The Orphan in Fiction and Comics since the 19th Century

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By

Marion Gymnich,

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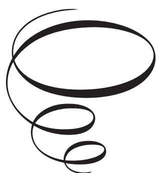

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INTRODUCTION

THE ORPHAN IN FICTION AND COMICS SINCE THE 19TH CENTURY

MARION GYMNICH,
BARBARA PUSCHMANN-NALENZ,
GEROLD SEDLMAYR, DIRK VANDERBEKE

The present study investigates the vast and diverse appearances of the orphan in fictional narratives. It analyses the ways in which this figure has been represented and given expression in literature from the beginning of the 19th century to the present. Literature is a privileged space in which key concepts pertaining to the way in which we have fashioned our societies and ourselves are discussed, negotiated, and formed. By tracing the development the representation of the orphan character has undergone in the past 200 years, it is possible to shed light on the evolution of other important concepts, like childhood, family, the status of the parental legacy, individualism, charity, etc. Of course, a study like ours cannot deal with the orphan motif exhaustively. In the first four of our chapters, we will focus on British literature, with the occasional look across the Atlantic and at Postcolonial Anglophone literatures. In contrast, the last chapter—dealing with the orphan in comics—will concentrate primarily on US-American texts, simply because the US has always been the prime market for comic books.

Orphans in the Victorian Novel

In the first chapter, Marion Gymnich discusses the figure of the orphan in the Victorian period, a time that is often considered to be "the most famous age of orphan stories" (Reynolds 2009, 273), having brought forth some of the best-known literary orphans, including Charles Dickens's Oliver Twist, Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre and Thomas Hardy's Jude

Fawley. In the Victorian period the term "orphan" was generally used somewhat more broadly than today, referring to children who had lost both of their parents as well as to those who still had a father or a mother, i.e., half-orphans (cf. Peters 2000, 1). While one may assume that, due to factors such as the death of many women in childbirth, Victorian children were indeed much more likely to lose at least one of their parents than children today, this historical fact alone is hardly sufficient to explain why the orphan was such an immensely popular figure in Victorian literature.

As the examples mentioned above already suggest, Victorian literary orphans tend to be younger and often more innocent than their predecessors in 18th-century and early-19th-century literature (König 2014). While the emotional intensity with which depictions of (suffering) orphans are often endowed in the Victorian novel may partially be accounted for by the use of the orphan as a supposedly universal embodiment of loneliness, Victorian representations of orphans are also informed by the sociocultural coordinates and ideologies of the period. The concept of childhood as a time of innocence, which burgeoned in Romanticism and developed into a fully-fledged idealisation of childhood in the course of the Victorian period, rendered an exploration of the orphaned child more interesting for Victorian writers and readers alike. Similarly, the "ideology of the 'proper' family", which was conceived of as "a refuge from the world" (Alston 2008, 17), resonates in Victorian images of orphanhood in various ways. In the light of idealised notions of the social unit of the (nuclear) family, the adopted child could become an intruder (*Jane Eyre*) or the agent who makes bliss in a family-like unit possible in the first place (Eppie in George Eliot's *Silas Marner*). In any case, the situation of the Victorian orphan is by definition a precarious one. In a society that knew neither adoption laws nor reliable security networks for parentless children, the (young) orphan is dependent on others' goodwill as well as on his or her own resilience and ingenuity.

While it would be intriguing to examine a wider range of representations of orphans in Victorian literature, including both dramatic texts and popular narratives (e.g. street ballads), the chapter will primarily discuss texts that have become classics. The main reason for the decision to choose novels by well-known authors is that these are the texts that have proved to be enormously influential as far as the history of the literary orphan is concerned. Though they were shunned by Modernist writers as relics of outdated stories of self-improvement and maudlin sentimentality, figures such as Oliver Twist, Pip Pirrip and Jane Eyre serve as "prototypical orphans" to the present day, providing templates for postcolonial rewritings as well as for children's literature and for images

of orphanhood circulating in today's popular culture. Yet, a closer look at some of the orphans roaming the Victorian novel soon shows that authors like Dickens, the Brontë sisters, George Eliot and Thackeray do not simply reproduce the same kind of character again and again. Instead, orphans turn out to be enormously versatile figures in terms of their characteristics, their fictional life trajectories and in terms of the issues that are addressed via this particular literary figure.

The proliferation of orphans in Victorian literature mainly results from the fact that this figure lent itself like no other to negotiating a range of different social problems and anxieties. Political discourses in the Victorian period even identified the orphans themselves as a social problem. After all, public interest in the orphan was fuelled by

> the anxiety Victorians felt when trying to cope with the large number of orphans and street children in their own time. Newspaper articles and novels attempted to focus on successful management of orphans from all classes, and, in most cases, these children were seen as threats to maintaining a successful, productive society because they did not have any solid, secure moral influences or, in many cases, a verifiable history (Reynolds 2009, 278).

Several emigration schemes were put into effect during the period in order to send orphans abroad, where they were supposed to help populate the British colonies and, ideally, make their fortunes. The chapter on orphans in the Victorian novel suggests a basic distinction between three different (proto)types of orphans: the pathetic orphan, the orphan as a figure of hope, and the orphan as adventurer. Each of these three types fulfils (multiple) distinct functions and relates to Victorian discourses in specific ways. The pathetic orphan for instance served as a potent vehicle for social criticism targeting institutions such as the workhouse and practices such as baby farming as well as the widespread callousness of individuals in the face of the plight of parentless children. While a number of writers utilise the figure of the pathetic orphan to intensify social critique, there are also novels that use this trope ironically, for instance as a device to reveal a character's hypocrisy. The orphan as a figure of hope embodies widespread notions of self-improvement. Thus, it does not come as a particular surprise that this type of orphan can be found quite often in the genre of the *bildungsroman*, whose protagonists frequently embody the notion that success is based primarily on the individual's intellectual and moral resources. Towards the end of the 19th century, the trope of the orphan as a figure of hope is increasingly discredited, giving way to a bleaker outlook on an orphan's chance of achieving (worldly) success and

finding happiness. A considerable amount of optimism survives in adventure novels, which often feature orphans as protagonists. Here, even very young orphans like Kipling's Mowgli continue to display an outstanding gift for surviving and even thriving in the most adverse circumstances. This also turns the orphaned protagonists of the adventure novel, which is typically set in colonies or regions that could be colonised, into representatives of imperialist thinking.

