WOMEN AND VICTORIAN LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT: The objective of this work is to analyze, from a feminist perspective, the importance of women for the Victorian Literature concerning issues linked to their literary production, as well as to their representation in fiction. This discussion will also deal with the double standard of literary criticism of the hegemonic male tradition in relation to the writers of the female tradition which was in its beginning.

KEY-WORDS: Women. Literature. Victorian Age. tradition.

AS MULHERES E A LITERATURA VITORIANA

RESUMO: Este trabalho tem como objetivo analisar, sob uma perspectiva feminista, a importância da mulher na literatura vitoriana, tanto no que se refere à questões ligadas à produção literária de autoria feminina quanto à representação da mulher na ficção. A discussão também abordará o duplo padrão de crítica literária da tradição hegemônica e masculina à obras e autoras da tradição que ora se formava.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Mulher. Literatura. Era Vitoriana.Tradição.

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The importance of English women for the Victorian Literature is deeply linked to the development of the novel. The genre novel in the modern sense of the word has been defended by scholars, like Freedman (1978), for example, as having been first written in England by Samuel Richardson with his *Pamela* (1740). For critics such as Said (1994), *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) by Daniel Defoe can be considered the first novel in English, while some others believe *Robinson Crusoé* to be travel writing literature, a popular genre at the time it was written. Allen (1991) suggests that Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* (1678) is the first novel written in English fiction. Bakhtin (2002) believes the genre novel to have been created by the Greeks, and as an example, he mentions *Satiricon,* by Petronius. For scholars like Zéraffa (1971) and Lukács (2000), it isgenerally accepted that the novel began with the rise of the bourgeois society, and it became the dominant form also due to that new social class for several aspects – but it is a consensus that the novel as it is known today is prior to the Victorian Age.

It is important to mention that writing novels was seen by the English society, for example, as different from writing poetry, mainly because the figure of the poet had a different status in society, which was that of a lesser god since Aristotle, as Gilbert and Gubar (1984) state, specially because writing poetry was linked to formal education, that is, knowledge, historically linked to the powerful aristocratic, patriarchal tradition that controlled society.

The poor people and women were historically denied access to formal education, which prevented them, in general, from writing professionally, and in the case of women, having a profession out of what was linked to the domestic sphere was also a male privilege. So, as the bourgeois society was made by the new social class that emerged from the common people, and once they theoretically did not have that much knowledge - which was common for the aristocracy - they were also considered a simple-minded audience, and therefore, the new genre novel was appropriate for them, mainly because it was considered a simple form which was about simple subjects, written by simple people, for a simple-minded audience. As Showalter (1977) puts it, that point of view judged the new genre quite appropriate for being written by women, then.

Due to its biographical nature and a generally accepted feature of female writing, the novel is about the life of the problematic individual, in lukacian terms, in search of himself/herself, that is, self-knowledge. These aspects are appropriate for the condition of the new individual - and the new rising social class - whether male or female, that came out of the social transformation of the 17th century, but female in special, once they were in a period of transition, and had begun to look for autonomy and assertion of an identity of their own, not only the identity they had been forced to accept by society – that of passive, submissive beings, who lived to serve men and their own families Women were in search for a broader understanding of their relations either internal or external concerning their own selves, men, and society.

According to Lukács (2000), the hero (or anti-hero) of the novel is disappointed about life, and that led him not only to a dramatic loneliness, but also to a psychological one, for the author believes that this new kind of hero suffers from an incompatibility concerning the external world, which is hostile to him, and that would lead him to self-destruction. Obviously, this condition was that of the human being in general, but besides anything, it was the historical condition of women.

