

# Self-fashioning and Moral Maturity in *Evelina*

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**Abstract:** *Evelina* can be taken as a literary event that reflects the social milieu in which it was written and published. As a literary action and social practice, this novel becomes an integrated part of the literary market and daily life in Frances Burney's age. There are complex and reciprocal relationships between the action of *Evelina*'s self-fashioning, the influence of ethical selection and the formation of moral maturity. This paper tries to address the important issues in the process of moral maturity to investigate the roles and limitations of self-fashioning in the growth of young women through fictional narratives in eighteenth-century England. In this way, the cognition and fulfilment of ethical identities can be explored in the due course.

**Keywords:** Burney; *Evelina*; self-fashioning; moral maturity; ethical identity

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**标题:** 《伊芙莱娜》中的自我形塑与道德成熟

**内容摘要:** 弗朗西斯·伯尼小说《伊芙莱娜》的写作和出版可被视为一个文学事件,反映了此过程中的社会情状与伦理环境。这种文学行为和社会实践是当时英国文学市场和日常生活的组成部分。女主角伊芙莱娜的自我形塑行为跟伦理选择和道德成熟之间形成了复杂的双向互动关系。本文试图讨论这部英国十八世纪后半期经典小说中关于道德成熟的话题,分析虚构叙事中的自我形塑在青年女子成长过程中的作用及其局限,以期研究伦理身份的认知与实现问题。

**关键词:** 伯尼; 《伊芙莱娜》; 自我形塑; 道德成熟; 伦理身份

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The success of Frances Burney (1752-1840), also known as Fanny Burney, was phenomenal in eighteenth-century England. She was a leading figure among a gallery of women writers including Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, Sarah Fielding, Charlotte Smith, Charlotte Lennox, Mary Wollstonecraft and many others. Her first novel *Evelina, or, The History of a Young Lady's Entrance into the World* was published in the year of 1778. It is widely acclaimed for its delineation of the moral maturity of the heroine. Julia Epstein argues that “the comedy here comes from the heroine’s (and her creator’s) youthfully impetuous and sly inversion of powerlessness into power, as Evelina learns to manipulate social manners and fashion so that she gains the greatest possible control over her life without offending those who seek to ‘guide’ her” (Epstein, *The Iron Pen* 121). In this sense, *Evelina* is highly tactical in her own way of self-fashioning. *Evelina* involves the growth of a young lady, but it is not a Bildungsroman in the strict sense. *Evelina* is a clear-minded woman with a strong character. In her letters, she fashions herself as an innocent, obedient and docile young lady. However, critics like Marta Kvande have noticed her obstinacy and tactics: “Evelina uses this pose of obedience as a cover” (Kvande 170). *Evelina*’s maneuver with her guardians reflects her will of self-fashioning. This novel presents to readers the progress of her moral maturity through the fusion of self-fashioning and ethical selection.

#### Self-fashioning through Epistolary Narratives

Burney’s life was an epitome of self-fashioning as a young woman in eighteenth-century England: she was a “protégée of Samuel Johnson, lady-in-waiting at the Court of George III, later wife of an emigré aristocrat and stranded in France during the Napoleonic Wars, she lived on into the reign of Queen Victoria” (Sabor title page). These social identities cultivate the image of Frances Burney as a woman novelist and a member of the fashionable society. Burney was born into a family with high social status. As the other young ladies, when she grew up, she made her way into the fashionable society. She was popular with Samuel Johnson and the Court of George III. She began her five-year service to the Court as Keeper of the Robes to Queen Charlotte in the July of 1786. She gained recognition and approval from the royal family, which endowed her with a fame for the fashionable society of London.

In *Evelina*, Burney focuses on the theme of the moral maturity of womanhood,

the efforts of self-fashioning and matrimonial endeavors. Ian Watt, in his *The Rise of the Novel*, summarizes the contribution of Burney in a good way: she synthesizes two divergent styles of novel writing created by Samuel Richardson and Henry Fielding, and starts a new vision for women writers “with the advantages of the feminine point of view” (Watt 296-299). Burney depicts a vivid psychological and sentimental landscape on a broad canvas of the daily life in eighteenth-century England to present the process of Evelina’s maturity from adolescence to womanhood.

