

THE REPRESENTATION OF FATHER-DAUGHTER RELATIONSHIP IN ELLEN PICKERING'S THE GRUMBLER

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Abstract: This paper aims at proving that nineteenth-century realist novel was not intended to create characters and their relationships in one-to-one correspondence with real, anthropological templates of Victorian society. It also focuses on showing that family roles and the parent-child relationships they imply are complex and therefore cannot be contained within any prototypical image. In order to achieve these goals, the article compares the representation of father-daughter relationship in Ellen Pickering's novel The Grumbler with its equivalent socio-historical paradigm. The novel depicts a close parent-child bond by presenting the image of a loving and present upper-class father, whose parental authority is heavily influenced by his character flaws, and the image of the ideal middle-class Victorian daughter embodied by an upper-class girl. As a result of this research, it has been concluded that both these intricate images, although verisimilar, do not replicate the typical social construct of the upper-class early Victorian father and, respectively, that of the early Victorian girl of the same social class.

Keywords: parent-child relationship, paternal image, ideal daughter, affection, deviation from socio-historical prototypes

The Grumbler, written by Ellen Pickering and first published in 1843, focuses on a non-traditional parent-child relationship established between Mathew Courtenay, a fifty-six-year-old English country squire, and his young cousin, Blanche, who is his ward for some years. Their relationship is characterised by affection and emotional closeness displayed by both the guardian and the girl in his care. In spite of the fact that Victorian daughters were closer to their mothers than to their fathers, as they were supposed to be based on specific social customs of the time (Shoemaker 2013: 133), there is no mother-daughter connection depicted in the novel. Instead, it is the father-daughter relationship which is particularly foregrounded, thus creating a favourable context in which the Victorian concept of ideal girlhood is fully revealed through the character of Blanche (Gorham 2013: 38). Although Blanche embodies the ideal Victorian daughter, her image as a girl is more complicated than it may seem, because Blanche is an upper-class girl with middle-class moral values. In contrast, Mr Courtenay's paternal image is not the ideal one, nor is it the one characterised by the most common features of upper-class fatherhood, as he is a present and affectionate father, whose parental love and authority are influenced by his flawed states of mind. Thus, these two major family roles and the parent-child relationship displayed in the novel depart from socio-historical templates of the early Victorian society, proving that they are more complex to correspond to their respective prototypical and conventional images and that nineteenth-century realist writers did not aim at such a correspondence.

The parent-child relationship between Mathew Courtenay and Blanche develops in conditions in which traditional Victorian norms concerning family structure are broken. First,

Blanche is not Mr Courtenay's biological daughter, but an orphaned cousin, who is entrusted into his care when she is seventeen together with other three cousins of her. Second, Mr Courtenay is a bachelor, which means that the family he forms with his cousins is a single parent unit and therefore beyond the conventional norm. Despite this, their relationship will be analysed as a traditional family bond, because the mother's lack is not expressed either by the novel's characters or by the external narrator, which otherwise would emphasize the family's incompleteness, and particularly because Mr Courtenay and Blanche regard one another as father and daughter and behave accordingly.

The close and warm father-daughter relationship depicted in the novel is partly the result of Mr Courtenay being a non-typical, loving, present and involved father. One of the major common characteristics of nineteenth-century upper-class men that prevented them from forming strong bonds with their children was their physical and/or psychological remoteness. Taking into account their various class-specific customs, fathers' frequent and long absences from home were considered normal (Roberts 1978: 59-62, McKee and O'Brien 1982: 18-19). The paternal figure depicted in *The Grumbler* through the character of Mathew Courtenay is in opposition to the fatherhood of these men in that Mr Courtenay is not an absent parent, a man busy with his public duties or business. Instead, he is confined to home due to his habits of seclusion, borrowed from his grandfather, and to his debilitating habits of grumbling. His isolation from the outside world gives Mr Courtenay the opportunity to be a physically present father to Blanche and he does not miss it. He enjoys spending time with her, walking outdoors and discussing together. Even when Blanche is with somebody else, Mr Courtenay likes to visually follow her, eager to know everything about her and to notice how her relationships with others develop. Thus, he is psychological present in his relationship with Blanche. He is deeply involved with her, striving to satisfy all her needs and to make her feel comfortable in his house. Although Mr Courtenay is interested in the well-being of all his young cousins, aiming at "making Ellesmere a happy home for [them]" (Pickering 1844: 21), he takes particular care of Blanche, the youngest of them, who becomes his dearest ward.

