

Literary Witness to Hidden Labor: Amy Dorrit and the Legacy of Young Caring Roles

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The Asian Conference on Cultural Studies 2026
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

This study examines the parallels between Amy (Little) Dorrit in Charles Dickens's *Little Dorrit* (1855–1857) and contemporary young carers, highlighting how the Victorian literary figure illuminates the realities of contemporary young carers. Amy's premature assumption of adult responsibilities strongly resonates with the lived experiences of modern young carers, who often shoulder emotionally and physically demanding caregiving roles within their families, with little recognition or institutional support. By comparing Dickens's narrative with recent sociological research, this study highlights Dickens's enduring relevance in exposing the systemic failures that compel young people to assume disproportionate domestic and emotional burdens. The study combines textual analysis with comparative thematic mapping to clarify recurring motifs—self-effacement, resilience, moralized responsibility, and restricted life opportunities—and the narrative strategies Dickens uses to evoke sympathy and critique structural neglect. Finally, the analysis underscores Victorian fiction's importance as a critical framework for understanding persistent caregiving inequalities in contemporary welfare states.

Keywords: Charles Dickens, caregiving, employment, gender, family, *Little Dorrit*, young carers, Victorian women

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Introduction

Charles Dickens's childhood—marked by his family's imprisonment in the Marshalsea debtors' prison and his premature employment at the age of 12 at Warren's Blacking Warehouse—left an indelible imprint on his imagination and shaped his recurring concern for children facing emotional and financial vulnerabilities. As observed by Adrian (1984), Dickens depicts parent-child role reversals so frequently that the pattern "appears nothing less than an obsession" (p. 119). In many of his novels, parents exploit their children's labor, and the children themselves assume responsibilities as breadwinners and caregivers without complaint.

This study examines *Little Dorrit*, which features one of Dickens's many victimized children, Amy (Little) Dorrit,* who simultaneously undertakes the roles of breadwinner, caregiver, companion, guardian, and surrogate mother. However, as implied by her diminutive nickname, "little," her labor remains unrecognized. Amy internalizes her duty to such an extent that she never questions her obligation toward her family, despite being its youngest member. Her self-effacement aligns with "willed smallness" (Schor, 1999/2007, p. 126). Dickens's fiction often assigns informal care to girls, reflecting Victorian culture's normalization of the suffering of women and moralization of their domestic labor. As noted by Slater (1983/1986, p. 339), Victorian people took women's endurance for granted.

The domestic work performed by Amy, which is emotionally and physically exhausting, unpaid, and undervalued, parallels the work done by modern young carers. By comparing Amy's silent suffering with the experiences of today's young carers, this study reveals the persistent dynamics that force young people—particularly girls—into exhaustive and unrewarding domestic labor under the moral banner of "family duty."

Amy Dorrit's Paradoxical Status

Amy Dorrit occupies a paradoxical position within her family. Despite being the household's least powerful member, Amy is the one on whom everyone depends for survival. This contradiction is both structural (rooted in hierarchy, authority, and gender) and operational, as reflected in the daily labor that sustains the Dorrit family. As the youngest daughter, Amy holds no authority and receives little recognition, and her only means of contributing is to meet Mr. Dorrit's constant demands. Confined with him in the cramped Marshalsea cell, Amy cooks and mends, while also soothing, comforting, and protecting Mr. Dorrit, habitually at the expense of her own well-being. One of the most important examples of her self-sacrifice is her tendency to secretly starve herself, giving her food to her father so that he can maintain the illusion of gentility. Schor (1999/2007, p. 126) interprets this act as an extreme form of self-effacement. Similarly, Waters (1997) notes that Amy's "diminutive stature, silence, and the invisibility of her work" (p. 119) tend to erase her material presence. In effect, Amy becomes the family's invisible laborer, performing the emotional and physical work that enables Mr. Dorrit to maintain his fragile dignity.

