

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18454/RULB.2022.36.11>

THE SPECIFICS OF THE FEMALE THEME INTERPRETATION IN VICTORIAN WOMEN WRITERS' WORKS

Research article

Shamina N.V.<sup>1,\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>ORCID : 0000-0001-5522-5205;

<sup>1</sup> National Research N. P. Ogarev Mordovia State University, Saransk, Russian Federation

\* Corresponding author (morcap[at]mail.ru)

**Abstract**

The present article examines the specifics of women's issues in artistic understanding in Victorian writers' works. The author notes the importance of considering various aspects of the functioning and gender relations change in the conditions of the XIX century English society transformation and the direct reflection of these processes in the literature. It is concluded that the female theme implementation in women writer's novels acquires, in comparison with the works of their predecessors, new features. The author substantiates the idea that the works created by J. Austen, the Bronte sisters and G. Eliot contribute – directly or indirectly – to the reassessment of values in favor of the private sphere of the woman's life and change the woman's role and functions in society.

**Keywords:** Victorian literature, artistic thinking, women's issues, female psychology, self-realization.

СПЕЦИФИКА ИНТЕРПРЕТАЦИИ ЖЕНСКОЙ ТЕМЫ В ПРОИЗВЕДЕНИЯХ ВИКТОРИАНСКИХ ПИСАТЕЛЬНИЦ

Научная статья

Шамина Н.В.<sup>1,\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>ORCID : 0000-0001-5522-5205;

<sup>1</sup> Национальный исследовательский Мордовский государственный университет им. Н. П. Огарёва, Саранск, Российская Федерация

\* Корреспондирующий автор (morcap[at]mail.ru)

**Аннотация**

В настоящей статье рассматривается специфика художественного осмысления женской проблематики в произведениях писательниц викторианской эпохи. Автор отмечает важность рассмотрения различных аспектов функционирования и изменения гендерных отношений в условиях трансформации английского общества XIX века и непосредственного отражения этих процессов в литературе. Сделан вывод о том, что реализация женской темы в романах писательниц приобретает, по сравнению с произведениями их предшественников, новые черты. Автор обосновывает идею, что произведения, созданные Дж. Остен, сестрами Бронте и Дж. Элиот способствуют – прямо или косвенно – переоценке ценностей в пользу частной сферы жизни женщины и изменению роли и функций женщины в обществе.

**Ключевые слова:** викторианская литература, художественное мышление, женская проблематика, женская психология, самореализация.

**Introduction**

The nineteenth century English literature and, above all, the Victorian novel, are rightfully considered one of the most significant pages in the European literature history. Victorian writers, while relying on the traditions of their predecessors and developing new themes, motives and techniques, enriched English realistic prose. Their works were the foundation for the most important discoveries of English-language literature of the twentieth century. At the same time, there is no doubt that the most important role in the Victorian novel formation and, more broadly, realistic aesthetics belongs to the nineteenth century women writers (J. Austen, the Bronte sisters, G. Eliot). Their conviction in the need to change the epoch's ideological attitudes, the social structure, traditional family norms and the way of life, their readiness to establish new socio-cultural attitudes found quite natural and adequate expression in their artistic creativity.

**Research methods and principles**

The female theme is one of the dominant ones in the literary process of England during the Victorian era (1837–1901). And although certain steps have already been taken in the development and scientific understanding of this problem by foreign and domestic literary critics, the clarification of the characteristic features of the female theme reflection in the women writers' work deserves special consideration [7], [8], [9]. We see the relevance of the present research in the need for a multidimensional consideration of the female theme artistic interpretation in the literary movement, in identifying the nature of a woman's personality artistic concept evolution in the literary and artistic practice of British writers, whose work falls on the 1840s–1870s.

The theoretical and methodological basis of the present work were the principles of comparative historical literary studies, which had been substantiated and developed in the works of the largest Russian scholars (M. P. Alekseev [1], M. M. Bakhtin [2], V. M. Zhirmunsky [4], etc.). Works of a general theoretical and private nature in the field of literary criticism, belonging to leading domestic and foreign historians of literature of Great Britain, primarily engaged in the literary process of the XIX

century (E. Yu. Genieva [3], V. V. Ivasheva [5], M. I. Tugusheva [6], etc.), as well as the works of historians and sociologists directly related to women's and feminism issues (A. A. Case [10], C. M. Feinberg [11], S. M. Gilbert [12], C. Hall [13], F. Mort [14], J. Wood [15], etc.) had methodological significance for our research.

