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| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Gender and Power in Victorian Literature: A Comparative Analyses

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| ABSTRACT

Strict class, gender, and moral dictates defined the social structure of the (1837-1901) Victorian era. In this framework, gender roles, especially for women, were limiting and complicated. By comparing four of the major novels of the period, Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre, George Eliot's Middlemarch, Thomas Hardy's Tess of the d'Urbervilles, and Charles Dickens's Great Expectations, it examines representations of gender and power in Victorian literature. Through the focus on the patriarchal texts of the oppressed fighting against the status quo, this research explores how writers of the time reflected societal issues or challenged them outright, disrupting the same in subtle and overt forms and struggles. At the heart of this is the idea of the "New Woman," a disruption of tradition in the form of an intellectual and socially rebellious figure of the time who does not conform to gender roles. Using a feminist, poststructuralist , and queer lens, this study interrogates the representation and resistance of dominant gender roles and power structures. Examining key female and male characters from Jane Eyre and Dorothea Brooke to Tess Durbeyfield and Pip, the article identifies tropes of gendered independence, marriage, intellectual agency, and masculinity. The results, aside from being interesting at first sight, reveal the complicated role of Victorian literature in both upholding and subverting the values of the period, especially when it comes to women and the discourse surrounding autonomy and agency. In conclusion, this article shows that the cross-section between gender and power played out in Victorian fiction is equally reflective of the time shortly before their publication whilst remaining relevant critiques in ongoing conversations and debates about gender equality and autonomy today.

| KEYWORDS

Victorian literature, Gender roles, New Woman, Poststructuralism, Gender autonomy, Literary analysis, Gender and power, Jane Eyre, Victorian social norms

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

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1. Introduction

The Victorian pudency (1837–1901) in England presented the latest changes in political, cultural, and social existence. With Britain emerging as the strongest empire in the world, people within it were considerably modeled by the set structures of society, which were greatly defined by class, gender, and morality. The industrialization, expansion of the British Empire, and the bourgeoisie class characterized this era, all of which greatly impacted the processes of the construction of sex roles and power relations in society (Mussman et al., 2023). On the one hand, industrialization had led to new avenues of social mobility, but for women, it had also reinforced the rigidity of the heteronormative norms.

The conflict between societal norms and individual inclinations was the foremost literary theme. Gender roles were not absolute for Victorian writers; they were complicated and performed, showing that individuals managed their position in society, fighting against and embracing its limitations(Williams, 2023). Public and private spheres and the gendering of these spheres are (though not limited to) especially central to the exploration of power and gender in the novels of this period.

This paper attempts to interrogate the notion of gender and power dynamics depicted in Victorian literature by comparing four seminal texts, namely, Jane Eyre (Charlotte Bronte), Middlemarch (George Eliot), Tess of the d'Urbervilles (Thomas Hardy) and Great Expectation (Charles Dickens). Each of these novels lends its own unique voice and style to shed light on the gendered experiences of the Victorian period(Zigarovich, 2024). Though the sweeping social structures tended to limit women, these are also moral critiques of these structures themselves. The novels highlight the changing ideas around women's roles within society, and in particular, the emergence of the "New Woman," that is, the rise of a rebellious, intellectual, and independent female at this time.

This paper hopes to unpack how the Victorian authors of the four novels reflected, questioned, and, on occasion, defied contemporary gender roles(Kaur & others, 2024). We will link gender and power to the themes of autonomy, social expectation, and resistance by closely analyzing key female and male characters such as Jane Eyre, Dorothea Brooke, Tess Durbeyfield, and Pip within a Victorian context. This paper argues that the gender and power representations in these texts not only mirror their respective social structures in real life but also critique their respective social structures for limiting the freedom and agency of individuals.

The article will borrow from feminist, poststructuralist, and queer theory to trace the nuances of sexualized power(Lucas & Ordeniza, 2023). For feminists writing about Victorian society, the focus is (inevitably) on the systemic oppression of women, but not all poststructuralist approaches recognize the essentialization of gender roles (which they tend to see as a biopolitical category of analysis) as a feminist perspective Queer theory, in bringing its tools, also helps in this study for studying how the texts created fragility or challenge so-called conventions attached to masculinity and femininity, exposing the performative nature of gender and the inadequacy of traditional gender binaries.

