

## Victorian Women and Literature: A Short Survey

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**Abstract:** Literature is a mirror of a society as it depicts the image of a particular era imbued with imaginative dexterity of the author. Victorian literature is not deprived of it. In the research article, an attempt has been made to explore the perception of womanhood and feminism in Victorian era and Victorian literature. The age has been viewed from historical point of views and examples are given from literary resources. Victorian era adopts contradictory issues defining the power and position of womanhood. In one sense, the reign of Queen Victoria uplifted the position of women; on the other hand, patriarchy dominance attacked the newly evoked feminism. The controversies and feminist concerns became a popular topic of discussion for general people and very interesting themes for literature. Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, Hawthorne's *A Scarlet Letter* and so on literary masterpieces made the general readers conscious of the critical facts of feminism.

**Keyword:** Feminism, Victorian era, patriarchy, dominance, domestic responsibility, womanhood, traditionalism, sexuality, violence.

### Analysis:

Women are considered the softer gender in human kinds and this biological fact is well elaborated through various sectors of intellectuality. Women are the source of beauty and love, which is the general point of views of every scholar but her subjective brilliance describes her as a source of power. Victorian era was the age when women's power and dignity started to be

marked and thus became a great source of criticism too. Most of the scholars adopted male centric views of womanhood, which is traditional as well as religious:

A woman received the greatest Honor that Human Nature is capable of when the Son of God vouchsafed to be her Son, and to derive his Humanity from her only. The masculine sex had no role in the incarnation, whereas a woman was appointed as the sole human author of Christ himself (Apetrei, 2010, p.135)

Such views were regarded for texts only but in real domestic lives, women were considered not a religious depiction but a developer of domestic fruitfulness. She is the person responsible for maintaining the house and children only and the outer world is for her forbidden to enter. Every age depicts a different picture of human society and the above mentioned quotation reflects the traditional and most religious view of womanhood which is reshaped and moulded according to social demands. The reign of Queen Victoria also depicted the picture of Victorian society. As it is well known that literature is the mirror of a society of a particular era, this research article will describe the imagery of women in the novels written in Victorian era. Defining Victorian literature in any satisfactory and comprehensive manner has proven troublesome for critics ever since the nineteenth century came to a close. The movement roughly comprises the years from 1830 to 1900, though there is ample disagreement regarding even this simple point. The name given to the period is borrowed from the royal matriarch of England, Queen Victoria, who sat on throne from 1837 to 1901. One has difficulty determining with any accuracy where the Romantic Movement of the early nineteenth century leaves off and the Victorian Period begins because these traditions have so many aspects in common such as both define women as a subject of love, lust romance and domestic alliance:

Women on early times were widely regarded as the lustful sex whose tempting, seducing, sexuality represented man's downfall from the biblical tale of Eve on, the keynote of nineteenth-century English attitudes is the passivity and reluctant sexuality of woman (Levine, 1994, p.129)

Such patterns of thoughts were vastly believed but, at the same time, recalcitrant views of such conventionality also aroused. If there is one transcending aspect to Victorian England life and society, that aspect is change – or, more accurately, upheaval from the early shackles of conventionality of gender. Women were also a source of great strength and energy. They can take a good care of the domestic household as well as the outside world of employment and thus can prove to be a great help to her male counterpart. Victorian started to believe the women power but at the same time doubted the successive advancement of their dynamism:

Victorian perception of sexuality- the subject of a vast literature ranging from medical textbooks and religious tracts to the successful industry of pornography – were built around a fundamental belief in sexual difference. Women and men were categorized by

their biology and that biology was seen as central in determining their social roles. (Levine, 1994, p.129)

Everything that the previous centuries had held as sacred and indisputable truth came under assault during the middle and latter parts of the nineteenth century. Nearly every institution of society was shaken by rapid and unpredictable change. Feminism was one of them, a powerful change in the society that led thousands of women stepping out of their comfort zones to a world of unknown challenges. At the same time, scientific advancements and economic developments were undermining the position of the Church in daily life. Charles Darwin's theories of evolution and natural selection brought humanity down to the level of the animal, and seemingly reduced the meaning of life to a bloody struggle for survival and this affected the females a lot. They felt the necessity of earning money and stepped out of the domestic boundaries, indirectly for the home and directly for them, to search for a better life:

