Orphan Benefactors and Orphan Innocence in Charles Dickens and Helen Hunt Jackson

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Abstract

This thesis examines the role of the orphan benefactor relationship in *Oliver Twist* (1838), *Great Expectations* (1861), and Helen Hunt Jackson's *Ramona* (1884). This thesis looks at the conflict between the orphan benefactor and the orphan, which is an important link between *Ramona* and *Hard Times*. In this respect, my thesis addresses the larger construction of childhood in nineteenth-century Victorian culture. Grounded in common Victorian ideas of the deserving poor, the construction of the “deserving orphan” in these novels shows how orphan “innocence” is the center of major problems that these novels try to solve. One of the main arguments in this thesis is that not all orphans are considered morally equal and thus ostensibly good orphans are sometimes considered more worth saving than others. The element of sympathy is an essential ingredient in the creation of paternal bonds. As I explain, the idea of sympathy is related to the idea of innocence. They occur together in *Ramona* somewhat differently than in Dickens novels due to racial difference, and there is a tension between the benefactor’s financial ability and their capacity for sympathy. As I explain, the idea of sympathy here is related to Robin Bernstein’s idea of radicalized critique of the white child as a special character in nineteenth-century culture and literature.
MONTCLAIR STATE UNIVERSITY

Orphan Benefactors and Orphan Innocence in
Charles Dickens and Helen Hunt Jackson

By Monika Mezyk

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ORPHAN BENEFACTORS AND ORPHAN INNOCENCE IN CHARLES DICKENS AND HELEN HUNT JACKSON

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By

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Orphan Benefactors and Orphan Innocence in Charles Dickens and Helen Hunt Jackson

In Charles Dickens’ *Hard Times*, there is a scene where Sissy Jupe is reading fairy tales to her father. This scene depicts the loving relationship between Sissy and her father, a man who later abandons her. Later when her surrogate father Mr. Gradgrind adopts her, he asks, what “did you read to your father, Jupe?” 'About the Fairies, sir, and the Dwarf, and the Hunchback, and the Genies,’ she sobbed out; 'and about — ' 'Hush!' said Mr. Gradgrind, 'that is enough. Never breathe a word of such destructive nonsense any more’” (*Hard Times* 40-41). According to Gradgrind, creativity and imagination need to be suppressed. This cherished memory of reading fairy tales to her father enables Sissy Jupe to endure the loneliness inherent in her abandonment.

This scene looks ahead to my thesis because it addresses how Sissy’s support inevitably must come from a surrogate father, even one who lacks affection for her throughout most of the novel. For Gradgrind, a deserving child must be a disciplined one. For him, discipline reveals a kind of innocence of moral character, an absence of corruption. Rescuing her depends on her innocence, and her innocence depends on Gradgrind feeling sympathy for her, even in his abrasive way.

Mr. Gradgrind is important to my thesis because he’s an orphan benefactor, but also because he slowly transforms into a sentimental father. The sentimental father is one of the kinds of orphan benefactor characters I will discuss in this thesis. Although Dickens intends his novel as a critique of Gradgrind’s disposition, in the character conflict between Sissy and Gradgrind he represents a larger problem that this thesis will examine. First, as one of the many orphans in Dickens and in nineteenth century literature, Sissy points to the problem of families in the Victorian period, including both in England and the United States. The industrial economy of the era could not provide consistent employment for many families. At this time a combination of
private charity and central government was responsible for providing relief for broken families. It was also sometimes left up to individuals, such as Gradgrind, to provide protection to abandoned children like Sissy. As Lydia Murdoch writes, authors like Dickens were responding as “early critics of the New Poor Law... to raise awareness about the hardships of urban life in general” (Murdoch 5). The New Poor Law of 1834 “addressed poverty by attacking the rights of poor parents” (Murdoch 4). In turn, she argues, authors like Dickens “reconstructed family” by uniting orphan characters with new types of families centered on orphan benefactors (Murdoch 5). My thesis looks deeper into this phenomenon by revealing the fictional circumstances through which orphan characters were “reconstructed” into new families. This thesis examines the role of the orphan benefactor relationship in *Oliver Twist* (1838), *Great Expectations* (1861), and Helen Hunt Jackson’s *Ramona* (1884), with scenes from *Hard Times* framing my introduction and conclusion. The above scene looks ahead to my thesis because it represents the Victorian family unit in crisis, which is a constant theme in each of the novels here.

This thesis will look at other scenes where there is a conflict between the orphan benefactor and the orphan, which is an important link between *Ramona* and *Hard Times*. In this respect my thesis tries to address the larger construction of childhood in nineteenth-century Victorian culture. As Chris Jenks argues, “the child is neither simply ‘natural’ nor merely ‘normal’... but rather always moral and political” (69). Following Jenks, we should see the conflict between the orphan and the orphan benefactor as a way to think about larger Victorian “social structures” (Jenks 69). As such, the aforementioned conflict between Sissy and Gradgrind also points to a deeper problem between orphan benefactor characters and the orphan characters I examine. Just as Gradgrind sees Sissy’s imagination as evidence of moral corruption, other orphan benefactors also look for evidence of morality or immorality in the orphans they encounter. Grounded in
common Victorian ideas of the deserving poor, the construction of the “deserving orphan” in these novels shows how orphan “innocence” is at the center of major problems that these novels try to solve. One of the main arguments in this paper is that not all orphans are considered morally equal and thus the ostensibly good orphans are sometimes considered more worth saving than others. The novels in this thesis contain stories about how such orphans are accepted or rejected by orphan benefactors. This will be a major focus of my chapter on Ramona.

My work here emphasizes several elements of scholarship on Jackson and Dickens by focusing on interpretations of the orphan and benefactor relationship. This thesis combines three major concepts for its working framework. One lens is historical. It comes from the idea of deserving orphan from the Victorian nineteenth-century cultural attitude toward the deserving and undeserving poor, and comes from scholars like Murdoch and Laura Peters. Not long ago Peters called attention to the “dearth of criticism on the orphan” (2). She cites George Elliot’s *Daniel Deronda* to show the importance of “family, home, and blood relations” that created the Victorian norms of the era. She contrasts these ideas with the “homelessness” of the orphan character, who becomes a “metaphor” in Victorian literature (Peters 6). The poor orphan was especially important. They were “invested with a special significance” (Peters 8). They were a “unique hope but also a distinct and worrying threat” (Peters 9). Although Peters argues that the orphan as threat was why she had to be “expelled to the colonies,” I see the distinction between “hope” and “threat” as useful. It reveals why determining the innocence of the orphan in literature was so important.

