

Role Of Women Reflected In English Literature Through Ages

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Abstract

Throughout the history of literature, female characters are often side characters that do not get much recognition from readers. Further analysis of male-centric works, reveals that women play central roles in literature regardless of the proximity to the protagonist (oftentimes, male) who is struggling with internal and external conflicts. Many of these conflicts in literature lead to significant analysis of the moral fabric that defines such a character.

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For example, the epic of "Beowulf" is revered for its accounts of heroism and male comradery. Beowulf is a courageous hero who defeats three monsters for the sake of a nearby country. The women in "Beowulf" are overlooked; however, a close examination of the poetry demonstrates that the women play roles that are central to the story and to that of society. Three major women play integral roles throughout the epic: Wealhtheow,

Grendel's Mother, and Hildeburh. These women entertain, bring peace, and contradict societal expectations of the female gender, either

directly or indirectly. The epic of "Beowulf" illustrates three major roles for the women in the society: the hostess, the peacemaker, and the monster.

In *Beowulf* the women presented are central to not only the story but also society itself. They present voices that offer influence over the predominately male group and often are the voice of reason with their husbands. These women should not be taken lightly. They are the **peaceweaver**, the **hostess**, and the **monster**. The role of the peaceweaver is often seen as a woman whose role is to marry someone from a rival tribe to bring peace between the enemies. The power of the woman in this role is historical, and it is as the peaceweaver that she makes her place in the hall. She has a talent for keeping peace among the warriors, between her husband and others, and in general, it is her peaceweaving skill that brings harmony.

An excellent example of a peaceweaver in *Beowulf* is **Hildeburh**, a Danish princess married to Finn, king of the Jutes. As a gift, it is expected that she will bring about an alliance between the parties. She is successful in her task, as she has a son. In a battle, she loses her son, her brother, and her husband, and she mourns these losses. The **scop**, or poet, tells us, 'blameless she was deprived of her dear ones at the shield-play, of son and brother; wounded by spears they fell to their fate. That was a mournful woman.' She returns to her homeland, where she is still considered a Danish queen. The story of Hildeburh is central to *Beowulf* as it demonstrates

the important role of the peaceweaver, who helps maintain loyalty between her homeland and her husband

Wealththeow is an excellent example of the medieval hostess who upholds social customs and demonstrates publicly the status of the men surrounding the king. In the beginning of the poem, Wealththeow begins by first serving her husband, Hrothgar, the king, from the mead cup. She then gives the cup to each of the men in order of their importance. In the opening scene, Beowulf is given the cup last because he is new to the hall. In the final scene, because Beowulf returns a victor, he is given the mead cup after the king, indicating that his the dramatic rise in his status due to his success.

When Beowulf returns, Wealththeow asks the king not to make Beowulf the heir to the throne, something she feels is the birthright of her sons. While Beowulf does become king, it is only as a placeholder until Wealththeow's sons are of an age to assume the throne. The role of the hostess is powerful, and her voice is one that strikes a chord with the king. The scop refers to her this way: 'Wealththeow is mindful of customs, excellent of heart, and sure of speech

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In the Middle Ages women had a secondary role, coming second after men.

Women's life was divided between family, marriage and religion. The women's main concern and responsibility was the procreation. In those times, family was very big so the typical role of the woman was that to be a good wife and a good mother. Some of them tried emancipation but they were blamed by society for this. These were the witches, the writers and the nurses (they took care of sick people and children). However there are some women who remained in the history.

Chaucer, in his female pilgrimage thought of women as having an evil-like quality that they always tempt and take from men. They were depicted as untrustworthy, selfish and vain and often like caricatures not like real people at all. Through the faults of both men and women, Chaucer showed what is right and wrong and how one should live. Under the surface, however, lies a jaded look of women in the form that in his writings he seems to crate them as caricatures and show how they cause the downfall of men by sometimes appealing to their desires and other times their fears. Chaucer obviously had very opinionated views of the manners and behaviours of women and expressed it strongly in The Canterbury Tales. In his collection of tales, he portrayed two extremes in his prospect of women. The Wife of Bath represented the extravagant and lusty woman where as the Prioress represented the admirable and devoted followers of church. Chaucer delineated the two characters contrastingly in their appearances, general manners, education and most evidently in their behaviour towards men. Yet, in the midst of disparities, both tales left its readers with an unsolved enigma.

