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NOBODY’S DAUGHTERS:
DICKENS’S TATTYCORAM AND GEORGE ELIOT’S CATERINA SARTI
by Beryl Gray

Doughty Street, where Dickens lived for three years (1836-9), is within a stone’s throw of the site of London’s Hospital for Foundling Children, which was established in 1739 by the retired sea-captain, Thomas Coram, whom Dickens venerated. Tavistock House – Dickens’s home 1851-60, and where he wrote *Little Dorrit*, the novel in which Tattycoram appears – was also only a short walk from the Hospital.

Dickens entirely approved of the way the ‘Foundling’ was managed in his own day. The *Household Words* article ‘Received, a Blank Child’, which he co-authored with his sub-editor, W. H. Wills, unreservedly praises the establishment’s system of rearing, training, and apprenticing its charges. It is also unstinting in its admiration of the building’s spacious orderliness, of the displayed works of art, and of the chapel with its organ donated by Handel, and where visitors could listen to the music performed by the children (and where Dickens rented a pew).

While Dickens’s proximity to, and interest in, the Hospital may have had some bearing on the fact that a considerable number of foundlings (not all from the Hospital) appear in his fiction, my concern here is principally with one: Tattycoram. Before turning to her, however, I want briefly to acknowledge her predecessor, Tilly Slowboy.

Tilly Slowboy is Dot Peerybingle’s maid-cum-nursemaid in *The Cricket on the Hearth* (1845). In contrast to her diminutive, chubby, bustling little mistress, whom we are clearly meant to find delectably feminine (Dickens certainly did), the bony, oddly-clad, maladroit Miss Slowboy, is defeminized.

Being always in a state of gaping admiration at everything, and absorbed, besides, in the perpetual contemplation of her mistress’s perfections and the Baby’s, Miss Slowboy, in her little errors of judgment, may be said to have done equal honour to her head and to her heart; and though these did less honour to the Baby’s head, which they were the occasional means of bringing into contact with deal doors, dressers, stair-rails, bed-posts, and other foreign substances, still they were the honest results of Tilly Slowboy’s constant astonishment at finding herself so kindly treated, and installed in such a comfortable home. For the maternal and paternal Slowboy were alike unknown to Fame, and Tilly had been bred by public charity, a Foundling; which word, though only differing from Fondling by one vowel’s length, is very different in meaning, and expresses quite another thing.¹

As a member of the Peerybingle household in a Christmas Book that Dickens himself thought ‘very quiet and domestic [. . . .] interesting and pretty’,¹ the lot of the grateful, comically gor-
ping, and even comically illegitimate Tilly Slowboy is, we are meant to see, a very lucky one. But neither Dickens nor his critics ask us to think of her as a member of the Peerybingle family: as an adopted daughter, or sister. Conversely, Tattycoram — who made her appearance ten years after Tilly Slowboy — is often described by critics as adopted. She, too, is grateful; but her gratitude frequently succumbs to rage towards, and judgement of, those to whom she has been assigned. Neither her perturbing, gazed-upon rages, nor her situation as a foundling, are presented comically: Dickens’s imaginative engagement with her engages the reader. Furthermore, an examination of his treatment of her, and of George Eliot’s depiction of Caterina Sarti in ‘Mr Gilfil’s Love-Story’, suggests a possible connection between the two parentless girls.

The first of the twenty monthly parts of *Little Dorrit* was published in December 1855. Seven months later, George Eliot’s important review essay, ‘The Natural History of German Life’, appeared in the *Westminster Review*. In this article, George Eliot offers her frequently cited assessment of Dickens’s treatment of character. Acknowledging the novelist’s greatness, and his ability to render ‘with the utmost power [. . .] the external traits of our town population’, she continues:

> and if he could give us their psychological character – their conceptions of life, and their emotions – with the same truth as their idiom and manners, his books would be the greatest contribution Art has ever made to the awakening of social sympathies. But while he can copy Mrs Plornish’s colloquial style with the delicate accuracy of a sun-picture, while there is the same startling inspiration in his description of the gestures and phrases of ‘Boots’, as in the speeches of Shakespeare’s mobs or numbskulls, he scarcely ever passes from the humorous and external to the emotional and tragic, without becoming as transcendent in his unreality as he was a moment before in his artistic truthfulness.5

