A New Historicist Perspective on The Question of Faith in W. Collins' *The Woman in White* and E. B. Browning's *Aurora Leigh*

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Received: February 7, 2024 Accepted: June 21, 2024 Online Published: July 10, 2024

doi:10.5430/wjel.v14n5p545 URL: https://doi.org/10.5430/wjel.v14n5p545

Abstract

The relationship between fiction and ideology is a crucial issue to many critical schools and theoretical approaches. Such an issue has been flowing smoothly across historical periods and influencing various social, historical, and cultural aspects. The Victorian era is one of these stages, and Victorian literature has played a significant role in determining the nature of such a relationship in the subsequent generations in England. Departing from the New Historicist theoretical framework, this study examines the views of two Victorian masterpieces, namely, W. Collins' *The Woman in White* and E. B. Browning's *Aurora Leigh* as both texts and contexts. Both are influenced by and influential in their circumstances. The subjectivities of the two authors are changed, and they are, at the same time, agents of change within their sociohistorical spheres. These literary works cannot be considered as only products of their times; they are also major players in creating new pathways for the development of people and culture. The conventional views of religion are questioned, and several inherent rules are constantly replaced by others. Although W. Collins and E. B. Browning explicitly voice their full adherence to religious beliefs and principles, skepticism becomes strongly expressed in some of their literary works while institutional faiths and their status are called into question in certain ways.

Keywords: Christianity, New Historicism, religious status, role of faith, social skepticism, Victorian beliefs

1. Introduction

Many approaches for literary theory and numerous critics from various epochs have primarily been eager to demonstrate the significance of the relationship between fictional works and ideologies. Thus, various sociocultural arenas and historical backgrounds of numerous literary works have been discussed accordingly. The Victorian era is not an exception, and Victorian literature has greatly influenced the views and perceptions of people of numerous issues, in general, and of religious beliefs and concepts of faith, in particular. As a critical approach that focuses on the study of literature within its historical context, New Historicism presents a theoretical framework that can be used to analyze and elucidate the formation of the relationship between fiction and ideology. It assumes, as Harold Veeser (1994) puts it, "that literary and non-literary texts circulate inseparably" (p. 2) and intertwine inextricably. This study discusses this idea anew in two Victorian masterworks, namely, Wilkie Collins' *The Woman in White* and Elizabeth Barret Browning's *Aurora Leigh*, from a New Historicist viewpoint. Furthermore, it intends to demonstrate how these cultural productions challenge dominant power structures as well as the explicit perceptions of the two authors. This study selected these works as contrasting samples of the writings of this period. The first is a prose narrative written by a male author, and the second is a poem written by a woman. Thus, the study reflects the extent of the prevalence of the idea in various works and among several authors during the Victorian era.

Victorian fiction presents and discusses several cultural and social concerns and anxieties. Moreover, it "… focuses on the fraught relationship between literature and ideology and the ways in which the literary text reworks available ideologies to give us a mediated picture of reality" (O'Neill, 1988, p. 215). To a certain extent, some Victorian writers engaged in the interrogation of the line between realism and illusion such that uncertainty transcended the limits of many deeply rooted givens; meanwhile, skepticism shrouded long-established beliefs. Numerous emerging social and cultural phenomena triggered many intellectuals to provide new explanations of the relationship(s) between humankind and the universe aside from religious explanations due to the great scientific advancements and other factors during this era. This scenario led to one of the most sensitive issues of this period's literature, which examined the manner in which religion was considered. The destabilization of religion and spread of secularization are symptoms of this period. As Charles Kingsley (2008) wrote, "The young men and women of our day are fast parting from their parents and each other; the more thoughtful are wandering either towards Rome, towards sheer materialism, or towards an unchristian and unphilosophic spiritualism" (p. XII). Incidentally, if disagreeing with the fact that faith became less influential in England and/or the west during this period is difficult, then this study demonstrates how the episteme—or the unconscious structures in any culture at any given moment that produce all knowledge, as coined by Michel Foucault (1970, p. 183)—may change across times and/or places according to their circumstances.

