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**Proposal: Religious Criticisms in Victorian Literature**

The Evangelical Movement played a major role in shaping Victorian society as “one of the most powerful sources of inspiration and sites of association in Victorian Britain.”[[1]](#footnote-1) This influence, both within London and spread throughout the empire, inspired thought and criticism in the fiction of the time period. The fiction addressed such varied topics as hypocrisy, the missionary movement, the culture wars for the focus (internal or empirical) of the nation, revival meetings, and specifically the persuasive speaking skills of church leaders. My proposed research paper will examine the commentary regarding this movement inside of the major Victorian texts we’ve studied this term: Charlotte Bronte’s *Jane Eyre*, Charles Dickens’ *Bleak House*, and Wilkie Collins’ *The Moonstone*.   
 One topic of particular interest in this exploration is that of missionary zeal. While philanthropic practice was central to the agenda of evangelicals, “missionary supporters at home were dismissed as maniacs obsessed with foreign affairs.”[[2]](#footnote-2)1 While most fictional depictions of those missionaries in the literature are harsh and unforgiving (especially in Dickens), there are messages of genuine belief and self-sacrifice for the cause of Christianity that must be part of the conversation as well. Characters of particular interest in this topic include Bronte’s St. John, Collins’ Godfrey Ablewhite and Miss Clack, and Dickens’ Mrs. Pardiggle and Mrs. Jellyby. A balanced approach must also include a discussion of the benefits of the missionary meetings within England, particularly that of encouraging “Victorian evangelicals to think about colonised people on a regular basis.”[[3]](#footnote-3)1  
 Another major focus for the paper will be the reliance on rhetorical preaching of Evangelical leaders. Depicted as golden-tongued hypocrites in the literature, characters such as Godfrey Ablewhite, Reverend Chadband, and St. John draw captivated audiences into actions, feelings, and values that they don’t necessarily have. Of the three, St. John is the only one who can be defended, as he is one whose actions show that he is willing to “lose his life” in order to gain Christ.[[4]](#footnote-4)2 A historical approach will also be taken in providing background to this reputation of outspokenness.  
 Additionally, biographical information will be explored to discuss the philosophies and events that drive the literature of Bronte, Dickens, and Collins. For instance, the difference in their views concerning final judgment directly contributes to the type of satire found in Collins versus what is found in Dickens. Dickens’ attempts to coalesce the ideas of Divine Providence and evolutionary theory can be seen in *Bleak House*.[[5]](#footnote-5)3 Bronte will also be explored, especially in the context of her entire family and the direct influences and clear ties with religious individuals around the family.

Also of interest to this research are the characters of Rosanna Spearman (The Moonstone) and Helen Burns (Jane Eyre). Both will be placed inside the context of the values of the Evangelical Movement and examined for both their own actions and the actions of others towards them. As they are both of lower social status, a connection will be made between these authors’ commentary and the biblical Beatitudes from Christ’s Sermon on the Mount.

1. Thorne, Susan. “Religion and Empire at Home.” *At Home with the Empire*. Ed. Hall, Catherine and Sonya Rose. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006. 143-165. Print. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. 1 Thorne, Susan. “Religion and Empire at Home.” *At Home with the Empire*. Ed. Hall, Catherine and Sonya Rose. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006. 143-165. Print. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. 2 Thormahlen, Marianne. *The Brontes and Religion*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999. Print. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. 3 Axton, William F. “Religious and Scientific Imagery in *Bleak House*.” *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 22.4 (1968). *JSTOR*. Web. 10 Mar. 2012. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)