


Domestic Trauma and Imperial Pessimism: The Crisis at Home in Charles Dickens's *Dombey and Son*

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*Dombey and Son*"**

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**Abstract:** In "Domestic Trauma and Imperial Pessimism: The Crisis At Home in Charles Dickens's *Dombey and Son*," Katherine Ostdiek discusses Dickens's representation of violence, grief, and recovery within the Victorian home as a pre-Freudian example of trauma. This comparison not only demonstrates the importance of trauma studies in the nineteenth-century, but more importantly, it thematically focuses empathy for the traumatized on the home. In this novel, Dickens dismisses topics related to the financial and social crises of mid-century Britain in favor of domestic themes that emphasize an idealized structure of the Victorian family. Through her use of trauma theory and cultural studies, Ostdiek examines Dickens's use of non-linear narrative and evocation of empathy from his readers in order to represent trauma and allow readers to process national grief.

## Katherine E. OSTDIEK

### Domestic Trauma and Imperial Pessimism: The Crisis at Home in Charles Dickens's *Dombey and Son*

The first installment of Charles Dickens's serialized novel *Dombey and Son* (1846-1848) was published in the midst of a series of financial crises in Britain, which escalated in October 1847 during "week of terror," when a variety of merchant companies and small banks collapsed (Campbell 70). Dickens may not directly reference the commercial crisis of 1847 in his novel, but the full title, *Dealings with the Firm of Dombey and Son: Wholesale, Retail and for Exportation*, alludes to Britain's global market and commercial practices, and thereby links the public sphere of global trade with the private sphere of the home—or between Mr. Dombey's firm and his family and household. As a result, Dickens obliquely addresses the imperial trade of Mr. Dombey's firm only to pull his readers firmly into the domestic drama—or in this novel *trauma*—that unfolds within the Dombey household. Stephen Dobranski characterizes Dickens's technique in this novel as a "new model of authorship" that delves into the relationship between the private and public spheres (390). Dickens appeals to his public's emotions in the preface to the 1848 edition of this novel, saying of the sorrow that his novel may evoke: "I hope it may be a sorrow of that sort which endears the sharers in it, one to another" (3). By linking his audience's shared affect, then, Dickens prepares a nation of readers to grieve for the events described in the Dombey household, namely Mr. Dombey's emotional and physical abuse of his daughter Florence—and her traumatization—rather than for Mr. Dombey's business failures and global exploits that mirror the economic uncertainties of mid-century Britain.

While the term "trauma" was not used in reference to psychological wounds until the late nineteenth century, applying theories of trauma to the representation of shock and suffering in mid-nineteenth-century literature provides unique insights into the psychological state of British society at this moment of national economic crisis (Sheehan 170). Sigmund Freud, the father of psychology, describes trauma as a psychological response to a particularly painful or grievous event. Additionally, Freud asserts that trauma was often the result unpreparedness or unexpectedness for a particular event, or the absence of "*Angstbereitschaft* or readiness to feel anxiety" during an initial loss or shock (Santner 25). It is not enough to experience pain; to be traumatized by an event, one must also be unprepared or surprised and therefore lack the "appropriate affect—*anxiety*" throughout the experience. As Peter Starr elucidates, the trauma-inducing incident "is just as crucially an event for which *one did not know to be anxious*" (46). In order to resolve or cope with this trauma, then, the traumatized must experience "traumatic *Dasein*" or the sense of "being back there," often in the form of a flashback, hallucination, or panic attack (LaCapra 89). As Dickens invites his readers to "[feel] a sorrow" in this novel, he prepares his readers to feel anxious for Florence, amidst their own worries—social and financial—and "[be] back there" through traumatic *Dasein*. This experience of traumatic *Dasein* attempts to resolve, or as Ruth Leys suggests "*cure... psychic trauma*" by providing opportunities for readers to know to feel, and then feel anxiety in the face of danger (28).

