



## ORIGINAL PAPER

# Victorian Women in Literature

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### Abstract

Many authors began to write about the sufferings and endurances of women in the Victorian Age. More and more novels focused heavily on traditional, typical Victorian female characters and their interactions. As to the movement for the emancipation of woman from the unjust burdens and disabilities to which the five authors made it a subject to reveal the benign qualities of woman, Hardy, Thackeray, Gaskell, Trollope and George Eliot also focused the condition of woman, besides Charles Dickens and the Brontë sisters – with a remarkable account of the social institutions of Victorian London. This does not mean that those novelists held feminist ideas, they simply he wanted to give woman her feminine privileges and rights. This study aims to explore most important Victorian writers who wrote about woman to seek the accuracy of Victorian views towards women. Charles Dickens was a pioneer in dealing with the kind of woman that was identified in that era. We also include Thomas Hardy and Charlotte Brontë who had different ideas in this point.

**Keywords:** *emancipation, female characters, feminism, Victorianism, women writers*

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### Introduction

When England faced the French and the Industrial Revolutions one after another in the 19th century, suffering was mainly restricted to the poor, women and children. Those who were forced to work for gaining the daily food, they were working under bad conditions. In the early nineteenth century and as a contrivance to protect women from the exploitation in the street, a new gender ideology arose in which “women were apparently restricted to the home, or ‘private sphere’, while men’s field was defined as the ‘public sphere’” (Thane, 1978: 1). While it restricted women’s activities and opportunities, women nevertheless occupied public and carried on public activities.

Marriage for countless women at that sometime means happiness and stability, whereas many Victorian theorists, philosophers, and commentators call marriage as a legally binding contract. Kames has this view, “Marriage is a contract still more important, as the happiness of one’s whole life may depend on it” (Kames, 1800:148).

In Victorian period, the view on women was around an image of women as both inferior and superior to men. They did not have their legally rights, they could not vote and had to pay workforce that appeared after the Revolution. Women forced to do their domestic sphere, they should clean, home, food and raise their children. The husband controlled all the property. The rights and privileges of Victorian women were very limited for both, the single and married. She faced many kinds of verbally and physically violence, and she did not have the right to divorce. The educated class especially the writers appeared to stand against the injustice law. Victorian culture exhibits in both literature and visual arts an accruing interest in nineteenth-century women's periodicals has found expression over the last decade in countless volumes of literary and historical scholarship. Many authors began to write about the sufferings and endurances of women in Victorian Age. Their novels focused heavily on traditional, typical Victorian female characters and their interactions. Nancy Henry mentions in *Victorian Literature and Finance* : " It would be difficult to consider women and investment in the nineteenth century without invoking the model of ‘separate spheres’, by which many historians and literary critics have understood and interpreted Victorian culture. The simultaneously public and private nature of financial acts seems to obviate the distinction between a public/male sphere and a private/female sphere. And yet, the activities of investing women, especially their presence in ‘the City,’ frequently called up the rhetoric of separate spheres in the Victorian press" (Henry, 2007: 112).

Elizabeth Lee, in *A Literature of Their Own*, summarizes that Elaine Showalter shows how women’s literature has evolved, starting from the Victorian period to modern writing. She breaks down the movement into three stages – the Feminine, a period beginning with the use of the male pseudonym in the 1840s until 1880 with George Eliot’s death; the Feminist, from 1880 till the winning of the right to vote in 1920; and the Female, from 1920 till the present-day, with a new stage of self-awareness about 1960 (Lee, 1997: 3). It was a the most important historical culture, reflected in the fictions of that era. As the nineteenth century was an age rich in fiction, it was the most enjoyable way to appreciate the textures of Victorian life. It is worth to read Victorian novels and, because of woman’s precious weight in Victorian fictions, the researcher finds it valuable to write about this kind of culture.

As to the movement for the emancipation of woman from the unjust burdens and disabilities to which the authors made it a subject to reveal the benign qualities of woman, there were novelists (besides Dickens) such as the Brontë sisters, with a remarkable

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account of the social institutions of Victorian London. In addition, Hardy, Thackeray, Gaskell, Trollope, Brontë and George Eliot also focused on the condition of woman.

### Dickens's View on Women

There are many female characters in each novel, of Charles Dickens's novels employ characters from diverse social classes of Victorian England, each character developed enough for the audience to convey his outlook according to the way he constructs his female characters: “. His words also bring to light his views on the women of his time . A great deal of criticism has connected Dickens' female characters in novels with women in his life” (Bashi, n.d :1).

