Chapter Two

Writing Rebellion, Teaching Survival: Literary Women and Teachers

With the increase in the number of schools, resident governesses gave way to the daily governess (who travelled to teach her wards) and then later to the school teacher. The aptitude and quality of school teachers were varied and their competence could not be easily evaluated. What the governess and the teacher had in common was the primary responsibility of imparting education. The concerns regarding education and training mattered to both, governesses and school teachers, but more to the latter, as rules and regulations became more formalized in the case of schools. School teachers, located away from home, (both their own, and the home of their pupils’) were not additionally burdened with the overall grooming, moral conduct and chaperoning duties assigned to the governess. She had fixed and proper duty hours (the school hours) and so, unlike Agnes Grey, she did not have to be subject to the whims and fancies of her students. In several canonical texts we find references to teachers in a school as in Jane Eyre, Villette, The Mill on the Floss, and Gissing’s The Odd Women, among others. Desire for domesticity, for a ‘true home’ or for a ‘home of their own’ was perhaps present in all Victorian women, and being forced to work presented a poor substitute; but, interestingly, Monica Feinberg Cohen states that:

By threatening Lucy Snowe with spinsterhood, Villette displays here a peculiar rhetoric of renunciation. The moment records Lucy's decision to redirect her desires: instead of wishing for a “true home” of her own, she will
wish for a school of her own; instead of wanting to establish herself in the institution of marriage, she will construct a surrogate establishment.¹

Victorian girls were brought up to believe in their proper sphere, the home, and that fulfillment lies in submitting to the needs of her family, in making others happy, in becoming what Patmore terms the ‘angel in the house’. If the women who were forced to work desired a true home, then many an ‘ideal’ Victorian Lady of Leisure also desired some useful occupation and felt the pressures of being merely ornamental and superfluous, of living in the house with little or nothing to do. Maggie Tulliver’s agonized cry to her brother – ‘because you are a man Tom, and have power, and can do something in the world’² – reveals her desire for some useful work in the masculine ‘public sphere’ and, through it, a realization of her own self-worth.

When we examine the history of women’s education and training, we see training colleges for women laid more emphasis on reinforcing traditional skills to make girls more feminine rather than imparting professional skills of teaching. This was again in agreement with the ‘separate spheres’ ideology, where women’s ‘proper sphere’ was the private space of the home, running the household, rearing children and meeting the needs of the husband. Rosemary Deem claims that girls were examined in subjects like seamstress, knitting and sewing. Domestic economy was part of their narrow curriculum.³ Only a few nineteenth-century schools, like North London Collegiate School, offered a curriculum beyond the basic literary and ladylike syllabus. Women teachers had to face many obstacles beginning with a

³ Details of curriculum used in training are provided in Rosemary Deem, Women and Schooling (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd, 1978).
lack of proper professional training, to struggling to gain recognition for their position and services, meagre pay and the absence of anything like a system.

The growing concern for the training of women teachers in girls’ schools led to the establishment of Governesses’ Benevolent Institution in 1843. The Secretary of the Institution, Rev. David Layng, suggested that certificates of knowledge and of teaching capacity might be issued to competent teachers who had successfully undergone training. More focus was placed on academic training than teaching aptitude. Queen’s College (1848) and Bedford College (1849) paid little attention to actual training in teaching. It must have been assumed that if knowledge was acquired, it could as easily be imparted. The methodology of teaching and how to impart knowledge were underestimated. The Schools Enquiry Commission (1868) reported that efficiency of teachers in girls’ training colleges had to be increased and measures had to be taken to do it but opinions differed as to the right method and the right approach. In the words of Rich, the report of the Commission was ‘non committal’. It expressed dissatisfaction with the training provided at women’s elementary training colleges. It suggested that the success of these colleges owed to the notion of its necessity in the minds of teachers and pupils, and not to the course content in method and teaching practice. Clearly the concept of ‘training the trainer’ had not gained widespread currency. It was in fact a contested idea. Thinkers like John Stuart Mill preferred ‘normal college scheme’ to training colleges. Others like W. C. Lake laid emphasis on professional training. Rich observes that ‘it was felt that training colleges had a cramping influence on the

---

mind, and there was a prevalent feeling that even elementary teachers would be the better for being trained with students destined for other professions.

There were two opposing views regarding women teachers. Some male educators complained that they were incompetent as they lacked intellectual training, moral strength, skilled aptitude for teaching, and thoroughness in the subjects they dealt with. But in a report of the Schools Inquiry Commission, Mr. Bryce noted that:

> Women are naturally skilful teachers, and they are, so far as my observation goes, zealous and conscientious teachers …. Women seem to have more patience as teachers, more quickness in seeing whether the pupil understands, more skill in adapting their explanations to the peculiarities of the student’s mind and certainly a nicer discernment of his or her character.

This careful observer has formed his opinion on the basis of his familiarity with a great number of schools and though he has deliberated on the deficiency of women teachers without a systematic University training, he acknowledges the natural tendency and moral and intellectual aptitude of women educators.

Most men viewed women as a subservient workforce that could be utilized in entering the teaching profession as the remuneration given to teachers was low. If women had rooms at their disposal, they would often open small private schools where education would be offered to children. This was especially convenient as it allowed women the opportunity of earning within the four walls of the house and hence was more ‘respectable’. Being at home, conformed to the ideology of her ‘proper’ private sphere and it did not problematize the issue of overstepping the domestic boundaries. However, as women

---

teachers were not often blessed with rooms and homes of their own, they gradually were forced to move, beyond domesticity, from the shadow of a private home to the light of a public classroom. Hellerstein declares that ‘if the forces of tradition helped women enter the classroom, it was the forces of change in the form of government legislated compulsory education that opened the door wide for them, creating a demand for a cheap source of labour to staff the newly created schools’.  

