

Spring Essay, *What impact did images have on the development of conscience / ethical discourse in the nineteenth century?*

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The nineteenth century saw the role of images adopt a new kind of power; one that deliberately sought to better the masses by offering a didactic representation of conscience and ethics. This, combined with increasing emphasis on cultural capital and identity through the democratisation of museums and galleries and emergence of printed press, made clear that images were considered paramount to education and awareness of political and social issues within society. In this essay, I will assess the ways in which images were used to enforce a particular narrative with the aim of educating and cultivating a sense of conscience in the masses for the overall improvement of a society that struggled with profound poverty, violence and crime following the industrial revolution.

The Victorian period is often associated with strong religiosity, morality and order, in a deliberate attempt by the authorities to regain control and maintain appearances during a period of dramatic social and political upheaval due to the industrial revolution and rapid expansion of the empire. Attitudes towards marginalised or vulnerable members of society, including criminals, children, women, animals and the mentally ill, evolved from one of degradation and humiliation to one of sympathy and reform. Poverty and addiction were treated as something that could be avoided with strong moral ethics, rather than being a product of the harsh conditions from which people suffered. Forced to combat new-found problems on a much larger scale, with swathes of people migrating to London and other major cities in search of work, middle-class Victorians took a reformatory approach, believing it was the moral, Christian thing to do. They viewed traditional methods as inefficient,¹ instead advocating for the protection of cruelty against children and animals, reform homes for prostitutes, skills-training programs for prison inmates, and improved health and safety standards in the work place.²

By making images, namely paintings and photography, more accessible through free gallery and museum access and the proliferation of images in newspapers, journals and pamphlets, their importance in contributing to the wider narrative was understood. Images were able to offer a new form of direct, immediate communication that could convey a message much

¹ Lawrence Goldman, *Science, Reform, and Politics in Victorian Britain: The Social Science Association 1857–1886* (UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 40

² George K. Behlmer, *Child Abuse and Moral Reform in England, 1870-1908* (USA: Stanford University Press, 1982)

quicker and more effectively than text. This type of communication relied solely on cultural and contextual understanding of its audience, rather than education level, literacy or class.

Victorian virtues like hard work, discipline, temperance, and charity were depicted with imagery that targeted the imagination of the public who might then envision themselves in place of the subject of the painting.³ In George Cruikshank's *The Bottle* (1847) series of eight plates, we see the plight of a man who, due to his reliance on alcohol, deteriorates from his first glass, to unemployment, poverty, violence and finally, insanity.⁴ In the final plate (*Fig 1*) we can see the father's alcoholism has reduced his children to 'the streets' with the adornment of the young girl indicating her profession as a prostitute and his son, with a 'rakish stance ... and the dandy-like spring of flowers in his mouth suggest an impending course of dissipation'.⁵ By depicting the gradual decline of a happy, middle-class family to this final image, Cruikshank not only projects an ideal of temperance but also allows the opportunity for the audience to be more sympathetic towards those that are suffering, as the path to ruin was only ever one step away.

For women in particular, the notion of being just one step, or one man, away from ruin was of serious concern,⁶ with many working-class and some middle-class women being driven to the streets following the death or separation of their father or husband. In G. F. Watts' *Found Drowned* (1849-50) (*Fig 2*), a young woman is portrayed washed-up on the bank of the Thames, under the infamous Waterloo Bridge, having taken her life due to falling pregnant out of wedlock.⁷ Although the young woman is positioned in a crucifix-like pose, emphasising the influence of religion and sacrosanct values of marriage, she remains beautiful and unaffected by the violent act of taking her own life, encouraging the viewer to be sympathetic when observing her misfortune. Her

³ J. Keri Cronin, *Art for Animals: Visual Culture and Animal Advocacy, 1870–1914* (USA: Penn State Press, 2018), p. 107

⁴ British Library, *The Bottle, a series of temperance themed illustrations by George Cruikshank, with poetry by Charles Mackay* <<https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/the-bottle--a-series-of-temperance-themed-illustrations-by-george-cruikshank-with-poetry-by-charles-mackay>> [accessed 6 March 2019]

⁵ George Cruikshank, Richard A. Vogler, *Graphic Works of George Cruikshank* (USA: Courier Corporation, 1979), p. 161

⁶ BBC Arts and Ideas, *Jack the Ripper and women as victims* (2019) <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p07237w4>> [accessed 6 March 2019]

⁷ Foundling Museum, *Focusing on Found Drowned* (2015) <<https://foundlingmuseum.org.uk/focusing-on-found-drowned/>> [accessed 6 March 2019]

emergence from the water suggests a rebirth, or baptism, emphasised by her peaceful expression and the light framing her face, suggesting reformatory ideals as a valid alternative to suicide.

