

The Image of Victorian Girls in Grace Stebbing's Novels and Short Stories

GYULEMETOV, Nikolay

Abstract

The purpose of this study is to explore and assess the stereotypes, discriminatory notions and behavioural rule framework (in positive and negative aspects) regarding the lifestyle and education of Victorian girls in several of Grace Stebbing's works. The possible influence and impact of the image of Victorian girls thus created will also be examined.

The works by Stebbing examined in the paper are the novel "That Aggravating Schoolgirl" and the short stories *Noel: Or, Earned and Unearned* and *Provide Things Honest; or, Those Two Young Hills*. These works all appeared in serialized format in the educational periodical *The Girl's Own Paper* in the early 1880s and thus present a valuable insight into various aspects of the young Victorian girls' lifestyle: school, leisure, family and romantic relationships and employment as well the emerging New Girl culture challenging the traditional roles of women in the Victorian era.

Keywords : Victorian education for girls, discrimination, gender challenges

I. Introduction

Grace Stebbing (1840 - 1936) was a prolific author of historical novels and educational articles mainly dedicated to the upbringing of young ladies. The daughter of a clergyman, Stebbing was a religious woman who was devoted to charity, etiquette and the rigid moral codes of the Victorian age. She wrote numerous articles for educational periodicals such as the *Girl's Own Paper* and several of her novels were published in that magazine. When discussing Victorian British literature, it is impossible to overlook the massively popular format of the era – the periodical. With the establishment of universal education in England in 1871 the demand for such publications rose rapidly: the young generation needed to read and express its own ideas. The educational periodicals became the focal points and outlets for these needs and magazines like *The Boy's Own Paper*¹ and its counterpart *The Girl's Own Paper* continued to be published well into the 20th century. The girls' magazine ran from 1880 to 1956 (one of the longest-running such publications) and served as a source of diverse knowledge. Stebbing's works, both educational articles and fiction, were published in *The Girl's Own Paper* from its earliest days onward. As she was one of the most prolific contributors to the magazine in its first years, her works merit more attention than she has hitherto received.

Naturally, educational periodicals were a medium through which opinions could be shared, exchanged

¹ This magazine ran from 1879 to 1967 – transcending several ages and both World wars - a testimony to its stable popularity and numerous readership.

and shaped. As they were used as a supplement (and in many cases as replacements) to textbooks with a heavy emphasis on their value as educational sources, it is important to accept that their influence upon the minds and outlooks of their readers was significant. Therefore the appearance of discriminatory imagery and viewpoints in such magazines naturally had an impact on the subsequent generations and Stebbing's works feature very prominently in perhaps the most popular girl's educational periodical. Furthermore, Grace Stebbing's works fall exactly into the timeframe of the "New Girl" movement (1880-1915) as described by Sally Mitchell:

"The new girl – no longer a child, not yet a (sexual) adult – occupied a provisional free space. Girls' culture suggested new ways of being, new modes of behaviour, and new attitudes that were not yet acceptable for adult women." (3)

In Victorian Britain the gender gap was still very wide despite significant improvements in women's education, welfare and rights compared to previous centuries. Women were still legally supposed to be inferior to men as a general rule of society, but Romanticism and Humanism had created an idealised role for them: that of the "angel in the house", a term coined after the eponymous poem by Coventry Patmore² which depicted the Victorian feminine ideal: a wife and mother who was selflessly devoted to her children and submissive to her husband. In order to become that, women must be trained from an early age to become wives and mothers. However, Stebbing's heroines frequently challenge this mold imposed on them, not always successfully, to be sure, but with confidence and with a conscious desire to choose their own future. The developing societal change of the Victorian girls and women was described by Suzanne Cooper: "A change in attitude was being brought about, not by the actions of a radical few, but by the quiet determination of many middle-class women..." (Cooper 64).

Stebbing's works possess both the progressive ideas of the New Girl culture and the reactionary, conservative notions of the Victorians: this dichotomy serves as the major plotline in all the works analyzed below.

