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The Construction of Intellectual Women in Victorian Society

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Oral Presentation O6.2

**THE CONSTRUCTION OF INTELLECTUAL WOMEN
IN VICTORIAN SOCIETY**

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Throughout the Victorian era, the appearance of intellectual, independent women became common in society, particularly in the role of governess or school teacher. The changing social trends caused this phenomenon, in that women were able to access formal education for the first time in the Victorian period. However, the new ideas and roles intellectual females could have were seemingly at odds with the existing social norms for women. To ease this tension and redefine the social expectations for women, male and female writers constructed intellectual women within literature, showing how these women would operate in society. Two excellent examples of intellectual females created in the Victorian era are Jane Eyre, the heroine of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, and Mina Harker (née Murray) of Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. As would be expected of the time, Stoker, a male writer, defines the female intellectual within socially acceptable norms for women, demonstrating that intelligence is compatible with marriage and domesticity; on the other hand, Brontë, a female writer, attempts to redefine social norms while constructing the intellectual female, to show that intelligent women will act in socially acceptable ways, but only on their own terms and not those of society.