

# READING VICTORIAN SCHOOLROOMS

Childhood and Education in Nineteenth-Century Fiction



ELIZABETH GARGANO

READING VICTORIAN  
SCHOOLROOMS

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ELIZABETH GARGANO

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*For Peter and Joe*

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## SERIES EDITOR'S FOREWORD

Dedicated to furthering original research in children's literature and culture, the Children's Literature and Culture series includes monographs on individual authors and illustrators, historical examinations of different periods, literary analyses of genres, and comparative studies on literature and the mass media. The series is international in scope and is intended to encourage innovative research in children's literature with a focus on interdisciplinary methodology.

Children's literature and culture are understood in the broadest sense of the term *children* to encompass the period of childhood up through adolescence. Owing to the fact that the notion of childhood has changed so much since the origination of children's literature, this Routledge series is particularly concerned with transformations in children's culture and how they have affected the representation and socialization of children. While the emphasis of the series is on children's literature, all types of studies that deal with children's radio, film, television, and art are included in an endeavor to grasp the aesthetics and values of children's culture. Not only have there been momentous changes in children's culture in the last fifty years, but there have been radical shifts in the scholarship that deals with these changes. In this regard, the goal of the Children's Literature and Culture series is to enhance research in this field and, at the same time, point to new directions that bring together the best scholarly work throughout the world.

**Jack Zipes**

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## INTRODUCTION

“I have heard strange things of schools,” muses the wise Fanny Williams in Frederic Farrar’s classic schoolboy narrative, *Eric: or Little by Little* (1858). She goes on to reflect that school may well ruin her young cousin Eric—as indeed it does (12). As the novel’s title indicates, exposure to hardened, older schoolboys wears away Eric’s moral character “little by little”; eventually, guilt-ridden because of his misadventures at school, he runs away, falls ill, and dies at home, redeemed by and reconciled to his family circle. Quaint and dated as her words appear today, Fanny spoke for many Victorians. As education became increasingly institutionalized throughout the century, numerous Victorian school narratives portrayed harsh, excessively regimented classrooms, contrasting the looming specter of educational standardization with a supposedly nurturing tradition of domestic instruction that dated back to Rousseau’s *Émile* (1762). In practice, individual novelists often accepted a degree of educational standardization as a social necessity. Yet as this book argues, during the Victorian era, fictive schoolroom scenes ritualistically dramatize a perceived imbalance between the rapid institutionalization of education and the shrinking realm of domestic instruction. This contest between institutional and domestic spheres involved high stakes, as writers and the reading public grappled with the questions of who had the right to define and shape the experience of childhood, and where that process of definition would take place. As adults with competing agendas strove to reenvision the space, nature, and status of childhood, journalists, novelists, and educational reformers resorted to vivid spatial metaphors to define emotionally freighted choices. Depicting the space of school as a divisive, segmented, and conflicted site, numerous novelists also portrayed this problematic territory as analogous to the culturally defined terrain of modern childhood.

Today in England and America, with the spaces of a vast national school system cemented in rules and regulations as well as in brick and mortar, Victorian school narratives help us recover the “strangeness”

## 2 • Reading Victorian Schoolrooms

that the fictional Fanny Williams associated with the emergence of a rigorously defined school space. At the beginning of the century, England had no national system of schools, no mandatory primary education, and few assumptions about what constituted a standardized curriculum—a body of knowledge that all children should study. By the end of the century all three elements were in place. This dramatic story of educational, historical, and cultural change resonated through a diverse array of nineteenth-century school narratives, including mainstream novels and those designed specifically for child readers.

The journey toward a nationally funded school system was slow and circuitous, marked by a series of legislative milestones. In the 1830s and 1840s, the state authorized limited funding to selected schools. In 1862, the Revised Code mandated inspections for a mixed bag of government-affiliated schools. Finally, the 1870 Education Act extended and consolidated the tentatively defined system already in place. In fact, the growth of a national school system was only one component, albeit a major one, of the proliferation of schools across the English landscape. Increasingly, Victorian children attended an assortment of day schools, private boarding schools, factory schools, parish schools, and academies for dissenters sponsored by the British and Foreign School Society, not to mention the illustrious public schools reserved for social elites. Class loyalties and tensions worked in complex ways to valorize schooling outside the home. Inspired in part by conservative fears about extending the franchise to artisans and working-class voters, legislators gradually carved out a national school system to educate the new pool of potential voters in middle- and upper-class values, while simultaneously teaching them to be content with their current economic and social status. This conflicted project opened avenues for upward mobility while often overtly discouraging it. A concurrent expansion of the elite public and private schools, which offered a classical education in Latin and Greek, presented a similarly confused picture. If classical education represented the social marker of the “gentleman,” its expansion problematized class boundaries even as the elite schools served as bastions of exclusivity and privilege. As schooling outside the home both reinforced and blurred class differences, it also challenged traditional assumptions about the primacy of domestic education and parental control.

