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Bakalářská práce

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**HOW VICTORIAN PAINTERS PORTRAYED WOMEN**

Prohlašuji, že jsem bakalářskou práci vypracovala samostatně a použila jen uvedených pramenů a literatury.

V Olomouci dne .....

Vladimíra Lagová.....

I would like to thank my supervisor Mgr. Ondřej Duda for his support and valuable advices.



**BACHELOR THESIS**

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**VLADIMÍRA LAGOVÁ**

## CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	7
INTRODUCTION.....	8
1 PREVALENT IDEOLOGIES.....	10
1.1 LAWS .....	11
2 WAYS WOMEN WERE PORTRAYED.....	13
2.1 THE IDEAL WOMAN.....	13
2.2 THE WIDOW .....	19
2.3 THE MOTHER.....	23
3 WOMEN AT WORK.....	24
3.1 CLASS DEFINES OCCUPATION.....	24
3.1.2 IMPACT OF THE INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION.....	25
3.2 FACTORY WORKERS.....	26
3.3 SERVANTS.....	28
3.4 THE SEAMSTRESS.....	30
3.5 THE GOVERNESS.....	32
4 FALLEN WOMEN.....	33
4.1 WHO WERE FALLEN WOMEN?.....	33
4.2 INFIDELITY.....	35
4.3 SUICIDE.....	36
5 THE PRE-RAPHAELITES - SEX AND REVOLUTION.....	37
5.1 WOMAN DESTROYED BY LOVE.....	38
5.2 THE KEPT WOMAN.....	41
5.3 THE GODDESS - FEMME FATALE.....	42
CONCLUSION.....	43
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	45
ANNOTATION.....	48

## **ABSTRACT**

The aim of this discursive thesis is to explore the ways in which Victorian painters portrayed women and what this revealed about their role and position in society at the time. The prevalent belief that predominantly male artists of the time focused on female weakness was tested by examining a number of works split into themes based on gallery visits, literature reviews and digital archive research. Women were either depicted as ideal women conforming to the rules of patriarchy or the polar opposite, fallen women who broke the prevailing social mores and paid a heavy price for their transgression. By examining the social and legal position of women it was clear that in reality women were in a powerless situation within the patriarchal society which was reflected and reinforced in much of the art. Even those who portrayed social problems sympathetically reinforced the prevailing status quo. The period was one of enormous change in political and social terms especially in the lives of women. The political fight for women's rights, their movement into higher education and expansion into the workforce seem glaringly absent from the imagery. Even the imagery of the revolutionary Pre-Raphaelites seemed stuck in the past.

## INTRODUCTION

“The Victorian conscience especially expressed in literature and painting, constantly focused on female weakness in all its forms” (Des Cars Laurence, 2000).

This discursive thesis aims to explore the question of how Victorian Painters portrayed women and what this tells us about the position of women in society at that time. The quote above expresses a commonly held view that the portrayal of women in Victorian art focused on female weakness. Whether this opinion stands up to scrutiny after an examination of the material will be discussed in the conclusion. The fact that the artists were predominantly male has a bearing on the topic.

A visit to the 19<sup>th</sup> century section of any large public art collection in Britain reveals a dichotomy in the way Victorian women were portrayed. On one hand they appear at the centre of perfect families, icons of domesticity and subservience; on the other hand, they appear as victims of circumstance, “*fallen*” women who have paid the price for breaking the prevailing moral code. Other striking depictions by the revolutionary Pre-Raphaelites, working in the latter part of the century, portray women in a powerfully sexual manner. Although women are often their primary subjects, they seem objectified; projections of male fantasy and ideals of feminine beauty. The Victorian period was one of profound economic and social changes due in large part to the Industrial Revolution. It brought great wealth for some, but also terrible poverty for many. The rapidly expanding economy produced a large middle class which had a formative impact on society. How some of these changes were expressed in paintings will be explored in this thesis.

Examining works of art from the past and analysing which subjects were most popular, throws light on the preoccupations and predominant values of the time. Even the subjects that artists avoided, offer important insights. As Jeremy Paxman writes in his introduction to “*The Victorians*.” “Victorian paintings do more than simply provide illustrations of the period, snapshots before such things were widely available. In the subjects the artists chose and their patrons wanted to see communicated, they tell us about the condition of Victorian society” (Paxman Jeremy, 2010). Art not only informs us about the society that produced it but can have a direct impact on that society. Brecht, the communist playwright, working in the 1920s is quoted as saying, “Art is not a mirror held up to society but a hammer to shape it” (Leon

Trotsky, 1924). John Ruskin, the most influential art critic of Victorian times, believed in the “innocent eye”; artists could paint without their prejudices, class, and beliefs affecting what they produced. However, the predominantly male artists covered in this thesis demonstrate that both their conscious and subconscious views, their class and their gender, informed their choice of subject matter and manner of painting.

Although Queen Victoria gave her name to the period of her reign (1837- 1901), in reality, historical divisions are arbitrary. There was not one definable artistic movement but overlapping styles, movements and schools. For the purposes of this thesis emphasis will be placed on individual artists, iconic paintings and on selected Pre-Raphaelites who focused on the portrayal of women. Throughout the period many portraits were commissioned of wealthy women, but only those of Queen Victoria will be included. An investigation into the broader social context of the paintings will help address the questions posed in the opening paragraph. Research will focus on the social history of Victorian women, their roles and status within the patriarchal society. Artists both reinforced and questioned these prevalent values. The idealised vision of women was supported by the ideology of “separate spheres” and the cult of domesticity expressed in “*the angel in the house*”. These ideologies confirmed the view that women were of lower value than men. Society was organised with roles strictly determined by gender. Darwin’s ground breaking theory, “The Survival of the Fittest,” worked alongside the theory of separate spheres. Selected paintings of women reflecting these ideas will be analysed. The image of the ideal woman was embodied by Victoria who represented a life based on respectability, motherhood and family. The polar opposite view is found in widespread images of “fallen” women. A wealth of images on this theme exist and selected examples will be discussed. The social and legal background underpinning these images will be examined, but the scope of this assignment precludes a detailed analysis of legislation.

All aspects of life were ruled by gender, including work. Attitudes towards women and work depended on social and economic class. The driving force of the Industrial Revolution is key to the period and its particular impact on women will be explored. Poverty and its particular effect on women will also be considered. The narrative of women forced into prostitution through economic and social circumstances, leading to suicide and death, appears in many iconic works. Social realist painters believed art could bring about change and aimed not to simply comment on social problems, but actively participated in trying to improve them.

The last section of the thesis will explore the revolutionary Pre-Raphaelites who portrayed women in a totally new way. Their sexualised female subjects were a contrast to the ideal prim women depicted by earlier artists. The “femme fatale,” the “damsel in distress” and the victim of lost or unrequited love, were popular subjects. These artists were famous at the time, and continue to be popular today, when many other Victorian artists have fallen out of favour.

## **1 PREVALENT IDEOLOGIES**

To comprehend how Victorian society functioned, it is important to understand its binary nature, which historians termed “separate spheres.” This patriarchal ideology was based on notions of strict biologically determined gender roles. Men were active members of society in control of all aspects of life, whereas women were confined to the domestic sphere. Although aspects such as race or class were not unimportant, gender was the most important division in hierarchal Victorian society. The concept of leading separate lives with the man as head of his family and his wife restricted to the home was the core of the theory. Women were expected to be subservient, not only to their husbands but to other men in the family.

“Because women were expected to be partners (albeit unequal ones) in such families, marriage was the goal of nearly all Victorian women. Most had no other way to attain economic security, and being unmarried became a stigma to be avoided” (Swisher Clarice, 2005, p.10).

“Men were physically strong while women were weak. For men sex was central, and for women reproduction was central. Men were independent, while women were dependent. Men belonged in the public sphere, while women belonged in the private sphere. Men were meant to participate in politics and in paid work, while women were meant to run the households and raise families. Women were thought to be naturally more religious and morally finer than men” (Encyclopaedia Britannica, ©2022).

