

UDC 82.09 + 305-055.2+008:7.072.3

DOI <https://doi.org/10.32782/2522-4077-2025-214.1-10>

## VICTORIAN FEMALE BEAUTY: CULTURAL DICHOTOMIES AND LITERARY ARCHETYPES

### ЖІНОЧА КРАСА У ВІКТОРІАНСЬКУ ДОБУ: КУЛЬТУРНІ ДИХОТОМІЇ ТА ЛІТЕРАТУРНІ АРХЕТИПИ

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This article offers a nuanced linguistic analysis of the sophisticated lexical strategies used to portray female beauty as a moral and ideological concept in Victorian novels and their Neo-Victorian reinterpretations. Through a comparative study of works by Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot, Thomas Hardy, and William Makepeace Thackeray – alongside key Neo-Victorian responses by John Fowles and A. S. Byatt – the analysis uncovers a pervasive Victorian duality: the clash between superficial physical attractiveness and deep spiritual virtue. This contrast functioned as a subtle means of social control, connecting a woman's appearance to assumptions about her intellect, morality, and social standing within patriarchal systems.

The research identifies recurring antonymic lexical pairs (e.g., “material” vs. “spiritual,” “rosy” vs. “pale”), highlighting the moral and emotional meanings embedded in descriptions of female beauty. While terms for physical attractiveness often suggest frivolity or moral weakness, references to “pale” or “subdued” beauty raise spiritual qualities as signs of true worth. Special focus is given to the symbolism of body parts – especially eyes and mouth – as well as the gendered views of beauty and the frequent personification of the “soul.” In Neo-Victorian texts, this contrast is partly challenged through efforts to connect outer and inner beauty, reflecting shifting attitudes and showing how literature can help shape changing cultural conversations about femininity.

By tracing how Victorian and Neo-Victorian authors negotiated beauty ideals, the study highlights the enduring influence of literature in shaping and contesting cultural archetypes. These findings underscore the continued relevance of Victorian notions of beauty in contemporary discussions of gender, objectification, and empowerment, and call for further interdisciplinary research into how language reflects and constructs norms across cultures and historical eras.

**Key words:** Victorian literature, female beauty, gender ideology, intercultural communication, cultural archetypes, aesthetic representation.

У статті проведено ретельний лінгвістичний аналіз складних лексичних стратегій, які використовуються для конструювання жіночої краси як моральної та ідеологічної категорії у вікторіанських романах та їхніх неовікторіанських інтерпретаціях. Шляхом порівняльного дослідження творів Шарлотти Бронте, Джордж Еліот, Томаса Гарді та Вільяма Теккерея разом із ключовими неовікторіанськими текстами Джона Фаулза та А. С. Байєтт аналіз виявляє стійку вікторіанську дуальність: протиставлення поверхової фізичної привабливості глибинній духовній цінності. Цей контраст функціонував як прихований механізм соціального контролю, що пов'язував зовнішність жінки з уявленнями про її інтелект, моральність і статус у патріархальному суспільстві.

Дослідження виокремлює повторювані антонімічні лексичні пари (наприклад, «матеріальне» – «духовне», «рожеве» – «бліде»), які підкреслюють моральні й емоційні конотації описів жіночої краси. Вербалізація фізичної привабливості часто набуває негативних відтінків, асоціюючи героїнь із легковажністю чи моральним занепадом, тоді як згадки про «бліду» чи «стриману» красу презентують духовні якості як справжню цінність. Особливу увагу приділено символіці частин тіла – зокрема очей і вуст – а також гендерному сприйняттю краси та частому уособленню «душі». У неовікторіанських творах ця дихотомія частково

згладжується завдяки спробам поєднати зовнішню й внутрішню красу, що свідчить про зміну ставлення та здатність літератури бути медіатором у розвитку культурних діалогів про жіночність.

Відстежуючи, як вікторіанські та неовікторіанські автори трактували ідеали краси, дослідження підкреслює тривалий вплив літератури на формування та переосмислення культурних архетипів. Ці висновки висвітлюють актуальність вікторіанських уявлень про красу в сучасних дискусіях щодо гендеру, об'єктивації та емансипації жінок, а також закликають до подальших міждисциплінарних досліджень того, як мова відображає й конструює норми в різних культурах та історичних епохах.

**Ключові слова:** Вікторіанська література, жіноча краса, гендерна ідеологія, міжкультурна комунікація, культурні архетипи, естетична репрезентація.

