

British Genre Painting of the 19th Century:

An Analysis of *Through the Fog*, *English Channel* (1886), and *Innocent Amusements* (1891)

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Abstract

This paper explores how together two British paintings *Through the Fog* by Julius Price (1896) and *Innocent Amusements* by John William Godward (1891) reflect the changing dynamics of the late Victorian era. The 19th century was characterized by a great deal of socioeconomic change due to Britain's rapid industrialization. This change is reflected in the artwork of the time. The paper analyzes the use of detail, use of space, and use of perspective in each painting to depict the Victorian world, both psychological and real. *Innocent Amusements* shows the world as many Victorians wished it to be, while *Through the Fog* gives a more realistic depiction of the late 19th century. The paper finds that despite being radically different with regards to subject matter, intended audience, style, and composition, each painting questions the place of the Victorian lifestyle in the upcoming 20th century, a concern that was common among the late Victorians.

The 19th century in Great Britain was a period of political, economic, and social change, especially in its last few decades. As Britain industrialized, the middle class gained considerable economic power, blurring class distinctions.



Fig. 1.

This challenge to the dominance of the upper class made it increasingly important for the upper class to reassert itself as the highest rung of Victorian society. As Jeremy Black and Donald MacRaid argue, “a feeling of insecurity helps to explain that, in so far as there was an aristocratic establishment of cultural and political hegemony, it was in part bred from elite concern, rather than from any unchallenged sense of confidence or complacency,” (Black, 4). This anxiety manifested in artworks such as *Innocent Amusements* (1891) by John William

Godward (Figure 1), a Roman genre painting that extolled the life and leisure of the upper class. However, changes in Britain's demographics, and subsequently the lives of the middle and lower classes, did not go unnoticed. Cities began to attract large numbers of the rural working class, who left the countryside in an attempt to escape poverty (Steinbach, 13). Thus, the presence of working class individuals in urban spaces became increasingly commonplace. This was reflected in works like *Through the Fog*, *English Channel* (1896) by Julius Price (Figure 2), which appealed to new middle class patrons as it reflected everyday urban life and the presence of both the working and middle classes in public spaces. *Through the Fog* reflects late 19th century Britain in a way easily relatable to the viewer.

The notion of separate spheres also dominated much of Victorian society, both in terms of private versus public life as well as male versus female (Steinbach, 113). A woman's sphere was private, distinct from and made possible by her male counterpart (Steinbach, 134). Even prostitutes, those women who operated in the public sphere, could only do so with the support of men. Society expected women to reside solely within a domestic sphere, which was kept distinct from the public sphere of men. However, by the late 19th century, women began to take on more public roles in society. This becomes important particularly in the upcoming World Wars when women are forced to take on the responsibilities of men. Traces of this change in the social sphere of women are reflected in both *Innocent Amusements* and *Through the Fog*.

It is interesting that two paintings, radically different with regards to subject matter, intended audience, style, and composition, were painted only five years apart. By examining Godward and Prices' use of details, interpretation of space, and use of perspective, it becomes clear that together, the two paintings tell two sides of the same story, that of late 19th century England. Both question the place of Victorian values in the late 19th century and beyond. While depiction of class distinctions, gender roles, and everyday interactions between individuals differ in each painting, each acknowledges the changing atmosphere of 19th century Great Britain. Though *Innocent Amusements* looks wistfully to the past as an example of beauty and the ideal life for the upper class, it is clear that the past remains impenetrable. *Through the Fog*, rather than looking to the past, finds dignity and grace in the everyday interactions of the ordinary 19th century individual. Together, these paintings reflect a period of transition in Victorian society and place the observer in the flux of a changing era. While reflecting on their relationship to the past, Victorians began to question their relationships to each other. Morality and hierarchy, which together formed the foundation of



Fig. 2.

most Victorian values, were tested as the 20th century approached, which brought significant change to both the class structure and place of women in English society. Both *Innocent Amusements* and *Through the Fog* are witnesses to and commentators on the social dynamics of Late Victorian England.

