

Neo-Mythos: Folklore and Subversion in Neal Stephenson's *The Diamond Age: or, A Young Lady's Illustrated Primer*

Neo-Victorian in design, Neal Stephenson's *The Diamond Age: or, A Young Lady's Illustrated Primer* creates a fragmented utopian/dystopian future where microscopic aerostats, and humans through them, can manipulate the world at will. As a tribute to Dickens' *The Old Curiosity Shop*, both literally and figuratively, the novel skirts a Vingean Singularity while focusing on a little, impoverished girl on the margins. Not truly a pastiche nor a parody, *The Diamond Age* contradictorily depicts Little Nell as both a stabilizing and subversive force in society with the help of a unique, and arguably fetishized, artifact: *A Young Lady's Illustrated Primer*. With this paper I seek to briefly examine how Neal Stephenson uses fairy tales and folklore within the novel to destabilize the Victorian concept of idealized femininity venerated in Dickens' *The Old Curiosity Shop*. My purpose is to ascertain if Stephenson is successful in transforming Nell into a fully-actualized and subversive agent within the novel and, thus, undermining Dickens' construction, or if Stephenson's Nell remains little more than a reimagining of the indoctrinated puppet he seeks to criticize.

For those of you who are unfamiliar with Stephenson's *The Diamond Age*, the novel is a future vision of the twenty-first century where the world is not just fragmented, but Balkanized into countless small "phyles" whose identity is determined as much by their geographic location as their assumption of a historical period and with its ascribed ideological affiliations. With the advent of nanotechnology, even the poorest of society have a "mediatron," which is a 3D immersive entertainment system, and a "matter complier," or M.C. for short, which allows for the production of anything from food to furniture. However, this is also a world where capitalism still exists. The wealthiest phyle in this future is the Neo-Victorians, or "Vickys," who are the culmination of every stereotypical image of nineteenth century society – rigidly patriarchal,

morally conservative, sexually repressed, and effusing a general worship for science and technology. The least of all are the Thetes who have no phyle and live in a general state of poverty and depravity within the Leased Territories, which are akin to Dickens' worst depiction of industrialized hades.

This is where the audience finds Nell who has just "grown too long for her old crib mattress" (Stephenson 43). With the help of *The Young Lady's Primer* and its fairy tale menagerie, which was stole by and given to her by her brother Harv, Nell embarks on a Dickensian journey that frees her from a deadbeat mother, who subjects Nell and Harv to a series of abusive and predatory boyfriends, through an artistic conclave, and eventually to the heights of Neo-Victorian society. In a surprising twist of fate, Nell becomes Princess Nell, the leader of an entire army of other liberated little girls, battling the onslaught of the Celestial Kingdom as it exorcises the land of "foreign devils" in a futile attempt to revert China back into an isolationist nation-state. Neal Stephenson's inclusion of this enlaced double narrative involving two parallel worlds that eventually coalesce – the outer world of Nell's material reality and the inner world created by Nell through her interactions with the *Young Lady's Illustrated Primer's* – not only makes *The Diamond Age* unique, but also exceedingly complex and self-referential.

Even without denuding the text of its nanotechnology and fantastic paraphernalia, the revisionary framework Stephenson uses is overt. Stephenson clearly based the design of his narrative off of Dickens' *The Old Curiosity Shop*. Not only is the protagonist in each case a young girl of the same age and name, but there are also a host of other superficial connections between the two texts. For instance, there is Master Humphery and Budd. Dickens' novel beings with Master Humphery wandering the streets as the primary narrator only to be excised at the end of Chapter 3 in order to "leave those who have prominent and necessary parts in it to speak and act for themselves" (35). Likewise, Stephenson's Budd skates the streets committing crimes

until removed from the text brutally as “several dozen of the microscopic explosives known as cookie-cutters detonated in his bloodstream” (43). Other characters that also line up in include David Quilp and Lord Alexander Chunk-Sik Finkle McGraw, who are both the mysterious and powerful beneficiaries behind the scenes, and Mrs. Jarley and Miranda, who are both strong and enterprising female characters who function as surrogate mothers within the novels.

