

## **Dombey & Son**

You do not read Dickens for plot realism. To criticise his novels on the basis of outrageous coincidences, or other plot contrivances, is rather beside the point. You read Dickens for his larger than life characters and his insights into human nature illustrated through them. You read Dickens for his flashes of brilliant description – and, yes, even for the uplifting value of a morality tale, well told. In Dickens one is always confident that the villains will get their comeuppance in the end, and the righteous will be rewarded.

This tale turns upon Mr Dombey's cold indifference to his daughter, Florence. A more accurate title would have been *Dombey and Daughter*, but that would lose the resonance of the title "*Dombey & Son*" which deliberately sounds like the name of a commercial company. Mr Dombey's status, you see, derives from his business success. There *is* a son, temporarily, namely young Paul, but he serves to emphasize by contrast Dombey's disdain for his daughter. Some critics have argued that the book should have ended after the death of Paul. Some critics should, perhaps, have been plumbers instead. Paul is a foil, not the focus of the story. The story is principally about *Dombey and Daughter*. It concerns the status of bourgeois women and girls in early Victorian England, and the contrast with that of working class females. One might even call it Dickens' feminist novel, but don't let that put you off. There is considerable counterbalance which is absent in modern feminism. The overall effect is not feminist.

### **The First Days of Young Paul**

*Dombey & Son* was a book chosen by my wife's reading group. I can see why it might have been a popular choice with an all-female book group, at least to those who struggled only through the opening episode. We find there as fine an illustration of Victorian sexism as one might wish – if one were a feminist seeking evidence (as they perpetually do) to consolidate the story of centuries of oppression suffered by womankind. Dombey's daughter, we are squarely told, is of no significance compared with the son whose recent birth is the centrepiece of the opening scene. The survival or otherwise of Dombey's recently delivered, and exhausted, wife is indeed of some interest to Dombey – but only on the same level as the sound maintenance of his furniture.

What those staunch defenders of female emancipation might have failed to note so clearly are two things. Firstly, the Victorian reader is clearly intended to regard this display of chauvinism as deeply reprehensible. The reader of 1846 was, we can therefore conclude, reliably *not* of the opinion with which hapless males today would be accused by proxy. (And let us recall by way of context that, although women did not have the Parliamentary vote at this time, 1846, nor did around 85% of men).

Secondly, the reader who is not monomaniacal obsessed with female victimhood would note in the same opening pages that it is Dombey's sister, Mrs Chick, who most emphatically reinforces the relative significance of a son compared with a mere daughter. It's almost as if womankind had something to gain by the ceremonial promotion of the status of males.

### **Mrs Chick and the Toodles**

Mrs Chick, Mr Dombey's sister and staunch promoter of his arrogance, had a personal philosophy that applied in all circumstances, being both a moral principle and a practical one.

It was simply this: we should all make an effort. Of what her own efforts consisted, other than this constant admonition to others, is less clear.

The shortcomings of Louisa Chick in the sister-in-law department is immediately confirmed in the opening scene by her bedside manner with the recently delivered, and ailing, Mrs Dombey. *“Fanny, Fanny! Don’t you think it’s time you roused yourself a little? Eh? Now, really, Fanny my dear, I shall have to get quite cross with you. It’s necessary for you to make an effort....this is a world of effort you know, Fanny”*. Fanny remains silent and unmoved by the admonition, unsurprisingly being unconscious and, indeed, dead a few moments later.

In respect of the feminist rewriting of history, a valuable passage comes just a few pages later as we see Mr Dombey interviewing candidates for wet nurse, one Mrs Toodle being accompanied by her whole brood and husband. After Dombey has laid down the law to Mrs Polly Toodle about her duties and dismissed her, he retains her husband for a moment, thinking that he should agree the business with the organ grinder, not just the monkey. But this, you see, is Dombey’s bourgeois prejudice which, he is baffled to discover, is in no way shared by the working class Mr Toodle. This is their exchange, Dombey speaking first,

*“You heard what I said to your wife just now?”*

*‘Polly heard it’, said Toodle, jerking his hat over his shoulder in the direction of the door (out of which his wife had recently passed) with an air of perfect confidence in his better half. ‘It’s all right’.*

*‘But I ask you if you heard it. You did, I suppose, and understood it?’*, pursued Mr Dombey.

