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**UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHAMPTON**

FACULTY OF HUMANITIES

English

**Material Morality: Success, Material Culture and the Realist Novel, 1848 to 1883**

by

**Esther Fernandez-Llorente**

Thesis for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

September 2015



UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHAMPTON

## **ABSTRACT**

FACULTY OF HUMANITIES

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### **MATERIAL MORALITY: SUCCESS, MATERIAL CULTURE AND THE REALIST NOVEL, 1848 TO 1883**

Esther Victoria Florence Fernandez-Llorente

This thesis explores how the Victorian concept of success – fundamental to Victorians’ understanding of themselves as such – was characterised and problematised by the demonstration of moral worth through material wealth. Critics, including David Trotter, ask ‘under what generic conditions have objects appeared as objects in a literary text?’ (Trotter 2008). I argue that between the 1840s and 1880s it is frequently the reflection of the discourse of success and failure in society, reflected through objects, that gives material things symbolic value within plot and form of realist novels, where success and failure are persistent themes.

I analyse gender roles and the circulation of objects to uncover the instabilities of Victorian characterisations of success. Focus within Victorian society on the material qualities of objects and the sense of permanence that they could create led, I argue, to the creation of a Victorian ‘Reality Effect’ (Barthes 1968). Things were emptied of meanings created through their production or circulation in order to signify the moral and material success of their current possessor through an ostensibly uncomplicated materiality which was nonetheless deeply unstable. I suggest that the exhibitionist, performative nature of this culture of success offered a potentially powerful role for middle-class women, which realist novelists challenged on moral and political grounds while making use of its aesthetic.

My three chapters trace reflections of this discourse in arenas from the triumphalist ‘public’ sphere of the Great Exhibition to the ostensibly ‘private’ sphere of the home. I evaluate *Vanity Fair*, *Great Expectations*, *Middlemarch*, *Daniel Deronda*, *Villette* and *The Portrait of a Lady* in particular, but allude to other novels to prove the range and depth of the theme, as well as works by Thomas Carlyle, Karl Marx, and John Ruskin. Through their attitude to Victorian material culture, I attempt to see, as Dehn Gilmore puts it, ‘not what but rather how the Victorians saw’ in this culture of intensely moralised display. This reveals the conflicted attitudes of Victorian realist novelists to the culture of success and its role in the moral, economic and social challenges of Victorian culture.



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# DECLARATION OF AUTHORSHIP

I, Esther Fernandez-Llorente

declare that this thesis and the work presented in it are my own and has been generated by me as the result of my own original research.

[title of thesis] Material Morality: Success, Material Culture and the Realist Novel, 1848-1883

I confirm that:

1. This work was done wholly or mainly while in candidature for a research degree at this University;
2. Where any part of this thesis has previously been submitted for a degree or any other qualification at this University or any other institution, this has been clearly stated;
3. Where I have consulted the published work of others, this is always clearly attributed;
4. Where I have quoted from the work of others, the source is always given. With the exception of such quotations, this thesis is entirely my own work;
5. I have acknowledged all main sources of help;
6. Where the thesis is based on work done by myself jointly with others, I have made clear exactly what was done by others and what I have contributed myself;
7. None of this work has been published before submission

Signed: .....

Date:.....



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The arrival of our daughter Katherine in July 2014 both challenged and inspired me to complete my thesis. Her apparent belief that the teetering piles of books around our home, so tempting for toddler mountaineering, are there for her benefit and enjoyment is not, as I hope she will feel in years to come, wholly unfounded.

Any errors are, of course, entirely my own.





## Introduction: Material Morality

This thesis examines how the relationship between novels and material culture was shaped by the discourse of success and failure in nineteenth-century Britain. I demonstrate how middle-class Victorians attempted to define and utilise the idea of success. From urban statuary to parlour-table knick-knacks, Victorian culture invites us to understand success as a ‘real thing’ which, through the agency of objects, synthesised moral and material success and made it demonstrable reality. A desire, which I trace within Victorian middle-class culture, to see material culture as an unambiguous signifier of success, rendered any suggestion of failures within the economic and social systems that produce and circulate objects deeply subversive. Victorian novelists consistently make such suggestions and their continual undermining of an object’s ability to define success is an under-explored part in the debate about what it means to be ‘Victorian’.

How success and failure are constituted is a seldom-analysed but fundamental theme in realist novels between 1848 and 1883. Novels were a popular cultural form, whose plots and use of objects constantly demonstrate a lack of synthesis between moral and material success. I contend, firstly, that questions of gender and the movement of objects between public and private spheres were particularly disruptive to such synthesis. Secondly, I argue that no Victorian, however earnest about the need for social change, could truly dissociate themselves from the often-conflicting cultures of production, acquisition and ownership surrounding them. Consequently novelists often struggled to reconcile their own views and experiences of Victorian consumer culture with the formal and political freedom that the novel afforded to explore success and failure. This produces charged relationships between objects and strategies for objectification depicted in these texts and some of their major themes – what constitutes success and failure in middle-class life – as well as between novelist and novel. These relationships highlight

complex Victorian concerns at a period of intersecting and sometimes conflicting moral, commercial and creative energies: confluences and conflicts which this thesis aims to investigate.

Defining material culture as ‘the social meaning of the physical world of things’<sup>1</sup> and assuming that ‘objects are central to the social construction and performance of identity’<sup>2</sup>, I examine middle-class Victorian material culture for efforts to express success and conceal failure. No critic has yet done this and I maintain that to understand a culture’s definitions of success and failure is a valuable step towards understanding that culture; in the case of the Victorians it is also a valuable step towards understanding the realist novels produced in this period. I argue that the discourse of success and failure is an important set of ‘ideas, values and symbols that pervade and shape the practice of exhibiting’<sup>3</sup> in Victorian culture, if we want to understand ‘not what but rather how the Victorians saw’<sup>4</sup>, as Dehn Gilmore argues that we should. I interpret ‘exhibiting’ as widely as possible, as the intent to show things, whether within public or private spaces. Ostensibly private spaces, such as the home and the body itself, had a conflicted role of being both highly personal but also individual display zones where the discourse of success and failure could be played out. Gilmore’s question of ‘how’ the Victorians saw the world they lived in is enriched by the understanding that they saw and read the material culture around them as a rich signifying system for what constituted success and failure.

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1 Judy Attfield, *Wild Things: The Material Culture of Everyday Life* (Oxford: Berg, 2000), p.15.

<sup>2</sup> Simon Morgan, ‘Material Culture and the Politics of Personality in Early-Victorian England’, *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 17 (2012), 127-146 (p.142).

<sup>3</sup> Daniel J. Sherman and Irit Rogoff, ‘Introduction: Frameworks for Critical Analysis’, in *Museum Culture: Histories, Discourses, Spectacles*, by Daniel J. Sherman and Irit Rogoff (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press: 1994), p.ix.

<sup>4</sup> Dehn Gilmore, *The Victorian Novel and the Space of Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), p.2.

## I: Defining Victorian Success: Conflating the Moral and the Material.

‘Success treads on the heels of every right effort; And though it is possible to overestimate success to the point of almost deifying it, [...] still, in any worthy pursuit it is meritorious’<sup>5</sup>, wrote Samuel Smiles in *Self-Help* (1859). *Self-Help* was one of the most popular non-fiction books of the century and in it Smiles clearly struggles with how to conflate moral and material aspects of success and how to treat failure. He attempts to justify the morality of ‘deified’ material success through conflating it with the moral value of ‘worthy pursuit’. Emphasis on the moral qualities of the individual suggests that lack of success is due to lack of ‘effort’: moral failure. That conflation made ‘success’ acceptable and desirable to many Victorians: with men such as Henry Cole and Joseph Paxton celebrated as much for their energy as their accomplishments. However *Self-Help* reflects the fear that moral qualities might not necessarily lead to success, or indeed that less desirable character traits might do so.

Revealing Smiles’s concern about the relationship between success and ‘right effort’, the 1866 edition of *Self-Help* does not contain this line, emphasising instead the accessibility of success through moral qualities, which ‘are found the most useful – such as common sense, attention, application and perseverance. Genius may not be necessary’.<sup>6</sup> Fusing moral and material success meant that there was no room for the recognition of failure as resulting from economic or social forces beyond the individual’s control, though this is something on which Victorian novels often focused. Reflecting wider cultural trends, as I will argue, Smiles is happiest justifying

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<sup>5</sup> Samuel Smiles, *Self-Help* (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1863) <<http://www.econlib.org/library/YPDBooks/Smiles/smlSH.html>>. [accessed 30 June 2015] (Chapter 3, para. 2). All subsequent editions are to the 2002 Oxford University Press edition based on the 1866 edition, see following reference.

<sup>6</sup> Samuel Smiles, *Self-Help*, ed. by Peter W. Sinnema (1859; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p.90.

how those who have material wealth can be morally successful. ‘Some of the finest qualities of human nature are intimately related to the right use [not the earning] of money’.<sup>7</sup>

This moral justification of success and wealth went hand in hand with a deep discomfort about acknowledging and exploring failure in Smiles’s work. In his 1866 preface, Smiles acknowledged contemporary criticism that ‘too much notice [...] is taken [...] of men who have succeeded in life and too little of the multitude [...] who have failed.’ But even as he acknowledged the existence of debates about success and failure in Victorian society, he argued that the prospect of failure should essentially be ignored. It ‘ought [not] to be set before youth’.<sup>8</sup> The subject would be ‘excessively depressing as well as uninstructional reading.’<sup>9</sup> Yet the Victorian public was avid to read about failure. In 1859, the same year as *Self-Help*, Charles Dickens’s *A Tale of Two Cities*, was published. Its hero was Sydney Carton, ‘idlest and most unpromising of men’<sup>10</sup>, utterly lacking in the qualities Smiles lauded but magnificently redeemed by self-sacrifice. Smiles’s oeuvre relies largely for its effect on tales of the lives of ‘real’ successful men. *Self-Help* and *A Tale of Two Cities* suggest the extent to which contemporary debates about success and failure were based on heavily fictionalised reality and reality reshaped as fiction. They also reveal that the discourse between success and failure was not as simple as a characterisation of each at opposite ends of a spectrum. The Victorian conception of success relied for its own coherence on denying the possibility of failure or dismissing it as immorality.

Smiles’s evocation of success, with its concern with property and aspiration, was essentially middle-class and this thesis focuses principally on

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<sup>7</sup> Smiles, p.242.

<sup>8</sup> Smiles, p.4.

<sup>9</sup> Smiles, p.4.

<sup>10</sup> Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities*, ed. by Andrew Sanders (1859; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p.82.

the Victorian middle classes, who were also the principal producers and consumers of novels. Those who saw themselves as successful property-owning individuals had to live with the knowledge that they could both rise and fall in a changing society. ('No class is ever long stationary'<sup>11</sup> opined Smiles). Aspiration and material gain carried the potential for loss. The Victorian middle-classes can be characterised by their attraction to certainty, even as it eluded them; they were a people who wanted to be assured about their place in the world – and were not. This attraction brings into primacy the comforting materiality of the object. I argue that a fundamental part of being 'Victorian' is to look for tangible, easily-read, controllable signifiers to signal freedom from the complexities of failure.

I define 'moral success' as morality materialised. Stefan Collini's definition of Victorian morality suggests how disruptive the idea of failure is if 'all values are assumed to be compatible':

Morality was understood very much as a system of obligations, [...] there was a tendency to extend the category of 'duty' as widely as possible [...] the characterisation of the alternative to performing one's duties stressed giving in to temptation or being seduced by one's inclinations, and these inclinations were regarded as inherently selfish [...], it was assumed that in any given situation there was always one moral right answer: all ultimate values are assumed to be compatible, and obligations, when clearly understood, cannot conflict.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Smiles, p.174.

<sup>12</sup> Stefan Collini, *Public Moralists: Political Thought and Intellectual Life in Britain, 1850-1930* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), pp.63-64.

Moral success was defined by one's relations with the world, rendering it public and verifiable by others. Crucially a level of economic security was often required to carry out such obligations. The conflicts and obfuscations of moral and material success are echoed in the howl of Marley's damned spirit in *A Christmas Carol* (1843) 'Mankind was my business!'<sup>13</sup> In a capitalist society, what is the balance of living off men and having social obligations towards them? The concept of 'duty' in an increasingly seductive material culture, combined with the moral absolutism that Collini refers to, provide a culture in which success and failure command heightened moral importance.

Moral success was a secular form of morality but, crucially, not antithetical to Victorian Christianity. The sermons of the Rev. George Clayton on the subject of the Great Exhibition make clear the perceived link between the 'stimulus' of material things to morally beneficial activity. 'This repository of wonders may be regarded as a beneficial stimulus to human diligence and industry.'<sup>14</sup> His sermons on the exhibition were preached at Congregationalist York Street Chapel, but the established church was heavily in evidence at the opening and closing ceremonies of the exhibition, led by the Arch-Bishop of Canterbury and the Bishop of London respectively. The opening of the Great Exhibition, under the auspices of church, state and industry, defined and sanctioned material morality in a way that had not been technically possible or even morally respectable in the preceding decades.

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<sup>13</sup> Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol*, ed. by Robert Douglas-Fairhurst (1843; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p.23.

<sup>14</sup> George Clayton, *Three Sermons on the Great Exhibition: Preached at York Street Chapel Walworth* (London: Green, 1851), p.27.

Deborah Cohen argues that ‘for an important mid-Victorian moment, morality and materialism coexisted as mutually reinforcing propositions’.<sup>15</sup> Always over the debates on success and failure hung the challenge of the New Testament, ‘no man can serve two masters, for [...] he will hate the one and love the other [...] ye cannot serve God and Mammon.’<sup>16</sup> According to Cohen, the Victorians’ ‘ingenious solution’ was that ‘things had moral qualities’.<sup>17</sup> I argue that the materiality of objects in Victorian material culture offered the illusion of a safeguard. The overcrowded reality of the Victorian parlour was an emotional bulwark against the fluctuations of the financial world where investments could vanish overnight in ‘crashes’ and ‘panics’ and there was no form of social security beyond the workhouse. It was in a sense of tangible possession that the Victorian sense of success was best ‘realised’: and in the realities of circulation that the possibilities of failure were most strongly felt.

Marxist-inspired critics, such as Elaine Freedgood, have examined that circulation: not least by depicting objects as trailing their associations of empire and industry into the gentility of the Victorian parlour. I argue that this must be seen in the context of Victorian middle-class desire to obliterate such traces because the aim of ownership was to suggest the moral qualities of hard work, perseverance and fortitude, which, ostensibly, had allowed the owner to earn the money to buy this object. Immediately, the history of the object’s production and acquisition is problematic given the manifold (and possibly immoral) ways in which an object could equally easily be acquired. Display or use of an object is no guarantee of ownership, or the morality of the owner, even in the domestic sphere, yet the Victorian conception of success attempted to make it so. Deborah Wynne argues that ‘personal property

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<sup>15</sup> Deborah Cohen, *Household Gods: The British and their Possessions* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), p.3.

<sup>16</sup> Luke 16.13

<sup>17</sup> Cohen, p.x.



should be treated less as an aspect of commodity culture and more as a complex relationship between humans and the material world'.<sup>18</sup> Wynne emphasises the performative nature of property ownership for women, especially in the Victorian era when, 'the ownership of portable property suggested stability and credit-worthiness, generating a sense of power within social and familial networks and fostering among owners a sense of identity and belonging'.<sup>19</sup> I explore ideas of success as being fundamental to this sense of power and explore not only how men as well as women used objects to perform as successful individuals within Victorian culture but how women themselves were used as objects reflecting masculine and marital success. Wynne argues that 'while there has been a proliferation of books on Victorian material culture [...] few have focused on the complexly overlapping forces of the public and private domains which characterise property ownership'.<sup>20</sup> I emphasise that the performance of success requires us to examine this overlap: in Chapter One I emphasise the importance of women displaying wealth in social environments, something much dwelt on in realist fiction, and the elision of men's work and places of work in the novel.

In *Vanity Fair* (1847-8) Becky Sharp skilfully exploits objects from both public and private spheres (very seldom honestly paid for with honestly-earned money – at least not hers) to create the illusion of prosperous respectability. Precisely because we, as readers, cannot be impressed by the sensory impact of the material splendour that Becky at her best and baddest accumulates, readers are encouraged to be cynical about this culture. The critic Juliet John has called for 'more sensitivity to aesthetic texture in our consideration of how literature represents things' and suggests that thing theory needs to re-engage with 'a premise [...] so simple that it should not

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<sup>18</sup> Deborah Wynne, *Women and Personal Property in the Victorian Novel* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), p.1.

<sup>19</sup> Wynne, p.2.

<sup>20</sup> Wynne, p.2.

need stating: things [in literature] are not things but words representing things'.<sup>21</sup> The literal differences between the object and the represented objects are key to understanding the novel's subversive and ambivalent position in the discourse of success and failure; the object's role on the form of the novel, especially in the discourse of success and failure can be slippery indeed.

In *Jane Eyre* (1847) Jane tries to 'read' her absent employer's 'character and habits' through his furniture. The reader is given vivid descriptions of Thornfield Hall's interior, 'a turkey carpet, walnut panelled walls, one vast window rich in slanted glass, and a lofty ceiling, nobly moulded'.<sup>22</sup> The question is: what are these interiors *for* in the novel? It is made very clear what they are *not* for; they are not a synecdoche for Rochester's character or even his social position.

The intriguing existence of Mr Rochester's 'ward', Adèle, causes Jane to 'meditate' but it is his furniture (not his house or estate) that clarify her thoughts and questions to Mrs Fairfax:

'In what order you keep these rooms [...] Is Mr Rochester an exacting, fastidious sort of man?'

'Not particularly so; but he has a gentleman's tastes and habits, and he expects to have things managed in conformity to them.'

'Do you like him, is he generally liked?'

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<sup>21</sup> Juliet John, 'Things, Words and the Meanings of Art', in *Dickens and Modernity*, ed. by Juliet John (Cambridge: Brewer, 2012), pp. 115-132 (p.117).

<sup>22</sup> Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, ed. by Sally Shuttleworth and Margaret Smith (1847; Oxford: Oxford World Classics, 2008), p.104.

‘Oh, yes; the family have always been respected here. Almost all the land in this neighbourhood, [...] has belonged to the Rochesters time out of mind.’

‘Well, but leaving his land out of the question, [...] Is he liked for himself? [...] What, in short, is his character?’

‘Oh! His character is unimpeachable, I suppose. He is rather peculiar, perhaps.’<sup>23</sup>

Brontë puns on ‘character’ as reputation and character as defining personal traits. In Chapters One and Three, I suggest that Victorian conceptions of success emerge from a culture where ‘character’ is an almost material asset on which social and economic success could hinge. Mrs Fairfax’s conflation of the two is thoroughly ‘Victorian’. She may have ‘no notion of sketching in a character’<sup>24</sup> as Jane patronisingly says, but it is she, not Jane who really understands what is happening in and around Thornfield.

Rochester’s furniture tells us nothing about him as a person that Jane (and the reader) wants to know. Is he likeable? Kind? Interesting? It only ostensibly establishes his class. As Elaine Freedgood puts it, ‘the age of walnut in English furniture runs from 1660 to 1720, so that possession of walnut furniture in a novel in which empire has spawned so much new richness indicates the family’s gentility and lineage’.<sup>25</sup> One might argue that Freedgood falls into exactly the error that novelists attempt to correct; just

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<sup>23</sup> Brontë, pp.104-5.

<sup>24</sup> Brontë, p.105.

<sup>25</sup> Elaine Freedgood, *The Ideas in Things: Fugitive Meanings in the Victorian Novel* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), p.31.

having something in your home does *not* necessarily say that you possess ‘gentility and lineage’: Rochester might have bought the whole lot at a bankruptcy auction. In fact his former status as a second son has put him in the same state as any arriviste; he had to marry money.

Freedgood’s specific dating of the ‘age of walnut’ can be usefully contrasted with Mrs Fairfax’s woolly yet characteristically accurate phrase ‘time out of mind’. The time when the Rochesters came to Thornfield has passed out of mind, they appear to have been there forever. Objects, like walnut furniture can obscure origins, rather than date them. The ultimate success is to transcend the impression of having ever had to create it, something middle-class readers with aspirations to gentility (and access to mass-produced imitations of the kind of furniture that Brontë describes) would have understood only too well. I discuss this in relation to *Daniel Deronda* in Chapter Three.

The settled, domestic state of Thornfield Hall – antique furniture, well-aired and dusted rooms (‘one would think they were inhabited daily’)<sup>26</sup> – contrasts with Rochester’s restless wanderings across the globe; the material evidence of his home masks his financial and sexual entanglements in the Caribbean. Having the *taste* of a gentleman, and the possessions, belies the worrying implications of his ward and his wanderings. This makes it possible to keep up a material fiction of settled existence, to ‘keep the rooms in readiness’,<sup>27</sup> for his imminent return. The material fact of this domestic, materialised order contrasts ringingly with Rochester’s physical and moral rootlessness.

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<sup>26</sup> Brontë, p.104.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

Emphasis on Jane's naivety, seeing a drawing room as a 'fairy place' with her 'novice eyes',<sup>28</sup> is telling. The sensuous richness of these material things, their colour, their detail, make a powerful impact on an inexperienced 'reader' of things. This is precisely the intent of the Victorian material culture of success and precisely the culture that the novel form undermines because it must divorce us from the immediate sensuous, visual experience of engaging with such things whilst metaphorically rearranging the furniture to show other ways of reading it.

So Rochester's dining room furniture tells us next to nothing about him and a great deal about how easy it is to read the wrong messages from furniture due to the Victorian convention of reading success into things. Freedgood argues that 'Even the slightest end table, the most unassuming side chair, could be a souvenir of sadism for Victorian readers of the novel'.<sup>29</sup> Clare Pettitt's response demonstrates that the circulation of objects makes them far more complex to read:

What happens, [...] to the 'memories of imperial mastery' when the mahogany furniture no longer belongs to the 'winners'? Freedgood's reading of things is perhaps *too* global and long-range. In the low-down thick of the domestic economy of British working-class communities in the nineteenth-century *things as well as people were subject to sudden falls in status*. The second-hand market not only cheapened mahogany furniture, but also distributed it liberally across

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<sup>28</sup> Brontë, p.105.

<sup>29</sup> Freedgood, p.51.

classes. The very ubiquity of mahogany chairs must surely have made it difficult for the Victorians to see each and every one as a ‘souvenir’ of sadism.<sup>30</sup>

This thesis develops Pettitt’s suggestion that it is in the circulation, in the ‘sudden falls’ (and rises) in the status of things and people and the connections between them, that middle-class Victorian conceptions of failure are to be found.

I aim to show that this discourse is part of a major theme of the realist novel on what constitutes success and failure. ‘I must be taken as I have been made. The success is not mine, the failure is not mine, but the two together make me’.<sup>31</sup> The radicalism of Estella’s words in *Great Expectations* (1860-1) smashes the binary of success and failure by suggesting that an individual could be both and admits that material success could be moral failure.

Estella seems to assume (in a rather un-Victorian way) that success or failure is constructed, not innate. She does not see herself as an individual with moral choices to make, but as a sort of blank canvas on which Miss Havisham and society at large has worked. Her view, presented as morally ambiguous, strikes at contemporary ideals of individualism and personal responsibility. In 1859, a year before *Great Expectations* first appeared in *All the Year Round*, Smiles’ *Self-Help* and Darwin’s *On the Origin of the Species* appeared. They explore conflicting ideas about the ability of the individual to control their surroundings and reflect the ideological ferment in which Victorian ideals of success were created. Is Estella one of God’s creatures, resolutely turned away from him and therefore a moral failure, or a creature

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<sup>30</sup> Clare Pettitt, ‘On Stuff’, 19: *Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century* 6 (2008), 1-12, (p.7). [my italics]

<sup>31</sup> Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations*, ed. by Margaret Cardwell (1860-1; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p.302.

evolved to meet the needs of her environment and therefore simply an ugly reflection of it?

One of the great failures that *Great Expectations* emphasises is for the individual to believe that he or she can function by remaining aloof from society, casting doubt on the extent to which individualism is possible. Miss Havisham is the most extreme example of this: ostensibly enclosed in her darkened house, she is, in fact, thoroughly 'worldly'. Many of the central characters of the novel, cynical Jaggers, the convict Magwitch, the Pocket family, are involved with and by her in the plot. Significantly it is the materiality of her cobwebbed house that creates the rotting illusion that she has turned away from the world.

Outside the walls of Satis House, the fresh youth of society prove themselves more than willing to act by Miss Havisham's obscene credo: ignoring love and social responsibility, pursuing money and power, using marriage to 'deceive and entrap', with cruelty as a preferred weapon. Bentley Drummle flourishes in society without the benefit of Miss Havisham's training. The material trappings that make Miss Havisham such a memorable character, mask the fact that she is a reflection of society not a powerful individual apart from it.

Who is responsible for the moral failure that runs through the novel? By showing how a multitude of characters, from the likeable clerk Wemmick to the bestial smith Orlick, contribute to images of societal success and failure, *Great Expectations* answers 'society'. One defining trait of a 'Victorian' novelist is a desire to understand who or what is responsible for creating and policing what we understand to be success and failure: potentially subversive to the equally Victorian ideal of fused moral and material success through individual agency.

## II: A Period of Success? Dating the Discourse

This thesis examines the discourse of success and failure between 1848 to 1883 while acknowledging that this is part of a much longer and wider debate. These are the decades, I argue, in which the consensus of moral and material synthesis was most powerful and the debate about how they synthesised, most urgently contested. In literary terms the thesis begins with the period of extraordinary cultural ferment around 1848 – a period that produced novels as disparate as *Jane Eyre*, *Vanity Fair* and *Dombey and Son* – and ends with the publication of Margaret Oliphant's *Hester* in 1883. The earliest novel I discuss in depth is Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* (1847-8) although I discuss several earlier works such as Thomas Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus* (1833-4) and Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist* (1837-9) in order to demonstrate that ideals of moral and material success did not come together overnight or uncontested.

*Vanity Fair* demonstrates how skilfully and ruthlessly material culture can be used to create material success (especially by a woman), presenting this as moral failure in itself and directly challenging the idea that moral and material success could be synonymous. Despite its focus on material culture, this novel is perhaps the last great unambiguous attack on the moral and material success before the failure of political change after 1848 and the rise of consumer culture encapsulated by the Great Exhibition in 1851. *Vanity Fair* also focuses attention on the circulation of objects and on the hazards of bankruptcy, both issues which I examine closely in later chapters.

The Great Exhibition represented a dramatic rupture with the 'Hungry Forties' embodying, in Marx's words 'the most astounding sang-froid when the dreams of the whole continent were still haunted by revolution'.<sup>32</sup> The dramatic shift in bourgeois confidence between 1848 and 1851 and the

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<sup>32</sup> Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, 'Review: May to October 1850', in *Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels: Collected Works*, 50 vols (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1975-2004), x (1978), pp.490-533, (p.500).



enormous scale of the Exhibition make these years an unsurprising place to begin exploring conceptions of success.

Charles Dickens's *Bleak House* (1852-3) and Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* (1853) were published after these changes had taken place. As 'Exhibition Novels' they demonstrate attraction to and repulsion from the new consumer culture, and handle it with a new degree of self-consciousness. I also analyse *Villette*, throughout the thesis, as one of the few novels to actively engage with how women might be successful in the world if they lacked not just beauty and wealth but physical and mental health.

*Great Expectations* shows how, by the 1860s, the amalgamation of moral and material success had become a far more insidious concept, deeply woven into the fabric of society and requiring far more nuanced analysis than Thackeray's mockery (or Dickens's earlier work) had given to it. Similarly George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1871-2) has at its heart the assumption that characters must learn to survive as moral beings in the world as it is, however vulgar and commoditised. One cannot hope to be morally successful if one has not learned to live within and manipulate the constraints of developing consumer society.

In Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* (1876) and Henry James *The Portrait of a Lady* (1880-1), I suggest, the zenith of the culture of moral and material success is most powerfully evoked and criticised through the figure of a woman signifying her husband's material success, potentially to the detriment both of her happiness and conscience. By the time Margaret Oliphant wrote *Hester* (1883) I suggest that the concept of a woman as a signifier of success was becoming less powerful: Hester is a thin creation compared to Isobel Archer. Although Oliphant meant to show Hester as the 'new woman', the moral conscience of her family, and her energetic banker aunt, Catherine, as an 'old' one, I suggest that the reverse was true and that by the 1880s the concept of a

female signifier of success was beginning to weaken as questions of women's real economic and political success began to gain ground.

Although I focus most closely here on the mid-Victorian period, I maintain that the discourse of success and failure in the Victorian age begins before Victoria's reign and ends after it concluded. There are good reasons to see the Great Reform Act of 1832 and The Poor Law Reform Act of 1834 as the basis of the Victorian age. Eric Hobsbawm argues that, 'the Poor Law was not as much intended to help the unfortunate as to stigmatize the self-confessed failures of society'.<sup>33</sup> This principle that poverty was a moral failure, all but punishable and certainly shameful, endured throughout the Victorian period as an epitome of failure, as I argue in Chapter Three. The novel was in the vanguard of the debate over whether poverty represented a great moral failure as well as an economic and social one.

In contrast, the political concessions to the middle classes within the 1832 Reform Act essentially made the ownership of property the test of whether a man had the right to a political voice. What you owned, rather than who you were born, was now the key to societal approbation. Material success was fundamental to citizenship.

During the 1830s and '40s, the debate on what constituted success and failure focused on the grim social consequences of industrialisation and urbanisation. Failure was dependence, lack of possessions, and the social problem novel constantly took up the cudgel in favour of the 'failures'. However, the changes that came in the 1850s required, I argue, a complex response from novelists. Writers such as Dickens and Gaskell, who had dealt so magnificently with outlining the consequences of economic failure in the *Hungry Forties*, increasingly had to confront a social construction of success,

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<sup>33</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, *Industry and Empire: From 1750 to the Present Day* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969), p.88.

not least in the form of the Great Exhibition. In Chapter Two I argue that they struggled, finding the novel form in general and realism in particular less well suited to dealing with success than with failure.

None of this is to suggest that Victorian novels represent an ascetic attitude to objects; indeed those who have no ties to material things, or claim not to, are often viewed with suspicion. The moral bankruptcy of the fraudster Melmotte in Anthony Trollope's *The Way We Live Now* (1874-5) is linked very literally to his material bankruptcy: the fact that he never really owns *anything*. Lack of material goods, or at least a proper respect for them, is often associated with moral failure in realist novels, in a world where the moral and material were often represented as synonymous.

Raymond Williams argues that 'it is almost true that there are no periods in thought [...]. The temper which the adjective Victorian is useful to describe is virtually finished in the 1880s; the new men who appear in that decade [...] are recognisably different in tone'.<sup>34</sup> This raises the question of whether any period, in thought or otherwise, should be judged principally by its 'new men'. I see the discourse of success and failure as persistent, not least because it went beyond the vagaries of fashion and novels, and maintain that material culture can provide evidence of such unfashionable persistence. *The Portrait of a Lady* and its close relationship to *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda* offers a tantalising possibility of coherence. Furthermore, 1883 sites *Hester*, and even *The Portrait of a Lady*, in the new post-Victorian world according to Williams. However, Oliphant was literally and metaphorically an old woman by the standards of her time, born in 1828 and with decidedly old-fashioned politics. In terms of assessing 'moods' and 'Frames of Mind' neither historians nor literary critics can afford to neglect those long stages of

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<sup>34</sup> Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society 1780-1950* (1958; New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), p.161.

unfashionable persistence which we can, often with the benefit of hindsight, identify as death-throes but which can, at the time, appear like a period of stability.

Success and failure, as I define them, could be looked for in works as far apart as the novels of Jane Austen and John Galsworthy. The discourse is as present in gothic novels such as *A Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890) as in Sensation Novels such as *The Woman in White* (1859-60). It has far closer relations with evolutionary science and the decline of religion, to name but two key aspects of nineteenth-century British history, than I have space to explore here. Material culture is one key aspect of a discourse that stretched tentacles into almost every aspect of nineteenth-century life. While I discuss a variant of the discourse of success that developed specifically within the British middle-classes, this conception of success and failure is certainly to be found in French and American realism, and to be searched for wherever commodity culture and realist novelists intersect.

### III: Where Were the Victorians?

The word ‘Victorian’ is used deliberately in this thesis. There are obvious problems in the use of the term; critic John Lucas thunders, ‘Victorian and Victorianism are terms we could well do without [...] all too frequently employed in ways that are chronologically indefensible, historically dubious, intellectually confusing and ideologically unacceptable’.<sup>35</sup> However, the word ‘Victorian’ is useful in referring to a set of often conflicting attitudes. The discourse *between* those attitudes, I would argue, constitutes what it means to be ‘Victorian.’

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<sup>35</sup> John Lucas, ‘Republican Versus Victorian: Radical Writing in the Later Years of the Nineteenth Century’, in *Rethinking Victorian Culture*, ed. by Juliet John and Alice Jenkins (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999), pp.29-45 (p.29).

Robin Gilmour has argued that the idea of ‘the Victorians’ is useful because they themselves engaged with it so energetically. ‘No previous generation had been so conscious of the uniqueness of their time [...] as an age *requiring definition*’.<sup>36</sup> I argue that if the idea of a Victorian *period* is debatable, there were certainly Victorian *people*. Walter E. Houghton’s *The Victorian Frame of Mind* (1957) demonstrates why working on ‘frames of mind’ is important even if (or because) it lacks the precision of modern criticism. He aimed to elucidate:

Those general ideas and attitudes about life which Victorians of the middle and upper classes would have breathed in with the air – the main grounds for hope and uneasiness which they felt, the standards of value they held – in a word, the frame of mind in which they were living and thinking.<sup>37</sup>

Houghton might be said to be using the Victorians’ own weapons to understand them as they set out to classify and organise concepts, such as success and failure, which postmodern critics might now assert to be both undefinable and unnecessary. However, if we dismiss such concepts, we increase the distance between ourselves and the nineteenth century by not respecting the fact that terms such as success and failure were the Victorians’ own critical tools, for good and ill, for understanding the world.

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<sup>36</sup> Robin Gilmour, *The Victorian Period: The Intellectual and Cultural Context of English Literature 1830-1890* (London: Longman, 1993), p.2. [my italics]

<sup>37</sup> Walter E. Houghton, *The Victorian Frame of Mind: 1830-1879* (1957; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978), pp.xiii-xiv.

When we begin to ask who the Victorians were, the idea that they were subjects of Victoria becomes increasingly useful in the context of a debate over success and failure. Certainly, many of the same developments in material and literary culture could be found in French literature. My analysis of Flaubert's work in this introduction (to say nothing of that of Prussian-Jewish Marx) demonstrates that Victorian British middle-class culture cannot be seen in a geographical or political vacuum; indeed, it relied on the sense of 'the annihilation of time and space' evoked by the (German) Prince Albert before the Great Exhibition. However, contrasted with German and Italian Unification and the French upheavals of revolution, republic, restoration and republic again, it is unsurprising that the moral and material culture of success in Britain in the nineteenth century might be different from that of other countries.

The comparative political and social stability against which the British variant of success developed within European culture could be embodied in the long life of one woman, Victoria. This was the backdrop against which ideas, such as Samuel Smiles's conception of successful individuals making up a successful nation, were developed.

#### **IV: 'Smelling a Little Too Much of the Workshop': How the Origins of Objects Shape the Discourse of Success and Failure in the Victorian Novel**

In 2014 the Victoria and Albert Museum hosted the exhibition 'Disobedient Objects', exploring 'the range of object-based tactics and strategies that movements adopt to succeed. [...] What other forms of agency do these objects involve? Can we identify material points where disobedience begins [...]. Are some politics unable to produce objects?'.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> *Disobedient Objects*, ed. by Catherine Flood and Gavin Grindon (London: V&A Publishing, 2014), p.11.

The exhibition showcased objects of protest: makeshift barricades, defaced currency, gasmasks made from plastic bottles. Editors Catherine Flood and Gavin Grindon situated these objects in opposition to more ‘conventional’ fine art exhibits. ‘Fine making often belongs to privileged social conditions, involving time, institutional training, normalisation and patronage. It is bound to discipline and governance. As a result fine objects are themselves mostly failures in the task of making change’.<sup>39</sup> Flood and Grindon presumably define ‘change’ as ‘revolution’: my focus on the circulation and presentation of objects (fine or otherwise), especially in novels, demonstrates their key role in the radical changes in the Victorian era: in particular the rise of the middle classes.

‘Fine making’ in the Victorian period (or that which was marketed as such) was regularly *not* the result of privileged social conditions: artisans were under huge commercial pressure as mass-production was making previously unimaginable products available to the middle classes.

Critics ranging from Virginia Woolf to Isobel Armstrong have seen the production of objects as central to being Victorian. Armstrong argues that in *Orlando*, Woolf:

intuitively registers the drive to produce in Victorian society, whether it is children or industrial goods, and the need to muffle. [...]  
bourgeois capitalism and its ideology, its inordinate excesses and

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<sup>39</sup> Flood and Grindon, p.12.

concealments, are embodied in the voluptuous taxidermy of the stuffed sofa.<sup>40</sup>

In Britain between 1848 and 1883, a ‘range of agencies’, including exhibitions, fashion, architecture and newspapers, used objects to convey what it meant to be successful. The politics of Victorian success arose out of a culture that produced objects in inordinate numbers through its imperial, industrial and commercial systems. These politics, I argue, relied on making objects ‘obedient’: signifying correct cultural messages, particularly the economic, social and moral success of those who associated themselves with such objects. Obedient objects should suggest a settled present and future for those individuals, not a disruptive and disrupted past arising from wider social and economic tensions. Not only are objects within Victorian novels surprisingly disruptive of attempts to construct this sense of obedience in material culture, but the novel itself, whether bound in handmade leather or constituted by a few torn pages of a third hand magazine serial, is the ultimate ‘disobedient object’: undermining the ideology of moral and material success.

Elaine Freedgood argues that:

The knowledge that is stockpiled in [...] things [in texts] bears on the grisly specifics of conflicts and conquests that a culture can neither regularly acknowledge nor permanently destroy if it is going to be able to count on its own history to know itself and realise a future.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Isobel Armstrong, *Victorian Poetry: Poetics and Politics* (London: Routledge, 1993), p.1.

<sup>41</sup> Freedgood, p.2.



The discourse of success and failure in material culture can be seen as a battle between those elements in society that wished to expose the genesis of objects in order to bring about social and moral change, and those who wished to ignore precisely such histories in order to use objects to preserve and enhance the status quo.

I contend that objects are ‘obedient’ or ‘disobedient’ according to what they reveal or conceal in the context of dominant social codes. In exploring the idea of the biography of the object, Igor Kopytoff argues that:

One way to understand a culture is to see what sort of biography it regards as embodying a successful career. [...] What, sociologically, are the biographical possibilities inherent in [an object’s] “status” and in the period and culture, and how are these possibilities realised? Where does the thing come from and who made it? What has been its career so far and what do people consider to be an ideal career for such things?<sup>42</sup>

I argue that an ideal biography for a successful Victorian object involved display of ownership, and a central factor of ‘obedience’ meant objects appearing to shed their previous histories, or suggesting only a highly sanitised version of their production and acquisition. Objects, especially in the domestic sphere, should demonstrate familial and financial permanence.

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<sup>42</sup> Igor Kopytoff, ‘The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as a Process’, in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. by Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp.64-94 (pp.66-7).

An object with a history outside the home that was affected by more than the strivings of the individual to acquire it might logically have a future outside the home which the individual would be unable to affect as well. Failure to lose that sense of history, perhaps by appearing too new or being claimed by another previous or potential owner, makes objects ‘disobedient’, I argue; they begin to reveal wider cultural failings in society and quite possibly those of their owners as well. I trace how novelists gravitate to such disobedient objects, and what they do with them.

Charles Dickens offered a devastating satire of a failed attempt to make objects obedient in *Our Mutual Friend* (1864-5):

For, in the Veneering establishment, from the hall-chairs with the new coat of arms, to the grand pianoforte with the new action [...] all things were in a state of high varnish and polish. And what was observable in the furniture, was observable in the Veneerings – the surface smelt a little too much of the workshop and was a trifle sticky.<sup>43</sup>

The Veneerings would be horrified to think that anyone would think that their furniture smelt of the workshop. This sensual, literal trace of the industrial, commercial landscape, combined with the constant repetition of the word ‘new’, exposes how the culture of success in which the Veneerings are functioning relies on *not* knowing, or questioning, the origins of things.

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<sup>43</sup> Charles Dickens, *Our Mutual Friend*, ed. by Michael Cotsell (1864-5; London, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p.6.

Dickens harks back to the furniture's production in order to disrupt the idea of objects as part of a settled, timeless domestic sphere.

The fact that, as Juliet John and David Trotter argue, things in novels function differently from things in reality, is precisely what makes Dickens's satire possible. Things in novels, divorced from a physical form, can advertise their origins and position in the cycle of ownership and commodity, far more clearly than a physical object. The Veneerings' furniture almost certainly would not smell of the workshop by the time it was sitting in the Veneering home (at least not over the smells of a Victorian dinner party such as wax candles, rich food and bad breath). Smell is a powerful trigger of memory; Dickens's description directs us not to the material presence of the object in the Veneering home, but to its industrial past. The smell evokes timber yards, carpentry, and packing cases. In the crested chair as a literary object, readers trace its industrial and social history as a signifier of success for the nouveau riche. With such a chair in real life, skill and care would have been taken to suggest that it had no such life: that it was a family antique and heirloom, perhaps crafted by a devoted retainer of the Veneering family from the days of heraldry (remember the 'bran new' family crest). Within the novel, the connection between the workshop and the grandeur which the products of it are supposed to represent can be evoked almost simultaneously and explicitly, making the attempt to make the object imposing, ridiculous.

According to Juliet John 'Dickens's thing art represents and critiques the new ways in which value was being configured and contested'<sup>44</sup> and Dickens's observation of the Veneerings satirises not only a class of people but also the practice of reading success through material culture.

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<sup>44</sup> John, 'Things, Words and the Meanings of Art' in *Dickens and Modernity*, ed. by John, p.117.

Karl Marx would have asserted that the Veneerings' furniture did not smell enough of the workshop. His concept of the Fetishism of the Commodity always had the potential to be devastating to the Victorian conception of success, even if, crucially, it was not recognised as such at the time. Marx argued 'the mysterious character of the commodity-form consists [...] simply in the fact that the commodity reflects the social characteristics of men's own labour as objective characteristics of the products of labour themselves, as the social-natural properties of these things'.<sup>45</sup> Erasing, or at least controlling the idea that objects reflect 'the social characteristics' of labour is fundamental to the Victorian credo of success:

The form of wood [...] is altered by making a table out of it.

Nevertheless the table continues to be [...] an ordinary, sensuous thing but as soon as it changes into a commodity, it changes into a thing which transcends sensuousness. It not only stands with its feet on the ground, but, in relation to all other commodities, it stands on its head and evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas.<sup>46</sup>

Marx defines commodity fetishism as social, moral and ultimately economic and political failure and in doing so offers a starting point for defining success and failure in the era in which he wrote.

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<sup>45</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital*, ed. by Ernest Mandel, trans. by Ben Fowkes, 3 vols (1867; London: Penguin, 1990), i, pp. 164-5.

<sup>46</sup> Marx, p.163.

Literary critics and historians, such as Elaine Freedgood and Eric Hobsbawm, influenced by Marxism, have fruitfully explored the origins of commodities and the social relations and tensions of production in Victorian culture. In this thesis, however, I want to consider Marx as a failure by the standards of his own time. It is only by understanding how alien his ideas were to the vast majority of the bourgeoisie in this period that one can understand the power of the Victorian conception of success. Critical willingness to embrace Marxism as an essentially timeless theory may be one reason why, until recently, critics have seldom examined the strength of the doctrines that Marx was pushing against on their own terms. This willingness is increasingly being challenged. ‘Thing theory’ looks beyond the concept of the commodity and Jonathon Sperber’s 2013 biography of Marx situates him firmly in the social, economic and intellectual milieus of Prussian and British bourgeoisie culture. Sperber explores Marx’s heavy sense of failure. ‘Half a century on my back and still a pauper. How right my Mother was! “If only Karrell had made capital, instead of, etc.!”’.<sup>47</sup> His analysis of the way in which Marx felt a failure alludes to the Victorian conception of success without developing it. In Chapters One and Three I examine how such apparently mundane ‘things’ as clothes and domestic possessions affected the contemporary images of Marx and Dickens, and how those images of failure and success respectively affected production and contemporary consumption of their work. The conflicting and complicated experiences of the men and women who lived through and wrote about the conception of success and failure, from Marx and Dickens to the eponymous queen herself, are key to understanding the conflicts and intensity within contemporary Victorian novels.

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<sup>47</sup> Marx and Engels Works (MEW) 32: 75, quoted in Jonathon Sperber, *Karl Marx: A Nineteenth-Century Life* (New York: Norton, 2013), p.482.

## V: The Victorian Reality Effect: Critical Approaches to Success and Failure

During the 1950's critics like Houghton and John Harrison addressed the subjects of success and failure directly but briefly.<sup>48</sup> Since then, most discussion of Victorian success and failure has been relentlessly politicised, from the critical debate surrounding Donald McCloskey's 1970 article 'Did Victorian Britain fail?' to Margaret Thatcher's selective championing of 'Victorian Values' and Eric Hobsbawm's studies of the nineteenth century, in which his Marxism naturally predisposed him to construct the emerging capitalist economy of the nineteenth century in terms of failure. In the 1980's critics such as Barbara Weiss and Norman Russell explored the Victorian dread of bankruptcy and economic failure, but the recent development of theories of Victorian material culture make Victorian ideas of what comprised success and failure ripe for re-examination in a different way.

Elaine Freedgood outlines the methodology in her 2006 work *The Ideas in Things*:

I [...] develop interpretative allegories in which I follow the narrative logic of the novel [...] but I delay such readings until I have acquired the knowledge of a collector. So I begin with objects rather than with

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<sup>48</sup> Houghton offers a five-page discussion in *The Victorian Frame of Mind* and in the article 'The Victorian Gospel Of Success' Harrison identifies a powerful genre of 'success literature' in the Victorian period, ranging from 'improving' articles in the *Penny Magazine* and *Chambers' Edinburgh Journal* to Smiles's *Self-Help*: a genre that has not been analysed, directly concerning success and failure. J. F. C. Harrison, 'The Victorian Gospel of Success,' *Victorian Studies*, 1 (1957), 155-164.

subjects and plots and stay with them a bit longer than novelistic interpretation generally allows.<sup>49</sup>

Freedgood's method has since come under attack: critics such as David Trotter, Clare Pettitt and Juliet John have argued for clear distinctions between objects that matter within the text and those that are simply 'stuff'. Trotter asks 'under what generic conditions have objects appeared as objects in literary texts?'.<sup>50</sup> Juliet John contends that:

Objects in novels function differently from things in the world and [...] can carry variable meanings and emphases in literary texts [...] Dickens is fascinated by how things mean. My concern is [...] with the relational way in which Dickens views things [...] within a representational framework.<sup>51</sup>

The discourse of success and failure is both part of that representational framework and a 'generic condition'. Looking at success as a nineteenth-century signifying system gives us an opportunity to reconcile form and material culture in the novel. Success and failure are integral to many plots at this time and the objects within novels both carry the traces of the discourse in wider society and have essential symbolic roles within the text.

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<sup>49</sup> Freedgood, p.4.

<sup>50</sup> David Trotter, 'Household Clearances in Victorian Fiction,' *19: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century*, 6 (2008), 1-19, (p.6).

<sup>51</sup> John, 'Things, Words and the Meanings of Art', in *Dickens and Modernity*, ed. by John, p.117.

I develop the relationship that John alludes to ‘between things and the signifiers used to represent them [which] seems to take us back to a “spent” critical moment: to structuralism and post-structuralism’.<sup>52</sup> I suggest that Barthes’s essay ‘The Reality Effect’, and the flaws that critics such as Bill Brown have usefully exposed in it, may have much to tell us about ‘Reality Effects’ functioning within Victorian society at large.

The material culture of success, accelerated by the processes of mass-production, relied on things, uncomplicated by too many meanings, to verify itself within society. Barthes claims that, ‘Flaubert’s barometer [... says] nothing but this: “*we are the real*” [...] the very absence of the signified, [...] becomes the very signifier of realism: The *reality effect* is produced, the basis of that unavowed verisimilitude’.<sup>53</sup>

The Reality Effect and the expression of success through material culture rely on ‘unavowed verisimilitude’ to give form and ‘proof’ to the impalpable. In Victorian middle-class culture the useless object within the ‘decorative semiotic economy’<sup>54</sup> of the middle-class drawing room broadcasts its owner’s success; functional objects, such as kettles, do not do this. It is essentially inconsequential objects, such as plant pots and doilies, which suggest the reality of domestic success: money, time and a settled existence.

A ‘real’ object has the advantage of tangibility if its owner wishes to convey this tangible sense of moral and material success. However, an object in a novel has no tangibility and texts can explore the fact that it inevitably represents different, often conflicting, things simultaneously. In ‘The Reality Effect’ Barthes looks to objects to convey reality through their ostensible lack

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Roland Barthes, ‘The Reality Effect’ in *The Rustle of Language* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989), pp.140-148 (p.148).

<sup>54</sup> Thad Logan, *The Victorian Parlour: A Cultural History* (2001; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p.26.



of meaning; they have no literary function other than 'to be'. He argues this through analysis of a short story by Flaubert, 'A Simple Heart' (1877), which includes detailed discussion and description of a bourgeois French household and the objects within it. Barthes admits that while it is 'just possible':

To see in the notation of the piano an indication of its owner's bourgeois status and in the cartons a sign of disorder and a kind of lapse in status likely to connote the atmosphere of the Aubain household, no purpose seems to justify the barometer, an object neither incongruous nor significant.<sup>55</sup>

Within realist novels, useless objects can certainly broadcast the 'reality' of the novel's *mise en scène*. However, critics such as Bill Brown and Elaine Freedgood have already challenged the idea of objects signifying nothing but their own reality. Bill Brown offers a reading of Flaubert's barometer that evokes the history of barometer-making:

For Flaubert's original readers [... the] moment when the taste for elaborately carved [...] barometers [...] had given way to a taste for the more accurate, portable instrument [...marks], if vaguely, the

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<sup>55</sup> Barthes, p.142.

bourgeois cultural capital of the past (embodied by an object that denies any schism between ‘science’ and ‘culture’).<sup>56</sup>

Brown also alludes to the barometer’s ability ‘to materialise (to signify indexically) an absent presence’.<sup>57</sup> These readings, whilst interesting, are tangential to the plot.

However, the ‘lapse in status’, which Barthes mentions almost in passing, is key to the setting of the story; the context from which Barthes draws Flaubert’s objects is all about money and middle-class loss of status and the story begins with a detailed discussion of such a loss:

Madame Aubain had married a comely youth without any money, who died in the beginning of 1809, leaving her with two [...] children and a number of debts. She sold all her property excepting the farm [...] the income of which barely amounted to 5,000 francs; then she [...] moved into a less pretentious [house] [...] Madame Aubain sat all day in a straw armchair near the window. Eight mahogany chairs stood in a row against the white wainscoting. An old piano, standing beneath a barometer, was covered with a pyramid of old books and boxes. On either side of the yellow marble mantelpiece, in Louis XV style, stood a tapestry armchair. The clock represented a temple of

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<sup>56</sup> Bill Brown, *The Material Unconscious: American Amusement, Stephen Crane and the Economies of Play* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1997), p.16.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

Vesta; and the whole room smelled musty, as it was on a lower level than the garden.<sup>58</sup>

This frank discussion of Madam Aubain's financial state primes the reader to 'read' material culture as measurements of the family's current, reduced, circumstances. The plot makes us see objects as signifiers of failure because we know that they are relics of better times, not the signifiers of current success that Madam Aubain clearly intends them to be. Barthes argues that objects signify 'reality': Madam Aubain, intends them to signal financial and social security as 'reality' when this is not the case. The piano, eight mahogany chairs; all echo the figure of Madam Aubain herself, sitting in a straw chair doing nothing all day, uselessness signals the gentility that money can buy. The story shows us both what Madam Aubain intends the furniture to mean and frames that furniture to mean something completely different: it shows her failure to control the meanings that her furniture can broadcast in a text.