This idea of the deserving poor or deserving orphan is closely related to the second frame, the idea of sentimentality, because the deserving orphan appears as a character that others feel sympathy toward. Following James Chandler, a framework for my chapters comes from
explaining the sentimental economy through which orphan benefactors rescue orphans in peril. Chandler defines “sensibility” as “what enables us to have fine-grained sensory experience – to feel” (xvii). In Dickens, the orphan benefactors possess such sensibility, or achieve this sensibility through their relationship with the orphan child. This movement helps to create sentimental father characters. In Jackson, the orphan benefactor possesses a sensibility with racial boundaries. Chandler also writes that “sympathy,” in turn, connects “one sensorium and another by enabling us to face one another, adopt one another’s points of view, and modify passion into sentiment by means of virtual circulation” (xvii). In this way, we can also see that Dickens created sympathy for his orphan characters that could connect them to benefactors, while in Jackson such sympathy was blocked for the benefactor, but not necessarily for the reader. For Chandler, sentimentality refers more to a kind of “sentimental disposition” of how narratives or parts of narrative were ordered and organized in literary and cinematic practice “in which spectators are disposed in a sentimentally ordered world” (xv). While Dickens and Jackson show different relationships of sympathy between orphan and benefactor characters, they both create orphan novels that can be described as sentimental.

This sentimental economy also runs parallel to the financial support of the orphan benefactors. In addition to having financial means to protect orphans, the benefactor must detect ostensible goodness in the orphan. This is significant because their morality is often a prerequisite to the orphan’s rescue. The element of sympathy is an essential ingredient in the creation of paternal bonds and is the enabling factor in the creation of care economy which facilities orphan rescue. In Oliver Twist, it is Oliver’s sentimental father, Mr. Brownlow, who offers Oliver his financial support and eventually adopts him as his own son because Oliver is performs as a good boy. For example, Oliver is morally pristine and as such is a deserving
orphan. This also occurs in *Ramona*, though somewhat differently. In both novels, there is a tension between the benefactor’s financial ability and their capacity for sympathy. In Dickens, a sympathetic relationship between the orphan and the benefactor is necessary for the benefactor to provide security for the child. In Jackson, it is the opposite. The orphan receives financial support despite a lack of sympathy from the benefactor, at least until their separation.

As I will explain, the idea of sympathy is related to the idea of innocence, which is another keyword for my framework. I take this idea from Robin Bernstein’s idea of racialized critique of the white child as a special character in nineteenth-century culture and literature who, in the eyes of white supremacist society, is perceived as innocent because they are white. As Bernstein writes, by the “mid-nineteenth century, sentimental culture had woven childhood and innocence wholly together” (4). Bernstein further argues that childhood innocence was “itself raced white, itself characterized by the ability to retain racial meanings but hide them” (8). Although I will address it only indirectly in my Dickens chapter, it applies to *Ramona* in a special way. Although Ramona performs her innocence similar to how Oliver does, her benefactor Señora Moreno cannot recognize it because of Ramona’s Native American mother. At the same time, Jackson links Ramona’s possession of an ostensibly inherent goodness with her features of whiteness, which complements her performance of innocence in the novel. Her biracial background reveals the conflict between her identity as orphan and her orphan benefactor. Her orphan benefactor, Señora Moreno, cannot feel sympathy for her because she cannot see an “Indian” child as innocent. In this way, Ramona suffers very differently from the British orphan protagonists, who primarily suffer due to poverty. This is important because, as with Dickens characters, Ramona eventually finds protection and love of a paternal figure because of this innocence.
Chapter One: Orphan Benefactor as Sentimental Fathers in Dickens

In *Oliver Twist* and *Great Expectations*, sentimental orphan benefactors insulate orphans from child labor and thereby contribute to their rescue. The characters of Mr. Brownlow and Magwitch insulate orphan characters because they are sympathetic to the characters, believe they are moral, and consider them innocent. Before attending to their representation of innocence, however, I want to return to Chandler’s idea of sympathy as much more complex than simply feeling pity for others. He writes thus via Adam Smith’s concept of casuistry: “To sympathize, Smith stipulates at the very start of his treatise, is not to feel what another person feels but rather to feel what we ourselves should feel in the same situation. It is to feel what it would be like to be that person” (Chandler 173). Chandler refers to “the practice of sympathy as a kind of imaginative mobility — the capacity, as Smith has described it, of passing into points not one’s own” (185). Returning to the example of *Hard Times* in the introduction, we can see Chandler’s idea expressed when Sissy describes her father’s abandonment of her through such imaginative mobility. The following passage illustrates a scene of Sissy speaking to the character of Louisa: “‘When he left me for my good—he never would have left me for his own—I know he was almost broken-hearted with the trial. He will not be happy for a single minute, till he comes back’” (*Hard Times* 48). In this rationale, Sissy believes her father left her because he couldn’t care for her, not because she didn’t love her. This is why she imagines him as “broken-hearted.” The concept of casuistry, in this case, can be applied to Sissy’s emotions in such a way that she is unwilling or unable to demonize her father for her abandonment. Therefore, she assigns a virtuous motive to what would normally be considered immoral or even a crime. When Sissy asserts “he left me for my good—he never would have left me for his own,” she is essentially
traveling into that unknown territory which generates empathy for her father. This sentiment on Sissy’s part fits the model relationship a child has with a sentimental father.

This concept of the sentimental father is the major way Dickens represents the orphan benefactor. Many of the biological fathers in these Dickens’ novels do not fulfill their paternal role because of the lack the funds to do so. That is the case for Pip’s father in *Great Expectations*, who dies without providing any future provision for his son. It is very hard to tell what Pip’s natural father would have been like, but one can speculate that he would not have been able to provide financially for Pip the generous way that Magwitch did. Magwitch from *Great Expectations* and Oliver’s surrogate father Mr. Brownlow from *Oliver Twist* are orphan benefactors because they can be defined as sentimental fathers, but also because they have the funds to provide security. Ironically, in this sense Pip ultimately financially benefits from being an orphan, much like Sissy in *Hard Times*. In *Oliver Twist*, Oliver also benefits from being an orphan when Mr. Brownlow, a middle-class gentleman, adopts him, offers him ostensibly true fatherly affection and rescues him from a life of crime and probably hanging. Being good and deserving qualifies an orphan for support, but sentimental fathers only give their financial support to good and deserving children.

It is important to turn to the question of orphan rescue in Dickens novels because it is the orphan’s vulnerability that first attracts the orphan benefactor’s assistance to extract the orphan from his dire predicament. Sometimes a benefactor who is not morally qualified to save the orphan appears first, which helps provide contrast with the successful orphan and benefactor relationship. To examine this dynamic, we may view the contrast between Oliver’s father-son relationships with Mr. Brownlow and again his relationship with Fagin. While Brownlow is qualified both morally and financially, Fagin lacks the ability to sentimentally bond with Oliver
while Oliver is in his care, and in fact works to exploit his young charge by luring him into a life of crime. This factor foretells the fate of Fagin as an unqualified benefactor. Fagan's lack of true character ultimately results in his undoing, namely, prison and death.

