

THE CINDERELLA SYNDROME

Regarding the Struggles of Stepchildren

These days, more Americans have seen the musical *Les Miz* than have read Victor Hugo's novel *Les Misérables*. In both versions, however, Jean Valjean adopts the young and vulnerable Cosette, who had been living as the fosterling of Monsieur and Madame Thénardier. In both versions, Cosette's situation under the roof of the innkeeper is less than enviable, although unlike the musical's presentation of the Thénardiens as lovable scoundrels, Hugo's account is much grimmer and their treatment of Cosette sinister and downright abusive:

Cosette was in her usual place, seated on the cross-bar under the kitchen table near the hearth. Clad in rags, her bare feet in wooden clogs, she was knitting woolen stockings for the Thénardier children by the light of the fire. . . . Two fresh childish voices could be heard laughing and chattering in the next room, those of Éponine and Azelma [the Thénardiens' biological offspring; in the musical version, Azelma was deleted]. A leather strap hung from a nail in the wall near the hearth.

As to the condition of Cosette herself:

She was thin and pale, and so small that although she was eight years old she looked no more than six. Her big eyes in their

shadowed sockets seemed almost extinguished by the many tears they had shed. Her lips were drawn in the curve of habitual suffering that is to be seen on the faces of the condemned and the incurably sick. Her hands . . . were smothered with chilblains . . . she was always shivering. . . . Her clothes were a collection of rags which would have been lamentable in summer and in winter were disgraceful—torn garments of cotton, with no wool anywhere. Here and there her skin was visible, and her many bruises bore witness to her mistress's [Madame Thénardier's] attentions. Her bare legs were rough and red, and the hollow between her shoulder-blades was pathetic.

By contrast, note the state of the Thénardiens' own children, Éponine and Azelma:

They were two very pretty little girls with a look of the town rather than of the country, very charming, the one with glossy chestnut curls and the other with long dark plaits down her back, both of them lively and plump and clean with a glow of freshness and health that was pleasant to see. They were warmly clad but with a maternal skill which ensured that the thickness of the materials did not detract from their elegance. Winter was provided for but spring was not forgotten. They brought brightness with them, and they entered like reigning beauties. There was assurance in their looks and gaiety, and in the noise they made.

Next, jump ahead from a nineteenth-century French best-seller to a publishing phenomenon of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century: Harry Potter. Any child can confirm that Harry's early days, growing up as a stepchild within—but not part of—the Dursley family, were more like the experience of Cosette than like that of Éponine and Azelma. The Dursleys' own son, the despicable Dudley, is ugly, stupid, and spoiled beyond comprehension. Photos of the young brat adorn the

Dursley walls, which reveal “no sign at all that another boy lived in the house, too.”¹

Contrasted with the overindulged Dudley, Harry never gets enough to eat, never gets new clothes, never gets toys, never gets a birthday celebration, sleeps in a cupboard under the stairs, does menial labor, and is yelled at constantly. Moreover—and for many children, perhaps the unkindest cut of all—Dudley gets to have birthday parties and presents, but not Harry:

Harry got slowly out of bed and started looking for socks. He found a pair under his bed and, after pulling a spider off one of them, put them on. Harry was used to spiders, because the cupboard under the stairs was full of them, and that was where he slept. When he was dressed he went down the hall into the kitchen. The table was almost hidden beneath all Dudley's birthday presents. . . . Every year on Dudley's birthday, his parents took him and a friend out for the day, to adventure parks, hamburger restaurants, or the movies. Every year, Harry was left behind with Mrs. Figg, a mad old lady who lived two streets away. Harry hated it there. The whole house smelled of cabbage and Mrs. Figg made him look at photographs of all the cats she'd ever owned.

Harry is also expected to wear the equivalent of Cosette's rags:

One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. . . . There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water. “What's this?” he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to

¹ Granted, Harry is nephew to Dudley's mother, so presumably a bit of kin selection ameliorates his rotten treatment, but our point is that compared to the overindulged Dudley, Harry is a stepchild indeed.

ask a question. "Your new school uniform . . . I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you."

Shades of Cinderella? Indeed. But Cosette and Harry aren't the only cases of abused stepchildren depicted via story. In fact, Cinderella herself, unlike Mickey Mouse or Donald Duck, did not spring fully formed out of the Walt Disney studios, or even out of the fertile forehead of Uncle Walt himself. She exists, in various forms, in many cultures, but always with the same recognizable tale of woe.

In an ancient Japanese folktale, a kind, gentle, and honest young lady named Benizara was much put-upon by her stepmother. Benizara was so virtuous (and also—a lovely Japanese touch—so good at extemporizing a poem) that she wins the heart of a nobleman. Her wicked stepmother, however, tries to substitute her own daughter—Cinderella's (sorry, Benizara's) stepsister, Kakezara—at the wedding, but stepmom screws up and Kakezara ends up dead. Which is probably just as well for Benizara: there is a broad-leaved and fiendishly sharp-spined plant, similar to the devil's club found in the Pacific Northwest, known in Japan as *mamako-no-shiri-nugui*, or stepchild's bottom wiper!

And that's not all. According to evolutionary psychologists Martin Daly and Margo Wilson, the Russian folktale of Baba Yaga begins as follows:

Once upon a time there was an old couple. The husband lost his wife and married again. But he had a daughter by his first marriage, a young girl, and she found no favour in the eyes of her evil stepmother, who used to beat her, and consider how she could get her killed outright.²

The stepmother urges the girl to go to her "aunt," sister of the stepmother, who is a witch, a cannibal, and, moreover, not very

² M. Daly and M. Wilson, *The Truth About Cinderella* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).

nice, but our Slavic Cindy cleverly consults her real aunt first and thereby learns how to elude the snare. "As soon as her father heard all about it, he became wroth with his wife, and shot her. But he and his daughter lived on and flourished." Living and flourishing is precisely what Cinderellas around the world have had a hard time doing, especially if their welfare is left to the not-so-tender mercies of stepparents. In this regard, the Grimm brothers' fairy tales are especially grim as well as consistent: in addition to Cindy herself, there is also Snow White, Hansel and Gretel, and The Juniper Tree. Whenever a deserving child is mistreated, *cherchez la stepmother*.

