

## WOMEN WRITERS OF 19<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY BRITAIN

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*Then Lady Reason.....said, "Get up, daughter! Without waiting any longer, let us go to the Field of Letters. There the City of Ladies will be founded on a flat and fertile plain, where all fruits and freshwater rivers are found and where the earth abounds in all good things. Take the pick of your understanding and dig and clear out a great ditch wherever you see the marks of my ruler, and I will help you carry away the earth on my own shoulders."*

Christine de Pizan

### ABSTRACT

The theme of this paper are the nineteenth century woman authors in the United Kingdom and their writing. A brief overview of the woman writers during the whole century will be given. The most important authors will be represented. The paper will also explore the economic, social, political and other circumstances that determined their writing and try to represent their lives, their struggles, their writing and the styles they used.

**Key words:** Women, 19<sup>th</sup> ct, United Kingdom, writers

### INTRODUCTION

The aim of this essay is to take a closer look at selected British Victorian women writers of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and at the society that influenced/shaped/restricted their writing. It is impossible to give the exact number of women writers that published then because there were so many of them. Some are known worldwide, some only to the experts in the field of literary studies, and for many other writers any records of their life and their works simply did not survive. The rise of the female novelist began in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, but it was not until the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century that their writings emerged on the literary market. For Elaine Showalter, the nineteenth century was the Age of the Female Novelist (Showalter, 1977, pp. 3-4). She believes that with appearance of Jane Austen, Charlotte Brönte, and George Eliot, the question of women's aptitude for fiction had been answered (Showalter, 1977, pp.3-4). Situation for women writers was very difficult. With almost no formal educational background and little job opportunities, they had no other choice but to immerse themselves in writing novels as their way to escape from the dominant patriarchal society. Importantly, in doing so, some of them would paradoxically appropriate

another masculine genre (Showalter, 1977, pp.3-4). It has to be taken into consideration that writing, and especially the novel genre, was for many of them the only way to comment critically on some of the social ills, including women's oppression. They regarded the novel as a powerful tool to raise awareness about restrictions that affected women in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Naturally, the messages that they wanted to convey were carried out under a veil of different literary devices. Their resistance would be manifested on the level of plot, characterization or style. Men held almost all the positions concerned with the writing, they were novelists, editors, publishers and in some aspect they felt threatened by the entrance of women in the field of literature. As Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar point out, "to many late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century men, women seemed to be agents of an alien world that evoked anger and anguish, while to women in those years men appeared as aggrieved defenders of an indefensible order. Thus both male and female writers increasingly represented women's unprecedented invasion of the public sphere as a battle of the sexes, a battle over a zone that could only be defined as a no man's land" (Gilbert, & Gubar, 1988, p. 4).

### THE VICTORIAN PERIOD

The Victorian period is traditionally divided into three phases: "»Early Victorian« culture, extending roughly to 1850. Throughout this time of agitation and reform, fear of social unrest and economic instability appeared in public discourse and cultural products...Between 1850 and the 1870s, »high« or »mid-Victorian« culture is the time of economic success and intellectual achievements, particularly those linked to industry, consolidated the power and status of the bourgeoisie... The »late Victorian« period inherited this contradictory mix of cultural assurance and self-doubt, but reimagined it as a battle between the outmoded values of the Victorian past and the rebellious, liberating possibilities of a more modern outlook" (Moran, 2006, pp.2-3).

It is impossible to go into details about each of the above signaled phases, because this paper would certainly exceed the required space limit. Thus, only a brief overview of some of the major topics that are important for the whole Victorian period will be represented.

#### **Economy**

Britain holds the title of "the first industrial nation". The Victorian period saw the rise of the middle class. New scientific discoveries and new technologies had a huge impact on all aspects of life. The British nation at the time was thriving on private businesses. The middle class was getting richer mostly through manufacturing enterprises and, although it can be talked about the emergence of a national market, it was not unified and its biggest problem was the regional diversity. Factories were built in every city, thousands of people left their villages and tried their luck in the big cities, which, in turn, started to become overcrowded and polluted. The development of the banking system spread across the country in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Nobility was banished to the margins of society as a whole

new social class of people started to predominate. Simultaneously, some fundamental changes were introduced to the structure of the British business. If earlier there had been numerous family-owned businesses, now there was a strong sense that the living should be earned only by male members of a household, while the domain of raising children and taking care of the house was left to women.

