Depictions of Women in Victorian Literature:
Precursors of Social Change or Stereotypical?

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England's Victorian Age was pregnant with the seeds of social change, intersown with the nutrients of personal and national introspection. Two novelists of the time, Charlotte Brontë (under the male pseudonym Currer Bell) and Charles Dickens, published works that serve as examples of this British milieu. Brontë's Jane Eyre, published in 1847, and Dickens' Hard Times, published in 1854 (Bomarito and Whitaker 193), expose concerns regarding their nation's commonly held opinions about the position and value of females. While there are similarities and differences between the authors' portrayals of their main characters, there is much less difference in the treatment of other females in either book, and very little difference in their descriptions of the madwomen, who play the foils to the moral and self-sacrificing Jane and Louisa. Bomarito and Whitaker describe Brontë as "challeng[ing] social norms through [her] female characters" and Dickens as "show[ing] pity for women but suggest[ing] men and women should keep their proper place in society" (192). Although Brontë breathes assertiveness and self-sufficiency into her character, Jane, and Dickens forms Louisa, at least partially, in the manner of his own preferences "grateful for favors received, humble, patient, and passive" (Scheckner 88), both authors conclude their novels within the mores of the Victorian age.

While the Victorian Age is also referred to as the long eighteenth century, a time period that survives from 1680 to 1880 (Innes 149), Brontë and Dickens live and write closer to the end of this era. Their books are set in the midst of the industrial revolution when evolving capitalism results in women from the poorer classes working in industry as well as being expected to maintain their domestic responsibilities. Additionally, women in better circumstances became readers and travellers and even writers. However, their writing was not always appreciated by the masses, especially the male masses. This elucidates Brontë's need to publish under a male pseudonym (Bomarito and Whitaker 192-193).

Brontë and Dickens create complicated personalities for Jane and Louisa. Jane's previously mentioned assertiveness erupts at the age of ten, when she fights back in response to her cousin's verbal and physical abuse. Before this incident she was "accustomed to John Reed's abuse, [she] never had an idea of replying to it; [her] care was how to endure the blow which would certainly follow the insult" (Brontë 8). After her aunt sends her to Lowood boarding school, Jane adjusts well. However, her parting words to her aunt, her biological uncle's widow, reinforce her assertiveness and show signs of recalcitrance:

> I am glad you are no relation of mine: I will never call you
> aunt again as long as I live. I will never come to see you

> when I am grown up; and if anyone asks me how I liked you, and how you treated me, I will say that the very thought of you makes me sick, and that you treated me with miserable cruelty. (30)

Throughout the novel, Jane speaks out expressing herself more than the female custom of the time. In addition, her self-sufficiency is exemplified in her determined flight from Thornfield Hall, a flight made in response to discovering Rochester already has a wife and that his marriage to her, Jane, would merely make her his mistress. However, Jane's harried escape from this compromising situation is in keeping with the Victorian regard for respectability as well as a display of her own character.

In comparison, Louisa is more than the Dickensian model of Victorian femininity. Taught from an early age to rely only upon facts, Louisa also has dreams. She shares her thoughts about wondering with her brother Tom, only to be caught in her musings by her mother, who berates both of them, Tom even more than Louisa (Dickens 45). When Louisa's father, Mr. Gradgrind, catches Louisa and Tom peaking at the circus through a hole in the fence, he assumes that Tom is responsible. Louisa, knowing that she is inviting her father's displeasure, responds to the accusation:

> "I brought him father" said Louisa quickly. "I asked him to come."
> "I am sorry to hear it. I am very sorry indeed to hear it. It makes Thomas no better, and it
> makes you worse, Louisa." (14)

Louisa defends and often subjugates her own feelings for those of her brother, Tom. In return he constantly insinuates that girls have life easier than boys. In one scene, Louisa is criticizing their shared childhood environment and states "It's a great pity, Tom. It's very unfortunate for both of us." To which he replies, "You are a girl, Loo, and girls come out of it better than a boy does" (43).

