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The Exemplary Deviant: Wynnie as a Symbol of Victorian Womanhood in *The Vicar’s Daughter*

Ginger Stelle

George MacDonald’s active interest in women’s emancipation is well known. *Most of his heroines challenge Victorian norms for women, and in The Vicar’s Daughter this is the whole plot of the story. Wynnie and Percivale quietly reject all the absurd cultural rituals and stereotyping of the period and she lives a happy and fulfilled life. Wynnie’s story of her marriage is told in a way that must have inspired and helped numerous other young married women to achieve the same fulfilment.*

As a novelist, George MacDonald possessed one of the most effective means of discussing the issues affecting Victorian society. Despite the emphasis of modern critics on his fantasies, his novels remain important as they reveal a writer very interested in these serious questions. As such, he was in touch with many of the movements of his time. He had contact with the Christian Socialists, with advocates for women’s emancipation, with the higher ranks of government, and with the literary world. As this list implies, he was in some things a rebel against the establishment camp. He cared passionately for the plight of the poor and for better education for women and children. (Triggs v)

The betterment of women and children is an issue he repeatedly addressed in his novels. In fact, Victorian society devoted so much time and effort to debating the question of women’s rights that it would have been difficult for him to completely avoid mentioning it in his novels.

In 1868, MacDonald addressed this issue directly in *The Seaboard Parish*: “And here I may remark in regard to one of the vexed questions of the day—the rights of women—that what women demand it is not for men to withhold. It is not their business to lay down the law for women. That women must lay down for themselves” (291). His viewpoint was actually very “liberal, even feminist,” for Victorian England (Raeper 259) although he claims otherwise a few lines later. Nonetheless, his considerations of this issue are rarely so direct. In fact, they are often so subtle that critics miss

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them altogether, resulting in observations such as that made by Richard Reis: “Most of MacDonald’s girls, however, are indistinguishable from each other and from the supposedly typical Victorian young lady of sensitivity and delicacy” (67). In reality, his female characters continually challenge, albeit subtly, standard Victorian ideas about women. A primary example of this comes in *The Vicar’s Daughter*.

*The Vicar’s Daughter* does not have a conventional plot with beginning and middle episodes advancing toward a conclusion. Instead, it opens with the wedding of Ethelwyn (Wynnie) Walton and Charles Percivale and traces them through the ups and downs of their early married life. The story consists of social engagements, children, money matters, servant problems, and so on. A significant amount of time is devoted to the development of a friendship between Wynnie and Marion Clare, a social worker. There is no ultimate denouement. As the novel ends, Wynnie and Percivale are still happily married, and there is every indication that life is going to continue very much as it has. Quite simply, MacDonald presents a full-length portrait of Victorian married life. Although critical interpretations are few, an interesting trend has emerged. Robert Wolff’s synopsis is as follows: “[T]wo characters engage our interest: Lady Bernard, drawn from Lady Byron, immensely charitable, and ready to reprove her servants when they are rude to a gentleman; and Miss Clair, perhaps suggested by Octavia Hill, who performs prodigies as a social worker in London” (296). Patricia Thomson, likewise, focuses her attention exclusively on these two ladies (34-35). Neimer critic mentions the rifle character and narrator, the vicar’s daughter. Yet, it is through Wynnie that MacDonald examines the complex life of Victorian women, while, at each step, he challenges the prevailing cultural stereotypes.

For the Victorians, a woman’s most important role was that of wife. Prior to marriage, her life was focused on getting married; after the wedding, it was focused on performing the duties of a wife. Nonetheless, it was unusual for a Victorian novel to feature a married woman as its central figure. The difficult set of realities facing women after marriage was not something society wanted its young women to understand (McKnight 12). Yet MacDonald sets as his narrator a woman who has been married for nine years, whose purpose is to recount “the history of [her] married life” which, as her potential publisher comments “must contain a number of incidents which, without the least danger of indiscretion, might be communicated to the public to the great advantage of all who read them” (4). MacDonald
makes clear here that he intends to depict Wynnie’s marriage as an example to others of what marriage can and should be.

