Dickensian Childhoods: Blighted Victorian Children in Michel Faber's *The Crimson Petal and the White*

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Abstract:
In *The Crimson Petal and the White* (2002), Michel Faber deliberately evokes characters and themes related to childhood from some of Charles Dickens's best-known works. Faber's motives for doing so are contradictory and complex: he re-emphasises certain of Dickens's key insights concerning Victorian childhood, particularly its miseries, and he even aggressively strives to outdo Dickens in 'authentic' details, but he also poses implicit challenges to Dickens's depictions of idealised children and his celebration of childishness in adults. Although Faber's position is representative of that of the neo-Victorian author, he also denotes the position of his contemporary readers as implicated by their desire to revisit and witness the abject suffering of children in the nineteenth century. Faber's work generates critical insights into Dickens's works and offers a revised definition of childhood in the Victorian era with broader applicability to the present.

Keywords: child abuse, childhood, childishness, *The Crimson Petal and the White*, Charles Dickens, idealised children, Michel Faber, prostitution, readers.

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When Michel Faber's neo-Victorian novel *The Crimson Petal and the White* was published in 2002, a number of reviewers drew explicit comparisons between his work and the novels of Charles Dickens[1] The comparisons were frequently made in regards to the novel's sheer size, as it rivalled the nineteenth-century triple-decker in length, as well as to Faber's panoramic, all-encompassing perspective of Victorian life in London. Another key similarity between Faber and Dickens, one that has been largely overlooked by critics, is their shared interest in nineteenth-century children and childhood. Dickens's recurring novelistic themes concerning childhood have been examined in great depth, but never in this context. Of the emerging critical body of work on *The Crimson Petal and the White*,

two chapters in the 2011 collection *Neo-Victorian Families*, edited by Marie-Luise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben, address Faber's representations of children, but they each explore other works as well, and neither is specifically concerned with Dickensian resonances: Louisa Yates investigates the figure of the child as an organising principle for constructions of alternative kinship in the neo-Victorian novel, while Marie-Luise Kohlke highlights Sophie's role in embodying Sugar's childhood trauma. Other neo-Victorian critics eschew deeper considerations of Faber's child characters altogether.[2]

The decidedly *adult* nature of *The Crimson Petal and the White* may initially appear antithetical to a sustained investigation of children's roles in the work; not only are its main characters grown, but its pages abound with graphic sexual experiences and intimate details concerning body parts and bodily functions. Only one child character, Sophie, receives more than cursory attention, and she is hidden away for the majority of the work. Closer consideration, however, reveals that children continually appear throughout the novel: peeping through windows, congregating in the streets, offering their young bodies in brothels, and haunting the memories and diary pages of the main characters. Faber also repeatedly invokes imagery involving infants and children in his descriptions of members of London society. The figures of children are hidden in plain sight in this work: in the margins of society, in the language of the text, and in the behaviour of ostensible adults.

Faber set *The Crimson Petal and the White* in mid-1870s London, a scant handful of years after Charles Dickens's death in 1870.[3] This article will argue that Faber's decision to position his narrator as Dickens's immediate chronological successor is mirrored by his desire to follow Dickens thematically and stylistically, and that one such inherited theme is the investigation of social and psychological issues concerning children in Victorian London. Children are among the most famous and beloved of Dickens's characters, in spite of – or, more likely, because of – their association with abuse, privation, neglect, and suffering, and while Dickens frequently leavened such depictions with heavy doses of sentimentality or humour, he nonetheless strove to convey the often degraded position of the child in Victorian England. *The Crimson Petal and the White* also portrays miserable, deprived children, and its frank references to their sexual abuse, brutal neglect, and savage living conditions are calculated to inspire horror

and sympathy in the contemporary reader, the same emotions Dickens evoked in his Victorian audience.

This article further argues that as Faber grapples with these shared child-related issues, he both draws from and deconstructs a number of Dickens's characters over the course of the novel. This is not to say that Faber's characters are intended to serve as either imitations or repetitions of Dickens's own literary creations; rather, this article is concerned with the ways in which they evoke specific, recognisable Dickensian features in order to pursue some of the same questions concerning children that haunted Dickens. More specifically, Faber appears deliberately to cover this same literary territory in order to extend and expand upon certain key Dickensian insights regarding nineteenth-century children as victims of Victorian society. In rejecting the Victorian sentimentality and ameliorating humour that is less palatable to contemporary audiences and by sharing lurid yet historically based details no reputable Victorian novel could ever include, Faber may even seem to have produced a more 'authentic' representation of Victorian children than did Dickens. Such 'authenticity', however, must not be taken at face value; as Simon Joyce cautions about neo-Victorian works, "we never really encounter 'the Victorians' themselves but instead a mediated image like the one we get when we glance into our rearview mirror when driving" (Joyce 2007: 4). The privileged position of the child in Western society precipitates the readerly outrage that Faber's suffering innocents are meant to inspire, yet given how effectively Faber's work demolishes the ideology of the Victorian 'cult of the child', contemporary ideologies surrounding the figure of the child are called into question as well.

At times, Faber strives to outdo Dickens, but he also employs child characters to highlight the narrative elisions and hollow ideologies of the Victorian novel. Faber further complicates his position by redefining 'childhood' in the context of Victorian culture, addressing and then refuting Dickens's celebration of childishness in adults. *The Crimson Petal and the White* also implicates its readers for their own contradictory positions; as Anne Morey and Claudia Nelson explain, the neo-Victorian reader "manifest[s] a desire to insinuate a contemporary self into the very phenomenon that Western liberal discourse now recognises as often dysfunctional, horrifying, or cruel", and the "neo-Victorian family", notably the figure of the child, enables this fantasy of belonging (Morey and Nelson

2012: 1). Faber's narrator addresses the reader, particularly at the outset, as both a curious tourist and as a solicitor of services with distinctly sexual overtones. Seeking particular sights and experiences, the readers are thus figured as complicit with the miseries that they subsequently encounter.

