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Gender and Sexuality in Victorian Literature: A Study of Charlotte Brontë's *The Professor*

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Abstract

Literary history owes a great deal to the Victorian era. Many issues addressed in Victorian literature, such as women's rights, gender roles, and power dynamics, continue to be relevant in contemporary society. Drawing parallels between Victorian perspectives and present-day discussions allows for a nuanced understanding of how societal expectations have evolved or persisted. Studying Victorian literature offers opportunities for literary analysis and applying critical theories to understand how authors engaged with and challenged societal norms. This enhances our appreciation of the literary canon while providing a foundation for applying similar critical approaches to contemporary literature. An examination of Victorian era address and reflect societal expectations around gender roles, power dynamics and study of sexual repression of Victorian literature and study of power of self and society of Victorian literature.

Keywords: Gender, Sexuality, Victorian, sexual repression, Literary history

1. Introduction

Education is a significant aspect of social life where individual identities and social disparities are formed and perpetuated via institutions, curriculum, and interpersonal interactions. The main emphasis of this course is on mandatory education, including elementary and secondary schools, as well as the creation and perpetuation of gendered and sexual identities and disparities.

The first segment of the course acquaints students with fundamental ideas and discussions in the realm of gender and education, including theories on gender socialization, disciplinary authority, docile bodies, class habitus, and cultural capital. In the second half of the course, we will explore the distinct methods and patterns through which gendered and sexual identities and inequities are created and sustained in modern neoliberal education systems.

This will be accomplished by examining qualitative research studies conducted in schools. We will examine the composition of femininities and masculinities, sexual

orientations, and explore the field of sex education and the personal perspectives of instructors. The subjectivities and inequalities related to race/ethnicity and social class are inherently connected to gender and sexuality.

As a result, in addition to dedicating two courses explicitly to these aspects, they will also be integrated throughout the rest of the reading material and discussions in an intersectional manner. You will be prompted to place readings in context and engage in critical reflection on your own educational experiences as well as your regional/national institutional educational environment in connection to the presented concerns.

2. Gender and Sexuality: The Professor in Victorian Literature

Victorian literature often encountered limitations in its examination of gender and sexuality due to the dominant moral and cultural standards of that age. An exemplary piece in this framework is Charlotte Brontë's "The

Professor." Posthumously published and predating her more renowned works like as "Jane Eyre" and "Villette," "The Professor" provides a unique perspective to analyze Victorian perspectives on gender roles and the limitations imposed on people by society norms.

"The Professor" takes place during the 19th century, a time known for strict gender conventions and expectations. The story follows William Crimsworth, an Englishman who moves to Belgium to seek freedom and a career. The story seamlessly integrates its examination of gender and sexuality with Crimsworth's encounters in a strange country, as he confronts the difficulties and confronts his own changing understanding of himself.

The figure of Frances Henri, a Swiss schoolmistress whom Crimsworth meets in Brussels, plays a pivotal role in the novel's exploration of gender relations. Frances deviates from the typical societal expectations placed on women at that era; she displays autonomy, intellect, and a resolute personality that undermines conventional ideas of femininity. The exchanges between Crimsworth and Frances provide as a foundation for Brontë to explore the intricacies of gender roles and the influence of social expectations on personal autonomy.

The book also delves into the realm of the professional world as a space where gender relations are negotiated. As Crimsworth establishes himself as an educator in Belgium, the difficulties he encounters and the exchanges with his female colleagues provide valuable observations on the constraints imposed on women in the fields of education and work. The inclusion of female characters like Mademoiselle Reuter and Zoraïde Reuter enhances the novel's examination of gender, emphasizing how women managed cultural norms while pursuing their professional aspirations.

Brontë's portrayal of gender in "The Professor" also encompasses the domain of matrimony and amorous connections. The narrative presents a contrast between the practical and emotionally distant marriage suggested by Crimsworth's brother and the more intense and unusual one he has with Frances. Brontë criticizes cultural norms around marriage by examining these partnerships, emphasizing the conflict between obligations and individual satisfaction.