A number of New Historicist critics have addressed the mechanism of such an issue. Examining the question of faith in certain Victorian works from a New Historicist perspective, it is difficult to lump the history of England solely and altogether under Christian teachings. Indeed, different ideologies and actors guide this dialectical relationship. Stephen Greenblatt (1980) best describes this notion in his argument, "… art does not pretend to autonomy; the written word is self-consciously embedded in specific communities, life situations, structures of power" (p. 7). In the same work, the author adds, "If … literature is viewed exclusively as the expression of social rules and instructions, it risks being absorbed entirely into an ideological superstructure" (p. 4). In other words, literature is inseparable from cultures and communities and simultaneously influences them. If a literary work is solely attributed to the agency or subjectivity of the author, then one may risk the omission of any external effect by the society or culture of the author. The literary work is an artistic expression of the author within his unique circumstances. According to Greenblatt (1980):

> … if literature is seen only as a detached reflection upon the prevailing behavioral codes, a view from a safe distance, we drastically diminish our grasp of art's concrete functions in relation to individuals and to institutions, both of which shrink into an obligatory "historical background" that adds little to our understanding. (p. 4)

In other words, literature, as well as culture and society, are made hybrid. The discourses of either side are interrelated and intertwined with the other. No literary work is independent of culture and vice versa. Both are considered texts and pretexts, prompting Marjorie Levinson (2018) to write that only intertextuality can help us to empirically analyze and examine "the contemporary meanings informing literary works (their parts, their production, their reception), as well as other social texts" (p. 35). Thus, language, as Greenblatt (1980) explains, becomes "a collective construction," and the role of people should be to investigate "both the social presence to the world of the literary text and the social presence of the world in the literary text" (p. 5). This explanation echoes the role assigned to readers by Louis Montrose (2013) to view literary works by considering "reciprocal concern with the historicity of texts and the textuality of history" (p. 20).

By examining W. Collins' *The Woman in White* and E. B. Browning's *Aurora Leigh* from the New Historicist perspective, this study demonstrates how these two very distinct samples of Victorian writings illustrate skepticism about faith and, directly or indirectly, question the role of religion in the authors' lives. Throughout the following discussion and in spite of their differences, this study elucidates that both literary texts, using Neema Parvini's words (2018), "are inextricably bound to … [their] cultural text[s] through a network of other texts and discourses …" (p. 241). The literary and sociohistorical texts and contexts are interchangeably interacting with and feeding each other. None of them should be privileged over the other while they are read and considered together as core texts, and the plurality of voices is always present, as cited by Lois Tyson (2006, p. 288). The discussion of each sample will be divided into three parts, namely, the explicit view of religion by the authors and their unequivocal expression of belief, their implicit or connotative portrayal of religion throughout their works, and an explanation based on New Historicist tenets as a conclusion of each discussion. Following Peter Barry (2002), the parallel reading of the literary foreground and the non-literary background with equal weight (p. 172) would enable the inclusion of a "thick description" (Tyson, 2006) or the personal side of history (p. 288) in the analysis. Any text will not independently outweigh or marginalize the interpretation of these texts. Such a New Historicist viewpoint would help readers approach these texts and differently trace the trajectory of their events and ideas.

2. Wilkie Collins' Perspective of Faith

2.1 Overview

To understand Collins' treatment of the subject of religion, considering three parts, namely, his overt expression of religious faith, his inexplicit delineation of religion in his novel, and reading these parts from the New Historicist viewpoint, is imperative. The first part contradicts the second, which will be demonstrated in the following section. However, the third part will endeavor to resolve this contradiction, as will be highlighted under the third section.

