

What is a woman? The Victorians clearly thought they knew the answer, since they had the benefit of religion, science and medicine to explain to them women's nature and role in life. Victorian science, in particular, provided an increasingly confident and all-embracing discourse that provided explanations for everything from the workings of women's bodies and minds to their place in the social structure. The question continues to be debated today, in all disciplines, and this book contributes to that debate. Setting their novels in the Victorian period, some of the most respected and exciting writers in Britain and America (including Margaret Atwood, A. S. Byatt, Toni Morrison, Sarah Waters and Angela Carter) have engaged closely with the religious, scientific and literary discourses that attempted to define and imprison women. But in addition, they show through a rich variety of fictional creations how women challenged the power of those discourses, and fought for the kind of sexual and professional freedom which continue to be central to feminism today.

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