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THE REINTERPRETATION OF BIBLICAL SYMBOLS THROUGH THE LIVES AND FICTIONS OF VICTORIAN WOMEN

“To Come Within the Orbit of Possibility”

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THESIS ABSTRACT

This thesis argues that nineteenth-century shifts in hermeneutics enabled women to re-vision Victorian conceptions of womanhood by reinterpreting biblical narratives within fictional texts. Due to these shifts, the meaning of biblical symbols was increasingly tied to the personal experience of the reader. This enabled women to reinterpret these symbols to reflect their own experiences as women. This hermeneutic approach was formulated out of critical enquiry into the nature of the biblical text which resulted in questioning the authority of the Bible. Questions regarding the authority of scripture opened up the possibility for Victorian authors to use fictive texts in order to reinterpret biblical symbols, resulting in the constant re-visioning of biblical symbols by readers and writers. As the authority of scripture became unstable, gender roles, which were rooted within a biblical symbolic, also became destabilized. The novels of female authors who reimagined biblical symbols gave voice to these authors' own experiences as women as they embodied these symbols within their life and work, resulting in new understandings of Victorian womanhood.

George Eliot was particularly conscious of the hermeneutic shifts which were taking place throughout the century due to her extensive involvement in the philosophical and theological movements of the era, and her novels demonstrate how these shifts influenced her work. The reinterpretation of biblical narratives within her novels also reflects how she embodied these female biblical symbols within her own life. While Eliot's awareness of the shifts taking place within hermeneutic practice is evident in her work, she was not alone in adopting this hermeneutic practice. Novelist Elizabeth Gaskell also reimagined and embodied biblical symbols, yet her experience as a Victorian woman was strikingly different from Eliot's own and led her to distinct reinterpretations of these symbols in her life and novels. Likewise, social activist Josephine Butler reinterpreted female biblical narratives in order to understand her life in relation to the 'fallen' women she worked with. These three women have been chosen for this project because of how they represent nineteenth-century shifts in hermeneutic practice toward biblical symbols in addition to the shared affinities and prominent differences between them.

To explore these issues requires a theoretical framework which encompasses literature, philosophy, sociology, history, theology, and feminist theory; however, fundamentally this project is concerned with theological hermeneutics and the nature of biblical symbols. This project examines the influence of nineteenth-century theologians David Friedrich Strauss and Ludwig Feuerbach on Victorian hermeneutics and applies more recent work by Paul Ricœur, Jacques Rancière, and Caroline Walker Bynum to formulate a framework through which to understand the Victorian interpretation of biblical symbols. As Victorian women readers re-visioned female biblical symbols as encountered through sacred and fictive texts, the fresh interpretations of these symbols enabled women to negotiate new ways of understanding gender. These hermeneutic shifts toward biblical symbols created a symbolic understanding of womanhood which was able to better convey the complexity of female experience, providing women with an understanding of womanhood that better correlated with their own experience as women.

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ABBREVIATIONS

- GEL*, followed by volume. *The George Eliot Letters*. 9 vols. Gordon S. Haight, editor. New Haven: Yale UP, 1954-1978.
- EGL*. *The Letters of Mrs. Gaskell*. J.A.V. Chapple and Arthur Pollard, editors. Manchester: Manchester UP, 1966.

All Bible references are from the New Revised Standard Version (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1999.)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

One of the first novels I remember reading in early adolescence was Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. The novel's first scene, which depicts Jane escaping with her cousin's book to the window seat ensconced behind red drapery, immediately resonated with me. I, too, often took refuge from the world around me by disappearing into a world of written words and images. As I began the research for this project I returned once again to the Victorian novels I read in my youth, but this time I initially found myself disappointed by them. As I was raised within the context of late twentieth-century American Christianity, Victorian novels at points sounded almost identical to the teaching about sexuality and gender roles I grew up with—teachings which I had since rejected.

I was not the first to note the similarities; several scholars argue that the evangelical Christian concept of the traditional family and spiritual womanhood is rooted in the Victorian ideal of domesticity and the symbolic figure of the 'angel in the house.'¹ Likewise, American Evangelicals remain uncomfortable with female sexuality in a way that bears resemblance to the Victorian valorization of women's

¹ Rosemary Radford Ruether writes, "What emerged was a Victorian ideal of the family—the 'modern family'—that continues to function today in the nostalgic imagination as a normative model." (*Christianity and the Making of the Modern Family*. Boston: Beacon, 2000, 102.). She later adds that "the cult of true womanhood of the Victorian era was restated in the 1970s in new evangelical tracts that claimed that traditional gender relations reflected the divinely mandated biblical form of the family." (158) See also: Amy Johnston Frykholm. *Rapture Culture: Left Behind in Evangelical America*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2004, 98; John Stratton Hawley. *Fundamentalism and Gender*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1994, 181; and Susan Hill Lindley. "Gender and Social Roles." *Encyclopedia of Women and Religion in North America*. Vol. 1. Rosemary Skinner Keller, Rosemary Radford Ruether and Marie Cantlon, editors. Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP, 2006, 23-32, 31.

chastity and the demonization of ‘fallen’ women. It is difficult not to notice, for instance, the parallels between twentieth-century Christian author Elisabeth Elliot’s teachings on womanhood and that of nineteenth-century lecturer John Ruskin. In an 1864 speech entitled “Of Queen’s Gardens,” Ruskin calls the home “a sacred place, a vestal temple” that is established “wherever a true wife comes” and exists as a “woman’s true place and power.”² Elliot, in a 1976 book defining what it means to be a Christian woman, writes: “You can create a climate for [your husband] according to your attitude, and this is part of your job as a wife...Let it be a place of beauty and peace.”³ Both Elliot and Ruskin understand that a woman’s fundamental role is found within the home creating a place of refuge for her husband. As I returned to reading Victorian novels as an adult, they initially seemed to reinforce the same teachings which were emphasized within the evangelical instruction of my youth, idealizing the ‘angel’ and denouncing the ‘fallen.’

However, when I was younger and attempting to figure out what it meant to be an evangelical Christian woman, *Jane Eyre* proved to be a formative text, providing me with a particular image of womanhood. I specifically identified with the tension Jane felt between her piety and self-reliance. I was a voracious reader; characters within both American and British Victorian novels such as Jo March and Catherine Earnshaw filling my imagination with strong images of independent womanhood which I admired. However, my understanding of Christian womanhood was more immediately shaped by the sermons on gender roles I heard preached at my church and the Christian books I read claiming to teach about dating and marriage.⁴ In

² John Ruskin. *Sesame and Lilies*. London: Smith, Elder, 1865, 148-149.

³ Elisabeth Elliot. *Let Me Be a Woman*. Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1976, 101.

⁴ These works included works by Elisabeth Elliot (*Passion and Purity: Learning to Bring Your Love Life Under God’s Control* and *Let Me Be a Woman*) and *Brio Magazine*, a magazine for teenage girls published by the American evangelical organization *Focus on the Family*. (A critique of the gender roles proposed by James Dobson, the founder of *Focus on the Family*, can be found here: Eithne

American evangelical communities, the ideal for every woman was to live in submission, quietness, and purity, and throughout my adolescence I accepted these teachings. The teachings on womanhood I grew up with were filled with commands that made spiritual purity outwardly visible —avoid short skirts to maintain modesty, avoid ‘secular’ entertainment to uphold holiness, avoid dating to preserve purity. These teachings, though sometimes difficult, could be mimicked precisely. At the time it seemed that the novels I read were filled with images that were not merely difficult but were impossible to copy. They were not commands to obey; rather, they were complex narratives to be interpreted. They were subtly shaping my self-interpretation, but not in the same way as my obedience to evangelical teachings, which affected me in ways I could not clearly identify at the time.

As I entered into adulthood, I very gradually distanced myself from the evangelical teachings of my youth. During my years of undergraduate study in the areas of theology and English literature, I became more familiar with Christian feminist discourse, which enabled me to reconcile my experience as a young woman to my religious faith. During this time I was also immersed in American and British literature along with the Bible; looking back it was through these written words that I came to understand who I was. These texts, the fictive world of the novel and the stories of the Bible, came alive within me through my own interpretive role as a reader. I became increasingly frustrated by the gender roles made implicit in the religious teachings I often heard growing up as they became irreconcilable with my actual experience as a woman. However, there remain aspects of feminist discourse (admittedly a broad field) that I find difficult to affirm, even though I accept many of its tenets, because it, also, does not always line up with my own experience as a

woman. Instead, I find myself drawn to complex narratives that raise more questions than they answer. Life with its own complexity makes it difficult to reconcile ideological teachings with personal experience. Somewhere within these fictive and sacred narratives is something that begins to speak about my experience where other more didactic teachings fail.

While the gender roles within Victorian novels initially seemed to share commonalities with the teachings found in American evangelical Christianity, as I delved further into the world of Victorian novels and culture through my research for this project I began to question twentieth-century assertions about Victorian gender roles. The understanding of these gender roles, often dependent on the symbols of the ‘angel in the house’ and the ‘fallen’ woman, seemed too simplistic. The dichotomous image of the ‘angel’ and the ‘whore’ was especially problematic because it did not seem that Victorian women understood their own role as women through these symbols. While patriarchy certainly tended to confine women to particular gender roles within society, Victorian novels reflect the shifts taking place in regard to nineteenth-century conceptions of womanhood which were inclined to question and reinterpret nineteenth-century gender roles. Using the symbols of the ‘angel in the house’ and ‘fallen’ woman to explain Victorian womanhood often serves to negatively reinforce the image of passive female submission to patriarchy, which does not fully reflect the way Victorian women understood their role in society. Because the symbols of the ‘angel in the house’ and ‘fallen’ woman fall short in describing Victorian gender roles, greater attention needs to be given to how Victorian women developed understandings of womanhood and how they interpreted their own role as women in society.

Due to the centrality of Christian practice in Victorian British society, women's roles tended to be defined through a particular understanding of womanhood drawn from female biblical figures. As women's roles became increasingly delegated to the domestic sphere,⁵ the idealization of maternity tended to be interpreted through the figure of the Virgin Mary. At the same time, women who did not fulfill the role of an idealized woman were understood through figures such as Mary Magdalene and Eve. However, as the understanding of the nature of biblical texts changed because of growing doubts toward the authority of the Bible, the meaning of scripture itself became more unstable. Out of these shifts a hermeneutic approach was developed toward scripture that was dependent on the personal experience of the reader. Because the role of women was understood through these biblical narratives, the meaning of womanhood itself was increasingly subject to being questioned as well, resulting in a shifting female symbolic. These shifts in hermeneutic practice enabled women to reimagine female biblical symbols which in turn resulted in the reinterpretations of Victorian conceptions of womanhood. While these reimagined female symbols remained tied to biblical myths, they found new meaning when reinterpreted through the experiences of Victorian women readers. In turn, these biblical symbols were reimagined within novels, which enabled readers to reinterpret symbols that were constantly given re-visioned meanings. Victorian women subsequently formulated their understanding of womanhood through their encounters with these biblical symbols both within the Bible and the reinterpreted biblical narratives found within fictional texts. Thus, the development of Victorian female gender roles was centrally tied to nineteenth-century hermeneutic practice which grew out of shifts in how the nature of biblical texts and symbols were understood.

⁵ See pages 23-24.

Methodological Concerns

With its focus on the way in which religious symbols operate in religion, literature, and culture, this project intertwines literary, theological, sociological, and historical concerns and is therefore interdisciplinary in nature. Because it is heavily dependent on theological interpretations to discuss the relationship between religious symbols and the novel, this work is a project that is fundamentally theological in nature. Much current scholarship utilizes ‘interdisciplinary’ approaches towards Victorian religion and literature, yet such work often lacks a theological approach to literature, instead often focusing energy simply on noting biblical allusions and passages that discuss theology within literature. One such example is J. Russell Perkin’s recent work *Theology and the Victorian Novel* in which each chapter summarizes the theological perspective of one author and goes on to catalog the parts of an author’s work that emphasize his or her religious views—such as a chapter listing passages within Charlotte Yonge’s *The Heir of Radcliffe* that echo aspects of John Keble’s Tractarian poetry. Perkin expresses the hope that his work may “contribute to the dialogue between these two disciplines.”⁶ But he begins his book with an announcement that novels do not have much to do with theology.⁷ He moves on to explain that he is tying literature and theology together because the Victorian novelist, immersed in a religious culture, often wrote about theological issues.⁸ At this point, Perkin’s opening statement about the disconnection between theology and the novel is self-fulfilling if one borrows his methodology. Perkin employs a literary rather than theological approach to the novel because he is simply trying to understand the content of novels. Perkin’s work is but one instance demonstrating an

⁶ J. Russell Perkin. *Theology and the Victorian Novel*. London: McGill-Queen’s UP, 2009, 5.

⁷ Ibid, 3.

⁸ Ibid, 5-6.

assumption that interdisciplinary study is as straightforward as blending two fields together: in this case, looking for religious allusions within literature. While work similar to Perkin's has increasingly come to be understood as an interdisciplinary approach to literature and theology, the methodology of this project is different.⁹

The intention of this project is to take a theological approach to the novel rather than a literary approach that looks at the way in which religion is discussed within the novel. Therefore, the project is more concerned with formulating a theological hermeneutic—how sacred texts are read, understood, and rewritten by a religious culture—along with understanding the relationship between the novel and scripture. Thus a theological approach to literature ultimately becomes concerned with what Elisabeth Jay calls “the organic connections between language and beliefs,”¹⁰ which refers to the inability of language to express fully religious experience and, paradoxically, the sheer power that is bound up in written texts that wrestle with that which is connected to God. Thus, a theological approach to literature is centrally concerned with how these written fictive texts operate in such a way to make incarnate the ineffable, and, in turn, how this changes the way in which one reads or understands sacred texts such as the Bible. These connections are further hinted at in David Jasper's claim that literature has the ability to speak about matters that theology often struggles to give voice to, paradoxically because literature is sensitive “to the inaudibility of the word, to the silence and darkness of God.”¹¹ While the novel could be understood as a secularized replacement of sacred text, Jasper

⁹ A helpful summary of the history and various approaches to the interdisciplinary field of theology and literature can be found in David Jasper's essay “The Study of Literature and Theology.” *The Oxford Handbook of English Literature and Theology*. Andrew Hass, David Jasper, and Elisabeth Jay, editors. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2007, 15-32.

¹⁰ Elisabeth Jay. “‘Now and in England’ (Eliot 1968:50).” *The Oxford Handbook of English Literature and Theology*. Andrew Hass, David Jasper, and Elisabeth Jay, editors. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2007, 3-14, 10.

¹¹ David Jasper. “The Study of Literature and Theology,” 28.

alternatively believes that literature is “a major expression of religious beliefs and experiences that have often been suppressed by the very guardians of theology.”¹²

Likewise, even revisionist interpretations of scripture by feminist theologians to some degree fail to express the lived experiences of men and women in relation to gender roles and sexuality. Heather Walton advocates a creative approach to reconstructing a female past in order to deal with this shortcoming in theological works, describing the task as requiring both “imaginative and interpretive resources.” In doing so Walton turns to literature for theological reinterpretations that might benefit current theological understandings of sexuality.¹³ Adopting Adrienne Rich’s definition of “re-visioning” from her essay “When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Revision,”¹⁴ Walton argues for the necessity of women “[critiquing] the male-centered traditions through which they have been formed and also to engage with them in order that they might be reclaimed and transformed.”¹⁵ Her use of the term “re-vision” powerfully describes a hermeneutic practice of reinterpreting, or rewriting, texts. This type of re-visioning allows women to discover a powerful mythology to support their experience as women. Indeed, such creative re-visioning is particularly accessible through literature. Re-visioned biblical symbols within fictive works express religious beliefs in a way that is often lacking in strictly theological works. A theology of gender and sexuality makes claims that one can choose to agree or disagree with, but novels tend to offer readers narratives and images that are open for infinite

¹² Ibid, 29.

¹³ Heather Walton. “Feminist Revisioning.” *The Oxford Handbook of English Literature and Theology*. Eds. Andrew Haas, David Jasper, & Elisabeth Jay. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2007. 543-557, 544. Walton here also mentions that feminist interpretations of scripture and Church history, such as the pioneering work by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, was necessarily both a creative and exegetical task (544).

¹⁴ Rich defines re-visioning as “the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction.” See: “When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-vision.” *College English* 34.1 (1972): 18-30, 18.

¹⁵ Walton. “Feminist Revisioning,” 543.

interpretations and are appropriated by each individual reader in ways that a theological work often is not.

The theological approach to literature within this project does not altogether avoid investigating some of the same issues Russell J. Perkin writes about; after all, understanding the novelist George Eliot's¹⁶ interest in Feuerbach's religion of humanity illuminates the meaning of her stories, but an analysis of the spiritual vantage point of an author is peripheral to this project that is concerned with deeper theological questions about the nature of sacred texts or religious symbolism and its relation to the novel. The theological approach to literature used in this thesis is much more concerned with what happens to biblical texts and religious symbols when they are rewritten and reinterpreted, along with exploring how the novel can be understood as a theological apparatus. Literary interpretations of texts that are focused on the content of the work are important to this project but only as a means of assessing how the content explains the novel's role as a sacred text, or, in other words, the way the novel is creatively re-visioning the religious symbol and how that then changes the way scripture is read and appropriated. In this project various novelistic narratives will be read and interpreted not simply in order to shed light on how a Victorian author might have understood the Virgin Mary, but rather as a method of reading novels as sacred texts.

¹⁶ Referring to the author George Eliot by name is problematic, particularly when working with both her life and fiction. Eliot was known by many names (and spelling variations) throughout her lifetime: Mary Ann, Mary Anne, Clematis, Appolyon, Marianne, Marian, Polly, George Eliot, M.E. Lewes, and Mrs. J.W. Cross. Yet, as Rosemarie Bodenheimer notes, the name "George Eliot" "retains its singular power to identify both the person and the writer." ("A Woman of Many Names." *The Cambridge Companion to George Eliot*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001, 20) For the ease of the reader, I have decided, with some reluctance, to take the path of clarity, referring to her in almost all instances, particularly those that refer to her intellectual and literary work, as George Eliot. In the recollections and correspondences of her contemporaries, I have kept their own names for her, which include several variations. In some instances, I have used Mary Ann Evans, her birth name, where it might be confusing to use her pseudonym, or to particularly emphasize the contrast between herself and her own self-interpretation as the author George Eliot.

George Eliot was a key Victorian figure whose work encompasses the areas of literature, theology, and philosophy; as such, critical academic work focusing on her has been voluminous. For this project, the focus on Eliot lies in two interrelated areas: first Eliot's philosophical and theological pursuits which reflect a tendency toward an embodied hermeneutic approach with scripture in the Victorian era; and second her appropriation of the Bible within her novels. By questioning her philosophical and theological influences, I am not specifically writing *about* Eliot *per se*; but rather, using her as a representative figure through which to trace the many diverse movements contributing to the embodied hermeneutic approach that developed in the second half of the nineteenth century.

Because this project is fundamentally concerned with theological hermeneutics, I have chosen to focus on Victorian figures who have exemplified an embodied hermeneutic within their life and writing. George Eliot is an ideal figure through whom to trace the influences on Victorian hermeneutic practices because she was particularly aware of how major intellectual movements were shaping interpretive approaches toward biblical and fictional texts. Diverse intellectual movements such as Romanticism, Pietism, and Higher Criticism significantly shaped the Victorian social imaginaries, particularly in regard to how Victorians read and interpreted the Bible, and in turn, fictional texts as well. Eliot, with her Pietistic background and her later appropriation of Romanticism and Higher Criticism, serves as a key figure where these influences come together in one person. The broader influence of these movements can be delineated throughout the Victorian social imaginaries. However, Eliot's extraordinary consciousness of how these movements were influencing hermeneutic practice toward biblical and fictional texts more broadly in society makes her work and philosophical reflections a useful starting place

to understand how these movements shaped Victorian reading practices. Despite the influence of these movements for a wider audience, Eliot's appropriation of these philosophical movements was atypical in many ways due to her self-awareness in the adopted interpretative practices in her life and work. Her novels, essays, and letters articulate the way she incorporated this approach to interpreting scripture within her work with a clarity that is not commonly found in the texts of other writers of the time period. While Eliot's life and work will provide the primary lens to trace the development of an embodied hermeneutic approach, other Victorian writers will be examined alongside Eliot's work, particularly key figures within the movements of Romanticism, Pietism, and Higher Criticism along with fellow Victorian novelists and literary critics.

After tracing the development of an embodied hermeneutic through various theological and philosophical movements of the era, I go on to analyze how specific Victorian female writers reinterpreted biblical symbols within their writing in order to understand their experiences as women. Within this project George Eliot, Elizabeth Gaskell, and Josephine Butler have been chosen as mid-century Victorian writers who used this embodied hermeneutic in order to reinterpret biblical symbols within their writing. Gaskell and Butler, whose lives and writings adopted an embodied hermeneutic, are used within this project to provide examples of how women with diverse backgrounds used the reinterpretation of biblical symbols as a way to understand their own unique experiences as women. Butler specifically provides an interesting contrast to Eliot and Gaskell as she was not a novelist, but nonetheless adopted a similar hermeneutic approach in her reading of fictive and sacred texts along with her autobiographical and biographical writings and essays. Thus Butler,

like Eliot and Gaskell, often reinterpreted biblical symbols within quasi-fictive narratives in a way that reflected her own experiences as a woman.

These three women have been chosen for this project because of how they each represent various, often contradictory, aspects of Victorian womanhood and used their personal experiences in order to rewrite biblical narratives within their work. Both the commonalities and striking differences in the female experience between these three women serve to emphasize the diverse ways Victorian women appropriated biblical symbols within their life and work. Despite different family arrangements and religious beliefs, all three women understood their own lives through female biblical symbols and reinterpreted these symbols within their writing, albeit in unique ways. Furthermore, because Eliot, Gaskell, and Butler were in dialogue with each other's respective works, they provide a useful means to explore how some Victorian women used and adapted the reinterpretation of biblical symbols by others within their own lives and writing, thus emphasizing the hermeneutic circle at play within Victorian hermeneutics.

Despite noteworthy differences in their experiences as women,¹⁷ all three figures returned to the same biblical symbols¹⁸—Eve, the Virgin Mary, and Mary

¹⁷ The differences and similarities between these women are striking, particularly with regard to family life and religious practice. Each of the women garnered both respect and social ostracism throughout their lifetimes, albeit for very different reasons. Eliot maintained a lifelong love relationship with G.H. Lewes, who remained married to another woman, making her a woman of ill-repute. Gaskell and Butler, on the other hand, maintained middle-class respectability through their marriages and families. Eliot remained childless (though she was active in raising G.H. Lewes' children), while Gaskell and Butler both raised large families (See pages 260-262). Furthermore, both Gaskell and Butler experienced the devastating loss of very young children (See page 276). While Eliot lost respectability through her relationship with Lewes along with her 'masculine' scholarly pursuits, she ultimately attained a saint-like status in society through her role as an honored author (See pages 215-223). Unlike the 'fallen' George Eliot who often defended her innocence, both Gaskell and Butler in some ways sought out controversy through their work and support of disadvantaged women of ill-repute, despite fulfilling middle-class ideals in other aspects of their lives (See pages 271, 287)

¹⁸ Each of the women came out of very different religious backgrounds: Eliot was raised as an Evangelical within the Church of England (as an adult she also at times practiced Unitarianism and Positivism—an interest that arose out of her religious doubt—see pages 76, 230), Gaskell was a lifelong practitioner of Unitarianism (See 249-250), and Butler remained Methodist throughout her life (For Butler's reflections on her faith: *The Women's Library*. The Josephine Butler Collection, JEB to

Magdalene—again and again within their writing as a way to understand their own lives and the role of women more generally. However, each interpreted these symbols in unique ways that reflected their own personal experiences as women. Furthermore, the way Eliot, Gaskell, and Butler have been appropriated and reinterpreted both by readers of their own time period and subsequent generations reflects the way in which they have been used by others as contemporary symbols of womanhood. Thus, the embodiment of female biblical symbols within Eliot, Gaskell, and Butler's lives and fictions ultimately shaped subsequent reinterpretations of these same symbols by their readers and critics.

The commonalities and differences between these three women emphasize that while women do have a collective experience as women, relating to the way gender is subscribed to women within a particular culture, at the same time each woman has personal experiences that shape the way she understands her role within society. Thus, each woman's reinterpretation and appropriation of biblical symbols was at the same time individual and collective as its meaning was drawn out of feminine experience. Furthermore, a hermeneutic of embodiment, as practiced by these Victorian women who reinterpreted female biblical symbols within their work, demonstrated an appropriation of biblical symbols that borrowed from a female tradition of interpretation. While each woman reinterpreted biblical symbols through their own experiences, she nonetheless was dependent on the history of interpretation of that symbol. As Eliot, Gaskell, and Butler reinterpreted these symbols through their own personal experiences as women through their individual reinterpretations of these symbols, they likewise contributed to this interpretative tradition.

Miss Priestman, 17 January 1883. Quoted in: Jane Jordan. *Josephine Butler*, 16. See also page 288) However, none of the women were particularly dogmatic about denominationalism, though the differences in their reinterpretation of religious symbols in their life and work can be traced through their different religious backgrounds.

Key Terms: Social Imaginary, Victorian, Victorian Reader, Gender, and Embodiment

Undergirding my argument is a theoretical framework of how cultural understandings are formed and how the central voices of society interact with the beliefs of the ordinary person to shape society's common practices. This framework informs what I mean by Victorian culture or society throughout this work. Charles C. Taylor's concept of the *social imaginary* is a particularly helpful way to explore the process of how Victorian discourse shaped nineteenth-century British social culture, specifically because of his interest in the interplay between new theories from leading thinkers and the daily practices of ordinary people. Taylor defines social imaginaries as the commonly held understandings that enable and legitimize shared beliefs and practices among a culture.¹⁹ While Taylor is not specifically writing about the Victorian era, his discussion of how the ordinary person constructs his or her understanding of the world, rather than how philosophical movements of a time period prompt theoretical understandings possessed by an elite few, is applicable to British culture of the nineteenth century.²⁰ His conception of the social imaginary explains how multiple strands of thought, even, in some cases, opposing philosophies, eventually come together to formulate an understanding of the world that influences the beliefs and practices common within a particular culture.

The concept of the social imaginary can be useful in describing how the theories advocated within philosophical or theological works read by a few Victorians eventually became adopted by large segments of British culture.²¹ Taylor proposes

¹⁹ Charles C. Taylor. *Modern Social Imaginaries*. Durham: Duke UP, 2004, 23.

²⁰ Ibid, 23.

²¹ Taylor writes, "It often happens that what starts off as theories held by a few people come to infiltrate the social imaginary, first of elites perhaps, and then of the whole society." He offers the theories of Grotius and Locke as examples of works that shaped the social imaginaries of their societies, but notes that the way they transformed social imaginaries have been many and varied (Ibid, 24).

that theoretical structures originating among the academic elite “penetrate and transform the social imaginary” over time.²² Taylor’s theory of the social imaginary assists in explaining how the theological theories found in religious movements or philosophical works came to shape the widely adopted hermeneutic practices of Victorian readers, even if many readers were unfamiliar with the theories that ultimately shaped their practice. Yet the relationship between fresh ideas and old cultural practices is not simply a one-sided relationship wherein new theories impact the social imaginary, but the new theories are also “given a particular shape”²³ by the existing social practices at play. In this Taylor is emphasizing that new theories do not simply replace old cultural practices, but that the new and old both have a role in forming the social imaginary. Thus, the hermeneutic methods advocated within Victorian philosophical and fictional works eventually became what Charles C. Taylor calls “the taken-for-granted shape of things”²⁴—an interpretative approach that became so prevalent it was frequently practiced as an implicit aspect of reading.

However, Victorian Britain was not a monolithic culture and Taylor’s theory raises questions about the so-called “taken-for-granted shape of things” as to who or what group was accepting thoughts and practices as normative. Furthermore, Taylor avoids discussing how certain beliefs and voices wield more influence than others within social imaginaries. While Taylor’s argument broadly refers to a general understanding of modern Western culture, nineteenth-century English cultural practices were often deeply divided by social class, gender, and religious affiliation—divisions Taylor avoids exploring (in lieu of such exploration Taylor refers to multiple social *imaginaries* rather than a singular social imaginary). Even though there certainly was overlap between these social groups in the Victorian era, distinctions

²² Ibid, 29.

²³ Ibid, 30.

²⁴ Ibid, 29.

nonetheless remained. Taylor's work on social imaginaries is, at points, simplistic, and it is certainly more general than specific in its focus. However, his work significantly points to the role that diverse, and often opposing, discourses have in shaping culture, a role which has also been explored within the work of philosopher Michel Foucault.²⁵ While Taylor focuses on the interaction between cultural practice and philosophical movements, Foucault is more interested in the relationship between knowledge, power, and discourse. Foucault is especially concerned with sudden cultural shifts from one way of thinking to another, a phenomenon Foucault refers to as "discontinuity" and which he attributes to the "relations between thought and culture."²⁶ Both Foucault and Taylor link culture to discourse, which is constantly breaking into and being adapted by the layers of discourse and practice within society.

While it is impossible to claim that Victorian culture at large advocated a single method to interpreting texts, I am interested in exploring the major voices contributing to the Victorian social imaginaries of the last half of the century, particularly those who shaped Victorian hermeneutic practice and gender roles. Like Taylor and Foucault, I seek to explore the interplay between varied and often contradictory discourses within a particular culture—with attention paid to shifts developing in thought and practice—in order to explain how Victorian female readers and writers interpreted and embodied the texts they read.

The method for explaining how biblical symbols can be reinterpreted and embodied through fictional narratives in this project is through an exploration of how female writers were reinterpreting biblical symbols through fiction during the mid to late nineteenth century. The terms *Victorian* and *nineteenth century* within this thesis are used primarily to refer to the time period of 1846-1880; however as the

²⁵ In particular, see: Michel Foucault. *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. London: Routledge, 2003, 28-31, 53-54; Michel Foucault. *The Order of Things*. New York: Routledge, 2003, 406-407.

²⁶ Foucault. *The Order of Things*, 56.

Victorian era and its thought cannot be so neatly divided, at times this project discusses pertinent works from earlier or later dates that either influenced later thought or reflect earlier hermeneutic practice. Much of my interest in Victorian hermeneutics is concentrated within a span of years from the publication date of George Eliot's English translation of David Friedrich Strauss' *The Life of Jesus, Critically Examined* in 1846 to Eliot's death in 1880 and these represent the basic limits of the project. This time period is a particularly fertile era to explore not only the influences of Victorian hermeneutic practice within fictional novels, but also the way women writers questioned traditional gender roles through their fictional works.

This thirty year time span approximates what Elaine Showalter calls "the Golden Age of Victorian authoresses,"²⁷ during which female authors, such as Anne, Charlotte, and Emily Brontë, George Eliot, Elizabeth Gaskell, Elizabeth Lynn Linton, Margaret Oliphant, and Elizabeth Charlotte Yonge, published works which were read popularly and generally received critical acclaim. The influence of Romanticism, Pietism, and Higher Criticism on Victorian hermeneutics and the appropriation of biblical narratives within fictional texts can be traced through the lives and work of these Victorian women during the third quarter of the nineteenth century. These movements increasingly questioned the authority of the biblical text by emphasizing the role of personal experience in the interpretative approach of the reader, which, in turn, encouraged the rewriting of biblical narratives within biographical and fictional texts. During this same period, women writers also increasingly questioned Victorian gender roles through their work so that fictional narratives might more accurately portray their own experiences as women. This project focuses on George Eliot, Elizabeth Gaskell, and Josephine Butler because their work clearly reflects the

²⁷ Showalter defines this era as female authors who were born from 1800-1820, including "the Brontës, Mrs. Gaskell, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Harriet Martineau, and George Eliot." (19)

influence of Higher Criticism, Romanticism and Pietism in that Victorian female writers were enabled to reinterpret biblical symbols within their fictional and biographical works.

The hermeneutic approaches to fictional texts within the social imaginary were, in part, informed by the development of the novel as a genre and the increasing interest in what it meant to be a *Victorian reader* of fictional texts.²⁸ Although current historians struggle to recreate the hypothetical ‘average Victorian reader,’²⁹ the era undeniably experienced growing literacy rates and an explosion in the combined availability and affordability of printed texts.³⁰ Furthermore, Victorians expressed an awareness that they were living in “the age of novels.”³¹ At the beginning of the twentieth century, Walter Raleigh reflected on the Victorian novel by predicting that

²⁸ For more on Victorian readers, particularly women, see: Kate Flint. *The Woman Reader: 1837-1914*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993; Sally Mitchell. “Sentiment and Suffering: Women’s Recreational Reading in the 1860s.” *Victorian Studies*, Vol. 21, No. 1, Victorian Leisure (Autumn 1977), 29-45; Sally Mitchell. *The Fallen Angel: Chastity, Class, and Women’s Reading, 1835-1880*. Bowling Green: Popular Press, 1981; Beth Palmer and Adelene Buckland, eds. *A Return to the Common Reader: Print Culture and the Novel, 1850-1900*. Burlington: Ashgate, 2011; Jennifer Phegley. *Educating the Proper Woman Reader: Victorian Family Literary Magazines and the Cultural Health of the Nation*. Columbus: Ohio State UP, 2004; and Joanne Shattock, ed. *Women and Literature in Britain: 1800-1900*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001. Richard Altick’s foundational work *The English Common Reader* (Columbus: Ohio State UP, 1957. Rpt. 1998) influenced these other works, but as Kate Flint notes, Altick was “virtually silent on the topic of women as readers” (*The Woman Reader: 1837-1914*, 32-33).

²⁹ Historians continue to struggle to define the term. After critiquing data from nineteenth-century literary records, library memberships, and literacy-related writing in periodicals, Margaret Beetham laments, “With all this mass of material evidence to draw on, questions of who was reading and what they read still remain difficult to answer. If we ask about the *how* of reading this problem is compounded.” (“Women and the Consumption of Print.” *Women and Literature in Britain: 1800-1900*. Ed. Joanne Shattock. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001. 55-77, 57.) Literacy rates and library memberships did not always reflect who was actually reading books, while autobiographical reflections on reading and reviews written for periodicals only recorded the responses of the more self-aware readers. Even sales records can be misleading—just because a book was popular does not guarantee that it was influential and had any lasting impression on readers. See: Jonathan Rose. “How Historians Study Reader Response: or, What Did Jo Think of Bleak House?” *Literature in the Marketplace: Nineteenth-century British Publishing and Reading Practices*. Eds. John O. Jordan and Robert L. Patten. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995. 195-212, 205.

³⁰ Deborah Wynne. “Readers and Reading Practices.” *The Oxford History of the Novel in English: Volume 3, The Nineteenth Century Novel 1820-1880*. Eds. John Kucich and Jenny Bourne Taylor. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2012. 22-36, 22.

³¹ Percy Greg. “Mr. Trollope’s Novels.” *National Review* Oct. 1858: 416-435, 416.

“The novel of the twentieth century will hardly rival the novel of the nineteenth.”³²

Raleigh refers here not just to the novel’s popularity but also its literary qualities.

Victorians expressed an awareness not only of the height of the novel’s popularity but also of the ubiquity of the novel among those of different class, gender, and religious affiliations. In 1870, Anthony Trollope exclaimed:

Novels are in the hands of us all; from the Prime Minister down to the last-appointed scullery-maid. We have them in our library, our drawing rooms, our bedrooms, our kitchens,—and in our nurseries.³³

While Trollope claims that novels were read by all, Victorians nonetheless often correlated reading practices with categories of gender and social class, creating a hierarchical relationship between the type of reader and quality of literature he or she consumed. Victorians generally understood novel readers—especially those readers of ‘quality fiction’—to be middle-class.³⁴ Novel reading was particularly related to middle-class women, though not always in a positive way. Women were often criticized for using their leisure time to read novels—these criticisms often tended to be related to the type of books they read.

Middle-class women were regularly condemned by cultural critics for their reading choices, as if they only read popular, unsophisticated fictional works.

Romance and sensation novels were not only understood as empty recreation³⁵ but also as morally corrupting. In many ways this reflected an earlier, more general Victorian fear applied to all fiction, which novelist Anthony Trollope criticized as “The ordinary old homily, inveighing against the frivolities, the falsehood, and

³² Walter Raleigh. “The English Novel in the Nineteenth Century.” *The Edinburgh Review* July 1902: 487-506, 505.

³³ Anthony Trollope. “On English Prose Fiction as a Rational Amusement.” *Four Lectures*. Ed. M.L. Parrish. London: Constable, 1938, 108.

³⁴ See: “Moral and Political Tendencies of the Modern Novels.” *The Church of England Quarterly Review* London: William Edward Painter, Strand, 1842, 286-310, 287.

³⁵ Sarah Stickney Ellis. *The Women of England, Their Social Duties, and Domestic Habits*. London: Fisher, Son, 1839, 50, 190.

perhaps the licentiousness, of a fictitious narrative.”³⁶ Fiction was understood as capable of influencing readers to act immorally, especially those who were viewed as weak-willed and therefore susceptible to fiction’s negative sway. Victorians claimed that women read more novels than men because they were “more sensitive, more impressionable” and had more leisure time;³⁷ thus, they were particularly vulnerable to the novel’s power. As one Victorian critic pointed out, “The great bulk of novel readers are females; and to them such impressions are peculiarly mischievous.”³⁸ John Ruskin, in his famous “Of Queens’ Gardens” lecture, similarly instructs that the reading choices of women should become “less frivolous” so that the average woman may be sure “that her books are not heaped up in her lap as they fall out of the package of the circulating library, wet with the last and lightest spray of the fountain of folly.”³⁹ The prevalence of instruction toward female readers demonstrates how central the woman reader was to the Victorian social imaginary, even if she was often criticized for her reading choices. Middle-class women were often the targeted audience of the novel, and the relative acceptability of the female author reflects the cultural understanding that middle-class women were predominately writing for other middle-class women.⁴⁰

In formulating my use of the term Victorian reader throughout this work, I have chosen to rely on the Victorian discourse on the novel, particularly as found in journals and magazines of the day. Victorian reflections on novel reading imply that

³⁶ Anthony Trollope. “Novel Reading.” *The Victorian Art of Fiction: Nineteenth-Century Essays on the Novel*. Ed. Rohan Maitzen. Buffalo, NY: Broadview, 2009. 277-298, 280.

³⁷ “Moral and Political Tendencies of the Modern Novels,” 287-288.

³⁸ Ibid, 287.

³⁹ John Ruskin. *Sesame and Lilies*, 162.

⁴⁰ The relationship between women writers and the novel was complex, evolving throughout the century. Gaye Tuchman’s work *Edging Women Out: Victorian Novelists, Publishers, and Social Change* (London: Yale UP, 1989) argues that in the later part of the century, men began to dominate the literary field, as male writers were increasingly correlated with the high-cultural novel while women were understood as writing less serious fictional works. Of course, this only served to emphasize the criticism that female readers were only interested in light, romantic fare.

the intended audiences of these works were middle-class, and often women.⁴¹

Furthermore, the novel writers focused on in this study, George Eliot and Elizabeth Gaskell, were themselves middle-class, and their works, like most novels of the day, reflect middle-class, nineteenth-century cultural values.⁴² More recent interest in performing gyno-criticism⁴³ to texts, along with the development of a feminist reader-response theory⁴⁴ has provided a helpful framework to understand why this cultural concept of readership mattered for Victorian writers and readers, particularly women. Adrienne Rich argues that while “[n]o male writer has written primarily or even largely for women,” female writers, on the other hand, necessarily write with an awareness of their male readers, even when they are intentionally addressing a female audience.⁴⁵ If they were to be taken seriously at all, “lady novelists” of the Victorian era such as George Eliot had to carefully balance the needs of distinctly different groups of readers.⁴⁶ To be marketable, their works had to win the approval of their publishers, who tended to be male, and find resonance with female, middle-class readers—who were the primary consumers of their texts.

At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that nineteenth-century readers of novels were an expanding, diverse group which did not always follow the class or gendered stereotypes of the day. Furthermore, many of those who did not, for

⁴¹ “Moral and Political Tendencies of the Modern Novels,” 287 and W.R. Greg. “False Morality of Lady Novelists.” *National Review* Jan. & April 1859. London: Chapman & Hall, 144-167, 146. See also: Margaret Beetham. “Women and the Consumption of Print,” 59; Sally Mitchell. *The Fallen Angel: Chastity, Class, and Women’s Reading, 1835-1880*, 45. Gaye Tuchman further claims that “[m]ost library readers were probably women. Most publishers’ readers were men,” which has implications for what was published and what constituted an author’s audience. (*Edging Women Out: Victorian Novelists, Publishers, and Social Change*, 66.)

⁴² Gaye Tuchman. *Edging Women Out: Victorian Novelists, Publishers, and Social Change*, 67.

⁴³ Elaine Showalter. “Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness.” *Critical Inquiry* 8.2 (1981):179-205, 184.

⁴⁴ For more on feminist work on female readers see: Mary. F. Rogers. *Novels, Novelists, and Readers: Toward a Phenomenological Sociology of Literature*. Albany: S.U.N.Y., 1991; Patrocinio P. Schweickart. “Reading Ourselves: Toward a Feminist Theory of Reading.” *Gender and Reading: Essays on Readers, Texts, and Contexts*. Eds. Elizabeth A. Flynn and Patrocinio P. Schweickart. London: John Hopkins UP, 1986. 31-62.

⁴⁵ Rich. “When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-vision,” 20.

⁴⁶ Further discussion on “Silly Novels by Lady Novelists” on pages 150-153.

example, read Eliot or Gaskell, nonetheless encountered the ideas found in their works through the ever-evolving social imaginaries of the era. Thus, my understanding of Victorian readers focuses on the response of middle-class individuals, primarily women, while at the same time recognizing the wider readership of nineteenth-century novels.

The way Victorian female readers were portrayed within nineteenth-century discourse on the novel reflects, in part, just how central *gender* and gender roles were within the social imaginary.⁴⁷ Joan W. Scott, in her foundational essay on the importance of gender within historical research, defines gender as “a constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived differences between the sexes, and...a primary way of signifying relationships of power.”⁴⁸ Scott’s definition emphasizes not just how gender is a cultural construction but also how gender categories tend to result in privileging one biological sex over the other. Feminist work on gender has often criticized the way patriarchal understandings of femininity have subjected women to being understood inherently as the weaker sex. In his nineteenth-century work *The Subjection of Women*, John Stuart Mill argues that womanhood is a cultural construction, claiming, “What is now called the nature of women is an eminently artificial thing—the result of forced repression in some directions, unnatural stimulation in others.”⁴⁹ Mill here emphasizes that the ideals of womanhood are projected onto women and do not necessarily reflect what is intrinsically female.

⁴⁷ The Victorian relationship between gender and hermeneutic practice is discussed on pages 142-163.

⁴⁸ Joan W. Scott. “Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis.” *The American Historical Review* 91.5 (1986):1053-1075, 1067. For more on the shifts in understanding of sex and gender see: Thomas Walker Laqueur. *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1990.

⁴⁹ John Stuart Mill. *The Subjection of Women*. New York City: Source Book, 1970, 8-39.

Gender as it is understood today was not part of the nineteenth-century lexicon. However, as Mill's statement suggests, Victorians were aware and interested in gender constructions, often referring to it as part of the "woman question." Along with using terms such as feminine and masculine, Victorians would refer to gender with terms such as "manly" and "womanly." The middle-class Victorian understanding of the "nature of women" tended to define womanhood through a woman's domestic role as wife or mother, which was born out of the idea that men and women should rule within separate spheres; manliness was tied to public, professional life and womanliness to the home. The Victorian social imaginary stressed that the "nature and social functions" of men and women were fundamentally separate and unique.⁵⁰ Women were viewed as the weaker sex: delicate, emotional creatures that lacked the rational capacity men were endowed with. They were also understood to be predisposed to morality and purity which in part was maintained due to their lack of sexual desire.

However, it is questionable whether Victorian discourse on manliness and womanliness completely locked men and women into specific gendered categories, as cultural constructions of gender throughout the century were unstable and dependent on changes that were taking place in the economy, along with advancements in the realm of theology and biology.⁵¹ There was a hearty debate, particularly throughout the latter half of the century, about proper roles for women which left room to question society's conception of womanliness. Fictional works, particularly those

⁵⁰ Robert B. Shoemaker. *Gender in English Society 1650-1850: the Emergence of Separate Spheres?* London: Longman, 1998, 57.

⁵¹ For shifts in the economy related to gender see: Shoemaker. *Gender in English Society 1650-1850: the Emergence of Separate Spheres?* For shifts in the theology related to gender see Callum G. Brown. *The Death of Christian Britain*. London: Routledge, 2001. For shifts in biology related to gender see: Laqueur. *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud*; and Rachel Malane. *Sex in Mind: The Gendered Brain in Nineteenth-Century Literature and Mental Sciences*. New York: Peter Lang, 2005.

written by women, also frequently created narratives and characters which served to challenge society's understanding of gender. While gender roles for women were being questioned throughout the century, at the same time some women actually accepted and reinforced patriarchal understandings of femininity in their work. This raises questions which are yet to be fully answered within feminist discourse about the relationship between the power of the social imaginary versus a woman's personal control and autonomy to shape her own conception of womanhood. While nineteenth-century gender roles were a cultural construct which tended to constrain women in their daily lives, the purpose of this project is to explore how the understanding of womanliness shifted throughout the century as women increasingly reinterpreted society's understandings of gender roles. These shifts were tied to the way Victorian female readers were re-visioning texts—both biblical texts and fictional works—by interpreting narratives through their own experiences as women.

The term *embodiment*, as used within twentieth and twenty-first century feminist work, provides a helpful way of understanding the centrality of each woman's individual experiences and how her experiences contribute to her gender identity.⁵² Embodiment within feminist discourse is also used to discuss how ideas and beliefs are incorporated into the bodily experiences of women, which contributes to how women understand their role as women. As one feminist discussion on embodiment notes, "[T]here is a tension between women's lived bodily experiences and the cultural meanings inscribed on the female body that always mediate those experiences."⁵³ Thus, embodiment ties together one's biological bodily experience to culturally constructed gender roles. However, female experience is often used by feminist scholars to refer to a range of concepts. Feminist theologian Anne Carr

⁵² Further discussion on embodiment is on pages 175-177.

⁵³ Katie Conboy, Nadia Medina, and Sarah Stanbury. "Introduction." *Writing on the Body: Female Embodiment and Feminist Theory*. New York: Columbia UP, 1997, 1.

differentiates categories of experience used by feminist scholars to include bodily experience (such as menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth, and sexual experiences), individual life experiences, and communal female social experiences.⁵⁴ Philosopher of religion Grace M. Jantzen, in reflecting on Carr's categories, believes that such a diversity of meaning to the word 'experience' should serve as a caution against the kind of "muddle that can result if we slide from one meaning to another without noticing."⁵⁵ While Jantzen is correct in this summation, at the same time, each of these different types of experiences are essentially related to both the material, bodily experiences of women and the cultural understandings of womanhood tied to gender. However, a more pertinent issue is to find the balance between ascribing too much power to the autonomy of women's experiences so as to disregard the very real impact of misogynistic gender roles in their understandings of those experiences, and trapping women within patriarchy, leaving their experiences as women devoid of self-determination. Likewise, it is dangerous to presume that there is any kind of singular, normative female experience, even if particular cultural understandings of womanhood may be projected onto women and influence how many women might interpret their own experiences. Rather, female embodiment needs to be understood as the constant negotiation and renegotiation of gender roles as shaped by individual experience within particular social imaginaries. Women of analogous backgrounds, cultures, and experiences may tend toward identifying with similar embodied beliefs, but nonetheless, each woman's self-understandings and beliefs are singular to herself and shaped by her own experiences as a woman.

⁵⁴ Anne E. Carr. "The New Vision of Feminist Theology." *Freeing Theology: the Essentials of Theology in Feminist Perspective*. Catherine Mowry LaCugna, ed. San Francisco: Harper, 1993, 5-30, 23.

⁵⁵ Grace M. Jantzen. *Becoming Divine: Toward a Feminist Philosophy of Religion*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP, 1999, 115.

An understanding of embodiment can be a tool, particularly for women, to reinterpret gender roles and bring new understanding to cultural conceptions of womanhood. As I argue more fully in chapter six of this project, during the nineteenth century, the novel was increasingly tied to the bodily—and gendered—experiences of the author. Thus, the fictional text itself came to be understood as the embodiment of the author. Some Victorian female authors were empowered through the novel to share their material, bodily experiences through fictional narratives in order to challenge, reject, or even at times reinforce society's conception of womanhood.⁵⁶ While these narratives served to reflect their own embodied experiences as women, at the same time, they also functioned to reinterpret gender roles for women within the social imaginaries.

However, for some Victorian readers, these embodied texts were dangerous because of the power they might hold over the reader. Fictional narratives were understood as having power to shape the thought and actions of the reader which served to create a type of embodied hermeneutic circle whereby the embodied experience of the reader and the writer were also at play within the novel through the act of interpretation. Readers embodied the fictional texts they read, which in turn shaped their daily experiences. Particularly for women living within a patriarchal culture with clearly defined gender roles, which often had negative effects on women, these embodied fictional texts and the hermeneutic circle at work within the interpretation of them had powerful repercussions as it enabled women to constantly reinterpret their role as women through the lens of female experience, both their own

⁵⁶ Though Helena Michie points out that within Victorian texts there is an “interplay between the present and absent female body.” Female bodily experience, as Michie notes, is often “supplemented with metaphors from other fields of discourse.” (*The Flesh Made Word: Female Figures and Women's Bodies*. New York: Oxford UP, 1987, 5.)

and others. The fictional texts themselves, then, became the embodiment of female experience.

Thus, within this project, embodiment is applied not only to the bodily experiences of women but also to the texts themselves. Fictional works are embodied narratives, as the text makes tangible the lived experiences of the author, even if these connections are not always transparent to the reader. Likewise, the use of re-visioned biblical symbols within novels reflects the way these symbols were first appropriated within the life of the author before becoming embodied within his or her work. These embodied texts were subsequently adapted and reinterpreted by the novel's readers, who appropriated the same symbols into their own embodied experiences as women, providing women with new ways through which to understand female gender roles.

Chapter Summaries

This project begins by introducing some of the problems with twentieth and twenty-first century conceptions of Victorian womanhood in order to explain the necessity of a study which explains how nineteenth-century hermeneutic approaches toward biblical and fictional texts enabled Victorian women to understand their role as women through the reinterpretation of biblical symbols. The second chapter establishes a theoretical framework for understanding nineteenth-century roles for women by surveying how the concept of Victorian womanhood has been understood and conceived by scholars in the fields of feminism, literary criticism, theology, and sociology. The bifurcated image of the 'angel in the house' and the 'fallen' woman has frequently been used by twentieth and twenty-first century scholars to explain gendered categories for women in the Victorian era resulting in an emphasis on how women were either idealized or demonized within nineteenth-century culture.

However, these symbols of Victorian womanhood need to be reevaluated because they fall short in adequately reflecting the way Victorian women understood their own experiences as women. Rather, women tended to use scriptural narratives as a way of interpreting their own lives, which resulted in the re-visioning of female biblical symbols by women writers. Victorian authors used their fictional narratives to further reinterpret the symbols found in the biblical text which reflected their own experiences as women. Female biblical symbols, such as Mary Magdalene and the Virgin Mary, were often appropriated and reinterpreted by Victorian female authors within their lives and their novels as a means of understanding not only their own role as women, but womanhood more generally.

The hermeneutic approach applied to scripture in the Victorian era, whereby biblical narratives were rewritten within fictional texts, was born out of changes in how the authority of the biblical text was understood culturally. The third chapter explains how Higher Criticism influenced the Victorian approach to scripture and, in turn, fictional texts. In particular, the influence of works by David Friedrich Strauss and Ludwig Feuerbach on the Victorian approach to reading and reinterpreting scripture will be explored. The influence of their Higher Critical works on nineteenth-century hermeneutic practice will be traced through the life and work of George Eliot who believed her fictional novels functioned to recover the truth of the biblical myths.

As Higher Criticism challenged the historical nature of the Bible, theologians such as Strauss and Feuerbach increasingly believed that mythical biblical narratives needed to be enacted within the present in order to have any basis in reality.⁵⁷ Strauss held that Christianity would only be saved through a Christology that believed that the

⁵⁷ For a helpful study on how higher critical biographies of Jesus were often tied to contemporary life and experience see: Halvor Moxnes. "What is it to Write a Biography of Jesus? Schleiermacher's *Life of Jesus* and Nineteenth-century Nationalism." *Jesus Beyond Nationalism: Constructing the Historical Jesus in a Period of Cultural Complexity*. Halvor Moxnes, Ward Blanton, and James G. Crossley, Ed. London: Equinox, 2009, 27-42.

incarnation of Christ took place within the present-day Christian community. Drawing out the distinction between the historical Christian understanding of incarnation and his own, Strauss writes, “The church refers her Christology to an individual who existed historically at a certain period: the speculative theologian to an idea which only attains existence in the totality of individuals”⁵⁸ Feuerbach similarly held that the human understanding of God was essentially the reflection of human nature. For both Strauss and Feuerbach, incarnation—or the embodiment of the divine—necessarily was enacted within some form of collective humanity.

George Eliot, who translated both Strauss’ and Feuerbach’s works into English, found their work to be a helpful hermeneutic approach to scripture. Yet, rather than simply adopt their work as her own, Eliot adapted their understanding of scripture as a way to reinterpret biblical texts through the medium of fiction, thus enabling her own experience as a woman to become embodied through these Christian symbols. As a religious free-thinker who was aware of the growing doubt regarding traditional understandings of scripture, Eliot was particularly conscious of the shifts that were taking place toward the authority of scripture, and her own work reflects a desire to reinterpret biblical symbols both through her own experience as a woman and within the fictional narratives of her novels. However, unlike Strauss and Feuerbach who postulated a collective incarnation of Christ within humanity, Eliot believed that the recovery of the reality of biblical narratives could be found within the individual embodiment of Christian symbols within the lives of men and women. Readers in turn participated in this embodied hermeneutic circle by reinterpreting Eliot’s use of biblical narratives within her fictional novels in order to uncover new meanings within scripture for the here and now. Therefore, these continual

⁵⁸ *The Life of Jesus, Critically Examined*. Trans. George Eliot. 2nd ed. London: Swan Sonnenschein, 1892, 782. See also:

reinterpretations of biblical narratives were imaginatively re-visioned through each reader's own life experiences.

The fourth chapter continues this argument by demonstrating that Pietism and Romanticism, like Higher Criticism, advocated an imaginative hermeneutic approach toward scripture by interpreting biblical narratives through the lens of personal experience. Pietism and Romanticism, though quite separate movements, each promoted the idea that the interpretation of texts through reading, and the reinterpretation of texts through writing, was intimately related to the life experience of the reader and the writer. Each encouraged a highly creative hermeneutic approach to texts, resulting in the reimagining and rewriting of ancient religious myths. The Bible, then, became a document no longer anchored to a historical moment but a text that could only become illuminated through the experience of the reader in contemporary life. As such, scripture became a fictional text to be read and interpreted in light of the experience of the reader. In turn, the rewriting or re-visioning of scripture through the means of the fictional text by Victorian authors such as George Eliot and Elizabeth Gaskell also became a valuable hermeneutic exercise because it enabled scripture to be approached in a way that truly addressed the contemporary concerns and life experiences of the nineteenth-century reader. This chapter concludes by arguing that increasing questions toward the authority of the biblical text, along with subsequent movements that encouraged imaginative reinterpretations of the biblical text as a means of understanding personal experience, had particular repercussions for women. Women tended to identify with female biblical symbols because of the strict gender categories within the social imaginary. Thus, women reimagined female biblical symbols both in their life and within novels so that the re-visioned biblical narratives might reflect their own experiences as

Victorian women. This provided women with symbols of womanhood that were no longer confined to society's understanding of gender but instead reflected their own experience as women.

The fifth chapter describes in greater detail the reinterpretation and appropriation of female biblical symbols by Victorian women within fictional works. Both Paul Ricœur's and Caroline Walker Bynum's theological works on symbols will be applied to nineteenth-century hermeneutic practice to show how the appropriation of these figures as symbols for Victorian readers and writers tended to be born out of the experience of each individual. Ricœur links discovering the meaning of the symbol with reenactment and experience—thus the hermeneutic exercise of symbolic interpretation is connected not only to language but also to one's own bodily experience.⁵⁹ This theoretical framework is useful in understanding not only how sacred symbols such as Eve, Mary Magdalene, and the Virgin Mary were appropriated by individuals throughout the Church's history but is also helpful in explaining how Victorian female readers interpreted these symbols and reimagined ancient narratives to reflect their own experience as women. Furthermore, while female biblical symbols tended to be used throughout the Church's history to reinforce a negative theological understanding of women, the re-visioning and appropriation of these symbols by individual women in the Victorian era enabled them to understand their role in such a way as to better reflect their own diverse experiences as women.

The sixth chapter more fully explains this relationship between the text and the experience of the reader by providing a theoretical framework through which to understand how predominately middle-class Victorians were inclined to understand

⁵⁹ Paul Ricœur. *The Symbolism of Evil*. Trans. Emerson Buchanan. Boston: Beacon, 1969, 7.

the relationship between authors, fictional works, and readers. Victorian literary critics and reviewers frequently related each fictional novel to the life of its author, claiming that an author's life experiences were intimately tied to his or her written texts. Because Victorian gender roles often shaped one's experience as a man or woman, novels—which were understood to embody authors' experiences—were interpreted as gendered texts. Understanding a novel as masculine or feminine shaped how readers approached and interpreted the narrative. In turn, Victorians believed that novels had the power to shape the life experiences of readers through the interpretive process of reading. Fictional texts were understood as the embodiment of the author's experience that subsequently became embodied within the reader's experience.

This type of embodiment of the text echoes the Christian concept of incarnation. French philosopher Jacques Rancière's work on the "theology of the novel"⁶⁰ applies the theology of incarnation to the hermeneutic process of reading fiction whereby the text of the novel and of scripture is constantly becoming embodied within the lives of readers. Thus, re-visioned biblical narratives are embodied within the author before they are returned to the fictional text of the novel where they are subsequently encountered by readers who reinterpret them again through their own bodily experience. Rancière's incarnational understanding of the relationship between biblical texts, novels, and the lives of readers hints at George Eliot's early belief that fiction has the ability "to come within the orbit of possibility"⁶¹—that is, fiction can become embodied and exist in reality through the act of reading. For Victorians living within a society saturated with both fictional and sacred narratives, there was an endless interplay between text and experience, or word and flesh, as novels reflected the embodiment of re-visioned biblical symbols.

⁶⁰ Jacques Rancière. *The Flesh of Words: the Politics of Writing*. Trans. Charlotte Mandelle, Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 2004, 72.

⁶¹ George Eliot. "GE to Maria Lewis, Griff, 16 March 1839." *GEL*. Vol. 1., 23.

The seventh chapter looks more specifically at the appropriation of these religious symbols within the life and work of the novelist George Eliot. Given Eliot's childless love relationship with the already married George Henry Lewes along with her foray into philosophical, theological and literary work, George Eliot did not fit into the traditional role of Victorian womanhood. Yet her writing shows an intense awareness of how she was understood within society and demonstrates her knowledge of what were perceived as acceptable boundaries within fictional work. The female protagonists in several of her novels will be explored as reimagined saints who were shaped by Eliot's own experience as a 'fallen' woman. It was Eliot's embodiment of biblical symbols in her life and her fictional texts which brought about her redemption in the eyes of her readers, resulting in a fascinating hermeneutic interplay between the word and flesh in her life and work.

The eighth chapter will continue to explore how the reinterpreted religious symbols of womanhood in the novel were embodied within the lives of Victorians through an exploration of the lives and writings of novelist Elizabeth Gaskell and social activist Josephine Butler. Both Gaskell and Butler, in contrast to Eliot, tended to exemplify middle-class respectability, yet each found an affinity with the symbols of both the 'sinner' Mary Magdalene and the 'saint' Virgin Mary. Despite Gaskell's tendency to conform to middle-class feminine norms, her life and novels often reflect unease with respectability and a desire to appropriate the Magdalene and Eve myths into her own life. Gaskell's novel *Ruth*, which questions the traditional 'fallen' woman narrative by re-visioning the symbol of Mary Magdalene, reflects the tension Gaskell herself felt between the idealizations of womanhood projected onto herself and the reality of her own experiences as a woman.

Josephine Butler, who appreciated the way Gaskell questioned society's treatment of 'fallen' women in her novel *Ruth*, adopted a similar hermeneutic approach to interpreting female biblical symbols within her own work. Butler tended to appropriate both the symbol of the Magdalene and Madonna for herself and the women she aimed to assist. While Butler's use of these symbols retained its reliance on scripture and Christian tradition, her reinterpretation of these symbols also reflects the powerful and significant shifts toward the conception of womanhood that took place throughout the era. Butler's work offers an example of the role theological symbols played in the Victorian era and the extent to which the proliferation of the novel and its use of religious symbols shifted the meaning and understanding of such symbols of womanhood.

The project concludes with a reflection on the nature of biblical symbols as approached through sacred and fictive texts along with the role hermeneutic practices have in shifting understandings of gender. Ultimately, the Victorian hermeneutic approach toward biblical symbols enabled women to re-vision nineteenth-century gender roles through the reinterpretation of ancient myths within the Bible. Caroline Walker Bynum's work on theological symbols proposes:

if symbols can invert as well as reinforce social values...if traditional rituals can evolve to meet the needs of new participants...then old symbols can acquire new meanings, and these new meanings might suggest a new society.⁶²

Here Bynum emphasizes how the meanings of biblical symbols need not be static; they can change to address contemporary concerns—but only when open to interpretation. The shift toward an imaginative hermeneutical approach to the biblical text and religious symbols, as espoused by the Victorians, was born out of an

⁶² Caroline Walker Bynum. "Introduction: The Complexity of Symbols." *Gender and Religion: on the Complexity of Symbols*. Eds. Caroline Walker Bynum, Stevan Harrell and Paula Richman. Boston: Beacon, 1986. 1-20, 15-16.

understanding of the Bible as a text no longer impenetrable to questions but, rather, open to an interpretation rooted in personal experience. These interpretations enabled new meanings to be applied to biblical symbols in such a way as to reflect the life experiences of each reader, which ultimately led to shifts in society's conception of womanhood.

Consequently, I am struck by the power of Victorian fiction over a century later within a different time and culture, at least within my own life, to shape understandings of womanhood. Just as the work of Victorian novelists assisted in ushering in first-wave feminism, religious symbols as reinterpreted in the Victorian novel shaped my thoughts, creating a voice and being that is diametrically opposed to the vision of femininity promoted by my culture and upbringing. Through the interpretive act of approaching the fictive world of the novel, I encountered the symbols of the Madonna and Magdalene and in turn embodied the symbol myself, causing my own life to become the embodiment of the symbols, existing as one of the infinite interpretations these symbols have had throughout history. Bynum's statement on the power of religious symbols illuminates the ability that symbols have to meet the needs of people of faith from various backgrounds, sexes, and cultures. Moreover, it demonstrates that religious symbols, even in cultures where they are absent or lacking, have the ability to be found again through the words of previous generations. It is in that moment of discovery that they are apprehended, re-visioned, perhaps given new meaning, and once again made flesh through the embodiment of the Word

CHAPTER TWO: INTERPRETING VICTORIAN WOMANHOOD

The purpose of this chapter is to survey the significant texts related to this project. This chapter begins with an overview of how Victorian womanhood has often been interpreted through the symbols of the ‘angel in the house’ and the ‘fallen’ woman. While twentieth and twenty-first century American and British works on Victorian gender roles within the fields of literary criticism, sociology, history, and feminism have often depended on these symbols to explain nineteenth-century conceptions of womanhood, the ‘angel in the house’ and ‘fallen’ woman dichotomy does not fully reflect how Victorian women understood themselves. Post-structuralist thought has shifted interpretations of the Victorian era from these simplistic categories to an increasingly complex understanding of nineteenth-century gender roles. The way Victorian women appropriated and interpreted themselves through biblical figures such as the Madonna, Mary Magdalene, and Eve—rather than the ‘angel in the house’ and ‘fallen’ woman—more fully reflect Victorian conceptions of womanhood. Understanding Victorian womanhood through the way women used and interpreted these biblical symbols conveys the complexity of how women interpreted themselves and also the shifts that were taking place within the Victorian social imaginaries with regard to understanding womanhood. This chapter concludes by discussing how women use and appropriate religious symbols as a means of understanding themselves.

