

MASARYK UNIVERSITY  
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PORTRAITS OF WOMEN  
(THE STUDY ON WOMAN CONDITION  
FROM DEFOE TO HARDY)

DISSERTATION

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TO THE BEST MUMMY  
IN THE WORLD

**DECLARATION:**

I declare that I have worked on this dissertation on my own and that I have used all the outside sources of material mentioned in the bibliography.

I agree that my dissertation is stored in the library of the Faculty of Education and used for educational purposes only.

## AUTOREFERÁT RIGORÓZNÍ PRÁCE

This dissertation has been devoted to the portraits of women in English literature in the periods of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

The survey has been based on the following novels, starting with Daniel Defoe's *The Fortunes and Misfortunes of the Famous Moll Flanders* [1722], Charlotte Ramsay Lennox's *The Life of Harriot Stuart, Written by Herself* [1750], Fanny Burney's *Evelina, or, the History of the Young Lady's Entrance into the World* [1778], Jane Austen's *Emma* [1816], William Makepeace Thackeray's *Vanity Fair: a Novel without a Hero* [1847-48], Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* [1847], Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* [1848], George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* [1860], George Meredith's *Diana of the Crossways* [1885] and completed with the novel *Tess of the D'Urbervilles: a Pure Woman Faithfully Presented* [1891] by Thomas Hardy.

It is necessary to point out that main female protagonists were not frequent in English literature. The first attempt to introduce a woman as the main literary character and the leader of the plot was presented by Daniel Defoe. The novel *The Fortunes and Misfortunes of the Famous Moll Flanders* was composed as the memoirs of a female thief in order to evoke the authentic personal experience.

Moll Flanders astonishes the readers by her familiar speech and questionable deeds. She supplies us with a detailed enumeration of her adventurous escapades and financial transactions. However, Moll, as a heroine, is not able to convince us of her femininity. She is termed as "masculine" by Watt or a "person" by Woolf (quoted in Mitchell, 1978: 21).

In spite of the lack of the feminine features of Moll's character, her originality and vitality definitely contributed to the evolution of female protagonists in the English novel.

The second authoress, listed in this work, is Charlotte Ramsay Lennox and her epistolary novel *The Life of Harriot Stuart, Written by Herself*. Harriot may remind us of Moll Flanders, she also experiences various adventures. However, her escapades are not concerned with thievery or prostitution and she does not also have to fight with any feminine traits.

Harriot travels around the world and depicts the life in America; this theme was only tackled by Moll. Dauntless Harriot is able to protect her chastity. She is also able to withstand the flood of suitors. Her lively spirit is, nevertheless, tied down by wedlock.

Another representative of the epistolary novel is Fanny Burney's book *Evelina, or, the History of a Young Lady's Entrance into the World*. An innocent ward of Reverend Arthur Villars is sent to the busy world of social London. Evelina's sincerity skilfully points out 'unnatural' phenomena in society. Her inexperience, on the other hand, brings her on the brink of a deep abyss of fatal compromising situations.

Evelina's obscure family origin and pecuniary situation complicate her stable establishment in higher society, but all these obstacles are successively surmounted. Evelina can be married to Lord Orville.

Jane Austen introduced her heroine Emma Woodhouse, in the novel *Emma*, with the following words "... no one but myself would like [her]" (Austen, 1994: 370). When we read this novel for the first time, it is hardly understandable, that Austen liked Emma so intensively. However, when we analyze this literary character profoundly; we realize that Emma is exceptional. She endeavours to resist a female 'predetermined' lot and desires to change prejudice and mores.

Emma's battle for independence is one of the most proficient Austen's camouflages. Other Austen's heroines 'only' provide us with smart innuendoes and brisk observations, but Emma is a vigorous and more obstinate fighter. Unfortunately, financially and socially secured Emma cannot succeed in defeating the impregnable principles of a patriarchal hierarchy. She marries Mr. Knightley.

Almost calm atmosphere of Highbury community is interchanged with the crowded stage of London world. Rebecca Sharp's persistent quest, for achieving better social station, can characterize William Makepeace Thackeray's novel *Vanity Fair: a Novel without a Hero*.

A capable female social climber, Becky exploits every single opportunity to escape from the fate of a poor girl. Her refined manoeuvres, prompt flattery, invention and pretty face are powerful assistants in her goal.

We can witness Rebecca's steep rise and headlong fall. She is an element beyond any control, which is not tamed either by marriage or by society. She definitely proves her capacity to survive under all circumstances. Simply, "Becky swims free in the pure element of art." (Tillotson, K. *Novels of the Eighteen-Forties*, Oxford, 1954; quoted in Sutherland, 1974: 32)

Unlike previous heroines – Moll, Harriot, Evelina or Emma, this female protagonist does not satisfy contemporary expectations, she does not become a venerable wife at the end of the book.

On the other hand, Jane Eyre, in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, does not share Rebecca's social aspirations. She prefers harsh living conditions at Lowood Institute for Educating Orphans to a 'comfortable' life at Gateshead. Or she does not take advantage of a marriage to Mr. Rochester.

Jane becomes a member of a governess slavery trade, she is sensible of its social prestige and disadvantages. The reputation of this profession was not positive, contemporary people often referred to "... governessing ... as a sort of leprosy or cancer ..." (Beer, 1975: 89).

