The
Victorian Novel
of Adulthood

PLOT AND PURGATORY IN FICTIONS OF MATURITY

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Contents

The Belly of Sheol

S wallowed whole and trapped in the leviathan's belly, Jonah spends three days underwater before surfacing to accept his role as God's prophet. The biblical story of Jonah's descent has become a favorite example for several literary critics interested in theorizing narrative lulls, for they take the prophet's most memorable turning point—his three days spent inside a fish—as emblematic of the uneventful in literature, a climax that is itself an anticlimax.

George Orwell's interpretation of the story insists that this aquatic journey to the interior "is a very comfortable, cosy, homelike thought," and he imagines the leviathan's stomach as a "womb big enough for an adult," if ultimately as an unproductive space of gestation. "Short of being dead," he writes, "it is the final, unsurpassable stage of irresponsibility."[1] Yet Orwell misses a crucial detail when he states that Jonah's marine reckoning stops short of death. The lesson Jonah learns inside the whale, like other famed trips to the realm of shadows—Odysseus's visit to Hades, Saint Patrick's quest through purgatory, Dante's journey from hell to paradise—involves an immersion not solely in viscera but in the realm of death itself: in Sheol.[2] As the prophet's prayer proclaims,

> I called to the Lord out of my distress,
> and he answered me;
> out of the belly of Sheol I cried for help,
> and you heard my voice.[3]

Addressing novels that resist plot, Robert Caserio usefully seizes upon Orwell's "Inside the Whale" as providing a model for describing narrative inaction in nineteenth- and twentieth-century literature.[4] He finds that to be "inside the whale" is to be immersed in a plot lull or, in his reading of Orwell's essay, to be the author of works that tend toward these troughs.[5] The ethical significance of becoming Jonah in the guise of author, character, or reader comes immediately into question in such studies that probe a discomfort with places of seeming lassitude in novels. Do these passages bear witness to contemplation and introspection or to an avoidance of action in the face of an urgent call? This question has characterized the work of scholars such as Anne-Lise François, who interestingly reframes narrative lulls in terms of recessive action rather than passivity, and Stefanie Markovits, who asks, "Can thinking ever be doing?"[6] Markovits follows in Caserio's steps in rightly drawing our attention to the "suspect" nature of refusing or failing to act, but in her study "inaction" and "inward action" can be considered jointly, thereby making it difficult to discuss thinking that amounts to doing separately from mental states in which this may not be the case. These less-active mental states could include apathy, complacency, boredom, idleness, and other forms of passivity that figure centrally in Orwell's "Inside the Whale."

A survey of Jonah's literary-critical fate reveals that when critics invoke this biblical story to discuss narrative lulls another submerged concern also surfaces: how to represent the hidden workings of adult conversion and unseen maturation in novels. The tendency has been to interpret these subtle changes in terms of inaction, stasis, or even regression. Nowhere is this affiliation between lulls and arrested development made clearer than in Orwell's depiction of Jonah in utero, a grown man crawling back into the womb. But if Jonah's story gives

us a model of narrative lulls, as I contend, it is certainly a more productive one than has previously been set forth by literary critics. To uncover a more productive, and less parodic and static, account of mature conversion requires new attention to the varieties of plots offered by stories of adult growth and development. Instead of framing representations of adult conversion in terms of inaction or passivity, then, this study focuses on a temporal concern: on radical gradualism in Victorian stories of adulthood and midlife.

Taking another trip "inside the whale," and into the afterlife that waits there, provides a useful first step in thinking through the ways that authors capture an extreme gradualism that belies the apparent lack of plot in narratives about maturity. To return to the prophet's example, what exactly can be said to *happen* to Jonah inside the whale? In invoking Jonah, critics often overlook the reference to Sheol as well as the curious detail that Jonah makes *two* "descents" (*yarad*) in rapid succession.[7] Fleeing from God's commandment that he preach repentance in Nineveh, Jonah sets sail in the opposite direction, toward Tarshish. En route, he performs his first descent, hiding deep in the ship's hull and falling asleep, leaving the crew above to struggle against God's wrath without having knowledge of its source. Eventually, through the casting of lots, Jonah is brought forth, at which point he insists that he be thrown into the sea, where a portable afterlife awaits within the leviathan. He then makes his second descent, this one into the "belly of Sheol." The difference between Jonah's two descents provides a crucial turn in his narrative, illustrating his transition from a type of inaction to inward action, his time in Sheol being devoted to prayer and reflection. It becomes a place where the Aristotelian categories of "character" and "action" become difficult to pry apart and where an internalized form of action, not simply inaction, produces a transformed prophet.[8]

