



miguilim

revista eletrônica do netlli

volume 3, número 2, maio-ago 2014

WORTHY SINNER: GENDER PERFORMANCE AND THE WILL TO REDEMPTION



UMA NOBRE PECADORA: A PERFORMANCE DE GÊNERO E A BUSCA PELA SALVAÇÃO

Ana Carolina Tavares Meira LIMA
UNIVERSIDADE DO PORTO, Portugal

RESUMO | INDEXAÇÃO | TEXTO | REFERÊNCIAS | CITAR ESTE ARTIGO | A AUTORA
RECEBIDO EM 23/06/2014 • APROVADO EM 25/08/2014

Abstract

The purpose of this essay is to investigate elements of theatricality within *East Lynne*, a sensation novel written by Ellen Wood. Through analyzing how the processes of both sinning and redemption are portrayed in the novel, it is possible to perceive the influence of Christian and Medieval values related to bodily punishment, death and forgiveness embedded in the narrative. In order to support the analysis, we opted for theories related to the Victorian theatricality and natural acting, such as Litvak (1992) and Voskuil (2004). The relevance of conduct literature in prescribing social acting is acknowledged, especially to Victorian noble women. Therefore, we aim at establishing a comparison between the conduct literature of the time (STICKNEY ELLIS, 1839; PATMORE, 1891) and the behaviour adopted by the novel's protagonist. By close reading *East Lynne*, it was possible to verify how the protagonist deconstructed gender imposed values and the punishment she received for her sinful acts. The religiosity in sensation novels is emphasized by the treatment of the character with medieval concepts of sexuality and adultery. Isabel is physically punished and suffers from constant pain as a reminder of her previous acts, until her sin is forgiven and she can rest in death. Punishing the protagonist also reinforces the conduct literature by serving the purpose of exemplifying

the consequences faced by a woman who sins against her own theatricality, thus, the sensation novel itself functions as conduct literature.

Resumo

O objetivo do presente artigo é investigar elementos de teatricalidade presentes na obra *East Lynne*, romance de sensação escrito por Ellen Wood. Através da análise dos atos pecaminosos, seguidos, pela busca de redenção da protagonista, é possível perceber a influência de valores Cristãos e Medievais, seja por meio da punição corporal, morte e perdão. No tocante ao aporte teórico utilizado a fim de fundamentar a discussão proposta, utilizou-se conceitos propostos por Litvak (1992) e Voskuil (2004) referentes à teatricalidade da sociedade Vitoriana. Sabe-se que a literatura de conduta da época prescrevia determinadas atuações sociais, que condiziam com elementos teatrais. Assim, buscou-se estabelecer uma comparação entre o comportamento da protagonista e o conteúdo de manuais de conduta da época para as jovens (STICKNEY ELLIS, 1839; PATMORE, 1891). Destarte, verificou-se a partir de uma leitura minuciosa, uma correlação entre valores medievais do Cristianismo, presente na literatura de conduta, e a teatricalidade de gênero imposta às mulheres pela sociedade Vitoriana. Ao longo da narrativa, a protagonista desconstrói os valores familiares, não praticando a performance feminina que lhe foi cabida. Como consequência, Isabel é punida fisicamente, sofrendo de constante dor que a lembra de seus atos pecaminosos, havendo a remissão de seus pecados apenas com a morte. Através da punição da protagonista, há um reforço da importância em respeitar as regras sociais, a fim de evitar um trágico fim, atuando assim tal romance de sensação como um manual de conduta para seus leitores.

Entradas para indexação

KEYWORDS: Victorian theatricality. Medieval values. Sensation novel.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Teatricalidade Vitoriana. Valores medievais. Romance de sensação.

Texto integral

My sin was great, but my punishment was greater.
WOOD (2005, p. 614).

