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AN OVERVIEW OF FEMALE SEXUALITY IN THE VICTORIAN ERA[2]

The paper analyses the strict societal norms imposed on women during the Victorian era (1837-1901) and investigates the extent to which these rules diminished the importance of female sexuality while emphasizing the necessity for modesty and domesticity among women. The argumentation is supported by references to Victorian etiquette handbooks, an examination of the origin and application of the term 'hysteria' to women who exhibit sexual desires, and by highlighting the recurring motif linking sex and death in Victorian literature. Finally, the arguments presented in the paper are exemplified with references from prominent Victorian literary works.

Keywords: female sexuality, Victorian etiquette, hysteria, Victorian literature, sex and death.

1. VICTORIAN *ETIQUETTE*

The Victorian era (1837-1901) was dominated by Victorian etiquette that, among other things, disregarded or at least diminished the importance of female sexuality, which was regulated by rigid societal norms that women were supposed to follow. They were expected to embody the modesty, purity, chastity, and domesticity of the age's namesake, Queen Victoria, who was seen as the ideal Victorian woman. She was the perfect mother of nine children and an exemplary wife to her beloved Prince Albert, whose untimely death at the age of forty-two doomed the Queen to perpetual mourning. Furthermore, Queen Victoria's stout and plump body made her the embodiment of motherhood and earned her the title of 'the mother of the nation'.

Although the ideal Victorian female body was the opposite of the Queen's, her domestic and familial lifestyle was a desired ideal. This was

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reflected in many handbooks of Victorian etiquette—'etiquette' being defined by the Cambridge English Dictionary (CED) as "the set of rules or customs that control accepted behaviour in particular social groups or social situations" (Cambridge English Dictionary 2025), and by the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) as "the customary code of polite behaviour in society; good manners" (Oxford English Dictionary 2024). To illustrate some of the basic social rules of the age, we will refer to two handbooks, both published in 1860. The first one, *Routledge's Manual of Etiquette*, provides separate sets of rules for ladies and gentlemen. The ladies' section advises that "where the sexes are the same, [*one should*] always present the inferior to the superior", the lady being "the superior in right of her sex" (Routledge 2020). For the letters of introduction, a lady's notepaper should "be of the best quality and the proper size. Albert or Queen's size is the best for these purposes". Regarding conversations, the author alludes to Shakespeare's Cordelia and urges the ladies to remember that "a voice "gentle and low" is … "an excellent thing in woman"", and warns them not to be too loud, never to speak of religion, never to interrupt a person who is speaking, not to be *always* (sic!) witty, etc. It further instructs them how to walk and dress, how to behave at parties, at the dinner-table, in the ballroom, and while staying at a friend's house. The exhaustive guidelines are concluded with some general hints, such as: "Compliance with, and deference to, the wishes of others is the finest breeding"; "Look at those who address you"; "Converse with a foreigner in his own language. If not competent to do so, apologize, and beg permission to speak English"; "Members of one family should not converse together in society", etc.

The other handbook was specifically designed for women and published as *The Ladies' Book of Etiquette, and Manual of Politeness*. Its author, Florence Hartley, herself a lady, shows comprehensive knowledge of the subject while giving even more thorough guidelines than Routledge on more or less the same topics, but unlike him, Hartley's style is more literary and descriptive. For example, concerning the "gentle and low" voice insisted on by Routledge, she writes: "Remember that a lady-like deportment is always modest and quiet. If you meet a friend at table, and converse, let it be in a tone of voice sufficiently loud for him to hear, but not loud enough to reach ears for which the remarks are not intended. A boisterous, loud voice, loud laughter, and bold deportment, at a hotel, are sure signs of vulgar breeding" (Hartley 2011: 41). However, while Routledge considers women to be the superior sex, Hartley ironically maintains: "Providence has willed that man should be the head of the human race, even as woman is its heart; that he should be its strength, as she is its solace; that he should be its wisdom, as she is its grace; that he should be its mind, its impetus, and its courage, as she is its sentiment, its charm, and its consolation" (294). On the other hand, she criticizes the "presumed intellectual inequality of the two sexes" (294-295) and blames the Victorian society for placing "dancing and needle-work at the extreme poles of female study"