Many women had to enter this profession as a means of sustenance, however meagre it might have been. It provided a more rewarding occupation than waiting endlessly for marriage. The ‘excess’, ‘superfluous’ or ‘redundant’ women who could not find a suitor had to fend for themselves and teaching was considered a decent option for educated middle class women. Girls were also conditioned to dread and despise the prospect of earning for themselves. Victorian ideology argued for a life of inactivity and idleness and it was preferred to honest work and to being paid for work.  

The most obvious and important qualification necessary for teachers was proper education and training. The kind and extent of education to be allowed to women was highly debated. Rebecca Rogers clarifies that ‘throughout the nineteenth century debates about girls’ education reflected the conviction that women needed both instruction in intellectual subjects and education in moral values for their special role within the family’.  

---

household duties. In the tension between domesticity and careerism, the Victorian tendency was to prioritize the former at the expense of the latter. It resulted in the formation of incompetent women teachers. In 1837 none of England’s four Universities were open to women. Queen’s College, London, founded in 1848, was responsible for training women interested in teaching. Both Oxford and Cambridge were reluctant to open their Local Examinations to school girls and it was felt that girls’ modesty and health would be harmed by competition (with their male counterparts). Rita McWilliams Tullberg in her essay ‘Woman and Degrees at Cambridge University, 1862-1897’,\footnote{Published in Martha Vicinus, A Widening Sphere: Changing roles of Victorian Women (London: Methuen and Co. Ltd, 1977), pp.117-145.} records that the Liverpool local committee strongly opposed the idea of examining girls on the grounds that it would abase the status of examinations in the eyes of boy candidates. Reformist Emily Davies’ efforts and struggle to illustrate the benefits of examinations in monitoring the effectiveness of teaching, prompted, both Universities to allow women to be examined. They did not award degrees to women, but only ‘certificates of degrees’. Full degrees and university membership were finally granted to Cambridge women only in 1948.

Nancy Armstrong, in Desire and Domestic Fiction, examines the works of such novelists as Richardson, Jane Austen, and the Brontes to reveal the ways in which these authors rewrite the domestic practices and sexual relations of the past to create the historical context through which modern institutional power would seem not only natural but also humane, and therefore desirable. By removing the characters’ personality traits and motivations from their class structure, domestic novels separate gender from the political realm. The fictional characters in these domestic novels were presented as unique individuals with distinctive moral and mental characteristics that were not indicative of their class or
status, but rather of their own personal subjectivity. This assertion of individual subjectivity is interesting in its affirmation of a completely independent and autonomous female subjectivity that exists outside of interpersonal relationships with men. Armstrong writes: ‘If a servant girl could claim possession of herself as her own first property, then virtually any individual must similarly have a self to withhold or give in a modern form of exchange with the state.’\textsuperscript{10} This is a strong Lockeian assertion, empowering not only middle class educated women, but also working class women. The domestic novel thus presents the course of a distinctive individual whose life begins to unfold in the flourishing middle class.

Jane Eyre was a resident of Lowood School for eight years out of which six were spent as a pupil and two as a teacher. Jane acknowledges the excellent education imparted at that institution. In Lowood, she developed a fondness for certain branches of studies, a determination to excel academically, and a child-like urge to please the teachers she admired. She recollects fondly the teachers who were supportive and encouraging. Her academic prowess secured her an opportunity to serve as a teacher there but after a period of two years, she felt a pressing desire for freedom from Lowood and its still and uniform life. Miss Temple, her beloved teacher, left Lowood when she got married, and with her departure Jane Eyre lost interest in the calm and monotonous life at Lowood. She grew weary of her methodical life there and longed for change. As a teacher, in Lowood, Jane Eyre was paid fifteen pounds per annum. When she advertised for a situation, the only response she received was from Mrs. Fairfax, Mr. Rochester’s housekeeper, who offered her double the amount of her present salary.

As a teacher, Jane shared a room with another colleague in her boarding school. The strict discipline practiced in Lowood obliged her to seek permission for going outside the Institution, and the deadline for returning was eight o’clock. It might sound restrictive but security concerns might have prompted such rules. Jane was readily granted permission perhaps because Lowood rules were not particularly oppressive. It could also be attributed to the fact that she had rarely asked for such permission and had never left Lowood since the time of her arrival eight years back. All her vacations had been spent there and she had received no communication or visits from any relative.

In Lowood, Jane was assigned classroom teaching during school hours but was she expected to discharge several other responsibilities in the evening. She had to sit with the pupils during their hour of study, afterwards she had to read out prayers to them, and then see them to bed. Once the pupils were in bed, she took supper with the other teachers before retiring to her room for the night. The teachers were allowed to carry a short candle to their rooms, which meant that they had to finish undressing, reading, writing and other chores before it burnt out. Though she had lived long in that Institution, she had to maintain strict decorum. Even to communicate the news of her new job offer, she had to seek prior appointment with the superintendent, give a reasonable ground for wishing to quit her present post (she mentions that her new situation offered her double her present salary) and request the superintendent to inform Mr Brocklehurst or some other member of the committee. She also needed their permission to mention their names as ‘references’. Following protocol, Lowood committee first sought the permission of Mrs Reed, Jane’s ‘natural guardian’, and then proceeded to grant her formal leave. For her good conduct in Lowood, both as pupil and
teacher, she was rewarded with a testimonial of character and capacity, signed by the inspectors of the institution. This was an essential document for her next workplace.

Later in the novel, when St John Rivers offers her the post of a mistress in his school for poor girls, he proposes a salary of thirty pounds, a house which is simply furnished and a domestic help who would also aid her in menial school keeping tasks. Jane quickly debates the advantages and disadvantages in her mind. She finds it ‘humble’ and ‘plodding’ but all the same she realizes that it is ‘sheltered’ and a ‘safe asylum’. She was weary of being a governess again (‘fear of servitude with strangers entered my soul like iron’\(^{11}\)) and hence she gratefully accepted this post. He warned her that it was a village school where she would have to interact with poor cottagers’ children, or farmers’ daughters. Her teaching would only comprise knitting, sewing, reading, writing and ciphering. Her erudition, scholarly pursuits, accomplishments and refined tastes would be paralysed there, so he feared that she would gain little job satisfaction. He refers to teaching in his village school as ‘a monotonous labour wholly devoid of stimulus’\(^{12}\).

