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978-0-521-88478-5 - The Tragi-Comedy of Victorian Fatherhood

Valerie Sanders

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction. Looking for the Victorian father*

The father was a stern and thinking man: ‘cold and cross-grained’, the neighbours called him, though what the meaning of the term ‘cross-grained’ may be, I will not undertake to say, as I only understand the term when applied to wood.¹

This description of a stereotypical Victorian paterfamilias, written around 1845–50 by the adolescent Charles Lutwidge Dodgson, otherwise Lewis Carroll, future author of *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (1865), features in ‘Sidney Hamilton’, a story Dodgson serialised in the family’s *Rectory Magazine*. Already displeased with his son when the story opens, Mr Hamilton ‘received him with a cold and distant manner, and a brow gloomier than that which he usually wore’ (p. 9), but when Sidney refuses to abandon an unsuitable friendship, the father threatens to cut him off. “Look you here, son!” shouted he seeing that his words made little impression on his son, “obey me, or on this spot I disinherit you!” (p. 11). So far so predictable: Dodgson’s writing perfectly encapsulates the essence of the Victorian ‘heavy father’ of popular imagination. More surprisingly, as the story develops, the father turns out to be right: Sidney’s unsuitable friend, Edmund Tracy, is exposed as a thief, and after a nightmare in which Sidney imagines his father letting him drown, Mr Hamilton – up before the magistrate on a false charge – is happily reconciled with his headstrong son. Both men have something to learn from the episode, about patience, stubbornness and trust, but the reader’s sympathy is assumed to be with the romantic son as he flees domestic tyranny, and sees his father publicly shamed before the reconciliation.

Over thirty years later, F. Anstey’s *Vice-Versa; or, A Lesson to Fathers* (1882) seems to expand and develop Dodgson’s idea of punishing the father, while half admitting he is right, in an extended battle with his schoolboy son. In this role-swapping fantasy, Paul Bultitude is changed by a magic wishing stone into his own son Dick, while Dick sees his

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father off to Dr Grimstone's boarding school, and for a glorious week revels in paternal freedom and authority, though he has an entirely different way of running both business and household. He abandons his job in the city and spends most of the day at home playing soldiers with the baby in the dining-room. 'You would laugh to see him loading the cannons with real powder and shot', Paul's daughter Barbara comments (assuming she is writing to her brother at school), 'and he didn't care a bit when some of it made holes in the side-board and smashed the looking-glass'.² While Dick causes chaos at home, Paul has much the same effect on Dr Grimstone's school, where he is first expelled, and then threatened with a public flogging, before he makes a laborious escape back home. There father and son confront each other in their changed identities: 'It was a strange sensation on entering to see the image of what he had so lately been standing by the mantelpiece. It gave a shock to his sense of his own identity' (p. 194). What the reader gathers from this role-swap is that being the father is infinitely preferable to being the son. In Dick's eyes at least, what fatherhood consists of is 'No school, no lessons, nothing to do but amuse myself, eat and drink what I like, and lots of money' (p. 197).

Both these texts offer what is essentially a son's view of being a father. In many ways a stereotypical fantasy of power and freedom, this impression of fatherhood is created from the outside, by youths who are too young and inexperienced to know what paternal responsibilities are. Victorian literature and life-writing are full of such stern fathers who are alien and other in their children's limited understanding, created from their perspective, rather than the father's own. In fact there are few good fathers in Victorian fiction, perhaps for the obvious reason that a good father, even more than a good mother, forestalls any real plot development or initiative on the children's part. Since it was his responsibility to provide for his offspring, the existence of a sympathetic and competent father was normally sufficient guarantee of a safe destiny for his children. In fiction, this often goes wrong when the father, like Meredith's Sir Austin in *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel* (1859), becomes unduly fixated on some plan or 'system' for his son. Dickens's fathers are especially prone to such schemes, from Mr Dombey (1848) to Pip's father-substitute Magwitch in *Great Expectations* (1860–1). The most notorious is probably Samuel Butler's Mr Pontifex (1903), who thrashes his sons to suppress any signs of self-will. 'You carry so many more guns than they do that they cannot fight you', the narrator says of fathers who bully their sons into conformity.³ Others are distracted by an external grievance, leading to revenge fantasies: Elizabeth Gaskell's John Barton (*Mary Barton*, 1848)