(295) while disregarding meaningful domestic conversation as an equally important aspect of marital life. To mend this, she recommends reading "something more solid", something other than "light literature" (180), so that a woman may commune "with superior minds" (181), namely men. She concludes that "the time is gone by, when women, with all their energies excited, will be contented to be the mere plaything of brother, husband, or father" (181).

2. THE FEMALE BODY

While woman as a plaything may be understood as an allusion to female sexuality, the handbooks of Victorian etiquette do not deal with such 'trivial' matter as the female body, apart from providing advice on how to dress it properly[3]. As a sexual being, a Victorian woman was 'a woman of no importance', or when she exhibited any sexual wants, she was deemed 'hysterical'. 'You look a little hysterical, my dear' is not a sentence a woman would say to a man, hysteria being reserved solely for women because it originally referred to a disorder of the uterus (Greek *hystera*) that led to "a neurotic condition peculiar to women" (Harper n.d.). During Renaissance, hysteria was often called 'the mother' and denoted a suffocating feeling starting in the womb (hence 'the mother') and rising through the body to choke one's heart and throat. Shakespeare uses it in this fashion when he has King Lear say: "O, how *this mother*[4] swells up toward my heart! *Hysterica passio*, down, thou climbing sorrow. Thy element's below." (II, 4, 56-58) (Shakespeare 2002: 507). This early in the play, Lear still blames his ungrateful daughters for all his misfortunes and is afraid of displaying emotions like a woman, so he wants them back to where they belong—in the stomach/womb, and not in his heart and head.

Similarly, in the Victorian era it was a sign of weakness to show emotions, particularly regarding the needs of the body. If a woman lost control over her emotions, she would be accused of being hysterical and sent to a physician to confirm the diagnosis. The disorder of the uterus, hysteria, was thought to cause weeping, anxiety, nymphomania, and frigidity, for which the 'proper treatment' was female genital massage, performed by Victorian doctors, as Rachel P. Maines claims in her book *The Technology of Orgasm*[5] (1999). She claims that with the discovery of vibrators, "some

3 For instance, Routledge writes that having a good lady's-maid is crucial in choosing the right dress for her mistress, one that would "give the arm sufficient room so that the back shall not pucker, … cut the body so that short waisted ladies shall not seem to have too short a waist, nor long-waisted ladies too long a one." (Routledge 2020)

4 My italic.

5 Full title: *The Technology of Orgasm, "Hysteria", the Vibrator, and Women's Sexual Satisfaction*.

physicians even had vibratory "operating theaters"[6] (Maines 1999: 11), but also admits that despite all the evidence she presents in her study, "the voices of women are seldom heard": "It is a rare person of either sex who sees fit to leave a record even of his or her most orthodox procreative marital sexuality, let alone of experiences with masturbation" (10). According to Maines, the word 'hysterical' has since "shifted from the technical designation of a disease paradigm to much more general references to uncontrolled, usually frivolous, emotions" (21). Nevertheless, it must be noted that contemporary dictionaries, such as CED, define 'hysteria' as "extreme fear, excitement, anger, etc. that cannot be controlled" (Cambridge English Dictionary 2025), which are certainly not frivolous emotions.