The Orphan in 20th- and 21st-Century British Fiction

For a considerable time, Nina Auerbach's article "Incarnations of the Orphan" (1975) remained the solitary investigation of the literary orphan figure. It stood alone in the evaluation of a motif that was extremely popular in 18th- and 19th-century fiction in Britain, but had received little critical attention that could be called systematic or theoretically well-founded. In addition, Auerbach's initiative, whose temporal frame extended beyond the 19th century, abstained from seriously considering the orphan in narratives of her own era. While Eva König's book-length study (2014) is proof enough that the lacuna remains a rewarding field for scholarship, it is restricted to the orphan in the Early Modern novel. In her two chapters, Barbara Puschmann-Nalenz compensates for this omission.

Auerbach's reticence to engage with 20th-century fiction may have had two reasons. In the Edwardian era, the popularity of the orphan character had shifted to children's literature, as David Floyd's recent research shows. Moreover, the rise of fantasy literature, which began in Britain in the last half of the 19th century thanks to George MacDonald and William Morris, but gathered steam in the first half of the 20th century with J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis, exhibited a different use of the orphan trope, which equally persisted in romance and crime fiction or thrillers. Amazingly, however, the motif was all but abandoned for mainstream fiction, even in narratives thematising war or other catastrophic events. This striking development—the second possible reason for criticism's disregard of the orphan character—is disclosed in the chapter "The Gap or, the Dying Orphan", which also addresses the perplexing link between the interval in orphan narratives and the generational blank in British social history caused by the original catastrophe of the 20th century, the First World War. When Auerbach declares Stephen Dedalus, hero of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), the paradigmatic orphan figure for 20th-century narrative fiction (Auerbach 1975, 416-17), her clarification of the ways and purposes in which Joyce uses the "orphan" character remains problematic, particularly because it is only in the last lines that

Stephen makes himself an orphan by exile to become an artist, imploring the "old artificer" (Joyce [1916] 1973, 253) to be his (god)father. Towards the end of the century, Julia Kristeva's socio-political analysis of the foreigner (Kristeva 1991, 1-2, 21-23) depicts this figure as self-orphaned much like Auerbach's portrayal of Stephen. Auerbach claims that Joyce plays with the orphan myth, only to debunk it in *Ulysses* in the figure of Stephen (Auerbach 1975, 416). Her second example, *The Horse's Mouth* (1957) by Joyce Cary, appears in a very incongruent combination with *A Portrait of the Artist*—an incomparability that is ignored by the critic. While Stephen imaginatively represents the orphaned exile as self-made man, Cary's protagonist Jimson, according to Auerbach, stands for "perpetual incoherence and loss" (Auerbach 1975, 418), thereby heralding a new beginning of the literary motif.

The chapter "The Gap" in this volume is dedicated—partly on account of the discrepancies in Auerbach's concluding evaluations—to the analysis of rare examples of narratives from the first half of the 20th century, where the central character is orphaned as a child or young person. When Auerbach prefers to address the orphan figure of the modernist period "as a picaresque artist" (Auerbach 1975, 416) she points to an important innovative element of the trope that first emerges in Joyce's *Portrait*, but which the reader also encounters in several mainstream novels of lesser renown: the orphaned artist figure that foretells an interconnection with the orphaned protagonist of fantasy fiction. "Picaresque", however, is an attribute atypical of the characters in the narratives at hand. Their melancholia, isolation and premature disappearance indicate a gloomy or disconcerted mood. The historical hiatus making itself felt in British society as well as in the literary history of the English orphan narrative and its criticism demanded a return to origins or the laying of new foundations, or both. "The Gap" is thus an ambiguous key-word with regard to the literary orphan figure in the English novel, since such a blank space also opens up in and is constitutive for the orphan's life narrative and (self-) image.

While up to the 1980s the orphan remains a rarity in literary fiction despite the historical reality of two world wars that produced a great number of orphaned children, Anglophone narratives of the past twenty years show an overwhelmingly frequent use of the character (cf. also Puschmann-Nalenz 2014). In the chapter "Some Things Remain Broken Forever"—a quotation from Kazuo Ishiguro's novel *When We Were Orphans*—the range of novelistic employments of the orphan, with an emphasis on post-millennial works, is explored. The orphan as *picaro* can be found in a few narratives and thus continues a tradition which criticism

has observed from Defoe to Joyce. Yet tragedy, bereavement and absence also play a greater part in the fictions published from the 1980s onwards, with the disappearance of the mother as a strikingly common motif. Socio-cultural theories by Julia Kristeva and feminist postulations by Luce Irigaray are called on to explain this literary particularity in an age when the death of mothers of young children—compared to the 18th and 19th centuries—is uncommon. The wide range of orphan figures appears even more diverse when, apart from the biological, also functional and cultural orphans, increasingly narrativised in the last fifteen years, expand the compass of the motif and its concomitant themes.

As a consequence of the multiplicity of circumstances considered relevant for orphanhood today, the question of parental substitution receives high priority in fictions; hence, in-laws, foster-mothers or -fathers and institutions such as orphanages take centre stage in part 3 of the chapter “Some Things Remain Broken Forever”. In a number of cases, the evaluation of fictional surrogates reveals them as poor-to-wicked replacements because of their incapacity and unwillingness to offer affection, thus recalling the *topos* of the fairy-tale stepmother. This seems all the more noteworthy since in the social reality of recent decades the institutionalised substitution of parental care and educational functions has become a favourite topic for public discussion and political agendas. In the literary narratives, the family, a much-debated phenomenon, still emerges to be as fundamental for an individual as it remains problematic. Successful emotional substitution of a parent turns out to be a scarcity in the sample of about twenty British and postcolonial novels.