The main purpose of this study is to explore the stereotypes, discriminatory notions and behavioural rule framework (in positive and negative aspects) regarding the lifestyle, education and bearing of young ladies in Stebbing's works and the ways the female heroines challenge and adapt to these. The possible influence and impact of the image of Victorian girls thus created will also be examined.

II. Outsiders and Schoolgirls

The novel *That Aggravating Schoolgirl* was divided into 34 chapters and was serialized in the magazine from October 1880 till April 1881 and later published in a single volume in 1885³. It presents a particularly good opportunity for studying the educational system (especially young girls' education)

2 Coventry Patmore (1823 - 1896) was an English poet. He wrote "The Angel in the House" based on his wife Emily, whom he viewed as the perfect Victorian woman/wife (The poem was originally published in 1854, revised through 1862).

3 Page references from "That Aggravating Schoolgirl" are from the one-volume edition.

and its influence upon the younger generation. The setting of the novel is a boarding school for girls which provides education to upper middle-class girls through the services of a variety of tutors (almost entirely female). The narrative begins with the introduction of two of the main characters: the schoolgirl from the title and the person to whom she is most aggravating. The new English governess of the school, Miss Emily Rowe, is introduced first: young and inexperienced, but dedicated and a strict disciplinarian. Then comes the introduction of the new schoolgirl, Helen Edison, who from the very beginning appears to be troublesome. In the letter from her mother to the Principal, Helen is described as: "...brought up so differently from most girls, that I fear she may appear to you in some respects almost eccentric. And I cannot deny that we have very greatly indulged her" (2).

The extent of Helen's eccentricity is revealed in the following chapters but Stebbing very quickly outlines the clash between Helen and Miss Rowe, aptly naming the first chapter "The Antagonists." Indeed, as we shall see, Miss Rowe is a representative of the mold in which Victorian girls were put: she is strict, unforgiving and sometimes even cruel with her pupils, and, to her, the duty of a governess is more important than the affection for the students. Helen, on the other hand, is headstrong and would openly challenge authority if she feels that authority is being misused, a behavioural pattern that appears uncommon in Victorian schools.

The main purpose of "That Aggravating Schoolgirl" is to show the atmosphere of a boarding school and the people who live, work and study there, as well as offer the young readers hints on how young ladies are to behave. There are, however, instances of discrimination, prejudice and perpetuation of stereotypes which are interesting from a modern point of view.

Helen's first day at school is a case in point. The reader gets the first physical description of Helen as well as of some of her peculiarities. Her most salient physical feature is her short, curly black hair, which sets her apart from her long-haired, blond classmates. The other girls appear startled by it, which Helen had anticipated and had planned to wear a blond wig to make her "first appearance" (6). This desire to fit in by using a wig to hide her natural hair seems a bit unusual, but Helen is obviously aware of the prejudice as she preempts the question from her classmates: "Then you naturally want to know whether my woollyish black hair proves me a Hottentot or a Zulu" (7). The other girls too indeed wish to know and pose the following two questions:

"...do pray tell us where in the world do you come from - from Robinson Crusoe's island, or where? For you are quite different from the rest of us, I'm sure."

"Then your father was an Indian, I suppose?" (7)

The second question is asked by the youngest pupil of the school, Rose Bell, who becomes a plot vehicle due to her young age and relationship with her elder sister Josephine. It is indeed obvious that Helen is thought to be an outsider because of her appearance and her uncommon frankness of expression, but her reaction to Rose's question merits attention: "A what?" cried the new pupil, her cheeks flushing hotly for

a moment. The next instant common sense returned to her, and her face cleared..." (8).

Helen is indignant that the others have assumed her to be of mixed origin: while she admits that her parents both lived and worked in India, she clearly states that their ethnic background has nothing to do with the indigenous Indian populace. While not racist in any modern sense of the word, the exchange about Helen's appearance and background goes on for a couple of pages and clearly demonstrates that people are quickly judged by their appearance, especially if it is uncommon. Also important is the fact that the novel takes place in a period when British India was much more accessible to women (Bilston 129) and articles on India were common in educational periodicals.

