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**The Women Question in Literature during the Victorian Era:**  
**The case of :Thomas Hardy and Charles Dickens**

**Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for a Master's  
degree in Anglo-Saxon Literature and Civilisation**

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## *Dedications*

I dedicate this work from the deep of my heart to my dearest parents, especially my mother who gave me the inspiration to fulfill this dream with her support, patience and encouragement.

To my sisters Sanaa, Houda, Nadjia and my brother Zaki . Also, to my fiance Nadir who is always caring about my study ,and never stopped encouraging me .

To all my dearest cousins

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### *Dedications*

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## **Abstract**

The thesis is entitled the women question during the 19th century in literature. The dissertation is an examination of the conditions of women in the Victorian society, and how the Victorian writers Charles Dickens and Thomas Hardy represented them. This dissertation is conducting by focusing on some of Thomas Hardy and Charles Dickens works as poets and as novelists. As most other Victorian writers; Hardy and Dickens were concerned with the "Woman Question". Their works reveal profound sympathy for women and their struggle to realize their desires and ambitions; both inside and outside the home. Our work is divided into two chapters. chapter one sketches the general historical background of the era entailing the life of Victorians in general and that of women in particular. The chapter includes diverse aspects of life including social, economic, and cultural dimensions. The aim of this chapter is to spotlight on the life of women and their struggle to get rid of oppression. Chapter two provides a further discussion of the conditions of women by referring to some writings especially those written by prominent Victorian writers and poets that focus on women and how they portrayed them. The aim through it is to demonstrate Hardy and Dickens' position towards women among their contemporaries. It is also concerned of the analysis of some of Their works as poets than as novelists, they are two of so many writers who sympathized with women and sought to change people's view on them during the Victorian era.

### **General Introduction**

The Victorian society was known by its rigid laws and harsh treatment of women. The latter were expected to fulfill their mission as good housewives, submissive wives, sincere and pure and have nothing to do with politics, philosophy or sciences for such subjects were only destined for men. In fact, the seed for such ideas was the fear of women's awareness of their oppression that would lead them to react and ask for equal rights and treatment. As a matter of fact, these stereotypes about women still existed even when women began to engage themselves in activities outdoors; they worked in farms and factories side by side with men and then indoors they did the housework and took care of the children.

Victorian writers dealt with many themes and subjects like the subjection of 'women' and issues related to them; 'Sexuality' these are the most important subject that has been tackled back then, and every writer had his own way of dealing with it.

The 19<sup>th</sup> century witnessed radical advances in the theorization of the study of literature; For example the one that came to prominence in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was "feminism". Critics undertook with many issues among them, the portrayal of the Victorian family, the different social classes and the conditions under which Victorians lived and the hardships and problems that were undergone by them (Robert Michael McNamara).

Thomas Hardy and Charles Dickens these two famous writers of the 19<sup>th</sup> century were at the center of the theoretical movements of the study of literature: "psychological, Marxist, materialist and so on..."; *Oliver Twist* began to be



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serialized in Bentley's Miscellany, women, regardless of their social status, had limited choices in life: they were expected to marry, obey their husbands, and have children. As the century progressed, women became increasingly unhappy and started to challenge the ideals that kept them limited and controlled culminating in the campaign to gain votes for women, driven by the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies founded in 1897.

Even though indulging in any sexual intercourse was abhorred in the Victorian society and women were called either 'prostitutes' or 'fallen women' we Hardy and Dickens had their own views in their works as so many other writers did too. The difference that Hardy and Dickens made is that they gave another image to women. They sympathized with the social position of women. They observed how women's rights were restricted and sometimes denied at that time. This is the fact behind Dickens and Hardy being called 'feminists'; it is due to the way women were portrayed in their novels. And that's why we chose these two famous figures of the era and analyzed their works about the women of the 19th century.

While Dickens may have had his own viewpoints on ideal femininity, he did not shy away from depicting women who fell short of this image; women who like Lady Dedlock in Bleak House were victims of pre-marital passion; like Nancy in Oliver Twist (1837-9), victims of poverty driven to crime prostitution; or like Little Emily in David Copperfield (1849-50), seduced and abandoned. Dickens also took direct action. As a result of discussions with the philanthropist, Angela Burdett-Coutts, in 1847 Dickens set up Urania Cottage in London, a home for 'homeless' women, as Dickens termed it, in Lime Grove, Shepherd's Bush. In 1849, Dickens wrote 'An appeal to Fallen Women', a leaflet designed for distribution to prostitutes taken into police custody, offering the cottage as an emotional and physical refuge.

What Hardy did, is that through his novels, "he championed the struggle of the strong, intelligent, sexual woman to achieve selfhood and social freedom". For this

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reason, some of Hardy's works especially *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1885) received harsh criticism.

Such ideas caused upheavals, for although other writers of their time embarked upon issues related to gender, they never dared to represent the prostitute as a pure woman whatever the harsh conditions they lived in. This opened the doors to so numerous critics that were concerned with the study of the portrayal of women in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

In the present work, we would try to study some of the works of Victorian writers about women during the Victorian era.

The degraded conditions of women led some of those who aimed to improve their conditions to rise against the social institutions and denounce all those who contributed to that state. They constructed the 'feminist movement' that was first started by a group of women to ask for their rights and later on enlarged to include women all over the world to organize themselves into movements and associations to react against men whom they accused of being the oppressor and the cause of their misery.

This extended essay is an attempt to a close study of some Victorian writers and their different views on women in the Victorian society and those who are named 'feminists'.

The research paper is divided into two chapters. The first chapter seeks to provide a historical background of the Victorian society. Precisely, it attempts to spotlight on the Victorian people, the general conditions in which they lived and their beliefs and thoughts. It also focuses on women and how they were perceived and treated at that era.

