IJCRT.ORG ISSN : 2320-2882

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

# Blue Victorianism and the Gendered Waters: Fluid Identities in *The Octoroon* and *The Odd Women*

Ms. Poyir Taipodia
Independent Scholar
Itanagar, Arunachal Pradesh

***Abstract:*** This research examines the convergence of Blue Victorianism, gender dynamics, and water symbolism in two lesser-studied yet thematically significant Victorian novels: *The Octoroon (1861)* by William Gilmore Simms, also known as Mayne Reid, and *The Odd Women (1893)* by George Gissing. Engaging with interdisciplinary critical frameworks, including blue Victorian and ecocriticism, the study argues that water in these texts functions not merely as a setting but as an active symbolic force that reflects and shapes the conditions of women's lives in Victorian society. The concept of Blue Victorianism, encompassing affective states such as melancholy, nostalgia, and aesthetic estrangement, is employed to examine how fluid spaces such as rivers, oceans, and coastal landscapes become metaphors for female subjectivity, social instability, and resistance to normative gender roles.

In The Octoroon, the Mississippi River and the Atlantic Ocean emerge as charged and paradoxical spaces, sites where ideologies of race, gender, and colonialism intersect. The novel's mixed-race heroine, Zoe, is positioned at the confluence of freedom and constraint, where water signifies both escape and fatal entrapment. In contrast, The Odd Women presents water in more domestic and introspective forms: coastal fog, rain, and reflective seascapes that parallel the emotional and social displacement of unmarried, economically precarious women. In both novels, water mediates themes of marginality, transition, and emotional isolation, rendering it central to the construction of gendered space and narrative movement.

By offering a comparative reading of these two novels through the lens of water symbolism and Blue Victorian aesthetics, this study contributes to broader scholarly conversations surrounding gendered spatiality, ecofeminist criticism, and Victorian representations of emotional and social transgression. However, it argues that water operates as a transformative and often destabilizing narrative force, simultaneously marking boundaries and enabling resistance within the gendered imaginaries of nineteenth-century fiction.

***Index Terms*- Blue Victorianism, gender, water symbolism, Victorian fiction, The Octoroon, The Odd Women, ecocriticism, feminist theory, maritime space.**

## I. INTRODUCTION

The Victorian period witnessed a profound engagement with the symbolic and material dimensions of the natural world. Among the many recurring elements in Victorian literature, water, rivers, oceans, rainfall, and coastlines emerge as particularly rich sites for examining the intersections of affect, identity, and ideology. This study investigates the symbolic, emotional, and political roles of water in two lesser-known Victorian novels: The Octoroon (1861) by Mayne Reid and The Odd Women (1893) by George Gissing. While these novels differ in tone, setting, and genre, Reid's transatlantic melodrama engages with race and slavery, and Gissing's a realist critique of gender and class they both rely on water imagery to frame questions of womanhood, agency, marginality, and emotional experience. This thesis situates these texts within the framework of Blue Victorianism to explore how water operates not only as a metaphorical device but also as a narrative force that mediates gendered and racialized experiences.

Blue Victorianism, a term rooted in affect studies and cultural criticism, refers to the melancholic, introspective, and emotionally resonant aesthetic sensibility found in much of Victorian literature. Traditionally associated with canonical poets like Alfred Lord Tennyson and writers such as Thomas Hardy, the "blue" in Blue Victorianism connotes not only sadness or emotional detachment but a broader cultural tone of yearning, alienation, and unresolved desire. Recent scholarship has expanded this concept to engage with environmental and feminist concerns, proposing that the blue in Victorian literature also speaks to ecological entanglements, bodily vulnerability, and the instability of identity. This study builds on that evolving body of work by arguing that water, in its literal and symbolic forms, operates as a key register of gendered emotional experience, especially for women navigating the constraints of Victorian modernity.

In The Octoroon, water is deeply entangled with racial and colonial logic. The Mississippi River and the Atlantic Ocean are not neutral geographical spaces but highly politicized and affectively charged zones. The river, constantly referenced in the text, becomes a site of social flux and existential uncertainty a liminal space where racial boundaries are blurred, and the fate of the mixed-race heroine, Zoe, unfolds with tragic inevitability. The Atlantic, symbolizing both separation and potential mobility, evokes the traumatic legacy of the Middle Passage and the haunting impossibility of return or belonging. Reid's representation of water reflects a wider Victorian anxiety about the fluidity of race, identity, and empire especially when embodied by a female protagonist whose very existence defies fixed categorization.

In contrast, The Odd Women approaches water with a quieter, more introspective tone. Rain, fog, and coastal seascapes are used to mirror the emotional interiority of women who exist outside traditional marital and domestic structures. The novels focus on so-called "odd" women those who remain unmarried and economically unstable provides a compelling framework for analyzing how emotional weather and natural elements become metaphors for social invisibility and psychological drift. Water in Gissing's novel is not necessarily dramatic or deadly, but it is insistent: a presence that quietly marks spaces of waiting, disappointment, isolation, and unresolved desire. The coastal imagery, in particular, highlights the liminality of these characters' social positions neither fully included in nor completely excluded from the structures that define respectable womanhood.

By drawing on feminist literary theory, ecocriticism, and postcolonial studies, this research situates water as a medium through which Victorian literature encoded complex anxieties about gender, power, and embodiment. Feminist theorists such as Judith Butler and Sara Ahmed provide insights into how embodiment and affect are socially constructed and experienced, particularly by women and other marginalized figures. Ecocritical approaches, especially those developed by Stacy Alaimo and Astrida Neimanis, help illuminate how natural elements like water are deeply enmeshed with questions of agency, corporeality, and relationality. Furthermore, postcolonial theorists such as Homi Bhabha and Paul Gilroy offer essential tools for unpacking how water becomes a space of imperial connection, displacement, and racial differentiation—particularly in a text like The Octoroon, which is fundamentally concerned with the legacies of slavery and transatlantic identity.