Amy's relationship with her father reverses the ordinary father-daughter dynamic; she becomes a "little mother" to him. Mr. Dorrit abdicates all parental responsibility, leaving Amy to manage the household, earn money, supervise finances, arrange her siblings' employment, and shield

* To avoid confusion, this study consistently refers to the protagonist as Amy Dorrit.

him from shame. This inversion—the youngest child becoming the family’s primary organizer—reveals the extent of the Dorrit family’s dysfunction. Holbrook (1993) famously remarked that “the trouble with Little Dorrit is that she is too good” (p. 78); this remark positions Amy as a figure who reflects the Victorian ideal of feminine virtue—being modest, patient, self-effacing, and endlessly giving. Similarly, according to Shoemaker (1998, p. 23), conduct literature repeatedly emphasizes virtues such as modesty, meekness, tenderness, and compassion as the hallmarks of ideal womanhood. In this sense, Amy embodies these traits so completely that her goodness becomes a mechanism for her own erasure.

Her family’s treatment of Amy reinforces this erasure as well. Instead of acknowledging her sacrifices or providing emotional support, Mr. Dorrit demands her obedience and reprimands her when she fails to meet his expectations. Her brother Tip contributes nothing but debt, thereby increasing her burden, whereas her sister Fanny despises Amy for being born in the Marshalsea. The narrator clarifies that this disregard is not accidental but structural: “It was the family custom to lay it down as family law that she was a plain domestic little creature. . . . Not to make too much of [her services]” (Dickens, 1855–1857/1985, pp. 279–280). The Dorrits insist on minimizing Amy’s contributions to maintain their fiction of gentility. Acknowledging Amy’s labor would expose the family’s dependence on the very child whom they consider insignificant.

Amy’s structural invisibility becomes particularly clear during the family’s release from the Marshalsea. As Mr. Dorrit and the others depart in new clothes, Amy is forgotten in her cell, lying unconscious on the floor. Subsequently, Arthur Clennam carries her to the carriage, remarking, “She has been forgotten” (Dickens, 1855–1857/1985, p. 481). This scene crystallizes the family’s exploitation of Amy, an indispensable yet unseen laboring body whose existence must remain invisible to preserve the family’s self-image.

Dickens uses this paradox to expose the moral and emotional economy of Victorian families. Amy’s insignificance is not a natural condition but a socially produced one that enables the Dorrits to function. Her position reveals a distorted power dynamic in which authority rests with those who contribute the least, and the family’s survival depends on the silent labor of the one deemed least important.

Amy’s Internalization of Her Filial Duty

Amy Dorrit’s acquaintances—both educated and less formally educated—recognize her family’s exploitation of her, albeit in different ways. For instance, Mrs. Chivery misinterprets Amy’s refusal to marry her son but accurately identifies the structural dynamic that traps Amy: a father who demands exclusive emotional possession, siblings who hold “high views” (Dickens, 1855–1857/1985, p. 304), and a young woman who believes she must “be always a sacrifice” (Dickens, 1855–1857/1985, p. 304). Mrs. Chivery’s words capture the essence of Amy’s predicament: she is “doomed to be a constant slave to them that are not worthy” (Dickens, 1855–1857/1985, p. 304). Dickens uses this outsider perspective to expose the Dorrit family’s moral blindness and the emotional logic sustaining Amy’s self-erasure.

Amy’s internalization of her duties begins early in her childhood. After her mother’s death, she assumes family responsibilities at the age of 8, inspired “to be something which was not what the rest were . . . for the sake of the rest” (Dickens, 1855–1857/1985, p. 111). At age 13, she understands her father’s incapacity—“no one better”—but continues to uphold the fiction of his gentility (Dickens, 1855–1857/1985, p. 112). This self-imposed obligation functions as

psychological internalization: Amy convinces herself that her purpose is to protect and serve her father, despite recognizing his failures. Her devotion is tantamount to self-conditioning, shaped by love but reinforced by Victorian gender ideology.

