

The Role of Women in 19th Century England

Role of Women (domestic)

- “Angel in the House” = 19th century feminine ideal
- wife and mother who was selflessly devoted to children, submissive to husband
- meek, charming, graceful, sympathetic, self-sacrificing, pure
- women set the moral standard that inspires others and must be held on a pedestal

takeaway idea: Sexism was certainly not a new idea, but the elevation of women to some unrealizable cultural idea (largely) is. The emerging middle class ideal was both patronizing and objectifying (women are supposed to set the example for all of society).

Role of Women (Angel in the House)

- from *The Angel in the House* by Coventry Patmore (1854):

Man must be pleased; but him to please
Is woman's pleasure; down the gulf
Of his consoled necessities
She casts her best, she flings herself.
How often flings for nought, and yokes
Her heart to an icicle or whim,
Whose each impatient word provokes
Another, not from her, but him;
While she, too gentle even to force
His penitence by kind replies,
Waits by, expecting his remorse,
With pardon in her pitying eyes;

And if he once, by shame oppress'd,
A comfortable word confers,
She leans and weeps against his breast,
And seems to think the sin was hers;
Or any eye to see her charms,
At any time, she's still his wife,
Dearly devoted to his arms;
She loves with love that cannot tire;
And when, ah woe, she loves alone,
Through passionate duty love springs higher,
As grass grows taller round a stone.

takeaway idea: Patmore's poem gave historians a label for these new middle class feminine ideals. If the cultural ideal is an angel, however, it guarantees that it will be an ideal that is unrealizable in actual living.

Role of Women (underlying social trends)

- prior to the industrial revolution, family members worked side by side in workplace (in and around home)
- shift to factory production = men go to work, women stay at home
- “separate spheres”: men inhabit public sphere (politics, economy, commerce, law); women inhabit private sphere (child-rearing, housekeeping, religious education)

takeaway idea: Gender roles become more rigid. Men are to inhabit the public sphere, women the private one.

Role of Women (labor)

- reality for working classes (up to 80% of the population) different; less likely to have means for woman to stay at home without contributing money to household expenses

- outside the home: domestic servants (primary female occupation outside home), factory workers, unskilled agricultural labor
- inside the home ("sweated trades"): seamstresses, washerwomen, straw-plaiters
- Census of 1851: 2.8 million women and girls at work (30.2% of labor force), almost certainly underrepresenting women working from home

takeaway idea: The ideal was an Angel in the House, but this was only a possibility for a tiny sliver of the population. For the majority of the middle and working classes, there is a gap between the cultural aspiration and day-to-day reality.

Role of Women (legal)

- girls received less education; barred from universities
- could not follow a profession; could only obtain low paying jobs
- upon marriage, everything a woman owned, inherited, and earned automatically belonged to husband
- a man had the right to force his wife into sex and childbirth
- if an offence or felony were committed against woman, only husband could prosecute
- a man could divorce his wife for adultery, but not the other way around

takeaway idea: Though an Angel in the House might seem (at least in some ways) an advance for women (in that they are theoretically the conscience of society), it masks a underlying social inequality that (if anything) widens the gap between the genders.

Role of Women (sexuality)

- chastity and purity for women were the ideal
- however, among the working classes, conception before marriage was not abnormal; marriage did not take place until pregnancy was obvious
- condoms first marketed in the 18th century; crude birth control was widely practiced (condoms, withdrawal, sponges, various rinses after intercourse)

takeaway idea: There was always a level of hypocrisy about Victorian attitudes toward sex. What was taught in the home and school did not square with reality, particularly for the middle and working classes. Victorians were just as interested in sex as any other society, but cultural notions of a woman's purity made looking at reality difficult and uncomfortable.

Uncertainties

- How can one have an ideal so at odds with reality?
- To what degree does this reality maintain or undermine patriarchal norms?
- Should women be satisfied with being admired and kept?
- Should women have more of a voice in society? What is the proper role for women?

takeaway idea: 18th and 19th century literature embodies these concerns (in part) because society was changing, altering the cultural ideal for women. On the other hand, there is the recognition that reality does not (and cannot) match this ideal. Authors either defend the cultural norm (either directly or indirectly) or they criticize it (by portraying its harmful effects on women).