

Drowned Angels and Watery Graves: Representations of Female Suicide in Victorian Art

Tânia Cerqueira

FACULDADE DE LETRAS DA UNIVERSIDADE DO PORTO | CETAPS

Citation: Tânia Cerqueira. "Drowned Angels and Watery Graves: Representations of Female Suicide in Victorian Art." *Via Panoramica: Revista de Estudos Anglo-Americanos*, série 3, vol. 7, nº 1, 2018, pp. 27-38. ISSN: 1646-4728. Web: <http://ler.letras.up.pt/>.

Abstract

The theme of the fallen woman finding salvation in death was a popular topic in Victorian art and literature, especially during the mid-Victorian era. From the fiction of Thomas Hardy and Charles Dickens to realistic paintings, the myth of the fallen woman had a strong presence.

In this article, I will focus on artistic representations of the fallen woman, such as John Everett Millais's *Ophelia* and Augustus Egg's *Past and Present* triptych and discuss the importance of William Shakespeare's Ophelia and Thomas Hood's poem "The Bridge of Sighs" for the conception of this mythical figure. I will also argue that, despite these artists' efforts to mercifully portray the fallen women, in the end, they reinforced a Victorian patriarchal discourse, which regarded women as physically and intellectually weaker than men, while mythologizing this transgressing figure, created in order to remind all women of the fate they could expect if they defied the idealized conception of femininity imposed by society.

Key words: fallen woman; Ophelia; Victorian culture; visual representations; death; suicide.

Resumo

A figura da mulher caída que encontra redenção na morte era um tema popular da arte e literatura Vitorianas, especialmente em meados desta época. Desde a ficção de Thomas Hardy e Charles Dickens até aos quadros realistas da época, o mito da mulher caída é mencionado com grande ênfase.

Neste artigo, analisarei representações artísticas da mulher caída, tais como *Ophelia* de John Everett Millais e a coleção *Past and Present* de Augustus Egg, e aludirei à importância de Ofélia de William Shakespeare e do poema "The Bridge of Sighs" de Thomas Hood, na concepção desta figura mítica. Também argumentarei que, apesar dos esforços destes artistas

em representarem esta mulher de uma forma misericordiosa, acabaram por reforçar o discurso patriarcal Vitoriano, que considerava as mulheres fisicamente e intelectualmente mais fracas do que os homens, ao mesmo tempo que mitificaram esta figura transgressiva, criada para lembrar todas as mulheres do destino que as esperava se desafiassem a concepção idealizada de feminilidade imposta pela sociedade.

Palavras-chave: mulher caída; Ofélia; cultura Vitoriana; representações visuais; morte; suicídio.

In the nineteenth century, an idealized vision of the female emerged. A vision sustained by the ideology of separate spheres¹ and the cult of domesticity,² it held a dominant place in the Victorian public discourse. Thus, the Victorian conception of femininity was centred on family, motherhood and respectability. The woman ended finding herself “trapped” in the private sphere of the house, a place where everyone expected her to be a provider of love, a caring mother to her children, and a figure of purity and chastity who unconditionally loved and supported her husband, submitting to his every wish and desire.

In other words, the Victorian woman was expected to be a domestic goddess, the perfect angel in the house.³ Any woman who defied the role imposed by the Victorians found herself ostracised by society. If her sexual indiscretions were discovered, she was branded a fallen woman.

The Victorians were obsessed with the figure of the fallen woman. As Nina Auerbach explains,

the fallen woman, heartbreaking and glamorous, flourished in popular iconography . . . Her stance as galvanic outcast, her piquant blend of innocence and experience, came to embody everything in womanhood that was dangerously, tragically, and triumphantly beyond social boundaries. (150)

Therefore, a myth created “by a neurosis of a culture that . . . feared female sexuality and aggression” (Auerbach 157) emerged: once a woman lost her virtue, she became a pariah, whose fall must end in death. The figure of the fallen woman was then created “by the Victorians to serve a moral purpose - to remind women of the disgrace and demise (moral, social, and economic) of sexually transgressive women” (Rhodes 12).

The trope of the fallen woman embracing her death was a popular topic in Victorian art and literature. Victorian painters, such as John Everett Millais⁴ and

George Frederic Watts,⁵ represented this woman in their masterpieces. However, instead of criticizing her actions, there was an attempt to depict her in a compassionate manner since they “recognized the complex emotions within the fallen woman and her situation” (Lee, “Fallen Women in Victorian Art”, n. pag).

