

# Feminist legislation and its effects on 19th century british literature

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Now that you've developed your skills, learned new information, and gained insights, what are you going to do? This final project should be influenced by the work you've completed these past few weeks. Determine who needs to do know about what you've learned.

Is there an important skill or lesson you want to share with others? Find an authentic audience and figure out how you are going to communicate your discoveries. You'll need to first develop a rationale for your project in which you'll discuss how your work has inspired you. I plan to write a full length piece of expository writing that will reflect the work I have been doing connecting the themes of the literature to key historical events and analyzing the reason that the work can be considered social criticism. To do this, I will write a paper on the changing views on women during the time period, as the 19th century provided the background for the women's rights movement of the next century. My work inspired me by making me look at the literature in a different way. Looking at how women are portrayed differently throughout the century caused me to reevaluate the novels and look more deeply into why this happened.

The role of women also serve as a very concrete example of how societal events are portrayed through the work of a time period. Understanding this has even affected the way I view modern literature. I am not more curious as to how our literary fads reflect our culture and what we can change through the use of the written word. I believe that Teenink is a good audience for this paper because the correlation between societal beliefs and literature is important to understand and this would be a group that would not only be interested in its ramifications, but may also use the idea to look for social

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criticism in their own class material. This project is important to me because the work of the 19th century has inspired me personally and I would like to spread the motivation I have found here with other people.

Full length expository piece to be posted to "teen ink" Feminist Legislation and Its Effect on 19th Century Literature The 19th century was a time of change. The industrial revolution irrevocably altered industry, the abolition of slavery in the British Empire freed millions, and the Opium wars opened trade with the Far East. And amongst this era of alteration, women found a voice in the policies and politics of the time. It was the women of the Victorian Era that first gained the momentum that would allow them ever-increasing social freedoms in the next century. These astounding changes and the social restrictions that accompanied the political freedoms had drastic influences on literature throughout the century. The reflections of a controversial women's rights movement is seen through the portrayal of women in works as disparate as *Pride and Prejudice* and *Frankenstein*.

The early 1800's was a time of relatively lax social restrictions, women were allowed to meet with and accompany men without chaperones and married in their late twenties. This was strictly contrasted however, by their total lack of legal rights or representation. For instance, upon marriage, a woman gave up all right to her fortune and was only entitled to 1/3 of the husband's land and interests in the case of his death. With almost no hope initiating a successful divorce, women were stuck in unhappy marriages, forced into financial and social submission. This chauvinist attitude towards the oppression of women can be easily shown by the 'auctioning' of wives in

which unwanted women were harnessed and sold by their husbands, who would face almost no legal redress. The literature of this early point in the century depicts active female characters that are generally socially mobile and serve to empower a generally weakened portion of the population.

Characters such as Elizabeth Bennet of *Pride and Prejudice* (written 1813) and *Jane Eyre* (1847) served to empower a strong feminist identity. The women in the novels of this time period were far more outspoken and developed over the course of the text. These characteristics would change drastically over the next decades. During that later portion of the century, the legal rights of women were greatly expanded. Before 1870, a married woman had no right to sue or be sued, keep money given to her in a will or own property or investments. This however changed with acts such as the Divorce Act of 1875 that established impartial state-run divorce courts.

Women received money left to them after the Women's Property Act of 1870, and they were entitled the rights to property and investment in 1882 in the Married Women's Property Act. This allowed a woman to own and be held responsible for land and businesses. This striking increase in political liberties came at the price of many social freedoms for women. No longer allowed to accompany men without chaperones, women were far more restricted during the later portion of the century. This is most clearly shown in the transition from strong and empowered female characters, to more passive and subservient roles in the literature of the time. Books such as *Frankenstein* depict women as bystanders with no constructive purpose other than an object of affection or desire.

Even in books such as Dracula where women are presented as major characters, they are considered easily corrupted and subject to the whims of others. You begin to see the reemergence of women depicted as weak and deficient. This can be seen as a reaction to the increasing feminist sentiment in England. The literature depicts the social backlash against liberating legislation. The effects of 19th century feminism are clearly seen through the lens of the literature produced during and after the enactment of controversial acts to advance the legal status of women. By documenting the social changes undergone as to the depiction of women in everyday society, literature preserved the dramatic backlash from this vital period in history.