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Social Roles and Treatment of Women in the Victorian Novels: Thomas Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge* and Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations*.

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Abstract

The Victorian novels are encapsulations of human activities in the Victorian era characterized by, among other things, the social roles of women and the manner in which they were perceived by the men of the era. Women were seen and treated as second class citizens. They were meant to play the role of a second fiddle in the affairs of the society. They were seen as being disposable and their fates attached to the whims and caprices of men. This study appraises the demeaning social roles of women as captured in Thomas Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge* and Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations*. It illuminates the pejorative and contemptuous dispositions of men towards their women counterparts in the aforementioned works of the Victorians. In doing that, it attempts to uncover for us, the negative perception of women by men of the era as mere tools for men's happiness and satisfaction. The study ends not only with the advocacy that these obnoxious notions be banished. It contends equally, that women should be emancipated from the private world of domesticity and be given equal rights and recognition in the public world dominated by men.

Keywords: Social Roles, Treatment, Victorian, Novels, Literature, Women, Men

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Introduction

The Victorian literature emerged during the reign of Queen Victoria in Britain. That was between 1837 and 1901. A unique set of characteristics marked this literary era, reflecting the social, political, and cultural changes of the time. The literature of the Victorian period shows "real people and real-life situations. Writers did not shy away from the grim parts of city life and the struggles of

people experiencing poverty. The stories of the era reflect a huge gap between the wealthy and the people with low incomes and the often harsh realities of living in an industrial society. The characters are complex and their problems are those that ordinary people face.

In our understanding of the social roles and treatment of women during the Victorian era, we shall make use of the feminist literary

criticism. This is to enable us to analyze the Victorian writers' concept of male and female and consequently what representations of sex exist in their literary works.

An Overview of the Victorian Novels

The stories of the Victorian literature, particularly those of the prose genre are relatable. The focus is on making everything appear as true to life as possible, from the dialogue to the settings. This realism helps to highlight the social issues of the time, pushing readers to see the need for change. The Victorian novels as they are, often aim at teaching readers right from wrong. The stories are like lessons on how to live a good life. The writers of that time believed books could make people better. As a result, they filled their stories with clear morals to guide readers towards good behaviour. For example, Charles Dickens' novel, *A Christmas Carol* shows the character, Ebenezer Scrooge undergoing a transformation from a miserly, selfish man to a generous and compassionate one. The story highlights a moral lesson about the importance of kindness, empathy, and generosity, especially during the Christmas season. This teaching side of writing was significant back then. It demonstrates that literature, beyond its entertainment role, is didactic. The Victorian novels reflect the

era's values where the society expected everyone to know and show good morals. The literary works are not just for entertainment; they are seen as tools to help build character and reinforce the society's rules on proper behavior. Moreover, Victorian literature often uses stories to point out what is wrong with the society. Writers like Thomas Hardy and Elizabeth Gaskell wrote about how unfair life was for people experiencing poverty; how children had to work, and how the class system stopped people from moving up in the world. These writers opened people's eyes to the problems around them and made them think about change. They were not afraid to show the ugly side of their world, and they hoped their books would make people want to fix these issues.

The Role of Women in the Victorian Era

Incidentally, during the Victorian era, writers started to question the role of women in society. They asked if women should have the same rights as men, like voting, owning property, or getting an education. Novels from this time often show women trying to find their place in a world that limits them. The women started working on their social roles as members of their society. Parts of the areas that they focused on were the issues of marriage and love. They came to the

realization that marriage should be inspired by love, rather than material things. In Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, for instance, the heroine, Elizabeth Bennet, fights for her right to marry for love, not just money. Similarly, in George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, characters look for more than just a good marriage; they want to make a difference in the world. This helps us to come to the realization of the fact that women have their minds and should be able to use them, just like men. Charlotte Bronte in *Jane Eyre* addresses the form of treatment that was given to women during the Victorian era. This bothers mainly on the constraints on women and class inequalities, offering insights into the status of governesses and the limited autonomy of women.

In the Victorian civilization, the home was an important sphere and it also outlined the relations between husband and wife in the domestic sphere, and on a larger scale, the relations between women and men. Mary Lyndon Shanley points out that "when most Victorians spoke or wrote about themselves, they testified to the importance of home and hearth in their constellation of values". Therefore, family life was an important value in the Victorian culture as it was inseparable from maternity, and it was portrayed as sufficient for women and many middle.

