Reality over romance
The truth about Victorian single motherhood

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The Fallen Woman
FOUNDLING MUSEUM, LONDON

When it came to entertainment, the Victorians loved a good tragedy — especially if it involved a moral tale and a pretty girl. So when painters were choosing subjects for their “modern life” pictures, intended to hang on the walls of middle-class drawing rooms, it is maybe not so surprising that the theme of the fallen woman was a popular choice, alongside that of the railway station or the seaside.

Some of these paintings can now be seen in a small but powerful exhibition at London’s Foundling Museum (to 3 January). The museum is in the former grounds of the Foundling Hospital, which was set up by Thomas Coram and opened in 1741, caring for children in a variety of ways until the building closed in 1926, when the hospital moved to the countryside of the Home Counties before being wound up in the 1950s.

This show concerns the life of the hospital in the 19th century, when previously “respectable” women who had become pregnant out of wedlock, would come to leave their babies there.

Curated by the art historian Lynda Nead, the show aims to contrast the popular portrayal of the “Fallen Woman” with the hard reality of those unmarried mothers’ lives. So, alongside the paintings and engravings of that era — some pretty, some romantic, some grotesque and shocking — can be seen the petitions written by, or on behalf of, the women who wanted their babies taken in.

They tell heartbreakingly stories of working women, such as governesses, who were seduced and then abandoned. In one petition, from Annie Culver, we read of a soldier boyfriend who, on hearing of her pregnancy, suggested that she drown herself and “he would help me do it”.

Drowning as a means of suicide is a recurring theme in the less pretty of the paintings to be seen in the show. Professor Nead says the theme of the “Fallen Woman” was a tricky one for painters: those who wanted to sell their work for the drawing-room wall had to “balance competing expectations about realism with those of beauty and pleasure”. Other artists, whose aims were not so commercial, could come closer to the grim reality of the lives and deaths of such women.

One of the most arresting pictures in the show, Found Drowned, by G.F. Watts, shows a woman lying dead on the banks of the Thames, under an arch, and beneath a single star. To Professor Nead, the star is a sign that while “Victorian society is too harsh to accept this woman, there is some kind of salvation after death”. But while horrific, the image of this particular woman, lying on her back, graceful in death, has an undeniable romantic quality to it — reminiscent of the drowned Ophelia painted around the same time by Millais.

Professor Nead agrees that some pictures in the show have “a slightly voyeuristic side to them”, while the moral message is, at the same time, “clear and legible”. One cannot rule out that there could be an “erotic, slightly titillating thread” running through some of the works of art.

But in the written petitions from the “fallen” women, which are shown alongside the paintings and engravings, sexual desire is firmly left on the back burner. As a record of what actually happened to them, and why they ended up in their predicament, the petitions are only partly reliable. This is because, by the Victorian times, only about one in five petitions were accepted by the Foundling Hospital.

To get a baby accepted, women knew what they had to say. They needed to argue that they were previously “respectable”, and had been raped or abandoned by their lovers.

There had to be victims, and any suggestion that they could have been sexually cooperative would have harmed their case. Part of the reason the hospital took the babies in was so that their mothers could return to a life of “respectability”.

In some cases, women did go back to work in their chosen professions, and went on to marry. In a touching painting by Emma Brownlow, The Foundling Restored to its Mother, a well-dressed woman is seen returning to the Foundling Hospital to pick up her daughter. She has brought a doll and a pair of shoes, and, in her excitement, has dropped the paper receipt that she would have been given when she first left her baby at the hospital.

This might seem a sentimentalised picture, but such reunions did, occasionally, happen for some of the Junes, Sands and Ellises whose names are listed as mothers in the Foundling Hospital’s next records. And the artist would have known this, as Emma Brownlow was the daughter of John Brownlow, a former pupil of the hospital who went on to become one of its administrators (and who provided Dickens with his inspiration for the kindly character of the same name in Oliver Twist).

We have no record, of course, of the voices of the women whose lives are portrayed in this show. They will never have the chance to tell their own stories. To reflect this, a sound installation by the musician Steve Lewinson accompanies the exhibition. Prominent actors, such as Ruth Jones and Marianne Jean-Baptiste, speak words and phrases from the petitions, and recite the names of some of the women who wrote them. A cacophony of whispers, it sounds like a message from the ghosts of a dark and sorrowful moment of motherhood past.

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