The orphan as a person of unknown or unrevealed origins, but endowed with graces that render him/her a communal benefit or a blessing for others is a rare but lately re-surfacing figure that also ostentatiously refers back to the ancient mythology of the foundling. In this type, surrealistic elements can mingle with mythic ones. With a renewed myth as a component of contemporary fiction, the orphan becomes a polysemiotic sign. In the middle of the second decade of the 21st century the trope of the literary orphan proves to be an increasingly colourful and fascinating device.

The chapter closes with a brief reflection on a topic that emerges several times in the novels, because of its close link to the orphan figure: “home” is assessed as a subject of narrative attention.

Orphans in Fantasy

In the penultimate chapter, Gerold Sedlmayr looks at fantasy literature. Rather than offering a broad overview, he aims at a detailed consideration of the orphan motif in three of the most successful and influential fantasy narratives of recent times, namely J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* septology (1997-2007), Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* trilogy (1995-2000), and George R.R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* series (1996ff.), which will comprise a projected seven volumes at its completion; at the time of writing, five volumes have been published, the last being *A Dance with Dragons* (2011). No doubt, orphans have prominently featured in fantasy tales for a long time: Peter Pan and his Lost Boys are orphans, just like Frodo in Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, the eponymous Prince Caspian in the fourth novel of C.S. Lewis' *The Chronicles of Narnia*, Ged in Ursula Le Guin's *Earthsea* tales, or the child protagonists in Lemony Snicket's *A Series of Unfortunate Events* series. Apart from these "true" orphans, there are many characters that Maria Nikolajeva terms "functional orphans" (Nikolajeva 2002, 172), i.e. individuals that grow up as if they did not have any parents, although these may still be alive. This is the case, for example, with Lucy, Edmund, Susan and Peter, the central protagonists in many of Lewis' *Narnia* stories.

It is strange, therefore, that hardly any critical work has been done in this field. James Michael Curtis, who, in 2016, submitted his PhD thesis *In Absentia Parentis: The Orphan Figure in Latter Twentieth Century Anglo-American Children's Fantasy*, claims that "[t]he vast majority of sustained critical work on orphans in literature—works written for children and for adults—focus predominantly on realist texts from the nineteenth century, leaving both the entirety of the twentieth century and the fantasy genre virtually ignored" (2016, 7). While this bespeaks the implicit prioritisation of "realist" literature over fantastic and fantasy tales in traditional canon formation, Curtis also proposes that, at least regarding the study of children's literature, scholars "have passed over these types of characters as mere recurrent tropes, devoid of any real substance beyond their being narrative fixtures or staples of nineteenth-century social reform" (2016, 1). Quite obviously, as Curtis demonstrates in his thesis, such scholarly disregard is undeserved. Even if the orphan were nothing but a "narrative fixture" (which is not the case, as the present volume seeks to demonstrate), its on-going use would not necessarily indicate that an archetypal universalist meaning was attached to the motif. On the contrary, since it is reused in, and hence cannot help being adapted to different

contexts, it rather reveals its protean nature and becomes itself expressive of the respective culturally specific mind-sets.

Accordingly, while it may be true that many literary orphan characters function as a "manifestation of loneliness" but at the same time "represent the possibility for humans to reinvent themselves", as Melanie A. Kimball (1999, 559) argues in her examination of the orphan motif in fifty folktales from different cultures, the implied consequences still differ widely. For instance, in C.S. Lewis' *The Horse and His Boy*, the third instalment in the *Narnia* series, the functional orphanhood of Shasta, who ultimately is able to discover his parents, his true name, and hence his "roots", is more than a nice narrative commonplace. Rather, it quite explicitly functions as the vehicle of a problematic, ideologically biased "Orientalist" narrative meant to reveal the moral, spiritual and intellectual "superiority" or "paternity" of Northern European cultures. Of course, depending on the critic's own take, the evaluation of a text's historical situatedness may lead to different results. Hence, to take another example, Lauren Byler very specifically regards *Harry Potter* as symptomatic of the prevailing neoliberal climate in the late 20th and 21st centuries in which concepts of "self-improvement and self-sufficiency" (2016, 115) are propagated at the expense of communal cohesion: "the overarching message of the series is that extreme individualism epitomizes the most admirable and valuable type of personhood" (120). The present contribution argues otherwise: namely that Voldemort's extreme individualism, which in turn is a consequence of his own orphan status, has catastrophic effects, which can only be countered by the community of which Harry, another orphan, becomes an integral part; whenever Harry isolates himself and so follows in the footsteps of Voldemort, he comes close to failure. Be that as it may, Byler's intriguing article is representative of much critical work on fantasy in that she mentions Harry's all-too-obvious status as orphan only in passing, without taking into account the possible relevance of the trope for her argument. In fact, when she suggests that, by letting go of the powerful Elder Wand at the end of the series, Harry "effectively concludes his makeover from a self-estranged orphan to a self-possessed hero" (Byler 2016, 137), she does not even consider whether the neoliberal individual might be synonymous with (postmodern) orphanhood. Byler's article hence is indicative of the fact that while there is hardly any critical work that focuses specifically on the orphan motif, there are numerous contributions that—if ever so slightly—touch upon topics which are relevant for an evaluation of the orphan heroes in fantasy tales: in the case of Harry Potter, for example, there are articles on Harry's relationship to

his parents, on all kinds of surrogate parents, on friendship, etc. The same goes for *His Dark Materials* and *A Song of Ice and Fire*.