If female voices were being controlled, so were their bodies. This does not mean that women were denied sexual pleasure, but rather that orgasm was allowed or encouraged only as long as it helped one to conceive (Mason 1994: 199-200). With conception and giving birth to children usually came a plump, full female body, exemplified by the era's ideal woman, Queen Victoria. However, in her study *Victorian Literature and the Anorexic Body* (2002), Anna Krugovoy Silver shows that the "look of overall thinness, including the fashion for boniness" (Silver 2003: 26) was the desired body look. A fear of fat overwhelmed Victorian women, and the body image concerns were "almost wholly focused upon the slender waist" (26), which allows Silver to cleverly dub them "waisted women". She describes in great detail the harmful practice of corset-wearing and tight-lacing, which Victorian women used to re-shape "their bodies, particularly their waists, to conform to normative standards of beauty" (36), because the "widespread belief [*of the age was*] that one of women's main duties in life was to be beautiful" (26). Herein lies a paradox: women were supposed to be beautiful and enticing, but they were not allowed to freely express their femininity and sexuality. In fact, the Victorian beauty myth "validated the slim body as a symbol of … her sexual purity" (14), so that the slimmer a woman was, the chaster she was, and in doing so it yearned to destroy the female body with this "anorexic logic" (14).

The destruction of the female body led to the linkage between sex and death. In the Elizabethan era, the slang term for sexual climax was 'to die', which found its expression in Victorian fiction. Carol Hanbery MacKay asserts that "by eroticizing death, an author makes of death not an ending but something that is a part of the life process, itself endlessly repeated" (MacKay 1990: 120-121). The 'non-ending life' trope is best seen in the rising popularity of the vampire figure who, unlike the ghost figure, represents a "double threat, at once physical and spiritual", but in practice "essentially sexual" (Tracy 1990: 34). The penetration of one's throat

6 Martha Henriques (Henriques 2018) challenges this view in her article "The vibrator: from medical tool to revolutionary sex toy", in which she claims that Maines' study is more of a myth than a proven historical fact. For more details, see: https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20181107-the-history-of-the-vibrator

becomes an overtly sexual act, not dreaded, but desired[7]. Hence, Victorian literature abounds with deaths, as Garrett Stewart notices: "Characters die more often, more slowly and more vocally in the Victorian age than ever before or since" (Stewart 1984, cited in Barreca 1990: 2).

3. EXAMPLES FROM VICTORIAN LITERATURE

In view of the presented socio-cultural circumstances surrounding women in the Victorian age, one should consider the manifestation of female sexuality, or lack thereof, in Victorian literature, focusing on the most significant genre that evolved during the 19th century: the novel. Among many Victorian noteworthy authors, Charles Dickens stands out as a major figure and an influential voice of the lower classes. In his fictional world, female characters tend to be either virtuous or fallen. The first usually embody the idealistic view of woman as nurturing, humble, self-sacrificing mother / sister /aunt figures, such as one finds in *David Copperfield* (1850): his mother Clara, Peggotty the housekeeper, David's aunt Miss Betsey Trotwood, and David's wife Agnes. The fallen women or prostitutes represent a tainted femininity that comes from sexually engaging with men. In *David Copperfield*, "Little Em'ly" becomes a fallen woman after Steerforth, with whom she has eloped, leaves her. Dickens 'saves' Emily by letting her escape to Australia, the land of convicts, but there are other fallen women in his works who cannot escape their tragic fate. One such woman is Nancy from *Oliver Twist* (1838), a girl prostitute that lives with the villain of the book, Bill Sikes. Adams believes that Dickens had to discipline Nancy's sexuality and make her a "virtuous whore who dies at the hand of her pimp because she embodies the social death that Oliver escapes" (Adams 2009: 64). Dickens's great rival, William Makepeace Thackeray, creates a heroine that is the total opposite to both the virtuous and the fallen woman figure because she is neither, but stands somewhere in between. Becky Sharp, the protagonist of *Vanity Fair* (1848), manipulates people around her to be able to "live well on nothing a year" (Thackeray 2001). She is an adept social climber who may have not elicited much sympathy among the Vic-

