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The New Woman in Embryo

Masculine Women in Victorian Novels

Kayla Merrick

In 1792, Mary Wollstonecraft defined the term “masculine woman” as “the imitation of manly virtues, or, more accurately, the achieving of the talents and virtues that ennoble the human character and raise females in the scale of animal being when they are brought under the comprehensive label ‘mankind’” (33). In 1894, a little over a 100 years later, Sarah Grand coined the term “New Woman” as the term for a woman liberated from oppressive Victorian standards, who “does not in the least intend to sacrifice the privileges she enjoys . . . especially of the kind which man seems to think she must aspire to as so much more desirable” (273). In the century between those two terms, women fought for the necessary reforms that would allow them equal freedoms to their male counterparts. In this paper, I will examine three novels—*Wuthering Heights*, *Daniel Deronda*, and *Jude the Obscure*—in the context of Victorian society and women’s issues at the time, and I will highlight how the silent struggles faced by the heroines in each novel are congruent with the silent struggles of women at the time. The heroine of each of these novels could be referred to as a “masculine woman” in that she has a Victorian society-deemed masculine desire to act and take control of her own life, but that desire is blocked by forced inequality to man through the institution of marriage.

These masculine heroines are then required to find sources of power outside of marriage in order to achieve an equitable relationship with their spouse and place in society. Thus the masculine nature of the heroines in Victorian novels represent the real-life struggles of women pushing for reform, paving the way for the birth of the New Woman.

During the Victorian period, there was a severe stratification of the sexes with rigid rules and strict social constructs pinning both men and women into tight corners. In Victorian society, the role dictated to women was one of marriage and childbearing. The justifications for this were drawn from a variety of sources, from doctors who proclaimed women were physically weaker and thus dependent upon men, to religious, Biblical reasonings. Queen Victoria herself said, "Let women be what God intended, a helpmate for a man—but with totally different duties and vocations" (Bingham 135). This ideology is often referred to as "separate spheres," meaning that men moved in their own public circles and purposes, and women in their own private ones, working together as equals to create a productive and profitable society for both sexes (Fitzpatrick 1). Despite this ideology's theoretical sense of equality, in practice the scales were heavily tilted towards males who were given opportunities for education, employment, and expression denied to their female counterparts. This was because according to the "separate spheres" ideology, men were better suited to be leaders—one of their main characteristics being their desire to be active and in control. On the other hand, women were supposed to be passive and submissive in order to be feminine. According to John Ruskin, a prominent Victorian social thinker:

The man's power is active, progressive, defensive. He is eminently the doer, the creator, the discoverer, the defender. His intellect is for speculation and invention; his energy for adventure, for war, and for conquest, wherever was is just, wherever conquest necessary. But the woman's power is for rule, not for battle,—and her intellect is not for invention or creation, but for sweet ordering, arrangement, and decision. (32)

As such, girls were raised to be submissive, and if they were given an education, that education focused on making her more appealing and thus more marriageable in the eyes of man. Askin Haluk Yildirim describes marriage in Victorian society as a "matter of survival," but she argues that getting married did not ensure a woman's total security as she was entirely dependent on him and she herself, all of her possessions, and any children

she should bear to him were considered solely his to use as he should please (47). Thus, with a marriage akin to slavery being one of the only options given to women, is it any wonder that many of the female characters in Victorian novels chafe against those matrimonial bonds? If marriage was the means through which women were made unequal to men, then it stands to reason women would have to look for ways outside of marriage to achieve equality.

Perhaps in response to this search for equality outside of the bonds of marriage, the Victorian era made possible the reform that led to the eventual liberation of women, as well as the arrival of the New Woman. Queen's College, the first institution in the world to give academic awards to women and the first one to receive a royal charter, opened in 1848, thereby legitimizing the education of women ("Schools"). This school was intended as a school for governesses, but eventually opened its doors to any woman seeking to learn. Consequently, the school played a key role in championing education for women. Then in 1882, the Married Women's Act gave women the right to own property in their own name, paving the way for greater freedom and autonomy as a woman no longer had to rely on her husband for support. This journey of reform culminated near the end of the era with the appearance of a figure that would be come to be known as the "New Woman," a figure who had freed herself from the restrictions of a marriage in which man "set himself up as a sort of god and required [women] to worship him" (Grand 272). This journey taken by real women in Victorian society towards liberation is reflected in and preserved by the active and thus masculine, fictionalized women in Victorian novels who attempt to achieve their desires through means other than and outside of marriage.

