



Tracing the Evolution of the Victorian Female Protagonist in Charlotte Bronte's Jane Eyre and George Eliot's Middlemarch

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Abstract : This research explores the conditions of women back in Victorian Era, the way women fought from rigid societal constraints and stereotypes and evolved overtime. It also explores the growth and personal struggles they experienced overtime

IndexTerms – Victorian Era, Condition of women, Societal constraints

Abstract

My NTCC research, Tracing the Evolution of the Victorian Female Character in George Eliot's Middlemarch and Charlotte Bronte's Jane Eyre, shows how women changed over time with little representation before finally recognizing their value, standing up for it, and escaping patriarchy. The project also shows how women are characterized, how they strive and develop personally, and how they strike a balance between their own aspirations and those of society.

During the Victorian era (1837–1901), women's participation was influenced by strict social norms, economic systems, and the legal system of the time. Women were dominated by men, the majority of them were not emancipated, and those who were employed did not receive enough credit for their labor. Women had extremely little options; they were not given many options for their jobs.

Men were expected to work outside the home and support their families, while women were primarily designed to be caregivers. It was expected of women to be as pure, nurturing, and compassionate as angels in the home. They were given the idea of the "Angel in the house."

The main focus of my thesis is on the roles and characteristics of women, their historical development, and their representation in the Victorian novels Middlemarch by George Eliot and Jane Eyre by Charlotte Bronte. This project focuses on how the two well-known female heroines in Victorian literature represent the development and evolution of feminist ideas.

While Dorothea's story portrays self-sacrifice, ambition, and independence, Jane Eyre's story emphasizes women's survival, personal development, and self-respect.

My project focuses on the manner in which these two individuals go through their own personal growth and tribulations, seek and manage independence in different ways, and leave a lasting impression on the viewer.

Aim

My project's goal is to understand and analyse how society ruled women, examining their individual challenges and development as well as how they battled against the male dominance and confinement they faced. My goal is to examine the various facets and intricacies that are associated with them. Additionally, each woman's abandonment and liberation from socially imposed constraints and expectations.

Methodology

1) Literary Analysis-

A thorough examination of both texts to gain a deeper grasp of the characters' depths and complexity. the manner in which they both pursued Independence, albeit in different ways. concentrating on their relationships, goals, desires, and personal challenges.

2) Comparative Analysis

Comprehending and contrasting both personalities on several levels, evaluating their morals, interpersonal relationships, interactions with society, and strengths and weaknesses.

3) Historical and Cultural Contextualization

Examine how novels present and contest feminist concepts that arose in the Victorian era. Examining how both writers positioned their characters in the male-dominated culture

About the Author

Victorian authors **George Eliot (1819–1880)** and **Charlotte Bronte (1816–1855)** were both very successful and well-known for their exceptional works. In addition to their literary accomplishments, they are recognized and honoured for their insightful observations on human nature, society, and gender dynamics.

Charlotte Bronte

was the third of six siblings to be born in Yorkshire, England. She suffered greatly as a little girl after losing her mother and two elder sisters. During this period of pain and grief, Charlotte became closer to her siblings, Emily and Anne, which further influenced their later works.

Notable works by Charlotte Bronte include *Jane Eyre* (1847), which blends gothic fiction with aspects of romance, treachery, suffering, and social class.

Shirley (1849): The primary objective of the book is to analyse the social upheaval of the early 19th century.

The semi-autobiographical story *Villette* (1853) examines issues of loneliness and unrequited love.

Bronte is renowned for her intensely emotional and intimate writing, which tackles a wide range of subjects, including betrayal, love, morality, and social class.

George Eliot

Her first name was Mary Ann Evans, but she later changed it to George Eliot. She was born in Warwickshire, England. She had the good fortune to be educated to a high standard, which was unusual for women in that time period. She was greatly influenced by philosophy, religion, and social issues. She changed her name and used a male alias to ensure that her work is acknowledged and given due consideration in a male-dominated culture.

Eliot, like Charlotte Bronte, is well-known for her writings, starting with *Adam Bede* (1859), a pastoral account of a morally challenging country life.