### Science

Indisputably, the 19<sup>th</sup> century was profoundly marked by one ground-breaking book, namely, Charles Darwin's *The Origin of Species*. Darwin's discovery not only threatened some of the traditional Christian values, but also brought fear and anguish to many. Influenced by the book, people started to question their religious beliefs and the truths that they had held sacred. Many of them turned to alternative sciences like phrenology and mesmerism. Science had a profound influence on literature because the plots of novels at the time began to reflect the determinism of Darwinian universe. Despite these new discoveries, the belief that women are inferior and subordinated to men remained unquestioned. There were very few women in the field of science, since they had no access to formal education and they were only allowed to listen to public speeches. Yet, together with scientific advancement, a lot of field work was needed. If they wanted to write something about geology, about nature, about traveling it was considered too exhausting and unappropriate for women to do it. It was believed that they could not climb the mountains, travel through deserts and dissect animals. It was just not done by a lady. Mary Somerville is one of the few who was famous for her work in mathematical and physical science: she was the author of the first scientific article penned by a woman for the Royal Society of London.

### Religion

Religion was a very turbulent issue during the 19th century. Many people either lost their faith because of scientific discoveries, they converted from one religion to another, or they started to find solace in the Eastern studies and read Madame Blavatsky's books or joined the Theosophical society. Still, for women religion was very important because it made a strong emphasis on their charity work. Women were expected to embody Christian virtues of love, purity, self-abnegation, and self-sacrifice, and to instill a Christian atmosphere at home. Religion strongly reinforced the fears of vanity and ambition that beset women who aspired to write. But it also (many Victorians believed) enhanced the status of women by valorizing feminine qualities for which neither classical culture nor the world of business and power had any place. It lent its imposing authority to the doctrine of separate spheres that restricted women's access to the world, but it also gave them a kind of moral authority, limited but real, that writers found particularly useful" (Mermin, 1993, p. 108).

Church made it possible for women to leave the house and do some work outside of it. And it also gave their writing a sense of purpose that nobody could deny. Some of the women writers who dealt with the problem of religion in their novels are Charlotte Elizabeth, Georgiana Fullerton, Adelaide Procter and Mary Howitt, all of whom converted to Roman Catholicism. Harriet Martineau, George Eliot, and

Frances Power Cobbe, like Linton, moved toward free thought or agnosticism. Annie Besant traveled spiritually from the Church of England, through free thought, to the wilder shores of Theosophy. Those who stuck to the faith they had been given upon their birth were likely to be near the extremes too: Christina Rossetti and Charlotte M. Yonge as high Anglicans, Mrs Gaskell as a Unitarian (Mermin, 1993, p.112).

### **Education**

Education for women was one of their most desirable goals. It was believed that women were not able to learn in the way men did, that their brain was smaller than men's and that it would do damage to their health if they spent long hours studying. Some of them, if they were fortunate enough, were homeschooled, but many of them had no formal education at all. The majority of them had to watch as their brothers went to established schools, universities or spent time with a private tutor. They had to educate themselves with the books from the house library if there were any, but some of them were lucky because their families allowed them to study with their brother's tutor. Some of them went to schools for girls that only offered to teach them some "accomplishments" like music, drawing. During this period there were many fervent debates about women's education and many books were written about this topic. A surge of conduct book even became a genre and the most famous were Sarah Ellis's *Exhortations to the Women, Wives, Mothers, and Daughters of England*, Elizabeth Sewell's *Principles of Education* and Charlotte Yonge's *Womankind*. But things started to change in the second half of the 19th century. "In the 1860s women were allowed to take examinations given by the University of London, and in 1869 the first university college for women and the first lectures for women began at Cambridge. These developments gradually altered the shape of the arguments about woman's abilities, but they came too late to benefit the major Victorian writers" (Mermin, 1993, p. 50)

### **Work**

Even if they coveted a job, women at the time had few employment opportunities. Most of them could only choose between the position of a governess or a teacher. But it was a paradoxical situation because although it was deemed a decent way of earning a living, at the same time it was considered as degrading because they were selling their knowledge, which many compared to a sort of prostitution which was also one of the most frequent ways that women from the poorest areas earned their money.

The stigma of women earning was changed with the emergence of women's writing. Preoccupation with writing did not seem very degrading for women. It could be done without anybody seeing it and it required little money. Women could enter the literary market and become journalists, editors and especially editors of journals for women and children: Geraldine Jewsbury was an editor, Mary Howitt's diverse, wide-ranging literary career included *Howitt's Journal*, a joint venture with her husband, and Eliza Cook, a poet, published *Eliza Cook's Journal* from 1849 to 1854 (Mermin, 1993, p.44).

