



Portrait of Women in Victorian Novels

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<i>Received:</i>	<i>Abstract</i>
03/11/2020	<i>This article examines the representation of three female characters in three Victorian novels. These three novels are Bleak house, Ruth, and Lady Audley's Secret. This work is, in fact, a study of how women were viewed in Victorian novels which actually depicted the Victorian society. The society of that time was male-dominated that tried to rule over women unfairly and made them as submissive as possible in order to handle them easily according to their selfish tastes. If women in Victorian society followed the expectations of men thoroughly, they were called angel-in-the-house; if not, they were labeled with negative labels like fallen-woman or mad-woman. This article tries to go through the characters of Esther Summerson, Ruth, and Lady Audley who appeared in the three aforementioned novels respectively in order to prove that the Victorian Society, which was represented in the novels of that period, was a harshly male-dominated society that ruled over women with bitter patriarchy.</i>
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1. INTRODUCTION

Based on both the historical and literary works, it is evident that women in the Victorian period did not have many rights. If women abided by the rules of patriarchy, they were considered as angel-in-the-house whose only duty was to keep the house clean and raise the children well according to the norms of their male counterparts; if not, they were treated and punished harshly by men in that patriarchy system.

Firstly, I am going to approach the character of Esther Summerson in Bleak House written by Charles Dickens as an “angel-in-the-house”.

Secondly, I have tried to show the representation of “fallen-woman” by the help of Ruth who was a female character in “Ruth” novel written by Elizabeth Gaskell.

Finally, the portrait of “mad-woman” will be discussed by going through a full analysis of Lady Audley in the novel Lady Audley’s Secret written by Mary Elizabeth Braddon.

So, in this article portrait of women will be discussed by analyzing three different labels which were prevalent in naming women in Victorian period that practiced patriarchy severely.

There have been so many studies on women in the Victorian literature in general done mainly from the points of view of feminism. For example, Warren in her book How I Managed My Children from Infancy to Marriage(1865) looks at women as victimized by the society and they are nothing but raisers of children and then the children become older and older and they need to get married and they leave the house, and the mother has no function beyond that.

Sally Mitchell in *The Fallen Angel: Chastity, Class and Women's Reading 1835-1880* (1981) debates the character of the immoral woman in an extensive variety of narrative written between 1835 and 1880 in the literature and fiction of the authors of the Victorian time. She discusses the issue of chastity in the women who were angels in the house and the lack of it in the women who went astray.

Nina Auerbach in *Woman and the Demon: The Life of a Victorian Myth* (1982) discusses women under the categories of the angel, of demon, of old maid, and of fallen woman via abundant instances taken from fiction, art, and memoir. She argues that women were thought to possess bad characteristics if they did not stick to the rules of men of their time. If the women were good enough to yield and surrender to men they were thought to be angels and good.

Judith Walkowitz in her book *Prostitution and Victorian Society: Women, Class and the State* (1982) shows how feminists organized over sexual matters, how public discourse on whoredom re-delineated sexuality in the late 19th century, and how the government contributed to reorganize meanings of social nonconformity.

Merryn Williams in her book *Women in the English Novel, 1800-1900* (1984) explores the way society looks at women as depicted in the English novel. She argues women were regarded as inferior to men and they were not given opportunities to express themselves.

Mariana Valverde in her article "The Love of Finery: Fashion and the Fallen Woman in Nineteenth-Century Social Discourse" (1989) traces the fact that according to the male-oriented society of Victorian period women loved and admired fashion and this love or admiration was, in fact, their tragic flaw which had led to their going astray and therefore they fall into prostitute and whoredom.

Elisabeth Bronfen, in *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic* (1992) voices her concern about women. She argues that the highly beautiful description of the death of beautiful women in literature and arts shows that our society wishes and desires the omission and eradication of women from all facets and aspects of social life so that men should be the social choice. She believes that art and aesthetic are united in this omission of women.

