker. Edith admits she has lost everything—her wealth, family connections, and good name—but has done so in order to free herself from Dombey's patriarchal grip and bring about the downfalls of Dombey and Carker. In this way, Dickens provokes anxieties in the middle-class reader not only through the threat of the vicious poor Alice embodies, but in a corrupted version of the middle-class wife. Edith possesses the power to either command social harmony in or bring about destruction of the home, and she fights back against patriarchal oppression fiercely through choosing destruction.

Florence Dombey stands in apparent opposition to the worldly cynicism and sexual bartering Edith and Alice employ, a paragon of middle-class virtue in her chastity and loving, motherly nature. However, like her two fallen counterparts, Florence suffers a financial and social fall when she escapes her father's home after his display of violence against her—the key difference is that this fall is not of a sexual nature, and thus renders her acceptable by middle class standards. Even still, Dickens instills a tension in his depictions of Florence that produces an anxiety in the reader; although she never loses her purity, the loss of it is continually threatened throughout the novel as she transgresses typical boundaries of gender and class. Early on in the novel, Florence is kidnapped by Good Mrs. Brown, who forces her to undress in order to steal her clothes (88). In this moment, Mrs. Brown compares Florence directly to the beautiful daughter she once had (89). Of course, Florence is returned to her father's household unharmed (98), but anxiety stirs in the audience, especially after Alice is introduced as Mrs. Brown's long-lost daughter. Although the threat to Florence's purity is only a real possibility for a moment, opening up and then closing down the possibility that Florence will meet the same fate as Alice and become a reckless and dangerous prostitute, this scene allows Dickens to begin drawing subtle parallels between his "angel" and "demon" women that become more pronounced throughout the novel. For example, after Dombey's discovery of Edith's disgraceful escape with Carker that will plunge the Dombey name into ruin, Florence steps forward to comfort her furious father. However, he repudiates her angelic qualities violently: "in his frenzy, he lifted up his cruel arm and struck her, crosswise, with that heaviness (...) and as he dealt the blow, he told her what Edith was, and bade her follow, since they had always been in league" (721). A Victorian audience would have recognized the brutalization of a woman as a lower-class

phenomenon and the not-so-subtle phrase “what Edith was” as a reference to “whore” or “prostitute.” Although Florence committed no indecent act, her father has labeled her by these terms because of her association, in his eyes, with Edith, prompting her to flee into the streets with a plan never to return. Therefore, Florence finds herself once again in a situation not far from the plight of a fallen woman: verbally and physically battered, penniless, and homeless in the streets.

In this way, Florence proves a victim of circumstance, teetering on the edge of fallenness, but she also possesses the ability to transform herself and take power over the men around her—much as Alice and Edith do. Uncle Sol is filled with “unspeakable admiration,” observing her superior ability to bring about domestic harmony (739). Although she excels in traditional housewifery, Florence also seems unafraid to defy gender roles, proposing marriage to Walter (770). Therefore, although Florence seems often to work within traditional norms of domesticity, it appears she has significant power to challenge patriarchy. The most notable example comes at the end of the novel in the great reconciliation scene between her father and her, in which she saves him from suicide. Florence quite literally has the spiritual prowess to adjudicate matters of life and death. Dombey has fallen so far in dignity at this point in the novel that he is reduced to the “it” pronoun, no longer humanly recognizable: “Suddenly, it rose, with a terrible face, and that guilty hand clasping what was in its breast” (910). At this moment, Florence enters with otherworldly, almost threatening energy as she prevents her father from taking his own life: “Then it was arrested by a cry—a wild, loud, piercing, loving, rapturous cry—and he saw only his own reflection in the glass, and at his knees, his daughter!” (910). Here, in this phantasmic appearance in the mirror and in the nature of her cry, one sees both Florence’s angelic and

demonic qualities; she appears as an angelic figure to serve a salvific purpose, yet her ghostly manner of appearance in the mirror communicates a threatening energy. Additionally, her cry for her father takes on a similar energy, its “wild” sound evoking earlier descriptions of Alice’s “wild hair” (523) and Edith’s “dark hair shaken down” (474) in their moments of demonic stalking. Although “loving,” Florence’s salvific cry is still “wild, loud, piercing” and “rapturous,” mixing the angelic and demonic aspects of her nature and aligning Florence more closely as a reflection of Edith and Alice, her fallen sisters.

