

## Four Adoption in the Developing British Novel: Stigma, Social Protest, and Gender

In the survey of English literature that I took in my sophomore year of college, the only novel we read was *Tom Jones*. We never considered Tom as an adoptee. Ironically, the teacher of this course, Mrs. Giovannini, was known to be an adoptive mother.

The course was not generally considered exciting. My roommate and then best friend recounted to me a conversation in which Mrs. Giovannini mentioned her daughter sleeping in class. “She’s her mother’s daughter,” my roommate joked. Embarrassed by her reflex witticism, she said to me that “the awful thing is that she isn’t her mother’s daughter.” I, who had told her I was adopted and was used to thinking of my adoptive mother as simply my mother, said nothing.

How many children had Mrs. Giovannini? Was Tom Jones Squire Allworthy’s son or not? What was my friend saying about me? And whose daughter was I?

Many historians and literary critics associate the rise of the nuclear family with the rise of the novel. Christopher Flint has even argued that the patterns of narrative “formally manifest” the social mechanisms of the family.<sup>1</sup> But while Flint argues that there is affinity because “Both narrative and genealogy usually develop in linear fashion,” in many novels, including those to be discussed in this chapter, genealogy is much more puzzling and jagged than linear in its presentation.<sup>2</sup> Disturbed genealogies and displaced children are common in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British novel. While these novels may show the family in pieces, they also show various family-making processes at work, depend for much of their effect on assumptions about the family, and

suggest the importance of some elements of the family by showing unhappiness resulting from their absence.

The focus on displaced children in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novel was not simply an artifact of narrative structure. During the time of the Industrial Revolution, more children *were* displaced. In late-eighteenth-century England and into the nineteenth century, the illegitimacy rate was on the rise. There was an abrupt series of increases after 1836; Laslett suggests that it was triggered by the English Poor Law of 1834, but a general rise in illegitimacy occurred across Europe at this time.<sup>3</sup> The novels discussed in this chapter and the next responded both to the increased sentimentalism of the family for those who could afford it and to the increased fragmentation of the family for those who could not.

Readers knew the traditional plot in which genealogies are clarified and birth parents are found. For one thing, they read Shakespeare, who was idealized and frequently read and performed in the late eighteenth century and the nineteenth. *Cymbeline* was very popular with the Victorians, and *Winter's Tale* was known well enough to have an impact too. But even more importantly, readers knew the story of Moses' adoption and many fairy tales that deal with similar themes. Moses as a foundling was on the official seal of the London Foundling Hospital; and depictions of his adoption were in Gibbs's 1836 Kitto Bible and in paintings given to the hospital by Francis Hayman and by Hogarth.<sup>4</sup> Like my roommate (a good friend whose place in my life has been much more positive than this story suggests), they probably thought of birth parents as the only real parents. At the same time they knew that children could be raised by other people, and apparently they were more interested than Sophocles' or Shakespeare's audiences in the psychology of this process. Although there was no legal form for adoption in England in this period, informal adoptions, in which the word was used, did occur. These *de facto* adoptions, as George Behlmer calls them, were sometimes beneficent and sometimes not.<sup>5</sup> As Penny Martin writes, "Anybody could give or sell a child to somebody else and anybody could take on a child—without it acquiring any legal rights within a new family."<sup>6</sup>

Many of the novels I shall discuss have been considered under the category of orphan literature. *Oliver Twist*, *Pip* of *Great Expectations*, and *Jane Eyre* are orphaned. *Evelina's* mother is dead, as is *Esther Sum-*

merson's father, and for most of the book their living parents do not acknowledge them.

But Oliver, Pip, Jane, Esther, and Evelina, as well as others I shall discuss, are all at some point adopted, though not through a legal procedure. Considering them as adoptees allows us to see them more contextually. We can compare their relationships with their surrogate parents. We can look at similarities between *Oliver Twist* and *Tom Jones*, or among *Evelina*, *Fanny Price*, and *Esther Summerson*. We can explore the impacts of heredity and nurture as they are juxtaposed in these novels and consider the allusions to, and revisions of, traditional adoption plots.

The genre of the novel provides an opportunity to develop the possibilities of adoption plots much further than the drama or the fairy tale. Omniscient and first-person narration give a chance to explore more complexity and development of feeling, about relatives by both birth and adoption, and about the condition of being displaced and different. Such feeling is less likely to be expressed on stage (the speeches in a play have to be relatively short, with less room for the musing of a character to himself in solitude). Often novels present themselves as making a more "realistic," contemporary gloss on a literary pattern: sometimes novels use the expected plot of family discovery as a myth, structuring readers' expectations that the novel can play off against. We may anticipate a reunion that never happens. Or perhaps it happens with results very different from those the characters or the audience expects. Using part of the reunion plot can lead to the conclusion that the adoptive family turns out to be more important than the myth of discovery suggests.

At the same time, the novel may go against a different kind of audience attitude, based more on the social stratification of the historical world than on drama and fairy tale. One of the main impulses of the novel has been an attack on stigma.<sup>7</sup> Many eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novels dramatize the adoptee's struggle against stigma, most often the stigma of illegitimacy but sometimes simply the stigma of being a poor dependent, not a birth child of the family. Frequently, minor characters articulate prejudices against the adoptee (or the future adoptee). Sometimes the narrator, or another character, explicitly argues against those prejudices. Usually the prejudiced characters are caricatures who are clearly undercut. *Tom Jones* and *Oliver Twist* fight

back against this stigma—very literally. Most female adoptees, such as Esther Summerson, Evelina, and Fanny Price, respond to prejudice by trying very hard to be good. The one female adoptee who initially follows the male pattern is Jane Eyre, who fights back against the attacks from her cousins and her Aunt Reed. The one male adoptee who follows the female pattern is Daniel Deronda, as we will see in the next chapter.

In *Tom Jones* and *Oliver Twist* explicitly and in some other novels less explicitly, adoption plots are occasions for novelists to explore questions about human nature: Are people basically good? How much of character is heredity, how much is environment, how much is a matter of the individual? Dickens's narrator argues with philosophers, and Fielding's characters, especially the tutors Thwackum and Square, stage philosophical arguments in which both the conservative Thwackum and the Enlightenment-oriented Square are wrong because they both neglect "natural goodness of heart."<sup>8</sup> The word *nature* and its derivatives are threaded through the fabric of these novels. Evelina, for example, says of her relationship with her birth father, "Must I now be deaf to the voice of Nature if I could endure to be abandoned without regret?"<sup>9</sup> Esther's reunion with her mother in *Bleak House* involves "the only natural moments of her [birth mother's] life."<sup>10</sup> In both of these examples, as often in Shakespeare, nature refers to an inevitable emotional impact of biological relationships. This view, as also in Shakespeare, can be expressed in negative terms, as when Brownlow in *Oliver Twist* calls Oliver's legitimately born half-brother "unnatural" (332) because of his behavior.<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, *nature* can be deliberately revised to refer to nongenetic relationships. Estella refers to "my nature; the nature formed within me"<sup>12</sup> in analyzing the influence on her of her adoptive mother, Miss Havisham.

### *Tom Jones* and *Oliver Twist*: The Stigmatized Boy and Human Nature

*Tom Jones*, written in 1749 soon after the establishment of the Foundling Hospital in London by Sir Thomas Coram in 1739, is very much involved in attacking the stigma on bastardy, which was one of the main reasons for the abandonment of foundlings and the controversy about care of them. The rich and generous Squire Allworthy finds

an infant in his bed and decides to raise him (this is referred to as adoption on pp. 116, 355, and 774). The family assumes that he is the child of a woman who recently worked in his household as a nurse and a schoolmaster whose servant she had been. Allworthy defends Tom against the prejudices of Mrs. Wilkins, his maid, who says that “it is, perhaps, better for such creatures to die in a state of innocence, than to grow up and imitate their mothers, for nothing better can be expected of them” (35); against the attacks of his sister Bridget’s husband, who quotes the Bible and the legal term “children of nobody” (70); and against the attacks by Bridget’s son, Blifil, who picks fights with Tom, calling him such names as “beggarly bastard” (112). When Tom falls in love with Sophia, her prejudiced parents oppose the match and design her for Blifil.

While Tom womanizes with many others as well and gets himself thrown out of the Allworthy house, throughout he is characterized as a man of good nature and generosity. He talks Allworthy and a constable out of sending Molly Seagrim to the workhouse because of her pregnancy; Tom takes the blame for their affair, though Fielding presents Molly as his determined seducer (151, 166). He persuades another man to marry a poor young woman he has made pregnant. This good deed is directly contrasted with his companion’s casual woman-blaming: “She was a little hungry, it seems, and so sat down to dinner before grace was said, and so there is a child coming for the Foundling Hospital.” Tom retorts, “Prithee, leave thy stupid jesting. Is the misery of these poor wretches a subject of mirth?” (667).