Elizabeth Langland in "Nobody's Angels: Domestic Ideology and Middle-Class Women in the Victorian Novel" (1992) deals with a dominant element of an intricate procedure: the connection of class and gender beliefs in an image of Victorian narrative, the "Angel in the House," who encompasses and is established by her ideological other, the servant.

Barbara Creed in *The Monstrous Feminine: Film, Feminism and Psychoanalysis* (1993) studies how men considered women as monsters and were afraid of them. She says that men did not love women as sane creatures but they hated them as insane and monsters and were afraid of them as castrators. She criticizes Freud's model of psychoanalysis. For her Freud is a version of patriarchy.

The present researcher tries to apply the theory of feminism to these three Victorian novels written by Dickens, Gaskell, and Braddon respectively. Based on this methodology, this article will discuss the representations of women under three categories: representation of women as angel in the house, representation of women as fallen, and representation of women as mad. The theory of this article is feminism. The feminist critics and theoreticians from whose works the present researcher will benefit include Virginia Woolf, Simone de Beauvoir, and Elaine Showalter who had shared objectives of defining, founding, and attaining similar political, economic, cultural, personal, and social privileges for women.

This work's theory of feminism concerns the first-wave and second-wave feminism, as the theoreticians above demonstrate Woolf and de Beauvoir as feminists of the first wave and

Elaine Showalter belongs to the second wave feminism. Woolf is the founding mother of the first wave-feminist (Bressler, 118) who proclaims many of the concerns later feminist critics were to pay attention to and “who herself becomes the terrain over which some debates have struggled”(Bressler, 118). Virginia Woolf’s reputation is basically due to her being a creative woman author, and later feminist critics have examined her novels widely from very diverse viewpoints. However, her being a feminist rests on two key works, *A Room of One’s Own* (1929) and *Three Guineas* (1938) (Bressler, 118). Like Simone de Beauvoir, Woolf is mainly worried about women’s material disadvantages in contrast to men. In *A Room of One’s Own* she examines the history and social background of women’s literary works, and in *Three Guineas* she deals with the relationships between male power and the occupations (Bressler, 118).

Simone de Beauvoir’s revolutionary work, *The Second Sex* (1949) shaped a theoretical base for materialist feminists for decades to come. Beauvoir believes that in a patriarchal society, men are thought to be important subjects, while women are deemed depending beings (Tyson, 96). He sums up the view of de Beauvoir’s work, thus:

Men can act upon the world, change it, give it meaning, while women have meaning only in relation to men. Thus, women are defined not just in terms of their difference from men, but in terms of their inadequacy in comparison to men. The word woman, therefore, has the same implications as the word other. A woman is not a person in her own right. She is man’s Other: she is less than a man; she is a kind of alien in a man’s world; she is not a fully developed human being the way a man is. (Tyson, 96)

Second-wave feminism has in common with the first wave’s struggle for women’s privileges in all areas, its principal stress deals with the politics of literary creation, with women’s ‘experience’, with sexual ‘difference’ and with ‘sexuality’, as simultaneously a system of oppression and something to welcome (Bressler, 120). Elaine Showalter is a key feminist figure of the second wave feminism whose work *A Literature of Their Own* (1977) deals with the literary depiction of sexual differences in women’s writing. In this book, Showalter examines a literary history of women writers; generates a history which displays the formation of their material, mental and sociopolitical bases; and stimulates both a feminist evaluation and a ‘gynocritics’, the word gynocritics refers to female authors (Bressler, 127).

2. DISCUSSION

Representation of Women as Angels in the House

Part one will explore the concept of the angel in the house in *Bleak House* by Charles Dickens. Esther, as an angel in the house, serves and submits first to Mr. Jarndyce as her guardian, and second to her husband Woodcourt. She is devoted and loyal to family harmony and is certainly and truly a perfect example of the Victorian ideal of the good woman; a lady who keeps her husband's house serene and tranquil, one who brings peace and tranquility to her husband and her children. Her sustenance is what allows her husband to get the joyful family life he has continuously desired for.

