



VICTORIAN CULTURAL LIFE AND ITS REFLECTION IN LITERATUREⁱ

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Abstract:

The paper aims to discuss the main themes of Victorian society and their reflection in literature, particularly the novel. It is of crucial importance to understand cultural and social life in 19th-century England in order to see and understand all the social layers of the Victorian novel. Reflections of social life in the Victorian novel are evident, and in most cases, constitute the principal sources of conflict and drama. Social order is one of the most important aspects of the Victorian novel and is a principle closely related to the most important layers within the novels: public and private spheres, property, revenge, social power, social position and (in)equality.

Keywords: Victorian culture, Victorian novel, history, "*Angel in the House*"

Resumen:

El presente trabajo tiene como objetivo analizar los principales temas presentes en la sociedad victoriana y su reflejo en la literatura, especialmente en la novela. Resulta fundamental comprender la vida cultural y social de la Inglaterra del siglo XIX para poder apreciar y entender todas las capas sociales representadas en la novela victoriana. Los reflejos de la vida social en la novela victoriana son más que evidentes y constituyen, en la mayoría de los casos, los elementos que generan el conflicto dramático. El orden social es uno de los aspectos más importantes de la novela y un principio estrechamente relacionado con algunos de sus temas fundamentales: las esferas pública y privada, la propiedad, la venganza, el poder social, la posición social y la (des)igualdad.

Palabras clave: cultura victoriana, novela victoriana, historia, «*El ángel del hogar*»

1. Introduction

The novel has always been a very realistic picture of society and life in a certain period of time, and this picture becomes immensely more precise during Realism, first of all, due to the fact that

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writers during this period paid special attention to detailed descriptions of reality. Canonical Victorian writers were dealing, among other themes, with current problems of society and the individual. The Victorian belongs to the tradition of Realism and therefore differs from the Russian or French realist traditions. Also, the most important novels from the Queen Victoria era differ from one another. Regardless of the primary focus of the research, it is impossible to write about Victorian novels without mentioning the principle of social power, a principle very close and directly related to the principle of private and public spheres and their relation(s). Power in nineteenth-century England, largely as a result of industrialisation, and the strengthening of capitalism, was primarily obvious as material value to which the majority of literary characters aim. This form of power was more dominant than any other and was presented as the most destructive factor in all canonical Victorian novels. Social power related to property had been creating a new social elite, which formed some new rules of behaviour. These new rules of social and moral behaviour were the foundation of the most dominant features of the Victorian novel poetics. A strong sense of national consciousness and pride were seen as a crucial point in the creation of the preferred features of social engagement, having in mind the fact that it was considered honourable and divine to be a part of the largest and most dominant economic and political power in the world. It is very important to have in mind that the Puritan tradition was very dominant in 19th-century England and that its heritage and tradition had a prominent role in the whole social system, marked with the dominant feeling of insecurity and doubt. Problematic moral patterns based on rigid Puritan rules were applied in different ways and additionally complicated the relation between public and private spheres within the society and novels as well. Various forms of transgressing social norms, primarily those directly related to moral and religious patterns of the Victorian age, are very often the major theme of the English Realism novel. The most important writers of the era dedicated special attention to these themes and treated them differently within the framework of specific poetics patterns.

Material values would take a central position on the collective and individual level as well. Rapid expansion of all social segments would influence collective consciousness, and one of the consequences would be a dominant struggle for better social position, income and social power. Within the family framework, a man had absolute control over all family members as well as property. The position of a woman in Victorian society can be illustrated by the syntagm "*Angel in the House*", in terms that she was supposed to be dedicated and humble in relation to her husband and other family/society members.

All these segments play a prominent role in the poetics of the Victorian novel and have an immense influence on the crucial segments in literature in this era. As suggested by Johnatan Kaler (Juvan 2011: 203), one of the characteristics of the novel in the era of Realism is the difficulty with identity. Literary stories, according to him, precisely indicate how an identity is shaped and what has the largest influence on it.

