



Women as Vestals of the Domestic Hearth: Interiors in Victorian Painting

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My dissertation project, "Constructions of the Feminine Interior", examines representations of women in interior spaces of contemporary paintings in Victorian England. The role of women in their dissociation from both men and other women are the object of my research. I proceed on the assumption that the spaces surrounding women are representations of the *inner self* of the figure being represented. I intend to demonstrate that representations of women in paintings contain within them a brisance similar to the portrayals of women by literary figures in novels and poetry of the same time. Therefore I will look at writers such as Emily Brontë, Henry James and Tennyson's Moxon edition, which itself links the written and visual world. In addition works by the painters John Everett Millais, William Holman Hunt and Elizabeth Siddal are examined.

Painting and literature are thereby viewed in close connection and compared to one another using the reception theory. My dissertation will identify the various views of women with the aid of a social historical and psychoanalytical approach. Therefore studies such as those by art historians Elizabeth Prettejohn and Allan Staley will be touched upon. This theoretical view will be enhanced by studies of exhibitions, the latest being 'The Cult of Beauty' in London's Victoria and Albert Museum in 2011.

I wish to show that "space" serves as a canvas for gender roles. In this light the various representations created by male and female artists are subjected to a critical analysis. In the context of the theorist John Ruskin, inside space serves as the world of femininity in contrast to the external or outside world of men. Within this examination space will not be treated as a passive, rigid construction. It is instead perceived as an oscillating medium that moves between the interior and the exterior. By that I wish to show that the interior can become part of the exterior and visa versa.

The core of the work is the analysis of the different female roles and the corresponding spaces surrounding them in paintings. Here the view of a male painting a woman and a woman painting a woman will be an integral focal point. There are two aspects of the male position: painter and viewer. And as for portraits an extra role besides being painter and viewer is attributed to the woman, as she has the third aspect of being the motif of the painting itself. With reference to these differing aspects my thesis will attempt to show how artists used space as a tool of expression for changing female stereotypes of the Victorian era. I would like to demonstrate that men and women not only assume different social roles but also depicted those roles in the art of their time, both



The Interior Art, Space, and Performance

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written and visual.

The research shall demonstrate that an interaction prevails between the spaces and the women represented. At the same time, space will also reveal itself to be a mediator that reflects the artist's attempt to break down social structures and conquer a new social space for women. The goal of my research is to demonstrate that painting in Victorian England uses space as a protagonist and canvas for the visualization of changing gender roles.