The issue of sexuality in "The Professor" is intricately intertwined with the wider examination of gender roles. The story explores the suppression and social prohibition around the manifestation of sexual desires inside Victorian society. Crimsworth's internal conflicts over his desires and cultural norms lead to a detailed depiction of the challenges people had while trying to navigate the limits of permissible conduct.

The book is set in Brussels, a place with distinct cultural characteristics, which enables Brontë to examine the impact of various civilizations on the development and enforcement of gender conventions. An analysis of the contrasting English and Belgian perspectives on women and their societal responsibilities serves as a framework for comprehending the difficulties encountered by people such as Crimsworth and Frances as they traverse the complexities of their national identity and gender.

3. Power of Self and Society of Victorian Literature

Victorian literature, characterized by complicated tales, explores the power dynamics at play in the 19th-century

society, including both individual and social levels. The examination of power, with its many aspects, acts as a tool that Victorian writers use to negotiate the intricacies of identity, control, and the social systems that influence personal fates. Analyzing this motif in many Victorian literary pieces offers understanding of the intricate mechanisms through which power functions, both internally and externally, in a society defined by inflexible standards and changing dynamics.

A key principle in Victorian literature is the conflict between the autonomy of the individual and the limitations imposed by society norms. Writers throughout that era struggled with the consequences of a rapidly evolving society, influenced by industrialization, urbanization, and changes in political and cultural frameworks. The person, often portrayed as a main character negotiating the difficulties of a changing society, emerged as a central focus for the examination of power relations.

Charles Dickens' "Great Expectations" portrays the protagonist, Pip, as a representation of the conflict between individual identity and society norms. Pip's transformation from a destitute orphan to a refined gentleman in Victorian England encapsulates the conflict between his own ambitions and the external influences that attempt to shape his character. The story delves into the profound influence of society norms and the inner struggles that emerge when people navigate their own aspirations in light of the expectations imposed by their social environment.

In Charlotte Brontë's "Jane Eyre," the main heroine, Jane Eyre, symbolizes persistence in the face of social limitations. Jane's quest for self-identity and independence is intricately intertwined with the examination of power relations throughout her journey. The novel's examination of gender standards and class inequalities mirrors the social power hierarchies that shaped the lives of individuals in Victorian England.

4. Great Expectations: A Reflection of Victorian Social Class

The name "Victorian" pertains to the period of Queen Victoria's rule over England from 1837 to 1901, which was succeeded by her oldest son, Edward VII. The Victorian Age, which was defined by a society structured according to social classes, was a period marked by significant change. Within this context, there are three distinct social classes: the Upper Class, the Middle Class, and the Working Class. Each class has its own unique set of qualities that dictate their behaviour within society. The Industrial Revolution played a significant role in driving political and economic transformations during this era. As a result of these changes, impoverished individuals, including men, women, and children, joined the labour force to meet their basic needs by undertaking menial jobs and enduring harsh living conditions. Charles Dickens' Great Expectations is a masterful portrayal of persons from different socioeconomic backgrounds in Victorian society. Dickens portrayed Pip, the central character and protagonist of the book, as a depiction of the lower class who aspires to attain wealth akin to the affluent characters in the story, particularly Miss Havisham and Estella. The work centres on the protagonist, Pip, and his evolving aspirations, ultimately leading him to want a life of gentility. The character of Pip clearly portrays

the perception of a "gentleman" during the Victorian Age. *Great Expectations* depicts the life of Pip, spanning from his early years until his maturity. *Great Expectations* is a bildungsroman that portrays the maturation of a singular character, Philip Pirrip, who is more often referred to as Pip. Pip has paramount significance in *Great Expectations* since he serves as the protagonist and narrator, with his actions forming the crux of the primary storyline of the work. The portrayal of social class in Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations* is of utmost significance in illustrating its impact on society. Social class is not indicative of an individual's character, but rather defined by the treatment they get and their level of education within society. The characters in *Great Expectations* are subjected to varying treatment based on their social status, highlighting the prevalent prejudice of the period when affluent individuals would oppress others who were less privileged. Charles Dickens wrote this novel with the primary intention of exposing the systemic injustice inflicted upon the lower class individuals in Victorian England. The poor faced immense challenges in their pursuit of a peaceful life, as the upper class oppressed them and hindered their upward social mobility. The work explores several issues, including societal dynamics, pride and vengeance, justice, and compassion. Charles Dickens examines these subjects by means of the protagonist Pip.