In Wuthering Heights, there are two female characters who embody this masculine desire to act—Catherine Earnshaw, who has a wild childhood among the moors, and her daughter Cathy Linton, who is kept sheltered by her father for most of her life. Catherine is the more masculine of the two, requiring others to bend to her will as "honeysuckles embracing the thorn" (Brontë 92) and desiring to retain her wild ways at *Wuthering Heights*, "half savage and hardy, and free . . . among the heather on those hills" (Brontë 125–126), all the while still possessing Thrushcross Grange. Cathy comes across initially as the more feminine, but still is depicted as "eager to be active" (Brontë 218); she desires to explore beyond the boundaries her father set for her. This desire is also seen in her wanting to be mistress of the two homes. Despite their differences in circumstances, both women follow a

similar pattern of living—their idyllic and active childhood is brought to a rude end by a foreign male, to whom they are rushed into marriage as a form of control. In Catherine's case, her marriage to Edgar Linton fails her as it takes her away from Wuthering Heights and the things she loves, forcing her into a traditional, feminine setting and keeping her from acting out her masculine desires until it kills her. Cathy, on the other hand, is able to overcome the destructive and selfish patterns of her progenitors and restore balance between Wuthering Heights and Thrushcross Grange.

Cathy's success in uniting the two houses does not come from her marriage, but from how she uses her education to lessen the difference between her husband and herself. Both Catherine and Cathy were educated, but Catherine's education was neglected after the death of her mother and then subsequently forgotten upon marriage. The major difference between mother and daughter was that Cathy the Second used her education to make her marriage equitable. By teaching Hareton, her future husband, and bringing him to her level, Cathy was able to facilitate the prosperous union of the two houses. Banu Akcesme identifies Cathy's inheritance of both contested properties in the end as a kind of victory, stating, "Cathy has a chance to establish more egalitarian and feminine society with her newly gained economic power and social rank after Heathcliff's death as the new owner of the Wuthering Heights and Thrushcross Grange" (35). In the end, Cathy sets things right by rising against traditional female roles through her education, lifting her prospective husband up to her level instead of lowering herself below him, as marriage to Hareton and inheriting both estates would not have been possible otherwise. Thus the contrast between Catherine and her daughter Cathy, who both have this desire to act and make decisions on their own terms, shows that education helps better the circumstances of a woman in a way that traditional marriage cannot.

Brontë's use of education as an equalizer between the genders and a tool for helping women achieve where marriage failed them in *Wuthering Heights*, coincides with educational reform changes for women. Published in 1847, *Wuthering Heights* came out one year before the opening of the aforementioned Queen's College. Planning for the school began as early as 1845, therefore the idea of greater educational opportunities for women would have been prevalent during the time period in which Emily Brontë was writing her novel. However, even if Brontë was not familiar with the proposed opening of a college for governesses, as a well-educated woman of

her day, she would have most likely been familiar with Mary Wollstonecraft's essay "A Vindication on the Rights of Women" which argues that the greatest gulf between the two genders is not any actual sexual difference, but a lack of education. Brontë's illustration of masculine women overcoming the limits of marriage through education then mirrors the steps taken to liberate women through education of the time period, marking in the pages of *Wuthering Heights* this first crucial step towards the New Woman.

After educational inequality was overcome, the next part of the journey towards the birth of the New Woman is recorded in George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda*, where the masculine desire of Gwendolen to act serves to show how economic inequality forces women into subservience to their husbands. As a general theme, inheritance law and its system of primogeniture was major fodder for Victorian novels. In the aforementioned *Wuthering Heights*, much of the conflict revolves around which character is proper heir to the estate. However, *Daniel Deronda* differs from many of those novels in that rather than dealing with whose right it is to inherit, it deals with showing how women suffer under those inheritance laws as a general rule. As stated by Marion Helfer Wajngot in her essay on inheritance law in Victorian novels, "*Daniel Deronda* is one of many nineteenth-century novels characterized by an ethical engagement with traditional wrongs . . . creating an emotional background for a rational reconsideration of social judgments and legal practices" (30–31). Thus the legal system of inheritance in *Daniel Deronda* functions exactly as it should—which is the problem. Under this system of inheritance, women are prevented from directly inheriting their husband's property, forcing them to be economically dependent upon him even after his death.