This study will compare both literatures to one another in terms of how Victorian literature critiques gender, power, and societal expectations. (Dolin, 2016). By examining four novels, we hope to expose not only the views on gender roles in Victorian society but also how the texts embellish, challenge, or comply with these roles. In the end, this paper aims to show that the struggles of Victorian characters, especially women against patriarchal power, are not only symptomatic of their time but also relatable to our current and ongoing struggles with gender, equality, and autonomy.

While there are four texts that this study uses, the scope is, of course, limited to the study of gender and power within those texts; however, they will be of great relevance. To keep the analysis focused, various other influential Victorian novels and characters are left out, e.g., Elizabeth Barrett Browning or the Brontë sisters; nevertheless, they are of paramount importance (Rasulovna, 2022). Finally, the theoretical frameworks of feminist, poststructuralist, and queer theory are useful in this analysis but are only employed as lenses through which to examine particular gendered interactions in the novels rather than as frameworks to be fully applied.

2. Literature Review

Of the literary themes of Victorian writing, none has proved a more central concern of literary criticism, particularly from feminist, poststructuralist, and queer theoretical perspectives, than the interrelation of gender and power. The Victorian era (1837–1901) was an era of enormous societal transformation; industrial capitalism was taking root, the British Empire was spreading, and the divisions of class, gender, and morals were becoming more entrenched(Dittmer, 2022). It is in this context that gender roles were produced and upheld through a multitude of social, cultural, and literary practices and discourses. Gender and the patriarchal reality of Victorian society, particularly as it pertains to female characters, continue to illustrate dynamics between outward behavior,

surrounding societal attitudes, and inner desires(Ferris, 2019). At the same time, scholars have pointed out how many Victorian authors employed their works to critique and subvert dominant gender prescriptions, offering more nuanced representations of male and female characters who struggled against or sought to escape the oppressive structures of the age.

For decades, feminist literary criticism has been foundational for gender and power studies in Victorian literature. Gender and especially the social and systemic limitations of women, particularly as represented in the Victorian home, sits at the core of many feminist readings of Victorian literature(DURSUN, 2022). Feministic researchers have especially been interested in the representation of repression, socialization, and fighting against the patriarchal power of women in literature. The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination (1979) by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar is one of the canonical texts in this area, tracing the suppression of female agency in 19th-century narratives(Ehnenn, 2017). Women characters in Victorian novels are frequently depicted as either domestic creatures penned in place or subjected to punishment for their transgressions toward patriarchal social systems. An influential feminist perspective emerging from their work is the notion of the "madwoman," the belief that when a female is repressed, she "becomes mad" if she cannot conform to the roles prescribed to her, which has greatly informed feminist readings of works like Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre.

Take Jane Eyre, where Bertha Mason, Rochester's first wife, is often read as the image of the repressed female body and mind literally imprisoned in the attic; she becomes the expression of sexual and then emotional excess(Jumana, 2019). As such, Bertha serves both as an example of feminine madness and a warning of the destructive effects of limiting a woman's autonomy, both of these notions being attributable to her background and proving the case that Bertha's madness is a direct result of her entrapment as well as suppression of desire. According to Gilbert and Gubar, Jane ultimately conquers Bertha, representing her capacity to establish independence and rise above the limits imposed by society.

Less delicately, feminist critics have mined the ways female characters claim agency in other Victorian novels(Stark, 2024). Take George Eliot's Dorothea Brooke in Middlemarch, whose aspirations organization is again foiled by her gender and her class. She marries the much older Casaubon, a scholar whose marriage stifles her intellect and soul, a post Victorian start to a critique of the lack of female choice, be it intellectual or emotional. While Dorothea's final marriage to Will Ladislaw suggests a limitation break, the novel nevertheless indicts the enshrined restrictions on women's ability for intellectual and emotional independence.

Another prominent focus of feminist criticism has been the intersection of gender, class, and sexuality in Victorian literature(Hatter & Ifill, 2016). The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer (1984) by Mary Poovey addresses Victorian discourse that simultaneously constructed gender as not only socially but also socially linked to class. Women also fell into groups defined by a class much more explicit than gender, and much of the literature from this time reinforces the notion that the value of a woman was determined through her family name or her marriage (Dowling, 2017)e. The nature of the constraints is especially recognizable from the works of Thomas Hardy and George Eliot.

