

## The discourse of domesticity in the nineteenth century British novel

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### Abstract

This paper seeks to examine how the discourse of domesticity crystallized in the first half of the nineteenth century in Britain. The contribution of the Evangelical revival to the conception of a sweet home in nineteenth century Britain is discussed. This paper demonstrates how the construction of woman as the angel of the house was reflected in the nineteenth century British novel.

**Keywords:** domesticity, nineteenth century British novel, evangelical revival, reflected

### Introduction

The transition from the seventeenth and early eighteenth century fear of female sexuality to the ideal of feminine propriety in the early nineteenth century was helped by a shift in the Protestant redefinition of the role of woman. The religious revival of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century was characterized by the feminization of religion. In *A Practical View of the Prevailing Religious System of Professed Christians in the Higher and Middle Classes Contrasted with Real Christianity* (1797), William Wilberforce declared that women had a "more favourable disposition to religion".<sup>[i]</sup> The ideology of the Evangelical revival confined female sexuality to the act of procreation within marriage. The salvation of the newly created subject hood of woman as mother was made dependent on her successful discharge of the myriad responsibilities of the household. Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall have argued in *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780-1850* (1987) that women's focus on the fulfillment of these responsibilities as mother and wife ensured the containment of the dangerous aspects of her sexuality<sup>[ii]</sup>. In *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education with a View of the Principles and Conduct Prevalent among Women of Rank and Fortune* (1799), Hannah More wrote:

"On you depend in no small degree the principles of the whole rising generation. To your direction the daughters are almost exclusively committed; and until a certain age, to you also is consigned the mighty privilege of forming the hearts and minds of your infant sons. To you is made over the awfully important trust of infusing the first principles of piety into the tender minds of those who may one day be called to instruct, not families merely, but districts; to influence, not individuals, but senates."<sup>[iii]</sup>

Mrs. Ann Martin Taylor (1757-1830) in *Practical Hints to Young Females on the Duties of a Wife, a Mother and the Mistress of a Family* (1815) advised how the promotion of "domestic virtue" and the preservation of "the happiness of the fireside" could become "an effectual, as well as a simple means of increasing national prosperity."<sup>[iv]</sup> In *The Manufacturing Population of England, its Moral, Social, and Physical Conditions, and the Changes Which Have Arisen from the Use*

*of Steam Machinery; with an Examination of Infant Labour* (1833), Peter Gaskell tied the existence of woman to the role of motherhood: "Love of helpless infancy- attention to its wants, its sufferings, and its unintelligible happiness, seem to form the very well-spring of a woman's heart- fertilizing, softening, and enriching all her grosser passions and appetites." Gaskell went on to claim that a woman, "if removed from all intercourse, all knowledge of her sex and its attributes, from the very hour of her birth, would, should she herself become a mother in the wilderness."<sup>[v]</sup> The reduction of women to her reproductive organs had implications for the ideological construction of separate spheres. The nineteenth century construction of gender conceived of man and woman as radically different. John Ruskin in *Sesame and Lilies* (1860) dwelt upon this radical difference:

"We are foolish, and without excuse foolish, in speaking of the 'superiority' of one sex to the other, as if they could be compared in similar things. Each has what the other has not: each completes the other, and is completed by the other: they are in nothing alike, and the happiness and perfection of both depend on each asking and receiving from the other what the other only can give."<sup>[vi]</sup>

Mary Poovey in *Uneven Development: the Ideological Work of Gender in Mid-Victorian England* (1988) pointed out that this theory of the radical difference between man and woman derives its strength from the scientific understanding of the female body.<sup>[vii]</sup> The result of the sublimation of woman's sexuality into maternal instincts was that she came to be seen as completely devoid of any sexual feelings. Eric Trudgill in *Madonnas and Magdalens: the Origins and Development of Victorian Sexual Attitudes* (1976) discussed how W. R. Greg, in his survey of prostitution in the *Westminster* (July, 1850), concluded that sexual desire in women "is dormant, if not non-existent, till excited; always till excited by undue familiarities; almost always till excited by actual intercourse."<sup>[viii]</sup> However, Mary Poovey in *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer: Ideology as Style in the Works of Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Shelley, and Jane Austen* (1984) has suggested that the late eighteenth century ideal of feminine propriety, instead of rejecting the "specter of female sexuality", transmuted it into its opposite.<sup>[ix]</sup>