Many women found other ways to fulfill their spare time. Between the 1850s and 1860s, first women's movements came to become stronger and grow in popularity.

One of their postulates was to reform the laws concerning divorce, women's property, education. They formed offices, subsidiaries, they started their own periodicals. They celebrated Florence Nightingale, Elizabeth Fry, Mary Carpenter, Louisa Twining, Mary Somerville and even Queen Victoria, seeing in them examples to follow.

### NOVEL WRITING

The immense success of the novel in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was mainly due to the fact that "The novel was the vehicle best equipped to present a picture of life lived in a given society against a stable background of social and moral values by people who were recognizably like the people encountered by readers, and this was the kind of picture of life the middle-class reader wanted to read about" (Daiches, 1960, p. 1049).

We can start talking about women novelists path in the 19<sup>th</sup> century by first looking at E. Showalter's three phases. The first phase assumes an *imitation* of the prevailing modes of the dominant tradition and an *internalization* of both its standards of art and its views on social roles (as the period from the appearance of the male pseudonym in the 1840s to the death of George Eliot in 1880 -the most famous authors were the Brontës, Mrs. Gaskell, E.B. Browning, H. Martineau and George Eliot.) The second phase is the phase of *protest* against these standards and values, as well as the advocacy of minority rights and values, including a demand for autonomy (1880 to 1920 the time when Charlotte Yonge, D.M. Craik, M. Oliphant, and E.L. Linton wrote) Finally, in the third phase of *self-discovery*, a turning inward freed from some of the dependency of opposition, a search for identity (as 1920 to the present). An appropriate terminology for women writers is to call these stages, *Feminine*, *Feminist*, and *Female* (Showalter, 1977, p. 13).

Many turned to novel writing because it did not require any knowledge of classic texts and poetry on the part of the writer. New technologies allowed for faster, more efficient printing, which, in turn, meant that a large number of books could be sold and women for the first time could make money as writers. The foundation of circulating library was a phenomenon in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Books were borrowed and sent into all parts of the country, so novels appeared in almost every household. Unfortunately, to date the efforts of literary scholars have mostly been on a few (G. Eliot, J. Austen, the Brontë sisters), while others have been left out from anthologies, theories, textbooks, researches. One of the main reasons why the latter have been underrepresented or neglected in the critical discourse was the perpetuation of stereotypes of femininity and the fact that they only wrote about domestic life. Another reason was that it was believed that women, contrary to men, only wrote popular literature. The characters that most women novelists used were very diverse, as can be seen from the genres in which they wrote. Interestingly, they did not give them the freedom that some of the authors enjoyed. The worlds they put their heroines in were restricted by ideology and customs. At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, most of them used the figure of a woman artist as the heroine for their novels and an invader of the masculine world.

There were different themes that dominated women's writing. It would be impossible to discuss them all at length, but the most common ones:

- The governess was a common figure of nineteenth-century fiction and there were so many novels with this topic that they could be considered as a specific genre. One of the themes tackled by Victorian female writers was the social position of the governess in the families, the loss of their social status and their struggle. Most of the authors wrote based on their personal experience. Unfortunately, not many of them are popular today, suffice it to mention Barbara Hofland's *Ellen, the Teacher* (1814), Rachel M'Crindell's *The English Governess: A Tale of Real Life* (1844) and Elizabeth Sewell's *Amy Herbert* (1844), who also wrote advice books on female education. (Ayers, 2003, p. 29);
- Little is known about the female detective novel. It started with Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794). The antecedents of the woman detective appear, for instance, in writers as diverse as Jane Austen (*Northanger Abbey*, 1818), Hoffnung (*Mademoiselle de Scudery*, 1820), and James Hogg (*The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner*, 1824) (Ayers, 2003, p. 58);
- "Sentimentalist novels tried to effect change by influencing the hearts and the feelings of their readers, exploiting the »feminine« cultural value of feeling for political purposes" (Ayers, 2003, p. 69). The most famous author of this genre was Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna, but others are mostly forgotten because they based their novels on conventions;
- In religious writing, novelists accepted the subordination of women because it was read as God's will. They wrote to inspire and preach to others. They believed that woman's life could get no meaning from matrimony, so they portrayed lives that were not shown in mainstream fiction, like Charlotte M. Yonge's heroines-Ethel May in *The Daisy Chain*, Geraldine Underwood in *The Pillars of the House*, where they do not marry, but they live happily nonetheless.
- "For the romantic and sensation novelists for whom writing was a wordly career, they shocked and titillated readers while nominally adhering to conventional morality, and who violated feminine decorum with impunity in their behaviour as well as their books" (Mermin, 1993, p. 82). The main representatives of the sensation novel, which had its heyday during the 1860s and 1870s, were Charlotte Yonge, Mary Elizabeth Braddon, Mrs. Henry Wood. Writings of many novelists could be placed between romantics and sensationalist and they include Frances Trollope, Eliza Lynn Linton, Felicia Skene, Anne Thackeray Ritchie.
- Divorce novels, another popular genre at the time, appeared only in the second half of the century. Women had no rights after marriage because they were considered to be their husband's property and if the marriage ended up in separation or divorce, they would have no legal protection. Although after 1880 divorced literary characters became very common, the introduction of such characters into the conventional plot in the middle of the century showed a huge improvement in the mindset of novelists. Anne Humphreys in her research of the middle century divorce novel recognized

