



**‘Defining Her Feelings in a Language Chiefly Made by Men’: Uncovering Alternative
Female Subjectivities in the Victorian Novel.**

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‘What a form she had, what a face she had’ (Dickens 399)

In Victorian society, the scope within which women could express their subjectivity was still narrow. Though there was an unprecedented number of female authors publishing novels, the use of male pseudonyms was still common. Thus, most authors were male and predominantly wrote their works from male perspectives. In this male-dominated environment, it was difficult to find authentic representations of female subjectivity. In his novel *Far From The Madding Crowd*, Thomas Hardy comments on this condition through his character Bathsheba Everdene, who laments that ‘it is difficult for a woman to define her feelings in language which is chiefly made by men to express theirs’ (342). In this vein, this article will inspect how and to what extent male authors managed to present women’s subjectivity authentically. To do so, it will compare *Far From The Madding Crowd* to Charles Dickens’ novel *David Copperfield*, examining how and why these authors use their narrators to shape their readers' opinions of their female characters. It will discuss the use of perspective, narrators as moral guides, and irony in both novels. This article will also employ the work of female novelists, such as George Eliot and Charlotte Brontë, as productive comparisons to the work of Hardy and Dickens. Ultimately, it will substantiate Hardy's greater ability to authentically portray his female characters through his narrator in comparison to Dickens.

Through the use of a first-person homodiegetic narrator, Dickens presents his novel *David Copperfield* from the perspective of his male middle-class protagonist. Because of this narrow viewpoint, he largely fails to present the subjectivity of his female characters. Accordingly, Dickens has neither of his two female protagonists speak in direct speech for more than 1,700 words after their introduction to the narrative. *David Copperfield* is written as David’s autobiography ‘which he never meant to be published on any account,’ (Dickens 13). This assertion manipulates readers into believing that David’s narration is truthful and

unbiased, similar to a diary, thus naturalising the male narrative perspective. This is comparable to Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, except that her novel reveals a typical Victorian *woman's* perspective. Dickens' narrator dedicates long passages to the character-building of female figures. Thus, David's wife Dora Spenlow is rendered into an object of David's desire described as 'everything that everybody ever wanted,' and admired for her looks rather than her actions: 'What a form she had, what a face she had' (Dickens 399). David infantilises and belittles Dora, talking of her 'delightful little voice, [...] gayest little laugh, [her] pleasantest and most fascinating little ways,' stressing 'little' repeatedly (399). Underpinned by the drawings of his illustrator Phiz, Dickens uses Dora's infantilization to play into the 'virgin-whore' dichotomy he perpetuates throughout his work. On the other hand, Dickens dedicates entire chapters to Dora's shortcomings in housekeeping, presenting Dora's character entirely through David's criticisms (Dickens Ch. 44, 48). Despite this, Ioannou claims Dickens does hint at a secondary female narrative to the main male-dominated narrative (143). While Agnes Wickfield's and Betsey Trotwood's treatment of Dora offers a critical view of David's assessment of his wife's faults, Ioannou's assertions that the novel explicitly points to issues of men's inadequacies in telling women's stories are less accurate (148). The women are indeed more accepting of Dora's supposed shortcomings than David is, and Betsey warns David that he 'must be gentle with her' (Dickens 644). However, David is never challenged for presenting his wife negatively. In her death, Dora even confirms David's unflattering characterisation of herself by saying 'I loved you far too well to say a reproachful word to you, [...] it was all the merit I had, except being pretty' (Dickens 773). Thus, Dickens' chosen narrative style manipulates readers into believing the account of a Victorian middle-class man to be honest and authoritative. David's representation of women is controlled by his perspective, leaving little room for independent

female character development, inauthentically constructing women as simplistic infantile beings and, additionally, perpetuating a 'virgin-whore' dichotomy.

