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## **THE GIRLS OF THE VICTORIAN PERIOD: ELIZA LYNN LINTON'S VIEWS ON VICTORIAN WOMEN**

Niniejsza praca ma na celu przedstawienie poglądów mało znanej pisarki wiktoriańskiej – Elizy Lynn Linton na ówczesne kobiety i ich role w społeczeństwie. Aby przedstawić te poglądy, analizie poddane zostały następujące artykuły: „Marriage Gaolers” (1856), „The Girl of the Period” (1868) oraz „On the Sides of Maids” (1874). Analiza powyższych materiałów została przeprowadzona w taki sposób, aby nie tylko przedstawić jej poglądy, ale również pokazać niezwykłą transformację, jaką przeszła z charakterystycznego dla jej wczesnej kariery stadium feministki w uwidocznione w późniejszych pracach stadium anty-feministki. Pokazana tu została również rozbieżność pomiędzy jej późniejszymi poglądami a życiem, jakie wiodła; żyła jako kobieta wyzwolona, a jednocześnie mocno krytykowała taki styl życia i kobiety, które odważyły się wyjść poza ramy ról przypisanych im przez społeczeństwo Wiktoriańskie.

Eliza Lynn Linton is a 19<sup>th</sup> century novelist and journalist who in her works ponders over the social roles of women in the Victorian period: the period which can be characterized by a huge transformation as far as the role of women and their position in society are concerned. Two extremes can be traced while discussing women issues: the first one is their role of a submissive wife who depends only on her husband's wills and who exists only to “love, honour, obey – and amuse – her lord and master, and to manage his household and bring up his children”<sup>1</sup>. The second extreme is occupied by an emancipated woman who does not see marriage as her only possible way of life, an educated woman who is able to earn her living by her own work, a woman who fights for her legal rights, and who tries to

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<sup>1</sup> Houghton, Walter: *A Victorian Frame of Mind*. New Heaven: Yale University Press 1957. P. 348.

liberate herself from the yoke of being a woman in the Victorian society. Eliza Lynn Linton herself represents none of these extremes: she stands in the middle by being herself an emancipated woman but still propagating the traditional image of a woman. Linton's views on the education of women can serve as a great example of her position. As Beatrice Harraden (1864–1936), Linton's apprentice, states:

I have always thought she cared more for a liberal education for women than she herself realised. Her own heart's inclination came out in divers [sic] unmistakable ways, but she had so saturated herself with her stereotyped opposition to the higher education of women and their ways, that her mind could not travel freely on that trail<sup>2</sup>.

It is evident that Beatrice Harraden tries to prove that Eliza Lynn Linton was not so much of an antifeminist as she had claimed herself to be. Although Linton herself did not stay in the confines of a traditional image of a Victorian woman – she was educated and earned her living – she still sharply criticised women who tried to climb out of these confines. Her conflict over women's nature and social role can be best described by the words of poetic tribute written after her death in 1898 by Walter Besant: "She fought for women; yet with women fought"<sup>3</sup>. This dual attitude towards the roles of women in Victorian society is visible in Linton's articles. Her early works were very feminist in tone and in the course of time she underwent a metamorphosis and eventually became an ardent antifeminist.

One of her early articles, feminist in tone, is entitled "Marriage Gaolers" (1856). Linton's feminist attitude towards marriage is clearly seen from the title of the article which evokes only negative feeling towards its subject. In the article, Linton discusses issues which were highly debated in the Victorian period, namely marriage and divorce in connection with woman question. Linton starts her discussion presenting different types of gaolers, beginning with the ones of criminal prisons and finishing with "the worst gaoler of all", namely the marital one, who is an absolute lord among all the remaining types<sup>4</sup>. To justify her opinion, she explains that wives, as prisoners, are treated by their masters in a worse way than any other of any

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<sup>2</sup> Harraden, Beatrice: Mrs. Lynn Linton in *Bookman* 8 (1898). P. 17.

<sup>3</sup> Besant, Walter, qtd. in Anderson, Nancy Fix: *Woman Against Women In Victorian England: A Life of Eliza Lynn Linton*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press 1987. P. 428.