In this sense, Curtis' PhD thesis—which exclusively focuses on children's literature, though—most certainly fills a gap. His approach is strictly psychoanalytical, arguing that

> children's fantasy orphan narratives […] externaliz[e] inner psychological processes and [allow] the orphan protagonists […] the opportunity to process psycho-developmental struggles in the absence of the parental influence that child developmental theorists claim is vital to the normalizing trajectory towards successful psychological progression to adulthood. (Curtis 2016, 16)

In contrast, the present study is not so much interested in the psychological development of the protagonists, but in the connection between the orphan motif, the influence and status of myth, and generic implications of fantasy. Starting from both Brian Attebery's assumption that "fantasy, as a literary form, is a way of reconnecting to traditional myths and the worlds they generate" (2014, 9) and Jacques Derrida's observations on the link in Plato's work between *mythos*, writing, and the orphan, of which Laura Peters also avails herself in her study on the Victorian orphan, it will be asked in which ways the orphan figure in fantasy functions both as a strategic device to negotiate Western metaphysical traditions and a means to "write oneself" in any meaningful way. In *Harry Potter*, this negotiation happens on the basis of the juxtaposition of Harry and Voldemort, both of whom must come to grips with their own orphan background in order to find their place in the world but choose different ways to do so: while Voldemort attempts to set himself up as wholly original, Harry realises that his own story can only be of consequence if he accepts its being entwined with the stories of others—which in turn carry equal significance and worth. Similarly, the functional orphan Lyra, the main protagonist in Pullman's decidedly intertextual trilogy, probes the truth claims of her parents as soon as she realises who they are, and ultimately understands that while each conscious being carries their own true story, such truth is never essential in the Platonic sense, but always material, dynamic and tied to a living here and now. In Pullman's cosmos, there is no capital-lettered Truth, no paternal *Logos*, which would be binding in any absolute sense; no destiny written in advance. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* may eventually turn out to be more conventional than Rowling's and Pullman's narratives, depending, amongst other things, on whether Dany, the central orphan character, will be successful by the end of the series. After all, judged by our standards, she is driven by the outdated belief that she has

the dynastic right to be queen of Westeros, a right that has come down to her from her parents via “blood”. However, while the fantasy genre commonly returns to bygone ways of placing the self in the world (for example through “blood right”) and so, on the metalevel, also to older (parental) modes of storytelling—what Northrop Frye refers to as “mythic”, “romantic” and “high mimetic” modes—*A Song of Ice and Fire* demonstrates that it necessarily does so by way of moving through the “low mimetic” and “ironic” modes as well. This, though, is part of their *ratio*: the fantasy stories discussed here are innovative precisely because they creatively refer back to older myths and stories, but without being able to or even wanting to ultimately insist on their binding powers.

Orphans in Comics

In the volume’s last chapter, Dirk Vanderbeke widens the scope and looks at a medium situated between literature and the graphic/visual arts. If orphans are no longer a central motif in mainstream 20th-century literature until the 1980s, this is decidedly not the case in the comics where ever since the end of the 19th century orphans seem to be the norm rather than the exception. Depending on the different genres—funnies and gag-a-day-strips, comic books, superhero comics, underground comix, and autobiographical comics—orphans appear in very diverse contexts, even if specific patterns are, of course, clearly noticeable. Sometimes the motif serves the generic requirements, or traditional narrative types are resurrected, but then the orphan occasionally also seems to serve commercial interests. In the face of their near ubiquity, however, orphans in comics have not been systematically researched. Of course, in the discussion of single works like *Gasoline Alley* or subgenres like the superhero comics the motif could not have escaped notice, but no thorough investigation has yet been published, an omission which this chapter intends to remedy.

When sequential pictorial narratives started to appear in American newspapers and Sunday supplements, the stories were short and consisted of only a few pictures. These minimal stories, usually culminating in a joke, lent themselves to the depiction of humorous pranks and mischief and thus also to juvenile protagonists, and as the format did not allow for any development of background or extended characterisation, it is occasionally difficult or impossible to determine whether the youngsters are orphans or functional orphans, or whether parents simply do not make an appearance. Thus, we learn only after quite some time that the Yellow Kid is, indeed, an orphan while most of the other urchins seem to have parents who are, however, usually absent from the stories.

When the artists began to organise the strips into longer narrations which were still published in the original format of daily strips, this also had an impact on the orphan motif. Unlike novels, which can speed up the narration and omit unwelcome aspects of the story but also include elements that were not considered suitable for the innocent entertainment of the funnies, the comic strips published on a day-to-day-basis were at the same time more and less realistic. They were less realistic as the time is frequently frozen and no real development takes place, but they are also more realistic as temporal gaps are very rare, if they exist at all. In addition, the series, which often ran on for many years—some are still around today—were not completely planned out, and experimental changes could be introduced quickly; in this they are similar to serialised novels of the 19th century, which could also accommodate reader's responses for higher circulation and commercial success. If a new feature or figure seemed promising to the comic artist or the publisher, it could be included immediately, but if it did not meet the approval of the audience, it could easily be dropped again equally quickly. Famously, the publisher of *Gasoline Alley* wanted to increase the appeal and reach a female audience and thus demanded to have a child added to the strip. But as courtship, marriage, and pregnancy would take up considerable time and also include elements that were not acceptable in the funnies, the child was delivered as an orphan to the doorstep of the main character and, being very successful, stayed with him ever after. Similarly, Huey, Dewey and Louie were dropped off at Donald's house by his sister and simply never picked up again—in consequence, most readers assume that they must be orphans, even though strictly speaking they are on a very long visit to their uncle.

In such cases, orphanhood is not linked to any loss, grief, or suffering, but once orphans are presented outside of a safe environment like the peer group in the Yellow Kid comics or the home of the foster parent in *Gasoline Alley*, more traditional plot elements or clichés à la *Oliver Twist* appear. In *Little Orphan Annie*, the orphanage where the young heroine grows up is a dismal place with little warmth or affection, and the danger of being returned there remains a constant threat throughout the series. In other stories, in particular in early detective and superhero comics, orphans and orphanages are occasionally introduced as potential victims of corrupt and criminal officials and administrators; they will eventually be saved by the respective hero who originally, and particularly in the era of the New Deal, frequently followed a social agenda.

With the rise of the superhero comics, the motif of the orphan undergoes a radical change. As in 20th-century fantasy, the heroes and, less often, heroines are to some extent constructed on the patterns of the

mythological hero and follow modified variants of the heroic journey described in the Campbellian monomyth, and thus they are quite regularly orphans. In addition, some of them witness the violent death of one or both parents which may trigger the decision to fight crime. But then those heroes are also haunted by the return of the trauma and occasionally more or less justified feelings of guilt. Over the decades, such stories of origin are usually embellished and extended, and in some storylines the heroic orphans have become neurotic or even psychotic.