Upper and middle-class women lived very different lives to those of the working classes, but the moral attributes of the “perfect” family with the husband and patriarch at its head, filtered down through the classes” (Perkin, 1993, p.74). The concept of “separate spheres” was widely dispersed before the industrial era. However, as Lynn Abrams explains in her article, “Ideals of Womanhood in Victorian Britain,”

“It was not a blind adherence to a set of imposed values. Rather it was a way of living and working based on evangelical beliefs about the importance of the family, the constancy of marriage and a woman’s innate moral goodness” (BBC-History Victorians, ©2014).

## 1.1 LAWS

The legal system supported the theory of separate spheres, giving men total power and women practically none. Women could not vote although this was the period where the battle for female suffrage began, only being fully achieved in 1929. When a woman married she lost her legal status and her husband owned everything that was hers prior to marriage. The legal term for this was “coverture”. In effect, a husband owned both his wife and children. This law not only stripped women of property rights, but also precluded women from entering contracts or even making a will. Pressure from the women’s movement in the late nineteenth century led to the weakening and eventual abolition of this oppressive law. It had impacted on all aspects of a married woman’s life. Frances Power Cobbe, the social reformer working for women’s rights wrote, as late as 1878. “The notion that a man’s wife is his PROPERTY, in the sense in which a horse is his property...is the fatal root of incalculable evil and misery” (Levine, 1994, p.14).

Coverture did not apply to single women, but most chose to marry as other options for financial security were so limited. Marriage was viewed as a lifelong commitment and divorce an almost impossible option. Before 1857 those seeking a divorce needed a private act of Parliament to be passed, which was complicated and expensive. Even upper-class wives who sought a divorce had a battle, but for poorer classes it was impossible. Even if a wife was successful, she had to pay her husband financial damages, if she had committed adultery. In stark contrast, a husband could get a divorce bill through as a matter of right.

“A wife who wanted a divorce had to prove not only adultery but further offences such as physical cruelty, bigamy or incest (Perkin, 1993, p.123).

“After the Matrimonial Causes Act was passed adultery remained the sole grounds for divorce, although wives could additionally allege cruelty and desertion in order to obtain a divorce. It was a landmark step in women’s emancipation giving them legal standing in the civil courts and allowing them a route to leave an unhappy marriage. However, it was socially

unacceptable and many women feared losing their social position and financial support if they were divorced” (UK Parliament, ©2022).

In poorer classes where neither partner owned much, the legal position of women in marriage was possibly less of an issue. Male violence against women was tolerated in all classes. Rape within marriage was not a crime and it was socially and legally accepted that husbands could “chastise” their wives for many reasons. Joan Parkin describes a case where a man beat his wife to death when he objected to her going to work in a pub. The judge sentenced him to three months in prison stating. “It was a minor offence of manslaughter. The blows were a mere chastisement” (Perkin, 1993, p.121). It is clear that under the law and within marriage the implementation of separate spheres resulted in the oppression of women. The contemporary writer, Sarah Stickley, wrote in 1830, “The first thing of importance is to be content to be inferior to men, inferior in mental power in the same proportion that you are in bodily strength” (Bauer, 1979, p.13). It seemed acceptance of oppression was not enough, women were expected to be happy about it. John Ruskin, the art critic and social thinker was widely read and highly respected. His views concurred with those of Stickley’s and highlight how stereotypical gender roles defined society and resulted in women being in highly disadvantaged position. “The man’s power is active, progressive, defensive. He is eminently the doer, creator, the discoverer, the defender. ...but...she must be enduringly, incorruptibly good; instinctively, infallibly wise, wise not for self -development, but for self -renunciation” (Ruskin, 1865).

In scientific thought, women were also placed below men. Darwin concluded his book, “The Descent of Man,” by stating, “Men attain a higher eminence, in whatever he takes up, than can women – whether requiring deep thought, reason or imagination, or merely the use of the senses and hands” (Cohen, 2010, p.333). His groundbreaking theory of Evolution, “Survival of the Fittest’, had an immense impact on Victorian Society. It caused outrage by potentially undermining the basis of Christianity, which underpinned Victorian society. He challenged the belief that humans descended from Adam and Eve, replacing it with the theory of evolution. His contention that humans evolved from apes was repugnant to many, and even today Creationists reject it as Christopher Wood writes, “To understand the Victorians it is essential to realise the extent to which religion dominated their lives... The evolutionary theories of Darwin had put a time bomb under the very foundations of Victorian belief” (Wood, 1990, p.87).



## **2 WAYS WOMEN WERE PORTRAYED**

It is evident that females were seen as inferior in every aspect of life, except in those areas designated as “feminine”. Alongside this was the belief that women were morally superior to men and innately more religiously inclined. This may explain the intense level of scorn and blame they experienced if they deviated from their designated role. The restrictive social conventions in place and the position of women in society are expressed in many paintings of the time. The first widespread image to explore is that of the ideal woman.

### **2.1 THE IDEAL WOMAN**

Lynn Abrams writes, “Victoria herself became the icon of late 19<sup>th</sup> century middle-class femininity and domesticity and was called “mother of the nation” (BBC, Abrams, 2001) . Clearly, her life was completely different to that of ordinary women, even those of the upper classes. She was ruler of an enormously powerful nation, in a position of personal power, and enjoyed unlimited wealth. Despite this, she managed to portray herself as someone whom ordinary women could emulate. It was an era when women were expected to be sexually passive and female sexual desire was a social taboo. Sex was seen as central to men’s lives but confined to reproduction for women. Victoria’s private life was different. Her marriage was a passionate love match and according to the historian Paula Bartley, Victoria responded with dismay when advised by her doctor to forgo sexual activity so as to prevent “Queen Victoria’s voracious appetite for food and sex” (History extra, ©2020).

Motherhood was the primary role for women. Victoria had nine children in seventeen years and was fortunate that they all survived into adulthood, at a time when most families lost children and babies to various illnesses. Dying during or after childbirth was a serious threat to women of all classes, but worse for the poor, with bad nutrition and the inability to afford medical help. Contraceptives were developed over the period but only those who were less religious used them and they were seen as immoral. Abortion was the resort of the desperate and was illegal, often resulting in injury or death. Victoria, the icon of womanhood, was the subject of hundreds of portraits throughout her long reign. The rapidly emerging art of photography also depicted her fulfilling her royal duties with modesty and diligence, while living a domestic life. The art historian Lydia Figes writes, “Queen Victoria was the most photographed and painted monarch to have ever lived (at that time). A fiercely intelligent

woman who acknowledged that her image was instrumental to her relationship to the public” (Figes, 2019). She was portrayed as a virginal young woman, a perfect mother and wife and finally as a grieving widow. These images of women were widespread, whether of the Queen or ordinary women.

The first painting to consider is *THE CORONATION OF QUEEN VICTORIA*, CHARLES ROBERT LESLIE R.A. 28<sup>th</sup> June 1838. (Royal Collection Buckingham Palace).



*Pic. 1: The Coronation of Queen Victoria, Charles Robert Leslie, 1838*

In this work 18-year-old Victoria kneels at the altar, to be blessed by the archbishop before her coronation. At this point in the ceremony, she is not wearing her crown or royal regalia. She is portrayed as a modest young woman, bowing her head to the authority of the Church and God. Her kneeling pose brings a young bride to mind, virginal and obedient, about to take on the adult role she was born to fulfill. A shaft of sunlight hits her head as if God's holy light is sanctifying the occasion. The subject is a Queen but as Charles Wood writes, “Although it took place in Westminster Abbey, Leslie paints the scene as if it were a private family affair” (Wood, 1990, p 21). Even at this important state occasion the artist places Victoria in a “safer” intimate setting, more appropriate for a young woman. Although important men are present, Victoria's female friends and entourage feature more prominently and increase the sense of a more domestic occasion. This famous painting reinforces the notion that modesty and remaining within the accepted bounds of femininity, were exemplified by the young Queen.

The second painting is by Sir Edwin Landseer, “WINDSOR CASTLE IN MODERN TIMES, 1840 Royal Collection London.