1. London's Poor Children

> They were a boy and girl. Yellow, meagre, ragged, scowling, wolfish; but prostrate, too, in their humility. Where graceful youth should have filled their features out, and touched them with its freshest tints, a stale and shrivelled hand, like that of age, had pinched and twisted them, and pulled them into shreds. (Dickens, *A Christmas Carol*, 2004: Stave 3)

The opening scenes of *The Crimson Petal and the White* are set in the slums of St. Giles, and the first character the reader encounters is the prostitute Caroline. She is in the process of douching with a mixture of water, alum, and sulphate of zinc, provoking the narrator to speculate on the likelihood that she is already barren from scarring. This opening scene establishes a recurring theme in the novel: in Faber's Victorian London, children are not wanted. The narrator then delivers a brief yet poignant account of Caroline's fall from virtue, directly precipitated by the death of her beloved son. After bringing him to London from North Yorkshire, Caroline desperately strove to balance earning a living as a dressmaker with caring for her child, yet her boy sickened in the squalid city environment, until one night he began "coughing and wheezing like a demented terrier pup" and died (Faber 2002: 14).

Victorian London proves to be a poisonous atmosphere for children across the social strata and throughout various city neighbourhoods and households. The individual children featured in this novel are all unwanted and unloved, from the prostitute Amy Howlett's son Christopher to William and Agnes Rackham's daughter Sophie. "This is a street", Faber's narrator states in the opening chapter, "where people wake when the opium in their babies' sugar-water ceases to keep the little wretches under" (Faber 2002: 6). Pregnancies are also unwanted, and when Sugar finds herself pregnant late in the novel, she attempts one method after another to induce a miscarriage, including throwing herself down a flight of stairs. Even the generous-hearted widow Emmeline Fox expresses her gratitude that she never had any children. As she explains, "We have filled up the world

awfully well, haven't we, with frightened and hungry human beings. The challenge now is what to *do* with them all" (Faber 2002: 259; original emphasis). These concerns were shared by many social reformers of the Victorian era, including Dickens himself, but as Faber traces Victorian society's tacit hostility towards children through the wretched slums to the estates of its upper classes, he establishes that nineteenth-century children's suffering was not only the isolated effect of pockets of poverty or ignorance, but the effect of the complicity of an entire adult population.

The youthfulness of the population in Great Britain was a defining characteristic of the Victorian era: children under the age of fifteen consistently made up approximately 35 percent of the population, and they were particularly visible in the streets of London (Frost 2009: 55; Nelson 2007: 55). In 1851, Henry Mayhew estimated that there were at least 10,000 children on the streets of London, the majority surviving by selling things (Mayhew 1967: 479). Hordes of children roamed the streets without any evidence of parental supervision, garnering both the attention and anxiety of grown members of society, including Dickens – and rightly so, as those who did not succumb to the high infant mortality rate were often neglected, abused, or forced into brutal labour. These facts contrast sharply with the idealised depictions of children in art, literature, and in the popular imagination that proliferated in the Victorian era. This 'cult of childhood' located and celebrated an unique beauty, innocence, and goodness within children; a few popular representations include the child portraits by Sir John Everett Millais and Sophie Anderson, Lewis Carroll's elegiac memories of young Alice Liddell, and literary characters including Diamond from George MacDonald's *At the Back of the North Wind* (1871), Cedric Errol from Frances Hodgson Burnett's *Little Lord Fauntleroy* (1888), and Dickens's own child characters, notably Oliver Twist, Little Nell, and Tiny Tim, who remain good and pure of heart despite the suffering they endure. The 'cult of childhood' gained cultural prominence in the Victorian era among the middle and upper classes and was an extension of the Romantic conception of the child, a philosophy extolling the state of childhood that originated in the writings of Jean Jacques Rousseau and was further developed and amplified through the poetry of Blake, Coleridge, and Wordsworth.

Dickens's idealised child characters are intended to serve as foils to his novels' harsh, bleak environments and villainous individuals, and he

strove to depict the effects of society's horrors upon children in realistic terms. In *Child-Loving*, James Kincaid uses the example of Oliver Twist to analyse the stark division between the myth and the reality of the Victorian child:

> One of the most baffling of the many mysteries of Victorian culture is the split between little Oliver Twist in the novel and little Oliver Twist in life. One is fawned over, protected, lusted after; the other is beaten, starved, imprisoned, transported. It's not that Dickens is unaware of this split; in fact, he exploits it. And it's not a simple dichotomy between literature and life, between the child one imagines and the child one kicks aside at the crossing or burns alive in one's chimney. Both images obtained and both children lived (though the first had a good chance of outliving the second). It's just that we are very likely to maunder on about the Wordsworthian child and forget the thundering counter-chorus of carelessness, contempt, and neglect. (Kincaid 1992: 74)

Faber appears to be very much aware of the split Kincaid describes, and he exploits it in his own way, though not by featuring angelic child characters; rather, he takes care to highlight the imperfections of pulchritudinous child characters such as Christopher and Agnes. Through harsh, unremitting portraits of street children, Faber evokes horror in modern-day readers for whom child abuse, rape, and death are deemed some of the most heinous and unforgivable crimes. The implicit gap between the ideal and the real is made far more perceptible as a result.