The 19th century is, of course, one of the most significant periods in British history: it is a period when industrialisation developed, and colonial policy reached its peak. During the reign of Queen Victoria, the British Kingdom was transformed into a modern world empire, and at about the same time, it was the first country in the world to successfully undergo industrialisation. In spite of the economic progress, or just because of it, the society in this period

is characterised by the dominant distinction between different social classes. The early Victorian period was marked by the opening of the world's first public railway station. The period from 1832 is known as a period marked by a series of reform laws, which brought changes in voting rights. The mid-Victorian period is characterised by prosperity and stability. The late Victorian period was marked by the Boer War, the Irish question became dominant again, USA would become a serious rival. During the late Victorian period, we can detect a slow disappearance of almost all dominant values, whose final destination was rural England, which is very often a setting of the Victorian canonical novel. Every single aspect of life will be transformed by technological, political or legal reforms in the field of universities, voting and election laws, parliament, education system, public health, work conditions, trade unions and so on.

Significant changes in everyday life were partly caused by industrialisation, which dictated not only its rhythm but also the sense of personal possibilities. It seems that the influence on social order was inevitable. The new economy offers numerous possibilities for rapid capital gain or loss. This is the period in which radical changes in social status were so realistic: the poor ones could easily become rich and vice versa.

The idea of freedom in the 19th century was very dominant and debatable. While the political influence was spreading through colonies, the situation with freedom was not good enough in the country. First of all, it had to do with the position of different social classes and women in general. The social role of working-class woman was multifaceted – she was a cook, a maid, responsible for a home budget, giving birth and raising children. Bad examples of wives and mothers in Victorian families were not a rarity. In such cases, a female principal was seen as a handicap, not as a foundation of a family. When a woman successfully managed to do all the obligations society expected from her, she was considered not only as a moral support and a family stimulus, but also as a source of practical and financial help. The real position of women in Victorian society could be best explained with the syntagm “*Angel in the House*”. Women were expected to be dedicated and obedient to their husbands. A woman is an angel characterised with virtues such as passivity, submissiveness, gratitude, weakness, (self)sacrifice and piety. In order to fit into the pattern of the perfect Victorian woman, she, before all other virtues, should be pure in both spiritual and physical senses and at the same time should stay invisible in the eyes of the legal framework and community.

2. “*Wuthering Heights*”

The novel “*Wuthering Heights*” was published in 1847. From that time till today, it is one of the most read novels in world literature and is considered one of the most enigmatic novels in English literature. It is an emotional story about passionate relationships and family put in the frame of the windy Yorkshire moors. The story depicts the lives of two generations over a period of forty years at the end of the eighteenth century. The novel is often compared with Tolstoy’s “*War and Peace*” and Shakespeare’s *King Lear*. As Ivanka Kovačević argues, Emily Brontë was one of those writers who contributed to the creation of new artistic forms in the novel (Kostić, 1991: 265). *Wuthering Heights* is a distinctive novel in terms of its form and its numerous Gothic and Romantic elements. The most striking Romantic elements in the novel are the very nature of the main heroes, their wild energies and an immense intensity of their love. The other

resemblance with the romantic tradition in the novel is the fact that the main heroes reject with loathing all the conventional and moral norms, and with a certain degree of rigidity reject religious teachings and a teacher, the falsest of all Pharisee, Joseph.

The central theme of the novel is a story about love, inner emotional strength of the main heroes, Catherine and Heathcliff. Passion, love, and hatred culminate in a Gothic world. The appearance of a second, detached narrator produces an effect of dissociation from the drama (Bloom 2008: 21). The novel itself is a specific one because it does not inherit the tradition of the previous writers and periods – it stands isolated, alone, and as Philip David says: “(the novel) represents something separate in itself, with its own geography, biology, and virtually untranslatable mythology” (Poole 2009: 180).

Although the main heroes have unusually powerful energy and were born out of very fertile imagination, the novel is based on a very solid foundation. An unusual story that leaves no one indifferent, we learn from two narrators, Lockwood and Nelly Dean. The first narrator is passive, and he leads us to the world of “*Wuthering Heights*”, while the other is a witness of almost all events in the novel. The reader cannot fully rely on either narrator, so after entering the world of nature and love is left on his/her own. The basis of the novel is additionally strengthened with a story from the past and the peripheral presence of the second narrator in those past events.

