AQA (A) Literature (Victorian literature); all comparative modules

Fallen angels

Nicola Onyett compares representations of the Fallen Woman in Victorian art and literature

I sometimes think that as readers we spend so much time looking for what is unique and original about a writer's approach that it is possible to overlook the fact that all texts are written, received and understood within a framework of other texts. The French literary theorist Julia Kristeva coined the term 'intertextuality' in 1966 to describe the complex connections that exist between texts, arguing that every time we read something new we routinely use our existing reading knowledge and practices to make meanings as we do so.

Working with Kristeva's idea of an intertextual network, this article will compare and contrast nineteenth-century poetry, prose and paintings to show how their representations of women can illuminate aspects of the Victorian milieu. Instead of taking a single text for granted, setting it alongside others can enable us to assess it more critically and actively, both in terms of what it is, and what it is not. It seems to me we are unlikely to become passive readers who lose sight of the writing process (and the infinite variety of approaches writers can take) if we have a framework for investigating the similarities and differences between their methods. In this case looking at some Victorian works of art is merely one of a range of strategies, techniques and perspectives which can help you investigate the cultural, social and historical contexts of the era more effectively.

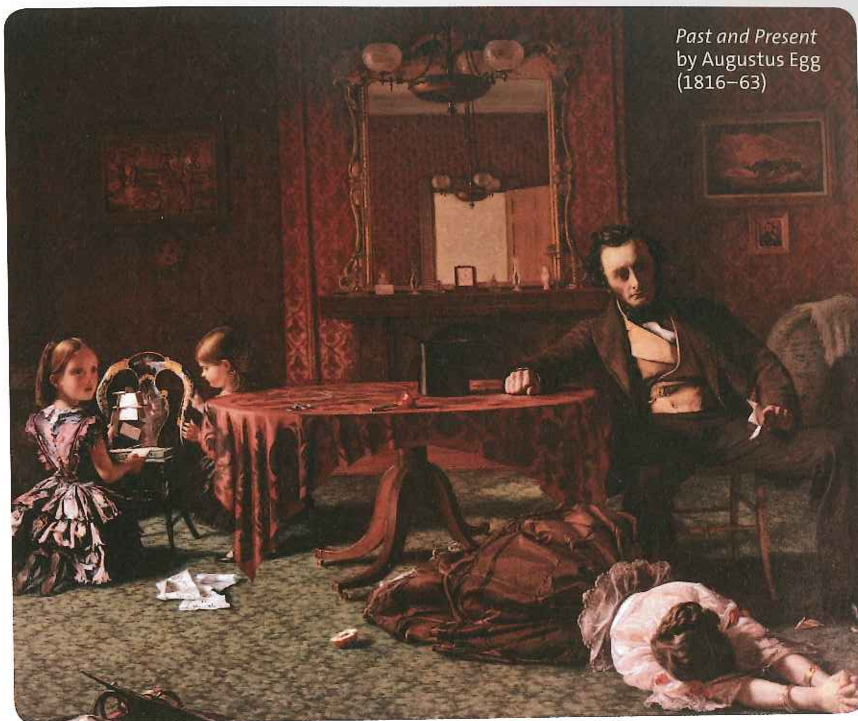
Found Drowned (1848–50) by George Frederick Watts

Bridgeman Art Library

The Madonna and the Magdalene

In the Victorian era women tended to be categorised as one of two extreme stereotypes — either the pure and virtuous domestic 'angel in the house' or the sexually voracious 'fallen woman'. These binary opposites were often linked to the two Marys closest to Jesus — his mother the Madonna and the prostitute Mary Magdalene. Women who had been seduced or were living a life of sin had broken the dominant mores of the age so thoroughly that morally and socially they had passed the point of no return. So final was their banishment from respectable society that it took some time before the fallen woman was considered an appropriate subject for either art or literature.