**The Urgency of the Problem.** The Victorian conceptualization of female beauty retains profound contemporary relevance as it reveals the historical roots of how femininity continues to be constructed, evaluated, and policed in modern societies. This study examines how nineteenth-century literary texts codified beauty through enduring cultural dichotomies – the opposition between physical charm and spiritual virtue, natural appeal and moral worth – that still inform today's visual culture and gender discourse. In our digital age where beauty standards achieve unprecedented circulation, these Victorian archetypes demonstrate remarkable persistence, resurfacing in advertising imagery, popular media, and political rhetoric about women's social roles.

The Victorian beauty paradigm functioned as what we might term a "moral-aesthetic complex," systematically linking female appearance to assumptions about character, intellect, and social standing. As this analysis demonstrates, canonical novels employed specific lexical strategies (antonymic pairings, embodied symbolism, gendered descriptors) to naturalize this ideological construct. However, neo-Victorian reinterpretations expose the instability of these dichotomies, challenging their patriarchal foundations while paradoxically reaffirming their cultural longevity.

By tracing how literary representations translated aesthetic ideals into normative frameworks, this investigation illuminates three critical processes: how cultural archetypes become codified in language, how dichotomous thinking structures gender ideology, and how contemporary fiction negotiates this problematic heritage. The study thus moves beyond historical literary analysis to offer a nuanced understanding of beauty's continuing role in cultural narratives of femininity.

**Analysis of Recent Research and Publications.** Research on the representation of female beauty in Victorian literature has developed along several interrelated lines. Classical studies laid the groundwork by exploring how aesthetic ideals reflected the broader ideological frameworks of the nineteenth century. In more recent decades, feminist narratology and cultural studies have re-evaluated these categories in light of poststructuralist theory and gender studies. For example, Tamar Heller and Patricia Moran [1] show how seemingly innocuous motifs, such as descriptions of the face or body, serve to encode moral judgments. Hilary Fraser's *Beauty and Belief* [2] explores the complex entanglement of aesthetic theories and religious ideals that shaped representations of women in Victorian culture.

Scholars have also paid particular attention to the interplay between physiognomy and mythology as interpretive frameworks. Katherine Inglis [3] has demonstrated how Darwinian ideas and pseudo-scientific physiognomy informed literary depictions of beauty and degeneration. Meanwhile, neo-Victorian studies – exemplified by the work of Louisa Hadley [4] – have argued that contemporary rewritings of Victorian texts simultaneously critique and reproduce the cultural scripts of beauty and femininity. The 2023 special issue of 19: 'Victorian Beauty,' ed. Alambritis and Scholl [5] extends this discourse through interdisciplinary approaches – from Flint's ecocritical study of fireflies to Evangelista's decolonial reassessment of Japonisme – demonstrating how current scholarship continues to reshape Victorian aesthetic studies.

**Purpose and main objectives of the study.** This article offers a linguistic and cultural analysis of how Victorian and Neo-Victorian literature constructs female beauty through lexical and symbolic dichotomies. By examining the interplay of language, aesthetics, and ideology, it reveals how literary

texts encode beauty as both a moral category and a cultural archetype, while tracing their evolution across historical and intercultural contexts.

Objectives:

- To analyze antonymic pairs (e.g., rosy/pale, material/spiritual) that reinforce the Victorian dichotomy between physical allure and moral virtue.
- To decode the gendered semiotics of body parts (eyes, mouth) as sites of moral and aesthetic judgment.
- To explore how linguistic representations of beauty shift according to a character's emotional or moral state.
- To contrast male and female perspectives in beauty descriptions, exposing their role in patriarchal ideology.
- To investigate the personification of the "soul" as a linguistic device that privileges spiritual over corporeal beauty.
- To trace how contemporary reworkings subvert or reconcile Victorian dichotomies, reflecting evolving cultural norms.
- To assess how these literary representations resonate beyond Anglo-European contexts, contributing to transnational discourses on femininity.

**Presentation of the main research material.** Attitudes toward female beauty in the Victorian era reflected a profound polarity of views about women themselves. J.B. Priestley aptly described the Victorian ideal of woman as "*beautiful but demure, domestic in her interest, but romantic in her environment*" [6]. In Victorian novels, a recurring characteristic is the contrast drawn between physical and spiritual beauty. Authors frequently employed the literary device of juxtaposing two distinct female archetypes: one representing superficial physical allure, and the other embodying profound moral virtues. This dichotomy underscored a central tenet of Victorian sensibility, wherein the intrinsic worth of latent, inner beauty was deemed considerably superior to that of overt, external attractiveness.