2.2 Collins' Explicit and Implicit Views of Faith

In *The Woman in White*, many aspects directly or indirectly point to the ineffective role of religion in the community of men. In his non-fictional writing, autobiographical or otherwise, Collins does not explicitly state that he is a non-believer. On the contrary, he affirms that he is a believer in religion, as he cites in one of his letters to the editor of the *Leader Magazine* T. F. Smyth Pigott, "… I believe Jesus Christ to be the Son of God …" (Lawrence, 1989, p. 396). Evidently, his overt faith occasionally contradicts the ideas he consciously or subconsciously unravels in fiction. He repeatedly throws clues to this effect, indicating that he is aware or unaware of this contradiction. His subconscious mind possibly feels the need to warn others of the repercussions of believing in religion. Identifying whether this scenario is due to a certain scientific discovery or something else related to an invention or a breakthrough, in particular, is difficult. Such an idea may solve the contradiction that results from the comparison of Collins' previous statement with the idea stressed by Lyn Pykett (2005): "[Collins writings] have tended to imply that he did not have any religious beliefs" (p. 63). Pykett's view is shared by Kenneth Robinson (1952), when he implied that Collins was irreligious (255–56), and N. P. Davis' claim (1956) that Collins rebelled against his father's piety, acquired "an aversion to religion," and became an atheist (19, 212).

One of the main elements that distinctively demonstrate this idea in his novel is the symbolic significance of places. Collins invites his readers to compare Italy and America and observe the effect of this comparison on the Church of England, which will be discussed later. In doing so, one can see where good and evil originate from, and these two locales can accordingly be categorized. Italy is well-known to be one of the strongholds of Christianity. That is where Sir Percival and Laura spend their honeymoon. Italy is a familiar place, where

religious laws and regulations are well-known. Moreover, they meet the most evil characters in the novel, namely, Count Fosco and his wife, in Italy. Thus, Percival's evil intention to steal Laura's fortune is linked with a satanic character (Count Fosco), who can help him achieve his brutal goal. In an ironic remark, Laura tells Marian that she has met her aunt Eleanor, Fosco's wife—"so much changed for the better" (Collins, 2005, vol. 1. p. 439). In the course of the events, the reader finds that her *aunt* is a merely a ploy of the evil Fosco, and her change will never be for the better, as if Italy has contaminated her. Throughout the novel, Collins artfully uses the narrative technique of foreshadowing to this effect. Laura's trip to Italy, a center of conservatism, traditionalism, and religious commitment, foreshadows the tribulations that will soon befall her. Notably, many authors have used Italy as a symbol of romance and love; however, in this context, one cannot attribute these symbols to Italy, because it does not nourish the love and intimacy of the main characters. The negative adherence to traditionalism is evident, when Laura mentions that when she and her husband visited the tomb of Cecilia Metella, she felt a deep sadness due to the indifferent reaction of the husband toward her request to build her a tomb: "He was not even looking at me!" (p. 551). It is as if people's views of relationship between men and women have remained the same since Ancient Rome when this tomb was built, and the religious values of Christianity lacked any positive impact in changing these relations for the better. Percival's reply to her request is even more disappointing, when he mentions that if the tomb is built, then it would be with Laura's money. Love, intimacy, good will, and other fundamental values and principles for every healthy society have departed that land. It has been replaced by hatred, indifference, and pragmatism. Such ruinous interaction between the characters in this space signifies the futility and danger of clinging to the past, with all its consequences, as an experience of life that should not be imitated in today's world. The past is an opportunity to benefit from the experiences of others. In summary, attributing the tendency to criticize faith to the literary text alone or the sociohistorical context is problematic. Instead, the focus should be on "attempts to rediscover literary texts as both the reflection and the creation of a given historical context" (Derdzinski, 2001, p. 272).[1] The manner in which the author highlights America as the antithesis of Italy reinforces this view.

In the novel, no evil of any form is related to this land; instead, it is the land from which the *savior* comes. America is attached to increasing development, creativity, and novel ways of thinking. With the help of Marian, Hartright leaves for America as if the author wanted to say that English people (represented by Marian and Hartright in this instance) still have the ability to choose their way of life away from traditionalism. This is well exemplified in Marian's words, describing Hartright's request from Marian to help him.