The 'Angel in the House' and 'Fallen' Woman

The great mass of twentieth-century studies on Victorian gender roles and sexuality have circled around variations of the dichotomous female image of the 'angel in the house' and the 'fallen' woman. The bifurcated virgin and whore motif has been used throughout much of Western history and continues to play a central role in scholarship on Victorian gender roles. Recent Victorian scholarship is particularly interested in the way in which religion and literature shaped nineteenth-century conceptions of female perfection and imperfection, particularly in regard to the growing idealization of women in the domestic sphere. The symbol of the 'angel in the house'—a phrase taken from the title of a poem by Coventry Patmore (1854) which recounts the virtues of his wife¹—underwent several shifts in interpretation throughout the twentieth century, but conceptions of the 'angel' have generally centered on an idealization of motherhood and the role of women within the home, an ideology that is understood as central to middle-class Victorians. This symbol has been given several unique labels, such as "spiritual womanhood"² and the "cult of true womanhood,"³ but all these different descriptors essentially describe the same type of idealized woman. Elaine Showalter summarizes the central conception of this exemplary woman as "a Perfect Lady, an Angel in the House, contentedly submissive to men, but strong in her inner purity and religiosity, queen in her own realm of the Home."⁴ As Showalter intimates, the idea of the 'angel in the house' is not merely a domestic ideal; rather, Victorian gender roles were tied together with

¹ Coventry Patmore. *The Angel in the House*. London: Macmillan, 1866.

² Jenny Daggers. *The British Christian Women's Movement: The Rehabilitation of Eve*. Hants, England: Ashgate, 2002, 7.

³ Barbara J. MacHaffie. *Her Story: Women in Christian Tradition*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006, 159.

⁴ Elaine Showalter. *A Literature of Their Own: British Woman Novelists from Brontë to Lessing*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1977, 14.

religious belief. The ‘angel in the house’ signaled a shift of the religious center of Victorian life from the Church to the home, and it made women responsible for teaching spirituality to the next generation.⁵

The ‘fallen’ woman—also called a “madwoman,”⁶ or a “demonic outcast”⁷—came to be understood as a woman who existed outside the norms established by the domestic angel. While the term ‘fallen’ woman is used primarily to describe women within illicit sexual relationships, Deborah Anna Logan notes that during the nineteenth century the term was extended to refer to the woman without children or without maternal instincts toward her children, the mad woman, the alcoholic, the beggar—almost any woman who was understood to be an anomaly within the culture.⁸ In most cases, these women were nonetheless judged by a “middle-class sexual ideology”⁹ even if their ‘fallen’ behavior was not literally sexual in nature or particularly deviant. Interpretations of the ‘angel in the house’ and ‘fallen’ woman as the main categories of womanhood in the nineteenth century did not go unquestioned by scholars,¹⁰ but for the most part they were generally accepted throughout the twentieth-century as the best way to understand Victorian gender roles.

While the religious symbols of the Madonna Mary and Mary Magdalene, as formulated throughout the Church’s history, may, on the surface, seem to mirror the ‘angel in the house’ and ‘fallen’ woman motif frequently used by Victorian scholars to

⁵ Brown. *The Death of Christian Britain*, 58-87.

⁶ Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar. *The Mad Woman in the Attic*. London: Yale UP, 1979, 77ff.

⁷ Nina Auerbach. *Woman and the Demon: the Life of a Victorian Myth*. Harvard: Harvard UP, 1982, 9.

⁸ Deborah Anna Logan. *Fallenness in Victorian Women’s Writing: Marry, Stitch, Die, or Do Worse*. London: University of Missouri Press, 1998, 8-10.

⁹ *Ibid*, 11.

¹⁰ See: Jeanne M. Peterson. “No Angels in the House: The Victorian Myth and the Paget Women.” *The American Historical Review* 89.3 (1984) 677-708; Nicola Diane Thompson. “Responding to the Woman Questions: Rereading Noncanonical Victorian Women Novelists.” *Victorian Women Writers and the Woman Question*. Ed. Nicola Diana Thompson. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999. 1-23.

describe nineteenth-century conceptions of womanhood, the Madonna and Magdalene construct proposed in this thesis differs from prior understandings of Victorian gender roles and offers a few advantages to feminist discourse on these gender roles. First, because the Madonna and Magdalene are symbols that have maintained constant use throughout the history of the Church, the overarching history of these symbols is useful in demonstrating that the meanings given to the symbols have shifted throughout different time periods. This is particularly relevant for feminist criticism because the use of these symbols by women within the Victorian era often provided positive reinterpretations of the Madonna and Mary Magdalene. Second, the ‘angel’ and ‘fallen’ woman images often reinforce or assume conceptions of the secularization of Britain during the nineteenth century, whereas the Madonna and Magdalene acknowledge the powerful role religion held culturally within the Victorian era.¹¹ Therefore, the ‘angel’ and ‘fallen’ woman as described by scholars often have more to do with twentieth-century perceptions of womanhood and sexuality than with a historical understanding of gender roles in the Victorian era.¹² This interpretation has certainly benefited contemporary feminist concerns as it highlights the negative repercussions patriarchy has for women, but it is less helpful in explaining the symbols used within a particular historical era. Third, the pervasive usage of the ‘angel’ and ‘fallen’ woman dichotomy in the last century of scholarship often serves to create a stereotype of Victorian womanhood that ignores the nuanced gender roles that existed throughout the time period; thus, using religious symbols as a means of explaining how Victorians understood

¹¹ For further discussion on Victorian religion see pages 56-59, 61-63 and 90-95.

¹² This argument stems from work within Michel Foucault’s *History of Sexuality Vol. 1*. (Robert Hurley, trans. NYC: Pantheon Books, 1978.) but is also found in works such as historian Jeanne M. Peterson’s “No Angels in the House: The Victorian Myth and the Paget Women.”

gender encourages one to go back to nineteenth-century discourse to discover the complexity of the symbols. As a result, it is my contention that a project about Victorian gender roles is well served not to assume that the ‘angel in the house’ and ‘fallen’ woman were the primary symbols used by the Victorian women to understand their role as women, but it would benefit from beginning with theological symbols (such as the Madonna, Magdalene, and Eve) that were constantly being referred to and reinterpreted within the lives of Victorians.

Another problem with relying on the ‘angel in the house’ and ‘fallen’ woman as symbols of the feminine lies with the common misconception of these symbols as figures that are only connected by their dissimilarities, which creates the potential for them to become stereotypes of the feminine. In a similar vein, the Madonna and the Magdalene are often linked together as if they were rivals within the Christian tradition, each representing divergent values of womanhood, rather than understanding them as complex figures rooted in the same founding myth. Yet, the symbols of the Madonna and Magdalene—by which I am referring less to the historical reality of their existence than the myths that have developed about them throughout the history of the Church—originate out of the figure of Eve. This means that many of the symbols and mythologies of the feminine used within scripture and Christian tradition, figures as diverse as Gomer, the Bride of Christ, and Mary of Egypt, emerged from a common narrative.¹³ Therefore,

¹³ Benedicta Ward, in her work *Harlots of the Desert*, similarly connects these narratives together. She writes: “The stories of the harlots belong to this literature of conversion, and behind them there is, of course, the pattern of the great penitent of the New Testament, Mary Magdalene. Behind her lies the image of the sinful woman who is Israel, unfaithful to the covenant of God. The sinful woman is also Eve, the mother of all the living, and therefore the image is of Everyman, of the human race alienated from the love of God.” (*Harlots of the Desert: a Study of Repentance in Early Monastic Sources*. Kalamazoo: Cistercian, 1987, 7.) Where I differ from Ward is to add the Virgin Mary to this typology. Both the Virgin Mary and Mary Magdalene are often connected with Eve. See: Susan Haskins. *Mary Magdalene: Myth and Metaphor*. London: Harper Collins, 1993, 143-145; and Marina Warner. *Alone of All Her Sex: the Myth*

the Madonna and Magdalene operate typologically in relation to Eve. It is important to note that within this project the Magdalene and Madonna will not be interpreted as contrasted figures but rather as symbols that are used to explain womanhood that have developed out of the mythology of Eve. Understanding these figures as rooted in the myth of Eve avoids the dichotomous stereotypes of the virgin and the whore, which opens up more complex understandings of these women as symbols. Rooting Christian symbols of the feminine in Eve also acknowledges the full complexity of narrative types and symbols that have originated from the first created woman, encouraging intertextual interpretations of narratives found in scripture and the hagiographic accounts of key female figures throughout the Church's history. This view of the Madonna and Magdalene as types of Eve acknowledges that these symbols cannot be interpreted independent of each other, but at the same time stresses that their narratives are inseparable from that of Eve and each other.

The religious symbols of the Madonna and Magdalene certainly offer advantages over the images of the 'angel in the house' and 'fallen woman,' but ultimately it is necessary to reject the paradigm of the 'angel' and 'fallen' woman as symbols of Victorian femininity because they do not accurately describe the way in which nineteenth-century women understood themselves. Nonetheless, this project is not simply an attempt to create new Victorian female archetypes to replace the 'angel in the house' and 'fallen woman' but rather to explore how theological symbols of the feminine, as found in the novel, were used and appropriated by Victorian men and women. However, in order to better understand how biblical symbols were used to construct understandings

and the Cult of the Virgin Mary. London: Picador, 1985, 59-61. If they are rooted in the same myth, then they must be understood more in connection to each other than as opposing images of womanhood. See further discussion on pages 129-139.

of gender within the Victorian era, it is helpful to first examine how Victorian gender roles have been interpreted by scholars, primarily through their construction of the ‘angel’ and ‘fallen woman’ as symbols representing nineteenth-century conceptions of womanhood.

To understand academic work on Victorian gender roles, one must first go back to the way in which the ‘angel in the house’ and ‘fallen’ woman were constructed as symbols throughout the twentieth century, before moving on to the way the Madonna and Magdalene operate as religious symbols of womanhood in the nineteenth-century novel. Because of the propensity for historical research to reflect contemporary concerns, shifts in the understanding of sexuality throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries explain, in large part, the changes that took place within research on Victorian gender roles. During the last century, symbols used to understand gender roles, such as the ‘angel of the house’ and ‘fallen’ woman, progressed within feminist discourse from markers of a patriarchal and misogynistic system to symbols that Victorian women used subversively in order to promote tenets of feminism. More recently, scholars have begun to emphasize the complexity of gender issues in nineteenth-century Britain, agreeing that while some elements of Victorian discourse were repressive for women, there were others in which the role of women expanded during this time period. The following summary of scholarship on Victorian gender roles is intended to introduce the various gender issues that were identified by twentieth and twenty-first century scholars in the fields of literary criticism and religious history regarding the ‘woman question’ of the nineteenth-century.

Walter E. Houghton's work *The Victorian Frame of Mind 1830-1870*, published in 1957, established an understanding of Victorian gender roles that was utilized by scholars for the remainder of the century. Houghton begins his chapter on gender roles entitled "Love"¹⁴ by using the image of the 'angel in the house' to describe the Victorian domestic ideal that regarded the home as a shelter maintained by women for the working man and regarded the family as the center of religious instruction. Claiming that women had "always been concerned with the home,"¹⁵ Houghton goes on to explain the various factors in life that would make such a domestic arrangement desirable to Victorians, such as its nostalgic appeal¹⁶ and the retreat it offered to men in order to "recover the humanity he seemed to be losing."¹⁷ Houghton brushes over the possible negative ramifications the Victorian idealization of domesticity had on women, concurrently defining a woman's role during the time period as one that ultimately assisted men in fulfilling their own role in society and by understanding the idealization of the 'angel in the house' fairly positively. He continues his study on the nineteenth-century family by critiquing their "ethic of purity" which he goes on to call "Victorian prudery."¹⁸ Houghton paints the domestic landscape of Victorian Britain as swarming with children but essentially silent about sex. Yet Houghton claims that when sex was spoken of, it was understood as a duty rather than a pleasure and was altogether dissociated from love. He further notes that society connected sex with uncleanness and the baser nature of man, which in turn

¹⁴ If the work had been written twenty years later, the chapter title would have probably made reference to the 'woman question,' as the chapter actually deals with gender issues and women more so than love. The chapter title certainly demonstrates a lack of interest in Victorian gender issues in the mid-twentieth century—something that would quickly reverse itself in the subsequent decades with the advent of second-wave feminism.

¹⁵ Walter E. Houghton *The Victorian Frame of Mind 1830-1870*. Yale: Yale UP, 1957, 341.

¹⁶ Ibid, 344.

¹⁷ Ibid, 345.

¹⁸ Ibid, 356.

created feelings of guilt and shame for sexual behavior, even within marriage. Houghton relates Victorian prudery to the growing alarm throughout the nineteenth century to the problem of prostitution and adultery. His analysis of Victorian domestic values and gender roles held sway within academic circles for several decades and continues to be influential today.

Eric Trudgill's book *Madonna and Magdalens: The Origins and Development of Victorian Sexual Attitudes* foreshadows many of the questions regarding Victorian prudery that were to be raised by Foucault, yet it remains very much dependent on the narrative constructed by Walter E. Houghton. Trudgill's work, which ironically has no mention of the Madonna or Magdalene as either cultural or biblical symbols apart from the title, takes Houghton's conception of Victorian sexual ethics and women's roles and attempts to reinterpret them in a more sympathetic light by placing them within a complex system of social and religious values. Perhaps most interesting is Trudgill's claim that the domestic ideal the Victorians sought to attain was actually dependent on the villainous prostitute that politicians, doctors, and the clergy so often railed against and demonized, particularly through the debate and passage of the Contagious Disease Acts (1864-1886).¹⁹ Trudgill believes that prostitutes protected respectable women from sexual transgression while at the same time providing men with a sexual outlet outside the home, thus minimizing the risk of contaminating the family with their lust. Trudgill writes:

The whore was to this extent the ally of sexual purity, deflecting the danger of seduction from respectable wives and daughters, and, equally importantly, deflecting from the marriage-bed any orgiastic practices husbands might desire.²⁰

¹⁹ For more on the Contagious Disease Acts see page 282.

²⁰ Eric Trudgill. *Madonnas and Magdalens: the Origins and Development of Victorian Sexual Attitudes*. New York: Holmes & Meier, 1976, 125.

Yet this supposition became troubling for later feminist critics who would argue that women did not necessarily *want* to be respectable according to Victorian standards.

Feminist Literary Criticism of Victorian Womanhood

Interest in the Victorian understanding of sexuality and gender roles escalated in the last three decades of the twentieth century, in part because of the growing interest in the Victorian era by feminists from the United States and Britain, particularly those involved in literary criticism. The foundation for twentieth-century feminist literary critiques of Victorian gender roles is found in Virginia Woolf's 1931 assessment of the 'angel in the house.' This symbolic woman became, for Woolf and many later feminist scholars, a label for the idealized Victorian woman, one that was limited to a domestic and maternal role. As a female writer, Woolf understood part of her occupation as "killing the Angel in the House."²¹ Woolf describes this superlative woman in a lecture entitled "Professions for Women:"

She was intensely sympathetic. She was immensely charming. She was utterly unselfish. She excelled in the difficult arts of family life. She sacrificed herself daily...in short she was so constituted that she never had a mind or a wish of her own, but preferred to sympathize always with the minds and wishes of others. Above all—I need not say it—she was pure. Her purity was supposed to be her chief beauty—her blushes, her great grace.²²

Woolf envisions this Angel as a phantom that shadowed her own writing, reminding her that she was writing for men and that she should use her feminine charms to keep anyone from knowing that she had a mind of her own. She worked to kill this phantom because

²¹ Virginia Woolf. "Professions for Women." *The Virginia Woolf Reader*. Ed. Mitchell Alexander Leaska. London: Harcourt, 1984. 276-283, 279.

²² *Ibid*, 278.

otherwise, the Angel would have “plucked the heart out of my writing.”²³ Woolf’s criticism of this idealized role for Victorian women centers on its portrayal of women as second-rate citizens that are undeserving of the same rights as men and must depend solely on their charm to maintain respectability.

Early second-wave feminists echo Woolf’s criticisms of Victorian standards for women, focusing their energy on censuring the idealizing and limiting conceptions of female gender created and sustained by Victorian men. This may be seen in Simone de Beauvoir’s seminal work *The Second Sex* which argues that women have been treated as the lesser sex throughout history. In a brief section on Victorian Britain, Beauvoir claims that “Victorian England isolated woman in the home” and that women were “destined only for reproduction.”²⁴ About two decades later, social activist Kate Millet repeats the problems asserted by Woolf, defining the sexual politics of the Victorian era as “the Victorian doctrine of chivalrous protection and its familiar protestations of respect, [which] rests upon the tacit assumption...that all women were ‘ladies.’”²⁵ This assumption is problematic for Millet because it understood women as the weaker, purer sex, thus preventing equal rights for men and women. Millet argues that the patriarchal system of the nineteenth century converted women into sexual objects by defining them only in relation to their husband and children. Women paradoxically were “made to suffer for and be ashamed of [their] sexuality, while in general not permitted to rise above the level of a nearly exclusively sexual existence”—which Millet connects with

²³ Ibid, 279.

²⁴ Simone de Beauvoir. *The Second Sex*. Ed. and trans. H.M. Parshley. New York: Everyman’s Library, 1993, 131.

²⁵ Kate Millet. *Sexual Politics*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1970, 73.

childbearing.²⁶ This is a statement very much dependent on Houghton's concept of Victorian prudery; however, it does acknowledge how this repression of sexuality negatively affected women. Millet differs from preceding critiques of the Victorian era regarding women in her timeline of feminist thought by placing the first phase of the sexual revolution from 1830-1930, whereas previous scholars often related the beginning of the sexual revolution with first-wave feminism, which places the movement in the later part of the nineteenth century. Millet agrees with Simone de Beauvoir that the Victorian era inhibited sexual behavior, but she held that these confining standards created a crisis that actually initiated an increase in sexual freedom and the repudiation of patriarchal systems. This interpretation of the Victorian era was embraced and adopted by later second-wave feminists; yet this later work differs from the writing of earlier feminists such as Millet in that it was most concerned with creating a female history—a positive interpretation of history that focused on the work and action of women—rather than focusing attention solely on arguing against patriarchal systems.

Throughout the 1970s, feminist literary criticism evolved as a specific discipline through increasing interest in women writers of the Victorian era. Victorian female novelists were interpreted as subversively using literature to fight against the misogyny of the nineteenth century. Elaine Showalter's work *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing*, performs gyno-criticism,²⁷ which she defined as a feminist reconstruction of the "political, social and cultural experience of women"²⁸ that makes "an effort to describe the female literary tradition in the English novel...and to

²⁶ Ibid, 119.

²⁷ Showalter. "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness," 184.

²⁸ Elaine Showalter. *A Literature of Their Own: British Woman Novelists from Brontë to Lessing*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1977, 8.

show how the development of this tradition is similar to the development of any literature subculture.”²⁹ Showalter’s work contributes to the idea that the relationship between Victorian female readers and woman novelists often amounted to a “genteel conspiracy,” covertly hinting at the restrictive role experienced by women, thus creating a mutual understanding among themselves of their own experience which over time became a more pronounced protest for change.³⁰ In this, Showalter understands the Victorian era as a transformative period for gender roles that was initiated and sustained within the cultural experience and work of women.

Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s work *The Madwoman in the Attic: the Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* in many ways complements the work of Elaine Showalter as they also seek to decode female written works from the nineteenth century by understanding such works as “attempts at the escape that the female pen offers from the prison of the male text.”³¹ Like Virginia Woolf, Gilbert and Gubar understand the ‘angel in the house’ to be the ideal that male authors applied to women.³² But, rather than only focusing on the angel, they are also interested in her opposite image, one that they believe through history had taken its form in the witch, monster-woman, and madwoman. Gilbert and Gubar argue that by the nineteenth century, female novelists “were conceiving fictional worlds in which patriarchal images and conventions were severely, radically revised,”³³ so that the

²⁹ Ibid, 11.

³⁰ Ibid, 15-16.

³¹ Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar. *The Madwoman in the Attic: the Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*. London: Yale UP, 1979, 44.

³² Ibid, 20.

³³ Ibid, 44,

dichotomous image of Victorian womanhood was being used in new and positive ways by women novelists of the Victorian era.

Another significant contribution to second-wave criticism of Victorian gender roles was Nina Auerbach's *Woman and the Demon: the Life of a Victorian Myth* which explores the various images of womanhood found within the context of Victorian myths yet offers a more nuanced interpretation of Victorian gender roles than the work of Showalter and Gilbert and Gubar. Through her study of cultural myths such as the 'angel in the house' and 'fallen' woman, Auerbach claims that nineteenth-century women "were fortified by the dreams of their culture as much as their lives were mutilated by its fears"³⁴—which demonstrates the power that symbols and myths have, playing both a positive and negative role in individuals' lives. To Auerbach, the 'angel in the house' and 'fallen' woman mythology gave women an ideal to aspire to but also forced them to live in fear of becoming that which was vilified within middle-class moral standards. Auerbach's work emphasizes the centrality of religion and literature as "primary and interdependent vehicles of apprehension" of womanhood.³⁵ She notes that the Victorian fictional imagination, rather than asserting "Victorian pieties about womanliness" wherein women were encouraged to live through "patriarchal family roles and exalted above all as mothers,"³⁶ was actually concerned with promoting outcasts of society—such as the old maid and fallen woman. Within the literary imagination, "the essence of womanhood as a Victorian idea sprang free of family life," resulting in such a powerful "imaginative abstraction, that she assumed the status of literature-in-life, leading humanity beyond the limits of mortality to the transfigured freedom of the literary

³⁴ Nina Auerbach. *Woman and the Demon: the Life of a Victorian Myth*, 34.

³⁵ Ibid, 219.

³⁶ Ibid, 61.

character.”³⁷ On the one hand, Auerbach takes a heavy-handed approach to interpreting Victorian literature and ignores female-written texts that did stress domestic roles for Victorian women. But, Auerbach’s claim that the ‘angel in the house’ can be understood both positively and negatively for Victorian women hints at the more complex approaches to gender roles that were explored in the succeeding decades. Furthermore, her use of the phrase “literature-in-life” as a concept to describe the way readers imitated the narratives they encountered in novels hints at the way readers embodied fictional texts. Auerbach is also one of the earlier feminist literary critics attempting to unravel the dual power of religion and the novel in nineteenth-century gender roles. Auerbach’s understanding of Christianity and literature as vehicles that enabled Victorians to understand gender roles is important to this project because it affirms Victorian religious practice and literature literary as potentially positive means for women to reinterpret religious symbols.

These early works of feminist literary criticism are foundational to the field as their revised literary history brought about greater awareness of a wider canon of female-written work and their hermeneutic provided a new way in which to approach those texts. Furthermore, their work affords second- and third-wave feminists with an empowering narrative through which to understand not only the nineteenth century but also their own struggle against patriarchy. Yet their work falls short in providing an adequate understanding of Victorian gender roles, particularly those of women. This, in part, is because early feminist literary critics were often just as concerned with gender issues and patriarchal systems of power existing in the latter half of the twentieth century as they were with those same issues in the nineteenth century. Their response to the Victorian era

³⁷ Ibid, 62.

is deeply colored, and to a degree, unavoidably so, by the concerns of their own day, resulting in an overbearing method that tends to place certain female novelists in well-defined categories of unquestioned feminism, while at the same time avoiding other female novelists such as Charlotte Yonge whose work defied such a simplistic feminist narrative. Thus, their contemporary concerns, along with a desire to present a coherent system of literary criticism, often neglect the complexity of gender issues and roles in the nineteenth century. Nonetheless, because of their focus on the time period as an era of change initiated by women, along with their understanding of novels as subversive texts, their work is instructive in understanding the way in which literature was used and understood by Victorian women.

Influence of Post-structuralism on the Understanding of Victorian Gender Roles

Literary and religious interpretations of Victorian gender roles and sexuality in the last three decades were largely influenced by questions raised by post-structuralists in the field of philosophy about the stability of texts and the links between author, text, and reader, which made it increasingly difficult for critics to argue for a single, correct interpretation of a text or apply an individual meaning to a symbol. The awareness of multiple layers of meaning in the text and the impossibility of creating a single narrative has encouraged feminist critics to avoid having just one interpretation of Victorian discourse. Literary critiques began to deal with literary texts as shifting and unstable narratives. The shift towards post-structuralism has also raised awareness that each Victorian woman understood her gender and sexuality in a unique way, calling for a

revision not only in the area of literature but also in historical understandings that hitherto had been commonly accepted by scholars.

It was not until the work of French sociologist Michel Foucault in the 1980s that this understanding of the nineteenth century began to be seriously questioned. Subsequent work has sought to revise many of Walter E. Houghton's claims about Victorian prudery and sexuality. The first volume of his *History of Sexuality* specifically takes issue with how the nineteenth century was understood by scholars throughout the twentieth century who claimed that the Victorian era was a period of sexual repression. Foucault begins his *History of Sexuality* by describing twentieth-century depictions of Victorian sexuality that underpin both the 'angel in the house' and the 'fallen' woman symbols. Beginning with arguments similar to those made by Walter E. Houghton decades earlier, Foucault summarizes twentieth-century's discourse on the Victorian era as such: "Sexuality was carefully confined; it moved into the home. The conjugal family took custody of it and absorbed it into the serious function of reproduction. On the subject of sex, silence became the law."³⁸ While Foucault admits that this modern theory of sexual repression is a strong argument, he believes that the reason it has held up so well has more to do with twentieth-century understanding of sexuality than the reality of Victorian discourse on sexuality.³⁹ Foucault produces his theory of Victorian sexuality by rejecting the theory of repression used in historical scholarship up until that point, claiming that it is built upon false premises.⁴⁰ In doing so, Foucault is not claiming that sex was never "prohibited or barred or masked," but rather that "it [was] a ruse to make prohibition into the basic and

³⁸ Michel Foucault. *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction*. Robert Hurley, trans. NYC: Pantheon Books, 1978, 3.

³⁹ Ibid, 5.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 13.

constitutive element from which one would be able to write the history of what has been said concerning sex starting from the modern epoch.”⁴¹ Instead of beginning his research with the idea that Victorian sexual attitudes were repressive, Foucault finds throughout the nineteenth century that a field of discourse about sex was being created that increased in both fervor and frequency.⁴² Foucault argues that rather than creating “mass censorship,” the Victorian era was actually creating “the wide dispersion of devices that were invented for speaking about [sex], for having it be spoken about, for inducing it to speak of itself, for listening, recording, transcribing, and redistributing what is said about it.”⁴³ Or, as Foucault succinctly states elsewhere, “Not only did [the Victorians] speak of sex and compel everyone to do so; [they] set out to formulate the uniform truth of sex.”⁴⁴ Foucault’s study about nineteenth-century sexuality also dramatically calls into question the entire twentieth-century formulation of the ‘angel in the house’ and ‘fallen’ woman narratives as Victorian gender roles may have been led less by misogyny and sexual repression and more by growing discourse on an expanding understanding of sexual roles—an idea which will be unpacked more fully throughout this work.

More recently, feminist literary critics have used post-structuralist work in order to revise previously accepted narratives about the Victorian understanding of the feminine. These revisions also help literary critics solve some of the problems inherent in the work of earlier feminist critics. Works by critics such as Elaine Showalter which sought to create a female literary tradition initially favored writers who most overtly questioned sexual repression such as the Brontë sisters, but later literary criticism,

⁴¹ Ibid, 12.

⁴² Ibid, 18.

⁴³ Ibid, 34.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 69.

prompted by Showalter's call to create a canon of female writers, branched out, bringing greater prominence to female writers such as Charlotte Yonge, Margaret Oliphant, and Elizabeth Gaskell, whose work was obscured after their original Victorian popularity had waned. Yet, there was an initial reluctance by early feminist literary critics such as Showalter, Gubar, and Gilbert to highlight works that were not easily understood as precursors to feminist thought or those that were labeled as anti-feminist works by literary critics. In the last decade or so, the increased scholarship on these female-written works has forced feminist scholars to deal with the cultural complexities inherent in Victorian lives and texts. This led to an increased desire to understand both historical and contemporary feminist issues when approaching Victorian female novelists, as Nicola Diane Thompson notes:

All Victorian women novelists [...] were fundamentally conflicted in their own beliefs about a woman's proper role, and I believe that the critical reception of their novels from Victorian times to the present has been filtered through the ambivalence of the novelists themselves as well as their critics on the complex issues which constitute the woman question.⁴⁵

Thompson's essay highlights the concerns of third-wave literary critics who are interested in the contradictions and nuances to be found in the work of Victorian woman writers, which has created an interest in female authors who were otherwise ignored by early second-wave literary criticism.

This project intends to emphasize the complexity and range of thought regarding gender inherent in Victorian writing. Current scholarship has worked positively to ensure not only that a variety of voices are heard but also that they stand amidst contradictions and confictions. As such there must be an awareness that current literary criticism of

⁴⁵ Thompson. "Responding to the Woman Questions: Rereading Noncanonical Victorian Women Novelists," 3.

historical works is unavoidably done in light of contemporary concerns, whether intentional or not. Therefore, rather than aiming to promote a single reading or interpretation that is definitive of Victorian novels or the time period, I wish to establish a helpful way through which one can gain greater understanding of Victorian Britain's cultural and religious concerns, with the broader intention of explaining how theological symbols can be understood in contemporary contexts.

Religious and Theological Interpretations of Victorian Womanhood

Religious historians have also been influenced by post-structural work in their exploration of the shaping of gender roles by the Church in Victorian Britain. Because of their focus on the role of religion in the culture, recent work in the field of religious studies serves as an appropriate companion study to the work of feminist literary scholars in the area of Victorian sexuality, as religion often drove Victorian culture and, therefore, functioned in forming gender roles. Jenny Daggers' research on the Woman's Christian Movement and first-wave feminism in Britain clarifies the role Victorian religious beliefs had in emphasizing the qualities of idealized femininity for women. Rather than understanding the Victorian idealized woman as a negative symbol for women that was promoted by a patriarchal system, Daggers argues that this idealization—which she terms “spiritual womanhood”⁴⁶—was embraced and emphasized by women as a way of actually creating gender equality. Daggers claims that throughout the nineteenth century female spirituality began to increasingly exist outside of “domestic confinement,”⁴⁷ leaving women with an amplified voice in the public forum when it came to issues of

⁴⁶ Daggers. *The British Christian Women's Movement: a Rehabilitation of Eve*, 98.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 100.

religion and morality. She writes, “In consequence, we discover spiritual womanhood as the chosen vehicle of British ‘first-wave’ feminism after the 1840s,”⁴⁸ as first-wave feminists took advantage of their reputation as spiritual role models in order to argue that they deserved certain equal rights. They also used their moral authority to demand that men be held to similarly high moral standards, further advancing gender equality.

Daggers’ assertion contradicts some earlier feminist literary critics in that it maintains that Victorian women tended to perpetuate “assumptions of a restricted, maternal and ‘spiritualised’ women’s sexuality,”⁴⁹ in order to advance in society rather than using subversive figures to overturn patriarchal power structures. Although the early demands of first-wave feminists did not parallel the tenets of sexual equality found in second-wave feminism, and the emphasis on spiritual womanhood met its demise in the mid-twentieth century, Victorian women’s embrace of spiritual womanhood provided the medium through which later feminism could grow by advancing certain aspects of sexual equality and advocating women as voices of authority and power.

Religious and cultural historian Callum Brown’s work *The Death of Christian Britain* complements Daggers’ argument by contending that the history of religion in Britain during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries can best be understood by analyzing a history of gender. Arguing against the commonly held view that the secularization process in Britain began in the Victorian era, Brown asserts that Christianity maintained power during the nineteenth century through its promotion of the conjoined discourse of piety and femininity before rapidly falling out of favor in the 1960s as “domesticity died

⁴⁸ Ibid, 2.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 2.

as a dominant discourse.”⁵⁰ For example, Brown claims that “Before 1800, Christian piety had been a ‘he’. From 1800 to 1960, it had been a ‘she’. After 1960, it became nothing in gendered terms.”⁵¹ Whereas, prior to the nineteenth century, females had been identified as a threat to piety through negative narratives such as that of the harlot or witch, the Victorian era’s segregation of the home and public spheres caused women to be understood as the “heart of family piety, the moral restraint upon men and children.”⁵² Brown’s work helps to explain Jenny Daggers’ supposition that first-wave feminism embraced their reputation as spiritual role models, as the shift that took place in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries granted women the possibility of being understood positively within the Church and society as a whole, while also appropriating to women a sphere of their own to work. From a twentieth-century feminist perspective, the domestic sphere and idealized spiritual model for women appears limiting, and certainly had negative ramifications for women, particularly in regard to sustaining such spiritual perfection. Placed within its context, this shift put women in positions of potential power resulting in a trajectory that birthed second-wave feminism and, as Brown argues, simultaneously brought about not only the “de-pietisation of femininity and the de-feminisation of piety” in Britain, but also, ultimately, secularization.⁵³ In short, because the practice of Christianity in Britain became increasingly dependent on gender roles that assumed female piety, the sexual emancipation that took place in the mid-twentieth century broke down gender roles and Christianity at the same time.

Brown’s work is integral to this project because of his explanation regarding the complex

⁵⁰ Brown. *The Death of Christian Britain*, 200.

⁵¹ Ibid, 196.

⁵² Ibid, 179.

⁵³ Ibid, 192.

gender issues that were involved in the sacralization of women and the domestic sphere throughout the nineteenth century.

Callum Brown's work also hints at the idea that men and women experience religion in different ways in part because of the gender roles that are assigned to them by their culture and religion. The work of religious historian Caroline Walker Bynum, while focused predominately on the religious experience of men and women in the European Middle Ages, can be read alongside Brown's work to give greater depth of understanding to the gender issues at work within religion and, more specifically, the ways in which men and women appropriate religious symbols. Bynum carefully seeks to avoid a single model through which to understand women's use of symbols, and, in a criticism that could easily be applied to works such as those by Showalter and Gilbert and Gubar, endeavors to evade "the essentialist and ethnocentric notions of female nature or of the 'eternal feminine' that animated early twentieth-century research."⁵⁴ Her theory calls for new modes of symbolic interpretation rather than just substituting female-referring symbols for male-referring symbols, such as Goddess for God or Mary Magdalene for Jesus. Rather than understanding historical gender roles through symbols or what gendered symbols signify, Bynum intends to explore how men and women use specific religious symbols. Bynum writes:

Even where men and women have used the same symbols and rituals, they may have invested them with different meanings and different ways of meaning. To hear women's voices more clearly will be to see more fully the complexity of symbols.⁵⁵

In other words, while the Virgin Mary is often understood as a female-referring symbol, both men and women used the Virgin Mary as a way of finding meaning in their religious

⁵⁴ Bynum. "Introduction: The Complexity of Symbols," 15.

⁵⁵ Ibid, 16.

experience, even if they might have interpreted her and appropriated her in vastly different ways. In her subsequent research, Bynum claims that even though the patriarchal Church emphasized women's weakness and incapacity, women paid little heed to these teachings. Rather, if one reads both male and female religious writers in order to look at "their use of gender-related notions, we find not only that men and women use the image of woman differently, but that it is not simply misogyny in either usage."⁵⁶

In her work on medieval spirituality Bynum argues against interpreting male and female symbols strictly along gendered lines, a theory that has just as much relevance in studying the Victorian era. Many feminist scholars of the latter half of the twentieth-century have been very quick to emphasize symbols such as the 'angel in the house' and the 'fallen' woman by understanding them strictly in gendered terms—believing them to be roles created by men to be projected onto women—thus resulting in interpretations of misogyny and sexism in their usage. Bynum's work is helpful in that it promotes a complexity of meaning for the religious symbol along with an interpretative method that encourages the whole range of voices using the symbol to be heard. Her theory of religious symbols also emphasizes the instability of symbols—religious symbols are constantly and unpredictably appropriated by men and women in ways other than the meaning and usage intended through the teaching of the Church. Victorian women and men certainly adopted masculine and feminine symbols in a variety of ways and for an array of purposes. It is better to avoid saying that the symbols they employed were overwhelmingly positive or negative for women or men, but rather that they were used

⁵⁶ Caroline Walker Bynum. "'And Woman His Humanity': Female Imagery in the Religious Writing of the Later Middle Ages." *Gender and Religion: on the Complexity of Symbols*. Eds. Caroline Walker Bynum, Stevan Harrell and Paula Richman. Boston: Beacon, 1986. 257-288, 261.

and understood by both sexes with versatility. Furthermore, biblical symbols were not always used by men and women to understand gender, as Bynum states: “gender-related symbols are sometimes ‘about’ values other than gender.”⁵⁷ It would be difficult to argue that Mary Magdalene was a completely genderless symbol, but naming her as a symbol of the feminine does not mean that men and women interpreted or appropriated her in similar ways or that she was only used by individuals in order to understand what it means to be female.

Examining the way that Victorian women used biblical symbols reveals that they were using these symbols in a highly complex way to explore their role as women. As will be explored further in the following chapter the theological work of German Higher Critics, such as David Strauss and Ludwig Feuerbach, shaped the way Victorian readers approached both sacred and fictional texts. German Higher Criticism, along with other theological and philosophical movements such as Pietism and Romanticism, encouraged readers to read the Bible not merely as a historical document but rather as a narrative that could be interpreted through one’s personal, individual experiences. Thus, female biblical symbols such as the Madonna, Magdalene, and Eve were reinterpreted by Victorian women as a means of understanding their own experiences as women. Exploring the range of female interpretations of these symbols reveals the complexity with which Victorian women understood their role as women and demonstrates the capacity for the meaning of biblical symbols to be re-visioned when interpreted through each individual’s life experiences.

⁵⁷ Bynum. “Introduction: The Complexity of Symbols,” 2.

CHAPTER THREE: VICTORIAN HERMENEUTICS—THE THEORY OF EMBODIMENT

“WE are not driven off our ground;—our ground itself changes with us.”¹ This was Victorian poet and philosopher Matthew Arnold’s response to how a “fair mind” was to respond to the growing body of “fresh knowledge,” particularly new developments in the field of theology, encountered within the modern era.² Arnold went on to add that when new knowledge displaces the old foundations of thought “it displaces easily and naturally and without any turmoil of controversial reasonings.”³ Here Arnold optimistically welcomes advances in theology and science, claiming that such advances do not destroy the foundations of authority, but rather shifts the foundation to accommodate them. However, not everyone in Victorian Britain was equipped with such a “fair mind.” Aware of the growing doubt toward the Bible’s historicity and the resulting loss of authority in the Bible, Arnold, in his work *Literature and Dogma* (1873), comments on how “Clergymen and ministers of religion are full of lamentations over what they call the spread of scepticism.” The authority of the Bible was quickly becoming questioned, and the questions raised tended to be met with controversy. Amidst such growing doubt, Arnold did not see any value in

¹ Matthew Arnold. *Literature and Dogma: An Essay Towards a Better Apprehension of the Bible*. New York: Macmillan, 1883, 7.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

discrediting the Bible or Christianity entirely. Instead, he instructed his contemporaries that they must honestly assess the state of Christianity in the present moment using two principles: “One is, that men cannot do without it; the other, that they cannot do with it as it is.”⁴ Arnold understood that a huge shift was taking place—a shift which hinged on how individuals understood the role of scripture in their lives. For Arnold, the Bible could only be restored to its central role in society by believing first “that the Bible requires for its basis nothing but what [readers] can verify” and second “that the language of the Bible is not scientific, but *literary*.”⁵ The shift in status of the Bible from being understood as scientific and verifiable to literary and interpretable was central to the Victorian hermeneutic approach not only to scripture but also to literature. Arnold believed that in order to understand the shifts that were taking place within “theology and Biblical learning”⁶ one needed to go to Germany. Germany, Arnold claimed, had “the facts”⁷ of the Bible. He goes on to explain: “Now, English religion does not know the facts of its study, and has to go to Germany for them; this is half apparent to English religion even now, and it will become more and more apparent.”⁸ Arnold is especially referring to German Higher Criticism, which, while not popularly received in Britain at the time, had already begun to shape Victorian social imaginaries.

Because of the shifting status of the Bible within Victorian society, Matthew Arnold was not alone in understanding how influential and relevant Higher Criticism was within Victorian theology. Decades earlier, George Eliot was influenced by German

⁴ Matthew Arnold. *God and the Bible: a Review of Objections to 'Literature and Dogma.'* New York: Macmillan, 1883, xi.

⁵ Ibid, 23.

⁶ *Literature and Dogma: An Essay towards a Better Apprehension of the Bible.* New York: Macmillan, 1883, 21.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

Higher Criticism as she translated two major nineteenth-century German theological works into English. Like Matthew Arnold, Eliot believed that German theology could prove useful for English religious thought and that the English refinement of Higher Criticism could result in an exceptional theological framework. In reviewing one of the first English Higher Critical works in 1851, Eliot notes:

England has been slow to use or to emulate the immense labours of Germany in the departments of mythology and biblical criticism; but when once she does so, the greater solidity and directness of the English mind ensure a superiority of treatment.⁹

Eliot was particularly struck by the need for a mythical interpretation of scripture—one that bore similarity with Arnold’s understanding of the Bible as literary. For these religious doubters, the Bible could no longer be read as a fixed, historical document, but instead was increasingly read as a narrative interpreted through the contemporary experience of individuals. Eliot’s understanding of scripture was directly shaped by the German Higher Critics she read, particularly the works of David Friedrich Strauss and Ludwig Feuerbach which she translated. The shifting status of the Bible shaped the interpretation not only of scripture but also of other literary works which were being interpreted in the same way.

The following chapter proposes that the Victorian method of interpreting texts, with its focus on embodiment, was rooted in the theological discourse of the era and was often inseparable from the biblical text itself. George Eliot, and the theological ideas she sought to embody in her fictional works, are the lens through which these influences into the Victorian interpretation of texts will be explored. Though Eliot was in many ways

⁹ George Eliot. “*The Progress of the Intellect, as Exemplified in the Religious Development of the Greeks and Hebrews*. By Robert William MacKay. London: John Chapman. 1850.” *The Westminster Review* London: Groombridge & Sons, 1851, 353-68, 354-355.

exceptional, her hermeneutic practice itself was not anomalous among Victorian authors and readers. Rather, what set Eliot apart from her contemporaries was how her broad studies in philosophy and theology made her acutely aware of the theological and hermeneutical shifts that were taking place throughout the era. Eliot had the capacity to articulate these shifts and was particularly self-conscious in the way she used philosophical and theological thought within her own life and work. After arguing how Eliot's own life and thought reflects the cultural shifts that were taking place in regard to the Bible and reading practices, this chapter will describe how Strauss and Feuerbach's biblical criticism shaped the Victorian interpretation of both biblical and fictive texts.

George Eliot and the Victorian Social Imaginary

In correspondence with the Positivist Frederic Harrison, George Eliot explained how again and again within her writing she had made

the severe effort of trying to make certain ideas thoroughly incarnate, as if they had revealed themselves to me first in the flesh and not in the spirit. I think aesthetic teaching is the highest of all teaching because it deals with life in its highest complexity. But if it ceases to be purely aesthetic—if it lapses anywhere from the picture to the diagram—it becomes the most offensive of all teaching.¹⁰

Eliot's depiction of ideas as flesh in this letter may have been intended as metaphor, but her metaphor reveals the embodiment of such ideas in her life and, she hoped, in the lives of her readers. This task of breathing life into ideas, or rather, the act of representing ideas through action, is more difficult to interpret than proposing ideas through dry, formulaic presentations. Even if the embodiment of ideas into human experiences is challenging, it creates a rich, multi-dimensional picture of life filled with nuances and

¹⁰ George Eliot. "GE to Frederic Harrison, London 15 August [1866]" *GEL*. Vol. 4. New Haven: Yale UP, 1955, 300.

contradictions. For Eliot, encountering the complexity of ideas in the flesh is a valuable and necessary activity for both readers and writers as they constantly embody and are changed by the ideas they encounter through the written word.

This letter also reflects how intentional Eliot was at aiming to embody theological and philosophical ideas both into her own life and her novels. She understood her fictional works as the incarnation of her thought. Her own theological beliefs were often concerned with one of the central religious questions of the era: as the authoritative role of scripture within society was disintegrating, how were individuals to read and interpret the Bible? As many scholars have argued,¹¹ the late Victorians were characterized by their growing disillusion with the Bible, and yet they were not always conscious of how these doubts shaped religious or cultural practice. Eliot, on the other hand, openly acknowledged the shifting status of the biblical text and was more conscious than many Victorians of how these shifts became the catalyst for a hermeneutic shift in fictional works as well.

This hermeneutic approach to texts was often practiced with little intentionality—it was simply how sacred and fictional texts were read within the social imaginary. Such an approach to interpretation was born out of beliefs that had been influenced from particular understandings that developed over time. Providing background to his

¹¹ See: Owen Chadwick. *The Secularization of the European Mind in the Nineteenth Century*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1975; Elisabeth Jay. *Faith and Doubt in Victorian Britain*. London: Macmillan, 1986; J. Hillis Miller. *The Disappearance of God: Five 19th Century Writers: Thomas Quincy/Robert Browning/Emily Brontë/Matthew Arnold/Gerard Manley Hopkins*. New York: Schocken Books, 1965; and Basil Willey. *More Nineteenth Century Studies: A Group of Honest Doubters*. London: Chatto and Windus, 1956. In contrast to Owen Chadwick and other early secularization theorists who trace a gradual shift towards secularization throughout Europe in the nineteenth century, Callum Brown holds that the secularization of Britain abruptly took place within the cultural shifts of the 1960s. Nonetheless, Brown argues that a “secularisation narrative” or an “idea of religious decline” began at the dawn of the industrial age in the eighteenth century and continued for the next century and a half as religious power structures were questioned by dissent and doubt (*The Death of Christian Britain*, 16). Brown proposes that the end result of religious doubt was not secularization, but a shift in how Christianity was absorbed into cultural practice.

conception of social imaginaries, Charles Taylor cites his specific interest in the relation between “practices and the background understanding behind them.”¹² By this he emphasizes that ideas and actions develop through the interaction between old conventions and new philosophical ideas rather than arising from nowhere. However, most individuals living within a particular culture are not aware of how theoretical movements come to shape their daily practices, such as the interpretation of texts. So, while Victorian hermeneutic practice was a part of the social imaginary and was practiced by many, George Eliot’s awareness of the philosophical and religious shifts that were influencing hermeneutic practice makes her a useful figure to trace the “background understanding” to the interpretative practices used throughout the era.

George Eliot, as a member of the intellectual elite among religious free-thinkers, philosophers, and literary figures of the era, is at once both an extraordinary and exemplary figure of the movements shaping the nineteenth-century social imaginaries. It is her extraordinary artistic and academic status along with her ties to some of the most noteworthy intellectual movements of nineteenth century in Britain, as well as her more common background as a farmer’s daughter born into an Anglican family with Evangelical ties, that allows George Eliot to be a helpful model through which one might explore the wide-ranging strands of thought that influenced aspects of nineteenth-century British culture as a whole.¹³ Because of her self-awareness in how she applied these various strands of thought into her life and work, analyzing her fictional and

¹² Taylor. *Modern Social Imaginaries*, 25.

¹³ Evangelical here is referring to a nineteenth-century branch of the Church of England that was influenced by Pietism—also known in Victorian Britain as low-church. See: Jay. *The Religion of the Heart: Anglican Evangelicalism and the Nineteenth-Century Novel*, 51-105. For more on Eliot’s religious upbringing see: Peter Hodgson. *Theology in the Fiction of George Eliot*. London: SCM Press, 2001; and Bernard J. Paris “George Eliot’s Religion of Humanity.” *ELH* 29.4 (1962): 418-443.

philosophical work enables a clear picture of the mechanisms inciting hermeneutic changes occurring on a broader scale throughout the century.

George Eliot's hermeneutic methods reflect the Victorian social imaginary both in her use of existing social practices and adoption of new ideas that were to become highly influential. Eliot's introduction to interpretative methods began with the Evangelical theology of her youth and continued with her sustained interest in religious free-thinking throughout her adult life. As an adult, aspects of German Higher Criticism and Romanticism, along with the continued influence of Evangelical Anglicanism, came to shape the way she approached texts. But these strands of thought were actualized not only in Eliot's life and practice but were also adopted and accommodated, though less intentionally, within a larger social context by British culture as a whole. Taylor's concept of the social imaginary explains how separate, and often contradicting, strands of thought infiltrate into society, shaping beliefs and practices. Eliot's influences include Pietistic theology—which many Victorians encountered in their daily lives—and theoretical works such as German Higher Criticism—which some Victorians never came into direct contact with. Both of these influences reflect the diverse strands of thought which intersected in the theoretical sphere of the Victorian social imaginaries.¹⁴ These beliefs led to the formation of a hermeneutic that encouraged readers to embody both fictive and sacred texts through the act of reading.

While Eliot's intentionality with which she incorporated her religious beliefs into writing may have been unique among Victorian authors—her correspondence and personal writing reflect an author who was very purposeful in the way she used her

¹⁴ Eliot maintained a life-long interest in Higher Criticism. Her library contained commentaries on Strauss' writing that were published thirty years after her translation work. See: Valerie A. Dodd, *George Eliot: an Intellectual Life*. New York: St. Martins, 1990, 88.

fictional writings to incarnate ideas and figures—her work is nonetheless representative of the interpretative imaginaries at play within the culture as a whole. The Victorian social imaginary had shaped the hermeneutic methods of the era to the extent that even writers less intentional in their work than Eliot nonetheless used their fictional works to embody ideas and scripture narratives. It is through Taylor’s concept of the social imaginary that George Eliot’s appropriation and understanding of various strands of thought can be understood as representative of how the “ordinary person”¹⁵ of nineteenth-century Britain understood their world and approached texts. So, Eliot’s interest in intellectual theories was not only foundational for her own novels, but, as such theories increasingly penetrated cultural movements, they became formative in constructing Victorian social imaginaries. Therefore, Eliot’s understanding of the world was both the exception and epitome of predominately middle-class Victorian thought, as the philosophy and theology she studied eventually came to shape the Victorian social imaginaries.

George Eliot was profoundly influenced by both Strauss’ *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined* and Feuerbach’s *The Essence of Christianity*, and she intentionally used her fiction to embody the ideas she encountered within their work. It has been noted by scholars that George Eliot reacted quite differently toward their respective works.¹⁶ Eliot’s reaction toward Strauss’ and Feuerbach’s works has been contrasted by critics. On Strauss Eliot wrote, “I am never pained when I think Strauss right—but in many cases I think him wrong, as every man must be in working out into detail an idea which has

¹⁵ Taylor. *Modern Social Imaginaries*, 23.

¹⁶ David Klemm. “The Influence of German Criticism.” *The Oxford Handbook of English Literature and Theology*. Andrew Hass, David Jasper, and Elisabeth Jay, editors. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2007, 144.

general truth, but is only one element in a perfect theory—not perfect theory in itself.”¹⁷

Her frustration with Strauss seems to contrast with her statement on Feuerbach, “With the ideas of Feuerbach I everywhere agree.”¹⁸ These two quotations have led scholars to the conclusion that Eliot was more critical of Strauss’ work than Feuerbach’s. Yet these snippets from Eliot’s correspondence do not offer a complete picture of her views.

Scholars often note Eliot’s supposed negativity towards Strauss’ thought by pointing to the above quotation without considering the general negativity emanating from many of her letters of the time period—a span in which Eliot was in constant worry over her father’s increasingly ill health, all the while experiencing the pressures she placed on herself about translating her inaugural work, *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined*, and the constant frustration with Strauss’ complex syntactical choices.¹⁹ Her letters during this period are filled with constant fretting, and as she continued on with the translation, she found Strauss’ work increasingly tedious and viewed the translation work as “a really grand undertaking” that demanded “the sacrifice of one’s whole soul.”²⁰ As one commentator has correctly surmised, the entire translation was accomplished “with great difficulty and care and obvious spiritual strain.”²¹ While it is worth noting that Eliot does mention weak points within Strauss’ work from time to time in her correspondence,²² put

¹⁷ George Eliot. “Letter to Miss Sarah Hennell. Foleshill, 1845.” *GEL*. Vol. 1. Gordon S. Haight, ed. New Haven: Yale UP, 1954, 203.

¹⁸ George Eliot. “GE to Sara Sophia Hennell, London, [29 April 1854]” *GEL*. Vol. 2. Gordon S. Haight, Ed. New Haven: Yale UP, 1954, 153.

¹⁹ Rosemary Ashton. *The German Idea: Four English Writers and the Reception of German Thought 1800-1860*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1980, 153, 159.

²⁰ George Eliot. “Letter to Miss Sarah Hennell. June 1845.” *Life of George Eliot: as Related in her Letters and Journals*, New York: Thomas Y. Cromwell, 1884, 66.

²¹ Suzy Anger. “George Eliot and Philosophy.” *The Cambridge Companion to George Eliot*. George Lewis Levine, editor. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001, 76-97, 78.

²² For instance: “The last few sentences were written under anything but favorable circumstances. They are not Strauss’s best thoughts, nor are they put into his translator’s best language.” (Eliot. “Letter to Miss Sarah Hennell. June 1845.” *Life and Letters: the Works of George Eliot*, Ed. John Walter Cross. Whitefish, MT: Kessinger, 2004, 66.)

into the larger context of her life at that point, her frustration with Strauss more likely stemmed from both her personal stresses at the time and her frustration as a translator with Strauss' word choices more so than disagreement with his general theology. The influence that Strauss had on her own work points to a larger pattern of overall agreement with at least the major tenets of his work; she felt particularly indebted to German thought for its "truly philosophic spirit into the study of mythology,"²³ which was foundational to Strauss' work.

Likewise, Eliot's estimation of Feuerbach's work is much more complex than is betrayed in her short line "With the ideas of Feuerbach I everywhere agree." Understanding Eliot's comment of agreeing everywhere with Feuerbach would much better be interpreted as a figure of speech showing her appreciation of his work, rather than a sign that she valued his theory over all others. This statement comes from a letter to her friend Sarah Hennell in 1854 about Feuerbach and is taken from a larger statement regarding her early translation of his work. As yet, this translation was rough and lacked her revisions. Eliot wrote: "I have written it very rapidly and have translated it quite literally so you have the *raw* Feuerbach—not any of my cooking,"²⁴ by which she means that at this point in the translation work she had not yet added any of her own modifications to the text. Later in the same letter Eliot qualifies her statement about agreeing everywhere with Feuerbach by saying, "but, of course, I should, of myself, alter the phraseology considerably."²⁵ By alterations, she refers not only to the language, but also to the ideas in his writing, thus making clear that her 'everywhere' agreement only

²³ Eliot. "The Progress of the Intellect, as Exemplified in the Religious Development of the Greeks and Hebrews. By Robert William Mackay. London: John Chapman. 1850," 359.

²⁴ George Eliot. "GE to Sara Sophia Hennell, London [29 April 1854]." *GEL*, Volume 2, 153.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

went so far.²⁶ Peter C. Hodgson describes her comment about agreeing everywhere with Feuerbach as “tongue in cheek,”²⁷ which is a more probable summation of Eliot’s words than the interpretation offered by scholars such as U.C. Knoepfelmacher who lift the quote out of context to demonstrate that “George Eliot acknowledged an indebtedness she seldom granted to any author.”²⁸ Eliot certainly appreciated Feuerbach’s work, and saw within it an ethical system that allowed for the innate ability of humanity to practice goodness—a goodness that became a repeated motif throughout her novels. As a translator, she also found his language clear and a pleasure to translate, which only contributed to her enjoyment of his work.²⁹ Yet in her writing it is unclear just how much, if at all, Eliot valued Feuerbach over and against other theorists. Eliot esteemed the work of several philosophers, and in all respects she sought to adapt their work for her own purposes.

The complexity that is found in Eliot’s appropriation of both Strauss and Feuerbach’s work hints at the way their works largely influenced her thought while at the same time emphasizing her ability to both draw from and critique a variety of sources in order to formulate a philosophical and religious perspective that was distinctly her own—and one that demonstrated a high level of thought, even at a fairly young age.

Furthermore, by perpetuating the belief that Eliot rejected Christianity altogether and

²⁶ Peter C. Hodgson correctly notes that phraseology in this instance, to Eliot, went beyond the translation of the words and instead meant the meaning of the text, as Eliot believed that “*how* things are said shapes the substance of what is said.” (*Theology in the Fiction of George Eliot*, 7.) Kathryn Bond Stockton similarly notes of the cooking imagery, “One senses from this metaphor, as well as from her letter, that Marian knew the extent to which, in translating Feuerbach, she was domesticating him for her English homeland.” (*God between Their Lips: Desire Between Women in Irigaray, Brontë, and Eliot*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1994, 187.)

²⁷ Hodgson. *Theology in the Fiction of George Eliot*, 7.

²⁸ U.C. Knoepfelmacher. “George Eliot, Feuerbach, and the Question of Criticism.” *Victorian Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 3 (Mar., 1964), 306-309, 307.

²⁹ Eliot. “GE to Sara Sophia Hennell. London, 6 February [1854].” *GEL*. Vol. 2, 141.

adopted the ‘religion of humanity’ found in Higher Critical works, scholars all too often overlook the life-long influence that Pietism³⁰ had on Eliot’s work, and at times also regrettably miss emphasizing Eliot as a great thinker in her own right who was capable of formulating her own religious beliefs. Eliot not only kept abreast of the latest intellectual movements of her day, but she was skillful at adapting these works to formulate her own distinct religious philosophy.

Though the hermeneutic practices advocated within the work of German Higher Critics and adopted by Eliot may have eventually become, to echo Taylor, the “taken-for-granted”³¹ interpretative approach to texts employed by Victorian readers, this does not mean that their actual writings were widely read or lauded, particularly in the first half of the nineteenth century.³² Early responses to German Higher Criticism expressed a fear that the Higher Critical assessment of the Bible’s historicity would encourage religious doubt to increase within a country already experiencing pangs of disbelief.³³ Reverend Charles C. Tiffany concludes his review of Feuerbach’s *Essence of Christianity* by writing, “Its essential degradation of all that mankind holds most sacred, its false assumptions, its strained and flippant explanations, tend to open the eyes to its corrupting influence.”³⁴ Tiffany understands Feuerbach’s work as the unmasked version of Strauss’ *Life of Jesus Critically Examined*—a work he mentions with only slightly less disdain.³⁵ Feuerbach’s book is claimed by Tiffany to be pantheistic and atheistic, a religious apparatus completely divorced from the central Christian figure of Christ. The work is

³⁰ See pages 98-101.

³¹ Taylor. *Modern Social Imaginaries*, 29.

³² Ashton. *The German Idea: Four English Writers and the Reception of German Thought 1800-1860*, 147ff.

³³ Ashton. *The German Idea: Four English Writers and the Reception of German Thought 1800-1860*, 147.

³⁴ Charles C. Tiffany. “Feuerbach’s *Essence of Christianity*.” *Bibliotheca Sacra* Oct. 1857: 731-752, 752.

³⁵ *Ibid*, 732.

particularly dangerous for Tiffany because it describes the destruction of Christianity in positive terms.

The unsigned reviewer of Eliot's translation of *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined* in *The British Quarterly* differed in tone from Tiffany's, attempting to avoid the "regret and dismay"³⁶ found in other critiques of the work. Even so, *The British Quarterly*'s consensus of Strauss' work was that it was inconsequential, deeming the book unimportant and a waste of time (though ironically the writer spends almost sixty pages explaining just how insignificant the work is). Strauss' work is claimed to be insignificant because it would not be successful in moving the steadfast faith of the strong Christian or any man accustomed to weighing evidence analytically, though the reviewer admits that Strauss' claims might bolster the views of those among the "learned latitudinarians" already practicing religious doubt.³⁷ The review calls Strauss' theories so "extravagant, fantastical, and improbable"³⁸ that they are barely worth the time to refute. However, the reviewer does take the time to spend a lengthy paragraph explaining how Strauss' work is a reflection of the bigger problem of disbelief that had penetrated the entire country of Germany due to theologians similar to Strauss, thus making clear the infidelity that had been born out of "learned Germany" for the previous fifty years.³⁹ Though Strauss' work is professed to be irrelevant, its actual relevance is attested to by the fear of the reviewer that the larger body of German theology must be avoided lest Britain follow down that same treacherous path toward disbelief. While a few early readers such as George Eliot admired both Strauss' and Feuerbach's work, eventually

³⁶ "The Life of Jesus Critically Examined by David Friedrich Strauss." *The British Quarterly Review* London: Jackson and Walford, 1857. 206-264, 206.

³⁷ Ibid, 206.

³⁸ Ibid, 221.

³⁹ Ibid, 209.

leading to the later acclaim of Higher Criticism, the general consensus in mid-century Britain on German theology was not generally so favorable.

Eliot's interest in German Higher Criticism and her subsequent translation work was certainly exceptional because of the general reception such works received in Britain. Eliot, however, not only read their works shortly after they were published, but understood them as great works of merit. By her early twenties, after being raised as an Evangelical Anglican, Eliot's religious skepticism had already taken root. She studied philosophical religious works in solitude in an attempt to find answers to her doubt at Foleshill as a young adult before moving to Rosehill.⁴⁰ At Rosehill, George Eliot fortuitously became acquainted with the Bray and Hennell families, British religious free-thinkers, who in turn introduced her to German Higher Criticism, providing her with the resources to formulate what was for her a tenable form of religious faith.⁴¹ It was Mrs. Charles Hennell who encouraged her to translate Strauss' work, and both the Hennells and the Brays encouraged her through the translation process.⁴² It was through her involvement in the intellectual circle at Rosehill that Eliot became such an early admirer of Higher Criticism, eventually bringing their works to a larger audience through her translations.

George Eliot's translations of Strauss' and Feuerbach's works were also remarkable because of her social status as a young woman. Eliot self-deprecatingly remarked on this in a letter to her friend Mrs. Bray:

I do not think it was kind to Strauss (I knew he was handsome) to tell him that a young lady was translating his book. I am sure he must have had some twinges of

⁴⁰ For a more in-depth history of how Eliot's upbringing shaped her philosophy and theology see: Dodd. *George Eliot: an Intellectual Life*, 74-98.

⁴¹ Eliot. *Life of George Eliot: as Related in her Letters and Journals*, 80 .

⁴² Ibid, 63.

alarm to think he was dependent on that most contemptible specimen of the human being for his English reputation.⁴³

Her translation of *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined* was published anonymously and it was assumed to have had a male translator.⁴⁴ Eliot's translation of *The Essence of Christianity* was her only work published under her real name, Mary Ann Evans. A writer for the *Bibliotheca Sacra and Theological Review* in 1857 was particularly aware and critical of Eliot's sex in relation to her translation of both Strauss' and Feuerbach's works: "It is a matter of no little surprise that a woman should have undertaken the task, in both these instances, of introducing to her countrymen and kinsmen works which, if accepted as true, would overturn the only religious system which has accorded to woman her present elevated position."⁴⁵ This comment primarily reflects some of the underlying beliefs within the patriarchal gender roles of middle-class Victorian society. Women were 'exalted' within their domestic capacity, but if they, as Eliot did, chose to work outside those boundaries, they were condemned by the same gender roles which 'exalted' women. It is unclear whether the reviewer here is pointing out the obvious stupidity or depravity (or both) of the female sex in relation to Eliot's translation work, but he was certainly drawing on negative female stereotypes and relating them to the corrupting evil of the German works she translated.

Eliot's own engagement with Higher Criticism did little to dispel the common fear that German theology would destroy the foundation of religious practice within Britain. George Eliot's engagement with German theology and philosophy, including her translation work with David Strauss' *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined* and Ludwig

⁴³ Ibid, 65.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 77.

⁴⁵ Tiffany. "Feuerbach's Essence of Christianity," 732.

Feuerbach's *The Essence of Christianity* is often linked with her increasing resistance toward the Evangelical Christianity with which she was raised. In her early twenties, after becoming familiar with liberal Unitarianism, Eliot began to question particular tenets of the Anglican *Thirty-nine Articles of Religion*, such as predestination and eternal damnation.⁴⁶ What happened thereafter to Eliot's religious belief has been a matter of debate. George Willis Cooke set the interpretive tone about Eliot's religious beliefs in his 1883 work on her life, stating: "she is deeply religious and yet rejects all religious doctrines,"⁴⁷ thus emphasizing her lack of ties to traditional Christianity. An analysis by Bernard J. Paris takes this idea even further eighty years later when he claims Eliot rejected Christianity altogether.⁴⁸ Other critics of Eliot's theology, such as Basil Willey and more recently Peter C. Hodgson, propose that while Eliot was not a practicing Christian, she was nonetheless deeply influenced and ultimately concerned with the religion of Jesus—that is, a commitment to a morality based upon Jesus' teachings. Some critics are correct in surmising that Eliot did reject, or at least question, many of the central doctrines of Christianity throughout her lifetime.⁴⁹ Yet Eliot remained interested, and even committed, to seeking out the *ethos* of Jesus throughout her lifetime. In an 1857 letter to her close friend Charles Bray, Eliot values Christ over a religious framework,

⁴⁶ Eliot. "GE to Mrs. Abijah Hill Pears, Foleshill [28 January 1842]" *GEL*. Vol. 1, 125.

