

FEMALE WRITING IN VICTORIAN FICTION : A SURVEY OF BRONTË AND GASKELL

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Abstract

This article attempts to take stock of Victorian female literature through the fictions of Charlotte Brontë and Elizabeth Gaskell. By revisiting the initial stages of female commitment, it explores the real motivations of female writers of that era and their use of writing as a weapon in the fight for the improvement of women condition. The selected texts reveal the degree of commitment of these authors in the struggle for the representativeness of the woman of their time.

Key words: *Woman, literature, Victorian era, feminism, commitment.*

Résumé

Cet article tente de faire un état des lieux de la littérature féminine de l'époque victorienne à travers les fictions de Charlotte Brontë et Elizabeth Gaskell. En revisitant les prémices de cet engagement féminin, il explore les réelles motivations des écrivaines de cette époque et leur usage de l'écriture comme arme de lutte pour la promotion de la femme. Les textes sélectionnés révèlent le degré d'engagement de ces auteures dans la lutte pour la représentativité de la femme de leur époque.

Mots clés : *Femme, littérature, époque victorienne, féminisme, engagement.*

Introduction

The Victorian era spanned from 1837 to 1901 and coincided with Queen Victoria's ascension to the throne and her death. It was, nevertheless, a period of paradox characterized on one hand by a female royalty, and, on the other hand, by the deficiency and injustice which women faced on. Women were

treated as second class citizens after men and it was considered out of place and even dangerous for them to be educated, to write or express opinions.

Writing during that period was not considered a feminine pursuit. Women have faced, since the seventeenth century, the common criticism that their hand was better suited to the needle than a pen. Anne Bradstreet had written in her time: «I am obnoxious to each carping tongue, who says my hand a needle better fits...» (Bradstreet, 26). The Victorian era was yet the time when many women would become writers proving that women could break through barriers that society wrongly imposed.

This study delves into this attractive sphere of female writing in the Victorian era, with a specific focus on the literary works of Charlotte Brontë (1816-1855), and Elizabeth Gaskell (1810-1865). The theory guiding this research postulates that both authors, as pioneering female writers in the Victorian era, employed their literary prowess to not only depict the struggles and triumphs of women but also to subtly challenge and redefine societal expectations. The aim is to shed light on the state of the art in this area, exploring how these two outstanding authors travelled into the socio-cultural landscape of their time through the medium of fiction. While exploring their fictional narratives, we unveil female experiences, putting the emphasis on the evolving status of women in a society undergoing significant transformations, with a perspective to the discourse on gender roles and literature in the Victorian era.

To achieve an extensive understanding of these female writing, a qualitative approach will be employed, including close reading and thematic analysis to distinguish the nuanced portrayal of women and the social restrictions they confronted within the fictional worlds crafted by these authors. The study first and foremost explores what motivated the commitment of women in critiquing the existed canon during the Victorian era. Then, it will analyse, on both sides, the insights of the writings

of the selected authors based on the ascension of women as central point of their works.

1. Women Representation During Victorian Era

During the Victorian period, it was quite impossible for women to make any improvement. Women during this time were in a stagnant position and were unable to find any hope or success in their lives. That inertia highly stimulated and motivated many women who used their pen to denounce their condition.

1.1. Victorianism as code of conduct

In her article intitled “The Construction of Victorianism”, Jane Thomas asserts that the term “Victorianism” denotes a “variety of styles, manners and cultural forms typical of the Victorian period” (Thomas, 1994, p. 2). Coined in 1875, the word Victorianism is often specifically directed towards Victorian morality, which refers to a highly moralized language and behavior. In the field of literature, Victorianism refers to the “art, attitudes and culture of the British and other English-speaking people that evolved during the time of Queen Victoria’s reign” (Gilbert and Gubar, 1979, p. 48). It was the time where the focus on limitation and dignity remained as an obvious appearance. In January 6th 1794, the following obituary announcement of death appeared in *The Morning Chronicle*¹:

