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FEMINISM: A STUDY OF CHARLES DICKENS'S GREAT EXPECTATIONS



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ABSTRACT

This research paper deals with Great Expectations (1860-61.) it is a story of the orphan Pip whose siblings are all dead, except for his sister Mrs. Joe Gargery who looks after him. The novel evokes the reader to pity Pip because of his circumstances as an orphan, who grows up under the abusive hand of his sister. Dickens skilfully exposes the slums in which the poor lived such as the forge where Pip grows up. The prison is also a recurrent feature in the novel, for example, Magwitch has just escaped

from prison when he meets Pip for the first time. He is later caught and sent by the Hulks, a prison ship that transported dangerous criminals to Australia. Magwitch's character is Dickens' revelation that from childhood, all that the poor are exposed to is crime. Therefore, members of the lower class are stereotyped as criminals from an early age, who take many trips in and out of courts and the prison.

KEYWORDS

Gender, Feminism, Poor life, Crime, Childhood, and Lower class.

RESEARCH PAPER

Introduction:

This research paper deals with Feminism and Dickens novels in the outline to Lizbeth Goodman's Literature and Gender, feminism is defined as the movement against the cultural and historical relegation of women and the struggle for economic, political and social liberation. Feminism was an aesthetic that attained distinction and significance in the early twentieth century, which resulted in the rise of many female writers such as George Elliot, Virginia Woolf, Charlotte Bronte and Elizabeth Gaskell (Travers 900). However, before the term feminism became a literary aesthetic, early Victorian writers like Jane Austen had already written works that were later documented as feminist literature. Feminism is the women's quest for recognition, power and authority, and, it attempts to relocate women beyond the confines of their male-controlled society (901). Women fight for emancipation because "they are treated as a kind of subordinate beings, and not as a part of the human species" (Mary Wollstonecraft). Victorian feminism was the women's struggle for equality in the Victorian society in the political, social and economic aspects that regimented life. Victorian feminism plays a major role in impacting the writings of Victorian writers, both male and female. This section will provide an overview of the Victorian gender constructions and Charles Dickens's writings in perspective of Victorian feminism.

Feminism means it is the belief in social, economic, and political equality of the sexes. Although largely originating in the West, feminism is manifested worldwide and is represented by various institutions committed to activity on behalf of women's rights and interests. Initially, Enlightenment philosophers focused on the inequities of social class and caste to the exclusion of gender. Swiss-born French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, for example, portrayed women as silly and frivolous creatures, born to be subordinate to men. In addition, the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, which defined French citizenship after the revolution of 1789, pointedly failed to address the legal status of women.

Female intellectuals of the Enlightenment were quick to point out this lack of inclusivity and the limited scope of reformist rhetoric. Olympe de Gouges, a noted playwright, published *Déclaration des droits de la femme et de la citoyenne* (1791; "Declaration of the Rights of Woman and of the Female Citizen", declaring women to be not only man's equal but his partner. The following year Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), the seminal English-language feminist work, was published in England. Challenging the notion that women exist only to please men, she proposed that women and men be given equal opportunities in education, work, and politics. Women, she wrote, are as naturally rational as men. If they are silly, it is only because society trains them to be irrelevant.

In the Victorian civilization, the home was an important sphere and it also outlined the relations between husband and wife in the domestic sphere, and on a larger scale, the relations between women and men. Mary Lyndon Shanley points out that "when most Victorians spoke or wrote about themselves, they testified to the importance of home and hearth in their constellation of values". Therefore, family life was an important value in the Victorian culture as it was inseparable from maternity, and it was portrayed as sufficient for women and many middle-class women regarded motherhood and domestic life as a substitute for women's productive role (Abrams). The ideology of the home was greatly emphasized by the Victorians and they also believed that it was important to preserve the identity of the home even at the cost of demeaning

any claim by adult women, daughters and wives to social and legal equality, individuality or rights independent of the men they were attached to (Ruckert). The home was also sanctified as an island of tranquility and obedience which was a blessing to the patriarchal rule of the male head who completely controlled the spouse and barred her from the public life of politics and economy. This tyrannical order sprang from the view of the natural sex difference which maintained that women's function in nature was child bearing and care providers; therefore, they had to be confined to private life. Liberal political theorists such as John Locke and David Wootton believed that nature was the realm out of which people evolved to become human, to form societies, governments, social contacts and the state, which created a class and gender distinction between men and women. It was such patriarchal beliefs that Victorian feminists had to challenge and overturn in order to form the fairer and more equal society that they envisioned. Therefore, Victorian feminism was a struggle against women's confinement to the private life and their yearning for belonging to the public world of politics and business.

In the Victorian society, the male figure was the symbol of authority, which shows the patriarchal nature of the society. Charles Dickens portrays this ideology in his works as noted at the beginning of *Great Expectations* when Pip is at the graveyard looking at his family's tombstones. The authority of Pip's father is confirmed by the way in which the inscriptions on the tombstones of his mother and siblings refer back to the fact that they are subject to him. Pip's father is the only one who is named and described as "late of this parish" while Pip's mother, is described as "wife of the above" (*Great Expectations* 3-4). The tombstone text inscribes divisions of power within the family which are registered in Pip's reading and the interpretation of the appearance of his lost parents accords with Victorian stereotypes of masculinity and femininity (Waters 15). To speak of Victorian feminism is to refer to the fight against such stereotypes and to create equality between the masculine and feminine world.

