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Abstract:

The Victorian era was defined as a series of changes in regards to the social, political and moral aspects of England during the nineteenth century. Many works during the Victorian period such as Sarah Stickney Ellis’ The Women of England: Their Social Duties and Domestic Habits, Coventry Patmore’s The Angel in the House, and John Ruskin’s Of Queens’ Gardens show a complex understanding of the intricate practices constituting Victorian women’s lives and reveal the domestic ideology of the time. In Jane Eyre by Charlotte Bronte, Lady Audley’s Secret by Mary Elizabeth Braddon and The Woman in White by Wilkie Collins the reader is able to see the tensions of the era regarding the Woman Question; in particular, the focus within these novels is on the woman as working for or against the conservative principles of the Victorian Era. The characters of Jane Eyre, Lucy Audley, and Marian Halcombe work against the conventions of idealized femininity during the Victorian era as described in the majority of the works of the time.

Keywords: woman question, women’s lives during the Victorian era, the Woman in White, Jane Eyre, lady Audley’s Secret, Victorian ideology, Victorian novel

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The Victorian era was defined as a series of changes in regards to the social, political and moral aspects of England during the nineteenth century. Many works during the Victorian period such as Sarah Stickney Ellis’ *The Women of England: Their Social Duties and Domestic Habits*, Coventry Patmore’s *The Angel in the House*, and John Ruskin’s *Of Queens’ Gardens* show a complex understanding of the intricate practices constituting Victorian women's lives and reveal the domestic ideology of the time. In *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Bronte, *Lady Audley’s Secret* by Mary Elizabeth Braddon and *The Woman in White* by Wilkie Collins the reader is able to see the tensions of the era regarding the Woman Question; in particular, the focus within these novels is on the woman as working for or against the conservative principles of the Victorian Era. The characters of Jane Eyre, Lucy Audley, and Marian Halcombe work against the conventions of idealized femininity during the Victorian era as described in the majority of the works of the time.

Gender inequalities in politics, economic life, education and social intercourse for women manifested themselves within the nineteenth century into a topic called the “Woman Question.” The Woman Question is a multifaceted debate regarding gender ideologies and what is expected of the perfect Victorian lady. Various incidents and circumstances were responsible for raising questions about the role of women in society; their privileges, their deprivations, their opportunities, and their problems (Anis 21). In the Westminster Review of July 1864, Justin M’Carthy grieved in an essay that:
The greatest social difficulty in England today is the relationship between men and women. The principle difference between ourselves and our ancestors is that they took society as they found it while we are self conscious and perplexed. (Anis 19)

Women were no longer willingly submitting to the principles of the time as they had once done. In D. H. Lawrence’s “Do Women Change?” he censures women’s desire to reinvent themselves and states:

Women used to see themselves as a softly flowing stream of attraction and desire and beauty, soft quiet rivers of energy and peace. Then suddenly the idea changes. They see themselves as isolated things, independent females, instruments for love, instruments for work, instruments for politics . . . And as instruments they become pointed and they wanted everything.

(Walls 238)

This quotation from Lawrence’s work aptly relates to the change of ideologies in the Victorian era amongst women. No longer did they want to be seen as the Angel in the House; women sought liberation from the shackles of social conventions.

Due to the expansion of education as well as the contribution of the printing press, the nineteenth century became the “great age of the English novel, this was partly because the novel was the vehicle best equipped to present a picture of life lived in a given society against a stable background of social and
moral values by people who were recognizably like the people encountered by
readers,” and this is the kind of picture of life the middle class reader wanted to
read about (Anis 19). Literature is the mirror of society, and during the
nineteenth century, it took up the Woman Question immediately.

In choosing female protagonists, most writers who were determined to
represent women as strong figures that challenged the conventions of the time
would represent them as capable creatures rather than beautiful ones (Anis 24).
So, the physical appearance of the protagonist was not always central for the
work, but rather, her ability to hold her own, which is found in the characters of
Jane Eyre and Marian Halcombe. Whereas Jane is more plain than beautiful,
Marian is described as ugly and dark; yet each of these characters are
represented as fully capable of inner strength.