*‘I heard it’, said Toodle, ‘but I don’t know as I understood it rightly, Sir, account of being no scholar, and the words being – ask your pardon – rather high. But Polly heard it. It’s all right.’*

*‘As you appear to leave everything to her’, said Mr Dombey, frustrated in his intention of impressing his views still more distinctly on the husband, as the stronger character, ‘I suppose it is of no use my saying anything to you’.*

*‘Not a bit’, said Toodle. ‘Polly heard it. She’s awake, Sir.’”*

We are familiar with feminism being predominantly a middle class concern today, but it is too little appreciated that, to the extent that male chauvinism was prevalent anywhere in Victorian England, it was mainly a bourgeois issue. The above extract illustrates nicely how the working class Mr Toodle confounds Dombey’s middle class expectation that he, Toodle, would naturally be in command of his wife. In reality, the 95% of the population who were working class had, of hard necessity, a far more egalitarian existence. And even Dombey, we note, left the domestic financial matter of agreeing Polly Toodle’s wages to his sister.

In respect of looking after Polly Toodle’s health while she is wet nurse to the precious Dombey infant, here is an amusing illustration of how our concept of a healthy diet has changed,

*“...the best of everything will be at your disposal. You will order your little dinner every day; and everything you take a fancy to, I’m sure will be as readily provided as if you were a Lady.’*

*'Yes, to be sure!' said Miss Tox (Mrs Chick's friend), keeping up the ball with great sympathy. 'and as to porter! – quite unlimited, will it not, Louisa?'*

*'Oh, certainly!' returned Mrs Chick in the same tone. 'With a little abstinence, you know, my dear, in point of vegetables.'"*

### **Mr Dombey and Florence**

Mr Dombey was proud, cold and arrogant, lauding it over everyone based simply on his wealth, gained through his trading empire. To Mr Dombey the birth of a son was a major business event as it provided the opportunity for business expansion and continuance of the Dombey name and glory beyond his own death. Florence, in contrast, was an irrelevance, her fatal flaw being of no use to business and hence of no use to Mr Dombey. From this disturbing beginning his relationship manages to go further downhill as the story progresses.

To set the scene for Dombey's later disastrous second marriage, here is an account of his first,

*"Towards his first wife, Mr Dombey, in his cold and lofty arrogance, had borne himself like the removed Being he almost conceived himself to be. He had been 'Mr Dombey' with her when she first saw him, and he was 'Mr Dombey' when she died. He had asserted his greatness during their whole married life, and she had meekly recognised it. He had kept his distant seat of state on the top of his throne, and she her humble station on its lowest step; and much good it had done him, so to live in solitary bondage to his one idea."*

Dombey is a man isolated by his own character: *"In all his life, he had never made a friend. His cold and distant nature had neither sought one, nor found one"*.

Mr Dombey's attitude to towards anyone whom he feared might come between himself and his darling son, Paul, was to command them to stand aside. Unfortunately, Florence is greatly beloved by the infant Paul – and who would not prefer the angelic Florence to the cold and arrogant Dombey? Dombey attempts to sever their connectedness, to no available and to his great discomfort. So Dombey's frank dislike of Florence grows. An illustration of Dombey's policing of those who might become too close to Paul is the promotion of the vapid Miss Tox. Miss Tox was admitted to the status of godmotherhood of little Paul by virtue of her insignificance. It was her insignificance which won her the status she coveted because her insignificance ensured she could not come between Mr Dombey and his son, for he had, *"a haughty dread of having any rival or partner in the boy's respect and deference"*.

Mr Dombey was apt to forget he had two children, not just a son. After Paul's death, when dictating the words of a memorial to him, Mr Dombey needed to have pointed out to him his error in describing the late Paul as *"beloved and only child"*. Dombey's relationship with Florence continues to go further downhill from there.

Florence steadfastly maintained her attempts to win over her cold father long past the point at which a child would really have given up, and here we see Dickens at his most mawkish, appealing to that Victorian foible to idolise females as perfect angels. Constantly she was rebuffed by her father, and this became worse after Paul's death. Bursting in upon Dombey one evening, against his instructions, Dombey is put out,

*"'What is the matter?' he said sternly, 'Why do you come here? What has frightened you?'*

*If anything had frightened her, it was the face he turned upon her....she stood and looked at him as if stricken into stone. There was not one touch of tenderness or pity in it. There was not one gleam of interest, parental recognition, or relenting in it. There was a change in it, but not of that kind. The old indifference and cold constraint had given place to something: what, she never thought and did not dare to think, and yet she felt it in its force, and she knew it without a name: that as it looked upon her, seemed to cast a shadow on her head.....love is quick to know when it is spurned and hopeless: and hope died out of hers, as she stood looking in her father's face."*

Later, after his son's death, Dombey muses, "*One child gone, and one child left. Why was the object of his hope removed instead of her?...She had been unwelcome to him from the first; she was an aggravation of his bitterness now. If his son had been his only child, and the same blow had fallen on him, it would have been heavy to bear; but infinitely lighter than now, when it might have fallen on her (whom he could have lost, or he believed it, without a pang).*" Later we read, "*In his pride, a heap of inconsistency, and misery, and self-inflicted torment, he hated her*". Yes, even hate, and stated several times. He hated the easy way she endeared herself to all, including his wife and his son, whilst all remained obdurate in their distance towards him. If you want a portrait of toxic masculinity, here it is. Tell us we are all Dombey's, though even the novel contains only the one, and he is set up to be despised.