Even though the notion of “Angel in the House” was not coined until the year of 1854 by Coventry Patmore in his poem, the division of social space and personal role has been in existence for centuries. Burney was born into a middle-class family. Her father was a musician and man of letters. Burney behaved well with the manners of a “lady” in the eighteenth-century. Young women should obey many disciplines to shape their identity and model their action of respectability. In the first half of the eighteenth-century, novel-writing was not taken to be a decent profession. Susan Lanser points out that even for women writers of the 19<sup>th</sup> century like Susan Ferrier, Elizabeth Gaskell and George Eliot, they will use many quotations and aphorisms to achieve the effect of authority. Aphorism will prove that women writers “are profoundly knowledgeable” and give them “a sense of association which is a blending of the texts of women writers and men writers” (Lanser 109). For the time when Burney lived, it was far more difficult to be a professional writer. This profession put women writers in a vulnerable position on the social ladder. Burney wrote in her diary on the entries for September of 1778: “I am frightened out of my wits from the terror of being attacked as an author, and therefore shrink, instead of seeking, all occasions of being drawn into notice” (Burney, *Diary and Letters of Madame D’Arblay* 761). For many writers in eighteenth and nineteenth century England, writing letters was an important channel of self-fashioning. Some of them even wrote diaries and letters with a view of collecting and publishing them in the future, which was a common practice at that time.

It is notable that Burney chose to use the genre of epistolary novel to tell her story and organize the form of her novel. The novel consists of two volumes. The first volume is made up of 31 letters and the second volume 22 letters. Evelina is the deserted daughter of a debauched aristocrat. When the novel begins, she is already a seventeen-year-old young woman who has been living in the countryside. When Evelina leaves for London and lives there, she narrates her stories through the letters to her guardian Mr. Villars and other people. The success of *Evelina* paved a way for Burney to enter the fashionable society. Sometimes, people tend to track down the

autobiographical elements of Burney's fashioning of herself in her *Evelina*. Burney comes to meet this situation in her life time and seems to accept the correlation with calmness or even gladness. "Instances of the gross conflation of Burney and her book product occurred when Dr. Johnson called her 'Evelina', (Come, —Evelina, —come and sit by me) and when two girls in a shop stared so intently at her, it was 'as if they expected to read in (her) face all the characters in (her) book'" (qtd. In Park 141). Julie Park's anecdote of Burney and Dr. Johnson testifies the success of her self-fashioning with her novel *Evelina*.

Urbanization is a dominant force in the history of England in the eighteenth-century. Burney delineates the impact of modernity on the daily life in London, which is one of the greatest cosmopolitan cities in the world then. For women living in cities, they undergo a significant change in their lifestyles when compared with a life in rural areas. Julia Epstein points out that "the heroines of Frances Burney's four novels embody a set of contradictions so paradigmatic of the later eighteenth century that they might be said to define the ideological tensions inhering in the period's complex demarcations of woman's social place" (Epstein, "Marginality in Frances Burney's Novels" 198). Through the letters of *Evelina*, Mr. Villars, Lady Howard and others, the image of *Evelina* is shaped in delicate details. As the preface of the novel says, "the following letters are presented to the public- for such by novel writers, novel readers will be called, -with a very singular mixture of timidity and confidence..." (*Evelina* xiv). The effects of the narrative and the process of self-fashioning are interconnected in a very complicated state in *Evelina*. Reading this novel in the specific historical milieu of the eighteenth-century, we will have a better understanding of the situation of Burney's action of narrating women's identity through daily life details and the fictional narrative of this novel.

With an exquisite touch of the pen, Burney depicts *Evelina*'s moral maturity and ethical selection in a graceful and imperceptible way. Shortly after arriving in London with the Mirvans, *Evelina* writes to Mr. Villars to inform him of their situation. In that letter, she mentions an interesting incident that expressed the ladies' different attitude towards self-fashioning. The first thing they do in London is to go to Drury-Lane theatre and watch a performance by David Garrick, a famous actor of the time. *Evelina* writes:

I am quite in ecstasy. So is Miss Mirvan. How fortunate, that he should happen to play! We would not let Mrs. Mirvan rest till she consented to go; her chief objection was to our dress, for we have had no time to Londonize ourselves; but we teased her into compliance, and so we are to sit in some obscure place,

that she may not be seen. As to me, I should be alike unknown in the most conspicuous or most private part of the house. (30)