Sensational fiction, however, was not without its weaknesses. One source
of this imperfection that must be acknowledged is the way in which shocking or
sensational novels boasted morally impeccable endings. Mostly, this manifests
itself as happy marriages on the part of main characters within the novel. Also,
sympathy for the forward woman varies with each novel, but she is finally
chastised in almost every case (Helsinger 125). This can be seen in the case of
Marian, who never marries at the end of The Woman in White, or Lucy Audley in
Lady Audley's Secret, who ends up in a mental asylum and eventually dies within
its confines. Women are essentially “homebuilders”. In spite of their urge for
dignity and freedom they need someone to love, to care for; someone who
The Victorian

appreciates them as a human being rather than as a “paragon of beauty” (Anis 24).

The characters of some sensational novels reflect not simply a discontent with old ways, but a tension between discontent and a disinclination to adopt radically new ways. To indulge subversive feelings within a context of still secure values is a need recognized by Victorian readers of sensation fiction. The unsatisfying tension found in these novels reflects the hesitation of sensation readers who feel subversive emotions but still support the woman’s sphere (Helsinger 126). This idea is witnessed through the character of Marian Halcombe when she is seen speaking to Walter Hartright about rebellious topics which women are not usually seen discussing; yet she is still serving him tea and biscuits in a very lady like manner.

The more traditional and role of woman is challenged in the novel Jane Eyre by Charlotte Bronte. The Woman Question is dealt with not through exploring the problems of political, economic, or educational matters, but by looking carefully at how women were regarded and how they regarded themselves as members of society. In the novel, Jane’s capability is emphasized rather than her beauty; there is an emphasis on the necessity of education, on employment as a means of independence and self reliance, and the right of woman to state her own feelings (Anis 28). In fact, Jane is rather frequently throughout the novel described as “plain.” With Jane Eyre, Charlotte Bronte created a literary work which challenged the traditional conventions of the Victorian era by showcasing the feminist view so clearly. Jane shows that women
are capable of being passionate and of experiencing fulfillment in a marriage where the partners are equals. Jane is a woman who resists the limiting conventions of her time and reaches her goal: a life of fulfillment and bliss.

Bronte’s characterization of Jane Eyre suggests her protagonist’s inner conflict between “reason and desire, rationality and passion, restraint and emotion” (Graves). Constantly throughout the novel, Jane fights between the two sides of herself; the side which feels the “womanly” plethora of emotions, and the stronger, “resolute, wild, free thing” as Rochester describes her.

Charlotte Bronte makes Jane Eyre intentionally unattractive and not very gifted. Jane Eyre is presented to the reader as a sickly, unloved child, but the reader is attracted by her love of reading and her strong character. Jane is so strong in her belief that she will become self sufficient that she would rather give up her life than leave the purpose of her existence unfulfilled (Anis 24). The reader develops an utter admiration for Jane because of her “unseduceable independence” through which she is able to overcome all obstacles during the course of her life by means of her own inner strength (Gilbert 486).

Education for women was available during the nineteenth century only in finishing schools such as Lowood School. In the novel, education is seen as a way in which to develop capability as well as a tool to achieve an honorable social standing (Anis 22). Lowood is a school where the available facilities are barely enough to hold the body and soul together, but Jane concentrates wholly on accumulating as much as knowledge and skill as she can in order to help herself do well outside of school. The system of education is seen as unformed, chaotic
and inadequate, where women are only taught trivial accomplishments in order
to fill up days in which there was nothing “important” to do (Anis 23). In Sarah
Stickney Ellis’ *The Women of England: Their Social Duties and Domestic Habits*,
she speaks on the education of women in England. According to the author, the
women of England possess the “grand privilege” of having a domestic education
which women in other countries do not enjoy; this places the women of England
at a higher level in society than women in other countries (Christ 1585).

Women in England have been given a “high and holy duty,” as Ellis says, to
be a source of morality for the country. Although their sphere of influence seems
somewhat small, it is “glorious in action” because it extends over the entirety of
the country through their husbands and sons that venture out into the world
(Christ 1585). Although women in England do not receive the same type of
education as women in other countries, their husbands and sons are great men
because of their domestic education and education in morality. Ellis goes on to
say, “And yet, what man is there in existence who would not rather his wife
should be free from selfishness, than be able to read Virgin without the use of a
dictionary?” Men want good wives, not intelligent ones (Christ 1585).