*Pic. 2: Windsor Castle in Modern Times, Sir Edwin Landseer, 1840*

This romantic work shows Albert and Victoria as a happy young couple on their own, with their small daughter and pets, but without servants or the formalities of royal life. The clear distinction between male and female activities and roles is evident. Prince Albert has returned from shooting birds. He still wears his outdoor boots, indicating he leads an active outside life. In contrast, Victoria holds a delicate posy of flowers and is dressed for indoor activities. Although she is the Queen, she stands up to attend to him, while he reclines. It is a painting demonstrating the concept of Separate Spheres, showing the division between male and female lives, even amongst Royalty. “His pictures (Landseer) show us a mid-Victorian family, romantic rather than royal; they reflect that gradual identification of the monarchy with the people, which was a feature of the Victorian Age” (Wood, 1990, p.23).

The image of a perfect mother and subservient wife, in her safe domestic setting was a very popular subject. “A LIFE WELL SPENT” by Charles West Cope RA 1862, Private Collection©James Hervey British Art, London.



*Pic. 3: A Life Well Spent, Charles West Cope, 1862*

In this depiction of ordered domesticity, a devoted mother is surrounded by her neatly dressed, well behaved children. She knits, while overseeing them, showing she is industrious. The cluttered composition appears claustrophobic to modern eyes, but reflects the comforts of life that her husband provides. The book on her lap, possibly a bible, suggests a mother should be a religious instructor to her children. The daughter in the front reads, while simultaneously rocking the baby's cradle. Perhaps this intimates that the next generation of women will replicate their mother's life. Like many works at the time, it is full of symbols. The wooden carving of Christ in the wall, the tablecloth design covered with crosses, lilies (symbol of the Virgin Mary) and the prominent bible are clearly Christian symbols. This painting reinforces the role of a mother following Christian values and fulfilling her duty. The belief that religious education was a mother's responsibility was expressed by Sarah Lewis in her book, "Woman's Mission," 1839, "They are naturally disposed to reverence, to worship to self- sacrifice...let them deeply engrave these principles on the hearts of their children" (Murray, 1982).



The art historian Kendall Smaling Wood argued that by the 1860s domestic art itself “had become imbued with sacred significance and that the genre had ascended to the realm of religious art ”This was exemplified by George Hicks’s *WOMAN’S MISSION*,1862-3” (Tate.org.uk, ©2022) .



Pic. 4: *Woman’s Mission: Companion of Manhood*, George Elgar Hicks, 1862

Pic. 5: *Woman’s Mission: Comfort of Old Age*, George Elgar Hicks, 1862

The work comprises of three paintings featuring the same woman in different roles. Firstly, as the doting mother in “*Guide to Childhood*,” then as the “*Companion of Manhood*” and finally as “*Comfort of Old Age*”. The *Companion* shows her husband clasping a black edged letter, denoting news of a death. He covers his face while his wife leans into him, supporting and comforting him while her body merges with his; two figures become one, she is part of him. It reflects the religious belief that a couple united by marriage are one. The word “companion” indicates her central position in his life, even if she is not his equal. Smaling Wood highlights the specifically religious symbolism in these works, linking them to particular parts in the Bible.

The third painting shows her caring for a sick old man, perhaps her father. The work is infused with light; possibly a heavenly illumination, suggesting that death and salvation are near. These three sentimental paintings show a woman dedicating her life to the service of others; a religious concept. Hick’s choice of title reinforces the belief that a dedication to home

and family was akin to a religious calling. The narrative could also be read less prescriptively and seen as a celebration of the central role women played in family life.

Countless Victorian artists portrayed pretty rosy cheeked women in domestic settings, often surrounded by children. These smaller, domestic genre paintings became increasingly popular and Smaling suggests this was a specifically British preoccupation, where a man's home was his haven and his "castle". A wife's calling was to take care of this haven for her husband. This subject appealed to both famous and less known artists. Many works were very sentimental and do not appeal to modern taste. They appear moralistic and aimed to reinforce Victorian values that viewers today do not endorse. This has meant that Victorian paintings, except those by the Pre-Raphaelites were somewhat disregarded for many years. As Jeremy Paxman writes "Victorian storytelling is, rightly, recognized as second to none, But the visual art of the Victorians has yet to be rescued from indifference." He goes on to say that these types of paintings try to indoctrinate us with values we no longer believe in and are often "cloyingly sentimental" (Paxman Jeremy, 2010, pp 10-11).

The Victorian image of the ideal wife came to be known as the "The Angel in the House". This phrase became a shorthand expression, summing up expectations of wives. It came from the title of a famous poem by Coventry Patmore published in 1854. The poem was so long that it was published in installments, over eight years, and affirmed traditional Victorian values. "The woman was expected to be devoted and submissive to her husband. The Angel was passive and powerless, meek, charming, graceful, sympathetic, self-sacrificing, pious, and above all — pure" (Allpoetry ©by owner).

To working class women struggling to feed and care for large families, living in cramped unhealthy accommodation, such images must have looked like fantasies. Poorer families did not have the luxury of women not working to help support the family. Even the clothes of wealthier women were constricting, with tiny waists formed by tight corsets and long skirts making fast movement difficult. The idea of sexual purity and subservience so entrenched in the expanding middle classes, filtered down to all classes. How far these bourgeois ideals were lived out in reality is hard to say. In order to even survive, working class women had to be tough, determined and resourceful. In her book, *Women of Victorian England*, Clarice Swisher explains that despite the powerless situation women found themselves in during the early Victorian period, where men dominated them at home and work,

they found ways to cope as described in her chapter entitled “*The Strength and Grit of Victorian Women.*”

“Since women lived under a political and social system that controlled them, it is astonishing that they were able to overcome their difficulties. Victorian women cleverly found ways to fulfill their own needs and, at the same time, appear to conform to the system” (Perkin, 1993). In her book *Victorian Women*, Perkin includes many contemporary accounts written or recorded by women themselves, which offer insights into what real life was like, as opposed to the rosy image portrayed in paintings. These accounts also show that despite the conventions of the time, many women enjoyed their sexual relationships and had more equal marriages than one might imagine.

## 2.2 THE WIDOW

Another popular depiction of the ideal woman was as a widow. This powerful emotional symbol combined the “ideal woman” with the Victorian obsession with death. The image of Victoria as a grieving widow was the subject of numerous works, after Prince Albert died aged forty-two. Her grief was so profound that she withdrew from public life for many years and wore full mourning clothes for a decade and black for the rest of her life.

An iconic image of Victoria as a widow was painted by Landseer in 1865. *QUEEN VICTORIA at OSBORNE*, Royal Collection Buckingham Palace.



*Pic. 6: Queen Victoria at Osborne, Edwin Landseer, 1865*

This painting was completed after Victoria had withdrawn from public life for many years. The aim was probably to demonstrate that despite still being in mourning, Victoria was finally engaging with the world again. Albert’s early death defined the rest of her life and kept the image of a grieving widow in the forefront of cultural life. At the time, some felt her

obsession with widowhood was excessive, even in an era when the rituals surrounding death were so widespread. In his book *Victorian Panorama*, Christopher Wood describes what he calls the “cult of death”. He explains that death was not the taboo subject it is today and how funerals were important social occasions. Sex is discussed freely today but was a taboo subject in Victorian times. Modern viewers may find the sentimental paintings about death and dying somewhat morbid. Many children died in infancy and fatal illnesses affected all classes. This meant that people were intimately involved with death in a way we are not today, with deaths frequently occurring at home, not in hospital (Wood, 1990).

“The Victorian cult of death is quite unique in English history. Never before or since have the English been so obsessed with the rites and rituals of death, funerals and mourning. A whole language of dress, objects and social formalities grew up around it” (Wood, 1990, p.103). Given this obsession, it is understandable that the subject of widows appealed to many artists and their public. The widow was a powerful symbol of helplessness and female suffering and reinforced the idea of female dependence on men. Widows were often depicted in churchyards, mourning their husbands or saying goodbye to dying relatives. They were expected to wear mourning clothes for at least two years or more, whereas men simply wore a single black band on one arm over their normal clothes.