In Victorian London, the perception of females as submissive, helpless, and emotional creatures, prone to madness and hysteria was widely spread.⁶ Despite the fact that more men than women would end up committing suicide, there was a feminization of suicide in the nineteenth century.

The Victorians “wanted and expected suicide, like madness, to be a ‘female malady’” (Gates 125) because of pre-conceived ideas of female mental fragility and instability. For this reason, there are far more Victorian representations of female suicide in both literature and the visual arts than male suicide. In several of these representations, “suicide by water . . . was the way most visual artists and many writers of the Victorian era imagined female suicide” (Gates 135).

The fascination with female drowning is related to the power of the patriarchal society. As Meessen claims, “the woman floating towards oblivion, slowly letting herself be submerged in water, was an object rather than agent” (38). Drowning was beheld as a passive and non-violent way of ending one’s own life, as opposed, for example, to a bloody death, such as shooting oneself, where agency was needed. Thus, “the Victorian iconography of female suicide by drowning can be regarded as an important discourse, through which such ideas [of female passivity] were propagated” (Meessen 104).

The portrayal of a fallen woman was easily recognized in the arts since “women at the water’s edge had a particular resonance for Victorian audiences; they carried connotations of prostitution and self-destruction” (Cooper194). In the visual arts, death by self-drowning is associated with feminine madness, love melancholy and transgression. As Gates argues, “if men had been their main reason to exist . . . losing them meant indifference to life” (131).

Moreover, it is also associated with the idea of baptism. Given that death by water was connected with the washing away of the sins, after falling into deadly waters, a sinful woman was pure again. Therefore, a fallen woman could only find redemption in a watery grave. In the end, “the drowned corpse after the event,

becomes a signifier of transgression, death and moral redemption” (sic) (Edmonds-Dobrijevic 123).

One of the most famous visual representations of female suicide by drowning is John Everett Millais’s *Ophelia* (1851-1852), which was inspired by William Shakespeare’s Ophelia from the play *Hamlet* (1609).⁷



Figure 1. John Everett Millais (1829-1896), *Ophelia*, c.1851-1852, Oil paint on canvas. © Tate Britain

Throughout *Hamlet*, Ophelia is mistreated, used by her family and by her lover, Hamlet. Too obedient, she makes no attempts to stand up for herself and passively accepts the patriarchal pressures. Ophelia’s lack of agency ends up being her downfall. After losing, physically and emotionally, two of the most important men in her life, Ophelia is overtaken by madness and no longer is interested in the world of the living. Consequently, when she falls into the waters of the brook, Ophelia offers no resistance, passively accepting her fate for the last time.

In his painting, Millais captures the moment of Ophelia’s death. In the representation, *Hamlet*’s tragic heroine is submerged in the waters of the brook; a garland made of “crownflowers, nettles, daisies, and long purples” (Shakespeare 4.7.165) floats by her side. Millais incorporates in his visual interpretation of the scene the beauty and serenity of Ophelia’s death narrated by Gertrude to Laertes and King Claudius.

Although it may depend on one's interpretation, several allusions to Ophelia losing her virginity can be found in the play. After madness emerges, Ophelia intones a ballad which tells the story of a young maiden who is seduced:

To-morrow is Saint Valentine's day,
All in the morning betime,
And I a maid at your window,
To be your Valentine:
Then up he rose, and donn'd his clothes
And dupp'd the chamber door;
Let in the maid, that out a maid
Never departed more. (4.5.49-55)

The girl in the song mirrors Ophelia's condition - she too has lost her innocence. In the midst of singing ballads about love, sex and death, Ophelia offers flowers to those around her, an act that can suggest a symbolic deflowering. Additionally, the interpretation of the flowers chosen by Ophelia to weave the garland, and later reproduced in Millais's painting, can be read as an indication of the young woman's fall:

There is a willow grows aslant a brook
That shows his hoar leaves in the glassy stream.
There with fantastic garlands did she come
Of crowsfeet, nettles, daisies, and long purples,
That liberal shepherds give a grosser name,
But our cold maids do "dead men's fingers" call them. (4.7.162-167)

The symbolism of the flowers intertwines with Ophelia's character and fate. Symbolically, crowsfeet, better known nowadays as buttercups, stand for childishness - in a sense, a childish innocence could still be perceived in Ophelia's behaviour and actions, especially as the madness takes over. Nettles represent the young woman's pain - a pain which emerged from the grief of being abandoned. Daisies are the symbol of innocence and purity.

