

## A STUDY OF CHARACTERS AND GOTHICISM IN VICTORIAN NOVELS

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**Abstract:** In this paper work we'll try to give a general explanation of the Victorian Era, where we'll give a short historical background of the period, the impact on literature, and the major literary form of the period, that is the novel. This era is in fact one of the most valuable and productive literary periods in English Literature as far as the prose is concerned. Plot and characters are specific for the novels, so the next aspect of this study we are covering is the psychological study of the major characters and their personalities, in some of the most famous novels of that period that we will cover, like *Jane Eyre*, *Wuthering Heights*, *David Copperfield*, etc. As far as characters are concerned, we'll try to find out the characteristics of the Byronic hero in the major male characters, like Heathcliff and Rochester, the development of major characters, like Seeforth and Jane Eyre, i.e. the analysis of a character's internal development as he or she undergoes a succession of encounters with the external world, than relationship between them etc. The role of women in these novels, as characters and authors, will also be pointed, since they prove to be very important for that period and for the development of the story. It is a period when we have a lot of women writers, like sisters Charlotte and Emily Brontë, George Eliot, Jane Austin, etc., and protagonists of the novels, like Jane Eyre in '*Jane Eyre*', Catherine in *Wuthering Heights*, Tess in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, Becky and Amelia in *Vanity Fair*, etc, and all this was an important feature of Victorianism. Another important aspect that will be analyzed is the aspect of Gothicism in Victorian novels, or better to say the gothic elements that are present in these novels, that utilizes the mysterious, the supernatural, the horrific and the romantic in the novels. According to this, we come across mysterious characters, big, dark and scary mansions, scary noises, darkness, sadness, and other elements that evoke horror, what immediately reminds us of Edgar Allan Poe.

However, the bottom line is to point out all these elements in these classical Victorian novels, find the common themes, compare them and thus give an overview of the Victorian era, novels and authors.

**Keywords:** Victorian Age, Gothicism, Characters, Novels.

### THE VICTORIAN ERA

The Victorian Era is named after Queen Victoria. She was crowned in 1837, when she was only eighteen years old. She ruled until 1901, a reign of 64 years.

The Victorian Age was characterized by rapid change and developments in nearly every sphere - from advances in medical, scientific and technological knowledge to changes in population growth and location. Over time, this rapid transformation deeply affected the country's mood: an age that began with a confidence and optimism leading to economic boom and prosperity eventually gave way to uncertainty and doubt regarding Britain's place in the world. Today we associate the nineteenth century with the Protestant work ethic, family values, religious observation and institutional faith. The Victorian era was a time in England's history when there was political stability and strict norms. When Victoria became queen of England the British Empire was quite big. At a time of her death the British Empire expanded significantly which wasn't a surprise considering that she ruled for 64 years. During this period England became the world's most powerful and richest countries by ruling a quarter of the world's population thereby having the largest empire. The two major reasons for the same were: fertility rate which was due to the improved standard of living of the people as a result of which the number of women who could have children increased while mortality rate lowered as there was no epidemic and also because the health facilities got better. Another Victorian characteristic was the industrialization of Britain. A number of factories sprawled up, that improved life and working standards, urbanism developed, infrastructure developed, specifically railways, and a lot of scientific inventions appeared like the telephone, the radio, railways, sewing machines etc were invented.

However, regardless this economic progress, poverty and exploitation were present. The gap between the rich and the poor increased significantly and the drive for material and commercial success was seen to propagate a kind of a moral decay in the society itself. The poor were exploited for their labor, and the bourgeoisie or the middle class rose due to increasing trade between Britain and its colonies and the Reform Bill of 1832 strengthen their hold.

There was also a shift from the Romantic ideals of the previous age towards a more realistic acceptance and depiction of society. One of the most important factors that defined the age was its stress on morality. Strict societal codes were enforced and certain activities were openly looked down upon. These codes were even harsher for women. A feminine code of conduct was levied on them which described every aspect of their being from the proper apparels to how to converse, everything had rules. The role of women was mostly that of being angels of the house and restricted to domestic confines. Professionally very few options were available to them as a woman could either become a governess or a teacher in rich households. Hence they were financially dependent on their husbands and fathers and it led to a commercialization of the institution of marriage.