Roughly nine months later, when her first fiction – the three interconnected stories that comprise *Scenes of Clerical Life* – was being serialized in *Blackwood’s Magazine*, she told John Blackwood that her stories always grew out of her ‘psychological conception of the dramatis personae’.6 She does not say ‘unlike Dickens’s stories’, but a distinction between her own aims as a writer of fiction, and what she understands to be those of Dickens, is implicit. Her claim is a direct reaction to her publisher, Blackwood’s, suggestion that she give the passionate little heroine of her second ‘scene’, ‘Mr Gilfil’s Love-Story’, ‘a little more dignity to her character’ (*Letters*, II, 297). However, its terms also recall her criticism of Dickens, and suggest that her realization of Caterina Sarti is perhaps intended as an indirect corrective to Dickens’s manner of presenting Tattycoram.

It is clear from the reference to Mrs Plornish that George Eliot had been reading *Little Dorrit* when she wrote ‘The Natural History of German Life’. Six parts of Dickens’s novel had been issued when she began her article in May 1856, and ten parts had appeared by the time she started work on her first story, ‘Amos Barton’, in September the same year. ‘Amos’ was fin-
ished 5 November, and 'Mr Gilfil' begun on Christmas Day – by which time thirteen of Little Dorrit's twenty parts had been issued. Tattycoram – to my mind one of Dickens's most tantalizingly under-psychologized characters – makes her first tormented appearance in Part I of the novel. The eighth part includes ‘Five-and-Twenty’, the chapter which recounts the circumstances of Tattycoram’s disappearance, and which derives its title from the repeated recommendation of her employer, Mr Meagles, to take command of herself, when impassioned, by counting five-and-twenty.

George Eliot’s presentation of Caterina is, I suggest, born of Dickens’s failure to keep faith with his own creation, for he seems to shy away from the implications of his own psychological penetration. Instead of developing the incipient – and potentially sympathetic – exploration of the connection between Tattycoram’s situation and her fluctuating resentment and remorse, he reduces the manifestations of her anguish to a mere battle between opposing sides of her nature. By suppressing the external, or circumstantial, causes of her outbursts, her author in effect compromises her, and the reader is discouraged from pursuing the questions raised by Meagles’s (or the narrator’s) accounts of them. But are these outbursts merely the ‘self-righteous rages’ that it has been suggested they are?

Tattycoram’s emotional instability arises from her knowledge that she is a foundling. Like Miss Wade, under whose influence she falls, she knows nothing of her own origins. Her dilemma is compounded by the indeterminate role accorded her by the Meagleses. Although she is taken from the Foundling Hospital ‘to be a little maid’ to Minnie (known as Pet) Meagles, whose twin sister is dead, the indeterminacy of Tattycoram’s actual position is reflected in the way commentators describe her. She is identified variously as ‘daughter-servant [...] and [...] sister-servant’; ‘Pet Meagles’s maid’; ‘maid or companion to Minnie Meagles’; ‘an orphan [...] adopted by the Meagles family after the loss of their own daughter’ who ‘acts as companion and attendant to Minnie’; and as ‘[t]he girl adopted [...] by the Meagleses to be Pet’s maid’. However we perceive her – as maid or attendant, as companion, as surrogate daughter, adopted daughter, or replacement sister, or as vaguely fulfilling an amalgam of two or more of these functions – Tattycoram’s status is unequivocally inferior to that of the doted upon and spoiled Pet. Tattycoram, who in ‘Fellow Travellers’, the second chapter of the novel, becomes the object of Miss Wade’s scrutiny, acutely resents this disparity. Passing Tattycoram’s room in the travellers’ Marseilles hotel, Miss Wade finds the ‘sullen and passionate girl’ (p. 25) sobbing and dishevelled, plucking at her lips and pinching her neck. But even as she rants and tears at herself, she acknowledges her fear of Miss Wade: ‘You seem to come like my own anger, my own malice, my own – whatever it is – I don’t know what it is’ (p. 25). Miss Wade – who sees Tattycoram’s affliction as analogous to her own – gazes at her ‘with a strange attentive smile. It was wonderful to see the fury of the contest in the girl, and the bodily struggle she made as if she were rent by the Demons of old’ (p. 25).