At Thornfield, Jane does not have to face a deep humiliation (although Miss Ingram's commentaries are painful), but she is exposed to a different kind of pressure, the pressure of her own wild passion and attachment to Mr. Rochester. However, she suppresses her love in order not to betray her conscience.

She longs for an equal relationship, which will not sentence her to the passive role of a pure 'pudding maker'. She intends to focus on her own intellectual development. Jane's union with Edward Rochester completes her complicated life journey.

Charlotte Brontë's book is stirring and full of dramatic reversals, however, her sister's novel *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* can be designated as 'scandalous', from the contemporary point of view.

Anne Brontë dedicates her writing to the public enlightenment in relation to matrimony. The novel reveals the consequences of a rash and preposterous marriage. It discloses difficulties in the mutual co-existence between a husband and a wife.

Helen Huntingdon does not represent the portrait of an ideal woman; a patient, tolerant and passive wife. Helen does not wish to become a martyr,

who resignedly bears her husband's treatment, the debauched style of his life or his rough deportment.

Helen does leave her husband. She breaks the sacrament of a holy matrimony in order to protect her son. She risks society's condemnation, her husband's great anger and own reputation.

Mr. Huntingdon's death redeems Helen from an unbearable union and from a complicated social post of a runaway wife. Finally, she succumbs to another marriage.

George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* tackles another delicate topic – the education of women. Talented Maggie Tulliver displays a natural aptitude for learning, which is multiplied by her inner hunger for knowledge. However, neither her will nor her abilities can overcome society's aversion to educate women.

Sophisticated women were prejudiced and they were intimidated that they would not be able to succeed in the marriage market.

Maggie's life is also burdened with the materialistic tradition of the community and constricting provincialism, which clings to static rituals and revered values.

Diverse limits and restrictions laid on Maggie, as the person of a female gender, result in her temporary weakness, which provokes social ostracism. Society is not interested in the inner complex writhing of Maggie's spiritual striving. It is not able to realize that Maggie has not succumbed to selfish motives and she has saved the purity of her soul and conscience. This society is not able to appreciate her brave return and the fact that she has not betrayed her relatives.

It is unimaginable to let Maggie live on in the contemporary world. She must die.

It may appear that George Meredith develops George Eliot's idea of an educated woman. Meredith examines the actual course of the life of an erudite woman.

Diana Warwick has reached a certain level of education and she can employ her knowledge in practice. She actively participates in debates and she can state equal arguments. Her judgements are even sought by men.

However, her personality surpasses the personality of her husband. He is overshadowed by Diana's intelligence, vivacity and social proficiency.

After the legal accusation of adultery, she does not hesitate and escapes from her husband. Neither the pressure of public opinion nor the impact of the uncertain social station can force Diana to return. She wins her personal battle in order to be subjected again.

Thomas Hardy discloses another taboo theme – a sexual relation outside a marriage. The book stresses that no means can restore a girl's chastity and no positive personal qualities can remedy her ruined reputation. The fate of a seduced girl cannot be reversed. Moreover, Tess Durbeyfield's nobility is not able to resort to dishonourable methods in order to be established in society.

Tess's desperate fight for a tiny portion of personal happiness is also burdened with the concatenation of unfortunate coincidental circumstances. Hardy's fatalism and Tess's 'inflexibility' result in a tragic ending, Tess is hanged.

All the above mentioned heroines can illustrate specific features in a woman's life in the previous centuries. The analyses of these female characters can create a detailed portrayal of a person of the female gender. These analyses can also highlight female roles, duties, possibilities and restrictions laid on women.

The analytical part encompasses references to the secondary source, including video and internet materials. It also exploits a wider range of primary sources, which can complete or specify the presented information.

As far as the hypotheses are concerned, firstly, I would like to remind us that women protagonists, 'despite their gender', have been able to perform or undertake worthwhile and leading roles in literary writings. In fact, they have stepped out of the background of characters in literary works or a 'crowd' of side literary characters hitherto employed in literature. Moreover, this writing should highlight that the powerful destinies of these literary women characters have contributed to the gradual surmounting of deeply rooted prejudice related to women.

Secondly, it should display that the heroines have been able to direct the attention to the numerous obstacles and limited prospects that surrounded their entire female existence. Consequently, the survey should point out that

their challenging stories were able to assist in the changes of the status and rights of contemporary women as well as in moderating their future outlooks.

Thirdly, the work ought to confirm the correspondence between the authenticity of writers' conceptions of the visions of women presented in the novels and the reality of these periods of time. There might be a clash "... between what [writers] accepted for themselves and what they accepted for their heroines" (Beer, 1975: 1).

It is an unspeakable pity that the narrow wisdom of the contemporary spirit of that time focuses on inferior matters, as

Life is altogether too complex and masterful and mysterious to be ordered into tidy little compartments of right and wrong; and any attempt so to order it inevitably leaves a good deal outside that is both interesting and delightful. (Cecil, 1948: 241)

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Because there must be something in Defoe's style and narrative technique that justifies the novel's position in literature some critics have already tried to find an explanation for Defoe's role in the rise of the novel. According to Ganzel it is the presentation of Crusoe's religious concern as a central event of the book that is an intellectual justification for the novel.[6] If we believe Novak "Defoe was able to please his audience (and) by his realistic technique. And through realism Defoe was to find a justification for fiction which was both aesthetic and didactic." [7]. As we ca