The Mill on the Floss (1860) tells the tragic story of brothers and the constraints of social expectations. In the middle of 1871–1872 Considered a classic, this complex novel delves into themes of marriage, ambition, and social change.

Style of Writing

the intricacy and psychological depth of George Eliot's works, which cover a wide range of topics, are widely recognized. Throughout the Victorian era, she was widely respected, and her notable works have made her famous today. Her novel *Middlemarch* is regarded as one of the greatest works of the Victorian era. which was very appreciated, and people continue to find it inspiring and like reading it.

Introduction on the topic

Significant social, cultural, and intellectual changes occurred in Britain during the Victorian era, which had a significant influence on literature. During that age, female authors and protagonists were prevalent in literature. Authors like Charlotte Bronte and George Eliot had a significant influence on literature, influencing readers and demonstrating that female authors could succeed. George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1871–72) and Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* (1847) are two of the most influential and imposing pieces of

Victorian literature, offering insights into the development of the female protagonists. The constraints and hardships faced by women in Victorian periods are depicted in both novels. The authors' delicate yet unique representations of their characters have a profound effect on readers and leave their mark on literature. Jane Eyre by Charlotte Bronte is a strong, courageous woman who asserts her value inside a strict patriarchal system and faces obstacles head-on. The character of Dorothea Brooke, on the other hand, emphasizes her own need for a purposeful life and her battles to balance idealism.

By using these characters, both authors not only question social norms but also disprove the doubters. These authors cleared the path and provided motivation for female authors to defy societal expectations and establish their own literary legacy. The works of George Eliot and Charlotte Bronte also show how these authors overcame patriarchy's domination and hardships to carve out their own niche and encourage several more female authors to follow in their footsteps. In a world where men predominate, breaking free from preconceptions and challenging society is not always simple; it also requires a full shift and carries a risk. In order to gain acceptance and recognition for her work, George Eliot changed her maiden name, Mary Ann Evans, to George Eliot. In their writings, Bronte and Eliot both draw attention to the plight and hardships of women, which in some ways affected readers and provided insights that were highly relatable and motivated women in one way or another.

Dorothea Brooke is presented as a multifaceted individual with genuine goals for the greater good. She longs for a meaningful life that incorporates spirituality and realism, rejecting the world's superficiality and attachments. In contrast to the traditional Victorian ladies who were limited to household duties, Dorothea wants to improve people's lives and have a significant impact on the world. Her early interest in reformist causes, such as enhancing the living conditions of tenants on her uncle's land, reflects her moral convictions and aspirations.

Her early interest in reformist causes, such as enhancing the living conditions of tenants on her uncle's land, reflects her moral convictions and aspirations. She marries Edward Casaubon, a considerably older man, since she feels that he would help her fulfil her higher destiny. She was unaware that life would be so ironic; she encountered Edward's domineering personality, which prevented her from achieving her goals. George Eliot illustrates the characteristics of a strict patriarchal society through the character of Dorothea Brooke. The way women are treated and their dreams are frequently dashed by others in their immediate vicinity. Nonetheless, her experiences help her to shape her identity and to grow as a person.

Condition of Women in Victorian Society The Expectations and Role of Women in Victorian Society -

During the Victorian era, women were only allowed to perform household chores and provide family care due to extremely strict social conventions and societal expectations. Women were viewed as angels. They were expected by society to be angelic, meaning innocent and pure. Women's conditions are frequently reflected in and critiqued by literature from this era. Both George Eliot Middlemarch and Charlotte Bronte's Jane Eyre are significant works that illustrate the state and development of women as protagonists, providing a prism through which the status of women in the Victorian era can be evaluated. The Angel in the House is validated by Victorian society, which emphasizes women's responsibilities as moral guardians and caregivers in the home. In order to prepare them for married life, women's education was restricted to embroidery, music, and simple household tasks. Their inferior status was further cemented by legal restrictions; they lacked an identity and had few property rights. Despite these restrictions and limitations, discussions challenging women's rights and status also emerged during the Victorian era. This change can be seen in the literature of the century, as writers such as Charlotte Bronte and George Eliot utilized their writings to question and criticize the constraints and social conventions that were placed upon them.