These possessions are framed by the metaphor of tombs. A piano that is covered with a pyramid of books cannot be played (one suspects that the books do not suffer from overuse either). A pyramid is a tomb housing objects as well as people: objects supposed to demonstrate the greatness of the people they are buried with. The clock shaped like the temple of Vesta, goddess of the home, offers obvious symbolism of the ideal home. Such clocks tended to be heavily ornamented, even to the point of obscuring their real purpose. (One could have found very similar clocks at the Great Exhibition, which Flaubert visited; one might even argue that they are more reminiscent of the Exhibition

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<sup>58</sup> Gustave Flaubert, 'A Simple Heart' in *Three Tales*, ed. by A. J. Krailsheimer (1877; Oxford: Oxford World Classics, 2009), pp.3-41 (p.3).

than the era when the house was supposedly decorated). In the context of the moral ideal of the home, this clock's function is less to measure time than to measure its owner's wealth. We learn that 'the whole room smelled musty, as it was on a lower level than the garden'.<sup>59</sup> This is not a temple to the home; it is a mausoleum to better times. The frank discussion of money and status in the plot, coupled with the metaphors that frame the furniture, means that Flaubert translates objects intended by characters to signify success into objects signifying failure; they are now useless memories of a more economically and emotionally secure life.

In the nineteenth century, the line between novel readers and the habitués of middle-class drawing rooms was comparatively thin. Dickens and Flaubert make us onlookers in the hall of the Veneerings and the drawing room of Madame Aubain. Many of their readers would have spent much of their lives in such rooms.

The discourse of success and failure can be explored as both a cultural phenomenon that helped to shape the concept of what it was to be Victorian, and as part of the 'rhetorical hierarchy'<sup>60</sup> of the text, which critics such as John have lighted on as the most productive aspect of Freedgood's theories about how to treat objects in novels.

## **VI: Men and Memorials: Reading and Celebrating Material Success in Victorian Material Culture.**

The politics of success requires engagement not only with the manifold ways in which people owned, aspired or, crucially, failed to own property but with the wider material culture that Victorians created around them. The Victorians literally built a culture of success: material things not simply celebrating a laissez-faire society in which success of the individual was the

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<sup>59</sup> Flaubert, p.3.

<sup>60</sup> Freedgood, p.2.

crowning social glory and moral good, but stating, through their very weighty existence, the magnificent inevitability of such a society. The Crystal Palace, the Albert Memorial and Holloway Sanatorium illustrate the materialised ideals of success with which Victorians, and middle-class Victorians in particular, were surrounded and expected to engage. This thesis asks: by what process were these materialised ideals domesticated and replicated by the Victorian bourgeoisie and how did the novel respond to this?

When Virginia Woolf wanted to produce an image that would sum up the Victorian age, she described, ‘a pyramid, a hecatomb or trophy [...] a conglomeration of [...] objects, piled higgledy-piggledy [...] where the statue of Queen Victoria now stands’.<sup>61</sup> The description is devastating: evocative *because* within that specific historical, Victorian, moment were objects and values so inextricably entangled.

The Albert Memorial in Hyde Park, containing hammers, elephants, angels, catalogues, classical friezes and gothic spires, embodies Woolf’s satire (see FIG 1). On 2<sup>nd</sup> July 1872, eleven years after Prince Albert’s death, it was formally opened to the public. Set in Hyde Park, the memorial was close to site of the Great Exhibition of 1851, one of the Prince Consort’s greatest achievements. Both Exhibition and Memorial can be seen as aspects of an on-going process of categorising society and individuals as successes or failures in which definition, judgement and ‘proof’, in the form of material culture, were considered crucial instruments for navigating a complex, urbanising and industrialising world.

At the Great Exhibition, the Victorians saw nothing odd in using steam hammers and Indian shawls and the Crystal Palace itself as evidence of (their) cultural superiority and industrial prowess denoting national, economic and

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<sup>61</sup> Virginia Woolf, *Orlando*, ed. by Michael H. Whitworth (1928; Oxford: Oxford World Classics, 2014), p.218.

moral success. In the Albert Memorial those same objects were used to illustrate the goodness and achievements of an individual; as *The Times*, put it, ‘The Taj of Agra was built by a century of long ago “to the memory of an undying love” but [...] the busiest and most practical people in this busy and practical age [...] built to the memory of a good man’.<sup>62</sup> Objects did much to make the Victorians ‘busy and practical’ and through objects they also hoped to be made more virtuous and perhaps a little less unromantic. The comparison evokes the Victorians’ sense that their own historical moment was different from what went before in a very material sense. The era of handcraft and romantic love has given way to the assemblage of mass-produced objects gathered from all corners of the globe. If Woolf used such objects to signal the distance of her era from the Victorians, the Victorians used them to distance themselves from other cultures past and present.

The quasi-religious nature of the memorial emphasises the link between moral and material success. Albert is seated as if between heaven and earth. Above him are a cross and spire upon which the moral qualities demanded by men like Samuel Smiles for success were personified as female angels: including Faith, Charity, Fortitude and Prudence. These angels hint at the role of women in Victorian middle-class culture as living signifiers of moral and material success. Below Albert are sculptures representing industrialism and imperialism. Clearly the link between powerful industry and imperialism and moral probity is a striving individual. The Memorial gave solid form to Smiles’s observation that ‘National progress is the sum of individual industry, energy and uprightness, as national decay is of individual idleness, selfishness and vice’.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> *The Times*, 2 July 1872, p.12.

<sup>63</sup> Smiles, p.18.

John Foley's statue of Albert in the memorial, presents him as an active, successful man, rather than a Prince, posed on a stool rather than a throne. Under one arm is a catalogue of the Great Exhibition and he is clad in the robes of the Order of the Garter: an order conferred on merit (See FIG 2). The cults of aristocracy, patriotism and success through individual endeavour are conflated.

However, Albert's achievements were literally and metaphorically overshadowed by the project of defining a successful man more broadly. His more controversial social crusades on subjects such as better housing for the poor were conspicuously absent from 'his' monument. The grimmer consequences of industrialisation and empire are sanitised by a blend of symbolism and materiality and hidden in plain sight. The workers in the sculpture to 'Manufactures' are determinedly classical in style (although Victorian Britain was hardly short of contemporary models). Their sacks, baskets and hammer are interchangeable between millennia: signifying the nostalgic past and the progressive future while eschewing tensions in the present. The little boy sitting at the feet of a bare-chested worker with a placid expression and well-fed air lends innocence to the scene rather than hinting at the appalling exploitation of child labour (see FIG 3). He is a long way from Jo the crossing sweeper. These statues bring industrial processes to the fore while obliterating the memory of the processes that brought them there. Using the physical reality of material objects to block out the social and economic reality of material processes echoes the treatment of exhibits at the Great Exhibition (a process that, ironically, went very much against Albert's wishes, as I show in Chapter Two).

When, in July 1872, the memorial obelisk and sculptures were unveiled, Albert's statue was not there and was not completed for another three years. The Memorial's principal architect, Gilbert Scott's, own introduction to his work takes on a huge irony:

The Great Purpose of an architectural structure as part of the memorial is to protect and *overshadow* the prince [...] to give to this overshadowing structure the character of a vast shrine, enriching it with all the arts through which the character of preciousness can be imparted to an architectural design and by which it can be *made to express the value* attached to the object which it protects.<sup>64</sup>

Scott, the archetype of a successful Victorian man himself, was probably more accurate than he intended to be in summing up the purpose of the memorial. Albert's reputation as a successful man and his relation as such to the wider national life were both protected and overshadowed by a wider cult of success. Underlying this reputation is the understanding that material things can be 'made to express the value of' of a man: 'the object'. Ironically, an active, successful man could hardly have been more thoroughly objectified.

When the Memorial had finally opened after over a decade of delay and debate, *The Times* commented, 'during all the tedious years of its erection, the public have never lost their interest in this costly and elaborate work'.<sup>65</sup> That sense of 'tediousness' suggests both the persistence of the project of conveying success through material form and the consistence with which it was debated.

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<sup>64</sup> Gilbert Scott quoted in the *The Builder*, 21 (1863), p.276. [my italics]

<sup>65</sup> *The Times*, 2 July 1872, p.12.



If the Albert Memorial presents the ideal of the Victorian cult of success, then Holloway Sanatorium, an asylum for the middle-class insane which opened in 1885, stands as an example of the practice: suggesting the fundamental status and consequences of the discourse of success and failure among the Victorian middle-classes, not least when looked at in relation to the life of its founder, Thomas Holloway.

Holloway epitomised the kind of success that the Victorians admired (and many of its contradictions). He made his money selling patent medicines, of whose success advertising, rather than ingredients or efficacy, played the major part. If his methods of making money were somewhat dubious, Holloway's means of spending it were indicative of the Victorian desire to fuse material and moral success; he built and founded Royal Holloway College as well as the sanatorium and was a considerable art collector. Both college and sanatorium were founded on enlightened principles whilst the vastness of their extravagant gothic architecture leaves little doubt of Holloway's desire to immortalise his success in bricks and mortar. His 1884 obituary in the *Illustrated London News* was dominated by two large pictures, firstly a middle-aged Holloway, looking powerful and paternalistic and, beneath his image, the picture of the enormous sanatorium he was building (see FIG 4) The fact that Holloway Sanatorium was opened eighteen months after Holloway died only emphasised the dynamism of his success. Karl Marx saw the failure of the capitalist system in the suffering caused in the making of money, perhaps one of the things that marked Marx as a man out of step with his time; what defined the Victorians' ideals of success was that they were less concerned with how money was made as a means of defining goodness than with how it was spent.

Holloway's sanatorium represents a dynamic response to the increasing public call in the 1860s for 'a successful middle-class asylum'.<sup>66</sup> *The Graphic* made Holloway's intended 'catchment' exceedingly clear:

The purpose for which it is designed is clearly defined by the founder to be the succour of persons of the middle class afflicted with mental disease [...] rich people [...] need no monetary assistance; and the poor [...] are already cared for in public asylums. Put broadly, the scope of the Holloway Sanatorium includes the doctor, the lawyer, artist, clerk or any professional breadwinner whose work cannot [...] be carried on by deputy and whose income ceases absolutely when he is unable to work.<sup>67</sup>

The focus here is unashamedly on the material, rather than the mental and emotional, threat of insanity and emphasises why success and failure were particularly middle-class concerns. Middle-class status relied on the ability to work and husband that wealth. The rich were insulated from the financial consequences of any mental condition, while the poor enjoyed the dubious benefits of 'public asylums'. Implicit in the article is the callous assumption that they had literally 'nothing to lose'. However, it is the loss of *everything*, of a profusion of material wealth and objects potentially lost as a result of middle-class madness, which haunted the Victorian readerly imagination.

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<sup>66</sup> 'C. L. Robertson (editor of *The Journal of Mental Illness*), Letter to *The Lancet*, 18 July 1863 'The Future Bethlehem Hospital' *The Lancet*, 2 (1863), p.80.

<sup>67</sup> *The Graphic*, 22 October 1881, p.8.

Holloway was built on the assumption of success: that its patients could and would be cured in order to return to productive lives as middle class citizens. As *The Graphic* opined 'it is simply as a curative institution that the handsome structure at Virginia Water has been founded [...] no patient will be allowed to remain more than twelve months. By this regulation it will be prevented from becoming an asylum and losing its special character'.<sup>68</sup>

The 'special character' of Holloway, as a place restoring people to the path of self-improvement and success, did not allow for failure. The possibility of ultimate failure: of incurable mental disease, taking with it all possibility of working life and appropriate adherence to social and moral norms, was simply not catered for or acknowledged. In this Holloway epitomised the attitude to failure amongst large sections of the middle-class establishment.

The very idea of 'a successful middle-class asylum', delivered without irony, suggests the mental strains of the Victorian conception of success: a brick and mortar evocation of Thomas Carlyle's 'somewhat singular hell [...] not making money, fame or some other figure in the world'.<sup>69</sup> Carlyle characterised this attitude as unique to his own period and the building of a castellated sanatorium by a conman millionaire to house successful lunatics was surely the point where his assertion was proved in bricks, mortar and human suffering.

John Ruskin (himself, of course, destined to lose his sanity) suggests in *The Stones of Venice* (1851-1853) that gothic architecture was a material expression of precisely those human qualities that were venerated in the cult of British success. The style, he claimed, revelled in its imperfections which represented an independence of mind and expression in its workmen:

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<sup>68</sup> *The Graphic*, 22 October 1881, p.8.

<sup>69</sup> Thomas Carlyle, *Past and Present* (1843; London: Oxford University Press, 1938), p.151.

No architecture can be truly noble which is not imperfect. [...] since the architect [...] cannot execute the whole [...] he must either make slaves of his workmen [...], or else he must take his workmen as he finds them, and let them show their weaknesses together with their strength.<sup>70</sup>

Gothic architecture, in Ruskin's estimation, was the height of individuality: not least in the fact that it gave men the right to succeed or fail according to their abilities.

According to Ruskin, the aspiration to success had failure built into it: 'no great man ever stops working till he has reached his point of failure'.<sup>71</sup> His argument suggests that the Victorians saw the discourse of success and failure as being literally built into gothic architecture, which surrounded them in town halls, suburban homes, hospitals and railway stations.

I maintain that Ruskin's presentation of success and failure built into material culture was powerful currency amongst the Victorian middle-classes. Those designing Holloway believed that the high gothic interiors of the building could actually have a beneficial effect on the mental state of the patients. According to *The Graphic*:

Cold stone columns and walls would, it was thought, sit heavily on a mind diseased, and it was resolved to make the principle apartments one

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<sup>70</sup> John Ruskin, *The Stones of Venice*, ed. by Jan Morris (1851-3; London: The Folio Society, 2001), p.137.

<sup>71</sup> Ruskin, p.137.

blaze of colour. The hall is accordingly lavishly decorated with figures and designs arabesque and grotesque, the latter displaying almost inexhaustible fertility of invention.<sup>72</sup>

It is hard to imagine the riotous gothic imagery of Holloway was as ‘cheerful’ to a ‘diseased mind’ as *The Graphic* hoped, but belief in the power of objects and a culture that produced masses of them (‘inexhaustible fertility of invention’) was clearly reflected in the design of Holloway Sanatorium, which was invested in the project of reconstructing successful individuals. The aim was for life in the sanatorium to be run along the lines of a country house and it was through the treatment of these middle-class patients as rational beings who could be ‘stimulated’ into ‘normal’ behaviour again that the sanatorium was intended to work:

Dominated by the idea that a cultivated person whose mind is affected will never be cured if surrounded by vulgar idiots and grim accessories, Mr Martin has endeavoured to introduce *as many objects as possible to awake and stimulate* the trained intelligence for the moment over-strained.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> *The Graphic*, 22 October 1881, p.8.

<sup>73</sup> *The London Daily News*, 13 September 1881, p.2. [my italics]

Leaving aside the levels of snobbery that the Victorians were capable of applying quite literally to the point of lunacy, this observation demonstrates just how fundamental an effect the Victorians considered material culture to have on the psyche of middle-class people. That combination of objects and attitude must, it was felt, lead to sanity, success and productivity. Ironically this suggestion of a ‘trained intelligence for the moment over-strained’ offers an intriguing suggestion of the strain that expectations of success could place on the Victorian middle classes.

### **VII: ‘The Qualities of Things’: The Impact of Gender on the Victorian Concept of Success.**

John Ruskin’s ‘Sesame and Lilies’ lectures (1865) appear to confirm classic oppositional Victorian stereotypes of successful men and women. Man is:

The doer, the creator, the discoverer, the defender. His intellect is for speculation and invention. [Woman’s ...] power is for rule, not for battle, [...] her intellect is [...] for sweet ordering, arrangement and decision. She sees *the qualities of things*, their claims, their places.<sup>74</sup>

The culture of success, as I define it, made ordering and understanding ‘the qualities of things’ at least as important as creating and discovering. The means of men’s earning a living may well have moved further from home in Victorian England, as men made the daily pilgrimage to the office leaving women in the suburbs, but I analyse how such work became increasingly incompatible with traditional manly virtues of physical strength and courage.

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<sup>74</sup> John Ruskin, *Sesame and Lilies: The Two Paths and the King of the Golden River* (ElecBook: London 2001), p.77, in site.ebrary.com [accessed 15 February 2016] [my italics]

The novel explores this incompatibility in *Middlemarch*'s Tertius Lydgate, and *Little Dorrit*'s Daniel Doyce.

Separate spheres of influence for men and women remain key categories for academic debate. Amanda Vickery argues that the idea of 'the unprecedented marginalisation of wealthier women can be found in almost any century we care to look'.<sup>75</sup> Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall respond that 'the separation of home from work was a long and never completed process, yet the development of the villa and the suburb in the 1830s marked the translation of particular ideas about family life into concrete form'.<sup>76</sup> Their argument strongly suggests that material culture was fundamental to the way in which the Victorians conceptualised gender. Thad Logan argues that the Victorian parlour 'appears in Victorian [...] fiction as a newly significant space'<sup>77</sup> and that 'the accumulation and display of many [decorative] objects [...] sets Victorian interiors apart from those of the eighteenth and twentieth centuries'.<sup>78</sup> Logan believes that 'while the separation of spheres was fantasy, insofar as homes did not and could not exist as transcendent spaces outside economic and political systems, the sequestration of women in the home was real enough'.<sup>79</sup> However, as Vickery suggests, to what extent was the middle-class parlour 'sequestration'? That argument relies on 'the curious assumption that the performance of heavy manual labour was intrinsically empowering for women, so therefore relief from drudgery saw women automatically devalued by society'.<sup>80</sup> I suggest that it is acting as successful people, rather than performing manual labour or earning money, that could empower women and that conflicting discourses of success for women grew up during

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<sup>75</sup> Amanda Vickery, *The Gentleman's Daughter: Women's Lives in Georgian England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), p.3.

<sup>76</sup> Leonora Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class 1780-1850*, rev. edn (London: Routledge, 2002), p.xv.

<sup>77</sup> Logan, p.1.

<sup>78</sup> Logan, p.2.

<sup>79</sup> Logan, p.25.

<sup>80</sup> Vickery, p.2.

the Victorian period. Firstly, and the one that has attracted most critical attention, is the question of how far a woman could be a success in a ‘man’s world’, earning money and having a satisfying career. However, in Chapter One I focus on the way women used and were used within the culture of material morality to signify success. Realist novels, as I show, constantly attack both women’s aspirations to success and the use of women as signifiers of masculine success.

The striking feature of the Victorian concept of success is the potential power and danger that it offers women. If the drawing room and the park, rather than the factory or battlefield, were where personal success was demonstrated, then women had almost as good a chance as men to display themselves and ‘earn’ the currency of reputation on which real financial credit and social and marital alliances could be built. All this suggests far more connection between public and private sphere than the Ruskinian ideal allows for.

Olive Cook argues that ‘superfluity in the Victorian house turned it into a personal museum [...] the antithesis of a home’.<sup>81</sup> I suggest that ‘private’ in the context of the Victorian drawing room is best understood as the desire to keep out traces of the industrial, commercial world and demarcate a zone of individualised display, rather than the unworldly site of domestic bliss that Ruskin evokes.

Deborah Wynne argues that much of women’s experience of property ownership was essentially performative and that ‘property (even if one does not own it) must be displayed to be effective’.<sup>82</sup> I suggest that this ‘effectiveness’ has even wider ramifications than affirming female ownership

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<sup>81</sup> Olive Cook, *The English House Through Seven Centuries* (New York: Overlook Press, 1983) p.270.

<sup>82</sup> Wynne, p.31.



of property. I suggest that the Victorian drawing room was a vital space in which both sexes used such performative relationships in the wider performance of success. For both Victorian men and women, the drawing room was the arena in which they appeared to divest themselves of economic concerns, in fact they were attesting to their success by implying that they had no such concerns and marking out the literal and metaphorical space to attend to moral and social success, family, charitable and social functions. In social gatherings, reputations were made and strengthened that could be of real economic use in the outside world. Tertius Lydgate fails to appreciate the importance of this in *Middlemarch*. Rosamond does not.

‘Keeping up appearances’ was an important financial stratagem for Victorians. In exploring the parlous domestic situation of Karl Marx, Jonathon Sperber argues, ‘His lack of assets and income was shameful – it had to be hidden from the world. As a practical matter, had the Marxs not kept up appearances, creditors would have called in their loans’.<sup>83</sup> Having the right sort of rooms to socialise in or the right sort of clothes to appear in offered social opportunities and occasions to cultivate a reputation, and reputations could be solid economic currency in the world of work.

Financial success or failure in a husband both offered married women ways to engage with success and failure. For the wife of a successful man, Ruskin’s assertion that a woman ‘sees *the qualities of things*, their claims, their places’ takes on a new importance. In Chapter Three, I examine how novels use domestic possessions in ways that bely and parody Ruskin’s ideal of things arranged to promote moral order.

Both Ruskin’s ideal and the manipulation of it suggest that women were in charge of the means of display which held the key to a surprising amount of

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<sup>83</sup> Jonathon Sperber, *Karl Marx: A Nineteenth-Century Life* (New York: Norton, 2013), p.483.

social and economic power. Exhibiting ‘the qualities of things’ to best display moral and material success could have far-reaching results for their families outside the home. However, the masculine experience of financial failure often gave women the opportunity to display moral courage and financial acumen in the wider world. In Chapter Three I explore the challenges and opportunities for a wife if her husband went bankrupt, throwing traditional Victorian gender stereotypes and the Victorian conceptions of success into chaos.

Despite the pervasiveness of Victorian gender stereotypes such as Ruskin’s, the Victorian conception of success was essentially a feminized one in which shopping trumped earning and material display was more socially important than being seen to work. However, beneath this importance of languid display lay vital and fundamental differences in what constituted failure for a man and a woman: not only were political and legal inequalities between the sexes enshrined in law, but failure for a woman was when she had to earn money, a failed man was one who could or did not. I argue that the novel stubbornly returns to these differences, exposing the realities that created and lay beneath those performances of success.

To what extent was women’s success, seldom built on the world of work and a career, illusory? Amongst other restrictions, during the years covered by this thesis, women were unable to vote, own property while married, easily obtain divorce or work openly. However, as Wynne has argued, the illusion of private ownership for women, based on performativity, could be very strong. ‘While women’s feelings of ownership may have been illusory from a legal perspective, the chances were that most women felt and believed that they owned their personal portable items.’<sup>84</sup> I argue that the Victorian conception

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<sup>84</sup> Wynne, p.35.

of success strengthened the illusion further by giving the performance of ownership wide and weighty ideological and practical currency.

In Victorian society a woman, if she could earn or gain money, like George Eliot or Angela Burdett-Coutts, could be socially, economically or even morally successful in the most unorthodox circumstances. If an unmarried woman could earn or acquire money, she was in a remarkably similar position to a man. Such a thing was not easy (but then it was not easy for a man). Thomas Holloway and Angela Burdett-Coutts both acquired millions; neither did so by the means lauded by Samuel Smiles: honest toil and patient self-denial. Holloway was a snake oil huckster and Burdett-Coutts inherited banking money. They ‘earned’ their success in Victorian England as philanthropists rather than capitalists. When Burdett-Coutts finally married, she lost her money under the terms of her inheritance.

Burdett-Coutts’ story suggests that marriage, rather than gender per se, was the disruptive element in women’s relationship with success in Victorian society. Marriage was always presented as the great ambition for a woman, in life and the novel, and it is marriage and the loss of legal status and financial control that goes with it, rather than gender, which complicates women’s relationship with success in the Victorian period. It deprived women of their property, rendering them ‘femme couverte’ and legal non-entities. The struggles over the Married Women’s Property Acts in this period reflect deep anxieties about ownership and identity that may well have been far more influenced by the question of how ideals of success were constituted than has been realised.

In the debate about how women could be successful in the nineteenth century the novel takes an essentially conservative stance. Why does Eliot not allow her women the freedom she, and the many reformers, philanthropists and feminists she knew, enjoyed? Why are Dickens’s heroines either venal or vapid? Why does James torment the pure-souled Isobel Archer? I contend that

novelists' focus on the origins of things and people renders them suspicious of precisely the kind of performative power that middle-class women could accumulate relatively easily. Sadistic literary husbands, Gilbert Osmond and Henleigh Grandcourt, demonstrate the obscene power that men really possessed over their wives should they choose to use it.

Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady* is a dramatic example of the moral as well as material objectification of women that the Victorian novel frequently practices. Even the title promises an ideal image whose capacity for success lies in being, not doing. Isobel's conversations with the worldly Madam Merle signifies this objectification, with Isobel saying to her, 'I don't know what your idea of success may be, but you seem to me to have been successful. To me indeed you're a vivid image of success'.<sup>85</sup> I will return to this scene in Chapter One but Isobel's assertion reflects a wider problem of women in relation to success in novels. We do not know what success for a woman is: indeed, the two characters have a long conversation about it but reach no conclusions. According to Isobel it is 'to see some dream of one's youth come true'.<sup>86</sup> We are not told what dreams, although we can assume that they involve travel and 'experience'. Mid-Victorian heroines are full of assertions like these. Dorothea Brooke longs 'after some lofty conception of the world'<sup>87</sup> and Gwendolen Harleth means 'to live'.<sup>88</sup> Such aspirations achieve nothing, yet women can crucially seem to have been 'a vivid image of success'. This is confusing enough but Madam Merle turns out to be a dismal moral failure: her materialism masks emotional abandonment, her pragmatism, humiliation, since neither lover nor daughter wants her. Women

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<sup>85</sup> Henry James, *The Portrait of a Lady*, ed. by Geoffrey Moore (1880-1; London: Penguin, 2003), p.252.

<sup>86</sup> James, p.252.

<sup>87</sup> George Eliot, *Middlemarch*, ed. by David Carroll (1871-2; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p.8.

<sup>88</sup> George Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, ed. by Graham Handley (1876; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p.692.

who appear to be successes, like Becky Sharp three decades earlier, are often moral failures. I contend that Victorian novelists shy away from precisely the kind of female success that the Victorian conception of success allowed for: a success that was frequently performative and relied on illusion and exploitation of objects.

Madam Merle really knows ‘the qualities of things’,<sup>89</sup> but not as Ruskin meant. Early in her relationship with Isobel she observes, ‘I’ve a great respect for things’.<sup>90</sup> If this is a useful skill in life then many novelists were deeply suspicious of it; material culture seduces and entraps women and it makes them prosaic. Madam Merle teases Isobel. ‘If you had the young man you dreamed of, then that was success [...] only [...] why didn’t you fly with him to his castle in the Apennines [...] What has he? An ugly brick house in Fortieth Street. Don’t tell me that. I refuse to recognise it as an ideal.’<sup>91</sup> Isobel of course does end up immured in an old Italian villa with a husband very like a gothic villain. If Madam Merle cannot endure the ordinary destiny of a happy ending on Fortieth Street for her friend, neither can James. In terms of success and the form of the novel, two things stand out in Isobel’s fate. Firstly, her circumstances must be Gothicised and rendered materially beautiful. She must be transported away from the prosaic world exemplified by Caspar Goodwood and Fortieth Street in order to demonstrate her moral courage: that she will not forsake her marriage and she will not be corrupted by her husband. Only in extreme passivity, in becoming a ‘portrait’ of goodness against a glamorous gothic background (as I explore in Chapter One), can she be allowed ‘success’ as a form of moral grandeur.

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<sup>89</sup> Ruskin, *Sesame and Lilies*, p.77.

<sup>90</sup> James, p.253.

<sup>91</sup> James, p.252.

*Middlemarch*'s Dorothea Brooke ends up in precisely the English version of Fortieth Street, giving 'incalculably diffusive'<sup>92</sup> and 'wifely'<sup>93</sup> help throughout her life. Her help to all and sundry may be incalculable but it is certainly unwriteable and marks the end of the novel. Daily suburban life and its engagement with the material is something that James and Eliot in particular could not bear for the 'finely-touched spirit'<sup>94</sup> of their heroines. It vastly limited what the novel could do with such characters. When Isobel Archer declares that her clothes "don't express me", "should you prefer to go without them?" Madam Merle enquired in a tone which virtually terminated the discussion'.<sup>95</sup> I argue that novelists' refusal to engage with the synthesis of moral and material culture in women's lives did indeed 'terminate the discussion' of those lives in plots. Such extremes of passivity and prosaicism in the endings for heroines mean that the plot of the novel must focus on the moment before they chose their destiny if they wish to preserve a realistic image of them in uncorrupted moral purity. If novelists choose to focus on the moral qualities of heroines then this is the moment when they are truly interesting.

### VIII: Conclusion

Between 1848 and 1883, the essential question raised in the novel concerning the discourse of success and failure remains the same: can a person who learns to survive in society be a truly 'good' 'successful' person? Most heroes and heroines struggle with how to become successful people: for which we may read people who are morally good with satisfying lives that gain a modicum of social approval and socially-sanctioned economic wealth.

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<sup>92</sup> Eliot, *Middlemarch*, p.785.

<sup>93</sup> Eliot, *Middlemarch*, p.783.

<sup>94</sup> Eliot, *Middlemarch*, p.785.

<sup>95</sup> James, p.253.

The tension between the personal and the social, the public and the private in pursuing success, is encapsulated in the circulation of objects in Victorian middle-class culture and its depiction in the novel. I have attempted to demonstrate that circulation throughout the structure of this thesis, so in Chapter One I look at the tensions inherent in ‘personal property’ within the culture of success as I define it. I argue that things such as clothes and jewellery can be of intense moral and emotional importance to the individual and are deeply personal yet are part of a highly materialistic system of signifying success for an individual. The most private zone of all is the body but it moves in public places. I examine the novel’s differing treatment of what constitutes male and female success. Throughout this thesis I examine the tension between the idea of the woman who signifies ‘success’ through material culture and the idea of the woman who is successful because she achieves. I analyse the ultimately conservative response of the novel to this conflict and suggest that, ironically, women may have been more ‘successful’ at signifying success in Victorian culture than men.

In Chapter Two, by analysing ‘exhibition novels’ and the discourse surrounding the Great Exhibition of 1851, I suggest that the novel had a similarly conservative stance on the consumer culture that both supported and undermined material culture signifying moral and material success through objects. Having looked at the construction of the ideas of successful men and women, in Chapter Two I use the Great Exhibition to examine a very Victorian attempt to translate individual success to national success through the representation of objects. I also use the Crystal Palace to demonstrate how private individuals used public spaces to ‘exhibit’ themselves as successful. Most importantly I argue that the Great Exhibition vastly complicated the way that objects could be used to signify success as it emphasised the circulation through consumption, rather than the production, of objects. The allure of the new and the movable would always be a disruptive influence on the idea that individuals could control the objects around them to signify their own

successful state, for it disrupted the emotional, personal signification of objects.

I explore the ramifications of that disruption through my investigation of domestic material culture and the home in Chapter Three. From *Villette* to *Daniel Deronda* I examine the problems Victorian characters faced in attempting morally and materially to construct a home. Home remained a key Victorian idyll: although not, I argue, in the etherealised sense of the domestic ‘private’ sphere, which the Victorian conception of success disrupts.

Home remains the acme of Victorian success and as a result I analyse how bankruptcy and the destruction of the home in Victorian society and fiction is the acme of failure. Furthermore, the novel suggests that bankruptcy brought about the dissolution of successful gender roles which had, in the absence of signifying objects, to be rethought.

Throughout the period 1848-1883 novels, increasingly self-conscious and sophisticated in their use of consumer and material culture, were both increasingly conservative in their approach to how individuals could be successful and constantly critical of the conception of success through signification: unsparingly separating and stripping back the material signification of success to examine and critique the, often conflicting, moral values that lay underneath it.





## Chapter 1: Forms of Thought: Defining Individual Success

### Introduction: Things and Thingummies: The Developing Role of Material Culture in the Victorian Conception of Success

In November 1849, an unsigned review of Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley* in the *Spectator* declared:

Whether broad cloth and bankruptcy, or the marriage of a poor lover to a rich wife, are proper moving elements of fiction, may be doubted. Trade, in its money-making aspect, appeals to no lofty emotion [...] a bankruptcy or legacy may be a means of inducing ill or good, but it is only to be mentioned and dismissed.<sup>1</sup>

Some of the most famous realist novels published between 1848 and 1883 would be considerably shorter had this judgement been applied. From *Vanity Fair* to *Middlemarch* to *The Portrait of a Lady*, over the following three decades, broad cloth and bankruptcy became not mere literary devices, as the reviewer suggests, but subjects worthy of discussion in themselves. Novels explored how relations between material culture and gender created a highly specific conception of success and subsequently of failure.

Henry James's review of *Middlemarch*, in 1873, reflects the increased respectability of subject 'matter' in novels since 1849. Despite his attack on

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<sup>1</sup> Unsigned review, *The Spectator*, 3 November 1849, quoted in *The Brontës: The Critical Heritage*, ed. by Miriam Allott (London: Routledge, 1995), p.130.

*Middlemarch* as ‘a treasure-house of detail but [...] an indifferent whole’,<sup>2</sup> James appreciates the aesthetic and moral importance of the ‘treasure-house’ of ‘broad cloth and bankruptcy’ in the novel. Of the failure of Tertius Lydgate to do ‘good small work for Middlemarch, and great work for the world’,<sup>3</sup> James says ‘There is nothing more powerfully real in all English fiction [...] impressiveness and [...] pathos are deepened by the consistently low key in which they are pitched. It is a tragedy based on unpaid butchers’ bills’.<sup>4</sup> The relationship between the discourse of success and failure and material culture is, by the 1870s, established as the appropriate stuff of tragedy in fiction.

All novels in the Victorian period deal to some extent with the question of domestic commodities: clothes, furniture, pictures and jewellery. Their ubiquity within novels creates a language of things within realism that, I contend, powerfully asserts itself as a theme of success and failure. In this chapter I explore the relations that cloth, clothing and jewellery open up between language, gender and conceptions of success and failure between 1848 and 1883. They are fundamental to a charged zone between public display and highly personal coverings and they are assets that Victorian men and women could and did use to act the part of successful individuals, with varying levels of veracity.

Asa Briggs suggests that a language of things might be a particularly Victorian phenomenon. ‘The convenient but slippery word ‘thing’ [...] acquired a particularly Victorian sound in the nineteenth century, along with ‘thingummy’ and ‘thingummybob.’<sup>5</sup> These words have their origins in the eighteenth century and Cynthia Wall has argued that in ‘the later eighteenth-

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<sup>2</sup> Henry James, review of *Middlemarch* in the *Galaxy* (March 1873), reprinted in *The Nineteenth-Century Novel: A Critical Reader*, ed. by Stephen Regan (2001; Milton Keynes: Routledge, 2005), pp. 79-85 (p.79).

<sup>3</sup> Eliot, *Middlemarch*, p.139.

<sup>4</sup> Henry James, review of *Middlemarch* in the *Galaxy* (March 1873), reprinted in *The Nineteenth-Century Novel: A Critical Reader*, ed. by Regan, pp. 79-85 (p.83).

<sup>5</sup> Asa Briggs, *Victorian Things* (1988; Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 2003), p.3.

century and throughout the nineteenth, description underwent a sort of rhetorical [...] “enlargement””.<sup>6</sup> Whilst such developments suggest a language of things that may well be tied to the changes of the industrial revolution and urban expansion, to what extent can such a language be considered specifically Victorian?

Thingummies and thingummybobs are revealingly defined as a ‘a person or thing whose name one has forgotten, does not know, or does not wish to mention’.<sup>7</sup> John Plotz suggests that ““thing” is the term of choice for the extreme cases when nouns otherwise fail us: witness the thingummy and the thingummybob. Thing theory is at its best when it focuses on this sense of failure, or partial failure, to name or classify’.<sup>8</sup> I argue that this ‘sense of failure’ in Victorian novels is powerfully used, conflating people and things both explicitly and implicitly to demonstrate and explore forms of moral, social and economic failure. This contrasts with the increasing numbers of vividly described objects in novels: the antithesis of the thingummy.

Dorothy Van Ghent famously wrote that in Dickens’s novels:

People were becoming things and things (the things money can buy or that are the means of making money or for exalting prestige in the abstract) were becoming more important than people [who] were

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<sup>6</sup> Cynthia Wall, *The Prose of Things: Transformations of Description in the Eighteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), p.7.

<sup>7</sup> OED 2011

<sup>8</sup> John Plotz ‘Can the Sofa Speak? A Look at Thing Theory’, *Criticism* 47 (2005), 109-118 (p.110).

becoming de-animated, robbed of their souls [while] things were usurping the prerogatives of their owners in the most literal sense.<sup>9</sup>

Van Ghent's tone makes clear that the idea of making people into things is the ultimate moral failure. I suggest that the acute distaste for commodity culture that she displays causes her to ignore the intriguing possibility of that failure's opposite: how the social relations surrounding 'things' might be constituted by the Victorians as success.

As signifiers of moral and material success, an object, 'thing' is supposed to reflect the person associating him or herself with it, and hopefully creating some sense of possession. A 'thingummy' suggests that an individual has failed to project their personality or agenda for signification onto the object or has so far failed to control the material culture around them that they are in danger of becoming the signifier, rather than the signified; for a man this was the acme of failure yet for a woman (or at least a 'lady') it could be the acme of success. In this Chapter, beginning with *Oliver Twist* (1837-9) and ending with *The Portrait of a Lady* (1880-1), I explore the conflicted role of things and thingummies, material culture and gender in developing a culture of success.

'It's all over Mrs Thingummy'<sup>10</sup> announces the doctor at the death of the unknown 'fallen woman' who is the mother of Oliver Twist. The callousness of the surgeon 'who did such matters by contract'<sup>11</sup> and of the workhouse system is powerfully established by Dickens in this disregarding of a person's name. 'Old Sally' (Mrs Thingummy) is indeed a thingummy to the doctor, as

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<sup>9</sup> Dorothy Van Ghent, *The English Novel: Form and Function* (London, Harper and Row, 1953), p.127.

<sup>10</sup> Charles Dickens, *Oliver Twist*, ed. by Philip Horne (1837-9; London: Penguin, 2003), p.5.

<sup>11</sup> Dickens, *Oliver Twist*, p.4.

a pauper and nurse she is a functionary without individuality: somewhere between person and thing. She robs the body of Oliver's mother of its/her jewellery. Had the surgeon, or anyone else, taken her a little more seriously as human agent, rather than an automaton within a system, she might not have had the opportunity, or desire, to steal the objects that reveal Oliver's parentage. Not only is the robbing of the corpse (and a corpse is surely the ultimate blurring between human and thing) an illustration of individual and social moral failure but 'Mrs Thingummy's' actions disrupt what Dickens clearly believes to be a vital process of reading objects that define people. Without the locket and wedding ring to identify his parentage, young Oliver is consigned to the workhouse, his prospects in life virtually over before they have begun.

The infant Oliver himself is described ironically:

What an excellent example of the power of dress young Oliver Twist was! Wrapped in the blanket [...], he might have been the child of a nobleman or a beggar; it would have been hard for the haughtiest stranger to have assigned him his proper station in society. But now that he was enveloped in the old calico robes which had grown yellow in the same service, he was badged and ticketed and fell into his place at once [...] the orphan of a workhouse [...] to be cuffed and buffeted through the world – despised by all and pitied by none.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Dickens, *Oliver Twist*, p.5.

I contend that Dickens does not dispute that dress and possessions can and even should be used to ‘assign’ people’s ‘stations’. Like all Victorian realist novelists he wrote as a player within the system he critiqued, not a dispassionate observer. Inability to evoke people through their clothes and physical attributes potentially robbed the novelist of a key means of exploring character and revealing wider societal failures, making loss of individuality a moral and formal problem for the novel.

Through clothes and furnishings, it was fabric that had arguably the most dominant role in building an image of moral and material success around a person through the display of personal effects, particularly through clothes. The modern world offered manifold opportunities for public and private display in bourgeois life, from the ‘parlour’ to shopping arcades. In contrast it rendered the earning of ‘successful’ quantities of money an increasingly unglamorous and private business. Male work habits and spaces, as I will argue in Section 1.3, were frequently denigrated or ignored in novels, reflecting their relegation from the centres of social and emotional life in the mid-nineteenth century and, crucially their ostensible dislocation from the conception of success, which they were expected to support economically. I argue that it is middle-class women, rather than men, who were in the best position to use objects such as furniture, clothes and jewellery as material ‘proof’ of status and success. Like objects, they were often supposed to be the obedient signifiers of their husbands’ success; but, like objects, they often ‘functioned’ entirely differently.

### **1.1: Material Politics and How to Successfully Avoid Them**

The opening passages of Thomas Carlyle’s *Sartor Resartus* (1833) claims that, ‘Man’s whole life and environment have been laid open and elucidated; scarcely a fragment or fibre of his Soul, Body and Possessions, but has been

probed, dissected, distilled, desiccated and scientifically decomposed'.<sup>13</sup> The great omission in this nineteenth-century process of understanding, Carlyle claimed, was cloth. 'How then comes it, may the reflective mind repeat, that the grand Tissue of All Tissues, the only real Tissue, should been quite overlooked by science?'.<sup>14</sup> It was an omission to be amply filled by Victorian writers in the following fifty years. Words and phrases like 'material culture' and 'materiality' are seldom more apposite than when discussing the Victorians, who frequently expressed their concern about the subjects through material in its most literal sense.

In *Cloth and Human Experience*, Annette B. Weiner and Jane Schneider implicitly suggest that cloth is a key signifier in the discourse of success and failure. 'Complex moral and ethical issues of dominance and autonomy, opulence and poverty, continence and sexuality, find ready expression through cloth.'<sup>15</sup> One's position in the class system, one's economic status (not necessarily contiguous with the former), and one's standing in relation to sexual morality and the marriage market are all fundamental indicators of success and failure for the Victorians and subsequently major themes in realist novels. Weiner and Schneider's analysis of capitalism's effect on cloth production and circulation also suggests that cloth's role in the discourse of success and failure is particularly applicable to the Victorian era, although *Cloth* seldom deals directly with it. 'Altering the process of manufacture, capitalism eliminated the opportunity for weavers and dyers to infuse their work with spiritual value [...]. By encouraging the growth of fashion [...] capitalist entrepreneurs vastly inflated dress and adornment as a domain for expression through cloth.'<sup>16</sup> This argument suggests ways in which the

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<sup>13</sup> Thomas Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus*, ed. by Kerry McSweeney and Peter Sabor (1833; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), pp.3-4.

<sup>14</sup> Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus*, p.4.

<sup>15</sup> *Cloth and Human Experience*, ed. by Annette B. Weiner and Jane Schneider (Washington: Smithsonian Books, 1989), pp.1-2.

<sup>16</sup> Weiner and Schneider, p.4.



discourse of success and failure was structured and gendered by cloth; as the British textile industry became increasingly a domain of mass production by unskilled labour, the realm of expression and aspiration passed to the consumer rather than the producer – and large numbers of producers and consumers were women.

The mass production of textiles was the opposite of everything the Victorian individual needed to be successful. The low-skill, poorly paid, often cyclical employment that it principally offered gave little opportunity for a person to use the virtues celebrated by the likes of Samuel Smiles, of courage, ingenuity, thrift and integrity, to better themselves (although they might well need all these things to survive). If a successful Victorian was a person in apparently full control of their destiny, a ‘fact’ reinforced by apparent control of the material culture that surrounded them, the Victorian mill-worker was the antithesis of this: a cog in a machine, the acme of alienated labour. This was especially true of female workers: successful women exhibited the material culture of success, ‘failures’, working women, created it.

By stark contrast, the entrepreneurial flair demanded by those who ran the sector could make them the acme of a successful man – or a bankrupt failure. Eric J. Evans argues, ‘It is a nice irony that while factory organization and discipline depended on specialization of function among the workforce, those who ran the firms were polymaths’.<sup>17</sup> Successful entrepreneurial businessmen had to control their environment which became a direct reflection on them.

If the relationship between successful entrepreneurs and ‘failing’ workers in the textile industry is dialectical, the sector, I suggest, bound women together in an exploitative web of factory hands, seamstresses, shop workers and consumers. The textile industry was heavily staffed by women. Catherine

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<sup>17</sup> Eric J. Evans, *The Forging of the Modern State: Early Industrial Britain 1783-1870*, 3rd edn (1983; London: Longman, 2001), p.110.

Barnes Stevenson and Simon Schama estimate that approximately 55% of textile workers in Preston and Manchester respectively were women.<sup>18</sup> While some, such as conduct writer Sara Stickney-Ellis, were vocal in their dislike of working women, many were happier to cast them as victims: failures of society. Elizabeth Gaskell's refusal to suggest that women workers could be involved in strikes in *North and South* (1854) and her characterisation of the sickly mill girl, Bessy, demonstrate how this current found its way into novels. A *Punch* cartoon in 1863, 'The Haunted Lady' (see FIG 5) strongly suggests this web of exploitation, with the lady in her new dress looking at herself in the mirror, egged on by an avaricious vendeuse, and suffering a moment's disquiet as she sees in the mirror the image of the dead or exhausted seamstress who has made the dress. Significantly it is the worker who is the ghost/image, the dress, the buyer and the seller who are living and 'real': the ultimate elision of labour. Furthermore all players in this image, from making, to selling, to consuming, are women. There was intense guilty awareness of the shadowy, (female) army of 'sweated' seamstresses, who seldom showed up on statistics, as Eric Evans argues,<sup>19</sup> but did so much to clothe Victorian England.

In contrast, capitalism's elevation of fashion placed upper-class women in an excellent position to take advantage of the culture of success. If success was to be measured through the material culture surrounding a person and how far they could give the impression of controlling or owning it, rather than through how it was earned, then middle-class women were well-trained in this: not least through their legal inability to actually own property.

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<sup>18</sup> Catherine Barnes Stevenson, "'What Must Not Be Said': *North and South* and the Problem of Women's Work", *Victorian Literature and Culture* 19 (1991), pp. 67-84. Simon Schama, *A History of Britain: The Fate of Empire 1776-2000*, 3 vols (London: Bodley Head, 2009), iii, p.144.

<sup>19</sup> Evans, pp. 122-4.

Deborah Wynne argues that ‘all property relationships entail the performance of ownership’<sup>20</sup> and that women’s, particularly wives’, ambiguous legal position with regard to ownership of property made them adept at this performance. ‘Given the fluidity of the law in practice (rather than the rigidity of the law in theory), it was in wives’ interests to display and use those objects that they liked as much as possible in public, for they could subsequently base a claim for ownership on their displays.’<sup>21</sup> If we see the Victorian idea of success as essentially based on establishing the largest number of acquisitive and emotional relationships with the largest amount of desirable objects, then the role of middle-class women in this discourse becomes fundamental. Ownership and possession was not the only way of asserting control of one’s surrounding environment: one could not ‘own’ the Crystal Palace or the Albert Memorial. However, by appearing there, suitably dressed, a person could establish their position as part of the culture of British success and aspiration and, as novels like *Villette* and *Vanity Fair* emphasize, the ‘right’ clothes could get you to the ‘right’ places. Clothing offered a link between what was obviously the most private sphere of the body and the desirable public spheres to which the right clothing could admit you. ‘Control of one’s surroundings’ to suggest success is, therefore, a deliberately nebulous concept. It relied on a performance of ownership and on the right to occupy particular zones of public and private space; it could involve buying, borrowing, blackmailing, inheriting, bluff or fraud. Doing this well gave the impression of material wealth and moral standing and indirectly purchased more of it. The performance of success was a widely accepted form of cultural credit.

A middle-class woman, therefore, was hardly a marginalised creature if she ‘performed’ her success by appearing gorgeously dressed in a desirable

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<sup>20</sup> Wynne, p.6.

<sup>21</sup> Wynne, p.30.

sphere, be it a fashionable public space or her own drawing room. She was actually in a far better position than a man to perform success: she had the leisure and she had the ability to wear an eye-catching wardrobe. Whether a woman did this well or not could have huge material results for the man in her life by advertising his financial success through his ability to clothe his wife.

Dress, fabric and jewellery for a woman could tell the world that a woman had a man who could take care of her and that a man was capable of decking out his wife lavishly and was therefore (presumably) well-off. In the context of the conception of success, marriage was proof that a man had successfully come of age: his bride was ‘living proof’ that he had earned enough money to support her and get married but if she performed well then she was also a kind of cultural credit card, whose legally ambiguous relationship with shops and lines of credit might enable a straightened husband to struggle on – or hasten his downfall.

Margot C. Finn’s assertion that, ‘in fiction as in social life more broadly, wives’ position in the symbolic economy of personal debt transactions was always Janus-faced’<sup>22</sup> is accentuated by an understanding of the characterisation of moral and material success in Victorian society. ‘Highlighting women’s economic agency in the domestic economic sphere by creating virtuous wives who rescue men from unwise credit transactions, English novelists also drew repeated attention to married women’s legal capacity to saddle their husbands with onerous credit obligations.’<sup>23</sup> I emphasise both the detailed understanding and the innate conservatism displayed by Victorian novelists confronted with women using their position as signifiers of success to actually gain material benefits.

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<sup>22</sup> Margot C. Finn, *The Character of Credit: Personal Debt in English Culture, 1740-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p.49.

<sup>23</sup> Finn, p.49.

An example of a female character operating in this economy of success with characteristic relish is Thackeray's Becky Sharp. Finn argues that '*Vanity Fair* explores the tendency of retail credit to compromise marital fidelity'<sup>24</sup>, which, I suggest, critiques the moral values of the conception of moral and material success in society more broadly. Becky ably handles her family's disreputable financial affairs, settling her husband's debts by 'conducting the business with the enemy's lawyers: [shaking] hands with them at parting in excellent good humour'.<sup>25</sup> Becky's charm as well as sharp wits are much in evidence here and that charm is at least as important as wit. Becky's husband Rawdon may not see 'what good [...] his wife [could] get [...] by making curtsies every night to a whole circle of French princesses'<sup>26</sup> but of course what Becky 'buys' are social connections, in every sense valuable. It is only due to her charm and parties that young officers come to her house, there to lose money playing cards with Rawdon, thus supporting her family. The detailed description of the family finances occurs in a chapter entitled 'How to Live Well on Nothing a Year': 'The truth is, when we say of a gentleman that he lives elegantly on nothing a year, we use the word "nothing" to signify something unknown'.<sup>27</sup> Yet Thackeray *does* know and in this context 'unknown' suggests 'unknowable' in terms of what society cares to admit. Like Rawdon's gambling, Becky's machinations are shown to be part of a 'black economy' that supports a conception of success reflected by material culture. The culture of 'reading' objects to suggest success relies explicitly on not understanding the wider questions of production and circulation surrounding objects, or the role of women, as Thackeray's blisteringly frank discussion of bourgeois finances made clear. This in turn makes people vulnerable to reading too much into appearances. *Vanity Fair* is

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Thackeray, p.463.

<sup>26</sup> Thackeray, p.454.

<sup>27</sup> Thackeray, p.454.

littered with characters left with debts by Becky, such as the innkeeper left with her trunks (which she assures him are valuable) as evidence of her intention to return, and presumably pay him. The trunks are opened when she does not and ‘they were not [...] found to be particularly valuable’.<sup>28</sup> Reading material culture for evidence of moral and material success can be worthless.

Writers such as Carlyle and George Eliot used cloth as a metaphor for the threads that bind society together, as I will show. By the 1870s Eliot triumphantly unified Carlyle’s image of ‘Soul, Body, Possessions’ into one of the driving metaphors of *Middlemarch*. Gillian Beer explores the ‘web of affinities’ in *Middlemarch* in terms of this link:

Tissue and cloth are contiguous images. So are web and tree: [...] The web could intimate the [...] relations between bodily and mental experience as much as the interconnections of society. [...] The web as woven cloth expressed also the process of coming to knowledge.<sup>29</sup>

Beer’s work reveals the close relations between *On the Origin of Species* (1859) and the realist novel. Like *Sartor Resartus*, *Origin*’s relationship to novels is complex (is *Sartor Resartus* a novel, and if so, what kind?). However they are both concerned with the relationship between morality and material and demonstrate the way in which, through consumerism, through

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<sup>28</sup> Thackeray, p.458.

<sup>29</sup> Gillian Beer, *Darwin’s Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (1983; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p.157.

science, through novels, material culture invaded what had previously been considered the ethereal realm of the Soul.