If Faber rejects idealised child creations, many details of Dickens's affecting portraits of London street children nonetheless resonate in his own descriptions. The squalid settings in *Oliver Twist* (1837-38) are as distinctly hostile to children as those in *The Crimson Petal and the White*: Oliver scarcely remains alive over the course of the work, and his friend Dick and Mr. Gamfield's chimney sweeps are killed. Young characters that survive (aside from the saintly Oliver) bear no vestiges of the Romantic conception of the child. The streetwise Artful Dodger is described as "a snub-nosed, flat-browed, common-faced boy enough; and as dirty a juvenile as one

would wish to see; but he had about him all the airs and manners of a man" (Dickens 1999b: 57). A strange hybrid of youth and experience, he is a child in years and stature, but his dress and worldly perspective are those of an adult, and as Richard Dellamora posits, the text and illustrations of *Oliver Twist* hint that he and the other boys may be victims of Fagin's sexual abuse (Dellamora 1996: 68-73).[4] In addition, the Artful Dodger's companion Master Charley Bates roars with uncontrollable, often inappropriate laughter at the slightest provocation, in a perversion of the joy supposedly inherent to the state of childhood.

These efforts to depict squalid realities concerning children are undercut by Dickens's mode of storytelling, which makes frequent use of humour, sentimentality, and melodrama, and offers a neat conclusion that intimates that a sense of rightness has been restored. In his 'Author's Preface to the Third Edition of *Oliver Twist*', however, Dickens claims to be aiming for literary realism, and he describes his intention to portray Fagin's gang and its child members with a greater degree of accuracy than had been done in previous works:

> It appeared to me that to draw a knot of such associates in crime as really do exist; to paint them in all their deformity, in all their wretchedness, in all the squalid poverty of their lives […] would be to attempt a something which was greatly needed and which would be a service to society. (Dickens 1999a: liv)

As Dickens matured as an artist, he strove to create more affecting portraits of street children, the most moving of which may be that of the crossing-sweeper Jo from *Bleak House* (1852-53). Dickens invites his readers to empathise with the ignorant and orphaned Jo even as he emphasises the enormous gulf between their respective positions, observing

> It must be a strange state to be like Jo! [...] To be hustled, and jostled, and moved on; and really to feel that it would appear to be perfectly true that I have no business, here, or there, or anywhere, and yet to feel perplexed by the consideration that I *am* here, somehow, too. (Dickens 1996: 236-237, original emphasis)

Jo's childish confusion, terror, and gratitude humanise him, rendering his loneliness, deprivation and eventual death deeply poignant. Yet even here, Dickens relies upon techniques of melodrama as Jo struggles to repeat the Lord's Prayer in his deathbed scene. Only in a few instances does Dickens attempt to depict the most brutal, unvarnished truths about London's poorest children – and even then, he depicts these children in allegorical terms, as with the hideous children Ignorance and Want that the Ghost of Christmas Present reveals in *A Christmas Carol* (1843).

Throughout his works, Dickens explores the vast incongruity between his society's privileging of the state of childhood and its actual treatment of its children, expanding upon themes and insights that originated several decades earlier with William Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience* (1789, 1794). In *The Crimson Petal and the White*, Faber demonstrates that he, too, shares Dickens's desire to explore this incongruity. The neo-Victorian genre allows him to freely imitate his Victorian antecedents, and Faber not only revisits Dickens's works, but he also strives to exceed him in depicting the miseries of poor urban children of the period. He punctures the popular notion of the idealised Victorian child through his researched depictions of hardened street urchins, locating ragged slum children with hands and feet "brown and tough as dog's paws; their infant physiognomies ugly with misuse" (Faber 2002: 10). The streets of the book teem with depictions of wolfish children, though, unlike Dickens's Jo, these children never betray any finer qualities. When Sophie Rackham stares at a barefoot urchin child, struck by their shared resemblance (given William's penchant for visiting prostitutes, the resemblance could be more than coincidental), the child responds by hurling a dog turd at Sophie. The urchin is the Victorian child feared by its society: savage and filled with rage.

Impoverished children repeatedly accost the novel's adult characters, who struggle helplessly to appease their raw need. William Rackham is "ill-at-ease around small children", even when the child is his own daughter (Faber 2002: 86). Henry Rackham doles out money and food to beggars, though he knows he is being manipulated. Mrs. Fox is less naïve, as her efforts for the Rescue Society have led her to witness "pox-raddled infants stowed in prostitutes' cupboards and dead babies decomposing in the Thames" (Faber 2002: 259), but her ceaseless efforts on behalf of the mothers of such children have little overall effect. Sugar, born and raised in

the slums, possesses the most sympathetic and clear-eyed perspective on London's street children, yet even she despairs at the sheer volume of needy children. Early in the narrative, she throws a coin to a child in a blanket, though she knows that "it's hopeless; she could fuck a hundred men a day and give all the proceeds to destitute children, and still make no lasting difference" (Faber 2002: 42).

As Sugar gradually rises in the world, she channels her desire to rescue children in need into a few specific cases. Dickens, as much as he despaired over society's organised efforts to improve the lives of children (from the 1834 Poor Law, to Gradgrindian compulsory education efforts, to philanthropies like those of Mrs. Jellyby and Mrs. Pardiggle), lauds the charitable efforts of individual figures such as the Cheeryble Brothers, Mr. Bownlow, Mr. Jarndyce, and the reformed Ebenezer Scrooge, all of whom are able to improve the lives of the young and needy. In *The Crimson Petal and the White*, though, Sugar fails to save Christopher Howlett, her efforts to rescue the child-like Agnes yield ambiguous results, and Sophie's position at the novel's close is uncertain. Faber's lack of optimism and failure to validate localised philanthropy reflect his contemporary perspective: he well knows that individual efforts to assist London's most wretched children in 1870 did not make a discernible difference in their lives, and his novel represents this bleak awareness.

