

Envy and Victorian Fiction

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Structuralist accounts of the classic novel have long noted that the genre's formal constraints pull narrative in two opposing directions: toward extension or dilation and toward closure. The nineteenth-century English novel comprehends closure primarily in terms of marriage and death, axiomatically associating extension with desire and life. If the goal of the novel's plot is to get to the marital or mortal end, the goal of the novelist, as Peter Brooks and others have argued, is to defer that end—for precisely three volumes, or nineteen monthly installments, or whatever the form demands. However, a sufficient number of distractions and divagations are required to keep the plot running without running it aground. This plot machinery, moreover, frequently finds a correlate in the ethical sphere, wherein the goal of such works is to establish forms of sympathetic identification between characters and readers—but only by enduring varieties of sympathetic error and failure. One especially powerful motor that serves both ends of the novel—those of plot as well as ethics—is envy, for it interrupts the straight course of the marriage plot as well as the development of a capacity for sympathy. More than many other forces that retard narrative entropy, however, envy is dangerous in the very temptations it offers: it is so engulfing that it not only propels the novel forward but also threatens to throw it off the rails by permanently jeopardizing the conditions of closure.

Unlike a number of other key affects, envy has received scant attention in novel criticism. Why should it present such a challenge, both within the plot—that is, to a novel's characters—and in the discourse, and thus to its readers? Powerful enough in the ordinary sense of covetous resentment, envy is also, in the psychoanalytic theory of Melanie Klein, one of the deep seats of human motivation by which relations between the self and the world are structured. For Klein, these relations originate in the pre-oedipal period, when an infant's first and most important object is its mother; this relationship establishes the pattern by which needs are satisfied and frustrated, and it lays down psychic structures that persist throughout life. When unmet, as they inevitably are, those needs are felt to be separate from and unavailable to the self; they are then projected onto so-called part objects, which are variously reviled for their unattainability, abjected for their failure to satisfy, and despoiled in an effort to reduce their psychic value. Envy develops in what Klein calls the paranoid-schizoid position, which constitutes the fragmented, phantasmagorical world of early infancy; it is, moreover, a way of being (that is, a position rather than a stage) into and out of which human subjects continue to move throughout life. Characteristic of the paranoid-schizoid position is a division, or splitting, of the world into diametrically opposed good and bad components. Envy, in Klein's definition, is thus primitive, relational, and destructive; it comprises both the feeling "I want what she has" and "Her having it diminishes me." It is bounded on one side by paranoia and greed, on the other by shame, and

is distinguished from jealousy, its counterpart in the depressive position, which emerges later.

Klein's account of envy merits our attention for its capacity to describe human motivations and emotions in their most primitive and fundamental aspects as well as for its emphasis on the embodied as much as the cognitive dimension of psychical experience. Within the emotional economy of the Victorian novel, envy, because it is relational, generates plot, serves as a counterweight to sympathetic identification, and, as I have suggested, threatens to disrupt both. It bears chronically destabilizing currents of contempt and aggression as well as characteristic psychical processes, which, in Klein's terms, include splitting, introjection, idealization, and projective identification. As a critical gambit in the direction of exploring its specifically literary dimensions, I aim to chart the terms and effects of envy in three Victorian novels, at once major and representative. For heuristic purposes, I provisionally divide the inquiry into three aspects of envy: in Charles Dickens's *Little Dorrit* (1857) I consider psychological envy, in Anthony Trollope's *The Way We Live Now* (1875) social envy, and in George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1872) moral envy. Tellingly, the envy expressed in each case takes a different diacritical term: it is posed against shame in *Little Dorrit*, benevolence in *The Way We Live Now*, and sympathy in *Middlemarch*.

Read for its emotional content, *Little Dorrit* is a book steeped in shame: the shame of poverty that attends bankruptcy, for which the title character is the repository; the shame of wealth that follows upon that poverty; and the shame of memory itself, which finds concrete form in the representation of debt. The personalities of the major characters, including Little Dorrit, Arthur Clennam, and William Dorrit, are organized by different versions of shame management in relation to money, class, family history, and sexuality. The novel would seem to support Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's emphasis in *Touching Feeling* on shame as a representative affect (one among a finite number) as well as the "keystone" (37) or developmentally originary one; shame, in her discussion, is innate in origin and almost illimitably wide-ranging in its effects. If we approach the novel with an eye toward envy, however, a different set of emotions and experiences comes into focus, revealing a world more relational, violent, and morally charged. Envy is most obviously associated with more minor and grotesque characters: Mrs. Clennam (who holds the secrets of the plot, based in her foundational envy of Arthur's real mother), Rigaud/Blandois (whose murderous pretension is represented as inadequacy with respect to a standard of bourgeois respectability), and, most notoriously, Miss Wade (whose virulent envy makes her an embodiment of rage, displaced onto and replicated by Tattycoram). I will to consider the last and most striking of these examples.