Dickens's novels employ female characters from various social classes of Victorian England. Each character is developed enough for the audience to make an assumption about Dickens's observations on domestic and social conditions. He was one of the most significant novelists of the Victorian age, and he aimed to accommodate and promote his characters to reflect that time. This does not mean that Dickens nourished feminist thoughts, he simply wanted to give woman her feminine privileges and rights.

As a novelist, he was anxious about the victims of his society and the way in which their lots can be improved. Dickens reacted towards the bad situations by employing figures to convey pessimistic historical vision, as the tragic symbol for human fate in the nineteenth century. He therefore chose to construct representative victims of legal institutions to draw attention to flaws in his world and the changes that might be made to improve social conditions. My intent is to write on the situation of woman in the nineteenth century in society and the society's views towards her.

Nineteenth-century English life is a recurrent theme in the novels, and versions of novels that abound in contemporary images. Alexander has a parallel idea, when he writes that in the nineteenth century: “There had been crazes for the Gothic novel and with Scott's fiction, yet it was only in the 1840, with Charles Dickens, that the novel again reached the popularity” (Alexander, 2000: 272). The attractiveness of Dickens' realistic novels seems to go with the expansion foundation of middle-class realities. Regarding the woman, Xiang argues that: “Most writers portrayed the nineteenth-century British woman as a naive, accepting figure with strong concerns about living up to the given societal ideals for a respectable woman”(Xiang, 2008: 5).

Dickens must have many opportunities of observing; his social pictures would have been imperfect without them. He has his considerable thoughts reflected in his great novels. He presents the destructive, abused, angelic, true mother , and the evil woman. But he prefer the angelic and utopian woman, whom he rewards with happiness.

“This idea of virtuous womanhood as possessed of innate, God-given powers to uplift, regenerate and redeem, which is so ubiquitous in Dickens's writing, is inextricably bound up with his celebrated idealization of the domestic. It is always in terms of personal relationships, especially within a family grouping, that woman, for him as for most Victorians, realized her full moral and spiritual potential” (Slater, 1983: 309).

Dickens speaks through his characters and so they become his mouthpiece, and behind each female character there is an aim which he wants to achieve. By representing his own points of view, feelings, thoughts and opinions, he means to cure the society. Dickens gives the reader an opportunity to recognize the greatness of the characters as well as to express his ideas about the behaviors and characteristics of women as a group.

It is obvious from Dickens' speech his forming of the characters in his novels in order to fit his purposes. He said:

"I believe it may be said of an author's attachment to the creatures of his own imagination, that it is a perfect model of constancy and devotion, and is the blindest of all.[I have], an earnest and true desire to contribute, as far as in me lies, to the common stock of healthful cheerfulness and enjoyment....I believe that Virtue shows quite as well in rags and patches, as she does in purple and fine line. I believe that she and every beautiful object in external nature, claim some sympathy in the breast of the poorest man who breaks his scanty loaf of daily bread...These creatures have the same elements and capacities of goodness as yourselves, they are molded in the same form, and made of the same" (Darwin, n.d: 65).

Dickens knew what he was talking about. In his later novel *Little Dorrit* (1857), he conveyed the kind of angelic female character represented by Amy Dorrit through whom Dickens concentrated on the human good and evil deeds, and how those deeds could draw the fate of human happiness or death. Concerning this character, Dickens serves the idea that the woman's ability has more to do than what the society supposes her to be. Emmy is reflected as the precursor of all humanity, an innocent character who achieves good deeds not only to her family but to the people around her. "In the sound of her voice, in the light of her eyes, in the touch of her hands, so Angelically comforting and true!" (Dickens, 2009: 787). As it happens with Dickens's characters, inner life is presented through being externalized and acted out. *Little Dorrit* illustrates one of the central and most important themes in Dickens's novels, that environment can act as a catalyst in term of influence and likeness. Amy presents him all her money to help him triumph over his distress, but he rejects her offer. After this caring and protective act, Little Dorrit swears to Arthur her perpetual love and this declaration allows Arthur to endure his dreadful prison period. She gives him a new hope and optimism in life.

Dickens proves that his heroine is a considerable woman for her moral manners, as she is praised by Mr. Meagles: "little, quiet, fragile figure ... that her young life has been one of active resignation, goodness, and noble service" (Dickens, 2009: 846).

The reader of the novel can observe deeply how she can help the prisoners in the jail. Amy takes it upon herself to care for and help others to the best of her ability. Little Dorrit seems to want someone to care for as a vital and important part of her existence. She lacks the pride and self-importance that are so apparent in heroines. Milbank's belief that "Dickens takes as given the close association of woman and home, and sees women as the group who might be able to extend their natural mothering and housekeeping tasks from the domestic to the public realm. In this, Dickens is close to feminist of the time, which used the ideological identification of woman with morality as an argument to extend their moral influence and values to the market-place and public institutions" (Milbank, 1992: 90).