In contrast to Dickens, Hardy's heterodiegetic third-person narrator has no personal stake in the plot. Hardy switches between different points of view in *Far From the Madding Crowd's* narration. In this, he can show different perspectives, including those of his female characters. As opposed to Dickens' presentation of a typical urban Victorian man's viewpoint, Hardy creates a richer picture of Victorian rural society. In consequence, the narration seems more balanced. Hardy's narrative technique is subjective realism, which at once acknowledges and challenges omniscient narration's limits. This narrative technique is similar to Eliot's in *Middlemarch*, in which her narrator switches between interlocking storylines. With his subjective realism, Hardy creates a wider scope for the expression of female perspectives unmediated by a male narrative voice - something one also finds in Eliot. Thus, Hardy rarely passes judgements on characters directly through his narrator, but develops them through action, allowing scope for a broader and more authentic expression of the female subject. For instance, Bathsheba shows herself to be intelligent and self-sufficient at the cornmarket, where she '[speaks] and [replies] boldly to men,' quickly '[adopting] the professional pour into the hand [...] in perfect Casterbridge manner' (Hardy 90). Especially in dramatic action, which creates a sense of shared experience with characters, Hardy achieves effects that are usually merits of first-person narration. When Bathsheba saves her corn during a storm, readers witness her bravery and industriousness. She is described as '[barring the lightning's] dazzle without flinching—thunder and all—and again [ascending] with the load [of reed sheaves],' showing determination and character development (Hardy 246). This is in contrast to Gabriel Oak's initial characterisation of her as 'idle' in the novel's opening chapter (Hardy 11). Hardy's narrative, thus, presents different

perspectives of women, free from artificial gender codes, thereby providing scope for the authentic exploration and development of female subjectivities.

One of the easiest ways any narrative can manipulate its readers' opinions is by passing explicit moral judgement on its characters and their actions through narration. In third-person omniscient narration, heterodiegetic narrators are often perceived as being unusually unbiased and reliable, due to their lack of involvement in the plot, which further naturalises male perspectives. Victorian readers and critics were accustomed to narrators judging characters' actions within the bounds of Victorian values. In *Middlemarch*, the (ostensibly male) narrator passes overt moral judgement on characters, including *Middlemarch's* women. Thus, Dorothea Casaubon is described as '[emerging] from [moral] stupidity' and Mary Garth as 'not [having] attained that perfect good sense and good principle which are usually recommended to the less fortunate girl' (Eliot 175, 93). Readers are plainly told where female characters fit into the Victorian moral framework. Within limits, homodiegetic first-person narrators, such as in *David Copperfield*, also somewhat manipulate readers' opinions in this way. Naïve younger David often hastily sorts people into 'good' and 'bad' binaries. In this vein, he calls Agnes his 'good Angel' and cannot accept James Steerforth might be '[his] bad Angel, or anyone's,' providing dramatic irony (Dickens 374). Once again, this strict binary contributes to Dickens' and Phiz's perpetuation of a 'virgin-whore' dichotomy. Still, Massimiliano Morini claims David-the-narrator, as opposed to younger David, 'is seen to be endowed with superior interpretive faculties and moral qualities' and is thus perceived as 'eminently reliable, a fictional double of the author' (602). Therefore, Victorian novels' narrators often manipulate their readers' opinions of their female characters by assuming the role of moral guide in the novels, which further authorises the male perspective. Narrators tell readers in binary terms where characters fit into the

Victorian moral framework. This method anchors readers' opinions of characters quickly, leaving little room for the authentic development of female subjectivity.

However, when readers are aware the narrator has a personal stake in the narrative, they are conscious of the narrator's potential unreliability, which weakens this method's effectiveness. This is the case in *David Copperfield*, as well as Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, forcing their authors to employ other devices to back their narrators' moral judgement. Brontë is known for addressing her readers directly through her narrator, with sentences such as 'Oh, romantic reader, forgive me for telling the plain truth!' to build a personal rapport with them, manipulating readers into believing Jane is a trustworthy judge of character (156). Dickens' narrator backs his assessments with gaugeable facts to make himself seem more reliable and authoritative. For instance, moral goodness in *David Copperfield* is often narratively indicated through the characters' cleanliness. Victorian society often associated outward cleanliness with clarity of conscience. Thus, Clara Peggotty, a character whom David describes as 'the best, the truest, the most faithful [...] friend,' is described as '[cleaning] everything over and over again' (Dickens 208, 634). Associating these two ostensibly unrelated facts reinforces the narrator's description of the characters. Furthermore, Dickens uses intertextual references, especially biblical references, to add authority to his account. Thus, Jeremy Tambling claims Dickens and his illustrator Phiz drew parallels between Martha Endell and the biblical Mary Magdalene (945). Aside from their similar names, Phiz's illustration 'Martha' shows Martha weeping at Ham Peggotty's feet, evoking Mary Magdalene washing Jesus's feet with her tears (Dickens 347). Once again, this reinforces Dickens' 'virgin-whore' dichotomy; through the association with Mary Magdalene, frequently portrayed as a prostitute, Dickens insinuates that Martha is a prostitute herself without having the narrator explicitly say so. Martha is merely described as 'disordering [her