Late in *Little Dorrit*, in a chapter titled "The History of a Self-Tormentor," Miss Wade narrates her own pathological case study. She allows that her psychological condition has often gone under the name of "an unhappy temper"; this temper is characterized by a furious resentment of those who pity her, condescend to her, or even show her kindness. She describes a series of possessive relationships, with both women and men, in which she exhibits the panoply of symptoms of Kleinian envy. She perceives the world as sharply divided between her beloved objects, in whom she invests all goodness, and all others, who aim, in her view, to insult and

undermine her. Of her schoolmates, for example, she complains, "I could hardly make them quarrel with me. . . . They were always forgiving me, in their vanity and condescension" (693–94). Invariably her loved objects disappoint her; she then seeks to destroy both them and the love itself in orgies of rage and resentment. Insofar as her feelings about the good objects result from outward projections of feelings about herself—both narcissistic enjoyment and self-loathing—her envious spoiling of the objects is also a form of self-destruction. At school, as she recounts, she had a "chosen friend," who set the pattern for those that follow. This friend, she says,

tormented my love beyond endurance. Her plan was, to make them all [friends and family] fond of her—and so drive me wild with jealousy. To be familiar and endearing with them all—and so make me mad with envying them. When we were left alone in our bed-room at night, I would reproach her with my perfect knowledge of her baseness; and then she would cry and cry and say I was cruel, and then I would hold her in my arms till morning: loving her as much as ever, and often feeling as if, rather than suffer so, I could so hold her in my arms and plunge to the bottom of a river—where I would still hold her, after we were both dead. (694)

In the delusional expression of the paranoid-schizoid position, Miss Wade understands every show of kindness as a threat that must be demolished. The possession by others of good things, such as love and affection, causes her to disavow her own desire for them and, in the process, to annihilate both the feelings and the people with whom those feelings are associated.

In one sense the envy in this novel is contained within the relatively flat, caricatured figure of Miss Wade, and it can be understood as the pathology that deforms her personality. But the elements of greed, contempt, aggression, and spoiling that envy comprises, once noticed, spill out onto other characters as well, enabling us to explain elements unaccounted for by the shame hypothesis. The Dorrits and Arthur all bear signs of envy in relation to their imagined past and future selves (as well as the others against whom they measure themselves)—envy that is contained, repressed, and sometimes expressed in bursts of fear, recrimination, and self-pity. It is as if traces of the envious minor characters work their way into, begin to inhabit, and threaten to overwhelm the bodies of the shameful major ones. This process is enacted most directly in the form of Flora Finching and her bizarre appendage, the character known as Mr. F's Aunt. At her every appearance, Flora (Arthur's former fiancée) lets loose an irrepressible torrent of volubility, a hysterical concoction of reminiscence, flirtation, grievance, and free association. Mr. F's Aunt herself explodes very occasionally with an outraged, gnomic pronouncement—usually hurled, for no apparent reason, at Arthur. Barely suppressed in Flora's shamed and shaming verbal flood is an undertow of envious aggression, and one can read Mr. F's Aunt as a sort of avatar for the violence of this affect, precisely to the degree that her ejaculations lack any comprehensible content. Both contained and expressed in this minor character, Flora's envy resonates with that of Miss Wade, and it is contagious: Arthur and Little Dorrit herself seem to catch it, becom-

ing greedy and possessive of the love they fear they cannot secure—Arthur for Pet Meagles and Little Dorrit for Arthur himself.