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As for the second chapter is about the portrayal of women by some victorian writers during the 19th century. it aims to mention the most prominent writers of the epoch, their preoccupations and the literary works that dealt with the subject of women and the conception of the ideal woman and How they were seen and portrayed by the society on one hand and on the other by novelists and poets in general then by writers whom are called 'feminists'. We selected two famous figures of the 19<sup>th</sup> century; by analyzing some of their works concerning Victorian women; we will be able to determine the aim of our work which is the women position during the Victorian era in literature .

## **1.1- Introduction**

Before studying a literary work, it is necessary to make an investigation about the period and society in which the writer lived as well as its people and their way of living, traditions and laws in order to understand the writer's world view and pave the way for a complete study of his work.

In this chapter, the researchers seek to examine the historical, social and biographical backgrounds of the novel under study so as to look at the ways in which these might have influenced the content and form of the novel. They seek to deal with the English society in the 19th century focusing on the economical aspect, social life, and the position of women in England.

## **2.1 The Victorian Era**

### **The Economical Aspect during the Victorian Era**

The Victorian period lasted a long time, during which the United Kingdom became an industrialized and urban nation. The 1830s and 1840s were marked by unemployment, poverty, rioting and horrible working conditions for women and children. The Mid-Victorian period (1848-1870) was a time of prosperity, stability and optimism; whereas the Late Victorian Period (1870 -1901) saw the decay of Victorian values, British imperialism, the Boer War, the Irish question, Bismarck's Germany which became a rival power; the United States that also became a rival power, Economic depression which led to mass immigration and Socialism (Victorian Era Economy)

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This period witnessed an enormous development in machinery which resulted in a lack of work for the working class. Bad working conditions and unemployment drove thousands of women into prostitution (ibid)

For few decades in the 19th century British manufactured goods dominated the world trade. Most mass manufactured items were produced more efficiently and competitively in Britain than elsewhere. In comparison, even in 1840, Britain possessed only about 2/3rd of the world's steam power and estimated to produce less than 1/3rd of the world's total manufacturing. (Victorian Era Economy)

The main competition was from the northern states of the USA, France, the German Confederation and Belgium. The years between 1873 and 1896 are known to economic historians as "the great depression" post the first wave of industrialization. (Ibid)

### **Society during the Victorian Age**

The English Society in the 19th century consisted of hierarchical structure containing the upper class, the middle class and the working class. This difference in social classes could be distinguished by inequalities in wealth, education, working and living conditions. Thus, the basic quality of daily life for people in Victorian England rested on an underlying structure determined by social class and shaped by traditional ways of life in country, town, and city (Mitchell24)

In addition to that, the classes lived in separate areas for Victorians believed that each class had its own standards and people were expected to conform to the roles of their class. Moreover, the Industrial Revolution marked a fundamental transition of human life depicted in papers. It had a great impact on the society including the emergence of working class, in which a mass of workers migrated

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from agricultural regions to industrial towns, where they lived in new urban slums (op.cit 24 )

Furthermore, the population figures increased rapidly in Great Britain from 15.74 million in 1801 to 27.39 million in 1851. This phenomenon was to lead to a demand for factory jobs for women and children, who were employed to scramble under machinery, retrieve cotton bobbins, to work in mines and other manufacturing plants. (Gender role in Charlotte Bronte )

The working class was considered to be the lower rank of social classes; the largest number was agricultural labors, domestic servants and factory hands. They were found in unskilled and skilled jobs; mining, fishing, transportation, industry and other manual jobs. Besides, their interest was just earning to remain alive and struggling poverty and illness. Thus, skilled workers who made up 15 percent of working class were worked as printers, bookbinders. Throughout that period, many children never attended school and half of them grew up unable to read and write, and ended up in a workhouse, which housed and fed people who had no power to support themselves; otherwise they were put to work. Boys and girls had to start work very young and they often helped in the work done by older members of the family (Victoria ).

As towns grew rapidly, the living conditions became bad .The new industrial towns were populated, dirty and unhealthy and housing conditions for working class were terrible(ibid) . It was a strategy for middle-class families to maintain adult women outside commercial or professional activities .The upper class was wealthy and dominant. The aristocracy and the gentry were affected by all of these changes. (Ibid)

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And with the rise of industrialization, the British aristocracy became strongly involved in the development of mining, canals and railways. For example, landowners used to control most of the country's agriculture.(ibid)

### **Women's Status during the Victorian Epoch**

The name of Victorian period was named after Queen Victoria. During the course of her reign, the British monarchy took on its modern ceremonial character. She and her husband "Prince CONSORT ALBERT of Saxe-Coburg Gotha" had nine children, through whose marriage were descended many of the royal families of Europe. (Victorian Era Divorces: Reason and Process)

Victoria never lost her early marriage passion for Albert "without him everything loses its interest". (Ibid)

The couple had a happy marriage. At the beginning of their marriage, the queen was insistent that her husband should not share in the government of the country. The prince was allowed to start seeing the dispatches, then to be present when the queen saw her ministers. The concession became a routine and during her first pregnancy, the prince received a key to the secret boxes, as one unwanted pregnancy followed another and as Victoria became increasingly dependent on her husband. The queen once so enthusiastic about her role came to conclude that "we women are not made for governing" (Ibid) The decision of the queen made the women considered "to be men's shadow" (Roy 22).

The Victorian society believed that "men and women were naturally different in capacity, and so ought to play distinct social roles. Anatomy determined destiny, and men were destined to be on top" (Ibid23) Men were meaner and tougher so their place was the outside world facing the harsh realities

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of the difficult worlds of business and politics; those areas according to these ideas were no place for woman (Ibid).