A Christian society associates sin with punishment, and divine forgiveness is the only method of escaping the lengthy atonement and penitence that is otherwise necessary. As demonstrated in the quote above taken from *East Lynne* by Ellen Wood, there is no balance between the two concepts; rather, the sinner is condemned to punitive suffering superior to the gravity of his errors. The Victorians were highly concerned with religious matters and this is naturally reflected in the literature of the period. According to James Adams, it was particularly characterized by a reinvigoration of 'Christian piety, and approaching human life as an arena of constant moral struggle, of resistance to temptation and

mastery of desire' (ADAMS, 2006, p. 127). As well as reflecting the changes in religious beliefs of the time, *East Lynne* represents a prime example of a genre of fiction known as the 'sensation novel', which explored subjects that were both socially and religiously condemned, such as: illegitimacy, bigamy, criminality, and adultery. Said by Pamela Gilbert to be 'haunted by a biblical and religious revenant' (GILBERT, 2011, p. 23), certain sensation novels had a tendency to 'cultivate a pious style that would reassure evangelical readers' (GILBERT, 2011, p. 23). The protagonist of *East Lynne*, abandoned to her fate after acting sinfully, accepts what seems to be divinely issued punishment for her behavior, whilst constantly searching for redemption. By deserting her husband and children, Isabel Vane neglected her role as wife and mother, deconstructing the necessary performativity expected of her gender. Not only has this character sinned by having an extra-marital affair with a Captain, but also by neglecting the feminine performance required of her by society. This essay is mainly concerned with an analysis of how the process of sinning and redemption in *East Lynne* is influenced by themes of theatricality. Taking into account Joseph Litvak's notion that 'theatricality is present everywhere' (LITVAK, 1992, p. 5), this essay will examine not only Isabel's performance as Madame Vine as a 'theatrical' act, but also the theatricality within everyday situations. With regard to the existence of theatrical elements in the cult of domesticity, the essay will explore how the protagonist faces punishment for endangering family values and challenging Victorian domestic virtues. By reshaping her identity and performing a character, Isabel enacts the role which belonged to her as 'the lady of the house'. Furthermore, the manner in which bodily punishment, death and forgiveness are closely linked in the narrative will be examined, particularly the possibility that this refers to tenets of medieval Christianity. In his essay on 'Sex and Canon Law', James Brundage affirms that, 'Christian authorities from the beginning of the church's history have been concerned about the sexual conduct of its members' (BRUNDAGE, 1996, p. 33). Elements of medieval Christianity are traditionally known for abusive methods when dealing with the punishment of sinners, but what is relevant to this essay are the significant shifts in the legal treatment of adultery that occurred in England in the later Middle Ages. Wives who were believed to have committed adultery were severely punished or even put to death, by the state, or at the hands of their husbands. The notion that sex was a sinful behavior and a consequence of 'humankind's continuing rebellion against God' (BRUNDAGE, 1996, p. 35) encouraged punishment for those who behaved immorally. In short, this essay primarily analyses the protagonist's sins, and in sequence her search for redemption, while observing the theatrical elements embodied in her acts. It will argue that both in acting as a governess and in the scene of her deathbed, Isabel performs a role whose purpose is to redeem herself from neglecting her family's wellbeing, and to atone for her adultery.

The Victorian sensation novel was a genre that would normally '...depict the ideal woman as a wife, mother, and loyal companion to her spouse' (GILBERT, 2011, p. 23); any deviation from this established social conduct would be the cause of the woman's portrayal 'as villainous and often punished by either other characters or by fate'. Barnhill observes that 'female wrongdoing was not only judged according to the law, but also according to the idealized conception of

womanhood' (BARNHILL, 2005, iv). In 1854, Coventry Patmore wrote a poem that characterized women as 'passive and powerless, meek, charming, graceful, sympathetic, self-sacrificing, pious, and above all pure' (PATMORE, 1891). Comparing Wood's protagonist to Patmore's description of femininity in this poem, *The Angel in the House*, Barnhill assumes that 'it is through fulfilling the role of the nineteenth-century ideal woman that Lady Isabel becomes the "villainess" who deserts her husband and children'. However, in distrusting her husband's loyalty, she is not behaving submissively or devotedly. Should it be possible for Barnhill to suggest that Isabel had been pure from the beginning of the novel, even though she is shown by the author to have had feelings for Captain Levinson? Incapable of bearing the guilt of her sinful love to Captain Levinson she consequently constructs in her mind a romance between another woman and her husband, thereby finding the perfect justification for continuing to pursue her lover. What Barnhill seems to have forgotten in her proposition is that loyalty to the husband was also represented by more than a submissive personality, but also in the accomplishment of certain duties which would be performed by the mistress of the house. In order to please her husband, a woman was expected to provide him with a comfortable environment by taking care of the household.