Esther Summerson is the model of a woman who is perfect as a Victorian type of woman. The qualities which she possesses in the novel include among others: she is pretty, she is a humble woman, a very modest one, she is quiet, assiduous, and thankful. She is a good caretaker, and homemaker who usually has a habit of working only for the benefit of others. These are what the society of her time desired from her as a woman and she did stick to these criteria as a woman. Charles Dickens in some part of narration informs us about Esther. The Victorian society advocated ‘submission, self-denial, diligent work’ since these qualities were considered

as the preparations for a life on the part of any woman who wanted to start married life. This is the ideology of the Victorian period concerning women and female personalities.

Representation of Women as Fallen Women

Part two will explore the representation of women as the fallen woman in Ruth by Elizabeth Gaskell. In the novel of Elizabeth Gaskell, Ruth is made a fallen woman by Henry Bellingham. Ruth is a young orphan girl employed in a decent workshop for the old Mrs. Mason. She is chosen to attend a ball to mend torn clothes. At the ball she encounters the aristocratic Bellingham, a corrupt person who is instantaneously fascinated by her. They come across each other again by accident and form a clandestine relationship; on a visit together they are seen by Mrs. Mason who, afraid of her shop's name and fame, sacks Ruth.

They head for London together and there Ruth meets the incapacitated and kind Mr. Benson. Bellingham is taken ill and suffers from fever and the hotel requests his mother who gets there and is sickened by Bellingham's having experienced sin with Ruth. His mother convinces him to leave Ruth in London, leaving her some money.

Having understood that Bellingham has left her, Ruth attempts suicide but is prevented by Mr. Benson who helps and aids her. When he gets to know Ruth's past and that she does not have anybody he takes her to his hometown to stay with him and his sister, Faith. When they know that Ruth is pregnant with a child they decide to tell lie to the town and say that she is a widow called Mrs. Denbigh, to defend her from a society which would then recoil from her. The text implies Ruth becomes a fallen woman.

Representation of Women as Mad Women

The third part will examine representation of women as mad women in Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret*. In the nineteenth century, the mad were considered as "unfeeling brutes, ferocious animals that needed to be kept in check" (A Literature of their Own, 8). During the nineteenth century a change happened, and the insane were considered sympathetically as "sick human beings" in need of help (A Literature of their Own, 8). In the novel of Mary Elizabeth entitled *Lady Audley's Secret* representation of women as mad women will be discussed.

What can be understood from the ideas of the nineteenth century is that those women who were strongly passionate, fervent, and talented were considered as mad and insane and also it can be understood that these women were limited by the society of the Victorian time which was a patriarchal society. Mary Elizabeth's novel, *Lady Audley's Secret*, is about such a woman, a strongly avid, eager, and talented woman who is, this is the opinion of the present researcher, limited simply because the poor creature wanted to express her feelings. Therefore, such a woman is considered a mad woman so that other women take notice and remember her as a warning. She is chosen by society as an example of those women who do not follow societal standards. It can also be understood that the patriarchal society made a woman who did not obey the rules to be synonymous with madness. Therefore, madness was a characteristic of women not men. Such a society just wanted humble women who should keep silent and say nothing at all. To obey meant to survive for a woman.

Lady Audley should be buried alive in an asylum since she is a dangerous woman. Putting Lady Audley into a madhouse is a way of stopping her outrageous conduct from ruining the character of the nobility, specially her spouse, Sir Michael Audley. She is put into the asylum because she is discovered to be a fierce woman who has not only made an endeavor to commit

murder but who has also married another man while simultaneously has been the wife of somebody else and left her child.

