

Character development and the victorian woman



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In the Victorian era, appropriate etiquette and manners were predetermined for both men and women. The society in which they lived maintained stereotypical gender roles more rigidly defined than at the present. The coming of age was difficult for any young person; therefore, the ability to distinguish among good and poor examples of etiquette was essential to attaining proper and respectful womanhood or manhood. The stereotypical Victorian woman was considered to be meek, weak, have few opinions, be generally helpless, and have little chance of gaining social status. For the most part, these women were said to have two main roles: courtship followed by marriage. Even from a young age, girls dreamed of a successful marriage in that this was their only hope of rising in society (Petrie, 199-206). In fact, one writer said " that it is not easy to comprehend the possibility of raising them to a higher plane than that to which they had been lifted, because of their natural incapacity for other than the domestic and social functions which they so gracefully fulfilled" (James, 215). These women were also considered intellectually inferior. Women were only expected to learn French, drawing, and music (Petrie, 200). Subjects such as art, literature, and especially science were considered too complex and advanced for a woman's mind (James, 324-25). As the fight began for women's equality, especially in education, one famous female author questioned men's intellect in marrying such passive women. In " Vindication of the Rights of Women," Mary Wollstonecraft asks: " Do the women who, by the attainment of a few artificial accomplishments, have strengthened the prevailing prejudice, merely contribute to the happiness of their husbands? Do they display their charms merely to amuse them? And have women, who have early imbibed notions of passive obedience, sufficient character to

manage a family or educate children?" (Mellor, 388) In other words, how can a man desire a passive and uneducated woman to become his wife as well as the mother and protector of his children? Without the correct education, the mother will not be fully equipped to deal with crucial issues that arise in managing a family and in parenting. Men would also be more satisfied if their wives completed them, rather than simply amused them. In Jane Austen's novel *Northanger Abbey*, however, the female characters express their individual opinions and do not appear to be naturally weak; they are instead forced to be submissive, or meek, towards men and compelled to rely on them. For example, when Captain Tilney demands that Catherine leave *Northanger*, she has no other choice. She is given neither adequate time to pack her things, nor a guard to ensure her safety on her way home (Austen, 177). She must yield to the man. As a young and impressionable girl, the young protagonist, Catherine Morland, must face these stereotypes and develop her individual character, while maintaining her intellect and not yielding to the expected passivity. In order to accomplish this, she needs both positive and negative examples of acceptable manners. After recognizing the differences in each of her acquaintances, she must choose which attributes to reject and which to embrace. Jane Austen effectively uses character foils, through both males and females, in order to aid Catherine in this critical search. Mrs. Morland, for example, contrasts with Mrs. Thorpe. Mrs. Morland lacks humor, but is kind and honest (Todd, 74). She desires the best for her children, but has little time to help Catherine because she spends the majority of her time educating the younger children. Catherine even overhears her parents say at one time that she is becoming a pretty young lady (Austen, 10). While her parents love her and wish only the best

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for her, they are not boastful about their daughter. On the other hand, Mrs. Morland is unafraid to boast of the greatness of her children – which is obviously why her children are also poor examples of character. She believes that “ all of them [are] more beloved and respected in their different station than any other three beings ever were” (Austen, 25). Catherine becomes more like her mother, however, by recognizing the good in people and by not being boastful of her relationships with others. Mr. Allen and General Tilney are both wealthy men, but they have different attitudes and values. Mr. Allen is practical, sensible, and humble, whereas General Tilney is obsessed with material objects. When showing Catherine around the abbey for the first time, he makes reference to the small size and simplicity of the rooms and even begins to tell her the very price of one particular item, while all along he is searching for compliments (Austen, 128). He implores Catherine to compare his possessions to that of Mr. Allen’s; by falsely suggesting that Catherine must be used to more luxury and nicer things at the Allen’s, he really only desires to hear Catherine deny this claim (Austen, 131). In comparison, Catherine falls in love with Henry Tilney, not because of his money, but because of his personality and heart. In this respect, she seems more alike to Mr. Allen. Henry Tilney and John Thorpe are also quite different from one another. Thorpe is excessively arrogant whereas Tilney has the ability to clearly recognize the motivations of others. Thorpe, who is at first determined to marry Catherine, for example, offers General Tilney only the highest compliments concerning her. His pride causes the Morlands to seem even wealthier than he himself believes them to be. In fact, this not only applies to the Morlands, but “ with whomsoever he was, or was likely to be connected, his own consequence always required that theirs should be great,