Early on Thursday morning, at Clapham Terrace, after a short illness, Mrs. Barclay, wife of Mr. Robert Barclay, died in Southwark. To those who enjoyed the happiness of an intercourse with the numerous and well-ordered family over which she presided, it cannot be necessary to describe the excellencies which distinguished her character as a wife, a mother, a mistress, and a friend, amiable, affectionate, upright, and humane. ...” (TMC, 1769, p. 6)

This excerpt tends to be based on the notion that they were specific essential qualities required from women. Individual characteristics, differences of temperament or personality seemed to be less important than the state of being a woman. For Elis (1839), at the beginning of the nineteenth Century, women had very limited rights. They were expected to remain obedient toward their fathers, then to their husbands when married. Middle and upper-class women generally remained home, caring for their children and running the household chores, whereas lower-class women often did work outside the home as poorly-paid domestic servants or laborers in factories and mills. Women “had no right to vote, and were barred from institutions of higher education. They could not undertake legal action, had limited control over personal property after marriage. In cases of divorce, they were rarely granted legal custody of their children” (Gilbert and Gubar, 1979, p.172). Representations of the lives of nineteenth-century British women, were therefore portrayed in negative terms.

Hence, women in the Victorian society had one main role in life, and that was to stay at home, take care of their family. They should therefore “maintain a comfortable atmosphere in the home for their husband to relax and rest after a tiring day of earning money” (Foster, 1985, p. 17). Before marriage, they would learn housewife skills such as weaving, cooking, washing, and cleaning, unless they belonged to a wealthy family where they were supposed to have servants and nannies. If they were wealthy, they did not always learn these tasks because their maids primarily took care of the household tasks. But in any case, women were considered as their father’s or husband’s property:

The husband and wife are one person in law: that is, the very being or legal existence of the woman is suspended during her marriage, or at least is incorporated or consolidated into that of her husband, under whose wing, protection and cover, she performs everything” (W. Blackstone 1756, p. 430).

That was the Victorian philosophy of “separated spaces” in which women belong to the domestic sphere, men to the public one, and that should never be confused. Women were also not allowed to be educated or gain knowledge outside the home as it was considered as a man’s world. Altick and Chew stated that: “a woman was inferior to a man in all ways except the unique one that counted most [to a man]: her femininity. Her place was in the home, on a veritable pedestal if one could be afforded, and emphatically not in the world of affairs” (Altick & Chew 1967, p. 154). Patriarchal society did not allow women to have the same privileges as men. Consequently, women were credited the feminine duties of caring for the home and pursuing the outlets of feminine creativity.

Such a set of established rules, conventions and decorum in Victorian society brought rigid gender roles that confined women to their domestic activities, and prevented them from being equal to men in all aspects of life. This discrimination stimulated feminist attitudes, and triggered women to start demanding their rights, whether legal, political or social. They sought for a way to make their voices heard and they found it in literature. This focus on women’s rights in society is often called “the ‘first wave’ of feminism activism” (Scholz, 2010, p. 5) and spanned the seventeenth through the early part of the twentieth. Thus, literature became a medium that best conveyed the unexplored complex lives of women during that period.

1.2. Women’s involvement through literature

During the Victorian era, women's roles changed radically. Industrialization redefined the role of women in the

home, opening at the same time new opportunities for them as industrial wage earners. These new modern changes raised women's awareness of gender inequality, and helped women steadily escalate in terms of importance to society to the point that society has become unsustainable without them.

That societal transformation was also noticed in the field of literature and had worked to provoke gender consciousness and reforms in their plots and motives. Richard Altick's work *The English Common Reader* (1998) provides useful information demonstrating how that new literacy was being bedded and used for political and social purposes. Charlotte Brontë and Elizabeth Gaskell both expressed and influenced their time's expectations for women. Through their novels, letters and essays, these nineteenth-century writers have portrayed the expectations imposed on them by society. Along with other female writers of their time, they have expressed the feelings of numerous women who were voiceless, and brought attention and support to their concerns. Nonetheless, the most useful part of their narration is that, despite their engagement, those female writers adopted some constructive methods consisting in maintaining the balance between feminine request and the family unit.

