

# *The Angel in the House* and Fallen Women: Assigning Women their Places in Victorian Society

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*This article juxtaposes Coventry Patmore's poem 'The Angel in the House' and William Holman Hunt's painting 'The Awakening Conscience', examining how they contributed to and illustrate the labelling of women in 19<sup>th</sup> century society as a means of regaining control over them in a changing society. The meaning of the terms Angel in the House and Fallen Woman will be analysed within their historical context, arguing that women in both categories had perhaps more in common than one would assume. I will conclude that neither the idea of the domestic angel, nor that of the ostracised fallen women could have existed in such an extreme form without their respective counterpart and that only the emergence of a third category, namely the New Woman, allowed women to slowly gain their independence.*

When we think about women in Victorian England, certain terms immediately spring to mind: Perhaps best known today is the term *The New Woman*, an elusive label that embodies everything vaguely connected to female emancipation and suffrage. *The Fallen Woman* is another term, which is somewhat vague in that it encompasses several conditions in which a Victorian woman could find herself, but which formed a very significant, if negative part of Victorian social life. Lastly there is the term of *The Angel in the House*, which itself may not be as well known today as the previous two, but which represents the perfect housewife, the domestic goddess of the middle class that we nowadays strongly associate with the 19<sup>th</sup> century and that in some ways haunts us to this day. These terms, or labels, as well as the ideas behind them were an important part of Victorian life and were not just reflected but also actively propagated in the arts and literature of the time. Two such examples are the painting *The Awakening Conscience* by William Holman Hunt, which depicts the situation of and indirectly also certain attitudes towards a fallen woman, and the poem *The Angel in the House* by Coventry Patmore, the title of which actually coined the aforementioned term for the Victorian middle class housewife. With the help of these two examples, this article will discuss the meaning and significance of the labels *Fallen Woman* and *Angel in the House*, and will explore the interconnections between these seemingly opposing terms.

Where did this need for labelling, for categorizing and stereotyping women arise from in the 19<sup>th</sup> century? Of course, it was not an entirely new phenomenon. Arguably, the first two female stereotypes in Western Christian cultures were Mary and Eve. The holy Virgin, pure and good, willing to sacrifice and to be made an instrument of God versus the temptress, herself seduced by the Devil, carnal in her sinfulness, who defies the rules laid down to her and thereby causes not just her own fall but the fall of man, the expulsion from Paradise. These two biblical women represent a kind of female duality, the two core qualities that have

traditionally been assigned to women.<sup>1</sup> However, this contrast between Mary and Eve is also a relatively abstract concept, which, although it informed most ideas about femininity, probably would not have had a very great bearing on every day life for most women. But in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, particularly in the second half, things started to change dramatically. Enough has been written about the effect of industrialization and urbanisation on society and the subsequent rise of a new middle class for it not to be necessary to be elaborated on in great detail. What is clear is that society was in upheaval and certain norms and traditions, roles within society, expectations and duties had to be redefined or confirmed. Therefore creating categories and propagating certain stereotypes was a way of reacting to all of these new developments and also, feminists would argue, a way for men to try and regain control over women, who suddenly challenged their assigned roles and tried to break free of the restrictions that society imposed on them.<sup>2</sup> It certainly is no coincidence that the moment the ‘new women’ started to demand their independence, the glorification of the housewife, of the angle in the house, took hold of society with unprecedented vigour. As Suzanne Cooper points out, on top of the issue of regaining control, the attempt to limit women to certain roles was part of the much larger Victorian obsession with respectability and its definition.<sup>3</sup> To be respectable meant everything as a member of the Victorian middle class and those who had lost their respectability were shunned, such as fallen women, who were ostracised from society and left with few other options but to either go to the workhouse or work as prostitutes. The 19<sup>th</sup> century the term ‘prostitute’, however, encompassed not just street whores, but everything from unmarried women who were in relationships with men, unmarried mothers, unfaithful wives and mistresses to artists’ models and certain kinds of actresses.<sup>4</sup> Consequently it is difficult to know exactly how many prostitutes in the modern sense really did work in London, since records of the time do not specify what ‘kind’ of prostitutes were taken into account for the projections, nevertheless, there are estimates that around 1870-80 up to 80,000 prostitutes worked in London, which at that time had a population of 3 million. In any case this was a new peak of the dichotomy of the two qualities of women: the good and chaste, and the sinful but sensual. It is therefore hardly surprising, that in art as well as literature of the time both ‘types’ of women featured very heavily.