Not only had this notion of household duty pervaded Victorian society as a common agreement among housewives, it was also literarily portrayed in the form of the widespread genre of advice manuals, which were a significant resource in dictating women's priorities in the domestic sphere. Emme Lampens has argued that 'advice manuals repeatedly stressed that the devoted housewife who dutifully discharged all her tasks not only promoted the happiness and welfare of her own family, but also added to the welfare of the entire society' (LAMPENS, 2012, p. 27). One example of this literature was *The Women of England*, by Sarah Stickney Ellis, which consisted of a collection of the main domestic virtues considered proper for women. In accordance with Ellis' manual, even the 'gentle, inoffensive and delicate ladies' (STICKNEY ELLIS, 1839, p. 12) such as Lady Isabel should be 'called back to a consciousness of present things' (STICKNEY ELLIS, 1839, p. 12) and be prepared to face their domestic duties. In Wood's *East Lynne*, Isabel pointedly does not seem to 'know anything about housekeeping' (WOOD, 2005, p. 147) and even though she admits that 'she must learn' (WOOD, 2005, p. 147), another housewife's capacity in this matter makes her feel like 'a bird released from its cage' (WOOD, 2005, p. 147). Instead of learning with her sister-in-law, Isabel opts to neglect her duties by claiming that she '[doesn't] understand that sort of work' (WOOD, 2005, p. 169). It is important to note that the cult of domesticity was an essential feature in gendered performance, and with the ascension of the middle-class, women were still expected to fulfill their house duties in order to balance the changing social structure. It may be suggested that as a Lady, Isabel was not in a position where household tasks should have been imposed on her. However, even though Lady Isabel was raised in an upper class environment, surrounded by luxury and servants, by marrying Mr. Carlyle, she automatically acquires a position of middle-class wife and as such, her role is to manage the house and be responsible for the education of her children.

Considering the importance of domesticity as an essential part of female performance, Isabel's lack of eagerness to be responsible for her home is designed by the author to suggest to first failure in the novel. In disregarding her duties, not only does Isabel deconstruct her performative role as women, but also has her identity as a housewife replaced by Miss Carlyle. As a result of this, Isabel Vane is given over to a fatigue caused by lack of activity, which in turn leads her to brood on the relationship between Barbara and her husband, culminating in her abandoning her family for self-ruin. Sarah Stickney Ellis establishes a strong connection between morality and the accomplishment of duties by arguing that 'the highest tone of moral feeling' is expected from 'the class of females' (WOOD, 2005, p. 169) that follow her description. From this perspective, Isabel's unfaithfulness could be defined as a behavior that should be expected from a woman who is incapable of managing her house and children. In accordance with Victorian beliefs, a woman '...cannot allow the lamp they cherish to be extinguished or to fail for want of oil, without an equal share of degradation attaching to their names (STICKNEY ELLIS, 1839, p. 12)'. Therefore, the protagonists disinterest in her feminine duties played a significant role in the moral degradation of her reputation. If we return to Patmore's definition of an ideal Victorian woman, when she cannot be characterized as a pure woman, Isabel also loses the status of 'Angel in the House', since morality represents an essential feminine quality.

Redemption or the pursuit of it, and true atonement are other subjects important to the sensation novel. In parallel to Maitland Wood's belief that 'there is no pain which good cannot spring' (quoted in BENDING, 2000, p. 49), all the suffering endured by Lady Isabel seems to have functioned to make her aware of the greatness of her sin. Only after years of suffering does Isabel become aware how 'careless as she herself had once been upon these points, she had learnt better now' (WOOD, 2005, p. 390). She ultimately perceives the importance of performing her duties and the gravity of preventing her children from having been 'trained to goodness, morality [and] religion' (WOOD, 2005, p. 390) by their own mother. Fortunately, 'Providence must have placed the opportunity in her way that she may see her children' (WOOD, 2005, p. 397) and attempt to reduce the damages of her choices. In order to understand Isabel's sin against her feminine performance, it is pertinent to consider Simone Beauvoir's famous statement that 'one is not born, but, rather, *becomes* a woman' (quoted in BUTLER, 1990, p. 1). In this sense, it is possible to state that one's gender needs reinforcement through a constant performance. Women in Victorian society, then, can be seen to be defined by their obedience to pre-established acts considered common to all women. Sharing a similar belief, Judith Butler argues that 'an identity [is] instituted through a stylized repetition of acts'. Therefore, in order to be a woman, demands imposed by society must be fulfilled. Incapable of performing what is considered to be a feminine behavior, Isabel automatically deconstructs her identity as a woman. Having failed to perform her own necessary theatricality, Isabel seems to move a step further towards the construction of her identity as Madame Vine.