After a brief scare suggesting that he might have unknowingly slept with his mother, the end of the novel reveals that Tom is actually the now dead Bridget’s son from a premarital affair. Learning this, and other information about Tom’s love of him and the deception of others, Allworthy is reconciled to Tom, who at the end of the novel is happily married to Sophia.

Illegitimacy is a key issue in this as in several other novels I discuss in this chapter. Since the solution to the plot comes from a letter from a deceased woman, Fielding could have made it contain the information that Bridget and her lover had been secretly married, but he did not choose to do so.<sup>13</sup> Tom is presented as a kind of case study of the unfairness of the stigma of bastardy, since the characters who maintain that stigma are so ridiculous and ill-willed. Tom’s promiscuity is often mingled with affection and concern for the women involved; he is fre-

quently presented as submitting to their seductions, which are understandable since he is so handsome and charming. The defense of bastardy here is in many ways an attack on what is considered cold and prudish moralism. The characters' language usually generalizes so much that it is clear Fielding aims not just to defend Tom but also to comment on a social issue.

How foundlings and illegitimate children should be treated was a topical question at the time *Tom Jones* was published. Fielding's friend Hogarth was a strong supporter of the Foundling Hospital and encouraged his artist friends to donate paintings to the hospital, which became, in effect, London's first art gallery.<sup>14</sup> From 1747 on, visitors came to observe the children and the paintings at the same time. Fielding, a London judge as well as a novelist, was proud of such British philanthropy, and the defense of Tom can be seen as an intervention against those who believed that the Foundling Hospital encouraged immorality. Nevertheless it is not clear that the novel is consistent about the treatment of foundlings without upper-class ancestry. We never hear about what happened to Molly Seagrim's child, after she is saved from Bridewell and goes back to her family, although we hear that another man might have been the father. Should we assume that it was cared for in her family?<sup>15</sup>

The treatment of women in this novel is troubling in ways that made it a strange choice for a sophomore survey at a woman's college in 1962, just before feminist criticism. Tom is without an adoptive mother, so that Allworthy can appear in more patriarchal preeminence. Tom's (unacknowledged) mother Bridget is made fun of at the beginning because she is apparently an "old maid" over thirty (one of the reasons, presumably, for the use of her first name in the twentieth-century British novel *Bridget Jones's Diary*, by a more recent Fielding, Helen). She dies offstage of the gout, while the most sympathetic characters of the novel, including Tom, are concerned, instead, about Allworthy's severe illness. No one ever suggests, after the secret is disclosed or before, that Tom looks like her or has anything in common with her. As van Boheemen says, her "dissembling hypocrisy is the origin of all Tom's troubles," but these crimes are punished more obviously in her also dissembling son Blifil than in her; the novel avoids focusing on her.<sup>16</sup> As for the minor female characters, Fielding enjoys making them ridiculous in fighting with each other or some other way. So many women are ridiculed here that the ridicule may be defensive;

van Boheemen may well be right in saying that the feminine is fearsome to Fielding.<sup>17</sup>

Heredity in general is given surprisingly little emphasis in *Tom Jones*. Near the end, Allworthy finally discovers that Tom's genetic father was a young man named Summer, who had formerly lived in his house: "a finer man, I must say, the sun never shone upon; for, besides the handsomest person I ever saw, he was so genteel, and had so much wit and breeding" (831). Before dying of smallpox, this man, whom Allworthy had treated as a son and who was himself the son of an admired friend, a clergyman, had begotten Tom. The reader can certainly infer that Tom has inherited Summer's looks and wit, but no one ever comments on this; Tom is told about his heredity offstage, so to speak, and we never hear him display interest in his genetic father. The main effect of this revelation is that it solidifies Tom's relationship with Allworthy, who now names him his heir; this new status removes Squire Western's opposition to Tom's marriage with Sophia. In all likelihood, as John Sutherland has shown, Summer—whose name was frequently given to illegitimate children because many were conceived at summer festivals—was having an affair with Bridget Allworthy and Jenny Jones at the same time, in an anticipation of Tom's own promiscuity, but like other aspects of his resemblance to Summer, this is not made explicit.<sup>18</sup> In the penultimate paragraph of the novel, Fielding emphasizes nurture over nature: "Whatever in the nature of Jones had a tendency to vice has been corrected by continual conversation with this good man, and by his union with the lovely and virtuous Sophia" (870).

One character in the novel does imply a strong negative influence of heredity on Tom, but this man is so lacking in credibility that he is simply referred to as "the pettifogger" (375), and his story about Tom is one that readers know to be false: "he's the bastard of a fellow who was hanged for horse-stealing. He was dropped at Squire Allworthy's door, where one of the servants found him in a box so full of rain-water, that he would certainly have been drowned, had he not been reserved for another fate."

Another passage of the novel emphasizes further that Fielding is more interested in the paternity of the mind than of the body: he develops at great length the image of the author as father of his book—"the care, the fondness, with which the tender father nourishes his favourite, till it be brought to maturity, and produced into the world" (494)—and he praises such "paternal fondness" for its distance from "absolute

instinct” and closeness to “worldly wisdom.” This attitude is in keeping with the sensibility of his time. In the early and middle eighteenth century, under the influence of John Locke and the Enlightenment, authors were more likely to view the child as a tabula rasa and emphasize the importance of education; hence the adoptive parents’ potential for developing the child was great. Later on there would be more focus on the child’s own feelings and insight, as well as the child’s own distinctive inborn hereditary tendencies.<sup>19</sup>

Charles Dickens, who will be the dominant figure in this chapter, was influential in developing the nineteenth century’s view of childhood; his novels are full of orphaned or partly orphaned children, with critique of their treatment by society and surrogate parents a major emphasis. Dickens’s commitment to arousing his readers to more sympathy with mistreated children seems to have developed from his sense of injustice at the hard labor in a blacking factory that he did as a child of twelve, because of his family’s poverty.<sup>20</sup> Like Fielding, who titled his novel *The History of Tom Jones, a Foundling*, Charles Dickens gave his first novel of childhood, published in 1837, a subtitle indicating that he is describing an exemplary case: *Oliver Twist: The Parish Boy’s Progress*. In the third edition, Dickens explicitly indicates his debt to Fielding, and aligns himself with Fielding particularly in an interest in portraying nature: “It is Nature for all that” (lxi). In both books the protagonist is repeatedly attacked for his illegitimacy and fights back; in both he is emphatically good at heart but sometimes (in different ways) is confused into going astray; in both he is fostered by a kindly man with more links than he knows with the child’s birth family, who formalizes the relationship at the end of the book.

Furthermore, if Fielding’s subtitle and his friendship with Hogarth underlines the likelihood that his first audience read *Tom Jones* partly in relation to the controversy over the Foundling Hospital, there is also external evidence of Dickens’s interest in the condition of such displaced children, and an internal pointer to the same institution.<sup>21</sup> Dickens subscribed funds to the Foundling Hospital while writing *Oliver Twist*: furthermore, the name he gave to Oliver’s benevolent patron, John Brownlow, was the name of the Hospital’s secretary, who had recently (1831) published *Hans Sloane, a Tale Illustrating the History of the Foundling Hospital in London*, and was to publish a history of the hospital that went into at least four editions.<sup>22</sup> However, there are con-

trasts between the novels, some of which point to changes between eighteenth-century and Victorian culture.

In Dickens's novel, at the beginning we see Oliver's birth in poverty and his time in a workhouse. Escaping from the workhouse, he falls into the parody family of the head thief Fagin. Mr. Brownlow, to whose house he is sent to steal, believes in Oliver's goodness at heart and realizes that he looks much like the deceased daughter of a friend. When Oliver goes on an errand for him, Fagin catches him again. Oliver escapes Fagin and is cared for by Rose, who has turned down her would-be fiancé because she thinks her illegitimate birth would ruin his political career. Near the end of the novel, we learn that Fagin's plot to use Oliver was assisted by Oliver's half-brother, known as Monks, in order to get the larger inheritance he is entitled to if Oliver has "stained his name" (351). As Oliver, still good, returns to Mr. Brownlow, it is revealed that Oliver's mother was indeed his friend's daughter, and also Rose's sister. Not only is Oliver vindicated in his final fostering by Mr. Brownlow, but also Rose can marry the man she loves because he decides to give up his political hopes to avoid the obstacle to his marriage.

