Educational Anxiety and Childhood in Victorian Literature: A Systematic Review of Pedagogical Dread, Institutional Power, and the Traumatised Child in the Nineteenth-Century Imagination

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ABSTRACT:
Childhood, education, and anxiety form one of the most fruitful, and the most morally freighted, fields of Victorian literary imagination. The child in the schoolroom, as object of interrogation of the most profound contradictions of its own epoch, of the evolutionary ideology of disciplinary formation, of the Benthamite belief in systematic teaching, of the Romantic legacy of child innocence, of the new psychological understanding of enduring developmental mutilation, reappear in the writings of Charles Dickens, of Thomas Hardy, again and again. The systematic review of the scholarly literature in the field of educational anxiety and childhood in Victorian literature described in this paper was carried out in line with the PRISMA 2020 guidelines and included 138 sources related to peer-reviewed literature, studies of historical education, psychological and psychoanalytic criticism, and research on digital humanities published between the years 1990 and 2024. The review defines five thematic nodes in which the representation of educational anxiety in Victorian literature works: the architecture of institutional fear; the body as location of pedagogical violence; the gendered difference of educational aspiration and anxiety; the figure of the autodidact as anxious alternative; the afterlife of childhood educational trauma in adult character formation. Close reading of canonical texts including

David Copperfield (1850) and Hard Times (1854) by Dickens, Jane Eyre (1847) by Charlotte Bronte, Tom Brown School Days (1857) by Thomas Hughes, The Mill on the Floss (1860) by George Eliot and Jude the Obscure (1895) by Hardy, as well as a larger collection of less studied schoolroom narratives, provide evidence in support of the main line of argument: that Victorian literature was not simply a reflection of educational anxiety but rather the major cultural technology by which Victorian society worked out, negotiated, and in some measure produced its own anxieties about how the modern subject came to be made in institutionalized instruction. The paper concludes by mapping the contemporary relevance of this Victorian literary-pedagogical archive for twenty-first-century debates about educational trauma, curriculum ideology, and the politics of childhood.

Keywords: Victorian literature, childhood, educational anxiety, pedagogical violence, institutional power, Dickens, Brontë, bildungsroman, schoolroom narratives, nineteenth-century childhood studies.

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1. INTRODUCTION

"Now, what I want is, Facts. Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life." With these famous opening words of *Hard Times* (1854), Charles Dickens placed educational philosophy at the violent centre of one of the nineteenth century's most sustained literary indictments. Thomas Gradgrind's mechanical utilitarianism, enacted upon the consciousnesses of children whose very names,Sissy, Bitzer,encode their symbolic roles in Dickens's allegory, has become perhaps the most recognisable emblem of what Victorian literature most consistently staged as educational catastrophe: the institutional destruction of the child's innate capacity for imagination, sympathy, and joy. But Dickens's *Coketown* schoolroom is only the most famous of a vast literary archive that returned obsessively, across the course of the Victorian period, to the figure of the anxious, suffering, and institutionally formed child as a primary vehicle for the culture's deepest self-examinations.

The Victorian period (conventionally 1837-1901) was, in historical fact, the epoch in which modern mass education was invented and systematised in Britain. The expansion of voluntary schools in the 1830s and 1840s, the rapid growth of denominational and non-denominational elementary schooling, the Grammar School Acts of the 1840s, the Newcastle Commission of 1858, the landmark Education Act of 1870 that established compulsory elementary education for all children, the Endowed Schools Act of 1869, and the ongoing public school reform movement catalysed by Thomas Arnold's Rugby: all of these institutional developments made education a site of sustained public debate, ideological contestation, and personal anxiety in ways that literature immediately and compulsively registered (Aldrich; Stephens; Dyhouse). The Victorian novel, in particular, was deeply implicated in these developments, both as a cultural medium that reached newly educated middle-class audiences formed by the institutions it depicted, and as a sustained critical apparatus through which those institutions were subjected to imaginative scrutiny (Flint; Eagleton; Armstrong).

This paper addresses three interrelated research questions. To begin with, what have the last three decades of scholarship made of the depiction of educational anxiety in Victorian literature and in what are the most fruitful methodological and theoretical frameworks? Second, how do Victorian literary texts reflect the connection between education, childhood and anxiety in the major thematic setups? Third, what is the Victorian literary-pedagogical archive telling us

about the connection between institutional education and the making,or unmaking of the Victorian subject? To answer these questions, the paper uses a systematic literature review following the PRISMA 2020 protocol (Page et al.), which will be supported by the close reading of canonical and less-read narratives of the Victorian schoolroom.

The value of this question goes beyond the history of literature. Victorian constructions of childhood as extended by literature still form the current notion of child development and the role of education and what should be taken as the form of institution formation, as Carolyn Steedman has argued. It is now a permanent component of Western cultural imagination, introduced by Dickens and his contemporaries, consisting of the figure of the traumatised schoolchild, and has implications in educational policy, psychological theory, and cultural politics, which have not yet been charted fully. This paper will seek to improve the field by synthesising thirty years of knowledge on this question and subjecting it to methodological rigor, as part of the greater interdisciplinary project of making sense of the relationship between literature, education, and the construction of childhood.