In the final pages of *Origin*, Darwin makes what is almost a plea for the acceptance of the fact that morality can be rooted in the material:

It is interesting to contemplate a tangled bank, *clothed* with many plants of many kinds, with birds singing on the bushes, with various insects flitting about, and with worms crawling through the damp earth, and to reflect that these elaborately constructed forms, so different from each other, and dependent upon each other in so complex a manner, have all been produced by [the laws of growth with reproduction] acting around us. [...] There is grandeur in this view of life.<sup>30</sup>

‘Clothed’, ‘elaborately constructed’, yet wholly natural; this is a complex, material world, constructed through language in which ‘soul, bodies, possessions’ are indissolubly mixed. Yet in that final line lies the plea that it be accepted as a moral realm, with ‘grandeur’, too; a morality that stems directly from its materiality. It would be several decades before Nietzsche could proclaim that God was dead but the Victorians were already celebrating and fearing a morality that grew out of the material, rather than the ethereal.

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<sup>30</sup> Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of the Species*, ed. by Gillian Beer (1859; Oxford: Oxford World Classics, 2008), p.360. [my italics]

## 1.2: Materialising the Language of Success

Examining nineteenth-century French culture, Anne Green argues that:

Throughout this period the imagery of dress seeps into the language, so that the boundaries between the rituals of reading, writing and dressing come to blur and merge. Ideas are clothed in language, costume generates meaning; dress can be read. In the words of Baudelaire, “fabrics speak a silent language”.<sup>31</sup>

I argue that this ‘silent language’ was developing on the other side of the Channel too. Carlyle argues in *Sartor Resartus*, ‘Language is called the Garment of Thought: however it should rather be, Language is the Flesh-Garment, the Body of Thought. [...] imagination wove this flesh garment [...]. Metaphors are her stuff’.<sup>32</sup>

The developments in technology and the birth of the consumer society gave people, particularly middle-class people, the ability to play the game of fashion with all its attendant implications for climbing up, and falling down, the social ladder. Clothes change people’s status. In Brontë’s *Villette*, a pink dress transforms Lucy Snowe for one night from humble school teacher to opera habitué. Victorian novelists are keen to use clothes and objects to reflect a person’s true character but deeply critical of efforts to conceal the ‘truth’ of a person’s character through clothes. Dickens does this scathingly

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<sup>31</sup> Anne Green, *Changing France: Literature and Material Culture in the Second Empire* (London: Anthem Press, 2011), p.124.

<sup>32</sup> Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus*, pp. 56-7.



when Pip, his fortunes transformed, is measured for a new suit of ‘fashionable’ clothes in *Great Expectations*. It sets the tone of the novel: where the increasing grandeur of his material possessions belies moral poverty. There are echoes of Thomas Carlyle’s attack on the figure of the Dandy in *Sartor Resartus*:

A Dandy is a [...] Man whose trade, office and existence consists of the wearing of Clothes. Every faculty of his soul, spirit, purse and person is heroically consecrated to this one object, the wearing of clothes wisely and well: so that as others dress to live, he lives to dress.<sup>33</sup>

Carlyle recognised the inherent conflict in relying on material culture to convey moral meaning. ‘Clothes gave us individuality, distinctions, social polity; Clothes have made men of us; they are threatening to make clothes screens of us.’<sup>34</sup> This explains why ‘pretending’ with clothes is frequently portrayed as morally wrong in novels: a form (literally) of lying about oneself.

The relationship between person and things, and how the one can truly reflect the other, is explored by Dickens in *Great Expectations* in a running metaphor relating to peoples’ hands. Estella sums Pip up as ‘a common labouring boy’,<sup>35</sup> offering as evidence the fact that ‘He calls the knaves, Jacks,

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<sup>33</sup> Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus*, p.207.

<sup>34</sup> Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus*, p.32.

<sup>35</sup> Dickens, *Great Expectations*, p.59.

this boy! [...] And what coarse hands he has. And what thick boots!'.<sup>36</sup>

However cruel she may be, Estella is technically right: how Pip relates to objects around him, the 'Jacks', the marks hard work have left on him and his clothes, do mark him as a member of the working classes. Pip's hands in particular would appear to be undisguisable 'proof' of hard labour, boots can be changed. However when, many years later, the convict Magwitch kisses Pip's (no doubt soft and well-manicured) hands such processes of reading a person are thrown into doubt: neither body nor possessions can reflection a person's moral and material status. Dickens briefly describes Magwitch's hands as 'heavy, brown,'<sup>37</sup> but *not* coarse. Magwitch's career as a sheep farmer would have left his hands incongruously smooth from constant contact with the lanolin in the sheep's wool. Shepherds were famous for their soft hands, paradoxically the mark of the gentleman. The scene where Pip is reunited with Magwitch is full of indicators of how clothes can disguise a man, including Magwitch's proud summation of Pip's jewellery, linen and books, 'that's a gentleman's I hope!' and his airy allusion to disguise, 'There's disguising wigs that can be bought for money, [...] hair powder and spectacles and [...] what not'.<sup>38</sup>

*Great Expectations* constantly plays on the assumption that you can read moral and material success from individuals' 'bodies and possessions' and that the latter will be a powerful reflection on the former. Dickens shows ways in which both are powerful and unreliable indicators: a highly political point in a society that believed that moral and material success were both fused and easily read through material things. Nor is this signification gender-specific. Jaggers exhibits the exceptional strength of his housekeeper, Molly's, hands to Pip but at her trial he ensured that 'this woman was so very

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Dickens, *Great Expectations*, p.314.

<sup>38</sup> Dickens, *Great Expectations*, p.329.

artfully dressed [...], that she looked much slighter than she really was; in particular, her sleeves [...] have been so skilfully contrived that her arms had quite a delicate look'.<sup>39</sup> Clothes and public expectations of the weakness of women generally are used to distort the truth of a woman as a physically powerful murderess. Molly's hands compare with Jaggers's obsessive hand washing, with its futile suggestion that his morally dubious occupation can be washed away at the end of the day, like something physical. Finally, in this section of the novel, Pip's failed attempts to rescue Miss Havisham from burning, combined with his rowing, must render his hands as 'coarse' as any working man's. Suddenly Pip's hands truly reflect the best of him, through courage and hard work. Through these misalliances of hands, clothes and attitudes, the difficulty of uniting 'souls, bodies, possessions' into a coherent reflection of success is acutely shown, but that these things can represent something profound of us is equally clear. Dickens lacks Thackeray's certainty of the sham functioning of material indicators. By the time *Great Expectations* was published the culture that truly felt that moral and material success could be synonymous was well established and constantly destabilised by escalating consumer culture and the novel form.

*Sartor Resartus* (1833) might be regarded as a founding text for the concept and conflict of Victorian success. It challenged the individual to use material culture to express him or herself and to ensure that that self was worth expressing. Carlyle uses clergymen as examples of the acme of moral failure in nineteenth-century England, suggesting that a new secular morality needed to grow out of material culture.

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<sup>39</sup> Dickens, *Great Expectations*, p.389.

Church Clothes have gone sorrowfully out at the elbows [...] some generation and a half after Religion has quite withdrawn from it, and in unnoticed nooks is weaving herself new Vestures, wherewith to reappear and bless us or our sons and grandsons.<sup>40</sup>

Carlyle memorably sketches moral failure as the disconnection between the moral traits and personal possessions of the individual. He also suggests how a new morality is evolving based on secular things.

In her 1855 essay on Carlyle, George Eliot explores how such images spread to become common currency, as she herself helped to make them:

Many of the men who have the least agreement with his opinions are those to who *Sartor Resartus* was an epoch in the history of their minds. The extent of his influence may be best seen in the fact that ideas which were startling novelties when he first wrote them are now become common-places.<sup>41</sup>

Carlyle gave, Eliot felt, not answers but ‘the means by which endless solutions may be sought’:<sup>42</sup> exactly how Eliot herself used his work. In 1830 Carlyle clearly felt the oddity of using clothes to explore morality. In his

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<sup>40</sup> Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus*, p.164.

<sup>41</sup> George Eliot, ‘Thomas Carlyle’, in *Selected Critical Writings*, ed. by Rosemary Ashton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 187-193. (p.188).

<sup>42</sup> George Eliot, ‘Thomas Carlyle’, in *Selected Critical Writings*, ed. by Ashton, p.187.

journal he wrote, 'I am going to write – Nonsense. It is on "clothes." Heaven be my comforter!'.<sup>43</sup> The speech marks emphasise his distaste for such low subject matter, but *Sartor Resartus* demonstrates how material culture was forcing its way into the nineteenth-century intellectual ferment. Within his lifetime Carlyle's use of clothes to explore and expose a person's moral standing in society would come to be standard practice.

### **1.3: Marx's Coat and Dickens's Waistcoat: Portable Property and Middle-Class Masculine Success**

If cloth was helping to shape the discourse of success in Victorian England, it was also shaping the production and circulation of novels discussing these materials of success, not least through the question of masculine dress. If the 'toilette' of a fashionable woman could identify her as a signifier of success then one might argue that the increasingly sober and discreet garb of middle-class men identified them as the creators of success, the signified.

In his essay "Marx's Coat", Peter Stallybrass demonstrates the direct effect that economic failure had on Marx's wardrobe and thus on his writing:

Without his overcoat, Marx was, in an expression whose force it is hard to recapture, 'not fit to be seen'. Marx's overcoat was to go in and out of the pawnshop throughout the 1850s and early 1860s. And his overcoat directly determined the work he could or could not do. [...] he could not go to the British Museum. If he could not go to the British Museum, he could not undertake research for *Capital*. What

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<sup>43</sup> Thomas Carlyle's Journal, 28 September 1830, quoted by Kerry McSweeney and Peter Sabor in the Introduction to Thomas Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus* (London, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), p.xiii.

clothes Marx wore thus shaped what he wrote. There is a level of vulgar material determination here that is hard to even contemplate.<sup>44</sup>

Recapturing the force and impact of the phrase ‘not fit to be seen’ must be at the heart of any attempt to understand how the discourse of success and failure operated in Victorian life and literature.

In *The Fall of Public Man*, Richard Sennett charts a descent into anonymity for men in the cities in the eighteenth century. ‘People in very large cities had little means of telling whether the dress of a stranger on the street was an accurate reflection of his or her standing in the society’.<sup>45</sup> By the nineteenth century this transformation for men was almost complete. Dark sober clothes became the uniform not for a particular profession but for a way of life: from lawyer to businessman to clerk, the ‘respectable’ and aspiring successful man signified his allegiance to a state of mind through what he wore. Even in the Victorian period itself the radicalism of this change was still felt.

In 1844 John Harris’s aquatint ‘A View in Hyde Park’ shows the elderly Wellington riding past the Achilles statue. Peter W. Sinnema points out ‘the physical incongruity between the brawny Achilles and the benign elderly Duke’.<sup>46</sup> A glance at the picture also tells us something else: it is difficult to distinguish Wellington, dressed in a blue frock coat, from a successful middle-class businessman: clothes and acumen, rather than youthful muscularity, are the weapons of success in Victorian England (see FIG 6).

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<sup>44</sup> Peter Stalleybrass, ‘Marx’s Coat’, in *Border Fetishisms: Material Objects in Unstable Spaces*, ed. by Patricia Spyer (London: Routledge, 1998), pp. 183-207 (pp.187-8).

<sup>45</sup> Richard Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), p.65.

<sup>46</sup> Peter W. Sinnema, *The Wake of Wellington: Englishness in 1852* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2006), p.124.

The fiasco of the Eglinton Tournament in 1839, with damp ‘knights’ sheltering from torrential rain under umbrellas, was symbolic of the way in which traditional costumes denoting masculine success, the highly decorative uniforms and flamboyant costumes of the military and aristocracy, were becoming laughably anachronistic. This is the century which the British army began by going to war in bright colours, particularly red, and ended, during the Second Boer War (1899 to 1902), in khaki. During the Indian Mutiny (1857) troops deliberately began to stain their uniforms with dirt for camouflage. The most ‘masculine’ form of success, winning a war, was no longer synonymous (even in theory) with personal display. This was even less so for the armies of clerks and businessmen in their dark business attire where the culture of success was strongest. I suggest that the relative anonymity of the ‘uniform’ of Victorian middle-class men, compared to the brighter display of middle-class women’s clothing, also must have offered a constant visual stimulus to regard ‘success’ as a matter of parade and display, rather than to draw attention to work and the nature of how that success was earned.

The Eglinton tournament spawned a cottage industry in souvenirs, from prints to jugs to printed cloth. In the Victoria and Albert Museum is a waistcoat made of that material dating from 1839 (see FIG 7). Mass production offered the middle-class man a practical means of expressing attraction to the ideals of chivalry through dress – while sitting at a desk in the office. However, the odd dash of individuality in a waistcoat aside (and Dickens was periodically sneered at in the press for the flamboyance of his) middle-class men’s clothes offered fewer (though by no means no) gradations for analysis of personal position than those of women. Paradoxically, this made the risk of being condemned through dress as a social failure for a man all the more dramatic: if a man like Marx could not stretch to a coat he must truly be poor. I argued in section 1.1 of the importance of dress as a means to ‘owning the public sphere’; the ramifications of the pawning of Marx’s coat

demonstrate the disastrous economic and social ramifications of exclusion from that sphere.

Marx's inability to find even an overcoat to convince the world that he was a respectable man and a writer who could earn money, can be usefully contrasted with Dickens's flamboyant, sentimental and deliberate use of dress to facilitate his own success as a writer: not least through his flashy waistcoats. In the 1840s during his American tour, newspapers disapprovingly wrote of Dickens's wardrobe, 'somewhat in the flash order'.<sup>47</sup> Dickens's rather vexed relationship with the American public notwithstanding, by the 1850s and 60s these waistcoats had become an integral part of his deliberately dazzling public persona. At his famous public readings, Dickens:

Always presented himself to his audience in full evening dress, with a bright buttonhole, a purple waistcoat and a glittering watch chain. His stage equipment consisted of a reading desk, carpet, gaslights and a pair of large screens behind him to help project his voice forward.<sup>48</sup>

This description emphasises the importance of dress, as much as projection or gaslight, in creating an (apparently electric) atmosphere in which Victorian novels were experienced. Dickens's dress for public readings and Marx's inability to get into a public reading room without an overcoat demonstrate

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<sup>47</sup> Worcester Egis, 5 February 1842, quoted in Michael Slater, *Charles Dickens* (London: Yale University Press, 2009), p.181.

<sup>48</sup> Clive Francis, 'Ten Things You Never Knew About Charles Dickens's A Christmas Carol', *Daily Telegraph*, 5 December 2012, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/charles-dickens/9724579/Ten-things-you-never-knew-about-Charles-Dickenss-A-Christmas-Carol.html> [accessed 14th December 2014]



that dress was not merely a signifier of success or failure, but helped to create both success and the writings that were so central to its discourse in the most material way possible.

However, clothing was also an outward sign of the fact that masculine success could be a rather undramatic and complicatedly ‘unmanly’ business in mid-Victorian Britain. By 1871, Samuel Smiles’s *Character* must have dampened the spirits of any boy-reader hoping to be a warrior hero:

Great men are always exceptional men; and greatness itself is but comparative. Indeed, the range of most men in life is so limited, that very few have the opportunity of being great. But each man can act his part honestly and honourably, and to the best of his ability. [...] He can be true, just, honest, and faithful, even in small things. [...] he can do his Duty in that sphere in which Providence has placed him.<sup>49</sup>

Success is democratised but also rendered rather banal; it is about the dogged acquisition of sterling moral qualities, not heroics or riches; a view far more appropriate to ‘a nation of shopkeepers’ who no longer, it seemed, had a Napoleon to beat. We move from muskets to mourning rings.

In his vivid evocation of Wemmick in *Great Expectations*, Dickens may have had Carlyle in mind. ‘The good sense of a gentleman is nowhere more finely developed than in his rings.’<sup>50</sup> Wemmick may not strike modern

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<sup>49</sup> Samuel Smiles, *Character* (1871; Create Space Publishing Platform, 2015) p.2.

<sup>50</sup> Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus*, p.212.

readers as an immediate example of successful masculinity but Dickens uses him to negotiate the complex relationship between moral and economic success for a man and to explore what they constitute. Wemmick is not a hero in any sense but he is a man whose advice Pip would do well to heed. When Pip discovers that his mourning rings are not the result of bereavements but gifts from condemned clients, Wemmick explains and advises:

‘These are all gifts of that kind. One brings another, you see; that’s the way of it. I always take ‘em. They’re curiosities. And they’re property. They may not be worth much, but, after all, they’re property and portable. It don’t signify to you with your brilliant lookout, but as to myself, my guiding star always is, Get hold of portable property.’<sup>51</sup>

Of course, as it turns out, it would have done Pip no harm to get hold of some portable property; *Great Expectations* do not necessarily have a firm material basis and can melt away all too easily. Magwitch is a ghastly parody of a successful man: who transforming himself from a convict to a successful sheep farmer. He has material wealth unlike the ephemeral fortunes of Pip or the rotting barrels that demonstrate the corruption of a successful entrepreneurial family in Miss Havisham’s garden. Magwitch is undeniably masculine, physically tough and periodically brutal, but such ‘masculine’ traits exclude him from being a ‘gentleman’. Despite his economic success and ultimate moral redemption Magwitch remains the ultimate social failure: a convict.

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<sup>51</sup> Dickens, *Great Expectations*, p.199.

John Plotz takes Wemmick's portable property as his starting point in arguing that objects have a dual role. 'They are at once products of the cash market and potentially, the rare fruits of a highly sentimentalised realm of value both domestic and spiritual, a realm defined by being anything but marketable.'<sup>52</sup> These rings are both 'curiosities and property', as Wemmick says, but Plotz sees Wemmick's mourning rings as an extension of his domestic set up: 'a form of domestic retreat [...] the only objects that can accompany Wemmick [...] out into his grimly workaday world'.<sup>53</sup> However, the rings may not be quite the form of portable comfort blanket that Plotz suggests. I would argue that they are a comfort to Wemmick *because* they combine the sentimental and the financial, *not* because they transcend the world of financial transaction, and as such they are the symbol of Wemmick's success. If Wemmick is a successful man in a Victorian novel then we have to conclude that being a successful man is a fairly un-dramatic business.

The more glamorous spaces in which bourgeois women exhibit themselves as successful are often contrasted with the distinctly unglamorous and frequently elided spaces where men, successful and otherwise, ply their trades in novels. Dickens is particularly good at evoking the dusty quarters of Jaggers and Tulkinghorn, in both of which the central theme is not only money but death and anachronism, with Jaggers' death masks and Tulkinghorn's Roman bust. These spaces feel moribund and almost exist in parentheses compared to the vividly evoked social spaces of Dickens's novels, such as Miss Havisham's drawing room or the fog-blanketed streets of *Bleak House*. Eliot also depicts cramped little spaces where men work. The Reverend Fairbrother's study is described by his mother as 'nothing but pickled vermin, and drawers of blue-bottles and moths, with no carpet on the

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<sup>52</sup> John Plotz, *Portable Property and the Victorian Novel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), p.2.

<sup>53</sup> Plotz, p.xv.

floor' (again images of death), and 'bare of luxuries'.<sup>54</sup> The novel reflects how the point of work in the Victorian middle-class mentality is to provide appropriate social spaces where success could be manifested rather than to create the objects that might feature in those spaces.

And the fundamental reason that Victorian society offered for men providing these spaces was marriage: the reward for men acquiring the kind of steady qualities and sufficient capital to earn the benefits of a home. In Victorian culture a man had to prove himself morally and materially successful and a socially sanctioned marriage would provide 'proof' of this in the eyes of the world. I suggest that in *Middlemarch*, Lydgate's failure to wait until he was financially able to support a wife would have been understood as a considerable moral, social and financial failing by Eliot's contemporary readership. Betsy Trotwood, that eccentric straight-talker in *David Copperfield* (1849-50), gives David the advice about his wife that Lydgate needed so badly:

'It will be your duty and it will be your pleasure too, – of course I know that [...] to estimate her (as you chose her) by the qualities she has, and not by the qualities she may not have. The latter you must develop in her, if you can. And if you cannot, child, [...] you must just accustom yourself to do without 'em'.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Eliot, *Middlemarch*, p.160.

<sup>55</sup> Charles Dickens, *David Copperfield*, ed. by Jeremy Tambling (1849-50; London: Penguin, 2004), p.645.

Lydgate has to learn the hard way to support Rosamond. 'Lydgate had accepted his narrowed lot with sad resignation. He had chosen this fragile creature, and had taken the burthen of her life upon his arms. He must walk as he could, carrying that burthen pitifully.'<sup>56</sup>

David's moral and material success means that he can support Dora financially and emotionally in her childish lack of domestication, which has serious implications for him:

I had a great deal of work to do, and had many anxieties, but the same considerations made me keep them to myself. [...] I did miss something of the realisation of my dreams; [...] I could have wished my wife [...] had had more character and purpose, to sustain me and improve me [...] I took upon myself the cares and toils of our life, and had no partner in them. [...] Dora [...] was bright and cheerful in the old childish way, loved me dearly, and was happy with her old trifles.<sup>57</sup>

David, torn between the desire for a childish 'bright and cheerful' wife and one who can be his 'councillor' reflects a key problem of Victorian gender relations that revolved around the conception of domestic success. When a man was 'successful' he wanted a woman who was demonstrably and decoratively useless to prove that success, echoing the function of his

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<sup>56</sup> Eliot, *Middlemarch*, p.752.

<sup>57</sup> Dickens, *David Copperfield*, pp.653-4.

furniture. However, when economic failure, moral dilemma or social disapproval loomed he needed support, all the more desperately because the creed of individualism suggested that there was no one else to whom he could or should look, something I explore further in Chapter Three.

David's ability to accept Dora's failings emphasises a magnanimity that Lydgate never becomes fully capable of. His trajectory in life is the opposite of that of Lydgate, who gets married in blithe denial of financial realities and is then forced to inflict them on his wilfully ignorant wife. Had David earned less money he would have been forced to try to make Dora more financially aware, as Lydgate must with Rosamond. We are told very little about David's work although the hints are dropped very deliberately so that we must be aware of his growing fame, such as his popularity in Australia. However, his possession of such a happy, silly little wife is eloquent proof enough of his financial success. Dora may be too daft to order oysters not ready-opened, or not to hire servants who do not sell off the linen and set the chimney on fire, but the fact that these incidents are repeated as comedies shows that this is a couple who can afford to give dinner parties, hire servants and replace stolen linen. Betsy Trotwood's final fairy tale revelation that she had not lost all her money but 'wanted to see how you would come out of the trial, Trot; and you came out nobly – persevering, self-reliant, self-denying',<sup>58</sup> is illustrated as much through David's marriage as through his financial affairs.

John Stuart Mill famously observed that 'the improved tone of modern feeling as to the reciprocity of duty which binds the husband towards the wife [has] thrown the man very much more upon home and its inmates'.<sup>59</sup> Throughout this thesis I suggest that men and women were indeed spending more time together, within and without the home: frequently engaged in

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<sup>58</sup> Dickens, *David Copperfield*, p.783.

<sup>59</sup> John Stuart Mill, 'On Liberty' and 'The Subjection of Women', ed. by Alan Ryan (1859, 1869; London: Penguin, 2006), p. 236.

exhibiting the culture of success. While shopping, extending lines of credit, and a certain amount of socialising could be done by a woman alone, to be truly successful she needed the darkly-clad figure of a husband as the background against which to ‘show’ them both, as a successful unit in society.

#### 1.4: The Manly Figure of Failure

In 1824 Carlyle met the poet Coleridge and came away decidedly unimpressed. In a letter he compares Coleridge unfavourably to his own labouring father:

His cardinal sin is that he wants *will*; he has no resolution, he shrinks from pain or labour in any of its shapes. His very attitude bespeaks this: he never straightens his knee joints, he stoops with his fat, ill-shapen shoulders and in walking he does not tread but shovel [sic] and slide – my father would call it skluiffing.<sup>60</sup>

‘In physical shapelessness, [Carlyle] read a moral failing.’<sup>61</sup> The ideal of masculine success stemming from a healthy mind in a healthy body persisted throughout the century. It crops up in the ideals of muscular Christianity and Samuel Smiles and is fundamental to movements and fashions as various as the Boy Scout movement and the half-baked chivalry of the Eglinton

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<sup>60</sup> Letter from Thomas Carlyle to John A. Carlyle, 24 June 1824 , Carlyle Letters Online. [carlyleletters.dukejournals.org](http://carlyleletters.dukejournals.org), DOI: 10.1215/It-18241220-TC-JBW-01 [accessed 14/2/16]

<sup>61</sup> Norma Clark, “‘Strenuous Idleness’: Thomas Carlyle and the Man of Letters as a Hero,” in *Manful Assertions: Masculinities in Britain Since 1800*, ed. by Michael Roper and John Tosh (London: Routledge 1991), pp.25-43, (p.29).

Tournament. However, in reality, physical work was an increasingly difficult route to economic success in Victorian England.

Like the figure of a muscular, bare-chested workman on the Albert Memorial, the figure of the manly worker, rendered distinguished through his physical strength was fast becoming anachronistic. Whilst in theory he might be venerated as a moral and physical success, the nineteenth century saw the rise of a mass, often unskilled industrial workforce; alternatively downtrodden and rebellious, like the workers of Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton* (1847) and *North and South* (1854-5). Working-class characters who have a happier ending, like Dickens's Joe Gargery and Eliot's Caleb Garth, have a childlike innocence that hints at their unreality. Joe has to stay cut off from the world by the 'meshes', for who can forget his painful trip to London to see Pip? Caleb's well-earned good luck in working on the railway may make him appear a figure of Progress but he is Eliot's wish-fulfilment figure. When these characters were written, they were already figures of nostalgia, their stories set decades previously. However much writers like Carlyle and Smiles and even Dickens, in his journalistic capacities, might venerate hard, physical labour, in reality it was usually synonymous with poverty and cyclical unemployment.

Nor was this fear, that physical strength and 'manliness' were no longer synonymous with success, confined to the poor. Throughout *Middlemarch*, the failure of Lydgate's physical strength to sustain him is a theme. It is actually presented as a weakness; he is shown as an animal being broken to the yoke and as he fails financially, his temper becomes more 'bearlike'.<sup>62</sup> Lydgate becomes a wild beast part-tamed and, despite his strength, he dies young in 'captivity' as a fashionable doctor under the thumb of his wife. The physical failure of Lydgate shows that physical strength and virile masculinity

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<sup>62</sup> Eliot, *Middlemarch*, p.150.



were not perceived as any guarantor of success in the Victorian novel – indeed, often quite the reverse.

Carlyle reflects Victorian unease with the fact that financial and social success was at variance with traditional, physical forms of masculinity. Having classified the London literary male as a failure in masculinity, physically and morally, Carlyle offers what, for a man, was the ultimate condemnation. ‘They are not red-blooded *men* at all; they are only *things* for writing articles.’<sup>63</sup> Carlyle does not use the word but his description represents men as ‘thingummies’; the idea of man as a cog in a machine, rather than in control of his own destiny, was always masculine failure. Furthermore, as Eliot argued, what might be viewed as Carlyle’s personal spleen in 1824 was part of a wider current of public unease about what constituted masculinity by the mid-century.

In 1850 Carlyle’s essay ‘Hudson’s Statue’ formed a savage delineation of the celebration of financial success and moral failure which Carlyle now felt passed for ‘greatness’ in a man. He attacks the proposal that a statue ought to be erected to George Hudson, the railway speculator, whose spectacular rise and fall ruined so many people during ‘railway mania’ in the 1840s as many rushed to buy shares in railways that often did not exist and never would:

Why was [Hudson’s statue] not set up, that the whole world might see it; that our ‘Religion’ might be seen, mounted on some figure of a

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<sup>63</sup> Thomas Carlyle, Letter to Jane Carlyle, 20 December 1824, [carlyleletters.dukejournals.org](http://carlyleletters.dukejournals.org), DOI: 10.1215/It-18241220-TC-JBW-01 [accessed 1/3/15]

Locomotive, garnished with scrip-rolls proper and raised aloft in some conspicuous place –for example on the *other* arch at Hyde Park?<sup>64</sup>

Carlyle, like Dickens and Trollope to follow, hated a con-man; using material culture or worse, the illusion of it to deceive people out of their material possessions all too easily created chaos in a culture that saw moral and material success as fused and easily signifiable.

The statue of Wellington on the ‘the other arch’ was an acid stab by Carlyle at Hudson’s friendship with the Duke. There were rumours that Hudson was giving inappropriate advice on investments and Wellington hastily distanced himself. Nevertheless, the image of the two statues suggests an old and a new hero, an old and a new kind of public success (although Thackeray’s *Vanity Fair* (1847-8) suggests that the qualities of a Hudson-style crook certainly had their uses in Brussels in 1815.) Wellington’s association with Hudson suggested that even heroes were not immune from the lure of financial success with its often-concomitant moral failure.

On the 14<sup>th</sup> September 1852, Wellington died. Many people, including Queen Victoria, saw his death as the end of an era: ‘We shall soon stand sadly alone [...] Melbourne, Peel, Liverpool – and now the Duke, *all* gone!’<sup>65</sup> *The Times* claimed that Wellington’s life was notable ‘for the invariable and unbroken stream of success which attended it from its commencement to its close’.<sup>66</sup> This is not strictly true. Wellington’s undoubted run of success in the Peninsular Wars had got off to a slow start and his role as a leading Tory

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<sup>64</sup> Thomas Carlyle, ‘Hudson’s Statue’, in *Works of Thomas Carlyle*, Centenary Edition, ed. by Henry Duff Traill, 30 vols (C. Scribner and Sons, 1896-1901), xx, pp.254-293, (p.256).

<sup>65</sup> Queen Victoria, letter to King Leopold, 17 September 1853, quoted in Elizabeth Longford, *Victoria* (1964; London: Abacus, 2011), p.249.

<sup>66</sup> *The Times*, 15 September 1852, p.4.

‘Ultra’ in opposing the Great Reform Act of 1832 was not only a notable failure of political judgement but demonstrated the extent to which he was out of tune with the nineteenth century as it developed. The Reform Act’s emphasis on property, whether earned or inherited, as a means of dictating the franchise was a key moment in enshrining the importance of middle-class material success. Like his statue, Wellington was in an increasingly awkward position in the Victorian age. If Nelson’s blinded eye represented a single-minded pursuit of heroic victory, Wellington’s increasing deafness demonstrated, rather sadly, his increasing isolation from the modern world. Despite this it was apparently unthinkable that a national hero should not be described as a success on his death. It suggests the extent to which success, rather than heroism, was now the defining characteristic for public approval.

The demise of Wellington and the conduct of the Crimean War saw the valorisation of the ordinary soldier, rather than officers, accelerating during the 1850s. In 1857 the first Victoria Cross medals, for men of any rank, were awarded for bravery ‘in the face of the enemy’.<sup>67</sup> The writings of William Russell on the suffering of men in the Crimea, Tennyson’s ‘The Charge of the Light Brigade’ (1854) and the celebration (not to say romanticisation) of the work of Florence Nightingale helped to earn the British soldier a heroic image in the eyes of the British public.

In stark contrast, however, the realist novel form tends to see the figure of the soldier as a failure. If a key aspect of success is the ability to function in the urban, commercial reality of the modern Victorian era, then the qualities that render a man a good, heroic, soldier are often shown in the novel to be ill-adapted to the unheroic, commercial world of ‘Civvy Street’.

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<sup>67</sup> [www.army.mod.uk](http://www.army.mod.uk) [accessed 6/3/15]

The figure of the failed soldier turns up constantly in Victorian novels; either he is a man whose soldierly attributes of strength and pugnacity fail to help him through the complexities of civilian life or he is a rogue: dashing but morally dubious, likely to vanish leaving trouble and heartbreak in his wake. The nature of a soldier's calling, and low pay, made it hard for him to cultivate the kind of material security and good reputation fundamental to Victorian success. *Vanity Fair*'s Rawdon Crawley, *Adam Bede*'s Arthur Donnithorne (1859) and *Far From the Madding Crowd*'s Sergeant Troy (1874) represent the breed. (*Adam Bede* was written not long after the Victoria Cross was introduced.)

Dickens's *Bleak House* (written just before the Crimean War) features two similar failures: Nemo, alias Captain Hawdon, and Sergeant George. Nemo was clearly a dashing young officer who won the heart of Lady Dedlock but he leaves her, so his sexual/moral failure is clear, and he dies nameless and penniless: literally 'no-one', with no reputation or 'character', the acme of masculine failure. Thomas Laqueur observes that a pauper's funeral was 'the final stamp of failure'<sup>68</sup> in this period. The episode of *Bleak House* containing Nemo's death and burial in a pauper's grave was published in June 1852, forming a significant contrast with the Duke of Wellington's elaborate funeral and the celebration of his life as a 'success' in the September of that year.

That not all 'failed soldiers' are moral failures only adds to the sense that their very 'manliness' – physical strength, courage, honesty and straightforwardness – actively hinders them from being successful in society. *Bleak House*'s Sergeant George is also a soldier in debt but his failed attempts to pay render him a noble failure. He tells Tulkinghorn, 'Except on military compulsion, I am not a man of business. Among civilians I am what they call

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<sup>68</sup> Thomas Laqueur, "Bodies, Death and Pauper Funerals", *Representations*, 1 (1983), 109-131 (p.120).

in Scotland a ne're-do-weel. I have no head for papers, sir. I can stand any fire better than the fire of cross questions'.<sup>69</sup> Much is made of George's strong physique but crucially it avails him nothing in the modern world against either the crippled but cunning form of the money-lender Smallweed, one of Dickens's financial successes and moral failures, or the complex web of contemporary law.

A wider look at Dickens's fiction and life makes it clear that we are not supposed to believe life would be better if it were less materialistic. Sergeant George's failure to manage his finances has real consequences, for himself and his friends. One can usefully contrast Dickens's own love of material things – houses, furniture (see Chapter Three), fancy waistcoats – with the sinister asceticism of *Bleak House*'s Tulkinghorn and Smallweed. Nothing could be less heroic and more of a moral failure than Smallweed but his name says it all, small weeds flourish. He makes money out of *no thing*; lending money to people, and having made that money he will not spend it on making life, his or anyone else's, happier, more comfortable, or more beautiful. A key theme of Dickens's fiction is the linking of lavish forms of material culture with the moral qualities of generosity and concern for one's fellow men. One has only to look at reformed Scrooge in *A Christmas Carol* to see that for Dickens, if you have money, you should spend it on friends and family. (Dickens's own financial affairs frequently creaked under the strain of this philosophy.) Similarly the easy-going largess of the Sedley household in *Vanity Fair* is a point in Mr Sedley's favour when he becomes bankrupt; his old business associates club together to buy him back his cutlery, presumably an allusion to the many cheery dinners he has asked them to.

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<sup>69</sup> Charles Dickens, *Bleak House*, ed. by Stephen Gill (1852-3; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p.402.

Total refusal to spend accrued money on material things in a novel is almost invariably a sign of moral failure, leading to cruelty, the will to power and monetary and spiritual meanness. Misers, from Eliot's old Featherstone to Dickens's Smallweed, demonstrate their failure to communicate with the world as much through their failure to acquire objects that can be 'read', as through nastiness.

Such meanness, spiritual and financial in this exaggerated failure to spend money, is the antithesis of the qualities needed in a good family man and a good provider. Such an antithesis is the lawyer Tulkinghorn. As a lawyer he produces nothing material and Dickens makes it clear that he exists, vampire-like, on the weaknesses of other people. 'His black clothes [...] never shine. Mute, close, irresponsive to any glancing light, his dress is like himself [...] He receives [...] salutations with gravity and buries them with the rest of his knowledge.'<sup>70</sup>

Tulkinghorn's asceticism and physical sparseness render him inhuman in the Dickensian moral and material economy. When Tulkinghorn dismisses George's honourable concerns to free his friend and former comrade Bagnet from debt with the words, 'my friend, I don't care a pinch of snuff for the whole Royal Artillery establishment – officer, men, tumbrils, wagons, horses, guns and ammunition',<sup>71</sup> he is not simply being predictably callous. Tulkinghorn is dismissing old and new codes of success, old-fashioned heroism and modern materialism and thus represents something close to moral and material anarchy.

In *Middlemarch* George Eliot explores the problems with unifying moral and material success against the 'unheroic' backdrop of the nineteenth century; how to be a moral and material success in the mundane world of the

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<sup>70</sup> Dickens, *Bleak House*, p.20.

<sup>71</sup> Dickens, *Bleak House*, p.510.

everyday? The problematic marriage between the moral and the material is literally incarnated, and complicated, in *Middlemarch*, in the disastrous marriage of Lydgate and Rosamond. Lydgate is a man in the grip of a vocation to understand the source of living tissue. However, he is about to be entangled in the web of a very different kind of tissue (or is it?), the ‘draperies’ that adorn his beautiful, fashionable wife, Rosamond. A man with an affectionate nature and passionate vocation, Lydgate is dragged down into failure: debt, an unhappy marriage and the loss of that vocation. He begins by disdaining material things and at the end of the novel he gets nothing *but* material things. Lydgate’s final incarnation as a fashionable doctor in London and on the continent with a pretty, well-dressed wife and four daughters might, in another novel, have been a happy ending. However, Lydgate ‘always regarded himself as a failure: he had not done what he once meant to do’.<sup>72</sup> Eliot makes it clear, though, that Lydgate’s failure is not his failure to do ‘great work’ in the medical field, it is his failure to reconcile himself to the materialistic world around him, a world he inadvertently chose to be more closely tied to by marrying Rosamond. Understanding the commercial material world and forming a relation with it that is not morally destructive is the great challenge that Eliot sets the characters of *Middlemarch*. It was the challenge for male and female characters throughout the Victorian realist novel.

Realism shows how apparently powerful and successful men, as well as women, can be rendered infantilised and powerless by their relations with the material world: clearly highly subversive in the context of the Victorian conception of success. *Daniel Deronda* shows that men, particularly upper class men, can be reduced to signifiers of success: like women they are infantilised by their relations to property. In *Daniel Deronda* Lady Mallinger

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<sup>72</sup> Eliot, *Middlemarch*, p.781.

sees Grandcourt as ‘a large living sign of her failure as a wife – the not having presented Sir Hugo with a son’.<sup>73</sup> Crucially, Lady Mallinger sees Grandcourt, not her own body, as this sign of failure. Women’s position, or lack of position, in the patriarchal system of inheritance meant that a married woman’s success was tied up with the production of a male heir; they became reproductive machines, thingummies. Just as objects cannot in themselves express ideas and sentiments, Eliot makes clear that women, in the eyes of contemporary society, will only ever be a conduit to further male ownership but these men too are conduits to the next generation.

However, until Grandcourt’s death (caused, one might suggest, by his wife sitting passive and unable to act – like the object he is trying to make her) Sir Hugo has been equally powerless to be master of his own destiny, able only to ‘perform’ the image of masculine success as a man in control of his estates. Eliot makes ironic mention of ‘Sir Hugo’s pleasure in being now master of his own estates, able to leave them to his daughters, or at least [...] to take makeshift feminine offspring as intermediate to a satisfactory heir in a grandson’.<sup>74</sup>

Jeff Nunokawa argues that:

An idea for proprietorial power repositied primarily, even exclusively, in ‘the power to bestow’ may dwell in the happiest of alliance with the market economy, but it does so by severely restricting the boundless

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<sup>73</sup> Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, p.236.

<sup>74</sup> Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, p.611.



ambitions for mastery that form a deep part of the ideological heritage of possession.<sup>75</sup>

I contend that the assumption that an essentially pragmatic conception to preserve estates, such as entailment, was a ‘happy’ alliance with the market economy suggests too roseate a view of relations between aristocracy and middle class: relations that the rising conception of success arguably put strain on. Contempt shown by Dickens, Trollope, Eliot and Thackeray (among others) for the aristocracy emerges in their portrayal of languid aristocrats on a sliding scale of incompetence and viciousness: from Sir Leicester Dedlock to Grandcourt and Felix Carbury. This contempt needs to be contextualised in the context of middle-class ideals of masculine success in which individualism and personal control of property was paramount.

The system of entailment, making men only lifetime custodians of assets whose onward journey of ownership was already predetermined in law, can in fact be seen as ‘feminising’ aristocratic men by excluding them from the culture of success. They become thingummies too. Cases of entailment in novels, such as the Bennets’ Longbourne Estate in *Pride and Prejudice*, or the Mallinger estate in *Daniel Deronda*, often dwell on the fact that the estate will pass not simply to men, but to unpleasant men. This emphasises the inability of the current, male, custodians to make moral as well as practical decisions about assets; they were thus deprived of the material and moral agency that was crucial in being a successful individual.

Deborah Wynne points out that:

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<sup>75</sup> Jeff Nunakawa, *The Afterlife of Property: Domestic Security and the Victorian Novel* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1994), p.84.

During the economic vicissitudes of the Victorian period portable property was increasingly recognised as a flexible alternative to real estate and the sluggishness of the parliamentary debaters in recognising this shift [...] meant that women's ownership of property was not subjected to the same level of legal scrutiny as was their ownership of land.<sup>76</sup>

If the ideological underpinnings of masculine ownership of land were under threat, then this suggests the subtle feminisation of the culture of possession and display that surrounded the growth of the middle-classes and the rise of the culture of success. However realist novels were in the forefront of pointing out that, although this feminisation might be the case, it was not necessarily a good thing for women themselves. Success and happiness were far from synonymous for Victorian heroines.

### **1.5: 'Too Perfectly the Social Animal': Signification and Objectification of Women Through the Culture of Success in Victorian Novels**

In 'Silly Novels by Lady Novelists' (1856) Eliot ruthlessly satirised attempts to fuse moral and material success in heroines. 'She is perfectly well-dressed and perfectly religious.'<sup>77</sup> This idea that a pretty (well-dressed) woman can be 'read', in novels and wider culture, as a good and happy woman, becomes highly political in a culture of signification that used the

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<sup>76</sup> Wynne, p.35.

<sup>77</sup> George Eliot, 'Silly Novels by Lady Novelists' in *Selected Critical Writings*, ed. by Rosemary Ashton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp.296-322 (p.296).

well-dressed woman as a synecdoche for her husband's success. Eliot's violent objection to this notion found expression not just in her blistering attack on 'silly novels' but in her own works in which well-dressed women and exquisite-looking heroines, including Gwendolen Harleth, Dorothea Brooke and Rosamond Vincy, suffer torments, as does their literary descendent: Henry James's Isobel Archer.

In the culture of success, a 'good' marriage to a man who could support her objectified a woman by making her the signifier of her husband's success while placing her in a position to perform success. Through her dress, her home and her social life, the successful woman demonstrated that her moral, economic and social position as a virtuous wife allowed her control over material things. (This control, of course, stemmed from her husband.) Novels therefore reflect a fundamental fault line in Victorian politics of success and gender relations; if a successful man needed a wife to be a signifier of his success, how did the wife become a success in her own right? Success for a woman in the world, whether through a career, philanthropy or political action was utterly distinct from the 'material' culture of success that bourgeois women and wives in particular were expected to signify. For a man these forms of success were largely synonymous through his role as provider (I discuss this and the significance of the Victorian home further in Chapter Three); but for a woman they were very different.

Dickens offers a biting critique of this conception of marriage and successful wives in *Little Dorrit* (1855-7). Mrs Gowan asks Mrs Merdle's advice on marriage, "Because you represent and express Society so well." Mrs Merdle reviewed the bosom which Society was accustomed to review;

and having ascertained that show-window of Mr Merdle's and the London jewellers' to be in good order, replied'.<sup>78</sup>

Mrs Merdle's glance at her necklace before she pronounces speaks volumes, showing how individuals gain confidence in the doctrine of success by focusing on the materiality of objects. Given Mr Merdle's subsequent bankruptcy and suicide, Dickens is setting the reader up to realise that such confidence in objects as signifiers of social and economic security is misplaced.

Mrs Merdle's subsequent advice reflects Dickens's pessimistic view on marriage as a material and social reflection of the discourse of success.

'As to marriage on the part of a man, my dear, Society requires that he [...] should gain by marriage. Society requires that he should found a handsome establishment by marriage. Society does not see, otherwise, what he has to do with marriage.'<sup>79</sup>

As I have argued in Eliot's treatment of Lydgate's rushed marriage to Rosamond, novels did not always represent the discourse of success as a bad thing in relation to marriage. The moral failure here is the idea that a man should 'gain' from marriage' rather than 'earn' marriage, by gaining the love of a good woman and earning the money to support her. Like Henry James's Madam Merle in *The Portrait of a Lady*, Mrs Merdle 'represents and express[es] society so well': she is a successful woman and undoubted moral failure because she is entirely defined by society's expectations.

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<sup>78</sup> Charles Dickens, *Little Dorrit*, ed. by Stephen Wall and Helen Small (1855-7; London: Penguin, 2003), p.412.

<sup>79</sup> Dickens, *Little Dorrit*, p.412.

In a culture that contained many examples of successful women and was highly ambivalent about how to treat them, realist novels largely focused on the problems of women who became signifiers of (masculine) success rather than triumphant seekers of their own fulfilment. Reality contained examples of women, such as Florence Nightingale and Queen Victoria, who learned to exploit this material culture of success, even as they were exploited by it, but the realist novel tends overwhelmingly to emphasise the difficulties of women in expressing themselves through material culture and in relating that self-expression to a satisfying role in the wider world. While combining success in the world of work with emotional fulfilment was hardly the norm in middle- and upper-class Victorian society, *there* were many examples of women who could offer inspiration: George Eliot, Elizabeth Garret-Anderson and Angela Burdett-Coutts were only a small sample of them. Yet novelists such as Eliot and Henry James overwhelmingly declined to use them as inspiration to explore how women could be successful.

Unsurprisingly, women who wished to achieve something in life were often attacked in Victorian for failing to uphold their role in the material culture of success. In 1859 *Fraser's Magazine* ran an article, entitled provocatively, 'A Fear that Women Will Cease to be Womanly':

There are plenty of good looking young ladies, whose toilette is not the most carefully arranged [...] they are presiding influences of sundry committees and Female Associations [...] they [...] take

ardent<sup>80</sup> part in important controversies. They are not really young women – they are Public Persons.<sup>81</sup>

Badly-dressed females are not in a position to demonstrate their husband's wealth through material means. They are not performing their proper social function. Moral energy can be seen to hinder the kind of commodification of women so useful to the expression of success in a family. (Dickens clearly felt this, with his characterisations of 'bad' wives and mothers like Mrs Pardiggle and Mrs Jellyby).

This culture of success and signification could actually give women considerable power (although novelists tend to think that such power is immoral). Deborah Wynne has argued for a distinction between the appalling possibilities of oppression offered by literal application of the law and the possibilities of acquisition and power open to women on a day-to-day basis, 'the denial of property ownership acted as a denial of legal identity for married women; nevertheless wives were able to find ways of overcoming their disability'.<sup>82</sup> This gives the possibility of nuanced and culturally sensitive readings of Victorian culture, rather than simply overlaying that culture with political readings. However, Victorian novels often work to strip back the culture of success that women could achieve and doggedly expose the helpless, painful predicament of women when that culture failed them. From *Jane Eyre* to *Great Expectations*, from *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda* to *The Portrait of a Lady* this is a persistent theme throughout the period.

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<sup>80</sup> A word frequently used by George Eliot to describe Dorothea Brooke.

<sup>81</sup> Quoted in Dorice Williams Elliot, *The Angel Out of the House: Philanthropy and Gender in Nineteenth-Century England* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2002), p.3.

<sup>82</sup> Wynne, p.7.

Novels (with *Villette* as a magnificent exception, as I will show) tend to emphasise the economic, political, moral and social traps of the material culture of success and in doing so they often highlight the helplessness and passivity of their heroines/victims. Dorothea Brooke and Isobel Archer perform great feats of self-sacrifice whilst never losing their sweetness of character; they are only allowed moral success. Those heroines who are selfish or greedy – Gwendolen Harleth, Hetty Sorrell, Hardy's Bathsheba Everdene – are, often excessively, punished.

Material success for women emerges in novels as a particularly pessimistic take on women's ability to signify social success through material culture. In *The Portrait of a Lady*, Madam Merle muses on the nature of material culture:

What shall we call our 'self'? [...] It overflows into everything that belongs to us – and then it flows back again. I know a great part of myself is in the clothes I choose to wear. I've a great respect for *things*! One's self – for other people – is one's expression of oneself; and one's house, one's furniture, one's garments, the books one reads, the company one keeps – these things are all expressive.<sup>83</sup>

One would expect a highly controlled, materialistic character like Madam Merle to be very much in control of such signifiers of success, and she is: to the point where Isobel describes her as 'a vivid image of success'.<sup>84</sup> This level of control is the acme of success in Victorian material culture for women and

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<sup>83</sup> James, p.253.

<sup>84</sup> James, p.252.

for men, but novels tend to present it as moral failure: a state in which women lose their sense of self and their consciences. As a signifier of success, Madam Merle, according to James, ‘was [...] too perfectly the social animal [...] she existed only in her relations, direct and indirect, with her fellow mortals. One might wonder what commerce she could possibly hold with her own spirit’.<sup>85</sup> In this description, she is truly a signifier, a collection of symbols of success, with no soul to be signified.

Early exchanges between Isobel and Madam Merle read as an argument James is having with himself about female success, with Isobel as the moral and Madam Merle as the material side. Madam Merle implicitly suggests that to signify success in material culture is to be corrupted by it. She describes herself as a porcelain pot:

‘I flatter myself that I’m rather stout, but [...] I’ve been shockingly chipped and cracked. I do very well for service yet, because I’ve been cleverly mended; and I try to remain in the cupboard – the quiet dusky cupboard where there’s an aroma of stale spices – as much as I can. But when I come out into a strong light – then my dear, I’m a horror!’<sup>86</sup>

I suggest that the ‘cupboard’ that Madam Merle attempts to ‘remain in’ is a direct inversion of the idea of the private, domestic sphere as the correct place of a woman. Madam Merle is at pains to suggest her own wonderings and that

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<sup>85</sup> James, p.244.

<sup>86</sup> James, p.245.



‘a woman perhaps can get on; a woman it seems to me, has no natural place anywhere, where ever she finds herself she has to remain on the surface and more or less to crawl’.<sup>87</sup> This is a somewhat baffling statement in the context of Victorian ideologies that located successful women as wives and mothers in the context of a home. I suggest that this statement refers to ‘successful’ women who use objects to demonstrate that they have wealth and social status. These women have constantly to demonstrate their ‘success’ which requires life in the public, social, sphere. For Madam Merle this entails a peripatetic life visiting country houses and travelling across Europe: the opposite of the ‘Angel in the House’ sequestered in her drawing room. (There is also the point that, depending on its design, a cupboard can be a place of storage or of exhibit.) This kind of exhibitionism is described by Merle as ‘crawling’ because, while it might enable women to survive, even flourish, it corrupts morally. Paradoxically the cupboard is society, ‘stale’ but still with the opulent allure of ‘spices’. A successful woman’s moral faults can remain well hidden in this social environment. ‘Light’ is the scrutiny of the novel.

The very real possibilities of entrapment offered to women by those signifiers of success - marriage and material culture - suggest why heroines of realist novels in the Victorian period tend to be rather badly dressed and increasingly self-consciously so. Dorothea Brooke, Isobel Archer are morally pure heroines who attempt to signify that purity by their lack of interest in fashion. However, detachment from materialism is shown to be morally good but a little ridiculous and almost impossible to maintain, and blitheness in the face of the material world is shown to be dangerously naive. Isobel Archer claims:

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<sup>87</sup> James, p.248.

‘I don’t know whether I succeed in expressing myself, but I know that nothing else expresses me. Nothing that belongs to me is any measure of me; everything’s on the contrary a limit, a barrier and a perfectly arbitrary one. [...] the clothes, which [...], I choose to wear, [...] may express my dressmaker but they don’t express me; [...] it’s not my own choice that I wear them; they’re imposed upon me by society.’<sup>88</sup>

Dorothea Brooke, despite her plain sleeves, falls victim to the first material temptation in the novel: the sensual allure of her later mother’s emeralds. In neither *Middlemarch* nor *The Portrait of a Lady* are the complications of being yourself as a woman, representing yourself and fitting that self into the world, resolved. Isobel exits the novel with the choice of returning to her husband or becoming a fallen woman. The good that Dorothea does is ‘incalculably diffuse’. In answer to Isobel’s statement that her clothes do not represent her: ‘should you prefer to go without them?’<sup>89</sup> Madam Merle enquired in ‘a tone which virtually terminated the discussion’<sup>90</sup>. It would be interesting to know what this ‘tone’ was: bitterness, humour, lightness? I contend that James ‘terminates’ the discussion because he does not have an answer himself. One cannot exist outside this culture of demonstrable material success but how do women exist well within it? Madam Merle and James’s definition of success for women, or at least heroines, also seem to have much in common, judging by the plot. ‘Her [Madam Merle’s] definition

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<sup>88</sup> James, p.253.