Tattycoram is not equipped to be her own psychologist, but if she is rent by demons, then Meagles – and through him Dickens – has already anticipated and extenuated her anger by defining the cause on her behalf. Earlier in the chapter, Meagles explains to the novel’s male
protagonist, Arthur Clennam, how his family had come by the girl. He and his wife had taken Pet to hear the singing at the Foundling Hospital, where Mrs Meagles had become distressed at the plight of 'all those children ranged tier above tier'; who will never know a mother's 'love, her kiss, her face, her voice, even her name!' (p. 17).

'[E]ven her name!'. This crucial blankness in the children's histories recalls 'Received, a Blank Child'. The adjective 'Blank' is a reference to the actual blanks on the forms that, duly filled in, the mothers receive in exchange for their children. The article quotes the form as saying:

Hospital for the Maintenance and Education of Exposed and Deserted Young Children. The blank day of blank, received a blank child. Blank, Secretary. Note – Let this be carefully kept, that it may be produced whenever an inquiry is made after the health of the child (which may be done on Mondays between the hours of ten and four), and also in case the child should be claimed.14

The received child is born away, baptised, and given the name by which it will be identified in future. If a baby, it is then handed over to a nurse who takes it off to Kent for a year, and who is in turn given a document outlining her duties to the blank child. All through the article, the adjective 'blank' is rhetorically repeated, so that, although there is nothing but praise for the institution, the effect is to render each child a blank, with no origin, no beginning, except that which is about to be bestowed by the Foundling Hospital.

Mr Meagles's response to his wife's distress is to propose that they take one of the children. They select the girl who had been given the 'arbitrary name' of Harriet Beadle.

'Now, Harriet we changed into Hatty, and then into Tatty [. . .]. The name of Beadle being out of the question, and the originator of the Institution for these poor foundlings having been a blessed creature by the name of Coram, we gave that name to Pet's little maid. At one time she was Tatty, and at one time she was Coram, until we got into a way of mixing the two names together, and now she is always Tattycoram.' (p. 18)

However kind Meagles's intention, it is difficult to credit his hope that a name inevitably signalling 'foundling' every time it's uttered might be considered 'playful' by its bearer, and have a 'softening and affectionate kind of effect' (p. 18). (Dickens does not place on Clennam the responsibility of expressing a view.) Nevertheless, Meagles had understood that allowances for Tattycoram would need to be made. As he reports telling his wife,

'if we should find her temper a little defective, or any of her ways a little wide of ours, we shall know what we have to take into account. We shall know what an immense deduction must be made from all the influences and experiences that have formed us – no parents, no child-brother or sister, no individuality of home, no Glass Slipper, or Fairy Godmother.' (pp. 18-19)
Illustration by Hablot K. Browne (‘Phiz’) to ‘Fellow Travellers’ (*Little Dorrit*, Book the First, Chapter II).
Despite this insight, the Meagleses hardly present themselves as parents to the young girl they acquire. Tattycoram is not among those many fictive Victorian young people viewed by their authors or benefactors as ‘adopted’. The list is extensive. In Dickens’s works alone it includes Oliver Twist, who is adopted by Mr Brownlow (who bears the name of an actual Foundling boy, John Brownlow, who by the time of Oliver Twist had become Treasurer of the Hospital. In 1847 he had published an account of it entitled Memoranda or Chronicles of the Foundling Hospital, and by the time of ‘Received, a Blank Child’ and Little Dorrit had become the Hospital’s Secretary.). It includes David Copperfield, who is adopted by Betsy Trotwood, and Estella in Great Expectations (1860-1), who is adopted by Miss Havisham.