In addition to the fact that Mathew Courtenay's fatherhood is not characterised by absence, his paternal portrayal further departs from the socio-historical prototype of the early-Victorian upper-class father in that his fondness is expressed more on emotional level rather than on the material one. Wealthy men, albeit generally remote, were often benevolent parents, displaying their generosity, and sometimes their love, towards their children, by lavishing them expensive gifts and by allowing them to enjoy various entertainments (Newman 1997: 118, Roberts 1978: 64-66, McKee and O'Brien 1982: 18-19). The novel, however, does not emphasise Mr Courtenay's material benevolence, although he does not begrudge spending money on Blanche. Instead, his fondness for her is shown through his everyday speech and behaviour. Mr Courtenay addresses Blanche with endearments like "my (own) little Blanche" (Pickering 1844: 45, 86); "my own merry happy Blanche" (Pickering 1844: 54); "my child" (Pickering 1844: 86, 87); etc. He is very familiar with her, allowing himself to call her nicknames such as: "little coaxer" (Pickering 1844: 67); "little mischief" (Pickering 1844: 39, 56, 73, 114, 128); and "little romp" (Pickering 1844: 27, 28, 36). Moreover, he openly displays his parental affection through hugs, kisses and touches, as demonstrated by the clauses framing Mr Courtenay's speech: "catching her in his arms, and lifting her off the ground" (Pickering 1844: 38); "kissing his fair ward's cheek" (Pickering 1844: 114); "imprinting a father's kiss on the upturned brow of the pleading girl" (Pickering 1844: 29); "gazing upon her with the fondest affection, [...], holding her hand in his" (Pickering 1844: 54); etc. All these examples reveal that

the relationship between Mr Courtenay and Blanche lacks the cold formality specific to Victorian upper classes, describing Mr Courtenay's parenting style as being more similar to that of the fond middle-class father, who treated his children with easy familiarity (Tosh 1999: 99).

There is one more common feature characteristic of upper-class early-Victorian men with regard to their paternity in terms of which the fictional father of *The Grumbler* can be compared to the typical anthropological construct. This feature is sovereignty that, according to David Roberts's research, describes the great majority of wealthy English men of the first half of the nineteenth century (Roberts 1978: 67). Despite their usual remoteness, upper-class Victorian fathers exercised complete authority over their children by controlling them through a variety of trusted agents, to whom they delegated most of their parental responsibilities (Roberts 1978: 62-64, Thompson 1988: 125-126). Due to the fact that in the novel Mathew Courtenay is the guardian of grown up boys and girls, he does not need to entrust them to the care of specialised staff, such as nannies, governesses or tutors. Given this, and Mr Courtenay's presence in the home, parent-child relationships he develops with his cousins, especially with Blanche, are unmediated. Despite this particularity, which could facilitate and improve his parental control, he lacks the undoubted authority most wealthy early Victorian men had within their families. This is not to say that Mr Courtenay has no power over his cousins and generally over his entire household at all, but that the ability to exercise his authority is substantially influenced by his personal qualities and feelings.

Mathew Courtenay's image as a character is constructed based on his two character flaws and the states of mind they arouse. *The Grumbler* begins with a dialogue between Mr Courtenay, the novel's protagonist, and his friend Mr Knyvett, which reveals Mr Courtenay's most serious shortcomings, namely his constant grumbling about everything and his dreadful hate for one of his relatives, Lambert Courtenay. An external subjective analepsis casts light on the origin of Mathew Courtenay's hate by divulging that Lambert has brought shame on Mathew and his mother by denying her marriage and, consequently, labelling his relative as an illegitimate child. By acting in such a manner, Lambert has tried to disinherit Mathew of his grandfather's estate, but unsuccessfully. Although this recall reaches back more than twenty years, the remembrance of Lambert's evil deed arouses a tumult of negative feelings, such as hatred, anger and revenge, which makes Mr Courtenay unrecognisable. The way he changes when he thinks or speaks of Lambert is fully described through Mr Knyvett's perspective:

Knyvett looked from the portrait of the dead, on which the light was gleaming as he gazed, to the face of the living, and, for the first time traced a striking resemblance between his friend, and his grim, tyrannical ancestor. The tone, instead of being querulous, was full of passion – the features, instead of showing a fleeting discontent, were stamped with the stern characters of hate (Pickering 1844: 9).

