

## Marriage

Flanders, Judith. *Inside the Victorian Home: A Portrait of Domestic Life in Victorian England*. W.W. Norton, 2003.

Marriage was the ultimate goal, but its very importance meant that it was better to reject a proposed connection that was not absolutely right. [...]

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Equality of social level as well as income was essential, but the hierarchical structure devolving authority from the man remained. In Mrs. Gaskell's novel *Ruth*, the wealthy Mr. Bradshaw ticked off on a mental list why his partner might be suitable for his daughter Jemima: he was "just the right age to unite the paternal with the conjugal affection ... [he had] a house ready furnished, at a convenient distance from her home ... in short, what could be more suitable in every way?" The other major concern, money, did not have to be considered in this case: as the business partner of Mr. Bradshaw, the prospective husband was equally matched with the family he might marry into.

Women took on the status of their husbands: women who "married down" were objects of scorn, as we have seen with Beatrix Potter's cousin. Caddy Jellyby, in *Bleak House*, knows that "Ma thinks there is something absurd in my having married a dancing-master, and she is rather afraid of its extending to her." Marrying up for status was entirely acceptable to both sides. (Within limits. A man from a good background who married a servant, for example, "degraded" himself. This was why Arthur Munby and Hannah Cullwick kept their marriage secret-- he could not bring himself to tell his mother.) Thackeray in *The Newcomes* was blas é about it: "Women sell themselves for what you call an establishment every day, to the applause of themselves, their parents and the world." This honesty was unusual; most novels presented a more idealistic surface to a pragmatic situation. When Bella Wilfer in *Our Mutual Friend* declares that she must "marry an establishment"-- that is, choose a man for his income rather than his love-- she is led by the author through the narrative to discover the error of her ways, until she reaches the domestic felicity of marrying a man of her economic status (lower middle class) for love. (For this, oddly enough, she is rewarded at the end of the book with-- an establish-

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ment. It is almost as though Dickens could not think what else society could reward her with, apart from money.)

That marriage was a business, for women, was often put plainly. Edward Widdowson, in *The Odd Women* (1893), has just told his sister-in-law that he plans to marry. She had not known he was looking for a wife, and asks: "Now why didn't you come and ask me to find you a wife? Why, I know two or three girls of really good family who would have jumped, simply jumped, at a man with your money. Pretty girls, too ... Don't you know, my dear boy, that there are heaps of ladies, real ladies, waiting to marry the first decent man who offers them five or six hundred a year? ... I would get together a round dozen in two or three days. Girls who would make good, faithful wives, in mere gratitude to the man who saved them from-- horrors. "

Given the necessity for financial and social equality, and the inability of the girl to become friendly with more than one man without receiving the dread designation of “flirt,” the introduction was essential. Earlier, meetings were governed by small local populations, who all knew each other’s circumstances, and thus were confined to social equals. By the middle of the century, the increase in the size of social groups, and the creation for the middle classes of various types of public recreation that had previously been accessible only to the wealthy-- theaters, concerts, seaside holidays-- made meeting by locality, of groups outside one’s normal sphere, a possibility. [...]

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But before marriage, once the financial status of the suitor was deemed acceptable and the proposal had been accepted by the woman and her family, the ceremony and its many formalities were the next hurdle, Many in the lower middle and middle classes simply had the banns read and went off to their local parish church, marrying with one or two close friends and their parents present. A new dress might be worn by the bride, although it was usually in a practical color (often black), which then took its place as her best dress for some years to come.

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Grand weddings and the complicated etiquette that surrounded them were the preserve of the wealthy. No one earning under £300 a year, and not many at that level, could afford to follow all the rules laid down. That paintings of courtship, engagements, and weddings were regularly shown in this period is another clue that complex ceremonies were an upper-class preoccupation.” Most unusually, novels are remarkably scant in details of weddings, compared to their depictions of other ceremonies. Diaries and letters are, even more unexpectedly not much more informative, suggesting that in middle-class life a quick trip to church was probably all that was expected. Even when more money was available, weddings were not yet given the central importance they are today. In *The Small House at Allington* (1861), the Countess de Courcy does not attend her daughter’s wedding, for no particular reason, and no one thinks it odd. It was only gradually that these formal rules began to be seen as the norm, whatever the underlying reality. As many changes have occurred in the years since, the elaborate prescribed structure is worth looking at.

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