The period's conduct literature clarifies Amy's mindset. Ellis (1839) insists that even "the most servile drudgery may be ennobled" (p. 38) when performed with patience and cheerful submission. Amy embodies this ideal perfectly, as her labor becomes not merely a practical necessity but a moral performance that confirms her identity as a virtuous woman. However, Dickens complicates this ideal by highlighting its psychological cost: Amy's self-sacrifice becomes compulsive, that is, a defining feature of her sense of self, rather than a freely chosen act.

Further, Dickens illustrates the limits of legal and ideological protections through an episode involving the Marshalsea turnkey Bob, who contemplates leaving his savings to Amy. Although the law could secure her inheritance, it could not protect her from emotional manipulation. As observed by Bob, no legal mechanism can prevent a "tender-hearted" (Dickens, 1855–1857/1985, pp. 110–111) girl from being persuaded—or guilted—into relinquishing her resources. This scene underscores the novel's central theme: the law can regulate property but not affection, obligation, or the moral pressures of family life.

The true harm of Amy's dedication is not physical exhaustion but the erosion of her capacity to imagine a life of her own. For her, service is second nature. When Arthur Clennam encourages her to leave the Marshalsea, Amy insists that remaining there is "much better, much more dutiful, much happier" (Dickens, 1855–1857/1985, p. 309). Following the family's release, she feels displaced and purposeless because others now care for her father. According to Dickens (1855–1857/1985), Amy has "no one to think for, nothing to plan and contrive" (p. 516) anymore, and she finds the absence of responsibility more alien than the mountains of Italy. Her identity is so tightly linked to caregiving that she considers leisure intolerable.

This dynamic intensifies during Mr. Dorrit's final illness. In his delirium, Mr. Dorrit imagines himself back in the Marshalsea, with Amy, his "little mother," tending to him with unwavering devotion. Dickens (1855–1857/1985) writes that she "would have laid down her own life to restore him" (pp. 710–711) and portrays her care as both heroic and troubling—an act of love bordering on self-annihilation. Dickens reveals that Victorian ideology, which praised self-effacement as women's virtue, can cause emotional dependency and compulsive caregiving.

Even after Mr. Dorrit's death, Amy remains bound to her past. At the novel's conclusion, although Arthur pleads that "this sacrifice of you must be ended" (Dickens, 1855–57/1985, p. 884), Amy plans to devote herself to Fanny's neglected children and tend to Tip's needs. Moreover, the final description of Amy's "modest life of usefulness" (Dickens, 1855–1857/1985, p. 895) suggests continuity rather than liberation. According to Byler (2013), Amy's compassion becomes her "imperial" (p. 238)—a force that governs her life as powerfully as any external authority.

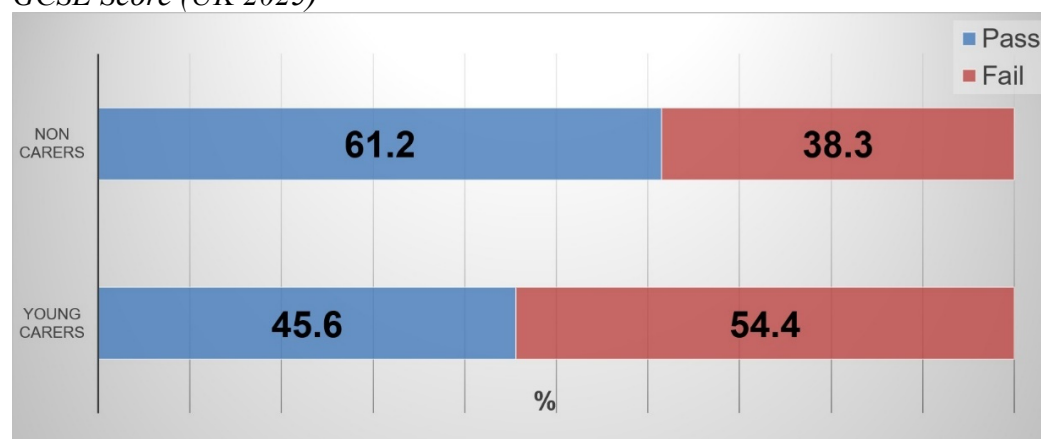
Therefore, Amy's internalization of her duties reveals the emotional mechanisms through which ideology of feminine self-sacrifice operates. Rather than being imposed on her solely from the outside, Amy's self-sacrifice is sustained by her own beliefs about love, virtue, and responsibility. Dickens's portrayal exposes the psychological cost of a system that equates femininity with service and moral worth with self-denial.

