Literary Representations
of the Victorian Middle-Class Domesticity

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Abstract

The nineteenth century stands out for its profound progress in all domains. It caused great changes within the Victorian society, which is known nowadays as abiding by a list of moral values. The middle-class representatives were striving to achieve the established standards more than anyone else, even if they did not manage to do that completely. Within this broader context, realist writers tried to instruct readers by means of the novels that depicted the respective society. Realist fiction was considered to have the potential of representing things and events in one-to-one correspondence with the real-world. However, this assumption came to be questioned, even severely criticized, because fiction, by definition, cannot be looked upon as a singular, objective creation, but as one possible version of reality, filtered through the writer's subjectivity.

In this respect, the present article makes a comparison between non-literary works (sociological and historical studies) and realist novels in order to show how distant the latter are from the former and to prove that writers used the novel as a tool in their attempts at shaping social facts, not at turning fiction into a mirror-image of the real-world. For this purpose, it explains the terms "middle class" and "domesticity", describes the characteristics of middle-class Victorians and analyses the family life of this social group from ideological, historical and literary points of view.

Keywords: Victorian middle-class domesticity; family; literary representation

During the nineteenth century, Victorian society experienced a significant change on account of the industrialization and urbanization that brought prosperity to the English. The emergence of new technologies, scientific discoveries and the improvement of education were also factors that contributed to this evolution. The English historian Thomas Arnold acknowledges that the development was so accelerated that "the life of three hundred years" seemed possible to live "in thirty" (1845: 179). Everything witnessed a prodigious start simultaneously (Arnold 1845: 179-180). As a result, all social classes identifiable at that point in time encountered various problems which

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transformed them to such an extent, that people living at the end of the century were totally different from those living at its beginning. The same happened to literary production, because "these rapid and sometimes dramatic developments in nineteenth-century social, economic and intellectual life provided writers with new themes and challenges", which was immediately noticeable when "briefly comparing the fictional worlds of [the] […] novels of the period" (Guy and Small 2011: 13).

In this respect, it is worth noting that the realist novel was acknowledged as the dominant literary form in the nineteenth-century Britain (Guy and Small 2011: 10). For a long time, it was "judged according to how faithfully it corresponds to things and events in the real-world" (Moris 2003: 5). Nowadays, this assumption is contradicted, for the simple reason that every literary work is subjective, being shaped in agreement with the author's intentions and individuality. That said, the verbal representations are "distinct from the actuality they convey" (Ibidem). Therefore, this demarche is intended to compare the actual Victorian society with its literary representations, so as to point out how far they are one from the other. However, in order to achieve the main goal of the study, only the Victorian middle-class will be had in view. Why this social group in particular? Because "middle-class ideals set standards for the nation", as historian Asa Briggs affirms (1990: 28). It was an example for everyone: "As the working classes were looking up, some, at least, of the upper classes were looking down" (Ibidem).

To start with, two related terms will be defined: middle class and domesticity. The latter can be explained only by mentioning and comparing it to its synonyms (home and family life). In a larger sense, according to Monica Cohen, domesticity "figures as a systematized body of concepts about human life and culture" (1998: 10). The historian John Tosh also gives a general definition of the term under focus here, affirming that it "offers a moral view of the world" (1999: 27). He adds that domesticity is concerned with the "quality of relationship between family members" (Ibidem). However, Gary Kelly restricts the meaning of this word by mentioning that it "included the idea of the home as a refugee from a hostile and competitive social world... the separation of the home from place of work" (1992: 12-13). This was exactly the way Victorian society, the middle classes in particular, perceived family life. The notion of middle class requires a more detailed explanation, even if it seems that it is self-explaining. Many historians acknowledge that the

variety of aspects which should be taken into consideration (the length of the Victorian period, to give just one example) "makes a satisfactory definition of the middle-class impossible" (Loftus 2011). Richard Trainor maintains that this social group includes "all employers, all non-manual employees and all (apart from the landed aristocracy and gentry) people supported by independent income" (1993 cited in CHCC 2002). It is indeed difficult to say who belonged to the Victorian middle class and what criteria were used to consider people as representatives of this social class, yet looking into the specificities of the Victorian middle class might help in defining it. It is worth noting that a specific amount of money and the keeping of domestic servants made the difference, as the historian Eric Hobsbaum explains:

> The genuine middle class was not large. In terms of income it might coincide with the 200,000 English and Welsh assessments over J300 a year for income tax under Schedule D (profits of business, the professions and investments) in 1865-6, of which 7,500 were for incomes of over J5,000 a year – very substantial wealth in those days – and 42,000 for incomes of J1,000-5,000. This relatively small community would include the 17,000-odd merchants and bankers of 1871, the 1,700-odd "ship-owners", the unknown number of factory and mine owners, most of the 15,000 doctors, the 12,000 solicitors and 3,500 barristers, the 7,000 architects and 5,000 engineers . . . It would not contain many of what are today called intellectuals or "creative" occupations. . . . The widest definition of the middle classes or those who aspired to imitate them was that of keeping domestic servants. . . . But in 1871 there were only 90,000 female cooks and not many more housemaids, which gives a more precise – though probably too narrow – measure of the real size of the middle class; and a gauge of the even more affluent, 16,000 private coachmen (1999: 134-135).

Of course, these are only some of the aspects that distinguished middle stratum of English society at the end of the nineteenth century. In addition, a list of moral values related in particular to family life, circulating at the time, serves to round up the description; accordingly, Victorian middle class had its own domestic ideal, which all of its members sought to attain. In this respect, professor Sally Mitchell mentions the fact that

> The family – made up of a father, mother, and children living together – was increasingly idealized during the Victorian period. People

developed firm ideas about how things ought to be, although not
everyone could meet these standards. At the same time, real changes in
work and income allowed family relationships to develop more fully
(2009: 145).

Michael Paterson shares the same idea, adding that even if "many
people failed to match the ethos of selfless service in their own lives,
they admired it in others, for moral responsibility was perhaps their
most respected ideal" (2008: 705).

The standards concerning domesticity were indeed very high.
This is proved both by historical studies and literary productions. If the
historians sought to show the Victorian society as it was, writers started
from the reality, but changed it according to the message they wanted to
carry across to their readers. Thus, the portrayal of the middle-class
family involves ideological, historical and literary standpoints.

Sally Mitchell describes the ideal home as

> the essence of morality, stability, and comfort. The husband had legal
> and economic control over his wife, children, and servants. The family
> depended on his income: the wife did not bring in money through labor
> (as in the working class) or have a private settlement (as among gentry
> and aristocrats). The children remained subordinate and obedient.
> Boys, who needed extended schooling to reproduce their parents' style
> of life, were under their father's authority until they had enough
> training and experience to make their own way in the world. Middle-
> class daughters were not expected to "make their own way" – with a
> very few exceptions, they stayed at home unless or until they married
> (2009: 146).

This of course is only an overview of the Victorian middle-class family.
In fact, every member had his/ her own rules that contributed to a
harmonious domestic atmosphere. But "although there was a common
moral code, it was often stretched at the edges or superficially
maintained with the support of cant and hypocrisy" (Briggs 1990: 12).
This reveals the true nature of the Victorian society, which did not allow
generalizations. In relation to this, Thomas Jordan states that

> There were tyrants like the fathers of Frederick Delius and Elizabeth
> Barrett and there were indulgent parents; there were incompetent and
> fluttery mothers and there were chatelaines who managed large
> domestic establishments with drill-like precision. There were cold,
> distant people like Lord Shaftesbury who could bleed for mankind in

general but found it hard to relate to individuals, including their own children. However, there were children who challenged their parents and provoked tension (1987: 66).

Consequently, the literary production of the time was divided. For example, "the literature of sentiment presented family in a quasi-sacred light", while "the literature of sensation (and, sometimes, autobiography) suggested that family might rather be the incubator of twisted emotions and disreputable secrets" (Nelson 2007: 7-8). Along these lines, one firstly needs to know which the standards assumed by every family member were in order to judge how great the discrepancy between the ideal and the real was.

As most scholars have pointed out, the most important role was attributed to the perfect wife. According to Claudia Nelson,

> the wife was instructed that she was responsible for the "moral tone" that turned an establishment from a house into a home and kept married men mindful of their own domestic duties. To some extent this tone was seen as a function of good housekeeping. Tidy, clean, and pleasantly decorated rooms, carefully chosen and well-cooked meals, serene rather than frazzled wives, would encourage husbands to hurry home from their work instead of spending their evenings in dissipation... Middle-class wives were expected to exert a positive influence over their husbands by exuding virtues such as purity, devotion, and selflessness (2007: 27).