It seems to me that the construction of gender difference and hierarchy is created at work as well as at home- and that the effect on women (less physical and technical capability, lack of confidence, lower pay) may well cast a shadow on the sex-relations of domestic life. (Swindells, 1985, p.3)

For some, the fundamental changes taking place in the world meant progress, and were a source of hope and optimism in females. For the majority of writers and thinkers, however, the inequality present in Victorian society was a kind of illness that would sooner or later come to a tipping point. Many intellectuals saw it as their duty to speak out against the injustices of this new and frightening world. Essayists like Thomas Carlyle railed against the systematic abuse he saw happening all around him. The level of social consciousness and immediate relevancy one finds in much of Victorian writing was something not witnessed before in English letters. The problems ranged from atrocious labor conditions and rampant poverty to the issue of women's place in the world – what contemporaries referred to as “The Woman Question.” Elizabeth Barrett-Browning had been outraged by a report she read detailing the practice and felt compelled to make her voice heard on the issue. She was certainly not alone in this feeling. Novelist Charles Dickens's *Bleak House* represented Esther Summerson, an illegitimate child, and Lady Dedlock, an aristocrat and the mother of Esther, describing the condition of women in the society of that time. Each of his many novels called attention to real-world problems that others might just as soon have swept under the rug. One cannot say exactly how much influence Dickens and others had on their society, but the fact that they tried to change their world is what is important. Writers of the preceding era did not speak to a popular audience nearly as much as the Victorians, or at least not as self-consciously. Various legislative acts supported the women rights that influenced Dickens to highlight these social issues:

An Act of 1884 gave a women certain rights over her person, in that it removed the danger of a prison sentence if she refused to return to live with her husband; his remedy was to try to get a legal separation on the grounds of her desertion without reasonable cause. But the Act did not wholly dispose of a husband's right to keep his wife in his home by force. (Perkin, 1996, p.118)

Not surprisingly, women in the Victorian world held very little power and had to fight hard for the change they wanted in their lives. What one thinks of as feminism today had not yet taken form in the Victorian period. The philosophy of female emancipation, however, became a rallying point for many female Victorian writers and thinkers. Though their philosophies and methods were often quite divergent, the ultimate goal of intellectual women in the nineteenth century was largely the same:

I believe... that there are comparatively few men who have the strength of motive which women have to assail this particular form of evil; it is to women therefore probably that we must chiefly look for the initiative in fresh acts of aggression against the conventional and accepted standard in society concerning sexual morality (Summers, 2000, p.65)

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Christina Rossetti's "Goblin Market" combines early feminist imagery with many other concepts in a fairy-tale like world of imagination. The life of the two sisters and the harassment they faced by men, the fruit sellers, as a great source of feminist controversies. Though not as highly regarded, Letitia Elizabeth Landon was also an accomplished and popular female poet. Charlotte and Emily Brontë crafted novels that have stood the test of time and taken their place as literary classics.

These women were exceptions to the rule. In Literature, the picture of women is very traditional and some are recalcitrant. The popular thinking of that time was conventional where women were regarding home-maker but that home treated them as a prison bar: 'home was frequently depicted as a prison, or a cage (even if 'gilded' or 'upholstered'), where young female fledglings had their wings clipped, as it were, against flight' (Dyhouse, 1989, p. 15). For example: Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll House* represents Nora Helmer, a woman who left home for self-respect. The home is described in this literary work as a house where women are treated as dolls, lifeless but plaything in the hands of manhood. The conjugal life depiction also illustrated the image of women. Nora's marriage was arranged and the consequence was in negatives:

The results of arranged marriages, as some writers had predicted, were all too often disastrous. The woman found herself tied to a man who, at best, was her undisputed master demanding complete obedience and submission. In most cases, the role was performed out of a sense of duty not of love. (Hill, 1993, p.89)



