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THE AMBIVALENT FEMININE IN VICTORIAN MYTHOLOGICAL ALLUSIONS

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Mythological allusions in Victorian novels play a key role in the conceptualization of femininity, reflecting and re-evaluating the era's complex and often contradictory views on female nature. This article examines how Victorian writers employed biblical and Greco-Roman myths not merely as literary ornaments, but as tools for the stylistic and ideological characterization of female figures.

The article identifies and analyzes the main stylistic functions of mythological allusions: antonomasia, which replaces a heroine's name with a mythological archetype (e.g., Delilah or Eve); comparison, which contrasts specific qualities of a heroine with the traits of mythological figures; and the use of epithets formed from allusions (angelical, demoniacal). This approach allows authors to create complex portraits where a woman can be simultaneously an "angel" and a "demon," the Virgin Mary and the temptress Eve.

Special attention is paid to the ambivalence of the male perception of femininity revealed in these works. On the one hand, men idealized women, comparing them to innocent angels or romanticized nymphs, which, however, often served to objectify them and prevent a true understanding of their spiritual depth. On the other hand, figures emerged that challenged patriarchal stereotypes, such as the independent and untamed Diana.

The study also examines how the change in sources for mythological allusions – from Christian stories to Greek myths–reflected broader cultural trends of the time, including pessimism and an interest in the natural, "animalistic" element. The images of half-women, half-beasts (Medusa, nymphs) show a Victorian fascination with and fear of the irrational, untamed side of female nature. The struggle of heroines for their own identity, reflected in allusions to Melusina, demonstrates how women aimed to go beyond traditional roles.

In conclusion, mythological allusions in Victorian literature are not merely a literary technique, but a dynamic means of exploring, reflecting, and negotiating the complex notion of femininity within the context of the socio-cultural changes of the 19th century.

Key words: *mythological allusions, Victorian literature, concept of femininity, gender stereotypes, archetypes, intercultural communication.*

Орел Алла. Амбівалентна жіночність у вікторіанських міфологічних алюзіях

Міфологічні алюзії у вікторіанських романах відіграють ключову роль у концептуалізації жіночності, віддзеркалюючи та переосмислюючи складні й суперечливі погляди епохи на жіночу природу. У статті досліджується, як письменники-вікторіанці використовували біблійні та греко-римські міфи не лише як літературні прийоми, але й як інструменти для стилістичної та ідеологічної характеристики жіночих образів.

У статті виділено та проаналізовано основні стилістичні функції міфологічних алюзій: антономазія, що замінює ім'я героїні на міфологічний архетип (наприклад, Даліла чи Єва); порівняння, яке зіставляє окремі якості героїні з репрезентативними рисами міфологічних фігур та використання епітетів, утворених від алюзій (angelical, demoniacal). Такий підхід дозволяє авторам створювати багатогранні портрети, де жінка може бути одночасно «ангелом» і «демоном», Дівою Марією та Євою-спокусницею.

Особлива увага приділяється амбівалентності чоловічого сприйняття жіночності. З одного боку, чоловіки ідеалізують жінок, порівнюючи їх з невинними ангелами або романтизованими німфами, що, однак, часто слугує лише для їхньої об'єктивації та відмови від розуміння їхньої духовної глибини.

З іншого боку, з'являються образи, що кидають виклик патріархальним стереотипам, як-от незалежна та неприборкана Діана.

Дослідження також розглядає, як зміна джерел міфологічних алюзій – від християнських сюжетів до грецьких міфів – відображала ширші культурні тенденції епохи, зокрема песимізм та інтерес до природного, «тваринного» начала. Образи напівжінок-напівтварин (Медуза, німфи) свідчать про вікторіанське захоплення та водночас страх перед ірраціональною, непідкореною стороною жіночої природи. Боротьба героїнь за власну ідентичність, відбита в алюзіях на Мелюзіну, показує, як жінки намагалися вийти за межі традиційних ролей.

У підсумку, міфологічні алюзії у вікторіанській літературі є не просто літературною технікою, а динамічним засобом відображення складного поняття жіночності в контексті соціокультурних змін XIX століття.

