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Johannis Tsoumas

University of West Attica

Hellenic Open University, Grecia

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Johannis Tsoumas
University of West Attica
Hellenic Open University, Greece

Introduction

Nineteenth century in Great Britain was a time of great political, economic and social upheavals, new ideals, revolutionary cultural movements and philosophical revisions.¹ At the same time, the rapid development observed in every scientific, artistic and technological field in U.K. as well as in many other countries of Northern Europe eroded the people's socioethical values, standards and practices, while it weakened their attachment to traditional morals and perceptions that had been embedded in societies for centuries.

This violent change was driven by a desired monetary gain that increasingly permeated the economic, political and social fabric and to a certain extent reflected its position in the field of arts. The mechanical methods of producing mainly new goods were constantly improving, but the artistic search could not keep up with the growing demand for new stylistic ideas for the constant renewal of the ephemeral consumer interest in order to expand sales.²

In this new world order, industrial development, along with all current scientific and especially technological innovations, offered new and attractive opportunities to the print industry, as a result of which it developed and triumphed. Thus, the invention of new techniques alongside older ones that reappeared was to change the course of the British and other European publications of the time, defining a new status in the fields of graphic arts and communication science. Although in the first decades of the century steel or copper-plate engraving technique was particularly popular,³ it was later replaced by the already known woodcarving technique which was less demanding and adequately precise in terms of reproducing illustrations.⁴ However, in the 1850s chromolithography⁵ started to be gradually employed rendering color illustrations more popular than ever.⁶

In the first decades of the nineteenth century the daily circulation of popular newspapers such as *The Times* almost increased tenfold, while in terms of illustration the constant appearance in the market of numerous magazines and periodicals of various subjects, including weekly women's, children's and religious magazines became unexpectedly popular. Fictional books of famous novelists and writers such as Charles Dickens' *Oliver Twist* first published in 1837, *A Christmas Carol* in 1843, *David Copperfield* in 1850, *Bleak House* in 1873, William Makepeace Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* published in 1848 or Ellen Price's, better known as Mrs. Henry Wood, novels *Danesbury House* and *Oswald Cray* published in the 1860s, proved to be extremely successful.⁷

In this context, the popular technique of illustration was a great way of depicting many great socio-political issues and events as they were presented through the imaginative stories of the aforementioned novels and many more. Through their inventive, charming plots and charismatic, but fate-stricken characters, Victorian society, especially its lower classes, was presented very much alive, albeit in many cases exaggeratedly distorted, plunged into poverty, child exploitation, disease, death, political and social injustice.⁸

There were also illustrations which accompanied important poetry collections such as Christina

Rossetti's *Goblin Markets and Others Stories*, Lord Alfred Tennyson's poems *The Lady of Shalott* and *Sir Galahad*,⁹ but also illustrations of purely fictional stories such as Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* launched in 1865, traditional European fairy tales such as *Beauty and the Beast* or *The Frog Prince*, both published in the 1870s and even religious publications and texts.¹⁰ However, most of them were far from factual Victorian society image as they depicted it in a rather unrealistic mode.

Along with book illustrations the caricature art played a very important role in the development of sociopolitical publications, as they both formed through their sharp and suggestive visual and, sometimes, textual language the often-changing British public opinion and point of view.¹¹

Although pre-existing as a kind of satire of social and political paradoxes since antiquity, print caricatures, as visual compositions usually accompanied by the analogous captions, began to find full application in the middle and late eighteenth-century France, England, and the United States of America. With their cheerful, light, but also sarcastic style, these publications ironically touched, cauterized or mocked the evils of each era.¹² Caricature as a kind of sociopolitical communication tool that magnified the physical features and especially the defects, or the contradictions of specific persons or situations and showed the discrepancy of their physical characteristics or moral qualities, proved to be the most effective form of denunciation, revelation, and protest in British society throughout the nineteenth century.

Many humorous, satirical and cultural magazines, among which were *The Scourge Magazine*, the *Punch*, the *Fun*, and the particularly successful sociopolitical, historical and art periodical *The Illustrated London News*, first appeared in 1842, would not be so hugely popular if they had not employed a large number of high-caliber artists who would accentuate their exquisite texts with their imaginative caricatures.¹³

Many illustrators started their careers creating independent, apt caricature prints in these magazines. Such prints, though addressed mostly at a broader middle-class audience, were

also popular with the lower classes, who were the most vulnerable and sensitive part of society as they had to pay the price for most of the political and financial decisions and acts, as well as for the upheavals that followed during the Victorian times.¹⁴

Most of caricature illustrations designed and published in the first half of the nineteenth century were almost entirely based on the power of the image and constituted an impressively thriving form of mass-market literature. Their almost theatrical, expressive, powerful, humorous, parodic style combined with its distortion technical features, evolved to a sharp satirical language which systematically treated huge social and political issues that tormented British society, in a humoristic but purely revealing, critical and, many times, constructive way.

Nevertheless, did all these have an impact on British art the decades that followed? Were Victorian artists of the 1850s onwards affected by these types of sociopolitical protest that enhanced the urgent problems of disease, poverty, hunger, war, and immigration in industrial Britain, and how did they begin to incorporate them thematically in their work to help and benefit the society? The research that follows, aspires to shed light on the rather unexplored relationship between book illustrations, caricatures, and painting in Victorian England, which will help to understand the further shaping of British art in the second half of the nineteenth century.