With the turn to underground comix, graphic novels and life writing, orphans become less frequent. Autobiographical plot elements and more mature topics shift the works towards the real living conditions of the 20th century in which orphanhood is no longer a common phenomenon. The loss of parents happens at later stages of life, and the actual moment of loss is often embedded in the routines or mechanics of modern life; in consequence, the experience is numbed and the protagonists have to come to terms with their seeming indifference and failure at "authentic" grief. These works may still show the graphic eccentricities and an occasionally bizarre imagery that mark some subgenres of comics and graphic novels, but they are ultimately quite close to the narratives in mainstream literature which explore emotional responses to tragedy in our world, a world that is marked by alienation, inhibitions, fragmentation, and isolation.

In comics journalism or documentary comics, the focus is often on catastrophes like war or natural disasters, and here orphans or functional orphans may become important again. The orphan appears as the emblematic consequence of failed politics, aggression and violence, inhumanity, or simply social incompetence and indifference in our urban landscapes.

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CHAPTER ONE

THE ORPHAN IN THE VICTORIAN NOVEL

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Even though 18th-century literature already features a remarkable number of orphans, as Eva König has shown in her study *The Orphan in Eighteenth-Century Fiction* (2014), characters who have lost their parents appear to become even more prominent as literary figures in the course of the 19th century, which "might also be called 'the century of the orphan'" (Floyd 2014, 1). Victorian literature is replete with male and female orphans of varying ages and different social classes, some of whom fail in their endeavours or even die, while others prosper and are granted a happy ending, yet often only after having endured a considerable amount of hardship. "One can hardly open a novel by Dickens, the Brontë sisters, or George Eliot without stumbling over at least one orphan", as Laura Peters puts it in *Orphan Texts* (2000, 1). Thus, it should come as no particular surprise that many of the most memorable characters in 19th-century literature turn out to be orphans: Oliver Twist, David Copperfield, Pip Pirrip, Jane Eyre, Heathcliff, Catherine Earnshaw, Jude Fawley and Kim are just some of the many well-known literary characters in Victorian novels who are shown to grow up without parents. As these examples already illustrate, orphans often appear as main characters in Victorian novels, which additionally stresses the pivotal role the situation of parentless individuals played in literature from that era. Moreover, Victorian writers frequently juxtapose several orphans in one and the same text, which renders the motif even more visible and invites comparison. Sometimes two or more orphans share the status of main characters, for example in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847) and in Elizabeth Gaskell's *Wives and Daughters*, which was first published as a serial from 1864 to 1866. There may also be further orphans in the background, appearing as minor characters or being mentioned in passing at some point or other in the course of a text. In Charles Dickens's *David Copperfield* (1849-50), for instance, there is a veritable host of orphans, including the

title character, his mother Clara, Little Em'ly, Ham Peggotty, James Steerforth, Tommy Traddles, the angelic Agnes Wickfield as well as the bitter and passionate Rosa Dartle, and even a young servant girl from the workhouse who is simply known as "the Orfling".

In the Victorian period, the designation "orphan" was not restricted to children who had lost both of their parents; instead, the term was also used to refer to those boys and girls who still had one parent (cf. Peters 2000, 1). As will be shown below, it may make a huge difference whether the remaining parent is the mother or the father. Generally, literary texts tend to suggest that children who still have a father are better off than those whose remaining parent is their mother. At first sight, this general observation may appear to be at odds with "Victorian ideology [which] would seem to suggest that mothers were idealized figures who commanded worship" (Vallone 2000, 219), but the advantage of still having a father can in fact be accounted for quite easily by the period's highly gendered economy, which ensured that men on the whole stood a much better chance of making a living and providing for children than women, whose options on the job market were extremely limited. Widows were thus much more likely to become destitute or dependent on the goodwill of others than widowers. This gender imbalance is echoed in Victorian literature. In Elizabeth Gaskell's industrial novel *North and South* (1854-55), for instance, the working-class widower Nicholas Higgins manages to provide for his own children and even supports the widow and children of his co-worker Boucher after the latter's suicide. Gaskell's *Wives and Daughters*, by contrast, alludes to the fact that typical women's occupations in the Victorian period, such as governess and domestic servant, made it extremely difficult for a widow to spend time with her own child, since employers were more than likely to force a woman to separate from her child.

Another variable that was bound to have an impact on the fate of an orphan was his/her social class (cf. Peters 2000, 7), as many novels are apt to remind us. While orphans from the working class typically faced the danger of becoming destitute and thus ending up in the notorious institution of the workhouse, upper-class orphans were more likely to lead a financially secure and relatively comfortable life, even if they were deprived of affection. The title character in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891) is a case in point. Middle-class orphans, by contrast, were in danger of losing their social position and descending into the working class or even becoming destitute. This is the threat that appears to hang over the protagonist in Charlotte Brontë's novel *Jane Eyre* (1847), whose mother belonged to the upper class but was cast off by her wealthy

family upon marrying a poor clergyman. When Jane's parents died, they could not leave her any money, which made her totally dependent on her relatives' goodwill.

As the examples mentioned so far already show, the term "orphan" does not refer to a clear-cut social category in Victorian literature; instead, it served as an umbrella term encompassing a wide range of different life trajectories, whose variability countless novels sought to explore. Even if one has to concede that the likelihood of becoming an orphan was significantly higher in the 19th century than it is today—due to factors such as "[t]he indisputable facts of shorter life-spans for adults, maternal death, widespread disease" (Vallone 2000, 220)—the omnipresence of parentless children in Victorian novels arguably cannot simply be accounted for by means of demographic figures. In the following, I will discuss various factors that may help to explain the popularity of literary orphans in the Victorian period.

