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**Desigualdad social y relaciones interpersonales  
en los diálogos de ficción victorianos**

**(Unequal social and interpersonal relations  
in Victorian fictional dialogues)**

MARÍA DEL MAR RIVAS CARMONA  
[mmrivas@uco.es](mailto:mmrivas@uco.es)  
*Universidad de Córdoba*

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**Resumen:** Los diálogos de ficción son un vehículo de caracterización mediante el que los autores transmiten información a sus lectores relativa a cuestiones básicas, tales como la procedencia social o económica de los personajes y, también, las relaciones interpersonales en las que interactúan factores como el estatus, la edad o el sexo del interviniente. El propósito de este estudio es mostrar cómo las distinciones sociológicas y de género suscitan diferencias significativas en la interacción discursiva. Con este fin, se han seleccionado diversos pasajes de cuatro novelas victorianas escritas por mujeres que corresponden a diálogos entre personajes femeninos y masculinos con relevantes diferencias de edad o estatus económico y social.

**Palabras clave:** Diálogos de ficción. Novela victoriana. Desigualdades sociales.

**Abstract:** Fictional dialogues are a vehicle of characterization by means of which the authors provide the readers with information not only concerning basic features such as social or economic backgrounds but, also, about the interpersonal relationships in which factors such as status, age and gender interact. The purpose of this paper is to show how gender and sociological distinctions yield significant differences in discursive interaction. For this purpose, we have selected various text excerpts from four Victorian novels written by women, that correspond to dialogues between male and female characters in which a wide range of features such as age or social and economic status interact.

**Key words:** Fictional dialogues. Victorial novel. Unequal social relations.

## Introduction

Dialogues are a main vehicle of characterization in fiction and, in many works, they have proved highly successful in revealing the characters' social position and cultural background, their moral behaviours and, what is more relevant to our purposes here, the interpersonal relationships based on features such as the status, age and gender of the speakers. In fact, the power of dialogue as a stylistic and narrative device is such (Schmid 2010; Thomas 2012) that it had a most relevant role in the development of the novel as a genre. As Genette and Porter (1993) put it, dialogue was one of the main paths of emancipation in the modern novel. It will be in the twentieth century when the novels play with the richness and versatility of dialogues as narrative devices<sup>1</sup>; nevertheless, they have served their authors as a powerful tool for characterization since the beginning of the genre.

Fictional dialogues are scripted and, thus, tend to be highly stylized in order to portray the characters' inner world and interpersonal relationships. Since the authors choose the strategies which best suit this social and psychological characterization, and the readers have to rely on the contextual meaning for the sake of interpretation, stylization has been considered a socio-pragmatic phenomenon (Urbanová 2003; 2005; Herman 2006).

The purpose of this paper is to study the way in which Victorian women writers portrayed interpersonal and social relationships in an era in which women's lives were marked by their dependency upon men. For this purpose, several text excerpts have been chosen and analysed; they are dialogues between men and women from *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë, *Agnes Grey* by Anne Brontë and *Wuthering Heights* by Emily Brontë, as well as *Adam Bede* by George Eliot. These passages reveal how a girl's education was nothing to worry about and a single woman's life was not worth much at that time; in fact, her "status was so low that no personal achievement could match marriage in terms of social approval and status", what is more, "marriage was a lifelong career with no escape for a wrong choice".<sup>2</sup> As a result of this situation they had little control over their own destinies. A woman was expected to marry and devote her life to her family, and those who didn't were termed "spinsters" or "old maids". A woman who wanted to be independent could try to earn her

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<sup>1</sup> See Michael Toolan, "Analyzing Fictional Dialogue", *Language and Communication*, 5:3, 1985, pp. 193-206, and "Analyzing Conversation in Fiction", *Poetics Today*, 8:2, 1987, pp. 393-416; and David Lodge, *Language of Fiction*, London: Routledge, 2001 [1966].