*The Angel in the House* is a long, semi-autobiographical narrative poem, written by Coventry Patmore and first published in 1854. It was inspired by Patmore’s love for his wife Emily and tells the tale of how the narrator met, courted and married the love of his life, with a second volume continuing the tale ten years into the marriage. When the poem was first published, reviews were disastrous and even today it is regarded more as a valuable piece of evidence of social history than as a great piece of literature.<sup>5</sup> What the poem does very successfully is describe in great detail the many wonderful qualities that make Honoria, the female

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<sup>1</sup> M. Luxemburg, *Faith and Gender: From Eve the Temptress to Subversive Angel, the flowering of Feminism* (14 July 2004) < <http://www.brli.org/events-proceedings/proceedings/24966> > [19 Feb. 2016].

<sup>2</sup> Luxemburg, *Faith and Gender*

<sup>3</sup> S. Cooper, *The Victorian Woman* (London, 2011), p. 90.

<sup>4</sup> G. Eley, *The Ruined Maid: Modes and Manners of Victorian Women* (Royston, 1970), p. 9.

<sup>5</sup> I. Anstruther, *Coventry Patmore’s Angel: a study of Coventry Patmore, his wife Emily and The Angel in the House* (London, 1992), p. 76.

protagonist, a perfect bride and wife. She is modest, chaste and innocent, she unconditionally loves and supports her husband, submits to him completely and is a caring mother to her children.

The following excerpt is only one example of that:

*Man must be pleased; but him to please  
Is woman's pleasure; down the gulf  
Of his condoled necessities  
She casts her best, she flings herself.  
...  
And whilst his love has any life,  
Or any eye to see her charms,  
At any time, she's still his wife,  
Dearly devoted to his arms;  
She loves with love that cannot tire;  
And when, ah woe, she loves alone,  
Through passionate duty love springs higher,  
As grass grows taller round a stone.<sup>6</sup>*

The poem puts the ideal wife on a pedestal, a not quite earthly being that knows no selfishness or anger, always good, always anxious to help the husband to be his best self. To a modern reader the poem appears very far removed from any conceivable reality, it seems to fetishize a type of woman that could not possibly exist in the real world. And yet despite its original failure, the poem did eventually strike a cord with the British public, it gained great popularity and its title became synonymous with the ideal Victorian housewife. One of the first people to admire and publicly praise the poem was John Ruskin. In November 1854 Ruskin wrote to Patmore: 'I cannot tell you how much I admire your book. I had no idea you had power of this high kind. I think it will at all events it ought to become one of the most popular books in the language — and blessedly popular, doing good wherever read'.<sup>7</sup> Ten years later Ruskin himself propagated very similar views in his lecture *Of Queen's Gardens*, in which he also praised Patmore's work again.<sup>8</sup> Both Patmore and Ruskin firmly believed that a woman's place was at home caring for her family and looking after the household, while her husband was out working, earning money and protecting the family. It had become a symbol of a respectable status, when the women (both wife and daughters) did not need to go out and work but could stay at home and hone skills that became a lady such as painting, singing and fine needlework.<sup>9</sup> It was also a way of trying to protect their innocence by keeping them away from any potential bad influences and temptations. Sex was not a topic that was openly discussed, many girls did indeed live in total ignorance until the day of

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<sup>6</sup> C. Patmore, *The Angel in the House*, CANTO IX, Sahara, PRELUDES, I, The Wife's Tragedy <<http://dbooks.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/books/PDFs/590767707.pdf>> [19 Feb. 2016].

<sup>7</sup> S. Eron (ed.), *Letters from Carlyle, Ruskin, and Tennyson on The Angel in the House* (2004). <<http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/patmore/eron9.html>> [26 Feb. 2016].

<sup>8</sup> J. Ruskin, *Sesame and Lilies. Lecture II. Lilies: Of Queens' Gardens* <<http://www.bartleby.com/28/7.html>> [26 Feb. 2016].