Apparently, wanting an education for oneself as a woman is a “selfish” act. Ellis
believes that women are of immense significance to society because they right
the evils which occur and serve as their husbands conscience; their lack of
education is compensated for by the admiration which people feel for women
due to their dignity and morality. A woman’s place in society does not entitle her
to an education outside of domestic matters.
Miss Temple and Helen Burns are presented to the reader of *Jane Eyre* as women whom Jane admires. Miss Temple is seen as a “shrine” of lady like virtues such as generosity of spirit, cultivation, courtesy, and repression – all of which echo Sarah Stickney Ellis’ *The Woman of England: Their Social Duties and Domestic Habits*. Ellis speaks “of seeking [woman’s] own happiness only in the happiness of others.” This echoes the ideas of many writers of the time that stated that woman’s job is to make people happy and be selfless (Christ 1585). Ellis discusses the absolute magnitude of the role of woman within the household as wife or mother and as a bestower of morality. Miss Temple dispenses food to the hungry, visits the sick, encourages the worthy, and averts her gaze from the unworthy (Gilbert 480). Although she disagrees with Mr. Brocklehurst’s self-righteous stinginess, she listens to his sermonizing in lady like silence and does not allow anyone to speak through her. She nourishes the young Jane in body and soul and is the impossible Victorian ideal--“the angel in the house”--that Jane could never wish or want to be (Gilbert 480).

Helen Burns is presented in much of the same way that Miss Temple is presented to the reader, as a woman who embodies another impossible Victorian ideal – self renunciation and spirituality. She tells Jane that one’s duty is to submit to the injustices of this life in expectation of the ultimate justice of the next. Yet, Helen does no more than simply bear her fate and meditate on readings which comment on inadequate fathers and compares the happiness of other readings to her own unhappy life (Gilbert 481). Despite her outward submissiveness, there is a concealed resentment within Helen Burns similar to
that within Miss Temple: a resentment which Jane does not share with the two because she has already become independent and self-reliant, even at such a young age.

The only employment option for a middle class Victorian woman to earn a living and maintain a claim to gentility was to be employed as a governess. In this sense, Jane Eyre is true to the conventions of the Victorian era. A governess could expect no security of employment, received minimal wages, and had an ambiguous status within the home somewhere between servant and family member. Perhaps it was because the governess so clearly indicated the uncertain condition of the unmarried middle class woman's status in Victorian England that Charlotte Bronte decided to explore her role in society through the character and plight of Jane Eyre (Anis 23).

After having spent half of her life within the confines of Lowood, Jane wishes to explore the outside world and begins to send out job applications for the position of governess. She is hired by Rochester at Thornfield Hall; she is not only relieved to attain this position, but also is ready to go to great lengths in order to preserve it. Jane even attends parties, on her master's orders, where she is looked down on by the guests. Her pay is meager, but it is also her only source of income and self-reliance at this point in the novel. If Jane leaves, she has no one else to turn to and no other option to help her maintain her sense of dignity (Anis 23).
Despite the sturdy character of Jane Eyre, she has moments of less controlled feeling--even though she has exemplary integrity. In one of Jane's most famous assertions of her integrity she states:

Do you think, because I am poor, obscure, plain, and little, I am soulless and heartless? You think wrong - I have as much soul as you, - and full as much heart! And if God had gifted me with some beauty, and much wealth, I should have made it as hard for you to leave me, as it is not for me to leave you. I am not talking to you now through the medium of custom, conventionalities, or even of mortal flesh: - it is my spirit that addresses your spirit; just as if both had passed through the grave, and we stood at God's feet equal, - as we are! (Gilbert 487)

The reader is surprised that Jane should take Rochester's marriage proposal so seriously. Jane is quite levelheaded when she discovers Rochester has a concealed wife; when Rochester can not marry Jane legally, he proposes to her that she should become his mistress. She not only refuses this, but also resigns her position in the house and finds another position elsewhere (Anis 24). This capacity to take responsibility in adverse situations is an important quality which many women lacked--though wished for--during the nineteenth century.