And although Florence begs for Dombey’s forgiveness, “Down upon the ground, clinging to him, calling to him, folding her hands, praying to him,” Florence’s saving of Dombey is no capitulation to his will (910). Yes, Florence does submit herself to her father by throwing herself down at his feet and promising him filial respect from herself and her son (911), but it is through this submission, or the appearance of it, that Florence gains emotional power over Dombey, and he must finally surrender himself to her will. As Dombey feels her embrace, “her kisses on his face (...) her wet cheek upon his own,” he also feels “oh how deeply!—all that he had done” (910). Although he cannot muster the ability to speak, Dombey longs to apologize to Florence and submits to her wish that he come to live with her: “He dressed himself for going out, with a docile submission to her entreaty (...) walking with a feeble gait” (911), led by Florence to the carriage that “[carries] him away” (912). In other words, Florence’s submission to Dombey seems a method of prompting Dombey’s own submission to her will. In many ways, the scene in which Florence saves her father from suicide reverses the blow Dombey dealt her in “The Thunderbolt” chapter. Where Florence was previously struck down and degraded, she is now ascending into spiritual power and dominance over Dombey. Thus, while Florence’s earlier

expression of salvific spiritual capability is rejected by her father, her salvific power reemerges with the demonic nature of her cry; he can no longer beat down or escape her spiritual influence. Indeed, if Dombey chooses to live, he must now live in her moral reality in which she literally overtakes the narrative. Florence usurps the very premise on which the novel is based and on which the work is titled; “Dombey and Son” no longer refers to Paul Dombey, Sr., and his longing for a male heir to the family business. With the birth of her own son, Florence becomes “Dombey” and her child the “son.” As Anderson writes, *Dombey and Son* proves a “complex exploration of a thwarted patrimonial pride: for the cherished son of the title, little Paul Dombey, dies early in the novel, and the rejected and resented survivor, Dombey's daughter, Florence, becomes a primary narrative focus. As Miss Tox exclaims after the death of Paul, ‘To think that Dombey and Son should be a Daughter after all!’” (80). Indeed, although Dombey retains an honored patriarchal position in his family, the loving grandfather, he is no longer *the* family leader; this role has been usurped by Florence, ironically, through her feminine powers of spirituality.

In other words, Florence’s status as a domestic and virtuous angel in the house does not render her powerless; yes, her story is carefully crafted to appeal to a middle-class audience and may appear as adherence to traditional courtship and marriage tropes to the uncritical eye, but Florence holds a large modicum of power over the lives of the men around her by the end of the novel. Alice threatens to overtake the narrative, Edith threatens to cut Dombey down to size, and Florence succeeds in both tasks. In this way, she is far from an innocent and docile servant to the men around her; she goes about gaining power through more traditional means, but still seems a threat to, and actually a conqueror of, patriarchal values. In this way, she is on par with Alice and

Edith; Florence's demonic sisters do not seem far off from her—they are all oppressed by and threaten upheaval of the same patriarchal men (Dombey and Carker), are renowned for their striking beauty, suffer a fall, and are endowed with the capacity to provoke anxieties in the reader. The key difference really seems to be adherence to middle-class values. Florence survives and gains lasting power in a world of patriarchy because she knows how to work within the confines of the oppressors' system. While Edith's and Alice's outright rebellions certainly prove a threat that lingers in the minds of the audience and Victorian conventions dictate that they must either die or at least quit society entirely, Florence flies under the radar with her misleading air of conventionality. Her commitment to middle-class values of purity, love, and domesticity allows her to subvert patriarchal social structures. In conclusion, none of these three fates sit completely comfortably within patriarchal norms—Alice's uncomfortable absolution and the lingering imagery of her in her most threatening state, Edith's refusal to admit wrongdoing toward Dombey, or Florence's upheaval of Dombey's life and construction of her own "family business." Therefore, *Dombey and Son* is in no way a defeat of the licentious harlot and a celebration of the virtuous angel; rather, it is a representation of the mythic power of woman across all social classes that provokes anxieties in the reader, causing them to question the level of agency the novel imbues women with by limiting them to these two angelic and demonic camps.

