

(DE)STABILIZING PATRIARCHAL POWER THROUGH REPRESENTATIONS OF WOMEN'S HAIR IN CHARLES DICKENS'S NOVEL "DOMBEY AND SON"

Ioana Boghian

Abstract

In Victorian male fiction hair occurs as a recurrent synecdoche, as a part of the object which represented female sexuality. Women's hair related problems were seen as indicators of pathologies challenging not only domestic relationships but also social order and political stability. Hair became a criterion of classification, and hairiness suggested sexual abnormality, madness and weak-mindedness, a belief also supported and promoted by scientists. By a semiotic approach to images of female hair in Charles Dickens's novel "Dombey and Son", this paper aims at identifying the way in which women's hair representations functioned as indicators for the (de)stabilization of patriarchal power in the Victorian age.

Keywords: *Victorian male fiction, female hair, (de)stabilization, the patriarchal power.*

1. Introduction

Hair is regarded by many as an important element contributing to the construction of an individual's identity, relationships, thoughts, moods, motivation and attitudes (Chandler, 2007; Cobley, 2005; Danesi, 2004, Van Leeuwen, 2005; Auer, 2007). Hairstyles are part of the body language witting and unwitting system of body signals and signs, together with gestures, postures, clothing¹. Whereas involuntary signals such as facial expressions of happiness, surprise, anger or disgust are usually understood by people in all cultures as they indicate human basic emotions, laughing, crying and shrugging the shoulders are mixed, or both voluntary and involuntary signals that may originate in human basic ways of responding to everyday life situations but that are shaped by culture, time and use. But gestures such as a thumbs up, a military salute belong to the learned, voluntary signals and their meaning varies across cultures. Also, alterations of the human body, for example routine hair service, convey certain messages². Social identity is constructed and communicated through a person's activities/work, his/her manner of speaking, way of clothing, hairstyles, eating habits, domestic environments and possessions, modes of travelling and use of leisure time³. Hairstyles are also a key element in building and expressing religious identity⁴, age, gender, race, belonging to a group as well as social class⁵. A special role is played by hair and gestures involving the hair in courtship rituals: by playing with her hair or by tucking the hair behind her ear to expose the neck, a female involuntarily send such messages as romantic, sexual availability.

Victorian scientific documents promoted the understanding of women in terms of physical, psychological, mental and moral childishness, the childlikeness of women being regarded as a mark of inferiority:

anthropologists compared the female skeleton to a child's; the female brain was and would always remain in a more or less infantile condition; a weak-willed, impulsive, rather imitative than original, timid and dependent, craving for sympathy; more prone to sin than men⁶. Even more suggestive of women's inferiority were the ideas that resembled women to savages: it was circulated the idea that women's alleged insensibility to pain (trauma or surgery, for example) was a mark of their primitiveness on the grounds that tolerance of physical stress was a residue of the power of lower animals to restore a lost organ⁷. This insensibility was seen by the Victorian to be still lingering in the lower human races, in the lower classes of society, in women and in children.

This view upon women as inferior to men was reflected on a social level in three ways:

- 1) upper-class women were less affected by such stereotypes because of the control they had over their money which allowed them to avoid accepting subordinate roles; also, by undertaking male activities, such as hunting, upper-class women promoted an image that destabilized the ideal of female physical fragility;
- 2) middle class women were usually expected to "cultivate themselves as ornaments", and to comply with the Victorian age standards for a "perfect lady" that should be leisured, ornamental and dependent⁸; a lady should not comb and arrange her own hair as this task was left to the lady's maid, the highest in rank among Victorian servants⁹;
- 3) for working-class women there was usually no other option than work.

The following section of the paper shall approach the way in which representations of women's hair in "Dombey and Son" convey the destabilization, or rather the denial of the destabilization of patriarchal power.

2. Challenging patriarchal power

Victorian times could rightly be called the 'Golden Age of Patriarchalism', with males dominating and controlling every aspect of society and particularly their families. They were owners and masters of their homes and of all within it, pets, servants and members of the family alike.

