

**Rehabilitating Catherine Dickens:**  
**Memory and Authorial Agency in Gaynor Arnold's**  
**Neo-Victorian Biofiction *Girl in a Blue Dress***

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Catherine Dickens – Charles’s ultimately estranged wife – entrusted her letters from Charles to their daughter Katey, urging her to “Give these to the British Museum – that the world may know he loved me once” (qtd. in Schlicke 162). Gaynor Arnold’s biofictional account of Charles and Catherine Dickens’s marriage, entitled *Girl in a Blue Dress* (2008), heeds Catherine’s imperative to tell her side of the story by embodying her in the novel’s narrator, Dorothea (or) “Dodo” Gibson; likewise, Charles Dickens is cast as Dorothea’s estranged husband Alfred. Both Catherine Dickens and Gaynor Arnold recognise an author’s power to shape truth and solidify historical memory. In life, Catherine Dickens attempted to regain control of her story by employing her husband’s own words (in the form of letters he wrote to her) to counteract his claim that he never loved her and to corroborate her narrative of their life together. In fiction, Gaynor Arnold continues Catherine’s rehabilitative mission by inviting readers to consider the truth of Catherine’s history through the memorable mode of story. Moreover, Arnold’s Catherine Dickens equivalent – Dorothea Gibson – significantly reclaims her life at the end of the novel by assuming authorship of her late husband’s as yet unfinished final novel. The historical Catherine and her fictional counterpart Dorothea both engage with Charles Dickens’s words as a means of recovery. Fittingly, Dorothea takes a critical additional step: while Catherine left Charles’s words to her to speak for themselves, Dorothea adds *her* own words to the narrative *he* initiated, thus achieving authorship and constructing memory herself.

Biofiction – the hybrid genre of biography and fiction – is well suited to Arnold’s narrative revisionism: “Ostensibly providing a (fictional) glimpse into the author’s private life, the genre of biofiction caters to the voyeuristic gaze of the public and their obsession with recovering the (historical) author’s ‘true’ and ‘authentic’ self behind the mask of his/her renowned public persona” (Novak and Mayer 25). In writing biofiction, Arnold thus challenges the traditionally accepted version of the Dickens’s marriage – which portrays Charles as the long-suffering hero and Catherine as the clumsy, dim-witted, ultimately unlovable dunce – by telling their story from Catherine’s perspective under the guise of Dorothea Gibson. Dorothea continues Catherine’s mission by indignantly recalling how Alfred “declared me a bad mother and a worse wife. Two untrue statements together” (93). And “to say we’d *never* been happy after all the loving things he said to me; after all the letters he wrote – that was a simple lie” (264). Dorothea offers a more balanced (and thus arguably more believable) version of events, which culminates in an authorial opportunity. Biofiction is also a fitting genre given Charles Dickens’s proclivity for mingling fact and fiction, which is well documented. His own son admitted occasionally feeling inferior to Dickens’s fictional family: “‘The children of his brain,’ Charley said, ‘were much more real to him at times than we were’” (Gottlieb 239). By choosing biofiction, Arnold consensually plays Dickens’s own game; however, as author, *she* chooses to tell the story from Catherine’s perspective. In so doing, Arnold participates in the neo-Victorian revisionist tradition by “*self-consciously engag[ing] with the act of (re)interpretation, (re)discovery and (re)vision concerning the Victorians*” (Heilmann and Llewellyn 4; italics original). Arnold employs Dorothea Gibson to help set Catherine Dickens’s record straight, thereby challenging

Charles's interpretation of events. In her "Author's Note" at the start of the novel, Arnold states that she has "taken a novelist's liberties as I explored an imaginative path throughout their relationship." However, she is equally quick to confirm that she has also "attempted to keep true to the essential natures of the two main protagonists as I have come to understand them" (np). Attempting to uncover the "authentic" or "essential" story of the Dickens's marriage through the mode of revisionist fiction is paradoxical, but as Cora Kaplan reminds us, biofiction "can be interpreted in various ways, as highlighting the tension between biography and fiction, as well as marking the overlap between them" (65). Arnold simultaneously effaces this boundary and restores it, in her quest to allow Catherine a voice in her own story. After all, when one of the primary players ostensibly confused his real and fictional children, broadcasting the wife's perspective via a fictional double seems quite appropriate.

Moreover, Arnold's method of rehabilitating Catherine by adapting her story into novel form makes it more likely to captivate the public imagination. According to Ann Rigney, "Stories stick. They help make particular events *memorable* by figuring the past in a structured way that engages the sympathies of the reader" (347). *Girl in a Blue Dress* is a prime example of Rigney's point: through biofiction – the term itself a melding of fact and fiction – Arnold demonstrates the author's prerogative to celebrate this complex slippage between history and story. By constructing Dorothea Gibson and installing her as the novel's narrator, Arnold forms one of the "neo-Victorian attempts to redress historical wrongs" (Smith 1) as she invites modern readers to reimagine the Dickens in a newly memorable way.

