

The representation of women in victorian texts



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Compare and contrast the representation of women in two mid-Victorian texts. (no more than 1000 words). Women in the Victorian age had no rights. They were prepared in their younger lives for one goal, which was that of marriage. Women were expected to be perfect wives and mothers and all aspects of their lives from financial to social were controlled by their husbands.

Representation means to show what the image was of a Victorian woman, although this was rarely done by women themselves. They were usually represented by men and had no voice of their own. The class and status of a woman was significant in that she was expected to marry a man of the same or better class than herself. By analysing texts written by two authors during the mid-Victorian era it is possible to see the similarities and differences in how women were represented at this time.

The first extract written by John Ruskin is from *Sesame and Lilies*. It is about the role of men and women in society and the relationship they have to each other. He is stating that people should stop trying to determine who the greater sex is and realise that men need women and vice versa. Ruskin believes that by working together men and women can create a good home. To achieve this they need to stick to their roles both privately and publicly.

A man's role is to provide and protect, whereas a woman's role is to keep the home in order. Women, also have a duty to provide loving and nurturing to their husbands. Ruskin also thinks that women can put a stop to war. They should not accept the misery and bloodshed caused by war. It is a

man's disposition to fight; women have a responsibility to persuade their men not to.

The second text *The Subjection of Women* written by John Stuart Mill is in favour for the rights of women. The main point of his extract is to put forward the idea of equality between the sexes. Mill is comparing a woman's role in marriage to be worse than a role of a slave. He claims that slaves in other countries have more rights than married women in England and Mill believes that this should change. He wants the law to alter so that a husband no longer owns his wife or any property that she inherits. He also states that it is not acceptable that a woman's father makes the decision on who she marries and he believes that a woman has the right to choose her future husband. As well as choosing her own husband, Mill believes that women should have the right to divorce if they are unhappy in their marriage or mistreated by their husbands.

He writes that it is unfair that a woman can be forced to stay married unless she has the financial means to go through a court to get a divorce. Mill is putting forward his argument that women are their own people and should therefore be entitled to the same rights as men. Ruskin's text represents women in an idyllic way. He states they could be queens and have power, by accepting their roles to look after their husbands.

His text describes women as the homemakers and men as the protectors. He writes that part of a woman's job is to keep her husband on the right moral path; in doing so women can put a stop to all the evil that is in the world. Although the extract seems to be calling for societal change, the tone

of the piece is suggesting that a woman's place is in the home and that she should accept this as her duty in life. The language Ruskin has used throughout the text has an idyllic tone to it the stars may be over her head; the glowworm in the night-cold grass may be the only fire at her foot; but home is wherever she is doesn't give a level-headed sense to what he is saying but a more wistful representation.

On the whole the text seems to be giving advice to women that the power they desire can be gained by them knowing their proper place is in the home looking after their husbands needs. Mills text on the other hand is stating that women should have equal rights to men. He uses much stronger language which is more direct. Use of words like force, sold, and obedience enforce the reality that married women are treated as slaves. He uses more political language than Ruskin whose language is more artistic. Mill's text is portraying women as humans that are the same as men and therefore should have equal rights. He actually used his position as an MP to try and directly give women the right to vote and which would have resulted in them having more equal rights although, unfortunately he failed to secure the change.

There are obvious differences in the author's beliefs of how mid-Victorian women should be portrayed. Both texts were written by men during the same historical period. The target audience the texts were aimed at was probably men and women in middle class society. The texts could be seen as advice intended for women, although Ruskin's is stating how women should behave in a marriage, Mill's is suggesting to women that they should fight for their rights. I think Mill's text is the stronger of the two as

he seemed to be writing it as a way forward for women. He was a strong believer in women's rights and supported the suffrage movement.

Ruskin's text is still a very male orientated view on what are specifically men's and women's roles in the home and in society.

He isn't saying that women should have more rights but that they should know their place, which is that of home maker and supporter of their husbands. His view although unrealistic now was very popular during the mid-Victorian era. In conclusion the two writers are representing women in a very different way. Mill's text was ahead of his time, as it is now easier to relate to his views than it is to the views that Ruskin held.

Words: 1024