The era saw an increase of women writers. The novel as a genre was initially seen as feminine literature and as the literacy rate among women increased, a new need for women writers catering to this segment was answered by these writers. Beside famous Charles Dickens, William Thackeray, etc, we have famous women novelists, like Charlotte, Emily and Anne Bronte, George Elliot, Jane Austin, etc.

### VICTORIAN BYRONIC HEROES

What is a Byronic hero? The Byronic hero is one of the most prominent literary character types of the Romantic period, created by and found in the famous Lord George Gordon Byron's works *Child Harold's Pilgrimage*, *Manfred* and *Don Juan*. First appearing in his autobiographical epic, *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, the Byronic hero is a faulted character who is typically isolated from society as a wanderer, or is in exile of some kind: whether the social separation is imposed upon him by some external force or it is self-imposed.

The character rejects the moral codes of society and because of this he is often unrepentant by society's standards. Due to these qualities, the Byronic hero is often a figure of cruelty as well as fascination. Characteristics of the Byronic hero are:

- high level of intelligence and perception
- sophisticated and educated
- self-critical and introspective
- mysterious, magnetic and charismatic
- "dark" attributes not normally associated with a hero
- disrespect of rank and privilege
- a troubled past
- power of seduction and sexual attraction
- social and sexual dominance
- proud
- arrogant
- highly emotional

Anyhow, this type of character influenced later authors and continued to be part of other works after the romantic era, especially in the Victorian novels. Byronic hero 'stays close to eighteenth century tropes of libertinism'<sup>48</sup>:

*Whilome in Albion's isle there dwelt a youth,  
Who ne in virtue's ways did take delight;  
But spent his days in riot most uncouth,  
And vex'd with mirth the drowsy ear of Night 11/14'*

Thus, Mr. Rochester from *Jane Eyre* is one of the most famous Byronic heroes in general. Charlotte Bronte creates an extremely interesting and mysterious character, who plays a very important role in Jane's life.

Throughout the novel, Mr. Rochester demonstrates many characteristics of a Byronic hero, not only in terms of a troubled past, but as an outcast like a personality, and overall complexity as a character as well. We see him as stern, rude, and demanding, with a dark and somewhat mysterious personality. We don't know much about his past, he leaves Thornfield unexpectedly, not telling where he heads, and appears again unexpectedly, after months, maybe years. He is reserved, tells nothing about himself, etc. He even hides the existence of his mad wife from Jane, and he falls in love with Jane and asks her to marry him even though he is already married (Byronic trait). Rochester

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<sup>48</sup> D. Michael Jones , *The Byronic Hero and the Rhetoric of Masculinity in the 19th Century British Novel* 2017  
McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, p.9

married Bertha Mason, but he was totally unaware that madness ran down her family line. Eventually, when he found out he had no option but to take her at home at Thornfield and lock her up. According to this dilemma his wedding with Jane Eyre had been affected, as he already has a wife, he could not marry Jane. However, we often see him snappy and collected with Jane. This is clearly typical of Rochester, as we see his first few encounters with Jane at Thornfield Hall. At first he is abrupt and almost dismissive of Jane, ‘Let Miss Eyre be seated,’ he said: and there was something in the forced stiff bow, in the impatient yet formal tone, which seemed further to express, ‘What the deuce is it to me whether Miss Eyre be there or not? At this moment I am not disposed to accost her.’ On the other hand is very in love with her. He also takes care of Adele who was left in his care by his French lover Selena, no matter he was convinced that she was not his own daughter. This shows that he is a man that is normally arrogant on a daily basis, but however, Charlotte gives us the impression that he is not a pejorative man.

In my opinion, Bronte’s presentation of Rochester is something between an ‘appealing hero’ and a ‘melodramatic fantasy character’. While Rochester’s traits maintain a real and human side of him that allows him to make mistakes and then learn from them, they also tend to lean towards extreme. There is certainly a sense of drama about this character, but Bronte uses this to make Rochester an appropriate hero for a gothic novel and an even more apt husband for Jane.