This study does not treat water as a static symbol or a passive backdrop, but as a mobile, mutable force—capable of representing both constraint and possibility, both emotional stagnation and transformation. In both novels, water becomes a crucial metaphor for the instability and permeability of identity, especially for women who do not conform to dominant gender norms. Whether through the spectacle of drowning, the foggy uncertainty of unmarried life, or the vast expanse of the ocean as a symbol of longing and loss, these texts deploy water as a mode of expressing that which is socially unspeakable or structurally suppressed. In doing so, they reflect and critique the emotional, ecological, and spatial constraints of Victorian gender ideology.

By focusing on two novels that have received relatively limited critical attention within ecofeminist and affective frameworks, this study aims to contribute to broader discussions in Victorian studies about the intersections of environment, emotion, and gender. It reveals how seemingly minor or domestic representations of water hold powerful subtexts about exclusion, agency, and survival. Ultimately, this research argues that the "blue" in Blue Victorianism should not be limited to sadness or poetic introspection but expanded to encompass the full spectrum of emotional and ecological complexity encoded in the literary waters of the nineteenth century.

## II.REVIEW OF LITERATURE

A comprehensive examination of scholarly literature on Mayne Reid's The Octoroon and George Gissing's The Odd Women reveals a spectrum of critical analyses focusing on themes of race, gender, social hierarchy, and symbolism. The following review encapsulates key contributions to the discourse surrounding these two novels.

While The Octoroon has not been the subject of extensive scholarly scrutiny, certain critical works have provided valuable insights: Sarah Meer's "Boucicault's Misdirection: Race, Transatlantic Theatre and Social Position in The Octoroon" (2009): Meer interrogates the myths propagated by Dion Boucicault regarding his theatrical adaptation of Reid's novel. She scrutinizes Boucicault's claims about audience reactions and the play's portrayal of race, shedding light on the complexities of racial and social hierarchies within the narrative.

Megan E. Geigner's "The Octoroon, Race, Photography, and Pre-adaptation" (2020): Geigner examines how Boucicault's adaptation of The Octoroon responded to British audiences' discomfort with the original ending, particularly focusing on the racial implications and the role of photography in the narrative.

Gissing's The Odd Women has elicited extensive critical engagement, particularly concerning its exploration of gender dynamics and societal expectations: Juliette De Soto's "The Starving Feminine Body in Gissing's The Odd Women" (2016): De Soto delves into the novel's recurrent references to food and the body, arguing that Gissing portrays the female body as both physically and socially deprived. She contends that the Madden sisters' self-destructive behaviors underscore the oppressive gender and economic structures of their time.

Anja Müller-Wood's "Gissing's Failed New Men: Masculinity in The Odd Women" (2016): Müller-Wood explores the challenges faced by male characters in adapting to the social transformations of the 1890s, particularly in response to the New Woman movement. She highlights how these characters embody the difficulties of redefining masculinity during this period.

Lawton A. Brewer's "George Gissing's Manifesto: The Odd Women and The Unclassed" (2008): Brewer examines Gissing's depiction of economic struggles and social class, emphasizing the author's focus on marginalized individuals and the complexities of societal expectations.

Gholam Reza Amouzadeh and Zahra Sadeghi's "Women's Education and Finances in The Odd Women (1893) by George Gissing" (2020): This study focuses on the portrayal of single women and the parallel roles played by money and education in the novel, highlighting the limited options available to women in the late nineteenth century.

Collectively, these scholarly works offer a multifaceted understanding of The Octoroon and The Odd Women, illuminating the novels' intricate explorations of race, gender, social hierarchy, and individual agency within the Victorian context.

## III.METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative, interpretative methodology grounded in close textual analysis, cultural historicism, feminist literary criticism, and ecocriticism. The research is comparative, examining The Octoroon by Mayne Reid and The Odd Women by George Gissing through the lens of Blue Victorianism a conceptual framework that investigates the emotional, affective, and symbolic dimensions of water in nineteenth-century literature. The aim is to illuminate how aquatic imagery operates as a medium of gendered expression and ideological critique in these two lesser-known Victorian novels.

The analysis begins by contextualizing both novels within the socio-historical landscape of the Victorian period, particularly the shifting gender norms, the influence of empire, and the rise of ecological and scientific discourses. In Reid's The Octoroon, the presence of the Mississippi River and the Atlantic Ocean are examined not only as physical and geographical realities but as ideological terrains in which racial hybridity, colonial anxieties, and feminine vulnerability are inscribed. Water here becomes a destabilizing force at once a marker of loss, displacement, and emotional rupture. This chapter situates Reid's use of water imagery within postcolonial and ecofeminist frameworks, drawing on theorists such as Homi Bhabha and Stacy Alaimo to show how water embodies both imperial trauma and gendered dispossession.

Subsequently, the analysis turns to George Gissing's The Odd Women, where water is portrayed through more subtle and domestic imagery rain, fog, coastal air used to reflect the interior emotional lives of unmarried and socially peripheral women. Drawing on the insights of affect theory, particularly the work of Sara Ahmed and Judith Butler, this section explores how Gissing uses the environment to express female alienation, deferred desire, and the psychic costs of deviating from the Victorian ideal of domestic femininity.

Here, water functions as both metaphor and mirror, reflecting the women's uncertain social standing and the emotional burdens of being "odd."

