

Max Lemuz

The Performance of Victimhood in *Little Dorrit*: A Shifted Moral Center

From the outset of Charles Dickens's *Little Dorrit*, there are competing disciplinary forces at work. The state, which is the typical disciplinary force of society, is portrayed by Britain's "best" and most goal-oriented department—that of the Circumlocution Office. The office's mantra of "HOW NOT TO DO IT" (Dickens 113) is a testament to their inefficacy and Dickens's acerbic satire. On the other hand, Amy Dorrit, who asks that others call her Little Dorrit, is a disciplinary force in her own right, and one that seems to be more effectual than a bureaucracy's platitudes.

A disciplinary force is revealed in the magnitude and ways that other characters are affected by their action and being. In this way, many characters can be disciplinary forces that dynamically affect others, but not all characters can do so in positive ways. The novel's moral center lies on a figurative plane where the most good one can affect in others is at the center. "Good" is a valuation that can fall into subjective pitfalls, but in *Little Dorrit's* sense, it ties in with the novel's themes of guilt. The realization and acceptance of guilt is a key indicator when measuring the effects of moral change. In this way, current scholarship has placed Little Dorrit at the moral center, while the Circumlocution Office can be seen operating on a moral plane that instead values bureaucracy for bureaucracy's sake.

The moral center was first identified by D.W. Jefferson as he placed Little Dorrit at the center of it. For him, Amy lived a life that "would hardly be possible without much sacrifice of the free play of the mind, in favour of a devotion which never meets with a true return" (Jefferson 309). He accurately identified Dorrit's sacrificial nature and despite any reciprocity

for her efforts, she was the “greatest and most sustained tribute to human goodness” (309). In the context of a perceived “imprisonment” of themes, Little Dorrit’s personality and character is elevated and is not restricted by theme.

Richard A. Currie complicates Little Dorrit as not just a silent goddess, but of a complicated woman with hidden rage. Her anger is quiet but pervasive as she defends her father from perceived criticism from Arthur’s own motivations and others’ judgements. “It is a classic example of the narcissistic defense in which the child defends the parent against any criticism” (Currie 315). The Freudian psychological analysis doesn’t necessarily have any moral implications according to Currie, but the tempered rage’s presence is of vital importance.

Critics Lauren Byler and Sherri Wolf dig deeper into Amy’s personality and actions by proving that Amy is empowered and because she acts with conscious purpose, despite and with her passive nature. Coming from a foundation of “feminist-inflected psychology” (Byler 220), Byler argues that Dickens’s characters, one of whom being Little Dorrit, exhibit a passive aggressiveness through their niceness and cuteness that ultimately lends to the idea that they are able to purposefully curate their identity through those traits. Little Dorrit’s interaction with John Chivery and Arthur are two examples where her seeming smallness are accentuated, despite wielding an unassuming control over the relationship. Wolf’s article examines the contrast between the expansion of the disembodied “Nobody,” who represents a lack of accountability with the unassuming Amy Dorrit who seems to be physically, socially, and morally an opposite. Wolf argues that Amy’s virtues and physicality create a pervasive form of disciplinary power, in line with Foucault’s theories on power relations, that are able to spread to those she encounters. The relationship Amy has with Arthur and her effects on him are clearly examined, and Wolf’s

insights that Arthur's feelings of responsibility are in direct relation to his interaction are well founded. Additionally, Wolf even relates the expansion of Amy's importance to Dickens as the novel progressed as another layer of her unassuming pervasiveness. While Byler provides compelling evidence that Little Dorrit is victimized, and at times uses that victimization to her benefit and curation of identity, it is not completely clear that her passiveness always leads to aggression, or even whether it acts as a purposeful performance of her identity.

Jacob Jewusiak's article posits, that for Dickens, Little Dorrit is very much an exercise in subverting the reader's attention by instead using the suspension of suspense, or as Jewusiak puts it, "waiting," as a type of suspense in itself. The argument is framed in contrast between the speculative and rash nature of the Circumlocution Office and those that rally around Mr. Merdle as a legitimate investment, and that of Amy Dorrit who exhibits patience as a virtue.