From Cinderella and her fellow sufferers to *Les Misérables* and Harry Potter, and lots more in between: what in Darwin's name is going on?

Biology, that's what. Evolution frowns on taking care of someone else's kids because there is no payoff in offering parental assistance when you aren't really the parent, when the genes thus promoted are not your own. From the dawn of human existence to the present day, people have lived in an amazing variety of different social systems, from capitalism to communism, feudalism to democracy, hunting and gathering to high-tech lifestyles of the rich, famous, and forgettable; we can be industrialists, serfs, monarchists, democrats, subsistence farmers, computer programmers. Yet for all this diversity, there is not now and has never been a single society in which people routinely give up their reproduction to someone else. Sure, we may delegate child care (typically for pay), but actual reproduction? No way. People indulge in all sorts of specialization and division of labor, but propelling genes into the future is something nearly everyone chooses to do for him- or herself. As we saw in Chapter 6, this can be achieved by promoting the success of relatives; the most obvious and direct route to genetic advancement, however, is to package your own genes in your own child. (More

accurately, for genes to package copies of themselves in bodies known as children.)

The clear-cut biological significance of reproduction is why altruism is so interesting: when we first encounter it, altruism appears to go against this most basic principle of the living world. Being a parent, by contrast, is so obvious, so appropriate, so biologically de rigueur that up until recently it has largely escaped the scrutiny it deserves.

The obviousness of reproduction and parenting derives from the simple fact that it is the most straightforward way for genes to enhance their evolutionary success. If you want something done right, goes the saying, do it yourself. And nowhere in the living world is this more true than when it comes to parenting. Whenever offspring are being produced, fed, trained, kept warm or cool or wet or dry, protected from enemies or introduced to friends, something fundamental is going on: genes are nurturing copies of themselves.

"He that hath wife and children," wrote the sixteenth-century English philosopher Francis Bacon, "hath given hostages to fortune, for they are impediments to great enterprise, either of virtue or mischief." Bacon, one of the great architects of modern science and philosophy, lived too early to understand this important finding of evolution: children may be impediments to some things, but they are also passports to the most pressing enterprise—indeed, the only persistent enterprise—of life itself. In this respect, all living things are hostages, not to fortune but to natural selection.

"We had lots of kids, and trouble and pain," goes the folk song "Kisses Sweeter than Wine," "but oh Lord, we'd do it again." Why would they do it again, given that having kids involves so much trouble and pain? And why did they do it the first time? Hint: not simply because of those oh-so-sweet kisses. In fact, natural selection has only contrived to make love and sex and kisses sweet in the first place because this is how biology gets us to do it.

Try asking spiders of the African species *Stegodyphus mimosarum* about trouble and pain. Comfortably housed within silken nest

chambers woven by the mother just for this purpose, baby spiderlings perch on her arachnid abdomen and cheerfully fill their own bellies with their mother's flesh (or whatever passes for flesh among spiders), eventually killing her in the process.

Why does Mommy *Stegodyphus mimosarum* permit such an outrage? Because they are so irresistibly cute. Or because it feels so wonderfully good, perhaps like having an itch scratched. Or maybe because she simply feels no alternative, like the mammalian need to breathe or circulate blood. Whatever the immediate mechanism, the end result is that her spiderlings are sent off into the world with a full stomach at their mother's expense. This is somewhat more extreme than the suburban parent making sure Junior goes off to school with a freshly made peanut butter and jelly sandwich, but at the most basic biological level it's not altogether different.

By contrast, picture a sleek, plump female elephant seal, maternally nursing her baby. Along comes an interloper, someone else's pup, who attempts to sneak-suckle. This youngster already has a mother, of course, but is trying to cadge an additional meal. (In the immortal phrase coined by elephant seal guru Burney Le Boeuf of the University of California at Santa Cruz, it is seeking to become a "double mother sucker.") What happens? Sometimes the sneaky little tyke succeeds, but most often the seal cow is outraged, and sometimes murderously so: she bites the little thief, occasionally killing him for his larcenous presumption.

Undoubtedly much of the difference between a self-sacrificial spider mom and a milk-withholding momma seal can be chalked up to differences between spiders and elephant seals. But you can still be sure that Spiderwoman wouldn't cheerfully offer herself for dinner to the arachnid equivalent of a swarm of double mother suckers, hatchlings of some *other* reproducing female, just as even the most puppicial pinniped behaves quite benevolently toward her own offspring. Parenthood matters. Parental benevolence in the natural world is not broadcast indiscriminately.

And so we come to a tiny, abundant, and intriguing animal, the Mexican free-tailed bat. Although each female produces only one young at a time, these creatures congregate in immense gatherings, hundreds of thousands and more in a single cave. While the adults are out cruising for insects, the young crowd together in "crèches," with population densities as high as two pups per square inch. Utter chaos appears to reign, especially when females return from foraging and the nurslings swarm all over them. Consistent with good-of-the-species thinking, instead of its good-of-the-gene alternative, batologists had long thought that the babies were fed indiscriminately and rather communistically: from each lactating female according to her ability, to each according to his or her need. Looking at the melee, it is difficult even for a modern biologist to imagine how parent-offspring pairs are ever sorted out.

But when Gary F. McCracken of the University of Tennessee studied these nurseries, he found that female Mexican free-tailed bats were not at all free when it came to dispensing milk. Mothers recognized their own young 83 percent of the time, apparently by sound and smell. Whenever a female suckled young not her own, it was evidently a result of error (on her part) and/or milk stealing (by the little batling). Stepbats need not apply.

