

# The Role of the "Fallen Woman" in Victorian Novels

Rosalind White – 22<sup>nd</sup> June 2016

The term "fallen woman" refers to an irrevocable loss of innocence, a concept originating in the biblical fall in the Garden of Eden; the characterisation of Eve as temptress links her fallen state with the loss of sexual purity.



During the Victorian period a woman's identity was intertwined with her sexual status; a woman was either an untainted "maiden," a wife or mother (which placed her sexuality safely in the domestic sphere), or she was vilified by labels such as "spinster" or "whore," both of which had negative connotations, the former with sexual atrophy, the latter with deviant promiscuity. Essentially, any deviance from the paragon of ideal Victorian womanhood, the "angel of the house," insinuated that a woman's fall was imminent. Each of the novels discussed here portrays a different interpretation of the "fallen woman."



## Hetty Sorrel in George Eliot's *Adam Bede* (1859)

In *Adam Bede* Hetty Sorrel is implicitly linked with the fallen Eve when she is seen gathering apples, conventionally regarded as the forbidden fruit. Hetty evokes the desires of the flesh, functioning as a foil to Dinah who represents an almost spiritual purity. "What a strange contrast the two figures made ... Hetty, her cheeks flushed, her neck and arms bare, her hair hanging in a curly tangle down her back ... Dinah covered with her long white dress, her pale face full of subdued emotion". Juxtaposed with Dinah's altruistic nature, Hetty's is innately selfish: she consciously wields her beauty to obtain male attention. She even desires to keep Adam under her spell when she has no wish to marry him: "she liked to feel that Adam was in her power, and would have been

indignant if he had shown the least sign of slipping from under the yoke of her coquettish tyranny". Therefore, although Hetty's vulnerability is detailed — she is described as having a "childish soul" and all the resilience of a "soft coated pet animal" — her awareness of her own sexuality renders her

amenable to her fallen state. In the mythos of the novel Hetty commits an untenable wrong by actively attempting to transcend her class; Hetty's desire to become a "grand lady ... with feathers in her hair" is as condemnable as her sexual transgression.

## Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton*

The association between "fallen women" and disease and pollution was not just a metaphorical one. The Contagious Diseases Act of 1864 decreed that women suspected of prostitution were subject to forcible examinations and often placed in hospitals for up to a year. This idea of the fallen woman as a contagion is particularly pertinent to Elizabeth Gaskell's novel *Mary Barton* (1848). In the Victorian period the threat of lower-class female sexuality was seen as "the driving force behind all crime, poverty and social disorder".



The impoverished fallen woman is embodied here in Aunt Esther who conceives of her fallen state as a contagious disease. Just as Lydia almost cries out to Midwinter "Lies! All lies! I'm a fiend in human shape!", Esther warns Mary not to touch her; "not me you must never kiss me". Esther functions as a cautionary omen of what will befall Mary if she succumbs to the upper-class Carson. The narrator emphasises the "unacknowledged influence" Esther has over Mary: Mary decides that "her beauty should make her a lady ... the rank to which she firmly believed her lost aunt Esther had arrived". However, unlike Hetty who dreams of lace and luxury, Mary dreams of ample food for her family and even finding Jem a job once she is Mrs Carson. Mary's refusal of the upper-class Carson and her abrupt acceptance of the working-class Jem removes her from the risk of becoming a "fallen woman."

In conclusion, the fear of the "fallen woman" and the valorisation of the pure "angel of the house" are both indicative of the Victorian need to confine female sexuality to marriage. Even Dinah, a paradigm of saintly virtue, must give up her role as minster in order to become the quintessential "angel of the house." In contrast to Dinah, Hetty and Esther violate the sanctity of marriage by falling pregnant outside of wedlock, and Lydia conceives of marriage not as a sacred union in which to have children but as an opportunity for monetary gain. As soon as these women resist the rules of society they are condemned and fall victim either to death or societal expulsion. In the Victorian period Darwinian theory was appropriated and branded with Victorian moral conventions, asserting that men are born "animals" and women "angels." Whilst it was considered natural for men to indulge in their sexual appetites it was considered perverse and "unnatural" for women to act the same way. Therefore, by using the "fallen woman" archetype each of these novels reveals Victorian culture's belief that female sexuality was dangerous, both to women themselves and to society at large.