

## XVIII

### Fallen Woman or Fallen Man?

**Representations of moral responsibility, punishment and reward in George Frederic Watts's painting *Found Drowned* (1848-50) and Charles Dickens's novel *Our Mutual Friend* (1864-5).**

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*This article will examine gendered representations of moral responsibility by comparing its treatment of fallen women in the above artefacts. George Frederic Watts evinces sympathy and condemnation for the plight of a drowned woman, alone bearing the punishment for her fall from prevalent societal expectations of female behaviour. Charles Dickens appears to go further in challenging the distribution of moral responsibility, inverting the stereotypic trope of the fallen woman by instead punishing a fallen man for his moral failure. Both artefacts, however, remain trapped in the dominant cultural model of the time, with its privileging of the patriarchal home as the best protector of female propriety. They thus re-enforce stereotypic inscriptions of gender. Read together as social documents, they reflect a society in transition, in which attitudes towards morality, class and gender, far from being universal and absolute, were fraught with paradox, uncertainty and ambivalence.*

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**T**he Victorians were much exercised by perceived essentialist gender differences, advocating separate public or private spheres for men and women even as a burgeoning urban female workforce increasingly complicated strict delineations. Traditionally, women were expected to maintain the highest moral standards, but were disproportionately castigated for falling from the ideal. Sarah Stickney Ellis exemplifies writers who place, unequivocally, the weight of moral responsibility for the health and stability of the nation itself upon women, as she declares, 'My sisters

[...] you have deep responsibilities; you have urgent claims; a nation's moral worth is in your keeping'.<sup>1</sup> Her rallying cry to the Women of England (1843), in her widely read conduct manual, was to use their superior moral courage to 'assist in redeeming the character of English men from the mere animal [...] into which [...] they are in danger of falling'.<sup>2</sup> Ellis uses crude binary opposites to inscribe supposed gender characteristics. This idea is typical of the widely held view that what Ellis describes as the 'delicacy of the female character'<sup>3</sup> requires masculine protection. That protection is afforded by the metonymic ideal of the middle-class patriarchal home, headed by an active, economically competent male<sup>4</sup> whose conduct is moderated by the gentle moral corrective of the 'Angel In The House', the embodiment of wifely, feminine virtues.<sup>5</sup> Ellis acknowledges the existence of a 'second class of females' who deviate from the norm through 'the pecuniary necessities of labour', and she argues strenuously that they should not be degraded by this necessity.<sup>6</sup> But the insistence with which she promotes her ideal social structure implies that departure from the safety of the patriarchal family model, whether by choice or economic necessity, represents a danger to properly constituted femininity. If the binary and moral order is thus disturbed, where does the responsibility for the inevitably dire consequences lie?

Those consequences are epitomized by the trope of the fallen woman, a common metaphor in mid-Victorian literature and art, and the binary opposite of the equally clichéd domestic angel. The term was wide enough to cover any female who had sex outside marriage, through to outright prostitution. Watts' *Found Drowned* and Dickens' *Our Mutual Friend* are linked thematically in challenging societal assumptions about female responsibility for the fallen state, complicating any suggestion that Mrs. Ellis's moral position was universally accepted. But at the same time, they demonstrate the strength and pervasive nature of Victorian representations of gender, with its lurking assumption that women should conform to the patriarchal ideal.<sup>7</sup> Both artefacts expose the hypocrisy and unfairness of societal double standards, but they nonetheless remain products of their age, 'trapped within an ideological theatre where the proliferation of representations, images, reflections, myths [and]

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<sup>1</sup> Sarah Stickney Ellis, *The Women of England: Their Social Duties and Domestic Habits* (New York: J.& H. Langley, 1843) reproduced in *The Select Works of Mrs. Ellis: Comprising the Women of England, Wives of England, Daughters* (London: Forgotten Books, 2012), p.6.

<sup>2</sup> Ellis, p.103.

<sup>3</sup> Ellis, p.104.