In his biography of MacDonald, William Raeper claims that “MacDonald’s Christianity asserted patriarchy and submission” in marriage, and that Wynnie, although placed in the position of narrator, sees herself “only in relation to [her] menfolk and voice[s] the opinions held by them” (261). As evidence, he quotes her comment:

> every woman is not as good as every man, and [...] it is not necessary to the dignity of a wife that she should assert even equality with her husband. Let him assert her equality or superiority if he will; but were it a fact, it would be a poor one for her to assert, seeing her glory is in her husband. To seek the chief place is especially unfitting the marriage feast. (15)

But MacDonald is not insisting upon female submission or claiming that women are inherently inferior to men. Wynnie’s final statement indicates that he is instead drawing on a particular New Testament ideal:

> When someone invites you to a wedding feast, do not take the place of honor, for a person more distinguished than you may have been invited. If so, the host who invited both of you will come and say to you, “Give this man your seat.” Then, humiliated, you will have to take the least important place. But when you are invited, take the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he will say to you, “Friend, move up to a better place.” Then you will be honored in the presence of all your fellow guests. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted. (Luke 14:8-11)

Though talking about a marriage feast, this passage has nothing to do with “submission and patriarchy” in marriage. MacDonald’s views about women were grounded in his New Testament vision of interpersonal relationships. In this context, Wynnie’s observation has less to do with the “Woman Question” than with the quality of humility every Christian should possess.

In fact, in contrast to “submission and patriarchy,” the marriages in *The Vicar’s Daughter* are based on mutual love and respect, beginning with the example set by Wynnie’s parents:

> it was no unusual thing for them to take opposite sides to those they had previously advocated—each happening at the
time, possibly enlightened by the foregone arguments of the other, to be impressed with the correlate truth, as my father calls the other side of a thing. [...] Discussions between them differed in this from what I have generally heard between married people, that it was always founded on a tacit understanding of certain unmentioned principles [...] I fancy we learned more from their differences than from their agreements; for of course it was the differences that brought out their minds most, and chiefly led us to think that we might understand[...] [T]he openness with which every question, for whose concealment there was no special reason, was discussed, did more than even any direct instruction we received to develop what thinking faculty might be in us. (14-15)

Clearly, Wynnie’s mother is not afraid to speak her mind, and her husband is open to hearing her opinion, even when it differs from his. Neither parent always wins. They have a shared set of principles, fully understood by both of them. They spend time debating a variety of subjects. Furthermore, they openly disagree with one another in the presence of their children, allowing them to see the basis upon which their marriage is built.

Wynnie begins the story of her own marriage at its proper beginning—her wedding day. From the start, MacDonald establishes that this is a marriage based on mutual understanding:

After [my parents] left us, or rather we left them, my husband did not speak to me for nearly an hour: I knew why, and was very grateful. He would not show his new face in the midst of my old loves and their sorrows, but would give me time to re-arrange the [53] grouping so as myself to bring him in when all was ready for him. I know that was what he was thinking, or feeling rather; and I understood him perfectly. At last, when I had got things a little tidier inside me, and had got my eyes to stop, I held out my hand to him, and then—I knew that I was his wife. (21)

As mentioned, MacDonald openly states his intention to set up Wynnie and Percivale as an example for other married couples. They share a strong bond. They know each other’s thought patterns, and they respect each other’s needs. Their relationship creates an atmosphere of openness. They are free to disagree, even to argue, ultimately reaching a compromise acceptable to
both (84-85). They tease one another (192-93). They lovingly reprove one another (121, 307). She opens his mail (303). They have a relationship based on respect and affection. 

Furthermore, there is a strong physical attraction between these two people. The Victorian era, particularly in the middle class, was marked by its prudery, even between married persons. “Consuming of passionate kisses” were in direct defiance of how an ideal wife was to act (Casteras 190). Nonetheless, on several occasions, their physical relationship is evident. Wynnie “threw [herself] into his arms” (33). She “lay [her] head on his knees” (85). In another incident, they share this exchange:

“I’ve brought you the baby to kiss,” I said. [...] 
“I was in such a hurry to bring her.”
“To be kissed?”
“No, not exactly. It wasn’t her I was in a hurry to bring. It was myself.”
“Ah! You wanted to be kissed, did you?”
“No, sir. I didn’t want to be kissed; but I did so want to kiss you, Percivale.” (98) 

This overwhelming desire to kiss would have been deemed inappropriate to experience, let alone record for everyone to read. Yet, MacDonald designates this relationship as an example of a happy, successful, fulfilling marriage. 

Along with the mantle of wife, a woman also acquired the role of homemaker. The Victorian middle class household was an intricate organization. A Victorian wife “planned the budget, ran a large and complex household, ordered food and arranged meals, nursed the ill, supervised her children’s early education, and guided the moral development of children and servants. She needed the skills of a restaurant manager, dietitian, nurse, teacher, cleric, bookkeeper, and housekeeper, and the strength of all these combined” (Gorsky 27). Furthermore, skill as a homemaker was often viewed as “an essential part of Christian womanhood [...] as part of spirituality” (Wilson 149). Failure was unfeminine, unacceptable, and, by implication, unspiritual. 

