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Victorian Genre Paintings: Seeing Virtue

Victorian Genre paintings reveal a dark moral history perpetrated against women of the time. During this time, The Fallen Women was a popular trope portraying women as domestic homemakers made to serve their purpose or as sinful and unvirtuous “fallen angels.” These Victorian paintings depicted women as nothing but accessories to a man's life. They were unable to provide for themselves without the societal pressures to be a “good” woman. In the eyes of Victorian Men, the perfect woman was one of submissiveness, domesticity, and purity. *The Awakening Conscience* by William Holemen Hunt and *Past and Present*, a triptych painted by Augustus Leopold Egg, and the writings of Coventry Patmore, the creator of the poem *The Angel in the House*, showing the foundational qualifications of Victorian womanhood, with depictions of the Fallen Angel and the Domestic tropes of the time. In the creation of this paper, in response to my accompanying creative work, I will flip this narrative by reversing the gender roles, placing the man in the submissive and the woman as the dominant, to critique the Victorian gendered roles perpetrated by the works of Hunt and Egg.

Angel in the House was a poetry book written by the 19th-century Poet and

Writer Coventry Patmore. It is a cultural foundation for the Idealized Victorian woman. In his writing, he states. "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." (Patmore.) This excerpt from *Angel in the House* depicts the image of a domestic Victorian woman. In this passage, we see that by this definition, a woman's pleasure only comes from that of a man, that a woman should fling herself into the depths of a man's problems with his emotional servant, she should give everything she has to a man, but is owed nothing in return. According to Patmore, this is the ideal woman. One with no personality, no self, but an idol accessory to a man's life. Patmore wrote this poem with his own wife in mind, flaunting her in a way that shows she had the perfect submissive. I use this example to show a written account depicting how a Victorian woman should act, further solidifying what we see in these Victorian paintings.



Augustus Egg made a trio of paintings depicting a woman's fall from grace, *Past and Present No. 1*. This painting is a clear depiction of that "fallen angel" trope. We see the wife thrown on the floor, the husband sitting down with a letter in his hand. We can assume the man was punishing.



Her because he found out about her sexual escapades outside of the marriage. We can see the kids playing with cards on the table, with one looking over to the scene with obvious concern on her face (TATE). This work is meant to show this woman's fall from grace, the punishment for a crime that her husband wouldn't face if it



were his infidelity questioned. This is an experience that in the Victorian era was exclusively feminine. *Past and Present No. 2* shows us the children, now orphaned, mother thrown out by a fallen woman, and father dead (Art UK) *Past and Present No.3*, we move back to the women as subject, she has fallen into extreme hardship, after being

thrown out of the home and labeled as un virtuous she is left to homelessness, In this work she is seen hiding under a bridge, with a child's legs coming out from under

her arms, with that, we can assume that she was forced into prostitution. To make money for herself, resulting in this baby (Art Uk.)

The *Past and Present* triptych depicts all aspects of the life and consequences of being a fallen woman; they reinforce these ideologies that man equals power and woman equals submission. It tells the viewer that a woman is nothing more than a man's property, that without him, she can't survive on her own. This is harshly problematic; during the Victorian era, and likely modern day, men are far more likely to



commit adultery than women.

Meaning the man depicted is not

only an abusive partner, but a

hypocrite. Punishing a woman

when he himself is likely to have

committed the same crime, with no

risk of becoming the "fallen man."

We can see that he acted with no

sense or reason, as in the second

of the three paintings, we see their

children orphaned, meaning their

only surviving parent is their

mother, who had no way of raising

her children due to their father's

damaged ego. Giving himself the role of god

The main subject of Victorian Genre painting is that of William Holman Hunt's *The Awakening Conscience*. This 19th-century painting depicts a woman, likely a mistress, living with a man outside of wedlock, rising up off the lap of a man. We see the woman looking out the window with a look of longing; we see this same sense of longing in all three of Egg's paintings, we see the open door in No.1, an open window in No.2, and the mother looking onto the open sky in No.3, longing is a common theme in these paintings, a woman's need for escape from the vile behaviours of the men around them. The woman in *The Awakening Conscience*, while standing up, has the arm of the man around her waist, indirectly telling the viewer she is trapped in this fallen state. On the floor of the painting, we see something that looks to be an animalistic depiction of the scene, A cat holding down a bird, unable to fly, effectively making this a predator and prey scenario. This is a woman who is trying to better herself and become the virtuous person the standards of the time want her to be. She is trapped by the expectations society has placed on her, expectations that no man of her time had.

All of these women depicted have been done a disservice by society, especially by the men who popularized and immortalized them through their work. We see this in Patmore and his writing in *Angel in the House*, with his main purpose being to promote and idealize these morally corrupt standards onto women, in an attempt to keep women as trophies meant to serve men's every wish. The works of Hunt and Egg both depict those struggles tenfold. A woman ripped from her children, with only the option of

prostitution to support herself, and another desperately wanting to escape her fallen state, no longer wanted to be this man's mistress, trapped in a so-called morally corrupt Life. The standards for women in the Victorian era were barbaric, treating women as men's pets, while men could commit as much adultery as they pleased with little to no



societal pressures.

This is why, for my creative project, I wanted to flip this narrative on its head. Taking the original painting of *The Awakening Conscience* and gender swapping the figures, making the woman the depiction of power and the male the submissive. I chose to use a photo of one of history's most sexualized women, Marilyn Monroe. With this, I wanted to give someone who had so little moral high ground in many people's eyes

and make her the all-powerful, the one who can't be punished for sexuality. The man is someone we don't know, no power, no reputation, overshadowed by the power of the women. Exposing the absurdity that is Victorian gender standards.

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Grammarly and Spell Check were used in this paper.

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