<sup>2</sup> Stephanie Colomb provides the readers with a wide perspective of women's background in the Victorian period in her introduction to the Longman edition of *Jane Eyre*. (Brontë 1847, rep. 1991: v-xxii).

own maintenance by the care and education of children, but being a governess meant living in loneliness, social inferiority and general abuse. There were not many other way-outs, as education for girls was not considered very important. So, the prospects were not very promising.

### 1. Man-Woman interaction

There is a clear interplay between language and social structure; language, indeed, is not only a reflection but also a “cause” of gender divisions in society (Coates 2004).<sup>3</sup> As Robin Lakoff stated “language uses us as much as we use language” (2004:3).

Dialogues serve as the vehicle of these divisions, for in discursive interaction “when one speaker is male and one female, male speakers tend to dominate” (Coates 2004:113). We can easily imagine that, if this tends to be the case in many cases still nowadays, things must have been much worse more than a hundred years ago when men in general thought that women had very little to say and were not worth talking to:

We are apt to be kinder to the brutes that love us than to  
the women that love us. Is it because the brutes are  
dumb? (*Adam Bede* 1960 [1859]:43)  
But where’s the use of talking to a woman with babbies?  
she’s got no conscience -no conscience; it’s all run to milk.  
(*Adam Bede* 1960 [1859]:239)

Women’s style or way of speaking has traditionally been described by linguists such as Robin Lakoff (2004 [1975]), Mary Ritchie Key (1996 [1975]), Jennifer Coates (2004 [1986]) or Deborah Tannen (2001 [1991], 1994), to name but a few of the early works on the matter, as being much more supportive and much less assertive than that of men. It has been stated in many studies that men tend to use commands much more frequently than women do; it also seems that, on many occasions, women prefer to use mitigated forms such as “let’s”, “maybe we can”, “why don’t we...?” which are more inclusive and more consultive. Women, therefore, are said to tend to express their proposals in the form of ‘offerings’ instead of ‘commands’ when interacting

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<sup>3</sup> Different critics such as Jennifer Coates (2004) and Deborah Tannen (2001) have paid attention to this sociolinguistic interplay in gender relations.

with men.<sup>4</sup> In a word, there seems to be a general tendency for women to be more “giving: offering” while men choose to be more “demanding: commanding” (in M.A.K. Halliday’s terms 2004 [1985]).

Though all this may sound like a sweeping generalization, evidence of it, however, has been found in a great deal of conversation recordings. Our procedure here has been to select a wide variety of characters that display a likewise wide range of distinctive features, such as age, social and economic status. The gender distinctions should yield satisfactory results judged from the initial hypothesis: significant difference in gender equals significant differences in speech.

### 2.1 *Female adult – male child’ dialogues*

#### A) MOTHER – BOY:

A)-‘Oh, Tom, WHAT A DARLING YOU ARE!’ exclaimed his mother. ‘Come and kiss dear mamma; and then WON’T YOU show Miss Grey YOUR schoolroom, and YOUR NICE NEW books?’  
-‘I WON’T kiss you, mamma; but I WILL show Miss Grey MY schoolroom, and MY new books.’

#### B) GOVERNESS - BOY:

-‘Now you MUST put on your bonnet and shawl,’ said the little hero, ‘and I’ll show you my garden.’(...tries to hit his sister)  
-‘SURELY, Tom, you WOULD NOT strike your sister! I HOPE I SHALL NEVER see you do that.’  
-‘You WILL sometimes: I’M OBLIGED TO do it now and then to keep her in order.’  
-‘But it is not your business to keep her in order, you know -that is for -’  
-‘Well, now go and put on your bonnet.’  
-‘I don’t know -it is so very cloudy and cold, it seems likely to rain; and you know I have had a long drive.’  
-‘No matter -you MUST come; I SHALL ALLOW OF NO excuse,’ replied the consequential little man.

(*Agnes Grey* 1994 [1847]:13-14)

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<sup>4</sup> Marianne ENGLE (1980) found that fathers tend to use more commands with children, especially with boys, than mothers, seemingly because mothers view interaction as an occasion to help children learn how to choose.

