

Women

Altick, Richard D. *Victorian People and Ideas: A Companion for the Modern Reader of Victorian Literature*. W.W. Norton, 1973.

Meanwhile, there were the women, who in the nature of the case must be considered separately. Their status in Victorian society and the roles they assumed had much to do with the form and content of fiction as well as with the moral atmosphere that permeated much other literature.

Upper- and middle-class women were sedulously set apart from the worlds of commerce and, generally, of intellect. This represented a marked reversal of attitude and custom. In the seventeenth century, aristocratic ladies had actively managed their family's household and estates. In the eighteenth, there had been plenty of middle-class businesswomen, engaged in a variety of occupations from fan-making and hairdressing to catering, and, as widows, often carrying on their husbands' trades, whatever these might have been—bookselling or hatmaking, building or ironmon-

50

gery. But the nation's increasing wealth and the growing complexity of the mercantile economy required a special kind of managerial expertise which supposedly was a peculiarly masculine gift. At the same time, prosperity among tradesmen and skilled artisans, often accompanied by a separation of business premises from the home, encouraged the detachment of women from the money-making world, and they began to aspire to a state of gentility devoid of responsibility.

By the beginning of the nineteenth century the powerful concept of "refinement" prescribed that all women outside the working class abstain from gainful employment except in cases of extreme necessity. It was such cases which resulted in a few Victorian women becoming professional writers. Frances Trollope, Anthony's mother, was forced to take to the pen when it became painfully clear that her husband, an unsuccessful lawyer with a disagreeable personality and unstable mind, would never earn the family bread. The Brontë sisters wrote, at least in part, to supplement their father's meager income as a clergyman. Mary Ann Evans wrote books and magazine articles simply to support herself, an unmarried woman with no other income. But it is noteworthy that prejudice against women writers was strong enough to make advisable the adoption of masculine pen names. Anne, Charlotte, and Emily Brontë wrote as Acton, Currer, and Ellis Bell; Mary Ann Evans took the name of George Eliot.

The way of life led by ladies near the top of the social hierarchy, as reported in popular fiction and journalism, tinted the ambitions of women below them on the scale. At a time when the world of men was governed by the idea or utility as the supreme value, the world of upper-class women made uselessness the test of almost any activity. Theirs were lives of elaborate idleness; they worked harder at being decoratively futile than any productive occupation would have required. They passed their days indulging desultorily in the "female accomplishments" learned in girl

51

hood, needlework, making boxes from shells collected at the seaside, sketching and watercolor painting, flower arrangement, strumming at the piano or harp, Their only faintly constructive deeds,

apart from supervising the household staff, involved charity-- taking blankets and basins of soup to the unfortunates on the estate, visiting the local school the family supported,

Among the aristocracy and the higher gentry, women had considerable freedom of movement. There was constant visiting back and forth among the intricately intermarried families, In the fashionable season, one occupied one's town house and was caught up in an exhilarating and fatiguing round of balls, "at homes," and dinner parties. Many families traveled about the Continent. The middle-class female enjoyed few such luxuries, although she joined her husband in dreaming of them. No family liking to think of itself as middle-class could be without at least one servant, and this was one ambition that was easily satisfied. Domestic servants were to be had for a pittance-- over 10 per cent of the female population were working as maids, washerwomen, and char-women in 1851-- and with shops stocking a growing number of commodities which had formerly been produced in the household, more and more women had less and less to do. Leisure was a sign of status, and in the middle class it was occupied as unproductively, in most cases, as in fashionable society. This new leisure had an important effect upon contemporary literature, because it was responsible for a greatly enlarged female reading public. In the servant-equipped middle class, books and magazines, mostly of an undemanding nature, helped fill the matron's yawning hours when no church bazaar required her firmly guiding hand, the children were in the nursery with their governess, and the weather was too wet for her to go shopping or supervise the gardener's work.

She mayor may not have wished to occupy her time so flabbily, but the Victorian woman had no choice. *Pater*

familias, when he came back from the office after a hard day competing in the business jungle, reigned as lord and master at table and fireside. His wife, though supreme arbiter of household affairs, was subservient to him, a devoted (and submissive) wife and mother of often all too many children. This allotment of roles belonged as much to the basic order of things as the concept of degree which Shakespeare so memorably formulated in *Troilus and Cressida*-- a passage, it is easy to believe Tennyson had in mind when, in *The Princess*, he had the king declare:

When the man wants weight, the woman takes it up,
And topples down the scales; but this is fixt
As are the roots of earth and base of all;
Man for the field and woman for the hearth:
Man for the sword and for the needle she:
Man with the head and woman with the heart:
Man to command and woman to obey:
All else confusion.

