

## **Introduction to the Victorian Era through Painting**

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The following is a method I've employed in several subjects in the degree in English Studies at the University of Málaga, more specifically in the subjects "Literatura Inglesa I (Novela)" y "Literatura Inglesa III (Poesía)". This practice has as its main aim to introduce students to the Victorian era (1837-1901) visually. To achieve this, I show students William Holman Hunt's painting *The Awakening Conscience* (1853) and guide them through an analysis of its symbolism and themes. Afterwards, I encourage them to relate what they have learned to the literature and cultural concerns of the period. This method succeeds in helping students to understand some of the main issues they need to pay attention to when we start analysing either the novels or the poetry of the period.

The activity, carried out in English, is detailed below.

<b>Title</b>	<b>Pre-Reading Visual Analysis Activity: William Holman Hunt's <i>The Awakening Conscience</i> (1853)</b>
<b>Modules</b>	Literatura Inglesa I (Novela) (2018/2020) Literatura Inglesa III (Poesía) (2024/2025)
<b>Aim</b>	-To be aware of the deceptive nature of appearances and of the presence of double standards in many artistic representations of the Victorian Era. -To learn to identify symbols and metaphors pertaining to the period visually in order to facilitate their written identification.
<b>Timing</b>	This practice is usually carried out in one session of one hour and a half.
<b>Resources needed</b>	A projection of the painting in class.
<b>Description</b>	<p>This activity should ideally be conducted prior to the students' reading of the assigned texts, or at the very outset of their engagement with them. The instructor will project <i>The Awakening Conscience</i> (1853) by William Holman Hunt, facilitating a structured visual analysis focused on the painting's symbolism and thematic content. Students will be encouraged to interpret the painting's ostensibly innocuous composition, uncovering its deeper cultural and moral implications, particularly within the context of Victorian society. Through guided observation and discussion, students should focus on several key visual elements that reflect broader Victorian values and gender dynamics:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) <b>The cat consuming the bird on the floor</b>, symbolizing the predatory intentions of the male figure toward the woman.</li> <li>b) <b>The discarded glove</b>, suggestive of sexual transgression or intercourse.</li> <li>c) <b>The disordered needlework</b>, indicating the woman's deviation from conventional Victorian gender norms and domestic ideals.</li> <li>d) <b>The garish decor, the poem on the floor (evoking regret), and the woman's attire</b>, all of which imply her status as a sex worker, specifically within the socio-cultural framework of Victorian moral judgment.</li> </ul> <p>For a more comprehensive interpretation of the painting, instructors are encouraged to consult the Tate Gallery's detailed analysis available at: <a href="http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/hunt-the-awakening-conscience-t02075">http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/hunt-the-awakening-conscience-t02075</a>.</p> <p>Upon completing the visual analysis, the instructor will guide</p>

students in synthesizing the symbolic details to uncover the painting's underlying message—namely, the depiction of an Irish female sex worker experiencing a moment of existential and moral reckoning, framed within the constraints and expectations of Victorian heteropatriarchal society. This exercise serves as an introduction to the thematic concerns prevalent in many Victorian literary texts. Specifically, it underscores how such works often critique cultural double standards, examine the role of women in a patriarchal and evolving society, and employ symbolism as a means of conveying complex moral and social commentary. These themes will be explored further in the literary works to be analyzed in the course.