Wynnie embraces her new role with gusto. She feels ownership in her home: “I presume there is a certain amount of the queenly element in every woman, so that she cannot feel perfectly at ease without something to govern, however small and however troublesome her queendom may be” (71). She thoroughly enjoys shopping for furniture and setting up her “nest” (26). Nonetheless, she is forced to learn as she goes. In one early scene, she
is “in the kitchen with Sarah, giving her instructions about a certain dish as if [she herself] had made it twenty times, whereas [Wynnie] had only just learned how from a shilling cookery book” (28). Her first attempt at entertaining guests is nearly a disaster (90). As MacDonald illustrates, skill at homemaking is acquired, not innate.

Furthermore, by Victorian standards at least, she is not entirely successful when it comes to managing her servants, one of the most important functions of a Victorian wife. She acknowledges this when, nearly a quarter of the way through her book, she says “It may have seemed, to some of my readers, occasion for surprise that the mistress of a household should have got so far in the construction of a book without saying a word about her own or other people’s servants in general” (85). Jenni Calder, in her book, *Women and Marriage in Victorian Fiction*, explains, “It was crucial for the married woman to be able to control her servants [...] The woman who was helpless in the face of her servants was a failure” (85). To call Wynnie “helpless” would be an overstatement. Nonetheless, when discussing her “intensely stupid” cook, she openly admits that some people would “of course feel contemptuous towards any one who would put up with such a woman for a single moment after she could find another.” She defends her position, explaining, “both I and my husband have a strong preference for living in a family, rather than in a hotel. [...] My servants are, if not yet so much members of the family as I could wish, gradually becoming more so; there is a circulation of common life through the household, rendering us an organization although as yet perhaps a low one” (86-87). This results in strange dinner times, often inedible meals, and an occasionally irate husband. Despite this, she would rather have this situation with its accompanying sense of family than the most efficiently run household with the most accomplished and orderly servants. Here, again, a characteristic Victorian would not have deemed such a shortcoming as essential to her family’s happiness.

Despite the Victorian insistence upon separate spheres with the home as a woman’s proper domain, women remained members of society. With marriage, a woman assumed a new status in the social hierarchy, with social duties to perform in addition to those at home. MacDonald points to the triviality of many of these rituals. For example, mornings were spent calling on various people: new neighbours, old friends, and acquaintances not particularly well liked whose company must be endured lest some offence be given. As Wynnie describes, “They—we—only talk about the weather and our children and servants, and that sort of thing.” [...] “But there never is any
thing sensible said about any of them,—not that I know of (7-8). Nonetheless, this practice took up a substantial portion of a Victorian woman’s time.

Also, women’s social relations operated on a strict system of reciprocity. If someone called upon a woman, she was obligated to return the call at the earliest possible time, whether she wanted to or not. The same was true for social engagements, such as dinner invitations. In one incident, Wynnie petitions her husband to agree to invite her cousin Judy and Judy’s husband to dinner: [55]

“We have been twice to dine with them,” I said.
“Well, don’t you think that enough for a while?”
“I’m talking of asking them here now.”
“Couldn’t you go and see your cousin some morning instead?”
“It’s not that I want to see my cousin particularly. I want to ask them to dinner.”
“Oh!” [Percivale] said, as if he couldn’t in the least make out what I was after, “I thought people asked people because they desired their company.”
“But, you see, we owe them a dinner.” (81-82)

She admits she does not particularly want to see her family. She wants to repay her “debt” (84). MacDonald is criticising the superficiality that marked these practices, but, for a very long time, these superficial social niceties were all women had.

In addition to all the questions surrounding women’s place in society, a debate raged on women’s capacity for friendship with one another. A popular opinion stated that “female friendships were notoriously shallow, most often a ‘rehearsal’ for the ‘serious business’ of relationships with men.” Real camaraderie could only occur between middle aged, childless women of differing strengths of character (Nestor 12). Even some women, such as Eliza Linton, believed that women could not have a relationship with each other “free from jealousy” (qtd. in Nestor 14). As MacDonald illustrates, many of the relationships between Victorian women, were, in fact, shallow. However, he also demonstrates that women were capable of deep, genuine friendship. He presents two women, one young and single, the other young, married, and the mother of an ever-growing family. In addition to socializing with each other, Wynnie frequently helps Marion in her work (164). She is the first person (after Percivale, of course) whom Wynnie turns to when she discovers that one of her children is missing (197). They confess their faults and mistakes to each other (154, 226). When Percivale is ill,
requiring much of Wynnie’s attention, Marion steps in to see that Wynnie is relieved periodically to get some rest and also that Wynnie’s children are not neglected (289). They confide in one another (373) but know when not to press for information (366). They each have the other’s best interests at heart and do what they can to help one another. Their relationship is entirely free from the competitiveness, jealousy, and antagonism Victorians believed characterized all female friendships (Nestor 13-14). Clearly MacDonald was challenging those accepted stereotypes.