Mary Wollstonecraft, one of the early British feminists, in her work *Vindication of the Rights of Women* established that "Girls marry merely to better themselves, to borrow a significant vulgar phrase, and have such perfect power over their hearts as not to permit themselves to fall in love till a man with a superior fortune offers." Due to the intensive industrialism, urbanization and social change, there emerged a massive competition within the new middle class who controlled the economy and this was a world controlled by men in which no woman could belong (Nead). In order to acquire economic stability, women were forced to marry men of a higher economic status as depicted by Jane Austen in her novel *Pride and Prejudice*, which satirically depicts Mrs. Bennet's pursuit of finding financially stable husbands for her daughters. However, Charlotte Bronte utterly repudiates marriages for inconveniences in *Jane Eyre* when Mr. Rochester proposes to Jane:

"Do you think I can stay to become nothing to you? Do you think I am an automation?-a machine without feelings? And can you bear to have my morsel of bread snatched from my lips and my drop of living water dashed from my cup? Do you think because I am poor, obscure, plain and little, I am soul and heartless? You think wrong! I have as much soul as you, and full as much heart. . ." (278)

Jane's rejection of Mr. Rochester's marriage proposal is an assertion of women's denial to marry for economic stability. Jane affirms her possession of feelings and shows that she will not marry a man who will treat her as a mere machine. Bronte's view of marriage is that of equality and mutual feelings, one of the key aspects which was being promoted by Victorian

feminism. In this way, she rejects the traditional view of marriage in which a woman should marry a financially stable man, in place of love. Bronte once told her publisher that she perceives economic dependency as “the great curse of single female life” because it forces the woman to marry for economic reasons (qtd. by Zlotnick 3). In addition, the creation of an assertive character like Jane, who rejects a marriage proposal, is a sign of a “desire to escape the oppressive social order” (qtd. by Zlotnick 3).

Unfortunately, marriage did not entirely offer economic stability and independence for women since the Victorian society was very patriarchal. There were laws which forced women to be subservient to their husbands; for example, the common law doctrine of covertures, which the Victorians felt defined roles ordained by the natural and theological order, which meant that through marriage, man and woman became one person (Shanley 8). Therefore, married women could not independently sign contracts nor draft valid wills and any married woman’s property legally belonged to her husband.

The struggle for women to be recognized as equal entities to men in society is further reiterated by Charlotte Bronte through the creation of the character Bertha Mason in *Jane Eyre* who is physically strong but banished from society because she is said to be “mentally disturbed.” This is an indication of the belief that middle and upper class women were regarded as inherently sick if they tried to step beyond their prescribed roles (Flekke 28). In the Victorian society, it was difficult to step out of the female boundaries and any woman who attempted or succeeded was immediately punished or became a social outcast. Charles Dickens also depicts this phenomenon in *Great Expectations* through the character of Mrs. Joe Gargery who is aggressive and authoritative, but she is immediately brought to her place through her attack by Orlick and becomes submissive and dependent.

The Industrial Revolution brought about change in focus on women’s labor. Women had the opportunity to explore prospects outside the family establishment or even earn money (Beddoe 92). However, the Victorian society maintained the view that a working woman would make a potentially irresponsible wife and mother. Writers like Charles Dickens also portray this ideology in the novel *Bleak House*, through the creation of Mrs. Jellyby, who is preoccupied with the colonization in Africa. However, she is portrayed as an incompetent mother who is unable to manage her children and her household. Victorian feminism was largely concerned with emancipating women from the private world of domesticity and gaining equal rights and recognition in the public world dominated by men. In the Victorian society, a woman who attempted to step beyond her female boundaries was immediately punished and could also be ostracized from society. This idea was largely prominent before most laws that protected women’s rights were passed. Most Victorian writers, both male and female, were greatly aware of feminism, but some male writers supported the patriarchal ideology that women were to be subservient to men. On the other hand, most female Victorian writers were in support of women’s emancipation, thus their novels depicted heroines who were either independent or could step out of the man-made female boundaries.

However, Dickens does not depict female characters who have economic liberty as those expressed by later feminist writers. His female characters are women who are yearning for financial freedom, unlike the modern women who are independent and self – sufficient as declared by Virginia Woolf that “The ordinary woman depends on the ordinary woman” (qtd. in Showalter 9). The Victorian women were economically dependent on men as a means of survival as noted in most Victorian novels particularly those by Jane Austen whose female characters are usually in search of propertied men.

In hasty, a feminist education of Dickens female characters determines that Dickens as a male writer, was sympathetic with the plight of Victorian women. His depiction of the female characters is a portrayal of the Victorian ideologies and perceptions towards women. Unlike the other novelists of his time who strongly promoted the Victorian gender constructions through their writings, Dickens subtly criticizes the behavior of women by the male-controlled society.

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