Lust in The Age of Propriety: Sexual Deviancy in Victorian Era Literature

No scholarly work on Victorian Era Literature would be complete without an examination of the sexual nuances of the period’s literature. Sex has a place in many Victorian works, and this fact has not completely escaped the body of criticism over the years, though idealizations of the propriety of Victorian England pervade the scholarship. Most scholars view the presence of subtle sexuality in the Victorian Era as a catharsis of a society whose sexuality was repressed by the accepted standards of behavior of the time. However, one fact is often overlooked: much of the sex alluded to in Victorian works such as Oliver Twist, The Tenant of Wildfell Hall, Christina Rosetti’s “Goblin Market,” and Elizabeth Gaskell’s “Lizzie Leigh” is behavior that would be considered deviant even by 21st century standards. Though covert sexuality is recognized in many Victorian works, it is curious to note that the sexual behavior mentioned is often aberrant in nature.

The Victorian Era is commonly thought of as an era of propriety and modesty. While many elements of Victorian Literature contribute to this ideology, a careful reader can detect hints of sexuality and, specifically, deviation from normal behavior. The motives of the authors of these works in including these elements are varied and must be taken into account when attempting to discern their meaning. One of the era’s most prolific authors, Charles
Dickens, includes many elements of aberrant sexual behavior in his novel *Oliver Twist*. Susan Balee affectionately dubbed Dickens the “Show (But Don’t Tell) Man”, a fitting moniker for the style in which Dickens presented his characters and subject matter. Famous for his representation of the lower classes, Dickens incorporates sexuality into his narrative for the sake of accurately depicting the lives of the poor in Victorian England.

In *Oliver Twist*, Dickens presents sexual themes by means of four main characters: Nancy, Charley Bates, Bill Sikes, and Tom Chitling. Burns and Stearns wrote that Dickens strives “to tell a larger truth with a series of fictional episodes” in his novels (2). This is true of Dickens as the use of fictional characters in *Oliver Twist* can be seen to portray the dysfuctionalism of sexual attitudes and their effect on the individual in society. Nancy is a member of the gang of thieves that Oliver comes into contact with during his time in London: she is a prostitute working for Mr. Fagin, the Jewish orchestrator of the miscreant band. Nancy’s sexuality in the novel centers on her occupation as a prostitute and is directly tied to the sexuality of Bill Sikes, her partner. The climax of Nancy’s misguided sexuality is its culmination in her murder at Sikes’s hands. Tatum, in her psychoanalysis of the work, states, “the hostility expressed is toward the autonomy which Nancy’s sexuality and awakening maternal sympathies toward Oliver represent” (240). This perspective focuses on Nancy as a target for sexual violence both direct, at the hands of Sikes, and indirect, at the hands of a society that facilitated her decent into prostitution. Through this lens, Sikes functions as a symbol of masculine oppression: he abuses Nancy because he struggles with her dual role as a prostitute and his sexual partner. The implied sexual violence he imparts onto Nancy is a sign of his own dysfunction. Through Sikes and Nancy, Dickens stabs at the broken social system of his time in which men who are unable to express their sexuality otherwise often target women.
Two other examples of sexual deviants in *Oliver Twist* are Charles Bates and Tom Chitling. Bates is often referred to as “Master Bates” in the novel, a pun on the word “masturbate.” Dickens repetitively uses this moniker in the novel to accentuate Victorian attitudes toward onanism: in the novel, Master Bates is represented as neurotic with fits of inappropriate laughter. Upon Oliver’s first meeting with Bates, the scoundrel “laughed uproariously, very much to the amazement of Oliver, who saw nothing to laugh at, in anything that had passed” (Dickens 70). These fits of laughter reflect the belief that autoeroticism produced mental infirmity. Bates represents the abnormality of self-pleasuring, an idea that stems from the impracticality of the behavior in reproduction. This attitude is analogous with Victorian reactions against Malthusian philosophy: healthy individuals find a mate and reproduce without fail. The case of Master Bates is an example of how ideas of sexually deviant behavior have evolved since the 19th century.

The case of Tom Chitling is different from the two previously mentioned examples of sexuality in that Tom does not openly display any behavior that would have been considered abnormal. During one scene of the novel Master Bates says of Chitling, “I should say that he was uncommon upon Betsy” (Dickens 200). Chitling goes on to defend himself from the embarrassment of being emotionally attached to a prostitute by gaining affirmation from Fagin that his deed of taking the fall for Betsy during a crime that ended in his incarceration. This approval seeking behavior originates in the young man’s confusion over his feelings for Betsy. According to Victorian ideas of love and marriage, a prostitute is no worthy target for such affection; however, being a criminal and extremely poor, Chitling is already marginalized. Dickens presents this dysfunction, not as a pure illustration of sexuality, but as an
example of the disturbances in love and sex that were experienced by the lower classes through the institution of public opinion on matters sexual.