<sup>89</sup> James, p.253.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

of success had been very pretty, yet frightfully sad. Measured in that way, who had ever succeeded? The dreams of one's youth, they were enchanting, they were divine! Who had ever seen such things come to pass?'<sup>91</sup>

In the case of James, one might suggest that he did not really wish them to come to pass. In his review of *Middlemarch* he claims, 'we believe in [Dorothea] as in a woman we might providentially meet some fine day when we should find ourselves doubting of the immortality of the soul'.<sup>92</sup> This suggests that the suffering of female characters in novels performs an almost Christ-like function of redemption in the novel, through the sacrifice of worldly desires in the secular morality that was growing in authority in the mid-Victorian era, Victorian heroines make the world feel like a better place.

Such spiritual consolation, for the reader, has to be contextualised within a competing ideology of success for women that demanded that they transcend material culture and the idea of success entirely. Coventry Patmore's *The Angel in the House* (1854) claims that the perfect woman:

She fails

More graciously than he succeeds.

Her spirit, compact of gentleness,

If Heaven postpones or grants her prayer,

Conceives no pride in its success,

And in its failure no despair;

[...] She grows

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<sup>91</sup> James, p.252.

<sup>92</sup> Henry James, review of *Middlemarch* in the *Galaxy* (March 1873), reprinted in *The Nineteenth-Century Novel: A Critical Reader*, ed. by Stephen Regan, 79-85 (p.80).

More infantine, auroral, mild,  
 And still the more she lives and knows <sup>93</sup>

The morally ‘successful’ woman, here, opts out of the whole culture of material success and failure in society. Total passivity, in contrast to masculine action, brings her moral authority, an opportunity that James significantly offers Isobel Archer at the end of the novel – to return to her husband – but does not actually make explicit. James’s answer to Isobel’s being a moral success is bleak; she must remain within her marriage and attempt to make a success of it but without compromising her integrity. The prospect of returning to her husband but retaining this integrity allies Isobel with Coventry Patmore’s ‘Angel in the House’: Isobel will become a source of moral beauty rather than a success in her own right but, unlike Patmore’s verse, the realism of the novel compels James to show that the emotional cost to his heroine will be terrible.

Realist novels take the experience of marriage, widely represented as the pinnacle of success for women, and expose what it could mean for them at its worst: when a lack of love or chivalry laid the foundations of legal cruelty and commodification bare. Sensation novels, such as Wilkie Collins’s *The Woman in White* (1859-60), make explicit perils of murder, incarceration, fraud and violence that women were potentially subject to upon marriage. Realist novels usually leave these threats implicit and frequently the effect of their echoing silence, combined with the skilful use of material objects, leads to a far greater sense of the psychological violence done to women than when husbands’ cruelty is woven into ‘sensational’ plots.

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<sup>93</sup> Coventry Patmore, *The Angel in the House*, 4th edn (1854; London: Macmillan, 1866), p.28.

Given the jaundiced view that Dickens offers of society's view of marriage, it is perhaps unsurprising that weddings in realist novels get short shrift. Jane Eyre's and Rochester's first wedding is a dramatic disaster, their second, like Dickens's Wemmick's wedding, is pointedly quiet. The fashionable wedding of the Lammles in *Our Mutual Friend* is a barbed criticism of such events. All this at a time when middle and upper class weddings in real life were becoming increasingly commercialised. Queen Victoria's wedding solidified the position of the wedding dress, flowers and veil. Newspapers and magazines and the invention of photography meant that the press could and did cover fashionable weddings in increasing detail. Such weddings were also more visible. Aristocratic families frequently eschewed their right to a special licence and a private ceremony in favour of a large church wedding. The dramatic figure of the aristocratic bride thus became a more public one. According to John Cordy Jeaffreson, who published a history of weddings in 1872, 'the innocent delight taken by womenkind in the graceful display of bridal finery' and 'love of picturesque ostentation'<sup>94</sup> was partly responsible for these public, fashionable weddings. (The book went through two editions and ten printings in two years, demonstrating its considerable popularity). The garnering of more and more attractive objects around weddings emphasised its role as the acme of moral and material success: where emotional, physical and material needs were conjoined, sanctified and celebrated. The novel, however (which, like weddings, claimed women as its dominant consumer), remained obstinately silent on the event itself.

What we get instead in the novel are a series of gruesome parallels with what ought to be some of the happiest moments of a new bride's experiences. In *The Portrait of a Lady*, when Isobel Archer makes her debut as a 'successful' and unhappy married woman, we almost literally feel the weight

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<sup>94</sup> John Cordy Jeaffreson, *Brides and Bridals*, 2 vols (London: Hurst and Blackett, 1872), i, p.65.

of material culture bearing down on her. Magazines and newspapers began increasingly to show pictures of the bride alone (in order to better show off her dress) (see FIGS 8 and 9). I suggest that Isobel Archer's debut in the novel as an unhappily married rich wife can be seen as a parody of such an image. In a clear allusion to the book's title, the naive Ned Rosier sees Isobel as Osmond's wife for the first time: 'framed in the gilded doorway, she struck our young man as the picture of a gracious lady'.<sup>95</sup> The simple black dresses of Isobel's girlhood, representing a slightly ascetic but uncomplicated relationship with the material world, vanish. Isobel has found that she cannot wear her clothes or her money lightly or naturally; she has lost her easy belief that she can use material culture to reflect who she is to the world. 'She was dressed in black velvet, she looked high and splendid.'<sup>96</sup> This miserable wife in black velvet is the antithesis of a happy bride in white. There are even troubling echoes of bridal costume:

Her light step drew a mass of drapery behind it: her intelligent head sustained a majesty of ornament. The keen, free girl had become quite another person; what he saw was a fine lady who was supposed to represent something. What did Isobel represent? [...] She represented Gilbert Osmond. 'Good heavens what a function!'<sup>97</sup>

The mass of drapery that literally keeps Isobel from running alludes not only to the fashionable costume of the day but to the train of a wedding dress. As such it reminds us how utterly entrapping marriage was legally. The

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<sup>95</sup> James, p.418.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> James, p.444.

‘intelligent head [which] sustained a majesty of ornament’ suggests the veil and orange blossom that was presumably there so recently and has clearly been replaced with longer-lasting jewellery. A wedding is fleeting: marriage is permanent. If the proponents of Victorian marriage liked to present weddings as moral sentiments attractively packaged in commodities, James’s image evokes the legal cruelty of marriage, given literal weight by material things. That sense of the weight of material culture pressing down on Isobel’s physical body and intelligence emphasizes the extent to which Osmond will *not* need to invoke the law to trap his wife and make her his possession. Victorian material culture and the culture of expectation it produces will do much of the job for him, trapping Isobel into the image of success: the portrait of a lady.

This beginning of married life is Isobel’s moral nadir; she tries to be a good wife and briefly appears in danger of becoming not just like Osmond, but his object, *something*. This is now her ‘function’ in the system signifying success: she has become a ‘thingummy’. Once Isobel has made her ‘choice’ of marrying Osmond the question in the novel is how can she combine being a moral individual with being a dutiful signifier of success as part of Osmond’s collection of beautiful things? There are hints throughout the novel that Isobel will triumph as a moral being, although not enough for us to be certain. Madam Merle says of Isobel ‘It’s very true that I don’t see you crawling: you stand more upright than a good many poor creatures. [...] I don’t think you’ll crawl’.<sup>98</sup> Isobel, she suggests, is too morally ‘upright’ to bend herself to becoming solely a signifier in the culture of success. James gives this dilemma a political twist: the wealth that her husband ‘successfully’ acquired was once hers and was acquired by marrying her. (The novel came

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<sup>98</sup> James, p.248.

out in 1880-1, just prior to the crucial Married Woman's Property Act of 1882 that gave a woman separate legal status from her husband.)

*Daniel Deronda* is in many ways a precursor to *The Portrait of a Lady*. Gwendolen's first public appearance, like Isobel's is very deliberately 'framed', echoing the triumphant procession of the bride and groom down the aisle:

The scene was one to set off any figure of distinction that entered it, and certainly when Mr and Mrs Grandcourt entered, no beholder could deny their figures had distinction. [...] It was to be supposed that [the bridegroom] would put up with nothing less than the best in outward equipment, wife included; and the wife on his arm was what he might have been expected to choose.<sup>99</sup>

Gwendolen, the girl who always thought that she would be able to choose to do as she liked, has truly been reduced to a commodity: not only has she been 'bought', but the phrase 'what he might have been expected to choose' objectifies her ('what' not 'who') and, commodity-like, she could have been one of a number of other beautiful, spirited women (the figure of Mrs Glasher hovers over this question of choice) who could have fulfilled Grandcourt's need for sex, an heir and a delightful object on his arm.

Gwendolen's developing sense that she has become an object and a failure in every aspect of her life is brutally proved in her brief struggle with

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<sup>99</sup> Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, p.348.



Grandcourt (all the more brutal for not being physical) over whether she should wear the Grandcourt diamonds. Gwendolen presents herself as an object that could be altered to her husband's taste. 'Am I altogether as you like?' [...] 'Oh, mercy!' [...] 'How am I to alter myself?'.<sup>100</sup> The coquettish remark is in tune with how a good Victorian wife might present herself to her husband, flirtatiously, as his to do with as he likes. Eliot explores the cruel realities when a husband really does treat his wife like this and that reality is the anatomy of a failed marriage:

'Put on the diamonds,' said Grandcourt, looking straight at her with his narrow glance. [...] 'Oh, please not. I don't think diamonds suit me.'

'What you think has nothing to do with it,' said Grandcourt, his *sotto voce* imperiousness seeming to have an evening quietude and finish, like his toilet.<sup>101</sup>

Gwendolen, as I discuss further in Chapter Three, has always thought of objects as a means by which to represent a successful image of herself so that she may 'appear under conditions of importance' and appear 'remarkable'. Here it is made brutally clear that she is not to represent herself or her tastes: she is the signifier not the signified, a thingummy whose job is to represent her husband's achievement and tastes. There is also a subversive twist, for Grandcourt is not morally a gentleman, gentle, chivalrous and kind; through

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<sup>100</sup> Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, pp.365.

<sup>101</sup> Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, p.365-6.

‘toilet’ and manners, he is a hollowed-out signifier of the idea of the gentleman, superficially devastatingly polite, ‘correct’ and languid. Society expects Grandcourt to be the signified and there is little to represent; however as a man, a ‘gentleman’ and a husband he has formidable legal power behind him. The full potential of the physiological and potential physical violence that Grandcourt could legally exercise if he chose is made clear on Gwendolen’s full realisation of the truth of her situation:

‘He delights in making the dogs and horses quail: that is half his pleasure in calling them his,’ she said to herself, as she opened the jewel-case with a shivering sensation. ‘It will come to be so with me; and I shall quail. What else is there for me? I will not say to the world, “pity me”’.<sup>102</sup>

‘Quailing’ and ‘crawling’: there are echoes of Madam Merle here (whose position is not dissimilar to Lydia Glasher’s). Faced with degradation, a proud woman can only attempt to put a good face on it ‘I will not say to the world “pity me”’. If Mrs Merdle’s representative bosom and Madam Merle’s ‘crawling’ across life is the end of the process of a woman being turned into an object to signify success, Gwendolen is the beginning; a woman whose recognition of her situation offers the heart-breaking possibility of moral redemption even as it appears to be slipping away from her. Eliot implies that the jewels act as manacles, Grandcourt as knowing jailer:

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<sup>102</sup> Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, p.366.

‘You want someone to fasten them,’ he said, coming toward her.

She did not answer, but simply stood still, leaving him to take out the ornaments and fasten them as he would. Doubtless he had been used to fasten them on someone else. With a bitter sort of sarcasm against herself, Gwendolen thought, ‘What a privilege this is, to have robbed another woman of!’<sup>103</sup>

Such is Gwendolen’s journey from spirited girl to passive signifier: Grandcourt’s interchangeable thingummy. This is ‘success’ that Gwendolen has ‘robbed’ another woman of.

Bitterly sensible now of herself as an object, Gwendolen uses herself as such to signal that she is more than the social and economic success which the Grandcourt diamonds signal to the world. She uses the necklace that Deronda redeemed from the pawnshop at the start of the novel as a private signal to him of moral dilemmas.

By now the reader, knowing the histories of both sets of jewellery, understands that the meanings attached to objects are slippery things. The diamonds, which have been ‘bequeathed’ to Gwendolen by Lydia Glasher, and the turquoise necklace, that belonged to Gwendolen’s father and was pawned and redeemed, have a multitude of meanings. Gwendolen is venturing into dangerous territory using her jewellery/herself to express her anguish and admiration to Deronda. Her attempt to signal her feelings fails, because there are *too many meanings* to be telegraphed through objects and Deronda misunderstands:

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

He thought that he understood well her action in drawing his attention to the necklace: she wished him to infer that she had submitted her mind to rebuke – her speech and manner had from the first fluctuated toward that submission – and that she felt no lingering resentment. Her evident confidence in his interpretation of her appealed to him as a peculiar claim.<sup>104</sup>

Grandcourt understands her meaning, perhaps better than Gwendolen herself, because, as the sadistic episode with the diamonds shows, he understands how objects work in the culture of success and that this one has temporarily eluded his control:

‘Oblige me in future by not showing whims like a mad woman in a play.’ [...] ‘I suppose there is some understanding between you and Deronda about that thing you have on your wrist. [...] don't carry on a telegraphing which other people are supposed not to see. It's damnably vulgar.’ [...] ‘What I care to know, I shall know without your telling me. Only you will please to behave as becomes my wife. And not make a spectacle of yourself.’ [...] ‘Only fools go into that

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<sup>104</sup> Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, p.381.

deaf and dumb talk, and think they're secret. [...] Behave with dignity. That's all I have to say.'<sup>105</sup>

Grandcourt's anger that Gwendolen has briefly eluded her role as his passive signifier is crushing in its dismissal of Gwendolen's feeling and very character: emotions are 'whims', desperate attempts to communicate are mere 'spectacle'. 'Dignity' is nothing less than total self-abnegation – with nice clothes. The reference to a 'mad woman in a play' is a deadly threat. There would be nothing, in terms of law, or literary trope, to stop Grandcourt confining Gwendolen in a mental asylum, as men such as Bulwer Lytton did, and literary villains such as *The Woman in White*'s Sir Percival Glyde. Only the correct signification of success through material things will keep Gwendolen safe. Her position is not only horrible but legally, politically and mentally dangerous.

However, Grandcourt's mistake is to believe that he has absolute control of the signification of objects, or indeed his wife. *Daniel Deronda* is a profound exploration of the failure of individuals to control the meanings that objects send out, despite, or because of the passivity of those objects. There are too many conflicting histories, too many other individuals 'reading' meanings or trying create meanings for any one to dominate totally. In the context of a culture that liked to control women and objects and limit their meanings to broadcasting economic, social and, often as a poor third, moral success, this was a deeply subversive thing to suggest.

Jewels hold a particularly charged and ambivalent role in relation to nineteenth-century object culture and domesticity. They were, in John Plotz's word, eminently 'portable': respectably able to slip in and out of the domestic

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<sup>105</sup> Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, p.383-4.

sphere, yet having very ‘feminine’ connotations. The sudden eruption of diamonds into Gwendolen’s life on her wedding night emphasise an object’s ability to act as a conduit for the bile and vengeance of other characters, like Lydia Glasher, who might otherwise have been kept at bay by the physical barriers and social conventions surrounding the domestic sphere. Jewels can be easily moved and they are slippery with multiple meanings: a generous wedding gift redolent of promised financial security and the fulfilment of sexual desire to Grandcourt is both a ‘curse’ and the beginning of wisdom for Gwendolen.

In *Daniel Deronda* diamonds have meaning precisely because of their past: their possession by Grandcourt’s mistress. Had it been possible, and Eliot shows that it is not, for Gwendolen to view the diamonds purely in the present, within the home, Eliot implies that there was a very real chance of happiness for Gwendolen and Grandcour:

He had expected to see her dressed and smiling, ready to be led down.

He saw her pallid, shrieking as it seemed with terror, the jewels scattered around her on the floor. Was it a fit of madness? *In some form or other the furies had crossed his threshold*.<sup>106</sup>

They have done so because of the object’s history outside the home. There is also the troubling implication of ‘some form or other’. The phrase makes the domestic sphere seem very fragile under this assault that is both psychological and material, as I explore further in Chapter Three.

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<sup>106</sup> Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, p.303. [my italics.]

### 1.6: The Culture of Success – and Successful Women.

As I have shown, the culture of signifying success was antithetical to women actually achieving much in their own right. In this section I explore what the culture of success did with potentially troublesome images of two ‘successful’ women in Victorian culture, Queen Victoria and Florence Nightingale. I argue that they were successful both in achieving something, and because of the way Victorian society (not without help from them) was able to co-opt them as signifiers of the wider Victorian conception of success. I contrast this with Charlotte Brontë’s *Villette*, which I interpret as an attempt to express the problems of reconciling material and moral success for women in the nineteenth century in the context of all-too-real problems: poverty, physical frailty and loneliness. Lucy Snowe begins life as an adult without money or love: ‘to myself alone could I look’.<sup>107</sup> By the end of the novel she is a successful woman with a home and a business, a school, in contrast to Brontë’s own failure to start a school. Achievement for a woman in her own right emerges as a powerful, problematic concept and the culture of materialised moral success as a formidable means of diluting it.

One of the stories covered most prominently in the first issue of the *Illustrated London News* in 1842 was ‘Her Majesty’s Bal Masque’; Queen Victoria’s Costume Ball at which she and Albert appeared as Edward the Third and Queen Philippa. The costumes emphasised traditional gender roles, with Albert cast as the warlike, virile monarch and Victoria as his supportive and fertile queen. The ‘masque’ was not the first or last time that Victoria and Albert would use clothes to transcend the awkward realities of the imbalance of power in their relationship.

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<sup>107</sup> Charlotte Brontë, *Villette*, ed. by Tony Tanner (1853; London: Penguin, 1985), p.95

On May 1<sup>st</sup> 1851, Victoria presented herself to her subjects as the ultimate female signifier, not only of her husband's success but of national success at the opening of the Great Exhibition (a subject that I address directly in the next chapter). It was, of course, not Victoria, but Albert who had worked so hard to bring the event about and the day that he made the seemingly impossible leap from unpopular foreign prince to a successful man in his own right – and a truly successful Victorian man needed a suitably adulatory wife. 'This day is one of the greatest and most glorious days of our lives, with which, to my pride and joy the name of my dearly beloved Albert is for ever associated!'<sup>108</sup> Even in her diaries, Victoria seems at pains to produce the requisite submissive admiration of a doting wife.

Victoria's role at the event was very much as a wife and a spectator. She opened the event, an official role that made her a signifier of success rather than an active creator of it. Queen and Consort presented themselves to the crowd as if they were a 'normal' middle-class family, 'Albert, leading me; having Vicky at his hand, and Bertie holding mine'<sup>109</sup> (see FIG 10). While Albert wore military uniform, Victoria's ruffled pink dress spoke of extravagant femininity (see FIG 11) and, crucially, could have been worn by any wifely 'signifier' of a Victorian husband's success. Furthermore, the presence of the royal children demonstrated Victoria's impressive fecundity. The presence of the young Prince of Wales implicitly emphasised Victoria's role as 'intermediate to a satisfactory heir', in Eliot's phrase. The Great Exhibition then might be seen as the apogee of success for Victoria as a popular Queen.

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<sup>108</sup> Queen Victoria's Journal, transcription Princess Beatrice, 111 vols (1832-1901) [www.queenvictoriasjournals.org](http://www.queenvictoriasjournals.org), xxxi, (1851), p.211. [accessed 9/10/14]

<sup>109</sup> Queen Victoria's Journal, [www.queenvictoriasjournals.org](http://www.queenvictoriasjournals.org), xxxi (1851), p.213. [accessed 9/10/14]



In stark contrast the Queen's image in later years as 'the widow of Windsor' is often presented as her nadir, with her refusal to play a public role as monarch marking her as a failure as Queen. A.N. Wilson, however, has argued persuasively that the years after Albert's death were more successful than have been previously portrayed. 'Her marriage [...] had infantilised her. She had become so used to his being the one who made the chief political decisions.'<sup>110</sup> However, Wilson emphasises that 'even in the immediate years after she was widowed, although she withdrew from much of public life, she continued to play a daily and active role in the political affairs of Europe'.<sup>111</sup> 'For a broken-hearted widow who is written off by so many biographers as a mental 'case' during this period, she was doing rather well at restraining Palmerston and Russell's last gasps at Whiggish gung-ho foreign policy.'<sup>112</sup>

This suggests, I contend, that Albert's death facilitated the Queen's transition from a conventional feminine signifier of success to a woman who achieved a degree of success in her own right. In this context, what really upset her ministers was her refusal to be a living symbol: to wear the brightly-coloured robes of state and open parliament. She refused to move much in the public sphere: to open events and give balls as a female signifier of success should. Victoria (in her dull black clothes like any bank clerk (see FIG 12) worked, reading briefs, advising ministers and visiting German royals; one might say she worked like a (male) civil servant. The point is not how successful she was but that she worked like a successful man.

Charlotte Brontë, who wrote *Villette* soon after having attended the Great Exhibition, did not live to see Victoria as a widow. Her own physical frailty and death during pregnancy made her the antithesis of the robustly healthy and fertile Victoria and barred her, as much as genteel poverty might have

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<sup>110</sup> A. N. Wilson, *Victoria: A Life* (London: Atlantic Books, 2014), p.259.

<sup>111</sup> Wilson, p.263.

<sup>112</sup> Wilson, p.282.

done, from becoming a signifier of success: a well-to-do wife and mother. *Villette* and Brontë's letters are heavy with this sense of failure. By the end of her visit to London in 1851, when she visited the Crystal Palace, Brontë had reached a sad conclusion of her own:

I cannot boast that London has agreed with me well this time; the oppression of frequent headache, sickness and a low tone of spirits, has poisoned many moments which might otherwise have been pleasant. Sometimes I have felt this hard and been tempted to murmur at fate, which condemns me to comparative silence and solitude for eleven months of the year, and in the twelfth, while offering social enjoyment, takes away the vigour and cheerfulness that could turn it to account. But circumstances are ordered for us and we must submit.<sup>113</sup>

Physically frail, burdened with depression and beleaguered by the responsibility of living with her ageing father, Brontë acknowledged that she was physically, mentally and socially unable to take part in the success culture surrounding the Exhibition. Her sense of exclusion, personal and physical failure, surely found outlet in contorted Lucy Snowe. Brontë was, of course, a successful woman, a writer, with a love, as I show in Chapter Two, of clothes and interior design, the very things used to create a signifier of success. *Villette* gives commodities a place as objects that give pleasure as

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<sup>113</sup> Clement King Shorter, *The Brontës: Life and Letters*, 2 vols (1908; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), ii, p.220.

well as status, but it also attempts to create a role for a woman with few 'marriage prospects' who nonetheless needs emotional and financial security.

The image of pink dresses in Brontë's work suggests her evolving view of what constituted female success and its pitfalls and that consumer culture had influenced and complicated her vision more than she may have wanted to admit. *Jane Eyre* contains a disturbing little scene in which the child, Adèle, appears wearing a pink satin frock, described in detail, given to her by Rochester, 'a miniature of Celine Varens' (his former actress-lover). As she kneels to thank him prettily, even saying 'C'est comme cela Maman faisait, n'est-ce pas, monsieur?',<sup>114</sup> the image of a childish desire for presents and a commoditised sexuality are troublingly fused. Among the many warning signs that all will not be well when Rochester first tries to marry Jane is when he attempts to buy her 'a superb pink satin'<sup>115</sup> dress which Jane successfully resists because she sees herself as becoming 'a jay in false plumage'<sup>116</sup> and losing her individuality. Fashion and commodities tend to have negative connotations in *Jane Eyre*. (The horrible Miss Ingram is very fashionable.) In *Villette*, however, commodities are far more seductive and the impression is not that enjoying them is a conduit to moral failings but that the admission that one might, in other circumstances, have enjoyed them is too painful to be processed. Lucy clearly loves her pink dress but can hardly bear to look at herself in the mirror, noting of her reflection only, 'it might have been worse'.<sup>117</sup>

The insistence on Lucy's smallness and plainness in the novel almost certainly represents Charlotte Brontë's bitter personal experience and can be seen as part of an attempt to address a practical flaw in the nineteenth

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<sup>114</sup> Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, p. 140.

<sup>115</sup> Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, p.266.

<sup>116</sup> Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, p.258.

<sup>117</sup> Brontë, *Villette*, p.286.

century's conventional vision of female success. What if a woman is physically frail, making marriage not the summation of moral, emotional, and (hopefully) economic and social success but a potential death sentence in the rigours of childbirth?

*Villette* is full of images of voluptuous, rich women; all forms of greed conflated. In front of the picture of a large woman, 'Cleopatra', Lucy the solitary onlooker in an art gallery, dwells on 'that *affluence of flesh*':

It represented a woman, considerably larger, [...] than the life. [...] extremely well fed [...] to attain that breadth and height, that affluence of flesh. She lay half-reclined [...] although she appeared in hearty health, strong enough to do the work of two plain cooks; she could not plead a weak spine [...]. She had no business to lounge away the noon on a sofa. She ought likewise to have worn decent garments; a gown covering her properly [...] out of an abundance of material [...] she managed to make insufficient raiment.<sup>118</sup>

Here then is another 'portrait of a lady', a sign of success: she does not need to work, she is well-fed, clad (inadequately according to Lucy) in fashionable drapery, surrounded by material abundance, 'a perfect rubbish of flowers'<sup>119</sup> but she is nameless; 'The Cleopatra' suggests a generic sex-object, she is just a portrait. Lucy's reaction reflects the jealous anger of a woman teetering on

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<sup>118</sup> Brontë, *Villette*, p.275. [my italics]

<sup>119</sup> Ibid

the brink of failure, with little money and few friends or prospects. All the material signifiers of success – clothes, flowers, even fat – are snubbed by Lucy, reduced in yards and pounds to the commodities that both the objects and the woman are. But *Villette*'s constant, often spiteful, focus on big, healthy women may also represent a bitter musing on Brontë's own physical failings.

*Villette* emphasises the extent to which the ideal of a woman as a signifier of success, with goodness, a happy marriage, endless maternal fulfilment and lots of pretty dresses thrown in (to be provided by an adoring husband), is a fairy-tale conception; a wilful confusion of morality and materiality. The success that she constructs for Lucy Snowe is a determinedly realistic affair. Paul gives her a house and a career and they acknowledge their love for each other but cannot marry because Paul has to go to the Caribbean. It is not exactly a happy ending but Brontë gives Lucy a few happy few years when her life has some form of balance:

The secret of my success did not lie so much in myself [...] as in [...] a wonderfully changed life, a relieved heart. At parting, I had been left a legacy [...] such motive for persevering [...] I *could* not flag. Do not think that this genial flame [...] lived wholly on bequeathed hope or a parting promise. A generous provider supplied bounteous fuel. I was spared all chill, all stint; I was not suffered to fear penury; I was not tried with suspense. By every vessel he wrote; he wrote as he gave and as he loved, in full-handed, full-hearted plenitude.<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> Brontë, *Villette*, p.594.

This epistolary relationship suggests that success for a woman requires love, material support and a wholesome protestant work ethic. Her description either offers a very material metaphor for love or hints broadly that Paul's voluminous love letters contain money: emotional and material sustenance in one. Lucy has love but none of the risks, freedom but less of the loneliness and financial security in imminently respectable form. In the context of the novel's discussion of success and failure for women there really is no doubt that Paul Emmanuel dies. He and Lucy cannot be allowed to marry and undo Lucy's professional successes, or perhaps, the ideal nature of the love that has built up between them in Paul's absence. Sex might threaten not just Lucy's autonomy but her life. Ultimately then, home, things, the pretty china that Paul bought for her, come to demonstrate Lucy's success. Material culture becomes both the symbol of her love and of her material and professional success as a headmistress with Paul's emotional and financial support.

Two years after *Villette* was published, the public found a 'real' heroine who worked, did not marry and was far more likeable (though often no less sharp-tongued) than Lucy Snowe. Florence Nightingale balanced an image of moral and material success with an undoubted ability to take her place in the wider world. The defining phrase 'The Lady with the lamp' evokes an image of secular sainthood with an easily recognisable image that would pass into popular and material culture. The image of soldiers kissing her shadow on the wall as it moved past them brilliantly feminises the public sphere of hospital work, making it appear an intimate, almost domesticated, space.

The famous description of Florence Nightingale stems from an anonymous drawing in *The Illustrated London News* in February 1855 (see FIG 13). Nightingale's biographer Mark Bostridge points out that, less than a year earlier, Holman Hunt's painting 'Christ the Light of the World' had appeared

to a massive but mixed reception <sup>121</sup> but the image of the maternal Lady with the Lamp may be even more generic than that. In 1852 a cartoon ‘Mrs England setting her House in Order’ features a chatelaine with a bunch of keys at her waist urging John Bull to ‘pay the Bill’ (the reform bill). Not only was the image of a woman skilled at the feminine arts of household management setting England’s ‘house’ in order one that had popular appeal, but the woman looks strikingly like the easily recognised image of Florence Nightingale (see FIG 14). As far as her public image was concerned, it is easy to conclude, rather cynically, that if Florence Nightingale had not existed, England’s press would have felt bound to invent her.

This powerful need for an Angel ‘Out of the House’ to mother Britain created an image of maternal gentleness and saintliness that obscured much of what actually made Nightingale materially successful. Her real work, the work that built hospitals and provisioned armies and saved thousands of lives, was not as a nurse herself, but as a political lobbyist, statistician and formidable organiser. Her duties as a nurse at Scutari were not her full role. Nightingale’s sister Parthenope wrote, ‘the [...] public [...] generally imagine her by the soldier’s bedside, where doubtless she is often to be found, but as she herself said, how satisfactory, how easy if that were all’.<sup>122</sup> Nightingale herself wrote, ‘I am really cook, housekeeper, scavenger [...] washerwoman, general dealer, store-keeper’.<sup>123</sup> Ironically, the demands of modern warfare required just the kinds of skills that the angel in the house required but on a massive, indeed international, scale and the British army and its support staff proved itself epically unable to provide such services. The domestic sphere suddenly went international and military.

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<sup>121</sup> Mark Bostridge, *Florence Nightingale: The Woman and her Legend* (London: Penguin, 2009), p.239.

<sup>122</sup> Quoted in Bostridge, p.230.

<sup>123</sup> Quoted in Bostridge, p.229.

Nightingale's success at times required a most unfeminine ruthlessness. In her early days at Scutari, she outflanked her adversaries in the army medical core who were opposed to her presence: 'co-operating' with the doctors, to the fury of her nurses, she refused to release any of her desperately-needed supplies without their orders. Then, after the disaster of the battle of Inkerman, doctors were forced to beg for them. A nurse, Selina Bracebridge wrote to Nightingale's mother:

Yesterday I shall never forget, 600 wounded from Sebastopol [...] It was 5 o'clock before a bit of lint could be provided except what we had [...] Many of the officials lost their heads – crying out to Flo 'you must make requisition for this & that' and not knowing what to do.<sup>124</sup>

This finally bought Nightingale power to carry out reform in the military hospitals but the idea of her standing by whilst men died in agony around her is entirely antithetical to the public image of 'the Lady with the Lamp'.

Queen Victoria recognised Nightingale's fitness for the world of masculine success, the public sphere, when she made her often-quoted remark 'I wish we had her at the war office'.<sup>125</sup> However, when she made a public presentation to Nightingale it was of a thoroughly feminine present of a diamond brooch (designed by Prince Albert) with 'blessed are the merciful' engraved on it. Mercy was not a quality much in demand at the war office: competence was. Nightingale's brooch might be seen as typifying the socially

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<sup>124</sup> Quoted in Bostridge, p.226.

<sup>125</sup> Quoted in Lytton Strachey, *Eminent Victorians*, ed. by John Sutherland, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p118.



acceptable relationship between material and moral success for women. The ideal woman was supposed to have spiritual greatness and yet, as Victoria's diamond brooch suggests, was still supposed to be passively draped in the stuff of material culture.

Ironically Nightingale literally became part of material culture herself; not just poems, articles and pictures but even models were made of her. One Staffordshire figurine even shows her (without a lamp, interestingly enough) with long flowing dark hair (see FIG 15). In reality, within weeks of arriving at Scutari, Florence Nightingale had cut off her hair and at one point, when ill, she was actually bald, but clearly the public stomach could hardly be expected to digest such images. Her feminine image literally became a commodity that could be exhibited in the home, a portrait of a lady, the angel in the house. The figurine indicated not only Nightingale's success but the moral underpinnings of the household that bought and exhibited it/her: her figure only stood in a household that had the money to buy it. Nightingale is an example of a monument to practical, social and political female success in the public sphere who was successfully co-opted back into the home through commodity culture as an exemplar of feminine morality.

In 1921 Lytton Strachey predictably dismissed Queen Victoria as 'a fixture – a magnificent, immovable sideboard in the huge saloon of state'.<sup>126</sup> However for a woman who could find the way to carry out fulfilling work, objects – pink dresses, oil lamps, china figurines – could provide valuable 'cover', making them socially acceptable by rendering them apparently more passive than they actually were. Queen Victoria as signifier of Britain, Florence Nightingale as maternal signifier of British nursing, both were socially acceptable even popular because 'feminised' by material culture into a socially acceptable image of success.

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<sup>126</sup> Lytton Strachey, *Queen Victoria: A Life* (London: I B Tauris, 2012), p.224.

Realist novels attack this culture of female signification, both by focusing on the political realities that underlay it and even providing the occasional alternative. Matthew Arnold dismissed *Villette* as ‘disagreeable [...] the writer’s mind contains nothing but hunger, rebellion and rage’<sup>127</sup> but Lucy Snowe stands as an unapologetic riposte both to the idea that a ‘successful’ woman was actually a wife signifying her husband’s success and to the tacit, socially sanctioned loophole that if a woman looked like part of the furniture, she could get anywhere.

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<sup>127</sup> Harold Bloom, *The Brontës* (1987; New York: Chelsea House Publishers 2008), p.105.



## **Chapter 2: The Stuff of Which Nations are Made: Conceptions of Success at the Great Exhibition of 1851**

### **Introduction: Making a Spectacle of Success**

The conception of success that I analysed in Chapter One clearly required individuals to be in full control of themselves and the world around them. In Chapter Two I identify the effort at the Great Exhibition of 1851 to expand this culture of successful individualism, expressed through material culture, to define national success. I demonstrate that this attempt, in this most triumphal of public spheres, had a series of profound impacts on the Victorian conception of success for the individual over the next few decades. If objects could so powerfully reflect not only a successful individual but a successful nation, why was exposure to the massed ranks of exhibits in the Crystal Palace the tumultuous experience that contemporary sources attest to?

Viewed through the lens of Victorian success, the items displayed in the Crystal Palace at the Great Exhibition of 1851 were an attempt to make the intangible doctrine of national success feel tangible, real and accessible. I contend that the ephemeral nature of the Exhibition complicated the ability, at the event and after, to use objects as ‘simple’ signifiers of moral and material, individual and national success: for the plethora of objects, only on show for six months, foregrounded questions of spectacle and circulation within the middle-class experience of objects. Using the dogmatic hothouse atmosphere of the Crystal Palace, filled with increasingly ambiguous material ‘proofs’ of success, I ask how relations between conceptions of success and spectacle impacted on the realist novel.

The Great Exhibition was undoubtedly a success – vastly popular, profitable, a cultural landmark – while conveying powerful and conflicting messages about what success actually was. When it came to success as the achievement of stated aims – such as education, global cooperation,

classification and boosting trade – the Great Exhibition only partially attained its goals. Yet how else to describe an event that sold six million tickets, raised £186,000 and gathered together one hundred thousand objects from across the globe? The questions of exactly what kind of success the Great Exhibition was, how it fitted with wider Victorian concepts of success and the subsequent effect of the discourse on the realist novel have not yet been addressed.

I suggest that it was as a ‘Crystal Palace’ – a place of grandeur and fantasy – rather than an industrial competition, ‘The Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations’, that the Great Exhibition impacted most strongly on the Victorian conception of success. It was more of an experience of spectacle than a place to educate producers and consumers, as the Royal Society of Arts had originally hoped, accentuating ideas of consumption, rather than production, as the basis of national and personal success.

I suggest that much of the Great Exhibition’s force in Victorian culture stemmed from its vanishing absence. The hugeness of the Crystal Palace itself and the fact that it was built and demolished again within two years emphasise its status in the public imagination as a massive, powerful, ephemeral ‘thing’. It endowed consumer culture with an intangible sense of spectacle and mystery. As such the Crystal Palace challenged an ideology of success that focused on the uncomplicated tangibility of objects. The event left a culture of success more powerful, more overwhelming and more complicated because it showed objects as alluring and chaotic.

According to Jeff Nunokawa ‘capital is exhibition’.<sup>1</sup> What makes the emphasis on the circulation of objects new at the Great Exhibition was the vivid material immediacy of these objects under one roof for the first time,

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<sup>1</sup> Jeff Nunokawa, *The Afterlife of Property: Domestic Security and the Victorian Novel* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1994), p.46.

witnessed by millions of people, and the massive sense of consumption *in potentia*: of the processes of circulation ‘frozen’ under glass. Thomas Richards has argued ‘the Great Exhibition made it possible to talk expressively and excessively about commodities’,<sup>2</sup> however, although prices were displayed at the exhibition, official policy banned sales. Nunokawa argues that the idea of ownership is doomed to failure because ownership can only be realised at the moment of exchange,<sup>3</sup> in this context the Crystal Palace becomes a strategy to defy that moment, to freeze the processes of exchange at their most visually powerful moment in a compelling image of success.

The conflicting senses of material mass and ephemerality that both underpinned and undercut the image of the Crystal Palace are captured in George Cruikshank’s cartoon ‘The Dispersal of the Works of All Nations From the Great Exhibition of 1851’ (see FIG 16). Within the context of Nunokawa’s argument, the cartoon captures the moment that the image of success shatters: giving a sense of pent up objects exploding out of the Crystal Palace after the exhibition is over. It is more interested in where objects would go after the Exhibition, rather than how they got there. The dazzling structure of the Crystal Place itself and the multitude of objects on show emphasized the glamour of the department store, rather than the processes of the factory. The clattering machinery, whose purposes often mystified onlookers, banged away in one corner of the Crystal Palace, where the power source was, but the allure of objects was everywhere.

By 1851 the assumption that moral and material success were linked rather than antithetical had gained ground, not least because of the vastly increased ability to reflect such a view that the Exhibition literally represented. I suggest the culture of ‘spectacle’ at the Great Exhibition had a profound effect on the

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<sup>2</sup> Thomas Richards, *The Commodity Culture of Victorian England: Advertising and Spectacle, 1851-1914* (1990; London, New York: Verso, 1991), p.21.

<sup>3</sup> Nunokawa, pp.84-5.

Victorian Reality Effect of success. This in turn suggests ways in which the realist novel struggled to accommodate this intensely visual and material construction of Victorian success, politically and formally. If the viewing experience of the Great Exhibition elided links between production and consumption, it also led to a viewing experience for the onlooker that was frequently characterized as chaotic, intense, almost hallucinatory. The ideal of successful British individuals as consumers avoided questions about moral, social and economic failures in the Victorian systems of production (Charles Dickens in particular was a novelist revolted by this, elision, as I show). The ‘exhibition novels’ of Charles Dickens and Charlotte Brontë, *Bleak House* (1852-3) and *Villette* (1853), are saturated by a sense of the self and the world as essentially disordered, fragmenting under the weight of intense materialism; in this they reflect and magnify the contradictions in the Great Exhibition’s portrayal of success.

Furthermore, novels such as Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Cranford* (1851) and George Cruikshank and Henry Mayhew’s *1851: or The Adventures of Mr and Mrs Sandboys* (1851) demonstrate the inescapability of consumer culture by the 1850s. If realist novels of the early 1850s expressed doubts about the conceptions of success displayed at the Great Exhibition, they also demonstrated the power and ubiquity of the conflicted culture of success in mid-Victorian England.

If the Great Exhibition marked a point in the nineteenth century when the concept of success became truly complicated by the spectacle of a consumer culture, it also marked a moment when the realist novel was profoundly out of tune with the culture of success. In the summer of 1851 Prince Albert, president of the event, was being feted as ‘a prince of pre-eminent wisdom, of philosophic mind, sagacity, with power of generalship and great practical

ability',<sup>4</sup> and Charles Dickens was sulking in Broadstairs beginning work on a novel (*Bleak House*) as antithetical to the Great Exhibition as he could make it, as this chapter demonstrates. The story of the novel after the exhibition is also the story of how the form re-engaged with the culture of success.

Dickens's personal capacity for pique aside, the Great Exhibition was a profoundly strange moment in nineteenth-century culture and recognised as such by many contemporaries. In the context of the changing nature of success and the wilful disregarding of social and economic failures in Britain that the event engendered, I pursue the question of why realist novelists fail to tackle the Great Exhibition directly in their work.

The response of contemporary novelists to this triumphant exhibition of things, at once hyper-real and surreal, ranged from the combative (Dickens), to admiring (Brontë), to revolted withdrawal (Gaskell), but they all faced a problem: how to write directly about an event and 'things', or a multiplicity of things, to which the only proper response was apparently amazed silence? The immediate answer is that they did not write about it directly, an omission I address directly, but the problems of it informed their fiction. Material culture, co-opted into this massive material fantasy of success, was written back into contemporary novels bearing a complex legacy of the politics of success – and failure.

If novelists did not like the cultures of success that the Exhibition attempted to represent, as I demonstrate, then they certainly made full use of them in their work. Novels such as *Cranford* and *Villette* tracked the impact of the Great Exhibition into the later 1850s and beyond. They explore the movement of objects: their capacity to be vividly present in all their sensuous materiality and to appear and disappear leaving mystification in their wake; in

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<sup>4</sup> Henry Cole, *Fifty Years of Public Work of Sir Henry Cole, K.C.B., Accounted For In His Deeds, Speeches and Writings*, 2 vols (London: Bell, 1884), i, p.116.



doing so, these novels themselves further complicated the discourse of success.

### **2.1: ‘The Sum of Individual Industry, Energy and Uprightness’: Conflating Individual and National Success in 1851.**

In his famous fund-raising speech at Mansion House in 1850, Prince Albert, President of the Great Exhibition, proclaimed:

We are living at a period of most wondrous transition, [...]. The distances which separated the different nations and parts of the globe are rapidly vanishing before the achievements of modern invention. [...] The products of all corners of the globe are placed at our disposal, and we have only to choose which is best and cheapest for our purposes, and the powers of production are entrusted to the stimulus of competition and capital.<sup>5</sup>

Albert’s ‘we’ leaves it unclear whether he means that the nation or the individual should ‘choose’, but his words suggest that both successful nations and successful individuals in the 1850s were those that could choose and acquire any ‘product of the globe’ and exploit it within the framework of free-market capitalism.

The Great Exhibition appeared to be a triumphant materialisation of the idea of the British nation as unified and globally superior, using exhibits to convey the idea that success naturally attached to Great Britain. In Chapter

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<sup>5</sup> Quoted in *The Times*, 22 March 1850, p.5.

One I analysed the Victorian belief that an individual's success can be represented by their control over the physical things of the world. Albert's speech suggests a triumphantly logical progression: why should the success of a nation (people ostensibly bound together in some form of shared culture) not be expressed in the same way: by exhibiting the objects it can 'choose' to display?

The sense conveyed in Albert's speech that the ability to conduct international trade led to almost godlike powers had already been satirised in 1848 by Dickens in *Dombey and Son*:

The earth was made for Dombey and Son to trade in, [...]. Rivers and seas were formed to float their ships; [...] stars and planets circled in their orbits, to preserve inviolate a system of which they were the centre. Common abbreviations took on new meaning in his eyes, and had sole reference to them: A. D. had no concerns with anno Domini, but stood for anno Dombei – and Son.<sup>6</sup>

Dickens mocks the idea that the sense of control that 'successful' individuals are supposed to have over their surroundings could be uncomplicatedly translated to suggest national success: the British male bestriding the globe with god-like control over material things even unto the elements. The comparison between Albert's speech and *Dombey and Son* is telling. The aspirations to power and to control of material things that characterise success

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<sup>6</sup> Charles Dickens, *Dombey and Son*, ed. by Dennis Walder (1846-8; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p.2.

for a nation in Albert's evocation look like egotistical megalomania when applied to the case of the individual. Dombey is a successful businessman and a moral failure. The sense of control over 'the products of all corners of the globe' in Albert's speech is clearly illusory in *Dombey and Son* where 'rivers and seas were formed to float their boats'.

Ian Watt has argued that one of the defining features of the novel form is 'total subordination of the plot to the pattern of the autobiographical memoir [... a] defiant [...] assertion of the primacy of individual experience in the novel'.<sup>7</sup> *Dombey and Son*'s depiction of this 'primacy of individual experience' magnifies flaws in the idea of a seamless translation between individual and national success; a process that would in turn be magnified hugely during the Great Exhibition. The event confronted realist novelists with a celebration of material success on a greater and far more immediate scale than had ever before been imaginable. Raymond Williams has argued that the 'twenty months in 1847 and 1848 in which these novels were published: *Dombey and Son*, *Wuthering Heights*, *Vanity Fair*, *Jane Eyre*, *Mary Barton*' were part of a sense of crisis which produced a 'new and major generation' of novelists.<sup>8</sup> I suggest that the unbridled celebration of bourgeois consumerism defined as national success in the years immediately following this period presented novelists with a very different but perhaps more demoralising crisis. How could the novel hope to represent an event whose success lay in both eliding the suffering in the systems of production and in characterising itself as un-representable?

In his Mansion House Speech, Albert dignifies the idea of global consumer choice with the ideological framework of a test:

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<sup>7</sup> Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding* (1957; London: Pimlico, 2000), p.15.

<sup>8</sup> Raymond Williams, *The English Novel from Dickens to Lawrence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), p.9.

Gentlemen, the Exhibition of 1851 is to give us *a true test of the point of development at which the whole of mankind has arrived* at this great task, and a new starting point from which all nations will be able to direct their further exertions.<sup>9</sup>

This conception of the Great Exhibition as a test of the state of world affairs was shared by its detractors:

Under [the] auspices [of the exhibition] the British bourgeoisie is summoning every one of its vassals from France to China to gather for a great examination at which they will have to show how they have used their time; and even the omnipotent Tsar of Russia cannot but command his subjects to appear in large numbers at this Great Test.<sup>10</sup>

Karl Marx, writing here in 1850, outlines the Great Exhibition in remarkably similar terms to Prince Albert. ‘This exhibition is a striking demonstration of the concentrated power with which modern large-scale industry is breaking down national barriers everywhere and increasingly blurring local peculiarities of production, social relations and the character of

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<sup>9</sup> *The Times*, 22 March 1850, p.5. [my italics]

<sup>10</sup> Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, ‘Review, May to October 1850’ in *Collected Works*, x, pp.490-533 (p.500).

each individual nation,'<sup>11</sup> he claimed. Like Albert, Marx saw the forces of free-trade laissez-faire capitalism dominating the globe although he clearly drew a radically different lesson from it.

In 1859 Samuel Smiles argued that 'national progress is the sum of individual industry, energy and uprightness'.<sup>12</sup> The Great Exhibition saw an influential attempt – from organisers, exhibitors, businessmen and clergymen among others – to use the Great Exhibition to justify and elucidate how the principles of individualistic success could be applied to defining a successful nation. The conception of the Great Exhibition as a competition foregrounded the moral and political framework of national success. It championed laissez-faire liberalism in which free trade and unfettered industrialisation and a burgeoning consumer society were allowed to function. It was in these unrestricted conditions that an individual was free to pursue success or find failure.

If Albert's speech was heavy with a sense of moral imperative, then the drive to justify the morals of consumerism was given impetus by the Great Exhibition. This was, of course essential if moral and material aspects of success were to be shown as unified. The 1850s saw an increasingly enthusiastic consumer society in which Christian morality remained important. The Reverend Henry Whitney Bellows preached a sermon in 1853 called 'The Moral Significance of the Crystal Palace' and claimed that luxury:

Is debilitating and demoralising only when it is exclusive; the indulgence of a class, the exception and not the rule. In that case it is

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<sup>11</sup> Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, 'Review, May to October 1850' in *Collected Works*, x, pp.490-533, (p.500).

<sup>12</sup> Smiles, *Self-Help*, p.18.

coupled with idleness, pride, and oppression. The peculiarity of the luxury of our time, and especially of our country, is its diffusive nature; it is the opportunity and the aim of large masses of our people; and this happily unites it with industry, equality and justice.<sup>13</sup>

So luxury, presumably defined by the accumulation of mass-produced goods, was given moral respectability through the fact that all British subjects were free to strive for material success.

From the 1850s to the 1880s, accelerating consumer culture rendered the material signifiers of that success increasingly unstable. In the teeth of this problem, influential Victorians continued to argue that the moral and material success of the individual could flourish under free-trade, laissez-faire capitalism and that a successful man as a citizen was the building block of a successful nation.

In 1850, the liberal *Westminster Quarterly Review* emphasised the link between international commercial competition, the road to success in the Liberal doctrine of laissez-faire free trade, and moral success in the individual. Such competition was, ‘the needful stimulus to the moral nature of man – the necessity of bringing the denizens of the whole earth’s surface in to personal communion for the purpose of exchanging their various production [...] thence grew up commerce’.<sup>14</sup> In this formulation, laissez-faire free trade provides the conditions for man to become morally and materially successful. The global scale of free trade (in an era when slower speeds of

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<sup>13</sup> Henry Whitney Bellows ‘The Moral Significance of the Crystal Palace’, quoted in Elaine Freedgood, ‘Cultures of Commodities, Cultures of Things’ in *The Victorian World*, ed. by Martin Hewitt (New York: Routledge, 2012), pp. 225-240 (p.235).

<sup>14</sup> ‘The Industrial Exhibition of 1851’, *Westminster Review*, 53 (1850), pp.85-100 (p.86).

communication inevitably guaranteed a traveller a considerable level of autonomy in any business dealings) emphasised the individualistic nature of the culture of success. Twenty-four years later, Samuel Smiles's *Thrift* was still emphasising the moral virtue of individualism based on financial success: the synthesis of moral and material success remained consistently powerful:

The desire for success in the world, and even for the accumulation of money [...] has [...] been implanted in the human heart for good rather than for evil purposes. [It] forms one of the most powerful instruments for the regeneration of society. It provides the basis for individual energy and activity. It is the beginning of maritime and commercial enterprise. It is the foundation of industry, as well as of independence. It impels men to labour, to invent, and to excel.<sup>15</sup>

Mass-production of things through new technologies for the British people, rather than by them, became central to the conception of success that relied on circulation of commodities among the middle-classes. While defending mass-produced articles against more skilfully produced and expensive ones, the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge claimed that:

The very opposite [of high artisanal skills] is the industrial characteristic of the British people; and if a choice must be made, it is

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<sup>15</sup> Samuel Smiles, *Thrift* (1875; Whitefish, Montana: Kessinger, 2010), p.56.

to be confessed that the state of that nation is best which produces the best things for its general population, rather than that which produces its costly works for a select and opulent minority.<sup>16</sup>

Thus they nicely amalgamated Christian and middle-class goals.

The majority of the exhibits at the exhibition would have been beyond the reach of most of Britain's manufacturing class. What this argument really meant was that objects previously only available to the upper classes were now available to the middle-classes. The article thus characterises a successful nation as one that can supply commodities to the middle classes. The characterisation of the bourgeoisie as 'the general population' demonstrates the extent to which success was a middle-class doctrine.

