

## HUNT'S AWAKENING CONSCIENCE

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William Holman Hunt's *The Awakening Conscience* (Fig. 1) was seen to be a problem painting from the start. "Enigmatic in its title, it is understood by few of the exoteric visitors," commented the *Athenæum* in its review of the Royal Academy exhibition of 1854. "Innocent and unenlightened spectators suppose it to represent a quarrel between a brother and sister; it literally represents the momentary remorse of a kept mistress, whose thoughts of lost virtue, guilt, father, mother, and home have been roused by a chance strain of music."<sup>1</sup>

The apparent need for explication was met to a large extent by John Ruskin, who wrote a detailed letter on the subject to the *Times*, part of his continuing campaign on behalf of Pre-Raphaelitism. "Assuredly it is not understood," he observed about the painting on exhibit; "people gaze at it in a blank wonder, and leave it hopelessly." Many later viewers have relied upon the eloquent inventory that Ruskin took of the things and meanings in this overfurnished picture; he showed the moral hidden in almost every object, symbolically selected though realistically rendered. "That furniture so carefully painted, even to the last vein of the rosewood – is there nothing to be learnt from that terrible lustre of it, from its fatal newness; nothing there that has the old thoughts of home upon it, or that is ever to become a part of home?"<sup>2</sup>

Though Ruskin explained much, he did not tell all; the painting's more private meanings he left out of account. He saw no need to mention that Hunt's model for "the poor girl" in the painting was Annie Miller, a vulnerable working-class beauty with whom Hunt had become infatuated. Hunt planned to protect Annie's morals and educate her social skills, and then, maybe, marry her: this idealistic and ambitious scheme was a staple of gossip in Pre-Raphaelite circles, which Ruskin must have known (Daly 112). Ruskin tactfully omitted to say that the social reformation that Hunt planned for Annie Miller closely resembled the spiritual reformation that takes place in the painting, as the fallen woman suddenly realizes the folly of her ways.

Hunt complicated his educational plan by attempting much of it *in absentia*. Immediately after he finished painting *The Awakening Conscience* he left both England and Miller for the Holy Land, where he would learn how to invest his Biblical paintings with a fresh realism (both *The Finding of the Saviour in the Temple* and *The Scapegoat* were begun there in 1854). He left instructions with his friends how Miller was to be treated: for which artists it was safe for her to model