The journey of Jane Eyre, as she develops and changes as a woman finding life in her own way, is depicted in Charlotte Bronte's Jane Eyre. The way she develops as a result of the difficulties and trials life presents, which in a sense helps her to define who she is.

Legal dependents of their fathers influenced women. They lacked a separate legal identity.

1) Legal Rights

- A woman's property immediately passed to her husband. The laws favoured men, and divorce was challenging. Women were permitted to purchase property by the Matrimonial Acts of 1857, but only under very specific circumstances, such as abuse or adultery. The father was granted custody of the children.

2) Education and Employment

- Girls were largely excluded from education. In order to prepare for marriage, only girls from wealthy households could receive an education at home or at private schools that focused on skills like sewing, music, and manners. Girls from the working class received little or no formal schooling

3) Career Possibilities

- Women had few options and were neither inspired or driven to pursue their goals. They were limited to roles and duties related to the home. Accepted occupations included factory employment, household work, and teaching, all of which were frequently low-paying. They were not provided with possibilities that would have allowed them to fulfil their aspirations and become free. Men were the only ones offered professional chances.

4) Roles and Social Expectations

- Women were supposed to take care of others and do household duties, while males were seen as the breadwinners by society. Marrying, starting a family, and raising children were the main responsibilities of women. That was the extent of their lives. They were not free to take care of it or take care of themselves. They were constrained by strict and inflexible societal rules and standards.
- Victorian ideals placed a strong emphasis on female virtue, virginity, modesty, and subordination. Women were viewed as morally upright, innocent, and pure. Angel in the House was the name given to them. None of the negative traits were associated with them or anticipated by society.

Changes Occurred in Victorian Era from the literary Point of a View The Novel's Dominance

Under Queen Victoria's rule (1837–1901), literature underwent tremendous change in response to important social, political, and technological developments. The novel's enduring popularity during the Victorian era can be seen in its emphasis on realistic portrayals of life, society, and individual struggles. Authors like Charles Dickens, Charlotte Bronte, George Eliot, and many more focused mostly on the suffering of humanity, especially women. They also placed a strong emphasis on urbanization and inflexible social and class structures.

Literature became more accessible, especially to the middle class, as a result of the regular serialization of books in periodicals. The serialized format inspired plot structures and exciting chapter endings. Victorian literature started exploring the inner lives, struggles, and dilemmas of its characters. How the characters overcame the challenges and found solutions. The protagonist's development was another aspect of the works that struck a deep chord with viewers. Literary masterpieces such as Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* continue to astonish readers and provide insights into the events of the Victorian era, particularly as they relate to women's lives.

Social Analysis

Women's rights and roles were also discussed during the Victorian era. Authors like Emily and Charlotte Bronte and George Eliot explored and highlighted the challenges women faced in their works, offering important insights into their situation. Numerous works, such as those by Anthony Trollope and Thomas Hardy, criticized strict societal rules and codes. The consequences of industrialization, such as poverty, child labour, and worker alienation, are frequently discussed in literature. Charles Dickens's *Hard Times* and Gaskell's *North and South* both illustrated this.

Poetry's Extension

Although they are tinted with Victorian concerns, early Victorian poets like Alfred Lord Tennyson and Robert Browning integrate themes of nature and passion from the romantic age. The struggle between new scientific discoveries and long-held religious beliefs was a common theme in Victorian poetry, such as Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*. Poets like Robert Browning made dramatic monologue, which explored intricate psychological states, more widely known.

Gothic Revival

Gothic fiction, which combined psychological depth with elements of mystery, horror, and the supernatural, was becoming more popular. Gothic literature was exemplified by Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights* (1847), and Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* (1847).

Experimentation with Genres

Authors like Lewis Carroll (Alice Adventures in Wonderland, 1865) and H.G. Wells (The Time Machine, 1895) experimented with science fiction and fantasy during the Victorian era.