<sup>4</sup> Nancy Armstrong, 'Gender and the Victorian Novel', in *The Cambridge Companion to the Victorian Novel*, ed. by Deirdre David (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp.97-124, (p.102).

<sup>5</sup> Coventry Patmore, *The Angel in the House* (London: John W. Parker, 1854).

<sup>6</sup> Ellis, p.104.

<sup>7</sup> Linda Nochlin, 'Lost and Found: Once More the Fallen Woman', in *Women, Art and Power and other Essays* (Boulder, Colorado: Westgate 1989), pp.57-85, (p.61).

identifications' hampering any radical interrogation of gender roles and responsibilities.<sup>8</sup> French Feminist critic Hélène Cixous argues that linguistic signifiers - such as head/heart, active/passive, strong/weak - create a hierarchy of gendered oppositions, artificial cultural constructs which code agency, power and control as masculine, but impose a vulnerable, dependent and inferior inscription of femininity.<sup>9</sup> Both Watts and Dickens, Armstrong contends, 'take a vulnerable feminine body and place in it a state of crisis' as if to flag up the dangers of non-conformity.<sup>10</sup> In both examples, the image of the female body is 'dramatized [and] compelled by male agency to conform to a historical idea of woman [...], to induce the body to become a cultural sign', and that sign indicates a femininity in need of protection.<sup>11</sup> Watts and Dickens send a clear moral message, condemning the unjust treatment meted out to fallen women, but they also demonstrate how literature and art form part of a paradoxical Victorian discourse, exposing the fault lines, anxieties and contradictions of that age. Both artefacts subvert, but at the same time re-enforce, the gender assumptions about which Cixous complains: each artefact is carrying the implication that 'behind every crouched figure of a fallen woman there stands the eminently upright one of the angel in the house'.<sup>12</sup>

*Found Drowned* exemplifies Watts's challenge to societal injustice, one of four works depicting his dismay at the human suffering brought about by industrialisation and social change.<sup>13</sup> Its sheer size confronts the viewer with the enormity of that injustice, as if compelling engagement and demanding emotional condemnation. Watts uses spatial arrangement, colour, light and shade as indicators of moral temperature.<sup>14</sup> The prone figure of a girl, her arms outstretched in a cruciform pose, gives a strong sense of horizontality, suggesting her actual and metaphorical fall. The folds of her skirt and the dimly lit flow of the river follow the horizontal line. The row of industrial buildings on the far riverbank adds a further layer, as though dark urbanity itself has crushed its victim, culpable in her destruction. A tall, phallic-like building rises vertically in line with the girl's lower body as if to pierce it, perhaps suggesting that she has been impregnated. The palette is limited to sombre ochres, browns, and blue-greys, in stark contrast to the pale, waxy skin of the dead girl's face, dramatically illumined by a single star.<sup>15</sup> She is utterly alone in her cold stillness, highlighting her abandonment. The bridge's arches frame her, suggesting a stony sepulchre, but also implying some shelter or protection, perhaps afforded to her in death, but denied her in life. The girl is unidentified. She is young, still beautiful, plainly

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<sup>8</sup> Hélène Cixous, 'Newly Born Woman' in *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, ed. by Julie Rifkin and Michael Ryan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp.348-354, (p.350).

<sup>9</sup> Cixous, p.348-9.

<sup>10</sup> Armstrong, p.108.

<sup>11</sup> Judith Butler, 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution', in Rifkin and Ryan, pp.900-911, (p. 902).

<sup>12</sup> Nochlin, p.61.

<sup>13</sup> Mark Bills and Barbara Bryant, *G.F. Watts: Victorian Visionary* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press in association with Watts Gallery, 2008), p.107.

<sup>14</sup> Nochlin, p.74.

<sup>15</sup> Nicholas Tromans, *The Art of G.F. Watts* (London: Paul Holberton, 2017), pp.17-18.