The first sentence of this passage indicates, through the use of two verbs of visual perception (*looked* and *gazed*), that the focalization lies with Mr Knyvett. Witnessing Mathew Courtenay's radical change of facial expression and speech, Mr Knyvett is shocked on discovering that his friend harbours such a terrible hatred, which disfigures him so much that he is unrecognisable. These sentences depict the two contradictory states of mind characterising Mr Courtenay. His state of discontent, which is expressed through querulous complaints about petty things or about things that might never happen, is presented here as being usual and routine since Mr Knyvett expects his friend to be querulous and to display dissatisfaction. In this support, the fact that Mr

Courtenay is called ‘the grumbler’, a nickname which gives the novel its title, also emphasises that discontent is his prevailing mood. However, it is replaced by the intense passion evoked just by the mentioning of Lambert’s name. Mr Courtenay’s outburst of hate and anger does not surprise Mr Knyvett by the force with which it is displayed, but by its unexpectedness. The element of unexpectedness is textually rendered here through the phrase *for the first time* and through the employment of the phrase *insteadof* after the words *tone* and *features*, pointing out the way Mr Courtenay’s tone and features usually are and the way they differ at the moment when he retells Mr Knyvett about Lambert’s wicked scheme.

The Grumbler abounds in direct and indirect textual evidence that supports the protagonist’s depiction as a man oscillating between petty discontent and passionate hate. Besides Mr Courtenay’s nonverbal behaviour specified above and the novel’s opening dialogue, which, together with many other dialogues, disclose Mr Courtenay’s habit of grumbling and in which he bluntly declares that he hates Lambert, there are also other ways of characterising his personality. Among them, one can mention the explicit qualification that lies with the external narrator, who makes an accurate and complete description of the main character when the novel moves towards its closure:

A worm was in his gourd – that worm was his own sin. Mathew Courtenay was a moral man – a kind man; but he was not, in its true sense, a Christian. He was not grateful for the blessings vouchsafed – he was not careful in the use of his talents committed to his care. His was not a humble, thankful heart; blind to his own sinfulness and need of mercy, he had refused this mercy to another, and discontent and hate, his two besetting sins, were never owned as such, and never striven with (Pickering 1844:139).

The first sentence of this descriptive passage reveals the external narrator’s attitude towards the main character. The metaphorical use of the word ‘gourd’ to denote Mr Courtenay’s head or mind acts as an indicator of narratorial sympathy rather than sarcasm, as it is the former which is supported in the novel through the repeated employment of the adjective ‘poor’ before the protagonist’s name (“Poor Courtenay” (Pickering 1844: 85); “Poor Mathew Courtenay” (Pickering 1844: 127); etc.). Additionally, the external narrator’s sympathetic attitude is shown by the way in which Mr Courtenay is portrayed in the second sentence of the above quotation. He is called a moral man, but his speech and actions come in contradiction with this qualification, proving the opposite. To be a moral person means, in general terms, to act fairly, to value truth and to be benevolent (Barrow 2007: 73-81). Mr Courtenay does not follow either of these principles. He is unfair to Reginald Courtenay, a young gentleman who saves Blanche’s life, considering him a deceiver and a thief only because he is Lambert’s son. Without concrete proof, Mr Courtenay accuses Reginald of stealing the paper demonstrating the veracity of his parents’ marriage. He throws Reginald out of his house and forbids him to speak to Blanche, whom the youth wants to marry. Being incapable of proving his innocence, Reginald is prejudiced on account of Mr Courtenay’s false accusations and suffers severely as a consequence. Nonetheless, Mr Courtenay is unmovable from his position and refuses to withdraw his charge against Reginald and to accept a union between him and Blanche. He is not really benevolent to either of them since he wishes to see both of them in their graves rather than to allow Blanche marry a guilty man.