However, intertwined with long purples, also known as wild orchids, which signify sexual love, they make Ophelia's loss of purity implicit. Besides, the weeping willow not only represents melancholy and mourning, but also forsaken love. As most fallen women, Ophelia has been abandoned by her lover.

In his representation, Millais added other flowers to the scene (forget-me-nots, which carry their meaning in the name; red poppies, a symbol of sleep and death; violets, representing "modesty and humility," which "appealed to the Victorian's

notion of [the] ideal woman” (Kirby 70); and fritillary, a symbol of sorrow), transforming a beautiful scene into a mournful and tragic one.

Furthermore, when Gertrude narrates Ophelia’s poetic death, the queen compares Ophelia to a mermaid, a symbol of sexual deviance:

Her clothes spread wide,
And mermaid-like a while they bore her up,
Which time she chanted snatches of old lauds
As one incapable of her own distress,
Or like a creature native and indued
Unto that element. But long it could not be (Shakespeare 4.7.172-177)

Not only does Gertrude say Ophelia looked “mermaid-like” and a “creature native,” but Ophelia chanting “snatches of old lauds” (4.7.174), while slowly drowned, reinforces the comparison. In Victorian culture “the image of [the] mermaid was pervasive . . . symbolizing fear of feminine sexuality and dramatizing the “otherness” of women” (Cooper 192).

In their many representations, both mermaid and fallen woman “shared a watery setting . . . put their bodies on display . . . [and] were the objects of judgmental gaze, although that judgement could range from condemnation to pity” (Cooper 194). Thus, the mermaid and the fallen woman are perceived as counterparts.

According to Ann Thomson and Neil Taylor, Ophelia ends up representing “a powerful archetype in which female insanity and female sexuality are inextricably intertwined” (Shakespeare 27). She is the archetype of the fallen woman in the mid-Victorian era.

In 1844, Thomas Hood’s famous poem “The Bridge of Sighs” was published. The poem describes the death of a fallen woman. After being thrown out of her home after an illegitimate pregnancy, she decides to end her life by throwing herself from Waterloo bridge.⁸ Cleansed by the waters of the Thames, “all that remains of her / now is pure womanly” (Hoods 19-20).

In *Passages from the Poems of Thomas Hood* (1844), Millais’s colourless illustration depicts this young fallen woman standing on the bank of the Thames. In the illustration, a tall bridge stands behind the fallen angel. As Barbara Gates argues, “in visual arts the Thames and its bridges came to represent the end of the line for such desperate women” (138).

Inspired by the tragic figure of Ophelia and Hood's poem, many painters blended and brought to life these two poetic and emotional scenes, creating vivid and realist paintings of the tragedy which encompassed the fallen woman.

George Frederic Watts's *Found Drowned* (1849-50)⁹ depicts a lost Victorian Ophelia driven to a watery suicide. The painting shows the body of a woman lying stretched out on the shores of the Thames, beneath Waterloo Bridge.



Figure 2. George Frederic Watts (1817-1904), *Found Drowned*, c.1848-1850, Oil on canvas. © Watts Gallery Trust

In the gloomy sky of industrialized London, a glowing star shines down on the dead fallen woman, the only source of light in the dark hues of the painting. The locket in her hand suggests unrequited love or the abandonment of a lover. In Watt's painting, there is religious symbolism: the fallen woman is stretched in a Christ-like form. She has become a martyr to Victorian morality. This scene is echoed in the third painting of Augustus Leopold Egg's¹⁰ 1858 series, *Past and Present* (1858).¹¹

Inspired by W. Holman Hunt's *The Awakening Conscience* (1853, oil on canvas, Tate Britain, London), Augustus Leopold Egg's *Past and Present* triptych represents the downfall of a bourgeois family. It follows the discovery of a wife's infidelity by her husband and the aftermath.

In the first panel, the husband discovers the wife's betrayal. The woman lies on the floor, while the husband stares at her with a letter, presumably from her lover, clutched in his hand. Near the woman, lies half an apple.¹² As Eve, the wife is being cast out from a haven. The open doorway reflected in the mirror foreshadows the wife and mother's exile into the unknown streets of London. Like the house of cards the children were building, the family house is collapsing.