2. HISTORICAL AND THEORETICAL CONTEXT

2.1 Victorian Education: Institutions, Ideologies, and Anxieties

The Victorian educational landscape was characterised by extraordinary institutional diversity and ideological contestation. At the apex stood the ancient public schools,Eton, Harrow, Winchester, Rugby, and their imitators,whose reform under the influence of Thomas Arnold (headmaster of Rugby 1828–1842) transformed them from sites of notorious disorder and moral laxity into instruments of character formation for the imperial ruling class (Honey; Chandos; Newsome). Below this elite stratum, a complex ecology of grammar schools, proprietary schools, private academies of wildly varying quality, dame schools, and voluntary denominational schools served the middle classes, while the growing network of National Society and British and Foreign Schools Society establishments, Ragged Schools, and after 1870 the Board Schools established under Forster's Education Act, extended instruction to the working classes (Digby and Searby; Gardner). The curriculum ideologies animating these diverse institutions were equally various: evangelical emphases on discipline, scripture, and moral formation; Benthamite insistence on useful knowledge and measurable outcomes; Romantic and post-Romantic defences of imagination and sympathy; and classical humanist traditions of Latin and Greek as instruments of elite formation (McCulloch; Simon; Ball).

Educational anxiety, as both lived experience and literary representation, was multiply determined by this landscape. For middle-class boys destined for the public schools, anxiety attached itself to the notorious practices of fagging, corporal punishment, bullying, and the social hierarchy of the dormitory as much as to formal instruction (Honey; Chandos). For girls, whose access to serious education was severely circumscribed by ideologies of separate spheres and the domestic ideal, educational anxiety took distinctive forms shaped by the tension between intellectual aspiration and social prohibition (Dyhouse; Gorham; Pedersen). For the aspiring working-class autodidact,the figure who haunts the work of George Eliot, Thomas Hardy, and their contemporaries,educational anxiety was inseparable from the class anxieties of social aspiration and the painful recognition of structural exclusion from the institutionalised pathways to intellectual fulfilment (Eagleton; Gagnier; Vincent).

2.2 Theoretical Frameworks: From Foucault to Childhood Studies

The scholarly analysis of educational anxiety in Victorian literature has drawn on a wide range of theoretical frameworks, and the survey of the literature conducted for this review reveals several distinct interpretive traditions. The most historically persistent has been a broadly Foucauldian approach, drawing on Discipline and Punish (1975; English translation 1977) to read the Victorian school as a disciplinary institution in which surveillance, examination, normalisation, and the production of docile bodies constitute the

primary instruments of subject formation (Hunter; Steedman; Bailey). This tradition has yielded rich analyses of the spatial and architectural dimensions of educational anxiety,the supervised dormitory, the monitored classroom, the exposed examination room,and has been particularly influential in readings of Dickens's schoolroom scenes and the public school novel.

A second tradition, drawing on psychoanalytic criticism from Freud through Klein and Winnicott to contemporary relational and attachment theory, has approached educational anxiety as a manifestation of deeper developmental dynamics: the child's negotiation of authority, dependency, and the fear of failure; the relationship between schoolroom experience and the formation of the ego ideal and superego; and the role of educational humiliation in the genesis of shame-based character structures (Bollas; Urwin; Walton). This tradition has been particularly productive for readings of the autobiographical bildungsroman, where the schoolroom scenes are most explicitly linked to the formation of adult character. A third tradition, emerging from the interdisciplinary field of Victorian childhood studies (inaugurated in its modern form by James, Jenks, and Prout, and applied to literature most influentially by Cunningham and Coveney), has situated educational anxiety within broader cultural constructions of childhood innocence, vulnerability, and the contested question of the child's nature,Evangelical doctrine of original sin, Romantic faith in natural goodness, and Utilitarian indifference to developmental stage competing for institutional dominance.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

The approach that will be used in this paper is a mix, an approach that includes (a) a systematic literature review that will be carried out in line with the PRISMA 2020 guidelines (Page et al.), (b) the thematic synthesis of the discovered scholarship, and (c) a close reading of primary texts of the Victorian literature that will be sustained and informed by the theoretical frameworks that are determined during the systematic literature review. Such methodological amalgamation is mirrored by the unique needs of the literary-historical research wherein methodologically structured scholarly synthesis and the hermeneutically attentive textual analysis are not only requisite but also complementary. The systematic review determines the condition of the field and its dominant thematic and methodological formations; the close reading tests, tests and extends the field through direct working with primary evidence; and the thematic synthesis ties these strands together into the five-node analytical structure that organizes Sections 4 through 8.

3.2 PRISMA 2020 Search Strategy

In October 2024, database searches were carried out in MLA International Bibliography, JSTOR, Project MUSE, Literature Online (LION), Scopus, and Web of Science. The search query was a combination of three concept clusters: (1) period: "Victorian" OR "nineteenth century" OR 1837-1901 OR 1847 OR 1850 OR 1854 OR 1860 OR 1895; (2) topic: education" OR school" OR schoolroom" OR pedagogy" OR instruction" OR curriculum" OR examination; (3) theme: anxiety" OR fear" OR trauma" OR childhood" OR child" OR pupil" OR student" OR bildungsroman" OR formation. Other searches were focused on particular authors: "Dickens" AND education; "Bronte" AND school; "George Eliot" AND education; Hardy AND education; Hughes AND school. Additional eligible sources were manual screened in reference lists of included studies.