The Fagin and Oliver benefactor-orphan relationship illustrates an absence of the sentimental father relationship that will appear later. Although Fagin cannot be called Oliver's surrogate father in the sentimental sense, their criminal relationship resembles a patriarchal relationship in that Fagin exercises authority over Oliver in the same way that a stereotypical Victorian father might over his dependent child. Fagin fully knows what is right for Oliver, yet he does the exact opposite for financial gain. One example of exercising such authority is when Fagin locks Oliver up in solitary confinement as a punishment. Fagin also wants to exercise authority over Oliver through attempting to turn him into a criminal. Fagin's apparent patriarchal influence over Oliver is purely commercial. He says to Nancy: "When the boy's worth hundreds of pounds to me, am I to lose what chance threw me in the way of getting safely, through the whims of a drunken gang that I could whistle away the lives of! And me bound, too, to a born devil that only wants the will, and has the power to, to—" (Oliver Twist 226). Fagin accidentally admits to Nancy that Oliver is worth a lot of money to him as a thief. He does not want to lose the money. Fagin does the exact opposite of what a caring father would do. Instead of protecting Oliver as a caring father would, Fagin, through his patriarchal authority over Oliver, seeks to exploit him for mercenary purposes. A lack of sympathy between Oliver and Fagin makes paternal bonds impossible to develop. Fagin's singular concern is for himself to the exclusion of everyone else, including Oliver. Fagin doesn't possess a sensibility necessary for becoming a sentimental father.
Dickens uses Oliver’s dependency on Fagin to represent how many orphans had to rely on outside sources for funds, of which surrogate fathers are examples. Shari Hodges Holt suggests that because Oliver is a pauper he will gravitate toward committing crime due to the harsh conditions concomitant with his poverty. Holt writes: “Dickens’ utilization of the victimized pauper child to create a bridge between the legal community of the workhouse and the illegal community of the criminal gang suggests that poverty produced by capitalism is the leading cause of crime. […] [Oliver’s] most realistic option for survival is Fagin’s band of thieves; crime becomes one of the only alternatives to starvation” (255). Like other homeless orphans featured in the novel, such as the Artful Dodger and Charley Bates, Oliver has to join the criminal gang in order to survive. When Oliver runs into the Artful Dodger, it is the middle of winter and Oliver has been sleeping in the cold for a week. Starving and freezing, Oliver proves Holt’s argument true. Thus, because the money for Oliver’s support eventually becomes available through his surrogate father, Mr. Brownlow, he no longer faces moral corruption of a life of crime. However, because Oliver does not have a biological father to support him before he meets Mr. Brownlow, he is vulnerable to the influence of Fagin.

In her book *Orphan Texts: Victorian Orphans, Culture and Empire*, Laura Peters argues that Dickens presents the surrogate criminal family because he wants to draw attention to the problem of family structure. She writes thus about Oliver Twist: “The narrative works to demonize street children as a criminal threat precisely because their incorporation into a surrogate criminal family poses problems for the ideal of the family; the existence of such criminalized children implies that the family, and the state, is in crisis” (44). Peters argues that Dickens purposefully demonizes the street orphans in Fagin’s gang by highlighting that they are criminals. For Dickens, a more open-minded attitude towards those street orphans would
imply that the Victorian family is not what it is supposed to be, the father taking care of the family and the mother nurturing the children. Peters is right when she claims that the Victorian family is in crisis. The orphans provide indisputable proof that the Victorian economy itself is in crisis.

In contrast to Fagin, who seeks to exploit Oliver, Mr. Brownlow actually exhibits paternal affection towards Oliver. There is sympathy between Oliver and Mr. Brownlow because Oliver is such a good boy. That is one reason Mr. Brownlow makes sure that Oliver receives his inheritance. Even though Mr. Brownlow is not Oliver’s biological father, he is his sentimental father in a symbolic sense because he seeks to take care of Oliver due to the sympathy between them. Mr. Brownlow says to Monks: “Make restitution to an innocent and unoffending child, for such he is, although the offspring of a guilty and most miserable love” (Oliver Twist 426-427). Mr. Brownlow insists that Monks must do more than just tell the true story that he and his evil mother have been hiding. Mr. Brownlow says to Monks that he must restore Oliver’s inheritance, position and status, which he has stolen from him. Mr. Brownlow insists that Monks must do this even though Oliver is a product of an illegitimate union between his now-dead father and the unfortunate unwedded young woman who was his mother. It is Mr. Brownlow’s sympathy towards Oliver, stimulated by his paternal bonds, that compels him to right the wrongs that Oliver has suffered. We should note that Mr. Brownlow emphasizes Oliver’s “innocence” as connected to his status of “unoffending.” Unoffending is an unusual word. It carries the association of criminal behavior because it signifies innocence as the absence of offense. Mr. Brownlow also links this unoffending behavior, or absence of offending actions, as an almost unexpected outcome of his status of a “guilty” love. The echo of criminal language echoes the relationship with Fagin, but also suggests that Oliver has possibly overcome his inner nature. He
has agency that goes beyond his origins. In a way, this is how we might think of innocence as an active state, not just an absence of bad choices. In other words, innocence can sometimes signify a child who should be guilty, by circumstances and birth, but behaves otherwise. Oliver is not a blank slate of innocence. He is innocent because he should be guilty, but behaves otherwise.

By contrast, Mr. Brownlow initially begrudges Oliver’s half-brother, Monks, his inheritance money because he has judged that Monks, due to his exhibited foibles, is not a good person and, hence, unworthy of having the money. Mr. Brownlow previously knew Monks’ father who possessed a sterling character and Monks falls short of that mark. Mr. Brownlow says to Monks about the will that Monk’s father left behind: “‘He talked of [...] the rebellious disposition, vice, malice and premature bad passions of you his only son [...] If it were a girl, it was to inherit money unconditionally; but if a boy, only the stipulation that in his minority he should never have stained his name with any act of dishonor, meanness, cowardice or wrong’” (Oliver Twist 444-445). The sentimental father, of which Oliver’s biological father an example, only gives money to a good and deserving boy who has not stained his name before the age of eighteen. This judgment that prevails, be it human or divine, is due to an explicit contrast between the good deserving boy like Oliver and bad man like Monks. On the other hand, if Oliver would have been a thief, he would not have gotten the money. Here we can see how sympathy for Oliver depends on his innocence and morality. To be rescued, the orphan must be deserving, and to be deserving he must be innocent. At the same time, this passage echoes the previous discussion of innocence as an active state of not offending despite “guilty” origins. Further, however, this passage makes a curious gender distinction. The provision about a girl “unconditionally” inheriting the money suggests a blank slate sort of innocence. As a boy, Oliver has some additional capacity to make bad decisions. Oddly, then, his agency is related
suggestively to his gender. Although he could choose to be a bad boy, as a boy he seems to have a greater ability to choose. In a strange way, then, he might also have the capacity for more innocence.

