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**Rejection of Victorian Social Values and Norms: A Feminist Analysis of
Smoke Screens by Harold Brighthouse**



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Abstract

*This study takes Harold Brighouse's play *Smoke Screens* as its research subject, and conducts analysis from a feminist literary perspective. Building upon the core feminist theories of Virginia Woolf (1929/1938), Simone de Beauvoir (1949), and Kate Millett (1970), this study adopts a research design of qualitative close textual analysis, focuses on several core thematic areas including gender and patriarchy. It unpacks the play's critique of the social institutions and gender norms of the Victorian era; and verifies that the play's female characters, who reject traditional identities, subvert the contemporary stereotype that framed women as compliant, dependent beings. The researcher points out that the core of the female protagonist of this literary work's resistance to economic dependence and patriarchal rule is her choice to reject alimony and live an independent life. To conclude, *Smoke Screens* illustrates a transition from restrictive Victorian norms toward modern feminist consciousness by portraying women who actively resist dependency and redefine identity through autonomy, mobility, and economic agency.*

Keywords: *Feminism, Gender Roles, Rejection, Victorian Social Values And Norms, Textual Analysis*

Introduction

The story is set in the Victorian era, which ran from 1837 to 1901, a period that enforced the discipline of separate public and private spheres: men belonged to the public domain, while women were restricted to the private sphere of the family. It constructed women as pure, but socially and intellectually inferior beings whose identities revolved around domestic duties (Vicinus, 1972). The Victorian gender ideology reinforced natural assumptions and beliefs that women were constructed to be subordinate, emotional, make self sacrificial over identity while men were believed to be rational associated with authority and independence. This led to a systematic marginalization of women from education, work opportunities and political participation limiting social and economic independence (Showalter, 1985). Such structural inequality produced lived experiences that made their way into the literary production, which often cast women in a narrow set of moral and domestic roles.

Feminist theorists argue that such roles were not biologically determined, but rather socially constructed by cultural and institutional practices. Beauvoir for example, famously claimed that "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (Beauvoir, 1949) hinting here to the idea that being a woman is shaped through social conditioning and not nature. Contrary to the current thinking, this Victorian social construction of femininity can be seen as an agent of control that enhanced women's dependency on men and should therefore be considered detrimental to women becoming active agents (Wollstonecraft, 1792). These gender ideologies were reflected in the Victorian literature and literature of that time also reinforced them. Women, meanwhile, were either depicted as Rosenberg's ideal domestic figure or a morally fallen woman (e.g., the Slut) with no middle ground in between the binary of purity versus deviance. Nevertheless, literary texts also started to reveal the

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inconsistencies in these norms and gradually questioning patriarchal authority and gender identity (Vicinus 1972). This criticism stresses that these representations are not neutral but ideologically motivated constructions that shape social understandings of the feminine (Showalter, 1985).

Smoke Screens was written in the early 20th century and is against Victorian ideals and conventions, making it a satire of the British bourgeoisie. *Smoke Screens* was written in a time of immense societal change for Britain with new social and political movements growing, Victorian values falling out of style, and modernism on the rise. A drama of that era that questions norms and freezes the volatile moment. This is a period of turmoil and the drama questions the accepted norms and values. The play's representation of a woman who decides to raise her daughter alone and without alimony is something that modern audiences can relate to, thus it remains a popular subject for academic research. Brighouse belonged amongst the playwrights of Manchester School, which was a productive literary movement that tried to introduce realistic and socially responsible theatre. By demonstrating that the seemingly conventional middle-class woman goes against the social expectations Brighouse dared take on the established norms of society in his time, including Victorian values and gender roles.

Statement of the Problem

Even though *Smoke Screens* specifically grapples with the traditional gender roles and social expectation in Victorian cultural values, it has received relatively little critical attention. Most of the writings on representation of female freedom in performance, have not been much seriously checked through feminist eyes lead character prefers to live as an autonomous being and raise her daughter without any dependency on alimony action which blatantly contradicts patriarchal mandate with economic dependence. Another trap is to overlook many of the cultural, social and historical issues that infect any understanding of regulating forces on women during Victorian era. Likewise, there hasn't been enough research done on these ideas' applicability to modern feminist discourse. In order to fill these gaps, a study that is suited to critically evaluate through a feminist lens whilst shedding light on the relevance of such norms associated with gender biases across societal norms.