Figure 1. George Frederic Watts, *Found Drowned*, c.1848-50, oil on canvas, 119.4 x 213.4 cm, Watts Gallery Trust.

dressed, her delicately curled hand holding an object, which appears to be a heart-shaped locket on a chain. The imagery suggests a tragic history, hinting at the seduction and desertion of a working girl, driven to suicide in her despair.

Interpretation of the painting is left to the viewer, but both its title, inscribed on the reverse, and the topography, place the scene at Waterloo Bridge, then a notorious location for suicides by drowning. 'Found Drowned' was a term used by some coroners to avoid the question of whether or not a death was by suicide, which was a criminal offence resulting in the denial of a Christian burial. Watts painted a smaller version of *Found Drowned*, entitled *The Bridge of Sighs*, which links it both to Waterloo Bridge and to Thomas Hood's earlier, but much re-printed poem (1844).<sup>16</sup> That poem popularises the plight of a fallen seamstress cast out by society and driven to suicide, alone bearing the ultimate responsibility for her 'sins'. The poem castigates the 'sexual asymmetry'<sup>17</sup> of blaming the woman, using metrical and lexical simplicity and a naïve *abab* rhyme pattern to evince sentimentalised reader response:

Lift her up tenderly,  
Lift her with care,

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<sup>16</sup> Bills and Bryant, p.114.

<sup>17</sup> Nochlin, p.57.

Fashioned so slenderly,  
So young and so fair!  
[...]  
Owing her weakness,  
Her evil behaviour,  
And leaving, with meekness,  
Her sins to her saviour!<sup>18</sup>

It shames the reader into acceptance of Christ's injunction that 'he who is without sin among you, let him cast the first stone at her', insisting that judgment should be left to God.<sup>19</sup> *Found Drowned* thus appears to give close artistic expression to Hood's sentiments.

The girl's pose suggests that she is a scapegoat, a Christ-like sacrificial lamb, alone bearing the sins of the world, nailed to the cross of societal condemnation. The darkness surrounding her suggests that the greater evil lies in that condemnation, rather than in her own transgression. Only the star, positioned immediately above the dark, sinister tower, and perhaps indicating the moral superiority of enlightenment, lightens her darkness. Starlight bathes her face, carrying the promise of redemption and God's mercy. But the painting's stark social realism carries no earthly comfort for the girl or for the viewer. It is dramatic but not melodramatic in its uncompromising finality. Watts did not exhibit it for 30 years, for reasons that are not clear, but when it did appear it provoked some hostile reviews: 'Bad policy, Mr. Watts, to confront these "curled darlings" with so vital a question. You come too close to home, Sir, to our consciences to be agreeable'.<sup>20</sup> What the curled darlings themselves thought goes unrecorded, but the disapproval suggests that Mrs. Ellis's 'delicacy of the female character' needed protection from the harsh realities of female transgression, and that Watts painting had upset this expectation. The criticism itself reflects the tendency to prescribe female behaviour, whether as sinner or scapegoat, social evil or victim, curled darling or fallen angel, by reference to the sort of binary extremes opposed by Cixous.<sup>21</sup> *Found Drowned* clearly challenges Mrs. Ellis's naïve assertion that 'English society is so happily constituted, that women have little temptation to vice'.<sup>22</sup> Watts's implied seducer remains literally and metaphorically absent, but this highlights the consequences of his moral vacuum rather than that of the girl. But in spite of the eloquence of Watts's moral message, he remains a man of his time, hinting at traditional perceptions of femininity. His dead girl is aestheticized as the

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<sup>18</sup> Thomas Hood, 'The Bridge of Sighs', in *The Poetical Works of Thomas Hood*, ed. by W. M. Rossetti (London: E. Moxon, 1871) pp.1-4.

<<http://dbooks.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/books/PDFs/600083865.pdf>> [accessed 23 Jan 2018].

<sup>19</sup> John 8.7.

