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"BETWEEN 'SEPARATE SPHERES' AND SELF-DEFINITION": REPRESENTATION OF MEN'S AND WOMEN'S ROLES IN SOCIETY IN CHARLOTTE BRONTË'S FICTION

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Abstract: Charlotte Brontë's novels consistently portray gender as a social construct rather than an immutable essence: individuals are "formed" by societal expectations regarding labor, authority, desire, religion, and respectability, subsequently challenged by crises that reveal the repercussions of those expectations. Bronte writes in a Victorian culture that increasingly idealized "separate spheres" – the public sphere of male labor and power and the private sphere of female moral influence and domesticity. She shows how these ideals limit women's lives while also forcing men into roles of mastery, control, and emotional self-denial. This article analyzes the portrayal of gender roles in Bronte's principal novels – Jane Eyre (1847), Shirley (1849), and Villette (1853) – focusing on (1) women's limited access to employment, property, and expression; (2) masculine authority as both a privilege and a burden; (3) the politics surrounding marriage, religion, and education; and (4) Brontë's narrative techniques (first-person confession, irony, enclosure imagery, and contested dialogue) that illustrate gender as a domain of conflict. The discussion contends that Bronte neither unequivocally supports nor outright rejects Victorian gender ideology, when examined alongside significant trends in Bronte criticism and Victorian gender history.

Charlotte Brontë, Victorian gender roles, separate spheres, women's work, masculinity, marriage, governess, Jane Eyre, Shirley, Villette, and feminist literary criticism are some of the words that come to mind.

Keywords: Charlotte Brontë; Victorian gender roles; separate spheres; women's work; masculinity; marriage; governess; Jane Eyre; Shirley; Villette; feminist literary criticism.

Introduction

Victorian Britain did not create gender hierarchy; rather, it intensified and formalized it into a dominant cultural norm. Industrial capitalism, changing class structures, and new moral languages of respectability led to a widely held belief that men were active, competitive, and rational people in public, while women were moral, emotional, and supportive people in the home. This "separate spheres" model didn't fit everyone's real life – working-class women worked, many middle-class women needed paid work, and many families didn't fit the ideal – but the idea was important because it gave men and women a guide for how they should be. In a British Library overview, Kathryn Hughes says that Victorians increasingly thought of men and women as living in "separate spheres," with women seen as physically weaker but morally better and therefore "best suited to the domestic sphere."

Discussion

1) The Victorian script that Brontë questions is about "separate spheres," respectability, and moral femininity.

Victorian gender ideology frequently extolled women while simultaneously constraining them. People said that women were morally superior, spiritually aware, and perfect for the home. But the same reasoning was used to keep women from getting political rights and many kinds of education and jobs: if women were the moral guardians of home life, their "proper" place was in that home life. The British Library overview highlights this paradox: the assertion that women wielded significant influence domestically was often employed as a rationale against the expansion of women's civic authority.

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Brontë makes that paradox clear in an emotional way. In her books, women are praised for being virtuous and punished for wanting things; praised for being patient and made fun of for being ambitious; expected to serve and then blamed for not being independent. People often picture the "ideal woman" as an angelic, humble, and calm person. But Brontë's heroines are intense; they think clearly, feel deeply, and speak in ways that go against those ideals. The conflict between cultural ideals and personal experiences generates narrative energy.

2) The governess, the voice, and the terms of equality in Jane Eyre show what women do.

Brontë puts a poor, orphaned girl in Jane Eyre into a world where women are judged by how obedient, beautiful, and marriageable they are. Jane's initial experiences serve as lessons in gendered power: during her childhood at Gateshead, she is punished for asserting her dignity; at Lowood, her suffering is reinterpreted as moral instruction. Brontë, on the other hand, uses these spaces to help Jane grow her inner strength. Jane is never just a "female victim"; she becomes a moral thinker.

2.1. The governess as a social contradiction: The governess is a symbol of Victorian ambivalence. She is educated but poor; she works in private homes but isn't related to anyone; and people are supposed to not see her, but she is always around. That tension is what makes Jane Eyre's critique of gender so strong. Jane is paid to work, but her work is seen as a "natural" part of being a woman because it involves teaching children, not as skilled work that deserves respect. Brontë shows how humiliating it is to be in such a position without making it sound romantic. Jane's self-respect manifests as a form of resistance: not overt rebellion, but a rejection of degradation as "normal."

2.3. Religion, work, and women's freedom Brontë makes women's roles even more complicated by having St. John Rivers offer Jane a "respectable" purpose: being his wife-assistant in missionary work. This is patriarchy in a spiritual way—less sexual and more authoritarian. St. John's view of women is utilitarian: Jane's body and life are tools for his work. Jane says no. The refusal is important because it goes against a version of feminine virtue that society praises (self-sacrifice) but is harmful to the self.