<sup>4</sup> Linton, Eliza Lynn: *Marriage Gaolers* in *Household Words* 5 (1856). P. 583.

other gaol. Linton points out that woman's relationships with her husband are similar to those men have with their animals; she writes:

[s]he [the wife] is her gaoler's property, the same as his dog or his horse; with this difference, that he cannot openly sell her; and if he maim or murder her he is liable to punishment, as he would be to prosecution by Cruelty to Animals Society, if he maimed or ill-treated his dog or his horse<sup>5</sup>.

By such a presentation of the relationship between a husband and a wife, Linton tries to prove that marriage is not the best destiny for a young Victorian woman. She claims that relationship where a man is a master and a woman his property is not healthy and, at the same time, should not be considered to be the best and only sphere for women to realise themselves in. What is more, she points out that the only protection wives get from their husbands is the one granted to "slaves in the United States – as is granted to all sentiment and domesticated animals in most civilised communities"<sup>6</sup>, which in practice means that wives do not have any protection at all.

It is important to note that Linton does not condemn marriage itself but a Victorian model of marriage in connection with Victorian England where, according to social rules and even in the light of law, a woman together with all her possessions become property of her husband who may govern her goods as well as her lot. To support her opinion, Linton presents many different examples of women who were deprived of their property because of their husbands' ill will: a husband squandered all his wife's fortune at the gambling table or among his mistresses or he even gave everything to his illegitimate children, "leaving his wife and their children to beggary"<sup>7</sup>. All the above is not a critique of marriage but of English laws which give husband a lot of rights and power over his wife while, at the same time, they do not give women even minimal amount of rights or any protection against marital abuse.

According to Linton, the situation becomes even worse and more complicated when it comes to the issue of divorce. She states openly that, what she calls, the relief of divorce is not instituted for a wife, who "must bear her chains to the grave, though they eat into her very soul; she must submit to every species of wrong and tyranny – the law has no shield for her!"<sup>8</sup> While for men, it is enough to have money to obtain a divorce without

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 584.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 584.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 584.

<sup>8</sup> Linton, E.L. *Marriage Gaolers*. P. 585.

a minute of hesitation: "If he can afford the various legal processes demanded by our wise laws, he can be free tomorrow, – be his wife the most virtuous lady in the land"<sup>9</sup>. The irony with which Linton speaks about the wisdom of English laws makes it clear that she disapproves of the situation in society where men are masters or lords and women their property or toys. These clear and obvious accusations against the Victorian legal system, presented by a means of a very strong language, were supposed to open readers' eyes and draw their attention to the current situation in society.

In order to leave a very strong impression on her readers, Linton finishes the article with her own summary of marriage:

This, then, is marriage: on one side a gaoler, on the other a prisoner for life, a legal nonentity, classed with infants and idiots [...] Neither property, nor legal recognition, neither liberty, nor protection has she, nothing but a man's fickle fancy, and a man's frail mercy, between her and misery, between her and destruction<sup>10</sup>.

Although this article is written from a feminist point of view, Linton does not disapprove of men themselves; she does not consider them to be bad creatures, she does not disapprove of the institution of marriage, neither. Linton is against social rules and legal system of Victorian England, which allow for such a situation where women suffer and are not considered to be equal to men, and, as far as legal system is concerned, women are not recognised by it at all, they are simply nonentities. All the above show that, even though Linton was a feminist, at least at the beginning of her writing career, she was not a typical one: she agreed with the feminists in general matters but detailed justifications of her opinions were different from the ones of the main stream of feminism.

Twelve years later Linton wrote an article which presents a totally opposing point of view. The article is considered to be her best-known one and the one that gave her fame and fortune. It is entitled "The Girl of the Period" (1868) and is an example that demonstrates her attitudes towards and views on her contemporary emancipated women. It is crucial in the discussion of Lynn Linton's literary career since it became an icon of antifeminism, and even "its title became one of the key terms of the

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 585.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 585.