> He says that the effort to return to his *old habits* and pursuits grows harder instead of easier to him every day and he implores me, if I have any interest, to exert it to get him employment that will *necessitate his absence from England*, and take him among *new scenes and new people*. [emphasis mine] (Collins, 2005, vol. 1. p. 375)

Hartright, who is a good character, does not want to go back to his old ways. Moreover, he seeks to escape from England, which continues to adhere to his old habits that are partially imported from ancient places and cultures such as those of Italy. He seeks liberty from the constraints of his land in the land of freedom. Hartright goes on "A private expedition to make excavations among the ruined cities of Central America" (p. 399), symbolizing his quest for the past (e.g., history and ancient monuments) to contribute to research and cultural heritage, search for other sources of wealth, or benefit from the others' experiences. He travels to America looking for modernity not antiquity. He does not go there to revive and imitate old practices, which is further emphasized when Marian says the following:

> I saw an extract from an American newspaper, describing the departure of the adventurers on their inland journey. They were last seen entering a wild primeval forest, each man with his rifle on his shoulder and his baggage at his back. Since that time, civilization has lost all trace of them. (p. 431)

The novel describes Hartright and his group as adventurers, emphasizing their will to discover new things. They entered a forest with guns and equipment. When their journey is compared with the experience of Sir Percival and Laura in Italy, one can perceive the irony contained in the novel. Italy is intellectually dangerous but physically safe. Those who go to Italy must be equipped against the poisonous mental influence whose impact is more lasting than the dangers associated with the physical risks of entering a forest in North America, whose negative impact rapidly diminishes and ultimately vanishes. Thus, the last clause in the aforementioned quotation is extremely significant. On the one hand, Italy is a highly civilized place; however, its civilization is thwarted. Italy does not use civilization to question its past. On the other hand, North America uses all means available to develop its present based on its perception of its past. This view of places, sites, or locations is supported by how the author portrays places within England related to religion.

The description of places that bear religious and spiritual significance in England reveals the link or relationship of religion with antiquity and backwardness. The idea of the lack of credibility of religion is related, especially considering the depiction of the most significant place in this work, namely, the Old Welmingham Church, more or less symbolizing the Church of England. To elucidate how the author, directly or indirectly, criticizes religion, examining the symbolic value of objects and events described inside and around places of worship is crucial. According to Hartright's first description of the church, similar to Italy, it is linked to antiquity—"[The Church] stood on the highest point in the village, an ancient, weather-beaten building"—and around it lie the remains of the village whose principal people "had long since deserted for the new town" (p. 331). The position of the church above the village signifies religious authority and influence, greatly diminished by age and new advancements. Human beings typically evolve with time, while religion remains the same. The narrator's physical description of the church is mingled with an emphasis on the improbability of enhancement, difficulty in management, and inflexibility, illustrated as follows: "The vestry door was of stout old oak, and the clerk put his large heavy key into the lock with an air of a man who knew that he had a difficulty to encounter" (p. 335). The difficulty of getting into the church using the key and the description of this door denote the uneasiness with which people are likely to perceive religion. Furthermore, the unchangeability,

primitiveness, and obsolescence of religion can be understood palpably from the clerk's following description:

> [The lock] is big enough for a prison-door—it's been hampered over and over again, and it ought to be changed for a new one. I've mentioned that to the churchwarden fifty times over at least—he's always saying, "I'll see about it"—and he never does see. Ah, It's a sort of lost corner, this place. Not like London—is it, sir? Bless you, we are all asleep here! We don't march with the times. (p. 335)