2. Girls for Sale

> Has *this* been my late childhood? I had none before. Do not tell me that I had, to-night, of all nights in my life! (Dickens, *Dombey and Son*, 2008: Ch. 27, original emphasis)

Contemporary readers accustomed to the criminalisation of paedophilia and statutory rape may still be shocked by the young age of many Victorian prostitutes and Faber deliberately evokes this reaction in his descriptions. A number of scenes in *The Crimson Petal and the White* are set in brothels, ranging from a dilapidated house in St. Giles to a more respectable Silver Street address, and Faber populates these houses with girls so young that they would be regarded as children if they were members of middle- or upper-class Victorian families. In *Victorian Childhood*, Thomas E. Jordan notes that in one large city, "one half of the prostitutes were under the age of eighteen over several decades" (Jordan 1987: xiii-

xiv). Dickens's concern for the fates of such fallen women transcended his literary career, and in 1847, he established Urania Cottage, a home for assisting and educating prostitutes who wished to adopt a different lifestyle. His depictions of young fallen women, including Nancy from *Oliver Twist*, Alice Marwood in *Dombey and Son* (1846-48), and Martha Endell from *David Copperfield* (1849-50), emphasise the possibility of redemption and even a limited degree of reintegration into society. Dickens would have been well aware of the youth of some of the prostitutes in London, and he clearly bases his characters upon his observations of such women, yet he scrupulously avoids depicting child prostitutes as such in his works. In *Oliver Twist*, the character of Nancy proclaims that she has worked for Fagin since she was "a child not half as old" as Oliver, yet Dickens has Nancy explicitly state that she "thieved" for him, not "whored" (Dickens 1999b: 127-128). Dickens's circumspection in this area would have stemmed at least in part from concern for his audiences: the notion of a young girl being sexually violated against her will would have outraged his Victorian readership, as would scenes that lingered inside brothels. Kincaid provides further insight into this Victorian social problem:

> We are told that prostitutes as young as 8 or 9 were not uncommon […]. At the outside, there seem to have been fewer than a thousand child prostitutes known to police; but the problem was very real. The question is what the problem was […]. Some Victorians seem concerned that children may have their moral sense blunted by contact with prostitutes, but there is not a great deal of evidence, until very late in reformers like Stead, that the *child*-as-prostitute is much of an issue. (Kincaid 1992: 76-77; original emphasis)

This would suggest that Dickens may not only have tailored his depictions of fallen women to meet the strict nineteenth-century standards for publication, but, like others, he may also have failed to appreciate the actual problem of children as prostitutes.

This problem is echoed in Faber's novel, where none of the male characters displays much concern over the young age of the prostitutes they use – in fact, the girls' youth constitutes their chief attraction. Bodley and Ashwell, William's friends from Cambridge, rhapsodise over the charms of

the newest and youngest prostitutes, raving, "Pubescent *girls*, William. Time catches up with them. They don't stay ripe for ever, you know. Indeed, you've already missed *some* girls that have passed into legend, Bill – *legend*" (Faber 2002: 62; original emphasis). Soon thereafter, William seeks out two brothel girls, ostensibly twins, and is deeply disappointed to find that while they are youthful, their bodies are already sexually mature. Through its graphic, unpleasant depictions of child prostitutes and their enthusiastic, unsympathetic male clientele, the novel again explodes the notion that Victorians revered and celebrated the figure of the child. In addition, the narrative premise positions the contemporary reader as complicit with a form of 'sexual tourism': in the opening scene, the narrator addresses the reader as one seeking to fulfil desires both literary and sexual, thus spurring a visit to the home of a prostitute.

Such complicity is quickly problematised by Faber, particularly upon the introduction of the novel's main character, Sugar, who was initiated into prostitution at the age of thirteen, when her mother, the brothel-keeper Mrs. Castaway, woke her and told her that "she needn't shiver anymore: a kind gentleman had come to keep her warm" (Faber 2002: 228). After noting Sugar's age (nineteen) and the number of years she has been a prostitute (six), Faber's narrator opines, "You do the arithmetic, and the answer is a disturbing one, especially when you consider that the girls of this time commonly don't pubesce until fifteen or sixteen" (Faber 2002: 34). Sugar's appeal to men is directly related to her ability to perform a perfectly convincing role as a trusting, precocious child. As Faber's narrator explains:

> What makes Sugar a rarity is that she'll do anything the most desperate alley-slut will do, but do it with a smile of child-like innocence. There is no rarer treasure in Sugar's profession than a virginal-looking girl who can surrender to a deluge of ordure and rise up smelling like roses, her eyes friendly as a spaniel's, her smile white as absolution. (Faber 2002: 35)

Faber depicts William as completely convinced by her ersatz childish enthusiasm and curiosity, her carefully constructed wide-eyed wonder. Over the course of the novel, Faber gradually reveals the extent to which Sugar's

sadistic mother casually tortured her and refused to acknowledge her status as a child and as *her* child, further emphasising the degree to which Sugar's childish qualities are an elaborate enforced performance.

Of all of Dickens's fallen women, it is Nancy from *Oliver Twist* to whom Sugar is most akin. Born and raised in London's worst slums, both were denied a childhood, both are still young, and both share a fierce desire to rescue other, still uncorrupted children with whom they identify. Nancy is moved to protect Oliver from the ruffians who surround him and threaten him with beatings and the sinister scheme of turning him into a criminal. When her secret plot to save Oliver is revealed, her lover, Bill Sikes, bludgeons her to death. Like Nancy with Oliver, Faber's character Sugar is haunted by her memories of Christopher, the blue-eyed, innocent-looking boy who resides at Mrs. Castaway's with his totally indifferent prostitute mother, Amy Howlett. Unable to rescue him, Sugar tries to save the child-like Agnes and Sophie. Marie-Luise Kohlke observes that Sugar "views Sophie as a replica of her own abused younger self" (Kohlke 2011: 131); this insight can also be extended to Sugar's attitudes towards Christopher and Agnes, revealing the solipsistic perspective motivating her seeming empathy. Faber problematises Sugar's philanthropic rescue efforts as Christopher never reveals any inclination to leave his mother, Agnes may have died as a result of Sugar's interference, and Sophie is duped into leaving her father and home, her wishes never consulted.