Comparative Analysis

1. Autonomy and Independence - The well-known Victorian novel Jane Eyre is a symbol of the struggle for women's autonomy and self-determination. The book's protagonist, Jane Eyre, is determined to uphold her morals and dignity and will not compromise them for love or safety. "I am no bird, and no net ensnares me," Jane famously declares, seeking equality and honesty in her relationship with Mr. Rochester despite her low social status as a governess. She chose to leave Thornfield after discovering that Mr. Rochester was already wed to Bertha Mason.

In contrast to Jane, Middlemarch's heroine, Dorothea Brooke, is born into riches but seeks meaning beyond marriage and domesticity, embodying a more idealistic and intellectual form of independence. The limitations placed on women's aspirations in a patriarchal culture are highlighted by her wish to pursue academic and philanthropic initiatives, particularly during her unfortunate marriage to Casaubon.

2. Marital and Romantic Restrictions: Jane's relationship with Mr. Rochester is revolutionary because she prioritizes her honesty and dignity over being his mistress. She shows how much she loves her integrity and self-respect by taking a step back and deciding to leave Thornfield as soon as she learns that Mr. Rochester is already married. This further illustrates the extent to which she has evolved as a woman as a result of navigating the harsh realities of life. This illustrates even more her steadfast dedication to moral rectitude and self-respect.

Dorothea's romance takes a more complex turn. While her first marriage to Casaubon serves as a cautionary tale about intellectual and emotional restraint, her second marriage to Will Ladislaw represents her rejection of social conventions. Unlike Jane, Dorothea sacrifices wealth and social status for love, demonstrating a shift from Victorian moral dogmatism to a more nuanced view of women's choices.

3. Education and Intellectual Development: Both Jane and Dorothea place a strong emphasis on intellectual development, despite their differing approaches. Because of her own convictions and her experiences at Lowood School, Jane is largely self-directed in her academic pursuits. Her path is one of selfdiscovery as she discovers how to blend passion with reason.

4. Social Critiques and Feminist Undertones: Middlemarch provides a more thorough and in-depth analysis of Victorian gender norms, although both books question them. Jane Eyre challenges the ideas of the time regarding women's passivity and reliance by promoting emotional and financial freedom. But Middlemarch goes a step farther by demonstrating how social structures, not just individual choices, determine women's fate. Eliot's portrayal of Dorothea highlights the need for broader social change by recognizing the limitations placed on even wealthy women.

Middlemarch and Jane Eyre are two examples of how female characters were portrayed during the Victorian era. Dorothea Brooke symbolizes the difficulties that impose restraints on women, whereas Jane Eyre stands for individual rebellion against social norms. When taken as a whole, these two pieces effectively depict the difficulties society presents to women. Additionally, the way women battle and triumph over it symbolizes how they have developed into a dominant force in society.

Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre and George Eliot's Middlemarch with reference to Secondary Texts

The representation of female characters in 19th-century literature reflects the limits of women and broader cultural expectations. Both Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre (1847) and George Eliot's Middlemarch (1871–72) include complex, evolving female characters who challenge gender expectations and symbolize the pursuit of self-definition. The growth of female characters in these works is examined in this essay using feminist theorists Simone de Beauvoir (The Second Sex), Judith Butler (Gender Trouble), Virginia Woolf (A Room of One's Own), and Bell Hooks (Feminist Theory: From Margin to Centre).

The Development of Female Self-Sufficiency in Jane Eyre

The heroine of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* remains independent despite social and personal challenges. Jane, an orphaned governess, defies Victorian gender norms by striving for both financial and emotional independence.

Simone de Beauvoir's point of view: De Beauvoir argues in *The Second Sex* that women are conditioned to be the "Other." One example of this is found in the Victorian classic *Jane Eyre*, where the heroine, Jane, resists being objectified by Rochester or St. John Rivers and remains true to herself. Her call for equality in romantic partnerships aligns with de Beauvoir's advocacy for women's autonomy.

Virginia Woolf's Point of View: In *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf highlights the need of financial independence for women. Similar to *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë, Jane's dignity and tenacity allow her to be an independent woman, illustrating the need of self-sufficiency for women's emancipation.