However, with the gothic atmosphere of Jane Eyre, it seems almost suiting for the hero to embody many such attributes of a Byronic hero. One of the most prominent literary character types of the Romantic period, the Byronic hero is not conventionally ‘heroic’ and his dark qualities tend to reject the image of a ‘traditional’ hero.

Heathclif - As far as Emily Bronte’s *Wuthering Heights* is concerned, the hero Heathclif has been widely approved as the quintessential Byronic hero of the novel. His identity is naturally united with that of Catherine’s, what makes her as well the Byronic heroine. Heathcliff encloses all characteristics of the Byronic hero, especially that of Byron’s Manfred: from his personality traits to his isolated position in society.

Both Heathcliff and Manfred are characters of darkness—racially and morally “other” in relation to those surrounding them in their respective texts. Throughout *Wuthering Heights*, Heathcliff exudes deep-rooted passion that he masks by an odious demeanor. The first sense of his isolation comes from his physical description: “a dark-skinned gypsy in aspect, in dress and manners a gentleman, that is, as much a gentleman as many a country squire: rather slovenly... an erect and handsome figure—and rather morose”. Similarly, in terms of his attitude, he is often compared with some type of evil, demonic figure.

Byronic hero is also present in the works of great Charles Dickens. He appears in the aristocratic revolutionary Steerforth in *David Copperfield*, and succeeded by Jack Maldon, James Harthouse, Henry Govan etc. Steerforth is a symbol of the Romantic poet in disguise- of Byron in particular. He experiences Byronism in his inability to experience the world subjectively. This is how David narrates and presents Steerforth. He is considered dislocated, and he views the world as a stage, and is unable to leave behind the Romantic angst and immerse in the acts and ethics of melodrama. He is an aristocratic hero, who plays one’s part for social status and power. His Byronism is not simply an act, but obviously a creation of his own mother, since it is she who brought him up to play a regal and heroic role. She emphasizes her son’s ‘high spirit, superiority, rebelliousness and individualism, what demonstrates that she built up his son’s life. He enjoys being popular and admired, what makes him different from other Byronic heroes, and this is done by him pleasing others, and thus make emotional connections with others. This is what makes him be very close to the narrator David, and respects his melodramatic view of the world and innocence, what is in fact an antidote on Steerforth’s own Byronism. Steerforth understands the dangers of a shallow vision of humanity, and sees the superficiality of the world, but still confuses the relationship between surfaces and depth, no matter intellectually and emotionally complex and aware of his complexity. Despite some valuing Steerforth as either villain or hero, his character illustrates the fabricated nature of absolute moral categories. This is how this character ‘highlights the unreality yet indispensability of melodramatic fictions in a post-Romantic age’<sup>49</sup>p.182

**Women in Victorian Novels** - Female characters in the Victorian Era were treated as second-class citizens in society and there were only few things in their lives that they could control. Women were expected to marry, have children and look after the home and family, as they were dependent on men. As we mention earlier, the symbiotic relationship between Heathcliff and Catherine, renders her own identity as the Byronic heroine as well. From the earliest depictions of her adolescence, Catherine is by definition a wild-child: her general attitude is tempestuous, as

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<sup>49</sup> John, Juliet; *Dickens's Villains: Melodrama, Character, Popular Culture*, 2001, Oxford University Press, Oxford, p.182

she is driven by impulses that cause her to act against social conventions. So, both of them can be viewed through the lens of the Byronic hero, as they breach the definitions of the social norms. Heathcliff was able to subvert both class and racial standards in order to reap his own wealth, while Catherine—although she did infract on the “rules” of the gender standard—was ultimately brought to her death by following the narrative of femininity.

Catherine is clearly the dominant female figure that helps the flow and the development of the story. She was the favorite child of Mr. Earnshaw, the landlord of Wuthering Heights mansion, who loved that kind of bright nature that she reflected. Catherine enjoyed Heathcliff’s company from the day her father brought him home, although she first considered him as a brother, just like Mr. Earnshaw presented him to Catherine and Hindley. They preferred to spend time together playing around; talking about many things even though they were so young.