The character of Tess in Tess of the d'Urbervilles is the excuse for Hardy to be brutally critical of the sexual double standard controlling women's sexuality in the Victorian Age. Socially deteriorated woman: Tess Durbeyfield, also with her lower social status, must face the tragic consequences of her sexual misdeeds, especially toward the other main character, the man evil Alec d'Urberville, who then amply manages to get away from social punishment(D'Cruze, 2024). But Tess, of course, is a female character, and it is the eventual downfall of a female character that reflects so accurately the greater dealing out of the harsh judgement that a man in her position would get over the woman involved. Tess, as the victim, makes Hardy the feminist (Pajnik et al., 2016). Gilead, proved by the treatment of Tess, reveals the correlation between gender, class, and morality in the period where the correlation manifests into a strange dance as women were often seen at a crossroads between gender and class, tethered to their social expectations and definitions of morality. As Elaine Showalter points out, Hardy shows the

"hypocrisy of the sexual double standard" in his portrayal of Tess, especially in the different futures that await Tess and Alec.

In Middlemarch, Dorothea is reduced to performative duties because her intellectual aspirations are childish and not valued by society, mirroring the class-based restrictions on women's freedom. She shatters the ideals of intellectual and emotional satisfaction defined above as her eventual marriage to Casaubon, who is both the archetype of male intellectual superiority and representational of the bourgeois class, comes at the expense of her soul, at the sacrifice of all that is her ideal self. In short, Poovey shows us that the spoken word the density of women's voices, both literary and sexual, was difficult to achieve in Victorian literature because of the rise of the modern family as the unit of social mobility coupled with the ideology of love as the primary organizing principle of enactments of social mobility meant that women had to be sidelined; after all, no one would want to hear their voices, and they never seem to happen in the same social context.

Though a great deal of scholarship on Victorian gender has centered on women, queer theory has helped with framing historical constructions of masculinity. Judith Butler, for example, has provided a framework through which we may analyze the ways in which Victorian texts trouble the simplistic divide of oppositional binarism between masculinity/femininity (Morse & Danahay, 2017). Gender is not an essence nor a set of characteristics but a construct performed based on repeated behaviors. This idea of performativity comes from Butler. When looking at masculinity in Victorian literature specifically, this theory has been most commonly used in a novel like Great Expectations by Charles Dickens.

Pip, as a character, provides fertile ground for examining masculinity in Great Expectations. Pip is thus a tortured character, obsessively chasing through the length of the novel after his ideal of beauty, the coldly beautiful Estella, who stands on the pedestal of her class, the class to which Pip aspires and which he associates with womanhood. Above all, however, it is a memoir of wealth: of the construction of a masculine identity based on social mobility, decency, and polish (Rezeanu, 2015). But Pip's ultimate discovery that these beliefs are empty and do not make him happy undermines the nature of Victorian masculinity with an existential slant as basing masculinity on outside appearances is, by its very nature, a complete failure of masculinity.

Through the character of Magwitch and in addition to the conversation about class, the novel also makes a more nuanced commentary on masculinity, depicting an alternative form of masculinity that is marginalized by Victorian society in the figure of this convicted (Moine, 2016). Although Magwitch is in many ways the oppressed one in this relationship, he assumes the dominant position; he is the method through which Pip finds his way to empowerment. This subversion of social expectations highlights Dickens' critique of the Victorian concept of masculinity, that power is not only situated in wealth and class but also in emotional connection and actualization.

Together with poststructuralist approaches to power, especially those of Michel Foucault, these postmodernist frameworks have contributed significantly to the formulation of gender theories in Victorian literature. The Foucault notion of power as something diffuse, relational & enacted through institutions & individuals gives a useful perspective to see how gender roles are constructed & maintained in 19th-century Britain (Dolin, 2016). Foucault's work on the panopticon, or on the idea that individuals internalize surveillance and control, can be compared to how Victorian characters internalize gendered expectations and play their role in a form of power.

Power goes beyond the outer imposition of external forces, as the characters in Jane Eyre and Tess of the d'Urbervilles also internalize power over themselves. The external conflict Between Jane and Mr. Rochester represents more than just opposition to authority; it also serves as an acknowledgment that Jane has her own individualistic subjectivity, and she is the one defining it instead of the oppressive aspects of society that constrain it. In a similar manner, Tess ends up suffering a tragic death because her belief in what society has deemed right or wrong about her sexuality, class, and other facets of identity has been internalized as a form of power in the story as well.