Charles Dickens typical novel illustrations

The strange but so realistic plots and the quirky, often extreme, socially vulnerable, but also emotionally powerful characters of most of Charles Dickens works were an amazing mix of imagination, adventure and realism that appealed profoundly to the readership of the time. In search of the true meaning of life, Dickens presented in an incredibly human and touching way the struggle for survival of the lower social strata of Victorian England, the prevalence of injustice and exploitation, the need for optimism and salvation, but also the justification, in many cases, of their unfortunate heroes after the end of their troubles. Young, defenseless, but dynamic boys fighting against Victorian society's counterfeit moral stereotypes



Fig. 1. Hablot K. Browne or Phiz, *The Emigrants*, 1850, steel etching illustration for chapter 57, in Charles Dickens's novel *David Copperfield*. Copyright: Philip V. Allingham.

and adversities. Working hard to meet their personal and family breadwinning needs; poor families experiencing violence and terror from the socially powerful; people disappointed, driven by fate to seek a better life through immigration to countries that promise better life prospects; men and women working in Britain's heavy industry, stigmatized by deprivation, illness and death. These are just some of the imaginary, but also realistic images that came to life in the pages of his novels.

It is no coincidence, however, that in many of his works, Dickens would incorporate many personal experiences and stories from his youth, thus maximizing the power of his fictional heroes and embossing the bitter truth of Victorian living. We should also note that his exemplary collaboration with many artists, who managed to illustrate his novels in the most appropriate way, giving them realistic intensity, vivacity, and dynamism, completed his vision for a series of

fascinating, moving stories. It would be interesting to focus on two of his most characteristic partners in the field of illustration who he thoroughly trusted some of his most groundbreaking works to, and who would 'animate' them in a totally different, personal, but undoubtedly effective way. The first one was the humoristic, but deeply human and sensitive Hablot Knight Browne or Phiz, followed by the realistic, but equally sensitive and communicative Frederick Barnard who would highlight in a more direct and touching way Dickens' dramatic plots.

A typical example of his most successful works is his novel titled *David Copperfield*, which contains many biographical elements and therefore he could not trust its illustrations to no one else with less artistic and temperamental flair but Phiz. In this case, Dickens chose Phiz, believing that he had the ability to be inspired and therefore to create unique works that would

combine meticulously the desired features of vision and imagination. Phiz, who was an extremely experienced artist, was able to produce unique etchings that would realize Dickens's characters through a distinctive lens of humor and social realism, thus making *David Copperfield* an even more attractive novel.¹⁵ In general, his illustrations were rendered with vivacity and movement, emotion and action and were closely linked to the narrative personality of the text. In many cases they were strongly representational and distinguished for the accentuated facial expressions, but also the excessive poses of the heroes of the novel so as to create more intense emotions to readers.

In one of his numerous illustration plates for that book he would flawlessly depict a scene of English emigrants in despair, among who was David Copperfield himself, before the departure of their vessel at Gravesend, to a trip that would take them away from the misery and wretchedness of Victorian society (Fig. 1). In this way Phiz enhanced the real problems of living in the margins of an otherwise secure and prosperous country such as Great Britain during Industrial Revolution, and focused on one of the most popular ways of escaping poverty, that of emigration.

In his incredibly market-successful novel *Bleak House* (1852-1910),¹⁶ Dickens would narrate a lengthy court case in Chancery Court, which arose from the drafting of many wills by one testator. In the preface to the 1853 first edition, Dickens stated that this imaginary litigation was based on several real cases.¹⁷ It was a work which portrayed a mosaic of characters, actions and emotions most of which had many and strong social and political messages, while it troubled a large number of readers of the time who were involved in similar, long-lasting legal struggles. For the 1873 edition, Dickens chose as illustrator Frederick Barnard, a keen artist and caricaturist who concentrated on illustrating scenes on social and political topics. His work, from a purely technical and compositional point of view, was even more accurate and informative than Phiz's. Having renounced the humorous style of caricatures, Barnard created illustrations that were more realistic and familiar to the readership. He rendered the main figures in a peculiarly plausible way in environments seen through unusual angles, and gave them the social, moral and ultimately fatal characteristics that the author described, in a masterful way.

In several of his sixty-one illustrations, Barnard would portray a young street cleaner, named Joe. However, the little familyless boy who lived in Tom-All-Along's, a supposedly miserable district of the city of London, and who seemed to have inadvertently become entangled in the quagmire of this litigation, without himself having done anything wrong, died of severe smallpox complications, thus making the sad style of the book even darker. An almost fatal figure, Joe was portrayed as tragically in Barnard's illustrations as in Dickens text, emphasizing the unjust fate of people, especially children, who lived on the margins of an otherwise compassionate and loving Victorian society (Fig. 2).

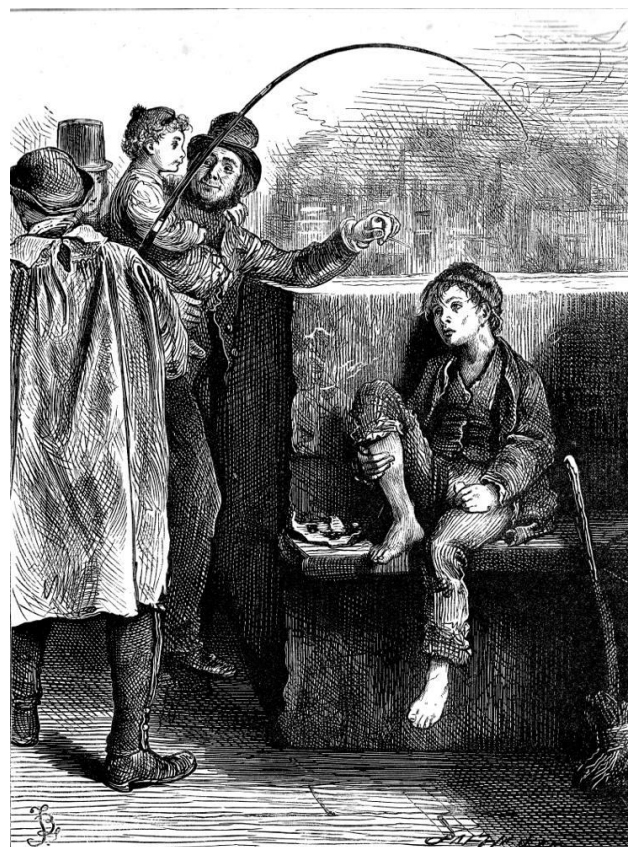


Fig. 2. Fred Barnard, *Joe*, 1873, etching illustration for Charles Dickens's novel *Bleak House*. Copyright: Philip V. Allingham.