This submerged storytelling model found in Jonah's narrative is not one readily identified with the bildungsroman, the novel of momentous first transgressions and the transition from youth to adulthood. Instead, the trip to the underworld and into the whale has

proven to be one particularly suited to *mature* protagonists—to travelers resembling Odysseus more than Telemachus. *The Victorian Novel of Adulthood* considers how many novels diagnosed with a lack of plot by contemporary literary scholars appear to be written against the bildungsroman tradition, extending past the coming-of-age story into the realm of *having come of age.* This is a time when marriage plots may have run their course or when stories of vocational pursuit have petered out, leaving characters in a midlife lull that Henry James labeled, with some irony, "the country of the general lost freshness."[9] Yet as common as such accounts are in Victorian literature, these times of mature struggling and introspection have been largely neglected in literary critical studies. Instead, we tend to think of novels about adulthood and midlife as an eccentric species in the nineteenth century, an aging relative to the more nimble and popular bildungsroman.[10] This account of the bildungsroman's dominance is bolstered by scholarship that upholds the coming-of-age story as the quintessential expression of Victorian nation building, a narrative of historical progression grafted onto a story of individual growth. Our attraction to the bildungsroman has proven so potent that a body of literature devoted to adulthood has been relegated to the sidelines, framed as a marginal subgenre, and ultimately absented from literary critical studies of the Victorian period as well as narrative and novel theories that discuss plot more broadly.

Challenging a longstanding critical love affair with stories of youth, *The Victorian Novel of Adulthood* proposes that novels about adulthood and midlife demonstrate a model of plot distinct from that of the bildungsroman and, as such, deserve separate consideration in studies of the novel. My goal, however, in discussing fictions of maturity is not simply to define this novelistic subgenre against the bildungsroman as a more dominant genre or to argue over the boundary lines for definitions of the bildungsroman. Numerous studies already exist to those ends.[11] Instead, I examine how our emphasis on the novel of youthful formation has shaped and, in many important ways, limited our understanding of, first, the range of

experience captured in Victorian fiction and, second, the distinctly gradual plots these fictions exhibit. In shifting our angle of perception and looking at the development of the Victorian novel through another subgenre of literature (namely, works dealing with midlife and adulthood), we can address an alternative, comparatively uneventful kind of storytelling than the one that has been commonly accepted and used as a model for novel studies. This approach requires that we rethink the way that we have framed the bildungsroman in scholarship on Victorian novels as the masterplot for the period and that we instead recognize the widespread representations of adulthood, midlife, and maturity.

This new awareness of the centrality of mature fictions in the nineteenth century, in turn, necessitates a reconsideration of the development of the English novel and the genealogy of Victorian historical consciousness. More than simply addressing the features that compose such fictions, this book argues for an alternative understanding of the development of the British novel that includes the many novels about midlife, showing how they equally constitute our sense of the novel's growth and defining features: its periods of suspension and its fascination with interiority, its wealth of accumulated daily detail, and its ability to render these details into a progressive, if at times uneventful, whole.

In representing barely perceptible development that unfolds slowly in adulthood, many of the works in this study are well-known for the biting criticism they inspire: Henry James's accusation that *Daniel Deronda* is more like a lake than a river in terms of its narrative flow; George Gissing's diagnosis of *Little Dorrit*'s "prevalent air of gloom" (a sign that "the hand of the master is plainly weary"); H. G. Wells's frustration with the way James's "vast paragraphs sweat and struggle" in "tales of nothingness" about cautious bachelors "going delicately" through life.[12] These novels, and many others accused of similar crimes against plot, have something in common: mature protagonists. Rather than depict the tumults of first love, loss, and transgression, they illustrate an adult-onset "arrested development." As a result, their

authors face the unique challenge of accommodating the prolonged inactivity of protagonists in a novel form that demands progression. Subtle narrative developments like these are truly "arrested developments," as they come to fruition when a character, and potentially a plotline, seems to stop moving. This paradoxical development within stasis is, upon inspection, a vision of the most extremely gradual and inward change imaginable, change that eludes surface recognition, requiring the powers of fictional insight to be uncovered.[13]