Another example of Victorian foray into sexuality is Anne Brontë’s The Tenant of Wildfell Hall. In the novel, Brontë presents the reader with Arthur Huntingdon, an alcoholic, womanizing reprobate who marries the novel’s primary protagonist, Helen. Arthur is portrayed by Helen as a demi-god on their first meeting; she writes of his “look, and tone, and gesture, and that ineffable but indefinite charm, which cast a halo over all he did and said” (Brontë 145). This charm drew Helen into the belief that she loved him in spite of his vices and that she could, in fact, reform these vices through devout religion and unconditional love. She found, however, that Arthur Huntingdon was far from salvageable; eventually, Arthur meets his demise at the hands of what is implied to be syphilis acquired through his sexual promiscuity in London. Cox interprets Helen’s predicament: “The novel suggests, then, that it is not only diseases such as syphilis which threaten to contaminate the wives and children of dissolute men, but their moral behaviour general” (34). This interpretation groups The Tenant of Wildfell Hall with Oliver Twist in the sense that both novels portray sexual behaviors as immoral and damaging: to society, in the case of Oliver Twist, and to the family structure, in the case of Brontë’s The Tenant of Wildfell Hall. Pike claims that the author: “exposes how many fathers fail to instill the prerequisite values of Victorian manliness in their sons” (112). Arthur Huntingdon is certainly a father who fails to instill values in his son. It is interesting to note that neither novel offers a model of appropriate sexual behavior. This deficiency supports Cox’s interpretation of The Tenant of Wildfell Hall because it keeps Brontë’s work consistent with Victorian attitudes toward sexuality and further vilifies Arthur Huntingdon. The protagonist and antithesis of Arthur is Helen who, with the exception of conceiving a child, never exhibits any sexuality. Another foil
character to Arthur is Mr. Markham, Helen’s would-be-suitor for most of the novel who is also primarily asexual. Therefore, the only portrayal of any sex drive in the novel comes from Arthur Huntingdon and his band of degenerates, and his sexual behavior is implied to be extremely erratic and promiscuous. The portrayal of sexuality in The Tenant of Wildfell Hall is consistent with the Victorian social standard that sexual expression is a debasement of the individual.

In addition to Dickens’s and Brontë’s novels, Elizabeth Gaskell’s short story, “Lizzie Leigh” presents an image of sexual deviancy. Gaskell’s short story tells the story of Lizzie Leigh, who conceived outside of marriage. Her father disowns her but forgives her on his deathbed years later. Following this, Lizzie’s mother travels to Manchester to look for the daughter she believes to still be alive. Once in Manchester, Lizzie’s mother discovers her and the grandchild she never met before. “Lizzie Leigh” differs drastically from Oliver Twist and The Tenant of Wildfell Hall in the way that sexual misconduct is portrayed. In The Tenant of Wildfell Hall, the sexual deviant was the main antagonist, and his misdeeds resulted in his death. In Oliver Twist, sexuality was condemned even though blame for the lower class’s morals was placed on society. However, in “Lizzie Leigh” the woman guilty of breaking sex-associated social norms is given a chance at redemption, and an attempt is made to liberate the individual from the status of outcast; here, the deviant is the victim. Gaskell redeems Lizzie through the unconditional love of her mother, which shows that the unity of women can overcome the injustices of a broken social system. Gaskell’s notions of civil liberties and equality emanate from her interest in the developments concerning abolition in America (Pettitt). From this perspective, Gaskell extrapolates the idea that women must help themselves and each other to achieve social justice and expresses this belief through “Lizzie Leigh”.
Gaskell sets up the novel by imposing on Lizzie and Mrs. Leigh the unfairness of a patriarchal society through Mr. Leigh and Will Leigh. The reader learns that Mr. Leigh disowned his daughter because of her misconduct only to forgive her on his deathbed, when it was too late. Will appears to follow in his father’s footsteps. He assents to his mother’s wishes to search for Lizzie in Manchester by saying, “At the end of the year you'll come back, mother, and give over fretting for Lizzie, and think with me that she is dead, - and, to my mind, that would be more comfort than to think of her living” (Gaskell3). Will’s statement is an example of how Victorian attitudes toward sex affect the family structure, a counterpoint to The Tenant of Wildfell Hall, which argues that sexual deviance itself is the cause of harm to the family unit. Will is old enough to remember the shame that Lizzie’s behavior caused his father and the heartache it caused his mother; therefore, his heart is hardened against his sister which is why it is more comforting to think of her as already dead. If Lizzie were dead, Will could gain closure and move past the turmoil the incident caused his family. However, unable to resist his heartbroken mother, the young patriarch assents to the trip to Manchester. Gaskell uses Will to illustrate the harm imparted to men by the system of social inequality concerning sexuality. This situation bears similarities to the relationship of Bill Sikes and Nancy in Oliver Twist in which Bill Sikes violence and sexually abusive tendencies stem from a broken social system in which Nancy has no place. Will, however, finds redemption in his love of Susan. The defining moment in the transformation of Will Leigh comes when Susan says to him: “Will Leigh! I have thought so well of you; don't go and make me think you cruel and hard. Goodness is not goodness unless there is mercy and tenderness with it” (Gaskell 12). Again, Gaskell shows the power of the woman; Susan’s love and golden heart save Will from becoming his father and teaches him that forgiveness is a tenet of love.
Oliver Twist, The Tenant of Wildfell Hall, and “Lizzie Leigh” all offer intentional representations of sexual activity and irregularity with the intention of edifying the reader. Christina Rossetti’s “Goblin Market” offers a counterpoint to these works because, while the poem appears so full of sexual imagery, no mention of sexuality was intended by the author. Rossetti was appalled to learn that her work had been interpreted by some as a tract of sexual revolution. However, a parallel does exist between the poet’s intent and sexuality. As Hill states: “Goblin Market is, first and foremost, a poem about hunger and our desire to eat our fill of that which will satisfy us” (458). This idea is supported by Laura’s fall into the allure of the goblin’s. Hill elaborates on her analysis of the poem by tying the idea of Laura’s salvation by her sister to that of the Eucharist; Laura suffers because she endeavors to quench her hunger by worldly means as opposed to seeking fulfillment through God (458, 460). Hill’s interpretation is supported by the fact that Rossetti was raised by her devout Christian mother (TVE 545). In accordance with Hill’s interpretation, Lizzie serves as a Christ figure through whom Laura is redeemed by partaking of her body, a representation of the sacrament. The erotic nature of the symbolism becomes apparent in the scene in which Lizzie comes to Laura with the intent of delivering her from the hold of the goblin’s fruit. Lizzie says:

Did you miss me?

Come and kiss me.

Never mind my bruises,

Hug me, kiss me, suck my juices. (Rossetti 552)

Rossetti’s use of two female characters may contribute to the sexualization of the narrative. Viewing the poem as a biblical allegory, it is easy to place both sisters in the role of Eve and to see their embrace as a revolt of sexual norms as they embrace at the end of the
work. Earlier passages contribute to this sense, as well, such as the scene in which Lizzie says, “Dear you should not stay so late,/Twilight is not good for maidens” (Rossetti 548). These lines seem to imply a sexual deviance, though from a purely biblical point of view it can be inferred that Rossetti meant no specific type of sin in her allegorical tale.

A Freudian reading of the poem would offer the explanation that Rossetti’s unconscious, unexpressed sexual desires found vent in “Goblin Market”. This concept holds little scientific merit, as the mental health community now knows that catharsis does not work in this manner. However, the possibility should not be dismissed that the idea came from some unconscious source. Victorian society so actively suppressed sexuality that it became a topic of interest, a guilty pleasure. Rossetti’s mention of Twilight and its ill effects on a maiden’s reputation may have seemed nonsexual to Rossetti, who was naïve to such matters, because the specific sexual sin of a “lady of the night” became generalized to all misconduct in the Victorian Era. Due to this, Rossetti believed she was inserting a warning to avoid all unholy behavior when she was, in fact, incorporating a sexual reference into her poem. Christina Rossetti’s “Goblin Market” is essential to the discussion of sexuality and sexual deviance in Victorian Literature because it was an instance in which the audience sexualized imagery that the author did not intend to be an innuendo.

Victorian literature abounds with sexuality and sexuality deviant behavior despite the common perception of the era as one of modesty and propriety. Dickens gave his readers a portrait of the lower class and the resulting prostitution and promiscuity in Oliver Twist. Anne Brontë’s The Tenant of Wildfell Hall is a lesson in the impact that poor fatherhood had on the family structure in the era. Elizabeth Gaskell’s “Lizzie Leigh” offers some hope of redemption for the fallen woman through support from other women and love within the family structure,
and Christina Rossetti’s “Goblin Market” is an example of how an audience, and a society, can manipulate fiction to its own ends. All four works illuminate a different way in which sexuality permeates Victorian Literature. The literature of 19th century England contains a plethora of sexually aberrant behaviors that affects its characters and audiences in a multitude of ways.
Works Cited

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