3.3 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Table 1
PRISMA Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria for Systematic Literature Review

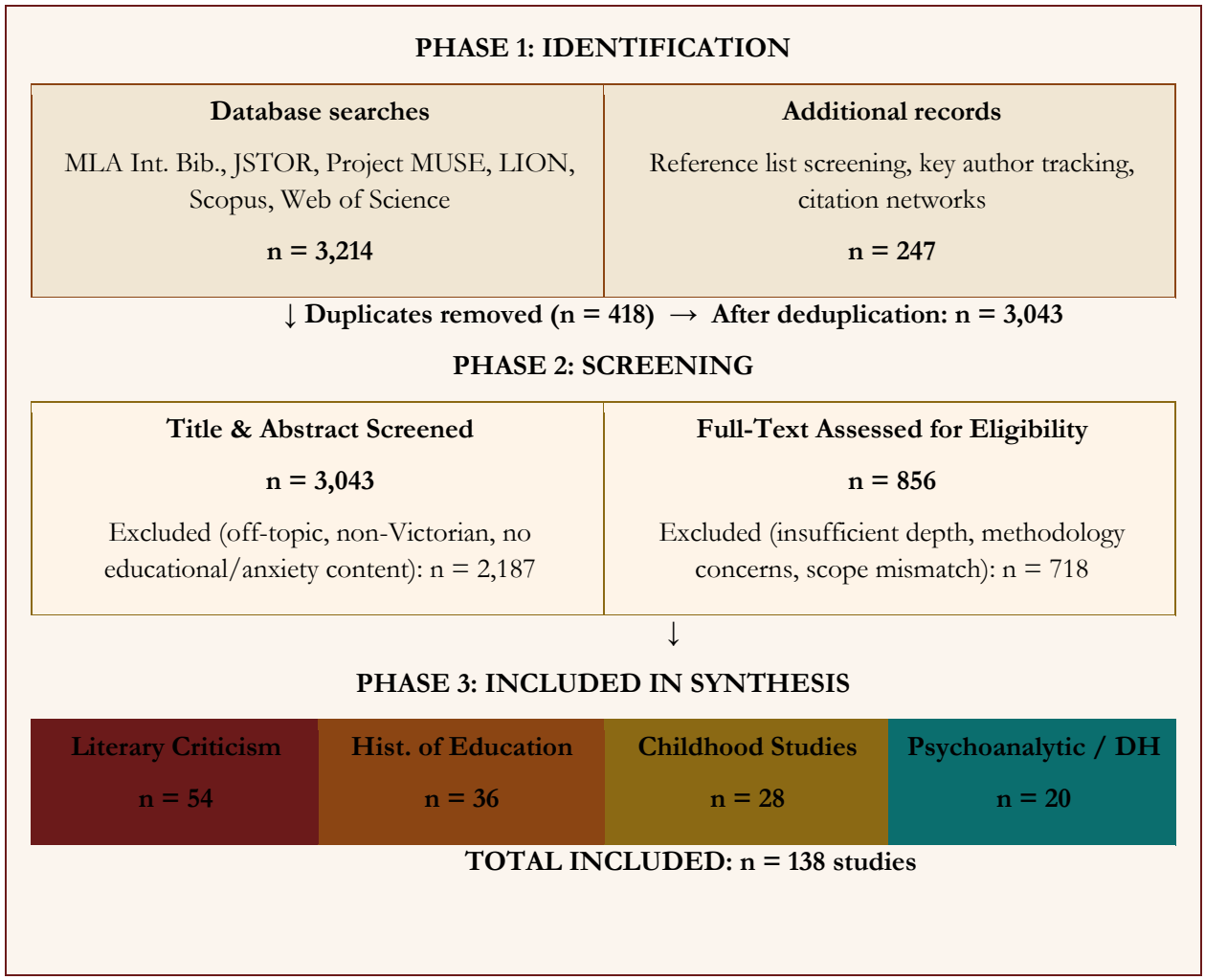
Criterion	Inclusion	Exclusion
Discipline	Literary criticism, Victorian studies, history of education, childhood studies, psychoanalytic criticism, digital humanities	Purely biographical studies, primary historical sources without critical analysis, non-academic commentary
Publication Date	1990-2024 (foundational pre-1990 works included selectively as anchor texts)	Pre-1990 works unless foundational and unavoidably cited in the secondary literature
Language	English-language publications; major French and German scholarship in translation where central to the field	Non-English publications without verified translations
Topic Scope	Studies addressing education, schooling, pedagogy, or the figure of the child specifically in relation to anxiety, fear, discipline, or trauma in Victorian literary texts	Studies addressing education in Victorian contexts without engagement with literature; literary studies without educational or anxiety dimension
Methodology	Peer-reviewed articles, book chapters, monographs with clear scholarly methodology; systematic or meta-analyses of Victorian childhood studies	Conference abstracts without full papers; MA dissertations; unpublished working papers
Primary Texts	Victorian fiction, poetry, autobiography with sustained schoolroom, educational, or pedagogical content; includes canonical and lesser-studied texts	Victorian texts where education is incidental; twentieth or twenty-first century fiction set in Victorian period

3.4 PRISMA 2020 Flow Diagram

The systematic database search was performed in October 2024, which resulted in a primary corpus of records, the duplicates of which were eliminated, the relevance of the titles and abstracts was checked, and the full texts were evaluated on eligibility. Figure 1 presents the PRISMA 2020 flow diagram documenting the complete review process.