Both heroines experience self-sacrifice. Shamir details the "virtues attributed to the valiant woman [of Victorian times, as] self-sacrifice, [and] the ability to maintain intimacy and social responsibility" (198). Jane's self-sacrifices include the deprivation and starvation she experiences when she flees Thornfield Hall and the already married Rochester. Her subsequent sacrifice is her marriage to this same Edward Rochester, whose wife is then deceased. However, as a blind and one-handed man, he is no longer able to care for himself, and Jane becomes his helpmate and caregiver as well as his wife. After Rochester proposes to Jane, he questions her decision by stating, "Because you delight in sacrifice" (Brontë 379). To which Jane replies:

> Sacrifice! What do I sacrifice? Famine for food, expectation for content. To be privileged
> to put my arms round what I value – to press my lips to what I love – to repose on what I trust: is that to make a sacrifice? If so, then certainly I delight in sacrifice. (379)

Through her non-provisioned flight from Rochester, Jane sacrifices herself to the Victorian era's social mores. Then for love of the man who would have knowingly compromised her, she sacrifices herself to a life of caregiving.

Meanwhile, Louisa sacrifices her virginity and freedom, not for Bounderby, the man she marries, but for the sake of her brother. While this union to a man she neither loves nor respects is suggested by her father, it is Tom's pleas that sway Louisa's choice. Louisa is prepared for her father's request by a visit from Tom, for Tom already resides with and works for Bounderby. Tom's words, non-specific in their connotation, are left for Louisa's overnight contemplation. He states:

> We might be so much oftener together – mightn't we? Always together, almost –
> mightn't we? It would do me a great deal of good if you were to make up your mind to I know what, Loo. It would be a splendid thing for me. It would be uncommonly jolly! (Dickens 74)

Tom selfishly considers himself before anyone or anything else; Louisa loves and considers her brother before herself. Cowles states, "Dickens clearly approves of Louisa's desire to serve Tom in the ways he expects – and certainly because Dickens, too, sees female self-sacrifice as natural" (8). Dickens portrays Louisa as the ultimate example of self-sacrificing Victorian femininity.

Another factor in each woman's life is education. Similar in intelligence, Jane and Louisa are well-educated, but in different styles of education. Jane's love of books and time in boarding school stimulate her imagination, as portrayed in her paintings. Rochester comments on some of her work with:

> You had not enough of the artist's skill and science to give it full being; yet the drawings
> are, for a schoolgirl, peculiar. As to the thoughts, they are elfish. These eyes in the
> Evening Star you must have seen in a dream. How could you make them look so clear,
> and yet not at all brilliant? For the planet above quells their rays. And what meaning is
> that in their solemn depth? (Brontë 108)

On the other hand, Louisa's education is one of facts and only facts. Imagination for Louisa is first bound by her father's beliefs and teachings, and then further bound by her marriage to Bounderby. Mr. Gradgrind is proud of the educational accomplishments of his children. Early in Dickens's story and while he is walking home, he thinks about his offspring:

> There were five young Gradgrinds, and they were models every one. They had been
> lectured at from their tenderest years; coursed like little hares. Almost as soon as they
> could run alone, they had been made to run to the lecture-room. (11)

Of particular note is the phrase "they had been made to run." There was obviously no choice allowed. Mr. Gradgrind's ruminations continued with:

> No little Gradgrind had ever associated a cow in the field with that famous cow with the
> crumpled horn who tossed the dog who worried the cat who killed the rat who ate the
> malt, or with that yet more famous cow who swallowed Tom Thumb: it had never heard
> of those celebrities, and had only been introduced to a cow as a graminivorous
> ruminating quadruped with several stomachs. (11)

Interestingly, Mr. Gradgrind refers to his children as it, a non-gendered term. The fact that his boys and his girls receive the same education is commendable, even if that education is stifling. Louisa, unlike Jane, is not allowed an imagination. Therefore education saves Jane from a subservient existence, while education limits Louisa's enjoyment of life.

