

Maria Peker

Gendered Time:  
Woman with a Past in the Victorian Novel

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I dedicate this work to my father Mikhail Dorn, who sadly didn't live long enough to see its publication. He would have been very proud to hold it in his hands.



## Preface

This dissertation is intended as a step towards closing the significant gap both in the study of the Victorian conception of the past and in the research concerning female fallenness in the Victorian period. It is thus situated at the crossroads of Gender Studies and the studies dealing with past and history in Victorian culture, and aims at advancing a new perspective on gendered time in the Victorian novel. At the centre of the present research is a literary figure who is known to the public as “the woman with a past” and in whom these two main focuses of my research are merged. This character type lends herself to demonstrating the significance of differences between the representations of time according to gender in Victorian literature and the consequences thereof for the general conception of gender differences in contemporary cultural discourse. As I intend to show, the gendered time perspective is inextricably connected with the issue of female sexuality, and their mutual influence acts as a pivotal point in the dissertation.

The gender-informed approach to time, more particularly past time, establishes a new perspective on the notorious concept of female fallenness in the Victorian period. I argue that the category of Victorian “fallen women”, among whom women with a past played an important, though until now largely underestimated role, has been erroneously homogenised by critical discourse and that not enough attention has been given to the differentiation and classification within this extensive group. The gendering of time is one of the tools used to make vital distinctions between different types of fallenness, and, paradoxically, to figure out the crucial similarities between feminine purity and “ideal” fallenness. Victorian fallen women make a good case for demonstrating the significance of the temporal aspect in the narratives of gender.





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## Introduction

There is scarcely a Victorian novel which does not contain the figure of a fallen woman, be it at the centre of its plot or at its margins. Virtually all of the canonical novelists of the period paid homage to what was deemed to be the so-called “Great Evil” of illicit female sexuality. Dickens was famous for his obsession with female fallenness, not only in his fiction (there is a fallen woman in almost every one of his novels from *Oliver Twist* (1838) forward), but also in real life, which prompted him to found a refuge home for prostitutes. Elizabeth Gaskell, one of the chief proponents of domestic realism, started off with the marginal but still strikingly memorable portrayal of a prostitute’s degradation in *Mary Barton* (1848) and continued by placing the fallen woman at the centre of her novel *Ruth* (1853). *Ruth* elicited outrage from a conservative audience as it pleaded for the opportunity of a fallen woman’s reintegration into respectable society. George Eliot’s most remarkable fallen woman, Hetty Sorrel in *Adam Bede* (1859), seems to be a less sympathetic character, seemingly forfeiting her right to the reader’s pity by killing her illegitimate baby. George Gissing, whom George Watt deems to be “the closest of all Victorian novelists to fallen women, in the sense that he married one who was a prostitute,”<sup>1</sup> propagates the need for reforms that can alleviate the plight of working-class women faced with the choice between starvation and prostitution in *The Unclassed* (1884). Thomas Hardy is famous for depicting the tragic consequences of a female sexual downfall in *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* (1891). Even Anthony Trollope, who was conspicuous for his aversion to sensational and melodramatic elements in contemporary fiction, still thought it necessary to devote one of his (admittedly, minor) novels to the problem of one whom he calls “for want of a truer word that shall not in its truth be offensive, – a castaway.”<sup>2</sup> This archetypal character was a recurrent figure in popular culture as is evidenced in countless plays and melodramas. The fallen woman has become a symbol of the enormous injustice of gender ideology in the Victorian age and illustrates the atrocious cruelties that can result from a double standard. Her prevalence in Victorian culture continues to excite critical attention up to the present day.

The crucial importance of this figure in nineteenth-century British culture is not only revealed by the central position of the fallen woman in fiction of this period, but is also attested to by this figure’s dramatically increased visibility in the works of Victorian social criticism in contrast to earlier periods. In 1842 William Tait deemed it necessary to explicitly defend his motives for addressing his monograph to such an indelicate and potentially offensive issue as prostitution, especially “as the subject treated of has seldom been urged upon the attention of the public, or exhibited in all its

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1 George Watt, *The Fallen Woman in the Nineteenth-Century Novel* (London: Croom Helm, 1984) 119.

2 Anthony Trollope, *The Vicar of Bullhampton* (1870; Stroud: Nonsuch Publishing Ltd., 2006) 11. All subsequent references are to this edition.

painful associations.”<sup>3</sup> However, in 1857 the reviewer of William Acton’s famous treatise, which was candidly titled *Prostitution*, did not even deem it worth justifying the choice of subject as it “has been so freely discussed in the periodicals of the day, that it would be mere prudery to offer any apology for drawing attention to its contents.”<sup>4</sup> In 1870 Anthony Trollope could finally rejoice over the greatly increased awareness of the problem, not only amongst the male readership – who were obviously the target group for the publications of medical journals and social treatises – but also, even more significantly, among the female reading audience. Indeed, he stated that

[i]t is not long since, – it is well within the memory of the author, – that the very existence of such a condition of life [...] was supposed to be unknown to our sisters and daughters, and was, in truth, unknown to many of them. Whether that ignorance was good may be questioned; but that it exists no longer is beyond question [...].<sup>5</sup>

At that point the awareness of the “Great Evil” permeated the whole of society and could not even for the sake of appearances be restricted anymore to the exclusively male discourses of medicine and social sciences. It finally entered, partly through the novel, which was considered a peculiarly feminine genre, into the domain of respectable feminine domesticity.

In the intervening years, fallen woman, as one of the examples of the “peripheral sexualities” in Foucauldian terms, has become “a personage, a past, a case history, and a childhood, in addition to being a type of life, a life form, and a morphology.”<sup>6</sup> In other words, she became infinitely more than a woman earning money through prostitution. Fallenness became an identity, which was impossible to change or shake off at will. The whole complex created the familiar mythology which interprets the fall as being irrecoverable and defining for the whole personality.

The obsession with female sexuality, so characteristic of the Victorian age, was crystallised in the paranoia surrounding the fallen woman. She was one of the most acute dangers to domesticity, which was considered to be the touchstone of British national identity. The “public woman” was another characteristic denomination of the prostitute. This was, in itself, an outrageous oxymoron since middle-class ideology placed women firmly in the domestic space. The paradox of the “public woman” could not be accommodated within the gender logic of the period and thus the prostitute becomes the unspeakable, the unpronounceable, and ultimately the inconceivable. W.R. Greg begins his famous article on prostitution stating that: “There are some questions so painful and perplexing, that statesmen, moralists, and philanthropists shrink from them by common consent.” He continues by remarking that:

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3 *Magdalenism: An Inquiry into The Extent, Causes, and Consequences of Prostitution in Edinburgh*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Edinburgh, 1842) xi.

4 “The Social Epidemic,” rev. of *Prostitution*, by William Acton, *Sanitary Review and Journal of Public Health*, III (1857-1858): 327.

5 Trollope, *The Vicar of Bullhampton* 11.

6 Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality. Volume I: An Introduction* (1976; New York: Vintage Books, 1990) 43.