Despite the lack of critical attention given to midlife in Victorian fiction, these gradualist plots of maturity are surprisingly common. For example, a classic bildungsroman by Dickens, *David Copperfield*, is as much about maturity as it is about youth, for it reveals a process of disillusionment born of adulthood. As the protagonist reflects after his first marriage and success as a writer, "I was happy; but the happiness I had vaguely anticipated, once, was not the happiness I enjoyed. . . . What I missed, I still regarded—I always regarded—as something that had been a dream of my youthful fancy; that was incapable of realization; that I was now discovering to be so, with some natural pain, as all men did."[14] Another archetypal bildungsroman, *Jane Eyre*, comes to rest in contemplative doldrums as vast and deceptively uniform as the space of the moors where Jane wanders. These suspended stretches on the moors follow the revolutionary rush of first experience, allowing the heroine to perform the work of maturity. Likewise, Ellen Wood's sensation novel *East Lynne*, which enthralled nineteenth-century readers with its illicit twists, mires itself for long periods in the complexities of married life and second unions, depicting motherhood and female aging as central concerns.[15] And *Vanity Fair*, a novel driven at the relentless pace of Becky Sharp's ambition, surpasses the boundaries of the bildungsroman early in its story arc, moving from the school days of Becky, Amelia, Dobbin, and George into accounts of failed marriages and widowhood, visions of second marriages, and an intergenerational chronicle of parental shortcomings. As Dobbin thinks back on the ten years that make up this portion of the novel, he observes, "Long years had passed. . . . He had

now passed into the stage of old-fellow-hood. His hair was grizzled, and many a passion and feeling of his youth had grown grey in that interval."[16] The "interval" of graying includes the entire middle of the novel up to its end, and while it occasions some of Thackeray's sharpest satire, it also includes his greatest overtures toward compassion for his aging central characters.

A Love Affair with the Bildungsroman:
Novel Studies and Forgotten Narratives of Midlife

Beginning in the mid-twentieth century, novels dealing with maturity were increasingly considered under a rubric that gives precedence to the coming-of-age story as "the 'symbolic form' of modernity," to quote Franco Moretti's influential assertion.[17] Works as varied as *Great Expectations* and *Little Dorrit* have been considered alike in scholarship that not only prioritizes the bildungsroman as a plot model but also goes so far as to cast the genre's "rise" and "development" as a bildungsroman narrative itself. For example, Mikhail Bakhtin frames the novel's history as an intergenerational conflict between rebellious youths and staid elders. The novel, presented as a scrappy pugilist, is "the leading hero in the drama of literary development," and it "fights for its own hegemony in literature; wherever it triumphs, the other older genres go into decline."[18] Georg Lukács likewise casts the novel as a protagonist in a story of formation, saying that the novel expresses the modern dissonance between the individual and his environment or, rather, between a "youthful confidence" and an "outside world . . . [that] will never speak to us in a voice that will clearly tell us our way and determine our goal."[19] In these foundational works of literary theory, the novel comes to occupy a role very similar to that of Pip in *Great Expectations* or Julien Sorel in *The Red and the Black:* the position of an upstart, of questionable class distinction, ascending the ranks.

This bias toward the bildungsroman in literary criticism continues today, and a new group of scholars including Jed Esty interestingly extend Moretti's account of the bildungsroman to address the genre's

colonial, even colonizing reach.[20] Indeed, the term *bildungsroman* has been applied so expansively in recent years as to include novels that imagine, more fully, second chances, second marriages, and the trials and tribulations of adult life. Moretti may claim *Middlemarch* as an example of the female coming-of-age story, but Virginia Woolf applauded this "mature" work for being "one of the few English novels written for grown-up people."[21] Woolf's assertion can be taken as an alternative starting point for uncovering a vast counter-tradition to the bildungsroman, one that centers on Victorian literature about "grown-up people" and their gradual plots of development.

To begin thinking about these mature plots requires reexamining our critical bias toward the bildungsroman and identifying how our most gradual models of plotting fell out of current critical discussions. Our existing studies more easily follow what Marianne Hirsch has called the picaresque strain in her discussion of the bildungsroman's overwhelming appeal in "Defining Bildungsroman as a Genre."[22] For this reason, many critics, notably Peter Brooks, struggle to encompass the introversion that Hirsch links with confessional narratives, instead consigning interiority to the static or suspended aspects of fiction. In discussing E. M. Forster's *Aspects of the Novel,* Brooks challenges Forster's dismissal of plot in favor of character, countering that if characters' "'secret lives' are to be narratable, they must in some sense be plotted, display a design and logic."[23] Brooks's opening volley would seem to suggest an ensuing discussion of plot's hidden, inward workings, but the quieter parts of characters' "secret" lives go largely unaccounted for in his study as well. He poses "desire" as a subject through which to discuss internalized action—or rather, those sequential movements that make character "narratable"—though, as his following chapters soon reveal, his real focus is on ambition that manifests itself in observable action. Many of his central case studies in *Reading for the Plot* are the "desiring machines" (41) of nineteenth-century literature: Pip, Julien Sorel, and Lucien from *Lost Illusions,* in other words, bildungsroman protagonists. Characters who find themselves less outwardly active or unable to translate desire into visible acts—those hampered

by factors including age, temperament, and gender—are less easily discussed in Brooks's model of plot based on engines, male arousal, and the Freudian death drive. His difficulty in accounting for what he terms the "female" narratives of desire reveals how his larger concept of plot strains to include an array of domestic, middle-aged, or otherwise less overtly "active" fictions. In this sense, his definition of plot does not vary deeply from the one he identifies as problematic in Forster's earlier work, for both his study and Forster's rely on a similarly eventful model of plot extrapolated from the bildungsroman—a model that effectively consigns periods of suspension and contemplation to fiction's other, less temporally focused "aspects," including character, style, and description.