Figure 1

PRISMA 2020 Flow Diagram: Systematic Review of Educational Anxiety and Childhood in Victorian Literature



3.5 Quality Assessment

The methodological quality of included literary critical studies was assessed using a modified version of the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) qualitative checklist adapted for humanities scholarship (Green and Thorogood). Criteria included: clarity and transparency of argument; adequacy of textual evidence; engagement with relevant secondary literature; methodological self-awareness; and contribution to the field. Historical education studies were assessed using Burnard et al.'s criteria for historical research quality. Studies achieving a minimum quality score of 60% on these criteria were included in the synthesis. Two reviewers independently assessed each included study; disagreements were resolved through consensus discussion.

3.6 Thematic Synthesis Approach

Thematic synthesis followed the three-stage approach developed by Thomas and Harden: (1) free coding of findings from included studies; (2) development of descriptive themes through grouping and organisation of codes; and (3) generation of analytical themes through interpretive translation of descriptive themes. This process identified five primary analytical nodes,institutional fear, corporeal pedagogy, gendered educational anxiety, the autodidact figure, and developmental trauma,which structure the analysis in Sections 4 through 8. Close readings of primary Victorian literary texts were conducted in dialogue with the

synthetic findings at each node, providing primary evidence against which the field's claims could be tested and extended.

4. THEMATIC DISTRIBUTION AND CITATION ANALYSIS OF THE FIELD

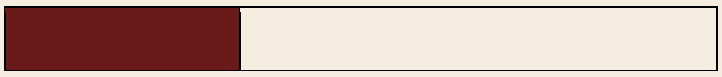
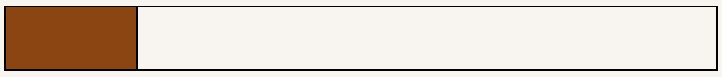
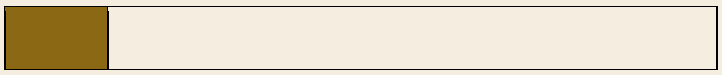
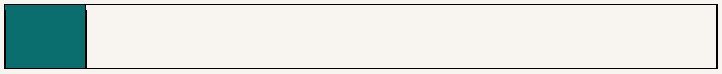
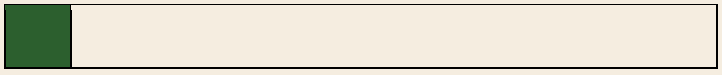
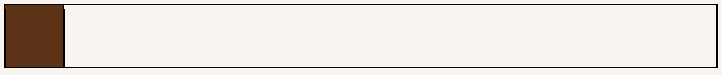
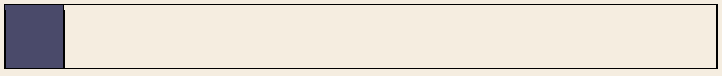
4.1 Distribution of Scholarship by Primary Author Focus

Figure 2 presents the distribution of the 138 included studies by primary Victorian author focus. The concentration on Dickens and Brontë reflects the canonical centrality of their schoolroom narratives, while the relative underrepresentation of Hardy and minor school narrative authors reveals important lacunae in the field.

Figure 2

Distribution of Included Studies by Primary Victorian Author Focus (n = 138)

Author Focus Distribution (% of included studies)

Author / Text	Proportion of Studies	% Share
Dickens (multiple)		32%
Charlotte Brontë		18%
George Eliot		14%
Thomas Hardy		11%
Thomas Hughes		9%
Multiple/Comparative		8%
Minor / Lesser-Studied		8%

4.2 Distribution by Methodological Framework

Figure 3 reveals the methodological distribution of included studies. The dominance of Foucauldian and New Historicist approaches reflects the enduring influence of post-structuralist theory on Victorian studies from the 1990s onward, while the growth of childhood studies and psychoanalytic approaches from 2005 onward marks a significant methodological diversification.

Figure 3

Distribution of Included Studies by Primary Methodological Framework (n = 138)

Methodological Framework Distribution (% of included studies)

Framework	Proportion	%
Foucauldian / New Hist.		28%
Close Reading / Formalist		22%
Victorian Childhood Studs		19%
Psychoanalytic		13%
Gender / Feminist		11%
Digital Humanities		4%
Other / Interdisciplinary		3%

4.3 Publication Trends Over Time

Figure 4 maps publication output by decade across the review period. The notable surge in scholarship from 2005-2015 coincides with the consolidation of Victorian childhood studies as a recognised sub-discipline and the publication of several landmark monographs (Plotz; Robbins; Pearce) that reoriented the field.