Woman's serfdom was sanctified by the Victorian conception of the female as a priestess dedicated to preserving the home as a refuge from the abrasive outside world. Convention dictated a rigorously stereotyped personality. She was to cultivate fragility, leaning always on the arm of the gentleman who walked with her in a country lane or escorted her in to dinner. The woman of the well-off middle class lived, in effect, under one of those capacious glass domes which protected parlor bric-a-brac-- stuffed birds, ornate shells, papier-mâché constructions, wax fruit and flowers-- from dust. She was Dora Spenlow (in *David Copperfield*) and Rosie Mackenzie (in *The Newcomes*); she was The Angel in

the House, to borrow the title of Coventry Patmore's hugely popular versified praise of domestic sainthood and the mystical, non-fleshly institution of marriage.

But underneath all the pretense, middle-class women had a real grievance. It was understood that, as Tennyson's neurotic hero in "Locksley Hall" put it,

53

Nature made them blinder motions bounded in a
shallower brain:

Woman is the lesser man, and all [her] passions,
matched with mine,

Are as moonlight unto sunlight, and as water
unto wine--

Putting aside woman's lack of sexual passion, which is clearly implied in the lines and was universally accepted as a biological fact because to assume otherwise was indecent, there was the wider implication that woman was inferior to man in all ways except the unique one that counted most (to man): her femininity. Her place was in the home, on a veritable pedestal if one could be afforded, and emphatically not in the world of affairs. In *Our Mutual Friend*, Bella Rokesmith told her husband, long before Ibsen's Nora Helmer got the idea, "I want to be something so much worthier than the doll in the doll's house." But the middle-class Victorian woman was allowed no such privilege.

Until fairly late in the century, any prospect of escape from the doll's house was made nugatory by two reigning assumptions: the female brain was not equal to the demands of commerce or the professions, and women, simply by virtue of their sex, had no business mingling with men in a man's world. "Be good, sweet maid," ran Kingsley's familiar advice, "and let who can be clever." There was something unpleasant, even alarming, about strong-willed women who insisted on using their minds. Accordingly, the education which girls of the upper and upper-middle classes received from governesses and from visiting language and music teachers was devoid of intellectual content, let alone intellectual challenge. It was limited to the polite accomplishments which were calculated to help her first to win a husband and then, after that primary goal was reached, to infuse her household with an air of the softer graces so as to maintain its separation from the gritty world of affairs. As Thomas Henry Huxley put it, girls were educated "to be either drudges or toys beneath man, or a sort of angel

54

above him."

This severe limitation of purpose prevailed in girls' private schools as well. Miss Pinkerton's early nineteenth-century establishment at Chiswick, which Becky Sharp thankfully leaves at the opening of *Vanity Fair*, was probably better than most such schools in Victorian times; most were abysmally bad. Only with the establishment of Cheltenham Ladies' College in 1853 was the first move made toward providing girls with a secondary education comparable to that received by boys in the better public (American: private) schools. As for higher education, Tennyson spoke the mind of most Victorian men, and probably most Victorian women as well, when he assigned forthrightly anti-feminist sentiments to speakers in *The Princess* (1847). Nonetheless, the Queen's College was founded in London the next year, and in 1880 women were for the first time allowed to take degrees at the

University of London. Women's colleges were established at Cambridge and Oxford in 1869 and 1879 respectively, but women could not take degrees at either university until 1920-21. A few young women of surpassing determination fought their way through medical school before the end of the century.

But these were rare specimens. It is true that their acceptance was somewhat eased by the heroic example of Florence Nightingale, a seemingly fragile gentlewoman whose ruthless resolution and efficiency, applied to the lethal field hospitals in the Crimea during the war of 1854-56, triumphed over military and bureaucratic negligence and incompetence. Miss Nightingale, "the lady with the lamp," became a cherished Victorian legend, and, more important, founded the modern profession of nursing. Nevertheless, until the last decades of the century almost the only occupation open to women of good family but reduced circumstances was teaching, as a schoolmistress (Charlotte and Emily Brontë) or, more likely, as a governess in a private family (Jane Eyre). In either case, the work was hard and the teacher's social status was as low as her pay; in most

55

homes governesses ranked with the superior servants. But single women, disappointed in their hopes of marriage-- census figures showed a surplus of females in Victorian England-- perforce had to settle for "governessing slavery," as Charlotte Brontë called it, if they had to earn a livelihood. Like the spinster aunts who found haven as permanent guests in many households, they were regarded, and regarded themselves, as failures.