Many women were widowed relatively young, and their mourning clothes marked them out as females who should avoid male attention. Perhaps this forbidden aspect proved titillating to men. It is striking how attractive most of these images are, considering the grim subject. Perhaps artists felt their viewers responded more sympathetically to images of beautiful women. Although many widows must have been older, the appetite for pretty young subjects prevailed (The Vintage news, ©2014-2022).

Robert Southey’s famous poem “The Widow, (1843) expresses the desperate plight of widows, deprived of their husband’s income and protection.

“I had a home once-

I had a husband

I am a widow, poor and broken hearted.

Pity me strangers,”

(allpoetry, ©by owner)



“Widowhood in the early Victorian times was often seen as an end of marriage, a devastating experience on women whose central role was to be a dutiful wife and guardian of the family” (Jalland, 2011, p.230).

A common narrative chosen by artists was that of the economic problems widows faced. *NAMELESS and FRIENDLESS* 1857 (Tate gallery, London) was painted by Emily Osborn, one of the most successful women artists of the period, at a time when male artists dominated.



*Pic. 7: Nameless and Friendless, Emily Mary Osborn, 1857*

Like her male contemporaries, she painted genre scenes, often of women in distress. The fact that a female artist chose this trope, indicates how pervasive this view was within society. However, she was a progressive thinker and active in the campaign for women’s rights so this painting could also be read as a criticism of the narrow choice of women’s occupations. It is a “genre scene,” portraying ordinary people doing everyday things, which was a common category of painting that defined the era. A pretty young woman is trying to sell paintings to support herself. She looks desperate as the potential buyer appears unkeen to buy. She does not wear a wedding ring, perhaps suggesting her lover has died, placing her in an even weaker position, than a wife. Double standards existed, where men could have mistresses and even second families, without losing their social standing. However, for the woman involved, it was a precarious position, where all support would cease and society would judge her harshly. This work clearly expresses the inequality between the sexes with regard to financial independence.

The second work *EXTREMITY*, 1886 by Arthur D. Brunton (Paul Mellon Centre, London) shows a desperate widow hesitating to enter a pawnbroker, while gazing at her wedding ring.



*Pic. 8: Extremity, Arthur D. Brunton, 1886*

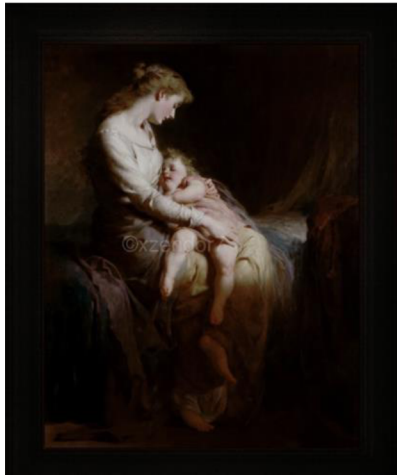
Her dire financial situation has forced her to pawn this treasured item. Placing the widow between brick pillars and gloomy walls compounds the sense of her being trapped by circumstances and reinforces how important a male protector and breadwinner was for a woman.

The possibility of a better future relied on being able to remarry. There were legislative improvements over time with a series of Married Women's Acts. In 1882 The Married Women's Property Act gave women independence regarding finances and property (legislation, © Crown and database right). These laws probably did not alter societal beliefs but they did end the powerless position of married women under the law. It ended "coverture" mentioned earlier in the section about separate spheres. The Act benefited those widows who had their own money before marriage and were now able to inherit property as well. Whilst the paintings of widows provoke pity, they do not appear to be strong campaigning images aimed at change, but simply a comment on how things were. They confirmed that women relied on men and were helpless without their protection. In contrast, social realist painters mentioned later in the thesis aimed to change the inequalities in society, rather than simply reflect them.

### **2.3 THE MOTHER**

Another very popular subject was of mothers and babies. The image of mother and child occurs throughout art history, particularly in depictions of the Virgin and child in Christian iconography. This history is reflected in the pose and lighting in many Victorian paintings of mothers. Although motherhood was a vital role, paintings of pregnant women did not emerge from the research undertaken. Providing a husband with heirs was a woman's duty,

but something done behind closed doors, and an inappropriate subject for art. However, the image of pretty young mothers gazing at their small babies with love and devotion was a popular one. Babies and young children were considered ‘innocent’ and Victorian ideas of strict parental authority and corporal punishment would not have applied to them yet. It was the relatively short period when a mother had control over her child without male intervention. A touching example is *MOTHER AND CHILD* by George Hicks, 1873 (Manchester Art Gallery).



*Pic 9.: Mother and Child, George Hicks, 1873*

It is an intimate portrayal of a mother enjoying private time with her baby. Her hair is tied back loosely in a casual style, only appropriate at home. In Victorian times strict rules existed regarding hairstyles. “Women were expected to wear it bound up after marriage and free flowing hair outside the home was considered unchaste and the characteristic of a morally depraved woman” (Arts Brighton, 2012, ©University of Brighton Faculty of Arts). The dark background is filled with drapery, suggesting a bed. By focusing the light on the mother and child and leaving the location unclear, Hicks makes this a universal image. The mother might be a rich woman, but her bare feet and simple clothing allow her to represent all women. The child’s pose is close to breastfeeding, but that would have been a taboo subject.

### **3 WOMEN AT WORK**

In “Victorian Panorama,” Wood describes the types of work different classes of women undertook and the great contrast between the social classes. The way society functioned based on the theory of separate spheres discussed earlier, meant that women were destined to stay within the domestic sphere and not join the workforce. However, women and girls from

families with limited financial means were obliged to work and help support both themselves and their families. “For working class women, the choices of occupations were limited, but they had to work as hard as men“ (Wood, 1990, p.125). In the same book Wood writes, “God and work were the catchwords of the age. The Victorians’ passionate belief in the gospel of work led them to despise idleness as a social and economic sin. And they worked incredibly hard, in both office and factory. Twelve hours a day, six days a week was common for most workers” (Wood, 1990, p.115).

### **3.1 CLASS DEFINES OCCUPATION**

Work involving physical labour or being out in public places, was only done by poor women. Upper and middle-class women were expected to remain at home and a level of idleness was even seen as a measure of gentility by some. Charity work was an acceptable activity for them because it conformed to the idea of women being virtuous with high moral standards. Philanthropy developed as a response to shifting views about poverty, deprivation and inequality. Although upper-class women were originally involved in personal charitable activities, after 1880 they joined middle class women in organized philanthropic work. Over time, these activities laid the foundation for the suffragette movement, when it became clear that change would only come about through the upheaval of the status quo. Philanthropic work and social reform activities were unpaid work, but they were vital in paving the way for social change. There were few acceptable jobs for single middle-class women with limited financial means, such as a Governess or a teacher. The most common job for lower class women of all ages was domestic service. The hierarchy of jobs meant that some had direct contact with their employers, whereas others were considered “below stairs” and relegated to physically hard work. Outside home a variety of jobs were undertaken by working class women and girls in the countryside and cities. Despite their relative poverty, they may have enjoyed greater equality with their partners than richer women who were confined to domestic life. They worked on farms, helped their husbands in their businesses, worked in shops and outdoor markets, selling items such as milk, flowers or matches on the street.

The portrayal of these jobs in contemporary paintings was often highly sentimental and ragged women and children were “prettified” and shown in a rosy light, implying their position was charming, not shocking. Some social realist artists such as Watts, Herkomer and Thomas Benjamin Kennington did show impoverished women in desperate situations. However, even these sanitised and sentimentalised their plight to a degree. A late Victorian work, *THE PINCH*

OF POVERTY, by Kennington 1889, The Foundling Museum, was one of a series of paintings commissioned by benefactors to highlight social ills in London.

The title was derived from a book by Thomas Wright on poverty. Despite being a touching image, the fatherless family appear sentimentalised, with a charming little girl in the forefront. Perhaps images of harsh reality might have offended the potential benefactors and would have been counter-productive. Many poor women were obliged to remain at home looking after their large families, taking in piece work or laundry to increase the family income.