Although, as I have argued, the doctrine of middle-class success can be found in other countries (particularly France which exhibited highly successfully at the Great Exhibition) the Great Exhibition demonstrates ways in which the Victorian conception of success acquired its own particularly British flavour. Isobel Armstrong states that 'the enfolding of multiple times and histories within one another meant that heterogeneous objects with different histories occupied the same gigantic space. Rather than homogenizing objects and cultures, this produced a shock of infinite particularity, a sublime of heterogeneity'.<sup>17</sup> I suggest that the 'shock' of the Crystal Palace did in fact 'homogenize' objects. Despite the well-publicised multiplicity of nationalities exhibiting (and in the case of colonies exhibited)

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<sup>16</sup> *The Industry of Nations: As Exemplified in the Great Exhibition of 1851* (London: Society of Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1852), p.22.

<sup>17</sup> Isobel Armstrong, *Victorian Glassworlds: Glass Culture and the Imagination 1830-1880* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p.142.



at the exhibition, they did so under the auspices of Great Britain on British soil: as few contemporary Victorian accounts failed to point out. The glassed space in Hyde Park robbed objects of their previous identities and turned them all into confirmation of the ‘success’ of ‘Great Britain’, which was able to gather them there.

This located the conception of success firmly in the culture of consumption rather than production. Isobel Armstrong argues that ‘the modern exhibition *always means things out of place*. Things are always meant to be somewhere else [...] the modern exhibition’s project is the making strange of the thing and, in 1851 [...] this meant reimagining relations with things’.<sup>18</sup> I suggest that, during the exhibition, exhibits were neither quite products nor commodities. Largely divorced from the processes of production in an exhibition meant to celebrate those processes and not, officially, for sale, these out-of-place objects were in a state of exaggerated ‘thingness’: relying for their effect on their own material properties and their position as exhibits amidst other often apparently random objects.

Eric Hobsbawm argues that ‘objects or practices are liberated for full symbolic and ritual use when no longer fettered by practical use’.<sup>19</sup> At the Crystal Palace objects were essentially divested of their industrial and imperial pasts and given a new narrative: they were ‘exhibits’ of British success which that placed them there. This is particularly clear in the way that the British made use of imperial exhibits at the Crystal Palace.

The Official Catalogue of the Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of all Nations gave the names of exhibits owners’ with great care:

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<sup>18</sup> Armstrong, p.221.

<sup>19</sup> *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. by Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p.4.

2) Messrs Foster and Smith: Zobs or cotton robes from Sierra

Leone [...] knife from Gambia, [...] table mats from Gambia [...] the glass obtained by melting European beads.

[...] 5) Trotter, Capt H D (RN): Various articles of African growth and manufacture, chiefly from [...] places on the banks of the Niger<sup>20</sup>

Needless to say, the objects' 'owners' are British. The silence concerning any previous owners of the articles, combined with the detail given about how they are used, saw objects divested of their overseas past and given a new narrative. The exhibition 'demonstrated' that the British were both omniscient, knowing even the tiniest detail of the lives of those they encountered, and omnipotent: nothing was too great or too small to be brought (by them) to the Great Exhibition. All things became signifiers of British success once they were placed in the glass hothouse of national success that was the Crystal Palace.

Suzanne Daly claims that an 'Indian shawl' (an item much in demand and much on show at the Great Exhibition) is both 'exotic' in nineteenth-century Britain and a 'marker of proper Englishness'.<sup>21</sup> I would argue that, for the Victorians, this mutability was superficially united by the conceptions of success that the Exhibition attempted to define. This suggested that Britain was a success precisely because it was able to draw to itself exotic artefacts, raw materials and commodities.

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<sup>20</sup> *Official Catalogue of the Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations, Third Corrected and Improved Edition, 1st August 1851*, 3rd edn (London: Spicer Brothers, 1851), p.166.

<sup>21</sup> Suzanne Daley, 'Kashmir Shawls in the Victorian Novel' in *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 30 (2002), 237-255 (p.238).

By this reasoning, Englishness is respectable precisely because the English are the kind of people who can bring back Indian shawls from the sub-continent. Novelists in the period seem to take delight in piercing this stereotype; Charlotte Brontë's drunken Irish woman in *Villette* manages to get a job precisely because she has such a shawl and therefore looks like a respectable Englishwoman, and of course Thackeray's Becky Sharp longs for an Indian shawl although, being rapacious, flirtatious and half-French to boot, a respectable English woman is clearly the last thing she is. This rich theme in Victorian novels, in which things are not what they seem, becomes extremely political at the time of the Great Exhibition. At the Crystal Palace, many exhibitors said explicitly, and the wider layout implicitly, that things could stand for a verifiable tangible vision of British economic and moral success. The very chaotic, impressive nature of the exhibition, however, problematizes just this kind of understanding: a point developed in realist novels through their use of material things.

The Victorian Reality Effect of success is vividly present during the exhibition. In 'The Reality Effect', Barthes argues that 'Flaubert's barometer, Michelet's little door finally say nothing but this: *we are the real*'.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore Barthes saw this process of signification occurring through objects that had ostensibly defied classification. The essential failure of the classification of objects at the Crystal Palace, at least from the point of view of their being easily read by the onlooker, is crucial to the construction of success at the Crystal Palace.

The sheer scale of the event and number of exhibits (over one hundred thousand) made it virtually impossible to have the kind of controlled classification and signification that Albert and other members of the Royal

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<sup>22</sup> Roland Barthes, 'The Reality Effect' in *The Rustle of Language*, pp.140-148 (p.148).

Commission had dreamed of. In March 1850 the minutes of the Royal Commission stated its aims:

The effect which the Exhibition is intended to produce – of showing, at one view, the points which human industry and ingenuity have reached in the arts of civilised life – would be materially diminished if the results of the industry of different nations in each department [were not exhibited together].<sup>23</sup>

Things could not be ordered from across the globe and exhibited according to type as easily as Albert had suggested at Mansion House. The relative bareness of the American stand, for example, stemmed simply from the huge difficulty of getting things there in time. Lobbying by interest groups, the need to keep heavy exhibits on the ground floor, the placing of the power supply in the northern corner of the Crystal Palace, were some of the reasons why the exhibits were essentially arranged by nation – with Britain and her territories occupying the entire west transept of the palace. Visually, onlookers were encouraged to judge countries by the size and variety of their output. Eileen Gillooly argues that:

The material arrangement of the various national departments also strongly invited the observers to contrast them competitively [...]

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<sup>23</sup> Minutes of the Royal Commission, 14<sup>th</sup> March 1850, Appendix C, p.102. quoted in James Buzard, 'Globalism, Nationalism and the Crystal Palace Floor Plan', in *Victorian Prism: Refractions of the Crystal Palace*, ed. by James Buzard, Joseph W. Childers, and Eileen Gillooly (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2007), p.47.

arranged as they were, the foreign departments could be easily juxtaposed not only with each other but collectively with the prodigious British department.<sup>24</sup>

So the best expression of the ethos of competition at the exhibition could be found not in the official competition (at which the French, not the British, won the largest number of prizes) but in the layout that represented Britain as the dominant power through the sheer spectacle and number of ‘British’<sup>25</sup> things displayed. Questions of ‘thingness’ and nationhood were thus foregrounded in this competition as to what comprised success on a global scale.

The Great Exhibition reflected Britain, to herself and to the world, as a nation of successful consumers rather than producers in a way that had never been technically possible before. However, exhibits tinged with the ‘enchantment’ of the Crystal Palace had ultimately to return to the ‘gross material world’ from which they came. *Punch* ran a cartoon entitled ‘Closing of the Exhibition: the Amazon putting on her bonnet and shawl’ (see FIG 17) which ostensibly offered the comforting picture of ‘things’ returning to normal: the Amazon is no longer a fierce, nude warrior but matronly-looking and fully-clothed, the attacking tiger is an outsize cat rubbing peaceably against her legs as she says to the (fully-clothed but still shackled) Greek slave “well My Dear! I’m very glad it’s over. It’s *very hard work keeping one attitude for five months* isn’t it?” [My italics]. The exhibition certainly had

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<sup>24</sup> Eileen Gillooly, ‘Rhetorical Remedies for Taxonomic Troubles: Reading the Great Exhibition’, *Victorian Prism*, ed. by James Buzard, Joseph W. Childers, and Eileen Gillooly, pp.23-39 (p.28).

<sup>25</sup> The nationality of objects from Britain’s colonial ‘possessions’, such as India, is a nice point here.

trouble 'keeping one attitude'. As Jeffrey Auerbach has argued, it was 'a protean event with numerous possible meanings'<sup>26</sup> but this cartoon actually emphasises the extent to which 'things' have *not* returned to normal after the event. Even when attempting to look domestic, the occupants of the Crystal Palace, with the outsize women, the random objects (a candelabra and a spear are in evidence) and the uncanny tiger/cat are irresistibly suggestive of Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* (1865).

## **2.2: 'Superior Classes': How the Victorian Conception of Success Raised Problems of Class and Gender at the Great Exhibition**

Looking back on the Exhibition after thirty years, that great organiser of the exhibition, Henry Cole, writing in 1884, sums up the Victorians' view of their own success as a nation, during the latter half of the nineteenth century:

A great people invited all civilised nations to bring into comparison the works of human skill. It was carried out by its own private means, was self-supporting and independent of taxes and the employment of slaves which great works had exacted in ancient days. A prince of pre-eminent wisdom, of philosophic mind, sagacity, with power of generalship and great practical ability, placed himself at the head of the enterprise and led it to triumphal success.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Jeffrey Auerbach, *The Great Exhibition of 1851: A Nation on Display* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999), p.5.

<sup>27</sup> Cole, p.117.

While the Great Exhibition was in many ways a celebration of the British middle-class values of success, embodied in Cole's vision of laissez-faire politics in action, the event brought the middle and working classes, and the *idea* of the classes together in ways that challenged those values. The defence of Britain's industrial prowess rested on the profusion and celebration of machinery at the expense of exploring the plight of workers and how they lived and worked. Successful mass-production needed a large, disciplined workforce and apologists of the Exhibition went out of their way to represent the working classes as grateful and disciplined (one might say cowed).

*The Illustrated London News* showed an illustration of admiring agricultural workers at the Exhibition under the statue of a Newfoundland dog (see FIG 18). Thanks to works such as Landseer's 'A Distinguished Member of the Humane Society' (1831) and texts like *Jane Eyre* in which the Newfoundland, Pilot, is Rochester's faithful friend through good and bad, the Victorian reader was likely to be able to interpret this image as a sign of the gentle docility and strength harnessed in service of mankind. This image needs to be seen in contrast to the fears of rebellion in 1848 and fears prior to the Exhibition that bringing too many working class people to central London would ferment political unrest.

In reality, the conflicts between the conception of success and the realities of production were played out in the construction of the Crystal Palace itself. By John Ruskin's definition, the Crystal Palace was the antithesis of gothic architecture that allowed for a demonstration of moral qualities and individual skill in its builders (see introduction):

Let it not be thought that I would depreciate [...] the mechanical ingenuity which has been displayed in the erection of the Crystal Palace, or that I underrate the effect which its vastness will continue to produce on the popular imagination. But mechanical ingenuity is not the essence either of painting or architecture.<sup>28</sup>

The Crystal Palace was essentially a mass-produced building, made with pre-fabricated glass panels and steel framework. It could thus be assembled at great speed on site by two thousand navvies (eighty men in one week assembled 18,000 pieces of glass).<sup>29</sup> Building the Crystal Palace required obedience, not aspiring independence of mind; indeed, a strike by men wishing to increase their pay from 4s to 5s a day was swiftly quashed, its ringleaders summarily dismissed.<sup>30</sup>

The ideals and tensions of competitive success were built into the Crystal Palace. Its design emerged from competition and the ideals of laissez-faire liberalism but it was built *by* poorly-paid workers. The failure of the strike at the Crystal Palace contrasts with the lionisation of its creator: a man in a position to show the kind of creativity and persistence that demonstrated that the Victorian ideals of success could work.

Joseph Paxton's design for the building was the winner of a competition, the means by which designs of many iconic Victorian buildings were chosen.<sup>31</sup> Paxton was feted as the creator of this extraordinary building. He

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<sup>28</sup> John Ruskin, *The Opening of the Crystal Palace Considered in Some of its Relations to the Prospects of Art* (London: Smith, Elder, 1854), p.6.

<sup>29</sup> Patrick Beaver, *The Crystal Palace: A Portrait of Victorian Enterprise*, 3rd edn (1970; Chichester: Philimore, 1986), p.24.

<sup>30</sup> Beaver, p.24.

<sup>31</sup> Including the Houses of Parliament and the Albert Memorial.



was also seen as an excellent exhibitor of the moral qualities in an individual that produced great things, objects, which could attest to the nation's hard work and ingenuity. As Deborah Wynne argues, 'The new adventurer of the mid-nineteenth century, unlike his earlier counterpart, searched for cheap raw materials and the most cost-effective means of production as the route to national glory'.<sup>32</sup> Fundamental to the difference between Paxton and his 'counterparts' was the way in which national 'glory' was being amalgamated with ideals of national and individual success, particularly and very visually at the Great Exhibition.

Paxton was a gardener turned polymath, whose successful story was turned into stirring narrative by W. H. Wills, under the auspices of Dickens, his editor. In 'The Private History of the Palace of Glass',<sup>33</sup> written for *Household Words* in 1851, Paxton is celebrated as a man of action 'one of the busiest men in England, whose very leisure would kill a man of fashion with its work'.<sup>34</sup> We have in this characterisation both a race against time and a celebration of the wonderful technical developments of the nineteenth century. 'In a country of electric telegraphs and of indomitable energies, time and difficulties are annihilated.'<sup>35</sup>

However, if Paxton was presented as a self-made man, his origins were modest rather than poor. He was the son of a Bedfordshire farmer and his early employment as a gardener offered him the chance to attract the patronage of the Duke of Devonshire. His position in life made 'self-help' possible in a way it seldom was for industrial workers. The idea that objects

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<sup>32</sup> Deborah Wynne, 'Responses to the 1851 Great Exhibition in *Household Words*', *The Dickensian*, 455. 97, Part 3 (2001), 228-234 (p.230).

<sup>33</sup> Charles Dickens and W. H. Wills, 'The Private History of the Palace of Glass', *Household Words*, 2 (January, 1851), pp. 385-391.

<sup>34</sup> Dickens and Wills, 'The Private History of the Palace of Glass', p.387.

<sup>35</sup> Dickens and Wills, 'The Private History of the Palace of Glass', p.386.

could embody a successful nation of productive individuals overlaid the awkward truth: that the consequences of an industrialising nation, particularly urban slums and mass-production, made it very difficult for the majority of workers, such as those who built the Crystal Palace, to cultivate such moral qualities, let alone use them to gain economic success.

Before the Exhibition, *Punch* magazine argued that an exhibition of the kind that the Royal Commission in charge of the Great Exhibition envisaged was an impossibility and suggested that Britain could not show off its successes without exposing its failures:

An exhibition of manufactures and commodities is not an exhibition of industry, but one of the results of it. A real exposition of industry would require that the industrious themselves should be exhibited as well as their productions [...]. However as needlewomen cannot be starved [...] nor miners blown up, amongst a multitude of people, with any degree of safety, it is suggested that paintings of our various artisans labouring in their usual vocations should accompany the display [...]. Shall we ostentatiously show off all manner of articles of comfort and luxury and be ashamed to disclose the conditions of those whom we have to thank for them? <sup>36</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> 'Specimens From Mr Punch's Industrial Exhibition of 1850', *Punch*, 18 (1850), p.145.

*Punch* was right that the ultimate exhibition was one of the results, rather than the processes, of production. Descriptions of the Great Exhibition echo Dorothy Van Ghent's assertion that 'people were becoming things and things [...] were becoming more important than people'.<sup>37</sup> While the objects at the Crystal Palace, as I shall show, were endowed by cartoonists like Cruikshank and novelists like Bronte, with a kind of chaotic sense of life, workers were celebrated for their machine-like qualities. On May Day 1851, the opening day of the Exhibition, the *Morning Chronicle* stated:

[Probably] no other people in the world could have achieved such a marvel of constructive skill within so brief a period. It is to our wonderful industrial discipline – our consummately arranged organisation of toil, and our habit of the division of labour, that we owe all the triumph.<sup>38</sup>

*The Chronicle* attempts to marry moral qualities that Smiles, eight years later in *Self-Help* (1859), would laud as necessary for success – discipline, drive, organization – with modern systems of mass-production. From the emphasis on working-class visitors as cogs in the industrial machine to their portrayal as well-herded and appropriately grateful onlookers, the portrayal of the working classes at the exhibition suggests the political success of the event as a means of defusing political tension. If making middle-class people into thingummies was failure, making working-class people into thingummies,

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<sup>37</sup> Van Ghent, p.127.

<sup>38</sup> *The Morning Chronicle*, 1 May 1851, p.8.

was political and social success and national unity in the face of exhibited material culture.

After the first week of the Great Exhibition the Duke of Wellington had placidly observed:

I have been at the Glass Palace again this day [...]. Everything in good order [...], there was no crowd or difficulty of any kind. The shops laid out in a much greater degree. As long as the payments continue at five shillings, I entertain no doubt that there will be no difficulty. The catalogue is useful but I know pretty well where everything is that would be worth looking for. It would be impossible to go over the whole thing in one view! [...]. Whether the show will ever be of any use to anybody may be questioned, but of this I am certain, nothing can be more successful.<sup>39</sup>

This bathetic description of the Great Exhibition is a shrewd analysis of the politics of Victorian success in action. The event appeared politically peaceful, and it was principally a festival of consumption rather than production (Wellington's blithe mention of 'the shops' would have infuriated organisers who attempted to forbid the buying and selling of goods). In Wellington's reading, success is the middle classes peacefully shopping amidst its own and other nations' produce.

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<sup>39</sup> Letter from Wellington to Lady Salisbury, 7<sup>th</sup> May 1851, in *A Great Man's Friendship: Letters of the Duke of Wellington to Mary, Marchioness of Salisbury 1850-1852*, ed. by Winifred Burghclere (London : John Murray, 1927), p.181.

When the Great Exhibition closed on 11<sup>th</sup> October 1851, *The Times* observed:

A slight sprinkling of the humbler orders, [...] among them a band of hop-pickers with wreaths of the plant around their hats' [again depicting the working classes as harmless, picturesque and traditionally rural] but with most of the 53,000 observers belonging 'to the middling or wealthier classes, and [consisting] of habitués of the Exhibition.'<sup>40</sup>

This reference to 'habitués' in particular suggests the predominance of the middle classes at the event given the expense of season tickets, £3 3s for men and £2 2s for women. Even the celebrated 'shilling days', ostensibly for working people, would have been a considerable expense for the average worker, to say nothing of the expense of travel to the event. The men who had built the Crystal Palace were paid 4s a day, £1 a week. The cost of tickets alone suggests strongly that the Great Exhibition was intended for those who could 'buy into' the idea of it ethically and materially and thus were ripe for further schooling as consumers and practitioners of the Victorian variant of success.

The great irony in the conception of moral and material success emphasised through things was that whilst middle-class men were supposed to be characterised as active individuals, the exhibition of necessity made such men into a mass of passive sightseers; indeed, I show that they were often seen to be less receptive than working-class sightseers.

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<sup>40</sup> *The Times*, 13 October 1851, p5.

The signification of success through well-dressed people appearing in correct public spaces made itself powerfully felt in the Crystal Palace through issues of space, class and gender. *Tallis's History of the Crystal Palace* describes it thus:

A more general distribution of company over the galleries and recesses was obvious at a glance. The holders of season tickets were probably [...] the persons to whom the aesthetics of the place, its artistic arrangements, its beauty and satisfaction to the outside sense were the chief attractions. To those it was first and foremost a lounge and a panorama unequalled for comfort, splendour and variety. For the details which occurred beyond the first reach of the eye and which did not form a striking part of the spectacle as seen from any favourite point of view, many of these visitors cared little. The naves, the transept, and the front galleries – the points from which the pictorial effects could be best taken, and the artist sense most completely gratified – were the positions chiefly frequented by them.<sup>41</sup>

That this 'distribution' is 'obvious at a glance' emphasises the extent to which class was emphasised by dress, but the sense of aesthetics that Tallis ascribes to the wealthier classes at the Exhibition can also be read in terms of the signification of success. The idea of the Crystal Palace as 'lounge and

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<sup>41</sup>*Tallis's History and Description of the Crystal Palace, and the Exhibition of the World's Industry*, 3 vols (London: Tallis and Co., 1852), i, p.101.

panorama' virtually makes it interchangeable with a drawing room when it comes to signifying success, and much the same process of being seen to associate with the correct objects and forming ambiguous impressions of potential ownership is occurring.

Tallis makes much of the sense of space and what can be seen from what point in the Exhibition. In the context of signifying success this suggests that the bourgeois and upper classes came to see and be seen and to carefully arrange themselves next to the most suitable objects for signifying success. The transept and centre of the nave contained the famous Crystal Fountain, greenery, a statue of Venus and Cupid, portraits of Victoria and Albert and a statue of the Queen (see FIG 19), it was also close to the Koh-i-Noor diamond. It was an attractive part of the building to those for whom vaguely classical statuary was a reliable indicator of culture. This distribution of the classes across the spaces of the Crystal Palace suggests that the upper classes did not want to associate themselves too closely with the products (and people) who were genuinely closely associated with Britain's industrial position in the world. *Punch* made the point with cheerful rudeness:

The 'superior classes' must begin to look about them, if they would retain the epithet [...]. The high-paying portion of the public go to look at each other, and to be looked at, while the shilling visitors go to gain instruction in what they see; and the result is, they are far better behaved than the well-dressed promenaders, who push each other

about and stare each other out of countenance on the days of the high price of admission.<sup>42</sup>

One abiding image of the Exhibition, therefore, is of the upper classes clinging nervously to the gentility of the nave and transept while amongst the respectable working classes and artisans, those ‘from the country [...] thronged the agricultural departments [...] the population of our manufacturing towns besieged *en masse* the departments of mechanic art and invention’.<sup>43</sup> This description conflicts with accepted gender stereotypes concerning the exhibition. Jeffrey Auerbach asserts that ‘space within the Crystal Palace was also divided along gender lines, with some areas apparently of more interest for men such as the agricultural machinery, and others seemingly more attractive for women, such as the bolts of cloth’.<sup>44</sup> However, reports from Tallis and *Punch* suggest that class was perhaps more significant than gender in demarcating spaces for people at the Crystal Palace; that it was working-class, rather than middle-class, men who were interested in these ‘masculine’ exhibits. The Crystal Palace therefore ‘exhibited’ different cultures of masculine success side by side: raising awkward questions about who was ‘successful’ and how.

*Punch*’s sneer and Tallis’s anxious evocations of ‘taste’ suggest anxiety that the position of the middle-class visitor at the exhibition rendered them passive and snobbish, rather than lords of all they surveyed, by dint of surveying it. Yet, such anxieties aside, the image of the successful man as a middle-class onlooker ‘exhibiting’ himself remained powerful and pervasive, as Tallis’s own argument shows and I have argued in Chapter One.

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<sup>42</sup> *Punch*, ‘The Shilling Days at the Crystal Palace’, 21. (1851), p.240.

<sup>43</sup> Tallis, i. p.56.

<sup>44</sup> Auerbach, p.156.



The unease about what constituted a successful man at the Great Exhibition suggests the extent to which the Great Exhibition was a 'feminised' space in which parading and window-shopping as signifiers of success fitted far better than trying to establish credentials as an active, successful individual in your own right.

As I have shown, the Great Exhibition was dominated by a sense of consumer culture in suspense. Objects were shown as if for sale, in fact never before had it been possible to display so many objects so alluringly. Part of that allure was their forbidden nature: the fact that they could not officially be bought but clearly periodically were. The Great Exhibition made window-shoppers of everyone who went; everything, from cotton to the Koh-i-Noor diamond, simultaneously seemed both attainable and unattainable.

The Great Exhibition suggests ways in which conceiving of individual and national success through consumption, rather than production, allowed both men and women to own the role of the British consumer. I contend that the Great Exhibition could have been a formative experience in educating middle-class women as consumers. The sight of so many objects, owned but not owned, must have brought home vividly, perhaps to millions of women, the possibilities that a successful nation offered to women as consumers.

The Great Exhibition was in many ways a very female space. It offered many middle-class women in an era of less communication, such as Charlotte Brontë, a chance to get to London, shop and socialise. There must have been a heady atmosphere of excitement and empowerment. With its refreshment rooms, the Great Exhibition must have been a more comfortable way to spend the day for women than the streets of London where there were as yet few provisions for them. The department store owner William Whiteley famously claimed that he first had the idea for his department store as a boy in the Crystal Palace. The link between women and shopping at the Great Exhibition is mocked in Henry Morely's article in *Household Words*, where a young lady

begs to make the Crystal Palace into a shopping mall. ‘Oh the dear Exhibition, where you can look at all the shops and need not buy [...] we shall never love shop windows in the dirty streets again!’<sup>45</sup>

Deborah Wynne has urged caution to those, such as Thomas Richards, who present the Crystal Palace as, ‘the first department store, the first shopping mall’.<sup>46</sup> ‘While such retrospective accounts underline the Great Exhibition’s function in creating the birth of consumer culture, the ideas proposed by Morely’s ‘young lady’ would have seemed comic to readers in 1851.’<sup>47</sup> Certainly Morley’s article was part of a comic, not to say misogynistic, discourse on women as shoppers at the Great Exhibition: *Punch* clearly envisaged the exhibition overwhelmed with voracious female consumers: offering up a cartoon ‘The Ladies and the Police – the Battle of the Crystal Palace’ (see FIG 20), that showed a lone police officer menaced by women armed with parasols. Comic this may well have seemed, but comedy can be the first step to rendering the unthinkable acceptable.

Furthermore, Wynne’s arguments on the performative nature of property ownership are particularly relevant to the question of women as consumers at the Crystal Palace in 1851. Wynne argues that:

Victorian novels published before 1882 abound with representations of women who, believing themselves to be property owners, *act* as property owners by writing wills and appropriating the things that they desire regardless of the fact that they had no legal rights to

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<sup>45</sup> Henry Morely, ‘What Is Not Clear About the Crystal Palace’ *Household Words* 10 (1851), p.400.

<sup>46</sup> Richards, p.17.

<sup>47</sup> Wynne, ‘Responses to the 1851 Exhibition in *Household Words*, in *The Dickensian*, p.232.

property. These characters forcefully demonstrate that property exists most powerfully in the imagination or fancy.<sup>48</sup>

This argument suggests that middle-class women would be particularly good at taking advantage of this atmosphere of furtive consumption because they were perforce used to the performance of ownership and surreptitious acquisition. *Punch*'s characterisation of female visitors as rabid shoppers barely held at bay suggests that a great deal of whispered bargaining, surreptitious handshaking and scribbled notes may have taken place: thus endowing the acquisition of objects with the allure of illicit flirtation. The eagerness to characterise and mock women as shoppers at the Great Exhibition may also have its roots in the need to differentiate them from middle-class and upper-class men, reduced

to onlookers and thus implicitly feminised. The Great Exhibition forced Victorians to confront how the role of signifier of success functioned for both genders.

It is an irony that perhaps the most sophisticated critique of the Great Exhibition and its role in developing consumer culture should have been written by a novelist conventionally celebrated for romantic provincialism: Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*. Virginia Woolf commented '*The Life*, by Mrs Gaskell, gives you the impression that Haworth and the Brontës are somehow inextricably mixed'.<sup>49</sup> Some of the blame for this perceived provincialism should certainly lie with Gaskell, literary enemy of the Exhibition, and Brontë's biographer. She sought determinedly to sanitise Brontë's image, not least in her relations with consumer culture. Gaskell's sometimes spiteful

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<sup>48</sup> Wynne, *Women and Personal Property in the Victorian Novel*, p.25.

<sup>49</sup> Virginia Woolf, 'Haworth 1905', [www.digital.library.upenn.edu/women/woolf/VW-Brontë.html](http://www.digital.library.upenn.edu/women/woolf/VW-Brontë.html) [accessed 4/5/15]

denigration of consumer culture and those who enjoyed it certainly had roots in life, particularly in her depiction of Brontë. In her determination to depict Brontë as appropriately retiring on her trip to London to see the Great Exhibition, we see the extent to which Gaskell distanced Brontë from the culture of success expressed through material things:

Her preparations in the way of dress for this visit [to the Exhibition], in the gay time of that gay season, was singularly in accordance with her feminine taste; quietly anxious to satisfy her love for modest, dainty, neat, attire, and not regardless of the becoming, yet remembering consistency, both with her general appearance and with her means, by every selection she made.<sup>50</sup>

Gaskell here sets up Brontë as the antithesis of consumer culture and also undermines any sense of her as an independent, cosmopolitan professional. She is not allowed to be a 'successful woman' in any sense. Brontë's letters however, reveal very different reactions to consumer culture, and *Villette*, written in the light of Brontë's visit to the Great Exhibition, demonstrates a deeply conflicted attitude to both. Her fears of vulgarity meet a longing, pathetic in the circumstances, for colour, excitement and pretty clothes. It is easy to see, in Brontë's reaction to the Crystal Palace and to shopping, where the tortured and conflicted Lucy Snowe came from. Brontë's letter to Ellen Nussey about her wardrobe for the trip to London is a sad little story of small aspirations quashed:

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<sup>50</sup> Elizabeth Gaskell, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, ed. by Angus Easson (1857; Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1996), p.377.

‘I told you I had taken one of the black lace mantles, but when I came to try it with the black satin dress with which I should chiefly want to wear it, I found the effect was far from good; the beauty of the lace was lost, and it looked somewhat brown and rusty. [She changed it for a white one] It is pretty, neat and light, looks well on black and, upon reasoning the matter over, I came to the philosophic conclusion that it would be no shame for a person of my means to wear a cheaper thing, so I shall take it and if you call it “trumpery” so much the worse.’<sup>51</sup>

Similarly, in another moment that sounds eerily like Gaskell’s Miss Matty in *Cranford* (see pp.171-3):

I [was hoping to have] your help and company in buying a bonnet [...] I determined to manage the matter alone [...] and got one which seemed grave and quiet there among all the splendours; but now it looks infinitely too gay with its pink lining. I saw some beautiful silks in pale sweet colours, but had not the spirit or the means [...] and bought a black silk at three shillings.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Charlotte Brontë, Letter to Ellen Nussey, 12 April 1851, in *The Letters of Charlotte Brontë, 1848-1851*, ed. by Margaret Smith, 3 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), ii, p.610.

<sup>52</sup> Charlotte Brontë, Letter to Ellen Nussey, 10 May 1851, in *The Letters of Charlotte Brontë, 1848-1851*, ed. by Margaret Smith, 3 vols ii, p.615.

The Great Exhibition and life in Villette granted Brontë and her heroine Lucy Snowe a taste of the glamorous cosmopolitan life that they both feared and longed for.

There may even be an allusion in the title of *Villette* to the affinity of women and the new consumer culture that was emphasized by the Exhibition. The connections between consumer culture and *Villette*'s working title 'Choseville' are obvious but it is noticeable how closely the word 'Villette', little town, rhymes with 'fillette' meaning a very little girl. The connection between little towns and little women reflects the question of the book: how could 'little girls', slight, plain, frail young women, succeed in the new commodity culture? The idea of Villette as a little town is also misleading. Lucy is torn between finding Villette cosmopolitan and crude, elegant and vulgar, strongly reflecting Brontë's views on the Crystal Palace. The name 'Villette' may therefore be a joke at Lucy's expense, reflecting her own sense of provincial superiority, while it evokes the miniaturised but still cosmopolitan and vulgar world of the Great Exhibition itself.

Lucy Snowe's energetically spiteful critique of the citizens of Labassecour (translated as 'the farmyard'), whilst still marvelling at their products and the vivid social life of Villette, mirrors the British attitude to foreigners and foreign productions at the Exhibition. Given the contradictions and tensions in defining 'successful' British people against each other, the appeal of defining British success against 'other', foreign efforts is clear. The idea of successful English citizens defining themselves against foreign competition further elides questions about citizens at home who have 'failed' or been failed by Britain's social and economic systems. One might cynically conclude that casting abroad, rather than in Britain, to find failures to define successful British citizens was by this time hugely politically convenient; in this Brontë's novel reflected the tensions of a nation exposing itself to

international competition and culture, far more than the provinciality of Haworth.

### **2.3: ‘All That Is Solid Melts Into Air’: Success and the Vanishing Crystal Palace in Realist Fiction**

The politics of success at the Great Exhibition did not function at all as the Royal Commission had intended. In 1851, the sheer power of the Crystal Palace as a piece of spectacle with the ability to transform the ideology of success caught novelists, journalists and revolutionaries alike by surprise.

All competitions, of course, have losers and in 1850 Marx was confident the British middle-classes would be chief among them. He anticipated that the Great Exhibition would be a defining moment of middle-class failure. ‘The bourgeoisie is celebrating this, its greatest festival, at the moment when the collapse of all its glory is at hand [...] the powers it has bought into being have grown beyond its control.’<sup>53</sup> Clearly Marx was wrong; with its six million visitors and flood of favourable reviews, if anything the Exhibition exaggerated the sense that the bourgeoisie had arrived as the central economic, social and political power of Britain, and it did so using objects. However, the reasons why Marx was wrong, and why he thought he was right, set useful terms for debate on how the conception of success operated at the Great Exhibition:

By displaying, narrowly confined within a small space, the whole mass of the productive forces of modern industry, precisely at a time when modern bourgeois relations have already been undermined from

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<sup>53</sup> Marx and Engels, ‘Review, May to October 1850’ in *Collected Works*, x (1849-51), pp.490-533 (p.500).

every side [the exhibition] is at the same time exposing to view the material which has been produced amidst these conditions of decay for the building of a new society.<sup>54</sup>

Marx understood that concentrating the produce of industry ‘within a small space’ would produce a massive visual stimulus with, he assumed, revolutionary consequences. The Crystal Palace would not simply smell ‘a little too much of the workshop’, in Dickens’s phrase, but reek unbearably, driving onlookers to revolutionary action. Marx thought that the bourgeoisie were exposing their failures to the world but under-estimated the extent to which the nature of the spectacle of the Crystal Palace would divorce material things from the realities of their production at the event.

Marx described the Exhibition as a ‘pantheon in which to exhibit with proud self-satisfaction, the gods [the bourgeoisie], has made to itself’.<sup>55</sup> Given his hopes for what would be achieved by this ‘Pantheon’, I suggest that Marx politicised the act of looking too deeply at the Great Exhibition in his belief that on-looking would ferment activism.

*Punch* was arguably more attuned than Marx to the culture of success operating around the exhibition, and to its power. In the magazine’s 1850 cartoon ‘Specimens from Mr Punch’s Industrial Exhibition of 1850 (to be improved in 1851)’ (see FIG 21), Albert looks concernedly at emaciated labourers working under glass. The images *under* the glass suggest that to look at an object is synonymous with understanding its production, making explicit the failure to engage with the social and moral problems of

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<sup>54</sup> Marx and Engels, ‘Review, May to October 1850’ in *Collected Works*, x (1849-51), pp.490-533 (p.500).

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.



production, just as Marx hoped. This connection between spectacle, production and revolutionary action is precisely what did not happen on a large scale at the Great Exhibition. *Outside* the glass domes, in Albert's worried expression and passive stance, there is the implied uselessness of looking, rather than evidence of political action. The workers are trapped under their glass domes, suggesting that the culture of spectacle is likely to keep them there.

The failure of Marx and Marxist criticism to acknowledge the power of spectacle to obliterate public perception of production has begun to be acknowledged. In *The Ideas in Things* (2006), as we have seen, Elaine Freedgood deemed the wooden furniture described in *Jane Eyre* as 'souvenirs of sadism': products of 'the deforestation, colonization and implementation of plantation slavery in the two critical sources of wealth in the novel'.<sup>56</sup> However in more recent work Freedgood has focused more on the circulation than the production of objects, acknowledging that:

In the Victorian world the violence of the extraction of raw material and its manufacture into commodities was not a source of grief; generally speaking rather it was a source of fascination and of national superiority. [...] the Crystal Palace Exhibition of 1851 illustrates the point.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Elaine Freedgood, 'Souvenirs of Sadism: Mahogany Furniture, Deforestation and Slavery in *Jane Eyre*' in *The Ideas in Things*, pp.30-54.

<sup>57</sup> Elaine Freedgood, 'What Objects Know: Circulation, Omniscience and the Comedy of Dispossession in Victorian It-Narratives', *The Journal of Victorian Culture*, 15 (2010), 83-100 (p.91).

The Crystal Palace's brief existence in Hyde Park echoed Marx's argument that 'all that is solid melts into air'.<sup>58</sup> Seen as a piece of commoditised ephemera the full irony of the Great Exhibition becomes apparent; it announced the enduring success of emerging capitalist culture by emphasising the alluring ephemerality of objects, in doing so it undermined a key point in the dogma of success: the usefulness of the object as an uncomplicated signifier of moral and material success. After the Great Exhibition the realist novel was even more sensitive to the movement of objects and commodities, undermining this sense of uncomplicated 'proof' still further.

The theory of synthesised moral and material success was not new at the Great Exhibition, as I have shown, but it was the point when industry, technology and public opinion allowed that concept to be very tangibly represented to an audience of millions. The Great Exhibition can be observed teleologically as the point at which developing technologies, ideologies and anxieties met to create the event. Technical, political and economic changes at the end of the 1840s – the apparent defeat of the Chartist movement, the development of the railway network, developments in glass manufacturing and increasing public interest and anxieties surrounding manufacture – all created conditions that made the Great Exhibition possible in 1851; as such it is tempting to see the Great Exhibition as the beginning of a new era.

The temptation to use such an event as a historical bookend is almost irresistible. Isobel Armstrong cautions against seeing the Exhibition unambiguously as 'a crux of cultural modernism'.<sup>59</sup> I suggest that the Great Exhibition, that great product of 'glass culture' (in Armstrong's phraseology) also needs to be considered as the product of a very specific moment in the nineteenth century. The very transience, allied to the physical vastness, of the

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<sup>58</sup> Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, ed. by Eric Hobsbawm (1848; London: Verso, 2012), p.38.

<sup>59</sup> Armstrong, *Victorian Glassworlds*, p.14.

Great Exhibition is fundamental to its place in the discourse of success. The huge building that was the Crystal Palace appeared and vanished again within a year as if by magic, as journalists and visitors were all too ready to say.

The Great Exhibition, perhaps like all truly successful novelties, was doomed to be a victim of its own success because its popularity made what had once been a novelty commonplace. Auerbach remarks of the railways, which played such a huge part in the success of the event, ‘the Great Exhibition transformed the excursion from a thrilling novelty into an established part of Victorian life’.<sup>60</sup> Similarly the true measure of the success of the Great Exhibition is the way in which its influence slipped into public life and it is this influence we find in novels: the culture of spectacle that would now surround objects and interact with the culture of success. Images of fantasy, mystery and perhaps above all, ephemerality were key to that influence.

Thomas Hardy’s 1893 short story ‘The Fiddler of the Reels’ certainly emphasises the Great Exhibition as a very specific historical moment:

‘Talking of Exhibitions, World’s Fairs, and what not,’ said the old gentleman, ‘I would not go round the corner to see a dozen of them nowadays. The only Exhibition that ever made [...] any impression upon my imagination was the first of the series, the parent of them all and now a thing of old times – the Great Exhibition of 1851. None of the younger generation can realise the sense of novelty it produced [...]. A noun substantive went so far as to become an adjective in

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<sup>60</sup> Auerbach, p.140.

honour of the occasion. It was ‘exhibition’ hat, ‘exhibition’ razor-strop, ‘exhibition’ watch, nay even exhibition weather [...] spirits, sweethearts, babies, wives – for the time.’<sup>61</sup>

By the time Hardy was writing, Exhibitions were simply part of the cultural furniture, even in rural ‘Wessex’. Like other cultural novelties the original Crystal Palace was dismantled and reconstructed in a different form. Although its massive popularity saw the building in Hyde Park rebuilt at Sydenham, it never achieved the heights of popularity that it held in 1851 but it gave vivid form and acceleration to the culture that Marx had articulated in 1848. Part of Marx’s belief that ‘all that is holy is profaned’ extends to the constant need for change in consumer products. Last year’s enthusiastic shopper is this year’s jaded consumer who must be tempted by a new novelty.

Hardy’s short story aside, there is arguably an echoing gap in realist fiction where the Great Exhibition might go, reflective of the fact that the Exhibition can be seen as a serious challenge to novelists’ attempts to balance moral and material success in the plots of novels as they struggle with the question of whether the Great Exhibition was a defining ‘moment’ in time or the start of a new age. In an article co-authored by Dickens, ‘The Great Exhibition and the Little One’ (1851), the difficulties of using such a huge collection of things in a ‘realistic’ context becomes clear. ‘Of these special signs and tokens of the peaceful progress of the world, how numerous, how diversified are they! – and [...] how impossible to be thoroughly singled out amidst the crowded masses of men and things.’<sup>62</sup> Not only were there too many and too diverse an

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<sup>61</sup> Thomas Hardy ‘The Fiddler of the Reels’ in *Life’s Little Ironies*, ed. by Alan Manford (1894; Oxford: Oxford World Classics, 2008), pp. 137-156 (p.137).

<sup>62</sup> Charles Dickens and Richard H. Horne, ‘The Great Exhibition and the Little One’, *Household Words*, 3 (July, 1851), pp. 356-60 (p.35).

array of objects on show to be easily read as ‘signs and tokens’ but the ‘crowded masses’ made it impossible to understand much about an individual object. Exhibits had been plucked out of context and thrown into a chaos that was in both senses spectacular.

*The Times* relished this culture of fantasy and ethereality, calling the Crystal Palace ‘an Arabian Nights structure [...] with a certain airy insubstantial character [...] which belongs more to an enchanted land than to this gross material world of ours’.<sup>63</sup> Verity Hunt argues that ‘even for its admirers, the exhibition’s prestige as a spectacle rested in part on its dazzling, ungraspable scale and multiplicity [...] resistance to narrativization and the deficiency of language thus became tropes for the grandeur of the show’.<sup>64</sup> *Chambers Edinburgh Journal* claimed that ‘nothing has ever struck us as more preposterous than an attempt to convey by language any adequate description of the Crystal Palace’.<sup>65</sup> In newspapers, catalogues, magazines, sermons, letters and guidebooks, the event was enthusiastically documented but all could, and frequently did, fall back on a trope that would become a classic of the literature surrounding the Crystal Palace. Ethereal and indescribable: these were the terms in which, paradoxically, the Great Exhibition attempted to create a materialised vision of what the success of a nation looked like.

*The Times* commented on ‘a fluctuating haze or mist [...] that added an air of unreality to the scene’<sup>66</sup> around the Crystal Palace. In *Household Words*, Charles Knight invoked Aladdin who ‘raised a palace in one night [...] of

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<sup>63</sup> Quoted in Armstrong, *Victorian Glassworlds*, p.142.

<sup>64</sup> Verity Hunt, ‘Narrativizing “The World’s Show” in The Great Exhibition, Panaramic Views and Print Supplements’, in *Popular Exhibitions, Science and Showmanship, 1840-1910*, ed by Joe Kember, John Plunkett and Jill A. Sullivan (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2012), pp.115-132 (p.122).

<sup>65</sup> *Chambers’ Edinburgh Journal*, 31 May 1851, p.337.

<sup>66</sup> *The Times*, 2 May 1851, p.4.

gold and silver'<sup>67</sup> (again a great project accomplished by one man – and magic). The trope of 'magic' surrounding the Great Exhibition performs a highly political act of abridgement within this discourse of ephemerality and production. In a letter to her father, Charlotte Brontë described the Exhibition:

It is a wonderful place, vast, strange, new, impossible to describe. Its grandeur [consists] in the assemblage of all things. Whatever human industry has created you find there, [...] great compartments filled with railway engines, [...] the carefully guarded caskets full of real diamonds [...]. It may be called a bazaar or fair but it is such a bazaar or fair as Eastern genii might have created. It seems as if only magic could have gathered this mass of wealth from all the ends of the earth – as if none but supernatural hands could have arranged this<sup>68</sup>

As Eva Badowska points out, Brontë:

Dreamily slips into an orientalist rhetoric [...] the imagery of bazaars and genii forms a predictable part of the ideology of

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<sup>67</sup> Charles Knight, 'Three May Days in London', *Household Words*, 3 (1851), pp.121-124 (p.121).

<sup>68</sup> Charlotte Brontë, letter to Patrick Brontë, 7 June 1851, *The Letters of Charlotte Brontë, 1848-1851*, ed. by Smith, 3 vols, ii, p.631.

global capitalist and colonial expansion of which the exhibition was an unabashed celebration [... but] to describe commodities as conjured up by a genii is to mask the movements of capital that really made things happen.<sup>69</sup>

In this context, ‘supernatural’ nicely elides the relationships between God and magic, morality and the intangible allure of consumer culture, at the expense of systems of production and their attendant flaws preparing the ground for a culture of success.

In this context it is hardly surprising that one of the most vivid accounts of the Great Exhibition should have been written in a letter to his sister by a man who, in 1865, would become practically synonymous with fantasy: the young Lewis Carroll:

I think the first impression produced on you when you get inside is one of bewilderment. It looks like a sort of fairyland. As far as you can look in any direction, you see nothing but pillars hung about with shawls, carpets, &c., with long avenues of statues, fountains, canopies, etc., etc., etc [...] There are some very ingenious pieces of mechanism. A tree (in the French Compartment) with birds chirping and hopping from branch to branch exactly like life. [...] A bird standing at the foot

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<sup>69</sup> Eva Badowska, ‘Choseville: Brontë’s *Villette* and the Art of Bourgeois Interiority’, *PMLA*, 120 (2005), 1509-1523 (p.1511).

of the tree trying to eat a beetle is rather a failure; it never succeeds in getting its head more than a quarter of an inch down, and that in uncomfortable little jerks, as if it was choking. I have to go to the Royal Academy, so must stop: as the subject is quite inexhaustible, there is no hope of ever coming to a regular finish.<sup>70</sup>

Pillars hung with shawls, choking mechanical birds: how else to cope with this avalanche of weird material things other than as fantasy? This avalanche, of course, was a particular challenge for realism. This sense of the vivid, alluring, vanishing artefact is surely at the heart of what Marx meant in the *Communist Manifesto* of 1848 when he wrote ‘All that is solid melts into air’. Marx’s attestation that ‘the bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly revolutionising the instruments of production’ suggests a stream of changing commodities. He also adds that ‘the bourgeoisie has, through its exploitation of the world market, given a cosmopolitan character to production and consumption in every country’.<sup>71</sup> Brontë’s ‘dreamy orientalism’ attests to the ‘cosmopolitan character’ that the exhibition lent to the objects within it. However, it was that very character that meant onlookers were not ‘compelled to face with sober senses [their] real condition in life’<sup>72</sup> at the exhibition.

In 1850, in *David Copperfield*, Dickens produced what seems to be an attempt to mediate, within the realist genre, between his desire to idealise the poor but happy family and the encroaching and seductive realities of consumer culture. We are presented with an image of the perennially unfortunate Tommy Traddles window-shopping with his devoted wife:

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<sup>70</sup> Stuart Dodgson Collingwood, *The Life and Letters of Lewis Carroll* (London: Fisher Unwin, 1899), pp.51-52.

<sup>71</sup> Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, p.39.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.



Then, our pleasures! Dear me, they are inexpensive [...] we go out for a walk in the evening, the streets abound in enjoyment for us. We look into the glittering windows of the jewellers' shops; and I show Sophy which of the diamond-eyed serpents, coiled up on white satin rising grounds, I would give her if I could afford it; and Sophy shows me which of the gold watches that are capped and jewelled and engine-turned, and possessed of the horizontal lever-escape-movement, and all sorts of things, she would buy for me if she could afford it [...] and really we go away as if we had got them!<sup>73</sup>

This kind of window-shopping foreshadows the Great Exhibition, where objects were not officially on sale and the glass of the Crystal Palace held everything in a state frozen between production and acquisition. Traddles and Sophy are allowed to want and enjoy commodities but not to actually buy them. This, in theory, was to be a central part of the experience of the Great Exhibition. In their enthusiasm for the technology and novelty of watches 'possessed of the horizontal lever-escape-movement', Traddles and Sophy are shaping up to be excellent viewers of the event (if of course they could afford it, which is doubtful). The diamond-eyed serpent is symbolic both of seduction and of wisdom and there is a strong sense here that Traddles and Sophy have found a way to appreciate consumer culture by keeping it at bay.

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<sup>73</sup> Charles Dickens, *David Copperfield*, pp.851-2.

Here is a perfect example of glass, as Isobel Armstrong puts it as, ‘barrier and mediator’.<sup>74</sup>

A year later, however, faced with millions of window-shoppers eyeing commodities at the Crystal Palace, Dickens’s view of window-shopping became considerably more jaundiced. His attitude in his letters towards those who went to the Exhibition might be characterised as a sort of irritated paternalism:

My apprehension and prediction – is that they will come out of it at last, with the feeling of boredom and lassitude, (to say nothing of having spent all their money) that the reaction will not be as wholesome and rigorous and quick as folks expect.<sup>75</sup>

The reference to people having ‘spent all their money’ is telling. Like Wellington’s remark about ‘the shops’, Dickens’s aside demonstrates a culture of surreptitious consumerism at the events. Perhaps part of the exhibition’s success was to endow the Crystal Palace with the seductive charge of the forbidden.

It is no surprise therefore that Dickens’s next novel, *Bleak House*, should have a less benign view of capitalism and consumer culture. In the context of his earlier, more optimistic, view of how consumer culture and morality could be assimilated and in an era in which so many narratives began triumphantly

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<sup>74</sup> Armstrong, *Victorian Glassworlds*, p.11.

<sup>75</sup> Letter from Charles Dickens to W. H. Wills, 27 July 1851, *Letters of Charles Dickens*, ed. by Nina Burgess, Graham Storey and Kathleen Tillotson, 12 vols (Oxford: Clarendon, 1965- 2002), vi (1969), p.449.

with dazzling descriptions of glass, Dickens' famous opening for *Bleak House* has Londoners floundering in fog and mud. This can be seen as a defiant repudiation of consumer culture *outside* the Crystal Palace.

Isobel Armstrong argues that in glass culture 'transparency posited an oppositional world, not invisible mediation [...] miniscule impurities [...] internal impediments to vision signified and *created* internal contradictions'.<sup>76</sup> I suggest that in *Bleak House*, Dickens deliberately placed glass culture in opposition to the questions of sanitation in London, in order to illustrate the ersatz nature of consumer success in contrast to the social failure of the metropolis.

The Exhibition and the preparation of London, or lack of it, intensified fears of success and failure for British Victorians. Chartism and 1848, the year of revolutions across Europe, were hardly distant memories; urban unrest was still a real fear. Furthermore, many of the institutions on which modern living depended, from water companies to law courts, were at best struggling to keep pace with the speed of urban growth. This is the background against which the Crystal Palace and the image of Britain as a successful nation were built. The definition of success creates its opposite. By defining success as peace and prosperity, measured in material culture, supporters of the Great Exhibition made the sprawling slums of London, its foul water, its shabby public buildings, a matter of national failure. At stake in those debates was the success or failure of urban capitalist culture and cities were still 'objects of fear',<sup>77</sup> as Eric J. Evans puts it: projects that might succeed or fail and could only do either dramatically.

The first image of *Bleak House* makes the prospect of failure of urban life a muddy reality:

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<sup>76</sup> Armstrong, *Victorian Glassworlds*, p.14.

<sup>77</sup> Evans, p.352.

London [...] and the Lord Chancellor sitting in Lincoln's Inn Hall.

Implacable November weather. As much mud in the streets, as if the waters had but newly retired from the face of the earth, and it would not be wonderful to meet a *Megalosaurus*, forty feet long or so, waddling like an elephantine lizard up Holborn-Hill. Smoke lowering down from chimney-pots, making a soft black drizzle [...] – gone into mourning, one might imagine, for the death of the sun. Dogs, undistinguishable in mire. Horses, scarcely better; [...] Foot passengers, jostling one another's umbrellas in a general infection of ill temper, and losing their foot-hold at street-corners, where tens of thousands of other foot passengers have been slipping and sliding since the day broke (if the day ever broke), adding new deposits to the crust upon crust of mud, sticking at those points tenaciously to the pavement, and accumulating at compound interest.