Prostitution and criminality were arguably the result of harsh economic circumstances, with many using prostitution to supplement their low-wage jobs or resorting to criminal activity to survive. With poverty estimated at 35 percent of the population in 1889,⁸ and 90 percent of crimes committed against property rather than an individual,⁹ the criminal problem was clearly an economic one. However, as noted by D’Cruze, ‘working class violence was constructed as a social problem highly visible to contemporaries and well documented’,¹⁰ emphasising society’s concern that criminality was caused by a lack of moral standards, rather than economic inequality. This, combined with the unethical approach to labour and the destruction of the ‘home’,¹¹ caused profound anxiety, acting as the catalyst to the Gothic Revival movement. The Gothic Revival sought to resurrect aesthetics of the middle ages, in an attempt to simultaneously revive the faith and social structures of the period. In his series, *Contrasts* (1832), Augustus Pugin compares a fictitious medieval landscape of London, brimming with church spires, to his contemporaneous landscape, complete with prisons and factories (*Fig 3*) to emphasise the moral decay that has taken place with the advent of industry.

Closely associated with the Arts and Crafts movement, the Gothic Revival took inspiration from the writings of John Ruskin. Ruskin suggested that the nation’s social health was directly related to methods of production, favouring hand-crafted, high-quality products made in good conditions with traditional methods, rather than machine-made mass production. In *Stones of Venice* he stated that ‘...we manufacture everything there except men; we blanch cotton, and strengthen steel, and refine sugar, and shape pottery; but to brighten, to strengthen, to refine, or to form a single living spirit, never enters into our estimate of advantages.’¹² Ruskin was deeply

⁸ Charles Booth, *Life and Labour of the People in London*, (UK: Macmillan and Co., 1892), p. 9

⁹ Louis A. Knafla, *Crime, Police and the Courts in British History (Essays from Criminal Justice History)* (USA: Praeger Publishers Inc, 1990)

¹⁰ S. D’Cruze, *Violence, Vulnerability and Embodiment: Gender and History*. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005) p. 3–4

¹¹ John Ruskin, Deborah Epstein Nord, *Sesame and Lillies (Lecture)* (USA: Yale University Press, 1865, 2002), p. 51

¹² *The Stones of Venice 1853*. Ruskin Volume II, chapter VI, section 16

concerned with the moral obligation of work, and that men who are not 'rightly occupied' lose the ability to develop 'steady, deep, perpetual' emotions, instead exerting energy into money-making, which he felt was inherently dangerous for society at large.¹³

Alongside his belief that modern life and industry was damaging to the population, Ruskin also valued the notion of the home as a refuge from the 'anxieties of the outer life'¹⁴. In *Sesame and Lilies*, Ruskin states that the home is 'a place apart, a walled garden, in which certain virtues too easily crushed by modern life could be preserved...'. Ruskin's notion of the home was typical of the Victorian period, with the belief that the domestic space is inherently safe and 'immune from antisocial forces outside'¹⁵. The domestic sphere was associated with women, who were considered physically weaker and in danger in a public realm, with the added expectation of their role as care givers and homemakers for the family aligning with the aforementioned 'angel in the house' ideal.¹⁶ The domestic space became a way for society to confine women, with those operating outside the home usually deemed as 'rebellious' or, otherwise, from a working-class background and, therefore, lacking morals. Occasionally, middle-class women would leave the home for 'semi-public activities'¹⁷ but it was generally assumed that women seen on their own outside were struggling with 'moral insanity' and were, in turn, easily branded as 'fallen women'.¹⁸