Figure 4

Publication Output by Decade: Educational Anxiety and Childhood in Victorian Literature Studies (1990-2024)

Publication Output by Decade

Decade	Relative Output	Studies (n)
1990-1999		13%
2000-2004		14%
2005-2009		22%
2010-2015		26%
2016-2019		18%
2020-2024		19%

5. THE ARCHITECTURE OF INSTITUTIONAL FEAR

5.1 The Schoolroom as Disciplinary Space

The most consistently developed theme in the scholarship reviewed is the reading of the Victorian schoolroom as a Foucauldian disciplinary space in which surveillance, examination, ranking, and spatial organisation combine to produce what Hunter has called the "governmental" subject of modern education. The Victorian schoolroom's physical organisation,its ranked desks, its elevated master's chair or desk at the front commanding sightlines down parallel rows, its blackboard as the surface on which individual failure is made publicly visible, its monitorial systems in which older pupils surveilled younger,enacts in architectural form the panoptic logic that Foucault identified as the signature technology of modern disciplinary institutions (Hunter; Foucault). The most sustained literary realisation of this spatial logic is arguably Dickens's description of Gradgrind's classroom in the opening chapters of *Hard Times*, where the "plain, bare, monotonous vault of a schoolroom" is explicitly correlated with the "plain, bare, monotonous" quality of the instructor's disciplinary philosophy (Dickens, *Hard Times* 9). The room's geometry is the geometry of its ideology.

An analogous space politics has been described by Norman Vance in the analysis of the one work The public school novel where the

various spatial zones are linked with a range of anxieties of different registers: the formal classroom with academic failure and the master with his authority; the dormitory with the unchecked cruelties of peer power and bullying; the playing field with the disciplinary politics of competitive sport; and the chapel with the evangelical conscience that oversees all other anxieties. Tom Brown's School Days (1857) by Thomas Hughes uses all four of these spatial registers with a certain kind of systematic completeness using Rugby as a moral geography where all spaces are filled with the anxiety-generating pressures of a total institution. The most widely recognized example of the period of institutional space as the location of legitimised violence is the notorious scene of Tom Brown being bullied in his dormitory at night by the older boy Flashman who burns Tom in a fire in front of the rest of the dormitory community (Hughes 131-48).

5.2 Analysis, prioritization and performance of knowledge.

An important branch of the scholarship under consideration specifically deals with the analysis of the technology of educational anxiety in the literary representation of Victorianism. In an analysis of examination scenes in Victorian fiction, Ozge Ozturk shows that the public examination, which came to preoccupy Victoria educational institutions, and which ranged between the local examinations taught in Oxford and Cambridge, and the Civil Service competitive examinations, produces a characteristic literary grammar of exposure, judgment and failure. The studied child or youth has to demonstrate the knowledge in a public, in front of an audience that involves peers, superiors, and in some instances, parents, in a form that is able to translate the inner world of intellectual growth into an outer, quantifiable and rankable product (Ozturk; Michie). An examination of moral character not of academic knowledge, but nonetheless actually exemplifying the same logic of public exposure and shaming judgment that the academic examination generates, Jane Eyre, an examination in her case by Mr Brocklehurst at Gateshead,"You have a wicked heart; and you must pray to God to change it" (Bronte, Jane Eyre 34), nonetheless plays the same role that the academic examination does.

The most theoretically refined model of thinking about how the Victorian literature enacts the anxiety of the observed self is the influential analysis of the relationship between numbers and statistics, examination and subject formation of the Victorian period by Mary Poovey (Poovey). We hear in her argument that the Victorian statistical movement and the Victorian examination system constitute a regime of visibility where the individual subject is produced as an inseparable constituent part of a regime of continuing evaluation and comparative values and grading is powerfully echoed in her literary representations of the anxiety of examination in David Copperfield where the terror of Dr Blimber and the forcing-house school is inseparable with the regime of constant assessment and comparable quantity and rank (Poovey; Dickens, David Copperfield).

6. THE BODY AS SITE OF PEDAGOGICAL VIOLENCE

6.1 Corporal Punishment and the Literary Body

The theme of corporal punishment is one of the most extensively portrayed in Victorian schoolroom story, as well as one of the most thorny in its ideological overtones. Physical punishment was used in Victorian educational institutions in a thorough, institutionalised, sense of legitimacy that modern sensibility can scarcely imagine imaginatively, and is reflected in Victorian writing on flogging, caning, and other corporal punishments, as the exaltation of the broader culture of the public school novel which taught the social importance of enduring corporal punishment as the testing of manliness, to the outraged, in the school of social criticism and autobiography that saw corporal punishment as a symptom of pedagogical sadism and institutional barbarism (Gathorne-Hardy; Turner).

Such a literary portrayal of the didactic corporal punishment is most extensively treated of in the Dickensian Nicholas Nickleby, 1838-39, Dotheboys Hall sequence, where the pedagogic

sadist Wackford Squeers unites didactic physical cruelty with didactic educational fraud. This notorious parody of the classroom, w-i-n, win, d-e-r, der, winder, a casement,created by Squeers, both addresses the false pedagogy of cheap private schools rote-learning and presents its pedagogical bankruptcy as inseparable with its physical exertion (Dickens, Nicholas Nickleby 84). The most detailed description of the intersection of Victorian medical and psychological discourses of child development with literary images of educational violence has been in Sally Shuttleworth, The Mind of the Child (2010) who has shown that Victorian writers were engaged in constructing on the real, disputed, and swiftly changing science of the impact of physical punishment on the growing mind.

