

Стереотипы о женщинах в романах Э. Гаскелл 1848-1855 гг.

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Stereotypes about Women in E. Gaskell's Novels of 1848-1853

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Аннотация

В статье рассматриваются три романа Э. Гаскелл – «Мэри Бартон» (1848), «Руфь» (1853) и «Крэнфорд» (1853), в которых писательница развенчивает викторианские стереотипы о женщинах («ангел в доме», «падшая женщина», «старая дева»). На фоне отказа от этих представлений Гаскелл создает новый тип героини.

Abstract

In the article three novels by E. Gaskell, «Mary Barton» (1848), «Ruth» (1853), and «Cranford» (1853), are approached as debunking the Victorian stereotypes about women («the Angel in the House», «the fallen woman», «the old maid»). In her protest against these notions, Gaskell introduced a new type of a heroine.

Ключевые слова: викторианская литература, гендерные стереотипы, женская проза, Элизабет Гаскелл.

Key words: Victorian literature, gender stereotypes, feminine writing, Elizabeth Gaskell.

(1) E. C. Gaskell (1810-1865) was one of those rare artists whose multifaceted talents make their art timely long after they were gone. Her social novels of the 1840s-1850s («Mary Barton», «Ruth», «North and South») were highly appraised a century later, while readers of the 21st century seem to prefer her nostalgic «Cranford», partly thanks to the brilliant BBC adaptations of 2007 and 2009, J. Dench, J. McKenzie, I. Staunton, T. Hiddleston starring. Yet, this contemporary notion of Mrs. Gaskell as a «cosy» Victorian lady novelist does not take into account her versatility, her zeal for artistic experiments, her courage when dealing with most burning issues of her time, or her reluctance to compromise.

(2) Despite the fact that Gaskell's works are often attributed to the so-called «motherly fiction», her texts most plainly reveal her (proto)feminist views, for



instance, in the way she treats the conventional gender models. M. Firstova points out that Gaskell's male characters are often passive and weak, while her heroines are, on the other hand, aggressively active and always in control [1, p. 5, 12].

(3) Though the Victorian Age undoubtedly saw a positive shift in woman's status, during the better part of the century the ideology of separate spheres prevailed in the uppermiddle class households: while men could freely establish themselves in politics or commerce, their wives were in charge of the house realm [6, p. 291]. This strictly decorative function of a woman gave birth to a powerful Victorian myth of the «Angel in the House» – a beautiful, kind, loving, pure, passive, ailing, unearthly woman, whomay be a muse but never a heroine, for she may never have a narrative of her own [3, p. 22, 24]. Lady novelists of the period openly protested against this foisted role model by working on a new type of a heroine – strong, active, independent, reasoning, and talented.

(4) Gaskell too had her say in that polemics, however, her heroines often strive for the peaceful, secluded existence of an angelic woman, but cannot achieve it. Mary Barton, the main character of Gaskell's first social novel, has to struggle with the unjust system and make an insufferable choice either to save her father, a criminal, or her lover falsely accused for the murder he had not committed.

(5) Gaskell's most considerable achievement in «Mary Barton,» however, is another female character she traced out with incredible gentleness. Her Esther, a drunkard and a prostitute, is shown as a noble and pure young woman, whose whole life was destroyed because of a single mistake that led to such a tragic degradation. Yet, following Ch. Dickens's

trail, Gaskell made her character retain this purity even after she had touched the very bottom.

(6) Thus, in her «Mary Barton» Gaskell tried to show that uppermiddle class ideals, including the «Angel in the House», were impossible for working women who belonged to the industrial England and had to work as hard as men in order to survive.

(7) Gaskell re-imagined Esther's character in a number of her writings, the most striking example of such a pure at heart «fallen woman» being her Ruth Hilton, the main character of the 1853 novel «Ruth». Virtuous Victorians resented the story of a young girl, seduced and abandoned by an aristocrat but it was Gaskell's sympathetic tone in it that overtly shocked them. The *Literary Gazette* expressed deep regret «at the author's loss of reputation» [4, p. 63] in their comparatively mild review of the novel. However, Gaskell's determination to debunk another Victorian stereotype – that of a sinfully corrupted «fallen woman» – was too strong. She made a non-conformist minister Thurstan Benson her mouthpiece, and in his powerful exclamation, «... not every woman who has fallen is depraved...» [2, p. 350], one can clearly hear Gaskell's own voice. The writer's religious experience allowed her to rise above the common prejudices and put her faith in the power of a sincere repentance, while her social work experience suggested that in most cases such women as Ruth were to be viewed as victims and hence treated kindly.

(8) Later that same year Gaskell had another her book finally published. In her «Cranford», the writer collected her reminiscences of her childhood and youth spent in a small provincial town. With her brilliant sense of humour peppered with mild irony, she portrayed her eccentric little Cranford ladies, all of them widows and old maids, whom she affectionately



calls the «Amazons». Such a simile is not at all accidental here: in her novel Gaskell completely destroyed the conventional notion of an «old maid» as a miserable and helpless creature. Though successful marriage was a number one priority for any young female Victorian who could not bear the thought of remaining single for the rest of her life and thus becoming a burden to her relatives, the Cranford ladies posed a striking contrast to this image. Energetic and independent old single women are basically in charge of the whole Cranford. Gaskell's novel is a sort of a feminist utopia, in which she portrayed an ideal world successfully run by single women, which allows A. Jaffe to justly call «Cranford» a critique of the ideology of separate spheres [5, p. 49].

(9) To sum up, I would like to highlight once again that in «Mary Barton», «Ruth», and «Cranford» Gaskell worked with conventional gender stereotypes concerning an ideal «Angel in the House», a depraved «fallen woman», and a miserably feeble «old maid». She successfully debunked these notions by means of social criticism, Christian ethics and even parody, creating a new realistic female role model of the modern age – individual, independent, strong woman, capable of holding out against the cruel world and aggressively striving for happiness.

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