<sup>9</sup> Cooper, *The Victorian Woman*, p. 12.

their wedding and sex was not regarded as something that ladies should enjoy. Although its origins are somewhat unclear, Lady Hillingdon has become famous for her quote: ‘When I hear his steps outside my door I lie down on my bed, open my legs and think of England’.<sup>10</sup> Marital sex was a duty, which at least in theory served the sole purpose of procreation, not something to be indulged in for pleasure. The more chaste and innocent a young woman and even a wife was, the more she lived up to the ideal that is also described in *The Angel in the House*. It is the paradox of Victorian times that society was at the same time prudish in an unprecedented way but at the same time obsessed with sex and its consequences. While chastity was expected and idealised as a female virtue, pre- and extramarital sex was a reality, even if one did not talk about it in polite society. Studies of mid-Victorian parish registers comparing dates of marriages and baptisms have even shown, that up to half of the brides were pregnant, when they got married.<sup>11</sup> Whether these results uncover Victorian hypocrisy or whether they show that ignorance about the matter worsened rather than improved the situation for young girls, it is certainly clear that no matter their upbringing and sheltered lives, young girls could not always be protected from being seduced and this is made obvious in Hunt’s *The Awakening Conscience* (fig. 1).

Coventry Patmore’s house, the family haven of love that his own angel Emily had created, was also the meeting place of many aspiring writers and painters and it was here that he became associated with the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood.<sup>12</sup> *The Awakening Conscience* was painted by one of the founding members and a friend of Patmore, William Holman Hunt, in 1853, one year before *The Angel of the House* was published. At first glance the painting could almost be a depiction of such marital bliss as Patmore describes it, with a husband and his wife sharing an intimate moment, singing together in their pretty home. It does not depict a street whore or a desperate woman, who has already been outcast, but a young woman, who one can easily imagine to have come from a respectable background and to have been very innocent and pure once. However, she has been seduced by the man next to her and at this very moment realizes the awful mistake she has made. While Patmore’s poem is very straightforward in the way it delivers its message, Hunt’s painting is much less easy to decipher. It is a puzzle that only reveals the whole story if one carefully examines all the little details and clues that have been included in the picture.

For example upon close examination one can see that the song they have been singing is Thomas Moore’s ballad *Oft in the Stilly Night*, which has been interpreted as a trigger that brings back to the woman memories of her innocent childhood and makes her reflect on her situation.<sup>13</sup> The cat toying with the bird mirrors the situation the woman finds herself in with her lover and John Ruskin vividly draws a picture of her future when he describes how ‘the

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<sup>10</sup> <<http://www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/close-your-eyes-and-think-of-england.html>> [20 Feb. 2016].

<sup>11</sup> Cooper, *The Victorian Woman*, p. 30.

<sup>12</sup> Anstruther, *Coventry Patmore’s Angel*, p. 6.

<sup>13</sup>J. O’Connell, ‘Of Music, Magdalenes, and Metanoia in *The Awakening Conscience*’, *Journal of Musicological Research*, 24 (2005), p. 126 ff.

<[http://www.academia.edu/206788/Of\\_Music\\_Magdalenes\\_and\\_Metanoia\\_in\\_The\\_Awakening\\_Conscience\\_](http://www.academia.edu/206788/Of_Music_Magdalenes_and_Metanoia_in_The_Awakening_Conscience_)> [3 Mar. 2016].

