

Gender Roles in Victorian Era Literature

Student's Name

Institution of Learning

Introduction

To begin with, despite the fact that the society of the Victorian era still had notably conservative views on gender roles and did not accept women as equal to men, who were considered as leaders and much more intellectually-developed beings, the literature of that time displayed a different vision of genders. While there were writers who followed the conservative system of principles and displayed gender roles in the way they were perceived by society, most of the prominent authors of the era fought against gender expectations and introduced dissimilar, more progressive images of men and women and portrayed strong females and non-heroic men.

Gender Roles in Female Victorian Era Literature

First of all, it is necessary to point out that the Victorian era is known for literature developed by female writers, which has gained significant recognition. In particular, these are works by Charlotte, Emily, and Anne Brontë and George Eliot (Mary Anne Evans), and they have displayed essential feminist ideas. These writers paid significant attention to the topic of women striving for independence, free choice, and the image of strong, intelligent, and talented women who fight for their place in the community. It should be noted that these writers did not ignore male characters and portrayed them differently from the usual men's gender role of that time. They did not follow the common heroic image of a natural leader with a much higher level of intellectual development and instead of it, displayed men from varying perspectives, showing both their strong and weak sides.

The book that can be viewed as a great example of this described depiction of gender roles in Victorian era literature is *Jane Eyre* by the already-mentioned female writer Charlotte Brontë. The main character of this book is a young woman who has had a difficult life, but still has managed to gain a high-quality education and to live independently (Brontë, 1847). The

approach of Brontë to gender roles is considerably innovative for the middle 19th century because, first of all, the main character is female. To add more, the image of Jane Eyre appears as considerably idealistic and the strongest of all portrayed characters, as she does not only manage to survive the tough conditions of her childhood, but also adheres to her principles even when her strong feelings are at stake. Finally, in the end, she appears as a savior of a man, and this relation of the female and male characters critically contradicts the usual gender expectations of that time (Brontë, 1847).

It should be added that this book also introduces a different approach to the male gender role in the character of Mr. Rochester. This figure, similar to the one of Jane Eyre, does not follow social gender norms; this phenomenon appears in the fact that Mr. Rochester is not portrayed as more intelligent and emotionally stronger than the woman character. To add more, he is shown as a person who needs help and gets it from Jane; significantly, the fact that he accepts this assistance contradicts the social vision of the male gender of the era (Brontë, 1847).

Notably, *Jane Eyre* is not the only literary piece by a female writer of the Victorian era that fights the gender expectations of that time. A similar tendency can be observed in the books *Wuthering Heights* by Emily Brontë and *Middlemarch, a Study of Provincial Life* by George Eliot (Mary Ann Evans). In particular, these books introduce a variance from the past, as they display an image of a woman who appears to be not only a person who should get married and focus on 'serving' her husband, but as an ambitious and intellectually-developed individual who can reach great achievements (Newman, 1990).

Gender Roles in the Male Victorian Era Literature

It is necessary to point out the fact that female writers were not the only ones who displayed gender roles in an opposite way to social expectations, because some of the leading

male writers of that time followed the same tendency. In particular, the works of Charles Dickens and William Thackeray also introduced dissimilar images of women and men. For example, Dickens' character Estella Havisham from one of his most well-known books, *Great Expectations*, highlights the critical negative aspects of female education and the imposed values of that time (Hagan, 1954). In addition, Thackeray develops significant male characters that are different from the typical social images of them as intellectually developed and leaders. In particular, this can be observed from the example of Rawdon Crawley from *Vanity Fair*; his figure appears as a dependent, not very intelligent and weak personality (Thackeray, 2005).

Conclusion

All in all, Victorian era literature displayed gender roles in a significantly different manner from the social expectations that Victorian era culture was accustomed to. This phenomenon appears in both the works of female and male writers, who introduced characters of strong and intelligent women, and men who are weak, dependant, and need help.

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