Regarding the representations of hairstyles of female characters, we may argue that the heroines' hair functions as a signifying system which, in the case of Charles Dickens's novels, indicates a woman's social and moral identity. Charles Darwin concluded that "in regard to the general hairiness of the body, the women in all races are less hairy than the men", the superfluity of hair being a sign of, together with brilliancy of color, activity of the scent glands, to the essence of maleness which was activity¹⁰. The male

organism was katabolic and destructive, whereas the female organism was passive, constructive and anabolic. When it comes to hair, Dickens himself was left paranoid about having his hair cut after experiencing the price of fame in a mass culture in the States, namely, the 'reward' of barbers selling locks of his hair for profit¹¹.

Taking into consideration the ideas mentioned in the introductory part of this paper, we shall try to identify the way in which untamed women's hair is used to signify the usurping of domesticity and of male dominance in the Victorian era. In semiotic terms, we may refer to hair and hairstyles as icons for the various social classes; as an index, we may say that hair and images of hair instructs and informs the viewer/reader with respect to the way in which a person treats, arranges (or ignores), displays and makes use of his/her hair; the way in which hair is perceived by an other and the response it triggers is also meaningful; as symbols, hairstyles (regarded as the effect and product of conventions and requirements) embody the idea of belonging to a certain group/culture/religion. We shall further focus upon the index function of hair and hairstyles as we shall try to analyze the way in which the literary use of hair images generates meaning, from the perspective of the relationships established between Victorian men and women.

As an extension of the human body, hair may be seen as a sign that stands for personality, social status and overall character of the owner. The semiotic questions that apply to the code of clothes, namely, *how*, *what* and *why* something signifies, may be applied to hair as well¹². The features that Danesi¹³ uses to interpret the code of clothes may be used to interpret the code of hair, too. The characteristics describing the hair code are that it is gendered, it is a social requirement and a sign of selfhood in a cultural context, also having a biological, protective role. Hair may also constitute a tool by means of which one may lie about himself/herself, especially in terms of social status, as an element of the overall impression created by means of clothes.

In "Dombey and Son", hair is described with almost all characters to be involved in indicating:

- 4) the character's social status and activities (middle- and upper-class men would have their hair curled for special occasions such as balls or weddings);
- 5) the character's mood (hair is used to mirror the character's inner struggles, fears, madness, rebellious attitude etc.);
- 6) gender, gender roles and clashes related to gender roles (for example, Miss Blimber is perceived by Paul Dombey Junior as having the hair done like a boy);
- 7) described almost like a character in itself, hair is an extension of the individual that is to be arranged, patted, disturbed, cut and sold,

curled, twisted and closely tied, pulled at, ignored, hidden or displayed.

2.1. The 'Rapunzel' of "Dombey and Son"

In Victorian male fiction a domestic woman would have a tamed, neatly arranged hair. As struggles for women's rights intensified in the later half of the nineteenth-century, fictional representations of women's hair began to point to, consciously or unconsciously, the idea of change challenging gender roles. In her authentic study on representations of hair in Victorian literature and culture, Galia Ofek suggests that Dickens deployed the image of Rapunzel's streaming hair "within the Victorian Medusa-Rapunzel dichotomous paradigm which has been shown to categorize women as either Medusas (sexually mature, 'fallen', threatening heroines) or Rapunzels (innocent, helpless and pure heroines)"¹⁴.

Starting from Ofek's approach to Dickens's literary construction of women's hair, we shall attempt to highlight the way in which this writer used the hair trope to (attempt to) circumscribe his heroines to conventional feminine roles and to "lock them in a cage of domesticity." Although Dickens criticized hair fetishism he began nevertheless to use hair as an indispensable element to character construction.

The space of the heroine-princess locked in a castle is shown by Dickens's description of, in the case of the novel that constitutes our point of interest, Dombey's house which is explicitly connected to the "enchanted houses", fitted with "dragon sentries" and "Gorgon-like" walls¹⁶, of romance, where heroines are imprisoned by Gothic villains. The fact that several of Dickens's plots resemble those of the traditional fairy story from beginning to end is obvious, with the terrifying appearance of Magwitch in the churchyard ("Great Expectations"), or the luring of Florence Dombey by good Mrs Brown ("Dombey and Son"). Touches of fairy-like incidents are clearly connected with Florence as, for example, when Walter helps her put on her shoe, picking it up and putting it "on the little foot as the Prince in the story might have fitted Cinderella's slipper on"¹⁷.