Current scholarship on *Girl in a Blue Dress* predominantly focuses on the long-silenced wife's opportunity to speak at last, as Dorothea determines to complete her husband's unfinished final novel *Ambrose Boniface*. While united in its interest in Dorothea's decision to work on Alfred's novel, critical opinion is nonetheless divided on whether Dorothea's authorial opportunity is ultimately empowering or restricting. Julia Worthington reads it as empowering: through assuming authorship herself, Dorothea is "thereby outlasting [Alfred] in life and literature" (86), and Margaret D. Stetz deems Arnold's novel a "representative text" of "feminist didacticism" in the Neo-Victorian genre (144). Conversely, Lai Ming Ho argues that "For a writer, being asked by Dickens's spirit to finish his book would seem to be an honour and recognition. This is however hardly an ideal feminist reconciliation and resolution for an estranged wife" (68). In Ho's reading, a posthumous invitation to authorship cannot cover offences enacted during Alfred and Dorothea's life together. Nonetheless, like Worthington, I see Dorothea's decision to write fiction as an important and empowering transition from living in the past, where she is stuck in the rut of repeatedly reading Alfred's first letter to her, to living in the present. The novel ends with the words, "And I start to write" (414). Dorothea is finally moving forward; she is now creating rather than merely regurgitating.

Surprisingly, despite the novel being typically described as an autobiography or memoir, the significance of confronting and constructing memory in the novel has thus far garnered little critical attention. This article addresses this gap by examining the novel's construction of Dorothea's authorial agency in reclaiming her life and reconciling her story following her husband's death. Dorothea's rise to authorship necessitates an interrogation of the memories – the realm where history converses and converges with story – of her life with Alfred.

Lillian Nayder references Arnold's novel several times in her biography of Catherine Dickens entitled *The Other Dickens*. While Nayder concedes that "Arnold grants [Dorothea Gibson]

more agency than others usually do in such depictions” (341)<sup>1</sup> her overarching assessment is that “writers such as Arnold challenge those who scapegoat Catherine Dickens yet share a common assumption with them: that Catherine’s significance and that of her sisters lie solely in their relationships with Dickens” (16). Therefore, while Arnold’s depiction of Dorothea may be “evocative and sympathetic” (16) Nayder still sees it ultimately falling short of the mark, since she views Catherine Dickens as more actively disputing her husband’s false narrative of her: “She took up her pen, as [Dorothea] does, and wrote – as much to counter as to complete her husband’s story. For the ‘real’ Catherine Dickens, not simply for the figure imagined by the novelist, widowhood was a starting point and offered more than a chance for retrospection and nostalgia” (341). Although Nayder’s observation about the danger in using Charles Dickens as the sole starting point for establishing Catherine’s consequence is valid (since Dickens certainly sought to control the narratives of everyone with whom he interacted) this “chance for retrospection and nostalgia” (341) cannot be so easily dismissed since it proves critical in building Dorothea’s narrative confidence. As narratorial detective, Dorothea initiates reputational repair which is both retrospective (as she reflects upon memories of life with Alfred) and future-oriented (as she sets out to leave her mark on Alfred’s final novel).

### **Productive Recollections: “I began to feel a person in my own right.”**

The power to speak – and significantly the power to speak *first* – clearly has lasting implications. Arnold challenges Charles Dickens’s perspective, which has traditionally overshadowed Catherine’s, through Dorothea’s role as narratorial detective. As such, attempting to tell her own counter-story, and distinguishing between true and false narratives, are clearly essential for Dorothea. In particular, she assigns prodigious consequence to the written word, and she repeatedly turns to letters to search for the truth, whether it is to uncover Alfred’s potential infidelity or re-install confidence that he once loved her. Dorothea professes, “I felt that letters were my only chance of finding out the truth” (233). Dorothea’s detective work with letters can be read as a nod to Catherine’s plea that the public review her love letters from Charles as evidence of their mutual affection.