Through Sugar's relationship with her mother, Mrs. Castaway, Faber invokes another Dickensian character: the beautiful, nihilistic Edith Granger from *Dombey and Son*. Like Sugar, Edith accuses her mother of denying her a childhood. Mrs. Skewton and Mrs. Castaway are both outsized, hideous figures: Mrs. Skewton a grotesque, withered 'Cleopatra' in garish youthful trappings, and Mrs. Castaway a smirking figure clad entirely in scarlet. Both place their daughter on display before men at an early age, to be sold to the highest bidder. The character of Edith is only a prostitute by way of analogy, while Sugar is actually one, but many of the dynamics are distressingly alike. On the eve of Dombey's proposal, Edith voices her anguish to her mother: "There is no slave in a market: there is no horse in a fair: so shown and offered and examined and paraded, Mother, as I have been, for ten shameful years" (Dickens 2003: 378). When her mother expresses bewilderment at how Edith characterises her past, the latter asks:

> "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. [...]" (Dickens 2003: 378)

The experiences and worldviews of Edith and Sugar establish that the state of childhood and the innocence associated with it are marked both by economic privilege and adult complicity, but do not represent a natural human condition.

Mrs. Skewton and Mrs. Castaway differ in social class, but both raise the same problem: the cultural and gender specific value assigned to female children in the Victorian period. Girls only became valuable commodities for such mothers when they became young women, and so both mothers force their daughters to inhabit adult roles when they are still really children. Of course, the class differences between Edith and Sugar do matter: Edith possesses the authority to refuse to dissemble, while Sugar's lower, more precarious social position means that her behaviour is never genuine as she always has to play a part. Dickens must also treat Edith as a fallen woman after she runs away with James Carker, and accordingly, she retreats from the world at the novel's close. However, because Faber writes for a different audience that will regard Sugar's character with sympathy, not harsh judgment, he can permit her not only to reject her status of 'fallen woman' but to completely reinvent herself as a respectable woman, granting her a degree of agency that Dickens's fallen women were never permitted.

3. The Child-Wife

> One thing troubled me much [...]. It was, that Dora seemed by one consent to be regarded like a pretty toy or plaything. (Dickens, *David Copperfield*, 2009: Ch. 41)

Thus far, my analysis has focused upon Faber's efforts to deflate the Victorian 'cult of the child' through his literary recreations of the abused, neglected, suffering children of that era. Faber depicts 'Dickensian' childhoods in every sense of the phrase's contemporary meaning, attempting to outdo Dickens's darkest visions with squalid details calculated to disturb even the most jaded modern reader, while evoking recognisable

character details from Dickens's novels. As noted above, Faber eschews idealised depictions of children in his narrative; in addition to implicitly contrasting the suffering of children against a cultural ideal of childhood (Victorian as well as contemporary), he also establishes foils in the immature, pleasure-seeking, self-centred adult characters that demand for themselves the exalted position set forth by the 'cult of the child'. These figures are not simply colourful individuals, as in Dickens's works, but are intended to represent a pervasive social trend Faber locates in the well-to-do classes of Victorian society. Faber thus establishes and explores a different dichotomy in his work: children who were denied childhoods versus adults who cling tenaciously to childhood.

The contrasting figures of Sugar and Agnes epitomise this split. Tiny, blonde, blue-eyed, and pretty, the adult Agnes still resembles a child and wishes to be treated like one. As Faber's narrator describes her, he takes pains to establish her child-like nature: "Agnes peers longingly over his shoulder, as if hoping a giant-sized parent might come rushing in to restore decorum" (Faber 2002: 134). Later in the same chapter, when Agnes's maid Clara helps her to bed, "Agnes shuffles to obey, but not like an old woman – more like a child being taken to bed after a nightmare" (Faber 2002: 156). At age twenty-three she is married and has given birth, but she still behaves like a child, making up tunes on the piano, playing with new hats, or fantasising about parties.

Certainly, the mental illness that the novel links to a tumour in Agnes's brain is partially responsible for her immersion in this fantasy, but the narrative also firmly establishes that her childishness is the result of her upper-class upbringing. As Ginger Frost explains, "[c]hildren in the upper and middle classes had longer childhoods than their poor counterparts […]. Girls stayed at home as 'children' of the house until they married, which could be into their twenties or even longer" (Frost 2009: 31).[5] Agnes has taken this societal attitude to its logical extreme: when everyone has treated her like a child well into her teens, and when being a pretty, clever little girl has earned her validation and admiration, even from her husband, she does not wish to abandon this privileged position for the more demanding roles of wife and mother.

Agnes greatly resembles Dora Spenlow Copperfield in *David Copperfield*, who also insists on being treated like a pretty child and appears incapable of handling any adult responsibilities after marriage. Both David

Copperfield and William Rackham are charmed by the childish natures of these women during the courtship period, but the charm quickly wears off once they are married. Agnes, though, is a Dora who does not conveniently fade out of the narrative; she is a Dora who lingers, growing increasingly inappropriate and less charming as she ages, until she becomes monstrous in her insistence upon childhood. Agnes is also as unsuited for motherhood as Dora would likely have proven, but Faber fully pursues the disastrous effects of such a figure having a baby. In addition, Dora may be helpless in the face of adult responsibilities, but she differs from Agnes Rackham in that she possesses some degree of self-awareness of her own shortcomings: she knows she is silly and giddy and stupid, even if she appears incapable of behaving any differently, and she knows she disappoints and angers David. For instance, she asks David to call her his "child-wife", explaining, "When you are going to be angry with me, say to yourself, 'it's only my child-wife!' When I am very disappointing, say, 'I knew, a long time ago, that she would make but a child-wife!'" (Dickens 1981: 595).[6]