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brooding on his resentment of the factory-owners; George Eliot's Mr Tulliver (*The Mill on the Floss*, 1860) waiting for his moment to get back at Mr Wakem; or Hardy's Michael Henchard (*The Mayor of Casterbridge*, 1886), whose troubles with his wife, daughter, mistress and business rival prevent him from forming any lasting domestic relationships. In Victorian life-writing, similarly preoccupied fathers abound: Philip Gosse, the scientist and religious fanatic of Edmund Gosse's *Father and Son* (1907); the intense Edward White Benson, Archbishop of Canterbury; Sir Leslie Stephen demanding sympathy and accurate household accounting from the daughters of his dead wife Julia; and Charles Kingsley and Charles Dickens, who, to their children, seemed to be always striding about the countryside in a tornado of activity, divided between their real-life practical concerns and their swarming imaginations.

Moreover, the father is very often the only parent who figures significantly in the novel or memoir. Dickens's children rarely mention their mother in their memories of him, even though she outlived her husband; while in his novels, Mrs Dombey dies in the opening chapter, Mrs Copperfield is survived by Mr Murdstone; Mr Jarndyce of *Bleak House* can offer his charges no motherly guardian other than Esther, herself a ward; and Mr Dorrit, the 'Father of the Marshalsea', loses his wife when Little Dorrit ('Little Mother') is a child of eight. There are, of course, plenty of memorable single mothers in Dickens's novels, such as Mrs Clennam and Mrs Nickleby, but the widowed or unpartnered dominant surviving father is a much more prominent feature of Victorian writing, especially in novels by Elizabeth Gaskell (Mr Gibson, John Barton, Nicholas Higgins) and George Eliot (often foster-fathers, such as Silas Marner, Mr Brooke, and Sir Hugo Mallinger). All the negative features of the angry widowed father seem to converge in Ephraim Tellwright of Arnold Bennett's *Anna of the Five Towns* (1902): a domestic tyrant who is also a miser, refusing to let Anna control her own finances, or be late home for tea. The Victorian 'heavy father' seemingly ends the century as secure in his bullying presence as he began it.

The purpose of this study, however, is to dismantle the stereotypical image of the Victorian father, and to do so by changing the perspective from which he is viewed. Because there is such a wealth of memoirs published by traumatised children, relatively little has been written about, or from, the father's own position. This material is found less in memoirs and novels, where reticence about parenthood is common to both male and female life-writers, than in the voluminous correspondence for which the Victorians were so well known. Here Victorian men can be found

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writing to their children, or to friends who were also fathers, and comparing notes on every stage of their children's progress. Here, too, fathers express their feelings about fatherhood in a way that was often unguarded or outspoken: regretting superfluous births, worrying about the slow progress of unmotivated sons or mourning the loss of a favourite child. Although these letters often mention the children's mothers, it is usually to imply that the mother has a different kind of relationship with her children – a more physical, practical and domestic one – while the father feels responsible for the overall direction of the child's life and eventual destiny. If proof is needed of an involved, 'hands-on' approach to nineteenth-century fatherhood, the letters of men such as John James Ruskin, Matthew Arnold, Charles Dickens and Charles Darwin provide ample evidence, much of it so far unused for this purpose.

This approach to finding out more about Victorian fathers owes much to the pioneering scholarship of researchers who have already tackled the strange 'absent presence' of nineteenth-century fathers in social history and literature. In fact, thanks to their recent efforts, there is no longer any real need to prove that the typical Victorian father was as decent and humane as his modern counterpart. Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, drawing on studies of specific families, have already shown that many late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth-century fathers were emotionally engaged with their children and closely involved in their lives.⁴ Though some Victorian fathers were undoubtedly harsh and distant, we know that the majority took their responsibilities seriously and wanted to do their best by their families; they bonded well with their children and were distraught when they were ill or died. Moreover, as John Tosh and others have suggested, respect for the untouchable authority of fathers seems to have declined as the century progressed.⁵ As early as 1865, *All the Year Round* claimed that the 'old patriarchal father', who was 'a sort of Jove to his children', had begun to disappear 'about the time when penny postage was adopted' (1840). 'It may be said', this reviewer concludes, drawing on political analogies suggested by the 1832 Reform Act, 'that children have compelled their autocratic fathers to give them a constitution'.⁶ Twenty years later, even a reviewer for the conservative *Quarterly Review* was admitting that 'the practical domestic authority of an English Father in his own household was once vastly greater than it is now. The ceremonious forms with which he was addressed by his children and even by his wife have disappeared.' Citing a Latin term for the powers traditionally lodged with the chief of the household, he concludes that they are living in the presence of a 'decayed Patria Potestas'.⁷