The Wife of Bath represents the "liberal" extreme in regards to female stereotypes of the Middle Ages. Unlike most women being anonymous during the Middle Ages, she has a mind of her own and voices herself. Furthermore, she thinks extremely highly of herself and enjoys showing off her Sunday clothes whenever the opportunity arises. She intimidates men and women alike due to the power she possesses. Because of her obnoxious attitude Chaucer makes her toothless, fat and large. Doubtlessly, she is very ugly, almost to the point of "not-presentable. This to me shows how Chaucer depicts what men don't want. The Prioress, on the other hand, serves as a foil to the Wife of Bath. Chaucer describes her as "tender-hearted" who cannot bear the sight of pain or physical suffering. She will cry at the thought of a dog dying. It could represent that she has a frail soul with low tolerance for pain and suffering. The latter description carries over into the modern stereotypes about women as skittish and afraid members of society who need to be cared for. Chaucer paints a very delicate and elegant picture of the Prioress. Her manners of eating are far from the brutish festivals of the time. Chaucer describes her table manners as very graceful, not a drop of anything would fall from her mouth, and she was very polite when taking thing at the table. (Lines 131-4). Chaucer's last description of Prioress - the letter "A" around her neck that stood for "Amor vincit omnia" meaning "Love conquers all." The brooch symbolizes love with which her rosaries are adorned is a common accessory for religious devotion, which carries the courtly love anthem: love conquers all. The symbol that she wears shows that she is perfect and obviously a representation of what most men of the time want but of course they can't have her. Accordingly, the Wife of Bath is daunting, ostentatious and ultimately ugly. She is nothing in comparison to the Prioress who is elegant, well mannered and above all loving

While economic mobility was truly restrictive for both men and women during the Middle Ages, women generally had fewer options than men in terms of societal roles—specially in terms of trade or profession—they could assume. This apparent lack of accessible professional roles is evident in the characterization of *The Canterbury Tales*: of the 24 pilgrims who journeyed together to visit the shrine of St Thomas Becket at Canterbury Cathedral, only three are women. Of the three, only two female roles are represented, that of a nun and that of a wife.

The women of the Renaissance, like women of the Middle Ages, were denied all political rights and considered legally subject to their husbands. Women of all classes were expected to perform, first and foremost, the duties of housewife. Peasant women worked in the field alongside their husbands and ran the home. The wives of middle class shop owners and merchants often helped run their husbands' businesses as well. Even women of the highest class, though attended by servants, most often engaged in the tasks of the household, sewing, cooking, and entertaining, among others. Women who did not marry were not permitted to live independently. Instead, they lived in the households of their male relatives or, more often, joined a convent.

Just as the Renaissance defined female roles, it clearly delegated certain behaviors to males. Theirs was a patriarchal society. We catch a glimpse of this patriarchy in a play like *Romeo and Juliet* with the power of Lord Capulet. It's easy to see that the male had a place and a role to play, just as the female had a lesser place and a role. The woman is either in the house of her father as Juliet is or in the house of her husband as Lady Macbeth is. Notice in *Macbeth* that Lady Macbeth is observed only within the castle at Inverness, and it is her duty to make "preparations" for the arrival of King Duncan. Lord Capulet underscores this female