Ключові слова: *міфологічні алюзії, вікторіанська література, концепт жіночності, гендерні стереотипи, архетипи, міжкультурна комунікація.*

Introduction. The Victorian era witnessed a remarkable resurgence of mythological discourse, transforming ancient narratives into vital instruments for navigating modernity. As E. Joshua [1] demonstrates, myth in this period was never merely decorative–it became a dynamic force that shaped cultural identity, blending classical traditions with Gothic and Arthurian revivals while absorbing contemporary anxieties about gender, morality, and social change. Writers deployed myth not as a distant allegory but as a living language, one that could sanctify or subvert the era's ideals of femininity with equal potency.

This mythological turn reflected deeper intellectual shifts. The waning dominance of Christian frameworks gave way to a renewed fascination with Greek and Roman pantheons–a transition that, as M. Louis observes, signaled both cultural pessimism and a romantic yearning for primal, elemental forces [2]. Within this context, female characters in Victorian fiction emerged as modern reincarnations of ancient archetypes. These were not casual metaphors but deliberate acts of mythmaking, through which authors could articulate tensions that realist conventions alone could not contain.

The era's conception of womanhood thrived on paradox, a duality encapsulated in Simone de Beauvoir's remark that myth renders woman simultaneously Delilah and Judith, Aspasia and Lucretia, Pandora and Athena [3. p. 196]. The archetypal "Angel in the House" coexisted with her shadow counterparts–the serpent-tressed Medusa, the sorceress Circe, and the child-killing Medea–all of whom haunted the margins of respectable fiction. Such contradictions mirrored broader cultural debates: as women gained access to education and questioned domestic orthodoxy, mythological allusions became a battleground for defining feminine nature.

Carl Jung's theory of archetypes explains why these ancient motifs remain so enduring [4]. The Victorian obsession with revisiting myths like Persephone's abduction or Arachne's defiance–stories that expressed hidden fears about female independence–can be understood through the activation of these primal images.

The study aims to examine how Victorian literature employed mythological allusions to construct, reinforce, and occasionally subvert cultural perceptions of femininity. The primary objective focuses on analyzing archetypal feminine figures – from the biblical Eve and Delilah to classical Diana and Medusa – revealing how major Victorian authors strategically used these myths to both uphold and challenge contemporary gender norms. Our central purpose demonstrates how mythological references served a dual function: as tools of patriarchal ideology in works by Thackeray and Eliot, while simultaneously becoming instruments of feminist resistance in novels by the Brontës and later neo-Victorian writers. The key goal of tracing this evolution from domestic ideology to feminist reinterpretation ultimately highlights literature's power to both cement and dismantle enduring cultural paradigms of womanhood through mythological frameworks.

Results. Mythological allusions in Victorian novels perform the following stylistic functions:

1. Antonomasia. In this function, an allusion is used in place of the proper name of a female referent. The author appeals not to a specific image, but to well-known mythological plots that act as precedent texts:

Delilah *patted Samson's cheek* [5].

We are Adam and ***Eve*** *unfallen – in paradise* [6].

2. Comparison. Individual qualities of a referent's character or appearance are compared with the most representative qualities

of mythological heroines: *Mary was too slim for her height, but Blanche was moulded like a* ***Diana*** [7].

3. **Epithets**, which are adjectives derived from well-known allusive nominations like *angelical* and *demoniacal.*

The most traditional and widespread biblical allusion is the **angel**, with whom women in Victorian novels are often compared. This comparison aligns with the Victorian stereotype of femininity embodied in the metaphor "Angel of the House." This "woman-as-angel" metaphor is one of the key characteristics of the character Amelia, as seen in descriptions such as *angel of a girl*, *poor white-robed angel*, and *the most angelical of young women*.

Amelia's antithesis, Rebecca, only pretends to be an angel to conform to social expectations: *"She succeeded in making us poor," Rebecca said with an air of* ***angelical*** *patience* [5].

Her true nature is revealed through antonymic allusions with the meaning of "demon" or "fallen angel," as in *horrid sarcastic demoniacal laughter* and *bad angel*.

The character herself denies her "angelic" nature, stating: *Revenge may be wicked, but it's natural," answered Miss Rebecca. "I'm no angel." And, to say the truth, she certainly was not* [5].