Next, a bird, specifically the mountain bluebird. Birds are especially interesting when it comes to parental care because unlike mammals, whose females are uniquely adapted to nurse their offspring, both males and females contribute about equally in the avian world. Rutgers University ornithologist Harry Power asked whether male mountain bluebirds who were manipulated into being stepparents rather than biological parents would behave differently as a result. In one experiment, mountain bluebirds were provided with nest boxes designed to be especially attractive to them. Bluebird pairs quickly moved in and started families, after which the males were removed, leaving the females single parents. They did not remain single for long, however. In what passes for bluebird society, they were "wealthy widows," since good nests are

hard to find, and, thanks to the researchers, each of these females now owned a valuable piece of property. They and their dependent offspring were soon joined by fortune-hunting males. Significantly, these new arrivals—stepfathers of the nestlings—did *not* participate in feeding the youngsters, and only one in twenty-five gave alarm calls in response to possible predators (biological fathers sound an alarm nearly 100 percent of the time).

Similar examples can be multiplied almost indefinitely. Indeed, it is now a commonplace among biologists that parenting in any species means caring for one's own children. Not for other living things the blithe assumption that parental solicitude is a mere social convention, as in this dialog from Bernard Malamud's novel *The Fixer* between Yakov Bok, falsely imprisoned in a Russian jail, and his estranged wife:

"I've come to say I've given birth to a child."

"So what do you want from me? . . ."

". . . it might make things easier if you wouldn't mind saying you are my son's father. . . ."

"Who's the father . . . ?"

". . . He came, he went, I forgot him. . . . Whoever acts the father is the father."

It may seem perverse to cite the above, which points *away* from biology; after all, our basic argument is that most literature makes sense in the light of biology rather than contradicting it. But those few cases that go against evolutionary wisdom stand out because of their rarity. When it comes to parenting, the truth is more often the precise opposite of Mrs. Bok's wishful thinking: whoever is the father acts the father. (The same applies, of course, to mothers, although they are less likely to be deceived.)

Whether bat or bird, seal or spider, living things reproduce because this is the major way their genes propagate themselves. It is also the major reason for love, including love of adults for each other and of parents for children. And it goes a long way toward

telling us why stepparenting is so often a conflicted and difficult business.

In the extreme case, stepparenting among animals leads to outright murder. The paradigmatic example was first reported by anthropologist Sarah Blaffer Hrdy, who studied langur monkeys in India. In this harem-forming species, one male monopolizes a number of adult females and breeds with them, while a corresponding bunch of langur bachelors languish resentfully in the background. Every now and then, a revolution takes place in langurland, whereupon the dominant male is ousted and one of the bachelors takes over the troop of females. In such cases, the newly ascendant male is likely to methodically pursue and kill the nursing infants, who are offspring of the previous male. Without suckling infants, the newly bereaved mothers stop lactating, their ovaries begin cycling once again, and they mate with their offspring's murderer. So, because nursing females are less likely to ovulate, by killing their infants a male not only eliminates the offspring of his predecessor but also improves his own reproductive prospects.

When Hrdy first presented her findings in the late 1970s, anthropologists and even some biologists were disbelieving. How could a behavior that is so hurtful to the species have evolved? (At that time, many scientists were still in thrall to species-level benefit.) It must be some sort of pathology, they insisted, or perhaps a result of overcrowding or malnutrition, or maybe just some weird anecdotal rarity. But subsequent decades have supported Hrdy's interpretation; moreover, a similar pattern of infanticide on the part of animal stepparents has been documented for lions, chimpanzees, and various species of rodents, almost wherever biologists have looked. The evidence is overwhelming: infanticide—and nearly always by nonbiological "parents"—is distressingly commonplace. It may well be downright terrible for the species, but so long as it's a net plus for the infanticidal individual, there it is.

What about people?

The Canadian husband-and-wife team of psychologists Martin Daly and Margo Wilson, professors at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario, have pioneered the evolutionary underpinnings of stepparenting as a risk factor for child neglect and abuse. Since child rearing is difficult, costly, and prolonged in our species, they reasoned, natural selection is unlikely to have produced indiscriminate parenting. (If even the Mexican free-tailed bat can be fussy about dispensing parental care, so can human beings.) In fact, parental feelings are expected to vary with the evolutionary interest that children hold for the adults in question: the greater the genetic return, the greater the inclination to invest time, energy, and love. And similarly, the greater the disinclination to mistreat them.

To summarize two decades of research on human beings: youngsters living with a stepparent are from forty to sixty times more at risk of neglect, abuse, and infanticide than are comparable children living with their biological parents. This is true even when other factors such as income, education level, and ethnicity are taken into account. Like it or not—and, given the high frequency of stepparenting and blended families, many people don't like it—the step relationship is by far the highest predictor of a child's maltreatment.

These numbers are staggering, and once again we must ask, what is going on here? Does this mean that all stepparents are abusive? Of course not. Neither does it imply that biological parents are necessarily doting. Nor that biologists have it in for nonbiological parents (one of the present authors, as a stepparent as well as a biologist, can testify on both accounts). But these startling findings do mean that in daily life, stepfamilies—because they are out of step with biology—are liable to be stressful places, demanding the best within us and sometimes bringing out the worst, leading in some cases to reduced caretaking, increased intolerance, and even, in extreme situations, violence. This is where langurs, lions, and chimpanzees come in, contributing to an understanding of child abuse, neglect, and even, on occasion, murder in human beings.

Despite its many rewards, child rearing can, after all, be stressful, even for the most well-balanced and devoted parents. It is understandable—if not pardonable—that without genetic connection to ameliorate the rough edges, there would be a lower threshold for adults' ability to tolerate infant crying, children's interrupting, and the normal demands of even the most well-behaved youngsters, not to mention the predictable requirements of food, clothing, education, and so forth, which often can only be satisfied at some cost to the stepparents' own biological children. Moreover, for unstable adults already teetering on the edge of self-control, stepparenthood could well make a tragic difference.

