

# The role of women in victorian society essay sample



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In this essay I am going to analyse the role of Victorian women in four short stories. The first story that I will be investigating is called the Half Brother I will be comparing this to all five of the short stories. These were times of great change and although we see much that was typical of society occasionally there is evidence of women wanting changes and to have more independence. There are examples of this autonomy in most of these short stories. A brief summary of the story, Helen (the character that I will be discussing) is the narrator's mother; she got married at the tender age of seventeen.

In those days Victorian women wanted to get married so they could get taken care of by their husbands, the reason being is that women didn't go to school so they had no academic skills. So if the women didn't get married they would most probably end up in squalor or prostitution. Helens first husband died of consumption. The story was set in Scotland in a rural area. Helen had 2 children with her first husband but unfortunately her one-week-old daughter died of scarlet fever. This left her with her son who is three years older than the narrator.

In those days birth control was not available, as it had not been invented, this was why many poor Victorian families were so big. This burden was so painful that Helen didn't shed a tear, in the text it says " looking in her pretty, pale, dead face, without so much as shedding a tear". After this happened Helen's sister Fanny was a caring sister who is selfless came to look after Helen and they took in work from the mills until Helens eyesight was no longer functioning properly. This was a poor situation for Helen as the

farm she was living on was in a poor derelict state and she needed money to support her children and herself.

One day when Helen came back from Church an old bachelor called William Preston had proposed to Helen and offered to take care of her family and support them. This seemed like a good idea but Helen was weary and upset by this because in the text it says “ Aunt Fanny heard her cry as if her heart was breaking”. When Helen told her about what happened Fanny was shocked because Fanny often thought that Helen had forgotten her first husband very quickly and this was concrete proof of it.

Fanny seemed a little green-eyed of the idea of Helen getting married to William Preston because fanny said, “ she would have been a far more suitable match for a man of William Preston age than Helen”. Helen was put in a dilemma now because she had to decide if marrying William Preston was the right idea she had to look at both sides of the coin and way up her possibilities. Helen did not love William Preston but her eyesight was in bad way and as William Preston’s wife she would never have to do anything and looking after a boy was a great charge to a widowed mother.

Fanny started to accept the idea of Helen and William Preston getting married because this would mean a comfortable living for them. That was every Victorian ladies dream to live in a big house and not have to work. In the text it shows how Fanny would get used to the idea of the marriage by saying “ by and by, aunt Fanny seemed to take a brighter view of the marriage than did Helen herself. Helen was reluctant about the idea of marriage because she did not love William Preston but the fact that she

would have a roof over her head and a husband to support her was too good an offer to turn down so she aunt fanny and the baby moved in with him.

Helen clearly did not love William Preston as in the text it says, " She loved Gregory (her son), and she did not love him" this made William Preston bitter and made him resent her son who was just a mere kid. Helen knew that William Preston did not like her so, which made her love for him even stronger, in the text it shows this by saying " he (William Preston) was so jealous of the ready love that always gushed out like a spring of fresh water" the metaphor there enhances how strong the love between the mother and son.

During the story Helens eyesight gets gradually worse because of the crying she had in mourning the death of her first child. It says in the text " Helens eyesight would never be good for much again" the health care in Victorian times was very poor as the technology of today was not available in those times which may people suffered and died at very young ages. In Victorian times people were put into classes so if you were in the working class you were more likely to go into prostitution and minor jobs like working in mills.

Women who were in the upper class did not have the problem of work as they were looked after by their wealth. So again it was possible to see that Helen had no choice but to accept the offer of marriage. The second story that I will discuss about is called Tony Kytes. The author Thomas Hardy was born in Victorian times (1840-1928), his stories were set in the area he called " Wessex", present- day Dorset, Wiltshire and Hampshire. Hardy was one of the first to writers to set his stories in rural England, this meant Hardy was in

a position to raise the issues of the so called “ expectations of a Victorian marriage.

He did this by introducing “ typical” Victorian women but in this story he has a character that is the total opposite and she was outspoken and self-governing. This story is about a man called Tony Kytes who is leading 3 different women called Milly, Unity and Hannah on an all of them think they are going to marry him. In the opening part of the story it describes Tony by saying “ Twas a little, round, firm, tight face, with a seam here and there left by the smallpox, but not enough to hurt his looks in a women’s eye”.

This implies that even though he may not be the most handsome guy but women still liked him. I think the reason for this is because it was vitally important for women in those days to get married as we see in the story of Half Brothers when Helen saw the advantage of getting married, she had to so she could support her family but in this story the women are single, unlike Helen who had been married once before.