Little Dorrit's Legacy: Statistics on Modern Young Carers

Amy Dorrit's self-effacement, patience, and suffering are often interpreted as sentimental or exaggerated. Holbrook (1993) argues that her submissiveness "forfeits credibility as an adult" (p. 87) and reflects Dickens's tendency to idealize the "angelic" (p. 87) woman. However, the hardships endured by Amy were not merely fictional constructs; as noted by Slater (1983/1986, p. 339), Victorian society routinely normalized women's suffering and expected them to bear emotional and domestic burdens without complaint. The patterns depicted by Dickens—youthful sacrifice, gendered caregiving, and the moralization of duty—persist in contemporary societies. Even today, many "Little Dorrits" exist in the form of young carers.

The United Kingdom is a global leader in recognizing and supporting young carers. It defines a young carer as "someone aged under 18 who cares for a friend or family member who, due to illness, disability, a mental health problem, or an addiction, cannot cope without their support" (Carers Trust, n.d. [b]). The challenges faced by unpaid young carers include low academic achievement; frequent absences from school; social isolation; experiences of bullying; and emotional strain, including ambivalent or negative feelings toward the person they care for. Moreover, young adult carers aged 16–25 experience additional pressures—mental health difficulties, stress from balancing study and caregiving, and disruptions to educational or employment trajectories. These factors often result in unemployment, low income, and ongoing emotional instability, and may disrupt individuals' long-term life planning. In 2022–2023, young carers missed an average of 23 school days (Carers Trust, 2024)—more than 1.5 times the rate of their non-carer peers—and their persistent absence rate was nearly double that of their peers (39.9% compared with 21.1%). Further, 2025 data revealed a substantial attainment gap between carers and non-carers: 45.6% of young carers achieved five General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) passes, compared with 61.2% of non-carers (Carers Trust, 2025, see Figure 1).

Figure 1
GCSE Score (UK 2025)



Carers Trust (n.d. [a]) provides numerous firsthand accounts of the diversity and severity of such experiences. Some young carers began providing care at 5 or 6 years of age, and many report experiencing panic disorders, chronic isolation, or repeated conflicts with teachers who misunderstand their circumstances. Several do not initially recognize themselves as carers, whereas others leave college or employment to support family members. Many young carers care for multiple relatives or face financial hardships. Despite facing these challenges, the young carers featured by Carers Trust often describe improved well-being after receiving

institutional support; however, they form only a small proportion of the many young carers whose struggles remain unseen.

The 2021 Census for England and Wales (Office for National Statistics, 2023) confirmed the uneven distribution of unpaid care by age and gender and recorded the presence of 127,175 carers under 17 years of age (1.4% of that age group) and 229,690 carers in the 18–24 age group (4.6%). Among 4.99 million unpaid carers, nearly three-fifths were women (2.95 million), and women provided care for significantly longer hours than men (Office for National Statistics, 2023, see Figures 2 and 3). These patterns underscore caregiving's gendered nature, a dynamic central to Dickens's depiction of Amy.