Take this little vignette as an illustration of Dickens' style. Florence, we know, craves that which she has been denied: paternal affection. She glances from time to time out of her window to the house opposite where live four daughters of a loving father. What cleverness to illustrate metaphorically Florence's distance from what she desires by having her witness familial affection from afar. Of the neighbouring father she muses, "*It was easy to know when he had gone out and was expected home, for the elder child was always dressed and waiting for him at the drawing-room window, or on the balcony; and when he appeared, her expectant face lighted up with joy, while the others at the high window, and always on the watch too, clapped their hands, and drummed them on the sill, and called to him.*"

### **Walter Gay, Solomon Gay and Good Mrs Brown**

Solomon Gay, his nephew Walter Gay, and his friend Captain Cuttle, are the antithesis to Mr Dombey, standing for the positive in men's relations with women. That the Gays are the opposite of wealthy, indeed in some straits, serves to emphasise their moral worthiness. Walter will be the love interest, of course – that we can be sure about immediately, which is comforting.

Old Solomon has failed to keep pace with the world. His shop, The Midshipman, sells ships' instruments, but sees no customers any more. Says old Solomon, "*the world has gone past me. I don't blame it; but I no longer understand it. Tradesmen are not the same as they used to be, apprentices are not the same, business is not the same, business commodities are not the same. Seven-eighths of my stock is old-fashioned. I am an old-fashioned man in an old-fashioned shop, in a street that is not the same as I remember it. I have fallen behind the time and am too old to catch it up again.*"

Business being so slack, young Walter – then barely more than a boy – starts work as a junior in Dombey's company. There he meets the Carker brothers, one the senior manager and the other the most junior in the company, of whom more shortly.

In a later episode, Florence, who is generally well protected, accidentally becomes separated from her escorts in a dangerous part of London. There she is effectively kidnapped by the ironically named Good Mrs Brown who is little more than a 'bag lady' with an eye for an opportunity to make some cash. "*I want that pretty frock, Miss Dombey,' said Good Mrs Brown, 'and that little bonnet, and a petticoat or two, and anything else you can spare. Come! Take 'em off.....Humph!...I don't see anything else – except the shoes. I must have the shoes, Miss Dombey.'"* Only narrowly were Florence's luxuriant curls saved from Mrs Brown's scissors.

Florence is left in rags, lost in a part of London he does not know. She has the wit to make for the docks where she knows her father's business is carried out. There young Walter takes her under his protection and escorts her to old Solomon's shop to allow her to recover before taking her back home. The incident has a profound effect on both of them.

Mr Carker the Manager becomes jealous of Walter's closeness to Florence (one catches a hint of Carker having designs in that direction). To get rid of Walter, Carker (the Manager) persuades Dombey to send Walter to their establishment in Barbados. One senses that Carker is less than mortified when the ship is lost at sea, and all hands apparently drowned. The reader can guess that the love interest is not going to be killed off.

Upon Walter's return from apparently drowning at sea, we find Florence and himself living with old Solomon and his friend Captain Cuttle in The Midshipman. Florence has, by this point, fled from her father who has become physically abusive in addition to his coldness.

Finally, and for so long expected, we get to the very Victorian "declaration of love" scene. The brother-sister relationship is played upon in the fashion of the time, so that it can be discarded and replaced. The denouement is, "*Walter', said Florence, looking at him earnestly, but with a changing face, 'what is that which is due to me, and must be rendered to me, at the sacrifice of all this?' 'Respect', said Walter, in a low tone. 'Reverence'. The colour dawned in her face, and she timidly and thoughtfully withdrew her hand; still looking at him with unabated earnestness. 'I have not a brother's claim. I left a child. I find a woman.'"*

### **Captain Cuttle and Jack Bunsby**

Captain Cuttle, retired old sea Captain, is one of those irresistibly endearing Dickens characters, as simple as he is staunch, the salt of the earth – or, rather, a salt of the sea in this case. Here is Dickens' description, "*No child could have surpassed Captain Cuttle in inexperience of everything but wind and weather, in simplicity, credulity, and generous trustfulness. Faith, hope and charity shared his whole nature among them.*"

