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Gender Roles and Female Characters in Victorian Literature: A Critical Analysis

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ABSTRACT

The enthralling world of Victorian literature is brought to life for us in this research paper, where gender roles and the portrayal of female characters take center stage. A tremendous change in the status and portrayal of women occurred throughout the Victorian era, which was characterized by fundamental societal, cultural and political developments. This change is intimately woven into the literature of the period. The investigation covers a wide range of topics, from the idealized representation of women as role models for virtue and domesticity to the complex myths surrounding fallen women, redemption and the societal repercussions that follow. It is analyzed for deep insights into the evolution of feminist viewpoints, championed by outstanding female authors who contested ingrained patriarchal standards.

An attempt is made to explore the complex relationship between social class and gender, examining how this dynamic affected the roles and possibilities open to women from a variety of backgrounds. Last but not least, the development of female characters all through the Victorian era, observing the emergence of the "New Woman" archetype and her significant impact on the literary scene are also touched. This research highlights the complexity of Victorian writing and highlights its singular capacity to both reflect and challenge prevailing social expectations for women and offering remarkable insights into the cultural transformations that characterized the Victorian age, through the various landscapes of idealization, decline and transformation. . Not only historical perspective but also acknowledge the ongoing influence of literature on the current conception of gender roles is also focused

Keywords: *Victorian literature, gender roles, fallen women, social expectations, transformation.*

I. INTRODUCTION

The in depth complex network of Victorian literature reveal the complex and dynamic interaction between literature and the dominant gender relations of the time. It offers insight on how literature, throughout this crucial period in history, reflected and actively impacted the

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changing norms of society, particularly those pertaining to women.

Examining the roles that men and women were given in Victorian literature is a key component of our investigation. This necessitates a thorough examination of the period's literary production, which ranges from idealized representations of women as household goddesses to intricate tales of women who have fallen from grace.

For instance, Jane defies conventional expectations of passivity and dependency by her tenacity and aggressiveness in Charlotte Bronte's "Jane Eyre." This act of disobedience questions conventional gender roles and is a shining illustration of how writing may disrupt social norms.

Similar to Estella in Charles Dickens' "Great Expectations," is a deceitful and heartless girl who was molded by her adoptive mother. The way Estella is portrayed emphasizes how societal expectations affect women and the complexity of their positions.

The insights are given on how men are portrayed in Victorian literature, contrasting their roles and actions with the development of female characters. It looks at how male characters were frequently portrayed as patriarchal figures or as opposites to the female ones, maintaining or questioning conventional gender standards.

It is been observed that how literature acted as a mirror of cultural norms and a force for change through this critical analysis. It sheds light on the various ways Victorian authors addressed the complicated issues of gender relations and gives readers a glimpse into the larger cultural and social changes taking place at this pivotal time in history and also adds to a better comprehension of the complex connections between literature and the constantly changing gender landscape in Victorian society.

II. THE IDEALIZED WOMAN: A DEPICTION OF VIRTUE AND PURITY

Women were frequently portrayed as models of morality and purity in Victorian literature. The novel "Jane Eyre" by Charlotte Bront is a classic illustration of this representation. The main character, Jane Eyre, is shown as being morally upstanding, adamant about her beliefs and unshakable in her judgment of right and wrong. She upholds her integrity throughout the book, despite trying circumstances, making her the ideal example of Victorian morality.

The idealized woman's portrayal in Victorian literature as morally pure and virtue was a recurrent subject that represented the time's beliefs and social expectations. These women were supposed to keep stringent moral standards and be steadfast in their beliefs. Even in the presence of difficulty or temptation, they were frequently portrayed as shining examples of morality.

The character of Jane Eyre from Charlotte Bronte's novel "Jane Eyre" serves as the epitome of

this portrayal. Readers are introduced to Jane as a young orphan who has been mistreated and who lives with her vile aunt and relatives. She remains steadfastly committed to her personal values and principles despite her difficult circumstances. Her representation as a virtue and purity is highlighted by a number of important factors:

1. Ethical conduct

One of Jane's distinguishing characteristics is her uncompromising moral integrity. She has consistently displayed a strong sense of right and wrong throughout her life, from her early years at Lowood School through her experiences as a nanny at Thornfield Hall. Her moral character is highlighted by her determination to budge from her beliefs, especially when faced with tough choices.