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For many, the word “Victorian” conjures up images of over-dressed ladies and snooty gentlemen gathered in parlors and reading rooms. The idea of “manners” essentially sums up the social climate of middle-class England in the nineteenth century. In the world at large, change was happening faster than many people could comprehend. Others embraced the new world that was coming into being, thrilled at the progress of science, women-power and society. Together, all these voices comprise an important and sometimes overlooked era in English literary history. The imagery of domestic violence as well as the consciousness of womanhood became the main topic of the story for writers and there, most literary works focused on woman issues:

It is interesting that many 1790s female writers take a contrary view, thinking that women, objects of the male gaze and thereby culturally conditioned constantly to appraise themselves, cannot easily escape from a self-consciousness which makes authentic self-expression and genuine relationships with others difficult. (Stafford, 2002, p.178)

Victorians always believed in traditionalism whereas the new pattern of thoughts evoked feminism in females making them conscious of self-identity. Many legal codes were prescribed to maximize the freedom of woman and triggers the light of feminism. These social phenomena were depicted in literature to not only as a source of entertainment but also as a source of consciousness. Specially, to dominate domestic violence, the attitude of the Court of England was appreciatively positive on females’ side that served as a great inspiration for women to change the society:

Victorian feminism had its roots in the Abolitionist campaigns of the anti-slavery movement of the early nineteenth century, so that on the face of it at least nineteenth-century liberal feminism would seem to had have an impeccably oppositional genealogy in relation to the politics of imperialism. (Legder, 1997, p.63)

Though the law suits considered women rights and thus energized women for a better change, the general society was still patriarchal superiority and which negatively reacted towards such changes. They revolted by not letting the womanhood to proceed toward the change and criticized the steps of women which taken out of the domestic sphere:

All analogies- class, minority, group, caste- approximate the position of women, but fail to define it adequately. Women are a category onto themselves: an adequate analysis of their positions society demands new conceptual tools (Kelly, 1986, p.8)



Courtesy: pussycatdreams.centerblog.net

For example: Nora in Ibsen's *A Doll's House* was a highly controversial literary piece only because of the heroine's decision of leaving her home for her self-respect. Torvald Helmer's explanation for refusing to take the blame—that a man can never sacrifice his integrity for love—ultimately reveals the depth of his gender bias. Nora's response that "hundreds of thousands of women" have done just that underscores that the actions of Mrs. Linde and Nora, both of whom sacrifice themselves for their loved ones, have borne out. Nora's belief that Torvald should take responsibility for her seems justified, since what she expects from Torvald is no more than what she has already given him.

As Nora's childish innocence and faith in Torvald shatter, so do all of her illusions. She realizes that her husband does not see her as a person but rather as a beautiful possession, nothing more than a toy. She voices her belief that neither Torvald nor her father ever loved her, but rather "thought it was enjoyable to be in love with [her]." She realizes these two men cared more about amusing themselves and feeling loved and needed than they did about her as an individual.

Moreover, Nora realizes that since she has been treated as a child for her entire life, she still is very childlike and needs to grow up before she can raise any children or take on any other responsibilities. Her defiance of Torvald when he forbids her to leave reflects her epiphany that she isn't obligated to let Torvald dictate her actions—she is independent of him and has control over her own life. The height of Nora's awakening comes when she tells Torvald that her duty to

herself is just as sacred as her duties to her husband and children. She now sees that she is a human being before she is a wife and a mother, and that she owes it to herself to explore her personality, ambitions, and beliefs.