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Nonetheless, the bullying stereotype of the Victorian father is curiously persistent – in the popular imagination, at least – and fictional examples reappear throughout the century. It is almost as if we *want* fathers to have been monsters, in order to have someone to blame for all that was wrong with the Victorian family. Given the current critical fashion for ‘problematising’ norms and monoliths in cultural history, especially the middle-class patriarch, the Victorian father is the ideal problem that won’t go away, the lurking villain in the drawing-room preventing wives and children from fulfilling themselves in the world beyond the home. He belongs, however, to a highly complex structure of relationships with women and children, colleagues and friends. The language he uses ranges from professional jargon to the private, subdued tones of grief and intimacy. He relates awkwardly to the sentimental, which he nevertheless needs *in extremis*. Clearly fatherhood cannot be discussed apart from motherhood, the history of gender relations, or indeed the dynamics of the whole family as it began to emerge from the Industrial Revolution into something recognisably like our current structures. Nor is it easy explaining exactly how fathers related to their children in view of our dependence on incomplete or atypical written records, or the tendency of fathers to dramatise their role in correspondence with male friends. ‘We know a lot less about fathers than we do about mothers’, Nancy E. Dowd asserts.⁸ Although she is referring to contemporary American society, her view that ‘Fathers parent less than mothers’, sounds like what we suspect of Victorian fathers, whose slippery social and domestic position is the focus of much current scholarship.

Following the lead of Davidoff and Hall, fatherhood specialists such as John Tosh, Trev Broughton, Helen Rogers, John Gillis and Claudia Nelson have examined in detail the anomalous condition of Victorian fathers as both central and liminal to the culture, uncomfortably aligned with its versions of middle-class masculinity as gentlemanly, well-bred, detached and self-controlled. Paternity makes men vulnerable as well as affirming their virility, especially in cases of childhood death and illness, yet as John Gillis (1996) suggests, fathers have long occupied only a threshold presence in family and domestic life. His impression is that our culture ‘simply will not take paternity as seriously as maternity’.⁹ This view is especially true of the Victorians, for whom motherhood is the cornerstone of the whole domestic structure, while the father’s place is more often than not in the external workplace. This is in fact the central paradox of Victorian fatherhood. The traditional patriarch belongs at the head of his table or as God the Father’s representative in the home,

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leading the family in morning and evening prayers, but his domestic role the rest of the time evades definition. The fact that many men worked from within their homes (clergymen, headmasters, authors and doctors especially) seems to have had little impact on the ‘separate spheres’ ideology, with the father at best relegated to his study where he worked in a tangential relationship with the rest of the household.

Social historians have now identified specific patterns of behaviour within upper- and middle-class family homes. David Roberts, for example, focusing on the memoirs of what he calls the ‘Victorian Governing Classes’, categorised his findings according to three characteristic fathering patterns: ‘remoteness, sovereignty, and benevolence’, concluding that fatherhood ‘was a conservative institution in Victorian England, one that prompted continuity more than it did rebellion’.¹⁰ More recently, John Tosh (1999) named four different fatherhood models which had become established by mid century. These were the absent, the tyrannical, the distant and the intimate father. Tosh also confirms that ‘Of all the qualifications for full masculine status, fatherhood was the least talked about by the Victorians.’¹¹ Because of its hidden performance in the home, and the assumption that everyone knew what a father was supposed to do, much of what he actually did do – apart from his legal responsibilities – apparently went untheorised. If the details of ‘mothering’ have been hidden from history until relatively recently, still more have the daily emotional and domestic commitments of ‘fathering’, as Stuart C. Aitken has argued in a discussion of its ‘awkward spaces’. Aitken claims that fathers suffer from an invisible ‘identity predicament’: they may be seen as co-parents with mothers, but they have always had more freedom than mothers to walk away from their children, and therefore opt out of active fatherhood. According to Aitken, this was particularly the case during and after the Industrial Revolution, which, in separating the male workplace from the home, legitimised the father’s emotional disjunction from his family. Moreover, though history has also seen mothers as ‘incomplete fathers’ (unable to provide materially for their children), fathers fare worse as ‘incomplete mothers’ because, as Aitken points out, in social science research at least, ‘mothers are the benchmark for norms in fathering’.¹² As ‘failed mothers’, nineteenth-century fathers were left with little direct advice as to how they were supposed to create an alternative role, especially in terms of achieving the right balance between emotional sensitivity and moral leadership – a balance that was assumed to come naturally to mothers. This was part-and-parcel of the culture’s uncertainty about what we might call middle-class ‘male values’. Even at their toughest and

