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PARADISE LOST: THE LIMITS OF DOMESTICITY IN THE NINETEENTH-CENTURY NOVEL

Katherine Ellis

The genesis of my interest in the family as a symbol of Paradise, a haven from which one is exiled and to which one struggles to return, goes back far beyond my involvement with feminism or my first forays into the world of academic scholarship. It began with my childhood passion for "family" radio programs, and for books about the Bobsey twins, Anne of Green Gables, and the five March girls. I think I loved these entertainments because, in my memory, at least, they all portrayed the family as a place from which one could venture forth and have successes or mishaps, but where there was always love, be it in the form of congratulations or comforting, that you could count on.

I do not know at what point I began to realize that my own family did not conform to this image, but I do know that for years I carried around with me the unshakeable belief that my "exile" from my family was a situation that I could remedy if I would only swallow my pride and become a good daughter. With my coming into the feminist movement I began to see that my history was not one of private aberration, and that my fellow "you can't go home again" types who had left home under circumstances similar to mine were not simply a lunatic fringe living on the edge of a world where everyone gathered happily around the dinner table every night when the sun went down.

One thing that feminism gave me was a view of that dinner table, that pool of warmth from which I felt so irrevocably excluded, from the point of view of the women whose role it was to put that supper on the table. I also read Laing and Esterson's study of ten women schizophrenics whose perceptions of what was going on around them within the family circle were constantly being refuted by the other members of their families. And as I came to understand how my role as the "house rebel" was shaped by my own family constellation, as well as by a larger set of societal constraints that define proper female behavior, I began to see my exile from the family dinner table as part of a network that spread its filaments over those women I envied no less than over those about whom I found myself thinking: there but for the grace of God go I.

But it was when I began to look into my own academic discipline, English and American literature, that I found yet another dimension to my experience as a member of a family. For in addition to a spatial dimension, a consciousness that

experiences are shared by hundreds and thousands of women "out there," it is vital, I think, that women see their experiences and ideas as having a history, a temporal dimension that is also shared. Literature is a good place to look for this dimension, not because it examines it as such, but because much of the material out of which literature is made draws on beliefs and assumptions that are so much a part of the consciousness of an era that they can be dramatized without being explained.

Of course the family is a structure that has figured in literature from its earliest beginnings. And there were good studies of the family prior to the resurgence of interest in that institution that accompanied the rebirth of feminism in the late sixties. Yet it is the urgency with which women in that movement began to view the family as the core of their own socialization that changed the way that I and many of my colleagues and students are looking at the material with which we work as teachers and researchers.

One area that has proved a focus for much discussion among many of us in different fields has been the notion of the family as an evolving, rather than a fixed, unit of social organization. Historians, economists, anthropologists, and sociologists have found not only that there are significant differences in the definition of the family in different parts of the world, but also that, in Western societies in particular, equally important changes have taken place, not so much in its size and structure as in its function at different periods in time.[1]

From the point of view of the woman's role within the family, the most dramatic and far-reaching of these changes came with industrialization, under which the family ceased to be a unit of production. For when in a given culture the home ceases to be a locus of production, so that work done in it cannot be a source of family income, women cannot play a role in the socialization of children *at the same time* that they contribute to the family income and to their own support. Thus what was, in Western Europe prior to the seventeenth century, a fairly loosely defined division of labor, became part of an institutional structure. And as this happened, as Alice Clark has pointed out, the notion of women and children as dependents first made its appearance.[2]

But when work moved out of the home and into the factory the changes that took place in the character of work created the need for a new kind of home. Both agricultural work and cottage industry were essentially communal, both within the family and within the larger community. But the factory system attempted to turn human beings into parts of machines, and to refer to them in terms of the dismembered parts of their bodies ("hands," for example) for the use of which the factory owners paid just enough to keep the worker alive.