The Captain's difficulties with his landlady, the termagant Mrs MacStinger, is an object lesson in domestic abuse, illustrating that there is no need for any intimate relationship for this term to apply. Captain Cuttle was, simply put, terrified of Mrs MacStinger who had a hold over him that we can understand as coercive control. The Victorians clearly had no trouble recognising the phenomenon, though perhaps no specific term for it. At one point we read the Captain explaining his recent absence, saying: "*We had some words about the swabbing of these here planks, an she – in short', said the Captain, eyeing the door and relieving himself with a long breath, 'she stopped my liberty.'"*

The Captain's flight from the abusive Mrs MacStinger did not relieve him of this fear. Rather, now lodging in old Sol Gay's shop, he remained fearful whenever he ventured out, in case he should run into her. *"The Captain never dreamed that in the event of his being pounced upon by Mrs MacStinger, in his walks, it would be possible to offer resistance. He felt it could not be done. He saw himself, in his mind's eye, put meekly in a hackney-coach, and carried off to his old lodgings. He foresaw that, once immured there, he was a lost man: his hat gone; Mrs MacStinger watchful of him day and night."* How much clearer could a case of coercive control possibly be?

Captain Cuttle's greatly respected friend Bunsby also suffered under the hand of a controlling landlady, and we intuit that Dickens must have had some first-hand experience of the breed. Relating to Bunsby's removal of the gangway which led to his dwelling on a boat, we read: *"That the great Bunsby, like himself (Cuttle), was cruelly treated by his landlady, and that when her usage of him for the time being was so hard that he could bear it no longer, he set this gulf between them as a last resource."*

Alas, poor Bunsby. Having had the goodness to retrieve the Captain's trunk from his previous dwelling with Mrs MacStinger, Bunsby becomes ensnared as her next victim.

The main theme of *Dombey & Son* may be quasi-feminist, but Dickens repeatedly reminds us throughout the book that, not only is this an aberrant behaviour specific to Mr Dombey but, if any more widely characteristic of popular sentiment, is confined to the bourgeoisie. The lower orders, we are reminded at many points, experience very different conditions as regards relations between the sexes. So, the feminists do not get this story all their own way.

In a scene towards the end, Captain Cuttle runs across his old friend Jack Bunsby now securely captured by Mrs MacStinger. They are on their way to church to be wed. Captain Cuttle is justifiably alarmed, not least because Bunsby's demeanour does not speak of voluntary action. Here they are nearing the altar,

*"'Jack Bunsby,' whispered the Captain, 'do you do this here of you own free will?'*

*Mr Bunsby answered, 'No'.*

*'Why do you do it, then, my lad?' inquired the Captain, not unnaturally.*

*Bunsby, still looking, and always looking with an immovable countenance, at the opposite side of the world, made no reply.*

*'Why not sheer off?' said the Captain.*

*'Eh?' whispered Bunsby, with a momentary gleam of hope.*

*'Sheer off', said the Captain.*

*'Where's the good?', retorted the forlorn sage. 'She'd capter me agen'.*

*'Try!' replied the Captain. 'Cheer up! Come! Now's your time. Sheer off, Jack Bunsby.'*

*Mr Bunsby merely uttered a suppressed groan.*

*'Come!' said the Captain, nudging him with his elbow, 'now's your time! Sheer off! I'll cover your retreat. The time's a flying. Bunsby! It's for liberty. Will you once?'*

*Bunsby was immovable.*

*'Bunsby!' whispered the Captain, 'will you twice?'*

*Bunsby wouldn't twice.*

*'Bunsby!' urged the Captain, 'it's for liberty; will you three times? Now or never!'*

*Bunsby didn't then, and didn't ever; for Mrs MacStinger immediately afterwards married him.*

*One of the most frightful circumstances of the ceremony to the Captain, was the deadly interest exhibited therein by Juliana MacStinger; and the fatal concentration of her faculties, with which that promising child, already the image of her parent, observed the whole proceedings. The Captain saw in this a succession of man-traps stretching out infinitely; a series of ages of oppression and coercion, through which the seafaring line was doomed."*

### **Young Paul Grows**

Young Paul, Mr Dombey's son, was never strong. He only grows weaker with age. He is not destined for manhood. Mr Dombey sends him away for his education, initially into the care of widow Pipchin. From that frying pan poor Paul proceeds to the fire of Dr Blimber's academy where young gentlemen were force fed the Classics, retaining the same no better than school pupils ever have. Paul struggled but was assisted by Florence who bought the books herself to study in her own time.