Jane's eventual attainment of her personal dreams, through her marriage to Rochester and her eventual motherhood, exemplifies the desires of the women of that age. The twenty years difference in the ages of Jane and Rochester is consistent with a practice that became popular during the Victorian period, "the older-man/younger-woman relationships" (Godfrey 168). These age differences "reinforce the subservient role of the female as child, as student, as victim, and the dominant role of the male as father, as teacher, and as aggressor" (168). However, in this marriage, Rochester's physical limitations and Jane's caregiving, both ameliorate Rochester's dominance and increase Jane's subservience. Jane refers to her marriage to Rochester very simply: "Reader, I married him. A quiet wedding we had: he and I, the parson and clerk, were alone present" (Brontë 382).

In contrast and yet still maintaining conservative views, the end of Hard Times keeps Dickens's heroine in her father's home without a husband or her own children. Louisa is denied any possibility of marital bliss, due to her unfortunate marriage to the obstreperous and pretentious Bounderby. Dickens describes Louisa's fate:

> Herself again a wife – a mother – lovingly watchful of her children, ever careful that they should have a childhood of the mind no less than a childhood of the body, as knowing it to be even a more beautiful thing and possession, any hoarded scrap of which, is a blessing and happiness to the

> wisest? Did Louisa see this? Such a thing was never to be.
> (222)

This denial therefore extends beyond Bounderby's death, for five years after his separation from Louisa, "Josiah Bounderby of Coketown was to die of a fit in a Coketown street" (221). By the end of their books, both authors maintain conventional morality regarding a woman's place, but considering the Victorian view that marriage and motherhood is the preferable goal, Brontë is kinder to Jane by allowing her that goal than Dickens is to his childless Louisa.

There are secondary female characters in each novel that are portrayed as decidedly angelic: Helen Burns and Miss Temple, as well as Sissy Jupe and Rachel. Jane attempts to befriend Helen on Jane's first day at Lowood, and the next day observes Helen being severely disciplined for having dirty fingernails. Helen's forbearance during the switching is described by Jane:

> Not a tear rose to Burns' eye; and, while I paused from my sewing, because my fingers
> quivered at this spectacle with a sentiment of unavailing and impotent anger, not a feature
> of her pensive face altered its expression. (45)

When Jane questions Helen about the incident, Helen blames herself rather than the teacher. Rebellious Jane describes how she would have resisted the teacher and broken the rod "under her nose" (46). Helen's reply exposes her religious upbringing and beliefs. "Yet it would be your duty to bear it, if you could not avoid it: it is weak and silly to say you cannot bear what it is your fate to be required to bear" (47). Even when Jane shares the story of her own abuse at the hands of her aunt and cousins, Helen's answer is:

> Would you not be happier if you tried to forget her severity, together with the
> passionate emotions it excited? Life appears to me too short to be spent in nursing
> animosity or registering wrongs (49).

So while Jane expects sympathy she receives counselling. Vander Weele states that "the tenor of Helen's life, and death, makes this advice difficult for Jane and her reader to contradict" (145). However, neither Jane nor the reader become aware of the manner of Helen's death until later in the novel, so this instruction is only valid after the story has run its course.

Helen is the reporter of Miss Temple's special attributions:

> Miss Temple is full of goodness: it pains her to be severe to anyone, even the worst in the
> school; she sees my errors, and tells me of them gently; and, if I do anything worthy of
> praise, she gives me my meed liberally. (47)

While Miss Temple is obviously Helen's favorite teacher, she becomes Jane's favorite, as well as Jane's role model. Miss Temple also defends an extra lunch that is provided for the students, because of the inedible porridge served for breakfast one morning. This defense was rejected publicly by Mr. Brocklehurst who answered her with:

> Oh, madam, when you put bread and cheese, instead of burnt porridge, into these children's mouths, you may indeed feed their vile bodies, but you little think how you starve their immortal souls! (53)

Similar to Helen's acceptance of her punishment for her dirty finger nails, Miss Temple quietly accepts Mr. Brocklehurst's remonstrance. Until her marriage, when she leaves the school, she cares for her charges with love. When Helen is dying of typhus fever, the good teacher keeps her in her own room, so that she can assist in caring for the young woman. Jane Eyre's Miss Temple shares angelic character traits with Helen Burns.