The woman's place was at home, carrying out a domestic role such as looking after children or supervising maidens. According to the Victorians, a true woman at that time was virtuous, pious, pure and submissive spending her day looking for ways to please her husband and creating a happy and healthy family from within the home (Ibid).

It was thought to be inappropriate for a woman to go out in public by herself. If she had to go out, she should be accompanied by a man, preferably her husband, her father or her brother because the outside world was so harsh and the woman should be protected one's (Chapitre 1 : Introduction à l'âge du bronze égéen).

They lived with the idea that "man with the head and woman with the heart, man to command and woman to obey; all else confusion." (Tennyson ,The Princess (poem) whereas women were destined to serve and obey them. In this article, Winifred Gallagher (2004) said:

Victorian men ruled the world. Even in the home, women's power was primarily confined to social spaces such as the drawing room, a formal place for the important business of receiving callers and impressing them with status symbols—the hostess fern collection, for example of her piano. (Domestic Space Bibliography - SFU.ca).

Men and women separated spheres; they could meet at breakfast or to engage in sexual activity, since men needed sons, heirs to continue the family tree and tradition (The British Library).

In addition, a girl would marry and that therefore she had no need of a formal education. It was believed that women were not able to learn in the way men did,



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that their brain was smaller than men's and that it would do damage to their health if they spent long hours studying. Some of them, if they were fortunate enough, were homeschooled, but numerous of them had no formal education at all (ibid).

The majority of them had to watch as their brothers went to established schools, universities or spent time with a private tutor. They had to educate themselves with books from the house library if there were any, but some of them were lucky because their families permitted them to study with their brother's tutor (Godiva's ride: women of letters in England, 1830 -1880). Some of them went to schools for girls that only offered to teach them some "accomplishments" like singing, drawing, playing piano and flower-arranging were all important. Through this epoch, there were several fervent debates about women's education and countless books were written about this topic (Ibid).

A surge of conduct books even became a genre and the most famous were Sarah Ellis's *Exhortations to the Women, Wives, Mothers, and Daughters of England*, Elizabeth Sewell's *Principles of Education* and Charlotte Yonge's *Woman kind* (Women writers of 19th century Britain-Home ICM).

Even when Oxbridge (Oxford and Cambridge Universities) started to accept applications from women via UCAS (The Universities and Colleges Admissions Service) some parents did not let their daughters go because women that were educated could not get married easily. This stereotype could not include black and working class women; it was really only for the daughters and wives from the upper class because working class women needed to go out and work in order to provide food and care for their children (Gender & Sexuality in the Victorian Era (Part I: Introduction)).

### **Women and Marriage in Victorian Era**

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Christianity regarded marriage as an obligatory process and a contract that could only expire by death. Both husband and wife should respect the contract. In fact, women were expected to marry and have children. (Spartacus Educational). However, women were sometimes unable to get married. As a matter of fact, in the 1850's, the number of men was so inferior comparing to that of women. For such reason, marriage in the Victorian era was the aim of any woman. There were a great "number of young women who could not expect to marry" (Mitchell Sally,14).

And just to make things worse the desire to be married was acceptable if it was about looking forward to taking care of children, the bride and groom might not love each other and to be married was legitimate, to be single was deviant and dishonest. C. Rosseti might argue the opposite « bride=village maid », single =like a queen.

Caroline Norton gave an account of how her husband beat her during her marriage. « We had been married about two months, when, one evening, after we had all withdrawn to our apartments, we were discussing some opinions Mr. Norton had expressed; I said, that "I thought I had never heard so silly or ridiculous a conclusion" (English laws for women in the nineteenth century : Norton, Caroline Sheridan, 1808-1877). This remark was punished by a sudden and violent kick; the blow reached my side; it caused great pain for several days, and being afraid to remain with him, I sat up the whole night in another apartment » (Welcome to - womeninworldhistory.com).

### **Middle Class Women Marriage**

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The middle class was a variety of social classes that consisted of bankers, businessmen, doctors and lawyers that was segregated from the working class. Marriage was viewed almost as the sole vocation open to middle class women; they were to be married by twenty-one, and expected to begin having children immediately, and if they passed the age of 30 without finding a bridegroom, they were well and truly on the way to being left on the shelf. As a matter of fact, a woman after marriage became her husband's servant; she should stay at home, taking care of him and making everything nice for him when her husband came back after a tiring day of earning the family's income; she was not supposed to talk to her husband about a domestic trouble or worries about the children; she was not expected to not trouble her master / husband (Fascinating History).

### **The Lower Class Marriage in Victorian Era**

The working class knew that they could not associate with the upper class; so marriage was usually confined to their own class. They had the freedom to choose whom they wanted to marry unlike the upper class that had to marry relations to keep wealth within the family. The lower class did marry for love that is to say that marriage was not arranged for them by their parents (The Victorian Era: Marriage, Divorce, & Relationships).

### **Women and Divorce in Victorian Era**

It happens that sometimes a man or a woman chooses the wrong partner. This may lead each one of them to ask for divorce though the phenomenon was abhorred during the era. To prevent divorce, the church granted separation or as it was known "menso et thoro" which meant "from bed and board".

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(Perkin Joan p. 22).

Divorce in this epoch entailed to loss of property and wealth. As a matter of fact, the only reason to obtain divorce is to prove the adultery. In case women wanted to gain a divorce for the reason of adultery, she had to prove that her husband had indulged in bigamy; she had also to confirm that her husband had committed incest, cruelty or desertion. That is why the society had obliged men to take care of their wives and their fidelity did not matter while the wives on the other hand if caught cheating they were seen as disrespecting. (Victorian Era Divorces: Reason and Process).