Similarly, in the pairs of Lucy and Maggie (*The Mill on the Floss*) and Paulina and Ginevra (*Villette*), the "angel" allusion is applied to the first heroine:

[…] *the little blond* ***angel-head*** *had pressed itself against Maggie's darker cheek* [6].

Ginevra is neither a pure ***angel*** *nor a pure-minded woman* [8].

The comparison of a woman to an angel is characteristic of the Victorian male consciousness: *Adam smiled, and looking more intently at the* ***angel's*** *face, said, 'It is a bit like her; but Dinah's prettier, I think* [9].

However, women themselves often react ironically to being identified as an angel, which suggests a protest against the male stereotype of the "Angel of the House":

Mary could not help laughing outright, in spite of her depression, at the idea of Margaret as an ***angel****; it was so difficult (even to her dressmaking imagination) to fancy where, and how, the wings would be fastened to the brown stuff gown, or the blue and yellow print* [10].

However, this is just his whim, and I will not contradict him; he shall be humoured: his ***angel*** *shall be an angel* [8].

Another biblical allusion is the archetype of Eve. The ambivalence of this image corresponds to the ambiguous perception of femininity that defined the Victorian male consciousness. On one hand, Eve is associated with the image of a temptress who holds power over a man: *Don't long for poison – don't turn out a downright Eve on my hands!* [7].

On the other hand, the image of Eve is romanticized and poeticized. Allusions to Adam and Eve are a way of poeticizing love and embodying the idea of the universality of this feeling: […] *she regarded him as* ***Eve*** *at her second waking might have regarded Adam* [11].

The spectral, half-compounded, aqueous light which pervaded the open mead, impressed them with a feeling of isolation, as if they were Adam and ***Eve*** [11].

We are Adam and ***Eve*** *unfallen – in paradise* [6].

The Victorian attitude toward a treacherous wife is conceptualized in the metaphor **TREACHEROUS WIFE is DELILAH**.:

Delilah *patted Samson's cheek* [5].

He was beat and cowed into laziness and submission. ***Delilah*** *had imprisoned him and cut his hair off, too. The bold and reckless young blood of ten-years back was subjugated and was turned into a torpid, submissive, middle-aged, stout gentleman* [5].

[…] *rapidly passing over events, till the full consciousness of his present situation came upon her, and perhaps annoyed at having shown any softness of character in the presence of the* ***Delilah*** *who had lured him to his danger, she spoke again, and in a sharper tone* [10].

In addition to the biblical figure of Delilah, W. M. Thackeray also uses the parallel image of Omphale, the Lydian queen who enslaved Hercules and forced him to do her bidding: […] *don't we see every day in the world many an honest Hercules at the apron-strings of* ***Omphale****, and great whiskered Samsons prostrate in* ***Delilah's*** *lap?* [5].

Greco-Roman Mythological Allusions

Images of goddesses from Greco-Roman mythology frequently appear as mythological allusions, serving several main functions in the novels:

1. Like the image of Eve, they are a way of poeticizing love. For example, in the descrip-

tion of Hetty's meeting with her suitor, there are allusions to Eros and Psyche: *He may be a shepherd in Arcadia for aught he knows, he may be the first youth kissing the first maiden, he may be Eros himself, sipping the lips of* ***Psyche*** *– it is all one* [9].

2. They implicitly point to the heroine's inner qualities. The image of Psyche, traditionally depicted as a butterfly, is used to imply the heroine's frivolity and inability to have serious feelings ("*butterfly soul*").

3. They serve an evaluative function and act as standards against which female beauty is compared: *No woman, were she as beautiful as* ***Aphrodite****, who could give or receive such a glance, shall ever be sought in marriage by me* [8].

4. They show a superficial male attitude toward women, a reluctance or inability to penetrate their spiritual world. For instance, in romanticizing Hetty's beauty, a character is unable to see her emotional limitations, admiring only her youthfulness: *She's a perfect* ***Hebe****; and if I were an artist, I would paint her* [9].