responsibility when he announces, in anticipation of the marriage of Paris and Juliet, that he will "play the housewife for this once." In *Macbeth*, as in Renaissance society, men were expected to engage in public affairs (as soldiers, politicians, leaders), to be talkers, make decisions, move events forward. They led lives which were duty-bound (mostly to the state), aggressive, and self-satisfying. On the other hand, women were expected to assume a more passive role. For example, at the beginning of *Romeo and Juliet* when the boys are milling around the streets of Verona and talking dirty about girls, Sampson (one of Capulet's servants) remarks, "And therefore women, being the weaker vessels, are ever thrust to the wall; therefore I will push Montague's men from the wall, and thrust his maids to the wall." The passage is ripe with stereotypical Renaissance thinking: women are weaker (physically, emotionally, intellectually, morally), and they exist for male sexual gratification—they're only good for "thrusting" to the wall. When Lady Macbeth decides to become an "active" partner in her husband's deadly mischief, she needs to pray "Come, you spirits ... unsex me here, / and fill me from the crown to the toe topful / Of direst cruelty," which suggests that it is not "natural" for a woman to be cruel.

During the Elizabethan Age, the wonderful heroines of the romantic comedies—Beatrice in *Much Ado About Nothing*, Rosalind in *As You Like It*, and Viola in *Twelfth Night*—reflect this blend of feminine and masculine attitudes and behaviors. Although they are women, subject at some point in each play to the care of fathers, brothers, and/or husbands, each is also "masculine" in her actions. As "strong females," they demonstrate more self-awareness than the men; they use their reason, they talk, they are mobile, often found in the out-of-doors rather than inside their fathers' or husbands' houses. They control the action. Portia, for example, controls the final scene of *The Merchant of Venice* by

bringing about the downfall of Shylock through her tempering of justice with mercy and by controlling the forces which enable her to live happily ever after with Bassanio. Viola, too, earns marriage with the man of her choice by acting literally as both male and female, and cleverly manipulating the Duke's relationship with Olivia. Like Portia, Rosalind dominates the action in *As You Like It*. She is intelligent, strong of character, patient, and demonstrates an unshakable integrity. Furthermore, she is strong and able to defend herself when falsely accused of treason.

Women's proper role in society, as defined by most opinion in that age, was largely limited to the domestic sphere, and even in family life, both legally and actually, women were always supposed to be under the control of some male authority: first by the father, then by the husband, and if the woman were widowed, in many regions finally by either male children or the male relatives of her deceased spouse. The course of a woman's life was clearly defined: first as daughter and virgin, then as wife and mother, and finally as widow. Only a wealthy widow had any real chance of being more or less independent and in charge of her own life. Even in that case, her independence in many regions was greatly restricted by the property rights of her sons and her husband's kinsmen.

Until the 'Reformation' women theoretically had the option of continuing to live in a virginal state by entering the monastic life. Since, however, most female monasteries expected postulants to present a dowry upon entry, in practice only women from relatively prosperous families had the option of becoming nuns. In the 13th and 14th centuries, especially in urban areas, informal communities of single women sprang up outside the monastic orders, but since such groups did not have official approval and were not subject to supervision and control by male clergy, they often faced suppression by authorities who feared

that unsupervised communities of females either would fall into heresy or would become prostitutes. After the Catholic Reformation became strong from about 1550, church authorities were even less tolerant of unofficial communities of unmarried females living together.

.Also in Romantic poetry nature is depicted in female terms in opposition to male powers of imagination. Blake envisions nature as the deceptive goddess Vala, and Wordsworth, although a worshiper of nature, also reveals the darker shades of her power and influence in such works as the Lucy poems and the "Intimations Ode" (1807). Individual women in Wordsworth's poetry often become subsumed in nature and its processes so that they have no voice, no identity apart from the male poet's perception of nature: Lucy dies and is "rolled round in earth's diurnal course / With rocks, and stones, and trees" ("A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal"). Readers have noted the particular association between nature and motherhood in Wordsworth's poetry, generally concluding that Wordsworth sought the guardianship and protection in nature that he lost with the death of his mother when he was a young child. Wordsworth perceptively describes the natural process of the mother-infant bonding in a noted passage in Book 2 of *The Prelude* (1850).

