

# Ambivalence Towards the Traditional Victorian Model of Femininity in Rosa Nouchette Carey's *Rue with a Difference*

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## Abstract

*Like other novels by Rosa Nouchette Carey, Rue with a Difference focuses on female experience as revealed through women's concerns surrounding their various family roles. It deals with marriage and maternity at a time when such domestic-related issues were obsolete and when the pervasive ideology of domesticity gave way to late Victorian ideologies. The novel's adherence to traditional domestic ideals was one of the reasons why it was considered outdated and doomed to oblivion for the most part of the twentieth century. Attempting to reassess Rue with a Difference from a more neutral perspective afforded by the passage of time, the present article is designed to prove that the novel does not fully approve the domestic ideology, displaying instead an ambivalent attitude towards it and its model of femininity. By comparing the representations of feminine family roles in Rue with a Difference with the non-fictional accounts of the models of womanhood promoted by the contrasting ideologies of Victorian culture, the paper will show that the angelic ideal is both supported and subverted within the same fictional text through the mixture of traditional and non-traditional features defining the main female characters.*

**Keywords:** representation, feminine family role, model of femininity, Victorian ideology, character construction

Rosa Nouchette Carey was a prolific English writer of the late Victorian and Edwardian periods. She was popular during her literary career mainly due to her female readership, who did not care too much whether her novels were highly appreciated by mainstream (male) critics or not (Hartnell 2000: 194). However, Carey's work was less enthusiastically received by critics and reviewers, who had mixed opinions about its quality (Crisp 1989: 23-24) and who increasingly considered it to have become outdated (Hartnell 2000: 191-192). The concern of Carey's novels with

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domestic matters relating to women at a time when the attention of the “supposedly well-informed” was concentrated on the New Woman is one of the reasons why these writings had been progressively dismissed since the last years of the nineteenth century and forgotten for a large part of the twentieth century. The present article is intended to contribute to the recovery of the fiction written by Rosa Nouchette Carey, which began at the end of the twentieth century, through the analysis of the most important female characters in *Rue with a Difference*. It attempts to prove that, despite the preoccupation with domesticity, Carey’s novels do not render female characters in total accordance with the traditional feminine model defined by Victorian domestic ideology, endowing them with certain attributes characterising the New Woman. This aspect reveals the ambivalence towards the angelic ideal characteristic of Carey’s works and their relatedness to the model of femininity prevalent during the period when *Rue with a Difference* was published.

Before presenting the main characters performing feminine family roles and determining the extent to which traditional and late Victorian concepts of womanhood are embedded in their construction, it is useful to briefly describe these concepts. Traditionally, Victorian women were expected to live up to the ideal of the Angel in the House. This model of femininity, which was promoted by the domestic ideology, depicted the ideal woman as a moral paragon in her roles of wife and mother. The angelic woman emanated a quiet and beneficial influence over her husband and children by displaying a wide range of positive moral qualities and feminine virtues, such as purity, innocence, sensitivity, gentleness, submissiveness, love, self-sacrifice, altruism and devotion (Nelson 1995: 20, 24, 30; Showalter 1999: 14; Nelson 2007: 27, Mitchell 2009: 267; Gorham 2013: 5). It was her mission to transform the home into a sanctuary of harmony, emotional security, health and comfort (Harrison 2000: 157).

In contrast to the traditional ideal of womanhood, the model of femininity which emerged and became increasingly popular during the last two decades of the nineteenth century – the New Woman – was not concerned with domesticity and femininity. Instead, it was concentrated on broadening women’s public roles and on increasing women’s rights, making them more similar to men (Rees 1977: 15; Vicinus 2013: ix-x). The New Woman was “mannish” and lacked all the features defining the Angel in the House (Sage 1999: 465). She was “unloving to children, impatient of

home and all that this includes" (Lynn Linton 1896: 43). In other respects, this type of woman had more social, economic and sexual independence than Victorian domestic ideology granted to women (Black et al. 2010: 103).

It is against the contrasting models outlined above that the two major female characters in *Rue with a Difference* are measured, attention being mainly paid to those similarities and differences which show how the traditional ideal is undermined in favour of the late Victorian feminist ideal.

