BOOK REVIEW

Social Identity and Literary Form in the Victorian Novel: Race, Gender, and Class and the Uses of Genre by Jill Franks (McFarland, 2022) 280 pp., paperback, $29.95

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In the Preface of *Social Identity and Literary Form in the Victorian Novel*, Jill Franks traces how she developed her recorded lectures and course outlines from during Covid to book chapters. As established in the subtitle of the text, she narrows the focus to race, gender, class, and genre from her broad course summary about Victorian literature. Each of the chapters draws in other concerns like empire, psychoanalysis, biography, historical, and neo-Victorian context to address the intersecting systems of inequality during this period. By limiting jargon and defining introductory theories, Franks writes in an accessible way to create a foundational understanding of Victorian literature. Envisioning teachers using this as a textbook in their courses or as inspiration for their own lectures, her primary goal is pedagogical. A standard textbook, *The Oxford Handbook of Victorian Literary Culture*, provides one of the most thorough discussions of Victorian concerns ranging from politics, gender, empire, religion, science to aesthetics and art. While engaging with similar concepts, Franks offers an alternative textbook option that is more approachable for students as it doesn't overwhelm with information but provides thorough context and introduction to main ideas and key concepts.

Franks clarifies her audience in the Preface as Victorian professors and teachers, undergraduate students, academics, non-academics, and people who love Victorian literature. The research for her chapters emerges out of 30 years of teaching literature, and she relies heavily on the second edition of Susie Steinbach's *Understanding the Victorians* to provide historical context and supplemental readings for her courses. Franks does not desire to write traditional academic essays, but 'to teach the novels, while also introducing undergraduate students to concepts in literary history and criticism, as this may be their first encounter with the texts'

(6). She does not include many secondary sources, but rather focuses on close readings, textual evidence, and personal interpretation, providing examples of how students may engage with the novels. *Social Identity* lacks a thorough bibliography, which would have been helpful to include, especially for instructors trying to shape their own lectures and courses. Therefore, it is better suited for pedagogical uses than for seasoned scholars who already have more advanced knowledge of the theories and texts discussed. Other texts about Victorian literature and pedagogy emphasize the teacher's role as planner and guide, including *Teaching Victorian Literature in the Twenty-First Century: A Guide to Pedagogy* and *Teaching Nineteenth-Century Fiction*. These texts provide sample syllabi and suggestions for teachers as they craft courses. Franks targets the teachers and the students, instead of just the teachers.

Following the Preface and Introduction, the structure of *Social Identity* includes 11 sections, each focused on a particular novel. The sections are arranged in chronological order based on the date the novel was published to demonstrate the development of popular genres and shifting ideologies. Each section contains multiple chapters to address the varying topics mentioned in the subtitle. Every chapter begins with a discussion question, then a synopsis of the text, followed by an analysis involving detailed theories and close readings. The discussion questions encourage student thought; however, several of the discussion questions include a yes or no question beginning with 'does' that could limit student's responses. Franks includes a works cited list at the end of each chapter instead of at the end of the entire text to show students a clearer example of what their papers will look like. *Social identity* contains no afterword, which would have been helpful for final concluding thoughts and to connect all ~~of~~ the main ideas; it ends abruptly after specific analysis of one text and fails to broaden back out. The two appendices provide a comprehensive and helpful list of additional discussion questions and a glossary of relevant historical and theoretical terms.

The Introduction provides historical context for the Victorian period and the questions of race, gender, class, and genre during this period to prepare the reader for the further chapters. Relying heavily on the canon of novels often chosen for Victorian courses, Franks includes the novels *Wuthering Heights, Jane Eyre, Vanity Fair, North and South, A Tale of Two Cities, Great Expectations, Middlemarch, Far from the Madding Crowd, Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, and

The Odd Women. Three chapters explicitly address genre, and she mentions genre in other chapters in connection to the other main topics. Her effective explanations of genre include metafiction in *Vanity Fair* (Ch. 6), allegory in *A Tale of Two Cities* (Ch. 10), and the novel of ideas in *The Odd Women* (Ch. 27). Franks includes three examples of the Neo-Victorian genre: *Wide Sargasso Sea* (*Jane Eyre*, Ch. 4), *Jack Maggs* (*Great Expectations*, Ch. 13), and *Mary Reilly* (*The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, Ch. 24). This genre involves retelling canonical Victorian texts from the viewpoint of minor characters through which Franks provides more direct insight into analysis of the concerns present in the texts, such as gender, race, colonialism, imperialism, and sexual violence.