While Freud's research is mostly outdated and discredited in clinical psychiatry today, his terminology and theories make up the foundation of psychoanalysis, which continues to permeate modern cultural and literary criticism. According to David Miller, editor of *The Journal of Literature and Trauma*, contemporary scholarship in "literature and trauma studies...is and *must* be, without reservations, international in its scope, conceptualizations, and concerns" (vii). It must attend to the "'history' of suffering and the possible narration... [of the] past *and* the struggle that must occur for the essential nature and significance of that suffering to emerge into clear and full historical recognition" (viii). After all, trauma is, as Jill Matus so succinctly puts it, "the disease of time" (101). Naturally, the field of trauma studies is comprised of a diverse body of work, partly due to its various theoretical and clinical applications, whether detailing case studies that focus on an individual, collective experiences of warfare and genocide, or medical histories and diagnoses of shock and hysteria. While these are not so much debates with one another, their arguments underscore the ongoing tension in trauma studies over the figurative and the literal—which I believe continues to be at the heart of all conversations regarding suffering, endurance, and understanding. Is the account real? Can we measure or quantify it? While Freud defines a traumatic memory as a memory of a specific event, Marianne Hirsch and Dominic LaCapra claim that these events can also occur before birth. They use the terms "postmemory" and "secondary trauma" to explain the "common experience of 'second generation' of Holocaust survivors" (Alloa et al. 1-2). The paradox at the heart of trauma is that the lived experience of pain or grief can transform memory and comprehension. By examining narratives of suffering—and recovery—in the

context of trauma studies we can better understand the suffering of the past and endurance for the future.

Critical studies of trauma in Victorian literature and culture tend to focus on specific historical or biographical case studies. For instance, Ralph Harrington and Christopher Herbert examine the effects of railroad development and warfare on individual and collective experiences, while Anne Stiles and Peter Logan highlight the emergence of medical terminology and theories in Victorian literature—noting the relationship between psychology and physiology. Unsurprisingly, Charles Dickens occupies a prominent spot in Victorian trauma studies. The scholarship of Maria Teresa Chialant, Richard Gibson, and Jill Matus each link events in Dickens's life to representations of trauma in his fiction. According to Dianne Sadoff, "Dickens... understood Victorian experience as fundamentally traumatic" (Sadoff 164). Furthermore, Sadoff argues that the traumas introduced, or arguably repressed, in Dickens's novels are re-written as part of a collective experience of trauma and recovery in modern Dickensian adaptation, *Mister Pip* (2007) and *Jack Maggs* (1997). While I do not examine modern adaptations in this article, Sadoff's argument sets an important precedent for examining intertwined traumas in Dickens's fiction. Similarly, Stacey Kikendall and J. Hillis Miller claim that in Dickens's novels, *Dombey and Son* and *Our Mutual Friend*, the experience of the individual and the collective are always intertwined—contrary to Foucault's binary within the Panopticon—which suggests that the conscious and unconscious of both the individual and the community are simultaneously entangled. In Kikendall's analysis of *Dombey and Son*, she traces forms of visual communication, or gazing, and claims that Dickens's depiction of the conscious and unconscious was both a product of his time, but also ahead of it. However, Kikendall argues that Florence's trauma and Mr. Dombey's guilt are all the result of "the gaze" whether given or withheld from a specific character, or from society as a whole (67-8). This interpretation reduces the fictional world that Dickens creates, from Mr. Dombey's business to the monstrous railroad, into a series of signifiers. While this reading addresses Mr. Dombey's guilt and Florence's neglect, it loses sight of the novel's historical context. Allusions in this novel to Mr. Dombey's firm, the British Empire, and maritime trade have significance for both Britain's relationship with the world and Mr. Dombey's relationship with his daughter. Reading this novel through the lens of trauma studies requires historical and cultural context in order to perceive the complexity of collective and individual grief and recovery. It allows us to better discern the dynamics at play in the relationship between global commerce and domestic responsibility as depicted in the Dombey household.