### **3.1.2 IMPACT OF THE INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION**

The Victorian period was one of enormous changes fueled by the Industrial Revolution. In his book “The Victorians” Jeremy Paxman suggests that, “Although Britain didn’t undergo the major political revolutions like those in France and other places in Europe, it experienced revolutions in every other sphere” (Paxman, 2010, p.12).

Monumental shifts and changes brought about by the Industrial Revolution had particular impact on the lives of women. The new technical inventions changed the largely rural economy to one centered in towns and cities, employing thousands of workers in various industries, such as cloth production and steel making. A high proportion of workers in the new factories were women and girls. The mass movement of workers into cities led to cramped, poor living conditions, with big families often sharing a single room. Huge financial gains were made by the factory and mine owners and the division between rich and poor became more marked. Factory owners increased production to a scale previously impossible leading to mass employment, but often at unlivable wages, causing deprivation and poverty. Those employed had little legal protection or bargaining power until the development of Trade Unions, aimed to protect the livelihoods of working-class people. The horrific conditions of women and children in factories and mines only improved after social reformers fought to pass new legislation, which improved conditions over time. This was the social backdrop to the paintings being discussed.

### 3.2 FACTORY WORKERS

Women working in mills, factories and mines were in a particularly vulnerable position. They may have been unable to work at times, due to prevalent illnesses such as tuberculosis or smallpox, or becoming heavily pregnant. Caring for sick relatives, made them more vulnerable to illness themselves and they also earned less than men. Another problem women may have experienced, was sexual harassment by powerful employers. A widow, or abandoned woman without male support had few choices. For many the only options were the dreaded system of workhouses or to become a prostitute.

Paintings of women at work will be discussed under the themes of factory workers, servants, seamstresses and governesses. Literature at the time highlighted the dehumanising effects of the new jobs, brought by industrialisation. Novels such as ‘Hard Times’ by Dickens or Gaskell’s ‘North and South’ described the harsh conditions and desperate poverty of factory workers. Victorian painters however, were slow or reluctant to paint the difficult subject of women in factories, mines or mills. Paintings of these subjects are rare because they were considered inappropriate subjects for artists of the Royal Academy. Illustrations and etchings in magazines and newspapers showed women at work, but challenging social issues were subjects many painters avoided, except social realist artists. The painting, *THE DINNER HOUR, WIGAN* by Eyre Crowe, 1874. Manchester Art Gallery.



*Pic. 10: The Dinner Hour, Wigan-by Eyre Crowe, 1874*

This is a rare example of an artist who chose factory girls in an industrial setting as his subject, and it became his most famous work. It shows groups of young female factory workers, outside on their lunch break. It could be considered a straightforward depiction of a real situation, and as such a social realist work. However, the young women all look un-realistically



pretty, neatly dressed and well fed. The whole place is spotlessly clean. Despite this rather rosy portrayal, the reality of working conditions was very different.

“They each employed hundreds of people and housed hundreds of machines, and each was filled with the din of labour from morning to night. It was impossible to relax too, even for a moment for the dangers of doing so were too great ; loose hair might become entangled in the machines, scalping the unfortunate victim in a trice; a finger might be nipped off in the spindles” (Paxman, 2010, p.57). Perhaps by setting the scene outside the factory, Crowe avoided showing the shocking conditions inside. There are hints that this is not an entirely positive depiction. A policeman in the background indicates that the workers were strictly controlled. The only barefoot girl in the painting, gazes directly at the viewers, as if confronting them with her poverty. Many praised the painting for its honesty but the critic of the *Atheneum Art* magazine wrote in 1874, “It was a pity Mr.Crowe wasted his time on such unattractive materials” (Wood, 1990, p.125).

The general taste at the time was to avoid depictions of the harsh side of reality, and to sentimentalise, or soften subjects, to make them acceptable. As in the paintings of the ideal woman, in her various forms, poor working women were also presented in a palatable way (Wood, 1990, p.125).

### **3.3 SERVANTS**

Swisher (2005, p.34) states that during the middle and late Victorian period, a third of all working women between the ages of fifteen and twenty were employed as servants. The number employed by a household was determined by wealth and social class. Considering the enormous number of women in domestic service, it is surprising that it was not a more popular genre., Wood suggests “Perhaps the reason why painters did not feel strongly about servants is that they were not an oppressed minority, like governesses ...The Victorians knew too much about servants” (Wood, 1990, p.133). As mentioned in the introduction, both the subjects chosen and those avoided inform the topic. Perhaps servants were seen as too mundane a subject to paint. Those who did choose the subject portrayed pretty young women, healthy and content, enjoying their work. The reality of their situation was different. Many servants were one step up from abject poverty, worked long hours, had few days off and could be dismissed for any reason. If a servant was dismissed without good references, finding alternative

employment would have been very difficult, often resulting in homelessness, destitution and even prostitution. Despite their real lives being very tough, Wood suggests that the depiction of servants was predominantly humorous and light hearted.

Making fun of someone places them in an inferior position, and the joke maker in a superior one. Images depicting the harsh realities of a servant's life were not discovered in the research undertaken. Perhaps any unease they posed, as strangers from a lower class, living closely within their employer's home, was diffused by ridiculing them, and treating the subject with humour. Although servants played an essential part in their employer's life, they had to "know their place". Unlike the homeless and poor, they were a less upsetting subject for artists to paint. If a servant was raped or had a sexual liaison with an employer resulting in pregnancy, she was likely to be dismissed and blamed for it. The reality of working in service was much more complicated and difficult than the paintings suggest (Wood, 1990).

READING PUNCH 1882 by A. Farmer shows two maids, mid work, enjoying a joke in Punch magazine.



*Pic. 11: Reading Punch by Mrs Alexandra Farmer ,1882*

One looks directly at the viewer, sharing both the joke in Punch, and that it is amusing that she isn't getting on with her work. Thomas John Hughes, 1892 private collection Mallett Gallery (Wood, 1990, p. 133). A more serious aspect was addressed in LEAVING HOME by T.J. Hughes, 1879 (Mallett Gallery).





*Pic. 12: Leaving Home, T.J Hughes, 1879*

A country girl prays before leaving home for the first time, to go into service. The simple interior and small chest of belongings reflects her modest background. Young girls from the aged of twelve started on the bottom level, as scullery maids. Her anxious mother in the back-ground, holds a bible; symbol of Christian values. Leaving home must have been a frightening prospect. Perhaps she prays that her employers will be fair, that she will remain pure, and that her job will improve her prospects.

### **3.4 THE SEAMSTRESS**

A very popular subject with Victorian artists was the overworked, exploited dressmaker, or piecemaker. The poem “The Song of the Shirt” by Hood, published anonymously in *Punch* in 1843, became famous and had a huge impact at the time.

“Stitch! Stitch! Stitch

In poverty, hunger, and dirt,

And still with a voice of dolorous pitch, -

Would that this tone could reach the Rich!

(Inglis, *Adventures in English Literature*, pp. 436-37)

A pictorial response to the poem was *THE SEAMSTRESS* 1846, Tate Gallery London, by Richard Redgrave, an iconic work of the “modern life” genre of the 1840s.

(Wood, 1990, p.126).



Pic. 13: *The Seamstress*, Richard Redgrave, 1846

The seamstress belonged to a category known as “*distressed needle women*.” They were lower middle class, middle class and even upper-class women in reduced circumstances, rather than working class women. The 1840s was a time of economic depression when many artisan trades were swept away by the Industrial Revolution. In her article “Slaves of the needle,” Beth Harris explains that “distressed gentlewomen” were increasingly forced to support themselves. They were widows or daughters whose fathers had died or lost their livelihood, forcing them to enter the world of employment. As discussed earlier, the world of work outside home was the domain of men not women; they were supposed to remain in a safe domestic environment (Victorian web, 2018).

In this iconic painting the seamstress is lit in the manner of earlier religious paintings. Her upward gaze appears saintlike, as she appeals for God’s intervention. The interior is an impoverished garret, at the top of a building where rent was the low. Through the window another lit garret can be seen, suggesting other poor gentlewomen are working through the night, all over the city. The clock on the wall indicates a life ruled by time. For a piece worker, payment was per item and not by the time taken. Additionally, the clock may suggest a late hour indicating that she worked through the night, and is still not finished. She looks exhausted and alone. Redgrave hoped that his work would raise public awareness of the plight of these women. A contemporary artist, Paul Poole wrote to Redgrave.