Mrs. Linde's manner of fulfilling her personal desires balances Nora's. Whereas Nora decides that she must be totally independent to be true to herself and thus rejects her family, Mrs. Linde decides that she needs to care for the man she truly loves to be true to herself and thereby become content. Ibsen positions Mrs. Linde as a foil (a character whose attitudes and emotions contrast with, and thereby accentuate, those of another character) to Nora in order to demonstrate that Nora's actions do not constitute the only solution available to women who feel trapped by society. Mrs. Linde's offer to care for Krogstad and his children will be a positive move for both of them, because they love each other, and Mrs. Linde, having sacrificed her whole life to live with a husband she didn't love in order to help her brothers and mother, will finally be able to live with her chosen partner. Nora, on the other hand, has sacrificed her own will all her life by allowing her father and Torvald to indulge theirs. Ibsen suggests that one finds himself or herself not in an independent life but rather in an independent *will*. Nora exits her doll's house with a door slam, emphatically resolving the play with an act of bold self-assertion which became, later, a burning topic of feminist concerns. On the other hand, some literary works were made to warn the society of the consequences which may happen to women if traditional codes are broken. For example, *A Street Car Named Desire* depicts the female protagonist Blanche Dubois who steps out of the general boundaries of conventionality and falls into deep ditch of suffering. Similarly Hardy's Tess in *Tess of d'Urbervilles* also shows the harsh results of a woman stepping to a man's world and thus ruining herself messaging the society that:

Chastity is so essential and natural to your sex, that every declination from it is a proportionable receding from womanhood. An immodest women is a kind of monster, distorted from its proper form. Shame is the eldest daughter of a defiled female. The appetites of lust is full of care and the fruition is folly and repentance. (Jones, 1991, p.30)

If we pay a close attention to the ending of the novel, the feminist concept will turn clearer. Phase the Seventh brings the novel to a tragic close through a shift in perspective. It begins in an aura of mystery, as Hardy chooses not to narrate the climax of Tess's struggle—her return to the bed of Alec d'Urberville. The first part of this section is told instead from Angel's perspective. When he arrives at The Herons, we have a gradual, sickening sense of what to expect, but Angel has no idea. He is too late because the race is over, and Tess's loyalty to her family has overmastered her integrity. Torn apart, Tess now kills her lover in a murderous rage out of love for her husband. From that moment, the novel simply becomes a mechanical process leading to the inevitable conclusion—Tess's death.

As Angel returns with renewed loyalty and love for Tess, it becomes apparent that Alec has considerably broken down Tess's loyalty to Angel. Tess recovers this love and loyalty when she

sees Angel again, and she feels guilty about how far she has drifted. Her pride in poverty when Angel is away stands in direct contrast with her fancy clothing and luxurious lodging, which physically measures how far into temptation she has gone with Alec. Her shame and grief cause her violent side to explode, and she kills Alec. Whether intentionally or not, Tess has fulfilled Angel's proclamation that they cannot be together as long as Alec is alive. The murder may appear justified to us at this point, after everything through which Alec has put Tess. But, though we may sympathize with Tess's actions, we know that Tess must now flee and live the life of a hunted criminal.

The short section narrated from the perspective of Mrs. Brooks is almost an exact double of the technique Hardy uses with Angel at the beginning of Phase the Seventh. Just as he excludes Tess's return to Alec, he excludes her murder of Alec. Just as an unsuspecting third party shows us that she has gone back to him, another unsuspecting third party shows us that she has killed him. Tess's mind has been at the center of the novel from its beginning, and practically everything that has happened has been shown solely in its relation to her. By shifting attention away from her so suddenly, Hardy creates the sense that Tess is already lost—though she is still alive, she has partially vanished into the gloom of her fate. At the end, despite the atmosphere of Gothic mystery and supernatural portent that infuses much of the novel, Hardy still manages to surprise us by setting the conclusion at Stonehenge, one of the most famous and mysterious monuments in the world.

How can we forget the suffering depicted in *The Scarlet Letter's* Hester Prynne. The society which the literary work shows is matter of great patriarchy dominance and the injustice women had to face during that era. Throughout Nathaniel Hawthorne's book *The Scarlet Letter*, Hester's attitudes toward her adultery are ambivalent. This ambivalence is shown by breaking the book into three different parts. In each part her attitudes change significantly. Hester starts by seeing her act as a sin that she is sorry for committing. She changes and no longer feels sorry for the sin. Finally, Hester sees the act as not sinful, but she regrets committing it. In the first part, covering the first six chapters, Hester thinks of her action as a sin. In chapter four she tells her husband that it was her fault for committing adultery when she says, "I have greatly wronged thee" (79). In chapter six Hawthorne writes that Hester knows "her deed had been evil" (92). This evil deed, in Hester's eyes, causes Pearl to act sinful, so Hester feels overwhelming guilt. At this point Hester feels that her actions were evil and were her fault, therefore she is sorry for committing adultery. In chapter five Hester's attitudes are the same but Hawthorne shows that these attitudes are not stable and are susceptible to change. Hester moves to a cottage on the outskirts of Boston, but because her sentence does not restrict her to the limits of the Puritan settlement, Hester could return to Europe to start over. She decides to stay because she makes herself believe that the town "has been the scene of her guilt, and here should be the scene of her earthly punishment" (84).