In this little piece of dialogue between a mother and a boy, the one who dominates is the child in spite of the difference of age. The command “Come and kiss dear mamma” is not only soft but also mitigated with the previous preparation with the expletive: “Oh, Tom, what a darling you are!” with a “dear mamma” as a supposedly desirable object by the child. The imperative means more an offer of affection than an actual command. Then, again, we have a polite request with a modulation through the operator “won’t” in which the mother inquires about the child’s degree of inclination towards her proposal: “Won’t you show Miss Grey your schoolroom, and your nice new books?”. The protagonist is the “you” of the little man. The mother has to provide the child with good propaganda in order to get something done by the child: “your NICE NEW books”.

The child’s turn proves that he is completely self-assured by means of a firm refusal or rejection of the first offer by the mother. The modulation in the modal operators shows how he is totally disinclined towards kissing his mother although it is his will to show the schoolroom : “I won’t kiss you, mamma; but I will show Miss Grey my schoolroom, and my books”. The protagonist is now the first person of the child “I”/“my”.

In the second part of the dialogue, the child commands his governess in a demanding way. There is a sharp contrast between the modulatory “must” of obligation imposed on her by the child (“You must put on your bonnet...”; “you must come”) or the bare imperative “now go and put on your bonnet”, and the modulatory “will” of inclination, which means that the only prevailing will is that of the boy “I will show you my garden”, “I shall allow for no excuses”.

Far from scorning him, the governess speaks in an unassertive way by means of mood adjuncts and modal operators implying a doubt in the degree of probability of his performing some actions: “Surely, Tom, you would not strike your sister!”. She is always trying to mitigate the expression of her will (“I hope I shall never see you do that”), even by means of hedges: “you know”, “I don’t know”... which reinforce this impression of unassertiveness.<sup>5</sup> Her modal operators always imply low or medium force, whereas his imply a high degree of force.

The child also makes use of interruptions avoiding a normal exchange of turns: (“that is for-” “Well, now go...”). According to Zimmerman & West (1975: 116) that is something quite usual in men (of all epochs), they tend to

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<sup>5</sup> According to Pamela FISHMAN (1980) women use this kind of hedges five times more than men.

overlap and interrupt their interlocutor much more than women, and especially if they are talking to women.

### 2.2 'Male adult – female child' dialogue

C) MALE SUPERINTENDENT - GIRL:  
-‘No sight so sad as that of a naughty child’, he began,  
‘especially a naughty little girl. DO YOU KNOW  
WHERE THE WICKED GO AFTER DEATH?’  
-‘They go to hell’, was my ready and orthodox answer.  
-‘AND WHAT IS HELL? CAN YOU TELL ME  
THAT?’  
-‘A pit full of fire’.  
-‘AND SHOULD YOU LIKE TO FALL INTO THAT  
PIT, AND TO BE BURNING THERE FOR EVER?’  
-‘No, sir’.  
-‘WHAT MUST YOU DO TO AVOID IT?’  
-‘I must keep in good health and not die’...

(*Jane Eyre*, 1991 [1847]:28)

This passage is just the opposite from the previous one. An adult male is in control of the conversation. According to Helena Leet-Pellegrini (1980) the powerful speakers are the ones who tend to hold the floor most and ask more questions seeking information based on their superiority. In this dialogue Mr. Brocklehurst, the school’s superintendent, clearly dominates and this is due to three features: he is older, he is the teacher and he is a man.

### 2.3 'Male child – female child' dialogue

D) BOY – GIRL:  
-‘What do you want?’ I asked...  
-‘SAY, “What do you want, Master Reed?”’ was the  
answer. ‘I WANT YOU TO COME HERE;’ and seating  
himself in an armchair, he intimated by a gesture that I  
was to approach and stand before him. ‘WHAT WERE  
YOU DOING BEHIND THE CURTAIN?’, he asked.  
-‘I was reading’.  
-‘SHOW THE BOOK’. (...) ‘You have no business to take  
our books; you are a dependant, mamma says; you have  
no money; your father left you none; you ought to beg,  
and not live with gentlemen’s children like us...’