Dickens emphasizes the intrapsychic dimensions of envy, seeing its violence as a problem of individuals that needs rooting out in order to make the corrupt world a more benign and humane place—one in which the shame that pervades it can be, if not eradicated, at least stabilized as a part of moral hygiene. In *The Way We Live Now*, by contrast, Trollope presents a universally cynical and competitive world; envy is social and systemic in this modern scene—which is acutely attuned to distinctions of status and wealth—and is closely associated with capitalism itself. Envy motivates many dimensions of the plot: the high-stakes grasping after quick profits, whether in the market for railroad shares, the mock-genteel gambling at the Beargarden club, or the literary marketplace that Trollope's surrogate, Lady Carbury, and several other characters enter into. The novel largely apprehends its materials in a mode of satire and critique, and the few glimpses it offers of an alternative to the damagingly competitive world present extra-market values, such as benevolence and altruism, as the only hope of a counterbalancing force—however inefficacious—to envy.

Both morally and monetarily charged, envy is a structuring principle of social relations here. It is most provocatively condensed in the Longstaffe family—both the ruined, self-important, contemptuous father and the indignant, devalued, sanctimonious daughter Georgiana. These characters illuminate the close companionship of envy and greed, which Klein calls “an impetuous and insatiable craving” (181). Greed is rampant in the world of Trollope's novel, but the envy attached to it works to spread the badness (in Klein's terms) to the unattainable objects of desire. In Mr. Longstaffe's supercilious disdain for the wealth, title, and possessions he lacks, and in Georgiana's furious destruction of both her friends and her suitors, we see the corrosive effects of envy. Mr. Longstaffe, Trollope writes,

entertained an idea that all who understood the matter would perceive at a single glance that he was a gentleman of the first water, and a man of fashion. He was intensely proud of his position in life, thinking himself to be immensely superior to all those who earned their bread. . . . He was beginning even to look down upon peers, since so many men of much less consequence than himself had been made lords; and, having stood and been beaten three or four times for his county, he was of opinion that a seat in the House was rather a mark of bad breeding. (99–100)

This is a particularly clear example of what Klein calls spoiling: turning the good thing that someone else has, and that the envious subject lacks, into a bad one as a way of disavowing the wish to possess it.

Through some nearly biblical form of justice, the father's envy is visited on the daughter, writ large now as ravenous pride, covetousness, and rage. Georgiana Longstaffe, we learn,

had meant, when she first started on her career, to have a lord—but lords are scarce. She was herself not very highly born, not very highly gifted, not very lovely, not very pleasant, and she had no fortune. She had long made up her mind that she could do

without a lord, but that she must get a commoner of the proper sort. He must be a man with a place in the country and sufficient means to bring him annually to London. . . . But now the men of the right sort never came near her. . . . When by chance she danced or exchanged a few words with the . . . [men] whom she used to know, they spoke to her with a want of respect which she felt and tasted but could hardly analyse. (246)

In this story of degeneration—which reads like a condensed anti-bildungsroman—the decline of Georgiana’s prospects serves to externalize her mental objects. Her descent reaches its nadir at the point when, despite scandalizing her family, she determines to settle for a wealthy, professional Jewish widower. That this match has, on her side at least, nothing to do with affection is perfectly clear in the misanthropic world of Trollope’s modernity. Her mother says to her of the match:

“You couldn’t have loved him, Georgiana.”

“Loved him! Who thinks about love nowadays? I don’t know any one who loves any one else.” . . .

“I think a young woman should love her husband.”

“It makes me sick, mamma, to hear you talk in that way. It does indeed. When one has been going on for a dozen years trying to do something—and I have never had any secrets from you—then that you should turn round upon me and talk about love!” . . .

“Georgiana, I will never see him.”

“Why not?”

“He is a Jew!”

“What abominable prejudice—what wicked prejudice! As if you didn’t know that all that is changed now! What possible difference can it make about a man’s religion? Of course I know that he is vulgar, and old, and has a lot of children. But if I can put up with that, I don’t think that you and papa have a right to interfere. As to his religion it cannot signify.” (728)

Perhaps it is needless to say that Georgiana’s apparently liberal protest against religious prejudice is a convenient fiction in defense of her own envious despoliation of her family, her would-be suitor, and herself. For in the anger that attends her envy, she projects the badness of the things she claims no longer to want onto everything and everyone, including herself.