‘woman question debate’<sup>11</sup>. The article appeared in “The Saturday Review” which was as Walter Houghton claims:

one of the period’s most influential, intellectual publications, that its readership was composed primarily of gentlemen, and that its writers were almost all Oxbridge graduates who had taken first-place honours<sup>12</sup>.

Publication of the article in such an influential publication proves that Lynn Linton was a journalist of a great significance and that her voice was an important one in the debate over issues concerning women.

The whole article is organised in the form of contrast between ‘a fair young English girl’ and ‘the girl of the period’. Such a construction heightens virtues of the former and vices of the latter but, at the same time, as Dobosiewicz suggests, “it implies that women can be reduced to only two categories”<sup>13</sup> showing immediately which of them is better or even the only proper one. Linton describes this ‘fair young English girl’ – the incarnation of traditional feminine virtues – as “a creature generous, capable and modest” who can be characterised by “the innate purity and dignity of her nature”<sup>14</sup>. What is even more important is the fact that ‘the fair young English girl’ is defined in a characteristically Victorian manner, namely she is placed in the relation to needs and interest of other people and especially to the needs and interests of her husband<sup>15</sup>. Linton writes that ‘the fair young English girl’ is:

a girl who, when she married, would be her husband’s friend and companion, but never his rival; one who would consider their interests identical, and not hold him as just so much fair game for spoil; who would make his house his true home and place of rest, not a mere passage-place for vanity and ostentation to go through; a tender mother, and industrious housekeeper, a judicious mistress<sup>16</sup>.

This short passage is a mere praise of the traditional role ascribed to a Victorian woman. Her being a wife and a mother was the only accepted way to express her female identity, her only destination and aim in life. Eliza

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<sup>11</sup> Dobosiewicz, Ilona: Eliza Lynn Linton’s ‘The Girl of the Period’: The Voice of Victorian Antifeminism. In: *Zeszyty Naukowe Uniwersytetu Opolskiego: Filologia Angielska* 13 (2003). P. 29.

<sup>12</sup> Qtd. in Dobosiewicz, I. Eliza Lynn Linton’s ‘The Girl of the Period’. P. 30.

<sup>13</sup> Dobosiewicz, I. Eliza Lynn Linton’s ‘The Girl of the Period’. P. 31.

<sup>14</sup> Linton, Eliza Lynn: *The Girl of the Period*. In *The Saturday Review* 14 (1868). P. 339.

<sup>15</sup> Dobosiewicz, I. Eliza Lynn Linton’s ‘The Girl of the Period’. P. 31.

<sup>16</sup> Linton, E.L.: *The Girl of the Period*. P. 339.

Lynn Linton propagates these traditional values and the didactic tone of the article demonstrates that she also wants to instil them in young English girls who had not yet been spoiled by the women's emancipation movement. In this article Linton presents not only the virtues that all fair English girls should possess but also shows the vices of a new woman and the consequences of being one.

The girl of the period against whom the article has been written is:

A creature who dyes her hair and paints her face, as the first articles of her personal religion; whose sole idea of life is plenty of fun and luxury; whose dress is the object of such a thought and intellect as she possesses. Her main endeavour is this to outvie her neighbours in the extravagance of fashion [...] and as she dresses to please herself, she does not care if displeases everyone else<sup>17</sup>.

First of all, what Linton disapproves of is the way 'the girl of the period' dresses and paints her face because what a person looks like is the first thing that people notice. During the Victorian period painting one's face was amounted to artifice; therefore, the 'girl of the period' who did that was immediately perceived as an unnatural girl. The appearance of the 'girls of the period' to which Linton pays so much attention was only a part of what constituted their whole extraordinary self. Another thing that Linton strongly disapproves of is their character; she states that imitation of a demi-monde, which 'the girl of the period' constantly does, leads:

to slang, bold talk and fastness, to the love of pleasure and indifference to duty; to desire of money before either love or happiness; to uselessness at home, dissatisfaction with the monotony of ordinary life, and horror of all useful works; in a word to the worst forms of luxury and selfishness, to the most fatal effects arising from want of high principles and absence of tender feeling<sup>18</sup>.