In a country where men were accustomed to thinking of themselves as "freeborn Englishmen," the fact that masses of people were coerced into accepting conditions previously achieved only under slavery must be regarded as no mean triumph for the capitalist class. And the transformation of the family from a place of production to a place of refuge from production was a key factor in

making this acceptance a reality. Thus the definition of the family that is still operative today, that of a refuge from the competitive, impersonal, dehumanizing world of work, is coextensive with a particular form of economic organization that, in shaping the family, shapes us all.

As Juliet Mitchell has pointed out, the home has become a sphere for individual development to the precise degree that individual workers are denied such opportunities on the job.[3] For the stone walls of the factory (or of the office, for that matter) do not a prison make if everyone inside those walls has a haven to withdraw to, a place where he can do what he pleases and where his needs are met. Of course the havoc, described so vividly by Engels, wrought upon the lives of the newly urbanized industrial army made for such intolerable living and working conditions that anything even remotely resembling the middle class domestic ideal was out of the question for a very large and inescapably visible segment of the population.[4]

It is not surprising, then, as these conditions worsened during the nineteenth century, that the pursuit of stability, domesticity, and the sure knowledge of one's parentage became an integral part of middle-class culture during this period. To see the sudden growth of railways, mines, factories, and slums as a "fall," a loss of an earlier, socially integrated Paradise, is a vision found in nineteenth-century writers of all political persuasions, however different might be their programes for the recovery of that unfallen state. And it is to be found in novels no less than in the "purer" forms of social criticism.

Having looked at my own and other families through the eyes, first of such feminist writers as Firestone, and then of R. D. Laing and his colleagues, one of the first novels that struck me in a new way when I reread it was *Frankenstein.* First of all, the history of the Frankenstein family is itself an interesting one. They had been for many generations counsellors and syndics, distinguished members of the Geneva bourgeoisie (home of Calvinism) and respected public servants of the state. The father of Victor Frankenstein, narrator of the main story, had married late, having given his youth and middle age to the care of "the affairs of his country." He did this presumably because he saw a split too wide for him to encompass between public and private life, as further evidenced by the fact that when he did become a husband and father of a family, he retired from public life entirely.

Thus in the very first paragraph of Victor's narrative, Shelley sets up the dichotomy between public endeavor and domestic bliss that is to widen as the story progresses. In the paragraph that follows, we see another example of a retreat from public life in Beaufort, Victor's father's friend, a man who "was of a proud and unbending disposition, and could not bear to live in poverty and oblivion in the same country where he had formerly been distinguished for his rank and magnificence."[5] He obviously thinks (though the elder Frankenstein does not agree with him) that financial ruin disqualifies him from membership in the community of the elect, that a loss of money means a fall from grace.

In the case of Elizabeth, Victor's betrothed, the opposite is true. The daughter of an Italian nobelman whose devotion to the cause of his country's liberty had lost him his fortune, and a mother who died giving birth to her daughter, Elizabeth is returned to the state of grace into which she was born when she is taken from her rustic foster parents and brought in, through her adoption by the Frankenstein family, into the Paradise of bourgeois domesticity. Victor's mother was the main agent responsible for this gesture, being motived in her passion for visiting the poor by the fact that she herself had dropped to the working class because she had to support her self-exiled father, and had only been rescued from this fallen state by marriage to Frankenstein the elder.

Thus Mary Shelley shows us, in the opening chapters of the Frankenstein narrative, how the respectability of bourgeois domestic life is a haven built upon the not altogether unshakeable foundations of economic security. It is also, as she points out, a place of uninterrupted harmony. No word of anger is ever exchanged between Victor's parents, or between either of them and either of their two charges. The children, too, were ";strangers to any species of disunion or dispute," so that Elizabeth is to Victor and to the whole family "the living spirit of love to soften and attract," causing him to turn his temper and violent passions "not toward childish pursuits, but to an eager desire to learn."[6]

Yet in this haven free of strife there is much in Victor that cannot find expression, and it was this dynamic in the novel that I perceived clearly only after my own similar family experiences had been generalized for me through my work in the woman's movement. In my family the rule was: If you can't say something nice, don't say anything. And if Victor left home to make his mark on the world with none of the conscious bitterness that I took with me out into that world, yet he found, as surely as I did, that when those drives suppressed at home for the sake of sweetness and harmony *did* find expression outside the protective walls of home and family, "the living spirit of love" was not there to contain the destructiveness and self-destructiveness they unleashed.