It also includes the first of two Walter Wildings in the 1867 Christmas story, ‘No Thoroughfare’, on which Dickens collaborated with Wilkie Collins. The plot of this story depends on the idea that a stranger equipped with a suitable reference could present herself at the Foundling, choose a child, and remove it forever. But, though Dickens may not have realized it, such transactions were against the rules of the Hospital, which maintained a policy of launching its foundlings into decent employment when they reached a suitable age. But, on whatever terms the Hospital’s children were parted with, they in any case could not have been legally adopted. ‘It was not until 1926 that English law recognised the legal possibility of adoption.’ Until then, adoption was at best an informal arrangement, and the term was often very loosely applied. To a Victorian, it could mean, ‘to take in’, or ‘to take an interest in’. It could also mean ‘to treat a child as one’s own’ – though without either the rights or the obligations of a legal parent. So, given that a precise definition of the term was elusive, and in the light of the fact that Dickens presents us with a variety of characters who perceive themselves as adoptive parents, it is noteworthy that only commentators – not the narrator, not Meagles – ever refer to Tattycoram as adopted. It is the reader who allows the possibility, or desirability, of her adoption to hover over her. The ‘insupportable ambiguity’ of her position arises because she is never regarded as a daughter or sister. She is looked for when she disappears, but there is no indication that she is actually missed by Pet, and her restored presence is not even a perceived comfort to her employers when Pet is ultimately lost to them. She is taken in (or hired), given a comfortable home, and protected; but she does not become, and is never presented as, a member of the family. To make her lot more bitter, the very name imposed on her is a positive and perpetual proclamation not only of her household and social status, but of her lack of a genealogy. It stigmatizes her as a foundling.

While Miss Wade’s origins are likewise a secret, in Part XVI of the novel she is at least given a chapter – ‘The History of a Self-Tormentor’ – to herself. But although this ‘History’ is presented as autobiographical, Dickens could not leave it altogether to Miss Wade, for the descriptive headlines he added to the 1868 Charles Dickens edition are directive and diagnostic: the reader is prepared for ‘Miseries of a Morbid Breast’, and a revealed ‘Distorted Vision’. Nevertheless, Dickens permits the factors underlying Miss Wade’s disease to impinge. We are made aware of her sense of not belonging – of others manifesting a consciousness of a reason to pity her, a reason that no one has explained to her. It is her inability to allow that anyone should feel goodwill towards her, or disinterested concern – let alone love – for her, that makes her repellent. It explains her self-isolation, and justifies her social exclusion. But, for all the
horror she generates, she is an embodiment of the emotionally dispossessed. Her pathological condition does not negate the psychological burden that, like Tattycoram, she was born to carry, but camouflages it — for, like Tattycoram, she has much to resent (in particular, the withholding from her of available information concerning her background, and the source of her occasional allowance). She has much to lament. The ‘unhappy temper’ (p. 645) her devoted but sorely tried school-companion ascribes to her is an authorial contrivance that enables Dickens to evade half of the very issue his imagination has presented. (Clennam, the recipient of Miss Wade’s document, is again absolved from the responsibility of any response to it.)

There are, however, significant differences between Miss Wade’s circumstances, and Tattycoram’s. Miss Wade has at least been treated — or came to be treated — as an equal by her exceptional (though not explicitly described as exceptional) series of patrons. Tattycoram is not. The young woman who employs Miss Wade as a governess, for example, is distressed when Miss Wade insists on calling her ‘Mistress’ (p. 647), while Tattycoram is reminded that Pet is her mistress, however soft that mistress’s commands. Tattycoram is offered no such opportunity for social equality in the course of the novel, a fact that Miss Wade is able to exploit. It is the foundation circumstances of the two unparented, impassioned women that are crucially similar. But although Dickens introduces and acknowledges these factors as relevant, he allows his own perceptions to be overridden and distorted by the psychological distortions of the document Miss Wade presents to Clennam. With her own semi-coherent resentment nourished and inflated by Miss Wade’s (authorially-inflated) malevolent influence, Tattycoram’s psychological history is subsumed by that of the cleverer woman who entices her away from her employer-protectors. That influence is then accorded predominance, and is made to become virtually all-sufficient: consequently, all that is necessary for Tattycoram’s restoration to the Meagleses is that her better nature should prevail, and express itself in abject contrition. Exultantly placing ‘at her old master’s feet’ (p. 786) the iron box of papers that [Rigaud] Blandois had deposited with Miss Wade, and that Meagles had so long sought, she falls on her knees, crying