Figure 2

Men vs. Women in Unpaid Care (England and Wales 2021)

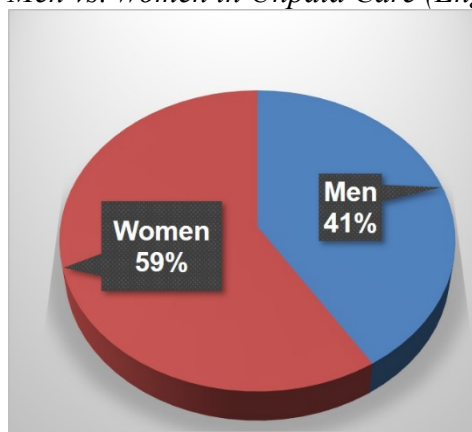


Figure 3

Hours Spent in Caregiving (England and Wales 2021)



Australia's national data reveal similar trends. The 2022 survey (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2024a, b) identified more than 105,000 carers under 15 years of age (2.2% of that age group) and 287,900 carers aged 15–24 years (9.3%), indicating a significant increase from 2018. Among the 3.04 million carers nationwide, women accounted for more than half (1.64 million, see Figure 4). Further, women accounted for more than two-thirds of primary carers providing

the most intensive support (781,700). Women tend to provide care for longer periods as well (see Figure 5).

Figure 4

Men vs. Women in Unpaid Care (Australia 2022)

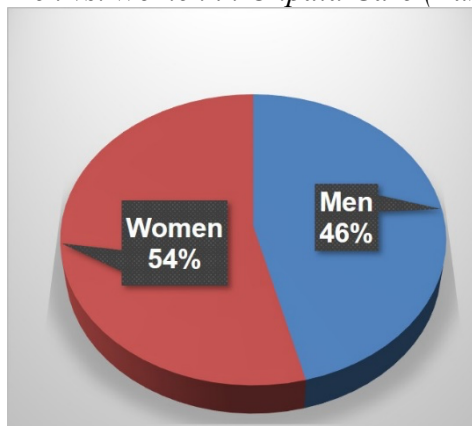
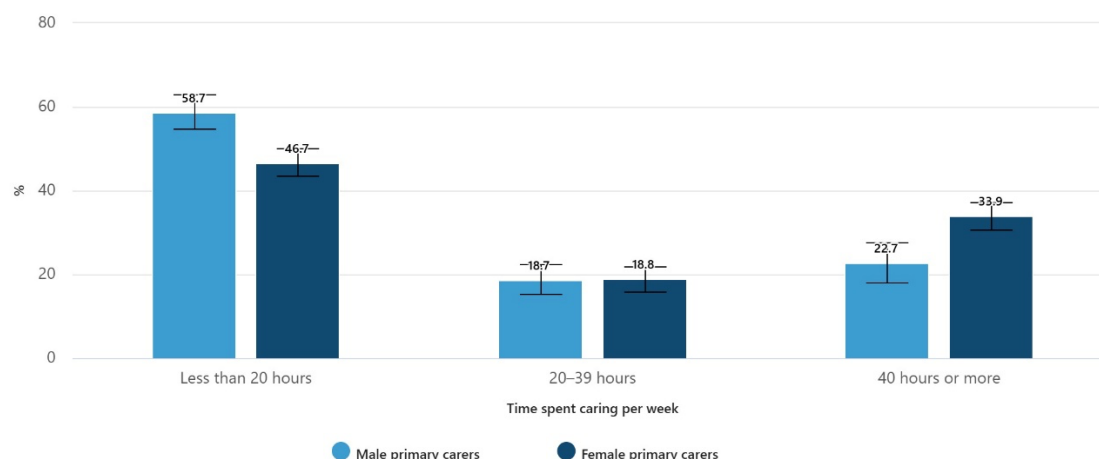


Figure 5

Hours Spent in Caregiving (Australia 2022)

Primary carers, average time spent caring per week, by sex, 2022



Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, Disability, Ageing and Carers, Australia: Summary of Findings 2022

The reasons most frequently cited by young carers for taking on a caring role are as follows: (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2024a, b)

1. A sense of responsibility toward one's family (64.7%)
2. Emotional obligation (47.4%)
3. The belief that they can provide better care than anyone else (46.0%)

These motivations—responsibility, emotional duty, and a self-sacrificing mentality—closely mirror the forces that shaped Amy Dorrit's caregiving in the 1850s.