Corporal punishment in the school story of the girls acquires other forms and has other ideological overtones. The physical cold (poor food and little clothing) of Lowood School, Jane Eyre, is replaced by the physical violence of the cane, but the impact on the physical body of the child is equally traumatic: the death of Helen Burns of typhus, partially caused by the institutional conditions of Lowood, is the ultimate violence done to the children by the school (Bronte, Jane Eyre; Gezari; Shuttleworth). The gendered logic of physical suffering, cold, hunger, bad clothes, of the school where the girls are, is a tradition of physical suffering, or more precisely, suffering of the body, as an institution of pedagogical violence in which the body of the girl is made to experience nothing but institutionalized denial of bodily needs.

6.2 The Coerced Body: Performance, Deportment, and Physiological Makeup.

Beyond overt corporal punishment, the Victorian educational literature demonstrates anxiety regarding the various means through which the child is shaped, regulated and disciplined with regard to the child body through institutional education. The deportment training which is the subject of the school novel of the girls,the strapped board to the behind to correct the posture,the hours of piano-playing that re-model the hands and shoulders,the principles of walking and sitting which inculcate the sense of bodily shame, are a more subtle yet equally extensive disciplining of the body (Gorham; Pedersen; Dyhouse). The Mill on the Floss (1860) is especially responsive to these somatic aspects of educational formation in its description of the education of Maggie Tulliver, where the imperative that Maggie should fit into the physical and behavioural standards of femininity is indissoluble with the imperative that she should drop the intellectual interest and emotional intensity that are the most important, and most anxious, of her characteristics (Eliot; Beer; Showalter).

7. GENDER, ASPIRATION, AND THE DIFFERENTIAL OF EDUCATIONAL ANXIETY

7.1 The Learned Woman and the Anxious Heroine

The large and methodologically varied body of the scholarship reviewed discusses the specifically gendered manifestations of educational anxiety that are exemplified in Victorian literature. The background historical approach to girls and woman in Victorian education by Carol Dyhouse gives the much needed historical background: environment where the opportunity of female education to serious learning was drastically cut-off by separate-spheres ideology, medical theories of the irreconcilability of intellectual effort with healthy female growth, and institutional arrangements effectively lock women out of the universities and the professions to which education could otherwise have been anticipated to lead (Dyhouse; Gorham; Pedersen). These limitations were recorded in the Victorian literature in a continuity and affective manner that forms one of the most significant contributions to the cultural history of gender.

The work by Charlotte Bronte forms the richest single source of research of gendered educational anxiety in Victorian literature. The early education, the antagonistic scrutiny at Gateshead, the deprivation as an institution at Lowood, the work as a governess that on the one hand serves as the ritual of intellectual formation, on the other the marginality of the educated woman in the Victorian social order, all of this combine with Jane Eyre to play the role of the educated woman with such

accuracy: educated enough to be acutely conscious of her intellectual potential, and placed by gender and by class at a level in the social structure which leaves no socially acceptable way of exercising that potential (Gilbert and Gubar; Showalter; Zonana). Villette (1853) elaborates this critique with the tortured negotiations of the pedagogical position by Lucy Snowe, where teaching of French literature to Belgian schoolgirls is turned into a location of a long-standing meditation on the concatenation of intellectual power, gender, and psychogenic repression (Bronte, Villette; Miller; Nestor).

7.2 Jude, Arabella, and ClassGender Intersection.

The gendered aspects of educational anxiety are most brutally made to focus in Thomas Hardy, Jude the Obscure (1895) when the triangulation of Jude Fawley is established as a defiant gesture against the world: the exclusion of the child (Jude) by the system (class), the non-academic feminism, its non-intellectual image of the feminist ideal (Sue Bridehead), and the symbolic horror of the child (Father Time), who in her suicide note, Done because we are too menny, expresses the ultimate realization of the world that gives no room to the children of an educationally ambitious but institutionally marginalized parent (Hardy, Jude the Obscure 355; Eagleton; Gregor). The critique of the connection between masculinity, education and the anxiety of Jude by Richard Dellamora has revealed how the novel can interpret educational exclusion as symbolic castration: the failure of Jude to gain admission to the Christminster University is not just a practical failure but an encapsulating attack on the identity that his education ambition had established in his life (Dellamora; Gagnier).

8. THE AUTODIDACT AS ANXIOUS ALTERNATIVE

8.1 Self-Education and Its Anxieties

The analysis of self-education,the autodidact tradition,as an anxious reaction to the exclusions and failures of institutional education is one of the most significant contributions to the study of educational anxiety in Victorian literature made by the reviewed scholarship. The history of working-class autodidacticism in Victorian Britain was given its first thorough historical treatment by Jonathan Rose in The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes (2001) which showed that self-education with cheap books, with mechanics institutes, with mutual improvement societies and with individual reading was a popular cultural activity already generating its own form of intellectual life, and already generating its own form of anxiety, the anxiety of the inadequately trained reader who is never certain whether his reactions to texts are correct; the anxiety of the self-educated man who is conscious of the incompleteness of his education; the anxiety of upward intellectual mobility in a culture that reserves intellectual authority to the institutionally qualified (Rose; Vincent).

Literary versions of the autodidact (including most notoriously Jude Fawley, in Hardy, but also self-edified characters in Dickens (Bradley Headstone in Our Mutual Friend, Stephen Blackpool in Hard Times), George Eliot (Adam Bede, Felix Holt), and Elizabeth Gaskell (John Thornton in North and South) are a consistent way of registering the particular fears of the self-educated: fear of being stigmatized as poorly educated, social anxiety of intellectual ambition in the absence of institutional validation, psychological cost of a form of education that is practiced in solitude and without the support of a communimental learning.

