



## Power Relations and Gender bias in nineteenth-century English literature

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### Abstract

Victorian perspectives and present-day discussions allow for a nuanced understanding of how societal expectations have evolved or persisted. Studying Victorian literature offers opportunities for literary analysis and applying critical theories to understand how authors engaged with and challenged societal norms. This enhances our appreciation of the literary canon while providing a foundation for applying similar critical approaches to contemporary literature. An examination of Victorian era address and reflect societal expectations around gender roles, power dynamics and study of sexual repression of Victorian literature and study of power of self and society of Victorian literature.

**Keywords:** Sexual Repression, Victorian Literature, Gothic, Power and Prejudice

### Introduction

Prostitution was a significant and pervasive issue in London throughout the Victorian Era. The fundamental nature and fragrance of it contradicted every ethical principle throughout this period. These fallen ladies neglected and discarded values such as virginity, purity, and grace.

Describing Queen Victoria as "Britain's sexiest" may have been unexpected. It seems that our perception has shifted away from the traditional image of strict and conservative male figures who bring unhappiness to their spouses and children, as well as women who cover the legs of pianos for the sake of modesty and then engage in sexual activity while thinking about their country.

Michel Foucault notably criticized these ideas of extreme prudishness as the "repressive hypothesis," which suggests that the Victorians were unable to openly discuss sexual matters. Foucault argues that throughout the 19th century, sex was not suppressed, but rather extensively discussed in several domains such as law, medicine, religion, and education.

Subsequent scholarly and mainstream publications have extensively explored the many ways in which desire was seen and expressed by individuals throughout the Victorian era. Prostitution was primarily influenced by social stratification and economic conditions inside society. Deborah Logan argues that social status and social

inequities are the primary factors that lead women to choose a route of prostitution.

Victoria's candid confession of female desire challenges the prevailing belief that sexual pleasure was only reserved for males during that time. According to the renowned the house's angel, according to Victorian critic and writer John Ruskin, represented a woman's purity of heart and her capacity to bring harmony into the world.

### The Victorian Era and Gothic Literature

Late-Victorian literature is primarily characterized by the Gothic literary tradition. Gothic literature, particularly Oscar Wilde's, reflects the Victorian era's influence on the genre and Bram Stoker. Historians often characterize Victorian civilization as oppressive when it comes to addressing sexuality, and this generally held idea is reinforced by nineteenth century Victorian Gothic literature. Notwithstanding this purported distinguishing attribute, the Victorian era contained a variety of discussions around morality and sexuality. The generalization of Victorian society remains a portrayal of a civilization that harbors fear towards sex and its possible consequences. Amidst the widespread criticism of sex, especially female sexuality, in Victorian literature, the significance of the mere act of discussing sex is often disregarded. Contrary to being a forbidden topic, sex was widely discussed, with perspectives

varying from supportive too restrictive. Victorian and Gothic writers enthusiastically included the subject matter into their literary works.

Marrying off a man's sexual appetites is portrayed in *Dracula* and other Gothic works of Victorian literature as a means by which women are supposed to suppress their own urges. It was often believed in the 1800s that women had no libido when it came to sexual desire. *Functions and Disorders of the Reproductive Organs*, written by Dr. William Acton, became a best-selling book in the US and England during the middle of the 1800s. It quickly rose to prominence as a go-to resource for sexual health advice all around the globe. "The majority of women (fortunately for them) are not greatly burdened by any form of sexual desires" that is, his summary of women's sexuality. In contrast to women, males tend to exhibit certain traits on a more consistent basis. Degler (1967) backs up this claim. Along with their pen and an audience, several so-called "doctors", dismissed female sexuality as non-existent, leading to widespread reading and discussion.

### **Power and Prejudice: *Villette***

"*Villette*," the renowned literary work authored by Charlotte Brontë, explores the complex dynamics of power and the widespread impact of prejudice. The book takes place in the imaginary town of Villette and follows the life of the heroine Lucy Snowe. It delves into social expectations, gender roles, and the intricacies of human identity. Brontë, renowned for her astute understanding of the human mind, creates a story that surpasses the traditional narrative frameworks of her day. Brontë provides a deep analysis of how power and discrimination influence both individual fates and society systems, using Lucy Snowe's experiences as a prism.

"*Villette*" begins with Lucy Snowe's voyage to the titular town, a foreign environment that serves as a figurative backdrop for the wider examination of one's sense of self and sense of belonging. Lucy's status as an outsider from the beginning highlights the novel's examination of power relations and discrimination. Lucy, acting as an unsuspecting narrator, offers insights that reveal the complex network of connections and cultural norms that control Villette.