hair] with her own hands,' suggesting her culpability in 'disordering' her life. Later on, she cryptically speaks of being 'lost' and 'corrupting' Emily by '[keeping] company with [her]' (Dickens 346, 689, 690). Dickens' intertextuality manipulates readers into assuming Martha is a prostitute and judging her accordingly. Thus, the method of narrators being moral guides can work in homodiegetic narratives, if they can make their moral judgement seem objective through further techniques. Dickens uses techniques such as associative 'evidence' and intertextuality to support David-the-narrator's judgement of female characters, manipulating readers into believing his inauthentic 'virgin-or-whore' dichotomy more readily, and, thus, perpetuating inauthentic representations of female subjectivity.

Hardy's third-person heterodiegetic narrator in *Far From the Madding Crowd* could easily pass judgement on his female characters. However, Rosemary Morgan points out that many of Hardy's contemporary critics were troubled that he did not employ the conventional narrator-as-a-moral-guide trope (32). Hardy's narrator does not tell readers where female characters fit into the Victorian moral framework, staying unclear about their moral attributes, and thus leaving more scope for the authentic development of female subjects. Instead, Hardy's characters express moral judgement on each other, distancing their judgements from the authority of the heterodiegetic narrator. He employs Gabriel Oak as the main moralistic censor in the novel. Thus, both principal female characters are first encountered from Oak's viewpoint. When Bathsheba is first described as 'young and attractive,' this is as 'Gabriel [...] beheld the sight,' it is Gabriel's opinion of her (Hardy 11). Bathsheba is portrayed as 'idle,' 'indulging' and 'vain' (Hardy 11-13). However, by saying 'this was but conjecture,' Hardy's narrator makes clear these are Gabriel's impressions, by no means absolute truths, backing this with hesitant words such as 'nobody knows,' 'seeming,' and 'probably' (Hardy 12). This makes these judgments subjective, similar to *David*

Copperfield's first-person judgements, depriving male perspectives of the authority they seek to claim. The narrator denotes Gabriel's inference as 'cynical,' distancing himself from the man's judgement (Hardy 12). Later, readers are called not to accept the characters' viewpoints as truth stating that 'wisdom lies in moderating mere impressions' (Hardy 55). Furthermore, Hardy's descriptions are rarely ends in themselves; frequently the narrator does not judge characters and, instead, their environment contributes to their characterisation. This allows for more authentic representations of women's experiences. In her introduction, Bathsheba is described as 'surrounded by tables and chairs [...] together with a caged canary' (Hardy 11). Both Bathsheba and the bird are surrounded or caged, drawing parallels between the two, insinuating both are trapped. Additionally, Hardy refuses to characterise the pregnant Fanny Robin as sinful and thereby perpetuate negative stereotypes of 'fallen women', but instead tries to point out men's heartlessness towards them. Thus, Fanny's Casterbridge Highway journey is tragic. She is described as '[swaying] sideways, and [falling],' while only a stray dog comes to her rescue (Hardy 259). Hardy, therefore, abstains from passing moral judgements on female characters through his narrator, consequently avoiding manipulating readers' opinions of such characters. This, consequently, allows more scope for potential alternative interpretations of female subjectivity. He distances himself from the novel's moral guide by making judgements seem more subjective, divesting male narrative judgement of its authority. Instead, Hardy relies on other techniques for characterisation, presenting female experiences authentically by exploring men's unfairness towards women, and willing readers to feel compassion.

To be less obvious in expressing narrative perspectives, Victorian novelists frequently used ironic subtext rather than straightforward narration. Victorian authors such as Eliot were well known for their subtle use of narrators to comment on characters and hint at