The energetic and open behaviour of Helen is also explained by her as her effort to please her father who had hoped for a son: but Helen's "tomboy" (10) antics alluded to in the letter to the principal have left him displeased as well. Having spent most of her life being spoiled as an only child in British India, Helen is very much an outsider in that group of boarding school girls, but they accept her quickly, fascinated by her personality. Helen becomes a leader and dominates the more obedient girls, showcasing how strength of personality can assist a young lady in fitting into a new environment.

Helen's position as a successful outsider is contrasted to the position of Josephine Bell: the oldest pupil and sister of little Rose Bell. She is called "poor Josephine" by her schoolmates and her description is startling:

"...a very tall, thin, almost white-haired girl of about seventeen. The pale careworn face and stooping shoulders gave the impression of a poor, half-starved seamstress just emerging from her close ill-lighted garret to carry home the needlework by which she earned her miserable food and shelter." (13)

Stebbing's depictions and opinion of seamstresses and their work will be discussed later. Here the importance lies in the reason for Josephine's misery: she describes herself as "stupid - so stupid" (15) and the reader learns that that opinion is shared by all the students and, unfortunately, by Miss Rowe as well. Later on it is revealed that Josephine's alleged stupidity lies in her inability to study effectively, which in turn is due to her being home-schooled in India before suddenly being sent to the boarding school back in England⁴ where she had to cram several years' worth of study in one in order to catch up with her younger classmates. Naturally she could not manage it and was quickly labeled as stupid. While her classmates feel some sort of condescending pity towards Josephine, Miss Rowe verbally abuses her and even forces her to use her much younger sister Rose as tutor because of her inability to study by herself. Such treatment is by no means pedagogical and only adds to Josephine's suffering. What is particularly sad is Miss Rowe's lack of empathy: branding her pupil as slow and stupid shows callousness which no doubt existed in Victorian minds: Josephine was failing in her duty to become an educated young lady, therefore she must be pitied or punished until shame and punishment made her succeed. This treatment prompts Helen to enter open confrontation with the teacher in front of everyone:

4 As explained in Chapter XIII: "An Hour In Josephine's Study"

something almost unthinkable, and their conflict escalates to mutual hatred. However, it later transpires that Miss Rowe's harshness comes from her own domestic problems: her mother is a widow (typical for a Stebbing heroine) and Emily Rowe has taken up teaching to provide money for her mother and little brother Harry. Later on Harry is injured and Miss Rowe is forced to leave school to take care of him, confiding her troubles to a forgiving Josephine, who in turn explains all to Helen. After that both "antagonists" from the opening chapter reach peace, sealed with Helen's help for Harry's recognition as a young hero due to him saving a toddler from death. The story ends happily as Josephine and Helen, now best friends, acknowledge the important roles they play in each other's lives, with Helen giving Josephine strength and hope, and Josephine with teaching Helen forgiveness and humility.

For the present study the instances of stereotyping (Helen's appearance and background), discrimination (Josephine, her learning difficulties and people's attitude towards them) and the presence of the common Victorian character of a financially distressed young lady forced to take up a job to support a fatherless family (Miss Rowe) are of significance. Stebbing bases her story on her contemporary English society and does not leave the established patterns for fiction aimed at young female readers: as Helen learns humility and self-control from Josephine and her benevolent teachers, she too enters the mold of a young Victorian woman and her tomboyish and confrontational nature gets more and more subdued. Thus the aggravating schoolgirl quietly evolves into a Victorian lady, Helen's rebellion against the negative influence of the system (represented through Miss Rowe's harshness and the condescending pity and abuse directed at Josephine) is abandoned when the interpersonal feuds are ended, signifying the success of the boarding school and its educational system as a whole, reaffirming its effectiveness. The novel is also significant because it falls into the most popular subgenre of the period – the school story (Mitchell 98). Mitchell further suggests that the appeal of such school stories is that "rebellion, evading rules and defying authority have no ill consequences" (Mitchell 99), which is the case with Helen and her friends: they test their mettle against Miss Rowe but all ends well in the safe yet adventurous environment of the boarding school.