Evangelicalism transformed the space of home into a sacred altar. In the memoir *The Life of William Wilberforce* (1838), Robert and Samuel Wilberforce wrote about his father William Wilberforce's time with his children: "Never was religion seen in a more engaging form than in his Sunday intercourse with them. A festival air of holy and rational happiness dwelt continually around him."<sup>[x]</sup> The Stanley family in Hannah More's *Coelebs in Search of Wife, Comprehending Observations of Domestic Habits and Manners, Religion and Morals* (1807) is presented as an ideal religious home. The sacrality of home was an inevitable consequence of the emphasis placed on the ceremonies of Sabbath ceremonies and family prayers. The link established between home and religion rendered the former a sacred temple from where the Evangelists' onslaught against the universality of sin could be launched. In his writings, Wilberforce frequently opposed the conflicts of the world to the peace and harmony of home. Speaking of his summer retirement from the Parliament, he told Dr. Coulthurst: "This occasional abstraction from the bustle and turmoil of the world, is highly beneficial to mind, body, and estate; and I had an opportunity of becoming acquainted with my own children".<sup>[xi]</sup> This kind of opposition built between the private and public served to characterize home as the haven of peace, as opposed to the troubles of the world. Wilberforce wrote in *A Practical View of Christianity* (1797): "when the husband should return to his family, worn and harassed by worldly cares or professional labours, the wife, habitually preserving a warmer and more unimpaired spirit of devotion, than is perhaps consistent with being immersed in the bustle of life, might revive his languid piety."<sup>[xii]</sup> As the opposition between the private and the public spheres was built up, woman came to be identified with the former, that is, home. In the discourse of the early nineteenth century, home became a sanctified place, in which, as Sarah Stickney Ellis (1799-1872) wrote in *The Women of England: Their Social Duties and Domestic Habits* (1839), the woman sat as "the humble monitress...guarding the fireside comforts of his distant home...clothed in moral beauty".<sup>[xiii]</sup> John Angell James in *Female Piety; or, the Young Woman's Friend and Guide through Life to Immortality* (1852) provided an exulting description of the word home:

There are few terms in the language around which cluster so many blissful associations as that delight of every English heart, the word home. The paradise of love- the nursery of virtue- the garden of enjoyment- the temple of harmony- the circle of all tender relationships-the playground of childhood-the dwelling of manhood- the retreat of age...this, home- sweet home- is the sphere of wedded woman's mission.<sup>[xiv]</sup>

The ideals of middle class domesticity laid a clear demarcation between the superintendence of domestic management, carried out by the middle class wife, and the manual work, undertaken by the servants. Discussing the work of the kitchen, Mrs. Sarah Ellis in *The Wives of England* declared that no sensible woman would consider it "a degradation" to overlook it, but "the vortex of culinary operations" should be "more appropriately left to their servants."<sup>[xv]</sup> What was stressed in this ideal was women's dependence upon her husband, father, or any other male relative. Such a woman might undertake philanthropic activities, but not paid labour. The identification of femininity

and home in the middle class constructed a norm against which women of the other classes were judged. Therefore, the category of working class women was a fundamental departure from the middle class ideal of femininity, the ideal in which women and home were bracketed together. The employment of women in the work outside of home was believed to compromise their femininity. Working class women were viewed as deficient in matters of domestic economy.

To illustrate how this domestic impulse was recorded in the nineteenth century British novel, the critical analyses of the following novels is presented: Maria Edgeworth's *Belinda* (1801), Hannah More's *Coelebs in Search of a Wife, Comprehending Observations on Domestic Habits and Manners, Religion and Morals* (1808), and Charles Dickens's *Hard Times* (1854).

In the chapter titled "Domestic Happiness" in *Belinda* (1801), Maria Edgeworth provides a picture of happy domestic arrangement:

"Lady Anne Percival had, without any pedantry and ostentation, much accurate knowledge, and a taste for literature, which made her the chosen companion of her husband's understanding, as well of his heart. He was not obliged to reserve his conversation for friends of his own sex, nor was he forced to seclude himself in the pursuit of any branch of knowledge; the partner of his warmest affections was also the partner of his most serious occupations; and her sympathy and approbation, and the daily sense of her success in the education of their children, inspired him with a degree of happy social energy, unknown to the selfish solitary votaries of avarice and ambition...Tastes that have been vitiated by the stimulus of dissipation might, perhaps, think these simple pleasures insipid."<sup>[xvi]</sup>