But none of Dickens' previous two novels, and perhaps all of the rest, narrated with such descriptive precision the harshness of the social web in which the lower classes survived in nineteenth-century Britain, than his second book titled *The Adventures of Oliver Twist*.¹⁸ The novel portrayed in a surprisingly clear way the variety of characters, and described flawlessly the social conditions that prevailed at that time,

depicting the real dimensions of the drama of poverty, deprivation, abandonment and misery of the orphans. In large urban centers where unemployment was almost a given, anyone without a job was doomed to die. In London alone, at least in the 1830s, there were more than fifty thousand homeless people living on begging. Weak workers, children of slaves, malnourished apprentices, chimney sweepers, but also thieves, beggars, orphanages, workshops, prisons, reformatories, and slums were also some of the horrible images of the society of that time.¹⁹

The unfortunate hero Oliver Twist was born one night in an asylum while his mother died shortly after his birth. Little Oliver, who did not even have a last name, lived a turbulent life in the midst of hunger, deprivation and violence and would be almost destroyed since he was such an easy victim of exploitation by the people of the underworld. But being by nature a brave and honest character, after many adventures, he was justified in finding joy and peace in a new family.

The first edition of 1837 was illustrated by George Cruikshank, an experienced illustrator, specialized in political caricature with a distinctively vivid and direct language. His satiric and many a times humoristic style was reflected on the way he drew the figure, which was generally plain, not particularly detailed and distorted up to a certain degree. Nevertheless, the expressiveness of the faces, the admirable agility of the bodies of its figures, and, in general, the strong communicative element of his compositions, made his work lively and dynamic. In this case, we can easily detect though an impressive contradiction between Cruikshank's stylized, caricaturist illustrations and Dickens' texts which are profoundly realistic, and thus sorrowful and moving.

The illustrator James Mahoney was the second in row to re-illustrate Oliver Twist's endless adventures, in the 1871 edition, but in a totally different manner. By studying first and later 'interpreting' Cruikshank's style, he would portray in a more natural, realistic and therefore, more convincing way Dickens' textual images of poverty, violence, danger, abandonment and allegory, creating thus deeper sympathy, compassion and mercifulness feelings to the readers. Throughout his work he seemed to be trying to move away from Cruikshank's distinctively classic, humoristic style. Thus, he

removed, in an almost dismissive way, any element of humor or distortion from the characters of the novel, trying to render them with realism, persuasiveness and truthfulness, enhancing thus the tragic reality of mid Victorian society. This was aided by the technique of etching, which he handled in an idiosyncratic manner and which gave his work a more artistic than graphic style.

James Mahoney, a talented Irish artist, printmaker, engraver, and illustrator, was already known to British public from his illustrations of the Irish Famine (1841-46) which were published in *The Illustrated London News* and were based on actual facts Mahoney experienced in his country during that particularly hard period (**Fig. 3**). Having such a terrible, and at the same time rare experience to portray people's real misfortune, he was proved to be the most suitable person to depict as cogently as possible Victorian marginal life and a young orphan's unhappy wandering in it, through a series of engravings of great technical and compositional skill and thus of high artistic value.



Fig. 3. James Mahoney's interpretation of George Cruikshank's etching illustration, *Oliver asks for more*, 1871, frontispiece for Charles Dickens's novel *The Adventures of Oliver Twist*. Copyright: Philip V. Allingham.

The power of sociopolitical caricatures

Satire as a form of criticizing or even laughing at aspects of society, from sexuality to religion, politics, culture, and social classes, constituted a functional tool of controlling and sometimes configuring human behavior in European

societies particularly affected by the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Regime. In short, it was a sharp language of oppositional rhetoric which, through theatre, singing, literature, and illustration stood up against any form of power.

In Great Britain, as early as the beginning of the nineteenth-century satirical magazines began to become extremely popular in the middle-class readership which was well-educated, financially stable, and was also interested in politics, society, art, and literature. However, over time, especially in the last two decades of the century, they started becoming more and more popular among the lower class readers. One of them, *The Scourge Magazine*, during its brief, five-year publication life span,²⁰ was soon associated with the wonderful age of freedom of speech of the early nineteenth-century press. Through its pages, many writers, intellectuals, poets, but also visual artists, defying the social and political

conventions and the modest ethics of the Victorian era, did not hesitate to attack the respective social institutions, politicians, their actions and practices without excluding the royal family members. This monthly magazine that aimed to shock and ‘shake’ the British institutional system not only through its satirical writings but also through its scathing caricatures, was considered highly ‘malicious’ by a large readership, but, at the same time quite apt and fair by a much larger one.²¹

The satirical physiognomy of *The Scourge* was almost entirely associated with one of the most talented caricaturists of the time, George Cruikshank, as it was the first magazine that accepted to risk publishing his early, quite challenging caricatures. The production of his drawings, at least during the short period of his collaboration with the magazine, was admirable as hundreds of drawings and color or black and



Fig. 4. George Cruikshank, *The Prince Regent: Gent, No Gent and Re Gent!!*, 1816, caricature color etching for *The Scourge Magazine*. Copyright: Richard Cavendish, *History Today*, Vol. 61, Issue 2 February 2011.

white caricatures were featured on its pages since the first issue. As he did not side with any political party, it was not only easy for him, but also convenient to create caricatures from an impartial point of view for the country's politicians, regardless of party, and their social and foreign policy. His subjects were quite bold for his time as he did not hesitate to satirize in a witty and humoristic way some of the most popular politicians of the era such as Prince Regent, King George IV and his wife Queen Caroline, but also Napoleon himself in the framework of anti-French propaganda, to reveal truth.