In fact, the proliferation of Victorian schools inspired an initially powerful but gradually diminishing resistance toward institutionalized education, embodied in a variety of fictive school narratives. To consider first the rich and conflicted genre of school stories written primarily for children, *Eric*, published at mid-century, harshly and unapologetically

critiques school life; by the end of the century, however, Evelyn Sharp's *The Making of a Schoolgirl* (1897) describes the world of school in glowing terms, as a gateway to passionate friendships and intellectual and emotional independence. Though often portrayed by later readers as an example of mindless school boosterism, Thomas Hughes's *Tom Brown's Schooldays* (1857) in fact offers a much more mixed portrait of school life than is generally allowed. To isolate such tales from mainstream literary works for adult readers would be, for my purposes, a critical misstep. Charles Dickens, Charlotte Brontë, and George Eliot not only grappled with the same issues, images, and themes central to the work of Farrar and Hughes, but the boundaries between literature for children and adults remained shifting and permeable during this period, allowing for rich mutual exchanges between children's tales and mainstream novels.

Although the novel's increasingly positive depiction of school life reflects society's rising level of comfort with education outside the home, the Victorians' abiding suspicion of institutionalized schooling should not be underestimated. The many fictive and journalistic attacks on institutionalized schooling critiqued not only the expanding national schools, but also an array of church and charity-sponsored schools, as well as schools established by private individuals as commercial ventures. For many Victorians, the institutionalization of education represented a wrenching, inspiring, and terrifying sea change that would alter not only social and familial relations, but the very notion of childhood itself.

The genre of the novel was in fact in a unique position to dramatize Victorian fears about education outside the home. As many critics have maintained, both the theme of education and the educative project have been central to the novel's development. A dramatic example is the international influence of Rousseau's groundbreaking *Émile*, widely accepted in its day as both a novel and an educational treatise. *Émile* serves as an early example of the *bildungsroman*, which strove to educate readers experientially rather than through didactic injunctions, as they vicariously suffered through the ordeals and rejoiced at the rewards of the fictive protagonists with whom they identified. This aspect of the *bildungsroman*—and the *bildungsroman* component within many mainstream Victorian novels—allowed novelists to cast their work (whether accurately or not) as a form of *domestic education*, a jeopardized bulwark against a rising tide of institutionalization. Thus, as I will argue, the education debates and the vivid schoolroom scenes that mesmerized readers of Victorian fictions are far more central to understanding the nineteenth-century English novel than has been

generally acknowledged. Conceptions of childhood, schooling, and the nature of novel reading converge in some of the most dramatic and influential schoolroom scenes in the work of Dickens, Brontë, Eliot, and others.

Harriet Martineau's *The Crofton Boys* (1841), a children's novel relatively neglected today, depicts a school where boys torment and torture each other under the distant supervision of relatively disengaged schoolmasters. Martineau's schoolboy hero pays a high price for his education: his foot must be amputated after a vicious attack by older schoolboys. The highly educated George Eliot, who wept over *The Crofton Boys*, shared a similar suspicion of institutionalized education. Strikingly, she affirmed "the superiority of the home education" over institutionalized schooling, in part because it promoted "personal responsibility and activity," developing not only the intellect but also the "emotions in connection with the common needs of life."<sup>1</sup> In novels for both adults and children, images of the schoolroom mediate institutional and domestic space and consequently foreground the tensions within Victorian assumptions about the private and the public realms. Easily recognized by its sterile rows of benches and its pared-down, functionalist, rectilinear spaces, the standardized classroom also evokes an increasingly regimented and codified pedagogy, which depicted the child's mind as a simple container waiting to be filled with adult knowledge. To probe, satirize, and combat this model of a hyperrational pedagogy, which appeared to develop the mind at the expense of the heart, body, and spirit, novelists not only critiqued the schoolroom itself; they also turned to other semi-domesticated spaces within the school but outside the classroom proper. Often invoked in contemporary educational discourse, these spaces furthered the fictive critique of standardized education. Along with the new standardized classroom, the locus and emblem of institutionalized learning, such domesticated pedagogical spaces constitute the major focus of this book. They include the common phenomenon of the *teacher's room*, a site adjacent to the schoolroom that embodied a traditional link between teaching and parenting; the *school garden*, which allegedly fostered the natural modes of learning endorsed by Rousseau and his influential pedagogical descendants Pestalozzi and Froebel;<sup>2</sup> and the curative *school sickroom*, which strove to heal a mind and body overburdened by a narrow intellectual regimen. In each case, these competing educational sites embodied varied ways of reintegrating domesticity into the space of school, aiming to correct what increasingly seemed a dangerously standardized and regimented pedagogy.<sup>3</sup>