How, then, should we regard lulls in which introspection displaces outward action? Are scenes of inward growth active or passive? Do they represent a cessation of plot or its most urgent turning points? This question of the relationship between interiority and plot has become a source of some critical impasse. Caserio has noted the challenge of trying to theorize introspective action at all. Invoking D. H. Lawrence's assertion that George Eliot "started putting all the action inside," Caserio writes that "[w]e find a novelist like D. H. Lawrence, for example, pointing to George Eliot as the major revisionist of the senses of plot and action because she *internalizes* action. . . . It is perhaps by the internalization of action, a step that ultimately makes action imponderable or makes it at best an arbitrary and unfixed sign in an unending series of metonymies, that George Eliot most undermines Dickens's sense of plot" (95). But must action "brought inside" really become "imponderable" in terms of plot?

These places of unseen, inward conversion are often overlooked in studies of plot even as they have been widely accepted as a central feature of realism. Ian Watt long ago noted that realism follows a "more minutely discriminating time-scale," asserting that before its advent "much of man's life had tended to be almost unavailable to literary representation merely as a result of its slowness."[24] This ability to capture slow processes is, in Watt's assessment of temporality

in the realist novel, the genre's hallmark and vital innovation. But in thinking about plot, we find a basic contradiction at work, apparent in George Levine's later gloss on Thackeray that "plot . . . is not an essential element for realism."[25] This view is echoed, in perhaps less stark terms, by Caserio and Markovits, who turn to character and inaction as central terms for discussing the "slow" parts of realist fiction— posing these stretches of text as comparatively static and devoid of plot. Examination of recent criticism reveals that an understated type of narrative momentum has been overlooked precisely because it has been absorbed into considerations of the plot's antitheses: character, discourse, style, description, and lyrical suspension, or in other words, aspects of narrative that fall under Gérard Genette's heading of "discourse," loosely defined as everything counterposed to "story" in a novel. Amanpal Garcha has tried to reclaim features of "discourse," notably style and description, as central to perceiving the pleasures of reading the "plotless" parts of fiction, but there is still a need to address what occurs during fallow places in novels.[26] As Garcha notes, other pleasures attend reading than the ones identified by latter-day structuralists such as Brooks, but he claims these pleasures for reading style and description alone. He therefore focuses on narrative features that arise when plot, as he defines it, ceases its machinations. One might ask whether plot really stops in this manner, giving way clearly to descriptive or discursive passages. It would seem that, on the contrary, it is during these apparent lulls in "story" that a gradual form of narrative progression is often most rigorously at work.

The question remains: what it is we read for when dramatic plotting subsides into an understated form of narrative development? To address these places of seeming quietude, some of the ground recently ceded to character and discourse might be more usefully discussed in terms of plot. Therefore, rather than eschew "plot" as a central term through which to understand lulls, it is time to consider *what kind* of plot is at work in many of the uneventful stretches that compose Victorian novels about adulthood and midlife.

Defining Novels of Midlife: Events, Epochs, and "Turning Stretches"

Beginning with the smallest unit of plot, the event, one might ask, what do these gradual plots of adult development look like in terms of events?[27] Many of the changes that compose novels of maturity tend toward lengthy representation and are hard to define in our existing critical rhetoric; they evade the tight narrative unit of the "turning point" and, more confoundingly, do not conform to larger attempts at excerption, such as the episode or the chapter. If anything, the drawn-out events in these novels are best captured by a phrase of George Eliot's in *Daniel Deronda* when she refers to them as "epochs" within a novel. Looking back on Gwendolen Harleth's adult maturation over the course of a year, the narrator of *Daniel Deronda* reflects that there are "differences" that "are manifest in the variable intensity which we call human experience, from the revolutionary rush of change which makes a new inner and outer life, to that quiet recurrence of the familiar, which has no other epochs than those of hunger and the heavens."[28] These swaths of time in which the "quiet recurrence of the familiar" can itself make a "new inner and outer life" offer an entry point for understanding what might be termed the "turning stretches" that compose novels of adult development.