Eliot's heroine Gwendolyn is caught in this trap of economic dependence created by Victorian inheritance laws. In all things, Gwendolyn appears to be the perfect Victorian ideal—she is well-versed in the myriad accomplishments a young lady is supposed to have in order to gain a husband, and is portrayed as physically very lovely. Amidst all her loveliness, however, her ambitious desire to be independent as a man is apparent, as seen in her asking "why should not a woman have a like supremacy?" (1.8). This sets her apart as having that masculine desire to act and have control over her life. She does not intend to marry, as she believes her family has means enough for her desires, but when financial ruin comes upon her family, partially as a result of the inheritance laws of the time, Gwendolyn finally accepts a proposal of

marriage. She then regards marriage as a sort of “social promotion,” stating that “a peerage will not quite do instead of leadership to the man who meant to lead; and this delicate-limbed sylph of twenty meant to lead” (4.2), with her marriage to Grandcourt seeming to promise to her “the dignities, the luxuries, the power of doing a great deal of what she liked to do” (13.53). Despite her hopes, Gwendolyn’s marriage proves to be just the opposite—rather than liberating her, it restricts her more than her prior impoverished state. Once again, marriage is shown as an inequitable relationship that requires the woman to be dependent upon her husband, one that must be overcome in order to achieve equality.

Gwendolyn’s inequality to and dependence on her husband is what prevents her from achieving her goal to act according to her own desires. Here, education is not the cause for the inequality in their marriage, as both Gwendolyn and Grandcourt are shown to be educated. Rather, it is Gwendolyn’s economic dependability on Grandcourt that makes their marriage inequitable and forces her to submit to his whims. This all should have been set right upon Grandcourt’s death, but Grandcourt’s skimping on her inheritance by giving her only a small living allowance, as made possible by inheritance laws at the time. Grandcourt could legally give his financially dependant wife as much money as he felt she needed, with the law trusting that a husband would take pity on his wife and leave her enough upon which for her to live comfortably. The fact that Gwendolyn was still financially under Grandcourt’s thumb at the end of the book is a subtle reminder of the control a man has on his wife, and her dependency on him, even after he is dead. Gwendolyn’s inability to gain economic stability through either marriage or inheritance highlights the necessity of economic independence for marriage to be equitable for women. Gwendolyn’s desire to act being thwarted by her economic dependency on her husband in *Daniel Deronda* shows that the system of primogeniture in Victorian inheritance laws needed to be changed before equality could be achieved. *Daniel Deronda* predates the Married Women’s Act of 1882 by about six years, making it a commentary on the need for such a reform and a reflection of the measures needed to increase a woman’s freedom from her husband. In this way, *Daniel Deronda* and its masculine woman marks the next step towards the liberation of women, giving women greater autonomy and control over their lives.

Continuing the idea of greater autonomy for women, Thomas Hardy’s *Jude the Obscure* addresses the inequitable nature of marriage through the

treatment of its masculine heroine, Sue Bridehead. Sue is described as one with a “curious unconsciousness of gender” (Hardy 143), able to interact with men “almost as one of their own sex” (141) and desiring to act and “Be more independent” (97), identifying her as one of the masculine women of Victorian novels. As such, Sue does not want to marry; she says, “I think I should begin to be afraid of you, Jude, the moment you had contracted to cherish me under a Government stamp and I was licensed to be loved on the premises by you—ugh, how horrible and sordid” (249). Sue’s desire to remain unmarried comes from her feeling that marriage would be restrictive and prevent her and Jude from existing as equals. In this way, Hardy shows through Sue the appeal life without marriage would have for a woman, as well as how liberation from marriage could help increase equality between the sexes.