Furthermore, the external narrator affirms in the second sentence of the previously cited quotation that Mr Courtenay is “not, in its true sense, a Christian”. This statement also reveals

narratorial sympathy and narratorial unreliability, as it is inconsistent with the evidence derived from the subsequent sentences of the same quotation and from other characterizations of the protagonist. Mr Courtenay's depiction contained in the last two sentences of the above passage does not show him as a Christian at all. He is similarly portrayed in the whole novel. First, the vindictive hatred Mr Courtenay harbours against Lambert is repeatedly called an "unchristian feeling" by other characters, such as Mr Knyvett and Blanche, who judged by their words and actions, are good Christians (not in the sense that they are prayerful and churchgoing, but in the sense that they believe and trust in God and hold Christian moral values). Second, with the exception when Mr Courtenay ultimately acknowledges his wrongdoings, he never mentions God's name. Additionally, the fact that he refers to the gods, and not to God, in his affirmation: "I was not born poetical, and thank the gods for it" (Pickering 1844: 40) suggests that he does not truly believe in God. When Mr Knyvett and Blanche try to correct Mr Courtenay's behaviour by telling him what is right and wrong in Christian terms, he disregards their advice and warnings or asks not to be preached to. Taking into account all these considerations, it becomes obvious that Mr Courtenay is not a Christian. Nonetheless, being sympathetic, the external narrator avoids to declare it straightforwardly by intercalating the phrase 'in its true sense' between *not* and *a Christian*, thus making the statement milder.

Despite the sympathetic attitude towards Mr Courtenay, the external narrator does not approve of his behaviour. It is clearly indicated in the quotation provided above that the external narrator objects, albeit mildly, to Mr Courtenay's negative traits, considering discontent and hate to be his major faults. The protagonist is subjected to narratorial criticism not because he has these character flaws, but because he does not want to admit that he is wrong and needs to fight against them. Although the external narrator rarely comments or gives interpretations on Mathew Courtenay's personality, as in the earlier-quoted passage, the narratorial disapproval of his behaviour is indirectly rendered through other characters' unfavourable attitudes towards Mr Courtenay's vices. Notwithstanding that Mr Knyvet and Blanche love Mr Courtenay as a friend and parent respectively, they find unacceptable his constant grumbling about everything and particularly his terrible hatred towards Lambert, which is more frequently and more powerfully displayed, being provoked by Lambert's new, this time successful, attempt to obtain Mathew Courtenay's estate. Through the friendly admonition and advice of these two characters, whose ideological positions are consistent with the external narrator's stance, the novel reproves Mr Courtenay's principles governing his life and emphasises their deviation from its dominating norm.

To return to Mr Courtenay's domestic authority, for the understanding of which his depiction as a man dominated by discontent and hate was examined, there is a direct connection between these two flaws and the relationships Mr Courtenay develops with his dependants, servants and 'children'. When he is in his usual state of discontent, which, along with his indolence, weakens his intellectual powers, Mr Courtenay's authority as the ruler of Ellesmere estate is somewhat undermined. Mr Courtenay regards himself as "'Sole monarch of all he surveyed:' despotic ruler over all things, animate and inanimate, within his home and park" (Pickering 1844:14), but the external narrator explicitly states, and his own behaviour proves, that Mr Courtenay's self-assessment is inaccurate. Besides the fact that he is never concerned about trivial things of his household, which are completely entrusted to his servants, Mr Courtenay is often unsure about the important decisions he has to take as the head of the estate. Instead of directing his servants according to his own wisdom, he frequently asks himself what his main servants' opinions will be if he acts in a particular way. Therefore, although he is a kind

master, he is commonly undecided, being “in some respects the slave of faithful [...] domestics” (Pickering 1844: 15). Nevertheless, when he is roused from his habitual state of mind, through being strongly opposed or especially under the influence of his passionate hatred towards Lambert, Mr Courtenay becomes resolute and unmoved. The full energy of his mind is activated and he takes the authority, once diminished by his own sloth and dissatisfaction, into his own hands.