In her ‘bare’ and ‘humble’ schoolroom, Jane had twenty pupils out of whom only three could read and none could write or cipher. Their regional accent creates such a distance that pupil and teacher have difficulty in comprehending each other’s language. Jane finds some of her pupils ‘unmannered, rough, intractable, as well as ignorant’\(^{13}\) though others are docile, willing learners with a pleasant disposition. Her initial response is one of desolation, dismay and degradation as she feels that she has scaled down the social ladder. In the beginning, she finds it ‘truly hard work’ to teach her ‘hopelessly dull’ pupils but as days pass, she enjoys the satisfaction of watching the ‘heavy-looking gaping rustics’ evolving into


\(^{12}\) Ibid, p.352.

\(^{13}\) Ibid, p.355.
‘sharp-witted’ girls. Jane’s success in the schoolroom makes her popular with her wards’ families who are courteous and polite to her when she visits their homes in the evenings. The regard and recognition she receives in the neighbourhood prove not just her proficiency as a teacher but also the respect accorded to a good teacher by the poor farmers and cottagers.

In George Eliot’s *The Mill on the Floss*, Maggie already had the experience of serving in a school for two years after her father’s sudden demise. Her cousin Lucy Deane terms it as a ‘dreary situation’, necessary only on account of the fact that Maggie desired to be independent and not to live with her aunt Pullet. Maggie tries to save money to enable herself to acquire accomplishments which would be required to secure a better job prospect. When Lucy tries to cheer her up and tells her that she has left the ‘dreary schoolroom’ behind and does not have to subject herself to menial chores like mending her pupil’s clothes, Maggie replies sadly that she fears that she has got into the habit of being unhappy. It is noteworthy that even school teachers were expected to mend the clothes of their pupils, much like the governesses. In residential schools, the duties of the teacher resembled those of the governess, with the difference that school teachers were not supposed to adapt to the family norms or the family’s social circle. Maggie is fatigued by the monotony of her routine and gets jealous of happy people. Lucy attributes Maggie’s depression to her ‘dull, wearisome life’. The school diet comprising ‘watery rice pudding spiced with Pinnock’ makes her gloomy. This unwholesome, meagre dietary allowance at school makes her eager to taste her mother’s custard. Her response to work is representative of many contemporary fictional teachers. She finds her work days ‘joyless’ and her work ‘distasteful’. Her longing for music and an opportunity to play the piano makes her play her pupils’ tunes repeatedly to savour the pleasure of fingerling the keys of the instrument.

---

Later in the novel, when faced with social ostracism, Maggie seeks employment as a means of both financial support and an engagement. Maggie had apparently transgressed the social boundaries and fallen short of fulfilling the four ‘cardinal virtues’ required of a ‘true woman’. Her ‘purity’ was suspect so when Dr Kenn inquires about some employment for her, his efforts are in vain as no one is willing to allow a tainted character like Maggie to step into their homes. A young woman about whom people gossiped was not fit to function as a nursery governess, or teacher, or even a companion. Maggie’s ‘sullied presence’ might be a potential threat to young children, but even a spinster like Miss Kirk who was in want of a reader and companion did not wish to risk any contact with the ‘dangerous’ quality of Maggie’s mind. The logic put forward by Miss Kirk seems strange. Being a mature adult, was she unsure of herself, her thoughts, passions, and inclinations? Does her fear of risking contact with Maggie’s quality of mind not suggest her own frailty? If her reasons for not associating with Maggie were only social, she might be excused. Being ill and alone, if she did not wish to incur society’s wrath and contempt, it is understandable; but if she is personally wary of Maggie’s mental workings, it reveals her own vulnerability. The treatment meted out to Maggie highlights the highly conservative nature of Victorian society and the strict imposition that a woman, if she is to be allowed to practise as a governess, or teacher or companion, must be chaste and of unimpeachable morality.

The response to teaching was quite similar to that of governessing. For instance, Picotee, Ethelberta’s sister in Hardy’s The Hand of Ethelberta, is a pupil teacher in one of the schools of the town in addition to which she also taught at a small village night school. She begins to ‘hate’ Sandbourne where she teaches and finds it dull. Ethelberta reminds her that earlier she used to be ‘happy enough’ there. She longs to go to London and stay with
Ethelberta, and thus be near her beloved Mr. Christopher Julian, who is her sister’s admirer. When she hastily left her Sandbourne school, she gave them insufficient notice. It shows that teachers were expected to provide a notice before quitting their work. Again, in Gissing’s *New Grub Street*, Maud Milvain works as a teacher of music and her sister Dora is a ‘visiting governess’ (similar to the daily governess) and both of them hate their jobs. According to their brother Jasper Milvain, they definitely lacked a ‘marked faculty’ for teaching. They felt ‘galled’ by the compulsion which forced them to give lessons. They had received basic education at the hands of their ‘homely schoolmistress’ and then were sent to a high school. It means that they had no formal specialized training for teaching. Their dislike of their profession was due to two reasons: first, they had no aptitude for it and second, the necessity of doing it irked them.

In Gissing’s *The Odd Women*, Everard Barfoot discusses, with Rhoda Nunn and Mary Barfoot, the marriage prospects of a friend of his. The man under discussion is a Mr. Micklethwaite who was to marry a female teacher. In the conversation, teaching is termed as the usual kind of ‘drudgery’, ‘uncongenial toil’, and as ‘one of the most difficult and arduous pursuits’.15 These are some common responses to teaching and teachers were viewed as pitiable creatures like the governesses. The visionary Mary Barfoot champions the need of a ‘calling in life’ i.e. a vocation for women. She lashes out against the attitude that teaching is as simple as ‘washing up dishes’ or even the one that women who have no other means of earning money can do so by teaching children, assuming that it requires no expertise. She rightly argues that to be effective teachers, women must be allowed to undergo ‘laborious preparation’ like men. She further asserts that a woman’s professional life must go on even after she gets married, just as a man’s career is unaffected by his marriage.