However, to assume Neal Stephenson is doing little more than cannibalizing the linguistic mask of Dickens and the “dead” ideology of the Victorians in order to construct the “Vickys” with uncritical mimicry is missing a salient point. While *The Diamond Age* self-consciously echoes Dickens’ novel, Stephenson’s depiction seems universally antithetical. When comparing them side-by-side, Stephenson’s characters and descriptions take on a satiric, and occasionally amusing, quality in their opposition to Dickens. For example, Quilp is overtly pedophilic and clearly has designs on making Nell his “little cherry-cheeked, red-lipped wife” in *The Old Curiosity Shop* (Dickens 53). This contrasts heavily with Lord Finkle McGraw in *The Diamond Age*. Although no less brooding and cunning, McGraw is focused on his own granddaughter, Elizabeth, and the psychological differences between her and Nell in “emotional stance” and “native intelligence” as he seeks to ascertain the answer to the age-old debate of nature versus nurture (Stephenson 287). Lord Finkle McGraw’s fatherly concern for Nell’s growth into an adult clearly stands in juxtaposition to Quilp’s diabolical schemes of marriage. As such Lord Finkle McGraw functions as both a criticism of Victorian social structures that enable Quilp to exist while simultaneously serving as a commentary on contemporary parenting.

In contrast, Stephenson’s satirical focus and commentary on Nell is far subtler and more nuanced. Nell in *The Old Curiosity Shop* never ages and never changes, and forever remains “a fine girl for her age, but small” (Dickens 63). She is the exemplar of self-sacrificing femininity.

She is the Cinderella *par excellence*. No matter how much coal you heap upon her little shoulders, she will soldier on and never say a word. As her senile and childish grandfather pathetically remarks, “they told me afterwards, that the stones had cut and bruised [her feet]. *She* never told me that. No, no, God bless her!” (Dickens 535). To be fair, Dickens was not the only Victorian writer to idolize a little girl such as Nell. According to Catherine Robson in *Men In Wonderland*, this idealization of little girls by middle-class men has long been acknowledged as a feature of Victorian era literature (3). Robson points out that the feminization of childhood and the era’s romantic nostalgia for the rural past, when combined with the glorification of the “Angel of the House,” lead to only one outcome: the prepubescent little girl as the penultimate symbol of male security (5-8). However, this provided security, as Robson clearly indicates, is dependent on stasis, which is why little Nell in *The Old Curiosity Shop* must die. She cannot grow old. Otherwise, she will fail to realize her role as a symbol of security (55).

While Nell fulfills her appointed task in *The Old Curiosity Shop*, she also attests to a glaring fault on the part of the author. Little Nell bears witness to many of the vulgarities and vagaries of industrial England during her journey, but her representation glosses over certain glaring societal ills. Chief among these are the rigid gender and class boundaries that Dickens clearly despises in so many of his other works because they promote injustice and inequality. Unlike his other works, there is no social justice, no equalizing of the scales, just a little girl meeting an ignominious end destitute and far from home. Dickens’ blind failure to uphold his beliefs is what Neal Stephenson seems particularly critical about in his reimagining of *The Old Curiosity Shop*. In order to lay bare this error, Stephenson employs the quintessential childhood genre that, not altogether coincidentally, Dickens was also a staunch supporter of: the fairy tale. As Jack Zipes remarks in his examination of fairytales in *When Dreams Came True*, Dickens was not only “among the first to criticize the deleterious effects of the industrial revolution,” but

also pivotal in employing fairy tale tropes systematically as “a psychological rejection and rebellion against the ‘norms’ of English society” (115,122). *Oliver Twist* would be a good example of how Dicken’s utilizes the rages to riches archetype commonly found in fairy tales like *Cinderella*. This is no less the case for *The Old Curiosity Shop*, which exploits the carnivalesque atmosphere of the fairy tale to drive the narrative forward.

