



The Representation of Gender Roles in 19th-Century English Literature

Mrs. Sammitla Usha Rani

Guest Lecturer, English Dept. Govt. K.P.G. College, Jagdalpur, Chhattisgarh India

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the portrayal of gender roles in 19th-century English literature, a period marked by rigid societal norms and evolving feminist ideals. Through an analysis of key works by authors such as Charlotte Brontë, Charles Dickens, and Thomas Hardy, the paper explores how literature reflected, reinforced, and challenged traditional gender expectations. By examining female and male characters, their agency, and societal constraints, this study highlights the tension between patriarchal structures and emerging critiques of gender inequality, offering insights into the cultural dynamics of the era.

Introduction

The 19th century was a transformative period in English literature, reflecting the social, economic, and cultural shifts of the Victorian era. Gender roles, deeply rooted in patriarchal traditions, dictated distinct spheres for men and women—men as breadwinners and women as domestic caregivers. However, the rise of industrialization, the women's suffrage movement, and early feminist thought began to challenge these norms. Literature, as a mirror of society, became a powerful medium for both reinforcing and questioning these gender constructs. This paper analyzes the representation of gender roles in 19th-century English literature, focusing on how authors portrayed male and female characters in relation to societal expectations. By examining works such as Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847), Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations* (1861), and Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891), this study explores how these texts reflect the complexities of gender dynamics and critique patriarchal norms.



Literature Review

Scholarship on 19th-century English literature has extensively explored gender roles. Gilbert and Gubar (1979) argue in *The Madwoman in the Attic* that female characters in Victorian novels often symbolize resistance against oppressive gender norms, as seen in Brontë's portrayal of Jane Eyre. Showalter (1977) highlights the emergence of a "female literary tradition" that subverted male-dominated narratives. Conversely, critics like Armstrong (1987) suggest that male authors, such as Dickens, often reinforced traditional gender roles while subtly critiquing them through complex characters like Estella in *Great Expectations*. Recent studies, such as those by Reynolds (2015), emphasize how Hardy's *Tess* challenges the "fallen woman" archetype, exposing the double standards applied to women's morality. This paper builds on these analyses by comparing representations of gender across both male and female authors, focusing on agency, domesticity, and rebellion.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative textual analysis of three primary texts: *Jane Eyre*, *Great Expectations*, and *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*. These works are selected for their diverse portrayals of gender roles and their prominence in 19th-century literature. The analysis focuses on:

1. **Character Archetypes:** Examining how male and female characters conform to or deviate from traditional roles (e.g., the "angel in the house" vs. the rebellious woman).
2. **Narrative Voice:** Assessing how the author's perspective shapes gender portrayals.
3. **Social Context:** Connecting literary representations to historical gender norms, including legal and social constraints on women (e.g., the Married Women's Property Act of 1870). Secondary sources, including feminist literary criticism and historical studies, provide context for interpreting the texts.

Analysis

1. The "Angel in the House" and Domestic Ideals

In 19th-century England, the ideal woman was epitomized by Coventry Patmore's poem *The Angel in the House* (1854), which glorified female domesticity, purity, and self-sacrifice. In *Great Expectations*, Dickens presents characters like Bidley, who embodies these virtues through her nurturing and modest



demeanor. However, Dickens complicates this ideal through Estella, whose coldness and ambition subvert traditional femininity, reflecting the societal pressures that shape her behavior. Estella's upbringing under Miss Havisham illustrates how women were molded to fulfill specific roles, often at the cost of their autonomy.

2. Female Agency and Resistance in *Jane Eyre*

Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* challenges the passive female archetype through its titular character. Jane's insistence on independence—"I am no bird; and no net ensnares me"—defies the patriarchal expectation of female subservience. Her refusal to marry Rochester until she achieves financial and emotional equality underscores her agency. Brontë contrasts Jane with Bertha Mason, whose imprisonment symbolizes the consequences of defying societal norms. Through Jane, Brontë critiques the limited roles available to women, advocating for self-determination.

3. Gender and Moral Double Standards in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*

Thomas Hardy's *Tess* exposes the harsh consequences of gender inequality, particularly for working-class women. Tess Durbeyfield's victimization by Alec d'Urberville and her subsequent rejection by Angel Clare highlight the double standards applied to female sexuality. While Alec faces no societal repercussions, Tess is branded a "fallen woman." Hardy's sympathetic portrayal of Tess challenges the moral rigidity of Victorian society, questioning why women bore the burden of sexual transgression while men escaped accountability.

4. Male Gender Roles and Power Dynamics

Male characters in these texts often embody patriarchal authority but also face societal pressures. In *Great Expectations*, Pip's journey to become a "gentleman" reflects the expectation of male ambition and financial success. Similarly, Rochester in *Jane Eyre* wields power but is humanized through his emotional vulnerability, suggesting a critique of rigid masculinity. In *Tess*, Angel Clare's hypocrisy reveals the fragility of male moral superiority, exposing how men, too, were shaped by societal norms.

Discussion

The selected texts reveal a complex interplay between conformity and resistance to gender roles. Female characters like Jane and Tess challenge the "angel in the house" ideal, asserting agency in a society that



sought to confine them. Male authors like Dickens and Hardy, while critical of patriarchal norms, often depict women within the constraints of their time, reflecting ambivalence about gender equality. Female authors like Brontë, however, offer more radical critiques, foregrounding women's inner lives and aspirations. These portrayals mirror the broader cultural shifts of the 19th century, including the rise of feminist activism and legal reforms that began to redefine gender roles.

Conclusion

The representation of gender roles in 19th-century English literature reflects the tension between tradition and transformation. Through characters like Jane Eyre, Estella, and Tess, authors both male and female interrogated societal expectations, exposing the limitations imposed on women and, to a lesser extent, men. While some characters conform to traditional roles, others challenge them, paving the way for modern feminist thought. This analysis underscores literature's role as a battleground for negotiating gender identities, offering insights into the evolving dynamics of the Victorian era. Future research could explore how these themes resonate in postcolonial or working-class contexts, broadening our understanding of gender in 19th-century literature.

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