‘Pardon, dear Master, take me back, dear Mistress, here it is! [. . .] Dear Master, dear Mistress, take me back again, and give me back the dear old name! Let this intercede for me. Here it is!’ (p. 786)

Although the narrator asserts that ‘Father and Mother Meagles never deserved their names better, than when they took the headstrong foundling-girl into their protection again’ (p. 787), they do not even now call her daughter. Instead, after she has confessed her madness under Miss Wade’s influence, she pleads,

‘I am not so bad as I was […]; I am bad enough, but not so bad as I was, indeed. I have had Miss Wade before me all this time, as if it was my own self grown ripe — turning everything the wrong way, and twisting all good into evil. […] I’ll try very hard. I won’t stop at five-and-twenty, sir. I’ll count five-
And so, beyond Mr Meagles's belated acknowledgement that if he 'had thought twice about it, [he] might never have given her the jingling name' (p. 785), neither he nor his wife need accept responsibility for Tattycoram's former torment. Far from it: our last image of the handsome girl with her lustrous dark hair and eyes, has her standing at the barred window of the Marshalsea Lodge with Mr Meagles. Having drawn her attention (and ours) to the contrasting 'little, quiet, fragile figure' (p. 788) of Amy – 'little Dorrit' – gliding into the prison, he uses the occasion to deliver a homily:

'See her, Tattycoram?'
'Yes sir.'
'I have heard tell, Tatty, that she was once regularly called the child of this place. She was born here, and lived here many years. I can't breathe here. A doleful place, to be born and bred in, Tattycoram?'
'Yes indeed, sir!'
'If she had constantly thought of herself, and settled with herself that everybody visited this place upon her, turned it against her, and cast it at her, she would have led an irritable and probably an useless existence. Yet I have heard tell, Tattycoram, that her young life has been one of active resignation, goodness, and noble service. Shall I tell you what I consider those eyes of hers that were here just now, to have always looked at, to get that expression?'
'Yes, if you please, sir.'
'Duty, Tattycoram. Begin it early, and do it well; and there is no antecedent to it, in any origin or station, that will tell against us with the Almighty, or with ourselves.'

That scene comes from 'Going!', the penultimate chapter of the novel. Since the last (double) number of Little Dorrit appeared in June 1857 – coinciding with the last part of 'Mr Gilfil's Love-Story' – George Eliot would not have read it before finishing her own story. Even if we leave that scene aside, though, and pass – as possibly many contemporary readers did – directly from the Dickens to the Eliot, the correspondences, parallels, and contrasts between Tattycoram and Tina Sarti, and their plights, present themselves quite strikingly.

Both girls are objects of charity. Each the physiological and temperamental opposite of her patrons, the passions of neither girl can be fully accommodated. Where Dickens's illegitimate foundling is the unacknowledged substitute for a dead twin daughter, George Eliot's little orphan – the legitimate offspring of impoverished parents – has been brought from Italy in lieu of children who were never born to her aristocratic benefactors, Sir Christopher and Lady Cheverel. But neither of the Cheverels had any idea of adopting [Caterina] as their daughter, and giving her their own rank in life. They were much too English and aristocratic to think of anything so romantic. No! the child would be brought up at Cheverel Manor as a pro-
tegee, to be ultimately useful, perhaps, in sortingworsted, keeping accounts, reading aloud, and otherwise supplying the place of spectacles when her ladyship's eyes should wax dim.  