The condition of women teachers in Victorian fiction was shared by the literary women, that is, women who took to earning their livelihood through their writing. In the Victorian era, George Eliot, the Bronte sisters, Mrs. Lynn Linton and Mrs. Oliphant were some of the glittering real life examples. Both teachers and literary women had white collar jobs and the basic requirement for both categories was that they had to be educated. A teacher had to sell her services to the school/institution and her pupils were her direct beneficiaries whereas literary women had to sell their works mostly to willing publishers and the reading public was their beneficiary. A teacher could work within the confines of her schoolroom and a writer could work in the privacy of her home. It was considered somewhat respectable as she did not have to leave her home to pursue her career. She belonged to ‘her proper sphere’, the private world of home. Lonely spinsters (like Miss Rice in Esther Waters) could survive through their writing and could also keep themselves occupied using their pen.

Catharine Gallahar analyses the complex authorial identity of Aphra Behn (1640-1689) who, she argues, draws on seemingly irreconcilable metaphors of the ‘author as prostitute’ and the ‘author as monarch’. By employing these contrasted ideas, she suggests that Behn emerges as the ‘victim-heroine’ of the male dominated literary marketplace. Gallahar shows the ‘plasticity’ of the terms ‘woman’, ‘author’ and ‘marketplace’ and also their interrelations. Behn is one of the women writers who harped on their femininity for financial advancement and attempted to highlight the commonalities between gender and their profession.

Behn’s biographer, Angelina Goreau has pertinently commented on the seventeenth century tendency to focus on the word ‘public’ in the word ‘publication’. A woman, who had

---

some publications attached to her name, was considered to be a ‘public’ woman. It probably springs from the concept of male hegemony and patriarchal control. A woman was to be her husband’s property; he not only owned her wealth, her body, her emotions, but also her mind. Lady Elizabeth Cary explained that the idea of a ‘public’ mind in a ‘private’ body threatened to fragment female identity and its unity:

When to their husbands they themselves do bind,
Do they not wholly give themselves away?
Or give they but their body, not their mind,
Reserving that, tho’ best, for other’s prey?
   No, sure, their thought no more can be their own
   And therefore to none but one be known.¹⁷

If a woman made the contents of her mind public, instead of reserving them for one man (i.e. her husband), she could be accused of immodesty and frivolity. Besides, there was a popular notion that writing was intellectual work, hence the preserve of the male. It followed that a woman who takes to writing encroaches on the male domain. Even in the nineteenth century, female writers like the Bronte sisters and Mary Ann Evans had to take on male pseudonyms to protect themselves from slander and to prevent their works from being rejected in the literary market. Gallahar affirms that ‘women’s authorship was both stimulated and regulated by sudden developments in the history of sexual difference: an unprecedented acceleration in the gendering and separation of public and private spheres, the notion that modesty, chastity and unselfishness came naturally to women’.¹⁸

Even a cursory look at Victorian fiction tends to disclose several fictional women writers like Hardy’s Ethelberta who wrote poems and published them and Gissing’s Marian Yule who ghost writes for her father and the Milvain sisters who write children’s

¹⁷ Ibid, p.47.
¹⁸ Ibid, p.147.
stories. Ethelberta faces much of the stigma attached to women who publish their works. The criticism is fuelled by the content or subject matter of her poems. To safeguard her identity, she signs her poems by an alphabet ‘E’ instead of attaching her name. Her collection of poems is entitled ‘Metres by E’. Written from a girl’s point of view, it tended to justify feminine actions, reactions and emotions. It comprised a ‘series of playful defenses of the supposed strategy of womankind in fascination, courtship and marriage’. The light, bright and gay collection had only one poem which was contrasted in tone and treatment. The poem ‘Cancelled Words’ was melancholy and seemed to result from a storm in the poetess’ soul. It invited comparison from readers and critics to Sir Thomas Wyatt’s poems’ which is a flattering comment on the literary standard of this poem and the flair of the poetess. Society’s response to these poems reflects how a poetess was regarded in the light of her publications. Ethelberta’s admirer Julian has a discussion with his sister Faith regarding these poems. His comments spring from his bitter-sweet relationship with the poetess as she had rejected his love and had married a rich man and was now a widow. His sister Faith tends to display a more neutral appreciation of the ‘tender’ love poems and presumes that the poetess is a ‘warm-hearted’ and ‘impulsive’ woman. For a woman to acknowledge her feelings in public and to show her warmth and spontaneity was in itself considered improper and indiscreet. Faith, being a young girl, with independent and dynamic views, allows ‘E’ some creative and artistic license. She doesn’t sit in judgment and condemn ‘E’ for being an imprudent woman but provides her the same footing granted to men. She says that ‘poets have morals and manners of their own, and custom is no argument with them’. She is generous enough to class ‘E’ with poets and not charge her for daring to write as candidly as men do.


In the social circles, a mystery surrounds the identity of the poetess ‘E’. People are intrigued by her character, personality, status, class, circumstances, age and experience. Some feel that her popularity is heightened by the curiosity generated by the mystery surrounding her. Ladies try to guess her age from the range of experience communicated in her poems and their guesses pin her down to fifty, while some suggest that the poetess’ father is of that age, and she merely pens down his experiences.