Dickens' descriptions of his more unpleasant characters are always a joy. Here's one of Mrs Pipchin, whose husband might have been grateful to meet an untimely death many years before in a venture to do with Peruvian mines: *"This celebrated Mrs Pipchin was a marvellous ill-favoured, ill-conditioned old lady, of a stooping figure, with a mottled face, like bad marble, a hook nose, and a hard grey eye that looked as if it might have been hammered at on an anvil without sustaining any injury. Forty years at least has elapsed since the Peruvian mines had been the death of Mr Pipchin; but his relict still wore black bombazeen, of such a lustreless, deep, dead, sombre shade, that gas itself couldn't light her up after dark, and her presence was a quencher to any number of candles. She was generally spoken of as a 'great manager' of children; and the secret of her management was, to give them everything they didn't like, and nothing that they did – which was found to sweeten their dispositions very much. She was such a bitter old lady, that one was tempted to believe there had been some mistake in the application of the Peruvian machinery, and that all her waters of gladness and milk of human kindness, had been pumped out dry, instead of the mines."*

Of their breakfast routine at Mrs Pipchin's, after an edifying reading from the bible, we are told of how *"Miss Pankey was borne away to be shampoo'd; and Master Bitherstone to have something else done to him with salt water, from which he always returned very blue and dejected"*. Mrs Pipchin's system included the reading of moral tales, *"the moral of these lessons was usually of a violent and stunning character: the hero – a naughty boy – seldom, in the mildest catastrophe, being finished off by anything less than a lion, or a bear."*

After being taken ill at Dr Blimber's, Paul returns home to slowly fade and die. Mr Dombey locks himself away and refuses all attentions. His attitude towards Florence becomes worse as he is tormented by the wrong child having died.

## The Carker Brothers

Mr Dombey's establishment includes two Mr Carker's: Carker the Manager and Carker the Junior. The former is the most senior figure in the company, other than Dombey himself, the CEO to Dombey's Chairman. Of Mr Carker the Junior, Walter Gay relates to Florence, "*The strangest man, Mr Carker the Junior is, Miss Florence, that ever you heard of. If you could understand what an extraordinary interest he takes in me, and yet how he shuns me and avoids me; and what a low place he holds in our office, and how he is never advanced, and never complains, though year after year he sees young men passed over his head, and though his brother (younger than he is), is our head Manager, you would be as much puzzled about him as I am.*"

Walter is unwise enough to mention Carker the Junior in the presence of Carker the Manager and we begin to get a glimpse of some history which might explain the former's being perennially a Junior:

*"'John Carker', said the Manager, turning suddenly upon his brother, with his two rows of teeth bristling as if he would have bitten him, 'what is the league between you and this young man, in virtue of which I am haunted and hunted by the mention of your name? Is it not enough for you, John Carker, that I am your near relation, and can't detach myself from that...'*

*'Say disgrace,' interposed the other in a low voice, finding that he stammered for a word. 'You mean it, and have reason, say disgrace.'*

*'What is your thought, then?' said his brother, 'and why do you thrust yourself in my way? Haven't you injured me enough already?'*"

Details are never given, but we learn that Carker the Junior disgraced himself when a young man by stealing, exactly what or how we don't know and can surmise it was probably of minimal amount. This has given his satanic brother carte blanche to lord it over him without restraint ever since. In a further interview between the Carker brothers, Carker the Manager is provoked to reveal his true self, if only by projecting it onto all around him.

*"'There is not a man employed here', he says, 'who wouldn't be glad at heart to see his master humbled: who does not hate him, secretly: who does not wish him evil rather than good: and who would not turn upon him, if he had the power and boldness.'*

*His brother, John, is shocked at this profession and denies it, charitably referring to his brother's thoughts as suspicions.*

*'I have no suspicions', the Manager retorts, 'Mine are certainties. You pusillanimous, abject, cringing dogs! All making the same show, all canting the same story, all whining the same professions, all harbouring the same transparent secret.'*"

So wound up is Carker the Manager that he continues to himself even after his brother has left the room, beating the fire with a poker as he talks: "*The faint-hearted, fawning knaves. There's not one among them who wouldn't feign to be so shocked and outraged! Bah! There's not one among them, but if he had at once the power, and the wit and daring to use it, would scatter Dombey's pride and lay it low, as ruthlessly as I rake out these ashes.*"

Mr Dombey should have been wary of Carker, but wasn't.