7 Compare with the excerpt from Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (publ. 1897), in which Jonathan Harker describes his encounter with the vampirellas: "I was afraid to raise my eyelids, but looked out and saw perfectly under the lashes. The girl went on her knees, and bent over me, simply gloating. There was a deliberate voluptuousness which was both thrilling and repulsive, and as she arched her neck she actually licked her lips like an animal, till I could see in the moonlight the moisture shining on the scarlet lips and on the red tongue as it lapped the white sharp teeth. Lower and lower went her head as the lips went below the range of my mouth and chin and seemed about to fasten on my throat. Then she paused, and I could hear the churning sound of her tongue as it licked her teeth and lips, and could feel the hot breath on my neck. Then the skin of my throat began to tingle as one's flesh does when the hand that is to tickle it approaches nearer—nearer. I could feel the soft, shivering touch of the lips on the super-sensitive skin of my throat, and the hard dents of two sharp teeth, just touching and pausing there. I closed my eyes in a languorous ecstasy and waited—waited with beating heart." (Stoker 2000: 33-34)

torian readers, but her 'skills' resonate well with contemporary audience. Although she often employs her sexuality to achieve her goals, she never quite falls into the category of 'fallen' women.

Even though Victorian authors did not shy away from creating sexual tensions between characters, they refused to "offer any sexual resolution" because a wedding night could not "enlarge the possibilities for emotion and indulgence" (Barreca 1990: 2-3) as much as death scenes could. Examples of such 'resolutions' include Nancy's death and the death of George Osborne—Becky's suitor and husband of her best friend Amelia, who is a truly virtuous woman. In other famous novels of the time, one finds the same formula: death as a means of resolving the sexual tension between two characters. The infamous and unexpected ending of George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* (1860) unites brother and sister, Tom and Maggie, only in death, thus putting an end to an implicit and forbidden sexual tension between them. Like Becky Sharp, Maggie Tulliver is an outsider, whose coarse hair and dark complexion symbolize her wild nature and great intellect. However, while Becky "exploits prejudice to become a part of the Victorian world" (Adams 2009: 117), Maggie challenges the Victorian prejudices against women in much the same manner as Charlote Brontë's Jane Eyre (1847). Maggie and Jane want to change the established social order, but Magie must die at the end of the novel in her brother's embrace because of their strong bond. Jane, on the other hand, gets to keep her man, Mr. Rochester, yet their bond is also odd given that both are unconventional outsiders. Jane's sexuality is deliberately understated in favour of her intellect. The 'true' feminine sexuality is represented through Jane's 'dark double', the Jamaican Creole Bertha Mason, Mr. Rochester's first wife, who dies a self-induced death when she sets fire to Thornfield, thus following the already established formula of death resolving sexual tensions.

Conversely, in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847), the most famous and most disturbing romantic story, Catherine's death, which is supposed to resolve the sexual tension between herself and the ruthless Heathcliff, only deepens it and engenders a brutal revenge that affects different generations of characters. Heathcliff's abuse of the young Cathy and Hareton may be seen as a punishment for Catherine and Heathcliff's unfulfilled transgressive desire. However, Emili Brontë ultimately shows that true love transcends sex, worldly issues, and humanity itself: she suggests that death is a reward for true lovers since it grants them eternal love. Another way to eternize love is through art, as Oscar Wilde shows in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890) when Dorian falls in love with Sibyl Vane, a beautiful young Shakespearean actress, who is for Dorian always fresh and new depending on the role she is playing: "Tonight she is Imogen … and tomorrow night she will be Juliet", he claims as he confides in his best friend Basil: "I have had the arms of Rosalind around me, and kissed Juliet on the mouth" (Wilde 2006: 66). However, the moment Sibyl decides to stop being an actress and dedicate her life solely to loving Dorian, she loses her