⁴⁷ George Willis. *George Eliot: a Critical Study of her Life, Writings, and Philosophy*. Boston: James O. Osgood, 1884, 221.

⁴⁸ Paris. "George Eliot's Religion of Humanity," 418.

⁴⁹ Yet she did not do so in order to intentionally bring about destruction to Christianity. In an 1868 letter, Eliot writes, "[Y]ou must perceive that the bent of my mind is conservative rather than destructive, and that denial has been wrung from me by hard experience—not adopted as a pleasant rebellion. Still, I see clearly that we ought, each of us, not to sit down and wail, but to be heroic and constructive, if possible, like the strong souls who lived before, as in other cases [eras?] of religious decay." ("GE to Clifford Allbutt, London, August 1868." *GEL*. Vol. 4., 472.)

writing, “I could more readily turn Christian and worship Jesus again, than embrace a Theism which professes to explain the proceedings of God.”⁵⁰

But the Jesus who Eliot admired was essentially the representation of the highest form of humanity, which was the embodiment of love. Even at a young age, before her work with German Higher Criticism, Eliot called Jesus the “embodiment of perfect love.”⁵¹ Jesus, to Eliot, was symbolic more than actual—an embodiment that was enacted not through a historical bodily man, but as a real spirit within humanity.⁵² Thus, the reality of Christ was found in the embodiment of love within the human race. Twenty years after writing to Charles Bray about her love of Jesus over Theism, Eliot was still concerned with this idealized Jesus. Seeming unbothered with the lack of a satisfactory true history of Jesus, Eliot claims to prefer instead the “Idea of Christ, either in its historical influence or its great symbolic meaning.”⁵³ While her focus on Christ throughout her life makes it difficult to claim she had completely rejected every aspect of Christianity, Eliot’s pursuit of this symbolic Jesus was made through philosophic channels that were often strongly criticized by those within either the dissenting or establishment Church. To this end, the Higher Critical works of those such as David Strauss and Ludwig Feuerbach provided George Eliot with a way to maneuver through questions about the historical accuracy of the biblical text while still maintaining a morality that related in some way to the person of Jesus.⁵⁴ While the impact of Strauss

⁵⁰ Eliot. “GE to Charles Bray, Richmond, 15 November 1857.” *GEL*. Vol. 2, 403.

⁵¹ “Appendix.” *Life of George Eliot: as Related in Her Letters and Journals*, 739. These are from the remembrances of Marian Evans from Mrs. John Cash which Cash claims took place in 1843.

⁵² For more on Eliot’s interpretation of Christ see: Jeffrey F. Keuss. *A Poetics of Jesus: the Search for Christ through Writing in the Nineteenth Century*. Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2002.

⁵³ Eliot. “GE to Mrs. Peter Alfred Taylor, London, 30 July 1863.” *GEL*. Vol. 4., 95.

⁵⁴ Both George Eliot and Matthew Arnold saw the chief value in Christian practice to be the development of a person’s righteousness or morality. See: Arnold. *Literature and Dogma: An Essay Towards a Better*

and Feuerbach on Eliot's religious pilgrimage has been duly noted by a number of scholars who have shown interest in her theological beliefs,⁵⁵ works about how Higher Criticism impacted Eliot's hermeneutical methods are rare and often lack a connection between her interpretive methods and a more general understanding of Victorian hermeneutics.⁵⁶ Yet the hermeneutic methods suggested by the works of Strauss and Feuerbach are inseparable from their proposed theology, and Eliot's novels reflect a hermeneutic approach that was deeply influenced by the work of these Higher Critics. Their theological influence on hermeneutics ultimately came to influence the Victorian approach toward reading fiction and embodying fictional and sacred texts. This hermeneutic approach was shaped by German Higher Criticism along with other religious and philosophical movements of the day, including Romanticism and Pietism—each of which stressed the importance of imagination, experience, and self-interpretation within a hermeneutic approach to texts .

Both David Strauss and Ludwig Feuerbach were writing in response to challenges arising in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries toward the historical accuracy of scripture and the person of Jesus. Despite addressing a common issue, Feuerbach distinguishes his own work from that of Strauss by noting that Strauss is foremost concerned with dogmatic Christianity, or “the system of Christian doctrine and the life of Jesus,” whereas his own work focuses on “Christianity in general, *i.e.* the Christian

Apprehension of the Bible, 316, 330; and Eliot. “GE to the Hon. Mrs. Henry Frederick Ponsonby, London, 10 December 1874.” *GEL*. Vol. VI, 97-100.

⁵⁵ See: Ashton. *The German Idea: Four English Writers and the Reception of German Thought 1800-1860*, 147; Hodgson. *Theology in the Fiction of George Eliot*. London: SCM Press, 2001.; and Keuss. *A Poetics of Jesus: the Search for Christ through Writing in the Nineteenth Century*.

⁵⁶ Two such works to note: Jeffrey Keuss' *A Poetics of Jesus: the Search for Christ through Writing in the Nineteenth Century* and Suzy Anger's article “George Eliot and Philosophy.” *The Cambridge Companion to George Eliot*. George Lewis Levine, editor. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001, 76-97. Keuss connects Eliot's hermeneutical approach to the broader reading of texts in the nineteenth century. Anger's article relates Eliot's philosophical readings to her hermeneutical practices.

religion, and consequently only Christian philosophy or theology.”⁵⁷ While both men draw from philosophy and theology, Strauss is more interested in offering a reinterpretation of the biblical text. Feuerbach, on the other hand, is concerned with how religious doctrines explain human nature and Feuerbach ultimately formulates a psychological and sociological understanding of humanity. Despite their different approaches, both works are centrally concerned with one of the key theological quandaries of the era: how to understand Christ in relation to history and the Bible. It was Higher Criticism’s response to this issue that Eliot, and the Victorians who had similarly begun to question the historicity of scripture, found helpful: a hermeneutic approach to scripture that could remain tenable amidst such doubts.

Strauss’ Word Made Flesh: the Incarnation of Christ through Christian Community

David Friedrich Strauss’ major work *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined* (first translated into English by George Eliot in 1846) influenced Victorian hermeneutic methods through its proposal that much of the Bible should be read as a myth. As an heir to eighteenth-century philosophy, Strauss was part of a tradition that had liberated itself from Christian orthodoxy while simultaneously holding up the Bible as an important “source of religious insight.”⁵⁸ Thus, in his work, Strauss intended to resolve problems inherent in both the supernaturalist and realist positions, that is, between those who accepted the biblical record as historically true and those who believed the writers of the

⁵⁷ Ludwig Feuerbach. *The Essence of Christianity*. Trans. George Eliot. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1957, xxii.

⁵⁸ Hans W. Frei. *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1974, 113-114.

biblical account had deliberately told false stories.⁵⁹ In doing so, Strauss suggested reading the Gospel accounts not as historical, but rather as mythical, which Strauss defines as a “fiction, the product of the particular mental tendency of a certain community.”⁶⁰ By connecting this myth with the early Christian community, Strauss was not suggesting that the Gospel writers were intentionally dishonest, but rather that they were writing the stories that formed the religious practice of the early church. This led Strauss to postulate that Jesus the historical figure is not entirely disconnected from the Christ on whom the Christian faith is built. Using a dialectical model of interpretation, Strauss began his analysis of each event within the Gospel narratives with a summary of the supernaturalist and naturalist explanations of the text before offering his own mythical interpretation. Strauss’ work was a climactic response to the eighteenth-century debate over the historicity of the Gospel accounts, and his use of mythical interpretations had the intention of retaining belief in the Gospel narratives while still acknowledging the uncertainties that arose for supernaturalist interpretations in light of scientific explanations of the text.

While Strauss’ work does undermine faith that is built upon supernaturalist foundations, he nonetheless attempts to uphold Christian practice through his postulation that religion can be reconstructed on philosophical grounds. Strauss wrote near the end of his work: “The object of faith is completely changed; instead of a sensible empirical fact, it has become a spiritual and divine idea, which has its confirmation no longer in history but in philosophy.”⁶¹ Echoing the work of Immanuel Kant, Strauss believed that

⁵⁹ David Klemm. “The Influence of German Criticism,” 137.

⁶⁰ David Friedrich Strauss. *The Life of Jesus, Critically Examined*. Trans. George Eliot. 2nd ed. London: Swan Sonnenschein, 1892, 87.

⁶¹ Ibid, 781.

Christianity can best be found in an idea—not an idea limited to the mind but rather an idea “which has an existence in reality.”⁶² For Strauss, this meant that the idea of Christianity must be found in something that is tangible in the present era. Strauss claimed that this idea of Christianity is found within the human race. It is humanity itself that is the incarnated God, which “dies, rises, and ascends to heaven” by transcending the earthly life and finding a “higher spiritual life.”⁶³ Strauss’ hermeneutic method is directly tied to his projection of humanity as the incarnated God. By understanding the narratives of scripture as a myth, Strauss builds upon the work of earlier German Idealists to create an approach to scripture in which the biblical text is read as a type of fiction that can only become a true history when enacted within the lives of individuals.⁶⁴

Strauss’ work systematically creates a hermeneutic approach that first questions the accuracy and authenticity of scripture and second argues against the rationalist explanations by those who believed the gospel narratives were full of errors. *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined* divides Christ’s life into a series of chapters which create a single biographical narrative out of the four Gospels. The commentary for each section begins with a description of the supernatural aspects of the biblical narrative. Then, Strauss goes on to describe natural explanations for the supernatural aspects before giving his own mythical view of the story. It is in his mythical interpretation that Strauss begins rewriting the biblical narratives as a type of fictional work. In his chapter on “The First Tidings of the Resurrection,” Strauss begins by pointing out the inconsistencies between the gospel narratives, which in this particular case mainly concern which women were

⁶² Ibid,780.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ One illustration of this is found in Strauss’s admonition to the clergy thus enlightened by his teaching to not ignore the historical interpretation of the Resurrection on Easter Sunday but to nonetheless dwell chiefly on the act of the individual being buried and raised with Christ. (Ibid,783)

visiting Jesus' grave and why they were there. Then, Strauss lists numerous interpretations used by biblical scholars to remove the contradictory aspects of the story, such as the theory that perhaps the individual gospel narratives are describing "a multiplicity of different scenes."⁶⁵ Strauss finds these explanations ridiculous, as they result in the "restless running to and fro of the disciples and the women" along with "the useless repetition of the appearances of Jesus before the same person."⁶⁶ As the incorporation of all the narratives into a single narrative does not result in creating a believable story, Strauss decides to investigate which one of the gospel narratives is "pre-eminently apostolic,"⁶⁷ that is, which is most likely to be closest to the historical record. He then turns to the supernatural aspects of the account, in this case the angels and earthquake, and offers various ways to interpret those using natural explanations. Finally, as he recounts the individual versions of this particular narrative, Strauss strives to uncover the mythical explanation of the stories, particularly with regard to what the Gospel writers sought to emphasize within their narratives. Here is where Strauss' mythological interpretation begins to operate as a work of fiction. In this particular narrative, Strauss imagines "secret colleagues" of Jesus to be the angels seen by the disciples or perhaps an "accidental meeting"⁶⁸ between two groups of people. He gives motives to his characters which are absent in the biblical text. He reinterprets the biblical text as a means of explaining what the biblical writers wished to convey within their narratives.

⁶⁵ Ibid, 710.

⁶⁶ Ibid, 713.

⁶⁷ Ibid, 714.

⁶⁸ Ibid, 718.

The Life of Jesus Critically Examined, then, not only is a work of philosophy and theology, but also functions as a literary work of fiction in which Strauss himself is rewriting the biblical narratives while concurrently encouraging readers of the Bible to understand scripture as an imaginative text. Matthew Arnold's appreciation for German thought is confirmed in his 1873 work *Literature and Dogma* when he echoes Strauss' mythical hermeneutic: "To understand the language of the Bible is fluid, passing, and literary, not rigid, fixed, and scientific, is the first step towards a right understanding of the Bible."⁶⁹ Underlying this type of interpretation was a breakdown of the authority that the biblical text had held within the Church for centuries.⁷⁰ As scripture increasingly became questioned throughout the nineteenth century, readers of the Bible were empowered to interpret sacred narratives in ways that encapsulated their own experiences as particular individuals. Because Strauss understood the Bible as a literary, mythical work, his work *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined*, which uses his understanding of the nature of scripture to rewrite biblical narratives, essentially created a work of fiction out of the sacred text. By revealing both the mythic and historical aspects of scripture, Strauss imaginatively re-visioned the biblical narratives, fabricating a new fictional account to be embodied within the true lives of believers.

In *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined* Strauss argues that the main element of religion is incarnation, that is, the understanding that the divine enters into human history, "thus assuming an immediate embodiment."⁷¹ As depicted in the Gospel accounts and

⁶⁹ Arnold, *Literature and Dogma: An Essay Towards a Better Apprehension of the Bible*, xv.

⁷⁰ David Klemm argues that this disintegration of authority was tied to Strauss' Christology, which understood Christ mythically rather than historically. Klemm writes that "Strauss's criticism dislodged the connection—so crucial for traditional Christian faith—between the (mythical) idea of the Christ as divine Son of God and the particular, historical person of Jesus." ("The Influence of German Criticism," 138.)

⁷¹ Strauss, *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined*, 39.

perpetuated by the Church, a belief in a historically incarnate Christ, according to Strauss, becomes increasingly improbable in the modern age,⁷² and can only be recovered properly through the embodiment of the divine within the community of those who profess faith in Christ. Faith in Christ and justification before God is described by Strauss as beginning with “the kindling within him of the idea of Humanity” through which “the individual man participates in the divinely human life of the species.”⁷³ Humanity approaches the Divine not through Christ’s historical existence, but through the incarnation of God within the lives of those who profess faith in Christ. Strauss’ discussion of the embodiment of the Divine within the human species and interpretation of the Gospel accounts as a mythical text opened up the possibility for fiction itself to be understood in relation to incarnation. If the Bible is a mythical work that can only be proved ‘real’ through the actions of the human species, other imaginative narratives likewise have the potential to become incarnated by the reader as they too begin to embody the fictionalized text. Strauss’ detailed fictionalized interpretations of the Gospel texts form a theoretical framework from which to imaginatively re-vision the biblical narratives. *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined* ultimately draws the fantastical myths of scripture into the sphere of reality, an exercise that was frequently practiced in the fiction of George Eliot and many other Victorian authors who rewrote biblical narratives and figures into their fictional plots as a way of imaginatively recovering the reality of the myth. The stories then become incarnate, not only through the words on the page, but also through the life of the reader.

⁷² Ibid, 40.

⁷³ Ibid, 896.

Feuerbach's Flesh Made Word: Uncovering the Humanity of God

German theologian Ludwig Feuerbach's mid-nineteenth-century work *The Essence of Christianity*, first published in Germany in 1841 shortly after *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined* and translated into English by George Eliot in 1853, takes Strauss' incarnational theology in which the Divine can be found within humanity even further. Feuerbach's central argument is that the idea of God comes out of the highest ideals which humanity attaches to itself.⁷⁴ Whereas Strauss uses a theology of incarnation to describe a humanity made divine,⁷⁵ Feuerbach understands the divine as human, arguing that:

the divine being is nothing else than the human being, or rather, the human nature purified, freed from the limits of the individual man, made objective—*i.e.*, contemplated and revered as another, a distinct being. All the attributes of the divine nature are, therefore, attributes of the human nature.⁷⁶

As an example, Feuerbach notes that individuals believe that God is love because they themselves love, thus as they imagine God, they assign to Him the highest conception of love, or love perfected.⁷⁷ In like manner, Feuerbach claims that perfected attributes of humanity assigned to God include wisdom and justice.⁷⁸ Furthermore, Feuerbach believes that in order for these human attributes to be ascribed to God, humanity must empty

⁷⁴ Feuerbach has rightfully come under feminist criticism for understanding maleness as normative and for deliberately projecting the image of the divine in the image of his own gender. I have chosen to speak of Feuerbach's concept of Mankind using the term humanity as a type of revisionist reading of his work. I do this not to obscure the masculinist aspect of his work (the quotations I use from *Essence of Christianity* demonstrate Feuerbach's gendered language), but rather to stress the meaning of his work as applied by those such as George Eliot. While his work has legitimately troubled contemporary feminists, others have also appropriated aspects of his work for a feminist philosophy of religion, albeit with modifications. See: Grace M. Jantzen. *Becoming Divine: Towards a Feminist Philosophy of Religion*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1999, 12-15, 88-99; Luce Irigaray. *Sexes and Genealogies*. Gillian C. Gill, trans. NYC: Columbia UP, 1993; and Stockton. *God Between Their Lips: Desire Between Women in Irigaray, Brontë, and Eliot*, 191-2.

⁷⁵ Strauss. *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined*, 895.

⁷⁶ Feuerbach. *The Essence of Christianity*, 14.

⁷⁷ Ibid, 18.

⁷⁸ Ibid, 21.

themselves and understand themselves to be the antithesis of these good qualities—thus necessitating the existence of God. As Feuerbach notes, “What man withdraws from himself, what he renounces in himself, he only enjoys in an incomparably higher and fuller measure in God.”⁷⁹ Here Feuerbach continues to turn the Christian concept of incarnation around—whereas Christ is understood to have emptied himself in order to become human, Feuerbach claims that man becomes nothing in order to necessitate the ‘existence’ of God.

The human conception of God is time and again referred to by Feuerbach as an object of the imagination. Throughout his work, Feuerbach refers to Christianity as a religion of the imagination and to God as its figment. In his preface to the second edition, Feuerbach writes:

Religion is the dream of the human mind...Hence I do nothing more to religion...than to open its eyes, or rather to turn its gaze from the internal towards the external, *i.e.*, I change the object as it is in the imagination into the object as it is in reality.⁸⁰

Or, as he claims later in his work, God is an “object of thought,” who only becomes known through “abstraction and negation.”⁸¹ While he believes his work unveils humanity’s creation of the Divine in its own image, Feuerbach’s own understanding of religion nonetheless involves a complex reimagining of both the person of Christ and humanity. His work is largely dependent on a particular understanding of humanity and divinity—one that constructs the idealized, mythologized human, even as he treats such venerated attributes as a timeless reflection of actual humanity. What Feuerbach is actually doing within his own construction of humanity within *The Essence of*

⁷⁹ Ibid., 26.

⁸⁰ Ibid, xix.

⁸¹ Ibid, 35.

Christianity is participating in an imaginative exercise. His work creates a fictionalized humanity based upon his understanding of humanity's conception of God. Feuerbach believes his essential task can be understood as "reduc[ing] the supermundane, supernatural, and superhuman nature of God to the elements of human nature as its fundamental elements,"⁸² yet this ultimately is circular reasoning in which his description of human nature is dependent on his own interpretation of humanity's conception of divinity. Because Feuerbach uses humanity's conception of God in order to create a framework for understanding human values and desires, his work becomes a psychological and sociological exercise rather than one that is strictly theological in its focus. Scripture was increasingly being used in the nineteenth century as a means of self-interpretation and interpreted in light of human experience rather than a means to know God and understanding Divine teaching. It was this kind of interpretation of scripture within the Victorian social imaginary that created a hermeneutic method that was concerned with the embodiment of texts within the life of the reader.

The Word of God as Fiction

Strauss and Feuerbach both understood the incarnation of Christ as a theology that ultimately is enacted through humanity itself. This interpretation of Christ was fundamentally dependent on a hermeneutic approach toward scripture that involved reading the Gospel accounts as a fictional narrative that could only become a true history through those who embodied the text within their own lives. German Higher Criticism provided Victorian religious doubters or free-thinkers, such as George Eliot, with a way to abandon traditional Christian doctrine without relinquishing ties to Christianity

⁸² Ibid, 184.

altogether. Higher Criticism was not limited to the areas of Christian doctrine and theology but also had resonance with the Victorian social imaginary in that it reflected the way individuals interpreted stories—whether stories from sacred text or fictional texts or even one’s own life story. Theologians such as Strauss and Feuerbach also provided writers such as George Eliot an interpretative framework through which to understand their own work. The interpretation of texts was understood as an imaginative act that encouraged readers to embody the narratives they read, allowing fictive works to become flesh in the same way that Christ could only truly be incarnated if readers chose to live out the mythical Gospel narratives.

CHAPTER FOUR: VICTORIAN HERMENEUTICS—THE PRAXIS OF EMBODIMENT

German theology created one possible response to the shifting status of the Bible in nineteenth-century Britain while at the same time contributing to the disintegration of the authority of scripture. At the same time, other movements in Britain had already advocated remarkably similar hermeneutic approaches to the Bible. While David Friedrich Strauss and Ludwig Feuerbach believed that Christ only became real through a tangible idea rooted in human experience, religious and philosophical movements influenced by Christian Pietism and Romanticism within Victorian Britain anticipated similar hermeneutic methods through their emphasis on individual experience and imagination as a means of interpreting scripture.

George Eliot will again be used in this chapter as a narrative thread to describe how these varied religious and philosophical movements together contributed to the Victorian social imaginaries and approach to interpreting texts. Eliot had direct ties with Pietism in her childhood, and while she increasingly distanced herself from the teachings of her youth as she grew older, she nonetheless valued aspects of Pietism throughout her life and recognized their influence on her later religious beliefs. Romanticism also shaped her thought—Romantic poets and literary figures continued to be read by her to the end of her life. With her critical awareness of the shifts taking place in hermeneutic approaches toward scripture and of how those approaches eventually came to shape her

own understanding of the novel, Eliot was particularly conscious of how Pietism and Romanticism related to the unstable status of scripture within society. While these movements proved to be influential within the larger social context, because of Eliot's peculiarities as a philosopher and novelist, she is an interesting example of the direct effect these movements had within the Victorian social imaginaries.

This chapter concludes by exploring the limitation and potential that Higher Criticism had, particularly for female readers. Both Strauss and Feuerbach proposed hermeneutic methods that enabled individuals to become the embodiment of Christ. But, because of the rigid gender categories for men and women, Christ as a male figure was increasingly understood as masculine, particularly within movements advocating 'Muscular Christianity.' Victorian women were not inclined to interpret their experiences through the masculine figure of Christ but instead applied the hermeneutic method developed through Higher Criticism, Pietism, and Romanticism to female biblical figures such as Eve, Mary Magdalene, and the Virgin Mary. Thus, women were enabled to imaginatively re-vision the sacred narratives of these female myths, using them as a means to interpret their own lives.

Pietism and the Embodiment of Scripture

The British Pietistic movement, which originated in the seventeenth century, emphasized a living, personal relationship between Christ and the believer, along with a personal moral purity that was an outgrowth of spiritual union with Jesus. Through this personal relationship with Jesus, Pietism valued feeling and experience over reason in the

life of the Christian.¹ Rooted in the Pietistic tradition, John Wesley (1703-1791) and the Methodist movement strongly emphasized the role of emotions in the Christian life, particularly in the moment of conversion.

In his journal entries recounting his legendary moment of religious conversion on Aldersgate Street in London, an event whereby Wesley experienced an emotional confirmation of his faith, he describes this event with an emphasis on his personal feelings: “I felt my heart strangely warmed...an assurance was given me that [Christ] had taken away *my* sins.”² Shortly before this event, Wesley had recounted how he had long doubted whether this inner sense of salvific assurance was a necessary part of conversion, having been a practicing Christian from a young age onward. Shortly before his Aldersgate experience, in the midst of a debate over this issue with Moravian missionary Peter Böhler, Wesley consulted scripture to clear up his confusion, attempting to explore Bible passages on conversion without bias toward his own beliefs. Finding he was wrong as far as scripture was concerned, he nonetheless believed “that experience would never agree with the *literal interpretation* of those Scriptures,”³ and thus he would still be correct that such an experience of conversion was not required for salvation. The next day Böhler introduced him to three individuals who testified to personal experience of conversion and Wesley became “thoroughly convinced”⁴ of the need for such a transformative religious experience. His prayers for evidence of his redemption were

¹ For a fuller history on Victorian Pietism, see: Jay. *The Religion of the Heart: Anglican Evangelicalism and the Nineteenth-Century Novel*; Owen Chadwick. *The Victorian Church*. 3rd ed. 2 vols. London: Adam and Charles Black, 1971; and Valentine Cunningham. *Everywhere Spoken Against: Dissent in the Victorian Novel*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1975.

² John Wesley. *John Wesley*. Ed. Albert C. Coulter. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1980, 66.

³ Ibid, 65.

⁴ Ibid.

answered shortly thereafter at Aldersgate where Wesley experienced an emotional encounter with Christ that he believed confirmed his salvation.

It is particularly striking that at one point in his Aldersgate narrative, Wesley admits that he would only believe the words of scripture if they were supported by the experiences of individual believers. His statement bears resemblance to Immanuel Kant's opening claim in his *Critique of Pure Reason* that "although all our cognition commences with experience, yet it does not on that account all arise from experience"⁵ in that Wesley's understanding of a particular theological tenet begins with human experience which, in turn, verifies the pre-existence of that theological belief within scripture. Wesley often taught the supremacy of scripture in the formation of theological doctrine,⁶ and in his Aldersgate story he emphasizes his interest in what response scripture has for his questions. Yet, in the end, he is dependent on contemporary human experience in order to verify the biblical text, thus elevating experience to at least an equal footing with scripture. Though it is impossible to say what his response to the theological question of conversion would have been had Böhler not offered him examples of individuals ready to affirm their embodiment of the doctrine in question, it is at least clear in Wesley's recounting of his story that he remained skeptical of the biblical teaching up until the point that he heard the testimonies of Böhler's friends. Thus, Wesley is dependent on personal experience as an aid for the interpretation of the biblical text. In this case,

⁵ Immanuel Kant. "Revised Introduction, 2nd Ed." *Critique of Pure Reason*. Trans. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2009, 136.

⁶ Wesley wrote, "Try all things by the written word, and let all bow down before it. You are in danger of enthusiasm every hour, if you depart ever so little from scripture; yea, or from the plain literal meaning of the text." (John Wesley. *John Wesley*, 361.) The Wesleyan Quadrilateral, a concept developed by Professor Albert C. Outler in the 1970s, theorizes that Wesley used four sources for formulating theological doctrine: Scripture, Tradition, Reason, and Experience, but that Scripture always was the prime source of doctrine for Wesley. (Ted A. Campbell. "Authority and the 'Wesleyan Quadrilateral.'" *T & T Clark Companion to Methodism*. Ed. Charles Yrigoyen, Jr. London: T & T Clark, 2010, 61-62.)

though Wesley is coming from a different place, he echoes Strauss' statement that what "we experience as members of the Christian church is a strengthening of our consciousness of God, in its relation to our sensuous existence"⁷ so that one's "natural and social life" become the means of understanding God. In each case, the men look to experience as a means of forming theological beliefs. Throughout his preaching career, Wesley continued to emphasize that theology cannot be separated from the experiential, emotional life of the believer, using the phrase "religion of the heart" repeatedly to describe Christianity.⁸

John Wesley's movement led religious revivals all over England; as such, Methodism proved influential not only with Dissenters, but throughout British culture as a whole. As Owen Chadwick has argued, the influence of Methodism was particularly felt among Evangelicals within the Church of England who adopted a pietistic emphasis on morality, daily scripture reading, and the role of 'feeling' in Christian conversion and life.⁹ Wesley's interpretation of scripture through the lens of experience is not dissimilar to George Eliot's response to the Bible as a young adult, influenced by both her Anglican upbringing and close relationships with her aunt, who was a Methodist preacher, and Maria Lewis, her teacher and close friend who was a pious Evangelical. As both Elisabeth Jay and Owen Chadwick have detailed, Evangelicalism, the so-called 'low-church' group within the Church of England, and its theological beliefs were largely shaped by the Pietistic movement and Dissenting groups such as the Methodists—though

⁷ Strauss. *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined*, 789.

⁸ John Wesley. *Sermons on Several Occasions*. Hudson: William E. Norman, 1810, 46, 91, 201, 216, 218. See discussion on Wesley's use of the phrase: D. Stephen and Stanley Hauerwas. "Theological Ethics." *The Oxford Handbook of Methodist Studies*. William J. Abram and James E. Kirby, eds. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009, 639.

⁹ Chadwick. *The Victorian Church*, Vol. I, 440.

the Evangelicals remained within the Established Church.¹⁰ Thus, the main influences in the first two decades of Eliot's life, her parents, aunt, and mentor Maria Lewis, laid a foundation emphasizing Pietistic values such as the importance of scripture, morality, and experiential feeling that were to have a life-long impact on her beliefs and writing. Eliot's novels and letters, particularly the letters written in early adulthood, are filled with references and allusions to scripture. Her early letters also frequently mention sermons and reflections on her developing spirituality.¹¹ From an early age, her life experiences became a means of interpreting scripture; likewise, scripture became a means of interpreting her experiences—both scripture and experience contributing to a hermeneutic that resulted in the embodiment of biblical narratives and symbols. As she noted many years later in a review of Robert Mackay's *Progress of the Intellect*, religious ideas become dead if they are not related to the real-life experiences held by individuals within a culture. Eliot writes:

[I]f, by a survey of the past, it can be shown how each age and each race has had a faith and a symbolism suited to its need and its stage of development, and that for succeeding ages to dream of retaining the spirit along with the forms of the past, is as futile as the embalming of the dead body in the hope that it may one day be resumed by the living soul.¹²

Eliot here notes that just as society is constantly evolving, the religious needs of a particular culture change as well. Furthermore, she points out that the religious beliefs of each era become shaped in such a way as to address the collective needs of individual

¹⁰ See: Chadwick. *The Victorian Church: An Ecclesiastical History of England*, Vol. I, 441; Jay. *The Religion of the Heart: Anglican Evangelicalism and the Nineteenth-Century Novel*, 16-19; and Jay. *Faith and Doubt in Victorian Britain*, 1-23.

¹¹ One such example is a letter to her uncle Samuel Evans, where Eliot writes: "I feel increasingly that nothing but the enjoyment of God's favour, walking in the light of His countenance, and daily progressing fitness for His presence and the companionship of the saints in light, can give real satisfaction." ("GE to Samuel Evans, Foleshill, 2 October 1841." *GEL*. Vol. 1, 112.) Later in the letter, she quotes from the Psalms (113).

¹² Eliot. "The Progress of the Intellect, as Exemplified in the Religious Development of the Greeks and Hebrews. By Robert William MacKay. London: John Chapman. 1850," 354.

societies. Therefore, doctrine necessarily is constantly evolving, lest it becomes dead. Eliot's understanding of the development of religion connects these shifting beliefs to how individuals experience their lives. Eliot here echoes Strauss' call for the authentic history of Christ to be found in the contemporary lives of His followers. Eliot's statement demonstrates the influence Higher Critical theology had on her later understanding of religion, but it also reflects her earlier Pietistic upbringing with its stress on the centrality of personal experience in the life of the believer. John Wesley, with his emphasis on the universal applicability of the literal meaning of scripture, would not have agreed with Eliot's statement, but, nonetheless, both he and Eliot allowed religious beliefs to be governed by strong ties to personal experience—ultimately emphasizing a desire for biblical narratives to find their true meaning within the embodied experiences of faithful followers of Christ.

Romanticism and the Embodiment of Texts

Romanticism, like Pietism and German Higher Criticism, also contributed to the Victorian social imaginary by ultimately encouraging the interpretation of texts to be shaped by the experience of readers through their embodiment of the text.¹³ This is not to say that the theologies and philosophies of these separate groups were alike; while they utilized similar interpretative methods, each group adopted vastly different conclusions about faith and action, which makes it all the more interesting that these separate

¹³ It is outside the scope of this project to provide an in-depth study of Romanticism as it relates to Victorian hermeneutic methods; as such, it will only briefly be related to the hermeneutic methods adopted by George Eliot through German Higher Criticism. For further study, see: David Jasper. *The Sacred and Secular Canon in Romanticism: Preserving the Sacred Truths*. London: Macmillan Press, Ltd., 1999; Stephen Prickett. *Origins of Narrative: The Romantic Appropriation of the Bible*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996; M. Jadwiga Swiatecka. *The Idea of the Symbol: Some Nineteenth Century Comparisons with Coleridge*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1980.

movements ultimately contributed to the Victorian social imaginary in such analogous ways in regard to the nineteenth-century approach to reading texts. Romanticism, with its emphasis on emotion, imagination, and individual experience, ultimately suggested a hermeneutic approach concerned with the embodiment of narratives. William Wordsworth, in his Preface to the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads: with Pastoral and Other Poems*, describes the philosophy behind his poetry:

For our continued influxes of feeling are modified and directed by our thoughts, which are indeed the representatives of all our past feelings; and as by contemplating the relation of these general representatives to each other we discover what is really important to men, so, by the repetition and continuance of this act our feelings will be connected with important subjects, till at length, if we be originally possessed of much sensibility, such habits of mind will be produced, that, by obeying blindly and mechanically the impulses of those habits, we shall describe objects, and utter sentiments, of such a nature and in such connection with each other, that the understanding of the being to whom we address ourselves, if he be in a healthful state of association, must necessarily be in some degree enlightened, and his affections ameliorated.¹⁴

Here Wordsworth is specifically explaining the development of the central purpose that drives each of his poems. Emotions are interpreted through one's personal experiences, and the meditation upon them in relation to objects is what creates the purpose of his poetry.

That meaning could be gleaned from the emotions that arise out of experience was a key component of Romanticism. This correlates with George Eliot's comment to her friend Sarah Hennell about listening to "uncultured" preachers whose actual words ultimately remain irrelevant, as "the emotions lay hold of one too strongly for one to care about the medium."¹⁵ In this way, the message of the sermon is not found within its text

¹⁴ William Wordsworth. *Lyrical Ballads: with Pastoral and Other Poems*. 1798. 3rd ed. Vol. 1. London: T.N. Longman & O. Rees, 1802, xi-xii.

¹⁵ Eliot. "GE to Sara Sophia Hennell, Wandsworth, [5 December 1859]." *GEL*, Vol. III, 228.

or subject matter, but rather is found in the emotion behind the words as appropriated and interpreted by the listener. For Wordsworth, the meaning of the text similarly is only understood through the emotion aroused both by the speaker and within the hearer of the words, rather than simply by interpreting the content. Wordsworth also believes that his own meditation on his feelings ultimately connects him to the larger concerns of mankind, allowing for personal introspection and experience to reflect greater realities beyond the self. It is through reflection on personal experience that one comes to understand and interpret the larger world properly.

Romantic poet and philosopher Samuel Coleridge connected contemporary experience more specifically to the interpretation of scripture.¹⁶ In his work *The Statemen's Manual* Coleridge pronounces that the Word of God is presented to the reader as a continuous stream wherein the Past and the Future are contained within the Present.¹⁷ By this he means that scripture describes historical events, but at the same time it is both describing the present and prophesying the future, thus providing Christians with a document that is at once historical, contemporary, and prophetic. It is through his understanding of scripture that the biblical narratives can be adopted by individuals and related to their own current experiences of the world. He further explains this approach to the Word of God by noting:

In the Scriptures therefore both Facts and Persons must of necessity have a two-fold significance, a past and a future, a temporary and a perpetual, a particular and a universal application. They must be at once Portraits and Ideals.¹⁸

¹⁶ For a more detailed study on Coleridge and his theological and hermeneutic approach see: Jasper. *The Sacred and Secular Canon in Romanticism: Preserving the Sacred Truths*; E.S. Shaffer. 'Kubla Khan' and *The Fall of Jerusalem: The Mythological School in Biblical Criticism and Secular Literature 1770-1880*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1980; Swiatecka. *The Idea of the Symbol: Some Nineteenth Century Comparisons with Coleridge*.

¹⁷ Samuel Taylor Coleridge. *The Statemen's Manual; or The Bible the Best Guide to Political Skill and Forethought: a Lay Sermon*. London: Gale & Fenner, 1816, 36.

¹⁸ Ibid.

It is through the perpetual, universal application of scripture that individuals can understand their own lives through the Word of God, thus allowing the rebirth of biblical narratives through the experiences of readers and interpreters of scripture. Coleridge's beliefs about scripture were formulated with the hope of re-connecting scripture with a world that was gradually becoming more secularized by offering a new way to interpret the Word of God. The Romantics expressed an awareness that society was increasingly shifting away from a world where the Bible held absolute authority within the Church and culture. In order to maintain a connection with the biblical text, the Romantics attempted to hold together the past with their present by participating in a movement which deconstructed religious belief, all the while looking forward to its rebirth.¹⁹ Romanticism, with its emphasis on personal experience and the appropriation of Christian texts and language for secular or poetic means, influenced the Victorian interpretation of texts by understanding the Bible primarily as a means to interpret present experience.

Higher Criticism, Pietism, Romanticism and the Victorian Social Imaginary

Strauss, Wesley, Wordsworth, and Coleridge certainly represent a wide diversity of theological voices influencing nineteenth-century thought. As I have argued up to now,²⁰ the hermeneutic approach to scripture and, in turn, other written texts such as the novel, advocated by each one of these movements came to shape the social imaginaries of Victorian readers, including George Eliot. At various stages in her life, Eliot professed

¹⁹ Jasper. *The Sacred and Secular Canon in Romanticism: Preserving the Sacred Truths*, 31.

²⁰ Specifically on pages 78-88 and 90-98.

deep personal interest in Pietism, Romanticism, and Higher Criticism, and despite the significant shifts her thought underwent, her hermeneutic approach, which shaped both her reading and writing of texts, remained profoundly influenced by each of these movements throughout her entire life. Each movement enabled scripture to maintain some form of centrality in day to day life, even as it was increasingly questioned within society. Scripture regained authority within the lives of individuals only when interpreted through its relation to personal experience. Even though significant hermeneutic shifts had taken place, the old conventional centrality of scripture was, in a way, preserved. What had changed is that authority of scripture had loosened, which equipped readers to both question and re-interpret biblical narratives in such a way which reflected their own personal experiences as men and women.

In 1841, when Eliot was in her early twenties and still closely tied to Evangelicalism, she wrote to her mentor Maria Lewis explaining a recent devotional method she was utilizing with success which involved “taking the parables or other portions of the New Testament for analyzation—writing in words other than those of Scripture the general truths contained or implied in the passage.”²¹ Eliot here emphasizes a desire to distill the meaning of scripture into its specific teachings through a hermeneutic method that involves the rewriting of scripture in order to realize the personal application of scripture within her own pious action.

John W. Cross, the man George Eliot married less than a year before she died, recounts in his biography of Eliot how they would begin their daily readings with a passage of scripture “which was a very precious and sacred book to her, not only from early associations, but also from the profound conviction of its importance in the

²¹ Eliot. “GE to Maria Lewis, Foleshill, [21 August 1841].” *GEL*. Vol. 1, 106.

development of the religious life of man.”²² Cross, though having only met Eliot later in life, was well aware of the impact that her Evangelical upbringing had in stressing the importance of the Bible, even if other factors had strongly influenced her reading of scripture in her adulthood. In 1859, Eliot would recount the seriousness with which she pursued Evangelical piety, writing of “the strong hold evangelical Christianity had on me from the age of fifteen to twenty-two and of the abundant intercourse I had with earnest people of various religious sects.”²³ She continues by explaining that for some time she rebelled against her religious upbringing but that ten years of experience had made her more sympathetic towards dogmatic Christianity, which she had not returned to, but nonetheless held as “the highest expression of the religious sentiment,” and she remained deeply interested in “the inward life of sincere Christians.”²⁴ In this same letter, Eliot closes her reflections on her religious background by stating, “[M]y most rooted conviction is that the immediate object and the proper sphere of all our highest emotions are our struggling fellow-men in this earthly existence.”²⁵ The relation here between emotion and the everyday, along with the earthly experience of humanity betrays the impact Romanticism had on Eliot’s religious thought. In 1839, Eliot first purchased *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth*, which, after reading, she excitedly wrote to Maria Lewis about: “What I could wish to have added to many of my favorite morceaux is an indication of less satisfaction in terrene objects, a more frequent upturning of the soul’s eye. I never before met with so many of my own feelings, expressed just as I could

²² John W. Cross. *George Eliot’s Life: as Related in her Letters and Journals*, 721.

²³ Eliot. “GE to Francois D’Albert-Durande, Wandswoth, 6 December 1859.” *GEL*. Vol. 3, 230.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 231.

²⁵ *Ibid*.

<wish> like them.”²⁶ Almost forty years later, her admiration for Wordsworth remained, as she wrote to a friend about how “we are agreed in loving our incomparable Wordsworth.”²⁷

Her letters are sprinkled with references to other Romantic writers: Goethe, Shelley, Byron, and Coleridge—reflecting her interest in the influential texts of the day. However, Eliot professed that she did not read the works of writers who greatly influenced her as “oracles,” and that even though they “profoundly influenced” her, this did not mean that she even “embrace[d] one of their opinions.”²⁸ Here Eliot distinguishes between “embrace” and “influence.” Eliot was influenced by many of the philosophical and theological movements of the day, but she avoided allegiances to any one school of thought. Instead, she adapted new thoughts as a means of formulating her own beliefs. As a young woman, she explained in a letter how readings influenced her:

My mind presents just such an assemblage of disjoined specimens of history, ancient and modern, scraps of poetry picked up from Shakespeare, Cowper, Wordsworth and Milton, newspaper topics, morsels of Addison and Bacon, Latin verbs, geometry, entomology and chemistry, reviews and metaphysics, all arrested and petrified and smothered by the fast thickening every day accession of actual events, relative anxieties and household cares and vexations.²⁹

At the time Eliot thought that this made her beliefs fragmentary, but this really reflects the constant connections she was making between the diversity of beliefs she encountered in her wide exposure to the philosophy and theology of the day. What is particularly striking in her reflections here is how she includes her personal experiences as a woman along with her reading and studies as influencing her philosophy. As she grew older, this “assemblage of disjoined specimens” only continued to broaden, and yet she continued to

²⁶ Eliot. “GE to Maria Lewis, Griff, 22 November 1839.” *GEL*. Vol. 1., 34.

²⁷ Eliot. “Letter to Miss Charlotte Carmichael, London, 26 December 1877.” *GEL*, Vol. VI., 439.

²⁸ Eliot. “GE to Sara Sophia Hennell [Foleshill, 9 February 1849].” *GEL*. Vol. 1, 277.

²⁹ Eliot. “Letter to Maria Lewis, Griff, 4 September 1859.” *GEL*. Vol. 1, 29.

interpret these thoughts through her own experiences to create a philosophy that was wholly her own.

Fictional “Experiments in Life” as Hermeneutic Practice

Both Pietism and Romanticism’s perpetual focus on emotions and experiences certainly shaped the self-interpretative aspect of hermeneutic practice not only for Eliot but also within the Victorian social imaginaries. German Higher Criticism also enabled Eliot to take her experience-shaped interpretation of scripture and turn it into a fictional narrative that was self-interpretive, or, at times, culturally-interpretative, at its core. Strauss’ re-written biblical text found in his *Life of Jesus Critically Examined*, like Eliot described her own work, was a series of “experiments in life,”³⁰ that is, an attempt to take the biblical text and make it a true history by rewriting it in light of contemporary religious needs. Thus, his text became an imaginative work in that his re-created Bible intentionally reflects the cultural conditions of his own era.

Eliot’s often quoted description of her own fictional works, from a letter to Dr. Joseph Frank Payne in 1876, demonstrates the way her writing was tied to such an incarnational hermeneutic. Eliot explains that her writing is “a set of experiments in life—an endeavour to see what our thought and emotion may be capable of—what stores of motive, actual or hinted as possible, give promise of a better life after which we may strive to keep hold of something more than shifting theory.”³¹ Here Eliot emphasizes that her novels are ultimately testing out the theoretical myths within a fictionalized world that mimics reality, a sort of laboratory where theory becomes intertwined with fictional

³⁰ Eliot. “GE to Dr. Joseph Frank Payne, London [25 January 1876]” *GEL*. Vol. VI, 1955, 216. See further discussion in the following paragraph.

³¹ *Ibid.*

experience before it becomes part of the embodied experience of the reader. Yet she notes that these experiments do not yield clear answers to life's looming questions (in this specific letter, Eliot was responding to the universal problem of death) but instead provide greater clarity to individual life experiences. She continues this statement by explaining that she will not "adopt any formula which does not get itself clothed for me in some human figure and individual experience, and perhaps that is a sign that if I help others to see at all it must be through that medium of art."³² It is through the medium of the novel that Eliot finds such embodiment of myths and theories to be possible. For Eliot, this human figure is born out of the biblical text—that mythical word that becomes embodied within her fictional characters. Her stories are experiments seeking the reality of the biblical text through the medium of fiction. Eliot desires for her narratives to distill the scriptural narratives to their very essence, in the hopes that her fiction might impart Divine truth to herself and her readers through the narratives of fictional characters. These fictionalized human figures of the novel are ultimately cloaked in the word, word returned to word, in part bound by the literary text that is Eliot's creation, but then released from the word to the human figure of the reader as he or she encounters Eliot's fictional stories and embodies the lessons drawn from them. In a letter to her friend Sarah Hennell in 1859, Eliot makes clear her desire that her readers might come to embody the incarnation of ideas found in her fictional texts, writing: "I quite share your faith that what yourself feel so deeply, and find so precious, will find a home in some other minds."³³ This embodiment of the scriptural narratives not only involves the interpretation of the sacred text and the fictional text, but is ultimately self-interpretative

³² Ibid, 216-217.

³³ Eliot. "GE to Sarah Sophia Hennell, Wandsworth, [5 December 1859]." *GEL*. Vol. 3, 229.

at its core—a hermeneutic approach taken not only toward words within books, but also within the flesh of embodiment.

The “experiment of life” that defines Eliot’s novels becomes an experiment both in the life of the text and the life of the reader, allowing the biblical myths to be embodied in the life of the reader, with the re-imagined scriptural stories of Eliot’s novels playing the intermediary role to incarnate the text. It is this interplay between imagination and divinity, flesh and word that ties the German Higher Critics to the Victorian hermeneutic method. Their theological understanding of the historicity of the Bible and of Jesus Christ may have been controversial, but its influence on the social imaginaries resulted in individuals nonetheless adopting their proposed hermeneutic method in their own reading practices. Just as Strauss created a fictional myth out of the biblical text, Victorian writers and readers were nonetheless inclined toward a practice of imaginatively re-writing scripture.

Embodying the Divine through Fiction

While Higher Criticism aimed to formulate a new Christology to respond to the growing doubt of the historical validity of Jesus as depicted in the Gospel texts, the work of Strauss and Feuerbach ultimately was concerned with creating a hermeneutic approach rather than a re-interpretation of Christ. This interpretative method had particular repercussions for women as personal, gendered experience became the lens through which imaginative re-interpretations of texts were made. More recent understandings of embodiment of biblical narratives often limit the incarnation of the text to Jesus, which excludes discussion on the appropriation of feminine biblical narratives by Victorian women. Theologian Jeffrey F. Keuss’ work on Victorian hermeneutics focuses on the

impact that Anglo-German higher criticism's theological concerns had on the Victorian novel, focusing on George Eliot as an exemplar of such an approach. Keuss understands incarnation within the novel as fundamentally concerned with the embodiment of Jesus Christ within the characters of a fictional narrative, writing:

Such a declaration of principle as to how literature functions as an incarnation of this coming together of subject and sacred, and what this embodiment within literary space ultimately concerns is what I am terming a *poetics of Jesus*.³⁴

Keuss' concept of a "poetics of Jesus" is similar to the embodied hermeneutic that is the focus of this work in that he believes that Eliot was intentionally enabling her characters to become the embodiment of Christ, resulting in a re-interpretation of the Gospel narratives that relates to her own life experiences.

For Keuss, George Eliot's wide-ranging characters, including Janet Dempster, Dinah Morris, and Maggie Tulliver, each operate as "different expressions" of the person of Jesus.³⁵ Keuss believes that Eliot seeks to recover the authentic, rather than historical, Jesus, who discovers legitimacy only "through the act of (re)writing as an act of true fiction."³⁶ Eliot's life is interpreted by Keuss as a searching for Jesus—a search that ends through the words of her novels as Christ becomes embodied within her characters. When found in fictional texts, Jesus subsequently becomes embodied within the life of the reader, thus making the interpretation of texts, whether the sacred or the secular word, the significant act of embodiment, as Keuss notes: "In the poetic cartography of George Eliot, the poetics are embodied *and* embody both in the poetics and the reader—you are

³⁴ Jeffrey F. Keuss. *A Poetics of Jesus: the Search for Christ through Writing in the Nineteenth Century*, 3. What Keuss terms a "poetics of Jesus" relates to Jacques Rancière's concept of incarnation, by which Rancière means the relationship between Word and flesh within the novel. Both terms are used to describe the embodiment of Christian narratives within fictional works. See further discussion on Rancière on pages 176-178.

³⁵ Ibid, 4.

³⁶ Ibid, 9.

Christ as Christ is in you.”³⁷ This corresponds to the type of incarnational hermeneutic that was a significant aspect of the Victorian interpretation of texts wherein the reader would interpret the text by embodying the figures found within the fictional narrative. Although Keuss is concerned with constructing an understanding of Eliot’s hermeneutic approach through her work with Higher Criticism, his interpretation ultimately has a Christological focus in that he argues that the embodied Christ within Eliot’s novels is formed out of the image of Jesus pictured in Strauss and Feuerbach’s works—an image that certainly is formed out of their interpretative approach toward scripture, but also stands as a particular theological vision of Christ.

Keuss’ work offers a detailed account of just how much Anglo-German Higher Criticism influenced George Eliot’s work, and it provides a compelling account of Eliot’s attempts to embody a sacred text that she found adequate only through a fictionalized reworking of its narrative. Significantly, Keuss does not limit a poetics of Jesus to Eliot’s male characters—instead of looking for the obvious typological ‘Christ-figure’ he focuses his attention on several of Eliot’s female characters as the incarnation of Christ within her work.³⁸ Keuss’ use of female characters within George Eliot’s novels as the embodiment of Christ offers the potential for a powerful feminist interpretation of her works. However, his work, which is predominately concerned with proposing a theological Victorian hermeneutic, does not offer a specifically feminist interpretation of the gender issues at work within his argument. This kind of interpretation would have been fruitful, as the female embodiments of Jesus that he describes in the fictional characters in the novel are important because they enable God to be embodied within the

³⁷Ibid, 204.

³⁸ Keuss is centrally concerned with Eliot’s use of female characters (Milly Barton, Janet Dempster, Dinah Morris, Hetty Sorrel, and Maggie Tulliver) as a poetics of Jesus (199).

whole of humanity, not just through male figures.³⁹ Where Keuss' work is particularly helpful is in providing a fresh interpretation of Eliot's works for modern feminist interpreters who suggest new gender models of the incarnated Christ within fictive texts.

Despite the positive implications Keuss' work has for current feminist discourse on the embodiment of the Divine, given the Victorians' proclivity for defined gender roles and gendered experience, it seems unlikely that even someone as progressive as George Eliot would have intentionally been creating female Christ-figures within her works.⁴⁰ Victorians were acutely interested in gendering texts, narratives, language, and characters.⁴¹ Literature itself was understood to be a reflection of the author's experiences; thus, the gender of each novel was often related to that of the author's sex and his or her own highly gendered experience within Victorian culture. The clearly defined categories of masculinity and femininity that were so common in Victorian culture contributed to the increasing masculinization of Christ in the second half of the century, which strained the capacity for women to relate their own female experiences to

³⁹ Reading Keuss' work alongside Grace M. Jantzen's *Becoming Divine: Towards a Feminist Philosophy of Religion* draws out some of the feminist issues that exist within his argument. In a section where she is in dialogue with Luce Irigaray, Jantzen poses the problem inherent with the male incarnation of Jesus as the human-God: "Maleness is after all only *one* of the sexes: it is only part of humanity, not the whole of it. So even if Jesus was God made flesh, he was only a *partial* incarnation. He could not be the whole, the unique and only one, since he did not encompass all of humanity." (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1999, 17.) Jantzen, in response to this, believes that the solution, in part, involves becoming the embodiment of the Divine, which is realized through "a new religious symbolic focused on natality and flourishing rather than death." (254) Incarnation within the works of Eliot, as Keuss outlines in his work, read alongside Jantzen's feminist philosophy of religion would result in an interesting feminist exploration as to what role literature can play in ushering in a female embodiment of Christ.

⁴⁰ Keuss offers a well-developed argument that should not be entirely dismissed; neither should his analysis limit these characters to be read as Christ-figures. It is my belief that Eliot's work can be used positively within contemporary feminist criticism—it lends itself well to discussions of gender and offers a place for positive, or at least complex, depictions of femininity within Victorian literature—a feat that many feminists may find refreshing in a sea of often misogynistic Victorian texts. However, Eliot was not first and foremost a feminist writer. I am more interested in the type of hermeneutic approach at play within the Victorian era; as such, I am arguing for how Eliot was reading and re-interpreting texts through her fictional works. Keuss' work on Eliot's hermeneutic approach shows the potential that her work has in addressing current theological concerns.

⁴¹ These claims are argued more fully in chapter six.

that of Jesus. However, Keuss' interpretation of Eliot's hermeneutic approach, as a "poetics of Jesus"—that is, an embodiment of Christ through many of her (female) protagonists—opens up the possibility that Eliot's re-visioning of the biblical text was not limited to mythologies of Jesus, but also could extend to female biblical figures, such as Eve, the Madonna, and Magdalene. Eliot, in her reading of Feuerbach, re-interpreted and appropriated his ideas in such a way as to enable his concept of the embodiment of the divine within humanity to reflect her own experience as a woman. Therefore, while Strauss and Feuerbach identified Christ with humanity, Eliot tended toward interpreting herself through female biblical mythologies—particularly, as will be argued more fully in chapter seven, with the Madonna. While a "poetics of Jesus" was increasingly inaccessible to Victorian women due to the masculinization of Christ throughout the era, the Victorian hermeneutic method, with its emphasis on interpreting scripture through one's individual experiences, enabled women to re-vision and embody the narratives of female biblical figures as a means of self-interpretation.

Gendering of Biblical Symbols in Victorian Britain

The masculinization of Jesus throughout the nineteenth century was an understanding that was related to the increasingly rigid categories of masculinity and femininity during the Victorian era. Thomas Walker Laqueur, in his foundational work *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud*, argues that "[s]ometime in the eighteenth-century, sex as we know it was invented."⁴² Laqueur here is referring to biological sexual differences that were assigned as male and female. Male and female

⁴² Thomas Walker Laqueur. *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1990, 149.

began to be understood as “opposite and incommensurable biological sexes,”⁴³ rather than fitting within a hierarchical structure wherein women were the lower form of the male sex. This conception of sexual differences also had ramifications for understandings of gender as well. Laqueur argues that out of this understanding that male and female were distinctly separate sexual beings, the belief formed that men and women also fulfilled opposite but complementary roles within society.⁴⁴ The realization of sexual difference resulted in clearly defined gendered categories: women were understood to be gentle, domestic, and maternal as a consequence of their biological sex, and men, as a natural consequence of their own biological sex, were strong, business-minded, and heroic.

Feminist critical work on the Victorian era, such as Mary Poovey’s, has demonstrated the inherent hierarchy within these categories. Muscular men were understood to have power over and against the docile “angel in the house,”⁴⁵ but many Victorian writers, both men and women, simply saw these gendered differences to be implicit within male and female sexual differences and often emphatically argued that neither male nor female gendered roles were necessarily better or worse than the other, as if womanhood and manhood meant ‘separate but equal’ status in society. John Ruskin’s 1864 lecture “On Queen’s Gardens” argues this point:

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

⁴³ Ibid, 154.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Mary Poovey. *Uneven Developments: the Ideological Work of Gender in Mid-Victorian England*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1988, 4-9. See also: Ruth Y. Jenkins. *Reclaiming Myths of Power: Women Writers and the Victorian Spiritual Crisis*. Lewisburg: Bucknell UP, 1995, 15-22.

are in nothing alike, and the happiness and perfection of both depends on each asking and receiving from the other what the other only can give.⁴⁶

Ruskin here expresses awareness that some might understand Victorian gender roles as viewing men as superior to women, perhaps offering an argument against early feminist voices, but at the same time strongly advocates a separate but equal understanding of men and women, where biological sex differences form gender roles.

This view was often adopted by women as well. Some women considered it to the advantage of society that they were born with feminine attributes because, as Sarah Stickney Ellis in her 1839 address to the women of Britain claims, it allows women “to assist in redeeming the character of men from the mere animal, or rather, the mere mechanical state” to which men were so frequently in danger of succumbing.⁴⁷ Ellis is dependent on these gendered categories throughout her entire work on womanhood, and, rather than finding them problematic for her sex, embraces them as the feminine charge of womanhood. Twenty years later, Dinah Craik’s similarly themed work on womanhood hints at some of the problems of the strict gendered categories within Victorian culture, noting that individuals of the same sex at times differ almost as much from each other as members of the opposite sex. Craik continues by speaking of the complex relationship between gender and sex: “For do we not continually find womanish men and masculine women? and some of the finest types of character we have known among both sexes, are they not often those who combine the qualities of both?”⁴⁸ Yet Craik does not call for

⁴⁶ John Ruskin. *Sesame and Lilies*, 146. For discussion on the differences between John Ruskin and John Stuart Mill see: Jennifer M. Lloyd. “Raising Lilies: Ruskin and Women.” *The Journal of British Studies*, Vol. 34, No. 3, Victorian Subjects (Jul., 1995), 325- 350; and Kate Millet. “The Debate Over Women: Ruskin Versus Mill.” *Victorian Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 1, The Victorian Woman (Sep., 1970), 63-82.

⁴⁷ Ellis. *The Women of England, Their Social Duties, and Domestic Habits*, 265.

⁴⁸ Dinah Maria Mulock Craik. *A Woman’s Thoughts about Women*. New York: Rudd & Carlton, 1861, 30.

doing away with gendered categories—emphatically stating, “No; equality of the sexes is not in the nature of things”⁴⁹—but instead calls for a third category which she calls “abstract right”⁵⁰ which either sex can embody and which is superior to either classification of womanhood or manhood. She also recommends that men and women should be understood as distinct individuals, which allows for some variation among each sex in how each person fulfills gender roles. Even critics of Victorian gender roles were not entirely opposed to sexual categories but, rather, disapproved of the dominance of one gender over the other. John Stuart Mill, in *The Subjection of Women* (1869), was acutely aware of the negative repercussions that gender roles had for Victorian women⁵¹ and held that gendered differences between the sexes were not naturally inherent, but were due to “education or external circumstances.”⁵² Yet, ultimately, Mill relies on sexual difference and gendered categories for the sexes—even amidst a proposal of egalitarianism and equality among those roles. Mill believes that, when a woman chooses to marry, “she makes choice of the management of a household, and the bringing up of a family, as the first call upon her exertions”⁵³—a choice he compares to that of a man choosing his lifelong profession (Mill, however, does not view marriage as a professional choice made by men). Although Mill’s understanding of marriage is couched in equality between the sexes, he is unable to let go of pre-conceived gender roles for men and women, reflecting just how clearly defined femininity and masculinity were within the Victorian social imaginary.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 13.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 30.

⁵¹ In particular see: Mill. *The Subjection of Women*, 24-33.

⁵² Ibid, 41.

⁵³ Ibid, 89.

The growing emphasis on the distinct sexual differences between men and women that began in the eighteenth century ultimately came to transform the Victorian interpretation of Jesus, though this shift became more pronounced in the latter half of the century.⁵⁴ Connecting Christ with his masculinity was also a reaction against the effeminate images of Christ which had been popular in the eighteenth century and into the first half of the nineteenth century, and which were later criticized for alienating men from Christian practice.⁵⁵ Also, as Higher Criticism focused on the historicity of Christ, along with the doctrine of Incarnation, increasing attention was paid to the humanity of Christ, rather than his Divinity, which in turn created an interest in his biological sex and how that related to his humanity. In art, this also meant a growing interest in depicting Christ in first-century Palestine, with a naturalistic setting to capture the historicity of the gospel narratives—with many artists traveling to the Holy Land to paint biblical scenes in a realistic manner. The shift from a genderless or even effeminate Christ to a masculine Christ can be illustrated most clearly through the Pre-Raphaelite artistic representations of Jesus. In particular, the heated response toward both effeminate and masculine paintings of Jesus mid-century demonstrates the huge shifts that were taking place at this

⁵⁴ For a more detailed history on the gendering of Christ throughout the Victorian era see: Norman Vance. *The Sinews of the Spirit: the Ideal of Christian Manliness in Victorian Literature and Religious Thought*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2009; Callum G. Brown. *The Death of Christian Britain*, 58-114; Frances Knight. "English Christianity, 1750-1940." *Jesus in History, Thought, and Culture: an Encyclopedia*. Vol. 1. Leslie Houlden, editor. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, Inc., 2003, 230-235; and Rachel Malane. *Sex in Mind: The Gendered Brain in Nineteenth-Century Literature and Mental Sciences*. New York: Peter Lang, 2005. For a study that follows the American gendering of Jesus in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—which parallels what was taking place in Britain—see: Betty A. DeBerg. *Ungodly Women: Gender and the First Wave of American Fundamentalism*. Macon, GA: Mercer UP, 2000.

⁵⁵ Thomas Hughes' pamphlet *The Manliness of Christ* in particular condemns what he construes as the lack of manliness within Christian practice, strongly advocating "manliness as the perfection of human character," which ultimately is found in Christ. (New York: I.K. Funk, 1880, 33.) Hughes argues for the manliness of Christ, not by doing away with his more feminine attributes such as tenderness and sympathy, but rather by re-interpreting such character qualities as essential for manliness, when combined with more masculine traits such as courage. See analysis of Hughes' pamphlet: Peter Gay. "The Manliness of Christ." *Religion and Irreligion in Victorian Society: Essays in Honor of R.K. Webb*. R.W. Davis and R.K. Webb, eds. London: Routledge, 1991, 102-116.

time, showing just how strongly gendered interpretations of Jesus had taken root within the social imaginary.⁵⁶ William Holman Hunt's earliest and most famous depiction of Christ was the painting *The Light of the World* (1851-3), a highly symbolic work where Jesus is depicted holding a lit lantern whilst knocking at the door of the soul, an allusion to Revelation 3:20. While Hunt went to extraordinary lengths to realistically portray illumination on a darkened evening, his depiction of Jesus, which he was assisted with by both male and female models, came under criticism by Thomas Carlyle, who lambasted the painting for its poor representation of "the noblest, the brotherliest, and the most Heroic-minded Being."⁵⁷ Carlyle goes on to compare Hunt's depiction of Christ to a painting by Leonardo da Vinci with its "puir, weak, girl-faced nonentity"⁵⁸—a figure cloaked in silk and jewels, with hands that looked as though they never accomplished physical labor. Carlyle here expresses desire for a realistic representation of Jesus—one that, for him, includes emphasizing Christ's masculinity.

Hunt's later work depicting Jesus, *The Shadow of Death* (1870-3), did just that, while at the same time reflecting the growing masculinization of Jesus that had developed in Victorian Britain in the decades between the two works. While retaining the symbolic and realistic elements of Hunt's first painting of Jesus, the figure of Christ in *The Shadow of Death* emphasizes the Son of Man's masculine qualities. He is drawn naked from the waist up, with noticeable muscles and veins, and he has unkempt, wild hair and visible facial hair. Hunt emphasizes Christ's physical work by depicting him as resting from his

⁵⁶ The negative reaction mid-century toward realistic, masculine representations of Jesus, particularly John Everett Millais' 'Christ in the House of His Parents' (1849) is discussed here: J.B. Bullen. *The Pre-Raphaelite Body: Fear and Desire in Painting, Poetry, and Criticism*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1998.

⁵⁷ William Holman Hunt. *Pre-Raphaelitism and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood*. Vol. I. London: Macmillan, 1905, 355.

⁵⁸ Ibid, 358. "Puir" is a Scot word meaning "poor."

labor amidst his tools in, presumably, his father's carpentry shop. Ford Maddox Brown's painting *Jesus Washing Peter's Feet* (1852) likewise depicts a manly Jesus hard at work, with his shirtsleeves rolled up to reveal muscular arms that are shown actively serving. Again, Christ has a slight beard on his angular face and his hair appears straight, uneven, and pulled back, unlike the angelic images of Christ with a rounded face surrounded by a halo of ringlets that were more popular in the first half of the century.