Her behaviour together with appearance are two the most striking aspects of 'the girls of the period' but for Linton appearance is an outward manifestation of morality. Men who look for purity and innocence in their future wives, will be unwilling to marry a girl whose appearance is an indication of her loose morals. As Linton claims, for 'the girl of the period' it will be very difficult to find a husband since "men are afraid of her; and with reason. They may amuse themselves with her for an evening, but they

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<sup>17</sup> Linton, E.L.: *The Girl of the Period*. P. 339.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 340.

do not take her readily for life”<sup>19</sup>. Linton reminds her readers that a girl who could not get married or who did everything not to get married was perceived by the Victorians as a creature who lacks essential female attributes.

For the Victorians motherhood was a natural outcome of marriage; therefore, Linton turns her attention to this issue, as well. Maternity was, apart from being a wife, a role in which a woman could realise her potential and therefore it was a very important for the Victorian society, for it provided a woman with both personal and social fulfilment. Rejecting to fulfil any of these duties was considered immoral. Since morality was highly valued by the Victorian society almost every woman aimed at fulfilling these two duties. As Linton writes, ‘the girl of the period’ does not fulfil the duty of maternity; although she may have children but if “children come, they find but a stepmother’s cold welcome from her”<sup>20</sup>.

Such a presentation of ‘the girl of the period’ is a warning for girls who think of rejecting traditional social roles. Linton shows who ‘the girl of the period’ really is and why the English girls should beware of becoming one. According to Linton, ‘the girl of the period’ is not a real woman since she is deprived of all the virtues that such a woman should possess. Although the article was written in a didactic tone and was to instil certain values, it won great popularity because of Linton’s humorous style of writing. Her ability to present serious matters in a witty way made her a very popular author whose papers were read very willingly by the Victorian society.

Another important article that concerns traditional roles of Victorian women is “On the Sides of Maids” (1874). Apart from being a wife and a mother, a Victorian woman also was to be a manager of a household. She was responsible for running the house as well as for the servants. A role of a lady of the house constituted a great deal of her everyday life; therefore, Eliza Lynn Linton pays a lot of attention to that role. Linton is highly critical of the way “the advanced women who now demand the gift of equality from men” treat their servants and especially maids<sup>21</sup>.

The first striking thing mentioned by Linton is that the domestic service holds “remains of absolutism of slavery” and “only in quite exceptional houses are servants held to have any rights beyond the elemental ones of food, lodging, and wages”<sup>22</sup>, though even these basic rights are often

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 340.

<sup>20</sup> Linton, E.L.: *The Girl of the Period*. P. 340.

<sup>21</sup> Linton, Eliza Lynn: *On the Side of Maids*. In *The Cornhill Magazine* 29 (1874). P. 306.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 299.



broken. Maids' food is always of poorer quality while the family has better and more appetizing meals<sup>23</sup>. As for the accommodation, the situation is even worse, and Linton accuses the English mistress that her maid:

lives under ground or just below the roof. Damp, drains, want of efficient ventilation, with the constant presence of draughts, surround her in winter; in summer these are supplemented by a furious fire for many hours in the day. Up under the tiles [i.e. in an attic room] she has the bleakest room in winter and the hottest in the summer<sup>24</sup>.

As seen above, the situation of a maid is not easy: she suffers not only from the lack of the quality food but she also has to endure the lodgings that are not appropriate for any human being to live in. What makes the situation even more difficult to bear is the set of rules established by the mistress which are to be fully obeyed by the maid. No maid can accept visitors in the kitchen, she is not allowed to get out of for half an hour into the bright sunshine, her laughter cannot be heard above stairs, etc.<sup>25</sup> The way Linton presents these restrictions makes the readers feel sorry for the poor maid and, at the same time, condemn the behaviour of the mistress who "may on her won free grace" assure some privileges but, as Linton observes, even the "kindest-hearted mistress treats it as an impertinence when her maids stipulate for rights"<sup>26</sup>. As for example if a maid asks for holiday beyond her regular ones, then such a request is immediately regarded as insolence and for that reason, it is very difficult for any maid to obtain any of the privileges mentioned above.