However, more than her rupture with femininity, other important factors contribute to her choice of 'acting'. Firstly, there is the metaphorical and foreshadowed death of Isabel Vane in a train accident, which automatically turns

Isabel herself into a phantasmagoric figure. Secondly, as an adulterous and divorced woman, Isabel loses her status as equivalent to Mrs. Carlyle. William Blackstone stated in the eighteenth century that ‘the very being or legal existence of the woman is suspended during the marriage, or at least is incorporated into that of the husband’ (quoted in HANSEN, 2006, p. 10). This attitude undoubtedly cast long shadows in to the next century, and considered in the context of Wood’s novel, the wife is a being lacking a personal and social sense of self. In one sense, Isabel is thus free to assume any identity which suits her purpose. After marrying, she becomes the property of her husband, and by deserting him she can no longer be defined as such, becoming then “no-one’s property” and, therefore continuing to have no identity in her own right. Finally, Wood infers that Isabel’s sins deprived her of her beauty, her defining characteristic throughout the novel. This pervasive lack of identity is an essential feature that enables her performance, allowing herself to be completely replaced by her character. Lynn Voskuil has argued that when acting naturally, society aimed at ‘authentica[ting] the spectacles they made of themselves’ (VOSKUIL, 2004, p. 3). Ironically, when Lady Isabel’s natural theatricality becomes an acting performance, she still authenticates herself, not because her spectacle is authentic, but due to the role played: Madame Vine being the one expected to be fulfilled by Isabel as Archibald’s wife. The concept of acting naturally is, then, partially deconstructed by Isabel playing a part which should be hers, but under a disguise. By partially I am referring to the authenticity of this performance. Not only was Lady Isabel playing a role that belonged to her when caring of her children, but also when adding her ‘own proved sensations’ (VOSKUIL, 2004, p. 21) to Madame Vine’s story. The personage’s life is replete with similarities to Lady Isabel’s, for instance, the number of children she had and the name of the first born being William. Isabel plays a role, but at the same time she incorporates elements of her own self, consequently, making it more authentic and natural.

In the *Picture of Dorian Gray*, the character Sibyl Vane renounces her own theatricality and denies performing in a stage for love of Dorian. Unable to experience the falsehood of a stage, Sibyl can longer pretend that her Romeo is not a ‘hideous, and old’ (WILDE, 2001, p. 70) man pretending to be her young lover. Unlike her, Isabel Vane embraces her theatricality after acknowledging its importance so that she can have a second chance to be near her children and husband. However, she not only needs to make an authentic spectacle of herself, but also carefully convince the spectators around her of the acting she is performing. In a society of critical surveillance, women tend to make spectacles (in Voskuil’s sense) of themselves, in order to avoid the judging eyes of their neighbors. According to Litvak, ‘a society of surveillance entails certain rigorous spectacular practices of its own’ (LITVAK, 1992, x). In the novel, however, Isabel’s acting becomes a real theatrical spectacle, which instead of being acted for social expectations, becomes a way of redeeming her soul. With regard to her performance as Madame Vine, she not only assumes a new identity by acting differently, but effects a dramatic change in her appearance. Wood clothes Madame Vine in blue spectacles, which assume the role of a mask, and allow Isabel to hide her face in order to avoid being recognized by her family. Throughout the text, it is possible to notice several performances from the same character. She initially

plays her role as a submissive and passive character. However, more than being simply a role, Lady Isabel's passiveness does not seem to be derived only from her feminine qualities, but is also compounded by her lack of identity. She is constantly led by other characters from her marriage, her replacement by Cornelia, culminating in her neglectful behavior with her family. The perceived greatness of Isabel's sin is strongly connected to her failure to perform her engendered role; therefore, her redemption demands the fulfillment of this performance. This supports Litvak's notion that theatricality itself should be treated 'with doses of more theatricality' (LITVAK, 1992, p. 15) as theatricality can be considered constantly present in daily activities.