This approach enables a more nuanced examination of the power regimes between male and female characters within the context of Victorian novels through the lens of Foucault's relational concept of power(Boucher, 2015). In a case like Middlemarch, the relationship between Dorothea and Casaubon can be viewed as a case study of the larger patriarchal structures that oppress women. Casaubon holds intellectual power and dictates Dorothea's worth; this is the patriarchal power structure that contextualizes their relationship and allows him to impose boundaries upon it (Ofek, 2016). The eventual rebellion that Dorothea expresses against this system, while severely constrained by external factors, represents a drive, however weak and under-defined, to struggle against the oppressive power relations that dictate her role in life.

Subversion of gender roles is a major theme in Victorian literature, as characters strive to overcome the roles that their society has set before them. Female and male characters alike resist the templates into which novels such as Jane Eyre, Tess of the d'Urbervilles, and Great Expectations attempt to force them(Danahay, 2016). For instance, what we see in the case of Jane Eyre, Jane refuses Rochester's first proposal and then leaves him on finding out about his covert marriage to Bertha Mason- refusing to submit to the position of the dutiful wife despite the endearment of such a position. Jane does not declare herself as free nor act freely in the act of rebellion for the sake of rebellion, but as a moral-acting woman who refuses moral subjugation.

Likewise, Tess for refusing to participate in the sexual double standard and refusing to be "the fallen woman" who simply bows her head in silent acceptance of the charge and quietly walks the lines of social judgement: this also is a form of subversion. Despite her ultimate downfall, Tess's moral steadfastness and her eventual repudiation of Alec d'Urberville's advances provide a scathing commentary on the expectations of an insatiable society that limits her.

Pip's quest for self-exploration in Great Expectations ultimately leads him to renounce materialism and social class in exchange for emotional and domestic satisfaction, and in doing so, he criticizes the gender-specific social and cultural standards that inform masculinity. His eventual Epiphany that masculinity is not determined simply by money or elitism subverts the patriarchal regimes of power regulated by Victorian society.

The Victorian era provides a lush ground to examine the complicated interrelationships of gender, power, and the southward pull of cultural expectations. Working from feminist, queer, and poststructuralist perspectives, critics have shown that Victorian literature incites and subverts the gendered power structure it represents(Akter, 2020). Feminist criticism has informed readings of Jane Eyre, Middlemarch, Tess of the d'Urbervilles, and Great Expectations, revealing the variety of strategies of characters as they strive to negotiate, resist, or conform to social demands of gender (TLN, Feminist criticism). These novels savour the reality of all facets of gender and power of that period as if this fictional historicity has some effect on the modern day of gender or the lack of autonomy and equality cadence.

3. Methodology

Using a qualitative, comparative literary analysis of the intersections of gender and power in four major Victorian novels (Jane Eyre [Charlotte Brontë], Middlemarch [George Eliot], Tess of the d'Urbervilles [Thomas Hardy], and Great Expectations [Charles Dickens]). Through close readings of these texts, this research explores the representation, subversion, and critique of gender roles and hierarchies in the context of Victorian social conditions (Akter, 2020). This approach utilizes close reading along with feminist, poststructuralist, and queer theory to evaluate the complexities of power tied to gender.

3.1 Textual Selection

These four novels were chosen to cover a wide breadth of the Victorian period in order to show varying perspectives about the role of gender in power. They were selected for their complex characterizations as well as their understanding of the gendered nature of class, sexuality, and social mobility(Rasulovna, 2022). The two texts offer different gendered experiences:

- While covering class and gender, Jane Eyre touches on individual self-direction.
- In Middlemarch, criticism is placed on the constraints that are set upon women in being able to seek true intellectual and emotional fulfillment.
- In Tess of the d'Urbervilles, we have a strong critique of the sexual double standard and the burdens that a woman carries through her perceived moral failings.
- Great Expectations meditates on masculinity, identity, and social capital.

As important works of Victorian literature, these novels are also crucial windows into the centering and de-centering of gender roles in relation to the culture of nineteenth-century England.

