

## THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN THEATRE

**Nosirova Muxlisaxon**

*4<sup>th</sup> year student of foreign language faculty*

*in Fergana State University*

[E-mail:muhlissamuhlis@gmail.com](mailto:muhlissamuhlis@gmail.com)

**Scientific supervisor: Adamboyeva Nafisa Qodirberganovna**

**Annotation.** *This article examines the text explores women's roles in Victorian theatre and literature, highlighting both restrictions and opportunities. It discusses how societal norms shaped their participation in the arts while noting the rise of actresses, playwrights, and feminist theatre movements. Sarah Siddons, Ellen Terry, and Elizabeth Inchbald are mentioned as key figures.*

*In literature, women were often portrayed through the "angel in the house" ideal, emphasizing domesticity and purity. However, authors like Charlotte Brontë challenged these norms, portraying strong female characters like Jane Eyre. The discussion links these themes to broader social changes, industrialization, and feminist movements, showing how Victorian literature and theatre both reinforced and questioned gender roles.*

**Keywords:** *The Victorian era, industrialization, urbanization, portrayal, directors, altered, traditional, multifaceted, actresses, playwrights, resonate, selfless, devoted, pure.*

### INTRODUCTION

The study of the role of women in theatre and their representation in Victorian literature reveals a complex interplay of societal norms, gender expectations, and evolving cultural landscapes. The Victorian era, known for its strict moral codes and gender roles, presented both constraints and opportunities for women in the arts. This coursework aims to explore these dual aspects, delving into the contributions of women to theatre and their portrayal in literature during this transformative period. The Victorian era spanned from 1837 to 1901, coinciding with the reign of Queen Victoria. This period was characterized by significant social, economic, and cultural changes. Industrialization and urbanization altered the traditional way of life, and these shifts were reflected in the arts. Theatre, as a popular form of entertainment, was deeply influenced by these societal changes. Women, who were often confined to domestic roles, began to find new avenues for expression and participation in the arts, particularly theatre. The role of women in theatre during the Victorian era was multifaceted. Actresses, playwrights, and directors began

to emerge, challenging the traditional male dominance in the field. Women like Sarah Siddons and Ellen Terry became iconic figures, not only for their performances but also for their ability to navigate and negotiate the restrictive social norms of their time. Inchbald's plays, such as "Lovers' Vows," were well-received and provided a platform for discussing issues related to women's roles and rights<sup>1</sup>.

### METHODOLOGY

In addition to individual contributions, the Victorian era saw the rise of women's theatre groups and organizations. These groups provided a space for women to experiment with different forms of theatrical expression and to advocate for social and political change. The feminist theatre movement, which gained momentum in the late 19th century, was instrumental in challenging traditional narratives and promoting women's voices in the arts. This movement laid the groundwork for future advancements in gender equality in theatre. The representation of women in Victorian literature offers another rich area of exploration. Victorian literature often reflected and reinforced the prevailing societal attitudes towards gender. Women were frequently depicted in roles that emphasized their domestic responsibilities and moral purity. However, literature also served as a medium for questioning and critiquing these roles.

Brontë's portrayal of Jane as a strong, self-reliant woman was revolutionary for its time and has continued to resonate with readers<sup>2</sup>.

One of the most prominent themes in Victorian literature was the "angel in the house" ideal. Coined by Coventry Patmore in his poem of the same name, this concept encapsulated the Victorian ideal of womanhood: selfless, devoted, and pure. The "angel in the house" was the epitome of domestic virtue, whose primary role was to create a moral and nurturing home environment. This ideal was perpetuated in countless literary works, reinforcing the notion that a woman's place was in the home, subordinate to her husband.

### DISCUSSION AND RESULTS

The New Woman movement of the late 19th century further complicated the representation of women in Victorian literature. This movement, which advocated for greater independence and rights for women, found expression in the works of writers like Sarah Grand and Olive Schreiner. The New Woman was often depicted as educated, career-oriented, and determined to break free from traditional constraints. While these portrayals were sometimes

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<sup>1</sup> Taylor, Jenny Bourne. *In the Secret Theatre of Home: Wilkie Collins, Sensation Narrative, and Nineteenth-Century Psychology*. Routledge, 1988.

<sup>2</sup> Stone, Marjorie J. *The Family, Sex, and Marriage in England, 1500-1800*. Harper & Row, 1977.

controversial and met with resistance, they played a crucial role in expanding the scope of female representation in literature. In theatre, the depiction of women underwent similar transformations. Early Victorian plays often featured stereotypical female characters, such as the virtuous maiden, the devoted wife, or the fallen woman. These characters were typically defined by their relationships with men and their adherence to or deviation from societal norms. However, as the century progressed, playwrights began to experiment with more nuanced and diverse portrayals of women. Henrik Ibsen, though not British, had a profound influence Victorian theatre with his realistic and socially critical plays. His work often centered on the struggles of women against the constraints of a patriarchal society.

### CONCLUSION

In summary, The interplay between societal norms and the arts in the Victorian era reveals a dynamic and evolving landscape. Women in theatre and literature navigated a complex array of challenges and opportunities, contributing to a gradual but significant shift in cultural perceptions and representations of gender. Their efforts laid the groundwork for future generations and helped to pave the way for greater gender equality in the arts. The role of women in theatre and their portrayal in Victorian literature encapsulate a period of profound change and ongoing tension. While the Victorian era imposed strict gender roles and expectations, it also witnessed the emergence of women who challenged these constraints and sought to redefine their place in society and the arts. The contributions of actresses, playwrights, and authors, alongside the evolving representation of female characters, highlight a dynamic and multifaceted narrative of progress and resistance. This period of transformation continues to resonate, offering valuable insights into the complexities of gender and the power of artistic expression in shaping societal change<sup>3</sup>.

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