One of the female characters the novel focuses on is Valerie, an upper-middle-class young widow. Although this woman is endowed with numerous positive moral qualities characteristic of the Angel in the House, such as tenderness, patience, maternal devotion and self-sacrifice, which describe her as an ideal mother, she is not an ideal wife and woman in the traditional sense. The narrative discloses through a range of external analepses, that Valerie "intellectually and spiritually [outgrew]" (Crisp, Ferres and Swanson 2000: 99) her husband and that their views differed on every subject. While Valerie was guided by the maxim "truth in word and truth in action" (RWAD: 34), her husband's words and preaching, as he was a clergyman, were inconsistent with his actions. Aware of her husband's lack of integrity, Valerie inwardly revolted against it, her life being transformed into "a secret martyrdom" (RWAD: 35). Despite her efforts to fulfil all her wifely responsibilities, her inner rebellion hindered her from being an angelic wife and from creating a warm domestic atmosphere for her husband. Being dissatisfied with her husband's inconsistency, Valerie could not be contentedly submissive to him, as the ideal wife was expected to be (Showalter 1999: 14), because, in her case, absolute and unquestioning submissiveness meant a compromise to her own integrity.

Valerie's disappointment in her husband generated a deep yearning for freedom from her unhappy marriage. Valerie has not fought for her wifely independence, nor has she openly expressed her desire to be independent. Therefore, this desire of her is revealed exclusively through her thoughts cluttering her mind after she regains her freedom through widowhood:

Valerie hardly understood herself at this period of her existence; she seemed to have come to a parting of the ways. Behind her lay the old

unsatisfying life, with its crushed hopes and bitter disillusion, its eager demands for happiness, its soul hunger and material prosperity, and before her lay the unexplored years – poverty and many cares – and freedom. Yes, freedom! For the first time since her girlhood she was free to live up to her own ideals of truth and duty. There were no galling restrictions on her liberty, no arbitrary human will to coerce her actions or fetter her movements. The obedience of the wife had sorely trammelled her, but the widow was a free woman; her path might be lonely and desolate, but there were no obstructions; her earthly and heavenly horizons were wider as they opened out before her sad eyes (*RWAD*: 177).

The first sentence and the final clause of the last sentence of this excerpt indicate that Valerie's inner world is focalized from her own perspective, which means that Valerie is both the internal character-focalizer and the focalized. From her point of view, which is supported by the external narrator, her wifehood was a painful experience because it did not satisfy her expectations and limited her autonomy. These two reasons are strongly emphasized here through the use of multiple phrases and words that convey the same or similar meanings. The first reason is pointed out through such phrases as *unsatisfying life*, *crushed hopes*, *bitter disillusion*, *eager demands for happiness* and *soul hunger*, and the second one is highlighted through the following synonymous groups of words: *galling restrictions*, *coerce her actions*, *fetter her movements*, *sorely trammelled her* and the term *obstructions*. The great variety of the lexical items employed to describe the same aspects of Valerie's former life seems to disclose the magnitude of its stifling effects, which have generated her overwhelming desire for freedom, best textually rendered in this quotation through Valerie's inner exclamation *Yes, freedom!*. Despite her confusion about the state she finds herself in, Valerie steps into the new phase of her life, which offers her, along with many difficulties, the long-yearned freedom to live according to her standards.

One more trait that Valerie has in common with the New Woman and that marks the departure of her image as a woman from the angelic ideal is her break with convention. Valerie is different from other women and unconventionality is the first characteristic assigned to her when she is introduced in the novel through other characters' perspectives. The novel begins with a dialogue between two women who discuss Valerie's behaviour after her husband's death. As stated by one of them, Valerie is "inexplicable"

(*RWAD*: 5), “a complete enigma” (*RWAD*: 4) and a woman with “a complex, [baffling] personality” (*RWAD*: 1). The reason this woman and some other characters do not understand Valerie and find fault with her conduct is that she does not conform to usual customs and traditions. For instance, they are shocked that Valerie wears regular clothes instead of mourning attire, “her sole concession to conventionality” being the black colour of her dress and the white of her cuffs and collar which indicates that she is a widow (*RWAD*: 16). Although Valerie is conscious of other people’s disapproval of her uncommon behaviour, she stands firm on her position and does not try to satisfy the societal expectations just to please them.

Besides her opposition to the custom of wearing mourning, Valerie has an unconventional outlook on marriage. She strongly endorses the egalitarian marriage built on love, which contradicts the patriarchal hierarchy advocated by the domestic ideology and the convention of marrying for financial security or social standing. The novel shows that Valerie considers equality and love as essential for a successful marriage through her repeated attempts to persuade her stepdaughter that “marriage without love is the one unpardonable sin” (*RWAD*: 269). Valerie’s support of an equitable relationship between spouses is also demonstrated by the fact that, in spite of her bitter marital experience, she renounces her status as a widow in favour of a married life with the man who treats her as his equal and respects her high principles of integrity and honesty. The external narrator tacitly assents to this view of matrimony by presenting at the happy end of the story three egalitarian couples, including that of Valerie and Mr. Nugent. Such an outcome is implicitly indicative of the narratorial approval of Valerie’s character as well, which is also suggested by the agreement existing between narrative and descriptive textual passages characterising Valerie and the argumentative parts of the text, through which the dominant ideology of the novel is directly communicated. Moreover, notwithstanding that the external narrator-focalizer generally does not criticise or openly agree with the protagonist’s thoughts, words and actions, holding an apparently neutral position, there are some cases when the narrative explicitly states that Valerie is right in her surmises and opinions about other characters, which contribute to revealing its approving attitude towards her.