Sally Mitchell maintains the same thing, calling the perfect Victorian woman *The Angel in the House*, in keeping with the title of a long poem written by Coventry Patmore. Her belief is that

> the pure woman's life was supposed to be entirely centered on the home. She preserved the higher moral values, guarded her husband's conscience, guided her children's training, and helped regenerate society through her daily display of Christianity in action. If she successfully made the home a place of perfect peace, her husband and sons would not want to leave it for an evening's (morally suspect) entertainment elsewhere (2009: 266).

Nevertheless, as mentioned earlier, reality differed in many aspects from the ideal model. The perfect wife was "an imaginary construct" (Armstrong 1987) which could not be attained, but which Victorian women desired to become nonetheless. In practice, it turns out that

middle-class wives "were seen as potentially incompetent, ignorant, or distracted" (Nelson 2007: 26), just as were those belonging to the working classes.

> Even in the case of middle-class maternity, which generally had a halo of sanctity, many Victorian texts condemn individual mothers, who are pilloried as weak and childlike, complacent and hypocritical, or even physically and emotionally abusive. These negative portrayals improve our grasp both of the ideal and of the depth of Victorian fears that this ideal might prove elusive" (Nelson 2007: 11-12).

This was in absolute contrast with the standards of the time, which postulated that "in the privacy of the home, her [woman's] finer instincts – sensitivity, self-sacrifice, innate purity – could have free play" (Mitchell 2009: 267). The fact that women did not accomplish their tasks properly is maintained by both writers of fiction and non-fiction. Charles Dickens may be mentioned among them, for criticizing the failed middle-class wives in his novels. These "critical portraits" "range from David Copperfield's Dora in 1850, a girl-wife who is too young and inexperienced to run a home successfully, to Bleak House's Mrs. Jellyby in 1853, a middle-aged woman who devotes all her energies to philanthropy and ignores the needs of her large family". [...] "Such works provided a number of desirable things to their readers, including the recognition that wifehood did not always come naturally and that the job of the middle-class Victorian wife was neither uncomplicated nor easy" (Claudia Nelson 2007: 26).

Moreover, Victorian women did not seem to fulfill their responsibilities as mothers either. Referring to middle-class representatives, Sally Mitchell affirms that "[t]he idealized loving mother probably spent only an hour or two with her children each day" (2009: 149). It is natural to be so, if one takes into consideration the fact that a nanny was most commonly employed to look after the children. Mothers only had a "supervisory role"; that is, they chose their children's food, clothing, books, even their friends (Nelson 2007: 52). There were usually three servants in a middle-class household (a cook, a housemaid and a nursery-maid), therefore, nothing difficult or unpleasant was left for the wives to engage in. Their

> jobs typically included keeping the account books, overseeing home decoration, planning menus in consultation with the cook, ordering

groceries and household supplies, sewing or purchasing clothing for all members of the household, hiring and firing employees to care for house and children, teaching the youngest children, maintaining the family's network of acquaintances by making and receiving morning visits, and acting as hostess at social occasions from children's parties to formal dinners (Nelson 2007: 26).

The responsibilities encountered gave women the status of rulers of their homes, in spite of the fact that they were supposed to be subordinate, dependent and obedient to their husbands. These circumstances "made [them] entirely responsible for [their] comfort, beauty, and morality" (Mitchell 2009: 267).

Nonetheless, Victorian women strove to be independent. They were dissatisfied with their "home imprisonment". This led to the rise of the organized feminism in the late 1840s, proving that the domestic ideology could not be implemented as desired (Nelson 2007: 22).

Even if the Victorian creed regarding family life was more concerned with the women's responsibilities, it also imposed a model for men. However, the roles of fathers were much more ambiguous than those of mothers. Thus, as John Tosh maintains in his book, *A Man's Place: Masculinity and the Middle-Class Home in the Victorian England*, there was no "stereotypic image of 'the Victorian father'" (1999: 79). According to the doctrine of separate spheres existing in nineteenth-century England, mothers dominated the private world, or home life, while fathers governed public life. Men held the status of breadwinners and had less to do with family matters. Therefore, as Claudia Nelson affirms, "men were often expected to be consumers of domesticity rather than its creators" (2007: 60). However, the legal authority belonged to them, at least theoretically.

