

19th Century Novel Gender Depictions Assignment

Due dates: This assignment is due February 25. If you turn in the assignment early enough, I will mark it up with comments and corrections as if it were a timed writing. If you turn in the assignment early, there will be a small grade incentive (+3 points). If you miss the midnight deadline but turn in the assignment before eight hours have elapsed, there will be a small point deduction (-3 points). If you turn in the assignment between eight and twenty-four hours late there will be a larger point deduction (-10 points). If you turn in the assignment at any point after that, there will be a substantial point deduction (-20 points; this is a flat deduction, not a cumulative one based on the number of days late). If you turn in the assignment late, but do not want points deducted, you may earn back credit by completing TWO essays from the prompt list (each using COMPLETELY DIFFERENT EXAMPLES from your novel). It will be recorded as the second half of a major grade (the class essay comprises the first half), so it will form a not-insignificant portion of your grade for the second nine weeks. It will be recorded as the second half of a major grade (the social and economic class essay comprises the first half), so it will form a not-insignificant portion of your grade for the third nine weeks.

You should engage the entirety of your novel (not necessarily in your particular focus, but in the way that it contextualizes evidence in terms of its significance to the novel as a whole). In other words, essays that *only* focus on the beginning of the novel are unacceptable.

Overview: 19th Century Women and “The Angel in the House”

The popular middle-class ideal for 19th century women was that they be submissive and devoted to their husbands. The metaphor for this ideal came to be “The Angel in the House,” the title of long poem by Coventry Patmore published in the middle of the century to celebrate his wife. While this ideal, on the one hand, celebrates women (in the sense that they are idealized as objects of devotion), it denies them an active role in their own lives and stereotypes them into one pre-determined role.

Here is a selection from the poem:

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.
How often flings for nought, and yokes
Her heart to an icicle or whim,
Whose each impatient word provokes
Another, not from her, but him;
While she, too gentle even to force
His penitence by kind replies,
Waits by, expecting his remorse,
With pardon in her pitying eyes;

And if he once, by shame oppress'd,
A comfortable word confers,
She leans and weeps against his breast,
And seems to think the sin was hers;
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.

A woman, in other words, was to be active only through her inspiration-- never through her deeds, and while Patmore believes women to be morally superior to men, this comes at the expense of denying women any voice in their own affairs or position in society (outside of the household).

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There are a couple of things to understand about this ideal. First, by no means did Patmore invent this model. The poem became popular because it embodied ideas that were already deeply embedded in the culture-- giving clear expression to a model of gender relationships that had existed for quite some time. Second, the reality was significantly more complicated, since-- like all ideals-- it only approximated truth in actual practice (especially for women outside the middle and upper classes). However, even when reality diverged from the ideal, both men and women would have been aware of these popular notions of the way things "ought to be."

The Readings

As before, the selections from *Daily Life in Victorian England* (selection one) provide cultural and historical details that help build background knowledge, in this case the cultural and material conditions of what it meant to be a woman during this time.

The second reading is a selection (beginning p. 11 of the source packet) from *The Madwoman in the Attic*, a book length study of the way that women were represented in 19th century literature and the ways that female writers used or transcended these stereotyped representations. This selection is not history, but literary criticism. It is very similar in argument to the selection you read from *The Second Sex* (one of the reasons why you read it), but the difference is that this is academic writing (academics writing for other academics), so you may find it more difficult to read. If you work through it earlier, you will be in more of a position to come to tutorials for help, compared to those who try to do this at the last minute. Also remember that you can download the presentation from class to help you.

Choice of Prompts

You are responsible for writing ONE of these. Essays MUST have specific quotation from your novel AND references to BOTH *Daily Life in Victorian England* and *The Madwoman in the Attic*. Essay length should be more than 800 words to do these ideas justice.

Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic* describe the two poles of representations of women in literature and popular culture during the 19th century (angels and monsters). To what degree does this pattern manifest in your novel, and what would this suggest about your author's view of the role of women in society?

Coventry Patmore's metaphor of the Angel in the House proved both remarkably popular and remarkably durable (as an ideal) over the course of the 19th century-- even as the reality of domestic arrangements did not match this model for many in the population. To what extent does this stereotype assert itself in your novel, and what would explain any divergences from this ideal?

Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar hypothesize that the persistence of the Angel in the House ideal (and the representation of women who do not live up to this ideal as monsters) finds root (at least partially) in male anxiety about the potential of female power or sexuality (a possible manifestation of that power). To what extent does either the author or his or her characters betray this fear of strong women, and how is this related to the way that they are represented in the novel?

A word of caution: do NOT assume that just because your novel was written by a female that it cannot contain, or even embody, sexist stereotypes.