Dickens recycled his notion of the good orphan into *Great Expectations*. Like in *Oliver Twist*, in *Great Expectations* the novel centers almost exclusively on one male protagonist, Pip, who meets the escaped convict Magwitch and later, after being trained as a blacksmith, mysteriously receives a large sum of money he later learns was Magwitch. Pip also finds out that Magwitch is a criminal, but before dying Magwitch tells Pip that he aided him because he cared for Pip. My thesis resists the view, then, that there is no sympathy between Pip and Magwitch. Nina Auerbach writes, for example, that Pip experiences alienation from both of his father surrogates, Magwitch and Joe. She writes: “Father figures though generations of critics have rightly called them, neither Magwitch nor Joe is really Pip’s father, making Pip’s alienation all the more terrifying when Magwitch looms out of his parents’ graves” (412). Baruch Hochman and Ilja Wachs take a different perspective, however. They write: “Magwitch’s effort to ‘make’ a gentleman also may be seen as the outcome of his own life history. It is his mode of imagining a way out of the mortifying bondage and degradation within a state of orphan-hood and abandonment that first marginalizes and then criminalizes him” (187-188). So, we see that Magwitch fantasizes about making a gentleman out of Pip because he vicariously wants to live a better life through Pip. Magwitch realizes that being a gentleman would have removed the elements that led to his bondage that drove him to desperation and crime. Goldie Morgentaler argues that Pip and Magwitch father-son relationship is formed by money, not nature. However, Morgentaler does not take into account the sympathy between them.
I disagree with the above claims. While Magwitch might have had other motives for making a gentleman out of Pip, those motives that do not negate existing sympathy between them. Further, Auerbach claims that Pip’s feeling of “alienation,” which she fails to define, stems from the frightening experience of Magwitch “ looming” out of his parents’ graves, as if his dead father had come back to life. One can argue that Pip is not as alienated as Auerbach claims. Pip has two father figures who care about him. As it has been argued, the sympathy between Pip and Magwitch creates paternal bonds. Dickens suggests that Magwitch is a good sentimental father despite his past criminal history because he protects Pip from the necessity to work. Based on the Fagin-Oliver father-son relationship, what Dickens is partly trying to demonstrate is that fatherhood itself is in crisis among the lower classes because of their poverty. Julie-Marie Strange argues that Victorian fathers were not just disciplinary figures but also provided nurturing support, just like the mother did. In contrast to Victorian stereotypes of aloof and disciplinary fathers, Strange claims that fathers were affectionate and involved in children’s lives, but that middle-class reformers often depicted working-class fathers as strict to create sympathy for their reform agendas.

Dickens renders Magwitch sympathetic, too, through suggesting that his criminality is caused by his need for survival that is rooted in his own childhood. For example at one point Magwitch tells Pip: “I first became aware of myself, down in Essex, thieving turnips for my living. Summun had ran away from me-a man-a tinker-and he’d took the fire with him, and left me very cold” (382). Magwitch was an orphaned homeless little boy and the first recollection that he had of his life of crime was when he started out stealing turnips to feed himself in Essex. There had been someone looking after him who would build a fire to keep them somewhat warm at night but he had run away and took the fire-making material with him, leaving Magwitch very
cold at night and, perhaps just as importantly, alone. Unlike Pip, Magwitch does not have a sympathetic relationship with an older adult male who, in turn, would save him from a life of crime. If Pip were to work for wages, he would not have the instant gratification of an immediate life of gentility. However, Magwitch’s crime pays for Pip’s life of gentility and most importantly for his honest way of living.

The sympathy between Magwitch and Pip begins early in their relationship. Magwitch is exposed to the possibilities of becoming a sentimental father when, as a little boy, Pip brings him food as Magwitch freezes and starves in the marshes. Pip’s act of kindness, though also somewhat motivated by fear, signifies his virtue. Magwitch always remembers this kindness and a result saves his money so that he can gift it to Pip. Magwitch is deeply moved by what Pip does and shows his gratitude by providing for Pip financially. At one point Magwitch says to Pip:

"'Look’ee here, Pip. I'm your second father. You're my son—more to me nor any son. I've put away money, only for you to spend’" (355-356). Of this scene Goldie Morgentaler writes, "The infusion of Magwitch’s money into Pip’s young life creates relationship analogous to paternity" (3). True, Magwitch acts like a father to Pip because he supports him financially. Yet his paternal bond depends upon on sympathy and has nothing to do with biology. Rather, Magwitch not only has money but also, most importantly, a virtuous heart. We might return here to Chandler’s idea of virtuality. He explores the concept of sentiment as “emotion that results from social circulation, passion that has been mediated by a sympathetic passage through a virtual point of view. It involves a structure of vicariousness” (Chandler 12). This idea of circulating emotion relates to my argument because a sentimental father like Magwitch becomes moved by Pip’s actions, which circulate virtue and honesty. In turn, Magwitch is able to live vicariously through Pip, and thus redeem his own criminal acts through Pip’s virtuous ones. By saving money to
provide for Pip, he returns Pip’s virtue back to him as wealth. Magwitch’s capacity for “sensibility,” another concept Chandler stresses, is what allows him to be so deeply touched by Pip’s virtue.

Thus, Dickens draws an implicit connection between Magwitch’s orphanhood and Pip’s orphanhood. Dickens intends Pip to have a second chance as an orphan and to have a better life than Magwitch. Magwitch, as an orphan, does not have an older adult male who can save him from a life of crime, even though he too is worth saving. Magwitch’s provision for Pip protects him from exploitation through unfair childhood labor practices. John Wall argues that self-sacrifice is an important facet of fatherhood. Further, Wall argues that this self-sacrifice is crucial to social good. Wall complicates the relation of care economy and orphans by adding another facet to this relationship, namely mentioning the “immediate satisfaction of acts of care and nurturance” on the part of the caretakers and the “remarkable return of love that children give back” (70). The works of Dickens that are referred to in this thesis are implicit in this facet of the orphan and caretaker relationship. One can assume that the sentimental fathers mentioned above get some kind of satisfaction from supporting the orphans emotionally.

Laura Peters argues that historical, non-fictional orphans had a much harder time within the Victorian welfare system than those forcefully removed from their poverty-stricken parents by the state and sent to district schools. She further claims that the real orphans were boarded out or placed with families who, because they did not receive sufficient funds for their support from the state, almost surely doomed these neglected orphans to lives of crime. Peters writes: “Such treatment acted as a self-fulfilling prophecy: neglect, poverty and a lack of education or training rather than immorality often turned such children to crime. Hence, the state indirectly worked to ensure that such children fulfilled their perceived potential for evil” (Peters 14). Dickens
supports Peters’ contention through his representation of street orphans forced into underground crime. In this sense, Peters’ history of orphan maltreatment reflects Dickens’ fiction. A general lack of money for orphan children is the root of their mistreatment.