One such example of an "epoch" of slow change can be found, over the span of hundreds of pages, in *Middlemarch*, a work in which Eliot resists a hasty return to the marriage plot. After Casaubon dies, Dorothea is left to consider his "shining rows of note-books" that stand as "the mute memorial of a forgotten faith."[29]

> At first she walked into every room, questioning the eighteen months of her married life, and carrying on her thoughts as if they were a speech to be heard by her husband. Then, she lingered in the library, and could not be at rest till she had carefully ranged all the note-books as she imagined that he would wish to see them, in orderly sequence. The pity which had been the restraining compelling motive in her life with

him still clung about his image, even while she remonstrated
with him in indignant thought and told him that he was
unjust. (304)

Despite the less than riveting pace of Dorothea rearranging Casau-
bon's books, this is not an entirely uneventful passage. In this moment
of dutiful remembrance mixed with "indignant thought," Eliot reveals
an internal turn of events for Dorothea, a move from duty to rebellion
bound up in her decisive act of writing a note scribbled inside an enve-
lope left for her by Casaubon. *"Do you not see now that I could not submit my
soul to yours, by working hopelessly at what I have no belief in?—Dorothea?"* (304).
This note turns the posthumous decree of Casaubon's will into a cor-
respondence, a dialogue with the dead. Nevertheless, although this
rebellious act of writing marks Dorothea's changing inward course,
her plot remains as devoid of outward action as before. Time passes
and readers encounter her many months later still "seated with her
hands folded on her lap, looking out along the avenue of limes to the
distant fields. Every leaf was at rest in the sunshine, the familiar scene
was changeless, and seemed to represent the prospect of her life, full
of motiveless ease—motiveless, if her own energy could not seek out
reasons for ardent action" (335). Casaubon's death might be expected
to return Dorothea to the plot of youthful possibility, but Eliot resists
this convention to prioritize a different and much less eventful devel-
opment for her heroine. In a departure from the typical progression
of the bildungsroman, Eliot downplays the idea of the momentous
first romance, both by presenting the desiccated figure of Casaubon
as the initial leading man and, subsequently, by giving this failed first
marriage so little space in the larger story of second chances. In this pe-
riod between Dorothea's marriages, the prolonged uneventfulness of her
central plotline achieves another kind of development, giving readers a
view of her continued maturation after she has already come of age.

 Such interludes appear throughout this study in novels and short sto-
ries about a cast of middle-aged types in Victorian and early twentieth-
century fiction, figures including the miser, the widow, the bachelor,

and the spinster. These character types pervade Victorian novels but are often thought of as "ficelles" to the youthful heroes and their plots of adventure. They stand on the margins of the bildungsroman in the same way that, in Austenian ball scenes, characters like Miss Bates, Sir William Lucas, and Mr. Knightley ring the dance floor observing the youthful dancers and helping their courtship plots along, rarely being pulled onto the floor themselves—and then, to memorable effect. They may appear resigned that their participation in the ball is over, but as self-consciously sidelined as these characters may be, their marginal position often becomes the fixation, the very center, of novels that imagine life after the marriage plot. This cast of characters is represented in the central protagonists studied in this book: Silas Marner, who undergoes a period of isolation and hoarding as a miser; Gwendolen Harleth, who experiences penitence as a young widow; Arthur Clennam, with his midlife homecoming and sojourn in the Marshalsea prison; James's "poor sensitive gentlemen"[30] who hesitate their way through hundreds of pages; and the unmarried middle-aged women of modernist fiction, these twentieth-century protagonists offering a more distanced reflection on the Victorian era and its waning marriage plots. The novels that contain these protagonists have been chosen as case studies because they each tend, in exemplary ways, to the "epochs" of slow change that characterize novels of maturity more generally. Although these works are exceptional for their uneventful plotting, they also stand as widely representative of a larger focus in Victorian literature on the imagined lives and emotional growth of middle-aged characters. For every Silas Marner there is a host of Victorian Scrooges and Boffins whose pattern of accretion matches the novel's own accumulative ends. Gwendolen has an array of sister widows, whose courtship plots range from the demure Eleanor Bold's remarriage to Madame Madeline Neroni's more brazen, if prone, flirtations in Anthony Trollope's *Barchester Towers.* On his own, Henry James peoples English literature with morose middle-aged bachelors, but his Marchers and Strethers find themselves in the good company of John Jarndyce and a league of avuncular wallflowers. The "old maid," that

varied staple of British and American fiction, at once includes the kindly Miss Bates and the more dynamic and iconoclastic Miss Wade and Rhoda Nunn, appearing in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as one of fiction's most flexible and surprising character types, a vehicle for both narrative experimentation and visions of larger social transformation, as Woolf's fiction demonstrates. Giving closer study to these protagonists and their fictions of maturity makes it possible to chart a correspondence between middle age and "narrative middles," uncovering a fuller range of lived experience in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century fiction.