Even as Hardy uses Sue to show how living outside of marriage can increase equality, he also uses her to show how living under the bonds of matrimony is inherently oppressive. After Sue enters into a consensual, unmarried relationship with Jude, she has relative peace for a time. Despite the equitable nature of this relationship, Sue’s peace does not last, as Society intervenes and does not allow her to live as she pleases outside of marriage without consequences. Sue is pressured into a marriage with Phillotson, which Sue agrees to “because of the awkwardness of [her] situation” (Hardy 162) in spending time with Jude as an unmarried woman. Their marriage by all accounts should be an equitable one, as they are equals both educationally and economically. However, Sue struggles to adjust to her marriage because marriage as an institution requires her to be subordinate to her husband, and not an equal. She runs away to live with Jude unwed to him, “do[ing] that which was right in (their) eyes” (Hardy 297) and not society’s. In the end, society rears its ugly head, and destroys the happiness and the children Jude and Sue had in their union. This causes Sue to run back to Phillotson in an attempt to set things right, stating “we must conform” (331), an act which leaves her trapped in her loveless marriage to a man who physically disgusts her, destined to “never [find] peace” (397) until she is dead, even as Jude is by the end of the book. Hardy’s portrayal of Sue as a masculine woman shows that even though a man and woman may be both educationally and economically equal, as Phillotson and Sue were, the institution of marriage itself forces them into an unequal relationship.

Sue's struggles against marriage mark the final step towards liberation and the emergence of Sarah Grand's New Woman, born from the labor of those masculine women of the Victorian era. The term "New Woman" was coined in the late nineteenth century, the same year that *Jude the Obscure* began serialization in magazines, with Sue Bridehead heralded by some as "the first delineation in fiction of the woman who was coming into notice . . . the intellectualized, emancipated bundle of nerves that modern conditions were producing" (Hardy xlvi). This "New Woman" of the late Victorian was marked by her refusal to follow societal norms, especially when pertaining to marriage and traditional gender roles. According to Serf, "[the New Woman] felt free to initiate sexual relationships, to explore alternatives to marriage and motherhood, and to discuss sexual matters such as contraception and venereal disease" (35). Rather than being submissive, as was expected, the New Woman acted like a man in regards to initiating relationships with who she pleased, or in choosing not to and remain independent—a sentiment which is echoed in Sue's choice to live with Jude. Sue therefore represents a very special figure of the masculine woman, as she is both a response to and representative of this new women's movement, but also the culmination of the pattern that Wollstonecraft influenced when she first delineated the term.

The fact that Sue remains trapped in an unhappy marriage at the end of the book presents a difficult challenge, and seems to suggest that Hardy wrote the book as a warning against the New Woman. However, the fact that Hardy sent letters to many of the New Women authors of the day, including Sarah Grand, seems to suggest a deep sympathy towards the New Woman (Davis 53). Forcing her into an unhappy marriage, then, is not to punish her for her ideas but to show the flaws of a system that did not allow those ideas to flourish. Therefore, Hardy's treatment of Sue Bridehead is not meant, as William A. Davis assumed, to be a critique of the New Women and to "show us why women like Sue will fail" (58), but is more to show that she cannot exist as she desires under the current system and that the New Woman movement was destined for failure unless marriage reform happened. This puts Hardy's sentiments on marriage more in line with Grand's, who argued that marriage reform was not to allow greater licentiousness among women, as men feared, but to put a stop to the double standard of chastity between the sexes. As Grand said, "True womanliness is not in danger, and the sacred duties of wife and mother will be all the more honorably performed" (274) when she is free from the system that oppresses her. As this idea is manifest

in how she was happier living free to act outside of a restrictive marriage, Sue Bridehead thus marks the arrival of the New Woman in literature, her journey having been recorded throughout Victorian novels through the struggles of women embodying the supposed-masculine desire to act.

Wuthering Heights, *Daniel Deronda*, and *Jude the Obscure* are examples taken from early, middle, and late Victorian periods, respectively, each addressing the issues facing women trapped in inequitable marriages, and each pointing towards social reform. In this way, Victorian literature encapsulates through its various fictional masculine women—and the problems they go through—the birth of the New Woman. In their pages is preserved the journey made by countless women struggling against societal norms and pressures to gain the right to act for themselves that had long been denied them. Thus, the struggles, triumphs, and failures of these masculine women of Victorian novels echoes the actual journey of women throughout the Victorian period fighting for the liberation of their gender that would culminate in the birth of the New Woman near the end of the period.

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