A prominent motif in "*Villette*" is the interplay between the individual and society, a motif that Brontë skillfully integrates into the storyline. The character of Lucy Snowe represents the difficulties of maneuvering in a society where established customs and anticipated behaviors have a strong impact. Being an unmarried, autonomous woman in a culture that often defines women based on their marital status puts her in a marginalized position, vulnerable to the criticisms and biases of people in her vicinity.

### **Progress on the book**

The novel *Pride and Prejudice* an 1813 romance book that explores social customs, authored by Jane Austen. The work chronicles the growth and maturation of Elizabeth Bennet, the central character, as she gains insight into the consequences of making snap judgments and develops a discerning understanding of the distinction between surface-level virtue and genuine moral excellence. The humor of the book stems from its truthful portrayal of etiquette,

education, matrimony, and wealth in England during the Regency era. In 1796, while visiting Goodnestone Park in Kent with her brother Edward and his wife, Austen started writing the novel. Between October 1796 and August 1797, the work that would become known as "First Impressions" was being written. Inquiring about Thomas Cadell's interest in reviewing the manuscript, Austen's father wrote to the London bookseller on November 1, 1797. Nevertheless, the offer was swiftly turned down in the reply. Following France's declaration of war against Britain in February 1793, the militia was mobilized. At first, there wasn't enough housing for all the militia battalions. Consequently, the militia were compelled to set up expansive camps in rural areas, which are referenced many times throughout the narrative. The militia regiment spent the winter in Meryton and then left in May from the Brighton camp, which was set up in August 1793. Building housing for each militia regiment was finished by 1796, indicating that the events of the book take place between 1793 and 1795.

### **Author Jane Austen's Style**

Free indirect speech is a storytelling device that is used by Austen in *Pride and Prejudice* and her other works. This technique involves representing a character's speech in a manner that reflects their thoughts or how they would speak, rather than using their actual words. Austen crafts her characters with intricately constructed identities and distinct voices. While Darcy and Elizabeth have many similarities, they also possess notable differences. The user's text is simply ". Austen employs a narrative style that mimics the tone and language of a certain character, namely Elizabeth. This technique encourages the reader to see events from Elizabeth's perspective, so allowing them to experience her biases and misunderstandings. "The process of learning, experienced by both main characters, is revealed to us exclusively through Elizabeth's perspective and her use of free indirect speech is crucial... because it is through this technique that we are kept engaged, if not trapped, within Elizabeth's misunderstandings." The reader's access to further insights into the emotions of other characters is limited to the correspondence shared in this work. The first letter that Darcy writes to Elizabeth serves as an illustration of this, since it imparts to both the reader and Elizabeth an understanding of Wickham's genuine nature. Austen used irony extensively throughout the work, particularly via the perspective of the heroine Elizabeth Bennet. She expresses the "dominant and restrictive societal expectations placed on women that profoundly influence her personal and professional life, cleverly concealed beneath a facade of ironic detachment." Commencing with a historical inquiry into the evolution of a certain literary genre and then progressing to empirical confirmations, this study uncovers Free Indirect Discourse as a technique that gradually arose as a practical method for addressing the distinctness of individual minds. From this perspective, Free Indirect Discourse may be seen as a specifically literary reaction to an environmental issue, offering a scientific rationale that avoids reducing literature to a mere biological extension, but instead recognizes its inherent worth as a unique art form.

### **Pride and Prejudice**

Storyline The announcement of a wealthy and youthful

gentleman called Charles Bingley leasing the estate of Netherfield Park creates significant excitement in the neighboring town of Longbourn, particularly among the Bennet family. The Bennet family consists of five daughters who have yet to be married. Their names, in order of age, are Jane, Elizabeth, Mary, Kitty, and Lydia. Mrs. Bennet is quite eager to see the marriage of each of her daughters. Following Mr. Bennet's social visit to Mr. Bingley, the Bennets participate in a ball where Mr. Bingley is in attendance. He is captivated by Jane and dedicates a significant portion of the evening to dancing with her. Mr. Darcy, a close acquaintance of his, expresses dissatisfaction with the evening and arrogantly refuses to dance with Elizabeth, leading others to see him as haughty and rude. During future social events, Mr. Darcy experiences a growing attraction towards Elizabeth's charm and intellect. Jane's acquaintance with Mr. Bingley is also flourishing, and she visits the Bingley home. While traveling to the home, she is caught in a heavy rainstorm and becomes unwell, which compels her to remain at Netherfield for several days. Elizabeth traverses muddy fields to attend to Jane, resulting in her clothes being spattered. This displeases the haughty Miss Bingley, who is the sister of Charles Bingley. Miss Bingley's malevolence intensifies upon seeing Darcy, whom she is actively pursuing, lavishing considerable time on Elizabeth.