In his preface to the third edition, Dickens said, "I wished to shew, in little Oliver, the principle of Good surviving through every adverse circumstance, and triumphing at last" (lxi). On one hand, as Catherine Waters says, this "involves a critique of nineteenth-century political and economic theories concerning socially determined development."<sup>23</sup> On the other hand, Dickens also emphasizes, much more than Fielding, the miseries of the poor, the workhouse orphan, and worst of all, the child who is not only a poor workhouse orphan, but also illegitimate. Oliver is looked down on by everyone from the charity-boy Noah, who can look down on few other people, to the workhouse manager, Mr. Bumble, who looks down on many. And the attacks on Oliver are more likely than in Fielding to include attacks on his mother and to make an explicit attack on his heredity. Noah calls Oliver's mother, about whom he knows nothing, "a regular right-down bad un" (36), and Mr. Bumble says, turning against her the persistence for which the reader would be inclined to praise her, "that mother of his made her way here, against difficulties and pain that would have killed any well-disposed woman weeks before" (41) and later refers to him as "born of low and vicious parents." Like Tom, Oliver fights back at insults, but the effect is

slightly different because he is more explicitly defending an insult to his mother and not just to himself. Doubling the treatment of prejudice against illegitimacy, Dickens near the end shows how Monks's mother tried to destroy Rose: she told her first foster parents "the history of the sister's shame, with such alterations as suited her; bade them take good heed of the child, for she came of bad blood; and told them she was illegitimate, and sure to go wrong at one time or other" (355).

Dickens, countering the social prejudice against illegitimacy, makes this child born out of wedlock more moral than any of the other children in the novel: "nature or inheritance had implanted a good sturdy spirit in Oliver's breast" (5). As Goldie Morgentaler argues, Dickens suggests his goodness is inherited from his parents because of the combination of their middle-class background and their love. Because his parents loved each other, Oliver has been "shielded by the grace of his heredity," unlike his half-brother, Monks, who is the product of a marriage that is legal but loveless. Dickens is here using the Victorian belief that "such matters as the state of mind of the parents and the degree of their affection at the time of conception had a bearing on the personality of the engendered child," a belief that goes back to views held in the Renaissance and before about the impact of the circumstances of conception.<sup>24</sup>

The strong emphasis on the physical resemblance between Oliver and his mother is another contrast to the situation in *Tom Jones*. Dickens uses the portrait in Mr. Brownlow's house to dramatize this; thus Oliver can see his mother's picture and respond to it without understanding the nature of his response. We are told that he looks at it with "awe" (71), but we never know if he thinks about his own similarity to the painting.<sup>25</sup> As Michael Ragussis has pointed out, Mr. Brownlow's relationship with Oliver, at the conclusion, stresses Oliver's connections with his dead relatives: Brownlow "traced in him new traits of his early friend, that awakened in his own bosom old remembrances, melancholy and yet sweet and soothing."<sup>26</sup> George Eliot will use a similar theme of memory in portraying Silas Marner as reminded of his sister when caring for little Eppie. She will also develop further the theme of the adoptive father nurturing the child in nature, and show more hands-on care in Silas.<sup>27</sup>

As Morgentaler writes, the strong resemblance between Oliver and both of his parents may go beyond probability, but it reflects the current theory of "blended heredity. . . . Each parent was thought to pass on all

of his or her characteristics through the blood, and the resulting child was therefore a blend of the two endowments.”<sup>28</sup> Mendel would not publish his findings until 1866, and even then was widely ignored; the complex interaction of recessive and dominant characteristics was not widely known. Dickens’s repeated emphasis on strong parent-child physical similarity repeats a theme that, as the previous chapter has shown, was frequent in Shakespeare, a writer Dickens loved and paid tribute to in many different ways.<sup>29</sup> While physical similarities of parents and children had been commented on occasionally since at least the time of Sophocles, Dickens’s stress on this theme both influenced and epitomized Victorian sentimentality about the family.

Tom Jones’s loss of his mother through her pretense enables comic plotting, and her death takes place offstage; in *Oliver Twist*, by contrast, as Carolyn Dever notes, maternal loss is not just a structural device but a psychological phenomenon, and we find the “complete articulation of the psychologized, sentimentalized plot of the dead mother.”<sup>30</sup>

### *Bleak House*, *Jane Eyre*, and the Tradition of Good Adopted Girls

Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British novels fight against stigma on female adoptees in two different ways. *Bleak House*, *Evelina*, and *Mansfield Park*, for example, emphasize the female protagonist’s goodness and gratitude to her adoptive father, and show the inadequacy and even destructiveness of most of the living maternal figures. In *Jane Eyre*, on the other hand, the protagonist fights back much like Oliver and Tom; Mrs. Reed’s cruelty doesn’t suppress her emotionally, and instead of a beneficent adopted father there are a number of helpful substitute mothers and sisters. Jane finds literal and spiritual kin in her cousins Diana and Mary, and kinship imagery is used metaphorically to make her relationship with Rochester seem like another version of the discovery of a lost family.

In *Jane Eyre* (1848), Charlotte Brontë effectively gives a first-person voice of protest to a child who mourns a lost family and is mistreated by her guardians. After the death of her parents and the uncle who adopted her, Jane is an outsider in her aunt’s family. She feels “like nobody there, . . . a heterogeneous thing . . . an interloper not of her [aunt’s]

race, . . . an uncongenial alien.”<sup>31</sup> Her cousin John attacks her specifically on the basis of her poverty, and as the novel begins, she fights back for the first time, acting, she thinks, “like any other rebel slave” and, others think, “like a mad cat” (6). Without an Allworthy to defend her, she is sent away to Lowood school, another place where she is considered, by the schoolmaster Brocklehurst, “not a member of the true flock, but evidently an interloper and an alien” (61). Here, at last, she finds a kind role model in a teacher, Miss Temple, whose career she later follows; since Temple was a name common among foundlings who had been left at the Temple Court, Miss Temple might have had experiences similar to Jane’s. After Miss Temple marries and leaves the school, Jane takes a position as a governess at Thornfield, in which she is once again in an ambiguous position in relation to a household, the unconventional one of Mr. Rochester, his ward Adele, and his housekeeper Mrs. Fairfax—once again an outsider on the inside, left out of the secret all the other adults know, never sure how close to Rochester she really is. While in the bad days of her relationship she worries that she is just an employee, on the good days she uses the language of kinship. “I felt at times as if he were my relation, rather than my master. . . . I ceased to pine after kindred” (142). “I feel akin to him. . . . I have something in my brain and heart, in my blood and nerves, that assimilates me mentally to him” (171). This language of kinship is not just Jane’s. Rochester too, in testing her feelings, asks, “Are you anything akin to me?” (250). Nevertheless, when she finds him offensive, she tells him off, as she tells off his condescending rich associates, and when his marriage is revealed and he invites her to live with him anyway, her morality joins with her fear of being a powerless dependent and produces a vision in which another kind of kinship wins out: the moon becomes her foster mother, or takes on her deceased mother’s spirit, and says to her, “My daughter, flee temptation” (320). She leaves.

This choice precipitates the part of the novel that uses the folklore plot of discovery of lost kindred most literally—when Jane finds a place to stay, her unknown and unrecognized benefactors ultimately turn out to be her cousins—and, unlike the Reed cousins at the beginning of the novel, the Rivers cousins, at least the women, are congenial to Jane. With Diana and Mary she feels absolute compatibility; St. John is idealistic like her, but much colder. Under pressure from him to marry her and accompany him as a missionary to India, Jane leaves to find out Rochester’s situation.

As most readers will remember, she finds his first wife dead and him blind, maimed, reformed, and still in love with her, and she marries him. But what readers may not remember is that her final words about their relationship complete the kinship theme. When she claims to be “flesh of his flesh and bone of his bone” (455), she is not just alluding to the relationship of Adam and Eve in language repeated in traditional Christian marriage ceremonies; her words also recall the story of Eve’s “birth” from Adam’s side; the use of this image by a character for whom kinship and its lack or presence has been so important is overdetermined. Metaphorically, Jane has found her true kin in Rochester.

Brontë treats loss of parents in several of her other novels. In *Shirley*, Caroline believes that her mother is dead; actually, her new friend, Mrs. Pryor, turns out to be her mother. And in *Villette*, Lucy’s parents are dead and she receives some maternal care from her godmother. It is easy to connect this theme with Brontë’s own life, given the early death of her own mother and the impact in her youth of her housekeeper and her aunt. But *Jane Eyre* clearly touched a chord in its society that still resonates today.

Jane was a new kind of heroine, one of the few assertive displaced girls in Victorian fiction, and indeed one of the most assertive heroines of any family configuration. But her status as an assertive adoptee is particularly striking because of its contrast to the other kind of female adoptees, who are defined chiefly by their gratitude. For example, in Frances Burney’s *Evelina*, the title character, whose mother died in childbirth, has been raised by her mother’s tutor, Mr. Villars, while her birth father refuses to acknowledge her. The novel is told in letters, and here is an example of the way she writes her adoptive father: “Surely never had orphan so little to regret as your grateful Evelina! Though motherless, though worse than fatherless, bereft from infancy of the two first and greatest blessings of life, never has she had cause to deplore their loss; never has she felt the omission of a parent’s tenderness, care, or indulgence” (259). She experiences stigma, though in a milder form than Tom, Oliver, or Jane, in the insensitivity of “polite society,” but instead of fighting back against it, she writes about it in her letters, and, at best, leaves the room.