(*Jane Eyre*, 1991 [1847]:3-5)

On this occasion, the interaction should have been more equal between Jane and her cousin John Reed, but his pretentious attitude prevents it. This attitude is based not only on his higher economic status but also on his being a man.<sup>6</sup>

Cousin Reed imposes his will by means of questions (“What were you doing...?”) and commands (bare imperatives, no mitigation at all): “Say...”, “Show the book”, “I want you to come here”... without even addressing her by any name, either Jane, cousin, etc., whereas he imposes the treatment “Master Reed” for himself in a humiliating way.

#### 2.4 ‘Man – female relative’ dialogue

E) MAN - WOMAN RELATIVE:

-‘Are you going to mak’ th’ tea?’ demanded he of the shabby coat.

-‘Is he to have any?’ she asked, appealing to Heathcliff.

-‘Get it ready, will you?’ was the answer, uttered so savagely that I started.

(*Wuthering Heights*, 1965 [1847]:54)

In this dialogue Heathcliff treats his daughter-in-law, Cathy, as if she were a house servant charged with the bearing of the household, the role women were traditionally assigned almost exclusively. As in the previous dialogue, the man is the one to ask the questions without paying attention to what is not interesting to him. According to Victoria DeFrancisco (1991), the topics or questions introduced by women are frequently much less successful than those introduced by men.

-‘Mr. Heathcliff, you have nobody to love you; and, however miserable you make us, we shall still have the revenge of thinking that your cruelty arises from your greater misery! You are miserable, are you not? Lonely, like the devil, and envious like him. Nobody loves you - nobody will cry for you when you die! I wouldn’t be you!’

-‘YOU SHALL BE SORRY TO BE YOURSELF PRESENTLY,’ said her father-in-law, ‘IF YOU STAND THERE ANOTHER MINUTE. BEGONE, WITCH, AND GET YOUR THINGS!’

(*Wuthering Heights*, , 1965 [1847]:319)

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<sup>6</sup> This is shown throughout the novel in his treating his sister as an inferior (in the same way as the boy in the first dialogue).

-‘You shouldn’t grudge a few yards of earth, for me to ornament, when you have taken all my land!’(...)  
-‘SILENCE!’ he exclaimed. ‘GET DONE AND BEGONE!’ ... ‘DAMNABLE WITCH!...OFF WITH HER!...I’LL KILL HER! DRAG HER AWAY!... ACCURSED WITCH!’

(*Wuthering Heights*, 1965 [1847]:349)

It is a frequent feature in these novels to find that brave women who dare state the reality which seems not to appeal their male interlocutors (“I WOULDN’T be you!”/ “You SHOULDN’T grudge...”) are confronted with a rude and uncivil answer which challenges their contribution: either menaces or even insults.

There is a folklinguistic belief that men swear more than women in general. Since Robin Lakoff (2004 [1975]) (also Coates 2004 [1986]), it has been stated that men use generally stronger expletives than women, especially when talking to other men. This may be due to the competitive male style which tries to reassert his powerful position. Women are said to have more sensitivity to the face needs of others (Coates 2004: 132), and their style has usually been described as being more refined and polite.<sup>7</sup>

Apart from being contradicted and treated in an uncivil manner when stating something unacceptable for a man, most frequently women have been urged into silence (as Cathy is by Heathcliff). According to Elaine Showalter (1982: 23): “(Women) have been denied the full resources of language and have been forced into silence”. Tasso in his *Discorso della virtù femminile e donnesca* (1582) said that, while eloquence is a virtue in a man, silence is the corresponding virtue in a woman; there is also the English saying: “Silence is the best

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<sup>7</sup> In Elizabeth GASKELL’s *Cranford*, a woman (Miss Matty’s mother) apologizes for having used a not very proper word:

‘He was always hoaxing them; "hoaxing" is not a pretty word, my dear, and I hope you won’t tell your father I used it, for I should not like him to think that I was not choice in my language... And be sure you never use it yourself. I don’t know how it slipped out of my mouth, except it was that I was thinking of poor Peter and it was always his expression. (1993 [1853]: 90)

But there are always exceptions:

‘...dear Matilda, try to be a little more lady-like. Miss Grey, I wish you would tell her not to use such shocking words; she will call her horse a mare: it is so inconceivably shocking! and then she uses such dreadful expressions in describing it: she must have learned it from the grooms. It nearly puts me into fits when she begins.’

‘I learned it from papa, you ass!’

(*Agnes Grey*, p.55)



ornament of a woman". Many sociolinguists such as Shirley Ardener (1975) and Dale Spender (1980) early suggested that silence has always been the desired ideal state for women.

### 2.5 'Man – female subordinate' dialogue

#### F) MAN – FEMALE SERVANT:

-‘Are you going to mak’ th’ tea?’ demanded he of the shabby coat.

-‘Is he to have any?’ she asked, appealing to Heathcliff.

-‘Get it ready, will you?’ was the answer, uttered so savagely that I started.

(*Wuthering Heights*, 1965 [1847]:54)

-‘...with the help of Satan, I shall make you swallow the carving knife, Nelly!’

-‘But I don’t like the carving knife. Mr. Hindley,’ I answered, ‘it has been cutting red herrings -I’d rather be shot if you please’.

-‘You’d rather be damned!’ he said, ‘and so you shall, no law in England can hinder a man from keeping his house DECENT, and mine’s abominable! Open your mouth!’

(*Wuthering Heights*,

p.114)

#### G) MAN – FEMALE EMPLOYEE:

-‘Miss Grey,’ said he, ‘...Don’t you see how Miss Bloomfield has soiled her frock? and that Master Bloomfield’s socks are quite wet? and both of them without gloves? Dear, dear! Let me request that in future you will keep them DECENT at least!’ so saying, he turned away... I was surprised that he should nominate his children Master and Miss Bloomfield; and still more so, that he should speak so uncivilly to me, their governess, and a perfect stranger to himself.

(*Agnes Grey*, p.17)

A woman’s role according to a man was to be devoted to making his life and his house comfortable. The strict, inquisitive and demanding tone could worsen if she was a servant or a subordinate, as Nelly is to Mr. Heathcliff or Agnes Grey to Mr. Bloomfield, in charge of keeping the house and the children “decent”, respectively.

Thus, menaces, expletives, questions and commands prevail when Mr. Heathcliff addresses Nelly: “Are you going to mak’ th’ tea?”, “Get it ready, will you?”, “...with the help of Satan, I shall make you swallow the carving knife, Nelly!”, “You’d rather be damned! and so you shall, no law in England can hinder a man from keeping his house DECENT, and mine’s abominable! Open your mouth!”

As for Agnes Grey’s master, Mr. Bloomfield, he does not even leave the possibility of an answer, turning away after his turn is completed. Let us remark the emphasis on the words “request” and “decent” in italics in the original text: Mr. Bloomfield emphasizes them making clear that he has a right to demand from her and that her duty is to obey.

*H) MAN – FEMALE EMPLOYEE:*

-‘Speak,’ he urged.

-‘What about, sir?’

-‘Whatever you like. I leave both the choice of subject and the manner of treating it entirely to yourself’ (...) ‘The fact is, once for all, I don’t wish to treat you like an inferior...’

-‘I am willing to amuse you, if I can, sir -quite willing; but I cannot introduce a topic, because how do I know what will interest you? Ask me questions, and I will do my best to answer them.’