Arnold incorporates this awe of written narratives into the novel, giving credence to Dorothea’s initial struggle to write confidently by juxtaposing it against Alfred’s insistence on the veracity of his version of events. In the middle of the novel, family friend Michael O’Rourke makes the critical observation that “Alfred always made sure you saw things exactly as *he* saw them” (166) and disagreements were certain to end with “the conviction that somehow *I* was in the wrong” (166). Dorothea’s situation was even more difficult; her disagreements with Alfred ultimately ended up in eviction from her own home, while Alfred’s confidence ensured public opinion was on his side. As Dorothea’s housekeeper, Mrs. Wilson, wryly observes, ““They believed him of course. When he said as he was honorable and had behaved himself, they took it as the Truth”” (94). Having long lived with Alfred’s version of their narrative, Dorothea initially lacks the courage to complete his unfinished novel. Authorship still feels unfamiliar to Dorothea, as she has thus far been

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<sup>1</sup> Specifically, Nayder cites the examples of Jean Elliott’s play *My Dearest Kate*, Claire Tomalin’s biography *The Invisible Woman: The Story of Nelly Ternan and Charles Dickens*, and Phyllis Rose’s study of love and power in Victorian marriage entitled *Parallel Lives*, which all deem Catherine Dickens’s post-Charles life “empty” (338).

denied a legitimate voice even in constructing her own side of the story about her failed marriage. In response to Mrs. Wilson's observation about the public's willingness to blindly accept Alfred's account, Dorothea admits, "She is right. Of course they believed him. Anything else would be out of the question" (94). Accustomed to Alfred alone shaping their family narrative and feeling "foolish" after disagreements with him, Dorothea must re-evaluate their shared history – and come to terms with her place in it – before she can assume authorship herself. Fortunately, authorial confidence does not permanently evade Dorothea, and she eventually discovers the authority writing affords. Whereas previously Alfred accused her of adopting the wrong perspective during disagreements, painting himself as the hero and her as the villain who must stubbornly "choose to see [the issue] differently" (145) Dorothea's eventual insistence on the legitimacy of her voice culminates in the opportunity to subject Alfred's perspective to suit her own when she steps in as author of his unfinished novel. Dorothea interrogates old memories – many of them preserved in letters – to shake Alfred's stranglehold over her story by confronting their past.

"The historical novel can be considered an act of memory, as Mieke Bal describes it, designed to bring the past into the present and to shape it for present purposes" (Mitchell and Parsons 13). As the novel's overarching author, Arnold grooms her narrator – Dorothea – by helping her to productively remember. Both Arnold and Dorothea channel memories into tools for transformation; the past becomes the necessary motivation for present – and future – change. Part of this process requires Dorothea to confront her *lost* memories. During a difficult pregnancy Dorothea confesses, "I forgot things. I lost things" (193) and then her daughter died, after which "I was given so much laudanum I can remember only blackness" (193). Alfred attempts to marginalise Dorothea at this vulnerable time by sending her away to recuperate, and he later uses her absence to support his claim about her failures as wife and mother. As such, to (ostensibly) aid her convalescence, Dorothea travels to the Midlands, where she gradually re-enters society.

Fortunately, her forced hiatus also proves fruitful: Dorothea's first foray as a storyteller takes place amidst this new social set, where she finds solace in sharing stories of her life with Alfred. At the outset, this audience is drawn to Dorothea as "the wife of Alfred Gibson" (202), but she notices that "[a]s the days went by, they began to ask me my opinion of matters, and were interested in what I had to say. Indeed for the first time *I began to feel a person*" (202; italics mine). Dorothea demonstrates her merit as a story-teller and conversationalist. Dorothea feels more fully human when afforded a legitimate voice, and remembering how her perspective was validated in the Midlands contributes to Dorothea's eventual authorial return. Reflecting upon past memories encourages Dorothea to move forward with her life. This is a substantial step in Dorothea's narrative of identity and stands in stark contrast to Alfred, "who never once looked to me for confirmation of anything . . . he never sought my views" (297). While Alfred may have initially played on Dorothea's weakness and memory losses to write her out of their family narrative, she reintegrates herself by remembering her recovery as a time of transition from being a voiceless wife to an individual with valid perspectives. Recovering and confronting painful memories, and acknowledging time lost to laudanum enable Dorothea to eventually challenge the selective history Alfred assigned her.

When the time comes to read Alfred's will, Dorothea explains, "I do not want or expect that anything material has been left to me. My memories are far more precious" (37). Dorothea fluctuates between the material and immaterial when her memories are involved. Recounting their early courtship, she muses, "When I read his letters, though, it was almost as good as

being with him” (41). The material letters point to an immaterial memory that is nearly as powerful as physical presence. Even Dorothea’s description of Alfred’s first letter to her as her most prized possession (39) is steeped in the slippage between physicality and immateriality, itself an offshoot of the overarching slippage between fact and fiction in the novel. Paradoxically, through embracing her immaterial memories Dorothea decides to re-engage with material things, and when she eventually reclaims choice possessions from her past life, she carefully picks objects that attest to her strengths and to her individuality.

