



Class And Gender: A Crossroads Of Power In 19th-Century Women's Writing

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Abstract:

The 19th century marked a pivotal era for women writers, who not only navigated the restrictions of their gender but also faced the constraints imposed by class systems. This article examines the intersection of class and gender in the works of prominent 19th-century female authors such as **Jane Austen**, **Elizabeth Gaskell**, and **George Eliot**. Through an exploration of novels like *Pride and Prejudice*, *North and South*, and *Middlemarch*, this study highlights the ways in which these writers critiqued both class hierarchies and gendered expectations. By portraying female protagonists who must grapple with societal constraints, these authors created narratives that interrogate the roles of women within both the private and public spheres, emphasizing the compounded oppression faced by women of lower social standing. This paper argues that 19th-century women's writing played a crucial role in early feminist thought by revealing the entangled nature of class and gender oppression, ultimately advocating for the social mobility and intellectual freedom of women.

Keywords:

Intersectionality, class, gender, 19th-century literature, Jane Austen, Elizabeth Gaskell, George Eliot, feminist literary criticism, women's rights, domesticity, marriage, social mobility

Introduction:

The 19th century in Britain was a period defined by intense social stratification, patriarchal values, and an emerging discourse on women's rights. For women, particularly those from lower and middle classes, opportunities were largely limited by their social standing and gender, which together functioned as dual forces of oppression. Women's voices were frequently excluded from political, economic, and intellectual

arenas. In response, women writers used their works as platforms to comment on these societal structures, often focusing on the intricate relationship between class and gender as pivotal to women's experiences.

Writers such as **Jane Austen**, **Elizabeth Gaskell**, and **George Eliot** navigated these themes with subtlety and depth. Their novels explore how class distinctions amplify gender oppression, portraying characters whose lives are shaped by the socio-economic conditions of the time. Through the lens of feminist criticism, this article will analyze how these authors articulate the intersections of class and gender and how these dynamics serve as barriers to women's autonomy, while also offering glimpses of resistance and empowerment. These works not only critique societal norms but also contribute to the development of early feminist thought by pushing for both gender equality and the breakdown of class hierarchies.

Gender and Class as Interlocking Systems of Oppression

In the 19th century, class and gender operated as mutually reinforcing systems that shaped women's lives. While upper-class women enjoyed certain privileges, such as the ability to pursue leisure and education, they were nonetheless confined by rigid domestic roles. Middle- and lower-class women faced more overt struggles, including economic hardship, the necessity of labor, and limited social mobility. Gender compounded these class struggles by further limiting their opportunities.

Elizabeth Gaskell's North and South portrays this tension vividly. **Margaret Hale**, the protagonist, is a middle-class woman who is initially insulated from the harsher realities of industrialization. However, as her family's financial situation deteriorates, Margaret must confront the intersection of class and gender head-on. Her growing awareness of the working-class women around her, such as **Bessy Higgins**, challenges the romanticized notions of womanhood promoted by her middle-class upbringing. In portraying both Margaret's and Bessy's struggles, Gaskell demonstrates how gender expectations change across class lines.

Marriage as a Mechanism of Class and Gender Control

Marriage was the primary means by which women in the 19th century could achieve economic security, particularly for those of the lower and middle classes. However, marriage also served as a tool for controlling women's autonomy. Novels such as *Jane Austen's Pride and Prejudice* and *Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre* illustrate how women were forced to navigate these constraints in order to secure their futures. For example, **Elizabeth Bennet** must weigh the economic necessity of marriage against her personal desire for love and mutual respect. Her refusal to marry **Mr. Collins**, despite the financial security he offers, represents a feminist rejection of the transactional nature of marriage, particularly as it relates to class mobility.

Similarly, **Jane Eyre** negotiates her lower social standing and gender by refusing to become **Mr. Rochester's** mistress, even though doing so would offer her financial security. **Brontë** uses Jane's rejection of unequal relationships to critique both the class-based and gendered constraints placed upon women. In

each case, marriage is portrayed not as a romantic ideal but as a site of negotiation where women must balance personal desire with societal expectations.

Education and Intellectual Autonomy

Education was another realm in which the intersection of class and gender became particularly evident. For most women, education was restricted to subjects deemed appropriate for their gender, such as music, embroidery, and household management. However, women from the lower and working classes often had no access to formal education at all, limiting their ability to improve their social standing.

George Eliot's Middlemarch portrays the intellectual struggles of **Dorothea Brooke**, a woman who aspires to more than what society expects of her. Dorothea's desire to study and engage in philosophical discourse is stifled by the patriarchal figures around her, and her first marriage to **Casaubon** represents the restrictions placed on women's intellectual freedom. Eliot uses Dorothea's story to highlight the tension between personal ambition and societal expectations, demonstrating that both class and gender act as barriers to women's intellectual autonomy.

Domesticity and Class Stratification

The domestic sphere was central to women's identities in the 19th century, and the division between the public and private spheres was often drawn along class lines. Upper-class women were expected to preside over the domestic realm, while lower-class women were often employed in service roles within the homes of wealthier families. However, domesticity was also a space of resistance where women could exercise a limited form of power.

In *Elizabeth Gaskell's Cranford*, the predominantly female community functions as a microcosm of 19th-century gender and class dynamics. Although the women of Cranford occupy a domestic space, they wield influence within their own community. The novel subverts traditional expectations by showing how women can use domesticity to create networks of support and solidarity, even across class lines.

The "New Woman" and Class Boundaries

As the century progressed, the figure of the "New Woman" began to emerge, challenging both class and gender norms. The "New Woman" was educated, independent, and often sought employment outside the home. This figure symbolized a break from traditional gender roles, and authors such as **George Eliot** and **Sarah Grand** used their works to explore the implications of this shift.

In *Middlemarch*, Dorothea Brooke embodies many characteristics of the "New Woman." Although she is constrained by class expectations and her role as a wife, Dorothea's intellectual ambition and desire to create social change suggest a feminist impulse toward breaking free of societal norms. Similarly, in *Sarah*

Grand's *The Heavenly Twins*, the protagonist **Angelica** rejects the restrictive norms imposed by both class and gender, seeking a more liberated existence.

Conclusion:

The intersection of class and gender in 19th-century women's writing reveals a complex web of social expectations that constrained women's lives, particularly in the realms of marriage, education, and domesticity. However, through their writing, authors such as **Jane Austen**, **Elizabeth Gaskell**, and **George Eliot** not only critiqued these limitations but also offered portrayals of women who resisted and redefined their roles. The novels of this period laid the groundwork for the feminist movements of the 20th century, demonstrating that the struggles women faced were not solely gendered but deeply entwined with class structures. By examining these intersections, we gain a deeper understanding of how literature from this era continues to influence feminist thought today.

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