Historical Context and Contents

Why did plots of maturity become more common in the early to mid-nineteenth century? Looking back on an era fascinated by development, G. K. Chesterton questioned why, in the nineteenth century, the "most important event in English history was the event that never happened at all—the English Revolution on the lines of the French Revolution."[31] J. S. Mill framed the period in slightly different terms in *The Spirit of the Age,* conceiving of his own time in terms of process rather than inaction: "The first of the leading peculiarities of the present age is, that it is an age of transition. Mankind have outgrown old institutions and old doctrines, and have not yet acquired new ones."[32] He concludes, "A man may not be either better or happier at six-and-twenty, than he was at six years of age: but the same jacket which fitted him then, will not fit him now" (53). The metaphor of having "outgrown" the vestments of youth is telling, for it speaks to an emerging national self-conception of being an era past the age of revolutionary fervor, engaged instead in searching for alternative models of change—models that, in novels as in political discourse, attended to newfound maturity as a vital part of British self-identity.

In many ways, the nineteenth-century obsession with conceptualizing gradualism across disciplines emerged just when British subjects began viewing themselves in more-distanced relation to the French

Revolution. This new national self-identity coincided with the emergence of middle age as a modern concept in the Victorian period.[33] It was an era when, as Walter Pater objected, "the idea of development" seemed to be "invading one by one . . . all the products of the mind."[34] A generation earlier, a sense of youthful revolution infused Wordsworth's retrospective insistence that to be "alive" at the time of the French Revolution was "bliss" but to be "young" was "very heaven,"[35] but discourse in the Victorian period increasingly yielded to a new set of guiding tropes oriented around maturation and uneventful development—economic growth, evolution, geological accretion and erosion, and, in theology, spiritual progress in the afterlife.

Modern critics, however, follow Gillian Beer and George Levine to focus overwhelmingly on only Darwinian evolution and geology as the main culturally available models of radically slow change.[36] Yet more than any other discourse, theology offered writers a narrative template for understanding and representing extremely slow development in later life. In contrast to a large body of scholarship focused on Darwinian and geological models of development in Victorian fiction, this study uncovers the presence of another, as yet underexamined, inspiriting zeitgeist that appeared frequently as a metaphor for mid-life development: debates about redefining purgatory initiated by Tractarians in Tract 90.

Beginning historically with the start of the Oxford Movement, *The Victorian Novel of Adulthood* seeks to ground aesthetic claims about plots of maturity in their historical and intellectual contexts. A new focus on mature protagonists in the mid-nineteenth century and early twentieth century corresponds with a period in which redefining the afterlife became a national obsession and source of ongoing controversy. The afterlife was a subject of the highest importance to Victorians, with discussions about purgatory occupying a central position in religious discussions initiated by the Oxford Movement. As Geoffrey Rowell states, eschatology was "discussed more publicly, and perhaps with more vehemence, than in any previous age."[37] If Jonah's unfolding is obscured by curtains of flesh and the elliptical style of biblical

narration, Victorian theologians' writing on the afterlife sought to illuminate the epistemological gap at his story's center: the problem of how we can understand and represent inward change. In the Bible, Jonah's conversion remains hidden, for in the style noted by Erich Auerbach, he enters and exits the leviathan with little intervening text to explain what happens there.[38] The transition from man to prophet occurs with a rapidity that verges on simultaneity; the development is implied but not shown. In contrast, theologians during the Victorian period produced hundreds of pages of sermons, poetry, and tracts that attempted to describe the change souls undergo in the afterlife. Judgment became the center for many of these theological works, for it is the only realm in the afterlife to have change as its fundamental condition, as opposed to either heavenly or hellish stasis.

The debate over reconceiving Judgment reached its most fevered pitch in the 1830s and 1840s, when theologians following John Henry Newman began to reconceive purgatory as a kinder, gentler—and much less eventful—state of growth, rather than as a place for a punitive trial by fire. The British public was especially transfixed and outraged when Newman published Tract 90 in 1841, the document in which he suggested that purgatory could exist for all Christians, not just Catholics. In this tract, Newman altered the popular conception of purgatory to frame the afterlife in terms of gentle maturation. He urged that a period of Judgment could offer souls "a time of maturing that fruit of grace, but partly formed in them in this life,—a schooltime of contemplation."[39] This emphasis on growth and development provided Newman with a way of constructing a productive narrative of spiritual eventfulness, and as a testimony to his success, maturation remained a feature of eschatology well into the twentieth century, particularly after World War I, when the idea of a progressive state after death offered the consolation of future maturation for the many young men who died fighting. In the Victorian period, his model of the afterlife may have initially drawn fire for all its proposed extinguishing of "Romish" flames, but as these developments evidence, it also seeped into popular religion and culture.