### Main results

Summing up the results of our research, we note the importance of considering various aspects of the functioning and gender relations change in the conditions of the XIX century English society transformation and the direct reflection of these processes in the literature.

1. Women's issues occupy an important place in the English Victorian novel. It appears to be one of the dominant themes in the literature of the epoch, which is determined by the historical, socio-cultural, economic and political features of this period.

2. Since the literary achievements of writers interpreting women's issues are quite different, there is a need for a more objective assessment of the ideological, aesthetic and artistic principles of their work.

3. The coverage of women's issues by writers of the Victorian period was the objective reality reflection of English society and, at the same time, an expression of the author's female psychology and artistic thinking.

4. The key points that determine the nature of functioning, behavioral motivation of the Victorian heroines are a puritanical, conservative worldview, on the one hand, and the recognition of the right to exist of a strong, independent, educated woman, on the other.

5. The nineteenth century English writers were among the first to embody in their novels the idea of the possibility of the heroine's self-realization not only in the traditional sphere of the family, but also outside it, in particular, in public, professional, charitable and other spheres.

### Discussion

The peculiarity of the formation and embodiment of the female theme in the English Victorian novel was largely predetermined by J. Austen works ("Sense and Sensibility" (1811), "Pride and Prejudice" (1813), etc.). Not falling within the chronological boundaries of the Victorian era, the writer, nevertheless, fits quite organically into its socio-cultural and literary context. Her work played a key role in the formation of the "female" prose of the Victorian era, having a noticeable influence on her followers' works. It is quite obvious that Austen's novels do not discuss the woman's role in society: whether she should have the right to vote or be engaged exclusively in household management. In them, as in life, the writer seems to fully accept and share the desire of her heroines to get married and does not show an obvious desire for changes in public life that could lead to another alternative. Austen's heroines correspond to the traditional Victorian ideal of femininity (they are able to feel deeply, faithful and constant, endowed with a love of nature and reading, have a pleasant appearance, good disposition and good upbringing), realize and accept their subordinate status, men's gender superiority and social dominance, without dramatizing their own fate at all. At the same time, there is no doubt that the pre-Victorian interpretation of the female theme presented in the writer's novels became a kind of starting point for the further development of the issue in the English women's literature of the following decades.

The generation of writers who entered literature in the 1830s and 40s (sisters Sh. and E. Bronte), when writing became a recognized profession, treated literary work as an opportunity to have a job, and thus express disagreement with gender asymmetry (primarily, the subordinate position of women) in society. However, they widely used male pseudonyms, which became a kind of sign of radical historical changes as a result of which the status of a woman increases, and she gets the opportunity to participate in the main directions of the literary process. In general, success in the literary field has become a symbol of the highest achievement for women, because by doing intellectual work, a woman could achieve creative self-determination on a par with male writers and find her own place in literature. In their novels, Sh. and E. Bronte, G. Eliot, taking the position of an observer, attempt to represent their own worldview, which is thoroughly permeated with the concept of gender, and where any description is impossible without deciphering the politics of gender relations within a specific time and geographical boundaries.

As well as Sh. Bronte's works, the novels "Mill on the Floss" and "Middlemarch" by G. Eliot comprehend and demonstrate the unfair attitude that a woman experienced in the conditions of Victorian England society. Clearly aware of the gender asymmetry present in the traditional patriarchal way of English society with its emphasis on the priority of the masculine over the feminine and the displacement of the female voice from the real polyphony of cultural texts, the writer, unlike her predecessors, resolves the conflict between personal protest and public morality more often in favour of the latter.

If Sh. Bronte examines the problems of women's realization in society, family, issues of marriage, E. Bronte in "Wuthering Heights" (a novel that does not fit into the traditional literary canon of Victorianism at all, either in terms of plot development or in the use of visual means) interprets the relationship of a man and a woman in an original way, depicting the "universal" Catherine and Heathcliff's passion, destroying any boundaries, focusing primarily on the love story in conditions of social inequality and injustice, as well as internal contradictions that torment the main character, her all-consuming love for the main character and inability to be with him.

The primary task of the female line representatives in Victorian literature is to reflect in the plot basis of their own novels the question of a woman's search for her own place in a patriarchal society, the theme of spiritual quest and her destiny as a female heroine. Consciously opposing the prevailing gender stereotypes that limit the possibility of personal and professional self-realization, the heroines of E. Bronte, Sh. Bronte and G. Eliot, under any circumstances, make their own choice and take responsibility for it on themselves, they are a new type of woman in the Victorian novel, unusual for their time, self-sufficient and independent, their sensuality is tragically represented. The heroines are extremely problematic, they try to comprehend existing gender stereotypes, developed models of femininity, their social conditionalities. The unifying features of Sh. Bronte and G. Eliot's works are the professional sphere subject, the departure from the family and household subject as the main one according to the canons of women's writing.