First and foremost, the Victorian preoccupation with orphans is closely linked with changing attitudes towards childhood. What sets the many orphans populating Victorian fiction apart from the majority of their 18th- and early-19th-century predecessors is the tendency of Victorian novelists to introduce orphans as children, more often than not providing memorable scenes that depict the ways in which their parentless state has shaped their childhood as well as their personality. 18th-century literature, on the whole, "rarely deals with the orphan's formative childhood experiences" (König 2014, 2) and usually focusses on parentless individuals who have already reached a marriageable age. This changes drastically in Victorian novels. The interest in orphaned children is particularly intriguing in a period that cherished childhood as a very special stage in human life (a fact that also accounts for the late 19th century becoming the beginning of the first "golden age" of children's literature) and that tended to idealise the institution of the family,[1] while simultaneously tolerating child labour[2] and sending large numbers of orphans into the colonies in the context of so-called emigration schemes.[3]

According to Jenny Keating, "[i]n the early decades of the nineteenth century, children had still been viewed as younger adults, responsible for their actions and their conditions. By the end of the century a sentimental view was taking hold" (2009, 18). The notion of childhood as a distinct and particularly important stage of human life, which contributes to "nineteenth-century authors' fondness for using child characters" (Nelson 2014, 78), provides a vital key to understanding the striking preoccupation with young orphans in Victorian literature. As Lewis C. Roberts puts it, "[f]or many Victorians, childhood was an idealized life quite apart from

the corruptions of adulthood, and for that very reason, childhood and children represented an ideal to strive for, and to protect" (Roberts 2005, 354). The Victorian notion of childhood as a stage of life that deserves to be protected can be traced back to concepts of human development which emerged earlier, in particular in the late 18th century and in the context of Romanticism, which is associated with the idea of seeing "children as close to nature and in some sense uncorrupted and pure" (Clarke 2004, 8). Although the exalted and sentimental Victorian concept of childhood is the outcome of developments that started at the very latest in the 18th century,[4] 19th-century literature does more than just perpetuate existing notions, as Claudia Nelson stresses:

> even while we concede that the Victorians inherited from older generations their interest in childhood, and some of their ideas about it, we may legitimately contend that Victorian conceptions of childrearing, of the state of being a child, and of the emotional importance of children to a society dominated by adults took on such weight as to represent something new in Western history. Never before had childhood become an obsession within the culture at large—yet in this case "obsession" is not too strong a word. (Nelson 2014, 69)[5]

In the course of the 19th century, the idealisation of children gave rise to a decidedly nostalgic approach to childhood among people from the middle class, for whom "[c]hildhood […] became the repository of good feelings and happy memories which could help the adult to live through the stickier patches of later life" (Cunningham 1991, 151). This preoccupation with childhood explains why orphans in Victorian literature are often significantly younger than their 18th-century predecessors, for instance those orphans who appear as "damsels in distress" in 18th-century Gothic novels. Last but not least, the tendency to idealise childhood as a time of innocence in the Victorian period also accounts for the appearance of famously incorruptible orphan characters such as Oliver Twist in Dickens's eponymous novel, who seems to be miraculously immune to any kind of temptation and corruption.[6]

A wide range of literary texts from the Victorian period include interesting portrayals of childhood, which are part of a "cult of the child that emerged in the nineteenth century" (Wagner 2008, 203). If these children happen to be orphans, the notion of childhood as an idealised stage of life deserving protection more often than not appears to be compromised, however, since orphans are frequently shown to be exposed to a harsh reality at a very early age. Instead of being sheltered and nurtured by parents or other caretakers, orphans in Victorian literature are

typically presented in situations where they can expect little sympathy, let alone affection. There are comparatively few stories about orphans who are lucky and find caring and loving foster parents right from the start, but these stories do exist. Sometimes caretakers who make it possible for an orphan to experience a happy, largely carefree childhood are found in quite unlikely places in Victorian literature. In George Eliot's *Silas Marner* (1861), for example, it is an aging bachelor who turns out to be a loving foster father for a little girl, while a pack of wolves, a panther and a bear prove to be excellent caretakers for a toddler in Rudyard Kipling's Mowgli stories.

The overwhelming interest in orphans is a feature that Victorian novels share with the fairy tale (cf. Kimball 1999, 561), a genre that became extremely popular in the course of the 19th century and that may in fact have contributed to the overall fascination with orphans as literary figures throughout the period.[7] While the fairy tale was still considered inappropriate reading for middle-class children in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, having been "equated […] with all that was ignorant and coarse" (Avery 1994, 123), the tales were at least "kept alive by chapbooks aimed at the cottage home" (123). In the course of the 19th century, however, the stories "were rediscovered, and gentrified and put out in up-market editions" (123). In addition to English fairy tales, the French tales by Charles Perrault and *The Arabian Nights*, which had already been available in English translations in the 18th century, were widely read. Since 1823, selected tales by the Grimms had been translated into English, and the first complete translation (by Margaret Hunt) was published in 1884 (Briggs 1991, 302). The hypothesis that the frequent occurrence of orphans in the Victorian novel is at least partially due to the popularity of the fairy tale can be supported by widespread intertextual references to this genre.[8]

According to Melanie Kimball, one may assume that the literary figure of the orphan has a certain universal appeal. Kimball, who derives her conclusions from a comparative analysis of 50 folktales originating in different cultural contexts, argues that the prominent role played by orphan heroes and heroines in fairy tales—and other types of literature—is a consequence of the fact that they are from the start singled out as exceptional characters: "orphans are clearly marked as being different from the rest of society. They are the eternal Other" (Kimball 1999, 559). Choosing an orphan as protagonist thus seems to be an ideal strategy in the realist novel for making sure that this character is likely to be perceived as unique without having to endow said character with any unusual qualities that would undermine the reality effect. The exceptional position ascribed

to an orphan tends to be especially striking in those cases where the literary motif of the orphan overlaps with another one, that of the foundling. The latter has been used since antiquity to stress the uniqueness of characters. The motif of the foundling has frequently been embedded in mythological or religious frameworks which serve to lend the orphan special importance, singling her or (more often) him out as the one predestined (by gods, supernatural beings, or fate) to achieve great things, as Rachel Bowlby points out in her sketch of what one might refer to as the "foundling plot":

> A baby is abandoned by parents who cannot or will not give it a life; by good fortune it is rescued; eventually, it goes on to achieve great things. In some such sequence, this foundling story has been powerful and perennial, all the more so in that it is so far from likely reality in cultures in which, for whatever reasons, the abandonment of infants has been common. […] Two famous ancient foundling stories being those of Moses and Oedipus. Each involves a rescued baby boy who later becomes a great man (Bowlby 2013, 87).

