



## **WOMEN'S CONDITIONS DURING THE VICTORIAN ERA: AN EXPLORATION OF THE DEPICTION IN ENGLISH LITERATURE**

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### **Abstract**

*The Victorian era (1837–1901) was characterized by strict social hierarchies and rigid gender roles that defined and limited women's roles in society. This article explores the multifaceted experiences of women during this period, highlighting the social expectations, legal constraints, and economic conditions. It examines the contrasting realities faced by women of different social classes, from the domestic ideals imposed on middle- and upper-class women to the harsh labor conditions endured by working-class women. The paper also discusses the slow but significant progress made in women's education, legal rights, and the emergence of early feminist thought. Through literary, historical, and cultural lenses, the article reveals how Victorian women navigated their limited roles and contributed to the foundations of the women's rights movement. This study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the challenges and changes that defined women's lives during one of Britain's most transformative eras. The Victorian literature offers the author's point of view of these situations, but still allows society and the surrounding characters to treat the female characters just as they would in every day Victorian life.*

### **Keywords**

*Victorian Era, Women's Roles, Gender Norms, Domestic Ideology, Separate Spheres, Women's Rights, Feminism, Legal Status, Female Education, Class Disparities, Women's Labor, Coverture, Suffrage Movement, 19th-Century Britain, Cultural Representation, etc.*

### **Full Article**

Women during the Victorian Era did not have many rights. They were viewed as only supposed to be housewives and mothers to their children. The women during this era were only viewed as people that should only concern themselves with keeping a successful household. However, during this time women were forced into working positions outside of the household. During the Victorian era the main role of women in life, was to marry and take part in their husband interests and business. Before marriage, they were supposed to learn housewife skills such as weaving, cooking, washing, and cleaning, unless they were of a wealthy family.

Women that were forced into working situations outside of their households were viewed negatively by society. Many women needed to have an income to support their families because the men in the household were not making enough money to survive. When the women entered the work places they were not made to feel welcome and were often harassed. These women workers therefore were not welcome in the work place (outside of the household) or in society. Women during the Victorian era were mainly confined to household works. They were considered to be seen doing household works like raising children and supporting their husbands.



Men were given dominance over women in matters of life and expressions of love. Men occupied the public sphere, which included politics, industry, and commerce. Women, on the other hand, occupied the private, or domestic, sphere, taking care of household duties and looking after children, and social visits, both at home and at church.

Despite the apparent respect given to wives and mothers in the 19th century, Women in reality lived in a world that discriminated them heavily against men. As men were superior in physical strength, men considered themselves the dominant sex and sought to keep women subdued for as long as they could.

They were supposed to follow the norms of the society. The society expected them to be pure and chaste. During the Victorian era women were supposed to stay home, do house hold works raise children and support their husbands. They had limited rights. They were not given financial independence. They were not allowed to go outside. They were not given social freedom. The society expected them to be decent and cultured. They were supposed to look beautiful with Clear faces, bright eyes and tinted lips, but everything had to look natural. It was believed that cheeks painted with blush had to look flushed, and lips had to look bitten rather than painted. They were expected to show feminine qualities like look innocent and beautiful otherwise, they would not be of marriage potential.

They were not allowed to work outside. Women from high status were expected to be educated and show refined manners. Whereas lower society women used to work outside .The working women were not given respect in the society. Even at work place they faced challenges and hard conditions. They were paid lower wages and were discriminated with their male counterparts. Women's rights were extremely limited during this era, losing ownership of their wages, their physical property excluding land property, and all other cash they generated once married. Victorian literature has been a mirror to the society while representing women in English literature English literature often reflected and critiqued the limited roles and expectations placed on women in Victorian society. The *Angel in the House* depicts a pure woman. The Victorian ideal of woman hood often embodied in the "Angel in the House" concept, depicted women as pure, submissive, and focused on domestic duties. This ideal reinforced societal expectations that women should be wives, mothers, and homemakers, not pursuing professional or independent lives. Angel in the house was written to idolize Patmore's wife .She was the angel in this context. She was depicted as pure selfless and entirely devoted wife to her husband. Over the time this concept became the symbol of the society that women were expected to be pure souls truthful, passive submissive and supportive.