Typical is his 1816 caricature in which he seemed to have targeted Prince Regent, by making a play on the word 'Gent'. Through the caricature caption which read '*Gent. No Gent & Regent..!*', Cruikshank cried out sarcastically that Prince Regent was a *Gentleman*, implying, though, that he was far from being one (**Fig. 4**). In this caricature he literally attempted to comment on the ever-changing perceptions of monarchical systems of governing, and more specifically, on the Prince as an individual, questioning, at the same time, the monarchical supremacy and omnipotence. Through the exaggeration of Prince's physical or even mental characteristics and habits he tried to unmask and reveal further perceptions of his character, many aspects of which were unknown to the public sphere. Using this light ridicule Cruikshank tried to portray the Prince in a way that would allow monarchical authority be also ridiculed or even transgressed.

In 1818, that is two years after *The Scourge* ceased to be published, his collaboration with William Hone, a progressive writer, bookseller and publisher gave him the opportunity to continue his caustic humor through his apt caricatures for the twenty-four-page political pamphlet *The Political House that Jack Built*.²² His satirical illustrations in both publications constituted a great resource of information for historians to understand the general views and the public opinion of the time just before the strict and rigid Victorian period arose, as they shed light on British society abrupt changes. In a broader sense, they illuminated the hectic transformation of Great Britain from a predominantly rural country in previous centuries into an authoritarian industrial superpower after the Napoleonic Wars, which was to rule the world.²³

In 1835 Cruikshank began publishing the *Comic Almanack*. In this general interest magazine, which often accepted the contributions of many great columnists and writers, he continued to publish a plethora of caricatures, continuing to satirize the political, social, moral and civil evils. *Almanack* continued to be published under these conditions until 1848, when its form and editorship were permanently changed and remained like that until 1853, when it ceased forever. However, the most important Cruikshank's contribution to *Almanack* at this stage of his career was the commission he received in order to illustrate *The Bottle*, a series of eight etchings which projected the alcoholism problem and its effects on Victorian society, especially on the family ideal.²⁴ After completing this series of caricatures,²⁵ Cruikshank, who had a really bad experience from alcoholism himself, became an ardent supporter of anti-alcoholism and gave lectures for the next thirty years throughout the country on the catastrophic effects of excessive alcohol consumption.²⁶

The degraded lives of people living in the poorer parts of the country, and especially London, were, as we have already noted in Dickens' books, a popular thematic field in all mid-nineteenth-century graphic arts. However, the widespread publication of illustrations and caricatures on this subject began to be observed as early as the 1840s and became a popular subject throughout the 1850s and 1860s. Although some material on this subject had already appeared in the pages of *Comic Almanack*, as we have already seen, but also in some issues of *The Illustrated London News*, the most important magazine for publishing such caricatures was the revolutionarily satirical *Punch* or *The London Charivari*, introduced in 1841 to the British market by the renowned wood-engraver Ebenezer Landers (1808-1860) and the successful journalist and playwright Henry Mayhew (1812-1887).²⁷ This new, almost aggressive form of magazine to the British ruling class began to shake the minds of the middle-class readership by showing it the serious social and economic problems of the lower classes. Such satirical interventions, with a clearly topical, humorous, but at the same time truthful and bitter style, focused on the miserable living conditions of the poor, the scourge of prostitution, the oppression of women, hunger, disease, misery, and even the pollution of the Thames from the industrial and urban waste, but

without condemning the policy pursued for the inequalities between social classes.²⁸

Despite its initial commercial success, the magazine soon began to experience severe financial difficulties, so in late 1842 it was sold to the already recognized printers and publishers Bradbury and Evans. The new publishing house made the most of the new technologies in the field of mass publishing and for the next two decades the magazine managed to attract the interest of many artists who published on its pages, among which were Harry Furniss (1854-1925), John Tenniel (1820-1914), John Leech (1817-1864), Richard Doyle (1824-1883), Charles Keene (1823-1891), Linley Sambourne (1844-1910), Phil May (1854-1903) and Francis Carruthers Gould (1844-1925). This group became known as 'The Punch Brotherhood', and also included Charles Dickens himself who joined Bradbury & Evans, after having ended his collaboration with Chapman & Hall publishers in 1843.²⁹

Aiming at a deeply conservative audience, and in fact through the wide circulation of cheap and easily accessible magazines, the satire of social inequalities had to be carefully formulated so as not to be a field of challenges and controversies, but a source to inform and activate the socially strong so as to care for and protect the socially weak. After all, it was no coincidence that within two years from the first day of its release, *Punch* had already managed to gain the trust of middle-class readers, but also to pique the interest of aristocratic circles, even the royal court.³⁰

The *Graphic* was also a well-known illustrated social weekly newspaper founded in 1869 by William Lusson Thomas (1830-1900), a famous wood-engraver and publisher of many magazines and newspapers of the time. Thomas had an engraving workshop which was intensively used for the preparation of the first issues of the newspaper which soon attracted many artists and illustrators who were badly treated by similar periodicals such as *The Illustrated London News*.³¹ As it appeared in the second half of the nineteenth century, when social injustice and poverty reigned in lower strata its principal scope was to encourage social awakening through charity and collective social actions. The engravings of several caricaturists, artists and illustrators, such as Luke Fildes (1843–1927) and Frank Holl (1845-1888), constituted significant

sources of inspiration for many other artists among which were the Pre-Raphaelite painter John Everett Millais, much later Vincent Van Gogh, and even Dickens himself who commissioned Fildes to undertake the illustrations of his novel *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* (1870), which however remained unfinished.

