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History of Western Art
Part Four – From Neo-Classicism to Impressionism

Assignment Four – Exercise 3

500-word analysis of up to four paintings or sculptures which demonstrate the influence of political, social and economic changes on the perception of women in the nineteenth century.

The Pinch of Poverty
Thomas Kennington
1891
Oil on Canvas
114.3 x 101.6 cm
The Foundling Museum, London

The Mother
Thomas Kennington
1895
Oil on Canvas
115 x 168cm
Aigantighe Art Gallery, New Zealand

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The Pinch of Poverty

A term first coined by economic historian Arnold Toynbee, The Industrial Revolution began in Britain in the 1760s. It was marked by a move from an agrarian, artisan economy to one dominated by mass production, industry and machinery. This move from small-scale, handcrafted production to large-scale manufacturing was made possible by

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developments such as the steam engine, the spinning jenny, electricity. Advances in transportation and communication all facilitated greater, faster trade and opportunities for import and export of goods. (Britannica) To meet the demands of the factory system and due to the mechanisation also being introduced in farming, workers were forced (often by lack of local employment) to move to cities. However, conditions in factories were shocking; long hours, dangerous working conditions, child labour, low wages. Extreme poverty meant that living conditions in cities were equally shocking. With no welfare system, those unfortunate enough to fall on hard times and be unable to work were forced to take what work they could get with the workhouse the final resort. (Extracts from Engels)

Thomas Benjamin Kennington trained as an artist and worked over a number of genres: a social realist painter, accomplished portrait and landscape artist. A social activist he used his art to highlight the plight of the poor (My Art Daily). Kennington painted in the French style with square brushstrokes and muted tonal colours; the wet pavement and the figures' reflections in it are beautifully captured. Although the subject matter is tragic, the figures are delicately depicted. The fog obscures the buildings and softens the sky creating depth and distance. (LARA)

A painting in the social realist genre, a mother slumps against railings with her 3 children; her face is gaunt and vacant, the black dress indicative that she is a widow; the wan baby in her arms sleeps. A small boy leans on her disconsolately, still clutching a posy of flowers. Her little girl, presumably taking her turn at selling, reaches towards us with a posy, hopeful that we will buy so her family can eat. The pavement is wet and smoke belches from the chimneys, the cause of the terrible pollution and fogs that characterized Victorian cities.



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The Mother

Contrast this image with Kennington's later painting (1895), *The Mother* (above): A warm, inviting setting where a mother tucks up her children for the night. The golden light is centred on the children, a rosy glow on the childrens' cheeks and the tender gaze of the maid show how family life should be. The room looks warm, clean and comfortable. Victorians placed great importance on family values and such narrative paintings underpinned the 'correct' social order. These paintings were didactic, instructions to the viewer on how to lead a good life (the poor were believed to be so by virtue of laziness or fecklessness). (My Daily Art Display).

In his social realist pieces, it is thought that Kennington may have been influenced by Spanish artist Murillo, in the "rich colouring, smooth handling of paint, and subject" (Victorian Web). His socially focused art was praised by critics. He won a number of medals, exhibited at the Royal Academy and RBA. He was a founder member of the New English Art Club. (Victorian Web)

Sources

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(533 words excluding headers and sources)