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and as his intimacy with any acquaintance grew, so regularly grew their fortune" (Austen, 193). Tilney, on the other hand, is considerate and tender and even helps Catherine to recognize her own follies — as when she suspects the General of being his wife's cause of death. He asks her to "consider the dreadful nature of the suspicions you have entertained" and to "remember the country and the age in which we live. Remember that we are English, that we are Christians" (Austen, 156) — thus guiding her back into reality. While Thorpe only wants Catherine because of her supposed money, Henry Tilney truly loves her. As evidence, when Tilney learns that she does not have much money, he still pursues and eventually marries her. Perhaps the most crucial contrast exists between Isabella Thorpe and Eleanor Tilney. Eleanor is reserved and calm while Isabella is more outgoing and feisty. Isabella is fickle and attempts to manipulate Catherine into going to Clifton with them by first asking her to retract her engagement with Miss Tilney. When this tactic doesn't work she tries again by calling her affectionate names (Austen, 79). She also accepts James Morlands proposal, but then flirts with Captain Tilney, causing James to break off the engagement (Austen, 159-60). It is quite ironic that Isabella claims that she paid no attention to Captain Tilney because she "knew the fickle sex too well" (Austen, 171), when in fact her own fickleness leads her to flirt with him. She tries to persuade Catherine to write to James, in her defense, but Catherine finally realizes her selfishness and insincerity. Eleanor is forgiving, as when she agrees to still go on a walk with Catherine even after having been unwillingly rejected. Eleanor is also disheartened and upset when she is forced to share with Catherine the General's demand for Catherine to leave. She begs Catherine to understand and reminds her that "you are too good, I

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am sure, to think the worse of me for the part I am obliged to perform. I am indeed a most unwilling messenger" (Austen, 176). In other words, she is a faithful and unselfish friend. As Catherine grows throughout the novel, she becomes increasingly more and more like Eleanor. In fact, because of Isabella's "inconsistencies, contradictions, and falsehood[s]" she discontinues her friendship with Isabella (Austen, 172). In conclusion, Catherine faces an array of examples to look to concerning her development of character as a Victorian woman. The poor examples of character, Mrs. Thorpe, General Tilney, John Thorpe, and Isabella Thorpe, all help Catherine to realize that selfishness and concern with material goods are qualities to be avoided. On the other hand, her mother, Mr. Allen, Henry Tilney, and Eleanor Tilney, all help her to know which qualities are welcomed and desired. She is attracted to the character traits of the latter four and becomes more like them throughout the novel. She is meek, in a positive way, and voices her many opinions, but she also finds a husband who allows her to be intellectual and considers her his equal rather than simply for entertainment purposes. Unlike most women at this time, she is able to raise her social status by marrying someone of a greater stature than herself, but this is not the motivation of her relationship with Henry. Catherine thus has the ability to become not the stereotypical Victorian woman, but an idealized and idolized Victorian woman. Works Cited Austen, Jane. *Northanger Abbey*. New York: Pearson and Longman, 2005. 8-198. James, Bartlett B. *Woman: In All Ages and in All Countries*. Philadelphia: The Rittenhouse Press, 1907. 311-340. Mellor, Anne K., and Richard E. Matlak. "Vindication of the Rights of Women." *British Literature: 1780-1830*. Boston: Heinle and Heinle, 1996. 371-413. Petrie, Sir Charles. *The Victorians*. New York: David McKay Co., Inc., <https://assignbuster.com/character-development-and-the-victorian-woman/>

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