Tony’s wife to be Milly gives the impression of a young sweet loyal fiancé but in saying that she seems like the type of women who is a little bit sly. I got this impression because in the text she says “ Surely you don’t want me to walk, now I’ve come all this way? ” when she said that to Tony she puts him a bit of a predicament which obviously can’t say no and she knows it; and that is why she said it. Milly was a typical Victorian woman and she was aware that men wanted a pretty yet feeble woman. I believe Milly expected Tony to do everything for her if they got married but obviously Tony was not that type of man.

In the Half Brothers Helen was similarly doing the same thing but she was doing it for her kids, also William Preston wanted a wife so he could have a kid that could inherit his money. Tony was not under so much pressure as it was the woman that was desperate to be married for financial security. He would expect a woman that was dutiful and pretty and to give him a family to pass on his inheritance. Also in the Victorians the women in the upper class needed to get married so their fathers didn't have to look after them and they wanted to have kids before they got too old. 5 years old was considered to be very old so most Victorian men picked their women while they were young.

The next girl who wants to marry Tony is called Unity she uses her sexual charm on Tony in persuading him to give her a lift home by saying " My dear Tony, will you give me a lift home? " Tony being the feeble man that he is obviously said " You don't suppose I could refuse ' ee? " I think the women in this story knew this that's why they always managed to exploit him like they did.

Unity really uses aggressive tactics yet enticing way to here what she wants by saying " can you say I'm not pretty, Tony? This obviously puts him in quandary but he tries to worm his way out by saying " I never knowed you was so pretty before! " Tony asks Unity to hide at the back end of his wagon that he is travelling so that Milly doesn't spot her so Unity follows his instructions accordingly quote " Unity Sallet agreed, and lay down at the back end of the wagon". This shows how Unity or even women in general are perceived as being less important to general public in Victorian times

because what kind of woman hides in a back of a wagon so she is not spotted by Milly, this shows how desperate Unity is to get Tony to marry her.

I think Tony thinks that he is a lady's man because he has two women at his feet and they both want to marry him but the only reason why he has these women begging for him is because they want to get married and that's the only reason. Now that Milly was on his wagon Tony wanted to get rid of Milly so he had to think up of an excuse because he had seen his old lover Hannah Joliver walking towards them Tony said " Then would ye creep under the empty sacks just here in the front of the wagon". Tony also tries to use some charm by saying " My dear Milly – my coming wife as I call ee".

Milly falls for his sweet talk and obliges to what Tony says. Tony sees his father and asks him his opinion about the women with Tony. Tony's dad replied, " If you mean to marry Milly Richard, do it, and theres an end o't". Tony's dad didn't really seem to care about Tony's dilemma and Tony was in a rush so he had to leave abruptly. While Tony and Hannah were on the wagon she scratched her face on some bramble, she started to cry really loudly and her father was walking behind their wagon.

When the father heard Hannah's cry's he shouted " My daughter is not willing, sir! then he said, " Be you willing, Hannah? I ask ye to have spirit enough to refuse him, if yer virtue is left to ee and you run no risk? " At this point Tony was very scared now and said, " She's as sound as a bell for me, that I'll swear! " Hannah still in pain said, " I have the spirit, and I do refuse him! " she said that because her father was there and partly because she

was in a tantrum but she did refuse him. Eventually Hannah refused him but Milly Truly loved him but foolishly married Tony the following Sunday.

The ending of Tony Kytes could be taken to mean that Hardy was aware that women needed to be more independent but he could not see that but he could not see that in the foreseeable future i. e he was happy to accept the “ideal Victorian woman” in marriage. The third story that I will discuss is called the Unexpected written by Kate Chopin (1854-1904) she began writing after her husband had died in 1883. She was especially keen to investigate the complex experiences of women in relation to men.

During the story you will see how love is tested and how ill health can change the expectations of a relationship. This story is about a man called Randall and his girlfriend Dorothea whom he was going to marry her after he had come back from his journey. When Randall was leaving upsetting but he had to leave but he would come back as soon as possible. In the story it doesn't tell you where he was going. In the text it says “The good-by dragged with lingering kisses and sighs and more kisses and more clinging till the last wrench came” Dorothea and Randall did not want to leave each other.