Following Ofek's reasoning, we may note that Florence is, in the example above, referred to as Cinderella: she was no Cinderella in terms of social position but she was a Cinderella in terms of Dombey's lack of affection towards her. The scene when Florence is kidnapped by Good Mrs Brown who wants to cut her luxuriant hair is illustrative for our approach to Florence as the 'Rapunzel' of this novel: "Good Mrs Brown whipped out a large pair of scissors, and fell into an unaccountable state of excitement... I'd have every lock of it"¹⁸. The cutting of the hair, which Florence escapes because while looking at the girl's hair Mrs Brown remembers the hair of her lost daughter, stands for loss of freedom. From a trap, the hair turns into an amulet, being freed from under the bonnet in a later, already mentioned

fairy-tale like scene, in the presence of Walter, Florence's future husband: "her miserable bonnet falling off, her hair came tumbling down about her face" causing "speechless admiration" and "commiseration"¹⁹ among the lookers. The revealing and freeing of Florence's hair stands not only as a sign of her being freed from the hands of Mrs Brown but also as an act of restoring Florence to the social class that she belonged to. This idea may be supported by the scene in which Florence encounters a "very poor" father and daughter from Chapter 24. Besides revealing Dickens's ambiguity and ambivalence in terms of his attitude towards children, which sometimes indicates suspicion and distancing, and sometimes empathy and compassion – an attitude representative for the entire age – this scene also supports the idea that physical beauty belongs to the middle - and upper classes and less to the poor. The relationship between this poor father and his little girl is exactly the opposite of that of Florence and her father, Dombey. Although Martha, the poor girl, is described as sullen, capricious, impatient, selfish, ungrateful and repulsive in appearance, we are made to feel no sympathy for her as a socially and economically marginalized child. Instead, we are made to feel sorry for Florence as an emotionally neglected child who feels that Martha is not entitled to her father's love, being such a bad and ugly child as she is. Florence, on the other hand, is described as pretty, kind and warm-hearted. It seems that "poverty breeds deformity"²⁰ and, we may add, richness breeds beauty. By escaping from having her hair cut Florence also escapes from being turned into a sexual object: Mrs Brown had formerly cut Alice Marwood's hair and then sold her to prostitution. From this perspective, hair is used with Alice, Florence and Edith as a synecdoche of female sexuality. The danger that Florence faces is hinted at by the act of replacing the girl's expensive clothes with rags and covering her hair with a torn and soiled bonnet, revealing of the depravity lurking outside, in the streets where Florence had got lost. By exploiting a Victorian reality, the prospering market of women's hair, through Mrs Brown's 'greed' for hair, Dickens portrays the accumulation of and idolization of matter in a "materialistic, exploitative and depraved society, where the quest for power, greed and hoarding of money, demonstrated by Mr Dombey and Mr Carker, corresponds to the trade in women, and both are figured in the compulsive and criminal hoarding of hair"²¹.

The final chapter of "Dombey and Son" depicts Dombey, now repeatedly referred to as the white-haired gentleman, taking pride "only in his daughter and her husband"²² and particularly in his granddaughter, also called Florence, whom he does not "bear to see ... apart"²³. There are no more ambitious projects troubling him and it is a girl, his granddaughter, and not his grandson Paul, that he loves the most, although he cares about the boy, too. Now relying upon the financial support of his daughter and

son-in-law, Mr Dombey's self-sufficiency from Chapter 1 - "the earth was made for Dombey and Son to trade in, and the sun and moon were made to give them light"²⁴, his estimation of his own daughter in such terms as "a piece of base coin that couldn't be invested - a bad boy - nothing more" has, by the end of the novel, turned into his stealing "away to look at her in her sleep"²⁵. Dombey, the stern, proud, implacable and emotionless head of the home department and firm has now been transformed into a (childish) white-haired gentleman financially and emotionally dependent on his daughter and granddaughter.

In the complex interplay of class, sex and trade, Florence's status - as discussed by S. Perera²⁶ - is defined by her position as Dombey's daughter. Dombey miscalculates Florence's worth and this is a personal but also a business failure. Dombey's refusal to accommodate Florence within the economy of the family business denies her a role in the domestic economy, and this has been suggested by her being constantly represented through images of her rich, luxuriant, streaming hair.