Earlier, we visited with *Jane Eyre* as an example of the girl-chooses-boy theme among Gothic novels. This romantic classic also tells several stepparent tales. Start with Jane and her aunt Reed, who, it must be noted, is her aunt through marriage and not blood. As the story begins, Mrs. Reed has assumed responsibility for the orphaned Jane, though not out of any altruistic feelings on her part, but rather because while on his deathbed, her husband (who had a genetic tie to Jane) admonished her to do so. Jane describes the case as follows:

I knew that he was my own uncle—my mother's brother—that he had taken me when a parentless infant to his house; and that in his last moments he had required a promise of Mrs. Reed that she would rear and maintain me as one of her own children. Mrs. Reed probably considered she had kept this promise; and so she had, I dare say, as well as her nature would permit her; but how could she really like an interloper not of her race [i.e., a nonrelative], and unconnected with her, after her husband's death, by any tie? It must have been irksome to find herself bound by a hard-wrung pledge to stand in the stead of a parent to a strange child she could not love, and to see an uncongenial alien permanently intruded on her own family group.

Although Aunt Reed kept her promise, she did so only half-heartedly, after having first "entreated him [her husband, Jane's uncle] rather to put it [Jane] out to nurse and pay for its maintenance." And so Aunt Reed proceeds to abuse our young heroine—psychologically for the most part—including a famous incident in which the girl is locked in the spooky room where her uncle died. Jane is then sent to an even more abusive school (in loco stepparentis) before eventually encountering Mr. Rochester of Thornfield Hall. It is not that Aunt Reed didn't understand her role as stepparent or that, as sociologists like to claim these days, she lacked role models, but rather that she didn't want to lavish the same solicitude on Jane that she made readily available to her own offspring.

As Daly and Wilson point out,

There is a commonsense alternative hypothesis about why some "roles" seem easy and "well-defined" while others are difficult and "ambiguous." It is simply that the former match our inclinations while the latter defy them. Stepparents do not find their roles less satisfying and more conflictual than natural parents because they don't *know* what they are supposed to do. Their problem is that they don't *want* to do what they feel obliged to do, namely to make a substantial investment of "parental" effort without receiving the usual emotional rewards. The "ambiguity" of the stepparent's situation does not reside in society's failure to define his role, but in genuine conflicts of interest within the stepfamily.

To this, we add that those "genuine conflicts of interest" are genuine because they are, at heart, genetic.

Consider now another classic English novel, *Oliver Twist*. We first meet young Oliver when he is a famously abused orphan who outrages the establishment by asking, among other things, for more porridge. As punishment, he is sent away to an abusive stepfamily of undertakers and thence circuitously to the underworld of London crime, where his newest "stepfather," Fagin, is interested

only in how Oliver's small, deft hands can contribute, by picking pockets, to Fagin's own material advancement. Obviously, Oliver isn't nurtured in this environment; rather, he is provided with just enough food to keep him alive and functioning, albeit unwillingly, as a participant in the gang's nefarious activities. Things end well, however, for our young waif precisely when his waifhood ends, that is, when he connects with his own biological relatives, the Maylies, and with a nonbiological protector, Mr. Brownlow (who eventually recognizes Oliver as the offspring of a dear friend's child).

Oliver Twist is unusual not only in turning out well but also in ending up remarkably sweet and good-natured, given his very difficult upbringing. More commonly, the stepchild—often a bastard child as well—is portrayed as angry at being dispossessed and ill-treated. To some extent, bastardy has thus been equated with nastiness (just think of the epithet), which provides a way for the biologically unsophisticated to understand what might otherwise be inexplicable. Consider Mordred, bastard child of King Arthur, who is ultimately responsible for nothing less than the fall of Camelot; the murderous Smerdyakov in Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*; or the violent and vengeful Edmund, the illegitimate child of Gloucester in *King Lear*, whose machinations result in his father's blinding and the deaths of all three of Lear's (biological) daughters.

As we've seen already, the evolutionarily optimal male strategy is to make as many children as possible but to invest preferentially only in those that are legitimate. Nonetheless, there are many stories of bastard children inheriting large amounts of money upon the father's death, especially if there are no natural children with a competing claim. (Despite his illegitimacy, Pierre Bezuhov, one of the central characters of Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, inherits a large fortune when his father dies; notably, Pierre has no siblings.)

Denial of the bastard seems counter-Darwinian, since parents should presumably want the best for their children, regardless of whether those children derived from a legally consecrated marriage.

But a parent's solicitude toward his or her illegitimate children is often complicated by conflict with a current spouse, particularly if other children have been produced legitimately (Smerdyakov had to deal with the three acknowledged brothers Karamazov, Dmitri, Ivan, and Alyosha, just as Edmund competed with Edgar, Gloucester's acknowledged son). Moreover, it is typically a *father* who has to deal with a bastard child, and fathers, as we have already seen, cannot be entirely confident that they are in fact fathers.

Uncertain paternity cuts both ways, from father to child and back again. Thus, referring to Odysseus, young Telemachus remonstrates, "My mother saith he is my father. Yet for myself I know it not. For no man knoweth who hath begotten him." If this is true of the offspring of the famously faithful Penelope, how much more true must it be of everyone else!

Whether coincidentally or not, this issue—who is whose issue?—reappears in James Joyce's *Ulysses*, developed by none other than Stephen Dedalus, who in fact represents a twentieth-century Telemachus, (re)united at the novel's end with his pseudofather, Leopold Bloom. In the "Scylla and Charybdis" chapter of *Ulysses*, Stephen expounds on the unknowability of fatherhood:

Fatherhood, in the sense of conscious begetting, is unknown to man. It is a mystical estate, an apostolic succession, from only begetter to only begotten. On that mystery and not on the madonna which the cunning Italian intellect flung to the mob of Europe the church is founded and founded irremovably because founded, like the world, macro- and microcosm, upon the void. Upon the incertitude, upon unlikelihood. Amor matris, subjective and objective genitive, may be the only true thing in life. Paternity may be a legal fiction. Who is the father of any son that any son should love him or he any son?

As Stephen notes, Telemachus's lament also works the other way: no man knoweth for certain whom he hath begot. And this, in turn, leads to a painful but prominent literary theme. In his

mordant play *The Father*, the Swedish writer August Strindberg describes the dilemma of a husband tormented by whether he is the biological parent of his child:

I know of nothing so ludicrous as to see a father talking about his children. "My wife's children," he should say. Did you never feel the falseness of your position, had you never had any pinpricks of doubt?