Another anticipated role women assumed after marriage was that of mother. Along with running the home, rearing the children was a central task in a woman’s life. At this time, “no one seriously challenged the deep-rooted assumption that it was a prime duty of the married woman to produce children” (Calder 159). Nonetheless, their profound ambivalence towards female sexuality made Victorians nervous about discussing children, particularly pregnancy and childbirth. Despite the acknowledgment that children were nearly inevitable, pregnancy was virtually unacknowledged in popular discourse. Victorian novels tended not to depict the early years of marriage: they either ended with the marriage proposal or they skipped from the acceptance of the proposal to a period several years later, allowing the heroine to re-emerge with children without the reader witnessing her transformation from virgin to mother. (Engelhardt 163)

However, MacDonald’s book is a portrait of the early years of a marriage. The issue of child-bearing is one he is unable to ignore. True, he does not address it openly. He skirts it with references to Wynnie as “not well” (59) and describes her excessive emotionalism (42) and mood swings (73). Still, there can be no question about her condition, for she observes, “what feelings could be commoner than those which now made me blessed among women?” (73). MacDonald defies the taboo to acknowledge a condition with which women everywhere could identify.

If pregnancy was an unmentionable subject, childbirth was even more so, despite its frequency in an age when large families were common. MacDonald and his wife had eleven children; it is reasonable to assume that he knew something about childbirth. Though he does not go so far as to illustrate the actual process of childbirth, he rejoins Wynnie in the immediate aftermath:

I woke one morning, after a sound sleep [...]

[56]
The room was so dark that I thought for a moment what a fog there must be; but the next, I forgot everything at hearing a little cry, [...] it was the cry of my first and only chicken, which I had not yet seen, but which my mother now held in her grandmotherly arms, ready to hand her to me. I dared not speak; for I felt very weak, and was afraid of crying from delight. I looked in my mother’s face; and she folded back the clothes, and laid the baby down beside me, with its little head resting on my arm [...] 

Never shall I forget the unutterable content of that hour. It was not gladness, nor was it thankfulness, that filled my heart, but a certain absolute contentment [...] Besides, the state of perfect repose after what had passed was in itself bliss; the very sense of weakness was delightful, for I had earned the right to be weak, to rest as much as I pleased, to be important and to be congratulated.

Somehow I had got through. (76-77) Wynnie’s description of her physical condition “after what had passed” borders dangerously on breaking the rule that insisted childbirth happen “offstage” (Gorsky 20). Since childbirth is a momentous event in any woman’s life, and for the early years of many marriages, her story would not be complete without a record of it.

Children were central to Victorian family life, and their care and upbringing was the primary task of a wife and mother. It was expected that, with appropriate motherly feelings, a woman would embrace the tasks of child-rearing and devote herself wholly to them. A woman who disliked children was hardly considered to be a woman at all (Gorsky 34). Likewise, a mother who did not personally see to the care of her own children was hardly considered a mother (McKnight 17). With appropriate zeal, Wynnie welcomes her new duties (78). Her child, later followed by others, becomes one of the chief concerns of her life. [57]

However, they are not her entire life. She openly expresses concern that her new baby is coming between her and her husband (97). She and Percivale take outings without their children, observing that “precious as children are, every pleasure is not enhanced by their company” (191). Furthermore, she is involved with Marion in her work, a task which takes her out of her home and away from her children, if only for a relatively small amount of time (164). With this association, MacDonald executes a direct
attack on the Victorian idea that a woman’s life was supposed to revolve entirely around home, family, and, especially, children. Wynnie explains, “[Marion’s] society did much to keep my heart open, and to prevent it from becoming selfishly absorbed in its cares for husband and children. For love which is only concentrating its force, that is, which is not at the same time widening its circle is itself doomed, and for its objects ruinous, be those objects ever so sacred” (250-51). For a woman to have a healthy and happy life, and to provide a healthy and happy home for her family, it was important to retain outside associations—something Victorian society did not accept.

