

연구논문

Female Moral Deviation in Victorian Culture

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〈Abstract〉

The sexual deviance of women in nineteenth-century England embodies certain problematic aspects of contemporary culture — its desires, anxieties and preoccupations — as covered in numerous texts and images. The long-held assumption that sexuality is biologically determined as the basic natural drive of the human being has been fundamentally challenged. Related studies have demonstrated the politics of sexuality by identifying it as the vital locus of power in modern Western societies. Research indicates that sexuality is a historically constructed entity, conditioned by economic, political and socio-cultural processes. The specific modes of representation of the fallen woman in Victorian art illustrate the ways in which artistic and cultural practices intervene in the construction of and, to a far lesser degree, the revision of the dominant ideas, values and morals regarding sexuality. They thus ultimately affirm the point that sexuality is a contested arena in which social relations, divisions and struggles all come to the forefront.

Key words: female moral deviation, sexuality, power, Victorian culture, representation

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1. Introduction

The present article is intended to examine the ways in which female moral trespass, personified by the fallen woman, is tackled in visual and other cultural discourses in the Victorian era. The term fallen woman, biblical in origin, refers to a woman who has fallen out of the grace of God due to her loss of innocence. The epithet was widely circulated in mid-nineteenth-century England with regard to aberrant female sexuality. Often synonymous with the prostitute, the fallen woman actually denotes a much larger grouping which encompasses sexually engaged maidens, adulteresses, victims of seduction, and other delinquent underclass females (Anderson, 1993: 2). The fallen woman was the “abased figurehead of a fallen culture” (Auerbach, 1982: 157) in which female body and sexuality were subject to a cash payment nexus. Indeed, prostitution, called the “Great Social Evil”, and other sexual transgressions raged in Victorian London. Hippolyte Taine, after a walk through the West End in the 1860s, observed that “every hundred steps, one jostles twenty harlots [...] The deplorable procession in the shade of the monumental streets is sickening; it seems to me a march of the dead. This is a plague-spot — the real plague-spot of English society” (Taine, 1872: 36). The social historian Roy Porter expounds the situation in more detail:

In 1859, 2,828 brothels were known to the police, though the *Lancet* thought London housed over twice that number and 80,000 prostitutes. The trade was high-profile because it mainly took the form of street-walking. Near the Bank of England prostitutes were said to stand in

rows like hackney coaches, while by the Radcliff Highway and Shadwell High Street whores strolled about ‘bare-headed, in dirty-white muslin and greasy, cheap blue silks with originally ugly faces horribly seamed with small-pox, and disfigured by ice’. The Haymarket was known as ‘Hell Corner’ (Porter, 1995: 299).

It can be stated that the rise of the female fallenness in Victorian society was symptomatic of a “repressive and hypocritical” culture, “publicly advocating strict codes of chastity whilst privately endorsing a massive system of prostitution and pornography” (Nead, 1984: 26). The fallen woman, which had been long since a taboo subject in respectable society, became popular subject matter in literature and the visual arts of the late nineteenth century. There was a substantial amount of literary works which were concerned with this particular female type, including *David Copperfield* (1849-50); *Ruth* (1853); *Adam Bede* (1859); *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* (1891). The theme was also a source of inspiration for painters and, by the mid-nineteenth century, made its way even to high art as well as popular art. Richard Redgrave’s *The Outcast* (Fig. 1), exhibited in Royal Academy in 1851, which configures in a melodramatic manner a fallen daughter with her illegitimate infant driven out of home by her disapproving family, first touched upon the unsavory subject and subsequently, numerous Victorian narrative painters and the Pre-Raphaelites followed the suit.