Use of Detail

The use of details in works such as *Innocent Amusements* and *Through the Fog* reveal deeper, perhaps even unconscious meanings that speak to the zeitgeist of Victorian England. According to Julian Treuherz, author of *Victorian Painting*, “in pictures like these [Victorian paintings], meaning and emotion are quietly conveyed, to be read from small clues like wedding rings, letters, the language of flowers and understated gestures,” (Treuherz, 110).

Godward’s use of details in *Innocent Amusements* emphasizes the past as an idyllic time to which Victorians can look back nostalgically. A young lady, who has put aside her sewing, balances a peacock feather on her finger (Figure 3) (Swanson, 39). Her gaze, as well as those of the two young girls on the left of the painting, is fixed on the feather, thus directing the viewer’s gaze to the feather and centering the entire composition of the painting on this one detail. Though a seemingly ordinary object, the feather highlights the leisure with which the young lady extends her arm. This action is the axis upon which the world of *Innocent Amusements* turns. Because the world of the painting is one of leisure, idleness and free time, it would have catered to the aristocracy and bourgeoisie, which was the only class that had the time for such leisurely activities. In art and painting, according to Treuherz, “prosperous Victorians could imagine they saw their own lives flatteringly mirrored,” (Treuherz, 173). Thus, upper class Victorians preferred works that mimicked their ideal lives and depicted a world of leisure, one without worries. *Innocent Amusements* reflects the upper class’s desire to live in a world where something as inconsequential as a peacock plume is given so much importance, a world where worry and hardship have no place.

The use of Roman statuary in the painting further contributes to its wistful and nostalgic atmosphere. The statue on the right is turned away from the viewer with an arm raised in a seemingly admonishing gesture (Figure 4). Because the statue is not fully visible to the viewer, it has an almost mysterious aura, rendering it unidentifiable. Another statue is located slightly off center in the painting (Figure 5). This statue is covered partly by a curtain. Again, because it is partly hidden from the viewer’s gaze, there



Fig. 3.

is a sense of the unknown, an untouchable quality of the statue, which gives the viewer a feeling of disconnect with the painting. There is little sense of realism in the painting, preventing the viewer from truly relating to it. According to Treuherz, “these pictures [roman genre paintings] attracted a public nostalgic for a mythical pre-industrial golden age of lost elegance and leisure,” (Treuherz, 170). The key words here are mythical and lost. The world of the painting is impenetrable; the viewer is denied access. While the painting can be looked at as part of a desire to return to the times of leisure and idle activity, there is a subtle yet inescapable sense that the past has no place in the future other than on canvas. The most the Victorians could do was own the past, by way of works of art, books, and artifacts; they were limited to admiring the past, wishing it to be real again. Thus, the use of detail in *Innocent Amusements* suggests that Victorian ideals belonged in the past.

The use of detail in *Through the Fog* creates a very different viewer-painting relationship than that created with *Innocent Amusements*. Art collecting and patronage shifted in large amounts to the middle class due to economic growth after the industrial revolution (Treuherz, 34). The rise of this new class of art collectors opened up new opportunities for artists in terms of subject matter and style as artists often catered paintings for their new middle class patrons. According to Treuherz, “these patrons [middle-class] liked recognizable subjects rather than remote allegory,” (Treuherz, 34). This marks a contrast with the taste of upper class patrons, who preferred flattering allegories of their own lives. Middle class patrons, on the other hand, preferred more realistic works that directly reflected different aspects of their lives. Price’s use of recognizable signage on the ship makes the painting easily relatable to a middle-class patron in and around urban centers such as London. For example, the red sign located on the right side of the painting advertises Madame Tussauds

Fig. 4. (top)
Fig. 5. (bottom)

