

## **A Mirror of Victorian Womanhood: Dickens' Representation of Gender and Society**

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### ***Abstract:***

The major purpose of this study is to find out what life was like for women in Victorian England, when gender norms were highly strict. Women were seen as dutiful, loyal, unselfish, and kind, and their lives were mostly spent serving their fathers and spouses. This research will explore not only the societal expectations placed upon women but also their personal experiences, struggles, and forms of resistance. By examining literature, personal letters, and historical records, the study aims to provide a nuanced understanding of their roles and the ways in which they navigated the confines of their circumstances. In the early 1800s, people had obvious views about what men and women should do. This research aims to uncover the complexities behind these societal expectations and how they shaped women's identities and opportunities. By examining personal letters, diaries, and literature from the period, the study will reveal the subtle resistances and adaptations women employed to navigate their constrained roles. Men had to work, offer services, and operate enterprises to gain property and ensure their families had enough money. Women, on the other hand, were usually left out of these areas and considered the moral guardians of the home. In a culture where males were in charge, their worth was assessed by how much emotional support and moral direction they could provide.

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***Keywords:*** Victorian Womanhood, Charles Dickens, Gender Roles, Patriarchy

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## Introduction

The Victorian Era (1832–1887) was the best time for English literature. It was a moment of political awareness, material wealth, democratic reforms, economic and technical progress, scientific progress, social turmoil, educational growth, and imperial growth. It was a time when things changed quickly and were challenging to understand. The writing from this time shows the problems that society was facing. "It was a time of faith and doubt, of morals and dishonesty, of wealth and poverty, of idealism and materialism, of progress and decline, of greatness and degradation," says A.C. Ward. Although it was a tough time, it produced more humorous writers than any other period. (Bronte, Charlotte, 1999).

## Review Of Literature

Gilbert, S and Guber, S (1979) groundbreaking research show that writers like Jane Austen and Charlotte Brontë were the first to challenge patriarchal norms in literature and society. The piece we looked at provides us three important pieces of information: Dickens' characters both supported and challenged patriarchal ideas. At the same time, Victorian society made tight gender roles the norm, and class had a big impact on women's daily lives. These results provide the current study a theoretical foundation.

Holcombe (1983) and Shanley (1989) Legal historians have extensively examined how patriarchal laws, particularly those concerning property and divorce, rendered women increasingly reliant on patriarchy, thereby perpetuating their dependence on men. Before the developments in the late 1800s, married women didn't have their own legal identities and couldn't own money, property, or custody of their children.

Armstrong (1987) and Poovey (1988) say that women were considered the moral protectors of the home, and their identities were limited to the idea of the "angel in the house." These ideas shaped how women acted and backed up men's power. The literature talks a lot about how Victorian civilization had tight ideas about gender.

Davidoff and Hall (1992) say that class had a big impact on how women lived their lives. When it related to women's jobs, middle- and upper-class women were not allowed to work in any kind of professional setting. Instead, working-class women did hard work in factories, homes, and mills. Many researchers say that industrialization made gender inequities worse.

Some of Dickens' critics, such as Bodenheimer (1988), Flint (1995), and Ledger (2007), say that he was both against social injustice and for Victorian feminine values. Dickens showed

how weak exploited women are with characters like Nancy in *Oliver Twist* and Sissy Jupe in *Harsh Times*, even if he often idealized home morals through characters like Agnes Wickfield and Esther Summerson. These critics claim that Dickens' style of writing makes the challenges that working-class women face and the paradoxes in Victorian ideas stand out.

Feminist historians like Mitchell (2005) and Caine (1997) have written about how feminist consciousness has changed over time, starting with the fight for women's rights to vote, work, and go to school.

### **Socio-Cultural Construction of Victorian Womanhood**

- **Domestic Ideology**

People thought highly of women because they were willing to follow directions and were compassionate, gentle, and selfless. People considered that having a male brain and being a woman were incompatible; therefore, they curtailed their education on purpose. Instead of school topics or job training, ladies from the upper and middle classes learned music, needlework, and how to have nice conversations to become ready for marriage. Women were important because they made homes tranquil and helped men attain their goals. Mitchell says that "the doctrine of separate spheres naturalized women's domestic confinement as a moral duty" (Mitchell, 2005 p. 22).

- **Legal and Economic Dependency**

The law made it considerably tougher for women to be free. The law changed in 1887 with the Married Women's Property Act. Now, married women can own property. Before then, their husbands got all the money they made without having to ask. Divorce rules were highly stringent for women, and only mothers with their children were allowed to see them. Holcombe says, "People had different rules for men and women that lauded men's liberties but punished women for the same things. (Holcombe, 1983 p. 42)

### **Class-Based Experiences of Women**

- **Middle- and Upper-Class Women**

Rich women who lived in the house were responsible for hosting guests, cleaning, and setting a good example. The spouse's fine clothes and lifestyle proved that they were rich, not that they were accomplishing anything on their own. Societal conventions dissuaded them from

seeking further education or employment. Caine (1997) contends that "middle-class femininity necessitated exhibition without independence" (Caine, 1997 p. 76).

- **Working-Class Women in Industrial England**

Industrialization made many poor women pursue dangerous, low-paying employment. A lot of them worked in factories, mines, and textile mills where the conditions were really harsh. Women made a lot less money than men, and there was a lot of harassment at work. They resided in underprivileged communities close to factories, grappling with poverty, illness, and social disdain. Dickens often used these terrible truths to highlight how weak women are working.

### **Dickens' Representation of Women and Society**

- **Dickens as a Social Critic**

Dickens wrote on the challenges that poor women, children, and people in general had to deal with, and his work was a tool to fight for social change. A lot of his works criticize how unfair Victorian beliefs about purity and selflessness are, yet some of his heroines fit these ideas. Ledger says that "Dickens' stories go back and forth between supporting domestic femininity and showing the violence that lies beneath it" (Ledger, 2007 p. 113).

- **Women Characters as Mirrors of Social Reality**

Dickens' female figures highlight how far off Victorian dreams and reality were: Nancy (from *Oliver Twist*): She is an example of being taken advantage of, being strong, and being a terrible victim in a system that makes the working-class criminals. Sissy Jupe (*Hard Times*): Shows empathy and emotional intelligence in a culture that prizes work and usefulness. Esther Summerson (*Bleak House*): Implicitly critiques the limited roles women had while preserving Victorian ideals of the home. Dickens utilizes these characters to highlight that women of all socioeconomic strata have to deal with moral uncertainty, unstable economies, and social limitations.

### **Discussion**

The Victorian view of what it meant to be a woman was full of inconsistencies. People commended women for being better than men morally, but they also took away their freedom to think, make money, and make choices. Men were able to preserve power by keeping the public and private worlds apart, which led to a long-lasting disparity. These distinctions are considerably clearer in Dickens's characters. Dickens's anecdotes expose the harsh treatment of working women and the challenges faced by middle-class women in managing their

emotions. Dickens had Victorian biases, but his work showed how hard it was for women to live under industrial capitalism.

### Conclusion

Women in the Victorian era had to deal with stringent social conventions, laws that favored men, and disparities depending on rank. They typically lost their rights to work, attend school, own property, and vote. They followed the house rules, which made it impossible for them to grow as people, like many women at the time. There were instances when early feminist views questioned principles and fought for changes in schools, workplaces, and laws. Dickens's novels are important cultural artifacts that talk about and criticize Victorian beliefs regarding gender. Dickens's portrayals of women show how contradictory the Victorian age was and how the reality of society at the time helped early feminists become aware of their rights. The effort to put Victorian literature in perspective looks at how difficult gender politics were in England in the 1800s.

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