## Edith

Here's another passage which displays the economy with which Dickens can pigeonhole a person's character. It is the first time Dombey meets Edith, walking with her mother who is in a wheelchair propelled by a servant, "*Walking by the side of the chair, and carrying her gossamer parasol with a proud and weary air, as if so great an effort must be soon abandoned and the parasol dropped, sauntered a much younger lady, very handsome, very haughty, very wilful, who tossed her head and drooped her eyelids, as though, if there were anything in all the world worth looking into, save a mirror, it certainly was not the earth or sky.*" Stupendous.

Edith's mother, Mrs Skewton, was referred to by Dickens as 'Cleopatra', in reference to her pretensions. The habit of lamenting how present times have become degraded compared to the past is nothing new. To illustrate both this and how firmly the romantic was in the ascendancy among fashionable poseurs like Mrs Skewton, Dickens has her opine: "*Those darling bygone times, Mr Carker,*' said Cleopatra, *'with their delicious fortresses, and their dear old dungeons, and their delightful places of torture, and their romantic vengeance, and their picturesque assaults and sieges, and everything that makes life truly charming! How dreadfully we have degenerated!'*"

Usually with Dickens' characters it is very clear whether they wear white or black hats, though those of poor character may be redeemed in the end. Edith is an exception. It is unclear whether we are supposed to sympathise with her or to condemn her. Edith is the most interesting character from the perspective of modern feminism. She regards herself as a victim. Specifically she regards herself as a victim of her mother's upbringing. Here we have an exchange upon the eve of Dombey's coming to propose marriage, an intention which is entirely clear to both Edith and her mother.

*"'You know he has bought me', says Edith, 'Or he will tomorrow.....God, that I have lived for this, and that I feel it'.*

*'What do you mean?'*, returned the angry mother. *'Haven't you from a child...'*

*'A child!' said Edith, looking at her, 'when was I a child? What childhood did you ever leave to me? I was a woman – artful, designing, mercenary, laying snares for men – before I knew myself, or you, or even understood the base and wretched aim of every new display I learnt. You gave birth to a woman. Look upon her. She is in her pride tonight.'*"

This resentment that Edith feels, presently directed at her mother, will shortly be directed instead, and with even greater venom, at Dombey. One has to feel a little sorry even for the appalling Mr Dombey that he is about to invite this avenging angel into his house. He is doomed, and so is Edith, but whilst Dombey might reasonably be said to deserve his coming downfall, it is almost entirely down to Edith to bring it about. ("Almost" because, of course, Carker the Manager is the other serpent that Dombey has already clutched to his bosom).

Edith, we recall, was widowed while still very young. She continued, "*Look at me, who have never known what it is to have an honest heart, and love. Look at me, taught to scheme and plot when children play; and married in my youth – an old age of design – to one for whom I had no feeling but indifference. Look at me, whom he left a widow, dying before his*

*inheritance descended to him – a judgment on you! Well deserved! Tell me what has been my life for ten years since.”*

Sympathy for Edith does not naturally come to us reading this. It seems their previous scheme miscarried. Yet, she and her mother have hardly been in poverty. Whilst rather on their uppers by the middle class standards of the time, they live an idle life, not being obliged to work for their living, and they keep servants. Moreover, however scheming her mother might be, Edith is in no way obliged to be ruled by her. Her lament strikes us as projection; in truth it is her own character she is recognising as selfish, vapid and lacking.

Edith’s own view of her entrapment, first by her mother, then by a first marriage which failed to provide her with riches, and now by Dombey, is emphasised repeatedly by Dickens. Rightly so because it is the source of Dombey’s downfall. Immediately before their doomed marriage we read,

*“Slowly and thoughtfully did Edith wander alone through the mansion of which she was so soon to be the lady: and little heed took she of all the elegance and splendour it began to display. The same indomitable haughtiness of soul, the same proud scorn expressed in eye and lip, the same fierce beauty, only tamed by a sense of its own little worth, and of the little worth of everything around it.....every scrap of gold so dazzling to the eye, she saw some hateful atom of her purchase money: the broad high mirrors showed her, at full length, a woman with a noble quality yet dwelling in her nature, who was too false to her better self, and too debased and lost, to save herself. She believed that all this was so plain, more or less, to all eyes, that she had no resource or power of self-assertion but in pride: and with this pride, which tortured her own heart night and day, she fought her fate out, braved it, and defied it.”*

Edith’s one saving grace is her genuine concern for Florence, whose uncomfortable position in the household she perceives accurately. So firmly does Edith believe that her mother’s influence is malign that she forbids her to have Florence stay with her during her honeymoon – dreading that Florence would be corrupted and turned into a manipulative man-trap like herself. Feminists take note: Dickens is telling us that the affectations of the female bourgeoisie were promoted and promulgated by the women themselves, not by ‘the patriarchy’ but by bourgeois women as an exploitation of men. Recall Mrs Chick being also an exemplar of the phenomenon.