This is an animated depiction of the excitement of a young woman at the first moment of arriving in the capital. It testifies Evelina's innocence and naivety in the fashionable world. She was eager to enjoy the bustle and hustle of that cosmopolitan city. Harvie Ferguson argues that "in modern society identity is exteriorized as appearance, this is important in a society where a high proportion of interaction takes place among strangers" (Ferguson 185). Evelina and other ladies surely knew this and were ready to exteriorize their taste and class identity through their dress and other ways of life. The situation with Evelina is almost the same. She wrote letters to tell her stories. This action is also an important way of self-fashioning. The epistolary narratives in *Evelina* help readers form a moral judgment on the characters. Since most of the stories in the novel are told by Evelina, she is the center of consciousness. In her letters, all the stories and other characters are tailored and filtered through her mind.

#### **Selection of Ethical Identity by Self-fashioning**

Self-fashioning is an active choice that is made through the mechanisms of subjectivity and the selection of ethical identity. Nie Zhenzhao holds that "moral behaviors and moral regulations are based on the premise of ethical identity, which restricts the subject of moral behaviors to the extent, sometimes, of mandatory degree through ethical taboos" (Nie, *Introduction to Ethical Literary Criticism* 264). Even if Burney doesn't use this word in her novel, as most of her contemporary writers, the issue of ethical identity looms large in *Evelina*. Self-fashioning is an active action and an intentional endeavor to form an identity and shape subjectivity. Jeffrey R. Wigelsworth holds that "current scholarship suggests that individual identity is formed through an internal process of self-fashioning and through membership in particular groups" (Wigelsworth 59). Wigelsworth is insightful to associate the formation of identity with self-fashioning. This is also true to the formation of ethical identity, which is a social entity of responsibility and rights.

Stephan Greenblatt defines self-fashioning in this way: "of course, there is some absurdity in so bald a pronouncement of the obvious: after all, there are always selves—a sense of personal order, a characteristic mode of address to the world, a structure of bounded desires—and always some elements of deliberate shaping in the formation and expression of identity" (Greenblatt 1). Greenblatt takes the action of self-fashioning as a way of communication with the world, which requires an

ethical choice and deliberate endeavor to shape identity. As a common sense, most of the people would stick to the customs and habits of their class. They are willing to achieve a sense of identity by following social rules that are set for and obeyed by all the people of their class. Appropriateness, which means being suitable and correct in a particular situation, is one of the guiding rules for ladies living in the age of *Evelina*'s time. In letter XXI, the heroine of this novel experiences a certain type of cultural shock when she expresses her "astonishment" at the "rudeness" of Miss Mirvan and Miss Poly (*Evelina* 146) who deviates from the expectations of the fashionable society when they talk about and go to an opera house. They lose their self-control without knowing the etiquette there. *Evelina* presents a moral vision to its contemporary readers that an eighteenth-century English woman should have self-control to achieve an aimable identity, which is the inward curb of her desire and self-fashioning.

When Burney published her *Evelina* in the latter half of the eighteenth-century, the manners of self-fashioning was popular for the fashionable society of London. People living in and immediately after the early modern age believed that they could fashion their own self and identity by following certain social etiquettes and rules. The notions of self and identity in the mind of Burney's contemporaries were constructed under the influence of John Locke and David Hume. The two philosophers combined to create a current of empirical relativism for British people. Hume's theory of the self is quite empirical too. He holds that "the notion of self is a fiction that is imagined in accordance with ideas" and that "there is no such thing as a monolithic self but a stream of incessant and momentary perceptions" (Radcliffe 56, 59). This trend of empirical philosophy was extremely influential in the eighteenth-century. With the enlightenment of this philosophy, people came to believe that there was no absolute or invariable state for the existence of an identity. It gave rise to a belief that the self was fluid and the identity can be fashioned. The action of Burney's making her determination to be a writer and writing her novel *Evelina* can be considered as a measure of her self-fashioning.