Time passed and Catherine became mature and a marvelous lady, but her feelings towards Heathcliff changed, and she fell in love with him. However, things weren’t as we would expect to be, an independent lady such as Catherine was very selfish, she loved herself more than anything else in the world, and never cared for others and their feelings. She revealed her real character when she experienced the life of Lintons’ during her four weeks stay at their house to recover from the accident she had when she was bitten by Lintons’ dog. While staying at their house, we can see changes in her character. Maybe this was the real character of Catherine since the beginning, but there was given any chance to find out what she really was. While she was deeply in love with Heathcliff, she started thinking that if she marries Edgar Linton she would become a great and privileged lady in that area, even though she had any feelings for him, but she does all of this because of social position, and how she looked in the eyes of others and her social position, for this reason she decided to leave her love Heathcliff, and marry the wealthy Edgar Linton. From a lovely girl that we used to see she became a very selfish one, thinking only of herself, she doesn’t care how others are feeling.

Anyhow, even though she got the position she had dreamed of, she never forgot her only love Heathcliff. They met secretly every time they had the opportunity. She was jealous and against Heathcliff getting married because she doesn’t want to share him with anyone else. In every action of Catherine, we see her selfishness, which has ruined her life and life of others that surround her. She was very hurt when Heathcliff married her sister-in-law, at that time she felt that pain that Heathcliff felt before. However, later she got pregnant by Edgar Linton, but her health deteriorated, and died at childbirth, leaving behind little Cathy. Along with her, Heathcliff died spiritually! So we clearly see how Catherine changed from an innocent, true and wild by nature young girl, into a selfish, egoistic woman, what eventually destroyed her life.

Jane Eyre is the protagonist of the same titled novel. She is introduced to us as a small, plain-faced, intelligent and honest English orphan, but we follow different stages of her development as a character; Jane’s childhood at Gateshead, where she is abused by her aunt and cousins; her education at Lowood School, where she acquires friends and role models but also suffers privations; her time as a governess of Thornfield Hall, where she falls in love with her Byronic employer, Edward Rochester; her time with the Rivers family at Moor House, where her cold clergyman-cousin St John Rivers proposes to her; and her reunion with and marriage to her beloved Rochester at his house of Ferndean. Partly, autobiographical, the novel abounds with social criticism and sinister gothic elements.

At Gateshead Hall, a ten-year-old orphan Jane Eyre is living with her uncle’s family. The uncle, Mr. Reed, dies shortly after adopting Jane, so his wife and their three children neglect and abuse Jane. She lacks a warm, steady motherly relationship, and as a result she shows some signs of depression. It was difficult to fulfill her basic needs in Gateshead hall, so she decided to attend the Lowood institution for a better life. This boarding school proved to be a very difficult place for her to be, but it was where she built her character. Strict rules, difficult and harsh conditions—she was subjected to severe cold and starvation, she was shunned, ridiculed, and isolated by Brocklehurst. However, there she finds her only friend in Helen Burns, who is very learned and intelligent, has a patient and philosophical mind, and believes firmly in God. Jane also got affected to Miss Temple, who becomes a kind of a mother model. This actually helped Jane survive and become a successful student.

After a long and difficult stay at Lowood, as a student and later as a teacher, Jane got an opportunity to work as a governess. She applies for the position in Thornfield Hall, where she practices her ability as a governess by taking care of little Adele, and tries to become a fulfilled person. She falls in love with the mysterious Mr. Rochester, and meets another mother figure in Mrs. Fairfax, experiences many interesting and strange moments, but comes across many mysteries as well. When after many doubts, she eventually decides to marry Mr. Rochester, she learns the fact that he was married, and this made her leave without any conflict and discussions. She went at her cousins’, in the Moor House. Jane meets people who support her through Diana and Mary. Eventually, she conveniently inherits a