“I think it is the most powerful for truth and pathos of any picture I have ever seen. Who can help exclaiming “Poor Soul! God help her” (Wood, 1990, p. 127).

Redgrave’s painting, *FASHION’S SLAVES* Private Collection, Gibbons Family painted a year later in 1847 depicts the other side of the equation; a rich woman complaining about a delay in receiving her order.



*Pic. 14: Fashion's Slaves, Richard Redgrave, 1847*

It focuses on the callous attitude of those exploiting piece workers. The female delivering her item is the personification of a genteel woman, reduced to a powerless position, through no fault of her own. Women like these ended up at the lowest end of the industry, lower even than those working in shops. These images reinforce the idea that women were safer at home and underline the inherent dangers encountered by women forced into the workforce. The painting evokes pity for gentle-women who have been reduced to such lowly circumstances. An alternative narrative is that the paintings were critical of the limited choices available to women to support themselves, and not against them joining the workforce, as such. Artists such as Anna Blunden, (*Song of the Shirt* 1854) Millais, (*The Seamstress* 1860) Watts (*The Seamstress*, 1850) and Frank Holl (*The Song of the Shirt*, 1875) also chose this emotive subject. Many portrayed a sole woman, when in reality several women often lived together in poor conditions, working as a team. Perhaps a single figure evoked more sympathy (19 century art, ©Taylor & Francis Group, An Informa Business).

### **3.4. THE GOVERNESS**

Another down-trodden, powerless image chosen by artists, was that of the governess or teacher. This was deemed an acceptable employment for educated single women from middle class families with limited resources. It was a favourite storyline in many contemporary novels such as *Jane Eyre* (Bronte) and *The Turn of the Screw* (Henry James). The governess's position was difficult because she was not part of her employer's family as she was below them in status. Neither was she accepted by the rest of the domestic staff as she was deemed superior to them. She lived in an isolated social limbo, separated from the affection and support of her own family, an outcast. Richard Redgrave, who painted *The Seamstress* in 1845, depicted this plight of the governess, in the *THE POOR TEACHER* 1844, Victoria and Albert Museum.



*Pic. 15: The Poor Teacher, Richard Redgrave, 1844*

It was commissioned by John Sheepshanks, a manufacturer and art collector who became wealthy during the Industrial Revolution. Redgrave produced four versions of the same subject.

“John Sheepshanks, who commissioned this version objected to the forlorn loneliness of the governess. Redgrave therefore added the girl by the door, and two girls skipping outside” (Wood, 1990, p.131). The governess wears mourning clothes, suggesting her father has died, and that she has been sent away to work, in order to help support her family. The addition of other figures into the composition does not decrease the isolation of the teacher; if anything, it increases it. The children in the background play happily, bathed in sunshine, while she is surrounded by shadow and gloom which accentuates how forlorn she feels.

Although Redgrave was known for what Wood calls “social protest” paintings it is unclear what action he hoped to stimulate. He portrays women in tragic positions but fails to suggest the path to affect change. In his paintings of the impoverished seamstress and the forlorn governess Redgrave employs the image of the ‘damsel in distress’, a helpless female needing to be saved by a man in ‘shining armour.’ It seems to be something Victorian men found

#### **4 FALLEN WOMEN**

In the categories discussed so far, women were portrayed in a positive manner if they conformed to their designated role. The depictions both reinforced and celebrated the predominant values of the time. Women without male financial support, such as widows or impoverished piece workers, evoked pity not blame. For “fallen” women who had transgressed the accepted sexual mores, blame, exclusion and destitution followed.

## 4.1 WHO WERE FALLEN WOMEN?

The term “fallen” originates from the biblical fall of Eve with the loss of purity and sexual innocence. The Victorians highly valued purity and sex was only acceptable within marriage. “A fallen woman could be a prostitute or a woman who has sex outside wedlock, whether voluntary or against her will-in short, a woman who has transgressed Victorian sexual norms” (Victorian web, 2009).

Fallen women were the chosen subjects of many of the most admired artists of the era. The theme combined beautiful women, pity, tragedy and sex; a powerful mix. A double standard existed allowing men to avoid the public disgrace and criticism meted out to women. Brothels were widespread and the use of prostitutes was common, but the male responsibility in the equation seemed absent. “Prostitution was considered the ‘Great Social Evil’... Venereal diseases were presented as God’s punishment, the wages of sin- only women, never men, could be the agents of infection” (Paxman, 2010, p.123). The Contagious Diseases Acts were passed in 1864 -66 in an effort to curb the spread of venereal diseases. Women suspected of prostitution were arbitrarily detained to undergo mandatory medical examinations. The laws were repealed in 1886 in response to action from Civil Liberties Groups. Women were blamed for venereal disease and even if their demise was shocking, it was viewed as somewhat inevitable. Their only salvation seems to have been through suicide and death.

Even innocent victims of rape who became pregnant, were held responsible and cast out by their family and respectable society. A child born out of wedlock, brought terrible consequences to both mother and child. The Foundling Hospital in London took in illegitimate babies, so their mother’s lives would not be destroyed. The term foundling, inferred a baby was abandoned, when in reality mothers without support had little choice. It was established before the Victorian period from generous motives, but was run in a punitive manner. Foundling institutions only helped women of “previous good character” and tragically most never saw their child again. Artists may have meant to show these themes in a compassionate way, but they seem to reinforce the prevailing sexual mores, reminding women of their terrible fate if they transgressed. A system of workhouses developed to aid the poor and homeless, and were often the last resort of unmarried mothers. They were harsh places, where women and men were separated and lived under strict regulations, working long hours at menial tasks to get food and shelter. The attitude to poverty at the time was complicated. Some believed it was the



result of laziness and a person's fault. Others believed it was due to misfortune and circumstances beyond a person's control. This led to the classification of the "deserving" and "undeserving poor." These classifications determined the level of help available. The plight of the poor was a cause taken up by several famous socialist realist painters such as Herkomer, Fildes and Holl.

"APPLICANTS FOR ADMISSION TO A CASUAL WARD. By Luke Fildes, 1874 (Royal Holloway College) is considered to be one of the most iconic Social Realist paintings of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

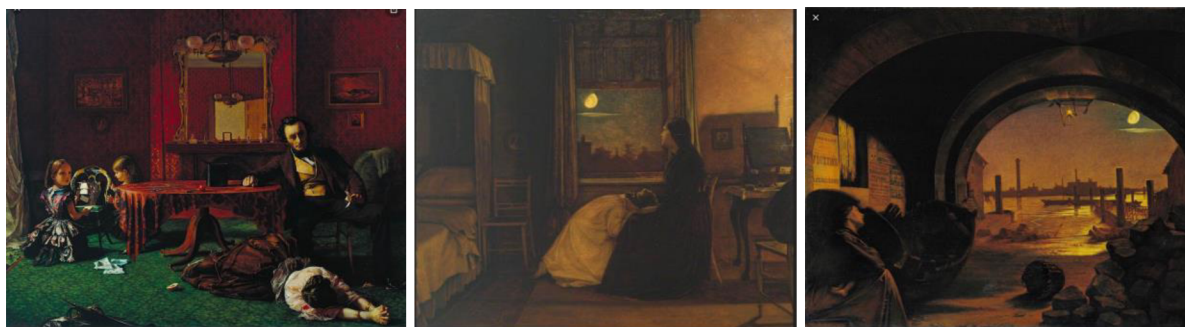


*Pic.16: Applicants for Admission to a Casual Ward , Luke Fildes, 1874*

A barricade was needed to keep the crowds back when it was shown at the Royal Academy. It movingly portrays different categories of the poor, waiting to go into the temporary shelter of the workhouse for the night in winter. An impoverished mother, baby and child, are bent over with cold and fatigue. Their figures are highly lit and form the main focus of the painting. It is a sympathetic portrayal and suggests they are "deserving poor," at least to the artist. Despite the great interest this large work engendered, it also provoked vitriolic criticism. In the Saturday Review of May 1874, the critic described the painting as "too revolting for an art which should seek to please, refine, elevate" (Paxman, 2010, p 70).