4.1 Models of Class Structure

Charles Dickens illustrates the many social classes prevalent throughout the Victorian Era by portraying Pip's character in *Great Expectations*. Pip has challenges in classifying himself and others because of the social transformations that took place throughout the Victorian Era. He tries to establish his own set of principles to discover his identity and position himself within society by controlling his destiny. This novel also addresses societal issues such as inequality, precision, and social categorization, which were prevalent in a hierarchical classification system. It introduces a new model of social classification that is based on self-determination and the ability to achieve status through actions rather than by birth. The kid, who has lost both of his parents and brothers and buried them in the marsh cemetery, is subjected to mistreatment by his older sister, who abuses him in a manner reminiscent of the character Cinderella. He comes with several adversaries - Magwitch, Orlick, Miss Havisham, Jaggers, and an unidentified guy with a closed eye and a file - and struggles to discern which ones pose a danger and which ones are kind towards him. His purity is corrupted by wealth and the allure of its potential. He disregards the kind entities, Joe the blacksmith and Biddy the unassuming school teacher, who provide him protection. Instead, he is enticed by Estella, a woman who is beautiful but without compassion. Claire Tomalin's analysis of the characters in *Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens provides a comprehensive understanding of their personalities and social status throughout the Victorian period. The tale is set in 19th century England and revolves on a young orphan's quest to secure a more favorable position in society. Pip's pivotal moment occurs when he first visits Satis House and encounters Miss Havisham and her adoptive daughter, Estella. These two personalities were pivotal in Pip's life

since they profoundly influenced and impacted his existence in the book. Following a visit to Miss Havisham and Estella, Pip becomes enamored with their opulence and Estella's allure. Pip develops romantic feelings for Estella, but she remains indifferent to his devotion, as she has been instructed by Miss Havisham to torment others with her beauty. Pip has a sense of guilt over his social status after being rejected by Estella, and he aspires to elevate himself to the status of a gentleman in order to regain her affection. As Pip examines the many socioeconomic strata inside society, he seeks to establish connections with individuals from all walks of life. Pip's perplexity over social hierarchy and categorization opens up the potential for his narrative to revolve on the process of exploring

4.2 Social Class

In the 19th century, Britain saw the emergence of new social and urban structures, with social class playing a significant part in the storyline of *Great Expectations*. During the industrial revolution, Britain saw significant industrial and economic expansion, which led to a mass migration of rural populations to urban areas, abandoning their agricultural occupations. In the opening of the story, we encounter a family of lower socioeconomic status residing in a rural community. Mr. Joe, a blacksmith, and his wife, a homemaker of lesser social status. She formerly performed domestic tasks and often voiced grievances about her apron. Due to her diligent efforts, she experienced feelings of disappointment and surpassed Pip. In the story, we see another family consisting of affluent and well-dressed ladies such as Miss Havisham and Estella. These are the two distinct types of families that indicate the presence of social classes in society. The Gargery family, on one hand, is impoverished, lacking in education, and living in a rural area. Conversely, Miss Havisham resides in a grand residence known as Satis House. The Pockets' residence is replete with domestic staff. Estella is a proficient dancer and has had her education in a foreign country. In addition, the other ladies in Pip's pretentious existence in London embody the archetypal upper-class Victorian women. After seeing the contrasting lifestyles throughout his early years, Pip aspires to get to the higher social class.