### **Maggie as Demonic Angel in Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss***

Like Dickens' female characters in *Dombey and Son*, George Eliot's Maggie Tulliver, the fierce heroine of *The Mill on the Floss*, also seems to embody both angelic and demonic qualities, although the convergence of these two identities seems much more overt than in

Dickens' Florence, Edith, and Alice. Although Maggie ultimately suffers a fall from grace in running away with her cousin's intended, she also fully occupies the status of angelic heroine throughout the novel. The narrative focuses solely on Maggie as a familiar and sympathetic female figure the audience can identify with despite her inclination toward emotional outbursts and social ineptitude. Lucy Dean, Maggie's first cousin and by definition the true feminine, dutiful, and proper "angel in the house," pales in comparison to Maggie. Lucy lacks the striking intellect, beauty, and force of spirituality Maggie possesses. Therefore, Maggie's true foil or match is not Lucy but herself; Maggie exists as a contradiction, a simultaneous embodiment of both the angel and the fallen woman. For instance, she possesses both alluring charm and physical attractiveness and yet fierce appearance in her unconventional beauty. Unlike the dainty and blonde Lucy, characterized by angelic sweetness in her manners and countenance, Maggie appears tall and dark. Maggie's thick, raven black hair, olive skin tone, and dark eyes distinguish her from the rest of her middle-class society from the very start of the novel as her mother and aunts complain that she looks more like a "mulatter" (12) or "gypsy" (64) than a family member of their own. This ethnic and racial "othering" of Maggie in her own family unit makes her keenly aware that she does not fit the expectations of the middle-class female, comparing her own dark appearance and vivacious, often moody behavior with Lucy's fair color and well-regulated conduct.

One sees this displacement and disconnect between Maggie's middle-class status and the lower-class, ethnic associations placed upon her in her first rebellion against polite society. Jealous of the copious amounts of attention heaped onto Lucy by Tom, Maggie strikes back, pushing her cousin down into the mud, and runs away to find her place among the "gypsies" she

has been associated with. Although Tom is “absorbed in watching for the pike—a highly interesting monster; he was said to be so very old, so very large, and to have such a remarkable appetite,” Tom neglects to realize that the true serpentine beast, Maggie, lurks behind himself and Lucy ready to strike. In her jealousy, Maggie is referred to as a “small Medusa” twice within this scene (93, 96) and when she can bear her brother’s oppression of her no more, Eliot writes,

There were passions at war in Maggie at that moment to have made a tragedy, if tragedies were made by passion only; but the essential *τι μέγεθος* [magnitude] which was present in the passion was wanting to the action: the utmost Maggie could do, with a fierce thrust of her small brown arm, was to push poor little pink-and-white Lucy into the cow-trodden mud. (95)

In other words, Maggie’s passion for her brother, her longing for his love and acceptance, changes her into a sort of monstress pushed to action to create a tragedy. Thus begins Maggie’s lifelong power struggle against Tom, a representative of the patriarchy due to his insistence on Maggie’s adherence to the status quo. Rather than creating a space for Maggie’s differences and responding empathetically, Tom continually punishes Maggie for her outbursts and indiscretions. Tom creates the “othering” of Maggie through his treatment of her—imposing a cycle of punishment and disregard that drives her to destructive action—when she longs only for his love and acceptance. Therefore, Maggie as the middle-class heroine both rails against and longs to submit to the patriarchy that dominates her life, complicating her desire for agency and need for emotional fulfillment.

Such a complex relationship with patriarchal influence follows Maggie into womanhood as she is both marginalized and yet glorified by patriarchal figures. Although a fair complexion

and golden, halo-like hair seem fairly representative of the angel across nineteenth-century literature, key features of the ideal middle-class woman, Maggie's unconventional beauty seems a source of fascination for the middle-class men in her life: "For one instant Stephen could not conceal his astonishment at the sight of this tall, dark-eyed nymph with her jet-black coronet of hair; the next, Maggie felt herself, for the first time in her life, receiving the tribute of a very deep blush and a very deep bow from a person toward whom she herself was conscious of timidity" (347). Maggie's fierce and exotic beauty exhilarates Stephen; rather than finding comfort in the familiar angelic face of a woman like Lucy, he is both intimidated and commanded by Maggie's magnetism. At once, she is both a "nymph," a demonic creature meant to lure men to their deaths through seduction, and an angelic queen with a "coronet." Therefore, Maggie's ethereal and unconventional beauty instructs Stephen to humble himself and literally bow down before her, not only as a gesture of middle-class polite custom but also as a sign of her power over him.