Similarly, heroes are unable to understand the feelings of the women they love, with one character calling Tess by the names of goddesses like Artemis and Demeter, prompting her protest: *He called her* ***Artemis****,* ***Demeter****, and other fanciful names half teasingly, which she did not like because she did not understand them. ''Call me Tess,'' she would say askance; and he did* [11].

The hero's perception of Clara's coldness and indifference is attributed to her restraint and pride, qualities associated with Diana, the goddess of the hunt: *Even so purely coldly, statue-like,* ***Dian-like****, would he have prescribed his bride's reception of his caress* [12].

Maggie's sympathy is mistaken for love and a desire to be a muse: *'Wouldn't you really like to be a tenth* ***Muse****, then, Maggie?' said Philip* [6].

In his attitude towards Laetitia, the hero alludes to Egeria, a nymph and advisor who taught legendary kings how to rule their people. At the same time, he does not suspect that this attitude hurts the heroine, who has loved him for many years and suffers from the fact that he sees her only as a friend: *[...] his* ***Egeria****, he names you… You are, he says, and he has often said, his image of the constant woman." Laetitia's hearing took in no more. She repeated to herself for days: "His image of the constant woman!"* [12].

5. They convey an ironic attitude towards certain female qualities through the metaphors:

– **POMPOUS WOMAN is MINERVA**. Using this metaphor, W. Thackeray creates a humorous portrait of the arrogant Miss Pinkerton, the proprietor of a boarding school for girls: […] *pompous old* ***Minerva*** *of a woman* [5].

– **STATELY WOMAN is JUNO or AURORA:**

Such a ***Juno*** *as I have described sat full in our view – a sort of mark for all eyes, and quite conscious that so she was, but proof to the magnetic influence of gaze or glance* [8].

However, stick to me, and neither this haughty goddess, dashing piece of womanhood, ***Juno*** *– wife of mine (Juno was a goddess, you know), nor anybody else shall hurt you* [13].

[…] *all this, I say, was done between the moment of Madame Beck's issuing like* ***Aurora*** *from her chamber, and that moment in which she coolly sat down to pour out her first cup of coffee* [8].

– **WOMAN with a STRONG PHYSIQUE is DIANA**: *Mary was too slim for her height, but Blanche was moulded like a* ***Diana*** [7].

– **INDEPENDENT, UNAPPROACHABLE WOMAN is DIANA:** *Although she scarcely knew the divinity's name,* ***Diana*** *was the goddess whom Bathsheba instinctively adored. That she had never, by look, word, or sign encouraged a man to approach her* […] [13].

In addition to goddesses, Victorian writers use other female figures from Greco-Roman mythology. The primary purpose of these allusions is to indicate a heroine's character. The image of the Amazon Camilla, for example, explicates qualities such as independence and untamable spirit: […] *her pleasure was to ride…to scour the plains like* ***Camilla*** [5].

Allusions to Cassandra and Iphigenia point to Clara's unconventional nature, which is sometimes perceived as madness, and her dependence on a father who is metaphorically sacrificing his daughter:

To discover yourself engaged to a girl mad as ***Cassandra****, without a boast of the distinction of her being sun-struck, can be no specially comfortable enlightenment* [12].

But, my love, my ***Iphigenia****, you have not a father who will insist on sacrificing you* [12].

Through the image of Clytemnestra, the murderer of her own husband, the writer seeks to reveal Rebecca's true intentions and nature: ***Clytemnestra*** *glides swiftly into the room like an apparition – her arms are bare and white? – her*

tawny hair floats down her shoulders, – her face is deadly pale, -and her eyes are lighted up with a smile so ghasty, that people quake as they look at her [5].

Mythological Half-Women and Half-Beasts

The ambiguous views on female nature are revealed in mythological images of half-women, half-beasts, such as Medusas, nymphs, and mermaids. These allusions perform the following key functions:

1. Poeticization and romanticization of heroines by men who are in love with them:

It is an oil-painting. You will look like a tall ***Hamadryad****, dark and strong and noble, just issued from one of the fir-trees, when the stems are casting their afternoon shadows on the grass* [6].

Stephen could not conceal his astonishment at the sight of this tall dark-eyed ***nymph*** *with her jet-black coronet of hair* [6].