The Social Roles and Treatment of Women in the Victorian Era

Class women regarded motherhood and domestic life as a substitute for women's productive role. The ideology of the home was greatly emphasized by the Victorians and they also believed that it was important to preserve the identity of the home even at the cost of demeaning any claim by adult women, daughters and wives to social and legal equality, individuality or rights independent of the men they were attached to. The home was also sanctified as an island of tranquility and obedience which was a blessing to the patriarchal rule of the male head who completely controlled the spouse and barred her from the public life of politics and economy. This tyrannical order sprang from the view of the natural sex difference which maintained that women's function in nature was child bearing and care providers; therefore, they had to be confined to private life. Liberal political theorists such as John Locke and David Wootton believed that nature was the realm out of which people evolved to become human, to form societies, governments, social contacts and the state, which created a class and gender distinction between men and women. It was such patriarchal belief that Victorian feminists had to challenge and overturn in order to form the fairer and more equal society that they

envisioned. Therefore, Victorian feminism was a struggle against women's confinement to private life and their yearning for belonging to the public world of politics and business.

In the Victorian society, the male figure was the symbol of authority, which shows the patriarchal nature of the society. Charles Dickens portrays this ideology in his works as noted at the beginning of *Great Expectations* when Pip is at the graveyard looking at his family's tombstones. The authority of Pip's father is confirmed by the way in which the inscriptions on the tombstones of his mother and siblings refer back to the fact that they are subject to him. Pip's father is the only one who is named and described as "late of this parish" while Pip's mother, is described as "wife of the above" (*Great Expectations* 3-4). The tombstone text inscribes divisions of power within the family which are registered in Pip's reading and the interpretation of the appearance of his lost parents accords with Victorian stereotypes of masculinity and femininity.

Victorian Women in the Light of Feminism

To speak of Victorian feminism is to refer to the fight against such stereotypes and to create equality between the masculine and feminine world. Mary Wollstonecraft, one of

the early British feminists, in her work *Vindication of the Rights of Women* established that "Girls marry merely to better themselves, to borrow a significant vulgar phrase, and have such perfect power over their hearts as not to permit themselves to fall in love till a man with a superior fortune offers." Due to the intensive industrialism, urbanization and social change, there emerged a massive competition within the new middle class who controlled the economy and this was a world controlled by men in which no woman could belong. In order to acquire economic stability, women were forced to marry men of a higher economic status as depicted in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, which satirically depicts Mrs. Bennet's pursuit of finding financially stable husbands for her daughters. However, Charlotte Bronte utterly repudiates marriages for inconveniences in *Jane Eyre* when Mr. Rochester proposes to Jane:

Do you think I can stay to become nothing to you? Do you think I am an automation?-a machine without feelings? And can you bear to have my morsel of bread snatched from my lips and my drop of living water dashed from my cup? Do you think because I am poor, obscure, plain and little, I am soul and heartless? You think wrong! I have as much soul as you, and full as much heart. . . (278)

Jane's rejection of Mr. Rochester's marriage proposal is an assertion of women's denial to marry for economic stability. Jane affirms her possession of feelings and shows that she will not marry a man who will treat her as a mere machine. Bronte's view of marriage is that of equality and mutual feelings, one of the key aspects which was being promoted by Victorian feminism. In this way, she rejects the traditional view of marriage in which a woman should marry a financially stable man, in place of love. Bronte once told her publisher that she perceives economic dependency as "the great curse of single female life" because it forces the woman to marry for economic reasons (qtd. by Zlotnick 3). In addition, the creation of an assertive character like Jane, who rejects a marriage proposal, is a sign of a "desire to escape the oppressive social order" (qtd. by Zlotnick 3).

Unfortunately, marriage did not entirely offer economic stability and independence for women since the Victorian society was very patriarchal. There were laws which forced women to be subservient to their husbands; for example, the common law doctrine of covertures, which the Victorians felt defined roles ordained by the natural and theological order, which meant that through marriage, man and woman became one person (Shanley 8). Therefore, married women could not

independently sign contracts nor draft valid wills and any married woman's property legally belonged to her husband.

The struggle for women to be recognized as equal entities to men in society is further reiterated by Charlotte Bronte through the creation of the character Bertha Mason in *Jane Eyre* who is physically strong but banished from society because she is said to be "mentally disturbed." This is an indication of the belief that middle and upper class women were regarded as inherently sick if they tried to step beyond their prescribed roles (Flekke 28). In the Victorian society, it was difficult to step out of the female boundaries and any woman who attempted or succeeded was immediately punished or became a social outcast. Charles Dickens also depicts this phenomenon in *Great Expectations* through the character of Mrs. Joe Gargery who is aggressive and authoritative, but she is immediately brought to her place through her attack by Orlick and becomes submissive and dependent.