Many consider Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* to be a feminist novel, particularly because it portrays a strong, independent female protagonist who challenges societal expectations of women in the Victorian era. Jane Eyre's journey towards self-realization, her pursuit of equality in relationships, and her refusal to conform to traditional gender roles are seen as key feminist themes

So Jane Eyre is a very possessive heroine who speaks the truth she is seemingly a plain and simple girl. Her life has been full of struggles due to her cruel and abusive aunt who--the grim conditions at Lowood School and her love for Rochester and then Rochester marriage to Bertha. Jane Eyre tried to defy the Victorian norms of submissiveness. She believed in her own thoughts and feelings. She was an independent woman who supports herself through teaching and governess work. This was a significant departure from the Victorian ideal of women being dependent on men for their livelihood.

She rebelled against the social norms of the society as she did not accept a marriage of convenience or a life solely focused on domesticity .This reflects her desire for personal fulfillment and happiness. She was against the marriage that was considered marriage as a primary





source of female identity and happiness. She wanted that there should be equality in marriage. Jane Eyre was against the limitations placed on Victorian women during the Victorian era. The upper class women were not allowed to work outside while the lower middle class women like Jane faced more economic hardships and fewer options.

### **Education and Employment:**

Education was limited and women mostly focused on accomplishments like music, sewing, and etiquette for middle and upper-class women. Working-class girls received minimal or no education. The working-class women worked as domestic servants, factory workers, and seamstresses. The Middle-class women rarely worked, if they did, it was as governesses or teachers. They were mostly involved in Professional fields like law, medicine, and politics, fields that were closed to women.

Their political and Legal Status was also restricted. They had no Legal Identity, Under the doctrine of *coverture*, a married woman had no separate legal identity from her husband. They also had limited Property Rights like before 1870: Women could not own property or keep earnings. Married Women's Property Acts (1870 & 1882): Allowed women to retain earnings and property after marriage. In the voting also women were excluded from voting. Suffrage movements began gaining strength in the late Victorian era.

During the Victorian era marriage and family life was seen as a woman's ultimate goal. Divorce was a difficult and socially stigmatized. The Matrimonial Causes Act (1857) made divorce slightly more accessible but still biased against women. Motherhood was idealized but also seen as a duty rather than a choice. In the Victorian period, women were considered inferior while the men were seen as superior. Women did not have their legal rights, they could not vote. Women were forced to do their domestic sphere, they should clean, home, food and raise their children. The husband controlled all the property. The rights and privileges of Victorian women were very limited for both, the single and married. She faced many kinds of verbally and physically violence, and she did not have the right to divorce.

Later Some Social Reform and Feminism also emerged during this period. First-Wave Feminism emerged during this period. It Focused on suffrage, property rights, education, and legal reforms. Some of the key Figures like Josephine Butler: Campaigned against the Contagious Diseases Acts. Millicent Fawcett the Leader of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies. Some Women's Organizations like Ladies' National Association and Women's Social and Political Union (founded slightly after the Victorian period, in 1903) also emerged.

Many authors started writing about the sufferings and the atrocities faced by women during Victorian age. Their novels focused heavily on traditional, typical Victorian female characters and their interactions. The Victorian literature reflected and questioned gender norms. Writers like Charlotte Bronte (*Jane Eyre*), Elizabeth Gaskell (*North and South*) and George Eliot (*Middlemarch*).

### **Themes of Independence, Repression, and Female Consciousness were Explored:**

Contradictions and Changes were starting. Although the Queen Victoria was a powerful female figure she held conservative views on gender roles. The era saw both the entrenchment of patriarchal norms and the seeds of modern feminism. In Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, the female Tess is the main protagonist of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*. Tess is a "pure woman" who struggles with societal expectations and the consequences of her actions, often facing prejudice and judgment. *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* depicts a Pure Woman Tess. It the twelfth published novel by English author Thomas Hardy. It initially appeared in a censored and serialized version, published by the British illustrated newspaper *The Graphic* in 1891. Then in



book form in three volumes in 1891, and as a single volume in 1892. Although now considered a major novel of the 19th century, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* received mixed reviews when it first appeared, in part because it challenged the sexual morals of late Victorian England.