These many virtues that critics discuss—patience, passivity, smallness, cuteness—are all aspects that develop through Amy's performance of self-identification. Little Dorrit's performance is one of victimhood, where she withdraws from others and allows their outward aggression to shape her own character. In doing so, she can be a disciplinary force to Arthur, however, that performance of victimhood seems to have its limits when it comes to affecting her own family who are in closest proximity to her. Because performative victimhood is exemplified by both the Circumlocution Office and Amy, I wanted to examine how that victimhood can complicate Amy's role as a moral center. Therefore, I contend that while Amy is closest to the moral center of the novel, her performative victimhood pushes her away from that center.

Far outside the moral center lies the Circumlocution Office, which is the prime satirical example of government bureaucracy and inefficiency. They also demonstrate performative

victimhood in its most extreme form. For a bureaucracy whose motto is understood as “the art of perceiving--HOW NOT TO DO IT” (Dickens 113), there is a decided lack of art in anything the office does. An artist creates to inspire or entertain while the Circumlocution Office seems to do neither, however, if there was one type of artist the office would be most like, it would be the comedic actor. The Circumlocution Office’s performative victimhood is one of complete farce, and Dickens used it as an extreme to show the dangers of performative victimhood.

Like the actor, the Circumlocution Office representatives act as if they’re on a stage performing for an audience. First, their most active role for a department that does nothing involves continually defending their office from “angry spirits [attacking] the Circumlocution Office. Sometimes, parliamentary questions were asked about it... by demagogues so low and ignorant as to hold that, the real recipe of government was, How to do it” (114). The use of a non-existent entity as their would be attacker reflects the non-existent nature of their attacks. As they denigrate populism by attacking demagogues, the office raises itself up above such “trifling” notions as democracy or representation. And once their role of defender is established, they perform their victimhood to the biggest stage they can find: the British Parliament. “Then would the noble lord... in whose department it was to defend the Circumlocution Office, put an orange in his pocket, and make a regular field-day of the occasion” (114). As if taking a refreshment to a theater show, the office defender stands on his stage in parliament with an orange and uses it as an opportunity to wax poetic about the virtues of the office, because despite trying to be a defender, the office nevertheless achieves majority votes with ease. The office’s performative victimhood is a theatrical art in its own right, and it uses it not to entertain or inspire, but to selfishly perpetuate a system that maintains the status quo. Here lies the fault of

performative victimhood that the office represents, and Amy also utilizes. But unlike the Circumlocution Office, Amy's performative victimhood can discipline some of those around her.

One of the clearest forms of Amy's performative victimhood is in her interaction with John Chivery. When Amy is caught by John in a moment of self-reflection at the Iron Bridge, she has no interest in his romantic advances, as she favors Arthur Clennam. Amy's performative victimhood takes the form of her remarking upon her own stature and strength, and compelling others to think in such terms. She tells John, "When you think of me at all... let it only be as the child you have seen grow up in the prison, with one set of duties always occupying her; as a weak, retired, contented, unprotected girl" (223). Amy is successful in rebuking John's efforts by calling his attention to her stature, and in doing so successfully wills him to her persuasion. In this way, Amy becomes a disciplinary force over John by using performative victimhood as her primary technique. Byler notes that Amy "also redoubles the will power required to restrain her irritation into a circumlocutory strike on John's eagerness to please her" (Byler 223). Amy transforms her passivity into her own unique form of aggression, and her "circumlocutory strike" calls to her adeptness to her art. Similar to the Circumlocution Office, Amy is calling attention to her own victimhood and using it to get her way, however, her disciplinary force can be a moralizing influence.