- Feminist Theory: Employing feminist literary criticism, particularly the research of Sandra Gilbert, Susan Gubar, and Mary Poovey, helps to aid an understanding of the ways in which women are portrayed with their experiences or struggles against gendered power dynamics (Kaur & others, 2024). The focus here is on female independence, intellectual freedom, marriage, and sexual liberation. Utilizing feminist lenses, this research evaluates the ways in which these female figures, Jane Eyre, Dorothea Brooke, Tess Durbeyfield, and Estella, get entangled in the pre-existing societal web that enslaves their psyche from beyond the dawn of their birth.
- Foucault's theories: From Michel Foucault's theories of power and identity, poststructuralism is then used to understand gender as a socially constructed, fluid category. Poststructuralism assumes that gender is something that people do(Ofek, 2016). This approach will be used to examine the manner in which individual acts, relationships, and institutional arrangements are used for the doing of gender (The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture). The mechanics of power and how it works, through men and women alike, will also be scrutinized.
- Queer theory, especially its expression through Judith Butler, pushes against the binary of gender and interrogates the socially constructed nature of gendered roles and enactments. This analysis takes centered and feminist perspectives with subsequent discussion focusing on the way in which the novels deconstruct functional and reductive normative notions of masculinity and femininity, identify opportunities in which characters recreate moments of transgression and moments of irresolution and the gratification of gender indeterminacy (Moine, 2016). And how Pip in Great Expectations wrestles with identities and aspirational desires that society would not fully support as masculine.

3.2 Method of Analysis

A detailed and methodical analysis technique to extract critical passages, motifs, and images to superficialize assertions of both masculinity and femininity constitutes the primary method of analysis. The process is explained in the following steps:

1) Close Reading of the Texts/The Novels: This assignment will break down each novel through analysis and close reading to highlight how gender roles and power structures are portrayed within each novel with the protagonists, characters, and the choices the characters make. In particular in regards to:
    - The emergence of significant female protagonists (Jane Eyre, Dorothea Brooke, Tess Durbeyfield, and Estella) and especially their relation to roles assumed by male characters, with a focus on how these social dynamics reflect or challenge gender norms.
    - The nature of masculinity and the expectations placed upon male characters (e.g., Mr. Rochester, Casaubon, Alec d'Urberville, and Pip) and how these male characters both do and do not embody Victorian ideals concerning masculinity.

2) Comparative Approach: A comparative analysis will find a way to compare gender and power representation in the four texts. The paper will compare and contrast the way gender is treated in each novel to find trends and specificities in different beings' experiences of gender (Ofek, 2016). The contrast between the assertion of Jane Eyre's autonomy and the victimization of Tess, the depiction of masculinity as Pip develops into a gentleman

compared to Alec d'Urberville's exploitative action, may yield a more complex understanding of the interaction of gender and power across different social contexts.

3) Thematic centers: The analysis will be based on the number of thematic centers:

- Feminine Agency: The extent to which women in a story exercise or lose agency as a result of their gender. Whether battling oppressive forces or the characters dealing with wistful longing, this will gods were independence or, ideally, some personal space.
- Marriage and sexuality: in what ways does marriage represent a form of power and constraint, and how is sexuality represented, especially with regard to sexual double standards regulating female bodies and behavior?
- Control Over Mind and Heart: Women want to think and feel, and the portrayal of how these attributes are inhibited or embraced by the world around them. A key example of this theme is the thwarted potential of Dorothea in Middlemarch.
- Synthesis: After analyzing each text, the study will then synthesize the results to present broader patterns and trends in regard to gender representation and power structure dynamics in Victorian literature. Through this, the synthesis will unpack the ways in which these works maintain, subvert, and/or challenge Victorian gender norms and hegemonic structures.

Although these novels do give a lot of insight into gender relations, this is going to be a narrower study. To maintain a focused comparative overview, other representative Victorian works, e.g., the poetry of Elizabeth Barrett Browning or the various mid-Victorian novels by the Brontë sisters, are not included. Importantly, although feminist, poststructuralist, and queer theoretical lenses inform the analysis, the study does not aim for an exhaustive imposition of the respective frameworks; they are used as tools to advance understandings of gendered power dynamics between the novels.