Similarly, in Jane Austen’s *Mansfield Park*, Fanny Price, adopted at ten by her richer aunt and uncle, lacks self-confidence and is grateful for very small gestures. Like Evelina, she experiences insensitivity rather than hostile attacks, and also like Evelina, she does little to defend her-

self; she doesn't even have the solace of letters. Austen gives a psychological analysis of Fanny's shyness, pointing out that in her adoptive household Fanny loses the importance formerly felt to her brothers and sisters.

A few years after *Jane Eyre*, Dickens created another self-sacrificing adoptee heroine, Esther Summerson of *Bleak House*, on whom this section of the chapter will focus because of the novel's psychological treatment of Esther, her relationship with her birth mother, and her pronounced contrast with Jane. Esther is raised by a stern "godmother," her aunt Barbary, who emphasizes the disgrace of her birth and conceals the child's survival from her mother; upon Barbary's death she is sent to school for six years and then hired by Mr. Jarndyce to be companion to the orphan Ada, one of the potential heirs involved in the enormous long-running lawsuit Jarndyce versus Jarndyce. Jarndyce, her "protector, guardian, friend" (144), eventually tells her about his letter from her aunt, criticizing the "distorted religion which clouded her mind with impressions of the need there was for the child to expiate an offence of which she was quite innocent" (289). In church she sees Lady Dedlock, whose face is for some reason "like a broken glass to me, in which I saw scraps of old remembrances" (305). Lady Dedlock realizes that Esther is the daughter she thought was dead, and they have one brief intense meeting in which the mother asks forgiveness and announces that she will keep their relationship secret and they will never meet again. Esther tells Mr. Jarndyce the story, and he proposes marriage to her, which makes her feel both gratitude and loss. Meanwhile, Esther's birth father has died in poverty after working as a scrivener under the name of Nemo; evidence is discovered linking his handwriting to that in love letters to Lady Dedlock, who flees to his grave, where she is discovered dead. Eventually Jarndyce gives up his claim to an engagement because he realizes that Esther really loves a young doctor, Allan Woodcourt, whom she marries near the end of the novel.

Like *Oliver Twist*, *Bleak House* is among other things a protest against attaching a stigma to illegitimacy.<sup>32</sup> Here the protest extends further to the accompanying coverups that separate birth relatives from each other. *Oliver Twist* focused, to a large extent, on physical hardships of an illegitimate boy; *Bleak House*, looking at the experience of a girl born out of wedlock turning into a woman, and using the first per-

son, focuses more on psychological hardships. The beginning of Esther's story gives a detailed picture of one version of bad adoptive parenting:

She was always grave and strict. . . . I felt so different from her, even making every allowance for the differences between a child and a woman; I felt so poor, so trifling, and so far off; that I never could be unrestrained with her. . . . I had never heard my mama spoken of. (63)

In a theme often found in adopted children even today, her birthday is a focus of stress, "the most melancholy day at home, in the whole year" (64). Like *Jane Eyre*—from whose novel Dickens quite likely learned something about presenting a first-person narrative of a displaced girl—she feels different not only from her aunt but also from her peers: "Why am I so different from other children, and why is it my fault?" (65).<sup>33</sup>

Esther's "godmother" explicitly voices the stigma that hangs particularly over Esther as a female because of the sexual double standard: "It would have been far better, little Esther, that you had had no birthday; that you had never been born! . . . Your mother, Esther, is your disgrace, and you were hers. The time will come—and soon enough—when you will understand this better, and will feel it too, as no one save a woman can." But she heightens the stigma by speaking as if Esther were the only child born out of wedlock in her society. "You are different from other children, Esther, because you were not born, like them, in common sinfulness and wrath. You are set apart" (65).

Unlike Tom or Oliver, or indeed Jane, Esther does not respond violently to such an attack. She has other ways of coping. She invests her doll with personality so that she will have some kind of companionship, and tells her everything.<sup>34</sup> Her aunt gives her a moral lesson: "Submission, self-denial, diligent work, are the preparations for a life begun with such a shadow on it" (65). She takes her aunt's lesson to heart, and even claims to be "fervently grateful to her" (66). Is Dickens thus trying to make Esther more acceptable to Victorian readers who complained that Jane was insufficiently grateful?<sup>35</sup> Esther's further words make clear that though she is influenced by her aunt, she also protests against her attitude: "I confusedly felt guilty and yet innocent." Unlike her

aunt, she understands the importance of love and kindness; she “would strive as I grew up to be industrious, contented, and kind-hearted, and to do some good to some one, and win some love to myself if I could.”

Esther thus fits much more into Victorian ideals of womanhood than Jane does. Although important traces of it remain, Brontë broke out of the Victorian gender schema in much of her novel. This is one of the reasons that post-Victorian readers have generally enjoyed Jane more. Consider, for example, the dominance of *Jane Eyre* in the interpretation of women writers presented in the pioneering feminist study *The Madwoman in the Attic*; the number of different movies made of *Jane Eyre* by contrast to only one recent filming (for the Arts and Entertainment channel) of *Bleak House*; the special session at the 2002 Modern Language Association meetings under the title “I’m Still Here: The Persistence of *Jane Eyre*,” about the novel’s continuing cultural presence; and the number of other novels in which characters remember reading it.<sup>36</sup> Both of the girls go away to school, and feel less alone; Esther enjoys “seeing in those around me, as it might be in a looking-glass, every stage of my own growth and change there” (74). Both young women become teachers in their school. But while Brontë uses this section to dramatize Jane’s further struggle against injustice, and the conflict between her attitude and Helen Burns’s self-sacrifice and nonviolence, Esther is already a model of sympathy. Though she is still different—the only student in the school who helps instruct the others, because of the understanding that she would have to earn her living as a governess—this does not bother her because she now receives love: “in course of time I had plenty to do, which I was very fond of doing, because it made the dear girls fond of me. . . . At last, whenever a new pupil came who was a little downcast and unhappy, she was so sure—indeed I don’t know why—to make a friend of me, that all new-comers were confided to my care” (73). While both leave the school to become companions to younger girls, Jane takes the risk of advertising, and Esther’s new position is provided for her. Jane is charmed by Adele, Rochester’s ward, but emphasizes that the child is not angelic and that she herself is sometimes bored; Esther, by contrast, virtually (and virtuously) falls in love with Ada: “such a beautiful girl . . . in a few moments we were sitting in the window-seat, with the light of the fire upon us, talking together, as free and happy as could be . . . my darling—it is so natural to me now, that I can’t help writing it” (77–78).

Recent critics have often commented on the rhetoric of modesty in

Esther's narrative, and her announced discomfort: "It seems so curious to me to be obliged to write all this about myself!" (73–74). She praises other people for accomplishments that we infer are largely hers, and is grateful to everyone. She says of the other children, "They said I was so gentle; but I am sure they were" (73), and of Ada, "It was so delightful to know that she could confide in me, and like me! It was so good of her, and so encouraging to me!" All these passages make her fit into the Victorian ideal of how girls and women ought to speak.<sup>37</sup> But at the same time, Dickens writes this character somewhat in Jane Austen's mode in *Mansfield Park*, emphasizing that her upbringing contributes to this modesty. Very close to the introduction of Esther's narrative, she points this effect out to the reader: "This"—her sense of distance from her godmother—"made me, I dare say, more timid and retiring than I naturally was" (63). Austen repeatedly emphasizes Fanny's sense of being important to no one; Esther knows that she "was to no one upon earth what Dolly was to me" (65) and explicitly links this lack with her hope to win love by her good works. She reminds us of this psychology, and the way in which her feelings of embarrassment at her appearance after her disease are also overdetermined, again when ambivalent feelings emerge at the thought of marrying Mr. Jarndyce: "how often had I considered within myself that the deep traces of my illness, and the circumstances of my birth, were only new reasons why I should be busy, busy, busy—useful, amiable, serviceable, in all honest, unpretending ways" (668).

As in other novels, the stigma of birth recurs with regard to Esther's marriage possibilities. Evelina's marriage to Lord Orville seems to be threatened by his sister, a "Court Calendar Bigot." Esther, with her usual modesty, is puzzled by the obsession with birth and ancestry that emerges in Mrs. Woodcourt, the mother of her friend Allan; she "talked so much about birth, that, for a moment, I half fancied, and with pain—but, what an idle fancy to suppose that she could think or care what *mine* was" (292).