Valerie’s strong, unconventional individuality, her desire for freedom and lack of complete wifely submission are the major similarities

between her image as a woman and the late Victorian feminine ideal. And although these characteristics are enough to prove that Valerie is not the epitome of the Angel in the House, they provide insufficient basis for regarding her as the embodiment of the New Woman. Valerie's description as a devoted and loving mother is the major argument against the late Victorian concept of femininity, which encouraged a hostile attitude towards motherhood. Apart from that, Valerie differs in many other respects from the New Woman. For instance, she is not intolerant of home and of everything related to it; she is not involved in the public sphere and displays feminine rather than masculine behaviour and habits. Accordingly, the novel's representation of the late Victorian upper-middle-class woman through the character of Valerie is a combination of traditional and unconventional features in which the former clearly prevail. Nonetheless, Valerie's endowment with certain attributes associated with late Victorian womanhood indicates that the literary text under the lens supports, to a limited degree, the New Woman ideology, carefully deconstructing the domestic ideology and its most pervasive ideal, which continued to be stereotypically ascribed to middle-class women up to the end of the nineteenth century.

The second female character depicted in *Rue with a Difference* is Pansy, Valerie's stepdaughter. Even from the opening pages of the novel, Pansy is described as an unconventional, late Victorian daughter. In spite of the fact that she has been brought up according to idealised expectations and upper-middle-class conventions regarding a daughter's education, namely she is educated at home by a governess (Steinbach 2012: 142), she enjoys more freedom than the ideal Victorian daughter was granted by the domestic ideology (Frost 2009: 33). Victorian domesticity expected daughters to remain in their parents' home until marriage, where their activities were strictly controlled (Nelson 2007: 86). These requirements were less commonly met during the decades before the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when the domestic ideology lost its popularity among the middle classes, being undermined by the New Woman ideology and child-centred doctrines (Griffin 2012: 38, Tosh 1996: 84-85, Robertson 2006: 422). Consequently, late Victorian middle-class girls were allowed more freedom of expression and action than their predecessors (Frost 2009: 165). Along these lines, the independence Pansy is given after her governess is dismissed by being permitted to wander in

Austria and the Tyrol, far away from her parents, who “have no possibility of communicating with her” (RWAD: 6), is a characteristic of her image as a girl that conflicts with the idealisation of girlhood promoted by the domestic ideology and that indicates similarity with the late Victorian model of femininity. Therefore, Pansy’s long wandering in foreign lands, which is called “Bohemian and up to date” (RWAD: 6) and which describes her as an unusual young woman, is strongly disapproved by a minor character with traditional ideas.

Unconventionality characterises other aspects of Pansy’s identity as well. It is expressed through her picturesque clothing, which suits her perfectly, and through her vivid and dramatic speech, related by the external narrator to her liking for “strong situations and startling paradoxes” (RWAD: 60). Another valuable indicator of Pansy’s individualistic personality is the pleasure she takes in shocking other people by her nonconformity to social norms. She is proud of being different from others and does not hide her own opinions and preferences, having an aggressive attitude towards people she dislikes. Pansy is portrayed as being too outspoken and straightforward not only with people outside her family, but also with those living in the same house with her. Even though she is “keenly alive to the minor morals of life” (RWAD: 305), being brought up in refined society, and despite her love for each member of her family, there are cases when she is so direct and blunt with them that she offends them. Such straightforwardness is a sign of Pansy’s misbehaviour and clearly not one of the traits the ideal Victorian daughter was expected to display.

Pansy’s excessive outspokenness is not the only facet of her behaviour that portrays her as a naughty child, and, accordingly, as an unconventional daughter. The novel reveals the fact that Pansy fails in various respects to conduct herself in an acceptable manner. The external narrator frequently emphasises that the girl’s way of acting is inappropriate by using explicit remarks such as: “Pansy, who was in one of her perverse moods, turned a deaf ear to this” (RWAD: 276); “It was the act of an undisciplined child” (RWAD: 266); “being in a mischievous mood” (RWAD: 353); etc. Moreover, all the qualities that designate Pansy’s behaviour as bad – like perversity, waywardness, irritability, wilfulness, opposition, wrong-headedness – are directly mentioned in the text mainly by the external narrator, but also by other characters, in particular by Valerie.