Upon Elizabeth and Jane's arrival at home, they discover the presence of Mr. Collins, who is paying a visit to their family. Mr. Collins is a youthful priest who is poised to inherit Mr. Bennet's property, which is subject to a "entailment" that restricts its inheritance to male descendants. Mr. Collins is an arrogant imbecile, despite being captivated by the Bennet girls. Soon after he arrives, he proposes marriage to Elizabeth. She rejects him, causing damage to his self-esteem. Meanwhile, the Bennet sisters have developed amicable relationships with military personnel stationed in a town nearby. One of these individuals is Wickham, an attractive young soldier who is amicable towards Elizabeth and informs her about how Darcy unjustly deprived him of his inheritance.

### **Pride and Prejudice: Characters**

- **Elizabeth Bennet:** Elizabeth Bennet, the second oldest of the Bennet girls, is a twenty-year-old woman who has intelligence, liveliness, playfulness, attractiveness, and wit. However, she has a propensity to create strong and biased first opinions. As the narrative unfolds, her connection with Mr. Darcy also develops. The trajectory of Elizabeth and Darcy's relationship is eventually determined when Darcy conquers his arrogance, and Elizabeth overcomes her preconceived notions, resulting in both of them yielding to their love for one another.
- **Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy:** Mr. Bingley's acquaintance is a wealthy individual, aged twenty-eight, who has the ancestral property of Pemberley in Derbyshire. It is speculated that this estate has a minimum annual value of £10,000, which is equal to £796,000 or \$1,045,000 in 2018. Despite his attractive appearance, height, and intelligence, Darcy lacks social skills and seems reserved and arrogant, leading people to often misinterpret his behavior as a sign of excessive pride

(which is partially true). He is a newcomer to the community and finally becomes the romantic interest of Elizabeth Bennet. Despite his seeming pride and subsequent unpopularity, his slaves attest to his benevolence and integrity.

- **Mr. Bennet:** The protagonist is a mature gentleman of moderate means, with an annual salary of £2000. He is the wryly sardonic head of the declining Bennet family, a family of landed gentry from Hertfordshire, and has five daughters who have yet to be married. The inheritance of his property, Longbourn, is restricted to male descendants. His initial fondness for his wife diminished soon after they were married and has now dwindled to the point that he just tolerates her. In the narrative, he is often characterized as lazy.
- **Mrs. Bennet (née Gardiner):** She is the middle-aged spouse of Mr. Bennet, who is socially superior to her, and the mother of their five children. Mrs. Bennet is a hypochondriac who has delusions of being prone to tremors and palpitations (referred to as her "poor nerves") if circumstances do not align with her desires. Her primary goal in life is to arrange advantageous marriages for her daughters with affluent men. Her primary worry is not whether these relationships would provide pleasure to her kids. She received a dowry of £4,000 from her father, Mr. Gardiner Sr., which was most likely invested at a 4% interest rate. This allowed her to receive an annual income of £160. Mr. Collins mentioned during his proposal that her future inheritance, which would only be available after her mother's death, was £1,000 invested at a 4% interest rate. It is probable that her settlement has increased to £5,000 over the years, but it still remains invested at a 4% interest rate. Jane Bennet is the oldest sister of the Bennet siblings. At the start of the story, she is 22 years old and is widely regarded as the most attractive young woman in the area. She tends to have a positive view of people, however she may be convinced differently if shown with enough proof. She develops romantic feelings for Charles Bingley, a wealthy and youthful man who has lately relocated to Hertfordshire and is a close associate of Mr. Darcy.
- **Mary Bennet:** She is the middle sibling among the Bennet sisters and is considered the least attractive. Mary has a grave temperament and mostly engages in reading and playing music. However, she often exhibits impatience in showcasing her achievements and displays a certain level of vanity towards them. She often imparts moral lessons to her family. As to James Edward Austen-Leigh's *A Memoir of Jane Austen*, Mary eventually wedded a legal assistant employed by her Uncle Philips and relocated to Meryton with him.
- **Catherine "Kitty" Bennet:** The individual in question is the fourth daughter of the Bennet family and is now 17 years of age. Despite being older than Lydia, she closely emulates her and accompanies her in her endeavor to get the attention of the militia leaders. She is often shown as being jealous of Lydia and is seen as a "foolish" young lady. Nevertheless, it is said that her condition ameliorated upon being separated from Lydia's influence. As to James Edward Austen-Leigh's *A Memoir of Jane Austen*, Kitty eventually wed a priest

residing in close proximity to Pemberley.

