

“When We Were Orphans”

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Do Dickens' orphans have anything in common with the orphans portrayed in TV news reports? Can an understanding of fictional orphan figures help us understand the troves of orphans *left behind after* natural disasters, epidemics, and genocides?

The goal of this seminar is to create a dialogue between interpretations of fictional orphans and social understandings of orphans. In order to make this connection, we will read works of fiction, sociological and anthropological case studies, and legislation that addresses the “orphan problem.” We will examine the different ways in which literary authors, social scientists, and legislators interpret this trope and perform diverse readings of each text.

We will begin our dialogue by discussing the differences among fictional depictions of orphans. In order to structure this discussion, I have included in the reading list some canonical texts and some texts that are more obscure. I think that this mixture will provide us with an opportunity to critique the two prevalent literary notions of the orphan, the Romantic and the Victorian.

The prospect of critiquing literary notions of the orphan implies that there is not a single definition of “orphan.” Indeed, two terms that are commonly used to define a person as an orphan, “child” and “abandoned,” prove difficult to define as well. Freud complicates matters further by suggesting that orphanhood is a part of every child's fantasy and a step towards “the liberation of the individual.” Freud's orphans are not abandoned; they declare themselves orphaned.

Theorizing and defining the orphan are noble undertakings, but shouldn't we be dealing with ‘real’ orphans? Perhaps, but it is only through analyzing the relationship between ‘real’ orphans and orphans as they are portrayed in fiction, case studies, and legislation that we can begin to understand what it means to be an orphan.