A third interpretive section synthesizes the findings from the previous analyses to explore how both texts reimagine aquatic spaces as liminal zones where the boundaries of gender, race, and identity are blurred or contested. This chapter makes a case for extending Blue Victorianism beyond its traditional aesthetic associations, demonstrating how water imagery in these novels encodes a complex matrix of emotion, resistance, and symbolic rupture. It shows that far from being passive or ornamental, water in these texts is a dynamic agent of narrative and ideological transformation.

Throughout the study, close reading is used in tandem with theoretical critique to engage with the symbolic economy of water in Victorian fiction. Primary textual analysis is supported by secondary literature drawn from Victorian studies, gender theory, and ecocriticism. This methodology ensures that the study remains attentive both to the literary texture of the novels and to the broader cultural frameworks that shaped their production and reception.

By focusing on these two lesser-explored novels, the research also seeks to broaden the scope of Victorian literary studies to include underrepresented voices and non-canonical texts. It contributes to the evolving field of Blue Humanities by foregrounding the emotional, symbolic, and political meanings of water in Victorian literature,meanings that are often deeply entwined with questions of gender, power, and cultural identity.

## IV. WATER AND WOMANHOOD THROUGH A BLUE VICTORIAN LENS

This part explores the intertwined representations of water and gender in Mayne Reid's *The Octoroon (1859)* and George Gissing's *The Odd Women (1893)* through the critical lens of Blue Victorianism. Drawing on recent developments in Blue Humanities and ecofeminist literary criticism, it seeks to uncover how aquatic imagery in these two lesser-studied Victorian novels articulates anxieties, constraints, and potential reimagining of womanhood within 19th-century socio-political and environmental discourses. Blue Victorianism, as a theoretical approach, expands traditional ecocritical and affective readings by focusing on water and atmosphere as not only settings but also as cultural, emotional, and gendered agents in Victorian literary expression.

In The Octoroon, water is a central thematic and structural element, functioning on multiple narrative levels. The Mississippi River, flowing throughout the southern United States, serves not only as a topographical feature but as a highly symbolic boundary, geographical, racial, and emotional. It is a liminal space that reflects the precarious status of Zoe, the mixed-race protagonist who exists between freedom and enslavement, whiteness and Blackness, purity and objectification. Her identity as an "octoroon" (one-eighth Black) destabilizes the racial binaries that upheld antebellum slavery and white supremacy. Through a Blue Victorian lens, the river represents this instability: its flowing, shifting, and undefinable quality mirrors Zoe's social and emotional existence.

The Mississippi is thus a fluid geography of identity, echoing concepts from Astrida Neimanis's work on hydro feminism, which emphasizes the embodied, relational, and porous nature of female subjectivity. Zoe's fate is inextricably linked with water emotionally, symbolically, and politically. The river becomes an affective archive: a space through which the trauma of slavery, the violence of colonialism, and the limits of womanhood are rendered visible. It also mediates Zoe's psychological and emotional condition, representing not only the longing for escape and freedom but the impossibility of transcendence within the racial and gendered structures of her world. Reid uses this aquatic imagery to generate pathos, situating Zoe within a Romantic tradition of tragic heroines—doomed, beautiful, and intimately tied to nature. However, in her case, nature is not a source of pastoral innocence but a space of entrapment, spectral memory, and inevitable demise.

Moreover, the absence of the Atlantic Ocean in The Octoroon evokes a transatlantic consciousness, linking Zoe's tragedy with the broader historical trauma of the Middle Passage. The ocean, though never explicitly depicted in the text, operates symbolically as the horizon of historical violence and forced migration that underwrites the Southern plantation economy. Its spectral presence in the narrative reflects what Elizabeth DeLoughrey calls the "oceanic imaginary" a conceptual space where colonial violence and submerged histories persist beneath the surface of dominant narratives. In this light, Reid's text, though not overtly anti-slavery, unwittingly reveals the emotional and historical weight of racialized femininity through its use of watery motifs.

In contrast, Gissing's The Odd Women employs aquatic imagery in a more understated but no less powerful manner. The novel does not center on grand rivers or oceans, but its affective and symbolic geography is shaped by smaller, atmospheric forms of water rain, fog, mist, and the suggestion of coastal space. These manifestations of water are deeply tied to the psychological interiority of Gissing's female characters, especially Monica Madden and Rhoda Nunn. For Monica, whose ill-fated marriage leads her into

isolation and despair, the recurring motif of rainfall becomes a visual and sensory articulation of her emotional erosion. Water here is not liberating but saturating, heavy, and ultimately stifling. It symbolizes the slow dissolution of hope under the weight of domestic and social repression.

In Rhoda Nunn's case, water functions somewhat differently. Initially aligned with aridity, both literal and emotional, Rhoda's rejection of marriage and sexual relationships places her outside the traditional emotional spectrum expected of Victorian women. She inhabits a space of rationalism, self-discipline, and ideological feminism. Yet her momentary contact with natural water, during her stay near the sea, introduces an emotional rupture. The ocean becomes a site of ambivalence: it tempts her with the affective depths she has long resisted and simultaneously terrifies her with its unpredictability. In these brief moments, the ocean functions as a threshold, both real and symbolic, between her constructed ideological identity and her submerged emotional life.

The interplay between wetness and dryness in The Odd Women resonates with Stacy Alaimo's concept of trans-corporeality, in which the human body is not separate from but continuous with its environment. Water, in this reading, becomes a boundary-crossing element that connects internal psychological states with external material conditions. Fog and rain are not merely atmospheric details; they are expressions of the characters' emotional and existential entrapment. This subtle use of water underscores the novel's broader critique of Victorian gender norms, which denied women both emotional agency and social independence.