Writing novels in the 18th and 19th centuries was not an easy task neither for men nor for women, mainly because the genre was in its full force already by the beginning of the 19th century, and writing it meant joining a "competition" – not only in the bloomian sense – with the masters of that form, for the novel had gained credibility in England. Some of those masters were Daniel Defoe who wrote *Moll Flanders* (1722), a first-person narrative written around 20 years before *Pamela,* about the life of a female thief. In 1749, Fielding published *Tom Jones;* his masterpiece is a *Bildungsroman,* and it is about the life, loves and developments of the protagonist. The other great name of the 18th century novel is the Irish writer Laurence Stern with his (anti)novel *Tristan Shandy* (1760-1767), as Freedam (1978) puts it.

The gothic novel also developed during the second half of this century; its creator was Horace Walpole in 1764 with his *The Castle of Otranto.* However, the new century brought some other controversies for the genre, and the main one was a profound and systematic interest of women not only in reading novels, but in writing them. One example is the first great female master of the genre, Jane Austen. Ousby (1998, p. 46) informs that she began her literary career at the age of 15

> with *Love and Friendship*, a burlesque of Richardson; other pieces belonging to the 1790s caricature, the sentimentality or excessive 'sensibility' of much late 18th-century literature. Her eye for the ridiculous in contemporary taste also inspired *Northanger Abbey* (published posthumously in 1818 but probably her earliest extended work of fiction), which satirizes her heroine's penchant for gothic fiction, and *Sense and Sensibility* (begun in 1797 but not published until 1811).

Austen also wrote *Pride and Prejudice*, begun in 1796 or 1797, but published only in 1813; this novel marks out her territory, as well as the subject and the mode of her following works. Austen mastered the genre novel with her *Mansfield Park* (1814), *Emma* and *Persuasion* (both published posthumously in 1816 and 1818 respectively). *Pride and Prejudice* and *Mansfield Park* were quite popular in Austen's days, and she was admired by the great writer of historical novels, the Scottish Walter Scott, as well as by the Prince Regent. According to Ousby (1998, p. 46),

> In these works Jane Austen chose deliberately to portray small groups of people in a limited, perhaps confining, environment and to mould the apparently trivial incidents of their lives into a poised comedy of manners. Her characters are middle-class and provincial; their most urgent preoccupation is with courtship and their largest ambition is marriage. The task she set herself required careful shaping of her material, delicate economy and precise deployment of irony to point the underlying moral commentary. She developed not by obvious enlargement of her powers but by the deepening subtly and seriousness with which she worked inside the formal boundaries she has established.

Gilbert and Gubar (1996, p. 329) says that Austen comically criticized the overvaluation "of love, the miseducation of women, the subterfuges of the marriage market, the rivalry among women for male approval, the female cult of weakness and dependency, the discrepancies between women's private sphere and public (male) history."

Freedman (1978) affirms that Austen seemed indifferent to the Romantic, the French and the American Revolutions; he says that she preferred to remain faithful to the principles and values of the 18th century. He notices that two of Austen's brothers were in the British Navy during the Napoleonic Wars, however, England is always in peace in her novels. Despite the criticism from the public (Austen was accused of

writing the same novel) and from female writers decades later (the Brontë sisters felt uncomfortable about the nature of her works concerning the docility of her heroines and their main preoccupation being marriage) she is considered the first great female writer of the English novel. Austen is recognized by her perfect technique, and profound view of social life, but mainly for delineating the restricted life of a provincial lady. Allen (1991, p. 115) says that "the attainment of self-knowledge on the part of the heroine is always part of Miss Austen's themes."

Austen did not live to be part of the Victorian Age - generally accepted to have began in 1837 with the rise of Queen Victoria to the English throne; the monarch died in 1901 – but she will be a reference for the female writers of the future generations, as well as Mary Shelly with her *Frankestein* (1818), although in a much lesser degree. Daughter of the rationalist philosopher William Godwin, and the feminist theoretician Mary Wolstonecraft, who in 1792 wrote the classic feminist pamphlet *A vindication of the rights of women*, and married to one of the most important Romantic poets, Pierce B. Shelly, Mary Shelly had a privileged life in terms of intellectual experience; one of her friends was the great poet Byron, who suggested them to write a ghost-story each; the result was her masterpiece.