Fog everywhere.<sup>78</sup>

The first things to emerge from the foggy darkness evoked in *Bleak House*'s opening, are dogs, 'indistinguishable in mire', an image of a dog-eat dog world: a bitter indictment of the capitalist creed of success. Then humans are 'jostling one another's umbrellas in a general infection of ill-temper' (umbrellas suggesting a degree of prosperity and respectability). The first direct reference to capitalism compares growth to mud (filth): 'crust upon

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<sup>78</sup> Dickens, *Bleak House*, p.11.

crust of mud, sticking at those points most tenaciously to the pavement, and accumulating at compound interest.' This is a dark, sinister world of poor visibility: a swipe against the apparent inability of readers/viewers of the Great Exhibition to 'see' the failures of poverty and injustice that the urban capitalist system can produce.

Far from denoting progress, this image of *Bleak House* suggests regression. Thomas Carlyle used images of mud and primordial chaos when attacking the idea of successful institutions:

Cease to brag to me of America and its model institutions and constitutions [...]. America, too, will have to strain its energies [...] crack its sinews, and all but break its heart as the rest of us have had to do, in a thousand fold wrestle with the pythons and mud-demons, before it can become a habitation for the gods. America's battle is yet to fight; and we, sorrowful though nothing doubting, will wish her strength for it. New Spiritual Pythons, plenty of them; enormous megatherions, as ugly as were ever born of mud, loom huge and hideous out of the twilight Future on America.<sup>79</sup>

Writers such as Dickens and Carlyle shared fears, conveyed through powerful images, that to fail to create a modern, urban, capitalist society in which poverty and injustice were at least minimised, was to fall back into

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<sup>79</sup> Thomas Carlyle, 'The Present Time' in *The Works of Thomas Carlyle, Centenary Edition*, ed. by Henry Duff Traill, 30 vols (New York: Scribner and Sons, 1896-1901), xx, pp.1-48 (pp. 20-21).

primal chaos: hence the political charge of the megalosaurus waddling up Ludgate Hill.

The violence of Dickens's image, his mockery of 'progress', suggests a dramatic change in his attitude from a year previously when he wrote indulgently of Tommy Traddles. This suggests how far the actual material, chaotic immensity of the Crystal Palace could affect people's viewpoints. Dickens did not seem to mind consumer culture in theory, or in the odd shop window, but confronted with its full power he was far more alarmed.

Juliet John has explored Dickens's sense of 'imagined community' with regard to the Great Exhibition:

Modern mass culture, at its best, would, for Dickens, enable a larger 'imagined community' to replace lost or passing forms of communal or cultural activity. It was perhaps because of Dickens's attachment to the idea of community, to personalized bonds between cultural producers and consumers, that he had what he called 'an instinctive feeling against' the Great Exhibition. [...] Informing [this feeling] is the lack he senses of emotional or personal bonds between the objects on display and their mass audience, and a lack of the feeling of order that, for Dickens, is generated by a sense of community.<sup>80</sup>

To those who saw 'community' as the bonds between producers and consumers, the Great Exhibition was a failure. But I suggest that Dickens's

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<sup>80</sup> Juliet John, *Dickens and Mass Culture* (London: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 63.

clear sense of himself as a voice in the wilderness (or at any rate in Broadstairs) demonstrates the growing power that he sensed of the alternative vision of success as material spectacle tinged with fantasy. Dickens's dislike of and uncharacteristic incoherence on the subject of the Great Exhibition stems largely from this sense that a culture of success, demonstrated through spectacle, was overwhelming the need to expose social and economic failures in an urbanising, industrialising Britain. Dickens's reaction is proof of Marx's mistake about the exhibition: assuming that to look at the object was to understand the (exploited) role of the producer and to be moved to action by it.

Dickens, as I have argued, had a highly sophisticated appreciation of the role of objects in fiction and a love of them in life. In a letter to W. H. Wills, half way through the Exhibition, Dickens wrote, 'I have always had an instinctive feeling against the Exhibition, of a faint, inexplicable sort. I have got confidence in its being a correct one somehow or other – perhaps it was a foreshadowing of its bewilderment of the public'.<sup>81</sup>

Usually no one was more precise and detailed than Dickens in describing that which he did not like especially if he detected any sort of hypocrisy or pretentiousness (of which the Exhibition had its fair share). What emerges from this letter is a sense of profound alienation from the objects on show: a distrust of the benefits of staring at commodities and a sense of being unable to make sense of things (literally). 'I have a natural horror of sights', he told Lavinia Watson on 11<sup>th</sup> July, 'and the fusion of so many sights in one has not decreased it.'<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Letter from Charles Dickens to W. H. Wills, 27 July 1851, *Letters of Charles Dickens*, ed. by Nina Burgess, Graham Storey and Kathleen Tillotson, vi, (1969), p.449.

<sup>82</sup> Letter from Charles Dickens to Lavinia Watson, 11 July 1851, quoted in Michael Slater, *Charles Dickens* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), p.329.

Ostensibly this was a strange comment from a man who seemed drawn to ‘sights’, who chronicled with relish the chaos of objects in *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1841). ‘Sights’, in this context, could mean ‘spectacle’ or the things on show at the Crystal Palace. I contend that it is the conversion of objects into spectacle that creates Dickens’s ‘natural horror.’

Pique and politics almost certainly played their part in Dickens’s ultimate dislike of the Exhibition (and perhaps his evasive tone about why he disliked it). The Royal Commission’s refusal to give official sanction to efforts of the Central Working Classes Committee to ensure that large numbers of working people visited the Exhibition resulted in Dickens proposing the committee’s dissolution, which duly happened in June 1850. By January 1851, Dickens joined voices with publications like *Punch* and Mayhew and Cruikshank’s *1851* by writing in *Household Words* that what was needed was, ‘another Exhibition – for the great display of England’s sins and negligences, to be, by a steady contemplation of all eyes and a steady union of all hearts and hands, set right’.<sup>83</sup> He feared that the public would lose sight of England’s many social problems in the course of constructing a great story of national success. Bewildered contemplation alone would not sort out the challenges of modernity. Indeed, by bolstering the sense of national confidence with the sense that all Britain needed to do was produce (never mind how) and heedlessly consume, the Exhibition was likely to obscure the sources of failure in the industrial and commercial systems. In its role in furthering the consumer society, the exhibition was also likely to create further failures by seducing people into consuming more than they could afford.

All this, I suggest, required a more passive response, more looking and shopping, or dreaming of shopping, from the individual than Dickens was

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<sup>83</sup> Dickens and Henry Morely, ‘The Last Words of an Old Year’, *Household Words*, 2 (January, 1851), pp. 337-339 (p.338).



comfortable with, either in his guise as an economically, professionally and socially successful man, or as a social crusader. Dickens was nothing if not a hard worker and a man of action, hence the apparent oddness of his sulky 'lassitude' on the subject of the Exhibition. He enjoyed the good things of the world with relish but he knew, more than most, that individuals do not become successful by shopping and dreaming. His novels are full of failures who do not learn this, not least *Bleak House*. Harold Skimpole is a blistering picture of a man, based on Dickens's friend Leigh Hunt, who does not understand why people cannot 'let Harold Skimpole live'.<sup>84</sup> The result is that he lives on the generosity of others. Skimpole is in fact an extreme example of a person who totally refuses to see the connection between producing and consuming. If he wants something, he must have it and gives no thought as to how it is to be bought and paid for, still less produced. His associations of himself to birds and butterflies<sup>85</sup> belie the fact that he lives in and requires the products of a modern industrial world, not the imagined bounty of nature.

Dickens, I suggest, saw the dangers in an exhibition that foregrounded moral success and all the potential prizes of success without emphasising the links of production between them. The experience of his father's financial failure made it clear to him that the desire to accumulate goods without knowing how to earn and pay for them must lead ultimately to bankruptcy, which (as I will argue in Chapter Three) was the greatest failure of them all. Simultaneously presenting objects as the real and tangible proof of success while divorcing them from the processes of production was lending the cult of success a dangerous aspect, Dickens felt.

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<sup>84</sup> Dickens, *Bleak House*, p.82.

<sup>85</sup> 'The butterflies are free, mankind will surely not deny to Harold Skimpole what it concedes to the butterflies', Dickens, *Bleak House*, p.90.

Was Dickens, as Andrew Sanders put it, ‘a man decidedly out of sympathy with his time,’<sup>86</sup> or a man caught between two conflicting arguments about what it meant to be a success, to be a producer or a consumer? Dickens was, after all, a ‘successful’ man, someone who had raised himself up from a boy working in a blacking factory to a phenomenally successful and influential writer. Even as he exposed social injustice, it is worth remembering that he himself escaped it and now had a great deal invested, literally, in the capitalist, urban economy. It is also worth remembering how little most people knew of Dickens’s origins until Forster published his biography of Dickens after his death. The less ‘successful’ elements of Dickens’s life, his father, his childhood, his relationship with Ellen Ternan, were not well-known to his adoring public. Like other articles of mass consumption, Dickens the novelist had a sanitised history that made his place in the pantheon of success in life appear natural and just: part, as it were, of the order of things.

#### **2.4: Writing Around the Exhibition: How the Novel Contends with the Ubiquity of Consumer Culture in the Age of Success**

The refusal of novelists to engage directly with the Great Exhibition itself, while determinedly charting the effects of it, suggests both awareness of its cultural importance as a piece of ephemera and a repudiation of the cultures of success that it showcased. Critics such as Isobel Armstrong, John Butt and Kathleen Tillotson and Andrew H. Miller<sup>87</sup>, among others, have traced allusions to and influences of the Great Exhibition in the imagery, structure and description of realist novels, in *Villette* and *Bleak House* in particular. However, the fact remains that Gaskell, Brontë and Dickens all failed to

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<sup>86</sup> Andrew Sanders, *Charles Dickens* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p.44.

<sup>87</sup> Andrew H. Miller, *Novels Behind Glass: Commodity Culture and Victorian Narrative* (1995; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008)

mention the Great Exhibition directly, let alone engage with or describe it. *Villette* is full of exhibitions, commodities, even a trip to London but Lucy Snowe, unlike her creator and alter ego Charlotte Brontë, did *not* go to the Exhibition when in London (where she would undoubtedly have been a wonderfully caustic commentator). Neither does Esther Summerson or ‘the ladies of Cranford’, nor, ultimately, the ill-fated Sandboys family, whose story is ostensibly the story of their trip there.

Dehn Gilmore points out that the sensation novel did make use of the Great Exhibition ‘as part of a well-known tendency to assert its contemporaneity wherever possible’.<sup>88</sup> Realist novels made far less use of the Great Exhibition in this way. Novelists are hardly bound to use events, however current, as grist to their plot, and many realist novels like *Jane Eyre* are set some decades in the past, yet *Bleak House* is determinedly *au courant* in its concerns with chancery law, sanitation, even the latest pseudo-science, as witness its interest in spontaneous combustion. John Butt and Kathleen Tillotson suggest that ‘in a novel where the life of England in 1851 is otherwise fully represented, the Great Exhibition is deliberately, even conspicuously, excluded’.<sup>89</sup> *Villette* too is undoubtedly a novel about commodity culture. (Brontë’s working title for the book was Choseville: Thing Town). The Crystal Palace is a presence that is very *deliberately* absent in ‘exhibition’ novels: an absence that can be explained politically as well as formally by realism’s struggle to engage with the changing culture of success. Deborah Wynne writes of Dickens’s struggle to balance his views with market demand in how *Household Words* treated the Great Exhibition. ‘In order to deal with the unwelcome necessity of representing the Great Exhibition, Dickens resorted to a strategy whereby *Household Words* discussed only the circumstances surrounding the event

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<sup>88</sup> Gilmore, p.86.

<sup>89</sup> John Butt and Kathleen Tillotson, *Dickens at Work* (1957; London: Routledge, 2009), p.182.

rather than the event itself'.<sup>90</sup> Wynne also points out that 'the unillustrated *Household Words* was unable to offer the exciting visual images of the Crystal Palace and its exhibits that appeared in rival magazines'.<sup>91</sup> I suggest that the same constraints and solutions characterise the form of the realist novel (less surprising given Dickens' dual role as journalist and novelist) during the Great Exhibition. It was a visual experience whose central trope was that it was indescribable and the realist novel sought to deal with the event by 'discussing only the circumstances surrounding the event'.

Benedict Anderson argues that, since the eighteenth century, the novel and the newspaper are the 'forms [that] provided the technical means for "re-representing" the *kind* of imagined community that is the nation'.<sup>92</sup> He presents the daily reading of newspapers as 'this extraordinary ceremony: this almost precisely simultaneous consumption ("imagining") of the newspaper-as-fiction'.<sup>93</sup> Henry Mayhew and George Cruikshank suggest, in their exhibition novel *1851: Or The Adventures of Mr and Mrs Sandboys* (1851), that this culture has percolated even to the rural fastness of the Sandboys family in Cumberland. Mr Sandboys 'became impressed [...] that all out of Cumberland was in a state of savage barbarism,'<sup>94</sup> by reading the newspapers 'that reached him, half-priced and stained with tea [...] from a coffee shop in London'.<sup>95</sup> So there is a direct connection between the world of consumer gossip and the imaginary rural fastness of the Sandboys, carried by the modern media.

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<sup>90</sup> Wynne, 'Responses to the Great Exhibition in *Household Words*', *The Dickensian*, p.228.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (1982; London: Verso, 2006) p.25.

<sup>93</sup> Anderson, p.35.

<sup>94</sup> George Cruikshank and Henry Mayhew, *1851: Or the Adventures of Mr and Mrs Sandboys* (London: Bogue, 1851), p.11.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

The word ‘consumption’ offers intriguing possibilities here, as to what it means to absorb the idea of a nation; does one look at it, read it, participate in it, buy it? All of these were aspects of an equally ‘extraordinary ceremony’ of mass-consumption at the Great Exhibition: in which the British were supposed to come to see themselves as subjects of a successful nation and successful empire. The Crystal Palace is an imagined community in its own right. Millions of people went to see it but many more participated at one remove, reading about the event in newspapers and, indirectly, in novels. So the event has direct parallels with newspapers in Anderson’s definition of the ceremonies that are needed to imagine a nation.

If it was barely possible, as Charles Dickens and Elizabeth Gaskell clearly felt, to ‘opt out’ of the Great Exhibition, it was certainly impossible to opt out of the consumer culture that it was accelerating. Gaskell’s revolted imaginative withdrawal after the Great Exhibition into the Knutsford of her childhood might be part of the inspiration for *Cranford* (1851) but her *Cranford* is riddled with objects that tether it to the modern world. Charles Dickens’ public readings may have been calls to social action, but a search through the provenance of his famously dandified wardrobe of embroidered waistcoats, rings and watch chains would almost certainly have taken the author through sweatshops, factories and mines.

*Mr and Mrs Sandboys* is an unusual novel in dealing with the Great Exhibition directly. However, the Sandboys family never actually get to the event. What they see instead is London in all its busy, humorous, dangerous, grimy glory. This obliquely suggests (as *Bleak House* does more pointedly) that the spectacle of success at the Great Exhibition is an irrelevance compared to the social problems and interest to be found on the streets of the capital.

Objects in *Mr and Mrs Sandboys* tend to be comic, vital (in both senses) and chaotic. Unsurprisingly the novel is full of things, whether it is the

stealing of clothes, or the narrow escape of the Sandboys family when their London ‘lodgings’ turn out to be a coal hole. Cloth, that backbone of the exhibition, appears in *Mr and Mrs Sandboys* in some provocative ways in this context. The respectable Cumberland farmer, Mr Sandboys, first appears in the novel wearing a rather strange garment:

It was his continual boast that he grew the coat he had on his back, and he delighted not only to clothe himself but his son Jobby (much to the annoyance of the youth, who sighed for the gentler graces of kerseymere) in the undyed, or ‘self-coloured’ wool of his sheep, known to all the country round as the ‘Sandboys Grey’ – in reality a peculiar tint of speckled brown.<sup>96</sup>

This obviously sets up the metaphor of the Sandboys family as ‘poor lost muttons’,<sup>97</sup> lambs to the slaughter, in the great metropolis of London. It also emphasises a rather bloody-minded sense of insularity that is constantly undermined. Mr Sandboys sees himself as proudly independent of the exciting evils of metropolitan living. However, although his trousers are made of his own fabric, Mrs Sandboys sends them to a tailor to be altered because she found ‘fault with the cut of them, declaring that they were not sufficiently tight at the knees nor wide enough over the boot’.<sup>98</sup> Mrs Sandboys, it appears, gets her clothes made locally but, ‘primitive as were the denizens of Buttermere and far removed as its mountain-fastness seemed from the realms

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<sup>96</sup> Cruikshank and Mayhew, p.11.

<sup>97</sup> Cruikshank and Mayhew, p.207.

<sup>98</sup> Cruikshank and Mayhew, p.30.

of fashion, the increased facilities for intercommunication had not failed to diffuse a knowledge of polkas and crinolines'.<sup>99</sup> The Sandboys' clothes are a synecdoche for the Sandboys family themselves; they may be made of local fabric but they are increasingly being shaped according to a national, even international, pattern.

*1851* contains a sort of anti-exhibition, in which the Sandboys, lost in London again, find themselves caught up in an old clothes sale. 'The Old Clothes Exchange in Houndsditch' is described in loving detail, parodying the way in which journalists were describing the Crystal Palace:

Once in the body of the Market, [Mr Sandboys] had time to look well about him [...]. He had never heard, never dreamt of there being such a place. A greater bustle and eagerness among the buyers of the refuse of London, than among the traders in its most valuable commodities. Here, ranged on long narrow wooden benches, which extended from one side of the market to the other, and over which sloped a narrow, eaves-like roofing, that projected sufficiently forward only to shelter the sinner from the rain, were to be seen the many merchants of the streets – the buyers of hareskins – the bone grubbers, and the rag-gatherers – the 'bluey hunters' or juvenile purloiners of lead [...]. Each had his store of old clothes – or metal – or boots spread out in a heap before him. [...] To walk down the various passages between the

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<sup>99</sup> Cruikshank and Mayhew, p.34.

seats, and run the eye over several heaps of refuse, piled on the ground like treasure, was to set the mind wondering as to what could possibly be the uses of each and every one of them. Everything there seemed to have fulfilled to the very utmost the office for which it was made; and now that its functions were finished, and it seemed to be utterly worthless, the novice to such scenes could not refrain from marvelling what remaining purpose could possibly give value to ‘the rubbish’. The buyers, too, were as picturesque and motley a group almost as were the sellers – for the purchasers were of all nations and habited in every description of costume.<sup>100</sup>

Connections between the market and the Crystal Palace begin with the standard trope for describing the Crystal Palace: amazement and the assertion that such a place was unimaginable until actually seen. The assertion of the vitality of the market, contrasts with the famously well-behaved, docile crowds at the exhibition: the market sellers are active, enterprising individuals. This is a place of trade, energy, useful objects and multiculturalism, slyly subverting the Great Exhibition’s vision of success. Here it is people who are in control of their own lives and objects – worn, recycled, fascinating – that are in a state of almost exaggerated functionality: their use value is far higher than their exchange value might suggest. Novelists were eager to point out that life happened outside the Crystal Palace (the market is open to the sky unlike the Crystal Palace): that the Great Exhibition was not a magnification of the world but a marginalisation of it.

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<sup>100</sup> Cruikshank and Mayhew, pp.99-100.



Mayhew's description here echoes Dickens's call for a 'real exhibition' to set right the true wrongs in society.

Furthermore the pointed description of useful rubbish in the Houndsditch market compares with the uselessness of many of the new exhibits at the Great Exhibition, such as the alarm clock that tipped its user out of bed into a bath of cold water. The focus in Houndsditch is on what the function of such refuse could be and crucially it makes the onlooker wonder 'what could possibly be the uses of each and every one of them', as the Great Exhibition so often failed to do.

Connections between cloth and newspaper and commerce are made explicit here:

Some of the buyers [...] are there chiefly to 'pick up' the old umbrellas, which they value not only for the whalebone ribs but the metal supporters – the latter articles furnishing the materials for the greater part of the iron skewers of London; while some of the buyers, [...], have come to look after the old linen shirts, which they sell again to the paper mills, to be converted by the alchemy of science, into the newspaper, the best 'Bath Post', or even the bank note.<sup>101</sup>

This evident fictional relish for the complex 'Autobiography of Things', in Igor Kopytoff's phrase, complicates any simplistic presentation of objects in novels as simply denoting success or failure. Mayhew reveals that the trash

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<sup>101</sup> Cruikshank and Mayhew, pp.100-101.

from the least desirable areas of London is in fact recycled and finding its way back into the most respectable areas of life. Skewers will find their way into respectable kitchens and the ubiquity of money and newspapers implies a link between everybody and this heap of refuse. This portrayal of objects must have brought home that the reader, like Mr Sandboys, was not apart from the possibilities of circulation and transformation of objects, for practically every reader would have touched a newspaper, bank note or article of kitchenware (and what, indeed, was the very paper that *Mr and Mrs Sandboys* was printed on made of?).

Such ubiquity and mutability of objects undermines their usefulness in providing visible, tangible, comforting indicators of success or failure. Not only do objects not stay the same shape but they disrupt categories of status, class and even gender, as a man's umbrella becomes a woman's skewer and an old shirt becomes a wealthy man's bank note. Objects can come spectacularly down in the world and then, it seems, back up again. They will not stay where they are placed.

Like objects, even people as apparently static as the Sandboys family are set on the move by the Great Exhibition with anarchic results. The family initially resolve not to go to the Exhibition but finally capitulate when they find that not only their neighbours but all the things that make life worth living appear to have decamped to London:

[Mrs Sandboys] could perhaps have cheerfully tolerated the abdication of the Cockermouth milliner – she might have heard, without a sigh, that Mr Bailey had shut up the shutters of his circulating library [...] –

but to have taken away her tea and sugar, was more than a lady in the [...] valley of Buttermere, could be expected to endure,<sup>102</sup>

The final straw is when Mr Sandboys can no longer get his newspapers. This family, presented as being as provincial as it could possibly be, is in fact bound into society by global trade networks (where else do Mrs Sandboys's tea and sugar come from?) and are consumers in their own right. They are part of the fabric of society and cannot opt out. It is part of the narrative of *1851* that everything and everyone is drawn to the Exhibition.

Both Gaskell and Dickens suggest that the culture of looking and spectacle, which the Great Exhibition exemplified, interfered with compassionate, empathetic human relations. Gaskell's 1851 novel, *Cranford*, bears heavy marks of such disapproval. When the good and naive Miss Matty faces financial ruin, her loyal maid, Martha, makes her a splendid pudding, paying for the ingredients out of her own pocket to cheer her up. Miss Matty says:

'I should like to keep this pudding under a glass shade, my dear!' and the notion of the lion couchant with his currant eyes being hoisted up to the place of honour on a mantel piece, tickled my hysterical fancy and I began to laugh, which rather surprised Miss Matty. "*I am sure [...] I have seen uglier things under a glass shade before now,*" said she.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>102</sup>Cruikshank and Mayhew, p.20.

<sup>103</sup> Elizabeth Gaskell, *Cranford*, ed. by Elizabeth Porges Watson and Dinah Birch (1851; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p.129. [my italics]

The whole idea of preserving spectacles, under glass no less, is presented as ludicrous. One could certainly see stranger and uglier things ‘under glass’ at the Crystal Palace (a case of stuffed ferrets ‘teaching school’ for example). Gaskell’s point portrays an utter weariness with the whole culture of looking at things and arranging things solely to be looked at. The absurdity of a pudding being put under glass is that a pudding is there to be eaten, to be used. Making it purely decorative destroys its point, particularly as the ingredients of this have been bought by a devoted servant with the express purpose of nourishing Miss Matty, physically as well as emotionally. Its creation might be taken as an entirely anti-capitalist gesture of affection. One wonders, however, where Martha got the idea for such a showy pudding (not from anyone in Cranford, surely?). The image of the lion couchant hints at Martha’s familiarity with a culture of national symbolism and spectacle beyond self-sufficient Cranford. What have Martha, and Gaskell, been reading, looking at and absorbing from the visual culture of success? Furthermore, currants are not a native crop of Cranford: this town too relies on global trade links.

*Cranford* evoked Gaskell’s childhood home of Knutsford. Jenny Uglow describes how Gaskell found Knutsford ‘a haven from the rush of Manchester [...] but she was now forty-one and events like the Great Exhibition made her feel as if science and progress were sweeping away the era of her youth’.<sup>104</sup> Like the Sandboys of Buttermere, the ladies of Cranford like to think that they have rejected modern consumer culture entirely; Cranford is a town essentially run by a group of elderly women. Men are mainly distinguished by their absence, so is commodity culture. ‘The ladies of Cranford are quite

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<sup>104</sup> Jenny Uglow, *Elizabeth Gaskell: A Habit of Stories* (London and New York: Faber and Faber, 1999), p.279.

sufficient.<sup>105</sup> Such is the aim. In Cranford, objects are cherished and well-bred economy is the aim of the respectable. 'We none of us spoke of money because the subject savoured of commerce and trade.'<sup>106</sup> In Cranford 'commerce and trade', which the exhibition represented as the source of great moral and economic success, are here at first considered a source of instant social failure in themselves. When they intrude into the narrative they are always, like progress, a source of disaster. Good Captain Brown is killed early in the narrative by that symbol of progress, the railway train, when he saves a child stuck in the rails. The Misses Jenkyns suffer disproportionately for their little forays into commerce and consumer culture. Miss Deborah invests in a bank that fails. 'She was quite the woman of business and always judged for herself.'<sup>107</sup> Modern life is obtruding itself relentlessly into Cranford and even Miss Matty finally has to keep shop. Like the residents of Buttermere, those of Cranford cannot entirely opt out of modern consumer culture and the culture of success and spectacle with which it was becoming increasingly closely allied.

There is, however, something unpleasantly punitive about the way that Miss Matty's suppressed longing for pretty things is punished, an emphasis that makes sense in the context of Gaskell's dislike of the Exhibition. Miss Matty receives the first warning that the bank has failed when shopping for a silk gown, 'the first time in her life that she had had to choose anything of consequence for herself'.<sup>108</sup> She is shown as being dangerously close to enjoying being a consumer:

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<sup>105</sup> Gaskell, *Cranford*, p.3.

<sup>106</sup> Gaskell, *Cranford*, p.4.

<sup>107</sup> Gaskell, *Cranford*, p.117.

<sup>108</sup> Gaskell, *Cranford*, p.119.

‘Whichever one I choose, I shall wish I had taken another. Look at this lovely crimson! It would be so warm in winter, but spring is coming on, you know. I wish I could have a gown for every season,’ [...]. ‘However,’ she continued in a more cheerful tone, ‘It would take me a great deal of trouble to take care of them, if I had them; so I think, I’ll take only one’.<sup>109</sup>

Gaskell makes it clear from the ‘more cheerful’ tone that consumer choice would be a burden on Miss Matty. The underlying story of her losing her money through the bank is that she is ultimately happier. Even Miss Matty’s longing for bright colours cannot be allowed, the narrator is trying to dissuade her from buying a ‘lilac [silk] with yellow spots’ suggesting instead a suitably ‘quiet sage green’<sup>110</sup> when the warning about the bank failure comes. There is a hint that this bad news has averted not just a fashion disaster but a moral one. Gaskell’s tone remains didactic. At one point Miss Matty longs for a fashionable green silk turban (the imagery of *The Arabian Nights* and the glamour of the orient being, of course, powerfully associated with the Great Exhibition, as Charlotte Brontë’s letters show). The narrator is there to see that Miss Matty gets a sensible bonnet instead. Anything that could be associated with the Exhibition in the mind of the reader is shown in a negative light, stemming, I argue, from a sense of the invasiveness of consumer culture. *Cranford* reveals that no one, not even a country community of ladies, is apart from it. Miss Matty, keeping a genteel shop at the end of the novel but ever kind and still a lady, is an example of an attempt to balance the moral and material demands of life in Victorian England.

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<sup>109</sup> Gaskell, *Cranford*, p.120.

<sup>110</sup> Gaskell, *Cranford*, p.121.

Despite Gaskell's attempt to 'provincialise' Brontë, *Villette* thoroughly investigates objects inside and outside exhibitions and the link between the two. Isobel Armstrong compares the Great Exhibition with 'the metropolitan festival that takes place in Villette's park'.<sup>111</sup> 'What Charlotte Brontë does here is to produce the Exhibition without the mediation of glass [...] here is not the actual spectacle behind glass as much as its epiphenomena – images of exotic display.'<sup>112</sup> This idea can be seen in play throughout the novel, in museums, classrooms, bedrooms, opera halls, for in *Villette* objects and strategies for objectification are everywhere: the 'Cleopatra' picture, gifts such as Lucy's watch chain for Paul Emmanuel, the Bretton family furniture and Lucy's pink dress. They are described in acute, sometimes even laborious detail (as they were in the exhibition catalogues):

Instead of two dozen little stands of painted wood, each holding a basin and a ewer, there was a toilette table, dressed, like a lady for a ball, in a white robe over a pink skirt; a polished and large glass crowned, and a pretty pin-cushion frilled with lace adorned it.<sup>113</sup>

However objects can also be sumptuous and affective. Armstrong argues that 'luxury that ransacks resources is also the [domestic] interior's coded meaning. Marble (Italy) [...] damask and arabesques (Damascus and the east) [...] "the unique assemblage of all things"'.<sup>114</sup> As Armstrong demonstrates, in the aftermath of the Exhibition those 'assemblages' were *seen* to be becoming

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<sup>111</sup> Armstrong, *Victorian Glassworlds*, p.241.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>113</sup> Brontë, *Villette*, p.241.

<sup>114</sup> Armstrong, *Victorian Glassworlds*, p.245.

less unique. Bourgeois luxury did not start into being in 1851 but its most famous spectacle certainly accelerated the pace. (Not for nothing did Brontë redo the interiors of Haworth Parsonage after the Great Exhibition). But the Great Exhibition also heightened understanding of the movement of objects and the ways in which that could destabilize, even while seeking to prove, the Reality Effect of success.

The positioning of these ‘images of exotic display’ in both public and private spheres emphasises the pervasive nature of the culture of success. This is a fundamental aspect of the novel’s sophisticated critique of female success: not least because it shows how the materialised culture of success explodes the binary between public and private spheres and how fundamental objects are to creating it (thus emphasising its fragility).

In Chapter Three I explore the ramifications of Lucy Snowe waking up in a strange place full of familiar, meticulously described furniture. It turns out that her rescuer is a former friend who has lost his former home in bankruptcy and, having saved the furniture, recreated the home in Villette. This is an unsettling image, suggesting the vivid power of objects both to ‘create’ home and to be moved. The gap between public and private space seems obfuscated by the material allure of the object, a process, I argue, that the Great Exhibition made Victorians very aware of. The event was a process of possessions made exhibits and exhibits becoming, or returning to be, possessions. Blurring the lines between possession and exhibit made them even more vividly part of the material culture of success.

Armstrong suggests that ‘La Terrasse, the Bretton home, is a place for preserving things, a kind of domestic exhibition of displaced artefacts’.<sup>115</sup> I suggest that, after the Exhibition, all possessions were ‘displaced artefacts’.

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<sup>115</sup> Armstrong, *Victorian Glassworlds*, p.244.



The things that middle-class Victorians bought and sold and preserved and lost would, after the Great Exhibition, always carry the potential for exhibiting: something understood with renewed clarity after the intense experience of material excess that participating in the event, even at one remove, engendered. This new understanding offered exaggerated possibilities for signifying personal success but it also emphasised the dangers. The vast exhibition, assembled and disassembled in eighteen months, demonstrated very clearly that objects, however apparently solid, can move or be displaced. In Chapter Three I shall analyse the problems, highlighted in realist fiction, of trying to create the sense of a stable domestic sphere out of ‘unstable artefacts’, in Armstrong’s phrase. The Great Exhibition was a key event in rendering those objects ‘unstable’ of meaning for several decades to come: instability, allure, the sheer impact of materiality had a huge impact on the materialised conception of success.

George Cruikshank’s cartoon<sup>116</sup> depicts exhibits marching and flying out of the Crystal Palace at the end of the event. It evokes (domestic) material culture as a powerful force with an uncanny life of its own, rendering objects unstable, of uncertain social meaning and unnervingly disinclined to stay, literally or metaphorically, where they were put. Former exhibits are fanning out and on the left of the picture a column of violins follows a gun and a marching pair of (Wellington?) boots. The non-domestic articles in the picture, the elephant with its howdah, the statuary and weaponry, lend this diaspora a martial air. They suggest an imminent invasion of material culture into Britain’s homes.

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<sup>116</sup> Illustrating Cruikshank and Mayhew’s *Mr and Mrs Sandboys*

## Chapter 3: Moving House: Movement of Material Culture Between Public and Private Spheres

### Introduction: Home from the Great Exhibition: How Objects Reflect Conceptions of Success and Failure Within the Home

This chapter explores how the novel reflected success and failure through the movement of domestic material culture throughout society, and the increasingly complicated histories that accrued to objects through this circulation (as I have shown in Chapter Two). Domestic possessions could be advanced as proof of an individual's control of their immediate environment and defence against powerful ideas of moral failure that relentlessly amassed around the idea of bankruptcy in the second half of the nineteenth century. The role of objects, as ostensibly stable signifiers of success, played its part in the Victorian middle-class cult of the home and in the (equally Victorian middle-class) horror of bankruptcy, which I argue is the acme of failure in mid-Victorian England. I show how this horror was often pungently expressed in novels, and life, through forcible removal of domestic possessions from 'the bankrupt's' home.

Examining the role of objects as 'defence' against failure and 'proof' of success is, I argue, a major theme in novels such as *Vanity Fair*, *Villette* and *Daniel Deronda*. I examine how characters used the objects within cluttered tableaux in Victorian drawing rooms to reflect and examine the performative discourse of success. This performative nature of success, I contend, renders the division of public and private spheres less powerful than many Victorians, and modern critics, have argued.

Possession and display lie at the heart of Victorian conceptions of success and the home. An individual must appear sufficiently in control of their immediate environment to assimilate objects into their domestic zone as a reflection of his/ her moral and material success, rather than have the

domestic zone reflecting its all-too-close industrial and imperial relations with the outside world. In the resulting struggle to have things that reflect an individual's depth of character and objects which reflect economic wealth, things – but, crucially, not too many new things – become the goal.

Here I explore portrayals of the home within the novel as a forcing house for the corrupting effect of the culture of success itself. This corruption is explored in two recurring themes: characters' inability to cultivate meaningful emotional relationships with and through objects, and what happens when objects are lost, most dramatically, through bankruptcy. Such exploration subverts the Victorian construction of the home as a cosy antithesis to the brutality of a fast changing world and the heart of moral values.

I examine ways in which furniture and personal objects can be used to make, and unmake, a home within novels; often, crucially, functioning in ways that characters do not intend. In a culture that created such a high expectation of objects' obedient signification, it is perhaps unsurprising to find objects in the domestic space of novels becoming unnerving. Not only do they increasingly appear to have other lives from those intended by their owners/users, but to have any other form of signification apart from settled domesticity at all subverts the culture of success, relying as it does on the illusion of control.

I discuss this literal and literary construction of the home by firstly exploring how the Victorian attempt to use furniture in the home as unambiguous signifiers of success is constructed physically and theoretically, and examining how the novel undermines this attempt. I define the Victorian home as a process of attempting to create an ambience of security (economic and emotional) and morality – the Reality Effect of success – through the use of decor and objects, as much as the physical space and structure of a house.

The writings of Samuel Smiles, John Ruskin and Charles Dickens all reflect a longing for material things to synthesise moral, social and economic success in the domestic sphere while frequently revealing that they could not. ‘A place for everything and everything in its place’<sup>1</sup> intoned Samuel Smiles in 1875. In contrast, four years earlier in 1871, Lewis Carroll’s Alice complained in *Looking Glass World* that ‘things flow about so here!’.<sup>2</sup> I argue that the semi-fantastic stream of objects in Cruikshank, Dickens and Carroll reflects, better than Smiles’s formulation, the experience of Victorian home-makers facing an influx of objects with complicated pasts and new possibilities for signification, than Ruskinian ideals of sequestered, morally benevolent domesticity.

The domestic objects in Cruikshank’s ‘Dispersal of the Works of All Nations’ captures the profound unease that ‘homeless’ objects, domestic objects in the public sphere, had in the Victorian imagination, whether in museums, exhibitions or shops. They are all latent double agents: reflecting not only hard-earned new wealth and access to new technologies such as aniline dyes, mass-production and electroplating, but with the potentiality for failure: impermanence and profound moral, social and economic unease. These things are at variance with efforts to use furniture to demonstrate success in the Victorian parlour.

I take a rather literal understanding of Freud’s ‘uncanny’, which can be translated as ‘unhomely’, as my starting point in understanding how objects reflected success and failure in the home. ‘Unheimlich’s [...] nearest semantic equivalents are “uncanny” and “eerie” but [it] etymologically corresponds to

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<sup>1</sup> Samuel Smiles, *Thrift*, p.8.

<sup>2</sup> Lewis Carroll, ‘Through the Looking Glass’ in *Alice in Wonderland*, ed. by Donald J. Gray, 2nd edn (1871; New York: Norton, 1992), 105-214 (p.154).

“unhomely”<sup>3</sup>.<sup>3</sup> Freud’s definition of ‘the uncanny [as] that species of frightening that goes back to what was once well-known and had long been familiar’<sup>4</sup> has particular relevance for domestic objects.

Expressing success through material culture requires domestic objects to be ‘heimlich’, homely, tamed and, if not concealed, at least confined securely within the home. If ‘unheimlich’ means untamed, unconcealed, out of the home, eerie, then novels such *Vanity Fair* and *Daniel Deronda* explore failure to ‘tame’ domestic objects. Objects moving around outside the domestic zone are often closely associated with forms of failure because too much circulation does not allow individuals to develop an emotional attachment to things.

Lewis Carroll’s *Alice Through the Looking Glass* (1871) is about nothing so much as the sheer uncontrollability of objects and the way they flow through different spheres and even change their nature. Objects in ‘Looking Glass World’ work their way first through a mirror, where they are reflected and distorted in the looking glass house of Alice’s dream, and then out on to a giant chess board. They change form, they can pass from dream to reality, and they pass out of the domestic zone into the chaotic ‘public’ world of the chess board (complete with shops and railway carriages).

Carroll’s unruly objects cannot be entirely consigned to the world of dreamscape, fantasy and children’s literature, particularly not when contextualised with other novelists and illustrators. Cruikshank and Carroll’s own illustrator Tenniel were both famous for their political sketches; indeed

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<sup>3</sup> David McIntock (editor) and Hugh Haughton (translator), notes from: Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny*, trans. by David McIntock, ed. by Hugh Haughton (1919; London: Penguin, 2003), p.124.

<sup>4</sup> Freud, *The Uncanny*, p.124.

both illustrated savage political (and racist) cartoons on the Irish Question<sup>5</sup> and the British response to the Indian Mutiny respectively. Whimsy, as magazines like *Punch* showed, could be devastatingly political. Cruikshank illustrated *Oliver Twist*, perhaps one of the most overt ‘social problem novels’ in Dickens’s oeuvre. That both men should have ended up chronicling the rise of objects suggests their increasing social and economic importance.

Victorian novels are crammed full of ‘unreal’ objects that operate on a scale from dream to nightmare. They question the realism/reality of the Victorian home. They certainly undermine its sense of security. If objects are the materials with which the successful home is to be built, then they are fraught with multiple meanings. Carroll’s fantastical walking chess pieces find their equivalents in works by Dickens, Eliot and Thackeray.

Charles Dickens’s own domestic life contained Alice-style moments; while waiting for his new home to be made ready in 1851, he wrote peevishly, ‘I dream of workmen every night. They make faces at me and won’t do anything’.<sup>6</sup> The dream, shading to nightmare, of creating a home and a Victorian man’s dread of being unable to control domestic material matters is clearly rendered and percolates into the domestic chaos of *Bleak House*.

Interpretations of household articles as uncontrollable, chaotic and mobile are frequently a threatening presence within Victorian novels but it is a sense of threat that they take from life. In 1852, two similar accounts were written of domestic chaos: one by Charles Dickens in *Bleak House* (1852) and the other by a Prussian spy reporting on the affairs of Karl Marx. In the former, Esther Summerson attempts to restore order to the anarchic Jellyby household:

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<sup>5</sup> Tenniel in *Punch* and Cruikshank in William Maxwell’s ‘History of the Irish Rebellion in 1798’ (1845)

<sup>6</sup> Letter from Charles Dickens to Mrs Morson, 24 September 1851, in *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, ed. by Storey and Tillotson, vi, (1850-52), p.494.

No domestic object which was capable of collecting dirt, from a dear child's knee to the door-plate, was without [...dirt...]. Poor Mr Jellyby, [...], became interested when he saw that Caddy and I were attempting to establish some order among all this waste and ruin, and took off his coat to help. But such wonderful things came tumbling out of the closets when they were opened – bits of mouldy pie, sour bottles, Mrs Jellyby's caps, letters, tea [...] firewood [...] saucepan-lids, damp sugar [...] – that he looked frightened and left off again.<sup>7</sup>

In the report on the Marx family:

In the whole apartment there is not one clean and solid piece of furniture. Everything is broken down, tattered and torn, with half an inch of dust over everything and there is a large old-fashioned table covered with an oilcloth and on it lie his manuscripts, books and newspapers, as well as the children's toys, and rags and tatters of his wife's sowing basket, several

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<sup>7</sup> Dickens, *Bleak House*, p.442.

cups with broken rims, knives, forks, lamps, an inkpot, tumblers, Dutch clay pipes, tobacco ash – in a word everything topsy-turvy, and all on the same table. A seller of second-hand goods would be ashamed to give away such a remarkable collection of odds and ends.<sup>8</sup>

There are distinct similarities here, in the long lists of objects and a certain relish for domestic chaos. If a police state felt that the condition of Marx's desk was worth analysing, then such similarity in realist novels suggests verisimilitude, comment on the politics of material culture, rather than aesthetic licence. Juliet John's trenchant reminder 'some things are symbolic in literature, others are just "stuff"' warns against taking the histories of objects too literally.<sup>9</sup> However this comparison marks a moment when the things in novels become very close to the things in reality: the objects on Marx's table and in the Jellyby cupboard are performing similar acts of signification in the Victorian discourse of success and failure.

One might suggest several aesthetic and political reasons why Dickens focuses on these 'things': humour, a desire to emphasise the importance of a 'good' wife, a long-standing interest in the qualities of things; but contrasting his work with this police report reflects a wider nineteenth-century sensitivity to the amount that a person's possessions could say about them and the wider discourse of success and failure in which Dickens, and all other novelists, were writing. Peter Stalleybrass has traced the extent of this, pointing out that when Marx's coat was in pawn he could not go to the British museum to work

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<sup>8</sup> Quoted in Mary Gabriel, *Love and Capital: Karl and Jenny Marx and the Birth of a Revolution* (2011; New York: Little, Brown, 2012), p.233-5.

<sup>9</sup> Juliet John, 'Things, Words and the Meanings of Art', in *Dickens and Modernity*, ed. by John, p.117.



(see Chapter One). This report begs the question of how much work Marx could do at home either: his possessions are used to represent him as politically and economically weak (the shadow of the pawnshop hangs over the last remark). With his manuscripts physically and metaphorically entangled in his family's domestic affairs – children's toys, wife's sewing – Marx is 'framed' by domestic chaos, looking as weak and failed as Mr Jellyby in whose cultural shadow he in fact stands. The comparison of novel and report demonstrates the circuitousness of the Victorian attitude to success expressed through material things: because people *felt* that objects were proof of material success or failure, they were. Such a report, despite its almost gossipy tone, had real political implications for Marx.

In *Bleak House*, 'waste and ruin', the economic and moral consequences of such domestic untidiness, are emphasised, with moral, gender and economic norms overturned. The Jellyby family is now bankrupt and Mr Jellyby totally 'unmanned', as his 'jelly-like' name suggests. Children are suffering: a dirty door plate explicitly signifies domestic neglect within, shading to cruelty, in the form of an unwashed child. Furthermore, it is the young women connected with the family, Caddy and Esther, who are attempting to create some order, rather than the master or mistress of the house. I argue that not only did the signification of success and failure cause greater similarities between men and women's roles in middle-class culture than is often allowed for, but that disruption of that culture, especially through bankruptcy, again threw the question of what constituted success for women wide open, an opening that novels were often happy to fill.

Novels from the 1840s to the 1880s absorb the way in which objects are bought, sold and altered in the Victorian economy at large. They also play on the desire of families to exhibit their objects, their successes, in front of a carefully chosen audience, a desire whose obverse was the fear of exposing

familial failures. The Crystal Palace foregrounded the idea of exhibiting domestic material culture as a form of success but it had its opposite in the Chamber of Horrors at Marlborough House, set up in 1852, where objects in ‘bad taste’ were placed on show before an anxious public. For those who found replicas of their own furniture on show, the exhibitionism of the Crystal Palace suddenly became the merciless scrutiny of the goldfish bowl: exhibition culture carried with it pride and anxiety in equal measure.

Middle-class homes were filled with objects whose ‘biographies’ theoretically offered a worryingly direct link to the discourse of success and failure outside the home through their industrial and commercial pasts. There has been a powerful critical tendency to see commodities, especially those with a ‘foreign’ past, as disruptive to Victorian domestic stability. Elaine Freedgood argues that:

The activity of consuming became constructed as increasingly dangerous during the nineteenth century, and not only because of the dangers of the exotic and the problem of foreign material penetrating and possibly disrupting the domestic interior – [...] the domestic interior itself was constitutively foreign. [...], the consumer was increasingly imagined as becoming a victim of various kinds of seduction.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Elaine Freedgood, ‘Cultures of Commodities, Cultures of Things,’ in *The Victorian World*, ed. by Hewitt, p.231.

Such criticism is in danger of constructing its own separate spheres, in which the lovingly homespun world of the domestic sphere is invaded by evil commodities and women in particular are helpless victims of commodity culture. Such an attitude ignores the way in which objects were used in the culture of success and in which they helped both men and women to exploit that culture, often in ways that transcended perceived gender norms constructed around the 'separate spheres'. Thad Logan argues that objects displayed in the parlour allowed 'middle-class men and women to experience a sense of mastery over the world while they variously acknowledged its vastness and its intricacy'.<sup>11</sup> This sense of mastery, I argue, is a fundamental tenet of the Victorian conception of success. Both Logan and Freedgood suggest the extent to which the home is an exhibition zone; if the Crystal Palace was a space in which national success could be demonstrated through the martialling of objects from all over the world, then the Victorian middle-class drawing room was where individual success could be demonstrated, as individuals acquired and displayed objects from all over the globe. As I discussed in Chapter Two, Elaine Freedgood suggests that 'in the Victorian world the violence of the extraction of raw material and its manufacture into commodities was not a source of grief [... but] a source of fascination and of national superiority'.<sup>12</sup> Freedgood was principally referring to the Great Exhibition, but I argue that the act of consumption (not, of course, officially sanctioned at the Crystal Palace) translated that sense of national success into individual success. That middle-class Englishmen and women could have the products of the globe reflected in their drawing rooms, with their Chinoiserie, 'Moorish', Indian or even simply mass-produced artefacts, was proof of how Albert's argument that 'the products of all quarters of the globe are placed at

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<sup>11</sup> Logan, p.181.

<sup>12</sup> Elaine Freedgood, 'What Objects Know', p.91.

our disposal and we have only to choose what is best and cheapest for our purposes' could work at the level of the individual. Laissez-faire individualism required the individual to be master of his own fate, unlikely to succumb to huge impersonal forces such as stock market crashes or natural disasters that could render individual efforts null and void. Selection and acquisition of material things that could be exhibited in a well-defined personal space was a key method through which Victorian individuals could construct themselves as 'masters' – and mistresses – of their fate in an increasingly uncertain world. This was the Reality Effect of success in which the sheer materiality of things reflects the success of their possessor, and it is seldom clearer than in the profusion of things in the Victorian home.

### **3.1 'Separate Spheres': Success and Spaces of Performativity**

According to Leonora Davidoff and Catherine Hall, by the 1840s, 'the expectation was that middle-class women should not be gainfully employed and many were able to retreat to a domesticated life in their suburban villas and gardens'<sup>13</sup>: public life was for men and private, domestic, life was for women. By this definition, moral and material success were categories firmly sundered by gender and united by marriage: men must be material successes by earning money, and women moral successes through staying at home and providing the antidote to a harsh industrialised, urbanised environment.

However, the conception of moral and material success that I analyse here reflects a very different formulation of public and private spheres. In Chapter One, I examined marriage as a form of moral and material reward; in this chapter I view it as a social function allowing men and women to construct an ideal home in which the most powerful performance of Victorian success was played out. Here I emphasize the home as an exhibitionary space in which

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<sup>13</sup> Davidoff and Hall, p.xiv.

absolute control over the material world could theoretically be enacted, rather than as a place of withdrawal from the outside world. Furthermore, I emphasise the domestic roles of men as well as women in constructing and maintaining the home and its image of success. Men such as Charles Dickens and Karl Marx, from radically different ends of the economic spectrum, were deeply involved in the domestic minutiae of their homes, while women's positions as exhibitors of success culture required them to sally forth from their homes for social purposes and to shop. These were performative duties in the role of successful people: even their frivolous aspects represented their economic and social status. I emphasise the very material benefits that could accrue from presenting the impression of domestic felicity to the world and the economic and social failures that could stem from failure to do so.

Amanda Vickery has noted drily that:

What is offered as the key period of deterioration depends on the author's own chronological specialism. [...] Like the insidious rise of capitalism, the collapse of community, the nascent consumer society and the ever-emerging middle class, the unprecedented marginalization of wealthier women can be found in almost any century we care to look.<sup>14</sup>

The conception of success is useful in thinking about gender in Victorian England because it relates so strongly to an acceleration and mass-distribution

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<sup>14</sup> Vickery, pp.1-3.

of material culture that could only technically happen in the last half of the nineteenth century. Within this period, women's roles as consumers, investors, debtors, hostesses and housewives were all radically impacted by the pervasive increase in manufactured and exported objects inside and outside the home.

The Ruskinian ideals 'Of Queens' Gardens' (1865) and Coventry Patmore's 'Angel in the House' (1854-1862) suggest that success for women is achieved through their ability to morally elevate the domestic sphere. This idealisation of women is problematised by a focus on material culture, since both writers rely on the dichotomy of using material things to build a culture that they, ostensibly, view as ethereal and spiritualised. Such boundaries require locks and physical space. John Ruskin famously presented the ideal home as a place where the physical boundaries must signify the psychological peace generated by its (female) occupants. 'In so far as the anxieties of the outer life penetrate into it, and the inconsistently-minded, unknown, unloved or hostile society is allowed by either husband or wife to cross the threshold, it ceases to be home.'<sup>15</sup> Ruskin's conflicted formulation relies on one fundamental tenet of the Victorian conception of success: the formidable levels of control, psychological and physical, that an individual was supposed to be able to exert over their environment.

Emotional extravagance like Ruskin's and Patmore's suggest a fevered longing rather than an assertion of a generalised middle-class reality. Even the most idealised images of the domestic sphere as an escape in the 1850s include an air of menace and fragility. For all the 'temple-like repose' and '*ordered freedom*, sweet and fair' evoked in Patmore's 'Angel in the House', the ideal home is still 'a tent pitch'd in a world not right'.<sup>16</sup> This is a

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<sup>15</sup> Ruskin, *Sesame and Lilies*, p.77.

<sup>16</sup> Patmore p.12. [my italics]

disturbingly fragile and telling image in an era where contemporary interior design had so much invested in giving the impression of moral and material solidity. Vickery suggests that:

The broadcasting of the language of separate spheres was almost certainly a shrill response to an expansion in the opportunities, ambition and experience of Georgian and Victorian women – a cry from an embattled status quo, rather than the leading edge of change.<sup>17</sup>

I suggest that such broadcasting needs to be seen as a reaction to the heavily materialised culture of success that made the home an extension of public life and individual ambition – the very things that Ruskin felt should be left at the doorstep – and simultaneously made women key players in that culture.