Her effect is perceptible on all strata of society, from the elite to the low. We see that rich gentlemen are intrigued by her and so are the members of the poor working class. Even a footman is seen to comment on her works. He calls ‘E’ ‘clever at verses’, that is, he appreciates her poetic talent but safeguards her from the domain of the bohemian and the weird by stating that the poetess ‘E’ follows convention by attending church regularly. E’s spontaneity and innate ability in the creation of poetry is lauded by the footman. In a literary discussion on the style and prosodic metres manipulated by E, gentlemen and critics debate the merits of her style. Some recommend her poems for her ‘originality’, for the ‘Anacreontic’ style of three feet and half spondees and iambics, others praise the ‘matter and tone’, while for some its appeal lies in its ‘liveliness’. Ladywell calls it ‘marvellously brilliant’. From the poems, they try to guess the nature of the poetess. It is simplistically assumed that she must be as merry and as melodious as her poems are. A critic admits that the poems are melodious, but sneeringly comments that the poems carry significance only because of its music, and without the melody, they have no charm or meaning left. The strange medley of responses that these poems generate demonstrates how a literary woman was perceived by society. Julian’s sister Faith finds it ‘strange’ that a woman ‘could bring
herself to write those verses’\textsuperscript{21} and she labels her a ‘fast lady’ meaning that the poetess is ‘bold’ and ‘forward’ in her expressions. Julian meekly defends the verses as ‘natural outpourings’ and goes on to justify the poetess: ‘A poetess must intrinsically be sensitive, or she could never feel: but then, frankness is a necessity even with the most modest, if their inspirations are to do any good in the world.’\textsuperscript{22}

Julian’s insight into the requirements of a published poetess reveals his understanding of the literary marketplace. As speculation on the identity of the acclaimed poetess builds up, a journal divulges Ethelberta’s name as the authoress and also declares her history (at eighteen, as a young governess, she secretly married the son of the house, who died two weeks after the wedding, and she now lives with her mother-in-law, Lady Petherwin). It praises her poems highly, approving of them as ‘brilliant effusions’. This burden of being identified gets heavy for the poetess and it spells disaster for her domestic peace. Her mother-in-law Lady Petherwin gets furious and she describes Ethelberta’s creation as ‘ribald verses’. She considers it improper and impious that her son’s widow could write and publish such ‘merry’ and ‘tender’ love poems. She shudders at the lack of ‘fidelity’ to her ‘dear boy’s’ memory. The attack on her daughter-in-law is extended to all those women who ‘get into print’, that is, who get their works published. Ethelberta tries to justify her stand by pointing out the difference between a writer’s ‘fancy’, i.e. creative imagination, and the writer’s real state of mind. She asserts that some of the ‘lightest’ of those verses were composed when she was in her ‘deepest fits’ of desolation. It may have been partly true, as she might have composed poems in a lighter vein to divert her mind from its dismal state, but she may have overstated her case to pacify her mother-in-law.

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid, p.66.
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid, p.66.
Ethelberta contradicts herself later in a conversation with her admirer Julian when she states that she cannot write satisfactorily any more because ‘to blossom into rhyme on the sparkling pleasures of life, you must be under the influence of those pleasures’\(^{23}\) and that the removal from such happy circumstances has affected her creativity adversely. Earlier, the lines had ‘flowed’ from her heart ‘like a stream’ when she had money. Harsh realities of domesticity, financial distress and family constraints make it impossible for her to write poems any more and she gives it up.

Getting her works published and critically acclaimed did not guarantee much success in Ethelberta’s case. As her identity gets known, her mother-in-law dictates that she should dissociate herself from those published poems. When asked to suppress them, Ethelberta reasons that, as they have been made public, she has relinquished her right over them. Lady Petherwin orders her to bring them under her control using the power of money. A fairly large sum – a thousand pounds – is quoted by Ethelberta as the likely amount in suppressing the published poems. It represents a case of how a woman’s writing might get denied even after her work had been published and her name brought into the public sphere. In exposing the vulnerability of the woman writer, Ethelberta’s example illustrates how even the published works of a woman writer might simply become – like the title of one of her poems – ‘cancelled words’.

In his novel *New Grub Street*, Gissing skillfully portrays the drudgery and monotony of the lives of literary women. Marian Yule slaves in the British Museum Library and does literary hack-work that her father, Alfred Yule, orders her to do. Every day, she goes to the library (even if weather conditions are hostile, for instance, there is severe fog or heavy

\(^{23}\) Ibid, pp.102-103.
rainfall), and works mechanically there, conceiving of herself as a ‘literary machine’ which ‘turns out’ books and articles. She ardently wishes for the invention of such a machine which would be a boon for such ‘poor creatures’ as herself who are doomed to the work of ‘literary manufacture’. She conjures up the role of the machine in her mind where one would only have to ‘throw in a given number of old books, and have them reduced, blended, modernized into a single one for today’s consumption’.\textsuperscript{24} This clarifies her position on the literary work that she is expected to churn out. She finds this insignificant pretence of ‘intellectual dignity’ unbearable and unjust. Finding her work futile and meaningless, she wonders: ‘When already there was more good literature in the world than any mortal could cope with in his lifetime, here she was exhausting herself in the manufacture of printed stuff which no one even pretended to be more than a commodity for the day’s market.’\textsuperscript{25}

What is most exploitative about her situation is the fact that she is writing as a deputy for her father, so the credit, if any, would go to him. She could not publish her works in her own name. This may be taken as a glaring example of how women lost out to men in the larger patriarchal public sphere and even in the specific male dominated literary marketplace. A daughter or a wife may have been employed to ghostwrite for her father or her husband. On certain days, Alfred Yule directs her to sit at home and copy laboriously from ‘disorderly manuscripts’. She could exercise no choice in the matter and the work was so completely devoid of any creativity or originality that it makes her feel like an ‘automaton’. She resents her father’s line of literary work, which was ‘writing about writing’.