Pansy herself acknowledges that she behaves “like a wayward child, and [tries her stepmother’s] patience” (*RWAD*: 337). These explicit means of qualifying Pansy are supported and reinforced by the qualification communicated through the words she utters to the people close to her and through the actions she displays towards them when she is in one of her mischievous or perverse states of mind.

While Pansy’s attributes described above indicate that her image as a daughter is not constructed in accordance with the angelic ideal, the latter is only partially challenged. Despite her instability of moods and the prevalence of negative traits during distressing times, Pansy behaves in a warm and friendly manner towards her stepmother. When she is in one of her good moods, she delights Valerie with “her bright companionship” (*RWAD*: 252). Similarly, she was a good companion for her father, thus performing one of the duties the Victorian domesticity required daughters to fulfil towards their parents (Nelson 2007: 84, 87). Even when Pansy is in one of her obstinate or perverse moods, she is not disrespectful to her stepmother. She does not quarrel with Valerie, even if their opinions about Pansy’s relationship with Gurth, her betrothed, are entirely different. Instead, with deep emotion, Pansy explains to her stepmother that she is sad for not being able to follow her advice. This is one of the reasons why the girl’s self-assertion does not affect their close relationship, which otherwise is strengthened by Pansy’s generosity and unselfishness. These two virtues are displayed in Pansy’s actions towards Valerie, as she selflessly offers herself to help her stepmother, like Ruth, whom she identifies with, to Naomi (*RWAD*: 70). She moves together with Valerie and her son in a humble cottage in order to take care of her family, oblivious to her own interests and comfort. She lavishly spends her income on them and is willing to live more modestly to save money for Ronald’s education. In addition, she offers Valerie moral support in difficult moments. Therefore, Valerie calls her “the best lover and the most liberal giver in the world” (*RWAD*: 85). Being endowed with generosity, self-sacrifice, devotion and tenderness, Pansy’s image as a daughter approximates, in this respect, the image of the ideal Victorian daughter.

Putting all the pieces together, the novel’s filial figure represented through the character of Pansy is particularly complex, combining traditional and non-traditional, late Victorian elements, thus departing from both Victorian concepts of femininity in focus. On the one hand, although Pansy



has very good relationships with her parents, providing both of them with her warm companionship and showing her unselfish generosity to her widowed stepmother, she is not an ideal daughter. Being a girl with unbalanced personality, Pansy is often dominated by negative moods that influence her behaviour. Hence, she is frequently described as a naughty, wayward daughter, who also disobeys her parents by choosing to marry against their wishes. On the other hand, despite Pansy's bold self-assertion and her freedom to display her individualistic, contradictory personality, which are points of similarity between the fictional depiction of the late Victorian middle-upper-class girl and the New Woman, there are many differences between the two. Pansy is not characterised by masculine qualities and does not display a conflictual attitude towards domesticity, nor is she interested in having any achievements in the public domain. Nonetheless, this female character shares enough features with late Victorian womanhood to indicate that the Angel in the House is both supported and subverted.

Both representations of feminine family roles in *Rue with a Difference* are distinguished by a mixture of attributes associated with the angelic Victorian woman and the New Woman, with the former predominant. Accordingly, they are not rendered in consistency with any of the two models of femininity defined by the contrasting ideologies at work within Victorian society. The characters' departure from the traditional standards of womanhood reveals an ambivalent attitude towards Victorian domestic ideology. Consequently, the argument that Carey's writings are committed to the ideal of domesticity – one of the reasons due to which they were neglected – is refuted, without denying the fact that *Rue with a Difference* is more concerned with traditional matters than with those which were increasingly popular at the end of the nineteenth century. This latter aspect seems to be the result of the requirements Rosa Nouchette Carey had to meet if she wanted her works to be published (Hartnell 2000: 10). Nevertheless, as far as its author's condition as a woman writer allowed, the novel under the lens displays the ideological context of the late Victorian middle classes, at a time when old and new concepts coexisted, by building the images of late Victorian upper-middle-class women out of traditional and non-traditional elements. Thus, *Rue with a Difference*, as well as other novels by Carey, facilitates the modern audience's understanding of the ideas and concepts governing middle classes of the late nineteenth-century England, being of significant value for present-day readers and critics alike.

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