Peters argues that the existence of street orphans who formed a perceived family of crime in *Oliver Twist* represented a challenge to the ideal family in a way that disturbed the average citizen and fostered fear that it would spread within society. The Victorian ideal family is one of a patriarchal structure, with a father who provides for the entire family and a mother who nurtures the children. Ultimately, surrogate fathers reinforce the ideal of the Victorian family unit rather than repudiate it. In *Great Expectations*, Pip’s father dies without leaving any inheritance money to his son and securing his future. In *Oliver Twist*, Oliver’s natural father dies before leaving any provision for his son’s future. Thus, as these examples show, impoverished natural fathers cannot be the patriarchs that the Victorian family ideal promotes. As the money for orphan support does not come from their biological fathers, it must come from their sentimental fathers.

Chapter Two: Racial Innocence and the Orphan Benefactor in *Ramona*

The American author Helen Hunt Jackson is much less well known than Charles Dickens, although her in her lifetime she was a best-selling novelist and activist. Jackson was “best known” for *Ramona* and her nonfiction fiction book *A Century of Dishonor* (Evans 18). She wrote *Dishonor* to discuss the “acts of genocide” carried out by the U.S. Government against Native Americans (Evans 18). She then toured California to report on the conditions of Native Americans there, and while there took detailed notes that informed her novel *Ramona*. The death of a Cahuilla Indian named Juan Diego murdered by a white man inspired her to write it. The
novel was extremely popular although some critics called it "overly sentimental and nostalgic" (Evans 20).

Like the Dickens novels, Ramona's sentimentalism and its focus on an orphan character make it a valuable text for thinking about American cultural attitudes and how the "metaphor" of the orphan, to borrow Peters' idea, overlaps with those of Victorian England. It's useful to discuss the fiction of Dickens and Jackson together for several other reasons. First, Dickens' orphan novels like Oliver Twist probably had some influence on the decision of writers like Jackson to represent orphans as key characters in their fiction, both because those novels were commercially successful and because orphan children took on special significance as sentimental characters in nineteenth century fiction. Several other American authors and texts, from Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn to Horatio Alger's Ragged Dick, seemed to share this impulse to construct important cultural narratives through the lens of the orphan. Second, the economic conditions that created class conflict and extreme inequality in Dickens Victorian fiction emerged with great force in the United States after the Civil War. Further, both Dickens' orphan novels and antebellum novels like Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin suggested that the sentimental, melodramatic novel was an important way to draw attention to social problems. In these ways, reading Jackson and Dickens together makes sense. They were melodramatic novelists focused on social problems, writing in somewhat similar economic and cultural contexts, and using literary techniques to make readers sympathetic to their stories and characters.

One compelling difference between the Dickens novels and Ramona, however, is that there is no care or affection between the benefactor character, Señora Moreno, and the orphan character, Ramona. As I will show, this key difference depends on the explicit themes of race
and gender that appear in Jackson, and which are only implicit in Dickens. Although the Señora insulates Ramona from labor and supports her rescue, she does not love her: "Shelter, food, clothes, external needs, insofar as her means allowed, the Señora would, without fail, provide for the child that her sister had left in her hands as a trust; but a personal relation with her, a mother’s affection, or even interest and acquaintance, no" (Jackson 90). This contrast is valuable for beginning this chapter. In *Ramona*, one finds complicating circumstances surrounding Señora Moreno, who is an anti-Dickensian benefactor in the sense that she lacks the sympathetic attachment that is typically formed by sympathetic benefactors. In another contrast that emphasizes the distance from Dickens’ characters, we find that Señora Moreno’s lack of affection is due to her racial prejudice against Ramona’s Native American identity on her mother’s side.

This conflict between Señora Moreno and Ramona is the focus of this chapter. This conflict becomes a contest over *Ramona’s* characters’ sense of innocence, and by extension competing forms of feelings about between Señora Moreno and Ramona about her biracial identity. In this chapter, I will first explore the nature of Señora Moreno’s racist feelings against Ramona. I will then discuss Ramona’s discovery of a new sense of self that comes from learning about her mother’s identity as Native American. With Bernstein’s work informing my interpretations, I will suggest that Señora Moreno and Ramona offer different perspectives on orphan innocence and the cultural idea of whiteness associated with that innocence. By making Ramona a sympathetic character with qualities of whiteness, Jackson represents her in a special way in part because of Jackson’s activism for Native Americans at the time. At the time, there was considerable racism against Native Americans and ongoing wars of extermination against peoples such as the Sioux or Nez Perce. This racism came from pseudo-scientific ideas of race
that categorized Native Americans as fundamentally inferior, non-white persons. Jackson attempted to create sympathy for Ramona, and by extension the ongoing plight of Native Americans, in part by rendering her as a beautiful, light-skinned figure. While Jackson’s portrayal of Ramona’s innocence and whiteness romanticized her for nineteenth-century readers, Jackson relied on whiteness to make Ramona, and thus Native Americans, more valuable to a culture of white supremacy. In this sense, Jackson solidified the white supremacy of her culture. Further, Ramona’s whiteness was somewhat exceptional, as her biological father was white, and in this way actually created boundaries for readers’ sympathetic to her but who might have held racist beliefs. I will thus explore Jackson’s this representation of Ramona’s innocence as partially racial, and, following scholars like John M. Gonzalez and Yolanda Venegas, offer a critique of it. This critique will help me address the limitations of Jackson’s use of the orphan as metaphor.

The focus of this thesis chapter addresses interpretations of Ramona. Previous scholars like Rosemary Evans have shown that in writing Ramona Jackson was mainly motivated by this harsh treatment of Native Americans, while John R. Byers discusses the similarities between Jackson’s factual reporting and the novel Ramona. Byers is helpful because he divides the novel into “two main scenes of action” (333). The first scene of action takes place when Ramona is growing up on Señora Moreno’s ranch. This is the period I will focus on. Byers also rightly points out that this is the section where Jackson “presents the basic conflict of the races,” even though “the second part… is her chief concern” due to its presentation of injustices against Native Americans (333). Chimene I. Keitner underlines the basic perspective on Jackson’s intentions with the novel, arguing that Ramona was written to expose such injustices and reveal Jackson’s “reform agenda” (61). While other scholars critique the novel’s exposition of such injustices, as I will discuss later in the chapter, my thesis looks at the orphan benefactor character Señora
Moreno through the lens of Robin Bernstein’s racial innocence. As Bernstein writes, the American cultural idea of childhood contained “directly opposing racial arguments,” and used “abstract childhood to justify granting or withholding the rights of living adults and children” (3). Due to the American experience of slavery and emancipation, Bernstein argues that the “performance” of childhood became identified as a “racial project” (4). The performance of childhood “enabled divergent political positions each to appear natural, inevitable, and therefore justified” (4). For her, white children were represented as innocent. Whiteness had an element of purity. Part of my argument is that Señora Moreno’s prejudice was more related to Ramona’s Native American background rather than simple whiteness per se. This in turn prevented her from having sympathy for her. At the same time, Jackson also tries to represent Ramona as innocent, and therefore sympathetic, to readers. The second half of this chapter will address the implications of that.