During its rise in popularity and influence in the nineteenth century, the Victorian novel became a venue for defining the English domestic space as different from and opposed to the frighteningly unknown and unpredictable world outside of England. In the words of Edward Said, the "foreign," or non-British world, "was felt vaguely and ineptly to be out there, or exotic and strange, or in some way or other 'ours' to control, trade in 'freely,' or suppress when the natives were energized into overt military or political resistance" (74). Typically, the empire, its resources, and the hierarchy of power that it enforced were "taken-for-granted as... natural aspects of Britain's place in the world and its history" (Hall and Rose 2). Therefore, the abuses of the empire were "not necessarily a matter of consciousness or deliberation" (21). In contrast, Dickens's acceptance of Mr. Dombey's privilege and authority over global economics suggests his own espousal of what Patrick Brantlinger terms "liberal optimism": the conscientious support of colonialism with the belief that colonial rule and global trade were good for both the parent country and the colony (27). Britain's attitudes toward colonial rule and imperial policy changed when resistance within the colonies triggered the decline of liberal optimism in favor of self-doubt and "imperial pessimism," or "colonial guilt" (Gilroy 89). It began to doubt its role in global economics, especially its authority over other nations and their resources. Britain's increased awareness, or pessimism, toward the consequences of imperial practices altered how the British public perceived "everyday" materials and processes derived from the Empire and the reach of Britain's global trade. These objects and practices, which were embedded in the customs of fashion and society, affirmed oppressive ideologies that often resulted in fiscal exploitation as well as emotional and physical abuse of others (Hall and Rose 23). The slow dispersion of these everyday practices influences "the way we perceive and respond to a variety of social afflictions" (Nixon 257). While these everyday practices continued, the increase in imperial pessimism made these oppressive customs difficult to ignore—that is, without finding alternative objects to grieve in their place.

Despite the contemporary increase in imperial pessimism and desire for reform, Dickens's *Dombey and Son* affirms ideologies that navigate and naturalize the hegemonic structures that imperialism supports in order to justify the exploitation of marginalized individuals, while criticizing the empire's effect on the ideal domestic figure: Florence Dombey. Assumed as common sense, these structures, including British supremacy, male superiority, progress through industrialization, and capitalism, make

injustices invisible or mundane within the "regulatory" structure and narrative of the Victorian novel. For instance, Deirdre David claims that of the two characters beaten in *Dombey and Son*, "the Native is struck because he is dark-skinned and Florence is struck because she is female" (64). While neither beating goes unpunished, the degree of their severity is distinctly different, since in the novel "it is explicitly not acceptable for a British father to hit his middle-class daughter but implicitly acceptable for a retired Indian army officer to beat his dark servant," which David suggests "speaks directly to Dickens's complex and unhappy view of empire" (66). Dickens does not condone Major Bagstock's beating of his servant, but he does diminish its cruelty next to Mr. Dombey's abuse of Florence. Major Bagstock's violent threats that he will "flay the Native alive," juxtaposed with the imagery of his humorously flailing rotund figure as he struggles to get into Mr. Dombey's carriage, downplays the brutality and significance of Major Bagstock's treatment of his servant (310). Instead, Dickens implies that abuse can be acceptable and even funny when it does not affect white, middle- to upper-class British citizens; not all lives or experiences are grievable. When read through the attitudes of liberal optimism, Major Bagstock's continual but outlandish beating of his servant is simply poor management, rather than a grievous breach of human rights.

However, when a white British girl is abused by her father, the imperial power dynamics that made Bagstock's violence acceptable no longer apply. Instead, Dickens's narrative becomes a criticism of the global commerce that unites British readers in unified outrage and empathy. This kind of abuse carries an emotional charge as "the blow delivered to an innocent Victorian daughter exposes her father's domestic wickedness so vividly that his wickedness in the public sphere is dimmed (but not entirely blotted out) by her suffering and forgiveness" (David 67). By underscoring Mr. Dombey's actions within his home, Dickens represses imperial pessimism in this text by focusing on the consequences of methods of management within the home. Mr. Dombey's domestic abuse and Florence's resulting domestic crisis imply to British readers that the imperial practices of Britain, like those Mr. Dombey performs in his firm, are corrupting the British patriarch and thereby destroying the English family. Consequently, Dickens suggests that British citizens focus their attention and grief on the family and home rather than potential injustices in the global market or distant colonies.