large sum of money from an uncle who lived abroad. But, no matter how hurt at Thornfield, we see that she had outgrown the effects of her childhood, and psychologically become strong, powerful and independent woman. She learns that Mr. Rochester lost a hand, an eye, and the sight of the other eye as a result of trying to unsuccessfully save Bertha from the flames, of which she was the cause. Upon acquiring the knowledge of his location, at a cabin called Ferndean, she sets off for it. Also Jane learns that life is bearable but needs Rochester to be happy even she was much younger than him. She and Mr. Rochester reconcile and marry, for he has adopted love and religion. She writes in the perspective of ten years after their marriage, during which she gave birth to a son and Mr. Rochester gained part of his sight back. Jane's long quest to find love and a sense of belonging is finally fulfilled. Her personality influenced by two factors, first is internal factor, Jane herself and second is external factor include the social environment. Jane Eyre is also 'a plea for the recognition of the individual's worth'. She 'demands to be treated as an independent human being, a person with her own her own needs and talents'<sup>50</sup>

Another interesting character is Tess, the protagonist of Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, a poor, but beautiful, bright and vulnerable young woman from the rural village of Marlott. Very intelligent, with an independent spirit, she is a victim of misfortunes that are hardly ever of her own doing, but her innocence, naivety, and unrealistic ideals sometimes make her suffer more. Throughout the book she is portrayed as a symbol of rural innocence, closeness to Nature, and ancient paganism, but ultimately the author's sympathy is for Tess as an individual woman, not just as a representative ideal. She is also a very tempting figure for the men of the novel, often to her detriment, so eventually she got caught between two men who are keen to possess her. She loses her virginity to Alec D'Urbervilles under unpleasant circumstances. She spends the rest of her life suffering the consequences that include the loss of her son Sorrow and her beloved husband, Angel Clare, great poverty, and ultimately the loss of her own life on the scaffold.

The narrator himself sometimes describes Tess as more than an individual woman, but as something closer to a mythical incarnation of womanhood. In Chapter XIV, he says that her eyes are "neither black nor blue nor grey nor violet; rather all these shades together," like "an almost standard woman." We can undoubtedly say that her story represents a deeper and larger experience than that of a single individual.

In part, Tess represents the changing role of the agricultural workers in England in the late nineteenth century. Being educated, Tess does not quite fit into the folk culture of her predecessors, but financial constraints keep her from getting a better position in life. However, we understand that she belongs in that higher world. However, we learn that the Durbeyfields are the surviving members of the noble and ancient family of the d'Urbervilles, thus there is aristocracy in Tess's blood, visible in her graceful beauty—yet she is forced to work as a farmhand and milkmaid. She does not enjoy singing the lower-class folk ballads; she seems quite uncomfortable with those popular songs. On the other hand, her diction is more polished than her mother's, but not to the level of Alec's or Angel's. She is in between, both socially and culturally.

As far as religion is concerned, Tess represents fallen humanity, as the frequent biblical allusions in the novel remind us. The extinction of the Tess's glorious predecessors reminds us of the early glory of the first humans, Adam and Eve, who diminished with their expulsion from Eden, making humans sad shadows of what they once were. Tess thus represents what is known in Christian theology as *original sin*, the degraded state in which all humans live, even when—like Tess herself after killing the horse Prince or succumbing to Alec—they are not wholly or directly responsible for the sins for which they are punished. This torment represents the most universal side of Tess: she is the myth of the human who suffers for crimes that are not her own and lives a life more degraded than she deserves.

#### **GOTHICISM AND THE INFLUENCE OF THE GOTHIC ELEMENTS IN THE PERSONALITIES OF THE VICTORIAN HEROES**

In the Victorian era, Gothic fiction had ceased to be a dominant literary genre, however, the gloomy atmosphere and persistent melodrama is present in many novels, especially in Brontes' novels. There are many elements that evoke horror, usual in romantic literature that survived and are present in Victorian novels

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<sup>50</sup> [Maxwell Quertermous](#), Harry; *The Byronic Hero in the Writings of the Brontes*, 1982 University of Texas, Austin, p.56

Gothic elements can be such as: an atmosphere of mystery and suspense, supernatural events, high emotions, complicated family histories, ancient houses, dark secrets and others. Jane Eyre has most of this elements, Jane is influenced by a gothic imagination as a child she wasn't anything like other children, her imagination while reading or looking at the pictures and illustrations was deep and dark. Gothic is a word that means 'wild' or 'barbaric'.