Frankenstein is considered by Gilbert and Gubar (1996, p. 353) "perhaps the most memorable and influential science fiction fantasy ever published in English." Shelley's gothic narrative follows the features of the genre and it is free of the conventions and restrictions of texts considered more realists in that Age of Reason. *Frankestein* shows the power of feeling and imagination against the tyranny of reason; imagination is seen as process of transgression in relation to the complicate reality of XIX century with its social transformation. The novel exploits the forbidden boundaries of human science, and brought a new sophistication to literary terror; in doing so, Shelly made the Gothic novel over into what today is called science fiction.

According to Ousby (1998), "none of her [Mary Shelly's] later novels matched the power, originality, and mythical sweep of her legendary first work – both *Lodore* (1835) and *Faulkner* (1837) are little more than romantic pot-boilers." Mary Shelley gave up writing long fictions when the interest of the general public moved from the Byronic heroes to the realism of Dickens. However she also wrote *Mathilde*, an unfinished novel begun in 1819, but published only in 1959. *Valperga* (1832), the story

is set in the 14th-century Italy, and portrays the lovelessness "and destructiveness of personal political ambition. *The last man* (1826), a political disillusioned and conservative vision of the end of human civilization, set in the 21st century" (OUSBY, 1998, p. 845), and *Perkin Warbeck* (1830). According to the Ousby, she wrote short stories for periodicals like *The Keepsake*, and produced some volumes of "*Lives* for Lardener's *Cabinet Cyclopedia*, and the first authoritative edition of Shelley's poems, with a preface and valuable notes." Her travelogue, *Rambles in Germany and Italy, in 1840, 1842 and 1843* (1844), was well received.

As it can be seen, these two great female names represent the beginning of a tendency, that is, women writing fiction in a systematic way, and not only fiction, but high quality fiction. They later would be seen as some of the pioneers of a female writing tradition, for they dared to cross the mine field of the literary male tradition, and launched the steps of a new one, a female tradition.

However, the issue of female appropriation of a form considered male – of course all literary genres appeared in the male tradition - did not happen without problems for women. According to Gilbert and Gubar (1984), that can be seen as an irreconcilable contradiction which involves literary genre and gender. The point is, women will at first follow the male patterns, but later, they will look for promoting a revision of the literary genres, as an attempt to use them according to their own needs and to denounce their social condition, mainly because the female writers of the 18th and 19th centuries were stuck in a social structure created for and by men, even though, they tried to subvert aspects of the male tradition either in form or in content – mostly in relation to the last one.

The fact that women brought some changes to the genres of the male tradition is a belief that is possible from a feminist perspective of today, because in general, because of the accepted belief concerning works written by women, as it is stated by Showalter (1977), and seen in the first paragraphs, there was a generalized skepticism in relation to the quality of their work, from the public in general, but also from many women. However, it is important to highlight some examples of women who took the novel form to a further step: Emily and Charlotte Brontë.

The Brontë sisters appeared in the literary market in the 1840s, the decade of the novel, the decade when the profession of novelist became recognized in England,

according to Cuddon (1998). They belong to the early Victorian generation of great novelist, along with Scott, Thackeray, Dickens, Trollope, and Elizabeth Gaskell. According to Allen (1991, p. 139), these early Victorian "were at one with their public to a quite remarkable degree; they were conditioned by it, as of course any novelist must be […]. They identified themselves with their age and were its spokesmen." Differently, the writers of the late Victorian period, George Eliot, Thomas Hardy, and Joseph Conrad, for example, "were writing in some sense against their age; they were critical, even hostile, to its dominant assumption. Their relation with the reading public was nearer to that of the twentieth-century novelist than to the early Victorians."