Entering her former home for the first time in years, Dorothea is confronted by a host of memories, many of them painful. The sight of a mahogany table recalls her “failures as a hostess, my failures of wit and grace and beauty, my failures of organization, my failures to keep awake . . . I don’t want anything to remind me of that time” (213). Thus, Dorothea successfully negotiates the terms of these memories by selectively choosing items to take and items to leave behind. Even as she declines to take anything that would remind her of dreadful dinner parties, she also dictates to her sister precisely what she *does* want: “‘I don’t want his writing things, Sissy! I want *my* property!’” (216). Dorothea’s specific declaration marks the separation between herself and Alfred. Although Dorothea does not wish to forget Alfred entirely, she is also learning to separate her narrative perspective from his.

Nonetheless, shortly after Alfred’s death, Dorothea still filters events through his perspective. Upon venturing out for a carriage ride, she contemplates how Alfred would fashion fiction from the surrounding scenes: “I watch them all going about their business and wonder about their lives; what stories Alfred could make of them” (149). Before Dorothea can see herself as a viable author with the capacity to pluck fiction from the mundane, she must struggle to make sense of her life – and confront the false narratives seeking to control her – in the wake of Alfred’s death. “Alfred already inhabited every real part of me” (47) Dorothea muses shortly after her estranged husband’s death. Later, she tells Mrs. Wilson, “Well, he was my life, I suppose . . .” (170), and at the outset of the novel, Dorothea’s daughter Kitty describes her mother as “a ghost from the past” (8). But by investigating her history, Dorothea’s narrative changes from one akin to Miss Havisham’s (imprisoned by spectres from the past permanently replicating epic disappointment) to one which acknowledges the disappointment but is able to move *past* the past. Thus, Dorothea’s decision to write fiction – to exercise narrative authority – is significant in that it also quite literally marks the start of a new chapter in her own life. Alfred may have created the characters in *Ambrose Boniface*, but it is Dorothea who will ultimately control them. Similarly, Alfred may have striven for sole authorial control over Dorothea’s history, but she learns to use his words to support her perspective, as when she re-reads his early letters to her in defiance of his lies that he never loved her. Like her historical counterpart Catherine Dickens, Dorothea employs her husband’s early words to thwart his later fictions; however, Dorothea takes the crucial next step by adding her own words to his narrative. This step also clarifies the distinction between an author and a narrator: a narrator has the power to speak, but the author constructs the narrator. As previously mentioned, Dorothea gains initial narratorial confidence while on her convalescent journey to the Midlands. Here she relates stories of her life with Alfred, and her perspective is validated by her audience. However, before Dorothea can achieve authorship, she must learn to critically evaluate conflicting viewpoints, read between the lines, and stand by her side of the story. She must expand beyond a narrator’s assigned viewpoint to adopt an author’s broader designs. Significantly, Alfred’s novel to be completed is a mystery, and it is up to Dorothea to provide the solution.

Dorothea notes Alfred's confusion between fiction and reality when she realises that Alfred's affair with Wilhelmina Ricketts (Arnold's Ellen Ternan equivalent) began "With play-acting. With the real and the imagined mingled together" (348). Alfred, accustomed to controlling both the characters in his novels and their living counterparts, turned to fictive play-acting whenever dissatisfied with his everyday reality – including Dorothea. Unfortunately, what started as fiction eventually encroaches upon his reality in dangerous ways, as evinced by Alfred's and Miss Ricketts's real-life continuation of what started as on-stage affection between characters in a play (347). Dorothea's turn as author affords her a similar experience, although in her case the influence of fiction on her reality is restorative. O'Rourke remembers that Alfred "was forced to realize that life is not a novel, that those around him were not his characters, and that in spite of all his fame and success, he couldn't will himself a happy ending" (265). For all his control over Dorothea during his lifetime, after death Alfred must rely on Dorothea to complete his work; she now has the authorial upper hand.

Further, narrative authority impacts public memory. Alfred's legacy lives on through his books: "he *was* a kind of monument. His image was on all his books. Everybody knew his plaid coats, his velvet collars, his bowler hats worn at a jaunty angle . . . Every month he wrote to them, his Dear Public. He shared with them the thoughts of his heart, the workings of his mind" (Arnold 212). Hence, Alfred's intense relationship with his readers contributes to Dorothea's initial difficulty in assuming his authorial position. Conditioned to having her voice and perspective perfunctorily dismissed, it is little wonder that Dorothea struggles to believe she has a valid viewpoint to impart. For example, many years earlier, when her sister, Sissy, assumed control of managing Dorothea's household, Dorothea sensed herself disappearing and remembers how "no one could hear my voice" (203). She does eventually regain her voice; even Queen Victoria later seeks her perspective on everything from coping with bereavement to adapting to celebrity status (152-58). Regardless, the confidence-building process is gradual, and it is interwoven with interrogating her memories of the life she once shared with Alfred. Once she comes to terms with her own memories – specifically those which have shaped her identity as wife of England's beloved novelist – Dorothea is similarly positioned to impact public memory by assuming authorship of Alfred's novel.