As shown, during the nineteenth century paternity could be seen in different lights. Besides the distant, abusive and ineffectual fathers that Victorian literature abounds in, there are also records of loving, affectionate fathers. (Nelson 2007: 60). John Tosh distinguishes four main types of fatherhood in nineteenth-century England, particularly related to physical absence, emotional distance, tyranny, and intimacy (1999: 93).

It is hardly surprising that the writings of the period under discussion illustrate home as a location for physical and psychological violence, whose victims were usually women and children. Josephine M. Guy and Ian Small enumerate this alarming theme among the others

characteristic of the nineteenth-century literature, and the novels of the Brontës, the works by Dickens, sensation fiction, as well as the novels written by George Eliot and Thomas Hardy are good examples supporting the thesis that "the abuse of patriarchal power, particularly in the home, was the dark side of social paternalism; moreover, the harsh physical and emotional reality of many marriages, rather than the ideology of domestic bliss..., was daily exposed in the courts and newspapers" (Guy and Small, 2011: 45).

As suggested, the differences between theory and practice brought lots of problems to the Victorian family. This left a mark on the children's destiny, too. The middle-class child, to whom the "Victorian world was a pleasant place" (Jordan 1987: 65), had much more privileges than the working-class offspring. For instance, they could attend school and obtain professions. However, this opportunity belonged to boys rather than to girls, as the latter did not need to be prepared for public life.

> A girl who would grow up to be a married woman like her mother could obtain her vocational training at home. Families in better circumstances saved and sacrificed to give sons an education that would lay the best possible foundation for their adult lives. Daughters were not deliberately neglected, but their schooling seemed less important. In addition, girls were thought to need more social and moral protection than boys. Parents disliked having them away from home or at large schools (Mitchell 2009: 181-182).

Thomas Jordan maintains the same thing, explaining that "for boys, always more valued than girls because of their potentials for achievement, the goal was an education which would inculcate a sense of class identity and a sense of self-confidence" (1987: 66). So, if daughters stayed at home and learned household management from their mothers, sons went to school and it often happened that they inherited their fathers' professions. Nonetheless, the situation changed at the end of the nineteenth century, when it became possible for girls to take advantage of opportunities for education and employment. Despite this, Victorian ladies preserved their social rituals staying at home and not working outside it (Paterson 2008: 705).

The nineteenth-century society had a model for children, as it did for grownups. Being the center of the family life, children were expected to be subordinate, "dutiful, obedient, and thankful for their parents' support and care" (Frost 2009: 11). They were separated from the adult

world, being forbidden to read newspapers and to be present at serious discussions (Mitchell 2009: 152). Unlike adults, who were responsible for their lives and for those of their offspring, children were dependent on the circumstances created by parents. It is obvious that if mothers and fathers did not follow the domestic principles, then their children were challenged to fail to match the moral ethos, too. Consequently, there were different types of "childhoods" in the Victorian era. Many children suffered because of domestic violence, either inflicted by their parents or by their kin (in the case of transnormative families that were frequent in nineteenth-century England). Despite these circumstances, nineteenth-century literature idealizes childhood, depicting children as "innocent, spontaneous, appealing, and naturally good" (Ibidem). Sally Mitchell explains once again that the writers' intention for the sentimental idealization was to protect children's innocence (Ibidem). However, there are Victorian novels, such as Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, that discover the spoiled face of the otherwise "naturally good" children.

The disjunctions between ideal and real created numerous problems surrounding family life. Solutions for these issues could be found in the writings of the time, especially in novels, as they were "a prime site for the construction and justification as well as the subversion of the domestic ideology" (Archibald 2002: 8). Moreover, the novel "helped to redefine what men supposed to desire in women and what women, in turn, were supposed to desire to be" (Armstrong 1987). This was valid not only for the horizontal relationships between spouses, but also for vertical ones, between parents and children. The respective literary form had the power to normalize particular behaviors, aiming to make people closer to the Victorian moral ethos. However, there is no one-to-one correspondence between the fictional world of the nineteenth-century novel and the reality of the time. The connection is rather based on the concept of cause and effect; that is, historical events shaped the Victorian novel and the latter, in its turn, influenced the course of history. So, writers used the novel as a strategic tool to shape social facts rather than to make fiction a copy of the real-world.

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