In my narrative of a rich fictive discourse engaging with cultural change, schoolroom depictions serve as persuasive vehicles of social critique, even though that critique may be conflicted, halting, and ambivalent, confused by middle-class blind spots and didacticism. As practitioners of the middle-class genre of school narratives, Victorian novelists sometimes attempt to defend working-class children from what they see as a soulless standardized pedagogy, in part because they recognize such standardization as an implicit threat to middle-class children as well. Yet when they actually come to envision alternative educational spaces such as the domesticated teacher's room, the "natural" school garden, and the curative school sickroom, they are most likely to stage these redemptive spaces as the locus of middle-class education. Like Rousseau, who doubted that the laboring classes could benefit from an individualized domestic instruction, middle-class novelists generally allow the boundaries of class to limit their horizon.

Nevertheless, the mixed motives and conflicting agendas that novelists bring to bear on the subject of school open spaces for insight, interrogation, and reform. Even when explicitly engaged in reshaping the psychological and social spaces of childhood experience, novelists often evoke layered images that undermine their overt agendas. Henri Lefebvre usefully sums up this dynamic, arguing that socially mandated "representations of space" (space as it is conceived in a legal or official document, for instance) repeatedly come into conflict with the metaphorical, imagistic, and emotionally freighted spaces depicted by artists and writers (images of space as it is lived through the senses and emotions).<sup>4</sup> No wonder, then, that the Victorians relished the emotionally fraught school scenes in novels. As novelists shaped schools out of words instead of brick and mortar, their words nevertheless had direct consequences on actual material structures. The public's horror at Dickens's portrait of Dotheboys Hall, where half-starved boys sank into imbecility, forced numerous Yorkshire boarding schools to close. Similarly, debates raged about the conditions at the Cowan Bridge School, which was seen as the model for Lowood in Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847), where orphaned girls suffered through famine, fear, and fever.<sup>5</sup>

Given the broad range of diverse texts that my study seeks to integrate, I must add a few words about my critical methodology and aims. In the effort to recoup the too-often neglected genre of the school novel, critics and scholars understandably draw sharp distinctions between school stories for child readers and mainstream Victorian fictions. As I have already suggested, however, the Victorians found such distinctions less necessary. Clearly, adult readers relished such widely discussed texts as *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) and *Tom Brown's Schooldays*

(1857), and in a literary culture that emphasized reading aloud, children could experience mainstream novels along with other family members. Dickens, who plays a major role in my analysis, exemplifies the difficulty of drawing hard and fast distinctions between writers based on their projected audiences. If his bleak school portraits in novels like *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838–1839) and *Dombey and Son* (1846–1848) aim to alert adult readers to the dangers of miseducating their children, Dickens was also a children’s author when he wrote his educational *Child’s History of England* (1851–1853), and a journalist when he published his popular school visits in *Household Words*, the journal he edited from 1850 through 1859. Thus, *Dombey*, *The Child’s History*, and the school visits in *Household Words* engage with pedagogical agendas in clearly related ways, albeit inflected by generic differences. Recent critics, such as Sandra L. Beckett and Katharine Capshaw Smith, emphasize the rich cross-fertilization between adult and children’s fiction, “unsettling lines between adult and child audiences, appropriating adult texts into children’s culture and vice versa.”<sup>6</sup> In novels for adult and child readers alike, then, fictive images of the schoolroom staked out ideological positions within the education debates, conjuring up instructional sites that were by turns utopian or coercive, inspiring or deadening. My project places so-called mainstream novelists and children’s authors in mutual dialogue, interrogating the sometimes tacit implication that children’s literature developed in isolation from other forms of fiction.

Further, I situate a diverse array of novelists, including Charlotte Brontë, Farrar, Hughes, Dickens, Martineau, May, and Carroll, within what Thomas Huxley in 1868 called the “chorus of voices” attempting to define education according to often contradictory ends and purposes. Celebrating education as “the great panacea for human troubles,” the chorus remains divided about what a good education is, what it might be, and what it ought to accomplish (“Liberal Education” 27). Victorian fictions, school logbooks, educational treatises, and texts on classroom management share in what Gallagher and Greenblatt describe as the “dense networks of meaning” embedded in any given culture (26); to vary the metaphor, such fictions articulate crucial “lines of force” in the web of associations, ideas, and images that make up the nineteenth-century debate on education in England. As agonistic sites where the young protagonists are divested of childhood and groomed for adulthood, school scenes bring together the most intimate and personal experiences with the broadest of social vistas. They build bridges between the pupil’s private interior spaces and the public face of a society in transition.