Henry Robinson was one of the first to sue for divorce under the new Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857, he was petitioning for the dissolution of his marriage on the grounds that his wife, Isabella, had committed adultery, and he submitted as evidence a diary in her hand in which she described the misery of her marriage, her boredom, her husband was often away on business and even when he was home she felt lonely. He was an unwelcoming partner, she wrote in her diary « uneducated, narrow-minded, harsh-tempered, selfish, proud », she also described the great moment enjoying with Edward whom she loved. (Summerscal ).

Over the five days of the trial, thousands of Isabella Robinson's secret words were read out to the court, and the newspapers printed almost every one. Her journal was detailed, sensual, alternately anguished and euphoric (Ibid)

Later on, when facts about women bearing the injustice and disloyalty of the husbands were revealed, people became aware of the necessity for those women to get separated. Among the wronged women, we cite Nellie Weeton whose husband married her just for money, he used to be so cruel

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that he beat and insulted her, arrested her in the ground ... It happens that he menaced to send her to a lunatic asylum if she tried to defend herself or oppose him, after a separation deed, she was allowed to see her daughter three times a year, only 50 pounds a year but not allowed to live within ½ miles of Wigan. Neslie wrote: « My husband is my terror, my misery. I have little doubt he will be my death » (Perkin p. 29).

Once married, women completely submit to their husbands. For this, most awakened people realized that the institution of marriage was “indispensable but which in some cases, because of the inequalities of the law and the one-sidedness of the bargain, exploited and brutalized the wife and condoned the tyranny of the husband” (Hardy 31). This fact is illustrated in Hardy’s poems in which most often, the couple discovers that the only thing that binds them together, is just the contract of marriage, without love or affections. This means that either the wife or the husband finds himself standing as an obstacle to the happiness of others. This is why women and some of their supporters aimed to engage in a struggle to pass more laws that would improve their conditions and grant them a respectable life. (Ibid)

### **1.5 Women’s Agitation to get their Rights**

All over the nineteenth century, women had no political rights despite the fact that there had been some movements to advance and ask for the rights of women. Later on, women’s conditions began to change. That happened when acts and laws on their favor were passed. Among the acts, one can mention the *Infants and Child Custody Act*, which was passed in 1839. This act gave women more rights to take care of their children in case of divorce. It is stated that if parents were separated

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(divorced), children under the age of seven should stay with their mothers (Galazter,NP)

By 1857, women whose husbands deserted them or were cruel to them could ask for divorce thanks to the Matrimonial Causes Act even though it did not completely satisfy women since men were still privileged and given more rights so that they could ask for divorce just by proving that their wives were adulterous. In 1882, the Married Women's Property Act secured for the woman all the property and possession she earned or inherited. The *Guardianship of Infants Act* was introduced in 1886. It made it clear that if a woman was widowed, she could gain full custody of the children. In 1891, women were no longer forced to live with a husband out of their will (ibid).

There appeared powerful and well-formed women whose consciousness led them to rise against the prejudice of society and claim their natural rights. As a matter of fact, "Middle-class women sought serious education rather than the paintings, piano playing, social graces, and general knowledge that were usual in girl's schools. They also began trying to extend the range of women's employment". Organized movements to claim women's rights began to take shape by the end of 1840's. This category of women included many among whom we cite Barbara Bodichon who formed Women's Suffrage Committee in 1865 to claim their rights. (Mitchell Sally p. 7)

Around 1872, women were being admitted to Cambridge University but unofficially. All the way through the year 1876, they started to win the right to become licensed physicians. Children also were touched by the reforms, so that, for the first time, government intended to do something to restrict the bad working conditions. (Ibid)

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In 1833, it was forbidden for textile mills to employ children less than 10 years. A year later, there appeared The Poor Law Amendment Act which offered help to those who could not support themselves (Patricia NP). However, the laws cited above did too little in practice and did not do much for women as it was expected. The acts were in fact just words on paper since women continued to suffer and live in horrible situations (Ibid).

Men were still dominant over females. The cause was that the society was governed by a patriarchal system. So, it was useless to amend or create acts or laws. What was necessary then was to change the system on which society relied and also change people's viewpoint towards women as being inferior. Women had to be patient and accept the few acts and the very slow change that was happening gradually on their favor since even the Queen promoted male's control and dominance over women. In addition to this, some passive women seemed to be indifferent to their subjugation to males and were satisfied of the position they had in society and therefore did not bother themselves to complain or ask for more rights (circle of rights ECONOMIC, SOCIAL AND CULTURAL RIGHTS OF WOMEN )

### **Some Women Writers in 19<sup>th</sup> Century**

Nineteenth-century Britain—a world of progress and reform, discovery and innovation, industrialization and social upheaval—saw intense debate about the position of women in society. It was this century of change that heard controversies about a wife's right to own property, staged arguments about a mother's right to custody of her children and ownership of her body, and witnessed the birth of the movement for women's suffrage. This was also the era of the professional woman writer, a time in which women demanded a place alongside men in the world of letters to contribute to cultural discourse (**Hard Times**). They cover the bulk of the social issues and problems of a particular time. Hence, one of the most important

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subjects treated in women's works from centuries ago were women's situation, which was the first concern of women writers especially during the Victorian period. (Victorian era April 2017).