Juxtaposing these two texts reveals contrasting yet complementary deployments of water and gender. In The Octoroon, water is expansive, dramatic, and overtly tied to historical trauma, racial identity, and colonial legacy. In The Odd Women, water is internalized, psychological, and symbolic of the emotional lives of women trapped in modern, urban, industrial Britain. Yet both texts use water to articulate forms of gendered constraint, whether through the river that defines and dooms Zoe or the rain that erodes Monica's sense of self. Both texts also suggest that water, as a metaphor, can evoke a kind of emotional truth that eludes social discourse.

Through a Blue Victorian reading, water in these novels functions not simply as a setting or plot device but as a vital symbolic structure through which ideologies of gender, race, and emotion are negotiated. These texts challenge the notion of water as passive or neutral; instead, they portray it as an active force—affective, political, and aesthetic. In this sense, water becomes a co-narrator of the female experience, articulating the submerged, the unspeakable, and the affectively charged conditions of being a woman in Victorian society.

Moreover, both novels expand the scope of what we might consider as "environmental" in Victorian literature. Whereas much Victorian ecocriticism has focused on land, nature, and the pastoral, the aquatic spaces in these works demand a reorientation toward fluidity, affect, and instability. The aquatic metaphors and motifs suggest new ways of understanding subjectivity as porous, relational, and in flux qualities that align with both the lived experience of women in these texts and with emerging ecofeminist and materialist critiques of Victorian ideology.

In conclusion, The Octoroon and The Odd Women demonstrate how water can serve as a critical lens through which to view gender in Victorian fiction. Whether through the violent currents of the Mississippi or the oppressive dampness of London rain, aquatic imagery in these novels underscores the emotional and ideological tensions that structure women's lives. By reading these texts through a Blue Victorian framework, this chapter reveals the powerful convergence of gender, water, and narrative, opening up new possibilities for ecocritical, feminist, and affective readings of the nineteenth century

## V.ECCORITICAL READING OF THE OCTOROON AND THE ODD WOMEN

An ecocritical approach to The Octoroon and The Odd Women opens up rich interpretative possibilities by foregrounding how both texts engage with the natural and built environment not as passive background but as an active element of narrative, ideology, and critique. While Reid's novel is set in the lush, colonized landscape of antebellum Louisiana and Gissing's unfolds in the atmospheric, industrialized spaces of late-Victorian London, both novels reflect on the profound environmental consequences of imperial expansion and capitalist modernity. They articulate ecological anxieties that emerge from the transformation and instrumentalisation of the environment and anxieties that anticipate contemporary concerns about human dominance over nature, environmental degradation, and the alienation from ecological embeddedness.

In The Octoroon, the Southern plantation functions not only as a socio-political structure grounded in the racialized logic of slavery but also as a deeply ecological construct. The very notion of the plantation economy relies upon the manipulation of land and labor for agricultural exploitation, converting biodiverse environments into monoculture systems of production. The novel's setting in the American South, depicted with an abundance of natural detail, from sprawling forests to teeming rivers and fecund swamps, is rendered with romantic and exotic flair, yet this representation must be critically situated within the logic of colonial

control. Reid's detailed and often admiring descriptions of the landscape serve a dual purpose: on the one hand, they establish the aesthetic value of the setting, creating a lush backdrop for the drama that unfolds; on the other, they underscore the ecological transformations wrought by settler colonialism. The land is not an untouched wilderness but a cultivated, commodified space altered to serve the needs of imperial economies and white settler ideologies.

Reid's narrative reveals the paradox of the colonial environment constructed as simultaneously natural and artificial. The plantation is both the site of natural bounty and a highly engineered system of ecological domination. Crops are planted and harvested in rhythm with market demands rather than ecological sustainability, forests are cleared for expansion, and waterways are manipulated for transportation and irrigation. Such spaces are emblematic of what Rob Nixon calls "slow violence" the gradual, often invisible environmental degradation embedded within everyday economic and political systems. The presence of enslaved individuals within this ecological framework further emphasizes how both human and nonhuman life are subjected to processes of commodification and control, making the plantation a deeply entangled site of environmental and social violence.

Moreover, the natural world in The Octoroon is not fully subordinated to human authority; it occasionally asserts its own agency in subtle and subversive ways. Floods, wild animals, and unpredictable weather events operate as reminders that the environment, though seemingly controlled, retains an autonomy that resists complete domination. These disruptions align with what Timothy Clark terms "the Anthropocene disorder" a condition in which nature, having been overexploited, becomes a source of instability and unpredictability. In this sense, Reid's portrayal of the Louisiana landscape is not merely romantic or picturesque; it reflects the latent ecological tensions of a world built on the unsustainable extraction of natural and human resources.

In contrast, The Odd Women presents a drastically different ecological register one defined by the dense, suffocating, and atmospherically charged environment of urban modernity. The novel's London is an ecological system unto itself: overcrowded, polluted, industrialized, and emotionally disorienting. Nature here is not lush or abundant; it is absent, artificial, or degraded. Parks, gardens, and the occasional countryside retreat function less as genuine engagements with the natural world than as nostalgic representations of a vanishing pastoral ideal. What the novel offers instead is an exploration of environmental effects fog, smoke, gaslight, dampness, and substances that shape both the physical experience of the city and the psychological state of its inhabitants.