Judith Butler's Point of View: Butler criticizes the notion that gender identity is constant in *Gender Trouble* by arguing that gender is a performative construct. Jane challenges conventional ideas of what it meant to be a woman in the Victorian era with her modest appearance, moral strength, and intellectual independence.

In a patriarchal society, Dorothea Brooke is an intellectual woman.

George Eliot's *Middlemarch* introduces us to Dorothea Brooke, a woman of immense intellectual ambition who is suppressed by a patriarchal society.

Bell Hooks' Point of View: Hooks argues that traditional feminism excludes women who don't have financial or social advantages. Similar to Dorothea in *Middlemarch*, Hooks argues that women's oppression is multifaceted and impacted by social norms, gender, and class. Dorothea is constrained by marriage and social expectations.

From Simone de Beauvoir's perspective: Dorothea initially thinks that working for a fantastic man (Casaubon) will fulfil her. The character of Dorothea in *Middlemarch* exemplifies De Beauvoir's theory that a woman's journey from passivity to self-assertion correlates with her eventual understanding of her own intellectual ideals.

Judith Butler Point of view: Butler's theories highlight the ways in which gender norms shape and limit identity. Through her intellectual aspirations, Dorothea is unable to confront Victorian femininity due to the rigid boundaries of gender ideals in her culture.

Both *Middlemarch* and *Jane Eyre* provide readers with inspiration and a route forward for the next generation by shedding light on how women deal with life's challenges and develop as human beings. We learn how Jane and Dorothea deal with the challenges of gender, autonomy, and betrayal that their lives provide from the viewpoints of Bell Hooks, Simone de Beauvoir, Virginia Woolf, and Judith Butler. In addition to illustrating the historical background of women's battles, these works also touch readers' emotions and educate them about the events of the Victorian era.

The second sex, Simone de Beauvoir

The Victorian era saw significant shifts in how female characters were portrayed in literature, reflecting larger cultural shifts in gender roles, education, and individual freedom. The heroines in George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1871–72) and Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847), who assert their individuality while defying patriarchal norms, serve as the best examples of these advancements. Simone de Beauvoir's feminist novel *The Second Sex* (1949) provides a theoretical framework for analysing these characters, particularly in light of their existential struggles and quest for self-definition in a male-dominated world.

Women as individuals and their pursuit of autonomy

According to De Beauvoir, women have historically been excluded, devalued, and considered as the "other," which has also impeded them from achieving their goals and integrating into society at large. George Eliot's

Middlemarch and Charlotte Bronte's Jane Eyre both have protagonists that suffer greatly and are viewed as different, and this is portrayed clearly in both works. Jane is portrayed in Jane Eyre as a positive character who changes throughout the story. She is shown as someone who stands up for herself and shields herself from more heartache and betrayal. She defends herself and denounces Mr. Rochester's cruelty and deceit. Similar to this, Dorothea Brooke in Middlemarch initially complies with gender norms, believing that marriage will enable her to fulfil her higher purpose. She decides to wed Casaubon, an older scholar. She decides to leave Casaubon and begin a new life after coming to terms with his limitations and reality. Simone de Beauvoir's theory that women must transcend assigned roles in order to reach self-realization is reflected in Dorothea's development.

Bell Hooks- The feminist Theory

Bell Hooks criticizes conventional feminist discourse for ignoring the multifaceted nature of oppression and concentrating on white, middle-class women. Despite their shared desire for independence, Jane Eyre and Dorothea's conflicts are influenced by their social classes. Jane's defiance of oppression is shown in her statement, "I'm no bird, and no net ensnare me." Bell Hooks' viewpoint, however, challenges us to consider if Jane's fight for autonomy is shared by women from varied ethnic and social backgrounds.

In a similar vein, the marriage of Dorothea Brooke and Casaubon represents Victorian ideas that viewed wives as homemakers. She does, however, have a more equal connection with Will Ladislaw later on, which illustrates how women are beginning to acknowledge their own agency in both personal and intellectual affairs. Bell Hooks' viewpoint emphasizes how crucial it is to end patriarchal relationships on both an individual and institutional level in order to give women the liberty they deserve.