All of these were roles the average Victorian woman would have been familiar with; however, MacDonald does not stop there. He includes another; one with which not all women were familiar, but which was becoming increasingly common: woman as writer/narrator. There was, in the mid-nineteenth century, a literary convention asserting a woman’s fundamental inability to shape and narrate a story, particularly if that story were her own (Case 17). When the plot necessitated the use of a woman’s own voice, generally it was couched within the larger frame of a male narrator, excluding

female narrators from the process of shaping the experiences they narrate into a coherent and meaningful story [...] a feminine narrator typically provides only the raw material of a narrative, which is usually shaped and given meaning by a male “master-narrator” within the text, or by an authorial or editorial frame that serves the same function. (Case 13)

MacDonald employs this convention when he gives the particulars of Marion’s life (132-53). She tells her story to Wynnie who incorporates it into the larger narrative structure of her book. What, is important to note is that MacDonald does not use a “male master-narrator,” but a female. He takes that literary convention and turns it completely around on itself. Furthermore, besides being given the authority and ability to frame Marion’s story, Wynnie is given the authority and ability to tell, in completely her own words, her own story. Moreover, MacDonald not only presents a woman telling her story; he presents a woman writing her story, with the intent of publication. By the mid-nineteenth century, female writers were hardly a novelty, but “combining marriage or family with authorship” was still looked down upon (Gorsky 158). Wynnie is the wife of an artist, and “to serve as muse for a male artist, inspiring him through physical beauty that symbolized inner purity, fit[ted] woman’s idealized role; to heed the muse and create...
art of her own was another story. Artists and writers—especially women—hovered on the fringes of respectability” (Gorsky 154). This fact, coupled with questions regarding the narrative authority of women, meant that it was necessary to provide Wynnie a justification for writing (Case 11). MacDonald, as described, establishes this justification at the very beginning. Wynnie’s endeavour becomes as “a social service rather than [...] an artistic” activity, making it palatable to the Victorian mind (Cohen 3).

Even with this justification, Wynnie is not eager to undertake the enterprise. It was common for narrators, even male narrators, to introduce themselves in an “apologetic and self-deprecating” manner (Case 2). True to this convention, she claims to be “much afraid of writing nonsense” (1). Furthermore, in her eyes, “the very notion of writing a book seemed preposterous” (3). Ultimately, it takes the combined efforts of her husband, father, publisher, and a family friend to convince her to try. Her reticence is in keeping with established literary conventions regarding feminine narration, as is the condition upon which she finally approves: that her husband be the final authority to approve or disapprove anything she writes (4). Nothing more is said about her as a writer until much later, in the chapter titled “Retrospective,” when she observes, “How impossible it seemed to me that I should ever write a book! Well or ill done, it is almost finished” (313). Regardless of narrative modesty and protestations of unworthiness, Wynnie writes a book.

Furthermore, she objects repeatedly that she has given no thought to the art of writing (314,354). As already mentioned, one of her conditions is that Percivale read what she writes, so that she can correct anything he does not like. The only recorded incident of him commenting on her book is when he describes a particular passage as “ponderous [...] speaking only from the point of art.” To which, she responds, “I know nothing about that kind of thing. [...] And it is too late, so far at least as this book is concerned to begin to study it now” (355). It is noteworthy that her husband’s only recorded objection to her book is one that she rejects altogether, choosing her own path over his suggestion. Also, despite her protestations to the contrary, she does have a theory about the writing and arrangement of books:

A biography cannot be constructed with the art of a novel, for this reason: that a novel is constructed on the artist’s scale, with swift-returning curves; a biography on the divine scale, whose circles are so large that they shoot beyond this world, sometimes even before we are able to detect in them the curve
by which they will at length round themselves back towards completion. (314)

Again, in keeping with accepted literary conventions of the time, Wynnie claims inadequacy as a writer but proceeds to demonstrate that she, though a woman, is capable of producing a book of quality.

In his portrait of Wynnie, MacDonald illustrates the primary roles Victorian women were expected to fulfil—woman as wife, homemaker, member of society, and mother. These positions were familiar to most women. Wynnie is a wife but an equal partner in a marriage based on mutual love and respect. She is a homemaker but not [59] an altogether successful one. She is a member of society, fulfilling the duties of such, but dismissing many of them as silly and unimportant. She is a mother, but not with an all-consuming devotion to her children, excluding all else. Finally, he gives her another role: she is a writer and narrator, and she is a successful one. Above all else, Ethelwyn Walton Percivale is happy and fulfilled in her life. By portraying Wynnie as slightly deviant in her performance of these roles while nonetheless setting her up as an example for others to follow, MacDonald directly challenged his culture’s standard views regarding the roles of women in society.

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