From the moment when Amy is first noticed by Arthur, he associates her with the nagging feeling he has about his own family's guilt. In this way, Arthur is impressionable to Amy's disciplinary force, and she readily exerts that influence. Despite being in a different country, Amy attempts to regulate Arthur's feelings and thoughts through her letters to him. In her final lines to him, she requests of him using powerful language to "think of me (when you

think of me at all), and of my true affection and devoted gratitude, always, without change, as of Your poor child, LITTLE DORRIT” (Dickens 465). The powerful language of her affection and gratitude seem to tread the line between a request and a demand. She makes note to sign her letter off by using performative victimhood as she calls herself a “poor child,” despite at that point having an abundance of wealth. Of course she was never comfortable with that wealth, but despite her social class, she is comfortable with utilizing performative victimhood, and in Arthur’s case, it is a moralizing force. Arthur is a character who readily admits his wrongdoing, and once he is taken to the Marshalsea himself, he even accepts full responsibility for his poor investments. Wolf succinctly explains Amy’s power as using “her subtle, unassuming, childlike presence [to be] an individuating, regulative effect in the novel, making other characters self-conscious, self-critical, and self-effacing” (Wolf 231). John and Arthur seem well-suited to be disciplined by Amy, but this is only in certain circumstances, for Arthur’s more morally ambiguous action is rarely attributed to Amy’s force.

Before looking at how Amy’s own family isn’t affected by her disciplinary force, it’s important to consider why Arthur’s choice to invest in Merdle is largely ignored by critics in discourses on Amy. If Amy’s disciplinary force through performative victimhood is to be a moralizing force irrespective of distance, it would make sense that Arthur would make the better choice and be affected by Amy’s own principles of waiting. When Mr. Pancks put forth his own arguments in favor of Merdle’s investment, he stresses that the investments are not meant to “repair a wrong you never committed. That’s you. A man must be himself. But, I say this... make as much as you can!” (Dickens 574). Pancks’s own form of persuasion seems to have been successful in moving Arthur toward the venture. By isolating Arthur to think just of “himself,”

Pancks is able to disconnect him from other influences. This is not to say with any strong certainty that it was Amy's fault or responsibility for Arthur's choice, but it does immediately clarify some of the limits of Amy as a moral center. Her moral influence becomes limited when it must face other external influences, and whether Arthur's choice to invest was at all informed by Amy's influence or not, that limit exists. More so than Arthur, Amy's own family not only doesn't seem to feel that same discipline, but instead, disciplines Amy, revealing more limitations to Amy's performative victimhood.

William Dorrit bore Amy in the Marshalsea, and while he sometimes tries to act as Patriarch to its "collegians," he exhibits his own performative victimhood when it comes to Amy. After Amy's encounter with John Chivery, William is worried that he's fallen out of favor with John's turnkey father. He exclaims, "Why, good Heaven! if I was to lose support and recognition of Chivery and his brother-officers, I might starve to death here" (Dickens 230). Despite being supported by Amy's own work and donations from other residents, William falls into hyperbole and suggests that this could kill him. He calls himself a "squalid, disgraced wretch! (231) in order to elicit forgiveness from Amy. William blames the turnkeys' attitude toward him on Amy's rebuke of John Chivery, and while there may be some truth to the matter, William uses performative victimhood to try to affect Amy. It seems as if Amy might even have learned her own performative victimhood from her father. Her response to his victimhood is to exert her own as she doesn't question or quail her father's fallacious thinking. Instead, she comforts "her father's wasted heart upon her innocent breast, and turning to it a fountain of love and fidelity that never ran dry or waned, through all his years of famine" (233). As this passage is framed through Amy, it combines her "innocence" with his "wasted heart" in a way that

reveals both of their performative victimhood. The notion that her father could starve is perpetuated through a metaphor of famine, yet the only lack of food that William experiences is “food for thought” on Amy’s part as she refuses to do anything but love and enable her father’s bad behavior.

