

**A STUDY OF CHARLOTTE BRONTË'S SUBVERSIVE HANDLING OF THE FIGURE
OF THE 19TH CENTURY GENTEEL WOMAN WITHIN THE MAINSTREAM
VICTORIAN CULTURE AND ECONOMY**

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INTRODUCTION

"The Brontë's were not, then, three weird sisters deposited upon the Yorkshire moors from some metaphysical outer space –on the contrary, their lives were shaped by some of the most typical conflicts of early Victorian England."(Eagleton 2005).

Eagleton probably had valid reasons for disclosing this piece of information on a cautionary note, for the average reader tends to conjure up an image of three eccentric, impossibly passionate women inhabiting their own isolated worlds when they think of the Brontë sisters.).

Eagleton(2005) defies this assumption by drawing attention to "Charlotte Brontë's ability to dramatize some of the definitive contradictions of a mobile, dislocated, rapidly altering social landscape" Moreover he attributes this ability of Charlotte Brontë's to the 'conflicting spheres and the allegiances between which she was placed' not only in her capacity as writer but as woman and employee as well.

These 'conflicting spheres' that Brontë inhabited can be seen to have moulded her work at many levels, giving rise to a 'split' or sense of division which characterizes her works, from the structure of her plots to the characterization of her heroines.

The establishment of industrial capitalism in 19th century England occasioned changes so vast and drastic in the position of its women, that it is no exaggeration to claim that it resulted in the creation of a new ideology relating to the genteel middle class womanhood. An ideology which not only prescribed standards, modes of behavior and definitions of what 'constituted' ideal womanhood but also made its presence felt in the way of life ,thought, art and literature of the Victorian era.

The new industrial era widened the division between domestic life and production and this created a polarity between men who were associated with the 'external' world of labour and women with the 'internal' world of domesticity.

However, the absolute exclusion of respectable middle class women from labour, according to Patricia Stubbs(1979) was not simply a matter of course. It was done deliberately. 'largely in order to protect the home and family as ideals..".

The concept of the home as a retreat or haven from the external world where utilitarianism and harsh competition and profit-seeking reigned became widely popular. The home and the woman enclosed within it became an elevated, sacred sphere, a sphere which must, if it is to remain 'unpolluted', exist untouched by the 'tumult' of the mercenary world without.

The mainstream literature of the time, reflecting mainstream thought, not only portrayed the dependant, housewifely woman as an attractive figure but also put forward the idea that their position was in fact an enviable one.

This is exemplified in Ruskin's 'Of queen's gardens'(1865),where he advocates an idealized image of the 'pure' woman within the house, illuminating the home and hearth with her 'spiritual glow'.

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Not only, insinuates Ruskin, should the woman thus placed be satisfied, but she should also feel grateful that her man enters the world of toil and labour, for her sake, while she leads what was shown to be a carefree, blissful existence.

In other words a clear demarcation between the women's sphere and the man's was achieved. While it was the man's role to engage in public life, politics, and trade the Woman was expected to exude a 'spiritual glow' over the home, to make it a pleasant place for her working husband.(Stubbs 1979).

In this paper I will be undertaking to examine how Brontë confronts this prevalent notion of the sheltered, cherished genteel woman and the woman's sphere she inhabits within a socio economic context.

METHODOLOGY

The object of this paper would be to analyze how Brontë subverts the propagandist image of the sheltered woman projected in the 19th century in her works.

I would be doing this by engaging in qualitative analysis, By

- 1) Examining the image of the idealized domestic woman, drawing upon mainstream and therefore patriarchal literature of the time by referring to prominent thinkers, writers and essayists of the era.
- 2) Analyze Brontë's women and the circumstances they are placed in with relation to the above image

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Brontë often subverts this notion of the sheltered, cherished gentlewoman and the safe but limited orb she inhabits.

She attempts this task firstly

- 1) by placing women in situations unforeseen or ignored by the dictates of the Victorian cultural authority, and secondly
- 2) by challenging the stereotypes familiar to the Victorian sensibility.

CONCLUSIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS

Upon close scrutiny it becomes clear that Brontë attacks the Victorian ideology which deemed it necessary for the majority of women to remain dependant and unoccupied.

The protests uttered by the Brontëan heroines concerning the lack of opportunity and real work are clearly shaped by the sense of injustice felt by their creator at the economic position in which the genteel middle class woman found herself.

Brontë's championing of liberty and occupation for women coincides with the account out of his own family life by Edward Carpenter (1906); himself a subversive writer and socialist who supported feminism and sexual liberty in the 19th century.

'..... every aspiration and outlet except in the direction of dress and dancing, was blocked.'

It is clear that Brontë equates autonomy and independence with economic power. She evidently sees economic independence as a means of escaping the stifling position in which the patriarchal society has placed women. On a more symbolic level it is the figure of the independent woman who is able to defy the rules of the male-dominated literary tradition.

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