

“MODELS TO THE UNIVERSE”
VICTORIAN HEGEMONY AND
THE CONSTRUCTION OF FEMININE IDENTITY

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Dissertation Abstract

This dissertation explores how women writers of popular novels in 1860s England characterized women, focusing in particular on the level of correspondence between fictional women to the prevailing ideology of the domestic angel. Unlike studies which posit this version of womanhood as merely as a function of patriarchal oppression, I see a more complicated relationship between it and the governing imperial hegemony of Victorian Britain. The imperial agenda relied on the preservation of the family structure which in turn depended on women adhering to the limits of her domestic sphere. Though my research reveals a universal dissatisfaction with the strictures of ‘true womanhood,’ the novels tend to reinforce and deploy this code of femininity as a means of conserving family, community and by implication, empire.

My analysis centers on the following novels which are representative of women’s popular fiction in the 1860s: Emily Eden’s *The Semi-attached Couple*, Charlotte Yonge’s *The Clever Woman of the Family*, Margaret Oliphant’s *Miss Marjoribanks*, Ellen Wood’s *East Lynne*, and Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s *Lady Audley’s Secret*.

Drawing on Julia Kristeva’s theory of the abject, I explore the contradictions inherent in the Victorian cultural valuation of women based on the ideology of the domestic angel layered over the traditional perception of women as inherently flawed or monstrous. I postulate that the mid-Victorian hegemony took the shape of a panoptical power pyramid, which, integrated with Foucault’s theory of the panopticon and Bourdieu’s theory of delegated agency, provides a useful model with which to examine

the circulation of power in Victorian culture, particularly in reference to the control and containment of women.

These writers emphasize the artificiality of the domestic angel ideology, dramatizing the struggles of women to meet to its tenets, and providing few successful role models signifying eventual success. Ultimately however, the authors also universally punish transgressors and reward those women who conform to angelic parameters.

I see the domestic angel as a function of hegemonic exigency, the novels underscoring cultural priorities over individual feminine considerations. This accounts for the strength of the domestic angel ideology within Victorian culture, despite feminist challenges to its oppressive restrictions.