3) The roles of men in Jane Eyre: power, weakness, and the "cost" of being a man Rochester is a study of male power that is both interesting and scary. He has money, sexual experience, and the ability to run a household. But Brontë won't let masculinity stay a privilege. Rochester's power is shown to be morally wrong because he lies, tests, manipulates, and tries to make Jane play a decorative feminine role. Simultaneously, he is emotionally deprived, isolated, and tormented by the very systems that conferred upon him power (inheritance, marriage markets, imperial networks).

Nancy Armstrong's analysis of domestic fiction highlights how nineteenth-century novels reconfigure power by transforming "the domestic" into a political sphere instead of a private sanctuary; her scholarship is often employed to interpret Jane Eyre as a narrative in which the male character is progressively integrated into a more emotionally driven, relational context. The novel's conclusion – Rochester wounded, Jane economically autonomous – can be interpreted as Brontë's endeavor to envision marriage following the dissolution of unilateral male dominance.

4) Shirley: women, property, and the politics of "female power" Jane Eyre focuses on the gender conflict in the private life of one heroine, while Shirley looks at the bigger picture of social change, like industrial unrest, class tensions, and competing moral economies. It is widely recognized as Brontë's most overtly "social" novel in both form and

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ambition. This change is important for how women are represented: their roles are now linked to both household dynamics and economic change.

4.1. Two heroines, two gender positions Brontë looks at how gender changes with property by comparing Caroline Helstone and Shirley Keeldar. Caroline is a lady who doesn't have any money, so she is at risk of being socially useless and emotionally stuck. Shirley is an heiress who has a lot of freedom to move, talk, and make decisions. Brontë uses Shirley to ask what a woman could be if she had money and, by extension, some social power. A Brontë scholar cited in a discourse on the novel's feminist aspects characterizes Shirley as a "theoretic possibility" of female autonomy linked to intellect.

4.2. Men under industrial pressure: Robert Moore and gendered responsibility Robert Moore's role shows another Brontë pattern: masculinity as an economic duty. He is not just a "bad man" who ignores women; he is a man who has been shaped by industrial capitalism, competition, and the need to modernize. He puts profit, survival, and power ahead of everything else, which makes the world a harsh place. Brontë illustrates how these pressures distort relational ethics: love is subordinated to business, and women's emotional labor serves as a buffer for male stress.

5) Villette: gender, watching, and the lonely woman who tells the story Villette is Brontë's most complex psychological examination of gender roles, particularly in relation to social surveillance and conversational authority. Lucy Snowe does not tell her story from the hopeful path of self-discovery that Jane Eyre does. Lucy, on the other hand, tells the story from the point of view of someone who has learned to hide, watch, and limit how much they reveal about themselves. Her society sees women, judges women, and punishes women for being seen. Lucy does not just give in; she has a plan.

5.1 The struggle for female identity: Lucy's connections with Dr. John (Graham Bretton), Madame Beck, and M. Paul Emanuel is a place where people interpret, change, or take over her sense of self. Men frequently assume the authority to delineate women's identities, dictating their emotions, purposes, and desires. Lucy doesn't fight back by being public about it; instead, she makes it hard to read. In narrative terms, Lucy's withholding becomes political: she doesn't let readers (or men) see everything about her whenever they want.

6) Brontë's craft: how the way she tells stories shows gender roles Brontë consistently employs stylistic choices in these novels to illuminate gender ideology:

First-person narration as female authority (Jane Eyre, Villette): the female narrator assumes the roles of judge, framer, and interpreter.Enclosure imagery (rooms, schools, attics): physical spaces serve as metaphors for social confinement—an approach fundamental to significant feminist interpretations.

Conclusion

Charlotte Brontë represents men's and women's roles in society as historically produced scripts—powerful, tempting, and damaging. Her novels expose how Victorian gender ideology praises women for virtue while restricting their choices, and how it grants men authority while training them into emotional hardness and control. In *Jane Eyre*, the governess figure becomes an experiment in female voice and moral equality: the heroine refuses to trade self-respect for security, challenging both worldly and religious patriarchy. In *Shirley*, Brontë links gender roles to property and industrial change, showing how women's possibilities expand with resources yet remain constrained by ideology, while men's authority is entangled with economic pressure and political conflict. In *Villette*, the focus tightens into psychological and linguistic power, where a woman's interiority becomes a contested territory and narrative withholding becomes a form of resistance.

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