## **4.2 INFIDELITY**

The narrative of the fallen woman, cast out from her family, becoming destitute and ending suicidal or dead, was chosen by Augustus Leopold Egg, PAST AND PRESENT, 1858 (Tate Gallery).



*Pic. 17: The Infidelity, Augustus Leopold Egg, 1858*

*Pic. 18: The Abandoned Daughters, Augustus Leopold Egg, 1858*

*Pic. 19: The Wife Abandoned by her Lover with her Bastard child, Augustus Leopold Egg, 1858*

This work comprises of three paintings: a triptych. It shows the downfall of a bourgeois family brought about by infidelity. The first work, ‘The Infidelity’, shows a husband clasp a letter proving his wife’s affair while she lies at her his feet, her hands in the position of a bound criminal. The apple on the floor symbolises Eve’s temptation and fall in the bible. On the left, the children’s house of cards collapses signifying the breakdown of the family unit. “The Abandoned Daughters” is set at a later time when the girls are orphans, living in reduced circumstances. Although their mother is alive, under the law, as discussed earlier, women had no custody rights. So, they are orphans. The message conveyed is that children are victims, punished for the sins of their mothers. The final work, ‘The Wife Abandoned by her Lover with her Bastard child’, shows the wife under an arch by the river, a common place for prostitution. She crouches in this gloomy place, holding her child and possibly contemplating suicide. Placing the advertising poster with the word ‘Victims’ above the woman’s head, implies compassion for her plight, but the main title of the work is highly moralistic. The woman gazes at the moon, a symbol of both chastity and love. She seems to be waiting for the tide to rise and wash her away to death, and redemption (joyofmuseums ©2022).

### 4.3 SUICIDE

Despite the artist depicting the female subject with compassion, Egg reinforced the narrative that any woman who sexually transgressed would probably end up dead. It could be read as a moralistic sermon warning against adultery, or as a protest against Victorian marriage laws. Whichever it was, it drew condemnation from critics. One from the Athenaeum wrote, “Mr Egg’s picture is divided into three compartments, each more ghastly

and terrible than the other” (Paxman 2010, p. 130). *FOUND DROWNED* by George Frederick Watts, 1850 (Compton Gallery).



*Pic. 20: Found Drowned, George Frederick Watts, 1850*

This work was based on 'The Bridge of Sighs,' a poem by Hood, (who also inspired artists with 'The Song of the Shirt').

“One more unfortunate weary of breath, rashly importunate, gone to her death!” (poem hunter)

A woman's dead body lies washed up on the banks of the Thames, in London. The title is important because 'found drowned', were the words used to avoid describing a death as suicide. Suicide was illegal and meant a religious burial was forbidden. Every element in this dark painting reinforces the tragedy of the situation. The body forms a cross, perhaps suggesting that she was once a good Christian woman and that Christ showed mercy to all. The sheer size of the work means the image confronts us and we cannot ignore it. Symbolic details like the locket and chain in her hand, suggest betrayal or abandonment by a man. A broken chain was a Victorian symbol of death. She may be pregnant, but wet fabric covers her body, so it is an open question. Sally King suggests that “Watts' depiction of London, with dark indigo smog covering the industrial cityscape, suggests not only the filth of the physical setting, but the threat of urban living for women” (The Victorian web, 2007). It is both a criticism of society's attitude towards women and poverty, and of the destructive side of industry. A single star lights the painting, perhaps symbolising her eventual salvation in death. Unlike Egg's painting, Watts does not blame the woman but the social conditions and societal beliefs that caused the tragedy.



## **5 THE PRE-RAPHAELITES-SEX AND REVOLUTION**

The last section will consider the Pre-Raphaelites, a group of rebellious young artists who revolted against the ideals of the Royal Academy and shook up the established art world. They rejected the focus on genre paintings and idolized the simplicity and values of art produced before Raphael. They believed in learning from nature and producing works that were a direct response to it, rather than referencing other works of art. Their juxtaposition of a realist technique with imaginative subjects was the cornerstone of their style.

The initial members of the “brotherhood” were Millais, Holman Hunt and Rossetti, but other artists such as F.M Brown, Leighton, Burne-Jones and many others adopted their ideas. Support from the critic Ruskin was vital in raising their profile and increasing their credibility. Many people were disturbed by their bright colours and minute attention to detail (hyper-realism), but the main cause for outrage was their subject matter and life style. They broke the mold of how women were portrayed, placing them at the centre of their work and using real life models; freeing their bodies from constrained garments, showing abundant loose hair, thick sensual lips and elegant exposed necks. These were highly provocative images, marking a clear break with earlier depictions. There was a close inter-relationship between their narrative paintings and literature. Choosing literary subjects from the past, allowed them to clothe female subjects in medieval or Grecian clothes as opposed to current fashion. This ‘screen’ of the past, allowed them to explore the social issues of the time, (love, sex, adultery, motherhood and death) using images that would have been unacceptable if they featured ‘contemporary women.’ Women were central to the Pre-Raphaelite movement, not only as subjects, muses, and partners but some became painters and writers themselves.

### **5.1 DESTROYED BY LOVE**

A common theme in Pre-Raphaelite paintings is that of the woman destroyed by love. As Kim Hae-In wrote “The theme of the woman destroyed by love-betrayed by unrequited love, seduced by false ideals -dominated Pre-Raphaelite, as well as other Victorian paintings and poems of the nineteenth century. Bound with the Victorian idea of feminine weakness, the Pre-Raphaelite concept of the woman as victim stems from themes of medieval romance” (Victorian web, 2004).

He suggests that although they portrayed women as sexual beings, capable of desire and lust, these emotions led to sexual frustration and retribution. The images are both fascinating and troubling, which may explain their continued popularity. Beautiful women as objects of desire, combined with the message that female passion requires containment and punishment, suggests the artists themselves struggled with the notion of female sexuality. Their voluptuous subjects appear to be male fantasies, rather than women with agency. Their own passion for women seems mixed with fear. Femme fatales and sirens with thick serpentine necks threatening and enticing men to their death. Women are depicted in a highly decorative manner, emphasising their physical attributes; captive damsels, passive beauties or their opposite, threatening sirens or powerful goddesses. Many works feature solitary female figures within oppressive spaces, with no means of escape, trapped. Numerous Pre-Raphaelite works illustrate the points above, but for this thesis four iconic works have been selected, painted by the initial members of the group. Three of the selected works were done in the 1850s, when Britain was 'the workshop of the world' due to the rapid industrial expansion. Widespread poverty, pollution and inequality defined this period, but the Pre-Raphaelites largely withdrew from these issues into a golden past of romantic stories and poetry. Their paintings often combine sentimentality and morality, following previous genres where the most emotive image of the age seemed to be a suffering woman.

Millais, a prodigiously talented young artist, painted *MARIANA* in 1851. (Tate Gallery).



*Pic. 21: Mariana, John Everett Millais, 1851*

It is a vivid, jewel like painting, packed with intricate details, symbols and a sense of hyper-reality, which were key components of the Pre-Raphaelite style. A brooding, melancholic atmosphere pervades the painting, and is found in many other works. Finding

inspiration in literature was another characteristic component. The subject Mariana, heroine of Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* and a poem by Tennyson, was abandoned by her fiancé after her dowry was lost in a shipwreck. She pines for him and longs for his return, seemingly locked away from the world. At first sight this seems to be a typical Victorian genre scene, of a passive woman in a dark cluttered interior, bemoaning her fate. However, what makes this a revolutionary work is the way Millais evokes her complicated psychological state. Her arched back is sexually provocative but also imparts information about her emotions. We, the viewers sense her yearning, her boredom, her loneliness and frustration. She seems trapped in the lusciously painted interior with no escape. Symbols of time passing, like the dead leaves on the floor, and a half-finished embroidery, suggest life goes on outside without any change in her predicament. In an era when marriage was women's destiny, Millais chose a daring subject, a frustrated woman, a spinster, not content to do her embroidery and hope her lover comes.