Simply copying was also a way of earning money. Nora in Ibsen’s \textit{The Doll’s House} (1879) feels ‘lucky’ to get a ‘lot of copying’ work to complete. She locks herself up in the


\textsuperscript{25} Ibid, p.137.
room, and sits copying from evening till late at night. She admits to getting ‘desperately
tired’ by the task but feels a ‘tremendous pleasure’ in being given an opportunity to earn
money. Nora’s pleasure suggests how even Victorian housewives placed at the centre of
comfortable domesticity may have longed for some economic independence (in this instance,
to help her father). She seems aware of the notion that paid employment belonged to the
masculine public sphere so she likens copying and earning money to ‘being a man’. For both
Marian and Nora, money becomes necessary to assist their fathers. Nora does not have to
earn to maintain herself as she is married and this work is only an exceptional exercise that
she undertakes to extricate her father out of his financial distress. In Marian’s case, money is
required both for supporting herself and her parents.

Alfred Yule had been very cautious about the education of his daughter. She was sent
to a day school and then, ten years later, to ‘an establishment’ (presumably a finishing school
like Miss Pinkerton’s in Vanity Fair) which endowed her with the polished language and
manners of a lady. As he had married a shop girl, Alfred nearly forbid his wife from
corrupting the speech of his daughter. This expensive and exclusive education, combined
with the intellectual genes inherited from her literary father, made Marian yearn for
independence and for some meaningful literary production or even some means of earning
which would be of interest to her. This training had also helped her to sharpen her
considerable natural abilities.

The wearisome burden of converting herself into a ‘literary machine’, against her
own inclination, proved detrimental to her health. She works constantly in the library from
half past nine to three o’clock, with an interval for tea and a sandwich. By the end of her day,
she gets ‘faint’ with tiredness and hunger and has a headache. Milvain notices that she looks
pale after the arduous work and also that she has ink stains on her fingers. In the library, she does her work so diligently that she would rarely look up from her writing desk and, if she had to consult reference books, she would walk to the shelves without looking at anyone. Marian worked sincerely but found no joy in it. She was willing to ‘throw away her pen with joy’ but necessity compelled her to carry on with her writing.

She falls in love with the shrewd strategist Jasper Milvain and longs for the comfort of domesticity. On hearing of her acquiring five thousand pounds, he declares his wish to marry her but hesitates when he learns that her money has been lost. Marian feels obliged to support her parents in their old age, especially as her father’s impending blindness threatens them with destitution. She proposes to give her share of money to them and to continue to write post-marriage to support them. In this proposal, we find a dutiful daughter who voluntarily wishes to continue her uncongenial toil for the sake of her parents. She then realizes that Jasper does not love her anymore because of her impoverished circumstances and she relinquishes her desire of being Jasper’s wife, placing duty before desire.

Marian, trained to write serious literary articles for periodicals, gets deeply wounded by Jasper’s callous suggestion to take to writing sensational fiction. He asks her to write something ‘that would sell’, like some work involving ‘love scenes’ which he thinks would come naturally to ‘a girl’ like her. He undermines her literary aptitude grossly and condescendingly assumes that women, being sentimental and romantically inclined, could churn out sickly sweet romantic escapades or cheap, mushy, even trashy bestsellers. This coarse remark was humiliating for Marian and she turns away saying, ‘I think that is not my work.’ Marian displays an acute literary acumen when, without even surveying the literary

---

27 Ibid, p.455.
market she intuitively apprehends that her father’s enthusiastic plans about launching a new journal would fail. Alfred Yule expresses the foolish exhilaration and naivety of a child in bringing out a new journal to establish himself as its editor. Marian discourages the enterprise citing overcrowding and ‘literary quarrelling’ in the marketplace. Earlier, she has denigrated these literary fights and denounced the profession as a ‘hateful’ one as it ‘poisons men’s minds’. At the end of the novel, we hear of her working as an assistant in a library and supporting her mother (when her father passes away).

In some sense, Marian does move beyond conventional Victorian domesticity, of fulfilling her desire of being Jasper’s wife and rearing their children and managing their household. She moves out of her proper private sphere into the masculine public sphere of work, that too intellectual paid work, in a library. To my mind, this is symptomatic of the modern domesticity where the woman may run the household, be the breadwinner and also take care of her domestic (in this case, filial) responsibility. Had Jasper given her the opportunity, she would have meticulously balanced both the private and public spheres and shown how multi-tasking was easy for women.

Jasper’s sisters, Dora and Maud, take up writing as an alternative means of supporting themselves (as they hate teaching). Jasper is successful in his plans of setting his sisters ‘afloat in literature’. He eggs them on to try writing as a means of livelihood. There was a demand for religious stories so he asks them to ‘patch one together’ and to concentrate on ‘Sunday school prize books’ as they ‘sell like hot cakes’. One of the four cardinal virtues demanded of a ‘true woman’ was piety, so understandably a girl dabbling in religious stories would be welcomed by the reading public. Jasper’s mercenary suggestion follows from his

---

29 Ibid, p.43.
philosophy that ‘literature’ is a ‘business’ or a ‘trade’ like any other. His advice – ‘get together half a dozen specimens of the Sunday school prize; study them; discover the essential points of such composition; hit upon new attractions; then go to work methodically; so many pages a day’\textsuperscript{30} – is a fine specimen of treating literature as a commodity. In tutoring them on how to write ‘good, coarse marketable stuff for the world’s vulgar’,\textsuperscript{31} he writes a specimen chapter and sends it to them and also sends them a few books that they might need. Initially they are apprehensive of the enterprise but then they ‘knock the trifle together’\textsuperscript{32} ‘very quickly’ and in a ‘workmanlike’ manner. They move on to compose for journals which proves to be ‘more exacting’ than their ‘initial task’ for the book market. They progress well with Dora writing for the journal \textit{The English Girl} and Maud reviewing novels for an illustrated paper. When Maud seeks an opinion from her brother on a piece of writing she planned to send to a weekly, Jasper recommends that she ‘knock out one or two of the less obvious reflections and substitute a wholesome commonplace’.\textsuperscript{33} She protests that such a step would make her writing ‘worthless’ (in a literary sense) to which he responds that it would make it ‘worth a guinea or so’ (in his usual mercenary argument). He reflects on public taste which abhors an ‘unusual thought’ and gets ‘simply irritated’ by sentiments that are not ‘glaringly obvious’. He believes it to be especially true for the people who read ‘women’s papers’. It illustrates society’s tolerance of women’s writing if it was not too intellectual (hence ‘masculine’) and suitably familiar and ordinary. An unconventional observation from a woman always seemed unsettling and unflattering to those whom Jasper refers to as ‘vulgar thinkers’ of the world.