Following a site-based approach, I examine seminal locations within and adjacent to the schoolroom. As Chapter 1 documents, the professionalization of pedagogy in the nineteenth century required a site, a system, and a theory: the rectilinear and functionalist space of the new standardized classroom is reproduced, theoretically at least, all across England in the national school system, as pedagogical theory increasingly insists that children's mental development fits a standard pattern. Drawing on the work of recent theorists of space, including Michel de Certeau and Henri Lefebvre, I explore Dickens's ambivalent depictions of schoolroom space, contextualizing them within contemporary arguments about school architecture and pedagogy. Dickens suggests that the loss or diminution of domesticity warps the child pupil's sensibility, and that standardized schooling may well threaten the very nature of childhood itself as it is traditionally understood.

Chapters 2 and 3 venture outside the classroom proper to examine, respectively, the marginalized place of domesticity at school and the role of the school garden. Both chapters incorporate an analysis of Rousseau's *Émile*, which dramatically influenced the Victorians' view of domesticity and nature at school. Chapter 2 examines a territory supposedly antithetical to the regulated, standardized classroom, the shifting and flexible space of domestic education imaged in the teacher's private room. Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and Dickens's *David Copperfield* deftly deploy images of domestic education within institutionalized settings as a means of cultural critique. In their work, however, the strict division between institutional and domestic education is also a problematic distinction, often in danger of collapsing because the germs of institutionality are revealed within the idealizing rhetoric of domesticity.

Chapter 3 explores the school garden, often portrayed as a corrective for the excesses of the intellectual classroom regimen. An emblem of child-nature, the school garden implicitly links the cultivation of children's minds and bodies with the conversion of raw nature into domesticated property. Constructed in nineteenth-century schools and novels as a gendered space, the school garden cultivates the sensibilities of boys and girls in oppositional ways. *David Copperfield* (1849–1850), *The Crofton Boys*, and *Tom Brown's Schooldays* depict the boys' garden as a level playing field in which boys learn to claim a rugged individualism suitable for future property owners; in striking contrast, in *Jane Eyre* and *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, girls learn to envision their own bodies as property that must be cultivated and controlled.

Chapter 4 locates in the school sickroom a last chance to balance institutional and domestic impulses, retuning both body and mind after the rigors of school life. In the perilous space of the sickroom,

domesticity and institutionality are difficult to reconcile. Portraits of the sickroom in *Nicholas Nickleby*, *Dombey and Son*, *Jane Eyre*, *Tom Brown's Schooldays*, *The Crofton Boys*, and E. J. May's *Dashwood Priory, or Mortimer's College Life* (1856) draw on the contemporary zymotic paradigm of illness to evoke a bleak picture of school life, establishing a tension between healthy growth and intellectual development. Incorporating the contemporary Victorian discourse linking overeducation and illness, as well as Michel Foucault's analysis of the developing space of scientific medicine in *The Birth of the Clinic* (1963), the chapter integrates varied theoretical and historical perspectives.

Because my examination of Victorian fictive schoolrooms involves theorizing space, like the novelists who have inspired my project, I find myself constructing discursive schoolrooms—a series of schools built out of words—in order to explore public and private, institutional and individual conceptions of school space. The ancillary pedagogical sites that I map—the teacher's room, the school garden, and the school sickroom—recede incrementally from the standardized classroom; at the same time, they become more problematic and culturally marginalized spaces, allowing for increasingly defiant attacks on the regimented rigors of school. My site-based analysis aims to remind readers that Victorian school scenes existed within a cluster of assumptions about competing school spaces. For Victorian readers, then, the regimented classroom necessarily evoked the oppositional image of a jeopardized domestic instruction, just as any common object conjures up its own shadow.