It is a good guess that by and large, fathers also find it easier to let go than do mothers, not necessarily because of any conscious doubt, but rather because of a biologically inspired diminution in confidence. In "Walking Away," the poet C. Day Lewis gives a predictably male view when he describes his eldest son going away to school, and the poet's awareness of "how selfhood begins with a walking away / And love is proved in the letting go."

Letting go is especially likely when there is doubt as to paternity. And not surprisingly, the phenomenon is cross-cultural. Take, for example, *The Tale of Genji*, written one thousand years ago by Murasaki Shikibu, and believed to be the first novel written in Asia, perhaps the first of all time. It tells of the picaresque adventures of Genji, offspring of the emperor and a concubine. Genji is exceptionally handsome and aristocratic, possessing a definite "way with the ladies." He has many lovers, including his own stepmother, Fujitsubo, with whom he has a child. He is also cuckolded: his favorite wife, the Third Princess, dawdles with Kashiwagi, the son of Genji's longtime political and sexual competitor, To no Chujo. Accordingly, when the Third Princess gave birth, Genji was deeply distressed: "How vast and unconditional his joy would be, he thought, were it not for his doubts about the child." And later, "It would not be easy to guard the secret [that the Third Princess had dallied with Kashiwagi] if the resemblance to the father was strong." The princess eventually abdicates and becomes a nun.

Anyone who still needs persuading that paternity matters should take a good look at Thomas Hardy's dark masterpiece *The Mayor of*

Casterbridge. A significant part of this novel examines how the relationship of the protagonist, Michael Henchard, with his purported daughter, Elizabeth-Jane, changes as Michael realizes that the girl he had thought to be his child turns out to be someone else's.

The book begins with a much younger Michael arriving at the English equivalent of a county fair with his wife and baby daughter, Elizabeth-Jane; in a drunken stupor, he sells them both—for five guineas—to a passing sailor. Eighteen years later, after Michael Henchard has reformed and made a name for himself as the highly respected mayor of Casterbridge, who should show up but his long-abandoned wife, with Elizabeth-Jane in tow, claiming that the sailor died and left them penniless. Elizabeth-Jane believes the sailor to be her father, and Henchard, seeking to avoid the obloquy of owning up to his despicable behavior eighteen years previously, but also wanting to make good on his obligations, suggests that he (re)marry his wife, after which their daughter will consider Michael her stepfather.

Henchard describes the scheme as follows:

"I meet you, court you, and marry you, Elizabeth-Jane coming to my house as my step-daughter. . . . the secret would be yours and mine only; and I should have the pleasure of seeing my own only child under my roof, as well as my wife."

He believes Elizabeth-Jane to be the daughter he sold eighteen years ago, an assumption that is shown by his benevolent concern for her upbringing: "The freedom [Elizabeth-Jane] experienced, the indulgence with which she was treated, went beyond her expectations." Although hints abound, it never crosses Michael Henchard's conscious mind that this child might not be his after all, even when the answer is literally staring him in the face, as in the following discourse:

"I thought Elizabeth-Jane's hair promised to be black when she was a baby?" [Henchard] said to his wife.

"It did; but they alter so," replied Susan.

"Their hair gets darker, I know—but I wasn't aware it lightened ever?"

"O yes." And the same uneasy expression came out on her face, to which the future held the key.

Later, after his wife's death, Michael discovers that Elizabeth-Jane is not in fact his child, the original Elizabeth-Jane having died soon after the sale to the sailor and been replaced by the present girl, who is of course the sailor's daughter. When this becomes clear, Michael rethinks the troubling matter of Elizabeth-Jane's lack of resemblance to himself, acknowledging that he and his now-identified stepdaughter look nothing alike:

He steadfastly regarded her features. . . . They were fair: his were dark. . . . In the present statuesque repose of the young girl's countenance [the sailor] Richard Newson's was unmistakably reflected.

And how did Michael Henchard respond to that newly perceived reflection? As follows: "He could not endure the sight of her."

From this point on, Michael changes from being a secretly dotting daddy merely pretending to be a stepparent into a predictable, withholding, and resentful stepparent trying unsuccessfully to act like a parent. Ironically, just as he tells Elizabeth-Jane the truth of their situation, Henchard notes that it has changed drastically: "The mockery was, that he should have no sooner taught a girl to claim the shelter of his paternity than he discovered her to have no kinship with him." And so he disowns and rejects her, further compounding the tragedy all around.

T. S. Eliot once noted that there was so much in Shakespeare—and, we would add, so much in Shakespearean criticism—that the

best one could hope for is to be wrong about Shakespeare in a new way. Well, here is a new way to look at *Hamlet*: as a stepparent story. It is clear that for all Hamlet's complexity and depth, he wasn't happy with Claudius, his stepfather, even before he got the unwelcome news from the ghost of dear old departed Dad that Claudius had done him in. In any event, Hamlet isn't shy about berating his mother, Gertrude, for her "o'er-hasty marriage" and urging her to refrain from sex with her new husband. Forget about Freud: should Gertrude become pregnant, this would further cloud Hamlet's future and give him a likely unwelcome competitor.

There is a French proverb, dating from about the same era as Shakespeare, that speaks not only to Hamlet and his uncle/stepfather Claudius, but also to many others:

*The mother of babes who decides to rewed
Has taken their enemy into her bed.*

David Copperfield would have to agree. As Dickens presents it, young David is a male version of Cinderella. Cindy's life went rapidly downhill after her father remarried. David's took a dive when his father died and his mother took Mr. Murdstone—who quickly revealed himself to be David's enemy—into her bed. Earlier, when courting Clara Copperfield, Murdstone had gone out of his way to seem well disposed toward young David, bringing him gifts, taking him for pleasant daily outings, and allowing him to ride on the saddle in front of him, never seeming the least offended when David was predictably cold toward him.