## Conclusion

It is quite obvious that one of the main achievements of English literature in the 1840s–1870s was the female character promotion to the center of literary prose. In the analyzed novels, there are various heroines who oppose the women's subordinate position, both in the family and in society as a whole. Although the novelists showed different sides of this protest, they are united in one thing – a woman should be established as a person, as a representative of the gender, be equal in rights with a man.

The specificity of the approach to the women's issues in artistic understanding by women writers is that the works created by them contribute – directly or indirectly – to the reassessment of values in favour of the private sphere of the woman's life and change the women's role and functions in society. Characterizing the peculiarities of women's perception of reality, we conclude that women writers have subjectivism of assessments, unity of the rational and the emotional-intuitive, the ability to think "through feeling". In their works, women writers opened the way to a powerful flow of individual and personal perception of the world. They are characterized by a deeper insight into the woman's psychology, the study of the internal motives of her behavior. At the same time, women writers, whose creative heritage was considered in our work, lay the tradition of interpreting the female theme, which continues in the literary process of Great Britain for the next decades.

## Благодарности

I would like to express my special gratitude to my scientific advisor, Doctor of Philology, Professor Oleg Efimovich Osovsky for his significant comments and important advice when writing the study, which results are reflected in this article.

## Конфликт интересов

Не указан.

## Рецензия

Все статьи проходят рецензирование. Но рецензент или автор статьи предпочли не публиковать рецензию к этой статье в открытом доступе. Рецензия может быть предоставлена компетентным органам по запросу.

## Acknowledgement

Выражаю особую благодарность моему научному руководителю доктору филологических наук, профессору Олегу Ефимовичу Осовскому за значимые замечания и важнейшие советы при написании исследования, результаты которого отражены в данной статье.

## Conflict of Interest

None declared.

## Review

All articles are peer-reviewed. But the reviewer or the author of the article chose not to publish a review of this article in the public domain. The review can be provided to the competent authorities upon request.

## Список литературы / References

1. Алексеев М.П. Английская литература: очерки и исследования / М.П. Алексеев — Л.: Наука, 1991. — 460 с.
2. Бахтин М.М. Эстетика словесного творчества / М.М. Бахтин — М.: Искусство, 1986. — 445 с.
3. Гениева Е.Ю. История всемирной литературы Английская литература: в 9 т.; / Е.Ю. Гениева, Д.М. Урнов — М.: ИМЛИ им. А. М. Горького, 1989. — 6 т.
4. Жирмунский В.М. Из истории западноевропейских литератур / В.М. Жирмунский — М.: Наука, 1981. — 303 с.
5. Ивашева В.В. "Век нынешний и век минувший...": английский роман XIX века в его современном звучании / В.В. Ивашева — М.: Художественная литература, 1990. — 479 с.
6. Тугушева М.П. В надежде правды и добра: портреты писательниц / М.П. Тугушева — М.: Художественная литература, 1990. — 271 с.
7. Шамина Н.В. Женская проблематика в викторианском романе 1840-1870-х годов (Джейн Остен, Шарлотта и Эмили Бронте, Джордж Элиот) дис. ...канд. null: 10.01.03 : защищена 2006-03-23 : утв. 2006-10-20 / Н.В. Шамина — Саранск: 2006. — 235 с.
8. Шамина Н.В. Своеобразие реализации женской проблематики в раннем творчестве Шарлотты Бронте ("Учитель"). / Н.В. Шамина // Филологические науки. Вопросы теории и практики. — 2019. — 1. — с. 271-274. — DOI: 10.30853/filnauki.2019.1.57
9. Шамина Н.В. Трактовки образа Доротеи Брук и проблема женского самосознания в романе Дж. Элиот "Миддлмарч". / Н.В. Шамина // Филологические науки. Вопросы теории и практики. — 2018. — 5-1 (83) . — с. 40-44. — DOI: 10.30853/filnauki.2018-5-1.6
10. Case A.A. Plotting Women. Gender and Narration in the Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century British Novel / A.A. Case — London: University of Virginia Press, 1999. — 240 p.
11. Feinberg C.M. Professional Domesticity in the Victorian Novel / C.M. Feinberg — Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1998. — 230 p.
12. Gilbert S.M. The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination / S.M. Gilbert, S. Gubar — London: Yale University Press, 2000. — 719 p.
13. Hall C. Defining the Victorian Nation: Class, Race, Gender, and the Reform Act of 1867 / C. Hall, K. McClelland, J. Rendall — Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000. — 320 p.
14. Mort F. Dangerous Sexualities: Medico-Moral Politics in England since 1830 / F. Mort — London: Routledge and Keagan Paul, 2000. — 250 p.
15. Wood J. Passion and Pathology in Victorian Fiction / J. Wood — Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001. — 232 p.