Roughly twenty lines on from that passage, George Eliot opens a new chapter with a reference to Caterina's 'adoption': thus the position of the 'little yellow bantling' (p. 113) exemplifies the flexibility of Victorian perceptions of adoption. And so, although Tina's domestic situation is less lowly than Tattycoram's, like Tattycoram's, it is indeterminate. She is not raised as if she were an actual daughter of the house, but '[grows] up very much like the primroses, which the gardener is not sorry to see within his enclosure, but takes no pains to cultivate' (p. 113). Treated with more overt affection than Dickens's foundling, she becomes more nearly a member of the family, with a place within the drawing room circle. Nevertheless, she is perceived not as virtual kin, but as the household pet - 'thrusting Sir Christopher's favourite bloodhound of the day, Mrs Bellamy's two canaries, and Mr Bates's largest Dorking hen, into a merely secondary position' (p. 111). As she develops, the fine singing and harpsichord-playing that essentially express her, and through which the reader is helped to understand her passionate nature and love longing, elevate her role to that of 'minstrel of the Manor' (p. 121). Where Tattycoram's lack of status is indicated by the 'playful' name inflicted on her, Tina's status is controlled and kept in perspective by the pet imagery that is constantly associated with her. Although she is not a maid, to her fond patron she is variously the 'little monkey Tina' or 'black-eyed monkey' or 'clever black-eyed monkey' who, on command, must transmogrify into the household 'singing-bird'. While she is considered an acceptable match for the Cheverels' ward, Maynard Gilfil, who does indeed love her, it is out of the question that she could be regarded in the light of a possible bride for their heir, Captain Wybrow, who nevertheless persists in secretly trifling with her love for him. In short, she cannot be thought of as a daughter, or as the potential chatelaine of Cheverel Manor. By addressing Sir Christopher as 'Padroncello', it is she who affectionately confers on him the role of both father and beneficent master. Miss Wade, on the other hand, jeeringly reminds Tattycoram that Mr Meagles is 'your patron, your master' (p. 319). And yet, ironically, the Cheverels understand Tina less than Meagles initially understands - or can make allowances for - Tattycoram. But where Dickens seems to shun his own comprehension of his foundling by subsequently according her no identity beyond her passions or pieties, George Eliot tries to make us know, and fully understand, her heroine. While her patrons encourage - even demand - Tina's singing, we recognize that they have no sense that the passion with which her rendition of Italian arias is imbued is her own passion. In fact, her inherent demonstrativeness is something to be curbed. When she emotionally throws herself down and clasps her patron's knee after having exquisitely performed arias by Gluck and Paesiello, for example, she is told by Lady Cheverel to 'leave off those stage player's antics' (p. 98).

Struggling with the inward excitement caused by the now betrothed Wybrow's renewed love-making, Caterina goes to visit her friend the gardener, but has to endure his praises of the wonderful complexion and fine figure of the bride-to-be, and his joy at Sir Christopher's joy at the prospect of the marriage. She makes her way back through the Manor grounds like a poor wounded leveret [...]. Mr Bates's words about Sir Christopher's
joy, Miss Assher’s beauty, and the nearness of the wedding, had come upon her
like the pressure of a cold hand, rousing her from confused dozing to a per­
ception of hard, familiar realities. [. . .] Caterina entered her own room again,
with no other change from her former state of despondency and wretchedness
than an additional sense of injury from Anthony. His behaviour towards her in
the morning was a new wrong. To snatch a caress when she justly claimed an
expression of penitence, of regret, of sympathy, was to make more light of her
than ever. (p. 137)

It is Caterina’s Tattycoram-like ‘state of diseased [and outraged] susceptibility’ (p. 150) that
triggers her actions when, with murder in her heart, she melodramatically ‘rushes noiselessly,
like a pale meteor’ (p. 163) to the gallery, seizes a dagger, and hurries to the Rookery to meet
Wybrow. The theatricality of this scene is regrettable because it overshadows the preceding
analysis of the cause and effects of jealousy, and the charting of Caterina’s war with her emo­
tions. What had been successfully transmitted, and internalized, is a sense of her unacknowl­
edged alienation from her kin and her kind. Her patrons fail to protect her – from Wybrow,
and from her own worked-upon emotions – because they fail to perceive her as herself.