My intention here is not to press a parallel between Victor Frankenstein and myself. Yet as more and more women are going out of the home and trying to function effectively in the world of work, they are encountering their own versions of the murderous consequences of the split between home and work, between the supposed freedom of the housewife and the supposed independence of the working girl. Thus Victor's struggle embodies a fatal contradiction in the particular form of patriarchy that emerged with industrial capitalism, a flaw that undermines the well-being of women as well as men.

For what good to Victor is Elizabeth's power "to soften and attract" if he must leave it behind when he goes out into the world? And if she cannot be a companion to him in his wanderings, why should he give the monster something that he, Victor, cannot have? Once Victor has been out in the world he becomes contaminated by it, and so can never really be united with the uncontaminated Elizabeth. To be joined with her, on the other hand, is to kill the pure thing that

she is. So while he reveres her for her helplessness, her passivity, her ultimate patience, he also resents these same qualities because they cut her off from any form of active life, any sharing in his life outside the home. Had Victor not been so furtive in his desire for knowledge (and all knowledge is forbidden where one is allowed to say only "nice things") he might have allowed himself time to make a creature his own size, one who mirrored the whole of him, not just a part. But to do that he would have had to be a whole person outside the home, and also a whole person within it.

Victor is expelled from the garden of bourgeois domesticity because he has a secret which makes him an outsider and which, growing unchecked outside its walls, takes on a life of its own whose consequences Victor cannot control. In *Great Expectations*, too, we have a secret which Pip keeps from his family: the stealing of food and a file for the convict he meets at the site of his parents' graves. Secrets in both novels seem to brand their owners as criminals, and in both cases the punishment and the crime are one: exile from the magic circle of domesticity. Yet Frankenstein differs from Pip in that he claims to have experienced the Paradise before he lost it. As Hillis Miller points out, in his brilliant study of Dickens' world: "*Great Expectations*, like most of Dickens' novels, does not begin with a description of the perfect bliss of childhood, the period when the world and the self are identified, and the parents are seen as benign gods whose care and whose overlooking judgement protect and justify the child."[7] So Pip's determination to find a place for himself inside the magic circle of Satis House comes not from a sense of loss but rather from the knowledge that he was an outsider from the beginning, that he has never even seen a likeness of his father, nor of "Goergiana, wife of the above," and so is guilty (as the poor are guilty) of the crime of being one of the "have-nots."

Throughout most of the book, Estella appears in Pip's eyes to represent the apex of "having." It is only after he has made his impassioned, Heathcliffe-like declaration to her ("You are part of my existence, part of myself . . .")[8] and she has submitted without resistance to Miss Havisham's final scheme of revenge that he sees the emptiness of everything that he has envied in her for so long. For she, deprived of that nurturant maternity whose absence in his own childhood Dickens resented so fiercely, is as much a "have-not" as Pip is. He is seduced into thinking otherwise by the fact that he meets her in Satis House, that place where he plays the role of child for the first time, and whose name meant, "when it was given, that whoever had this house could want nothing else."[9] Its mistress, Miss Havisham, actually does want nothing else, which is why Pip makes her the source of the fortune by which he sees himself transformed into a "have" like Estella. This creature who has stopped time may seem a strange form for a nurturant mother to take, yet at the level of fantasy the first prerequisite of Edenic bliss is the power (presumably on the part of the mother-goddess) to stop time.

So Estella and Pip have, in the figure of the woman who watched over them as they "played," as children, a common mother, just as they have a common father

in Magwitch, the convict who says to Pip, "Look'ee here, Pip, I'm your second father. You're my son—more to me nor any son,"[10] only to be revealed, at a later point in the story, as Estella's actual father. So it is that their common "family tie" ends up being not the source of their respective "great expectations," as Pip had hoped, but represents instead a common origin in what is, both metaphorically and literally, the underworld.