III. Victorian Girls, Family and Employment

The next story by Stebbing to be published in *The Girl's Own Paper* is called *Noel: Or, Earned and Unearned*. It appeared in Christmas Roses, the special Christmas edition of *The Girl's Own Paper* in 1881. This special edition was dedicated to Christmas traditions: from cooking recipes and advice on decorations to Christmas-themed short stories like *Noel*. It deals with the family aspect of Christmas and the ancient tradition of spending the holiday with one's own family, or indeed with loved ones. The two main characters in this short story are Euphrosyne (Zina) Deacon and Nessie Cartwright, two schoolmates from an "Establishment for Young Ladies," a boarding school in Surrey. Their backgrounds and personalities are different: Zina is a wealthy orphan while Nessie has a family but her doctor father is ill and his inability to work has brought the family to poverty; Zina is presented as benevolent, but

rather spoiled due to her fortune. Nellie, on the other hand, is “shy,” “docile” and “intelligent” (19). The plot revolves on the plan made by Zina to have Nessie visit her for Christmas and the problems that arise from it. Nessie is forced to decline the invitation on the grounds that she can’t afford it and her clothes are old and unacceptable, whereupon Zina tries to alter some dresses to fit Nellie with disastrous consequences. Eventually the two girls find a solution to the problem and the story reaches a happy conclusion with Nessie getting a job as a church organist and staying at Zina’s house.

There are several instances in this simple short story that perpetuate stereotypical or discriminatory notions. Euphrosyne’s opinion regarding women and employment merits particular attention: while discussing the possibility of Nessie starting to work as an organist in order to help her poor family, Zina is shocked that her friend would contemplate working for money as opposed to simply accepting it as a gift from wealthy benefactors. She even tells Nessie “Then you are a little silly!” (23) when the other girl says that she’d rather work for pay instead of receiving alms, even from a friend. At the same time Grace Stebbing allows the reader a glimpse into Zina’s thoughts:

“Besides, to [Zina], at that time, earning one’s living had a sound almost as derogatory, and a great deal more unpleasant, than accepting it without the earning.” (23)

Zina therefore finds it unbecoming for a young lady to work for her income and find Nessie’s readiness to be employed as a form of “perverted taste” (23), which comes in unison with the general idea of the era: that women belong in the house and are to be supported financially by their parents, husbands or wealthy friends. Nessie is indeed described as a quintessential future “angel of the house”: loyal, diligent and kind, so Zina takes the role of a Victorian mentor who naturally opposes the idea of her ward/friend getting a job; it takes a lot of arguments and pleading to dissuade her from this stance. The ending of the story provides one more stereotypical notion of the era: in the very last sentence, Stebbing reveals what became of the two girls: after living together for a while, “...they actually found they loved someone else better than each other, and they went and got married!” (23).

Thus the triumph of the Victorian image for a woman’s place in the world: school friendships, adventures and misadventures: they are all steps toward the ultimate goal: marriage. Both girls accepted their duty and the fact that, in Stebbing’s words, they loved their husbands more than they loved each other further affirms that they both neatly fit the mold of angels in the house, having left all their past behind and embraced their future as wives with eagerness.

Noel is a simple short story without much substance or suspense behind it, but it offers another look into late Victorian society and the patterns in the relationships between close friends and families. Many of *The Girl’s Own Paper* readers were from the same or similar background as Nessie and Zina and could undoubtedly feel connected with the two characters, their thoughts, feelings and hopes. Therefore the ideas in the narrative must be seen as representing typical points of view of the era when it was written and as such it is valuable source material.