Masculine representations of Christ were not limited to art. The "Muscular Christianity" associated with the Anglican priest Charles Kingsley's fictional works was also advocated by many preachers of the day, wherein Christ was held as the model of manliness for other men to imitate. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, Charles Spurgeon, the popular Baptist preacher, wrote, "When I saw that a man in Christ *is* a man, I mean that, if he be truly in Christ, he is therefore manly."⁵⁹ Hugh Stowell Brown, another renowned Baptist preacher, in his sermon "Manliness: a Discourse to Young Men" similarly holds Jesus as "the Perfect Man."⁶⁰ According to Brown, Jesus' life and teachings offer the "highest, the best, and the only safe and perfect standard"⁶¹ of manliness, interpreting Christ's choice to love and bless his enemies as a show of "marvelous strength,"⁶² rather than feminine weakness. While Brown's sermon as a whole attempts to differentiate between a Christian form of masculinity that is found in Christ and the savage form of masculinity found in the world, Brown's concept of Christ

⁵⁹ C.H. Spurgeon. *A Good Start: a Book for Young Men and Women*. London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1898, 16.

⁶⁰ Hugh Stowell Brown. *Manliness and Other Sermons*. Edinburgh: Oliphant, Anderson & Perrier, 1889, 17.

⁶¹ Ibid, 10-11.

⁶² Ibid, 19.

is clearly gendered. In a separate lecture on manliness, Brown likewise equates manliness with Christ but explicitly connects this masculinity with the incarnation, claiming:

Man is manliest when he is most virtuous, man is manliest when he is most like God; but since virtue is a somewhat abstract term, and since God is a Spirit indescribable, incomprehensible, infinite, it simplifies the matter to say—man is manliest when he is most like Jesus Christ.⁶³

Jesus was believed to be both God and sexually male, therefore he was also understood as the exemplar of manliness. This masculinized Jesus of the latter nineteenth century contrasts with John Wesley's description of Christ a century earlier, defining Christianity as that which is in accordance with the "softness, sweetness, and gentleness of Jesus Christ,"⁶⁴ a description that emphasizes more feminine attributes of Christ rather than formulating an image of Christ that stresses masculine strength.

In light of the tendency toward delineation between masculine and feminine in relation to biological sex within the nineteenth century, along with the increasingly masculinized interpretation of Christ, it seems unlikely that Eliot was intentionally using female characters within her works to operate as "Christ-figures." While Eliot was certainly progressive both in regard to gender roles and theological beliefs, like most Victorians she nonetheless connected masculinity and femininity with biological sex. Eliot's husband John W. Cross discussed Eliot's beliefs in relation to gender roles and women's issues in the biography about her that he wrote after her death. Cross explained that Eliot was "keenly anxious to redress injustices to women"⁶⁵ and did everything in her power to raise their status in society. At the same time, Eliot was appalled at the idea of

⁶³ Ibid, no page number.

⁶⁴ John Wesley. "Letter to William Wogan, Esq., in Spring Gardens, London/ Savannah, March 28, 1737." *The Life and Times of the Rev. John Wesley, M.A., founder of the Methodists*. Ed. Luke Tyerman. Vol. 1. London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1870, 138.

⁶⁵ Cross. *George Eliot's Life as Related in her Letters and Journals*. 725.

the “masculine woman” seeking instead “to be, above all things feminine.”⁶⁶ Cross goes on to define Eliot’s idea of femininity as concerned with sewing, music, and housekeeping—skills she did not feel absolved from due to her “exceptional intellectual powers.”⁶⁷

Even highly effeminate depictions of Jesus within the Victorian era never went so far as to make Christ biologically female. Linton’s Christ-figure protagonist in *The True History of Joshua Davidson* (1872) is described as “a beautiful boy, with a face almost like a young woman’s for purity and spirituality” as a means of emphasizing his piety despite his male sex rather than as a means of making him female. To connote morality with ideal feminine beauty was a common Victorian device in art and literature, particularly in the first half of the century.⁶⁸ Linton’s writing illustrates that while the Victorian concept of Jesus became increasingly masculine throughout the century, the more feminine vision of Jesus had not disappeared entirely from the social imaginary. In such interpretations, Jesus was only gendered as feminine as a means of emphasizing his moral goodness and never appeared literally as a woman; likewise, women within Victorian society were seldom understood to be Christ-figures—the appropriation of Christ was not generally available to women in that way.⁶⁹ Linton’s fictionalized Christ-

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ See: Helena Michie. *The Flesh Made Word: Female Figures and Women’s Bodies*. New York: Oxford UP, 1987.

⁶⁹ Instead, women would often identify with particular attributes of Christ, but understood these attributes more generally as Christian virtues, rather than an embodiment of Christ. Julie Melnyk’s essay “‘Mighty Victims’: Women Writers and the Feminization of Christ,” contains an interesting discussion on the feminization of Christ, particularly in the first half of the nineteenth century, claiming that women often used these feminized Christ images as a potent female symbol, which became the primary symbol with which they identified. Melnyk argues that the lack of available female symbols, combined with the increasing feminization of Christ, created a culture that drew women to the figure of Christ as a means of self-interpretation. While Melnyk is right in her description of the gendering of Christ within Victorian Britain in the first half of the century, she incorrectly surmises the lack of feminine symbols available to women in that time period and frequently mistakes women’s identification with Christian virtues with that

figure also reflects the Victorian desire for an idealized, rather than human, portrait of Christ. This penchant for an idealized Christ also created disdain for any image of him that depicted him with human flaws, which explains the uproar surrounding John Everett Millais' painting "Christ in the House of His Parents" with its illustration of the child Christ with large hands and feet, dirty skin, and an emaciated frame. One reviewer condemned the work, "We are presented with that which is merely disgusting,"⁷⁰ while another believed the painting was a failure because only the spiritual ideal could be harmonized with the physical ideal.⁷¹ Because of the era's defined gendered categories, Christ was initially portrayed as feminine in the early decades of the century because he was interpreted as possessing the moral piety that was more often associated with idealized womanhood—it was this type of feminization of Christianity that prompted the masculinization of Christ in the latter half of the century.

Millais' works reflect the growing interest in a realistic portrayal of Christ, which included rendering Christ with masculine attributes to reflect his biological sex. Eliot describes in her novel *Adam Bede* preference for a realist style of art such as Millais' portrait of Christ, writing of "this rare precious quality of truthfulness that I delight in many Dutch paintings." She continues by describing her appreciation of work that depicts the "exact likeness" of common people—works that are often criticized by others for their vulgar depictions of "clumsy, ugly people"—as opposed to art that shows idealized

of Christ himself. (*Victorian Literature and Culture*, Vol. 31, No. 1, Victorian Religion (2003), 131-157.) This is not to say that Victorian women never appropriated Christ as a symbol for womanhood—Florence Nightingale is one such rare example—but such interpretations, while interesting, were uncommon and thus not a part of the overall Victorian social imaginary. See: Florence Nightingale. *Suggestions for Thought*. Ed. Lynn McDonald. Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier UP, 2008, 589. See also: Elisabeth Jay. "Women Writers and Religion 'A self worth saving, a duty worth doing, and a voice worth raising.'" *Women and Literature in Britain: 1800-1900*. Joanne Shattock, editor. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001, 251-274.)

⁷⁰ Bullen. *The Pre-Raphaelite Body: Fear and Desire in Painting, Poetry, and Criticism*, 6.

⁷¹ Ibid, 10.

“cloud-borne angels...incorrect prophets...heroic warriors.”⁷² Eliot explains that as a novelist she avoids creating “a world so much better than this,”⁷³ preferring instead to work within the confines of real human experiences in her writing, which resulted in the use of, rather than breaking out of, the boundaries of gendered experience.

If Eliot was explicitly using her characters to embody Jesus in the same way Feuerbach claims occurs within Mankind, it might be a more appropriate nineteenth-century understanding to argue that Eliot is using Love as an embodiment of the Divine rather than an embodiment of Christ as the appropriation of the Divine. Love becomes the middling term—that is, Eliot’s fiction brings forth the embodiment of God through love that arises between two human characters. Individuals are not Christ incarnated, but it is Love itself that is the incarnation of God: as Feuerbach writes, “Love is the middle term, the substantial bond, the principle of reconciliation between the perfect and the imperfect, the sinless and sinful being, the universal and the individual, the divine and the human.”⁷⁴ Put another way, for Feuerbach, Love *is* incarnation. In this way Feuerbach emphasizes a collective humanity that embodies Christ rather than individuals who are Christ-figures, which Strauss likewise supports through his emphasis on the community of believers that become Christ to the world. The incarnation of the Divine within Eliot’s

⁷² George Eliot. *Adam Bede*. Contributor Carol A. Martin. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2001, 161.

⁷³ Ibid 160.

⁷⁴ Feuerbach. *The Essence of Christianity*, 48. This emphasis on love is also validated through Eliot’s interest in Positivism, as August Comte places love as the starting point through which a progression toward Positivist ideals is made—ideals that culminate in its highest goal of worshipping humanity as God. See: *A General View of Positivism*. Trans. J.H. Bridges. Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Pub., 2006, 5; August Comte. *Systems of Positive Polity*. Trans. John Henry Bridges, Frederic Harrison, Richard Congreve, and Henry Dix Hutton. Vol. 1. London: Longmans, Green, 1875, 557. For more on Positivism see: T.R. Wright. *The Religion of Humanity: The Impact of Comtean Positivism on Victorian Britain*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1986.

work is thus found within the interaction that takes place within the collective human body rather than in any one character.

Yet, Eliot does take the words of scripture and embodies them through her fictional characters. Her female characters, though, are not the embodiment of the Divine but are the incarnation of female mythologies rooted in scripture, thus bringing to life female figures and narratives such as the Madonna, Mary Magdalene, and Eve within the fictional world of the novel. These female figures remain highly gendered within Eliot's work, but, through her re-visioning of the sacred scripture, they take on flesh that is shaped by Eliot's own experience as a woman, which, in turn, gives new meaning to Victorian conceptions of femininity.

Embodying Feminine Sacred Narratives

In this chapter, I have outlined the Victorian approach to interpreting texts—a hermeneutic method that shaped how individuals read sacred and fictive works, including, at times, interpreting biblical texts by re-visioning them into new fictional narratives within the novel. Such an interpretative approach enabled a re-interpretation of scripture that was used as a means of self-interpretation, involving imaginative re-visions of sacred narratives and ultimately enabling the embodiment of those narratives within the life of the reader. Eliot's theological beliefs certainly convey her strong interest in the embodiment of the Divine within her fictional works, but the Victorian hermeneutic approach to text, which Eliot not only employed, but actually contributed to the development of within the social imaginary, enables an incarnation that is not limited to Jesus but expands to include the embodiment of feminine biblical figures as well. In the following chapters, the embodiment of female biblical figures within the fictional women

of the novel will be explored in greater detail, using specific examples not only from the work of George Eliot but also other Victorian writers such as Elizabeth Gaskell and Josephine Butler. Such an embodiment of female figures within fictional works allowed for the re-visioning of these ancient narratives, enabling them to exist as symbols that continued to be appropriated by Victorian women in new and evolving ways, ultimately contributing to an understanding of the feminine that, while not abolishing Victorian gendered understandings, provided women with a female symbolic that suited their own individual experiences as women.

In light of the restrictive and often constraining gender categories within the Victorian social imaginaries, it might seem as if limiting female embodiment to feminine biblical narratives would be constraining for Victorian women as it only served to emphasize patriarchal gendering of symbols. Furthermore, if women were unlikely to become the incarnation of Jesus within the fictional text, did this not exclude women from embodying the Divine image? Yet the hermeneutic method proposed within Higher Criticism, Pietism, and Romanticism, which advocated the imaginative interpretation of the biblical texts through the experiences of each individual reader, enabled women such as George Eliot to embody and re-vision not only Christ, but female figures within the biblical text. Eve, who like Adam was created in the image of God, and the Madonna and Magdalene, saint and sinner bearing the likeness of Eve created in the image of God, were both intimately connected with Christ, and these women became the means for women to re-vision and embody biblical symbols in such a way that reflected their own experience as Victorian women.

Figures such as Mary the mother of Jesus, Mary Magdalene, and Eve—often sidelined in the biblical text—were given new voice and prominence within the nineteenth-century novel. For Victorian female readers this meant that the meaning of scripture was no longer confined to a historical narrative but could be understood through their own experiences. Ultimately this resulted in contributing to a more complex understanding of these symbols, whereby these saints, through the embodied experience of Victorian readers, were enabled to become the incarnation of saints. Likewise, the re-interpretation of female narratives found in scripture led to the re-assessment of the concept of femininity and what it meant to be female within the nineteenth century. Women became capable of expanding and re-interpreting gender roles for themselves in such a way that reflected their own personal life and experiences. This was empowering to women and allowed them to find new ways of understanding womanhood, ultimately enabling them to expand society's understanding of gender. Their re-visioned narratives of female symbols often encompassed aspects of their life and actions that did not conform to society's conception of femininity, enabling some marginalized women to have a greater voice or even increased respect within society. Furthermore, it gave women the means to interpret their lives positively, even if their actions and beliefs did not exactly correspond to the previously rigid conceptions of womanhood within Victorian society.

These re-visioned narratives also created a highly sophisticated female symbolic rooted within the Bible and expanded into the fictional novel—resulting in symbols whose meanings were constantly being adapted and re-appropriated by Victorian women as a means of interpreting their own lives. While this hermeneutic method did not do

away with Victorian understandings of gender and the patriarchal understanding of feminine experience, it nonetheless provided women with the means to interpret themselves through gendered symbols that were comprehended through the lens of their own experience as women. Over time this created a shift in the way gender roles were understood, ultimately leading to endowing women with a potent tool to understand and shape their own lives and actions.

CHAPTER FIVE: “HERE AND THERE IS BORN A SAINT:” FEMALE RELIGIOUS SYMBOLS IN THE VICTORIAN NOVEL

In the second book of *Adam Bede*, within a chapter entitled “In Which the Story Pauses a Little,” George Eliot anticipates what the reader’s reaction to her portrayal of the village minister, Mr. Irwine, will be: “This Rector of Broxton is little better than a pagan!”¹ Responding to the hypothetical outcries of her readers, Eliot pauses in her storytelling to describe her role as an author. She claims that rather than creating a fictional world where everything is as it should be, she believes the highest calling of the author is “to give a faithful account of men and things as they have mirrored themselves in my mind,” even if, admittedly, such mirrors are only as perspicacious as the storyteller describing the reflection. Eliot goes on to note that idealized portraits of the world only serve to create a hardness of heart toward the less than ideal everyday life, which in turn allows injustice and prejudice to form against “the real breathing men and women,”² a point which Eliot uses to introduce the purpose in her writing: to illuminate and elevate that which is ordinary.³ At this point, Eliot calls her narrative “my simple story”—a little, self-deprecating statement that dismisses the complexity of her work against the idealistic

¹ George Eliot. *Adam Bede*. 159.

² *Ibid*, 160.

³ *Ibid*, 161-162.

portrayals of the world found in what she considered to be inferior novels. Her chapter operates as an argument against such idealistic fictions. Her next lines emphasize the challenge of her work: “Falsehood is so easy, truth so difficult.”⁴ For Eliot, like many other Victorian authors, fiction was intended to represent truth. Truth—and the simple stories that relayed it—ultimately was born out of the personal experience of the author.

Eliot’s chapter about the role of truth within fiction in *Adam Bede* is filled with allusions to Strauss’ work—Eliot is much more interested in the real and the present rather than an idealistic interpretation of the world. Eliot uses images from art to express her preference for the real over the ideal. She writes:

Paint us an angel, if you can, with a floating violet robe, and a face paled by the celestial light; paint us yet oftener a Madonna, turning her mild face upward and opening her arms to welcome the divine glory; but do not impose on us any aesthetic rules which shall banish from the region of Art those old women scraping carrots with their work-worn hands...⁵

To Eliot, the angel and the Madonna are not the idealized myths that originate in scripture and gain embellishment throughout the Church’s history. Rather, the angel and the Madonna are commonplace individuals. For Eliot, they are women who are “faces I know, whose hands I touch, for whom I have to make way with kindly courtesy.”⁶ Eliot here emphasizes her understanding that fiction has the potential in it to not only represent truth but also to make possible the embodiment of mythic-historical figures within the real lives of ordinary women. To Eliot, her fictional Madonnas—along with St. Theresas, St. Catherines, and Mary Magdalenes—are the true embodiment of the myth. These saints are her neighbors, her friends, and herself. She repeats this idea in the Prelude to

⁴ Ibid, 160.

⁵ Ibid, 162.

⁶ Ibid, 162.

Middlemarch. After introducing the epic life of Saint Theresa, Eliot focuses her attention on her own protagonist whose life is more simple and common. Eliot concludes the novel's prelude by re-visioning the myth of Saint Theresa into the true history of her characters: "Here and there is born a Saint Theresa, foundress of nothing, whose loving heart-beats and sobs after some unattained goodness tremble off and dispersed among hindrances, instead of centering in some long-recognisable deed."⁷

Eliot was not alone among Victorian writers reimagining biblical narratives in order to draw out the truth within the biblical myth. Nineteenth-century British novels are filled with characters that are explorations of what an embodied biblical figure might look like within the true history of the era. Victorian readers in turn used these reimagined biblical figures to understand their own experiences, an interpretive lens of sorts through which to comprehend their lives. Consequently, those reimagined narratives would be appropriated by individuals into their own embodied lives. Victorian writers such as George Eliot and Elizabeth Gaskell relied on their own personal experience to interpret biblical female figures, creating a Christian feminine symbolic that was reinterpreted within their life and writing. The hermeneutic practice they used was intimately tied to their own experience. As such, these symbols ultimately held different meanings for each of them. The purpose of this chapter is to explain just how Victorian writers used biblical symbols within their novels.

⁷ George Eliot. *Middlemarch: An Authoritative Text, Backgrounds, Reviews, and Criticism*. Ed. Bert G. Hornback. New York: Norton, 1977, xiv.

Biblical Female Symbolic

Female authors such as George Eliot and Elizabeth Gaskell were not simply alluding to biblical characters within their work; their use of scripture involved a hermeneutic process whereby biblical figures within scripture were reinterpreted through the female characters in their books. This hermeneutic process involved using their own experience as Victorian women to bring renewed meaning to the biblical text. These biblical figures and narratives were understood by Victorian authors symbolically. As symbols, biblical narratives and figures had a meaning that was rooted within a myth—a myth first found in the Bible, but expanded upon throughout the Church's history. These symbols were given fresh interpretation by these authors as they reimagined biblical figures through their own embodied experience as women. Their novels then became the means through which to interpret the biblical text. Women readers were shaped by these reinterpreted biblical symbols in order to construct an understanding of womanhood. Figures in scripture—primarily Mary Magdalene and the Madonna Mary—were used in order to formulate a concept of the female through which women could both understand themselves and interpret the embodied experiences of other women. Together these formed a biblical female symbolic appropriated by predominately middle-class Victorian women within their day to day lives.

Twentieth-century theologian Paul Ricœur's theory on religious symbols provides a helpful method of understanding the use of female biblical figures and narratives within nineteenth-century fictional works by emphasizing the importance of hermeneutics in the use of religious symbols. Ricœur is interested in what happens to biblical symbols when a culture becomes increasingly separated from the myth in which the symbol was originally

grounded. Ricœur is responding to traits he identifies within modernity, specifically that of “forgetfulness and restoration.”⁸ Modernity, he believed, was experiencing “forgetfulness of the signs of the sacred” along with a “loss of man himself insofar as he belongs to the sacred.”⁹ Ricœur does not understand this as secularization per se but rather as a severing of traditional meaning from religious symbols and myths. Rather than understanding this as a spiritual crisis, Ricœur believes modernity holds great potential for a restoration to the sacred which is found in the process of emptying language and in turn filling it with new meaning. In this way, his work aptly applies to the sense of religious doubt that was felt among Victorians—particularly among the intellectual elite in the second half of the century—which created a crisis of faith throughout the era.¹⁰ Many of the religious doubters, such as George Eliot, were not interested in doing away with religious symbols and myths but were attempting to appropriate them with renewed meaning that could allow them to be sustainable and meaningful within the culture.

While the reading of scripture continued to influence the shaping of the Victorian social imaginary throughout the era, doubt in the historicity of scripture—that is, whether the events portrayed in scripture really happened—was changing the way individuals interpreted and used scripture in relation to their daily lives. Mary Augusta Ward’s novel *Robert Elsmere* contains a scene that briefly depicts both the motivation for the religious skepticism of the era and the reaction that many Christians had toward it. Her novel tells the story of Robert Elsmere who grows increasingly incredulous toward miracles and the divinity of Christ. One evening, his wife—a devout believer—discovers Robert’s notes in his study and is left in immediate shock and dismay: “That page so shocked a mind

⁸ Ricœur. *The Symbolism of Evil*, 349.

⁹ Ibid, 349.

¹⁰ See pages 61-64.

accustomed to a purely traditional and mystical interpretation of the Bible that the book dropped abruptly from her hand, and she stood a moment by her husband's table, her fine face pale and frowning."¹¹ Yet Ward depicts Robert within his own crisis, almost unwillingly becoming more firmly resolved in his beliefs, "conscious that it was the crisis of his history, and there rose in him, as though articulated one by one by an audible voice, words of irrevocable meaning."¹² There was a growing awareness throughout the century that the meaning that scripture held was shifting, particularly among those who were questioning traditional tenets of Christianity—a shift that was welcomed by some and regretted by others. Even though Paul Ricœur is using his theory of symbols to respond to a type of religious loss unknown to the Victorian era, his theory for understanding the role of religious symbols within a culture where the understanding of such symbols is quickly shifting is well suited to an exploration of the Victorian interpretation of biblical text.

Ricœur outlines his theory on religious symbolism in his work *Symbolism of Evil*, where he traces the Christian understanding of evil. He begins by claiming that the symbol of evil is rooted within the Adamic myth. For Ricœur, "The story of the fall has the greatness of myth," by which he means that the story "has more meaning than a true history."¹³ In this Ricœur believes that the Adamic myth is not tied to a specific time or place, but rather consists of a narrative that finds its meaning through interpretation. The moment the myth becomes interpretable, Ricœur claims the myth begins to function symbolically. It is the hermeneutical process of interpretation and reinterpretation of symbols that allows the meaning of symbols to be somewhat fluid within a particular

¹¹ Mary Augusta Ward. *Robert Elsmere*. London: John Murray, 1921, 323.

¹² Ibid, 342.

¹³ Ricœur. *The Symbolism of Evil*, 236.

culture. At the same time, Ricœur believes that the interpretation of the symbols remains rooted within its original myth, so that the symbol maintains its ties to both the sacred text and religious tradition.

Ricœur's interpretation of the symbol of evil within the Christian tradition, which he interprets through the Adamic myth, curiously overlooks one of the predominant interpretations of the Creation/Fall narrative throughout the Church's history. The Fall, and thus the origin of evil, has overwhelmingly been blamed on Eve by the Church.¹⁴ This interpretation of Eve is first found within Judaism but was quickly adopted by early Christians. Philo of Alexandria, a Hellenized Jew living in the first century, believed that the downfall of humanity took place even before the fall within the Genesis 2 narratives, as "The starting point of a blameworthy life becomes for [Adam] woman."¹⁵ Therefore he blames the existence of Eve as a woman for humanity's downfall. In the Christian tradition, the guilt placed upon Eve largely developed out of the epistle to Timothy, where the writer provides instruction on women's roles within the Church using the story of Eve to argue that women are to be quiet and submissive, for "Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor."¹⁶ This interpretation of Eve's role within the Fall narrative has often been used as a way to understand woman more generally. Indeed, much of the Church's blame

¹⁴ For further discussion on the myth of Eve and how she has been related to evil and fallenness, see: John A. Phillips. *Eve: The History of an Idea*. New York: Harper & Row, 1984. For a history of the reinterpretation of Eve by twentieth-century Christian women, see: Jenny Daggers. *The British Christian Women's Movement: The rehabilitation of Eve*.

¹⁵ Philo of Alexandria. *On the Creation of the Cosmos According to Moses*. Trans. David T. Runia. Leiden: Brill Academic, 2001, 87.

¹⁶ I Timothy 2:13-14. While Pauline teaching is often problematic for women, this isolated passage in Timothy does not reflect the whole of New Testament teaching on who is culpable for the Fall. Romans 5:12 places the blame of the Fall on Adam, stating that "sin came into the world through one man." This "one man" is more explicitly linked to Adam a few verses later (5:14). However, throughout its history, the Church has largely chosen to emphasize Eve's role in the Fall.

upon Eve for giving birth to evil has, by extension, been foisted upon all women in all times, as women were understood by Church Fathers such as Ambrose, bishop of Milan (ca. 340-397 C.E.), to be “descendent of Eve” who offended mankind by their “inherited tendency to wrong.”¹⁷ Even earlier, Tertullian of Carthage (ca. 160-ca. 220 C.E.) quite emphatically condemned all women for Eve’s sin, stating:

And do you not know that you are [each] an Eve? The sentence of God on this sex of yours lives in this age: the guilt must of necessity live too. *You* are the devil’s gateway: *you* are the unsealer of that [forbidden] tree.¹⁸

Tertullian and Ambrose were early theologians within the Christian tradition and much of the later Church’s teachings about women were heirs to their interpretation of the Fall narratives.¹⁹ Out of this deep tradition of associating the myth of Eve with evil, it is particularly striking that Ricœur, as a twentieth-century philosopher of religion, only associates the Adamic myth with the Christian symbol of evil.

By claiming that the symbol of evil is formed out of the Adamic myth, Ricœur overlooks the figure of Eve within a narrative that is intended to explain human origins and evil in the world. She is mentioned by Ricœur briefly as another figure introduced in the Adamic myth, playing the role of the Other to that of Adam or the serpent,²⁰ but Ricœur is focused on Adam’s role within the myth. He understands Adam as the representative human for both men and women, making the biblical myth of the opening chapters of Genesis Adamic, which Ricœur uses to mean anthropological, that is, the

¹⁷ Ambrose. Ambrose. “On the Christian Faith.” *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*. Eds. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace. Vol. 10. New York: Christian Literature, 1896. 199-314, 292.

¹⁸ Tertullian of Carthage. *Ante Nicene Christian Library: The Writings of Quintus Sept. Flor. Tertullian*. Vol. 1. Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1869, 304.

¹⁹ See: Haskins. *Magdalen: Myth and Metaphor*, 73-80; and Warner. *Alone of All Her Sex: the Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary*, 58-60.

²⁰ Ricœur. *The Symbolism of Evil*, 234.

symbolic aspect of sin within the myth finds resonance with the human condition.²¹ This interpretation of the Fall narratives hints at Thomas Aquinas' (ca. 1225-1274 C.E.) allusions to Eve's secondary creational order, suggesting the man "was more perfect than the woman,"²² in that Ricœur interprets Adam as more representative of humanity than Eve. As for Eve, Ricœur understands her to be representative of human frailty, so that Adam and Eve no longer operate as symbolic of either sex or gender (as they tended to be throughout the history of the Church), but rather represent humanity and fragility respectively. This interpretation resembles Augustine of Hippo's (354-430 C.E.) interpretation of the Fall where he emphasizes that Eve was "deceived by credulity" —by which he means that she was weakly ignorant, as opposed to Adam who intelligently "sinned with his eyes open"²³—in that the woman was too weak in this moment to truly represent humanity. So then, Ricœur attempts to avoid sexist language by claiming that "Every woman and every man are Adam; every man and every woman are Eve; every woman sins 'in' Adam; every man is seduced 'in' Eve."²⁴ Thus each man and woman embodies aspects of Adam and Eve in both their humanity and frailty, which, to Ricœur, sidesteps a gendered interpretation of the Creation narratives.

Ricœur does not completely ignore the androcentric nature of the Genesis narrative though he certainly evades any in-depth discussion into the way the Church has used the passage to promote a patriarchal system that understood women as evil daughters of Eve. Ricœur briefly acknowledges this tradition by noting that "the story gives evidence of a very masculine resentment" toward women and agrees that this is a

²¹ Ibid, 233.

²² Thomas Aquinas. *Summa Theologica Vol. 4 (Part III, First Section)*. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, trans. NYC: Cosimo, 2007, 1859.

²³ Augustine. *The City of God*. Trans. Marcus Dods. New York: Modern Library, 1993, 459.

²⁴ Ricœur. *The Symbolism of Evil*, 255.

legitimate criticism of the Genesis text, but he then goes on to say that the story is actually pointing to an “eternal feminine” which refers to “the frailty of man,” which he believes goes beyond issues of sex or gender.²⁵ Yet, throughout his work on the symbol of evil, Ricœur consistently focuses on male images, figures, and language. Furthermore, interpreting Adam and Eve as having symbolic attributes that are characteristic of humanity may be a good attempt at avoiding gendered understandings of the narrative, but in actuality his understanding of the Adamic myth is still problematic from a feminist perspective. Ricœur remains dependent on the common stereotypes of feminine frailty, which he assigns to Eve, while his interpretation of Adam as representative of humanity only serves to reinforce the idea that maleness is normative, which makes Ricœur’s argument fiercely dependent on patriarchal language despite his efforts to avoid such analyses of the passage. Additionally, while Ricœur’s focus on Adam’s role in the Fall myth and his use of the male and female figures to refer to something beyond sexual distinctions might be understood as an antidote to the negative interpretation that women have generally carried within interpretations of the Genesis narrative, Ricœur’s understanding of the Adamic myth is nonetheless problematic not only because it avoids the rich diversity of symbolic language—both feminine and masculine—that seeks to describe or explain evil, but also because his frequent avoidance of female symbolic imagery or language simply excludes the female from his argument. Furthermore, Ricœur’s assertion that the central claim of the Adamic myth “is to order all the *other* figures in relation to the figure of Adam, and to understand them in conjunction with him and as marginal figures in the story which has Adam as its principal protagonist”²⁶ rejects

²⁵ Ibid, 254.

²⁶ Ibid, 235.

Eve as a central figure in her own right within the myth. If the myth plays an explanatory role for humanity, Ricœur's interpretation of it encourages a reading that understands the whole female sex as having an outlying role to humanity, again emphasizing maleness as representative of humanness.

Far from holding a peripheral role, throughout the Church's history Eve often has been the central female figure through which a theological understanding of womanhood has been formed. Furthermore, Eve's role within the Creation myth has provided a figure through whom other female figures have been understood. The Creation narratives provide interpreters with a female figure that is both "good" before the Fall and sinful after, which, for the history of the Church, has been used to justify a dichotomous image of femininity that defines women as either sexually pure or impure.²⁷ Through Eve the Christian understanding of maternity developed—all women, like Eve, are understood to be the mothers of all the living. Motherhood, as understood through Eve within the Fall narrative, is both a curse and blessing. As both John A. Phillips and Marina Warner argue, with the exception of the Virgin Mary—whose impossible-to-emulate narrative of maternity was not only a blessing but an undoing of the curse—maternity throughout the Church's history was more often interpreted as a curse upon women because it was a sign of the female propensity to engage in sexual sin.²⁸ While the Church has often given more attention to the fallen Eve, using her as a symbol of the evil and sexual waywardness inherent within what throughout the Church's history was often understood as the lesser sex, the Madonna has been used throughout the Church's history as a type of "Second Eve" in the same way Christ is understood within the Pauline epistles to be a

²⁷ Phillips. *Eve: The History of an Idea*, 38-54.

²⁸ Ibid, 140-145; and Warner. *Alone of All Her Sex: the Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary*, 50-67.

“Second Adam.”²⁹ Thus Mary not only operates as a perfected female figure but also undoes the Curse through her obedience to God in bearing his Son. Another major female symbol that is rooted in the myth of Eve is Mary Magdalene. Over time, the Church developed a complex mythology where Mary Magdalene was understood as a redeemed prostitute or former temptress by patching together various biblical passages in combination with a rich hagiographical tradition and a female symbol rooted in the sexual waywardness of Eve.³⁰ Such is the female symbolic that grew out of the mythology of the Creation and Fall myths—one that often contrasted an idealized vision of femininity through the Virgin Mary with what was understood as the reality of female nature: the weak, vulgar sexual temptress of Mary Magdalene.

Yet, as Ricœur’s interpretation of the Adamic myth illustrates, the concept of Christian symbols for women or female mythologies have not always been promoted by the gatekeepers of theology throughout the Church’s history. Instead, those in positions of authority within the Church, who for the most part have been men, have used male figures such as Adam to be representative of humanity in general, or Christ as humanity idealized. Furthermore, male figures within scripture have often been used as role models for individuals to imitate, whereas key women in scripture, such as Eve and Mary Magdalene, were used to emphasize the sinful, sexually deviant nature inherent to the female sex.

Many twentieth-century feminist works conclude that the use of Mary Magdalene, Eve, and Mary, the Mother of Jesus throughout the Church’s history created a female

²⁹ I Corinthians 15:45. See also: Warner. *Alone of All Her Sex: the Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary*, 60-62.

³⁰ Susan Haskins argues against the possibility that all these myths are rooted in the same historical person but points to the powerful relationship between Eve, the Virgin Mary, and Mary Magdalene to explain how the myths developed (*Mary Magdalen: Myth and Metaphor*, 90-97.)

symbolic that had overwhelmingly negative repercussions for women. Susan Haskins interprets Mary Magdalene as a symbol “used to perpetuate patriarchal systems” and that “when the symbol of good and purity is seen as a virgin woman, and her moral counterpart, of evil and luxury, as a sexuate woman, power politics comes to mind.”³¹ Marina Warner, in her work on the Madonna, draws attention to the fact that even a positively understood figure such as the Virgin Mary was used in such a way as to promote patriarchal power structures and depreciate the role of women as the Madonna was such an overly idealized figure that as a symbol she created an unrealistic standard of womanhood that women were unable to attain.³² Warner claims that women often turned to a chaste, ascetic life in order to fulfill the idealism prescribed to them through the Virgin narratives. However, she argues that this type of personal piety negatively affected other women, as “the very conditions that make the Virgin sublime are beyond the powers of women to fulfill unless they deny their sex.”³³ The freedom gained by those entering into convents was done “at other women’s cost, for belief in the inferiority of their state underpinned it,”³⁴ by which Warner means that by entering into convents and understanding the ascetic life as superior, these women were also promoting the idea that piety was found only in the negation of female sexuality. These same critics frequently claim that the only way out of the Christian female symbolic formed through female biblical figures throughout the Church’s history was to subvert these symbols and reclaim them as a way of empowering religious women.³⁵

³¹ Haskins. *Mary Magdalen: Myth and Metaphor*, 397.

³² Warner. *Alone of All Her Sex: the Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary*, 254.

³³ Ibid, 77.

³⁴ Ibid, 78.

³⁵ The reinterpretation of these female figures by feminist scholars began with Elizabeth Cady Stanton’s two volume seminal work *The Women’s Bible* published in 1895 and 1898. Another highly influential feminist work that returned to these same issues almost a century later was Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza’s

This type of interpretation of the use of female biblical figures throughout the Church's history assumes, however, that women interpreted and used symbols in the same ways that men did, or even that women heeded the Church's teaching about womanhood. In her work on European spirituality of the thirteenth and fourteenth-centuries, Caroline Walker Bynum claims this was not the case, arguing instead that "Medieval men and women looked at and used gender-related notions very differently"³⁶ and that females often ignored male claims of their inferiority within their service to God.³⁷ This does not mean that Bynum ignores the very real abuse of patriarchy that was excused by the Church through teachings that were extrapolated from the myths surrounding these female biblical figures. Rather, Bynum understands her work as an inquiry into what women were actually saying and experiencing within the Church—allowing actual female voices to be heard rather than listening only to what paternalistic men were teaching about them.³⁸ In a later work, Bynum explains how a common misunderstanding of symbols misses the actual role that symbols held for Medieval Christian women. Symbols, Bynum claims, did not in themselves enforce specific behavioral traits, but instead "enabled women to express and give meaning to certain basic realities that all societies face."³⁹ This is not to say that the appropriation of biblical symbols did not influence behavior but rather that the use of such symbols did not directly determine how women acted, nor did they directly result in prescribed actions. Rather, as Bynum notes elsewhere, "if we turn our attention not to what gender symbols

In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins. (NYC: Crossroad Pub. Corp. 2000.)

³⁶ Caroline Walker Bynum. "'And Woman His Humanity': Female Imagery in the Religious Writing of the Later Middle Ages," 277.

³⁷ Ibid, 260.

³⁸ Bynum. "Introduction: The Complexity of Symbols," 16.

³⁹ Bynum. *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: the Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women.* Berkeley: U of California P, 1988, 276.

signify (for they never merely signify) but rather to how men and women use them, we may find that the varied experiences of men and women have been there all along.”⁴⁰ Biblical symbols such as Eve or Mary Magdalene were available for women to interpret and appropriate as they saw fit, which resulted in complex, often unpredictable responses. Bynum claims that women often rejected the male interpretations of womanhood and instead used female symbols such as the Madonna not to understand the female sex, but to understand other aspects of their faith.⁴¹

Bynum finds Paul Ricœur’s theories on biblical symbols particularly helpful in her work on medieval women’s use of symbols; her indebtedness to his thought is particularly clear in her preference for understanding how symbols are used by medieval women rather than what they might have meant. Bynum recognizes that symbols never have any one meaning; for example, Eve does not universally equal female waywardness. Rather, symbols are interpreted and appropriated by individuals, which is what makes the question of *how* symbols are used much more relevant than *what* a symbol signifies. This highlights the importance of experience within interpretation. When symbols are used by individuals as a means of providing understanding to the world around them, people necessarily use their own experience to interpret what the symbol means to them. This contributes to the complexity within the use of symbols as a symbol’s meaning is not stationary but is constantly being reinterpreted as often as it is appropriated.

It is this interpretative aspect of symbols that Bynum borrows from Ricœur, even if he is most interested in how symbols are used in the twentieth century rather than in the medieval time period. Ricœur is specifically interested in what happens to biblical

⁴⁰ Bynum. “Introduction: The Complexity of Symbols,” 16.

⁴¹ Bynum. *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: the Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women*, 269.

symbols when they begin to no longer hold any meaning within contemporary discourse. He believes that individuals can enter into a “second naïveté,”⁴² as if they were encountering these symbols for the first time. When this happens, individuals apply new meanings to symbols through the act of interpretation. However, Ricœur’s “second naïveté” could just as well apply to women of the medieval—and Victorian—ages who out of necessity found that female symbols were personally meaningless unless they were able to apply their own interpretations to them. But, even when reinterpreted through individual experience, the meaning of symbols remains tied to “the original enigma of the symbols”⁴³—that is, the myth they are rooted in. Nonetheless, through the hermeneutic act of the interpreter, a symbol’s meaning is rediscovered through the “full responsibility of autonomous thought.”⁴⁴ Thus, while the symbol is bound to previous interpretations, it concurrently finds freedom within the individual interpretation made by the critic. This means that the “second naïveté” does not sever the interpretation of the symbol from its original myth—that is, Eve may be given a new interpretation, but the new interpretation nonetheless remains rooted in the Creation myths and the Christian tradition.

Interpretation knots together a symbol’s meaning with the “endeavor to understand by deciphering” the symbol’s meaning—a knot Ricœur describes as a hermeneutic circle.⁴⁵ The hermeneutic circle opens a symbol up to infinite revisions as each interpreter, through his or her understanding of the symbol, brings the symbol into “coherent discourse,” enabling the symbol to become appropriated and embodied by the interpreter, while it nonetheless avoids becoming completely foreign to its audience as

⁴² Ricœur. *The Symbolism of Evil*, 350-351.

⁴³ Ibid, 349-350.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 350.

⁴⁵ Ricœur. *The Symbolism of Evil*, 351.

the new interpretation retains connection with previous interpretations. In this way, Ricœur's hermeneutic circle would be better described as a corkscrew that is constantly spirally away from its origin but nonetheless remains integrally linked to its mythical origins, constantly finding itself reinterpreted yet entirely connected to other hermeneutic enquiries into its meaning. Victorian writers such as Eliot and Gaskell linked together the biblical narratives of figures such as the Madonna and Magdalene with the Church's creation of female myths before embodying the symbols through their own autonomous act of interpretation. By interpreting these symbols through their own experience, they refashioned these symbols in entirely unique ways. Yet, because the symbol remains rooted within a religious tradition, the individual appropriation of these symbols retains coherence within the social imaginary, while at the same time the interpretative act applied to the symbols allows these symbols to be heard again, as if for the first time.⁴⁶ These fresh interpretations of the Christian feminine symbolic, linked not only to the biblical text and Christian tradition but also to the fictive world of the novel, enabled Victorian readers to apply these biblical symbols not only to their religious practice but also to other aspects of their lives, including secular endeavors.

This is the hermeneutic process at work within the novels of many female Victorian authors such as George Eliot and Elizabeth Gaskell. In the Middle Ages, according to Caroline Walker Bynum, women were generally uninterested in using female figures to create a female symbolic, but rather "used *woman* to symbolize *humanity*."⁴⁷ However, Victorian women *were* highly interested in reinterpreting female biblical symbols in order to construct an understanding of what it means to be female. In part this could be

⁴⁶ Ibid, 352.

⁴⁷ Bynum. *Holy Fast and Holy Feast: the Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women*, 264.

rooted in the Victorian idea that reading and writing was to be a self-interpretive exercise; therefore, women were using female symbols as a way of encouraging an understanding of the self, which in the Victorian social imaginary remained within strict gendered categories. Yet this appropriation of female figures in order to create a symbolic understanding was not strictly limited to the area of womanhood—though in a culture where highly gendered categories informed most areas of personal experience, such symbols were often related to specific aspects of gender. Women did create understandings of specific aspects of female experience from these female symbols—roles such as mother, wife, and homemaker—but they also used these same symbols to understand other, universally human aspects of their life, such as participation within the community and Church. Above all else, these symbols were used as a means of self-interpretation—which in turn was sometimes used to create a symbol for womanhood or feminine experience. At the same time, these symbols were also used to inform beliefs outside of gender by female readers. Ultimately, these women, through their hermeneutic practice, expanded the meaning of the symbols, drawing them out from their original myth and history of interpretation and giving them new meaning that could be applied to their own lives and experiences as women. When an author's use of these Christian symbols within their work is read alongside their own embodied experience as women, the relationship between word and flesh within the Victorian novel can be more clearly understood.

Self-Interpretation through the Written Word

The use of biblical figures as symbols within Victorian novels was, in part, indebted to the popularity of typology within nineteenth-century hermeneutic practice. In

his work *Victorian Types, Victorian Shadows*, George P. Landow argues that biblical typology had a “pervasive influence upon Victorian culture.”⁴⁸ Throughout his work he argues that typology not only shaped the interpretative method Victorians applied to the Bible but that it was ultimately used within secular discourse to create more in-depth meaning or give authority to particular beliefs. The distinguishing factor in the Victorian use of typology that encouraged the use of typology in secular discourse, such as literature and art, according to Landow, was the “widespread belief that scriptural types could be fulfilled in the individual’s own life.”⁴⁹ Thus, typology in the nineteenth century was increasingly used as a means of self-interpretation rather than Christological interpretation.

Victorian typology diverged from the traditional Christological typology that had been used throughout the Church’s history in two key areas. First, Victorians understood types as establishing behavioral and theological norms for contemporary society and culture—in that the biblical text set a typological precedent that was fulfilled within successive eras. Where traditionally Christian typology had been applied to the Hebrew scriptures to interpret how certain events or figures point forward toward their fulfillment through New Testament types such as Christ or the Church, Victorians saw contemporary events as pointing back toward scripture. Interpreting the present as if it fulfilled biblical narratives encouraged individuals to intentionally pattern their own life or view of current events after specific biblical texts, creating a sort of self-fulfilling typology.⁵⁰ Second,

⁴⁸ George P. Landow. *Victorian Types, Victorian Shadows: Biblical Typology in Victorian Literature, Art, and Thought*. Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980, 12.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 50.

⁵⁰ Landow distinguishes between the different uses of typology by labeling one Christian typology, where the “lesser anticipates the greater,” and the other secular typology, where a writer “pattern[s] a later character up on—literally ‘after’—some great figure who precedes him.” (*Victorian Types, Victorian Shadows: Biblical Typology in Victorian Literature, Art, and Thought*, 108.) Earl Miner describes this

typology in the Victorian age tended to be used as a means of self-interpretation rather than as a means of formulating a theological understanding of Christ. In both of these aspects, Victorian typology became increasingly used to interpret individual, embodied experience through the lens of biblical events or figures.

This method of self-interpretation was at the core of the Victorian hermeneutic method. Several popular genres in the Victorian age—autobiography, biography, diaries, and, not least, the novel—frequently utilized typology in order to encourage introspection and self-interpretation, often with the goal that the scriptural type might also become fulfilled in the reader’s life as well.⁵¹ In using character or narrative typology within their novels, Victorian authors were providing the reader with a framework from which to interpret and understand their fictional worlds while at the same time offering an interpretation of the biblical text. This use of typology ultimately encouraged readers to understand themselves as biblical types and figures. Fictionalized works were understood to be “the self-history of the narrator,”⁵² a point particularly emphasized in the full title of Charlotte Brontë’s popular work, *Jane Eyre: an Autobiography*, which intentionally blurred the lines between history and fiction.

If typology provided a structure to interpret a fictional character’s history, biblical figures could likewise be used as a means of self-interpretation. It is this hermeneutic use

reversed chronology use of typology as “retrospective typology.” To this, Miner also adds the categories of “strict typology” and “loose typology” to describe the range of typological interpretation found in literature. (“Afterward.” *Literary Uses of Typology from the Late Middle Ages to the Present*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1977, 370-394, 378-379.) The point here is not to get lost in exact terms for typological usage within fictional texts but rather to acknowledge the way typology was used for a variety of purposes in nineteenth-century interpretation.

⁵¹ For more information on the use of typology in various Victorian genres see: Linda H. Peterson. *Victorian Autobiography: the Tradition of Self-Interpretation*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1986, 22; and Elisabeth Jay. *The Religion of the Heart: Anglican Evangelicalism and the Nineteenth-Century Novel*, 152-153.

⁵² Landow. *Victorian Types, Victorian Shadows: Biblical Typology in Victorian Literature, Art, and Thought*, 12.

of typology to appropriate narratives as a method of self-interpretation that enabled the Victorian adaptation of biblical characters and narratives within the novel to go beyond the use of mere intertextuality within fictional works. This was not always the case, however, as sometimes typology simply served to help authors create character and narrative types; that is, authors would borrow from a biblical story or figure in order to create the structure for the characters and narratives within their fictional works. One subtle character type can be found in Mary Augusta Ward's novel *Robert Elsmere*, where early on the protagonist's wife Catherine is modeled as a type of Deborah.⁵³ Thus, with little exposition, Ward structures her character after the Old Testament prophetess and judge, alluding to her role in the story as a righteous woman and spiritual leader.

On the other hand, Victorian authors would also use typology as a means of re-visioning the biblical narrative while at the same time developing a complex interpretive device for their character. Thomas Hardy borrows from aspects of the early Genesis narratives within his novel *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, recreating a new Eve figure through his protagonist. Echoes from Genesis are heard throughout the novel. The 'Chase scene,' in which Tess is presumably raped by Alec, carries several parallels to the Fall myth. Hardy uses primordial language in his descriptions of the scene. The secluded area is, "the oldest wood in England,"⁵⁴ isolated from the rest of the world both by distance and fog, and enveloped by "primeval yews and oaks."⁵⁵ There in the woods, alone, walk a man and woman. Despite the possible romantic connotations of the scene, the episode recounts a departure from innocence. Tess and Alec are surrounded by an idyllic location, yet the man falls into temptation and the woman into ruin. The Chase

⁵³ Mary Augusta Ward. *Robert Elsmere*, 27. See also Judges 4-5.

⁵⁴ Thomas Hardy. *Tess of the D'Urbervilles: a Pure Woman*. New York: Modern Library, 1951, 87.

⁵⁵ Ibid, 90.

scene marks the end of the first phase of the novel, entitled “The Maiden” and introduces the second phase called “Maiden No More.” Hardy’s description of the rape is subtle, but as Tess is violated, he rhetorically asks where Tess’s guardian angel or God is at the time. Not surprisingly, they are absent from the scene. A few weeks after the incident, Hardy describes a walk Tess is taking, “It was always beautiful from here; it was terribly beautiful to Tess to-day, for since her eyes last fell upon it she had learnt that the serpent hisses where the sweet birds sing, and her views of life had been totally changed for her by the lesson.”⁵⁶ The Fall has taken place and it is not possible to go back to the former idyll. Tess explains to Alec that she “didn’t understand your meaning till it was too late.” Alec replies that she is using a typical woman’s excuse, but eventually admits that he did wrong to her. As she walks away she comes across a man painting judgments from scripture that horrifyingly accuse Tess of her ‘sin.’ It reads, “THY, DAMNATION, SLUMBERETH, NOT. 2 PET. ii.3.” along with an unfinished command, “THY, SHALT, NOT, COMMIT—” Tess nervously asks the man, “Suppose your sin was not of your own seeking?” His answer is inconclusive, so Tess walks away murmuring, “Pooh—I don’t believe God said such things!” The whole scene echoes aspects of the Genesis story: the punishment the serpent brought upon earth, Adam first placing the blame of his actions on the woman, God’s commands to humanity, Eve’s temptation to disobey without seeking to sin, and the serpent questioning the validity of what the humans thought God had said.

Tess’s role as a fallen Eve figure is further emphasized in another reworked Garden scene—this time documenting another type of fall: falling in love with Angel Clare. The scene begins with Tess walking alone in the garden on a typical summer evening. Again,

⁵⁶ Ibid, 96.

Hardy presents an earthy, sensual paradise. Tess walks on the outskirts of the garden which “had been left uncultivated for some years, and was now damp and rank with juicy grass which sent up mists of pollen at a touch...[and] weeds whose red and yellow and purple hues formed a polychrome as dazzling as that of cultivated flowers.”⁵⁷ Angel sits in the garden playing a simple melody on a harp, as Tess goes through the garden, gazing on the last glimpse of sun and the first twinkling of stars. Angel approaches Tess, coming up behind her stealthily. Tess reacts with burning cheeks, jumping slightly away from him. They speak for a short while and so begins their romance. Hardy uses the next several pages to describe their developing relationship. Tess and Angel get in the habit of meeting together alone in the mornings before anyone else is awake. Their morning meetings are depicted as Edenic, “The spectral, half-compounded, aqueous light which pervaded the open mead impressed them with a feeling of isolation, as if they were Adam and Eve.”⁵⁸ The reference to this couple is made again when Angel returns from a long break, explaining to Tess he hastened back because of her. Tess responds by, “[regarding] him as Eve at her second waking might have regarded Adam.”⁵⁹ It is unclear whether Hardy uses the phrase “second waking” here to refer to Eve before or after the Fall. Nonetheless, these allusions both look back and foreshadow Tess’s falls while simultaneously emphasizing her innate innocence, similar to the beauty of nature as even the weeds take on the beauty of flowers.

Ultimately Hardy’s re-visioning of Eve through his character Tess not only provides a new interpretation of the Creation narratives, but also provides his readers with a new language with which to appropriate the symbol of Eve within their own lives.

⁵⁷ Ibid, 158.

⁵⁸ Ibid, 167.

⁵⁹ Ibid, 218.

However, this use of typology through characters within the novel was not limited to biblical symbols. As typology was increasingly used as a means of self-interpretation rather than for a theological understanding of Christology, it became less important for typological understandings to rely on scripture at all. George Eliot, in particular, frequently employed the use of hagiography as a way of formulating a typological understanding of her characters. Dorothea Brooks in *Middlemarch* stands as a particularly striking use of such hagiographic typology. In the Prelude, Eliot relies on the life of Saint Theresa of Avila to emphasize the many unknown Theresas whose lackluster lives do not involve one crucial action but rather exist as women who disjointedly seek after some “unattained goodness.”⁶⁰ The last paragraphs of the novel repeat the analogy to Theresa, praising Dorothea for her faithfulness in pursuing good as “the effect of her being on those around her was incalculably diffusive: for the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts.”⁶¹ The allusion to Saint Theresa is not the only use of typology in the novel; Dorothea is also related to biblical characters such as the Blessed Virgin Mary, Sara, and Dorcas along with other saints from throughout the history of the Church including Santa Clara and Saint Catherine.⁶² Eliot used these figures in her novel in order to demonstrate how individual women could embody the narratives and character traits of these saints. That Dorothea, along with many other female characters within Eliot’s novels, could be understood through the typology of so many different figures highlights the potentially diverse meanings that these symbols have when interpreted

⁶⁰ George Eliot. *Middlemarch*, xiv.

⁶¹ Ibid, 578.

⁶² Eliot also uses Saint Catherine of Alexandria typologically within *Adam Bede* to refer to Dinah Morris (57). In her notebook for *Adam Bede*, Eliot described Saint Catherine as “beautiful, learned, and with oratorical skills, who steadfastly refused to marry, recognizing Christ alone as her spouse.” (Carol Martin. “Explanatory Notes” *Adam Bede*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2001,508.) Dinah shared similar traits.

through one's individual experience. The narratives themselves became multi-faceted and complex when interpreted in light of such varied experience.

Borrowing from such symbols to create fictional characters not only reinterprets the myths of figures such as Saint Theresa but also gives readers, particularly female readers, a means of self-interpretation through these re-visioned narratives. At the same time, authors were reinterpreting these ancient myths through their own embodied experience, breathing new life into the figures and allowing them to become a true history within their own lives, their characters, and the lives of their readers. Ultimately this enabled women to take symbols which had often led to negative interpretations of womanhood by theologians throughout the history of the Church to be understood in more positive ways. Furthermore, because of the nature of the fictional text and the nineteenth-century hermeneutic of embodiment, Victorian women were empowered by these re-visioned female saints within the novel to give new meaning to biblical symbols in a way that reflected their own experience as women.

CHAPTER SIX: VICTORIAN HERMENEUTICS AND THE GENDERING OF THE TEXT

William Thackeray introduces the sixth chapter of *Vanity Fair* with a statement that the section is so short it barely deserves being designated as a chapter at all. But Thackeray explains how its brevity does not negate its significance, writing: “And yet it is a chapter, and a very important one too. Are not there chapters in everybody’s life, that seem to be nothing, and yet affect all the rest of the history?”¹ Rather than tell some grand romantic tale, Thackeray goes on to recount how Jos Sedley does *not* propose to Becky as a way of explaining how Amelia and Becky came to part ways—two significant events in Becky’s life. His description of the chapter’s brief, seemingly mundane narrative serves to explain how brief moments can actually be important. His analogy between the structure of a novel and the life of his reader more dramatically demonstrates just how much the genre of the novel had come to influence the understanding of real life in Victorian Britain.

Readers accustomed to interpreting the narratives of the novel increasingly relied on the language of the novel’s narrative structure as a way of interpreting their own lives. Additionally, out of the Victorian interest in the relationship between the novel and real life developed the understanding that the life of the author often intersected with the

¹ William Makepeace Thackeray. *Vanity Fair: a Novel without a Hero*. 1848. Oxford:Oxford UP, 2009, 61.

author's text so that the stories and characters of the novel reflected the life of the author. Thus, understanding the author's life experiences aided the reader in his or her interpretation of the text. As Victorian gender roles tended toward assigning strictly gendered traits of masculinity to men and femininity to women, the understood relationship between an author's life experiences and his or her fictional works resulted in the gendering of texts as masculine or feminine by readers and reviewers. As will be argued more fully throughout this chapter, masculinity was often understood within the Victorian social imaginaries as strong, forceful, rational, and public while femininity was often understood as weak, delicate, emotional, and domestic.² Because of the constant interplay between the novel and real life within the Victorian social imaginaries, gender roles were applied to novels, resulting in understanding texts as either feminine or masculine in nature.

The purpose of this chapter is to outline the relationship between the Victorian novel, the life experience of the author, and the gendering of the novel as a way of describing an important component of how Victorian readers interpreted fictional works. First, I will argue that the Victorians had definite conceptions of masculine and feminine writing. The proliferation of the novel and literary criticism throughout the nineteenth century led to persistent speculation about the "gender" of a text—whether it was masculine or feminine in nature—which, in turn, shaped how men and women believed a text should be interpreted. Second, I will argue that Victorians directly tied the gendered identity of the text to the embodied, real-life experience of the author. This understanding of the embodied text played an influential role in shaping Victorian hermeneutic practice

² These distinctions between masculine and feminine will be explored more fully throughout this chapter. See: Nicola Diana Thompson. *Reviewing Sex: Gender and the Reception of Victorian Novels*. New York: New York UP, 1996, 12-21.

as it enabled readers to appropriate the text into their own lives. Third, I will argue that this type of embodied hermeneutic was not limited to the reading of novels but was applied to the biblical text as well, by both authors and readers, encouraging a continual reimagining and re-visioning of texts.

Identifying the Gender of the Text

The Victorian preoccupation with the gendering of novels is related to a much larger process of gendering various modes of academic discourse. In an essay entitled “Literature and Theology: Sex in the Relationship,” Heather Walton outlines how literature has been understood as feminine, particularly when contrasted with the masculine “‘logocentric’ discourses of theology and philosophy.”³ This gendering of discourses within Western scholarship hinges on the patriarchal understanding of rationality as a male characteristic, particularly when contrasted with female emotionalism. Pamela Sue Anderson likewise notes: “In the images of the Enlightenment, reason is transcendent and male, while irrationality is immanent and female as ‘the other of reason,’ as the mystical, the maternal, and the mythical.”⁴ Categorizing literature as the mysterious, seductive female figure of the arts, and theology and philosophy as the reason-centered, masculine rulers of the sciences has

³ Heather Walton. “Literature and Theology: Sex in the Relationship.” *Imagining Theology: Woman, Writing and God*. New York: T& T Clark, 2007. 34-48, 38. She also discusses the gendering of disciplines in her work *Literature, Theology & Feminism*. (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2008.). For further discussion on the way theology and philosophy are often gendered as male see: Pamela Sue Anderson. *A Feminist Philosophy of Religion: the Rationality and Myths of Religious Belief*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1998; and Grace M. Jantzen. *Becoming Divine: Toward a Feminist Philosophy of Religion*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP, 1999.

⁴ Anderson. *A Feminist Philosophy of Religion: the Rationality and Myths of Religious Belief*, 10.

most often resulted in pitting the irrational feminine in a losing hierarchal struggle against the more valued masculine attribute of rationality.⁵

While Walton's essay is particularly focused on the contrasted gendering of literature, theology, and philosophy by twentieth-century scholars, the gendered divisions between reason and emotionalism can also be found within the Victorian era, in part because women were typically excluded from rational, scientific discourse. Women were, however, permitted and even welcomed into the softer, more emotional literary world as authors and reviewers, at least until the later decades of the nineteenth century. Gaye Tuchman and Nina E. Fortin argue that rather than invading a traditionally male dominated space, female novelists of the early to mid-nineteenth century actually dominated the field.⁶ However, as novels became increasingly tied with high culture rather than popular culture, and writers understood as professionals, men invaded this female field—a process Tuchman and Fortin find analogous to urban gentrification.⁷

Whereas Walton understands the twentieth and twenty-first centuries' conceptions of literature to be gendered as female, the gendered lines were not drawn so clearly within nineteenth-century understandings of literature. Victorian readers spent the last half of the century particularly interested in designating more clearly identifiable gendered categories for both academic disciplines and individual texts. Victorian literary

⁵ The dominance of reason and rationality—and how they have been understood as masculine—in the disciplines of philosophy and theology is discussed at length in Pamela Sue Anderson's work *A Feminist Philosophy of Religion: the Rationality and Myths of Religious Belief* (6-13.) See also: Michèle Le Doeuff. "Long Hair, Short Ideas." *The Philosophical Imaginary*. Colin Gordon, translator. London: Continuum, 1989, 100-128.

⁶ Gaye Tuchman and Nina E. Fortin. "Fame and Misfortune: Edging Women out of the Great Literary Tradition." *The American Journal of Sociology* 90.1(1984): 72-96; and *Edging Women Out: Victorian Novelists, Publishers and Social Change*.

⁷ Gaye Tuchman and Nina E. Fortin. *Edging Women Out: Victorian Novelists, Publishers, and Social Change*, 207-208.

critic George Henry Lewes in particular pointed out that “rough divisions”⁸ existed between the field of literature and the fields of philosophy and science. While there was not one definitive, agreed upon gendering of literature throughout the era, Lewes’ descriptions of the divisions between the fields in his essay “The Lady Novelists” is dependent on gendered categories and reflects the prevalent interest in ascertaining the gender of individual texts. He begins his essay by contrasting the various fields without gendered language, writing: “Science is the expression of the forms and order of Nature; literature is the expression of the forms and order of human life.”⁹ Later in the essay he overtly genders the disciplines using the type of language later criticized by feminists such as Walton and Anderson, claiming the intellect to be masculine and the emotional to be feminine, resulting in a “rough division” wherein “philosophy would be assigned to men ... literature to women.”¹⁰

Two years later, in an essay reflecting on female authors in France, Lewes’ lover George Eliot offered a similar reflection on literature, which resulted in her dissenting with Lewes’ gendering of science. Eliot begins her essay with her own beliefs about the gendered divisions between these fields:

Now we think it an immense mistake to maintain that there is no sex in literature. Science has no sex: the mere knowing and reasoning faculties...must go through the same process, and arrive at the same result. But in art and literature, which imply the action of the entire being...in which every peculiar modification of the individual makes itself felt, woman has something specific to contribute.¹¹

Eliot here draws from the Victorian understanding of literature as the embodied experiences of the author in order to argue that the gender of the author does matter.

⁸ G.H. Lewes. “The Lady Novelists.” *The Westminster Review* 2 (July 1852): 129-141, 132 .

⁹ Ibid, 130.

¹⁰ Ibid, 132.

¹¹ George Eliot. “Woman in France: Madame de Sablé.” *Westminster Review* Oct. 1854: 448-473, 238.

Ultimately, to Eliot, this is why women, with their distinctly feminine experience, should be valued as authors, as their contributions to the field, in her view, cannot be replaced by male authors in her view. This mid-nineteenth century “rough division” between science and art would lead to the eventual, clear, gendered contrast between literature and other disciplines that Walter speaks of in her essay, but as this chapter will demonstrate, Victorians were unsure of how to gender literature, as even Lewes in this same essay fails to maintain a consistent gender of the medium throughout his work.¹²

With the novel being a relatively new field, Victorians spent the century attempting to explore literature’s gender, unsure of how to sort out its masculine and feminine elements. For this reason the relationship between gender and Victorian texts lacked stability, which left room for constant exploration and debate about the gender of texts—particularly for authors who maintained anonymous gender through pseudonyms such as George Eliot and Currer Bell, which led to speculation as to how their fictional works should be read.¹³ Victorians did not view literature as simply female in the same way Walton claims occurred with later fictional works, but they developed a complex gendering of the arts, obsessively dividing literature up into a series of dichotomous categories, labeling individual works of literature as masculine or feminine, while at the same time outlining gendered distinctions for authors and readers of literary works. As such, Victorian writers and readers were constantly experimenting with how gender roles

¹² Especially see: “The Lady Novelists,” 130 & 132.

¹³ Victorians were quite interested in making connections between authors and their works. As pseudonyms were common, reviewers and readers made an effort to discover the true identity of authors. Eliot’s choice of a clearly masculine nom de plume is generally correlated with her desire that her works be received as male-written texts, whereas the more gender-neutral name “Currer Bell” immediately raised questions about the author’s gender. See: Maria Frowley. “The Victorian Age, 1832-1901.” *English Literature in Context*. Paul Poplawski, ed. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2007, 481; Tuchman and Fortin. *Edging Women Out: Victorian Novelists, Publishers and Social Change*. 52-54; and Jenny Uglow. *George Eliot*. London: Pantheon, 1987, 9; and 83-84.

and gendered text could be explored through fictional narratives. The way feminine literature throughout the era was frequently tied to lower-quality sensational or romantic works, and the way female readers were frequently chastised for their reading choices, has been rightfully criticized by feminist literary critics.¹⁴ However, the underlying belief within the Victorian social imaginary that understood novels as the embodiment of the author's experience has the capacity to be understood positively. This understanding of gendered texts enabled female readers to embody the powerful narratives they encountered in fictional texts, which ultimately resulted in the re-visioning of the Victorian concept of womanhood.