The liminal characters who haunt some of the finest narrative paintings of the nineteenth century and their counterparts in Victorian literature hover on the borderline that separates respectable society from the outsiders, raising awkward questions about the criteria by which they are judged and excluded. These Victorian images of the fallen woman allow us to investigate the ways in which a range of artists and writers tapped into a fascinating cultural danger zone of transgressive sexual relationships which included bigamy, adultery, seduction and rape. Against this backdrop, contemporary representations of women in art and literature encourage us to consider what it really meant to be a woman in Victorian society.



Past and Present by Augustus Egg (1816–63)

TopFoto

Good girls gone bad

Augustus Leopold Egg's *Past and Present* (1858) and Mrs Henry Wood's *East Lynne* (1861)

Past and Present is a powerful sequence of three paintings in which Augustus Leopold Egg narrates the destruction of a respectable middle-class family. The subtitles of each frame tell the sorry story as the artist remorselessly delineates the consequences of a married woman's adultery: first 'The Infidelity Discovered', then 'The Abandoned Daughters' and finally 'The Wife Abandoned by her Lover with her Bastard Child'. In each separate scene Egg's audience had to piece together a sequence of visual clues to get to the heart of the story. In many ways his complex and ambitious triptych form echoes the three-volume narrative structure that dominated mid-Victorian fiction. Egg's condemnatory attitude to the mother in his paintings is completely unambiguous and perhaps startling to more modern and liberal eyes. Clearly the unfaithful wife represents a major stumbling block in the smooth functioning of respectable society who must be severely punished.

This fiercely judgmental response was perhaps never more strongly echoed in fiction than in Mrs Henry Wood's shocker *East Lynne*, a runaway bestseller of the sensation novel genre pioneered by Wilkie Collins. Ellen Price Wood began writing to support her family after the failure of her husband's business, producing a series of bestsellers of which *East Lynne*, with its far-fetched and convoluted plot and thrillingly scandalous theme, was by far the most famous.

After Henry Wood's death Ellen continued to support herself and her family, and by the time she died in 1887 she had earned a small fortune entirely through her own efforts. Perhaps the writer's strong sense of personal responsibility and remarkable work ethic accounts for the sufferings she heaped on the head of her errant heroine, Lady Isabel Carlyle. Unlike her unimpeachably moral and stoically respectable creator, giddy Lady Isabel abandons her husband and children to elope with an aristocratic villain who deserts her. One suspects it gave Ellen Wood a certain amount of grim pleasure to ensure that following the birth of her illegitimate child, Lady Isabel is forced to disguise herself as a governess and go to work for her ex-husband and his new wife. She is then forced to witness the death of her young son, unable to reveal her true identity — a crudely schematic approach which would have been heartily endorsed by Miss Prism in Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

In Miss Prism's own 'three-volume novel of more than usually revolting sentimentality', as Lady Bracknell no doubt accurately describes it, the author is proud to declare that 'the good ended happily, the bad unhappily. That is what fiction means.' As it was, the stock characters and conventional tropes purveyed by Ellen Wood made *East Lynne* a smash hit and led to its successful reincarnation as a stage melodrama. Ironically, Lady Isabel's famous declaration of horror and shame at her son's deathbed — 'Dead! Dead! And never called me mother!' — does not even appear in the original novel, being from a later stage version.

Original sinners

Thomas Hood's 'The Bridge of Sighs' (1844) and G. F. Watts' *Found Drowned* (c.1848–50)

Art critic Richard Dorment has noted that G. F. Watts' 'sublimely beautiful paintings exposed brutal truths about Victorian society...like John Ruskin and William Morris, he saw art as a means to social reform'. While as a young man Watts painted

standard romantic subjects — Dorment describes a range of 'hopeless loves, dark deeds, noble knights and glamorous villains' — from the late 1840s he began to respond to the terrible social conditions of Victorian London. For Dorment, in paintings such as *Found Drowned* 'nocturnal London itself becomes part of the story, the indifferent maw that swallows up...anonymous lives'. Dorment points outs the significance of Watts' decision not to 'show his realist paintings publicly for another 30 years' and the fact that he never tried to sell them. 'He understood that the Victorian public would not tolerate — and certainly would not hang on their walls — works that told such brutal truths about the society they lived in.' Unlike Egg's conventional artistic representation of a fallen woman, Watts was no doubt correct in assuming that his own more radical, nuanced and sympathetic response was unlikely to gain similar widespread popularity.

