

# *Flatland*: A Multidimensional Critique of Victorian Society and Modern Power Structures

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This paper explores *Flatland* (1884) by Edwin Abbott Abbott as a layered critique of Victorian social, epistemic, and gender hierarchies. Through its geometric allegory, it depicts how spatial order mirrors and enforces class and patriarchal domination. The protagonist's dimensional awakening foregrounds the limits of perception and the paradox of enlightenment, while the novella anticipates modern concerns around surveillance, normalization, and ideological reproduction.

**Keywords:** *Flatland*, Abbott, Victorian satire, epistemic hierarchy, gender oppression, spatial metaphor, dimensional allegory

## Introduction

Edwin Abbott Abbott (1838-1926), the Victorian schoolmaster-mathematician behind *Flatland* (1884), embodied the paradox of a cleric challenging Victorian norms. His mathematical satire critiqued biopolitical governance and foreshadowed postmodern spatial theory.

Set against the democratization struggles of the Third Reform Act (1884) and rising hereditarian doctrines, epitomized by Galton's *Inquiries Into Human Faculty* (Galton, 1883), *Flatland* subverted progressivist teleologies. Conceived amid the mechanized rationality of the Second Industrial Revolution, Abbott's dimensional thought experiment prefigured Latour's (Latour & Crawford, 1993) "modern constitution", a construct dividing nature and culture.

Though a clergyman, Abbott was an outspoken reformist, advocating workers' rights in 1868 sermons and aligning with Christian socialist movements (Norman, 2002). His activism extended to women's education, collaborating with Emily Davies and Elizabeth Garrett Anderson to challenge Cambridge University's exclusion of female candidates (Helsing, Sheets, & Veeder, 1983), paralleling *Flatland*'s critique of gender essentialism.

Modern scholars (Lightman, 2019) place Abbott within the "Victorian scientific dissenter tradition". His advocacy of class consciousness predated Marx's *Capital*, and his mathematical allegories challenged Spencerian social Darwinism. Rather than contradictions, these positions formed a unified critique of dominant Victorian scientism.

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### Content Overview

Edwin Abbott's *Flatland* operationalizes Foucault's (2012) "biopolitical governance" through Euclidean hierarchy, where bodily geometry dictates epistemic authority. Its Cartesian power structure—ranging from monofeminine lines to priestly near-circles—weaponizes mathematical purity, mirroring Victorian phrenology's linkage of cranial angles to morality.

The text's hereditary system underscores its Darwinian subtext. While polygonal elites benefit from Lamarckian "acquired characteristics", laborers and women embody social Darwinism's fixed underclasses. The "Women's Code" exemplifies Butler's (Butler & Trouble, 1990) gender performativity, with mandated oscillation literalizing patriarchal spatial control.

Abbott's legal framework anticipates totalitarian mechanisms. The "Irregular Shapes Criminal Law" reflects Foucault's (2013) panoptic normalization, pathologizing non-Euclidean bodies. The suppression of the Color Rebellion evokes Orwellian thoughtcrime, while circular clergy reify Baudrillard's (1994) simulacral power through infinite-sided hyperreal authority.

The text's revolutionary force emerges through dimensional transgression. The Square's hyperspatial awakening enacts de Certeau's (de Certeau, Jameson, & Lovitt, 1980) "tactical resistance," while Lineland's absolutism parodies Comtean positivism. These mathematical metaphors, as Jameson (2016) suggests, constitute a "cognitive mapping" of Victorian epistemic violence.

### Analytical Section

#### Epistemic Violence and Gendered Oppression

Abbott's dimensional allegory exposes the epistemic violence inherent in hierarchical knowledge systems, particularly in how they intersect with gendered oppression. The rigidly stratified society of *Flatland*—where bodily geometry dictates epistemic authority—serves as an allegory for patriarchal and class-based exclusions in Victorian society. Abbott's depiction of *Flatland*'s female inhabitants as mere line segments literalizes the reduction of women to two-dimensional existence, mirroring Victorian gender norms that confined women to domestic and reproductive roles. This reflects what Beauvoir (1970) later theorized as the "Othering" of women, where male-centered structures render female agency invisible. The "Women's Code", which mandates female lines to oscillate at rapid speeds for visibility, exemplifies Butler's (Butler & Trouble, 1990) gender performativity—Where femininity is not an innate essence but an enforced set of behaviors, dictated by the patriarchal state.