While Victorian literature was not understood as innately female, literary critiques of individual novels during the Victorian era were dependent on the dichotomy which existed between rational masculinity and irrational femininity. Increasingly throughout the nineteenth century the consensus among literary critics was that serious, great literary works were masculine, while popular or light reading fare was feminine.¹⁵ W.R. Greg's essay "False Morality of Lady Novelists" published in the *National Review* in 1859 scathingly critiques what he deems the less serious works of women who take "to novel writing both as the kind which requires the least special qualification and the least severe study, and also as the only kind which will sell."¹⁶ Greg blames this lesser quality of

¹⁴ See: Kate Flint. *The Woman Reader: 1837-1914* ; Sally Mitchell. *The Fallen Angel: Chastity, Class, and Women's Reading, 1835-1880*. Bowling Green: Popular Press, 1981; and Jennifer Phegley. *Educating the Proper Woman Reader: Victorian Family Literary Magazines and the Cultural Health of the Nation*.

¹⁵ For the history of the shift correlating male authorship with the "high-culture novel" see: Tuchman and Fortin. *Edging Women Out: Victorian Novelists, Publishers and Social Change*, 65-92. Matthew Arnold in particular argued for the elevation of higher forms of literature against popular fiction. See: *Culture and Anarchy: An Essay in Political and Social Criticism and Friendship's Garland: Being the Conversations, Letters, and Opinions of the Late Arminius, Baron von Thunder-ten-tronckh*. New York: Macmillan, 1899.

¹⁶ W.R. Greg. "False Morality of Lady Novelists," 148.

writing on the attributes of youth, which he ties to “brief, imperfect, and inadequate”¹⁷ life experiences of both young male and female authors. But, for women writers, he goes on to describe their distinct disadvantageous experience of life as “partial,” in that they lack knowledge of the “science of sexual affection.”¹⁸ Greg is so reliant on Victorian gender roles, which identified women as more sexually passive, that he does not even pause to consider whether male writers actually have more sexual knowledge than women, but merely assumes that this must be true. The point of his essay is to argue that while female-written novels may contain interesting stories or characters, they nonetheless can never attain the greatness of male-written novels because a female author’s view of life will always be “imperfect and superficial” due to her experience of life as a woman.¹⁹

Even female writers were not immune from reinforcing such a gendered dichotomy. Novelist and literary critic Margaret Oliphant, in an article critiquing the reading choices of the lower classes, makes a curious distinction between feminine and masculine writing, tying masculine writing to both the highest and lowest classes while relating feminine writing to the middle classes. Her essay reflects the contradictory Victorian belief that women were both the moral agents of the home and weak figures who need protection—by men—from immorality. To do this, Oliphant ties middle-class literature to femininity just as Victorian culture itself related middle-class morality with femininity. She writes of “the fiction feminine, which fills with mild domestic volumes the middle class of this species of literature.”²⁰ Thus middle-class fiction is tied to

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid, 149.

¹⁹ Ibid, 148.

²⁰ Margaret Oliphant. “The Byways of Literature: Reading for the Million.” *Blackwood’s*

domestic novels which reinforce the woman's role in fortifying the femininity of the home. Oliphant continues by noting, "The lowest range, like the highest range, admits no women."²¹ By this Oliphant does not necessarily mean that only women were permitted to write certain types of novels, but rather that domestic or romantic novels were only capable of being gendered as feminine.

The work *English Women of Letters: Biographical Sketches* (1863) by Irish novelist Julia Kavanagh likewise reinforced a gendered understanding of literature. Kavanagh begins her book with a general introduction to British literature, writing:

The character of the English novel has, for the last seventy years, been much modified by what threatens to become an overwhelming influence—that of women. It has lost its repelling coarseness—a great gain—but it is to be feared that its manliness and its truth are in peril.²²

Kavanagh first explains that female-written novels are lacking in the praiseworthy attributes of male-written novels including "portraiture of character...construction of story [and] variety of incident" before describing the laudable elements of female-written novels, including the feminine aspects of "delicacy, tenderness, and purity." She goes on to argue that these feminine attributes, while commendable aspects of femininity, result in inhibiting truth within the novel because they "give us a world too sweet, too fair, too good."²³ More explicitly than Oliphant, Kavanagh ties together the sex of the author with the gender of his or her work, and yet her biographies of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century female novelists make clear that it is possible for women to write commendable

Edinburgh Magazine 1858: 200-216, 206. Reading habits were constantly being tied to social class in Victorian periodicals. See also: Fanny Mayne. "The Literature of the Working Class." *The English Woman's Magazine and Christian Mother's Miscellany* Jan. 1850: 619-622.

²¹ Ibid, 206.

²² Julia Kavanagh. *English Women of Letters: Biographical Sketches*. Vol. 1. London: Hurst & Blackett, 1863, 4.

²³ Ibid, 5.

novels—which attain greatness because of the balance between feminine and masculine qualities in their writing.

Other female authors intentionally argued that female-written works could be understood as masculine rather than feminine as a means of praising particularly great works by women authors. In 1856, shortly before publishing her own fiction, George Eliot wrote her famous essay “Silly Novels by Lady Novelists” in which she uses explicitly gendered language when contrasting great literature to frivolous fictional works. She begins by reinforcing the stereotypical characteristics projected onto Victorian womanhood, using a series of cliché, feminized terms to describe particularly feminine writing, emphasizing its shallow, juvenile, superficial, and weak qualities to define the writing of lady novelists.²⁴ This is not to say that Eliot considers all women incapable of being good novelists; rather, she allows that talent indeed resides among female writers, but only if their work has inherently male qualities to it.²⁵ Among her list of able lady writers, Eliot mentions Harriet Martineau, Currer Bell (i.e. Charlotte Brontë), and Mrs. Gaskell.²⁶ But, such female writers attain high esteem for Eliot because they “have been treated as cavalierly as if they had been men.”²⁷

Eliot’s tone throughout this essay is a bit facetious, though not overtly so. It is as if she is veiling her criticism of gendered categories for literature—protesting them through her use and emphasis of them. She is clearly frustrated with the lower class of novels so often tied with lady novelists, but her criticism appears to focus on the gendered categories themselves along with the female writers who reinforce this

²⁴ George Eliot. “Silly Novels by Lady Novelists.” *Westminster Review* Oct. 1856: 442-461, 442-443.

²⁵ Eliot believes that there are many more good male writers than female writers, as she refers to the “many writings of great men, and a few writings of great women.” (455)

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 460.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

understanding of lower-class novels. Yet, her essay is carefully crafted with a tone which seems intentionally vague at points, as if she purposefully avoids making her argument lucid enough to arouse suspicion from her male readers—a position Virginia Woolf later argued that many women writers adopted. Woolf’s lecture “Professions for Women” recounts how the “Angel in the House” fluttered behind her while writing a review for a male-written novel, whispering in her ear to “use all the arts and wiles of our sex. Never let anybody guess that you have a mind of your own.”²⁸ For Woolf, writing involved a process of veiling her intellect and her argument so as not to offend or confuse male readers.²⁹ This type of persona is not original to Woolf; women such as Eliot often adopted rhetorical devices that made their work less threatening to their male readers. The unclear tone in this particular essay—along with the occasional contradictory aspects of her argument—suggests that this is how Eliot was writing at this time. It is the satirical nature of Eliot’s essay, in which she mocks silly novels, that carries her critique of the era’s gendering of novels.

Eliot herself experienced frustration about how she was treated as a female author, often worrying about how she was perceived as a female writer and philosopher.³⁰ Her essay on lady novelists reflects a writer responding to her own feelings of inferiority due to the treatment she received as a woman in her field, in addition to her feelings of contempt for an industry which fueled the very stereotypes her own novels broke. While she seems to be mocking the gendering of novels, at points in her essay it is less than

²⁸ Virginia Woolf. “Professions for Women.” *The Virginia Woolf Reader*, 279.

²⁹ This was true for Eliot as well, particularly in the case of writing *Scenes of Clerical Life* where she intentionally created the persona of a rural clergyman as a disguise. She was successful, as she later recounted: “There was clearly no suspicion that I was a woman...when G. read the first part of ‘Amos’ to a party at Hel’s, they were all sure I was a clergyman—a Cambridgeman.” (*GEL*, Vol. 2, 408.)

³⁰ See: Eliot. “Letter to Mrs. Bray, end of 1844.” *Life and Letters: the Works of George Eliot*, 65.

certain whether she is actually doing this or if she is accentuating the Victorian understanding that great literary works are gendered as male. The gendering of high-culture novels as male influenced the way Eliot's work was read—even after her identity had been revealed. An 1861 review by author Dinah Craik entitled "To Novelists—and a Novelist" refers to George Eliot—who, at that point was known to be Mary Ann Evans—in entirely male pronouns, preferring "to respect the pseudonym."³¹ In doing so, Craik also maintains the idea that great literature—which Eliot's work was deemed—was masculine in nature and that the author was best understood in masculine terms even after it was discovered that "he" was a female author.

Nonetheless, George Eliot closes her essay on lady novelists by praising the best fictional texts written by women because they have distinctive qualities over and against those of male-written texts.³² Her short essay is both highly nuanced and at times inconsistent. The complexity of the essay allows for multiple interpretations of how Eliot relates gender to the fictional writer. At points her essay clearly reflects the broad Victorian understanding that assumed the writing of *great* literature to be a male exercise, but at the same time Eliot also seems to be lamenting the lack of a celebrated, distinctively female body of literature.

Female writers such as George Eliot assisted in breaking down the belief that lady novelists could only be viewed as "silly," but, on the other hand, the field of literary

³¹ Dinah Maria Mulock Craik. "To Novelists—and a Novelist." *Macmillan's Magazine* London: Clay, Son, & Taylor, Nov. 1860. 441-448, 444. Leslie Stephen's biography on George Eliot (*George Eliot*. London: Macmillan, 1903.) similarly reflects the way Eliot was gendered male, as the volume was part of a series entitled "English Men of Letters." There was speculation as to whether George Eliot was a male or female prior to the discovery of the real identity of the author, and continued discussion on her gender afterwards. See Anne Mozley. "Adam Bede and Recent Novels." *Bentley's Quarterly Review* June 1859: 433-472 and "Unsigned Review, *London Quarterly Review*" *George Eliot: the Critical Heritage*. Ed. David Carroll. New York: Routledge, 1996. 104-108.

³² Eliot. "Silly Novels by Lady Novelists," 461.

criticism, which was rapidly developing throughout the century as a scholarly discipline, was more often discussed using masculine language, despite the many female literary critics, such as Eliot and Craik, who regularly published well-received reviews in major magazines. Regardless of female contributions to the field of literary criticism, the perception that it was a rational exercise resulted in literary criticism being understood as a ‘masculine’ field. In 1886, critic and professor of English literature Edward Dowden, writing for the *Contemporary Review* on the subject of “The Interpretation of Literature,” strung together a series of clearly male metaphors as descriptors of the practice of literary criticism. Dowden began by offering a mixed simile of woodworking and hunting to describe literary interpretation:

If some fine interpreter of literature would but explain to us how he lays hand on and overmasters the secret of his author, we should feel like boys receiving their lessons in woodcraft from an old hunter----and we are all hunters—skilful or skillless [*sic*]*—in literature.*³³

Hunting is not the only sport used as metaphor here to describe literary criticism; elsewhere Dowden mentions wrestling and swimming to describe his profession.³⁴ He went on to call literary criticism the “police and magistracy of literature,”³⁵ this time referring to male professions to emphasize the masculinity of the field. Elsewhere, he described the literary critic as approaching the text “full of athletic force.”³⁶ Dowden’s use of figural language to describe literary criticism is consistently reliant on masculine imagery. Unsurprisingly, Dowden’s piece regularly mentions male authors³⁷ and always

³³ Edward Dowden. “The Interpretation of Literature.” *Contemporary Review* May 1886: 701-719, 702.

³⁴ *Ibid*, 710.

³⁵ *Ibid*, 704.

³⁶ *Ibid*, 711.

³⁷ Dowden’s essay is filled with the names of many great male authors and philosophers. George Eliot is the sole female author he mentions, with only brief discussion (711). At one point Dowden lists male and female characters in great literature, but concludes the predominately male list by noting they were “all born of the brain of man, the creator.” (703).

describes the author as “he” throughout the text. In comparison to the virile science of interpreting texts, Dowden discussed literature itself using softer, emotional, and, therefore, feminine language, as exemplified in his description of literature as “revelation of the widening possibilities of human life, of finer modes of feeling, dawning hopes, new horizons of thought, a broadening faith and unimagined ideals.”³⁸ Through his descriptive language and metaphorical figures, Dowden emphasized literary writing and criticism as a masculine science, but literature as feminized art: for this understanding Dowden is indebted to traditional links between academic enterprises with rationality and artistic endeavors with emotion.

Gendered Texts and Experience

While Edward Dowden’s conception of literary criticism and literature follows Heather Walton’s position that ‘rational subjects,’ such as literary criticism, have been gendered male and that literature had been gendered female in Western culture, other Victorian critics were nonetheless interested in guessing the sex of individual novelists based on the perceived gender of the texts they wrote. Yet much of the Victorian concern over whether a novel or novel writing should be deemed masculine or feminine revolved around a larger debate about the nature of the novel and its relation to real life. This relationship between the novel and the author’s life was used by literary critic George Henry Lewes as a means of ascertaining the gender of fictive works. Lewes, who was George Eliot’s lifelong partner and lover, discussed these connections in an article entitled “The Lady Novelists,” published four years prior to Eliot’s own essay on the

³⁸ Ibid, 702.

topic.³⁹ His essay demonstrates an acceptance of women writers, despite the many stereotypes that abounded regarding their work. In light of more recent feminist criticism, Lewes' essay contains both positive and negative discourse about female-written literature.⁴⁰ While Lewes pointedly criticizes those unable to accept the cultivation of intellect among women, at the same time he is decidedly negative toward the "strong minded woman," avoiding the "folly" of discussing "'woman's mission' and 'emancipation.'"⁴¹ Nonetheless, his central query, "What does the literature of women really mean?" was ultimately a question that grew out of his desire to define the gendered attributes of literary works.⁴²

Lewes' answer reveals just how much the gendering of text in the nineteenth century was related to Victorian gender roles, or, in other words, how the fictional world in the novel was connected to the real, gendered, life experience of the author. He begins by explaining that literature is not simply a mirror raised at society, and that rather than reflecting society, literature is the "expression of the emotions, the whims, the caprices, the enthusiasms, the fluctuating idealisms which move each epoch."⁴³ This led Lewes to consider what specifically "female literature" means. For Lewes, female literature is a fictional world that is an expression of life shaped by a distinctly female experience so that "the advent of female literature promises woman's point of view."⁴⁴ Lewes attributes the molding of a woman's experience to her involvement in the domestic sphere and

³⁹ Alice R Kiminsky argues that the similarities between Eliot's and Lewes' beliefs on female-written literature reflect her "literary indebtedness to him." ("George Eliot, George Henry Lewes, and the Novel." *PMLA*, Volume 70, No. 5 (December 1955), 997-1013, 998.)

⁴⁰ See: Barbara Caine. "G.H. Lewes and 'The Lady Novelists.'" *Sydney Studies in English* 7. (1981): 85-101.

⁴¹ G.H. Lewes. "The Lady Novelists," 129-130.

⁴² *Ibid*, 130.

⁴³ *Ibid*, 131.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*.

natural inclination to “greater affectionateness, [and] her great range and depth of emotional experience.”⁴⁵ At this point Lewes’ argument is excessively dependent on his culture’s stereotypical understanding of womanhood. This dependence, which permeates the essay, results in a belief that both promotes female experience and understands such experience as inherently inferior to its male counterpart. Yet Lewes criticizes female authors who simply imitate male work, and, in a line that sounds strikingly similar to second-wave feminist literary criticism,⁴⁶ he asserts:

We are in no need of more male writers; we are in need of genuine female experience. The prejudices, notions, passions, and conventionalisms of men are amply illustrated; let us have the same fulness with respect to women.⁴⁷

Therefore, as a literary critic, Lewes believed that female literature was directly tied to female experience and should be valued for this distinction. Throughout his essay, Lewes constantly returns to the word *experience*. It is the author’s own life experience which sets his or her fictional worlds apart from the creative works of others, thus explaining the need for distinctly male and female fictional works, as each one, according to Lewes, reflects very different types of life experience.

Though Lewes clearly contends at the beginning of his essay on female fiction that literature does not mirror society, he struggles to maintain consistency in his construction of the relationship between the fictional world of the novel and the real life of the author throughout his essay. If fiction relates the life experience of its author, as Lewes contends, how can it not, in some form, reflect society at large? Even in his own praise of specific female authors, Lewes contradicts this point. Praising Jane Austen’s

⁴⁵ Ibid, 132.

⁴⁶ Feminist poet and critic Adrienne Rich in particular emphasizes that women are now living in an era where their own voices are awakening, and they must give birth to writing which reflects their own experiences as women. (“When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-vision,” 18-30.)

⁴⁷ Lewes, “The Lady Novelists,” 132.

work in this same essay, Lewes writes, “To read one of her books is like an actual experience of life.”⁴⁸ He similarly describes both the work of Mrs. Gaskell and Charlotte Brontë, stating: “They have both given imaginative expression to actual experience.”⁴⁹ In his 1847 review of Brontë’s novel *Jane Eyre*, Lewes more explicitly notes, “Reality—deep significant reality—is the great characteristic of the book.” This reality found in the fictional text is evidently a prized trait to Lewes. Throughout these two essays Lewes consistently praises great fiction for its ability to reflect the reality of the world, thus underscoring his belief that each novel is directly connected to the life experience of its author.

The connections drawn between the real world and the fictional novel were not only related to one another in Lewes’ criticism but could be found in a variety of Victorian works on the nature of fictional texts. In a lecture delivered in 1884 on “The Art of Fiction” Henry James proclaimed, “A novel is in its broadest definition a personal impression of life,”⁵⁰ and later adds, “It goes without saying that you will not write a good novel unless you possess the sense of reality.” James here understands the ability to communicate the reality of the world through fictional writing to be a necessary quality of an author. Fellow author Harriet Martineau similarly noted the connection between the life of the author and his or her stories in her autobiography, writing that it is impossible to create a truly fictional plot. The solution, she notes, is to take the plot from actual life, as “accordingly it seems that every perfect plot in fiction is taken bodily from real life.”⁵¹

⁴⁸ Ibid, 134.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 138.

⁵⁰ Henry James and Sir Walter Besant. *The Art of Fiction*. Boston: Cupples, Upham, 1885, 60. James’ lecture also reinforced ideas of male authorship by his mention of the “brotherhood of novelists.” (51).

⁵¹ Harriet Martineau. *Autobiography*. Ed. Linda H. Peterson. Plymouth, UK: Broadview, 2007, 189.

Martineau's use of the word *bodily* here stresses just how much the Victorians understood the fictional text to be a reflection of the author's embodied real-life experience. The best novels, according to Martineau, were those with an author who enables his or her life experiences to become a fictional narrative. While some critics argued that the events depicted in novels varied from lived experience, they nonetheless maintained that there exists a relationship between the two, such as the case of James Fitzjames Stephen's 1855 essay "The Relation of Novels to Life" in which he argues that novels simply lacked the full experience of real life, not that there was no relation between the two. Stephen, in fact, notes the similarities between life and the novel in his description of the novel as "fictitious biography," a term that emphasizes how the genre was understood, at its root, to be a story of life, even if the novel and real life were not to be understood as synonymous.⁵²

Victorian literary critics most often linked the fictional novel to the real world in their discussions on the sex of an author in relation to his or her work, which drew particular interest from critics when an author wrote using a pseudonym. While Mary Ann Evans⁵³ and Charlotte Brontë are some of the most famous Victorian authors who wrote under a pseudonym, this practice was not limited to women, as John Ruskin, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and William Makepeace Thackeray were male authors who at times wrote using female pseudonyms. Gaye Tuchman and Nina E. Fortin argue that female writers were just as likely to use a female or gender-neutral pseudonym as male writers, and that at one point in the century male writers were actually more likely to adopt a

⁵² James Fitzjames Stephen. "The Relation of Novels to Life." *Victorian Criticism of the Novel*. Eds. Edwin M. Eigner and George John Worth. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1985. 93-118, 96.

⁵³ According to her husband J.W. Cross, Evans chose George Eliot as a penname because "George was Mr. Lewes' Christian name and Eliot was a good mouth-filling, easily pronounced word." (*Life of George Eliot: as Related in Her Letters and Journals*. Thomas Y. Cromwell, 1884, 219.)

female pseudonym than a female was to adopt a male pseudonym.⁵⁴ Thus, Eliot and Brontë's use of pseudonyms does not necessarily demonstrate their desire to hide their sex as a way of breaking into a male-dominated field or to avoid having their work dismissed for publication. Rather, they assumed these male pseudonyms so that their work would not be gendered as feminine. Because their work was not received as feminine, Eliot's and Brontë's work avoided being read through the biased double standard feminine writing was judged by, preconceptions that Catherine Judd describes as a type of "class standard" wherein feminine books were held to lesser standards than 'serious,' masculine literature.⁵⁵

When authors maintained anonymity through their use of pseudonyms, various conjectures invariably arose out of an understanding of what a specifically male or female experience of life might be and how that experience then connected to the fictional world as envisioned by the author. Reviewers of female writers using male or gender-neutral pseudonyms drew particular interest from critics who wished to determine an author's sex, such as in the case of novels by Currer Bell and George Eliot before their identities became public as Charlotte Brontë and Mary Ann Evans. One unsigned reviewer of *Jane Eyre* was convinced that no woman could have written the novel, but rather that it was written from the outgrowth of male experience, claiming: "The writer dives deep into human life, and possesses the gift of being able to write as he thinks and feels."⁵⁶ Likewise, reviewer Elizabeth Eastlake was quite sure that the author of *Jane*

⁵⁴ Tuchman and Fortin. *Edging Women Out: Victorian Novelists, Publishers and Social Change*, 53-54.

⁵⁵ Catherine Judd. "Male Pseudonyms and Female Authority in Victorian England." *Literature in the Marketplace: Nineteenth Century British Publishing & Reading Practices*. John O. Jordan and Robert L. Patten, editors. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995, 250-268, 253.)

⁵⁶ "Unsigned Review, *Era* 14 November 1847." *The Brontës: The Critical Heritage*.

Eyre was unable to demonstrate any knowledge inherent to her sex and must therefore be male, or, if female, had “long forfeited the society of her own sex,” thus demonstrating that Victorians were very aware of gendered categories of experience, as the gender of the authors was paramount to their sex.⁵⁷ On the other hand, an unsigned reviewer in *The Christian Remembrancer* was confident that Currer Bell was female, asking, “Who, indeed, but a woman could have ventured ...to fill three octavo volumes with the history of a woman’s heart?” However, this reviewer later explains that the rumor regarding the author of *Jane Eyre* being male was most likely started by women who understood that it was a most unfeminine work, with “masculine power, breadth, and shrewdness... masculine hardness, coarseness, and freedom of expression,” and were therefore embarrassed to associate the work with anything other than a male author.⁵⁸ Despite acknowledging the novel’s masculine tendency, the same reviewer calls *Jane Eyre*’s Mr. Rochester a “true embodiment of the visions of a female imagination,”⁵⁹ thus strongly connecting the author’s own gendered life experience and imagination with an embodiment of the text.

Similar inferences were also made about George Eliot’s works, prior to the discovery of her true identity. A reviewer of *Adam Bede* published in *The Times* mentioned of “Mr.” George Eliot: “When his previous work appeared it was even surmised he must be a lady since none but a woman’s hand could have painted those touching scenes of clerical life.” An unsigned piece in the *Saturday Review* notes that

Ed. Miriam Allot. New York: Routledge, 2001. 78-80, 79. The author of this review also used overtly masculine language that hinges on the connection between maleness and rationality, noting the novel was “the victory of mind over matter, the mastery of reason over feeling.” (Ibid.)

⁵⁷ Elizabeth (Rigby) Eastlake. “Vanity Fair and Jane Eyre.” *Quarterly Review* Dec. 1848: 153-185, 176.

⁵⁸ “Unsigned Review, *Christian Remembrancer*, April 1848, xv.” *The Brontës: The Critical Heritage*. Ed. Miriam Allot. New York: Routledge, 2001. 89.

⁵⁹ Ibid, 90.

most reviewers believed the author of *Scenes of Clerical Life* and *Adam Bede* to be male, but that after discovering the true author, certain female qualities of the text were realized. Nonetheless, the critic claims that Eliot, despite exposing certain feminine qualities in her work, “likes to look on paper as much like a man as possible”—a comment that functions as both a descriptor of Eliot’s work and an explanation for critics who missed what was finally publically realized as the feminine-ness of her novels. In many ways the Victorian interest in gendering the text can be directly tied to a critical double standard in how to judge literature, with male and female works being read and reviewed in different ways. Charlotte Brontë confirms this in the preface she wrote to her sister’s novel *Wuthering Heights* entitled, “Biographical Notice of Ellis and Acton Bell” in which she explains why she and her sisters chose vaguely masculine pseudonyms:

while we did not like to declare ourselves women, because--without at that time suspecting that our mode of writing and thinking was not what is called 'feminine'--we had a vague impression that authoresses are liable to be looked on with prejudice; we had noticed how critics sometimes use for their chastisement the weapon of personality, and for their reward, a flattery, which is not true praise.⁶⁰

Charlotte Brontë’s preface demonstrates her own awareness that female written work was not deemed as serious as male work and thus lacked access to genuine critical acclaim—a point that is echoed in George Eliot’s essay on lady novelists. Brontë’s preface also shows her mindfulness that their novels would be identified as masculine because of the novels’ content and style despite having female authors. This emphasizes not only the process whereby Victorian reviewers identified the gender of the novel but also how closely tied a novel’s gender was to the intimate relationship Victorians believed existed

⁶⁰ Charlotte Brontë. “Biographical Notice of Ellis and Acton Bell.” *Wuthering Heights*. Ed. Alison Booth. Boston: Pearson Education, 2009, 331.

between an author's real-life gendered (i.e. masculine or feminine) experience and their created fictional worlds, even in cases where reviewers were wrong.

The 'Dear Reader' of Gendered Texts

The juxtaposition between real life and the fictional narrative in the novel was not limited to the experience of the author. Readers brought to their reading and interpretation of novels their own life experience. Thus, it was both the author and his or her readers who together contributed to the meaning and interpretation of the novel. Readers, therefore, entered into a real-life engagement with the narrative of the fictive works they read their own life experiences into. This relationship between the life of the reader and the fictional text was a relationship that Victorian authors seemed intent on untangling, particularly since the audience's reaction to the text seemed unpredictable. This awareness of the unknown audience's participation with the novel created a need for authors to develop the fictional character of the 'reader' within their works, a device which served to instruct their real readers in how to interpret the text they were reading. Walter Ong emphasizes that Victorian fiction writers were aware of this odd relationship between themselves and their audience—which was necessarily both fictional and real—self-consciously intoning “‘dear reader,’ over and over again to remind themselves that they are writing a story in which both author and reader are having difficulty situating themselves.”⁶¹ Both Victorian authors and readers struggled to understand the relationship between the author and reader, the real and the fictive. The 'dear reader' so

⁶¹ Walter J. Ong. *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*. London: Routledge, 2000.

often referred to by Victorian authors in their novels, including George Eliot's,⁶² underscores just how complex the juxtaposition was between the reader, the writer, the fictional narrative, and the reality it reflected. Thus, it is not only the text of the novel but also an author's audience itself that is necessarily an imagined construction. As such, authors were creating fictional readers within their narratives as a way of admitting both the important role the reader played in their stories and the unpredictable or even unknown nature of how the narrative might interact with each real individual reader.

While the 'dear reader' was, in some way, an imagined character in the mind of the author, the fictional narrative of the novel became a part of real life through the interpretation and appropriation of the story by each real reader. Victorian critics and authors expressed awareness of how fictional narratives became embodied through the interpretative act of the reader. Thomas Hardy, in his essay "The Profitable Reading of Fiction," writes of the parts added to the story through the reader's imagination that were never intended by the author: "Sometimes these additions which are woven around a work of fiction by the intensive power of the reader's own imagination are the finest parts of the scenery."⁶³ Hardy holds reading as an active exercise where the readers participate in the text with the author to create not only their own interpretations, but their own narratives. A novel, therefore, holds endless interpretations, as each reader brings his or her own thoughts and experiences to the text. But this is not where the reader's active participation with the text ends. Victorian literary critic James Fitzjames Stephen notes: "Novels operate most strongly by producing emotion," which he later points out

⁶² The 'reader' is particularly referred to repeatedly in Eliot's earliest work *Scenes from Clerical Life*. Other authors who used the phrase include Charles Dickens and William Makepeace Thackeray.

⁶³ Thomas Hardy. "The Profitable Reading of Fiction." *Forum* NYC: Forum, 1887, 58.

“produces some moral effects.”⁶⁴ By this, Stephen is drawing connections between the act of reading and its effect on the lived experience of the reader.

This connection between the novel and the life of the reader was also noted by Victorians who were opposed to the reading of novels because of the effect they could have on the moral character of the reader. At the age of nineteen, and still tied to her Evangelical upbringing, George Eliot, writing to her teacher and mentor Maria Lewis, marveled at the ability of fiction “to come within the orbit of possibility.”⁶⁵ This breaking in to the “orbit of possibility” occurs when the life and actions of the readers become influenced by the text, thus inciting action that, without reading the novel, would not have happened. In the same letter, Eliot more clearly expresses that readers are shaped by the texts they encounter, writing:, “We are each one of the *Dramatis personæ* in some play on the stage of life—hence our actions have their share in the effects of our readings.”⁶⁶ Because of this, Eliot, at this point in her life, maintains uneasiness at the power of the novel to influence the reader’s actions, potentially in immoral ways. This early letter of Eliot reflects a typical Victorian concern amongst conservative Evangelicals that the narratives or characters of the novel might actually become formative texts within the reader’s life. Earlier in her letter, Eliot calls men and women “imitative beings,” claiming that anyone who reads to any purpose will eventually become shaped by the ideas he or she encounters in the text.⁶⁷ Ironically, later in life Eliot intentionally used her novels with the hope that they would do just that.

⁶⁴ Stephen, “The Relation of Novels to Life,” 99.

⁶⁵ Eliot. “GE to Maria Lewis, Griff, 16 March 1839.” *GEL*. Vol. 1., 23.

⁶⁶ *Ibid*.

⁶⁷ *Ibid*.

Eliot's understanding of fiction's ability "to come within the orbit of possibility" reflects an exploration of the very complex relationship between the author and reader of the fictional text. This relationship becomes increasingly relevant for Victorian women when analyzed through both the gendering of the text and the gendered experience of both the author and reader as it equipped them with the means to interpret the text, and in turn themselves, through re-visioned narratives. More recent philosophical and theological conceptions of embodiment are helpful in describing the relationship between Victorian female readers and the texts they read along with the significance that the embodiment of the fictional text had for nineteenth-century women.

Embodying the Gendered Text

Feminist work in the last couple of decades has used the term *embodiment* to speak of how beliefs and ideologies formed out of the gendered experiences of men and women become materialized through the human body.⁶⁸ Victorian readers came to embody the fictional texts they read through their interpretation of the text, as their bodily experiences became directly shaped through their encounter with the novel. This meant that as men and women encountered new ways of understanding themselves and their individual experiences through fictional texts, their actions came to reflect the characters and narratives they encountered in their reading. The Victorian preoccupation with tying the gender of the text to the author's sex resulted in a rejection of what feminist philosopher Pamela Sue Anderson has termed "the disembodied identity of the rational subject," which, at least in nineteenth-century discourse on literature, meant the

⁶⁸ For further discussion on embodiment see: Anderson. *A Feminist Philosophy of Religion: the Rationality and Myths of Religious Belief*; and Jantzen. *Becoming Divine: Toward a Feminist Philosophy of Religion*.

acknowledgement that men and women experienced life and texts differently. This, to Anderson, stands in contrast to ‘rational’ or even ‘masculine’ fields like philosophy that often ignore the bodily, and therefore gendered, experiences of its subjects. Rather, Victorians understood literature as replicating the “embodied identities of sexually specific subjects”⁶⁹—which enabled men and women to produce fictional narratives which reflected their own bodily experience.

For the Victorians, the fictional narrative and its characters were inseparable from the gendered experience of the author. Furthermore, the fictional narratives of the novel also became a part of the embodied experience of readers as it came to shape their own thoughts and actions. In his review of *Jane Eyre*, George Henry Lewes writes of the author’s depiction of the novel’s protagonist: “A creature of flesh and blood, with very fleshly infirmities and very mortal excellencies; a woman, not a pattern: that is the Jane Eyre here represented.”⁷⁰ Lewes’ word choices here—blood, fleshly, and woman—emphasize the Victorian understanding of the embodiment of the text, stressing how the characters of a novel are birthed from the bodily experience of the author and subsequently adopted by the reader, thus appearing not *ex nihilo* but reproduced out of human life itself and constantly multiplied as each individual reader claims the narrative as his or her own. A character was not limited to words on a page but reflected the embodiment of the author’s experience and became embodied within the reader through the act of reading and interpretation.

⁶⁹ Anderson. *A Feminist Philosophy of Religion: the Rationality and Myths of Religious Belief*, 127.

⁷⁰ G.H. Lewes. “Recent Novels: French and English.” *Fraser’s Magazine* London: John W. Parker, 1847. 686-695, 692.

While work on embodiment has been formative in feminist discourse, it also finds resonance with the Christian conception of incarnation.⁷¹ Whereas feminist philosophers use the concept of embodiment as a means of legitimizing gendered experience within philosophical discourse, incarnation within Christian theology is used to describe the relationship between God and humanity. Embodiment denotes the way ideologies become materialized; incarnation refers to how the spiritual is made into flesh. Both embodiment and incarnation are concerned with making the comprehension of experience possible through the body. Within Christian theology, the term incarnation is used to describe the moment wherein the Divine becomes human through the person of Jesus Christ, thus capturing the embodied experience of God. The first chapter of John's gospel account is the exemplary Christian incarnational passage due to the writer's poetic description of Christ as the Word that becomes flesh and dwells among humanity. In this passage, John begins by introducing Christ as the Word who was with God and was God since the beginning. His description of incarnation is most explicit in verse fourteen, "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father." Flesh here refers to the embodied experience of being human. The Word made flesh in this passage is Christ, but throughout scripture the Word is also used to refer to the sacred scriptures, the utterances of God, and the good news of the gospel message. While the Christian understanding of incarnation is generally used as a theological term referring to Christ as the Word made flesh, within the Pauline epistles this type of embodiment is extended to the Church, those persons who choose faith in the Word. These believers, who are referred to several

⁷¹ Pamela Sue Anderson claims that the myths of incarnation are embodiment "configured in narrative form." (*A Feminist Philosophy of Religion: the Rationality and Myths of Religious Belief*, 135.)

times as the “body of Christ,”⁷² participate in Christ’s incarnation by being returned to the Divine image and living as Christ in the world through their renewed lives of faith. Thus, humanity is incarnated into the Divine image, becoming the flesh made Word. It is in this way that the Church itself becomes the embodiment of the Divine and regularly acknowledges this incarnation through the celebration of the Eucharist, wherein the Church has traditionally connected the Word and flesh of Christ with the textual liturgy and embodiment of the wine and bread as it becomes the body and blood of Christ when consumed. Thus, the Word is constantly appropriated by Christians into their embodied experiences, allowing the Word to become flesh through human life.

This embodiment of the Word into flesh has a particular affinity with the double movement enacted by Victorians on fictional texts. The written text was first connected with the lives of authors and, secondly, with readers who would reinterpret the fictional story in some form into their own lives. The narratives of the novel reflected their authors’ embodied experiences and were, in turn, embodied, or incarnated, by the reader. Twenty-first-century French theorist Jacques Rancière’s recent work *The Flesh of Words: the Politics of Writing* borrows from the Christian understanding of incarnation to construct what he calls the “theology of the novel,” which connects with this concept of fictional texts becoming embodied by readers.⁷³ Somewhat analogous to Jeffrey K. Keuss’ “*poetics of Jesus*,”⁷⁴ in which Keuss is concerned with the embodiment of Christ within George Eliot’s novels, Rancière uses the Christian understanding of incarnation as

⁷² The Church community is explicitly referred to as the “body of Christ” in I Corinthians 12:7. In other passages (Romans 7:4, I Corinthians 10:17, and Ephesians 4:12), the phrase is used to refer specifically to Christ’s body but at the same time relates that body to the communal gathering of believers.

⁷³ Jacques Rancière. *The Flesh of Words: the Politics of Writing*, 72.

⁷⁴ Keuss. *A Poetics of Jesus: the Search for Christ through Writing in the Nineteenth Century*, 3.

a way of explaining the type of embodiment of the text that takes place when a reader appropriates the fictional text into his or her own experience of life.

Rancière, like Keuss, is also interested in the incarnation of Jesus within the text of the fictional novel, using the phrases “theology of the novel”⁷⁵ and “theology of the literary body”⁷⁶ to refer to the embodiment of the text. While Keuss is concerned with theological hermeneutics, Rancière developed his theory of the novel to explore the relationship between literature and political or social action. Their works are most similar in the way both scholars construct a hermeneutic approach toward the novel that is concerned with the incarnation of the text through the life of the reader. However, whereas Keuss argues that George Eliot’s female characters become incarnated Christ figures, Rancière returns again and again to male protagonists to illustrate the potential for the word to become the Word made flesh, using the examples of Don Quixote, Balzac’s Father Bonnet and Doctor Benassis.⁷⁷ He does not address gender explicitly within the work in regard to his conception of flesh (neither, for that matter, does Keuss)—within Rancière’s work, flesh is not explicitly male but, rather, inherently male because of how he develops his argument about how texts are incarnated. For Rancière, flesh returns again and again by way of the incarnation of Jesus, who for him is a male figure who is returned to the Word within the predominated male characters of fictionalized novels. Incarnation—or the embodiment of Jesus—is more often than not put in masculine terms in Rancière’s work, as it is in Feuerbach and Strauss’ work as

⁷⁵ Rancière. *The Flesh of Words: the Politics of Writing*, 72.

⁷⁶ Ibid, 77.

⁷⁷ Exceptions within Rancière’s work include *Madame Bovary*. In an interview conducted in 2008 about his theology of the novel, Rancière does express interest in the role of the mother in the novel and society. (Jacques Rancière and Anne Marie Oliver. “Aesthetics against Incarnation: An Interview by Anne Marie Oliver.” *Critical Inquiry* 35:1 (2008): 172-190.) However, overall, his work on incarnation of texts is predominately concerned with male figures.

well—though Rancière is writing his work within an era where feminism has been an important academic discourse for decades, whereas Strauss and Feuerbach were not. By focusing on male embodiment of scripture and the novel, Rancière misses the key role that the gendered experience of men and women plays within their embodiment or incarnation of the text. Nonetheless, his work on the relationship between incarnation and the novel provides another theory to assist in understanding the Victorian embodiment of fictional narratives.

Rancière's "theology of the novel" adopts the incarnational language of John's gospel to explain the implications of reading fictional narratives, using the Word to refer to written fictional texts and Flesh to denote the life or action of the reader. A theology of the novel hinges on Rancière's interpretation of the first chapter of John's gospel. To him, this scripture passage describes an incarnational circle, whereby the Word, Christ, becomes flesh, but is then returned to the Word through the scriptures. The Word of scripture is then read by the believers who in turn embody those words in their daily lives. The novel, then, like scripture, becomes an incarnational text—the narrative is first experienced in the author's own life before it is turned into word on the novel's page. This word is then read by the reader, becoming a narrative that shapes and influences his or her own embodied experience. The fictional narratives then become enacted within the life of the reader, allowing the Word to be made flesh through a hermeneutic method that enables the embodiment of the text. Thus, the theology of the novel involves an incarnational circle whereby flesh becomes word which becomes flesh over and over again.

The Word Made Word: the Embodiment of the Biblical Narrative within the Novel

The hermeneutic method inherent in Rancière's incarnational understanding of the novel is particularly helpful in unraveling the nineteenth-century dependence on biblical narratives and character typology for the formation of the fictional text. Some have argued that the novel increasingly replaced the Bible as a type of secular scripture; even some Victorian writers made this claim. Thomas Hardy wrote that "young people nowadays go to novels for their sentiments, their religion, and their morals."⁷⁸ Stephen Prickett, however, contends that the "commonly assumed secularity of the mainstream [novel] rapidly begins to evaporate on closer inspection." Instead, he claims that the novel "appropriate[s] for itself the oldest of all literary traditions by reading back into the Bible itself the origins of narrative."⁷⁹ The Victorian novel was often indebted to the Bible for its imagery, language, characters, and plot—sometimes overtly, as in the case of the novel *The True History of Joshua Davidson* by Elizabeth Lynn Linton wherein the title character is clearly a Marxist Christ figure reenacting the Gospel narratives in Victorian Britain.⁸⁰ At other times this is done more subtly, as in the title character in George Eliot's novel *Adam Bede* whose narrative is found within the Genesis account of the first Adam. This indebtedness toward the Bible for shaping fictional narratives is hardly surprising; Victorians were immersed in the biblical text from a young age due to the Protestant emphasis on the importance of daily scripture reading. John Ruskin's childhood memories of reading scripture are hardly exceptional as he explains how his mother forced him "to learn long chapters of the Bible by heart; as well as to read it every

⁷⁸ Hardy. "The Profitable Reading of Fiction," 62.

⁷⁹ Stephen Prickett. *Origins of Narrative: The Romantic Appropriation of the Bible*, 265-266

⁸⁰ *The True History of Joshua Davidson*. New York: Garland, 1975.

syllable through [...]from Genesis to the Apocalypse, about once a year.”⁸¹ As an adult, Ruskin recognized, in part, the effect that such an emphasis on biblical reading had on his understanding of the world: not that it shaped his own spirituality, but that it influenced his way of thinking and his understanding of what words meant.⁸² In a culture saturated with the words of scripture, authors of novels naturally borrowed their own writing from biblical texts to create reinterpreted narratives, myths, and symbols. Their works also had a ready audience capable of recognizing these biblical allusions, narratives, and figures that were reimagined into fictional worlds.

Their readers, in turn, would not only embody these texts through their own lives and actions but would also read these fictional accounts back into the biblical text itself, thereby allowing the novel to shape their interpretation of scripture. As Stephen Prickett argues, it was not until the eighteenth century that the Bible was understood to have a coherent, novel-like narrative with “character, motivation, and plot,”⁸³ and as the novel proliferated within the culture, this understanding of the Bible only increased throughout the succeeding century, affecting how readers in turn interpreted sacred texts. At this point, Rancière’s hermeneutic circle needs to be expanded if it is to fully explain the Victorian approach to sacred and fictional texts. Scripture itself, which is the flesh made Word, returned to flesh when it was approached by the Victorian reader, thus becoming embodied through the reader’s experience. Fictional writers, as readers and interpreters of scripture, take their embodied experience and return the sacred texts to word again

⁸¹ John Ruskin. Ruskin, John. *Pearls for Young Ladies: from the Later Works of John Ruskin*. New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1878, 11.

⁸² Ibid, 12.

⁸³ Prickett. *Origins of Narrative: The Romantic Appropriation of the Bible*, 264. Prickett also ties this biblical novelization directly to the fundamentalist attachment with “the literal ‘historical’ true of the narrative stories themselves,”—which he understands as a modern development (267).

through the pages of the novel. Such a process of returning the Word made flesh to word again occurs as the fictional tale is created out of the writer's embodied experience and interpretation of the scriptural narratives. The Word, which is now both sacred narrative and fictional novel, returns to flesh again through embodiment of the fictional narrative in each reader's life. This embodiment of the biblical narrative, re-visioned as fictional text, in turn shapes the way the reader, as he or she returns to read scripture, interprets and appropriates the biblical text. Thus, the re-visioned Word—both through scripture and the reinterpretation of biblical narratives through the novel—is constantly reimagined and interpreted by the reader, a reader who has the potential to become both reader and writer. What this means is that, for Victorians, both the writing and reading of fictional and sacred texts becomes a hermeneutic exercise, an act of embodied interpretation that enabled the constant reinterpretation of the biblical text. A novel was not only a story to be interpreted, but it offered an interpretation of the scriptural text.

The Embodied Word and Authored Body

To return to where this chapter began, Heather Walton closes her essay “Literature and Theology: Sex in the Relationship,” by reminding her readers that “A book is not a body; a book is not a girl—really.”⁸⁴ Despite the endless debates by Victorian literary critics to discover how each book was gendered, in the end a book cannot be female—or male for that matter. Yet, Walton concludes this statement by venturing, “And yet...,” drawing attention to just how gendered a literary text can become when read and interpreted in certain ways. In fact, as demonstrated by Nicola Diane Thompson in her work *Reviewing Sex: Gender and the Reception of Victorian*

⁸⁴ Walton. “Literature and Theology: Sex in the Relationship,” 48.

Novels, it was with the gender of the text, and not necessarily the sex of the author, that Victorian authors and critics were so concerned—with a gendering that was often intimately tied with the gendered real-life experience of the author.⁸⁵ In Victorian Britain, a novel's gender was more or less tied to the author's sex—but not always, as reviewers of Eliot's and Brontë's work would make clear. This is hardly surprising within a culture where gendered experiences were almost completely tied up with one's sexual identity.

The Victorian connection between gendered experiences and sexual identity has often been understood as constraining, particularly for women. My aim is not to argue against this point—Victorian gender roles did, in fact, often force women into a limited role in society—but rather to claim that the Victorian understanding of fictional texts and the interpretative acts performed by both authors and readers provided a place where the social constraints that came along with one's sex could be questioned and expanded upon through the interpretation and embodiment of the text. This leaves open the possibility that the relationship between texts and gender, and the relationship between narratives and embodiment, can be understood positively for readers of both genders. As the interpretation of scripture became increasingly understood as an introspective, individual, and imaginative exercise, readers, in turn, applied a similar hermeneutic approach toward the writing and reading of novels. Texts, both sacred and fictive, became embodied by individuals and thus became appropriated and reinterpreted in ways which reflected the individual, gendered experiences of each reader. So, while books are never bodies, they nonetheless are empowered to become flesh and dwell among us through the act of reading and the embodiment of the text. It is this powerful capability for fictional narratives to become embodied through the real-life experiences of the author and reader

⁸⁵ Thompson. *Reviewing Sex: Gender and the Reception of Victorian Novels*, 108.

that enables a positive understanding of the Victorian 'feminine' novel as these re-visioned narratives gave women the ability to create a female symbolic which reflected their daily experience as women, while at the same time expanding the meaning of the Victorian conception of womanhood.

CHAPTER SEVEN: NOBLE BOOKS AND SOILED AUTHORS

When Elizabeth Gaskell first read George Eliot's *Scenes of Clerical Life*, she was highly impressed by the as yet unknown author of the work and quickly recommended the stories to her good friend, American author Charles Norton. She boasted about finding the work, claiming, "They are a discovery of my own, & I am so proud of them."¹ After her endorsement of the work, the oft curious Gaskell continued by telling Norton, with a twinge of disappointment, "I have not a notion who wrote them."² At this point, many readers believed "George Eliot" to be a pseudonym, and there was some speculation as to the author's real identity. Gaskell, who took an interest in society gossip—particularly literary gossip—became increasingly interested in uncovering the identity of the author of the books she admired. Such conjecture only increased among the public with the successful publication of Eliot's second novel *Adam Bede*. As rumors circulated about who wrote *Scenes of Clerical Life* and *Adam Bede*, Gaskell became more and more curious about the identity of George Eliot. At one point, Gaskell was herself presumed by some to be the author of *Adam Bede*, which caused her to write a light-hearted yet complimentary note to George Eliot,

¹ Elizabeth Gaskell. "Letter 384." *EGL*. Eds. J.A.V. Chapple and Arthur Pollard. Manchester: Manchester UP, 1966, 493.

² Ibid.

(who Gaskell mistakenly addressed as “Gilbert Eliot”³) requesting permission to assent to the rumors. In her letter to the mysterious author of *Scenes from Clerical Life*, Gaskell calls the case of mistaken identity “the greatest compliment paid me I ever had in my life,” and goes on to say that had she actually written those great works, she would be overwhelmed with “pride and delight in myself.”⁴ As time passed, new rumors spread that the identity of George Eliot was actually Mary Ann Evans. Gaskell’s opinion toward the author George Eliot in turn shifted due to Evans’ status among middle-class Victorian society as a ‘fallen’ woman.

At the time, Mary Ann Evans was well known for living with George Henry Lewes, who remained married to Agnes Lewes, and it was this ‘illicit’ relationship with Lewes that tarnished Eliot’s reputation. Prior to her relationship with Lewes, Evans had already garnered ill repute, though certainly to a lesser degree, for her religious free thought and translation of controversial works by German Higher Critics.⁵ As one reviewer later remarked:

It would have been difficult for so able a writer to gain the public ear as a professedly religious and even clerical author, if the same name had been signed to the *Clerical Scenes* in 1858 and to *Adam Bede* in 1859, as had been signed to translations of Strauss’ *Life of Jesus* in 1846, and of Feuerbach’s *Essence of Christianity* in 1853.⁶

³ Eliot reacted to this misnomer with amusement when sharing Gaskell’s complimentary letter with her editor Mr. Blackwood: “I hope the inaccuracy with which she writes my name is not characteristic of a genius for fiction.” (“GE to William Blackwood, [Wandsworth], 6 June 1859.” *GEL*. Vol. 3, 76.)

⁴ Gaskell. “Letter 431.” *EGL*, 559.

⁵ The British essayist Henry Crabb Robinson’s review of *Adam Bede* after its author was made known exemplifies such a response, railing the work’s author for her sex and religious beliefs. He also expresses his discomfort with kinder critiques such as Gaskell’s that saw Eliot as moral because of her fictional works rather than her own actions. Robinson writes: “I would rather so excellent [?] a book was written by any man than a woman and worse that of all the woman, the translatress of Strauss should be the writer. Such a fact destroys all comfortable notions of right and wrong, true and false as they make the writer quite independent of personal character.” (Henry Crabb Robinson. *Henry Crabb Robinson on Books and Their Writers*. Vol. 2. London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1938, 787.)

⁶ Richard Simpson. “George Eliot’s Novels.” *Home and Foreign Review* Oct. 1863. Edinburgh: Williams & Norgate, 1863, 522-549, 523.

This comment underscores the relevance of Evans' theological beliefs, along with her 'immoral' relationship, in connection with her public reputation.

Gaskell's distress over the possibility that Evans was the author of *Scenes of Clerical Life* and *Adam Bede* more immediately stemmed from her disbelief that such moral literary works could have been the creation of such an impure woman (thus reflecting the Victorian belief that the life of the author was intimately connected with their fictional works). Writing to George Smith, Gaskell declared, "It is a noble grand book, whoever wrote it, —but Miss Evans' life taken at the best construction, does so jar against the beautiful book that one cannot help hoping against hope."⁷ Gaskell was clearly uncomfortable with the authorship of novels she otherwise counted among her favorites. Yet even expressing uneasiness with Evans' personal life, Gaskell maintains "Janet's Repentance" from *Scenes from Clerical Life* "above all still."⁸ This high praise of Evans' work may partly explain the way that Gaskell, after discovering the identity of "George Eliot," found it helpful to blame the adulterous relationship more on Lewes than on Evans.

In her immediate reaction toward the authorship of her beloved George Eliot novels, Gaskell attempted to reconcile her admiration for the author with her awareness of the author's reputation. Writing to her friend Charles Norton, Gaskell gives a brief history of Evans' life and family background, concluding with the following summary of the more controversial aspects of Evans' life:

Miss Marianne Evans translated Strauss's Life of Jesus [sic], & then left Coventry, going to live in London where she became acquainted with Mr. Lewes, author of Life of Goethe &c.—His wife left him to go and live with Thornton Hunt, (Leigh Hunt's son) & Mr. Lewes went abroad (5 years ago) with Miss

⁷ Gaskell. "Letter 438." *EGL*, 566.

⁸ Gaskell. "Letter 444." *EGL*, 581.

Evans, who now takes the name of Mrs. Evans. All this is miserable enough; — but I believe there are many excuses—the worst is Mr. Lewes’ character & opinions were (formerly *at least*) so bad.⁹

In a separate letter to Harriet Martineau around the same time, Gaskell outlines in great detail how she came to discover Mary Ann Evans as the author behind the George Eliot novels—a letter which demonstrates Gaskell’s charming obsession with Victorian literary gossip. She closes her multi-page letter by exclaiming, “oh *how* I wish Miss Evans had never seen Mr. Lewes.”¹⁰ Shortly after writing to Harriet Martineau, Gaskell wrote to George Smith, begging for more news on George Eliot, claiming to be bereft of sources of gossip, and desiring for “a long account of what she is like &c &c &c &c &c, —eyes nose mouth, *dress* &c for *facts*, and then—if you would—your impression of her, — which we won’t tell anybody.” She goes on to ask, “*How came she to like Mr. Lewes so much?* I know he has his good points but somehow he is so soiled for a woman like her to fancy.”¹¹ Gaskell’s letters show how uncomfortable she was with blaming Evans’ lifestyle on a lack of morality; she was much more confident that at least most of the blame could be attributed to Lewes himself. In a letter written directly to George Eliot after discovering her identity, Gaskell remains disappointed with the Evans-Lewes relationship. After showering Eliot with the highest of praise, “I have read them again; and I must, once more, tell you how earnestly fully, and humbly I admire them. I never read anything so complete, and beautiful in fiction in my whole life before,”¹² Gaskell goes on to admit, “I should not be quite true in my ending, if I did not say before I

⁹ Gaskell. “Letter 444.” *EGL*, 582.

¹⁰ Gaskell. “Letter 445.” *EGL*, 586.

¹¹ Gaskell. “Letter 446.” *EGL*, 586-7.

¹² Gaskell. “Letter 449.” *EGL*, 592.

concluded that I wish you *were* Mrs. Lewes.”¹³ Gaskell softens the blow of her words by immediately stating, “However that can’t be helped, as far as I can see, and one must not judge others.”¹⁴ This last statement here falls in line with other comments made by Gaskell that attempt to understand, or at the very least excuse, the situation in light of the type of person that Lewes, not Eliot, was. Eliot was not soiled; Lewes was. Gaskell only found her guilty by association and even then found such culpability unsustainable when viewed alongside Eliot’s great works of fiction.

Shortly after writing her letter to Eliot, Gaskell wrote again to George Smith, thanking him for providing the gossip about George Eliot that she had solicited. The statement about Eliot in this letter clearly demonstrates the type of dilemma Gaskell wrestled with in order to reconcile the range of emotions she felt toward Eliot, the ‘fallen’ woman and her “noble” literary works. Gaskell writes:

I was very much obliged to you for sending us so much about Mrs. Lewes (what do people call her, —) Do you know I can’t help liking her, —*because* she wrote those books. Yes I do! I *have* tried to be moral, & dislike her & dislike her books—but it won’t do. There is not a wrong word, or a wrong thought in them, I do believe, — and though I should have been more ‘comfortable’, for some indefinable reason, if a *man* had written them instead of a *woman*, yet I think the author must be a noble creature; and I shut my eyes to the awkward blot in her life.¹⁵

Gaskell here gives a fascinating glimpse at the complex, often contradictory, relationship many Victorians had with nineteenth-century novels and their authors—one that assumed an embodied text both between reader and writer.¹⁶ Her letter also reveals just how critical gender was to societal expectations—she would have been more at ease had George Eliot actually been male, even if she is at the same time aware that her discomfort

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid, 592.

¹⁵ Gaskell. “Letter 451.” *EGL*, 594.

¹⁶ See pages 162-170.

toward Eliot's sex lacked any logical basis. Nonetheless, even if she was unable to reconcile author and text completely, Gaskell interpreted George Eliot the person as moral only if approached through her fictional works, which she understood to be the embodied work of the author.

Even if Gaskell failed to understand how Eliot's novels and lifestyle could coincide, being labeled as a 'fallen' woman in Victorian Britain nonetheless powerfully shaped Eliot's interpretation of texts and her fictional narratives. As a 'fallen' and, therefore, socially isolated woman, she used her fiction to sympathize with women in a range of difficult circumstances, bringing purity, or at least pity, to the 'fallen' and drawing attention to those everyday saints who are often overlooked for their unconventional lifestyles. What follows is an interpretation of Eliot's role as a woman within Victorian society through both her own writings and critical responses to this role throughout her own time period and subsequent eras. It is nearly impossible to separate the real-life individual Mary Ann Evans from the mythic author George Eliot.

Biographies of Eliot, spanning from her own era to those more recently published, seem only to create larger-than-life portraits of Eliot, not only because she stands as such a towering literary giant of the nineteenth century but also because her lifestyle and intellect were so unconventional, especially for a woman. Yet this idealization of Eliot in many ways reflects how Evans understood herself. She often used mythologized biblical symbols as a means of self-interpretation and in turn adapted these images of venerated women for both her fictional narratives and self-understanding.

The remembrances of her friends, readers, and acquaintances, along with her own letters, journals, and novels, together formulate an idealized vision of Eliot, depicting her

as a type of Victorian saint whose greatness rested in some unknown quality which could best be discovered through her fiction. This type of sainthood was dependent on her self-interpretation and emphasized throughout her novels. In the preface to her novel *Middlemarch*, Eliot redefines the epic life of the saint as one whose “loving heart-beats and sobs after an unattained goodness...instead of centring in some long-recognizable deed.”¹⁷ She earlier explains that such modern-day Saint Theresas aspire after both “a vague ideal and the common yearning of womanhood.”¹⁸ She ends her novel by returning again to her symbols of sainthood, framing her narrative as hagiography, writing of her female protagonist Dorothea—the modern Theresa:

But the effect of her being on those around her was incalculably diffusive, for the growing good of the world is partly dependent on un-historic acts, and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life and rest in unvisited tombs.¹⁹

Dorothea is the embodiment of Saint Theresa within Eliot’s novel, and her faithfully lived life is not hidden but, rather, interpreted and mythologized first by Eliot and then her readers through her fictional narrative. Likewise, Eliot’s epic life is found within the interpretation, rather than the rudimentary facts, of her story. Thus, rather than embark on a futile search for the ‘real’ rather than mythological’ Mary Ann Evans, I am most interested in George Eliot as she was interpreted—both by herself and others. It is in this interpretation where the interplay of word and flesh took place—between her life, novels, and readers.

The focus of this study will be her relationship with Lewes as the primary experience through which she interpreted herself and re-visioned the biblical female

¹⁷ Eliot. *Middlemarch*, xiv.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid, 578.

symbolic within her novels. Though initially shunned by the Victorian middle class, George Eliot ultimately found a type of sainthood through her novels, not only with Elizabeth Gaskell, but throughout Britain. She serves to demonstrate the powerful potential of a hermeneutic practice which reinterprets biblical narratives within the fictional text: narratives which, for Eliot, were then turned into a lived reality.

“She Knew What She Was Losing”: Reception of the ‘Fallen’ Author

Handwritten on the first page of her manuscript of *Adam Bede*, George Eliot inscribed these words: “To my dear husband George Henry Lewes, I give the MS of a work which would never have been written but for the happiness his love has conferred on my life.”²⁰ Yet Lewes was not Eliot’s lawful husband—he remained legally married to Agnes Lewes, née Jervis—and despite Eliot and Lewes’ deep commitment to each other until Lewes’ death, according to the moral standards of the era, many middle-class Victorians would have judged their relationship to be immoral and adulterous.²¹ This resulted in not only a dwindling social circle but practical inconveniences as well. In the early stages of their relationship, Eliot had to go by Mrs. Lewes to procure lodgings with G.H. Lewes. She made requests to her remaining friends to remember to refer to her as Lewes’ wife because revealing their true relationship could have resulted in the landlady removing them from their home for impropriety.²² The great nineteenth-century historian Lord Acton, reflecting on Eliot’s life shortly after her death, noted the broader sacrifices

²⁰ Eliot. *Life and Letters: the Works of George Eliot*, 282.

²¹ For more on Victorian sexual standards see: Deborah Anna Logan. *Fallenness in Victorian Women’s Writing: Marry, Stitch, Die, or Do Worse*. London: University of Missouri Press, 1998; and Eric Trudgill. *Madonnas and Magdalens: the Origins and Development of Victorian Sexual Attitude*. An interesting history and Victorian critique of these values can be found in: Friedrich Engels. *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State: in the Light of the Researches of Lewis H. Morgan*. New York: International Publishers, 1972.

²² Eliot. “GE to Bessie Rayner Parkes, Richmond, 22 March 1856.” *GEL*. Vol. 2, 232.

that Eliot was forced to make as a woman in an unmarried sexual relationship with a married man. Acton notes that Eliot, at the time, thought she knew exactly the consequences of her behavior, and thought them “not...too high a price for the happiness of a home.”²³ He continues by bluntly explaining the reality of her situation, placing it within the larger scope of her later life:

She urged with pathetic gravity that she knew what she was losing. She did not. Ostensibly she was resigning a small group of friends and an obscure place in literature. What she really sacrificed was liberty of speech, the foremost rank amongst the women of her time, and a tomb in Westminster Abbey.”²⁴

Lord Acton’s reflection on the price paid for establishing a public marriage of sorts with the already wed Lewes assumes that Eliot would have attained the highest honors he lists had she not committed herself to a relationship with Lewes. His use of the word “pathetic” implies weakness on the part of Eliot during this time, rather than interpreting her decision as a moment of inner strength. While Acton, in a sense, is correct that Eliot’s choices had some negative consequences, he fails to understand that if Eliot had not fallen in love with G.H. Lewes, her literary output undoubtedly would not have been the same—and could not have emphasized the same themes. His comment fails to temper the negative consequences of Eliot’s choices with the honor and acclaim she did attain as the author George Eliot, despite, or perhaps even because of, the status of her relationship with Lewes.

However, Acton is correct in assessing that the initial reaction toward the identity of George Eliot was not generally so generous across England as Mrs. Gaskell’s. Many readers read her novels with suspicion, as if her moral flaws would be passed on to the

²³ John Dalberg-Acton[Lord Acton]. “George Eliot’s Life.” *The Nineteenth Century* January-June 1885. London: Kegan, Paul, Trench, 1885. 464-485, 476.

²⁴ Ibid.

readers of her works. Here was the double-edged sword of the Victorian hermeneutic approach to fictional works: if fictional works were the embodied word of the author, even the most pure novel could affect the reader for good or ill, depending on the author's personal morality. In an unsigned review of *Adam Bede* published in the *London Quarterly Review* after the real author of the work had been revealed, the reviewer warns "thoughtful and religious people" from being deceived by such works, claiming that "the exceeding literary merit of the book" often "hides its evil beneath its good."²⁵ Some reviewers alluded to Eliot's 'fallen' status by expressing concern that Eliot's personal sin negatively shaped the underlying philosophy of the book, in that she pictured Maggie Tulliver's self-renunciation, faith, and prayer as "powerless to affect the rectitude of her conduct."²⁶ Such depictions of the omnipotence of evil were chastised as "false and degrading assumptions"²⁷ by reviewers. Though such reviews did not explicitly connect Eliot's own religious beliefs and sin to Maggie Tulliver's narrative, a subtext condemning the powerlessness of prayer and confession in Eliot's personal life underlies their criticism.

Though still containing subtle disapproval of Eliot's lifestyle, a more positive review of *Mill on the Floss* published anonymously in the *Saturday Review* more clearly links Eliot with her sexual 'fall.' The author adds Eliot to a list of controversial female authors (including Currer Bell and George Sand, the latter who, like Eliot, was considered a 'fallen' woman) and criticizes each of them for their emphasis on, and

²⁵ "Adam Bede—The Mill on the Floss." *London Quarterly and Holburn Review* July 1861. London: Hamilton, Adams, 1861, 301-307, 302.

²⁶ "The Mill on the Floss" *The Eclectic Review* July-Dec.1860. London: Judd & Glass, 1860, 222-224, 224.

²⁷ "The Novels of George Eliot." *The National Review* Oct.1860: 191-219, 219. However, prefacing this criticism is a comment claiming that the author does not believe the novel itself "embodies any questionable moral principle." (217.)

overly detailed accounts of, sexual arousal in their works, writing that “They linger on the description of the physical sensations that accompany the meeting of hearts in love.”²⁸

The reviewer ironically adds, “No one could be less open to the charge of thinking lightly of purity than George Eliot. She proclaims in every page the infinite gain of virtue.”²⁹

The rest of the review is full of cautious praise, so it is doubtful the reviewer was being intentionally facetious in such comments, yet the allusion to George Sand subtly signals to readers that the reviewer was aware of the connection that could be made between “bodily feelings” presented in the novel with the “passion of love” enacted within the author’s own life—an association that the reviewer clearly feels the need to criticize as cautionary instruction to readers.³⁰ The comment itself also reinforces the great pains Eliot took to maintain purity within her novels—a fact that was observed and noted by her critics. Such reviewers almost seem relieved that Eliot made such an effort to maintain decency and morality within her works.