### **3.2: Playing House: Constructing the Culture of Success**

The concept of the ideal Victorian home might be best defined by its reliance on two things: heavily defined personalized space and a profusion of objects within it. According to George Graham:

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<sup>17</sup>Vickery, p.7.

The possession of an entire house is [...] strongly desired by every Englishman; for it throws a sharp, well-defined circle round his family and hearth [...]. This feeling, as it is natural, is universal but it is stronger in England than it is on the Continent.<sup>18</sup>

That the shape and space of a house should be a matter of international competitiveness says much about the status of the home in mid-Victorian Britain (especially in the jingoistic atmosphere of 1851). The much desired house, rather than apartment, offered the individual a personal zone of display in which they could appear fully in control of all moral and material elements. The preoccupations here, with clearly demarcated space and success through competition, echo those of the Great Exhibition.

Graham's words advertise the British home both as a piece of well-defined personal space and a place of defensive withdrawal; they suggest Wemmick's one-plank drawbridge in *Great Expectations*, physically fragile yet psychologically vital in allowing Wemmick to retain his humanity despite working for Jaggers. He has found a bizarre but effective way to combine material success with happiness in his mental separation of home and office life; but this is a fantasy – and depicted by Dickens as such. Like Miss Havisham's Mansion, of which, I suggest, 'Walworth' is a benign variant, the cosy little house offers only an illusion that it is apart from the real world. This whimsical domestic set-up is underpinned by Wemmick's ability to earn money. This earning power – not the produce of his cucumber frame or the malodorous pig – allows Wemmick to perform the purely imaginative feat of

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<sup>18</sup>Report of George Graham, Registrar General on the Census of 1851, pp.xxxv-xxxvi, quoted in Judith Flanders, *The Victorian House: Domestic Life From Childbirth to Deathbed*, 2nd edn (2003; London: Harper Perennial, 2004), p.xxxviii.



cutting one's self off from London in domestic security. Wemmick owns all his possessions including his house, not a given for a clerk in this period. Wemmick's mourning rings are the symbol of this success; his combining of the 'separate spheres' and of moral and emotional success.

Dickens's preoccupation with the boundaries of the home ranged from the comedic to the sinister. Throughout the mid-Victorian period the discourse that sought to create the home as a place of psychological ease and refreshment needs to be seen in the context of considerable concern that these boundaries might be subject to failure: literal and financial collapse and the exposure of family secrets to public view. Dickens's image of the collapsing Clennam house in *Little Dorrit* offers a dramatic image of the failure to control and contain one's moral and material world, especially in the context of the Victorian preoccupation with the physical fragility of the home in a hostile world:

In one swift instant, the old house was before them [...] another thundering sound, and it heaved, surged outward, opened asunder in fifty places, collapsed, and fell. The dust storm [...] parted for a moment and showed them the stars [...] the great pile of chimneys, which was then alone left standing like a tower in a whirlwind, rocked, broke, and hailed itself down upon the heap of ruin.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Dickens, *Little Dorrit*, p.827.

This is a powerful image of moral and financial rottenness in the domestic sphere. The very sense of the material solidity of the house makes the sense of movement and collapse ‘heaved, surged’, more shocking. In this context Charles Eastlake’s outburst against the evils of stucco in 1878 may seem a little less hysterical:

What the general public do not know is that the structural deceits which [stucco] conceals are daily becoming so numerous and flagrant. [...] How frequently have we heard, during the last few years of the fall of houses which have been [recently] built? [...]. The whole front is a sham, from the basement story to the attics. [...] A few years have made it a dingy abode: a few more years will make it a ghastly ruin.<sup>20</sup>

Preoccupation with reinforcing boundaries was not entirely fanciful. In 1883, Beatrix Potter detailed a troubling practice by London’s builders that put filth and physical and moral failure literally at the heart of the home:

Builders are in the habit of digging out the gravel on which they ought to found their houses and selling it. The holes must be filled. The refuse of London is bad to get rid of [...]. The builders buy, not the cinder and ashes, but decaying animal matter and vegetable

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<sup>20</sup> Charles Eastlake, *Hints on Household Taste in Furniture, Upholstery and Other Details* (London: Longman’s Green 1869), pp.23-24.

matter etc. to fill the gravel parts. It is not safe to build on at first, so it is spread on the ground to rot, covered with a layer of earth [...].

After a while the bad smells soak through the earth and floors and cause fevers. This delightful substance is called ‘dry core’.<sup>21</sup>

Success and failure is a discourse literally built in to the homes of the Victorian middle-classes; the desire to see the home as a separate sphere in which spiritual peace, rather than material concerns, prevailed was always under attack, whether from dubious builders or acerbic novelists. The obverse side of the argument that material things could reflect permanence and moral values was a fear that physical rottenness lay at the core of such material and emotional edifices and could be morally and physically dangerous.

To these anxieties concerning the physical (im)permanence of the middle-class home, could be added anxieties concerning its permanence in the family psyche of the middle-class family. According to Judith Flanders, ‘a bare ten percent of the population owned their own homes; the rest rented [...] prosperous middle-class families taking renewable seven-year leases. This allowed families to move promptly and easily as their circumstances changed’.<sup>22</sup> By the very nature of the system, those in the middle could rise up or sink down. The suggestion that bricks and mortar were therefore relatively transient in the middle-class experience throws further emphasis on the role of possessions in creating the home. Furniture often comprised the biggest investment a family could make. While the value and taste of objects within the home – pianos, shell collections, indoor plants – demonstrated economic

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<sup>21</sup> Beatrix Potter, journal, 6 March 1886, quoted in Flanders, p.xlix.

<sup>22</sup> Flanders, p.xxxix.

and social credentials, they also hinted at fitting occupations for family life: hard work to earn them and good conduct and grateful contentment within the home in using and displaying them.

The journalist Percy Russell emphasised the link between interior design and the development of personal morality in 1874:

Furniture after all, must exercise a very important influence upon the character [...] It is ever possible so to order the interior of our abodes, supposing only the necessary means and the necessary taste are at command, as to produce a very satisfactory moral effect on the character.<sup>23</sup>

Thad Logan contends that ‘the characteristic bourgeois interior becomes increasingly full of objects [...] that do not have obvious use value but rather participate in a decorative semiotic economy’.<sup>24</sup> I argue that the ‘use value’ of that ‘economy’ was chiefly in creating a visible, tangible sense of moral and material success: the Reality Effect of success where things had nothing to do but broadcast the reality of their owners’ financial and moral security. In order for this theory to work, the onlooker in the home must know how to read domestic objects and those objects must signify widely accepted meanings.

In *Orlando*, Virginia Woolf’s satire captures the sense of objects breeding nervous gentility among their owners, followed by further objects:

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<sup>23</sup> Percy Russell, *Leaves From a Journalist’s Note-Book* (London: 1874) p.56. quoted in Cohen, *Household Gods*, p.13.

<sup>24</sup> Logan, p.26.

Rugs appeared [...] furniture was muffled; walls and tables were covered; nothing was left bare [...]. Coffee supplanted the after-dinner port, and, as coffee led to a drawing-room in which to drink it, and a drawing-room to glass cases, and glass cases to artificial flowers, and artificial flowers to mantelpieces, and mantelpieces to pianofortes, and pianofortes to drawing-room ballads, and drawing-room ballads (skipping a stage or two) to innumerable little dogs, mats, and china ornaments, the home – which had become extremely important – was completely altered.<sup>25</sup>

This knowing parody suggests both how middle-class assumptions of gentility breed a need for objects and how, ‘skipping a stage or two’, such an attitude prefers not to dwell on how the cluttered Victorian home came about. Woolf’s whole fantasy of the Victorian home, springing into being unquestioned, plays on the tension between the assumption of permanence and the reality of movement in the Victorian home.

### **3.3: ‘Luminous With Meaning’: How Objects Mean Success in the Victorian Home**

Novelists frequently make a trope and a joke of characters who define themselves and their worth by their possessions, which suggests that such emotional and economic dependence on a set of mutually agreed signifiers

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<sup>25</sup> Woolf, *Orlando*, p.223.

was widespread enough in Victorian society to be familiar to novel-readers at least. It also presents the novel as part of the critical force exposing the failures in such a culture.

To emphasise the moral success of the home, the family as a happy unit functioning within approved gender roles, objects need to acquire a sense of stasis. They must give the impression that they have no future beyond being lovingly possessed by their current owner (or at least remaining within the family). Very often they must also deny their past outside the home: they must not ‘smell of the workshop’. Such stasis relies on a domestic sphere untroubled by economic worries and eschewing the vagaries of fashion. It belies not only the ‘biography of objects’, with their manufactured and commercial pasts, but the industrialised capitalist economy itself. Inevitably, this economy relied for its own success on consumers constantly demanding fashionable new objects. Such objects are loaded with meaning, reflecting a disposable income, a good eye for trends and time to seek them out. Uniting moral, social and economic success in the home through the medium of objects was, therefore, no easy task. Interior design walked a fine line between the settled comfort of domesticity, and being unfashionable and perhaps reflecting genteel poverty. While the right objects could easily reflect wealth and status, too slavish a devotion to fashion, too many object changes suggests shallowness, vulgarity and ostentation, such as Dickens’s Veneerings.

In apparent contrast to the Veneerings, the Davilow family in *Daniel Deronda* (1876) use (rented) old furniture to try to give the impression of old wealth.

The house was but just large enough to be called a mansion [...] no beholder could suppose [it] to be inhabited by retired trades-people:

a certainty which was worth many conveniences to tenants who  
[...] had the taste that shrinks from new finery.<sup>26</sup>

To ‘shrink from new finery’ would apparently be to shrink from the code of success altogether, which no one could accuse Gwendolen and her mother of doing, but, crucially, the Davilows are not middle class. They are, by the skin of their teeth, gentry: ‘that border-territory of rank where annexation is a burning topic’.<sup>27</sup> Gwendolen is wilfully ignorant of the way in which her family is provided for. ‘Her maternal grandfather had been a West Indian – which seemed to exclude further question.’<sup>28</sup> (Eliot’s dash adds a nice irony to this sublimation of economic and imperial knowledge.) The aristocracy, theoretically, were aloof from the middle-class cult of success.

‘Stasis’ is taken a stage further when new things are considered vulgar in themselves. *Great Expectations* demonstrates this: where the energy of entrepreneurialism at Satis House has given way to vindictive gentility, demonstrated through rotten barrels outside the house and rotten furniture within. While novels may not be overly keen on new things, therefore, there remains the implicit understanding that without them, stasis can easily turn to rot. The attempts of the Davilow family to create a sense of grandeur, permanence and success through rented antique furniture needs to be situated in a wider discourse of success and failure in material culture in order to gain its full moral and formal force in the novel.

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<sup>26</sup> Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, p.16.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, p.17.

According to Clare Pettitt ‘it is the active accrual of meaning over time that makes things cherished and luminous with meaning’<sup>29</sup> in the novel. David Trotter also argues that in Victorian fiction, ‘scenes of household clearances, imagine the object’s double reduction: from household god to commodity; from commodity to matter, or stuff’.<sup>30</sup> This privileging of the emotional meanings of things over their wider social signification has characterised the attempt by critics like Trotter and Pettitt to re-emphasise the aesthetic and formal function of objects in novels. However, I argue that objects’ capacity for signifying success is very frequently a part of that function.

Trotter argues that ‘under favourable circumstances, or as a result of charitable intervention, [an object’s] original meaning and value might be restored to it’.<sup>31</sup> He cites the young stockbrokers who club together to return the Sedleys’ spoons to them after the bankruptcy auction. The emphasis here is on the emotional meanings of objects and it is these, according to Trotter and Pettitt, that give objects first place in the rhetorical hierarchy, in Elaine Freedgood’s phrase, of the text. Both Pettitt and David Trotter have attacked Freedgood’s emphasis on production in the things in novels as ‘perhaps *too* global and long-range’,<sup>32</sup> with Pettitt preferring to focus on ‘the history of consumption and use’<sup>33</sup> (and thus the opportunity to accrue emotional meanings) among objects, rather than their production. I have argued that much of the significance of the Victorian conception of success stemmed from its attempt to either effect a divorce from or sanitise objects’ histories of production: to see them as extensions of an individual and evidence of their control of their own lives. Without therefore wanting to over-emphasise

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<sup>29</sup> Clare Pettitt, ‘Peggotty’s Work-Box: Victorian souvenirs and Material Memory’, *Romanticism and Victorianism on the Net*, 53 (2009), erudite.org [accessed 03/01/14] (para 11 of 27)

<sup>30</sup> Trotter, p.15.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Clare Pettitt, ‘On Stuff’, p.7.

<sup>33</sup> Pettitt, ‘Peggotty’s Workbox’ (para 26 of 27)



histories of production too greatly, I believe that attempts to privilege the emotional over the wider social and economic meanings in objects damages our understanding of success and failure. Trying to sunder the moral from the material in the name of form does disservice both to our understanding of Victorian culture and our understanding of the novel.

What concerns Trotter, Pettitt and Juliet John, among others, is in Trotter's words, 'under what generic conditions have objects appeared in the literary text?'.<sup>34</sup> How do we decide what objects have 'value' to the text? As Pettitt puts it 'a simple binary of objects, split between those that can speak meanings within the text, and those that are obdurately silent [...] seems to me to be helpful but ultimately inadequate'.<sup>35</sup> Both Trotter and Pettitt highlight Freedgood's concept of the 'rhetorical hierarchy' of objects in the text as a means of restoring proportionate meaning to objects. Success and failure are one set of 'generic conditions' that give value; they can also often cross the binary between objects 'luminous' with emotional meaning and mere matter and stuff.

The application of success and failure as a set of 'generic conditions' offers a new way of reading descriptions of the home in Victorian novels. In practice, the exhibition of success in the home needed (some) new things. Many novels, however, would seem to hold to Pettitt's argument that things need time and emotional connection to gain meaning. Many of the most memorable interiors of Victorian realism – Miss Havisham's rotting dining room, for example, or the 'vault-like' interiors of Thornfield Hall – rely on old furniture for their atmosphere. However, one might argue that the older the furniture gets, the less 'realistic' it is. 'New' things speak directly of a

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<sup>34</sup> Trotter, p.6.

<sup>35</sup> Pettitt, 'Peggotty's Workbox' (para 26 of 27)

discourse of success that novelists often avoided; like well-dressed women (see Chapter One) smart new homes are often morally ambiguous places in novels.

In *Daniel Deronda*, Eliot comes up with an ingenious way of using old things to explore modern problems of success and failure. The Davilow family's move to the rented house Offendene serves as an extended discussion about how the Reality Effect of success can (and cannot) be constructed and the fear that women who use objects in the game of success are in danger of becoming objects themselves.

The lack of characters' emotional ties to domestic objects is very much part of their formal function and meaning at the beginning of *Daniel Deronda* and is fundamental to the discourse of success and failure in the text. The relationship that people had, directly and indirectly, with what Trotter dismisses as 'matter' within the huge circulating pool of objects, so well summed up in Cruikshank's 'Dispersal' cartoon, is important. As things became increasingly vital in the politics of success and failure, the lack of emotional connection to things was creating a set of significations in its own right, and it was one that novelists used to good effect. Success, as Pettitt hints, may well involve people learning to balance the moral and the material, to 'earn' objects in the economy of the novel through love of things and people. However, the greater part of the plot of realist novels is about such processes being out of balance, about characters striving for success and failing, or attaining their goals only after lessons learnt. In this context one might well expect to find objects surfacing periodically whose formal importance is their randomness, their lack of emotional connection. In *Daniel Deronda*, this is most powerfully shown in the rented house Offendene: a 'dene' being a valley, Eliot hints that this is the 'valley of the orphan'. As in the public sphere where we first saw her, Gwendolen's future hangs in a

balance: will this be a refuge or the zenith of her moral and emotional rootlessness?

It is through the furniture at Offendene that Eliot stages (literally) the rather desperate and childish attempts by Gwendolen and her mother to build success, moral and emotional stasis, through objects that are in fact impersonal rented pieces of furniture. Eliot laments the fact that the house cannot be ‘luminous with meaning’ for Gwendolen:

Pity that Offendene was not the home of Miss Harleth’s childhood, or endeared to her by family memories! [...] The best introduction to astronomy is to think of [...] the] little lot of stars belonging to one’s own homestead. [...] this blessed persistence in which affection can take root had been wanting in Gwendolen’s life.<sup>36</sup>

The development of empathy through long emotional association with things is therefore an ideal but, crucially in realism, it is not how things *are*. Eliot emphasises how fundamental furniture is to creating the ‘conditions’ of social status. Offendene appears to be the secure antithesis to the Davilow family’s peripatetic wanderings on the Continent:

[Gwendolen] had disliked their former way of life, roving from one foreign watering-place or Parisian apartment to another, always

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<sup>36</sup> Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, p.16.

feeling new antipathies to new suites of hired furniture, and meeting new people under conditions which made her appear of little importance.<sup>37</sup>

This throwaway line about ‘new suites of hired furniture’ ostensibly refers to just the kind of ‘matter’ in novels that Trotter invokes. In fact, the discourse of success and failure gives it formal significance, especially when compared to the vividly described objects that furnish Offendene. In this comparison, ‘matter’ becomes the signifier of failure. It is part of the ‘conditions’ under which Gwendolen operates and therefore one of the ‘generic conditions’ that Trotter invokes to create meaning. Constantly changing, anonymous things, we are made to understand, have been deleterious to Gwendolen’s social position (which she understands all too well) but they have also played a part in eroding her moral sense. In this context, telling us nothing about the Davilows’ previous furniture is not simply a question of artistic proportion because some objects do not matter much to the text, but a deliberate decision to emphasise their lack of character and thus their lack of ability to help form Gwendolen’s character.

This small but deliberate decision in the rhetorical hierarchy of the text is highlighted by the vividness with which the furniture at Offendene is described by contrast: ‘the dining room all dark oak and worn red satin damask, with a copy of snarling, worrying dogs by Snyders’.<sup>38</sup> The drawing room, we understand, has an ‘antechamber crowded with venerable knick-knacks’, including an organ, ‘old embroidered chairs’ and a (probably) Spanish picture of ‘nothing but ribs and darkness’<sup>39</sup> according to Gwendolen.

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<sup>37</sup> Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, p.17.

<sup>38</sup> Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, p.20.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

This is an increasingly detailed and idiosyncratic collection of objects and furniture that the family discover as they move through their new home. It has character and interest, which serves to emphasise to us that it is not connected to the Davilows. Gwendolen, however, immediately sees how the collection's interesting materiality can be used in her pursuit of success.

Throughout this section of the novel Gwendolen increasingly attempts to use furniture, interiors and objects to 'frame' herself as a successful person. She is both determined to be successful and very unclear what that will entail. 'I am determined to be happy – at least not to go muddling away my life as other people do, being and doing nothing remarkable.'<sup>40</sup> Her conception of herself is tied up in her relationship to material culture: how it 'frames her'. The adults around her collude with this; her mother comments, 'That is a becoming glass, Gwendolen, or is it the black and gold colour [of the room] that sets you off?'.<sup>41</sup> The idea of a room 'setting off' a young woman begins to make it uncomfortably clear how deeply Gwendolen's family regard a 'good' marriage and material culture as being interlinked. Eliot suggests something else with this room, in which Gwendolen and her mother are about to discuss marriage – 'the only happy state for a woman'<sup>42</sup> according to Mrs Davilow - and Gwendolen's vague aspirations to success. The room contains 'a pretty little white couch', presumably for Gwendolen, and a 'black and yellow catafalque known as the 'best bed', presumably for Mrs Davilow. A catafalque is a 'raised platform on which the body lies in state before burial'<sup>43</sup> and it is rather a pointedly unusual thing to call a woman's bed. Eliot may still be playing with the gothic imagery of the rest of the house but I suggest that,

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<sup>40</sup> Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, p.22.

<sup>41</sup> Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, p.21.

<sup>42</sup> Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, p.22.

<sup>43</sup> Graham Handley (ed.), (footnotes) in George Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, p.698.

situated in the discourse of success and failure, these beds are vivid images of the impossibility of happiness for a woman in the context of the Victorian conception of success through material culture. Mrs Davilow is hardly an advertisement for the happiness of marriage. I suggest that the ‘catafalque’ invokes marriage as a living death in which one is exposed to admiring public view; after all, only important people lie in state. This is in effect the fate that awaits Gwendolen in her marriage to Grandcourt. As I have remarked before in this thesis, the connection between a woman, a corpse and a ‘thing’ is redolent of the discourse of success and failure. Here it suggests that the successful woman is ultimately transformed into a domestic object: she is inert, dead. In Chapter One I discussed Gwendolen’s progress, through her unwilling exhibition of her husband’s jewels and possessions, towards becoming an object in the economy of success. Here I emphasise the role that domestic material culture has in facilitating that process. An understanding of the wider politics of success and failure brings into prominence and formal coherence a whole range of objects in novels that hover between being ‘luminous’ with emotional meaning and mere matter; indeed the position between the two is often what facilitates their signification of success or failure.

Gwendolen’s naive assumption that objects are pliant things to help her create the right background is undermined in the novel. Eliot’s careful assemblage of objects to reflect upon the politics of success creates a succession of disturbing images undermining the sense that objects can be so easily used. The overall image of a girl playing at the images of heroines with the random objects in a rented house is deeply childish. Gwendolen cries ‘Here is an organ. I will be Saint Cecilia, someone shall paint me as Saint Cecilia!’<sup>44</sup> and Gwendolen does indeed create ‘a charming picture’.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, p.20.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

However, this constructing herself as an image of success has direct correlations with what Gwendolen can and must do throughout her life if she wishes to be successful and this she herself understands, even if she does not understand the implications of it. The adults do understand it and, object by object, Gwendolen, beguiled like a child with pretty things, is being led towards the trap of a 'good' marriage. Despite a lack of money, Gwendolen's uncle agrees to let her have a horse because 'a fine woman never looks better than on horseback [...] this girl is really worth some expense: you don't often see her equal. She ought to make a first rate marriage'.<sup>46</sup> Gwendolen is simultaneously celebrated as a social success and portrayed as if she were a horse herself. Only a few pages earlier she is described by the narrator as standing out among her family, 'imagine a young race horse [...] among untrimmed ponies and patient hacks'.<sup>47</sup> If the horse is 'thingummy' in the semiotics of success, something between machine for transport and creature, then it is left deliberately unclear whether Gwendolen is not well on the way to becoming a thingummy herself: Grandcourt's object to reflect his success in obtaining her. The character of Gwendolen is deeply suggestive of the fact that women become successful through things – through looking good among things – a dangerous strategy that risks turning them into objects themselves.

Consciously and unconsciously, therefore, Gwendolen is playing at signifying success; her new improved domestic setting has emboldened her in the use of things and people to make an attractive image of herself. This is a strategy that comes to a dramatic head, both foretelling what is to come and critiquing the image of women as signifiers of success, in Gwendolen's ill-fated amateur dramatics performance as the statue of Hermione from

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<sup>46</sup> Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, p.28.

<sup>47</sup> Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, p.19.

Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*. As usual here, all things and people to hand are pressed into service. 'The ante-chamber with the folding doors leant itself admirably to the purposes of a stage, and the whole of the establishment, with the addition of Jarrett the village carpenter, was absorbed in to the preparation for an entertainment'.<sup>48</sup>

The character of Hermione seems a very deliberate choice on the part of Eliot. According to Anna Jameson (with whose work Eliot was certainly familiar) in her 1832 work on Shakespearian heroines, 'Hermione exhibits what is never found in the other sex, but rarely in our own – yet sometimes; – dignity without pride, love without passion, and tenderness without weakness'.<sup>49</sup> She is listed under 'Characters of the Affections'. Clearly Jameson is shaping the character of Hermione into the mould of what would become the 'the angel in the house' in Victorian Britain. Gwendolen has none of these qualities and does not particularly want to acquire them. She sees only the opportunity to make an attractive image of herself that will call attention to her real beauty and imagined talents: she wishes to signify success, not the female suffering and patience epitomised by Hermione.

In the play, the 'awakening' of the 'statue' Hermione finally restores her to life, love and family; for Gwendolen being a statue allows people to admire her, particularly her smitten cousin, Rex, who, in the character of Leontes, is to be allowed 'to kneel and kiss the hem of her garment and so the curtain was to fall'.<sup>50</sup> So far, one might say, Gwendolen is the perfect signifier of a young girl's success, she has chaste devotion of a young man, the attention of all and material comfort and she is imitating the 'perfect woman' Hermione. Eliot gives us the ironic culture clash of a woman trying to signify success through

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<sup>48</sup> Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, p.48.

<sup>49</sup> Anna Jameson, *Shakespeare's Heroines: Characteristics of Women, Moral, Poetical and Historical* (1832; New York: Burt, 1900), p.169.

<sup>50</sup> Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, p. 48.



signifying a very different view of feminine perfection through self-sacrifice. This might suggest that Gwendolen is about to awaken to love and happiness. In the ‘reality’ of the amateur dramatics in the novel the hinged panel painting inopportunely springs open, wringing ‘a piercing cry by Gwendolen, who stood without change of attitude but with a change of expression that was terrifying in its terror. *She looked like a statue into which a soul of Fear had entered*’.<sup>51</sup> A really good living statue, a female signifier of success, Eliot suggests is based on fear, fear which seems (often and disturbingly in the nineteenth-century novel) to throw female beauty into sharp relief. Significantly, some of Gwendolen’s audience do not recognise her distress: asking ‘was it part of the play?’.<sup>52</sup> Klesmer even remarks ‘a magnificent bit of *plastik* that!’.<sup>53</sup> Acting as a signifier of success in this charade entails a woman’s anguish – and material things; in her future marriage with Grandcourt, where she cuts a handsome figure, Gwendolen will have both in abundance.

When the hinged panel is first discovered, Gwendolen instantly dislikes it and demands a key. ‘Let the key be found or else let one be made [...and] brought to me’.<sup>54</sup> This whole episode of the key, beginning with this declaration, has the air of a gothic fairy tale. However, it shows that not only can things not be easily controlled but that their uncontrollability is not always apparent.

Gwendolen’s attitudinising takes her through her own homes, to gambling halls, to hunting fields. The process of objectifying a young woman as ‘successful’ requires her to be seen, exhibited, in order to ‘catch’ a good

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<sup>51</sup> Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, p.49. [my italics]

<sup>52</sup> Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, p.50.

<sup>53</sup> Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, p.49.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

husband: there could be no successful constructing of the ideal private sphere of the home without women's social involvement in the public sphere.

We first see Gwendolen gambling at the opening of the novel:

In one of those splendid resorts which the enlightenment of ages has prepared [...] at a heavy cost of gilt mouldings, dark toned colour and chubby nudities, all correspondingly heavy – forming a suitable condenser of human breath belonging [...] to the highest fashion.<sup>55</sup>

This is very much the public sphere and, while Eliot and the priggish Deronda might disapprove of Gwendolen, it is worth noting that this as an example of the public sphere giving a woman a chance of success. Gwendolen has the opportunity to exhibit herself, to attract a rich husband, to win money. None of this is rendered very attractive by the novel and this in itself reflects the fact that material success can be a brutal business and very difficult to integrate with moral success, especially for a woman (we are not encouraged to disapprove of Deronda's presence in the same resort, or of his habit of following women and dealing at pawn shops). Eliot's evocation of the dark heavy atmosphere of the gambling hall suggests the weight of a decadent material culture waiting to crush Gwendolen when her luck turns.

Eliot's memorable image of the grand but sordid public sphere becomes formally important when contrasted with the fantasy at Offendene. Eliot ultimately seems to suggest that the divide between public and private spheres is minimal: how much difference is there between the dark heavy mouldings of the gambling hall and the equally dark, heavy spaces of rented Offendene?

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<sup>55</sup> Eliot, p.4.

The things within it are equally anonymous and equally employed in the bleakest performance of success without a moral dimension. Whether Gwendolen is showing off in a gambling hall, on horseback, or in charades in the drawing room she is engaged, albeit with only partial awareness, in the performance of success, exhibiting herself to catch a rich husband.

The fantasy of unified domestic, social and moral success in a family is destroyed at Offendene: the medium is bankruptcy. David Trotter has argued that the household clearance that so often follows bankruptcy in novels is formally and emotionally important because it shows ‘the object’s double reduction: from household God to commodity: from commodity to matter or stuff’.<sup>56</sup> Here this is not the case; there is no clearance because Offendene is rented and it is the humans who will have to move. There is the double pathos of having no treasured possessions to be parted from which emphasises their moral as well as their financial bankruptcy. They have their all invested in a performance of success and, when they lose it, the ‘thing’ that is hawked for sale is not their furniture but Gwendolen, who decides to marry Grandcourt.

If Eliot uses the Davilow family in *Daniel Deronda* to explore the moral bankruptcy of the performative culture of success, Brontë’s *Villette* explores intense emotional relationships with objects in the home in relation to what comprises a successful life for a woman. In *Villette* we ultimately see the Reality Effect of success functioning as it should: with objects signifying balanced moral and material success.

The finding, losing, destroying and reconstructing of homes is a huge theme in *Villette*. It begins by locating the Bretton family, not Lucy, in ‘a handsome house in the ancient town of Bretton’<sup>57</sup> where the family have been

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<sup>56</sup> Trotter, p.15.

<sup>57</sup> Brontë, *Villette*, p.61

‘residents for generations’. Like Eliot lamenting the peripatetic Gwendolen, Brontë seems to believe that ‘a human life [...] should be well-rooted in some spot’.<sup>58</sup> Certainly the young Lucy is able to use the domestic objects and spaces of Bretton to construct her ideal view of human relations. ‘The house and its inmates especially suited me. The large peaceful rooms, the well-arranged furniture, the clear wide windows [...] so quiet was its atmosphere, so clean its pavement – these things pleased me well.’<sup>59</sup> This, I suggest, is more than metaphor. Lucy’s description presents Bretton as a lesson in physical and psychological control, underpinned by financial stability. ‘Well-arranged furniture’ both suggests the ‘well-arranged’ mind that ordered it and further facilitates calm, control and pleasurable domesticity. This is the pleasure of ‘mastery’, in Thad Logan’s words, over domestic objects. This appreciation of furniture as a conveyer of social, moral and psychological order, I shall argue in Section 3.7, is a vital emotional counterpoint to Lucy’s own home life, which lacks all these things. It also offers the means to create female success.

When Lucy wakes up, after collapsing delirious in the streets of Vilette, it is furniture and the relationships contained within it that allow her to fight her way back to sanity. It is important to situate this fight in the wider discourse of success and failure. Like the women in Holloway Sanatorium, the stakes for Lucy’s recovery are even higher than mental health; without it, she is potentially alone, friendless, without a job or money. In such a precarious situation the streets of Vilette are full of menace for Lucy. The officers who offer the possibility of rape or molestation on her first night in Vilette blur the line between homeless and fallen woman. This image of Lucy’s plight mirrors the view of Victorian society at the time; not for nothing did Dickens and Angela Burdett-Coutts (another successful woman) name their foundation

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<sup>58</sup> Brontë, *Vilette*, p.16.

<sup>59</sup> Brontë, *Vilette*, p.61.

for reformed prostitutes a 'Home for Homeless Women'. 'Homeless' is more than a euphemism; it reflects a conception of female failure. A woman without a home is unable to adequately perform in the culture of success: she needs a private 'base' in order to sally forth into the public sphere and thus to reap the benefits, such as financial credit and useful social connections.

Paradoxically, the full importance of home in the Victorian conception of success can only be appreciated by emphasising its links to the public sphere. Brontë's attempt to answer the question of how a woman might be successful and gain a home without marriage was an urgent response to the discourse of success and material culture, of which her own excursions to London and the Great Exhibition and her renewed interest in interior decorating at home at Haworth must have made her intensely aware by the 1850s.

Lucy's awakening in the reconstructed Bretton household in Villette is a lesson in 'successful' emotional relationships with objects and how they can confusingly circulate, paradoxically making such relationships harder. It is through the furniture, described piece by piece that we see Lucy's fragile mental state rebuilt:

Still half-dreaming, I tried hard to discover in what room they had put me; [...] my eye fell on an easy-chair covered with blue damask.

Other seats, cushioned to match, dawned on me by degrees; and at last I took in the complete fact of a pleasant parlour, with a wood fire on a clear-shining hearth, a carpet where arabesques of bright blue relieved a ground of shaded fawn; pale walls over which a slight but endless garland of azure forget-me-nots ran mazed and bewildered amongst

myriad gold leaves and tendrils. A gilded mirror filled up the space between two windows, curtained amply with blue damask. In this mirror I saw myself laid, not in bed, but on a sofa. I looked spectral<sup>60</sup>

Chair by chair Lucy constructs her surroundings into a safe, pleasant place. The plenitude of description here also shows how Lucy is experiencing her own version of the Reality Effect of success. Seldom in fiction can it be clearer, or more vital, that the furniture says '*we are the real*'. The excess of described things makes it difficult to apply metaphor; one can just make out Lucy as a 'mazed and bewildered [forget-me-not] amongst myriad gold leaves' but even this image serves to suggest her transience against the material solidity of the furniture. Even as the furniture is rendered thoroughly material through description, Lucy herself is still 'spectral' in the mirror.

The construction of the relations with things, a relationship so powerful that it can, if necessary, pull you back to security from the edge of insanity, is a central preoccupation of this section of the novel:

Why did Bretton and my fourteenth year haunt me thus? Why, if they came at all, did they not return complete? Why hovered before my distempered vision the mere furniture, while the rooms and the locality were gone! As to that pincushion made of crimson satin,

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<sup>60</sup> Brontë, *Villette*, p.238.

ornamented with gold beads and frilled with thread-lace, I had the same right to know it as to know the screens – I had made it myself. Rising with a start from the bed, I took the cushion in my hand and examined it. There was the cipher ‘L. L. B.’ formed in gold beads, and surrounded with an oval wreath embroidered in white silk. These were the initials of my godmother's name – Louisa Lucy Bretton.<sup>61</sup>

One might suggest that the pincushion reflects an ideal set of moral and material relations through things, for Lucy has made it for someone she loves and the very fact that she has made it allows her to begin emotionally and physically relocating herself in the world. This is not, however, a case of alienated labour and commodity culture triumphantly surmounted. Lucy may have made the pincushion but she did not weave the red satin or make the gold beads. ‘Feminine’ needle work culture relied increasingly on the culture of mass produced commodities to sustain it. Brontë is interested in how individuals can create relationships with things within commodity culture, not outside it. Furthermore, Lucy’s description suggests, as throughout *Villette*, sensuous appreciation for the things that global commerce makes available. Love and appreciation of things in themselves, the memories they hold and the relations that they have facilitated with others are at least as important as the making of things but all are ways of creating relationships that facilitate the moral and material success of the individual.

The circumstances in which the furniture got to Villette reminds us that the comforting ease with which objects can be used to make a home is matched

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<sup>61</sup> Brontë, *Villette*, pp.241-2.

by the discomfoting ease with which that home can be dismantled. Only the furniture survives when the Brettons go bankrupt and lose their money. Graham Bretton must metamorphose into ‘Doctor John’, the successful professional whose hard work brings his family back from financial disaster. The salvaging of the family furniture represents moral and emotional success; despite disaster he has managed to retain it, or recover it, ship it to Vilette and reconstruct their home closely enough for Lucy to recognise it. It is a cheerfully material image of fortunes regained and domestic harmony restored through moral and practical effort.

Bretton is not, of course, to be Lucy’s home but we can argue that it is the place and the set of relations that taught her how to value, in all senses, a home. When Paul brings Lucy to her new home at the end of the novel, one senses that Lucy is using details to convince herself that this, her home, is real, just as she did when she awoke in Vilette among the Bretton furniture:

Opening an inner door, M. Paul disclosed a parlour, or salon – very tiny, but I thought, very pretty. Its delicate walls were tinged like a blush; its floor was waxed [...] in one corner appeared a guéridon with a marble top, and upon it a work-box, and a glass filled with violets<sup>62</sup>

I contend that this detailed description of a home is Brontë’s effort to evoke a relationship between a successful man and a successful woman. We are given painstaking detail about how Monsieur Paul paid for and created this idyll ‘trudging about three mortal weeks from house painter to upholsterer’.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Brontë, *Vilette*, p.584-5.

<sup>63</sup> Brontë, *Vilette*, p.586.



Although the house is a brief place of fantasy and domestic idyll for Lucy and Paul, this home is in no sense a retreat from the world, rather it is a means to connect to it. This is not simply a home but a business: the home and school, of which Paul has set Lucy up as ‘directrice’, are all one building. Lucy is explicit that she is not being bankrolled by Paul Emmanuel, but being set up in business, given a chance. ‘The first year’s rent you have already in your savings; afterwards Miss Lucy must trust God, and herself.’<sup>64</sup> I suggest that it was particularly important for Brontë to emphasise this business relationship in order to quell implications that Paul has installed Lucy as a mistress in preparation for his return. Lucy’s profession will protect her against moral speculation as well as financial want.

The ‘blush of pink’ in the walls signals erotic potentiality that never happens. Pink is the colour of longed-for fantasy in *Villette*, culminating (as discussed in Chapter One) in Lucy’s pink ball dress. As we know, this dress vanishes, ephemeral as Lucy’s hopes of love for Doctor John. Is it the implication here that a trace of that fantasy has survived in the more solid form of Lucy’s home; a domestic fantasy that, this time, has the solid underpinnings of her hard-won emotional maturity and financial security?

### **3.4: Premises, Promises and Premiums: Success, Masculinity and the Domesticated Dickens.**

In this section I emphasise the intense involvement of men in maintaining the increasingly heavy burden of the Victorian domestic cult, knowing that maintaining, or the inability to maintain, a home was public signification of moral and material success or failure.

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<sup>64</sup> Brontë, *Villette*, p.589.

The critical concept of the separate spheres helps to entrench the idea that the domestic sphere was ‘women’s work’. I emphasise the role of successful men in constructing the cult of the Victorian home in life and in novels. John Ruskin, John Stuart Mill and Samuel Smiles all wrote about the importance of home life for men. William Morris and Charles Eastlake wrote about and produced the furniture that should go in the home. The phrase ‘Angel in the House’, surely the most popular expression of the ideal of the domesticated female, was coined by a male writer, Coventry Patmore, in 1854.

In 1839, on moving into 1 Devonshire Terrace, Charles Dickens wrote to John Forster that he was moving to ““a house of great promise” (and great premium) “undeniable” situation and excessive splendour [...] I am in ecstatic restlessness’.<sup>65</sup> Dickens’ success can be measured by his house moves as much as his book sales. Changing homes indicates not only his income but how he felt a successful man should live and behave. Dickens’s domestic life provides a revealing link between the cult of domestic success in life and in novels.

The length and expense of Dickens’s lease on Devonshire Terrace asserts that he is a ‘coming man’ with a future. Promise was linked to premium but the physical attributes of the house, its situation and ‘excessive splendour’, are used to hammer home the point. In this triumphant context Dickens’s ‘restlessness’ strikes a discordant note. Fred Kaplan describes him as being ‘increasingly aware of his own restlessness, he worked the harder at creating domestic stability’.<sup>66</sup> This depiction of Dickens reflects a very Victorian determination to use domestic material culture to create the moral climate of domestic happiness: not least by *exhibiting* that happiness. According to Rosemarie Bodenheimer, ‘Dickens experienced the house as a site for the

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<sup>65</sup> Charles Dickens, Letter to John Forster, 7 November 1839, *Letters of Charles Dickens, 1820-39*, ed. by House and Storey, i (1965), p.598.

<sup>66</sup> Fred Kaplan, *Dickens: A Biography* (1988; London: Avon Books, 1990). p.116.

exercise of managerial control and as a neat, pretty world he could make: he found it both a burdensome locus of responsibility and a proud setting for scenes of family hospitality'.<sup>67</sup> 'Scenes' is a telling word in Dickens's domestic life. The amateur theatricals which he liked to produce in the family home literally made a happy family life performative: something to be displayed to verify domestic happiness.

Here I explore Dickens's 'managerial control' of his home in the context of relations between success and gender: the Victorian male's need to assert success through domestic control. The autonomous male ought to be able to control not only himself but the material culture of his home. In *Thrift* (1875) Smiles wrote that:

Order is most useful in the management of everything, of a household [...]. A place for everything, and everything in its place. Order is wealth; for, whoever properly regulates the use of his income, almost doubles his resources. Disorderly persons are rarely rich; and orderly persons are rarely poor.<sup>68</sup>

Dickens's Mr Jellyby stands as an 'awful warning' of what could happen to men who did not control their domestic environment. Dickens certainly intended to be his opposite. Neither he nor his contemporaries seemed to see anything wrong or unmanly in his involvement with domestic life. The

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<sup>67</sup> Rosemarie Bodenheimer, *Knowing Dickens* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007), p.128.

<sup>68</sup> Smiles, *Thrift*, p.38.

startling absence of Catherine Dickens in so many of the decisions concerning her home suggests far more than lethargy from constant pregnancies. In 1852 she produced her own cook book, *What Shall We Have for Dinner?* under the splendidly aristocratic pseudonym of Lady Maria Clutterbuck. She took her pseudonymous persona even further and killed off her husband:

The late Sir Jonas Clutterbuck had, in addition to a host of other virtues a very good appetite and an excellent digestion; to those endowments I was indebted (though some years the junior of my revered husband) for many hours of connubial happiness.<sup>69</sup>

Mamie Dickens describes the real Dickens's eating habits very differently:

In very many of my father's books there are frequent references to delicious meals, wonderful dinners and more marvellous dishes, steaming bowls of punch, etc., which have led many to believe that he was a man very fond of the table. And yet I think no more abstemious man ever lived.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Catherine Dickens, *What Shall We Have For Dinner? Satisfactorily Answered by Numerous Bills of Fare for From Two to Eighteen People*, 2nd edn (London: Bradbury and Evans, 1852), p.v.

<sup>70</sup> Mary Dickens, *My Father As I Recall Him* (London: Roxburghe Press 1896), p.2.

She locates Dickens's domestic interests very differently and precisely in the object culture of the home:

There never existed, I think, in all the world, a more thoroughly tidy or methodical creature than was my father. He was tidy in every way – in his mind, in his handsome and graceful person, in his work, in keeping his writing table drawers, in his large correspondence, in fact in his whole life.<sup>71</sup>

Mamie reflects the expectation that a man's control over himself and his home would reflect outwards into 'his whole life'. Fiercely hagiographical, she clearly saw nothing odd in his intimate involvement in their home's running and interior design:

My sister and I occupied a little garret room in Devonshire Terrace, at the very top of the house. He had taken the greatest pains and care to make the room as pretty and comfortable for his two little daughters as it could be made [...] he made a point of visiting every room in the house once each morning, and if a chair was out of its place, or a blind not quite straight, or a crumb left on the floor, woe betide the offender.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Mary Dickens, p.18.

<sup>72</sup> Mary Dickens, pp.16 -17.

Dickens and Catherine's home life demonstrates the failure of two people to create fantasies of domestic success for each other through material culture. He seems to have been relatively uninterested in food and she was, if not uninterested, then, certainly excluded from the interior design of her own home. Dickens's books and letters and Catherine's cookbook make clear their aspirations for constructing domestic success through material culture; she was more concerned with the food on the table and he was more concerned with what kind of dining table they had.

Bodenheimer's exploration of the link between Dickens's home and psychological struggles for order needs to be located in the wider context of Victorian ideals of domestic success. Bodenheimer argues that, during the 1850s, homes became more important to Dickens's work. In fact and fiction, 'Dickens takes detailed control over the practical housing of a complex human situation, and discovers that, in one way or another, his ordered will fails to contain his own emotional conflicts or those of others'.<sup>73</sup>

Dickens's feelings about the importance of furniture in the psychological and practical makeup of the home were quite literally visceral. During his stay in Broadstairs in 1851, while his new home was renovated, his stream of letters bearing detailed instructions testify to his frustration at being unable to oversee the work personally. To a suggestion that the lavatory in the bathroom need not be screened he wrote:

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<sup>73</sup> Bodenheimer, p.128.

I would decidedly partition off the WC. I have not sufficient confidence in my strength of mind to think I should begin [...] every day with the enforced contemplation of the outside of that box. I believe it would affect my bowels. It might relax, it might confine but I mistrust its having some influence on the happy mediocrity it is my ambition to preserve. And therefore I would mask the WC.<sup>74</sup>

All this humorous talk about constipation needs to be seen in the context of wider Victorian beliefs in the importance of furniture arrangement and its effect on physical and mental health. Thad Logan claims that, ‘the strength of the cultural imperative to create perfect [...] homes must, of itself, have generated deep apprehensions about one’s ability to do so’.<sup>75</sup>

Both Dickens’s *David Copperfield* and Eliot’s *Middlemarch* deal with the strain on young men that this culture of domestic success caused. David Trotter addresses the literary trope of young men witnessing a house sale:

[young men] give that scene or trope an additional twist. In each case, the household whose clearance the young men witness is not their own [...] since a household is what they can still only aspire to. The event draws attention to the very specific problem of identity which

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<sup>74</sup> Letter from Charles Dickens to Henry Austin, 1 October 1851, *The Letters of Charles Dickens 1850-52*, ed. by Storey and Tillotson, vi (1988), p.502.

<sup>75</sup> Logan, p.217.

afflicts those whose capital is symbolic [...] those who have only their own integrity to sell, rather than muscle, or the contents of a bank account.<sup>76</sup>

This question of identity is entirely tied up with what it means to be a successful man. Trotter suggests that they do not have ‘muscle’ to sell, though it is difficult to see how this would improve their situation. The ‘masculinity’ of being an able-bodied soldier avails Thackeray’s Major Dobbin little at the Sedleys’ house sale in *Vanity Fair*. Thackeray’s illustration actually shows him being menaced by the looming auctioneer (see FIG 22). Dobbin’s ‘lanky figure and military appearance’<sup>77</sup> render him clumsy and out of place in almost any social situation. The reason that Dobbin can help Amelia is not his muscle but his money.

The desire to see hard work and self-control leading to moral and material reward in the form of a comfortable home, and the realisation that it was not always so, is particularly palpable in *David Copperfield*. Dickens deals with the problem by establishing the figure of Tommy Traddles as David’s literary whipping boy. (Indeed, during their schooldays together this is made explicit). Traddles, as a young lawyer, focuses on accumulating the furniture for the marital home, evoking it as a long tortuous process:

‘The table clothes and pillowcases [...] are what discourage me most [...] so does the ironmongery [...] because these things tell, and

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<sup>76</sup> Trotter, pp.17-18.

<sup>77</sup> Thackeray, p.224.



mount up. However, “wait and hope!” [...] In the mean time [...] I get on as well as I can. I don’t make much, but I don’t spend much.’

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By having Traddles obsess about furniture, rather than money, Dickens avoids the pitfall of making him look materialistic. Furniture can be imbued with sentiment in a way that money cannot:

Here [...] are two pieces of furniture to commence with. This flower-pot and stand, she bought herself. You put that in the parlour window [...] this little round table with the marble top (it’s two feet ten in circumference), *I* bought. You want to lay a book down [...] or somebody comes to see you or your wife and wants a place to stand a cup of tea upon, and – and there you are again!<sup>79</sup>

The objects allow Traddles to accumulate memories and imagine living together with his fiancée in minute detail. This idea of building a home through objects fits within the culture of success: offering tangible proof of what has been accomplished whilst constructing a tantalising, moralised vision of the happily domesticated future. Traddles’s is a much more realistic

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<sup>78</sup> Dickens, *David Copperfield*, pp.413-414.

<sup>79</sup> Dickens, *David Copperfield*, p.413.

tale than David Copperfield's of triumph over adversity, of financial failure and ultimate success, in the form of a happy marriage.

Traddles can also be contrasted with *Middlemarch*'s Tertius Lydgate: a man whose failure stems in large part from his failure to control the domestic material world, as Eliot makes clear with ironic detail:

The ease with which a medical man who thought that he was obliged to keep two horses [...] and a high rent for house and garden, might find his expenses doubling his receipts, can be conceived by anyone who does not think these details *beneath his consideration* [...]

Lydgate supposed that 'if things were done at all, they must be done properly' – he did not see how they were to live otherwise. If each head of household expenditure had been mentioned to him beforehand, he would have probably observed that 'it could hardly come to much,' and if anyone had suggested a saving on a particular article – for example, the substitution of cheap fish for dear – it would have appeared to him simply a penny-wise, mean notion.<sup>80</sup>

Traddles's meticulous accumulation of furniture and his concern with cost contrast with Lydgate's airy dismissal of the material and financial realities of domestic life. This is a man not in control of his immediate environment and it is directly the source of his financial and moral failure. Dickens himself fell

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<sup>80</sup> Eliot, *Middlemarch*, p.552. [my Italics]

somewhere between Lydgate and Traddles in outlook when he wrote, in 1851, ‘I think I have now estimated every new thing in the way of furniture and fitting [...] and [...] arranged for its being forthwith provided. The figures are rather stunning but it is a life business (I hope) and ought to be complete’.<sup>81</sup>

Dickens’s precision about furniture echoes Traddles, and his desire to make it ‘complete’ echoes Lydgate’s desire for things to be ‘done properly’. But, in contrast to Lydgate, Dickens’s career was well-launched. He had reason to assume that his income could catch up with his material ambitions and that literary success would breed economic success if not, as the end of his marriage shows, domestic success. Dickens was, however, of his time in hoping that the care he took in ornamenting his homes would reinforce his, and his family’s domestic happiness. In the following section I examine what happened when the culture of performative domesticity was not enough to prevent financial failure.

### **3.5: Bankruptcy: A Somewhat Singular Hell**

In *Past and Present* (1843), Thomas Carlyle argued that financial failure, rather than the fires of hell, represented the ultimate form of failure for Victorian society and that an obsession with material things was a distinguishing aspect of the nineteenth-century’s “Strange New Today.”

What is it that the modern English soul does, in very truth, dread infinitely and contemplate with entire despair? What is his Hell; [...] I pronounce it to be the terror of “Not Succeeding”; of not making

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<sup>81</sup> Letter from Charles Dickens to Henry Austin, 26 September 1851, in *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, ed. by Storey and Tillotson, vi (1988), p.494.

money, fame, or some other figure in the world – chiefly of not making money! Is that not a somewhat singular hell?<sup>82</sup>

The logical apotheosis of this modern hell is bankruptcy – to be officially declared unable to pay one's debts. The state of bankruptcy offered the Victorians a compelling definition of what failure meant in an age that relished definition and classification, and venerated success and dreaded failure. The intense moral importance attached to hard work, independence, and physical possessions during the nineteenth century made bankruptcy a particularly Victorian form of crisis. In *Self-Help* Samuel Smiles evokes not just dislike of bankrupts but fear of them as immoral thieves: 'If a man do not [sic] manage honestly to live upon his own means, he must necessarily be living dishonestly upon the means of somebody else'.<sup>83</sup>

To become bankrupt was very public proof that either or both moral qualities and assets were insufficient proof against the vicissitudes of life, or (as many Victorians preferred to believe) that the bankrupt had failed to display them correctly. The question of how bankruptcy was viewed therefore had huge implications for the individualised, materialised, highly moralised, Victorian conception of success.

Mary Poovey points out that:

The dramatic changes in bankruptcy legislation [...] which alternated between imprisoning bankrupts and excusing their debts and which

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<sup>82</sup> Carlyle, *Past and Present*, p.151.

<sup>83</sup> Smiles, *Self-Help*, p.297.

mandated, then outlawed, then restored government supervision of settlements, suggests a pervasive uncertainty about whether an individual's financial failure should be treated as an ethical failure.<sup>84</sup>

Novels are a key part of that 'pervasive uncertainty', constantly undermining the unambiguous image of bankrupts as financial failures whose troubles stemmed directly from their own failures of morality or stupidity. Novelists frequently put the case that many people became bankrupt through no fault of their own and that even those who did, such as Lydgate, were often deserving of some empathy. Novels were a key part of the debate on how bankrupts should be treated.

In *Dombey and Son* Dickens creates the businessman Dombey, who begins the novel convinced that he is utterly in control of the material world. 'The earth was made for Dombey and Son to trade in [...] Rivers and seas were formed to float their ships',<sup>85</sup> Dombey, of course, goes bankrupt:

Through a whole year, the famous house of Dombey and Son had fought a fight for life, against cross accidents, doubtful rumours, unsuccessful ventures, unpropitious times and most of all, the infatuation of its head, who would not contract its enterprises by a

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<sup>84</sup> *The Financial System in Nineteenth-Century Britain*, ed. by Mary Poovey (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp.3-4.