Indeed, the model of Judgment that Newman proposed increasingly found its way into literature that used purgatory as a metaphor for the gradual work of adult *Bildung:* in *Daniel Deronda,* Gwendolen Harleth's arduous grasping after self-knowledge, described at length as her "purgatory . . . on the green earth" (669); in *Little Dorrit,* the narrator's repeated references to Judgment that accompany Arthur Clennam's penitential growth in the Marshalsea prison; in *Villette,* Lucy Snowe's desperate search for consolation that leads her to dabble in Catholic practices including confession and to consider the "unspeakable solace . . . of purgatory."[40] Whereas Gwendolen's and Arthur's stories unfold with purgatorial pacing, Lucy's unresolved ending maintains the novel in an ongoing narrative middle, a purgatorial state of midlife suspension. Thus, although this book addresses a range of cultural forms that authors invoke to create a sense of the gradually unfolding in literature, this study recurs to purgatory as a central modality that authors used to think about narrativity. In these "purgatorial plots," Dante emerges at key points, his imagined journey to purgatory functioning as a metaphorical quest story for mature protagonists. For writers ranging from George Eliot to Virginia Woolf, the *Divine Comedy* provides a source through which to envision the gradual transformation of characters who find themselves, like Dante in the beginning of the *Inferno,* "Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita," midway through life's journey.[41] However, even when citing Dante in these novels of adulthood, the writers in this study invoke a distinctly modern model of eschatology devoted to slow growth and not the Florentine poet's strenuous and clearly plotted trip up Mount Purgatory.

Tracing the evolution of purgatory as a theological concept and as a literary metaphor, this book offers a new critical understanding of the ways that religious and intellectual concepts from the Oxford Movement were inflected and engaged in Victorian fiction. Early chapters reveal how the methods employed by theologians came to influence fiction writers, notably Dickens and George Eliot, who sought to capture subtle maturation in the novel form. Later chapters show how this lineage of purgatorial plotting continued into the nineteenth and

early twentieth centuries in works by writers, in particular Woolf, who portrayed the Victorian era as purgatorial while emulating Victorian methods for showing maturation and historical change.

On a formal level, each chapter reveals how specific methods borrowed and adapted from discourses including primarily theology but also visual art, lyric poetry, botany, economics, and folklore appear in a variety of literary approaches to remaining indefinitely in medias res. These methods and techniques include establishing closure while gesturing at its impossibility, spinning counterfactual "shadow" stories that absorb the main action from a central storyline, extending the "sense of a middle" by concealing the beginning of a given action or event, and destabilizing the "moment" as the unit for measuring events. In its broadest scope, then, *The Victorian Novel of Adulthood* engages questions about how historical influences shaped literary form to understand why a gradualist approach to plot arose as a common feature of Victorian novels of adulthood. Uncovering a vital connection between gradual plots in theology and those in fictions starring mature protagonists, it addresses a critical intersection between religious studies, intellectual history, and novel studies to reveal how the form of Victorian fiction evolved both alongside and through changes in religious philosophy.

In seeking to give context for literary developments, the book's first chapter, "'Strange Introversions': Newman, Mature Conversion, and the Poetics of Purgatory," probes the historical and theological origin for many accounts of gradual maturation in Oxford Movement controversies through twentieth-century conversations about purgatorial maturation. After defining purgatory and discussing how it became the epicenter for Victorian controversies about redefining the afterlife, the chapter turns toward considering purgatory as a narrative model, using Newman's essay on Aristotle's *Poetics* and *The Dream of Gerontius* as central examples to understand his complex ideas about action, character, and plot. These works foreground the conundrums and paradoxes that come with capturing a "state of change," the kind of action that purgatorial quest stories demand and delimit, exemplifying the

innovations employed by theologians such as Newman to approach these kinds of representational challenges. On a larger historical scale, Newman's gentler model of purgatory offered Victorians a model for converting their own animosities about the Oxford Movement into a productive narrative of change. The chapter ends with a consideration of how Newman's eschatology continued to haunt late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century religious fictions and works of theology, his model of Judgment as a maturational state experiencing a great resurgence after World War I in offering the grieving the consolation that the youths who died in battle could mature in the afterlife.

Chapters that follow show how purgatory and other related metaphors for gradual transformation began to appear in secular Victorian novels that capture adult *bildung*. Taken together, these works make manifest a cultural pattern of gradualist thinking; in their use of metaphors at once scientific, economic, art historical, and theological, they comment self-reflexively upon their own gradualist storytelling mode as it unfolds. In terms of organization, each chapter centers on a figure who strongly embodies this method of purgatorial plotting, beginning with the miser and continuing on to the widow, the bachelor, and the "old maid."