Thus, Maggie seems to push the boundaries of middle-class society on both ends of the socioeconomic spectrum. Langland writes of Eliot's construction of women within society in *Middlemarch*: "On the one hand, the 'self' inevitably reflects society; on the other, it must resist society" (189). And indeed, Maggie does so in inhabiting middle-class society and resisting it through both lower- and upper-class characteristics. Although Maggie is born into a solidly middle-class station that is her natural place, it is not a state which comes naturally to her. Maggie teeters on the edge of lower-class territory through her various circumstances throughout the novel: her attempted escape into gypsy culture as a child, her family's sudden descent into poverty, her secret rendezvous with Philip Wakem, and of course, her love affair with Stephen

Guest that ends in her fall from grace. As Auerbach writes, “in her mélange of demonic and transforming power, Maggie seems a fallen woman by nature,” constantly in rebellion against middle-class norms and morality (183). Indeed, her attempts to abide by such rules through imposing strict religious limitations on herself as a means to self-instill obedience and prudence end futilely (305). Instead, Maggie acts rashly albeit bravely in her interactions with suitors and family members, behavior typically thought to belong to a lower, coarser class. However, at the same time, such queenly descriptions of Maggie suggest she is spiritually purer, above the polite and proper middle-class society in her intense beauty and defiant manners. Therefore, Maggie is at once several seeming contradictions: beautiful and savage, normal and “othered,” the victim and assailant of her society—in short, the angel and the demon.

Maggie’s depth and complex character mark a significant turning point in the development of the Victorian heroine. Published in 1860, *The Mill on the Floss* appeared at the dawn of a new decade of sensationalism and changing sexual mores. Mitchell writes of the 1860’s: “Middle-class virgins are unchaste in sensational novels, as they had not been in earlier popular fiction” (74). Although *The Mill on the Floss* cannot be classified as a sensational novel per se, Mitchell argues that the line between popular sensationalist reading and serious social problem novels blurred, resulting in a fallen woman of the 1860s that provokes greater sympathy on the reader’s part (74). Like Maggie, this figure does not willingly presume to engage in sexual activity, but through a variety of circumstances, may end up in situations that compromise her reputation for purity (74-5). In this way, Mitchell argues that the fallen woman becomes a more relatable figure as these tales provoked sexual anxieties surrounding the middle-class female in a Victorian patriarchal society. Of course, the heroine’s morality is maintained but she still has

undergone the threat of a fall, an anxiety for many middle-class women: “She becomes the emotional focus for everywoman’s sense of oppression, victimization, and powerlessness” (105). In this way, traces of the fallen angel are clearly visible in the angelic heroine of the 1860’s.

The change in morality from a selfless and respectable angel like Dickens’ Florence to an impetuous and imprudent figure clearly tainted with fallenness such as Maggie did not go uncontested. In her 1861 review of *The Mill on the Floss*, writer Dinah Craik condemned Maggie as “selfish and futile,” in her actions; furthermore, Craik criticized Eliot’s choice to drown Maggie, writing that her death was “welcomed as the solution of all difficulties” when Maggie should have instead been made “to endure and to help others” (Mitchell 114-5). Mrs. Craik seems to long for a return of the angel of the 1840s and 1850s in this statement—a self-effacing heroine who fulfills her domestic duty and places the needs of others before her own. Maggie’s brash choices in love, rejection of middle-class values, and death mark her as fallen and yet the Victorian audience knows they are supposed to empathize with and relate to Maggie. We see the world through her eyes and feel the threat of her victimization and the longing in her quest to find love and spiritual fulfillment. Indeed, although Maggie rejects the strict notions of chastity and mild-mannered ways of the ideal middle-class heroine, she seems simultaneously the embodiment of the self-effacing heroine Craik longs for. In the end of the novel, Maggie rights her rash behavior, falls to her knees in submission to God, and embarks on a Christian quest to find and ultimately sacrifice herself for her brother. Therefore, Maggie’s duality as a challenger of feminine chastity and her wholehearted submission to a Christian mission allows her to embody the most important virtues of the middle-class heroine while simultaneously transgressing the traditional values such a heroine is supposed to hold dear. Maggie’s duality

complicates the construction of the middle-class heroine as a representation of her social class's values and thus threatened the middle-class domination of the novel.