〈Fig. 1〉 *The Outcast*, 1851

Data: oil on canvas, 31×41 inches, Royal Academy, London

2. The Representation of Female Fallenness

The proliferation of the fallen woman in high art indicates that she assumed a highly charged role in contemporary middle-class consciousness and existence (Bullen, 1998: 57). The bourgeois domestic ideology which pervaded in Victorian society is predicated upon the notion that the family is the basic institution of the state and that national order, stability and morality hinge upon the respectability of domestic life. Central to this ideology was the establishment of the feminine ideal and of sexual double standards. Accordingly, the prime role of women was defined as the “Angel in the House” who is committed to her duties as the moral centre of the

bourgeois family. The feminine ideal underscored the cardinal virtues of women: faith, sacrifice, forbearance and, most importantly, chastity. Female sexuality was repressed as it was in opposition to the social dictates for female propriety. Women were, it was alleged, sexually uninterested by nature and their desire was confined to reproductive practices and gratification of their partner, a belief exemplified by William Acton's well-known claim that women "are not much troubled with sexual feeling of any kind" (Acton, 1865: 112-13). This resulted in the double standards of sexuality which demanded that respectable women should be desexualized. Female sexuality was regarded as deviant, morbid and dangerous while male sexuality was seen as innate, natural and healthy. Female sexuality, therefore, came to be defined by the long-standing binary opposition of pure/impure or licit/illicit, and women who violated this peculiar sexual code of morality were relentlessly branded as "fallen".

The fallen woman, who incarnates unregulated female sexuality, was considered to pose a profound threat to society. She was liable to destroy the sacred home, spread disease, contaminate society and cause social disorder. The middle-class anxieties about female carnal desire or sexual deviancy led to a social programme which purported to control and regulate its potentially catastrophic consequences, best exemplified by the Contagious Diseases Acts of the 1860s. While the controversial Acts was a policy response to the problem, on an ideological level, myth-making on the fallen woman's fate was undertaken. Thus, the powerful myth "that the harlot's progress is short and rapid, and that there is no possible advance moral and physical; and that once abandoned she must always be profligate" (Mayhew, 2005: 17) was invented and entered a range of

discourses of the times, be it socio-cultural, political or biomedical. Regardless of her actual conditions, the fallen woman — and the prostitute in particular — was persistently represented as an agonized, terror-stricken and doomed figure who perishes in the tragic end. For instance, W. R. Greg's article of 1850 in *The Westminster Review* addresses the plight of a prostitute in markedly deterministic terms. He asserts that she is denied any possibility of redemption and that her fate is bound to a “downward path” and ultimately ends in extreme wretchedness: “the career of these women is a brief one; their downward path a marked and inevitable one [...] they are almost never rescued; escape themselves they cannot” (Greg, 1850: 454).



〈Fig. 2〉 *Found*, 1854

Data: oil on canvas, 36×31,5 inches, Delaware Art Museum, Delaware

The myth of the prostitute's downward progression featured in the passage above became a dominant rhetoric of fallenness in the nineteenth century and constituted a tradition of Victorian narrative painting on the subject. Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *Found* (1854, <Fig. 2>) is a case in point. The picture illustrates a country drover encountering in the city street his erstwhile beloved who has become a prostitute. Her degradation manifests itself in her appearance. Her person with the ravaged look and the seedy garment is clearly demarcated as a site of disease and decay. Slumped against the bleak wall, the soiled woman is placed way off the centre. The compositional marginality is a trope for her socially ostracized position. She is an outcast, banished from the sanctioned spheres of family, church and state. Her exitlessness is accentuated by the triple images of masculinity which besiege her: a male figure, a phallic cannon and a netted cart. The man tries to lift her but she turns her face away from him. Her self-abandoning gesture indicates that she is too ashamed or listless to respond to her would-be "saviour". His grip in turn seems too insecure to be an agent of regeneration. No emotional reciprocation happens between the two figures. The wall against which she persistently crouches stands for her deadlock and the possibility of her returning to lost innocence seems doubtful.

August Egg's triptych *Past and Present* elicited a public clamour when it was first exhibited with no title at the Royal Academy of 1858 because it daringly tackled the topic of female adultery.¹⁾ A scandalous

1) It is significant that *Past and Present* was produced one year after the passing of the Matrimonial Causes Act (1857) which stated that a man can divorce his spouse for her adultery alone but a woman cannot on the same ground (Graham-Dixon, 1999: 167).

image, it shocked the audience and remained unsold in the artist's studio until after his death (Treuherz, 1993: 114). The picture employs a serial format to tell a story of a well-to-do bourgeois family destroyed by the wife's extramarital relation. The accompanied narrative in the exhibition catalogues alludes to the point that female infidelity is to blame for domestic devastation and the anguish of all involved:

August the 4th: Have just heard that B. has been dead more than a fortnight; so his poor children have now lost both their parents. I hear she was seen on Friday last, near the Strand, evidently without a place to lay her head — What a fall hers has been!