In order to better understand the importance of the Brontë sisters for the Victorian Age and for the English fiction, it is necessary to consider with Freedman (1978, p. 28; my translation) that when the Romantic Movement hit England by the end of the XVIII century, it first grew stronger in poetry – the most representative names were Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats, Shelly and Byron – so it was not fertile in novels. However, after the first romantic wave, "the Brontë sisters produced at least two masterpieces of fiction which deserve to be equaled to the best poetry of Keats and Shelley." In *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights* they highlighted most of the common Victorian themes: sickness, death, and the pathetic, for example, from a powerful female perspective, although they did not want to be linked to the category of female writers, since the term was still seen as negative. They published under androgynous pseudonyms, a recurrent strategy for female writers to avoid the double standard of criticism towards novels written by women, as Showalter (1977) shows.

Emily Brontë introduced in the English fiction the use of multiples narrators, and a gypsy protagonist in her only novel, *Wuthering Heights* (1847). Her sister Charlotte provoked a revolution in the representation of female and male identities as well as their roles in gender relations with her *Jane Eyre* (1847). Charlotte, and Anne Brontë – who wrote *Agnes Grey* (1947) and *The tenet of Wildfell Hall* (1948) - chocked critics and readers of the Victorian Age because of elements considered unfeminine in their novels. However, even more different from what was expected for a female standard of content – the 1840s saw the emergence of many female novelists, although, this work will deal only with some of the greater names, those responsible for forming a tradition – was Emily's masterpiece.

In a well known study of her novel, Cecil (1958, p. 138) defends that Emily is ahead of any tradition, mainly because *Wuthering Heights* does not follow the conventions of the Victorian, canonic and male novel:

> She writes about different subjects in a different manner and from a different point of view. She stands outside the main current of nineteenth-century fiction as markedly as Blake stands out the main current of eighteenth-century poetry.

Actually, Emily Brontë is considered by many scholars to be the first modern writer, in the English tradition. Cecil highlights that she did not write to please an audience - like Dickens did – so that she was not limited by issues related to the reception of her work. In her novel, she surprised readers by bringing up a controversial issue: the metaphorical link between oppressed groups and their union by identification – women and foreigners united against the patriarchal tyranny and the British imperialism.

Charlotte and Anne still shared the traditional ways of thinking concerning marriage as the typical female and Romantic ideal - although Charlotte in *Jane Eyre* brought a more assertive behavior concerning gender relations as it can be seen in her heroine. Differently, Emily Brontë killed the married women of her novel; the married women die at giving birth - the exceptions are the old Mrs. Earnshaw and Linton. The only women who survived in the end are childless: the narrator Nelly Dean and Catherine's daughter; the latter one has the cultural power as a tool for controlling the male figure of her future husband, Hereton.

Wuthering Heights is considered a dramatic and romantic poem, and many critics compare it to Shakespare's *King Lear* (1605), and Emily Brontë to Shakespare himself (ALLOT, 1979). Although *Wuthering Heights* portray some of the issues of its age, at the same time it seems out of the Victorian traditional novel. According to Freedman (1978), it is about a metaphysical search of the human being and its place in the universe; it is a question and a statement of the Romantic ideals; a criticism to the Romantic egoism.

Emily Brontë's sister Charlotte Brontë was more explicit in her dealings with what became known as "feminist" issues. It is obvious that each writer, whether male or

female, usually writes about the experiences that he/she had, therefore, his/her production will deal with themes that are part of his/her own concerns. The relevance and the greatness of the production of Jane Austen, for example, can not be questioned, once they are fundamental for the development of a female literary tradition. However, the Brontë sisters seemed to have misunderstood the irony of Austen's work concerning women's behavior towards men and other issues, so they felt uncomfortable about the nature of Austen's heroines, and also about some of their contemporary female writers.

From one hand, historically, the representation of women by male writers showed portrayals of ideal women (angels, passive, submissive, childlike), and feared women (prostitutes, witches, Evas, Lilliths). Heroines created by men seemed to follow prescribed roles for women; they seemed to keep imprisoning women in images that were imposed on them, and even female writers like Jane Austen – as the Brontë sisters felt – *seemed* to somehow reproduce that male model of women, instead of proposing changes in a more explicit way.