2.2. The 'Medusa' of "Dombey and Son"

Like Florence, Edith's hair is also represented mainly through images of rich, dark, streaming locks. This section of the paper will attempt to approach Edith Granger, Dombey's second wife by identifying her with the classical image of the Medusa, an image suggesting women's power to (physically, emotionally and financially) paralyse and kill men. Dombey's marriage with Edith is inevitably destructive because, although she objectifies herself, and this is what Dombey recognizes and appreciates, she will not be manipulated. Her hair points to her rebellion against male patriarchy. In the character of Dombey, Dickens draws together the authoritarian, latent violence of the domineering male and the chilling dedication of mercenary ambition. "Dombey and Son" employs a vocabulary of private and public, domestic and foreign words participating in a discourse of trade and empire which simultaneously addresses the issues of home, family and women. Another marker which is part of Dombey's patriarchal discourse is his perspective on female beauty. Introduced to the aristocratic Edith, Dombey acquires her hastily then loses no time in displaying his bargain to a guest list of sundry eastern magnates. He is first dissatisfied with his wife when she does not receive enthusiastically enough the director of an East India company. By refusing to perform for the assembled bankers and magnates, Edith rejects her chief function in the contract between the couple - a contract openly alluded to in the unfortunate anecdote told at their first dinner party: "She is regularly bought, and you may take your oath he is as regularly sold!"²⁷ Edith's beauty has always been recognized as a commodity by her mother who has devoted herself to developing it for a future consumer.

The image of the Medusa was chosen by Freud in 1922 as a symbol of masculine castration anxiety: "To decapitate=to castrate. The terror of Medusa is thus a terror of castration that is linked to the sight of something ... The hair upon Medusa's head is frequently represented in works of art ... she becomes the woman who is unapproachable and repels all sexual desires"²⁸.

Edith, who may be regarded as Alice Marwood's double, seems to become a snaky gorgon after being prompted by the mother into an unhappy mercenary marriage which she tries to escape by an illicit liaison, all of which make her a "beautiful Medusa"²⁹. Hair speaks instead of Edith when, for example, overhearing a complementary remark addressed by Mrs Skewton at the sight of her and Mr Dombey, what would have been discernible as tone of voice is made visible through the hair: "Edith, overhearing, looked round, and flushed indignant scarlet to her hair"³⁰. When Edith is considering to leave Dombey, her hair is streaming down and, at one point, Florence's and Edith's locks of hair intermingle, suggesting their similarity in terms of Dombey's lack of affection towards them: "'Is it late?' asked Edith, fondly putting back the curls that mingled with her own dark hair, and strayed upon her face"³¹. The hair of both Florence and Edith is represented as "streaming" freely, a mark of these two women's refusal to undertake the domestic roles that a male (Mr Dombey) would assign to them, especially in the absence of affection.

Chapter 47 in which Edith and Dombey have their last quarrel before Edith runs away with Carker, reveals images of hair as a live presence in the conversation of the two, as replicating, emphasizing and dramatizing Edith's words. The conclusion that they should be separated, Edith's response to Dombey's attempts in subduing her to his will, is accompanied by Edith's gesture of proudly and forcefully plucking the diamonds tiara from her head, freeing her hair from the symbol of male dominance which tumbles down as if to reveal the full power of her desires: "She lifted her hand to the tiara of bright jewels radiant on her head, and, plucking it off with a force that dragged and strained her rich black hair with heedless cruelty, and brought it tumbling wildly on her shoulders, cast the gems upon the ground"³².

In this scene, Edith embodies all Victorian women with a will of their own, refusing to be mere domestic roles in the house of a proud Victorian man, disdaining to behave as movable objects used to display wealth and as social entertainers for the husband's business partners. Hair becomes a *synechdoche* not only of female sexuality but also of female will and mental, intellectual abilities. The importance of hair as a substitute for the female mind, as an extension of women's inner thoughts, is also suggested in the scene when Florence is kidnapped by Mrs Brown: "Florence was so relieved to find that it was only her hair and not her head that Mrs Brown coveted"³³.