Perhaps the most consistent and representative caricaturist-contributor to the magazine since its inception was John Leech, a significant and influential figure of Victorian culture whose work can be considered a landmark for all caricatures that appeared in Victorian periodicals.³² His first contribution appeared in the pages of *Punch* in August 1841 and since then he continued to provide most of his issues with caricatures aimed at raising public awareness of the enormous poverty and impoverishment problems of the lower class strata. Generally speaking, Leech's work was quite sophisticated and balanced in the way he presented both middle and working classes as he avoided direct contrast between them. He also tried not to put the blame directly on politicians and capitalism, as his critique was detected within a moral rather than a purely political framework. We can then assume that he must have contributed if not directly to changes in governmental policy, then at least to a change in tone that finally helped to create a more favorable social climate to assisting the poor, but also to changing many more aspects of the social scene of the country.

His sharp allusions through his carefully illustrated compositions, as well as the aptly worded captions, often had themes ingrained in Victorian culture and aesthetics that no one had ever thought of touching on. Thus, in addition to the already known issues of poverty and social inequality, his scathing reference to the role of women, especially those of the middle class who had to have a predetermined role in a society that wanted them as instruments of the macho/patriarchal mentality and perception, without privileges and social rights, was particularly important.³³ In cases like this Leech used his caricature genius as a 'powerful instigator' that would reveal the need for a general social reform in which women would play a particularly important role. Thus, he tried to bring to the public spotlight women's power to claim their rights, to achieve new goals in life and to overcome the stereotypical boundaries by



THE PARLIAMENTARY FEMALE.

Father of the Family. "COME, DEAR; WE SO SELDOM GO OUT TOGETHER NOW—CAN'T YOU TAKE US ALL TO THE PLAY TO-NIGHT?"
Mistress of the House, and M.P. "HOW YOU TALK, CHARLES! DON'T YOU SEE THAT I AM TOO BUSY. I HAVE A COMMITTEE TO-MORROW MORNING, AND I HAVE MY SPEECH ON THE GREAT CROCHET QUESTION TO PREPARE FOR THE EVENING."

Fig. 5. John Leech, *The Parliamentary Female*, 1853, caricature etching for *Punch* magazine. Copyright: Punch Limited.

which they were entrenched for centuries. Here, the use of graphic satire worked as a key regulator of public opinion regarding this taboo issue (**Fig. 5**).

The Crimean War and its protagonists, especially around the battlefield, but also many behind-the-scenes important characters for its development, constituted another important topic of commentary for Leech. Through these caricatures he managed to have a beneficial effect on shaping public opinion on the importance of heroism, self-denial, self-sacrifice, love for the homeland and fellow human beings, the importance of military operations, but also the role of Great Britain in shaping the world map.

A new social approach in Victorian painting themes

During the first decades of the century, when the first explosion of illustrations appeared in the British novels and press, painting moved in the orbit of the principles of Romanticism, a

movement that left no room for negotiation in terms of its aesthetic, technical and thematic principles. Around the middle of the century, when illustrations and caricatures had reached their peak, Victorian painting would apotheosize the neo-Gothic principles through the aesthetics and ideology of Pre-Raphaelite painters. The magical journey of these artists in medieval times, the idealization of the cultural context of that distant era, the rejection of industrialization and mass production, which was inextricably woven with the humble consumer instincts, as well as the great influence of Augustus Welby Northmore Pugin (1812-1852) in the formation of neo-Gothic aesthetics,³⁴ constituted the most important reasons for their unwavering commitment to their ideals.

At the same time, the Pre-Raphaelite painters chose to see British society and the world at large through a wide range of symbolisms that hinted at much more than they revealed to modern-day viewers accustomed to simple descriptions of Bible-themed or Shakespeare's works, ordinary

landscapes and portraits.³⁵ It is clear, then, that in this case illustrations and caricatures did not at all affect the formation of Pre-Raphaelite art.

Even more conscious was the reaction of the Aesthetic Movement artists of the 1870s and 1880s, to the gloomy reality experienced by the lower social strata of the country. The painters associated with this Movement sought nothing less than the creation of a new kind of art, free from any moral, allegorical or didactic purpose, but also from the deterioration of the cultural ideas and moral codes of the Victorian era. For these artists, who turned a blind eye to the sad daily life of the social masses, art was created only to be beautiful, attractive, lustful, and dreamy. Thus, they created paintings that had no moral or didactic character, and simply offered visual and tactile pleasure, deliberately excluding all negative aspects, such as sickness, poverty, deprivation, injustice, and death. The Aesthetic Movement artists systematically avoided any connection with the Victorian social reality, trying to embellish its ugliness through the beauty and harmony of their compositions.³⁶ This was, after all, the main reason that the illustrations of the time did not have any effect on their aesthetics and ideology.

Despite the evolution of British painting, which seemed to be aware of the social problems, but at the same time to ignore and overcome them in order to create imaginary, almost dreamy themes, there were cases of individual Victorian painters and other artists who had a completely different view. Seeing that stark social inequality, hunger, and disease since the mid-nineteenth century had been the norm rather than the exception of otherwise prosperous industrial Britain, they began to try to find ways in which art could contribute to the personal and social upliftment and relief of the people of the lower classes who suffered. Believing that art had the ability to intervene in the way people think and act, they created mainly paintings and engravings, but also decorative objects whose role was not only to comment on the serious social issues of the time, but to actively participate in their solution.

It was no coincidence, however, that the shift of this handful of artists to the harsh reality of British society coincided with public inquiries and news reports, as they were formed through the columns of newspapers, magazines, and the

revealing plots of the classic novels of the time, whose popularity had already reached its peak. The role of illustrations and caricatures had proved to be just as important as it enhanced the seriousness of these problems, enabling them to be documented in a systematic way and thus to become perfectly visible, understandable, and important to the wider readership of the country.³⁷

Having already been familiar with the society image through the publications of the time, some Victorian artists, many of whom were also illustrators or graphic designers themselves, began to be drastically influenced by the visual and socially fiery language of the amazing novel illustrations, but also by the caricatures intelligent charm. So they created works that aimed at continuing their explosive protest, but in the sophisticated and unique way that painting dictated. Many of them began to believe that the main purpose of art was not beauty and elegance, but its ability to highlight social weaknesses and at the same time to contribute to the common good and improve the standard of living of people.³⁸ By exhibiting their works at well-known galleries, among which was the Royal Academy, and trendy exhibition venues, they were guaranteed a large and influential audience. By the time, paintings about the dire social issues became increasingly popular, replacing, in many cases, audience's interest for historical paintings, landscapes, and portraits that had previously dominated British art fairs. It should also be noted that in addition to their pure painting activity, many of these painters used their strong public image for other types of action such as designing banners or posters for social events, donating their work in charity venues etc.