\textsuperscript{30} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{31} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{32} Ibid, p.146.  
\textsuperscript{33} Ibid, p.424.
Both Maud and Dora get married at the end of the novel. Maud marries Mr. Dolomore and talks with ‘laughing scorn’ of the days when she lived in Grub Street. Post-marriage she lives in luxury in the world of ‘fashionable literature’ and also that of ‘fashionable ignorance’. Literary pursuits, from being a dire necessity, become ‘a note of distinction’ and an ‘added grace’ to the wife of Dolomore. Dora marries Whelpdale. Interestingly, both sisters get married without thinking of financial gain but only as a fulfillment of their desire for domesticity. Their individual economic independence may have lent them an assurance to choose as directed by their hearts. Mrs. Dolomore’s forced writing fades into the background. Being rooted firmly in the centre of her private sphere, her home, she does not have to worry about the paltry money she made in the public sphere of the literary marketplace. Dora strikes a different note from her sister. Even after her marrying Whelpdale, she continues to write and does not wish to ‘abandon literature’ entirely. She seems to be relishing the ‘pretty tale’ she writes in her dainty and charming ‘boudoir’. Her case elucidates how a married woman did not necessarily have to forgo her career in order to establish her domesticity. Literary women fortunately did not have to cross the boundaries of their private sphere to further their career. Mrs. Whelpdale does go beyond domesticity in the restrictive Victorian sense, which conceived of a working woman as a challenge to the masculinity of her husband, the provider, but she demonstrates a new domesticity where the woman can balance both private and public spheres with élan. Dora could marry where her heart chose because her writing afforded her some confidence and some economic assurance.

Alice Barton, in George Moore’s *A Drama in Muslin* (1886), is considered to be plain and quiet but she has literary aptitude. She composes a play named *King Cophetua*. As a
schoolgirl she can narrate in a style which is ‘simple’ and ‘unaffected’. She is advised by the journalist, Mr. Harding, to write a novel and, like Jasper Milvain, he seems to believe that everyone can write a novel as it requires no expertise. Left to her resources, Alice begins to write ‘The Diary of a Plain Girl – Notes and Sensations’. It is serially published in a lady’s journal and she gets thirty shillings a week for it. In the month of April, she makes three pounds for her articles, and hopes to make ten pounds in the following month with the help of Mr. Harding who fetches her work. Just as the Milvain sisters depend on their brother, Alice too seeks the assistance of Mr. Harding to survive in the literary marketplace. She continues her journalistic writing and makes twenty pounds with which she hopes to help an unwed young May to conceal her pregnancy. When she has to bear all the expenses of May for the next three months, she wonders how she could make more money. Writing paragraphs, articles, and short stories, and sending them to all editors is an option she weighs in her mind. She works incessantly as if ‘chained’ to her desk to keep sending money to May. May’s child is born and then it dies, so some more money is required for its burial. Alice manages to send it; when May comes to meet Alice, she notices how ‘tired and pale’ she looks as a result of overwork.

It is noteworthy that Alice, even on holiday with her family, keeps thinking pleasantly of the plot of a new story, and its characters. She is content and deeply interested in her work. She, like Dora Milvain, continues to write after her marriage, and for similar reasons. Her husband’s income of three hundred pounds is insufficient; moreover she likes to write novels in her study with her bookcase behind her. On Thursdays, women novelists of Alice’s circle meet to discuss their works and engage in intellectual talk. Even when Alice becomes a
mother, she continues to write, and proves how both domesticity and a career may be balanced in an understanding way.

In George Meredith’s *Diana of the Crossways* (1885), the protagonist Diana Merion thinks of writing as a career, when compelled to earn her bread. Being a cast away wife, she considers ‘ink’ to be her ‘opium’ and her pen as the instrument to ‘dig up gold’ for her. Instead of hoping to secure some money from her husband through her lawyers, she looks forward to earning which would grant her ‘pride of independence’. In her period of crisis, writing is a consolation, an occupation, and a livelihood. Her response to work is positive. She likes to write; it not only keeps her occupied, but also diverts her mind from her unenviable position of being a social outcast. Her ‘new, strange, solitary’ life, instead of being depressing to her, inspires her and ignites her imagination. She learns to be self-dependent and her memory goes back to her girlhood days, almost obliterating her conjugal life. It liberates her from painful associations and assures her of tranquillity and a fertile, creative mind. The pleasure of exercising her free will and enjoying her independence make her oblivious to her dreary and small lodgings; her ‘passion for reality’ makes her happy that she is no longer merely a ‘drawing room exotic’. Being blessed with ‘unconquerable health’, she can work late into the night and then wake up early feeling fresh and rejuvenated. The reviews of her first literary journal are condemnatory, asking her to stop ‘penning’. Despite negative criticism, she continues to lead the ‘double life’ of the author. Diana feels strongly about writing as an art and its ability to arouse ‘inner vision’. Redworth proofreads her writing critically to protect her writing from critics, and he discovers that Diana’s writing does not cater to the general public taste, but personally he cannot help admiring her work.
To be financially independent, she desires extended sale of her efforts. Redworth tries to mystify readers by creating suspense around the identity of the writer. As in the case of Ethelberta’s poems, readers get intrigued by the unravelled mystery. We learn that critics are moved by rumours of the author’s veiled loveliness. Her work ‘The Princess Egeria’ gets so hyped for being ‘a rich scandal of the aristocracy’\(^\text{34}\) that publishers are astonished to receive orders for its copies even before the work is advertised. Redworth is full of praise for the book, and calls it a ‘piece of literature’ and hopes that it gets ‘competent critics’. Word-of-mouth circulation helps the book become hugely successful, with its editions running like ‘fires in summer furze’. Success affords her a comfortable house, and she looks upon writing as a ‘solace’, a ‘refuge’, and as an escape from her ‘personal net’. Her dependence on her ‘quill’, that is, her instrument of work, becomes so high that she admits to not being able to live by herself, without her pen as her ‘one companion’.