〈Fig. 3〉 *Past and Present*, No. 1, 1858

Data: oil on canvas, 63.5×76.2cm, Tate, London



〈Fig. 4〉 *Past and Present*, No. 3, 1858

Data: oil on canvas, 63.5×76.2cm, Tate, London

The first scene of the trilogy, *Misfortune* (Fig. 3), depicts the moment when the wife's misconduct was discovered. In a splendidly furnished drawing room, indicative of the middle-class status of the household, the shocked husband sits distraught, holding the offending letter while the sinner implores for mercy. She prostrates herself, driven to miserable shame and despair with her face hidden. The claustrophobic atmosphere implies that she stands no chance of getting a way out, cut off from the outside world. The painting is laden with pictorial symbols like a rotten apple, a tumbling house of cards, the images of shipwreck and paradise lost, which all unequivocally point to the domestic debacle caused by female moral lapse. The second

picture *Prayer* shows grown daughters, bereft of both parents by now, still grieving and comforting each other. *Despair* (Fig. 4), the last of the trilogy, portrays the adulteress thrown out on to the streets. An exile from the proper sphere, she is huddled in a sewer below the Adelphi arches of the Waterloo Bridge, holding her illegitimate child. The setting of the Thames bridge, often associated with the fallen woman's suicide of the day, signifies the inevitably tragic end which awaits her. Female adultery was regarded as the vilest of evil which would assail and irrevocably demolish the reverent bourgeois home.²⁾ It was thought to be even more menacing than prostitution, which, as a necessary evil, ultimately contributes to upholding bourgeois social arrangements by meeting the physical needs of men and by protecting middle-class girls from predatory male desire. *Past and Present* reveals the Victorian moral panic towards female adultery which potentially makes havoc of marriage as an institution.

2) The absence of a seducer, which features Egg's trilogy, implies that the woman is solely responsible for her misdeed even if she is a victim of male temptation.



〈Fig. 5〉 Plate VIII, *The Drunkard's Children*, 1848

Data: glyphograph



〈Fig. 6〉 *Found Drowned*, 1867

Data: oil on canvas, 83.86×46.85 inches, Watts Gallery, Compton

George Cruikshank's *The Drunkard's Children* (1848, <Fig. 5>), which presents a guilt-ridden prostitute committing suicide by throwing herself from a bridge, reproduces the myth of fallenness that the prostitute is doomed to "downward path" of despair, social ostracism and finally death. In effect, the motif of suicide by drowning was part of a conventional representation of fallenness in Victorian art. A parallel image is found in George Frederic Watts's *Found Drowned* (1849-50, <Fig. 6>). The picture, startling in its severe clash of structural principles, configures a drowned corpse washed up under the bridge, whose sharp diagonal line slashes the overall composition, reinforcing a sense of shock on the viewer's part. Here again a tainted woman meets a tragic end. The implication is that self-accusation through suicide is the only solution to the irredeemable unforgivable sin, female sexual deviancy.

The above-discussed paintings feature in common a condemnation against the fallen woman, attesting to the "neurosis of a culture that feared female sexuality and aggression and so enshrined a respectably sadistic cautionary tale punishing them both" (Auerbach, 1982: 157). It should be brought to attention that this way of rendering the fallen woman was far from value-free, disinterested cultural practice. Rather it was part of an ideological project which was intended to discipline the public by communicating a powerful moral message. In other words, the images above are, to a greater or lesser extent, manipulated ones which are involved in myth-making or the construction of a specifically Victorian discourse on female fallenness. The point of the discourse is unequivocal: the fallen woman, whose immoral contaminating presence poses a threat to society, should perish in the event and that there is no alternative available

for her. This particular rhetoric of fallenness represented in the contemporary visual art contributed to the formation of the dominant assumption on the fallen woman. It thus affirmed and reproduced the middle-class domestic ideology which insisted on the regulation of female sexuality.