### **The Author's (In)visibility**

Dorothea explains to family friend Michael O'Rourke why she hibernated for so long after the separation: "How could I meet people? How could I look at their faces, imagining what they were thinking of me? . . . And I certainly didn't want my dear friends to have to take sides. It was better to become invisible" (149). Alfred also attempts invisibility by deflecting responsibility for their separation onto Dorothea; his written announcement shifts focus away from his part in the failure of their marriage by blaming her. O'Rourke theorises that "Poor Alfred is like a cuttlefish. When in danger, he attempts to disappear into his own ink" (239). Alfred seeks safety behind his words. Accustomed to having his narratives unflinchingly accepted, Alfred masquerades behind his written constructs, shaping stories to suit his personal agenda and constructing his own truths. Alfred's (incorrect) insistence that his sister-in-law, Alice, requested on her deathbed that he henceforth wear her ring is an example of how Alfred moulds his own historical record (251). Dorothea reflects, "He told the story so often I wonder if he'd come to believe it in the end" (251). For Alfred, narrative certainty equals truth. Words represent longevity – and control. His daughter, Kitty, recognises this tendency in her famous father: "Oh prose is all very well. You can control prose. And his prose-children did what he wanted them to do. But he was never so passionate about his real

children – or his wife, for that matter” (16). Fact and fiction are interwoven; history and story come together, then fall apart again. Alfred navigates this slippage so as always to remain in command, even when his preference entails invisibility.

Conversely, Dorothea uses the written word to *regain* visibility. She seeks the truth about Alfred’s relationship with Wilhelmina Ricketts through letters. She (re)discovers the truth about Alfred’s initial love for her through letters. She once held out hope “that if Alfred and I could resume our correspondence, we might perhaps contrive a reconciliation of our own” (243). This is not to be, however, and Dorothea finally comes to understand that while she desired “to remember him at his best” (265) she had become “too much of a reminder to him, a reminder of the wrong thing he had done” (265) for him to desire to remember her. Thus, Dorothea productively channels her memories into a desire to recover the visibility that Alfred has taken from her. In reading Alfred’s autobiographical notebook, Dorothea comprehends his inclination for “showing the scars only in his books” (279). Conversely, through fiction Dorothea seeks to heal her scars inflicted by Alfred.

### **Dorothea’s Narrative Detective Work and Catherine’s Public Rehabilitation**

Regaining her visibility also requires Dorothea to confront her sister, who took Alfred’s side after the separation. Dorothea is disappointed to hear Sissy repeating Alfred’s untruths: “That was Alfred’s much-rehearsed complaint: that I received without giving, that I broke his love with my indolence and indifference . . . And she – along with half the world – has chosen to believe that is the truth. Sometimes, turning it over and over in my mind, I’ve been foolish enough to believe it myself. But it’s not true, and I won’t let her say it” (219). This insistence signals a significant step; not only is Dorothea now more certain of the truth in her own mind, but she also has the strength to challenge those who blindly believe Alfred’s false stories. She gains further strength by pocketing Alfred’s notebook, wherein she discovers a brief autobiography. By engaging with Alfred’s memories, she realises his desperation to believe that “He is not Alfred the adulterer, the caster-off of wives, but Alfred the gentleman-hero – standing up nobly against the trials of life . . . Yours Truly. The One and Only. The Great Man” (289-90). For Alfred, all narratives must point to his laudable identity, and this discovery enables Dorothea to reconcile the competing accounts of their relationship history in her own mind: “no one forced him to refer to me among his friends as *the best wife that ever was*. No, as Michael says, he is convincing *himself*, justifying why he did not love me at the end by saying he never loved me at the beginning and that the marital mistake was not his” (289; italics original). Alfred’s inconsistent narratives now make sense, and glimpsing his memories inspires Dorothea to bravely visit the other woman – Wilhelmina Ricketts.

Indeed, it is actively remembering that imbues Dorothea with the courage to confront her rival and demand Miss Ricketts’s side of the story. Dorothea announces to Wilhelmina Ricketts that “I have been remembering the many years that my husband and I spent together, and I find that you owe me something, Miss Ricketts” (337). Unlike Alfred, who manipulated narratives to suit his authorial agenda, Dorothea desires to incorporate *all* the players’ perspectives in her quest for narrative reconciliation. This variegated narrative is Dorothea’s strength, since it imparts credibility to her side of the story. Unlike Alfred, who notoriously possessed a “very partial memory” (73) Dorothea desires the full story. By positioning the wife as narratorial detective inspecting memories to uncover the truth of her failed marriage, Arnold invites readers to reconsider (with Dorothea) how distorted facts become convenient fiction; eventually, this discovery imbues Dorothea with the self-