The trope of the foundling being saved "by good fortune" and growing up "to achieve great things" sometimes also informs the representation of children in Victorian literature, a case in point being the "man's cub" Mowgli in Kipling's *The Jungle Book* (1894). Mowgli's fate is of course reminiscent of that of two of the most famous foundlings in antiquity: Romulus and Remus.

Strictly speaking, not all foundlings are necessarily orphans. Sometimes characters who appear to be parentless at first sight turn out to have been deserted or given up by their mother, their father, or even both of their parents. Miss Havisham's adopted daughter Estella, who is not aware of the fact that her parents are criminals and are in fact still alive, in *Great Expectations* is a case in point. Stories involving children who have been given up by their parents constitute what is perhaps the darkest facet of the representation of parentless individuals in Victorian literature, since they allude to various factors that may have caused parents to desert their children in the first place, including crime and destitution. Often such stories are based on the fact that women gave up their children (or were forced to do so) in order to avoid the shame of being an unmarried mother. In fact, as Tamara Wagner reminds us, in the 19th century orphanhood served as "a common euphemism for illegitimacy" (2008, 204). Ultimately, the idea of deserting a child also entails the disconcerting question of whether the love for one's child, which we tend to consider as

"normal", really comes quite as natural as one would perhaps like to believe.

One explanation for the popularity of orphan characters holds that parentless children are likely to provoke a strong emotional response among readers. This intense reaction derives from the pity orphan characters are almost bound to trigger, coupled with the possibility of "[o]rphan characters in folktales and literature symboliz[ing] our isolation from one another and from society" (Kimball 1999, 559). In other words, the figure of the orphan may manifest deep-seated human fears: "Orphans are a tangible reflection of the fear of abandonment that all humans experience. […] Orphans are a reminder that the possibility of utter undesired solitude exists for any human being" (559).[9] By exploring what loneliness may feel like (and how one may try to cope with this emotion), representations of orphan characters invite the readers to feel empathy, i.e., "to imagine what it is like to live the life of another person who might, given changes in circumstance, be oneself" (Nussbaum 1995, 5). In this way, representations of parentless children may achieve what Martha Nussbaum considers one of the prime functions of literature, namely arousing empathy and being "disturbing in a way that history and social science writing frequently are not. Because it [literature] summons powerful emotions, it disconcerts and puzzles" (5). This function of literary orphans is visible in the (numerous) novels from the Victorian period that depict orphans whose suffering is caused by hard-hearted individuals, inhumane institutions or a combination of both.

Despite a potentially universal emotional response to the loneliness embodied by the literary figure of the orphan, one still has to assume that there is a considerable degree of cultural and historical variation with respect to representations and interpretations of orphan characters. In other words, the orphan is hardly a timeless trope; instead, it is a literary figure that responds in manifold ways to preoccupations, anxieties and hopes that are characteristic of its time. In this vein, Nina Auerbach argues that the figure of the orphan in Victorian literature was informed by the uncertainties Victorians had to face in a world that was undergoing radical change due to the far-reaching impact of industrialisation, urbanisation, new scientific developments, and a growing religious unease:

> When we think of the Victorian orphan, we think first of all of the lost boys wandering through Dickens' London, embodying in their pathos all the Victorians' self-pity and terror in the mazes of the new world the nineteenth century has inaugurated. Industrialism, religious conflict, and scientific discoveries had orphaned the Victorian age of its sense of its

> past; the other side of the orphan's freedom was his fear, his need of guidance in a world without maps. (Auerbach 1975, 410)

As Auerbach points out, the literary orphan in Victorian literature can be interpreted as the embodiment of a feeling of loss and rootlessness that was arguably typical of its time, which appears to have been an "orphaned age" in some respects.

Yet at least early- and mid-Victorian culture was also informed by a strong belief in progress—a notion that is likewise reflected in many literary orphans. There are numerous parentless characters in Victorian novels who end up being successful despite their very humble beginnings in life. After periods of hardship, many a fictional orphan ultimately reaches a very respectable and secure social position. This approach to the literary figure of the orphan supports the Victorian ideal of self-improvement and the hope that prosperity could be achieved by means of one's own efforts, which was for instance promoted by Samuel Smiles's *Self-Help* (1859).[10] What literary figure could be better suited for furthering a belief in the human potential for shaping one's own fate than an individual who starts his or her life in the most adverse circumstances, being more often than not dispossessed in financial terms in addition to being deprived of emotional nurturing? While other characters could hope to benefit from their parents' financial, emotional and/or moral support, the orphan frequently was left to his or her own devices. Although orphans in Victorian literature are not universally presented as being poor, this at least appears to have been a widespread pattern. Thus, the orphan is also the ideal protagonist for the "from rags to riches"-story, which became increasingly popular in the 19th century in Great Britain as well as in the United States. By showing "the resilience of the natural victim, always managing to survive" (Auerbach 1975, 395), male orphans are apt to exemplify the ideal of the self-made man. The manufacturer Mr Thornton in Gaskell's *North and South* is depicted as a self-made man who had to support his mother and sister after his father's suicide, when he was still very young.[11] Heathcliff in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, who at first does not call any worldly possessions his own, at one point disappears for a while only to return with a remarkable fortune and the manners of a gentleman (though admittedly not the attitude of one). There are many orphans in Victorian literature who ultimately cannot be kept down by specific obstacles or a hostile environment, no matter how precarious their situation is at times: David Copperfield manages to change his life for the better at the age of ten, and Oliver Twist as well as Jane Eyre are close to starvation at certain points in their lives, but end up in affluent positions.