2. Resilience and independence

In addition to abiding by moral standards, Jane exhibits moral purity in her commitment to upholding the moral standards of others as well as herself. She rejects accepting a life that betrays her morals in favor of independence and self-respect. The established gender roles are challenged by her quest for personal development and her refusal to conform to social conventions.

3. Compassion and selflessness

Jane is a morally upright person who also has a strong sense of compassion and altruism. She demonstrates compassion and understanding for those in need through her caring for Helen Burns, a young student at Lowood and her eventual worry for Mr. Rochester's welfare. These characteristics reveal her moral character.

4. Resilience in the Face of Adversity

Jane's steadfast fortitude in the face of difficulty serves as a symbol of her virtue and goodness. Her capacity to retain her moral compass and sense of self in the face of obstacles, such as learning Mr. Rochester's sinister secret, exemplifies her unflinching dedication to her beliefs.

5. Strong Sense of Identity

Jane has a strong sense of identity and is fundamentally deserving of respect. She places a strong emphasis on her uniqueness and integrity by refusing to be characterized merely by her gender or socioeconomic standing.

The Victorian ideal of women was essentially reflected in the way virtue and purity were portrayed, with examples being Jane Eyre. These individuals were praised in Victorian culture for being role models because of their moral fortitude, resiliency and unshakable dedication to

morals. Through their deeds and decisions, they communicated the value of moral rectitude and individual virtue, adding to the Victorian era's larger cultural conversation on gender and morality.

(A) "The Angel in the House"

Coventry Patmore's poem, which popularized the idea, had a significant impact on Victorian literature. The character of Dora Spenlow in Charles Dickens' "David Copperfield" serves as an illustration of this. As the picture of the perfect Victorian wife, Dora is portrayed as delicate, obedient and completely committed to her husband. Her main responsibility is to establish a peaceful home that adheres to the Angel in the House ideal.

(B) Literary Works Exemplifying the Idealized Woman Archetype

Dorothea Brooke, a character in George Eliot's "Middlemarch," represents the idealized woman archetype. The Victorian concept of virtuous femininity is reflected in Dorothea's persistent dedication to moral values, generosity and her commitment to worthy causes. Her personality reflects the focus on moral integrity and self-sacrifice.

Additionally, Meg March personifies the domesticated and upright Victorian woman in Louisa May Alcott's "Little Women." Meg freely makes personal sacrifices for her family in order to fulfill her responsibility as the oldest sister to establish a supportive home atmosphere. Her persona fits the description of the ideal domestic and family-oriented woman in Angel in the House.

III. THE FALLEN WOMAN

The depiction of fallen women was a recurrent theme in Victorian literature that explored the effects of straying from traditional expectations of virtue and purity. Tess of the d'Urbervilles by Thomas Hardy provides a notable example. Tess, who was first depicted as a representation of innocence and purity, suffers a stunning fall from grace with devastating results. Her experience serves as a moving illustration of the ethical and societal consequences that fallen women in Victorian society had to deal with.

Tess Durbeyfield, a young woman from a lowly home in "Tess of the d'Urbervilles," finds herself in circumstances that test her virtue and chastity due to a string of bad incidents. Tess finds herself caught up in situations that lead to her being referred to be a fallen lady despite her original innocence and good intentions. Her hardships and unfortunate relationship with Alec d'Urberville demonstrate the harsh criticism and social exclusion that women who strayed from the Victorian ideal of virtue experienced.

Tess's early portrayal as a pure virgin and her later experiences as a fallen woman are starkly contrasted in the book, highlighting the precarious situation of women who violated Victorian moral norms and highlighting how they were treated. Tess's trip serves as a depressing reminder of how harsh society's standards were back then.