In order to strengthen the impression of how bad an English mistress is, Linton puts her in the opposition to a French mistress who treats her servants with friendliness, and who grants personal privileges which are unknown to an English mistress. The English maid is not as the French one, "a companion to her mistress to the lively markets, down to the gay boulevards, or for long sweet summer hours in the gardens of the Tuileries and Luxembourg"<sup>27</sup>. Linton claims that English maids are deprived of fresh air and brisk circulation of out-of-door life, but what is even worse is that in the opinion of English mistresses, their friendly companionship is not necessary for their maids. As Linton claims, one of the reasons for such

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<sup>23</sup> Linton, E.L.: *On the Sides of Maids*. P. 300.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 300.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 300.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 299.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 300.



a situation is the fact that the home character of domestic service has gone and it has become “merely a business without personal affection or individual ties, wherein time and labour are carried to the best market and sold for the highest price they will fetch, like any other commodities”<sup>28</sup>. This new character of domestic service is for Linton much worse than the old one and she immediately associates this deterioration with a “new woman” who “demands the gift of equality from men” and who uses her superior position<sup>29</sup>. Servants are totally dependent on their mistress’ will and are described by Linton as:

‘eating their bread all the same’, as when the castle table fed its hordes of pauper serfs bound to render the service of their lives in return for the coarse means of living liberally tossed to them and the dogs alike; and though they have abandoned the patriarchal protection of masterhood, they still demand the devoted fidelity which was in return<sup>30</sup>.

What Linton suggests is the fact that servants are treated as in the times when the very existence of the servants was in the hands of their masters who could decide about their life or death. They were to fulfil orders of their masters without demur. In the Victorian period, when the times of serfs were gone, there existed a very similar service, namely the service of maids and the only difference was that the masters were replaced with mistresses. It leads to the conclusion that mistresses await submissive service without fulfilling any obligations that were scribed to the past proprietors.

Another thing that Linton mentions is the range of duties the English maid has to fulfil,

She is liable be rung up at all hours; her very meals are not secure from interruptions; she has not time that is absolutely her own; and even her sleep is not sacred. In the dead of night something may be wanted, and she must get up to bring or to do it<sup>31</sup>.

These duties together with the conditions the maid has to live in are, according to the English mistress, factors which are not to make the maid unhappy since there are more important areas of life such a maid does not have to face while her mistress has to contend with them. Maids do not have to bother about the food because they are “sufficiently fed”, they do

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 299.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 299.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 299.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 299.

not have to pay taxes, they are regularly and punctually paid and, what is of the greatest value, they are allowed to conduct very pleasurable lives. All these factors are involved in the creation of an image about which Linton asks: "Are they not the most envied of us all? [...] is it not the pleasure enough for these young women [...] to sit down alone, or together in the silent kitchen with a basketful of sewing for their evening amusement?"<sup>32</sup> The tone of this passage as well as the irony flowing out of it enable the readers to realise that Linton mocks the naive beliefs which are common to all English mistresses that granting basic rights together with allowing servants to sit in the "silent kitchen" for pleasure is enough to satisfy their needs. This short passage demonstrates that no mistress cares about her maids' feelings and state of mind. According to the English mistress, in order to gain maid's fidelity and eternal love, it is enough to feed her and give her place to sleep without even asking about her real needs.

Since the English mistresses do not care about maids' feelings, it is obvious that they are not going to pay any attention to the education of her servants. Linton points out that education together with pleasure were forbidden fruit for the English maids. What is more, she claims that:

a literary or artistic maid would rank as twin-sister with an immoral one, and that if she wanted to keep her place she would have to understand that the golden apples of the tree of knowledge never grew for her plucking, and that for a servant to be educated into the region of thought and the aesthetics is a monstrosity calling for condemnation and dismissal<sup>33</sup>.