<sup>20</sup> *The Spectator*, 7 January 1882, p. 22, <<https://archive.spectator.co.uk/article/7th-january-1882/22/art>> [accessed 23 Jan 2018].

<sup>21</sup> Lynda Nead, *Myths of Sexuality: Representations of Women in Victorian Britain* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), p.7.

<sup>22</sup> Ellis, p.43.

beautiful, tragic victim of a hostile urbanity, which is inherently inimical to the delicacy of the stereotypic female.<sup>23</sup> For all the painting's compelling exposure of societal injustice, there lingers the sense that the angel might not have fallen had she been adequately protected in the patriarchal house, within the safe confines of the dominant social structure.

There were other challenges to sexual double standards. William Acton's 1857 report, drawing on an earlier report of Ralph Wardlaw, examines the moral and public health aspects of prostitution from a medical practitioner's viewpoint. Acton strongly condemns male sexual behaviour and societal hypocrisy that punishes women alone, describing as 'monstrous, un-Christianlike, un-Englishlike'<sup>24</sup> those who would pass judgment upon a fallen girl: 'Foolish and shortsighted those who imagine that if they may send forth the scapegoat into the wilderness, they can also, under our dispensation, impose the burden of their sins upon her'.<sup>25</sup> Wardlaw demands that a seducer be 'branded as he deserves'.<sup>26</sup> Their indignation raises the proposition that 'for every fallen woman, there must be a fallen man'.<sup>27</sup> The shadowy figure of that fallen man is realised in Charles Dickens's last completed novel, *Our Mutual Friend*.

Dickens's novel, like Watts's painting, is characterised by his own commitment to literature and art as morally transforming forces, a campaigning duty to expose harsh realities as a service to society.<sup>28</sup> Dickens was himself, for a time, actively involved in a project for the rehabilitation of fallen women and his novel reflects Acton's insistence upon male responsibility for attacks on female virtue.<sup>29</sup> It traces the pursuit of a poor, innocent, orphaned working girl by a wealthier, better educated, socially superior male, but inverts the fallen woman trope by depicting not the expected ruin of Lizzie Hexam, but the brutal punishment of her would-be seducer, Eugene Wrayburn. But, for all its subversion, Dickens's novel ultimately resolves itself in the dominant culture of the domestic sphere.<sup>30</sup> Beautiful, self-sacrificing, modest, hard-working Lizzie serves as a double caricature, both a vulnerable potential victim and a middle-class domestic angel in the making. Her reward for actually and morally saving her penitent fallen man is a stereotypic marriage, of which Mrs. Ellis would be proud.

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<sup>23</sup> Brian Donnelly, *Reading Dante Gabriel Rossetti: The Painter as Poet* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015), p.128.

<sup>24</sup> William Acton, M.R.C.S., *Prostitution, considered in its Moral, Social, and Sanitary Aspects, In London and other Large Cities. With Proposals for the Mitigation and Prevention of its Attendant Evils* (London: John Churchill, 1857), reproduced in (London: Forgotten Books, 2015), p.5.

<sup>25</sup> Acton, p.5.

<sup>26</sup> Ralph Wardlaw, D.D., *Lectures on Female Prostitution: Its Nature, Extent, Effects, Guilt, Causes and Remedy* (Glasgow: J. Maclehouse, 1842), p.96. <<http://dbooks.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/books/PDFs/600051530.pdf>> [accessed 23 Jan 2018].

<sup>27</sup> Alexa Craig Faxon, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1989), p.67.

<sup>28</sup> Dierdre David, 'Introduction', in *The Cambridge Companion to the Victorian Novel*, ed. by Deirdre David (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p.7.

<sup>29</sup> Jenny Hartley, *Charles Dickens and the House of Fallen Women* (London: Methuen, 2009).

<sup>30</sup> David, p.7.