Comparative Analysis: Continuities Across Time

The tasks performed by modern young carers closely resemble those undertaken by Amy Dorrit. Contemporary young carers administer medication, assist with feeding and dressing, manage household cleaning and finances, supervise younger siblings, and provide emotional support. However, as with Amy's labor in the Marshalsea, the carers' work often remains invisible to teachers, neighbors, and even social service professionals. Families may conceal young carers' presence due to stigma or fear of intervention, whereas the carers themselves frequently feel embarrassed or reluctant to disclose their responsibilities (Phelps, 2020, pp. 15–16). Further, limited caregiver identity restricts access to information and external support.

Socioeconomic and demographic factors heighten young carers' vulnerability. According to Hounsell (2013, pp. 5, 8, 11), young carers are more than 1.5 times more likely to have minority ethnic or non-native English-speaking backgrounds, and their families typically have lower educational and income levels than non-carers' families. As in Dickens's London, economic precarity and social marginalization significantly influence who becomes a young carer and the severity of the associated burden.

A second continuity lies in the emotional logic that sustains caregiving. Amy's sense of duty is rooted in love, guilt, and internalized expectations of feminine virtue. Similarly, contemporary young carers frequently cite the following motivations: family responsibility, emotional obligation, and the belief that they can provide better care than anyone else. These motivations reflect a persistent cultural narrative that frames caregiving as a moral imperative, rather than a shared social responsibility, thereby shifting the burden from institutions to individuals.

Gender is another defining factor in caregiving. Victorian ideology explicitly linked femininity with characteristics such as self-sacrifice, patience, and domestic labor. Although contemporary societies no longer codify such expectations through conduct books, caregiving remains disproportionately feminized. Statistical data from the United Kingdom and Australia reveal that women are significantly more likely than men to become primary carers, mirroring the gendered patterns depicted by Dickens. Therefore, Amy's experience resonates with the lived realities of countless modern girls who assume caregiving roles because they are considered more responsible, nurturing, or available than their male counterparts.

Another parallel between contemporary and Victorian carers is their social invisibility. Whereas Amy's family deliberately minimized her labor to preserve their fictitious gentility, many modern young carers struggle with invisibility in schools, workplaces, and social settings. Teachers may misinterpret lateness or absences, peers may misunderstand the constraints of caregiving, and institutions may fail to recognize the carers' need for support. This invisibility obscures the extent of their labor and limits their access to the resources that can alleviate their burden.

However, there are important differences between contemporary and Victorian caregiving. Contemporary welfare states provide at least some formal recognition and support to young carers through organizations such as the Carers Trust, educational accommodations, and social services, whereas Amy operated within a system that offered no institutional safety nets. Therefore, Dickens's portrayal is both historically specific and uncannily prescient because it exposes the emotional and structural mechanisms that continue to shape caregiving even as social frameworks evolve.

Together, these continuities suggest that *Little Dorrit* offers more than a sentimental portrait of Victorian suffering. It provides a critical lens for examining the persistent undervaluation of caregiving labor and the enduring pressures placed on young people, particularly young women, to sacrifice their own well-being for family stability. By reading Amy Dorrit's narrative alongside those of modern young carers, we can better understand the cultural narratives that sustain caregiving inequalities and the urgent need for greater visibility, recognition, and institutional support.

Discussion

Victorian literature must be read from an interdisciplinary perspective to understand the caregiving narratives of Amy Dorrit and modern young carers. Dickens's portrayal of Amy is not merely a sentimental narrative device but a cultural artifact that exposes the emotional, gendered, and structural dimensions of caregiving. Contemporary sociological research reveals that the distribution, perception, and moral framing of caregiving labor depicted in *Little Dorrit* remain relevant across time.