realities and experiences beyond patriarchal discourse. One of Eliot's most famous examples in her novel *Middlemarch* is her persistent description of 'poor Mr. Casaubon,' who in reality is abusive and controlling of his wife Dorothea (70). Hardy also uses irony through a heterodiegetic narrator to comment on his characters and circumvent patriarchal discourse, thus achieving greater authenticity in his representations of female subjects. For instance, Bathsheba's actions often have ironic consequences. When she decides to go to Liddy's sister to '[get] out of the way of Mr. Boldwood,' the journey ironically leads her straight to 'the very man she sought so anxiously to elude' (Hardy 198). When she secretly takes her horse to follow Sergeant Troy to Bath, this is ironically what leads to her exposure, which the narrator sarcastically comments on as the 'initial success we have already seen' (Hardy 214). Such irony hints at a sense of helplessness in the context of a seemingly ineluctable patriarchy. Simon Gatrell claims Hardy's use of irony, especially in reference to lower-class characters, is intended to encourage feelings of superiority in 'the sophisticated reader' (40). However, Hardy also uses this tragic irony to express women's plight. Thus, after finding out the late Fanny had been pregnant with Troy's baby, Bathsheba bitterly remarks 'the one feat alone—that of dying—by which a mean condition could be resolved into a grand one, Fanny had achieved. [...] It had [...] set upon all things about her an ironical smile' (Hardy 290). Ironically, Fanny's tragic death is what reunites her with Troy in their shared grave. Hardy, thus, uses irony to force his reader to confront the world's injustice towards disgraced women, achieving a more authentic representation of female perspectives.

Irony has a salutary effect even in Dickens' novel, hinting at the fallibility of the male narrative perspective. The fact that *David Copperfield* is narrated in retrospect provides scope for Dickens to use irony through his homodiegetic narrator, similar to Hardy and Eliot. He uses 'echoic irony' (Wilson 1722), such as in the 'Brooks of Sheffield' episode of *David*

Copperfield. ‘Echoic irony’, coined by Deirdre Wilson, describes the technique whereby narrators repeat something to ‘tacitly dissociate [themselves] from an attributed utterance or thought’ (1722). Mr Murdstone invents the code-name ‘Brooks of Sheffield’ so the boy does not know he is talking about him. Young David is oblivious that he is being ridiculed. The older David’s narration points to it through echoic irony. So, when Mr Murdstone says it is ‘only Brooks of Sheffield’ they need to be careful of, the narrator ironically repeats this phrase in his remark that young David ‘was quite relieved to find that it was *only Brooks of Sheffield*’ (Dickens 35, *my emphasis*). This method ‘tacitly dissociate[s]’ (Wilson) younger acting David from older narrating David. A side-effect of this is that David’s narration becomes even less reliable since it emphasises that time has passed between the action and the retelling. Furthermore, Rosemary Mundhenk points out that David not only unconsciously but deliberately misremembers parts of his childhood because of emotional trauma that is connected to his memory of them (335). For instance, David explains ‘from the moment of [him] knowing of the death of [his] mother, the idea of her as she had been of late had vanished from [him],’ thus, he suppresses all his negative memories of her (Dickens 144). If David-the-narrator admits to misremembering something here, Dickens is suggesting he might be fallible elsewhere. By discernibly pointing out his narrator’s faults, Dickens suggests that his narrator’s opinions are not absolutely true. This hints at the possibility of alternative female subjectivities parallel to David’s subjectivity. Thus, both Dickens and Hardy employ irony to provide scope for authentic female subjectivity.

In conclusion, Victorian authors use their narrators in different ways to manipulate their reader’s opinions of their female characters. Accordingly, the degree to which female subjectivity is authentically represented differs between the novels discussed in this article. Firstly, the first-person narration of *David Copperfield* offers a narrow perspective on

Victorian society through a middle-class Victorian man's viewpoint. The novel's women are entirely defined by the way David portrays them, leaving little room for the portrayal of female subjectivity. Contrastingly, *Far From the Madding Crowd's* third-person narrator presents an array of subjectivities, including those of its female characters. Secondly, Hardy refuses to use the narrator-as-moral-guide trope to avoid perpetuating inauthentic judgements made on Victorian women. Dickens, in contrast, uses his narrator David as a moral guide, but since he is unreliable as a homodiegetic narrator, Dickens has to employ different devices to make his moral judgments seem less biased and succeed in authorising his male narrative perspective. However, both Dickens and Hardy use irony to tacitly comment on their female characters and the world's treatment of them, hinting at authentic female experience beyond patriarchal discourses, or at the fallibility of the male perspective. This opens the possibility for alternative female subjectivities to the main narrative. In conclusion, Dickens' and Hardy's narrators manipulate the opinions of readers by directing the way 'the woman's story' is presented. In this, Hardy succeeds in presenting authentic female subjectivities, while Dickens largely falls short of this achievement.

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