Research Objectives

To analyze how *Smoke Screens* represents gender as a socially constructed identity and challenges Victorian ideals of femininity such as passivity, obedience, and dependence.

To examine how the play critiques patriarchal power structures through female characters who resist male authority and assert autonomy in personal, social, and economic spheres.

To explore how the play presents female economic independence and modern values as a rejection of Victorian social, moral, and cultural limitations.

Research Questions

How does *Smoke Screens* construct and challenge Victorian notions of femininity and gender roles through its female characters?

In what ways does the play represent resistance to patriarchal structures and male dominance in relation to marriage, divorce, and economic control?

How does *Smoke Screens* reflect the transition from Victorian ideology to modern

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feminist consciousness through its depiction of female independence and social change?

Significance of the Study

The study of Harold Brighouse's *Smoke Screens* shows how the play opposes general ideological concept of Victorian society and represents women's aversion against patriarchal norms through feminist criticism as well as norm. Consequently, this can be useful for future researchers seeking to employ feminism in literary interpretation or analyze works by Harold Brighouse.

Literature Review

British theatre from the early 20th century onwards has received considerable scholarly attention, both with regard to its engagement with social change and class mobility (Innes, 2002; Williams, 1983). Many early 20th century playwrights (Hynes, 1976) dealt with the changing Victorian conceptions of gender, identity, and interpersonal relationships. Harold Brighouse was known for depicting the middle-class way of life and contributing to social realism. Nevertheless, he was relatively overlooked as a dramatist who examined class dynamics and social change through his play, *Smoke Screens*, in particular. In fact, *Smoke Screens* has received very little critical attention, especially regarding feminist perspectives.

Academics examining plays from the turn of this century confirm that there has been an incremental move away from Victorian traditions that emphasized strict moral codes, hierarchical class structures, and distinct gender identities (Williams 1983; Innes, 2002). Dominant values during the Victorian period typically involved women being dependent upon men financially and residing in the domestic sphere (Perkin, 1993). However, in early modern theatre the portrayals of women began to reflect autonomy, involvement in political activities, and engaged citizens (Hynes, 1976). Many interpret this trend as representative of wider societal and cultural developments, including the rise of feminist activism and increased discussion regarding gender equity (Showalter, 1985).

Feminist literary theory provides an important framework for understanding the changes described above. In the view of Simone de Beauvoir, gender is not a given; it is a social construction created and maintained by society's norms and expectations and not a biological fact (Beauvoir 1953). When she declares that "a woman is not born; she is made," Beauvoir makes clear how the obligation to be feminine is imposed by society. This idea is particularly relevant to the examination of literature that challenges conventional gender stereotypes. Similarly, Kate Millett contends that patriarchal authority constitutes a pervasive power structure that is embedded in social, political, and cultural institutions (Millett 1970). Millett's analysis illustrates that the literature has both supported and challenged patriarchal institutions. It is her theoretical perspective that provides the basis for critically analyzing texts portraying women rebelling against the norms of society and rejecting male authority.

Virginia Woolf also stresses how important having your own space as well as being financially independent are to developing a female identity (Woolf, 1929). In her opinion, without intellectual independence and financial independence, women will not reach the full potential of who they are. Her theories provide an important source of information when analyzing literature that depicts women resisting domestic repression and economic dependence, as she emphasizes both personal space and

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economic independence for women to develop into their full potential.

Feminist literary criticism has had a significant impact on feminist historical analysis; however, these theorists' views and theories have not been equally applied to works by lesser-known playwrights like *Smoke Screens*. Previous research into feminist playwriting has concentrated primarily on the works of more established playwrights; thus there is a gap in the analysis of works that deal with the same types of issues concerning resistance to gender inequality and social change. Moreover, throughout these studies about Victorian social convention, there is a consistent thread demonstrating the restrictive nature of gender roles (Perkin, 1993; Tosh, 1999). Men were in positions of authority and had power to control their families, while women were expected by society to conform to a standard of domesticity, obedience, and modesty. Cultural practices, expectations from society, and literary depictions were among the many things that reinforced those values (Vicinus, 1972). However, as women have begun claiming autonomy and more control over their own lives, there has been a gradual but increasing challenge to the established way women were viewed by society throughout the twentieth century (Showalter, 1985).