Building on the historical and religious context from chapter 1, chapter 2, "George Eliot's Winter Tales," explores Eliot's fictions of maturity, beginning with her slimmest novel, *Silas Marner,* in which she portrays her protagonist's purgatorial development during his sixteen years as a miser. For all its apparent stasis, this period allows Silas to undergo a process of "collecting himself" (among many other things) that recalls the "school-time of contemplation" and "time for maturing that fruit of grace" that Newman presented as the nature of accretive change occurring in purgatory ("Intermediate State," 377). The uneventful interlude that characterizes Silas's miserly years subsequently appears in the lives of Eliot's young widows as well, and the second part of the chapter discusses Gwendolen Harleth's struggles with maturity as a young widow, a time described explicitly as her "purgatory . . . on the green earth," rendered in images from Dante's

Purgatorio. Daniel Deronda proves to be Eliot's most extended vision of purgatory, but in alluding to Dante's tragic female penitent, Madonna Pia—a favorite subject of Pre-Raphaelite painters—Eliot rewrites the role of the tragic waiting woman as a figure of inward action rather than of inaction.

From misers and widows, the third chapter, "The Bachelor's Purgatory: Arrested Development and the Progress of Shades," passes onto another recurring figure of stalled adult malaise: the "poor, sensitive gentleman," as Henry James termed his favored protagonist, a figure who rears his downcast head in numerous Jamesian fictions. Chapter 3 traces the prehistory of the sensitive bachelor as a mature protagonist, focusing primarily on Arthur Clennam's anxious homecoming at age forty in *Little Dorrit,* and shows how Dickens uses folkloric and purgatorial imagery to portray Clennam's adult "arrested development." It examines a previously overlooked source for the novel in revealing how Amy Dorrit's curiously static "fairy story" is a rewriting of the Peter Schlemihl folktale of the man who sold his shadow. This folkloric source resonates throughout the novel as Dickens blends shadow folklore with images of the purgatorial progress of shades. These shadow folktales provide a model for how a longer form (like the Victorian novel) can function to absorb a protagonist's lengthy inactivity, for the action in many shadow folktales is displaced into a counterfactual realm embodied by a shadow or "No-body" figure—as demonstrated in the novel by Clennam's thus-named alter ego, "Nobody." Cast as a No-body, Clennam becomes akin to a Victorian shade, undergoing the trials of waiting and sensory deprivation that are common to conceptions of purgatory. In Dickens's secular novel, these extended trials are transposed to an earthly place for penitence—the purgatory of the Marshalsea penitentiary. I conclude the chapter by briefly tracing how James, following in the steps of his predecessor, uses counterfactual techniques that strongly resemble Dickens's approach in *Little Dorrit.* As with Clennam's midlife odyssey, James imagines alter egos for his sedentary bachelors in his short works including "The Beast in the Jungle," "The Altar of the Dead,"

and "The Jolly Corner." However, it is in *The Ambassadors* that James truly takes uneventful plotting to new extremes to capture his hero's midlife renaissance, extending techniques for remaining in medias res that can be found in his earlier short fiction.

In my final chapter, "Odd Women and Eccentric Plotting: Maturity, Modernism, and Woolf's Victorian Retrospection," I follow purgatorial plotting into the terrain of the modernist novel to explore the "odd woman" as a figure through whom Woolf—and several other authors who bridge the late Victorian period and early twentieth century—frame their accounts of mature retrospection. My contention in this chapter is that the middle-aged unmarried woman plays a crucial focalizing role in decentered modernist plots, or as I call them, "eccentric plots" of maturity, and I focus on Woolf's *The Years* as an interlude dually shaped by Dante and Victorian literature. In writing *The Years,* Woolf openly emulated Victorian novelists for their ability to capture prosaic life, and the novel exemplifies Woolf's desire to descend into a literary past, for she modeled her vision of Eleanor Pargiter's midlife quest for greater understanding on the *Purgatorio* as well as on Victorian descents into the lulls of daily existence. In finding continuity between Woolf's vision of midlife development and Victorian encounters with the prosaic, I chart how the visit to Hades recurs as the metaphorical journey of maturity, an allegorical descent that is part of a rich tradition from *The Odyssey* to *Ulysses.* This conclusion gestures toward a larger understanding of how a purgatorial approach to plotting comes to characterize a fundamentally modern philosophy about storytelling, one more commonly ascribed to modernists and postmodernists in their "resistance to plot" but which, upon investigation, has its origin in the uneventful fictions of Victorian novelists who sought to represent maturity.

The book ends with a coda, "Descent and Tradition," that further explores how myths of descent function as the archetypal quest story of adulthood, appearing in each of the novels in this study as they reveal the transformations that result from an immersion in the past. This story of mature renovation through preservation provides

another way of thinking about the overarching history of the novel in the period between Newman and Woolf, for each story of descent builds on previous ones to form a continuous tradition of recounting the challenges and adventures of maturity.