### **Hardy's View of the Weak Woman**

The nineteenth century was an age rich in fiction, and the novel was the most enjoyable way to appreciate the textures of Victorian life. It is worth reading about Thomas Hardy and his personal view about the Victorian woman, his art, his poetry, and his novels of ingenuity, fantasy and romance. "Hardy is the best Victorian psychologists of creativity because of his relaxed form and moral detachment : emotional and sensuous detail is

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common in other great Victorians" (Hardy, 2000: 47). Remarkably, Hardy could expose the woman's struggle in circumlocution techniques.

The novel *The Mayor of Casterbridge* is not a moral expanse, the novel's plot reveals the consequences on kinds of characters with different moods, non-moral level of a quality of character, a condition of existence Henchard and on the opposite side of, we find the conventional women. *The Mayor of Casterbridge* begins with a scene that dramatizes the analysis of female defeat as a function of capitalism this opening scene of such heartlessness and cruelty that it still shocks readers today. Hardy presents Susan as a woman who shows little emotions, a woman, brings a dark secret that suffered of Henchard's doom. Hardy's heroines become more completely Hardy's voice to recognize and judge the world. Thomas Hardy was providential enough to get such an opportunity.

Hardy's women can't be studied only under the influence of love. Love is another force which causes pain for the woman, she may be forced to vice because of her emotions. Hardy tends to study the woman psychologically by both her heart and soul. For him women are more the creatures of instinct and impulse than men. This very realism of Hardy is seen in the fact that women in his novels suffer more than his men. The woman endorses the society's injustice then ends her life with a tragedy. His estimate of women is superior, but tempered and conditioned by devoted observation of the realities around him. From the very beginning, Hardy imagines the cheapness of woman through his husband:

"Well, then, now is your chance; I am open to an offer for this gem of creation."

She turned to her husband and murmured, "Michael, you have talked this nonsense in public places before. A joke is a joke, but you may make it once too often, mind! I know I've said it before; I meant it. All I want is a buyer" (Hardy, 1996: 9).

Susan is treated with scorn by Henchard, and there are direct indications from the narrator that Henchard is suspicious about her mental power, her way through the novel is one of continued triumphs over coming circumstance, then she succeeds in improving her worldly situation; she guesses the true age and situation of her surviving daughter so as to establish her in wealth before her own death. "idiotic simplicity" (Hardy, 1996: 17).

"Henchard's wife acted for the best, but she had involved herself in difficulties. A hundred times she had been upon the point of telling her daughter, Elizabeth-Jane, the true story of her life" (Hardy, 1996: 79).

"Her simplicity – the original ground of Henchard's contempt for her – had allowed her to live on in the conviction that Newson had acquired a morally real and justifiable right to her by his purchase – though the exact bearings and legal limits of that right were vague" (Hardy, 1996: 80).

Present-day society's conditions and attitudes have been compared to the treatment of Susan, Lucetta, and Elizabeth-Jane. In *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, Allingham considers: "Thomas Hardy attempted to make Victorian society more aware of its treatment of and attitudes towards women. This object he effected through the chief female characters of the novel" (Allingham, 2003: 2).

During the events, he conveys that women in their different estates are consistently revealed either as unimportant workers or as pawns in male power-games in this late Victorian novel. Thomas Hardy portrays these females with an effort, and describes their tragedies to criticize society. Hardy, as Xu Xiang argues, "exposes the weakness of human beings. He thinks that one reason for the characters' tragedy is the

weakness of their characters” (Xiang, 2008: 3-4). Martin Blocksidge has a different view on Hardy, he commands that “Hardy’s view of human nature and the likely outcome of human endeavor is almost unremittingly tragic” (Blocksidge, 1991: 4).

Hardy was different from Dickens in exposing physical love and susceptible to female charm. According to Alexander, “His characters, rather than showing psychological development, are made of simple elements and experience a variety of emotions as plot and situations act upon them. His mixing of genres invokes a greater variety of dimensions than other novelists” (Alexander, 2000: 302) because he lived much of his life out of doors so he could observe unbelievable or accidental scenes.

### **Brontë’s Attitude on Woman**

Charlotte Brontë (1816-1855) was particularly drawn, by experience as well as by imagination, to the troubles of the unmarried and monetarily poor women. She dramatises those cases in *Jane Eyre* (1847) and *Villette* (1853). Charlotte Brontë wrote under the masculine pseudonym Currer Bell. She was received with great praise, and this is one of the reasons that allowed her to write about the injustice on woman. Eventually, the position of women in Victorian society became a major political issue; as a result, there appeared many prominent women Victorian novelists, and some of the problems which women faced are inevitably reflected in their work.