It was, in any event, an unnaturally sheltered and restricted existence the middle-class girl and woman led; little wonder that neurasthenia was as prevalent as the personal records of the period reveal it to have been. And little wonder, too, that at the very same time they portrayed "ideal" specimens of Victorian girlhood and womanhood, wrapped in an aura of virtue and innocence, the leading novelists, from Thackeray to Meredith and Hardy, repeatedly studied the nonconforming woman-- the outsider, the prey of ambition, the man-eater-- and her various motivations, pride, possessiveness, sexual hunger, intellectual aspiration, or whatnot. The revered cluster of Victorian domestic virtues served as a norm, a vulnerable assumption upon which writers frequently mounted an outright or covert attack on the unrealities and perversions of the prevailing womanly ideal, the myth of domestic accommodation and tranquility.

Life was very different in the working class. Here women, far from living under a glass dome, were part of the labor force, as they always had been in order to help their husbands squeeze out a living. The conditions under which they labored changed as the factory system replaced cottage industry; the necessity that drove them to work was more bitter than it had ever been. Their availability in large numbers enabled employers to pay the low wages which, in a vicious circle, required all able-bodied members of a family to work, irrespective of sex or (apart from exceedingly young children) age. Women toiled long hours on the land in season; they worked by their husbands' side in the

56

outcry more or less put an end to it, they slaved in the mines.

Except for children, women were the most exploited of all workers. Long after the factory acts had curbed the worst abuses of female labor in the textile industry, girls and women continued to be sweated in dressmaking and tailoring establishments and in such trades as nailmaking and matchmaking. The latter trade was the scene of an especially famous London strike in 1888, when the

plight of the Bryant and May match-tippers acquainted the public with the ravages of “phossy jaw,” a form of necrosis caused by the phosphorus they handled. Women who could not leave home often did piecework at starvation wages-- boxmaking, for example, and tinting Christmas cards and book illustrations. One’s pleasure in leafing through a Victorian gift album, a sporting book, or even an occasional novel is diminished by the reflection that the engravings were colored by hungry women and their small children, often working by the light of a single candle. Whether they were employed in a factory or at home, women who were tied to machine or table for long hours had little energy left to care for such homes as they possessed or for the sickly children they bore. What with the exhausting nature of their employment, the unhealthy conditions wherever they worked, the lack of medical care, and the price exacted by repeated childbearing, Victorian working women were old in their twenties.

Whatever their social rank, in the eyes of the law women were second-class citizens. Although there was sporadic discussion of the female franchise, and some mild agitation in its favor, women were at the bottom of the electoral priority list, and the only concession made to them by the end of the century was the right to vote in local elections. Only in 1918, after many years of militancy (window-breaking, mass meetings, street demonstrations, and hunger strikes when they were jailed), did women win participation in national elections, as a reward for their contribution to

the war effort; even then, the franchise was limited to those over thirty.

Of more immediate concern to Victorian women were the other legal disabilities they suffered. Until 1839, a woman who was separated from her husband, regardless of the reason, lost custody of their children; in that year the law was changed to allow her to retain those under seven, and in 1873 the age was raised to sixteen. The law under which everything a married woman possessed or acquired became the inalienable property of her husband was changed only by a series of parliamentary acts in 1870-82. Until 1857, divorce, which opinion condemned except in the most intolerable circumstances, was possible only by means of an act of Parliament introduced for the individual case. The plight of Stephen Blackpool, the workingman in *Hard Times* who was married irrevocably to an alcoholic wife, was typical of many such situations. Even after divorce became available through the courts, the procedure was so expensive that few could afford it. And, as with employers in their relations with workers, the balance of justice was tipped toward the ruling party. A husband could divorce his wife on the simple ground of adultery, but a wife had to prove not only her husband’s adultery but an additional offense such as desertion, cruelty, rape, or incest. As late as the nineties, less than six hundred divorce cases went through the courts in a year.