In this passage, religion is evidently likened to a prison of the human mind. Moreover, it is in dire need of modernization; however, the people in charge refuse, unless it is in accordance with their interests. This notion is a reminder of how Collins criticizes religious authorities, as emphasized by Keith Lawrence (1989)—"[Collins' letters] emphasize [his] distrust of established churches, which he viewed as hypocritical and manipulative" (p. 392). The comparison of London with the church, although relatively odd, is crucial in the context of modernity and antiquity, because this can be discerned through the last two sentences that demonstrate the extent of the futility of religion. The improbability of any future change for the better is further evident in Hartright's description of the church from the inside. He says, "The room had once been lighted by a small side window, but this had been bricked up, and a lantern skylight was now substituted for it" (Collins, 2005, vol. 2. p. 337). The source of light is confined to the lantern, and all other sources of contact with the outside world have been blocked. Communication and sharing lie at the center of research and progress, which are impeded by self-isolation. Such an image definitely denotes the narrowmindedness of religious leaders, whence the fact that religion is frequently attributed a bleak, gloomy, and ultimately doubtful status among communities.

Furthermore, such a decaying place is unqualified to be the protective place of the marriage-register. Marriage is the most blessed bond in religion; however, the religious organization is even unable to keep a record of married people. This issue is extremely sensitive and highlighting this aspect indicates the carelessness and negligence of religion, which is unable to implement the necessary procedures for people's lives. In other words, directing people's lives is placed in the negligent and irresponsible hands of the religious establishment. At a certain point, the keys are stolen from the clerk. This event is also symbolic, because it reveals the fact that whoever controls the church will yield great power in influencing the community, which cannot be attributed to anyone in particular. Undoubtedly, this image reflects the chaos, loss, and uncertainty that the community is meant to face. Another significant event in this context is the burning of the vestry and Percival. This event largely evinces the fact that changing aspects related to belief and religion for good or bad will prove costly and will inevitably lead to serious repercussions. Moreover, it depicts the idea that religion needs to be rebuilt based on a more logical wisdom. The church has been used by Percival to achieve his evil objectives. Throughout the novel, the church never contributes to spreading good among people, which is contrary to its primordial mission. In addition, the forging of the register by Percival (p. 357) symbolizes the possibility of counterfeiting and adapting religious laws according to peoples' whims. Finally, the scene of the burning of the marriage-register toward the end of the novel presents Collins' optimism regarding people's view of religion. This scene stresses that future generations will need to clean all that has been tarnished by the religious institution in the past by hook or crook, if they hope to achieve its development and its promise of change.

2.3 A New Historicist Explanation of Collins' Views

Is not such a negative view of the role of faith and the religious establishment contradictory to Collins' explicit aforementioned statement that he is a believer in Christianity? At this stage, the explanation provided by New Historicism is invaluable. New Historicism is not concerned with appropriating facts and details to produce one coherent narrative. Instead, it explores and elucidates inherent discontinuities and gaps, which are lucid and powerful indicators of subjectivity and agency. Thus, simultaneously, the literary text becomes a context that participates in shaping history "by circumstances of production as well as consumption" (Greenblatt, 1988, p. 23). In other words, products of human genius, such as literary works, as well as other sociocultural elements adopted by generations through tradition, create, compose, or format the question of faith. Both contribute to the current understanding of its changing nature. Thus, claiming that one fixed definition, concept, or position of faith exists among communities is impossible. The novel palpably reflects that Collins is a believer, as per his statement, but remains critical of religion in his fiction. This view resonates with Antonio Gramsci's idea of the organic and traditional intellectual in *The Prison Notebooks*. The idea of the organic intellectual originates from his subjectivity, which in turn is affected by a sophisticated matrix of relationships across contexts. Thus, he tries to (re-)organize the interests of society and the state despite being a member of such a society and a subject of this same state. Incidentally, his ideas may not be necessarily in tandem with the superstructures advocated by Gramsci (n.d., pp. 131–162). Moreover, New Historicist ideas are similar to certain ideas of other critics, such as Edward Said, who presents a discussion of the terms *origin*, which is divine, mythical, and privileged, and *beginning*, which is secular and humanly produced, in his book entitled *Beginnings*. Moreover, Said (1975) insists that no beginning originates from or is initiated by a human regardless of the extent of one's mentality without preexisting traditions. He further argues that everyone is made and a vast network of factors, elements, and circumstances form an individual's genius. They cannot be solely attributed to an organized array of sources or a group of arranged reasons. Instead, internal and external influences play an inextricable role in constructing all with varying degrees. Characterizing the relationship among these influences within specific tenets is challenging since it is always dialectical.