Another short story by Stebbing that sheds light on the image of Victorian girls and more specifically on what occupations befitted them is *Provide Things Honest; or, Those Two Young Hills*. It was serialized in three parts in the late November 1881 issues of the magazine, by which time Grace Stebbing was an established author in *The Girl's Own Paper*.

Provide Things Honest relates the story of the Hill sisters - Margaret and Elinor - and their idea to sell some needlework in order to earn money for a present for their mother. At the same time another girl, Ida Deacon, is in desperate need for small items of needlework (doll's shoes, dresses and suchlike) for a stall her friend runs. After some misadventures with a shopkeeper the girls meet and the transaction is arranged to the satisfaction of everyone. By a happy coincidence, it also appears that their mothers had mutual acquaintances, become fast friends and the short story ends in complete happiness.

What is interesting in the narrative are two points about the image of young Victorian ladies. First comes an example of the rigid moral code to be adhered to by the girls. Ida Deacon had promised a friend of hers to make needlework items for a "fancy fair" but had neglected to do any work and is in a very real danger of breaking that promise. Her mother, Mrs. Deacon reprimands her harshly:

"I think it is a very bad business indeed," replied Mrs. Deacon, very gravely, "that all people should learn to distrust my child, should have reason to put no faith in her promises." (115)

Her reproach continues with distinctly religious overtones as she states that her shame as a mother of a "lazy daughter" (115) is overshadowed by her shame as a Christian and reminds Ida of the Biblical tale of the servant whose indolence and laziness made him useless to his Lord:

"Remember we are not told that [the servant] did anything whatever that we call "bad", he was only indolent, lazy, idle. And for him the awful words were said, "Cast ye unprofitable servant into outer darkness." (115)

Therefore sloth and laziness are a great sin for future young ladies, all the more so since it was expected of them to attend to all the household affairs as "angels in the house." Still, the mother tries her best to help.

At the same time Margaret and Elinor Hill are trying to sell their handmade needlework items in order to buy their widowed mother a new dress. It becomes evident that, while not poor by any standards, their family's financial situation is deteriorating since their father's death. The girl's concern for their mother's health and their wish to make her happy shows them as perfect examples of Victorian young ladies, with one major exception: much like in the short story *Noel* mentioned above, the idea of upper-middle class girls working for payment quickly becomes a major point of contention. When their mother, the widow Hill, finds out, she is appalled to the point in breaking down in tears:

"... What would your poor father have felt if he had lived to know that his children earned money by

needlework?” (141)

We should take a moment here to analyze why would that line of work sound so shocking to a Victorian lady. In her article “Slaves of the Needle: The Seamstress in the 1840s,” Beth Harris asserts that “lower middle-class, middle-class, and even upper-class women (“distressed gentlewomen”) were increasingly put in the position of having to support themselves.” While that is not particularly shameful, the low wages and increasing social and financial difficulties eventually forced some of these seamstresses into prostitution, an occupation viewed with particular disgust in Victorian society. “The Reports of the Children’s Employment Commission in the English Parliament” in the mid-1800s shocked the nation with stories of the cruelty and exploitation of needlewomen. Many young women lived, worked, and died, in miserable conditions: over 15 000 such women worked in London alone, according to the anonymous pamphlet “Women’s Work: A Woman’s Thoughts on Women’s Rights”. Furthermore, English writer Douglas Jerold wrote about the negative image of the profession and those forced or chosen to practice it in his essay “The Dress-Maker”:

“Is there a more helpless, a more forlorn and unprotected, creature than, in nine cases out of ten, the Dress Maker’s Girl – the Daily Sempstress; pushed prematurely from the parental hearth, or rather no hearth, to win her miserable crust by aching fingers?” (103)