charm, as though her own sexuality cannot compete with the allure of art: "Last night she was a great artist. This evening she is merely a commonplace, mediocre actress" (73). Even in the last decades of the Victorian era, female characters die once they overtly exhibit their sexuality: Sibyl ends her life once Dorian tells her that without her art she is nothing, only "a third-rate actress with a pretty face" (75). Finally, Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) implies that true sexual freedom comes only in/after death, when women bitten by a vampire continue to 'live' a life in death and are allowed not to have any restraints and to be sensual and voluptuous. Not only is this depicted in the scene with Jonathan Harker and the seductive vampirellas, but also in the peculiar relationship between Count Dracula and Mina. The intimate act of drinking blood alludes to copulation and is always sexual in nature, so when Dracula forces Mina to drink his own blood from a wound in his chest, she complies even though she is repulsed by him. Silver maintains that "Dracula thus reveals and exploits Mina's *own* appetite: female hunger signifies female sexual desire which, in Stoker's novel, literally makes women monsters" (Silver 2003: 120).

4. CONCLUSION

As the paper has shown, the Victorian age was filled with paradoxes regarding the desired position of women in the society. In line with the Victorian etiquette, women were supposed to follow the domestic and familial lifestyle exemplified by Queen Victoria. Accordingly, they were to be modest, polite, and obey the patriarch of the family, keeping their voices gentle and low. However, when it came to their bodies, plump figures were not desired, because fat symbolized sexual hunger and low social status, whereas slimness symbolized sexual purity, which was preferred. Hence, the ideals of the age were largely unrealistic, since a woman was expected to be a silent wife, a slim mother, a 'pure' beauty, and an asexual being. Women who did not fulfil these expectations were often deemed 'hysterical'. All this had found its way into Victorian literature: the examples shown in the paper span across the whole age and prove that the image of Victorian women had not in fact changed until the end of the 19th century. The Victorian age left future novelists a rich legacy of stifling female sexuality in a work of art, which in turn helped them rebuild and reshape the image of women in the 20-century literature.

The constantly growing body of literary criticism dealing with female sexuality and the body in the Victorian Era shows that the interest in this topic is not abating. Apart from numerous scholarly articles addressing the subject, over the last several decades, entire studies have been published that debunk the myths surrounding female sexuality in the Victorian Age (*Myths of Sexuality: Representations of Women in Victorian Britain* (1988), by Linda Nead), or connect the Victorian notion of sexuality to other impor-

tant themes of modern times. To name but a few: *Unstable Bodies: Victorian representations of Sexuality and Maternity* (1995), by Jill L. Matus; *Bodies and Lives in Victorian England: Science, Sexuality, and the Affliction of Being Female* (2021), by Pamela K. Stone and Lise Shapiro Sanders; *Narrating Empire and Domesticity in Neo-Victorian Fiction: Domestic Elsewheres* (2025), by Marlena Tronicke; *The Waltzing Body in Victorian Literature: Narratives of Sexuality and Power* (2025), by Sabrina Gilchrist Hadyk. The ever-increasing interest in the notions of female sexuality demonstrates that they remain germane to solving contemporary issues that arise from them.

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Biljana Vlašković Ilić / ŽENSKA SEKSUALNOST U VIKTORIJANSKOM DOBU

Rezime / Rad razmatra stroge društvene norme koje je Viktorijansko doba (1837-1901) nametalo ženama i razotkriva načine na koji su ova pravila ponašanja umanjivala značaj ženske seksualnosti dok su naglašavala da su skromnost i porodični život najznačajniji u životu jedne žene. Navedena argumentacija potkrepljena je izvodima iz viktorijanskih priručnika za lepo ponašanje, analizom porekla i primene termina 'histerija' na žene koje pokazuju da su seksualna bića, kao i isticanjem da je jedan od najčešće korišćenih književnih motiva u viktorijanskoj književnosti izjednačavanje seksa i smrti. Argumenti do kojih se dolazi prilikom sprovedene analize dodatno se potkrepljuju primerima iz nekih od najznačajnijih dela viktorijanske književnosti.

Ključne reči: ženska seksualnost, viktorijanski pojam lepog ponašanja, histerija, viktorijanska književnost, seks i smrt.

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