Virginia Woolf- A Room of One's Own

According to Woolf, women have historically been denied access to the knowledge and resources needed for personal and artistic freedom. By deciding to work as a governess, Jane Eyre demonstrates her readiness and desire to achieve financial independence. This also demonstrates the hardships she faced in order to further her education and establish her own career. Her decision to leave Mr. Rochester as soon as the truth is revealed is an example of her preference for self-respect over love.

Similar to this, Dorothea in Middlemarch first conforms to gender expectations by getting married to Casaubon, a much older scholar, in an effort to fulfil her intellectual potential. However, as she grows more self-aware and progressively realizes his limitations, she does depart from passive femininity. Woolf's viewpoint highlights how Dorothea's goals are thwarted by social structures that limit women's access to information and autonomy.

Judith Butler- Gender Trouble

Butler argues that gender is not an intrinsic quality but rather a recurrent performance shaped by social standards. Jane Eyre serves as an example of this concept when she takes a step back after discovering Mr. Rochester's truth. She decides to forgo her love but not her dignity. It demonstrates the extent to which she has changed as a woman. Butler's belief that a woman's gender identification can be flexible and self-determined rather than biologically fixed is consistent with her path towards self-respect and dignity.

In the same way Butler's gender is a site of resistance and negotiation is highlighted in Middlemarch when Dorothea Brooke flees the marriage with Casaubon after realizing her value and deciding to defend herself.

Psychoanalysis Literary Theory

Theory of Psychoanalysis Literature

Jacques Lacan, influenced by Sigmund Freud, developed psychoanalytic literary theory, which analyses the inner impulses, internal conflicts, and psychological development of characters. We may track the evolution of the female protagonist, focusing on Jane Eyre and Dorothea Brooke, by applying this approach to the analysis of George Eliot's Middlemarch and Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre. These data reflect shifting perceptions of female identity, independence, and psychological complexity during the Victorian era.

Jane Eyre: The Personal Identity and the Battle for Independence

Psychoanalytically speaking, Jane Eyre reflects Jane's journey through Freud's theory of psychological development, particularly the Oedipal complex, suppression, and the need for selfhood. Jane seeks emotional fulfilment and independence because of her latent desires and concerns, which were influenced by her childhood trauma at Gateshead and her experiences at Lowood.

1. Jane's Development:

- The Id, Ego, and Super Ego

Jane's outcry against injustice is a reflection of her id's raw impulses. The influence of individuals like Helen Burns and Miss Temple, who enforce moral and social standards, is a representation of the superego.

- Jane is able to strike a balance between her need for love (Rochester) and her refusal to be his mistress as a gesture of self-respect as her ego grows more balanced over time.

2. Repressed Desires and the 'Madwoman in the Attic'

- Bertha Mason represents the unrestrained desires that Jane, bound by Victorian morals, must restrain, and might be seen as Jane's suppressed alter ego.
- The physical weakness that Rochester experiences at the end of the book alludes to Jane's ultimate success in regaining emotional and psychological balance.

Dorothea Brooke: The Lacanian Mirror Stage and Unmet Desires

Dorothea Brooke's character in Middlemarch can be examined via the lens of Jacques Lacan's concepts of symbolic order and the mirror stage. Unlike Jane Eyre, who ultimately finds a stable identity, Dorothea's journey is marked by idealization and disillusionment, signifying a deeper struggle within the symbolic order of patriarchal society.

1. Dorothea's misidentification and the Mirror Stage

Dorothea believes that Casaubon's idealized portrayal of marriage and purpose reflects her own academic objectives. She is forced to confront her own limitations and desires when she eventually discovers he is intellectually sterile, shattering this illusion.

2. The Symbolic Order and Female Constraint: The symbolic order is symbolized by Casaubon, who imposes rigid regulations that restrict Dorothea's independence.

Unlike Jane, who eventually gains autonomy, Dorothy's final relationship with Will Ladislaw suggests both personal fulfilment and continued societal compromise, leaving her ending uncertain.

Analysis of Comparative Psychoanalysis

Both Jane and Dorothea undergo psychological transformations, yet their tales highlight different aspects of female self-actualization:

Jane's path from early suppression to self-realization aligns with Freud's concept of individuation. Dorothea's path is more in line with Lacanian theory since she struggles against the limitations of the symbolic order as well as her own misinterpretation of her desires.