One of the most characteristic painters and also a very diligent illustrator and graphic designer in several magazines of the time, who dedicated a large part of his work to capturing the miserable life of the poor, was Luke Fildes. Fildes believed that the power of image was so intense that could change public opinion on the issues of injustice, poverty and inequality and consequently could activate many philanthropists and strengthen the collective social action.³⁹ These were the main reasons that he turned a large part of his art towards this theme. It was no coincidence then that the style of his painting was very reminiscent of book and newspaper illustrations, not only in terms of subject matters, but also in terms of

style and technique. One of his most important works, inspired by a corresponding illustration of the late 1860s in *The Graphic* newspaper, was his 1874 oil painting titled *Applicants for Admission to a Casual Ward*, depicting poor and perhaps homeless people waiting patiently in line to get the coveted ticket to a London night shelter, widely known as a casual ward (**Fig. 6**). When the painting was first exhibited, it caused significant reactions, as it portrayed the poverty of the lower social strata in a realistic, almost shocking way. However, although some critics found it provocative and thematically ugly, many more argued that the painting was a wonderful opportunity to raise public awareness of the issue of poverty.



Fig. 6. Sir Luke Fildes, *Applicants for Admission to a Casual Ward*, 1874, oil on canvas, 57 x 94 cm. Copyright: Tate Gallery, London.

Another genre and social reform painter of the time was Thomas Benjamin Kennington (1856-1916) who focused on depicting the life of the poor in Britain in a challenging and almost idealized way that triggered the audience's emotions. Being influenced by the book illustration and caricatures of his time, but also by the Spanish painter Murillo's works, he managed to produce oil and watercolor paintings, often described as Victorian narrative paintings that constituted some of the most representative samples of social and moral protest of his time. His great work, *The Pinch of Poverty* (1891), depicts a poor, unprotected mother with two young children and an infant waiting patiently in a damp corner of London to sell their freshly cut flowers (**Fig. 7**). The look of the little flower seller, the painful, almost ashamed expression of the mother, the innocence of the little boy on the left and the bliss of the sleeping baby, are a strong punch in the face of society which makes it feel guilty and

remorseful. The flowers, which are symbols of innocence, purity, but also supplication in this case, create strong emotions in the viewers, pushing them to contribute to the restoration of poverty and misery.



Fig. 7. Thomas Benjamin Kennington, *The Pinch of Poverty*, 1891, oil on canvas, 114,3 x 101,6 cm. Copyright: The Foundling Museum, London.

Painter, keen social realist illustrator in magazines such as *The London Illustrated News* and *The Graphic* and a fanatical admirer of Hablot K. Browne's or Phiz and John Leech's works, Charles Joseph Staniland (1838-1916) began exhibiting his work both in London and in the British province in the 1860s.⁴⁰ John Leech, inspired by the important issue of immigration, a social scourge in Victorian England that was the result of extensive poverty and deprivation seen through Phiz's illustrations for Dicken's novel *David Copperfield*, created his famous work entitled *The Emigrant Ship* (1880) (**Fig. 8**). This painting, also known as *Good-Bye!* depicted in an almost realistic way poor travelers patiently waiting at the port dock to board on the ship that was just preparing to depart for the long journey of migration. The anguish of the poor, afflicted Victorians who seemed to part from their families, the pain of uprooting from the motherland, the despair of separation, but also the excitement of departure are portrayed in this



Fig. 8. Charles Joseph Staniland, *The Emigrant Ship or Good-Bye!*, 1880, oil on canvas, 104 x 176 cm. Copyright: Bradford Museums and Galleries permanent collection.

multi-faceted work which constitutes another characteristic example of despair and need for a better life through the immigration.⁴¹

The presence of a woman painter, Emily Mary Osborn (1828-1925) in the Pantheon of all these artists who first began to create the basis of social realism painting, was particularly interesting. As a strong voice for women's rights in Victorian England, she dedicated her life to creating better living conditions for women suffering from domestic violence, devaluation, social exclusion, lack of income, and unemployment. Her work, entitled *Nameless and Friendless*, was the culmination of her efforts to highlight the personal and social power of Victorian women to resolutely assert their right to fair professional treatment, pay and opportunities (**Fig. 9**). The main protagonist of the painting is a young female painter, dressed in black, a mourning dress code of the time. Thus being an unprotected orphan, she is accompanied by a little boy, probably her brother, and tries to sell one of her paintings to an art dealer whose contemptuous expression suggests suspicion or even rejection. This work seems to show the courage, strength, but also the talent of a portion of women in their effort to stand on an equal footing with male painters in a purely male-

dominated area, as was the mid-nineteenth-century fine arts. At the same time, it conveys the message of the Victorians' need for a dignified life in an environment of poverty, inequality, and injustice. The work, which premiered at the Royal Academy in 1857, aroused mixed feelings among critics and audience alike, but for Osborn it marked the beginning of a long career in painting with similar themes.⁴² According to our view, this painting became a strong sociopolitical statement which would create a lot of concern and possibly guilt to those who were active members of the social system and enjoyed its benefits.

Corresponding references to the social status of Victorian women had already been made through the illustrations and apt caricatures of Leech, who seemed to have influenced Osborn, at least in a psychological level.