A contrast is drawn between Lady Delacour's fashionable life and Lady Anne Percival's domestic felicity. Delacour's "domestic misery"<sup>[xvii]</sup> but fashionable existence and Anne's delight in the "simple pleasures" of domesticity finally convinces Belinda that domestic existence is preferable. However, Edgeworth's belief in the possibility of reform allows the "moral tale" to reclaim Lady Delacour for the purposes of a new role under a new domestic order at the end of the novel<sup>[xviii]</sup>. In the chapter "Rights of Women", by making Freke both the champion of the rights of women and a powerfully sexual female figure, Edgeworth suggests that the disruptive potential of female sexuality can be contained through their domestication.<sup>[xix]</sup>

In the "Preface" to 1809 edition of *Coelebs*, More disclosed that a letter was sent along with the manuscript of the novel, in which More's visit to "a country gentleman and a few of his friends" was mentioned. She declared that the "generality of these characters move in the quiet and regular course of domestic life." More regretted that though her friend's house was pleasant, yet "its annals were not the most splendid to record."<sup>[xx]</sup> Hannah More's aim in *Coelebs* (1808) is to select her heroine from "a large class of excellent female characters, who...pass through life honoured and respected in their own small, but not unimportant sphere".<sup>[xxi]</sup> The novel begins with Charles's declaration of his admiration of Milton's portrayal of the character of Eve as an embodiment of an idea of conjugal happiness. Expressing his agreement with Milton's affirmation

that the perfection of the character of a wife consists in promoting in her husband good works, Charles asserts that a woman's learning is almost useless if a woman is "ignorant of the most indispensable, and most appropriate branch of female knowledge." [xxii]

Charles's quest for a suitable wife takes him to London, where he encounters a variety of fashionable women, including Lady Melbury, who was warm-hearted, liberal on the one hand, and "vain, sentimental, romantic, extravagantly addicted to dissipation and expence" on the other [xxiii]. Charles's pursuit takes him to the country house of his father's friend Mr. Stanley, where he meets Mr. Stanley's eldest daughter, Lucilla, who rises early, inspects the household accounts, makes breakfast for her parents, and teaches the younger children [xxiv]. Lucilla's skillful management of Stanley household, her reading of "learned books", and her weekly rounds of charity work make her an exemplar of a desirable wife in the novel [xxv]. However, Lucilla's knowledge of Latin is justified by showing that a classical learning is not necessarily opposed to domesticity: "it is very possible for a woman to be totally ignorant of the ordinary but the indispensable duties of common life without knowing one word of Latin". [xxvi] The knowledge of classical language is shown as stemming flamboyance: "A learned language, which a discreet woman will never produce in company, is less likely to make her vain, than those acquirements which are always in exhibition." [xxvii] In *Coelebs*, More propagated an evangelically inspired ideal of a charitable, domesticated womanhood. There is another example of a happy family, Dr. Barlow, whose wife has not only increased the happiness of her family but also enabled him to discharge his duties with success: "She is as attentive to the bodies, as her husband is to the souls of his people, and educates her own family as sedulously as he instructs his parish." [xxviii]

In Charles Dickens's *Hard Times* (1854), Stephen Blackpool's wife is embodiment of all the social maladies for which working class women were blamed by the middle classes. She is not the ideal wife, whose charms around the hearth afford comfort to her husband. The reasons Stephen gives to Bounderby for desiring to separate from her is:

I ha' lived under't so long, for that I ha' had'n the pity and comforting words o' th' best lass living or dead. [xxix]

The idea of "Home, sweet, Home" as a shelter from the conflicts of the world falls flat on its face in its applicability to the economically constricted existence of the working class families. This explains Stephen's reluctance to go home:

O! Better to have no home which to lay his head, than to have a home and dread to go to it, through such a cause. xxx

In *Hard Times*, the vulgarity, sexuality, immorality, and lack of cleanliness and etiquettes of Stephen's drunkard wife are underlined in the novel to invoke a sense of disgust.

Such a woman! A disabled, drunken creature, barely able to preserve her sitting posture by steadying herself with one begrimed hand on the floor, while the other was so purposeless in trying to push away her tangled hair from her face, that it only blinded her the more with the dirt upon it. A creature so foul to look at, in her tatters, stains, and splashes, but so much fouler than that in her moral infamy, that it was a shameful thing even to see her. [xxxi]

As opposed to the "debauched features" of Stephen's wife, Rachael is depicted as "an Angel", who is "too merciful" to let the wife die. Though Rachael works in the factory, her mere presence provides Stephen a sense of comfort. The description of the house when Rachael is attending Stephen's sick wife is indicative of the attraction of the ideal of a good wife even in the working class:

Everything was in its place and order as he had always kept it, the little fire was newly trimmed, and the hearth was freshly swept. [xxxii]

The characters of Rachael and Stephen's wife in *Hard Times* are created along the nineteenth century dualistic division of women into the angel and the prostitute.