In Frankenstein, the function of the family is one of splitting and restricting. By outlawing all behavior not conducive to harmony, the bourgeois family perpetuates itself by producing divided selves, each half desperately searching for a magic someone with whom a union can take place that will end the split. But the bourgeois family does more than simply limit and divide its members. Florence Nightengale anticipated Laing by a hundred years when she said:

> The family uses people *not* for what they are, nor what they are intended to be, but what it wants them for. . . . If it wants someone to sit in the drawing room, *that* someone is supplied by the family, though that member may be destined for science, or for education, or for active superintendence by God, i.e. by the gifts within.[11]

If bourgeois parents use their children for purposes they have determined, then Magwitch and Miss Havisham are bourgeois parents writ large, and the disillusionment that accompanies Pip's coming of age is nothing less than a discovery that parenthood does not exist to promote the interests of the child. His view of Miss Havisham as an adopted mother had been entirely distorted by these expectations:

> She had adopted Estella, she had as good as adopted me, and it could not fail to be her intention to bring us together. She reserved it for me to restore the desolate house, admit the sunshine into the dark rooms, set the clocks a-going and the cold hearths a-blazing, tear down the cobwebs, destroy the vermin—in short, to do all the shining deeds of the young knight of romance and marry the princess.[12]

Pip assumed, in other words, that Miss Havisham was motivated by a wish to give to himself and Estella what she had never had: the timeless domestic Paradise of which her own role in Satis House was a grotesque inversion.

But a belief in the reality of the knight and the princess who live happily ever after is the core of the ideology that the family transmits from one generation to the next. Moreover, it does so precisely on the terms that Miss Havisham and Magwitch transmit it to their "children." I first heard the message articulated in in my first consciousness raising group, and it has come up innumerable times in discussions with women since then. The message is: I couldn't have it, but you can. And behind that apparent generosity, behind the sacrificial stance through which bourgeois parents bind their children to them with hoops of guilt, lies the real nexus that keeps the family together: I couldn't have it, so you can't either.

They can't have it, Dickens concludes, because it doesn't exist. "Hand in hand, with wandering steps and slow," Pip and Estella leave the ruined Eden whose possession had once been all Pip's hope. The world lies all before them now, filled with all the evil that has been expelled rrom Eden, but there is nowhere

else for them to go. The place they leave is not an Eden of abundance where a person can want nothing, but a ravaged, deserted shell from which the life has been sucked. It is ironic, I think, that Dickens, who became so famous as a creator of "family reading," and Mary Shelley, who wrote to exhibit "the amiableness of domestic affection and the excellence of universal virtue," should yield such a bleak vision of the powers of the domestic ideal. Yet I think this *is* their letter to the world, and what lies all before us still is the working out of its implications.

Its implications are, unfortunately, very different for women in different places in the social structure: the categories of single and married, middle class and working class, employed and unemployed, make for very real differences when we assess what we need to survive. And when we think about survival, particularly with the economy in the shape that it is now in, the family is right there on the surface of our consciousness. And by family I mean that concept that I have been speaking about throughout this paper: that place of refuge from "the world" that was first defined as such in the middle of the eighteenth century.

If we look back on the history of this idea we can see that it has always been put forward as a way of dealing with, and at the same time as a way of concealing, a reorganization of the economy in which women lost not only status but real economic power. Historically, then, the family has been a key institution under capitalism inasmuch as it has assumed the task of providing a refuge for "non-productive (i.e. those unable to earn a wage sufficient for their own support) members of society, thus relieving the state, or in former times the parish, of its responsibility for their support. But if women's sole worth is measured by their role in the family, one need feel no guilt about levelling economic sanctions against those who fall outside the supposed sanctuary of domesticity.