Nevertheless, Dickens makes it clear in this novel that Mr. Dombey's failures as a father are the result of his imperial business practices. He illuminates Mr. Dombey's relationship with global trade through the vivid imagery of global commerce that surrounds Mr. Dombey's firm. In order to acquire the "decorative booty of empire," like the wine aboard the sinking *Charming Sally* about which Uncle Sol tells his nephew Walter, Mr. Dombey's firm risks the lives of its workers on a regular basis (Peters 23). However, unlike Uncle Sol, Mr. Dombey never considers the origins of the objects he attains, moves, and sells, nor does he acknowledge the consequences of his business endeavors. Instead, as the narrator suggests, Mr. Dombey perceives the world and its riches as objects he can obtain and employ for profit: "the earth was made for Dombey and Son to trade in, and the sun and moon were made to give them light. Rivers and seas were formed to float their ships; rainbows gave them promise of fair weather; winds blew for or against their enterprises; stars and planets circled in their orbits, to preserve inviolate a system of which they were the center" (12). Here Dickens uses passive voice to criticize the firm's objectification of the natural world and Mr. Dombey's exploitation of its natural resources for a profit. Nature labors for Mr. Dombey's business: forming, giving, and blowing to maintain and protect the firm. For Mr. Dombey, the wine, the hookahs, and the "gorgeous princes of a brown complexion" are available for the taking and the lives of the men and women aboard the ships are available for the risking (46). Dickens, however, reinforces liberal optimism by upholding Mr. Dombey's authority as a white British man and merchant, while criticizing Mr. Dombey's worldview as limited and self-centered because he invests more in his son—the central figure of his ideology—and disregards his daughter. Mr. Dombey considers his female child "a piece of base coin that couldn't be invested—a bad Boy—nothing more," while he makes the birth of his son sacred, so that "common abbreviations" such as AD (*anno Domini*) appear to him as "anno Dombey—and Son" (12-13). His distorted perception of the world as objects to be used and traded for profit affects his ability to value his children as beings, and to see his daughter as the ideal domestic figure that Dickens portrays.

While Dickens asserts that Mr. Dombey's commercial worldview wreaks havoc on the home, he also implicates maritime trade and exportation as threats to British domestic life through his portrayal of the ocean. The figure of the ocean represents the world outside the British Isles and poses a mysterious threat to Florence and Paul Dombey. This novel manages the ocean through boundaries that the characters imagine out of ignorance, curiosity, and fear, in order to encourage acquiescence toward the Empire in British ideology, and thereby regulate the public's perception of Britain's exploits. The ocean, or what Suvendrini Perera terms the "blank" colonial space, separates young Master Blitherstone from



his family, and both alludes to and masks potential concerns and risks that might impact Florence and Paul Dombey and their friend Blitherstone (7). While this void evokes terror and uncertainty amongst Dickens's characters, as well as his contemporaries, the "blank" space of the ocean also insulates the inhabitants of the British Isles, creating national cohesion—albeit around fear and uncertainty.

As the boundaries of the colonial "void," the ocean and sea both enclose the British Isles and figure as agents of violence when crossed. The boundary of the sea marks the difference between life and death for the characters, since anyone who goes to sea is typically assumed dead. After all, when Walter, Paul and Florence's lower-class friend, crosses the sea to go abroad, he is assumed dead; Mr. Dombey's wife, Edith, is considered socially dead after leaving England. Naturally, Florence and her brother Paul assume their lives would be at risk in this unknown world beyond the sea, and that they will remain safe as long as they stay on British soil. When they each alternately imagine living in India, separate from one another, they conclude that they would die (128). As the gem of the British Empire, India represents both the high value and grave sacrifice of global trade. Unsurprisingly, Paul's and Florence's involvement with India, or more specifically with global commerce, leads to Paul's death. He crosses this threshold when he joins Mr. Dombey's firm in order to secure a loan for Walter's poor Uncle Sol (152-3). As Paul makes his decision to loan Walter money from the firm, Dickens conveys the conflict within Paul; his face momentarily expresses "a sharp understanding of the reference conveyed in [his father's] words" on the power of money and the "grand[ness of] having got it" (152-3). Paul said he would die if separated from Florence and his initial engagement with the Dombey firm weighs on his mind and foreshadows his death. By sealing Paul's fate with his first act for the firm, Dickens draws his readers' attention from the concerns of participants such as Walter or Sol, and instead focuses the narrative's empathy on Florence, her loss, and her experience at home after Paul's death.