Hardy portrayed Tess as a pure woman although molested by her cousin she was considered pure according Thomas Hardy. Which was against the norms of the Victorian era? Women in Hardy's novels seem to rebels against the Victorian norms of the society. Hardy in his novel *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* portrays Tess as a pure woman .She despite being molested by her cousin is portrayed as a pure woman.

### **The Victorians looked down upon an unchaste woman during the Victorian era:**

According to Victorian standards Tess was considered as impure woman as she was molested before marriage. During the Victorian Era women were supposed to be pure virgin and chaste before marriage. During the Victorian period some events, legislation and publications highlighted the procuration of women's rights, that is, the right to vote, to own property, to child custody and work. In 1847 and 1850 there was the passing of the Factory Acts where women and children were restricted to ten and a half hours a day. In Victorian literature, women were often portrayed in ways that reflected societal expectations of the time, including domesticity, morality, and submissiveness. However, some authors also challenged these norms by creating strong, independent female characters and critiquing the patriarchal structures of society. Notable examples of women writers include Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Christina Rossetti, George Eliot, and Charlotte Bronte.

The Victorian era, named after Queen Victoria who reigned from 1837 to 1901, was a period marked by significant social, political, and cultural transformation in Britain. It was also a time when rigid gender roles were firmly entrenched in society. Women during this period were largely defined by their domestic roles and subjected to a patriarchal framework that governed both public and private life.

Victorian society was deeply influenced by the ideology of "separate spheres," which dictated that men belonged in the public sphere of work and politics, while women were confined to the private sphere of home and family. The ideal Victorian woman was expected to be pious, pure, submissive, and domestic—a model often referred to as the "Angel in the House," a term popularized by Coventry Patmore's poem of the same name.

Women were expected to marry young and devote themselves to the care of their husband and children. Education for girls, especially in the early Victorian era, was limited and focused on preparing them for domestic life rather than intellectual or professional achievements. Women's experiences varied significantly depending on their class. Middle- and upper-class women were largely sheltered and excluded from professional work, though they often managed large households and engaged in charity. Lower-class women, however, had to work in factories, as domestic servants, or in other labor-intensive jobs to support their families. These working women often faced exploitation, long hours, and poor working conditions.

In rural areas, women participated in agricultural work alongside men, but with the rise of industrialization, many migrated to cities where work was available but often grueling and underpaid.

Legally, Victorian women were subject to a host of restrictions. Upon marriage, a woman's legal identity was essentially absorbed by her husband under the doctrine of *coverture*, meaning she could not own property, enter contracts, or earn wages in her own name. It wasn't until the Married Women's Property Acts of 1870 and 1882 that married women gained the right to own and control property.





Women also lacked political rights. They were denied the right to vote, serve in Parliament, or hold public office. However, the suffrage movement gained momentum during the latter part of the Victorian era, laying the groundwork for future reforms.

#### Education and Reform Movements

Despite societal constraints, the Victorian era also saw the beginning of significant changes in women's education and rights. Pioneering women like Mary Wollstonecraft (whose ideas influenced the period), Florence Nightingale, and Emily Davies pushed boundaries. The establishment of women's colleges such as Girton and Newnham at Cambridge was a major milestone.

The burgeoning feminist movement challenged traditional gender roles and campaigned for legal and educational reforms. Reformers also fought against child marriage, prostitution, and the lack of employment opportunities for women.

#### Cultural Representations:

Victorian literature often reflected and reinforced gender norms. Authors like Charles Dickens and Thomas Hardy depicted the plight of fallen women and the consequences of defying societal norms. However, women writers such as the Brontë sisters, Elizabeth Gaskell, and George Eliot provided powerful counter-narratives, exploring themes of female independence, intellect, and emotional complexity.

#### Conclusion:

Women in Victorian times lived under a strict code of conduct that limited their freedoms and opportunities. Yet, within these confines, they found ways to challenge and reshape their roles. The latter part of the 19th century witnessed the seeds of the women's rights movement, which would blossom in the 20th century into a broader push for gender equality. The resilience and contributions of Victorian women remain a vital chapter in the ongoing history of women's empowerment. They explored themes of love, social justice, and the complexities of human nature.

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