Luckily for David, who is increasingly aware of his and Dora's unsuitability, he does not have to endure his disappointment in his marriage for very long. When Dora is on her deathbed, she eloquently apologises for her silliness to David, predicting that "as years went on, my dear boy would have wearied of his child-wife […]. He would have been more and more sensible of what was wanting in his home. She wouldn't have improved. It is better as it is" (Dickens 1981: 711). The plot of *David Copperfield* wraps itself up beautifully, with David and Agnes happily married and all the problems and inconveniences of a child-wife erased. *The Crimson Petal and the White* explores, then, a version of what would have happened had Dickens's narrative devices not conveniently removed Dora. William, like David, recalls that Agnes "was awfully young when I married her – too young, perhaps. Playing with dolls still" (Faber 2002: 417). Agnes proves to be not only childish but petty, superficial, and entirely self-centred, incapable of fulfilling the role of an adult wife and mother, even given the greatly limited degree of practical responsibility expected of her as a middle-class woman.

Sugar finally reaches a crucial insight about Agnes after she reads the old diaries the latter wrote at the age of fourteen:

> Now at last Sugar understands: this muddle-headed, minuetting adolescent *is* a lady, as fully adult as she'll ever be. Yes, and all the ladies Sugar has ever seen, all those patrician damsels dismounting imperiously from their carriages, or promenading under parasols in Hyde Park, or parading in to the opera: they are children. Essentially unchanged from when they played with dolls and coloured pencils, they grow taller and gain a few 'accomplishments' until, at fifteen or sixteen, still accustomed to being made to sit in a corner for failing to conjugate a verb or refusing to eat their pudding, they go home to their suitors. (Faber 2002: 553; original emphasis)

The novel suggests that Victorian society, through its double standards, has created a nation of child-wives. In addition, Agnes's desire to remain a child has troubling effects. Her obsession with preventing signs of aging, combined with her mental instability and religious fanaticism, lead her to a desperate search for spiritual secrets to staying forever young Even more disturbing than Agnes's endless fixation on her appearance is her complete ignorance of how her adult body functions. The narrator explains that "[t]o Agnes, bleeding from the belly is a terrifying and unnatural thing. No one has told her about menstruation; she has never heard the word nor seen it in print" (Faber 2002: 236). Her diary contains two different narratives about her experience of giving birth: one, terrified and woefully ignorant – "*[Clara] prattles that everyone is very worried about 'the baby' – how very late it is, & that it must come soon. Whose baby can this be?*" (Faber 2002: 526; original italics) – and the other, a version of her recurring fantasy about being taken to the Convent of Health as a child, where a Holy Sister relieves her of the demon squirming in her belly.

But Agnes is far from being the only child-like adult character in *The Crimson Petal and the White*. Although her husband William Rackham assumed a measure of authority when he cut his hair, grew a beard, and took over the management of Rackham Perfumeries, the novel frequently highlights his immaturity. On his first visit to Sugar's, he wets his pants and she cleans him, murmuring "Poor baby"; shortly thereafter, she characterises him as "an infant searching for a warm bed to sleep in" (Faber 2002: 115, 174). When he is happy, he twirls around a lamp-post "like an

urchin child at play"; when he is upset, he "sulks and stammers and bawls, and falls asleep in mid-task, like a querulous infant" (Faber 2002: 350, 681). William also suffered an unhappy childhood – his adulteress mother departed when he and his older brother Henry were infants – and he seemingly possesses few childhood memories, for he struggles to recall his shared boyhood with his brother Henry. Perhaps his lack of perspective on his own childhood could be attributed in some measure to his failure to progress beyond such a state. William's masculine companions are also childish in one way or another. Henry, for instance, is as obsessed with women's flesh and sexual activity as a typical adolescent boy, and proves incapable of committing himself to the adult responsibilities of either religious orders or marriage to Mrs. Fox: he sees himself as "a little boy trapped inside a monstrous, degraded husk" (Faber 2002: 314). Their father, Henry Calder Rackham, enthuses wildly over Christmas crackers, games, and toys. Meanwhile William's Cambridge friends, Bodley and Ashwell, resemble two Peter Pans in their rejection of heteronormative adulthood in favour of the complete freedom to pursue every trite adventure, sexual desire, and self-indulgent urge together.

Dickens also described many childish adults in his works, for instance in *Bleak House*, where "we have a whole mountain of irresponsible children-adults of whom Skimpole is the wonderful apex. And they are all condemned" (Wilson 1970: 211). The well-to-do characters of *The Crimson Petal and the White* all merit the same description of "irresponsible children-adults", and Bodley and Ashwell in particular are very reminiscent of Skimpole. The latter is charming but also selfish and cruel, and he uses his childish nature to defend his worst actions: when he wishes to refuse to help Jo, who is suffering greatly from illness, he gaily explains, "You'll say it's childish […]. Well, I dare say it may be; but I *am* a child, and I never pretend to be anything else" (Dickens 1996: 454; original emphasis). Malcolm Andrews identifies five main categories of the grown-up child in Dickens's fiction, only two of which Faber chooses to include in *The Crimson Petal and the White*. One of these categories is that of "arrested development" (Andrews 1994: 75), though in crafting his characters Faber eschews sympathetic examples like Maggy in *Little Dorrit* (1855-57) in favour of versions of Skimpole. In Faber's novel, Victorian society upon the whole is complicit with this childish behaviour, so long as these boyish men and girlish ladies possess the necessary capital to maintain their play. The

other category that Faber includes is that of "premature little adults" (Andrews 1994: 79), such as the Artful Dodger and Louisa Gradgrind from *Hard Times* (1854), of whom the precocious Sugar is his most fully developed example. These antithetically positioned options are both perversions of the expected progression from childhood to adulthood, and while the novel's characters do not all fit neatly into one category or another, a sufficient number do.