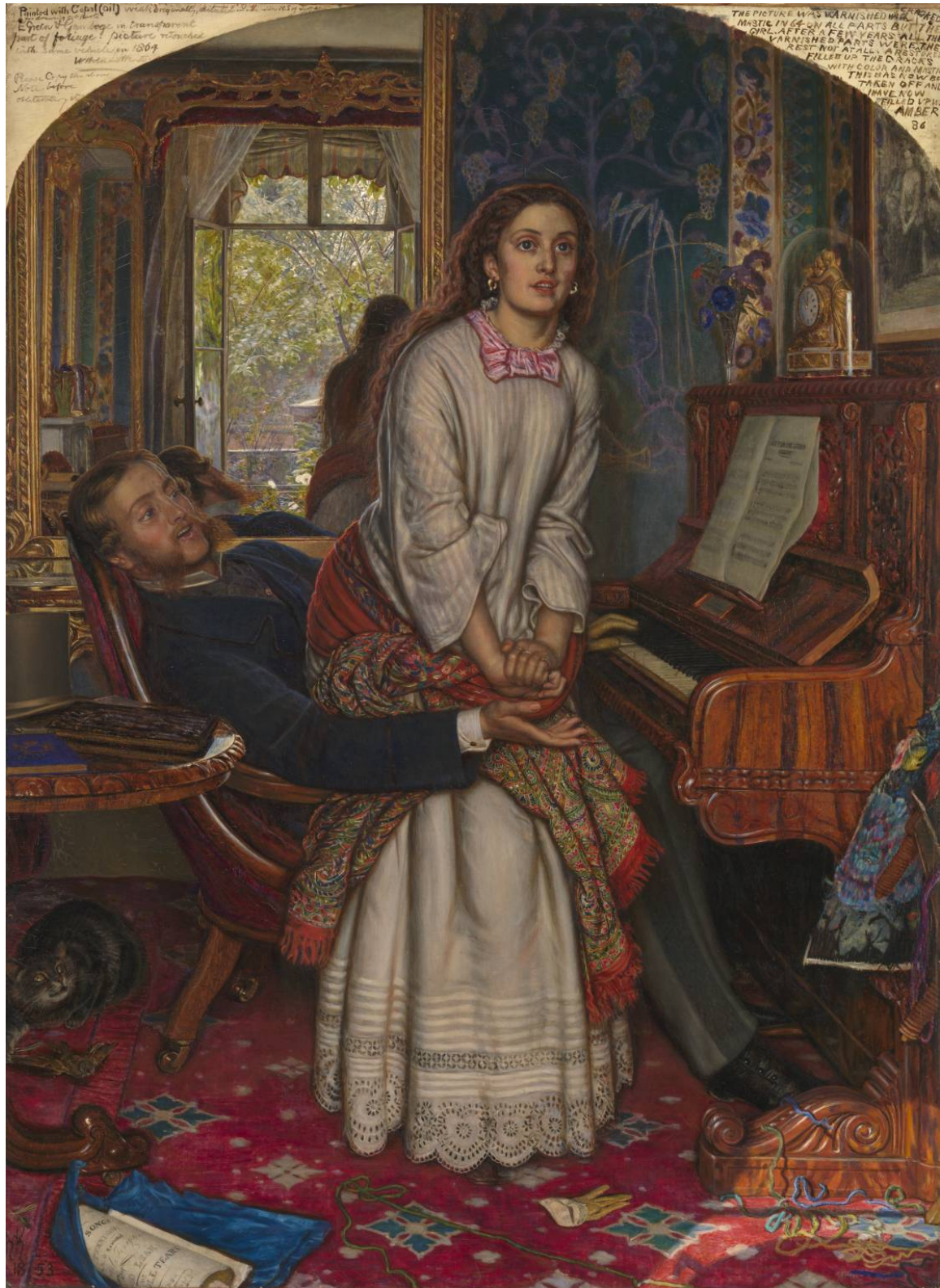


Figure 1. William Holman Hunt, *The Awakening Conscience*, 1853, oil on canvas, 76.2cm x 55.9cm, Tate Britain, London. Image courtesy of the Tate.

very hem of the poor girl's dress, at which the painter has laboured so closely, thread by thread has a story in it if we think how soon its pure whiteness may be soiled with dust and rain, the outcast feet failing in the street'.<sup>14</sup> And yet the painting still offers a glimmer of hope, a way out for this misguided young woman, who has come to her senses and judging by the look on her face is full of repentance. Nevertheless, a woman once fallen was an outcast of Victorian society. While it was generally accepted that men had sex before they got married and that married men might frequent prostitutes every now and then, women were taught that there was no greater sin than to be with a man who was not their husband and if they were exposed their reputation was ruined. They were immediately put into the category of a fallen woman and to redeem themselves after that was nearly impossible. A little book from 1791 has the expressive title 'Advice to unmarried women: to recover and reclaim the fallen; and to prevent the fall of others, into the snares and consequences of seduction'.<sup>15</sup> While it actually offers some sympathy to the women who were genuinely misled by a man and suggests rigorous exercises of repentance as a way to redeem themselves, the author also makes it very clear, that fallen women will find it very hard to ever be accepted even for a maid's position in any respectable household and are probably looking at very bleak prospects indeed. *The Awakening Conscience* depicts a woman exactly in the situation that little advice book addresses, in that it shows a young woman, who has been seduced, but has seen the error of her ways and appears to be seeking redemption. But like the advice book the picture leaves no doubt that she has thrown away her life and even though she may be forgiven in the Afterlife if she truly repents, it is not likely that she will ever be able to fully redeem herself in this world.