Prior studies have explored Victorian social values, gender ideology, and feminist resistance through various theoretical approaches. Arildsen (2018), in *Challenging or Conforming to the Norms of Victorian Society: Queen Victoria's Stance on Women's Social Status*, discusses the way Victorian society maintained rigid gender roles in relation to Queen Victoria's ideals of morality and social conduct, thereby institutionalizing women in domestic spaces. In addition, Patil (2021), in *The Representation of Women in Victorian Literature: A Reflection of Society and Changes*, argues that Victorian literature portrays a patriarchal setup where women are regarded as inferior, emotional beings limited to private and domestic spheres. Together, these studies provide an ideological background of Victorian gender roles.

Khrisat et al. (2012), in *Patriarchal Dominance in Virginia Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway, To the Lighthouse, and The Waves*, examine patriarchal supremacy in Woolf's fiction and illustrate how literary works expose male dominance and psychological oppression imposed on women within traditional society. Moreover, Greenberg (2016), in *The Victorian Influence on Virginia Woolf's Domestic Feminist Aesthetic in Mrs. Dalloway and To the Lighthouse*, explains Woolf's feminist aesthetic by showing how her literature challenges Victorian domestic ideology to promote women's intellectual and economic independence. These theoretical approaches highlight early feminist struggles against Victorian constraints.

Furthermore, Joseph (2018), in *The Degendering of Virtue*, extends feminist philosophical debate by engaging with Simone de Beauvoir's idea of woman as the "Other," emphasizing how moral and gender constructs are socially produced to sustain patriarchal dominance. Collectively, these studies highlight recurring themes of patriarchy, gender construction, and resistance to Victorian norms. Despite the existence of numerous studies about both feminist theory and Victorian society, there is still a significant lack of more specific investigation into how *Smoke Screens* particularly confronts and rejects these influences. Strong female characters, economic freedom, and non-compliance with gender role ideals all serve to illustrate a significant area for feminist analysis which is still not well documented or systematically addressed. To fill this void, this paper provides a feminist analysis of *Smoke Screens* and demonstrates how it refutes the Victorian standards and beliefs of society (Beauvoir, 1953; Millett, 1970; Woolf, 1929). By contributing additional

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insight into how early 20th century theatre represents gender and social change in society, it will benefit the study of Harold Brighouse's works and affect the broader field of feminist literary criticism.

Research Methodology

As opposed to quantitative methods that focus primarily on statistical analysis, this research employs a qualitative descriptive research design, which emphasizes the interpretation of textual data. Classic qualitative research examines and describes social phenomena based on language, behavior and concepts rather than correlations among variables (Creswell, 2010, p. 93). The research itself uses Harold Brighouse's Play *Smoke Screens* as its primary data source. A thorough reading of selected parts of the text, including specific dialogues, characters, and thematic attractions, allows for an analysis of how the play criticizes social values of the Victorian age, including gender roles, femininity and female independence by way of a feminist literary theory perspective. Descriptive analysis of the data also allows for the identification of the themes of patriarchy, resistance and social change.

Theoretical Framework

This research utilizes feminist literary theory, largely accomplished through the philosophies of Virginia Woolf, Kate Millett, and Simone de Beauvoir, to explore the ways gender is produced, the operation of patriarchy, and the necessity for women's independence in literature.

In *The Second Sex*, one of the most influential texts in feminist theory and literature, Simone de Beauvoir argues that a woman is not defined biologically, but rather that womanhood is socially constructed by means of culturally and historically-specific ways of creating women (Beauvoir, 1953). Simone de Beauvoir's assertion that "one is not born, but rather becomes a woman," highlights the manner in which society constructs women's identities to fit within a set of pervasive and rigid gender norms (Beauvoir, 1953). Consequently, Beauvoir's argument will allow for the analysis of the extent to which *Smoke Screens* questions and disrupts the female identity as dictated by Victorian notions of femininity as passive, submissive, and dependent based on the representations of both female and male characters in the novel.