Similarly, Mr Courtenay’s parental authority over Blanche also greatly depends on which of his two states of mind governs his behaviour. Usually, Mr Courtenay allows Blanche to have her own way in everything and although he considers himself strong enough to refuse to fulfil her every wish, he always lets himself be coaxed by her. However, Mr Courtenay has more recourse to his paternal authority during the difficult period of his life. From the moment when the paper proving his parents’ marriage is stolen, the lack of which gives Lambert the right to disinherit him, Mr Courtenay’s hatred is provoked, bringing him out of his ordinary indolence and making him purposeful. As a consequence of all these changes, Mr Courtenay is determined to have his own way in his relationship with Blanche. He dares to ask her to obey, as a devoted daughter should do, in things that are against her will and happiness. For example, Mr Courtenay forbids Blanche to wed Reginald, although he knows that she will marry no one except him. Being full of vindictive hatred against his enemy, Mr Courtenay is blind to all the suffering his favourite and beloved ward endures being separated from her lover. Thus, Mr Courtenay subdues his fondness for Blanche to his parental authority and, in general, subordinates his relationship with her to his strong, negative feelings towards Lambert and to the ensuing prejudices he has against Reginald.

Despite Mr Courtenay acts against Blanche’s well-being and happiness by interdicting any interaction between her and Reginald, their parent-child relationship remains close and affectionate, and there are two reasons for that. First, Mr Courtenay does not intend to hurt Blanche by expelling Reginald from his house, because he does not know that Blanche loves Reginald. Later, when Mr Knyvett hints him that Blanche feels differently towards Reginald, Mr Courtenay obstinately refuses to accept this idea. Although he is deeply attached to Blanche, he does not observe that she changes considerably from a childish girl to a thoughtful woman and that she suffers without Reginald. Mr Courtenay is incapable of understanding his daughter’s emotional needs and feelings, because, as a result of his constant grumbling and his terrible hatred, he tends to be self-absorbed, all the more so when Lambert tries again to deprive him of his property and succeeds to become the master of Ellesmere. It is this self-absorption that determines Mr Courtenay to disapprove the marriage between Blanche and Reginald even after Blanche tells him that she would not marry another man. Nonetheless, while Mr Courtenay little cares about Blanche’s feelings for Reginald, he is not blind to her daughterly affection for him. Her tender care of him and her sincere sympathy with him in his difficulties make Mr Courtenay appreciate and love her even more.

Second, notwithstanding that Mr Courtenay’s hatred and prejudices directly affect Blanche’s life, she continues to be a good daughter to him, being depicted as an ideal Victorian daughter who dutifully performs the family roles nineteenth-century English society ascribed to middle- and upper-class girls. According to Claudia Nelson, Victorian girls were expected to entertain their parents and to be their companions (2007: 84, 87). By amply fulfilling these responsibilities towards Mr Courtenay, Blanche is, like many upper-class daughters of the early Victorian era, a real delight to him, whom she regards as her father. Being lighthearted and joyous, Blanche makes Mr Courtenay forget about complaining and does not leave him time to

be idle. She is also of great help to him in times of hardship. According to Mr Courtenay's own words, Blanche is the only person to comfort him when he finds out that the sole document proving his right over Ellesmere estate has been stolen: "[...] no one to soothe or console me; no one to feel for and with me; but you will do all" (Pickering 1844: 86). The repeated use of the words *no one* and the employment of three verbs of the same semantic field (*soothe, console, feel for/with*) in one sentence emphasise that nobody sympathises with Mr Courtenay and is able to relieve his sufferings, with one exception, that of Blanche, as indicated by the adversative conjunction *but*. Through her deep compassion, Blanche offers Mr Courtenay the solace he needs. Likewise, she is the one who tenderly nurses him when, after being deprived of all his possessions, he is ill and poor.

Despite her loyalty as a daughter, Blanche's character significantly changes in the novel. Initially, during the first period of time after her arrival to Mr Courtenay's house, Blanche is described as being a merry, animated and wilful girl, who usually manages to have her own way on account of her sensitive nature, and in particular on account of her ability to coax others to act according to her will. However, she does not go so far as to hurt someone through her actions or to abuse the benevolence of the people surrounding her. Unlike many middle- and upper-class Victorian daughters (Frost 2009: 28, Steinbach 2012: 141), Blanche is not scolded for her liveliness and her overt display of emotions, although Mr Courtenay often grumbles, usually at her back, that she is mischievous. There is no evidence that Blanche is expected to be decorous and the fact that the family environment in which she is reared by Mr Courtenay is free from the constraints of upper-class formalities indicates that Blanche is appreciated not for her skills in social graces, but for her positive character qualities, such as friendliness, frankness, unselfishness, and generosity.