The rise of the novel witnessed a fast-growing number of women writers. Aphra Behn and Sarah Fielding gained fame as women novelists, but their popularity and financial success were rather limited. Frances Burney came from a well-to-do family and her determination to become a professional writer was a deliberate endeavor of self-fashioning. She was a pioneer as a woman writer. It justifies her insistence on the anonymity of her authorship when she publishes her *Evelina*. There has been a bias that in the eighteenth-century women novelists were not as good as men writers. Andrew Varney summarizes the causes of this situation:

widely accepted bias toward women's competence as writers, their treatment of "lesser" topics, the legal status of women that limits their identity of an "author", the difficulty to receive payment out of their gender roles, social custom and prejudice that discipline women to stay in the field of domestic sphere, contemporary criticism to valorize "masculinity", association with loose sexual morality, their education that excludes them from the classical culture (Varney 117-118). Varney gives a reasonable explanation to this deep-rooted bias, which impeded Frances Burney when she started her writing career. Her selection of her identity as a woman novelist was a financial, social as well as an ethical action. She made use of her fictional narratives to take part in the great enterprise of eighteenth-century women novelists. They contributed to let their contemporary readers to have an imaginary experience of the moral maturity of a young woman in cosmopolitan London.

For young women coming from rural districts, the opera houses in London are very attractive. In a letter written on March 26, Evelina expresses her wish to go to London, she writes:

They tell me that London is now in full splendor. Two playhouses are open, the Opera-house, Ranelagh, and the Pantheon. You see I have learned all their names. However, pray don't suppose that I make any point of going, for I shall hardly sigh, to see them depart without me, though I shall probably never meet with such another opportunity. And, indeed, their domestic happiness will be so great, -it is natural to wish to partake of it. I believe I am bewitched! (27)

For Evelina and other ladies of the middle class or aristocratic families, going to an opera house is a way of entertainment as well as a way of self-fashioning in the fashionable society. They wear cosmetics and gorgeous clothes to show off the extravagance and affluence of their life style as fashionmongers. They take pains to cater to the fashionable culture and try to have an emotional identification with their class. It is their way of fashioning their identity in the public sphere. The opera house is also one of the few places that are suitable for young ladies at that time.

In letter X, Evelina and the ladies were preparing to go to the famous Dury Lane Theatre. Mrs. Mirvan was reluctant to go to the theatre, her excuse was that she worried about the dress of the young ladies because they "have had no time to Londonize" themselves (30). Evelina was in a great ecstasy when she went to the theatre. She wrote in her letter in a high spirit: "We sat in the pit, where every body was dressed in so high a style, that, if I had been less delighted with the performance, my eyes would have found me sufficient entertainment from

looking at the ladies” (55-56). Evelina spends her earlier years in the countryside. When she arrives in London, she is eager to fashion herself in accordance with the requirements of the fashionable society. She can't wait to start her action of self-fashioning. She arrives in London on April 2. It is exactly on the same day that she goes to the theater to watch a play by David Garrick, the most popular actor of the time. The next day, she comes to St. James Park, a landmark of London. On April 4, she goes to a private ball given by a very fashionable lady. Before going to the ball, she goes to a barber's shop for hairdressing. She feels uncomfortable with the new style of her hair by writing in the letter to Mr. Villars in this way: “You can't think how oddly my head feels; full of power and black pins, and a great cushion on the top of it. I believe you would hardly know me, for my face looks quite different to what I did before my hair was dressed” (34). It shows that Evelina takes pains to comply with the customs of the fashionable society of London. She is anxious to gain recognition and be admitted into the circle of fashionable ladies. Karen Lipsedge points out: “In *Evelina* it is the dressing-room that Burney employs to signal the heroine's transition from maiden to potential mistress. Equally central to Evelina's transition, Burney suggests, is her heroine's ability to acquire the ‘art of cosmetic transformation’” (Lipsedge 122). As a young woman bred in the countryside, Evelina has a natural feeling of admiration for cosmetics, consumption and fashion in the cosmopolitan city.

#### **A Young Lady's Entrance into the World: The Maturity of Moral Sentiments**

As the subtitle suggests, this novel tells the story of Evelina's entrance into the world. It testifies the features of Bildungsroman. Evelina, as a young lady from the countryside, feels the impact of different culture and customs in London. She has the moral guidance of Mr. Villars and Lady Howard. Lord Orville, observing a strict code of morality has an influence on Evelina too. Mr. Villars, Lady Howard and Lord Orville function as an external power to guide Evelina through the unsafe ground of moral issues. Their existence serves as a supporting power for the moral maturity of Evelina. She needs more guidance and suggestions at the beginning of the novel, which can be proved by the number of letters written by these people. The first seven letters of the novel are written by Lady Howard and Mr. Villars. These letters fulfil the tasks of introducing the background of the story, depicting the personality and history of Evelina as well as providing necessary information. The physical existence of the letters of Lady Howard and Mr. Villars works as a moral voice that protects Evelina as an unsophisticated young woman. Gradually, she enters the world and gains independence with her own way of exploration, which



is achieved with the force of self-fashioning. With the progress of the story, Lady Howard and Mr. Villars move to the background and the personality of Evelina comes to the foreground.