3. E. B. Browning's Views of Faith

3.1 Overview

To understand Browning's perspective of religion, considering three parts, namely, her unambiguous articulation of religious belief, her

connotative portrayal of religion in her poem, and reading these parts from the New Historicist standpoint, is crucial. As demonstrated through W. Collins, the first part appears incompatible with the second, which will be discussed in the following section. However, the third part would endeavor to resolve this incompatibility, as will be highlighted under the third section.

3.2 Browning's Explicit and Implicit Views of Faith

A Victorian poet, Elizabeth Barrett Browning posits that religion is very old fashioned for people and that they should no longer rely on it for their progress in another literary work entitled *Aurora Leigh*. Going beyond this narrative, Greenblatt also proposed such an idea; he mentions that the role of literature in the 19th century is to normalize "disbelief and to explore the origins and limits of the concept of 'ideology'" (Gallagher & Greenblatt, 2000, p. 18). In the poem, Browning exemplifies the adverse effect of religion on people in a relationship, which is highly encumbered by a deep-rooted religious heritage. Furthermore, Helen Cooper stresses E. B. Browning's remark in her preface to *Poems of 1844* as follows:

> … she determined to write "with a peculiar reference to Eve's allotted grief, which, considering that self-sacrifice belonged to her womanhood, and the consciousness of originating the Fall to her offence, appeared to me [Browning] imperfectly apprehended hitherto, and more expressible by a woman than a man" (Browning, 2020, p. 5; Cooper, 1988, p. 6).

I would like to reiterate my opinion that Browning evidently negatively portrays the role of religion despite refraining from expressing secular views; instead, she explicitly voices adherence to religious principles in her statements, which is observable in her correspondence with the Reverend William Merry from 1843 to 1844 on predestination and salvation. She identifies herself as a Congregationalist: "I am not a Baptist—but a Congregational Christian—in the holding of my private opinions" (Kelley et al., 1984, vol. 8, p. 150). Browning (1900) reaffirms her belief when she says, "we want the sense of the saturation of Christ's blood upon the souls of our poets …" (p. 176). Despite such remarks in her writings, one can sense certain instances that are more likely to attract readers' attention to her critical view of religion. Therefore, I believe *Aurora Leigh* should be examined from two perspectives, namely, (a) Browning's illustration of Aurora's relationship with other characters, emphasizing the points where one can identify the effect of religion and (b) how Browning satirizes religion in a manner that depicts refusal to adhere to its instructions within that relationship.

The relationship of Aurora with others is heavily laden with religious attitudes that have been accumulated over centuries. This idea can be better apprehended in her relationship with Romney, whose view of the role of women is highly influenced by the religious view of Adam and Eve, as he says, "I ask for … wifehood" (Greenblatt & Abrams, 2006, p. 1101). He wants Aurora to perform the traditional role of the obediently assistant wife similar to that assigned to Eve. Describing him as an educated and ambitious reformer renders the author's implication increasingly ironical given that Romney's attitude is supposed to be one of the best in his community. Therefore, many ordinary people embracing this religious perspective is unsurprising. Subsequently, we realize that one of the main arguments between Romney and Aurora is whether a woman can be a lofty artist. Conventionality and traditionalism have been imposed in Aurora throughout the poem, as Stephen Greenblatt emphasizes (Greenblatt & Abrams, 2006, p. 1097), and Romney wants to inculcate this sense of conformism in Aurora's mentality. Further, he wants her to imitate and do what is taught by religious principles and endorsed primarily by men to preserve the power of both.