In fact, Eliot seems to outrightly reject and belittle middle-class society in many of her novels. In her analysis of *Middlemarch*, Langland observes Eliot's construction of society as inane and empty when she writes that "women [in Eliot's novels] who do not rise above society's claims are little better than household furnishings" (192) and that "women have no meaningful sphere for social action" within it (196). In short, "Eliot's novel [*Middlemarch*] tends to emphasize middle-class society as a petty, unproductive medium that consistently thwarts fellow feeling and the achievement of human community" and that great women must choose to transcend it (206). However, in decrying middle-class society, many critics warn that Eliot is playing directly into the hands of patriarchy. As mentioned before, women controlled the social sphere of the middle class; this was often their only avenue of gaining power over their situations. Therefore, Langland argues that disparaging society diminishes the significance of the middle-class woman (193). Where Dickens often shows his angels in the throes of labor as the "middle-class manager," Langland writes that Eliot's female characters are often portrayed as idle and without purpose (200). In short, Langland argues that "By thus advocating the impotence of women, even in the social world, exposing their apparent ignorance and inability to act effectively, the novel more seriously extends the power of the patriarchal realm it is seemingly criticizing" (195). Indeed, Eliot seems not to be primarily attacking patriarchy but the female role within it, implying that conventional middle-class women are often the most repressive upholders of patriarchy. Although Maggie has committed no sexual sin, she is constructed as a fallen woman by the frivolous and ignorant "world's wife" (453). Maggie's true

fallenness lies not in the truth of her night with Stephen Guest but in a refusal to abide by strict conventions of appearances. Maggie falls when she refuses to marry Stephen Guest after their near elopement; she cannot bring herself to hurt Lucy by absconding with her fiancé and thus sacrifices herself, knowing she will be cast out of society. Eliot makes it abundantly clear in her analysis of the “world’s wife” that the true sin in the eyes of society is coming back from the trip unmarried; if Maggie had simply betrayed her cousin and married Stephen, she would have been not only accepted back into but actually celebrated in society for gaining a rich and respectable husband (454). Therefore, Maggie’s “fall” is actually a rise above the moral mediocrity and superficiality that surrounds her.

Indeed, escaping the limitations of society seems a very plausible way for Eliot to allow Maggie to realize her true spiritual potential. Auerbach writes that “a woman’s fall is imagined as almost the only avenue through which she is allowed to grow” and such a statement seems fitting for Maggie (Auerbach 166). She cannot continue to live under the hold of polite middle-class society; everything about her character, even her large stature, suggest she has outgrown the world which she inhabits. Where Florence subverts the conventions of her society to gain power subtly, Maggie’s impropriety and impulsivity construct her as an obvious “monster of ego” (185).

However, while Eliot seems upfront about her criticism of middle-class society, I do not believe her depiction of it is without hope for social change. Maggie’s death is such a crushing blow not only due to her faultlessness but also because there does seem to be potential for her to renegotiate middle-class morality on her own terms and rejoin society without compromising her virtue. Despite Eliot’s disparagement of the “world’s wife,” Maggie forges strong bonds with

various individuals in this patriarchal society—many of them female—who see her virtue and rush to her aid. Maggie has at her side her cousin Lucy with whom she has reconciled, a mother who pledges she will follow Maggie anywhere, Bob Jakin and his wife who take her into their home, and a potential marriage with Philip Wakem—her equal in intellect and feeling—on the horizon. Even her Aunt Glegg—a seeming embodiment of the “world’s wife” early in the novel due to her critical demeanor and strict commitment to middle-class values of economy, prudence, and familial pride—boldly advocates for Maggie. Therefore, I would disagree with Langland that Eliot’s female characters typically fit the mold of the idle housewife as the women who rally around Maggie actively resist their role as the “world’s wife” and instead use their positions to protect one relegated to the status of a lower-class fallen woman. While middle-class female society can represent unwavering support of the patriarchy, it also clearly represents hope for societal change and empathetic relations among women.