Like many adoptees, Esther has several names. *Esther* comes from the orphaned girl who names a book of the Bible, who is adopted by her cousin Mordecai. Summerson is identified as a fiction, but has a number of dimensions. The novel explicitly identifies it with Esther's provisions of warmth and sunshine for others;<sup>38</sup> yet it is associated with the foundling tradition; it echoes Tom Jones's birth father's name Summer, and similarly recalls the conception of foundlings during summer festi-

vals. Her aunt had written to Mr. Jarndyce that “if the writer were to die before the child became a woman, she would be left entirely friendless, nameless, and unknown” (289); Esther says that in the many nicknames that he gives her—“Old Woman, and Little Old Woman, and Cobweb, and Mrs. Shipton, and Mother Hubbard, and Dame Durden . . . my own name soon became quite lost” (148). While arguably these names are intended as affectionate compensations for her early lack of love, they also serve as a denial of her youth and, given Victorian assumptions, of her sexuality. They also fit with the side of Jarndyce that wants to marry her himself instead of freeing her for a livelier union.<sup>39</sup>

Her birth parents are presented as figures who really have lost their names: her birth father, once called Hawdon, is now known as Nemo, which means “No One,” and fits, as the novel develops, with the legal term identifying an illegitimate son as *filius nullius*, Latin for son of no one.<sup>40</sup> Her mother has lost her first name, being identified only as Lady Dedlock throughout the novel, except in one reference to the appearance of the name Honoria in her correspondence with Hawdon, mockingly made by Mr. Swallowweed (787).

Lady Dedlock, this detail reinforces, has lost her honor, but what the novel emphasizes even more is that she has lost her nature in denying her relationship with Hawdon and Esther.<sup>41</sup> On the first page in which she is introduced in the novel, she is identified as “Lady Dedlock (who is childless)” and described as “put quite out of temper” by seeing a poor family, “a child, chased by a woman, running out into the rain to meet the shining figure of a wrapped-up man coming through the gate” (56). The first-time reader does not know why this picture should bother Lady Dedlock, but retrospectively the pain produced by her secrecy and self-repression becomes clear. When she finally acknowledges herself to Esther, their conversation involves “the only natural moments of her life” (566; the indirect discourse makes ambiguous the source of this judgment, whether Esther or her mother, but presumably they agree on it). When her housekeeper pleads for her to help her son, accused of murder, we are told “she is not a hard lady naturally . . . but so long accustomed to suppress emotion, and keep down reality; so long schooled for her own purposes, in that destructive school which shuts up the natural feelings of the heart” (812).

More than any other novel discussed here, *Bleak House* develops the feelings between a mother and a daughter separated at birth as they see

each other without clear understanding and move toward acknowledgment. We see this from Esther's point of view; interestingly, though Esther has often mentioned her sense of being different from others, when she finally sees someone who looks like her, she takes a long time to mention that resemblance, as if the idea is too new, or suggesting possibilities too epochal, to admit. It is Lady Dedlock's look at her, not her looks, that she discusses: "Shall I ever forget the manner in which those handsome proud eyes seemed to spring out of their languour, and to hold mine!" (304). Yet the image of mirroring occurs, even if displaced: her face seems, mysteriously, "like a broken glass to me, in which I saw scraps of old remembrances" (305). Seeing Lady Dedlock's face in church, Esther hears the prayers uttered in her godmother's voice, and sees herself as a child, but she does not understand why. Why does Dickens insist on this lack of recognition, though other characters such as Guppy and Jo see their similarity or confuse the two? Partly to create suspense, but partly also to dramatize the distance from nature society has created in both of these characters: Esther is shy and wouldn't dare to presume this connection for herself; Lady Dedlock is reserved because of pride. Class difference, social custom, and the shame that Victorian society attributes to their true connection, if out of wedlock, keeps them apart. Consistent with this theme of social obstacles to relationship, the language that Esther uses is often similar to the language traditionally used by the secret romantic lover, much as in Petrarchan poetry: "I do not quite know, even now, whether it was painful or pleasurable; whether it drew me towards her or made me shrink from her. I think I admired her with a kind of fear. . . . I had a fancy . . . that what this lady so curiously was to me, I was to her—I mean that I disturbed her thoughts as she influenced mine . . . but when I stole a glance at her, and saw her so composed and distant and unapproachable, I felt this to be a foolish weakness" (372). The sentiment in this passage, when Esther sees Lady Dedlock in church, is remarkably similar to the sentiment in the passage in *Middlemarch* where Will sees Dorothea in church; Petrarch's first sight of Laura, the legendary genesis of Petrarchan love poetry, was traditionally in the same place.

Esther never admits that she sees a similarity to herself in Lady Dedlock until after Lady Dedlock reveals herself as her mother—and the way she phrases the similarity is by emphasizing its loss; having been badly marked by smallpox, she feels "gratitude to the providence of God that I was so changed as that I never could disgrace her by any

trace of likeness; as that nobody could ever now look at me, and look at her, and remotely think of any near tie between us" (565). It is just after this thought that she first in the narration calls Lady Dedlock her mother. When she first sees Lady Dedlock at this accidental meeting, a new phase in their relationship is marked by a change in her mother's face that Esther does not want to name: "a something in her face that I had pined for and dreamed of when I was a little child; something I had never seen in any face; something I had never seen in hers before." This something, most likely, is the sign of the emotion that Esther thinks of as motherliness; it is appropriate to her inhibitions that Esther cannot name it yet. It is Esther's disease that has invited this greater concern for her in Lady Dedlock; but what leads to Esther's recognition that this is going to be their moment of acknowledgment is the token of Lady Dedlock's own interest in Esther, the handkerchief that Esther had used to cover a dead baby in what might be considered her own gesture of motherliness.

Esther wants to stand with her mother against the world, but her mother refuses. The emotional mood of their reunion gives the reader the feeling that they should be together, as they would be if they were in a plot like that of Shakespeare's *Winter's Tale* or *Pericles*. Lady Dedlock insists that she must keep her secret and not see Esther again; the plot as well as the language suggests that this is an unnatural choice. Parallel to Esther and her mother the novel places George and his mother, Mrs. Rouncewell. While they have been apart since, as a young man, George decided he wasn't good enough for his family, Mrs. Bagnet, the novel's representative of the good middle-class mother, reunites them when George is in prison. Unlike George, Esther cannot publicly take her place beside her mother.

The meeting of Esther and Lady Dedlock is one of the places where the Victorian novel seems to speak directly to the recent debate about open adoption records. Lady Dedlock is the birth mother evoked by the closed-record side, who feels that her life would be ruined if her past became visible, except that Dickens frames her position to make the reader feel the tragedy of this insistence. Some might feel that in her society such secrecy is painfully necessary, but for others this shows another cost of stigmatizing illegitimacy and dramatizes the wrong-headedness of those who would like to return to Victorian values.

Once again, the novel does not give Esther a choice about what to do.<sup>42</sup> The relationship must be a secret, except that she is allowed to tell

Mr. Jarndyce. The meeting sends her into the closest thing to despair; but after receiving letters from Ada and Jarndyce, she is cheered, and Ada takes on a maternal role for her at this point.<sup>43</sup>

Unlike the similarity between Evelina and her mother, the similarity between Esther and hers is only one of appearance, not one of temperament. Part of the point of the novel, indeed, is how environmental influences have affected both of their temperaments as well as keeping them apart.<sup>44</sup> Dickens uses the plot of their separation and temporary reunion to a large extent as a social commentary: "What connexion can there be, between the place in Lincolnshire, the house in town, the Mercury in powder, and the whereabouts [*sic*] of Jo the outlaw with the broom, who had that distant ray of light upon him when he swept the churchyard-step? What connexion can there have been between many people in the innumerable histories of this world, who, from opposite sides of great gulfs, have, nevertheless, been very curiously brought together!" (272). This commentary is comparable to Austen's emphasis on the sadness of the contrast and alienation of Fanny's poor mother from the richer aunt who adopts her in *Mansfield Park*; the gap between the rich and the poor in her society had divided them so much that "the ties of blood were little more than nothing."<sup>45</sup> But since Victorian society felt particularly strongly about the intense bond of motherhood, to show that connection broken and made unconscious was a particularly strong social protest, here as, in a different way and country, in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

Dickens surrounds the plot of this broken family not only with the reconstitution of the blood-related Rouncewells but also with various other domestic arrangements in which the bereaved and orphans bond together. Jenny, the poor woman with whom Lady Dedlock changes clothes in her final flight, lost, early in the novel, the child whose corpse Esther covers with her handkerchief. She helps to take care of her friend Liz's child and says, "It's my dead child . . . that makes me love this child so dear, and it's my dead child that makes her love it so dear too, as even to think of its being taken away from her now" (367). George, who has lost touch with his family, takes care of literal orphans and encourages them to help each other out: he brings Phil and Jo together, saying, "Here is a man, sir, who was found, when a baby, in the gutter. Consequently, it is to be expected that he takes a natural interest in this poor creature" (697), and at the end, after he is reunited with his family, George still takes care of Phil. And Esther helps to take care of Ada's

son Richard, after his father has died: "I call him my Richard! but he says that he has two mammas, and I am one" (934).

Esther's gratitude to Jarndyce has much in common with Evelina's gratitude to Mr. Villars. In both cases the women often claim that because of their guardian they do not feel the stigma or desertion related to their displaced status. When Esther recalls her godmother's words about the disgrace of her mother, she says to Jarndyce that "to him I owed the blessing that I had from my childhood to that hour never, never, never felt it" (290). When she suggests that Mr. Jarndyce might be able to help her mother, she says that he has "been the best of fathers" to her (568).