The nineteenth century was therefore the Age of the Female Novelist. In 1993, Robin Gilmour observes that feminist interest in Victorian culture "has passed well beyond an interest in the woman-as-rebel to an interest in woman-as-other, a suppressed voice heard in the distortions of the male culture's attempt to ventriloquize it" (Gilmour, 1993, p. 189). Female authors transcended intensely by criticizing male authors who thought that women had no suitable intellectual skills to produce a competent literary work worth competing with. Through their writing, the question of women's aptitude for fiction, at any proportion, had been answered. However, in order to stand alongside the men on their stage, these female authors had to use

male pseudonyms or write anonymously to avoid the scornful judgments or critics of the society based on their sex.

Charlotte Brontë and Elizabeth Gaskell have successfully illustrated in their novels the hardships and struggles women had to overcome in order to become liberated and equal to men. In their respective novels, they exposed to the public the real situation of the oppressive society they were living in. The character of the “New Woman” is the main protagonist of each of their literary work. Their heroines’ main role is to criticize discriminating stereotypes about the position of women in society.

2. The Brontës’ Saga.

As the century progressed, women through literature, have tried to break the social, political, and legal constraints which society imposed on them. The Brontë sisters are part of those female writers who attracted huge interest at the time of their celebrity, and, indeed, continue to do so now. This personality had been acquired due to the combination of brilliant, different writing from the three sisters, despite of the extreme dysfunction noted in the family.

2.1. The Imaginary World of the Brontës

Charlotte, Emily and Anne Brontë were respectively born in 1816, 1818 and 1820. They were three sisters of an original family of six children. Lynne Banks recounts this family’s extraordinary literary talents and how it was overshadowed by extreme personal suffering. Charlotte, Emily and Anne Brontë all wrote stories set in a fictional land known as *Glass Town*. The latter was invented by the four together, though Branwell and Charlotte Brontë were the dominant players. After 1831, the siblings separated into two groups and each created its own “world”. Charlotte and Branwell separated out into *Angria* which was an extension of *Glass Town*, while

Emily and Anne conceived their own private world of *Gondal*.

The Brontë's original passion was thoroughly transformed into mature writings that has given the classical works that have been praised by many generations. Among them are *Jane Eyre* (1847) by Charlotte, *Wuthering Heights* (1847) by Emily and *Agnes Grey* (1847) by Anne. Our analysis will focus on the first cited in response to our initial selection.

Charlotte Brontë was the oldest of the three sisters, and like her sisters, published under a male pseudonym (Curer Bell). *Jane Eyre* (1847), an English literature classic, was her most famous and well-known work. Although she passed away before 40, she was the longest-living of her sisters, and the historical legacy of her and her sisters remain as examples of leading literary women.

Charlotte Brontë's writing is set in the midst of the industrial revolution when evolving capitalism results in women from the poorer classes working in industry as well as being expected to maintain their domestic responsibilities. However, her writing was not always appreciated by the masses, especially the male masses. This explains "Brontë's need to publish under a male pseudonym" (Bomarito and Whitaker, p.199).

2.2 Jane Eyre or Charlotte Brontë's Quest For Feminine Identity

Charlotte Brontë (1816-1855) was particularly drawn by her experience but also her imagination to the predicaments of the unmarried women during Victorian time. This is what she dramatizes in *Jane Eyre* (1847) and she bound it to earlier Gothic novels, with its mysteries, and supernatural events. But as Jane matures, her autobiography likewise takes on Victorian themes and characteristics.

Jane Eyre is a Bildungsroman, or a coming-of-age story, in which the protagonist's aspirations are set against the

pressures and expectations of society. Brontë uses Jane's character as a metaphor for resolving England's political issues regarding female consideration.