3. Conclusions

The essence of a Victorian wife in terms of hair is expressed by Susan Nipper, Florence's nurse: "if I hadn't more manliness than that insipidest of his sex, I'd never take pride in my hair again, but turn it up behind my ears, and wear coarse caps, without a bit of border, until death released me from my insignificance. I may not be a Amazon, Miss Floy, and wouldn't so demean myself by such disfigurement, but anyways I'm not a giver up, I hope"³⁴.

Victorian wives were expected to have their hair turned up behind their ears and hidden under a bonnet as a sign of their domestic, submissive, humble role. Our paper constituted an attempt to highlight the way in which images of rich streaming hair render the idea of the destabilization of Victorian patriarchalism. Especially in the absence of affection and love from the part of men (Mr Dombey), women (Florence and Edith) are illustrated as wearing their rich hair loose, streaming, as a sign of their refusal to comply with Victorian male standards and expectations regarding a woman's worth, role and duties. Our purpose did not include the effect of women wearing their hair loose upon the women themselves, but the effect it produced upon men, namely, financial and emotional collapse.

Notes

¹Danesi, 2004, p. 53.

²Cobley, 2005, p. 21.

³Chandler, 2007, p. 153.

⁴Van Leeuwen, 2005, p. 40.

⁵Auer, 2007, p. 364.

⁶Russett, 1991, p. 54.

⁷*ibidem*, p. 56.

⁸Brown, 1985, p. 72.

⁹Pool, 1993, p. 231.

¹⁰*ibidem*, p. 78.

¹¹Paroissien, 2008, p. 154.

¹²Boghian, 2010, p. 189.

¹³*ibidem*.

¹⁴Ofek, 2009, p. 104.

¹⁵*ibidem*.

¹⁶Dickens, 2002, p. 295-296.

¹⁷*ibidem*, p. 75.

¹⁸*ibidem*, p. 72.

¹⁹*ibidem*, p. 75.

²⁰Benziman, 2012, p. 157.

²¹Ofek, 2009, p. 107.

²²Dickens, 2002, p. 803.

²³*ibidem*, p. 808.

²⁴*ibidem*, p. 6.

²⁵*ibidem*, p. 808.

²⁶Regan, 2001, p. 285-286.

²⁷Dickens, 2002, p. 474.

²⁸*apud* Ofek, 2009, p. 111.

²⁹Dickens, 2002, p. 601.

³⁰*ibidem*, p. 360.

³¹*ibidem*, p. 565.

³²*ibidem*, p. 610.

³³*ibidem*, p. 72.

³⁴*ibidem*, p. 301.

References

- AUER, P. *Style and Social Identity*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 2007 [=Auer, 2007].
- BENZIMAN, G. *Narratives of Child Neglect in Romantic and Victorian Culture*. Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012 [=Benziman, 2012].
- BROWN, J.-P. *A Reader's Guide to the Nineteenth-Century English Novel*. London: Macmillan, 1985 [=Brown, 1985].
- BOGHIAN, I. *Houses in Victorian Novels. A Semiotic Approach*. Saarbrücken: Lambert Academic Publishing, 2010 [=Boghian, 2010].
- CHANDLER, D. *Semiotics. The Basics*. London: Routledge, 2007 [=Chandler, 2007].
- COBLEY, P. (ed.) *The Routledge Companion to Semiotics and Linguistics*. London: Routledge, 2005 [=Cobley, 2005].
- DANESI, M. *Messages, Signs and Meanings. A Basic Textbook in Semiotics and Communication Theory*. Toronto: Canadian Scholar Press, 2004 [=Danesi, 2004].
- DICKENS, C. *Dombey and Son*. Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Classics, 2002 [=Dickens, 2002].
- OFEK, G. *Representations of Hair in Victorian Literature and Culture*. Hampshire: Ashgate, 2009 [=Ofek, 2009].
- POOL, D. *What Jane Austen Ate and Charles Dickens Knew*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993 [=Pool, 1993].
- REGAN, S. (ed.) *The Nineteenth Century Novel. A Critical Reader*. London: Routledge, 2001 [=Regan, 2001].
- RUSSETT, C.-G. *Sexual Science. The Victorian Construction of Womanhood*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991 [=Russett, 1991].
- VAN LEEUWEN, T. *Introducing Social Semiotics*. London: Routledge, 2005 [=Van Leeuwen, 2005].