### **Elizabeth Gaskell**

Often referred to as Mrs Gaskell, was an English novelist and short story writer. Her novels offer a detailed portrait of the lives of many strata of Victorian society, including the very poor, and are of interest to social historians as well as lovers of literature, she was one of the major literary figures of the nineteenth century, who was encouraged by Dickens. Her novels were the mirror image of reality of the time. She wrote *North and South* (1855) which is known for their social concerns. In this novel, Gaskell gave an example of the perfect woman who is brave who does not fear to challenge men, and she exhibited the evolution of women in a rich society that started to change in fiction not in reality besides defending the suffering workers (Elizabeth Gaskell p50-55)

### **Mary Shelley**

Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley (30 August 1797- 1 February 1851) was an English novelist, short story writer, dramatist, essayist, biographer, and travel writer, best known for her Gothic novel *Frankenstein*. The novel *Frankenstein* (1818) is about science and fiction; it includes gothic elements; the women are described in few details which reduces their importance in the story. In this novel, the main idea is that men were busy with science and forgetting women, she shows that women were always victims of male's mistakes (Mary Shelley p 227 -239 ).

### **Jane Austen**

Jane Austen (16 December 1775 – 18 July 1817) was an English novelist



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known primarily for her six major novels, which interpret, critique and comment upon the British landed gentry at the end of the 18th century. Austen's plots often explore the dependence of women on marriage in the pursuit of favorable social standing and economic security (Jane Austen )

Her novel *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) illustrates this point; this means that the novels are romantic. Her core interest was the moral, social and psychological behavior of her heroines. She wrote primarily about young heroines as they grew up and searched for personal happiness. *Pride and Prejudice* depicts a society in which a woman's reputation is of the utmost importance. A woman is expected to behave in certain ways. Stepping outside the social norms makes her vulnerable to ostracism (Ibid)

### **Conclusion**

This chapter has been concerned with the analysis of major events that characterized the Victorian era as well as the general living conditions of women. To be more explicit, it has examined to some extent the life of women in a society that was governed by a patriarchal system. It has looked into to some degrees marriage and divorce during the era and the laws as well as the acts that determined their rights and duties. The chapter has also pointed out to the struggle of women to overcome the hardships and injustice they faced during that age. At last, it has provided a short overview of women writers in 19<sup>th</sup> century and their inspiration from the society to achieve their literary work.

## Chapter Two: The portrayal of women by some Victorian writers

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### Introduction

Until comparatively recently, the majority of published writers were men and the portrayal of women in literature was inevitably one-sided. In the ancient world literacy was severely limited, and the majority of those who could write were male. However, the contribution of women to oral culture should not be underestimated – in folk songs, stories and nursery rhymes – a tradition which eventually fed into written culture.

### The Most Prominent Writers of the Era

This long period witnessed the rise of some of the greatest poets and writers of the English language. The notable Victorian poets include Lord Byron, Alfred Lord Tennyson, Elizabeth Browning, Shelley, William Wordsworth, and so forth. Byron's brooding romantic poems attracted a lot of attention in a society noted for its high regard for morality. **Tennyson** was a prolific writer whose love for nature and romance found expression in beautiful poems several of which were based on myths and legends of a long past classical period. **Shelley and Wordsworth** are other Victorian poets whose works paint a brilliant picture of nature (Sutherland).

The novels of the Victorian age are generally based on very strong concepts of morality. In a society where modern industries were emerging rapidly, countless literary works sought to bring out the grim reality of a landless working class and the precarious condition of declining gentry. Charles Dickens proved to be highly skilled in portraying the actual condition of the society and women during the 19th century. **The Bronte Sisters** produced some of the literary masterpieces of this period. *Wuthering Heights* by Emily Bronte, set amidst the forbidding moors of Yorkshire. Charlotte Bronte wrote *Jane Eyre* which narrates the growth of a young woman. The tales are firmly grounded in a sense of high morality (Bronte vs Bronte).

The other famous writers of the Victorian era include **George Eliot** or **Mary**

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**Ann Evans** who adopted a male pseudonym to distance herself from the light-hearted

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romances with which women writers of the time were associated. Her novels like *Middlemarch* and *Silas Marner* are based on realism and provide deep psychological insights of women. Morality is the dominant theme of the Victorian epoch. Other renowned writers of the Victorian age comprise **Anthony Trollope**, **Thomas Hardy** and Charles Dickens who presented a sombre picture of daily life and struggle against hardship condition of women. Represented often with help of tragic characters. Oscar Wilde combined satire and morality to produce some of the best-known works of English Literature (Victorian Era life in England. Information about society & daily life).

### **The Conception of the Ideal Women during the Victorian era**

Apart from the Queen- who was the ideal Victorian woman, she may have resembled Mrs. Frances Goodbye, the Wife of the Reverend J Goodbye of Ashby-de-la-Zouch in Leicestershire, of whom it was said at her death that she carried out her duties as mistress of a small family with 'piety, patience, frugality and industry'. Moreover,

*'... her ardent and unceasing flow of spirits, extreme activity and diligence, her punctuality, uprightness and remarkable frugality, combined with a firm reliance on God*

*... carried her through the severest times of pressure, both with credit and respectability ...'*

*(The General Baptist Repository and Missionary Observer, 1840-2006). 10 oct. 2006*

Mrs. Goodbye exemplified the good and virtuous woman whose life revolved around the domestic sphere of the home and family. She was pious, respectable and busy - no life of leisure for her. Her diligence and evident constant devotion to her husband, as well as to her God, identifies Frances Goodbye as an example to other women. She accepted her place in the sexual hierarchy. Her role was that of help and

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domestic manager.

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The increasing physical separation of the home and the workplace, for various amongst the professional and commercial classes, meant that these women lost touch with production, and came to fashion an identity solely within the domestic sphere. It was through their duties within the home that women were offered a moral duty, towards their families, mainly their husbands, and towards society as a whole. However, as the example of Frances Goodbye shows, the ideal woman at that time was not the weak, passive creature of romantic fiction. Rather she was a busy, able and upright figure who drew strength from her moral superiority and whose virtue was manifested in the service of others. Rather it was a way of living and working based on evangelical beliefs about the importance of the family, the constancy of marriage and woman's innate moral goodness (Lynn Abrams Published: 2001-08-09).