Jack Zipes explains that the fairy tale is “a manifesto for itself and a social manifesto to blend [the author’s] regressive urges with progressive social concerns without succumbing to overt didacticism” (121). *The Diamond Age* does seem to demonstrate a regressive urge when considering the feudal phyles and the Vicky’s within the work. A fact made all the more apparent when comparing the novel to Stephenson’s previous novel, *Snow Crash*, which similarly explores anarch-capitalist philosophy, but in a cyberpunk setting. Zipes also notes that the more “feminist” fairy tales call into question gender relations and sexual identity while endeavoring “to expose oppression and hypocrisy” within society by using “the power of the imagination as a potent force” for change (Zipes 126,129). The fairy tale then, seems like the perfect tool for Stephenson to use to free Nell from oppression in the narrative and attack the hypocrisy of Dickens’ artificially ascribed Victorian gender categories on which both are based. However, incorporating fairy tale elements realistically within a potential future reality is a difficult task. To solve this problem, Stephenson creates a book within a book: *The Young Lady’s Illustrated Primer*.

The *Primer* could be loosely defined as a nanotechnological version of a present-day e-reader such as the Amazon Kindle, but far more complex. Made up of “smart paper” which consists “of infinitesimal computers sandwiched between mediatrons,” the primer appears to be an extremely advanced visual novel that employs machine learning to analyze the patterns and trends in a reader’s choices to subtly modify that readers behavior and developing psyche

(Stephenson 64). Lord Alexander Chunk-Sik Finkle-McGraw commissions this extraordinary work for his granddaughter Elizabeth as a birthday present. He hires John Percival Hackworth, a well-regarded nanotech engineer of Bespoke, to design the *Primer*. The purpose of the book is to inculcate its owner with subversiveness by mixing a “the nobleman’s emotional stance” with “the pluck to take risks with her life” (81). When Hackworth sees the potential of such a device, he designs an elaborate scheme to filch “a second, secret copy of the *Primer*” to give to his daughter, Fiona (Stephenson 84). On his way to deliver it, Hackworth is assaulted by a small gang of thugs, led by Harv, who capture his illegal copy and give it to Little Nell.

When little Nell opens the stolen *Primer*, the book bonds itself to her and becomes her irrevocable possession. What once was a story about “a little girl name Elizabeth” becomes a story about “a little Princess named Nell” (Stephenson 93, 95). The *Primer* uses Nell as “a datum from which to chart a psychological terrain” and set up a parallel fantasy world that matches that terrain (Stephenson 106). The *Primer* adapts and adopts specific environmental stimuli in Nell’s real reality as it composes a story that gradually shapes “the unique psychological terrain” of Nell’s mind and personality into a supposedly outstanding member of Neo-Victorian society (Stephenson 107). When she finally reaches adulthood, it appears that the *Primer* has had only marginal success. Even though Nell is a successful graduate from Miss Matheson’s Academy of the Three Graces, which is attended by only the highest echelon of Neo-Victorian society, she shows no inclination toward rebelliousness. Unlike the other two girls who eventually receive a copy of the *Primer*, Elizabeth Finkle-McGraw and Fiona Hackworth, Nell appears to be nothing more than a fully-grown version of the Nell in *The Old Curiosity Shop*: a perfect example of female self-deprecation. On the surface, there is no dramatic tension between the adult Nell in *The Diamond Age*, and the childhood Nell in *The Old Curiosity Shop*. There seems to be no

personality conflict or friction from a narrative point-of-view – just the realization of the Victorian ideal of femininity.