Estella, however, experiences a tremendous metamorphosis as the novel goes on. Her quest for personal growth and salvation challenges the idea that broken women are doomed to a life of moral decline. Estella struggles with her identity and feelings beneath her cool demeanor, ultimately rejecting the position Miss Havisham has given her.

Estella's story of redemption emphasizes that even those who have fallen out of favor with society have the capacity to change and grow personally. It questions the premise that once a woman veers from Victorian ideals of virtue and purity, her fate is set.

The portrayal of fallen women and stories of redemption in Victorian literature provided a nuanced analysis of the effects of deviating from social expectations of virtue and purity. Tess's example in "Tess of the d'Urbervilles" highlights the misery and societal censure experienced by fallen women, whereas Estella in "Great Expectations" challenges the notion that redemption is impossible. The arguments around morality, gender and societal expectations in Victorian culture were complicated and influenced by these narratives.

IV. FEMINISM AND FEMALE AUTHORS

1. Emergence of feminist themes

Feminist ideas first appeared in literature during the Victorian era, frequently supported by female authors who questioned societal expectations and traditional gender roles. In Charlotte Bronte's "Jane Eyre" is an example of a good character in this aspect; the riveting exploration of feminism, independence and the fight for equality is Jane's journey.

Jane Eyre, the main character of "Jane Eyre," defies social conventions at a young age. She was raised in poor circumstances and suffered abuse; as a way to recover independence and a sense of worth, she pursues education and personal development. The constrictive gender roles of her day are challenged by her drive to claim her identity and make her own decisions in life. Jane rejects meeting the demands made of her. Jane chooses to unite with Mr. Rochester on the basis of love and respect for one another rather than on the basis of social expectations for women.

By establishing her autonomy and fighting against the restrictions placed on women in Victorian society, Jane's character exemplifies feminist principles. Her tale is not just a love story; it is also a feminist one that promotes women's autonomy and self-determination.

2. Important Women Authors and Their Contributions

One noteworthy female novelist of the Victorian era who made a substantial contribution to the creation of feminist themes in literature is Charlotte Bront. There were, though, other significant female writers during this time:

i. Mary Ann Evans as George Eliot

Mary Ann Evans, who wrote as George Eliot, made a significant impact on female writing with her book "Middlemarch." In a changing society, the novel examines the complexity of women's lives and goals. George Eliot explores the difficulties and opportunities women in the Victorian era via the experiences of many female characters. Rosamond Vincy's desire for a comfortable existence and Dorothea Brooke's desire to work in philanthropy, for example, demonstrate the variety of choices and limitations women faced at this time. The complex representation of female characters and their social roles in "Middlemarch" has won praise.

ii. Elizabeth Barrett Browning

Although she is most recognized for her poetry, Elizabeth Barrett Browning's writing has influenced feminist theory. She examines topics of women's independence, creative endeavors and the quest for intellectual and aesthetic fulfillment in her epic poem "Aurora Leigh." In order to distinguish herself as an artist and subvert conventional gender stereotypes, the title character, Aurora Leigh, is a budding poet.

The introduction of feminist concerns into literature was greatly aided by these eminent Victorian-era female writers. Their writings provided insights into the struggles and aspirations of women, fostering discussions about gender equality, individualism and the changing roles of women in a changing society. They had a significant impact on the feminist debate of the period through their stories and characters.

V. GENDER, CLASS AND INTERSECTIONALITY

1. Intersection between gender and social class

The complicated issue of gender and social class intersection in Victorian fiction looked at how a character's social standing and gender interacted to determine their experiences and prospects. Elizabeth Gaskell's book "North and South" provides an insightful illustration of this intersection.

The protagonist of the book, Margaret Hale, comes from a middle-class family that experiences a huge social upheaval when they relocate from rural southern England to Milton, a heavily industrialized northern town. Through her experiences, Margaret was able to demonstrate how

her gender and rising socioeconomic class present particular opportunities and problems.

2. Obstacles Faced by Women

Margaret Hale must contend with the limitations imposed on them by Victorian society, including gender stereotypes and a lack of employment opportunities. Although she is constrained by her gender in a number of ways, she is able to adjust and discover her place in Milton's evolving landscape thanks to her intelligence and tenacity.