Many literary critics have argued that this was the first novel that presented an unreal world as a real one in an almost barbaric surrounding (Smith 2006: 561). It is more important to mention that this novel had an immense influence on *natural history theory* through expressing passionate love for nature, pantheism and rejection of traditional Christian teaching.

Wuthering Heights, a chronicle of two generations of the Earnshaws and Lintons families on their estates. All of the troubles within the family start from the moment when Mr Earnshaw brought to his home the young Heathcliff, who had been left on the street on his own, which has an explicit social implication. On one side, love between Heathcliff and Catherine was born, and on the other, there was young Hindley’s hatred and revenge towards Heathcliff, who was considered an interloper and a person who might take place in the house and father’s heart, which is again a strong social implication and the very presence of the Victorian order. Half-wild children, as Nelly Dean describes them, Heathcliff and Catherine, were spending their days running all over the cliffs, enjoying limitless freedom, pure and often merciless nature and the company of each other. These pictures from their childhood would stay forever in their memories, and later on, when they would be separated physically, they would nostalgically long to return to this state of spirit, the principle of freedom, purity, and primeval natural energy. This energy is about the same time as their struggle for freedom, their vision of life and a new order, which later on proved to be a utopian principle, having in mind the fact that rigid social norms were the ultimate *winner* at the end of the novel.

One innocent adventure of the two young friends on the Heights would lead to the estate of the Lintons, Thrushcross Grange. Thrushcross Grange and *Wuthering Heights* are “*the opposite poles*” (Adams 2009: 309) – the first one belongs to the strict Victorian social order, while the other might seem chaotic, but still represents the principle very close to freedom, fully developed identity and the essential vision of life. Also, Thrushcross Grange represents everything a new social order brought: refinement, luxury, manners, respect for norms and

standards of social conventions, etc. When it is about the Heights and Thrushcross Grange relationship ambiguity, then we have to mention one more difference. Ivanka Kovačević noticed that inhabitants of Heights are connected with primeval threads of community/collectiveness, while in the home of the Lintons, in that fertile valley, rules social order, and everyone occupies a clearly defined social position. These two places represent the very relationship between old and new time and value systems.

The issue with the identity is, according to numerous Victorian literary critics, a direct consequence of the current social and cultural life. One of the best examples of the problematic identity issues is the novel *“Wuthering Heights”*. Identity in this novel is presented here as a principle that could not reach its full meaning without the presence of the other being and unity with it. This symbiosis creates a new spiritual entity resembling a semi-divine being. The only link of the two beings, two unities that make a new (semi)divine identity, is love – the principle that is lifelong sought. As in many other canonical Victorian novels, the main obstacle for the fully developed identity is society in general (Kurteš 2014: 202).

Different kinds of life within social classes promoted different values. The old Victorian values were present in the middle-class families, while the new values slowly came to the higher classes. In the example of *Wuthering Heights*, the conflict in social life was reflected in the novel. Properties Thrushcross Grange and *Wuthering Heights* represent two opposite poles with the different values they nourish. The social and cultural life of this period was centred around material property. Then it is not a surprise that revenge in the Victorian novel is, above all, materialistic in nature (best examples are the characters of Heathcliff in *“Wuthering Heights”*, Rebeca Sharp in *Vanity Fair*, Mr Tulliver in *“The Mill on the Floss”*).

Victorian values, social order and cultural life brought a real drama into this Victorian novel – all the visions of free life, all transcendental layers which might be salvation and a way for a better and meaningful life stayed as utopia, primarily due to the fact that the main heroine at one point in the novel could not help but see herself as a typical Victorian girl. This young woman chooses property and social respectability over instinctive and overwhelming love.

3. *“Great Expectations”*

The motifs in *“Great Expectations”* appear in symmetrical pairs, as seen by Ivanka Kovačević (Kostić 1991: 275). The symmetry can be seen in the descriptions of rural and urban life, innocence and experience, temptations and sufferings, virtue and vice. Professor Kovačević also notices the similarity between this novel and the fairy tale: the novel is a kind of fairy tale set in the Victorian framework, so Estella might be a beauty, Miss Havisham an evil fairy, Satis a palace and so on.