Victorian views of a woman as a being combining cultural and natural, animalistic elements were reinterpreted in A.S. Byatt's modern "neo-Victorian" novel, Possession. Throughout the work, the author alludes to the mythological figure of Melusina, a half-woman, half-serpent who married a mortal man to gain a soul. The character Christabel, a Victorian poetess in the novel, dedicates her poem to this mythological being. The image of Melusina becomes an object of feminist discussion and receives a modern interpretation, as she is considered a symbol of a woman who seeks independence not only from men but also from her own female nature.: […] *the new feminists see* ***Melusina*** *in her bath as a symbol of self-sufficient female sexuality needing no poor males.* [14]; *The two women […] discussed liminality and the nature of* ***Melusina's*** *monstrous form as a 'transitional area' […] – an imaginary construction that frees the woman from gender-identification* [14].

The Victorian woman is a hostage to her own nature, which often brings her suffering: "*And so she talked on, of the pains of* ***Melusina*** *and the* ***Little Mermaid****; and of her own pain to come, nothing. Now I am clever enough to recognize a figure of speech or a parable, I hope, and I see that it could well be thought that she was telling me, in her own riddling way, of the pains of womanhood*. [14].

The heroine of Adam Bede seeks to avoid the fate that awaits every woman: […] *perhaps* ***water-nixies****, and such lovely things without souls, have these little round holes in their ears by nature, ready to hang jewels in. And Hetty must be one of them: it is too painful to think that she is a woman, with a woman's destiny before her* [9].

2. Emphasis on the woman's natural qualities, such as an untamed spirit, an atypical appearance, or antisocial or irrational behavior. The mythological images of a nymph, a Pythia, or a Medusa are used to create portraits of active, independent, and non-conformist heroines:

The ***nymph*** *of the woods is in her* [12].

She certainly had at times the look of the ***nymph*** *that has gazed too long on the faun* [12]

Maggie tossed her hair back and ran downstairs […] whirling round like a ***Pythoness*** *and singing as she whirled* [6].

Maggie lingered at a distance looking like a small ***Medusa*** *with her snakes cropped* [6].

3. Explication of the heroine's "inhuman" qualities, indicating her lack of spirituality and inability to feel human emotions. For example, after committing infanticide, a character in Adam Bede loses her childish, naive appearance and becomes like a horrifying Medusa. The cold, reserved, and refined Paulina, a heroine in Villette, is compared to an Undine or a nymph.:

And the cheek was never dimpled with smiles now. It was the same rounded, pouting, childish prettiness, but with all love and belief in love departed from it – the sadder for its beauty, like that wondrous ***Medusa-face****, with the passionate, passionless lips* [9].

[…] *while she half-feared, half-worshipped Paulina as a sort of dainty nymph – an* ***Undine*** *– she took refuge with me, as a being all mortal, and of easier mood* [8].

Conclusions. The study of mythological allusions in Victorian novels reveals a complex and often contradictory view of femininity. Rather than just being decorative, these allusions served as a dynamic tool for authors to explore gender roles.

First, they were a powerful tool for characterization. Allusions allowed writers to immediately link heroines to archetypal qualities, from the purity of the "angel" to the strength of Diana or the cunning of Delilah. While the "Angel of the House" metaphor reflected the era's ideal of domesticity, it was also used ironically by female characters to protest against these rigid gender stereotypes subtly.

Second, these allusions show the ambivalence of the male Victorian perspective. Men

often romanticized women as poetic nymphs or innocent Eves, but this was a superficial act that prevented them from seeing women's intellectual and emotional depth. Comparing women to figures like Hebe or the Muses often served to objectify them as sources of beauty or inspiration.

Finally, the shift to Greco-Roman and pagan myths points to a deeper cultural and psychological tension. The use of figures like nymphs, Medusa, and Melusina highlights the dual nature of women–both human and wild. This tension was central to the Victorian understanding of femininity, portraying women as beings who embodied natural forces that could be either charming or threatening.

In short, mythological allusions in Victorian literature were a dynamic way of exploring, challenging, and negotiating the multifaceted concept of femininity in a rapidly changing world.

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