Millais's iconic work *OPHELIA*, 1852 (Tate Britain, London) shares elements with *MARIANA*, in its painting style, choice of a tragic literary figure, and the abundance of symbols.



*Pic. 22: Ophelia, John Everett Millais, 1852*

She is a victim of unrequited love, sinking into her watery grave and leaving this world. The artist seems detached, and we can only guess at Ophelia's emotions. Her prone pose echoes a body in a grave, a figure slipping back into nature. The technical skill, wealth of symbolism and moving subject have contributed to this being the most popular painting in the Tate collection and one of the most famous images in Victorian Art. The model was Lizzie Siddall, Rossetti's wife. She posed all winter lying in a cold bath warmed by candles, which often went out, and died a year later, aged 32. It is said that she killed herself after suffering depression, but that Rossetti destroyed her suicide note to ensure a religious burial. Referring to the quote

at the start of this thesis, it is hard to imagine a more helpless image of a woman than this one; not destroyed by sexual transgression but destroyed by love.

## 5.2 THE KEPT WOMAN

THE AWAKENING CONSCIENCE 1854 (Tate Britain) is by another founder member of the Brotherhood, Holman Hunt.



*Pic. 23: Awakening Conscience, Holman Hunt, 1853*

The subject is a “kept woman,” which was a very risqué choice, and differs greatly from the images of fallen women discussed earlier. “Hunt was the first to tackle the theme of the kept woman, who has been stricken with conscience as she sits on her lover’s knee at the piano, in their newly- furnished love nest. To the theme of the damsel in distress, Hunt has brought his own intense symbolism of objects, almost every one of which adds detail to the story” (Wood, 1990, p.136). The music score on the floor is for ‘Tear, Idle Tears,’ by Tennyson, a poem about lost innocence, a cat devouring a helpless bird are a few of many symbols in the painting. The mistress does not wear a wedding ring. According to Hunt rented a room in a brothel as location and the model was his lover, whom he tried to “reform”, without success (Des Cars Laurence, 2000, p.54). The message of this work was revolutionary; a fallen woman should not bear the burden of transgression alone; men were also culpable. The leering man is less sympathetically portrayed than the mistress, who looks in need of protection. The painting was seen as highly offensive and drew criticism from many, but Ruskin defended it. It remains an iconic work because it broke with the conventional images of fallen women and put men in the frame.

### 5.3 THE GODDESS-FEMME FATALE

After the death of his wife and muse Elizabeth Siddall, Gabriel Dante Rossetti fell into alcoholism and depression but continued to paint. He became totally obsessed by Jane Morris, the wife of his friend William Morris. She became his model and subject of many of his later works, as well as his partner, for a time. Her strong jawed face, dark wavy hair and full lips appear repeatedly in his work, replacing the softer beauty of earlier muses and mistresses.

The last work she posed for before their relationship failed, was *ASTARTE SYRIACA*, 1877 Manchester Art Gallery.



*Pic. 24: Astarte Syriaca, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, 1877*  
*Its alternative title is Venus Astarte.*

Unlike the earlier images of women by Millais and Hunt, here we see a powerful goddess, not a victim of love or a damsel in distress waiting to be saved. She is the goddess of fertility and sexual love. The roles between artist and muse seem reversed. It is Rossetti who is destroyed by love and desire, whereas the goddess seems all-powerful, uncaring and in control. This large imposing painting depicts the muscular limbed subject staring directly at the viewer, her eyes not modestly averted from the male gaze. The painting was criticised for its strong erotic content. The loose green robes both conceal and reveal her sensuous body with one leg placed as if she is about to stride forwards. The winged figures behind her are angels of the crescent moon or the morning star. Poisonous deadly nightshade plants curl around their torches, sending the message that this goddess, and sexy women in general, are to be feared;

loving and desiring may bring male downfall. His romantic poem which accompanied the painting is a testament to his obsession.

“That face, of Love’s all-penetrative spell  
Amulet, talisman and oracle,  
Betwixt the sun and moon, a mystery” (Poet and poems, ©2011-2022).

Portraying a woman as a goddess is a long way from depicting a real woman or presenting a balanced relationship between the sexes. Earlier images of women as helpless victims, contain elements of sadism and Rossetti’s later works featuring Jane Morris seem masochistic in tone. Perhaps social changes that threatened patriarchy also threatened male sexuality.

## 6 CONCLUSION

The particular ways Victorian artists portrayed women inform us of how they were positioned within society. The exploration of the social background to the works, allows one to see the disparity between reality and the idealised depictions of women. Many painters seemed to reinforce the inferior position of women living a proscribed life of domesticity. Others sought to challenge it. However, the author believes that even those appearing to portray social problems related to women sympathetically, actually reinforced patriarchal ideas. The quotation at the start of the thesis suggested that there was a focus on female weakness in all its forms in this period. Looking at a wide range of images, there does seem to be some truth in this assertion. The legal and social position of women was one of powerlessness, so it is no surprise images reflected this. In real life this was an era of enormous shifts in society such as the development of an active feminist movement. Women were moving into different professions and education was opening up to them. In the material examined, images of these monumental changes in women's lives were not reflected in high art. Even the Pre Raphaelites who were so obsessed with female sexuality and sought to change the view of women, seem stuck in the past where men were in control.

In April 1913, three Suffragettes entered Manchester Art gallery, and as part of their militant campaign for votes, smashed paintings depicting women, including Venus Astarte and several other Pre Raphaelite works. Their own passionate words demonstrate that women were no longer prepared to tolerate the way they were portrayed and stands as a fitting final comment to this thesis. "There is to me something hateful, sinister, sickening in this heaping up of Art treasures, this sentimentalising over the beautiful, while the desecration and ruin of bodies of women and little children by lust, disease and poverty are looked upon with indifference" Ethyl Smith (Manchester art gallery, ©2022).



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## ANNOTATION

Jméno a příjmení	Vladimira Lagová
Katedra:	Ústav cizích jazyků
Vedoucí práce:	Mgr. Odřej Duda
Rok objavození	2022

Název práce:	Jak viktoriánští malíři zobrazovali ženy
Název v angličtině:	How Victorians painters painted women
Anotace práce:	<p>Cílem této diskurzivní práce je prozkoumat způsoby, jakými viktoriánští malíři zobrazovali ženy a co to prozrazovalo o jejich roli a postavení ve společnosti v té době. Převládající přesvědčení, že se v té době převážně mužští umělci zaměřovali na ženskou slabost, bylo testováno zkoumáním řady děl rozdělených do témat na základě návštěv galerií, recenzí literatury a výzkumu digitálních archivů. Ženy byly zobrazovány buď jako ideální ženy odpovídající pravidlům patriarchy, nebo jako pravý opak, padlé ženy, které porušily převládající společenské zvyklosti a zaplatily vysokou cenu za svůj přestupek. Zkoumáním sociálního a právního postavení žen bylo jasné, že ve skutečnosti byly ženy v patriarchální společnosti v bezmocné situaci, což se odráželo ve velké části umění.</p>
Klíčová slova:	Viktoriánské ženy, sluhové, ideální žena, vdova, matka, zákony, práce, dělníci, třídy, Prerafaelité

Anotace v angličtině:	<p>The aim of this discursive thesis is to explore the ways in which Victorian painters portrayed women and what this revealed about their role and position in society at the time. By examining the social and legal position of women it was clear that in reality women were in a powerless situation within the patriarchal society which was reflected and reinforced in much of the art. Even those who portrayed social problems sympathetically reinforced the prevailing status quo. The period was one of enormous change in political and social terms especially in the lives of women. The political fight for women's rights, their movement into higher education and expansion into the workforce seem glaringly absent from the imagery. Even the imagery of the revolutionary Pre-Raphaelites seemed stuck in the past.</p>
Klíčová slova v angličtině:	<p>Victorian women, servants, ideal woman, widow, mother, laws, work, factory workers, classes, Pre-Raphaelites</p>
Rozsah práce:	<p>49 stran</p>
Jazyk práce:	<p>Angličtina</p>