The reason lady Audley is considered mad is that she does not act like a humble woman as other women did. In other words, she does not behave according to the norms of the Victorian society and therefore she is labeled as mad. The house in Victorian time and society was considered to be a protection from the hazards and perils of the external world, but in the novel, the apparently impeccable domestic woman, Lady Audley, is discovered to be a ferocious felon who has not only made an attempt to kill, but who has also committed adultery and left her child. This novel shows how Victorian society is disturbed when Lady Audley does not obey the ideas and concepts of patriarchal society concerning good women or angels in the house. Therefore, she is not a perfect example of the angel in the house and for this reason she is deemed as a mad woman with nasty ambitions. The novel shows her committing bigamy, the novel shows her as a violent person and cruel. There is a conversation between Dr. Mosgrave and Robert in the novel whose subject is Lady Audley:

Dr. Mosgrave: Because there is no evidence of madness in anything she has done. She ran away from her home, because her home was not a pleasant one, and she left in the hope of finding a better. There is no madness in that. She committed the crime of bigamy, because by that crime she obtained fortune and position. There is no madness there. When she found herself in a desperate position, she did not grow desperate. She employed intelligent means, and she carried out a conspiracy which required coolness and deliberation in its execution. There is no madness in that. (Braddon, 236)

3. CONCLUSIONS

The three novels which are discussed in this article are written by Dickens, Gaskell, and Braddon. Of these three writers the last two are females who depict the lives of women and their novels are feminist in essence since they represent the rights of women and condemn the way men view women. In the case of Ruth, the female novelist is critical of the way men seduce women and leave them live by their own and it is the women who are always blamed in such cases. Ruth as a novel wants to change this attitude towards women and bring a change to society. The other feminist novel, Lady Audley's Secret, is written by a female writer depicting the life of a woman. Lady Audley is in fact, the type of new woman who is very assertive and pushes the restrictions determined by patriarchal society. She is clever. She gets around the patriarchal rules and rejects them and asserts herself. She seems to be a slap on the face of patriarchy. The interest in the depiction of the life of a woman like Lady Audley and Ruth makes their writers seem as feminist because the writers want to problematize the situation of women in their time. Gaskell is very critical of the situation and explicitly says she wants to change the attitude towards fallen women by making Ruth die the death of a scapegoat. Braddon is more feminist by depicting the life of a transgressor who overtly turns the patriarchy on its head. Knowing that people will object to the depiction of the life of a fallen woman, Braddon, ironically, at the end of the novel says she hopes no one will protest to her story because the end of it makes the good people all happy and contented.

Psychological Complexities

In the novels of Elizabeth Gaskell and Elizabeth Braddon both Ruth and Lady Audley wear mask to live happily in unknown districts. The novels tell us how complex the characters of women are as this is voiced by Robert Audley in Lady Audley's Secret when he compares lady Audley with Alicia. She is transgressive, assertive, and disobedient. Robert Audley is very afraid

of Lady Audley and thinks she is an evil who reads his pathetic soul and plucks his thoughts out of his mind. However, Ruth in comparison to Lady Audley is not that much transgressive and her fall happened unintentionally. Lady Audley is very complex in comparison with Ruth. In the novel *Ruth*, the title character wears a false name to live in peace. She is successful in doing so. This tells us these women like to live in harmony with others. It also tells us how wrong we are in our opinion of people like Ruth. It tells us that such people can live in respectable society in disguise.

Rise of Women Novelists and Women Poets

In this article three writers were discussed. Two of them were women and this shows the number of women novelists in the period were on the rise. In fact, in Victorian period female writers tried to gradually defend themselves by depicting the lives of women. Gaskell did it by writing and depicting the life of a fallen woman and making her a great person. Despite the fact that the depiction of a fallen woman was not common these writers did it and gave voice to such women who were seduced by men and did not have a good life. Accordingly, Elizabeth Braddon in *Lady Audley's Secret* is describing the life of a woman. Lady Audley is tired with the norms and standards of male-dominated society showing the expectation of Braddon herself. She, as a woman novelist, voiced her concern over these male-dominated standards by depicting the life of a transgressive woman.

