



Reconsidering the Victorian Angel in the Light of Butler's Concept of Performativity as a Key Indicator of Gender Identity Construction

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Abstract

Amid the fast changes and repercussions of the French and Industrial Revolutions, women's critical status in the British transitory period stimulated the Victorian elite, such as Elizabeth Gaskell, to raise the complex issue of femininity and womanhood in her writings. Given the predominant concept of the woman as an angel, this study sets forth to examine the mechanisms of the building-up of women characters wrestling with the Victorian ideal of the angel that has been established by theorists of domestic ideology, namely the leading figures, Coventry Patmore and John Ruskin. Gaskell's discourse represents an attempt to transcend the established norms of traditional femininity in contradiction with masculinity. This argument is corroborated through three analytical angles. While the first section presents the socio-cultural background of women as angels, the second one analyses the female characters' performance within the theoretical framework of Butler's concept of "performativity" through which gender identity is 'enacted,' and the third section examines the role of the language in the selected novels, namely *Mary Barton* and *North and South*, to validate the subversive discourse towards founding the New Woman's identity.

Key words: Gender, discourse; femininity; rewriting; E. Gaskell.