Although these good moral traits characterise her throughout the story, there comes another period of time when Blanche is not a lively girl anymore, but a thoughtful and grateful woman. The point that marks Blanche's transformation is the terrible accident on her horse when she faces the peril of losing her life. The external narrator emphasises Blanche's radical change by contrasting her nature before and after the accident: "She was no longer a mere butterfly, sporting among flowers, and thus living out her little day – she was the feeling, thoughtful, and above all, the grateful woman" (Pickering 1844: 61). In order to describe Blanche before the accident, the external narrator compares her to a butterfly that sports among flowers. The verb 'sport' is deliberately used here in place of other verbs like fly, flutter, flit, etc. to highlight her previous childishness and spiritedness. These characteristics do not completely disappear, instead, they are subdued to new traits, such as thoughtfulness, dignity and gratitude, which begin to govern her nature after the accident. Besides the narratorial explicit statements, Blanche's transformation is disclosed through other types of direct qualification (for instance, it is explicitly mentioned by the character herself and it is described by other characters, such as Knyvett) and through indirect qualification as well, because it is amply demonstrated in the way Blanche overcomes the subsequent trials in her life. The manner in which Blanche effaces herself by suffering the separation from Reginald in silence and by trying her best to support and console Mr Courtenay reveals that she has learnt to place others' needs and interests above her own. She has learnt to obey Mr Courtenay unquestioningly and not to coax him into allowing her to have her own way.

Taking into account all these particularities, it becomes obvious that Blanche's image as a Victorian daughter is a hybrid one in that it represents an upper-class girl who is endowed with traits that Victorian domestic ideology ascribed to middle-class girls. There was some difference

between the expectations for middle-class girls and for upper-class girls. The former were instructed to be paragons of morality and virtue and thus to embody the feminine ideal of the Angel in the House (Gorham 2013: 101-102, 111). In contrast, the latter, whose families did not endorse the Victorian ideology of domesticity, including its model of femininity, during the early and mid-Victorian era (Tosh 1999: 27, Lerner 1993: 31, Anderson 1989: 49), did not receive a religious and moral-oriented education, consequently being more concerned with their genteel status and with their marriage prospects than with the possession of Christian moral values (Nelson 2007: 79, Nelson 1995: 67, Seymour 1992: 109-110). *The Grumbler's* representation of upper-class Victorian daughter in the character of Blanche deviates from its corresponding ideal and prototypical model through the lack of special interest in upper-class decorousness and through the multitude of positive moral qualities and the Christian spirit Blanche is characterised by. These features make the heroine of the novel be the epitome of the Angel in the House, an ideal enthusiastically embraced by early middle-class Victorians (Anderson 1989: 49). Direct textual evidence, such as her being considered an angel by John, one of Mr Courtenay's main servants, confirms the fact that Blanche is the incarnation of the angelic model of femininity defined by Victorian domesticity, which was better applied to daughters than to mothers (Gorham 2013: 6-7).

In addition to the fact that the close and affectionate father-daughter relationship between Mr Courtenay and Blanche is not a common type of parent-child connection among the high circles of Victorian society, it is neither the novel's representation of the upper-class father nor that of the upper-class daughter that conforms to its respective socio-historical paradigm. Although verisimilar, the father's image illustrated in the character of Mr Courtenay deviates from the real anthropological prototype of the upper-class early Victorian father. Mr Courtenay is not described as being a remote, materially benevolent and sovereign parent, like many wealthy English men of the first half of the nineteenth century were. He is a present and affectionate father, whose parental love is conveyed emotionally rather than through lavish presents. Furthermore, Mr Courtenay's paternal authority is undermined by his usual state of discontent, being instead firmly exercised when the hatred towards his enemy overwhelms him and prevails over his parental love. The novel's daughter figure is also original and complex, but its complexity arises from the fact that it is embodied by an upper-class girl who is endowed with the traits Victorian domestic ideology attributes to the ideal middle-class girl. Such depictions of early Victorian family roles and parent-child relationships seem to disprove the popular assumption that the realism of the nineteenth-century novel consists in representing characters and their relationships in one-to-one correspondence with their respective socio-historical templates.

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