Role of Poverty and Materialism

One of the findings of this article is that to be an angel in the house and to be a fallen woman is something financially defined. It is only related to money that people are good and bad. Money is a deciding factor in being an angel in the house. To be angel and to be the opposite is very much related to materialism. A woman can be a good wife if she can bring home the bacon. In the novel *Lady Audley's Secret* a woman is turned transgressive and wild because of poverty and lack of money to support herself. If she had married a good husband she would have been very successful as a woman because she has the characteristics of a good woman. We see she is very generous and kind. The only thing she lacks is money or a good husband mostly a well-off husband. This is true about Victorian women who considered marriage as a social ladder. A good husband with money was favorable that meant that the man is a reliable one whom a woman can rely on financially. In the case of Lady Audley who cannot rely on George because he is good-for-nothing and without money, there is no promise of a good life and the result is the destruction of the whole family. When she marries Sir Michael Audley, Lady Audley behaves like a great woman and if her former husband had not appeared she would have remained a good wife to Sir Michael Audley and this tells a lot about how to be good is related to be financially secure.

This is true about Ruth, too. The reason Ruth turns into a fallen woman is that she does not have money to support herself when she is dismissed from her work because she was seen with Mr. Bellingham. If she had not been dismissed from her work she would have been a good person. In other words, if she had had money, she would not have fallen and would have remained an angel through her life.

In the case of Esther, she is provided with money and necessary things by Mr. Jarndyce. If Esther, also an orphan, were in place of Ruth she would likely fall. The reason for this is that she is provided with money. The goodness is rewarded in her when she marries the one she loves and this is because she does not have financial problems. Victorians appreciated goodness on the part of a woman and they advocated angel in the society. If a woman lived up to the expectations

of a society such as Victorian society she would continue living in the respectable society of her time; otherwise, there was no place for her to remain in the respectable society.

Marriage as a Social Ladder

All the three women examined in this article considered marriage as a social ladder. Esther in *Bleak House* regards marriage as a progress and she finds it and enjoys it. She is good enough according to the tastes of the Victorian period. But from the point of feminists she is very passive and inactive. She has accepted the conditions offered to her by the patriarchy and acts according to what society expects. One of the findings of this article is that women in male writers are shown as passive and obedient, kind, and good. For example in the novel *bleak house* nearly all women are good, passive, and kind. Esther, Ada Clare, and many other women in the novel are all examples of good women who act according to the norms. If they act according to the norms they are shown to have good marriage and marital life. To be good is to a great extent related to be financially well-off by marrying a rich man. For example, if the two women of this article who are fallen and mad had been wives of rich husbands they would have been good women. In the case of Ruth who is considered a fallen woman she is not married and is poor and orphaned. If she had had a rich husband to support her she would not have been a bad woman. In other words not having a financially successful marriage is responsible for the fall of Ruth and also for the bitter end of Lady Audley.

The Fallen and mad women examined in this article are defamed and ostracized. Because female misbehavior was considered a pollution, the abnormal woman was omitted from respectable society. Female misbehavior is shown in the novels of Ruth and Lady Audley's *Secret* as a danger of instability to a stable society, and whether the woman is guilty of sexual wrongdoing or not, in order to correct the social order she is omitted.

It is important that both Ruth and Lady Audley examined in the two novels *Ruth* and *Lady Audley's Secret* are ultimately removed from 'respectable society' at the close of their tales by their deaths. Their removal is by natural death, thus each woman is removed from her family, and eventually from society as a whole. The removal of Ruth is different from the removal of Lady Audley because Lady Audley is removed by the agents of society and put to a madhouse where she dies a lonely death, but the removal of Ruth is through her disease which she herself welcomes and wishes to die. Ruth is given the characteristics of a good woman and at the end everybody is sad that she is dead and she is given a good funeral.

From the comparison of these three women, it is concluded that all of them love to form a family and to be a housewife. In the case of Esther, she loves a family and she loves to form a family. She is very caring and cares for everybody and this shows her attention to family life. What is interesting is that she is created by a male writer. She is very submissive, very humble, and very meek. Perhaps a male writer like Dickens as a representative of Victorian age shows Esther as a kind person while the female writers like Elizabeth Gaskell and Elizabeth Braddon are not like that and they depict women that are not absolutely good and kind. They show moderate women and transgressive women. Of course, in the case of Braddon, lady Audley is very active and energetic something which Victorian society did not wish to see.