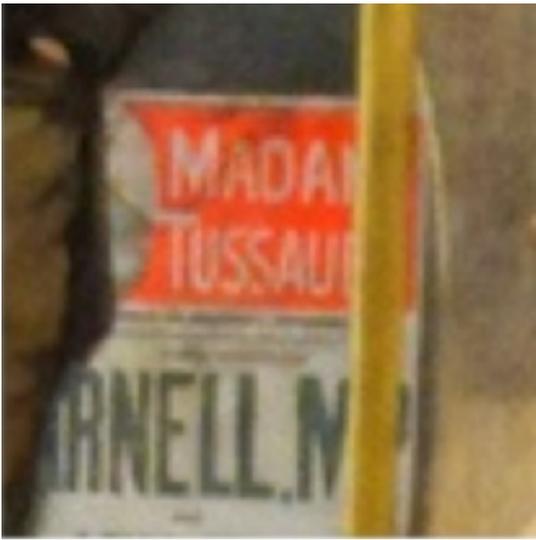


Fig. 6.

Wax Museum, a popular tourist attraction that would have been known to the viewer (Figure 6). Another sign on the left of the painting advertises the Daily Telegraph, a newspaper that would have been read by the viewer (Figure 7). Depicting everyday signs and advertising makes the painting extremely current and relatable to the observer. Advertising had become an important means of communications. Contemporary viewers would have instantly recognized the signs as those they would see out on the street and on penny steamers similar to that depicted in the painting.

The bundle of tools in the painting emphasize the setting as one to which the viewer can easily relate (Figure 8). Located on the left side of the painting next to a man smoking his pipe, it contains a variety of workman's tools, identifying the man as a working class individual. This kind of bundle would have been what many factory workers would have carried with them on their way to work. The presence of this working class individual sets the painting firmly in everyday late 19th century England. This is consistent with the rise of the middle class art collector. For such patrons, art was a reflection of the reality of their world as well as an invitation for thought. The presence of a working class individual in a public space is something that many middle class individuals would have seen, particularly in urban settings. *Through the Fog* tells a story of the ordinary individual, from the



Fig. 7.



Fig. 8.

laborer to the mother depicted in the center of the painting, from the working to the middle class. It is an acknowledgment not of an untouchable past but of the reality of 19th century Britain suggesting an increasing awareness of present and future changes in Victorian society.

In examining the use of detail in *Innocent Amusements* and *Through the Fog*, it becomes clear that each painting establishes very different viewer-painter relationship, one where the viewer must look to a fictional past, and the other where the viewer sees a plausible present. Together, the uses of detail in these paintings hint at the changing dynamics of late Victorian England.

Use of Space

The use of space in each painting reveals how Victorians saw their relationships to each other with regards to class as well as gender roles in the late 19th century. According to Steinbach, "in the Victorian period, spaces became separated, with city and country and public and private particularly distinct from one another" (Steinbach, 11). The distinction drawn between public and private space, where every space had a specific function and a defined boundary, reflected the similar distinction between public and private life.

In *Innocent Amusements*, each group of figures has its own defined space (Figure 1). The young lady is placed clearly in the foreground, the two younger girls in the middle ground, and the two men in the background. There is little interaction between the three groups. Each group of figures engages in a specific activity that does not interact with any of the other groups. The two men in the background engage in business without any perceivable regard for the women inside the home. The two women in the middle ground of the painting gaze at the peacock feather. They do not seem to pay much heed to the woman in the foreground beyond the balance of the peacock feather. The woman in the foreground is focused on the peacock feather, seemingly oblivious to the other groups of figures in the painting. This separation of space between the groups of figures is not uncommon in Roman genre paintings of



Fig. 9.

the Victorian era.