Having discussed both *The Angel in the House* and *The Awakening Conscience* within their historical context, it becomes clear that there was almost no way for middle class women of escaping these labels, since they either complied to social expectations and became some sort of chaste, obedient domestic angel or they almost certainly fell within the category of a fallen woman. Women who dared to rebel against this status quo even risked being put into asylums for being 'mentally unstable'.<sup>16</sup> Thereby they were firmly assigned their places in society, places, which appear to have nothing in common. However, when we consider the two examples discussed here, we can come to the conclusion that there are several things that connect their subjects beyond the fact that their creators moved within the same circle of friends. We have seen before, that at first glance, Hunt's painting can look like a normal domestic scene and in a way all that is lacking in order for it to be one is a wedding ring on the woman's finger. But furthermore, what unites the woman in the picture with Honoria

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<sup>14</sup> J. Tambling, 'Late Style: Approaching Madness In Praeterita', *English*, 58, 221, (2009), p. 127 <<http://ezproxy-prd.bodleian.ox.ac.uk:3245/content/58/221/116.full.pdf+html>> [27 Feb. 2016].

<sup>15</sup> *Advice to unmarried women: to recover and reclaim the fallen; and to prevent the fall of others, into the snares and consequences of seduction* (London, 1791) <[http://ezproxy-prd.bodleian.ox.ac.uk:2119/ecco/retrieve.do?sort=Author&inPS=true&prodId=ECCO&userGroupName=oxford&tabID=T001&bookId=0075600300&resultListType=RESULT\\_LIST&searchId=R1&searchType=AdvancedSearchForm&contentSet=ECCOArticles&showLOI=&docId=CW3317725982&docLevel=FASCIMILE&workId=CW117725982&relevancePageBatch=CW117725982&retrieveFormat=MULTIPAGE\\_DOCUMENT&callistoContentSet=ECLL&docPage=article&hilite=y](http://ezproxy-prd.bodleian.ox.ac.uk:2119/ecco/retrieve.do?sort=Author&inPS=true&prodId=ECCO&userGroupName=oxford&tabID=T001&bookId=0075600300&resultListType=RESULT_LIST&searchId=R1&searchType=AdvancedSearchForm&contentSet=ECCOArticles&showLOI=&docId=CW3317725982&docLevel=FASCIMILE&workId=CW117725982&relevancePageBatch=CW117725982&retrieveFormat=MULTIPAGE_DOCUMENT&callistoContentSet=ECLL&docPage=article&hilite=y)> [25 Feb. 2016].

<sup>16</sup> Luxemburg, *Faith and Gender*.

and every other married woman is that neither of them are truly free. A wife may have been respectable and if all went well also safe, but until reforms, such as the Married Women's Property Act of 1870, everything a woman owned belonged to her husband and she was therefore completely at his mercy. If the marriage did not work out it was nearly impossible for a woman to get a divorce and to keep any money. A mistress on the other hand remained more independent financially, but socially she had no safety net and was, as the painting shows through little details such as the clock under the bell cover, a kept woman in more than the figurative sense. Finally, as their presentation in both the poem and the painting illustrate, both wife and mistress are objects of male desire existing only to please, the wife, if she adheres to the ideal, as a status symbol, the mistress to provide the things that a marriage with such a saintly figure is probably lacking, each in a way creating a greater demand for the other. In fact one can say, that it would have been impossible for one to exist without the other. In other words, in order for the categories to be most effective, women needed to be pushed to the extreme ends of the spectrum- the domestic angels needed to be glorified in order for the transgressions of the fallen women to appear more shameful, so the differences between them would appear insurmountable. While the New Woman, initially served as much as a counter part to the Angel in the House, eventually this new category provided a way out of this confining opposition and allowed women to slowly redefine who they wanted to be. Nevertheless, the tendency to put labels on women continued together with certain expectations of women's roles in society and one could rightfully ask, whether we have really come very far, when labels like stay-at-home-mum, working mum or career woman are still being used as defining descriptions for women.

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#### LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure 1. William Holman Hunt, *The Awakening Conscience*, 1853, oil on canvas, 76.2cm x 55.9cm, Tate Britain, London. Image courtesy of the Tate.