This aesthetic perspective is elucidated through the comparative portrayals of heroines. For instance, in the analyses of Ginevra and Paulina from "Villette" and Dinah and Hetty from "Adam Bede," the authors employ lexicon drawn from antonymic domains: "material" versus "spiritual," "bright" versus "unassuming," and "moderate":

*At dinner that day, Ginevra and Paulina each looked, in her way, very beautiful; the former, perhaps, boasted the advantage in **material** charms, but the latter shone pre-eminent for attractions more **subtle** and **spiritual**: for light and eloquence of eye, for grace of mien, for winning variety of expression* [7].

[...] *Paulina Mary was become beautiful – not with the beauty that **strikes the eye like a rose** – orbed, **ruddy** and **replete**; not with the plump, and **pink**, and flaxen attributes of her blond cousin Ginevra; but her seventeen years had brought her a refined and tender charm which did not lie in complexion, though hers was fair and clear; nor in outline, though her features were sweet, and her limbs perfectly turned; but, I think, rather in a **subdued** glow from the soul outward. This was not an opaque vase, of material however costly, but a lamp chastely lucent, guarding from extinction, yet not hiding from worship, a flame vital and **vestal*** [7].

*What a strange contrast the two figures made! [...] Hetty, her cheeks **flushed** and her eyes **glistening** from her imaginary drama, her beautiful neck and arms bare, her hair hanging in a curly tangle down her back, and the baubles in her ears. Dinah, covered with her long white dress, her pale face full of **subdued** emotion, almost like a lovely corpse into which the **soul** has returned, charged with **sublimar** secrets and a **sublimar** love* [8].

As evidenced by the examples, Victorians regarded a woman's paleness as an indicator of spiritual beauty, whereas rosy cheeks were associated with frivolity. The authentic nature of a woman whose beauty was considered purely physical became apparent when she encountered difficult or tragic

circumstances. For Victorians, the direct correlation between a woman's appearance and her emotional state was perceived as indisputable:

*Her face had latterly changed with changing states of mind, continually fluctuating between **beauty** and **ordinariness**, according as the thoughts were gay or grave [9].*

The transformation in the appearance of a spiritless woman who has experienced tragedy and lost her physical attractiveness is conveyed through the use of vocabulary with contrasting meanings: "gay" – "sad," "evil," "rosy" – "pale." This technique is employed, for example, in the depiction of Hetty, whose childlike beauty vanishes as she undergoes disappointment and fear, ultimately culminating in her becoming the murderer of her child:

*And yet, even in her most self-conscious moments, the face was sadly different from that which had **smiled** at itself in the old speckled glass, or smiled at others when they glanced at it admiringly. A **hard** and even **fierce** look had come in the eyes, though their lashes were as long as ever, and they had all their dark brightness. 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 [8].*

*But he began to see through the dimness – to see the dark eyes lifted up to him once more, but with no smile in them. O God, how **sad** they looked! The last time they had met his was when he parted from her with his heart full of **joyous**, hopeful love, and they looked out with a tearful smile from a pink, dimpled, childish face. The face was **marble** now; the sweet lips were **pallid** and half-open, and quivering; the **dimples were all gone** – all but one, that never went; and the eyes – O! the worst of all was the likeness they had to Hetty's [8].*

The effect of contrast is also used when a woman tries to hide her true face. Thus, Rebecca's lack of spirituality is reflected in her appearance:

*He fell asleep after dinner in his chair; he did not see the face opposite to him, **haggard**, **weary**, and **terrible**; it lighted up with fresh candid smiles when he woke [10].*

*But what a face it was! So **white**, so **wild** and **despair** stricken, that the remembrance of it haunted him afterwards like a crime, and the sight smote him with inexpressible pangs of longing and pity [10].*

On the other hand, it is precisely in the most tragic moments that the true value of a woman's spiritual beauty is revealed:

*Many who were looking for mere **flesh and blood** beauty, mere **colouring**, were disappointed; for her face was deadly white, and almost set in its expression, while a mournful bewildered soul looked out of the depths of those soft, deep, grey eyes. But others recognised a **higher and a stranger kind of beauty**; one that would keep its hold on the memory for many after years [11].*

The inability to feel diminishes the value of physical beauty. Furthermore, this perception of beauty is predominantly attributed to women, whereas men are frequently unable to recognize a woman's true nature immediately and tend to favor external attractiveness and youth. For instance, only female characters perceive the emotional inadequacy of Hetty and Rebecca, while male characters are drawn solely to their youth, freshness, or striking appearance.