We are reminded of Josephine Bell’s first description in *That Aggravating Schoolgirl*: the very image of hopelessness and misery: a seamstress. Suzanne Cooper describes “the reality of life as a seamstress” as “shockingly hard” (Cooper 49). Therefore the use of needlework as a source of income carried the stain of poverty, moral and physical failure and even death: no fate any mother would wish upon her child. Mrs. Hill’s reaction makes sense when bearing in mind the image and reality of the seamstress profession in Victorian England. However, Margaret’s reaction to her mother’s shock is impressive with its reasonableness:

“...surely papa wouldn’t have been frightened of a sound? [...] If we had sorely wanted money, would it really have hurt him to know that we earned it in any right and honest way? [...] The world’s opinion cannot really make these sorts of things right or wrong, ladylike or unladylike, can it, mamma?” (141)

Here Stebbing’s character challenges the stereotype that work is below young Victorian ladies of means. She also refuses to accept the negative notions regarding the profession of the seamstress. Her challenge is surprisingly successful; where Kathleen fails to assert herself against the mold of what a Victorian girl can and cannot do, young Margaret manages to convince her mother that old stereotypes and condescending notions must give way to pragmatic thought. Mrs Hill’s thoughts, however, echo the societal and moral condemnation apparently still associated with the seamstress’ job:

"...but yet, to the Major's widow at that hour, it seemed as if living on dry bread and water would be far preferable to earning anything more comfortable by such a despised employment as needlework." (141)

Clearly the stereotype and prejudice against the unfortunate women in that industry was deeply ingrained in the minds of the Victorian ladies. However, Mrs. Hill (and thus Stebbing herself as an author) eventually gives her blessing to her daughters and the money they make through their needlework help pay for their more ladylike engagements such as painting and music lessons. Thus Grace Stebbing gives some moral and practical justification to the paid employment of young ladies as a means to the end of receiving better ladylike education. This is in tune with the New Girl mindset: working women are not to be despised, and only a few years later (the 1890s) "business" has entirely favorable meanings" for working girls (Mitchell 32). From this point of view both *Noel* and *Provide Things Honest* propagate a standardized image of Victorian girls: their talents and abilities can be employed (under supervision, of course) in order to provide means for furthering their education as young ladies.

IV. Conclusion

This paper analyzed several of Grace Stebbing's works attempting to assess the image of young ladies in late Victorian England, what it entailed and how it was created, maintained and impressed in the minds of its target audience. The efforts of the characters to follow or to challenge the idealized image of Victorian ladies imposed on them are present in all of Stebbing's works examined above. It is my conclusion that Stebbing aims to depict the challenges all young British girls must face to become ladies, which is the goal they should all aspire to. While some of the characters challenge some aspects of that goal, they generally change their minds through typical coming-of-age stories. It is also my belief that Victorian education provided many benefits for the young ladies, training them in tact, social graces and compassion. However, the rigid social and gender framework in which the girls were confined throughout their lives undoubtedly removed many opportunities for a more active role in society. Still, the increasing number of heroines challenging the status-quo and embracing the New Girl culture in Stebbing's works is in unison with Mitchell's claim that the 1880s were a turning point in both female education and in the way adolescent women viewed themselves and their role in society. Furthermore, Sarah Bilston claims that the "long-standing terms of transitional girlhood were implicitly shaping the cultural sense of the rebellious [New] woman", invoking "rhetoric of awakening youth" (Bilston 174), which fully applies to Stebbing's youthful heroines and shows her as an author representative of these important trends in defining and shaping the image of Victorian girls in that transitional age.

Other Stebbing novels such as *Wild Kathleen*, *Fun And Fairies; Or, Those Four Little Girls* and *Lost Her Shoe And a Few Little Threads* also deal with adolescent heroines and would undoubtedly provide more information for future research on the evolution of the image of Victorian girls and the roles that image propagates and perpetuates. Grace Stebbing, while not one of the most famous Victorian writers, was very prolific in the field of literature aimed at adolescent readers and thus her work can be used to

locate, define and analyze images of Victorian girls with all the positive and negative aspects of those images and their influence upon later generations of young women.

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