Yet a range of empirical documents of the times — articles, tracts, and journalistic reports — , which take a more enlightened approach to the problem of the fallen woman, suggest that her real-life conditions were far more complicated and open-ended, being at odds with the prevailing myth of fallenness. For instance, Henry Mayhew's extensive survey, *London Labour and the London Poor* (1861) attempts to address prostitution in the socio-economic context of urban industrialism, suggesting that it was more a result of financial pressure than of moral laxity. Mayhew deems the prostitute as a victim of *laissez-faire* capitalism and his findings tend to repudiate the deep-seated mythology of the fallen woman as a doomed figure. According to the survey, the prostitute is a common labourer who trades on her body for a livelihood and is exploited by capitalist economy. The author indicates that there is no rigid line between respectable society and depraved underworld, since underpaid female workers like shop-girls, milliners, seamstresses or factory hands often resorted to streetwalking and were engaged in occasional prostitution to supplement their meagre wages (Mayhew, 1968: 217).

William Acton's *Prostitution* (1857)³, another pioneering study of

3) The full title is *Prostitution, Considered in its Moral, Social, and Sanitary Aspect, in London and Other Large Cities and Garrison Towns, with Proposals for the Control and Prevention of Attendant Evils*.

Victorian sexual trade, also challenges the prevailing myth that “a fall from virtue was final” (Nead, 1988: 49), asserting that rescue and rehabilitation of strayed women are made possible through social proposals. Indeed the pervasive existence of prostitution in nineteenth-century England prompted many efforts to reclaim the fallen woman, which included Josephine Butler’s feminist campaign against the Contagious Diseases Acts and the establishment of Urania Cottage, a home for reformed prostitutes, by Charles Dickens and the philanthropist Lady Burdett-Coutts. Acton contends that a number of women were engaged in prostitution on a sporadic or part-time basis, dictated by their financial circumstances. That is, prostitution constituted a temporary stage in their life and that the fallen woman was often reintegrated into respectable society through marriage:

by far the large number of women who have resorted to prostitution for a livelihood, return sooner or later to a more or less regular course of life [...] During her career she has obtained a knowledge of the world most probably above the situation she was born in [...] Is it surprising, then, that she should look to the chance of amalgamating with society at large, and make a dash at respectability by a marriage? Thus, to a most surprising, and year by year increasing extent, the better inclined class of prostitutes become the wedded wives of men in every grade of society, from the peerage to the stable (Acton, 1969: 72-73).



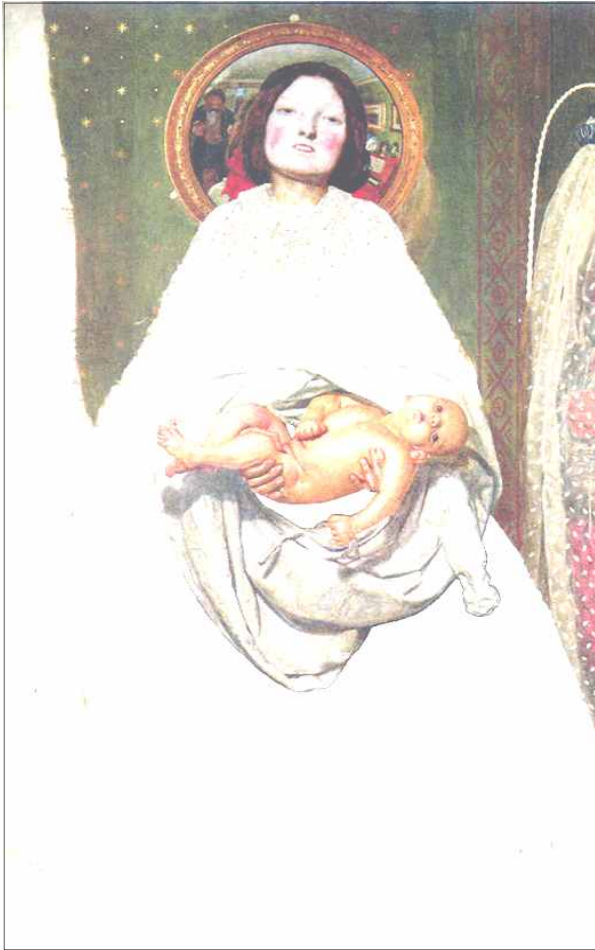
〈Fig. 7〉 *Awakening Conscience*, 1853

Data: oil on canvas, 76×56cm, Tate, London

Holman Hunt's *Awakening Conscience* (1853, 〈Fig. 7〉), a companion piece of his best known religious painting *The Light of the World*, seems to endorse the possibility of rescue of the fallen woman. As a whole, the picture offers an optimistic prospect for the fallen woman, arguing against the popular myth of her life and death. The image depicts a clandestine rendezvous of an upper-class man and his mistress at a set-up home in St.