Right at the beginning of the novel when Jane, as a child, is oppressed by John Reed, she vehemently resists with hard words:

Accustomed to John Reed's abuse, I never had an idea of replying to it: my care was how to endure the blow which would certainly follow the insult. "Wicked and cruel boy! ... You are like a murderer – you are like a slave-driver – you are like the Roman emperors! (C. Brontë, 1847, p. 13)

Through this quotation, Jane Eyre shows an act of self-assertion by violently protesting against the injustice of her fate. Charlotte Brontë wants to inform her readers about the representations of her time. Reading, in Jane's case and education in general, seems to be an illegal act during that time. Right before this scene, we are said that Jane withdrew to a "hiding-place" (C. Brontë, p. 10) to read Bewick's *History of British Birds* and is struck by John Reed for having used his books. Later, when John Reed shouts, "You have no business to take our books" (C. Brontë, p. 13), he asserts his ownership to both the material form of books and the act of reading itself. He strengthened that act of suppression by throwing the volume of Bewick at Jane and causes her to fall and hurt her head. This is what boost up Jane's spontaneous act of defiance which she will develop all through the novel and her strategy triumphed at the end.

In the novel, Jane expresses herself more than the female convention of the era. Moreover, her self-sufficiency is demonstrated in her determined departure from Thomfield Hall that allowed her to discover that Rochester already has a wife and that she would simply become his mistress. Yet, Jane's escape is conforming to the Victorian regard for respectability

as well as a display of her own character.

Alison Milkbank argues in her *Daughters of the House* (1992) that *Jane Eyre* is “the search for a feminine identity that is genuinely challenging, and ultimately redemptive for human kind in general” (Milkbank, 1992, p. 141). Although Charlotte Brontë was always conscious of the economic and emotional deprivations felt by the single woman, *Jane Eyre* is strongly and positively to blame of her own life.

In *Jane Eyre*, Charlotte Brontë displays a dreadful story of a respectable middle-class spinster. The major character experiences a life full of movement and quest. The heroine’s prevision and her double act of revenge positively transform and redeem the male-dominated world, a world seen almost entirely from a female perspective. Her fiction is not merely written for women but to all the community.

3. Brontë-Gaskell Instant Friendship: A Wise Channel of Transition

Often referred to as Mrs. Gaskell, Elizabeth Cleghorn Gaskell was a British author born on 29 September 1810 in Lindsey Row, Chelsea. Gaskell was a Victorian female novelist who wrote well-known novels such as *Mary Barton* (1848), *Cranford* (1851-53), *North and South* (1854-55) and *Wives and Daughters* (1865). Aside from writing those great novels, Gaskell did something unusual at that time; that is to write a biography about another British female novelist, Charlotte Brontë at the request of the Brontë’s father.

Gaskell and Brontë (Charlotte) “met in 1850 and formed a lasting friendship based on their experience as fellow novelists” (M. Smith, 1995, p. 111). Both shot to fame with their first published novels, *Mary Barton* (1848) and *Jane Eyre* (1847), they underwent the questioning pleasures of being English women glorified by London society. They

“subsequently met just three times” (M. Smith, 1995, p.112), but their correspondence shows a deep mutual respect and affection.

3.1. Elizabeth Gaskell: A Typical Victorian Woman

The denomination “Mrs. Gaskell” suggested a mature respectability. Born in 1810, Gaskell married, at twenty-one, a Reverend William Gaskell, with whom she raised four daughters. Jenny Uglow reveals in his book that Elizabeth Gaskell was extroverted, energetic, and often restless. She enjoyed her literary success and mixed with celebrated writers and thinkers, but her friendly gossiping letters show that she was also immersed in the ordinary pleasures, burdens, and values of an upper-middle-class Victorian wife and mother. According to Uglow, Gaskell deeply believed that women were generally happier when married. This is why she encouraged her highly ambivalent friend, Charlotte Brontë, to accept the proposal of her father’s curate to marry her.