#### The Paradox of Vision and Dimensional Hierarchy

Beyond gender, the novel critiques hierarchical knowledge production through the protagonist's dimensional awakening. The Square's odyssey from Lineland to Spaceland enacts what Fanon (2023) termed "sociogenic dislocation"—A traumatic unmooring from one's cognitive framework that reveals the constructed nature of spatial ontologies. His journey exposes how dimensional privilege functions as a form of "epistemic imperialism" (Spivak, 1986), where those in higher epistemic positions impose knowledge on those in lower ones. This is evident in the Sphere's repeated yet futile attempts to indoctrinate the Square into a third-dimensional worldview, an analogy to colonial educators' struggles to impose Western epistemologies on indigenous societies. Just as the Sphere insists on the reality of three-dimensional space, colonial regimes sought to discredit indigenous knowledge systems, reinforcing the Enlightenment myth of Western rational superiority.

Abbott subverts rationalist universalism by demonstrating that dimensional perception is socially conditioned, rather than a neutral, objective truth.

The revolutionary tension of *Flatland* resides in its paradoxical treatment of vision. While the novel ostensibly celebrates the Square's expanded perception, Abbott simultaneously deconstructs ocular centrism through *Flatland*'s aggressive rejection of hyperspatial truth. This exemplifies Jay's (1993) "scopic regime" clash, as *Flatland*'s clergy deploys circular surveillance to enforce geometric orthodoxy. The Square's newfound multidimensional gaze threatens this rigid order, leading to his heretical condemnation—An allegory for Foucault's (2012) panoptic discipline, where power is maintained through constant visibility and normalization. The novel's legal system, particularly its punitive approach to "irregular" shapes, functions as a form of carceral architecture, prefiguring modern mechanisms of biopolitical governance.

Crucially, the narrative anticipates postcolonial theories of hybridity. The Square, now aware of multiple dimensions, exists in a liminal state: spiritually exiled from Flatland yet physically confined within it. This embodies Bhabha's (1994) "third space" of cultural translation, where the colonized subject inhabits a space between conflicting epistemologies. His ontological homelessness parallels what Anzaldúa (2004) calls a "nepantlera" state, where individuals exist between cultural and cognitive worlds without fully belonging to either. This challenges Victorian progress narratives, which depicted enlightenment as a linear trajectory toward rational advancement, by exposing it as a nonlinear, often traumatic process.

The collapse of dimensional hierarchy under its contradictions mirrors Marx's dialectical materialism. In *Flatland*, Lineland's linear absolutism (thesis) meets Flatland's planar complexity (antithesis), culminating in Spaceland's volumetric synthesis. Yet Abbott resists Hegelian teleology, instead suggesting that each epistemic breakthrough merely replaces one totalitarian order with another—echoing Adorno's (2020) warnings about enlightenment regression. The implication is that even revolutionary knowledge systems risk reproducing oppression unless they fundamentally rethink power structures.

### **Intertextual Connections and Broader Implications**

Intertextual analysis reveals Abbott's prescience in anticipating 20th-century critical theories. The suppression of the Color Rebellion parallels Marcuse's (2013) concept of "repressive tolerance", wherein superficial allowances for difference mask deeper systemic control. Similarly, Lu Xun's (2017) iron house metaphor—which describes a sealed structure where its inhabitants are unaware of their entrapment—finds its spatial counterpart in *Flatland*'s rigidly enforced geometric constraints. These parallels align with Said's (1983) concept of "traveling theories", where revolutionary ideas morph across cultural coordinates while retaining their subversive core. Abbott's dimensional allegory thus transcends its Victorian origins, providing a lasting critique of epistemic violence, patriarchal control, and colonial knowledge hierarchies.

### **Summary**

Edwin Abbott's *Flatland* (1884) is far more than a Victorian mathematical curiosity; it is a profound critique of hierarchical power structures, epistemic violence, and social exclusion. Through its geometric allegory, the novella deconstructs what Foucault (2013) termed "regimes of truth", revealing the mechanisms by which knowledge and perception are regulated to maintain existing hierarchies. Abbott's portrayal of dimensional oppression functions as both a satire of Victorian social stratification and a broader reflection on how dominant ideologies shape epistemic authority.

By engaging with feminist, postcolonial, and Marxist critiques, *Flatland* emerges as a remarkably prescient text that anticipates modern debates on biopolitical governance, gendered exclusion, and the disciplining of perception. The treatment of women as mere line segments literalizes patriarchal control, while the Square's failed enlightenment mirrors the challenges of epistemological liberation under entrenched ideological constraints. Furthermore, Abbott's depiction of knowledge production as inherently hierarchical challenges the notion of progress as a linear, teleological process.

The novel's enduring relevance lies in its ability to expose the recursive nature of oppression—how each epistemic revolution risks replacing one form of totalitarianism with another. This insight, echoing Adorno's (2020) warnings about enlightenment regression, remains critically important in contemporary discussions on algorithmic bias, surveillance capitalism, and institutionalized knowledge control. By framing dimensionality as both a metaphor for and a mechanism of power, *Flatland* remains a vital text for interrogating the structures that continue to govern perception, authority, and exclusion in modern society.

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