- **Lydia Bennet:** The Bennet sister who is the least old, being 15 years of age at the start of the tale. She displays a lack of seriousness and is stubborn in her ways. Her primary pursuit in life is on engaging in social interactions, particularly engaging in flirtatious behavior with members of the militia. Consequently, she elopes with George Wickham, despite his lack of desire to marry her. Lydia has a complete disregard for the ethical principles upheld by her culture. As Ashley Tauchert aptly observes, she exhibits a propensity for emotional responses without engaging in rational thought.
- **Charles Bingley:** The individual in question is a charming and affable young man of considerable fortune hailing from the northern region of England, maybe Yorkshire, given the mention of Scarborough and the existence of a town named Bingley in West Yorkshire. He has taken a lease on Netherfield Park, an estate located three miles away from Longbourn, with the intention of eventually acquiring it. He is juxtaposed with Mr. Darcy due to his typically more agreeable demeanor, yet he depends on his more knowledgeable companion for guidance. An instance of this may be seen in the obstruction of Bingley and Jane's romantic relationship due to Bingley's unquestionable reliance on Darcy's viewpoint. He has a lack of determination and is quite susceptible to the opinions and influence of others. Specifically, his two sisters, Miss Caroline Bingley and Mrs. Louisa Hurst, strongly disapprove of Bingley's increasing fondness for Miss Jane Bennet. He received an inheritance of £100,000, which he could choose to invest at an interest rate of either 4% or 5%. This would provide an annual income of £4,000 or £5,000 respectively.
- **Caroline Bingley:** Caroline Bingley, the arrogant and pretentious sibling of Charles Bingley, with a substantial wealth of £20,000. This affords her an annual allowance or pin money of £800 to £1,000, depending on the percentage of her investments. Miss Bingley has intentions towards Mr. Darcy and, as a result, feels envious of his increasing affection for Elizabeth. She tries to discourage Mr. Darcy's love for Elizabeth by mocking the Bennet household and criticizing Elizabeth's behavior. Miss Bingley also harbors disapproval towards her brother's admiration for Jane Bennet, and exhibits contempt towards the society at Meryton. Miss Bingley's vanity and conceit stem primarily from her excessive spending and privileged education. She is also deeply insecure about her family's wealth being derived from trade. Consequently, she is eager for her brother to acquire an estate, elevating the Bingleys to the social class of the Gentry. Additionally, she desires to marry a wealthy gentleman who owns land, such as Mr. Darcy. The relationship between Miss Bingley and her sister, Louisa Hurst, mirrors the dynamics observed between Lydia and Kitty Bennet, as well as between Mrs. Bennet and Mrs. Phillips. In both cases, one individual plays a subordinate role to the other. Caroline, like Lydia and Mrs. Bennet, assumes the position of the dominant figure, while Louisa, like Kitty and Mrs.

Phillips, takes on a more submissive role. However, it is worth noting that Louisa, being already married, does not experience the same level of desperation as Caroline. Louisa is wedded to Mr. Hurst, who owns a residence situated in Grosvenor Square, London.

- **George Wickham:** Wickham and Mr. Darcy had known each other since they were babies, since Wickham's father worked as a steward for Mr. Darcy's father. As a member of the militia, he has an outwardly appealing demeanor and quickly develops a strong emotional connection with Elizabeth Bennet. Subsequently, he absconds with Lydia, without any intention of entering into matrimony. This act would have caused utter humiliation for both Lydia and her family. However, Darcy intervenes by offering a bribe to Wickham, persuading him to marry Lydia in exchange for settling his immediate obligations.
- **Mr William Collins:** At the start of the story, Mr Collins, who is 25 years old, is Mr Bennet's second cousin. He is a clergyman and the current expected inheritor of the Longbourn House estate. He is a sycophantic and arrogant individual, inclined to deliver lengthy and monotonous orations, who displays an extreme loyalty towards his benefactor, Lady Catherine de Bourgh.

### Conclusion

Victorian literature provides a comprehensive and intricate portrayal of the social concerns pertaining to gender, power relations, and cultural expectations in the 19th century. The literary works of this period actively interact with, react to, and often question the dominant standards, presenting a varied collection of stories that shed light on the intricacies of Victorian society.

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