<sup>i</sup> William Wilberforce, *A Practical View of the Prevailing Religious System of Professed Christians in the Higher and Middle Classes Contrasted with Real Christianity* (New York: American Tract Society, n.d.), 330.

<sup>ii</sup> Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780-1850* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987), p. 114.

<sup>iii</sup> Hannah More, *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education with a View of the Principles and Conduct Prevalent among Women of Rank and Fortune* (London: Printed for T. Cadell and W. Davies, 1811), p. 63.

<sup>iv</sup> Mrs. Ann Martin Taylor, *Practical Hints to Young Females on the Duties of a Wife, a Mother and the Mistress of a Family* (New York: Printed and Published by A. Ming, JR, 1829), vii.

<sup>v</sup> Peter Gaskell, (1833) *The Manufacturing Population of England, its Moral, Social, and Physical Conditions, and the Changes Which Have Arisen from the Use of Steam Machinery; with an Examination of Infant Labour* (New York: Arno Press, 1972), pp. 144-145.

<sup>vi</sup> John Ruskin, *Sesame and Lilies*, ed. by C. R. Rounds (New York: American Book Company, 1916), p. 92.

<sup>vii</sup> Mary Poovey, *Uneven Development: the Ideological Work of Gender in Mid-Victorian England* (Chicago: the University of Chicago Press, 1988), p. 7.

<sup>viii</sup> Eric Trudgill, *Madonnas and Magdalens: the Origins and Development of Victorian Sexual Attitudes* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1976), p. 56.

<sup>ix</sup> Mary Poovey, *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer: Ideology as Style in the Works of Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Shelley, and Jane Austen* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1984), p. 19.

<sup>x</sup> Robert Isaac Wilberforce and Samuel Wilberforce, *The Life of William Wilberforce*, vol. III (London: John Murray, 1838), p. 470.

<sup>xi</sup> *Ibid*, vol. III, pp. 468-469.

<sup>xii</sup> *A Practical View of the Prevailing Religious System of Professed Christians*, 331.

<sup>xiii</sup> Sarah Stickney Ellis, *The Women of England: Their Social Duties and Domestic Habits* (1839), in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, fifth edition (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1986), p. 1639.

<sup>xiv</sup> John Angell James, (1852) *Female Piety; or, the Young Woman's Friend and Guide through Life to Immortality* (Mississippi: Venture Publications a Ministry of Old Paths Baptist Church Independence, n.d.), p. 52.

<sup>xv</sup> Mrs. Ellis, *The Wives of England: their Relative Duties, Domestic Influence, and Social Obligations* (London: Fisher, Son and Co., 1843), p. 261.

<sup>xvi</sup> Maria Edgeworth, *Belinda* (London: Everyman, 2009), 204.

<sup>xvii</sup> *Ibid*, 06-07.

<sup>xviii</sup> *Ibid*, 451,

<sup>xix</sup> *Ibid*, 216-217.

<sup>xx</sup> Hannah More, *Coelebs in Search of a Wife, Comprehending Observations on Domestic Habits and Manners, Religion and Morals*, vol. 1 (London: Printed for T. Cadell and W. Davies, 1809), vi-vii.

<sup>xxi</sup> *Ibid*, 131.

<sup>xxii</sup> *Ibid*, vol. 1, 02.

<sup>xxiii</sup> *Ibid*, vol. 1, 152.

<sup>xxiv</sup> *Ibid*, vol. 1, 180.

<sup>xxv</sup> *Ibid*, vol. 1, 180-82.

<sup>xxvi</sup> *Ibid*, vol. 1, 34-35.

<sup>xxvii</sup> *Ibid*, vol. 2, 230-231.

<sup>xxviii</sup> *Ibid*, vol. 1, 205.

<sup>xxix</sup> Charles Dickens, *Hard Times*, ed. by Fred Kaplan and Sylvere Monod (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2001), p. 59.

<sup>xxx</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 64-65.

<sup>xxxi</sup> *Ibid*, p. 55.

<sup>xxxii</sup> *Ibid*, p. 66.

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