In the second painting, set several years later, the two girls are comforting each other. Their father has passed away, leaving them orphans. Although their mother is still alive, the girls are all alone since Victorian law denied maternal custody rights. As John Stuart Mill wrote “even after he [the husband] is dead she is not their [the children’s] legal guardian unless he by will has made her so” (Mill 161). Through brush strokes, Egg recriminates the Victorian society that judges the children for the mother’s “crimes.”

In the final scene of the triptych, the woman is under the Adelphi arches, a common place for prostitution and criminality at the time. In her arms, covered by a shawl, she holds the child born of her infidelity.



Figure 3. August Leopold Egg (1816-1863), *Past and Present, No. 3*, c. 1858, Oil paint on canvas.
© Tate Britain

On the wall behind the fallen woman, there are three posters advertising plays with suggestive titles: *Victims*, *A Cure for Love*, and *Return the Bride*. All the plays,

contain the structural components of . . . complicated, almost farcical, plot; unexpected encounters; jilted lovers; misconstrued actions; mixed-up packages; and happy resolution . . . Each play depicts people trapped in unhappy marriages and comments upon the possible reasons and consequences of such mismatched unions. (Rutherford n. pag.)

Not only does Egg reveal that his sympathies lie with this woman (he places the poster with the word “victims” written on it above her and the bastard child), but he unveils

the reality of the institution of marriage: the marital happiness propagated by the Victorian discourse was a farce; most women who were forced to marry young lived unfortunate and despondent lives.

In this painting, the fallen woman is staring at the moon, a symbol of “virginity and chastity . . . partly through its connection with virgin goddesses [Artemis or Diana] and partly because its light is cold” (Ferber 130), as if she is waiting for the river waters to rise and wash her away - “if the tide is out of for the moment, it will not be for long; the woman’s beloved moon will see to that” (Gates 139). As Ophelia, the woman passively accepts her fate and waits for the tide to come and wash her away, in hope of finding in death the expiation she could not find in life.

Abraham Solomon’s¹³ *Drowned! Drowned!* (1860, unknown) takes its title from Laertes exclamation when Gertrude first tells him of his sister’s death.¹⁴ It represents the moment the body of the drowned woman is discovered. Echoing Hood’s poem, in the lithographic reproduction, the female body is carefully lifted by a woman. A bullseyes lantern illuminates the beautiful face of the corpse.

Diverging from his contemporaries, Solomon included in the painting the man who ruined the young woman’s life. While society judged and condemned any woman who dared to defy the ideal of Victorian Respectability, men did not see their transgressions punished, therefore maintaining their social position. Near the man, stands his new conquest, who is unaware of the drowned Ophelia; unaware that she may be the next woman dragged from the river waters lifeless.

On the whole, the bodies of the drowned angels are surrounded by an aura of peacefulness and quietude. There is a magnificence covering the ugliness of death - in death, beauty and innocence are once more restored; in death these “sinners” find salvation, becoming again angelic figures.

The authors of the visual representations explored in this essay did choose to view and depict the fallen woman favourably. However, in their attempts to make society more receptive and compassionate towards a figure which defied the female ideal and Victorian conceptions, they ended up reinforcing the stereotype of the fallen woman, as well as the patriarchal discourse on gender roles.

Instead of dispelling the belief that females were feeble, passive and submissive figures, they strengthened the myth “invented by the Victorians in order to remind all

women of the eventual demise and death of those who could be categorized as sexually transgressive and threatened to destabilize male order” (Meessen 23).

Through the exposition of the galvanic bodies, Millais, Watts, Egg and Solomon created an iconography that exalts the fallen woman, but which did nothing to change the conception built around the image of the subservient female intrinsic to the Victorian patriarchal discourse.

As a matter of fact, they reinforced the patriarchal discourse. These representations forced women to embrace the idealized conception of femininity imposed by a patriarchal society since they perpetuated the myth that any woman who defied Victorian order - any woman who was sexually transgressive - would end up in the cold waters of the Thames.