In Hard Times, Dickens provides his own idealized women: Sissy and Rachel. Cowles describes these two women as exhibiting "extraordinary devotion (especially to a needy male), remarkable love-based powers of intuition, firm but modest assertion of heart-felt values, great spiritual strength and endurance" (8). He continues by stating that "throughout his novels, Dickens identifies these traits as inherently feminine, natural to all good-hearted women" (8).

Even Mr. Gradgrind, with his focus on schooling and facts, is able to recognize something special in Sissy. He tells her, "You are extremely deficient in your facts. Your acquaintance with figures is very limited. You are altogether backward, and below the mark" (Dickens 72), and then he asks Sissy to stay with his family and to help Mrs. Gradgrind. It is Sissy who visits Harthouse for Louisa's sake and convinces him to leave Coketown. It is Sissy who advises Tom to hide with Mr. Sleary's circus, when Tom's crime becomes obvious. And finally, it is Sissy who marries and has the children, whom Louisa is able to play with.

The other female character that Dickens portrays as all-good is Rachel. Scheckner announces that Rachel is "Stephen's 'angel', providing emotional and domestic comfort for him" (109). Dickens explains Rachel and Stephen's relationship with:

> No word of a new marriage has passed between them;
> but Rachel had taken great pity on
> him years ago, and to her alone he had opened his
> closed heart all this time, on the
> subject of his miseries; and he knew very well that if he
> were free to ask her, she would
> take him. (65)

Even though she loves Stephen, Rachel attends to and cares for his wife, when his wife arrives unannounced, unwanted, drunk and wounded. She speaks to Stephen, "I know your heart and certain that 'tis far too merciful to let her die, or

even so much as suffer, for want of aid" (66). Rachel doesn't realize that Stephen will soon consider allowing his hated wife to drink the poison that Rachel is using on her wounds. When Rachel interrupts his wife's action and is later leaving his home, Stephen kneels before her and states:

> Thou changest me from bad to good. Thou mak'st me humbly wishfo' to be more like thee, and fearfo' to lose thee when this life is ower, an a' the muddle cleared awa.' Thou'rt an Angel; it may be, thou hast saved my soul alive! (70)

Dickens names Rachel an Angel through the words of Stephen. All four of the secondary female characters, Helen, Miss Temple, Sissy, and Rachel, are portrayed as remarkably kind-hearted and forgiving. While these features fit Dickens expectations of Victorian women, Brontë may have included Helen and Miss Temple to act as a contrast to the fiery Jane or to assist Jane in managing her own excitable emotions.

The last characters to be examined are the two major villains, one for each novel. In both novels, a wife is the anti-heroine. In both novels, these wives have been labelled crazy, mad. Darrow has a possible explanation:

> Following the ancient belief that mental and emotional disturbances originated in the uterus, Victorian literature and culture was rife with images of 'madwomen' whose 'insanity' often consisted merely of defying gender norms by engaging in intellectual or professional pursuits, or advocating increased rights and opportunities for women. (Madness 146)

While the belief of mental disorders originating in the uterus could be applied to both Stephen's wife and Rochester's wife, merely because they are women, neither of them could be considered an intellectual.