Such an attitude towards education of maids, even towards basic abilities to read or write was dictated by the belief that "the more ignorant the woman, the more likely the machine"<sup>34</sup>. The "machine" is very easy to be taken care of, she does not have needs apart from these very basic ones, it is more convenient to maintain the "machine" and believe that everything was done to satisfy her. Thus keeping the maids away from "the tree of knowledge" allows the mistresses to wield the control over their maids and protects them from losing their submissive and faithful servants who perceive their work as the highest goal they can achieve.

Linton pays a lot of attention to the relationship that exists between the mistresses and the maids. She points out that the employer is the absolute ruler while the servant is just a movable serf from whom the employers

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 300.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 301.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 301.

demand all they desire<sup>35</sup>. Linton studies the relationship between the mistress and the maid where the former constantly plays the role of the bad one, and the latter – of the good one; in order to emphasise the distinction, she compares the mistress to the old slave-holding ladies. She writes:

no lady feels herself degraded by the use of harsh language to her servants, just as no slave-holding lady feels herself degraded if she strikes her slave or orders her out to be flogged. And no one acknowledges she has been unjust, or apologises to the maid she has wronged<sup>36</sup>.

The maid, on the other hand, “is required to bear everything without a murmur”; even when she is harshly spoken to, she must only answer in a sweet voice. To strengthen this point, Linton uses an example of a maid who, even while being nervous, ill or in trouble, is required to bear “the same smooth manner and the same placid face”<sup>37</sup>. It transpires that the mistress is a very callous creature who does not only pay little attention to her maid’s feelings but she even does not want to admit that her servant can have as regular troubles as other human beings, but, as it was mentioned above, any maid is treated as a machine and is expected to behave as one.

Throughout the whole article, Linton enumerates different changes which the character of household service underwent. She does it in order to turn the readers’ attention to the fact that the service of maids became a mere business where the mistress is only an employer and the maid – an employee. More importantly, she is able to understand that the house has become a small company where the mistress plays the role of a manager, and as in every business there is no place for tender feelings or relationship other than professional.

Through the tone of Linton’s argument it transpires that she misses the times when relationship between the mistress and the maid was based not on the professional terms but on mere, tender feelings, when these two were friends or even sisters, when English homes had “old-world closeness of attachment”<sup>38</sup>. She writes about these good old times in the tone of nostalgia; on the one hand she is intelligent enough to observe all the transformations of the household service, but on the other – she misses the old times and disapproves of the current situation. Linton pins the blame on the mistresses who have risen above their servants and who have sought to

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 302.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 304.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 304.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 299.

keep them in the position of inferiority and did not offer any kind of their own companionship instead<sup>39</sup>. The passages devoted to her accusations of the mistress are written in the tone of reproach or rebuke for the existing situation. Linton behaves as an observer who is able to see all the changes as well as the consequences but who cannot reconcile herself to what the household service has become. As the title of the article suggests, Linton takes the sides of the maids; she constantly accuses mistresses of treating their servants with no respect or even with contempt. Eliza Lynn Linton wants people to be aware of what has happened, how the household service has changed into serfdom and that such a change is not for the better. She wants people to realise that the next thing that should be done is an attempt to bring the old character of the household service into life again, simultaneously she knows that such a reconstruction is merely impossible.

Eliza Lynn Linton is a professional writer who earns her living by pen which makes her a woman who does not stay in the confines of a typically Victorian understanding of women and their social roles. Her views, however, do not yet interfere with the glorification of the traditional values that women should find in themselves. Her articles prove that she cannot reconcile herself to the current situation, to women experiencing metamorphosis from wives and mothers to “the girls of the period” who renounce with these traditional roles ascribed to their gender. She is able to see these changes in women’s attitudes towards life as well as the changes which the life itself has undergone. She not only observes the changes but undergoes them to as well. Her early works are very feminist in tone while her later ones present a totally opposite point of view. Moreover, her lifestyle contradicts the ideas she is propagating in her writings. She is a woman who does not stay within the confines of the image of the traditional Victorian woman. She earns her own living, she lives without a husband and even though her views on women are very antifeminist, the way she lives proves that she is more feminist than she wants herself to be.

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 299.