In *“Great Expectations”*, all the characters live in relative isolation, appearing to communicate more with themselves than with others. The immense social pressure tends to be one of the most dominant problems which create obstacles to communication and imagination. In other words, Victorian civilisation and social order seem to undermine the vitality of language which once existed and to reduce imagination to its own parts. It is often considered that these attitudes present in the novel were the consequences of the writer’s fears from childhood (Van Ghent 1961: 125). Also, Dorothy Van Ghent states that solipsism in this novel is the most

expressed in comparison to all other novels in world literature. The characters' speech often appears to be directed at no one, as a direct consequence of unambiguous alienation which was transferred from Victorian society into the Victorian novel (Ibid. 127).

Among other themes, this Victorian novel explores and describes the destruction of all principles which formed tradition, as well as dehumanisation under the immense pressures of industrialisation, colonial imperialism and exploitation. Under these circumstances, individuals in society, just like Dickens' characters in his novel, found themselves on the margin of society and gradually acquired the status of objects used only when somebody needs them in order to reach more and more profit and material wealth (Kurteš 2012: 54).

One of the most prominent problems in *Great Expectations*, as stated by Ivanka Kovačević, is a prominent struggle between God and evil and love and hate (Kostić 1991: 276). Both groups of principles are closely related to Victorian cultural life, as is the case in many other Victorian novels. Evil and hatred function as metaphors for the condition of Victorian society, which hardly leaves a space for individuality, while good and love represent a tiny space in characters where they nourish idealism and primordial values. The main character, Pip, from the very beginning of the novel, is presented as someone who lacks love, and he is in a constant archetypal quest for the source of this principle. Emotionally, Pip's childhood is marked by deprivation and neglect. His first acquaintance with Miss Havisham he will describe as "...she had the appearance of having dropped, body and soul, within and without, under the weight of a crushing blow" (Dickens 1994: 58). His first visit to Satis' house was marked by a pointing finger showing him to play. Later on, this gesture will be realized as a very direct embodiment of hate, and it has a double meaning: it represents Pip's first knowledge of grown-ups' sadism, while the other dimension represents a social symbol of the economically predestined situation where a human soul is (mis)used as a means for gaining social advantages (Van Ghent 1961: 128).

Because she was left on her wedding day, Miss Havisham returns to her Satis house, spending her days in darkness, frozen in time. Desperate, all alone and hurt, she decides on revenge as an expression of her hatred (once love transforms into hate) as a way to compensate for the pain and suffering she is living with. Her decision to hate and take revenge on children can be characterised not only as an aggression over love, but as aggression over life as well (Ibid: 131). Children become instruments of revenge of broken Miss Havisham's heart and have the same as any other objects. Estella will furthermore serve as a whip of revenge. All the means she uses have not been sufficient to compensate for what was lost – and that is love.

The character of Miss Havisham is, as Ivanka Kovačević argues, a metamorphosis of disillusioned love into destructive hatred, and at about the same time represents a refusal of the character to overcome the immense loss (Kostić 1991: 289). Both cases kill the spirit, and it is extremely difficult to move forward, but just to look for hate and revenge. Psychological disintegration, alienation and dehumanization are only some of the consequences which occur as a current state, and that is the deprivation of love and the presence of hate and revenge.

Both Estella and Miss Havisham represent a duplicated version of one picture. In that sense, cold Estella and Miss Havisham are not two different characters. The two characters represent the same essence with two aspects and a spiritual continuum (Van Ghent 1961: 291). In relation to Miss Havisham, Estella is about the same age as her punishment (Kostić 1991: 289). Estella's inability to love may itself be interpreted as a form of punishment.

The relationship between Pip and Estella occupies a central place in the novel. Estella was Pip's great inspiration, his punishment and reward, a heartless beauty. The symbolism of her character would become more complex in relation to other characters (Kostić 1991: 291), not only with Pip. Firstly, because she was deprived of love, her character is often considered a contrast: her physical beauty did not have its spiritual equivalent. Instead of that, her inner self symbolises a spiritual wasteland, marked by loneliness and emotional deprivation.