One of the most significant insights of this comparison is the persistence of caregiving invisibility. Dickens dramatizes the Dorrit family's systematic minimization of Amy's labor to preserve their fragile sense of gentility. Modern young carers experience a similar erasure because their work is often hidden within the private sphere, misunderstood by educators, and overlooked by institutions. Carers' invisibility has material consequences: it limits their access to support and intensifies emotional strain. Literature can expose this hidden labor by making its moral and emotional cost visible. Dickens's narrative strategies—sympathetic characterization, irony, and the juxtaposition of public appearance with private suffering—enable readers to confront the moral and emotional costs of caregiving ignored by society.

The second insight is related to the moral burden of family duty. Amy's caregiving is framed as a natural extension of her virtues, in alignment with Victorian ideals of femininity. Despite living in a different ideological landscape, contemporary young carers often articulate their motivations in similar moral terms: responsibility, love, guilt, and the belief that "family comes first." These continuities suggest that caregiving is not merely a practical task but a culturally constructed role shaped by expectations pertaining to gender, emotion, and morality. Dickens's novel highlights how these expectations act as psychological mechanisms that enable carers to internalize their caregiving obligations.

This comparison also highlights the limitations of institutional support. Although modern welfare states provide more resources to carers than Victorian England, young carers continue to face significant barriers to recognition and assistance. Dickens's depiction of the Marshalsea underscores the inadequacy of systems that rely on private sacrifice to compensate for structural failures. In this sense, *Little Dorrit* anticipates contemporary debates on care ethics, social policy, and emotional labor distribution. The novel's critique of institutional neglect resonates with present-day concerns about how societies allocate responsibility for care and how they do, or do not, value the labor of those who provide it.

Finally, this interdisciplinary approach underscores literature's importance as a form of social knowledge. Fiction can reveal the emotional truths and structural dynamics that statistics alone cannot capture. By interpreting Dickens's narrative through contemporary sociological research findings, this study highlights how literature clarifies caregiving's emotional and structural dimensions.

Conclusions

This study demonstrates that Amy Dorrit's caregiving experiences in *Little Dorrit* offer a compelling framework for understanding modern young carers' realities. Despite being separated by more than a century and existing within radically different social structures, Amy and contemporary young carers share the following core dynamics: the invisibility of labor, the moralization of duty, the gendered distribution of care, and emotional pressures that compel them to sacrifice personal well-being for family stability. Accordingly, Dickens's portrayal of Amy transcends its Victorian context to reveal enduring patterns of society's reliance on the unpaid, unacknowledged labor of the young, particularly women.

By interpreting Dickens's narrative through contemporary sociological research findings, this study highlights how literature clarifies caregiving's emotional and structural dimensions, which cannot be comprehensively captured by statistics alone. Amy's story exposes the psychological mechanisms underlying caregivers' internalized sense of obligation, cultural narratives that frame self-sacrifice as a virtue, and institutional failures that force vulnerable individuals to compensate for systemic shortcomings. These insights strongly resonate with the lived realities of contemporary young carers, who continue to experience educational disruption, emotional strain, and social isolation while providing essential support to their families.

Further, this comparison underscores the importance of using interdisciplinary approaches in caregiving studies. Rather than being merely historical or sentimental, Victorian fiction offers a rich archive for examining the cultural construction of duty, gender, and emotional labor. A comparative reading of Amy Dorrit's experiences and modern young carers' realities highlights the necessity of ensuring greater visibility, recognition, and institutional support for young caregivers. Moreover, it requires scholars to examine how narratives of virtue and sacrifice shape public perceptions of care and obscure underlying structural inequalities.

In summary, *Little Dorrit*, a literary witness to hidden labor, serves as a reminder that caregiving, when left unacknowledged and unsupported, can limit carers' life opportunities. This study's comparison of the experiences of Amy Dorrit with those of contemporary young carers clarifies the historical continuity of caregiving burdens and the urgent need for modern welfare systems to address them.

Acknowledgment

This study was supported by JSPS KAKENHI (grant number: JP124K03738).

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

The author declares that generative AI and AI-assisted tools were used solely for proofreading the manuscript and improving its language and readability. The author is fully responsible for the contents of the paper.

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