Bradley Headstone's characterisation in *Our Mutual Friend* as a man whose "decent working clothes showed him to be a working-man" while his rigid propriety displayed the anxious effort of self-improvement is one of Dickens's most psychologically complex portraits of the autodidact condition: a man simultaneously elevated and deformed by the effort of self-education, whose repressed violence expresses the psychological costs of the gap between aspiration and attainment (Dickens, *Our Mutual Friend* 228).

9. THE AFTERLIFE OF EDUCATIONAL TRAUMA: CHARACTER FORMATION AND DEFORMATION

9.1 Education and the Formation of Pathological Character

The fifth and in some respects most theoretically sophisticated node of the reviewed scholarship concerns the relationship between educational experience and adult character formation: the question of how the anxieties of the Victorian schoolroom leave their traces in the adult psyche and the adult social world. This question is central to the bildungsroman as a genre, whose fundamental concern is precisely the relationship between formative experience,including educational experience,and the character that emerges from it, and Victorian literary criticism has increasingly drawn on contemporary developmental psychology and trauma theory to theorise these relationships with greater precision (Bollas; Walkerdine; Urwin).

Sally Shuttleworth's analysis of the intersection between Victorian psychological science and Victorian literary representations of child development has demonstrated that Victorian novelists were genuinely engaged with,and in some cases ahead of,the emerging scientific understanding of early experience's formative power (Shuttleworth). Dickens's repeated returns to the childhood self,in *David Copperfield*, in the autobiographical fragment, in *Great Expectations*, in *Dombey and Son*,constitute what Ian Watt has called "the anatomy of the wounded self," a sustained literary inquiry into the way in which specific childhood humiliations, deprivations, and institutional experiences leave permanent structures in the adult character (Watt; Collins). The "blacking warehouse" experience,Dickens's own childhood experience of being removed from school to work in a boot-blacking factory,haunts his representations of educational anxiety with a biographical specificity that has been extensively documented (Forster; Kaplan; Ackroyd).

9.2 Resilience, Recovery, and the Educated Self

Not every Victorian literary manifestation of educational anxiety leads to trauma and pathology, though, and a valuable line of the scholarship considered has served to follow the opposite narrative: the child who suffers institutional agony and comes out better and not worse. The heroine Jane Eyre is the paradigmatic Victorian story of how education can be used to break the spirit of a humiliated child of Lowood, and transforming herself into one who can say clearly and insistently, I am no bird, and no net enslaves me, that the safe child would never have known (Bronte, Jane Eyre 284). Shuttleworth's analysis has shown how Victorian psychological discourse provided the conceptual resources for this narrative: the hardening of the self through adversity, the development of what we would now call resilience through the experience of managed suffering, is a Victorian educational idea as much as a literary one (Shuttleworth; Steedman).

10. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF PRIMARY TEXTS

Table 2 presents a comparative mapping of the five thematic nodes across the primary Victorian literary texts central to this analysis, demonstrating the distribution of anxieties across the canonical schoolroom literature and identifying the distinctive contribution of each text to the literary-pedagogical archive.

Table 2

Thematic Node Distribution Across Primary Victorian Schoolroom Texts

Text / Author	Institutional Fear	Corporeal Pedagogy	Gendered Anxiety	Autodidact Figure	Developmental Trauma
Hard Times (Dickens, 1854)	Central: Gradgrind utilitarian schoolroom; ranked, surveilled classroom	Present: Mechanical drilling; Circus bodies as counter-instance	Moderate: Louisa's emotional repression; Sissy Jupe as feeling alternative	Absent: Circus outside the school provides informal alternative education	Central: Louisa's emotional numbness as product of defective education
David Copperfield (Dickens, 1850)	Strong: Salem House surveillance; Creakle's petty tyranny; Blimber's forcing house	Central: Creakle's caning; Blimber's intellectual forcing as psychic violence	Moderate: Agnes Wickfield as idealised educated feminine; Emily's limited education	Present: David's solitary reading in Blunderstone	Central: Salem House humiliations leave lasting trauma; Mr Dick's educational failure as disability
Jane Eyre (C. Brontë, 1847)	Central: Lowood as total institution; Brocklehurst's surveillance; public humiliation	Central: Cold, hunger, inadequate clothing; Helen Burns's death as institutional violence	Central: Educated woman's social marginality; governess as educated outsider	Moderate: Jane's solitary reading and drawing as self-education	Strong: Lowood experience as formative; resilience narrative through suffering
The Mill on the Floss (Eliot, 1860)	Moderate: Tom's school scenes; Mr Stelling's inappropriate curriculum	Moderate: Tom's physical discomfort; Maggie's bodily energy as transgressive	Central: Maggie's intellectual aspiration vs. femininity demands; gender-curriculum mismatch	Strong: Maggie's voracious self-directed reading; Kempis as self-education	Strong: Educational deprivation contributes to Maggie's adult marginalisation
Tom Brown's School Days (Hughes, 1857)	Central: Rugby as total institution; Arnold's moral geography; chapel, dormitory, field	Central: Dormitory bullying; Flashman's violence; flogging as	Absent: Male homosocial institution; masculinity formation as central anxiety	Absent: Institutional education unchallenged by autodidact alternative	Moderate: Bullying leaves traces; Arnold's formation as positive developmental force

		legitimate discipline			
Jude the Obscure (Hardy, 1895)	Central: Christminster as inaccessible institution; exclusion as anxiety mechanism	Present: Jude's labouring body as mark of class exclusion from intellectual life	Strong: Sue's intellectual feminism vs. social prohibition; educational gender inequality	Central: Jude's self-teaching as the novel's primary educational mode	Central: Educational disappointment as the novel's fundamental tragic principle; Father Time