Bertha Mason Rochester, Rochester's deranged wife hidden away within the house, serves as Jane's double throughout the novel. Jane is the socially acceptable or more conventional personality, whereas Bertha externalizes the free, uninhibited, criminal self (Gilbert 481). Bertha functions as Jane's dark
double throughout her stay at Thornfield. Every one of Bertha's manifestations are associated with an experience or repression of anger on the part of Jane Eyre (Gilbert 493). Gilbert states within her essay entitled “Plain Jane's Progress” that:

Bertha not only acts for Jane; she also acts like Jane. The imprisoned Bertha, running ‘backwards and forwards’ on all fours, for instance, recalls not only Jane the governess, whose sole relief from mental pain was to pace ‘backwards and forwards’ in the third story, but also the ‘bad animal’ who was ten year old Jane, imprisoned in the red room, howling and mad. (Gilbert 493)

At the end of the novel, Jane draws her powers from within herself. When she is at Marsh End contemplating a marriage to St. John, she realizes that she cannot do it and in that moment, “The wondrous shock of feeling had opened the doors of the soul’s cell, and wakened it out of its sleep.” For in that moment, Jane had been freed from the burden of her past: she had awakened to her own self, and her own needs (Gilbert 499).

Yet Jane marries Rochester when he becomes physically and financially reduced by the accident which kills his wife. Only when Rochester is pauperized is Jane able to marry him. Somehow throughout this process, Jane still maintains her status as a thinking and independent woman rather than a weak female. But Charlotte Bronte is able to proclaim the rights of her sex through Jane as she awaits the initiative of Rochester (Anis 25). Rochester's love for Jane was genuine, as she was neither attractive, nor wealthy, nor eligible for a man of his position when he first proposes to her. It is only when Jane no longer needs his
money, when she can become mistress of his heart that she is willing to accept him: and it is in this role that she takes her rightful place of dominion over Rochester's home (Graves 2).

The more traditional role of woman is *especially* challenged in the novel *Lady Audley's Secret* by Mary Elizabeth Braddon. During the nineteenth century, “sensational” and “fleshy” heroines emerge as strong minded, passionate women. These women are anything but angels, sometimes even participating in criminal acts. In *Lady Audley's Secret*, the passive victim becomes the active victimizer. The sensational heroine (or antagonist) challenges social roles and moral laws. Lady Audley is subversive enough to call into question the culture’s moral health and the nature of womanhood (Helsinger 112). The novel takes crime, mystery, passion, social commentary, and questions of identity into account.

Externally, Lucy Audley is the epitome of all that is feminine; beautiful, fragile, and mannerly. Lucy Audley appears to the reader as the perfect *Angel in the House*; a model for traditional womanly behavior who accepts fundamental differences between the roles of men and women (Helsinger xv). Lucy goes from the *Angel in the House* to the devil in the house in a short period of time.

Dethroning the *Angel in the House* means discontent within the household, but how satisfactory can traditional roles be if adultery, bigamy, and spouse killing captivated millions of readers? The *Westminster Review* in 1865 commented on the general sense of dislocation:

> The New Woman, as we read of her in recent novels, possesses not only the velvet, but the claws of a tiger. She is no longer the Angel,
but the Devil in the House . . . Man proposes, woman disposes, is the new proverb. The Fathers, after all, were right when they said Adam was more tempted by Eve than by the Devil. (Helsinger 125)