### **Dombey’s Downfall**

On their marriage, Mr and Mrs Dombey immediately became an instance of the irresistible force meeting the immovable object.

*“He had imagined that the proud character of his second wife would have been added to his own – would have merged into it, and exalted his greatness. He had pictured himself haughtier than ever, with Edith’s haughtiness subservient to his. He had never entertained the possibility of its arraying itself against him.”*

Edith’s coldness and disdain for everything and everyone – bar Florence – in the Dombey household was apparent to all. It comes to a head when they hold a painfully disastrous social event in their house in which Mrs Dombey, whose duty as hostess would be to oil the social wheels, quite deliberately chooses to do the opposite. Mr Dombey has words with Edith, the

sort of words he would have had with an underperforming employee. There is no ambiguity: he simply demands total submission. This might produce resistance in anyone, but to the likes of Edith the degree of un wisdom in this approach serves to illustrate how seriously Mr Dombey fails to understand the precariousness of his position.

Staggering to the modern mind, though perhaps not at that time, is Dombey's usage of his Manager, Carker, as the agent of transmitting instructions to his wife regarding her conduct and attitude towards himself, Dombey. Incredible! Could anyone ever be so lacking in the understanding of people? Perhaps this was just an opportunity to further underwrite Dombey's almost inhuman coldness that he could imagine such a recourse to be a good idea. Or perhaps this was Dickens merely levering some plot advantage, bearing in mind that Carker had been positioning himself to steal Edith away anyway. So Dombey demands his wife's total submission (his own word) in all things, including showing no further devotion to Florence, and Carker is instructed to convey this instruction to Edith. What could possibly go wrong?

The climax of Edith and Dombey's disastrous marriage occurs at the dinner table, with Edith present but with Mr Dombey preferring to speak through Carker. *"I must beg you, now that matters have come to this, to inform Mrs Dombey, that it is not the rule of my life to allow myself to be thwarted by anybody – anybody, Carker – or to suffer anybody to be paraded as a stronger motive for obedience in those who owe obedience to me than I am myself. The mention that has been made of my daughter, and the use that is made of my daughter, in opposition to me, are unnatural. Whether my daughter is in actual concert with Mrs Dombey, I do not know, and do not care; but after what Mrs Dombey has said today, I beg you to make known to Mrs Dombey that if she continues to make this house the scene of contention it has become, I shall consider my daughter responsible in some degree, on that lady's avowal, and shall visit her my severe displeasure."*

Dombey refuses to consider separation, and Carker – for perhaps the only time in the book, and, of course, for selfish reasons – attempts to change Dombey's mind, to no avail. Edith despises Carker. But Edith is now desperate and accepts Carker's assistance. She flees her husband, with Carker's help. This is inevitably interpreted as "running off with Carker", and this is quite deliberate as far as Carker is concerned. They flee abroad, and Carker has Edith in his power now – or so he thinks.

But Carker's plan to have Edith as his mistress misfires. In a scene in their hiding place abroad Edith regales us again with her lament,

*"I am a woman", she said, confronting him steadfastly, "who from her childhood has been shamed and steeled. I have been offered and rejected, put up and appraised, until my very soul has sickened. I have not had an accomplishment or grace that might have been a resource to me, but it has been paraded and vended to enhance my value, as if the common crier had called it through the streets. My poor, proud friends, have looked on and approved; every tie between us has been deadened in my breast. There is not one of them for whom I care, as I could care for a pet dog. I stand alone in the world, remembering well what a hollow world it has been for me, and what a hollow part of it I have been myself. You know this, and you know that my fame with it is worthless to me."*

*'Yes, I imagined that,' (said Carker).*

*'And calculated on it', she rejoined, 'and so pursued me. Grown too indifferent for any opposition but indifference, to the daily working of the hands that had moulded me to this; and knowing that my marriage would at least prevent their hawking of me up and down; I suffered myself to be sold, as infamously as any woman with a halter round her neck is sold in any market-place. You know that.'*

*'Yes', Carker said, showing all his teeth, 'I know that.'*”

I'm sure I'm not alone in finding Edith's lamentations sounding a little hollow. Is she not a poor little rich girl? Never was she destitute. And even in those times, with women's options very much restricted, there *were* options open to her. Many women worked to keep themselves, even “gentlewomen”, even then. She was not obliged to remain with her mother. She was not obliged to collaborate with the marital marketplace of eligible ladies. Many women did not. She was complicit, but comforted herself by projecting all blame onto others, in typical feminist fashion.