3. Class and Gender Intersection

In a working-class manufacturing town, Margaret must manage the difficulties of social class as a middle-class lady. The severe divisions in Victorian society are brought out by her interactions with the mill owners and employees. It is highlighted by Margaret's capacity to transcend these divides and promote social change that her social class and sexual identity are intertwined.

"North and South" presents a detailed portrait of how women and social class interacted in Victorian England through Margaret's character. It highlights the difficulties experienced by women from various social classes and their contribution to societal change.

4. Opportunities and various roles include

The drama "Pygmalion" by George Bernard Shaw examines how a woman's appearance and manners can affect her possibilities and duties. Eliza Doolittle's voice and manners go through a drastic metamorphosis, which affects her social standing and opportunities.

Eliza's Transformation, Part 1 Professor Henry Higgins teaches elocution and manners to working-class flower vendor Eliza. Her social position changes as she adapts her speech and actions to fit the upper class. She changes from being a flower girl from the lower class to a woman that can pass for an upper class person.

5. Impact on Possibilities

The evolution of Eliza shows how her prospects and sense of value in society change as a result of her communication. Although her newly discovered talents give her access to better work opportunities, they also put her in a distinct social group, raising concerns about her identity and sense of belonging.

The play "Pygmalion" emphasizes the ambiguity of gender and class roles as well as how appearance and behavior can affect how people are perceived in society. Eliza's voyage is a statement on how easily social identities may change and how difficult it is to navigate the intersections of class, gender and race in Victorian society.

These instances from "North and South" and "Pygmalion" shed light on the interactions between social strata, gender and opportunities in Victorian literature. They show characters adjusting to obstacles and changes in their identities and responsibilities, illuminating the complex dynamics of class and gender in the time period.

VI. CHANGING FEMALE CHARACTERS

The Emergence of the "New Woman" in Victorian Literature

The "New Woman" signaled a fundamental change in how female characters were portrayed in Victorian literature. By embodying traits like independence, self-reliance and a rejection of social conventions, these women questioned traditional gender roles and society expectations.

In "The Age of Innocence" by Edith Wharton, Ellen Olenska is a woman who aspires to independence and self-determination, standing in stark contrast to the Victorian era's conventional gender roles and expectations. She made the choice to depart from her unhappy marriage and come back to America because she didn't care about social norms and she wanted to be happy for herself. The character of Ellen represents the shifting perceptions of women's duties as well as the rise of a more forceful and independent female figure.

The title character, Aurora Leigh, is an aspiring poet who questions traditional gender stereotypes in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's epic poem. By choosing a career in the arts and working to establish herself as a poet, she violates social expectations. The voyage of Aurora is a metaphor for the shifting expectations and ambitions of Victorian women. Her tenacity in staking out her imaginative and intellectual prowess highlights how women are increasingly able to follow their passions and jobs outside of conventional gender boundaries.

These examples highlight how the "New Woman" was portrayed in literature during the Victorian era in England, challenging traditional gender roles and promoting greater independence and self-expression. These representations depict how society has changed and how women's aspirations have evolved throughout this critical juncture in history.

VII. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Victorian literature offers a fascinating and instructive lens through which we can see the complex interaction of gender roles and the constantly changing representation of female characters. We have revealed the complex structure of Victorian works of literature through this critical examination, demonstrating their amazing ability to support and contradict the social expectations placed on women.

The assessment of the romanticized, depraved and changing female characters has revealed a

tapestry of stories that offer rich insights into the more general cultural changes that occurred during the Victorian era. With their strengths, weaknesses and desires for autonomy, these people reflect the societal changes and tensions of their period.

In addition to gaining a deep grasp of the past, reading Victorian literature forces us to face the ongoing role that literature continues to have in influencing how we view gender roles today. These pages provide enduring lessons, prompts and reminders that call us to constantly reexamine and reconsider the nature between gender and social norms, especially in today's technologically advanced society.

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