

Examine the different ways in which the writers of your 2 texts have presented the role of women in the societies in which the women live.

In this novel we see many the role of women transcendent from one class to another and some of the roles are still adhered to in today's world. Women during the Victorian era were usually associated with modesty, reputation, as well as pride and elegance for the middle/higher class women. From a 21st century perspective, such associations may seem rather far fetched, however it can be questioned to what extent the role of women in societies has changed. Considering the current ongoing topic of women in society, perhaps this is one of many aspects which has altered very slightly over the centuries.

In the two novels there are many roles women take, differentiating with class and position. One of these is the role of work. Work greatly varied between the lower and upper class and 'ladies' in the upper class societies occupied themselves with needless 'work' such as sketching, evident in 'North and South' we see Margaret fretting over cottages which have been 'reproaching me for not having sketched them'.(p26)In contrast to Margaret and Louisa, Fanny and Mrs Sparsit occupy themselves with gossiping and further useless occupations.

The working life of a lower class woman was very different in the Victorian era. Lower class women were occupied with merciless work in the factories and such. Unlike the middle class, women such as Mary or Rachel had no choice but to work in order to survive as well as support the family, as this was one of women's main roles; supporting the family in many ways.

Women in all classes also took the role of carers. In Hard Times we see Louisa's support for her brother as well as her dad towards the end of the novel. In North and South Margaret plays the role parallel to Louisa with her father and brother to an extent. In North and South Margaret almost plays the role of a counsellor, and is presented by Gaskell as a strong minded woman, although in the Victorian era women were liked to be seen as dainty even though they were looked upon for support and guidance. Unlike Margaret her mother is not as strong, and is not looked up to for advice and help which Margaret and Louisa often are. In the household Margaret seems to be the main caregiver excluding Dixon.

Carrying on with the subjects of home, working class women who were able to work did not spend much of their time at home. If they were able to they would work to help support the family and would spend much of their lives in the factories working alongside some of their family members, which is the case with Mr Higgins and his daughter. Even though Rachel is alone in Hard Times she is still forced upon work to survive.

In an upper/middle class society women were mostly at home, such as in Louisa's case who follows an inhibited lifestyle. In *North and South* Gaskell presents a more charitable and outgoing woman who, in Milton and Helstone regularly visits the poor to bring baskets. Being the daughter of a clergyman this was not frowned upon or seen as unusual as her charitable work was supported by her family, as well as her religion. In *Hard Times* Dickens presents Louisa as somewhat of a robotic 'object' whose apathetic nature is brought upon by the Utilitarianism society, whereas in *North and South* Margaret is seen as more caring and humane. Although in *Hard Times*, Dickens does not seem to focus much on women and their roles, and society as a whole takes centre piece.

A factor present in women through the Victorian era which transcends class is the idea of unblemished women. Women of all class were expected most of all by their parents to stay untouched until they were married. This idea is present in Gaskell's novel very evidently, especially in the scene 'Mistakes' (p189) where although there is talk of her embracing Mr Thornton Margaret says 'let them insult my maiden pride as they will – I walk pure before God'. Even though Margaret assumes that her act will not be of concern as she is trusted enough to be pure, it is quite the opposite as there is talk of her act within the Miltons, and this idea of being unblemished goes on as Mr Thornton sees Margaret at the train station with another man. This shows the importance of women and their role for being pure and untouched in the Victorian era, and this is brought out much in Gaskell's novel whereas in Dickens it is not entirely present.

Gender relations are also present in both novels and we see many relationships between men and women of both classes. The role of father daughter both Louisa and Margaret are taken under and Margaret is supportive of her father whereas even though Louisa accepts the marriage proposal brought upon her by her father she is not entirely satisfied in her relationship with her father. Mr Thornton has a similar sort of relationship with her mother who is her sons support and caregiver, and even though Thornton is presented as a strong independent gentleman he still requires the comfort of her mother and this is the role her mother takes on.

As we can see in both novels women play a very important role in the societies in which they live in and their roles of caregivers is more present in the upper class societies than in lower class where the women spend their time working and contributing to the family financially.