This behavior comes to a high point when both her sister Fanny and William are abusing her when she is seen walking with a pauper. With no avail to Amy’s apologies, Fanny takes offense and exclaims “Oh! Don’t Fanny me, you mean little thing, don’t! The idea of coming along the open streets, in the broad light of day, with a Pauper!’ (firing off the last word as if it were a ball from an air-gun.)” (367). The violent language used to describe Fanny’s verbal attack transforms it to that of a physical weapon which reveals the pain that she inflicts on her own sister. In Fanny’s view, however, she is not attacking Amy but defending her own family’s honor. She falls neatly into the Dorrit line of performative victimhood as well but does so with the purpose of defending attackers like the non-existent ones of the Circumlocution Office. William is not as biting as his daughter, but his remarks are dismissive to Amy’s point of view and ultimately contribute to her verbal and emotional abuse. As a response to Amy’s unrelenting apologies, William says “I will forget it as soon as I can. I,’ with hysterical cheerfulness, ‘I--shall soon be able to dismiss it” (369). And in his remark, he doesn’t dismiss his offense, but his own daughter’s feelings at the cost of a false sense of family honor and esteem. What is most noteworthy is that William’s words of sorrow don’t match up with his “hysterical cheerfulness.” This is because William revels in the pauper’s visit, as shortly after he refers to the man as a “bruised reed” (369), which references the bible in order to deify himself. In Hegelian fashion,

William Dorrit relies on the pauper's presence (the only person of a class lower than he) to give him a sense of higher status, despite the slave in this scenario ironically being the freer man.

In response to this abuse, Amy maintains her performative victimhood to less than effective results. "Thus directed, Little Dorrit dutifully rose and obeyed: only pausing for a moment as she went out of the room, to give her sister a kiss of reconciliation" (371). The self-conscious or self-critical are completely devoid from Fanny and William, whereas Amy's acquiescence shows that her own performative victimhood has its limits. These limits lie in a disciplinary force greater than her own, that being her family's performative victimhood. The Dorrits use a "fight fire with fire" strategy, and William and Fanny's disciplinary force is overwhelming for Amy. She not only leaves their high-minded presence, but even attempts kissing Fanny as a point of reconciliation. With no mention of a reaction from Fanny, it is not surprising if her gesture was dismissed in line with her emotions. The true power in this disciplinary force and the failing of Amy's performative victimhood lies in what Amy would have done if she knew how upset her family would be. She claims that "[she] would not have come here with him, father, [she] would not indeed" (369). In order to pacify her family, Amy was willing to do the morally dubious act of shunning the pauper in line with her own family's values and sense of esteem. This failing isn't isolated to this scene, however, as it is only a part of what contributes to an enabling force that leads Fanny and William unchanged by her.

Both sister and father end up unchanged and immune to Amy's performative victimhood. Fanny ends up marrying Edmund Sparkler for a Defacto trophy marriage for status's sake. Fanny acknowledges Edmund's lack of merit yet marries him anyway. When arguing with him, she mentions that Amy is a "precious child of that still character that they require a contrast--require

life and movement around them, to bring them out in their right colors and make one love them of all things; but she will require to be roused, on more accounts than one” (682). In making this statement, she says more about herself than she does of Amy. While Amy’s passive nature may be accurate, Fanny admits to not being able to bring out the best in her in no caring way.

Additionally, the “rousing” which Amy requires seems to be that of the veins of abuse that she would subject her sister to, which cements the fact that she has not changed as a person. William dies at the hands of his own descent into madness culminating in a rant to his “creditors” who turn out to be fellow dinner guests. After his death, William’s brother eulogizes him by maintaining the same esteem that he always had for himself. “O my brother! O William, William! You to go before me; you to go alone; you to go, and I to remain! You, so far superior, so distinguished, so noble” (638). His final actions contrary to his brother’s final words, William ends his life where it began, with inflated esteem that others are willing to carry on and maintain. At this point, it’s important to bring back the most venerable Circumlocution Office and compare it to Amy.