This belief gives the impression that she views her action as a sin and feels a need to further punish herself. But this belief only covers her actual feelings. To the contrary, as Hawthorne describes, her real reason for staying is that "There dwelt, there trod the feet of one with whom she deemed herself connected in a union, that, unrecognized on earth, would bring them together before the bar of final judgment, and make their that marriage altar, for a joint futurity of endless retribution" (84). This comment means that the real reason for her staying is that Reverend Dimmsdale, the father of her child, lives there and she hopes to someday marry him. Hester believes that her adultery was a sin, but the book makes it clear that she enjoyed it. Consequently, Hester sees herself and everything she enjoys, such as sewing, as sinful. She continues sewing, though, which seems to symbolize that she would commit adultery again. Hester also shows some anger about her punishment. She believes that there are others who have committed adultery but have not been caught because they were in different situations than Hester. Hester's changing attitudes reveal that while she sees her act as a sin, she believes her punishment was unjustified, even though she pretends to be punishing herself even more. In the second part of the book Hester's views change: she is no longer sorry for what she has done. Hester's mood changes "from passion and feeling to thought" (158). Instead of seeing her act as impulsive, as an act of passion, Hester now inwardly decides that the act was not such an evil sin, and she is not sorry for committing it. She shows that she thinks the act she and Dimmsdale committed was not evil when she tells him, "What we did had a consecration of its own"(186).



Courtesy: [www.parisperfect.com](http://www.parisperfect.com)

The Scarlet Letter was supposed to remind Hester and the townspeople of her sin and make her sorry about her act, but as Hawthorne writes, "The scarlet letter had not done its office" (160). Hester goes beyond her punishment and helps the poor, making the townspeople feel that the scarlet letter stands for "able" rather than "adultery" (156). This causes the townspeople to start to think the "A" stands for angel instead of adultery. Hester's progression from passion to thought leads her to conclude that the adultery was not evil but beautiful, therefore there was no reason for her to feel guilty any more. The third part of Hester's development is found in the last chapter. Hester is an old woman who is now looked upon as an advisor. At this point in her life she does not see her adultery as a sin, but for the sake of womanhood she is regretful that she did it. She knows that someone will "establish the whole relation between man and woman on a surer ground of mutual happiness" (245). Hawthorne describes that Hester had earlier thought of being the "prophetess" of this changing relationship. Yet now Hester "recognized the impossibility that any mission of divine and mysterious truth should be confided to a woman stained with sin, bowed down with shame, or even burdened with lifelong sin" (245). This shows her recognition of her impurity and that she would have liked to have been pure so that she could have changed womanhood. Throughout the book, Hester's attitudes are hard to read. She outwardly portrays Puritan feelings and attitudes, but is merely hiding what she is actually feeling. She moves from showing only Puritan attitudes, seeing her act as a sin, to showing her inner thoughts, not seeing her act as a sin. She does, however, regret the adultery at the end because it damaged her and she feels she could have brought more to the world if she had not committed the act. Hester went through many struggles to finally show her inward feelings and deny the Puritan beliefs.

The issue of woman power is still a controversial fact. If we compare it with today's world, we can mark the partiality of the male-centric society. Though this partiality or controversy will always remain until and unless the term feminism is concerned. In one side, Queen Victoria was the supreme of all power that denotes the dignity of womanpower. On the other hand, the general womanhood was dominated by patriarchy. Both these issues are marked in Victorian literature and are still an open-ended source of research to find out the branches of feminism and its related controversies evoked from the Victorian era.

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