Very descriptive language used the style is very melodramatic and lengthy words and sentences symbolise how long it took them to separate. Randall was supposed to return in a month but he caught a cold so he was delayed, Dorothea desperately wanted to see Randall but her parents wouldn't allow it. This gives the idea that her parents were trying to stop her from seeing



him but it could also been for her own well-being because maybe they do not want her to catch his cold; But in saying that, that is a pretty feeble excuse.

In those days people could die of a cold and other minor illnesses. Dorothea was somewhat obsessed with the marriage that was expected to happen when Randall got back, in the text it says " She sat daily gazing for hours upon his portrait, which showed to be an almost perfect specimen of youthful health, strength and manly beauty" once gain the author uses very lengthy and melodramatic sentences to get the obsession point across.

When Randall came back he had lost his manly beauty, it says, " This was not the man who had gone away from her; the man she loved and had promised to marry" Dorothea was shocked at what had happened to her husband to be. Dorothea was horrified at the thought of marrying Randall now she wanted to get out of this relationship right away. In the text it says, " Dorothea had changed her house gown, had mounted her ' wheel', and was fleeing as if death himself pursued her".

In that sentence it has a double meaning because when says " Death himself" the author is talking about Randall who is most likely not going to recover from his illness. That is totally out of character in Victorian society because the women would never leave the man plus she would probably have no means in supporting her self; But in saying that her family could be rich and may have the means to support her. This story compared to Half Brothers is much more of love story with a sad ending but in Half brothers it has a sad theme throughout the story that immediately tells the reader there is sadness in the story.

The ending of *The Unexpected* is basically unexpected which tells you about the author that she was not afraid to write about issues that would have been seen as taboo in Victorian times. In this story I feel sorry for the Randall because he expected to get married to Dorothea but unexpectedly she left him because she didn't want to marry a man who was ill. This basically shows that she didn't love him but she only loved his healthy body.

Dorothea is similar to the women in *Tony Kytes* because they were only after him because they wanted to marry him but Dorothea wanted to marry Randall because he was handsome but she didn't love him because if she did she would have stayed with him even though he was ill. Dorothea clearly did not like Randall in the text it says " She attempted to withdraw from the embrace" Dorothea was just a superficial women but so were the women in *Tony Kytes* just that they weren't really interested in Tony's looks unlike Dorothea.

The 4th story that I will be analysing is called *Sikes and Nancy* written by Charles Dickens (1812-1870) *Sikes and Nancy* was one of Charles Dickens's most powerful and influential readings. It brought a drama to literary readings that had never been seen before. So graphic was his performance that more delicate audience members actually fainted. This short exert was taken from the story of *Oliver twist* which was one of Dickens' earliest novels. The story of *Sikes and Nancy* is about Sikes a crook who bullies Nancy who is too afraid to stand up to him and eventually ends being killed.

In the story you know that Sikes bullies Nancy because in the text it Nancy says, " Its not very easy for me to leave him unless he knows why" this

shows that Sikes has immense power of her and Nancy cannot break that. Women in those times like Nancy who were poor did not have a choice in what job they could do so most of them were in to prostitution. Nancy clearly feels nothing for Sikes and her poor life by saying, " I am chained to my old life. I loathe and hate it but I cannot leave it" this also shows that she has no self-esteem because she believes that she cannot leave but sadly enough it is miserably true.

Nancy is even offered a way out of her poverty to start a new life in a different country but because of her low self-esteem she turned down the biggest opportunity and she just couldn't leave Sikes because of the power that he has over her. When Sikes knew that Nancy had been visiting people behind his back he was extremely angry. His associate, Fagin feared a little for Nancy's safety by saying, " You won't be- you won't be- too- violent Bill? This shows that fagin is afraid that bill Sikes is more than violent and that he should take it easy on Nancy.

In Victorian times domestic abuse wasn't an unknown problem but it simply enough men had to show their authority and this is how they done it especially there was no money. When Sikes confronted Nancy he struck her repeatedly until she died in her own pool of blood. After he had killed Nancy he set the house on fire and staggered out with guilt. When they found the Body of Nancy Mr Brownlow offered fifty pounds to the man who catches the murderer alive.

Sikes was running away from the murder and the people who were hunting him he found a rope in a loop in put it round his neck fell to his death where

his brains were dashed out. I think the reason why Charles Dickens made such a graphic ending to the story was to show revenge on Sikes so it kind of gave a happy but sad ending. The moral of the story was too show how the poor Victorian people suffered in this case Nancy was the one who suffered but because of her poor situation she couldn't get out of her squalor, which was the true life of Victorian times.