John's Wood, an area by then disreputable for such arrangement. Her predicament is symbolized by a cast-off glove in the foreground and a captive bird beneath the table seized by a predatory cat. The “convolvulus in the vase on the piano and the tangled embroidery threads on the carpet” also articulate the point that she is entrapped (Barnes, 2001: 78). But in spite of these, the kept woman springs to her feet in response to a sudden revelation, turning resolutely away from the morally obtuse man who tries to coax her back to his embrace. She looks outwards as if seeking for an escape from her present situation. In the mirror behind her a ray of light is reflected, which implies that redemption will be available for all her moral trespasses owing to her remorse and repentance.

Arguably, the most unusual image of the fallen woman in Victorian art is found in Ford Madox Brown's unfinished *Take Your Son, Sir!* (1857, <Fig. 8>), which gives voice to the fallen woman herself. The wronged woman, far from being humiliated, looks utterly defiant and uncompromising. Holding up the illegitimate baby from the womb-like folds, she demands that her seducer should share the responsibility of its conception and custody. His diminutive image appears in the convex mirror as an “ironic reminder of an earlier nuptial painting Van Eyck's *Marriage of Arnolfini*” (Rose, 1981: 11). In this manner, Brown's fallen woman exhibits the “simultaneity of fall and apotheosis” (Auerbach, 1982: 165). Her daring cry is not only a straightforward appeal to the disowning man but a challenge to sexual double standards. It poses a caustic accusation against the androcentric society that represses female sexuality as a deviation from social norms.



〈Fig. 8〉 *Take Your Son, Sir!*, 1857

Data: oil on canvas, 38,1×70,5cm, Tate, London

3. Conclusion

In conclusion, the rise of the fallen woman in the nineteenth-century England signifies the fact that she embodies certain problematic aspects of Victorian culture: its desires, anxieties and preoccupations. There is a considerable amount of contemporary literary and visual works which are concerned with female sexual lapse and its potentially catastrophic consequences. The long-held assumption that sexuality is biologically determined as the basic natural drive of the human being has been fundamentally challenged. Michel Foucault's *The History of Sexuality* (1976), more than anything else, elucidates the politics of sexuality by identifying it as the vital locus to grasp the workings of power in modern society. He maintains that sexuality, conditioned by economic, political and socio-cultural processes, is historically constructed. The peculiar modes of representation of the fallen woman in Victorian art, as discussed above, brilliantly illustrate the ways in which artistic and cultural practices are involved in the construction of and, to a far lesser degree, in the revision of the dominant ideas, values and morals on sexuality. It thus ultimately affirms the point that sexuality is a contested arena in which social relations, divisions and struggles all come to the forefront.

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빅토리아조 문화와 여성 일탈의 재현

최지안*

〈국문초록〉

19세기 영국에서 빈번했던 여성의 성적 일탈은 당대 문화의 문제적인 양상들을 체현하는 바, 이 주제는 다수의 텍스트 및 이미지에서 다루어졌다. 섹슈얼리티가 인간의 기본 충동으로서 생물학적으로 결정된다는 가정은 도전 받아왔다. 관련 연구는 성이 근대 서구사회에서 권력이 작동하는 주요 지점임을 규명함으로써 성의 정치학을 논증했다. 즉 성이란 역사적으로 구성되는 실체로서, 경제, 정치, 사회문화적 제 과정들에 의해 조건지어진다. 빅토리아 시대 시각 텍스트에 나타난 타락한 여성의 특수한 재현 양식은, 문화적 실천이 성에 관한 지배적인 관념, 도덕, 가치의 (재)구성에 어떤 식으로 개입하는지를 예시한다. 이는 또한 성이란 사회적 역할 — 관계, 균열 그리고 투쟁 — 이 전면화되는 하나의 경연장임을 시사한다.

주제어: 여성 일탈, 섹슈얼리티, 권력, 빅토리아조 문화, 재현

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