Aurora's rejection of Romney's marriage proposal suggests her refusal of a number of religious principles that can be further observed in her narrative. This aspect is apparent when she tells Romney that he is already married to his "social theory" and that she refuses to "be the handmaid of a lawful spouse" such as "Hagar." Religion was the main social theory that had been effective for a long time. By mentioning Hagar, she points out that men use religion to their advantage in a satirical manner, as illustrated by Romney's reply "So you jest" (p. 1102). The verses that demonstrate how Aurora likens Romney's view of marriage to things related to Christian history and teachings further bolsters this notion.

> 'You treat of marriage too much like, at least,
> A chief apostle; you would bear with you
> A wife … a sister … shall we speak it out?
> A sister of charity.' (p. 1102)

Browning mingles classical concepts with references to Classicism in a fictional work. Stone (1995) points out the effect of this combination as follows: "the 'transumptive allusions' of Aurora Leigh draw on classical as well as Biblical texts" (p. 154). Drawing on the paradigm of poetic influence by Harold Bloom, she adds, "… the metalepsis or transumptive allusion practiced by the strong poet[ess] is a means of expressing h[er] mastery over h[er] precursors and rivals" (p. 156). I will venture to add that her mastery is achieved by refuting Romney's argument. Her use of Biblical remarks supports her rhetoric that religious connotations influence Romney's opinion. Even Browning's diction can be viewed as directing the readers' attention to her dismissal of Eve's inferior position to Adam as expressed by religion:

> You forget too much
> That every *creature*, female as the male,
> Stands single in responsible act and thought
> As also in *birth* and death. [emphasis mine] (Greenblatt & Abrams, 2006, p. 1102)

Browning tends to candidly criticize the Biblical reference to the way of human creation. According to the Scriptures, Adam was first

created, and then Eve was born out of him, opposing Browning's idea of the equality between men and women in birth. Thus, the relationship between Aurora and Romney is placed within a satirical context that is intended to be critical of religion.

Aurora Leigh is finally fraught with ironical remarks toward religion, as one reviewer said, "the poem is against conventionality, and it is a sheer negation of belief" (Donaldson, 1993, p. 59). This idea appears evidently in the manner that Aurora describes her aunt as well as the past and present. While introducing her aunt to the readers, she satirizes the way her aunt was brought up.

> She had lived we'll say,
> A harmless life, she called a virtuous life,
> A quiet life, which was not life at all,
> (But that, she had not lived enough to know)
> Between the vicar and the county squires, (Greenblatt & Abrams, 2006, p. 1093)

Although her aunt did not violate religious rules, Aurora continues to view her life as lacking in experience and excitement as if religion encouraged people to live a monotonous and uncreative life. Moreover, Aurora abhors conventionality, while her aunt advocates it, and she imposes it on her education of Aurora. Her aunt's conventionality is primarily religious as the word *vicar* plainly suggests. By satirizing her aunt, Aurora criticizes the conventionality of society in general, as can be apprehended from the following remark:

> She liked a woman to be womanly,
> And English women, she thanked God and sighed,
> (Some people always sigh in thanking God)
> Were models to the universe. (p. 1096)

For a woman to be womanly entails abiding by Romney's social theory. One can see the deity participating in the formation of the role of women. She thanked Him (he who apparently symbolizes religion) for his instructions and teachings in this respect. English women were universal models; thus, Aurora's critique can be considered transcending all borders to include all women who follow religious principles. The significance of her aunt's sighing is to depict her relief from an exhausting trouble. Religion has taken it upon itself to solve the question of women who are consequently relieved from merely thinking about it. Further, Aurora sees that the past should be used well for the present instead of the other way round. The past experience should positively influence the life of present and future generations. In fact, Aurora revolts against religion when she says the following:

> And I, I was a good child on the whole,
> A meek and manageable child. *Why not?*
> *I did not live, to have the faults of life*: [emphasis mine] (p. 1094)

