

HARRIETTE WILSON'S *MEMOIRS* AND
WILLIAM HOLMAN HUNT'S *THE AWAKENING
CONSCIENCE*

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The influence of diverse literary works on William Holman Hunt's painting, *The Awakening Conscience*, has been noted in a variety of Victorian and modern commentaries. The *Athenaeum* review of the 1854 Royal Academy Exhibition drew analogies with Thomas Hood's "The Bridge of Sighs" and Edward Bulwer-Lytton's novel, *Ernest Maltravers* (Hunt 1:405). George Landow has characterized the painting as having "complex origins in Dickens, Tennyson, and Hunt's own readings in the Bible" (47), and Kate Flint has drawn attention to "this painted text's incorporation of literary texts" (48), in particular, to similarities with Wilkie Collins's 1852 novel, *Basil* (51). Kathryn Smith claims that both the subject and content of Hunt's painting were influenced by Hablôt Knight Browne's illustration entitled *Baby Blake*, for Charles Lever's novel, *Charles O'Malley*, published in 1841 (44). Hunt himself, recalling the literary origin of *The Awakening Conscience* in his autobiography, explained that when reading Dickens's *David Copperfield* he was "deeply touched by the pathos of the search by old Peggotty after little Emily, when she had become an outcast," adding that his intention was "not to illustrate any special incident in the book" but to "take the suggestion of the loving seeker of the fallen girl coming upon the object of his search" (2:429).

Within the painting itself one encounters allusions to specific literary works. On the floor of the drawing-room is the musical score for "Tears, Idle Tears" from Tennyson's *The Princess*, set to music in 1853 by Edward Lear, a friend of both Hunt and Dante Rossetti (Flint 49). Over the mantelpiece is an engraved reproduction of a Frank Stone painting, *Cross Purposes* (1840), depicting an episode from Sir Walter Scott's *The Legend of Montrose* (Flint 49). On the piano is a musical setting for Thomas Moore's "Oft in the Stilly Night," the singing of which has unwittingly triggered the awakening of conscience in the kept woman.

The plethora of literary allusions is not confined solely to the visual content of the actual painting itself. Three biblical quotations are also directly associated with *The Awakening Conscience* in an ancillary capacity. On the frame, Hunt placed a quotation from Proverbs 25.20: "As he who taketh away