Many reviewers remained somewhat cautious about Eliot’s novels, and not only because of her status as a ‘fallen’ woman or because of her religious beliefs. In addition to her relationship with Lewes, several significant aspects of George Eliot’s life did not follow the traditional Victorian female narrative of experience. She was a spinster into her late twenties, living an independent life apart from family during her early adulthood. Throughout this time she self-sufficiently earned her own income through academic endeavors that were generally reserved for men during the era, including translating theological works and editing *The Westminster Review*. She remained a working woman

²⁸ “The Mill on the Floss.” *The Saturday Review of Politics, Literature, Science, Art, and Finance* April 1860: 470-471, 471.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

for the rest of her life, earning her own income through her writing. She never had children of her own and did not legally marry (to John Cross) until the last year of her life.

Even late in her career, after her reputation as an author brought her greater respect, friends and admirers remained unsure of how to understand such a female intellectual. After visiting Eliot and Lewes in 1873, the American historian John Fiske was very careful to emphasize that “There is nothing a bit masculine about her; she is thoroughly feminine and looks and acts as if she were made for nothing but to mother babies,”³¹ before repeatedly emphasizing all of her “manly” qualities, such as her power of argument, knowledge, and thinking abilities. In one instance Fiske notes: “She thinks just like a man and can put her thoughts into clear and forcible language at a moment’s notice.”³² Such a mixture of “feminine” personality and “masculine” intellect were at times baffling or even off-putting to those who found themselves in Eliot’s presence, even if they remained in awe of her great stature as an author and thinker.

As an intellectual, free-thinking, ‘fallen’ woman, social ostracism and isolation were not entirely unfamiliar to her. Even at a young age she realized how her choices and lifestyle could quickly result in separation even from those she was close to. Her pivotal choice to stop attending her parents’ church and renounce her childhood religion quickly resulted in estrangement from her father—a separation that was not permanent, but nonetheless shows that she was well acquainted with social isolation as a repercussion for public action. Furthermore, as a woman with an advanced intellect, her scholarship resulted in further alienation from those who otherwise might be considered potential

³¹ John Fiske. *The Letters of John Fiske*. New York: Macmillan, 1940., 278.

³² Ibid.

friends. As it was, she barely had any female peers whom she could speak with as equals. Margaret Lonsdale noted in her George Eliot biography shortly after Eliot's death: "She looks down on us from the height of her loneliness—from the snowy mountain-top where she breathes a rare keen air of pure intellectual enjoyment which would be fatal to the health, if not to the life, of less exalted mortals; from the depths also of the loneliness of her self-chosen lot."³³ Lonsdale thus composes an image of Eliot that ties together the alienation Eliot suffered both by her intellectualism and her relationship with Lewes. It is this image of the estranged saintly woman aloof from humanity that Eliot adopted in her own interpretation of herself. In turn, her fictional narratives often center on such women who redefine what it means to be an everyday saint. In particular, Eliot used her fiction to reinterpret the Madonna figure as a means of exploring what it meant to be a saintly Victorian woman. In this she attempted to blur the lines between societal expectations of idealized womanhood and the reality that each woman exists in some way as 'fallen.

The 'Fallen' Saint: George Eliot finds Redemption through her Fiction

Maggie Tulliver, the heroine of the novel *Mill on the Floss*, is frequently identified by literary critics as George Eliot's most autobiographical character.³⁴ The novel's narrative serves to underscore the challenges women in particular face when confronted by gender roles. Even from childhood, Maggie is at odds with society's expectations for womanhood, from her appearance and manners to her desires and

³³ Margaret Lonsdale. *George Eliot: Thoughts upon her Life, her Books, and Herself*. London: Kegan Paul, Trench, 1886, 2.

³⁴ See: Zelda Austen. "Why Feminist Critics Are Angry with George Eliot." *College English* 37.6 (1976): 549-561, 553; Gilbert and Gubar. *The Mad Woman in the Attic*, 491; Edgar W. Hirshberg. "George Eliot and Her Husband." *The English Journal*, Vol. 56, No. 6 (September, 1967), 809-817, 814; Judith Mitchell. "George Eliot and the Problematic of Female Beauty." *Modern Language Studies*, Vol. 20, No. 3 (Summer 1990), 14-28, 20; and Jennifer Uglow. *George Eliot*, 127.

aspirations. Maggie finds herself in a constant battle against conforming to middle-class expectations of femininity, and as she grows older she turns to religious asceticism as a way to divorce herself from societal expectations through one of the few unconventional, yet still respectable, means available to her as a Victorian woman. Both Maggie and Eliot are ugly ducklings who desire intellectual and spiritual fulfillment. Like Eliot's relationship with Lewes, Maggie's romance is with a man who her brother refuses to accept, thus losing her respectability, foremost with her brother, but also among the local townspeople.

The novel centers on the complex relationship between Maggie and her brother Tom, a young man who is able to attain the education and autonomy that Maggie, as a young Victorian woman, can only dream of. Maggie is all too aware of the unequal balance of power that exists between men and women in her culture, as she explains to her brother Tom during an argument in which he threatens to force her to submit to his will. When he accuses her of disgraceful behavior and questions why she is unable to show affection in the same way he does, Maggie responds, "Because you are a man, Tom, and have power, and can do something in the world."³⁵ Tom's response defends this patriarchal structure: "Then, if you can do nothing, submit to those that can."³⁶ This submission does not come easily for Maggie. In the end of the novel, Maggie seeks out her estranged brother during a storm and they end up drowning together. Maggie, at the end, is no longer concerned with only her own desires; she has submitted to the larger needs of those around her and in this she finds salvation, even if it is only to be found in eternity. Eliot ends her novel with a sentimental image of the drowned siblings: "brother

³⁵ Eliot. *The Mill on the Floss*. New York: Modern Library, 2001, 371.

³⁶ Ibid.

and sister had gone down in an embrace never to be parted: living through again in one supreme moment the days when they had clasped their little hands in love and roamed the daisied fields together.”³⁷ The ending brings the reader back to the beginning of the book where the siblings’ childhood days were spent in harmony, before they were divided by gendered roles and driven apart by jealousy. Suspended in death, Eliot enables Maggie and Tom to live out their beautiful childhood union over and over again. Yet Maggie’s act of love toward her brother is ultimately one of submission; she must forgive her brother—admitting she was wrong—and put his needs above her own, ultimately sacrificing her own life to bring about reconciliation between them. This ending makes Eliot’s feelings towards the uneven power structure between men and women unclear. Maggie Tulliver, like many of her heroines, such as Dorothea in *Middlemarch* and Dinah in *Adam Bede*, has unconsummated dreams that ultimately fade or, quite literally, die away within the arms of a man.

It is debatable whether Eliot used these endings to emphasize how problematic gender roles can be for women who desire some greater fulfillment in life or to show that human love is the highest form of religious experience. Most feminist criticism about Eliot’s novels has attempted to explore the gender implications within Eliot’s novels, particularly in relation to the lack of personal fulfillment for her female characters at each novel’s end.³⁸ Zelda Austen’s aptly titled essay “Why Feminists are Angry with George Eliot” typifies the feminist complaint regarding Eliot’s work, commiserating with other critics who accuse Eliot of “supporting the prevailing values of Victorian culture.”

Austen goes on to note: “In her novels the woman who breaks the mold of convention is

³⁷ Ibid, 558.

³⁸For the history of feminist criticism of Eliot’s works see: Kathleen Blake. “George Eliot: the Critical Heritage.” *The Cambridge Companion to George Eliot*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001. 202-225.

doomed.”³⁹ Elaine Showalter likewise criticizes those who follow in Eliot’s “pattern of self-sacrificing masochism,”⁴⁰ a type of behavior that ties into the Victorian conception of the ‘angel in the house.’ Other critics, such as Kimberly VanEnsveld Adams, completely disagree with critics who understood Eliot as a proponent of the ‘angel in the house’ mentality and instead identify Eliot’s works with a “feminist social critique,”⁴¹ claiming her literary works intentionally questioned the gender roles that existed within Victorian society. Still other critics have adopted a more complex understanding of Eliot’s views of Victorian gender roles, such as Gilbert and Gubar, who admit that while Eliot’s advocacy of more ‘feminine’ attributes could dangerously confine women to society’s stereotypes, this idealization of womanhood might also be used “as a means of criticizing masculine values.”⁴² To read Eliot’s novels as containing any explicit feminist message about gender and gender roles is in many cases a misreading. Likewise, to understand Eliot’s works as not only conforming to but also advocating the gendered values of her culture is equally problematic. Rather, Gilbert and Gubar argue that Eliot’s works, when read in light of the woman question give insight into her own experiences as a Victorian woman who was unable to conform to her society’s expectations of womanhood, even while she yearned for respect and admiration from those around her. Gilbert and Gubar believe that Eliot’s stories reflect the complexities that existed within the confines of Victorian gender roles as one could never escape them, yet at the same time no one ever precisely conformed to them either.

³⁹ Austen. “Why Feminists are Angry with George Eliot,” 550.

⁴⁰ Showalter. *A Literature of One’s Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing*, 162.

⁴¹ Kimberly VanEnsveld Adams. “Feminine Godhead, Feminist Symbol: The Madonna in George Eliot, Ludwig Feuerbach, Anna Jameson, and Margaret Fuller.” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 12.1 (1996): 41-70, 57.

⁴² Gilbert and Gubar. *The Mad Woman in the Attic*, 499.

When Eliot does explicitly explore Victorian roles for women, it is generally through her own reinterpretation of the Christian symbol of female saint, often by re-visioning this image in order to emphasize the complexity of womanhood. Eliot came to reinterpret the biblical symbols of the feminine through her fiction in order to explore the complexities of Victorian gender roles, particularly in her own life through what during this time period would have been considered a contradiction of life experiences—as independent woman and married woman, as morally idealized woman and fallen woman, as woman and ‘man.’ Despite the many personal attributes which estranged Eliot from those who had once been friends and acquaintances in her early adulthood, as time passed, Eliot increasingly garnered deep respect from her readers for her intellectual capacity as she gained notoriety as an author. Over time, in spite of the “awkward blot”⁴³ of her relationship with Lewes, Eliot earned the respect and even admiration of her fellow countrymen and countrywomen in large part because of the public admiration she garnered through her novels. She became the Magdalene figure which found salvation through her fictional narratives.

Eliot explored her multifaceted relationship with Victorian gender roles through her appropriation of Christian narratives. From a feminist standpoint, it is helpful to analyze how Eliot repeatedly used Christian saints as symbols of the feminine in her novels—symbols which were drawn from the narratives of both the Madonna and Magdalene—to explore what it means to be a Victorian woman. The saint was a powerful image for Eliot, both in her novels and her life, and it was the human embodiment of the saint symbol that was of particular interest to her. Time and again her novels allude to saint figures through her female protagonists, and throughout her life she was very

⁴³ Gaskell. “Letter 451.” *EGL*, 594.

interested in what it meant to be a Madonna figure within her contemporary society. Not only do her narratives involve a re-visioning and re-appropriation of female sainthood, but her use of these narratives as a hermeneutic framework to interpret her own life and experience as a ‘fallen’ woman stands as a paradoxical moment in which the adoption of the maternal Madonna figure so often feared by feminist critics became, for Eliot, the actualization of an empowering act. These narratives and symbols not only provided the foundation for her female characters but strikingly proved helpful in understanding her own self, particularly her selfhood in relation to George Lewes. Thus, her relationship with Lewes enabled her to formulate her own understanding of these Christian symbols, particularly in relation with her interpretation of the Madonna and Magdalene figures.

G.H. Lewes and His Relationship with the Author George Eliot

Literary critics frequently note Eliot’s relationship with Lewes as crucial to her work as a writer, but generally in relation to either how his philosophical ideas influenced Eliot’s writing, or how his encouragement supported her work. Rarely is G.H. Lewes’ unconventional relationship with Eliot explored alongside her fictional narratives. Critics, particularly those analyzing Eliot’s work before second-wave feminist literary criticism became influential, held that George Eliot’s success as an author was due to Lewes, as if Eliot would not have become an author at all were it not for the confidence he gave her and the inspiration his own work lent to her novels. In an essay written in 1955, Alice Kaminsky wrote: “The comparison of Lewes' and George Eliot's theories of the novel...aims to reveal more clearly the nature of her literary indebtedness to him.”⁴⁴ Kaminsky notes a connection between Lewes’ and Eliot’s philosophies, suggesting that

⁴⁴ Kaminsky. “George Eliot, George Henry Lewes, and the Novel,” 998.

Eliot's own beliefs were shaped by Lewes' thoughts. Edgar W. Hirshberg similarly stressed in 1967: "As a result of their illegal union Marian Evans became famous, as George Eliot."⁴⁵ In his essay, Hirshberg understands Lewes to be directly responsible not just for occasionally inspiring the narrative structure of Eliot's work but for being directly responsible for George Eliot as author. This link between Lewes and Eliot's novels portrays the relationship as one that was overwhelmingly advantageous to Eliot, who, in addition to needing assistance with her novel writing, is also interpreted as an unattractive spinster who was often depressed and suffered from low self-esteem.

Eliot was often understood by scholars as a needy woman who required Lewes' support because of her many shortcomings. This interpretation of Eliot and her romantic relationship began in her lifetime and continues to be perpetuated in more recent biographies. Harold Bloom describes Eliot's relationship with Lewes by stating, "Lewes brought her some much needed happiness and self-esteem: Eliot had often feared that she would never find a companion, in no small part due to a sense of her personal unattractiveness."⁴⁶ Several of Eliot's contemporaries made similar statements about Eliot's unattractive appearance and depressed nature, reflecting her need for Lewes' support.⁴⁷ Lord Acton's interpretation of their relationship is particularly interesting in

⁴⁵ Hirshberg. "George Eliot and her Husband," 809.

⁴⁶ Harold Bloom. *George Eliot*. New York: Infobase, 2009, 6.

⁴⁷ In a collection of personal recollections from her friends and acquaintances, Eliot's appearance and emotional state are frequently related descriptions. Mathematician Soph'ia Kovalevskia's account of Eliot's appearance is particularly negative: "A small lean figure with a disproportionately large, heavy head, a mouth with huge protruding 'English' teeth, a nose which, though straight and beautifully outlined, was too massive for a feminine face, some kind of old fashioned strange coiffure..." (Soph'ia Kovalevskia. "The Imagined and the Real." *George Eliot: Interviews and Recollections*. Ed. K.K. Collins. NYC: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010. 81.) Eliot was often described as kind hearted and jovial, but friends would often notice an underlying sadness, claiming, "She looked fragile, overweighted perhaps by thought, and with traces of the depression of which she so often complains in her letters." (Stephen. *George Eliot*, 144.)

that he propagates this belief while at the same time admitting it as a dubious claim, writing:

Lewes helped dispel the gloom and despondency of George Eliot's spirits, and stood manfully between her and all the cares he did not cause. His literary skills have done her untold service, although the recorded instances of his intervention are contestable.⁴⁸

Acton's comments betray the gendered hierarchical power structure attached to such interpretations of Eliot's relationship with Lewes. These criticisms, both Victorian and more recent, of the Eliot-Lewes relationship create a narrative where Eliot is portrayed as the unattractive, helpless, emotionally unstable woman who has a successful career that is propped by her stronger, masculine lover. Interpretations which highlight this aspect of their relationship are pejorative criticisms which serve to dismiss Eliot as an author when she was actually a successful writer and scholar in her own right.

It is more accurate to say that while it was indeed Lewes who first encouraged Eliot to try to write a novel,⁴⁹ he was not the mastermind behind her great literary works. The often-made correlation between the Lewes-Evans union and George Eliot's success as a writer overemphasizes George Henry Lewes' role in assisting Eliot with her writing. Edgar W. Hirshberg speculates that Lewes influenced George Eliot not only by encouraging her to write and offering her comments and suggestions, but also by contributing to the "conception, composition, and completion,"⁵⁰ of her great works. Such commentary on the relationship between Lewes and Eliot is paternalistic in its tone and discredits Eliot's own masterpieces as works that would never have existed without

⁴⁸ Acton. "George Eliot's Life," 78. Acton follows this comment with the following interesting remark about Lewes: "He was not quick in detecting her sovereign ability, and must bear the reproach that he undervalued his prize, and never knew until it was too late that she was worthy of better things than the position to which he had consigned her." (Ibid.) Acton's reflection places Eliot in the submissive role to a fallible god-like figure who regrettably controlled her fortunes.

⁴⁹ Eliot. "GE Journal, Richmond, 6 December 1857: How I Came to Write Fiction." *GEL*. Vol. 2, 407.

⁵⁰ Hirshberg. "George Eliot and her Husband," 813.

George Lewes.⁵¹ George Eliot scholar Gordon S. Haight's preface to his seminal collection of Eliot's letters notes that Lewes played a large role in the creation of George Eliot the author in that he bolstered her self-confidence enough to bring her works to fruition. However, Haight also correctly concedes that those who believe Lewes shaped Eliot's philosophical views are mistaken, as "Every main bias had been taken before they met, and they respected each other too much to desire uniformity of opinion."⁵² Haight here demonstrates that Lewes played an influential role in Eliot's life and work but at the same time offers Eliot greater autonomy as an author than several other critics, which seems to be a more accurate, nuanced approach to the influence Lewes had on Eliot's work.

Eliot's essay "How I Came to Write Fiction" relays Eliot's independence as an author. She begins her essay by explaining, "It had always been a dream of mine that some time or other I might write a novel, and my shadowy conception of what the novel was to be, varied, of course, from one epoch of my life to another."⁵³ Her lifelong dream of writing a novel seems free of her relationship with Lewes. It is interesting that her comment about her novel ideas shifting throughout different parts of her life suggests she was aware of how her experiences shaped her fictional narratives. Even when Eliot describes the support Lewes initially gave her, she betrays that he was not unconditionally supportive, as he speculated the possibility that the book could be "a failure...just good enough...or...a chef-d'oeuvre at once—there's no telling."⁵⁴ This is hardly the type of encouragement that could alone sustain her work; she had some level

⁵¹ Ibid, 817.

⁵² Haight, Gordon S. "George Eliot and her Correspondents." *GEL*. Vol. 1., xlvi.

⁵³ Eliot. "GE Journal, Richmond, 6 December 1857: How I Came to Write Fiction." *GEL*. Vol. 2, 406.

⁵⁴ Ibid, 407.

of self-confidence within her to begin with. Her essay “History of ‘Adam Bede’” further demonstrates the centrality of her own personal vision in relation to her works, at one point claiming it was “*my treatment* [of the story], which alone determines the moral quality of art.”⁵⁵

The prevalent emphasis among critics of Lewes’ role as a contributor to Eliot’s writing also tends to disregard the other ways he might have influenced her work. Despite the frequent suggestion that Eliot was indebted to Lewes in her writing, very little is ever said by critics and biographers about how her ‘illicit’ relationship with the man she deemed her husband came to shape her writing—that is to say, while much is made of the influence that Lewes had on Eliot’s philosophical beliefs, little connection is made between her fictional narratives and her actual status as a ‘fallen’ woman in Victorian society. Yet Eliot’s novels are filled with instances that relate to marriage, love, and ‘fallenness’ in such a way that drawing a connection between them and her own experience of unlawful marriage would undoubtedly prove fruitful. It is through the lens of Eliot’s life experience as a ‘fallen’ woman that she read and interpreted the biblical symbols which she re-visioned within her novels. Eliot herself acknowledged the relationship between her ‘fallenness’ and her novels, writing to a friend after *Adam Bede* had received glowing reviews: “I am a very blessed woman, am I not? to have all this reason for being glad that I have lived, in spite of my sins and sorrows—or, rather, by reasons of my sins and sorrows.”⁵⁶ This statement expresses how Eliot came to embrace

⁵⁵ Eliot. “GE Journal, Richmond, 30 November 1858: History of ‘Adam Bede.’” *GEL*. Vol. 2, 504.

⁵⁶ Eliot. “GE and GHL to Mme. Eugène [Barbara Leigh Smith] Bodichon, Wandsworth, 5 May 1859.” *GEL*. Vol. 3, 64. Feminist literary critic Nina Auerbach connects Eliot’s status as a “fallen woman” with her “sins and sorrows” by interpreting Eliot’s letter as referring to “the almost magical metamorphosis that the role of fallen woman brought to her own life.” (Nina Auerbach. “Rise of the Fallen Woman.” *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*. 35. 1 (1980): 29-52, 50.)

what others might have understood as the lowest points of her life, realizing that those moments also shared in shaping her success. Unfortunately, the “sins and sorrows” of Eliot’s life are rarely explored in relation to her literary works.

Kathryn Bond Stockton is one of the few critics to even mention Eliot’s perceived ‘fallenness’ in relation to her work at all, as she ties together Eliot’s relationship with Lewes with the sensuous philosophy of Feuerbach. Stockton points out that Eliot was not coincidentally engaged to Lewes a week after her translation of *The Essence of Christianity* was published in England, in that Feuerbach’s emphasis on the human, not religious, sacrament of marriage, along with his exposition on the value and necessity of human love, certainly shaped Eliot’s understanding of marriage and may have convinced her that experiencing the highest of human relationships, marriage, was essential.⁵⁷ Stockton defines Feuerbach’s definition of marriage as both sexual and religious in nature, as his writings “strove to unite spiritual existence with bodily sensuous philosophy.”⁵⁸ She goes on to explain how Eliot’s role as a fallen woman related to her profession as a writer. By taking on the role of author George Eliot, Stockton claims, she “became both ‘Eve’ and ‘Madonna’ in relation to Lewes, and both [Eve and Madonna] at the same time.”⁵⁹ Stockton here is referring to her duality as Evans and Eliot as well, tying them together in the biblical symbols of Eve and Mary. Stockton makes this point as an aside to her larger argument about relationships between women in Eliot’s work, but her point is worth pursuing further in relation to Eliot’s experience as a Victorian

⁵⁷ Kathryn Bond Stockton. *God Between Their Lips: Desire Between Women in Irigaray, Brontë, and Eliot*, 185.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

woman and the hermeneutic approach she took toward biblical symbols such as Eve or the Madonna within her fictional works.

Nina Auerbach's essay "Rise of the Fallen Woman" most strongly draws a connection between Eliot's experiences as a 'fallen' woman with her fictional works. Auerbach argues that Eliot's fiction was powerfully transformative in her own personal life, dramatically presenting her life history as if she were a real-life Cinderella:

[F]or George Eliot, the transforming power of the myth brought gladness and grace. Whether deliberately, unconsciously, or accidentally, George Eliot seems to have composed her own life so that its fitful, rudderless, and self-doubting first half was alchemized into gold when the austere bluestocking became the fallen woman. In the period of relative ostracism after her elopement with George Henry Lewes, the ugly duckling became a swan, the critic became an artist, and the awkward victim became the sibylline Madonna of the Priory and of England itself, as George Eliot was formed out of the mistakes of Mary Anne Evans.⁶⁰

Auerbach believes that Eliot's 'fallen' relationship with Lewes is at the crux of her transformation, idealistically interpreting Eliot's life as "a mythic work of Victorian fiction."⁶¹ Eliot's achievements at the end of her life certainly contrasted with her social position as a young woman, but Auerbach's mythologizing here is fantastical and exaggerated. Furthermore, Auerbach's interpretation of Eliot's relationship as a "mistake" is an unnecessarily negative view of Eliot's relationship with Lewes. Auerbach goes on to suggest that Eliot achieved her success through her unflinching faith in the potential for personal renewal from the repercussions of her 'fallen' status rather than a need for redemption. Eliot, Auerbach reasons, found her salvation as an artist, but only by first adopting a conventional role of womanhood. Auerbach claims that Eliot attained this idealistic femininity by assuming a traditional role within her relationship with Lewes,

⁶⁰ Auerbach. "Rise of the Fallen Woman," 51.

⁶¹ Ibid.

one where she was helplessly dependent on his supportive care.⁶² Here Auerbach unfortunately reverts back to the familiar trope of the Pygmalion myth⁶³ alluded to by earlier critics who understood Lewes as the one who brought forth the great artist George Eliot, as Mary Ann Evans increasingly conformed to the conventional image of the submissive wife through her domesticated relationship with Lewes.

Suggesting that Eliot's role as a 'fallen' woman was pivotal to her success as a writer in this way is troubling because it echoes the idea that Eliot, as a female writer, was utterly dependent on a man for her success. However, Auerbach's interpretation of Eliot's authorial career is helpful in that it demonstrates the relationship between Eliot's 'fallenness' and literary career with her status as a type of saint. Earlier in the same essay, Auerbach's exploration of the connections between Eliot's 'fallen' status and the female characters within her novels is more fruitful. Auerbach believes that Eliot makes "monumental autographical projections"⁶⁴ upon some of her female characters, particularly Maggie Tulliver from *The Mill on the Floss* and Hetty from *Adam Bede*. She ties the cords of the myth of the 'fallen' woman together with Eliot's novels and personal life, claiming that this myth had an impact "not just on art, but on the life of the writer we know well—George Eliot."⁶⁵ Eliot used her fiction not only to find redemption but also to reinterpret her own life narrative as a 'fallen' woman.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid, 50.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

Self-Interpretation of the ‘Fallen’ Woman

To understand how Eliot’s experience as a ‘fallen’ woman shaped her hermeneutic approach to reading and writing texts, it is helpful to understand the history of Eliot’s relationship with Lewes, including her own interpretation of their relationship. George married Agnes Jervis in 1841, and for the first several years of their marriage they lived together in a communal London household with other couples. After having four children with George, Agnes had a fifth child with Thornton Hunt, who was the husband of one of the couples participating in their shared living arrangement. Lewes forgave his wife for her indiscretion, and treated the child as his own, but after she had a second child by Hunt—while Hunt continued to father children with his wife—George eventually found the situation intolerable and sought a divorce. However, according to English law, because George legally registered the first child as his own, it was assumed that he had approved of the affair, making it impossible to obtain a legal divorce. By the time that Eliot and Lewes had decided to travel together to Germany in 1854, Lewes had been separated from his wife. However, many of the rumors surrounding their relationship questioned what role Eliot had in causing the permanent separation between Lewes and his wife—rumors so strongly engrained within society that they resurfaced over twenty years later, when Eliot’s marriage to J.W. Cross was announced.⁶⁶

The exact cause of separation was to some degree left to speculation, though Eliot denied tearing apart their marriage and was emphatic that Lewes had not “run away from his wife and family.”⁶⁷ Eliot further defended Lewes’ actions by explaining that Lewes

⁶⁶ Rosemarie Bodenheimer. *The Real Life of Mary Ann Evans: George Eliot, her Letters and Fiction*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1996, 112.

⁶⁷ Eliot. “GE to Charles Bray, Weimar, 23 October 1854.” *GEL*. Vol. 2, 178.

maintained financial support of his wife and children, remaining actively involved in the children's upbringing.⁶⁸ It was while Eliot and Lewes traveled to Germany in 1854 that Eliot revealed their relationship to her closest friends, the Hennels and the Brays. Eliot first wrote to Charles Bray, hoping to assuage rumors circulating in London at the time regarding the separation between Lewes and his wife. She guarded against the attacks on Lewes by pointing out that he was a highly moral gentleman. The main thrust of her letter was to defend Lewes' behavior, with Eliot claiming that "his conduct as a husband has been not only irreproachable, but generous and self-sacrificing to a deep degree far beyond any standard fixed by the world."⁶⁹ Eliot expressed fear to Charles that rumors had spread about herself as well, and cautioned him not to believe anything he heard about her beyond the fact that she was romantically involved with Lewes and living with him. Toward the end of her letter, Eliot acknowledged that she was aware of the possible repercussions of her actions and professed that she was willing to accept such consequences "without irritation or bitterness," going on to emphasize that what would be the most painful result of her decision to be with Lewes would be "the loss of friends."⁷⁰ This line reflects not only her conscious awareness of the punishment in store for her because of her relationship with Lewes, but also her uncertainty with how her closest friends, including the Brays and Hennels, might respond to her news.

While initially the Brays and Hennels were alarmed at the relationship, they continued correspondence and remained close. Sara Hennell later gave greater insight

⁶⁸ Eliot made this her first point in her letter to Charles Bray revealing her relationship with Lewes, as rumors had been swirling around London that Lewes had "'run away' from his wife and family." Eliot wrote of Lewes that "Since we left England [he] has been in constant correspondence with his wife; she has had all the money due to him in London; and his children are his principal thought and anxiety." ("GE to Charles Bray, Weimar, 23 October 1854." *GEL*. Vol. 2, 178.)

⁶⁹ Eliot. "GE to Charles Bray, Weimar, 23 October 1854." *GEL*. Vol. 2, 179.

⁷⁰ *Ibid*.

into their concerns, reflecting, “We all regarded this union as a calamity...Mr. Bray regarded it as due to her defective self-esteem and self-reliance, and her sufferings from loneliness.”⁷¹ Eliot’s letter in response to Cara Bray’s correspondence at the time reveals that her close friends were also concerned for her reputation and morality as well,⁷² but Sara’s later explanation also expresses the worry Eliot’s friends felt over her personal needs.

While still traveling in Germany with Lewes, almost a whole year passed before Eliot wrote again at length about her relationship with Lewes—this time addressing a letter to Charles Bray’s wife, Cara. Eliot’s purpose in writing at this time was focused more on defending her decision to live with Lewes, which stood in contrast to her earlier letters which served more to extol Lewes’ treatment of his wife as a type of defense for the more immediate objections to their relationship consisting of rumors swirling around that Lewes had abused his wife in some way. Eliot’s tone at this point reflects how seriously she responded to the many objections Cara had to the news that Eliot was now considered by many to be a ‘fallen’ woman. Eliot, however, did not understand herself as such, and attempts in this letter to show how her relationship with Lewes was a decision made with great gravity and moral aptitude, all while maintaining a high view of marriage. She begins her letter by claiming:

Assuredly, if there be any one subject on which I feel no levity it is that of marriage and the relation of the sexes—if there is any one action or relation of my life which is and always has been profoundly serious, it is my relation to Mr. Lewes.⁷³

⁷¹ As recounted in: Moncure Daniel Conway, *Autobiography: Memories and Experiences of Moncure Daniel Conway*. Vol. 2. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1904, 415.

⁷² Eliot. “GE to Sara Sophia Hennell, Weimar, 31 October [1854].” *GEL*. Vol. 2, 181.

⁷³ Eliot. “GE to Mrs. Charles Bray, East Sheen, 4 September 1855.” *GEL*. Vol. 2, 213.

She continues by again emphasizing Lewes' great moral character and pleading that Cara, even if she disagrees with her views on marriage, might trust that Eliot makes her decisions with sincerity and morality. She then questions how any person familiar with the realities of the world could cast judgment on her actions, and claims to understand them only in light of the many complexities that shape society's views.

Her letter constantly emphasizes that her ethical actions are beyond reproach. She highlights her and Lewes' moral aptitude by claiming, "I indulge in no arrogant or uncharitable thoughts about those who condemn us," along with, "We are leading no life of self-indulgence, except indeed, that being happy in each other."⁷⁴ She also believes their actions to be entirely selfless, stating, "We are working hard to provide for others better than we provide for ourselves, and to fulfill every responsibility that lies upon us. Levity and pride would not be a sufficient basis for that."⁷⁵ Eliot also emphasizes how she is different than the typical 'fallen' woman, writing:

Light and easily broken ties are what I neither desire theoretically nor could live for practically. Women who are satisfied with such ties do *not* act as I have done—they obtain what they desire and are still invited to dinner.⁷⁶

Eliot here alludes to how unashamedly public she had made her relationship, in contrast to the many women who carried on adulterous relationships in secret, as if to point out the irony that those who are immoral and must take pains to conceal their actions undergo no consequences for their sin, while moral individuals such as herself who have nothing to hide suffer unfairly.

But Eliot was not invited to dinner, or any other social engagements, as news of her indiscretion spread among those she knew, including many close friends and

⁷⁴ Ibid, 214.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

immediate family members. Even one of her closest friends, Cara Bray, immediately cut off correspondence with Eliot for the better part of a year after hearing news of her relationship with Lewes and did not meet with Eliot in person for another four years.⁷⁷

Lewes, however, in a striking example of the Victorian double standard toward the opposite sex, continued to receive invitations to dinner by “general society,” and some of the men he dined with would even call on him at his house without their wives.⁷⁸ Eliot, on the other hand, was visited only by women who did not care about their reputations or those who had no reputation to care about.⁷⁹ She did not dare make calls herself, as her visits would have been unwelcome.

While Eliot was no stranger to isolation, the social repercussions of her marriage to Lewes were certainly the most severe ostracism she had faced in her life. She seems to have simply accepted the consequences. While she did not often directly refer to the ‘fallen’ aspect of their relationship, when she did, such as the handful of letters to her friends written shortly after the Eliot-Lewes relationship became public, Eliot’s attitude toward the whole affair would best be described as defensive or even self-righteous.⁸⁰ By the time Eliot and Lewes returned from Germany, reports about their relationship had already spread among her shrinking social circle in England. Even amongst some of her deepest ties, Eliot avoided informing them of her relationship for as long as possible, attempting to evade their impending separation. Eliot lived with Lewes for three years before she informed her siblings of their union. It was legal reasons relating to her father’s estate that seemed to have prompted her announcement to her family. She would

⁷⁷ Gordon Haight. *George Eliot: A Biography*. NYC: Penguin Books, 1986, 191.

⁷⁸ Charles Norton. *Letters of Charles Eliot Norton*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, & Co., 1913, 316.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Eliot. “GE to Sara Sophia Hennell, Weimar, 31 October [1854]”; “GE to Mrs. Charles Bray, East Sheen, 4 September 1855”; and “GE to Charles Bray, Weimar, 23 October 1854.”

later write that while her marriage had been known to all of her personal friends, she had not informed her family because: “knowing that their views of life differ in many respects from my own, I wished not to give them unnecessary pain,”⁸¹ which makes clear that Eliot intentionally kept them uninformed of her relationship until it became absolutely necessary.

Her first letter to her brother was not entirely truthful about the whole of her living arrangements, as if she desired to lead him to believe that she was legally married by telling him simply that her name had changed and that she had “someone to take care of me in the world.”⁸² This last phrase was euphemistically used to describe her relationship with Lewes in hopes that her brother would interpret this as meaning she was recently wed. She continued the marriage narrative by referring to Lewes in this letter as her husband, which, for Eliot, was the common title that she used to refer to Lewes, though in this case she had ulterior motives for the title. She closed the letter by confirming that she had been acquainted with him for several years, which understates the truth of their relationship. She signed her letter “Your affectionate Sister, Marian Lewes”⁸³—biographer Rosemarie Bodenheimer notes that it was at this time that Eliot began insisting that she be referred to as Mrs. Lewes.⁸⁴ Eliot’s letter to her sister Fanny around the same time was even more misleading, stating, “My husband has been well known to me for years, and marriage is a very sober and serious thing when people are as

⁸¹ Eliot. “GE to Vincent Holbeche, Gory, 15 June 1857.” *GEL*. Vol. 2, 349.

⁸² Eliot. “GE to Isaac Pearson Evans, Gorey, 26 May 1857.” *GEL*. Vol. 2, 331.

⁸³ *Ibid*, 332.

⁸⁴ Bodenheimer. *The Real Life of Mary Ann Evans: George Eliot, her Letters and Fiction*, 129.

old as we are,”⁸⁵ alluding to their relationship as one entered into within an official capacity and with great formality and forbearance.

In a letter to Sara Hennell, written shortly after this correspondence to her siblings had been sent, Eliot expressed encouragement at her sister Fanny’s kind response to the news and hope that her sister Chrissey and brother Isaac, whom she had not yet heard replies from, might maintain correspondence with her.⁸⁶ This optimism would not last. Upon receiving her letter, her brother asked that his solicitor respond to Eliot’s letter as Isaac was unable to write in a “Brotherly Spirit.”⁸⁷ The letter requested further information. Eliot replied to the solicitor with greater detail of Lewes’ background and the arrangement of their relationship, making clear that “[o]ur marriage is not a legal one, though it is regarded by us both as a sacred.”⁸⁸ Eliot then briefly explained the situation surrounding Lewes’ legal marriage. This news would end the correspondence between Eliot and her brother Isaac until her marriage to J.W. Cross two decades later, at which point Isaac broke his silence by offering her congratulations on her lawful matrimony. Upon finding out the truth of her relationship with Lewes, Isaac encouraged his sisters to also cut off all ties with Eliot—Eliot never corresponded with Fanny again, and only briefly heard from Chrissey before her death.

These letters—to Charles and Cara Bray along with her siblings Isaac and Fanny—are among the only records critics have of Eliot’s own interpretation of her relationship with Lewes and the subsequent fallout she experienced. She did not speak at length about the overwhelming loss of friendships that occurred when news of her

⁸⁵ Eliot. “GE to Mrs. Henry Houghton, Corey, 26 May 1857.” *GEL*. Vol. 2, 333.

⁸⁶ Eliot. “GE to Sara Sophia Hennell, Gorey, 5 June 1857.” *GEL*. Vol. 2, 342.

⁸⁷ Vincent Holbeche. “Vincent Holbeche to G.E., Sutton Coldfield, 9 June 1857.” *GEL*. Vol. 2, 346.

⁸⁸ Eliot. “GE to Vincent Holbeche, Gorey, 13 June 1857.” *GEL*. Vol. 2, 1954, 349.

relationship spread or how individuals would refuse to call on her. When Eliot did mention Lewes in her letters, she spoke of him in familial terms as her husband. Her letters to the Brays and her siblings on the subject of her marriage make clear that Eliot was well aware of these repercussions and seemed to have accepted them before they even came. At the same time, her letters reflect a woman confident in the morality of her choice.⁸⁹ While she hints that, given a choice, she would much prefer to be legally married, she nonetheless makes clear that theirs was a sacred bond, reflecting an even higher order of marriage. She offered no apologies to anyone and almost seems to have undertaken her relationship to Lewes as a sort of martyrdom—a self-sacrificial act in the name of love. While Eliot patiently accepted the consequences experienced by ‘fallen’ women living in Victorian Britain, her renown as a respected author led to social acceptance and, ultimately, adulation as a type of spiritual mother to the nation.

Attaining Sainthood: “Her Marriage was a True One”

Eliot steadfastly believed that her sacred, though not legal, marriage to Lewes exemplified self-sacrificial love rather than immorality. Both her novels and personal actions led many of those who knew her to believe that she would not have taken any action other than that which her conscience felt was the moral choice—a testament to the type of stature her novels had garnered her. One gentleman claimed that “he was certain by what he had seen of Miss Evans that she had done no wrong, that she could not have

⁸⁹ Her friend George Smith would concur with this interpretation, saying of Eliot that “she was unconscious of moral wrong in her relationship with [Lewes].” (“A Liberal Education.” *George Eliot: Interviews and Recollections*. Ed. K.K. Collins. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010. 82.)

done anything she did not in her conscience feel to be right.”⁹⁰ In other words, Eliot’s initial arguments made to defend her relationship with Lewes prevailed among some of her contemporaries toward the end of her life. Other critics agreed that Eliot had not violated her own conscience by seeking out their union but were still not convinced that her relationship with Lewes was actually moral. As Charles Norton stated about Eliot’s morality:

I do not believe that many people think that Mrs. Lewes violated her own moral sense, or is other than a good woman in her present life—but they think her example pernicious, & that she cut herself off by her own act from the society of the women who feel themselves responsible for the tone of social morals in England.⁹¹

Norton’s reflections on Eliot demonstrate the middle-class Victorian power structures which existed in order to make sure such behavior remained condemned—a middle-class morality which Eliot herself frequently reinforced within her novels. He nonetheless prefaces his harsh censure by admitting that Eliot was, at heart, a moral woman.

It was not only Eliot’s lifestyle that served as a defense for her behavior. While Eliot suffered for her relationship with Lewes, it was her reputation as an author of great, moral novels that bought her salvation in the eyes of many middle-class Victorians. Her ‘fallenness’ was redeemed through her fictional narratives. George Willis Cooke’s biography of Eliot, written in 1883 shortly after her death, exemplifies the shift that had taken place throughout her career as a novelist, from public condemnation to what can only be understood as approval of the Lewes-Eliot union. Cooke adopted the tone which

⁹⁰ Maria Congreve recalled hearing her father say of Eliot that “when people were speaking unkindly of her and Mr. Lewes, that he was certain by what he had seen of Miss Evans that she had done no wrong, that she could not have done anything she did not in her conscience feel to be right.” Recounted in: Edith Simcox. *A Monument to the Memory of George Eliot: Edith J. Simcox’s Autobiography of a Shirtmaker*. London: Routledge, 1998, 147.

⁹¹ Norton. “Close, Low, and Eager,” 77. Curiously, while this letter was included in the 1913 edition of his letters (*Letters of Charles Eliot Norton*, 316.), this particular paragraph was edited out at the time.

Eliot herself tried to establish from the beginning about her relationship with Lewes. Cooke directly used Eliot's novels to vindicate her behavior; in his chapter on Eliot's 'marriage' to Lewes he writes: "No one could have written of love and marriage in so high and pure a spirit as everywhere appears in her books with whom passion was in any degree a controlling influence."⁹² It is interesting that Cooke's chapter on Eliot's 'marriage' to Lewes contains many long excerpts about marriage from her novels as a kind of 'proof-text' that Eliot's marriage could be nothing but the most moral of unions. In the same way that Eliot initially argued for her purity within her letters to friends and family, her novels came to be understood as a defense for her high view of love and marriage.

Understanding the role Eliot's novels had within her journey toward redemption explains in part the overwhelmingly positive interpretation of the Lewes-Eliot relationship that arose shortly after Eliot's death. George Willis Cooke's biography initially seems most interested in setting apart Eliot's relationship with Lewes from the purported hedonistic immorality and selfish individualism within the relationships of writers such as George Sand, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Heinrich Heine, and Percy Bysshe Shelley.⁹³ In contrast, Cooke describes Eliot's marriage as the highest of all human duties:

No one has insisted more strongly than she on the importance and the sanctity of the social regulations in regard to the union of the sexes. That her marriage was a true one in all but the legal form, that she was faithful to its every social obligation, has been abundantly shown. She was a most faithful wife to Lewes, and the devoted mother of his three children by the previous marriage, while she found in him that strong, self-reliant helpmate she needed.⁹⁴

⁹² George Willis Cooke. *George Eliot: a Critical Study of her Life, Writings, and Philosophy*, 41.

⁹³ *Ibid*, 44.

⁹⁴ *Ibid*, 41.

Here Cooke defends Eliot's 'marriage' by showing that she had the highest possible understanding of marriage. Furthermore, he claims that within her relationship she was the model wife and therefore demonstrated her fulfillment of duty. Far from being a lawless marriage, Cooke claims that Eliot's relationship with Lewes actually fulfilled a higher and more sacred law than that of Parliament, noting that for Eliot, marriage was a sacrament, not from any religious institution, "but of the sublime fellowship of humanity,"⁹⁵ thus emphasizing Eliot's marriage as the highest of moral choices. He also makes clear that her marriage was not made in a "passionate spirit,"⁹⁶ in an attempt to de-sexualize the nature of their relationship.

The George Eliot biography written by Margaret Lonsdale around the same time took a more negative tone toward their relationship, admitting her depiction of Eliot's life will not make "any excuses for her."⁹⁷ Overall Lonsdale seems more hesitant than Cooke to praise the Leweses' marriage (so as not to encourage immorality), and she overwhelmingly blames Lewes for the indiscretion, writing that Lewes must have been very selfish or "he could not have deliberately cast a moral and social blight upon George Eliot's life, by inducing her to stifle her womanly nature so far as to consent to live with him in dishonour."⁹⁸ However, Lonsdale attempts to redeem Lewes, admitting that Lewes encouraged Eliot to write her novels, which she understands as a positive contribution to Victorian society. Like Cooke, Lonsdale is careful to play down the sexual aspect of their indiscretion, claiming that at the heart of their relationship was an intellectual union.⁹⁹

Despite her criticism of the immoral relationship between Lewes and Eliot, Lonsdale, like

⁹⁵ Ibid, 42.

⁹⁶ Ibid, 44.

⁹⁷ Lonsdale. *George Eliot: Thoughts upon her Life, her Books, and Herself*, 22.

⁹⁸ Ibid, 21.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

Cooke, describes Eliot sympathetically and glowingly reports of her moral aptitude. Later critics tended to take Cooke's approach to understanding the Leweses' marriage. In the mid-twentieth century, Edgar W. Hirshberg described the relationship between Evans and Lewes as a beautiful romance that stands in "colorful contrast" to the usual staid relationships in nineteenth-century England, a comment that echoes Cooke's earlier interpretation of their relationship.¹⁰⁰

These biographical portraits of the Lewes-Eliot relationship, with their focus on the intellectual and spiritual bond shared by the couple, fail to recognize that despite the Victorian veils and euphemisms that were adopted to describe their bond, the central issues of their relationship remained sexual in nature. Without the sexual aspect of their relationship, Eliot would not have been a 'fallen' woman at all and it would have been absurd for Eliot to convince the public of a sexual liaison only in order to maintain a spiritual union with Lewes. Later critics have often ignored this aspect, often preferring instead to cling to the Cooke vision of their marriage. Even Gordon Haight, in his extensively researched biography on Eliot, relegates her sexual life to a brief anecdote told in the middle of a larger narrative—though his commentary is explicit when compared to Cooke's or Lonsdale's comments on Eliot's relationship with Lewes. Haight relates the recollections of Eliot's friend Barbara Leigh Smith who wrote to her friend Bessie after visiting the Leweses:

I do wish, my dear, that you would revise your view of Lewes. I have quite revised mine. Like you, I thought him an extremely sensual man. Marian tells me that in their intimate marital relationship he is unsensual, extremely considerate.

¹⁰⁰ Cooke. *George Eliot: a Critical Study of her Life, Writings, and Philosophy*, 41.

His manner to her is delightful. It is plain to me that he makes her extremely happy.¹⁰¹

Smith portrays Lewes as a lover more concerned with Eliot's pleasure than his own, an attribute which she delighted in. Haight goes on to note that Barbara then explained in her letter, though less precisely, "that the Leweses practised some form of birth control, and intended to have no children."¹⁰² The only commentary Haight offers about this information is that "[t]he satisfying sexual life gave Marian a sense of well-being she had never known before,"¹⁰³ but he is unable to back his speculation up with any direct evidence from Eliot's letters or journal.

Haight's portrait of Eliot as a sexual woman is not entirely conjecture. Eliot herself, in a curious essay entitled "Woman in France: Madame de Sablé" written shortly after she began her love affair with G.H. Lewes, reflects on the relationship between physical passion and the inspiration of French female authors. She prefaces her discussion on French marital practices with a warning: "Heaven forbid that we should enter on a defence [*sic*] of French morals, most of all in relation to marriage!"¹⁰⁴ Yet, Eliot claims that permissiveness in regard to love affairs is one of the leading causes of the growth of female intellect in French culture. She uses earthy, sexual language to

¹⁰¹ Haight. *George Eliot: A Biography*, 1986, 205. Kathleen McCormack interprets this line to refer to the "thoughtfulness and gentleness of Lewes as a lover." (*George Eliot's English Travels: Composite Characters and Coded Communications*. Oxon: Routledge, 2005, 54.)

¹⁰² Haight admits that he has no primary source for this information, as the information came from a letter destroyed shortly before its contents were described to him. (*George Eliot: A Biography*, 205.) Despite being a dubious source, this information does fit with the depiction of Lewes and Eliot's relationship made by their contemporaries, as discussed below. Their use of birth control is striking considering a review by Lewes where he claims that because the "grand function" of women is "maternity," women writers are unable to lay the intellectual foundations necessary to become the type of writers that men are. ("Currer Bell's Shirley." *Edinburgh Review* Volume 41 (1850):153-173, 155.) Because "[n]ature...designs *all* women to be mothers," Lewes believes this unfortunately makes it impossible for women, even childless women, "to know who are to escape that destiny till it is too late to begin the training necessary for artists." (Ibid, 156.) At the very least, Lewes was aware of how children could negatively affect Eliot's career as a writer.

¹⁰³ Haight. *George Eliot: A Biography*, 205-206.

¹⁰⁴ Eliot. "Woman in France: Madame de Sablé," 239.

describe these relationships.¹⁰⁵ She demonstrates how marriage produces rest and security for women but argues that a conjugal relationship fails to “foster a passion.”¹⁰⁶ She continues by explaining that this lack of passion within marriage fails to attract or maintain the relationship. Eliot goes on to mock domestic chores because of their inability to “arouse the dormant faculties”¹⁰⁷ of a woman’s desire—thus arguing that housework is not, after all, an aphrodisiac for women. She closes her discussion on French intellectual women and their passionate love affairs by stating:

The vivid interest in affairs which was thus excited in woman must obviously have tended to quicken her intellect, and give it a practical application; and the very sorrows—the heart-pangs and regrets which are inseparable from a life of passion—deepened her nature by the questioning of self and destiny which they occasioned, and by the energy demanded to surmount them and live on.¹⁰⁸

She centrally argues here that a sexually-charged relationship will serve to advance a woman’s intellect and creativity. Eliot’s tone in the essay expresses a desire to not be misinterpreted as advocating such affairs—she is merely explaining the role of love affairs in developing the French intellectual female author. Nonetheless, while she is specifically reflecting on French woman writers in this piece, it is difficult not to read Eliot’s essay through the lens of her burgeoning love affair with Lewes during the time she wrote the piece and her subsequent career as an author. Her essay seems to suggest

¹⁰⁵ Victorian discourse around sex was often veiled—dependent on allusion, figurative language, and euphemism. Michel Foucault argues in *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction* that while Victorians censored an “authorized vocabulary” about sex, there was nonetheless a “discursive explosion” on the subject of sex. He continues, “It may indeed be true that a whole rhetoric of allusion and metaphor was codified. Without question, new rules of propriety screened out some words: there was a policing of statements.” (17-18). Eliot’s essay frequently returns to this discussion of sexual desire, but by using the morally correct, veiled language, rather than by explicit reference.

¹⁰⁶ Eliot. “Woman in France: Madame de Sablé,” 239.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, 240.

that her sexual relationship with Lewes had aroused in her passions and desires which she believed were contributing to her developing intellect.

Some of Eliot's contemporaries who reflected on her relationship with Lewes after spending time with them together also emphasized the physical element of their affair, even if they were not overtly sexual in their assessment of the Lewes-Evans relationship. Annie Fields, describing a visit to Lewes and Eliot in 1869, wrote of Eliot: "She was his chief topic of conversation, the pride and joy of his life, and it was quite evident that she returned his ardent devotion with a true love."¹⁰⁹ Field's mention of "ardent devotion" and "true love" implies a physical connection in addition to an emotional bond between the two. The novelist Eliza Lynn Linton's description of their relationship, though still using Victorian veiled language for their sexual relationship, is more heavy-handed with her allusions and metaphors. Thus, her description, though still highly codified, borders on explicit:

With all her studied restraint of manner, George Eliot had a large amount of what the French call temperament. As a lover she was both jealous and exacting, and the "farfallone amorose [amorous butterfly]" whom she had captured was brought pretty tautly to his bearings. If even he went so far as Birmingham to lecture, he had had to return home that night—as she quite gravely said to a lady in my presence: "I should not think of allowing George to stay away a night from me."¹¹⁰

Linton's remembrances emphasize the sexual nature of their relationship. She describes Lewes as a sexual object who was completely under Eliot's control and interprets Eliot as a sensual woman, ardently desiring her husband. Echoing to some degree Elizabeth Gaskell's assessment of Lewes as a lascivious libertine, Linton depicts Eliot as an impassioned woman who desires her lover all to herself.

¹⁰⁹ Annie Fields. "George Eliot." *The Century Illustrated Monthly Magazine*. Volume 58. May-October 1899. NYC: The Century Co., 1899, 442-446, 444.

¹¹⁰ Elizabeth Lynn Linton. *My Literary Life*. London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1899, 100.

Despite having what was clearly a sexual relationship, Eliot most often chose to emphasize their ‘marriage’ as one of moral purity, lacking physically intimate overtones. She seems to have desired a “true marriage”¹¹¹ in the Feuerbachian sense—with its essence being love. Feuerbach held that a true, moral marriage was one that was the result of a “free bond of love” which is “spontaneously willed, [and] self-sufficing.”¹¹² Yet Feuerbach considered this “true marriage” to be founded on sexual love and criticized the Church for its veneration of chastity.¹¹³ He believed that sensual pleasure needed to be acknowledged alongside one’s sexual life.¹¹⁴ On the one hand, it seems that Eliot’s relationship with Lewes embodied this kind of “true marriage”—even in admitting to their sensual life together by publically making their relationship known. It seems that those who saw them together noted as much. On the other hand, Eliot seems to have wanted the public to understand that theirs was a “true marriage”—a moral marriage—one that was pure and sacred “in and by [itself].”¹¹⁵ It is unsurprising that the biographies written shortly after her death were intent on describing their relationship as if it were only the highest kind of spiritual union. Any other sort of interpretation of their relationship might have glaringly contradicted her reputation as spiritual mother of England at the time of her death. But, more than that, Eliot’s own understanding of her marriage to Lewes centered on the purity of their relationship, even if this purity was partly sensual in nature.

¹¹¹ Feuerbach. *The Essence of Christianity*. 341.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Ibid, 397-

¹¹⁴ Ibid, 399.

¹¹⁵ Ibid, 342.

The Literary Journey toward Sainthood

It is clear through her letters that Eliot never viewed herself as a ‘fallen’ woman; she believed this was an unfair status imposed upon her by her culture.¹¹⁶ In the handful of letters where she wrote explicitly of her relationship with George Lewes, she portrays herself as a woman who was very confident in the morality and ethics of her choice. Yet, despite her protestations of purity, she initially experienced fallout from close friends who reacted unkindly to her new social status even at the earliest stages of their relationship while Eliot was traveling in Germany with Lewes. This reaction toward her only heightened when she returned to England. A few years later, Eliot took advantage of the anonymity afforded to her through writing and became a published author. Early readers of *Scenes from Clerical Life* often assumed the unknown author to be a clergyman, which reflected both the ecclesiastical subject matter and the moral purity of the content.¹¹⁷ Although acutely aware that the critical reception of her work would be quite different if the public knew the real author, Eliot doubtless felt vindicated that her works were accepted as morally pure by reviewers of her first two novels.

While George Eliot’s literary works were given heavier criticism after her identity had been made public, it is surprising just how many reviews continued to refer to the uplifting quality of her novels. At times these reviews contained a subtext of suspicion (or some cases criticism) toward the works of a ‘fallen’ author, stemming from a discomfort with Eliot’s lifestyle rather than her literary works, but oftentimes reviewers

¹¹⁶ Eliot. “GE to Charles Bray, Weimar, 23 October 1854.” *GEL*. Vol. 2, 178; and Eliot. “GE to Mrs. Charles Bray, East Sheen, 4 September 1855.” *GEL*. Vol. 2, 213.

¹¹⁷ Jane Carlyle, in her letter to the as yet unknown author, acknowledges the rumor, yet jokingly questions it, writing: “The newspaper critics have decided you are a Clergyman, but I don’t believe it the least in the world. You understand the duties and uses of a Clergyman too well for *being* one!” (. “Mrs. Thomas Carlyle to GE., London, 20 February 1859.” *GEL*. Vol. 3, 19.) For further discussion on conjectures about George Eliot being a clergyman see: David Carroll. “Introduction.” *George Eliot: the Critical Heritage*. NYC: Barnes & Noble, Inc., 1971, 5.

were in the same category as Elizabeth Gaskell: uncomfortable with Eliot's relationship with Lewes, yet unable to find moral depravity in her works. The reviews for her latter works were not as overwhelmingly positive as they had been for her first two fictional works (which were anonymously published); at the time *The Mill on the Floss* was published, G.H. Lewes attributed the "less favorable" reaction to the novel to "[t]he disclosure of authorship" and "the fact of the book being a 'second book,'" ¹¹⁸ by which he meant that there was no way Eliot's later works could ever live up to the high praise and popularity experienced by her first novel. Yet, despite the initial suspicion toward Eliot because of her relationship with Lewes, critics regularly remarked upon the moral purpose found in her works. An unsigned review in the *Westminster Review* of *The Mill on the Floss* connected the author's own personal desires with the morality presented in her novel: "George Eliot, like Maggie, hungers and thirsts after a higher life and cannot reconcile herself to these pitiful limitations." ¹¹⁹ It is tempting to read between the lines and interpret this comment in light of the new knowledge that George Eliot was Mary Ann Evans—perhaps the reviewer understood Eliot as the 'fallen' woman desiring redemption, and uses his or her column as an interpretation of the author as much as the novel.

Even the Victorian reviewer Richard Simpson's perceptive essay on Eliot's works, which uncovered the underlying theological implications of Eliot's novels in a way few literary critics of his day were able to comprehend, understood Eliot as a moral woman. He stressed at the conclusion of his review that:

¹¹⁸ Lewes. "GHL Journal, Naples, 4-5 May 1860." *GEL*. Volume. III, 291-292.

¹¹⁹ "The Mill on the Floss." *The Westminster Review* July & Oct. 1860. London: George Manwaring, 1860, 24-33, 31.

The positive good of her sensible ethics outweighs the negative evil of her atheistic theology; and her books may be read not only with pleasure and profit, but...without a conception of the hidden meaning.¹²⁰

Though his purpose is to argue that Eliot's atheistic moralizing undergirds her novels, Simpson often connects the way readers interpreted her works with the way they ultimately interpreted her life. Earlier in his essay, Simpson also astutely notes:

When the pseudonym was discovered, it had already served its purpose, George Eliot was already accepted as a great artist; her teaching had been dubbed clerical, and it was too late in the day to turn upon her and call her an atheist.¹²¹

Such a promotion of her novels demonstrates how pervasive the interpretation of Eliot's works as sources of moral truthfulness was. Her reviewers were aware of her 'immoral' relationship with Lewes, but her novels became her moral defense and their 'inherent' purity left many of these readers feeling as if they were unable to fully criticize her.

Eliot as the Magdalene and Madonna

Over time, as Eliot's novels garnered respect and acclaim, she was increasingly embraced by her readers despite her reputation, though admittedly there nonetheless remained those who were unable to view her as anything but 'fallen' and immoral. Nevertheless, by the 1870's, some of the most well-known Victorians clamored for invitations to the Leweses' Sunday afternoon gatherings. During this period even Queen Victoria's daughters were thrilled to meet George Eliot for dinner, a sign that she had attained the highest level of respect in Britain.¹²²

In her own mind, she had never questioned her personal integrity. Even if publically she was known as a 'fallen' woman—a Magdalene figure—George Eliot

¹²⁰ Richard Simpson. "George Eliot's Novels," 549.

¹²¹ Ibid, 525.

¹²² Haight. "George Eliot and her Correspondents." *GEL*. Vol. 1, xlv.

understood herself as a sainted Madonna. Eliot approached the symbol of the Madonna out of a great personal desire for piety and drew out of that symbol a way of understanding herself as a pure woman. In letters, G.H. Lewes would sometimes refer to Eliot as Madonna.¹²³ Even Lewes and Eliot's home during the last decades of their lives took on a saintly symbolic order. She and Lewes called their last residence "the Priory" and "the religious house." Visitors would often pilgrimage to the Priory each Sunday to participate in the weekly gatherings held in Eliot's drawing room, hoping to learn from her words of wisdom. Author Eugénie Hamerton described the scene of the Sunday gatherings at the Priory, herself using religious language to describe the scene:

[T]he worshippers surrounded the idol so closely that they kept her a prisoner within a double circle, and they were so eager for a few words from her lips, that as soon as she moved a step or two they crowded about her.¹²⁴

The Priory was a place of worship, and Eliot became her readers' sainted figure. In her later life, Eliot became the embodiment of the Madonna symbol for herself, Lewes, and her many followers.

Thus, it was not only Eliot who understood herself as a Madonna figure; others frequently focused on Eliot as both a maternal and prioress figure—a contradiction of terms that nonetheless reflected the esteem she earned. Without having any children of her own, her role as mother figure was just as literally improbable as being the Virgin Mother. Benjamin Jowett commented upon her "homely but motherly features,"¹²⁵ and an obituary written about her similarly noted of her appearance: "A remarkable motherliness of look was indeed, what most distinguished her personal appearance: and this alone gave

¹²³ "GHL to Mme. Eugène [Barbara Leigh Smith] Bodichon, London, [18 May 1877]." *GEL*. Vol. VI, 374.

¹²⁴ Eugénie (Griedriez) Hamerton and Philip Gilbert Hamerton. *Philip Gilbert Hamerton: An Autobiography, 1834-1858 and a Memoir by His Wife*. Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1896, 335.

¹²⁵ Benjamin Jowett. "A Kind of Saint." *George Eliot: Interviews and Recollections*. Ed. K.K. Collins. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010. 219.

her a certain beauty, in spite of the large, massive, homely features of her face.”¹²⁶ This focus on her motherly appearance reflected the odd agreement that many of her contemporaries came to that she was both unattractive and yet lovely to look upon due to her beautiful character and graceful manners, typified in Turgenev’s comments: “I know that she is not attractive, but when I am with her I do not see this.”¹²⁷

She was later often treated as a saint or priest by many Victorian readers, due to the reputation she had gained through her novels. A male reader admitted of Eliot: “Yes, I used to call her mother-confessor” because “[n]o one gave me better advice than she did.”¹²⁸ Anthony Trollope similarly admired this attribute of Eliot, noting:

I think of all the human beings I have ever known or met George Eliot would have made the most admirable, the most perfect father confessor. I can conceive nothing more healing, more salutary to a stricken and darkened soul, than unrestricted confession to such a mind and such an intelligence as hers. Surely a Church with a whole priesthood of such confessors would produce a model world.¹²⁹

Another friend remarked that Eliot was “[t]he best priest to go to.”¹³⁰ Benjamin Jowett referred to Eliot as “a kind of saint without a definite creed.”¹³¹ This sainthood was granted through Eliot’s embodiment of the biblical text and, in turn, the embodied symbols in her novels. Eliot’s life involved a redefining of what it meant to be a pure woman, a saint, or a Madonna figure. She actively interpreted her life through a hermeneutic process that involved the relentless re-visioning of Christian symbols

¹²⁶ Frederick Greenwood. “George Eliot.” *George Eliot: Interviews and Recollections*. 219.

¹²⁷ Soph’ia Kovalevskaja. “The Imagined and the Real,” 81. Matilda Bethan-Edwards noted of Eliot, “If hers was ugliness would we have more of it in the world!” (“Matilda Betham-Edwards.” *George Eliot: Interviews and Recollections*, 55) Henry James similarly said, “Now in this vast ugliness resides a most powerful beauty.” (“To Henry James, Sr. May 10th [1869].” *Henry James, Selected Letters*. Harvard: Harvard UP, 1987. 33-40, 35.)

¹²⁸ Arthur Compton-Rickett. *I Look Back: Memories of Fifty Years*. London: H. Jenkins, 1933, 56.

¹²⁹ Thomas Adolphus Trollope. *What I Remember*. Vol. 2. London: Richard Bentley & Son, 1887, 287.

¹³⁰ Charles Waldstein. “At Odds.” *George Eliot: Interviews and Recollections*. *George Eliot: Interviews and Recollections*. Ed. K.K. Collins. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010. 212.

¹³¹ Jowett. “A Kind of Saint,” 219.

through the lens of her own experience in order to attain the highest vision of her own humanity.

Her interest in the Virgin Mary and her subsequent interpretation of the symbol of the Madonna in her own life had several influences stemming from her interest in art, Auguste Comte, and Ludwig Feuerbach. Eliot's journals and letters reflect a personal interest in paintings of the Madonna which she sought out during her travels to Italy and Germany. In a journal entry written in 1858, Eliot mentions a number of Madonna paintings she saw and comments on the two imitating the work of Andrea del Sartos, describing them as "full of tenderness and calm piety."¹³² She soon after reflected on another group of Madonna paintings she saw in Dresden, paying particular attention to one by Holbein, describing it as one which was "particularly exquisite—a divinely gentle, golden-haired blonde with eyes caste down in an attitude of unconscious, easy grace."¹³³ During this trip to Germany, she would frequently visit the gallery to meditate on these Madonnas. She was endlessly interested in depictions of the Madonna and child, always commenting upon how the paintings depict the highest attributes of feminine goodness. Eliot used these paintings as a meditative 'text' of sorts, allowing them to shape her interpretation of the symbol of the Madonna. But, for Eliot, the images of the Madonna and child were not simply depictions of a historical moment. In those images she saw a symbol of the heights which humanity could attain—an image that she applied even to women she saw along the streets, explaining to a friend that "sometimes one sees a Madonna and child at every third or fourth upper window," while traveling in Rome.¹³⁴

¹³² Eliot. *Life of George Eliot: as Related in Her Letters and Journals*, 267.