Eagleton (2005) says that the Brontë sisters lived in a world of transition, and because of that, they felt the need for a different female attitude, a more assertive behavior towards life, marriage, career, religion, moral values, and their own selves. Due to that, the nature of Charlotte's writings was more volcanic; her world was romantic, spontaneous, sexual and supernatural, as it can be seen in *Jane Eyre.* This novel changed the route of the female literary tradition that was in its beginning, for Charlotte creates a heroine with a mind of her own, of independent spirit, and in search for economic, professional and emotional satisfaction, and a hero that treats women the way they would like to be treated, that is, as equals.

Jane Eyre became a symbol of what meant to be a young, single girl growing up, developing herself and getting mature as an individual, as a professional and as a woman in the Victorian Age, mainly because "the typical individual of the new social order, as Charlotte's heroines again reveal, was self-seeking and hard-headed, yet fragile and desperately exposed" (EAGLETON, 2005, p. xiii). However, the Victorian public was not ready to see these features in a heroine, specially in a novel written by a woman, and mainly a heroine that when called "angel" by her beloved Mr. Rochester says that she would rather be a thing than an angel.

In *Jane Eyre,* Charlotte Brontë portrayed the attempts of a woman to express herself freely - out of what was expected for her sex - and her search for her own identity. The writer seems to have done this unconsciously through the several resources of her narrative, such as dreams, hallucinations, and visions that represent the psychological development of her heroine's inner life. Charlotte Brontë wrote a novel that denounces the terrible limitations imposed on the women of the Victorian Age, mainly those of low social class. She wrote about their hard working conditions as governesses, teachers, and artists; about the emptiness of the lives of young women awaiting marriage, and about the appropriation of women's proprieties by their husbands that can result in madness.

Jane Eyre was responsible for the rising of a new kind of heroine that was a professional and that represented a kind of model for future generations. Jane was a fictional ideal that matched strength and intelligence with female tenderness, witty and domestic skills in order to live in a time of profound economic changes, due to the Industrial Revolution, as Showalter (1977) shows. And this heroine had above all, a mind of her own, as Jane herself tells Mr. Rochester. Showalter (1977, p. 28) defends that Charlotte Brontë subverts the female gothic, and "the mad wife locked in the attic symbolizes the passionate and sexual side of Jane's personality, an alter ego that her upbringing, her religion, and her society have commanded her to incarcerate."

The Brontë sisters were not affected by a new way of production that appeared in England around 1940s, which changed the nature of the English novel: the system of publication in series, that is, a novel would appear in parts in newspapers or magazines. Each issue would publish from three to four chapters of a novel, and after the end of the series, the reader would have the whole book in parts, or could buy it in three volumes, as Freedmam (1978) puts it. This transformation had a tremendous impact for the Victorian novel, because the novelist would create the story according to the interest of the public, and Dickens mastered this technique with his *A Christmas Carol* (1843), *David Copperfield* (1850), *Great Expectations* (1860-1), and became the great name of his day, different from Jane Austen, Mary Shelley, and the Brontë sisters, who – except Charlotte Brontë – had their value only posthumously recognized.

The presentation of Dicken's work in series and the freshness of his humor helped his acceptance from the public, specially because he was a man of little

education writing for an audience that was very much similar to himself. The thematic of Dickens world, as those of important male novelists of his days, like Thackeray with his *Vanity Fair* (1847-48), for example, was about earthly issues related to an increasing materialistic male world of ambition, during the transformations brought by the Industrial Revolution. He was responsible for discovering an important writer of the Victorian fiction, Elizabeth Gaskell, who contributed to his magazine, *Household Words*, and later wrote the biography of Charlotte Brontë, shortly after her death.