assurance to pursue narrative authority. Comprehending the shifting accounts of her marriage to Alfred prepares Dorothea to finalise the mysterious ending to *Ambrose Boniface*. Her later turn as literary detective relies upon her current success in interrogating living suspects and piecing together the puzzle of her shattered former life. As such, Dorothea hopes Miss Ricketts will be honest with her: “Surely she will not try to maintain with me the pious fiction [Alfred] promulgated for his Public” (340). When Dorothea leaves at last, she feels she and Miss Ricketts share a strange understanding. Dorothea even feels slightly sorry for the younger woman: “After all, I can look back on many happy memories; whereas what little life Miss Ricketts has known was snatched from her . . .” (377). Dorothea draws comfort from filtering through her memories to reclaim an authentic narrative with which she can live.

Dorothea’s visit to Wilhelmina Ricketts is also an opportunity for another traditionally voiceless woman to state her perspective. It is interesting, however, that Wilhelmina’s position is still filtered through Dorothea. Alfred described his former wife to the other woman as “A virtual invalid. A recluse. A woman who no longer shared anything with her husband – including, no doubt, her bed” (353). Dorothea clarifies to herself, “Perhaps that is how he saw it, but it is not the whole truth” (353) and she proceeds to correct Alfred’s skewed perspectives to Wilhelmina. Wilhelmina confesses, “He said that as far as England was concerned, he *was* Public Opinion” (355). Alfred/Charles may have promoted himself as “Public Opinion” itself, but more recently authors – like Arnold – turned to biofiction to enact what Cora Kaplan terms the “retroactive repair of injustices to the subject” (51). In a subtle, yet powerful, manoeuvre, Arnold positions Dorothea Gibson as a detective who seeks perspectives and interrogates memories so that Catherine Dickens’s Public Memory can co-exist alongside Charles Dickens’s long-lauded “Public Opinion.”

We can almost imagine Catherine Dickens applauding her literary double for surveying the evidence uncovered by her investigations and declaring: “And I *was* loved by him, no matter what anyone says” (73). After all, this was why Catherine submitted her love letters from Charles to public scrutiny following her death: “that the world may know he loved me once” (qtd. in Schlicke 162). Dorothea remembers how helpless she felt at losing her voice to Sissy after their sister Alice died, but by the end of the novel Arnold allows Dorothea to overcome this past helplessness to reclaim her voice – both for herself and for Catherine Dickens.

### **Woman of Letters: Dorothea Gibson’s Authorial Apprenticeship**

As I have suggested, in keeping with Catherine Dickens’s request, the novel reinforces the power of letters to set the historical record straight. Arnold’s Dorothea uses letters as a form of evidence to defend her narrative of past events. The physicality of letters is particularly emphasised in the novel; remembering is experienced both emotionally and physically. For instance, a letter from Alfred advising that they should separate is felt as a physical shock: “I started at those so unforgiving words. The black letters seemed to spring out at me like words on a newly cut gravestone” (235). Dorothea literally associates Alfred’s penned cruelty with death itself. This is a marked change from the young Dorothea, who felt she glimpsed Alfred’s true character through his letters. She had even contemplated telling her father, Mr. Millar, how her love for Alfred has grown through their (secret) correspondence: “I longed to tell him about the letters, how I felt I knew Alfred Gibson’s very soul . . .” (53). Young Dorothea is deeply connected to Alfred’s correspondence because for her, Alfred *is* his letters. Similarly, the older Dorothea cannot bear to think of Alfred writing love letters to Wilhelmina Ricketts, because “his love letters are like my own blood” (362). Dorothea feels a



certain physical possessiveness of Alfred's letters; they are more than merely memories for her, they form part of her very identity and existence as they prepare her for authorship. Letters may wound her, but they also invigorate her as she remembers and reconciles to the truth of her story.

Thus, when Queen Victoria sends her condolences and an invitation to meet, Dorothea muses: "Yes. She has written to me. I am a person of importance, in *her* eyes at least" (80). And after visiting Queen Victoria, Dorothea's confidence has grown further; she now refuses to be manipulated by Kitty's vagabond husband Augustus. Dorothea tells herself, "I do not have to accede to every request that is made of me. I am, after all, an independent woman" (179). Her interaction with the Queen, having begun with a letter of invitation, proves fortifying.