¹³³ Ibid, 276.

¹³⁴ Eliot. "GE to Mrs. Richard Congreve, Rome, 4-6 April, 1860." *GEL*. Vol. 3, 288.

Like the women she encountered in her everyday life, Eliot seems to also have believed that it was possible that she might embody the Madonna in her own life.

The theologies of Auguste Comte and Ludwig Feuerbach likewise shaped her understanding of the symbol of the Madonna. Comte's Positivist system, which Eliot claimed to be influenced by,¹³⁵ upheld the Roman Catholic adoration of the Virgin Mary and promoted the Madonna as a goddess symbol in his religion of humanity.¹³⁶ He specifically believed that mothers should be an object of worship for men and women.¹³⁷ Comte often correlated angels with the Madonna as symbols of womanhood, and he applied this idealized understanding of the feminine to his love and muse Clotilde. Eliot's annotations of Comte's *Catéchisme* were focused on his use of the Madonna as a symbol within his religious system, which Victorian scholar T.R. Wright claims influenced her use of angels and Madonna figures in her novels.¹³⁸ Like Eliot, Comte meditated on artistic images of the Madonna with child, claiming, "In painting or in sculpture, equally, the symbol of our Divinity will always be a woman of the age of thirty, with her son in her arms."¹³⁹ Eliot's affiliation with Positivism is complex, and Comte's understanding of womanhood did not always have positive repercussions for women.¹⁴⁰ But at the very

¹³⁵ Positivism is the religion originating from the French philosopher August Comte. Eliot counted Positivists as her friends, provided financial support to the Positivists in Britain, and regularly read Comte with her husband. In 1867 she claimed, "My gratitude increases continually for the illumination Comte has contributed to my life." ("GE to Mrs. Richard Congreve, Biarritz, 16 January 1867." *GEL*. Vol. 4, 333.) However, there is no record of Eliot claiming to profess Positivism as a religion, and her lifestyle at certain points contrasted with its teachings. For more on Eliot's relationship with Positivism see: W.M. Simon. "Auguste Comte's English Disciples." *Victorian Studies* 8.2 (1964):161-172; Martha S. Vogeler. "George Eliot and the Positivists." *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 35.3 (1980): 406-431; and T.R. Wright. *The Religion of Humanity: The Impact of Comtean Positivism on Victorian Britain*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1986.

¹³⁶ Wright. *The Religion of Humanity: The Impact of Comtean Positivism on Victorian Britain*, 32.

¹³⁷ Auguste Comte. *The Catechism of Positive Religion*. Trans. Richard Congreve. London: John Chapman, 1858, 122.

¹³⁸ T.R. Wright. "George Eliot and Positivism: A Reassessment." *The Modern Language Review* 76.2(1981): 257-272, 266-267.

¹³⁹ Comte. *The Catechism of Positive Religion*, 142.

¹⁴⁰ Wright. *The Religion of Humanity: The Impact of Comtean Positivism on Victorian Britain*, 32.

least, Eliot was interested in his idealization of the Madonna, and his thoughts on the Madonna reinforced her own meditations on this powerful symbol.

Unlike Comte, Feuerbach was critical of the Church's idealization of the Virgin Mary, drawing parallels between self-denial of God's attributes with the monk's denial of real women in favor of an idealized woman.¹⁴¹ When formulating his own theology Feuerbach repositions the Virgin Mary as part of the Trinity, along with the Father and Son.¹⁴² For Feuerbach, the Virgin Mary symbolizes Love, the central tenet of his theology, claiming that Love was "essentially feminine in its nature."¹⁴³ This symbol of Love is found within the mother-son relationship of the Madonna and her child, as Feuerbach writes, "The love of man to woman, the love of the youth for the maiden, receives its religious—its solo truly religious consecration in the love of the son to the mother; the son's love for his mother is the first yearning of man towards woman."¹⁴⁴ Both Feuerbach and Comte, along with Eliot, emphasize the image of the Madonna with her son as a symbol of the feminine, divinity, and love. Eliot's own interpretation and idealization of the Madonna undoubtedly borrowed from aspects of Comte's and Feuerbach's writings on the Virgin Mary as they both depicted the Madonna as a symbol which could be embodied or incarnated by any woman. Eliot echoed this thought when expressing her desire for literary portraits of Madonnas which were actually the "faces I know, whose hands I touch, for whom I have to make way with kindly courtesy."¹⁴⁵ Likewise, the Madonna became a symbol through which she interpreted her own life.

¹⁴¹ Feuerbach. *The Essence of Christianity*. 49. A feminist critique of Feuerbach's understanding of the Madonna can be found in Kimberly VanEnsveld Adams' essay "Feminine Godhead, Feminist Symbol: The Madonna in George Eliot, Ludwig Feuerbach, Anna Jameson, and Margaret Fuller."

¹⁴² Ibid, 102.

¹⁴³ Ibid, 104.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid, 102-103.

¹⁴⁵ Eliot. *Adam Bede*, 162.

Just as Eliot used biblical symbols as a means of self-interpretation in her life, she also frequently used biblical symbols within her fictional works as a means of re-visioning Christian narratives—the same Christian narratives that had given shape to the Victorian understanding of gender roles that were applied to women like her. It was her public reputation and personal experience as a Victorian woman that strongly shaped her understanding and interpretation of these Christian symbols of womanhood. These reinterpreted symbols were in turn used to create many of the characters and narratives in her novels, enabling these re-visioned symbols to be approached and embodied again by her many readers. She explored these Christian symbols through her fictional characters, as they joined her in her journey toward sainthood, which became a process that ultimately redefined what it meant to be a Madonna, Magdalene, or even a Saint Theresa.

The Sainted Women in Eliot's Fiction

While Eliot uses reinterpreted Christian symbols throughout several of her books, her novel *Adam Bede* offers two particularly striking female characters which borrow from biblical narratives: Dinah Morris and Hetty Sorrel. Both of these characters, the ‘fallen’ Hetty and the female preacher Dinah, demonstrate the complex hermeneutic approach Eliot applied to scripture as a means of self-interpretation. Hetty and Dinah are reinterpreted Eves, Magdalenes, and Madonnas. Eliot’s life experience due to her status as a ‘fallen’ woman is rarely ‘read’ alongside her fiction, yet her relationship with Lewes shaped her interpretation of these Christian symbols and the way she re-visioned these symbols within her novels. Such connections provide keys not only for interpreting Eliot’s novels but also in creating a framework through which to understand the embodiment of the text by female readers of the nineteenth century.

In an early scene in the novel, Eliot introduces her two female characters through a sermon. Dinah, a Methodist preacher visiting her aunt and uncle in the village of Hayslope, is introduced by Eliot when she preaches to the community. Dinah's sermon commences with an exposition on John 4, where Jesus approaches the Samaritan woman at the well. She uses this passage to describe the salvation available to those who are not even seeking Jesus' mercy. She begins her sermon by exclaiming:

Saviour of sinners! when a poor woman, laden with sins, went out to the well to draw water, she found Thee sitting at the well. She knew Thee not; she had not sought Thee; her mind was dark; her life was unholy. But Thou didst speak to her, Thou didst teach her, Thou didst show her that her life lay open before Thee, and yet Thou wast ready to give her that blessing which she had never sought. Jesus! Thou art in the midst of us, and Thou knowest all men; if there is any here like that poor woman—if their minds are dark, their lives unholy...deal with them according to the free mercy which Thou didst show to her.¹⁴⁶

This sermon scene introduces Dinah, the Methodist preacher, and her cousin Hetty Sorrel, who stands in the crowd listening to her sermon. The two young women are contrasted throughout the novel: Dinah as saintly and pure, Hetty as 'fallen' and immoral. It is revealed later in the novel that Hetty is the "poor woman, laden with sins" that Dinah speaks of in her sermon. She is the one who is in need of salvation and who finds the living water at the end of her weary journey, not because she seeks it, but because she is shown mercy through Dinah.

In *Adam Bede* Eliot builds her narrative around two female characters who serve as character foils to one another. Dinah and Hetty both share characteristics of Magdalene and Madonna figures. Dinah fulfills the role of female saint—a pure woman—yet she does so through an unconventional, or even socially questioned, role as a Methodist

¹⁴⁶ Ibid, 22.

preacher.¹⁴⁷ Throughout the novel, Dinah is depicted as a saint—one who is unaware of her saintliness—and is compared with Saint Catherine and the Madonna by Eliot in the novel.¹⁴⁸ She often plays a maternal role, chiefly to Hetty, but also to her aunt's children. In one scene, the baby Totty is shown preferring Dinah over Hetty.¹⁴⁹ The novel ends with an image of Dinah standing with her own two children, as a picture of marital and maternal bliss.¹⁵⁰ Hetty is the narrative's Magdalene figure, yet her naïveté and pregnancy reflect aspects of the Madonna narrative. She is a 'fallen' woman on multiple levels: her sexual promiscuousness, self-absorption, and infant-abandonment are her central character flaws. Even in smaller matters, she does not live up to the feminine ideal. She is a poor caretaker for Totty, she is not interested in domestic chores, and she uses her feminine wiles to mislead decent men.¹⁵¹ Yet, like Mary Magdalene, she finds salvation, even if it is short-lived.

George Eliot often contrasts the two main female characters in *Adam Bede* by describing their physical appearance and mannerisms. Dinah Morris is introduced in the novel as she prepares to preach to the small village of Hayslope, as having her eyes closed and head hung low, speaking in an even tone. She is at once a picture of humility and timidity; yet her role as preacher also conveys strength and power. Her femininity and gentleness belie her religious calling. Before she speaks, a stranger in the crowd says to himself, "A sweet woman...but surely nature never meant her for a preacher."¹⁵² By

¹⁴⁷ Even Dinah admits, when questioned about whether the Methodists sanction woman preachers, that there are those who question her role, saying, "I understand there's been voices raised against it in the Society of late, but I cannot but think their counsel will come to naught. It isn't for men to make channels for God's Spirit." (81)

¹⁴⁸ Ibid, 57, 254.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid, 134.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid, 479.

¹⁵¹ Ibid, 137-141.

¹⁵² Ibid, 21.

this he is commenting upon her sex, but also her physical presence, as her demeanor and appearance are unassuming. Dinah lacks self-awareness and pretentiousness; she is filled with love. She is dressed plainly, in dark colors, wearing a Quaker cap. Her facial features are delicate, her face “a uniform transparent whiteness” and her hair described as “smooth locks of pale reddish hair.” She is not necessarily a young woman who is defined by her beauty, but her being itself exudes her love and holiness, which is her attraction. Eliot finishes her description by noting that “It was one of those faces that makes one think of white flowers with light touches of colour on their pure petals.”

Kimberly VanEnsveld Adams has convincingly drawn parallels between Dinah’s appearance and the appearance of Raphael’s Sistine Madonna which Eliot would meditate upon during her visit to Germany in 1858 while writing *Adam Bede*.¹⁵³ Dinah’s appearance is described along with her character traits; Eliot draws a portrait of a Virgin Mary who is love and purity incarnate. Her description of Dinah, with its emphasis on her inner character, rather than physical beauty, is reminiscent of those comments made about Eliot which shy away from discussing her ugliness in order to highlight her attractive demeanor. The details regarding Dinah’s appearance sound strikingly similar to the remembrances of Eliot’s contemporaries of her own countenance, as Eliot writes: “The eyes had no peculiar beauty, beyond that of expression; they looked so simple, so candid, so gravely loving, that no accusing scowl, no light sneer could help melting away before their glance.”¹⁵⁴ For Eliot, Dinah is a symbol for Victorian female sainthood.

Dinah’s cousin Hetty is her opposite. One of Hetty’s longest scenes has her sitting in her bedroom, at night, as she keeps a sort of nightly ritual, which Eliot describes as a

¹⁵³ Adams. “Feminine Godhead, Feminist Symbol: The Madonna in George Eliot, Ludwig Feuerbach, Anna Jameson, and Margaret Fuller,” 54-55.

¹⁵⁴ Eliot. *Adam Bede*, 21.

“religious rite” and a “peculiar form of worship.” The object of her worship is herself and her meditations are upon her seduction of Arthur Donnithorne. Her ritual betrays both her self-absorption and her aspirations for joining the upper class. She lets her hair down into dark, “soft and silken...delicate rings”¹⁵⁵ in order to mimic a portrait she saw in Lydia Donnithorne’s dressing room. Hetty hangs large earrings from her ears and frames her soft, white shoulders in a tattered black lace scarf she had found. Then, in the candlelight shining dimly from candles she purchased herself for this purpose, she meditates on her beauty in front of an old, blurry mirror, thinking of how much Donnithorne is enamored with her, sure that “[h]e would want to marry her and make a lady of her.”¹⁵⁶ Eliot depicts Hetty as naïve in this regard, not only innocent of the reality of her lot in life but also so self-absorbed that she is disconnected from any sense of reality. Nonetheless, Hetty is almost overwhelmingly beautiful, yet Eliot subtly offers warning for any man who would fall in love with her:

It would be the easiest folly in the world to fall in love with her: there is such a sweet baby-like roundness about her face and figure; the delicate dark rings of her hair lie so charmingly about her ear and neck; her great dark eyes with their long eyelashes touch one so strangely, as if an imprisoned frisky sprite looked out of them.¹⁵⁷

She describes her almost as a helpless kitten that men fall in love with simply because of her overwhelming beauty, as they assume that “[h]er heart must be just as soft, her temper just as free from angels, her character just as compliant.” At the beginning of the novel *Arthur Donnithorne* and *Adam Bede* are two such men. At first, Eliot appears to blame them for falling under such deceptive charm: “No; people who love downy peaches are apt not to think of the stone, and sometimes jar their teeth terribly against

¹⁵⁵ Ibid, 136.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid, 137.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid, 138.

it.”¹⁵⁸ Yet this image alludes to Eve, as if Hetty is the temptress offering the unsuspecting men her forbidden fruit.

Eliot becomes more dismissive of Hetty as she continues to describe her; Hetty embodies everything that Eliot is not: young, attractive, coquettish. On reflecting further on Hetty’s physical appearance, Eliot interjects:

I find it impossible not to expect some depth of soul behind a deep grey eye with a long dark eyelash, in spite of an experience which has shown me that they may go along with deceit, speculation, and stupidity... One begins to suspect at length that there is no direct correlation between eyelashes and morals.¹⁵⁹

As in several of her other novels, Eliot expresses interest in female beauty as a type of ‘other’ category for herself, but she remains cautiously suspicious of it.¹⁶⁰ A few lines further down the page, in an insulting ‘compliment,’ Eliot adds, “No eyelashes could be more beautiful than Hetty’s.”¹⁶¹ While Eliot often employs a negative tone toward Hetty, she also seems to almost pity Hetty for her naïveté and vapidness. Hetty’s characterization stands as an argument against the “‘dear deceit’ of beauty” which, to Eliot, often hides one’s “moral deficiencies.”¹⁶² Beauty, it seems, does not make up for one’s vanity, dishonesty, or promiscuity.

Eliot handles Hetty’s sexual fall carefully, gradually informing the reader of the kind of intimacy her relationship with Arthur involved. Their first meeting alone in the woods seems almost the picture of childlike innocence, except for Eliot’s comment about the pair: “It was a pity they were not in that golden age of childhood when they would have stood face to face, eyeing each other with timid liking, then given each other a little

¹⁵⁸ Ibid, 139.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid, 139.

¹⁶⁰ Such as Eliot’s criticism that Gwendolen’s beauty undervalues Mirah’s character qualities as a woman (*Daniel Deronda*. Ed. Graham Handley. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1988, 477.) or her praise of Dorothea’s unornamented beauty (*Middlemarch: An Authoritative Text Backgrounds Reviews and Criticism*, 1.).

¹⁶¹ Eliot. *Adam Bede*, 139.

¹⁶² Ibid, 141.

butterfly kiss, and toddled off to play together.”¹⁶³ Eliot uses this line to emphasize the problem of desire within adult infatuations, foreshadowing that their little kisses were not to be simple child’s play. Arthur seeks moral advice from the Rector over his dalliance with Hetty, but he naïvely anticipates that nothing wrong could come of their rendezvous. It is Adam who discovers their relationship, and, not suspecting the full extent of their affair, confronts Arthur for kissing Hetty and giving her presents. He angrily condemns Arthur: “[I]f you mean behaving to a woman as if you loved her, and yet not loving her all the while, I say that’s not th’ action of an honest man, and what isn’t honest does come t’ harm.”¹⁶⁴ Eliot uses this conflict to emphasize that Hetty is not responsible for her ‘fallenness;’ she has been used and deceived by Arthur.¹⁶⁵ Her narcissism and ingenuousness may have made her more susceptible to his deception, but Arthur was aware of his wrongdoing the whole time, ignoring his conscience in order to experience fleeting pleasure.

However, Eliot does not understand Hetty as pure; her sexual experience with Arthur has made her a fallen Eve figure, losing her innocence after being deceived. But, Hetty’s greater fall occurs not with Arthur, but with her child. Eliot seems most troubled by Hetty’s rejection of the maternal. The first hint of her pregnancy is described by Eliot in relation to her beauty, as Eliot explains, “the sweet lips were as beautiful as ever, perhaps more beautiful, for there was a more luxuriant womanliness about Hetty of late.”¹⁶⁶ Here Hetty is positively described as a young pregnant woman fulfilling her womanly role as mother. Eliot becomes increasingly sympathetic toward Hetty

¹⁶³ Ibid, 118.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid, 270.

¹⁶⁵ This is echoed in Adam’s first reaction to hearing of Hetty’s crime of killing her child, when he exclaims, “It’s *his* doing...if there’s been any crime, it’s at his door, not at hers.” (Ibid, 367)

¹⁶⁶ Ibid, 323.

throughout her pregnant suffering as she attempts to escape her fate of social ostracism by journeying after Arthur in order to beg for his assistance. Hetty's journey becomes a spiritual pilgrimage in search of salvation as she becomes more and more desperate to escape her fate. But, for Hetty, her future is not only problematic from a social standpoint but from a personal one as well. She has never aspired for maternity. Instead, she has dreamed after fancy clothing, shoes, and other finery. Young life never touches her, as Eliot notes early in the novel, "Hetty would have been glad to hear that she should never see a child again." A few lines later, in order to emphasize even more strongly where Hetty's priorities are, Eliot explains that even baby chicks peeping out under their mother's wing did not move Hetty, as they were "not the sort of prettiness she cared about, but she did care about the prettiness of the new things she would buy for herself at Treddleston fair."¹⁶⁷ Her lack of maternal feeling becomes problematic at her trial, as Hetty's counsel is unable "to elicit evidence that the prisoner had shown some movements of maternal affection towards the child."¹⁶⁸ Hetty's disconnect with her child causes her to abandon it—and this action, the rejection of her maternity, is her foremost sin, even more so than her liaison with Arthur. When Hetty confesses to Dinah what happened that fateful day she forsook her baby, she admits, "I don't know how I felt about the baby. I seemed to hate it—it was like a heavy weight hanging around my neck; and yet its crying went through me, and I daren't look at its little hands and face."¹⁶⁹ The sound of its crying remains with Hetty; she hears this small remnant of maternity joined with Dinah's supplications, both calling her to repentance. Otherwise, the abandoned baby symbolizes her fall from grace. Hetty is the Magdalene figure, a sexual woman who

¹⁶⁷ Ibid, 141.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid, 389.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid, 406.

only finds redemption when her brokenness figuratively brings her weeping to the feet of Jesus, recognizing him as her only hope for salvation.

Hetty finds deliverance, both through the Madonna figure of Dinah, who acts as her intercessor to God, and Arthur Donnithorne, who arrives at the last minute with a legal release of death. Hetty's earthly redemption is short-lived. She dies in a state of grace, yet like the Magdalene who was understood to be childless, she remains separated from her maternity. Despite her ultimate redemption and the sympathy her story evokes, Eliot remains critical of her 'fallenness,' perhaps for the practical reason that her novels would not be considered moral if she did not. The sexual fall combined with infanticide allows Eliot to be unquestionably critical of Hetty in a way that perhaps she could not be if Hetty's only sin had been sexual. Yet Eliot convincingly uses Hetty's situation to argue that societal expectations and sexual double standards can have dire consequences for women. At the same time, the character of Hetty forms an argument against all those who dismissed Eliot for her own 'fallenness.' Interwoven into the narrative of *Adam Bede* are echoes of Eliot's letter written as an apology for her relationship with Lewes: "Women who are satisfied with such ties do *not* act as I have done."¹⁷⁰ Whereas Hetty's sexual ties with Arthur were at best naïve and at worst deceitful, Eliot was intentional in her relationship with Lewes, sincerely believing that her choice to be with him was a moral one. Their bond, she believed, was not taken lightly or selfishly, and she worked hard to maintain purity within their relationship.

Embodying the Madonna through the Fictional World of the Novel

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

Eliot ultimately identifies herself not with the ‘fallen’ Hetty, but with Dinah, who with great hesitation and thought enters into marriage with Adam, even if it goes against some of her earlier held religious ideals. Even as she grows to understand her love for Adam, she pauses, claiming that from her childhood on she has “been led towards another path” and that all of her joy comes from “living only in God and those of his creatures whose sorrows and joys he has given me to know.”¹⁷¹ But over time Dinah grows to understand her shared love with Adam to be part of the Divine Will, even if it does not coincide with the ideals that she had previously set for herself. Eliot, reflecting on Dinah and Adam’s marriage, closes *Adam Bede* by noting:

What greater thing is there for two human souls, than to feel that they are joined for life—to strengthen each other in all labour, to rest on each other in all sorrow, to minister to each other in all pain, to be one with each other in silent, unspeakable memories at the moment of the last parting?¹⁷²

This echoes Eliot’s understanding of true marriage in her own life—a marriage that existed even between herself and Lewes—the dear husband to whom her novel is dedicated.

Through the character of Dinah Morris, Eliot reinterprets the figure of the Madonna to be one who speaks the Word of God and intercedes on Jesus’ behalf. Even at the novel’s end, after Dinah has chosen to give up her preaching in order to serve as an example of feminine submission to the newly agreed upon Methodist rules against female preaching, she continues with “other sorts o’ teaching” including “talking to the people a bit in their houses.”¹⁷³ Yet, it is interesting how Eliot assumed the role of preacher herself through the character of Dinah. By writing her fictional novel, Eliot embodied the role of

¹⁷¹ Ibid, 454.

¹⁷² Ibid, 475.

¹⁷³ Ibid, 481.

female preacher, speaking and preaching throughout her fictional text through Dinah. Writing in her diary after writing the novel, Eliot notes, “How curious it seems to me that people should think Dinah’s sermons, prayers and speeches were *copied*—when they were written with hot tears, as they surged up in my own mind!”¹⁷⁴ Eliot conveys here the image of the author who is fully embodying her own life experiences into the text of the page. Her reflections echo Dinah’s own descriptions of her preaching: “[S]ometime it seemed as if speech came to me without any will of my own, and words were given to me that came out as the tears come, because our hearts are full and we can’t help it.”¹⁷⁵ These sermons spring up out of Dinah’s—and therefore Eliot’s—own embodied experience of womanhood.

Eliot’s role as preacher within the novel is echoed in an essay by Allen Permar Smith entitled “George Eliot and the Authority of Preaching” where he claims that the literary setting of a fictional novel can be transferred into the material world. For Smith this means that “Dinah’s sermon really is an embodiment of her encounter with Christ, and the authority with which she speaks lifts her fictive experience out of the pages of the novel in a powerfully political way.”¹⁷⁶ Smith is more concerned with how twenty-first century Christians can hear Dinah’s sermon as an authoritative proclamation of the Gospel within the eternal present in the same way they would hear the ‘Good News’ preached from any other pulpit, but his argument about Dinah’s embodied preaching, with its blurred lines between the reality of the material world and the fictive world of the

¹⁷⁴ Eliot. “GE to Sara Sophia Hennell, Wandsworth, 7 October 1859.” *GEL*. Vol. 3, 176.

¹⁷⁵ Eliot. *Adam Bede*, 82.

¹⁷⁶ Allen Permar Smith. “George Eliot and the Authority of Preaching.” *Theology and Sexuality* 13.2 (2007):175-180, 179.

novel, reinforces the idea that Eliot embodied her fictional narratives, enabling the Word to become flesh even through the sermons she preached in her novels.

Early in *Adam Bede*, Eliot offers a brief aside as she discusses Hetty's own understanding of her relationship with Arthur. Eliot notes that Hetty lacked the knowledge to interpret her situation, writing: "Hetty had never read a novel; if she had ever seen one, I think the words would have been too hard for her: how then could she find shape for her expectations?"¹⁷⁷ Eliot understood the reading of narrative texts—both fictional and sacred—as a means of self-interpretation. Had Hetty any access to such narratives, she would have had a clearer understanding of her life experiences. Eliot herself used the novel to explore this fine line between fictional narratives and material worlds. She aspired after the figure of the Madonna and used her novels to become the bearer of the Word of God, as preacher and pure woman. And it is through her fictional texts that she found her redemption and embodied this re-visioned sacred symbol of womanhood.

¹⁷⁷ Eliot. *Adam Bede*, 123.

CHAPTER EIGHT: “ONE WOMANHOOD SOLIDAIRE”

In her essay “Silly Novels by Lady Novelists,” George Eliot ranks Mrs. Gaskell, along with Harriet Martineau and Currer Bell, as talented female authors who are treated “cavalierly” by critics.¹ Eliot, whose essay on female novelists was published before she began writing her own novels, was frustrated that when a female author’s “talent is at zero, journalistic approbation is at the boiling pitch,” while on the other hand, when a female author’s work “reaches excellence, critical enthusiasm drops to the freezing point.”² She continues by facetiously voicing her appreciation to these severe critics for “fulfilling a chivalrous duty in depriving the mere fact of feminine authorship of any false prestige.”³ Her mocking tone is directed at those works written by women who in Eliot’s estimation completely lacked any literary talent. Eliot sarcastically attacks the proliferation of low-quality literature written by “women of mediocre faculties”⁴ throughout her essay. As she concludes her argument, Eliot returns to works of literary greatness by women such as Mrs. Gaskell by claiming that these women have an affinity for writing fiction which equals that of men.⁵ However, for Eliot, these works of literary excellence written by women are unique from male-written works as they “have a precious specialty, lying quite apart from masculine aptitudes and experience.”⁶ To Eliot, women can excel at writing

¹ Eliot. “Silly Novels by Lady Novelists,” 460.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid, 461.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

fiction because, unlike other forms of writing, it is “free from rigid requirements”—or, as she explains more fully, “it may take any form and yet be beautiful.”⁷ She believed women writers were not bound by rigid literary conventions when writing novels, and thus their fictional narratives could take a form that best reflected their own experiences as women.

Later on, in letters written after she had begun writing her own novels, Eliot writes of Gaskell as if they shared a deep bond as distinguished female authors. Replying to a letter from Gaskell celebrating Eliot’s novel *Adam Bede*, Eliot draws a connection between her authorial role and Gaskell’s: “Only yesterday I was wondering that artists, knowing each other’s pains so well, did not help each other more; and, as usual when I have been talking complainingly or suspiciously, something has come which serves me as reproof.”⁸ The reproof Eliot speaks of here is Gaskell’s letter, and such a reply demonstrates that Eliot esteemed Gaskell as a fellow artist and peer who could understand her position as a female writer in a way few others could.

While Eliot found camaraderie with Gaskell as a female writer, Gaskell herself felt less clear about her own identity—both as an author and more broadly as a woman. George Eliot seemed to have had a clear understanding of who she was and how her experiences connected, or in some cases did not connect, with society. On the other hand, Gaskell was often unable to sort out many of the conflicting aspects of her character and desires. She saw her true self to be fragmented into various parts at war with each other. Writing to her good friend Eliza Fox in 1850, Gaskell quite frankly assessed her identity:

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Eliot. “Nov. 11, 1859.” *GEL*. Vol. 3.

[F]or I have a great number [of Mes] and that's the plague. One of my mes is, I do believe, a true Christian—(only people call her socialist and communist), another of my mes is a wife and mother, and highly delighted at the delight of everyone else in the house, Meta and William most especially who are in full extasy. Now, that's my 'social' self I suppose. Then again I've another self with a full taste for beauty and convenience whh [*sic*] is pleased on its own account. How am I to reconcile all these warring members? I try to drown myself (my *first* self,) by saying it's Wm⁹ who is to decide on all these things, and his feeling it right ought to be my rule, on all these things, and his feeling it right ought to be my rule, And so it is—only that does not quite do. Well! I must try and make the house give as much pleasure to others as I can and make it as little a selfish thing as I can.¹⁰

Gaskell's reflection on her many "mes" demonstrates the tension she felt between what was expected of her and what she desired, particularly in regard to the nineteenth-century conception of womanhood. For Gaskell, the reinterpretation of biblical symbols was so important because these symbols offered her narratives through which she could understand the complex facets of her selfhood. These female biblical symbols, when re-visioned through her own experience as a woman, enabled her to understand womanhood in a way that reflected the tension she felt between her many "mes."

The fictional female characters in her novels often reflect this tension as they tend to be the embodiment of the Madonna and Magdalene, and the merging of the two figures in her work illustrates the complexity and contradiction of female experience which she experienced in her own life. For Gaskell, womanhood meant identification with both the Madonna and Magdalene, at tension with each other while reflecting the whole range of "mes" within each woman. While the appropriation and reinterpretation of these female symbols did not result in an immediate reconciliation between the warring "mes" within her, the embodiment of these symbols gave women

⁹ William, her husband.

¹⁰ Gaskell. "Letter 69," *EGL*, 108.

such as Gaskell a broader understanding of womanhood that better reflected their own experiences as women.

Gaskell's use of biblical symbols within her novels not only reflects her interpretation of womanhood drawn from her own experience but also shaped how her readers understood themselves and others—particularly women who were marginalized within society. Josephine Butler, who was a social advocate on behalf of prostitutes in the latter half of the nineteenth century, was particularly influenced by Gaskell's re-visioning of the Magdalene and Madonna symbols in her novel *Ruth*. Butler's interpretation of herself and other women, particularly the prostitutes she worked with, was modeled after Gaskell's hermeneutic approach wherein biblical symbols become re-visioned and embodied within her life and work. Yet, for Butler, these re-visioned symbols reflected the common, shared experience of womanhood rather than the fragmentation of female identity emphasized by Gaskell. In Butler's vision, the nature of womanhood is to live in solidarity with all women; this solidarity links women together to common causes, experiences, and purity—a radical interpretation within a culture that tended to interpret women through contrasting moral, religious and class categories. Butler wrote:

Even if we lack the sympathy which makes us feel that the chains which bind our enslaved sisters are pressing on us also, we cannot escape the fact that we are one womanhood, *solidaire*, and that so long as they are bound, we cannot be wholly and truly free.¹¹

Butler's work dramatically shifted the narratives of the Magdalene and Madonna within Victorian Britain by emphasizing a single womanhood—one that is not dependent on a false dichotomy of purity and fallenness but dependent on the unity and wholeness of woman. Yet, for Butler, this vision of female solidarity did not result in

¹¹ Josephine Butler. *Josephine Butler: an Autobiographical Memoir*. London: J.W. Arrowsmith, 1928, 215.

a narrowing of the conception of womanhood. Rather, “one womanhood *solidaire*” meant an increasing emphasis on the complexity of female experience that is rooted within the biblical symbols of Mary Magdalene and the Virgin Mary. These symbols find their fulfillment in the varied experiences of women, whether rich or poor, ‘pure’ or ‘fallen,’ mother or spinster: all were women and Butler believed that these experiences should collectively be framed within an understanding of what it means to be a woman.

The purpose of this chapter is to examine how female identity was formulated through the interpretation of female biblical symbols primarily within the work of Elizabeth Gaskell and to a lesser extent Josephine Butler. Like George Eliot, Gaskell and Butler re-visioned biblical symbols within their fictional and biographical writing, giving new meaning to these symbols which reflected their embodied experiences as women. However, because of their unique life experiences, particularly in their domestic lives as wives and mothers and their active work on behalf of impoverished women in Manchester and Liverpool, Butler and Gaskell embodied these symbols in different ways than Eliot, which contributed to an increasingly complex conception of womanhood in their work. Given Eliot’s preoccupation with reinterpreting the symbol of the Madonna through her life and fictional works, it is interesting that Gaskell and Butler—whose lives seem to exemplify the domestic image of the ‘angel in the house’—actually understand their lives through Mary Magdalene. Both Gaskell and Butler often use both the symbols of Mary Magdalene and the Madonna to interpret not only the ‘fallen’ woman in their midst but their own lives as well. For both Gaskell and Butler, the reinterpretation of these female biblical symbols created an understanding of Victorian womanhood which reflected their own complex experience as women.

The Identity of Elizabeth Gaskell: a Great Number of “Mes”

In many ways, Elizabeth Gaskell’s fictional works enabled her to explore various aspects of womanhood in ways that she otherwise would have been unable to do as a respectable middle-class wife of a Unitarian minister. Yet, she was aware of the various contradictory elements of her nature, particularly those that did not fit into the prescribed conventions of womanhood. While Gaskell tended to be regarded as an example of a domestic ‘angel,’ both in her own time and by subsequent generations of critics, Gaskell understood her own life as the embodiment of various female biblical symbols, which transcended such a simplistic interpretation. Gaskell’s life, and its interpretation by herself and others, connects with the names she chose or had placed upon her and the way those names reflect her own embodiment of biblical symbols. These names—pseudonyms, titles, and nicknames—for the many “mes” with which she identified herself—all illustrate the various ways Gaskell and her critics interpreted her character and experience as a Victorian woman.

Gaskell certainly exalted domesticity and maternity in her work, but these roles do not reflect the whole of her experience as a Victorian woman. Elizabeth Gaskell’s personal ambitions were often in conflict. She sought to both attain selflessness and fulfill her desires. She wanted to be a public social advocate while at the same time care for the needs of her home. Her letters emphasize her diverse interests, with discussion on political matters, literature, celebrities, and gossip, but they also reveal her interest in domestic tasks and farm chores. In one typical reflection on her chores, she mentions, “I’ve scarcely seen anyone yet; but then I’ve made four flannel petticoats and I don’t know how many preserves and pickles, which are so good and successful I am sure it is my vocation to be a house-keeper; not an

economical one, but a jolly extravagant one.”¹² “Extravagant” is a fitting word to describe Gaskell’s role at home; she reveled in a home overflowing with garden bounty, fresh milk and eggs, and children toddling around the house. At the same time, she pursued an active and fulfilling life outside the home as an author and social activist, apart from her husband and children.

One of the ways in which Gaskell expressed her personal autonomy was through the way she named herself in relation to her husband. Despite expressing deep enjoyment of particular aspects of domestic life, her relationship with her husband did not reflect Coventry Patmore’s idealization of the ‘angel in the house.’ It was perhaps her upbringing in a matriarchal household by her aunt, along with her practice in the Unitarian Church, which defined marriage as a mutually submissive relationship rather than one characterized by rule and obedience, which informed her desire to sustain her sense of autonomy even within marriage. In a letter written shortly before her wedding, the then Elizabeth Cleghorn Stevenson wonders how in the world she will finish her wedding preparations in so little time and jokingly adds that she likewise is unable to fathom how she is to “learn obedience” by the end of the month. She adds, with increased sobriety, that “‘to learn obedience’ is something new: to me at least it is.”¹³ As a final comment upon her appreciation of her independence, Elizabeth adds that every time she enters her room, she “smell[s] nothing but marking-ink and see[s] nothing but E.C.S. everywhere.”¹⁴

Once married, Gaskell continued to express her desire for relative independence. In a biographical reflection on her life written soon after her death, Mat Hompes highlighted Elizabeth’s early marital desire to separate her own duties from

¹² Gaskell. “Letter 49.” *EGL*, 84.

¹³ Elizabeth Gaskell. “Letter to Harriet Carr, August the 8th [1832].” Gaskell, Elizabeth. *Further Letters of Mrs. Gaskell*. Eds. J.A.V. Chapple and Alan Shelton, Manchester: Manchester UP, 2003, 19.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

that of her husband: “She held, besides, a settled conviction that no congregation has the right to usurp the time of a minister’s wife, and this conviction she did not hesitate to express when circumstances required.”¹⁵ Yet, it would be an overstatement to say that Gaskell was an entirely emancipated, self-reliant woman. Writing to her good friend Eliza Fox, Gaskell admits, “I long (weakly) for the old times where right and wrong did not seem such complicated matters; and I am sometimes coward enough to wish that we were back in the darkness where obedience was the only seen duty of women.”¹⁶ Yet she follows this comment by explaining that even then, her marriage would not mean complete submission: “Only even then I don’t believe William would ever have *commanded* me.”¹⁷ It seems, understandably, as if she is unable to completely avoid the role expected of her by her culture, even as she expresses awareness of how she does not precisely fit into such confines herself.

Another way Gaskell chose to identify herself was through her penname. Gaskell initially published stories under the name of “Cotton Mather Mills” but abandoned it soon after. She also flirted with the idea of a pseudonym for her first novel, requesting at the last minute that her publisher consider “Stephen Berwick” as a penname,¹⁸ but her request was made too late and the novel was published anonymously. Her initial uncertainty about her penname reflects, in part, how closely tied an author’s identity was to both a novel’s reputation and profitability. The publisher of her earliest short stories, John Howitt, believed that her first and subsequent novels would be more popular if published as “works of a lady.”¹⁹

¹⁵ Mat Hompes. “Mrs. Gaskell.” *The Gentleman’s Magazine* July-Dec.1895: 124-138, 128.

¹⁶ Gaskell. “Letter 69.” *EGL*, 108.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Gaskell. “Letter 28.” *EGL*, 60. Stephen in honor of her father, William Stevenson, and Berwick, where he was born.

¹⁹ John Howitt. *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*. Vol. 19. Manchester: Manchester UP, 1935, 105.

However, Gaskell initially seemed more comfortable using a male pseudonym, desiring, like Charlotte Brontë,²⁰ for her works to be primarily read as authoritative and respectable works of literary merit.²¹ Gaskell's initial anonymity proved stressful; she wrote to her publisher trying to find humor in the situation:

I find every one here has most convincing proofs that the authorship of *Mary Barton* should be attributed to a Mrs. Wheeler... I am only afraid lest you also should be convinced and transact that part of the business which yet remains unaccomplished with her.²²

Despite her light-hearted tone, Gaskell seems disappointed that she had not received full credit for her work. She shortly thereafter claimed she was exhausted with her anonymity, writing:

Hitherto the whole affair of publication has been one of extreme annoyance to me, from the impertinent and unjustifiable curiosity of people, who have tried to force me into an absolute denial, or an acknowledgement of what they must have seen the writer wished to keep concealed.²³

While there was some initial speculation as to the authorship of *Mary Barton*, it did not take long for Elizabeth to confirm among friends that the novel was hers. Her choice to be known, thereafter, as Mrs. Gaskell, was, for the most part, sustained for the remainder of her career, though she did publish *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* under the name E.C. Gaskell.²⁴ Using "Mrs." within a nom de plume was not unusual for nineteenth-century female writers; this nomenclature signaled a desire for decorum, perhaps done in awareness of the need for a weight of respectability behind the somewhat controversial subject matter of her works.

Nonetheless, the name choice was almost permanent—it was not until the late twentieth century that she began to be referred to by others as Elizabeth Gaskell rather

²⁰ See pages 168-169.

²¹ Jenny Uglow. *Elizabeth Gaskell: A Habit of Stories*. London: Faber & Faber, 1993, 183 and 187-188.

²² Gaskell. "Letter 31." *EGL*, 63.

²³ Gaskell. "Letter 33." *EGL*, 64.

²⁴ Deirdre D'Albertis. "The Life and Letters of E.C. Gaskell." *The Cambridge Companion to Elizabeth Gaskell*. Ed. Jill L. Matus. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2007. 10-26, 14.

than Mrs. Gaskell.²⁵ The two separate names, though similar, indicate different types of identities assigned to her by critics—one which emphasized her domesticity, the other her individuality. Even early feminist literary critics such as Showalter, Gubar, and Gilbert kept her penname as a means of emphasizing how little she had in common with authors they considered to be subversive Victorian woman writers. The title of “Mrs.” only began to be dropped by later feminist literary critics who found the name disconcerting and not a true representation of her complex identity. After all, she signed her name “E.C. Gaskell” in all her letters, and did not refer to herself as Mrs. William Gaskell, which reflected her belief that the custom of not “sign[ing] yourself by your proper name” was “*a silly piece of bride-like affectation.*”²⁶ Her choice of Mrs. Gaskell as a penname demonstrated greater personal autonomy than the published names of authors such as Mrs. Humphrey Ward and Mrs. Henry Wood, who used their husband’s name for pennames, thus retaining the “silly affectation” of tying one’s identity with her husband’s.

The “Mrs.” was not all that feminist literary critics of the twentieth century found uncomfortable about Gaskell and her literary works. Many early second-wave feminist critics were suspicious of Gaskell in light of the way she appeared to extol and live out the Victorian ideal of Coventry Patmore’s ‘angel in the house’ rather than protesting Victorian conceptions of womanhood. Gaskell, who had already fallen out of popularity from the Victorian literary canon in the early twentieth century to the point that her many of her novels were out of print, had much less appeal to early second-wave literary critics than the more obviously subversive texts of the Brontës, Austen, and Rossetti. The domestic novelist Mrs. Gaskell, as Gubar and Gilbert refer to her in their seminal work *The Madwoman in the Attic*, is only mentioned briefly in

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Gaskell. “Letter 14,” *EGL*, 40. See: Uglow. *Elizabeth Gaskell: A Habit of Stories*, 1993, 77; and D’Albertis. “The Life and Letters of E.C. Gaskell.” 14.

relation to other women writers.²⁷ Elaine Showalter, in her equally important work *A Literature of One's Own*, gives Gaskell a more prominent role in her history of Victorian writers, including her in the first generation of “nineteenth-century feminine novelists” alongside Eliot, Browning, and the Brontës.²⁸ Mrs. Gaskell, while not the focus of Showalter’s work, is mentioned occasionally as an author in her own right, often in relation to her “motherly fiction.”²⁹ This maternal quality to her novels only seemed to reinforce Victorian gender roles in a way that second-wave feminists found discomfiting. Showalter uses Gaskell’s maternal role to show the constraints that were placed upon Victorian women rather than interpreting Gaskell’s conformity to Victorian gender roles as a choice that she made herself. This interpretation of Gaskell reflects the difficulty in sorting out just how socially determined gender roles were for Victorian women, especially when they seemed to conform to such understandings of womanhood.

For the most part, Mrs. Gaskell was understood as a second-tier Victorian author by literary critics, including feminist scholars, due in large part to the dull portrait of the author that had been painted by critics in the first half of the twentieth century, such as that of David Cecil who famously described Mrs. Gaskell as “soft-eyed, beneath her charming veil...a dove...all a woman was expected to be; gentle, domestic, tactful, prone to tears, easily shocked.”³⁰ Cecil even went so far as to emphasize her maternal qualities, adding “So far from chafing at the limits imposed on her activities, she accepted them with serene satisfaction.”³¹ The subtext is clear:

²⁷ At one point, they begin a paragraph with the line, “As domestic a novelist as Mrs. Gaskell,” which stands in contrast to their more positive assessment of less ‘conventional’ female writers. They continue by emphasizing Gaskell’s discomfort with Eliot and Lewes’ relationship and end their brief discussion on Gaskell’s relation toward Eliot with a note of surprise that a woman such as Gaskell appreciated Eliot’s early fiction. (Gilbert and Gubar. *The Mad Woman in the Attic*, 484.)

²⁸ Showalter. *A Literature of Their Own: British Woman Novelists from Brontë to Lessin*, 19.

²⁹ Ibid, 71.

³⁰ Cecil, David. *Early Victorian Novelists: Essays in Revaluation*. London: Constable, 1935, 198.

³¹ Ibid.

that Gaskell was indeed the perfect Victorian woman whose prioritizing of motherly and wifely duties did little to improve her writing. Cecil treats Gaskell's life as another text to be read along with her novels, and yet his portrait of Gaskell as a delicate, maternal woman is actually created out of his own understanding of motherhood which he imposed onto her life.

Cecil's description of Gaskell's maternity in many ways echoes an 1850 review written by G.H. Lewes of Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley*. In his review, Lewes comments upon the effects motherhood has on the female author, which was odd for Lewes to mention in this particular review since Brontë did not have any children of her own. Discussing the role of women in society, Lewes writes, "The grand function of women, it must always be recollected is, and ever must be, *Maternity*."³² Lewes goes on to argue that with maternity comes postponement—"for twenty of the best years of their lives—those very years in which men either rear their grand fabric or lay the solid foundations of their fame"—during which women are nobly occupied with "the cares and duties, the enjoyments and sufferings of maternity."³³ Lewes describes these years as exhausting and incapacitating for women, and he ends by rhetorically questioning how this occupation of women could in any way result in the greatness of a Milton or a Newton.³⁴ His commentary on the relationship between maternity and the female author is placed within a larger argument to show how women, contrary to popular belief, may actually share some equality with men, but that such equality does not mean equal identity or endowments. Lewes is aware that the issue of female authorship "is a delicate one,"³⁵ but in some ways his argument

³² Lewes. "Currer Bell's *Shirley*," 155.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 154.

can be read positively as it acknowledges the type of personal and professional sacrifices that result from motherhood.

Lewes' commentary on motherhood highlights the way maternity tends to be projected onto women. This was particularly true in the Victorian era, when maternity was a rigidly defined and assumed social role for women. Gaskell's novels were often interpreted in light of her role as a mother, and her own life as a mother became a 'text' that was just as central to interpreting her work as the words on the pages of her novels. Even so, this interpretation was not based upon Gaskell's understanding of her own maternity or her role as a woman but rather upon the interpretation of motherhood which was projected onto her by her readers.

During the first half of the twentieth century, Gaskell's work fell out of favor. The view that Gaskell was a domestic, "typical Victorian woman"³⁶ promoted the idea that she was first a mother and secondarily an author—which coincidentally meant her works were ranked as second-rate quality in comparison to nineteenth-century literary greats who made writing their central profession. It was Edgar Wright's 1965 work *Mrs. Gaskell: the Basis for Reassessment* that reintroduced Gaskell to a twentieth-century audience by questioning the way Gaskell had been interpreted in the first half of the twentieth century. Wright does deal briefly with the relation of gender issues to Gaskell, addressing in his first chapter the derogatory stereotype that followed Gaskell into the twentieth century, that of "the moderately cultured amateur with a nostalgic affection for childhood traditions and a talent for story-telling, when she could spare the time from maternity and good works."³⁷ Here Wright emphasizes the negative connotations that came along with being portrayed foremost as wife and mother. Wright calls these "the superficiality of elements in the

³⁶ Cecil David. *Early Victorian Novelists: Essays in Revaluation*, 198.

³⁷ Edgar Wright. *Mrs. Gaskell: the Basis for Reassessment*. London: Oxford UP, 1965, 4.

critical opinion”³⁸ that surround the work of Mrs. Gaskell.³⁹ He argues that, to the detriment of literary criticism on her work, much of it has been done in connection with her biography, which unfortunately meant that “[t]he essential quietness, respectability and overt domesticity of her life leave hardly a crevice for any sensation.”⁴⁰ Instead, Wright desires to consider Mrs. Gaskell’s works on their own merit, apart from her biography—though he does not entirely depart from connecting her life with her novels as he includes brief discussions on her childhood and her religious beliefs.⁴¹ Nonetheless, rather than explaining the gendered image of Gaskell as wife and mother in relation to her novels, as later feminist critics would, Wright largely divorces Gaskell’s biography from her fiction in order to do ‘serious’ literary justice to her work.⁴²

Feminist criticism of Gaskell’s work was indebted to Wright and his reevaluation of her novels because his work brought her novels to the attention of a new generation of readers. However, the focus of feminist literary criticism shifted to fresh understandings of Gaskell’s construction of gender roles, often in relation to her biography rather than through a critique of her literary works solely on their own merit. In the late twentieth century, feminists were equipped with a renewed interest in conceptions of maternity and femininity, along with more nuanced understandings of gender roles in the Victorian era and increased interest in female authors who had been obscured by the patriarchal canon, all of which encouraged a feminist reassessment of Elizabeth Gaskell and her novels.⁴³

³⁸ Ibid, 4-5.

³⁹ Wright retains the “Mrs.” in his work when referring to Elizabeth Gaskell.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 7.

⁴¹ Ibid, 25 and 53.

⁴² Ibid, 18.

⁴³ For history of feminist criticism of Gaskell’s work see: Deanna L. Davis. “Feminist Critics and Literary Mothers: Daughters Reading Elizabeth Gaskell.” *Signs* 17.3. (1992): 507-532; and Patty Stoneman. *Elizabeth Gaskell*. 2nd ed. Manchester: Manchester UP, 2007, 1-20.

Later second-wave feminist critics made serious attempts to reinterpret Gaskell as subversive, or even a feminist in her own right, if only of the nineteenth-century variety.⁴⁴ Jenny Uglow's biography on Elizabeth Gaskell begins with an epigram that intentionally uses Gaskell's own words as a response to David Cecil's description of her as a weak, maternal dove:

I feel a stirring instinct and long to be off...just like a bird wakens up from its content at the change of the seasons...But...I happen to be a woman instead of a bird... and ... moreover I have no wings like a dove to fly away."⁴⁵

Uglow's juxtaposition of Cecil's interpretation of Gaskell with Gaskell's own self-interpretation rescinds the stereotypical female image that had been attached to Gaskell for so long; at the same time, it serves to introduce the complexity which Uglow argues Gaskell felt as a Victorian woman. Uglow pictures Gaskell as a woman who understood that certain limitations were placed upon her sex within the Victorian era, but who nonetheless experienced real longings to be free of them. Throughout her biography, Uglow presents a sympathetic and detailed sketch of a woman who felt torn, not contented, with the demands placed upon her by Victorian gender roles.⁴⁶ More so than most biographies on Gaskell, Uglow's work depicts the tension Gaskell felt between her own desires and society's demands upon women.

Felicia Bonaparte, in a rather odd, quasi-biographical work on Gaskell in which she correlates Gaskell's actual life with a fictional construction of Gaskell's inner demon, goes significantly further to uncover a feminist role model in Gaskell. Published a year prior to Uglow's work, Bonaparte argues that while Gaskell appeared on the outside as a perfect, dutiful wife and mother, internally she constantly wrestled with her inner demon—a demon that can only be uncovered when her whole self—"her life her letters and her fiction"—is read "as one continuous metaphoric

⁴⁴ In particular, see: Stoneman. *Elizabeth Gaskell*.

⁴⁵ Uglow. *Elizabeth Gaskell: A Habit of Stories*, 1.

⁴⁶ In particular, see: Uglow. *Elizabeth Gaskell: A Habit of Stories*, 45-46, 100, 116, 249.

text.”⁴⁷ In particular, Bonaparte uses Gaskell’s fictional works to create an equally fictional character that Bonaparte conjures up as Gaskell’s demon. This demon is characterized by Bonaparte as fighting against maternity and housewifery, all while desiring what was considered improper for Victorian women—a dark side that even Gaskell herself was unable to fully recognize. In this work, Bonaparte strains to include Gaskell with those more famous feminist madwomen hidden away in the Victorian attic.

Bonaparte’s own personification of Gaskell’s demon has been rightfully criticized as “a fictional account of a non-existent being, without the truth or reality of a novel”⁴⁸— which is an interesting criticism in itself due to its intentional blurring of lines between the categories of fact and fiction, word and flesh. Yet Bonaparte’s use of a demon in order to explain Gaskell’s many conflicted “mes” is no less fictional than Cecil’s image of Gaskell as fundamentally a mother. Both are interpretations of womanhood that are projected onto Gaskell by later day critics. Ultimately, Bonaparte’s image of the demoniac Mrs. Gaskell illustrates just how challenging it is for some feminist critics to use Gaskell’s life and work to create a feminist role model, as Gaskell’s life and work does not immediately lend itself to obvious subversion of Victorian gender roles. Gaskell herself often struggled to sort out her many “mes” and used her fiction as a way to explore various facets of womanhood in a way that reflected the complexity—and truth—of female experience.

⁴⁷ Felicia Bonaparte. *The Gypsy Bachelor of Manchester: the Life of Mrs. Gaskell’s Demon*. Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 1992, 10.

⁴⁸ Angus Easson. “Review of *The Gypsy Bachelor of Manchester: the Life of Mrs. Gaskell’s Demon*.” *Victorian Studies*, Vol. 38, No. 2 (Winter, 1995), 284-286, 285. Other reviews critical of Bonaparte’s work can be found here: Alan Shelston. “Review of *The Gypsy-Bachelor of Manchester: The Life of Mrs. Gaskell’s Demon*.” *Nineteenth-Century Literature*. 48.2 (1993): 251-253; and D.J. Trela, “The Gypsy-Bachelor of Manchester: The Life of Mrs. Gaskell’s Demon”. *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 93.1(1994): 127-128.

Rather than creating complex and generally unconvincing narratives such as Bonaparte's that highlight the more subversive aspects of Gaskell's work, the feminist assessment of Gaskell in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries often return to the very image that David Cecil emphasized and Edgar Wright scorned: Gaskell as mother. Feminist literary critics emphasized the image of motherhood that Gaskell herself chose to use repeatedly in her letters and fictional works. Deanna L. Davis finds that Gaskell's portrayal of the maternal illustrates the tension many mothers feel between taking care of their own needs versus sacrificing those needs in order to care for their family—a tension that Davis believes resonates with modern women.⁴⁹ Anticipating the portrait created in Jenny Uglow's biography of Gaskell constantly living in tension between society's desires and her own, Davis claims that while Gaskell attempted to live up to the high ideals of motherhood valued by middle-class Victorian society, she was all too aware of the kind of personal sacrifice of one's career and public life that the ideal required. While Gaskell neither alters nor protests these societal expectations, she nonetheless realistically portrays, both through her life and novels, the types of exhaustions and emotional breakdowns that a constant striving to fulfill such idealized maternal models requires.

Davis desires to see Gaskell as a complex figure rather than as a one-dimensional mouthpiece for either the Victorian 'angel in the house' or the modern feminist. She writes that Gaskell's "work does point us back in the direction of needing to acknowledge women as individual selves with needs that sometimes conflict with the goals of nurturance."⁵⁰ Davis' argument is striking in that she maintains sympathy toward Gaskell's idealization of maternity within her work, yet at the same time she gives validity to feminist interpretations of Gaskell's novels as

⁴⁹ Davis, "Feminist Critics and Literary Mothers: Daughters Reading Elizabeth Gaskell," 532.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 532.

subversive, such as Thomas P. Fair's belief that Gaskell used traditional social models of marriage and family for "subverting [patriarchal systems] to allow her rebellious heroines agency and the opportunity to fashion their own success from within the system that would attempt to contain them within its boundaries."⁵¹ Instead, Davis rightfully acknowledges the complexity and contradiction in Gaskell's life and work. It is this tension between the reality of women's lives and the idealization of women's roles—either as the 'angel in the house' or as proto-feminist—that feminist literary critics have been well-served to wrestle with in more recent work on Victorian female writers. Davis allows Gaskell to live within her nineteenth-century constraints while enabling her to have a distinct voice that responded positively to the issues of her day—and, as Davis notes, maintains resonance for women today, who remain pressured by the "mythology of the nurturing mother that has prevented us from acknowledging [the mother's] human needs."⁵²

Since Gaskell tied her own identity to her roles as wife and mother, one might be tempted, as many critics have, to associate her with the symbol of the Madonna or the 'angel in the house.' This interpretation of Gaskell does, in part, describe the way Gaskell understood herself—particularly her role as a mother. She did at times identify with the mother of Jesus, writing in her diary, which she kept for her eldest daughter Marianne, "This morning we heard a sermon from the text. 'And his mother kept all these sayings in her heart'. Oh! how very, very true it is."⁵³ Here Gaskell looks to Mary as a fellow pilgrim in her journey of motherhood, relating a passage from the Gospel of Luke to her own experiences as mother to Marianne. Strong

⁵¹ Thomas P. Fair. "Elizabeth Gaskell: A Well-tempered Madness." *Gilbert and Gubar's The Madwoman in the Attic After Thirty Years*. Annette R. Federico, editor. London: University of Missouri Press, 2009, 217-236, 218.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Elizabeth Gaskell and Sophia Holland. *Private Voices: the Diaries of Elizabeth Gaskell and Sophia Holland*. Eds. J.A.V. Chapple and Anita Wilson. New York: St. Martin's, 1996, 58.

parallels can be drawn between Gaskell and the biblical symbol for purity and maternity, yet, though not as immediately obvious, Gaskell's own life experience and her fictional works also look to Mary Magdalene and Eve as symbols of womanhood, which are appropriated by Gaskell in her fictional writing for characters who have had divergent life experiences from her own. Gaskell particularly seems to identify with Eve in the temptations she felt to defy conventions and in her understanding of motherhood as reminder of both mortality and salvation.⁵⁴ Gaskell's use of these symbols, both in her life and work, is most clearly seen through the title character of her novel *Ruth*, who embodies each of these female symbols: Eve, Mary, and Mary Magdalene. She understands these symbols through her own experience as wife and mother, using the biblical text as a lens of self-interpretation before rewriting the symbols into her fictional stories. Throughout her novel *Ruth*, Gaskell re-visions the narratives of these figures, providing herself and her readers a means of self-interpretation and ultimately a way through which to embody these figures in their own lives. The following section will introduce Gaskell's novel *Ruth* in relation to the social issues which it was arguing against—most specifically its re-interpretation of the Victorian 'fallen' woman.

The Fictionalization of the 'Fallen' Woman

Shortly after Gaskell's novel *Ruth* was published, George Eliot, in a letter to women's activist Clementia Taylor, remarked candidly, "'Ruth,' with all its merits, will not be an enduring or classical fiction—will it?"⁵⁵ Eliot continues by complaining that Gaskell's love for the dramatic—and here is an implied comparison with Eliot's

⁵⁴ This would parallel not only Eve's temptation and subsequent fall but also the curse/blessing that is given to her as a result of her sin, that she would experience pain in childbearing, but through such suffering bring forth the one who would crush the head of the serpent. (Genesis 3:15-16)

⁵⁵ Eliot. "GE to Mrs. Peter Alfred Taylor, London, 1 February 1853." *GEL*. Vol. 2, 86.

own fiction which she claimed sought to be a reflection of common, ordinary life⁵⁶—mistakenly resulted in agitating the reader “for the moment” rather than securing “one’s lasting sympathies.”⁵⁷ Nonetheless, Eliot found Gaskell’s style refreshing, especially compared to the “false and feeble”⁵⁸ representations found in most female-written works, and even took delight in Gaskell’s descriptions, calling them “pretty and graphic.”⁵⁹ Eliot continues by remarking on the detailed descriptions of the attic of the minister’s house in Gaskell’s novel *Ruth*, claiming that they reminded her of “snowdrops springing out of the soil.”⁶⁰

It is unsurprising that Eliot, who was rarely interested in discussing her own status as a ‘fallen woman,’ is more interested in critiquing Gaskell’s carefully created domestic scenes than the overall subject of the novel: the treatment of the ‘fallen’ woman in Victorian society. Eliot never mentions the story’s plot or female protagonist in her letter or reflects on the possible parallels to her own life. Instead, she ends her discussion of Gaskell’s novel by writing, “Mrs. Gaskell has certainly a charming mind and one cannot help loving her as one reads her books.”⁶¹ Gaskell’s charm is not explicitly related to the subject matter of *Ruth*, but it is difficult to entirely disconnect Eliot’s praise for the work from the novel’s central themes. While Ruth’s ‘fall’ as the innocent seduced girl who becomes pregnant as a result of her illicit relationship with a wealthy gentleman was worlds apart from Eliot’s unofficial marriage and lifelong romance with George Henry Lewes, both Ruth’s brief affair with Bellingham and Eliot’s relationship with Lewes illustrate the Victorian double sexual standard where women were judged more severely than men for sexual

⁵⁶ See discussion on pages 116-118.

⁵⁷ Eliot. “GE Journal, Richmond, 6 December 1857: How I Came to Write Fiction.” *GEL*. Vol. 2, 86.

⁵⁸ Eliot. “GE to Mrs. Peter Alfred Taylor, London, 1 February 1853.” *GEL*. Vol. 2, 86.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

‘transgressions.’ The social ostracism presented in the novel that frequently threatened women whose sexual relationships outside of marriage became public also reflects a key consequence of Eliot’s affair with Lewes. *Ruth* was used by Gaskell to argue against the Victorian conception of ‘fallenness’ as applied to women, even women such as Eliot. For Gaskell, ‘fallenness’ is a cultural construct applied to certain women unfairly and does not necessarily reflect their actual identity.

Gaskell did not shy from using her fiction to address controversial cultural issues, but she did so as a means of embodying lives of women, particularly those living through situations largely ignored by her middle-class readership. Specifically, Gaskell was interested in how particular social issues affected women in their interpretation of self along with their place in society. Elizabeth Gaskell’s third published novel *Ruth* is often labeled a social work in the tradition of her first novel *Mary Barton: A Tale of Manchester Life* because, at its core, *Ruth* offers commentary and argument on contemporary issues in its descriptions of life experienced by a young Manchester seamstress. Throughout *Mary Barton*, Gaskell rails against the abuse of the poor, working-class individuals employed at factories in industrial cities such as Manchester, where she resided.⁶² The work was intended to educate the middle class about the putrid living conditions of the poor which individuals outside the lower classes either rarely came in contact with or ignored, unless, like Gaskell, they worked amongst the poor. In *Mary Barton* Gaskell advocates for political and social changes to reduce the vast class divide in Britain between the poor and the wealthy. Gaskell’s message in *Ruth* similarly presents a social or moral dilemma.

⁶² Gaskell moved to Manchester after marrying her husband in 1832. Manchester—a factory town acutely experiencing the economic and social shifts which were occurring throughout the century due to the Industrial Revolution—shaped her personal, political, and religious views to a great degree. Her novels, particularly *Ruth*, *Mary Barton*, and *North and South*, reflect issues surrounding industrialization, factory work, and the working class which Gaskell had witnessed in her city. For more on Manchester see: Gary S. Messinger. *Manchester in the Victorian Age: the Half-Known City*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985.

While the novel refers to issues related to social class and industrialization, the central argument in *Ruth* concerns the widespread negative attitude toward what was then considered the “Great Social Evil” of the Victorian era: prostitution or, more broadly, ‘fallenness.’

An understanding of the social issues Gaskell was addressing within her novel *Ruth* requires broader understanding of how women who were deemed ‘fallen’ were understood within the Victorian era. ‘Falleness’ was a social construct—one with a fair degree of fluidity in meaning. Understanding the ‘fallen’ woman in this way was a hermeneutic exercise that often applied the biblical symbol of Mary Magdalene to women whose lifestyles fell outside the conventional understanding of womanhood. Yet understanding these women as modern-day Magdalenes involved a rereading and reinterpretation of this biblical symbol. Some used the symbol of Mary Magdalene to emphasize the redemption and reclamation of the ‘fallen’ woman while others used the same symbol to underscore the detrimental effects that such women could have on society at large. In some ways, the growing discourse on the ‘Great Social Evil,’ along with the emerging body of scientific studies and surveys on prostitution, contributed to a reinterpretation of the Magdalene that ultimately created the fictionalization of the ‘fallen’ woman: an understanding of the life and experiences of a ‘fallen’ woman could only be understood through a narrative that was superimposed over a ‘fallen’ woman’s own experiences. Gaskell’s own novel *Ruth* also created a fictionalized ‘fallen’ woman in order to explore the cultural issues of the century’s ‘Great Social Evil,’ but this was done intentionally to reinterpret biblical symbols of womanhood in a way that reflected a wide range of female experiences in the Victorian era.

The term “Great Social Evil” was prevalently used in the middle of the nineteenth century as a euphemism for sexual vice or prostitution.⁶³ However, Victorians tended to define prostitution fairly broadly; the term ‘fallen woman’ was a concept that had a range of meaning in nineteenth-century Britain. Scottish Presbyterian minister and popular writer Ralph Wardlaw, in a lecture on female prostitution, defined prostitution as “the illicit intercourse between the sexes,”⁶⁴ thus extending the definition of prostitution beyond monetary transactions for sex. Later in his lecture he placed the significant weight of blame on women within these relationships, as he did not wish to separate prostitution from any other sexual acts outside of marriage, writing: “I consider the word prostitution as, equally with *fornication* and *whoredom*, applicable to the woman, who, whether for hire or not, *voluntarily surrenders her virtue*.”⁶⁵ Such a view reflects the Victorian understanding of any kind of sexual ‘sin’ as prostitution—provided the sin was committed by a woman.