More importantly than the spectacle Lady Isabel has to perform as a mistress, is the role she embodies when deserting her family, acting as an immoral figure, and disrupting the expectations of an upper-class character. In *East Lynne*, the protagonist's spectacle seems to 'generate a number of spin-offs, liable to cause embarrassment for those in the novels that would seem to uphold traditional family values' (LITVAK, 1992, xii). In order to redeem herself from her lack of both wifely and motherly instincts in abandoning her children and husband, Isabel assumes her role as a 'middle woman' in accordance to Victorian principles, by incorporating the identity of Madame Vine. Several episodes in the novel are orchestrated in order for her to assume the role which belonged to her initially, but this time as 'part of the cross she had undertaken to carry' (WOOD, 2005, p. 411). She returns to her home not as the lady of the house, but as a governess. If Litvak's argument regarding the theatrical features inherent in the figure of a governess is considered in relation to Isabel's characterization of one, the artificiality of acting a role can be observed. In the novel, however, it seems that this performance is duplicated by the fact that we are presented with the triplicate performance of an aristocratic lady transformed into governess and actress at the same moment, instead of the traditional 'governess-turned-actress' (LITVAK, 1992, p. 71) plot. Isabel incorporates these roles within a disguise, and thereby personifies a new being.

As mentioned above, Victorian culture was deeply concerned with sin and punishment and, consequently, the literature of the period reflects this. As Lucy Bending suggests, 'the experience of pain was, of course, not uncommon to the Victorians ... such pain was reflected in a multitude of ways in the stories that they wrote and read, and that Victorian fiction was awash with physical suffering' (BENDING, 2000, p. 89). After the heresy trials of the 1860s, changes regarding the association between bodily punishment and sin occurred, and medical explanations diverged from the belief of 'pains of eternal damnation' (BENDING, 2000, p. 5). Nonetheless, a very common belief in the 19th century was that as a result of sinful behavior, 'pain had been seen as an expression of God's justice' (BENDING, 2000, p. 28). Victorians considered that 'faith in atonement suggested the redemptive power of their suffering' (BENDING, 2000, p. 30). In *East Lynne*, the notion of 'atonement which involved vicarious suffering' (BENDING, 2000, p. 5) is clearly perceived in the narrative. The main character undergoes severe physical and psychological changes during her repentance. Not only does she suffer from bodily pain but 'what the accident left undone, grief and remorse accomplished'

(WOOD, 2005, p. 388). Being ostracized and removed from 'respectable' English society are the initial punishments Isabel has to face due to her choices (BARNHILL, 2005, p. 3). The representation of bodily pain in the nineteenth century, particularly in this novel, seems to bear an association with the process which must be faced by the protagonist in order to redeem her sins. Failing to perform her gender imposed role, Isabel is punished for committing both the sin of adultery and the neglecting of her duties as wife and mother. This gruesome focus on pain and bodily punishment inflicted by a vengeful God was a commonplace in medieval religious literature. Borrowing from theological principles stemming from God's punishment of the fall, Ellen Wood places her protagonist in a realm of martyrdom where she is severely punished for her acts. Given that 'thou shalt not commit adultery' is one of the founding commandments of the Christian faith (EXODUS, 1769), it is understandable that the punishment for such an offence should be necessarily be greater than the act. As Brundage has described, 'since adultery was a far more serious matter than fornication, it was usually punished severely both by canonical tribunals and by secular judges' (BRUNDAGE, 1996, p. 42). Like a Victorian Eve, Isabel disregards her duties and searches for the pleasures of the flesh, abandoning her previous state of peace. As such, for breaking the rules imposed on her, women are punished and suffer bodily pain. While Eve is condemned to bear a child and suffer in birth, Isabel not only loses her two of her children (the illegitimate baby and her first born), but is disfigured and damaged in a train accident to the point that she suffers constant pain. In the following passage from the novel, it is possible to observe the extent to which bodily punishment has altered the physical presence of the protagonist:

She was young, active, when left here, upright as dart, her dark hair drawn from her open brow and flowing on her neck, her cheeks like crimson paint, her face altogether beautiful. Madame Vine arrived here a pale, stooping woman, lame of one leg, shorter than Lady Isabel – and her figure stuffed out under those sacks of jackets. Not a bit, scarcely, of her forehead to be seen, grey velvet and grey bands of hair...The mouth was entirely altered in its character, and that upward scar, always so conspicuous, made it almost ugly. Then she had lost some of her front teeth, you know, and she lisped when she spoke. (WOOD, 2005, p. 620).