In addition to letters, Dorothea also recalls newspaper accounts of Alfred's misrepresentation of her in the press, discovers an old notebook of Alfred's, reminisces about her former life with friends and family, and even interviews the other woman. Dorothea's daughter claims that Dorothea loved Alfred too much; her sister accuses her of loving him too little. Miss Ricketts – Dorothea's rival for Alfred's affections – and the press possess skewed views of Dorothea supplied by Alfred (whose own opinion of his wife varied with time). Dorothea's confidence in relation to narrative discourse grows as she wrestles these contradictory perspectives uncovered in her investigations into a more cohesive account of her history with Alfred. Probing these multiple voices is preparation for her future venture as a novelist, wherein she will encounter heteroglossic voices, themselves a "prerequisite for authentic novelistic prose" (1194) according to Mikhail Bakhtin. Navigating the tension inherent in these differing voices is a critical aspect of authorial growth. By thus chronicling Dorothea's turn as a narrative detective who scours old documents and new discussions alike to wrestle conflicting viewpoints into a narrative she can accept, Arnold further participates in the neo-Victorian revisionist tradition, wherein previously marginalised individuals are allowed a greater voice.<sup>2</sup> As Kym Brindle argues, "neo-Victorian novelists stress that material traces of the past are fragmentary, incomplete, and contradictory." This is certainly true – Arnold's novel is full of fragmented accounts and contradictory perspectives – yet it also acknowledges that with enough fragments, a coherent picture can emerge.

Arnold further explores how researching and writing letters prepares Dorothea to assume authorship. Here again, fact and fiction, and history and story converge, as the letters she finds help equip Dorothea to create fiction. Solving the mystery shrouding her past with Alfred prepares Dorothea to solve the mystery in his unfinished final novel. As outlined previously, Arnold's assignment of this task to Dorothea shifts the mistreated wife from a place in which she is stuck simply reflecting upon the past to a place where she has come to terms with past injustice and can now move forward. Again, unlike Lillian Nayder, I read Dorothea's "chance for retrospection and nostalgia" (Nayder 341) as instrumental in preparing Dorothea to find her authorial voice.

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<sup>2</sup> Dorothea's narrative detective work is also reminiscent of the Victorian sensation novel, with its recourse to media and evidence. Brimming with conflicting accounts of the mystery to be solved, *The Woman in White*, by Dickens's friend and collaborator Wilkie Collins, is an example.

### The Author's Installation: Embracing Ambiguity

The novel leaves ambiguous the critical scene in which Alfred returns from the grave to invite Dorothea to finish his novel: "Is this a dream? Is he a ghost?" (390). Arnold declines to decisively answer these questions. I maintain that Dorothea's imagination conjures this scene. After all, she has sought the elusive "Truth," and while some questions remain as yet unanswered, confronting Alfred's, Miss Ricketts's, and her own memories has yielded a narrative she can accept. Now that Dorothea is released from pondering Alfred's insistence upon destroying any tender memories of their courtship and early marriage, and now that she has confronted his relationship with Miss Ricketts, Dorothea's unencumbered imagination accepts authorial responsibility from postmortem Alfred, who tells her: "'*Ambrose Boniface* needs concluding. And you, Dodo, will be the one to see to it'" (391). Far from being a sign of continued subservience, Dorothea's acceptance of the authorial mantle from Alfred is pivotal in her transition from self-described "footnote" to author outright. She has literally been marginalised – pushed to the edge of the page – and her life usurped by the "One and Only." Yet at the end of Arnold's text, Dorothea emerges from the margins to assume overarching authorship of Alfred's unfinished novel. Alfred has long claimed sole narrative authority, but this authority now passes to Dorothea. She seeks guidance from him, some clue as to his intended resolution, but he demurs: "'It is a Mystery, after all.' He laughs . . . 'Oh, you'll find the answer if you look hard. I've every confidence in you, Dodo'" (391). In a stark transition from Alfred's former tyrannical control of all words concerning himself, in Dorothea's dream he leaves the ending entirely in Dorothea's hands. Dorothea – or at least her subconscious – is ready to move forward.

In the notebook Dorothea stole from their former home, she realises that Alfred's confidence was failing as he wrote *Ambrose Boniface*:

I hope only to stay alive long enough to complete *Boniface*. I should not want to leave it as a mystery to my readers – although at this moment I have to admit it is something of a mystery to myself . . . I have an almost superstitious dread as I see the last chapters come towards me, as if they are some kind of Nemesis; and I shy away from them. Perhaps my powers of invention are failing. (270-71)

Alfred's fear is important evidence for the reversal of narrative power as the authority to author shifts from Alfred to Dorothea. This insecurity returns in Dorothea's dream where at last Alfred is willing to acknowledge the validity of Dorothea's perspective. Arnold contrasts the "real" Alfred, whose beliefs "became to him as inviolable as Scripture" (264) where he "chose to see" (289) Dorothea as having sole responsibility for their marital unhappiness and wrote "convincingly" on this point (289), with the reconstructed Alfred of Dorothea's dream, who relinquishes his perspective to her control. Dorothea's confidence has grown as Alfred's has diminished.