When the young Barnacle goes to visit Arthur in the Marshalsea, he maintains his performative victimhood by attempting to dissolve his office of any responsibility for Arthur’s confinement. In this, he reveals another quasi-motto for the Circumlocution Office: “Regard our place from the point of view that we only ask you to leave us alone” (721). The office makes it a point to be left alone. Amy, in a sense, with her separation of others also wants to be left alone. Her performative victimhood is similar to the office’s in its sometimes-selfish intents; however, the disciplinary moralizing force is clearly seen in Arthur. Jewusiak notes that “Amy is able to overcome her father’s imperatives: in the first case, Mr. Dorrit inherits money that makes

Chivery a bad match and, in the second, he dies before pressuring Amy into marrying someone she does not love” (Jewusiak 289). Despite these successes, they are not due to performative victimhood and have little relation to the moral center of the novel, as those are her own selfish interests. The self-regulating force that Amy had on Arthur was non-existent in Fanny and William, and it begs the question “Why?” It is because of the power of performative victimhood itself. When aimed at Arthur, performative victimhood was effective for Amy as it was a strategy, he had little experience in. On the other hand, the Dorrit family were masters of their own performative victimhood, and there’s was overwhelmingly stronger than Amy’s. It could be that performative victimhood is stronger the less self-reflecting a person is because any criticism bounces off. If that was the case though, it might be argued that performative victimhood was not what keeps Amy from being the moral center of the novel, however, I would disagree.

Performative victimhood, at its core, caused Amy to use the same strategies that enabled bad behavior and maintained the status quo, and in that way, her performative victimhood did just that. As the Circumlocution Office maintains a bureaucracy that stalls economic change with innovators like Daniel Doyce, Amy stalls personal change in those closest to her.

In recalling Amy’s letters to Arthur once more, it is important to note the structural difference that the two chapters have compared to the rest of the novel. While primarily in third person, the letter format provides the reader a unique opportunity to understand Amy’s position. Wolf explains that the letters to Arthur show “a similarly emphatic plea that he not let go of the past. She seeks a fixed temporal relationship with him such that she continues to be the impoverished, needy child of the Marshalsea, and he the man preoccupied with her, aggravated by a sense of guilt...” (Wolf 223). Amy’s disciplinary force ends up being a temporally freezing

one. Her letters are in writing and cannot be changed once sent, which is fitting considering she has no interest in changing herself or even those around her. The changes in Arthur that critics attribute to Amy might easily be a part of Arthur's character from the beginning. Instead of Arthur being disciplined by Amy because of her performative victimhood, he could be disciplined by her because he wants to. With the positives of performative victimhood possibly negated, that only leaves the negatives of that freezing effect which seems to have played out not only in Amy's letter to Arthur, but with her family. Her father, just as her sister, became temporally frozen as people with a high sense of esteem and that did not change.

A common objection is that William did, in fact, change as exhibited in his final raving outburst, however, whatever change occurred in his mind, it was inarguably not for his benefit. For the disciplinary force to be a moralizing contributor, it would have had to positively affect him in some way. This is not to say that Amy is not closer to the moral center of the novel than, say, the Circumlocution Office. Performative victimhood may be reason to complicate Little Dorrit's moral landscape, but her other virtues are still withstanding. Self-reflection and a humble identity are ever-present in Amy, and if only the Circumlocution Office had an ounce, they might just happen to stumble into "doing it."

Works Cited

- Byler, Lauren. "Dickens's Little Women; or, Cute as the Dickens." *Victorian Literature and Culture*, vol. 41, no. 2, 2013, pp. 219-50.
- Currie, Richard. "As If She Had Done Him a Wrong': Hidden Rage and Object Protection in Dickens's Amy Dorrit." *English Studies*, vol. 72, no. 4, 1991, pp. 368-84.
- Dickens, Charles. *Little Dorrit*. Oxford University Press, 2012.
- Jefferson, D. W. "The Moral Centre of 'Little Dorrit'." *Essays in Criticism*, 1976, pp. 300-17.
- Jewusiak, Jacob. "Suspenseful Speculation and the Pleasure of Waiting in *Little Dorrit*." *Victorian Literature and Culture*, vol. 44, no. 2, 2016, pp. 279-96.
- Wolf, Sherri. "The Enormous Power of No Body: Little Dorrit and the Logic of Expansion." *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, vol. 42, no. 3, 2000, 223-54.