11. DISCUSSION

The systematic review and thematic analysis presented in this paper yield several conclusions that advance beyond the existing scholarship on educational anxiety and childhood in Victorian literature. The first and most fundamental is the recognition that Victorian literary representations of educational anxiety constitute not merely a reflection of historically documented educational conditions but a primary cultural technology through which Victorian society processed, contested, and in important respects produced the anxieties that education generated. The sheer consistency of the schoolroom's return in Victorian literary fiction,from the 1830s to the 1890s, across genres from the social novel to the school story to the bildungsroman to the late Victorian tragedy,argues for a structural, generative relationship between the form of the Victorian novel and the anxieties of the Victorian educational system, rather than a merely contingent or descriptive one (Coveney; James et al.).

The second major finding concerns the methodological evolution of the field. The systematic review reveals a clear trajectory from the dominance of Foucauldian approaches in the 1990s and early 2000s,productive for mapping the disciplinary architecture of the schoolroom but prone to a certain theoretical reductionism that risk making the child a passive effect of institutional power,toward more nuanced, agency-sensitive, and developmentally sophisticated approaches in the scholarship of the 2010s and 2020s. The influence of Victorian childhood studies, with its emphasis on children's own cultures, voices, and forms of resistance, has enriched literary analysis by directing attention to the ways in which literary children negotiate, subvert, and survive their institutional environments rather than simply being formed by them (Plotz; Robbins; Pearce). The autodidact tradition, in particular, has been recuperated as evidence of precisely this agential response: the child or young person who constructs an alternative educational identity precisely because the available institutional identity is experienced as inadequate, threatening, or exclusionary.

The third finding concerns the differential of educational anxiety across gender and class. The systematic review vindicates that gender and class are not simply contextual variables of the Victorian literary expression of educational anxiety but its structural dimensions of expression, the kinds of anxiety experienced by girls, women, and working-class autodidacts, are qualitatively different, not simply more or less abundant, than those of middle-class boys. Such a difference is significant to modern readers of Victorian literature not least because it can be mapped onto ongoing discussions regarding the equity of education, the ideology of curriculum, and the connection between education in institutions and social reproduction (Cunningham; Vincent; Dyhouse).

The fourth finding pertains to the issue of contemporary relevance. The Victorian literary-pedagogical archive is not anything like an artefact of the past; it is a living cultural legacy which informs current beliefs about the purpose of education, the growth of children, and the ways in

which institutional formation is legitimate. image of the suffering schoolchild,the figure who recurs from Oliver Twist to Pip to Jane to Jude,is one of the foundational images through which Western culture thinks about the relationship between institutional power and individual development, and its Victorian literary formulation continues to exert influence on educational discourse, policy debates, and psychological frameworks that are nominally far removed from the nineteenth-century schoolroom.

12. CONCLUSION

This paper has presented a systematic review and thematic synthesis of three decades of scholarship on educational anxiety and childhood in Victorian literature, grounded in the PRISMA 2020 protocol, and has extended the field's insights through sustained close reading of canonical and lesser-studied Victorian schoolroom narratives. The five thematic nodes identified,the architecture of institutional fear, corporeal pedagogy, gendered educational anxiety, the autodidact as anxious alternative, and the developmental afterlife of educational trauma,constitute a comprehensive map of the domain and a productive framework for further inquiry.

Victorian literature's sustained engagement with educational anxiety is one of the most intellectually productive relationships in the literary history of the period. From Dickens's systematic indictment of utilitarian pedagogy to Hardy's tragic anatomy of class-based intellectual exclusion, from Brontë's representation of the educated woman's impossible social position to Eliot's analysis of gender and curriculum, Victorian novels constitute a sustained, morally serious, and formally sophisticated engagement with questions about institutional education, childhood development, and the politics of knowledge that remain urgently relevant. The fact that the Victorian schoolroom continues to haunt Western cultural imagination,in the persistent appeal of the public school novel, in the figure of the tyrannical schoolmaster as cultural archetype, in the suffering child as the prototypical victim of institutional power,testifies to the depth and durability of the imaginative work that Victorian literature performed on its culture's educational anxieties.

Future research directions suggested by this review include: longitudinal digital humanities analysis of the schoolroom's spatial representation across the full corpus of Victorian fiction; comparative analysis of educational anxiety in Victorian literature and contemporary young adult fiction; interdisciplinary studies connecting Victorian literary representations of educational trauma to current clinical and educational psychology research on adverse childhood experiences; and further archival work on the lesser-studied traditions of Victorian girls' school fiction that the present review has identified as underrepresented in the existing scholarship. Each of these directions would deepen and extend the understanding of one of Victorian literature's most consistently productive, morally serious, and culturally generative domains.

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