However, Arnold portrays Dorothea as requiring time to fully process what has happened and embrace her new authorial status. Interrogating her memories, revisiting the home she once shared with Alfred, calling upon the Queen, confronting her rival Miss Ricketts, reading and writing letters, and above all determining her position in the overarching narrative of England's celebrity novelist, have been significant stages in leading her to this juncture. Nonetheless, years of narrative abuse cannot be instantaneously eradicated. Shortly after her ethereal encounter with Alfred, Dorothea confides to Mrs. Wilson, "'Alfred was a literary genius. And I have never written anything in my life – except letters!'" Mrs. Wilson encourages Dorothea, "'I've heard it said that you write very nice letters'" (393). Dorothea's

immersion in letters develops from an exclusive focus on past words, wherein she perpetually re-reads Alfred's old letters to her, to include a future-oriented focus that results in finishing Alfred's novel. This opportunity cannot be underestimated; the impact of fiction on Alfred's reality has been repeatedly highlighted throughout the novel. His children, in particular, complain of feeling secondary to their father's literary creations. Consequently, I propose that *Ambrose Boniface* is Dorothea's imagination conjuring a posthumous apology. In her dream, Alfred invites her to authorship. As such, by voluntarily installing his wife as author of his novel, the "Great Man," who defied others' attempts to influence his perspective in life, is now subjected – both in fiction and in reality – to Dorothea's control.

Kitty enquires, "If you want to write, why not try something for yourself? Are you content to be his echo?" (410-11). Dorothea is not echoing Alfred's original words though; she can now choose her own words. Far from merely being Alfred's echo, then, Dorothea's influence over the exact narrative Alfred started is important. Until now, he has denied her a voice in their shared life story. Therefore, it is essential that she now finishes the *same* story he started. His involvement in the novel also ensures it will be read. The counter-argument remains that Dorothea requires Alfred's authorial status in order to be heard, but so be it. Regardless, she will at last have a platform to share her perspective. And all the while, she retains the power to solve his mystery – thus changing the novel as a whole – while he fades into the background. Dorothea once mused to O'Rourke, "He reinvented our lives, didn't he?" He laughs dispiritedly. 'You could say it was his most accomplished piece of fiction'" (264). Dorothea now has the opportunity to challenge the fictional reality Alfred mandated for her, paradoxically through turning to fiction to recover her life. Once she has her audience's attention, they may well be willing to hear her perspective on other matters as well, as happened previously in the Midlands. *Ambrose Boniface* is the start, and with Dorothea's son-in-law Augustus, "We'll all look forward to your literary debut, Ma." (411).

## Conclusion

In the novel's first chapter, Dorothea's daughter Kitty accuses her mother of being "a ghost from the past, wandering around the room in the dark. Expecting him to 'turn up,' perhaps?" (8). Arnold cleverly juxtaposes Kitty's accusation at the beginning and Dorothea's vision of Alfred at the end: initially Dorothea is the listless, purposeless ghost, utterly enmeshed in her husband's false narrative, but by the end, Dorothea is the dominant author and Alfred is the ghost (writer). For all his certainties, Alfred lacked the capability to "will himself a happy ending" (265). In fact, he could not even will himself to finish his final novel. Instead, it is Dorothea who will conclude Alfred's novel. As Mikhail Bakhtin points out, "The prose writer makes use of words that are already populated with the social intentions of others, and compels them to serve his own new intentions, to serve a second master" (1219). In fine Bakhtinian form, Dorothea assumes control of words bearing Alfred's signature. He may have invented the fictions of his life with Dorothea and his final novel, but she inherits control of this narrative legacy after Alfred's passing.

In *Girl in a Blue Dress*, both the author, Gaynor Arnold, and the primary protagonist she creates, use their authorial positions to challenge Charles Dickens's words. In her "Author's Note," Arnold explicitly outlines her intentions: "Above all, in Dorothea Gibson I have tried to give voice to the largely voiceless Catherine Dickens, who once requested that her letters from her husband be preserved so that 'the world may know he loved me once.'" Indeed, in Arnold's biofiction, Dorothea both finds her voice and assumes narrative mastery when she

sets out to complete Alfred's as yet unfinished final novel. Catherine Dickens claimed Charles did in fact once love her – and she left his letters to her as proof – but nonetheless *he* remains primary author of their story. The letters are authored from his perspective. Conversely, Arnold's Dorothea Gibson furthers Catherine's restorative cause: she expands upon her husband's words to articulate her own authorial voice, thereby actively participating in shaping their legacy. Previously denied a part in naming their children (90), Dorothea now has the chance to christen literary characters. Alfred may have initiated *Ambrose Boniface* and the narrative of his life with Dorothea, but it is she who (quite literally) has the last word.

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