Surprisingly, for Diana, writing is a pleasurable way to earn money by doing what she delights in. Diana’s writing and style get adversely affected by her circumstances when her investments suffer a huge loss. She gets rebuked by her editor for being absent from London for a considerable period. This weakens the thread of gossip that she can bring to him. It hints at how writers survive in the marketplace: they have to be famous; at least, be much talked about in fashionable circles, friendly with editors and prospective critics, and indulge in gossip. At one point in the novel, she (like Moore’s Alice Barton) is pressurized into writing night and day for immediate payment. When she is most pressed into writing, she realizes that she ‘can’t’ as her head seems to become devoid of ideas. This leads her to suspect her choice of vocation and question whether she has made a mistake by opting for it, as she dejectedly calls herself the ‘flattest proser’. She loses all self-esteem and refers to her

situation in terms like ‘denounced wife’, and ‘wretched author’ on the brink of bankruptcy. She recalls her days as the married mistress of The Crossways: she had a ‘solid footing’, a comfortable identity and she could luxuriate in her domesticity. In her helplessness and despair, she probably regrets the change in her circumstances. In the editor Mr Tonan’s office, she becomes aware of ‘a spot where women had dropped from the secondary to the cancelled stage of their extraordinary career in a world either blowing them aloft like soap-bubbles or quietly shelving them as supernumeraries’.

Women writers being largely faceless could work undisturbed in their homes without unsettling the dictates of domesticity. Like the work of the housewife (primarily supervisory duties), the writer’s work was usually invisible. The product in both cases could be seen (in the former, a clean, well maintained house, excellent food on the dinner table, and so on; in the latter the literary output) but not the actual work involved. In a large Victorian household, to supervise the day’s cooking, washing, cleaning, dusting, scrubbing, gardening, and to manage the entire battalion of servants from the ladies’ maid, housekeeper, cook to the gardener, footman, stable hand, was quite a task and then to appear unhurried, carefully attired and always free and ready at the beck and call of the husband or children, to oversee their progress with the governess, was the work which was invisible and unlauded. Similarly, writing for long hours all day, or working in the library, or writing even late into the night was invisible and could be easily denied. For instance, most of Marian’s work was conveniently usurped by her father. The disadvantaged position of the woman writer rose from the fact that her work could easily be rendered invisible; however, the implicit benefit was that the woman writer could lead a different public life: as a wife, or a widow, or a spinster, while keeping her literary life private. At one level, writing was considered to be

‘masculine’, as it involved intellectual work, so the woman dabbling with the pen/quill was inappropriate; but at another level, she could work incognito, and safeguard herself from blame and earn her bread in peace.

The woman writer being largely invisible was not well represented in visual arts. Painters did not try to glorify women, who took up the ‘pen’/quill (again considered to be a ‘male’ instrument), instead of remaining content with the ‘needle’, (which means, stitching household articles as part of her domestic chores).
‘Public Women, Private Lives’

The Victorian woman writer, being nameless and faceless, could work silently in the privacy of her home without disturbing the codes of domesticity.

The dichotomy of work and home diminished to some extent in the case of teachers and literary women. Teachers and literary women (writers and journalists) enjoyed the privilege of living in their homes or in institutions (residential schools) or spaces they could call their own. Governesses and companions had to live in their employers’ homes and feel exiled from the comforts of domesticity. Home as a haven, a place of refuge and comfort, where you could have security and rest after a hard day at work, is a blessing that was bestowed on most teachers and writers but denied to governesses and companions. A school teacher in a residential school would not feel as unwanted and alienated as a governess in somebody else’s house. She could conceive of the school quarters as her ‘home’ but a governess or companion was denied that comfort. The response to teaching, writing and governessing may have been similar but the desire for domesticity is not as thwarted in the case of teachers and writers as in the case of governesses and companions.

Ethelberta lives at home, in her proper sphere, at the centre of domesticity, with her mother-in-law. After a rough day in the library, Marian Yule can return home and relax in a room of her own and be welcomed by the warmth and concern of her mother (and occasionally her father too). The Milvain sisters stay at home (in rented rooms) and accomplish their writing while benefitting from each other’s company and visits from their brother, his friends and Marian. They are placed in domestic surroundings and do not have to face the pangs of ‘homelessness’ or alienation. By contrast, governesses like Jane Eyre and Agnes Grey were exiled from the warm glow of domesticity and suffered from loneliness and ‘othering’ in the homes that they could not think of as their own, among people who were not their friends, relatives or even colleagues.
As the case of Ethelberta establishes, a peculiar advantage enjoyed by writers was that they could keep the fact of their employment hidden from the eyes of the world if they so wished. She lives with her mother-in-law who is completely unaware of Ethelberta’s composition and publication of poems (under a pseudonym) till the time a journal discloses her identity. It was generally believed that accepting remuneration for work lowered the status of a woman in society, so a writer could use a pseudonym, get her works published, and receive payment discreetly, without risking her dignity and social prestige.

When women gained entry into the public world of work, they would (in some sense) go beyond domesticity, but teachers and writers could nurture a semblance of domesticity, denied to governesses and companions. In the next chapter, professional women shall be examined to see how they fare in the divide between domesticity and careerism.