Godward further distinguishes between the home, a private space, and the outdoors, the public space. He frames the door of the home with the entryways leading into the home, which creates a funneling effect that makes the outside world seem even farther from the internal space of the home. This is consistent with the perception and appeal of the rural space by many Victorian patrons. "One immediate response to urbanization was the growth of the notion of the 'pastoral'... [there was] idealization of rural space as beautiful and unspoiled... of rural society as a quickly disappearing one," (Steinbach, 13). The separation of the public and private comes as a response to the growth of cities, particularly the shift in demographics as the rural poor migrated to urban centers while the wealthy left the city and escaped to the disappearing rural countryside. The countryside therefore became a symbol of status and wealth that the wealthy attempted to use to reassert their distinction from lower classes. By setting the painting in a countryside home, Godward depicts the home as a retreat from the world, reflecting a similar desire of the upper class to retreat into the country from the urban world.

However, there are signs that the outside world is beginning to invade the home. Godward's chooses to focus on the atrium of the house, its most 'public' space as it is the most open to the outdoors. For example, the vines and leaves on the roof of the home creep like weeds along the roof and begin to descend down into the interior of the home (Figure 9). This suggests the influence of outside forces within the home. Another example of an invasion of the interior space is the presence of pigeons in the home, which fly in from the outside (Figure 10). Pigeons are characteristic of urban centers. As a symbol of the city, their presence in the atrium of the home gives the sense of an invasion of the outside world. Much like with his use of details, there is a feeling of change in the painting, a slight sense of insecurity when it comes to classical Victorian values, consistent with the changing dynamics of the late 19th century. Despite the outside



Fig. 10.

world being so far away, its influences can be felt within the home, which is considered one of the most private spaces in Victorian England. According to *Innocent Amusements*, true retreat from the world and its influences seems to be impossible.

The distinction of space, where every space has its own function and role in society, also separated people beyond class. Gender was an important distinction between people to the point where men and women had separate spheres in society. This distinction played an important role in limiting women to

private spaces. "The notion of 'separate spheres' dominated women's lives," says Black (245). The space of women was deemed to be the home; women were not meant to roam far from it (Steinbach, 133). This separation of space between man and women is yet another example of Victorian compartmentalization in social structure. Like in the class structure, gender was viewed as a distinguishing factor between social groups, each of which required a distinct space in the overall social order. In *Innocent Amusements*, the women are firmly within the space of the home, where they engage in leisurely activities. The men of the painting are located in the background, where they deal with worldly matters (Figure 11). Their placement close to the door associates the men with the public space as does the scroll in the right man's hand. The two seem to be conducting some form of business, which associates them with the public sphere.



Fig. 11.

An interesting point of comparison is the respective gestures of the young lady with her peacock feather and the man with the scroll (See Figures 3 and 11). The man holds his arm with a sense of purpose; there is tension in the movement as he gestures to his fellow. This gesture gives a sense of seriousness to whatever it is that the men seem to be discussing. On the other hand, the young girl in the foreground of the painting extends her arm with a grace that directly contrasts the gesture of the man. Her task is one of leisure, not of business or necessity. The contrast between the gestures further highlights the separation of space between the men and women of the painting. According to Steinbach, "men made the domestic sphere possible through their work, but were rarely physically present in it," (Steinbach, 134). Thus, while one space could not really exist without the other, boundaries were still drawn between them. *Innocent Amusements* highlights this idea both in the placement of the figures in the painting as well as in the gestures of the young lady and right-most man in the background. The man, by engaging in business matters, provides the financial stability, which makes it possible for the woman with the peacock feather to engage in such a leisurely activity without worry of the outside world. Thus with regards to gender, the painting lends weight to the idea that the spheres of men and women are distinct, rarely interacting except by contrast. While *Innocent Amusements* seems to insist on separate spheres for men and women, the connection between the two gestures, the two arms extended forward, relates the man and woman to each other. While they exist in separate spheres, they interact with each other by the contrast of their gestures. There exists a relationship between the man and woman. This coupled with the outside influences in the interior of the home subtly suggests a challenge to Victorian values of distinct spheres of space.

