

IN THE NAME OF GOD

**CRIME AND PUNISHMENT IN THE  
VICTORIAN NOVEL**

BY

**LIDA MIRHASHEMIAN**

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EVALUATED AND APPROVED BY THE THESIS COMMITTEE AS: **EXCELLENT**

.....*A. Abjadian*.....

**AMROLLAH ABJADIAN, Ph.D.,**  
PROF. OF ENGLISH LITERATURE  
(CHAIRMAN)

.....*F. Pourgiv*.....

**FARIDEH POURGIV, Ph.D.,**  
ASSISTANT PROF. OF ENGLISH  
LITERATURE

.....*P. Ghasemi*.....

**PARVIN GHASEMI, Ph.D.,**  
ASSISTANT PROF. OF ENGLISH  
LITERATURE

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To my husband who has kindly supported me  
during the years of my education.

To my mother who has always been a great help  
and encouragement

And

To my two little angels.



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## **ABSTRACT**

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The Industrial Revolution in the Victorian age changed the social and economic foundations of the English society. These changes gave rise to the expansion of the middle-class and the appearance of bourgeois society that required moral earnestness, the observation of taboos, and severe punishment of the sinful.

The rise of the middle-class marks the rise of novel as favorable means of entertainment. The Victorian society, dominated by middle-class morality, expected the novelists to be instructors and preachers of the bourgeois manners and ideals.

The Victorian novelists had close and constant dependency on their readers because most novels were published serially in magazines. Novelists had to be careful not to disturb the strict moral standards of their readers. They punished the sinful severely only to satisfy their morally biased readers.

Charles Dickens, George Eliot, and Thomas Hardy are representative novelists of the Victorian age. In spite of their many differences, they punished any sin or moral flaw very severely

because they were forced to meet the strict moral demands of their readers.

This study shows that the severe punishment of the fictional characters in Victorian novels are much greater than what they deserve. The crime or moral shortcoming for which the sinful are punished harshly in the Victorian period is insignificant in the 20th-century novel. This study shows that the Victorian novelists go so far in punishing the sinful that any reader comes to sympathize with them and consider them as the victim of the social demands. Thus reader is left bewildered and sad about the pathetic lives of the doom-stricken characters.

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# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

### A. Background to the Victorian Novels

A study of some of the poems of Tennyson and almost the whole works of Matthew Arnold implies the significance of the ancient Greek literature to the Victorian writers. It is clear that ancient Greek epics and tragedies are related to great heroes like Achilles, Agamemnon, Oedipus and the like while Victorian fiction affected by the realistic and naturalistic movements is basically bourgeois literature. Aristotle's advice to ennoble the characters has little bearing on the Victorian novels which deal with common people and everyday life. It is actually this difference between characters and subject matter that has brought about the pathetic punishment as suffering in the Victorian novel.

The protagonist of a good tragedy like those of Sophocles is, according to Aristotle, a rather good man who is neither innocent nor vicious, a distinguished man who has a tragic flaw. The main characters of many Victorian novels are not distinguished in the

Aristotelian sense, but they share the other requirements of the Aristotelian tragic hero. Michael Henchard, Tess, Hetty and the like are neither innocent nor vicious, but they lack the greatness of Oedipus and Lear who are beyond our knowledge and excite our pity as well as admiration. That is why they are tragic while Victorian novels present pathetic characters who excite much pity and little or no admiration. The tragic flaw or the sin of a character is unbelievably condemned and the character is severely punished only to satisfy the morally biased readers. Thus, the pattern of the Greek tragedy is employed by many Victorian novelists while the process of punishment is intensified and the sudden fall in Greek tragedy is changed to a gradual and painful punishment. Even the sinful are punished so severely that the reader sympathizes with them. There are reasons for such a treatment of fictional characters.

The Victorian period marks the rise of the middle class, the appearance of bourgeois demand for moral earnestness, the observation of taboos, severe punishment of the sinful, and the production of fiction that appeals primarily to the middle-class reader. It does not mean that the Victorian age produced nothing but bourgeois literature. In fact, Victorian poets were critical of bourgeois values and manners. But Victorian



novel is a different story. There were forces favorable to the middle-class demands and tendencies: most novels were published serially in magazines and had numerous middle-class readers. Consequently, novelists were encouraged to respect bourgeois morality and, thus, the realistic movement started and followed by George Eliot who demands moral responsibility in fiction.

Realism is a movement which arose in the nineteenth century and was centered in novel. Realism, to quote Thrall, "can be thought of as the ultimate of middle-class art, and it finds its subjects in bourgeois life and manners"(397). The realist has a great interest in the audience to whom his work is addressed. George Eliot in chapter xvii of *Adam Bede*, which is a classic statement of the intention of the realist, talks about the pictures of common life and average experience. "The subject matter of realism consists of surface details and minor catastrophes of the middle-class society" (Thrall 398). Even the naturalism of Thomas Hardy could not avoid the moral demands of the middle-class Victorians.

The Victorian novelists could not ignore the middle-class demands and narrow-minded morality which emphasized moral earnestness, especially in punishing the criminals to the extent that we now sympathize with them. Thrall argues that "Pride in the

growing power of England” and “the dominance of Puritan ideals held by the rising middle-class” produced “a spirit of moral earnestness linked with self-satisfaction which was protested against . . . as hypocritical, false, complacent and narrow” (504-505). The rise of the new middle-class audience and the new media of publication, the magazines, were among the forces that went into shaping the Victorian fiction.