Trying to go deeper into the analysis and interpretation of all the above-mentioned caricatures, illustrations and paintings, it would be useful to turn our gaze to their common thematic base which is poverty, deprivation, misery and generally the adverse living conditions of the lower social strata of the mid-Victorian times. Of interest is the theoretical

perspective of the well-known art historian Linda Nochlin, who had focused a large part of her research interests on the social analysis of nineteenth-century art in Europe with several references to the Victorian period, but also to the significant period of the Realism movement, which includes, in its wider interpretation, English social realism, as well.



Fig. 9. Emily Mary Osborn, *Nameless and Friendless*, 1857, oil on canvas, 82,5 x 103,8 cm. Copyright: Tate Gallery, London.

According to Nochlin 'the most impressive and seemingly pragmatic constructions of social misery are based on narrative'. If we take into account this argument we will be able to better understand the effort of the artists to narrate the gloomy reality of the Victorian era either through the texts of great writers such as Dickens, the articles of important magazines and through the thematically radical painting of the aforementioned painters. Most of these works give the feeling of a heartbreaking virtual narrative which through its realistic formulation conveys the sad truth of social misery to the viewer. In many cases, caricatures and illustrations mainly combine surprising details and important observations without resorting to symbolism or moralizing.⁴³

Another important argument of Nochlin, which we can also detect in most of the aforementioned works, is that the structure of their compositions is such that the viewer can see the results of the new, carnivorous capitalist system and its application in its marvelous industrialized production system, the social structure of the urban environment, even the sociopolitical morals of the time in a hopeless juxtaposition

with the survival difficulties of the working class, the resulting misery, unimaginable poverty and deadly diseases.⁴⁴ However, most of these works, whether accompanied by supporting texts or standing alone in the form of a simple visual narrative, provide the viewer with a variety of information regarding people, their experiences, their feelings, their meaningful relationships and their contact with the urban environment through which he can discover the possible hidden meanings of the works that cannot be detected at first sight.

By this we wish to point out that a simple and perhaps cursory reading of such artistic depictions of misery, pain and hardship runs the risk of degrading these works in a way that may be reminiscent of the shallow and perhaps disinteresting depictions of corresponding works of the eighteenth century or even, render them so ordinary and predictable as to make the viewer indifferent to the harsh reality.

Conclusion

As we have already seen in this research in the aftermath of the Industrial Revolution machines, in the speed of economic and technological development and in the context of a counterfeit moral and social perfection, Victorian society began to be unveiled through literary works, magazine and newspaper articles, as well as through the vivid illustrations and bold caricatures of important artists of the time. Combined with sharp and apt texts, these revealing images presented to the general public the Victorian low classes living conditions, triggering this way several discussions on this issue in the political, social and cultural arena of the time, which continued for much longer.

It is not by chance that Victorian painting, beyond the well-known movements of the time, found fertile ground to flourish thematically, only after the stormy variety of publications adorned with this new, rich pictorial material. The few Victorian artists who were inspired by the misery of the lower social strata and did not hesitate to capture it in their works, may not have had the motivation, neither the courage to do so, if the middle-class readership, had not already been aware of that situation. Having thus to face a seriously thinking and socially sensitized public, the mid and late nineteenth-century British painters took a leading role in the general

effort of social reforms using their art as a valuable tool. Hoping that their works would be an occasion for questioning, would influence the way of thinking of those in charge, and would shape the public debate, they aimed to find drastic solutions to these crucial problems. In substance, their art was powerful enough so as to ultimately influence, in one way or another, the much expected changes in the sociopolitical theatre of the country.

Furthermore, Victorian painters played a significant role to the emergence of social realism painting, which spanned from the early to the mid twentieth century in Europe and the United States of America. Social Realism international art movement had representatives of many art forms, including inter alia photography and film making, and focused thematically on the everyday conditions of the working class people and all those who experienced the new way of living in west urban societies.

Notas

¹ Tim Lambert, "Life in the 19th Century", in <https://localhistories.org/life-in-the-19th-century/> (accessed 11/12/ 2021).

² George Mathiopoulos, *Η Ιστορία της Γραφιστικής, Πρώιμη περίοδος-19ος αιώνας: βιβλιοπαράγωγή (History of Graphic Design, Early period-19th century: Book production)*, Athens, Technological and Educational Institution of Athens, 2015, p. 204.

³ Also known as etching, steel engraving was primarily based on the idea of carving a pattern into a metal plate. The incised areas of the desired pattern would be soaked up with ink and then would hold it so as whole metal surface would be pressed on and transferred onto paper sheets.

⁴ Sally Mitchell, *Wood Engraving' in Victorian Britain: An Encyclopedia*, New York and London, Garland, 1988, p. 868.

⁵ Having already been invented in 1798 by the German actor, author and playwright Alois Senefelder (1771-1834), the technique of classic lithography was as follows: the theme or representation of each composition was drawn with greasy chalk on porous limestone or on a tin slab and then it was dried. When water ran on the etched surfaces, the greasy ink entered only the places that were engraved and not the rest of the wet stone.

⁶ It initially appeared as a new revolutionary technique in works exhibited at the 1851 Great Exhibition, Hyde Park, London, but its systematic and complete application was mainly detected in Jules Cheret's and Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec's poster art and publishing at the end of the century. Geoffrey Wakeman, *Victorian Book Illustration: The Technical Revolution*, Michigan, Gale Research, 1973, p. 37.

⁷ Morton N. Cohen, *Lewis Carroll: A biography*, Vancouver, Vintage books, 1996, p. 30.