The use of space in *Through the Fog* contrasts firmly with that of *Innocent Amusements*. Instead of distinctly compartmentalized spaces, there is one continuous space in which all the figures reside (see Figure 2). Most figures are touching at least one other figure in the painting. Even the one solitary figure in the painting,



Fig. 12.

the working class man sitting on the bench towards the front left of the painting, is related in a way to the rest of the figures with regards to space (Figure 12). The bench he sits on leads the eye into the crowd of figures, giving the man a connection to the other figures of the painting. According to Steinbach, “most people sought not to break barriers or rise as high as possible, but to find happiness at the level at which they found themselves,” (Steinbach, 115). Social mobility, per Victorian values, was not feasible at the time, and thus acceptance of one’s social status was easier than attempting to move up in the social ladder. However, while the man is isolated in terms of class, he still, by way of the bench, shares space with the other figures of the painting, thereby blurring the boundaries between classes. The working class man also relates to the front-most woman wearing a blue dress, who appears to be middle class. Both are painted in similar positions, hunched a little forward and turned slightly away from the viewer. Thus in a way, they occupy a similar, yet separated, space. The way the figures of the painting occupy the total space of the painting suggests the viewers’ awareness of the world in which they live, one where different classes can occupy the same space. The painting challenges the idea of clear and distinct classes by relating a working class man to middle class individuals in a public space.

There is also a difference between the two paintings in the treatment of gender roles, where women begin to occupy the same spheres as men, again threatening the old social order. On the right, both man and woman entertain the crowd, each performing the same role (Figure 13). The crowd contains both men and women watching the performers avidly. An interesting point of comparison is again between the woman in blue and the working class man on the left. Looking at this from a gender perspective, it recalls the similar arm gestures in *Innocent Amusements*. It is clear that here there is a sense of unity in the postures of the figures. Each figure, regardless of gender, occupies a similar space, suggesting that both man and woman can command similar roles in society and foreshadowing the upcoming changes in the roles of women, particularly when World War 1 occurs and women take on what used to be male responsibilities.

Through the Fog challenges Victorian values and reflects the changes of the late 19th century while *Innocent Amusements* acknowledges the changes but still wishes for the past. In both

paintings, traditional boundaries are tested by the changes impacting late Victorian society with the once hard-line divisions between spaces becoming increasingly indistinct.

Use of Perspective

The use of perspective in each painting further reflects the mindset of Victorian England in the late nineteenth century. According to Patience Young, “the artist who observes the natural world may convincingly convey every nuance of a time and place – not only the physical surroundings, fashions, and hairstyles, but also the atmosphere which suggests sounds, aromas, the weather. These elements give the picture a sense of immediacy, helping the viewers to feel they are actually at the scene,” (Young, 1). Atmospheric perspective is thus particularly useful in connecting the viewer to the painting, as it is most mindful of the volume of objects and air and the effect this has on the optics of the viewer, (Young, 3) In a sense, atmospheric perspective enhances realism in painting by presenting a more accurate reflection of the perspective of the viewer.

However, in *Innocent Amusements*, linear perspective is dominant in the painting, vanishing slightly off center to where the men are speaking. This allows the viewer to see the degree of separation between the outside world and the inner atrium. The perspective used is mathematical, reminiscent of Renaissance techniques. This mathematical rationality in the painting again gives it an untouchable quality, almost as though it is too real to be true. Furthermore, the narrowing of depth into the painting as the door is framed by the opening to the atrium give the painting a slightly shallow quality because so little of the area behind the atrium is shown (Figure 14). Though there is some use of atmospheric perspective in the depiction of the countryside, most of the



Fig. 13. (top) Fig. 14. (bottom)

painting is done in crisp detail. The use of linear perspective fails to account for the volume of objects as well as the blurred look of objects far from the viewer. This gives the painting an extremely rational and slightly unreal feel.