Dickens, like Watts, uses spatial metaphors through which to explore moral stature. We first encounter Eugene, 'buried alive in the back of his chair', declaring that he 'hates his profession' and that 'the word he abominates most is energy'.<sup>31</sup> His horizontal, lounging, physical and mental indolence reflects his lack of moral backbone. When his friend, Mortimer Lightwood, representing the voice of manly conscience, challenges him: 'Eugene, do you design to capture and desert this girl? [...] Do you design to marry her? [...] Do you design to pursue her?' Eugene evades the questions by joking that he is a riddle to himself and bored with 'trying to find out what I mean [...] I have no design whatever. I am incapable of designs'.<sup>32</sup> His moral carelessness and irresponsibility reflect the behaviour of the feckless males so vehemently condemned by Acton and Wardlaw.

The sustained downward pressure Eugene piles upon Lizzie echoes his debased conscience and morality. He ruthlessly exploits the power imbalance between himself and his victim, using his social, educational, class and gender advantages to bear down on her vulnerability and innocence, guilt-tripping her into gratitude to him for hiring a tutor to teach her to read. The power-struggle comes to a head in the chapter *A Cry for Help*. Eugene has stalked Lizzie to the paper mill to which she has escaped to evade his attentions. She begs him to 'respect my good name [...] give me the full claim of a lady upon your generous behaviour', and she beseeches him to be merciful in not forcing her to disclose her love for him, which, as the reader discerns, renders her more vulnerable to his advances. But, as the narrator chillingly records, 'he was not merciful with her and he made her do it'.<sup>33</sup> The third person narrative voice thus guides the action, intervening in the dialogue to urge disapprobation for Eugene's behaviour. The precise moment of Eugene's moral fall, however, is focalised through him, so that the reader is left in no doubt about his intentions. He coarsely resolves to 'try her again' the next day, and soliloquizes 'Yet I have gained a wonderful power over her [...] she must go through with her nature as I must go through with mine. If mine exacts its pains and penalties all round, so must hers, I suppose'.<sup>34</sup> The scene for Lizzie's seduction is set and she will be powerless to resist the pressure, another potential victim of the Bridge of Sighs.

But Dickens's moral mission inverts the seduction-to-fall trajectory by substituting Eugene for Lizzie. Eugene's punishment is brutal and dramatic. He is violently attacked by a rival, thrown into the river and left for dead, mirroring the watery fate of Watts's fallen girl. Lizzie, however, rushes to the rescue and, seeing 'a bloody face turned up towards the moon and drifting away' uses her skills as a waterman's daughter to row out, 'seize it by its bloody hair' and tow it to shore.<sup>35</sup> In contrast to Watts's aestheticised girl, Dickens dehumanises Eugene, using the synecdoche of the bloody face and the

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<sup>31</sup> Charles Dickens, *Our Mutual Friend* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp.11, 19-20.

<sup>32</sup> *Our Mutual Friend*, p.294.

<sup>33</sup> *Our Mutual Friend*, pp.689, 693-95, 702.

<sup>34</sup> *Our Mutual Friend*, p.696.

<sup>35</sup> *Our Mutual Friend*, pp.699-700.

absence of a personal pronoun to urge on the reader the response of revulsion, which was traditionally heaped upon the fallen woman. Dickens leaves no scope for moral equivocation or pity. Eugene is only allowed to live once he repents, admitting ‘I have wronged her enough in fact: I have wronged her still more in intention’, and that ‘she would have done well to have turned me over with her foot [...] and spat in my dastardly face’. He marries Lizzie, gaining Lightwood’s approval as ‘the mark of a true man’. Thus, Lizzie’s virtue is preserved, but Eugene remains maimed as a punishment, ‘resting on his wife’s arm and leaning heavily upon a stick’.<sup>36</sup> Nonetheless, purged by his suffering and redemption, he resolves to work energetically for his angel wife, his moral backbone now totally dependent upon her womanly support. They resolve into Mrs. Ellis’s domestic ideal, each adopting the properly gendered characteristics it implies.