Approximately at the time when *Jane Eyre* was published, mid-Victorian England was concerned in a great deal of argument about social reform. For instance, a group called the Chartists published a ‘People’s Charter’ in 1838 calling for universal male suffrage and Karl Marx and Frederich Engels completed the *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (1850) in which they discussed the working class to grab power. A number of texts identified as the ‘Condition of England’ novels engaged creatively with social and political change including Charles Dickens’ *Dombey and Son* (1846–1848), Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Mary Barton* (1848) and Anne Brontë’s *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848).

In *Jane Eyre*, Brontë certainly explores a variety of contemporary issues; such as the ill-treatment of children and the role of the church in Christian faith. Furthermore while the focus of the text is definitely on Jane’s inner life and personal battles, the problems, she faces were shared by many real-life women who struggle to get her earn the daily foodstuff in spite of the little choices on hands in poor society. *Jane Eyre* is a first-person autobiography of emotive, narrative, and at times mythic power, tells the story of the easy tutor. Jane, The orphan heroine suffers, is tried many times, and triumphs. After difficulties in her early life, falls in love with her employer, Mr Rochester. They marry, Jane deserves her final happiness.

Charlotte Brontë found an appropriate device to expose her rejections against the educational system, hypocrisy, humiliation and bigotry, this device was to write *Jane Eyre*, which was a revolt to find the heroine way as an independent woman. Jane is victorious at the end of her story because she has maintained narrative influence and power. Her achievement lies in her ability to narrate a text that forces her to confront Entrhancement, she is as Angela Hall-Godsey says: “Jane is the power behind her own narrative” (Hall-Godsey, 2008: 44).

Brontë believes that a woman should give the opportunity to work as a teacher, this view comes as her feelings when she was a teacher at some period in her life. The teaching field is the only way occupation that the woman may success in, it is the social

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work and respectable duty of the middle class woman. Jane Eyre was so lucky to love her employer. In their relationship, they broke all the social boundaries.

In her fiction, Brontë establishes a comparison between self-controlled woman represented by Jane and the animalistic character represented by Rochester's first wife. She also introduces a different and new voice of passion. When she was a child, Jane was a far impassive kid, and she suffered from fear and the aggressive treatment of the adults. Charlotte Brontë reflects her life, and the Victorian injustice rules towards the child and woman. They both suffer from poverty, sickness and fear. Her terror appears in a parallel terror with Jane's. Alexander mentions that Brontë was the first novelist to convey a landscape connecting to her own experience, and he adds: "The seriousness of Brontë's effort to define woman's emotions besides the power and vigor of her affecting world are instantly accessible to anyone" (Alexander, 2000: 275-76).

Alison Milbank's study articulates that *Jane Eyre* is "the search for a feminine identity that is genuinely challenging, and ultimately redemptive for human kind in general" (Milbank, n.d, 141). Although Charlotte Brontë was always conscious of the economic and emotional deprivations felt by the single woman, Jane Eyre is strongly and positively to blame of her own life. Charlotte Brontë paints a grim picture story of a respectable middle-class spinster, its central character experiences a number of extraordinary things in a life full of movement and quest. Her fiction is not merely written for the feminine but to all the people in community.

Kornstein's thesis (2003) exposes Brontë's struggle for autonomy as a largely isolated woman living with a tyrannical father and, later, within a brief marriage. Her novel reflected her own character with the passion and fervor and her life and strong, but never guiltless spirit. Her first novel, *Jane Eyre*, shows Brontë struggling with the issue of civilizing passion, her own as well as her characters. At that point Brontë insists on the conflict of the woman with her natural desires and social condition: the conflict between Passion and Reason. She has the tendency to share the deepest secrets of her soul with the readers (Kornstein, 2003: 11).

She could "be an agent of her own sexual development" (Hall-Godsey, 2008: 10) by understanding the suffering of her own lack at her own hand. Charlotte Brontë explored the desires directly which are taken in her personal life. By using the female character 'Jane,' Brontë "defied the Victorian conventions of middle-class femininity" (Kornstein, 2003: 11) because she lived and spoke as she wanted according to her wishes.

When a woman takes the responsibility of writing amidst her domestic duties, she "must not hide her gift in a napkin; it was meant for the use and service of others". Gaskell believed that

"if a woman were blessed with the ability to write, then she must labour to do what is not impossible...and God would bless her endeavors. Brontë's constant struggle to achieve respectability as a woman in a 'man's profession' left her feeling isolated and vulnerable, longing to escape and to experience true freedom" (Gaskell, 1908: 238).