Ironically then, it seems that both in the novel and in society, divine providence and the law, which would both be responsible for punishing the sinner, mainly focus this trial on punishing female sexuality. Claiming that female morality had a strong impact upon the household environment, adulteresses were more severely punished than males because they were thought to bring shame upon their husbands and her children. In *East Lynne*, Isabel's punishment for her adultery is clearly more severe than that meted out to Captain Levinson. In fact, he is not punished for his attitude towards her or any other women, but instead for a murder he committed prior to Lady Isabel's desertion.

Disfigured and nameless, Isabel does not achieve forgiveness by merely being capable of performing her feminine role. Even though her performance redeems her to a certain extent for her neglectful behavior towards her family, the sin of adultery remains, staining her reputation. It seems that Isabel 'falls into sin from which she is never able to completely extricate or exonerate herself' (BARNHILL, 2005, p. 102). Of such greatness was the sin of adultery that, in accordance to Cvetkovich's statement the moral sin of the Victorian woman who sexually transgressed 'is equivalent to death, since she dies socially when she falls into disgrace' (quoted in BARNHILL, 2005, p. 102). In a similar sense then, the theatricality of her performance can redeem her from the act that would absolve her completely – her death. Death would be the way to purify her from her moral vices. It is important to note that redemption through death represents an important and recurrent notion in the text. In several passages, the author foreshadows the tragic finale of the protagonist. A prime example of the presence of death in the text occurs after Lady Isabel's train accident; she gives glimpses of how her redemption can be completed by claiming that '[her] death will be the only reparation [she] can offer' (WOOD, 2005, p. 321). Finally, one of the important scenes of theatricality in the text is Isabel's deathbed scene, when she presents her true self and puts her mask as Madame Vine aside. Religiosity coupled with theatricality plays a crucial role in the development of the drama within the final scene: 'Not an hour had I departed, when my repentance set in; and even then, I would have retracted and come back, but I did not know how' (WOOD, 2005, p. 614), claims the protagonist.

The confession which must precede the death of a sinner is also a Christian ritual, and a dramatic feature of the sensation novel. Isabel constantly emphasizes the necessity for her 'to rest in heaven'. Reinforcing the notion of God's justice, Isabel argues that 'God has forgiven [her]' for all her sins after the entire struggle she has faced - 'Nothing but bad feelings; rebellion, and sorrow, and repining' (WOOD, 2005, p. 617). Reminding us once more of Wilde's piteous character, Isabel's dies from a broken heart. Both Vanes put an end to their acting with a dramatic scene of death: Sybil through her suicide, which is described by Lord Henry as a 'wonderful ending to a wonderful play', and Lady Isabel's inability to stand the weight of her Cross (WOOD, 2005, p. 612). By confessing her real motive for abandoning her children and husband, Isabel accepts her guilt and is prepared for forgiveness. Interestingly, the moment Isabel renounces her theatrical performance, Archibald assumes a different role. Throughout the novel, he plays the part of the betrayed husband, but also acts as a religious figure. In this scene, Mr. Carlyle plays the role of the priest and is responsible for the formal dispensation of Isabel's forgiveness. The moment of extreme unction is a significant part of the deathbed ritual, and it often required the presence of a priest to give the final absolution. Only through the administering of the sacrament can the human spirit appear pure before its Judge. When claiming that 'may he so deal with me, as I now fully and freely forgive you' (WOOD, 2005, p. 616), Archibald finally gives a closure to Isabel's 'one long scene of mortal agony' (WOOD, 2005, p. 614).