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most conservative', argues Matthew Sweet, 'Victorian theorists and polemicists failed to offer a uniform, coherent blueprint for proper masculine behaviour'.¹³

Although motherhood was widely considered to be 'natural', endless quantities of advice were published to help new mothers produce healthy children and manage their homes. Pye Henry Chavasse's *Advice to Mothers* (1839) ran to countless editions; other popular titles included Henry Frank E. Harrison's *Advice to Mothers How to Rear Their Infants Healthily* (1882), Dr Alfred Fennings's *Every Mother's Book* (1858) and William Buchan's rather quaintly titled *Advice to Mothers on the Subject of Their Own Health; and on the Means of Promoting the Health, Strength, and Beauty of Their Offspring* (1803). According to Sally Shuttleworth, such were concerns about the physically poor condition of women and the risks of inherited disease, that 'the functions of maternity were the object of fierce scrutiny and control'.¹⁴ With fathers, bodily separateness from the child meant there were no such acute health issues to discuss. Though there was a *British Mothers' Magazine* (1845–55), which became *The British Mothers' Journal* (1856–63), edited by Mrs J. Bakewell; a *Mother's Magazine* (1842–62); *Mother's Friend* (1848–59); and *Mother's Companion* (1887–96), there was apparently no niche market for fathers' supportive literature, any more than there is today. The British Library catalogue lists no Victorian periodicals beginning with 'Father's' (*Father's Companion*, or the like), though advice to fathers was sometimes hidden away in 'home' or 'family' magazines, especially for the lower classes. Poole's *Index to Periodical Literature* (1882), covering the first three quarters of the nineteenth century, lists only a handful of articles concerned with fathers and fathering, and most of these refer to the Church Fathers, or to serialised fiction about fathers and children.

Under 'Mothers', though the list is still surprisingly short, there are articles on the duty, influence and education of mothers, as well as 'middle-class' mothers and 'mothers of great men'.¹⁵ If the term 'fathers of great men' lacks the same resonance, so do the notions of the duty, influence or education of fathers. Sarah Ellis, who instructed the Women, Mothers, Wives and Daughters of England, felt no call to advise the fathers, except parenthetically, through her advice to their wives.¹⁶ Natalie McKnight even suggests that Mrs Ellis sees a mother's duties as 'being nothing short of maintaining and developing the child's complete physical, mental, and spiritual health, pretty much without the help of father'.¹⁷ Ellis also makes the point that there is 'no escape' from the duties of being a mother, whereas (though she does not say so explicitly),

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being a father has always been a more casual responsibility, to be accepted or not, largely at the father's own will. The frontispiece to her *Women of England* shows a triangular-shaped family group on a sofa, consisting of a mother being embraced by two daughters, with a boy sheltering by her side, while in the doorway stand two men in dark coats, either coming in or going out, and pointing their fingers towards this tableau of domestic bliss. The men's liminality in the domestic scene is perfectly symbolised by their position in the doorway, looking slightly bemused by what they see. Dressed in dark colours as a further contrast to the whiteness of the women and children (the only boy is already darkly dressed like his father), the men look as if they would be happier out of the house and at their club or office. Ellis's unshakeable belief in the subordination of women to men within the home, though by no means founded on any conviction of male moral superiority, must have made her reluctant to engage directly with the reformation of male behaviour.

Fathers' absence from the domestic scene was not always the norm, however. In his work on the history of the family in colonial America, Steven Mintz has shown that in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, the father was the dominant parent, and domestic advice books were directed towards men rather than women.¹⁸ In England, at a similar period and beyond, fathers were themselves regarded as a source of wisdom, as shown in the titles of books such as the widowed Dr John Gregory's *A Father's Legacy to his Daughters* (1773), or the early-Victorian Samuel Thompson's *A Father's Advice to His Daughters on Entering into the Marriage State* (1844). The frontispiece to *The Family Friend* (Vol. II, 1849–50) is dominated by an illustration of a father with a book on his lap, reading to his surrounding family. As my chapter on Kingsley shows, fathers also featured in lesson books for children, giving advice about science, history and religion, but they came to be eclipsed by mothers whose natural qualification for the teaching role was more readily recognised.