She used writing also as a mean to practice castration. Hall-Godsey has written about this subject:

"Writing equals castration, Writing allows women a moment in which to carry the mark and make the mark simultaneously-the proverbial double-edged sword... In the case of the female characters in the novels of Charlotte Brontë, the author exhibits a passionate level of violence toward his/her female characters. As an author, Charlotte Brontë created a world that, in its textual

reproduction, becomes a history of female self-castration by writing under a man's pen" (Hall-Godsey, 2008: 10-14).

As Juliet Barker writes in her book *The Brontës: A Life in Letters*, "Brontë's desires to love and be loved were often shrouded by the desire to be independent and treated equally as a woman. She wished that women of the time would not sit idly by waiting for a husband to "rescue" them. Writing to William Smith Williams of her aggravation with such women, she encourages him to trust his daughters to make "their way honorably through life. Advocating respectable work for women, she says, "Teachers may be hard-worked, ill-paid and despised – but the girl who stays at home doing nothing is worse off than the hardest-wrought and worst paid drudge of a school." "Families of daughters sitting waiting to be married, I have pitied them from my heart. She suggests that these women obtain a hobby on which to focus their energy so "idleness" will no longer be a factor. Brontë's desire is, "I wish all your daughters – I wish every woman in England had also a hope and motive" (Barker, 1998: 241-42).

It is obvious to the minds that Brontë wanted to change the past and bad conditions of woman in that time as she herself had suffered of them. Bronte speaks through Jane, declaring:

"Women are supposed to be very calm generally: but women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for their faculties, and a field for their efforts as much as their brothers do; they suffer from too rigid a restraint, too absolute a stagnation, precisely as men would suffer; and it is narrow-minded in their more privileged fellow-creatures to say that they ought to confine themselves to making puddings and knitting stockings, to playing on the piano and embroidering bags. It is thoughtless to condemn them, or laugh at them, if they seek to do more or learn more than custom has pronounced necessary for their sex" (Brontë, 1981:101).

The influence of *Jane Eyre* set on the reader's capacity for emotional attachment of the storyteller's experience. The reader's engagement in the novel is implicit as an identification with its heroine. An analysis of the life of Charlotte Brontë and the following reconsiderations of her work show the connection between the author's life and art. The audience receives the storyteller as the author herself, she shares the same emotional experience. Charlotte Brontë faced critics because of the resemblance between her and first-person narrator. In using a forceful first-person narrator, she adds additional pressure on the readers who are not of the same class or gender as Jane to experience a variety of oppressive situations alongside her, adding to the novel's sense of social critique. One reviewer talks about the bond that is established between character and reader Bronte tries by her novels to change the Victorian's view towards woman. It is a declaration of the narrow and violent systems of the 19th century society.

Nancy Henry mentions: "Many of the same Victorian authors embraced capitalism in their daily lives, and whether we find their involvement inevitable or hypocritical, it is a fact that complicates our understanding of the culture's attitudes toward the economic system that so influenced their lives" ( Henry, 2007: 113-114).

*Jane Eyre* gave Charlotte Brontë the opportunity to express the cruelty of the society and institutions; writing *Jane Eyre* she was also able to tell a story in the first person of a young woman who could change her life to the unusual. In chapter 31, she declares through Jane, the bad conditions of the woman student in that age: "My home, then, when I at last find a home – is a cottage, a little room with whitewashed walls and a sanded floor" (Brontë, 1981: 611). But in spite of this, she lives her days with satisfaction.

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She can coexist with all the students in her classroom, and she feels that she's well liked in the neighborhood.

In Victorian times, women were supported by their husbands if they were lucky enough to get married, and they did not have financial sources. They didn't have a whole lot of choice in jobs, and they couldn't make very much money. Jane could do, by her own strength, what the Victorian woman should have done, she has earned and advertised her way to financial and psychological independence and became rich. She could conquer her natural desires through will-power. Even when she returns to Rochester at the end of the novel, she is still promoting her liberty. Jane tells Rochester:

"I only want an easy mind, sir, not crushed by crowded obligations... I shall earn my board and lodging, and thirty bound a year besides. I will furnish my wardrobe out of that money, and you shall give me nothing but..."

"Well, but what?"

"Your regard,..." (Brontë, 1981: 452).

The three Victorian authors used literary elements in order to make us better understand the role of women in the Victorian Era, and to create for us many of our mental images of the period. Each of them wanted to present the Victorian woman according to his/her personal observations, and they succeeded to portray the often conflicting outlooks imposed on them by society.

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