The Victorian period is a peculiar age as far as the bourgeois demands and the novelists’ sensibilities are concerned. It was the time of great economic expansion of England which was the first country that became industrialized and captured the market all over the world. Accordingly, England faced a new condition and even problems not experienced before. Apart from economic and social expansions of England, the new condition created false pride and nourished bourgeois morality and narrow demands.

The Victorian period’s thought, spirit, and mood are peculiar. The Victorian moral discipline and Puritan ideals originated from Evangelical teaching rooted in earlier decades. As literature, in General, is in close relation to, and even a reflection of thoughts, beliefs, and spirit of social context, the literature of Victorian period was influenced by the strict mood of morality and

spirituality inspired by Evangelical and bourgeois tendencies. The strict sense of bourgeois morality restricted the novelists of the period to preserving and respecting the boundaries of the middle-class moral codes. They were warned not to disturb the serious moral values of the middle-class people who were their main audience.

The fact that most Victorian novelists published their novels serially in magazines intensifies the force of readers' ideas upon their novels. So, the literary men and especially the novelists of the age were highly conscious of the severe Victorian moral standards and their direct dependence on the readers. Thus the Victorian novelists, especially George Eliot, acted as rigid and strict creators and at the same time merciless judges of their fictional characters. They did not forgive the slightest mistakes or shortcomings of the characters and in the case of committing even a forgivable crime, the novelists punished the fictional characters severely. This is true of most nineteenth-century novelists, especially Charles Dickens, George Eliot and Thomas Hardy who are the subjects of this study. These novelists, in spite of their different approaches and views, share a common view of inflicting severe

punishment on their sinful characters that remain unpunished in post-Victorian novels.

Most Victorian novels appeared for the first time serially in magazines, a fact which shows the close relationship of the novelists and readers. As a result, the Victorian novelists were forced not to hurt the feelings of their readers. Thus they observed and respected the Puritan ideals and the so-called spiritual zeal of the time. These novelists were highly conscious of not disturbing the moral restrictions of the bourgeois society. Therefore, when a character commits any crime, however insignificant it may be, he is punished severely only to satisfy the moral demands of the age. Consequently, the concept of crime and punishment in the Victorian novels is an appealing topic.

The narrow Victorian morality had striking influence on the novels than on the poetry of the Victorian period because the Victorian novelists had direct relation to their readers and were compelled, to some extent, to satisfy their desires and ideals, and to teach and please them at the same time. This fact becomes clearer if we bear in mind that most Victorian novelists published their novels weekly or monthly in different magazines.

As far as the economic condition of the Victorian age is concerned, it would be useful to remember that it was the time of great expansion and rapid and fundamental changes that transformed England from an agricultural-based country to the first industrialized country in the world. England became a world power as well as a powerful country in trade and industry. Joan Evans states that the realm of Queen Victoria was a "far-flung Empire" that brought the greatest economic successes of England (61).

England's rapid development and industrialization, in spite of creating diverse and even opposing reactions and problems, made London the center of the Western civilization. It is worth mentioning that London expanded and its population increased from about two million when Queen Victoria came to the throne to six and a half million at the time of her death. Industrialization was the cause of great and significant social changes in England and brought about the new formula in population and class distribution.

These economic and social transformations gave rise to an astonishing significance of the middle class in number and social status. The newly progressed middle-class people had their own likes and dislikes that became the leading principles in the whole Victorian

era. The industrialized society and the considerably increased number of middle-class people in England were some of the causes of the rise of novel. Jerome Buckley believes that "all levels of the bourgeois society in England had increasing leisure time that had to be filled". They were interested in novels more than in other forms of art (68). Poetry which needs sophisticated mind was somehow beyond their reach.

Concerning the conditions of the age Raymond Chapman says, "going out in evening was rare except for the richest and the poorest" (27). For the increasing middle-class people it was the time of reading. Often one member of family read a novel aloud as accompaniment for sewing or any other domestic work (27-28). He also explains that the novel was not only enjoyed in private reading but was read aloud at home or in the public hall. Furthermore, he emphasizes that "a novel [was] praised or blamed for its moral influence, and its characters could inspire fashions of dress and patterns of behaviour" (32).

The middle-class people read novels mainly because novels were in accord with their own level of education. As Walter Allen says "Dickens was a man of little education, writing for the public often more poorly educated than himself" (12). The huge number of

middle-class people needed entertainment and novels served as the cheapest and the most available means of entertainment. David Cecil believes that the great novels of earlier period in Victorian age had been all primarily designed to be "an entertainment for the middle-class reading public and their subject-matter and treatment had been limited to those aspects of life which could be made to serve as an entertainment" (290). The necessity of amusing the public became a vital yet frustrating job for the novelists. Walter Allen believes that Dickens is a "great novelist and a great entertainer" at the same time, probably, in history of English fiction(14). He also explains that the public for whom Dickens wrote "was largely a new public brought to consciousness by the industrial revolution of England"(16).

The novelists of the age wrote their novels under the restriction of being in harmony with the middle-class ideals, thoughts, beliefs, and needs. They were quite aware of the necessity of pleasing their readers. It was a time much before the dominance of the doctrine of art for art's sake. The Victorian novelists cherished the relation of writer to reader and they also pondered very seriously on what Gordon N. Ray calls the "moral obligation" of the novelists to their readers(67). However, it was the artist's first duty to communicate