### **The Backstory and Carker-the-Manager's Wickedness Revealed**

Harriet is Carker the Junior's sister. She stayed loyal to him after his disgrace and they live together. The mysterious Alice, who today we might call a bag lady, first enters the story as the subject of Harriet's charity. It turns out she is Good Mrs Brown's daughter and has just returned from having been transported as a convict. We are told that Alice was a great beauty in her youth. Here she is talking to Harriet in a passage surely meant with some irony in view of its applicability to a more major character, i.e., Edith,

*“‘When I was young and pretty, and this’, plucking contemptuously at the hair she held, ‘was only handled delicately, and couldn't be admired enough, my mother, who had not been very mindful of me as a child, found my merits, and was fond of me, and proud of me. She was covetous and poor, and thought to make a sort of property of me. No great lady ever thought that of a daughter yet, I'm sure, or acted as if she did – it's never done, we all know – and that shows that the only instances of mothers bringing up their daughters wrong, and evil coming of it, are among such miserable folks as us.’”*

There is a deliberate compositional echo between Edith's view of her own usage by her mother as a marital asset and Alice's usage, also by her own mother, for financial gain via attracted men. The big reveal is that it was Carker-the-Manager who caused Alice's ruin, implicitly with her mother's connivance. She was effectively prostituted and later fell into a life of crime after being dumped. There is some intimation that Carker had a hand in her being deported. It is also revealed that Alice was an illegitimate cousin of Edith's, further underwriting the intended resonance in their stories, both fallen women in different ways.

### **The Ending**

Mr Dombey and his friend, the Major, pursue Carker and Edith across Europe. Edith escapes. Carker flees with Dombey and the Major in hot pursuit. So rattled and harried is Carker that he carelessly gets run over by a train. (Dickens didn't like trains and so saw a monstrous train as a fitting means of dispatching the villainous Carker). There is a brief meeting much later between Florence and Edith, the latter then emigrates to Italy to live with a relative.

Before fleeing with Edith, Carker-the-Manager had prepared his exit by extracting his own finances from the company, whilst running the company deliberately into a parlous condition.

In truth, the company could have been saved by effective intervention, which would have required considerable contraction. Mr Dombey's pride could not countenance the loss of any part of his empire. As a result, the firm was driven into insolvency and Mr Dombey is ruined. Dombey becomes even more reclusive, a broken man, all his sense of self-worth gone. Florence marries and they go off to China to make Walter's fortune. My Dombey did not attend the wedding. When Florence and Walter return, now with Mr Dombey's grandson in tow, Florence finds her father a changed man.

The story ends with the reformed Mr Dombey now doting on both his grandchildren, the girl and the boy alike.

### **Dicken's didn't like trains?**

Famously Dickens did not like trains. This is usually put down to his being aboard when a train derailed at Staplehurst, Kent, in 1865 when ten passengers were killed. But *Dombey & Son* was written 19 years earlier and Dickens seemed not to be enamoured of trains even then. He choose to have Carker killed by one, describing it in the passage as a roaring monster. And earlier in *Dombey & Son* we read this interesting piece of social history,

*“The first shock of a great earthquake had, just at that period, rent the whole neighbourhood to its centre. Traces of its course were visible on every side. House were knocked down; streets broken through and stopped; deep pits and trenches dug in the ground; enormous heaps of earth and clay thrown up; buildings that were undermined and shaking, propped by great beams of wood. Here, a chaos of carts, overthrown and jumbled together, lay topsyturvy at the bottom of a steep unnatural hill; there, confused treasures of iron soaked and rusted in something that had accidentally become a pond. Everywhere were bridges that led nowhere; thoroughfares that were wholly impassable; Babel towers of chimneys, wanting half their height; temporary wooden houses and enclosures, in the most unlikely situations; carcasses of ragged tenements, and fragments of unfinished walls and arches, and piles of scaffolding, and wildernesses of bricks, and giant forms of cranes, and tripods straddling above nothing....Hot springs and fiery eruptions, the usual attendants upon earthquakes, lent their contributions of confusion to the scene. Boiling water hissed and heaved within dilapidated walls; whence, also, the glare and roar of flames came issuing forth; and mounds of ashes blocked up rights of way, and wholly changed the law and custom of the neighbourhood.*

*In short, the yet unfinished and unopened Railroad was in progress.”*