4. Findings and Discussion

The novels clock in at the equivalent of a global shipping crate of pages masses of text on the collision of male and female, all the while traversing this meeting ground of gender and power, these multifarious, evasive, torrential overlaps of the inch deep and a mile wide centers of society, culture, and the Victorian center in just four titles: Jane Eyre (Charlotte Brontë), Middlemarch (George Eliot), Tess of the d'Urbervilles (Thomas Hardy), and Great Expectations (Charles Dickens) and with a diversity of syntax and usage of the literary toolbox that one need not even be fuzzy on the concept of home turf, or even anything one shaky step and gallivant walk upwards of ten thousand steps all the while seeing or even observing the examination of form fiction itself and the quicksand beneath it, the history of all literature, in and out of lush fabric stretching to and for the bloody every day to enter beyond, in, and of Victorian feminist discussion peeking around between the folds instead into black holes of such giants buckled in against one another, as if wrapped within human tethered structure their very discussion hanging up in a garbled mess within a multi-storied apartment complex which one dwarf center bound upon the male and female players in pernicious interaction/non-play alike of the gender spectrum a comic book in true story form, a multi-leveled series of endless pages from four novels broken up from the captive themes of conquest, ideals of female meekness and that of subtle paternal hand-holding where one can see its playwright, and for a moment one is free for the purpose of the four, as far as character study and virtue, as far as dogma and shift down on clashes of weight, justice in buckle but never caving, never wilting. Their four novels boast walls alive, holding inter-generational heat beyond the collapse, offering solid walls both dreamy and sponging roots centuries ranging before, and yet deep in blood trailed spaghettis, and fought over within as layered book sheets, forbidding yet holding destiny required believing without much faith woven into the remarks above and their stratosphere of story dragging among themselves and though these sheaves may be dog-eared ahead of time those books wherein within their pages, under vast years, each soul the male and each the female enacting civilization after civilization within the cracks of the breaks and the preternatural depths of solid history get afloat a forehead height being cerebral ages and cultures through spilt pages now interwoven or even those substitutive volumes of them on paper. The different intersections of social structures and individual agency are highlighted through key insights on

the relationships between gender, autonomy, class, and power resulting from this comparative analysis of the novels. The results can be organized into a few central themes reflected across the texts: gendered independence, marriage and sexuality, intellectual agency, masculinity and power, and social defiance.

One of the major themes that arises across all four novels is gendered autonomy. An aspect common to all these pieces, be they books, films, or plays, is the way that the main characters, especially the female leads, have more character than choice; they are creators of their fate but held hostage by their society. However, in many ways, the novels also depict the various ways the protagonists either navigate, challenge, or conform to these limitations.

The struggle for autonomy is especially vital in Jane Eyre, where it is a driving force for the titular character. Jane is introduced as an orphan ostracized from society and later finds herself at the bottom of the social hierarchy as a governess at first; her relationship with Mr. Rochester, already at a considerable social and economic advantage over her, places her in an even greater one. Yet Jane's quest for autonomy ultimately manifests itself in her choice to leave Rochester upon discovering he has a first, living wife. By telling Rochester that she loves him yet will refuse to be with him because of his nature, Jane is doing exactly what the narrative warns against: she is valuing herself more than what love and marriage are offering her on a silver platter. In a way, it is an attack on the dominant Victorian concepts, which limited women to domesticity with little power and no voice.

Lady Audley Victorian society defines rebellion, not social duty, as a necessary step toward autonomy, yet Jane Eyre resists the social and cultural limitations of her context while defending morality instead of social roles to prove that moral integrity, not rebellion, is the key to personal freedom and independence. Jane does not vilify marriage, often a site for female subjugation, but she does not accept it unless on terms that are equal to Rochester, as a man would; this is significant in the sense that Jane refuses to submit to social norms, she establishes herself on her own terms, suggesting that women are fully capable of having moral agency equal to men. In so doing, Brontë delivers covert protest against the notion of womanhood as naturally passive femininity, a feminist correction of the love story. Likewise, Dorothea Brooke attempts to seek intellectual companionship in Middlemarch , but her ambitions are unmated by her sex and her station. Immediately, we see Dorothea as a woman of great intelligence who wants something more from her life than marriage and housewifery. Her marriage to an older scholar, Casaubon, however, also represents the restrictions on women's intellectual agency in the Victorian era. Dorothea is at first subjected by Casaubon in the name of love to his plans, which ultimately consider her a mere tool for help in his (academic) life and not as a person and intellectual in her own rights.

The class hierarchy further limits Dorothea's intellectual freedom. Dorothea, with her respectable, if not slightly lower, social status, is basically boxed in by what society expects of her, especially when it comes to her intellectual and emotional desires. She later marries Will Ladislaw, which is a claim to independence but also, in so many ways, a problematic claim to independence because she ends up marrying a man who values her intellect and sensitivity, but this is not the same thing as true equality of brilliance. However, she also seeks to unshackle herself from the bounds of intellectual confinement of the norms of the day through gender and class, and so her journey is also one of abiding dissatisfaction.

By contrast, when we take a little look at the life of her heroine, Tess, in her novel Tess of the d'Urbervilles, the reader sees the tragedy of a generally powerless person due to her class and gender. Jane and Dorothea insist to varying extents on negotiating their role, whereas Tess cannot escape the straitjacket constructed for her. Alec d'Urberville preys upon his lower-class status, providing an exemplar of how the Victorian social hierarchy coopts women's sexuality. The systemic limitations that nineteenth-century women, particularly those lower on the social ladder, face are illustrated by Tess's eventual doom, as she meets societal degradation for affording herself one sexual freedom.