The Angel in the House is a poem by Coventry Patmore which suggests woman is the ideal creature when she is a wife or mother. In this poem, the speaker describes woman as man’s better half when he states, “No lik’en’d excellence can reach / Her, the most excellent of all / The best half of creation’s best” (Christ 1586). Patmore further emphasizes this belief later on in the poem when he states, “I'll teach how noble man should be / To match with such a lovely mate” (Christ 1586). Woman is also described by Patmore as simple and sweet, “For she's so simple, subtly sweet / My deepest rapture does her wrong” (Christ 1586). But, woman is not only simple and sweet, she is also gentle and uplifted by love: “On wings of love uplifted free / And by her gentleness made great.” So, not only does woman possess these qualities, they also serve to make her divine in a sense. Woman is also portrayed as fair in heart, meek, submissive, and self sacrificing when the poet states, “New fairness even in her fair heart . . . So meet, so far unlike her own . . . Until we find, as darkness rolls / Away, and evil mists dissolve / The nuptial contrasts are the poles / On which the heavenly spheres revolve” (Christ 1587). The last line also depicts the way in which the home is regarded as a heavenly sphere or safe haven. All of these qualities accurately describe Lucy Audley’s outward manner and appearance, but are antithetical to her true nature.
Another work which regards the “true” nature of the home as a place of peace and a safe haven would be John Ruskin’s Of Queens’ Garden. In this work, he states, “This is the true nature of home - it is the place of Peace; the shelter, not only from all injury, but from all terror, doubt, and division (Christ 1588). It is the wife’s duty to maintain order and tranquility within the household, and it should always remain a “sacred place, a vestal temple.” He goes on to say that woman must be “enduring, incorruptibly good.” These items are exactly what makes the novel Lady Audley’s Secret so absolutely terrifying to Victorian men and women of the nineteenth century. Lady Audley is depicted as a woman who commits atrocities within the home that her husband has no knowledge of what so ever: frighteningly, she is regarded by everyone as an angel and a beauty. That is, until the end when she admits to all of her fiendish activities.

In the Times of London after the release of the novel, the following was written about the character of Lucy Audley:

Lady Audley’s character is well conceived, and develops itself naturally. In the first few chapters, she appears a perfect angel. The beauty of the country, the delight of her husband, the beloved and admired of all….Gradually we discover the mask. She is a heartless creature who plays a heartless game . . . It is not easy to represent a woman in such a position, or with a character capable of such acts; to depict the lovely woman with the fishy extremities. Miss Braddon would be entitled to rank as the first of lady novelists if she had perfectly succeeded in reconciling these contradictions;
nevertheless her portraiture is by no means feeble, and gives promise of great success hereafter. (Helsinger 132)

The monstrous acts committed on the part of Lady Audley which occur in the novel serve to make Victorian’s aware of the ‘false’ realities presented in the Victorian Era (Walls 231). Lady Audley goes against all that is seen as conventional idealized femininity.

In The Woman in White by Wilkie Collins, Marian Halcombe is a character that is fully independent of men. Marian violates stereotypes not only in manners, but appearance as well (Allingham). Marian is described as tall, dark, with “thick, coal black hair, growing unusually low in her forehead,” frank and forward, and, to Walter at least, unattractive because of features such as “swarthiness” and a “firm mouth and jaw” which he reads as masculine. Walter states, ”Her expression - bright, frank, and intelligent - appeared while she was silent, to be altogether wanting in those feminine attractions of gentleness and pliability, without which the beauty of the handsomest woman alive is beauty incomplete.” Marian has large hands, an open manner, presence of mind, and a general scorn for her own sex. Her energy and assertiveness enable Marian to rescue the passive Laura Fairlie from the asylum where she is being kept as Anne Catherick (Cohen 141).

Marian is complex and unpredictable, and transcends the limitations which the nineteenth century imposed on women. She remains fully in possession of herself and motivated by her own concerns throughout the entirety of the novel. “No man under heaven deserves these sacrifices from us
women,” cries Marian to Laura while discussing Laura’s soon to be “entrapment” and “subjugation” in a loveless marriage which Laura only enters to please her father (Allingham). True to Victorian ideals about womanhood, Laura remains a model of “patient endurance,” while Marian takes hold of situations with two hands. Dark and ugly as she is, Marian fights to save Laura from male domination and attacks masculine condemnation of female intelligence and character.

In *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Bronte, *Lady Audley’s Secret* by Mary Elizabeth Braddon and *The Woman in White* by Wilkie Collins the reader is able to see the tensions of the era regarding the Woman Question; in particular, the focus within these novels is on the woman as working for or against the conservative principles of the Victorian era. These works can be usefully contrasted with works during the Victorian period such as Sarah Stickney Ellis’ *The Women of England: Their Social Duties and Domestic Habits*, Coventry Patmore’s *The Angel in the House*, and John Ruskin’s *Of Queens’ Gardens* which show a complex understanding of the intricate pattern constituting Victorian women’s lives, and reveal clearly the domestic ideology of the time. The characters of Jane Eyre, Lucy Audley, and Marian Halcombe, however, work against the standard Victorian conventions of idealized femininity as formulated in the dominant culture of the period.
Works Cited


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