In attempting to define prostitution, Dr. William Acton (1813-1875), whose book on gynecology and prostitution was first published in 1857 and went through numerous editions during the nineteenth century, begins the second edition by discussing the complexity of defining the term prostitute. He believed that etymologically speaking the term suggests earning money for sexual favors, but he continues by noting that “divines and moralists” maintain that “all illicit intercourse is

⁶³ The sheer volume of nineteenth-century texts on the subject only reinforces Michel Foucault’s claim that “sexuality, far from being repressed in the society of that period, on the contrary was constantly being aroused.” (*History of Sexuality: An Introduction*. Vol. 1., 148.) Informative books containing studies on the fallen woman often used “Great Social Evil” in their titles, such as: William Logan. *The Great Social Evil: the Causes, Extent, Results and Remedies*. London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1871; and Francis W. Newman. *The Cure of the Great Social Evil with Special Reference to Recent Laws Delusively Called the Contagious Disease Acts*. London: Trübner, 1869.

⁶⁴ Ralph Wardlaw. *Lectures on Female Prostitution: Its Nature, Extent, Effects, Guilt, Causes, and Remedy*. Glasgow: J. Maclehose, 1842, 10.

⁶⁵ *Ibid*, 17.

prostitution.”⁶⁶ In a report by the Select Committee on the Contagious Disease Acts, Mr. Parsons, a surgeon, defined prostitution even more broadly, stating, “It is more a question as to mannerism than anything else.”⁶⁷ Thus, the idea of prostitution was on occasion not defined by sexual actions but in the first instance by “mannerism:” public behavior that deviated from middle-class social norms. This understanding of prostitution emphasized that, for some in Victorian Britain, ‘fallenness’ was just as connected with issues of gender and social class as it was to defying conventional sexual behavior within the nineteenth-century social imaginary. The Victorian double sexual standard often ensured that within these illicit relationships it was the woman who was deemed sexually wayward while little judgment was cast upon the man. Men, it was believed, naturally desired sexual pleasure, whereas women did not. Therefore, men needed to protect the purity of their wives by fulfilling their desires with other women. These other women, however, were exercising unnatural, and therefore sinful, passions.⁶⁸ To emphasize this, Victorian discourse contrasted a married woman’s chastity with the pleasure prostitutes displayed—the latter being viewed as an exception that illustrated the sinfulness of female sexual pleasure. Dr. William Acton explained this:

As a general rule, a modest woman seldom desires any sexual gratification for herself. She submits to her husband’s embraces, but principally to gratify him; and, but for the desire of maternity, would far rather be relieved from his attention.⁶⁹

⁶⁶ William Acton. *Prostitution Considered in its Moral, Social and Sanitary Aspects in London and other Large Cities and Garrison Towns with Proposals for the Control and Prevention of its Attendant Evils*. 2nd ed. London: Clarke, Doble & Brendon, 1972, 1.

⁶⁷ *Report from the Select Committee on Contagious Disease Act (1866): Together with the Proceedings of the Committee, Minutes of Evidence, and Appendix*. Vol. 28. London: House of Commons and Lords, 1869, 9.

⁶⁸ Eric Trudgill discusses the Victorian double sexual standard at length in his work on the important role prostitutes played in enabling men and women to fulfill idealized sexual roles. (*Madonnas and Magdalens: the Origins and Development of Victorian Sexual Attitudes*, 125.)

⁶⁹ William Acton. *The Functions and Disorders of the Reproductive Organs in Childhood, Youth, Adult Age and Advanced Life Considered in their Physiological, Social and Moral Relations*. 8th ed. Philadelphia: P. Blakiston, 1894, 210.

Here Acton echoes the Victorian idealization of domestically-minded women: a woman's pleasure was to be found in her husband's pleasure and her own maternal desire. This view of women's sexual natures was eventually criticized. Marie Stopes, who wrote *Married Love* in the early twentieth century as a response to Victorian teaching on sex, lamented:

Consequently woman's side of the joint life has found little or no expression. Woman has been content to mould herself to the shape desired by man wherever possible, and she has stifled her natural feelings and her own deep thoughts as they welled up.⁷⁰

Victorian women who found themselves unable to stifle these "natural feelings" tended to be understood as contributors to the 'Great Social Evil' believed to be infiltrating the nation. Social reformers, such as Josephine Butler, increasingly called for men to be equally culpable for sexual infidelity throughout the later part of the century, but Victorian discourse still tended to blame women for sexual waywardness.

Prostitution and 'fallenness' were strongly tied not only to gender but also to social class. Many of the more sympathetic voices toward prostitutes in the Victorian era recognized the economic reality of women who either earned money through sex or were kept as mistresses, even if they still believed that sexual waywardness was morally wrong. Novelist and social critic Dinah Craik, in a work published in 1858, described such working class women as the "poor everyday sinners" who found it "so much better to be a rich man's mistress than a working-man's ill-used wife, or rather slave."⁷¹ Craik professes shame at "how few young women come to the marriage-altar at all, or come there just a week or two before maternity; or having already had several children, often only half brothers and sisters, whom no ceremony has ever legalized."⁷² Her reflections seem to cast blame on society for not taking care of the

⁷⁰ Marie Stopes. *Married Love*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2004, 31.

⁷¹ Craik. *A Woman's Thoughts about Women*, 262.

⁷² Craik. *A Woman's Thoughts about Women*, 259.

poor as much as on the women themselves. While Dr. William Acton controversially claimed that “prostitution is a transitory state, through which an untold number of British women are ever on their passage,” and went on to say that many prostitutes end up marrying, and marrying “exceedingly well,”⁷³ Craik disagreed. Instead, Craik argued that while economic factors forced women into immoral lifestyles, their sexual fall in turn perpetuated their impoverished status by making it increasingly difficult to find work after their ‘fallenness’ was discovered. As for the repercussions of sexual sin on the ‘fallen’ woman, Craik explains, “Respectability shuts the door upon her; mothers will not let their young folks come into contact with her; mistresses will not take her as a servant.”⁷⁴

It is difficult to evaluate whether Acton or Craik correctly surmised the situation for Victorian ‘fallen’ women. While work such as Acton’s demonstrates that Victorians were interested in creating a large body of statistical data on prostitution, such compilations of evidence were colored by the prejudices of the day. Furthermore, Acton’s work was written with an agenda: to advocate the government regulation of prostitution, consisting of regular gynecological examinations of prostitutes to prevent the spread of venereal diseases.⁷⁵ Twentieth and twenty-first century discourse on the Victorian ‘fallen’ woman, particularly work by feminist scholars, has only complicated the matter in that it has amplified the negative response toward ‘fallen’ women in the Victorian era as a sign of the negative ramifications of a patriarchal power structure.⁷⁶ Furthermore, feminist criticism has

⁷³ Acton. *Prostitution Considered in its Moral, Social and Sanitary Aspects in London and other Large Cities and Garrison Towns with Proposals for the Control and Prevention of its Attendant Evils*, 49.

⁷⁴ Craik. *A Woman’s Thoughts about Women*, 271.

⁷⁵ Acton. “Preface to the Second Edition.” *Prostitution Considered in its Moral, Social and Sanitary Aspects in London and other Large Cities and Garrison Towns with Proposals for the Control and Prevention of its Attendant Evils*, v-vi.

⁷⁶ See: Auerbach. “Rise of the Fallen Woman”; Deborah Logan. *Fallenness in Victorian Women’s Writing: Marry, Stitch, Die, or Do Worse*; Jill L. Matus. *Unstable Bodies: Victorian Representations of*

often sought out subversive ‘fallen’ women as a means of highlighting women who fought against negative understandings of womanhood. Victorian women—particularly those deemed ‘fallen’ women—often experienced negative repercussions for not conforming to idealized standards of womanhood. However, works on prostitution such as those by Acton and Craik ultimately create a fictionalized conception of the ‘fallen woman’ in order to make their argument. A woman’s ‘fallenness’ was understood through a specific type of narrative projected onto her rather than through each woman’s own experiences. The ‘fallen woman’ of twentieth and twenty-first century scholarship on the Victorian era often tends toward being a fictionalized construction, even if she is constructed around a divergent narrative. What Gaskell’s novel accomplished was to provide new understandings into what it meant to be ‘fallen’ through her reinterpretation of the Magdalene and Madonna. Moreover, her work provided a hermeneutic model for women whereby biblical symbols could be re-visioned through personal experiences. It is through this appropriation of biblical symbols that what was once ‘fiction’ could become flesh through the reader’s embodiment of these symbols.

Elizabeth Gaskell as a ‘Fallen’ Magdalene

Ultimately, the title character of Gaskell’s novel *Ruth* is a fictional reinterpretation of Mary Magdalene while at the same time a re-visioning of the fictionalized Victorian ‘fallen’ woman, borrowing from the same myths that tended to be applied to such women, but re-visioning the symbol in such a way as to create new ways of understanding the ‘fallen’ woman. Yet because Elizabeth Gaskell’s hermeneutic approach to the symbol of Mary Magdalene is limited by her own life

experiences, Ruth becomes not only the embodiment of the ‘fallen woman’ but also of Gaskell herself. In this way, Ruth reflects the tension that Gaskell felt as a Victorian woman between idealized womanhood, ‘fallenness,’ and her own life experiences.

While Gaskell herself is frequently understood in relation to her purity and maternity, she did not limit her interpretation of herself to the symbol of the Madonna, but also tended to embody the biblical symbols of Eve and Magdalene. Though she was not ‘fallen’ in the Victorian sense of the word, she certainly identified with her fictional character Ruth. Her use of all three of these symbols conveys the complexity with which she understood womanhood in relation to her own experience.

Elizabeth Gaskell frequently questioned the Victorian conception of womanhood and even sought to defy it at points through the strong, personal autonomy that she maintained. At times she was barely apologetic at defying particular conventions. Writing about an inappropriate conversation she had with two young girls in Sunday school, Gaskell wrote, “so there I am in a scrape—well! it can’t be helped, I am myself and nobody else, and can’t be bound by another’s rules.”⁷⁷ She remained always acutely aware of what was appropriate and proper, and occasionally sought out ways to break with convention. She may have appeared on the surface to be the proper, domestic, maternal Victorian woman, but this was only one of her many “mes” and she sometimes quite intentionally enabled her other “mes” to shape her actions also.

In writing *Ruth* she had a fairly clear idea about what the response might be and, while the uproar over it was distressing, she seemed to take pleasure in the reaction toward her book. Writing to her good friend Eliza Fox shortly after *Ruth* was published, Gaskell exclaimed, “I think I must be an improper woman without

⁷⁷ Gaskell. “Letter 32.” *EGL*, 64.

knowing it, I do so manage to shock people.”⁷⁸ In this regard, Gaskell stands in striking contrast to George Eliot. Both women were particularly aware of Victorian gender roles and their relation to them, but unlike George Eliot, who interpreted her own motives as pure despite her rather unconventional lifestyle, Elizabeth Gaskell often sought out opportunities to defy idealized conceptions of womanhood.

The tension Gaskell felt between being an idealized mother and an improper woman throughout her experience as a woman can particularly be felt in her reflection on being a female author.⁷⁹ While Gaskell may not have been as aware as George Eliot of the philosophical and theological shifts that were taking place in hermeneutic practice, the two women were both acutely aware of how the Victorian understanding of gender affected their roles as writers. Gaskell, unlike Eliot, felt a divided duty between her professional and domestic duties. At an early point in her career, she wrote that a blending of “home duties and the development of the Individual”⁸⁰ is desirable for women, and her letters frequently reflect a desire for personal fulfillment. Nonetheless, she also professed discomfort with the idea of being both a mother and an artist at the same time.⁸¹ Once, while responding to a woman who had written to ask her how to become a writer, Gaskell cautioned against writing stories while raising children—even though this is something Gaskell did herself. Gaskell expresses concern that she would “become too much absorbed in my *fictitious* people to attend to my *real* ones.”⁸² Despite this, Gaskell explains that being a wife and mother had been an asset to her writing, not a hindrance, claiming, “When you are

⁷⁸ Gaskell. “Letter 150.” *EGL*, 223.

⁷⁹ It is unsurprising then that in her biography on Charlotte Brontë—an author whose gender and sex became questioned with the publication of *Jane Eyre*—a recurring theme is Brontë’s response to being a female author. (*The Life of Charlotte Brontë*. London: Smith, Elder, 1870, 142, 217, 260, 283, 308–309, 320, 344, and 420.)

⁸⁰ Gaskell. “Letter 68,” *EGL*, 106.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² Gaskell. “Letter 515.” *EGL*, 695.

forty...you will write ten times as good a novel... just because you will have gone through so much more of the interests of a wife and mother.”⁸³ This reflects Gaskell’s belief that motherhood need not be detrimental or exclusive to her life as an author. Nonetheless, her response also demonstrates the tension she felt between her roles as author and mother.

Despite on occasion becoming an “improper woman,” Gaskell often faced less severe criticism for defying certain social conventions as long as she maintained respectability through her role as a wife and mother. John Malcolm Ludlow, in an unsigned review of *Ruth*, at length discussed female authorship, concluding that Gaskell was the greatest female author of her day, in part because she was married and had children. Ludlow believed that Gaskell’s writing came “from the heart of a woman ripe with all the dignity of her sex, full of all wifely and motherly experience” and that she was able to write more easily under the “fear of God” if she was already writing “in the fear of husband and children.”⁸⁴ Earlier in the essay, Ludlow argued that because of Gaskell’s role as a mother, she was more capable of validating how motherhood might be a blessing to ‘fallen’ women.⁸⁵ An unsigned review in *The English Review* similarly related Gaskell to her role as a wife, describing Gaskell as “the wife...herself of a dissenting minister.”⁸⁶ In part, the reviewer believed Gaskell’s work should be deemed respectable because of her role as a minister’s wife. Yet, despite the respect she gained in society because of her domestic roles, it is interesting that Gaskell expressed discontent with conformity to social ideals of womanhood. While it seems counterintuitive to the reality of Elizabeth Gaskell’s and George Eliot’s experiences as women, Gaskell felt an affinity with the complexities of Eve’s

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ John Malcolm Ludlow. “Ruth.” *The North British Review* May 1853: 151-174, 169.

⁸⁵ Ibid, 155.

⁸⁶ “Ruth: a Novel. By the Author of ‘Mary Barton.’” *The English Review* April 1853: 193-194, 194.

and Mary Magdalene's fall, while Eliot understood her experiences through the symbol of the Virgin Mary. Ultimately, Gaskell used the reinterpretation of biblical symbols within her novel *Ruth* as a means of understanding the numerous "mes" which constituted her experience as a woman. This resulted in a complex understanding of Victorian womanhood which both accepted and defied the conventions of her day.

Ruth as a 'Fallen' Madonna

Gaskell's novel *Ruth* tells the story of a disadvantaged young woman who is sent away to be a seamstress after the death of her parents. She begins spending time with Henry Bellingham, a wealthy man, and, after being caught taking a walk with him on a Sunday, is fired from her job, leaving her with absolutely no wages or social stability. In desperation, Ruth becomes Bellingham's mistress, but, shortly after, Bellingham abandons her.

Strikingly, Ruth is characterized from the beginning of the novel as "innocent and snow-pure,"⁸⁷ and she does not lose her innocence even after her relationship with Bellingham. For Gaskell, purity is an inward quality that is not always reflected through outward actions. Rather, Gaskell held that there are political along with moral values that have implications for the fallen woman. These values, along with the often hypocritical actions that accompany them, are ultimately complicit in her 'fall.' However, Gaskell does not go so far as to excuse Ruth's actions—she makes Ruth quite painfully pay the price for her sin and depicts her as in need of redemption. However, factors outside of Ruth's control, such as a lack of maternal care, an absence of consequences for gentlemen who take advantage of young girls, and a

⁸⁷ Elizabeth Gaskell. *Ruth*. Oxford: Oxford UPs, 2011, 37.

constant threat of poverty, are all blamed by Gaskell for Ruth's 'fall.' In this same way, Ruth's eventual conversion is dependent on factors outside Ruth's control and is enabled by the community of friends who have placed confidence in her inner purity.

Early in the novel, Gaskell criticizes Mrs. Mason, who oversees Ruth's work as a seamstress' apprentice, because she was both "careless" in keeping the girls in her care from temptation and "severely intolerant" if the girls succumbed to temptation.⁸⁸ Gaskell reflects on the situation by mentioning, "It would have been a better and more Christian thing, if she had kept up the character of her girls by tender vigilance and maternal care."⁸⁹ Ruth, whose mother was now dead, was in need of a maternal figure to teach her how to avoid temptation.

The story of Ruth's life was inspired by the life of a young woman named Pasley, and in Gaskell's correspondence about Pasley she kept coming back to Pasley's maternal deficiencies, emphasizing just how consequential Gaskell believed the death of her mother was for Ruth's life.⁹⁰ In a letter written to Charles Dickens in 1850, Gaskell writes at length about Pasley, who was a seamstress' apprentice. Gaskell explains to Dickens that the young girl's father had died when she was two years old and "her mother had shown most complete indifference to her."⁹¹ After being seduced, Pasley was distraught and wrote to her mother several times, never receiving an answer. Unsure what to do, Pasley entered into what she thought was a penitentiary but was in actuality a decoy for a house of prostitution. Throughout her letter to Dickens, Gaskell holds Pasley's mother responsible for her 'fallenness.' Likewise, Ruth's lack of any type of maternal figure in her life leaves her unable to

⁸⁸ Gaskell. *Ruth*, 45.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Uglow. *Elizabeth Gaskell: A Habit of Stories*, 245-247.

⁹¹ Gaskell. "Letter 61." *EGL*, 98.

properly understand her relationship with Bellingham. Gaskell describes the type of advice Ruth lacks:

She was too young when her mother died to have received any cautions or words of advice respecting *the* subject of a woman's life—if indeed, wise parents ever directly speak of what, in its depth and power, cannot be put into words.⁹²

While Gaskell here is reflecting on the importance of a mother's advice about love, her writing also hints at the crucial role that mothers have in instructing their daughters on sex. To Gaskell, Ruth lacks the most important relationship a young woman could have, and she ultimately places much of the blame for Ruth's 'fall' on this lack of maternal care.

The novel's focus on maternal care reflects Gaskell's own experience with motherhood. Gaskell, who lost her mother at an early age and experienced the loss of two of her own babies, clung to her role as a mother to her surviving four children, constantly fearful that she would lose them or that they would lose her.⁹³ The female protagonist of *Ruth* reflects Gaskell's experiences as a woman, not only because they both lacked mothers but also in the way they responded to their own maternity. After Bellingham abandons her and leaves her 'fallen,' Ruth becomes depressed and suicidal. She is then taken into the home of a minister and his sister who take pity on her. Ruth soon discovers she is pregnant, but her new caretakers agree to conceal the origins of her pregnancy, instead explaining to their community that Ruth is recently widowed. It is Ruth's maternity, and not her purity, which Gaskell uses to re-vision Ruth as a symbol of the Madonna.

⁹² Ibid, 37.

⁹³ The death of Gaskell's mother and her children is frequently discussed in relation to the emphasis on maternity within her novels. See: Stoneman. *Elizabeth Gaskell*, 16-22; and Margaret Homans. *Bearing the Word: Language and Female Experience in Nineteenth-Century Women's Writing*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986, 223-224.

The scene of her son's birth is pictured as a nativity as Gaskell describes the moment Ruth first meets her son Leonard: "The earth was still 'hiding her guilty front with innocent snow,' when a little baby was laid by the side of the pale white mother."⁹⁴ The quotation from Milton's "On the Morning of Christ's Nativity" makes explicit Ruth's dual role as a fallen Madonna. Gaskell goes on to describe Ruth's growing feelings of maternity, "For here was a new, pure, beautiful, innocent life, which she fondly imagined, in that early passion of maternal love, she could guard from every touch of corrupting sin by ever watchful and most tender care."⁹⁵ This description emphasizes Ruth's new-found purity through her role as mother to her innocent newborn son.

Gaskell continues by depicting Ruth's experience in this small moment as symbolic—one which connects her to the experiences of all women: "And *her* mother had thought the same, most probably; and thousands of others think the same, and pray to God to purify and cleanse their souls, that they may be fit guardians for their little children."⁹⁶ Through her description of the experiences of all women who bear children, Gaskell hints at the experience of the Madonna and also of Eve, the mother of all the living.⁹⁷ Gaskell indicates that all women come to motherhood as fallible human beings, but that through the act of bearing children, with God's help, they may find salvation.⁹⁸ Gaskell describes that the experience of "tending, nursing, and contriving for the little boy" resulted in Ruth feeling "happy and satisfied and peaceful."⁹⁹ Gaskell herself took great joy in her domestic role, claiming, "I am always glad and thankful to Him that I am a wife and a mother and that I am so happy

⁹⁴ Gaskell. *Ruth*, 132.

⁹⁵ *Ibid*, 132-133.

⁹⁶ *Ibid*, 133.

⁹⁷ Genesis 3:20

⁹⁸ This echoes I Timothy 2:15, "Yet woman will be saved through bearing children, if she continues in faith and love and holiness, with modesty."

⁹⁹ Gaskell. *Ruth*, 160-161.

in the performance of those clear and defined duties.”¹⁰⁰ In Ruth she created a ‘fallen’ woman who became the embodiment of her own experience as a woman and thus becomes saved. Ruth, who is re-visioned as a symbol of the Madonna and Magdalene, reflects Gaskell’s many “mes”—some of which fit comfortably into Victorian middle-class domestic life and some of which did not. Yet, despite the contradictory elements of her character, Gaskell understood herself, like Ruth, as pure, even if there were elements of her life that defied certain Victorian conventions of womanhood.

Ultimately, Gaskell used her novel to re-vision the symbols of Eve, the Virgin Mary, and Mary Magdalene in order to bring redemption to the Victorian ‘fallen’ woman. Several years after Leonard was born, Ruth has a confrontation with Mr. Bellingham (now known as Mr. Donne), who had hitherto been unaware of Ruth’s situation. Mr. Donne at first asks Ruth to be his mistress, promising to financially take care of her and their son. When she refuses, he proposes marriage, which she also declines, due in part to the separate paths their lives have taken. Ruth tells him of their ‘fall:’ “You have talked of it with no sound of moaning in your voice—no shadow over the brightness of your face; it has left no sense of sin on your conscience, while me it haunts and haunts.”¹⁰¹ Earlier in the conversation, Ruth explains her conversion to purity by alluding to Mary Magdalene, stating, “The errors of my youth may be washed away by my tears—it was so once when the gentle, blessed Christ was upon earth.”¹⁰² This image of the Magdalene, washing Jesus’ feet with her hair and tears, emphasizes Ruth’s role as a penitent sinner who is purified through her confession and realization of her sins. At the same time Ruth is identified with the Madonna as she keeps Leonard in her arms, protected from any potential harm.

¹⁰⁰ Gaskell. “Letter 71.” *EGL*, 118.

¹⁰¹ Gaskell. *Ruth*, 245.

¹⁰² *Ibid*, 244.

Eventually, though, Ruth's 'widowhood' becomes revealed as a cover and the town learns of her true history. In one of the most climatic and forceful scenes in the novel, Mr. Benson, the minister who had rescued and cared for Ruth, argues with Mr. Bradshaw, a powerful gentleman in the community whose daughters had been tutored by Ruth. Mr. Benson defends fallen women by contrasting the actions of Christ with the actions of the world toward such women, ardently claiming:

[N]ot every woman who has fallen is depraved;...many, many crave and hunger after a chance for virtue—the help which no man gives to them—help—that gentle tender help which Jesus gave once to Mary Magdalene.¹⁰³

Benson stands as a sort of Christ-figure who assisted Ruth in her redemption, but he goes on to emphasize, "[E]very woman, who, like Ruth, has sinned, should be given a chance at self-redemption."¹⁰⁴ This self-redemption is the result of her good works and morality. She is both Magdalene and Madonna because of her role as a pure mother. Nonetheless, Bradshaw, along with the rest of the small town, is not convinced of her innocence. Both Ruth and Leonard are ostracized by the community. Ruth, unable to tutor any longer, becomes a nurse and works among the poor and the outcasts of society. The novel ends dramatically; while caring for Mr. Donne (Bellingham), Ruth contracts a fever which causes her death.

The novel's ending was initially controversial, particularly for those who appreciated the novel's argument against society's treatment of the 'fallen' woman, because it seemed as if Ruth was punished at the end, as if the only appropriate ending for her would be death. Even before the third installment of the novel was published, reviewers predicted that Ruth, in order to fulfill the convention of salvation

¹⁰³ Ibid, 284.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

through death, would need to perish to attain her final glorification.¹⁰⁵ Others thought the ending to be unfortunate. Responding to Gaskell's plans for the novel, Charlotte Brontë initially praised the concept but protested the ending, asking, "Why should she die? Why are we to shut up the book weeping?"¹⁰⁶ Elizabeth Barrett Browning similarly confessed in a letter to Gaskell, "I am quite grateful to you as a woman for having treated such a subject—Was it quite impossible but that your Ruth should *die*? I had that thought of regret in closing the book."¹⁰⁷ Yet, Gaskell's argument was centrally concerned with the unfairness of society's treatment of the 'fallen' woman, which is why ending the story happily would have seemed absurd. However, her interpretation of Ruth's life—and death—makes clear Ruth's purity. In some ways, Gaskell's ending follows the conventional Victorian 'fallen woman' narrative—Ruth, like many other fictional 'fallen' women such as Lady Dedlock in *Bleak House*, Tess in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, and Hetty Sorrel in *Adam Bede*, succumbs to a tragic death after experiencing suffering as consequence of her 'sin.' Yet, unlike other 'fallen' women protagonists in Victorian novels, Ruth dies more a martyr than a tragic, condemned figure—she is portrayed by Gaskell as a sacrificial victim of society's idealized vision of womanhood. In this way, Gaskell emphasizes Ruth's saintly qualities rather than her 'fallenness.' The question "Why should she die?" was precisely the reaction Gaskell desired toward her argument about society's treatment of 'fallen' women.

Toward the end of the novel, just as Leonard discovers the truth of his birth, but before Ruth's death, Leonard waits outside the hospital for his mother and listens to the conversation of those gathered outside the building. As he eavesdrops on their

¹⁰⁵ Linda K. Hughes and Michael Lund. *Victorian Publishing and Mrs. Gaskell's Work*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia, 1999, 83-84.

¹⁰⁶ Gaskell. *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, Charlotte, 391.

¹⁰⁷ Elizabeth Barrett Browning. "Letter to Elizabeth Gaskell." *Elizabeth Gaskell: the Critical Heritage*. Ed. Angus Easson, London: Routledge, 1991. 316.

conversation, Leonard begins to realize that they are discussing his mother. One man says, “They say she has been a great sinner, and that this is her penance.”¹⁰⁸ Another disagrees, stating that her work was not a penance but rather done “for the love of God, and the blessed Jesus.”¹⁰⁹ Shaking his fist at the man, the second man tells the first, “I could fell you...for calling that woman a great sinner.”¹¹⁰ Leonard, who at that point was unsure of how to view his mother who had just recently confessed her sin to him, becomes more confident and proud of his mother as he listens to the conversation and is eventually emboldened to declare, “She is my mother.”¹¹¹ All the people there gather around him. Gaskell concludes the episode by alluding to the Madonna, writing, “From that day forward Leonard walked erect in the streets of Ecclestone, where ‘many arose and called her blessed.’”¹¹² In this scene Gaskell juxtaposes the image of the penitent sinner—the Magdalene—with the women that all were to call blessed—the Madonna. She is not a sinner; she is a saint. It is significant that this public recognition of her saintly status occurs shortly before her death. Her death is not a punishment for her sins but a recognition of her sainthood, which serves to further emphasize society’s wrongdoing against the ‘fallen’ woman. Her inheritance is that all will remember her and recognize her greatness; as such her death is not filled with shame but with glory.

Reception of *Ruth*: Re-Interpreting the ‘Fallen’ Woman

As Gaskell wrote her novel *Ruth*, she felt increasingly apprehensive about how the work would be received. By nature Gaskell tended to be fairly melodramatic, so by the time her novel was published she had worked herself into a panic over its

¹⁰⁸ Gaskell. *Ruth*, 346.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Ibid, 347.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Ibid.

public reception. While she made little mention of the many accolades her work received, she almost seemed to revel in, or even enjoy, the controversy she had created. She let her friends know that she was in the midst of a distressing “Ruth fever”¹¹³ and ended up forbidding others from expressing their disapproval of the work to her.¹¹⁴ She explained that the pain she felt from such criticisms was analogous to Saint Sebastian being tied to a tree about to be shot with arrows.¹¹⁵

Despite the anguish she felt at the response toward her book, she was optimistic that she achieved her goals in writing it, stating, “I have spoken out my mind in the best way I can, and I have no doubt that what was meant so earnestly *must* do some good.”¹¹⁶ However, Gaskell summed up the general assessment of her work thusly: “‘An unfit subject for fiction’ is *the* thing to say about it.”¹¹⁷ It was a statement that she found painful to hear, leaving her bitter and in tears.¹¹⁸ It was not just the critical reception that bothered her; she wrote a friend explaining two men from her church burnt the first volume of *Ruth* and a third man refused to let his wife read the book, even though they sat next to the Gaskells at church.¹¹⁹ She also emphasized to others that *Ruth* was pulled out of circulation in lending libraries, parents refused to let their children read it and adult sons refused to let their mothers read it.¹²⁰

Gaskell’s critics and biographers have often taken her interpretation of the negative reception toward the novel’s subject matter as fact.¹²¹ Some critics were certainly harsh, but Gaskell’s critique of society’s treatment of the ‘fallen’ woman

¹¹³ Gaskell. “Letter 150.” *EGL*, 222.

¹¹⁴ Gaskell. “Letter 148.” *EGL*, 220.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 221.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 220.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁹ Gaskell. “Letter 150.” *EGL*, 223.

¹²⁰ Gaskell. “Letter 151.” *EGL*, 223.

¹²¹ See: Monica Correa Fryckstedt. *Elizabeth Gaskell’s Mary Barton and Ruth: A Challenge to Christian England*. Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1982 and Uglow. *Elizabeth Gaskell: A Habit of Stories*, 337-342.

was often welcomed and praised by reviewers. When the novel did receive criticism, it was more often due to readers believing that the book did not reflect the truth of Ruth's situation rather than being uncomfortable with the story's major themes. Some were concerned with the "white lie" told about Ruth's widowhood, most often because it did not fit with Mr. Benson's character.¹²² A couple of reviewers noted that the depictions of the characters in *Ruth*, particularly its portrayal of a 'fallen woman,' were inaccurate. In one particularly uneven review published in *Sharpe's London Magazine*, the unsigned reviewer complains that Ruth is met "with the tenderest and most affectionate treatment, and yet, however admired and lived, she is cut off."¹²³ According to the reviewer, this does not reflect the salvation penitent women often find who are in Ruth's situation.¹²⁴ An unsigned reviewer in the *Spectator* similarly noted that Ruth is so pure and sentimental that she does not "square with the actual."¹²⁵ The reviewer believed that because "the story ceases to be a general picture of life," the novel ultimately "fails in impressing the lesson the author would apparently teach."¹²⁶ Poet Arthur Hugh Clough likewise questioned the overall truth of the novel, calling it "a little too timid" in its critique of the double sexual standard because it became untenable "that such overpowering humiliation should be the result in the soul of the not really guilty, though misguided girl."¹²⁷

Yet, these 'negative' reviews, for the most part, only briefly mention these criticisms as minor faults and frequently include praise for other aspects of the novel. Gaskell's emphasis on the negative reception of her work may have been the case of

¹²² Most notably: G.H. Lewes. "From an Unsigned review of *Ruth*, the *Leader*," *Elizabeth Gaskell: the Critical Heritage*. Ed. Angus Easson. London: Routledge, 1991. 214-218, 215; and "Recent Works of Fiction [Mrs. Gaskell's *Ruth*]." *The Prospective Review* April 1853: 222-242.

¹²³ "From an Unsigned Review of *Ruth*, *Sharpe's London Magazine*." *Elizabeth Gaskell: the Critical Heritage*, Ed. Angus Easson. London: Routledge, 1991. 208-211, 210.

¹²⁴ *Ibid*, 210-211.

¹²⁵ "From an Unsigned Review of *Ruth*, the *Spectator*." *Elizabeth Gaskell: the Critical Heritage*. Ed. Angus Easson. London: Routledge, 1991. 211-214, 212.

¹²⁶ *Ibid*.

¹²⁷ Arthur Hugh Clough. "April 6, 1853." *Letters and Remains*. London: Spottiswoode, 1865, 254.

an author being overly aware of criticism of her work, but on the other hand it also reflects her enjoyment in creating controversy. This again reflects Gaskell's many "mes." Part of her desired to experience some aspect of 'fallenness' or even unconventionality, but the other part of her was fearful of the repercussions for such actions. She was shocked and appalled that her book was being censored and burned, yet at the same time she prohibited the book in her own house, claiming that it was "not a book for young people, unless read with someone older."¹²⁸ She went on to mention that she intended to read it together with her daughter Marianne at some point, who, at eighteen years old, was hardly "young" at the time. Gaskell was clearly aware of just how controversial her work was but, even so, claimed that she would "do every jot of it over again to-morrow."¹²⁹ She seemed to both understand and enjoy the controversy surrounding the book.

Despite Gaskell's emphasis on the negative reaction to her work, many critics actually rallied behind her unveiling of the sexual double standard and hypocrisy toward sexual sin. Reviews in both *Bentley's Miscellany* and *Westminster Review* likened *Ruth* to a sermon,¹³⁰ with the reviewer in *Bentley's* claiming, "[I]t is the high moral purpose of the story that we most admire."¹³¹ An unsigned reviewer in the *Guardian* praised *Ruth* for its "very high and pure conception"¹³² and described the title character as "gentle, tender, confiding, and imaginative."¹³³ A review in the *Manchester Examiner and Times* similarly praised *Ruth*, stating: "[W]e are acquainted with no English novel more lofty in its sentiment, more simply truthful in its

¹²⁸ Gaskell, "Letter 148." *EGL*, 221.

¹²⁹ *Ibid*, 220.

¹³⁰ *Elizabeth Gaskell: the Critical Heritage*, 241 and 264.

¹³¹ "Contemporary Literature." *Bentley's Miscellany* Volume 33. London: Richard Bentley, 1853. 233-241, 238.

¹³² *Ibid*, 234.

¹³³ *Ibid*, 235.

narrative, more beautiful in its general tone throughout.”¹³⁴ Rather than offer shock and condemnation for the novel’s themes or purpose, many reviewers praised Gaskell’s characterization of Ruth along with her criticism of society.

George Eliot’s lover, G.H. Lewes, wrote a review that emphasizes his awareness of the double standard, which is particularly interesting because of his own ‘fallen’ relationship. Lewes begins by arguing, “We may observe in passing, that in using the words ‘guilt’ or ‘crime,’ or ‘sin,’ we are for the moment accepting what in reality we do not accept.”¹³⁵ Lewes’ main criticism of Gaskell’s novel is that she has followed certain conventions in order to make her story acceptable to all but the most strident moralists. In other words, Gaskell’s depiction of society’s treatment of the ‘fallen’ woman, for Lewes, did not go far enough. He believes that Ruth is too young and too innocent; Gaskell would have had a more effective argument had “Ruth been older, and had she more clearly perceived the whole consequences of her transgression.”¹³⁶ Lewes believes that Ruth’s conversion would have been stronger had she been more culpable for her actions, but in this he somewhat misses Gaskell’s point that even pure women can fall.

The response to Gaskell’s work demonstrates the shifts that were taking place within society’s understanding of the ‘fallen’ woman. Gaskell’s novel *Ruth* provided her readers with a re-visioning of the biblical symbol of Mary Magdalene that enabled them to more sympathetically understand women on the margins of society. Even more so, Gaskell’s novel—particularly its title character—reflected the complexity of Victorian womanhood experienced not just by the ‘fallen’ women but by all women. Gaskell encouraged women to understand their own experience as not just tied to the

¹³⁴ “From an Unsigned Review of *Ruth*, the *Manchester Examiner and Times*.” *Elizabeth Gaskell: the Critical Heritage*. Ed. Angus Easson. London: Routledge, 1991. 236-239, 237.

¹³⁵ G.H. Lewes. “Ruth and Villette.” *Westminster Review* April 1865: 245-254, 477.

¹³⁶ *Ibid*.

Madonna or to the Magdalene but to draw from and reinterpret these seemingly contrary biblical symbols of womanhood in such a way as to reflect the whole of their experience as women. Through the embodiment of such a range of female symbols, the Victorian conception of womanhood expanded to better reflect the various experiences encountered by women.

Josephine Butler and *Ruth*

In his review of *Ruth*, G.H. Lewes argued for the particular importance of how women read and responded to Gaskell's novel, noting, "It is only women who can help women, and it is only women who can really raise those that have 'fallen;' not indeed by countenancing them, but by appealing to their self-respect."¹³⁷ Lewes' statement here reflects his belief that women have distinct life experiences apart from men and that Gaskell's work offered a female understanding of the 'fallen' woman. Gaskell's fictional narrative applied her own experience as a woman to the lives of other women—even 'fallen' women. In turn, Gaskell's novel played a role in how her female readers viewed 'fallenness' and interpreted their own roles as women. Ultimately, Gaskell's novels became embodied within the life and work of some of her female readers and shaped their understanding of womanhood. Social activist Josephine Butler was one such reader of *Ruth* whose interpretation of her own experiences and the lives of the women she worked with were shaped in part by Gaskell's reinterpretation of the Magdalene and Madonna symbols in her novel.

Josephine Butler believed, like Lewes, that women were best suited to help other women, particularly those marginalized within society. Butler's advocacy on behalf of prostitutes during the last half of the nineteenth century branched out into

¹³⁷ Lewes. "Ruth and Villette," 476.

promoting awareness of women's issues relating to female suffrage, poverty, trafficking, and unequal sexual standards for men and women. She was a prolific writer and speaker who was involved in creating houses of rest for sick or poor women, which included taking such women into her own home. Butler most often framed her advocacy on behalf of prostitutes as a reaction against Parliament's passage of the Contagious Disease Acts (hereafter CDA), which required registration and forced internal examination of any woman suspected of prostitution—legislation Butler believed cruelly and hypocritically punished women as a direct result of the double sexual standard in Britain.¹³⁸

Like Elizabeth Gaskell, Butler used her life experiences as a means of interpreting not only her own role as a woman, but also that of other women around her. Butler understood Victorian womanhood through the use of biblical symbols, and her interpretation of these symbols was overwhelmingly affected by Gaskell's novel *Ruth*. In particular, the novel shaped the way she interpreted her own role in society and that of the 'fallen' woman. Butler recounts reading the novel:

A book was published at that time by Mrs. Gaskell, and was much discussed. This led to expressions of judgment which seemed to me false—fatally false. A moral lapse in a woman was spoken of as an immensely worse thing than in a man; there was no comparison to be formed between them. A pure woman, it was reiterated, should be absolutely ignorant of a certain class of evils in the world, albeit those evils bore with murderous cruelty on other women. One young man seriously declared that he would not allow his own mother to read such a book as that under discussion—a book which seemed to me to have a very wholesome tendency though dealing with a painful subject. Silence was thought to be the great duty of all on such subjects.¹³⁹

Butler, like Gaskell, found it difficult to be silent on an issue that impacted so many women. While Butler's reflections on *Ruth* date her reading of the novel to over ten

¹³⁸ The CDA was first passed in Britain in 1864, and renewed and extended in 1866 and 1869, before finally being repealed in 1886. For more of the history surrounding the CDA and the discourse surrounding prostitution in Britain see Trevor Fisher's work *Prostitution and the Victorians*. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997.)

¹³⁹ Josephine Butler, *Josephine*, 23.

years before her work with prostitutes was initiated in any formal manner, her sympathetic portrayal of the prostitute and ‘fallen’ woman within her own writing shares an affinity with Gaskell’s narrative and the hermeneutic approach Gaskell used to re-vision biblical symbols.¹⁴⁰ In the same way that Gaskell characterized ‘fallenness’ through the reinterpretation of biblical narratives within her novel, Butler reimagined the symbol of Mary Magdalene as a saint figure which she used to interpret and understand not only ‘fallen’ women but also the shared experience of womanhood connected to all women.

Butler was dependent on her personal reinterpretation of biblical symbols, most often Mary Magdalene and the Virgin Mary, to explain her relationship with ‘fallen’ women. Butler’s hermeneutic approach toward scripture along with her use of biblical symbols and her understanding of morality was shaped by her Wesleyan faith, which was responsible for her ardent and personal Christian practice.¹⁴¹ She often tied biblical narratives to her own experiences, feeling a personal affinity with the female figures of scripture. Butler also applied these symbols to the lives of the women for whom she advocated. She believed that only women could give voice to the female figures of the Bible by interpreting them through their own experiences as women. Retelling the story of the angel’s visit to the Virgin Mary by focusing on Mary’s silence after discovering that she would bear the Son of God, Butler asks, “Has any *man* ever tried or dared to think what those months were to her?”¹⁴² She does not

¹⁴⁰ Judith R. Walkowitz notes that Butler’s biographical accounts of rehabilitated fallen women even borrow from Gaskell’s narrative framework in *Ruth*. See: *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London*. London: Virago Press, 1994, 89ff. See also Helen Mathers. “‘Tis Dishonour Done to Me’: Self-Representation in the Writings of Josephine Butler.” *Sex, Gender, and Religion: Josephine Butler Revisited*. Jenny Daggers and Diana Neal, Editors. New York: Peter Lang, 2006, 43-45.

¹⁴¹ Jane Jordan. *Josephine Butler*. London: John Murray, 2001, 16-19, 44. See also: Josephine Butler. *The Morning Cometh: a Letter to my Children, by ‘Philates.’* Newcastle: T.M. Grierson, 1903, 49.

¹⁴² Butler. *Josephine Butler and the Prostitution Campaigns: Diseases of the Body Politic*. Vol.1, Eds. Jane Jordan and Ingrid Sharp. London: Routledge, 2003, 185. (From a speech presented at the annual address to the Ladies National Association, 14 November 1871.)

answer this question but instead goes on to emphasize that Mary's silence can be adequately understood through the type of loneliness that only women experience.

Butler's public discourse on prostitution was shaped, in part, by her belief that all women embody religious symbols of the Virgin Mary and Magdalene. Her use of these symbols within a secular, political discourse further demonstrates that, for Butler, these symbols were not stuck within an ancient religious tradition but had relevance in the here and now because of how they could be rediscovered through the lives of all women as they encountered biblical symbols in the text and in turn became the embodiment of those symbols. Butler's hermeneutic approach toward the female symbols of scripture is particularly emphasized in the way she interpreted the narrative of the woman who knelt at Jesus' feet and washed his feet with her tears—a figure believed to have been Mary Magdalene throughout much of the Church's history.¹⁴³ In one such allusion to the Magdalene, Butler describes the way Christ welcomes the 'fallen' woman, writing:

And the seal set upon every such message was ... the Lover of the Lost, the Friend of sinners; of Him who welcomed the sinful woman, the sister of those who are called in police reports "habitual prostitutes," "abandoned women," "recalcitrants," "social nuisances"; of Him who accepted her tears, who suffered her to kiss His feet.¹⁴⁴

For Butler, being Mary and resting at the feet of Jesus no longer was locked into a historical time or place but materialized in those public spaces in which women met together to serve God. Josephine Butler's appropriation of biblical symbols was a hermeneutic act: Butler's interpretation of womanhood begins with the biblical and cultural myths surrounding these figures but also draws from the reinterpretation of these symbols she encountered within Victorian discourse, such as in Elizabeth

¹⁴³ The image of Mary Magdalene washing Jesus' feet was a frequently used motif in Butler's work. See: *Josephine Butler and the Prostitution Campaigns: Diseases of the Body Politic*. Vol. 1, 95 and 292; *Josephine Butler: an Autobiographical Memoir*, 12 and 208-209.

¹⁴⁴ Butler. *Josephine Butler and the Prostitution Campaigns: Diseases of the Body Politic*. Vol. 1, 292.

Gaskell's *Ruth*. Her interpretation of the biblical texts and the fictional re-visioning of these symbols within novels was also shaped by her personal life as a woman and by her work with other women, including her charity work with 'fallen' women. Butler's interpretation of these figures remains tied to the interpretive tradition but also brings new meaning to these symbols drawn from her own experience as a woman, which pulls the symbols into a coherent discourse with her own work and the contemporary issues of her day.

Within her work, Butler shifts the Victorian conception of the idealized woman in that the Magdalene is the Madonna but also that the Madonna is the Magdalene. Butler's emphasis on the purity of the former prostitute echoes a passage in Gaskell's novel *Ruth* in which one of the characters describes women such as Ruth, saying: "not every woman who has fallen is depraved; that many... many, many crave and hunger after a chance for virtue...that gentle tender help which Jesus gave once to Mary Magdalen."¹⁴⁵ It is as if both Butler and Gaskell are claiming that impurity cannot be the whole identity for the 'fallen' woman—these women really are the Madonna just as much as the Magdalene.

Similar to the portrait of 'fallenness' in Elizabeth Gaskell's *Ruth*, Butler believed that the 'fallen' woman could at the same time be 'pure.' Butler often idealized marriage, maternity, and female sainthood—and while these qualities were difficult to juxtapose with the Magdalene symbol, Butler nonetheless believed that these women could be reclaimed as symbols of purity. Describing Mary Lomax, the first prostitute that she brought into her home, Butler wrote to her niece:

[Mary] is so *clean* taken out of all memory of sin even that one feels as if talking to a being of angelic purity. Yet she *can* grasp the whole sad subject of prostitution like a *man*, calmly, & philosophically, yet with the deep indignant

¹⁴⁵ Gaskell. *Ruth*, 350-351.

tenderness of a Christian. Is she not a wonderful being!¹⁴⁶

Her narratives of the ‘fallen’ women served a practical purpose to her work: Butler emphasized the purity of the women she took into her home to argue that the rehabilitation of ‘fallen’ women was preferable to forced medical examinations to prevent the spread of venereal disease. However, her belief that the Magdalenes in society could be purified also operated to shift cultural understandings of womanhood from a fixed dichotomy of pure and fallen to one which she believed more accurately portrayed the range of female experience.

While Butler’s interpretation of the ‘fallen’ woman has resonance with Gaskell’s own, she also created her own distinct, reimagined Magdalene narrative, which she appropriated not only to the fallen woman but to herself and to all women. It is this new interpretation of the Magdalene as ‘every woman’ that brings Butler’s re-visioning of religious symbols into coherence with the cultural issues of her day. She felt strongly that all women share a common bond with similar experiences as women and that it was critical that women understood how interconnected their experiences as women are. Butler, who, like Elizabeth Gaskell, lost her daughter at a young age, was drawn to these young women in dire situations and longed to tell them, “I understand. I, too, have suffered.”¹⁴⁷ Butler often emphasized her own sufferings as a way to create a bond between her and the marginalized women she worked with. Her belief in the solidarity women had with each other also played an important role in her political advocacy on women’s issues. Butler believed that as

¹⁴⁶ Butler, *Josephine Butler and the Prostitution Campaigns: Diseases of the Body Politic*. Vol. 1, 84. Helen Mathers notes Butler’s conflation of the Madonna with the Magdalene in her article “‘Tis Dishonour Done to Me’: Self-Representation in the Writings of Josephine Butler,” but neglects to connect how Butler’s re-interpretation of these symbols in turn shaped her understanding of her own womanhood, focusing instead on how Butler used this understanding of the Magdalene within her fallen women biographies (42-45).

¹⁴⁷ Josephine Butler, *Recollections of George Butler*. London: Simpkin, Marshall, Hamilton, & Kent, 1892, 182-3.

long as one group of women was suffering then all women were vulnerable, and that to ignore the very real sisterhood that existed among women often resulted in injustices that could affect any woman.¹⁴⁸

When speaking with ‘fallen’ women, Butler would often share her own experiences as a woman in order to break down the barriers of indifference and resistance she believed the women had toward life. In one particular instance, Butler recalls sharing her experiences as a wife and mother with a group of young women who gathered around her seated on the floor. She spoke to them “of the sweetness of family life, of the blessing of the love of a pure and chivalrous man, and of happy married life” and continued by drawing a portrait of domestic bliss surrounding her domestic chores, children, and husband.¹⁴⁹ Butler later acknowledged that her words might seem cruel to offer to women who most likely had little opportunity to achieve such a lifestyle.¹⁵⁰ But, Butler notes that her depiction of family life softened the women’s hardness toward life; the women reacted with heads bowed and tears streaming down their faces, as if to say, “Too late! too late! that is not for us. Once we had now and then such a dream, but now—nevermore!”¹⁵¹ In that moment, Butler responds to them as a mother and, instead of crushing their spirits further, lifts them up into a place of esteem, equal to her own as wife and mother:

I dropped on the floor to be nearer and in the midst of them, and spoke words which I cannot remember, but to this effect: “Courage my darlings! Don’t despair; I have good news for you. You are a woman and a woman is always a beautiful thing. You have been dragged deep in the mud; but still you are women. ... It may be that the picture I have drawn is not for you, yet I dare to prophesy good for you and happiness even in this life; and I tell you truly that you can become, in this life, something even better than a happy wife and mother—yes, something better.”¹⁵²

¹⁴⁸ Butler. *Josephine Butler: an Autobiographical Memoir*, 215.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 212.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁵² *Ibid.*

Her message to these women hinges on the idea that, as women, they all share commonalities, and it is what they have in common—not their differences—which should be tied to their understandings of womanhood.

As Butler emphasized the shared experiences of all women, it is unsurprising that she often applied the same biblical symbols to herself that she did the ‘fallen’ women she worked with. Yet given the way that Butler often fulfilled the Victorian conception of idealized womanhood as wife and mother, it is interesting that it is Mary Magdalene that Butler identifies with most often.¹⁵³ The image Butler returns to repeatedly throughout her writing is that of the unnamed woman in the Gospels who kisses the feet of Jesus. Butler recognizes the feet of Jesus as the place where true womanhood rests. Here all women gather and become Magdalenes within a community of womanhood: rich and poor, fallen and saintly alike. Butler describes resting within this image thusly:

Looking at my Liberator in the face, can my friends wonder that I have taken my place (I took it long ago)—oh! with what infinite contentment!—by the side of her, the “woman in the city which was a sinner,” of whom He, her Liberator and mine, said, as He can also say of me, “*this woman* hath not ceased to kiss my feet.”

Here Butler pictures herself not just sitting beside Mary Magdalene, but actually *becoming* the Magdalene who does not cease to kiss Christ’s feet. This echoes a poem written by Mary Lomax, the former prostitute ministered to by Butler, who wrote of her teacher, “She told me of the Holy One, and led me to his feet,/Where the pure and the penitent, the saint and sinner meet.”¹⁵⁴ It is in this place that the prostitute becomes the Madonna who likewise rests at Jesus’ feet at the cross and also where idealized, maternal women such as Butler become the Magdalene. Therefore, Butler

¹⁵³ One of Butler’s earliest biographers drew parallels between Josephine and Mary Magdalene also. See: Millicent G. Fawcett and E.M. Turner. *Josephine Butler*. London: The Association for Moral and Social Hygiene, 1927, 151.

¹⁵⁴ Butler. *Josephine Butler and the Prostitution Campaigns: Diseases of the Body Politic*. Vol. 1, 89. (This is a poem written by Mary Lomax and Dedicated to Josephine E. Butler, February 1867.)

embodies these Christian symbols, re-visioning the nature of womanhood to create a place which gathers all women together at Jesus' feet—a place in which purity and 'fallenness' co-exist and where the lines between them become difficult to distinguish, categories which apply to everyone and no one at the same time.

Attaining Sainthood through the Embodiment of Biblical Symbols

At St. Olave's Church in southeast London there is a large stained glass window depicting female saints and historical figures.¹⁵⁵ The Virgin Mary stands at the center of the window and is flanked by Saint Catherine and Queen Elizabeth I. Above these women, and depicted as much smaller figures, are Elizabeth Fry, Florence Nightingale, Edith Cavell, and Josephine Butler. Butler is represented in the stained glass with a Bible in one hand and a petition to Parliament in another, which points to the connection between the biblical text and political advocacy in her work.¹⁵⁶ Butler re-visioned Christian narratives, using them to interpret her life and the lives of the women she worked with, as a way to campaign for political change. However, the stained glass at Saint Olave's not only shows how Butler used biblical symbols but also demonstrates how Victorian women such as Butler were interpreted by others as saints within the Victorian social imaginary.

It was through the embodiment of biblical symbols that women—often somewhat unconventional women like Butler or Gaskell whose work was met with controversy—brought credibility to their lifestyle and work. The same type of sainthood that both Butler and Gaskell projected onto the 'fallen' woman was in turn projected onto their lives as well, both by themselves and others. For Butler and

¹⁵⁵ A similar stained glass portrait of Butler, at the Lady Chapel in Liverpool Anglican Cathedral, was consecrated in 1910. In the Liverpool portrait, Butler is surrounded by Queen Victoria and Victorian social reformers such as Elizabeth Fry and Agnes Jones.

¹⁵⁶ Jordan. *Josephine Butler*, 3.

Gaskell this sainthood was tied to religious faith and Christian practice, yet it enabled social respectability and 'sainthood' that went beyond the life of the Church, influencing domestic, professional, and political life for women as well. Furthermore, because of the way in which Butler and Gaskell re-visioned biblical symbols, particularly Mary Magdalene and the Madonna, their understanding of sainthood reinterpreted conventional Victorian understandings of 'purity' and 'fallenness.' Their appropriation of these symbols through their life and work ultimately expanded society's understanding of womanhood in order to more fully reflect the experiences of all women. Therefore, even though women with different class and social backgrounds tended to have vastly different life experiences, Butler and Gaskell's re-visioning of these symbols enabled women to discover solidarity with each other through their own appropriation of biblical symbols because their understanding of self and others was rooted within the same myths.

CHAPTER NINE: CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

George Eliot, Elizabeth Gaskell, and Josephine Butler each interpreted her own life through the re-visioning of biblical symbols, which created an embodied hermeneutic that increasingly enabled Victorian women to redefine society's conception of female gender roles. For Eliot and Gaskell, these embodied biblical symbols, reinterpreted through their personal experiences, became further re-visioned within their fictional works. Likewise, Butler, who projected re-visioned biblical symbols onto the 'fallen' women she worked with, created a fictional female symbolic within her speeches and autobiographical reflections. Recent scholarship of the last several decades has tended to interpret Victorian womanhood through the symbols of the 'angel in the house' and 'fallen' woman. While Eliot, Gaskell, and Butler were certainly familiar with the way women were idealized or degraded through Victorian gender roles (though each experienced the repercussions of these gender roles in very different ways), they did not understand their own role through the symbols of the 'angel' and 'fallen' woman. Rather, they understood womanhood through their reinterpretation of female biblical symbols.

While the dichotomy of 'angel' and 'whore' first adopted by twentieth-century scholars to explain Victorian womanhood provides a helpful—and needed—criticism of the idealistic gender roles demanded of women within a patriarchal society, in the end these contrasted symbols do not adequately reflect the full complexity of how Victorian women understood themselves. Ultimately, Victorian women were able to access a voice to express and interpret their experiences as women through a

hermeneutic method which enabled them to re-vision and embody biblical symbols. This type of hermeneutic method accommodates changing understandings of the nature of symbols and of the status of the biblical text, enabling men and women from different times and places to bring renewed significance to the biblical text and Christian symbols through the lens of their own experiences.

In this thesis, I have examined how biblical symbols were re-visioned by Victorian women through the medium of fiction in order to create an understanding of womanhood which reflected their own experience as women. The project began by arguing that philosophical and theological movements such as Higher Criticism, Romanticism, and Pietism responded to questions regarding the authority of the biblical text by practicing a hermeneutic of embodiment, whereby texts were interpreted through the personal experience of the reader. In particular, David Friedrich Strauss' and Ludwig Feuerbach's Higher Critical works read the Bible as a literary text through their imaginative re-interpretation of scripture. Their interpretive approaches called into question the historic reality of the biblical narratives and instead used scripture as a means of self-interpretation in the here and now. Similarly, the works of twentieth-century theorists Paul Ricœur and Caroline Walker Bynum suggest that the nature of biblical symbols enables new meaning to be given to symbols through hermeneutic practice. Biblical symbols are given new meaning when they are re-interpreted by the reader, and this new interpretation, while tied to its biblical myth, arises out of the life experiences of the reader. This hermeneutic approach was especially significant for Victorian women who were enabled to question Victorian conceptions of womanhood through their re-visioning of biblical symbols within the reading and writing of fictional texts. George Eliot, Elizabeth Gaskell, and Josephine Butler each used her life and work in order to re-vision and

embody biblical symbols. While the hermeneutic approaches used by these women to interpret biblical symbols were strikingly similar, their very different life experiences resulted in individual and unique interpretations of the same symbols. This demonstrates the capacity for biblical symbols to be re-visioned in infinite ways when embodied within the lives of readers. Through these unending re-visions, the personal experiences of women are given a voice while biblical narratives gain new authority when pulled into the reality of the reader's daily life.

Entering the Orbit of Possibility between Two Worlds

In his poetry and literary criticism, Matthew Arnold often expressed interest in the growing religious doubt of the era. To Arnold, the religious foundations upon which his culture rested were cracking, and he was unsure what to make of these changes. His poem "Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse," describes the Victorian crisis of faith. Within this poem, Arnold defines the era as "Wandering between two worlds," the first of which is dead and the second which is "powerless to be born."¹⁵⁷ This is the position of the Victorian doubter who was all too aware of how the nature of religious faith in Britain was changing. Arnold's poem is about dissimilarities: contrasting technology with tradition, ancient stories with science—a world where the tomb is juxtaposed with life and faith is simply an "exploded dream."¹⁵⁸ Yet, as Arnold's poem suggests, the Victorian position of standing between the old and the new amidst scientific and technological advances also reflects the shifting status of scripture—the Word of God became suspended between the worlds of faith and disbelief.

¹⁵⁷ Matthew Arnold. "Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse." *Fraser's Magazine for the Town and Country* April 1855: 437-440, 438.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

This suspension of place—the “wandering between two worlds” Arnold writes of—can also be applied to the space between life and fiction. It is in this space between two worlds where a hermeneutic of embodiment takes place; this is the moment where word becomes flesh. Victorian women were often caught between these worlds, yet unlike Arnold, who feels in this highly charged moment that the new world is “powerless to be born,” some Victorian women, through the practice of reading and re-writing the ancient female symbols, gave birth to a new symbolic understanding by reinterpreting biblical narratives through their own experiences. As a young woman, George Eliot expressed fear at the power of fiction because of its ability to enter into “the orbit of possibility,”¹⁵⁹ a reflection that provides a partial response to Arnold’s own doubts. Whereas he looked out dismally at the shores of Dover Beach, watching the “Sea of Faith” withdraw from view,¹⁶⁰ Eliot read the fictional text, both of scripture and the novel, so that she might stand at the shore and draw the water back to herself through the embodiment of its sacred narratives. As she grew older and her own doubt about traditional Christianity grew, Eliot became increasingly confident in the ability of novels to reflect the essence¹⁶¹ of scripture. As a result of the development of nineteenth-century hermeneutics, the status of the biblical text had changed—not just for Eliot and Arnold, but for society at large. And while many Victorians were left feeling uncertain about its future, new possibilities for understanding the Bible opened up as well. It was the re-visioning of scripture through these fictional narratives that enabled men and women to begin incarnating the Word of God through their interpretive practice as readers.

¹⁵⁹ Eliot. “GE to Maria Lewis, Griff, 16 March 1839.” *GEL*, 23.

¹⁶⁰ “Dover Beach.” *New Poems*. London: Macmillan, 1867. 112-114, 113.

¹⁶¹ I am intentionally alluding to the influence of Feuerbach’s *The Essence of Christianity* on Eliot’s hermeneutic practice.

Implications

For Victorian women, this process of incarnation or embodiment was discovered most frequently through biblical female symbolic figures such as Eve, the Madonna, and Magdalene. These biblical figures are still used today as powerful symbols for women living in cultures where Christian narratives are retained in some form. However, what made this type of hermeneutic practice significant for Victorian women is just how critical these symbols were as a mode of self-interpretation—allowing them room to break out of the confines of society’s understanding of womanhood while maintaining a connection to the myths in which conceptions of gender were rooted. While this did not necessarily mean that women immediately claimed subversive narratives, it gave them the means to appropriate biblical narratives according to their own experiences as women.

It is the nature of biblical symbols themselves that enables them to be constantly re-interpreted and re-visioned, resulting in new interpretations which in turn are read back into the biblical text. This means that this type of hermeneutic approach is not limited to the Victorians but that biblical symbols have the potential, always, as Paul Ricœur believes, to be approached again as if for the first time in a sort of “second naïveté”¹⁶² that enables the individual to bring new meaning to the biblical text through his or her act of interpretation. This type of hermeneutic method is particularly helpful for those who are or feel themselves to be unjustly treated within society, as it enables them to re-vision sacred symbols in order to break out of the traditional interpretation of biblical narratives which were originally used to reinforce their marginalization. However, such a hermeneutic approach raises questions about the role of scripture within modern Christian practice. Matthew

¹⁶² Ricœur. *The Symbolism of Evil*, 350-351.

Arnold lamented the increasing separation between a culture rooted in scripture and one divorced from its power.¹⁶³ While Ricœur claims a biblical symbol's meaning remains tied to its original scriptural myth, what happens to the interpretation of scripture as the re-visioned symbols spiral further and further away from the biblical myths? Perhaps as scripture becomes increasingly read as a fictional text it ceases to have any connection with the ancient myths of scripture and the history of Christian tradition. At the same time, it may be that the re-visioning of biblical symbols through imaginary works produces new relevancy for these ancient myths within the reality of the present, providing new authority for biblical narratives even as the status of scripture in society is uncertain.

Closing Meditation

At St. Mary's Cathedral in Glasgow, Scotland there is a large triptych mural by American artist Gwyneth Leech hanging from the north wall of St. Anne's Chapel. The piece is entitled "Kelvingrove Triptych" and it depicts the Easter Passion taking place in modern-day Kelvingrove Park in Glasgow. At first glance, it is simply an image of the park on any ordinary day: there are children, cyclists, dogs with their owners, groups of Sikh and Muslim men and women. Yet a closer look reveals members of St. Mary's own congregation and members of the artist's family. To the left is the scene at Gethsemane: the disciples gather around Jesus in the park as he is arrested. On the right side of the triptych is the moment where Mary Magdalene encounters the transfigured Christ in the garden but does not yet recognize him. In another panel, Leech depicts the *Magnificat*, showing two pregnant women—Mary and Elizabeth—standing in the garden beneath some elm trees along Woodlands

¹⁶³ Arnold. *God and the Bible: a Review of Objections to 'Literature and Dogma'* 121.

Drive, surrounded by birds commonly sighted in the area.¹⁶⁴ The painting is at once real and fictive, sacred and profane. The figures of Mary Magdalene and the Madonna are given particular prominence in this painting, along with the artist's own daughter, and I like to think that the painting embodies the author's own experience with maternity and the Divine as she re-visions the biblical text for herself, the church, and the local members of the community that gather throughout the week in Kelvingrove Park. Through her artistic re-visioning of the Gospel narratives, she enables the church, community, and even the park itself to be given new meaning—just as the biblical text itself gains new life and significance through the interpretation of her paintbrush.

When I first visited St. Mary's shortly after moving to Scotland, I was instantly taken by this painting, and I have continued to meditate on it since. Recently, I have begun to imagine what George Eliot would make of such a painting, and I like to think that my own meditations on the painting are similar to her love for the Holbein Madonna in Dresden which she frequently visited to reflect upon. But, even more than that, Eliot's own novels, like the Kelvingrove Triptych at St. Mary's Cathedral, allow readers of the text to enter into the biblical symbolic and embody it, so that the Word may become flesh and dwell among us. In the same way, biblical symbols become embodied in us as readers through the act of interpreting fictive texts. Here we stand, between two worlds of texts, the Word of God and the word of fiction; one seems unreachable in its historical distance and the other appears inaccessible in its imaginative nature—and yet somehow the biblical symbols spiral out from their sacred roots into the novel and pass through our bodies, becoming born again through our lives as readers.

¹⁶⁴ St. Mary's has produced a pamphlet describing this painting and its history.

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