Tess's rueful fate illustrates how women in Victorian society were rated on their purity, and moral codes limited women by restricting sexual behavior and morality. The hypocrisy of punishing Tess while also granting absolution to Alec, the former male exploitative figure, demonstrates the intrinsic binariness between genders. The fact that

Tess avoids the climax of the book, her own greatest triumph in her own truest tale, is not merely a blow against her personally but rather an indictment of the wider, more powerful societal forces at play that not only decreed women's property of men but thoroughbred whores in commercial sexual morality, where men were free to roam but women never could, and it was all set-in hard stone with the awkward solidity of the moral beliefs of generations past.

Pip struggles to grow beyond the confines of his lower-class expectations in Great Expectations, but his realization of masculinity makes the true accusations against Victorian power structures. Although the novel is concerned with the growth of the male character Pip, his insecurity concerning masculinity exposes the vulnerability of the ideal masculine identity in Victorian culture. Estella, now a diamond of the highest order because she is so beautiful and so above Pip in class, becomes Pip's obsession, and her unattainability disturbs what we think of as pretty standard gender expectations. Under different conditions, perhaps the early Victorian setting of the book itself, Pip's usage of the word 'gentleman' would open up a whole range of meanings about how he might perform masculinity, yet his desire is simultaneously idealized and policed by social conventions.

The generalization from Pip goes over as a condemnation of inflexible masculine identity as intertwined with wealth, status, and power. Pip rejects his original ambition to escape his social class in favor of a more authentic identity, exposing the constraints of masculinity in the Victorian period. The masculinity of the burdensome kind rather than the fearsome; Pip's wrestling with gendered power illuminates how expansive and nuanced gender norms are in relation to the individual experience.

Another common theme in these novels is the effect that marriage and sexuality have on power structures. Marriage comes across as simultaneously a personal relationship and a social institution that orchestrates and codifies gendered power. Both marriage as oppression and marriage as negotiation of power are aspects that the novels present.

Marriage is portrayed as an institution that confines women to inflexible gender roles in Jane Eyre. Bertha Mason, Mr. Rochester's first wife, represents the binding and confining nature of Victorian marriage, which expects women to be submissive, docile, and confined to the bounds of virtue and social propriety. This image of marriage as a sordid entrapment, however, becomes problematic in the face of Jane's eventual marriage to Rochester, which Brontë complicated as personal terms alluded to the prevailing Victorian notions of marriage. Although Jane carries a genuine love toward Rochester, her decision to marry him is also driven by the power structure of their relationship. The marriage represents an egalitarian partnership: after first leaving him, her decision to marry him as an equal marks a shift away from the longstanding notion that marriage is built on submission through dominance or vice versa.

Many scholars acknowledge that marriage is one of the central themes of Middlemarch but approach it as an ambivalent institution with the potential to both empower and constrain women. Dorothea is physically imprisoned in her first marriage to Casaubon, who represents a God-like figure of intellectual and emotional oppression, and then she is freed when she marries Will Ladislaw, a character evoking a more equal union. Even then, though, Eliot's critique is in these very terms: society restricts Dorothea. The expectations of women imposed by Victorian society limit Dorothea still in her role as a wife and mother, and the fraught dynamic between personal longing and obligation remains a theme.

Tess of the D'Urbervilles conveys the tragedy of marriage as an institution and mirrors the imbalance of patriarchal power in the relationships between men and women. The two relationships Tess has with Alec and, later, Angel Clare represent the sexual double standard and the extent to which society controls and polices women's sexuality. Alec sexually assaults Tess in a horrible scene that has two meanings; it depicts the 'twisting of Victorian moral codes' for, although Alec leads her to bed with his pruning purposes – 'Alec has no intentions at all of loving her, and certainly not in the bourgeois Victorian sense. Tess' sexual past is a source of shame when she marries Angel

Clare, showing how the worth of a woman is prized according to their so-called purity. In a Victorian Australia of moral hypocrisy, the novel dwells upon a society that will punish women for committing transgressions that men like Alec are allowed to embark upon, free from the consequences of the law.