The protagonist aspires to attain the status of a refined and respectable individual, embodying the societal ideals, with the aim of winning the affections of Estella and securing a privileged living in the highest echelons of society. Pip, the protagonist of the story, is captivated by the look and amenities of wealthy people, particularly Miss Havisham and Estella. He aspires to elevate himself from his impoverished upbringing and attain wealth, aspiring to become a gentleman like those he admires. Pip's first observations of London evoke the Industrial Revolution and its consequential impacts. Upon Pip's arrival in London, he is astounded by the overwhelming influx of immigrants seeking employment and the noxious odor emanating from the factories. "The vastness of London frightened me." I had some reservations over its aesthetic, contorted, constricted, and unclean nature". Upon relocating to London, Pip becomes immersed in the sophisticated metropolitan lifestyle and acquires extravagant habits such as employing a personal servant and purchasing costly attire. Consequently, he incurs significant debts. This exemplifies

the goals of the general populace, devoid of critical thought, since they are inclined to emulate affluent individuals.

4.3 Search for Self-Identity

Great Expectations portrays the quest of everyone to discover their own sense of identity. Pip, the protagonist of the work, provides readers with insights into his quest for self-identity within society. In the work, it is evident that Pip often has a sense of bewilderment over his existence and consistently strives to discover his true sense of self. He constantly contemplates his origins and future trajectory due to the unfortunate circumstances of losing his parents at a tender age, resulting in his sister and brother-in-law, Joe Gargery, assuming responsibility for his upbringing. The work chronicles Pip's journey from infancy to maturity, as he recounts his own experiences and explores the backdrop of Victorian social class in his quest for sense of self. Pip strives to become a determined person after being enraged by the actions of Victorian society throughout his existence. Actually, he had planned to wed Estella, a rich young lady, and so he thought about changing his social status and aiming for the upper crust. The central idea makes a compelling case: no matter the circumstances, a person's true identity remains unaltered, concealed under the veneer of success, fame, and fortune. Regrettably, Pip initially fails to comprehend this fact: he had always endeavoured to alter his own identity ever since his first chilly encounter with Miss Havisham, particularly with Estella, to conform to a seen ideal that he believed they desired.

Pip first tries to establish his sense of self within society, but eventually gets inundated and has a profound sense of guilt. He is a naive youngster who deeply empathizes with the tragic circumstances of other people. Estella plays a significant part in Pip's life, leading to the development of his current personality. Pip adores Estella without considering the repercussions. Pip is now experiencing embarrassment over his own identity and is compelling himself to make alterations to gain Estella's affection. Pip used Estella to establish his own sense of self and to signify his moral growth. During his journey of self-discovery, Pip encounters numerous challenges, such as the influence of Miss Havisham, a fictional figure from the book. Havisham, Miss manipulates Estella to teach Pip a lesson about his true benefactor. However, Pip, driven solely by his desire to win Estella's love, disregards all consequences. As a result, he seeks to change his clothing and appearance, feeling ashamed of his social class. When Pip develops an admiration for Magwitch and witnesses Estella choosing Drummle over him, he gradually comes to the realization that a person's social status is not of great value. He also realizes that his conduct as a gentleman has caused harm to those who cared in his place. The moral leanings of Victorian society's residents were depicted in Great Expectations by Charles Dickens. The values that the Victorians lived by were virtue, honesty, chastity, cleanliness, and power, typically regarded with great attention. Pip had great enthusiasm in this state and underwent many transformations while grappling with a range of moral dilemmas. Pip, in some manner, loses sight of the principles he was instilled with, since Miss Havisham and Estella have influenced him with a lavish lifestyle. Despite encountering such circumstances, Pip remains optimistic and has high

aspirations for his future. He consistently endeavours to transform himself, leading to his ongoing quest for self-identity.

5. Conclusion

The issue of sexual restraint in Victorian literature provides a complex examination of cultural conventions, gender expectations, and social hierarchies. Authors engaged in the exploration of intricate human needs amid a society that aimed to stifle and regulate these emotions, using allegory, symbolism, and social criticism. The interaction between societal expectations and personal impulses, together with the convergence of gender and class dynamics, contributed to the intricate examination of sexual suppression in Victorian literature.

In essence, the impact of the Victorian age goes beyond its inflexible gender norms and hierarchical power structures. This chapter contributes significantly to the ongoing narrative of progress towards greater gender equality. The challenges and actions of this era laid the foundation for the continuous development of society norms, fostering the ongoing endeavour towards a fairer and more comprehensive future.

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