Mrs. Gaskell first novel was published in 1848, *Mary Barton,* subtitled "A tale of Manchester life," as a distraction from grief - a common start for many women - for she had lost a son; her attitude exemplifies a tendency that turned out to be recurrent in women that became writers in the nineteenth century, as Showalter (1977) observes. Ousby (1998, p. 360) says that "it is a tale of industrial strife and unrest, touched by the melodramatic, and growing out of the Chartist movement of the 1840s;" she was charged of class prejudice, for many believed she preferred the workers to the employers.

Ousby reminds that one of her most successful novels, *Cranford,* appeared at irregular intervals in Dicken's magazine from December 1851 until May 1853, a book that discusses the verities and decencies of the human condition. In this novel, she caught the quiet and humorous atmosphere and the equally quiet disasters of the lives of middle-class women who lived in a small town. Allen (1991, p. 183) says that "The society delineated is almost entirely feminine, and the work is a little triumph of literary tact;" this novel is probably an Amazon utopia, an important aspect of female writing, which is using the male form for female purposes.

Mrs. Gaskell published *Ruth* in 1853, a novel dealing with the concealment of an unmarried working-class mother's problem, and *North and South* (1855), another industrial story, among other novels and short-stories. It is a tale that compares "the industrialized north of England to the more agrarian south – Mrs. Gaskell continued to undertake fictional studies of what nineteenth-century called the 'condition of England' question" (GILBERT and GUBAR, 1996, p. 421). It is important to consider that

> In a century rich in women writers Mrs Gaskell stands to the forefront in her sympathy for the deprived, her evocations of nature, her gentle humor and

> her narrative pace. Of note is her exceptionally direct development as novelist form loosely structured melodramatic writing to the urbanity and balance form of her later work, particularly *Wives and Daughters* (OUSBY, 1998, p. 361).

Elizabeth Ckeghorn Stevenson – Mrs.Gaskell - is also known for being an admirable woman in harmony with the society of her time. Allen (1991, p. 183) reminds that

> her serenity existed side by side with a vigorous and courageous social conscience, of which these novels are the fine expression. They are flawed, as so many Victorian novels are, because of the author's obligation to fill up three volumes irrespective of whether her talent could sustain them.

Gilbert and Gubar (1996, p. 421) says that Mrs. Gaskell had a special ability to deal in her fiction with sensitivity and sympathy about circumstances that were particularly different from her own, and that would indicate the range of her literary talents, so that "some critics have considered those talents as distinctively 'womanly' because of their delineation of 'woman's oddities' in a work like *Cranford*."

Critics such as Cecil (1958, p. 183) highlight some interesting points about Mrs. Gaskell, and one of them is exactly about her choice of pen name. He says that other female writers such as Charlotte Brontë or George Eliot were eagles concerning their need for independence, while Mrs. Gaskell chose to be known by the public through her affiliation with her husband's last name. He suggests that although these female writers he mentions are feminine, Mrs. Gaskell "was all a woman was expected to be: gentle, domestic, tactiful, unintellectual, prone to tears, easily shocked." Although these adjectives are too strong, she was the typical Victorian woman, and that would be reflected in her work.

It seems that Cecil – who makes a fair judgment of the other female novelists in his book – wants to highlight the differences in attitude within the female tradition. That difference of attitude could be seen as it follows: Emily and Charlotte Brontë, and George Eliot, did not want their names to be linked to any kind of association with the female tradition that they helped to form, mainly because that would mean to be disrespected, and have their work misjudged, so they decided to use male or androgynous pseudonym.

However, it seems that Mrs. Gaskell – considered one of the few married (and happy) female writers of the period - was not that much worried about the problems of reception, and decided to write in a feminine way, about feminine issues from a feminine perspective. Cecil reproduces a standard of criticism for her that echoed that of the 19th century. He says that her work "was wholly lacking in the virile qualities. Her genius is so purely feminine that it excludes from her achievements not only specifically masculine themes, but all the more masculine qualities of thought and feeling" (p. 185). His attitude shows that double standard that male critics used since the 19th century to judge a text written by a woman, as Showalter (1977) discusses. It also shows that virility, which is obviously associated to man, should be a present quality in a woman's text, since virility was associated with the power of the patriarchal authority.