Within Victorian working-class culture, the father's role tended to be seen as more central and natural than it was in some middle-class homes. William Cobbett argued in his *Advice to Young Men* (1829–30) that the presence of servants in the middle-to-upper classes impeded good relations between fathers and children, whereas working men had more 'hands-on' experience of looking after their growing families. Moreover, he equated active fatherhood with good citizenship and moral worth, strenuously denied that it made a man effeminate, and reminded his readers that 'the honourable title and the boundless power of father' came

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with lifelong responsibilities.¹⁹ Richard Oastler's *The Home* (1851), a conservative paper which took as its motto: 'The Altar, the Throne, and the Cottage', similarly offered its working-class readers positive images of home life to offset the heartless atmosphere of the mills. Several issues were prefaced with poems celebrating the domestic happiness of the working man in the pre-industrial golden age, such as 'The Cottage Fire' by historian Agnes Strickland, which climaxes in the father's return home at the end of the working day:

His rosy prattlers round him press,
With smiles of infant glee;
The youngest nestles to his breast,
The elder climb his knee.²⁰

Nevertheless, fatherhood in all classes was recognised as problematic by the Victorians, and was widely discussed in the public domain, albeit not in the same places as motherhood. Instead, it emerged largely in spaces dominated by male hegemonic discourse: parliamentary debates, newspaper journalism and in the law courts, where an entirely male assembly continued for much of the century to defend the father's privileges, while slowly giving ground to a growing recognition that society was changing and the old traditions would no longer answer. Mostly, in nineteenth-century Britain, fathers were written *about*, rather than directly advised. Though their behaviour was more often criticised than applauded, the underlying reluctance to tackle fathers head-on with their shortcomings produced a vague malaise in the culture, rather than the passionate activism generated by concern for women's rights. Pulled three ways between biological, social and legal definitions, blamed (by implication) for not embodying the gentler, more nurturing characteristics of motherhood, Victorian fatherhood was in all aspects of its performance a seemingly stable idea under persistent attack by a combination of neglect, complacency, shifting public opinion and legal reform.

'BOUNDLESS POWER': FATHERHOOD AND THE LAW

The sixty-four years of Victoria's reign saw a gradual erosion of the father's 'sacred' and 'natural' rights to what amounted to exclusive ownership of his offspring. The catalyst for this decline in respect for fathers was largely the legal and cultural focus on the breakdown of middle-class marriage, which inevitably exposed disturbing examples of how husbands and fathers behaved in the home. As separated and

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divorced mothers began to claim an equal or morally superior right to custody of their children, judges, church leaders and Members of Parliament found themselves locked in argument as to what exactly a father's rights and duties entailed. Despite almost continuous discussion of the mother's claims around issues such as child custody, the Poor Laws, marriage, divorce, and marriage with one's deceased wife's sister, there remained an underlying conviction in favour of the father's custody rights, which took the whole century to undermine. 'Nothing can be clearer than that, according to English law, the parental power is vested in the father alone', *The Times* reported in 1864. 'It is he who while he lives is permanent guardian of the children, and entitled to the control of their persons during the age of minority.' While conceding that younger children and girls belonged more rightly to the mother, this editorial nevertheless insisted that 'we must here, as ever, adapt human laws to the natural inequality of the sexes, and give the superiority of right to that which cannot but have the superiority of power'. Twenty years later, in 1884, there was still a basic legal and common understanding that 'The children belong to the father.'²¹

While concern existed about the working-class father, this centred largely on his role as a good provider. As Sonya Rose argues, parliamentary debate about the Factory Acts in the 1840s 'reinforced the idea that men were responsible for the economic well-being of their families, whereas wives were responsible for motherhood'.²² A good working-class father, therefore, was a man who could keep his family out of the workhouse and put wholesome food on the table; he also avoided the alehouse, and helped his sons into apprenticeships. Although there were ongoing arguments about the bastardy clauses in the Poor Law Amendment Act, working-class fatherhood perhaps seemed easier to regulate than the middle-class version where there were subtler nuances of education, religion and personal morality at stake.²³ Victorian anxiety about fatherhood came to rest essentially on the plight of the middle-class man whose marriage had somehow foundered, making the welfare of his children a new cultural responsibility.

In the nineteenth century, the father's role – at least as discussed in the public domain – was primarily legal, and his 'ownership' of any children of his marriage was a point of principle widely accepted for most of the period. Caroline Norton's campaign to have the mother's rights acknowledged on an equal basis is too well known to need reiterating here; it was the first serious legal challenge to the supremacy of the father, which opened the doors to further assays, not least from Norton herself,