In *Found Drowned*, a young woman's lifeless body lies where it has been washed up under the Adelphi arches by Waterloo Bridge, which was for years a notorious suicide spot. The implication is that this poorly dressed servant girl has been driven to suicide out of guilt, remorse and fear over a failed love affair or illegitimate pregnancy. This resonant London location, an appropriate resting place that connotes a fallen woman who can fall no further, also appears in Egg's last *Past and Present* painting. Significantly, however, the two artists differ in that whereas Egg appears to endorse the typical Victorian view that a married woman who destroys her own family deserves to die, Watts' depiction is far more sympathetic.

Watts' compassionate approach is echoed in Thomas Hood's early Victorian ballad 'The Bridge of Sighs', which relates the everyday tragedy of 'one more unfortunate' for whom suicide seems the only way out. While Hood acknowledges the drowned girl's sins in his poem's final stanza, this is balanced with an accompanying call for pity which echoes Jesus' remark 'let him that is without sin cast the first stone'. Indeed much of the blame for the unfortunate girl's death is ascribed to the 'Dissolute Man' who had presumably abandoned her. The reader is urged to think 'Not of the stains of her, / All that remains of her / Now is pure womanly'; ironically the filthy waters of the Thames seem to have left the dead woman newly baptised and washed clean of sin. Hood's plea for tolerance, mercy and sympathy is a powerful and consistent thread which runs throughout the poem. He orders the Victorian public to 'Touch her not scornfully' but 'Think of her mournfully', admonishing them:

> Make no deep scrutiny
> Into her mutiny
> Rash and undutiful:
> Past all dishonour,
> Death has left on her
> Only the beautiful.

As he reminds his bourgeois audience, 'Still, for all slips of hers' the girl was 'One of Eve's family'. If there is sin in this story, Hood seems to suggest, his respectable middle-class readers might do well to locate it a little closer to home. It is possible to infer that the dead girl was thrown out of her respectable employment when her affair (or possibly illegitimate pregnancy) was discovered, and she was thus left with a stark choice between prostitution, starvation or death. As Hood points out:

> Alas! for the rarity
> Of Christian charity
> Under the sun!
> O, it was pitiful!
> Near a whole city full,
> Home she had none.

Like *East Lynne*, 'The Bridge of Sighs' was also transposed into another type of text, with its ballad form making it particularly suitable for being set to music. Fundamentally Hood was reimagining the age-old story of the sexual double standard which was summed up with chilling understatement in the suicide note of the tragic maidservant Rosanna Spearman in Wilkie Collins' *The Moonstone* (1868). As she notes with clinical precision:

> I was a thief, because my mother went on the streets when I was quite a little girl. My mother went on the streets, because the gentleman who was my father deserted her. There is no need to tell such a common story as this, at any length. It is told quite often enough in the newspapers.

Sex and the city

Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *Found* (1854) and Thomas Hardy's 'The Ruined Maid' (1866)

The unfinished painting *Found* was the famous pre-Raphaelite Dante Gabriel Rossetti's only attempt at tackling a real-life social issue. Presumably he struggled with the form and preferred to concentrate on the mythical and medieval subjects for which he became famous. In this picture a young cattle-drover has come up to town from the country only to discover that his former sweetheart has fallen into prostitution. Despite his apparent sympathy and willingness to forgive her, she refuses to return home with him. She may be too guilty and ashamed to go home after betraying her true love, feeling that she will contaminate his country innocence. A more subversive reading might be that she is so caught up in her new city life of sin that she no longer places any value on the supposed blessings of respectable marriage. The net which entangles the calf in the drover's cart may be seen to symbolise either the web of sin enmeshing the fallen woman, or, more controversially, the stifling conventionality of everyday Victorian life.