Overtly, Aurora does not accept the Christian belief that everyone is born a sinner, because a child has no life of his/her own, and this reasoning solely relies on her logical power. The present should not be responsible for the repercussions of the past. Aurora further reiterates this view by saying that the poets' work is to represent their age not that of Charlemagne, followed by her statement that living art presents and records true life (pp. 1106-07). I believe that the past in this context is intended to refer to religion for two reasons. First, it is true that Charlemagne's age is part of the past; however, choosing Charlemagne specifically is not fortuitous. According to Margaret Reynolds (1992), Charlemagne was "crowned Emperor by Pope Leo III in 800, and [he] (c. 742-814) was considered the prototype of a Christian king throughout medieval Europe" (p. 598). Second, Aurora's insistence that the living art, which records the present, and the present is the true life, can be interpreted as an insistence on the idea that dead art records the past, which is not a true life. Thus, religion does not stand for true life but mythical life.

3.3 A New Historicist Explanation of Browning's Views

Considering the aforementioned views, Browning addresses the same question raised by W. Collins. Therefore, is there a paradox between Browning's admission of being a believer while demonstrating a critical stance toward religion in her work? In reality, Browning's view of religion should not be exactly the one she presents in her poem. The sociocultural context to which she belongs does not constrain or consume her subjectivity. On the contrary, she breaks free from the contextual entity or the historical superstructure and creatively formulates a different perspective. Greenblatt (1980) elucidates such an approach to understanding literature as follows: "There is no such thing as a single 'history of the self' … except as the product of our need to reduce the intricacies of complex and creative beings to safe and controllable order" (p. 8). Thus, literature cannot be interpreted or traced merely according to prior contexts, which may affect the text. However, they do not necessarily shape it within a particular linear or straightforward framework or an exclusive trajectory of interpretation. Greenblatt underscores this aspect further by stating, "… Humans themselves were not, in Clifford Geertz's phrase, cultural artifacts." Summarizing his view, Greenblatt states that "[l]iterature functions within this system in three interlocking ways: as a manifestation of the concrete behavior of its particular author, as itself the expression of the codes by which behavior is shaped, and as a reflection upon those codes." Therefore, literature should not be understood as literary biography (pp. 3–4).

4. Conclusion

One may argue that religion in these particular Victorian literary works is not depicted as positively participating in people's lives. The two writers have clearly addressed the issue of religion directly or indirectly through their presentation of issues pertinent to the life of the people of their time. Generally, poems and literary works "are social and historical products …" (Jerome McGann, 1983, p. 3).

Sociohistorical circumstances do not produce them simply as aesthetic art. They are themselves circumstances that influence society and history. Moreover, according to Foucault, they are an integral part of the episteme. Hence, the primary focus of criticism should not be on the literary text but on the historical context of which literature is an intrinsic part. Regardless of the depictions of W. Collins and E. B. Browning in their writings of their beliefs, one can still find many threads that lead them to forge their critical views of religion and society. This aspect partially explains why certain critics have accused some Victorian writers of being irreligious,[2] when in fact their works interrogate the stability of religion as it yearns for new ideas. According to John Stuart Mill, in his essay "The Spirit of the Age," "The first of the leading peculiarities of the present age is that it is an age of transition. Mankind have outgrown old institutions and old doctrines, and have not yet acquired new ones" (Schneewind, 1965, p. 30). Thus, it is hardly surprising that ideas regarding secularism and modernism did not come unexpectedly as is frequently said and written. Similar to a number of other Victorian writers, W. Collins and E. B. Browning have likely paved the way for these ideas, as well as for other ways of looking at human beings, other ways of thinking, and other beliefs one way or another. To a great extent, the massive ideological change that occurred in England can be considered a potential outcome of the ideas expressed by these Victorian writers, whose profound legacy has exerted an influential impact on the intellectual climate of the next generation of English people and all subsequent generations.

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Notes

Note 1. I am using Mark Derdzinski's words, which he uses in reference to Stephen Greenblatt's work.

Note 2. For a detailed account of this, see Lawrence's article "The Religion of Wilkie Collins: Three Unpublished Documents."