Gaskell understood the value of domesticity to the female writer; for all that it was suffocating, it was also a shield. Mrs. Gaskell well understood how to do things in the accepted way. As a spouse and mother of four children, she had an image of a devoted wife. However, she managed to travel alone without her husband.

3.2. The Rejection of Social Convention in Gaskell’s North and South

The upheaval in class boundaries, the industrialization of England, religion, and women’s issues in the Victorian era were all themes of Elizabeth Gaskell’s work. In her novel *North and South*, she openly rejects the conventions of her time and provides a revolutionary description of her main character, Margaret Hale. She chose to separate her heroine from other female characters by giving her distinctive qualities that stand out and are suggestive to be imitated.

Social class issues are also well developed in *North and South*. We have people from the south of England (Margaret Hale) with very different values than people from the north (John Thornton). This justifies the fact that Thornton's mother, a snob who thinks that poor people smell, doesn't want her son marrying a poor woman. However, Margaret did not care about her future mother-in-law attitude as she courageously faced her when the latter dares confront her about her walking alone at night with a young man. Margaret answers with indignation: "What must you think of me, madam?... You can say nothing more, Mrs. Thornton. I decline every attempt to justify myself for anything" (E. Gaskell, 1855, p. 66).

Hence, Margaret is undoubtedly not a type of Victorian woman who is known to be shy, humble and timid so as to never argue with anyone. She challenges traditional gender expectations, exhibiting independence and resilience in her actions. She also rejects societal norms that confine women to specific roles, placing herself as a pioneering female character in Victorian literature.

In fact, *North and South* is all about challenging authority, especially when it tries to work against compassion and justice. Margaret Hale constantly crosses the boundaries set by the English society of that Era. Every chapter of the book displays a fight against a power. While demonstrating that Margaret is a progressive character, Gaskell provides her heroine with enough physical qualities that help her achieve her aim: "her mouth was wide; no rosebud that could open only just enough to let out a 'yes' and 'no', and 'an't please you sir'," (E. Gaskell, 1855, p. 34). Analysing Margaret Hale as an evolving character involves delving into her views on gender, class, and industrialization, as well as exploring her role in advocating for workers' rights and navigating non-traditional romantic relationships. This analysis contributes to a deeper understanding of Elizabeth Gaskell's portrayal of progressive

female characters in Victorian fiction.

Conclusion

From the above analysis, it can be stated that female writing in the Victorian era through Charlotte Brontë and Elizabeth Gaskell's fiction has provided informative insights into the characterization of women by women, and the various roles they played in the literature of the time. Though they adopted different methods in that battle, the two authors fought with the same energy that had led at least to people consciousness about the actual place of women in society.

Brontë and Gaskell both present a piece of their personal lives and imaginations in their novels and in their characters. They have developed complex heroines and provide suitable novels that have satisfied a craving for a new female representation which occupies the center stage.

Despite insidious dissemblances in the author's approaches to addressing gender roles, the study revealed that Brontë and Gaskell's female characters, through their struggles, served as powerful vehicles for the expression of women's goals. Such a diversity in the author's approach proves the intricacy and richness of Victorian female writing.

Moreover, our analysis confirm the hypothesis that the two authors, not only reflected in their writings the social changes of their time but also actively contributed to the discourse on gender roles. Their works stand as timeless assertion to the resilience and complexity of female characters, illustrating the evolving status of women in Victorian society. Essentially, the state of the art in female writing during the Victorian era, as illustrated by Brontë and Gaskell, urges continued researches and perceptives. By analysing their narratives, we gain a profound understanding of the dynamic power of female literature during Victorian times.

Note

The Morning Chronicle was a newspaper founded in 1769 in London. It was notable for having been the first steady employer of Charles Dickens as a journalist. It was the first newspaper to employ a salaried woman journalist Eliza Lynn Linton; for publishing the articles by Henry Mayhew, and for publishing other major writers, such as John Stuart Mill.

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