Cecil did not consider that other patterns of themes, and point of view were already in progress in his own century through a different tradition – the female one. He also did not consider that women wanted to be free to write from their own experiences, and not to have the male experience as the basis for their own, basically because they were different. Besides, understanding and/or portraying virility was not the goal of female writing, mostly because they were writing against that element, which represented the male authority that had been responsible for excluding them from the literary tradition, to say the least.

It was through fiction, mainly through the novel, that women, specially the pioneers of the 19th century, used this genre to question and defy the male attitude of writing about women from a perspective that contradict women's interests and misrepresented them in male fiction and in history, and denied them a voice of their own to speak about themselves. The historical behavior of the patriarchal society led women to promote a gradual fight in the private and public spheres in order to offer a counter-point to what silenced them as individuals and as women capable of forming an opinion and express it through any media, including the public and professional writing activity, no matter what genre was chosen.

Another leading figure of this period and tradition was Mary Ann Evans, best known for her pseudonym, George Eliot (1819-80). Allen (1991), among other scholars, says that this writer promoted a change in the English novel that would be decisive for the development of the novel in England. Considered by Cecil (1958) as the first

modern novelist, she led the novel to its second and mature phase. Freedman (1978) reminds that Virginia Woolf considered Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1871-2) one of the few novels in English written for adults, mostly because there was no fiction for children in that country until the 19th century, so novels were seen as entertainment for children, teenagers and adults. However, Freedman defends that *Middlemarch* is a new genre in the sense seen by Woolf. He believes that one of the unique features of *Middlemarch* as a Victorian novel is the way the condition of matrimony is analyzed – for Eliot applies one of the most subtle analytical view of all English fiction to the marriages in that novel.

George Eliot either in her life (she lived with George Henry Lewes, a married man, for decades, and despised Charlotte Brontë's morality in *Jane Eyre*) or in her work defied several of the standards of the Victorian society. Actually, the fact that she adopted a male pseudonym shows that as a clear historical sign of a literary consciousness marked by gender. She is one of the most influential of all English novelists, and is admired as much for her acute powers of observations and in-depth characterization as for her novels.

According to Ousby (1998), George Eliot was a novelist, critic, poet, - editor of the radical *Westminter Review* but for a while got no salary for that -, and journalist. She translated from the German and published anonymously, *The life of Jesus, critically examined by Dr. David Strauss* (1846), and *Essence of Christianity* (1854); later, she would go through a typically Victorian crisis of faith in Christianity. Following the current practice of her days, her debut as a fully fledged writer of narrative did not come until the serial publication in Blackwood's Edinburg Magazine in 1857 of "The Sad Fortunes of the Reverend Amos Barton," "Mr. Gilfil's Love-Story", and "Janet's Repentance." The next year they were published and well received as *Scenes of clerical life*, which was followed by *Adam Bede* (1859), *The mill of the floss* (1860), and *Silas Marner* (1861). She also serially published *Romola* (1862-3). Then, *Felix Holt the radical* (1866), *Middlemarch: a study of provincial life* in independent parts from 1871-2, and from 1874-6 she published *Daniel Deronda*; her last work was a series of essays *The impressions of Theophrastus Such* (1879). She also wrote some novellas and poetry, including *The Spanish Gypsy* (1868), and *The legend of Jubal and other poems* (1874).