Although a male-centered solipsistic vision prevails in much of the poetry, the Romantics also strive to place male-female relationships in the context of the fundamental human rights and freedoms inspired by the French Revolution. In *America* (1793), for instance, Blake dramatizes the intrinsic relationship between political and sexual liberation; following Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), he sees the analogy between political and marital tyranny. In a renovated world, the "doors of marriage are open," and females glow "with the lusts of youth" (15:19, 15:22). Like Wollstonecraft, Blake sees female liberation also

liberating men from the self-destructive relationships based on power and jealousy. Shelley, despite the contradictions in his own life and art, also claims in his *Defense of Poetry* (1840) the "abolition of personal and domestic slavery" and the "emancipation of women" to be the highest hopes for humankind.

Jane Austen, of course, knew that she had been excluded from a male tradition. She has Anne Elliot argue in *Persuasion* (1818) that "men have had every advantage of us in telling their own story. Education has been theirs in so much higher a degree; the pen had been in their hands" (Chapter 23). Through close and sympathetic portrayal of characters like Anne Elliot, Emma Woodhouse (*Emma*, 1816), and Elizabeth Bennet (*Pride and Prejudice*, 1813), Austen presents women who change and develop as they discover knowledge of themselves and their social world. We sometimes see her women characters through men's eyes, but we are almost always allowed to focus on the heroine's developing consciousness

Despite the working generalizations between poets and novelists, we should acknowledge that the images of women across genres are as varied as the authors themselves. The Romantic period constitutes less a consistent school of thought than a historical span that includes such diverse writers as Byron and Austen. Even within the work of individual authors, often unresolved and contradictory images of women abound, revealing the ambivalent attitude toward women and their place in late eighteenth-century and early nineteenth-century culture

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 era, 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, Lord Tennyson's *The Lady of Shalott*, and Robert Browning's *Women and Roses* are three such examples where writers try to define the position of the Victorian woman.

Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market* and Tennyson's *The Lady of Shalott* define situations where women who try to attain some higher knowledge, only found in the "man's world," lose their ability to return to what they used to be and are seen by society as impure and raped of their woman-ness.

Rossetti's *Goblin Market* compares the two main Victorian views of women. One construct is represented by Lizzie who despite the attempts of the men to entice her to fall remains pure of heart, and innocent. The other is represented by Laura who eats the "fruit of knowledge" given to her by the goblin men and loses the ability to return to innocence. Laura's unappealing action of "buying from us with a golden curl," likens her situation to that of a prostitute. Also by comparing Laura's diminishing condition to that of Jeanie who died from the same conditions, Rossetti places fear into the readers by suggesting that seeking knowledge brings about death. In having Laura and Lizzie enter the marketplace Rossetti also alludes to women being consumed by the atrocity of man and his knowledge. From these examples, it is clear that Rossetti's intentions were to create a world of vivid imagery to steer women in her time away from the "goblin men" and the fruits of their knowledge.

Imagery in this poem is intertwined around night and day. Victorians commonly associated women with the lunar phases of serenity and purity; whereas, men were identified with the creative forces of the sun. This view is most strongly seen in the inner calm Laura and Lizzie have. In the beginning, the women are described as being

"veiled" and "crouching together," small and weak having to rely on one another. When one is outside during the night hidden shadows and the quietness of the dark causes the mind to play tricks causing a person to become subdued and weak. Lines 145-146, "Should not loiter in the glen/ In the haunts of goblin men," play upon the fear of Victorian women and its association with the darkness.

Rossetti also uses various imagery from the day to define times in which good events occur. The girls, before Laura's fall, are placed in the daytime where "twilight is not good for maidens"(line 144). Rossetti also equates "righteous" work habits and playfulness in the daytime. To Rossetti, the sun and daylight represent goodness and the proper time to work. It also describes the time of day when no bad things can happen. The Goblin Men, on the other hand, only appear at night where "their offer should not charm us,/ their evil gifts would harm us"(lines 65-66). Here, during the night is when the image of monsters and harmful events happen. In Rossetti's view women who partake in the daylight activities are more wholesome and obedient than women who flirt and hang around with men at night.