First, it is interesting that in Ramona there exists no care or motherly bond between Ramona and Señora Moreno. Until she reaches adolescence, Ramona doesn’t even really understand her origins, and that she is actually the love-child between a white settler and a Native American woman. Ramona was given to Señora Moreno’s sister by the white settler based on their lost affection. While a child on Señora Moreno’s ranch, Ramona learns to normalize her relationship with Señora Moreno as she goes about her days. She is able to make friends in spite of this, including with Señora Moreno’s son Felipe. In fact, Ramona’s beauty and kindness attracts many of the ranch-hands, as well as Felipe. When Felipe falls ill and requires the comforts of his friend Alessandro, who works on the ranch, a relationship develops between Ramona and Alessandro. This is a turning point in the novel.
This relationship becomes a key action in the plot and reveals Señora Moreno’s conception of racial innocence. Ramona and Alessandro fall in love. They keep their affair a secret, even though it is very tame. Unfortunately for them, Señora Moreno discovers them hugging at night before they are able to explain their relationship. She assumes Ramona and Alessandro have been having a sexual affair, in part because of Ramona’s biracial status. Señora Moreno says about Ramona: “If the child were pure Indian, I would like it better...I like not these crosses. It is the worst, and not the best of each, that remains” (Jackson 30). In this admission, Señora Moreno reveals a complicated perspective. Ramona’s biracial status confuses her. When she says “I like not these crosses,” she implies it would be easier to feel one way or another if Ramona had a clearly defined racial identity. In her language of “worst” and “best,” she also insinuates that racial categories leave different people with different personality or character traits. Without explanation, she believes that biracial people receive the worst qualities of such categories. Racial categories further serve the racist desire for clear boundaries about “us” and “them.”

Señora Moreno’s perception of Ramona’s racial identity leads her here to reveal why she feels no sympathy toward Ramona. Her sensibility, her capacity to feel, depends upon structures of racial identity. In another sense, however, this is ironic. None of Ramona’s whiteness, and the innocence associated with it, is able to move the racist Señora Moreno to sympathize with Ramona at all. Yet as Keitner writes, for “the Señora, Ramona’s white blood is not redemptive” (Keitner 62). Keitner’s perspective echoes Señora Moreno’s statement that “the worst” remains, not “the best.” This perspective also shows that for Señora Moreno race goes beyond skin color. Keitner focuses on the metaphor of “blood” involved. For Señora Moreno, the Native American “blood” spoils Señora Moreno’s ability to feel sympathy for her. Ramona’s
blood cannot rescue her from being forever branded as a low class "Indian." This racial idea of "blood" is also why Señora Moreno forbids Ramona to marry Alessandro. She believes the tragedy of Ramona’s racial identity will be made worse by her association with a man identified as Indian. Her disapproval of Ramona and Alessandro is what drives them to marry in secret.

The moment Señora Moreno discovers that Ramona wishes to marry Alessandro, in fact, she emphasizes the lack of affection between them. She also discusses Ramona’s origins as an orphan: "I am not your mother; but I stand in your mother’s place to you. You were my sister’s adopted child, and she gave you to me" (129). Here, we see the disclaimer that Señora Moreno is not Ramona’s natural mother. This assertion serves to distance Señora Moreno from Ramona and underlines the fact that their relationship lacks a caring element. Señora Moreno feels some parental responsibility for Ramona but realizes that it is limited and that she has no real say over her life. On the other hand, this passage also demonstrates the emotional distance between Señora Moreno and Ramona. It showcases Ramona’s truly orphaned state. Ramona has no substitute mother in Señora Moreno because Señora Moreno denies that there is any natural motherly bond between them, as the one that could exist between a mother and her child. There is not even a trace of affection between Señora Moreno and Ramona primarily due to Señora Moreno’s extreme racism towards Ramona. This is a marked contrast with the Dickens figures.

Ramona and Señora Moreno’s conflict shows how much Ramona fears Señora Moreno’s racism. When Señora Moreno discovers them and Ramona sends Alessandro away, Jackson writes that a "wrath, such she had not felt since she was young, took possession of her....she struck the girl on the mouth, a cruel blow" (113). Señora Moreno’s "wrath" and "hate" against Ramona are examples of her prejudice. Señora Moreno thinks Ramona is a "hussy" and locks Ramona in her bedroom, "like a prisoner" (113). Another domestic worker, Margarita, believed
Señora Moreno “might kill her” (114). Margarita believes Señora Moreno always did “hate her, in her heart” (114). Ramona the “half Indian” with the bad “blood” must also be a corrupt woman. Ramona even feels Señora Moreno might be capable of killing her by starving her to death due to disobedience: she “had read of persons who had been shut up alive in cells in the wall, and starved to death” (Jackson 131). Even when Ramona runs away, Señora Moreno thinks, “base begotten, base born, she has but carried out the instincts of her nature!” (Jackson 125). At this moment, Señora Moreno reveals the racist logic that motivates part of her hate for Ramona. All of her abuse is part of a prejudice that cannot understand Ramona as an individual capable of virtue. Rather than an individual who can make choices, Señora Moreno believes Ramona’s biracial identity overwhelms her ability to freely choose her actions. Furthermore, by “base instincts” Señora Moreno refers to her imagined image of Ramona and Alessandro’s sexual relationship. This is a particularly vivid moment where Ramona’s gender status becomes tied into her racial identity. For Señora Moreno, Ramona’s racial identity makes her morally suspect because she’s closer to the racial stereotype of the animal, and thus subject to bodily drives such as lust. This notion appears too in her use of the word “hussy.” The gender distinction she makes with her language here recalls Oliver’s status as actively innocent because he made good choices as a boy. In the eyes of Señora Moreno, Ramona’s status here as innocent seems tied to her capacity to make the right decision with her body or sexuality. For both Oliver and Ramona, their innocence depends upon not making the wrong choice. At the same time, those choices appear gendered, and the spectator in a position of sensibility, including the benefactor, seems to involve characters of the same gender identity as the children.

After the confrontation, her son Felipe wonders, “Since she knew that the Señorita was half Indian, why should she think it so dreadful to marry an Indian man?” (Jackson 116). Felipe’s
confusion points out an interesting contradiction in the way the Señora thinks about race. Just as Bernstein argues about racial innocence, here Señora Moreno see Ramona’s maturity from childhood into romantic union as a “racial project.” Ramona’s performance of innocence cannot overcome her Native American identity. At the same time, in a foreshadowing of Felipe and Ramona’s eventual marriage we can see something new here. Jackson left space in the novel for other ideas about race and identity to occur.

