

# Girl

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She seemed much older than I, of course, being a girl, and beautiful, and self-possessed.

—Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations* (1861)

**G**ARL; gyrl; girl; grrl. The hard G, widening into an open midcentral unrounded vowel, and descending in pitch to a dark L, clashes in its guttural sound with the sentimental sweetness and light of idealized Victorian girlhood. One might hear in the word's subterranean rumble the grunt of unwomanly labor or the growl of suppressed rage. Rage at what? Perhaps the labor the girl is required to perform. Pip needs Estella to be the mature, self-possessed girl the better to present himself as dispossessed and entranced by her. But she knows her self-possession is a theatrical effect of her starring role on Miss Havisham's stage, not a property that belongs to her. "All that you have given me, is at your command to have again," Estella tells Miss Havisham in words that could be uttered by almost any Victorian girl or woman during the reign of coverture; "Beyond that, I have nothing."<sup>1</sup> Priceless, this ideal female creature, the girl, is also valueless, her worth contingent upon those to whom she is attached.

Of course, Estella hardly springs to mind as the quintessential Victorian girl. That role is reserved for the patient and selfless Biddy, Esther Summerson, Little Nell, and their ilk, who would be cloyingly precious if it weren't for the rage that enflames them more than the cool and knowing Estella. Tearing John Chivery's heart to pieces in a fashion that would fill Miss Havisham with glee, Amy Dorrit makes him feel the burden of his love and her life: "When you think of me at all, John, let it only be as the child you have seen grow up in the prison; with one set of duties always occupying her; as a weak, retired, contented, unprotected girl."<sup>2</sup> These good girls too are possessed of the alienating and enraging self-possession called selflessness. If "girl" names a female child as well as

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a woman of any age, it's because female maturity requires remaining little, always in service of others rather than self.

But the idea of the girl does more work than enforcing angelic femininity simultaneously puerile and utilitarian in its selflessness. The rigidity of that idealized selflessness contrasts with the flexible boundaries of the category "girl" and the values attached to it. Shamed at breaking the family horse's knees in the attempt to squire Gwendolen Harleth through a hunt, Rex Gascoigne "felt his heart swelling and comporting itself as if it had been no better than a girl's."<sup>3</sup> He knows the only thing worse than being a silly boy is being a girl. In its earliest signification of a child of either sex, "girl" names that space of abjection where we all start and to which anyone can return. However, the girl's abjection is a strange one, more the froth of triviality than the viscous horror of non-human ooze. After all, Rex worships that which it would be appalling for him to devolve into.

The terms *girl* and *boy* largely run parallel in semantic development, providing gendered generic names for children, sweethearts, subordinates, and slaves—with a bewildering range and mix of tones from affectionate to malevolent coloring those acts of naming. But it always seems a little more terrible to be or be called a girl than a boy. Take the name of the maid-of-all-work, the one servant employed by even the most marginally middle-class family, referred to as "the girl" or a slavey.<sup>4</sup> Variables of age, gender, class, and race produced wildly variant definitions of the girl and indexes of her value. Anthony Trollope grouched about "that indefinite term of girl—for girls are girls from the age of three up to forty-three, if not previously married," suggesting marriage rather than age separates women from girls.<sup>5</sup> As Sarah Bilston demonstrates, women novelists publishing contemporaneously with Trollope emphasized how events other than marriage could be pivotal for female development, displacing "notions of maturity-as-wifedom by plotting and charting the transition to womanhood as an emotional, psychological experience" that could involve friction with one's mother, the end of school, charity work, emigration, or paid employment.<sup>6</sup> Though the age range Trollope gives for girls covers childhood to middle age, girlhood was characterized by conduct books from the latter half of the nineteenth century as what we might now call adolescence, "the blissful season which lies between thirteen and twenty."<sup>7</sup> Such definitions indicate that girlhood also operated as a mechanism of class construction. Working-class girls who went into domestic service, factory labor, or prostitution at twelve or thirteen (or earlier) had little leisure for the "blissful season" prior to

