Rehabilitating Catherine Dickens: Memory and Authorial Agency in Gaynor Arnold’s Neo-Victorian Biofiction Girl in a Blue Dress
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Abstract

Critical work exploring (2008), Gaynor Arnold’s biofictional account of Charles and Catherine Dickens’ marriage, predominantly focuses on the long-silenced wife’s opportunity to speak at last, as the Catherine Dickens character (re-christened Dorothea Gibson by Arnold) determines to complete her late husband Alfred Gibson’s unfinished final novel. However, the significance of confronting and constructing memory in the novel has garnered surprisingly little critical attention; this absence is particularly remarkable since the novel is typically touted as an autobiography or memoir. My article traces the import of Dorothea’s memories in her quest to construct a narrative of her interaction with Alfred in which she appears as a valid player in her own story, rather than as a “footnote” to her husband’s overarching narrative. Exploring the ontological slippage between history and story, I argue that through its merging of memory and narratorial agency, this fiction simultaneously effaces—and restores—the facts. Thus reconciled to her past, Dorothea can focus on her future, and the confidence she has discovered through productively remembering ultimately inspires her to work on Alfred’s as yet unfinished final novel. A “footnote” no longer, Dorothea thus transitions from confronting the story of her past to constructing the story of her future, as she appropriates Alfred’s authorial voice to claim co-creatorship of an entirely new narrative. In fine Bakhtinian form, she assumes control of words bearing Alfred’s signature; he may have invented the fictions of his life with Dorothea and his final novel, but it is she who (quite literally) has the last word.

By positioning the wife as narratorial detective inspecting memories to uncover the truth of her failed marriage, Arnold invites readers to
reconsider (with Dorothea) how facts have been twisted into a convenient fiction and imbues Dorothea with the self-assurance to pursue narrative authority. Paradoxically, through extricating the facts from the fiction of her life, Dorothea is inspired to write fiction herself in an attempt to regain her life. Likewise, Arnold also demonstrates the narrator’s prerogative to celebrate the slippage between fact and fiction: she rehabilitates Catherine Dickens by inviting readers to consider the truth of her history through the memorable mode of story.

**Keywords**

Gaynor Arnold; Girl in a Blue Dress; Catherine Dickens; Charles Dickens’s marriage; neo-Victorian biofiction; neo-Victorian feminism; Dorothea Gibson; Lillian Nayder; The Other Dickens

**Full Text:**

PDF

**Refbacks**

There are currently no refbacks.

Buy Girl in a Blue Dress by Gaynor Arnold from Amazon’s Fiction Books Store. Everyday low prices on a huge range of new releases and classic fiction. Gaynor Arnold was born and brought up in Cardiff. She read English at St. Hilda’s College, Oxford, where she acted in many plays, notably at the Edinburgh Festival and in a tour of the US. She has two grown up children and became a full time writer in 2009 after many years working for Birmingham’s Adoption and Fostering Service. Customer reviews. 3.7 out of 5 stars. Arnold Gaynor (EN). At the end of her life, Catherine, the cast-off wife of Charles Dickens, gave the letters she had received from her husband to their daughter Kate, asking her to donate them to the British Museum, so the world may know that he loved me once. The incredible vulnerability and heartache evident beneath the surface of this remark inspired Gaynor Arnold to write Girl in a Blue Dress, a dazzling debut novel inspired by the life of this tragic yet devoted woman. Arnold brings the spirit of Catherine Dickens to life in the form of Dorothea Dodo Gibson, a woman who is doomed to live... in Studies Narratology, Victorian Literature, and Neo-Victorian Literature. Dr. Kathryne Ford is currently a researcher in the School. • Rehabilitating Catherine Dickens: Memory and Authorial Agency in Gaynor Arnold’s Neo-Victorian Biofiction Girl in a Blue Dress... by Kathryne Ford. Critical work exploring Girl in a Blue Dress (2008), Gaynor Arnold’s biofictional account of Charles and Catherine Dickens’ marriage, predominantly focuses on the long-silenced wife’s opportunity to speak at last, as the Catherine Dickens...