In the conventional and patriarchal notion of sexuality in the eighteenth-century, women were supposed to be more emotional, moody and benevolent than men. Their behaviors were thought to be governed by irrationality and sentiments. The spread of the moral theories of David Hume and Adam Smith made English people believe in the value of moral sentiments. It is possible that Burney read Hume's *The History of England*, for she modeled the despicable character of William as "violent, haughty, tyrannical" in her tragedy *The Siege of Pevensey* (Wallace 66). Burney was definitely more familiar with Adam Smith, since Adam Smith was also a member of the Samuel Johnson Club (Rogers 89). Adam Smith's *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759) played an important role in shaping the forms of aesthetics and morality in the eighteenth-century. In the theory of Adam Smith, sympathy is a core element for the sense of morality. Smith's theory of moral sentiments contributed to the rise of Sentimentalism in eighteenth-century England.

Frances Burney was fashioned by the mainstream notions of sentiments and virtues, and in turn she expressed them in her novels. *Evelina*, however, is anti-Sentimentalism. This practice was quite against the grain in the field of novels when *Evelina* was published in 1778. The dominant genre of novel at that time was sentimental novel. "The declaration 'A Sentimental Novel' actually appeared on the title pages of many works of fiction of this period, and was particularly common during the 1770s and 1780s" (Mullan 2236). Even though Sentimentalism was highly influential at that time, Burney's heroine Evelina was not under the sway of this philosophical and cultural trend. Sentiments were taken as a proof of capability of morality. The abundance and overflow of sympathy and sentiments were considered to be a symbol of moral advantage. Rejecting the logic of reason and urban life, Sentimental novels of the eighteenth-century advocated feelings and rural life. When Burney wrote *Evelina*, she deviated from this convention. At the beginning of the novel, Evelina leaves the rural district and moves to the cosmopolitan London. She is sanguine and rational, even if she has some flaws, which are inevitable problems and marks of growth in a novel of Bildungsroman. The notion of "reason" is used by most of the characters as an important means to fashion their identity. Words like "reason", "reasoning" and "unreasonable" appear more than ninety times in *Evelina*.

Frances Burney is on an assured ground to know how to self-fashion the identity of herself and her heroines in the novels. Burney and Evelina can be

deemed as a two-way reciprocal expression of self-fashioning. The publication of *Evelina* can be considered as a literary event that enabled both of them to tell “her story” and to self-fashion herself. Throughout the novel, the consciousness of morality is a central theme. The major characters like Evelina, Mr. Villars, Lady Howard and Mrs. Mirvan are the embodiment of morality. They guide their actions with strict moral disciplines. Apart from that, some of the minor characters like Sir Clement Willoughby, the flamboyant and frivolous nobleman, keep virtues and decorum in their mind all the time. Even for Madam Duval and the Branghtons, the vulgar antagonists, they have a wrong code for the sense of appropriateness which is contrary to the widely accepted standard and mainstream morality. Nevertheless, they still confine their ethical selection and identity to the domain of morality. It is not their intentional neglect of morality, but instead, it is the discrepancy between their false sense of “morality” and the mainstream standard of morality that makes them look disagreeable to the other people.

According to ethical literary criticism, “moral enlightenment is the fundamental function of literature, which is achieved through the reader’s esthetic experience in the process of reading”(Nie, “Ethical Literary Criticism: A Basic Theory” 191). The fictional narrative of *Evelina* serves as a fabric, into which Burney weaves her ideas of moral maturity, ethical selection and ethical identity for young ladies of the eighteenth-century. The texture of the epistolary novel foregrounds the narrative voice and authority of Evelina. She functions as a center of consciousness, through which readers come into contact with other characters. The moral maturity of Evelina presents the conflict of individual will-power of self-fashioning and the strong shaping power of culture.

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