Nevertheless, there is a true disparity in their immutable frames, but it only becomes obvious when you realize there are not two Nells, but three. There is Dickens' Nell, a prepubescent girl struck down by tuberculosis, Stephenson's Nell, a child inculcated into Vicky society, and the *Primer's* Princess Nell, the Nell who becomes the leader of her own phyle of girls at the end of the novel. The différence is created by the *Primer's* mimetic quality of mirroring the fictional world of *The Diamond Age* as a fairy tale. The story of Princess Nell in the *Primer* and the story of Nell in *The Diamond Age* do not always fluidly interconnect with each other, which marks them as separate entities. Nell even remarks, at one point, that she feels the *Primer* misled her to “suppose that killing Burt would be a simple matter, and that it would improve my life” (Stephenson 281). Over time, the discontinuity grows more pronounced and Nell in *The Diamond Age* acquires “the knack of translating [the *Primer's*] lessons into the real world” (Stephenson 282). According to Sherryl Vint, the contradiction between the representations provided by the device and Nell's actual social experiences allow Nell to resist the subject position that the *Primer* is attempting to instill and create a contrasting position (143). The rift created between narrative realities provides a space for actual agency, which allows Nell to resist the call of ideology and articulate the reverse discourse (Vint 143). Nevertheless, this articulated subversion is not explicitly connected to Dickens, but implicitly so, since the actual subversion is happening entirely within the narrative of *The Diamond Age* as Nell subverts the narrative in the novel with the narrative in the *Primer*.

More precisely, Nell's narrative, in the beginning of the novel and the *Primer*, appears to be little more than a typical Dickensian *bildungsroman*. However, the narrative of Nell's coming of age in her material reality does not end in her assuming an individual and mature identity –

both psychologically and physically speaking as it should. Instead, she ends up assuming her role as depicted in the *Primer*, Princess Nell, the royal leader of the Mouse Army. She assumes a fully realized fairytale role in her material reality. At the end of the novel, her identity is not separate, but merged with her technologically constructed identity in the *Young Lady's Primer*. Nell is no longer a “lady” or a “princess” as defined by the ideological precepts of her retrograde society. Nell is posthuman. N. Katherine Hayles defines the posthuman subject as “an amalgam,” or “a collection of heterogeneous components” that form a “material-informational entity” (3). In this sense, Nell is part of a system that comprises her as the material element and the *Primer* as the informational construct. There is entanglement of the technologic with the biologic subject. Nell’s subject position in regard to the *Young Lady's Primer* shifts within the novel as the roles and boundaries in which each operate “undergo continuous construction and reconstruction” (Hayles 3). The end result of this shifting construction, which continually negates and reaffirms Nell’s agency, provides no a priori way to distinguish Nell’s self-will from the other-will of the *Primer* (Hayles 4). The boundary that clearly should separate woman from machine is blurred, so that there is difficulty discerning when the data is made flesh or when the flesh made data.

At the end of the narrative, Nell is neither Dickens’ Little Nell nor Princess Nell in the *Primer*. Nell has subsumed the entire identity of both to become an amalgamation, a synthesis of her own choosing. Neither Nell of *The Diamond Age*, as a perfect facsimile of Dickens’ Little Nell in *The Old Curiosity Shop*, nor the *Primer's* Nell have been erased. Rather, the subject of the latter has simply overwritten aspects of the former leaving no discernible way to tear them apart. If we extend this to its logical conclusion, then *A Young Lady's Illustrated Primer* has overwritten *The Diamond Age* as well. Hence, the ambiguity of the title is explained. The idealized femininity of Victorian society made manifest in the beginning of the narrative has been modified by the strong female subject from a fairytale at the end of the novel. Stephenson

has freed Dickens' Little Nell from the gender and class inequality that conspired in her original death at the end of *The Old Curiosity Shop* by utilizing fairytale conventions. No longer beholden to the rigid boundaries of her fictional reality, Nell assumes a position of complete equality at the end of the novel. She is equal to all as the queen of her own domain in *The Diamond Age* and *A Young Lady's Illustrated Primer*.



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