Almost immediately after the marriage, however, Mr. Murdstone begins to reveal himself for who he really is: cold, domineering, and cruelly indifferent to David's needs. He moves quickly to separate David from Clara, first emotionally, by, as David puts it, "preventing [Clara] from ever being alone with [him] or talking lovingly to [him]," and then physically, by packing him off to boarding school. By the time David Copperfield returns for the

holidays, his little brother—Murdstone's child by Clara—has been born. Mr. Murdstone is not literally a male langur monkey, killing an infant so as to breed with the mother, but the parallel is strikingly close.

Once Clara dies, Murdstone's true relationship with David becomes clear: young David is sent to work in Murdstone's factory at age ten, where he is ill-fed and overworked. When the boy runs away to the safety of his great-aunt, Murdstone is quick to give up on him altogether. Here is that great-aunt, Betsy Trotwood, confronting the stepfather with his behavior:

"Do you think I don't know what kind of life you must have led that poor unworldly, misdirected baby? First you come along smirking and making great eyes at her [David's mother], all soft and silky. . . . Yes, you worshipped her. You doted on her boy, too. You would be another father to him. And the poor deluded innocent believed you. She had never seen such a man. Yes, you were all to live together in a garden of roses. . . . And when you had caught the poor little fool you must begin to make a caged bird of her and try to teach her your own ugly notes. So it was, Mr. Murdstone, that you eventually succeeded in breaking her heart. And if that were not enough you have done your best to break her boy's spirit."

For her part, Clara Copperfield had been clueless and perhaps somewhat desperate, not unlike Hamlet's mother, Gertrude, who evidently assumed that Claudius would treat young Hamlet in a benevolent, fully paternal manner and that the prince, similarly, would promptly accept Claudius as a replacement father. Instead, Hamlet persisted in his view that something was rotten, not only in Denmark generally but in his personal situation as well. But at least Hamlet was a young adult; David Copperfield, by contrast, is langurlike in his helplessness.

Parentless waifs tug at our heartstrings; we cannot help recognizing their need for family. But *Oliver Twist* and David

Copperfield are exceptions, at least in retaining their own good humor: stories often suggest that once they become someone's stepchild, waifs who have been sinned against ere long become sinners in their own right. Joe Christmas, protagonist of William Faulkner's *Light in August*, starts life in an orphanage, where he has the bad fortune to accidentally eavesdrop on a sexual encounter involving two of the adult employees. In punishment—and fear that he will expose the couple—he is sent to become the foster child of Mr. McEachern, a willful, violent Christian fundamentalist who regularly beats young Joe for stubbornly refusing to memorize the catechism. As his life unfolds, Joe grows up tough, resentful, and violent, eventually killing a woman who sought to befriend and help him (and who also became his lover). Joe Christmas—everybody's stepchild, forced by a violent and rejecting world to become violent and rejecting in turn—is soon captured, castrated, and killed by a pursuing mob of vigilantes.

A century earlier, Heathcliff grew up the disfavored stepchild of *Wuthering Heights*. Wild (as bespeaks the gusty implications of the book's title), abandoned (in both senses of the word), and fiercely in love with Catherine Earnshaw but deemed unsuitable to marry her because of his unknown background and lowly step status, Heathcliff wreaks revenge on both the Earnshaw family, which denied his legitimacy, and the Linton family, into which his beloved Catherine eventually marries. Heathcliff's retaliation involves destroying the offspring of both lineages in a passionate quest to compensate, somehow, for his intolerable outsider situation.

The stepchild or fosterling as violent outsider isn't a characterization limited to Joe Christmas and Heathcliff. In fact, it is difficult to identify an imaginative literary depiction of the stepchild as a happy, well-adjusted, wholly accepted member of either family or society.

When it comes to stepparenting stories, one need only consult the immense, six-volume compendium *Motif-Index of Folk Literature* to see just how universal is the idea of the wicked

stepparent. Tale after tale features evil stepmothers, but nary a case in which stepmothers are benevolent or well-intended. As for stepfathers, the *Motif-Index* identifies two categories: "cruel" and "lustful."

It is fruitless to deny the ubiquity of the negative stepparent image. But maybe the very myth itself of the malevolent stepparent is the cause of the problem. Maybe it is because stepparents are widely seen to be so difficult that they in fact are difficult. However, this begs the question of *why* stepparents are so widely viewed in a negative light. Most likely, stepparents are perceived as potentially dangerous and liable to treat their stepchildren badly because—all over the world—they occasionally do so, and, more to the point, they are on average more prone to do so than are biological parents. Whereas most stepparents are decent, humane, and loving—and some genetic parents are truly despicable—the fact remains that on balance, the former are significantly more liable to be "bad parents" than are their genetically connected counterparts. And nonbiological children—although perhaps less dramatically than Heathcliff, Joe Christmas, or even Cinderella—are liable to suffer the consequences.

Parenting is an extreme form of kin selection. To be a parent is to participate in a one-directional flow of benefits, a disparity that is necessitated by the fact that parents are so much older, larger, wiser, and more powerful than their children. Parents are biologically (and therefore psychologically as well as socially) expected to conform to these expectations and to accept an asymmetrical relationship with their children. With some notable exceptions, discussed in the next chapter, it is an arrangement that works well for all parties.

Stepparents, on the other hand, often struggle to mimic genetic parents, in their behavior as well as their feelings. And yet it is a difficult undertaking, even for the best of them. The most well-intended advice, anecdotes, and pop psychology—even when utterly non-Darwinian—acknowledge that stepparenting is difficult,

as is being a stepchild. By contrast with its widespread if unintentional depiction in literature, the evolutionary biology of stepparenting has not made impressive headway into the traditional wisdom of social science, which, as we have said, still tends to attribute its near-universal stress to problems of "role definition" and "social expectations." It is far more likely that the fault lies not in our stars and not in society but in ourselves, that is, in the fact that we are biological creatures, carrying on a long-standing tradition by which genes struggle with other genes and favor copies of themselves.