The conclusion which can be drawn from this discussion is that there are constant elements of theatricality within Isabel's behavior, both in her actions as a sinner, but also in pursuit of her redemption. By failing to perform her feminine role as a housewife and allowing her feminine identity to be replaced by Miss Carlyle, Isabel takes her first step towards her damnation. Further, considering the Victorian beliefs regarding women's duties in a domestic sphere, it is possible to perceive that her negligent behavior towards her duties is indicative of her morality, and is therefore constructed by the author to foreshadow her later adultery. By losing her status as property of her husband, Isabel becomes a figure without any apparent social or personal identification as a woman. This, coupled with her physical disfigurement, enables her to wander namelessly, and assume any identity which suits her best. Pursuing forgiveness, Isabel tries to redeem herself by reassuming her role as responsible for the house and the education of her own children. As a governess, she performs the role that belonged to her as Archibald's wife. When playing a role that already belonged to her under a disguise, Isabel replaces the concept of 'natural acting' with a theatrical performance, and allows her identity to be consumed by Madame Vine. Although she succeeds in this task, fate in accordance with the Christian notion of punishment, has still secured for her the punishment appropriate for adultery. Not only is she punished by society and law, but also it seems that divine providence must intervene against her. By examining the bodily suffering which Lady Isabel was exposed to, it is possible to conclude that Victorian society shared the belief that only through bodily suffering could the sinner be truly forgiven. Furthermore, aside from the physical pain inflicted upon the character, death plays a crucial role in eternal salvation. It seems therefore that the representation of death in the novel works in a contrasting way: the death of Isabel's children reinforces the punishment against her character, but the death of the Isabel herself embodies the idea of death as the ultimate atonement. As stated by Nina Auerbach, 'death does not simply punish or obliterate the fallen woman: its ritual appearance alone does her justice' (quoted in BARNHILL, 2005, p. 30). Finally, the religiosity in sensation novels is emphasized by the treatment of the character with medieval concepts of sexuality and adultery. Isabel is physically punished and suffers from constant pain as a reminder of her sin, until her sin is forgiven and she can rest in peace in death. The physical disfigurement and pain Lady Isabel suffers in the novel demonstrates above all the Victorian belief of God's justice being administered through human suffering.

Referências

ADAMS, James Eli. Victorian Sexualities. In: TUCKER, Herbert F. (Ed.). **A Companion to Victorian Literature & Culture**. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006. p. 125-140.

BARNHILL, Gretchen Huey. **Fallen Angels: Female Wrongdoing in Victorian Novels**. Unpublished master's thesis, University of Lethbridge, 2005. 169 p.

- BENDING, Lucy. **The Representation of Bodily Pain in Late Nineteenth-Century English Culture**. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000. 309 p.
- BRUNDAGE, James A. Sex and Canon Law. In: BULLOUGH, Vern L.; BRUNDAGE, James A. (Ed.). **Handbook of Medieval Sexuality**. New York: Garland, 1996. p. 33-50.
- BUTLER, Judith. **Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity**. New York: Routledge, 1990. 272 p.
- GILBERT, Pamela K. **A Companion to Sensation Fiction**. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2011. 680 p.
- HANSEN, Tessa. **Illegitimacy in the Mid-Victorian Novels of Charles Dickens and Wilkie Collins**. Unpublished master's thesis, University of Canterbury, 2006. 109 p.
- LAMPENS, Emme. **Constructing Femininities: Mrs. Henry Wood's East Lynne and Advice Manuals of the Nineteenth Century**. Unpublished master's thesis, University of Ghent, 2012. 87 p.
- LITVAK, Joseph. **Caught in the Act: Theatricality in the Nineteenth-Century English Novel**. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992. 304 p.
- PATMORE, Coventry. **'The Angel in the House' (1891)**, The Victorian Web. Disponível em: <<http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/patmore/angel/26.html>>. Acesso em: 20 abr. 2014.
- STICKNEY ELLIS, Sarah. **The Women of England, Their Social Duties, and Domestic Habits (1839)**, Victorian Women Writers Project, Indiana University. Disponível em: <<http://purl.dlib.indiana.edu/iudl/vwwp/VAB7198>>. Acesso em: 20 abr. 2014.
- VOSKUIL, Lynn M. **Acting Naturally: Victorian Theatricality Authenticity**. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2004. 268 p.
- WILDE, Oscar. **The picture of Dorian Gray**. London: Wordsworth Classics, 2001. 224 p.
- WOOD, Ellen. **East Lynne**. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005. 704 p.

Para citar este artigo

LIMA, Ana Carolina Tavares Meira. Worthy sinner: gender performance and the will to redemption. **Migulim – Revista Eletrônica do Netlli**, Crato, v. 3, n. 2, p. 192-202, mai.-ago. 2014.

A autora

Ana Carolina Tavares Meira LIMA é graduanda em Letras Inglês, pela Universidade Federal da Paraíba. Mestra em Literatura Inglesa, pela Universidade Oxford Brookes (Inglaterra). Doutoranda em Didática de Língua Inglesa, pela Universidade do Porto.