Such hope is present even in the final events of the novel leading up to Maggie’s shocking and heart-wrenching death. I believe that this ending is much more complicated than a spiritual transcendence over an unfeeling middle-class world on Maggie’s part—the empty sentiment that she was perhaps “too good for this world.” Yes, there is power in her salvific sacrifice, but we must view the final scene of the novel in the overall context of the ongoing power struggle between Maggie and Tom—a context that highlights both Maggie’s demonic and angelic qualities. As Florence dominates Dombey and as Edith and Alice viciously hasten the demise of Carker, Maggie must cut Tom down to size as a representation of patriarchy by the end of her spiritual journey. As Maggie stands before Tom aboard the boat, having just rescued him from drowning in the attic of their childhood home, they share a silent moment of

understanding for one another. Maggie seems to win in the ongoing battle between them as Tom beholds her in astonishment and wonder: “Tom [was] pale with a certain awe and humiliation. Thought was busy though the lips were silent: and though he could ask no question, he guessed a story of almost miraculous divinely-protected effort” (482). And at first glance, Maggie does appear victorious over the patriarchal Tom. Maggie is poised as the semi-divine hero in Tom’s eyes, having acted valiantly on the command of a higher power while Tom is reduced to silence and “humiliation” because of the awe her presence commands. When Maggie and Tom are struck down by the barge and die a watery death, there seems an equality at last between Maggie and Tom: “(...) brother and sister had gone down in an embrace never to be parted: living through again in one supreme moment the days when they had clasped their little hands in love, and roamed the daisied fields together” (483). On the surface, it seems Maggie has tamed and channeled her feminine vivacity into heroic sacrifice, allowing herself to become the agent of familial reconnection and cohesion—even if this reconnection comes at a heart-wrenching cost.

However, this scene, although a reunification of brother and sister, recalls earlier conflict between them, which undermines the harmonious, youthful “hands clasping in a field of daisies” imagery. We cannot forget the turbulent nature of Tom’s and Maggie’s childhood together—calling to mind the demonic aspect of her nature—despite her Christ-like sacrifice. Indeed, the final scene of Maggie and Tom descending into the water recapitulates the scene at the pike pond mentioned before in which Maggie lashes out and pushes Lucy down into the pond. This “tragedy” of going down into the water repeats itself as Maggie finally gains recognition and respect from Tom and they are knocked down by the barge to a watery death. Yes, the loving and idyllic moments of their childhood, clasping hands and picking daisies in the field, are recalled

but so are the turbulent power dynamics. Their death does not read so much as an equalizing force, but a full circle return to their original conflict in which Tom finally concedes to Maggie's superiority; in other words, the harmonious nature of their reunification depends on Tom's submission to her feminine power. Maggie now takes her final place as the "Medusa"-like sea monster from the pond scene. Auerbach writes that Maggie remains a "commanding source of metamorphic energy" and transforms herself into the "demonic, otherworldly mermaid," the quintessential icon of demonic Victorian womanhood (94). In other words, Maggie's death is by no means a redemption and punishment for her fallen ways or a glorification of female selflessness. Rather, it is a true tragedy and criticism of patriarchal power's demands on the vivacious strength of femininity. Maggie's memory haunts the reader and her threat to patriarchal norms does not disappear under the water with her. It is true that Maggie's and Tom's tombstone reads, "In death they were not divided," but such a cohesion seems to have point up the destruction and wasted potential of a determined and brilliant heroine and her brother who realized her excellence too late (484). Maggie's salvific power of love channeled into her efforts to save Tom (her oppressor) bridges the gap in understanding between the two of them, but it also results in their mutual destruction and therefore a loss of family cohesion for other characters.

Maggie's death ultimately highlights her two natures. Like Edith and Alice, she proves herself the image of the jilted lover—the haunting and demonic "mermaid" beneath the water whose wrongful death leaves behind the lingering threat of retaliation. And yet like Florence, Maggie proves a salvific angel who sacrifices herself for the patriarchal man she loves. Maggie's transformative power in death not only takes on a threatening nature but a salvific and angelic