Such struggles aren't hopeless, however. Indeed, we would argue that they are much of what being human is all about. Think of the scene in *The African Queen* (based, incidentally, on a novel by C. S. Forester), in which Katharine Hepburn's character sternly points out to a grimy, boozy Humphrey Bogart, who has sought to excuse his alcoholic excess with the claim that somehow his nature made him do it: "Nature, Mr. Allnut, is what we are put on earth to rise above."

When it comes to rising above nature, what about adoption? Doesn't its success show the inadequacy of biology as an interpreter of family function and dysfunction? Quite the opposite. What adoption really demonstrates is how easy it is, in certain cases, for us to fool Mother Nature.

To understand how this can happen, we must first emphasize an important rule: natural selection doesn't do more than is needed. This is because it takes "selection pressure" to create something out of nothing. No pressure, no adaptation. This is relevant in the case of adoption because would-be adopting parents must somehow fool themselves into feeling that their adopted child is "theirs." As it happens, evolution strongly promotes mechanisms that enable parents to recognize their children—and which therefore work against adoption—but only if there is a threat that otherwise parents would waste their precious care on someone else's offspring.

In other words, parent-offspring recognition should be acutely developed when mixups are likely and absent when they aren't. People aren't biologically prone to such errors, and so we lack mechanisms to prevent them. For a good case of this notion, Mike Beecher of the University of Washington turned to a pair of bird species, the bank swallow and the rough-winged swallow. Bank swallows nest in burrows dug in clay banks and are colonial, with many nesting pairs closely associated. Hence, breeding members of this species run the risk that their parental care might be misdirected to someone else's young. Rough-winged swallows, on the other hand, although closely related, are essentially solitary, each pair maintaining a nest that is isolated from other rough-winged swallows. So there is very little chance that a rough-wing will accidentally proffer food to nestlings other than its own.

Beecher found that the vocalizations of young bank swallows (the colonial species, vulnerable to mixups) are much more distinctive than those of rough-wings (the go-it-alone guys). Having a unique vocal fingerprint makes it easy for bank swallow parents to learn the distinctive vocal traits of their offspring. As a result, when bank swallow youngsters land at the wrong nest—which they often do, since in this colonial species, nest entrances are typically close to each other—the adults shoo them away, reserving food and protection for their own offspring. By contrast, rough-winged swallows can afford to be indiscriminating, since under normal conditions they run no risk of being importuned by strangers. There are no rough-winged swallow equivalents of double mother suckers, as among elephant seals. Interestingly, rough-winged swallows can be fooled by an experimenter, duped to accept strangers introduced into their nest, something that bank swallows never do. Rough-wing parents will even feed bank swallow babies; bank swallow parents reject any babies not their own.

To recapitulate: rough-winged swallows (the species that, because of its solitary lifestyle, doesn't possess offspring-recognition mechanisms) can essentially be induced to adopt, whereas bank

swallows (whose social tendencies put them at risk of misdirecting their parental efforts) are equipped with a built-in tendency to recognize their offspring, and to reject nestlings that aren't their own.

Although people are more social than solitary, when it comes to offspring recognition, we are rough-wings rather than bank swallows. After a woman gives birth, there is simply no question whether the baby is hers. Switching newborns may take place in Gilbert and Sullivan operettas or—very rarely—in a modern, crowded metropolitan hospital, but not among a small band of early hominids trudging around the Pleistocene savannah. There is simply no way an African Eve could find herself *accidentally* nursing someone else's child. Lacking the threat of misidentifying our babies, our ancestors would almost certainly have also lacked any automatic, lock-and-key recognition mechanisms. (Recall the minimalism of evolutionary adaptations.) As a result, we have a wonderfully open program when it comes to identifying children as our own.

Granted that our evolutionary past gives us leeway to fool ourselves, in a sense, into responding as though someone else's offspring is actually our own, but why do so? After all, to adopt is to expend time and resources on behalf of someone *unrelated* to the adopter. Accordingly, it would appear to be an evolutionary blunder, comparable to genuine altruism (that is, beneficence toward another without any genetic compensation). Yet human beings can be quite insistent upon adopting, often struggling against heavy odds and bureaucratic red tape to do so. Adopted children, moreover, are typically well loved and cared for, and about as successful as biological children.

To start with, let's point out the obvious: adoption, overwhelmingly, is *not* most people's first choice. When it comes to children, the vast majority prefer to make their own. Only if this is not an option are most people inclined to satisfy their desire to be a parent—a desire that is almost certainly a highly adaptive legacy of evolution—by parenting someone else's kids. In addition, bear in

mind that for perhaps 99.99 percent of its evolutionary past, *Homo sapiens* lived in small hunter-gatherer bands that almost certainly numbered fewer than a hundred. Within such groups, most individuals were related. As a result, anyone who adopted a child was likely to be caring for a genetic relative (say hello once again to our old friend kin selection). Even individuals who cared for an unrelated child may well have positioned themselves to receive a return benefit from the child's genetic relatives as well as becoming a possible recipient of social approval, and hence biological benefit, from within the local group.

Note once more that stepparenting and adoption are not the same, the former being a much darker and more troubled phenomenon. To be sure, stepparenting is similar to adoption in that non-genetic "parents" end up taking care of someone else's children. But whereas adoption involves a specific commitment to the adopted child (typically on the part of *both* adopting adults), stepparenting nearly always comes about as a side effect of two adults' commitment *toward each other*. Stepchildren, if any, are generally thrown in as an unavoidable—and, if the truth be acknowledged, often unwanted—part of the deal.³ Adoption, moreover, typically takes place when the child is an infant, thereby enhancing the prospects that adopting parents can fool their unconscious selves into responding as though the adopted child is genetically their own. On the other hand, it usually isn't until they are older that stepchildren enter the stepparent's life, which is a further obstacle to parental devotion.