But since Jarndyce's adoption of Esther is not something regulated by law (as it could not be in Victorian England), there is an ambiguity about what kind of relations they are, even more than with Evelina and Villars. The ambiguity is intensified by Esther's difficulty in understanding her own feelings—understanding, for example, her need for anything else in marriage apart from a relationship of gratitude. When she calls Jarndyce "the Guardian who is a Father to her" (291), she can see some discomfort in his face, presumably because his feelings for her are not only fatherly. When he proposes marriage to her, in the odd mode of asking her, as she says, "would I be the mistress of Bleak House" (666), she feels she must accept out of affection and gratitude. Still she feels "as if something for which there was no name or distinct idea were indefinitely lost to me" (668). Esther's reticence here can be seen as generically Victorian, yet it can also be attributed in part to the specific circumstances of her early upbringing, in which sexuality is first introduced to her by her aunt as the cause of her and her mother's disgrace.<sup>46</sup> (We will find a similar caution in Daniel Deronda's attitude about sex, for analogous reasons.) Dickens helps to make this connection when Esther thinks, a few paragraphs later, "the deep traces of my illness, and the circumstances of my birth, were only new reasons why I should be busy, busy, busy—useful, amiable, serviceable, in all honest, unpretending ways" (668).

When Allan Woodcourt proposes to her, Esther again emphasizes her gratitude to Jarndyce, "the best of human beings" (890), though she has a brief realization that she would rather marry Woodcourt. But she finally gets the marriage to Woodcourt without ever having to make a choice: Jarndyce observes her feelings about Woodcourt and not only tells her that he is releasing her from her promise to him, but gives

Woodcourt a Bleak House of his own, furnished just as Esther likes, so that she can still be “the mistress of Bleak House.” Esther continues to express her gratitude to Jarndyce till the end, yet there is still something ambiguous in their relationship. “To Ada and her pretty boy, he is the fondest father; to me, he is what he has ever been, and what name can I give to that? Yet while I feel towards him as if he were a superior being, I am so familiar with him, and so easy with him, that I almost wonder at myself” (934).

Everything seems happy in her life at the end. But at the same time, the excess of Esther’s modesty (she cannot believe that people love her for her own sake; she feels gratitude that people love her in spite of her appearance) reveals to the modern reader that she is still marked by her early upbringing, though to most Victorian readers it probably gave the final confirmation to her ideal qualities.

*Bleak House* on the one hand and *Oliver Twist* on the other show some of the gender polarities of Victorian culture. A reader could be expected to sympathize with a boy who fights back under stigma, but if a girl were to be a novel’s heroine, she would usually behave in a more self-denying way. *Jane Eyre* broke that expectation openly, but *Bleak House* and *Mansfield Park* complicate it because they show adopted girls whose habit of self-denial is not simply a virtue but also a character deformation.

## *Great Expectations*: Male and Female Adoptees

In *Great Expectations* Dickens considers a male adoptee (as I will call him because he has substitute parents, though one is his sister) brought up with stigma, and shows that he has more psychological difficulties than Oliver and Tom had; he juxtaposes him with a female adoptee who has responded to her upbringing by becoming neither a good girl like Esther nor a rebel like Jane.

The orphan Pip, cared for by his sister (roughly) and Joe Gargery the blacksmith, her husband (lovingly), helps an escaped convict, and some time after is summoned by the rich Miss Havisham to visit her house and meet her adopted daughter Estella. Pip is much impressed by the life of the rich, and scorns his relatives and his friend Biddy in his frustrated love for Estella.

More explicitly than any of the other novels discussed thus far, *Great Expectations* deals with the impact that different forms of adoption have on the adoptee's identity.<sup>47</sup> The novel juxtaposes Pip's adoptive relation to his sister, to Joe, and to the convict Magwitch, with Miss Havisham's adoptive relation to Estella, and Pip's fantasy adoption by Miss Havisham.

Although Pip was born in wedlock, his position as an orphan being raised by parents other than those he was born to makes him feel stigmatized because of his sister's treatment of him, "as if I had insisted on being born in opposition to the dictates of reason, religion, and morality, and against the dissuading arguments of my best friends" (22). He is told little or nothing about his dead parents;<sup>48</sup> his sister mocks him for going to the churchyard and complains about what a burden he has been. Even Joe says to Pip, of his earlier self, "if you could have been aware how small and flabby and mean you was, dear me, you'd have formed the most contemptible opinions of yourself!" (47). His sister's friends also emphasize his position as outsider in the family: when Mr. Pumblechook says, "be grateful, boy, to them which brought you up by hand" (24), he is referring to the same feeding by porridge that Oliver Twist endured, and Pip takes it to refer to his sister's frequent blows. Pip's relation to her is so disturbed that we never learn her name.

In response to his sister's treatment, Pip neither fights back violently like Tom and Oliver when insulted nor attempts to be supergood, as Fanny and Esther do. He knows that she is unjust, and it affects him: "Through all my punishments, disgraces, fasts and vigils, and other penitential performances, I had nursed this assurance; and to my communing so much with it, in a solitary and unprotected way, I in great part refer the fact that I was morally timid and very sensitive" (62).<sup>49</sup> He seeks refuge outside the Gargery household; in the churchyard at his dead parents' tombs he is accosted by Magwitch, and, used to obeying unreasonable threats, he gets the convict food and a file, thus preparing for Magwitch's later adoption of him.

In contrast with his wife, Joe is always kind to Pip. He may even have married her, at least partly, to help Pip. Rather than insisting on a title suggesting family authority, Joe wants Pip to consider him "ever the best of friends" (47). There is no courtesy family title for Pip to use for Joe (76). On the other hand, subordinate as Joe is to his wife, the only name she is ever given is Mrs. Joe. This family thus reverses the expectations that the blood relative will be more caring than the relative

by marriage, that a woman would be more nurturing than a husband, and that giving up a name in marriage means subordination.

Raised by a brutal father, Joe is illiterate and too protective of women to defend Pip from his sister's harshness, but he, together with another orphan, Biddy, provides Pip with enough kindness to mitigate her sternness, and encouragement to proceed with his education. The interest that Miss Havisham takes in him promotes his belief that he can get beyond his own household, which is heightened by the news that he is "adopted by a rich person" (159).

Raised by this money to education in London, Pip sees his position as adoptee as comparable to that of Miss Havisham's adopted daughter Estella, and tries to fit into the aristocracy and to distance himself from Joe. Aspiring to Estella since childhood, he hopes that he may be destined for her, and ignores Biddy.

Rather than the aristocratic Miss Havisham, however, it turns out that his benefactor is Magwitch the convict, who has made money in Australia and returned secretly. Pip is crushed by this news—instead of someone near the top of society, he owes his position to someone who would be near the bottom except for the fact that he has made money.

Magwitch and Miss Havisham are parallel figures, both of them wronged, and adopting someone else partly to make up for that wrong.<sup>50</sup> In both cases the adoption has bad effects. Miss Havisham trains Estella to look down on everyone, and Magwitch's money, with Miss Havisham's influence, enables Pip to look down on Joe and Biddy.

In the presentation of Miss Havisham's relationship to Estella, the novel gives another cautionary picture of how an ill-willed adoptive parent can deform a child. Unlike Esther's adoptive mother, Estella's focuses not on the child's inherited guilt but on how the child can be the adoptive mother's surrogate in the world, to punish the men who love her as revenge for her own jilting. Estella reproaches Miss Havisham, "I am what you have made me. Take all the praise, take all the blame; take all the success, take all the failure; in short, take me. . . I was no party to the compact . . . for if I could walk and speak, when it was made, it was as much as I could do" (308–9).

And yet the novel does not finally present Estella as irredeemable. Pip reports Estella as speaking of suffering as stronger than "all other teaching" (or than "Miss Havisham's teaching," in the original version of the ending), and helping her to "understand what [his] heart used to be" (492, 493).

What is adoption's power over Pip? The influences on him are diverse: no single person has as much influence as Miss Havisham's on Estella; his sister's harshness is mitigated by Joe and others. The novel's outcome requires not only his misery with his sister, but also Magwitch's secret gift and Pip's fantasy that it comes from Miss Havisham. Of all the novels discussed in this chapter, this novel comes closest to giving an adoptee a choice with regard to affiliation with adoptive parents, but as it turns out, all Pip can do is drop the affiliation with Magwitch by refusing his further legacy; he cannot go back to the affiliation with Joe by working on the forge and marrying his old orphan friend Bidly, as he thinks of doing.<sup>51</sup> His birth parents are long lost to him by death, and close association with Joe and Bidly is lost to him by his failure to recognize their worth sooner; the most he can do is keep up "a constant correspondence" (488) with them, while he works away at the position in the East that the education Magwitch has paid for has enabled him to reach. In the second version, when he meets Estella and believes that they are to be reunited, the ending permits him to have it both ways, giving him the woman he aspired to, now humbled and changed. She speaks of "the remembrance of what I had thrown away when I was quite ignorant of its worth" (492) in terms that could summarize his attitude toward Joe.