Conclusion

The evolution of the Victorian female heroine in Jane Eyre and Middlemarch reflects the shifting values and challenges that women encountered over the 19th century. Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre, who challenges gender expectations by asserting her autonomy in both her personal and professional life, embodies the early seeds of female independence and self-respect. In contrast, George Eliot's Dorothea Brooke in Middlemarch portrays a more complex and socially embedded struggle as she navigates the moral and intellectual constraints imposed on women by a rigid social system. Despite the fact that both major protagonists aim for self-satisfaction, their journeys are rather dissimilar.

While Dorothea's ambitions are constrained by social conventions, Jane Eyre ultimately finds love and emotional fulfilment on her own terms, leading to a more complicated and oftentimes ambiguous conclusion. When taken as a whole, these characters show how female agency in Victorian literature developed gradually while acknowledging the persistent limitations of their time and reflecting the broader cultural movement for women's liberation.

The evolution of the Victorian female heroine in *Jane Eyre* and *Middlemarch* demonstrates the slow shift from rigid patriarchal norms to a more complex analysis of female agency and self-determination. Jane Eyre, a fiercely independent and morally uncompromising heroine who wants equality, respect, and emotional fulfilment on her own terms, challenges the conventional Victorian picture of femininity. Her journey from a disenfranchised orphan to a self-assured woman is a prime example of an early feminist awakening, emphasizing personal integrity and disobedience of society expectations. However, George Eliot's Dorothea Brooke in *Middlemarch* represents a more complex and pervasive social struggle. Unlike Jane, whose rebellion leads to a definite determination, Dorothea's aspirations for intellectual and spiritual fulfilment are constrained by the rigid social conventions of her time. Because of the limitations imposed on women who wanted to engage in public and intellectual life, her persona offers a more realistic portrayal of the challenges experienced by aspirational Victorian women.

While *Jane Eyre* is an early example of individual autonomy, Dorothea is a more modern and socially conscious figure who grapples with the many interconnections of gender, class, and intellectual aspiration. Different stages of the female protagonist's development are reflected in both characters. In the end, Jane manages to combine her freedom and love, while Dorothea's journey is less clear-cut, illustrating the ongoing tensions between personal objectives and social expectations. These two novels by Brontë and Eliot contribute to the discussion of women's roles and provide the groundwork for future literary heroines who will continue to challenge expectations.

The evolution of the Victorian female protagonist reflects the shifting perspectives of the 19th century on women's responsibilities, goals, and difficulties, as illustrated by George Eliot's *Middlemarch* and Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. These two novels, which were published more than 20 years apart, demonstrate how the female protagonists evolved from fiercely independent to more perceptive of societal influences and intellectual aspirations.

In *Jane Eyre*, Brontë creates a heroine who defies the stereotypes of women by emphasizing moral rectitude, emotional autonomy, and self-respect. Jane's transformation from an orphaned and abused child to an independent adult who ultimately chooses love on her own terms embodies the early feminist assertion that women should have personal liberty and equality in relationships. Because it portrayed a woman who desired to be treated as a moral and intellectual equal to men, Brontë's portrayal of Jane was revolutionary for her day. The distinction between Jane and Dorothea demonstrates the broader evolution of Victorian female protagonists. While *Jane Eyre* demonstrates an earlier feminist attitude of disobedience and individual agency, *Middlemarch* presents a more complex and realistic view of women's responsibilities within a patriarchal system. Dorothea's struggles reflect the growing awareness of how women, particularly those with wealth and knowledge, were bound by social norms, marital regulations, and intellectual limitations. Ultimately, these two texts demonstrate the slow but inadequate development of women's emancipation in Victorian literature. While Charlotte Brontë's Jane represents the possibility of escaping social constraints, Eliot's Dorothea depicts the enduring structural constraints that shaped women's lives. Collectively, they mark important junctures in the literary evolution of female protagonists, from passionate disobedience to a more profound engagement with societal reality.