Kate Millett defines patriarchy as a relational system of masculinity-based power with an inextricable linkage to the dominant social, cultural and intellectual aspects of society (Millett, 1970). Following Millett's theory, it is important to understand how the ideal of Victorian behaviour governs the behaviour of women in relation to marriage, morality, and financial dependence. This analytical approach allows for Brighouse's *Smoke Screens* to be viewed as a critique of patriarchal power, particularly through the representation of women expressing their independence and resisting male dominance.

In her essay *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf argues that women require intellectual space and economic independence in order to gain the freedom and ability to express themselves creatively (Woolf, 1929). The examination of female characters questioning their dependence on economics, as well as their compliance with traditionally defined domestic duties, supports Woolf's assertion that women require economic stability in order to develop and sustain an independent identity. Woolf's perspective provides a basis for the interpretation of female independence in *Smoke Screens* as an expression of women's rejection of the Victorian limitations on their mobility and agency.

When viewed together the following theoretical positions provide a cohesive

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framework from which to analyze how *Smoke Screens* redefines womanhood and counters Victorian social expectations. This analysis will identify how *Smoke Screens* illustrates female resistance, critiques traditional norms about women and portrays the larger transition from Victorian ideology to present feminist awareness through Beauvoir's notion of the social construction of gender, Millett's theory of patriarchy and Woolf's notion of economic self-sufficiency.

Analysis and Discussion

This study centers feminist literary theory as its core academic foundation, sources its theoretical materials from three classic theorists Virginia Woolf, Kate Millett, and Simone de Beauvoir, adopts their analytical frameworks to investigate the logic of gender construction, the operational mechanisms of patriarchy, and the necessity of female autonomy in literary works, and cites an argument put forward by Beauvoir in 1953 to corroborate its core position that gender is a social construct.

Through a critical reading of its text, the play thus reveals and challenges Victorian conceptions of gender, social order, and female constraint. *Smoke Screens*' female protagonists, such as Primrose and Lucy, challenge gender stereotypes and display independence and bravery. *Smoke Screens* also depicts the rise of the middle class and the fall of nobles. Brighthouse's commitment to modernity is evident in the play's emphasis on contemporary issues like women's rights and social unrest.

Mrs. Austin's sitting room is in her Kensington flat. It is a woman's room, exhibiting no sign of masculine use but of course, that old theory that women do not care about comfort of themselves, but only for men, is thoroughly out of date (Brighthouse, 1932, p. 283).

The common Victorian belief that women's rooms should be pleasant for men is brought into question given Mrs. Austin's description of her sitting room as a "woman's room" and the lack of any sign of masculine use. The statement "that old theory that women do not care about the comfort of themselves, but only for men" criticizes the Victorian notion that women are more concerned with making their surroundings comfortable for men than for themselves.

Brighthouse holds out a vision in which a woman rebels against the patriarchal order and puts her comfort first. This part displays the main themes of the play so best: female power, independence and defiance of social values. Such ideas were revolutionary for the Victorian era. Brighthouse simply turns this on its head, giving us a more progressive and feminist account by portraying a role for a woman that puts her comfort and agency at the center. *Vogue* and *The Tatler* are penned aside "A table, down R, along with cigarette-box, ash trays and match holders" (Brighthouse, 1932, p. 283). Another instance in which the play subverts Victorian morality and social mores. The cigarette box, the ash trays, the match holders in Mrs. Austin's sitting room and elite fashion magazines such as "Vogue" and "The Tatler", would offer hints of liberation from conventional Victorian ideals of modesty and restraint. These objects hint at a level of extravagance, glimmer and cosmopolitanism that Victorians prevented women from owning or which alluded to manly sodalities. Cigarettes and smoking paraphernalia particularly undermines the Victorian idea that women in particular should shun tobacco, and other vices; because it was thought they were unwomanly. By portraying these items in a woman's home, Brighthouse juxtaposes them against social assumptions about female behaviour and interest, implying a stronger argument for women's independence.