Faber's novel levels an indictment against adult immaturity, and in so doing denotes a key difference from Dickens, who condemns some types of grown-up children, but celebrates others, condoning their self-indulgence, immaturity, and regressive behaviour. In 1853, Dickens published an essay titled 'Where We Stopped Growing' in *Household Words*, which Malcolm Andrews characterises as "one of Dickens's more explicit and extended statements on the value of immaturity" (Andrews 1994: 57). The essay catalogues all of the objects, people, and enthusiasms that Dickens claims he has never outgrown, and it concludes: "Right thankful we are to have stopped in our growth at so many points […]. If we can only preserve ourselves from growing up, we shall never grow old, and the young may love us to the last" (Dickens 1994: 206-207). Dickens boasts of his own childishness and indicates that retaining a measure of immaturity as an adult is a virtue worth celebrating. *The Crimson Petal and the White*, by contrast, takes pains to demonstrate how the upper classes revel in their lifelong state of childhood at the expense of the lower classes. In fact, the latter's lack of proper childhood is shown to be the direct result of the labour they have to provide to give these adult children the 'toys' and pleasures they demand. In his essay, Dickens derives particular enjoyment from London perambulations and the odd cast of characters he encounters; in the context of Faber's realism, however, the objectification of these individuals and the privileged status Dickens enjoys become more readily apparent. As a result, in Faber's novel childhood becomes a luxury that only the wealthy can afford.

4. The Figure of the Child

> His feeling about the child had been negative from her birth. He had never conceived an aversion to her: it had not been worth his while or in his humour. She had never been a positively disagreeable object to him. But now he was ill at ease about her. She troubled his peace. (Dickens, *Dombey and Son*, 2008: Ch. 3)

Sophie is the most prominent child character in *The Crimson Petal and the White*, and though she is "locked away like a squalid secret" for the majority of the narrative (Faber 2002: 705), the climax of the novel involves a struggle between William and Sugar for possession of her, signalling a broader ideological conflict (with gender and class overtones) over the issue of control of the nineteenth-century child. Sophie appears as "a plain, serious-looking child, certainly no candidate for a Pears' Soap advertisement – or a Rackhams' one, at that" (Faber 2002: 147). Faber's allusion to the famous 'Bubbles' advertisement for Pears, painted by Sir John Everett Millais in 1886 and depicting an angelic little boy with wide, upturned eyes, emphasises the extent to which popular Victorian images shaped cultural expectations regarding children at the time. The members of the Rackham household chiefly ignore plain Sophie, and the novel depicts her struggle to establish her identity through her limited interactions with adult society. Like many young Victorian children in well-to-do families, she is confined within the home, raised by servants, and given an education devoid of practical application. In fact, her perplexity seems reflective of a more universal condition concerning nineteenth-century privileged girlhood. Moreover, Sophie's voracious reading functions to confirm rather than alleviate her confusion, for her two favourite authors, Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll, reinforce the illogical, nonsensical nature of her world. When she reads the line in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) where Alice says, "Who in the world am I? Ah, *that's* the great puzzle!", the narrator reveals, "Sophie must take a deep breath whenever she re-reads it, so alarmed is she by this quotation from her most secret thoughts" (Faber 2002: 682).

As an only child in a well-to-do Victorian family, Sophie's childhood is hardly *Dickensian*. She does, however, grow up isolated and lonely: her mother is incapable of acknowledging her existence, her nurse is cruel, and her self-interested father fails to value a girl child who cannot

inherit his business, cannot maintain the family name, and may not even be marriageable. Sophie's position evokes that of Florence from *Dombey and Son*, whose cold-hearted capitalist father also does not love or want her until his abrupt change of heart in the novel's closing pages. Florence similarly struggles to understand her father's lack of affection for her, a condition which is explained by Dickens's narrator in monetary terms: "In the capital of the House's name and dignity, such a child was a mere piece of base coin that couldn't be invested – a bad Boy – nothing more" (Dickens 2003: 5). In *Dombey and Son*, Dickens explores different standards by which people assign value to children. The novel clearly rejects Dombey's chilly, sexist analogies involving currency and investments, and advocates instead a perspective based on sentiment as the only appropriate register for establishing a child's worth.

Faber shares Dickens's interest in how value was assigned to nineteenth-century children, but he is more interested in staging an ensuing conflict in a consumer culture where possessions and self-identity are closely linked. The book's pages are crammed with material goods, and the bourgeois child is shown to offer the same possibility for the transformation of one's self-image as a new hat or dress. Sophie's malleable identity permits adult desires to be inscribed upon her, and both William and Sugar perceive her worth through their own lens of self. William gradually suspects that Sophie may prove a worthwhile investment after all, as her successful debut into society and subsequent good marriage would reflect positively upon him as head of a distinguished household. Sugar's relationship with Sophie is more affectionate, but her desire to keep Sophie stems from her wanting to fill the role of Sophie's mother and her need to protect Sophie's young body as hers was never protected.

Sophie's play activities also reveal that she has begun to think of herself in ways that do not conform to society's expectations of her. She abandons a new doll in favour of a spyglass, and she asks Sugar if she can be an explorer when she grows up. By absconding with Sophie, Sugar is not only providing Sophie with the great adventure that William would have denied her, but she is, in essence, saving her from the self-interested, patriarchal nature of the Victorian family, and perhaps even from a fate like that of Agnes. In this respect, Faber is also indulging contemporary readers in a measure of wish-fulfilment: as Cora Kaplan notes, "*The Crimson Petal and the White*'s women are the only sympathetic gender in the novel"

(Kaplan 2007: 99-100), and the quasi-feminist Sugar is permitted to triumph in the struggle for possession of the figure of the child, and to sidestep oppressive Victorian societal norms for at least a brief moment. The ending further offers an antithesis to the book's bleak opening chapter, which recounts how Caroline brought her son to London to die. In the final chapter, Sugar and Sophie are leaving the poisonous city atmosphere, and in place of Caroline's descent into prostitution, the fallen woman regains at least the appearance of respectability.