*It is generally a feminine eye that first detects the moral deficiencies hidden under the 'dear deceit' of beauty: so it is not surprising that Mrs Poyser, with her keenness and abundant opportunity for observation, should have formed a tolerably fair estimate of what might be expected from Hetty in the way of feeling [8].*

*Quiet Mary Burge, who sat near enough to see that Hetty was cross, and that Adam's eyes were fixed on her, thought that so sensible a man as Adam must be reflecting on the small value of beauty in a woman whose temper was bad [8].*

*She is but a poor lackadaisical creature, and it is my belief has no heart at all. It is only her pretty face which all you gentlemen admire so [10].*

Men cannot immediately recognize Dinah's spiritual beauty, preferring Hetty:

*If Dinah had got a bit o' colour in her cheeks, an' didn't stick that Methodist cap on her head, enough to frighten the crows, folks 'ud think her, as pretty as Hetty.' 'Nay, nay,' said Mr Poyser, with*



rather a contemptuous emphasis, 'thee dostna know the pints of a woman. The men 'ud niver run after Dinah as they would after Hetty [8].

Clara Middleton, who attracts men much more than Laetitia Dale, argues with men herself, proving that spiritual beauty is more valuable than physical attractiveness:

"You," he said to her, "can bear the trial; few complexions can; it is to most ladies a crueller test than snow. Miss Dale, for example, becomes old lace within a dozen yards of it. I should like to place her under the tree beside you... Clara said: "Miss Dale could drag me into a superior Court to show me fading beside her in gifts more valuable than a complexio." [12].

A beautiful woman who lacks coquetry often remains unnoticed:

And Maggie was so entirely without those pretty airs of coquetry which have the traditional reputation of driving gentlemen to despair, that she won some feminine pity for being so ineffective in spite of her beauty [13].

Meanwhile, coquetry, although condemned by Victorians, also arouses admiration:

I know that, as a rule, sensible men fall in love with the most sensible women of their acquaintance, see through all the pretty deceits of coquettish beauty [8].

Where was the beautiful black-eyed Houri whose appearance in the first charade had caused such delight? She was twice as handsome as Becky, but the brilliancy of the latter had quite eclipsed her. All voices were for her [10].

Thus, not every man can appreciate a woman's spiritual beauty. For example, while most men perceive Jane Eyre as unattractive, in the eyes of the man who loves her, she is regarded as beautiful:

He stood considering me some minutes; then added, "She looks sensible, but not at all handsome." "She is so ill, St. John." "Ill or well, she would always be plain. The grace and harmony of beauty are quite wanting in those features" [14].

Don't address me as if I were a beauty; I am your plain, Quakerish governess." "You are a beauty in my eyes, and a beauty just after the desire of my heart, -- delicate and aerial" [14].

The inseparable connection between beauty and spirituality is expressed in the works through the parallel use of the lexeme *beauty* and its synonyms, as well as the lexeme *soul*, which is frequently personified:

It was a moment when a woman's **soul** is more incarnate than at any other time; when the most spiritual **beauty** bespeaks itself flesh; and sex takes the outside place in the presentation [9].

[...] they shone in the liquid lustre of her eyes, which had suddenly acquired a **beauty** more singular than that of Miss Temple's -- a beauty neither of fine colour nor long eyelash, nor pencilled brow, but of meaning, of movement, of radiance. Then her **soul** sat on her lips, and language flowed, from what source I cannot tell [14].

Poor Maggie! She looked very **beautiful** when her **soul** was being played on in this way by the inexorable power of sound [13].

She was **pretty**; her eyelashes were long and dark, her eyes dark-blue, and her **soul** was ready to shoot like a rocket out of them at a look from Willoughby [12].

Neo-Victorian writers reflected the Victorian polarity of views on female beauty in their novels. In J. Fowles's work, the earthly and pragmatic Ernestina is contrasted with the mysterious and emotional Sarah. Sarah is not beautiful by conventional standards, which underscores her atypical nature and non-conformist perception of the world:

[...] **not a pretty** face, like Ernestina's. It was certainly **not a beautiful** face, by any period's standard or taste. There was no artifice there, no hypocrisy, no art, no mask; and above all, no sign of madness [15].

The description of Sarah also reflects the Victorian mentality's identification of a woman's spiritual beauty with the tragedy she has experienced:

But it was an unforgettable face, and a **tragic** face. Its **sorrow** welled out of it purely, naturally and unstoppably as water out of a woodland spring [15].