But *Our Mutual Friend* also raises the suggestion that men might be equally oppressed by strict binary gender expectations which fail to reflect the complexities of human nature. As he equivocates between his role as a gentleman or a cad, Eugene’s interior monologue indicates a ‘failure in masculinity’ to live up to the standards expected of Victorian manhood.<sup>37</sup> The moral confusion of the riddle of Eugene Wrayburn: ‘riddle-me-riddle-me-riddle-me-re, p’raps you can tell me what this may be? [...]. No, upon my life. I can’t’, is juxtaposed with Lightwood’s voice of conscience: ‘What is to come of it? What are you doing? Where are you going?’<sup>38</sup> These paradoxes force the reader’s focus onto contradictory aspects of masculine conduct, a refreshing change from focusing on the woman. Dickens’s novel was written at a time when his own moral standing as the upright family man was compromised by his desertion of his wife, Catherine, and his liaison with the young actress, Nellie Ternan. The reader may conclude that, in Eugene’s riddle, Dickens plays out his own unresolved conundrum, his own binary tension between gentleman or cad, ‘celebrant of the hearth’ or fallen man.<sup>39</sup>

Such paradoxes suggest a society in transition, challenging fixed gender assumptions, but struggling to acquire new ones.<sup>40</sup> Dickens, Acton, Wardlaw and, to a lesser extent, Watts, expose the injustice of the prevalent morality, but still recommend the dominant cultural model as a remedy. Acton cites female destitution and economic necessity as the main cause of fallen-ness, but his response is to promote the protection afforded by marriage. ‘**Teach them housewifery**’, cries Acton, in capital letters, arguing that ‘the duties of wife and helper [...] are [a woman’s] real inherent rights [...]. My nostrum is marry and colonize, colonize, colonize’.<sup>41</sup> Wardlaw’s answer is to ‘marry; -fear God; - be virtuous;

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<sup>36</sup> *Our Mutual Friend*, pp.738, 742, 811-13.

<sup>37</sup> Donnelly, p.106.

<sup>38</sup> *Our Mutual Friend*, pp.295, 407.

<sup>39</sup> Catherine Waters, ‘Gender, Family and Domestic Ideology’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Charles Dickens*, ed. by John O. Jordan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp.120-35, (p.120).

<sup>40</sup> Barbara Dennis, *The Victorian Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p.16.

<sup>41</sup> Acton, pp.182-5.

- be happy'.<sup>42</sup> Similarly, Dickens's Urania House project for fallen women suggests marriage and emigration as a goal, 'raising up among the solitudes of a new world some virtuous homes much needed there'.<sup>43</sup> If husbands could not be supplied in Britain, the colonies would provide. More radical solutions to the limited opportunities available to women would be left to others and to a later era.

Mid-Victorian literature and art frequently concern themselves with the position of the individual within society, which necessarily involves a critique of that society, its values and prejudices, uncertainties and inconsistencies. The precise intentions of authors or artists cannot be presumed, but their artefacts can be read as social documents reflecting the pre-occupations of the society in which they were created. Watts and Dickens, Ellis, Acton and Wardlaw represent only some of the many 'voices' articulating those pre-occupations, but together they represent a synergy between literature, art and current debate. Together, they create the impression of a dynamic society in a state of flux, in which class, gender, social and moral absolutes were being passionately and energetically interrogated. The cosy moral attraction of 'the domestic character of England...the home comforts, the fireside virtues for which she is justly famous' remained strong.<sup>44</sup> But a re-evaluation of the separate spheres ideology was started, contributing towards the long process of re-adjustment of strict gender and moral hierarchies, which remains a work in progress.

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<sup>42</sup> Wardlaw, p.91.

<sup>43</sup> Charles Dickens, 'Homes for Homeless Women' in *Household Words*, V11/161, 23 April 1853, p.169, *Dickens Journals On-line* 169. <<http://www.djo-org.co.uk/indexes/journals/household-words.html>> [accessed 27 Jan 2018].

<sup>44</sup> Ellis, p.6.

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