Surely this is why, with the myth of domestic fulfillment exploding all around us, the family is still the key to survival for most women. From my increasingly marginal position in the academic world I can see women losing their jobs. Those who are married are now writing books, going back to school, or having another baby. For those who are unmarried, and thus outside the family support system, the situation is quite different. Then there are those of us who, like myself, have drawn from their work some of the support and strength that domesticity did not provide. For us academia itself has become a kind of refuge, fraught to be sure with sibling rivalry for the favor of male chairmen, fatherly thesis advisors and the like, but at least a job that allowed us some space for intellectual growth. But now economic reality has entered that "garden" too, and the conditions that have sometimes allowed *some* women to find worth and self-esteem outside the circle of domesticity are becoming harder and harder to come by.

You don't need to be a social scientist these days to notice that the family-as-refuge is being pushed very hard by the media. Pick up any magazine at your supermarket check-out line and you will see how important women's dexterity with crochet hooks, old tin cans, and cheap cuts of meat has become to the maintenance of an ideology of affluence under a situation of runaway inflation. The

suggestion is that, if we work hard enough (perhaps even full-time) at living better for less, no one will mind living on a diminished income (the Waltons seem, in fact, to love it) and women and teenage children will be so busy saving money together that they will prefer this domestic jollity to going out and getting (or not getting) an ill-paying job.

The ideology of domesticity is based on the assumption that women and children prefer dependency to productivity, or can learn to prefer it if the jobs available to them are sufficiently unrewarding and unrewarded. The present "crisis of the family," with its attendant "generation gap," suggests that this is becoming less and less true. Moreover, much of the impetus of the women's movement, both in the nineteenth century and in this, came from against the glorification of nonproductive domesticity. Thus the contradictions arising out of the separation of work, the sphere of productivity, and home, the sphere of domesticity, are the same contradictions that are rendering untenable the definition of family as refuge from the world of getting and spending.

This is why our struggle must be one that works toward the elimination of that dualism. We who are in academia cannot afford to be seduced by the "happy family" situations we may have been able to create on our jobs, or in the women's movement generally. These sources of support are just as vulnerable to economic cutbacks as is the family whose breadwinner finds his wages shrinking because of inflation. We can try to be good, to work harder, teach larger classes, publish more, be more pleasing to those who have power over us. But our efforts will be, finally, no more helpful to us in the long run than the efforts of the housewife to save capitalism by spending less at the supermarket. Female productivity outside of the labor room and the nursery has never been on the capitalist agenda, which is why we must now begin to demand it as a right for all.

NOTES

This paper was originally given as a talk at a conference, "The Scholar and the Feminist," held at Barnard College, May 11, 1974. The question that this talk attempted to answer was: How has feminism affected your scholarship?"

[1]See Peter Laslett, "Size and Structure of the Household in England over Three Centuries," *Population Studies* 23 (1967): 199-223; E. A. Wrigley, ed., *An Introduction to English Historical Demography* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1966); Peter Laslett, ed., *Household and Family in Past Time* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1972).

[2]Alice Clark, *Working Life of Women in the Seventeenth Century* (London: Frank Cass and Co., 1968), pp. 12-13.

[3]Juliet Mitchell, *Woman's Estate* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1971), p. 152 ff.

[4]Frederich Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class in England in 1844* (New York: International Publishers, 1968); Henry Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor*, 4 vols. (New York: Dover Books, 1971).

[5]Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein* (New York: Dell Publishers, 1965), p. 30.

[6]Ibid., pp. 35, 37, 36.

[7]J. Hillis Miller, *Charles Dickens: The World of His Novels* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1969), p. 251.

[8]Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations* (New York: The New American Library, 1963), p. 391.

[9]Ibid., p. 66.

[10]Ibid., p. 345.

[11]Florence Nightengale, "Cassandra," published in Rachel Strachey, *The Cause: A Short History of the Women's Movement in Great Britain* (London: Bell, 1928, reprinted, Port Washington, N.Y.: Kennikat Press, 1969), p. 406.

[12]Dickens, *Great Expectations*, p. 252.