In William Holman Hunt's *The Awakening Conscience* (1853) (*Fig 4*) we are presented with a unique perspective of the domestic sphere, albeit occupied by an unconventional couple. *The Awakening Conscience* was intended to be read in a similar way to paintings from the Renaissance period, with symbolic imagery filling the claustrophobic domestic scene, ensuring the image would be read correctly by its contemporaneous audience. In a sense, this substitutes

¹³ John Ruskin, *Sesame and Lilies Ruskin*

¹⁴ Deborah Denenholz Morse, Martin A. Danahay, *Victorian Animal Dreams: Representations of Animals in Victorian Literature and Culture* (UK: Taylor & Francis Group, 2007), p. 98

¹⁵ Denenholz Morse, Danahay, p. 97

¹⁶ Andrew Bradstock, *Women of Faith in Victorian Culture: Reassessing the 'Angel in the House'* (Germany: Springer, 2016), p. 31

¹⁷ Anne Digby, *Victorian Values: Women in Public and Private*, Volume 78 (UK: The British Academy, 1992), p. 31

¹⁸ Digby, p. 198

the lack of literacy in the poorer populations whilst relying on their cultural context to guarantee correct understanding of the painting's moral meaning. The female figure is the central focus on the painting, protruding from the colourful interior in a simple white gown and with her stance leaning towards us as she leaves the lap of the man who keeps her. It is clear she is his mistress, rather than wife, as her lack of wedding band is emphasised by the positioning of her hands, whereas the newness of the textiles and furniture in the interior suggest an immoral relationship in which nothing appears like home, in Ruskin's sense of the word, deliberately depicted as chaotic and garish. The newness of the interior suggests it is one that has not been lived in by a family, further indicating the distance from this couple and that of a traditional, moral household. *The Awakening Conscience* depicts a 'fallen woman' as she has a moral awakening, sparked by the song that reminded her of the innocence of her childhood.¹⁹ In her reflection, we can see that she is gazing towards the brightly-lit garden outside with the beam of light penetrating the domestic scene, which, combined with the star above her head on the frame, emphasises the divine influence of her epiphany.

Although we are observing a domestic scene, we are also presented with the metaphor of the cat and the bird behind the chair. The domestic space as a refuge from external dangers has been disrupted, with the cat toying with the bird which, although appearing to be in good health, is completely dependent on the cat as to whether it will survive or not. Birds were routinely associated with women during the Victorian period,²⁰ but especially those that were confined to cages. In this painting, the bird is free but at the whims of the cat which, mirroring the gaze and whiskers of the man, 'symbolises male domination and control made possible by unequal class and gender distributions of power.'²¹ The bird, with its wings spread, appears poised to fly, but we know that there is little chance it will be able to escape. This suggests a similar demise for the woman, who would need to physically break past the grasp of her lover to reach her redemption. According to Danahay, the cat and bird - albeit animals securely located within the domestic sphere - 'represent the unsettling eruption of violence into relationships that were supposedly

¹⁹ Tate, *William Holman Hunt: The Awakening Conscience* <<https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/hunt-the-awakening-conscience-t02075>> [accessed 7 March 2019]

²⁰ Denenholz Morse, Danahay, p. 109

²¹ Denenholz Morse, Danahay, p. 111

immune from conflict' as their violence is happening within the home.²² In *The Awakening Conscience*, the relationship depicted is not considered moral, raising questions as to whether this woman is allowed to seek redemption or rather if she is being used as an example for acting inappropriately.

The prevalence of animals and their relationship to women allows for a better understanding regarding contemporaneous attitudes towards home, family and space. Attitudes towards animals, especially pets, livestock, and game, were that they were there to be controlled or used by man, either for companionship or labour, which could be argued to be the same as man's relationship towards women.²³ In the Victorian period, many artists created animal-focused paintings to relay sentiment about what constitutes moral values, with emphasis on ethics and 'sympathetic imagination' that relied on the ability to 'think ourselves into the mind and being of another'.²⁴ It was believed that cultivating empathy through sympathetic imagination was 'the very essence of civilisation'.²⁵ The works of Edwin Landseer encapsulate this, particularly *Saved* (1859) (Fig 5), in which the intelligence of the dog is apparent in his act, as is his unconditional devotion to humans as it appears he saved the child without the need for instruction. *Saved* is one of many examples in which an animal has been portrayed with humanistic qualities, suggesting that humans would struggle to make an empathetic connection to them without relying on anthropomorphism. In his 1980 essay, *Why Look at Animals?*, John Berger emphasises the human's reliance on animals as a means to understand ourselves, suggesting that animals offer a perfect 'Other' to confirm our sense of self in ways which other humans can not.²⁶