Through the Fog makes use of both linear and atmospheric perspective, giving it a sense of incidental banality that is missing in *Innocent Amusements*. In *Through the Fog*, the vanishing point is located near the harp on the right side of the painting (Figure 15). This extremely off-center vanishing point gives the painting a sense of depth not present in *Innocent Amusements*. It is as though the viewer can walk straight into the painting and become part of that world. *Through the Fog* also uses atmospheric perspective to give the painting a sense of mass and depth. Price's use of the smoke and steam of the industrial processes occurring within the painting makes more distinct objects appear shadowy and farther away. He mimics the way Victorians would have seen such a scene, masked by smoke and steam, hazy and indistinct. The use of atmospheric perspective gives the painting a more natural feel to which viewers can relate than possible with *Innocent Amusements*. The painting strives for a more communal or collective relationship to the viewer by reflecting the world in which the viewer lives.

The difference between the two paintings' treatment of perspective reflects a transition in the mindset of the late Victorians. With regards to "unpretentious depictions of daily life," (Treuerherz, 178) "whilst detail was still an important factor in a work's public appeal, the late Victorians also liked to be moved," (Treuerherz, 179). Thus, more realistic representations made possible through the use of atmospheric perspective became increasingly popular among late Victorian patrons. *Through the Fog* reflects late Victorian changes in the mindset of art with regards to the relationship to a painting. *Through the Fog* becomes part of the world of the viewer, while *Innocent Amusements* remains an idyllic object of the past, distinct from the world of the viewer. The uses of perspective in these two paintings suggest an overall tension



Fig. 15.

in how Victorians viewed the changing dynamics of late 19th century England, some praising the idyllic past, while recognizing its place in the past, and others looking to the realistic present.

Conclusion

The late 19th century was a time of change in the mindset and outlook of the Victorians. While some chose to look wistfully to the past, others chose to accept the present. *Innocent Amusements* and *Through the Fog* reflect these contrasting views, one of the higher class, who

preferred the past in which they had dominated English society, and the other of the rising middle class, which began to prosper as part of late 19th century changing economic and social dynamics. When compared together, the tension observed between the two paintings reflects the tension noted by scholars within Victorian society. According to Black, "the century closed with defeat abroad and social tension at home," (Black, 14). This tension came not from classes directly challenging each other but from the question of how Victorian values have to change or adapt in the new century as class distinctions and gender spheres began to blur.

However, as seen in *Innocent Amusements*, while the use of detail, space, and perspective held fast to classic Victorian ideals of both painting and societal values, there remains a subtle acknowledgment of the inaccessibility of these Victorian ideals. This same idea is emphasized in *Through the Fog* through Price's use of detail, space, and perspective, which reflects everyday late 19th century England. Both paintings reflect how once rigid Victorian ideals of order, hierarchy, and gender separation are challenged as the world entered the 20th century. While the two paintings take starkly different approaches, they stem from the same idea of changing social dynamics. Thus, in looking at these two paintings, the viewer can sense the societal turmoil Victorians went through in trying to find a place in a very new world. The fact that there are these two paintings, which serve as mirrors of the same society but depict different images, gives the viewer not only a sense of change in 19th century Great Britain, but also more importantly how Victorians viewed their changing society.

Ultimately, each painting questions, and makes its late 19th century viewers question, the place of Victorian values in the new emerging world.



Fig. 16.

Innocent Amusements suggests 'the past', which it idealizes. *Through the Fog*, on the other hand, simply suggests 'not here' and proceeds to reflect the transition of these values into late 19th century Britain. Both the paintings and the Victorians, like the man at the top of *Through the Fog* (Figure 16), are left looking towards an indistinct and hazy future. The changing social dynamics to which these paintings are witness are vital; they are the foundations upon which the 20th century builds upon. Further research into this particular era, a time of slow yet significant social change as seen in these two paintings, may help shed light on the mechanisms by which later changes, from the women's rights movement to the rise of economic and subsequent social mobility, came to be. More generally, it can help scholars further understand how exactly social structure is adapted to changing economic and

social dynamics as well as the implications this may have on the present day individual.

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