Tennyson's poem "*The Lady of Shalott*," also describes what happens to a woman when she steps out of her own world and enters the realm of man. His Lady is a weaver, who weaves a web from what she sees behind herself in a mirror. When the Lady sees Sir Lancelot's image in the mirror, it causes her to turn around and ultimately lays the basis for her death. Here, the illusion of women's lusty desire and the very fact that she feels passion and desire, two qualities thought to only be possessed by Victorian men, causes the death of the Lady of Shalott.

Tennyson uses nature to describe the Lady's position in society. The Lady "weaves by night

and day, a magic web with colors gay”(37-38). The image of a woman weaving by night draws ties with Rossetti’s poem of the realms of men and women. Line 10, “willows whiten, aspens quiver,” shows the monotony of the Lady’s days. Here, this imagery adds to the mood of dreariness that the Lady is trapped within. Although the Lady weaves throughout the daytime she has yet to be connected to the realm of man because what she weaves is indirectly seen, “shadows of the world” (line 48). It is when she desires to be within this world that, once again, causes her destruction.

Although Rossetti and Tennyson don’t say it directly, their views on women and their place in society are reflected within their poems. Women are to be uneducated, and be concerned with homely activities like cooking and weaving. They are to remain pure and innocent, to an almost religious extent, and not partake in “prostituituos ,” and unclean rituals. They don’t outright attempt to define women and what they are supposed to do. This is what Robert Browning’s poem, *Women and Roses* attempts to do.

In Robert Browning’s poem *Woman and Roses* the speaker compares the ideal woman to a rosebush. Rose imagery is seen throughout the poem to indicate values of love and passion of women towards their husbands. In using the image of the rose, he defines women according to the past, the present or Victorian standpoint, and suggests how the idea of being a woman will change in the future.

Throughout the Victorian era, people saw Nature as being separate from their society. The use of nature imagery in all the poems described above reflects these Victorian ideals. Rossetti’s use of nature defines the context in which women and men are divided, and why it is bad to integrate the two. Tennyson’s poem uses nature imagery to describe the Lady’s position in society. Nature

imagery is also used by Tennyson to compare the bleakness of the Lady’s situation to the life that thrives outside her mirror image. Browning’s poem centers the rose, nature imagery in itself, to compare what he believes the perfect woman should be. In the comparison of women to nature, all three poets suggest that women are separate from men. However, the Victorians held notions that nature and women were similar in the respect that they both had to be subdued.

George Meredith wrote a significant New Woman novel, *Diana of Crossways* (1885) about a passionate and intelligent upper-class young woman who is trapped into an abusive and degrading marriage. The novel became an inspiration for a number of New Women in their struggle for emancipation at the turn of the century.

George Gissing’s (1857-1903) *Odd Women* (1893) takes up the theme of redundant women in the 1880s. The novel focuses on the fates of single women and demonstrates that the patriarchal and male dominated society is unable to accept the increasing presence of new independent women in the public sphere.

Grant Allen (1848-1899) wrote one of the most hotly discussed novels, *The Woman Who Did* (1895), which combines the free-love theme with an anti-marriage message. The Cambridge-educated heroine of the novel refuses to marry her lover, but gives birth to her illegitimate daughter. The novel prompted Lucas Cleeve (Adelina G. I. Kingscote, 1868-1908) to write *The Woman Who Wouldn't*, and Victoria Cross(e) (Annie Sophie Cory, 1868-1952), *The Woman Who Didn't*.

Thomas Hardy, who praised some of the New Woman writers (Sarah Grand, George Egerton and Grant Allen), created a memorable and tragic female character in his last novel, *Jude the Obscure* (1896). Sue Bridehead, an enlightened

liberal New Woman, is a victim of oppressive Victorian double moral standard. Like the New Woman female authors, Hardy objects to the Victorian view of the sacredness of the institution of marriage. In *Jude* he proposes the abolition of conventional marriage because it is not in harmony with human nature.

Charlotte Brontë withdrew into the world she created. It was through her writing that she was allowed to breathe life into her suppressed self and dreams. Charlotte Brontë spoke of the evils of the condition of women, deep-rooted within the structure of the social system (Moers, 18). Charlotte Brontë urged women not to linger on such problems; though the literary world must be grateful she did not heed her own advice. It was through her discontent that the characters of Jane Eyre and Lucy Snowe were born.