In the detective story unraveling of Estella's heredity, this novel adds to the parallel with Pip because in both cases the original parents are unrecoverable. Estella is the child of the lawyer Jaggers's servant Molly, whom he has successfully defended against the charge of murder, and of Magwitch. Pip gradually discovers the connection between Molly and Estella by noticing the similarity in their hands and eyes. One effect of these connections is to emphasize to Pip the links between people of different classes that he had thought so separated. As in *Bleak House*, Dickens uses adoption to show how people of different parts of society are bound together in ways rarely visible. He emphasizes this theme by presenting Pip's explicit thoughts about how embarrassed before Estella he is at his connection to Magwitch, how he thinks of them as such opposites. As Pip learns more of the story, he uses imagery from Joe's forge to describe the connections: seeing the similarity between Estella and Molly, he thinks "how one link of association had helped that identification in the theatre, and how such a link, wanting before, had been riveted for me now" (396). Even though Miss Havisham does not know who Estella's mother is, he thinks "the connection here was clear

and straight" (406). Dickens here animates the "dead metaphor" of "links of association," and the image works in keeping with the valuation of Joe in the novel. The importance of "links" testifies to the value of the world of the forge, where literal links are made.

The specifics of Estella's ancestry and formation emphasize the power of adoptive parenting over nature in its influence on individual character, even more than in Estella's words recently quoted. Her birth mother married young and killed out of jealousy: Jaggers refers to Molly as having "gipsy blood. . . it was hot enough when it was up" (398). Jaggers has been able to control her; she is described as a wild beast tamed under his influence. Pip is particularly struck by an action of her fingers that is like knitting without anything to knit. Knitting is making connections (with yarn instead of the steel of Joe's forge), and the family connections Molly has made cannot be acknowledged.<sup>52</sup> This knitting/not knitting parallels her role as a mother who is not a mother. Furthermore, readers' possible recollections of Dickens's previous novel, *A Tale of Two Cities*, with the famous Madame Defarge, who knit as she cheered on the guillotine, would have fit with the presentation of Molly as potentially threatening.

By contrast to her hot-blooded mother, Estella is repeatedly seen as cold; Miss Havisham eventually confesses, "I stole her heart away and put ice in its place" (405). Estella says that she is unable to understand what love means; this lack of understanding, she says, "is in *my* nature. . . . It is in the nature formed within me" (366). In keeping with this assessment, Pip observes "in some of her looks and gestures . . . that tinge or resemblance to Miss Havisham which may often be noticed to have been acquired by children, from grown persons with whom they have been much associated and secluded, and which, when childhood is passed, will produce a remarkable occasional likeness of expression between faces that are otherwise quite different" (240).

Adoption in this circumstance is presented as powerful, and the knowledge of Estella's heritage presents a quandary. If Molly had not concealed her child and given her to Jaggers to find a home, she presumably would have been convicted, and what sort of life would Estella have had? As Jaggers says, he sees children "being generated in great numbers for certain destruction . . . being imprisoned, whipped, transported, neglected, cast out, qualified in all ways for the hangman" (419). This is, indeed, the story of Estella's father's childhood, parentless, "tramping, begging, thieving" (350). So, bad as Estella's life with Miss

Havisham has been, life without Miss Havisham might have been worse.

All the other mysteriously born characters in the novels I discuss here learn the solution to their mysteries. Estella alone is kept in ignorance, maintaining the absence from the original compact of which she has complained. We see again some of the assumptions behind the closed adoption records. Jaggers believes that telling would hurt everybody; it does not occur to him that it could simply be revealed to Estella without telling anyone else: "I think it would hardly serve her, to establish her parentage for the information of her husband, and to drag her back to disgrace, after an escape of twenty years" (420). In this dimension, like other adopted women in Dickens's novels, like the adoptee in the closed-records system, she is represented as passive.

Like some other adopted characters, such as Esther in *Bleak House* and Daniel Deronda, she has a sense of difference from her caretaker: from her early childhood, she says to Miss Havisham, she remembers "looking up into your face, when your face was strange and frightened me!" (309). This could refer to Miss Havisham's face being strange in her eccentricity and wild regret, but, since she uses the past tense, it could also refer to her sense of being unrelated, feeling different from Miss Havisham in the years soon after her adoption, in spite of the similarity that Pip would eventually see. And Estella's mysterious marriage to Bentley Drummle, lower in class than Miss Havisham, could again be attributed to her continued sense of being an outsider in the household, no matter how much she had assimilated herself to it, and therefore seeking to marry someone else who was from a lower class, with whom she might fantasize that she might belong better.<sup>53</sup> (Oddly, he even has the violence associated with her birth mother.) Still, even in the fantasy world in which Pip marries Estella at the end of the novel, I find it hard to imagine Pip telling her her story.<sup>54</sup>

## Conclusions

In all of these novels, adoptees' identities are at issue in a very literal sense. Even their names may be a perplexing topic. Not quite sure what she should call either him or herself, Evelina writes to her adoptive father, "I cannot sign to you Anville, and what other name may I claim?" (69). *Oliver Twist's* name is created at random by Bumble.

The sense of problematic identity is often connected with a dramatized difference from those around them, whether in appearance, psychology, social status, or all three. Jane Eyre, Esther Summerson, and Daniel Deronda (and in a different way, Fanny Price, adopted at a later age from parents she remembers) are the adoptees for whom the sense of difference from those around them is most fully articulated. This is dramatized as physical difference for all these characters except Fanny, but for all of these four there is a sense of psychological difference as well.

But, as the term *adoptee* suggests more than “orphan,” for most of these characters there exist others whom they are in some way more like, to whom the novel will lead them. Both Esther and Daniel will finally meet the mothers who resemble them, but for neither, any more than for Fanny Price, will this lead to the idyllic family reunion predicted by the romance pattern. For Esther this is complicated further because it takes a long time to reveal that the woman whose appearance so fascinates her, with whom she feels so strangely linked, is indeed her mother, while a number of other characters confuse them.

Jane, on the other hand, will eventually find similar people of three kinds, though physical similarity is not emphasized as much as in some of the other novels. Least problematic are Mary and Diana Rivers, who she feels resemble her in their interests and temperament. Their brother, St. John, finds her sufficiently similar that he wants her to help him as his wife in his mission to India, an idea both appealing and threatening to Jane. But finally it is Rochester with whom her discovery of kinship, though metaphorical, feels the most intense. The discovery of her literal relatives, though not her parents as in *Pericles*, *Winter's Tale*, and *Evelina*, makes it possible for her to marry. Submerged in the imagery in which Rochester is Adam and Jane is Eve born from his side, and Rochester is also Lear to Jane's Cordelia, come back to save him in his misery, is a fantasy in which Rochester is Jane's father and her mother, and she is his mother.

In a number of plots the physical resemblance in the birth family is something we are told more by someone who observes it than by someone who participates in it. *Evelina's* similarity to her dead mother is the crucial proof to her father that she is not an impostor. Dickens juxtaposes both Oliver and Esther to a portrait of their mother with a likeness observable to others but not commented on explicitly by the children themselves. Pip discovers the physical similarity between Estella

and Jagers's servant Molly and learns the story of their relation, but never tells Estella.

In other plots physical resemblance is never noted, but spontaneous affection occurs between characters who later turn out to be blood relations. The commitment to Tom Jones that Squire Allworthy shows could be part of his general beneficence; his sister Bridget's interest could be part of what would be considered womanliness, but both turn out also to foreshadow their relationship to Tom. When Evelina sympathizes with the poor orphan Macartney, who turns out to be her brother, when *Jane Eyre* meets the Rivers sisters, when Oliver meets Rose, who turns out to be his aunt, the instant sense of affinity—in two of these cases also a matter of both being orphans—seems to have predicted their shared heredity.

However, in many of these novels there are counterexamples to show that shared heredity need not mean affection. Tom and Oliver are hated by their half-brothers Blifil and Monks; Evelina feels no affinity for her grandmother or her relations the Branghtons; and Fanny, devastatingly, having felt out of place with her rich aunt and uncle, also feels out of place when visiting her poor parents, brothers, and sisters. And of course all these novels contain families untouched by adoption in which relatives are at odds.

What of other kinds of resemblance beyond physical appearance among birth relatives? In most of these novels, these are developed only in a rather general way. Oliver and Rose are both virtuous; Jane feels a similarity of interests with the Rivers sisters, and they certainly resemble her temperamentally more than her other cousins the Reeds, but more specifics are rarely commented on. When Dickens gives Estella a birth mother who is a tamed murderer, we are left to wonder about the relevance to Estella's own psychology. Most of these novelists spell out many fewer specific similarities between adoptees and their birth families than the typical adoptee search narrative of recent years. Perhaps the best-known Victorian exception to this rule is George Eliot's depiction of heredity in *Felix Holt* and *Daniel Deronda*.