4. "The Mill on the Floss"

The Mill on the Floss is one of the most famous Victorian canonical novels and, certainly, one of the most adequate examples for analysis of the very nature of the Victorian novel and its relation towards literature, the novel in the first place. The principle of Victorian moral is very connected with the issue of Victorian religion, which is seriously transformed in this period, primarily thanks to the process of the Industrial Revolution, the immense development of science and every single aspect of society and social system in general. The Victorian novel deals with religious feelings, while in the later phase it can be seen that agnosticism becomes increasingly present. Due to this fact, materialism and indulgence in secular pleasures would be more prominent in this era. At about the same time, religion faced the loss of its traditional and long-lasting role as a mediator of social control and cohesion. As an intellectual system, religion was defeated by the development of science, while the pastoral role of the church became weaker because of a very present and obvious social prosperity and commercialization (Harris 1993: 10).

"*The Mill on the Floss*" (as well as other George Eliot's, i.e. Mary Ann Evans' novels) describes the moral burden of life in a universe deprived of traditional faith. This novel is characterized by the numerous autobiographical elements (Mary's relation with brother Isaac in the childhood would serve as inspiration for the creation of Maggie and Tom Tulliver, life with the married man, G.H. Lewes, numerous descriptions of the environment and exploration of the young girl's inner life. It is believed that Eliot is the originator of the *psychological novel*ⁱⁱⁱ within Victorian literary tradition and work (Blamires 1988: 10-22). The most obvious psychological elements in the novel can be seen all the time, because the main stress in the novel is on what is happening *inside* the hero(ine). All the inner struggles the heroine is faced with are caused by the burdens of the Victorian moral: how to please father, mother, brother, how to love a man, Philip Wakem, who is an enemy in the family's perception, how not to love him when he is everything she dreams about, how to stay with Stephen Guest when he belongs to Lucy and how not to stay when the damage is already done, and so on. All the inner struggles briefly described in this novel would serve as a solid background for the birth of the modern novel and all its orthodox characteristics: stream of consciousness, epiphany, etc.

Apart from religion, one of the prominent moral authorities is the family. The Victorian family in its basis, is a patriarchal one. Generally, it is considered that a middle and upper-class

ⁱⁱⁱ *Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms* define psychological novel as "A vague term to describe that kind of fiction which is for the most part concerned with the spiritual, emotional and mental lives of the characters and with the analysis of character rather than with the plot and the action. Many novelists during the last two hundred years have written psychological novels", pp. 709-710.

family has been faced with the obvious decline, while at the same time, emotional, cultural and economic functions are slowly changing and adapting to wider social spheres. All these changes can be clearly seen throughout Victorian literature, and *"The Mill on the Floss"* is only one more example. John R. Maynard claims that all the characters in the novel *"The Mill on the Floss"* should be seen only as an allegory of social (in)convenient circumstances. Maynard also claims that an individual stands for the decline and/or boom of a certain social class, so Tom Tulliver's character is a typical representative of the middle class, and he, of course, has certain ambitions to succeed in society through private education and, more importantly, by gaining more and more social power (Maynard 2002: 287). In this Victorian novel, as well as in many others, we can find the presence of the middle class as the only valid source of values and social standards. Everything which stays outside the current framework is and must be exposed to mockery, pillory, and it is not rarity that a character dies just because of the existence of unbridgeable gaps that were formed in the 19th-century English novel between two opposite poles: an individual and middle-class norms. Most of these norms were inherited from the Puritan tradition, and they are subject to only slight modifications until the Victorian period. Both Franco Moretti and Terry Eagleton, among other influential critics, argue that it is exactly this level where all dramas and plots are being constructed (Kurteš 2012: 235).

This novel, among other things, discusses the issue of moral possibilities and re-examines the role of a literary work in the modern world. As an answer, there is a possibility and potential of literature to teach people how to focus on their emotions and pay more attention to the essence of compassion. Terry Eagleton claims that a writer is able to force his way into inner facts, and that a novel itself is at about the same time in and outside the life it narrates. The power which family has in its hands causes Maggie to stay with no option and hope for any change. All hopes regarding the liberalisation of rigid family expectations concerning loyalty and conformity are transformed into a regressive act of two children going down the river. With special focus on emotions, this novel clearly shows emotional affection for the past, which seems to be stronger than any bonds with the future. The family, as it can be seen throughout the novel, has a significant role in the life of an individual, but at about the same time, the family is imposed as a source of social power and moral values, which are, under the aggressive pressure, transformed into a destructive principle (Levine 2001: 53).