The exploration of gender in the Victorian period begins with *Wuthering Heights* (Ch. 2), moves to *North and South* (Ch. 7), *Middlemarch* (Ch. 16 & 17), *Far from the Madding Crowd* (Ch. 20 & 22), *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (Ch. 26), and ends with *The Odd Women* (Ch. 27 & 28). In these chapters, she provides relevant accounts of the history of women's rights, the bias of the law providing men more freedom, the separate spheres ideology, and the Angel in the House, drawing on Gilbert and Gubar's major scholarly contribution, *Madwoman in the Attic*. Specifically, in Chapter 7, Franks examines *North and South*'s Margaret as fulfilling the expected roles in the home associated with both males and females all while maintaining the semblance of separate spheres ideology and masculine authority. In a different vein, in Chapter 17, Franks provides a character analysis of the busybody, Mrs. Cadwallader, from *Middlemarch*. In this analysis, Mrs. Cadwallader's sarcasm emerges as a product of the separate spheres ideology as she strives to gain power through gossip and manipulation; however, she does not provide a threat to the social structure because others see her as a means of entertainment. Franks's explanations also include appropriate overlapping concerns, drawing in psychoanalysis (Ch. 2), character analysis (Ch. 17), biography of the author (Ch. 22), religion (Ch. 26), genre (Ch. 27), and class (Ch. 28). These chapters include a valuable array of examples regarding the expectations and limitations for women during this period and examples of how these novels demonstrate ways women could be independent while operating in this society.

As an extension of the discussion of gender, Franks develops five chapters detailing the effect of class during this period: *Wuthering Heights* (Ch. 1), *North and South* (Ch. 8), *Middlemarch* (Ch. 18), *Far from the Madding Crowd* (Ch. 21), and

Tess of the D'Urbervilles (Ch. 25). These chapters begin by demonstrating the complexities of switching classes due to the belief that moral differences existed between classes. Franks then moves into demonstrating that forming relationships with people from different classes can destabilize, not necessarily destroy, the expected systems. In Chapter 21, she explains how the minor characters in *Far from the Madding Crowd* depicted as rural serve as the foil for the Gabriel or as additional humor as the use of dialect had become more popular during this time. Her analysis of class provides a useful discussion of the function of class in the Victorian period in a way that students can grasp the nuances of a power structure that they don't experience in modern culture.

The discussion of race covers a smaller range of texts than the previous two topics as only three chapters focus on it: *Jane Eyre* (Ch. 3), *Vanity Fair* (Ch. 5), and *Great Expectations* (Ch. 15). In relation to *Jane Eyre*, Franks explains how the Victorians would have connected skin color with biology and morality (Ch. 3). By cataloging the references to skin color in this novel, she places the different characters in categories of whiteness and darkness based on the descriptions and defines their moral characteristics in relation to this description. She places Maria Temple, Diana Rivers, Rosamond Oliver, and St. John Rivers in the whiteness category and Edward Rochester, Blanche Ingram, and Bertha Mason in the darkness category. By doing this, she critiques the Victorian idea of colorism that connects skin color to morality. When explaining *Vanity Fair*, she uses psychoanalysis to gracefully observe the different types of racism during the period against Black Caribbeans, Arabs, Jews, Irish, and French (Ch. 5). Her conversation about race confronts the uncomfortable reality of Victorian texts directly instead of ignoring it or glossing over it. She defines casual racism during the period and relates the conversation of race to our current conversations, providing a warning that modern discussions can easily overwhelm the relevance to Victorian texts. Focusing on the historical context helps to have relevant conversations, while maintaining focus on the actual texts. Given the title of Franks's book, I expected a diverse range of texts included in the volume; however, the major novels discussed were all written by the White English middle-class and were standard canonized novels. Including works by authors from different backgrounds and races would have enhanced and strengthened the conversation Franks begins.

While *Social Identity* mainly focuses on the topics included in the title, six chapters significantly extend outside of these in a way that still fits the scope of the work. Chapters 9 and 11 focus heavily on the historical context of *A Tale of Two Cities* regarding the tensions between the French and the English, while also exposing the violent and unjust legal systems. Chapters 12 and 23 (*Great Expectations* and *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*) rely almost exclusively on Freudian psychoanalysis to conduct individual character studies of Pip's guilt and Jekyll's sexual repression. Chapter 14 examines the religious connotations of the specific image of fire in *Great Expectations*, and Chapter 19 provides a form of speculation regarding epidemic in *Middlemarch*.

Overall, *Social Identity and Literary Form in the Victorian Novel* provides helpful essays to begin having conversations about Victorian literature, specifically in a classroom context.

Bibliography

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