womanhood. While “girl” served as a derogatory epithet for free and enslaved black women, Christina Sharpe, writing about Phillis Wheatley, reminds us that Wheatley, like other black women of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, was “never really a girl; at least not ‘girl’ in any way that operates as a meaningful signifier in Euro-Western cultures; no such persons recognizable as ‘girl’ being inspected, sold, and purchased at auction in ‘the New World.’”<sup>8</sup> The term “girl” links and separates, values and devalues.

The contingent value of the girl as a cultural figure appealed to writers and other would-be engineers of Victorian values. Trollope would make the inefficiency of girls in clinching their marriage plots the working principle that drove his novels, a paradox that vexed his utilitarian approach to writing and postal administration. Henry James, seeking a challenge for his representational capabilities, would select the perceptions of a five-year-old girl as her venal parents divorce and remarry. His production of art through this “light vessel of consciousness” may have been inspired by George Eliot, who also makes a virtue of the slender, insignificant “consciousness of a girl” in *Daniel Deronda* (1876).<sup>9</sup> Casting Gwendolen Harleth as the unseeing eye of a world-historical hurricane, Eliot asks, “What in the midst of that mighty drama are girls and their blind visions?” answering, “In these delicate vessels is borne onward through the ages the treasure of human affections.”<sup>10</sup> Container for treasure rather than treasure itself, matter through which art is generated but not art on her own, the girl is invaluable—outside of value but intrinsic to it. Her value resides in being the insignificant object through which significance can be measured by contrast. Mistaking herself as treasure, not vessel, Eliot’s heroine enacts a variation on Sharpe’s account of “How a Girl Becomes a Ship”: “Other people allowed themselves to be made slaves of, and to have their lives blown hither and thither like empty ships in which no will was present: it was not to be so with her.”<sup>11</sup> Gwendolen errs in believing her will captains the ship of her life, preventing her from becoming a vehicle serving other people’s desires. In doing so, she evokes and overlooks her linkage to the enslaved people who made her family’s fortune in Barbados.<sup>12</sup> Differently and less devastatingly shipped when her husband regards her “as if she were part of the complete yacht,” Gwendolen is nonetheless joined with these people in being rendered fungible, perpetually in-valuable.<sup>13</sup> Connecting this spoiled girl to the transatlantic slave trade enables a translation of value that risks erasing her triviality and forcing an impertinent

equivalence. Such volatile conjunctions accentuate the dynamism of the girl as a fulcrum in a value-assigning system.

#### NOTES

1. Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations* (New York: Penguin Press, 2003), 304.
2. Charles Dickens, *Little Dorrit* (New York: Penguin Press, 2003), 236.
3. George Eliot, *Daniel Deronda* (New York: Penguin Press, 1995), 74.
4. As late as 1891, Sherlock Holmes refers to the maid Watson and his wife employ as “a particularly malignant boot-splitting specimen of the London slavey.” Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 7.
5. Anthony Trollope, *Framley Parsonage* (New York: Penguin Press, 2004), 138.
6. Sarah Bilston, *The Awkward Age in Women’s Popular Fiction, 1850–1900: Girls and the Transition to Womanhood* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 6.
7. Marianne Farningham, *Girlhood* (London: James Clarke, 1869), 19–20. See also Anonymous, *Girls and Their Ways; By One Who Knows Them* (London: John Hogg, 1881).
8. Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 52–53.
9. Henry James, *What Maisie Knew* (New York: Penguin, 1985), 26; Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, 124.
10. Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, 124.
11. Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 41; Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, 39.
12. Susan Meyer traces Eliot’s many metaphorical references to Gwendolen Harleth as an enslaved person in *Imperialism at Home: Race and Victorian Women’s Fiction* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), 158–71.
13. Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, 672.