- 8 Julia Thomas, '32 Illustrations and the Victorian Novel', *The Oxford Handbook of Victorian Literary Culture*, Oxford Handbooks, 2014, p. 618.
- 9 All were exquisitely illustrated by Dante Gabriel Rossetti who opened a new chapter in Pre-Raphaelite art and altered the until then typical British illustration modes.
- 10 These two smartly illustrated books by Walter Crane constituted a huge publication success of the well-known publishing house of George Routledge and Sons.
- 11 Rebecca Wanzo, *The Content of Our Caricature: African American Comic Art and Political Belonging*, New York, New York University Press, 2020, p. 4.
- 12 Terry Mosher, 'Drawn and Quartered', *Maclean's*, Leader and Dreamers Commemorative Issue, Ottawa, 2004, p. 171.
- 13 Christopher Hibbert, *The Illustrated London News' Social History of Victorian Britain*, London, Angus & Robertson, 1975, p. 18.
- 14 The rise of the middle class that had already begun in Britain since the beginning of the Industrial Revolution in the late eighteenth century and its high social status during the Victorian era maximized the lack of privileges and social rights of the lower classes, which, although constituted an important part of the national production process, was just a tired 'follower' of all sociopolitical, cultural and economic developments.
- 15 Jane R. Cohen, *Charles Dickens and His Original Illustrators*, Columbus, Ohio State University Press, 1980, p. 100.
- 16 This novel was first published in twenty sequels between March 1852 and September 1853 in relevant magazines. It was also republished several times in the form of a single book in the next few years with illustrations made by different artists each time, including Hablot Knight Browne.
- 17 Charles Dickens, *Bleak House* (preface), *New York, Hurd and Houghton, 1868*, p. viii.
- 18 The novel was first published in 1837 with great commercial success and is the first novel written in English worldwide that has a child as the main character.
- 19 Charles Dickens, 'Oliver Twist', *Classics Illustrated*, issue 1004, Athens, Atlantis Publications, 2004, p. 45.
- 20 Also known as *A Monthly Expositor of Imposture and Folly*, it first appeared in 1811 and stopped being published in 1816.
- 21 George Cruikshank, *The Scourge or Literary, Theatrical and Miscellaneous Magazine*, Classic Reprint Series, London, Forgotten Publications, 2015, p. 99.
- 22 As John Simkin mentions, in most of his caricatures he continued mocking King George IV who in 1820, having enough of his satirical attacks, proposed Cruikshank the sum of one hundred pounds to stop caricaturing Him in indecent situations. John Simkin, "George Cruikshank", *Spartacus Educational*, in <http://spartacus-educational.com/PRcruikshank.htm> (accessed 20/12/2021).
- 23 John Wardroper, *The Caricatures of George Cruikshank*, Boston, David R. Godine, 1978, p. 10.
- 24 Corryne Kosik, "George Cruikshank", in <https://www.illustrationhistory.org/artists/george-cruikshank>, (accessed 22/12/2021).
- 25 At this stage of his career there was a major shift in his interests as he began to focus on caricatures and illustrations that dealt with important social issues with the main one being alcoholism. So from 1848 onwards he published another important series of etchings titled *The Drunkard's Children, A Slice of Bread and Butter* and *Our Gutter Children*, which bore significant social messages about poverty and alcoholism.
- 26 John Wardroper, *op. cit.*
- 27 Marion Harry Spielmann, *The History of 'Punch'*, The Project Gutenberg eBook, in https://www.gutenberg.org/files/23881/23881-h/23881-h.htm#Page_10 (accessed 8/03/2022).
- 28 Simon Cooke, 'The Life of the Streets and *Punch*', in <https://victorianweb.org/art/illustration/socialrealism/2.html> (accessed 23/12/2021).
- 29 Philip V. Allingham, 'Punch, or the London Charivari (1841-1992) - A British Institution', in <https://victorianweb.org/periodicals/punch/pva44.html> (accessed 7/08/2022).
- 30 Richard D. Altick, *Punch: The Lively Youth of a British Institution, 1841-1851*, Columbus, Ohio State University Press, 1977, p. 17.
- 31 Mark Bills, 'Thomas, William Luson (1830-1900)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004, p. 398.
- 32 Henry J. Miller, 'John Leech and the Shaping of the Victorian Cartoon: The Context of Respectability', *Victorian Periodicals Review*, vol. 42, n° 3, 2009, p. 267.
- 33 Beate Wilhelm, *The role of women in Victorian England reflected in Jane Eyre*, Norderstedt, GRIN Verlag, 2005, p. 4.
- 34 Pugin believed that Gothic art contained significant Christian forms of art and thus he developed a distinctive Gothic Revival architectural and design style influencing profoundly traditional British art and architecture. The interior decoration of the Palace of Westminster, its iconic clock tower and many neo-Gothic style churches in England, Australia and Ireland are some of his most important works.
- 35 Zsuzsanna Ujszaszi, 'The Pre-Raphaelite Journey into the Middle Ages, A Quest for Spiritual Experience', *Acta Universitatis Sapientiae, Philologica* 7, 1, 2015, pp. 30-31.
- 36 Francesco Carelli, 'The Aesthetic Movement: perfect beauty so pale and cold', *London Journal of Primary Care*, n° 5, 2013, p. 48.
- 37 George Frederic Ward, "Art for reform and social change in Victorian Britain", in <https://artuk.org/discover/stories/art-for-reform-and-social-change-in-victorian-britain>, (accessed 10/01/2022).
- 38 Nevertheless, it is important to state that this type of thematology was only a part of their work, however extensive, as most of them were also occupied with several other subjects including portrait and landscape painting.
- 39 Nick Souter and Tessa Souter, *The Illustration Handbook: A guide to the world's greatest illustrators*, New York, Oceana, 2012, p. 26.

40 Simon Houfe, *Dictionary of 19th Century British Book Illustrators and Caricaturists*, Woodbridge, Antique Collectors' Club, 1996, p. 310.

41 Julian Treuherz, *Hard Times: Social Realism in Victorian Art*, London, Lund Humphries, 1993, p. 35.

42 Charlotte Yeldham, *Women Artists in Nineteenth-Century France and England*, New York, Garland, 1984, p. 49.

43 Linda Nochlin, *Misère: The Visual Representation of Misery in the 19th Century*, New York: Thames & Hudson, 2018, p. 70.

44 *Ibidem*, p. 75.

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