### **Women and some Victorian Poets**

During the Victorian era, there was great controversy over the roles of women and what constituted the ideal woman. For the better half of the period, women were seen as pure, pious and innocent. They were treated like household commodities. In literature, this view is best represented in Victorian poetry. Through the use of nature and color imagery, Victorian writers sought to sustain the image of women as being angelic and not having the desire to seek higher knowledge. Christina Rossetti's "Goblin Market," Alfred, Robert Browning's "Women and Roses" and Lord Tennyson's "The Princess (1847)," are three such examples where writers try to define the position of the Victorian woman (Victorian Women in Literature by Jaymie Alford writer).

In the poem "The Princess" (1847) Lord Tennyson definitely circumscribed males and females' duties at home as well as the spheres adequate to each one of them. He said:

*Man, for the field and woman for the hearth: Man,  
for the sword and for the needle she; Man, with the head*

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*and woman with the heart, Man to command and woman*



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*to obey*

*(Quoted in Sally Mitchell, 1996:267)*

The poet made it obvious that the adequate place for a woman is the house to perform certain tasks whereas the man should be the 'bread winner' of his family, the one who is suitable to 'command' and manage his family being the wiser and more experienced. Women have nothing to do but obey, be subdued and to perform certain tasks like needlework (*Daily Life in Victorian*).

Elizabeth Barrett Browning had started writing at an early age. She was concerned with the different issues facing women. Barrett Browning brought together these interests in various aspects of the Woman Question in her major poem, *Aurora Leigh* published in 1856. It traces Aurora's struggles to establish herself as a professional woman poet. Barrett Browning returns to the issue of women's education as Aurora's aunt subjects her to an 'education' system which threatens to eradicate both her enquiring mind and her individuality. She is made to read conduct books on how to be a good woman, learn lists of useless facts, and performs obtuse tasks like spinning, glass and modeling flowers in wax (Elizabeth Barrett Browning and the Woman Question). It is only when Aurora discovers her father's library, with its extensive range of ideas and knowledge that she feels her world and mind opening up, imaged here in terms of volcanic eruption:

*as the earth Plunges in fury, when  
the internal fires Have reached and  
pricked her heart [...] –thus, my soul  
[...]  
Let go conventions and sprang  
up surprised (Book 1, ll. 845–52)*

As Barrett Browning, Hardy treats the same idea in *Tess of D'Urbervilles*. In fact, despite his richness, Tess could not fall in love with her cousin Alec

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D'Urbervilles because she feels that he does not really value her as a woman, but

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instead, he views her as an *object* to satisfy his sexual desire. In the poem entitled *Porphyria's Lover* written in a form of monologue, Robert Browning objectifies women. The speaker in the poem represents his beloved as being submissive, obedient and keen on her husband to the extent of “worshipping” him. She neglects herself to serve him

*Murmuring how she loved me--- she  
Too weak, for her heart's endeavor,  
To set its struggling passion free  
From pride, and vainer ties  
dissever,  
And give herself to me forever.  
But passion would  
sometimes prevail,  
Nor could to-night's gay  
feast restrain  
A sudden thought of one so pale  
For love of her and all in vain:  
So, she was come through wind and  
rain.  
  
Be sure I looked up at her eyes  
Happy and proud; at last I  
knew  
Porphyria worshiped me; [...]*

The poem shows clearly that the lover does not care about *Porphyria's* deep love and respect of him. In spite of the fact that he knows so well that she adores and worships him, he is so indifferent and simply says that all what she does for him is in

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vain. Most of the females represented in the works of Thomas Hardy instead, are rebellious, and most of them do not accept to live with a partner who does not value them(Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Women's Issues, and Aurora Leigh). Once they

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feel themselves neglected, or not treated as they deserve, they rebel by showing dishonesty and immorality to their husbands (The position of women in Thomas Hardy's poetry).

### **Women and some Victorian Novelists**

The image of women in the Victorian literature is often a stereotypic reflection of social realities in nineteenth-century Britain. The middle-class ideal of womanhood was a domestic one; the Victorian woman is seen as daughter, wife, and mother, with qualities men deemed suitable for the fulfillment of these roles. The highest manifestation of this ideal is "the angel in the house," a label derived from a poem written by Coventry Patmore between 1854 and 1860, extolling married life and the model wife, a competent manager of domestic affairs and an exemplar of all the moral virtues (Women's Literature in the 19th Century: Overviews).

### **Charles Dickens (1812-1870)**

English Victorian era author wrote numerous highly acclaimed novels including his most autobiographical *David Copperfield* (1848-1850);

"Whether I shall turn out to be the hero of my own life, or whether that station will be held by anybody else, these pages must show. To begin my life with the beginning of my life, I record that I was born (as I have been informed and believe) on a Friday, at twelve o'clock at night. It was remarked that the clock began to strike, and I began to cry, simultaneously."

As a prolific 19th Century author of short stories, plays, novellas, novels, fiction and non,

during his lifetime Dickens became known the world over for his remarkable characters, his mastery of prose in the telling of their lives, and his depictions of the social classes, mores and values of his times. Some considered him the spokesman for

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the poor, for he definitely brought much awareness to their plight, the downtrodden

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and the have-nots. He had his share of critics like Virginia Woolf and Henry James, but also many admirers, even into the 21st Century (Biography of Charles Dickens).