Jane Eyre, arguably Charlotte Brontë's *tour de force* intermingles autobiographical elements with romantic notions of the period. In the character Jane, Charlotte Brontë created a slight woman, in all respects plain, modest, morally strong and intelligent. Like the author, Jane's isolation created her persona, providing her with the necessary survival skills. Jane does not need a man to make her feel worthy; instead, she carries her self-worth in her mind and determination. Through Jane, Brontë exhibits resentment toward a society that has scorned her, while maintaining a detachment toward humanity as a whole.

When Jane ultimately falls in love, she embraces the notion of love itself, not the label or profits derived from it. However, Jane will not sacrifice her morals or self-respect for any man. In essence, she will not sacrifice herself. It is imperative to her to remain true to herself. Nothing can tempt Jane in this respect: wealth, status, or love.

I care for myself. The more solitary, the more friendless, the more unsustained I am, the more I will respect myself (301).

Like Jane, Charlotte herself was determined to marry a man she respected. In fact, she refused several offers of marriage that would have afforded her a life of ease, simply because the offers did not come from men she deemed her equal, or rather she felt them intellectually and morally deficient. She believed that a good woman, like any decent man, could not live without self-respect. She believed passion a temporary emotion that could easily give way to disgust, or worse, indifference. "God help the woman who is left to love passionately and alone"

The dawn of the twentieth century witnessed changes in almost every aspect of the day-to-day lives of women, from the domestic sphere to the public. The women's movement, with its emphasis on advocacy of equal rights, newly formed women's organizations, and the rise of a new generation of female artists, photographers, and professionals, transformed the traditional patriarchal social structure across the globe. Followed closely by the advent of World War I, these social shifts, which had been set in motion at the beginning of the century, developed further as women were propelled into the workforce, exposing them to previously male-dominated professional and political situations. By the midpoint of the twentieth century, women's activities and concerns had been recognized as a significant element of the literary, scientific, and cultural landscape of several countries, marking a revolutionary change in the social and domestic roles of women.

Women in the early twentieth century were perhaps most active and influential as writers and artists. The advent of the new century did witness a change in the style and content of women's writing, as well as an increase in the depiction of

feminine images and themes in literature. Male authors such as D. H. Lawrence and W. D. Howells explored issues pertaining to sexuality and the newly redefined sexual politics between men and women. Women authors such as Dorothy Richardson, May Sinclair, and Katherine Mansfield focused on topics pertinent to women, bringing attention to the myriad difficulties they faced redefining their identities in a changing world. Other major women writers of the period included Gertrude Stein, Virginia Woolf, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, and Edith Wharton. In the arena of art, the early twentieth century provided growing opportunities for women to exhibit their work. In 1914, for example, the National Academy of Design first allowed women to attend anatomy lectures, thus providing them with a chance to study draftsmanship and develop drawing skills in a formal setting. Many female artists—among them Dorothea Lange and Claire Leighton—used their talents to highlight the social realities of their times, and some of the most powerful images of this period, including stirring portrayals of coal miners and farmers, were produced by these women

[1] Quoted in: Warren Montag: “What is at stake in the Debate on Postmodernism?”, in: E. Ann Kaplan, *Postmodernism and its Discontents*, p.101, London, 1988.

[2] “After Auschwitz and Stalinism it is certain that no-one can maintain that the hopes which were bound up with modernity have been fulfilled. To be sure they have not been forgotten, but rather destroyed.” Quoted in: Peter Dews: “From Post-Structuralism to Postmodernity”, in: *ICA Documents 4*, p.15, London, 1986.

[3] Critics include: Mike Davis, “Urban Renaissance and the Spirit of Postmodernism”, reprinted in Kaplan; Alex Callinicos: “Drawing the Line”, *International Socialist*, 53, Winter, 1991

[4] Frederic Jameson: “Postmodernism and Consumer Society”, reprinted in Kaplan, p.22.

[5] Davis, p.83. 1988