two kinds of plot: the Caroline Norton plot (how to escape from a bad marriage) and the Jane Eyre plot (is it allowed to make a second marriage?). The problem with all these novels was how to present the heroine as innocent and deserving love. Humphreys distinguishes four types of solution: in the first one, the unsatisfactory partner dies, as in *Jane Eyre* and *Middlemarch*; in the second one, the abused partner, usually the wife, dies after years of mistreatment, like in Caroline Norton's *Stuart of Dunleith*. The third solution heralds impending separation or divorce. The fourth resolution is bigamy either attempted or achieved. *Jane Eyre* (Humphreys, 1999, p.45).

- Children's literature was very popular in this period and its representatives were Maria Louisa Molesworth, Julia Horatia Ewing, Frances Browne, Jean Ingelow- these authors offer phantasies of matriarchy and the story usually begins when children accidentally enter this area and they are delighted to see that it is very different from the real world (Chapman, 1999, p.61).
- The themes of New Woman's writing were the experiences of women who wished to enter the institutions of literature. They opposed the traditional roles of women and they sought to improve their social conditions. Mona Caird, Emma Brooke, Sarah Grand, Olive Schreiner are the most famous ones.

The success of women's literature coincided with a strong opposition on the part of men writers. They did not appreciate that women exhibited unwomanly force in their works, but again there is a paradox because male writers criticized women writers when they displayed woman weakness in the novels (delicate women's health...). They mocked them for their knowledge and they mocked them if they did not know enough. Surprisingly, it was not only men who welcomed the changes with great skepticism. There were many anti-feminists who believed that the only place for women was their home. The most famous amongst them were Charlotte M. Yonge, Eliza Lynn Linton, Mary (Mrs. Humphry) Ward, Margaret Oliphant.

## CONCLUSION

The society in which women authors in the 19<sup>th</sup> century lived was in a constant flux. New towns were emerging, people moved from the country to the cities looking for new jobs; factories and networks of railways were building all around the country. The immense British Empire was expanding because of new colonies. Religion was questioned because of the new discoveries in science and Darwinian thesis.

Education was in the men's area but schools started to open for girls who previously had only access to books through circulating library or maybe library in their own homes. Although they were educated the job market for them was almost nonexistent (unless they wanted to work in a factory). The only other options they had was either to be a governess or a writer. But the 19<sup>th</sup> century literary world, was dominated by men. Before the Victorian period, woman's roles in art were very different. She was either men's muse, his inspiration, or she helped in his composing but only a few women dared to write. The first great literary works by Victorian women were Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* in prose fiction, Barrett Browning's *Sonnets from the Portuguese*

and *Aurora Leigh* in verse. Upon the publication of their works, first era for women writers was born. Writing was considered unworthy of women, and only if she had a good reason for it (if she was the sole breadwinner in the family) it wasn't frowned upon. They wrote about various topics, mostly in the form of a three decker novel and in different genres like the governess, detective, sentimental, religious, divorce, children's literature, New Woman etc. The courage that took women novelists to write, to publish, to publicly admit the authorship of their works was something that today most of women cannot imagine. Though many of them today are judged according to the stance they took on the issue of womanhood, it would be unjust to put them only into categories of radicals or conservatives (take into consideration that what we consider conservative for today's point of view was radical in their's) Their writing, their struggle, their courage, their opposition opened doors for new generations of women writers.

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