Dickens is "the most representative of Victorian novelists. Some will contend that he is also the greatest. No doubt he lacks the profundity of George Eliot, the consuming passion of the Bronte sisters, and the peculiar eclat of Thackeray, yet he surpasses them all in his basic humanity, a childlike naivete, and an amazingly fecund imagination. These qualities place him among the foremost of all English novelists. Dickens achieved in his lifetime wide popularity among all sections of readers. (Ibid)

Charles Dickens consistently reflects the image of the angel in the house. In *David Copperfield* (1849-1850), Agnes Wickfield is the paradigm of this stereotype. She has control of the management of her father's household, her mother being dead, and she wears at her waist a basket containing the house keys. This image of Agnes is combined with the picture of her ascending the staircase, the light from a stained-glass window shining behind her. The image of the saintly woman pervades the novel; to the end. David sees Agnes as "ever pointing upward ... ever directing me to higher things!" (The art of Charles Dickens as a novelist)

The role is repeated in Esther Somerson, the domestic and moral anchor of *Bleak House* (1852-1853), whose emblem also is the basket of household keys. Esther is a model female, modest, loyal, self-sacrificing, caring, subordinate to men and nurturing of children. Women who fall short of the domestic ideal do so because they are incompetent in some way to fulfill the role of housekeeper, wife, and mother; they lack the moral qualities considered essential for the role, or they are psychologically unsuited to the passive, subservient character demanded by it. (Ibid)

Dickens presents many ineffectual angels. Often, they are childish women like David Copperfield's wife, Dora, prized for her innocence and sweetness despite her very real deficiencies as housekeeper and wife. By and large, Dickens treats such

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characters tenderly, torn between their attractive feminine qualities and their serious inability to manage for their husbands. Sometimes, however, he uses the indifference



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to good household management as a metaphor for a warped social vision and misplaced priorities. Mrs. Pocket (*Great Expectations*, 1860-1861) buries herself in the peerage, ignoring her children. Mrs. Jollibee's establishment in *Bleak House* goes to ruin, and her family is neglected as she sets her sights on philanthropy in Africa. Setting these irresponsibilities against the larger themes in the novels, Dickens implies that such women should be attending to their domestic duties (Ibid).

In general, aggressive women, old or physically unattractive women, women desiring to do traditionally masculine work, and unmarried women of a certain age are considered anomalous and inherently unfeminine. These characters sometimes are given a wider scope than the traditional heroine, their idiosyncrasies freeing them from the conventional role. Willkie Collins' Marian Halcombe, the dark and unattractive sister in *The Woman in White* (1860), is resourceful, brave, and intelligent. She is given "manly" virtues to compensate for her lack of beauty. While men treat her as an intellectual equal, Marian is not an example of the "new woman" found in the later novels of the period. She has no ambitions to do men's work or to claim rights denied to her because of her sex (Unbecoming Women: British Women Writers and the Novel of Development). subjective torments and ultimately find peace by accepting the prescribed role for them. Dickens constitute the image of the traditional woman during the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Ibid).

### **Thomas Hardy(1840-1928)**

Thomas Hardy really was a poet. But when he began to write poems in 1862, there were nobody to read them. Therefore, to attract an audience and to gain a good financial position he began to write novels with a determination. As he was trained as an architect in his life and pursued this profession for 11 years till he abandoned it in 1873, he showed the same skill in building his plots which made *Under the Greenwood Tree*, *A Pair Of Blue Eyes*, *Far From The Maddening Crowd*, *The Return Of The Native*, *The Trumpet-Major*, *Two On A Tower* and *The Mayor Of Caster*

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bridge unforgettable successes (Biography of Thomas Hardy).

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If a student or researcher examines some of Hardy's major novels, he or she will certainly find that he was among the writers who sought to depict "the new woman" with new conceptions, new ideas and conduct. His heroines were represented as being rebellious against the constraints of their society, strong, hardworking, intellectual and enlightened women. Hardy's works provoked a large debate so that they became a subject that arose a fierce discussion as they sometimes led to bitter criticism and to people's resentment, the fact that annoyed him (Ibid).

Hardy witnessed how women were treated and the conditions in which they lived. He was aware that the Victorian society restricted women's spheres concerning education, economy, and politics. In fact, women were denied many rights even sexual feelings. While taking no notice of the man who committed sexual offences and justified them, the woman who engaged in any sexual activity was disdained and perceived by society as a 'fallen' woman though the two engaged in the same deed and committed the same misdeed. Women were always the scapegoat whenever a sexual relationship was discovered between the two sexes without taking into account the reasons that pushed them to do so. Nevertheless, for some Victorian women, prostitution was often regarded as the unique refuge in order to escape poverty, misery and oppression, that is to say, they engaged in such sexual acts knowing that this would be the sole way that could enable them to earn their living (Biography of Charles Dickens).

Through his works, Hardy made an overt attack on some beliefs and traditions held by society. For instance, in *Jude the Obscure*, he condemned the institution of marriage through Jude's illegal relation with Sue who objected marriage tie with Jude and believed that it was a free relation and not marriage that would bring happiness for them. In the *Mayor of Casterbridge*, he criticized the

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concept of 'family' through showing an awful scene in the opening of the novel,

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which was a wife and daughter's sale by a drunken husband. Hardy also treated capitalism and its negative impacts on society. The aim of the writer through creating such stories was to show the deficiencies of the Victorian society and its hidden aspects contrary to how it was exposed by others (ibid).

Hardy's female characters are completely different from the stereotyped Victorian women. They are unconcerned with the restrictions and customs of their society. For instance, in *Jude the Obscure*, Sue is represented as a modern and a free woman. As a matter of fact, she possesses a contradictory personality. A determined individualist who fears marriage as a degrading form of social prostitution, she is deeply narcissistic and neurotically insecure, which results in a farcical vacillation.