By communicating profound, complicated themes to a wide audience, with the added authority of being published in national newspapers or exhibited on gallery walls, images were an effective way to assert Victorian ideals of morality to a mass public. When combined with other

²² Denenholz Morse, Danahay, p. 103

²³ Josephine Donovan, *Animal rights and feminist theory* (USA: The University of Chicago Press, 1990), p. 350-375

²⁴ Denenholz Morse, Danahay, p. 107

²⁵ Cronin, p. 109

²⁶ John Berger, *Why Look at Animals?* (UK: Penguin Great Ideas, 2009), p. 9

major reformative initiatives in education, healthcare and crime, their role in shaping a social conscience through ethics aided in defining values that would emphasise the role of the citizen as an individual as well as against an Other, albeit a drunkard, a prostitute or an animal, with which to measure themselves. In a sense, such initiatives allowed for preventative measures to be taken in crime, education and health, as existing solutions were incompatible with the demands of industry.

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THE BOTTLE HAS DONE ITS WORK—IT HAS DESTROYED THE INFANT AND THE MOTHER, IT HAS BROUGHT THE SON AND THE DAUGHTER TO VICE AND TO THE STREETS, AND HAS LEFT THE FATHER A HOPELESS MANIAC.

Fig 1: *The Bottle Has Done Its Work — It Has Destroyed the Infant and the Mother, It Has Brought the Son and the Daughter to Vice and to the Streets, and Has Left the Father a Hopeless Maniac* — George Cruikshank. 1847.