Paul's participation in the Dombey firm may not lead directly to his deathbed, but it forces him to enter a realm that Florence cannot, and thereby validates their mutual fear of separation. On his deathbed, Paul tells Florence that he can "hear the waves" and that he can see their deceased mother across the water on the shore as "the motion of the boat upon the stream was lulling him to rest" (253). Dickens's use of this imagery affirms the correlation that Paul and Florence construed between crossing the ocean and death (253). Since Paul cannot survive his contradictory roles as Mr. Dombey's business partner and Florence's little brother, his death underscores the impact that global trade and national expansion can have on British families. After Paul dies, Dickens closes the chapter with Miss Tox's reference to the incongruity that Paul's death imposes on the business firm, exclaiming, "Dear me, dear me! To think... that Dombey and Son should be a Daughter after all" (253). While Miss Tox recognizes Florence's place within the family, her emphasis on the business highlights the way in which the Dombey family privileges the concerns of the firm over the family, and the effect that these everyday rituals and beliefs contribute to Florence's emotional suffering.

Naturally, Dickens's most overt criticism of Mr. Dombey occurs in his depiction of him as an abusive father. Guilty of striking and neglecting his daughter Florence, Mr. Dombey behaves coldly toward her throughout the novel, particularly once her mother dies. His consistent neglect and withdrawal of affection may seem slight from moment to moment, but has an accumulative effect as "slow violence" (Nixon 257). Mr. Dombey's indifference toward his daughter stems from her sex, as "girls are thrown away in this house" (Dickens 38). The mere mention of Florence's name by Mr. Carker to Mr. Dombey causes "angry thoughts in reference to poor Florence [that] brooded and bred in Mr. Dombey's breast, usurping the place of the cold dislike that generally reigned there" (402). When his son dies, his discomfort with Florence turns into resentment and abhorrence in that she reminds him of the legacy he has lost. To repress reminders of his son, Mr. Dombey shuts himself up within his room where "the door was ever closed" (276). Instead of giving her the affection she craves, Florence's father abuses her through his neglect, leaving her "alone in the deserted house, and day succeeded day, and still she lived alone" (355). Even observers pity her situation, as a mother tells her child, "your misfortune is a lighter one than Florence's; for not an orphan in the wide world can be so deserted as the child who is an outcast from a living parent's love" (381).

Mr. Dombey's most overt abuse in the domestic sphere occurs when he hits his daughter in response to his second wife Edith's scandalous departure. His strike, as any form of trauma-inducing violence, significantly disrupts and "unsettles" Florence's "understanding of existing contexts" within her home (LaCapra 117). After Edith runs away with another man, Mr. Dombey attacks Florence: "in his frenzy, he lifted up his cruel arm and struck her, crosswise, with that heaviness, that she tottered on the marble floor; and as he dealt the blow, he told her what Edith was [a whore], and bade her [Florence] follow her, since they had always been in league" (721). Initially, Mr. Dombey punishes Edith for resisting his authority, which eventually drives her away. By striking Florence, Mr. Dombey projects his anxiety

toward the public humiliation that Edith's abandonment elicits onto the most consistent domestic figure in the novel. While Dickens unequivocally condemns Mr. Dombey for his abuse of his daughter, he also neglects to disclose the mysterious failure of Mr. Dombey's once booming firm. His readers are left to assume that a broken home will break the foundation of British capitalism.

Dickens's narrative of grief and suffering turns its focus to Florence. He depicts her experience of trauma as non-linear through her "violently suppressed or forgotten" memories of her father's abuse, which allows readers to process shared grief through their empathetic reading of the British home (Lyotard 11). Florence's reaction to her experiences of domestic abuse demonstrate both her lack of "*Angstbereitschaft* or readiness to feel anxiety" and her repression or avoidance of those memories (Santner 25). Freud terms the psychological struggle that Dickens depicts as "pathological mourning," in which the traumatized attempts to simultaneously cling to and reject their experience of abuse (Freud 586-87). When Mr. Dombey hits Florence, exploiting her trust and love for him, she internalizes the pain; she holds on to it, even as she tries to forget: "she fled from the idea of him as she had fled from the reality, and he was utterly gone and lost. There was no such Being in the world" (Dickens 736). She not only runs away from Mr. Dombey, but also attempts to run away from the memory of his abuse. After being struck by her father, Florence's hands tremble but "she did not weep; she did not utter one word of reproach" (721). Her deferred response is indicative of "the *structure of [traumatic] experience or reception,*" in which "the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated *possession* of the one who experiences it" in that emotional avoidance and fragmented time characterize the structure of Florence's traumatic experience (Caruth 4). She initially displays a degree of numbness and avoidance, refusing to cry and repressing her affection for her father; all she sees is "his cruelty, neglect, and hatred" and "stamping [her fondness for him] down" she claims that she has no father and is an orphan (Dickens 721). Essentially, she re-writes her memories and identity to cope with unthinkable pain and suffering.