But even Eliot's novels, like the others, place more emphasis on the influence of adoptive parents, whether for good or for ill, than do Shakespeare's romances. In the previous chapter I found possibilities for reading the romances to see the impact of expectations and family stories, but this is an "against the grain" reading, not the meaning they most obviously convey. But the stress is quite different in these novels.

Squire Allworthy may occasionally err, but his generosity to Tom is much more discussed in the novel than, for example, the old shepherd's generosity to Perdita in Shakespeare's play. (And if the reader is tempted to think that the novel still presents this generosity as biologically based because he is Tom's uncle, think about how little emphasis Shakespeare gives to the generosity of uncles in whose household acknowledged nieces and nephews live, such as Leonato in *Much Ado*.) Many of the adoptive parents who are not related by birth are even more idealized than Allworthy: Brownlow, Evelina's adoptive father, Jarndyce. In writing her adoptive father, Evelina refers to herself as "creature of your own forming" and calls him "parent of my heart" (369). Perhaps, however, some of the characters express their gratitude in a way that reveals ambivalence to the reader. For example, of her "fate peculiarly cruel," Evelina remarks, "most benevolently have you guarded me from feeling it" (167–68).

The adoptive parents who are not idealized are still influential, even though not in ways they wanted. *Great Expectations* particularly shows this irony when Estella says to Miss Havisham, "I am what you have made me." The bad influence of Esther Summerson's godmother, in emphasizing her shame, continues throughout the book in the emphasis on Esther's diffidence. Several novels contrast adoptive children reared by different people in different ways, for example, Fanny versus the Crawfords.

In almost all of these books, one could argue, birth relatives are important and adoptive relatives are important too. Representing a group of characters related by both birth and adoption permits psychological and social exploration; it often dramatizes class differences, and, especially in Dickens, it emphasizes the unexpected connectedness of people in different classes, thus criticizing social divisions.

In the group of novels discussed here, it is quite striking that the admired adoptive parents are almost all male: Joe in *Great Expectations*, Villars in *Evelina*, Thomas Bertram in *Mansfield Park*, Jarndyce in *Bleak House*, Allworthy in *Tom Jones*, and Brownlow in *Oliver Twist* (which mitigates the pattern a bit with the presentation of Rose). Adoptive mothers are almost always presented with a dominant emphasis on criticism—consider Lady Bertram, Aunt Barbary, Miss Havisham, Pip's sister, Mrs. Reed. Some male adoptive parents are critically presented as well, but there are no good female adoptive parents as important in the novels as several of the good adoptive fathers are.

(Beyond the novels I focus on, there are exceptions to this generalization: consider, for example, Betsy Trotwood in *David Copperfield* and Lucy Snowe's godmother in *Villette*.) However, there are nurturing women, especially in the novels by women: Miss Temple, who helps Jane survive Lowood and becomes her model; Mary and Diana, her cousins; Lady Howard, who helps Evelina; Jenny, in *Bleak House*, who helps to take care of her friend's child; Mrs. Rouncewell, the model mother of the same novel.

Why are there, nevertheless, so many unpleasant adoptive mothers in these novels, all familiar enough in British literature to be influential? To some extent this is a special case of the negative presentation of mothers in Victorian fiction, what Marianne Hirsch has called "maternal repression," involving "absence, silence, and negativity."<sup>55</sup> Lady Bertram fits to some extent into the pattern of the "absent mother," but Barbary, Mrs. Reed, and Miss Havisham are all too present during the formative years of the central characters of their novels. Hirsch says that in Victorian fiction "multiple and surrogate mothers, like Jane Eyre's, are better able . . . to help daughters avoid the traditional temptations of romantic love, of marriage, and of objectification than a biological mother might be."<sup>56</sup> But clearly not every surrogate mother will do this. Or they may, like Aunt Barbary, disable a girl's self-confidence without even offering her the possible, if illusory, compensations of romantic love.

The novels I discuss here are particularly focused on the impact of children's upbringing, and since in our culture women have been most immediately involved in child rearing, this is one reason why surrogate mothers appear, rather than surrogate fathers, in narratives in which the treatment of children in early life harms them. This is most obvious in the way Dickens presents the different kinds of damage to Esther by Aunt Barbary, to Estella by Miss Havisham, and to Pip by Mrs. Joe. On the other hand, in order to provide happy endings for their characters, most of these novels need an adoptive father with social power, who has often been looking after the growing child from a distance—Villars, Bertram, Jarndyce, Brownlow, Allworthy. For day-to-day nurturing that is beneficent, the outstanding figure in these novels is Joe. His low social position makes a marked contrast with the status of the other men, and links him in some ways with Silas Marner, to be discussed in the next chapter. The mother substitute who comes closest to these fathers in both nurturing and importance is probably Rose.

Birth parents play smaller roles than adoptive parents in most of these novels. Birth mothers are dead in *Great Expectations*, *Evelina*, *Jane Eyre*, and *Oliver Twist*. Birth fathers are dead in all those novels except *Evelina*, and also in *Tom Jones*. The Prices play small, disappointing roles in *Mansfield Park*, after Fanny's reunion with them has been much anticipated. Both birth parents die during the course of *Bleak House*, the novel that gives the fullest sympathy to a birth mother. Molly in *Great Expectations* is a kind of pendant portrait to Lady Dedlock, at the other end of the class system but with a similar doom to shame and secrecy. Bridget in *Tom Jones* is a comic caricature. *Evelina's* birth father seems to be a negative character through most of the novel; then suddenly near the end we learn that misinformation accounts for his rejection of *Evelina*, and he now accepts her.

These patterns are quite different from the configurations in Shakespeare, if we remember the idealized pictures of birth mothers in *Winter's Tale* and *Pericles*, the flawed birth fathers central to both of those plays, and the subordinated lower-rank adoptive fathers of *Winter's Tale* and *Cymbeline*. One could find resemblances only in the dead birth mother and evil stepmother of *Cymbeline* (a play the Victorians loved) and the evil foster mother and good nurse of *Pericles*. The hints about the importance of caregivers' expectations in Shakespeare have turned into much clearer pictures of the impact of early environment. Harmful surrogate parents are themselves more psychologized in these novels. Rather than simply wanting to kill others' children to help their own, Aunt Barbary and Miss Havisham, even Aunt Reed, have moral agendas in their treatment of their adopted children, agendas that in some cases build on commonplaces of Victorian culture.

The novels I discuss in this chapter are important because they show how frequently the developing novel portrays adoption in a way that recognizes the importance of both heredity and nurture, protests against stigma, and mourns social divisions. The aspects of these novels that move me most are Fanny's sense of being out of place in both her families, the tragic difficulties of Esther's relationship with her birth mother, and Jane's fantasy family relationships with both the Rivers sisters and with Rochester ("He is akin to me"). I was in some ways a good girl like Fanny or Esther, but without their practical abilities and with more of Jane's recalcitrant spirit, evident mainly in my tendency to argue on behalf of open rebels. On the other hand, my family configuration was unlike that of most of these novels, with a distant, unhappy

father and a loving adoptive mother. Perhaps because these novelists were more interested in critiquing adoptive mothers than adoptive fathers, and in critiquing flaws much larger than those my mother had, the pictures of adoptive households here do not particularly resonate with me. Nor do any of these novelists, unlike Eliot, present adoptive parenting in detail that I could identify with as a parent.

Many of the themes in these novels anticipate those in George Eliot's. Silas's and Rufus's care of their adoptees is similar in spirit to those of adoptive fathers like Brownlow, though Eliot's characters are much less idealized and much more limited. Daniel's questioning about his identity is a more thoroughly developed (and cross-gendered) version of Esther Summerson's, with ethnic and religious difference added on. Physical resemblance appears when he and Eppie finally meet their birth parents.

But in at least one way Eliot's novels are structured differently. In the three I discuss in the next chapter, the plots are all set up to suggest that the adoptee has a choice between two different ways of life, associated with two different sets of parents. In each case the choice is weighted to emphasize that the one chosen is better and therefore the choice is inevitable—but it is still more of a choice between different families than occurs in any of the other novels. I would argue that Eliot is probing more deeply into these questions. She plays around with words like *father* and *nature* much more in *Silas Marner* than any of the others do, demanding much more that the reader think about what fatherhood really is. This topic is hinted at by the great importance of the influence of adoptive parents in the other novels, but not developed into a possible redefinition, as in Eliot. She also shows Silas and Rufus giving more hands-on care to their adoptees than is the case with any of the adoptive parents in the other novels. And in *Daniel Deronda* she deals with the issue of adoptees' relation to cultural traditions in a way none of these novels attempt.