The Industrial Revolution brought about change in focus on women's labour. Women had the opportunity to explore prospects outside the family establishment or even earn money (Beddoe 92). However, the Victorian society maintained the view that a working woman would make a potentially

irresponsible wife and mother. Writers like Charles Dickens also portray this ideology in the novel, *Bleak House*, through the creation of Mrs. Jellyby who is preoccupied with the colonization in Africa. However, she is portrayed as an incompetent mother who is unable to manage her children and her household. Victorian feminism was largely concerned with emancipating women from the private world of domesticity and gaining equal rights and recognition in the public world dominated by men. In the Victorian society, a woman who attempted to step beyond her female boundaries was immediately punished and could also be ostracized from society. This idea was largely prominent before most laws that protected women's rights were passed. Many Victorian writers, both male and female, were greatly aware of feminism, but some male writers supported the patriarchal ideology that women were to be subservient to men. On the other hand, most female Victorian writers were in support of women's emancipation, thus their novels depict heroines who are either independent or can step out of the man-made female boundaries.

However, Dickens does not depict female characters who have economic liberty as those expressed by later feminist writers. His female characters are women who are

yearning for financial freedom, unlike the modern women who are independent and self – sufficient as declared by Virginia Woolf that “The ordinary woman depends on the ordinary woman” (qtd. in Showalter 9). The Victorian women were economically dependent on men as a means of survival as noted in many Victorian novels, particularly, those by Jane Austen whose female characters are usually in search of propertied men.

Social Roles and Treatment of Women in Thomas Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge*

Hardy, in this novel, brings to light the harsh reality of Victorian society's treatment of women. This aspect of the novel may be illustrated by comparing present-day society's conditions for and attitudes towards women with how characters in the story treat Susan Henchard, Lucetta Templeman and Elizabeth-Jane Newson. Elaine Showalter points out that *The Mayor of Casterbridge* begins with a scene that dramatises the analysis of female subjugation as a function of capitalism: the auction of Michael Henchard's wife Susan at the fair at Weydon-Priors" (56). Henchard's auctioning of his wife to the highest bidder at Weydon fair verifies that in early nineteenth-century England, women of her class, in rural districts, were regarded as little more than

stock to be disposed of at their owners' whims: "it has been done elsewhere" (12) affirms that such sales were not uncommon.

After awaking from his drunken sleep and realizing that Susan has indeed left with the "genial sailor"(26), Henchard rationalizes that Susan's "meekness" and ignorance--her "idiotic simplicity" (17)--has led her to acquiesce in the transaction, and does not look further than the spiked fury for what drove him to sell her. His "introspective inflexibility"(89) makes it impossible for Henchard to see beyond his wife's gullibility and his own alcohol abuse to the real cause of the sale, his stubborn pride. He thinks his having sold her is a delusion--until he finds her wedding ring on the grassy floor and the five shillings and the bank-notes in his breast-pocket.

Eighteen years later, when Susan returns to Henchard destitute after Richard Newson's being reported lost at sea off the coast of Newfoundland, Henchard attempts to make amends. Although he may have been signaling his desire to be forgiven, he encloses with a note to his former wife five pound notes and five shillings, in total the same amount for which he had sold her. He sits down at the table and writes a few lines; next taking from his pocket-book a five-pound note, which he puts in the envelope

with the letter, adding to it, as by an after-thought, five shillings. (78) Although conducted in his library rather than in his business office, this act looks suspiciously like another cash transaction on the part of a merchant who makes his living by buying and selling commodities, and knows to a penny what it will take to make a purchase. Even the narrator notes that Henchard's gesture of enclosing the bank-notes and coins "may tacitly have said to her [Susan] that he bought her back again".(79)

The remarriage of Michael and Susan Henchard is the product of what Hardy terms "business-like determination (93) and "strict mechanical rightness" (93) in Henchard's conscientious thinking. Henchard courts Susan as if he were going to work or performing a civic duty: "The visit was repeated again and again with business-like determination by the mayor". (93) Outside the church on their wedding day, the common people's reaction to the event is negative; the average Casterbridger feels that the Mayor is degrading himself. In the eyes of the townsfolk, he is "lowering his dignity by marrying so comparatively humble a woman". (95) To extrapolate from this statement, women were (and still are) regarded as status symbols, just as the right make of car is today. People in Casterbridge

are mystified at Henchard's choice, for Susan has neither the social status, nor physical attractiveness, nor money necessary for one who wishes to marry a merchant-prince.