Thomas Hardy must be regarded as a key forerunner of the Modernist Movement in literature. His novels and poetry all display tendencies that would reach their apex in the early twentieth century. Hardy often created desolate, hopeless worlds where life had very little meaning. He also actively questioned the relevance of modern institutions, in particular organized religion. Sentiments like these would find accomplished spokespersons in poets like T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound. Another skilled poet who is often considered a precursor to Modernism is Gerard Manley Hopkins. Though he never published in his lifetime, his work was greatly received after his death. His unusual use of language set him apart from virtually every other poet of his day. Hopkins was very much concerned with religion and the nature of Creation. However, he still preserved a healthy quantity of skepticism. It is this existential doubt that, like Hardy, made Hopkins a favorite among the Modernist writers who would later discover his work (Ibid).

For many, the word "Victorian" conjures up images of over-dressed ladies and snooty gentlemen gathered in parlors and reading rooms. The idea of "manners" essentially sums up the social climate of middle-class England in the nineteenth century. Rules of personal conduct were in fact so inflexible that the Victorians garnered a reputation for saying one thing while doing another – an attack that the next

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generation of writers would take up with vigor. In the world at large, change was

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happening faster than many people could comprehend. A surging global economy was orchestrated by the might of the British Empire. The nobility, formerly at the top of the pyramid in society, found their status reduced as agriculture lost its preeminence in the now industrial economy. Mechanization and steam power led to ruthless efficiency, while more often than not the poor suffered under the weight of the capitalist middle class. Being impoverished in Victorian England was unpleasant to say the least, but there were efforts underway to improve the lot of the poor. The Reform Bills of the nineteenth century extended voting rights to men who were previously disenfranchised

– but not, of course, to women. That would require years more of struggle. For all of the social inequalities which still persisted, the Victorians successfully undermined some of humanity's most time-honored institutions. Some writers greeted these changes with fear, and wanted desperately for society to check its relentless pace. Others embraced the new world that was coming into being, thrilled at the progress of science and society. Together, these voices comprise an important and sometimes overlooked era in English literary history(Ibid).

### **Conclusion**

In this chapter, we attempt to take a glance at some Victorian writers, poets and at some of Thomas Hardy and Dickens' works.

It is worth remembering that Victorians lived in an intensely patriarchal society, despite the British Empire working under the reign of the most powerful woman of the century. Queen Victoria was utterly against the idea of any other women having power. In a furious letter to her friend Theodore Martin, she wrote that women were a "poor, feeble sex" and that the suffragist Lady Amberley should be "whipped".

Dickens's women were a product of the age he lived in, and of a legal system that still referred to women as the chattel of their husbands and fathers, keeping them in that status both in life and in literature. As for Hardy, it can be said that like his contemporaries, Hardy sought to advertise for the "new woman" who is free from

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the conventions and restrictions of society. Nonetheless, he criticized harshly  
the



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institution of marriage which he considered as nothing but a snare that could lead to the unhappiness and misery of either the husband or the wife , he also criticized the concept of the ideal family that was sacred for Victorians .

## General Conclusion

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The aim of this dissertation is to shed the light on the women question in the 19th century of Victorian England by some Victorian famous writers, it also demonstrates the reason behind their writings and choice of heroines though being well admired writers. This means how they treated the women question and representing a figure of Victorian time. Also, it has tackled to study and to evaluate women and the position they held and their conditions in the Victorian society through their literary works.

In the first chapter of the work, we provided a general background of the Victorian era. We have referred to a major event that changed people's lives and conditions to a great deal, which was the industrial revolution. The latter led to the emergence of wealthy families who possessed factories and means of work but also led to worsening the poor's living conditions and to their exploitation by the rich.

Then, we have moved to speak about the living conditions of women during the era. Through such study, we wanted to have an idea about the life of women in general and the category of women called "fallen women". Furthermore, we wanted to show clearly that the laws of the Victorian society were rigid, and that women underwent a great oppression since their rights were restricted by society, more particularly by men and even by Queen Victoria herself who advocated male's dominance and supremacy over women for being wise, apt to command and take decisions.

We have depicted the conditions of women in different spheres. We endeavoured to show the bad living conditions in which they lived and the double standard laws that condemned women and excused men. We have then moved to show how those conditions started to change little by little thanks to women's struggle to free themselves from the heavy chains that linked them to subjection, the second chapter is concerned with some prominent Victorian writers who were troubled by 'the woman question'. We intended to show the change of women's conditions as represented by both earlier and later novelists and poets and how the latter viewed

## General Conclusion

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women and represented them in their major works. We have referred to some of their writings to find out how they portrayed women. We also gave a general insight over

Thomas Hardy and Charles Dickens' novels to find out how they portrayed their heroines the fact that led to them being called feminists writers.

The aim was to defend the woman position in society that was known by its harsh conditions and unequal laws towards women the reason that led them to rebel. We cited Charles Dickens and Thomas Hardy whom were largely concerned with the plight of women, but, unlike the writers of their time, the

portrayal of events and the expression of ideas and opinions was done with overtness and clearness they defended woman and encouraged their struggle and saw woman as pure and innocent despite what they did to achieve equality and raise their voices.

We have analysed the women portrayed by some victorian novelists and by some victorian poets we chose hardy and dickens' writings and focused on the female character in them, how women being a victim of harsh conditions and social institution, marriage, freedom, faithfulness, innocence, self-respect and at last woman's sense of responsibility.

Through studying these different themes, we found out that most women are victims of oppression, ill-treatment, injustice and victims of the social conditions. They are oppressed by men who consider them as an object, of which, they get rid, if they consider it worthless. For this, certain women find themselves in big troubles after engaging in illegal relationships and beingAt last, we can say that 19th century was well known by its giant writers and prominent novelists of the history of English literature whom portrayed woman of the mentioned era and define the term of "the woman question" through their writings.

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