Commenting on the reception of Eliot's work, Gilbert and Gubar (1996, p. 801-2) reminds that Lewes once said that "'people would have sniffed' at Eliot's first novel, *Adam Bede* (1859), 'if they had known the writer to be a woman,' and its instant success did place George Eliot in the ranks of major novelists such as Dickens and Thackeray." They also mention that *Silas Marner*

> was so popular that her publisher, Blackwood, had to double the original edition of four thousand copies within a month after publication. By that time Eliot had become a careful business woman who negotiated herself for the 7,000 [pounds] she received for *Romola* (1863).

The writers also say that the recurrent subject of Eliot's mature novels – *Felix Holt, Middlemarch, Daniel Deron*da – was about the relations between the private lives of men and women and the public issues of culture and society. Considered by many critics such as Cecil (1958) and Allen (1991) as an intellectual, and praised for her skills in dealing with subjects in a deep way, Eliot "lived in a much larger world of ideas, ideas which conditioned her views of fiction, the shape her novel took, and the very imagery of her prose" (ALLEN, 1991, p. 219-20). He highlights that she changed the nature of the English novel, and the

> plot in the old sense of something external to character and often working unknowns to it, is irrelevant and unnecessary. Character, in fact, itself becomes plot; though in her greatest novel character itself is discovered to be conditioned by environment, or rather, its capacity for growth and scope to be limited, almost to the point of tragedy, by the world around it (ALLEN, 1991, p. 221).

Cecil (1958, p. 263) says that George Eliot "does not break with the tradition she had inherited, she develops it, and develops it in a direction which entails alteration for its fundamental character." She used the old formulas, but for a new purpose, for he believes other typical Victorian novelists like Dickens, Mrs. Gaskell, and Charlotte Brontë to be instinctive novelists, different from Eliot who was an intellectual writer, and because of that, her books are constructed around a central ideal. However, what makes her different from them is that she was an innovator, "not only because her

approach to her subject is intellectual, but also because her intellect took in a great deal of new country" (CECIL, 1958, p. 266). Cecil defends that she broke with those "fundamental conventions both of form and matter within which the English novel up till then had been constructed." (p. 266).

It is important to mention that George Eliot became a critic of some kinds of novels written by women. She wrote an article titled "Silly Novels by Lady Novelists," in which she denounced the covert victories of feminine values; she considered many of them inauthentic and charged them of copying male style. She was against those novels which were focused on love fantasies, for she was one of those women who could imagine fantasies of power for women out of the love sphere.

Considering the work of these female writers of the 19th century, shortly mentioned here, one can agree with Showalter (1977, p. 29), when she says that despite its restrictions, the novel written by women from Jane Austen to George Eliot moved "in the direction of an all-inclusive female realism, a broad, socially informed exploration of the daily lives and values of women within the family and community." The author reminds that both Charlotte Brontë and George Eliot "increasingly came to dominate their period and to represent the models against which other women novelists were measured, they too became the objects of both feminine adulation and resentment" (p. 104). They were the two main figures, and it was for them that women writers looked up as their main model and source of inspiration, as their predecessors looked to Jane Austen.

This work showed the importance of women in the Victorian literature highlighting different aspects related to each writer, but each one in fact shows a picture of the situation of women writers and their fiction in a society going through a period of deep transition in several areas, so that the reader could have an idea about the difficulties of being a woman and a woman writer in the 19th century. It could be seen how the themes and interests of these women varied, and how the pioneers' point of view helped to pave the way for the new generations, even though the new writers saw the rise of different needs as well as accomplishments that promoted the development of a literary tradition written by women.

The female writers mentioned here also took to a further step the perspectives of the pioneers in a sense that they not always agreed with them, but in disagreeing, they

promoted changes that helped to promote other changes in the form and in the content of the English novel, and in the condition of women as writers and as women. Had they not decided to break the silence and take chances, the world would not have benefited from the powerful imagination and literary work of great women who dared to defy the prescribed roles for women in that century. The second half of the Victorian Age saw an increase in women in active roles in society, but the women writers discussed here were responsible for forming a tradition that guided the new generations into the mine field which is that of the literary world.

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