Thomas Hardy's 'The Ruined Maid' also deals with the theme of country innocence versus sin in the city. It takes the form of a conversation between two country girls, Amelia, who has abandoned her 'home in the barton', and an unnamed stay-at-home friend. The poem's first five rollicking quatrains have a question and answer structure in which 'Melia's friend spends the first three lines excitedly asking for the juicy details of 'the ruined maid's' new life, with 'Melia herself then adding the stanza's heavily ironic last line. The naïve country bumpkin comments admiringly on the way Amelia has shed her old clothes, accent and habits on her way to the top, reminding her:

> 'You used to call home-life a hag-ridden dream,
> And you'd sigh, and you'd sock; but at present you seem
> To know not of megrims or melancho-ly!' —
> 'True. One's pretty lively when ruined,' said she.

In the sixth and final verse, however, Hardy alters the pattern and the two speakers split the lines equally, as if Amelia can no longer

hold back her wish to tell the truth about the price she has paid for the trappings of success. Reverting to her old country dialect, she knows there is no way back into respectable society now:

> 'I wish I had feathers, a fine sweeping gown,
> And a delicate face, and could strut about Town!' —
> 'My dear — a raw country girl, such as you be,
> Cannot quite expect that. You ain't ruined,' said she.

Despite its specifically Victorian setting, 'The Ruined Maid' is now usually read as a pastiche or blackly comic mockery of hypocritical contemporary values. Indeed the text lends itself very well to modern reinterpretations and it is possible to read it as a satire on early consumerism, a condemnation of the vacuous worship of minor celebrities, or a dig at the pretensions of the upwardly mobile. However we read it, though, it seems a good deal more enigmatic and sophisticated than either 'The Bridge of Sighs' or *East Lynne*.

Subverting Victorian values

The fascinating intersection between nineteenth-century history, art and literature provides a rich and illuminating way into exploring the social, sexual and moral anxieties of the Victorian age. The strength and resilience of the classic Victorian iconography of the fallen woman was debated by later Victorian writers such as Oscar Wilde and endured into the twentieth century, albeit eventually transposed from a melodramatic to a comic mode. In P. G. Wodehouse's *The Code of the Woosters*, for instance, published in 1938, 'silly ass' aristocrat Bertie Wooster is informed by his omniscient manservant Jeeves that in order to blackmail his terrifying enemy, the would-be fascist dictator Roderick Spode, Bertie need only mention *that he knows all about Eulalie*. As Bertie explains to his aunt after the astonishing success of this tactic, Spode's guilty secret seems blindingly obvious:

Bridgeman Art Library

Found (*c.*1869) by Dante Gabriel Rossetti

> One can fill in the picture for oneself, I think, Aunt Dahlia? The trusting girl who learned too late that men betray...the little bundle...the last mournful walk to the river-bank...the splash ... the bubbling cry...I fancy so, don't you? No wonder the man pales beneath the tan a bit at the idea of the world knowing of that.

The truth, however, as Bertie discovers later, is somewhat different. 'Eulalie' is not a tragic fallen woman but Spode's own alter-ego, and the terrible skeleton in his closet is that he designs ladies' underwear in his spare time. On the eve of the Second World War, it seems, the classic motif of the fallen woman has become such a debased cliché that Wodehouse feels free to mock it.

References and further reading

Collins, W. (1868) *The Moonstone*, Oxford University Press.

Dorment, R. (2008) 'G. F. Watts: Confronting the Demons of his Age', in the *Daily Telegraph* 25 November 2008: www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/art/3563601/GF-Watts-confronting-the-demons-of-his-age.html.

Hardy, T. (1901) *Selected Poems of Thomas Hardy*, Everyman.

Hood, T. (1844) 'The Bridge of Sighs': www.poetry-archive.com/h/hood_thomas.html .

Wodehouse, P. G. (1938) *The Code of the Woosters*, Penguin.

Wood, Mrs H. (1866) *East Lynne*, Oxford University Press.

Nicola Onyett is chief examiner for A-level English literature for a major exam board. She teaches at Queen Margaret's School, York and is on the editorial board of The English Review.