Gissing's urban world exemplifies what Raymond Williams described as the shift from country to city in the Victorian imagination, and through an ecocritical lens, this shift becomes one of ecological estrangement. The characters in The Odd Women navigate a world in which environmental conditions have become internalized as forms of stress, fatigue, and alienation. The environment is no longer external; it seeps into walls, bodies, and emotions. This atmospheric ecology is shaped by industrial capitalism, which regulates space and time through factory rhythms, office labor, and rigid spatial hierarchies. The spatial politics of the novel, the division between the overcrowded tenements and the more affluent districts, between the urban center and the seaside retreat, mirror broader environmental inequalities and foreshadow contemporary discourses around environmental justice.

The city in The Odd Women functions as a degraded ecosystem, one where ecological balance has been supplanted by mechanical routine and environmental manipulation. Air is no longer clean, space is no longer open, and even time itself is regulated through artificial cycles of labor and production. Gissing presents a world in which nature's rhythms are overwritten by industrial logic, yet the effects of this overwriting are palpable. The constant presence of fog, the psychological weight of enclosed spaces, and the occasional yearning for natural escape all testify to an underlying ecological anxiety. Unlike Reid, Gissing does not aestheticize the environment; he represents it as fragmented, polluted, and disenchanted. Yet this disenchanted nature is not powerless; it continues to exert influence over the lives of the characters, shaping their health, mood, and social mobility.

Both novels, when considered together, demonstrate how Victorian fiction engaged with environmental transformation in ways that anticipate the concerns of modern ecocriticism. While The Octoroon articulates the environmental consequences of colonial expansion and agricultural exploitation, The Odd Women addresses the ecological implications of urbanization, industrialization, and atmospheric degradation. Each text situates the human subject within a dynamic environment shaped by historical, economic, and material forces, and each dramatizes the cost of ecological disconnection and control.

What emerges from this comparative reading is a broader picture of the Victorian ecological imagination, one that is neither monolithic nor static but rather diverse and responsive to the shifting material conditions of the 19th century. Both Reid and Gissing explore the entanglements of human and nonhuman

worlds, albeit from different vantage points, and both contribute to a literary tradition that grapples with the challenges of environmental representation. Their work suggests that ecological crisis was not foreign to the Victorians; it was embedded in their landscapes, their cities, their systems of labor and their empire. An ecocritical reading thus reveals not only the environmental textures of these novels but also the ideological investments and anxieties that underlie their representations of nature and place.

## VI. FLUID IDENTITIES IN THE OCTOROON AND THE ODD WOMEN

The notion of fluid identity explores resists categorization, evolves in response to social and environmental pressures, and is constructed rather than innate is central to both The Octoroon (1859) by Mayne Reid and The Odd Women (1893) by George Gissing. While these texts differ in their socio-historical and geographical contexts, both interrogate the essentialist assumptions of Victorian society regarding race, gender, class, and respectability. Reid's novel, set against the backdrop of slavery and colonial exploitation in the American South, and Gissing's urban realist fiction, situated in industrialized London, reflect a growing literary consciousness of how identity is produced and regulated yet also how it may fragment, shift, and resist containment.

In The Octoroon, the character of Zoe serves as a profound symbol of racial and legal ambiguity. Legally enslaved due to the American "one-drop" rule despite being phenotypically indistinguishable from a white woman, Zoe is caught within an arbitrary racial categorization that reveals the contractedness of racial identity. Her existence troubles the racial binary upon which American slavery relies. Her tragedy, in part, stems from the impossibility of resolving her liminal position within a system that demands clarity and purity of lineage. The term "octoroon" itself reflects a bureaucratic logic of classification fractionalized, mathematical, and scientific in appearance yet ideologically loaded. As Homi K. Bhabha would argue in his theory of hybridity, Zoe's racial mixture is both a threat and a fascination to white society; she becomes a site of anxiety where boundaries collapse and colonial authority is destabilized.

Reid's depiction of Zoe, while at times sentimentalized, opens up a discursive space for questioning the rigidity of racial identities. Her physical resemblance to white femininity challenges the basis of racial differentiation, revealing it as performative rather than biological. Moreover, the plantation setting,nominally fixed and hierarchical,is itself permeated by cultural and racial intermixture. This hybridity undermines the illusion of a racially pure, culturally distinct colonial order. Indeed, Zoe's desire to marry George Peyton, a white man, dramatizes the legal and social boundaries that uphold racial hierarchies while also revealing how those boundaries can be crossed, transgressed, or blurred. Yet her death, ultimately, reaffirms the tragic consequences of fluidity in a system that punishes ambiguity. As critics like Werner Sollors and Toni Morrison have suggested, the tragic mulatta figure often serves to critique the ideologies of racial purity and property, exposing the contradictions of a society that simultaneously desires and abhors hybridity.

Fluid identity in The Octoroon also extends to the landscape itself. The Louisiana bayous, swamps, and plantations are not stable backdrops but volatile, shifting spaces that mirror the social instability of the narrative. The topography resists mastery and reflects the porous boundaries of race and belonging. In such an environment, racial lines like geographical ones are mutable, contested, and often indeterminate. Reid's romanticization of nature ironically undermines the fixity of identity by immersing characters in a world of ecological and cultural multiplicity.

In The Odd Women, the focus shifts from racial ambiguity to gender nonconformity, yet the underlying theme remains: identity is not fixed but shaped through performance, negotiation, and constraint. Gissing's novel centers on a group of women who defy Victorian expectations of domestic femininity. Characters like Rhoda Nunn and Mary Barfoot exemplify the "New Woman" independent, educated, and economically self-sufficient. These women, by choosing careers over marriage, inhabit a social identity that is in constant flux. They are "odd" not only because they are statistically surplus women in a marriage-driven society but also because they exist outside traditional roles. Rhoda, in particular, is a study in performative identity. Her resistance to romantic attachment and embrace of feminist ideals position her as a modern, liberated subject, yet her emotional vulnerability, revealed through her complicated relationship with Everards Barfoot, underscores the tensions between ideology and emotion, theory and lived experience.

Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity is highly relevant here. Rhoda's identity is not a natural state but a series of performances shaped by social scripts and personal convictions. Her feminism, while sincerely held, becomes both an armor and a mask, something she uses to construct a subjectivity that is viable within a hostile patriarchal system. But Gissing does not idealize this identity; instead, he portrays it as contingent, evolving, and internally conflicted. Rhoda's shifting position between professional autonomy and emotional fulfilment highlights the pressures faced by women attempting to redefine themselves outside of marital and maternal frameworks.

Monica Madden's storyline, by contrast, illustrates the dangers of relying on socially constructed identities of respectability and domestic stability. Her trajectory from working-class shop girl to trapped wife reveals how Victorian gender roles are themselves based on illusions of protection and permanence. Monica's attempt to rise socially through marriage ends in emotional and physical confinement, suggesting that traditional female identity roles are equally fluid, though in ways often masked by ideology. Her subsequent actions, her affair, and her desire for escape reveal a latent resistance to the constraints placed upon her. Monica's downfall is not a simple moral judgment but a critique of the limited roles available to women and the violence required to enforce them.

The urban environment of Gissing's London further emphasizes identity's instability. The city, unlike the plantation of The Octoroon, is not a place of natural abundance or racial mixing but of social stratification, surveillance, and rapid change. Yet it also allows for anonymity, reinvention, and deviation from norms. Women who work in offices, who live together without male guardianship, and who pursue intellectual independence are engaging in acts of self-creation in an ecosystem that is both liberating and punishing. Gissing's realist attention to detail captures the contradictions of modern identity: how it is shaped by external forces (economics, gender ideology, institutional power) but also how it can be actively constructed through daily practices.

Together, these two novels articulate a complex vision of identity as inherently unstable, shaped by racial, gendered, and environmental forces. Zoe and Rhoda are emblematic figures of transition, caught between older ideological systems and emergent forms of selfhood. They reflect broader cultural shifts in the Victorian imagination: the collapse of fixed racial categories in the face of colonial hybridity and the disintegration of the idealized feminine in the face of modern feminist critique. Reid and Gissing, though very different in style and ideology, both recognize that identity is a site of struggle, a space where social expectations, personal desire, and historical change collide.

Critically, both texts suggest that while fluid identity can be empowering, it is also precarious. Zoe's tragic death and Monica's downfall remind readers of the violence that often attends nonconformity. Rhoda's internal conflict and emotional repression indicate the psychological toll of maintaining an oppositional stance in a conformist society. Yet, despite these challenges, both The Octoroon and The Odd Women leave open the possibility of reimagining identity not as a static inheritance but as an evolving, negotiated process. Their characters offer early literary blueprints for what would later become foundational concepts in postcolonial and feminist theory: hybridity, performativity, and intersectionality.

In this way, fluid identities in both texts reflect not only the characters' struggles but also broader questions about the Victorian world's ability to absorb change. The novels act as cultural artefacts of a transitional age, capturing moments when identities began to loosen from the moorings of race, class, gender, and nation. In doing so, they make visible the mechanisms of social control while also charting paths toward alternative, more inclusive understandings of selfhood.

## VII. FINDINGS

The findings of this research underscore the complex and multifaceted ways in which The Octoroon by Mayne Reid and The Odd Women by George Gissing interrogate and portray the fluidity of identity in the Victorian period. Both novels, though distinct in setting and subject matter, converge in their thematic investment in unstable, transgressive identities that defy Victorian norms. Reid's The Octoroon engages primarily with questions of race, colonialism, and legality, using the figure of Zoe a woman of mixed racial heritage who is visually indistinguishable from whiteness but classified as Black under slavery laws as a narrative site for exploring the socially constructed nature of racial identity. Her very existence destabilizes the rigid racial binaries of antebellum society, revealing how race, far from being a biological absolute, is defined by arbitrary legal and social boundaries. Zoe's identity as an "octoroon" becomes symbolic of the larger ideological crisis faced by a society dependent on maintaining racial hierarchies while simultaneously haunted by the hybridity that undermines them.

Parallel to this racial destabilization in The Octoroon, Gissing's The Odd Women explores the complexities of female subjectivity and the emergence of the New Woman as a fluid and contested identity in fin-de-siècle Britain. Rhoda Nunn, Mary Barfoot, and even Monica Madden represent women caught between traditional Victorian expectations and the changing socioeconomic realities of the late 19th century. Rhoda, in particular, exemplifies a performative and evolving gender identity; she resists the institution of marriage, embraces professional life, and promotes female independence, yet struggles internally with emotional desires and contradictions. Her identity, like Zoe's, is neither fixed nor fully autonomous; it is shaped by external pressures, personal ideology, and internal conflict. The novel challenges the ideal of the stable, domestic woman and proposes instead that gender, much like race, is a mutable and performative construct subject to revision, resistance, and redefinition.

Moreover, the research reveals that both novels depict identity as fundamentally intertwined with environmental context, drawing upon ecocritical frameworks that consider how natural and built environments mediate human subjectivity. In The Octoroon, the lush, unruly landscapes of the American South swamps, rivers, and plantations reflect and amplify the instability of racial and legal systems. Nature in Reid's text resists domestication, mirroring the threat posed by racial hybridity to the colonial order. The land becomes a space of entanglement, where distinctions between Black and white, free and enslaved, are blurred. Conversely, in The Odd Women, the urban environment of London becomes a site of anonymity, alienation, and potential reinvention. The city enables women to break free from rural domestic norms, pursue education, and establish new forms of female companionship and labor. Yet, this urban freedom is fraught with precarity and emotional isolation. The environment in both novels, whether natural or urban, functions not merely as a setting but as an active force shaping and reflecting the fluid identities of the characters who inhabit it.