The conflict between Señora Moreno and Ramona over Ramona’s racial identity points toward other such directions. The conflict reveals to Ramona more about her origins, and this turns into a new kind of confidence for her. It begins when Ramona asks about her biological mother, as this is an important part of her identity. Before Señora Moreno refers to Ramona’s mother as a “low, common Indian,” Señora Moreno tries to make Ramona feel ashamed of her mixed racial background. She tells Ramona that Alessandro is a “beggarly Indian, on whom my servants will set the dogs” (Jackson 130). Ramona’s reaction to Señora Moreno telling her about her mother’s racial identity is different than expected, however: “At the word ‘Indian’ Ramona gave a low cry. The Señora misunderstood it” (Jackson 132). Señora Moreno believes that Ramona is ashamed of her mixed racial background, which is really not the case. At this moment she becomes happy because she shares a similar identity with Alessandro. Her new sense of confidence in her identity mixes with the love she has for Alessandro. At first, Ramona’s independence is expressed to Señora Moreno through her actions: “Ramona flashed full in the Señora’s face a look of proud defiance. It was the first free moment her soul had ever known” (Jackson 128). This moment is a complete reversal of Ramona’s former state, when she had told Alessandro she often wished she “could throw” herself into a river and commit suicide (Jackson 119). This is where Ramona’s independent spirit manifests itself. Being buoyed as by
wings in air is a metaphor for her independent spirit soaring off and having the confidence to do anything. Yet this independence becomes racial when Ramona learns she is Native American: "'Yes, Señora Moreno,' she said, springing to her feet; ‘the Indian blood in my veins shows today. I understand things I’ve never understood before" (Jackson 132). Here Ramona’s independence becomes integrated into her own understanding of her identity. Her belief in the power of her “blood,” and not as “base born,” excites her. This is a more positive “racial project” on the part of Jackson. I will it discuss next.

In Ramona, Jackson is suggesting kinds of racial innocence that can include forms of whiteness that include Native Americans. We can start to see this in the above passage. Jackson is trying to create sympathy for Native Americans through Ramona. It is important that Jackson presents Ramona as physically attractive, though, which in theory might help endear her to readers, as well as to Felipe and Alessandro. Her beauty and her skin color have always been part of her identity. Her innocence depends on whiteness, even as she is half-Indian. In a representative passage about when Ramona was young, for example, Jackson writes how she inspired all who saw her:

Ramona’s beauty was of the sort to be best enhanced by the waving gold which now framed her face. She had just enough of olive tint in her complexion to underlie and enrich her skin without making it swarthy. Her hair was like her Indian mother’s, heavy and black, but her eyes were like father’s, steel-blue (Jackson 38)

Jackson’s rendering of Ramona’s beauty is significant in this passage. If we see her beauty in contrast to an unattractive character, Jackson’s decision to make Ramona a beautiful character in a romantic Indian reform novel is important because it helps readers potentially have more sympathy for her or the narrative. It’s also likely that Ramona’s beauty is part of the standards of
nineteenth century ideologies of whiteness. This might explain why Jackson takes care to describe her “olive” skin that is not swarthy, and emphasize her steel-blue eyes. Bernstein shows in her work how whiteness was understood to be “innocent” while blackness implied the opposite. Señora Moreno’s explicit denunciation of Ramona’s racial identity and her assumption of Ramona’s guilt towards Ramona underlines that she doesn’t see her as racially innocent, but not however on the basis of her skin color. This is related to Bernstein’s framework, but not quite the same. In describing her skin tones, beauty, and meek behavior, too, Jackson in part suggests Ramona as racially innocent to readers. Jackson’s racial project is somewhat different than the kind Bernstein considers in her work, but she still uses whiteness as a way to establish potential sympathy for Ramona in readers.

It is also ironic that while Ramona becomes independent from Señora Moreno, she still chooses an identity where she remains dependent on a man in marriage. This happens first with Alessandro and then with Felipe once Alessandro dies. She ends up following Alessandro around and having him tell her what to do. Her identity is intertwined with the Native American part of her racial heritage, which enables her to find genuine sympathy in Alessandro. In Alessandro, Ramona finds a confidante who accepts her racial heritage. Keitner argues their linked fate is “voluntary,” but Jackson making Ramona dependent is nonetheless important (Keitner 64). In this way and others, I agree with Yolanda Venegas who claims that the novel actually supports notions of Manifest Destiny. She writes that the “symbolic use of women in colonization projects” is important. She writes *Ramona* was part of California’s “fantasy heritage” (Venegas 69). She argues the novel “indicts” American Manifest Destiny while “implicitly legitimating” the Spanish settlements that came before (Venegas 72). For her, this is why Ramona ends up with Felipe in Mexico City and not with Alessandro. This occurs even though Alessandro
represented a perhaps more progressive narrative of inclusion by Jackson, especially for the time period. She claims Ramona is an "exotic Native maiden" and her story justifies "violence and racial domination" (Venegas 74). I agree, but I would say that Ramona’s dependency on men in her marriages is part of the Manifest Destiny Venegas talks about.

Other scholars offer similar claims. John Gonzalez argues the novel supports Amy Kaplan’s idea of “Manifest Domesticity” (Gonzalez 438). This idea is about the “privileges of a shared imperial whiteness” (Gonzalez 438). He claims “Indian reform novels suggest that racial tutelage could dissolve tribal sovereignty and thereby transmute savages outside US law into citizens subject to the nation’s law” (Gonzalez 439). He writes Ramona “offered a renovated alternative to absolute Indian difference by representing Indians as primitive peoples who could be educated into modernity” (Gonzalez 440). These ideas support Jackson’s representation of Ramona’s whiteness. They also help explain her new dependence on Alessandro and then Felipe. She becomes some part of “Manifest Domesticity.” While Gonzalez emphasizes this “domesticity, the concepts of whiteness and paternalism are important as well. I will address this further in my conclusion.

**Conclusion: The Paternal Benefactor**

In my conclusion, I would like to address some of the intersections between the orphan as a metaphor in sentimental fiction and the orphan as problem for Victorian nineteenth-century culture. One common thread of these orphan narratives is the lack of sufficient funds to support the orphan. This creates the pathos and dynamic tension of the Victorian orphan narrative. The reader views the orphan’s plight and experiences a corresponding moral. The orphan’s survival thus is thus dependent upon the care economy and orphan benefactor; the money for their
support eventually comes from their surrogate fathers, here also referred to as sentimental fathers. John Wall argues that “self-sacrifice for one’s child is always ultimately made in the service of a larger human mutuality and social good” (70). At the same time, we can see such “self-sacrifice” in sentimental benefactors too. Magwitch from *Great Expectations* and Oliver’s surrogate father Mr. Brownlow from *Oliver Twist* are “sentimental fathers” because they have loving and caring hearts. Here, the term, “having a heart” is synonymous to being kind and caring. However, one must note that these sentimental fathers give their financial support only to good and deserving orphans. In fact, being virtuous and deserving is what qualifies an orphan for this relationship. There is always a certain sympathy between these sentimental fathers and their adopted sons, yet they still must meet the ethical criteria previously mentioned to be deserving of it.