one in that she now embodies the image of the Virgin Mary from the legend of St. Ogg earlier in the text. Like the Blessed Virgin in the guise of a beggar woman whom no one would help to cross the river, Maggie appears marginalized and reduced in dignity by the townspeople before her final conversion/death scene. However, once Ogg steps in to perform this selfless act of kindness, rowing the beggar woman across the river, she transforms magnificently into the Virgin: “And it came to pass, when she stepped ashore, that her rags were turned into robes of flowing white, and her face became bright with exceeding beauty, and there was glory around it, so that she shed a light on the water like the moon in its brightness” (110). Just as the Virgin reveals herself in all her splendor after being rowed across the river by Ogg, Maggie takes up the oar by herself after she falls to her knees in prayer and receives her spiritual mission from God to save Tom from the flood. Here, the revelation of Mary to Ogg is recapitulated in Tom’s observance of Maggie’s quasi-divinity as she reestablishes the Virgin’s promise/prophecy of protection: “And from henceforth whoso steps into thy boat shall be in no peril from the storm; and whenever it puts forth to the rescue, it shall save the lives both of men and beasts” (110). Although both Tom and Maggie meet a tragic death, recapitulating Maggie’s propensity for enacting a ‘tragedy’ through her passions at the pike pond, such tragic action takes on a salvific meaning in that Maggie seems to renew spiritual legendry as the embodiment of the Virgin Mary. At once, Maggie is both the image of dangerous siren or petrifying Medusa—lurking below the surface of the water as a temptress threatening to lure men to their deaths—and the most prominent icon of purity in the Blessed Virgin—promising angelic salvation through that same watery death. In this way, Maggie’s simultaneous embodiments of angelic and demonic personas allow her to both transgress and conform to traditional expectations for the middle-class

Victorian woman, rejecting bourgeois patriarchal conceptions of womanhood and yet assuming the self-effacing role demanded of middle-class women in an attempt to redeem that same patriarchal system.

## **Conclusion**

One can see a clear convergence between angel/harlot representations in the works of Dickens and Eliot. These identities are not polar opposites, but rather two modes of womanhood finding their home in both the dutiful housewife and fallen woman. Dickens and Eliot, in particular, used aspects of the angelic and demonic in both their heroines and anti-heroines to address the gender and class threats inherent in transformative female power. Dickens both increases and yet limits the power of the middle-class through Florence's ability to diminish patriarchal power by working within the confines of a woman's role in her society, abiding by traditional qualities of gentleness, love, and domesticity. Eliot, on the other hand, critiques traditional femininity and patriarchal middle-class conventions through her rebellious Maggie, whose salvific death serves to highlight the lingering anxieties surrounding patriarchal power dynamics. The true similarity between the two modes of womanhood seems to be transformative spiritual power and the true difference the acceptance or rejection of middle-class values.

Although all Victorian female characters possess aspects of both purity and fallenness, the construction of a character as either an angel in the house or a fallen woman seems drawn along lines of class conformity. Thus, convention dictates that the roles for the two archetypes are set: the angel in the house will fulfill her domestic duties, honor traditional womanly conventions, and be rewarded with financial security and love through marriage, while the fallen woman will begin a downward spiral ending in death. However, as I have demonstrated above, there is much

more than meets the eye in these fates. Yes, Victorian female characters inhabited societies that oppressed them, but the much more interesting matter is the way in which they navigate their class and gender expectations to negotiate power within their respective roles. Although resigned to separate fates, both the angel in the house and the demonic woman use their spiritual abilities to challenge directly the patriarchal men that oppress them and provoke anxiety in the reader on the state of the middle class. The fates of these women do not serve as a means to tie up loose ends or assuage fears in the novel; the angel does not always submit to a man in marriage but instead works within a traditional role to gain power over her situation, and the fallen woman, while doomed to die, does not perish without first directly challenging her patriarchal oppressors. Florence, Edith, Alice, and Maggie all recapitulate earlier expressions of their fierce, markedly feminine agency in negotiating their traditional roles (in the case of Florence) or meeting their fates (death for Alice and Maggie and isolation for Edith). These recapitulations provoke anxieties in the middle-class reader on female rebellion in a patriarchal society—allotting the female characters their portion of agency. In this way, I have shown that literary heroines and monstresses cannot be so easily separated from one another in representation, like Auerbach's "monster of ego." Within the novel, the boundaries between the angel in the house and the fallen woman seem permeable, calling for a holistic analysis of Victorian womanhood rather than the drawing of divisional lines.

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