In examining these identities through the lens of Blue Victorianism, the research finds that the emotional tones surrounding identity, such as sorrow, estrangement, longing, and psychological conflict, are central to both texts. While Blue Victorianism often emphasizes melancholia, in this research, it is used to analyze a broader emotional spectrum that characterizes the instability of identity in transition. Zoe's profound sense of displacement and doomed love is framed through an atmosphere of romantic tragedy, yet it also critiques the systems that necessitate her suffering. Rhoda's emotional restraint and internal divisions likewise highlight the psychological toll of self-fashioning in a world that offers limited models of female subjectivity. These emotional undercurrents are not merely affective background but are integral to the novels' political critique. They expose the tensions between inner life and societal expectation, suggesting that emotional distress often arises from inhabiting an identity that resists dominant norms.

Furthermore, this research reveals that both novels anticipate theoretical debates that would gain prominence in postcolonial and feminist scholarship. Zoe's character and the legal-political structures surrounding her resonate strongly with Homi K. Bhabhi's concept of hybridity and the "Third Space," where meaning is produced through negotiation and contradiction rather than purity. Similarly, Rhoda's performance of gender roles and her struggle with conformity align with Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, wherein identity is not innate but constructed through repeated actions and social expectations. By engaging with these characters through contemporary theoretical frameworks, the research demonstrates how Victorian literature was already grappling with questions of identity's instability, performance, and resistance long before these ideas were formalized in critical theory.

One of the most significant findings of this research is the portrayal of the tragic costs of liminality and fluidity. While both novels open up radical questions about the nature of identity, they also portray the consequences of living outside normative boundaries. Zoe's death is not simply a narrative closure but a reinforcement of the dangers posed by racial ambiguity in a society that cannot tolerate it. Monica Madden's emotional and social collapse after her failed attempt to align herself with middle-class respectability through marriage reveals how rigid gender expectations punish deviation. Rhoda's internal conflict does not lead to liberation but instead highlights the emotional fatigue of sustaining an oppositional identity. These outcomes demonstrate that while the novels envision possibilities beyond conventional identity formations, they also acknowledge the social, legal, and emotional mechanisms that resist such transformations.

In conclusion, the research finds that The Octoroon and The Odd Women serve as critical literary spaces in which the Victorian novel interrogates the boundaries of race, gender, and identity. Through characters who inhabit liminal spaces, environments that resist containment, and emotional landscapes that reflect psychological and social turmoil, both texts challenge the Victorian ideal of a unified, stable self. Their depiction of identity as fluid, performative, and shaped by environmental and institutional forces offers not only a critique of Victorian social structures but also a vision of subjectivity as dynamic and contingent. This understanding contributes meaningfully to Victorian studies, feminist criticism, ecocriticism, and postcolonial theory by highlighting how literature serves as both a mirror and a mechanism for cultural self-examination and transformation.

## VIII. FUTURE SCOPE

The present study, by engaging with The Octoroon and The Odd Women through the intersecting lenses of Blue Victorianism, ecocriticism, and fluid identity, opens up fertile grounds for future scholarly inquiry into the interplay between affect, environment, and identity in Victorian literature. While this research has concentrated on two comparatively underexamined texts, it gestures toward broader thematic and methodological concerns that warrant further critical investigation across a wider literary and cultural corpus of the nineteenth century.

One significant avenue for future research lies in the extension of the Blue Victorian framework to other lesser-known or non-canonical Victorian texts. The concept of emotional atmospheres, particularly affective registers like alienation, anxiety, and emotional estrangement, can be applied more broadly to uncover submerged narratives within Victorian literature. Future work could explore how affective ecologies intersect with gender, class, and race in the fiction of writers such as Charlotte Riddell, Margaret Oliphant, or Dinah Mulock Craik, thereby expanding the emotional and ideological scope of Victorian studies.

Moreover, the theoretical construct of fluid identity, as elaborated through race in The Octoroon and gender in The Odd Women, provides a rich critical model for examining identity instability across other axes, including class mobility, neurodiversity, and queer subjectivities. The emergent body of work in Trans studies, disability studies, and Black Victorian studies provides a productive critical field for interrogating how Victorian literature anticipates or resists poststructuralist and intersectional theories of the self. For instance, the integration of Trans theory into Victorian literary analysis, particularly about performativity and embodiment, can unearth new interpretations of gender variance in texts where it has traditionally gone unrecognized.

Ecocriticism, as employed in this study, can also be developed in more nuanced directions. Future research may examine the material environments of Victorian fiction beyond symbolic interpretation, attending to the intersection of ecological degradation, industrial capitalism, and human subject formation. The environmental conditions represented in Reid's Southern plantation landscapes and Gissing's industrial urbanity can be placed in conversation with the growing scholarship on eco-gothic, petro fiction, and anthropogenic temporality in nineteenth-century literature. Such frameworks offer avenues to conceptualize how Victorian texts encode anxieties about ecological collapse, resource exhaustion, and spatial dislocation concerns that have renewed urgency in our contemporary moment.