As Florence carries her experiences within her psyche, her memories of abuse, as fragmented representation of time, erupt as manifestations of trauma throughout the novel. Her abuse refuses to remain lodged in the past and pervades her life, similar to Freud's suggestion that the traumatizing incident is a constant part of how the traumatized experience life: "[trauma] acts like a 'foreign body' lodged in the psyche, working over time" (qtd. in Sheehan 170). When Florence looks in the mirror, following her escape from home, she sees the bruise her father left, a "foreign body" that emerges in her psyche to re-live the violence, Florence both simultaneously remembers "in a moment" and "shunned [the memory] instantly" (736). Dickens locates Florence's shame and fear in the mark left by her father "as if she bore about her something wicked" that she will continue to carry with her (744). Florence, "ashamed and afraid of it... fled from reality." Within her new reality, an ambiguous dream-like state of domestic bliss, Florence imagines herself in a "happy home" before becoming "a grey-haired woman, carrying her secret to the grave" (736). Florence's reaction to the bruise, then, in eliciting a nebulous fantasy of an alternative world, ruptures the novel's timeline.

Florence's avoidance of the "shattered fragments" of her experience pull her, uncharacteristically, from reality and resist linear time (743). Matus depicts the experience of trauma as creating a "narrative rupture occasioned by those fictional occasions of not being oneself" (3). Similarly, Florence denies her familial identity as a Dombey after she is hit. Dickens's empathetic narrative of Florence's emotional state focuses the novel's plot on her efforts to rebuild her life and family with Captain Cuttle. When Florence sits with Captain Cuttle and thinks about Walter, she struggles to avoid the "fragments" that reemerge in her memory. The narrator distinctly indicates that she most definitely is not thinking about her father, implying her struggle to repress memories of violence. The narrator also states that Florence no longer desires her father's love and that she is not thinking about the time her father hit her; in fact, these thoughts are "so appalling to her," that she physically shakes trying to avoid her memory: "she covered her eyes, and shrank trembling from the least remembrance of the deed, or of the cruel hand that did it" (743). In other words, Florence remembers not to remember being hit. Her conscious and unconscious mind struggle for control, hinting at the inherently fragmented structure of her traumatic experience. This violent process possesses Florence, not simply by bringing up bad memories, but also by conjuring psychosomatic responses that link the condition of her mind to the responses of her body; Florence wrings her hands, weeps, and faints, sleeping "uneasy in mind and body." When Florence attempts to confront her memories of her father and home, her heart "was filled with a wild dread that fled from all confronting with its shattered fragments," the "shattered fragments," alluding to the way trauma disrupts linear concepts of time and experience (724, 734).

When Florence escapes her father's abuse, she arrives at another home affected by Mr. Dombey, but one which privileges family and love over commerce and power. The original inhabitants, Solomon Gills

and Walter, are both gone and assumed dead, since Walter was sent across the ocean and Uncle Sol went after him. Captain Cuttle welcomes Florence and quickly becomes a surrogate paternal figure. He treats her like family, cooking for her and offering her comfort. Florence imagines that she overcomes her suffering through a domestic fantasy that occurs in her aforementioned dream. She yearns for her dead brother and for Walter, and "dreams of finding, a long way off, some little sisters to instruct, who would be gentle with her and to whom, under some feigned name she might attach herself, and who would grow up in their happy home." This fantasy of domestic life serves as a healing tool for the grievous wrongs wrought by Mr. Dombey. However, this dream disrupts the trajectory of time in this narrative. The dream is set in the future, "a long way off," but it causes Florence to conflate the timeline of her past experiences, present situation, and future hope. When her mind returns from the dream to the "dim and clouded" present, she confuses the duration of her abuse, "bring[ing] herself to believe that what had happened were but the events of a few hours ago, instead of the weeks or months, as they appeared" (736-7). Even though Mr. Dombey's slow and immediate violence toward her continued over years, she comes to perceive his abuse as "the events of a few hours." Florence's symptoms, represented through distorted eruptions in time and an alternative reality, illuminate the ways in which trauma distorts our perception of time to avoid reality, but also to imagine paths to recovery.