The supernatural events always seem to happen at night, there were high feelings included and tension. Jane often had creepy dreams and signs for something bad to happen, she could feel that something was going to happen because of all the strange actions that were happening in the house, and so it did.

Red room is one of the elements which Jane describes it as a room of terror, looking more like a prison to her and the red furniture's were all a metaphorical imagination of blood and death for Jane because she knew that it was the room where her uncle had died and she had images of him haunting the room, this supernatural imagination has a gothic element.

Rochester himself represents a gothic aspect that has to do with a mysterious secret about his past, he is described by Jane as a moody person that has a misery in his heart, with a dark and mysterious face and it turns out to be exactly like that, a man with a dark secret.

Bertha Mason is the most dramatic gothic element in the novel. We don't get introduced to her but she appears to us in a different way like creepy laughs and sounds, she is responsible for setting fire to Mr. Rochester's bed, attacking Mr. Mason, she was described as a 'goblin' and a 'vampire' who threatens to 'drain [Mason's] heart' (Ch. 20) and tearing Jane's veil before her wedding. She was Rochester's wife who was considered by him mad woman that came also from a mad family but he married her only because of her beauty and wealth, so after discovering her madness he kept her locked in a room and continues to live his life as he hasn't got a wife.

As far as *Wuthering Heights* is concerned, the most important gothic elements present are: the setting itself, the mansion Wuthering Heights, an old, hunted, decaying house, located in a moor, which gives a frightening atmosphere, because of the isolation. The weather is another gothic element, as we have an extreme atmospheric tumult, a windy weather, causing a frightening voice and noise, scary situations during the storm, etc. Violence towards women can be considered something scary and terrifying as well, like for example when in a drunken state Hindley threatens to kill Ellen, than when Hithcliff throws a knife at Isabella, but luckily she got away, and when she tells Ellen how badly she is treated by her husband, and many other cases. Insanity is also present in the novel, and it adds to the gothic atmosphere. It is seen when Cathy descending into madness when she becomes ill, experiencing (and sometimes creating) fits of hysteria that frighten Linton and Ellen. Heathcliff too acts as if he is approaching madness from grief after Cathy's death. He dashed his head against the knotted trunk; and, lifting up his eyes, howled, not like a man, but like a savage beast being goaded to death with knives and spears. Finally death is what evokes horror in the novel. A full 8 out of 10 members of the Linton and Earnshaw families die during the story. Many of them die young and tragically. There are also some very dramatic symbols utilizing the death of animals within the story. When Lockwood visits Wuthering Heights for the second time, he haplessly attempts to compliment Cathy on what he thinks is a bed of cats.

Finally, it may be concluded that upon analyzing and comparing the chosen Victorian novels, we can draw similarities among the elements chosen and motifs used. First, there are similarities in characters, we meet typical Byronic heroes in more than one novel, both Heathcliff and Rochester show features of this kind of a personality, secondly female characters play a key role in the development of the story and development and behavior of the abovementioned Byronic heroes, as we saw the influence of Catherine on Heathcliff, the influence of Jane on Rochester, Tess's influence on Angel and Alec, Estela's influence on Pip, etc., and we have examples of 'Bildungsroman'<sup>51</sup>, we trace the personality of Jane and Pip, from childhood to adulthood. . It is in the Victorian novels that we have women heroines, and women authors, or novel writers become famous and got successful. Gothic elements, elements that evoke horror, are present, like eerie castle/mansion, villains, death, darkness, madness, storms, and gore, as in other Gothic works, elements that survived from romanticism. We can clearly conclude that the features of a Byronic hero are closely related to gothic elements, or better to say, the gothic elements stress and point out the features of these Byronic heroes, so they become more powerful. This also tells us that Romanticism influenced the Victorian literature, and they are closely related.

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<sup>51</sup> *Bildungsroman* is a *novel* that focuses on the psychological and moral growth of the hero from youth to adulthood, in which character change is extremely important

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