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In this case, the evidence provided here proves Brighouse's denial. Here in, it can be shown how Brighouse's antagonism towards Victorian society's norms and values is depicted with regard to women's enjoyment of luxury and indulgence, as well as their modesty and femininity. Brighouse presents a more liberal attitude in the context of feminism that opposes the existing views about the woman's place as it represents luxury and enjoyment "She walks over to table R's cigarette box and lights one." "These mother's cigarettes are putrid things... I must smoke something, mustn't I" (Brighouse, 1932, p. 285). The Victorian ethics of moderation and temperance, frugality, and avoidance of vice are defied by the act of smoking a cigarette, especially an expensive one and an exotic one. The description of cigarettes as "filthy things" and "tasting like all the sins of Asia" is representative of the Victorian approach that considers such an act sinful and against their values. But the indifference shown by the character to such smoking and even saying "I must smoke something, mustn't I" is the opposite of Victorian behavior.

Primrose also makes reference to the problem of female gluttony and pleasure when she talks about her smoking habits without feeling guilty or regret. By showing women who smoke and enjoy expensive cigarettes, Brighouse subverts Victorian gender conventions that restricted female luxury and pleasure. "I have been speaking about an actual niece with the latchkey in her bag and a cigarette in her lips in the public street... (Brighouse, 1932, p. 292). This picture of the niece having a key, smoking, and having a talent for back answer is an attack on the Victorian concepts of female modesty, restraint, and submission, as it depicts a modern and liberated vision of womanhood. This sentence demonstrates that the behavior of the niece and the attitude of the niece are very different from what was allowed by Victorian women in terms of independence and self-restraint. This person has been depicted by Brighouse as going against the Victorian social and cultural conventions and upholding more liberal values.

Based on Kate Millett's definition in *Sexual Politics*, "patriarchy can be understood as a set of relationships within which one gender (males) is dominant and the other (women) subordinate, involving systems of power based upon the cultural, social, and intellectual spheres." The role of Millett's theory in this particular investigation is important as regards the study of the Victorian principles according to which women should behave, particularly concerning issues of marriage, morality, and money. The drama frequently questions the Victorian notion that women are socially and economically reliant on males. The persona of Lucy openly opposes patriarchal authority:

LUCY. She knows I had divorce her father.

SUSAN. She knows you refused alimony (Brighouse, 1932, p. 289).

Lucy's rejection of alimony and her independence challenge patriarchal economic control because divorce was socially stigmatized throughout the Victorian era. Refusing alimony would have been seen as a clear rejection of social standards and male authority as women were supposed to continue being financially reliant on men. Lucy's achievements further expose the patriarchal structure of male dominance in economic spheres "You beat the men at a man's own game" (Brighouse, 1932, p. 289). This claim emphasizes her accomplishments in an area that is dominated by men. Lucy challenges the conventional Victorian notion that women should only be involved in household duties and men should be in public and commercial life by

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succeeding in business and transportation. Her accomplishments directly refute patriarchal notions of female competence and capacity.

Lucy resists the patriarchal authority that is characteristic of Victorian times: "I have not thought of doing anything so Victorian" (Brighouse, 1932, p. 293). The clear attempt to resist Victorian methods of control, especially regarding inheritance and power relations, is seen in this particular quote. By resisting Victorian methods, she distances herself from a system that traditionally endorsed men's dominance over women in life and decision making. This play is indicative of how morality and behavior are shaped by patriarchal attitudes.

CLARICE. He is known as the ugliest man in the Rugby football field... (Brighouse, 1932, p. 294).

Even assessments of masculinity and beauty are socially manufactured standards that uphold prevailing cultural norms. These explanations show how social systems classify people in ways that support larger power structures. Overall, Brighouse clearly criticizes Victorian patriarchy through Lucy's independence, financial success, and rejection of patriarchal conventions. The drama highlights the limitations of patriarchal control in Victorian culture by showing how women oppose male dominance through economic and societal agency in addition to personal choices.

In the book *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf makes it clear that for women to be free and express themselves, they must have intellectual freedom and independence in terms of finances (Woolf, 1929). It is from this point of view that an analysis of women characters who challenge their economic dependence and their stereotypic roles in relation to domestic tasks can be drawn. The definition of female independence in *Smoke Screens* from the point of view of Victorian constraints to women's movements and agency is backed by the view of Virginia Woolf. Lucy's financial success is a perfect representation of Woolf's economic independence idea:

What had you but a car that you could drive? And you hired it out and drove it. And 15 years later you own three garages and I do not know how many taxicabs. You beat the men at a man's own game (Brighouse, 1932, p. 289).