In Stephen's account as he speaks to Mr. Bounderby, he'd married his wife more than nineteen years previously and although she had been pretty and had a good reputation then, she had gone "bad" soon after their wedding (Dickens 58). She returned regularly to strip their home of everything of value and Stephen had been paying her for the last five years to stay away. Stephen states, "From bad to worse, from worse to worsen. She left me. She disgraced herseln everyways, bitter and bad. She coom back, she coom back, she coom back" (58). When Stephen discovers her in his home yet again, his thoughts overwhelm him and his internal voice describes her:

> Such a woman! A disabled, drunken creature, barely able to preserve her sitting posture by steadying herself with one begrimed hand on the floor, while the other was so purposeless in trying to push away her tangled hair from her face, that it only blinded her the more with the dirt

> upon it. A creature so much fouler than that in her moral infamy, that it was a shameful thing even to see her. (55)

Thomas believes that the moral infamy mentioned in connection to Stephen's wife "could only imply sexual misconduct to a Victorian audience" (70). In addition, Thomas quotes Baird as suggesting:

> That the wounds and the sore on the neck of Stephen's wife are the eruptions of syphilis and that the poisonous liquid with which Rachael treats these wounds is probably perchloride of mercury, otherwise known as corrosive sublimate, a widely used medicine for syphilis. (70)

Therefore Stephen's wife's insanity or madness may be connected to promiscuity, which could have resulted from non-conformist sexuality.
Rochester's wife, Bertha, is a plantation owner's daughter, and while Rochester labels her a lunatic, her fault may also have originated in promiscuity. David suggests that Rochester initially found his Jamaican wife "sexually exciting" (108). Rochester, in his own explanation to Jane states that, "my father told me…Miss Mason was the boast of Spanish town for her beauty: and this was no lie" (Brontë 260). He continues with, "I was dazzled, stimulated: my senses were excited; and being ignorant, raw, and inexperienced, I thought I loved her…I never loved, I never esteemed, I did not even know her" (260). Of great concern for Rochester is Bertha's lack of intelligence for he states, "her cast of mind common, low, narrow, and singularly incapable of being led to anything higher, expanded to anything larger" (261). And then he adds, "What a pigmy intellect she had – and what giant propensities!" (261). Bertha's size is mentioned often in descriptions of her, but her inactivity while shut away would only have added to this feature. Important for understanding Bertha's condition is Rochester's statement that "the doctors now discovered that my wife was mad—her excesses had prematurely developed the germs of insanity" (261). This statement may be suggesting that Bertha's sexual excesses, like Stephen's wife's sexual transgressions, resulted in syphilis.

While her actions seem to prove her mental state, Bertha's madness may also have resulted from her ten year incarceration or if not resulted, at least been exacerbated by it. Bertha's laughter during her imprisonment is mentioned by Jane a number of times; Jane just doesn't know at the time that the laughter is Bertha's. Initially Jane characterizes the laugh as "distinct, formal, mirthless" (91) and as Beattie states "not hysterical or blubbering" (261) and only changes the quality of the sound to "goblin laughter" (126), when the laugh is heard during the setting of a fire in Rochester's bedroom. Bertha displays her hatred of Rochester when he enters her room with the officials from his intended wedding. She attacks him violently. But then, he is the man who has kept her locked up for ten years.

Brontë and Dickens have either intentionally or non-intentionally described mad women who have likely strayed from the Victorian expectations of sexual contact. Brontë's woman is a married woman from a wealthy family of suspicious origins, while Dickens's woman is a married factory worker from England. Different origins and different social classes, they are the same only in being female and being mad.

Both authors, Brontë and Dickens, present a piece of their personal worlds and/or their imaginations in their novels and in their characters. In Jane Eyre and Hard Times they develop complex heroines, support them with stereotypical secondary female characters, and provide action through conflicted relationships. They expose gender inequality in Victorian England and while skirting on the edge of acceptability, they maintain enough of that age's gender restrictions and stereotypes to be accepted by the general public. Through the influence of these narratives and others from this era, perspectives regarding gender and social inequality were challenged and equality between the sexes became more balanced. Much has changed for women, children, men, and society since the nineteenth century and much remains to be transformed and equalized now and in the future.

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