## Список литературы на английском языке / References in English

1. Alekseev M.P. Anglijskaya literatura: ocherki i issledovaniya [English Literature: Essays and Research] / M.P. Alekseev — L.: Nauka, 1991. — 460 p. [in Russian]

2. Baxtin M.M. E'stetyka slovesnogo tvorcestva [Aesthetics of Verbal Creativity] / M.M. Baxtin — M.: Iskusstvo, 1986. — 445 p. [in Russian]
3. Genieva E.Yu. Istorija vseмирnoj literatury' [History of World Literature] English Literature: in 9 vol.; / E.Yu. Genieva, D.M. Urnov — M.: IMLI im. A. M. Gor'kogo, 1989. — 6 vol. [in Russian]
4. Zhirmunskij V.M. Iz istorii zapadnoevropejskix literatur [Aesthetics of Verbal Creativity] / V.M. Zhirmunskij — M.: Nauka, 1981. — 303 p. [in Russian]
5. Ivasheva V.V. "Vek ny'neshnij i vek minuvshij...": anglijskij roman XIX veka v ego sovremennom zvuchanii ["The Present Century and the Past Century ...": the English Novel of the XIX century in its Modern Sound] / V.V. Ivasheva — M.: Xudozhestvennaya literatura, 1990. — 479 p. [in Russian]
6. Tugusheva M.P. V nadezhde pravdy' i dobra: portrety' pisatel'nicz [In the Hope of Truth and Goodness: Portraits of Writers] / M.P. Tugusheva — M.: Xudozhestvennaya literatura, 1990. — 271 p. [in Russian]
7. Shamina N.V. Zhenskaya problematika v viktorianskom romane 1840-1870-x godov (Dzhejn Osten, Sharlotta i E'mili Bronte, Dzhordzh E'liot) [Women's Issues in the Victorian Novel of the 1840s-1870s (Jane Austen, Charlotte and Emily Bronte, George Eliot)] dis...of PhD in Social and Human Sciences: 10.01.03 : defense of the thesis 2006-03-23 : approved 2006-10-20 / Н.В. Шамина — Saransk: 2006. — 235 p. [in Russian]
8. Shamina N.V. Svoeobrazie realizacii zhenskoj problematiki v rannem tvorcestve Sharlotty' Bronte ("Uchitel'") [The Peculiarity of the Women's Issues Implementation in Charlotte Bronte's Early Work ("The Professor")]. / N.V. Shamina // Filologicheskie nauki. Voprosy' teorii i praktiki [Philological sciences.Theory and Practice Issues]. — 2019. — 1. — p. 271-274. — DOI: 10.30853/filnauki.2019.1.57 [in Russian]
9. Shamina N.V. Traktovki obraza Dorotei Bruk i problema zhenskogo samosoznaniya v romane Dzh. E'liot "Middlmarch" [Interpretations of Dorothea Brooke's Image and the Female Identity Problem in the Novel "Middlemarch" by J. Eliot]. / N.V. Shamina // Filologicheskie nauki. Voprosy' teorii i praktiki [Philological sciences.Theory and Practice Issues]. — 2018. — 5-1 (83) . — p. 40-44. — DOI: 10.30853/filnauki.2018-5-1.6 [in Russian]
10. Case A.A. Plotting Women. Gender and Narration in the Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century British Novel / A.A. Case — London: University of Virginia Press, 1999. — 240 p.
11. Feinberg C.M. Professional Domesticity in the Victorian Novel / C.M. Feinberg — Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1998. — 230 p.
12. Gilbert S.M. The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination / S.M. Gilbert, S. Gubar — London: Yale University Press, 2000. — 719 p.
13. Hall C. Defining the Victorian Nation: Class, Race, Gender, and the Reform Act of 1867 / C. Hall, K. McClelland, J. Rendall — Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000. — 320 p.
14. Mort F. Dangerous Sexualities: Medico-Moral Politics in England since 1830 / F. Mort — London: Routledge and Keagan Paul, 2000. — 250 p.
15. Wood J. Passion and Pathology in Victorian Fiction / J. Wood — Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001. — 232 p.