

The Angel in the House

This is a phrase which comes from Victorian times.

What do you think it means?
Write down some ideas which you are prepared to share with the class.

The term comes from a poem, 'The Angel in the House', written by Coventry Patmore, published in 1854 and revised in 1862.

Although this is nearly twenty years after Dickens published *Oliver Twist* the idea of the 'Angel in the House' was already prevalent in England.

Look at the painting below and consider how it might fit with the phrase 'angel in the house'.

Insert a painting of a Victorian family group. There is one available here:

http://www.24hourmuseum.org.uk/content/images/2005_5693.JPG

The popular Victorian image of the ideal wife/woman came to be "the Angel in the House," who was expected to be devoted and submissive to her husband. The Angel was passive and powerless, meek, charming, graceful, sympathetic, self-sacrificing, pious, and above all--pure.

© http://academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu/english/melani/novel_19c/thackeray/angel.html

Now look at the following paintings and decide what you think has happened in each one, bearing in mind that they are linked to each other and are related to the Victorian ideal of 'the angel in the house':

Insert the first of Augustus Leopold Egg's
'Past and Present' paintings (1858).

Available at:

<http://www.tate.org.uk/research/tateresearch/tatepapers/07spring/rutherford.htm>

Insert the second of Augustus Leopold Egg's 'Past and Present' paintings (1858).

Available at:

<http://www.tate.org.uk/research/tateresearch/tatepapers/07spring/rutherford.htm>

Insert the third of Augustus Leopold Egg's
'Past and Present' paintings (1858).

Available at:

<http://www.tate.org.uk/research/tateresearch/tatepapers/07spring/rutherford.htm>

The preceding three paintings have shown us:

The scene when a husband discovers his wife has been adulterous and the consequence of her actions.

This, then, is the 'fallen woman'; the woman who transgresses (disregards laws or rules) Victorian social and moral codes of behaviour.

Now relate what you have learned during this presentation to your reading of *Oliver Twist*.

Are there any 'angels in the house' in the novel?

Or any 'fallen women'?

Read the following which are from the chapter in which Rose and Nancy meet:

The girl's life had been squandered in the streets, and among the most noisome of the stews and dens of London, but there was something of the woman's original nature left in her still; and when she heard a light step approaching the door opposite to that by which she had entered, and thought of the wide contrast which the small room would in another moment contain, she felt burdened with the sense of her own deep shame, and shrunk as though she could scarcely bear the presence of her with whom she had sought this interview.

She raised her eyes sufficiently to observe that the figure which presented itself was that of a slight and beautiful girl; then, bending them on the ground, she tossed her head with affected carelessness ...

The kind tone of this answer, the sweet voice, the gentle manner, the absence of any accent of haughtiness or displeasure, took the girl completely by surprise, and she burst into tears.

‘Oh!’ said the earnest girl, folding her hands as the tears coursed down her face, ‘do not turn a deaf ear to the entreaties of one of your own sex; the first – the first, I do believe, who ever appealed to you in the voice of pity and compassion. Do hear my words, and let me save you yet, for better things.’

‘Lady,’ cried the girl, sinking on her knees, ‘dear, sweet, angel lady, you are the first that ever blessed me with such words as these, and if I had heard them years ago, they might have turned me from a life of sin and sorrow; but it is too late, it is too late!’

In pairs, consider how Rose and Nancy fit the ideal of 'the angel in the house' and 'the fallen woman'.

Find other examples from the novel which reflect the status of these two.

What do you think Dickens is trying to say to the reader about these women?

Is he sympathetic, dismissive, judgmental or objective about Rose and Nancy?