After envisioning an alternative path toward healing, Florence begins to recover through the unconventional family under the protection of Captain Cuttle. She imagines herself "a wandering princess" and Cuttle "a good monster," as they settle before the hearth. Cuttle's scruffy and good-natured temperament, full of "faith, hope, and charity," reflects a disinterest in financial concerns. He gladly offers his money to Florence, even claiming that "it an't 'o no use to *me*...I wonder I haven't chucked it away afore now" (741). Rather than criticizing commerce and capitalism, Cuttle's anti-materialist attitude constructs a hierarchy of moral values that emphasizes family above all else. Cuttle begins referring to Florence as his niece with pride, and tries to make her home in his "Midshipman's berth" as comfortable as possible. The narrator implies that their unconventional family forms a new reality for Florence and transforms her past into fantasy, or a "terrible dream she had once called Home" (742). The home she left, supported by the global trade of Dombey and Son, figuratively disappears like a nightmare that ends at dawn. This new narrative of domestic life disrupts the former that began with the Dombey's, in order to create a narrative that facilitates Florence's recovery.

On Florence's path to recovery, images that formerly posed a definite threat cease to do so. For instance, the ocean's symbolic danger diminishes within Florence and Cuttle's family as Cuttle describes the sea with appreciative reverence: "it's a almighty element. There's wonders in the deep, my pretty. Think on it when the winds is roaring and the waves is rowling. Think on it when the stormy nights is so pitch dark... 'Lord help 'em, how I pitys all unhappy folks ashore now!'" (745). Even the threat of death is negated when Cuttle's story of "only out'ard bound" ship that sailed from the port of London ends with Walter Gay's arrival. During Cuttle's harrowing tale of the ship destroyed by the storm and the man aboard that survived, Florence repeatedly tries to turn away, but Cuttle begs her to focus and hear the narrative out. Unlike Mr. Dombey, Cuttle reinforces narrative integrity. He guides and encourages Florence to ensure her endurance. He tells her not to look around, to continue looking at him—until a shadow appears on the wall—and then he turns her attention to the Walter Gay. When he returns, Walter fulfills Florence's domestic by proposing to her. Her episodes of weeping and fainting subside and she begins a happy new life under a new family name: Florence Gay. The world beyond England no longer poses a threat since Florence, the object of domestic and imperial violence, has discarded Mr. Dombey's legacy and formed a new family. She tells Walter that if he makes her his wife, "I will love you dearly... I will go to the world's end with out fear" (770). Her new family, moreover, diminishes the threat the ocean once posed; as Walter's wife, Florence is able to travel at sea with him without fear.

When Mr. Dombey's business has failed, he remains cloistered within his house, haunted by his memories of "the stain of his domestic shame" and awaiting his savior. Dickens locates Mr. Dombey's failure in both the public world of global trade and in the domestic; however, he blames Mr. Dombey's shame on his failures at home and confines Mr. Dombey's suffering to the domestic realm to prioritize the effect Mr. Dombey's actions had in the home. Memories of his abuse of Florence become "the sharp grief of his soul" (904); they attach to the home he betrayed. Without anywhere else to go, Mr. Dombey must sit in "the ghostly, memory-haunted twilight" of his house and "remember it [hitting his daughter] in that room, years to come." Mr. Dombey's mind and body begin to crumble within his house, just as his home once crumbled from his neglect. To illustrate the severity of Mr. Dombey's distress, Dickens signals Mr. Dombey's dissociation from reality, not unlike Florence's fractured memories and alternative realities. As Mr. Dombey looks in the mirror, he sees himself as a separate entity that walks to and fro before him. Such doubling—also depicted in Dickens's short story *The Haunted Man* (1848)—signals the