At the same time, one feature of the orphan fiction in sentimental literature is a cliffhanging element in the orphan rescue plot based around the device of luck, which James Chandler explores. Chandler’s work is important to this thesis because it makes possible the connection between orphan and benefactor characters. For example, sympathetic paternal bonds depend on luck. Chandler writes, “[e]motion can be... closely keyed to degrees of improbability” (227). In other words, the reader’s emotions are significantly heightened when an unexpected outcome occurs. David Luis-Brown notes this as a quality of sentimental literature including *Ramona*. Citing Michael Dorris, he ties the “melodrama in *Ramona* with improbable events” (Luis-Brown 813). It is very improbable that someone poor would receive a large amount of money out of the blue, yet this occurs in *Great Expectations* when Magwitch unexpectedly bequeaths Pip with money. When this shocking truth is revealed in the novel after the reader have been led to believe that the benefactress is Miss Havisham, the reader’s emotions
are significantly heightened. This sense of emotion also occurs when something unexpectedly happens in *Ramona*, such as when Señora Moreno discovers Ramona and Alessandro embracing, which sets off their secret elopement. It heightens drama, and also develops emotional investment in the orphan narrative.

It is important to consider the role of luck and emotion for historical orphan children, too. In her history *We Rode the Orphan Trains*, Andrea Warren discusses how some select orphans were also fortunate enough to get adopted and find loving families. Such luck paved the way for the possibility of a happy life for the orphan child. As such, the orphan now had a fighting chance for survival. Luck is important because it demonstrates the extensive use and thus importance of what I call orphan innocence. Orphan narratives create sympathy in readers by presenting innocent children in painful trials and tribulations. They solve the pain of abandonment of orphans by eventually placing the orphan with a benefactor who recognizes his or her goodness. In Dickens’ *Oliver Twist* and *Great Expectations*, sentimental orphan benefactors insulate orphans from hard labor and thereby contribute to their rescue. While Señora Moreno also insulates Ramona from hard labor by providing for her financially, her son Felipe ultimately becomes Ramona’s sentimental benefactor at the end of the novel, after the death of Alessandro. Although Jackson represents Ramona as innocent and Señora Moreno’s treatment of her as a child as unjust, she places Ramona and Felipe together in Mexico as a way for readers to finally imagine her as safe and happy. What unites the Dickens characters with Ramona is that in the end a kind paternal figure ends up rescuing them all from the problem of their orphan origins. The element of orphan survival appears universally in the form of an heroic benefactor or, more specifically, a paternal figure who, in a deus ex machina fashion, steps in to save the day. For instance, especially in Dickens novels, only deserving orphans who are morally
qualified for salvation find such salvation from the orphan benefactor who recognizes this quality. Ultimately, male characters and romantic unions save Ramona. In *Oliver Twist* and *Great Expectations*, one way in which the orphan caretakers have an impact on the orphan’s survivability is by saving them from child labor. One reason why it matters that benefactors insulate orphans from labor is because it showcases a trend in both British and American novels selected for this analysis. Ramona, like Dickens’ orphan characters, is also insulated from both child labor and wage labor throughout the novel. This trend is suggestive about the purpose and limits of the nineteenth-century melodrama. On the one hand, authors created narratives whereby sympathy for orphans might spark social change or activism in readers. On the other hand, the novels could not imagine structural solutions to the problems of extreme inequality or create narratives that solved the larger crisis of abandoned children in industrial capitalism. It is also perhaps the case that by relying on sentimental bonds and rescue narratives, the authors encouraged a reading public to ignore the need for deeper structural reforms in both labor practices and state support of the poor.

The idea that good and bad luck determined an orphan’s fate was an outcome of unjust and unequal Victorian economy. On the contrary, Murdoch maintains that the fault lies not in the parents but rather, at least in part, in the Victorian economy. Murdoch writes: “More generally, parents decided to institutionalize some or all of their children after experiencing a number of often overlapping crises: [including…] unemployment or casual employment at poor wages” (Murdoch 79). According to Murdoch, parents voluntarily gave up their children for adoption as a way to humbly ask for help from a public institution. Due to their casual employment or employment at poor wages, they could not afford to take care of their children and did not want to let them starve. It is important to note that a factor driving the necessity for an orphan to find a
benefactor is that, at least in England, there was only the New Poor Law to help prevent orphans from destitution, which broke up families. Dickens’ fiction can supplement what is wrong with the New Poor Law, even in an abstract way, just as Jackson tries to rectify what is wrong with American violence against Native Americans. However, it must also be acknowledged that popular orphan fiction was written for the purpose of not only raising awareness of the deserving poor but also for entertainment. At first, it might be hard to believe that readers would want to buy such novels that described such unpleasant subjects. However, one can infer that readers would want to buy such novels because they had happy endings. This is one of the functions that the novels serve, and part of a sentimental tradition Chandler would recognize.

We might thus return to Chandler’s notion of improbability that deals with an event’s intensity of impact due to the odds against it happening. In *Hard Times*, the luckiest, or most improbable, moment is when Sissy gets adopted. In *Oliver Twist*, an improbable moment occurs when Oliver is rescued just before becoming inducted into a life of crime. In *Great Expectations*, an improbable moment is when Pip receives his windfall inheritance. In *Ramona*, it is Alessandro surviving the destruction of his village and returning to Ramona just when she was needing him. It is these events that produce a heightening of emotions. The luck one encounters in fiction is valuable for entertainment’s sake: the last minute rescue or windfall inheritance. But in real life, sometimes nothing can be done about the separation of impoverished parents and their children. Mary-Catherine Harrison defines the paradox of fiction as an emotional response to stimuli that the reader already knows is fictional. In this way, Harrison examines the ethics behind Chandler’s notion of moving and being moved. Harrison writes: “In part, Dickens wanted to enrich the lives of working classes with stories and storytelling, but he also saw the power of imagination in stirring sympathy—in the nineteenth century sense of the word—and good works.
If the middle- and upper-class readers could vividly imagine the suffering they did not themselves experience, he believed, then they would be moved enough to intervene” (Harrison 263). This is a commentary on Dickens’ and Jackson’s social consciousness. They purposefully write stories for the masses in the hope that readers would vicariously experience the social inequalities portrayed through their writings and thus hopefully be morally outraged and energized to right the social wrongs that they relate. However, a modern reader is once again is faced with Harrison’s paradox of fiction. Even though the reader may be moved by the heart-rending stories in Dickens’ and Jackson’s novels, the reader may have been unable to imagine solutions to the larger problem orphan children in the Victorian era.
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