Terry Eagleton states that for the most crucial understanding of this novel, it is very important to emphasize that the lack of compassion is not a direct consequence of inadequate education. Eagleton points out that it is very important to point out that key motifs in this novel are values of customs, feelings (love in the first place) and predilection as a consequence of a habit. Moral values can be transformed into the framework of scientific doctrine and vice versa. The greatest difference between Tom and Maggie is in the fact that Tom, together with Dodsons, enjoyed in the narrow-minded bourgeois values such as parsimony, chastity, loyalty, diligence and obligation towards relatives, while on the other side Maggie could write a novel and she represents a world which is far above Tom's (Eagleton 2005: 175).

Compassion for others fulfils one's own being, and about the same time, it can mark abandonment of the unique way towards one's own personality. Maggie is faced with the natural selfishness and unnatural self-sacrifice. In the end, she chooses to die with the man she loves

rather than live with the man who loves her. All the principles Maggie turned to and because of which she rejects love, turns its back to her in the end. The surroundings she is sacrificing for do not deserve that sacrifice at all. Maggie's explicit rejection of breaking all relations with social community and enforceable moral values has its deep roots in Victorian society and moral values. Maggie allows moral obligation to prevail, not passion; her brother and family, not her lover, present, not the past. The only reward for her asceticism is death. She and Tom are sinking into the past she promised herself to (Eagleton 2005: 176).

If we have to make a more precise distinction between the opposite poles in the novel, it would not be a mistake if we describe them as a public and a private sphere. In the life of the main heroine, Maggie Tulliver, the private sphere is always in second place because the public (family, society, morals) has always advantage in the social order and then in the novel. George Levine claims that self-denial was an ethical and epistemological imperative. Levine further explains that a struggle is a key principle in all works of George Eliot and that the struggle refers to the heroine's attempt to enter the world of reality (Levine 2008: 25-26). In this sense, Maggie is the writer's alter ego. The struggle Levine describes is nothing more than a struggle between private and public spheres, or the struggle of an individual against Victorian morals. It can be even strange that it is not so easy to determine the borders of the opposite spheres in this struggle against Victorian moral. These two spheres constantly intermingle throughout the novel, so sometimes it seems that the borders between the spheres are at the same time unbridgeable and invisible. They represent an unbridgeable gap in terms that it is clear that on the macro level of Maggie's life, the private sphere can never be in accordance with the public one – expectations of her surrounding, society as the widest possible community, and her family, of course. It can be expected that family naturally belongs to the private sphere, but it was not the case in this novel. Maggie's family stays in the shadow of the public, not the private sphere, because it upholds all the principles of society. Maggie's tragic quest for her own being and freedom is tilting at windmills. The public sphere and its principles are too strong, so nothing else could defeat it. All battles have been completely lost at the very beginning, and the winner was well known. A girl like Maggie Tulliver does not have a chance to establish a meaningful life in this world. Her suppressed feelings, ambitions and intelligence stay alive and at the end of the novel come forcefully to the surface, causing emotional and essential flood and take two young lives back to childhood, the only possible spot with hope for salvation and a new beginning without borders of Victorian moral (Kurteš 2012: 238).

Victorian cultural life was very realistically presented in the Victorian novel. All the positive and negative segments of the social and cultural life were described and discussed through the prism of characters' lives. All the writers managed to show all the negative aspects of the current era and the consequences of public life on private spheres. The processes which completely changed the country had an immense influence on private sphere segments as well – the characters were deprived of essential human features, society in general was faced with the process of dehumanisation, alienation, and the characters could not act properly, in accordance with their wishes and moral attitudes. The gap between individual and collective/social caused a real drama, and it is a common Victorian theme, while in most cases,

at the end of a novel, society proved to be the most dominant principle, much stronger than an individual.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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