Another example is found in Pip and Estella's complex relationship in Great Expectations, which points to nuanced dynamics of marriage and gendered power. However, that desire for Estella embodies an ideal of masculinity that Pip has internalized, so his obsession with Estella further reflects the way in which masculine and feminine expectations structure society. Nonetheless, with regard to gendered expectations, Estella directly shatters the masculine ideal by rejecting Pip both emotionally and socially. The manipulation between the two men reveals the extent to which the societal machinations of social class, gender, and primal impulses deform the human beings behind the roles of Man and Woman, rendering superficial the once-simple exchange of curvaceous bodies for gold jewelry and revealing them to be puppets of a larger power basis that dwarfs them in importance.

Although oppressive social structures are the norm when it comes to gender relations in the Victorian period, each of the four novels also includes instances of resistance and subversion. Be it through claiming independence, shunning custom, or rediscovering their masculinity; the characters embody the propensity of all people to rebel against imposing hierarchies in whatever way possible when they are afflicted by them.

The way Jane Eyre defies Mr. Rochester by refusing to submit to him within the bounds of marriage and instead going for him on her own terms is a direct challenge to the stationary, passive identity the patriarchal institution of marriage forced upon the women of the past. The feminist aspect of Jane's moral independence within a patriarchal system defies the stereotype that women must conform to patriarchal subservient traditions in order to attain fulfillment and happiness.

Tess d'Urbervilles Tragedy Unfortunate as that resistance may be, Tess of the d'Urbervilles is an example of the gender norm subverted: a tragedy of oppositional and doomed femininity. Rather, Tess is not a passive victim but an active fighter who challenges the gendered social mores that punish women for their sexuality. Despite her well-intentioned actions, Hardy employs her character to highlight the oppressive nature of patriarchal ideals surrounding womanhood and the ways society prevents women from acting with true freedom. Likewise, Pip's final decision to reject the ideals of wealth and high social status that he assumed would make him a "gentleman" demonstrates a refutation of the misogynistic ideologies of Victorian masculinity in Great Expectations. Pip embodies a transition between the confines of social expectations of self that are couched in gender terms.

The three novels touched on here illustrate the complicated interactions of gendered space, patriarchal authority, and ideological conduct in Victorian society. They show that through the lenses of feminist criticism, queer theory, and poststructuralism, that gender roles were both commented on and resisted in the writing of the story. Gender and class limit the autonomy of the female protagonists in Jane Eyre, Middlemarch, Tess of the d'Urbervilles, and Great Expectations, yet their resistance highlights the potential for individuals to subvert oppressive systems. Though rarely without its peril, the subversion of normative identity is, on some level, a critique of the Victorian gendered power relations that governed social, emotional, and intellectual life at the time.

5. Conclusion

By examining the interplay of gender and power in select Victorian novels Jane Eyre, Middlemarch, Tess of the d'Urbervilles, and Great Expectations, this research shows that the Victorian era rests upon a complex and ambiguous discourse on gender within the limitations of the period and its culture. Not only do these stories reflect the hyper-rigid gender roles that defined Victorian society, but they also critique, challenge, and undercut them by illustrating characters who fight, fail, or can only shake up a bit the power structure of the traditional home.

Each of these texts and the central women within them, Jane Eyre, Dorothea Brooke, Tess Durbeyfield, and Estella, are faced with the confines of society entering the picture along with the circumstance of their being a woman.

However, through their resistance, rejection of patriarchal control, and determination of their identities, these characters claim agency too. The stories illuminate how the place of women was determined by layers of gender/caste/morality intersectionality, rife with the tensions of conformity versus rebellion and complacency versus agency.

On the other hand, Great Expectations plays a more subversive role with masculinity, showing the relative weakness of a social identity, namely a masculinity contextualized in wealth, prestige, and achievement. In this sense, Pip's journey toward emotional maturity and his final disillusionment with the ideals of what kind of man he should be replicate the pressures assigned to men during the Victorian period, pointing out that masculinity, too, was directly embedded with class and societal ideals. Even the treatment of masculinity in Great Expectations pairs nicely with the study of femininity in the other three novels to the point home that gender (male or female) is a sort of continuum and highly contested terrain.

In conclusion, the results of this study highlight that Victorian power and gender were not stable in literature but were places of constant negotiation, resistance, and subversion. The challenges faced by similar characters also echo ongoing conversations around gender equality, agency, and the spectrum of traditional gender roles, thus offering glimpses into both past and present constructs of gendered power dynamics. In their analysis of gender, power, and a few other things, these novels are timeless in their critiques and continue to speak to our issues of gender, equality, and identity today.

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