Additionally, this research points to the potential of comparative transatlantic and postcolonial approaches. Reid's transnational context writing as an Irish author about American slavery invites comparative studies of race, empire, and identity across colonial geographies. Similarly, Gissing's urban realism could be situated in dialogue with continental or imperial narratives addressing the politics of modernity and gender. Examining global circulations of Victorian affect and environmental imagination might bring to light how British literary culture was engaged in ongoing exchanges with colonial and diasporic voices.

Finally, the integration of digital humanities methodologies such as distant reading, textual mapping, and network analysis can expand the analytical scope of this research. These tools can facilitate the identification of patterns of affect, geography, and identity across a large corpus of Victorian texts, enabling macro-level analyses of emotional and environmental tropes over time. This approach would also allow scholars to trace the evolution of fluid identity formations across different genres, authors, and publication networks.

In conclusion, this research provides a foundational platform for further interdisciplinary engagement with Victorian literature. By expanding the corpus, employing evolving critical frameworks, and embracing methodological innovation, future scholarship can continue to interrogate how Victorian narratives of identity, emotion, and environment remain dynamically relevant within both literary history and contemporary theoretical discourse.

## IX. CONCLUSION

This research has critically examined two relatively underexplored Victorian-era novels Mayne Reid's The Octoroon and George Gissing's The Odd Women through the intersecting lenses of Blue Victorianism, ecocriticism, gender theory, and the notion of fluid identities. While these novels emerge from distinct cultural and geographical contexts, they share a common narrative concern: the representation and negotiation of identity in spaces shaped by emotional, social, and environmental pressures. Through a detailed comparative literary analysis, this study has demonstrated how both texts contribute to an evolving understanding of Victorian literature not as ideologically fixed or formally conservative, but as a dynamic field responsive to anxieties surrounding race, gender, emotion, and ecology.

One of the central contributions of this research lies in its deployment of Blue Victorianism as a critical lens. This emerging area of Victorian studies focuses on the emotional atmospheres, melancholic affects, and non-verbal modes of feeling that structure both individual interiority and collective social experience. In The Octoroon, emotional intensity is inextricably linked with racial identity and legal marginalization. Zoe, the protagonist, is constructed as a tragic figure whose internal turmoil is mirrored by the unstable natural landscape of the American South. Her racial ambiguity generates a space of emotional and legal liminality that speaks directly to the instability of antebellum racial codes. In The Odd Women, emotional restraint, disaffection, and repressed desire underscore the psychological costs of modern femininity and social

independence. Gissing's female characters navigate a society in flux, in which emerging discourses of women's rights and education clash with deeply entrenched patriarchal norms. The emotional atmospheres in both novels become affective fields through which identity is both formed and fractured.

Ecocriticism has served as another foundational approach in this research. Rather than treating the environment as a neutral backdrop, this study has interpreted natural and urban spaces as active elements in the construction of character and narrative. The Octoroon positions the plantation landscape not merely as a geographical setting but as a politically charged and ideologically saturated space. The Southern environment reflects the moral and racial contradictions of slavery, where the natural world is implicated in both violence and beauty. In contrast, The Odd Women presents an urban, industrialized environment that reflects the atomization and alienation of modern existence. The physical space of the city becomes both a site of female agency and disconnection, encapsulating the paradoxes of progress and personal loss. Both novels suggest that the environment whether rural or urban bears affective weight and participates in the larger ideological systems shaping human subjectivity.

Another key thematic concern in this research has been the exploration of fluid identity. Reid's Zoe occupies a complex intersection of racial and gendered identity, where her legal status as a slave contrasts sharply with her appearance and cultural refinement. Her identity is constructed as both unstable and dangerous to the established social order, illustrating the performative nature of race. Similarly, Gissing's characters, particularly Rhoda Nunn, exist at the margins of normative femininity. Rhoda's resistance to domesticity and her pursuit of intellectual independence place her in a space of in-betweenness that defies binary classifications of womanhood. Both novels highlight how identity is not essential or static but negotiated within and often constrained by social, legal, and environmental structures.

Furthermore, this study contributes to the understanding of how affect and atmosphere mediate character and plot. Emotional ambivalence, unspoken longings, and social discomfort are recurrent themes in both novels, and they are often communicated through environmental cues weather, landscape, architecture that resonate with the characters' internal states. These emotional registers do not merely reflect character psychology but function as critiques of the ideological frameworks that govern race and gender in the Victorian period. Through this lens, both Reid and Gissing participate in a larger literary tradition of using affective and ecological motifs to interrogate normative ideologies and offer alternatives, however limited or tragic, to hegemonic identities.

In choosing to focus on lesser-known texts, this research also emphasizes the critical value of expanding the Victorian canon. The Octoroon and The Odd Women, while not commonly featured in mainstream Victorian literary studies, offer rich terrain for examining how nineteenth-century writers experimented with narrative, character, and form to engage pressing social issues. These novels reflect anxieties about empire, race, gender reform, and emotional repression in ways that resonate with contemporary critical discourses, including intersectionality, postcolonial theory, and feminist ecocriticism. By bridging Victorian studies with current interdisciplinary frameworks, this project highlights the continued relevance of nineteenth-century literature to present-day conversations about identity, affect, and the environment.

In conclusion, this research has demonstrated that Victorian fiction, particularly when read through newer critical lenses such as Blue Victorianism and ecocriticism, reveals deeply entangled relationships between selfhood, space, emotion, and power. The Octoroon and The Odd Women stand as complex literary artefacts that challenge monolithic readings of the Victorian era and offer a more nuanced understanding of how identities are imagined, constrained, and potentially reconfigured in literary texts. This study not only contributes to the scholarship on Reid and Gissing but also invites further inquiry into other overlooked works of the period that similarly grapple with the fluid contours of identity in a world of shifting moral, emotional, and ecological terrains.

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