Fig 2: *Found Drowned* by George Frederic Watts, c. 1850

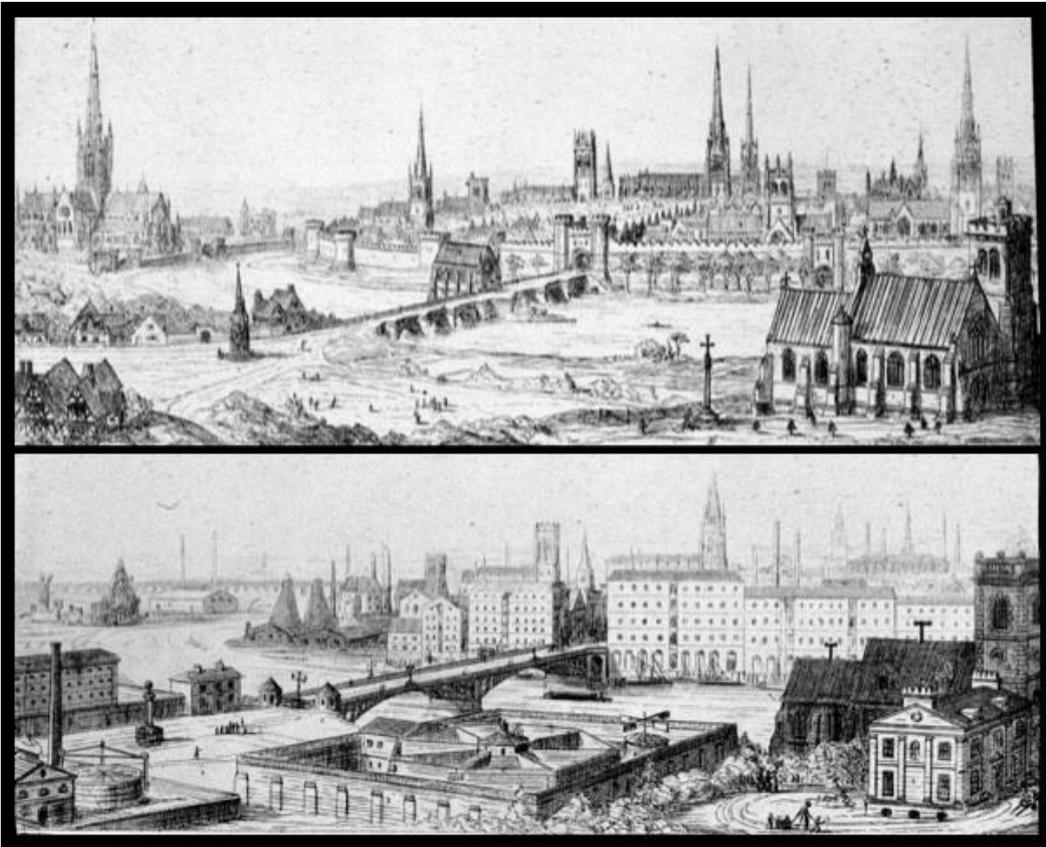


Fig 3: *Contrasts* by Augustus Pugin, 1832

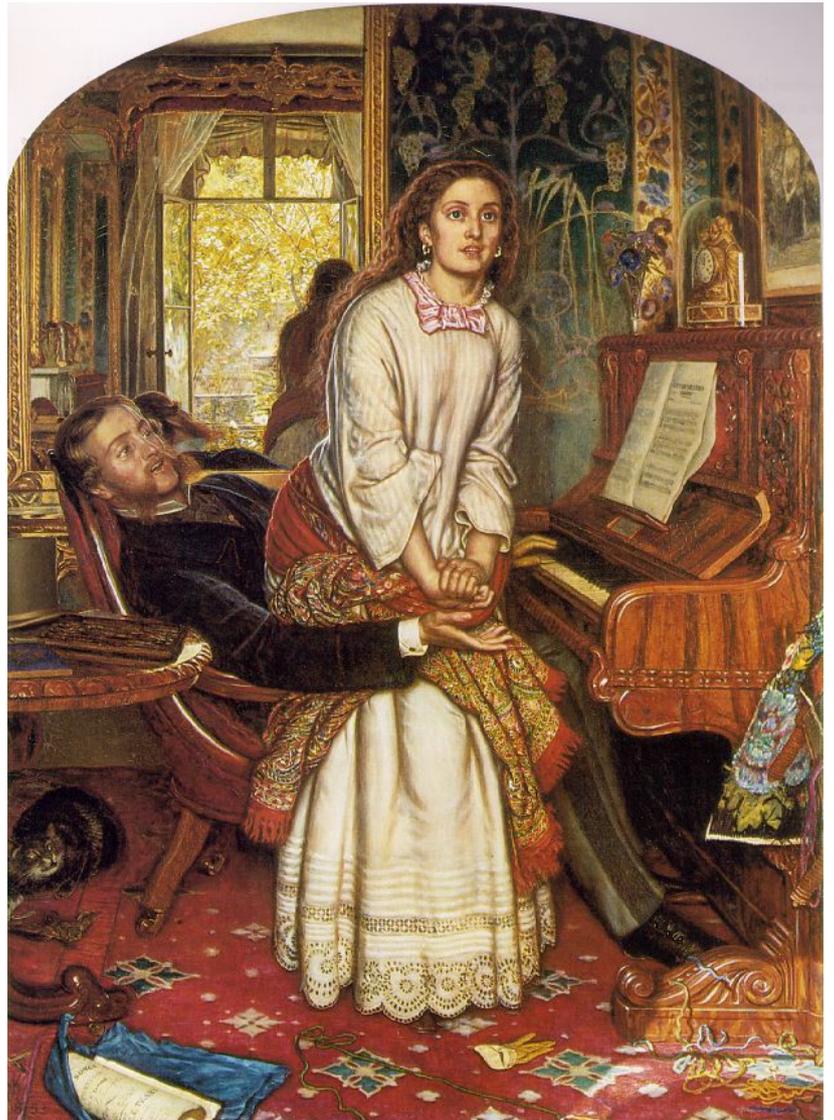


Fig 4: *The Awakening Conscience* by William Holman Hunt, 1853



Fig 5: *Saved* by Edwin Landseer, 1856