psychological battle that trauma elicits between the conscious and the unconscious. In this dissociative state, unlike Florence's domestic fantasy, Mr. Dombey witnesses his own blood spreading out across the home he destroyed and seeping into the world he tried to control. In this state, Mr. Dombey observes "it," or his other self, alone in his home, while the world "harassed him to death" and pools of his blood "would move so stealthily and slowly" across the room and under the door to represent his failure and loss. Even within the walls of his room he can see and hear the "world... very busy and restless about him... whispering and babbling." Thus, his transactions in *Dombey and Son* have followed him into the rooms of his home: the world of goods and trade now haunt him, taking on "a bleared and russet colour in his eyes," because he allowed his imperial practices within the firm to destroy his family. His blood, tracked on feet from the house into the streets, now mingles "among those many prints of feet," and he thinks that for the blood "to leak out into the hall, it must be a long time going so far" (909-10). This dream of Mr. Dombey's blood spreading throughout the house recalls the violence he has committed in his home and his current atonement through grieving, as well as the metaphorical blood on Mr. Dombey's hands from his participation in imperial trade, which now is "going so far" as to finally be recognized in his home. Even though Mr. Dombey's participation in global trade factors into his grief and guilt through the haunting whispers of the world and his bleared view of its commodities, his colonial guilt is relegated below his grief for the family he abused and lost.

Even though Mr. Dombey's sins against humanity expand beyond the household, Dickens emphasizes that the home is the site of redemption and recovery. Florence returns with Walter to nurse her father, who is "shattered in mind, and perilously sick in body" (928). When Mr. Dombey looks at his own hand, which struck Florence and signed Walter's sailing orders, "he marked how wicked and murderous that hand looked," suggesting his feelings of guilt for the inhumane acts that his hand carried out both at home and abroad (910). Florence becomes her father's savior and healer when she returns to him in a "gleam of light." When Mr. Dombey recognizes the "ray of sun" as his daughter, his detachment from reality ends. He recognizes "his own reflection in the mirror" and becomes himself again, as the narrator stops referring to Mr. Dombey as an "it" (911). Once Florence pulls her father out of this altered state of consciousness, the narrator emphasizes Mr. Dombey's ability to feel: "He felt her draw his arms about her neck; he felt her put her own round his; he felt her kisses on his face; he felt her wet cheek laid against his own; he felt—oh, how deeply!—all that he had done." Florence's daughterly love allows her father to feel and process his guilt as Florence repeatedly apologizes and tells her father she's changed—despite the narrator's insistence that she is "unchanged still. Of all the world unchanged" (912); her apologies stand in for those absent from Mr. Dombey. Furthermore, her overflow of feeling not only allows Mr. Dombey to forgive himself and rejoin Florence's domestic narrative, it also encourages readers to empathize with Florence and forgive Mr. Dombey as well.

Dickens resolves *Dombey and Son* by uniting the Dombey and Gay families in domestic bliss. In this new home, Mr. Dombey seizes the opportunity to love and care for his grandchildren, particularly little Florence, and thereby repair his former domestic unrest. However, by allocating the consequences of Mr. Dombey's behavior and actions to the home, this narrative assumes that domestic harmony will heal all problems. This solution minimizes any opportunity for readers to deal with the position of the abused Native or the perpetuation of imperial exploitation at the hands of Walter, the new patriarch. Dickens dismisses any anxiety readers may feel over Walter's new role in favor of reassurance for the kindness Walter exhibits as a husband and father—and his success where Mr. Dombey failed. Walter figuratively preserves the *Dombey and Son* legacy by keeping the firm's practices alive.

This novel's uncritical acceptance of Walter's success at home and abroad reveals Dickens's disregard for the role that guilt and imperial pessimism plays in the British experience of global trade and imperial expansion. Instead, these feelings are superseded by Mr. Dombey's domestic abuse, resolved in Florence's household, and reassured by the kind smiles of Walter, the new paternal imperialist. While imperial expansion and global capitalism put England in a precarious position throughout the 1840s, this novel responds to national uncertainty and imperial pessimism by representing domestic trauma, narrating recovery, and promoting empathetic reading as a coping mechanism. As readers connect over Florence's traumatization and recovery, Dickens draws their focus away from national conflict and foreign affairs and toward an idealized fictional family. While this narrative technique does little to solve the problems faced in mid-century Britain, it does attempt to offer an alternative philosophy to deal with suffering and trauma. Empathetic reading does not address or solve national crises, but it does unite readers. As he wrote the preface to the 1848 edition of *Dombey and Son*, perhaps Dickens hoped that—like Florence's domestic fantasy—this fiction might offer a path for his readers toward healing and resolution.

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