<sup>85</sup> Dickens, *Dombey and Son*, p.2.

hair's breadth, and would not listen to a word of warning that the ship he strained so hard against the storm, was weak, and would not bear it. The year was out and the great House was down.<sup>86</sup>

Dickens plays with the image of sinking ships in the description of Dombey's bankruptcy (without ever specifying the exact cause of it). This reinforces the idea of factors beyond Dombey's control, such as storms and tides and the inevitable failure to control material things.

In the context of the debate surrounding the 1849 Bankruptcy Consolidation Act, Dickens's description of how bankrupts are treated is telling:

The world was very busy now, in sooth, and had a great deal to say.

It was an innocently credulous and a much ill-used world. It was a world in which there was *no other sort of bankruptcy whatever*.

There were no conspicuous people in it, trading far and wide on rotten banks of religion, patriotism, virtue and honour [...] The world was very angry indeed.<sup>87</sup>

The 1849 Act was one of nearly a hundred bankruptcy bills put before parliament between 1831 and 1914. Nearly a third became law.<sup>88</sup> The 1849

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<sup>86</sup> Dickens, *Dombey and Son*, pp.856-7.

<sup>87</sup> Dickens, *Dombey and Son*, p.856. [my italics]

<sup>88</sup> There were also three Royal Commissions, ten Parliamentary Select Committees and One Lord Chancellor's Committee, see *Victorian Insolvency: Bankruptcy Imprisonment for Debt and*

Act was part of an attempt to make clear the moral status of a bankrupt. The 1842 Act had refused to grant a bankrupt a Certificate of Discharge if more than £200 was lost within a year of bankruptcy.<sup>89</sup> By 1849 these certificates contained three classes to distinguish whether a debtor was a “virtuous” debtor whose insolvency was attributed to unavoidable losses and misfortune, the “unfortunate” debtor whose conduct was generally satisfactory, and the “spendthrift, calculating or fraudulent debtor”.<sup>90</sup> In this context, Dickens’ mocking suggestion that there was ‘no other sort of bankruptcy whatever’ becomes provocative. The 1849 Act was built on the principle that ‘prima facie the creditor was in the right and the debtor in the wrong’.<sup>91</sup> Twenty years later came the ‘Rogue’s Charter’ of 1869 through which, in the words of the introduction to the 1883 Bankruptcy Bill, ‘the public entered once more into a system of voluntaryism, which again led to absolute chaos, and gave general dissatisfaction’.<sup>92</sup> This judgement reflects the fact that the 1883 Bill, at the end of my period, saw a dramatic swing back in favour of significant government regulation. Such massive swings of opinion enshrined in such a slow-moving entity as the law demonstrate the turmoil and urgency of debate on the subject of bankruptcy.

Mary Poovey argues that ‘we cannot understand the nineteenth-century developments in the British financial sector without recognising the role [of] print culture’.<sup>93</sup> The lack of statistical evidence for bankruptcy, prior to the re-regulation of the state in 1883, must be viewed in the light of the emerging

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*Company Winding Up in Nineteenth-Century England*, V. Markham Lester (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995) p.3.

<sup>89</sup> Markham Lester, p.180.

<sup>90</sup> Markham Lester, p.67.

<sup>91</sup> Hansard 3<sup>rd</sup> ses. (1849) cv.11 42.

<sup>92</sup> M. D. Chalmers and E. Hough, *The Bankruptcy Act, 1883 With Introduction, Index, and Brief Notes* (London: Waterlow and Sons, 1883), Introduction, p.ix.

<sup>93</sup> Poovey, *The Financial System in Nineteenth-Century Britain*, p.x.

print culture that made bankruptcy a pervasive fact for the increasingly literate Victorian society. Bankruptcy was announced in newspapers, not least to publicise the sale of the bankrupt's goods, that so often accompanied the disaster, and it was a pervasive subject in novels. Whilst a man's actual chances of going bankrupt may, as Eric Hobsbawm argues, have been relatively slim (the lack of proper statistical evidence makes this a somewhat political claim), I argue that the reading public dwelt in an atmosphere where it was a vague and pervasive threat: precisely the kind of atmosphere in which dread and exaggeration can flourish.

Predictably, those who wanted to believe in a man's ability to control his own destiny sought to play down the pervasive interest in bankruptcy (thus giving further proof that the interest was there). Samuel Smiles claimed that, 'as for failure *per se*, [...] readers do not care to know about the general who lost his battles, [...], the merchant who could not keep out of the *Gazette*'.<sup>94</sup> Sales suggested otherwise. Dickens was the most popular and perhaps the most financially-concerned novelist of the age. Smiles, despite the massive popularity of his 'self-help' texts, might have asked himself why it was worth the *Gazette* publishing the names of bankrupts or why successful novelists returned to the subject again and again.

Eric Hobsbawm also dismisses the idea that bankruptcy was ubiquitous:

A man might have to work hard to raise himself into the middle class but once in a moderately flourishing line of business he could take things very easily indeed, unless he made some appalling miscalculation, or hit an abnormally bad patch in the course of an

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<sup>94</sup> Samuel Smiles, *Self-Help*, p.4.



abnormally bad slump. Bankruptcy was, according to economic theory, the penalty of the inefficient businessman and its spectre haunts the novels of Victorian England. But in fact the risks of incurring it were extremely modest [...] The very horror of bankruptcy is itself a symptom of its comparative rarity.<sup>95</sup>

However Markham Lester argues that, ‘the Victorian’s concern about financial failure was not unfounded. Losses from bankruptcy averaged between four and five million pounds annually throughout the nineteenth century – not including private arrangements’.<sup>96</sup>

Hobsbawm’s arguments that the middle classes formed only a very small section of the British population, as few as 900,000 in 1851 rising to 1.4 million by 1871,<sup>97</sup> only increase the chances and awareness of bankruptcy within that class. It would be misleading to suggest that the middle class dominated Britain through their numbers, but they certainly wielded a vast amount of influence in relation to those numbers and they made up a huge proportion of the reading (and writing) public.

Bankruptcy, and attempts to control and legislate on it, operated in a febrile atmosphere of moral judgment, lack of factual information and powerful competing narratives on what comprised success and failure. I want to examine how novelists used the material culture of the home to explore the position of the victims of bankruptcy against the background of profound social and legal debate in Victorian society concerning the treatment of

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<sup>95</sup> Hobsbawm, *Industry and Empire*, pp. 156-157.

<sup>96</sup> Markham Lester, p.3.

<sup>97</sup> Hobsbawm, *Industry and Empire*, p.157.

bankrupts. Like David Trotter, I focus on household clearances in novels as a crucial moment in defining what failure meant: both the failure of individuals and the failure of the cult of success.

Trotter argues that:

The deathbed apart, there are few scenes more profoundly disturbing in nineteenth-century fiction than [...] the process of ‘selling up’; the identification of domestic material goods for sale at auction, either *in situ*, or elsewhere. Of course, we shouldn’t be surprised by this, if the Victorians took the idea of home anything like as seriously as they made out. How could such a violation or wilful sacrifice of domesticity not be profoundly disturbing?<sup>98</sup>

I have offered reasons why the Victorians took the idea of home seriously. If the acquisition of objects and bringing them into the home was a key part of success, the loss of objects (and this could hardly be more codified than in bankruptcy and a house sale) became the acme of failure.

Not only Thackeray’s *Vanity Fair* but his private letters reveal both fascination with and horror at the ritual of the house sale. In a letter he wrote:

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<sup>98</sup> Trotter, p.1.

I have just come away from a dismal sight – Gore House full of Snobs looking at the furniture – foul Jews, odious bombazine women who drove up in mysterious flies which they had hired, the wretches, to be fine as to come in state to a fashionable lounge – Brutes keeping their hats on in the kind old drawing rooms – I longed to knock ‘em off: and say Sir be civil in a lady’s room.<sup>99</sup>

This letter was written two years after *Vanity Fair* was written, although the concerns that Thackeray displays (with vulgar people violating a private home full of happy memories that are now divorced from the objects concerned) are so similar to the episode in the novel, that this letter could almost be an extract from it. One wonders whether Thackeray’s impressions of the sale were influenced by his own fiction, and if so, how many other readers felt the same. The Sedley house sale, reflects a very Victorian dread not of seeing the private sphere of the home become ‘public’ but in seeing the former owners lose total control of that sphere; the home is no longer an exhibitory space for one’s desirable possessions but the place in which one must literally advertise that one has lost control of those possessions. Thackeray plays heavily on this dread in *Vanity Fair*:

How changed the house is, though! The front is patched over with bills, setting forth the particulars of the furniture in staring capitals.

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<sup>99</sup> *The Letters and Private Papers of William Makepeace Thackeray*, ed. by Gordon N. Ray, 4 vols (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1945-6), i, p.532.

They have hung a shred of a carpet out of an upstairs window – a half-dozen porters are lounging on the dirty steps – the hall swarms with dingy guests of oriental countenance, who thrust printed cards into your hands and offer to bid. Old women and amateurs have invaded the upper apartments pinching the bed curtains, poking into the feathers, shampooing [rubbing] the mattresses, and clapping the wardrobe doors to and fro. [...] who would have ever thought, as we sat round that broad table sparkling with plate and spotless linen, to have seen such a dish at the head of it as that roaring auctioneer?<sup>100</sup>

The excruciating details emphasise how everything most private is ruthlessly made public, in the images of strangers poking about in beds and drawers. Thackeray also emphasises how objects are brutally divorced from the personal memories that have been woven about them. It was the apparent amalgamation of economic and moral worth that domestic objects reflected which created the cult of success. Therefore these moments when those functions are sundered are vital indicators, possibly of the failure of the bankrupt individual, but definitely of the conception of success, constructed through the domestic sphere itself.

Thackeray refers to the sale at the opening of the episode as ‘an exhibition’. I suggest that the auctioned furniture implies not simply the total inversion of the ‘private’ sphere, but a parody of the ideas of exhibiting personal furniture to show success. Thackeray’s deep unease about the mixing of public and

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<sup>100</sup> Thackeray, p.201.

private here emphasises that consumer culture and the culture of exhibiting was still in its infancy.

Symbolically, the image of the ‘roaring auctioneer’ at the head of the dining room table displaces the image of the traditional Pater Familias carving the family joint; the literal and symbolic provider for his family. Significantly, however, many of the people involved in the process of tearing the Sedleys’ home apart for money are women. In fact the whole event is described as markedly gender neutral in terms of power. Far from the making of money relying on a sexual division of labour, capitalism here utterly displaces gender and the family as the organising principle of society. Bankruptcy emerges as economic, social and moral chaos through the dissemination of domestic objects and personal possessions.

Trotter analyses this chaos in terms that minimise the importance of the biography of the object. ‘Scenes of household clearance imagine the object’s double reduction: from household god to commodity, from commodity to matter, or stuff [...] the thumbing and prodding threatens to expose them as the waste matter they will before very long become.’<sup>101</sup> It is, Trotter argues, ‘possible to restore value and meaning to objects thus reduced, by means of moral action’<sup>102</sup> (such as Dobbin buying Amelia’s piano). However, as many novelists were well aware, auctions opened up a range of possibilities for objects, they might go into other homes, to dealers, or even be recycled into other objects. The alternative Exhibition of London’s junk stalls, which Cruikshank evokes so vividly in *Mr and Mrs Sandboys*, shows this clearly, as I argued in the previous chapter. These possibilities for objects leave important traces in novels because of the discourse of success and failure. It is

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<sup>101</sup> Trotter, p.15.

<sup>102</sup> Trotter, p.12.

precisely *because* objects can go on to have another life that the conception of success is so undermined by a sale like this. The sense of the home as a permanent fixture in which objects must always have this particular set of sentimental meanings is brutally undermined.

In *The Mill On the Floss* (1860), Trotter identifies Mrs Tulliver's distress at the loss of her silver teapot as stemming from Eliot's 'serious concern [...] with the potential loss of history sedimented in personal possessions, a history that can easily come to mean too little or too much'.<sup>103</sup> However, much of her distress comes from her vivid speculation about what will happen after her possessions have passed from her ownership:

'To think o' these cloths as I spun myself,' she went on, lifting things out and turning them over [...] 'And they're all to be sold, and go into strange people's houses, and perhaps be cut with the knives, and wore out before I'm dead. You'll never have one of 'em, my boy,' she said, looking up at Tom with her eyes full of tears, 'and I meant 'em for you. I wanted you to have all o' this pattern.'<sup>104</sup>

The idea of the linen moving in to other houses, being 'cut with knives', that they cannot go to her son, is what really appals Mrs Tulliver. Trotter sees objects as being reduced to 'matter', almost to nothingness, but one senses that Mrs Tulliver might well have preferred to burn or destroy her precious

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<sup>103</sup> Trotter, p.13.

<sup>104</sup> Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, ed. by Gordon S. Haight (1860; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), p.203.

linen and possessions herself, rather than giving them into other hands. It is the very fact that the auction may go on to be a source of possibility to other people, in a widely held culture of material success and personal responsibility, that allows novelists to make such poignant use of them to indicate personal economic failure and the sense of social and moral failure that this placed on 'the bankrupt'.

The meaning of the Victorian concept of success in domestic material culture is generated by the amalgamation of economic and moral and emotional meaning. Characters such as Mrs Tulliver and Dombey may be too wedded to their possessions, but in the Victorian literary canon they are preferable to those who have virtually no material affiliations at all. In 1873, Trollope shows the schemes of the financier Melmotte in *The Way We Live Now* as being entirely divorced from the physical world. The putative South Central Pacific and Mexican Railway, the speculative scheme which Melmotte sells throughout fashionable London, is a giant fantasy:

The object of Fisker, Montague and Montague was not to make a railway to Vera Cruz, but to float a company. Paul thought that Mr Fisker seemed to be indifferent whether the railway should ever be constructed or not. It was clearly his idea that fortunes were to be made out of the concern before a spadeful of earth had been moved. If brilliantly printed programmes might avail anything, with gorgeous maps, and beautiful little pictures of trains running in to tunnels beneath snowy mountains and coming out of them on the margin of sunlit lakes, Mr Fisker had certainly done much, but Paul,

when he saw all these pretty things, could not keep his mind from thinking whence had come the money to pay for them.<sup>105</sup>

One significant phrase here is ‘pretty things’. The image of the railway, the vividly described pictures that sell the fantasy of success, is now the commodity itself. There is almost a nostalgia for the Scrooges and the Dombeyes of the 1840s who, for all their greed, did actually sell *something*.

In the 25-year timespan between *Vanity Fair* and *The Way We Live Now*, the Becky Sharps of the world might be said to have triumphed, at least in literature. Becky, bored with life in Paris with only Rawdon’s gambling earnings to sustain her/them, decides that, ‘opera boxes and restaurateur dinners palled upon her: nosegays could not be laid by as a provision for future years: and she could not live upon knick-knacks, laced handkerchiefs, and kid gloves’.<sup>106</sup>

Within ten years a major sea-change would have occurred and, had Becky Sharp been operating in the 1850s or later, it is tempting to imagine that she might have drawn a very different conclusion. One thinks of Trollope’s debt-ridden Lady Carbury, another woman supporting a shiftless gambling male, and her understanding that appearances, things, are vital to surviving economically and socially in the world. The difference is that Lady Carbury is far more respectable than Becky Sharp ever was, and time and changing attitudes – as well as class – have played a considerable role in this burgeoning respectability.

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<sup>105</sup> Anthony Trollope, *The Way We Live Now*, ed. by John Sutherland (1874-5; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p.78.

<sup>106</sup> Thackeray, p.457.



Novelists may, crucially, see such understanding as immoral, divorcing moral success from other kinds, but they seldom question the centrality of material culture as a valid form of success in Victorian life. *The Way We Live Now* demonstrates what happens when people are too greedy and society too complex for them to be able to ‘read’ material culture for signs of success. Material things may run the risk of making people immoral but the lack of them, according to Trollope, risks even more frightening forms of moral, social and economic breakdown.

### **3.6: ‘What Can I Do?’ Economic Failure and Gender Roles Within the Home.**

In the words of Sara Stickney Ellis:

Gentlemen may employ their hours of business in almost any degrading occupation and if they have but the means of supporting a respectable establishment at home, may be a gentleman still; while if a lady but touch any article, no matter how delicate, in the way of trade, she loses caste and ceases to be a lady.<sup>107</sup>

Passive female characters such as Rosamond Vincy, Oliphant’s Mrs John, Amelia Sedley and Dora Copperfield are a grisly consequence – a product –

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<sup>107</sup> Sara Stickney-Ellis, *Women of England: Their Social Habits and Domestic Duties* (New York: Appleton, 1839), p.266.

of the concept of success. Improbable as it may seem coming from that character, *Middlemarch*'s appalling Rosamond actually asks an important social and political question: what should, what can, women do to help their husbands through the social and political crisis of bankruptcy? When her husband, Lydgate, confesses his debt:

‘What can *I* do Tertius?’ said Rosamond, turning her eyes on him again. That little speech of four words [...] is capable by varied vocal inflections of expressing all states of mind, from helpless dimness to exhaustive argumentative perception, to the completest most self-devoting fellowship to the most neutral aloofness. Rosamond’s thin utterance threw into the words ‘What can *I* do?’ as much neutrality as they could hold.<sup>108</sup>

Eliot evokes the range of a wife’s possible responses to the crisis of bankruptcy. She clearly applauds ‘the completest self-devoting fellowship’ in times of financial crisis, but what does that mean?

In *Vanity Fair* Mrs Sedley offers this kind of support:

One night Mrs Sedley was writing cards for a party; the Osbornes had given one, and she must not be behindhand; John Sedley [...] seized her in his arms, and said, with a hasty voice, ‘We're ruined,

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<sup>108</sup> Eliot, *Middlemarch*, p.558.

Mary. We've got the world to begin over again, dear. It's best that you should know all, and at once.' [...] He thought the news would have overpowered his wife [...] But [...] when he sank back into his seat, it was the wife that took the office of consoler [...] she called him [...] her dear John – her old man – her kind old man [...] her faithful voice and simple caresses [...] cheered and solaced his overburdened soul.<sup>109</sup>

Mrs Sedley's transformation from prattling socialite to domestic angel is instant. Thackeray's skimming over her dialogue also hints that her reaction is so common that it is almost a trope of literature. In contrast, Rosamond's desire to distance herself from the unpleasantness is cruel but more logical, given her sheltered life up until this point. 'In poor Rosamond's mind there was not room enough for luxuries to look small in.'<sup>110</sup> Female failure to engage with the world outside their parlours is shown by novelists to lead to loss of empathy and an inability to engage with reality. It renders them morally infantile.

In *The Mill on the Floss*, Mrs Tulliver is initially presented as an unsympathetic and unintelligent character. Her slow, materialist conception of the world paradoxically gives us sympathy for the child, Maggie, before we even see her. For Mrs Tulliver sees her only as a series of unsatisfactory relations with the material world. 'How to keep her in a clean pinafore two hours together passes my cunning, [...] if I send her upstairs to fetch

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<sup>109</sup> Thackeray, p.212.

<sup>110</sup> Eliot, *Middlemarch*, p. 659.

anything, she forgets what she's gone for, [...] her hair won't curl.'<sup>111</sup> The very first thing we learn about Mrs Tulliver is that she is a woman content to be an object among objects, supported by her husband.

Rosamond Vincy is another woman who positively insists on being objectified. She is a horrible parody of domestic virtue, whether pouring tea or tinkling away on the piano; she is also an entirely logical product of the processes that render women signifiers of success. Women are *supposed* to remain unpolluted by male business affairs. A successful woman is a woman lavishly kept by a husband, who need not concern herself with his world. Rosamond is determined to be successful and being materially and socially successful, for a woman, means never really having to support and empathise with her husband. The problem, as Eliot and Margaret Oliphant present it, was that a truly 'successful' woman, a signifier of her husband's economic success through material things, was so insulated from any form of economic experience as to render her unable even to empathise with, let alone help, her husband during the crisis of bankruptcy.

Mrs Sedley clearly intends to support her husband in his bankrupt state but she is unable to prevent him from sliding into impotent depression, as does Mr Tulliver, whose wife is no help whatsoever (only lamenting the loss of her linen). One is led to wonder what difference a noble wife actually makes to a bankrupt husband. There is no sense that these women are expected to do anything outside the home. Rosamond might as well have asked 'What can I *be*?'

Only in 1872, just after *Middlemarch* was written, was a married Women's Property Act Passed that allowed women to retain their own earnings. Before this, any money that a woman earned, rather than inherited (and surely

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<sup>111</sup> Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, pp.12-13.

working would have been the most practical type of help in times of bankruptcy?) would have been forfeit with the rest of her bankrupt husband's possessions. Beyond a little sweetness to her beleaguered husband, how much could Rosamond really have done to help her husband's debt crisis? Eliot's ideal of 'complete fellowship' was emotional, not practical.

Against this trope of the admirable but passive wife prepared to suffer with her husband, lies the more active and transgressive female character. When economic instability threatened, women often had to 'prove' their economic worth by leaving the home to sell their labour (just as domestic objects might have to 'prove' their worth by being sold). How they respond to this crisis is often a key moment in a novel. However beneficial it might be in economic and moral terms, women's responsiveness to such crises exposed the fact that the family had failed to uphold the traditional model of success: inviolate home, passively decorative female and economically successful male. Fundamentally, as suggested in the term 'working girl', the idea of a woman working outside the home was considered a form of moral failure, akin to prostitution.

Oliphant's novel *Hester* (1883) offers a clear but sympathetic image of what Eliot might mean by 'helpless dimness' in the face of financial turbulence. The novel's first major scene is a tragi-comic one, in which the frantic chief bank clerk informs the wife of the banker, John Vernon, who has mysteriously disappeared, that there will be a run on the bank in the morning:

'A run on the bank,' said Mrs John dismayed, 'What does that mean?' [...] Mrs John sat looking at him with bewildered eyes. 'I don't understand [...] the bank of course is for that isn't it? I never

understand how you do it,' she added with a little of the sprightliness for which she was distinguished, 'it has always been a mystery to me what good it can do you to take all the trouble of paying other people's bills for them and locking up their money and having all that responsibility; but I cannot deny that it seems to answer,' she concluded with a little simper. The harassed clerk looked at her with pity that was almost tragic. If she had not been so handsome and so fine and *surrounded by all these luxuries* it is very likely that he would have been impatient and considered her a fool.<sup>112</sup>

The clash between the idealised successful-as-signifier woman and the requirements of the real world in times of crisis is marked here. Mrs John's decorative uselessness and the luxuries that surround her demonstrate that she is a successful woman; therefore, even at this moment of crisis, she is worthy of a little respect from her husband's clerk. Significantly, Mrs John does try to help by offering the pin money that she has in the house to stave off a run on the bank: she has twenty pounds. This good-hearted, if foolish and useless, gesture redeems Mrs John in Oliphant's eyes. Dorothea Brooke is a far more profound character than poor silly Mrs John, but is she ultimately much more use in her promise to 'learn what everything costs' than Mrs John offering up her twenty pounds? It is all housekeeping money after all.

Catherine Vernon is Mrs John's opposite in *Hester*; armed with money, intelligence and spirit, she is destined to be the novel's successful woman

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<sup>112</sup> Margaret Oliphant, *Hester*, ed. by Philip Davis and Brian Nellist (1883; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p.12. [my italics]

through achievement rather than signification. By having her boxes of gold publically carried into the bank on market day, by personally cajoling, arguing with and reassuring nervous investors as a young woman in the 1820s, Catherine prevents a run on Vernon's bank. The high point of drama in the novel is when she is called on to do this again in the 1860s as an elderly woman. Gold is not the issue here because Catherine has by now amassed something more formidable than gold in the banking world: reputation. The decades in which she has successfully run the family bank have given her a reputation that any Victorian man would envy as a competent business-woman and as an admired member of the community. Catherine does charitable work, but crucially she does it in a masculine way: she builds alms houses and contributes lavishly to local causes. She does not personally look after her old and indigent relatives as a good woman might, she builds a house for them and regards their eccentricities and touchy pride concerning her charity with an indulgent but ironic eye. She is the opposite of a conventional good woman; rather disliked by her family but much-feted in the local community. Her good (masculine) reputation, however, renders her effective and successful: Catherine is able to secure enough capital to save the bank for a second time.

Oliphant makes it very clear that there was a price to be paid for a woman taking on a man's role, even when she does it so successfully. Catherine never marries or has children and within her wider family she is something of a despot. The result, Oliphant would have us understand, is that the two nephews whom she partially brings up and whom she trains up to run the bank are failures. The one, Harry, is too weak to withstand her and the other, Edward, is driven to rebellion, making the increasingly wild gambles on the stock market that threaten to ruin Vernon's Bank for the second time. Oliphant's message is clear: had Catherine concentrated on bringing up her

nephews properly, they would have turned out better. The short term advantage of a clever woman at the helm of the family business is not worth the long term damage to the family's economic or emotional well-being of having a woman break out of the domestic sphere so conclusively. Although Catherine is by no means a 'bad' woman, she shares with *Vanity Fair's* Becky Sharp the sense that a woman can be corrupted by success in the economic sphere. 'Catherine had not altogether escaped the deteriorating influence of too much prosperity.'<sup>113</sup> This sense of Catherine's moral corruption through financial power is why the true success during the second banking crisis of the novel is the eponymous and incidentally penniless Hester, Catherine's niece and the daughter of Mrs John. Hester's role during the second run on the bank is to give comfort to the beleaguered Catherine. She refuses to elope with Catherine's disgraced nephew, Edward, after he has ruined the bank and this is her moral and financial triumph: to have withstood his sexual temptation.

Catherine, with her inconvenient power and energy, dies quietly and conveniently, having negotiated sufficient credit to save the bank. Hester is represented by Oliphant as the real legacy of this remarkable woman. She can be seen to represent a new generation of women. She has Catherine's sense and intelligence and strength of character but she does not venture out of the feminine sphere. Her action in times of economic crisis is limited to kind gestures and to retaining her moral rectitude. In Hester, the Vernon family will have a matriarch again, but a properly domestic one this time.

Oliphant echoes Eliot's conservative view of women's role in bankruptcy; a woman outside the boundaries of the domestic sphere is a woman out of control doing her own business and other people's too. She might display, in

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<sup>113</sup> Oliphant, p.26.



Eliot's image, 'exhaustive argumentative perception,' which Eliot offers as one possible (negative) reaction for women to the crisis of bankruptcy.

Davidoff and Hall offer a wonderful image in *Family Fortunes*:

Marriage became both symptom and the institution of women's containment. It was marriage which would safely domesticate the burgeoning garden flower into an indoor pot plant; the beautiful object potentially open to all men's gaze became the possession of one man when kept in the house like a picture fixed to the wall.<sup>114</sup>

Bankruptcy offered the complete reversal of this; women spilling out of their domestic safety. Davidoff and Hall's image conflates the possibility of sexual and economic chaos outside the domestic sphere. Becky Sharp certainly conflates the two in her role as a sexual and economic adventuress in *Vanity Fair*. Although she is a survivor in life, she is certainly a moral bankrupt. Even in provincial Middlemarch, Rosamond Vincy manages to create chaos outside the marital home and invites trouble into it, in the comely form of Will Ladislaw with whom she conducts a flirtation.

Novelists have often stressed that passivity was a feature of the male bankrupt, as witness Eliot's enfeebled miller, Mr Tulliver, in *The Mill on the Floss*, Trollope's apathetic Felix Carbury, Thackeray's Mr Sedley, sitting in his coffee house writing hopeless letters ('I don't know anything more dismal

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<sup>114</sup> Davidoff and Hall, p.451.

than that business and bustle and mystery of a ruined man').<sup>115</sup> They are all rendered apathetic and infantile by the experience of bankruptcy. To become a bankrupt was a crisis of gender as well as social class. It was unmanly and proved that you were unable to support a family. Women, however, are damned if they remain passively in the home, condemned to suffer with their husbands, and damned if they do not, going out into the world to work and negotiate like men. Bankruptcy was potentially a source of moral crisis, simultaneously offering the prospect of masculine inactivity and feminine action outside the home.

### **3.7: What is the Matter With Lucy Snowe? Bankruptcy, Shame and the Characterisation of Failure**

The question of shame, crucial to realistic presentations of failure, is a complicated one for novelists to evoke, since what it mainly produces is silence. Bankruptcy therefore is usually evoked, either through generalisations or through novelists' 'eavesdropping' on the domestic front.

I argue that *Villette* may offer one of the most realistic accounts in the Victorian era of bankruptcy and its resultant shame, and of attempts to gloss over failure. The experience of a family financial failure may account for much of Lucy Snowe's obvious bitterness. If it is obscure and Lucy reluctant to speak of it, that is because it was a feared and virtually indecent subject in Victorian society: one of the great points of realism in the novel may be its heroine's refusal to speak about such matters, rather than use them to dramatize relations between the sexes.

At the start of *Villette*, an extended metaphor describes the eight years of Lucy's girlhood. She leaves the home of her godmother, Mrs Bretton, and an extended period of crisis engulfs her which is only ever described through the

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<sup>115</sup> Thackeray, p.238.

image of a shipwreck. She emerges ‘in my mourning dress, a faded, hollow-eyed vision’<sup>116</sup> without money, friends or family:

It will be conjectured that I was of course glad to return to the bosom of my kindred. Well! the amiable conjecture does no harm, [...] picture me [...] stretched on a cushioned deck, warmed with constant sunshine, rocked by breezes indolently soft. However, it cannot be concealed that, in that case, I must somehow have fallen over-board, or that there must have been wreck at last. I too well remember a time – a long time of cold, of danger, of contention. To this hour, when I have the nightmare, it repeats the rush and saltiness of briny waves in my throat, and their icy pressure on my lungs. I even know there was a storm [...]. For many days and nights [...] we cast with our own hands the tackling out of the ship; a heavy tempest lay on us; all hope that we should be saved was taken away. In fine, the ship was lost, the crew perished.<sup>117</sup>

We learn two ‘facts’ which don’t entirely account for the intensity with which this bereavement is experienced. Firstly that Lucy was not happy to return to her family and that in the course of what followed ‘the crew’ (presumably family members: a rather caustic term for them) died. Since

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<sup>116</sup> Brontë, *Villette*, p.96.

<sup>117</sup> Brontë, *Villette*, p.94.

Lucy is not that keen on her family, is grief really the source of such trauma? The whole idea of a shipwreck hangs tauntingly between being overwhelmed by natural forces (like death) or human error (like financial failure).

We learn nothing about Lucy Snowe's parents in the novel but she does not disagree with the reliably tactless Ginevra Fanshaw's assessment that she is 'nobody's daughter'.<sup>118</sup> However, at the inn where she stays on her first visit to London, Lucy says that the waiter remembers:

My two uncles, Charles and Wilmot, who, fifteen years ago, were frequent visitors here. [...] he recalled them perfectly, and with respect. [...] He said I was like my Uncle Charles: [...] A ready and obliging courtesy now replaced his former uncomfortably doubtful manner<sup>119</sup>

Obviously Uncle Charles is a man one can respect, although one has to ask, what is wrong with Uncle Wilmot? Their constant presence fifteen years ago in this inn that Lucy can now barely afford suggests that the family has come down in the world.

I suggest that the time 'of cold, of danger, of contention' is a massive family row, perhaps between the respectable and non-respectable elements, and that the shipwreck is synonymous with the decline of the family fortunes and the breakup of the family itself.<sup>120</sup> Even the benevolent Mrs Bretton falls out with Lucy's family in this period; clearly they are quite an argumentative lot.

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<sup>118</sup> Brontë, *Villette*, p.215.

<sup>119</sup> Brontë, *Villette*, p.108.

<sup>120</sup> A sinking ship is also the metaphor used for bankruptcy by Dickens in *Dombey and Son*.

‘Contention’ is an unusual word in the context of a shipwreck, or death, and carries an air of reality breaking through the metaphor, suggesting that the real issue was violent arguments. If a ship’s crew stopped to argue in the middle of a storm that probably would account for the sinking of the ship. Did a family business collapse in a welter of disagreements? If Lucy was never somebody’s daughter, only somebody’s niece, then the caustic nature of her comment, ‘I must somehow have fallen overboard’, suggests that she was neglected and abandoned in the confusion.

Brontë often has Lucy betray her thoughts to the reader by having her focus obsessively on some character undergoing similar experiences. In the case of the family and the shipwreck Lucy very deliberately does not tell us what happens but diverges into the unnecessary detail about how the Brettons have lost their money. ‘The handsome property [...], which had been chiefly invested in some joint-stock undertaking, had melted, it was said, to a fraction of its original amount. Graham, I learned from incidental rumours, had adopted a profession.’<sup>121</sup> The collapse of joint-stock companies was a constant source of bankruptcy and financial failure in the first half of the Victorian era, when they were largely unregulated. Is it possible that the same crisis that cost the Brettons their fortune cost Lucy’s uncles theirs?

As a man, Graham can reinvent himself as a successful Doctor. ‘In the profession he had adopted, his success was now quite decided. Within the last three months, he had taken this house (a small château, they told me [...])’.<sup>122</sup> Lucy, as a penniless woman, has a much harder time finding work. Is this why Lucy refuses to reveal herself to Graham when they next meet eight years later? When they meet he is a doctor, she in the capacity as under-

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<sup>121</sup> Brontë, *Villette*, p.95.

<sup>122</sup> Brontë, *Villette*, p.251.

teacher, nurse and servant. Does she fear that his lack of recognition is not only a personal but a social snub because she is now a poor teacher and children's nurse, rather than a house guest?

Since financial failure was considered a moral failure in its own right in Victorian England, it is hardly surprising in these circumstances that Lucy comments 'so far as I recollect, I complained to no one about these troubles'.<sup>123</sup> Shame, secrecy and trauma were almost inevitable adjuncts of financial failure at the time. Lucy's time in London is a bitter reminder of the snubs to be endured by those who had not money to back their aspirations to gentility. Family members dying does not entirely account for Lucy being left quite so alone in the world. They may all have died but I argue that it is more likely that after some undisclosed disgrace, friends and the rest of the family simply won't speak to Lucy, except for the eccentric, reclusive old spinster who eventually takes her on as a nurse. Lucy ultimately becomes a successful woman, with love, autonomy, a career and a home but I argue that the driving force of tenacity and bitterness that got her there in the first place may well be an early exposure to the bitterest Victorian failure of all: bankruptcy.

### 3.8: Conclusion

Recent criticism has undermined both the Victorian and the critical conception of the Reality Effect, whether by emphasising the past history of objects as 'souvenirs of sadism' or dismissing their careers beyond the boundaries of the novel. The ideal of the Victorian home offered the opportunity not only to use objects to construct an image of success but to imbue them with personal meanings. The fusing of emotional and moral meanings with the object's economic and social semiotics enabled it to create a 'reality' of success. However, Victorian novels demonstrate that such

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<sup>123</sup> Brontë, *Villette*, p.94.

meanings are seldom stable; objects had lives beyond the home, including the industrial, commercial processes that created them and the possibility of a life beyond their immediate ownership. Therefore, they threatened an ideal of success which depended on a sense of stasis in a world which was increasingly fast-paced and unpredictable. In this world the home needed to be both refuge and exhibition space in the personal cult of success but is was also shown by novelists to be an increasingly fragile defence against the moral, economic and social challenges of Victorian culture.

## Conclusion. Afterlife: A Century of Success

In this thesis I have attempted to demonstrate the coherence of the Victorian conception of success in the years 1848 to 1883: a thirty-five year span in which the novel both used and contested the concept of success at its zenith. However, I have tried to allude to the fact that this period was only the central point of the Victorian discourse of success and failure and of its impact on novels. This discourse was at least two decades in the making before 1851 and still persisting into the 1920s and I contend that its impact went beyond the genre of realism.

‘I find it harder and harder every day to live up to my blue china’;<sup>1</sup> Oscar Wilde is reputed to have said this around 1876, the same year that *Daniel Deronda* was published. While the character of Gwendolen Harleth underwent the hideous process of being objectified as a successful wife, a young aesthete was challenging the basis on which this process rested. Wilde argued that objects could work as a moral influence only by inspiring through their beauty. In 1891 he wrote ‘the only excuse for making a useless thing is that one admire it immensely’.<sup>2</sup> The Reality Effect of Success was imperilled by this doctrine, for it needed serried ranks of ‘useless’ objects to attest to wealth, to the moral and material comforts of domestic and social life, well (but discreetly) earned.

Richard Ellman argues of Wilde’s alleged aphorism that ‘no one else could have said it’<sup>3</sup> but for the rest of the decade (at least) almost everyone else was saying it. Wilde was attacked from the pulpit in Oxford by Dean John Burgon:

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<sup>1</sup> Oscar Wilde, quoted in Richard Ellman, *Oscar Wilde* (London: Penguin, 1988), p.43.

<sup>2</sup> Oscar Wilde, ‘The Preface’, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, ed. by Isobel Murray (1890; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p.xxiii.

<sup>3</sup> Ellman, p.44.



When a young man says not in polished banter, but in sober earnestness, that he finds it difficult to live up to the level of his blue china, there has crept into these cloistered shades a form of heathenism, which it is our bounden duty to fight against and crush out if possible.<sup>4</sup>

As the longstanding publicity around this remark suggests, this ‘heathenism’, had not only crept into the cloisters but crept out and established itself in the wider world. The remark was repeated in the *Oxford and Cambridge Undergraduate’s Journal* in 1879.<sup>5</sup> George Du Maurier satirised it in *Punch* in 1880: an ‘intense’ young couple admire a teapot, ‘oh Algernon, let us live up to it’ (see FIG 23). Burgon’s sermon represents ‘a cry from an embattled status quo’<sup>6</sup> from, I argue, a society that saw the powerful connection between moral and material things beginning to slip and realised that, if it did so, Victorians would lose that vital element of ‘proof’ that its laissez-fire capitalist structure worked morally and economically for individuals.

It is easy from this distance to see Wilde’s remark as the first pebbles of an avalanche that would bury the very idea of success in Victorian literature. However when he made it, *Middlemarch* had only been published for two years and *The Portrait of a Lady* was not yet written. These novels have at

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<sup>4</sup> John Burgon, quoted in Ellman, p.45.

<sup>5</sup> Ellman, p.44,

<sup>6</sup> Vickery, p.7.

their heart the belief that characters should adapt to fit into a world dominated by the material morality characterising Victorian success. In *Middlemarch* Lydgate is inclined to sneer at, ‘Mrs Bulstrode’s naive way of conciliating piety and worldliness, the nothingness of this life and the general desirability of cut glass’.<sup>7</sup> This description of naivety encourages us to think of Lydgate as a ‘modern man’ and Mrs Bulstrode as a nonentity in a provincial backwater. *Middlemarch* is set very deliberately around 1832 and the events surrounding the Great Reform Act: the very beginning of the Victorian conception of success, as I have argued. This naivety, therefore, would appear to be a thing of the past, but Eliot wrote of a conception that was growing and deceptive in strength, at that time and in hers, not a provincial anachronism. Carolyn Steedman writes of Lydgate ‘his grave error is to fail to take Middlemarch seriously. This brilliant young man who has studied in London, Edinburgh and Paris (he is the only true metropolitan in the book) cannot believe that this little town, peopled with mediocrities, can frustrate his plans [...] but it does. Middlemarch gets him, drags him down’.<sup>8</sup> The people and ideas that the future proclaims right-thinking, the ‘metropolitans’, are not always recognised as such in their own times. In 1895 Burgon’s clarion call against Wilde seemed to have been heeded and Wilde was duly ‘crushed’ by trial and imprisonment. The character Lydgate was also broken by a materialistically moral society. Both, buoyed on waves of ‘modernity’, failed to appreciate the power of the Victorian conception of success.

To be ‘Victorian’ was to succeed in reconciling cut glass, reaping the fruits of a consumer society, and a moral existence in this life. What characterises realism in the period I have chosen is an innate conservatism, an assumption that characters must learn to live within society as it is: that this is necessary, if difficult, this assumption in itself demonstrates the power of the Victorian

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<sup>7</sup> Eliot, *Middlemarch*, p.252.

<sup>8</sup> Carolyn Steedman, *Dust* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), p.96.

conception of success. Novelists' analysis of the ramifications of the discourse of success also learnt realism much of its aesthetic: of tragedies 'based on unpaid butchers' bills',<sup>9</sup> for men and unresolved dilemmas of love and identity, from a prison of objectification, for women. The final two novels I explore in this thesis, *The Portrait of a Lady* (1880-1) and Margaret Oliphant's *Hester* (1883), written as they were on either side of the Married Women's Property Act of 1882, represent the zenith of the objectification of women to demonstrate moral and material success and the beginning of its slide into obscurity. *Hester* looks like an attempt to put back the clock: the future belonged far more to energetic women like the dead Catherine than to the living Hester, the eponymous and saintly heroine. Success, expressed through the proof of material things and the use of women as 'material things', was beginning to date.

If, as I suggest, Victorian middle-class culture retained its persistent vein of thinking about success, the way that the novel began to use the discourse became increasingly antagonistic by the fin de siècle. Isobel Archer is a living portrait of moral and material success at terrible personal cost in 1881. The character Dorian, from *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), immortalised by his own portrait, is a moral failure in the cause of beauty and hedonism. This oppositional relationship between two novels, a decade apart, suggests the extent to which the novel form began to focus unambiguously on failure, rather than the culture of success. Mrs Humphry Ward's *Robert Elsmere* (1888) is about a young man who loses his faith and gives up a promising career in the church. The novel contains no suggestion, as Eliot did with the similarly idealistic Lydgate, that Elsmere should adjust himself to a world in

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<sup>9</sup> Henry James, review of *Middlemarch* in the *Galaxy* (March 1873), reprinted in *The Nineteenth-Century Novel: A Critical Reader*, ed. by Regan, pp.79-85 (p.83).

which moral and material success are linked and ineluctable forces: indeed, the fact that he dies trying to form a new brand of humanism might even be called a celebration of material failure in a world that appears to be losing the comfort of its moral absolutes. *Robert Elsmere* was a runaway bestseller, reflecting the urgency of the question, what was the relationship between the moral and the material if there was no God, only Mammon?

Those twin towers of moral materialism: the Church of England and the middle-classes both felt themselves to be under increasing attack as the end of the century drew near. Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* (1895) evokes a man who *ought* to have succeeded according to the rules of Victorian society. Jude Fawley is an inversion of 'Self-Help'. The idea of the working-class man who tried and succeeded in joining the middle classes was a staple of Smiles's work; *Jude* does not critique the culture of success, like Eliot or Dickens, it is a tale of the impossibility of succeeding in that culture and it earned a violent reaction: like Wilde, Hardy was condemned from the pulpit. The fact that Jude fails and is a decent man, though, by the standards of the day 'immoral', suggests both an antiquated and unforgiving form of religion and how disruptive an increasingly literate working class was becoming to the culture of middle-class success.

Not only class and religion but literary genres themselves were destabilising the ideals of moral and material success. In the gothic genre, *Dracula* (1897) depicts the utter failure of material boundaries to repel evil, suggesting the uses of the gothic in exploring the previously unexplorable in the discourse of success and failure. The Reality Effect of success may well become the 'Unreality Effect'. However, critically, *Dracula* was not a runaway critical and commercial success until the era of cinema (which in itself suggests the persistence of this discourse of success and failure into the twentieth century). The outrage and fitful popularity of novels, such as *Jude*,

*Dorian Gray* and *Dracula*, often evoked demonstrated the persistence of the culture of success that they pushed against.

Periodisation and the demise or persistence of the culture of success are made no easier to identify by conflicting assertions of late Victorians as to when that era ended. Cecil Beaton seemed to dismiss the idea of the fin de siècle and the 'naughty nineties' when he wrote of the era of his childhood, remembering, 'after the monotony which had blanketed London in the latter years of Queen Victoria's reign [...] the Edwardian age as a period of gaiety'.<sup>10</sup> Beaton was writing in 1954 yet, thirty years earlier, Virginia Woolf attacked Edwardian writers for their realism, famously asserting that 'on or about December 1910, human character changed'.<sup>11</sup> Woolf's attack demonstrates a persistent relationship between Victorian success and the realist form. 'The Edwardian tools are the wrong ones for us to use.' Woolf opined. 'They have laid enormous stress on the fabric of things. They have given us a house in the hope that we may be able to deduce the human beings who lived there.'<sup>12</sup> This, of course was exactly how middle-class Victorians had looked at the world. According to Woolf therefore, the form, if not the politics, of success still influenced the novel form by 1924 when she wrote 'Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown'. She sneers that 'old women, of course, ought to be made of freehold villas and copyhold estates, not of imagination'.<sup>13</sup> In Gwendolen Harleth, Estella and Isobel Archer we see the psychological impact of what it really meant for women to be not just 'made' of villas and estates but made to signify them.

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<sup>10</sup> Cecil Beaton, *The Glass of Fashion: A Personal History of Changing Tastes and the People Who Have Inspired Them* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1954), p.6.

<sup>11</sup> Virginia Woolf, 'Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown', *The Hogarth Essays* (London: Hogarth Press, 1924), pp.3-24 (p.4).

<sup>12</sup> Woolf, 'Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown', p.18.

<sup>13</sup> Woolf, 'Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown', p.19.

Woolf's attack was aimed in part at writer John Galsworthy who, in 1906, wrote *The Man of Property*, part of the *Forsyte Saga* which stands as a great examination of the Victorian conception of success. The middle-class Forsytes are the great exemplars of material morality, success. Galsworthy wrote that 'so many people have written and claimed that their families were the originals of the Forsytes that one is almost encouraged to believe in the typicality of that species'.<sup>14</sup> In other words, although threat might have been in the air, the Victorian conception of success was alive and well by the 1880s and, if anything, gaining solidity, materiality, through splendid unfashionableness. Furthermore the character of the beautiful Irene begins the novel, married to Soames, as the acme of a woman objectified and made miserable by, the signification of success: there are similarities between her and Isobel Archer: both have husbands who view them as additions to collections of beautiful things. Significantly, however, Irene escapes to work and independent means followed by a happy marriage. Isobel could theoretically go on to do this too. The great difference between 'Victorian' James and 'Edwardian' Galsworthy is the latter's obvious support for his heroine's choice, whilst James is ambivalent about his heroine's happiness and in thrall to her beautiful image as a signifier trying to maintain moral worth. Galsworthy is always writing against 'property', against material morality, but his tone increasingly shifted in the fifteen years from writing *The Man of Property* in 1906 to *To Let* in 1921 from a sometimes savage attack on the values of moral materialism, to an element of affectionate nostalgia. This, I suggest, demonstrates that in the first years of the twentieth century moral materialism was still powerful. *To Let*, the final volume in the first trilogy of the saga was published in 1921, bringing the saga to the present day but Soames, like his creator, must struggle on in an increasingly alien

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<sup>14</sup> John Galsworthy, 'Preface' (1922), *The Forsyte Saga*, ed. by Geoffrey Harvey (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p.5.

world. (Galsworthy himself died in 1933.) It is tempting to use the First World War as the final ‘end date’ for the death of ‘Victorian values’ yet, while it decimated the men of Woolf’s ‘Edwardian’ and ‘Georgian’ generations, the final irony is that old Victorians lived on, like Soames, like Galsworthy. Soames, who begins ‘his’ saga as the acme of ‘success’, with his property and his beautiful wife, becomes ultimately a tragic figure as Galsworthy explores how his credo fails him. *The Forsyte Saga* stands testament to Walter Pater’s attestation in 1866, ‘forms of intellectual and spiritual culture sometimes exercise their subtlest and most artful charm when life is already passing from them’.<sup>15</sup>

At its height, between 1848 and 1883, however, the middle-class conception of success, moral materialism, was often so powerful that it appeared no less than a self-evident truth: a Reality Effect within Victorian culture. In this thesis I have attempted to show how the novel’s focus on things allowed it to expose and dissect the Victorian conception of success. In doing so I hope I have demonstrated new relations between the form and themes of the realist novel and the complex culture in which it reached its zenith.

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<sup>15</sup> Walter Pater, ‘Coleridge’s Writings’ in *The Westminster Review*, January 1866, quoted in abridged form in *The Nineteenth-Century Novel: A Critical Reader*, ed. by Regan, pp.47-8 (p.48).







## Appendices



## Appendix A



Figure 1: The Albert Memorial (p.36)



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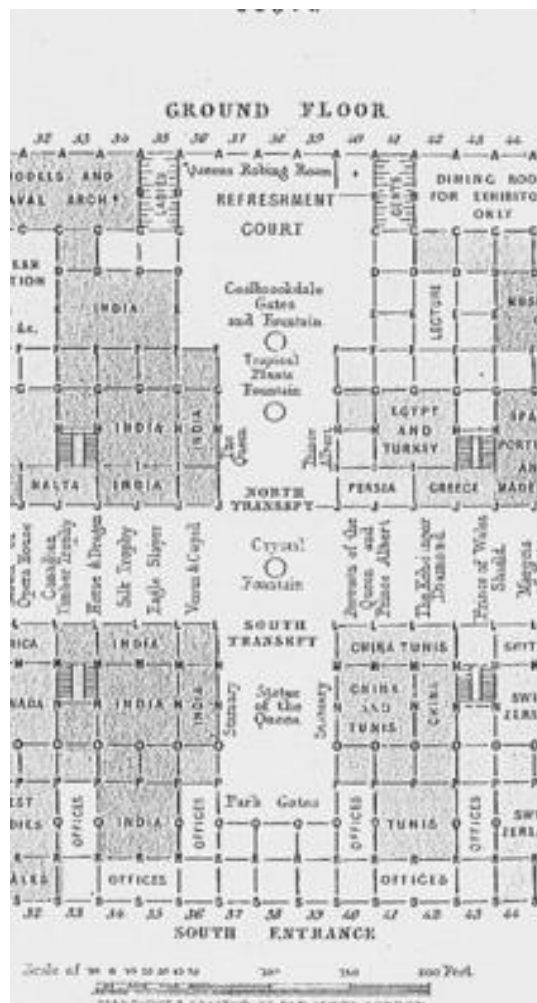


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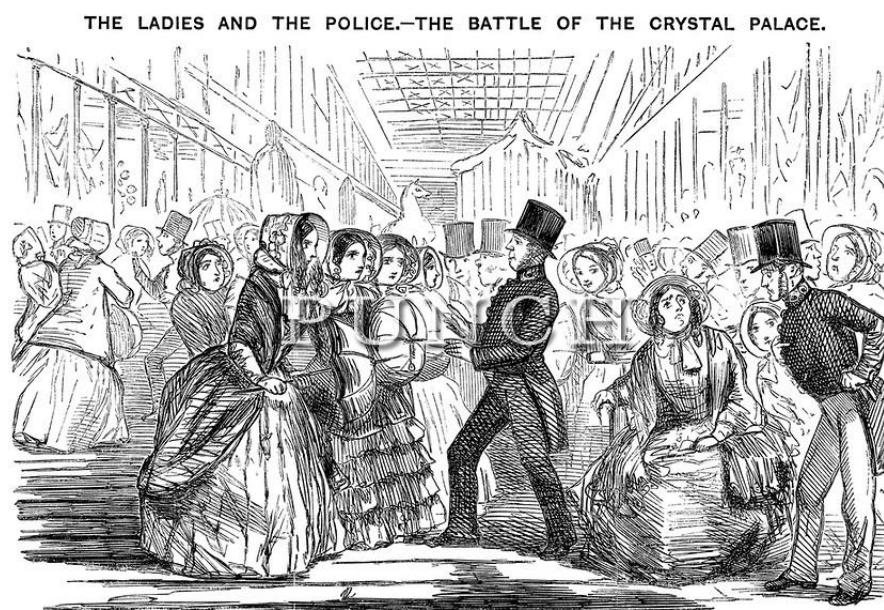


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THE SIX-MARK TEA-POT.

*Aesthetic Bridegroom.* "IT IS QUITE CONSUMMATE, IS IT NOT?"

*Intense Bride.* "IT IS, INDEED! OH, ALGERNON, LET US LIVE UP TO IT!"

Figure 23: 'The Six-Mark Tea-Pot, George Du Maurier, *Punch*, October 1880 (p.280)



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