Both Jane and Oliver are not entirely "self-made" characters, however, since they are ultimately saved by family members; Oliver is reunited with parts of his family, and Jane is first saved from destitution by her cousins and then inherits money from an uncle who made his fortune in Madeira. This positive impact of family members on the individual's fate supports the Victorian idealisation of the family. Still, the loss of one's parents generally seems to create much less emotional turmoil and suffering for Victorian literary orphans than for many of their 20th- and 21st-century counterparts (see the chapter "Some Things Remain Broken Forever" by Barbara Puschmann-Nalenz in this volume). While this at times surprising lack of mourning appears to be at odds with the powerful Victorian "myth of the loving nuclear family" (Alston 2008, 9), the comparative ease with which the loss of their parents is accepted by many literary orphans in 19th-century novels confirms the strong belief in individual progress, which fosters an orientation towards the future rather than the past.[12] Unlike many orphans in recent literature, including J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter (see the chapter by Gerold Sedlmayr in this volume), Victorian literary orphans typically do not go to great lengths to gather information about their parents and may thus, from today's perspective at least, even display a certain callousness.

In her comparative analysis of fairy tales, Kimball notes significant differences in terms of how societies deal with orphans. While there are cultures that tend to "cut them off from society at large" (Kimball 1999, 559), there are others in which "orphans are regarded as special people who must be protected and cared for at all costs" (559). In Victorian culture and literature both of these attitudes appear to coexist; while many officials argued that orphans should be taken care of because they held enormous promise for the future, literary texts from the period time and again focus on orphans being bullied by their peers, maltreated by caretakers and expelled from family circles that might include them. In numerous Victorian novels, orphans have to undergo considerable hardship before they find an environment in which they are cherished and protected, if they happen to find such an environment at all. To a certain extent, the fictional orphans' life trajectories reflect Victorian discourses about how society should deal with parentless children as well as the institutions that were established as a consequence of these discourses. Throughout the 19th century, there was no legislation which regulated adoption; instead, "[b]efore the Adoption of Children Act of 1926, which established a legal framework for full adoption, adoptions in England most often took the form of ad hoc arrangements, usually but not always within families" (Bowlby 2013, 139).[13] This seems to suggest that liberalism,

which shaped the Victorian economy, also had an impact on family politics.

As the examples mentioned above already suggest, any study of representations of orphans in Victorian literature is also bound to address the depiction of caretakers, including widowed fathers and mothers, grandparents, aunts, uncles, brothers and sisters, stepfathers and stepmothers, foster mothers and fathers, guardians and mentors as well as people working in various institutions whose purpose was taking care of and educating orphans. The way caretakers are presented turns out to be crucial for what is arguably one of the main functions of orphan stories, i.e., the didactic goal of inviting readers to take an interest in the fate of orphans and to contribute to social reform movements. In Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, for instance, the infamous Lowood School is transformed into a truly charitable institution once the public has recognised the despicable way in which said institution was run by the hypocritical Mr Brocklehurst. The depiction of deficits in institutions and allusions to possible improvements alike were apt to encourage Victorian readers to get interested in charitable work, or at least that is what some writers may have hoped for.

The figure of the orphan is situated at the intersection of various discourses that preoccupied Victorian society. It was, for instance, intimately connected with notions of individual progress. After all, what could be better evidence of the possibility of achieving something in one's life than a "poor and friendless" orphan eventually turning out to be successful against all odds? The impact of the cultural master narrative of self-improvement, which was informed by Puritan work ethics, even caused the authorities to increase the number of orphans by turning children of the poor into "orphans", as Peters points out:

> the state was actively encouraged to make orphans of the children of the poor. By mid-century, following evidence submitted by Mr Hickson, the Committee of the House of Commons was advocating the removal of children from "unworthy" parents (unworthy in this sense means poor and in need of relief) (Peters 2000, 13).

This policy, which is, for instance, applied in Dickens's *Great Expectations* when Jaggers "creates" an orphan by taking Estella away from her mother (cf. Gordon 2002, 215), went hand in hand with a custom practised in the notorious institution of the workhouse, which routinely separated children from their parents.[14] Destitute men and women were widely regarded as unfit for parenting. Simultaneously, the idealisation of the family and the growing significance of the "home" in the 19th century are two of the

concepts that are often negotiated and problematised by means of focussing on orphans. Laura Peters claims "that the prevalence of the orphan figure can be explained by the central role which the family played at the time" (Peters 2000, 1). In the Victorian period, even "[t]he Queen herself seemed to offer a model of perfect domesticity in her large family, middle-class values, and reliance on her husband" (Vallone 2000, 217).

For an orphan, "home" often turns out to be a highly ambivalent concept. On the one hand, "home" may be an object of intense desire for a parentless child, which more often than not remains elusive. When Oliver Twist meets Mr Brownlow, the prospect of finding a good home seems to be within his reach—only to give way to cruel disappointment when Fagin and his gang force him to come back with them. Nina Auerbach argues that "[t]he figure of the wandering orphan, searching through an alien world for his home, has fascinated generations of novelists" (1975, 395). On the other hand, "home" may turn into a negative concept from the point of view of an orphan, becoming a prison due to the hostility or downright cruelty of caretakers, as Jane Eyre's experience at Gateshead exemplifies; or it may simply mark a void, perhaps never to be filled completely. Finally, orphans were also embedded in the discourses and practices of imperial expansion. After all, in the official discourse of the time, "the orphan embodies a surplus excess to be expelled to the colonies" (Peters 2000, 19), a notion which is reflected in the emigration schemes.

As will be shown below in more detail, orphans turn out to be highly versatile figures appearing in a wide range of literary texts in different genres and fulfilling diverse functions in Victorian literature. The figure of the orphan appears to be ideally suited for addressing a number of discourses, issues and problems that are characteristic of the Victorian period. Although critics sometimes use the umbrella term "orphan novel" to pay tribute to the amazing popularity of orphans, it is worthwhile noting that orphans are not typical of a specific genre *per se*. Instead, they appear in various different genres, which is further evidence of the versatility of this figure. Still, one may identify some genres where orphans can be found particularly frequently—and this may even serve as a clue to some of the functions the literary figure of the orphan may fulfil. To a certain extent, the genres in which fictional orphans are especially prominent tend to correlate with three basic types of orphans that can be identified in Victorian literature and that will be discussed in the following sections of this chapter: (1) the *pathetic orphan*, who is particularly prominent in the social problem novel; (2) the *orphan as a figure of hope*, who occurs most