*(Jane Eyre, p.138)*

In this dialogue between Jane Eyre and Mr. Rochester we find the same masterful and abrupt tone in the man (bare imperative “Speak”, expletive: “Stubborn”, etc.) and the same respectful tone in the governess (the treatment: “sir”, modulation through adjectival predicators indicating inclination: “am willing”, etc.). Nevertheless, there is an important concession by the man, he not only allows her but asks her to speak and leaves the choice of topic and treatment of it to the woman. This is something very unusual in this kind of relationship: master-employee. He even states that he does not want to treat her like an inferior. Curiously, this statement carries the implicit acknowledgement or recognition that considering her an “inferior” would be the normal or usual way of treating women, even more if they are their employees. His other fault is that he just wants her to speak for the sake of being entertained: “I am willing to amuse you, if I can, sir -quite willing”. This is a clear acceptance of the traditional belief that women favourite topics are trivial.

There has always existed a stereotypical belief that women’s talk equals verbosity plus triviality. Words like “chatter” or “gossip” are mainly used when

talking about women. Many studies seem to prove that women do not talk so much as men think, and sociolinguists as Coates (2004)<sup>8</sup> think that the evidence is that women tend to discuss different topics as do girls and boys. However, the fact that some typically male topics (such as sport, politics and cars) are seen as “serious” while topics such as child-rearing and personal relationships are labelled “trivial” is simply a reflection of social values which define what men do as important, and conversely what women do as less important.

### 2.6 *‘Man – his future wife’ dialogue*

1) *MAN – HIS FUTURE WIFE:*

-‘...I offer you my hand, my heart, and a share of all my possessions.’

-‘You play a farce, which I merely laugh at.’

-‘I ask you to pass through life at my side -to be my second self, and best earthly companion ... Jane, I summon you as my wife: it is you only I intend to marry... my equal is here, and my likeness. Jane, will you marry me?’

*(Jane Eyre, p.269)*

-‘Jane, you understand what I want of you? Just this promise –“I will be yours, Mr. Rochester”.’

*(Jane Eyre, p.336)*

Things seem to change when Jane ceases to be a servant and becomes his master’s beloved. For the first time, he recognizes: “my equal is here”, but there is still an underlining idea of possession which prevails all through this romantic declaration: he “offers”, but he also “summons” her, he “intends”, “he wants” something from her... Even though he is asking her about her willingness to marry him, his will is ever-present. He wants her to promise that she will be “his”, another one of his many possessions.

### 2.7 *‘Man – woman’ dialogu:*

Let us conclude with a humorous passage which could be a summary of what many people at that time thought about men-women relations:

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<sup>8</sup> See also the early studies of Haas (1979) and Seidler (1989).

-‘...However, I’m not denyin’ the women are foolish: God Almighty made ‘em to match the men!’  
-‘Match!’ said Bartle; ‘ay, as vinegar matches one’s teeth. If a man says a word, his wife’ll match it with a contradiction; if he’s a mind for hot meat, his wife’ll match it with cold bacon; if he laughs, she’ll match him with wimpering. She’s such a match as the horse-fly is to th’horse: she’s got the right venom to sting him with -the right venom to sting him with.’  
-‘Yes,’ said Mrs. Poyser, ‘I know what the men like -a poor soft, as ‘ud simper at ‘em like the pictur o’ the sun, whether they did right or wrong, an’ say thank you for a kick, an’ pretend she didna know which end she stood uppermost, till her husband told her. That’s what a man wants in a wife, mostly; he wants to make sure o’ one fool as ‘ull tell him he’s wise...’

(*Adam Bede*, p.504)

### Conclusions

Even though this selection may seem too biased in its display of dominant male characters (more competitive style, more commanding and demanding of information, they hold the floor avidly, they interrupt and use “high force” modal operators and harder expletives...) versus passive female ones (much more supportive and less assertive, using mitigated forms such as “low or medium” force modal operators, more hedges, more refined or polite terms...), it decisively represents a highly recurrent tendency in the novels of this period. These extracts are, thus, representative of the way women felt and, also, of the ever-present symbology of oppression and confinement that made these women describe themselves as birds in cages.

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