Works Cited

- Auerbach, Nina. *Woman and the Demon: The Life of a Victorian Myth*. Harvard UP, 1982.
- Cooper, Suzanne Fagence. “The Liquefaction of Desire: Music, Water and Femininity in Victorian Aestheticism.” *Women: a Cultural Review*, vol. 20, no. 2, 2009, pp. 186-201.
- Davidoff, Leonore and Catherine Hall. *Family Fortunes, Revised Edition: Men and Women of the English Middle Class 1780-1850. Revised Edition*. Routledge, 2002.
- Edmonds-Dobrijevic, Fiona. “Drowning Girl: Water and the Feminine Body.” *The International Journal of the Arts in Society*, vol. 5 no. 4, 2010, pp. 119-128.
- Ferber, Michael. *A Dictionary of Literary Symbols*. Cambridge UP, 2007.
- Gates, Barbara. *Victorian Suicide: Mad Crimes and Sad Stories*. Princeton UP, 2014.
- Kirby, Mandy. *A Victorian Flower Dictionary: The Language of Flowers Companion*. Ballantine Books, 2011.
- Lee, Elizabeth. “Fallen Women in Victorian Art.” *The Victorian Web*. 21 December 2009, www.victorianweb.org/gender/fallen.html. Accessed 17 November 2017.
- Marshall, Gail. *Shakespeare in the Nineteenth Century*. Cambridge UP, 2012.
- Meessen, Valerie. “Post-mortems: Representations of Female Suicide by Drowning in Victorian Culture”. MA Thesis, Radboud University, 2016.

Mill, John Stuart. *The Basic Writings of John Stuart Mill: On Liberty, The Subjection of Women and Utilitarianism*. Modern Library, 2002.

Rhodes, Kimberly. *Ophelia and Victorian Visual Culture: Representing Body Politics in the Nineteenth Century*. Routledge, 2017.

Rutherford, Annabel. "A Dramatic Reading of Augustus Leopold Egg's Untitled Triptych." *Tate Papers*, no. 7, 2007, <http://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/07/a-dramatic-reading-of-augustus-leopold-egg-untitled-triptych>. Accessed 4 June 2018.

Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet: Revised Edition*, edited by Ann Thomson and Neil Taylor. The Arden Shakespeare Third Series. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016.

¹ The ideology of separate spheres dictated a woman's place was in the private sphere, in the sphere of the home and family life.

² The cult of domesticity became "more widespread in the nineteenth-century" because "more people among the expanded middle class had greater resources to practice the domestic ideal" (Davidoff and Hall xx).

³ "The Angel in the House" is a narrative poem written by Coventry Patmore, published in 1854. Inspired by Patmore's marriage with his wife Emily, the poem describes the ideal happy marriage. This concept can be found in the third canto "The Lover," where the wife is perceived as a spiritual figure, and as a mean of getting closer to God. The term was widely used to describe the perfect Victorian middle class housewife.

⁴ John Everett Millais (1829-1896) was an English painter. He was one of the founders of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. He was well-known for his landscape and portraiture paintings. Apart from *Ophelia*, some of his most famous works are *The Blind Girl* (1856) and *The Boyhood of Raleigh* (1870).

⁵ George Frederic Watts (1818-1904) was an English painter associated with the symbolist movement. A versatile painter, he became known for *The Wounded Hero* (1837) and *Hope* (1886). He was considered to be the greatest painter of the Victorian era.

⁶ In the nineteenth century, female madness was intrinsically connected with her sexuality.

⁷ As Gail Marshall writes in the synopsis of *Shakespeare in the Nineteenth Century* (2012), it was "in the nineteenth century [that] Shakespeare achieved the status of international pre-eminence that we recognize today." Hence, since Shakespeare was extremely popular with the Victorian audience, it is not surprising that *Ophelia* was the subject of so many Victorian painters.

⁸ In the 19th century, Waterloo Bridge was popularly known as the Bridge of Sighs because many people chose to commit suicide there.

⁹ Watts took the painting's title from a regular column in the *Time New Paper* where it was listed the number of women that committed suicide by self-drowning.

¹⁰ Augustus Leopold Egg (1816-1863) was an English painter. He belonged to The Clique, a group of artists created in the 1830s which rejected the academic high art in favour of genre painting. He was interested in moral themes, as perceived in the diptych *The Life and Death of Buckingham*.

¹¹ Egg's triptych was displayed with the quote: "August 4th - have just heard that B_ has been dead more than a fortnight, so his poor children have now lost both parents. I hear she was seen on Friday last near the Strand, evidently without a place to lay her head. What a fall hers has been!"

¹² In the Christian tradition, the apple signifies the loss of innocence.

¹³ Abraham Solomon (1823-1862) was a realist English painter. He became famous through works such as *Contrast* (1855), *Waiting on the Verdict* (1857) and the controversial *First Class - The Meeting* (1854), which he later revised.

¹⁴ “Drowned? Oh, where?” (Shakespeare, 4.7.161).