This passage illustrates how far Lucy has progressed from a humble background into becoming the owner of several garages and taxis. This success of hers in the male dominated sphere of transportation is a case in point for Woolf's view of the importance of economic independence for woman. Lucy's success in breaking out of the confines of the household and making a name for herself in the commercial arena through economic independence is seen here. In addition to this, she deals with the problem of work versus parenthood very practically.

LUCY. I could not be domestic mother to my daughter while I was running a business (Brighouse, 1932, p. 291).

In addition to challenging Victorian assumptions about stability and parenthood in the passage above, the play also demonstrates Lucy's awareness of changing generations. In this instance, the line reveals the clash between the Victorian assumption of domestic womanhood and the actual participation of women in economic activities. Through her statement, Lucy is rejecting the Victorian assumption that a woman's role is reduced to that of being a mother at home.

LUCY. The Victorians had their parents. Security was going to last for ever... nothing secure today so we let them have the best we can

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whilst the going's good (Brighouse, 1932, p. 292).

This part proves the move from traditional Victorian strictness to a flexible and sensitive modern way. Lucy knows that because of social and economical instability, it is necessary to give way to softer approaches to life such as empathy. It serves as the example of how Woolf makes her point that women's roles need to be adjusted according to changing social circumstances, and they need to become more independent. Besides, she highlights examples of women not following traditional feminine behavior and showing themselves by the phrase "I have been speaking about an actual niece with the latchkey in her bag and a cigarette in her lips in the public street..." (Brighouse, 1932, p. 292). The image is that of a new type of woman who breaks all norms of Victorian modesty and restraint, travels around openly in public, and embraces modern ways. The illustration of such a character confirms Woolf's assertion that for women to fully realize themselves, they need to enjoy intellectual as well as physical freedom. It is clear from Brighouse's illustrations of women like Lucy who are economically independent, socially liberated, and intellectually enlightened. Such depictions clearly conform to Woolf's idea of woman's freedom. The findings of this study demonstrate that *Smoke Screens* by Harold Brighouse significantly disrupts Victorian gender ideology by representing women as autonomous economic and social agents rather than passive domestic figures. Through feminist theoretical lenses, particularly Simone de Beauvoir's concept of gender as a social construction, Virginia Woolf's emphasis on economic independence, and Kate Millett's critique of patriarchy, the play clearly challenges institutionalized gender roles embedded in Victorian society. The character of Lucy, who rejects alimony and achieves financial independence, exemplifies Beauvoir's (1949) argument that womanhood is socially produced rather than biologically determined. Similarly, her economic success reflects Woolf's (1929) assertion that women require financial autonomy to achieve self-realization and intellectual freedom. Moreover, the play's repeated subversion of male authority and rejection of patriarchal dependency aligns with Millett's (1970) theory of patriarchy as a systemic structure of power that governs social and economic relations. Overall, *Smoke Screens* illustrates a transition from restrictive Victorian norms toward modern feminist consciousness by portraying women who actively resist dependency and redefine identity through autonomy, mobility, and economic agency.

Conclusion

As an attempt to investigate the way in which the play defies Victorian views on femininity and gender, this research analyzed *Smoke Screens* by Harold Brighouse from a feminist perspective. As indicated in the research findings, the play portrays women who rebel against their dependency on men financially and challenge the norms associated with it. Independence is emphasized in the play for women in areas such as marriage, divorce, work, and financial independence, for example, in the cases of Lucy and Primrose. On the whole, the study reveals that the book *Smoke Screens* rejects the Victorian gender ideology and provides a contemporary perspective on women's independence. As a matter of fact, it can be stated that feminist reading is important when it comes to the interpretation of works of literature and the revelation of their criticism of existing social hierarchy and gender relationships. What is more, it has been discovered that Brighouse criticizes

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patriarchal dominance by describing female characters that have the ability to make their own decisions and defy social norms.

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