On the other hand, Ernestina embodies the stereotypical qualities of a Victorian woman and is no different from other women:

*She was so very nearly one of the prim little moppets, the Georginas, Victorias, Albertinas, Matildas and the rest who sat in their closely guarded dozens at every ball; yet not quit* [15].

Similarly, A. Byatt's heroine, Christabel, is not a typical Victorian beauty:

*She was not exactly beautiful – her face was too long for perfection, and not in the first flush of youth, though the bones were well-cut and the mouth an elegant curve, no pouting rosebud* [16].

The given excerpt also contains a refutation of the Victorian distinction between physical and spiritual beauty. This is evident in the description of the heroine's lips (*no pouting rosebud*). As P. Ingham observes, Victorian writers, when depicting their heroines, drew on the popular phrenological works of the period, which regarded the eyes as the “intellectual” organ and the mouth as the “animal” one. In studying the image of Tess, P. Ingham argues that the use of the epithets *peony mouth* and *flower-like mouth* in her portrait constitutes an implicit indication of the heroine's eroticism [17]. At the same time, the descriptions of Tess devote considerable attention to her eyes (*large tender eyes, neither black nor blue nor grey nor violet; rather all those shades together: large eyes violety-bluey-blackish*), suggesting a harmonious combination of spiritual and physical qualities. By contrast, the epithets *rosy* and *pouting* prevail in the descriptions of infantile heroines such as Hetty or Miss Ingram, one of the female characters in *Jane Eyre*, who serves as the antithesis of the main heroine:

*It is of little use for me to tell you that Hetty's cheek was like a rose-petal, that dimples played about her pouting lips* [8].

*I sometimes regretted that I was not handsomer; I sometimes wished to have rosy cheeks, a straight nose, and small cherry mouth* [14].

Christabel's image embodies the changes in Victorian consciousness, reflected primarily in the attempts of later Victorians to combine physical and spiritual beauty in one woman, as seen in the examples of Tess or Clara. In A. Byatt's work, the heroine herself asserts the inseparable connection between the bodily and the spiritual:

*‘If I were a Good Fairy,’ said Christabel, ‘I would wish her a pretty face – which she has – and a capacity to take pleasure in the quotidian.’ ‘You wish me to be Martha, not Mary,’ I cried with some little fire. ‘I did not say that,’ she said. ‘The opposition is false. Body and soul are not separable’* [16].

**Conclusions.** The analysis of Victorian novels and their Neo-Victorian reinterpretations demonstrates that the lexical means used to describe female beauty are closely tied to polarized views of women and enduring literary archetypes.

Authors consistently employ antonymic lexical pairs (e.g., material vs. spiritual, rosy vs. pale) to contrast superficial attractiveness with deeper moral worth. Descriptions of eyes and mouth serve as a symbolic function: the eyes are portrayed as markers of intellect and the soul, while the mouth signifies sensuality or immaturity, echoing the phrenological ideas prevalent at the time. The contextual variability of beauty highlights the perceived connection between a woman's appearance and her inner state, particularly in moments of crisis.

Linguistic analysis further reveals a gendered dynamic of perception: female characters are often able to discern hidden moral shortcomings beneath external charm, whereas male characters are typically captivated by youth and outward appeal. The frequent personification of the soul reinforces spirituality as an active force that confers authentic beauty.

Neo-Victorian texts partially subvert this dichotomy by combining physical and spiritual qualities within a single heroine and explicitly rejecting their separability.

Ultimately, the linguistic strategies in these works both idealize and constrain Victorian womanhood, perpetuating cultural stereotypes that link moral character to physical appearance. Considered in an intercultural perspective, this lexical and symbolic system not only reflects Victorian ideological

frameworks but also prompts broader reflection on how language constructs and sustains archetypes of female beauty across cultural contexts.

The patterns revealed in this study suggest several promising avenues for further investigation. A particularly fruitful direction would be examining the transnational circulation of Victorian beauty ideals in non-Anglophone literatures, with special attention to colonial and postcolonial reinterpretations. Comparative analysis of male beauty representations could illuminate gender asymmetries in the moral valuation of appearance. Digital humanities methodologies – particularly corpus analysis – might productively trace the historical evolution of beauty-related lexicon across genres and periods, revealing new insights about how aesthetic norms transform as they cross cultural boundaries.

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*Дата надходження статті: 16.07.2025*

*Дата прийняття статті: 25.08.2025*

*Опубліковано: 16.10.2025*