My work is indebted to Beverly Lyon Clark's *Regendering the School Story* (1996) and Claudia Nelson's *Boys Will Be Girls* (1991), which recouped previously neglected school narratives, exploring the school novel's role in fostering assumptions about the limits and possibilities of gender. My admiration for these critical examinations prompts me to draw on their insights and analyses within the cultural context of Victorian education debates. Finally, my study, which aims to chart a fictive conversation inspired in part by the development of a standardized, increasingly regulated school system, must position itself in relation to Foucauldian arguments explicating the realm of bureaucratic surveillance and its expanding reach throughout the modern era. In recent years, such literary critics as Nancy Armstrong, Joseph Litvak, and D. A. Miller have illuminated the purview of surveillance in Victorian fiction, evoking a landscape very much like Paul Dombey's "last view" of his coercive (and ultimately fatal) school, which the dying boy recalls as "always a dream, full of eyes" (Dickens, *Dombey* 204).<sup>7</sup> In *Discipline and Punish* (1975), many of Foucault's most telling arguments revolve around space. Modern discipline, he emphasizes, requires both

the “enclosure” (141) and “partitioning” of space: “Discipline organizes an analytical space,” assigning individuals to their proper place within an architecture of inspective supervision (143).

Arguably, the territory of school is defined by varieties of inspection, from the limpid gaze of *Émile*’s all-seeing tutor Jean-Jacques to the coercive inspective visits of *Jane Eyre*’s Brocklehurst, or the dutiful and wistful school reports of a Matthew Arnold (1889), dispirited by what he regards as unimaginative teaching.<sup>8</sup> Yet this very catalog of inspective acts surely hints at difficulties with Foucault’s unified and totalizing vision of educational developments. As varieties of inspection proliferate, they become less a figure than a ground, less a story to be told than a blank page still waiting for an inscription. Inspective agendas are not necessarily equivalent, and the dense inspective atmosphere of a schoolroom, whether Rousseau’s or Brocklehurst’s, nevertheless reveals blind spots, gaps, and hidden corners, along with (to vary the metaphor) silences, miscommunications, and other failures of speech. As Michel de Certeau argues in *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1980), “Foucault’s analysis of the structures of power” also illuminates an alternative “pathway” that may be “inscribed” as either its “consequence” or its “reciprocal”: “one can follow the swarming activity of these procedures that, far from being regulated or eliminated by panoptic administration, have reinforced themselves in a proliferating illegitimacy, developed and insinuated themselves into the networks of surveillance” (96).

Such a reading, which entails examining the ground on which the Foucauldian narrative inscribes its figure, allows Certeau to acknowledge the “unreadable but stable tactics,” which carve a space for the “surreptitious creativities” that are “merely concealed by the frantic mechanisms and discourses of the observational organization” (96).

Admittedly, Certeau’s delineation of the shifting and fluid movements of urban life primarily emphasizes the randomness that circulates through unenclosed spaces, in contrast to the walled-in spaces of a school. Yet even within the partitioned experience of school, such random or unexpected groupings exist, often dramatized by novelists as gaps in the structure of a metaphorical, institutional architecture—spaces that permit transgressions and secrets.

Drawing on Foucauldian arguments when they illuminate specific images and agendas, I nevertheless aim to chart not a broad highway toward standardization and inspective interactions, but rather a series of circuitous engagements between domesticity and institutionality, as defined and circumscribed by distinct yet mutually supportive school sites. In Victorian fiction, institutional and domestic spaces appear not

as static entities, but rather as provisional, shifting realms engaged in a dynamic and dialectical relationship. Institutionalality is frequently defined by means of its supposed opposite, domesticity; similarly, domesticity may be seen as a powerful and positive force or conversely as a *residuum*—what is left when the realms of institutional space have been walled in (or out). As they creatively challenge each other, the two realms nevertheless enjoy a mutually reinforcing commerce. If the boundary between them shifts according to one's perspective, their oppositionality is nevertheless useful as the two realms are configured and reconfigured to achieve specific social ends.

As institutional and domestic sites are partitioned off from each other within the school, the child protagonist's sensibility reflects such partitioning. While the institutional classroom cultivates the child's mind, domestic pedagogy supposedly nurtures the child's heart. At the same time, the vigorous activity of the school garden and the healing potential of the school sickroom imprint themselves on the child's jeopardized body. If the schoolroom enters the modern world through a complex mapping of spatial partitioning and subordination, the modern child's sensibility is dramatized as similarly divided and regulated. In this sense, Victorian fictions increasingly cast the space of school as analogous to the experiential spaces of modern childhood.

Within the complex spatial partitioning of school experience, the mid-nineteenth-century novel tends to ally itself with the tradition of domestic education, suggesting that the institutionalization of childhood through standardized education jeopardizes specifically "novelistic" ways of learning, knowing, and processing experience. It is no accident that institutional schooling and modern children's literature appear to grow and flower together during the modern era. Frequently appearing at odds (as numerous Victorian tales relish depictions of children who flout authority), they are nevertheless intimately linked. At the same time, the flexible conception of a relatively unregulated childhood experience (standing in contradistinction to coercive schooling) is central to paradigmatic plot structures within the mainstream novel as well.