As Bert G. Hornback remarks, "there are striking parallels" (25) between Susan and the second woman from Henchard's past, Lucetta. "She tries to break from the bonds of her past, and this destroys her". (25) What destroys Lucetta are the attitudes of society. For much of the duration of Lucetta's existence in the novel, she is the subject of ridicule. When word is circulated throughout her native Jersey about her intimacy with Henchard, it is she and not Henchard who suffers opprobrium. This intimacy, when revealed in Casterbridge, leads to her social downfall (signalled by the Skimmington), a miscarriage and subsequently, her death.

Elizabeth-Jane, on the other hand, is not subjected to the public ridicule and mistreatment to the same extent as Lucetta. Henchard appears to be the main instigator of her worries. From the beginning of Henchard's remarriage, Henchard takes it upon himself to see that Elizabeth-Jane conforms to the manners, fashion, attitudes, and general lifestyle expected of the Mayor's daughter. First, he assumes that Elizabeth will take his name without objecting: "You shall take it as if by choice". (141) If

Elizabeth-Jane were male, Henchard would not have been as domineering in his request since a man's name is "sacred".

The next idiosyncratic imposition of Henchard upon Elizabeth-Jane involves her style of handwriting; "Henchard's creed was that proper young girls wrote ladies'-hand". (150) He makes her feel ashamed at not having written "a line of chain-shot and sand-bags" (the narrator is reading Henchard's mind here) rather than a proper lady's hand. Henchard naturally assumes that, since Elizabeth is female, her writing will reflect her relation to him. This, however, is not the case. Essentially, she has been raised as a fisherman's daughter; Henchard somehow expects that his marrying her mother would transform her into a well-bred lady.

Present-day society's conditions and attitudes have been compared to the treatment of Susan, Lucetta and Elizabeth-Jane. In *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, Thomas Hardy attempts to make Victorian society more aware of its treatment of and attitudes towards women. This object he effects through the chief female characters of the novel, as well as through such minor figures as Mrs. Goodenough (the furmity vendor), Nance Mockridge, Mother Cuxsom, and Mrs. Stannidge, the genial publican of the Three Mariners Inn. Whether of high or low estate,

women are consistently revealed either as insignificant workers or as pawns in male power-games in this late Victorian novel.

Social Roles and Treatment of Women in Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations*

In his novel, *Great Expectations*, Charles Dickens displays the recurring theme of how sometimes in life, despite what the accepted behavioral norms are for a certain group, not everyone complies with these standards. He uses this theme to make a profound statement with regard to his lack of conformity to gender ideals as depicted by the Victorian era, through the use of reversed gender roles. Stereotypically, Victorian ideals stated that women were to be kind and nurturing, and the men were to be strong, stoic and dominant. These roles are reversed in *Great Expectations*, exemplified by Mrs. Joe's cold-hearted, punishing ways and Joe Gargery's maternal and compassionate traits. Charles Dickens depicts the theme of reversed gender roles in his novel. Tickler is introduced in the novel when Joe is wearily telling Pip that Mrs. Joe is on a rampage searching for him. In this scene, Pip explains that "Tickler was a wax-ended piece of cane, worn smooth by collision with my tickled frame." (6) Tickler is a symbol for the abuse that Pip and Joe face by the mean-spirited Mrs. Joe. This adaption of a woman abusing

a man, unlike the gender stereotype suggests, exemplifies the evident reversal of gender roles. Tickler also demonstrates the literary element, irony, because its name does not match its use. The word 'tickler' is generally associated with something light-hearted, painless, and butterfly-like. This contrasts with Mrs. Joe's use of 'Tickler', because she utilizes the cane to inflict pain upon her family when she is unhappy with them. This is portrayed when Joe and Pip have a parley when Pip returns from the cemetery, and Joe expresses to Pip, "I wish it was only me that got put out, Pip; I wish there warn't no Tickler for you, old chap; I wish I could take it all on myself." (38) This exemplifies how Mrs. Joe's violence and physical abuse is placed upon Joe and Pip, unlike stereotypical traits say that the man is the one who abuses his woman, showing the reversal of gender roles that is evident in *Great Expectations*.