If there are passages of ‘excessive pathos’ in ‘Mr Gilfil’s Love-Story’, and if George Eliot
sometimes implicates her narrator in a pattern of animal imagery that intensifies the pathos, a
distinction is nevertheless made between perceptions of Caterina as a contented pet, and rep­
resentations of her as a trained and exploited (monkey, bird) or suffering (wounded leveret,
bird) creature of the wild. Ultimately, we distinguish between the singing-bird she is required
to be, and the musician her own soul impels her to be. Moreover, the narrator indirectly asso­
ciates himself less with the animal than with the botanical imagery that the sympathetic gar­
dener – Caterina’s nearest ‘relative’ (she calls him ‘uncle Bates’ [p. 135]) – applies naturally
to her. His view of her as ‘nesh and dillicat’, and as likely to ‘[fade] away laike them cycla­
mens as I transplanted’ (p. 137), recognizes, and therefore reminds the reader, that she is not a
native ‘primrose’. She has been transplanted from her natural environment, but her need for
particular tending has not been met.

Little Dorrit is a very great novel, and both Miss Wade and Tattycoram are, in the truest sense,
extra-ordinary creations. They are projected, or, in Miss Wade’s case, ‘anatomized’, self-per­
ceptions of women denied all connection with, or knowledge of, their line – possibly even, in
Tattycoram’s case, her ethnicity. ‘Mr Gilfil’s Love-Story’ is a comparatively minor work writ­
ten when its author was still virtually a novice in the art of fiction, and had yet to write any of
her novels. It could not, and does not, compete with Dickens’s achievement. But Caterina
Sarti represents a serious attempt to conceptualize and psychologize a girl’s experience of hav­
ing been taken into a household, but not – in the full modern meaning of the term – adopted.
Tattycoram, on the other hand, manifests the confrontation by Dickens’s heightening imagi­
nation of the violent turmoil, resentment, and thwarted need that a foundling such as she might
suffer. But she also represents, I suggest, Dickens’s impulsion to suppress, contain, or order
such disruptive forces as he has caused her to embody. She is not a criminal to be dispatched,
but a behavioural anomaly to be brought under (fictive) control. Where Caterina is allowed a
kind of fulfilment in a brief marriage to the loving Mr. Gilfil before she fades from life like a diminishing echo, the only fulfilment permitted Tattycoram is that of a notional Duty. (Meagles’s exhortation to her is itself an amplification of the “advice in print and parchment” presented to foundlings when they left the Hospital.)

In a novel that was originally to be called Nobody’s Fault, and in the greater part of which the hero is perceived as perceiving himself as ‘Nobody’, the real non-entities are the mothers of the foundlings. The price Tattycoram must pay for a home and charitable treatment is absolute self-subjugation, and the abject reclamation of a name that proclaims her – ‘Nobody’s Daughter’.

Notes

1. A version of this paper was presented to the Dickens Fellowship on 1 June 2001.


15. Lionel Trilling calls them ‘but indifferent parents’ (op. cit., p. 132).


19. The idea that a foundling was beyond society’s pale is encapsulated by the heroine’s languorously contemptuous sister Dolly in Chapter XIII of Rhoda Broughton’s novel, *Cometh Up as a Flower* (1867). ‘One must come home now and then’, she says, ‘or else people would say that one had been turned out of doors for misconduct, or that one’s papa was in gaol, or that one emanated from the Foundling, or something equally distressing.’


22. ‘Received, a Blank Child’, *Uncollected Writings*, op. cit., II, p. 463. ‘You were taken into [this Hospital] very young, quite helpless, forsaken, poor and deserted’, this document is quoted as saying. ‘Out of charity you have been fed, clothed, and instructed [...] You are to behave honestly, justly, soberly, and carefully, in every thing, to every body, and especially towards your Master and his Family; and to execute all lawful commands with Industry, Cheerfulness, and good Manners....’