Punishment of Wrongdoing

Regarding the punishment of wrongdoing in the three novels on the part of women who commit it, the present researcher came to this conclusion that some committed suicide like Lady Deadlock in *Bleak House*, some voluntarily welcomed a disease like Ruth who herself decided to do it in order to commit self-punishment while readers and some others in the novel believe that

Ruth shouldn't have died and she did not deserve death. Lady Audley was not punished publicly and this may also be because of the shame on the patriarchal name that the female criminal showed. That's why they put her into a madhouse under a false name.

Esther is rewarded because she was good enough to listen to men. She acted as she was wanted to. She is an angel in the house according to the norms and standards of society. Braddon ends Lady Audley in a special and private way. Gaskell makes Ruth die the death of a martyr. She is a good heroin when she dies and a good funeral is given to her. At the end of her life her friends are all in tears. Lady Audley is depicted as selfish, and is at the end criticized for her not living up to the norms of that patriarchal society.

Ruth, however is very differently ended by the author who controls her fate. Her final repair is clearly found to be depending upon a final repair of her confidence and sense of self-esteem. This curing and repair of self-confidence is commonly strengthened by the Bensons, who help Ruth when she wishes help and nourishment. Consequently, the repair of Ruth's pride, self-confidence, and sense of self-esteem results in her salvation. In the case of Ruth the writer is more critical of the patriarchy that imposes downfall on Ruth.

The writer is critical of many people who are responsible for her fall. However, there are good people in the novel who help Ruth and the writer appreciates their help and support. In fact, there are two groups of people in Ruth, one group is helpful and one group is not. People are either good or bad in the life of Ruth.

The Unfair Male Judges of the Victorian Society

Another finding of this work is that it is society which decides how to punish wrongdoing in the society and unfortunately, the very most important point here is that the society is ruled by men only and these men are the judges and they are bad judges who always take the side of men. These judges defined what is to be rewarded in a woman and what is to be punished in a woman. Therefore, it is expectable to punish women unfairly simply because the women didn't have power. Consequently, these judges rewarded those women who observed the rules of the judges and punished the transgressors. This was their ideology and preached it and condemned violating it harshly and unfairly. Likewise, if there is a fall it is women who are blamed. In the case of a fall two persons are involved, a man and a woman, but the Victorian society blames women in cases of all downfalls. The reason for this is that society is man-oriented and the man escapes justice. The real people to blame are men in such cases who seduce women and leave them alone in the society.

Victorian Criteria for Good and Evil

Victorian criteria and standards of good and evil in regards with women are surrounded over the submission and lack of submission of women. Women who are submissive are good and women who are not submissive are evil. The submissive ones remain in the society and the disobedient ones are omitted from society in order not to affect other women negatively. In this article Esther is submissive and remains in the respectable society of Victorian period while Ruth and Lady Audley are transgressive and are omitted from society. Victorian society rewarded submissive women and rejected disobedient ones. Their criteria for good and evil depended on women's obedience and disobedience to men and the quality of how to raise a family.

Trans-Valuation of Values

When Ruth is going to live the life of an angel under the false name of Denbigh, everybody respects her and thinks that she is a great woman. The novel is in fact trans-valuing

the values. When she is able to be a pure woman in one district under the false name, Gaskell has a message that how shaky and unstable the values are and in fact she deconstructs such values and norms telling us to change our perspectives regarding the fallen women. Gaskell transvalues the values by describing on the one hand, Ruth's innocence and simplicity which make her very idealistic and weak, and on the other hand, making her ethical by placing emphasis on her sense of guilt, repentance, and also her desire for improvement. Ruth, at the end, disobeys Mr. Bellingham, not accepting him and his money and his offer of marriage telling him she does not love him anymore and what she did was because of love. She repents her deeds telling him they are very far apart and when she most needed him he left her alone.

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