Put it all together, and whereas stepparenting and adoption are both clearly part of the human behavioral repertoire, the latter is likely to be much less conflictual and—at the biological level, at least—downright easy. Not surprisingly, literary depictions of adop-

³Technically, fostering is yet another category, which applies when a child is taken into the house of adults, neither of whom is the biological parent. It pertains to the situations of Cosette and Oliver Twist, and especially in the past meant virtual slavery. For our purposes, it is essentially equivalent to stepparenting, but with two stepparents and no biological parent to leaven the child's plight.

tion tend to be correspondingly comfortable as well as comforting. Barbara Kingsolver's first novel, *The Bean Trees*, was a heartwarming, thought-provoking, yet thoroughly genuine depiction of the adventures of Taylor Greer, a delightful, headstrong, and impulsive young woman who adopts Turtle when the young child is deposited into the front seat of her car. The connection between adoptive parent and child constitutes the core of the book, and it is one that the reader never doubts, despite the fact that Taylor and Turtle are not genetic relatives. Although they don't share genes, they do share needs, and the affiliation is one that Taylor enters into of her own free will, not carried along in the slipstream of a higher-priority adult relationship.

Earlier, we looked at how Monsieur and Madame Thénardier treated Cosette very differently than their own daughters. Now it's time to consider another relationship depicted in *Les Misérables*, that between Jean Valjean and Cosette. The middle-aged Valjean didn't find himself stuck with the young girl because of a sought-for union with her mother, Fantine; rather, he adopted Cosette, because, as Hugo makes clear, she met his need for a child just as he met her need for a parent:

The gulf that nature had created between Valjean and Cosette, the gap of fifty years, was bridged by circumstance. The overriding force of destiny united these two beings so sundered by the years and so akin in what they lacked. Each fulfilled the other, Cosette with her instinctive need of a father, Valjean with his instinctive need of a child. For them to meet was to find, and in the moment when their hands first touched, they joined. Seeing the other, each perceived the other's need. In the deepest sense of the words it may be said that in their isolation Jean Valjean had been a widower, as Cosette was an orphan; and in this sense he became her father.

Another example of adoption, and to our mind the most suitable and heartwarming account, is George Eliot's *Silas Marner*. A

lonely, reclusive miser, Silas is a painfully nearsighted weaver whose only pleasure comes from counting his accumulated gold pieces. One day his trove is plundered, plunging him into despair.

Formerly, his heart had been as a locked casket with its treasure inside; but now the casket was empty, and the lock was broken. Left groping in darkness, with his prop utterly gone, Silas had inevitably a sense, though a dull and half-despairing one, that if any help came to him it must come from without.

Shortly thereafter, upon entering his isolated cottage, Silas sees a golden gleam in front of his fireplace; it isn't his gold, but a tiny, yellow-haired girl who somehow managed to reach safety after her destitute mother died in the snow nearby.

Silas adopts Eppie, and she transforms him in return, helping the old man regain his life just as he saved hers. The once-bare windows of chez Marner are soon festooned with lacy curtains, and Silas, for his part, finds himself opened as never before to joy and fulfillment. Eppie is a replacement, and more, for the former miser's lost gold:

He could only have said that the child was come instead of the gold—that the gold had turned into the child. . . . The gold had kept his thoughts in an ever-repeated circle, leading to nothing beyond itself; but Eppie was an object compacted of changes and hopes that forced his thoughts onward, and carried them far away from their old eager pacing towards the same blank limit—carried them away to the new things that would come with the coming years, when Eppie would have learned to understand how her father Silas cared for her.

But there is trouble in paradise, arriving in the person of Godfrey Cass, the biological father of Eppie and the sole surviving son of Squire Cass, the town's wealthiest man. It seems that eighteen years previously, in a fit of drunken foolishness, Godfrey had failed to rise above "nature" and had impulsively and secretly married a coarse and

common woman, who became Eppie's mother. Mortified by his earlier error, Godfrey had kept secret not only his marital indiscretion but also his fatherhood until, many years into a childless marriage, he revealed the truth to his wife, Nancy. (Godfrey's truth-telling was also stimulated by the discovery of the body of his good-for-nothing brother, along with Silas's gold, which he had stolen.)

Godfrey and Nancy Cass go to Silas and Eppie, demanding custody of the now budding young lady, pointing out that they can offer her wealth and a "suitable upbringing" far beyond anything available from the rustic weaver. Eppie, however, elects to remain with her adoptive father, and also marries a fine young chap, thereby concluding our tale.

There is nothing demeaning about adoption being a win-win proposition, benefiting Jean Valjean as well as Cosette, Silas Marner as well as Eppie. And it is neither surprising nor disreputable that the childless Casses cast a longing parental eye on Eppie as well. Nor is it irrelevant that by their action, adopters are often seen to demonstrate their good character and even, on occasion, their marriageability: don't forget the importance of "good behavior" (Chapter 3) in demonstrating one's suitability as a mate.

Also, keep in mind *Jane Eyre* and her eventual encounter with the lordly, and also secretly married, Rochester. Jane was initially hired as governess to Rochester's young ward, a girl named Adèle who was the offspring of a French prostitute and maybe, just maybe, Rochester's natural child as well. He denies it, however, claiming that he adopted Adèle out of disinterested altruism:

"I see no proofs of such grim paternity written in her countenance. . . . I acknowledged no natural claim on Adèle's part to be supported by me; nor do I now acknowledge any, for I am not her father; but hearing that she was quite destitute, I e'en took the poor thing out of the slime and mud of Paris, and transplanted her here, to grow up clean in the wholesome soil of an English country garden."

If you were Jane Eyre, wouldn't you, too, be moved by the kindness of such a man, however forbidding and distant he appears in other respects? And wouldn't his benevolent adoption of Adèle go a long way toward modulating any sense you might have of him as cold and unfeeling? Isn't it interesting as well that the villagewide reputation of Silas Marner, who spent decades trying unsuccessfully to live down an unjust accusation of thievery in his youth, was finally rehabilitated when his devotion to baby Eppie, his adopted child, became public?

"All happy families are happy in the same way," wrote Leo Tolstoy in the famous opening sentence of *Anna Karenina*. "Every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." As to happy families, there is room for debate, but when it comes to unhappiness, Tolstoy was certainly onto something: people have devised—or blundered into—innumerable ways of being unhappy. Even this diversity, however, resolves itself into some recognizable patterns, many of which involve the struggles of stepparenting.