Faber's conclusion of *The Crimson Petal and the White*, though, effectively withholds a satisfying narrative resolution. Nearly 850 pages into the book, Sugar and Sophie board an omnibus and the novel abruptly ends, in spite of William's ongoing pursuit and their utterly unimaginable future. In rejecting conventional narrative resolution, Faber enacts the unresolved nature of the Victorian era's ideological struggle for dominance over the figure of the child. He also gestures towards the ongoing nature of this struggle, for while contemporary society may consider itself far more enlightened in its treatment of children than the Victorians, every major aspect of child-rearing today is hotly debated by experts and parents alike, child idols are admired for their conformity to an idealised image of childhood (however false), and cycles of child abuse, labour, poverty, underage sex trafficking and neglect continue both in the Western world and in developing countries.

5. Conclusion

The Crimson Petal and the White offers historically-rooted insights into the plights of nineteenth-century children, but through its evocations of Charles Dickens's child characters, it also provides contemporary readers with a guide for reading Dickens in this context. Faber's work advocates granting the most serious attention to Dickens's lonely, maligned, realistic child characters – but only if humour and sentimentality are excised, for only then will their true pathos and Dickens's most scathing societal criticisms become manifest. Faber's horrific descriptions of abused children also serve to remind contemporary readers that Dickens would have seen such sights himself (or even worse) in his London perambulations, and that they informed his fiction, even if he had to eliminate their most shocking aspects. As Steven Marcus remarks in the very different context of *The Other Victorians*, "*this* is the kind of thing that the Victorian novelists could

not but be aware of – even though their explicit dealings with it were very circumspect – that their work as a whole was directed against" (Marcus 2009: 138; original emphasis).[7] Faber is further cautioning readers that Dickens's idealised child characters must be recognised as artificial cultural constructs, and that his celebrations of adult immaturity should be received with open scepticism. Faber's pastiche and his direct addresses to contemporary readers invite those who may be growing nostalgic about the world of Dickens to come 'play'. Such readers, who arrive seeking familiar pleasures in the neo-Victorian novel, as the childish male adults of *The Crimson Petal and the White* seek familiar pleasures in its brothels, are implicated instead for their dubious desires by the all-too-real visions of suffering, abject children.

Notes

1. A representative sample of quotations from reviews illustrating this comparison follows: from *Publisher's Weekly*: "Faber, like Dickens or Hardy, explores an era's secrets and social hypocrisy […]. [I]t's just the sort of gorgeous, Dickensian doorstopper that serious readers will cozy up with as fall winds start blowing" (Zalecki 2002: 47); from *Kirkus*: "Imagine a Dickens novel freed of the restraints imposed by Victorian propriety. There's no other way to describe this enthralling melodrama" ([Anon.] 2002); from *The Booklist*: "An unseen narrator bids the reader into a London that at first seems simply Dickensian. But Faber's breathtaking novel is more intimate with its characters and less hopeful in its resolutions" (Cooper 2002: 1885); from *New Statesman*: "Faber has been acclaimed as 'the new Dickens,' credited with having written 'the first great 19th-century novel for the 21st century […]. Clever, well-crafted, and enjoyable this book may be, but Dickens it ain't" (Abrams 2002).
2. Much of the existing scholarship on *The Crimson Petal and the White* concerns itself with formal issues related to the emerging neo-Victorian genre, with serious investigations in this vein by Letissier 2009; Kaplan 2007; and Palmer 2009. More recent articles by Colella (2010) and Perticaroli (2011) have, respectively, explored the role of the sense of smell in reconstructing the past and depictions of material objects and commodity culture in the novel.
3. Early in Faber's novel, a nameless prostitute references Dickens in a bawdy boast, claiming:

> '[...] I've 'ad all the great names. I've 'ad Charles Dickens.'
>
> 'Ain't 'e dead?'
>
> 'Not the bit *I* sucked on, dear.'
>
> 'Dead five years or more. Hignorant, you are.'
>
> 'It was 'im, I tell yer. I didn't say it was last week, did I?'
>
> She sniffs pathetically. 'I was no more than a babe.' (Faber 2002: 98)

By simultaneously introducing Dickens and establishing his death, Faber can acknowledge his revisiting of Dickens's literary territory as he positions himself as a would-be successor. The prostitute's lament about her youth also renders the figure of Dickens as complicit with the abusive treatment of the young in the context of child prostitution.

4. Dellamora argues that, whether sexual abuse literally occurs or not, Dickens prompts the thought through the Artful Dodger's queer manner, the intense relationship Fagin shares with his boys, iconography associated with the devil in Cruikshank's representation of Fagin, and the extreme guilt Fagin evinces before he is hanged (Dellamora 1996: 68-73).
5. This is not to argue that all Victorian middle- to upper-class daughters who were expected or forced to remain home enjoyed extended childhoods, only that those in relative privilege who did not have to adopt the roles of surrogate mother or housekeeper could still occupy a position within the structure of the family analogous to that of a child.
6. *David Copperfield* is a particularly rich source of child-like adult female characters, as Clara, Emily, and Agnes all possess various mannerisms and attributes associated with children.
7. Marcus offers his remark in the context of a first-hand recorded account of the brutal rape of a field hand. Marcus's study addresses Victorian pornographic discourse, and his insight thus particularly applies to the child prostitutes and rape victims that proliferate in the pages of Faber's work, fictional representations of actual figures from Victorian England.

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