For the novelist, envy is a valuable tool because of the sharp, often violent distinctions it effects between goodness and badness, and because it entails aggressive psychical maneuvers by which the good and the bad are externalized, idealized or devalued, and eventually reabsorbed. To move from Dickens to Trollope to Eliot is, in the sphere of ethics, to go from a Manichaeian polarity between good and evil to a world of mixed motives and moral complexity. If the two pole stars of George Eliot’s universe are egoism and sympathy, then envy might be said to orbit between them. In *Daniel Deronda* (1876), for instance, Eliot writes about the envy that Grandcourt supposes Deronda must feel for him: “An imaginary envy, the idea that others feel their comparative deficiency, is the ordinary *cortège* of

egoism" (279). The egoist—always villainous, or at any rate morally deficient, in Eliot—fantasizes himself the object of another's envy; sympathy, by contrast, forestalls and defeats envy through its forms of identification, incorporation, and selflessness. In this regard, sympathy might be likened to gratitude, the term that in Klein's lexicon stands in diacritical opposition to envy.

In *Middlemarch*, the element of paranoia that informs envy seems especially pertinent to at least one character: Mr. Casaubon. Writing of Casaubon, Eliot aphorizes: "There is a sort of jealousy which needs very little fire; it is hardly a passion, but a blight bred in the cloudy, damp despondency of uneasy egoism" (211). It is important to separate jealousy from its more primitive cousin envy even if, in common parlance, the term *jealousy* is often used to mean envy (although the reverse is never the case). Eliot, however, is quite precise. While one might be tempted to ascribe Casaubon's contempt of Will Ladislaw to jealousy, in fact what he experiences is much more fundamental, Ladislaw serving only as the incidental object of his animosity. As Eliot writes, "His antipathy to Will did not spring from the common jealousy of a winter-worn husband: it was something deeper, bred by his lifelong claims and discontents" (360). This "antipathy," equally directed at the professional rivals with whom he imagines himself to be in competition, strongly resembles Klein's account of envy; it generates grandiose fantasies of a crushing victory: "To convince Carp [the object of Casaubon's scholarly envy] of his mistake, so that he would have to eat his own words with a good deal of indigestion, would be an agreeable accident of triumphant authorship" (420). Reported in free indirect discourse, this is part of Casaubon's fantasy of his own posthumous glory, and as it continues, the scholarly conquest merges into the romantic one:

Since, thus, the prevision of his own unending bliss could not nullify the bitter savours of irritated jealousy and vindictiveness, it is the less surprising that the probability of a transient earthly bliss for other persons, when he himself should have entered into glory, had not a potently sweetening effect. If the truth should be that some undermining disease was at work within him, there might be large opportunity for some people to be the happier when he was gone; and if one of those people should be Will Ladislaw, Mr. Casaubon objected so strongly that it seemed as if the annoyance would make part of his disembodied existence. (420)

In other words, even the imagined possibility of another's happiness after his own death threatens to rob Casaubon of a peaceful afterlife; there is a zero sum of happiness in his psychic economy, and anyone else's possession of it comes at a cost to himself. This way of turning emotions into objects—giving them the form of things outside oneself, including other people—serves important psychic functions, according to Klein: it is a way of managing one's dissatisfaction with the world as well as oneself, of splitting the good from the bad, and of spoiling the good in order that no one—not oneself, not others—might enjoy it. It is a compulsive, if fascinating, form of violent animosity.

Finally, while Casaubon is immovable from his envy, displaying many of its essential dimensions, Ladislaw is able to shift into what Klein calls the depressive position, from which integration of whole objects is possible (rather than the polar-

ized part objects of the paranoid-schizoid position), and the reparation necessary to coping with the moral complexity of real life can begin. The principle of sympathy, so central to Eliot's undertaking, counterbalances envy, and while it ultimately escapes Casaubon, it becomes evident not only in characters who emerge into a fragile ethical and affective balance by the end—Dorothea and Ladislaw, as well as Rosamond and Lydgate, if only for a time—but also in the narrative approach itself: working constantly to elicit the reader's sympathetic identification through its efforts at testing, generalizing, and explicating the behavior of its characters, the narrative both explicitly and implicitly aims to generate compassion even for the envy of Casaubon, using the violence and negativity of this affect to evoke its antidotes, those provisional efforts that Klein calls gratitude and reparation.

In all three novels I have discussed, envy does important work: it belies the sentimental benignity of Dickens, oddly preserving the shame that underwrites that world; it pervades the cynical modernity of Trollope, who offers only a flaccid hope of altruism as its antithesis; and it enables the reparative gestures of Eliot through a countervailing sympathy. A constitutive feature of the human psyche, envy, with its destructive capacity for effecting sharp moral distinctions, is also deeply and formatively woven into the fabric of the social.

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