Furthermore, as the novel progresses, Pip recalls his relationship with Joe upon his sick days, when Joe had nursed Pip back to health. Pip says, for the tenderness of Joe was so beautifully proportioned to my need that I was like a child in his hands. He would sit and talk to me in the old confidence, and with the old simplicity, and in the old unassertive protecting way... (366)

This quote exemplifies Joe's tender and nurturing qualities, and his zealous approach

to his dearly-cherished friend Pip, which correlates back to the theme of reversed gender roles that go against the Victorian era's stereotypical feelings on the perceived role of a man; Joe goes against this standard by displaying maternal characteristics in his caring for Pip.

Looking at Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge* and Charles Dickens' *Great Expectation* generally, one comes to terms with the form of social roles expected from women during the Victorian era as well as the form of treatment that was meted to them. Women, at that time, were expected to be meek and humble. They were expected to be docile without having a mind of their own. They were also expected to see their husbands as their masters who they must obey in all things and at all times.

It is significant to note that while this social role and treatment of women worked perfectly well in Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, it didn't work out well in Dickens' *Great Expectations*. In Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, Susan Henchard allows herself to be sold off to a stranger, a fisherman, who initially shares no relationship with her. She allows it because she realizes that it is what her husband, Henchard wants. She sees herself as an opinionless woman. She sees herself as a

piece of property that is owned by her husband and can at the same time be disposed of by her husband. So, when her husband decides to auction her off, she does not put up any resistance. Again, even after her remarriage with Henchard, the mayor of Casterbridge, the same behavior continues. She continues to see herself as an object that exists for her husband's happiness. Henchard continues to manipulate and use her to his advantage. This form of control and manipulation is extended to Jane Henchard. He makes her to change her name and her hand writing. He make sure that she dances to his tunes. This, to a great extent, helps us to understand the demeaning social roles women of the Victorian era were compelled to play and the kind of demeaning treatments that were given to them.

Conversely, in Dickens' *Great Expectations*, we notice a change in social role and treatment of women. Rather than women being treated as the victims, they are seen as aggressors. Mrs. Joe is presented as assuming the social roles that were hitherto reserved to the men of the era. She is seen flogging and maltreating Pip who is not only a boy, but also a relative of hers. She tells Pip that he is worthless and will amount to nothing. In the beginning of the novel, when Pip returns from meeting the convict on the moor, he gets

this scolding remark, “where have you been, you young monkey?” says Mrs. Joe, stamping her foot”. (7-8) She calls Pip names all of the time and abuses him both verbally and physically. These actions beat Pip down and make him feel worthless and invaluable.

It is significant to note that Mrs. Joe's social role is more or less a reversal of Mr. Joe's social role. Mrs. Joe is strict and harsh to Pip; while Mr. Joe is kind and caring to him. However, Pip's embarrassment and stubbornness almost cost him his friendship with his brother-in-law Joe, who has been his great friend even before he begins to live in London. Pip notes thus:

I had been mistaken in my fancy that there was a simple dignity in him. The fashion of his dress could no more on its way than when he spoke these words then it could come on its way to heaven. He touched me gently on the forehead and went out. As soon as I could recover myself sufficiently, I hurried out after him and looked for him in the neighboring streets, but he was gone. (236)

Pip loves Joe for who he is and he is not ashamed of him. Despite this reversal of roles experienced in Dickens' *Great Expectations*, it is the obvious that during the Victorian era, men were often portrayed in an opposite manner as heroic, strong, independent, and smart. Many of the female characters were wives who did and would support anything

their husbands said or were just minor characters. They had little or no voice and were often pushed aside and belittled so the male characters could speak their mind and make a larger impact. The male characters were often the main characters and they had the stereotypical traits the male character would have.

In hasty, a feminist education of Dickens female characters determines that Dickens as a male writer, was sympathetic with the plight of Victorian women. His depiction of the female characters is a portrayal of the Victorian ideologies and perceptions towards women. Unlike the other novelists of his time who strongly promoted the Victorian gender constructions through their writings, Dickens subtly criticizes the treatment of women by the male-controlled society.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we can say that the Victorian novels, typical to the literature of the era, capture human activities in the human society. These human activities encapsulate the social roles of women and the manner of treatment that is given to them. Hardy and Dickens through their novels, *The Mayor of Casterbridge* and *Great Expectations*, respectively, draw our attentions to these social roles of women and the treatments that were meted out to them by men of the

Victorian society. They equally shared with us the possibility of a change in this role and the need to treat women with utmost dignity and respect.

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